Thrown Together

by teaandbiscuitsforall

Summary

Tom is cajoled into appearing on a celebrity episode of chef Claudia Rey's cooking show. Luke is trying his best to deal with all the publicity headaches stemming from Tom's new romance and has decided the appearance will help things. Assuming, of course, that Tom doesn't completely alienate the host before they even have a chance to shoot.

Notes

Okay so this starts in June 2016, meaning we're going to hit the Taylor Swift relationship to start. There is no Taylor hate in this, but we know they break up so there should be no shockers there. And if her mere presence bothers you, she's in Chs 8 and 9 and the breakup happens by 12. I've gotten some comments about it, so I figured it was best to let everyone know. And trust me, there's method to including the stuff with her from a character standpoint.

I'm taking some liberties with Tom's timelines to get him where I want for this story. The prospect of mapping out his whereabouts for half the year and beyond was exhausting- it's not completely wrong, but if I fudge on some dates for story convenience don't kill me.
I'll update tags as we go along. This bad boy is gonna be a slow burn, so strap in for that. :)
Chapter 1

Tom didn't want a bloody damn assignment. He was bone tired and good and truly home for the first time in a year. In the span of the last week alone, he'd smiled more than he thought humanly possible. But that's what happened when you filmed multiple projects back-to-back and then went off on not one, but two press tours. It may have been exhilarating and exciting, but he was fucking exhausted.

He hadn't been alone in... well he wasn't even sure how long. Normally he loved being out and about around people, but in the last month he'd started craving solitude. Even from his girlfriend. Feeling a bit guilty about it too, if he was being honest.

And now he was meant to be having a break. A real one. Not the "time off" he usually took while still making the talk show rounds or preparing for a role. Real actual time off.

But Luke had other ideas.

The DVD had been sent via courier that afternoon. And to add insult to injury he had to sign for the damn thing. Dragging his ass out of bed at the insistent doorbell hadn't set him in the best of moods. If Luke had actually been there when he ripped open the note, he might have hit him.

Tom,

Get up. You're supposed to fight jet lag not give in to it. I'm not sure why you've been so damned cranky since you got back, but I have a possible solution. You know you can't not work. It's not in your nature. And this job is small. Tiny. Minuscule.

One spot on this show. It will take a few days and force you to get back on a decent London schedule. Then I promise I'll leave you alone.

Just watch the DVD. And I'll know if you didn't.

Luke

As much as it galled him, he had the niggling sensation that Luke was right. Not that he had to admit that to him. Ever.

He grudgingly settled down in his living room with a generous measure of scotch. He couldn't even reason with himself on account of the liquor. It wasn't even 5 o'clock where he'd come from, much less where he was now. But it gave him a small degree of satisfaction to perform his assignment under the influence.

He hadn't known what he expected, but it certainly wasn't a cooking show. The disc contained 6 episodes of Thrown Together, featuring a bubbly American female chef with a mop of unruly brown curls. The premise was simple enough: chef goes to people's homes and teaches them how to put a meal together using only what they already have in fridge and pantry. The guests all had a habit of kitchen mishaps and lacked the confidence to attempt such a thing on their own.
But what easily could have been cheesy and reminiscent of a bad game show, was utterly charming. The host, Claudia Rey, managed to inform her guest and the audience without any of the condescension he hated in some popular cooking shows. She never balked at the strange cadre of ingredients she was presented with and seemed to bring out the best in her guests.

“Okay, Emily. What kind of vegetables do you have for me?”

The woman looked embarrassed to answer and Tom could feel how much she hated to admit this on television. “Just frozen, I’m afraid. Some corn and broccoli and I think I have some onions.”

“Oh, but frozen isn’t bad!” Claudia was quick to reassure the woman. “Frozen means it’s always going to be great quality whenever you need it. My freezer is full of frozen stuff. Sometimes my own that I prepped for storage and sometimes store-bought, but it’s not the harbinger of doom that some make it out to be. If anyone turns their nose down at frozen, you send them to me.”

After a few moments of gathering what she wanted from the fridge, freezer, and pantry, the pair reconvened at the counter, a broad smile on the chef’s face. “So you want a dinner that both picky kids and a pickier husband will love, right?”

“Yes. Is that even possible?”

“Absolutely! It’s gonna be great and I’m going to show you exactly how to do it.”

And the woman believed her, but not only that, Tom did as well. She just radiated confidence and seemed completely at ease with what she was being asked to do. And in the end she delivered on her promise. The show turned out to be an amalgam of *Chopped*, a basic cooking class, and a talk show. It had no right working, but it did.

One chap, who admitted that he regularly bodged up even simple toast, was grinning like a child when he'd helped prepare dinner for his boyfriend by the end of the episode.

Tom liked it. He still had no idea what it had to do with a job, but he liked it. When he gave in and called Luke after the last episode, he tried to ignore the pompous satisfaction in his publicist's voice.

"Now why did I just spend almost three hours watching a cooking show?"

"Because, I want you to be on it. They're looking to do some celebrity episodes and it would be good for you."

"Luke, I know you're not my business manager, but I assure you I'm not hurting for money."

"Not good for your wallet, mate. But it's gonna help keep your face out there before you continue your vacation and then run off to Australia. They're filming soon, but won't air until later in the year."

"People haven't had enough of my face?"

"The more relevant you are, the more work you get. The better work you get." Luke was already pulling out one of his tried and true aphorisms.

"You'll badger me about this until I do it, won't you?"

"You know me so well, Tom." He could just picture the supercilious smile on Luke's boyish face. People never expected someone who looked like Luke to be so damned shrewd and cunning.
“So I’d have a film crew invade my house during the vacation I’m supposed to be taking?”

“Just a slight delay to the vacation. Then I promise I’ll leave you alone, presuming you don’t do something stupid and I have to jump in to do damage control.”

“You’re already talking as if I’ve agreed to this thing.”

“Come on, Tom. Make nice with the camera and the host for a few days and you earn some extra time off. I can’t have you out of the public eye for too long and this little project buys us some quick notoriety.”

“I don’t need any more notoriety. I can’t even go for a run any more without the bloody paps making a spectacle of it.”

“That’s not my fault and you know it, Tom.” The affable tone morphed into a protest of indignation.

“I know, Luke, I know.” He took a deep breath and another sip of his drink before continuing. “It’s not her fault all this comes along with her.”

“I know that better than most. Maybe some time apart will be good. The paps will probably figure that you’re only interested in hibernating and hopefully they’ll back off.” Time to placate the celebrity, Tom thought. And then move in for the kill. He wasn’t wrong. “Listen, you’re a smart guy and I’m sure you see the sense in this. We can get it over with quickly and then you can become a hermit until your next job for all I care. Okay?”

“Fine. Make the arrangements.” It didn’t actually sound all that bad. Might even be educational.

“Excellent! This is going to be great, mark my words. You have lunch with her day after tomorrow, so do make sure you’re sufficiently presentable and charming, won’t you?”

“How do I already have a lunch meeting scheduled if I only just now agreed to this, Luke?” He felt more exasperation than anger at this development, but he had to go through the motions.

“Because I’m highly efficient and unparalleled at my job?”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. It’s not that you’re an overbearing arse or anything.”

“Perish the thought!” He was laughing though, likely just happy he got his way before the scheme blew up in his face. “I’ll email you the details, shall I?”

“I’m atwitter with anticipation.”
“What in the name of holy fucking hell did you just say?” Claudia screeched the words into the phone, unconcerned with the other pedestrians giving her dirty looks. This was important and it didn’t matter that she was in the middle of a London park.

“I said,” her sister continued in a patient voice, “that I’m pregnant. You know the thing where a baby grows inside of me for a while and then I pop it out at the hospital? That.”

“Listen smartass, I can be shocked and excited and you’re going to let me, okay?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“My baby sister is going to have a baby and that’s a big damn deal. I will yell all I want and you can’t stop me.”

“This is not my first baby, Claude.”

“But it’s the first I’m not there for and I might be freaking out a little bit.” She hastened to continue, not wanting to make this all about her, despite the unease that was settling in her stomach. “But super happy for you, Jules. This is wonderful. Have you told Nali?”

“Yeah, I hate to break it to you, but I told my wife before I told you.”

She was already a thousand miles away contemplating the situation and completely missed the sarcasm laced in Julianne’s reply. “That was probably a good idea.”

“Okay, I can tell you are freaking out, but I have a morning class and I’m going to let you go now. Just be happy about this and don’t worry so much.”

“Yes, ma’am.” So much easier said than done, but she’d placate her sister with what she wanted to hear.

“Love you, Claude.”

“Love you too, Jules. Send my love to Nali and Moira too.”

“Will do.” And with that she ended the call.

Claudia felt a bit dazed as she walked out of the bright June sunshine and into a nearby coffee shop. Her little sister was pregnant and she was going to miss it. Slumping down into a vacant booth, she suddenly felt homesick with an intensity greater than she’d ever experienced since moving to London four years earlier. Her baby sister. Not that she wasn’t ecstatically happy about the news, but unfortunately it brought along some difficult feelings too.

As petty and jealous as it made her feel, she couldn’t help but think about the math. If Jules was pregnant, that probably meant any travel plans were on hold indefinitely. And nobody wanted to travel with a newborn, so that put a potential visit off even further. Then she remembered that Nali would be defending her thesis in 18 months, turning into another obstacle.

Suddenly she acutely felt the only major downside to relocating across the Atlantic. She probably wouldn’t get to see her sister and her family for another couple of years at best, because right now her schedule kept her tied pretty close to London. It was suddenly a depressing thought.
Deciding a large dose of caffeine and sugar would help, she stood and joined the small queue in front of the counter. Her phone vibrated in her hand just as she was giving the barista her order, but she ignored it. She never wanted to be that guy in the coffee line and decided to wait until after she had her order and was back out in the bustling street before checking her phone again.

There were now seven missed calls from her agent. Shit. Either something very good had happened or something really monumentally bad. She returned the call immediately, now eager to reach her house a few blocks away, but unwilling to wait until she got there.

“Claudia!” He shouted her name as soon as the connection was established. “We got him!”

“Who?” Her thoughts might have been a bit muddled, but she thought she surely would have understood if a situation existed where the simple use of him would tell her who in the hell they were talking about.

“Hiddleston! He’s agreed to be on the show.” Terence sounded as if this was possibly the greatest achievement in all of modern Western civilization.

“Okay,” she began feeling like she was already on uneven footing. “That’s great, but why the hell does that necessitate seven calls in the span of five minutes? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Love, this is a big deal. He’s A-list all the way.”

“Is this one of those things that gives you an agent boner that I don’t quite understand?”

“Surely you’ve heard of him?”

“Yeah, of course, I don’t live under a rock. He’s that actor guy that’s in everything. The one with a funny name, but not the one with the funniest name.”

“And he has a tremendous fan base. A fan base that will watch your show simply because he’s on it.”

She reached the house and somehow managed to juggle keys, coffee, and phone, getting through the front door without a mishap. “All right, I acknowledge that this is a good thing, even a great thing, but this is not seven calls and inducing arrhythmia kind of good. My sister being pregnant is a seven call event, not this.”

“Let me put this into agent perspective for you.” His tone was mild, but she knew he was straining not to let sarcasm overcome him. She would play nice. “For me, this is like if all seven of your sisters got pregnant at the exact same time. On the moon.”

“I don’t have seven sisters.”

“Then it’s like finding you have six more you didn’t know about and they’re all bloody pregnant. Okay?”

“Well might I say congratulations on your little miracle?”

“That’s more like it.” Now mollified, the excitement was back in his voice. “You’re meeting him for lunch on Thursday for the interview.”

“He agreed to that?” She’d been warned that celebrities had to be handled differently than her normal guests.
“His publicist did without blinking an eye.”

“Well okay then. You’ll send me the calendar details?”

“Already have.”

“I’ll be there with sufficient amount of bells on to signal how momentous an occasion it is.”

“Now you’re just making fun.”

“Good bye, Terence.”

She heard something about an ungrateful Yank before hanging up. He was all bluster and she knew it. For all his grousing about her innate and unsatisfactory American-ness, he adored her. She was as easy a client as he’d ever had to hear him tell it.

Despite just earning a double dose of good news, she was restless. The house was quiet and cool, but right now she needed a distraction. And as was usually the case, that distraction led her into the kitchen. She needed time to process the first bit of news and time to strategize about the second. This called for music and for pie.
Chapter 3

Claudia had smiled when she saw where the lunch meeting had been scheduled. Terence would never miss an opportunity to give her home court advantage and she kind of adored him for it. It was nice to have someone so thoroughly on your side in a business that turned out to be a hundred times more complex than she’d ever realized.

Customarily early, she tried to stop fidgeting in her seat while she waited. Despite her flippant attitude with her agent, she was genuinely nervous. She could deal with chefs and regular people all day long, but celebrities were like another breed. After all the horror stories she’d heard from Terence, she’d started to see them as something entirely other. But, as Terence was always quick to point out, she was now one of them, a thought that never stopped giving her pause. She was a celebrity chef whether she liked it or not.

And she did like it, loved it even. Not the fame part, but the job itself. She still couldn’t believe anyone wanted to pay her to have fun all day. But even so, she was a damn professional about it. She reminded herself that as she absently straightened the notebook in front of her. She’d had this same meeting with every prospective guest without major incident. She could get through this one too.

Surprisingly, he showed up right on time. As he sat down after enthusiastically shaking her hand, she took stock of him. Well, in person he was far more attractive than any person had a right to be, but otherwise he wasn’t setting off any alarm bells. She usually had a good first read on people and he didn’t strike her as a diva type, which was something she’d been worried about. The last thing she needed was an asshole to deal with, handsome or not.

“Mr. Hiddleston, thank you for agreeing to meet with me before we film.” Good. She sounded like a reasonable, competent adult.

“Oh god, please call me Tom.” If he was putting on an affable regular guy shtick, he really was a good actor, because he came across as entirely genuine. She relaxed slightly, happy he was at least faking cooperation.

“Then you can call me Claudia and it won’t get weird.”

He surprised her with a deep, musical laugh at that. “Excellent. Wouldn’t want to start off weird, that’s for sure.”

That was as far as they got before their waiter swooped in to take their drink orders. Hers was a formality, since Blake already knew what she wanted, but she was glad they observed the niceties all the same. The routine of restaurant service was always a comfort to her. Tom ordered a gin and tonic and before she knew it they found themselves alone again.

She was used to taking the lead at these things, so she plowed forward. “I’m sure it seemed a bit odd that we meet beforehand, but I like to get some information from my guests before we start. Do you mind if I ask a few questions?”

“Of course not. Fire away.” His grin was something out of a damn toothpaste ad. As she opened her notebook and found the right page, she wondered what it must feel like to have won the genetic lottery.

“So what would you say your skill level is in the kitchen?”
He looked momentarily taken aback by the question, but the fleeting look of confusion was gone in an instant. “Well, I’m not intimidated by most recipes, but I’ve never attempted anything really complicated. And I’ve never had any training, so I probably do everything completely wrong, but I’ve never given anyone food poisoning, so I figure I’m not a danger to anyone.”

“Okay. That’s good, but if there’s anything you’re curious to learn or think might be interesting to ask about, let me know. I can’t promise it will come up, but I can prep for it all the same.”

“You mean you can’t work a croquembouche into any episode?”

She laughed at the suggestion, feeling more at ease by the second. “Would that I could, but no. Actually, that’s not a bad idea. They’re really not as difficult as people think.”

They were interrupted again when Blake brought their drinks. He presented her lavender martini with a flourish that made Tom raise an eyebrow. But he kept any comments to himself and they ordered without another such quizzical look.

But she wasn’t off the hook. He pounced when they were alone again. “They know you here, don’t they?”

“I used to work here,” she answered as simply as possible, but the raised eyebrow was back, beckoning her for more detail. “And I kind of created this drink.”

“They still serve a cocktail you invented? That’s no small feat. This is a rather successful restaurant.”

She kept her face as neutral as possible, not wishing to switch focus to her job history before the interview was over. “It turned out more popular than drunk me ever anticipated.” After a beat she felt compelled to clarify. “The drink, not the restaurant.”

“Now there’s a story there that’s just begging to be told.”

Fine. She wasn’t going to get away from it. She could throttle Blake and his damn serving flourish. This wasn’t meant to be about her. “It’s not much of a story. I was working here a few years ago and a bunch of us decided it was a good idea to get drunk after a particularly horrible service. And somehow the bartender and I started talking shit and I told him I could come up with a new drink so good the owner would put it on the menu. So I muddled behind the bar in a tipsy haze and actually made something pretty good. And they did end up putting it on the menu. I think they just keep it because it’s a good story.”

“Well now I have to try it.” He waved Blake over in a way that didn’t come off as rude, a rare thing in Claudia’s experience, and ordered one of what she was having. She tried to ignore the smug look on the waiter’s face as he left. Home court advantage was nice, but also a pain in the ass.

When they were alone again she tried to put things back on track, but Tom spoke before she had a chance to ask the next question. “So what do I need to have on hand for this to go according to plan?”

Her brow furrowed at the question, not understanding what exactly he was getting at. “I don’t follow.”

“What’s my shopping list before you show up with a film crew? If there’s anything I need to get specifically will you send me a list or something?”

Realization hit her and her mouth acted before her brain had a chance to stop it. “Have you seen the show?”
“Yeah. My publicist sent several episodes over before pitching this to me.”

“I think you’re still confused though. I work with whatever is on hand. That’s the whole concept.”

“Right, but like…” his cheeks darkened, “some things are part of the plan, right?”

“The plan? You think I lie about being able to come up with recipes on the fly?”

“Not lie, no. No. But I just assumed that some of it was… I don’t know arranged in advance.”

“Mr. Hiddleston, I was raised working in restaurants. I knew how to cook before I knew how to do algebra. I went to culinary school at seventeen and I’ve been working ever since. I graduated with a masters from the Università degli Studi di Scienze Gastronomiche before I hit twenty-five and I’ve worked in five star restaurants on multiple continents.” Unbeknown to her, Claudia’s voice was rising with every statement. “And you think I cheat on my show?”

“Oh shit. Claudia, no, I’m so sorry.” In his defense, he looked genuinely chagrined. “I just thought that there wasn’t any way you could come up with those recipes with no foreknowledge. It’s too put together.”

Her breath was already coming out in ragged gasps and she felt her face burn with anger and indignation, but she managed to keep her voice low. “If you wouldn’t have interrupted me, you would have seen the only prep I do ahead of time is this interview. You can stock the kitchen with whatever the fuck you want, and I’ll make something with it.”

“Jesus. I apologize. I… I made a terrible assumption and I’ve upset you with it. Please, can you erase the last five minutes from your memory and let us start over?”

She took a deep breath and tried to reign herself in. Terence’s voice rang in her ears, telling her to be nice to the famous actor. It took her a moment or two of silence, but she got herself under control. “If you think you can manage not to insult my entire career again, then I suppose I can pretend you didn’t just call me a fraud.”

“I’m so sorry, Claudia. I’m jet-lagged and it’s no excuse, but I acted like a tit and I’ll swear to be on my best behavior from now on. Okay?”

“Fine.”

“Ask me whatever you want and I’ll tell you the truth, okay?”

“Why are you even doing this? You can’t need the money and god knows I see your face enough as it is, you’re not starving for publicity.” His recalcitrant attitude made her bold enough to ask the pointed question.

“I’m trying to take some time off and Luke— that’s my publicist— well, he thought that this would be good press for me and it would air at a time that would keep me relevant while I was off filming. Or something like that. Half of what he tells me sounds like empty buzz words, but I think that’s the gist of it.”

“You’re not slumming it to get to a wider female audience?”

“Slumming it? No. I wouldn’t have entertained the idea of doing this if I hadn’t enjoyed your show.”

“So you really did watch it?”
“Yes. And I quite enjoyed it. Claudia, contrary to my asinine behavior, I was impressed by it. Nobody is forcing me to be here.”

“Okay,” she began slowly. “We can pretend this wasn’t a complete clusterfuck.”

“I would appreciate that.”

She took a deep breath and moved on to the next question on her list. “Usually my guests are preparing for a specific event. A romantic dinner or something for their kids. Do you have anything like that I need to keep in mind?”

He already wanted to crawl away in shame, but he answered, hoping they could put his horrible behavior behind them. “I haven’t been home for more than a week in about a year. So I wanted to do a meal for my family.”

“Formal dinner, buffet lunch, what are we talking here?”

“I was thinking a brunch would give us the most freedom. Plus, my mum loves a good brunch.” He flashed her the smile that usually thawed even the iciest of countenances only to have her face remain impassive. Well shit.

“I can do that. How many are we talking?”

“Eight?”

“Eight is doable.” She scribbled a note and took another healthy sip of her drink before continuing. “Are there any dietary concerns or allergies I need to be aware of? For you or your guests.”

“Well, my sister’s new boyfriend avoids dairy, but I don’t think it’s an allergy or anything.” He felt like an even bigger ass for even suggesting this, but she did ask.

“Okay. I’ll shoot for at least half the menu being dairy free.”

“Listen, Claudia… you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Tom, this isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for a normal guest, so it’s not a big deal.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you still.”

She couldn't think of any response that wasn't completely bitchy, so she simply nodded her head and continued scribbling notes.

"So you went to school in Italy?"

"Yeah." Trying not to make her tone clipped, she elaborated. He was trying to be affable and as much as she wanted to throw the remains of her martini in his face, she'd vowed to be good. "A small town in the northwest."

"So you speak Italian?" He looked delighted at the prospect.

"Enough to be dangerous. My food-related vocabulary is extensive." Along with her collection of swear words and rude phrases. "Conversational Italian regarding other topics leaves a bit to be desired. I'm stronger in French."

"Enough to be dangerous, that about sums up my knowledge of a handful of languages. So did you work in France?"
"For three years in Carcassonne." It had turned into her first head chef position.

"You know I've always wanted to visit there. But it's not near a major media hub or film festival, so I've never gotten the chance."

"It's gorgeous. You should make the time someday."

"I have a long list of that kind of thing piling up, to be honest. My schedule's been a bit hectic these last few years."

"That's understandable. In fact... I have enough here to get me started. More than enough, actually. I know how valuable your time is, so I can give some of it back." She stood and signaled Blake before gathering her things.

"I..." He seemed at a loss momentarily, standing only when his manners took him on autopilot. "Please don't feel like you have to rush off on my account."

"It's fine." Blake bent over as she spoke quietly to him, telling him to send her the bill later so she could make a hasty retreat. She hated cancelling her order more for the kitchen staff than her wallet, but she'd call later and beg Weaver's forgiveness.

When Blake left them, she again turned to Tom. "So we'll be good to go next week whenever they finalize schedules. Your PR guy has my contact information if you have a question in the meantime."

"It was great to meet you, Claudia." He must have resigned himself to her departure, because his perfect smile was back in place. If he was sane, he was as grateful to end their ill-fated interview as she was.

"You too, Tom." She offered him her hand and they shook quickly.

"I look forward to working together."

"Yeah, me too."

In another minute she was out on the pavement, frantically hoping she could flag down a taxi before he emerged. Thankfully, one pulled up almost as soon as she put her hand in the air. She didn't begin to relax until she made it back to her kitchen and had gulped down a dose of liquor to steady her nerves. If the interview was any indicator, the next week was going to be hell.

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Little did Claudia know, Tom wasn't in any hurry to rush away. He finished his drink and decided to stay for lunch. Despite what she'd assumed, he didn't bring up his schedule in hopes of ending the meeting early. And now after meeting (and soundly insulting) his new co-worker, he was even more determined to do everything he could to make up for his abominable assumption. And though she no longer worked there, he was sure she'd left imprints at Lutin beyond just the cocktail.

Getting the waiter sorted out on the bill turned into a bigger ordeal than he'd anticipated. Claudia, at least in this man, inspired dogged loyalty and he wasn't willing at first to sway from her orders. Finally it took Tom admitting he'd put his foot in his mouth and couldn't bear having her pay when he'd been the idiot. He got a rather disapproving look from the guy, but he'd relented in the end.

"I take it Claudia was good to work with," he finally asked.

"The best." That at least got him smiling again. "She knew everyone and treated us all with respect.
Knew the names of our girlfriends and dogs and anything else you'd assume a big time chef wouldn't bother with. The front of the house doesn't always get that from the kitchen. She never yelled even when we were the ones that cocked up. Everyone loved her."

"I don't find that hard to believe." But he'd seen first-hand what caused her to lose her cool. Apparently when a giant arse of a poncey actor completely insulted her skill set and implied her work was fraudulent, she had no problem yelling. Thank god Luke hadn’t been there to see it or he’d never hear the end of it.

He thanked Blake for his help and had plenty of time to devise a plan for getting on Claudia's good side. For some reason her sullied opinion of him nagged at the back of his mind, just begging to be remedied. And he would remedy it. Otherwise the next week would be torture for both of them, and he wouldn’t accept that without at least trying to fix it.
Chapter 4

There was no way around it. He'd have to make the call to Luke or his grand plan was dead in the water. But he was worried word of his blunder had reached the publicist and that was a conversation he didn't want to have. It might have been possible to get the information via an assistant or someone else at Prosper, but then he ran the risk of more people figuring out what had happened, or worse misconstruing what he was trying to do. No, there was nothing for it but to make the call.

He answered after only three rings. "Hullo, Tommy boy. What can I do for you?"

"Christ, you're in a good mood."

"Getting my way tends to do that. I just got an enthusiastic update from Ms. Rey's agent. She wants to start as soon as possible."

Well, let him think it was for good reasons. "That's good to hear," he replied, making every effort to sound casual. "Actually that's why I called. I wanted to see if you had Claudia's contact information."

"And why would you need that?"

"I... well it's rather stupid..." He pretended to grapple with his words, already having planned out his excuse. "She mentioned she was a fan of Taylor's and I wanted to send her some signed stuff. Figured it'd be a nice gesture."

"That's quite thoughtful of you."

"Yeah well she's making an effort to accommodate my family, so it only seems right."

"Listen, I'm glad you rang. I wanted to double check with you about the party next month."

"Which one?" He damn well knew which one, but if Luke had something to say, he'd let him go out and say it.

"The Independence Day one. There will be a lot of media scrutiny and people posting pictures all over the internet. It's important that you... well that you stay on guard."

"Luke, you really do know how to make a party sound fun."

"I mean it, Tom. There's a lot of negativity around you right now and we can't afford to court any more of it."

"Negativity? Because I'm publicly dating someone?"

"Don't be stupid, Tom, it doesn't become you. It's because you're dating her. And before you start on a tirade, I know it's not fair and I know that the fans don't know her like you do, but I'm here to manage public perception, even when it's not fun. But I've said what I wanted to say, what it was my job to make sure you heard, so I'll leave it at that."

He sighed heavily, and ran his hand through his hair. Deep down he knew Luke was right and was just looking out for him, but it didn't make the pill any easier to swallow. "Yeah, okay. I'll keep that in mind."

"I'm emailing you Claudia's info now, okay?"
“Great. Thanks, Luke.” He hung up, feeling decidedly less enthusiastic than he had a few minutes before. But at least he had a plan to sort out his working life, if not his personal one.

-XXX-

"That was your first of the celebrity crop, yeah?” Jules had just gotten the whole surreal story from her older sister.

"Yep. So you know if this is any indicator, the rest will be a pain in my ass too."

"At least you got to look at someone pretty, though he did insult your livelihood."

"He's not pretty enough to get away with that shit." But he had essentially gotten away with it. There was nothing she could really do short of canceling his appearance. And that would only reflect poorly on her. “But enough of that, fill me in on everything on your side.”

“Well, we just told Moira about the baby and she’s more excited than we expected.”

“That’s good! I was worried she’d be upset.”

“Yeah, we were too.”

“How’s work?”

“I have my tenure review next week, but I don’t know if I’m going to get it.”

“You have excellent evaluation scores, the students love you, and you pack out every class you teach. They’d be idiots not to give it to you.”

“I’m a little too feminist for some of the committee.”

“Anyone with a vag is a little too feminist for them. They can fuck off for all I care. They’re just going to get used to the fact that ladies can do all sorts of things now like read and vote and own property.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm. She had no idea how Jules stayed sane in such a toxic environment.

“Society just doesn’t learn. I mean the Celts were quite progressive and then—”

“Okay, dear heart, when you go into lecture mode that’s probably a sign it’s time to hang up.”

"Only if you never bore me with a lecture about wine."

"Deal. Love you so much, Jules."

"You too, big sis."

"Give my love to everyone."

"I will. And you keep from killing that actor next week. Remember they won't let you have knives in prison."

She laughed at the ridiculous reminder. "I'll keep that in mind."

They rung off, Claudia feeling much lighter for having told the story to a sympathetic ear. If she could endure class with demon Chef Hammond, she could certainly get through three days of filming. She'd bitten her tongue enough other times and she could do it again. If Terrence was to be
believed this would offer her and the show a nice boost.

Interrupting her thoughts, the doorbell chimed, jarring in the silence of the house. She found a delivery guy waiting patiently at her front door. After confirming her name and having her sign for the long box he was toting, she was able to escape back into the house to examine the mystery box.

Tucked amongst the stems of several dozen snowy white Calla lilies, she found an envelope with her name in sprawling blue script. It wasn't Michael's handwriting, but then again even handwritten notes that accompanied such deliveries were written by the florist's staff. But she'd already dismissed Michael as the sender. He'd often ranted about the "giant money suck" the floral industry was and all for a bit of green that would die soon.

What she wasn't expecting, was the signature scrawled at the bottom of the letter.

_Claudia,_

Let me again apologize for being such a monumental ass. I stupidly assumed that what you create with great skill couldn't possibly be as good as it appears. It was a foolish assumption and the kind of pessimistic outlook that I usually try to avoid at all costs. I hope you let me show you that isn't how I usually strive to be.

I know flowers are rather clichéd, but it turns out my original idea of getting you a knife would have been another gaffe. I had no idea a chef's knives were so personal. So I settled for something that would hopefully brighten up your kitchen.

You are absolutely within your rights to not forgive my boorish behavior, but I just wanted you to know that I really am looking so forward to working with you. I'm sure I have a lot to learn from someone as accomplished as you. Jesus, I know that sounds like a lot of simpering rot, but it's the truth. I haven't been home much lately and over the past few years every time I've actually taken the time to prepare a meal... it's hard to explain but it almost grounds me back in reality. I know, more of the ridiculous actor talk, but I think this will help me bring back something that's been sorely lacking in my life.

Shit. I should have typed this out. I could have edited out the existential crisis part, but the florist is getting impatient, so it'll have to stay. All that to say that I'm excited to get started next week.

_Tom_

She read the note three times, unable to reconcile the ignorant comments he'd made with the simple candor of these words. Either Tom was being genuine and wanted to repair the damage he'd done, or he was hypersensitive about his image and this was all show to make her think he was a nice guy. She wanted to believe it was the former, but there was still a deep well of mistrust when it came to those of the celebrity elite. It was a club she was reluctantly on the fringes of and yet had no idea how they operated.

In the end, she decided that she could be the bigger person and at least try and forgive him. And hell, she didn’t even really have to mean it. As long as he got warm fuzzies from working with her, it all served the same purpose. She could silently think he was a preening ass and nobody would have to know. Yep, that’s what she’d do. She was a damn professional and she wouldn’t let some asinine comments degrade her reputation. No amount of rude comments could destroy her credentials or credibility.
Feeling much better for taking the high road, she pulled out her notebook and jotted down a few more notes regarding the mystery brunch menu. She’d done this many times before and this job would be no different. If she could make it through this episode without yelling at or hitting someone it meant she could damn well do anything. This may be a test from the television gods, but she’d fucking pass it if it killed her.
Chapter 5

With skill born from decades in professional kitchens, Claudia opened the trailer door with her knee while carting coffees, her purse, phone, notebook, and a container of muffins in her hands. Sin, the stylist, looked on with amused interest as she carefully unloaded onto the long counter stretching across half the space.

“Sin, I’m sorry it’s a rat’s nest today,” Claudia began apologetically, offering the woman a large coffee by way of greeting.

“Isn’t that what it usually is, my dear?” The older woman’s Irish lilt always sounded like music to Claudia, even when her hair’s honor was being impugned.

“Well, but sometimes… yeah it usually is.” One hand absently patted the messy bun atop her head as if confirming the state of things.

“But you brought me a latte, which evens things out considerably.” It might have been the fact that she towered over Claudia and it might have been her age, but she felt very maternal about the young chef. She gave her a swift peck on the cheek before ushering her over to the shampoo chair. “There’s nothing for it but to start from scratch.”

“I brought muffins,” Claudia managed before Sin was leaning her back and getting to business.

It wasn’t until she was seated at the mirror, towel drying her hair did she notice the trailer had another occupant. “Oh shit, didn’t see you there. Good morning.”

“Morning,” Tom replied, a small grin on his face. She wondered just what was so amusing. Before she could come up with anything else to say, Sin was behind her, a look of grim determination on her face. “This one,” she motioned to Tom, “was early and I hardly had to do a thing. His hair’s practically perfect. A bit of gel and he was ready.”

“In Claudia’s defense, she does have rather more to deal with than I do. And being early is easy when all you have to do is walk ten steps from your door.”

Sin simply rolled her eyes and began work. Claudia bit out a polite, “thank you,” despite being slightly rankled at his quick response. She was touchy around him, probably subconsciously pissed at his gaffe at lunch. She mentally chided herself for being petty and offered him a smile. “I made muffins for everyone, if you’re interested. Pumpkin cranberry.”

While Sin had her bent over while doing something complicated with her wet curls, Tom took a muffin. The appreciative noises he made brought him up slightly in her esteem. Maybe she could stop mentally berating him and let it go. So far, he was being very polite.

She decided to brief him on the protocol, but wasn’t afforded the chance until after they’d left the trailer. She felt a bit embarrassed to see the production vehicles and makeshift tents invading such a genteel neighborhood, but he’d signed up knowing they’d end up in his kitchen. She pushed the thoughts of his neighbors aside and forged ahead. “So okay, we’ll film the pantry stuff first, obviously. Then I have to make everything I’m planning so we have something pretty to pull out of the oven when we’re cooking together. We take pictures of everything I choose and get the interns to make a grocery run so we have enough for multiple go-arounds.”

“So you make everything twice?”
“Yep. But not all of it today. We usually do half the first day and finish up the next. The third day is usually short and just extra shots to make everyone comfortable we got everything. So I’ll just be in your hair for a few days and then you can go back to that vacation.”

He showed her through the house, following the snaking cables to the nest of chaos currently encompassing his kitchen. It was a nice space, she saw with relief, sporting a sizable island and state-of-the-art stove. Large enough to accommodate the cameras and other equipment once the table was removed from the breakfast nook. Everywhere that wasn’t going to be on camera was jammed with crew and equipment, but by far not the tightest squeeze they ever had to make.

As she expertly weaved her way amongst the clutter, she greeted each crew member, offering a smile and a reminder that there were muffins on the craft services table. When they emerged into the empty space, Tom had that amused look on his face again. “You made enough for everyone?”

“Made what? Oh the muffins?” He nodded. “Yeah well a hungry crew is an unhappy crew, so I always try to make sure they’re covered. They are also the recipients of everything we make for filming. It would be a complete waste just to throw it away.”

“But isn’t that what the set caterers are for?”

“They keep minimal snack things, but it’s mostly me feeding my people. It’s too ingrained in my nature not to do it, so the production company just gave up trying to stop me.”

“You are like a force of nature, Claudia.” Her cheeks reddened and he rushed to amend his statement. “And I mean that in a good way!”

“Well thanks, I suppose. I’ll have to put that quote on my resume.”

They waited a few more minutes for the director to amble over and prep Tom for the shots they’d be getting. Although nothing was technically scripted, they had to make the best use of their time, so appraising the talent of the camera angles just saved everyone costly and laborious reshoots. It only took a few hours to do the pantry crawl as she liked to call it, owing the swiftness to Tom’s experience with all things film.

“Okay everyone, that’s a break for food prep. And just to let you know, I’ve been informed that Claude’s in a Broadway mood today, so take your leave accordingly.” Liz, the director, shot her a wink as she made the announcement.

Once everyone began to disperse, Tom looked over to her, air of confidence gone for the first time that she’d seen. “Do you need me to do anything?”

“No, but thank you for the offer. I have this down pat. Take a break if you need some quiet or food or whatever.”

“But you’re going to stay working?”

“I don’t consider this part work, Tom. I’m a big girl, I promise I’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Yell if you need me to help with anything.”

“Will do.” Absolutely wouldn't do, she thought, but sometimes it was important to observe the niceties.

She began the comforting ritual of prep after plugging her phone into a nearby speaker dock. It was something the crew had gotten used to setting up wherever they went and it had become a topic of
conversation regarding her choice of genre for the day. Most of the people on set regarded her quirk with bemused acceptance, but she’d coaxed a few of them into singing along occasionally. Of course it was usually after threatening to take them all to mandatory karaoke, but it added a sense of brevity to the set.

Today, as Liz had warned, she put her Broadway playlist on shuffle as she set to work. And however odd her crew had found it in the beginning, they now gave her fond smiles as they headed out to finish a task or go to break. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Tom talking to one of their production assistants, smiling and signing something she’d offered to him with a shaking hand. And that was good. He’d better damn well be nice to her people or she would have to have words with him, famous actor or not.

But even he drifted out of sight as she began chopping vegetables and herbs. Slowly she felt her body relax and for the first time noticed how tense she’d been. This wasn’t just a normal job and her body knew it. Thank goodness for this little oasis of calm in the middle of all the chaos.

As the strains of the fourth song ended, she felt more herself than she had all day. She knew good and well her little musical habit was seen as odd, but after years of working in kitchens that were too hectic for the luxury of music, she saw it almost like a reward for all the dues she’d paid working for someone else. Even when she’d been head chef it wasn’t an indulgence she could afford when stations routinely had to shout at each other as the main means of communication. But now this was quite literally her show and she’d do as she pleased.

When *Without You* from *Rent* came on she raked her eyes around the room. “Where’s Eddie? He’s my Roger.”

Carl, one of the techs still left behind the monitors, poked his head out and gave her the bad news. “Out sick today, Claude. And before you ask the answer is no. I can't carry a tune.”

“Never stopped me, Carl. Damn. Now I have to be stupidly melodramatic by myself.” Carl just shrugged and went back to his work, more than used to the chef’s eccentricities.

She joined in on the second verse, enjoying the comfort of something she’d loved since childhood. When she heard a male voice pipe in during Roger’s part she nearly dropped the whisk she’d been beating eggs with. Tom walked around to the other side of the counter, giving her a smile as he sang along.

Momentarily stunned into silence, he had to prod her when Mimi’s next line started. “Don't make me be stupidly melodramatic by myself either.” Shit. He’d been watching and she hadn't even noticed.

Voice faltering at first, she did as he bade, a sense of complete unreality coming over her. While she sang along with Mimi’s next solo lines he pointed at a couple of zucchinis she hadn’t gotten to yet and raised his eyebrows. “Sliced?”

“Thin half moons,” she replied automatically as if he was her prep chef. He took a nearby knife and began to slice as they continued their strange duet. She wasn’t used to someone not only tolerating her odd habit, but embracing it in such a way. And coming from this huge actor that she’d initially written off as an asshole was an even bigger surprise.

But his enthusiasm was infectious and they rose in pitch with each successive line. Before she knew it she was actually having fun. This effervescent man had invaded her kitchen during her sacred alone time and it didn't feel wrong, nor did it grate on her nerves. This was turning out to be the strangest job she’d ever done.
And he didn't leave once the ballad was over. He moved on to dicing ham at her instruction and he actually seemed to be enjoying himself as well. He didn't know all the songs like she did, but he had a more impressive repertoire than she’d expected. There was none of the disdain she’d expected from someone who by every account basically breathed for Shakespeare.

When Liz came in shortly after 12:30 to ask if she’d be wrapping up soon, Claudia begged for a few more minutes. “Lemme listen to Guns and Ships and Yorktown and I should be good. We’re doing the eggs on camera, yeah?”

“We are. Just those two, not the one between.”

“Yes ma’am.” She was such a creature of habit and liked to end on something that hyped her up for filming.

Wiping off her hands on the towel she’d hung out of the pocket of her jeans, she clicked the buttons until she got what she wanted. People had started to filter back to their stations and a few audibly groaned when they heard what she was listening to.

Tom glanced quizzically around when someone grumbled something about sore winners and looked to her for an explanation. “What is this from and why are they upset about it?”

“It’s from Hamilton and they’re just jealous that they don’t have an awesome musical all about kicking America’s ass.”

“Ah, I see,” he said, but still looked confused. However, the confusion seemed to recede as the second song progressed. “Oh so this is the American revolution then?”

“Yeah. You’ve never heard of Hamilton? It’s huge and awesome and you should listen to it immediately.”

“Told you she’d try to convert him,” Amy piped in to the group at the sound board.

“The hired help should be seen and not heard, thank you.” She stuck her tongue out at Amy and earned a raspberry in response. “Didn't you Brits invent that?”

“Yank’s been watching too much Upstairs Downstairs,” Carl groused.

“I'm secure in my belief that I'm right and you’re all just bitter about it.”

Soon after, Liz reigned everyone in and began setting up the shots for them. And even despite the intrusion on her solo time, she felt good about it. Things were going much smoother than she’d expected and they were getting a lot done. By the time they broke around six o’clock they were a bit ahead of schedule, something that always put Liz in a genial mood.

“That’s a wrap for today, ladies and gents! Normal call tomorrow.” She turned to Tom and continued issuing instructions. “If you’ll leave your clothes in the trailer we’ll see that they’re laundered and pressed for tomorrow. Anything you need from me in the meantime?”

Claudia didn’t wait to hear his reply, instead heading off on her own. He didn't need to be escorted around like a child and she was eager to change into something more comfortable. But despite her head start he caught up with her before she could even make it to the courtyard. Damn long legs, she grumbled to herself.

“Claudia, I had a lot of fun today. Thank you.”
“No problem. I'm just going to get changed and then I’ll see to the dishes.”

“I can do that,” he protested. “You’ve been on your feet all day and it's my house.”

“It’s also my set and I haven't seen you sitting down either. I always take care of cleanup. It’s too ingrained in me to not tidy up after service. We have to hit the ground running tomorrow.”

“Well at least let me offer you some wine or something for your trouble. And I’ll keep you company.” It sounded like he’d already made up his mind and she couldn't think of a polite or logical reason to refuse.

“Okay.”

“Great! Meet you in the kitchen in ten?”

“Sure,” she offered him what she hoped was a convincing smile.

After she’d changed into leggings and a roomy sweatshirt, she put her shoot clothes in the trailer’s hamper. At the bottom she caught a glimpse of the blue button-up he’d worn that day. Well, he was quick to follow instructions at least. She steeled herself before walking out into the twilight and back up his front steps.

Everyone else had cleared out and he was already waiting for her when she made her way back to the kitchen. "White or red,” he asked. She saw that he’d changed into another button-up and trouser combo, looking like the only thing that had changed were the colors. So he was dapper at all times, she thought.

“Whatever you want to open is fine. I'm not picky.”

“Red it is then.” He poured them each a glass and retrieved one of the bar stools that had been stowed out of frame. Before sitting down at the counter he asked again if he could help.

She rebuffed the offer, but as gently as possible. Reminding herself that he was just trying to be polite, she explained the ritual to him by way of softening the refusal.

“You learn pretty quickly in restaurants that your main job after getting the patrons served is to get the kitchen back in the state you found it at the beginning of service. I probably wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if I didn't see to it personally.”

“I just assumed you had staff for that.”

“They offered them to me, but I like it this way. It's like a tangible close to the work day.”

“That makes sense.”

A phone buzzed and since hers was stowed in her pocket, she knew it was Tom’s. He glanced at the screen and back at her apologetically. “I’m sorry, I need to take this.”

“No problem.” She turned back to the sink and focused on the pile of bowls and cutlery. But he didn't leave the room and she couldn't help but hear his side of the conversation.

“Hello, darling.” She tried not to listen, but gave up almost immediately. “Almost done with day one, yeah.”

The person on the other end must have had a lot to say, because it was at least another minute before he replied. “I miss you too, but July will be here before we know it.” She’d already noticed that Tom
was quite the little optimist.

There were a few more innocuous exchanges and then he ended the call with a reciprocation of love. She stayed silent until he offered further information and another apology.

“Sorry about that, but my girlfriend is quite busy and I usually have to drop everything when she has a moment to talk.” He looked mildly embarrassed about it, something she chalked up to those faultless manners of his.

“That’s totally fine.” That sounded like a pretty shitty arrangement to her, but she kept that opinion to herself.

“I uh… I wanted to thank you again for moving past my horrible behavior at lunch. You’re clearly terribly good at what you do and gracious in the face of assholes to boot.”

“We’ve all said stupid shit we regret. It’s not a big deal, Tom.”

“You may not think so, but I do. So thank you all the same.”

"And I should thank you for the flowers. They were beautiful.” He grinned at her words, thankfully refraining from thanking her for thanking him.

A few minutes later she was finished with both the dishes and her wine. He assured her he’d handle the soap and wash cycle, insisting on walking her not only to the front door, but also through the gates to her car once she’d gathered her things.

“Thank you again for such an instructional day. I’ll see you in the morning, yeah?”

“Bright and early,” she assured him.

As she drove home, she couldn't tell if she was looking forward to the next couple of days or dreading them. Tom didn't seem content to leave her be like she was used to, but it wasn't as terrible as it could have been. In fact, it wasn't terrible at all. There was still a sense of surrealism about the whole thing, but that wasn't necessarily bad, just weird. Well, however she felt, it’d all be over in a few days and she could go back to her normal life.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I love it when you guys comment. Honestly it's such a highlight. Thanks to those who talk to me and let me ramble on about how much fun I'm having with this project. :)

The next morning she again found him already in the hair and makeup trailer when she arrived. He offered her a warm smile and greeting as Sin put the finishing touches on his hair.

“So Claudia, I’m curious about something.” He let the statement hang for a beat before continuing. Jesus, she wasn’t sure she was properly caffeinated for a curious Tom Hiddleston, but she patiently waited for the rest. “Honestly how do you manage to take such disparate items and turn them into a coherent menu?”

He just looked so genuinely curious, it gave her a moment’s pause. It didn’t feel like idle chit chat to pass the time, which startled her. Despite the interviews she’d done when the show first started, nobody had ever really asked her that. And it was something that she didn’t need to explain to her professional friends. They all understood perfectly.

“I’ve lived for food basically my whole life. My family owns several restaurants and I’ve just always been in the kitchen. My dad and uncle and grandmother were always willing to show me something new and once you get a good set of skills, you can tackle almost any ingredient. Culinary school helped a lot, both of them in different ways, but they exposed me to a wide range of things I wouldn’t have worked with otherwise. So there are very few things I’d be reluctant to work with.”

“But how do you put it all together?”

“As soon as I’m presented with the pantry or fridge, my mind just starts organizing them into dishes. And there’s always something versatile like pasta or rice or chicken that can be turned into almost anything. You just have to know what to put with it to make it fit the occasion. It’s really not that hard. In fact, the whole reason I got the idea for this was from Chopped. You have to take this basket of dissimilar and really odd ingredients and turn it into a meal. I had a blast on the show and I kept thinking what a neat concept it was and how it could be modified to help everyday people. Food doesn’t have to be scary and getting creative with it is easier than most people think.”

“You were on Chopped?”

“She won it,” Sin interjected, proud grin on her face. “Twice.”

“Yeah. A friend of mine sent in an application for me and when I got picked, she dared me to win it. By some miracle I did.”

“With pig cheeks no less.” The stylist continued to smile as she bustled about preparing her tools for Claudia’s unruly tresses. She hadn’t even known Sin had seen the episodes. She didn’t usually talk about herself and all the scrutiny was making her mildly uncomfortable. A sip of her coffee helped give her something to do with her hands.

“It’s not any magical skill though. To answer your question, I’ve put in a lot of time in the industry
and this is something that comes along with it.”

“Well I’m impressed, regardless of how you downplay it. I’m actually really looking forward to making your menu for my family. I think it’s going to be a big hit.”

“I’m glad.” She was saved a further reply by the trilling of her phone. It was Jules’ ringtone and doing the time zone calculation in her head, she realized it was after midnight there. Her heart dropped at the thought of what news might necessitate a call so late.

“Jules?” She answered without a thought about Tom or Sin or anyone else. Her world had narrowed to pinpoint focus.

“Claude!!” Jules shouted in her ear, the background filled with chatter and noise.

“Are you okay? Is everything—”

“Calm down, I can hear the anxiety in your voice. This is good news. Great news really. Like Onomaris triumphing in battle kind of great.”

“When you make sixth century references I get confused. You know this.”

“Fourth century, Claude. Forth! And she’s really a fascinating figure. She—”

“Get to the modern really great news, please.”

“I. Got. Tenure.” She enunciated each word with gravity, but burst into a fit of giggles when she was done.

“Holy shit, Jules that’s amazing!” She heard a loud chorus of shouts accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. “Where are you?”

“That bar you like by campus. The department is taking me out to celebrate. Listen I gotta go, but I wanted to tell you right away. We’re gonna play quarters and you know I can’t resist a good game of quarters. I can’t drink, but Nali’s here to play proxy for me.”

“Just be safe, okay?”


“Love you too. Call me later, okay? I want to hear all about it.”

“I will give you a play by play of the meeting if you want. Bye, big sis.”

“Bye.” She hung up and couldn’t help the goofy smile from enveloping her face. “Sorry.” She placed the phone back in her pocket and apologized to Tom. It had been kind of rude, but then again she thought it might have been an emergency, so she excused her faux pas and moved on. "My sister just got tenure and had to shout about it.”

"That is absolutely a shout-worthy accomplishment. Where does she work?”

"University of Georgia. Youngest history professor ever to get it too.” She knew she was susceptible to bragging, but at that moment she didn't care.

"That's wonderful. What era does she concentrate on?”

"Celtic history. My niece gets bedtime stories about Boudica more often than not. She's such a nerd
and I'm so proud of her."

"As well you should be."

"I was really worried her pregnancy would throw it into jeopardy, but they told her before she announced it, so it looks like she's in the clear." She had no idea why she was imparting that much detail to a man she hardly knew, but it had just come spilling out.

"Why would that matter?"

"Because academia is full of stuffy assholes that will take any excuse not to promote a woman, much less a lesbian. The world can be a shitty place sometimes, but when stuff like this happens I'm given hope." That was rather more than she’d anticipated sharing, but the good mood had caught her off guard and her filter was clearly on the fritz. Jules would be rolling her eyes at her if she could see her big sister now.

“So she got tenure and has a baby on the way. That's a lot of good in a short amount of time. I think it's wonderful how proud of her you are.”

“Thanks.” She couldn't think of what else to say now that she'd way over-shared, so she decided silence was her best bet. Thankfully a long awkward silence wasn't in the cards for them that morning. Minutes after they'd ended their conversation a man came to the trailer and soundly distracted both of them.

He wore a light linen summer suit and a large grin once he spotted Tom, which wasn't hard to do in a room that was at least one quarter mirror.

“What are you doing here?” Tom almost jumped out of his chair

“Just wanted to see how you were getting on.” And making sure he hadn't stuck his foot in his mouth with this woman again. Tom had spilled the beans about his regrettable comments at the interview and he felt like he had to do some damage control just to be safe. Offering his hand to Claudia, he introduced himself. “Claudia, it’s so lovely to meet you. I'm Tom’s publicist, Luke Windsor. So if he misbehaves please give me a ring first before you call the papers.”

“He’s been very good so far, I must say.”

“That’s what I like to hear!” Luke clapped his charge on the shoulder and she wondered how it must feel to necessitate a minder. Celebrity was an odd state of being, she decided. “Now I don't want to bother you at work, but I did hope I could stick around and watch. I'll admit I'm rather fascinated by your whole concept here, Claudia. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, the more the merrier.” Who was she to refuse? It was Tom's house after all and nothing about Luke set off any danger signs, so it couldn't hurt. Terrence had told her to keep the movie star happy and Tom seemed positively giddy at the idea. It honestly felt like a child eager to show their parent their kindergarten classroom.

“Great! You wouldn't happen to have any more of those muffins from yesterday, would you? Tom wouldn't stop raving about them and I'm starved.”

Smooth, Hiddleston, really smooth. Or was Luke the calculating operator that just knew what to do with the bits of information he’d gleaned from Tom? She wasn't sure, but she could sense she was being buttered up. He probably just wanted to be sure she had only positive things to say after working with Tom.
"I’m not sure, but if there are they’d be at craft services. I brought monkey bread today, so there will be at least some of that."

"I can’t wait. I’ll just pop over there and check. Again, it was wonderful to meet you, Claudia."

"You too, Luke."

He left them to finish with Sin and she had the decided impression that she’d just been handled. But all in all it wasn't an unpleasant experience, so she’d handle it without comment. It wouldn't do to dwell on whether it was normal for publicists to visit the set and he probably wouldn't do any harm. Just a few more days and she’d be back into her safe and predictable world. Until then, she’d try to enjoy herself as much as possible. There was no sense brooding about it.

When they broke for cooking prep this time, Tom stayed in the kitchen with her without another word. She wasn't sure if this was his need to be involved in his own home or if he'd actually enjoyed himself the day before, but she'd roll with it either way. As the crew drifted away to rig equipment or take a break, he looked over at her like an eager puppy. It was kind of endearing.

She outlined everything they'd need to do to put the quiche together and he seemed to take it all in, carefully listening to her plan. Although the dough was simple enough, she didn't really trust him to work on it, so she put him on veg duty. Mushrooms, onions, and asparagus shouldn't be difficult. It was kind of petty, she knew that, but the food was going to her crew and she wanted it right. She justified it by reminding herself that dough could be tricky.

Luke seemed content to putter around the bank of monitors at the far side of the room and as long as he didn't get in the way of the grips and techs, she didn't really care. They weren't paying her to babysit both of them and he'd probably been around cameras enough before to ensure he wouldn't break one. She hoped that was true and if not, well the production company had insurance.

Before she got her hands dirty, she turned on a classic rock station to keep things neutral. Show tunes were all well and good when she was alone (alone with the crew at least), but today she'd try to accommodate Tom as well. She had no idea what kind of music he preferred and the classics seemed safe enough.

Just as she was about to start incorporating the butter into her flour, she glanced over and saw him hacking into his onion. It was downright mutilation.

"Can I show you a better way to do that?"

"Of course," he stepped away and offered her the knife.

She demonstrated the technique she favored, showing him with an unspoiled version. He watched intently as she cut it in half, peeled it, and made a series of cuts not quite through to the end. "This way," she explained now making rows perpendicular to the first, "you still have the root side as an anchor to hold it together until you’re ready to slice. Think you can do that?"

"I know I won't be as quick, but I’ll give it a go.” He was slower than she was, but not embarrassingly so, looking like most people that didn't take entire classes devoted to knife skills.

As she went back to the dough, keeping a close eye on his progress, she heard the beginning notes of Bohemian Rhapsody, always one of her favorites. To her surprise, Tom immediately started singing along. After a few bars, he asked, "Can we turn it up? I love this song."

"Sure," she mumbled trying to hide her amusement. With one of her clean knuckles she managed to press the volume button on the remote and was rewarded an impassioned plea to Mama.
When she just watched in mute fascination he nudged her with his hip. "Come on. You know the words. Everyone knows the words to *Bohemian Rhapsody*. It's a law of nature."

He wasn't wrong and she couldn't resist joining in on the chorus as she went to town working the butter into the flour. Luke briefly disappeared behind one of the monitors, but reemerged moments later with a huge grin on his face. Clearly enjoying the show, he even began waving his lit phone in the air as the song crescendoed.

The whole thing felt goofy and ridiculous and just plain fun. Before she knew it they were both done with their tasks as the last notes of the song played. It had gone by so quickly and only then did she notice the knots of people scattered about the space. They'd likely been drawn by the noise as she and Tom got louder with each successive line. By the time Tom spotted them, spontaneous bouts of applause had started to break out.

He gave each group a little salute and then one final deep bow before pointing to Claudia. It was too absurd to refuse and she did a deep curtsy with her hands caked in flour. She couldn't hide the large smile that had crept across her face. Despite her initial dislike of him, Tom's charm knew no bounds and he'd slowly coaxed her into accepting his presence where no guest usually tread. Again she thought of how very different he was then she'd expected.

The rest of the afternoon went quickly as the two of them seemed to fall into an easy rhythm. Liz was delighted with the takes they were getting and she had to admit it was a boon to have someone so familiar with cameras and the whole process. She was used to dealing with people who tended to panic at the sight of all the equipment you didn't glimpse just watching from home. Claudia had given a fair few pep talks over the years to nervous guests. But not having to worry about Tom was kind of liberating. She just had to concentrate on hitting her cues and making sure the food looked good, both of which were second nature to her at that point.

Luke, much to her surprise, stuck around the whole day. And while she couldn’t put her finger on it, she got the distinct impression he was silently quite pleased about something. Probably just the whole Tom not making an ass of himself again thing, she assumed. She was pretty jazzed about that herself. Despite her initial impression, the man really did seem to be open and eager with any project he worked on. She hadn't seen the first hint of derision or elitism from him and he was even on a first name basis with several crew members, which told her more than anything. This was a man that respected what he did and respected those around him, no matter what part they played. It was damn refreshing to see.

They broke a couple hours early so Liz could go ahead and comb through the day’s footage to begin planning what cleanup shots they’d need to grab the final day. Again Tom followed her back to the trailer, this time peppering her with questions about the menu. What was the best order to make things in? What if the oven had to be at two different temperatures? It finally occurred to her that he was actually going to make the meal for his family, just as he’d said. For some reason she’d just assumed that was the scenario he’d chosen for the show and had just picked something that would play well with the audience. Thankfully, she had the good sense not to blurt out her realization, lest he start apologizing again. He did that a lot, she had learned.

Before they had a chance to retire to their respective dressing areas, Luke came in, another vainglorious smile on his face. "There you two are! An early wrap calls for an early drink, in my opinion. Isn’t that an old adage? If it isn’t it should be."

“Pretty sure you just made that up, mate,” Tom chuckled.

“Well, let’s start a trend then. Tom’s favorite pub is just around the corner. I’m buying.” He addressed the invitation more to Claudia than Tom, as she was the unknown in the equation.
Her initial instinct was to say no, but when she thought about it, she didn’t have a good reason for it. She’d tried and failed several times to keep Tom at arm’s length during filming, so what would a drink hurt? This would end up being a very odd week in the grand scheme of things, likely just an aberration in her usual routine. One more day and they’d go their separate ways. So yeah, she could have a drink with Tom and his baby-faced escort.

“Sounds great. It’s been too long since I’ve had pub chips anyway.”

“Excellent. You two get your wardrobe sorted out and then we can go.”

“Wardrobe, dishes, and then pub,” she corrected him.

“Dishes?”

“Claudia has an end of day ritual,” Tom explained. “And before you ask, no she won’t let either of us help.”

“Well okay then.”

She felt like she was being regarded as a bit of an oddity as they waited for her to finish up the dishes, but she wouldn’t be swayed no matter how weird it seemed to others. They weren’t the first people to be startled by her thorough approach to the production, nor would they be the last. As she closed the door of the dishwasher, she felt that familiar sense of accomplishment settle over her. They’d done well today and now her brain could properly shift gears from work to… well not personal time exactly, since she wasn’t sure what would come of having a pint with Tom and Luke. But the more she dwelled on it the more awkward it would be, so she tried to push the thoughts away and focus on enjoying a trip to the pub.

They walked the handful of blocks and found the place only marginally busy. It took no time at all to grab a table in one of the shadowy corners and place their drink orders. The place was more upscale than a traditional pub, but she shouldn’t have been surprised that a gastropub was more of Tom’s style. They had chips and beer and that was really all that mattered.

When the waitress came back with their pints, Claudia placed her food order, but had a special request. "Is there any way I can get some mayonnaise on the side, a couple of cloves of minced garlic, and some lemon wedges?"

The girl looked at her quizzically, but said she didn't think it'd be a problem. But all curiosity about the odd order seemed to leave her the moment she caught sight of Tom. He’d had his face buried in the beer menu when she took their initial orders and now she was confronted with the handsome bastard in all his glory. She whisked their menus away, eyes lingering on Tom longer than necessary. Claudia felt a bit sorry for her and thanked her profusely when she finally tore herself away to put the kitchen order in.

"That happens a lot, doesn't it?" She'd directed the question to Tom, but Luke was the one that answered.

"It's my curse, I'm afraid. People just get so intimidated by my chiseled good looks."

"What a burden for you," she exclaimed, patting his hand sympathetically.

"You two are hysterical," Tom grumbled.

The three made small talk for a few minutes before someone stomped up behind her. And before she could register the heavy footfalls and turn around, a voice boomed out.
"If you wanted garlic aioli, you should have bloody well asked for it! This is a class establishment, I'll have you know. I should kick your arse to the curb for thinking I'd use some rubbish store brand mayonnaise."

By the time her eyes traveled up the thick torso wrapped in a stained set of chef's whites, he'd finished his little speech. The men stared aghast as she squealed with delight and launched herself up at the bloke that had just read her the riot act.

"Cole!"

Tom and Luke watched as he spun her around like a rag doll before putting her back on her feet. "I knew it was you, chef. Nobody else would try and make their own garlic aioli tableside."

Remembering her companions, she turned and introduced the gruff man. "Tom, Luke," she pointed to each in turn, "this is Cole. He used to be one of my line chefs."

They all shook hands and muttered the appropriate great to meet yous and the like. Cole pulled her into a fierce side hug, smiling like a proud parent. "Claude here didn't teach me everything I know, but she did handle all the important bits."

"You know, Weaver cursed the day you left. He'd just assumed you'd move up to be his sous chef."

"That was the plan, but my fiancée's da took ill and she needed someone to run the kitchen here. He recovered and didn't want the stress to put him back in hospital, so I stayed. We own the place now."

"That's amazing!"

"And bit by bit I'm getting this lot," he waved a hand at the other patrons, "used to something a bit better than frozen fish and tinned peas."

"Fighting the good fight then."

"Aye." He glanced back at the window leading into the kitchen and turned back with a guilty look. "Damn, I have to get back in there. My second is as green as a fucking field of clover. He's probably frozen in place. Come visit me one afternoon after lunch rush and we'll catch up."

"Absolutely."

He gave her another affectionate squeeze and a smacking kiss on her cheek before retreating. "I'm triple frying those chips the way you like 'em, chef."

"Thanks, Cole!"

She sat back down, a fond smile on her face. "Do you know someone in every kitchen in town," Tom asked with a smile of his own.

"No, though the community is a tight-knit one."

"The people at Lutin had nothing but praise for you too."

"You talked to them about me?" Trying to keep the accusation out of her voice was difficult, because that seemed like an invasion of privacy.

"Just our server. He said you were wonderful to work with and I must say, I agree."

Despite the compliment, she wasn't mollified. It was one thing to have this kind of thing come up
organically, but to question someone about her just didn't sit right. Why did he care anyway?

"I think this calls for a toast to my new favorite chef." Luke's cheery words shook her out of her internal diatribe and she put her best fake smile on as they clinked glasses. Everything in her life had taken on a surreal cast ever since Tom had entered the picture and she found herself feeling wrong-footed more often than not in his presence.

The interview theme continued, but this time Luke was the one that seemed keen on hearing her life story. It didn't rankle like Tom talking to her former staff behind her back though, so she'd endured the temporary spotlight.

"Where'd you go to culinary school in the states, Claudia?"

"New England Culinary Institute."

"But you're from the south, aren't you?"

"Yeah. When I was picking out schools Good Eats was just getting popular. And I found out Alton Brown went to NECI and I started looking at it and I really liked their bachelors program." Plus, it was several states away from her mother, which was a huge motivator. But they didn't need to know all that.

"Well, having watched everything today I'm damn impressed. That trick of putting milk in scrambled eggs was new to me. I might even try a few of those recipes myself."

"That's the whole reason I do what I do. Email me a picture if you do. I guarantee it will make my day."

"You have a deal."

As soon as she could do it politely, she made her excuses and stood to leave. Cole had already comped their bill, so after she said her goodbyes, she was out into the summer evening. But she barely made it half a block before she heard Tom call her name.

"Claudia! Wait up!" Despite the sprint he'd just made, he wasn't even breathing hard. "I just wanted to apologize for the third degree back there. I honestly don't know what's gotten into Luke today."

"We can't seem to finish a meal together without you apologizing for something."

"You left so quickly I just... I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine, Tom. I've spent all day around people and now I need to recharge my introvert batteries before tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"It's probably hard for someone like you to understand, but I need alone time to recover from the people and the talking and the noise."

"Someone like me?"

"An extrovert. It's obvious you'd probably wither and die after too much alone time. I don't have that going on at all."

"Oh god, Claudia, I had no idea. I'm going to kill Luke for dragging you out with us tonight."
"He didn't *drag*, he invited. I'm not a total hermit, but I know myself well enough to see when it's time to go home. No big."

"Okay. You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm perfectly fine. Go have fun with Luke and don't worry about me. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bright and early?"

"Yeah, bright and early."

He stood for a moment as she walked away, giving her a ridiculous little wave before turning back towards the pub. As she walked back to her car, she couldn't help but wonder if he *was* exactly as advertised. There didn't seem to be any artifice about him and god knew he hadn't needed to come check on her just then. What if he was just a genuinely good guy who just happened to make millions per job? It seemed rather anachronistic, but not wholly unheard of.

This job had been a headache, she thought, just not the one she'd originally expected. She'd already spent far too much energy contemplating Tom and his motivations, especially since they'd never cross paths again. Whatever Tom's deal was, she didn't have to worry about it past tomorrow. He could go on apologizing to trees for breathing the oxygen they produced for all she cared.

But as she walked past his darkened house on her way to the car, the message became very clear. Two imposing gates, a security system, and a hearty front door effectively cut the house off from the rest of the city. Unless Tom let you in, your only option was to stand there, face pressed against the bars. And after everything she'd learned about him, it was the one thing that made her sad, and in that moment she pitied him.
“Claude?” She heard Michael’s voice followed by the slam of her front door. Sometimes she swore he did it deliberately just to annoy her.

“Kitchen!”

A few moments later he entered and kissed her cheek before dropping his bag on the table. “So done with the movie star now, right?”

“Yep. We wrapped this afternoon.”

“I’m sure you’re glad to be well shod of him. I know these celebrity episodes are good for the show, but I don’t envy you one bit having to work with these primadonnas.”

“He actually was very nice and polite. He didn’t have a cross word for anyone on set, which really surprised me. We invaded his house for almost a week and he was totally cool about it.”

“Ah, so that cultivated charm worked on you too,” he sighed and smiled knowingly. “He’s famous for it.”

“Listen, I’ll take someone like that pretending to be nice over someone being an active douche any day.” She continued prepping the vegetables, letting her muscle memory take over. “Tell me about your day.” She knew that’d get him off the subject of Tom. It was odd how she felt almost protective of him after hearing how Michael just assumed he’d be an asshole.

Michael, a book editor, never missed an opportunity to talk about his work—almost to the point of annoyance. “Sam dropped a massive manuscript on my desk out of nowhere and wants my notes by the end of the week. But he said I’m the only one he trusts to be brutally honest with a promising new author, so of course I’ll get it done.” He managed to make himself sound put-upon, but she knew he lived for assignments like that.

“Aww don’t be too hard. Constructive criticism is one thing, but sometimes I feel bad for your authors. It takes so much to put your thoughts out there for someone else to read them and then you just tear it apart.”

“Darling, that’s my job. I don’t relish it, but I have to do what I can to improve the material. You’d be a terrible editor, always telling every hack that what they did was stupendous. You wouldn’t last a month.”

“Gee thanks. What a lovely thing to say.” She rolled her eyes and moved toward the saucepan on the range.

“It’s just because you’re too kind, Claude. In my position sometimes you have to be the bad cop. Some writers just need tough love if they’re to whip their manuscripts into anything resembling a real novel.”

“Yeah well I’m glad you’re not my editor.”

“Cookbooks are a different animal entirely. What does Larena even do with your book? Does she test every recipe?”

“There’s bits in between the recipes and she’s helping me decide on a flow for things and she deals
“Hey,” he began in that patronizing tone she absolutely loathed. “No need to get defensive. I think working with that Hiddleston chap has taxed you more than you realize. Why don’t I get you a glass of wine to help you wind down?”

“That’d be nice,” she grumbled, noticing that he didn’t refute her observation that he thought the manuscripts he worked on were at a higher level than her own. And she supposed that was true in a way, but it made her feel somehow less than and she didn’t like it. It was one of those things that she could think about herself, but nobody else was allowed to.

He brought her a glass of something red, ignoring the fact that she was preparing a chicken dish. But, feeling superior at her own marvelous self-control, didn’t lecture him on the correct pairing. She’d put time in at a winery in Napa and she knew a great deal about wine as it related to food. Come to think of it, that might make a good second cookbook idea, she thought and filed away the idea for future reference. She reasoned that maybe both of them shouldn’t be elitist at the same time, so she sipped without comment and moved the vegetables to the saucepan. At least it was a bottle from her own stock, so she didn’t have to pretend it was a good vintage when it wasn’t.

“I have a cocktail thing at work Friday night. Will you put on that purple dress I like and accompany me? We could do dinner afterward anywhere you want, make a real date out of it.”

It had been a while since they’d done more than dinner in, a movie, and then sex before bed. Even Claudia was starting to feel in a rut and she was the most ardent homebody she’d ever met. A boring party at the publishing house didn’t sound terribly exciting, but a real date after would make it worthwhile. “Sure. Weaver’s looking to move somewhere new and he’s been begging me to check it out. It’s Thai French fusion and it sounds amazing.”

“W... Weaver... you know him from?”

“He was my sous chef at Lutin. He’s the short Scottish guy that came to my housewarming. The one with all the tattoos.”

“Ahhh yes. He got spectacularly drunk, didn’t he? Although in his defense, many of your friends did.”

“Yeah, you get chef types away from the stove for a night and they’re going to enjoy themselves. It’s so stressful.”

He nodded, but didn’t seem to hear her. Instead of replying, he plowed forward with a new thought. “Listen, I have that massive book to get through, I’m going to get some reading in before dinner, okay?”

“That’s fine.”

Giving her another peck on the cheek, she watched him leave the room in silence. For some reason he never seemed content to just stay and watch her work and it had always sort of galled her. Part of her just always envisioned her partner happy to enjoy watching her putter about the kitchen as they talked and joked. It was probably one of those stupid childhood fantasies people got and she tried to brush it away. Nobody was perfect, after all.

But lately just about everything Michael said or did seemed to rub her the wrong way. Maybe it was just the stress of the show. Despite Tom’s stellar attitude, she’d been stepping on eggshells at least for the first part of the shoot. It had taken her a lot to move past his insensitive comments at their lunch,
but it looked like that had been a genuine mix up. At least she had some time off to decompress before dealing with the next celebrity. They had to work around some hectic schedules to get their guest’s cooperation, so it meant she was on standby until the stars aligned. Stephen Fry was next and she was trying not to freak out at the idea of working with him. Now that was someone that left her starstruck. If Michael had a rude word to say about Fry, she’d likely deck him.

She would put the downtime to good use though, making the finishing touches on her book and maybe even getting some things together for the next one. In fact, the book tour that fall would take her through Napa. She’d probably be able to spare some time to visit some of her old friends and snag a couple of cases to send home. The wine concept was a good one, she decided. She could try and demystify the idea of wine as a something only the elite could truly enjoy. As her mind started working through all the sommeliers she knew and which would be good to talk to, the tension she’d been carrying finally started to abate. She needed to work on her own terms again and this would provide an excellent return to her normal life.

By the time she called Michael back for the meal, she had the bones of a nice plan and already felt lighter at the prospect. Michael, however, decided to dredge up a topic that was guaranteed to make her angry.

“I saw that you went with the glass tiles in the hall bath.” Nothing about his tone was confrontational, but she knew damn well what he was doing.

“Let’s not debate the finer points of my shitty home decor taste, shall we? I’ve had a long couple of days and you’re not going to change my mind.”

“I was just making an observation, Claude.”

“I’m not stupid. I know you wanted me to go with that friend of yours for interior decorating, but I’m picking everything myself.” She’d been renovating the house for what felt like ages now and was getting very tired of his constant stream of helpful suggestions. Somehow they always came across more critical than anything. “Every time you bring it up, we end up fighting and I just really don’t want to go down that road tonight. So let’s just drop it, okay?”

“Fine by me.” And though his tone stayed genial throughout the exchange, he settled into a sullen silence after she refused to be baited. There was nothing Michael loved more than what he called a vigorous debate. But he was never content just to share his views, he always tried to convince her that he was right and it was insufferably frustrating. So she’d call his bluff and let him stay as quiet as he wanted.

They might do a movie after dinner, but sex was definitely off the table as far as she was concerned. She didn’t find his insufferable know-it-all side conducive to romance and he’d have to deal with the consequences of picking at an already irritated wound. Maybe he’d even decide to stay at his place that night. When she realized she was actively hoping for that, she decided to give things a thorough examination at the next available chance. Something told her it wasn’t healthy to feel that way. They’d have to have a serious talk soon if the relationship was going to go anywhere. And as much as she dreaded such a thing, she felt better knowing that something would have to give sooner or later and it would likely be for the better, no matter what the outcome.

As it usually did, having even the beginnings of a plan lifted her spirits, despite the fact that Michael still hadn’t said another word. Surely that was just the introvert in her enjoying a bit of quiet contemplation? That had to be it.
Despite the fact that she barely knew him, being called into a classified meeting with Luke felt remarkably like being summoned to the headmaster’s office. The man with an affable baby face seemed surer of himself than anyone had any right to. Smug didn’t even begin to describe it and it was something she hadn’t seen from him when they’d first met. And he’d insisted on turning it into a dinner meeting, which she wasn’t sure was a good or bad thing. The same went for the fact that he wouldn’t tell her why he wanted to talk to her and Tom with such urgency.

“Luke, I have plans,” she’d protested that afternoon. Not particularly enticing plans, but plans nonetheless. She’d be lying to herself if she said she hadn’t made a token protest, remembering the office party Michael had invited her to. What had seemed like a good idea a few days ago now sounded like it would be torture.

“Break them. Trust me, you’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

“You can’t just tell me now?”

“There’s some show along with the tell. Listen, I’ll foot the bill for a very expensive meal and all I need you to do is listen.”

“Why does this sound like you want one of my kidneys or something?”

“I’d never be so crass as to ask for a body part after only one meeting. Perish the thought.” He chuckled warmly, but refused to give any other details.

She relented more out of curiosity than anything else and when he sent her the details via text, she wasn’t disappointed at his choice of restaurant. Expensive was even a bit of an understatement. It was the kind of restaurant that she would have hated working at, but loved patronizing. The dishes were known for their fussy perfection and the head chef for his dictatorial nature. But she had no doubt the meal would be exquisite.

When she showed at the appointed time, Luke was already seated in the private dining room he’d reserved. So the meal was to be fancy and private, she thought. Suddenly she wished they’d chosen somewhere she was familiar with, but tried to push the thought away as Luke shook her hand.

After making sure she had a healthy measure of wine, he got right to it. “Tom’s half an hour behind you. I had something to discuss with you before he gets here.”

“That doesn’t sound at all ominous.”

“It’s not, I assure you.” He gave her another grin, looking about twelve in the process. “I have a business proposition for you.”

“Listen, I don’t do catering. It’s too much of a damn headache and weddings are the absolute worst to work. No matter what you do something always goes wrong.”

“What? Who the hell is getting married?”

“I thought that Tom… I mean god knows I know nothing about celebrity gossip, but when you’re stranded at the checkout and there’s 112 point font screaming at you, it’s hard to miss. Especially when I’ve met the guy in person.”
“You think Tom is getting married and that I’m asking you to cater the wedding?” He took a large swig of his wine and pinched the bridge of his nose, looking like he was imagining a bleak, dystopian future.

“Okay by your tone I’m guessing that’s not the case?”

“Not remotely. And this doesn’t exactly bode well for my sales pitch.”

“Sales pitch?”

“Yes. Contrary to that ridiculous story that I couldn’t get to go away, I am actually good at my job.” Not that it looked like it lately. If Tom would at least listen to him… but that was an internal rant for later.

“I’m happy for you?”

“God, you’re a talker too. No wonder you two worked so well together. Just shut it for a moment and let me finish explaining. Okay?” She silently waved for him to continue, now completely unsure where the conversation was going. “What I was trying to say was that I’m a very good publicist. And I think you could benefit from my services.”

“Luke, I don’t even really know what a publicist does. So I’m pretty sure that means I don’t need one.”

“All celebrities need one. Don’t let anyone fool you. I can’t open up Twitter without being confronted with some idiot that should have someone on their team to know when to take the phone away.”

“I’m not a celebrity. Not for real.”

“Define real.”

“I’m not a society girl or in the film industry or anything that requires your level of supervision.”

“If you don’t know what I do, then how can you know you don’t need me?”

“Publicists are for people that party too much and need their image cleaned up.”

“Is that why you think Tom is a client?” He raised an eyebrow at her, as if to challenge her. Tom certainly didn’t seem the part, but who the hell knew. He was an actor and could have just been on good behavior around her. “If you’re so good at what you do, then I wouldn’t know if he was a coke-sniffing nympho narcissist with a clown fetish, now would I?”

“I’m not a bloody magician, Claudia. But our dear Thomas is entirely too verbose, has the attention span of a toddler on a sugar high, and needs someone to keep him focused at press events.” And he also was dating the princess of pop, which seemed to create its own unique vortex of shit for Luke to deal with. But he didn’t mention that. There was a line between sales pitch and gossip.

“So you’re a fancy babysitter.”

“At times, yes. I’m also the buffer between my clients and the rest of the world. Press interactions go through me. I craft the message we want to send to the press and by extension the rest of the world. I hold hands where necessary and make the unpleasant phone calls.”

“Okay. So babysitter with an asterisk. I still don’t think someone like me needs someone like you.”
“Claudia, you’re on the rise. This show will not be your last and I know you’re set to publish your first cookbook in the next few months. Books mean publicity tours and you don’t have anyone to organize that for you now.”

“The publisher sets those up.”

“Yes, but they’re just going to throw you to the wolves so to speak. They’ll have someone from marketing there to make sure their brand is protected, but who makes sure yours is?”

“My brand? You make me sound like some kind of commodity.”

“You are, my dear. You are. Even if you don’t think so now, you can be.”

“And why would I want that?”

“This show isn’t going to last forever. Nor will your status as a culinary darling. Not unless you actively cultivate your image. I can help you do that. As well as offer you a degree of protection from the press. They can be vicious and if they turn the tide of public opinion against you, your career could evaporate before your eyes if not handled properly.”

“You went from being a friendly neighborhood child care profession to a mobster offering me protection for the low, low price of my soul.”

“Jesus you can be dramatic! Like it or not, you’ve left the safe, warm kitchen for the cold glare of the spotlight and that glare can hurt if you’re not careful.”

She leaned back, feeling more off her game than she had in a long time. He wasn’t wrong about her lack of knowledge about all things celebrity. “So you want me to hire you,” she finally stated, wishing for all the cards to be on the table.

“Yes. Not just me, but my whole firm. There will always be someone on hand when you need us. We’ll be sure to cover all the angles. Gossip and news sites alike will be monitored for you. We’ll know what people think or say about you as soon as it happens. And if we want to change the conversation, we’re equipped to do that.”

“Why approach me like this? I must be small fish to someone like you.” Tom couldn’t be their only A-list client. He probably escorted a passel of stars to events every other night.

“I like you and believe it or not, that’s helpful to me in a client. And I have some self-interest at play, which you’ll see when Tom gets here.” More intrigue and allusions to Tom joining them shortly. If possible, she was even more confused than before he’d given her the rundown.

“Not to be indelicate with your English sensibilities, but I don’t think I can afford you. I have some money now, but nothing on the level of an A-list film star.”

“We operate on a sliding scale. You will not require as much handling as Tom would, since he seems to be perpetually promoting this project or that. But I’ll make a deal with you on the issue of our fee.” He leaned forward in his seat, a grin on his face telling her that he’d thought of something extremely clever. Or at least he thought so. “We’ll get you on the books as a full-fledged client and your fee will be one quid a month. We can do that through the end of your book press tour to give you a complete idea of what we can offer. If you still think you don’t need me after that, then we part with no hard feelings.”

“Man, you weren’t kidding when you called this a sales pitch.”
“Do we have a deal?” Again she marveled at how a man could manage to look so self-satisfied with the face of an angelic fifteen-year-old. It shouldn’t have been possible. She couldn’t picture him in full serious business mode, but she knew he must be good at what he did or people like Tom wouldn’t be clients.

She mulled it over for a moment, realizing he’d set up a situation in which it’d be foolish for her not to agree to his proposal. “Okay. I’d be dumb not to give it a try.”

“Knew you’d see logic!” He actually rubbed his hands together in glee, like some kind of over-the-top Dickens character. “Now once Tom gets here we can move on to part two.”

“You’re going to be insufferable and not tell me a damn thing until you’re ready, right?”

“Correct.”

“Then pour me another glass of wine.”

Tom ambled into view a few minutes later. As they all greeted one another, she was again struck by how odd such a meeting would have seemed even a few weeks ago. Then she’d gotten pulled into Tom’s orbit and all bets seemed to be off.

He slid into the seat next to her and offered them both a wide smile. As he unbuttoned his jacket, she noticed he’d donned a waistcoat. Apparently Tom didn’t mess around when the dress code was formal. It made her feel self-conscious about her own ensemble. She’d worn an emerald knit skirt with a fluted trim and a white silk wrap blouse. Dressier than she’d normally go, but seeing what Tom chose made her want to run off to the nearest gown store. As if sensing her discomfort, he leaned over and murmured. “You look lovely, Claudia. That color suits you.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled and found it time to take a judicious sip of her wine. She wanted away from talking about her outfit. She hadn’t even bought the damn thing, it was part of the small group of items the publishing company had provided to ensure she looked appropriate for her upcoming tour.

Luke excused himself briefly to confer with their server and Tom saw an opportunity to compare notes. "Did he tell you why we're here? Why he practically forced me?"

"Well, part of my reason was that he wanted me for a client. Which as of a few minutes ago I am."

"Welcome to the fold, I suppose.” He chuckled and swiveled his eyes back to Luke momentarily, expression one of bemused affection. "I promise it doesn't usually feel like a Cold War spy novel dealing with Luke."

"I must bring that out in him. Lucky me."

Before Tom could respond, Luke rejoined them, placing a laptop at the empty place on their four top. "Okay, I know this is all a bit cloak and dagger, but before you ask a hundred questions I want you to watch something."

He pulled up a video and she couldn't help but lean in with anticipation at what the hell kind of video would warrant such behavior. The one thing she hadn't expected to see was herself.

There was no sound for the first thirty seconds or so, but she knew in an instant when it had been taken. It was during kitchen prep for Tom's episode and had to be from one of her very own cameras. But they hadn't been rolling as far as she knew.

"I bullied one of your camera operators to capture this for me when I was on set. Don't go after him,
Claudia, he thought I had enough authority as Tom's rep to do it or he never would have handed it over."

"Luke, I still don't understand," she sighed, still watching the two of them. He'd started taping while they were prepping before belting along with *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

It didn't take long for screen Claudia to intervene as Tom mutilated his onion. She saw the quick knife lesson and watched as she showed him how to properly dice the vegetable. And while he towered over her, she was impressed with the confidence and authority she radiated. As a rule, she didn't watch herself usually, so there was a bit of surreality to the whole thing. And then they'd started singing.

"This was underhanded of you." Tom frowned, looking dourer than she'd thought possible from such a sunny person. Luke leaned over and muted the audio, but kept the video going.

"I know, Tom, and I do apologize for that, but this was like getting lightning in a bottle." He gestured to the screen still showing the eerily silent pair of them. "This was tremendously entertaining to watch. People would eat this up, if you pardon my food pun."

"Yeah. That's why we had Tom on the show." She still had no idea why he'd felt it so important to get that moment on film. Was this some kind of hazing ritual for new clients? It didn’t make any sense.

"Claudia, this could be so much bigger than a single episode." His excitement was mounting and he seemed ready to jump out of his chair with it. She kind of wanted to hit him in that moment if only to get him to spill the rest of the information he was holding back.

"What are you suggesting," Tom asked.

"I took the liberty of calling a friend of mine at ITV and showing her the tape, just to see if I was crazy or not. And it seems that my instincts are good. She offered you ten episodes on the spot."

"Wait. What?" She had to lean back and it probably wasn't the wisest choice, but she took a swig of wine as well.

"They want the two of you to do a cooking show. If you can have that much fun together when you're not even trying, people will watch."

"Luke, are you sure that would be the wisest choice career-wise for me?" He looked chagrined to even bring it up in front of her, but after a gulp, he continued. "I mean television wouldn't have... I mean isn't that usually for... shit I don't know what I'm asking."

"What Tom means to ask," she interjected, "is whether he should be slumming it in TV." Being that polite was painful to watch sometimes.

"I'm not—"

"Okay so he eventually would have found a nicer way to put it, but why in the hell would someone like him waste his time with ITV?"

"Tom, we can have this discussion in front of Claudia now or later, it's up to you."

"Say it now. You've dragged her into whatever this is, so we might as well hash out whatever needs hashing."
"A year ago I would have agreed with you. Hell, three months ago even. But you've taken some hits lately."

"Hey, that's not—"

"I'm not blaming anyone here, I'm just stating facts." He held up his hands in a posture of defense and continued. "And I'm offering something that I think will help you. The Night Manager went over so well, but you lost your air of affable approachability when all anyone sees these days are paps pictures of you and Taylor. People are starting to see you as an elitist social climber." He stopped Tom's outraged outburst before he could articulate it. "I'm not saying that's remotely true, but it's my business to know what the chatter is. People who know you know the real you, but the public only knows what they're allowed to see. This is a great way for them to see you as a human again, rather than just a cold, remote celebrity."

"And you think a television show will be the answer to all my ills? While keeping in mind that I've 'taken hits' despite your best efforts to stay in front of public opinion on this?"

"Tom, you know that's not fair. I've been working seventeen hour days to try and clean up after you. The meet the parents trip alone lost me sleep for a week."

"Listen guys, I don't feel like I should be here for this." She was getting more uncomfortable by the second and if she drank any more wine she'd probably start interjecting her own opinions in and nobody needed that. This felt way out of her league and something that should have been private between the two men.

"No, Claudia, you should stay," Tom replied, but kept his eyes locked on Luke. "He seems to think you're the answer to our problems, so this involves you too."

"I know you don't want to hear any of this, but I can't just keep trying for damage control. You have alienated a lot of your fan base with your relationship. It's a fact. And however fickle these people may be, they're the ones that keep you relevant and propel you into better roles. I think in a lot of ways this show will allow us to hit the reset button on your public perception."

Tom didn't interrupt and Luke took it as a positive sign to keep going. "You need to be seen as that affable guy again. It's going to help cushion the blow anytime the paps want to pull a story out of their asses. And let's be honest, they're watching you like a hawk now."

He sighed and she saw genuine concern in his face. "You like pudding, you do stupid voices to make your friends laugh, and you're one of the true genuinely nice people I know. I want people to see that again." His tone was pleading, like he was at the end of his rope and desperately wanted Tom to see his side of things.

"And why would Claudia need to agree to such a thing?"

"God Tom, how are you the most naive one in the room about this? I'd get a hell of a bigger audience if you're my costar. I'm not dumb." Even she recognized that people who didn't give a shit about her recipes would watch just to see him grin and wax poetic about food.

He turned to her, as if truly considering her for the first time. "More scrutiny would probably come along with this."

"Yeah, I'd gathered that," she deadpanned. She was past all the posturing and arguing, ready to move on. The publicity game may have been new to her, but some of it was just common sense.

"I mean if that doesn't bother you fine..."
"I like what I do, Tom. More than I ever could have predicted. I love teaching people that food can be joy and love and fun, that it shouldn't be intimidating. If I can pass that along to more people, then yeah I'll worry about getting my pic taken when I'm out buying tampons."

"It might not be that benign."

"I'm boring." She shrugged and wondered when they’d move on to the meal. The decision was already made in her mind, surprisingly enough and now she just wanted to eat. It wasn’t a good idea to keep drinking with nothing on her stomach. She might end up saying something she couldn’t take back. “They'll figure it out sooner or later."

"So you're on board?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I'm willing to try it out for ten episodes, providing the premise isn't awful."

Luke, quiet during their exchange, spoke up again. "They're giving you a blank check essentially. The two of you cooking together on camera for ten thirty minute blocks. That's as restrictive as they're going to get."

"Really?" She'd never heard of such a thing. She had screen test after screen test with a team of marketing people before the network brass would sign off on Thrown Together.

"Claudia, I don't think you realize how magnetic the two of you are on that clip. Jeannie said it made her feel like she was hanging out with you guys. She was more than willing to give you two carte blanche. It doesn't hurt that you both can count a senior VP of programming as a fan."

"Tom?"

He looked intently at her, possibly taking the measure of her now that the possibility of being more than just passing acquaintances was on the table. She calmly returned his gaze, strangely tranquil about the whole thing. Luke had made a good case and she did want to do what she could to help Tom. By the sound of it he needed it. And it would probably do her career good in the process. Like Luke’s earlier proposal, she’d be dumb not to at least try it.

"I trust Luke." He took a healthy pull from his previously untouched wine glass and seemed to shed his defensive anger. She wasn't sure if this was the famous actor at work or if he'd truly come around that quickly. "I'm in."

"I'm so happy to hear that. Neither of you will regret this. I'll set up some meetings with ITV in the next few days and we can start working on a schedule." His enthusiasm was infectious. She found herself looking forward to the project. The idea of having that kind of freedom was enticing.

Luke, likely not wanting to press his luck after his victories, excused himself a few minutes later. "I've interfered enough for a lifetime, so I'll leave you two to have dinner in peace. The whole thing is on me and already taken care of, so order whatever you want and drink as much as you want."

They said their goodbyes and before she knew it she was alone with Tom, a mixture of fear and excitement swirling around inside her. It had been madness to commit to such a crazy suggestion right away, but she had a distinct impression that it was the right move.

Once Luke left it was easy to stay quiet as they studied menus and placed their orders. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d made the correct choice, but it nagged at her that she was so damn sure about it. She’d known Tom in the briefest sense of the word for barely a week and her new publicist even more minimally than that. What kind of a person just agreed to a new business partner so quickly? Well Tom did, obviously, but maybe he was impetuous like that. She had no idea. And
maybe this was just the means to salvage his public reputation.

That was part of the problem, she supposed. She didn’t know this man and had just tied herself to him in a very concrete way. But as much as she wanted to be upset with herself, she just couldn’t. This was exciting and new and different and they might fall on their faces, but if they did, so be it. It was like moving to a new restaurant, but on a massive scale. Luke was right that Thrown Together wouldn’t be around forever. It was good that she already had another project lined up, even if she hadn’t realized the need for it until that night.

He interrupted her inner monologue, oblivious to the specifics, but clearly concerned over her silence. "Listen, I'm sorry Luke railroaded you into this. He doesn't know how to stop himself sometimes. If this isn't something you'd really like to do, then just say the word and I'll get you out of it."

"Do you want out?"

"Surprisingly no." He flashed her a boyish grin. "It sounds like a lot of fun. And as much as I’m loath to admit it, he’s right about the perception issue. This will help with that, so it sounds like a two birds with one stone kind of deal. I wouldn't have agreed if I didn't want to do it."

"I wouldn't have either, so it sounds like we're in business." She raised her glass and clinked his when he did the same. "Here's to a productive partnership."

"So ah... how does this work now? I mean when I have a script to prepare with I'm good, but I'm on uneven footing here."

"Well, astonishingly enough Luke got the network to agree to let us do kind of whatever we want, which is... daunting and also pretty damn exciting. So I suppose we'd better come up with a concept or theme or something beyond just throwing the two of us onto a kitchen set and rolling the cameras."

"Right." He pulled his phone out and started scrolling through screens. At first she thought he was already blanking out on her, but he quickly relieved that fear. "Are you free tomorrow afternoon? I figure we can get some takeaway for lunch and start with a planning session."

"I thought you were supposed to be on vacation."

"Well I know it's technically work, but this sounds like it will be fun. And I'm not faffing off all over the globe for interviews and the like, so as long as I'm getting plenty of rest, I think my body will still register the much-needed vacation. It's a win win."

"Okay. So tomorrow afternoon. Say one?"

"Perfect. Shall we do mine or yours?"

"I have workmen re-tiling one of the bathrooms right now, so your place is probably a tad quieter."

"Excellent! And you already know the address and everything. How very convenient!" His manner was nothing short of gleeful.

Something close to panic flared in her chest, but she did her best to smile enthusiastically. This was a good idea, she was just nervous like she was before every new job. Once she was in it, it would be fine. Probably.

"Great," she managed to reply before grabbing her glass for another sip of liquid courage.
Just as she'd hoped, the edgy nervousness leaked away as they worked. Well, it wasn't real work, but at this stage talking was all they were prepared to do until they worked out some larger details.

And the truly excellent Persian food he had ordered went a long way to allaying fears of his lack of culinary knowledge. He may not know how to make most of his favorite dishes, but he had a wide-range of tastes. At least he wasn't a stick in the mud about food. She already had a sizable list of things to look into based on what he'd already mentioned.

They'd settled in on his living room couch, amid a profusion of containers. It actually turned out more casual than she'd expected. He may seem like an uptight British gent, but he wasn't above eating directly out of a takeaway box like a regular person.

"Is there any way we can make sure there's a dessert something in every show?"

"Tom, do you have a sweet tooth?"

Doing nothing to disguise his grin, he suddenly looked all of ten. "Quite a big one, really."

"Well then I think we should do that. This is your show too after all."

"But all you've done is written things down as I prattled on. What do you want to focus on?"

"Honestly it doesn't matter to me. I just love showing people how to cook. If we can throw in some things that look complicated but aren't once you know the tricks, then that's just a bonus."

"So what if we just aim for interesting recipes to share with people and I play the audience proxy while you exert your not inconsiderable culinary prowess?"

"I think that would work. That way we're not tied to any one gimmick and we'd have the freedom to do what we want."

"I think this will be really great, Claudia."

"Me too." And she actually meant it. Not that she didn't love her show, but the format could be constrictive.

"Okay, so we could start with some menu planning, unless you want to leave that to me." She wasn't sure how involved he aimed to be. It could be that he just expected to show up on filming days and be done with it.

"Can't have you doing all the work! Let me just run to the loo for a sec and when I come back we can get down to brass tacks. Need anything while I'm up?"

"Um I wouldn't turn down another beer."

"Then you shall have it!" He bounded out of the room with vigor that reminded her of a golden retriever and she couldn't help but smile. He certainly seemed like he'd be a good partner to work with.

She looked back through her notes and didn't even register the jingle of keys in the front door. It wasn't until she was greeted directly by the room's new occupant that she even realized someone else was there.

"Hi," the blonde woman waved, a look of mild confusion on her face.
"You're Taylor Swift," Claudia blurted out. She stood on some kind of autopilot, scattering her papers in the process.

"I am. And you're Claudia, right?"

"Yes! It's so nice to meet you." She offered her hand and the two women shook just as Tom was reentering the room.

"Taylor! What a lovely surprise." He looked more shocked than surprised, brows furrowed together for a few seconds before he transformed his expression with an affable smile.

It was a good thing he had the foresight to put the bottles down, because she bounded into his arms before he even finished his sentence. "Tommy!!"

"What are you doing here, darling?"

"I cleared my schedule for a few days so I could see you. I missed you." The last sentence felt like an intimate admission and Claudia felt her cheeks redden. She needed to go.

"Tom, I'll just put together some preliminary info for us to work on later. I don't want to intrude."

"Work?" Again Taylor looked confused as she detached herself from Tom. "I thought you were done filming last week."

"This is something new. Something that ah... well it just came up yesterday. Luke's idea and we think it's a good one. Claudia and I are getting our own show together."

"A cooking show?"

"Yes. I think it's going to be brilliant. And we're already working on what dishes to use and Claudia's agreed to let me have a pudding recipe in each one and well we've rather hit the ground running, haven't we?"

"But it's nothing that can't wait until later. I'm sure you want to spend time with Taylor." She bent to gather the scattered papers, wishing she was anywhere else but there. They probably couldn't wait to tear each other's clothes off as soon as she left. She knew long distance relationships could be frantic when you finally got to see one another.

"I have the best idea!" Taylor's smile lit up her whole face. "Why don't you two test a menu while I'm in town? I would love to be a guinea pig and see how you two work together. I'll be so much fun and I want a chance to get to know you, Claudia."

"That could be interesting." She tried to stay noncommittal without dismissing the idea entirely. The whole thing sounded exhausting if she was being honest with herself.

"What about tomorrow night?"

"Umm I could do that."

"This is so great! Bring your boyfriend or whoever so I have someone to talk to while you guys are being geniuses in the kitchen. Okay?"

"Okay." How was one woman so damnable forceful? She wasn't even being rude, but Claudia had a hard time refusing her. Especially when she looked so genuinely excited at the idea. "But can we do it at my place? I have a better setup."
"Well, I don't doubt that! You're a chef after all! This is gonna be so fun!"

"Yeah I'm sure it will." She still couldn't believe she'd so readily agreed. It was time she made her exit before she got press-ganged into anything else. "I'll email you the address. I'm gonna run now though and let you two catch up."

Taylor regaled her with a steady stream of so nice to meet yous and other such pleasantries until Claudia made her escape a few minutes later. She seemed to be a sweet woman, but good lord was she intense.

The solitude of her car was welcome after the maelstrom she'd just experienced. But she couldn't head home just yet. She'd make a run to a few of her favorite shops to see if anything struck her fancy for tomorrow night. The heavy shopping would have to wait until the morning. She'd visit the early-morning markets tomorrow before making any major decisions. It all depended on who had what and what looked the best.

The menu didn't bother her. No, she was used to coming up with them on the fly. But she would have to spend some time making sure everything was in order for guests. The nice thing about just having redone her kitchen is that she hadn't had time yet to clutter it up too badly. It would be fine, she told herself. She realized she'd been doing that a lot lately.
I know the Taylor stuff is squicky for some of you guys, but rest assured there's method to my madness. You'll get a nice contrast down the road of what a healthier Hiddles relationship looks like. Cause I'm coming at this assuming there were real feelings (I don't like contemplating the alternative too much) and that they or he or she moved waaaayyyyy too fast. So in this story he's getting a lesson from that in the coming chapters. That's my rationale if that helps at all.

But if even what you've seen so far is too much, know that the breakup is done by Chapter 12, if you want to skip ahead. I want to give you guys options if she might be a potential deal breaker for you.

And if you still want to say goodbye know that I shall miss you, but I totally understand.

"I love your house, Claudia." Taylor strolled around the kitchen, wine in hand, settling on her massive collection of cookbooks. She'd had a shelf built in to house them all and in a few months hers would join the others, she thought with a thrill.

"Thanks. I've been remodeling for the past six months or so and I was so happy to get my kitchen back. It was killing me."

"I bet," Tom chimed in from his place beside her. She'd already put him to work chopping shallots and though he wasn't dicing them as evenly as she would, he wasn't doing a bad job.

They'd made it past the awkward introductions and although Michael hadn't fawned as expected, the utter indifference he exuded was borderline rude. Usually he was downright sycophantic with anyone remotely well-know and his attitude had thrown an unforeseen wrench in her plans. Already this was more stressful than it should have been.

“Claudia, this is an amazing location. You’re a stone’s throw from the park, on a private square, it’s amazing. How’d you manage to…” he hesitated, struggling to find the phrase he wanted. “To… land such a property?”

“I keep telling you, Tom, you don’t need to be that polite around me. How did I afford it?” She laughed and took a sip of wine. “By sheer luck. The owner was going through a really bitter divorce and was asking a fraction of what it was really worth. I put an offer in hours after I saw it, thinking it was a mistake, but when she saw I was a single woman, she accepted on the spot. It needed a decent amount of work, but I still got it for a steal, and I’m so close to being finished with it.”

"It turned out fairly well,” Michael added. “Although, I still stand by the fact that granite would have looked better in here than what you chose."

It took a monumental force of will, but she managed to smile indulgently and reply without too much venom in her words. "Granite is very porous and I'm too tough on my counters to fuss with it. This soapstone is perfect for me. It is my kitchen, after all."
Taylor, likely sensing the tension, pounced on the first bit of silence and changed the topic. "What are you two making for us?"

"Greens with a shallot vinaigrette, seafood cassoulet, and some gorgeous bread I found this morning. And since I was already making the puff pastry, there are going to be Napoleons for dessert. Nice and simple."

"You already made the dough?" Tom sounded like she’d admitted to knocking grannies over for fun.

"Yeah sorry. It's kind of time intensive, so I went ahead and got it ready this morning. If you really want to learn, I can show you later."

"Maybe we can do a dough episode."

"That's a good idea. It's something that looks intimidating, but isn't really once you get down to it."

"I have a good feeling about this show, Tom." Taylor walked back to the island and took a seat in one of the bar stools as she spoke, making even such a simple gesture look intimidatingly glamorous. Claudia cursed herself for not choosing a more appropriate outfit, but when she was cooking she never wanted to be uncomfortable. She wouldn’t even be donning jeans if the company had been someone she was closer to. After years in chef’s whites, she was used to the comfort and range of motion such an outfit afforded her and wasn’t ready to deviate too far from that for the sake of her aesthetic.

"I do too." He finished with the shallots and turned to Claudia for instruction. She’d have to get used to being more teacher than anything, at least for a while, since Tom seemed to be a quick study.

“What next?"

“Dice the onion and then peel and devein the shrimp and then we should be ready to start cooking.”

“Don’t we want to start as soon as the onion is ready? That can brown while I work on the shrimp.”

“Nope. One, they don’t need to brown, just get translucent. Two, *mise en place*, Tom. Everything should be prepped and ready to go before you start cooking. Saves everyone a lot of time and cuts down on distractions.”

“Yes, chef.” She watched as he worked on the onion, using the technique she’d taught him and felt a swell of pride to see that he’d actually improved. Yes, he was a very quick study.

“We need to get you some knives of your own before we start filming,” she said, seeing that his hand was just a bit too big for the grips on her set. “I’ll add it to my list.”

“Claude does love her lists,” Michael added with an indulgent smile.

“I’ve noticed! She wrote like a madwoman as we worked yesterday.”

She went to pull the stock out of the fridge along with a few other remaining ingredients, taking the brief respite to remind herself that it was going relatively well, all things considered. When she moved back to her place at the counter, Tom had a suggestion for her.

“What about some music?”

“Sure.” She synced her phone with the nearby speaker and put it on shuffle, making sure to keep the volume low enough as to not completely discourage conversation. Although her blood pressure would probably thank her if everyone would just be quiet for the remainder of the evening. But even
she knew that was a fool’s dream.

Once the cassoulet was safely ensconced in the oven, she started showing Tom how to properly whisk together a vinaigrette. “So, we could use a blender, but I like the texture of the shallots and I don’t want to ruin that by—” She stopped when she realized everyone had gone quiet and Tom didn’t seem to be paying her any attention, which was unusual.

“Claude, this is John Mayer,” Michael finally spoke, but it far from explained everyone’s odd behavior.

“Yeah. I like his earlier stuff. He used to play in Atlanta a lot and he was friends with some of my friends’ friends, if that makes any sense.” She stopped again, still sensing that she was overlooking something big. Finally after a few more awkward moments of silence she just bit the bullet and asked. “I’ve missed something, haven’t I?”

“Honestly, it’s no big deal. I dated John a while back.”

“Shit. Sorry, I didn’t know that.” She scrambled with her phone to find an innocuous playlist that wouldn’t offend anyone. But she really didn’t know these two, nor did she understand that there was information that everyone else just seemed to know about them. Googling someone before having them over for dinner wasn’t her usual protocol. As she clicked through the interfaces, nothing seemed safe enough. “Nobody’s had a thing with Ani DiFranco, right? Because that’s what we’re going with now.”

“Really, it’s fine, Claudia. There’s no need to change on my behalf.”

“Nope. I can’t have a guest uncomfortable… well more uncomfortable.”

“Can we honestly not listen to that feminazi rubbish?” This time it was Claudia who froze at his words. But the two glasses of wine Michael had already downed must have put his danger sense on the fritz and he kept going. “I’m all for feminism, but her brand of it smacks of misandry. She should just go be a lesbian if she hates men so damned much.”

“Get out.” The command came out menacing and low.

“What?”

“Get. Out. You’re no longer welcome in my home.” She seethed with rage, only narrowly stopping herself from slapping him across his smug face.

“Oh come on, Claude. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you were on your period or something. You’re so sensitive.”

“This is not a goddamn joke. Get the fuck out of my house. Now!” The words finally seemed to penetrate his cavalier attitude. He looked to Tom and Taylor, who were trying their best to be quietly unobtrusive, and when he found no help there, he looked back at Claudia. True anger radiated off her and he knew by that point it was done.

Without another word, he put his glass down and exited. She heard the front door slam less than a minute later and only then did she breathe a sigh of relief. But it was a momentary one, when she remembered she’d done this in front of an audience.

“I’m so sorry you had to see that.” Embarrassment burned on her face, but it fought with a giddy elated feeling that she’d was better off with him gone and that her choice had been the right one. The situation had been more dramatic than necessary, but at least the outcome was positive. “As you saw,
one of my many flaws is my temper."

“You couldn’t have planned that, Claudia.” Tom’s eyes were soft and sympathetic as he studied her. She hadn’t seen him tense up waiting for Michael to leave and had no idea he’d been very close to escorting him out himself. You just didn’t talk to someone you cared about like that.

“I don’t blame you at all,” Taylor added. “I think you made the right choice.”

“Thank you both for being very kind in the face of my horrible behavior. I swear to god I don’t usually offer this kind of show when I have people over.” Chuckling mirthlessly, she turned back to her cutting board and began dismantling the fennel with practiced ease. “It’s just there are some things that are deal-breakers.”

“There’s absolutely no need to explain.” The concern was evident in Tom’s words even if she didn’t have the courage to look up at him right then. And she actually believed him, which surprised her more than almost anything.

The remainder of the night passed without further drama, much to Claudia’s imminent relief. By all accounts they enjoyed the food and towards the end she’d even begun to relax. Taylor even offered her a quick hug before they took their leave, offering to host her if she ever found herself in New York.

As Claudia put away leftovers and put the space back to rights, the mindless cleanup offered her time to think everything over. And she decided her initial reaction had been correct: Michael was an ass and it would have been a waste of time to stay with him. She was no stranger to single life and it didn’t scare her. Far from it, she felt more relief than anything. Although the thought that she’d aired her dirty laundry in front of others still left her uneasy, it wasn’t something she could change and she tried her best to move past it.

All in all it wasn’t the tensest breakup she’d ever had, but it did take the prize for most public. She should probably take this as some kind of sign. It probably wasn’t in the cards for her to coexist with someone in a healthy relationship. Sangledom was a lot less complicated and you didn’t run the risk of getting hurt. At least this breakup had been her own choice, she thought, trying to find a silver lining in the shitstorm of a night. No, by all accounts she was horrible at being with someone. It’d be cleaner just to stop.

Others would probably call it a depressing thought to end the night on, but there was a kind of liberation in it that Claudia took comfort in. She could focus on her career and not feel guilty about it. Between that and friends and family and her house there were a hundred things she’d do better to focus on, things she wouldn’t fuck up without even knowing why.

As she curled up in bed, the silence didn’t seem oppressive or intimidating, it was a luxury. And she didn’t need anyone else intruding on it, not really. When the alternative was someone like Michael, she’d happily sleep alone.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I'm having such fun talking to you guys in the comments. Thanks for all the good discussions and encouragement!! <3

She was almost ready to call it quits for the day when Tom beat her to it. "We've done enough work for today. We have three episodes outlined and we deserve a break." He stood and crossed over to her bar. "What can I make you?"

"I don't stock anything I won't drink, so whatever you're having is fine." She took a moment to stretch in her seat at the table and reflected that they had gotten a lot done in just a week. Tom turned out to be very hands on in a way she hadn't predicted. He kept surprising her.

"I can't say no to a good scotch." He brought her a generous measure that matched his own and gave her a little salute before taking a healthy sip. "For what it's worth, I think the kitchen looks grand with these counters."

"Thanks. I mean I don't give two shits if anyone but me likes it, but it's sweet of you to say."

He tipped his head back and laughed heartily at her statement. "Jesus, Claudia it's nice to meet someone as fucking honest as you are. It's been a while for me."

"So all your people just kiss your ass and don't tell you the truth?"

"Not the older ones, the people I met before I got famous, but yeah usually when I meet someone new they just think I want to be fawned all over."

"I don't fawn, so lucky you."

"You most certainly don't, but it's a nice change, I assure you."

"Yeah but sometimes I don't watch my mouth as the situation dictates. I'm kind of mortified about the whole Michael thing. I shouldn't have done that in front of you two. I let my temper get the better of me."

"Don't worry about it." He paused momentarily before his next question, as if to gage whether he should ask it or not. Curiosity clearly won out. "Do you regret it?"

"I regret the how, not the end result. I told myself a long time ago it wasn't worth it to let people treat me like shit, especially partners. He was an ass and it was a long time coming. I should have done it sooner in a much less public fashion."

"Then I'm glad you're well shod of him."

"Me too."

He got up and rather than pouring himself another scotch, just brought the whole bottle back to the table. Something told her this was more than just a celebratory drink. Nobody drinking that
determinedly was doing it for positive reasons. But the last thing she wanted to do was put her foot in her mouth, so she stayed quiet.

Tom, it seemed, was a font of curiosity and had another question for her. "So tell me, was television always your ambition?"

"Nah. I just wanted to work with good people in interesting places. Until London I always followed the job rather than picking a city and then finding work there."

"So you've traveled a lot?"

"A ton. School in Vermont and Italy, jobs in Boston, Napa, Atlanta, and France. I've been all over."

"Wow."

"Yeah it was great in my twenties, but the schedule of a restaurant chef was starting to wear on me. I took the Chopped money and I decided to put down roots in London. The nomad impulse had run its course. The television thing just kind of fell into my lap."

"How so?"

She was a little uncomfortable with the third degree, but she figured it was his right to learn the basics about his new partner. "I was working at Lutin and a customer wanted to speak to the chef. I went out, expecting some irate asshole, only to find Terence, my future agent, asking to represent me on the spot. Said he'd been looking for someone to put up for a show and that my food would be perfect."

She considered sharing more and decided it wouldn't hurt before continuing. "And I'm naturally an early bird, so the pouring myself into bed at two in the morning thing was getting old. I gave it a shot just for grins and the BBC liked me and offered me a show."

"So you went after a schedule change?"

"Not entirely. The money wasn't anything to turn my nose up at. Because with the show came recognition and if even a handful of people know a chef's name, then someone is going to offer them a cookbook deal. It's crazy how in this industry work begets more work."

"I've found that as well. I'm almost terrified to take an extended break for fear that casting agents will forget my name while I'm gone."

"Tom, I doubt anyone would forget a name that ridiculous." She didn't mention that she could hardly go anywhere these days without seeing something about Tom and his girlfriend plastered all over the place. Nobody could probably forget him now even if they wanted to.

He grinned and let out the strange little chuckle he was known for. "Very true. Maybe that will buy me an extra vacation here and there."

"You don't seem the vacation type though."

"I hear that a lot. Do I have workaholic tattooed across my face or something?"

"I think it's just that people can tell you love what you do."

"God, I hope that's all it is. I'm not adverse to time off, it's just that interesting jobs keep cropping up and I don't want to turn them down."
"As long as you're not stressing yourself to death, I think you should pursue whatever the hell you want."

He raised his drink. "I'll drink to that." They clinked their glasses and settled into an easy silence. It hadn't been that hard to talk to him after all. Either he was genuinely a nice guy or he was very dedicated to keeping up the facade. And the latter just didn't strike her as the truth, not after all the time they'd spent together at that point.

"Listen, if you're going to keep drinking I need to get some food into you."

"I have a high tolerance, Claudia." Despite his pronouncement, his words were starting to slur just a tiny bit and she wasn't sure how stubborn he would get about driving himself home.

"Yeah well, you've been in my house for several hours without eating and my chef senses are tingling. I was going to make dinner anyway."

"As long as it's not an inconvenience..."

"Tom, food is my life. In fact, let me look at our list and I can probably make one of the recipes we picked out for the show."

"Yeah, but honestly Claudia it isn't necessary."

"Tom, food is my life. In fact, let me look at our list and I can probably make one of the recipes we picked out for the show."

"Cajun shrimp pasta. That okay?"

"Yeah, but honestly Claudia it isn't necessary."

"I'm not obtuse, Tom. It's your prerogative to drink your problems away if you want, but I'm guessing you wanted company or you would have gone home to do it. You stay here you eat, it's as simple as that."

"Thanks. I'm sorry I'm being such a prat."

"Nah, you're fine. But you're gonna watch at least. I'm not giving you a knife after what you've had, but you do need to observe this if we're putting it on the show."

"Yes, chef!" He flashed her one of those too-bright-to-be-real smiles and seemed at least a little happier at the prospect. Maybe he was just pleased she'd figured out his motives and wasn't kicking his drunk ass out onto the street. Whatever it was, it looked as if some of the stress he'd been shouldering evaporated.

He ended up settling atop one of her counters with a view of the whole process. It was odd to have a man of his height hovering so high above her, but she rolled with it. In fact, it was pretty comical to see his long legs dangling over the side of the counter, like the largest little boy she'd ever seen.

She started to see what Luke had been talking about. With her knowledge and Tom's boyish enthusiasm they'd make for an interesting team. She just hoped people would watch. Nobody had talked about it, but having a project like this fail for her wouldn't be great for her career. Tom had acting and didn't really need it, but this was big for her.

They prattled on about superficial topics during dinner, but as soon as he cleared the plates away, he finally admitted his issue out loud. "I'm worried Taylor isn't the person I'm meant to be with."

Well damn, she thought, skip dessert and get right to the heavy shit. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't know... it's just a feeling I get when we're not together. When she's here it's great, but after my gut just tells me it's not right."
"Do you usually listen to your gut?"

"Yeah. It's been wrong before, but overall I try not to second guess it."

"Is it telling you to break it off or just that it's uneasy?"

"Uneasy."

"Maybe wait it out then. Give it some more time. How long have you been together?"

"A few weeks."

She couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped at his pronouncement. "Shit. Sorry. It's just that I can't even begin to think about the big L so soon in my relationships. A few months in is still the if-the-sex-is-good-don't-worry-about-it phase. But then again I'm the single one of the two of us, so I'm not the best example."

"I haven't really done a full-on relationship in a long time, but I see I haven't changed much over the years. I fall hard and I fall fast." He hesitated a moment, looking sheepish, but plowed forward after taking another sip. "We already did the parent meetings already too."

"Jesus Christ, Tom! That's…" Realizing she was coming off as extremely harsh, she tried to temper her tone. "That's very fast."

"That's very fast." Fast was an understatement. Deep down she thought it was naive and terrifying, but he didn't want to hear that right now, so she opted for something he might understand. "I just think it's probably too soon to know anything. I know we all want to believe in love at first whatever, but if it is possible it's not the norm, so you'll only fuck yourself over trying to force it."

"I suppose you're right." She didn't like being responsible for his hangdog expression, but she wasn't the person to spout platitudes at him either. Hadn't he just said he'd appreciated her honesty?

"Listen, I think you should see where it goes. A few weeks isn't really even enough time to get to know someone really. Not truly. Falling is all well and good, but ideally you want more than just the fall, right?"

"Yeah." He finished what was in his glass, but didn't yet reach for more, which she took as a positive sign. "I'm sorry I laid all this on you. We barely know each other." Didn't seem to bother him in the soul mate department, but she kept that little observation to herself.

"Well, we're partners now, so that's okay. I reserve the right to call you in if I need commiseration at a later date."

"That's fair. I'm really glad I met you, Claudia. I needed a dose of reality in the unreality my life has become."

"Happy to oblige." She patted his hand, happy the emotionally taxing portion of the evening appeared to be over. "Wanna watch Monty Python and finish the bottle?"

"Absolutely."

They got good and truly shitfaced and after a prolonged argument about which transportation option was better, Tom ended up sacked out on her couch. And while she had the foresight to drain a large bottle of water before she succumbed to sleep, Tom had no such luck. One moment he was insisting that he had a fabulous discreet car service and the next he was out cold. Even if she had been willing to search his phone for the number to said car service, there was no way she could move him.
She did what she could by tipping him over into a reclining position and covering him with a blanket. He could sort himself out in the morning, she figured, hoping to hell he didn’t have some kind of interview or job on the books. Something told her that he wouldn’t be his usual chipper self when he finally awoke. Neither would probably be in great shape, but she probably had a leg up on him in the hangover department. Working late hours in a stressful environment inevitably led to late night parties when they finally booted the last patrons out. She’d spent many such nights building up a decent tolerance and it didn’t look like she was nearly as blitzed as Tom was. She prayed her good luck would hold in the morning, since she was a baby when it came to hangovers.

So she chugged water and took some preemptive aspirin tablets before settling into her own bed in a much less dramatic fashion. Sleep wasn’t easy to court though. She couldn’t seem to wrap her brain around being the kind of person that pondered the love question after being with someone such a short amount of time. It was like setting yourself up for failure, she reasoned. Because, as she reminded herself, the idea that you’d know if one person was the person after less time than it took for her to pick out a paint color was utter madness. The odds were certainly not in Tom’s favor and that was if you ignored the more unconventional aspects of his relationship. Celebrity instacouples generally didn’t have a long shelf life, but Tom seemed to be the only idiot out there that didn’t know that. For all his travels and experiences, he was remarkably naive in some aspects.

She drifted off wondering what she was going to do with him when the inevitable happened. If he was this despondent at the mere possibility of Taylor not being his soul mate, how the hell would he handle an actual breakup? Thinking about it made her head hurt… that or it was the scotch catching up with her.

By the time she woke, it was well past ten and she didn’t hear a peep from downstairs. She grabbed a quick shower, brushed the alcohol aftertaste from her mouth, and drank more water before venturing into the kitchen. Once she was more awake and able to take stock of things, she sent a prayer to Bacchus, because it could have been much, much worse. There was a hangover, but it was mild so far.

Coffee, it turned out, was more important than making sure her house guest was sufficiently not dead. But that was only because she heard his snores from across the hall. No person in distress could snore that heartily, she decided and moved on to more pressing matters. Caffeine bolstered her mood and by the second cup she was feeling almost completely herself. And that meant food. Hopefully when he finally emerged, he wouldn’t be so far gone that a greasy breakfast would do him more harm than good.

Confident he was going to continue to sleep it off, she decided to focus on breakfast. Prepping something like this was second nature to her, not because of any restaurant training, but because of her grandmother. Nana had focused young Claudia’s excess energy into helping her whenever she gathered the family for Sunday breakfast. It was now ingrained in her.

And for some reason she felt compelled to go all out. She was mixing biscuit dough when she heard Tom stumble into the room with a groan.

"Morning, sunshine." She watched as he eased himself into a barstool and took pity on him. He was in no fit state to do it himself, so she brought him a mug of coffee and several aspirin. "Milk or creamer is in the fridge and I have sugar if you need it."

"Black is fine," he croaked, wrapping his long fingers around the mug and inhaling the steam.

"Breakfast will be up shortly." She went back to the dough and when she was happy with the consistency, dumped it onto a floured cutting board.
He seemed momentarily mesmerized as she began rolling it out. "I don't know that food is a good idea for me right now," he finally stated.

"I think it will help. We Southerners tend to swear by a big greasy breakfast to help with a hangover."

"What's that," he motioned to the dough she was now cutting into circles.

"Biscuits. The normal kind."

"Normal?"

"You call cookies biscuits. These aren't that."

"Well what are they then?"

"Different than anything you have. But you're getting my Nana's recipe, so you'll have a proper introduction. And I'm gonna do bacon and eggs and hash browns, and probably some gravy too."

"Gravy?" His nose wrinkled in disgust.

"Hush. I know what I'm doing. You'll like it."

"Yes, ma'am," he drawled in an accent that came out of nowhere.

She simply raised an eyebrow and continued on with her work. He went back to watching, eyes following every movement of her hands. As if on some kind of delay, he addressed her unspoken question a few minutes later.

"I played Hank Williams recently and I had to pick up his Alabama drawl."

"Where'd you guys film?"

"Louisiana mostly."

"And you still haven't had a real biscuit? What kind of low-rent catering services did you have on that set?"

"I'm sure they were top notch, but I had to strictly moderate my food. Hank was whip thin. I ate a lot of broiled chicken and broccoli. The crew probably had biscuits for days, but alas I couldn't."

"Well, you can now."

"At least until training starts again."

"For?"

"Loki. We start shooting in a month or so."

"No wonder you jumped at the chance to get into a cooking show. You're just hungry!"

"You've found me out. My love for all things pudding has drawn me to you."

"Dork," groused with no real ire behind it. His reasons were his own and that was fine. And while he seemed ready to learn all about her, part of her wanted to keep him at a distance. She wasn't sure why, but it's what had prevented her from asking more questions during their sharing session the
night before.

She smiled and motioned toward the oven. "Well you can enjoy this while you're allowed. And I could put some high protein recipes together for you that are a bit more exciting than broiled chicken day in and day out."

"That would be amazing. Already you're making my life better, partner." The coffee seemed to be helping him, because already he seemed less rough around the edges. "Even when I get pissed and pass out on your couch."

"Man, I don't know what kind of friends you have, but this was a common occurrence when I worked in restaurants. Looking back, it's a tad frat house, but sometimes you need to do something stupid to work through an issue."

"And I was very stupid last night. How are you so normal?"

"I wasn't chugging it down like it was going out of style."

"True."

She got the bacon going and was whisking the eggs before he spoke again. "Thanks again, Claude. You're great to hang out with. Maybe next time I'll even be sober for it."

"Don't go crazy now," she laughed. "We do have a fair amount of work ahead of us if we want to get all ten episodes planned out before you have to go back to your real job. That way I can work on it while you're gone and maybe we can figure out a shooting schedule."

"That sounds grand. But this is my real job now too. I'm not phoning it in with this or anything."

"Good to know." She wasn't sure what else to say, so she decided it was a good time to brush the biscuits with butter for their trip to the oven.

He let her prepare the rest of the meal in silence. Well, he was silent at least until he tucked in. For all his protests about the food, he attacked his plate with vigor, all the while making satisfied noises.

When he came up for air, he began waving a biscuit around as if to punctuate his words. "These are amazing. Why don't we have these at every meal?"

"Some people do."

"Will you show me how to make them?"

"Sure. It's really easy."

"Breakfast is the absolute best meal," he stated around bites of his eggs.

"It really is. You can go sweet or savory and if you want a cocktail you can do that too and call it brunch."

"Ooh can we do a brunch episode?"

"Every show does, we may as well join the party. Hell, Flay made a whole damn show around brunch."

"And these biscuits. We have to put these biscuits on it. People need these."
"If that's what you want, then we can do that. I feel like I should suggest butter and jelly on them, but I don't want to make your head explode."

"Do you have any?" His eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"I have some homemade raspberry preserves if you're interested." His eager nod and smile told her he was. Geez he was an easy mark. If she ever wanted anything from him it'd be ridiculously easy to ply him with good food in order to get her way.

They finished breakfast, Tom looking better than he had when he'd emerged earlier.

"I've imposed upon you enough for one day I think. I'd best be off. If you'd like to work at my place tomorrow, I'll do the cooking. You've outdone yourself with this and dinner."

"Okay, we can do that."

"I'm going to do some research on this brunch idea. I think that we could have fun with that."

"Sounds like a plan." Again it struck her as odd that this famous man known for commanding audiences could be reduced to the human equivalent of an excited puppy at the mention of brunch. He was a contradiction, and one she hadn't expected when first agreeing to the partnership.

As was usually the case when she had guests, she felt a sense of relief when the door closed behind him. She needed time to recharge and be alone in her space. It was something that she'd argued with Michael about several times. He thought when she wanted to be alone it meant she was upset with him. Trying to explain introvert proclivities to an extrovert was always a challenge, but he'd taken it as a personal affront.

The relief was short-lived however. Within minutes of Tom's exit, her phone buzzed and informed her he was the one calling. "Forget something?"

"I fucked up, Claudia. There's a group of paparazzi outside."

"What?"

"They got shots of me leaving."

"Okay." She replied slowly, not sure why this was a big deal.

He must have sensed her confusion, because he elaborated. "They saw me yesterday too when I was out at running errands before I came to your place. Claude, I'm wearing the same clothes."

"Oh shit." She'd finally caught up and the panic started to flare in her gut.

"Oh shit is right. I'll call Luke. Just sit tight until you hear from him."

Thankfully she only had to wait a few minutes before Luke rang her. "Well, Claudia I'm going to earn that quid this month."

"That bad, huh?"

"Well it wouldn't normally be an issue, but Taylor... well, she complicates things and Tom was a colossal idiot."

"What do you mean?"
"He sent a tweet last night. A picture of the two of you and a bottle of Lagavulin."

"He tweeted that?! I thought he was just taking a selfie."

"Tom didn't follow my cardinal rule. Don't drink and social media. It's something we'll go over before your book tour. You haven't gotten my full orientation yet."

"But I don't have a Twitter account."

"You will before long. It's a pain, but a necessary one. Do try to be more responsible than Tom, huh?"

"So they figured he was at my house and they waited for him to come out?"

"Seems so. Deceptively simple and I could have worked around it, but I didn't realize he didn't leave your place last night."

"Luke, nothing happened. We got drunk and he slept it off on my couch."

"The details aren't my business, Claudia."

"Yeah but I need you to know I'm not that kind of person. Not only is he with someone, but we're just partners." She slumped onto the couch, suddenly very tired.

"Okay. That's good. I'll do what damage control I can, but this is probably going to be all over the rags."

"What about Taylor?"

"He's trying to get ahold of her now. But I do have an idea about that. You might not like it, but I want your agreement before I bring it to her camp."

"That already sounds delightful."

"Well first we need to announce the show and explain that you two are working together. It doesn't undo all the damage, but ITV can confirm that we didn't just pull this out of our arses just to cover up an indiscretion."

"Then?"

"Then if I can wrangle a way to get you and Taylor in the same city, will you have a very public lunch with her?"

"Public meaning you'll tip off the press to be there so there's photographic evidence that we're playing nice?"

"That's the idea. You catch on quick."

"Yeah okay I'll do it." This was already turning into a massive headache.

"Really? I honestly thought I'd have more of a fight on my hands. You got caught in the middle of this and none of it was your fault."

"Are you actively trying to dissuade me now?"

"No, never mind. You're saving me a hell of a lot of trouble, so thank you. Tom owes you big time."
"Luke, tell me the truth, he's really not the kind of guy to cheat on his girlfriend, right?"

"Absolutely not." He replied without hesitation. "Tom's a good man. Sometimes has shitty judgment, but he's not a creep. If he was, I'd still represent him, but we wouldn't be friends."

"Okay good. I know it's none of my business—"

"He's made it your business and you had every right to ask. Let me burn up the transatlantic phone lines and see if I can get some things sorted out. I'll call you as soon as I have details, okay?"

"So am I under house arrest until they go away?"

"No, that just makes you look guilty. In fact, if you have any errands to run it might be good to get out of the house. They want a shot of you leaving and when they get it they'll probably go away."

They said their goodbyes and she decided a trip to the market wouldn't be a bad idea. After getting dressed and putting on enough makeup to avoid looking like death warmed over, she bit the bullet and walked out of the house.

Contrary to what she'd expected, they didn't shout her name or draw any attention to themselves. Instead they seemed content to use their zoom lenses from across the street, which was fine with her. These guys didn't seem like the aggressive types she'd heard stories about, a fact which she was eternally grateful for.

But Luke's assumption that they'd be gone by the time she got back was incorrect. Six men were still clumped together across the street from her house when she returned with her groceries. They marred her usually tranquil view of the wooded square. Feeling like she'd probably get scolded for it later, she took a deep breath and walked over.

"Listen guys, the most exciting thing I have planned today is making some pasta. You can stay out here and watch my door if you want, but just be prepared for a whole lot of nothing if you stay." Without waiting for a reply or rude comments, she turned and went inside.

-XXX-

There may be trouble in paradise for the pop princess and her new beau. Tom Hiddleston was spotted leaving celebrity chef Claudia Rey's house recently. That wouldn't be cause to inform you, dear readers, except that it looks like he stayed overnight. Sure they may be working on a new project together, but it looks like that's not all they're cooking up.

And before anyone protests about the bloodthirsty press, we were tipped off about Hiddleston's whereabouts by none other than the actor himself! Late Thursday night he tweeted a smiling picture with Rey and a very nice bottle of scotch and he didn't leave her Kensington house until late Friday morning. Seems he has an appetite for Americans now, although this one's an ex-pat. And we've also learned from sources close to the chef that she recently broke up with her boyfriend. Looks like she may be after an upgrade.

Now we expected drama from the Hiddleswift relationship, but honestly we didn't think it'd be from the faultlessly charming actor! No word yet on TayTay's reaction to the news, but if we were Rey, we'd watch our backs. How many words rhyme with chef?
"PR reps for all three were unavailable for comment. Although we do think it should be noted that Rey is now repped by Hiddleston's own firm, Prosper. Do with that what you will, dear readers."

"Well," Luke said placing a copy of the gossip site's article on his desk. "This seems to be the worst of it. Which is to say it could be worse, so given the circumstances I’d say you got off easy."

"That's easy?" She looked from Tom to Luke with incredulity. The pair of them had gathered in Luke's office to go over the game plan.

"In the world of the gossip mags and their so-called journalists, this is mild."

"They've just insinuated that Tom's the kind of person to fuck around on his significant other and that I'm a home wrecker!"

"Claudia," Luke began with a conciliatory tone. "This is nothing. The paps have been leaving you alone and pictures of your lunch with Taylor yesterday are being leaked as we speak."

She'd flown all the way to New York just to be seen at an outdoor cafe with the singer. It had been awkward as all hell with an entourage of handlers and the like, but she'd done it. And more for Tom than anyone else. He looked more exhausted than she did and he wasn't even contending with jet lag.

"This whole thing is bizarre."

Tom spoke for the first time, his expression pained. "Claude, I can't thank you enough for doing that for us. I would have gone with in a heartbeat if—"

"If I wouldn't have forbidden it," Luke interjected. "The last thing we want is to reinforce the idea of a love triangle. This way it just looked like the girls sharing a meal and discussing all the silly rumors. And neither looked fazed, so it showed that the other woman thing is nonsense."

"You've explained it enough times, Luke, but I still would have liked to be there to talk to Taylor in person."

"Well you know what, mate? We couldn't afford that. It had to be a controllable situation and when the two of you get together it's anything but that. You're going back over there for that ridiculous 4th of July party soon, you can talk face-to-face then."

Tom glowered at him across the desk, face full of thunder and fury. "I'm well aware that you don't approve of my choice with Taylor. You don't need to keep reminding me of it over and over again."

She wanted to be anywhere but in her seat at that moment. If felt like tension that had been simmering for some time was about to boil over and she didn't want to be there for it. She ended up blurring out the first question that came to mind that she thought might derail the impending showdown.

"What sources close to me?"

They both looked at her, startled out of their staring contest and Luke answered first. "We think it's Michael."

"Well that's fucking great. He still continues to be an asshole. Awesome."

"This will pass, Claude," Tom reassured her. "The media has a short attention span."
"Now would be a great time for a royal to get pregnant or divorced or something," she stated.

"Even without that, this story will cycle away before you know it. By the time the press junket for the show rolls around this will be old news. I'll make sure of it."

"Okay, well I'm going to go pour myself into bed. I'm not sure what day it is, but we're working tomorrow, right?" She directed the question at Tom.

"If you're up to it."

"Yeah I'll be fine once I have the longest hottest bath in history and a good night's sleep." Flying across the Atlantic for a few hours and then flying right back had messed with her sleep schedule and she was paying the price now. "I'll leave you two to it, but don't kill each other while I'm gone. I mean I miss my family and all, but no need to recreate Christmas of '08 just for my benefit."

She left them and at least Luke was chuckling as she went. Hopefully they'd hug and make up... or whatever it was that British men did. Probably drink tea and refuse to talk about their feelings. Whatever it was, she was beyond caring at that point.

Happy to find the street free of photographers, she got home without incident and went straight for the tub. As she sunk down into the scalding water, she tried to let all thoughts of Tom and the press slip away. She was less than successful.

As much as she liked Tom and enjoyed working with him, she was starting to think Luke was right. Most of the trouble he'd had of late seemed to stem from his new relationship. Rumors and press craziness seemed to follow her, whether she was at fault or not. She didn't know enough about the woman to tell if it was cultivated on purpose or not, but she did see the effect it had on Tom. Wherever the blame did or didn't lay, she felt bad for him.

Eventually she was able to distract herself from the sudden influx of famous people into her life. She shuffled through her phone until she decided on a Harry Potter audiobook. It always managed to suck her in no matter what was going on elsewhere. She stayed in the water until she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer and only then did she collapse into bed without a further thought.

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She woke up briefly in the dead of night, but was able to roll over and fall back to sleep almost immediately. It was the only time she moved. By the time she woke up early the next morning she'd netted over twelve hours of sleep and felt like a new person. Once she'd had a cup of coffee, if felt like she was back to her old self. The next time someone asked her to fly sixteen hours round trip for a thirty minute lunch, she'd tell them to fuck off.

When the doorbell rang around eight o'clock, her good mood almost evaporated. She warily spied a delivery guy through the peephole and prayed this wasn't an elaborate ruse by an ambitious member of the press. But curiosity got the better of her and she opened the door.

"Ms. Rey?"

"That's me," she replied, ready to slam the door if things went south. The guy didn't have anything in his hands and she wasn't familiar with the logo on his uniform.

"I just wanted to be sure you were home, miss. I have a delivery for you. I'll just pop down to my van and bring it up."

He was bounding down the stairs before she had a chance to reply. When he came back he was
toting a large flower arrangement. She signed the necessary paperwork and took it into the kitchen. It was a riot of white lilies and a host of other breeds in different shades of purple. It was housed in an enormous crystal vase and the whole arrangement was several feet in circumference.

Snagging the card from amidst the fragrant blooms, she was surprised to see Luke's name at the bottom.

C,

*Thanks again for bailing us out. You're a trooper and hopefully nothing like this will ever happen again. The grand royal duke of idiocy himself would have sent these, but I wouldn't let him for fear of the press getting wind. But know that we both appreciate what you've done.*

*Talk soon,*

*Luke*

She sighed and decided that another cup of coffee was required. One thing she couldn't decide on, however, was if this damn show was worth the headaches she'd already endured because of it. The jury was still out on that one.
He was rather sodden by the time he made it up the front steps. Hopefully Claudia would have a
towel or something for him, because he hadn't had the foresight to bring an umbrella. But she
surprised him by opening the door before he even had a chance to ring the bell.

"Hey! Uh, can we push work back maybe an hour?" She was breathless and looked out onto the wet street with an eager expression.

"Of course. Nothing's the matter I hope."

"Nope. It's raining." She said it like it provided an adequate explanation, but it just managed to confuse him further.

"That's not... what?"

She sighed impatiently, using the time to pull her hair back into a ponytail. "I have this thing with summer rain. It's the only time I like to run. So feel free to hang out here and I'll be back in a bit."

"You're going to go run in the rain?" He now saw she was kitted out in running shorts and a tank top, far from her usual working attire.

"Yeah."

"Mind if I join you?" It had been a stupid and impulsive suggestion, but he was now more than a little intrigued. "I didn't go out this morning and I could use the exercise."

"You want to run in the rain in those tight-ass jeans?" She raised an eyebrow and didn't look convinced.

"I have a bag in the car."

"Can you change really fast?"

"Absolutely."

It was only the work of a few minutes to slip into his gear. She groaned when he came out of the bathroom. "Oh god you're like a real runner, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You like it and stuff. I can tell. Listen, I'm shit at it and I usually hate it, but like I said I have this thing. So we're not doing like fifteen miles or whatever you usually do."

"Whatever you're up for is fine."

"We'll go to the gardens and see from there, okay?"

"A fine plan."

"Get going then!" She shooed him out the front door and punched a code into a recessed panel.

Within minutes he was soaked to the bone, but it wasn't altogether unpleasant. The rain was a nice contrast to what was going to be a sweltering day. And Claudia set such an easy pace his heart rate
was barely up. But it was nice, even if it wasn't as vigorous as his normal runs were.

They pounded down the nearly empty streets, usually quiet that time of morning, and emptied even further by the weather. He could tell she wasn't used to even this sedate pace, her breath coming out in uneven huffs. But the smile on her face spoke volumes and every now and again she'd look up and close her eyes contentedly.

By the time they made it onto the high street and had the green expanse within sight she looked to have acclimated herself better. He thought it was safe to engage her in conversation, her mood already brighter than it had been when he asked to intrude upon her run.

"You going to tell me why you were in such a rush to get out here?"

"I'm from Georgia, right? So the summers when I was a kid were brutal. And we had several droughts when I was little. So rain became a big deal to me." She shrugged. "I just got into this weird habit of running around when it did finally rain. And I kinda already have a thing for water anyway."

"Well you moved to the right city," he laughed.

"Yeah. People kept trying to dissuade me from choosing London and would always tell me how much it rained, like it was a bad thing."

"Lucky for me you like our rain so much."

She nodded and refocused her eyes on the pavement ahead. It was odd, he did feel lucky to know her, but felt awkward now that he'd vocalized it. He was silently berating himself for voicing such a sentiment aloud when she interrupted his thoughts with a grunt of what sound like pain.

"Claude?"

"Cramp," she explained, kneading a spot on her side.

"You want to stop?" They'd just made it into the park and he pointed to a set of benches.

"No," she said it through clenched teeth, but he could hear the determination in her voice. "The Long Water. I can make it there."

It was less than half a mile, so he didn't press her, and the sight of the green space did seem to spur her on. After a few more minutes, she finally halted before the Serpentine Bridge, still clutching her side.

They stood silently for several minutes as her breathing returned to normal. The rain had slackened into a gentle shower, pattering the surface of the small river. It was a truly idyllic spot.

"Told you I'm shit at running."

"We got here mostly in one piece, but maybe we should walk back when the time comes."

"I'll be okay. Just need a few minutes to rest."

“So you have a water thing you said?”

“Yes.” Her cheeks colored from more than just the exertion. “I’ve always been drawn to water of any kind. Lakes, rivers, ponds, rain. I overpaid for this tiny little apartment in Carcassonne because it overlooked the Aude. It’s weird, I know.”
“We all have our little quirks, Claude.”

She kept massaging her side, but stopped as soon as a question occurred to her that she should have thought of much earlier. “Aren’t you afraid someone will see us out and about together?”

“We’re not doing anything wrong, Claude.”

“Well I know that, but the press didn’t seem to care about that last time. And the last thing I want is to make more trouble for you.”

“You didn’t make the trouble last time. I did that all on my own.” He looked down and studied his shoes. When he got around to asking his question, she realized he’d been itching to bring it up for days. “So how was Taylor when you talked to her?”

Indulging in an momentary exasperated expression, because he still wasn’t looking at her, she tried to keep her tone patient. “She seemed… guarded. I tried to explain what really happened, but she just said she didn’t want to talk about it. She stayed on her phone a lot.” When he did look up she saw that it absolutely wasn’t what he was hoping to hear. Shit. When was Tom going to realize she wasn’t the relationship whisperer? She was like the opposite of that. Because she figured that if he wanted to ask his girlfriend about something then he should do that. Sometimes confronting what you didn’t want to talk about was necessary. But, it wasn’t her place to tell him that, so she opted for a neutral reply.

“But Tom, I’ve only met her once. I don’t know her super well. I mean you’ve talked to her about it and you see her soon, so I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Yeah.” For the first time, she could see the facade click into place. He smiled, but wasn’t true, wasn’t real. “She was probably just stressed about the party.” They both knew she had people to worry about that kind of thing for her, but she’d let him hold onto that idea if it made him feel better. But she got the impression he was simply trying to save face at that point and she’d let him do that as well.

“I bet that’s what it was.” Despite the fact that the pain hadn’t subsided completely, she was utterly desperate to end the conversation. The whole thing made her supremely uncomfortable. “Listen, I feel much better, we should probably head back. We only have a few more days before you leave.”

“If you’re sure you’re okay…”

“I’m good. That pudding episode isn’t going to plan itself.”

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By the skin of their teeth, they got all ten episodes outlined before Tom was off to the States. And for the most part they even knew which recipes they’d go with, but she did have a small amount of research and testing to do before she was satisfied with the more unfamiliar items. As much as she’d grown to enjoy his company, she was also itching to put him on a plane so she could get back into the kitchen. It wasn’t anything personal, but when she was in the process of creating a new dish, or in this case several new dishes, she needed solitude and time to work. Even in restaurants when she had a skilled staff at her fingertips, she preferred to work alone on that part. Not that input from others wasn’t necessary at some point, but the last thing she wanted was someone hovering over her trying to help as she mumbled to herself and scribbled notes between tastes.

So she had plenty to look forward to without their near daily work sessions. Despite that though, she felt a twinge of sadness as he stood at her front door, ready to jet away the next day.
“Claude, I’m so glad we’ve started this. Let me know if you need me to do anything before I’m back in town.”

“Yeah, that seems totally plausible.” She let her arched eyebrow convey the sarcasm in her words. “You’re probably going to be like nineteen time zones away. It’s not like I can ask you to pop over to the market if I need an ingredient. Yeah, no. I’ll be fine, Tom. There will be plenty of work to do when you get back.”

“Still. If you want to bounce an idea off me or have a question I can answer you fairly quickly, despite what time zone I’m in. Keep in touch, okay?”

“If I email you it won’t like put you in movie jail for the rest of the shoot?”

“No if I’ve remembered to surrender my mobile before I go on set. And that’s more my worry than yours.” He grinned, looking like an excited kid about to go off on a grand adventure. “And I’ll probably have to bother you with recipe questions anyway. I’m not really even sure what quinoa is, let alone how to cook it.”

“It’s all in the packet I emailed you.” Rolling her eyes in mock exacerbation, she bemoaned, “Helpless celebrity can’t even read!”

“I’ll be sure to give you a ring if I feel my ego getting too big to handle, shall I?”

“If you need some relief from all the fawning, I’m your gal.” Surprising herself, she pulled him into a quick hug. In that moment, even with a bemused expression on his face, he seemed so solitary that the hug had seemed almost necessary. Damn now the ridiculous sap of a man was rubbing off on her. Rather than linger awkwardly, she coughed and forged ahead. “Well, be safe and put your damn phone away if you plan on getting drunk, okay?”

“Yes, chef.”

Something like regret tugged at her gut watching him leave, despite the predominant feeling of relief. It certainly wasn’t that she was waiting to be rid of him, but she was also looking forward to work at her own pace too. But the sad little feeling persisted as she watched him walk across the street to his car. It intensified when he turned and waved before departing. Yes, she’d get her break from him all right. It’d be months before they saw each other again and if she was being truly honest with herself, it seemed like too long.
Once she put her new project with Tom temporarily to bed, Claudia's life returned to some semblance of normalcy- at least for a month or so. July saw two more celebrity episodes under her belt, with a lot less drama than the first and she was even able to carve out some time to finish the final edits on her book. All and all, she was pretty damn pleased with the summer's accomplishments as September rolled around.

But, of course, Luke seemed to have a knack for disrupting her ordered little world. He called her in for tour prep far earlier than she'd anticipated. But since he'd handled the issue with Tom before she'd even technically signed a contract to be Prosper's client, she'd go and be nice. It had benefited him to deal with her side of the story as well, but seeing the lengths he'd gone to for both of them bought him a good mood as far as she was concerned.

Luke, publicist to the stars that he was, wouldn't be joining her on the tour, but he was sending an eager junior staffer named Khari to play nanny in his stead. The girl somehow managed to look even younger than her boss, but he assured Claudia she was eager to get her feet wet. It looked like she was the training celebrity, but that was fine by her. She didn't plan on being a problem, so she'd let the kid get some experience without complaint.

But despite Khari's introduction, Luke dismissed her soon after the hellos to continue on with what he kept calling her orientation. She got the social media talk again, but this time with much more detail. She had the distinct impression Luke was doing this himself only because of her connection with Tom.

He was walking her through Twitter in excruciating detail when she had to stop him, albeit as gently as she could manage. "Luke, I know the basics already. I'm not a Luddite, I just never saw the need for Twitter before."

"Sorry. I just have some clients that aren't on it for a reason and I have to make sure they understand how it works so they don't post something publicly and assume it’s private. I know you already understand the social media prohibition while drinking, since you had a practical demonstration of why that rule exists."

"Oh yes," she laughed. "I have that one ingrained in my brain. I hope he's spared you any more issues with Taylor's PR team."

"Just the usual post-breakup damage control, but that's not his fault."
"They broke up?" Her heart lurched at the idea of Tom having to deal with it alone, thousands of miles away from home.

"Claudia, my darling unspoiled sweetheart, I rather love you sometimes. Why can't everyone be as nonchalant about celebrity happenings as you? Though I suppose my job probably wouldn't be necessary if that were the case." He sighed wistfully at the thought. "It's been splashed around everywhere for the past few days."

"Poor Tom." She remembered how bereft he'd been at the mere thought of her not being the one. "I hope he's okay."

"He'll be fine, Claudia. I talked to him this morning and he seemed in good spirits."

"But would he actually let you know if he was really upset? Tom strikes me as the grin and bear it kind of guy."

"That he is, but he's also extremely resilient and he's working now, which is the best thing for him."

"Luke, I know it's not really any of my business, but is he happy? I mean I only ask because he... I don't know. Sometimes he seems kind of walled off. And others he's open and completely present and I wonder if it's anything I've done to bring out one side rather than the other. He's my partner and I think my friend and I worry about him sometimes."

"You're a dear, Claudia. I hope he appreciates having someone like you on his team, I really do." He sighed and took his glasses off, instantly de-aging himself by ten years. "I think he's at his happiest when he's working and he has a fair bit of that ahead of him just now. But whether it's just a distraction from dealing with things or not, I can't say. He's my friend too and there are still times I wonder if I'm even getting the full story from him, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do."

"I believe he'll be okay though. Plenty of things on the docket for him to wear himself out with. At least he can't wallow in unhappiness if he keeps moving, right?"

"That's something, I guess." It bothered her that she couldn't do something to help him, but they weren't so close that she knew for sure whether an encouraging text would help or hurt. So she decided to leave it be. The man was probably beset with both genuine and nosy inquiries and her voice didn't need to be added to the din.

They continued with the lesson, but to her great relief went at a much faster pace. Luckily the firm would handle any Facebook presence required of her, so at least for the time being she only had the one social media platform to worry about.

Before sending her on her way, he made her promise to send her first tweet before she went to bed that night. "Back in my day famous people didn't have Twitter," she groused as he was walking her out.

"Yes, well back in your day you had to record songs you liked off of the radio and pray they didn't get cut off by a commercial. And nobody paid you to play in the kitchen, so I think we can agree to deal with any of the bothersome aspects of the technology boom with aplomb, right?"

"I suppose."

"That's my girl. I'm off to LA tomorrow for Tom's Emmy appearance and it will make my trip considerably brighter if I know you're squared away before I go."
"I can follow instructions, Luke. I'll be the model client."

"Somehow part of me doubts that, but I do appreciate the sentiment."

Just as she'd promised, she sent the damn thing out into the electronic ether when she got home that night. And knowing full well she could easily waste her evening refreshing and waiting for something to happen, she signed out of the account and went about her business instead.

When she checked the next afternoon, she was surprised she'd netted a couple thousand new followers and tried to scroll through her notifications to figure out why. There were only three accounts she recognized: Prosper's, Tom's, and Luke's.

The Prosper mention was straightforward, if a little formal, welcoming her. Luke had responded soon after she'd sent the message out. She smiled seeing the warning and could hear Luke's voice as she read it. What could possibly go wrong?

Tom, bless him, focused on what was truly important: dessert.
And if Luke didn't have her grinning, then that certainly would have done it. And that explained the influx of followers. Surely some were just curious to see what she'd say in response to him. Doing the time zone calculation in her head, she realized that he'd only replied minutes before. Deciding not to agonize over her reply, she typed out the first thing that popped into her head.

It was another half an hour before he responded, but the two words left her laughing aloud in the middle of her kitchen.

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She hadn’t actively planned it… but then again she knew that wasn’t the truth. One did not just wake up at 1:30 in the morning, find a likely illegal television stream from the States, and accidentally hunker down to watch the Emmys. No, she’d done it rather deliberately, although she couldn’t remember actively making a decision to do it. She supposed it was something that she’d just taken as inevitable and even as she’d set her alarm the night before, there wasn’t any hesitation.
There was, however, some subconscious reasoning churning away to justify her behavior. Although Tom was the first person she’d known that was famous in a traditional celebrity sense, many of her friends were superstars in the culinary world. And she told herself that if anyone televised the dinner rush on a night Michelin reps were thought to be in attendance, well she’d sure as shit make time to watch it.

But now she knew someone that was going to be up for a very prestigious award, someone that was now her business partner and even friend, and she saw it as a no-brainer.

She found herself grinning like an idiot as Tom twirled his co-presenter around before being able to award his Night Manager director with an award. No matter what any cynical insiders would say, she could tell he was genuinely ecstatic about her win. And though he didn't win in his own category, she hoped he was having a grand time all the same. He certainly looked it.

Later blaming it on fatigue, she pulled out her phone and typed out a message, sending it before she could talk herself out of it.

By the time the ceremony was over, she was far too awake to simply crawl back in bed, so she shuffled off into the kitchen to get coffee going. When her text alert went off she assumed it was Jules with a baby report and let it wait until after she had her first sip of caffeine. Nearly doing a spit take, she saw that Tom had actually responded.
Who am I to resist a turn around the stage and making a talented woman smile? But what in the world are you doing up in the middle of the night to see it?

Just wanted to support you. Honestly I didn't expect a reply. Shouldn't you be guzzling champagne now and kissing everyone on both cheeks? I imagine that's what happens at Hollywood parties and please don't disabuse me of that notion. It makes for an entertaining picture in my head.

I'm on my way to a party, but I'd rather skip it. Are you up for the day then?

Yeah. Resigned myself to it and I'm enjoying my coffee already, so there's no turning back. Why aren't you jazzed to party it up? Thought you loved parties.

Just not in the mood, I suppose. I'm rather exhausted.

Before she could think of a reply, another message came right behind it.
She wished she was sensing a melancholy tone to the texts where there was none, but something told her she wasn't that off base. For the second time in less than a day she felt pity for him. He was a grown man, far more used to the rigors of his profession than she was, but she hoped he was taking

What's for breakfast?

I'm craving waffles.

Send me a picture before you tuck in, would you? I'm about to go plaster a smile on my face and I'm going to live vicariously through you.

Shouldn't I be the one envious of your current situation?

I know you're not though.

I'm just channeling a certain introvert at the moment, despite it being a very public day for me. I'll feel better once I get to pour myself into bed. One good thing about not winning is that I don't have to worry about the interview circuit tomorrow.

I'm on standby if you need a distraction, okay?

Thanks, Claude.

She wished she was sensing a melancholy tone to the texts where there was none, but something told her she wasn't that off base. For the second time in less than a day she felt pity for him. He was a grown man, far more used to the rigors of his profession than she was, but she hoped he was taking
Luke had left him in the limo for a few minutes while he ensured several fiddly details were verified before Tom made an appearance. It felt like the eye of a hurricane, half the night’s craziness was behind him, but it was also far from over. Normally he enjoyed the chance to meet people he’d hoped to work with or just plain admired, but tonight he was in a rare mood and all he wanted was some peace and quiet, neither of which would be provided by the good people at AMC. And sadly, it was just the first of many parties he had to be seen at throughout the night and following morning.

Even for someone normally driven to see and do everything possible and talk to everyone, he had his anti-social moments. It was rare that they coincided with an event like this, but it had happened before and he knew he’d make it through. Having Luke there helped, but he’d never been more grateful to see Claudia’s name pop up on his phone. Of all the people he knew, she probably understood his current mood more than most. He didn’t know how she was able to constantly navigate between the public presence necessitated by her job and the home life he knew she craved even more than he did. She was a wonder.

And as the weeks had ticked by, he’d found himself thinking of her more and more. The work they’d done together had been entertaining and fulfilling in a way he hadn’t anticipated. True, the rigorous part of filming hadn’t come yet, but so far it felt less like work than it had hanging out with a friend. Somehow it had managed to give him the downtime part of him needed along with sating the constant drive to work and create before all the offers dried up. Because that was always the fear, that one day he’d stop getting auditions and there’d be no more interesting characters to pour himself into. It was always a possibility and one he tried to avoid at all costs.

Luke found him staring at his phone several minutes later.

“First real smile I’ve seen from you all night,” he exclaimed, climbing back in the car.

“I was just talking to Claudia. She watched the show.”

“She’s still in London.”

“She is. That was incredibly sweet of her. My folks don’t even get up in the middle of the night for my appearances any more.” Nor could he blame them. The novelty had worn off, but knowing Claudia did it left him with a warm feeling of contentment in his gut.

“She’s a good person and I like her more than I ever thought I would. She’s worried about you, you know.”

“Yeah, she said as much just now.” Hearing Luke confirm it though meant she’d expressed that concern to him as well. But rather than it feeling like an intrusion of his business, it was almost a comfort to know she genuinely cared. “Take care of her on this book tour, will you? She’s not used to that kind of thing.”

“We have things well in hand, Tom. She’s a smart one and I have no doubt she’ll adapt as needed.” He sighed, sensing something in Tom that would bear contemplation at a later date. “Now, are you ready to go back into the fray?”

“No, but I’m ready to do my job.” And it felt more job than it usually did. For the first time in a long while, he wished he had someone with him to make the night more bearable, a partner to rely on. Luke was great, but he yearned for someone to share experiences like this with. But whining to
himself about it wouldn’t change what he had to do tonight.

“I’ll take it.”
Despite her youth, Khari proved to be worth her weight in gold as the tour progressed. Luke had been right that the publisher only seemed inclined to be sure she was in the right place at the right time, not what she’d do or say once she got there. But Khari filled her in on the show she’d be appearing on, any pertinent details about the talent she’d be interacting with, and a host of other interesting tidbits. In less than a week she’d become invaluable to Claudia.

She appeared on morning shows and a number of syndicated talk shows, demoing the same handful of recipes over and over again, but she kept the tedium at bay by remembering her audience. She was teaching people even if she couldn’t see them and that was her real aim. The publisher would say that her aim was sales, but that was just the proverbial icing on the cake. The message she tried to emphasize over and over again was that food didn’t have to be intimidating.

But the part of the tour she was looking forward to the most were the actual book signing events. She’d get to directly interact with people and answer their questions. Any amount of playing nice with vapid television hosts was worth it if it got her to the good part. They’d already covered the UK and made it across the US before her first signing took place in San Francisco. Then they’d trace their steps back, but this time focusing on bookstores and small venues rather than television studios. It seemed like a waste to visit the same cities twice, but Khari had explained that the pre-release television spots were meant to drive people to the book events. And it did have some logic to it.

“Khari,” Claudia called to the girl from the bathroom of her suite. At least the publisher didn’t have her slumming it in cheap motels. “I have dinner with some friends tonight after the signing. You’re more than welcome to join us if you want.”

“It’s sweet of you to invite me, but I’m dying to go to this club I’ve read about.”

“Ah okay, I see how it is. The young cool kid doesn’t want to spend a night with boring old folks.”

“Something like that, yeah.” She grinned at Claudia who had just emerged in one of her pre-approved outfits. How she missed the simple luxury of working in leggings or jeans. “So you know people in the area?”

“I worked at a winery nearby for a few years and some of my less nomadic friends are still in the area. One has her own place in the city now and there’s nothing we like more than showing off our restaurants.”

“Can I trust you to stay out of trouble without me?”

“Come on, Khari. You’ve seen how boring I am. I’ll probably be back to the hotel before you are.”

She made it through the signing despite her protesting hand, but it had been more fun than the whole first part of the tour combined. The publishing rep scowled seeing how much time Claudia was taking with each customer, but couldn’t really do anything about it, since she was willing to stay until everyone was taken care of. It probably only amounted to an extra hour or so and she saw it as worth every minute.

Service was in full swing by the time she got to Kay’s new digs, the maître d’ showing her to the private room they’d taken over. And while Kay had a few more hours left in the kitchen, the rest of them ate and drank and caught up. Knowing full well that nobody would be able to stick to just one dish, they’d been served family-style, everyone able to sample whatever they wished.
“So Claude, who in the hell do I have to sleep with at the BBC to get my own show?” Jason, a pastry chef, grinned at her as he pulled a stuffed mushroom off her plate and popped it into his mouth.

“I wouldn’t know, dearest. I’m so fucking talented they heap money on me based solely on that. Now you, on the other hand, would probably have to satisfy half the board before they’d let you in front of a camera.”

He let out a bark of laughter and kissed her on the cheek. “I miss you, Claude. Nobody else appreciates my sense of humor.”

“Nobody else is crazy enough to think you’re funny,” Lizzie piped in.

“And yet you agreed to marry me. What does that say about you?”

“You two are engaged?!” She watched as Lizzie waggled her left hand, showing off the ring. “Congratulations! When did this happen?”

“A few weeks ago,” Jason confirmed. “But someone’s been too busy to check Facebook for news of her woefully un-famous friends.”

“You know I loathe Facebook.”

“And yet I see you have your very own page, professional chef and TV personality, Claudia Rey.”

“My PR people did that.”

“Don’t tell me I’ve been tweeting at some public relations underling,” he moaned.

“No, that’s really me.”

“So you really do talk to Tom Hiddleston on a regular basis?” This time Iris spoke up before Jason could respond.

“Well yeah. We’re doing a show together.”

“I don’t see you talking about work. I see you sassing each other on Twitter.”

“We text and email about work.”

“Luckiest bitch I know,” Iris exclaimed. “If I was in possession of Tom Hiddleston’s personal phone number, you’d bet your ass I’d ‘accidentally’ text him some pics of me in lingerie. Like ‘oops so sorry you had to see that.’ So he’d know what he was missing.”

“You are about as subtle as a brick to the face, Iris!”

“Subtle isn’t going to get you into that man’s pants, Claude.”

“I don’t want into that man’s pants! He’s a colleague and a friend and contrary to what you think, television isn’t one long extended orgy.”

“Shame.” Iris sat back looking completely nonplussed for having made the suggestion she had.

Thankfully the conversation moved on to Lizzie and Jason’s impending wedding as everyone argued over what the perfect menu would consist of. They drank too much wine, ate some stupendous food, and told stories about the good old days and Claudia felt herself relax for the first time since the tour
had begun. As good a time as she’d been having, this was the first time she didn’t feel like she had to be on.

And contrary to what she’d told Khari, she didn’t get back to the hotel until almost one that morning. She went through her bedtime prep in a happy haze, but by the time she laid down, one thought kept drowning out all the others. She giggled stupidly aloud to the darkened room, unable to let go of the thought of Tom’s pants. Thinking it just the remains of a nice buzz, she continued to laugh intermittently at the very idea. As if she could just send a risqué text and have him fall into her bed like magic.

The absolute absurdity of the notion had her giggling like an idiot. Tom slept with… well aside from Taylor she wasn’t sure who Tom slept with, but she was sure his tastes ran more towards starlets and models. As if he’d choose a mouthy chef with a temper over a demure little actress with a perfectly proportioned body sculpted by hours at the gym. Iris had to be more inebriated than she’d realized.

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By the time she got back to the UK, the appearances got easier. Everything left was clustered relatively close to London, so she was able to sleep in her own bed between the last few signings.

She was nearing the end of her second hour at a Waterstones in Ipswich, when one of the guests managed to make her forget about her cramped hand.

"And who would you like me to make it out to?"

"Either Diana or Tom's mum, I answer to either."

That gave her pause and she looked up again at the older woman now beaming down at her. There was something comfortably familiar about that smile.

"I can't wait to see what recipes you put in," she continued on as Claudia stared rather lamely up at her. "That brunch was so wonderful, I'd trust anything you'd put in front of me at this point."

Hearing the mention of brunch, she relaxed a bit. The episode hadn't aired yet and only a handful of people knew the menu she'd worked up for Tom's family. It did her heart good to know that he had used it to entertain his family.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it." The genuine smile that spread across her face replaced the politely wary look she'd been sporting. She hadn't run into any delusional fans, but then again this had been the first purporting to be related to her insanely famous new friend. "He was asked me about a hundred questions to make sure he got it right."

"I'll be sure to help him refine his technique before he has you over again." She bent her head, trying to think of an inscription that sounded neither insipid nor cold.

"He'll be the most eager student you've ever had. He's over the moon about the new show. Can't wait to get back to town to get a crack at it."

The idea that he was off in some fantastic locale filming a very big budget movie, and yet was still excited to come back and work with her left her a bit giddy. "I'm glad to hear he won't mind hitting the ground running once he gets back."
"Mind? Oh dear, he lives for it. And he tells me you've promised him desserts, so that guarantees his cooperation."

"I'd gathered that," she laughed. Now she saw where those stunning blue eyes came from. The more she looked at the woman the more she saw the resemblance.

Realizing that as much as she'd like it, she couldn't sit around chatting all day, she again focused on the inscription.

_Diana/Tom's mum,_

_I hope you enjoy making the recipes as much as I did coming up with them. But if anything in the kitchen doesn't go to plan I can give you a chef's secret: with enough wine almost anything is edible._

_Claudia_

_PS- I feel compelled to let my friend's mom know that he is unfailingly polite. You did an excellent job there._

Before she left, Diana asked for a hug and Claudia happily obliged. The woman had an air about her that just radiated happiness and warmth and it was infectious. The remainder of the event moved quickly and she found her smiles came even easier. It had been a long time since she'd been properly hugged by someone's mother and though it brought a pang of regret with it, the good feelings far outweighed the bad.

It was after ten that night before she made it back home, but despite her fatigue she found it difficult to court sleep. Deciding it was the result of too many time zones in too few days finally catching up with her, she resigned herself to wakefulness. No amount of tossing and turning was doing her any good, so she pulled out her phone and began going through emails.

Only a few were for business, scheduling confirmations with the set designer and buyers for the show, and a reminder from Khari about her last two appearances in London, and they were easily sorted. When she moved on to her personal mailbox she saw two new messages from her sister, both sprinkled with personal news (mostly baby-related), but mostly just begging her to come home for Thanksgiving. And however much she hated doing it, she had to explain for the umpteenth time that they were set to shoot the entire week of the holiday. She knew Jules would understand and hoped that Moira would be as forgiving. The girl didn’t always see logic when there was something she wanted, including her Aunt Dia.

Unwilling to dwell on her… well it wasn’t exactly homesickness, more _familysickness_, she found herself composing a text.

Not expecting an immediate reply, she was debating the merits of staying in bed versus getting up and trying to get some real work done. She still hadn’t settled on the brands of knives she thought
might suit Tom. He’d have to try several out, but she knew some wouldn’t work for him no matter what. Contemplating the tensile strength of various brands, she was surprised to hear her phone buzzing beside her and even more surprised when she saw who the caller was.

“Tom?”

“Why in the world are you awake at this hour?”

“I would ask you the same, but I’m not exactly sure where in the world you’re at right now.”

He chuckled, sounding about as tired as she felt. “I’m in Australia finishing up filming. Another week and a half and I’m in London again. I’ll probably sleep for a week once I get back to my own bed.”

“That’s what I thought too, but here I am tossing and turning.”

“Too much travel can do that to you. So you met mum, huh?”

“I did! She was so sweet, Tom. It was honestly the highlight of my day.” After a beat a thought occurred to her and she voiced her question without thought. Fatigue wore away at her filter, she tried to remind herself. “Did you send her to check up on me?”

“As if I could send my mother to do anything she didn’t want to do. No, I didn’t ask her to go, but I have been telling her all about our plans for the show. She knew all about your tour when we talked the other day. I’m betting she’d been planning to meet your for a while now.”

“It would sound devious if she weren’t so nice.”

“She’s a mum, Claude. Devious and nice aren’t always mutually exclusive with them.”

“True.” She felt a pang of unpleasantness thinking of her own mother and chose to steer the conversation in a different direction. “So I made sure you didn’t have anything on the books for the show for the first week after you’re home. You can have a nice long rest and get readjusted to London time, okay?”

“Can I be terribly rude and make a request of you, Claude?”

“Shoot.” Mildly concerned, waited to hear what he considered to be terribly rude. Tom was possibly the most polite human she’d ever met, so for him rude could range anywhere from not standing when she left the room to homicide.

“Your recipes have absolutely saved my life the past couple of months, but I’m dying for a meal that isn’t healthy or loaded with protein. Could you… would you mind having me over for a supremely unhealthy and terribly satisfying dinner?”

Again his definition of rude and hers didn’t coincide. “God, you’re asking a chef to make you a meal? I don’t know…” She clucked her tongue disapprovingly. “You know how much I hate feeding people.”

The sweet dolt must have been tired, because he took her words at face value. “Shit. I know it was an imposition, I’m sorry—”

“I hope you’ve got your lines memorized, Tom, because I have a feeling you’d be crap at improv today. I was teasing. I’d be happy to make you something carb-laden and delicious.”
“There’s a light at the end of my tunnel! Now I have something to look forward to to get me though these last few days.”

He always made such a production out of something she considered second nature, it always brought a smile to her face. “Yeah okay, don’t give yourself an aneurysm over it. I’ll have things on standby, so just give me a yell when you’re back and ready to emerge from your hibernation, okay?”

“I absolutely will.” She heard a shout in the background and a muffled reply. “I’m getting called back to the set, Claude. I have to let you go.”

“Don’t forget to leave your phone. I won’t have you in movie jail on my account.”

“Perish the thought, I’ve had a perfect record this shoot. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Bye, Tom. Break a leg.”

She heard him laughing and before he had a chance to reply she ended the call. Now they both had something to look forward to that wasn’t work-related. It was almost like they were real normal people.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I'm not entirely happy with this chapter, but I've fiddled with it long enough and I'm super excited about the next ones to come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After only three days back he rang her up, sounding more eager than tired. "Can we do that dinner tonight? Is that enough notice for you?"

"Sure. I have all but a few of the supplies. Do you want to show up and eat or did you want to participate?" She'd remembered how crushed he was at not being able to help with the puff pastry last time, so she wanted to give him the option to be involved in the whole shebang if that appealed to him. That and the apology note he'd written her admitted how preparing a meal helped him, so she wanted to assist if she could.

"I'd love to learn and help!" The response was more eager than she'd expected. He had to still be exhausted, but was jumping at the chance to be put to work.

"Okay. So be here around six then?"

"Sounds perfect. Can I bring anything?"

"Nope, I'll take care of everything."

"I'm so looking forward to this. You're a dear for doing this for me, Claude."

"Happy to help welcome you back home."

Once they hung up, she went over her list again, pleased that she'd planned a meal that would meet Tom's expectations. He may have thought it was rude to make such a request of her, but it had offered her a challenge to either tweak an old recipe or create a new one. She'd spent two full days deciding what to prepare and it had been heaven.

When he arrived, she noticed that though he sported bags under his eyes, his outfit was still flawlessly put together. He might have been wearing jeans, but even coupled with a white t-shirt and gray hoodie managed to make it look sophisticated. A part of her kind of hated him for the ability, because she knew her sweatpants and t-shirt didn't look nearly as impressive.

After she opened the door, he pulled her into an enthusiastic hug before the door had even closed behind them. She even felt her feet momentarily pulled off the ground as he demonstrated that all the protein had been put to good use. Before she knew it they were both giggling idiotically.

"I missed you, Claude," he finally said once the laughter had subsided.

"How did you have time to miss anyone? You've been working nonstop."

"Ah, but not all work is created equal." He loved what he did, but the time they'd spent putting the show together had been a lot less chaotic than filming and promoting and he did indeed miss the
calmer pace of his work with Claudia.

"You just wanted dessert and you knew I'd oblige you," she laughed, enjoying teasing him. And it was getting less awkward between them as he realized that despite their first meeting, she really wasn't easily offended.

"I never said my motives were a hundred percent pure."

"Well calm down there, tiger. We have to make everything first."

He held up a bag she hadn't noticed at first. "I know you said not to bring anything, but I did get you something in Australia."

"You did?" Brow furrowing in her surprise, this was absolutely not what she'd expected.

"I found a local wine I quite enjoyed and thought you may like it too. I brought you a few bottles."

"That was really sweet, Tom. Thank you." She took the bag and turned to head to the kitchen in order to give her a moment to collect herself. For some reason she was reacting strongly to his gesture, not even sure why. By the time they made it to the other room she'd recovered, mostly by shoving the complex emotions aside, telling herself she'd deal with them later.

Unaware of her internal confusion, he glanced around the kitchen as if hoping to see signs of what they'd be making, but saw only the normal tidy space he'd gotten used to. "What's on the menu, chef?"

"Some antipasto, Alfredo lasagna with sausage, and tiramisu for your sweet tooth."

Enraptured look on his face, he positively radiated happiness. "God Claude, that sounds amazing. And I at least know the trick of soaking lasagna sheets before cooking, so I'm not completely useless."

"Well..." She hated to see his smile falter, but he would have seen the contradiction soon enough. "You don't have to do that when the pasta is fresh. And it's so fresh we haven't even made it yet."

"That decadent meal also includes homemade pasta?"

"But of course. I went to school in Italy. They'd revoke my diploma if I bought my own pasta!"

"Clearly you have your life well in order and I am but a humble minion begging for scraps of knowledge at your feet."

"Okay, drama boy, I'm going to need you to dial it down a bit. We have a lot of work to do."

Despite her words, he bowed low at the waist and came up with a flourish. She couldn't help but laugh at the frankly ridiculous gesture. This kind of drama, the kind that left her relaxed and warm inside, well maybe she could do with a bit of it in her life.

They worked together as easily as they had before, Tom seemingly happy to follow her lead. He listened attentively, blue eyes watching her closely when she explained anything. It had been a long time since she'd had to teach at what was a remedial level by professional standards. She may work with hapless cooks, but for the most part the work was on her, which she usually preferred. But now sharing the work didn't bother her. On the contrary, she found it rather rewarding.

An odd look crossed his face as she slid the dish housing their hard work into the oven. "What?"
"I was just thinking that I would honestly pay money to see you in full restaurant chef mode."

"Sorry to disappoint, but I have no plans to head into a professional kitchen any time soon."

"A man can dream."

"Dream all you want, because I don’t know of anyone that would let me just pop in, take over their kitchen with my own menu for a couple of nights, and pop out."

"Fair enough." He dropped the subject, but the idea still nagged at him. It was like he’d never truly seen her in her element and the curiosity just grew the longer he knew her. "Now what do you need me to do for the tiramisu? I must say, I’m an excellent taste tester."

"I don’t doubt it, but you’re doing the whole thing. I’ll walk you through it."

Though it didn’t look as visually appealing as her own would have, he did an admirable job with the dessert. She could tell he was constantly fighting an impulse to steal a ladyfinger, but refrained until they’d used all they needed for the dessert. His eyes practically rolled up into his head when he devoured the biscuit once the dish was safely stowed in her fridge. "I have no idea how you aren’t constantly eating when you’re in the kitchen."

"When I’m in restaurants I kind of am, but not in the way you think. You have to constantly taste everything to make sure it’s up to your standards."

"So you’ve sent things back because they didn’t taste right?"

"Oh yeah. You have to. They’re your recipes and they’re designed to work in tandem. If the sauce is off, the protein may not taste right and the veg may seem boring. It’s a delicate balance."

He had that odd look again, a kind of admiration that made her a bit uncomfortable. But that discomfort was mixed with delight as well. When a man like Tom, consummately dedicated to his work, admired your own work ethic, it was a stamp of approval not many received.

"I’d bet your parents are so incredibly proud of you, Claude."

The delight receded some at the mention of her parents, but she tried not to show it on her face. She probably failed miserably in the presence of someone used to studying expressions and recognizing nuance. “I know my Dad would have been. He only saw me accepted to NECI and he was over the moon. I don’t know what he would have done with me on television.”

Immediately, he recognized her use of past tense. “I’m so sorry, Claude, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine. You didn’t know my Dad was gone. I don’t mind talking about him.”

“How old were you?”

“Eighteen. Only in my second semester in Vermont.”

Something like that put his own childhood issues in to rather harsh perspective. “That’s terrible. Though I am sure he’d be proud of you, television or not.”

“Thanks.” Taking a deep breath, she decided to shake off the melancholy that threatened to swamp her, instead focusing on Tom’s pronouncement and what she knew to be true about her father. He wouldn’t want her mired in regret over him. “So tell me all about your Emmys trip.”

“Parts were good fun, but it was mostly just tiring in the middle of an already taxing shoot. I was
glad to be done with the parties and get back on set." A grin crept over his face, as if he'd thought of something very amusing.

"Your turn." He put his hands on the counter mimicking hers as they'd been when she'd asked her question. "So tell me all about your book tour."

"I smiled so much I thought my face was going to break."

"So far quite like the Emmys."

"I was able to see my sister and her family the night I was in Atlanta, so that was a bright spot."

"Already you have a leg up on me." He gestured for her to continue.

"I saw friends whenever I could. And we can't forget that I was able to meet your mom."

"I did ask her about that, by the way."

"She said that it was simply that she wanted to meet the woman that made it possible for me to not only attend, but to host a family brunch. And also that she doesn't usually get to meet my coworkers and she wasn't going to ignore the opportunity."

"At least she was honest." She couldn't blame the woman for being curious, because were the roles reversed, she'd do the same thing.

"My mother is honest with me no matter what, even when I don't want to hear it." His cheeks colored at the thought, as if remembering a recent instance of his mother's unvarnished honesty.

"Can I bug you with work for a few minutes?" Having him back within arm's reach meant she could finalize some things left pending for months and she was itching to get past the planning phase. "We have some time before the food’s ready and I’ve made a few changes I want to go over with you."

"Mind if I crack open one of those bottles if you’re going to put me to work?" The smile he flashed wasn't perturbed though, and based on what she knew of Tom he wouldn't mind the small work detour.

"Be my guest."

By the time he left that night, loaded down with leftovers, she felt like they were ready for the next step. The only big item they lacked at this point was a damn name for the show. But other than that all ten episodes were planned and they were ready to start talking to directors and such the following week. That prospect alone was probably responsible for her jovial mood and the extra bounce in her step. Yes, she reminded herself how good it felt to be working. The fact that working with Tom specifically seemed to garner a more intense positive reaction was brushed aside. Hell, she'd just only recently admitted to herself that she missed him during the break. She could only handle thinking about her new partner so much these days.

Chapter End Notes

By request, I'm going to start including recipes when the chapter is particularly food intensive. You can see the lasagna [here](#). Although let's be real here, Claudia isn't using any jar Alfredo sauce, so a scratch recipe is [here](#).
And the tiramisu is [here](#). I haven't made this particular recipe, but if you guys want a yummy dessert that really is super easy, give this one a a go. It has crazy high ratings, which is always a good sign.

(On a side note, does anyone know how to code the links to open in a new tab on AO3? The usual way I'd code the tag isn't working and only opens in the same tab.)
"I don't know what we're meant to be doing if filming is at a standstill." She'd found rather quickly that the best way to put Tom in a snit was to stop him from working. He took the current cameraman strike as a personal affront. They were still working on the set, but without the camera people, any wardrobe and makeup tests were off the table and it was eroding into their schedule. At this rate, they’d be lucky to start filming in January, since next to nothing would get done during the holidays even if there’d been no strike.

Luring him over to her house with the promise of something to do, he now pouted from his barstool while she busied herself looking for inspiration in a gigantic stack of loose recipe cards.

"We can still plan. And the better prepared we are once a settlement is reached, the more efficiently we can work. And keep in mind, you only have me for two more days before I head out."

"And what am I supposed to do with you gone? Luke will probably make me go to boring parties just to be seen."

"Listen, you're the one that makes it so easy to think you're having the time of your life at those boring parties. If you weren't so damn charming, he'd give you a break."

"Remind me again why you're flying home. It's more than just seeing family, right?"

"Thanksgiving, brainiac. And when you're a food family like we are, this is basically our Super Bowl." At his wrinkled brow, she added some clarification. "Uh like our Wimbledon I guess?"

"Ah, so it's a big deal."

"It's huge. There are a lot of us and we long since stopped trying to cram everyone in someone's house. We go to my uncle's restaurant and hang out all day. Nobody can stick to the just bring one thing policy and there's more food than anyone needs, so we eat off of the leftovers for about a week." Even if he wasn’t, she was grateful for the strike, otherwise she wouldn't have had time to fly home for the holiday.

He saw how her face lit up talking about it and was grateful at least one of them would be enjoying their impromptu time off. "It sounds wonderful. I hope you have the best time."

"Why don't you come with?" It was out of her mouth before she had a chance to filter it. She reminded herself that he could always find a polite way to decline if he wanted to. He was the poster child for manners, after all. But on the off chance he needed the distraction, this would give him one. As briefly as she'd known him, even she saw that inaction was hard for him.

"Claude, I wasn't angling for an invitation. I couldn't possibly intrude on you family holiday."

Was that his polite excuse or just a token protest? Geez these Brits and their manners were confusing. On the off chance that it was a weak protest, she continued on. "You would not be intruding. Like I said, we have enough food for a small army and everyone would love to meet the person I'm working with now."

"I'm sure it's too late to get a hotel room though."
Ah, so he was interested. "We wouldn't stay in a hotel. Nana would skin me alive. If I brought you, she'd have an extra person to fuss over, which is practically her favorite thing to do in the world."

"Are you sure it wouldn't be an inconvenience?"

"Absolutely not! Hell, we can even call it research. If we get a second season we can do a Thanksgiving episode and teach the UK the wonders of dressing vs stuffing." Sensing her prey was ready to give in, she delivered her final argument. "So basically this is for work, so you can't say no."

"Alright, alright. I would be happy to attend Thanksgiving with your family."

"This is great!"

"Give me your travel details and I can have my PA see about getting me on your flights."

"I can do that myself. No need to get the help involved in everything, Tom." It had been a long time since he'd been around anyone with that mentality.

Before he knew it she was tapping away on her phone, a look of concentration writ across her face. He had no doubt that Claudia was more than formidable when she had a mission and he tried to just sit back and enjoy the show.

It was only the work of a few minutes and a handful of questions for him before she was done. "Okay we're next to each other on the way in, but not back. But we have over a week to work on that, so I'm not worried."

"How marvelously efficient of you."

"It's the wonders of modern technology. I'm told you can actually use these things to call people and everything." She waved the phone around and grinned.

"Claudia, this is really kind of you. Thank you for letting me tag along."

"I'll be fun. But there is something serious we need to discuss before we go." She looked so hesitant to even brooch the subject, he had a stirring of apprehension. What had she waited to discuss until after he committed?

"Under no circumstances are you to bring one single solitary suit. You have a problem, Thomas."

While she kept her expression grave for at least a few beats after her statement, he burst into a hearty laugh right away. "I'm not wearing a suit now!"

"Only because this is just us goofing around in the kitchen. But I'm serious. This is not a remotely formal affair, so you will not dress up unnecessarily, okay?"

"Understood. Do I need to have you present while I pack to ensure I follow instructions?"

"I'll trust you to make appropriate choices."

"Your faith in me is terribly heartening, Claude."

"I'm magnanimous like that." She laughed and tossed him a recipe card from the stack she'd been riffling through earlier. "Be a good boy and I'll make you that when we get back."

He glanced at the card and chuckled. She'd remembered. "You'll make me croquembouche if I behave? Hmm bribing me with dessert is a tried and true method to ensure my cooperation."
"I will teach you how to make it. You get pudding and get to learn how to impress the ladies with your culinary skills. What more could a man such as you want?"

He smiled, but part of him wondered what she meant by the part about a man such as him. Certainly she hadn't meant it as an insult, but it nagged at him all the same. Is that all she thought he was about? Surely not, but then again they hadn't known each other long. As she moved back to her recipe search, he promised himself that Claudia would soon know the real Tom. For some reason he had a strong need to prove there was more substance to him than met the eye.

"Will you send me the flight info when you get a chance?"

"Already emailed it to you. I'm amazingly efficient at many things," she bragged giving him a little bow.

"Of that I have no doubt," he replied.

Just as he hoped she'd learn more about him on the trip, he found himself more than curious about the family that had produced his partner. In many ways she was a contradiction, so the insight could only help him connect with her better at work. He swore to himself that that was the only reason he now couldn't wait to meet her family.

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The flight from London to Atlanta was blessedly uneventful. It was amazing how much calmer his life had become without the constant media presence Taylor seemed to attract. He’d seen enough whispered conversations with her publicity team to at least suspect that some of the paparazzi ambushes weren’t wholly unexpected. But, he reminded himself, that was no longer his concern. Claudia was a decidedly less dramatic traveling companion.

When she’d emerged from the taxi at the airport, he almost laughed at how unconcerned she seemed with the prospect of photographers. “You know there’s a possibility the paps will be here and snag a picture of us.”

“Okay,” she shrugged and looked down at her ensemble of a t-shirt and sweatpants and looked back up at him. “Did I not dress up enough to be seen with you or something?”

“Oh god no, that’s not it at all! I just wanted to be sure you knew.”

“Yeah, I’d thought about that already and I don’t really care. Anyone who can sit on a flight for eight hours looking like they stepped out of a fashion magazine has my admiration, but I’m not that person. If the press doesn’t like it they can kiss my ass.”

“Alright then. I can’t imagine why Luke thought you needed his services. Clearly you can just tell the press to fuck off all on your own.”

“I know, right?” She grinned up at him, took her bag in hand, and began marching off towards security.

Much to his relief, she’d sprung for first class tickets. Though he never considered himself a slave to the trappings of his job, he was loathe to cram his long frame into a coach seat if he could help it. Once they were settled, he waited until she was done rummaging through her backpack for a book before broaching what he always thought of as a delicate subject.

“How much do I owe you for the ticket?”
She blinked over at him for a few seconds with a furrowed brow while she processed his question. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Claudia, it’s not—”

“It’s fine, Tom. I mean I don’t have like you money, but I’m good to buy you a plane ticket. No big.”

“That’s very generous. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” She squirmed in her seat, clearly as uncomfortable as he was, but likely for different reasons. After a few beats, she pulled her backpack out from under the seat and began searching through it again. He took the hint and dropped the subject.

In Atlanta too he was pleasantly surprised at the lack of fanfare that accompanied them. Aside from a little girl asking him if he was Loki on the train to baggage claim, nobody said a thing to him. And before he even had a chance to reply, Claudia was squatted down beside her and answered for him. “He certainly is. Do you like Loki?”

She still stared up at Tom while she answered in a quavering voice. “Yes. He’s bad, but he’s also very sad.”

“That is very true.” He took Claudia’s lead and brought himself down to the girl’s level.

“He should be nicer to his brother though. My mom always says that I’m not allowed to be mean to my brother like Loki.”

“Your mother is very smart,” he laughed and nodded at the woman hovering nearby. “If Loki were nicer, it would make a lot of things easier, huh?”

“Yeah I think it would. He’d get more hugs and he really needs them.”

“He absolutely needs more hugs.”

Her mother drew the girl away and apologized for bothering them. Claudia assured her it was absolutely fine and when the two pairs parted at the next stop, the little girl waved at them until she was out of sight.

“You were good with her,” he mused, trying to figure out what baggage carousel they needed to head towards.

“Kids are us if we had no filters or agendas. They’re way more fun to be around than most adults. My niece is just a bit younger than her and I wish I got to see her more often.”

“She’ll be at Thanksgiving, right?”

“Yeah. They live in Athens, which isn’t too far from the rest of the family. I’d riot if Jules didn’t bring her.” She continued when they’d made it to their carousel and settled in to wait. “So we have about another hour to drive once we get the rental. And I know Nana will have food for us when we get there, whether you’re hungry or not.”

“I’m starved actually. Airline food rarely sates my appetite.”

“Then you’re already a perfect house guest. If there’s one thing she loves, it’s feeding people.”

“Hmm I can’t imagine that that runs in the family or anything.”
“Oh god you think I’m bad? Nana’s the master and she hasn’t slowed down with old age.”

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

“I’m just gonna warn you, she’ll say you’re too skinny. It’s just an excuse to force you to eat more, so if you’re full, stand your ground.”

“Has she ever considered set catering? There’s a Marvel studio in town and I’ve never met a more ravenous group than a film crew. She’d be in seventh heaven.”

“She probably would, but we’re actually trying to get her to slow down some. I’d like her to still be here by the time I get around to having kids.”

“Sometimes work is good for you, even when you’re older.”

“Okay keep opinions like that to yourself. She doesn’t need any more ammo for that particular discussion.”

“I will be the perfect quiet guest. In fact, it sounds like my mouth will be rarely free to talk, so you probably don’t have to worry about it.”

“You are the most verbose person I’ve ever met, Tom. I doubt even food would stop you.”

“Talk with food in my mouth? And incur the wrath of Diana Hiddleston? No thank you.”

It was the work of another half an hour to get their bags and make their way to the rental car. He found it fascinating to watch Claudia negotiate her way through a place so different than London and to do it so effortlessly. Since they’d known each other, his sole context had been London, his city, in which she always seemed just slightly out of place. Here he was sure it was the opposite, although he had a feeling he wouldn’t blend in as easily there as she had in London. But these were the kinds of things he thought about all too often and he’d long since learned to keep to himself. Most people didn’t appreciate that it was hard for him to turn it off when he’d spent his career asking the same questions for each character he portrayed. People loved the output of a well-acted character they could have empathy or hate or lust for, but when they saw that the process didn’t stop with the script, they got uncomfortable.

Even Taylor hadn’t understood when he’d started musing aloud about one of their drivers in Italy. Of all people he thought she would, as she was always scribbling out a lyric here or a melody there, but she’d only looked at him like he was crazy and told him he was meant to be taking a break from work. But it wasn’t all work and nobody other than his actor acquaintances seemed to get that. Yes, it was certainly a ritual developed from studying characters, but it was also about his innate curiosity about the world. He’d always been fascinated by other people and their lives and stories and behavioral quirks.

So he watched in silence as Claudia joked around with the tired woman behind the rental car counter. He watched as she made the woman smile and somehow they got to talking about Thanksgiving. The woman lamented about not being able to find a good turkey brine and Claudia happily pointed her toward her own recipe online. “I’ve tweaked this one over the years and so far everyone has loved its current iteration. Just be sure to thaw it completely. That’s where I find most people have issues. And if you need to thaw it quickly, Alton Brown has a great drip method on the Food Network website.”

“Oh my word, you’re that Claudia Rey. I knew that name sounded familiar. I’ve seen you on Chopped! What are you up to now?”
“I used the money I won to move to London and I ended up with a show there. And I have another in the works with Tom here.” He gave a wave and beamed back at the woman. He was strangely very gratified to be included in the long list of Claudia’s accomplishments.

“Where can I see them here? I’d love to watch you.”

“Unfortunately we’re not on a US network with any regularity. Sometimes BBC America will show Thrown Together marathons in the middle of the night, but that’s all I’ve heard about.”

“We’re working on getting the new show picked up by a network out here,” Tom added, which was a surprise to her, but she didn’t want to go into it in front of a stranger.

“Well I’m gonna write to Food Network and let them know they need you on their schedule. Your brine is probably going to save my Thanksgiving turkey. If I hear one more dry meat comment from my aunt, I’ll probably strangle her.”

“I swear by brining and that’s what my family is using for our turkeys, so I wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

“Y’all should do a Thanksgiving episode! Save more than just my bacon.”

She laughed and tapped Tom on the chest. “We’ve actually talked about that. Tom’s never experienced a good Southern Thanksgiving before.”

“Well honey, I’m sure you’ll show him how it’s done.”

They chatted for a few more minutes until a man came up behind them, visibly impatient to get his vehicle. Once they were settled in their SUV, Tom asked about something that confused him in the earlier exchange.

“You said turkeys as in more than one. How many does one family need?”

“I don’t think you’ve understood the full scope of what you’re getting into, Thomas. We’re going to have about fifty people in and out on the big day. We’re doing multiple turkeys a few hams and lots of chicken and dressing. And those are just the meats. And someone always thinks it’s funny to bring a turducken, so you’ll probably see one of those too.”

“Do I even want to know what a turducken is?”

“Yeah, but I want to save that for later. I’m sure someone will love to explain it to you.”

“What in the hell have I gotten myself into?”

“This is gonna be fun,” she laughed, pulling the vehicle out of the parking deck.

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As promised, Nana had a feast ready for them. He’d never seen so much food for just a casual family dinner. When he’d made a comment about going to additional trouble for him, Claudia had just smiled and said this was normal when Nana had anyone over. He’d spent time in the south while filming I Saw the Light, so all of it wasn’t completely unfamiliar to him, but maintaining Hank’s whip thin figure meant that he hadn’t indulged in most of the dishes he’d spied at meals the cast and crew had shared. Now he was under no such restriction and vowed to try everything.

And Nana for her part, was happy to keep heaping his plate over with anything he wanted more of.
She’d slowed down long enough to greet him with a hug that was surprisingly strong for a slight octogenarian that barely came up past his elbow. But once the introduction and hug was complete, she’d moved off to plate something, all the while filling Claudia in on the goings on of the family.

“Nunk can’t wait to see you, girl. He says he needs to strategize with you now that his sous chef is back. Lisa’s been helping him the last couple of years, but every time they get in the kitchen together for an extended period of time they start threatening to divorce. They need a break this year. She can stick to the desserts and you can help Nunk with the big stuff.”

“Nunk’s my uncle on my dad’s side,” Claudia told him.

“Her favorite uncle.”

“Is… is Nunk short for something? I’ve never heard that before.”

Nana just laughed and put two more fried green tomatoes on his plate while Claudia explained.

“That’s not his real name. When I was a kid we watched the Olivier version of King Lear in school and I thought nuncle was the greatest title and was appalled we no longer used it. So I started calling my favorite uncle Nuncle and everyone picked it up and pretty soon it got shortened to Nunk. Needless to say it stuck.”

Nana continued to relay every bit of information she had on more people than Tom could keep up with, so he mostly just ate in silence. He heard Claudia’s accent soften even more and settle into something very similar to her grandmother’s. He hadn’t realized how she’d probably had to change her speech to be more palatable for a British audience. It was nice to hear the unvarnished version of her and she looked more relaxed than he’d ever seen her.

When he finally pushed away from his second piece of country fried chicken, he declared, “I’m stuffed. Couldn’t eat another bite, but it was all so delicious. Thank you so much Mrs. Rey.”

“None of that, son. You’ll call me Nana like everyone else. I don’t wanna have flashbacks of my mother-in-law. She’s been dead for twenty years and if you say that name again I’m pretty sure that harpy will hear it and rise up from the grave.”

“Nana’s lost what little was left of her filter. She’ll say anything.”

“And that’s my right at eighty six years old.”

“Damn straight!” Claudia raised her glass in salute before turning back to Tom. “But I wouldn’t call it quits yet. I told Nana about your penchant for pudding and she made something for you.”

His eyes lit up like a child’s at the mention of it. “Really?”

“She won’t even give me the recipe for this, so you should feel honored.”

“Then it’d be even harder to get you to visit,” the woman groused as she pulled a covered pan from the fridge. She pulled off the lid with a small flourish and he saw peaks of browned meringue. Despite his previous statement that he was done with the meal, his mouth watered at the sight.

“And Nana takes things literally, so this is an actual pudding dish.” She scooped out a portion and thrust it at him, replacing his plate with a bowl. “Banana pudding,” Claudia elaborated.

The satisfied, borderline obscene, noise he made told her he quite enjoyed the dish. They’d eaten together several times now and she’d never seen him tuck into a meal as he had this one. He’d probably regret it later, but she was happy he appreciated Nana’s hard work. He’d thanked her for
the superb meal half a dozen times as they ate. She had glowed with pride at each one, no matter how many times she’d insisted it was nothing.

In a few short minutes he was scraping the bottom of the bowl and quizzing Nana about the dish. “So the actual pudding isn’t banana flavored?”

“Good lord no. The only banana flavored pudding comes in a box and tastes horrible. This is actually homemade custard with bananas mixed in.”

“And it’s the custard I haven’t been able to replicate,” Claudia added. “The meringue is no problem, cookies are easy, but she puts something I can’t figure out in the custard and she won’t tell me what.”

“I told you, you can have it when I die.”

“Jesus Nana, don’t be so damned morbid. You could give it to me now and I could think of you every time I make it. That and I’m pretty sure you’re going to live forever out of sheer stubbornness.”

“I’ll consider it.” They both knew she was lying and dropped it.

After their long trip and extensive meal, she was sure Tom was probably ready to sleep. And even if he wasn’t, she sure as hell was. So when Nana shooed her out of the kitchen, threatening to disinherit her if she tried to help with the dishes, she decided to show Tom to his room. The house wasn’t large, but he’d have his own room and bathroom at least.

“You’ll be in the room I used to crash in between jobs,” she informed him, showing him through the door. “Bathroom is through the far door. We don’t have anything on the docket tomorrow, so sleep as long as you like. I might even be able to rustle up something touristy to do if you’re so inclined. Just let me know.”

“Where are you sleeping?”

“The couch.”

“Claudia, no! You should have the bed. I won’t—”

“You won’t have anything to say in the matter. I’ve slept on that couch more times than I can count. I’ll be fine. I knew that’s where I’d be if I invited you, so it’s not like you tricked me or anything.” She didn’t give him a chance to protest further, by distracting him with his bag. She hoisted it into his arms and left the room before he’d known what hit him. Shutting the door, behind her, she heard a muffled goodnight and smiled. Tom could be handled, she’d discovered, you just couldn’t let him talk too long or he’d manage to win you over to his side. The man was too polite sometimes for his own good, but she’d use it to her advantage at times like this. After all, a lengthy discussion wouldn’t have gotten them anywhere and she needed some rest.

As was usually her way, she found herself back in the kitchen as if on autopilot. Nana was snuggling plastic wrap over the leftovers and watched as Claudia sunk back down into one of the kitchen chairs. “Not like you to bring someone home for Thanksgiving, Claudia Imogen Rey.”

Shit. She was using her full name. “He needed a distraction, Nana. He’s been brooding ever since his last breakup.”

“Seems like a nice young man.”

“He’s a good guy. I was surprised to find it, but he’s a hard worker and I really think we’re going to put a good show together.”
“I don’t doubt that. If you’re involved, it will be good. And he seems enthusiastic.”

“I think it’s been fun for him so far. We start shooting in January and I’m actually excited about it too.”

“What’d you tell me he was famous for again?”

“Superhero movies mostly. Nothing you’ve seen.”

“Hero, eh? I could see that. That boy has an ass made for spandex.” She’d long since stopped being shocked by her grandmother’s blunt assessments about things.

“He’s actually the villain.”

“No! With that sweet smile. I don’t believe it.”

She laughed, happy to talk to someone who wasn’t more clued in about her partner than she was. People were forever telling her facts about Tom like he was some kind of grade school paper topic. “I’ll rent one for you so you can see for yourself.”

“Well he certainly is handsome…”

“No, Nana. He’s not going to give you great grandbabies, so you can just forget it. We work together. Don’t shit where you eat.”

“What a vulgar saying!”

“I learned it from you! Remember when you didn’t think I should ask that waitress out when I was working at Nunk’s. And you turned out to be right. Dating someone you work with is a bad idea.” In fact, just to test Nana’s theory, she’d dated a fair number of coworkers over the years before she resigned herself to that fact. Restaurants were worse than soap operas.

“I was right in that case, but I reserve judgment to change my mind. I’m old and fickle and can think what I want.”

“You can think it all you want then, but it doesn’t change anything. We’re friends and colleagues and that’s all. You might want to resign yourself to the fact that I’m not going to pop kids out any time soon.”

“There was a time in my life where I was sure all I’d ever do was stay home and take care of my children. I was sure my husband and I would grow old together. I was sure I wouldn’t outlive any of my kids. But life generally doesn’t give a shit about the way you think things ought to go. Sometimes for the worse, and sometimes for the better, but usually always different from where you thought you’d end up. So I wouldn’t make any grand pronouncements if I were you.”

“Yeah okay, Nana.”

“Don’t just yeah okay me, missy. I’m old and you’re obligated to listen to my wise advice.”

“More like wise ass advice.”

“That too.”

“I will listen and ponder then with the appropriate amount of reverence for my senile old grandmother’s words, okay?”
“That’s better, you ungrateful punk.”

“I love you too, Nana.”

She stowed the remains of the meal in the fridge and walked over to kiss her granddaughter’s cheek. Despite their caustic words, the two were extremely close, only wanting the best for one another. “You look half dead, Claudia. You don’t need to stay in here and babysit me. Go on to sleep.”

“I was hoping I could hold out longer. It’s not even eight, but I’m about asleep on my feet.”

“Then go. Blankets are on the couch and… hell, you know where everything is. It’s your house after all.”

“Just because I own it, doesn’t mean it’s mine, Nana. This will always be your house.”

“Till I die at least.”

“What a comfort you are for the holidays.”

“I’m not going to live forever, Claudia, you need to come to grips with that.”

“Okay all this zen go with the universe stuff coupled with pronouncements of your death is not exactly reassuring me, Nana. There’s not something I should know, is there?” She narrowed her eyes at the slight woman and took stock. She’d hardly changed in the last twenty years, with maybe a few additional wrinkles here or there to show for the extra years. As always, she was dressed in her usual slacks and top, which Claudia always thought of as regular grandma-issue. The apron hung on her thin frame as it usually did, well-worn and stained from hundreds of meals. She looked her same old self, as immutable and reliable as ever.

It was odd to her that Nana had always been an old woman as long as she could remember. That was the nature of grandparents, she mused. They were already so fixed by the time the grandkids were old enough to really notice them. And Nana was no exception. Claudia had a very vivid memory from when she was maybe four years old of Nana teaching her how to properly boil eggs. And in that memory she looked almost exactly as she did now. At that rate surely she’d be around forever, but even Claudia knew that was wishful thinking. I didn’t mean she wanted to dwell on it though.

“No, just preparing you for the inevitable. That and sometimes you need a swift kick in the ass to get things into perspective.”

“Well you’re always good for an ass kicking.”

“That I am. Now get to bed, before I have to employ my actual foot rather than just my metaphorical one.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She gave the woman a quick hug before heading back into the living room. She barely had the energy to change into pajamas, but nothing could have induced her to sleep in the travel-worn outfit she’d been wearing for more hours than she could even count. Time zone calculations were for people not yawning so hard their jaws popped. Once again, Nana proved the wisdom of her age. Her body demanded rest and after turning off the lamp, she quickly obliged it.
Y'all, if you've never had proper banana pudding with meringue and custard and the only thing that's not homemade are the cookies and bananas, then you haven't lived, my friends. I was raised in the south and I didn't have real nana pudding until I was in high school and I swear a chorus of angels came down to sing as I ate it.

This is the closest I can find to what my pudding connection makes. And I will say in the next couple of chapters you get one of the recipes I use every Thanksgiving without fail.

Thank you to the lovelies who comment- you guys make my day!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was only mildly surprised to wake up with a furry lump on her chest. “There you are, baby.” It was still early, but her body flatly refused to sleep any longer. The persistent ache in the small of her back made sure of that. She held the ginger furball and sat up with an unhappy groan. “Did the man scare you? I know you’re shy, Millie, but I bet he’s an easy mark. He’ll probably pet you and give you scraps. He’s a big old softie.”

The cat just looked up at her dolefully and nudged her hand with its head. She was quite sure Millie thought she was an idiot to have to request head scratches, but then again didn’t cats think all humans were big, dumb, hairless kittens?

“I missed you, sweet girl.” She purred contentedly now that Claudia was attending to her needs. “You wouldn’t happen to know kitty shiatsu, would you? My back is killing me.” No response from the feline. “I’m clearly getting too old to kip on the couch. Not sure when it happened, but I’m officially old, kitty butt.”

The cat let out a meow, not in response to Claudia, but at the room’s new occupant. “Claude, I insist you take the bed.”

She turned to spot him in the archway leading to the kitchen, trying to ignore Millie’s claws digging into her chest at the sight of the newcomer. She wasn’t overly fond of strangers and had probably spent most of the previous night hiding in Nana’s bathtub.

“You’re the guest, Tom.” It was too damn early to be arguing about it. She should have kept her mouth shut, but had assumed she’d be awake first. But she should have known he was a morning person too. Hell, he was already attired in running gear even though the sun hadn’t properly come up. She was only good for getting some coffee or going to a market that early. It was even too early for her to give a shit about him seeing her sleep-tangled hair.

“I can sleep anywhere. It’s one of the skills I’ve acquired in years on sets where there’s a lot of waiting. I’ll do fine on the couch, whereas you’ve already shown you’re not.”

“You don’t have to do the gentleman act with me, okay? You’re a guest and that’s that.”

“How many IQ points between the two of you and it never occurred to you that that bed is big enough for two of you?” Nana’s voice piped in from the kitchen. Now that wasn’t a surprise. No matter how early Claudia got up, Nana beat her without fail, always saying that older people didn’t need as much sleep.

She quite enjoyed watching Tom blush up to the roots of his hair at the suggestion. “I… I mean if you don’t have… if you don’t mind, Claudia.”

And while she could have throttled her grandmother for interfering, remembering full well the conversation they’d had the night before, she could see it was the cleanest solution. Otherwise he’d probably physically deposit her on the bed that night rather than let her continue on in discomfort. It wasn’t worth the fight, but she could already see the smug smile on Nana’s face even before she said the words. “Yeah, we can do that.”

He nodded and smiled, clearly relieved they’d settled on a compromise. Making his way to the front
door, he gave Millie a pat on the head as he passed. Directing his words to the cat, he said, “She’s right about me, you know. I’ll pet you for days if you’ll let me.” And without another word, he made his way outside. Probably to run to Atlanta and back, she figured, remembering her pitiful excuse of a run with him that summer.

“Seeing as you’re up, come help me with breakfast.” Nana called to her from the kitchen and she reluctantly put Millie down. “Coffee’s already made so once you get some, get started on biscuits.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

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Despite Tom threatening another run to burn off his breakfast calories, she was able to shunt him off into the bathroom with ease while she retreated to Nana's for a shower. Half an hour later she found him in the living room, a very determined expression on his face. It only took a few seconds to realize Millie had retreated beneath the coffee table and he was trying to lure her out.

"Millie, come here girl." The singsong voice startled her coming from such a large man.

"She'll warm up to you. Just give her a bit of space and next thing you know it she'll be in your lap begging for attention."

"I've never been very good with delayed gratification." If it had been anyone else, she would have wondered whether he was flirting with her, but she immediately dismissed such a ridiculous idea.

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me." She sat down beside him and sighed. "So. Touristy stuff or nothing or what?"

"What kind of touristy stuff did you have in mind?"

"I don't know. Atlanta has a zoo, an aquarium, the Coke museum all Georgia schoolchildren are contractually obligated to visit in elementary school, lots of stuff."

"You wouldn't want to go to an aquarium though, right?" Instantly she knew what he had to have looked like as a boy, shyly asking for something he wanted.

"Yeah you know how much I hate water. But beyond that, if I didn't want to go, I wouldn't have suggested it." When was he going to realize that she didn't have the temperament for artifice?

"I think that'd be grand then. Would you like to bring your niece along too?"

"You’d be willing to cart around a four-year-old all day?"

"Wouldn’t you?"

"Well yeah, but I’m biased."

"You don’t get to see her a lot and an aquarium is extremely kid-friendly, so why not?"

"If you’re sure."

He gave her a Cheshire Cat grin. “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t.”

She pulled out her phone and dialed Jules’ office number. She should be able to catch her before her first class. “Hey, Claude,” she answered the phone almost immediately.
“Hey little sis. Can I steal your kid today?”

“Hmm I don’t know. She’s doing finger puppets at day care today…”

“Oh shut it. You know she’d rather go to the aquarium with me. Time with Dia is way cooler than finger puppets.”

“Of course you can take her. You’re on the list at day care, but I’ll call them now just to let them know you’re coming.”

“Thanks, Jules.”

“There’s a spare car seat in the garage and try not to get her too sugared up. We *would* like her to sleep tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” She hung up after another round of rules and suggestions, grinning all the while.

In less than an hour they were waiting at the front desk of the day care. She’d had to sign a sheaf of papers, shown them her ID, and been recorded by the security cameras, but all they had to do now was wait. When the screech of “Auntie Dia!” rang out from down the hallway, she braced herself for the onslaught.

The little girl pelted into her, arms going around her legs as she giggled happily. After prying her off, she picked Moira up and hugged her tight. “How’s my little jellybean?”

“I’m gonna be a big sister, Dia! Just like you!”

“I know you are!”

“Mama didn’t tell me you were picking me up.” She seemed a bit wounded at the fact and Claudia knew the girl hated to be left out if there was a secret in the offing.

“That’s because this was a surprise. We’re taking you to the aquarium!” Before they headed back out into the chilly parking lot, Claudia repositioned the girl on her hip and swiveled around to face Tom. “Mo, this is my friend Tom. He’s coming with us today.”

Moira stuck out her hand as if to shake, but cackled excitedly when instead he bent to kiss it, giving the child a low bow. “It is excellent to meet you, Moira. Your aunt has told me a lot about you.”

“You sound like the people on Dia’s show.”

“That’s because I’m from England too.”

She girl nodded and they headed out, getting her buckled into her car seat with only a modicum of fuss. Glad she’d opted for an SUV, she was able to keep Moira in sight with the rearview mirror. Unlike Millie, Moira had no such aversion to newcomers and she chattered away happily with both Tom and Claudia as they drove.

As she glanced back and watched Moira talk about her dog, all the while kicking her legs, the picture reminded her of Tom and his boundless energy. He was like a small child with a seemingly endless reserve, burning off the excess in any way he could. And it wasn't always physical, sometimes she could swear the intense concentration he gave to work or to the conversation he was engaged in was only possible because of this well of energy. Even when she glanced over at him he was watching Moira in the mirror and listening to her every word. If anyone ever accused Tom of laziness or inattentiveness, it would be clear that they didn't know the man.
And when they got Moira unbuckled and ready to go, Tom was quick to take the backpack stocked with all the items necessary to travel with a young child. Before she could protest verbally, he raised his eyebrows as if to invite her challenge. "I can tote this, which leaves you free to wrangle Moira." It wasn't a ridiculous idea and she gave in grudgingly, still partially convinced that as the girl's aunt, she should deal with it.

As she took the lead, Moira jumping along with her as she held the child's hand, Tom lagged a few steps behind, suddenly engrossed in his phone. She shrugged it off, knowing the trip wouldn't end all his normal responsibilities. But when they made it to the ticketing area, Moira lowered her voice and told her aunt between furtive glances at Tom that she had to go to the bathroom. He immediately looked up and made eye contact with Claudia. "I'll get tickets while you ladies scope things out, all right?"

Clearly embarrassed to talk about bathroom needs in front of a relative stranger, Tom acted like he had no idea for the real reason they split up. She could have hugged him for it, since the knew her niece was unaccountably shy about certain things and he just rolled with it. But before they moved away, he crouched down beside her and asked a question. "Tell me Miss Moira, which is your favorite, otters, dolphins, or penguins?"

She needed only a moment to consider and responded enthusiastically, all embarrassment fading away. "Penguins!"

"Excellent." Without further explanation, he stood and moved to the short ticket line, waving at the pair as they headed to the bathroom.

When they returned a few minutes later, he was bouncing on the balls of his feet, waiting for them at the entrance. He offered Moira a lanyard displaying a penguin one one side and a slot for her ticket on the other. Bowing low as he slipped it over her head, she giggled in delight. She found his Prince Charming performance complete with bows and flourishes intensely amusing and Claudia had to admit it was fun to watch the giant of a man fussing over the pint-sized girl. And anything that garnered a curtsy from Moira in response would automatically be entertaining Claudia.

"We must be outside the gift shop by noon," he spoke quietly when Moira skipped ahead.

"Why? What are you up to?"

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you." Infuriatingly, he shot a wink at her and grinned as if keeping her in the dark was the most delightful thing.

Rather than push him and still likely end up with no information, she let it go, needing all her focus to keep up with the four-year-old blur in front of her. They were able to herd her into the line for the next dolphin show without much fuss about the wait. As they inched forward to file into their seats, Moira found out that she had more Thanksgiving experience than Tom and felt duty-bound to fill him in on the holiday activities.

And throughout her litany of facts and opinions, he listened, asking questions when he wanted her to clarify a point. She beamed up at him, happy to be more knowledgeable than an adult for once. The only thing that got her to stop the barrage of information was the lights dimming to signal the beginning of the show. She watched with wide eyes as the animals jumped high and streaked through the water. And she found the front rows getting splashed to be hilarious. All in all, her niece seemed to be having an excellent time.

They herded her through the tropical area before feigning the need for a rest in front of the gift shop. It was only a few minutes to noon and Claudia raised an expectant eyebrow at Tom while Moira
focused on a row of stuffed animals on display in front of the store. She thought for sure he’d let her in on the grand plan at that point, but he just smiled that insouciant smile and gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. So it would be secrecy until the appointed time then.

With what she estimated as a minute to spare, he pulled two lanyards out of his jacket pocket, offering one to Claudia and putting one around his own neck. She noticed they matched the one he’d given Moira earlier. But before she could question him about them, a man with the aquarium logo embroidered on his polo interrupted. “Are you the Rey group?”

“We are,” Tom answered easily.

“Okay, if you’ll come with me, we can get started.”

She scooped up her niece, following the quick pace the man was setting as he wove through the crowds. Thankfully, it was always easy to spot Tom, as he was a head taller than almost everyone else. They worked their way through the cold water exhibits, finally going through a nondescript door into a utilitarian area and leaving the crowds behind. It only took a few minutes to realize they were on a special kind of tour.

Their guide, now joined by three other aquarium workers, began to explain about their penguin population. They went over everything from feeding habits to breeding patterns and to her great surprise, Moira listened with rapt attention. In the span of an hour, they not only got to feed some of the resident penguins, but got to touch the little animals as well. She’d rarely ever seen her niece so utterly delighted. The girl was extremely careful when a worker brought her over to pet the bird’s sleek back, but when she made it back to Claudia and Tom, she was practically vibrating with excitement.

And though they visited other exhibits after the special program, nothing would clearly hold a candle to the penguin encounter. It was late afternoon by the time they bundled her back into her car seat and before they were even out of the garage, Moira had dropped off into a nap. Claudia was tired too, but she suspected that would be the case no matter what activity she’d chosen for a day with the little girl.

“So you’re sneakier than I would have ever expected.” He’d gone above and beyond just tagging along to fill the time and she was immensely grateful for it.

“I can be very devious if the cause is a good one,” he grinned back at her, looking rightfully pleased with himself.

“Well, thank you. She’s always a good cause in my eyes and you made her day. Hell, I think you may have made her year.”

“She’s a wonderful little girl. I can see why you’d jump at the chance to spend time with her.”

“I thought she was going to talk your ear off for a while there.”

He chuckled, a fond look crossing his face. “She’s enthusiastic, which is something I’ll never discourage in anyone, let alone a little one.”

“You’re going to be an awesome dad when the time comes.”

“And you’ll be an amazing mother, beyond the clear advantage your kids will have with a chef preparing their lunches.” The steady confidence in his voice startled her, leaving her with a lump in her throat. His approval meant more to her than she ever would have expected. She mumbled a thanks and kept her eyes focused on the road ahead of them.
They lapsed into a silence for several minutes until he asked about the next day’s schedule. Jumping onto the safe topic that didn’t come with a side of emotional self-reflection, she explained that they’d be focused on prep work at Nunk’s the next day. And before she could give him an out to stay at Nana’s or do something on his own, he surprised her once again.

“I could use the extra practice if we’re going to be filming soon. I don’t want our audience to think I’m a complete novice.”

“Okay, then we can certainly put you to work.”

“Looking forward to it.”

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She tried not to dwell on their new sleeping arrangements as they dropped Moira off, introducing Tom to Jules and Nali. It had been easier to put the thought aside the further away they were from Nana's house. But as the two women thanked Tom for setting up such a memorable experience for their daughter, Claudia's thoughts drifted elsewhere.

Already she feared the new arrangement would leave her worse for wear than the painful couch. For her, sleeping next to someone new took time to result in actual restful slumber, and that was even with sex in the equation. With Tom there was nothing like that to distract her from the anxiety of sharing a bed with someone new. She'd probably sleep worse than she had the night before, except now she'd absolutely have to lie about it.

She grew increasingly restless through dinner, barely able to focus on Tom's reaction to Nana's chicken and dumplings. By the time it became obvious that she couldn't put off bedtime forever, she grabbed a t-shirt and a pair of pajama pants and went to change in the bathroom. Drawing it out, she brushed her teeth and washed her face with more care than she ever gave either task.

Almost jumping out of her skin, it startled the hell out of her to come out of the bathroom and find him waiting patiently in the wicker rocker Nana kept in the corner. She tried to calm down, reminding herself that he would indeed be in the room she was sharing.

"My turn," he asked with that annoyingly luminous smile. She found it annoyed her when she didn't share the sentiment. When she did, it was warm and welcome. He turned before disappearing into the other room. "Pick whichever side you like, I'm so knackered it won't matter a bit to me. I'm liable to fall asleep brushing my teeth as it is."

She chose the side closest to the bathroom and as soon as her head hit the pillow she knew it'd been a mistake. A woody citrusy scent hit her and she immediately knew this was the side Tom had chosen the night before. Great. And while she was trying to decide how to switch without making it obvious she'd done so, he emerged, leaving her to her fate.

The whole thing was just too odd for her to be comfortable with. She flopped over onto her stomach and willed her brain to cooperate and send her into a restful sleep, but she wasn't exactly optimistic.

"I tend to be a cover hog," she said without thinking, like this was a normal occurrence.

"That works out then. I usually kick everything off in the middle of the night. Can't stand to be hot."

"Then we shouldn't have any problems."

Silently she thanked Nana for investing in a queen rather than a double as he climbed beneath the covers on his side. After turning out the light, he settled onto his back and she fought the impulse to
wiggle around to find the most comfortable position. All these restrictions, despite the fact that they were all self-imposed, were putting her in a foul humor.

"Claudia?" Less than two minutes in and he wanted to chat.

"Hmm?" If she knew Tom at all this was the beginning of a curious line of questioning. And while she didn't mind his inquisitive nature most of the time, now she really wanted to sleep. Or at least try to sleep. But she was intruding upon his bed, so she did her best to keep her tone neutral.

"Why did you invite me home with you?"

It seemed like too much trouble to fabricate a gentler reason, so she just admitted the truth. "You seem lost right now, Tom. I thought this might get your mind off things. That and Nana's asked me about a thousand questions about you and I figured this was the best way to answer them."

"Lost? How so?"

"Ever since you got back from the shoot it just feels like," she grappled with the best way to say it. "It feels like you're looking for something and nothing is measuring up. You're my friend and I want to help, but I don't know how. This seemed like something that might help distract you at the very least."

"Are you always this manipulative with your friends?"

"Hey!" Despite the darkness of the room, she propped herself up on her elbows, instantly on the defensive. "Manipulative is a strong word. I saw a person I care about in some kind of distress or existential crisis or whatever this is and I wanted to help. And since I don't actually know what to do for you, I fell back on my default, which is to do something that might make you feel better. You didn't have to come if you didn't want to."

"I misspoke, Claudia, and I apologize. Manipulate was the wrong word." He always seemed to be eating his words around her. "I just... why do you even care?"

"What?" Did he honestly not understand how this friendship thing worked? For such a smart man, he could be obtuse about many things.

"Why does it matter to you whether I'm going through something or not? I haven't missed a day of work, I haven't yelled at you or treated you unkindly, so why?"

"I told you, I care about you. You're my friend in addition to my business partner. You think just because you show up to work with that fake smile on your face that I don't care whether you're upset about something? You underestimate me, Tom."

And he'd done it again. Insulting this woman was like a hidden talent of his. Other people could juggle, but he had a knack for putting Claudia on the defensive with just a few words. "I didn't mean it... Jesus I always manage to sound like an ass around you." He scrubbed a hand over his face and changed tact. "What makes you think I'm upset?"

"I have eyes." He seemed to be waiting for more of an explanation, so she obliged. "You do that happy guy mask thing a lot these days."

"I do what?"

"The thing where you bring all your charm and big smiles to bear down upon the world so people won't dig too deep, so they'll be mollified and keep moving."
"You didn't keep moving."

"Yeah, well I'm too stubborn for my own good." She laughed mirthlessly. It was easier to talk like this, in the dark where his piercing eyes couldn't find her. "That and I know what it looks like, what that feels like. It's exhausting, but you think it has to be easier than letting people past a certain point, because people tend to disappoint."

"I'm usually concerned with doing the disappointing."

"That too. You're good at running."

"You are too. I've seen your CV."

"Like recognizes like, I suppose."

"I'll always need to travel for work though." If the jobs kept coming. He was terrified of the day they wouldn't. "Seems a bit like a drug addict working at a pharmacy."

"Nah. You just need to worry about going towards something rather than running away from it. If you want London as your home base, maybe figure out what you can do to want to come back when the work is done."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"Trying to. You asked me once if television was my ambition and I wasn't completely honest. I didn't want TV per se, but I was looking for a change. I worked really hard to earn the chef de cuisine title and god was it exciting at first. But then the shine wears off after a while. You're more traffic cop and quality control than cook. And I started to miss actually preparing the food. When you're on the line you want the top spot, when you're at the head you miss the line. So I jumped at the chance to just cook with people, make it simple again. Television offered that. I needed a change and I made it."

"I still love what I do though."

"Then your thing isn't your career."

"What is it then?"

"Shit if I know, Tom. That's for you to figure out. But while you're working on it, I'm the friend that's gonna invite your ass home for Thanksgiving, hoping you won't have to put the mask on for a while."

"Thanks, Claude." He couldn't think of anything else to say, since everything else seemed inadequate. Nobody, save his immediately family, was able to pierce through his veil of charm to see what was really happening. And he was actually damn grateful for the fact. He needed people to tell him when the act was becoming more than just something he put on for the press.

"Any time, Hiddleston. But I need sharing time to be over now so I can get some sleep. Big day tomorrow." She didn't expect sleep to come easily, if at all, but at least if he drifted off she wouldn't have to play therapist the whole night. Under normal circumstances she wouldn't have minded, but she was so bone tired she needed whatever rest she could get.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so I took some liberties with the penguin encounter. Though it is a real thing you can do (along with an otter one and a dolphin one), they don't allow kiddos that young to participate. But I couldn't resist Tom scoping out the aquarium on his phone and seeing something he wanted to do for Moira (and Claudia). But holy wow if you can do one of the programs, I highly recommend it, along with the whole Georgia Aquarium.
Tom's first coherent thought the next morning was that this was a fan-fucking-tastic mattress. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so soundly. And he was even warm, but it wasn't the suffocating feeling he usually got with too many blankets. No, this was entirely pleasant and though his internal clock was telling him it was time to get up, he was reluctant to move an inch.

Claudia, on the other hand, didn't have the same impulse, shifting slightly beneath him. Beneath him. The realization hit him, instantly chasing away the remnants of sleep. In the low light it was difficult to see, and the idea of feeling his way around didn't seem the wisest course. So the nearest he could tell, he was partially draped over her, head currently resting on her shoulder.

So close to her neck, that if he'd had the inclination he could have pressed a kiss to her skin without moving anything but his lips. But he wasn't so inclined, because that would be incredibly ill-advised. This was Claudia and she was not his to handle in such a manner. Unfortunately, sleeping Tom had no such reservations and was curled around her like a clinging vine. And of course that was the moment he got a whiff of her shampoo or body wash or something that was subtle and herbal and all too beguiling.

And while his brain went a bit foggy at the scent, she shifted again, curling into him even further, a small satisfied noise escaping her lips once she settled back down. The movement gave him another piece of information damning asleep Tom to even more of a penance: their legs were tangled together as well. Shit.


It was like unconscious Tom was angry at his waking counterpart for denying him nightly companionship and had literally reached out to the first female to share his bed in months. Quickly he'd begun to think of this as a separate man, a separate Tom he could blame for his current predicament. But ultimately this was his own damn fault and he knew it. But it wasn't like he'd never platonically shared a bed before. And nothing like this... this inappropriateness had ever happened.

At least Claudia wasn't awake yet. He still had time to rectify the situation without any awkward discussions. Because despite his mind being asleep mere minutes before, it was clear that at least part of him was awake and very aware of her close proximity. A very vocal part of his wayward body wanted to ignore the fact that this was Claudia, his friend and business partner, and nothing more.

Taking a fortifying breath, he began the delicate process of extricating himself from her embrace. He tried not to focus on how warm and soft she felt in his arms as he freed first his legs then his torso. Thankfully, his arm had simply been flung over her and wasn't tangled in her impossibly curly hair.

It took several minutes of sliding incrementally away and he was so close to being free when she flung a hand out, groping over an empty space of mattress. Without waking up, he saw her face contort into a soft pout as she made a dissatisfied noise when her hand made contact with only the covers. Apparently his wasn't the only subconscious who'd been seeking some kind of comfort.

When he made it off the bed, he stood watching her, almost frozen in place. Despite the momentary pout, her face had relaxed back into a soft expression and she looked so peaceful. It was a damn cliché of a thought, but it was such a change from her normal countenance. Because no matter how engaging Claudia was, she always seemed to keep him, if not everyone, at a bit of a distance. He enjoyed seeing her so relaxed and unguarded, at least until one of his better angels reminded him that she wouldn't take such voyeurism so lightly.
Keeping his steps as light as possible, he grabbed his bag and took it into the hall, rather than risk waking her up with the noise of his bathroom chores. He supposed he could change into his running clothes in another room. At least it would give him something to focus on other than the unexpected comfort they'd found in one another.

Feeling a rather odd mix of guilt and regret, he padded into the kitchen, only slightly startled by the sight of Nana at the table. She slowly lowered her paper and gave him the once over with those shrewd eyes of hers. Eyes, he now noticed, shared the same green hue as Claudia's.

"Sleep well?" He hoped it was his own internal guilt that added a dimension of teasing accusation to those two words.

"Excellent, thank you." Not sure it was safe to elaborate on that line of thought at all, he continued. "I didn't want to wake Claude. Is there somewhere I can change really quick?"

"Such a thoughtful boy," she mused, almost as if she was talking to herself. Then she looked at him again and answered directly. "My room's just down the hall from yours. There's a bathroom if you need it too."

"I'm going for a run. Need anything while I'm out?" He'd noticed a small shop a mile or so away and though he was trying to be a good house guest, he also dreaded coming back to an awake Claudia. She may remember their surprising sleeping arrangements and he didn't know if he was ready for that conversation. But also thought that it would be even worse if she didn't recall it.

"No, I have everything I need. But thank you. You just concentrate on working up an appetite for breakfast. Would you like pancakes or biscuits and gravy?"

Manners told him to tell her either would be fine. That's what his mother would have expected. But his mother had never had this woman's biscuits and he was sure once she did, she'd forgive such a breach in etiquette. "Biscuits and gravy would be heaven, Nana."

She grinned and shifted her attention back to the paper. "Then heaven it is."

He changed quickly, deciding he'd have to wait on the toothbrushing until he had access to his own bathroom again. Something told him he wouldn't have the mental focus to dwell on his morning breath while he ran anyway.

The sun was straining weakly through the clouds as he set off, happy to be alone with his thoughts. As his feet pounded across the pavement he tried to sort out exactly how he felt about what happened. And truthfully nothing really had happened. Both had been unconscious and they'd ended up snuggling. The problem was, however, that it was the way he'd expect to wake up with someone he'd been intimate with. Well, physically intimate with at least. They'd gone down the emotionally intimate path already, but the physical part wasn't something he could categorize as platonic.

No, the whole thing was a snarl of complications, both personal and professional. He dared not venture too far down the road of possibilities or he'd get to a point of no return. Claudia was off-limits. This wasn't some costar he'd be around for a couple of months, have fun with, and then move into the next project. Conceivably they'd be working together for years and he wouldn't let anything get in the way of that. She was his friend and that would have to be that.

Feeling like he'd at least settled some things, he picked up the pace. If yesterday's morning meal was any indicator, he'd need to work up a large appetite. It would be rude otherwise.

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Claudia was unsurprised to find herself sprawled across an empty bed when she stirred. It was later than she usually woke, but she chalked that up to the potent combo of a previous night's bad rest and a day entertaining a rather energetic child. And as she stretched, she realized she was not only pain free, but that surprisingly she felt well-rested. She must have been damn tired if she'd been able to sleep next to Tom at all.

Much more at ease about the whole arrangement, she quickly hit the bathroom to deal with those chores before venturing into the kitchen in search of caffeine. Already the day was looking considerably brighter. There really was no substitute for a good night's sleep.

-NXX-

Nana chased them out of the kitchen as soon as Tom declared himself good and truly full. It seemed that she was the ultimate creature of habit and would be doing her work for tomorrow in her own kitchen. Claudia had invited her along to work at Nunk's, but the woman waved the idea away, protesting that she'd be fine working without all the chatter 'you young folks' bring.

They retired to what neither could term anything but their room and she insisted he have first go at the shower. He'd run already that morning and she figured he was probably itching to get cleaned up. But rather than wait for her turn in the kitchen or living room, she decided to lounge on the bed and catch up on email while he showered.

As she responded to Terrance's update on the strike (there really was no update), sent a question to the set designer, and replied to a few personal items, she tried not to focus on their now shared space. The idea that Tom was showering mere feet away from her left her with an oddly unquantifiable feeling. Despite the uneventful bed sharing the night before, she had the distinct impression that something had shifted, something that she couldn't put her finger on.

She supposed it was the increased intimacy forced upon friends who suddenly had to share a small space. But something niggled at the back of her mind that left her a bit uneasy, like she'd forgotten something important in the oven. They were simply getting to know each other better, she reminded herself, all the while yearning for the simplicity of childhood. When you were a kid you made a new friend and that was that. Sleepovers, space sharing, and a host of other things just happened and nobody even thought about it. Everything got more complicated with adulthood, even friendships.

Thankfully, he broke her out of her reverie when he emerged from the steamy bathroom still toweling his damp hair. "I left you some hot water," he declared, grinning as if he'd bestowed a true gift upon her.

"You'd better hope so. I get cranky if my shower isn't hot enough."

When she came out, hair already pulled into a wet pile atop her head, she almost fainted at the sight of Tom before her. "Are those sweatpants?"

"I've been informed that mobility and ease of movement is paramount in a professional kitchen. I'm doing my level best to fit in on the line."

"Well someone's been paying attention! I just honestly didn't think your body was a capable of wearing anything that wasn't perfectly tailored to fit you." She put her hand to her head, feigning shock. "I just need a minute to ingest this new information."

"Ha ha, Claude. You're so terribly droll." The pained wince he flashed was all for show, he was happy to know his choice had met with her approval.
After only a few more digs about his casual attire, they headed out to the restaurant. Nana made them promise to bring home some rum for her bread pudding and Claudia had to all but tear Tom away from that particular topic before he started reciting verse about his love of all things pudding. She swore Nana was choosing recipes specifically for him at this point.

When she pulled into a restaurant supply store a few minutes later, he assumed they were stocking up on supplies for the next day. But when he caught sight of her almost mischievous smile, he knew she was up to something. This was likely payback for his secrecy the day before. And just as she hadn’t pressed him, he’d let her have her fun.

They wove their way past racks of pots and pans, glinting dully in the light of the warehouse space. He could tell by the way her posture relaxed slightly that this place was as much a home to her as her own kitchen. Leading them to a counter situated along the long back wall, she gently drummed her fingers on the glass display case dotted periodically with scarred leather mats. Her smile was now a full grin and he’d finally figured out their aim, for beneath her impatient fingers hundreds of knives lay on display.

"You need a new knife?"

"Hush your mouth. My knives are like my babies. I wouldn't just randomly buy a new one. You need a good knife set."

"You've said that before, but Claude I have knives in my kitchen."

"And I'm sure they were nice and expensive in their big old wooden block, but the handles aren't right for you and I'm not a fan of the quality of the steel. Tom, there's a reason restaurants don't supply their chefs with knives. They're personal."

"Well okay then. What would you suggest?"

"You're going to test drive some and see what feels right for you."

He felt rather ridiculous trying knife after knife, miming cutting an invisible piece of food. But whenever he glanced over at Claudia, she had such an acute expression of enthusiasm that he wouldn’t derail with a snarky attitude. This was something she wanted to do for him and for their work together and he had promised to be a model student. Not only that, but he realized that this was a memory or moment or whatever he wanted to call it, it was something that they could share. And that thought alone would have ensured his cooperation, because he felt very humbled to be afforded this luxury. From what he saw, Claudia knew people everywhere, but rarely let anyone get very close.

So for now, he’d focus on the task at hand, though unsure how he would make any kind of a decision. “Claude, I’m an utter novice. I have no idea about the quality of the metal or the balance or anything like that.”

“All of these are fine knives, so the thing we’re looking for is comfort. Even if the weight is just a few ounces off it can leave your hand aching at the end of the day.”

“But I don’t see much difference between any of these.”

“You would at the end of prep today, I assure you.”

“Can’t I just get whatever kind you have?”

She laughed and smiled indulgently, as if explaining an empirical fact to a young child. “Hold up
your hand, Tom.” He did as instructed and put her own palm against his. It utterly engulfed hers, not so much as a millimeter of her own hand showing behind his. “See how much bigger your hand is than mine?” Nodding, he realized he’d never really paid much attention to her hands, but now thought it was idiotic that he hadn’t noticed the stark contrast.

Withdrawing her hand, she turned back to the counter and the attendant that was helping them. “What Shuns do you have?”

“Sora, Blue, Classic, Dual-Core. We have almost all of them.”

“Let’s try the Sora eight inch. If he doesn’t like the curve on that, then we can rule a few others out.”

The man nodded and laid a new knife out on the mat. Tom could tell the clerk recognized Claudia’s knowledge and deferred to her rather than him. It was all fine with him, since he’d probably end up going with her recommendation anyway. And almost as soon as he had it in hand, she clucked disapprovingly.

“Might as well try the Classic then. It’s straight as an arrow.”

This time when his hand closed around the grip, he actually noticed a difference, as if he’d worn the wrong size of shoes his whole life and was suddenly presented with his actual size. She spotted the grin and for the first time, asked if Tom could try it out on something. It was apparently routine, because the man pulled out a couple of carrots. As he worked through the vegetables, he quickly felt how superior this was to his clunky set at home.

“Do we have a winner,” she asked.

“I believe so.”

“Should have pegged you for the classic type. Clean lines, nice balance, just right for you now that I think about it.” Before he could reply, she turned back to their clerk, not content with just the one chef’s knife. “What sets do you have?”

“I have an eight piece with a case. It will take care of almost everything unless you need something really specialized. It has this eight inch chef, along with the paring, utility, boning, bread, and slicing knives.”

“Perfect. We’ll take it.”

The salesperson handed a box over to her and they made their way up to the registers at the front of the store. Before he could even think about pulling out his wallet, she was handing a card to the young cashier. The only thing that kept him silent was his shock over the price that rang up on the screen. He simply goggled in confusion and mutely followed her out to the car when the sale was complete.

By the time they were buckled in, he regained his voice. "Claude, you absolutely shouldn't have paid for those."

"Call it an early Christmas present. I wouldn't know what to get you otherwise, what with you being ridiculously rich and whatnot. Couldn't think of anything else you'd need."

“That’s far too generous. Please let me pay you.”

“Nome.”
He knew her well enough to recognize when an argument would be futile. But beyond the cost, the idea that she’d given thought to his Christmas present at all was startling. Though she never made a lot of fanfare about it, he’d seen that she was far more sentimental than he’d first realized. And even if the desire to repay her so he wasn’t taking advantage was a strong one, the almost wounded look on her face made him override it. He’d give anything to return her to the serene expression from that morning.

“Claude, it’s a wonderful gift and I don’t want to seem ungrateful. I’m honestly touched. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She hesitated a moment before a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “If it makes it less weird, I am going to have you working some of the cost off today.”

“Which I’m actually looking forward to. But it doesn’t have to serve a purpose, because I’m good, Claude. Sorry I was a bit of a tit about it. It just surprised me, that’s all.” She’d gone through such trouble and he’d almost ruined it. Maybe the morning’s strange beginning had thrown him off more than he’d originally thought. He’d have to watch his words more carefully, lest he offend her again.

“Good.” She nodded and repeated the word softly, almost to herself. “Good.”

Before he could think of anything else to say, she pulled out of the lot and he gathered the matter was done. And strangely all he could think of was that the most complicated part of his day hadn’t been waking up with Claudia in his arms. That had actually been fairly simple until he’d begun to panic. But no, the decision he’d come to during his run was the wisest course, despite the fact that at that moment he wanted nothing more than to reassure her with more than just words.
Shunting all the holiday catering orders to Nana's own restaurant, Nunk had blessedly closed his kitchen in favor of getting ready for the family gathering. She pushed past the closed sign and led Tom into the kitchen, a cacophony of noise assaulting them as they entered.

"Those are for my pie! I put the ones for your casserole by your station."

"I put them where I wanted them!"

The raised voices didn't seem to faze Claudia, who continued to head deeper into the kitchen.

"Oh thank god," the woman cried when she got sight of Claudia. "Best you deal with him. I've already had enough."

Claudia grinned and kissed the woman on the cheek. "Lisa, this is Tom." She gestured at him and he waved at her, feeling like a prize idiot for intruding at an awkward time.

"Tom, let me give you some advice. If you ever marry a cook, do yourself a favor and take a nice long vacation over Thanksgiving. They're *unbearable* to be around otherwise."

A burly man popped his head around a corner and groused back. "It'd be fine if you weren't so damn bossy, woman. This is my kitchen."

"Okay well that seems about normal then," Claudia said, still smiling.

"I'm going home. It's sad when two teenagers are less trouble than one grown ass man!" She turned to Claudia and Tom, giving them a toothy grin. "Tom, pleasure to meet you and I expect we'll get to talk more tomorrow. Now if these two are too much for you, just have Claude bring you over to my house for a break."

"You're making my pie, right?" Claudia suddenly looked twenty years younger as soon as the words were out of her mouth. In many ways Lisa had been a mother to her and she was one of the few people who got to see her with the guard completely down.

"Of course. As soon as we got word you were coming home I ran and got the ingredients."

"Thanks, Lisa." The older woman kissed the top of her head before she headed out without another glance back at her husband.

Nunk continued to grumble inaudibly until Claudia pulled him out of his snit. "Come here and say a proper hello."

Dropping his surly attitude so quickly it make Tom almost double take, the big man stepped away
from the cutting board and barreled towards Claudia. It moments he'd gripped her around the waist and spun her around like she was Moira's size. The cackle of laughter that issued from her even sounded like her niece's. When he put her down, she was winded and grinning from ear to ear.

"You don't think I'm getting a tad old for that, Nunk?"

"Nah. As long as I can do it, you're not too old." He wrapped an arm around her and turned to face Tom. "This is the new partner, eh?"

"Yep. Nunk, this is Tom. Tom, this is my Uncle Nunk." She realized that adding the title of uncle was more than a little redundant knowing where the title first came from, but it was natural for her after all these years and she wouldn’t change just because someone new was in the mix.

Tom offered the man a hand and was given a rather vigorous handshake. He got the impression he was being sized up and while the two men were almost the same height, Nunk's build was a far cry from Tom's own lean form. Broad shoulders and well-muscled arms made him look like a burly rugby player and he'd be lying if he wasn't a tad intimidated.

"Good to meet you, Tom. Claude's been telling us about the new project. She's hasn't been too hard on you I hope." The older man gave him a wink, which left Tom wondering how much about their disastrous meeting the family knew about.

"Not at all." Well, not recently at least. It wasn't a total lie. "I've learned loads already and she's an excellent teacher." Claudia's cheeks colored at the compliment and she quickly moved her gaze to the floor.

"Course she is! Her daddy and I taught her everything we know. And then you add my momma to the mix and it doesn't surprise me one bit." He'd noticed her reaction and began laying it on pretty thick. "Plus she went to years of culinary school and worked in fancy kitchens all over the place. And she's smart as a damn whip. When they tested her IQ in middle school—"

She finally cut him off. "Okay well that's enough of that. Tom's seen my resume."

"Wouldn't be a holiday trip home if I didn't get to embarrass you in front of your new friend."

"Maybe this is why I don't bring people with me usually."

"Aww you're hurting my feelings, Claude!" His smile was at odds with the statement and Tom suspected this was an 'argument' they'd had a lot over the years.

"Yeah well put the teasing aside, we're here to work."

"Bout damn time too. I have a mountain of things that need doing, but I’m going to borrow Tom to start. For now I want you focused on your dressing. Last year we made two pans and it wasn’t near enough. I think six will do."

"You want me to make six pans of dressing?"

"Everyone always wants to take some home, especially if you’re the one making it. And I’m reserving two pans for my own personal use." He gave her a rakish smile, completely unapologetic.

"But you have my recipe. You can make it whenever you want."

"Not the same. Just tastes better when you’re the one making it."
Shaking her head in wonder and feeling more pride than she probably should have, she found the small mountain of ingredients piled at her old station and got to work. And despite her internal protests, the ego boost was a good feeling. She started to wonder if working in television was making her needy in that particular department, but reminded herself that praise from someone close, someone she trusted like Nunk, was far different than adulation from the faceless masses.

While Claudia set to work sorting the jumble of items, Nunk turned to Tom who was silently absorbing everything. Seeing Claudia in this new environment was offering up a host of new information. Nunk gestured to the zippered pouch Tom held in his hands and brought him out of his thoughts. “Brought your own knives. That’s good. I hope Loki of Asgard doesn’t mind being put on veg duty.”

Surprise flitted across his face as Nunk watched on, an impassive look on his own. He hadn’t seen the first bit of recognition from any of Claudia’s family so far and it was surprisingly refreshing. He’d reminded himself time and time again that the fame and accolades were only byproducts of doing work he loved, but he’d be lying if he said he hated it. But the past few days had been a refreshing change, because he found even the adulation to be grating after a while.

Nunk, seeing his reaction, replied with a hint of menace in his voice. “Yeah, I know who you are.” The man could have been an actor, Tom thought, sensing everything that simple statement carried though not spoke aloud. But once the warning was given and received, Nunk was all affable smiles once again. “My boys are going to flip meeting you. They have no idea the Tom that Claude is working with is that Tom.”

“There’s a Marvel studio in Atlanta. I can see about getting them tickets for a tour if you’d like.” Despite the threat he’d just leveled at him, Tom liked the man already and made the offer out of genuine kindness. “Filming’s set to start soon and I’ll ask if they can maybe get a look on set. If that’s all right with you, of course.”

“And make me dad of the year for letting them go? Yeah, it’s all right with me.”

As Claudia usually did, Nunk put him to work chopping vegetables. It was one of the things he couldn’t mess up too royally being untrained, since the only major drawback was his speed. Or lack thereof. But true to her word, the he could already tell a difference using his new knives. Smiling to himself, he decided that there was little his partner generally wasn’t right about. She was pragmatic in a way that Tom couldn’t always manage. He’d been told many times that he had his head in the clouds too much, that he was far too idealistic. He needed someone in his life that would not only see things he wouldn’t, but would be honest enough to tell him about it. And now that he’d met her family, he could see where that trait came from.

Before long Tom heard Nunk address Claudia. "How are you doing, little bit?" Though he'd lowered his booming voice, it still wasn't hard to hear Nunk's question. He'd gone over to her workspace and despite their backs being turned to him, Tom could hear every word, thanks in no small part to the acoustics of the room. And it didn't help that it was just the three of them, no noisy kitchen activity to cover up their conversation.

"I'm okay. Still a bit jet lagged, but otherwise good."

"That's not what I meant.” His voice softened and he shuffled his feet nervously before continuing. “I know this time of year is hard on you ever since we lost your dad."

"I'm..." She hesitated and Tom could almost see the pensive expression on her face. He felt like an intruder, listening to such personal business, but if he tried to leave them to their talk it would make it all the more obvious. They were between him and the door, so he stood in place and watched as her
head bent down before continuing. "I miss him a lot these days. There are so many things I wish I could tell him about."

"I know, Claude. He would have been so proud of you. And I know I'm no replacement, but if you ever want to talk I'm here. Day or night."

"Thanks." She cleared her throat and Tom saw her stiffen her shoulders. The change to her body language was palpable even from across the room. "Nana told me that Judy knows I'm in town."

"That might have been my fault." She looked over to him and it was the big man's turn to hang his head. "I was bragging to Steve- you remember he's that butcher we like at the market. Well I was telling him you were coming in for the holiday and one of her cronies was picking out a chuck roast a few cases away. I didn't see her at first and she must've heard the whole thing. I'm sorry, Claude."

"Don't worry about it. She was bound to find out one way or another. I'll deal with it."

"You don't have to—"

"It's fine." Her tone brooked no argument and he could easily see this Claudia running a hectic kitchen with such steel in her voice. At that moment he wished Nunk would pull her into one of his epic hugs, because the tension she was radiating just begged to be soothed. It hurt him to see her almost shut down at the mere mention of some woman. Even the curiosity about who she was and what she'd done was dampened by the ice in Claudia's terse reply.

He didn't reply and after a few minutes just patted her on the shoulder and went to go check on something in the oven. Tom refocused on his own task, now peeling several sacks of potatoes, but when he'd steal glances over at her he was happy to see the tension seemed to slowly leave her body. The kitchen truly was a restorative for her, there was no doubt about that.

They worked in relative silence for several more hours before everything was done or as done as it could be before the next day. But after the frosty patch, they'd thankfully settled back into a relaxed atmosphere. He watched with rapt attention as his workmates flitted about chopping and sorting while managing to simultaneously keep sauté pans going with a number of things. He did well to focus on one item at a time when he cooked at home.

Nunk had been keeping track of everything, jotting times and temperatures onto a large piece of butcher paper taped up on one wall. When they'd stowed the last covered dish into the fridges, Claudia stood and studied the paper. Taking one of the nearby markers, he watched as she began writing numbers beside each dish. She'd contemplate the group for a few moments and then add a notation before moving on to the next item.

"What's she doing?" He asked Nunk, who seemed just as content to watch her work.

"Organizing. All the items of the same number go together. They're probably all around the same temp, so they'll get chucked into the oven together."

"But they're not all exactly the same."

"Nah. She's got an eye for it. We'll just watch everything to see when each is ready to come out. I have catering pans, so we can keep it all nice and warm before the meal. Don't you worry." He clapped Tom on the shoulder and almost knocked him over. Despite what he'd read in cookbooks over the years, the one overriding lesson she'd taught him was how important instinct was. She always just seemed to know about food and it never ceased to fascinate him.

When Claudia was satisfied, she was all smiles when she turned back to face the two of them.
"Battle plan in place at least for our stuff. I make no promises for the rest of the family."

"Noreen is going to rush in here five minutes before we're set to start, whining about how she couldn't get her greens ready in enough time and how we have to wait while she finishes."

Claudia grinned and shook her head. "That's what pressure cookers are for."

"Amen. Now you two better run. Momma's texted three times to have me remind y'all about her rum."

"She seems awfully keen to finish up that bread pudding. " The suspicious note in Claudia’s voice was tempered by a wry smile.

"Might have something to do with Lisa stopping by to help her finish up." He emphasized the last part with air quotes.

"Ah. So some of it will be medicinal then. We'll get a big bottle."

"See that you do. The last thing I need is a cranky mother to go with my irate wife."

Claudia shook her head, unable to understand why the normally happy couple couldn't seem to share a workspace without threatening to see a marriage counselor. She'd worked with both of them before and didn't have any problems. "Be nice when you get home tonight. I don't need any extra family drama tomorrow, okay?"

"But she was the one—"

She held up her hand, quelling his protest with the simple gesture. "I don't care who did what. Go home and be sweet to your wife."

"I will," he grumbled. "Just gonna get these dishes going and I'm headed out." Tom suddenly realized where Claudia's dish habit had likely come from. Though she would have normally offered to help, she led Tom away without interfering in Nunk's ritual. She elected to give the man a peck on the cheek on the way out instead. The two of them clearly had a routine even if Tom was clueless about all the nuances.

She didn't speak again until they were buckled back into the SUV. "So you ready to run for the hills yet?"

"Why in the world would you think that?"

"My family's a bit... well... I suppose weird is a good word."

"Everyone's is, Claude. Don't let anyone try and tell you differently. I'm having a grand time so far, so don't worry about me. Okay?"

"Suit yourself. You'll probably have a ball tomorrow then. More people than you can shake a stick at. Right up your alley."

"I can't wait."

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It was late in the afternoon, as the sky was darkening swiftly from dusk to dark as it did in the winter months, when they saw a pair of headlights spear through the windows and splash across the wall leading into the kitchen. Most of those that had just popped in to chat or have a piece of pie had
filtered back out and it was down to what Tom thought of as the core group. Besides Claudia, Nana, and himself, there was Jules’ little family, Nunk, Lisa, and their two sons. There was also one of Nana’s other children, a reticent woman much older than Nunk, but for the life of him he couldn’t recall her name. He had his ears pricked for anyone to refer to her directly, as it was beginning to drive him nuts.

At the sight of the headlights, Nana craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the newcomer. “We’re not expecting anyone else to drop in that I know of,” she stated.

“I bet it’s a desperate family that lost a battle with their deep fried turkey. They’re probably starving and saw our lights.” Jules looked at Claudia and raised an eyebrow after she’d finished with her prediction.

“Nah, crazy great aunt Esther poisoned the sweet potatoes and they narrowly avoided the rest of the family’s fate. They’re fleeing for shelter,” she added her own idea.

Without thinking, Tom piped in. “You’re both wrong. It’s a van-load of nuns on the way to Atlantic City and they’re hoping to stop off for a trip to the loo and some truly spectacular pumpkin pie.”

Claudia rolled her eyes at him and was about to ante up on the prediction when Nana cut her off with a curt statement. “It’s Judy.”

He’d never seen Claudia go so stiff and even his gaffe when they’d first met hadn’t brought that kind of thunder to her face. In a matter of seconds she’d turned from the carefree woman he knew to the picture of stony hatred. He had no idea why two words had wrought such an immediate change in her, but he had an idea that he’d find out momentarily. Everyone’s attention had turned to her and he had the distinct sense they understood what was happening where he was clueless.

With a grunt of derision, she stood and stalked over to the glass doors. Before the woman had a chance to so much as touch the handle, Claudia intercepted her. She took the older woman by the elbow and steered her away from the entrance, stopping a good ten feet from the door. All Tom could tell of her by the outline stark in the yellow headlights was that she was taller than Claudia and had a prim air about her, clutching her handbag to her side as if she expected the other woman to snatch it away.

Nana must have caught sight of his confused expression and finally took pity on him. “That’s the girls’ mother. They don’t exactly get on,” she explained. He noticed that everyone else had returned their attention to each other or the dessert remnants on their plates, suddenly interested in anything but the scene unfolding outside. He saw Nali take Jules’ hand and press a kiss to it. The pair of them just stared down at the table, stricken looks on their faces.

It only took a few seconds for Claudia’s hands to start waving as she shouted something at the other woman. In months of knowing her, he’d never seen Claudia treat anyone like this. Trusting her judgment, he assumed her mother must have done something monumentally terrible to warrant that kind of instant ire. He saw his friend point vehemently at the car, not lowering her arm until the woman threw up her own hands and stalked back to the waiting vehicle. Though trying their best not to gawk at the exchange, several of them winced as Judy slammed the passenger door shut.

Claudia stayed on the pavement outside, arms crossed in defiance, until the sedan had pulled out of the parking lot and onto the deserted road.

Everyone silently watched as Claudia marched back towards the kitchen, deftly plucking a newly opened bottle of wine and a glass off of a table as she went. She went through with only the low swish of the door signaling her exit.
After a few minutes conversation started to resume. Tom was horrified that nobody followed her. She obviously wasn't moving on to the liquid portion of the meal for good reasons.

Jules noticed his attention and patted his hand sympathetically. "She'll be all right. That's how she deals with going a few rounds with Mom."

Nana nodded sagely. "Whenever their mama comes by this is what happens. She'll want to be alone for a bit."

"Well I'm going to go check on her." He was moving before he finished the sentence.

"Suit yourself," was all of the old woman's reply he heard before his legs took him out of earshot.

Not sure what he'd find, he pushed the door open gingerly and stepped inside. Claudia was sitting cross-legged on one of the stainless steel tables in the middle of the space. Staring straight ahead with a stony expression on her usually genial face, she sipped at her red wine.

Unsure how to begin, he walked over and hopped up on the counter beside her. He just wanted her to know he was there if she needed him.

"This used to be my domain, you know."

The statement threw him off for a moment, before he picked up the thread. "This kitchen?"

"Yep." She took a healthy swig from her glass and topped it off before continuing. "This was my first head chef position. I was so excited. I made Nunk choose between me and the other candidates with a blind tasting so I would know I got it from talent rather than nepotism."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty one. I was such a baby. And I thought I was hot shit... for about a day."

"What happened?"

"Hurricane Judy."

"Your mother?"

"Yeah. She couldn't wait to piss in my Wheaties. Said that I was lucky Daddy's family was willing to look after me like that. She didn't even have to say it, but I knew she thought they just gave it to me because of who I was. Didn't even enter into her mind that I might just be damn good at what I do."

She took another gulp, eyes never leaving the far wall. "The thing is, is that I didn't know anything. Nobody does at that age. I thought I was through with culinary school so I knew it all. But she took pleasure in seeing me struggle while I figured out some tough lessons."

"That's not right, Claudia."

"No it fucking isn't. Then she gets remarried after Daddy died and she finds some good old religion. Starts to talk to Jules about hell and sin an awful lot. I came over one day before service to find Jules sobbing in the driveway, because our fundamentalist fucking stepfather called her a dyke and said she'd burn in hell for daring to kiss her girlfriend."

"I moved her in with me the next day. Cut ties with that part of the family and never looked back. But every now and then she shows up, not out of love, but trying to bring her wayward daughters back to grace. I won't let her near Jules any more. She's not going to make her cry again."
From what he’d seen, that meant standing between her mother and sister as some kind of a human shield. That kind of confrontation couldn’t have been easy for her.

"She came by when Nana threw me a going away party before I went to Italy. Tried to get me to convince Jules that she wasn’t really gay, that it was just a phase. Because I was the good straight daughter she would listen to me I guess. Instead, I told her I was bi and that she could fuck off."

"Nobody deserves to be treated like that by anyone, let alone by a parent."

She finally tore her gaze away from the rack of pots and pans she’d been studying and looked at him a beat before offering him the glass. He took it and took a generous sip before handing it back. "I’m sorry, Claude."

"Not your fault."

"No, but I can be sorry all the same."

"Thanks."

"They said you’d rather be alone right now. I can leave if you want."

"It’s more that I don’t want to burden anyone when I feel like this."

"But you’re already saving them the burden of having to deal with your mother. There’s nothing that says you can’t seek comfort for that."

"It’s not our dynamic."

It was no wonder they’d ended up tangled together that morning as well. Not only was he apparently incapable of keeping his grubby hands to himself while he slept, she was clearly in need of some kind of solace that she denied herself while awake. Maybe being back in such surroundings had affected her even before the confrontation with her mother. He wished he could offer her such support now, but knew that wasn’t his place. Even now he wondered if she’d resented his presence and was too polite to order him out.

"So would you like me to go?" Though he voiced his concern to ensure he did as she wished, he was almost positive she wouldn’t turn him away. Just because she fled from the group didn’t necessarily mean she wanted to deal with everything alone.

"No I... I mean it’s sweet that you came in here at all. If you don’t mind, I’d like you to stay." He’d known it, but it had been good to hear her say it aloud.

"Then I will," he replied simply.

They passed the glass back and forth in silence for several minutes. The bottle was almost empty before she spoke again.

"I’m sorry about Taylor."

Surprisingly he didn’t feel the familiar bristle of annoyance he usually did when anyone was bold enough to bring her up. "I am too."

“I wanted to tell you that at the time, but I wasn’t sure if you’d want to talk about it or to absolutely not talk about it and I didn’t want to piss you off, so I didn’t say anything.”

“It was kind of you to even give it that much thought.”
"I'm kinda tipsy, so we can blame my tacky curiosity on that, but why did you break up? Not that you have to tell me it's really none of my—"

"It just wasn't working and it was only going to get worse. Everything was idyllic while we were both traveling and schedules were light, always able to make time for each other, but it got hard once we both went back to home base. Having lives across the Atlantic doesn't exactly set you up for success. And neither of us have a lot of free time when we're working. Not to mention the fact that the age difference was starting to make itself obvious."

"I can see that. I just hate it for both of you. She seemed sweet and you're a doll. Shame it went that way."

"She was the first one I'd really been with publicly since people knew who I am. It had been a long time since I was that open about a relationship."

"Do you regret that?"

"No, actually. I got the feel for what it could be like in the future. Although I'm well aware that much of the media attention we got was because of her, not me. Not that it was her fault, but it was an experience nonetheless. Well, he didn't want to think it was her fault, but when image and publicity were both involved it became very difficult to be sure.

"I still feel bad for both of you though. It's never as easy as it looks on paper."

"Thanks. It's nice to talk to someone who doesn't immediately try to vilify her for the breakup. I wasn't really anyone's fault. Well, the breakup itself maybe, but the aftermath and how her team had handled it, not so much. But he'd fumed to Luke enough on that particular subject and he didn't want to bother her with that nasty facet of the public eye.

"It's usually in a friend's nature to want to build their person up after something like this happens. Some people just do it by laying blame elsewhere, whether it's warranted or not."

"You didn't."

"Yeah well I try hard to be fair in situations like this. Dealing with my mom has taught me that. Because if you only heard her side of things... woo! You'd think I was a Satan worshiping heathen."

"She sounds like a piece of work."

"That woman has never even met her grandbaby. Just sees her as a product of a sordid relationship. I honestly think she'd be fine if one day Jules just up and abandoned her family for a nice hetero relationship. Anyone that thinks her family is somehow less because they're gay doesn't deserve to be near them."

"Hear hear." He emptied the remaining wine into the glass and raised it in salute.

"God Tom, I'm sorry. You came for a nice family dinner and you get roped into this shit."

"No, I came to meet my friend's family and experience Thanksgiving. Nobody said you all had to be perfect."

"Y'all. It's okay, you can say it."

He ended up replying with something that sounded like youwl, sending her into a fit of laughter. She nearly fell off of the table in her mirth. It had done his heart good to see her smile.
"I will have you know, I can sound just like you if I had the inclination. But I'm on vacation."

"Sure, honey. Sure."

Once she composed herself, they rejoined the others. As soon as Claudia sat down, Moira clambered up into her lap.

"Hey, jellybean."

"Mama wants to know if you'll watch me tomorrow morning while her and Mommy go out and do taxes." The girl wrinkled her face and looked like anything in the world sounded more exciting.

"Taxes?" Claudia looked over to her sister and Nali.

"Yes, you know how it's traditional to do your taxes the day after Thanksgiving. And you have to go early or all the best accountants will be taken." Nali widened her eyes when the child looked away, silently pleading for Claudia to go along with it.

"Oh right, how silly of me to forget. In England we do them the day after the Queen's birthday, so I got confused." Tom nodded sagely when Moira looked over to him for confirmation. "But I have to see if Tom is okay with being abandoned."

"There will be no abandoning," he replied. "Moira and I have already been discussing the pillow fort she'd like us to build and I'm a veritable fort expert, so you can't possibly leave me behind."

"Dia, he can come too, right?"

"Sure. I wouldn't want to leave my jellybean without her new architect." The grin on Tom's face showed that he wasn't merely being polite about being dragged into babysitting duty, so she decided not to over think it. She'd enjoy more time with her niece and if Tom was game for that, well then it would probably be an entertaining day for all of them.

Chapter End Notes

This is the dressing I make every year. It's a friend's recipe, but if anyone asks just say it's an old family recipe. Doesn't have to be your family. ;)

1 large skillet cornbread
½ pkg of herb seasoned stuffing mix
3 cups chicken broth
1 can cream of chicken
1 can cream of celery
1 can French onion soup (strain out the onions)
Enough water just to rinse out each soup can
Sage and Poultry seasoning to taste
Pepper to taste
1 large onion (chopped)
½ stick unsalted butter
3 eggs

Crumble cornbread into large container with stuffing mix, soups, water and broth. Cook
onions in ½ stick butter until tender and add to mixture. Add 3 eggs stirring and mixing well. Add sage, poultry seasoning and pepper to taste. Mix well and pour into 13x9x2 baking dish (sprayed first with PAM). Bake for about 45 minutes on 350.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Minor spoilers for Moana in this chapter.

Thank you for being patient with me while work has been too crazy to write properly the last few weeks. I hope you guys enjoy the update! :)

After they said their good nights later that evening, neither Tom nor Claudia drifted easily into sleep. She quickly rolled onto her side, back to him, as if to hide her wakefulness if he happened to look her way. For his part, he stayed stock still, unwilling to provide any distraction that would prevent her from getting some rest. Each of them just assumed the other was finding the sleep they themselves were finding so elusive.

Claudia kept flashing back to her mother, who somehow managed to plead with her to repent her wicked lifestyle while still sounding stiff and unfeeling. She wished more than anything that their holiday, such a rare time to enjoy her family, hadn't been marred by the woman's presence. But that was her MO, stalk in when everything was going well just to be hateful and disruptive. She always had trouble reconciling this new hard, uncompromising woman with the one that had sung her to sleep as a child. She'd been a totally different person when Claudia's father was alive. It was almost like she was mourning the loss of both parents, despite the fact that only one had died.

It was something she'd only superficially talked with Jules about. The younger sister had done a better job at shrugging off the strained relationship with their mother. Or at least that was the air she'd appropriated around her sister. But it was partially for that reason Claudia took it upon herself to keep Judy away from Jules and her family, as masochistic as that looked to someone like Tom.

And it was true, he didn't understand her willingness to stand in front of the woman's bile in order to spare everyone else. While he understood the thought and the love behind it, it nevertheless seemed terribly unfair. That wasn't the kind of burden someone should bear alone, which was precisely why following her into the kitchen that night had been second nature to him. Claudia's instinct might have been to fight, but his was to bolster her afterward.

But something beyond the incredulity that Claudia would subject herself to such abuse lurked at the back of his mind. Whatever it was, it was keeping him from sleep and yet he couldn't quite grasp the idea, only brushing against the edges and sensing it was something rather monumental. Something the display had stirred in him refused to go away, but also refused to come fully into the light. It was maddening, like having the word you wanted on the tip of your tongue only a hundredfold more frustrating.

As he lay there trying to make sense of his thoughts, he felt Claudia stir beside him. She didn't turn over, but instead began to fidget restlessly, emitting low moans of what sounded like distress. It only took a moment to recognize that she must have been having a bad dream.

"Claude," he whispered, hoping to distract her out of it. When she made no indication she'd heard him, he hissed it louder. "Claude."

She began to thrash more violently and he thought she was now mumbling words, though he
couldn't suss out what exactly she was saying. He'd heard something about not waking up a person in the middle of a nightmare, but didn't know if that was correct or not. All he knew was that the feeling of helplessness watching her struggle was more than just unpleasant. He desperately wanted to help, but wasn't sure how.

Still undecided about trying to rouse her, he put a hand on her bare arm and was surprised that it calmed her almost instantly. She wasn't back to a normal slumber, but the intensity of the dream or whatever it was lessened. Acting purely on instinct, he scooted in close behind her and pulled her back against his chest. As it had before, the increased contact quieted her.

He draped an arm over her and heard her murmur something, but the tone wasn't distressed as it had been earlier. She even sunk back into his chest before stilling completely, her breathing returning to the steady rhythm of sleep. Little by little he felt the tension ease from her body as she relaxed back into untroubled slumber.

He'd done it unconsciously and now here he was, spooning Claudia in full possession of his faculties. But he strangely didn't feel guilty about it. If she woke then and there he'd simply explain what had happened. Over the past few days his initial guilty reaction to finding them entangled had receded and he'd stopped chastising himself for something he had no control over. This though, this he did have control over and yet he couldn't muster the energy to feel bad about it. He'd soothed his friend while she was in distress and it was as simple as that.

Quickly drowsiness began to overcome him now that thoughts of Claudia's Thanksgiving sacrifice were overshadowed with others. He was still left with the idea that some monumental realization was just beyond his mind's grasp, but now it seemed a trivial matter. He'd figure out what it was eventually, he told himself as his eyes drifted shut.

-XXX-

"But baby, your Mommy told me you saw it twice on Wednesday."

"I wanna again! Please, Dia. It's really really good."

They'd already turned the living room into a massive fort, appropriating all the chairs from the dining room and all their extra blankets. And it wasn't that she didn't want to take Moira to the movies, she just knew every second with the girl was precious and the prospect of taking two hours out of their real time together wouldn't be her first choice.

She gave Tom a questioning look over the girl's head and he nodded enthusiastically. It kept surprising her how willing he was to sort through Lego blocks, readjust the fort layout, or listen to the girl wax poetic about her favorite stuffed animals. Going to a kid's movie seemed like it was no different in his estimation. Genuine pleasure shone through in his smile and she realized that she couldn't possibly resist the two of them. Between that smile and Moira's puppy dog eyes she was a goner.

"Okay. Let's get your coat. I'll just text your moms to let them know where we're going."

"They're gonna be so jealous, Dia!" Moira crawled out through the blanket drape that was their door and pelted out of the room.

"Thanks for this, by the way," she told Tom in a bemused voice.

"I wanted to see it anyway and it will make her so happy. It's a win-win."

The soft light filtering through the fabric may have been playing tricks on her, but she swore the
small smile he was sporting was one she'd never seen before. Once again, she was struck by how good a father he would be if he was this patient with what was essentially a stranger's child. The instinct just seemed so ingrained in him.

"Well, I'm glad you think so."

They got Moira loaded once again into the rental vehicle, this time with less fuss than before. He saw that the whole thing got easier the more you did it and felt unaccountably pleased at the realization. And as tired as he was after a partial sleepless night, he didn't want to bow out of more time with the girl. She was an absolute delight and it was an interesting learning experience seeing Claudia interact with her. And though his partner had some telltale dark circles under her eyes, she didn't seem too tired to wrangle the child either. In fact, it was plain to see how much she enjoyed watching Moira, that it wasn't simply a sisterly chore for her.

"Wanna listen to the soundtrack on the way, Mo?" Before they pulled out of the driveway Claudia looked back through the rear view mirror at her. In for a penny, in for a pound.

But the child's response surprised her. "No! It will spoil the movie, Dia! You can't know the songs first!" She was so adamant, crossing her little arms like a pint-sized gatekeeper, it was everything Claudia had not to laugh. Moira, and children in general, didn't like being laughed at for expressing their view of the world.

So she held her gaze through the mirror and nodded solemnly. "I didn't think about that. Thanks for making sure I didn't spoil it, jellybean."

The girl beamed back at her, glowing at the praise. "Welcome, Dia!"

The drive to the strip mall and trip to the snack bar proceeded without another unknown faux pas on Claudia's part and they were settled into the crowded theater with a cool ten minutes to spare. By the time they situated Moira with her popcorn, she was positively wriggling with excitement.

"Moana is my favorite princess now," she confided to the adults flanking her on either side. "I still like Belle, but Moana can do all this stuff and it's really cool and you're gonna see she's the best."

She continued to enthuse about the character while carefully checking her words so she wouldn't spoil anything. It was a diligent effort and Tom was sure to thank her for it as well. The only thing that stopped the excited chatter was when a man plopped down in the seat in front of Moira. She took one look at the hat he sported and began staring daggers at him. The thunder of a child scorned was a sight to behold, especially one related to Claudia.

Rather than let it escalate, Claudia took decisive action. "Switch with me, little butt."

The girl started to protest and Claudia calmly explained that she had no problem seeing and that it was an easy fix. Thankfully, the lights dimmed before she had a chance to voice her outrage at having to move because someone else was being rude. Claudia could all but hear the tiny tirade forming on her lips and sent up a prayer of thanks for prompt projectionists. The child was related to her after all and she knew if a wrong was perceived she'd have trouble staying quiet about it.

Just as advertised, Tom did find himself enjoying the movie. Moana, as Moira had promised, did indeed do all this stuff, and the music was rather infectious. But despite the engaging story, he found himself involuntarily stealing glances over at Claudia.

In the light of the day, he now saw how foolish he'd been the night before. What had seemed such a simple solution at the time now looked starkly ridiculous. He'd been such an idiot to think the only
path had been to spoon with her for god’s sake. It was like convincing yourself that ice cream would cure a broken leg simply because you wanted ice cream. And though the analogy made sense to him, he avoided thinking too hard about what it was he really did want from her.

But just because he'd been missing the feel of someone in his arms didn't mean Claudia was available for that kind of thing. And every time he took such a liberty, conscious or not, he endangered their relationship. What if she'd woken up and found him pressed against her? He didn't think it would have been pretty. She simply didn't think of him that way. So while he no longer felt guilty about the nocturnal cuddling, it didn't mean it had been a smart thing to consciously choose. And he continued to waffle about her potential reaction should she have noticed how close they got each night.

After several minutes of staring at the screen pretending to watch while his mind cycled through the issue, he was brought out of his thoughts abruptly. The soft sniff beside him may as well have been deafening, as it cut through everything else. His attention snapped to Claudia immediately, stomach dropping when he saw moisture on her cheeks.

Looking back at the screen, but this time paying attention, he saw Moana talking to her beloved grandmother's ghost. Even his distracted mind saw why that would strike a chord with her. Over the last few days Nana had made several statements about her inevitable passing and it clearly weighed heavily on Claudia.

Again the helpless feeling threatened to overwhelm him, crowding out the logical voice in his head he'd just been vowing to pay closer attention to. All he wanted then was to ease her hurt and no kind of reason would win out over that impulse. He reached over and took the hand she was resting on the armrest. Giving it a firm squeeze, he tried to offer her some reassurance or comfort, just something to let her know she wasn't alone.

To his great surprise, she nodded once, keeping her eyes forward, and left her hand resting in his. Not only was she not rejecting his gesture, but she seemed to actually accept it as well. He felt the helplessness recede and found he was able to focus back on the movie.

Neither moved their hand until the credits began to roll, but by the time the lights came up, it was as if nothing had happened. Claudia focused on getting Moira into her coat while Tom gathered their trash. He told himself that nothing really had happened, since in the grand scheme of things holding a friend's hand when they were upset was far from a momentous occasion.

She didn't say a word about it as they took Moira home and turned her over to Jules and Nali. He half expected her to mention it when they found themselves alone on the drive back to Nana's, but she suddenly wanted to talk about work and some ideas she had for the set. He replied to her suggestions and answered questions, but his heart wasn't in it. It felt like something had happened and they were now just trying to ignore it. And doing a poor job of it.

By the time Nana banished them from the kitchen that night he was looking forward to escaping into sleep. Things had become stupidly complicated and he didn't want to think about it anymore.

But as soon as the door closed behind them, she startled him by stopping short. He almost ran into her as she turned to face him. Expression now writ with determination, she quickly stood on her toes and pressed a quick peck to his cheek.

"Thanks for earlier," she mumbled, face engulfed in a hot blush. He knew immediately this wasn’t a thank you for helping babysit Moira. She stood silent for a moment before continuing in a strangely thick voice. "I'm going to grab a shower before bed. I'll just be a few minutes."

Before he could respond, she darted into the bathroom, leaving him to ponder the oddly buoyant
feeling in his chest. Gone was the desire to flee into sleep, now he was back to pondering the shift that had most definitely happened. It wasn't until he heard the water shut off several minutes later that it even occurred to him to move.
Chapter 20

Though the strike ended in late December, Tom’s Golden Globe nomination had put another delay on the production. Nobody wanted to ramp things up only to pause for his trip to LA, so they were postponed until he returned. And despite his numerous apologies, she saw how surprised and pleased he was to get the chance to attend the ceremony. He was plainly proud of the work they’d all put into The Night Manager and she’d never begrudge him the opportunity to be recognized for the effort.

Resigning herself to another early morning viewing party, she was surprised to have those plans dramatically altered. Out of the blue she’d gotten a call from a frantic event manager in Los Angeles, begging her to fill in for an ailing chef.

“I’m five thousand miles away,” she’d protested, wondering how desperate they really were to fly her half way across the globe to handle one service.

“We’ve had the most glowing recommendations about you, Chef Rey, and your CV is beyond impressive.”

“I can name a dozen chefs in the greater Los Angeles area with similar if not more impressive resumes.”

“We want a name, and one that people in our organization are familiar with.”

“Who exactly are you with?” Amongst the pleading to have her fly out in the next twelve hours, the woman had neglected to tell her who was offering her a truly staggering amount of money for one night of work.

“BAFTA Los Angeles.” Well that at least cleared things up a bit. It was conceivable that people at a British organization would know her from her television work. But she had a feeling there was more to it than just that and this woman wouldn’t be able to confirm her suspicions. “Please, Chef Rey, we know this is a terrible imposition, but you’d be doing us a tremendous favor.” Yep. Only the Brits would see offering her a job, paying her handsomely for said job, and stroking her ego in the process as an imposition.

Karen, as she’d eventually remembered the woman’s name was, explained the situation in better detail once she realized that Claudia wasn’t going to deny her outright. She could practically hear the hope swell in her voice as she laid on the sales technique. “We’re doing something different with the BAFTA Tea Party this year.” Claudia didn’t have the heart to tell her she’d never even heard of the event. “Instead of little desserts or finger foods, we’re doing a full meal. But Jamie’s laid up with pneumonia and we’re desperate to replace him. And I’m going to be completely honest with you, this whole change was my idea and if I mess this up they’ll fire me on the spot.”

“Jamie?”

“Jamie Oliver.”

“Right.” Well, at least she was following someone she admired.

Relenting more for the sake of working in the famous Four Seasons kitchen than the salary, she agreed to bail them (well, mostly Karen) out. The fact that she felt sure the offer had come her way more from the suggestion of one key member of their little club than anyone’s recognition of her name actually had done little to damper her enthusiasm. Before she’d even gotten off of the phone, finalizing several details before Karen was willing to let her ring off, she’d scribbled some ideas in
the margins of her notebook. Even the prospect of little to no sleep over the next few days did nothing to stop her mind from whirling into action. Picking up a job at such late notice was daunting, particularly one so high profile, but she couldn’t help but feel a pang of excitement.

“It’s probably going to kill me,” she spoke into the empty living room. “But at least I’ll die having fun.”

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Three days of travel, planning, and prep left her running on adrenaline and a lot of caffeine, but by the time Saturday afternoon rolled around, she was feeling pretty damn good about it. The team she’d inherited from the hotel was top notch, so she didn’t have to worry about the quality of their work. Well, no more so than she ever had to. It was a head chef’s job to ensure perfect quality while working with a sometimes imperfect medium. Food could be unpredictable, but through arduous prep and a constant watch on every dish that came out, she’d catch any issues before they were delivered to the patrons.

And such patrons were her main concern at the moment. Despite finding Tom to be the contrary, she knew they could be demanding and unpredictable. She still believed him to be the exception, not the rule. It was a thought she kept in mind as she addressed both the kitchen and front of house staff just before the event was set to begin.

“I know the menu is fixed, but I’ve been warned that it’s not unusual for some attendees to have more specific demands. If that happens, take their request and come to me. We’re fully stocked, so we should be able to make something to satisfy even the pickiest of customers. You’re all professionals so I won’t bore you with the basics, just keep the quality high and we’re going to have a great service.”

“Yes, chef!”

The team dispersed, everyone going to their stations to await the chaos that would soon be upon them. Right now the nominees and presenters were getting their pictures taken outside or milling about in the reception area before the dining room was opened in another five minutes. She took a final tour of the stations, answering a few last minute questions before circling back to her own spot at the front of the kitchen.

Gabe, her sous chef, was waiting for her. Though it was his job to be her right hand, he’d taken his duties a bit further than strictly necessary. He’d shadowed her to an extent that she could hardly check something in the freezer without him being only a step behind. And his manner was borderline flirtatious, only just shy of inappropriate. Claudia figured he was angling for a job or a recommendation and in his youth thought he’d employ any means to get it. She couldn’t wait to be rid of him.

It was odd that she even had to worry about such things, but then again this was her first time back in a professional kitchen since she’d moved to television. People like Gabe just assumed she was connected and could offer a career boost, but little did he know, most of her contacts were those she’d worked with before she stepped in front of a camera. She could no more call up Wolfgang Puck and ask for a favor than she could five years ago. But clearly Gabe didn’t know that and managed to bring sycophancy to a new level.

At least he knew his way around the kitchen and he knew the staff, whereas she was a stranger. And when orders began to roll in, she found him to be competent, if too sleazy for her liking. She couldn’t be choosy when it came to such a last minute job, so she’d put up with it for the sake of keeping things running smoothly. But more than anything else, it felt good being back in the kitchen like this,
despite the potentially problematic clientele and all the pressure.

“One fish, two pasta, and one beef,” she called out across the bustling space, reading out the latest order. Once they were notified, she turned her attention back to the two dishes just placed in front of her. A quick glance at the slab of Wagyu beef on the plate told her it was overcooked. Quickly confirming it with a touch of her hand, she turned back to the meat station, trying to ignore how much money had just been wasted.

The guilty look on the chef’s face told her he’d known good and well that the meat wasn’t cooked properly and had tried to send it out anyway. “Sid, fire another beef and don’t let yourself get distracted this time.” Turning to another station, she barked out another order. “Jenna, I need another bass in six minutes.”

“Yes, chef,” they both replied, Jenna shooting Sid a murderous look across the room. It was his fault she was having to redo her dish amongst all her other orders and she knew it. At least they only had a finite amount of guests to serve, as new patrons wouldn’t replace those that had already eaten like they would in a normal service. As it was, the orders were beginning to slow and she could sense the worst of the rush was over.

Momentarily without an order to plate, Claudia looked up only to see a familiar frame leaning against the wall next to the dining room door. When Tom caught her eye, he gave a little wave and didn’t bother disguising his shit-eating grin. Looking rather pleased with himself, he walked over to meet her at the window.

“My, my. What a surprise to see you here, Mr. Hiddleston.” He laughingly pulled her into a hug, now at least looking a tad sheepish. “I don’t suppose you could tell me who gave the fine people at BAFTA my name when Jamie turned up sick.”

“I may have mentioned in passing that you are a superb chef and that thanks to me was available to step in.”

“Mentioned in passing?”

“Just a few… several times.” He gestured at her crisp chef’s coat and grinned again. “I did say that I’d pay good money to see you in chef mode and here I didn’t have to pay a pound.” In contrast to her utilitarian outfit, he wore a deep red suit, pristinely cut to flatter his long limbs. About the only thing they had in common was the double breasted cut they both wore. She knew he was in his element and this time she was the one on unfamiliar ground. If they weren’t in the shelter of the kitchen she’d probably be a mass of nerves. Hollywood was more a foreign country to her than any other she’d been to.

“Two minutes to the window, chef,” someone shouted behind her.

“Well, they’re paying enough pounds for you, so I hope you enjoy the show.”

“It was very informative and I have to say the food was amazing, Claude. I was tempted to order one of everything.”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it.” His praise meant a great deal to her, but practicalities began to intrude on the warm feeling his words brought. “I do have to get back though. Good luck tomorrow. I’ll be camped out in my suite rooting you on.”

“Why don’t you come with me?”

It took her a moment to even register what he was asking and though she hated to quash the hope
that shone on his face, she had to be practical. “Tom, I’m exhausted, I have nothing to wear, and you
can’t just bring along a plus one at the eleventh hour. It was sweet of you to ask, but I have a date
with my pajamas and room service.”

“Yeah. No. It was stupid of me to suggest it.” He hadn’t even known what led him to blurt
something like that out, but the prospect of having Claudia with him made the evening sound much
more appealing. Ever since they’d come back from Georgia he’d been left with a kind of restless
boredom only alleviated by work or Claudia’s company.

“Listen, I’m probably going to sleep half the day away tomorrow, but I’ll probably be up all night
once I do. I’m still adjusting to the new time zone and… well I mean if you get bored of the after
parties I’ll be awake.”

“I might take you up on that, Claude.” He smiled again and squeezed her shoulder. “I’ll stop
distracting you now. I just couldn’t resist getting a glimpse of you in action. See you tomorrow
then?”

“Yeah. I’ll have my fingers crossed for you.”

They said their goodbyes and she made it back to the window just as the two remade dishes were
presented to her. Happy to find the proteins were both cooked to perfection, she happily plated them
with quick, efficient movements. Nobody mentioned their famous visitor, but the others looked at her
with slightly awed expressions now, Gabe’s more subdued than she would have expected.
Thankfully nobody asked her about Tom as they finished service, nor did anyone bring him up as
they cleaned up afterward. She couldn’t say exactly why, but she didn’t want to talk about it with
any of her temporary subordinates.

Though it was only seven by the time the kitchen was set to rights, Claudia couldn’t wait to
disappear into her suite. Karen had seen that she was booked in the same hotel as the event and was
sure to remind her that anything she could want from booze to food to an extra robe would be
comped. They’d gone out of their way to make the job as attractive to her as possible and she had to
admit there was a certain charm to sleeping a few floors above her workplace. Though now all she
cared about was a hot shower and her enormous bed.

In her fatigue she almost missed the white bag nestled beside the lamp on her bedside table.
Apparently Tom’s charm included sweet talking hotel staff into sneaking items into guest rooms.
Nothing about that really surprised her. The short note propped against it was penned in Tom’s now
familiar handwriting.

    Claude,

    I know you haven ’t had time to enjoy the city, so I wanted to leave these for you. I
found an amazing bakery on a run the other morning and knew you’d appreciate these.
You did a phenomenal job today. I heard so many people raving about their dishes. I
hope you enjoy the show tomorrow night.

    Tom

PS- You have to show me how to make these.

Inside the bag she found several dozen colorful macarons. She should have known he wouldn’t be
able to resist sharing something sweet. Deciding a bath would offer her a better opportunity to
sample Tom’s present, she took the bag and headed to the bathroom, step a bit lighter than it was
before.
Chapter 21

She wasn’t ashamed to say she let out a great whoop of triumph when Tom’s name was read as the winner of his category. And she couldn’t stop smiling as his acceptance speech rambled on. It was still a little weird to see him on television like this and she had to remind herself that she actually knew him. Because at that point he wasn’t the affable guy that hung out in her kitchen, he was a genuine star. It still took some getting used to at moments like this. Being confronted with the other part of his life always left her with a strangely wistful feeling and the distinct impression it was somewhere she couldn’t join him.

And it didn’t help matters when she remembered what kind of scenes he’d had with Elizabeth Debicki when she was his leading lady versus the kind of interactions Claudia had with him. The two were light years away from each other and most of the time it was very easy to compartmentalize her version of Tom from the ultra sex god roles he portrayed on his day job. If directly confronted with Tom in his Jonathan Pine persona, Claudia would probably go into some kind of shock.

But along with the happiness at his win and the renewed realization that the same Tom she knew was basically a paid chameleon, she also felt a twinge of disappointment. Surely he’d stay out partying all night and celebrating with the other winners and media darlings. She saw very little chance that he’d show up at her suite now. Refocusing on the rest of the show, she realized her heart was now heavier than it had been with the prospect of seeing him so soon. As it was now, she wouldn’t get to reconnect with him until filming began the following week and they were both back in London. It was a dismal prospect.

During the next commercial break she opened the congratulatory champagne she’d had delivered along with the sampling of items that had been her dinner. Now she’d have the finish it by herself, but Tom had won, which was the most important thing. At least now she wouldn’t have to worry about clearing her meal away. Not that there wasn’t ample space in the suite to stow the tray or even a small army of staff willing to whisk it away, but now it didn’t really matter. It didn’t bother her, so why worry with it?

As she usually found with excellent champagne, it was incredibly drinkable. She found herself with an empty bottle in far shorter time than she meant to. They hadn’t even gotten to the main film awards and she’d guzzled down a very expensive bottle like it was water. A giggle erupted from her mouth as she watched Emma Stone accept her award as the absurdity of the whole thing hit her. This was the epitome of the division she’d been pondering earlier. Tom was less than two miles away, but for the lack of physical distance he may as well have been on the moon. He was in the thick of things and she was lounging on the couch in her pajamas. He may visit her world sometimes, but she’d never be able to join his. Laughter suddenly cut short by the sobering thought, a wave of sadness replaced the giddy feeling from earlier.

But she quickly suppressed the bad feelings, realizing she hadn’t properly congratulated Tom on his win. It took several minutes to decide on what exactly to say, but she knew she wanted to absolve him of any responsibility of visiting her later. Knowing Tom he’d do it out of obligation and the idea made her feel preemptively guilty. He should be free to enjoy the parties as a winner, she thought.
Feeling past the point of being able to keep up the charade of positivity, she shifted her focus to the suite’s generously stocked bar.

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Everything was a whirlwind for the next several hours after his win. He went through the rest of the ceremony in a daze and even the grumblings over the topic of his acceptance speech didn’t penetrate. He went through the post-win interview room, clutching his statuette as if someone would realize their mistake and ask for it back. This was the biggest award he’d won to date and he still couldn’t quite believe the truth of it.

Luke collected him after the cameras stopped rolling and ushered him into a car, which proved to be needed more as a command center than transportation, since their first party was within easy walking distance. It had taken a good half hour to get through the throngs of people that simply had to congratulate him in person. Luke refrained from pointing out that many of them didn’t seem inclined to give Tom the time of day just a few short hours before. But now he was an official winner and the smile plastered across his face made Luke keep that observation to himself. He wouldn’t taint this moment. Judging by the whispers he’d heard and the early internet talk, there would be blowback to deal with, but it could wait until tomorrow.

“There are at least four parties I need you to hit. And remember my cardinal party rule, if there is someone you’d like to… ah get to know better, then please don’t sneak off to a dark corner to do so. Just exchange numbers.” Though that was what started the Taylor debacle, but he couldn’t keep Tom celibate just for the ease of his job.

But rather than look injured and protest that he’d never done such a thing before and wouldn’t start now, Tom hadn’t seemed to hear him. “I’m not staying out all night. Claude’s in town and invited me over. So let’s keep the parties to a minimum.”

Already glancing back down at his statue, he missed Luke’s raised eyebrow. “I figured she would have headed home yesterday.”

“With me here there was no rush to get back to London. And she looked beyond drained. I have no doubt that she completely crashed once the adrenaline wore of yesterday. Plus, they have her in a huge suite and this is probably the first time she’s been able to enjoy it.”

“I will only parade you through the must dos then. But it’s still going to be several hours, Tom. Don’t you think you’d best let Claudia rest after her last couple of days?”

“She said she’d be up anyway because of the time zone change.” His look was downright pleading, Luke noticed, but again chose to keep his comments to himself.

“As long as you’re not going to be disturbing her.”
“She wouldn’t have invited me if I would have. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Claude, it’s that she doesn’t do things out of a sense of politeness. It’s nice to be able to take someone at face value.”

“Sadly it’s a rarity in this business,” Luke agreed. “So that’s the plan then. We’ll pop over to the official party, get your statue engraved, and thank a few key members of the HFPA. Then I’ll get you moving as soon as possible.”


It was another excruciating four hours before the car made its way to the Four Seasons. Tom knew how it must look to Luke, him content to barge into Claudia’s hotel room well after midnight, but for once he couldn’t be bothered to care if it was rude or not. Everything tonight had been tainted with an artificial sheen he didn’t normally mind. Even his win hadn’t dulled the impulse to retreat to a more real environment. And despite Luke’s valiant efforts, he’d heard more than a few snide comments about his speech. He knew he hadn’t gotten the point across he was aiming for, but some of the venom he’d heard surprised him. It had been a contributing factor to how much alcohol he’d had, far beyond his normal limit for public consumption.

Part of him knew he’d be better off to go to his own room, but he was craving a dose of Claudia’s no-nonsense reality. She’d tell him if the speech had made him look like an ass or not. Her unvarnished opinion meant rather a lot to him. Knocking on the door of her fifteenth floor suite left him feeling more hopeful than anything.

It took almost a full minute for her to answer, but the sight of her in rumpled PJs, hair a riot of messy curls, left him more content than he’d been all night. “You dork,” she began, the thick cadence of her words immediately noticeable to him. “I told you that you didn’t have to come if you didn’t want to. I bet you could have gotten into any party tonight.”

“I wanted to see you,” he shrugged, completely unapologetic for once in his life.

“Well, okay then.” She turned around and he followed her into the grandiose space. She returned to her place on the couch and he saw she was watching her laptop rather than the large television set into one wall.

“Hellboy,” he asked when he realized what she’d been watching.

“I love this movie and I don’t have an HDMI cable, so it was just easier to watch it this way.” Shifting her focus back to him, she seemed to remember his reason for even being there. “You won tonight! I’m so happy for you!”

“Thanks, Claude. Wish you could have come though.”

“The last thing you needed was a flurry of press wondering if we’re boning or not. This way they got to focus on your win.”

“Or my poncy speech.”

“Huh? Your speech was sweet.”

“People didn’t like it. Luke will probably have his work cut out for him on that one. They said I was humblebragging.”

“People are cynical assholes, Tom. Fuck em.”
“Claude, you have no idea how much I needed to hear that.”

“I wish we were at home. I could whip up something to make you feel better.”

“You’re doing a good job of that without any food.”

She blushed at the compliment and quickly refocused on the small screen. He did the same, but after a few moments stood up again. “I’ve got to move this tray,” he explained. “I want to stretch out my legs.”

He took the tray heaped with dirty dishes over to the large dining table, but paused when he spotted something nestled amongst the fine china. “Claude, what’s this?” He brought over the scrap of paper and handed it to her.

As comprehension dawned, her expression grew dark. “What an asshole.” He craned neck to get another glimpse of the note and now realized there was a phone number at the bottom. But he didn’t want to ask, in case it was something she didn’t want to talk about. His curiosity was sated just a moment later though. “This guy was my sous chef for the event. He hit on me the whole time and now he saw fit to give me his phone number. Because that’s what was lacking from my dinner order. He probably should have taken the hint when I didn’t ask for it in the first place.”

“Maybe he just thought you were intimidating. I mean Claude you are a world-class chef.”

“No, trust me he thinks quite enough of himself.”

“So you’re not going to call him?”

“Ugh, no! Even if I hadn’t sworn off dating I wouldn’t be desperate enough to hit up Gabe.”

“You did what now?” That statement had gotten his attention like a splash of cold water.

“I… well I’m shit at it and I attract assholes like flies on shit- Gabe is a case in point. So I decided that it wasn’t worth the trouble and I’m probably better off alone.”

“Claude—”

She cut him off before he could give her any trite reassurances. “It’s okay, Tom. I’m fine with it. This way there’s no disappointment, hurt feelings, arguments, and guilt.”

“But there’s no butterflies and romance either, Claude. Sounds like you’re cutting yourself off from the good to forestall some potential bad.”

“Potential.” She let out a derisive snort of laughter. “You just haven’t known me long enough.”

“I won’t tell you you’re wrong, but I do wish you’d at least leave yourself open to the possibility. You deserve someone great and I bet they’re out there.”

“Fine. If I promise not to be completely closed to the idea, will you stop giving me those big sad eyes?”

He hadn’t realized he’d been doing such a thing, but at least it had earned a concession from her. It hurt his heart to think that she’d just resigned herself to never finding her soulmate. He knew he was an incurable romantic, but she seemed to have veered into the unhealthy opposite of the spectrum. “Sad eyes are shutting off completely,” he said, giving her a big smile.

She rolled her eyes, but smiled back at him all the same. It was kind of comforting that he even cared
about her happiness like that, like it was someone she trusted reassuring her that she wasn't as screwed up as she'd thought.

But before either of them could continue on that track, his stomach grumbled so loudly she thought it had to physically pain him. She forestalled the apology his chagrined expression told her he was about to give. "Didn't they feed you at the ceremony?"

"I ah... well they did, but I... was too nervous to eat."

"So you got all boozed up on an empty stomach?!" Sometimes he was incredibly irresponsible with himself. "I at least had the good sense to eat before I got sloshed."

She stood, but had to lay a steadying hand on his shoulder when it left her a bit woozy. "We're ordering something." In another minute she was parked back on the couch, pushing the menu at him. Thank goodness swanky hotel kitchens stayed open all night.

"I can't decide," he finally said after studying the limited night menu. "Pick for me? You know what I like."

"Get you drunk and you're helpless," she groused, but it flattered her all the same. Tom really was stupidly charming.

She ordered several things, happy that there was a phone within easy reach so she didn't have to get up again. The couch was entirely too comfy and the alcohol had left her with a pleasant fuzzy feeling that was quickly turning into lethargy. Without thinking she stretched her legs out across his lap and sighed happily at the change in position. Tom just smiled, repositioned the blanket to cover her feet, and turned his attention back to the movie.

When a gentle knock on the door interrupted a few minutes later, he bounded up without her having to ask. Even drunk he was too graceful for his own good, she noticed. While he tended to the room service she picked up his award and began inspecting it.

"Jesus this is heavy," she mumbled. "I'm gonna write my name in with a Sharpie and start telling people I won a Golden Globe." It was a loud declaration and she giggled with the hilarity of the idea. "You don't mind, do you?"

When she looked up to see the bemused smile she'd expected, instead she got a look at the person who had delivered their order. In the place of the usual uniform, the man wore a white chef's jacket. It took a moment of bleary confusion to see that it was Gabe. The idiot just hadn't been content to leave her his phone number.

"Hey, Gabe." She tried to make it sound casual and probably failed, but she wanted Tom to know who it was.

The other man's eyes darted between her and Tom. He'd removed his bow tie and had the first few buttons of his shirt undone and she now noticed that his jacket was nowhere to be seen. He looked disheveled in an artful way, looking every bit as if a stylist had carefully crafted each detail in an effort to flatter him. She almost sniggered out loud watching Gabe's expression turn stony.

"Claude," Tom called over his shoulder. "Did we need anything else?"

"Nope. I still have some of the macaroons you got me for dessert, so we're all set."

Tom took the heavy tray rather than subject either of them to Gabe any longer than necessary. It was sad that it had taken another man's presence to show him she wasn't interested, but then again men
like him weren't generally inclined to assume that a woman's complete lack of interest actually meant that they weren't interested. At least it had been entertaining. In fact, she burst into a fit of giddy laughter as soon as Tom had closed the door.

"In his case I revoke my plea to keep an open mind regarding the possibility of love. Just want to make that clear," he explained as he set the food down.

"I would be insulted if you thought I'd ever willingly be with an asshat like that."

"I know you better than that, Claude."

"At least he didn't put me off my meal."

"Me neither."

"That's because you're half-starved and we're both drunk." She narrowed her eyes at him, temporarily reminded of his reckless behavior. "Promise me you'll take care of yourself when I'm not around. It was dumb not to eat anything."

"I know." She glared at him and he quickly added his agreement. "I promise, Claude."

Relaxing back into her seat, she seemed mollified. It gave him a warm feeling in his chest that she cared enough to scold him about his admittedly thoughtless behavior. Unless it was the alcohol or his win... it was hard to tell sometimes.

They ate as they usually did, each offering the other tidbits from their plates when they tasted something they liked. After polishing off his meal it was his turn to stand and feel gravity was working against him more than usual.

"You are in... inebri...intoxicated," she laughed, enjoying the idea that he wasn't always a perfect model of, well, perfection.

After regaining his footing he put on a serious face and replied in a Spanish accent. "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

That caused her to erupt in a fit of riotous giggles. "My name is Inigo Montoya, prepare to die," she declared in a breathless gasp.

Rather than fixing another drink at the bar, Tom plunked back down, enjoying the sight of Claudia overcome with mirth. "God I love that movie."

"Netflix has it, you know," she finally replied after the worst of the hysteria had passed. "If you want to watch it."

He flashed the boyish grin that told her he thought the idea was a good one and they hunkered back down in front of her laptop. Before Westley even left the farm, Claudia had repositioned herself. Putting a pillow in Tom’s lap, she laid down, content to watch the movie sideways. The long hours, rich food, and alcohol were all catching up with her, but she was reluctant to officially call it a night. Once she settled, she thought how curiously comfortable she was. Something about the whole night had felt rather dreamlike, as it wasn’t their usual routine when they socialized. Between the new surroundings, the giddiness at Tom’s win, and the overindulgence, it almost didn’t feel real. For this reason she didn’t think too hard about using Tom as her personal pillow. Normally she’d never assume such an easy familiarity, but then it felt okay.

Tom too noticed the difference and without realizing it found his fingers gently carding through her
hair. Even Claudia took the familiar gesture in stride, or at least he thought so at first. He quickly spied that the reason for her silence was that she was now rather soundly asleep. Careful not to jostle her, he stood and closed the laptop before picking her up as gently as possible. But as soon as he had her nestled in his arms he saw that it would probably take an air horn to wake her.

His own energy finally seemed to be flagging as well and he was suddenly very grateful that he didn’t have to carry her far. It was everything he could do to get her tucked into the massive bed and make it back to the couch before he collapsed into his own dreamless slumber. The last thing he thought of before succumbing completely was that his luckiest moment of the night hadn’t been when his name was called at the ceremony.
Chapter 22

A banging on the door startled Claudia awake. For a moment she didn't realize where in the hell she was, but then her brain caught up with her and she remembered why she wasn't in her own bed. Unfortunately when the thought hit, so did the headache. She could have throttled past Claudia for drinking so much.

Stumbling into the other room, she didn't spot the newly-conscious Tom struggling to get up from the couch. Her number one priority was to make whoever was knocking on her door go away as quickly as possible and after that, she thought dying sounded like a better idea than dealing with her hangover.

The sight of Luke's smiling countenance didn't make her any more inclined to care whether she knew the noise offender or not.

"Morning, Claude."

She merely grunted in reply and turned to find her purse. She had aspirin somewhere and that had eclipsed all other desires. Even spotting Tom, now squinting back at Luke, didn't deter her from her search.

"Well, you two had quite the party last night." He didn't exactly seem to be taking pleasure from their discomfort, but he was a little too amused for her liking. "But as much as I hate to break things up, I have to steal Tom."

"Jesus," Tom finally croaked. His throat felt drier than the damn Sahara, but at least the headache he had seemed to be rather mild all things considered. "I'm not late for anything, am I?"

"No, you have a couple of hours to smarten up and look respectable. I know it's still early, but I wasn't sure what state you'd be in. I've got six interviews for you today and we have some notes to go over beforehand."

"Notes?" He watched as Claudia emerged from the other room with a pill container and two bottles of water. Wordlessly she offered him a handful of aspirin and one of the bottles before plopping down next to him on the couch.

"There's some talk about your speech." All humor left his genial face.

"Shit. I should have just thanked Mum and gotten the hell off the stage before I could cock it up."

"You meant well," Claudia interjected. 

"And that's basically what we're going to tell people." He took in Tom's rumpled clothes and bloodshot eyes. "Are you up to it today?"

"Yeah, yeah. I think I look worse than I feel."

"Well, you look like shit, so let's hope so."

Tom turned to Claudia and spoke as if Luke wasn't in the room. "Anyone who thinks Luke pampers his clients clearly hasn't met the man."

"He's hell on your ego," she nodded and replied.
He ignored their jibes and now spoke to Claudia. "I'm sorry to intrude and run, but we have to be off. I have to get him prepped and ready. When are you flying back?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"We're leaving in the afternoon. You're both expected on set on Thursday, right?"

She nodded before realizing that quick head motions probably weren't the best idea at present. It struck her that if Tom looked like shit then she had to resemble something out of a horror movie. It didn't bear thinking about. At least she wasn't expected to be faultlessly good looking today and was free to hibernate her hangover away. It would take a lot more than whatever Tom netted per film to get her to play nice with the press on a day like this.

Luke stood and Tom followed right behind him. He looked strange and she figured he was trying to find something to apologize for. But she'd already been drunk before he got there and she couldn't think of a thing that even his polite manners could ask forgiveness for.

"Go kick media ass," she called to them. "I'm going to try and not die."

Tom turned back, looking guilty, but thankfully didn't issue an apology. "Thanks for last night, Claude. I had a lot of fun."

"Me too, even though it doesn't feel like it right now. Go get all scrubbed and pressed and whatnot. I'm headed back to bed."

"Sorry I had to wake you, Claudia." At least Luke's was warranted.

"Yeah, yeah, make it up to me later." He flashed her one more smile before the pair of them disappeared into the hallway.

"Did you do anything last night I need to be prepared to talk about? The room wasn't trashed and nobody called the police, but you do know I like to be thorough."

"We watched a few movies and passed out." Maybe it was the other man's knowing smile or maybe he wanted to say it out loud for his own reasons, but a beat later Tom felt the need to elaborate. "Nothing happened, Luke. I slept on the couch."

"You know," he began carefully, focusing on their path to the elevator rather than meeting Tom's eye. "It wouldn't be terrible if something had happened. I mean from a publicity standpoint."

"We're friends and coworkers. You think I'd mess that up? We both know I'm not the best at keeping a relationship going."

"You've been involved with costars before." Not that he was exactly looking forward to the work that would come along with a new relationship, but he couldn't expect Tom to stay single just to suit his publicist.

"A fling is one thing when you're on set for a few months and nobody expects anything after wrap, but this would be different."

"Claude's certainly different though, she's not your usual type."

Tamping down on a wave of irrational anger, Tom realized Luke was right. She wasn't like any of his past girlfriends or any of the women he'd... had fun with over the past few years. Despite Luke's tutelage Claudia still had a streak of naiveté about her, something he didn't see very often from those
in the public eye. No, she wasn't calculating when it came to protecting her own image. Despite her shrewd mind, she was still more idealistic about how things should work in the press and that usually didn't coincide with reality. She wasn't used to not being taken at her word.

"We're friends," he repeated again, a bit of steel in his voice.

"Fine," he held up his hands in a show of surrender. "I just wanted to mention it in case you thought I'd be a barrier. I think Claude's terrific is all."

"She is and smart enough not to want any of the trouble someone like me would bring her." That and she'd sworn off relationships altogether, but he didn't need to divulge that to Luke. It was bad enough they were discussing her like this at all, but that seemed a step too far.

Luke's expression softened and Tom's response confirmed what he'd suspected. "You're not damaged goods, Tom. You don't have a normal job and yes your life is a bit mad sometimes, but that doesn't mean you don't deserve to be happy."

"Yeah, because I've brought the women such happiness in the past."

"Don't give me that sad sack bullshit," Luke snapped. "I'm not an idiot and neither are you. Taylor was the first woman in a long time you even attempted to do a full relationship with. It failed and I'm sure that didn't feel good, but that doesn't mean you're some kind of a pariah. Jesus, but you can be dramatic sometimes. All I'm saying is that Claudia is great and you won't see me standing in the way if you two ever move into something more than friends and colleagues. I am concerned, however, when you start sounding like a jaded nihilist. That's not like you."

"Maybe I'm just becoming a realist."

"And maybe you had your heart broken and you're not used to how that feels. You don't do things by halves that's for damn sure." He rubbed his temples and tried to keep too much ire out of his voice. Sometimes his job felt like that of a secondary school guidance counselor. "Listen, feel like shit if you want. I get that and god knows we've all been there, but do me a favor and not swear off the possibility of happiness just because you're in a strop now."

Hadin't he said something similar to Claudia the night before? He hoped he hadn't sounded so trite, but realized he probably had and that she'd just been humoring him. In a moment of weakness he blurted out the very thing he'd decided not to divulge. "You plan on giving Claudia same pep talk then? She's sworn off dating too." He felt like he had to share the indignation her statement had riled up in him.

"Ah." All at once several things became clear to Luke and he no longer wanted to begrudge Tom his bad mood. He knew it was likely temporary, as someone with Tom's disgustingly optimistic outlook wouldn't sulk for very long.

But now it seemed he was spoiling for a fight. "Ah, what?"

"Nothing." Now a row was something Luke would begrudge him, as they had too much work to do. But Tom's little pity party had illuminated some things and he did appreciate the additional information. Unbeknownst to him, he'd been working partially in the dark when it came to Tom and Claudia. Now he knew he'd have to keep an eye out for how this could effect his interactions with either of them. "I just like both of you in addition to you being clients and I don't want to see either of you closed off to something good. That's all."

"Sorry. I don't feel great just now. I probably just need some food in my stomach and a long shower."
"I appreciate your concern, Luke. You're a good friend, no matter how much shit I may give you sometimes."

"And because I'm also your very excellent publicist I can arrange for breakfast and a hot shower, though I'd advise you to only attempt one at a time." Though it had been a bad joke, it earned a smile all the same.

"Noted. I don't know what I'd do without your wise counsel." There was a fair bit of sarcasm in his words, but Luke saw that the worst of the storm had passed. If nothing else, Tom was usually quick to bounce back out of a funk and he hoped this situation would be no different. At least now he knew to be sure the two of them were booked in the same hotel when they happened to be working in the same town. He told himself it was to simplify logistics and make things easier should something romantic develop, but he also knew it was more than that. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea of them together.

"Probably curl up into a ball and cry I expect." Tom's reply shook him out of his thoughts. He clapped his friend on the shoulder and led him into the underground parking garage. "I'll try to move things along as quickly as possible today so you can have as much time to rest up before we leave, okay?"

"Thanks, Luke." He wasn't looking forward to interviews coupled with damage control, but the prospect of going home did brighten his outlook a bit. He'd plow through like he always did and in a matter of days he'd be back to the kind of work he relished. Travel was all well and good, but he couldn't wait to be back in London. It was going to be a long day, but at least he had that on the horizon.
Hiddleston Not Very Low-Key After His Globes Win

Sources tell us that the golden statue might not have been the only thing Tom Hiddleston won the night of the Golden Globes. After making token appearances at a handful of parties, he left early, a bold move considering the amount of damage control he's likely doing after that disastrous speech. He was spotted returning to a hotel after bugging out of the William Morris bash. This normally wouldn't set tongues wagging, but it wasn't his hotel.

Not only was the Marvel star seen entering the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills, but we've confirmed that he was in celebrity chef Claudia Rey's suite later that same night. We personally don't believe in coincidences and it should be noted that the actor was decidedly "disheveled" according to our source at the hotel. Now the pair are working together on an upcoming show, but something tells us the two of them weren't trading recipes at 1 in the morning. He didn't leave until early Monday morning, sneaking out through the garage, but still managed to be spotted by two more witnesses. Hiddles, if we can give you a bit of advice: you may want to stay at the same hotel as your secret boo to avoid bringing attention to your booty calls.

At least we're back on common ground with Hiddleston, who's very public romance with pop princess Taylor Swift ended after more photo ops... err dates... than we thought possible in three short months. He seems back to his old MO of romancing pretty colleagues for a short time, denying anything but a professional relationship in public, and moving on when the project is done. His slinky behavior Monday morning is a signal he's back to true form. What a shame for us, but his Prosper publicity team is probably breathing a sigh of relief. It has to be exhausting to coordinate so many public appearances and try to spin them as casual outings. Hopefully Chef Rey is on board for a romance on the down-low.

We weren't able to verify why Rey was even in LA, as the ex-pat now makes her home in London, but rest assured we'll keep you apprised of any additional details as they emerge. This one might even be special if Hiddleston is bringing her along when he travels, albeit in secret. Baby steps, huh, Tom?
"Claude, I'm so sorry. I should have been more careful."

"You must be tired to be this thick," she griped. "This is Gabe's handiwork- payback for me not wanting to sleep with him. If only he would have threatened to tell the press I was friends with you, because as we all know that's what really revs my engine. Just think, I could have had unfulfilling sex with an ambitious wart of a man and I passed it up. What an idiot I am."

"Gabe?" For once Luke looked confused. He wasn't used to being the uninformed one in the room.

"My sous chef at the BAFTA event and he made it his mission to get into my pants. He brought our room service order after I ignored his other super subtle advances and Tom answered the door. He's their source at the hotel." She turned to Tom and raised an eyebrow. "How much you wanna bet that the nonexistent sex we had was better than the actual sex that weasel Gabe could have offered?"

His cheeks reddened at her mention of sex. "This isn't a joke, Claudia. They implied you're my kept woman."

"Well you're not doing a great job then. I thought kept women just lounged around all day counting their diamonds. I'm due at work in..." she squinted at her phone. "Fifty seven minutes. You're clearly not supporting your mistress properly."

Luke, ever the professional, ignored her sarcastic words and focused on the issue at hand. "How would you like me to respond?"

"Isn't that what we pay you for?" She still didn't see the urgency. People made things up and posted them online all the time. It wouldn't be the last time a gossip site tried to manufacture a scandal out of nothing. "My response would have been to laugh, ignore it, and sleep later."

"You have to refute it. I have the highest respect for Claudia as a co-worker and a friend and what they're suggesting makes her sound... well... like she's—"

"Like she's banging a movie star." She let out a loud gasp and put her hand on her forehead in a move that was pure over-the-top drama. "How ever will I get past such a slanderous accusation? I might as well join a convent now that my reputation is in tatters!"

"Claude, this is serious!" Previously as visibly tired as she was, the indignation that caused the outburst seemed to wake him out of his trance.

"No it isn't! People want to know who you're sleeping with. So every woman you're spotted with becomes gossip fodder." She turned to Luke. "Am I right?"

"In a very crude sense, yes. But you're in a different position than others that have been pulled into the rumor mill after being around Tom."

"I'm not a civilian. I have a very smart publicist of my very own to protect me against real media problems. I may not be an actress, but I'm not without resources. I would just prefer to keep those resources focused on important things, not what basically amounts to junior high gossip."

"So you want me to ignore this? No statement? No clarification?"

"If this happened to either of us independently, with some random faceless celebrity you didn't represent, how would you handle it?"

"I'd ignore it, but prepare a response for you to give if asked about it directly."
"I vote for that option." She stood, ready to focus her attentions on the show. "Tom, I do appreciate that you care about my reputation so much, but I'm more than capable of weathering a rumor that I'm good enough in bed to warrant a secret booty call from you. It's not 1817, I'll be fine."

"Do as the lady says then," he sighed. "We'd best be off."

Luke nodded and watch them leave, Tom's mood still morose. Claudia, on the other hand, seemed to be warming to her theme. He heard her chide Tom as the door closed behind them. "You know, you have an in with Jaguar. Think they could swing something shiny for your mistress? Is mistress the right title if you're not married?"

Jesus, he'd probably be in for an earful from Tom later for agreeing to her plan. But in a way it was gratifying to see someone so unperturbed by a gossip story. While he was with Taylor it would have been crisis time if a site dared report that Tom hadn't blessed her when she sneezed. Claudia seemed content to laugh at the bullshit and move on. Professionally that quality scared the hell out of him, but personally he rather admired her for it. Tom had been right about one thing, Claudia was different.

-XXX-

"We have to name the damn show," she lamented, slumping into one of the dressing room’s makeup chairs. "We don't even have a name to give when we film the intro tomorrow."

He only seemed to half hear her, instead wishing to settle another question first. "Mine or yours tonight? I'm knackered, but I suppose I can manage some brainstorming before the date I have scheduled with my pillow."

Her expression changed from one of exasperation to concern. "Aww Tom, I know you're still exhausted from L.A." While she had had time to rest, he'd worked practically until Luke bundled him onto the plane. The early meeting that morning hadn't helped things either. "We don't have to do anything tonight. I bet we can rearrange the schedule and start filming with something other than the intro."

"No, it'll be good for me. If I go home now I'll just crash and I'll be up in the middle of the night. I need to get back on a proper schedule."

"All the same, we'll do your house so you're within staggering distance of your bed."

"How did I get so lucky to snag such a considerate co-star?"

"I honestly don't know. I don't normally warm up to people after they insult me."

Instead of cringing at the memory, he grinned. "I may have behaved like a rank amateur, but my apology was first rate, you have to admit. Flowers and a hand-written note."

"You can be charming when you feel like it," she admitted, the grudging tone in her voice all for show.

They made their way to Tom's place and though it was an earlier day than they'd have during a normal shoot day, she sunk gratefully into the couch with a tired groan. "What are we ordering for dinner?"

"No need. I've got it covered."

Too exhausted to temper the look of shock on her face. "You do?"
"I'm having trouble adjusting back to GMT. I was up at 1 this morning and decided to get something together for tonight. Good thing I did too. I had no idea we'd need a working session."

"I can't say I'm happy you couldn't sleep, but I won't turn down a home cooked meal!"

It turned out that he'd made one of her own recipes. And his choice of tartiflette, a rustic potato casserole, turned out to be the perfect kind of comfort food after an interminably long day. They made a token attempt at keeping it healthy with a small salad, but the cheesy dish was clearly the main attraction.

Once the dishes were cleared away, they stayed at the kitchen table, each aware that the comfortable couch in the lounge would prove far too tempting when coupled with their full stomachs.

"Please tell me you have something up your sleeve, because I can't think of anything that isn't insanely stupid." She'd brainstormed several times and nothing fit the tone of what they wanted to do.

"I don't, but we haven't worked on it together and I have every confidence that's what we've been lacking."

She smiled wryly and pulled her notebook from its resting place on a nearby chair. "Ever the optimist."

"Let's just start talking. We've both tried the list approach and came up with nothing."

"Okay..." Lists were comforting and orderly, but she figured it wouldn't hurt anything to humor him. Putting the pen down, she looked over expectantly. This was his idea and she assumed he'd get the ball rolling.

He didn't disappoint. "So what if we start with what we want the show to be."

"A cooking show?" The lack of sleep and anxiety over their task left her with a short supply of patience and it was plain in her voice.

But Tom wasn't deterred. "Oh come on, Claude. Work with me. We're trying to get our thoughts unstuck. Don't make me run you through beginner's drama exercises to loosen you up."

"No, no we don't have to resort to finding what tree I'd be. I'm not that desperate!"

"Then you'll need to behave." He waggled his eyebrows at her and it earned him a small smile. It was accompanied by an eye roll, but he'd take what he could get. "Just start with why you want to even do this project."

"To teach people about food." He stayed silent, waving her on to continue. "I want to show that food doesn't have to be intimidating, that it can be fun and if you mess up you can just do it again."

"Preferably only after the episode is over."

She ignored his interjection and kept going. If he wanted her to talk, she could damn well wax poetic about teaching people to cook. "I want to de-mystify French and Italian cuisine and show people that food doesn't have to be fussy. Something rustic like the tartiflette you made can be perfect. It's not all foie gras and sweet meats."

"So down-to-earth and inspiring. And I want to keep the humor in what we're doing. We can do everything we want and still be entertaining, right?"
"Exactly!" As she warmed to her subject it became easy to elaborate. "I want to make our viewers want to turn the TV off and run to the kitchen."

"Like an appetizer for what they can do on their own."

"More like an amuse-bouche. It's our choice what we show them. We don't just give them any old food, it's cultivated just for them."

"Amuse-bouche." He murmured the phrase, as if testing the consistency of it on his tongue.

"Yeah I know I'm busting out with the food terms, but it's technically more appropriate. Your pronunciation is excellent, by the way."

"No, Claude. Amuse-bouche." The excitement in his voice left her with a furrowed brow, unable to see why he was suddenly so happy.

"That's what I just said. You're starting to babble, Tom. I think I should put you to bed now."

"As a name! It's simple and elegant, but still sounds rather playful. Amuse-bouche!"

"You don't think we'll come off as elitist?"

"Not to anyone who actually sits down to watch. I mean people who just want to judge sight unseen will think that anyway based on me. But if that didn't put you off working with me, I don't think it should stop us from using a French culinary term."

She seemed doubtful, so he continued. "People are going to take about a minute and a half to see that you aren't the least bit snobbish and that you love what you do. Believe me Claude, it shines out of every pore when you're working."

"I do like the idea of whetting their appetites to go cook on their own."

"And that's what we'll tell them. I think this sounds right. I've tried about a thousand horrible combinations of our professions and names and came up with nothing."

"Yeah, me too. I even started looking up Shakespeare references, but everything felt contrived and stupid."

"Tell you what," he began, eyes sparkling with excitement. "Sleep on it and if you don't think it will work when we're not both exhausted we'll go with it. The worst thing that can happen is that we sound like idiots and we go back and film the intro later. But I have a feeling if we put this off to marketing people it will be Shakespeare and the Southern Girl before we know it."

"Okay. We'll try it out tomorrow and see if it's good or not. That's doable."

"Does that allay the stress over the name at least a bit? I was getting worried about you."

"Who says my stress was at a worrying level?"

"You do. I know you well enough to tell when you're frazzled, Claude. You've been picking apart every napkin within reach all day. That's generally only reserved for high anxiety time."

She was temporarily taken aback by his attention, sure that her bad little habit escaped most people's notice. But rather than focus on the fact that her business partner was that clued into her moods, she chose to answer the question instead. "Yeah, I actually do feel better about it. I mean I know it's not set in stone, but it's better than having nothing." She paused a beat and looked down at her hands.
"Thanks. For noticing that I needed help."

"You're welcome. But you know, you can ask sometimes too. I want to be an equal partner here and if that means de-stressing you then I want to be here for you."

"Thanks," she repeated, the word sounding inadequate. She really wanted to say much more about how just that small gesture reminded her of how grateful she was to have him, but she didn't have the eloquence for it. Instead she kept it simple, but reached out and squeezed his hand to convey at least a little of what she was feeling. The potent combination of fatigue and relief was doing odd things to her.

Tom managed to distract her from the tumult of emotions with a change of subject. "Listen, Claude. About the article..." The conciliatory tone of his voice shook her out of whatever weird line of thought she was starting to go down.

"I think calling it an 'article' is a bit heavy-handed for a gossip blurb, but go on."

"I just wanted to—"

"Tom, if you're apologizing again I swear I may need to scream."

"No... Well I mean I kind of was, but not about the story itself. It's just that sometimes I feel like you've gotten a lot of headaches because you're working with me now. And I know all of this was kind of dropped on you so suddenly. I mean we do one episode together and then Luke is coercing you into doing this project with me and now the gossip rags are talking about you—"

"Whoa there. You can't apologize for their stupidity. I mean I know you have good manners and all, but that seems beyond the pale even for you."

"But it's all because I'm a target."

"So? I wasn't coerced, no matter what you think, and I could distance myself from you if I wanted. But I don't. You're my friend, Tom. And people can be stupid about it if they want. I honestly couldn't care less about everyone else though."

"Sometimes I just don't get you, Claude."

"There's not much to get. Take me at my word and stop thinking some dumb rumor monger is going to send me into an emotional spiral running for the hills. Okay?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face and seemed to really take in her words. "Yeah okay."

"Well on that heartfelt note, I think we both need some sleep before tomorrow."

"I think you're right. It should never be said that my partner isn't a remarkably smart woman."

"Eh, I'm too tired for flattery." She stood up rather reluctantly and stretched. "I'll see you," she glanced at her watch, "in eleven hours."

"Bright and early for our big day?"

"Early and hopefully the makeup team can manufacture the brightness."

"I'll take it." He grinned as she gathered her things and walked her to the door. She'd made it halfway to her car by the time she registered that he'd kissed her cheek as they'd said goodbye. Weariness did odd things to them, it seemed, but it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was a feeling
she’d have to figure out later. For now, she had to get herself ready for their first real day of work together. And she was looking more forward to it than anything else in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

I searched for something that would be something Claude would make and that would work when assembled ahead of time. Plus, the tartiflette looked amazing. There are two recipes here and here.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the update hiatus! Work has hopefully calmed down and I should be back to a more regular posting schedule. Thank you for sticking around!!

*insert fake social media image disclaimer here*

The one thing that really worried Claudia about working with Tom was that it might break the rhythm she'd cultivated on set. And she knew he wasn't the only change to contend with either. A new network and production company meant a different crew and as she walked into the building it felt like the first day at a new school. For some reason the previous day's prep activities hadn't seemed as momentous as the first day of actual filming and now she was downright nervous.

After dropping her things in her dressing room, she took a moment alone in front of the mirror to give herself a silent pep talk. In the midst of reminding herself that she was a professional and that Tom would help her shoulder the load, her phone rang. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night in Georgia, Jules' phone number showed on her screen.

"Jules?"

"Oh calm down, mother hen!" Her sister sounded tired, but judging by her tone nobody was in the hospital, so she let her body relax. "I just wanted to wish you luck on your first day filming."

"Jules, you didn't have to get up at three something in the morning to do that."

"I'm not up on purpose. You can thank your niece for that. She doesn't want to go back to sleep. But," she brightened her tone, "I figured as long as I was up, I'd give my big sis a call."

"That's really sweet. Thanks."

"You nervous?"

"I don't know if nervous is the right word, but I'm something."

"You'll do great. And you don't even have to wing it with complete strangers. You've just got to contend with Tom."

"Yeah."

"Speaking of which, is there anything I need to know on that front?"

"No." She thought about what Jules could be fishing for and came up with nothing. Her sister didn't give a damn about their media strategy for the show and she couldn't think of anything else that was relevant.

"Oh, I just thought that if you'd started knocking boots that you'd let your poor sheltered baby sister know all the scintillating details."
"Jules!"

"I have to read about it on Facebook like I'm other people. Honestly Claude, I expect to be notified when things like this happen."

"Jesus, it's just a stupid gossip story. Do you really think I'd be dumb enough to get involved with Tom of all people?"

"Don't see why Tom, of all people, would be a bad choice. He's successful, good with kids, and even the lesbian can appreciate that he's breathtakingly handsome, if you're into that kind of thing."

"Because we work together! And that's only one of about a thousand reasons why I'm not even boarding that train of thought. It was a trashy gossip post fueled by a chef at that hotel who was pissed I wouldn't sleep with him."

"You're just breaking hearts left and right."

"Now you're just being an ass."

"I'm the little sister, that's part of the job description."

"Yeah well go kiss my new niece for me and take that ass of yours ass back to bed, okay?" She knew her sister was just teasing her, but the idea that everyone else knew what was best for her still rankled. She made an effort to soften her voice when she continued. "Thanks for the call though, even though you are a monumental pain."

"Yeah, yeah I love you too, Claude."

"Go get some rest. And I mean it about the kiss."

"You come see us soon and you'll get to kiss her yourself."

"As soon as I can manage to take a few days I will."

"Break a leg, sis."

"Good night."

She ended the call before she started feeling too bad about missing the birth, even if she was the only one chiding herself about it. No matter how much she loved her life in London it would always be difficult at times like that. But those were thoughts for later. For now, he had to get fixed up for their first real day of work.

Plastering a believable smile on her face, she walked through the adjoining door to the brightly lit room. The studio they were using had the makeup area set between hers and Tom's dressing rooms. Each had adjoining doors and it didn't surprise her to see Tom already in his designated chair.

"Morning, partner."

"You must have slept well," she observed. That or his makeup was already applied and hid the under eye circles he'd been sporting the night before.

"Like the dead. I feel almost human again."

"You really do need a proper vacation some time, Tom. And not one where you take an hour off and pick up a new project either. A real one."
"I could say the same about you, dearest Claudia."

“At least I don’t have anything immediately after we finish this. I may even go visit the family. Whereas you’re probably immediately dashing off again to exotic parts unknown to film your next blockbuster.” She sat down, grinning at him in the mirror, but simultaneously feeling a pang of unease at the thought.

“Actually,” he began, suddenly focusing on the cuffs of his shirt. "I'll be sticking pretty close to London for the foreseeable future. All I have on the schedule is promotional stuff and some voice work. And I’m looking to see if I can find a West End production for the autumn. I’m itching to get back on stage."

"That sounds awesome, Tom. I'll be on the front row for that!" She paused and furrowed her brow, much to the stylist's chagrin, as he was trying to apply primer and Claudia's expression certainly wasn't helping. "Unless of course that's awkward and distracting for you."

He actually quite liked the idea of watching Claudia react to a performance. She was usually so expressive it would be fun to see, but then again that could pose a distraction as she’d feared. But rather than dissuade her, he sidestepped the question. "I probably wouldn't be able to spot you unless it was an intimate theater. Now if it was the Donmar we'd only be a few feet apart if you sat on the front row." He flashed her a confident smile. "But I am a consummate professional and would do my best to ignore the tears you'd likely shed at the more dramatic moments."

"Drama, drama, drama. I'd love to see you in a comedic role."

"Even in a darkened theater your laugh would give you away. I'd know it anywhere."

"Well it sounds like I might just be destined to distract you while on stage. I think you're going to have to live with that."

"I do so suffer for my art." He reclined in his chair, an air of ineffable defeat suffusing his features.

"You are such a dork," she deadpanned, waiting for him to snap back and smiling as he predictably did just that.

"Thank goodness you agreed to work with me before you figured that out. I fooled you long enough for that at least."

"Yeah, because I only deal with the absolute poshest people and I myself am the epitome of class and sophistication."

"Posh is as posh does, Claude," Tom pronounced as if it was sage wisdom.

"That is nonsense and you know it!"

They continued to banter on as the stylists flitted about preparing them for the scrutiny of the camera. Before she knew it, Claudia's apprehensions had melted away. Tom seemed to have a unique gift for getting her out of her own head long enough for things to settle into a more comfortable state. Watching him joke around with the PA sent to ensure they made it to the stage without mishap, she wondered if he even realized he was doing it. But the fact was that if you were in his presence long enough to get over being star struck, that he’d probably manage to put you at ease before you knew what hit you. It was like full contact charm or something.

But before she could delve too deep into the thought, it was time to start rolling. The director, a fresh-faced adolescent-looking man she’d never worked with before, walked them through the first setup
and before she knew it it was time to make their project a reality.

As they waited for a final lighting adjustment, Tom turned to her and offered the smile that made him look like an excited little boy about to open his Christmas presents. "Break a leg, eh?"

"I know technically this is showbiz and that's an appropriate thing to say, but if I fall and hurt myself I'm coming after you first."

The grin didn't leave his face as he turned to face the camera and crew. "Yes, chef." The little thrill she felt deep in her gut at his almost jubilant response almost distracted her from the countdown they were now getting from one of the grips. Feeling a genuine smile crack across her own face, she harnessed that kernel of energy and focused on the introduction they'd rehearsed. Tom wouldn't let her make an idiot of herself and the comfort of that kept the warm expression in place as the camera started to roll.

-XXX-
Another one. I'm starting to think @twhiddleston and I have a #dubsmash problem. oy.ly/msQ76pp19

@lin_manuel I can't stop listening to Hamilton. @chefclaudiarey and I have been Dubsmashing it like mad.

@twhiddleston @chefclaudiarey I have to admire your attitude!
@twhiddleston, @lin_manuel is talking to us. That's cool. No big. Just have some happiness in my eye right now.

12:16 PM - 23 Jan 2017

Tom Hiddleston
@twhiddleston

@chefclaudiarey do I need to get the scolding cats?

12:22 PM - 23 Jan 2017

Claudia Rey
@chefclaudiarey

@twhiddleston Possibly. I'm honestly a bit distraught. I need a minute.

12:24 PM - 23 Jan 2017
@chefclaudiarey Pouting internally a bit that meeting me elicited no such response, but I'm going to be an adult about it.

12:25 PM - 23 Jan 2017

Claudia Rey
@chefclaudiarey

Don't pout. I have photos.

12:27 PM - 23 Jan 2017

Tom Hiddleston
@twhiddleston

Headed to your photobooth room now.

12:30 PM - 23 Jan 2017
Chapter 25

They finished filming sooner than Claudia would ever have thought possible. Though her Thrown Together experiences were generally good, the ease with which she breezed through this time amazed her. Tom likened it to a one woman show suddenly getting another actor to support her rather than shouldering the burden of the production on her own.

She supposed that was true, but beyond the practical work considerations it turned out to be just plain fun to have Tom on set. There were several days where her abdomen positively ached from laughing so hard. When every day was a delight, work seemed to absolutely breeze by.

The only downside was that she felt a kind of letdown after they wrapped. Normally she'd find solace in a quiet return to this portion of her working life, but instead she found herself in a minor funk. Even the distraction of working on her next book and planning for the third season of Thrown Together wasn't enough of a distraction.

The ire compounded upon itself when she realized that the bad mood was evident to others as well. After getting dressed down by Nana for being "downright pissy," on a phone call she realized she'd been taking it out on others. The epiphany didn't exactly help her black mood. She ended up angry with herself for being so angry. Even Claudia felt how out of character it was for her and rather than contemplate the real cause, threw herself into her work.

And no matter how many times she reminded herself that it was good that Tom was keeping busy with movie premieres and interviews, she couldn't help but wonder how he even enjoyed the work they did together when it was so boring by comparison. Well, it wasn't boring to her, but then again she wasn't an extrovert extraordinaire who lived for people and parties. It was too easy to forget that part of Tom's life when they were sequestered on her couch debating whether Tom could have two pudding recipes in a single episode or not. More than once in the weeks following she wished she had a different temperament, one that was more adaptable. But even in those morose moods she was eventually able to talk herself around. It had taken a long time, but she was damn happy with who she was and how her life was shaking out.

Thankfully she was in one of these more positive moods when Luke called her in mid-March.

“My favorite chef in the world,” he exclaimed as soon as she picked up. “How I’ve missed you!”

“I’d normally say I’d missed you too, but you’re kind of scaring me with how excited you sound.”

“I’m glad to be back to one of my… how do I say this without sounding crass? One of my easier clients.” He paused for a millisecond before continuing. “No, that sounded awful. Sorry, Claude.”

She smiled despite herself. “It’s fine, Luke. I imagine I must be like putting on cruise control after a nasty bit of highway?”

“Ooh I like that! I’ll probably steal that at some point. Anyway, I just wanted to touch base with you about the press coming your way next month.”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen a schedule for that yet. What kind of time away are we talking about here?”

“A few weeks, I think. But I’m still working out the details with ITV. They want to promote the hell out of this, but I’m trying to temper them and do more quality than quantity. I trusted you’d be fine with that decision.”
“I am, but don’t say no to anything that doesn’t make good sense for the show. I can slog through it if something is important. I’m not a total hermit.”

“You are brilliant and engaging even when you don’t want to be there, I’ve seen the book tour interviews. I was actually quite proud. But at least this time you’ll have Tom to keep you company. I won’t promise that that’s always going to be a boon, but he generally keeps things interesting. Although there are times I’ve had to stop myself from slipping him a sleeping pill when he’s been keyed up and I need a quiet moment.”

“You are a babysitter after all! I knew I hadn’t been wrong about that.”

“I won’t lie and say I hadn’t considered fitting him with a giant version of those ghastly toddler leashes they make. But,” he sighed wistfully, “you’ll be there to help entertain him on this trip.”

“That’s why you’re excited. You just want to pawn Tom off on me when he gets in one of his eager puppy moods. And to think, I’m paying you for this kind of shoddy treatment.”

“I am a professional,” he exclaimed with ridiculous mock outrage before continuing in a conversational tone. “And yes, I am excited about that. We’ve just been jetting around for Kong and I’m knackered.”

“Don’t count your chickens, Luke. You’ll probably have to spend even more energy wrangling me. I’ve never done anything on this scale before.”

“Ah, you’ll be fine. Once I get you prepped properly, that is. That’s why I called. I wanted to see if you were free next Tuesday afternoon for an orientation session.”

She grabbed her phone of the nearby counter and scrolled through the calendar. “I actually can’t do then, sorry. I have an appointment. But I don’t have anything scheduled for that Wednesday. Would that work?”

She heard keys clacking before he answered. “I can see about juggling a few things, but that should be fine. I’ll give you a yell if we can’t massage the calendar. Otherwise, I’ll expect you here at 10 ready for press tour boot camp.”

“Didn’t we do that already? I mean I did go on a book tour all by my lonesome.”

“One, you weren’t alone, because Khari was on hand to shepherd you around. Two, this will be… let’s just say more intense this go around.”

“Because of Tom?”

“Yes and I know I didn’t exactly make it sound enticing, but it honestly is a good time. Long days and lots of trekking through airports, but it will be fun too. I just want to make sure you’re fully comfortable before we kick things off. We’re starting in London, so at least you get some time at home before we jet off.”

“Okay then. Next Wednesday it is. I will do my best to be a model student.”

“That’s what I like to hear. See you soon, Claude.”

Now why did that sound vaguely menacing?

-XXX-
Both Luke and Tom seemed convinced she needed coaching to prepare for the press junket that would kick everything off. It became clear that the two had discussed it and Tom took it upon himself to crash their training sessions. But unbeknownst to Claudia that was only the first of several such meetings, and after a few days of reassurances, she started to resent the hell out of it. She wasn't a complete novice when it came to the press, nor was she a child in need of reassuring. Hadn't she made it through her book tour with flying colors? Luke had even admitted as much, but she soon saw that didn't amount to much. Now that Tom was involved it was like she was reset back to zero, a complete amateur as far as they were concerned.

When they were explaining the protocol for probably the tenth time, she'd finally had enough. "Listen, I'm a big girl capable of rational thought and speech, often at the same time. I'm going to be fine, okay? I really wish you two would go focus on something else."

They both sat back from the conference room table and had the decency to at least look chagrined. "Sorry, Claude." Tom, (because of course it was Tom I-Never-Miss-A-Chance-To-Apologize Hiddleston) spoke first. "We just don't want you to be overwhelmed."

"You're overwhelming me with all this prep. A couple of damn mother hens."

"This is my job, Claudia."

"Your job is telling me once, maybe twice, but we've been over and over and over this. Luke, consider me thoroughly informed. Job well done. Now can we please move on?"

"Yeah okay. Fine. Maybe I did go a bit overboard." He put up his hands in mock surrender and got a smile out of her. "We can move on to Twitter then."

"I've been the model Twitterer or Tweeter or whatever the fuck it's called," she protested.

"You have, you have! I'm not admonishing. I just wanted to let you know that one of my people will be posting a few things in the lead up to the show. So if there's anything on your account that needs to be private, delete it before next week."

"I don't have anything they can't see." Maybe it was just her surly mood that day, but even that new piece of information kind of rankled. Really she just wanted to be anywhere but the sterile conference room tucked in the back of Prosper's offices. It made her feel like she was in detention or something.

"Okay, then that's crossed off the list." He gave her a bright smile and she kinda wanted to smack it off his face. "Next—"

Tom interrupted him before he could continue. "None of this is earth-shattering, Luke. Could you maybe send an email for the last few things? We've bugged the shit out of Claudia enough for one day I think."

"Oh. Yeah I can do that." He seemed started at Tom's assertion and she got the impression that he was usually a good little soldier and let Luke run these meetings as he saw fit. "Sorry again, Claudia. I'll calm down once we get the first junket under your belt."

"It's fine," she grumbled. "I know you're just trying to do your job."

Once she gathered her things, she was surprised when Tom followed her all the way out to her car. "I thought we agreed that the nanny act was over."

"Professionally yeah, but as a friend not so much. You need your pajamas, some unhealthy
takeaway, booze, and something ridiculous to watch. And also possibly ice cream."

"How do you figure?"

"Claude, I've known you long enough to tell when something isn't right and I'm an expert in recognizing burnout."

"I'm just tired, Tom."

"Then a night in will do you good. Come on. Let me take you home and we can veg out. Think of it as a reward for all the junket prep. Plus," he shoved his hands into his jacket pocket and looked contrite, "I've been so busy lately and we haven't had a chance to hang out."

"It's Friday during party season. Don't you have a tux to don or something?"

"Nope. Free as a bird. You're stuck with me."

"I'm not going to be good company."

"That remains to be seen. Come on, Claude. Let me at least try to cheer you up."

"Fine." She handed him her keys. "But you're taking me to that gelato place I like. If we're gonna do this, we're doing it properly."

He gave her a quick half hug before rushing to open her door for her. "Tonight I am full-service."

She chose to ignore the alternate, dirtier version of his statement. He just looked too sincere to tease.

After a trip to two separate markets and the gelato shop, they stopped by Tom's place so he could pack a bag. She waited in the front seat, halfway between grateful and annoyed. Her instinct was to hibernate at home alone, but he was taking it upon himself to make her feel better. And he even seemed happy at the prospect. The whole thing was weird for her, but it seemed easier to go along with it rather than fight him. And nothing said she had to get into the impetus for her ill temper. If she’d let him, he’d probably do ninety percent of the talking anyway.

In another half an hour she was searching through takeout menus trying to decide what she wanted for dinner. "What about Thai," she shouted. Tom was changing in the hall bathroom and she wanted to be sure he heard her.

He startled her when instead he poked his head around the entrance to the kitchen. "Whatever you want is fine. I'll call it in once you decide. Oh," he walked over and deposited a stack of envelopes on the coffee table. "Mail's just arrived."

"Thanks."

"I have a few quick calls I have to make then I'm all yours. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

She waved him away, somehow without rolling her eyes at the thought. There was nothing she needed him for, but she would let him play babysitter if he wanted. It clearly made him feel better at least and he probably needed a good deed for the week or they’d take away his Boy Scout membership. Switching her attention to the mail, she was surprised to find an envelope from the states amidst the junk.

But when she went to inspect the contents, she froze. Jules had sent a stack of glossy prints from Pippa's christening and her heart leapt into her throat. She wasn't prepared for it and yet couldn't stop staring at the tiny child's balled up fist.
It was several minutes before he rejoined her in the living room, but one look and he knew something was wrong. A cascade of photographs had fallen at her feet and she sat stock still, eyes glued to a spot on the floor.

After calling her name four times with no response, he put his hands on her shoulders and gently shook her. In a moment her eyes snapped up. It was like waking someone from a deep sleep. She looked confused and then spotted the pictures and rushed to pick them up.

"Sorry. Zoned out there for a second." She gave him a tight chuckle and stood. "Um I settled on Thai. You know what I like. I'm gonna run to the bathroom for a second."

"Claude, are you all right?" He didn't like the glassy cast to her eyes.


She made it to the hall bathroom and turned the tap on with fumbling fingers. Splashing cold water onto her face didn't really help, but at least it made her feel like she was doing something to get past whatever this feeling was.

With a monumental effort she tried to get her breathing under control, but that felt like a losing battle as well. Why did Tom have to follow her home? If she'd been alone as originally intended she wouldn't feel this need to pull herself back together so quickly. As it was, she could practically feel the seconds ticking by and willed her body to calm down.

She wasn't sure how long it had been, but eventually a soft knock on the door signaled that her time was up. Thought it was the last thing she wanted to do, she turned off the faucet and put a smile on her face before opening the door.

"So, what'd you order," she asked, brushing past the concerned look and moving back into the living room.

"I didn't. Claude, something's up. Talk to me."

"I'm fine, Tom."

"Yeah, no you're not." Snagging her wrist as she entered the other room, he bade her to look at him. "Tell me what's happened."

"Nothing!"

"Fuck all nothing's happened. You're white as a sheet. You were fine when I left and then when I came back something had happened."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Want to and need to are two separate things. And you sure as hell look like you need to." She didn't say anything, but nor had she wrenched her hand out of his grasp. "Something about those pictures, wasn't it?"

"Goddammit, why do you have to be so observant?" She visibly sagged admitting it and he could now feel that her hand was shaking.

"Come sit down." He led her back to the sofa and waited for her to explain.

"So I found out I can't have kids the other day."
"Claude, I'm so sorry."

"I thought I was... well you know handling it pretty okay, but I saw those pictures and it hit me, really hit me that I can't do that. I have this fucked up uterus that is apparently useless and I can't—" She began to gasp for air, stricken look on her face.

He jumped up and ran to the kitchen. After searching three drawers he found what he was looking for and brought the paper bag back to her.

"Breathe into this, Claude." He rubbed slow circles on her back as she focused on her breath. Before long she felt the constriction in her chest abate and the panic start to recede.

"Now you see why I wasn't in a great mood today," she explained after a few silent minutes.

"And I intruded like an ass."

"You meant well, but yeah I'm gonna be shit company tonight."

"I don't mind staying," he offered.

"That..." It took a lot for her to admit it, but she managed to get it out. "That would be nice." She couldn’t make eye contact as she said it, but at least she’d been honest rather than sending him away. And he really did want to help, of that she was sure.

"Good. Now what do you need first?"

"I wouldn't turn down a drink, if only just to calm me down some." She didn’t want to get shitfaced in front of him, but a bit of a drink would likely help settle her nerves.

"Coming right up. I'll get that order called in once you're ready for food. You want your usual?"

"Yeah, thanks."

He did make a pretty good distraction after all. They sipped and talked about the upcoming junket and joked about Luke the nanny. As he stood to collect their glasses, he looked at her gravely. "It's the last I'll say about it if that's your wish, but if you want to talk about it I'm here."

Without another word, he disappeared into the kitchen and she was left to consider his offer alone. It would'n't do to talk to Jules about it any time soon, so Tom actually seemed like a safe bet. She did need to voice some things aloud or the bad feelings would continue to fester.

When he came back, she began without making eye contact. Somehow that seemed easier whenever there was something big and unpleasant to discuss. "I got really sick when I first moved to France, but I was in a new kitchen and I couldn't risk taking any time off. We were closed on Mondays and I was going to wait to see a doctor until then. So in the week I waited, a UTI turned into a raging kidney infection. They think it spread to my uterus too without us knowing it. Left a heap of scar tissue in its wake."

She drained the last of her drink, savoring the warmth as it trailed down her throat. "And they found said scar tissue this week and gave me the stellar news. The really cruel part is that I'm producing eggs like a champ. They don't think I'd have any problem there, but I can't safely carry a child, because there's no good... real estate for an egg to attach itself."

Pulling her legs up beneath her, she continued in a flat voice, simply needing to get it out. "I have my stubbornness to thank for this. I think that's the shittiest part. Well, not the shittiest, but a close
second."

"You had no way of knowing, Claude. We've all done reckless things without truly knowing the consequences."

"No, I didn't, but that doesn't change anything. And it's not even like I was ready to think about kids, they've always been this sort of abstract concept. Something I'd do when I was older. But I'm 35 now and it was gonna come up soon regardless."

"If kids are what you really want, you have options, Claude."

"That's the thing! I still don't know if I do or should, I just got what I can't do thrown in my face. I finally have stability in my life and financial freedom and still don't fucking know what I want. How crazy is that?"

"It's not crazy at all. I have those worries too. And it might look good on paper, but you know you rarely slow down enough to give a relationship proper attention, let alone a child."

"Yeah."

"So don't for one second think there's something wrong with you for not knowing yet."

“Thanks, Tom.” She didn’t exactly feel better having dumped all this at his feet, but it was as if she wasn’t quite so alone as she had been before. And even that small change seemed to make the whole situation just a bit more bearable. The overwhelming panic she’d been fighting off since the doctor gave her the news dulled some, replaced with something she couldn’t categorize as good, but wasn’t as terrifying as the alternative.

He reached over and took her hand, silently offering her his strength and support without miring her in unnecessary words. They sat like that for several minutes before she turned back to him and asked a question that replaced his dour expression with a smile. “I changed my mind. Can we do dim sum instead?”

“Absolutely.” If it helped her any, he’d gladly eat library paste. He’d see to it that she was okay no matter what.
Chapter 26

For the much-anticipated junket Luke had them settled in a room she was surprised to see was simply a rearranged banquet hall with a video-friendly backdrop behind them. It looked less like the intimidating hot seat than they'd led her to believe and more like an ordinary room. It might have been in a ritzy hotel, but it was still nothing special.

At least he had calmed down some since she had words with him. He seemed back to normal now in what she thought of as his natural habitat. For her part, she'd gone through hair and makeup with not a single peep of protest. She'd be on her best behavior and hopefully he'd back off for future events.

As they waited for the first journalist, Tom gave her hand an encouraging squeeze and a big smile. "You are an intelligent and capable woman, Claude. I have no doubt this will be a walk in the park for you."

"I'm just ready to be done with it."

"We will in a short twelve to fifteen hours."

"As long as we get food and bathroom breaks I can do it."

"That's the spirit."

Luke had arranged for the interviews on camera to happen first while they were as fresh as possible, both from a mental and physical standpoint. After the first six, she was starting to think they all shared notes ahead of time. It was the same handful of questions over and over again. How did Tom get through this tedium on a regular basis?

After they'd chatted with morning show hosts, lifestyle gurus, and entertainment reporters, it was blessedly time for a break before the print interviews began. After being beset by a stylist seeking to touch up her makeup, she was allowed to escape to the ladies room. Resisting the urge to splash water on her face, she congratulated herself on getting past the hard part. Her face might never regain its real shape after all that smiling, but she'd done it.

By the time the assistants began ushering in the print reporters, she actually began to feel relatively at ease. She'd probably never be a polished as Tom, who seemed to be able to chat with anyone as if they were an old chum, but she was pretty pleased with how things had gone so far. Maybe his prowess with the press was rubbing off. She had no idea how he managed to pull it off in addition to looking out for her, but he'd been watching her like a hawk, making sure she was always supplied with water and had a break when needed. He was giving Luke a run for his money, because before he could ask how she was doing, Tom was always a step or two ahead. I may get used to that kind of treatment, she mused.

Now that they didn't have to worry about lighting or makeup retouches, things began moving at a faster pace. Before she knew it they'd breezed through half a dozen publications. And though they too seemed mostly content to rehash the same handful of questions, she found it easier to respond without the stress of being on camera getting in the way.

But unfortunately it was giving her a sense of complacency about the whole thing. When Todd Alworth from EW came in, he should have at least set off her creep radar, but it took a few minutes for alarm bells to sound in her head. Despite the fact that he wasn’t overtly twirling the mustache of his goatee, she nonetheless should have recognized the feral look on his thin face. He played nice
until Luke stepped out, pressing his phone to his ear and waving apologetically.

The question came as soon as Tom had finished waxing poetic about how much he was learning from Claudia. "So Tom, last year you were in a very public relationship with Taylor Swift—"

Immediately, Claudia leaned forward and glared at the man. "Oh wow that has to be some kind of record! Luke left the room less than two minutes ago. I mean I personally don't find him intimidating, but he must have some strong PR mojo to keep you from pursuing that question until he was out of earshot." Instinct told her to get in front of this thing before Tom said something they’d all regret. He wasn’t normally one to make unguarded comments, but she didn’t want to take any chances.

"What?" She'd expected a more eloquent response from someone who dealt with words all day, but then again she'd surprised him.

"I suppose you have to be pretty ballsy to flout the interview guidelines you agreed to before coming here, but it kind of negates it when you waited until the PR guy is out of the room. I've gotta deduct points for that."

"Listen, if you're insinuating—"

"I'm too direct to insinuate. It's one of my many faults, Tom can corroborate. What I'm flat out saying is that the line of questioning you were about to pursue is directly addressed in the guidelines Luke gave to all of you. And wouldn't you know, it was off limits! So you either didn't read it and needed me to fill you in, or you were ignoring them and hoping you'll get a good story out of it."

"People have a right—"

"No, actually they don't. And you agreed to stay away from a topic that has nothing to do with this project before coming here, or more accurately your publication agreed. It's not relevant."

"It is if you're the reason they broke up." He sneered at her, clearly thinking he'd shock her with the statement.

"Oh my god that's even kind of cute that you thought that would work! Who did you say you worked for? Entertainment Weekly, right?" He nodded, now looking much less confident. "You're a journalist and I'm sure you understand that this isn't relevant to the project we're here to talk about. But I'll tell you what, I'll answer whatever you want to ask for five minutes, or until Luke comes back. Then we move on to why we're really here."

"Claude, you don't have to do that." Tom looked more uncomfortable than she'd ever seen him. It galled her that this trumped up idiot had rattled him, but she figured she had to give him something or he'd skewer them both. Tom hadn’t been prepared to talk about Taylor and was visibly off his game. She’d do what she could to avert attention to herself rather than see him let something slip when he wasn’t at his best.

"Yeah, I know. Per the guidelines I could terminate this right now, but Todd would have to go back to his editor empty-handed, which nobody wants. So I'll sate his curiosity." She turned her gaze back to the reporter, barely suppressed anger flashing in her green eyes. "Go."

"Are you now or have you ever been romantically involved with Tom?" She had to resist the impulse to roll her eyes. Somebody had been watching too many Law & Order reruns.

"No. He's my business partner and my friend."

"You met Taylor when they were still together, correct?"
"I did."

"What was your impression of her?"

"She's a lovely woman. And funnier than I expected." It was a bit more effusive than she'd be if she was being completely honest, but the answer seemed to take him aback all the same. If he was searching for a catty answer to exploit (and she damn well knew he was), then she wouldn’t give him ammo for that story.

"Why'd they break up?"

"I don't know specifics. I generally don't make my friends go into excruciating detail when they break up with someone. But from what I gathered, it was difficult to be in a long distance relationship. It was not, as you accused before, because of me. I think I would know if that was the case."

“So he hasn’t spilled all the details. I’ve always heard he was quite the gentleman.” The last statement came out as almost an afterthought, just a casual observation. Todd was regaining his footing and seemed to be warming to the change the interview had taken.

She allowed herself a millisecond of internal rage before taking a long breath. It wouldn’t do to scream at him and she now had a point that she actually wouldn’t mind making its way into a story. “He is, but not because he doesn’t kiss and tell and treats his partners and ex-partners with respect. No, that just makes him a decent human. Nobody should be put on a pedestal for that. Distilling him down to just that actor guy who doesn’t treat people like trash is an insult.” Tom shifted uncomfortably beside her, but she didn’t even look his way. This was something she’d already gotten tired of in just the short time they’d worked together and she couldn’t seem to stop the words as she gained momentum.

“If you really want to celebrate his more extraordinary qualities, then we can talk about his unparalleled work ethic, or his commitment to using his fame to help others, or the talent he’s worked so hard to cultivate, or the care he shows his friends when they’re having a rough time.” She’d leaned forward as she spoke and was now staring at Todd with an expression that couldn’t be interpreted as anything but raw aggression. “So if you don’t want to discuss those, then we should probably move on to the next question.”

A charged silence filled the room as Claudia continued to glare across at the reported. After what felt like an eternity he cleared his throat and looked down at his notes. Only when he broke eye contact did she lean back in her seat and assume a more relaxed posture. Something had shifted once again and the reporter looked almost cowed, despite the resentment still evident in his eyes.

"How did you and Tom meet?" It looked like it killed him to move onto a benign subject, but even if he tried again, she wouldn’t back down.

"He came on Thrown Together last summer."

"And shortly thereafter you began a separate project together. How did that come about?" Well at least he was moving away from the breakup, even if he did still have a mulish look in his beady little eyes. But Claudia just wanted him to behave, nothing said he had to like it.

"It was Luke’s idea. He observed filming one day and saw us goofing around during prep and thought it was entertaining. He pitched it to ITV and they offered to let us try it out.”

As if summoned by her words, Luke slipped back in the room. By the tranquil look on his face, he
had no inkling of what had just occurred. "Speak of the devil," she exclaimed with a genuine smile. "I was just telling Todd how this whole thing was your idea."

She watched as his eyes flicked between Todd and the two of them, likely sensing something was amiss from Tom's pinched expression. The interview cop was back and he'd lost his window to bully them, so the reporter's expression was also grim. By comparison Claudia probably looked like she was having a grand time.

Luke was no idiot, but nor was he impetuous, so he took his cue from Claudia. "I will gladly take all the credit," he stated, settling back into his seat behind the journalist. “Please don’t let me interrupt. I had to take a call, but I’m back now.” Bless him, he was sending a very direct message, probably noticing Tom’s palpable unease.

They went on for a few more banal minutes before Luke called for them to wrap up. At least that couldn’t be blamed on anything personal. Each reporter had an allotted time with the pair and the only hope anyone had of getting home was to follow the schedule.

Tom, for the most part, bounced back to his usual charming self once Todd left the room. Luke clearly wanted to inquire about the situation before the next reporter was shown in, but a terse head shake from Tom told him that was a story for later. It was the last sign she had that anything was still amiss until they were ready to break for the day. She was gathering her things together, already preoccupied with fantasies involving sweatpants and mindless television, when Tom cornered her.

"You didn’t have to do that."

"What?" It took her a few confusing moments to realize he was talking about the incident with Todd. "Oh that. Luke wasn’t around and I didn’t want you to have to find a nice way to tell him to kiss your ass, so I jumped in."

"You didn’t have to,” he repeated.

"And you don’t have to do a lot of things to look out for me, but you do. It’s how this whole friend thing works, Tom."

"This wasn’t something like helping me move or picking me up at the airport, Claude. You… it…” His brow creased and she was taken aback, as she always was when words didn’t come to him easily. The man lived to be verbose and rarely found himself speechless.

When he finally did continue, the anger in his voice surprised her even more. “Do you have any idea how badly that could have turned out for you? That it still might? He could lambaste you and you just… you acted like it was nothing, like it didn’t matter as long as I didn’t have to field an awkward question.”

“IT was wrong, Tom. He had no right to bring that up. I could have had his job if I’d pressed it and he damn well knew it. He figured we’re just the idiotic talent and once our minder was out of earshot we’d be easy targets. I wasn’t about to let him get away with treating you like that.”

“Treating Tom like what?” Luke’s voice startled them both, and she was sure that when they turned around the guilty looks on their faces piqued his interest even more than her words had.

“A reporter got bold when you left the room at one point and asked me about Taylor.”

Claudia felt slightly vindicated when Luke looked almost apoplectic as anger clouded his usually genial face. She rushed to explain, sensing he would be more on her side than Tom’s. “And I quickly reminded him of your guidelines and gave him something else to focus on.”
“And what was that?”

“She offered to answer any question he posed to her.”

“And I suppose he took you up on that, did he?”

“Yes, and it was no big deal. He didn’t get the quote he’d been looking for and he understands the shitty position he put himself in with EW. He’ll play nice.”

“But you can’t know that for sure!” Tom turned to her, cheeks red with outrage.

RATHER THAN CONTINUE TO TRY REASONING WITH HIM, SHE TURNED HER FOCUS TO LUKE. “WHAT’S THE BIGGER CATASTROPHE? THE MOUTHY AMERICAN WE ALL KNOW ISN’T GRACIOUS AND CHARMING GOT A BIT SASSY WITH A REPORTER OR TOM HIDDLESTON, MOVIE STAR SUPREME, GETS CAUGHT OFF GUARD AND MAKES A DUMB STATEMENT ABOUT HIS SUPERSTAR EX?” BEFORE SHE LET HIM ANSWER, SHE FOCUSED BACK ON TOM. “IF THIS BECOMES AN ISSUE, AND I REALLY DON’T THINK IT WILL, BUT IF IT DOES, LUKE WILL HAVE AN EASIER TIME SPINNING MY RESPONSE THAN IF YOU WOULD HAVE EVEN ENTERTAINED TALKING ABOUT TAYLOR. I’M A RELATIVE NOVICE WITH THE PRESS AND HE CAN SELL IT ANY NUMBER OF WAYS. THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN WORSE FOR YOU, I SAW THAT AND I REACTED.”

FOR HIS PART, LUKE CONSIDERED HER WORDS CALMLY, WHILE TOM SILENTLY FUMED. WHEN HE SPOKE, IT WAS IN A MEASURED TONE, CLEARLY MEANT TO PLACATE HIS FRIEND. “THIS WASN’T IDEAL AND I’M AS MUCH TO BLAME AS THAT IDIOT. BUT I THINK CLAUDIA MADE THE BEST OF A SHITTY SITUATION. NO RESPONSE TO THAT LINE OF QUESTIONING WOULD HAVE WORKED FOR YOU.” CUTTING OFF A PROTEST FROM TOM, HE CONTINUED. “AND I KNOW YOU’RE NOT REALLY UPSET WITH EITHER OF US, SO YOU CAN DROP THE ANGER. IT’S DONE, TOM.”

AS HAD HAPPENED THE LAST TIME SHE’D SEEN HIM UPSET, THE INDIGNATION SEEMED TO LEAK AWAY LIKE A BALLOON SLOWLY LOOSING AIR. LUKE HAD BEEN ABLE TO GET HIM TO SEE REASON BEYOND HIS INITIAL EMOTIONAL REACTION AND SHE FELT HERSELF LET OUT A BREATH OF HER OWN THAT SHE HADN’T EVEN KNOWN SHE’D BEEN HOLDING. AS TOM LET GO OF HIS IRE, SHE FELT A FLOOD OF RELIEF THAT NO REAL DAMAGE HAD BEEN DONE. AND BY THE TIME THE TRIO HEADED TOWARDS THE PARKING DECK, HE SEEMED MUCH MORE HIMSELF.

EVER THE GENTLEMEN, THEY WALKED HER TO HER VEHICLE FIRST. SHE’D BARELY HAD A MOMENT TO CLICK THE DOOR OPEN BEFORE TOM PULLED HER INTO A FIERCE HUG. WITHOUT A WORD OF EXPLANATION, HE LET HER GO A FEW MOMENTS LATER, LEAVING HER HALF BREATHTLESS AND MORE THAN A LITTLE CONFUSED. BUT SHE SENSED IT WASN’T THE TIME TO QUESTION THE ODD DISPLAY AND INSTEAD PRESSED QUICK KISSES TO BOTH THEIR CHEEKS BEFORE ESCAPING INTO THE QUIET INTERIOR. SHE COULD STILL FEEL TOM’S GAZE UPON HER UNTIL SHE’D ROUNDED THE CORNER.

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FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS TOM WAS FORCED TO ADMIT IT TO HIMSELF: HE WAS GOOD AND TRULY FUCKED. HE’D PASSED THE POINT WHERE HE COULD IGNORE HIS FEELINGS FOR CLAUDIA ANY LONGER. THE PROBLEM THOUGH WAS WHAT TO DO WITH THEM. Normally he’d just make a stupidly grand gesture and expect the rest to just fall into place. In retrospect, that maybe wasn’t the wisest course to ensure lasting happiness.

But this was Claudia, who clearly wanted nothing to do with him beyond their current relationship. Not that he could blame her, as there were a host of reasons someone sensible like her would want to stay well away from anything resembling romance with him. Even if she hadn’t witnessed the way things had fallen apart with Taylor, she’d see that he couldn’t be an ideal partner in any way. And if one thing was abundantly clear to him even after such a startling revelation, it was that she deserved
better than what he could give her.

Before he’d even made it home from the junket he knew the truth of things. She wasn’t his to want in such a way and he’d never bring her anything but misery. No, the best he could offer her was friendship. That, he was fairly certain, he could handle. And he damn well would handle it, because the alternative was out of the question. He wouldn’t chase her away with talk of a relationship he couldn’t sustain and he’d learn to be content with the way things were.

But as he replayed the afternoon’s events over and over in his mind, he was struck again by her foolish bravery. She’d jumped to defend him without a second’s hesitation. There was no calculation about how it would affect her own image or what ill it could do her. She simply acted and in her impetuous way, unaware that it was the nail in the coffin of his resolve.

And he had to admit it had been one of the sexiest things he’d ever seen. Watching her he’d felt a confusing combination of lust, admiration, and indignation and the fact that he knew exactly what she felt like nestled in his arms wasn’t helping matters. It was similar to how he’d felt watching her command the kitchen in Los Angeles, but now that he was fully aware of his desires, he couldn’t dismiss them as mere fondness for a friend.

She’d chalked up his shocked almost dumbfounded reaction as the aftermath of that reporter’s interrogation, but in reality he’d been rendered speechless by Claudia. His Claudia. Though she wasn’t his to speak of in that way, in his heart he thought of her in such terms. And now that he admitted it to himself, he had for a while now. There was nothing in the world to do about it, but at least he could carry that private talisman to give him comfort when he had to forgo what he truly wanted. It was the best thing for her and he knew it.

And it was the most painful truth he’d ever experienced.

But despite the sad resolve that now gripped him, the decision to keep a romance off the table, he found himself dialing her number later that night. Part of him thought it had to be masochistic to pick at the wound he’d only just admitted existed, but he couldn’t resist the impulse in the face of denying himself everything else.

"Tom?" He chastised himself for the worry in her voice. Usually electing to text beyond dinner time, she had to assume something was wrong.

"Claude, sorry to call so late. I haven't woken you, have I?"

"No, I just got out of the tub. Gimme a sec, will you?"

"Sure." He gulped at the thought of her skin, pink with heat, and her curls damp from the steam. But now wasn't a time for fantasies. He heard her put the phone down and tried to wait patiently for her to return.

It was more than a second, but she still came back on the line quickly. "Okay I have acquired pajamas. What's up?"

"I just wanted to check on you."

"Check on me? You're the one that was put through the ringer today." If only she knew, he thought with more bitterness than he liked. "How are you?"

"That was nothing I haven't dealt with before. I just know today might have been a lot for you. There were so many people. I mean you had to stay practically glued to me all day."
"It wasn't all fun and games for me, but I'm okay. I think I did okay."

"You were wonderful and I'm glad more people will get to see that after today."

"Oh thank goodness! I was worried Luke was just being nice so I wouldn't freak out on the tour."
She sighed with relief, but continued in a tone that brooked no argument. "But Tom don't say I was glued to you all day like that makes things harder for me."

"Claude, you don't need to—"

"I know people tend to wear me out, but you're not," she struggled for a moment before continuing. "You're not other people, Tom."

"What do you mean?"

"There are some people that don't drain my social batteries. Because I don't need to put anything on with them. Most are family like Jules and Nana and Nunk, but you're on that list too. I'm not constantly wishing to be alone when you're around, so please don't think that."

"But people exhaust you."

"Most, but not all. There are exceptions to every rule."

That probably wasn't what he needed to hear right then, that he was different, or dare he hope even special in her eyes. He'd just talked himself into staying away from anything more than what they had now, but this little revelation wasn't helping bolster that decision. Nor was the thought of her curling up in bed, fresh from her bath. His reptile brain chose to deviate from reality with the Claudia in his mind having chosen not to acquire any pajamas. He had to stop that line of thought before he said or did something stupid.

"Tom, you were so sweet to check up on me. I'm okay, good even. And hopefully I've given Luke enough confidence in me that he'll let us have at least a little fun on the tour."

"Don't fret if he still frets though, Claude. It's in his nature to expect the worst and hope for the best and it's his job. But I do think he'll let us off the leash a bit. Happy talent is cooperative talent."

He heard her snicker when he mentioned the leash. "What?"

"Nothing. Something dumb I'll tell you about on the plane."

"I'll hold you to that." Sighing, he chided himself for wanting to keep her talking, despite the hour. He felt selfish and hated himself for it. "I'm glad you emerged from your first major press event with me unscathed." And he was glad to have learned he wasn't other people to her. That part was something he could secretly cherish. It wasn't what he wanted, but it was something.

"Couldn't have done it without you or Luke. Though maybe don't tell him I said so. If he thinks his boot camps were too successful he may rope me into more."

"My lips are sealed." About more than she would ever know.

As much as he would like to leave it there, he had something else to mention. "I also wanted to thank you for today. You said some wonderful things about me, but Claude, please don't think you need to become my human shield." Though it had been a hell of a boost to hear her listing all the good qualities she saw in him.
"It was the truth," she said simply. "He needed a dose of reality."

"Reality. That's honestly how you see me?"

"What? Talented and hardworking and kind? Of course I do, Tom. You stayed with me the other day when you didn't have to and talked me out of a really bad headspace."

"You don't need to pay me back for that by taking the heat when an interviewer gets too aggressive."

"I know that, Tom!" The heat in her words startled him, but the flash of anger was quickly followed by a long sigh. "That's not why I did it. Like I said, it was the truth and the right thing to do. Friendship goes both ways." He was pondering her words when she asked a quiet question. "You really just calling to make sure I was all right?"

Momentary panic seized his heart before registering not accusation, but wonder in her words. Too many had been cavalier with her in the past and he ached thinking about the fact that his concern would be such a surprise. "Yeah, Claude. You're important to me."

"Why?"

If he hadn’t just resolved to keep his true feelings in check, he might have just blurted something out then and there. But even if he’d planned to act on them, now definitely wasn’t the time. "Why not? You're tremendous."

She didn't answer and he could picture her quizzical expression, the one she wore when presented with a minor problem or challenge. Her brow would be creased and she'd be unconsciously worrying at her lower lip. Even knowing how inappropriate it was, he couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to take her in his arms and do his best to evoke a very different expression. His libido stirred at the thought, though he knew it was absurd. No wonder he'd resisted admitting his feelings for so long if this was how his mind acted now that he had.

He couldn't justify taking up any more of her time, no matter how much he wanted to. "Listen, I won't keep you any longer. Go get some good rest. The big stuff starts in a few days."

"Hey, thanks for being great today." She hesitated and he let the silence settle before she continued, voice now a bit flustered. "And not only today, also just in general. I'm lucky to have you as a friend. I know I'm not... that I don't say that kind of stuff a lot, but I'm grateful for you, Tom. I just wanted you to know that."

"That's very good to know, Claude. Sleep tight."

“You too.”

She rung off and he marveled at how much better he felt knowing that she was grateful for him. I might not have been the declaration of romantic affection he really craved, but it was enough. He felt sure now that he’d chosen the wisest course in regards to Claudia. Keeping her in his life and enjoying their friendship seemed much more doable after their talk and he was actually starting to look forward to their trip again.

In fact, he reasoned that now that he’d admitted he was interested in her romantically, maybe he’d be able to move past the impulse and settle back into their established relationship. How often had the romance part fizzled away on him anyway? It would be better this way, he decided. He didn’t seem to be able to have both a romance and a lasting friendship with a woman, and he’d much rather have the lasting option with Claudia. The discomfort would pass soon enough and they’d be back to normal.
Feeling better about his decidedly mature attitude, he decided to head to bed after a cold shower. Though he may have been intellectually satisfied with his decision, not all of his body had followed suit. He’d let his libido take control too many times over the years though, and it had gotten him nowhere.

He could stay focused and do whatever he had to do to keep Claudia as a friend, even if meant there'd be a lot of lonely mornings and icy showers in his immediate future. But despite thinking he'd reasoned his way around the whole thing, he gave very little thought to the easiest solution to the immediate physical need, another woman to warm his bed. That idea had flitted across his mind and had been so vehemently quashed he wasn't even entertaining thoughts of why it had felt so repellent and wrong. No, he was consciously ignoring that corner of his thoughts lest he find himself in an even deeper emotional crisis. It wasn't any kind of real solution and he would leave it that way for now.
They'd made it through the first four days of the tour without incident. Claudia felt like the universe was finally beginning to cut Tom a break rather than incessantly throwing the Taylor debacle back into his face. And for his part, Luke seemed like the proud papa watching his children perform a new task he'd just taught them. The amount of praise he kept heaping on them was almost too much, but she wouldn't begrudge him a smooth tour. He deserved it after the year he'd had.

By day five they were in Spain and Luke had offered them the afternoon off, a chance Claudia jumped at. After a light morning of interviews they returned to their adjoining Barcelona hotel suites to enjoy some well-deserved downtime. It wasn't so much that she needed to be alone, just that she desperately needed some quiet away from jabbering reporters and their shallow questions. Not that her taste of hard-hitting questions at the junket had been enjoyable, but at least that had been real. So far, everything else was just fluff.

But when she expressed her desire to return to the hotel, Tom hadn't pressed her and had probably assumed she needed some introvert time. Which was certainly fine, she reminded herself. He might need the time on his own even if she had been hoping to watch a movie together. Even extroverts needed some time away from the masses, right?

She grudgingly resigned herself to a quiet afternoon in, but when she gave the bathtub a closer inspection and found that it was heated, the prospect of a relaxing bath took most of the sting out of it. Some would probably think her an utter hick for finding the lushly appointed suite so charming, but she'd long past the point of caring. The day she saw such luxuries as commonplace would be a sad one in her book.

The terrace alone caused her heart to skip a beat when she'd spotted the glittering view from it when they’d arrived the night before. She’d tried to rein her giddiness in, but by Tom’s indulgent smile she figured he’d noticed her delight. He never teased her for it though, which raised her esteem of him considerably. In fact, he’d watched her with an almost calculating… something that made her certain she knew what it meant to be the focus of a character study. But she’d quickly brushed the thought aside for a study of Tom’s own rooms. They were nearly identical, but she’d insisted on scoping out his setup as well.

It took a bit of wrangling to get everything set up to her liking, but after dragging in a table from the living room, half the mini bar's snacks, and a sundry of electronic distractions, she felt ready to soak the afternoon away. She was listening to an audiobook less than twenty minutes into her bath, when the crash of a door slamming open stirred her from the stupor she’d been in.

"Claudia?" It was unmistakably Tom and the urgency in his voice killed any protests over privacy that she may have voiced.
"Bathroom," she shouted back, worried that the news had to be terrible to warrant such an uncharacteristically rude intrusion.

By the time he made his way into the room and she heard his exclamation of chagrin, she didn't care about politeness, only about what precipitated him barging into her room without a word of warning. "Shit. I had no idea you were—"

"I'm behind a screen, Tom. I know you have the delicate sensibilities of an eighteenth century romance heroine, but it doesn’t sound like now is the time to be dainty. Give me a sec to pause this damn thing." She fumbled with her phone, grateful she didn’t end up dropping it into the water. "Now, what’s the matter?"

"It really isn’t that important, Claude… I shouldn’t be intruding like this."

"Tom, I know you well enough to know you didn’t just pop over for a casual chat. What’s going on?"

"Well, I mean only if you’re sure…” Before he finished the first word she could tell he was already fighting the impulse to blurt it out and now that her initial shock was gone, she had the distinct impression it was good news. The idea let her relax significantly and she settled back into her half reclined position, ready to wait for him to get on with it.

"Tom, I’m naked and you’re in the same room, but you can’t see me, can you?"

"No."

"Okay then. I wouldn’t have let you in if this freaked me out, so can we move past that part?"

"Right. Of course. And I wouldn’t have barged in here like this except… well, I need your advice."

"About what?"

The complete unreality of the moment caught up with him as he struggled to focus on the reason he was now three feet away from a very wet, very naked Claudia. The words he finally managed to stutter out seemed completely inconsequential in light of that startling fact. "I just got a message that Lin-Manuel Miranda wants to talk to me."

" Seriously?!" He tried not to picture what movement she might have made to warrant the sloshing sound he heard.

"I haven’t a clue what this could be about and my first thought was that I had to tell you about it. My agent just texted me and gave me his number and said he wanted me to call when I got a chance."

"You came to talk to me rather than call him?" The incredulity was plain in her question and though it didn’t make a lot of sense, he’d known talking to her first was the correct decision.

"What do you suppose he wants?" This was a much more pressing question than the one she’d asked and he knew he didn’t really have a good answer for her if she pressed him, so it was best to keep the conversation moving.

It put her on a speculation track and he breathed an internal sigh of relief. "Maybe he wants us to stop Dubsmashing his stuff." Though it had been months since they’d posted anything.

No, they hadn’t seen much of each other lately and he’d missed the days they’d spent filming and doing whatever they could to make the other laugh. He realized with a sickening pang that they'd
only get that once a year at best. It wasn't nearly enough for the new thing inside of him that wanted Claudia all the time and in a number of creative ways. And yet now they were sharing a space in a completely new way and he couldn't do what he wanted most and join her in the water. The efficacy of waiting for the feelings to pass was starting to come into doubt.

Unaware of his thoughts, she continued, hitting upon the same points he'd considered. "But it's been forever since we did any new ones and I have a feeling if he wanted us to stop they'd send a letter or something. Does the fact that this came through your agent tell us anything?"

"It might. Though if you need to get into contact with someone you don't know, going through their agent is usually the quickest option."

More rippling noises meant she’d shifted positions again. He risked a direct glance at the screen, and although he couldn't make out details, he thought he saw movement that indicated she was leaning over the edge now. He was both grateful for and opposed to the presence of the decorative mashrabiya screens that he’d thought so charming just the night before. Now part of him wanted to burn the damn things while another was imminently happy they were there to aid his beleaguered self-control.

Claudia brought him back to the conversation at hand. "Famous people honestly just call someone's agent if they fancy a chat and haven't actually met and exchanged numbers? They should have given me some kind of a handbook that explained these things. I clearly don't understand how any of this works."

She sighed and he noted a distinct weariness in it that gave him a guilty start. He'd wanted to give her some time to have a break and not even an hour in he was intruding. "Back to the question at hand. You should just call him, Tom. We could make up a hundred reasons he may want to talk and we'd likely be wrong on all of them."

"Do you... do you mind if I call him from here?" It was stupidly selfish, but he didn't want to go back into his empty suite. Her presence instantly made any room more habitable. But before she had a chance to reply, his confounded conscience got the better of him. "I'm sorry, Claude. I know I'm intruding on your quiet time. You must think I'm the world's biggest ass."

"I can soak just as easily with you here as not. I mean basically nothing is getting me out of this tub right now, so I have all I need to continue my recovery from the press."

"Thanks, Claude. Were you not... um where you are, I would hug you right now."

"Hug me later. Now you have a call to make."

"Right."

She listened intently as he dialed and had a little internal pout when he didn't put it on speaker phone. But she did have to admit that would have been a shade duplicitous and Tom was more forthcoming than that, almost to a fault. It felt like the pleasantries they were exchanging lasted far longer than they should have. At least it left her with something other than her own surprise over how easily she'd forgotten how odd it was to have her friend in the room while she bathed. Well at least the actual bathing activities were done, it was now more of a slow stewing in the hot water.

After a few minutes, Tom started to steer away from the infuriatingly polite chitchat. "Listen man, I'll admit I was happy to hear you wanted to talk, but I haven't been able to figure out why. What can I do for you?"
She spent the next few minutes in frustrated silence, straining to hear even a snippet of what was being said on the other end of the line. Quickly she realized that she was trying to focus on a moving target, as Tom was now pacing down the length of the tiled floor. He murmured assent or understanding a few times and she was sorely tempted to throw something at him to put an end to his endless trek back and forth.

Finally, Tom spoke. "I mean I have to check with my agent before I can officially reply, but yeah I don't see a reason why I couldn't. It's not been in my wheelhouse of late, though I'd love a crack at it." She heard him hesitate, before adding a final statement. "But I am a baritone you know."

He chuckled at whatever Lin said. "From you that means a lot. I worked very hard on it and I was proud of what we were able to put together. At the very least I would want to work on something for you and let you hear what I came up with. I don't want any decisions made before you know whether I'm shit or not."

Now her curiosity was going wild, the two of them obviously discussing some kind of a job. It felt like another hour before Tom rung off, though it was probably only a few minutes. Even if she couldn't see him, she could just hear Tom's charm oozing out as he talked with what basically amounted to a complete stranger. He was so easy with people and he didn't even have to try.

After they said their goodbyes, promising to talk soon, he slumped onto the tile floor with an exhalation of breath that could be very good or very bad. She hoped it was the former.

"Well?"

"He wants me in Hamilton when it opens in the West End."

The words didn't compute for her. "Wait, what? Tom, I love you, but you're basically the whitest person I've ever met. What in the hell part would you play?"

When he didn't immediately answer she worried she'd been a bit too honest with him, but when he spoke she could practically hear the smile in his voice.

"Claude, you never pull any punches. I adore that, you know." Before she could decide how to respond to the compliment he was explaining further. "He thinks I'd do well with King George."

"Ohh!" She felt an idiot to think he'd be offered anything else in a show that had prided itself on diversity. "Well you'd be amazing and I'd get to see you be funny in a role! We all know you're aces at brooding romantic types, but not everyone knows what a goofy dork you are."

"Gee, thanks."

"Oh shut up. You know I mean that in a good way! This is so big and fun and different. You're doing it, right?"

"I'm not even sure I can do it. It's not in my vocal range."

"Neither was Hank and look what you did with that. Tom, if I know one thing about you, it's that you put an inhuman amount of effort into your work. And when you couple that with your raw talent, you can do basically anything."

She sounded so matter-of-fact that he was temporarily taken aback. The complete faith she seemed to have in his abilities made his head swim. Thank goodness he'd had the good sense to sit down to ponder things. He felt as if he was a literary heroine ready to swoon at a compliment from a suitor. At least she couldn't see how her words had affected him. Hopefully she assumed he was deep in
"You honestly think so?" He did sound rather dazed when he voiced the question, but he would have been in that state regardless of the company. This was huge, Claudia did have the right of that.

"You're the smartest idiot I know. Of course I think so!"

"Lin mentioned Hank too."

"Because he didn't just pull your name out of his ass. He recognizes that you can do this and be stupendous."

"I have been looking for a stage production."

"And you're going to do this one. I know you and you're gonna have to put some work in to convince yourself that you can do it, but once that's taken care of you have to agree. If you won't take my word, trust Lin's instinct. He didn't ask you personally just to be nice."

"You word holds more weight than just about anyone's, Claude."

"It does?"

"Of course it does."

The practical questions she'd wanted to ask about the length of the run and a hundred other things died away at the certainty in his voice. How in the world had she turned into one of the people Tom Hiddleston took career advice from? A year ago he'd just been that guy with the horns to her.

They sat in silence for several minutes while each contemplated not only the job offer, but other weightier subjects. Tom's mind kept drifting away from the career opportunity to the fact that she'd said 'Tom, I love you.' And though he knew it hadn't been in the way he'd wanted, he had to admit to himself that he did want it. Quite a lot.

Something other than his libido had swelled at the words and he found that even her casual usage of the phrase was like a hit of some hitherto unknown wonder drug. It had no right to feel as good as it did to hear her say that, but it was no longer something he could hope would go away. Because he desperately didn't want the feeling to go away. It was painful and unrequited and yet every little centimeter of ground he made with her left him euphoric.

But he never fully trusted himself in that state, so he thought it safer to occupy himself with an innocuous topic.

"Claude, what in the world were you listening to when I came in?"

"An audiobook. One of my favorite books actually."

"It was dreadful narration."

Before he had a chance to apologize for maligning her choice in entertainment, her giggle signaled that she hadn't been offended by his comment. "The author is reading it and she’s a fabulous writer, but the woman should have left it to a professional." She sighed with faux dramatism and continued in a hearty lament. "But not everyone can have someone like Tom Hiddleston read to us whenever we please."

"Everyone may not, but you certainly can." He stood, ignoring the creak of his tail bone protesting
after sitting on the hard floor. “Is it on your Kindle?”

“Yeah, but you don’t need to—“

“I don’t think you know how much I enjoy reading aloud.” Particularly to her. It may have been showing off, well no it damn well was showing off, but he never had a chance to perform in front of her. Because their show was just him and he desperately wanted to demonstrate the breadth of what he could do. She’d seen some of his films, she’d admitted as much, but being able to perform for her in person was an opportunity he couldn’t resist. And there was at least a small part of him remembering that several women had commented that him reading aloud was akin to seduction.

Within a few minutes he’d retrieved her Kindle, changed into a comfortable pair of sweats, and found some cushions that would spare his backside more discomfort. He’d tasked her with downloading the book in question and refused to entertain any of her protests about it being too much to ask. If only she knew everything she really could ask of him. Reading to her was the least of it.

But since pondering the day’s revelations and hopefully coming up with a satisfactory plan in response was a solitary exercise, he’d gladly entertain Claudia as long as she’d let him. As he settled in, the familiar excitement he got before going on stage was tempered with a bit of new anxiety.

“Now, I reserve the right to change accents as necessary. I’ll have to correct on the fly since this is the first I’m seeing of the material. I’m usually—“

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re usually more prepared. You’re offering to read to me so get on with it before I have to start wondering whether you’re really a big old diva.”

“Perish the thought! A cold read it is.”

As he settled into the most comfortable position he could manage, back resting against a cabinet, he concluded that there was nowhere else in the world he’d rather be. The thought was both terrifying and strangely exhilarating. He’d put the time in to decide how best to approach her and he’d try his damndeast to make her his. It had long since stopped being a choice, even if it had taken him awhile to admit it. Well, he’d never shied away from hard work before and he wouldn’t this time either.
Chapter 28

After a few hours, Claudia decided that if she didn’t get out of the tub soon she never would. Though she was loath to stop Tom’s narration. Even though she’d read the book several times, it was like a new story with the depth he added to each character. When he paused for a drink of water, she voiced the idea she’d decided upon.

“I’m going to need food soon and I should probably get myself back on dry land. Let’s kidnap Luke and go out for a celebratory dinner. I’ve never been to Barcelona and I want to see some of the city.”

“You wouldn’t mind going out on the town?”

“As long as I don’t have to smile and pretend inane questions aren’t boring me to death I don’t. That and I’ll have my men with me, which always makes things more enjoyable.”

“Your men?”

“Yes, I’ve claimed you and Luke. At least for the remainder of the trip. Neither of you is rude enough to say no to me, so I figured I may as well take advantage while we’re gallivanting around Europe.”

“I should probably know what I’ve been press ganged into. What does being one of your men entail?”

“Hmm. Well obviously making sure I’m adequately fed. That’s top on the list. Protecting my honor by fighting any necessary duels for me. Carrying my humble self if a situation becomes so vexing that I faint. Being my translator should I be questioned by the police. You know, that kind of thing.”

“Being a tad dramatic there, aren’t you, Claude?”

“You actor types love drama.”

“True.” He paused as if truly considering the ridiculous duties she’d made up and she couldn’t help but grin. “I suppose I could be called upon if it comes to pistols at dawn.”

“Knew I could count on you! How about you give me half an hour to get ready and then we can ambush Mr. Windsor. Is that doable?”

“I will save you the ambush and pop over to his room while you’re getting ready. I should probably prepare him for what you signed him up for.”

Reluctantly, he left her to amble down to Luke’s door, part of him hoping he wouldn’t be able to join them. But once he explained that Claudia wanted the two of them to squire her around, his friend agreed only too readily. It was likely for the best, he reminded himself, as his new resolve to expand his relationship with Claudia was without any kind of plan. He couldn’t just expect a single dinner alone to change things. So all in all it was better that Luke would be there to temper his baser instincts.

After a flurry of texts, they decided to meet in the lobby and though Claudia was the last to appear, she was by far the most enthusiastic.

“Half an hour of primping and you’re not even wearing your hair down?” Luke raised an eyebrow in mock judgment when she wedged herself between them on the sofa they shared.
Completely unperturbed, she extended her legs and put an arm around each of them. “Tom can attest that thirty minutes isn’t nearly long enough to wrangle my hair. Sian’s a professional and even she takes longer.” She pressed a smacking kiss to Luke’s cheek and grinned blithely. “I would have been ready sooner, but I figured my publicist would want me to slap on enough makeup to not look like an embarrassment next to my two dapper gentlemen.”

“You’d outshine us no matter what,” Tom asserted. In fact, she fairly radiated happiness at the moment and it was more becoming than any of the fancier clothes she’d donned during their tour appearances. Even in what looked like an ancient pair of jeans and a nondescript blouse, she looked amazing. Yes, he was good and truly fucked. He had no chance of resisting her and he’d been an idiot to suppose he did.

“You are faultlessly charming and would find some positive if I showed up in a literal trash bag. Luke is more of a realist. But I adore you both.” Just for good measure, she kissed Tom’s cheek as well.

“Why are you so disgustingly cheerful?” Again there was no ire in Luke’s words. In fact, he seemed very amused.

“I had an amazingly relaxing afternoon and I’m super excited about Tom’s new job.”

“What new job?”

“You didn’t tell him? Ugh, I can’t say I’m surprised. You still haven’t convinced yourself about it, huh?” She turned to Luke. “We’ll explain over dinner. I’m ravenous.”

She stood and turned back to them, a large smile still on her face. “Come on! I hope you already have somewhere in mind, because I may gnaw my arm off if I don’t get food in front of me soon.”

Tom had actually agonized over where to go, though he’d only had a few minutes to find a suitable place. It was suddenly an anxious prospect, as he wanted to please and impress her with somewhere perfect. The timing wasn’t conducive to it though and he was only able to do some cursory research on his phone. But he was happy with what he’d chosen, at least as happy as he could be without sampling the menu himself.

“Can you handle a twenty minute walk or do I need to have the front desk rustle up a candy bar for you? I would hate for you to have to resort to self-cannibalization.”

“I reserve the right to stop at any interesting food vendors we may come across, but I think I can make that.”

As she almost skipped ahead as they exited the hotel, Tom was reminded strongly of Moira. And although he’d never seen Claudia quite this buoyant, the resemblance was uncanny. He’d had no idea why she’d found the afternoon so restorative, but a part of him was pleased that she’d spent it with no one but him. Surely he had to be at least partially to blame for her good mood. And he’d been in heaven... well, his version of heaven would have involved reading to her while ensconced in bed together, but at this point he’d take what he could get.

Claudia shook him out of his thoughts by hooking her arm through his as they set off down the street. She’d done the same with Luke on her left and the men shot indulgent smiles at each other over her head. The publicist seemed content to let his charges take the lead, likely happy not to be the coordinator for the night.

Tom felt a bit guilty, but his attention began to drift away from the conversation as his mind focused
on how nice it felt to have Claudia on his arm. And even though he knew intellectually that the press could cause trouble if just the pair of them were spotted like this, he wished once again Luke hadn’t joined them. The weather was mild and the dusky twilight far too romantic for such an outing.

As if she could sense his thoughts and wanted to dash cold water on them, she pulled free of both men and found her phone. They’d reached the city’s Gothic Quarter and she wanted to take pictures. Of everything. Several pictures of everything.

“Claude, I thought you wanted to get to the restaurant as soon as possible,” he protested, trying not to sound truculent. If they continued on there was a good chance she’d take his arm again, but not if she kept flitting about with her phone.

“I do, but it’s magic hour. Even I can’t fuck up pictures in this light. Just gimme a minute.”

As she walked around getting shots of the square they’d stopped in, Luke chuckled and turned to Tom. “You know, about some things she’s professional, shrewd, and cool as a damn cucumber, but something like this and she sheds decades in an instant. I’m not sure what that says about her, but it is rather endearing, isn’t it?”

“Hmm,” he replied, wishing to stay noncommittal on the subject. He felt like every word out of his mouth could potentially telegraph his true feelings. Come to think of it, that wasn’t the best feeling in the middle of a press tour where his whole job was talking.

Luke chose his next words carefully, as if suddenly wary of his friend. “I hope whoever she ends up with appreciates all her facets.”

“To hear her tell it she’s not ending up with anyone.”

“I don’t personally believe that. I think she got tired of looking and settling, but she’s too damned loving not to need to share it with someone.”

“Loving?” Struggling desperately to keep this tone light, he didn’t have the courage to look at Luke as he spoke. “And how would you know about that trait?”

When he did risk a sideways glance at Luke, the man’s smug ghost of a smile confused him. “I hear how she talks to her family, I see how protective she is of friends like you. She doesn’t do that out of duty, you know.”

“Does what?”

“Defend you. If she didn’t value you she wouldn’t stand between you and a rabid reporter without a second thought about herself.” He sighed and added a tentative statement, lowering his voice. “She does care for you, Tom.”

“Yes, I know.” The words came out clipped with more than a little bitterness. Though he’d decided he would have to act on his feelings at some point, he didn’t harbor any delusions about the outcome. It wasn’t a foregone conclusion that it would be a positive one. “And you, and all her friends.”

“She’s so wonderfully different,” Luke stated, voice again chipper, as if he was on the verge of laughter. “So different than many of the celebrities either of us have worked with. Sometimes I have to remind myself to take a different tack with her. And it’s a bit extra work, but more than worth it, don’t you think?”

Part of him wanted to declare his feelings for her right then and there, just so Luke could see what he assumed would be disastrous results. He’d caught Luke’s message and almost snorted aloud at the
thought that starting a romance with Claudia would just be ‘a bit of extra work.’ He knew Luke was only trying to help, but he rather resented the implication that Tom hadn’t recognized that his usual romance repertoire wouldn’t work on her. He damn well knew she was different, why else would he torture himself hoping his love would fade?

He’d already handled matters differently than he had with other women he’d felt infatuation for. And this was more than that. She was different, how he felt was different, and it didn’t take Luke fucking Windsor to show him that. Even the word different couldn’t adequately explain how radically singular Claudia felt compared to any of the others that came before.

He wheeled around to face the man, an angry retort dying on his lips. Luke’s expression wasn’t one of smug superiority, it was of concern and care. His friend hadn’t broached the subject assuming Tom’s ignorance, but rather to offer his support, albeit in a circumspect way.

“I do think that, yes. Choosing what different tack to take though isn’t something to be done lightly.”

“No, it isn’t. But you’re a smart chap and I have faith you’ll come round to the right one sooner or later. And should you need for anything I hope you wouldn’t hesitate to ask.”

He wasn’t going to bloody well ask his publicist for romantic help, but it was kind of him to offer. Tom had some semblance of his pride left, though if he thought for a second Luke’s assistance would gain him what he wanted, well then he wouldn’t hesitate. But he knew in his gut that wasn’t the case.

However much he wanted to begin romancing Claudia immediately, he was able to recognize that a press tour was bad timing. And when they got home it wouldn’t be much better. In addition to the new show she seemed confident he’d be doing, he was in serious talks to work with Ken on Hamlet near the end of the summer. If he could make both work, he knew he would. And that left precious little time to convince Claudia he would be a good... anything.

It probably should have given him pause that the appellation of boyfriend didn’t altogether seem enough to him, but he pushed that thought aside for the moment. The fact of the matter was that making any kind of overture in the next few months would have been foolish. No, he’d have to plan the when as carefully as the what. Waiting months seemed interminable to him, but there really wasn’t anything for it. Just as he’d alluded to Luke, this was too important to make a misstep.

“Thank you.”

“You know I wouldn’t normally pry like this.” Only Luke would consider the veiled small talk as prying. “But I want to see you both happy. Do forgive the intrusion into such a private matter.”


As if on cue, Claudia bounded back over to them, face still shining with happiness. “Okay, I’m done. Let’s go.”

“We’re almost there.” Tom told her, referring to more than just their proximity to the restaurant. She had no idea of the double meaning, but it made him feel better. She’d say he was being needlessly dramatic, which strangely also helped calm his restlessness.

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His choice of restaurant turned out to be a good one, offering excellent seafood and even better wine. The three of them took their time and enjoyed a thoroughly relaxing meal. Tom took great pleasure in watching Claudia tell Luke about his phone call and subsequent job offer. It was hard to imagine a
task he couldn’t handle with Claudia’s seemingly endless faith in him.

After dinner they wandered over to an outdoor cafe to enjoy the night air. The conversation died down to sporadic bursts, each of them mostly lost in their own thoughts. Well, Tom pretended he was at least. He mostly stole clandestine looks at Claudia as she sipped her espresso and watched people. Night had fallen at last, but the cafe lights and those of other businesses gave him plenty of light to study her calm countenance. She really did look so happy and at peace that he wanted to imprint it on his memory.

Later he would blame that rather punch drunk feeling on the suggestion he blurted out. Motioning at the handful of couples dancing as a single guitar player strummed a slow melody, he asked. “Care to dance, Claude?”

“What?” She looked over to him and back to where he was pointing and back to him again. “Oh no. I cannot dance. I mess up a box step.”

“There aren’t any steps to what they’re doing,” he gestured to the others. “Come on. I would be remiss in my tour guide duties if you don’t get to check this box on your tourist list.”

He couldn’t say why he was pushing it, aside from a very selfish desire to have danced with her at least once. Indecision flashed across her face and he took it as a sign she didn’t find the idea completely abhorrent. Standing, he offered her his hand and an encouraging smile. He ignored Luke’s knowing grin as he pretended to be engrossed in his phone.

“Fine,” she finally huffed. “It’s your ass if I make an idiot out of myself.”

Assuming it was wiser to stay quiet, he simply smiled and led her over to the other dancers. Honestly it was more organized swaying than anything, but it gave him an excuse to get her alone in a new environment. Things that would seem absurd to do when they worked at home in London now seemed acceptable. He remembered feeling something similar when they were in Los Angeles.

Tom took one hand in his and drew her closer, though not nearly as close as he’d have liked. He watched her closely as they began to move and was relieved to see no sign of anxiety, just a hint of mild chagrin.

“You’re doing beautifully,” he reassured her.

“I know you’re capable of more than this high school dance thing.”

“Ah, but that’s all flash. Lately the only time I shimmy is when I’m goaded by the press.”

“God Tom, we can go sit down if you want.”

She looked pained at the idea she was the source of any discomfort. But as she moved to go, he used it as an excuse to pull her a tad closer. His hand was now on the small of her back and he wouldn’t have wanted to sit down if his very life depended on it.

“No, no. This is different, that’s all I was trying to say. It’s nice to just dance for the sake of it.”

“Oh, okay,” she mumbled, not looking fully convinced.

Trying to get her mind away from the subject, he brought up another. “So are you enjoying Barcelona?”

“So much. It’s beautiful. I hate that we’re tied up with work the rest of the time we’re here. I need to
come back at some point just to play tourist.”

“I feel that way about most of the places I visit,” he chuckled. “I don’t do nearly enough pleasure travel.”

“Neither of us do. We should actually plan something rather than just talking about it.”

He was sure she meant that they should do so separately, but images of the two of them traipsing off to parts unknown threatened to distract him all the same. Because the reality of everything he wanted with Claudia had finally crystallized in his mind. He wanted travel and a home and a full-blown life with her. And rather than terrifying him, the idea of marriage and family seemed a natural one if it was with her. He wanted to know what it would be like to attend functions with her, to come home to her after a shoot, to do the bloody grocery shopping with her for god’s sake. All of it. He was greedy for it in a way that should have scared him, but strangely didn’t.

If only Luke had any inkling of the depth of Tom’s feelings, he wouldn’t have felt the need to nudge him in Claudia’s direction. Once he’d allowed himself to admit the depth and breadth of his feelings, there was no going back. It really was only a matter of time and timing.

Feeling a literal tug on his ear, he was drawn back to the moment by a grinning Claudia. “Am I that boring then? A few minutes dancing with me and you’re daydreaming.”

“Claude, I—”

She chuckled, looking amused and a tad exasperated. “It’s okay, I’m just teasing. I know you have a lot going through your head after this afternoon.”

And she had no idea that she was the topic of his current musings, not a prospective job. “I apologize, Claude. I’m being a terrible partner. You have my full attention.” Not that Claudia in some form didn’t already.

“No worries. What I was asking, is where you’d go if you could drop everything and jet off somewhere.”

Wherever she was. Jesus, it was stupidly sentimental and soppy, but it was the goddamn truth. “Somewhere I’d be forced to relax. It would have to be remote so I wouldn’t be tempted by museums and cities and the like. Maybe an isolated beach?”

“That does sound amazing. I’d love to be able to take a nap if the mood struck and stay in PJs all day just because I could. I suppose I could do that at home, but it never seems to work out that way, does it? We saw what happened the last time you tried to take some time off at home. Luke roped you into working with me.”

“In that case I’d have to say it was worth missing the vacation time. And nobody roped me into anything.”

“You know what I mean though. Sometimes I feel like I have to schedule time to myself weeks in advance.”

“You’re not running yourself too ragged are you, Claude?” He worried about her sometimes, particularly when he remembered that she often needed recharge time, as she termed it.

“Maybe a little, but you should talk. You’re not going to have time to breathe in the next six months. Two shows and Marvel promotion on top of that is a lot.”
“How about if I promise to take better care of myself if you do as well?”

“I can agree to try. But you need to speak up if I can do anything to help you while you juggle everything coming up. Okay?”

“Same goes for you.”

She pulled away and stuck a hand out. “We should shake on it to make it official.”

Wanting to make much more than their little deal to be made official, he restrained from taking her in his arms and settled for the handshake she offered. At least he was gifted with a luminescent smile for it, which was something. And though he was reluctant to return, he felt bound to offer her that option.

“Did you want to head back?”

“Not really, but we probably should. We have a long day tomorrow.”

Offering her his arm, they strolled back to Luke and announced their intention to go back to the hotel. Again, Luke seemed overly focused on his phone and even lagged behind the pair of them as they walked back through the narrow streets. It was obvious that he was giving his charges some time together and Tom had the distinct feeling of being a chaperoned youth in an Austen novel.

They made their way back at a more sedate pace now that Claudia’s rampageous appetite wasn’t urging them on. But to Tom the time was slipping away all too quickly. He had to tamp down on impulses to use the romantic setting as a backdrop for a grand declaration of his feelings. Part of him at least kept himself in check, realizing that though it would play well on a movie screen, it wasn’t likely to net him the desired result.

So he settled for a chat and her company and reminded himself to be grateful even for that. Claude wasn’t one to socialize in excess, and he’d learned to revel in the opportunity when it arose. Though to hear her tell it, he wasn’t one of the people that could expect metered interactions with her, because she didn’t find him draining like everyone else. That was something at least, wasn’t it?

She was telling him about an interesting offer she’d received to endorse a line of cookware when they were interrupted by a loud shout from a darkened doorway. He couldn’t make out what the person was saying at first, but the man obliged him by yelling it again. As soon as his brain translated the statement to English, he tightened his grip on Claudia’s arm.

But of course Claudia was more curious than he’d like, and wanted more information before she allowed him to hustle her along. She’d shifted her attention to the man, now visible in the weak light. He wore a disheveled business suit and swayed slightly on his feet.

“What’d he say?”

“Something rude I’d rather not repeat.” Tom attempted once again to get her moving, and found her feet firmly rooted in place. “Come on Claude.”

Luke had materialized behind them, expression wary and pinched. Publicists tended to hate situations they weren’t orchestrating and Tom could feel the unease rolling off of his friend. “He looks like he’s had one too many after work. He’s of no concern to us.”

“What did he say, Tom?” Her voice was low and hard.

“He wanted to know if I would... share you with him.”
“What?!” Before he knew it, she’d pulled free of him and stalked up to the man. “You want to ask me something? Say that shit to my face!”

“Jesus, Claudia!” Luke looked beside himself.

“Claude, he’s just a drunk asshole,” Tom called feebly. And presumably the man didn’t understand English, but bringing up a practicality like that seemed useless at that point.

There was a tense moment of stasis in which the man looked more confused than belligerent and Tom breathed a small sigh of relief. Maybe the worry had been premature.

When she didn’t get a response, Claudia all but spit a final retort at him before turning away. “Aww nothing to say? I’m shocked. Take your drunk ass and your tiny dick home.”

The man must have known more English than he’d originally thought, because he brought his hand up as she turned back to her companions. Something dark and angry Tom had been holding back burst forth and before he knew what had happened he had the offending hand twisted behind the drunkard’s back.

Claudia had yelped in surprise when he’d flown past her, but he hadn’t heard it. He hardly heard anything, though her mouth was moving and she looked to be shouting. Everything was drowned out by rage. This pitiful excuse of a human had been about to strike her simply for standing up to his catcalling.

Gradually the rush of blood pounding in his ears subsided and he heard Claudia calling his name as well as the drunk caterwauling about his arm. Luke had stayed silent, but now closed the distance between the two groups and spoke coolly to Tom.

“Time to go, Tom.”

“He was going to—“

“I’m well aware of what he intended. And you stopped that from happening. Any further action would be ill-advised.”

“Because the press would object if I pummeled this piece of trash?” He knew Luke didn’t deserve the sneering tone, but he couldn’t keep it from his voice. He was livid and wanted to hit the man who had tried to harm Claudia. Not only harm her, but treated her like a disposable object. Deep down he knew he was overreacting, but it was like his frustrations stemming from his recent revelations left him unable to resist baser instincts.

“Partially, yes. You may not like it, but it’s reality.” Luke put a hand on Tom’s shoulder and continued in a softer voice, so low that Claudia likely wouldn’t hear. “You know she doesn’t appreciate being treated like a helpless maiden in need of protecting. You’ve dealt with the threat. Anything else would be overkill.”

No logic about the press would have broken through to him at that point, so Luke had widely chosen an argument that had the best chance of getting Tom’s attention. And it did give him pause, long enough for a modicum of sense to return and realize that nothing he wanted to do would come to anything but a bad end.

But before he relented and let the man go, he leaned in low and spoke to him in Spanish. “If I let my ignoble instincts run wild, as you did earlier when you made such lewd comments about the lady, I would beat you within an inch of your life. But though it pains me sometimes, I’d like to think I’m better than that. At least I know I’m better than you.” He released his arm and the man fell to his
“Go home and learn a lesson from this.”

Without a backwards glance he walked back to where Claudia stood, Luke at his heels. Sometimes it felt like shit being the better person.

“Are you okay,” she asked as soon as he joined her.

He wasn’t sure whether he should be flattered that she cared about the state of him, or if he should feel insulted that she’d think such a minimal altercation might have harmed him. “I’m fine. Are you all right, Claude?”

“I’m... it was stupid of me to confront him like that, but he just made me so angry!”

“Well that makes two of us.” He offered her a stiff smile and his arm. “Come on. You either need a stiff drink or a decadent dessert to calm you down before bed.”

“What if I kinda want both?”

“Then you shall have it!” They began walking, Luke again bringing up the rear.

“I’ll just take a few handfuls of Valium, thanks,” Luke muttered.

“I was joking about fighting duels on my behalf, you know,” she looked up at Tom grinning.

“Oh no, I take my duties as your man very seriously. Particularly when the lady lets her temper take over.”

“Nana likes to say I have more spirit than sense at times like that.”

“Don’t apologize for the spirit, as long as you keep me around to help when the spirit gets you in a sticky spot.”

“Deal.”

They’d made a few deals that night, neither of which were actually the one he wanted. But when he thought about it, the promise to help take care of one another in times of stress or trouble was part of what he wanted with her. Their friendship wasn’t completely antithetical from a romance and the thought buoyed him. Yes, there were some aspects he wanted to expand and despite the persistence of his libido, the physical facet was just one of several. True, he did want to make love to her, but the need to create a whole life with her overshadowed that single want. It surprised him more than a little bit, but it also reaffirmed that Claudia was the woman for him. He’d never felt such a complex mix of needs and desires with anyone else and was sure the decision that had seem impulsive earlier was really just his logical mind catching up with the rest of him.

And he’d wait however long he needed to ensure his overture was perfect. The rest of his life literally depended on it.
It's NaNoWriMo time again and I'm hoping this story will be the main beneficiary of my word count push.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Not long after they all parted in the hotel hallway, Tom found himself pacing restlessly around his suite. He may have made intellectual peace with his long term plan for Claudia, but that didn’t calm the rest of him that wanted desperately to have her sleep beside him that very night. Only the adjoining doors separated them, but the despair he’d felt when saying goodnight had been almost overwhelming. He wasn’t good at waiting, particularly when he’d made his mind up about what he wanted. And as long as he’d wrestled with it, Claudia was all he wanted.

And however hard he tried, in that moment he couldn’t be consoled with thoughts of what could happen months down the line. Possibility wasn’t enough to sate him in his current mood. It was likely his close proximity to her combined with frustration that put him in a morose frame of mind. Usually he was the maddeningly positive one, but now it felt like the next six months may break him.

He’d momentarily toyed with the idea of keeping his distance from her when they returned, blaming his packed schedule. But it hadn’t taken long for him to admit that he didn’t have the willpower to stay away unless forced to do so. Even in their current state of friendship he needed to be around her. He could be his complete self around Claudia and there were precious few people that fell into that category.

After several minutes of roaming around his rooms, he decided to force himself to get some rest. They would have another long day ahead of them and he found it particularly draining when he was the only one that spoke the native language of the country they were in. It was certainly helpful, but put even more pressure on him than usual. That and he was anxious to move on to France where both of them could eschew the need for a translator. And he knew damn well he wasn’t eager just to make his life easier. He had a strong need to see Claudia converse in French. How he was going to keep himself under control at that point he wasn’t really sure, but he would make do.

-XXX-

He’d only been in bed a few minutes, trying not to let the silence of the large, darkened rooms get to him, when Claudia slipped under the covers next to him.

“Claude, what are you—” He struggled to understand what was happening, feeling groggy and disoriented by her sudden appearance.

Rather than reply with words, she climbed on top of him and kissed him with an unexpected fervor. Her fingers dug into his scalp as she pulled him forward to meet her lips and at first he was just euphoric at his luck. Grateful for the opportunity to touch her in a new way, he ran his hands up and down her body, surprised to find her clad in a silky gown that barely covered her curvy little body.

And while his own body was quick to respond to her presence, Claudia seemed intent to hurry things along, grinding her crotch against his. Within moments he was hard and craving more. Judging by
the wild look in her eyes, it hadn’t gone beyond her notice either.

But after a few minutes, the silence began to nag at him and he pulled away from her as politely as he could manage. Hands gently holding her at bay, he gasped a lungful of fresh air, unaware that the sweet, cloying sent rolling off of her had been like a drug to his system. “Not that I’m complaining, but what’s gotten into you?”

The smile that slowly crossed her face was new to him, like something the Cheshire Cat would wear. “You want to fuck me,” she said simply.

“Christ, of course I do, Claude. But what in the world did I do to warrant a response like this?”

Her face softened, and she brushed a finger across his cheek. “You know how sexy you are, Tom. Modest or not, you know. How long did you think I’d be able to resist?” She leaned in close, lips brushing against his while one of her hands worked him free from his boxers. “You’re not going to make me beg, are you?”

Despite a small voice in his head crying that this wasn’t right, that something was off, he simply grunted and began to kiss her again. He most certainly wasn’t going to make her beg, because he wanted this, wanted her, more than anything else in his life. Everyone else paled in comparison to Claudia.

Without another word, she slid him inside of her and he could feel the satisfied smile on her lips as they kissed. Claudia began to move at a vigorous pace, sliding up and down as if speed was her only goal. It was already taking most of his self-control not to come and it felt like she was hell-bent on testing it.

She reared back and braced her hands on his torso, bucking as she spoke a handful of devastating words. “This is all you’re good for, you know.”

“What?”

“Fucking. We’re never going to have anything more than this. I’ll never love you the way you want.”

“Why would you—”

She continued talking, never ceasing the movement of her hips. “You’re broken, Tom. Just a pretty man with a nice cock and nothing else to offer.” Her voice was cold and mocking as she looked down on him with hooded eyes. “You’ll never be enough for me and it will be fun while it lasts, but I’ll leave you eventually.”

Before he could deny it or shout for her to stop, he woke up with a start. The whole thing had been a terrible dream. Glancing at the bedside table he saw he’d only been asleep a few hours.

Even though he now knew it hadn’t been real, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, wishing to no longer feel the press of her lips against his. He panted trying to regain his breath as he reminded himself that it hadn’t been her. His Claudia would never be so cold and cruel. But despite that logic, she’d given voice to some of his deep-rooted fears and hearing them from her mouth was an experience he didn’t want to repeat.

Almost as an afterthought, he realized that although dream Tom had restrained himself, real Tom had come in his pants like a goddamn teenager. Grunting with disgust, he climbed out of bed and shed his clothes in a heap on the floor.
Shaking with relief that though it had been terrible, it was only a nightmare, he turned the shower on as hot as he could get it and stepped beneath the spray. Since he was unable to rid himself of the haunting image of Claudia astride him while she spewed hate down upon him, he settled for scrubbing himself clean. When he finally turned the water off, his skin stung from his efforts, but he’d managed to rid himself of the contaminated feeling.

The idea of returning to sleep seemed abhorrent for many reasons, least of which was the slightly sick and overheated feeling he found himself contending with. The temperature of his shower was likely a component, but his stomach roiled with hot unease at the images he couldn’t stop remembering. Without another thought, he grabbed a robe as his feet took him to the balcony. The cold rush of air and the low din of the city below helped calm him and he felt his breathing slowly return to normal.

*I hadn’t been real*, he reminded himself over and over again. And it sure as hell didn’t change anything in the real world. Yes, the dream apparition had voiced so many of his fears about starting a relationship with Claudia, but he’d be fucking damned if he let them rule him. Doubt was something he’d become quite adept at ignoring when it threatened to paralyze him. He could second guess his decision to pursue her, but it wouldn’t change anything. It only increased his chances of making himself miserable.

Already feeling more himself in the chilly breeze, he pulled on the bathrobe he’d snagged, now grateful for the warmth. The idea that some enterprising photographer could have gotten a shot of him in the nude almost made him laugh out loud. But no, the elegant and very discreet hotel had beautifully decorated and landscaped the terraces so they were more secluded than they appeared. Fellow guests couldn’t see one another and only a few vantages from other buildings would allow anyone to see him. It had been a stupid reflex to even think of it, but a hazard of his industry.

He was about to head back inside when he heard Claudia’s door slide open. Unsure whether he should slip back in and risk awkward questions in the morning or reveal his presence, he stood rooted in place. One option evaporated when he heard the soft click of buttons on her phone immediately followed by ringing. Staying beyond this point meant he couldn’t reveal himself, but he couldn’t seem to move. He was half afraid and half hopeful to hear her voice, the real Claudia’s voice, as if it would fully banish the hateful nightmare version.

It was cowardly and frankly creepy, but he silently crept closer to the wall that separated them. He could berate himself later, but now he felt a strange mix of curiosity and longing just to hear her. He prayed it wouldn’t be a decision he would regret.

For her part, Claudia was completely unaware she wasn’t alone. Something about the stuffy, still room had pushed her outside, despite the dropping temperature. Spring was still in its infancy, but she’d grabbed a thick blanket from her bed before venturing out. As she waited for her sister to pick up, she settled into a lounger and tucked the duvet around her. It was actually quite cozy.

“Dia!” Unexpectedly, Moira answered Jules’ phone. The girl hadn’t gotten the grasp of a greeting that didn’t involve screeching the caller’s name.

“Hey, pumpkin. What a nice surprise.”

Tom let out a deep sigh, hearing the warmth in her words. Someone who spoke with that much kindness couldn’t possibly hurl the kind of cruelty at him that the apparition had. Relieved and more than a little embarrassed at himself, he realized that though her voice had been a kind of balm to him, he couldn’t leave without risking discovery. He didn’t have it in him to lie to her if she asked what the hell he was up to. Instead, he strained his ears, hoping to hear some of what was said on the other end of the call.
“Mama said I could answer, because we know you, but I’m not allowed to call you by myself unless it’s an emergency.” Moira enunciated the words slowly as if they were a mantra she’d been told to memorize. Claudia remembered that there’d been an incident when Jules was little involving a sky-high phone bill and an accidental call to Brazil. Clearly they weren’t taking any chances with Moira.

“That is very smart. But pretty soon you’ll be old enough to call me all by yourself.”

“I know.” She sounded a bit sullen about it, but her aunt ignored the tone.

“You looking forward to your birthday party next week?”

As expected, that subject had completely removed any trace of petulance and she was given another shout in reply. “Yes! I’m having all my friends over and the cake is gonna be so big, Dia!!”

“Ooh, what flavor?”

“Mommy wanted lemon, but I picked chocolate.”

“That’s what I would have picked too. Listen, can I talk to your Mama, little bit?”

“Okaaay. Will you FaceTime with me on my birthday?”

“I will absolutely do that. I made your Mama promise not to have you open my present until I could see. You be a good girl, okay? I love you.”

“I love you too!”

She heard Moira shout that Dia wanted to talk to Mama and after a minute Jules came on the line.

“Sorry, Claude. She saw your name and insisted on answering.”

“It’s totally fine. I love talking to her.”

“Good, but I hope it’s not an emergency. I can’t remember where you are, but it’s gotta be late.”

“It’s after midnight. I’m in Spain.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just can’t sleep. This guy was an ass to us earlier and... well I’m still kind of wired I guess.”

“What happened?”

“Some drunk idiot was yelling some nasty shit at me and when Tom translated I... well—“

“Did something stupid?”

“I kind of got in his face and said his dick was small.”

Tom smiled remembering the fire in her eyes as she’d stalked up to the drunk and shouted right back at him. Though it had terrified him at the time, now knowing the outcome he could see the humor in it.

“Because idiot drunkards in all cultures just love that.”

“Yeah.”
“So you’re still worked up over it?”

“Not that, no.”

“Claudia Rey, did you hit him?!”

“No! But Tom kind of... he sort of snapped.” Tom tensed after hearing his name and prayed he hadn’t disgusted her with his behavior. “Luke had to talk him down from beating the shit out of him.”

“Jesus. That sounds awful.”

“I had my back turned and Tom said the guy was about to hit me and he... like ninjaed past me and had him incapacitated in about three seconds.”

Her tone was hard to read, but he was fairly certain it wasn’t negative. At least that’s what he hoped.

“Oh, well that’s different then. If some guy was ready to hit you behind your back I’d damn well expect him to stop it if he could.”

“It was just really intense.”

“How do you have so little self-awareness, Claude?”

“What?”

“I have seen you confront people who even looked at me funny before. You waved a very large chef’s knife around when one of my exes said something mildly threatening to me. You have no room to chastise Tom for his reaction.”

“I’m not,” she hastened to reply. “I just... I’m not used to that.”

Breathing another sigh of relief, he thought wildly that he would have been a rubbish spy in real life. Playing one and giving the camera enigmatic looks was a hell of a lot easier than trying to stay cool in a real situation, particularly in one where the stakes were so high for him. He would sooner walk over hot coals than do something that would court her disapproval.

“Do you mean to being on the receiving end of something like that you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“You care deeply about the people you love and sometimes you get a little extra about it. Tom seems to be the same way.”

“I never would have expected anything like that from him. He’s so damn... proper. He didn’t bless anyone or apologize, he just took action. It sounds terrible, but I didn’t know he had it in him.”

Tom didn’t know whether to be ashamed or proud that he’d acted the way he had in front of her. At the very least she’d seen a different side of him. Not the romantic ‘oh, wouldn’t he make a good husband’ side, but he supposed every additional bit of him she uncovered hopefully let her to that decision. He had to see this as a step down the right road or he’d second guess his every move, well more so than he already was.

“Not everyone wears their temper on their sleeve, Claude.”

“I know I’m too much on the other side. I would take a miracle for me to keep my mouth shut when
all I want to do is beat the living shit out of someone.” She let out a small snort of amusement. “It just seemed odd to see him as the hot-headed one.”

She had no idea of how in control he actually had been that night... maybe not in that instant, but on the whole he’d stopped himself from declaring his feelings several times. Of course now he was listening to a private conversation like some kind of a voyeur, but everyone had their faults, right?

“You two look after each other. I’m damn happy to know someone has your back, Claude. And you’d better let him.”

“What does that mean, Jules?”

“You like to go it alone when things get shitty, which is usually the worst possible time for it. He saw that at Thanksgiving and didn’t want you to endure it alone. And you actually let him where you normally don’t with us. I just think he’s good for you and you should let him be good to you.”

“I just don’t want you to have to deal with—”

“Claude, I get that. I don’t always like it, but I get it. You protect me, sometimes when I don’t need it, but you do it because you love me. Tom’s instinct is to protect you. Tonight felt weird for you because you don’t usually allow that kind of thing.”

“Not a lot of people try,” she said so softly Tom had to strain to hear her. There was pain and resignation in her voice and he desperately wished he could comfort her. Even without hearing the full conversation he could guess enough about the context to understand what she was referring to.

“Yeah well one is now and he’s a good guy. Do me a favor and don’t close yourself off from a good person. Trust me, it can be a pain in the ass when someone wants to defend you at every turn, but it’s worth it. My older sister does it for me and I’m grateful for it, even when I don’t always say so.”

Claudia giggled and felt a few tears escape her eyes. Wiping them away, she tried not to sound too weepy. “How are you the wise one now? You’re supposed to be the bratty little sister who doesn’t know anything.”

“I got some extra intuition points when I became a mom. You’ll get the boost when it’s your turn and then I’ll go back to bratville.”

Claudia wanted to tell her sister about her infertility, wanted desperately to have Jules give her the kind of comfort unique to sisters, but she couldn’t bring herself to open that can of worms. As it was, she was up far too late for the day they had planned. But oddly it wasn’t terrible that Jules didn’t know. Tom knew and that seemed like it would be okay, if only for the time being.

“Yeah,” she managed to mumble. “Jules, thanks for listening, but Luke will murder me if I fall asleep during an interview tomorrow. I should go force myself to get some rest.”

“We can’t have that.” She laughed and the sound soothed her as it usually did. Knowing her sister was happy was like a balm to Claudia. “And remember I never mind listening, sis. That’s what I’m here for, okay?”

“I am too.”

“I love you, Claude.”

“Love you too. Give everyone hugs for me.”
“Will do.”

He heard her click the phone shut followed by the sound of a sniffle. For several reasons he wished she would go inside, but decided it was fitting to be out there with her even if she didn’t know it. If she chose to stay out there all night at least she wouldn’t be alone. Again, he felt guilty for the deception, but hoped it was a forgivable transgression.

Claudia sat for several minutes thinking about what her sister had said. It felt strange to have someone like Tom in her corner, and even stranger to see that he was genuine about it. He wasn’t trying to use her to boost his social status, get him a job, or get in her pants, but he’d been so supportive of her from the beginning. And Jules was right, she wasn’t used to that. If she was being completely honest with herself, many of her friendships were superficial. Not for any reason other than her instinct to keep people just a little at bay. But Tom had proven different and she decided to take Jules’ advice and let him be different.

Part of her wanted to explore just what that meant, but she was suddenly far too tired to continue with the introspection. Standing up on stiff legs, she gathered her things and went back into her room, intent on getting enough rest to get her through the next day.

Tom waited a few minutes after her door had closed before heading back into his own suite. It was astonishing to him that so much had happened in one day. Not that the actions themselves had been all that earth-shattering, but the information he’d gained and resolutions he’d made were monumental. He was buoyed with a fresh surge of hope that though the waiting would be hard, he could and would move to the next stage with Claudia. Patience was a new thing for him, but he’d give it his best effort now that there was something sufficiently enticing waiting for him at the finish line. A real, honest relationship with her was worth the hardship and wait.

Not wishing a repeat of his earlier nightmare, he dragged a blanket and pillow over to the couch and settled in there rather than the bed. It was dumb, he knew, but he didn’t want to take any chances. He didn’t want anything derailing his momentum now that he’d finally come down to what the real goal was.

Chapter End Notes

Also, I swear this really will be an explicit fic, so for your patience you get a little preview in this chapter. Though it isn't the best way to get some smut.
Once Tom had convinced himself that he would do well with the Hamilton role, as Claudia knew he would, his days rapidly filled up with rehearsals. And though the part was the smallest in the show and he wasn’t on the schedule nearly as much as the rest of the cast, he sheepishly admitted to her that he made a habit to show up whenever he could. And now that Hamlet was over, that was basically any time anyone was rehearsing. He enjoyed the camaraderie that developed with a stage show’s cast and crew and didn’t want to miss out on any of it. There was nothing about it he didn’t seem to love, filling her in with stories whenever he had time to come over for dinner.

“I’m really glad you’re enjoying yourself, Tom.” It was two weeks before opening and probably the last time she’d see him until after the premiere. He was positively thrumming with excitement at the prospect of being in front of a live audience again. She had no idea how he’d been able to pour himself into a character like Hamlet and then turn around and dive headfirst into another show. But in this he seemed like an addict looking for his next fix and she figured that it wasn’t the worst addiction to have.

And even though she could see the physical strain in his slightly puffy eyes and paler than usual skin, she knew he’d have it no other way. He seemed tired, but thriving. Hamlet had been draining for him and she got the distinct impression the musical was a kind of restorative. They’d already finished dinner and had migrated to her sofa and she had half a mind to send him home early for some much-needed sleep. Not that he would sleep, judging by the look of him, nor was she ready to say goodnight quite yet.

“This has been so much fun. I cannot wait for you to see it, Claude.”

“Why don’t you give me a little preview now?”

The knowing, supercilious grin that flashed across his face was as maddening as it was endearing. “I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“But I don’t get to see it until the second week,” she complained.

“That’s for the best. We’ll get all the kinks worked out for you.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been doing for the past two months?” She knew it sounded pouty and childish, but damn it she’d missed being able to hang out with him regularly. Not that she hadn’t been busy working on her own project, but some of the sheen had worn off on Thrown Together and it wasn’t as much fun as it had been at the start.

“Ah, but that’s just to get the words and notes and blocking down. It’s a different set of issues when you get in front of an audience.” He winked at her and managed to look like a mischievous boy. “But I’ll make sure we’re at our best on the night you come.”

“I will be on my best reserved theatergoer behavior.”

“Oh no, you absolutely won’t! I expect a genuine Claudia reaction. I meant it when I said I wanted to hear your laugh from on stage.” He surprised her by peering intently at her, a suddenly grave expression on his face. “But only if I’ve earned it. If you lie to me and tell me I’m better than I am, I’ll be quite cross with you.”

She rolled her eyes and finished the last of her wine. “It’s stupid that you’d think I’m even capable of lying about something like that. Nana always says I’m too honest for my own good.”
He relaxed back into his seat, the grin back on his lips. “Personally I think it’s an endearing quality.”

“That makes you one of very few.”

She could sense he wanted to say more on the topic, likely assuring her that people not appreciating what he considered her stellar qualities was their fault and not hers. But he surprised her and moved on to another subject.

“So tell me what you’ve been up to. Any new projects in the works? I feel like we haven’t talked in ages.”

In reality they stayed in pretty constant contact via text, but she had to admit it wasn’t the same.

“I’m in talks for this live Thanksgiving thing Food Network does every year. It’s all these chefs in the kitchen making holiday stuff, answering viewer questions live, and it looks like pure chaos. They throw emails and Skype calls at them while they’re trying not to burn the dish they’re making. It’s like a literal trial by fire.”

“Kitchen chaos is right up your alley, Claude, and I know you’re a Thanksgiving expert. That sounds excellent for you.”

“I really hope it works out. Alton Brown always hosts it and I’m such a huge fan of his.”

“It’s about time you get a chance to work with him, you are both alums from the same culinary school. I’ll be cheering for you from home.”

It startled her that he’d remembered that bit of her CV, and even more that he’d recalled the connection to the other chef, but then again Tom was thorough in his work and he was clearly the same with his friends.

“You may not be able to see it from here. I have to go to New York to film, if they want me involved that is.”

“I’ll have Nana tape it for me then. But I do know how to work Skype, so who knows, I may just have a question for you.” Point of fact, he didn’t actually know how to Skype, but it couldn’t be that difficult, could it? They would surely put a call from him on air. He despised using his celebrity for such a thing, but couldn’t bring himself to drop the idea.

“You’re a dork.”

“No Claude, honestly I need to make sure my dressing isn’t dry. You’ll need to give me some tips!”

“Any dressing that you’ll be party to will be made by me, okay? You’ll have to come up with something better than that.”

“I do love a challenge,” he grinned back at her slightly exasperated expression, knowing the true meaning of his words was lost on her. She’d know soon enough though. He was toying with a New Year’s declaration, but couldn’t decide if it was the right kind of corny or not.

“I’m going to be a basket case if they pick me. People I’ve idolized for years will be there.”

“They’d do well to idolize you, Claude. You’re a dynamo and you’re more than used to thinking on your feet. And you can charm basically anyone, particularly when you’re talking about food.”

He felt his stomach swoon a bit as she blushed at the compliment. “You’re my partner. I think you’re
biased.” He damn well was biased, but she had no idea the extent of it.

“Maybe so, but all the same I think you’d be brilliant. And you’ll be home for the holiday as a bonus!” That part didn’t seem so much of a boon to him, but he’d be glad of whatever made her happy.

“That’s the one shitty part. It films a few weeks before the big day and my shooting schedule here isn’t letting me go home on the actual holiday. At least I got last year. And Jules is toying with the idea of coming here for Christmas, so that’s something.”

“I hope they make it. Though I don’t know if London can withstand a Mo and Dia reunion.”

“You’d probably do best to retreat to the country then. I’m going to take her everywhere if they come. All the dumb tourist stuff I’ve never done even though I live here. She’s been a bit down lately not being the center of attention anymore and I want her to have some quality baby-free time to feel special.”

“That sounds perfect. If you need a driver or bag boy, let me know. I’d be happy to help.”

She shifted her gaze back up to him and he stopped himself from shifting around under the weight of her scrutiny. Had he gone too far? Did she sense just how eager he’d be to squire the two of them around town? How eager he was to do anything with her?

“You’re supposed to be this big, shiny, suave movie star and honestly you’re just a sentimental marshmallow who knows how to make sexy faces when the camera is pointed at him. My first impression of you was so damn wrong. I’m glad you apologized and went out of your way to be my friend.”

“I’m glad you let me.” They studied each other for a few silent moments, Tom wishing he could pour his heart out then and there and hating his better angels for talking him out of it. He’d allowed very few people to get close enough to see past his professional veneer and he was so grateful that she’d been one of them.

Not trusting himself to stay on safe ground if they continued on that subject, he coughed and brought it back to the family visit. “Honestly though, I think my December will be fairly light, so I’d be happy to be yours and Moira’s escort.”

“Thanks. If they do come I’ll probably take you up on that. She’s asked me a few times about her new friend Tom. You’ve apparently thoroughly charmed my niece, that’s for sure.”

He wanted to know what he could do to charm her aunt, but reminded himself for the thousandth time that rushing on that account would likely lead to disaster.

“She’s the real charmer. Miss Moira is an absolute delight.”

“She’ll never let you leave if you flatter her like that to her face. Which you will not, because I’m her aunt and I selfishly want to be her favorite. You can’t show me up too much.”

“There’s no way I could replace her Dia.”

“Damn right,” she grinned before looking at him with the same careful scrutiny as before. “But seriously Tom, you look exhausted. If they come I don’t want you sacrificing your hard-earned rest time helping me wrangle my niece.”

“I look at anything that isn’t work as rest time.”
“Because you’re insane. When’s the last time you had a lazy morning in bed?”

There was no use telling her that such things held little interest for him unless he was sharing said bed with her, so he stuck to the simple truth. “It’s been a while, but Claude I can have a rest without literally staying in bed half the day, you know.”

“I’m not entirely convinced you know how.”

“Do you think I’d lie to you, Claudia?”

“Oh course not.” The question had taken her aback.

“Then take my word when I say I’d be up to running around town with the two of you. I swear to wave the flag if the time comes and I’m too worn out, okay?”

“Okay.”

They lapsed into silence and Tom felt a tiny pang of guilt over what had been a fib. Even if he was dead on his feet, he had no plans to stay home rather than tag along. He’d have to be dying to forgo seeing Claudia in Aunt Dia mode. And he wasn’t too proud to admit that he would take any opportunity to put himself in situations that would help her see him as father material. Of late the idea of having a whole family with her became more and more solidified in his mind.

At times he worried he was thinking too far down the timeline before she’d even agreed to a single date, but that fact that he could easily picture such things told him he was ready to utterly commit himself to her. It wouldn’t hurt to show her that in small ways before he made his intentions known. He certainly didn’t think that it could harm his chances.

Though he was reluctant to do so, he had one more thing to ask her before he took his leave. He was rather tired and as much as he wished to stay longer, he had made her a promise that he wouldn’t run himself too ragged. “Claude, can I ask a favor of you?”

“Sure. But we’ve talked about this, Tom. Food isn’t a favor.”

He chuckled, remembering the numerous times she’d had to hit him over the head with that concept. In his line of work favors were traded almost like currency and it was nice to add Claudia to the small circle of friends that seemed content to do things for each other without ulterior motives or hope of reciprocity.

“I’m thinking of taking a job, but I’m on the fence about the script. I can’t tell if it’s a good fit for me or not. Would you mind reading it and giving me your opinion?”

“I don’t know anything about film making though.”

“Knowing nothing about stage theater didn’t stop you from weighing in on Hamilton.”

“Yeah, but that was just because I selfishly wanted to see you in the part.”

“Do the same with this then. Your opinion means a great deal to me, Claudia.”

“I make no promises that the advice I give will be good.”

“You can sign a waiver if you like.” He grinned over at her, wishing the night could simply end with the two of them heading upstairs to climb into bed together. She interrupted an elaborate fantasy scene he was constructing with a timid request of her own.
“Can I ask you a favor then too?” She rushed on without waiting for him to reply and he could see this was somewhat difficult for her. “You don’t have to and I know you’re so busy, but would you maybe mind taking a look at my manuscript? I don’t want too many chef fingerprints on it and you’re exactly the kind of person I want this book to be of benefit to and—”

“Of course I will. My days are a lot of hurry up and wait and I’d love to have some excellent reading material. Are you looking for detailed notes or just general impressions? And do I have time to try out some of the recipes?”

“I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give,” she said, sounding rather astounded. “I’m just too close to it at this point and I think my editor is as well. I would love any feedback you can make time for.”

“It would be my honor, Claude.”

“Great! I’ll have a copy sent over to your house.”

She stood to clear away their glasses and a sharp grunt of pain had him up like a flash, concern radiating from his expression. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.” She mentally berated herself for letting him see her discomfort. Usually she kept under better control, but she’d just been so damn comfortable that she’d let her guard down. “Just cramps.”

Expecting the near universal male response to such a statement, she was surprised when he plucked the glasses from her hand and ushered her into the kitchen. “I’m putting you to bed then. Are you already medicated or do I need to fetch you something?”

“I uh… I took something before you got here.”

“It’s wearing off then. We’ll get you sorted with that or you may have trouble sleeping.”

“Tom, I’m fine. It’s not fun, but it’s nothing you need to worry about.”

He turned around and gave her an appraising look. “Claude, you had an audible response to pain, which isn’t like you. And I’m guessing you need more rest this time of the month anyway, so it won’t hurt to get some medicine in you and send you to bed early.”

After depositing the glasses in the sink he continued toward the stairs. She just stood in place goggling at him. “You’re not freaked out by this?”

“Why would I be freaked out? It’s natural and from what I understand a right nuisance, so I figured you could do with a little help.”

“Almost all the men I’ve known would just as soon pretend women don’t have to deal with this because it grosses them out.”

“Those are the men that think they’re the tougher of the sexes, I’d wager. I grew up with a mother and two sisters and I’ve had… uh women in my life before, it doesn’t bother me.” He searched her face for any sign he was overstepping, but saw only amused curiosity. Still, he wanted to give her an out if she needed it. “But if it makes you uncomfortable then I can just head home.”

“No,” she responded instinctively, surprising herself in the process. “It’s been not great this month and you’re sweet to want to help.”

“I honestly don’t see how women go through something like that every month and are expected to keep silent. I will never understand it.” He sighed and motioned up the stairs. “Why don’t you get
changed into pajamas and I’ll see about bringing you some tea. Do you have a heating pad or something like that? My mum used to swear by it."

Still a bit dazed at the turn of events, she shook a bit of the stupor off and responded. “Uh yeah. There’s one in the hall bathroom under the sink.”

“I’ll get that as well then. Is there anything else you can think of?”

“Really Tom, you don’t need to—”

“And you don’t need to make me dinners or put recipes together for me or anything else you do. This is the same thing, so if you want me to accept that making me dinner isn’t a big deal, then you’ll accept this without complaint.”

It took her a moment to remind herself that Tom wasn’t the duplicitous type and wouldn’t lie to her about something like this. And even if she believed he would, there was no motive for him. So though it was a struggle, she nodded and went up to change as he suggested.

It was strange to climb into bed and wait for him to attend her like she was a sick child, but she couldn’t lie that it also felt nice too. She’d had to be self-reliant, particularly in situations such as this and this was shaky new ground to her. But above all else, she trusted Tom’s sincerity and hoped that would get her through any awkwardness.

For Tom, the instinct to help her was so natural he realized later he may have overstepped. But as he moved about getting her tea made and rummaging around for anything else he thought might help, there was no second guessing. And honestly whether he had ambitions of romance with her or not this would be something he did regardless.

It was only the work of a few minutes to bring the supplies and he had to push down the well of feelings he got seeing her waiting for him in bed. That visual turned out to be a heady one and a bonus he’d likely contemplate later.

“Do you need anything else before I head out?” It wasn’t as awkward as he’d imagined, being in her bedroom for the first time, but then again he’d had plenty of time to think about that scenario. Right now he wanted to make sure she was taken care of, but also that he didn’t overstay his welcome and make things awkward for her.

“No, this has been great. Thank you. I’m sure I’ll sleep like a baby now.”

“In future if you do need anything, and I mean anything, then you just have to ask, Claude.”

“It’s not my instinct, Tom.”

“I’d gathered that,” he said with a wan smile. “I know it must be hard without your family here, but keep me in mind if you would. Can you at least try?”

“I can do that.”

It wasn’t a grand promise, but from Claudia it was big concession. He’d take it and be happy she wasn’t telling him to stop sticking his nose in her business.

“Good. Now you send me your book and I’ll send you that script and then I’ll make us dinner so we can compare notes, okay?”

“That sounds great.”
“Okay, I’m really leaving now,” he gave her a sheepish smile.

“Night, Tom. Thanks again for everything.”

“It’s my pleasure. Sleep well, Claude.”

He reluctantly climbed down the stairs, but reminded himself that he’d made progress even if it didn’t take him across the finish line. The whole situation really had turned into a parable about the tortoise and the hare, though he supposed he couldn’t say that until slow and steady actually did win the race. The current important thing though, Claudia’s comfort, was attended to and that put a little extra spring in his step as he turned off lights made sure everything was locked up tight.

Unwilling to drag her out of bed, he referred back to the instructions he kept on his phone to make sure he armed her security system properly. She’d patiently shown him how to operate it in case he ever needed to get in while she was unavailable. He could still remember the amused smile she kept trying to hide watching him try to remember how to disarm and arm the damn thing using a keypad that had far more buttons than were strictly necessary. He’d already had a similar lesson with her and to his chagrin, she needed no notes or endless repetition to remember how to operate the damn thing. At least she had been entertained rather than annoyed.

Closing the door quietly behind him as the alarm counted down with muted beeps, he didn’t relish going back to his empty, cavernous house. It didn’t even feel like his home anymore. He was leaving home now, he just didn’t technically live there yet. But even Claudia’s warm abode, nestled next to her beloved square wasn’t home either. She was and hopefully in time she’d feel the same way about him.

“God, I hope it’s soon, darling,” he whispered, hand lingering on the doorknob. He felt every bit the lovesick, dramatic idiot, he trekked back to his car with mixed emotions. But if this interminable wait didn’t do him in, it would all be worth it.
To celebrate the end of his stage run, Tom requested another decadent dinner from Claudia. It was turning into a bit of a tradition and she was pleased to note he hardly balked when he asked her. He was finally starting to take her word that asking for food wasn't the height of rudeness. It had only taken a good year and a half to get him there, she mused as they were enjoying the frangipane and pear tart he'd insisted on preparing himself. It wasn't as pretty as it would have been if she'd done it, but the taste was perfect. He'd certainly learned more than just Claudia etiquette from their work together.

"Tom, this was exquisite. I swear I could send you to culinary school at this point and you'd pass with flying colors."

"You really think so?" He pondered the last bite on his plate, squinting at the delicate layers as though he hadn't spent all afternoon constructing it. "I still contend that yours is better."

"Food you don't have to make always tastes just a little better. It's a natural law. Why do you think restaurants make so much money?"

"Then I will happily use my skills to be your sous chef so we get around that hurdle." He opened his mouth to say something further, but was interrupted by the trilling of his mobile. Only a few numbers were programmed to ring through while he had it on silent and she hoped it was a pleasure call rather than an emergency one.

Seconds after hearing his, "Hi, Mum," greeting she saw from his face that is was thankfully the former. Wishing to give him a bit of privacy, she snagged his last bite on her own fork and began gathering dishes. While he listened to Diana talk, he stuck his tongue out at the affront of losing even a crumb of his dessert. She just smiled blithely back at him and moved over to the sink while they chatted.

After a few minutes he called her back to the table and surprisingly offered her the phone. "Mum wants to talk to you."

"Uh okay." It startled her, but she wiped her wet hands on her pants and took the device, trying not to sound too confused. "Hi Mrs. Hiddleston."

"Oh none of that! It'll be Diana or Tom's mum, remember?"

"Right." She chuckled at the memory of the book signing. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to check and see if you can block off the Saturday after next. I'm having a little supper
party and I wanted Tom to drag you along. He had such lovely things to say about your family's Thanksgiving last year, so I've decided to put on my own! It will be scaled down from what I'm sure you're used to, but I hope it helps make up for not being able to visit your family this year."

Claudia felt her throat constrict and the beginnings of tears spring up in her eyes at the woman's kind words. The gesture temporarily overwhelmed her with gratitude and thankfully Diana prattled on while she collected herself.

"And I hope it's not an inconvenience, but would you be able to bring some of your dressing? Tom couldn't stop raving about it and I'd love to try it. It's terribly rude of me to invite you only to make you bring something, so do let me know if I'm being an insufferable old bat for even asking."

"No, no it's absolutely fine!" Of course the Hiddleston penchant for assuming everything was somehow rude wasn't isolated to Tom. But it helped her find her voice, which came out surprisingly normal. "It is so sweet of you to think about me and I'd love to come. In fact, if you need me to make anything else just let me know."

"I couldn't possibly ask you for anything else, dear."

"Diana, it's no trouble. Have Tom send you my number and I expect you to let me know if there's anything else I can bring. I can even put him to work helping me."

"Well, only if you make my boy help. He adores everything you're teaching him."

She glanced over at Tom and saw his amused expression. Though his face shone with an almost childlike curiosity, the rest of him was anything but boyish. Long legs were propped up on the chair next to him, which only emphasized how damn tall he was. Sometimes it was easy to forget how physically imposing he could be, particularly at times like this when he was relaxed and happy.

Looking him directly in the eye, she responded. "He is a very quick study and an excellent partner." The statement earned an eyebrow raise from him and a slight pink blush bloomed across his cheeks.

"I've heard much the same of you, Claudia. I can't wait to have a proper chat with you. I'm sure I can find all my truly embarrassing pictures of Tom for you just to make it a bit of extra fun."

She laughed at the prospect of seeing any picture of Tom that could possibly be deemed unflattering. But if it existed then surely his mother would have it. "I would love that. Not sure Tom will, but he doesn't really have a say in the matter, does he?"

"He'll grumble a bit, but I don't think he'd deny you anything if you asked. He's quite fond of you."

It was Claudia's turn to blush, something that Tom seemed to immediately notice. He reached over and plucked the phone from her hand with an indulgent grin. "All right, that's enough of you two conspiring."

But for all his grousing, Claudia saw that he genuinely loved, and better yet liked his mother. She found herself excited at the prospect of seeing them together. They were probably a sight to behold, all smiling blue eyes and more charm than should exist in just two people.

"Bye, Diana," she called loud enough to reach the receiver, heart a bit lighter at the prospect of the dinner.

As Tom spoke to his mother a few more minutes, Claudia returned to the sink to finish the dishes. The rich meal was doing its work and making her groggy. As a yawn overcame her she vaguely heard him ring off and walk over to join her.
"Sorry about that."

"Why would you be sorry? She's adorable."

"She likes you. I'm constantly being asked about all things Claudia. She's quite the fan."

"I'm a fan of the lady that raised such a fine son. I should thank her for that." She surprised herself by saying it out loud, but then again it was the truth. When she glanced over at him his cheeks were glowing crimson.

"I... thanks, Claude."

"Any time." She yawned again and turned off the faucet in defeat. "Well, any time other than now, because I'm about to turn into a pumpkin unless I get to bed soon. Can I be rude as hell and kick you out now?"

An odd look flashed across his face for just an instant before a smile overtook it. She wasn't sure what it was, but her gut did a little swoop at the sight. Fatigue had her seeing things. "I will graciously be kicked to the curb." Bending low in the fashion that had so delighted Moira, he took her hand and placed a soft kiss on it. "Rest well, Claude. And don't you dare finish those dishes when I leave. You look dead on your feet. I'll tuck you in myself if I have to."

The tinge of menace in his voice contradicted the warmth of his words, but it also brought back the flutter in her stomach. It was like her brain was going haywire tonight. No wonder she'd almost burst into tears at Diana's invitation. No doubt sleep was exactly what she needed.

"Okay, okay I promise to leave them until tomorrow. Happy?"

"That'll do." Rather than elaborate on his cryptic statement he pulled her into a quick hug and kissed the top of her head. "Night, Claude. Go get some rest. Mum will probably bend your ear tomorrow trying to pick out a menu and you'll need your wits about you for that."

"That sounds wonderful actually."

He held her for a few moments longer and then released her with a little nudge. "Up you get. I'll lock up and see myself out."

"Okay." Another yawn mostly enveloped her response and she waved him goodnight before making her way upstairs.

-XXX-
How long of a drive is it to your mom's house?

Two hours and a bit.

Okay, I'm going to budget for three and a half then just to be sure I'm not late.

This isn't tea with the queen. It's just my mum.

Oh, the queen I don't care about. But I don't want to ruin Diana's dinner by being late.

Why don't you just drive with me then? If something happens, I can take the blame.

Your car won't fit everything I'm toting.
"Claude," Tom called, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. "You've checked everything at least four times now. Can we please get on the road?"

She poked her head around the back of the Land Rover and ignored his statement. "I haven't packed any wine. Should I go grab a few bottles?"

"I'm sure Mum has the wine covered. Come on Claude, if we don't leave now we run the risk of
being late."

That did the trick. "Okay. Yeah we cannot be late."

"Particularly when you're providing half the food."

"I would have done more if your mom would have let me."

"I have no doubt." He tried to suppress a knowing smile at the thought of Claudia and his mother trying to politely argue with one another over the food situation. Claudia could be supremely willful, but she may have found her match in Diana. She seemed flustered enough about the upcoming dinner that he had to wonder what the other woman might have said or done to put her on edge.

He managed to shoo her into the passenger seat without much more fuss. When she shucked off her coat for the drive, he was surprised to notice she wore a dress he'd never seen before. She kept nervously rearranging the deep ruby fabric over her knees as he navigated out of the city, eyes roving over the passing scenery.

“Claude, you didn’t happen to have consumed fifteen espressos before we left, did you?”


“You seem anxious and I was hoping it was fueled by a caffeine overdose. But if that isn’t the case, you should probably tell me what my mother’s done to get you this agitated.”

“Nothing.” She looked over at him and when the stole a glance back at her, she did seem genuinely confused by his statement. “Your mom is great.”

“Then what in the world has put you in such a state?”

“I’m just nervous I guess.”

“Whatever for?”

“Your mom has gone out of her way to include me in this, which is so sweet, but other than the two of you I won’t know anyone there. Unknown situations make me a little uneasy.”

“Claude, I’ve seen you walk into rooms filled with bloodthirsty journalists without batting an eye. How is it my mum’s garden society friends are intimidating you before you’ve even met them?”

“It’s not really them I’m worried about.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand then.”

“I don’t want to embarrass the two of you,” she admitted, cheeks burning with shame.

Before responding, he pulled into a nearby car park and put the vehicle in park. It visibly startled her, but she remained silent and waited to see what he had to say.

“Claudia Rey, you are one of the most self-assured people I’ve ever met. You are bold and honest and funny and an absolute delight to be around. Why in the hell would you think you would ever be an embarrassment?”

“I didn’t go to an academic college. I don’t usually socialize with people in your... in that set. I can’t talk about Greek tragedies and their influence on city-state politics. I make food, Tom.”
She looked so panicked and stricken it caused his throat to constrict. He almost wanted to cry at how distressed she was now that she’d given voice to her anxieties. How she could feel inadequate in any room he had no idea. To him she was charming and he actually enjoyed that they didn’t have similar educational backgrounds. It didn’t speak to her intellect, just to her differing interests. In fact, despite the narrow focus of her education, he found her a wealth of knowledge on subjects she’d pursued for the sheer love of them. He’d happily listened to her lecture for over an hour on the Albigensian Crusade and remaining Cathar sites she’d visited when living in France.

In his eyes she had nothing to be ashamed of and it pained him that she wouldn’t have considered herself part of his social set... not that he even knew what that meant really. She sounded like she’d walked out of a Victorian novel, suddenly acutely aware of caste and class.

“I can’t... I don’t understand where this is coming from. Where you went to school has nothing to do with anything. What in the world got you thinking about that?”

“I uh... well I overheard someone at your wrap party and it got me thinking.”

“Overheard them say what exactly?”

“That they couldn’t understand why you’d spend time with someone who probably didn’t know the difference between Keats and Keynes. That it was one thing to work with me, but quite another to socialize with a yank fry cook.” She stared down at her clasped hands, studying the white knuckles as she spoke. “Or something to that effect.”

“Who?” The single word came out in a semi-feral growl.

“Um I don’t want to—“

“Who, Claudia?” He was livid and despite the other emotions she was dealing with, he could tell there was well of anger in her as well. And part of him was perturbed at Claudia herself, for even letting such a caustic, idiotic comment to upset her. But emotions weren’t always rational, so he tried to push that thought aside.

“That redhead. Her name was Bitty or Biddy I think.”

“Ah. We went to RADA together. Well, she was a year behind me. She’s horrid, Claude. She goes out of her way to find something to complain about wherever she is. She never could understand why I hated being around her.” He let out a sigh, knowing he wouldn’t be able to scream any sense into the ridiculous woman that had upset his Claudia so much. He ached to do something to alleviate the anger still simmering in his gut.

“Oh Claude, you didn’t overhear anything. She probably made her comments loud enough that she’d be sure you would hear her. I’m surprised you didn’t call her out for being such a tacky bitch.”

“I’m not supposed to do things like that,” her tone was bitter, but he did detect a faint smile. And at least she’d given up on avoiding his eyes. “Luke would have lectured. That and it would have just given her more ammo. I’m not that much of an boorish Yankee hick.”

“You’re worth more than hundred Bidys. And I can’t believe you let someone like that get to you. Or at the very least why you didn’t see fit to ask me to weigh in on whether I think I’m degrading myself by being your friend.”

“It was too stupid to mention.”

“Damn right it was stupid.” It came out harsher than he intended, so he took a deep breath and
continued in a softer tone. “What I mean is that the very idea you’re not good enough for mine or anyone else’s friendship is so absurd to me that I’m frankly incredulous at the notion it bothered you.”

“It’s true though.” Seeing his arched eyebrows, she continued before he could interrupt. “I mean the bones of it is, even if she was being a catty asshole about it. I didn’t go to Cambridge or Oxford or RADA. If you want a dissertation on mother sauces, then I’m your woman. But the rest...”

“The rest is rubbish. What was your instinctive response to hearing the bile she was spouting?”

“Anger.”

“Rightly so. Because you knew she was full of shit. Trust your gut instinct on this, Claude. And if you need further bolstering, get it from me. But don’t for a second let someone like that ruin tonight for you.”

“It sounds kinda stupid when you put it like that,” she admitted sheepishly.

“I know it does, because I know you. You’re wonderful and you would be no matter what damn school you went to.”

It was a more bracing statement than he would have liked to make, but any more sentimentality might lead him to say something he wasn’t prepared for yet. Or she wasn’t prepared rather. He would have been happy to extol her virtues in any number of ways, but now wasn’t the time.

With a deep sigh, she squared her shoulders and gave him a large, albeit a little forced, smile. “Thank you for the tough love, Tom. I suppose I wasn’t being rational about it.”

“No, but that’s what I’m here for, Claude.” He patted her knee before turning back to the steering wheel. “Now, are you ready to continue on? I can make up some time on the highway if you swear not to tell my mother I sped.”

“I can’t even see the speedometer from here,” she said breezily. “I wouldn’t know how fast you choose to go, so if asked I won’t even have to lie.”

“Excellent.”
Chapter 32

Though she’d worked herself into almost dreading the party, Tom’s words had gone a long way to soothing Claudia’s frazzled nerves. Once her fears had seen the light of day, they seemed rather silly. But then again, such things rarely followed rational trains of thought.

She tried not to think back on the actual incident, as it still angered her that she let such a vicious person get under her skin. The woman was probably just pissed she wasn’t Tom’s type. Though come to think of it, Claudia wasn’t even sure what his type was. She’d only met one of his girlfriends and since then he hadn’t shown the tiniest interest in anyone else. At least as far as she knew. She didn’t think he’d keep something as important as a significant other secret from her, but it did seem odd that he was as chaste as a monk for all she knew. Odder still when she knew he had a reputation for being a lothario.

Before she could give the conundrum further thought, it was time to unload everything. The pair of them arrived in advance of the rest of the guests in order to help Tom’s mother set up. It was a happy bit of chaos and shook away any lingering misgivings. Diana was warm and welcoming and Claudia couldn’t picture any scenario where a night in her home would be tortuous.

Before long the guests began to filter in. Many seemed to serve with Diana on this local council or that charity board and she rapidly began to lose track of who went with which group. Tom’s mother seemed intent on introducing her to everyone as people milled about with cocktails before dinner began in earnest.

She lost sight of Tom after a while and ignored the pang of regret that she wasn’t conversing with him instead of the earnest man Diana had introduced as Henry something something something Young from an arts charity they’d both served on. He was terribly boring, but she made her best effort to smile and stay engaged in the conversation.

Thankfully, they sat down to dinner soon enough and Diana arranged herself next to Claudia. Likely to give the two some time to talk alone, Tom was seated halfway down the table. A few times Claudia spied a mutinous look on his face as he glanced to the head of the table. She tried her best to look contrite whenever their eyes met, but it was out of pity more than anything. Diana was a gracious hostess and funnier than she’d expected. She was regaled with several stories of the mischief Tom and his sisters used to get up to.

“I am sorry my girls couldn’t make it, dear,” Diana apologized as they worked on the main course. “They’re both dying to meet you, but lately Tom’s the only one I can get ahold of with any regularity. I’m so glad he’s slowed down a bit.”

“Slowed down?” She chuckled at the idea. “He just did back-to-back West End shows!”

“He stayed in town though. For him that’s almost a vacation.”

“True.” She sipped her wine and smiled at how similar mother and son were. Only a Hiddleston would consider his recent schedule as slowing down.

“We’ll have to do another brunch and bring you along to meet everyone. But I insist you leave the cooking to my son. Even chefs deserve a day off.” She laughed and waved at the table full of food. “Not that I gave you one!”

“I was more than happy to contribute. This has been so nice.”
“I was sorry to hear you wouldn’t be able to go home for the holiday and this was the least I could do to thank you for all you’ve taught Tom.”

Somehow she didn’t think this was payment in kind for simply showing him some cooking techniques, but didn’t want to argue the point. Instead, she chose to brag on her son. “Well Tom’s taught me more, I’d wager. I have a lot more patience with the press than I used to and I know Luke is grateful for that as well.”

“Luke’s a darling man, but he’s so very high-strung. I saw quite a bit of him the summer before last and he didn’t look at all well.”

“He ah...” she tried to keep her face neutral, but wanted to laugh at the genial woman’s sour expression. “He was very busy for a while there.”

“I’m sure you give him a lot less heartache.” The older woman patted Claudia’s hand and she wasn’t quite sure which him she’d referred to. Something in her gut said it wasn’t Luke.

By the end of the meal, she was too at ease to care if she didn’t remember half of the names of the people around her. Everyone had been lovely and all the food she’d fretted and worried over was a hit. And since Tom was driving, she didn’t hesitate to indulge in the after dinner toddy Diana had offered.

And when she found herself again speaking to Mr. Too Many Names, it wasn’t such a chore as it had been earlier. She’d lost sight of Tom again though and that still carried the same twinge of regret.

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As Tom was clearing away the dishes, his mother cornered him in the kitchen, a determined look on her face.

"Thomas, would you please stop scowling every time one of my guests engages Claudia in conversation? They'll think I've been lying about my charming middle child if you're being passively rude to everyone."

"I'm not—"

"You are! Need I remind you I've known you your whole life and can ruddy well recognize when you're having a strop?" She continued in an airy tone, moving to straighten a stack of unused napkins. "You act as if you have some proprietary hold over the girl, which is clearly not the case."

Ah, so that was the score of things. His mother never was very good at being duplicitous and if he hadn’t been so preoccupied with all the attention Claudia was getting he would have noticed sooner.

“Why don't you just say what you want to say?"

The direct tone tinged with defeat must have startled her, because when she looked up he saw guilt in her eyes. "All right. Fine." She abandoned the already neat stack of linen and moved to face him. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

A quip died in his throat when he saw the concern on her face mix with the guilt over her little ruse. "Yes," he replied simply. And though it hurt, it also felt liberating to say it out loud to someone. "And you invited people that would undoubtedly be charmed by her. The Honorable Henry David Ascot Farthington Bingham Young can’t seem to get enough of her. Was the plan to instill me with such jealousy that I’d propose on the spot?"
"Nothing quite so dramatic! And Henry’s name isn’t quite that ridiculous, dear. I just thought you might need a... a push to help you put things into perspective." She smoothed down the front of his sweater, such a habitually maternal gesture it made his heart swell. His mother had meant well and he couldn't fault her for it. "She really is a lovely girl."

"While I appreciate the sentiment, Mum, that was a conclusion I'd come to all on my own. It didn't take half the single cinema board members chatting her up to bring me to the realization."

"Well it was remarkably instructive for me."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know that she fully recognizes when someone's interested in her." She held his gaze, a bit of steel glinting up at him from her blue eyes. "She's just... there's some kind of innocence to her. I don't think she's just going to wake up one day and decide to move in with you."

"Her house is better, we'd sell mine." The words were out of his mouth so quickly it startled him. He hadn't known just how much thought he'd given to such things, despite the fact that none of it was even on the table yet.

"Well, at least you've worked that little detail out," she said a little tartly. The ire was gone in an instant though, replaced by a softer, pitying look. "But my point is that you'll have to actually pursue her, dear. At least if you want the question of where to homestead to ever come up."

"Just because I want it doesn't mean that it can or will happen." He knew how morose he sounded, but this was the first time he'd been able to express not only the good feelings Claudia brought out in him, but the frustration as well. Waiting for the perfect time hadn’t been bolstering to his morale.

"Why can't it?" She may have thought Claudia lovely, but the sharp tone of the question led Tom to imagine that his mother wouldn't stay as fond of anyone that didn't see her son in the same light she did.

"She swore off relationships, Mum."

"Haven't you done that as well?"

"For different reasons, I'm afraid. I don't want anyone else and she doesn't want anyone."

"And you've presented yourself as an option then?"

"Well not... overtly. But we're together whenever we can be and—"

"And," she interrupted, "my darling boy can be quite thick when he's in love." The fond look was back, though now he found it a shade condescending. "If tonight has been any indication, she is too straightforward to hope anything subtle will succeed in showing her what else you could have together."

"I don't want to chase her away altogether." Of late he’d been waffling between his original plan and taking the coward’s way out simply to avoid the risk.

"Oh sweetheart, you're quite miserable, aren't you? You're going to have to ask her if this is something she wants. Even if the answer isn't to your liking. Otherwise you'll drive yourself mad in this limbo."

"The timing hasn’t been right for a while now. And everything has to be perfect or I risk losing her."
“Rubbish. I agree it’s not something to do lightly, but if you’re waiting for some grand alignment of the stars then you’ll be waiting forever. It doesn’t have to be perfect, it just has to be real. She’ll be able to see how sincere you are.”

“God, why did I have to be seeing someone when we first met?”

“Because you’re a romantic and have been looking for the right person for a long time. But if you think she’d have let you near her as a single man, you don’t know her as well as you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you actually listened to her conversations tonight? She’s polite and engaging, but everything is on the surface. When you first met you were safe, I think. I don’t know if she would have agreed to work as closely with you otherwise. It’s just a guess and I know you know her better than I do, but it’s just the impression I get.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“And you’ve never behaved foolishly?” She raised an eyebrow and he was sure she was remembering the manic call home explaining he was bringing his girlfriend of a few weeks to meet the family.

“Point taken.”

“I’m not rubbing your nose in it, dear. My point is that I think you’re long past the danger zone with her. All you can do now is be honest.” She cupped the side of his face and managed to look both ferocious and sentimental. “Lord knows you’re dashing, smart, and good-hearted and she should absolutely count herself lucky for gaining your affection.”

“You’re biased.”

“And I will not apologize for it.” She backed away and moved to open another bottle of wine. “I just want you happy, darling.”

“I know. Thanks, Mum.”

“You’re very welcome, dear. No get back out there and do try not to stare daggers at everyone that talks to her. You seem to forget that she did come here with you, after all.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Despite her push to rejoin the party, he didn’t follow his mother back into the crowd. He’d barely been able to talk to Claudia all night and he saw that was at least partially to blame for his abysmal attitude. He could have kicked himself for behaving so badly in front of his mother’s friends.

As he was trying to muster up the enthusiasm to go back out there, Claudia burst into the kitchen, closing the door resolutely behind her. “I’m hiding,” she said with a conspiratorial wink.

“That bad, is it?”

“Not really, I just needed a breather.”

Her cheeks were prettily flushed and her green eyes sparkled with amusement. And drink. She seemed completely relaxed and he was grateful to see his talk had done some good, hopefully it was that and not just the wine she’d had.
“You’re a bit drunk,” he laughed.

“A teensy drunk, yes. Pleasantly tipsy.”

Before he could assist, she’d hopped up to sit on the counter and looked pleased that she made the leap without incident. His heart had stopped for a split second, but jump started when she grinned back at him.

“Your mum is as sweet as she can be, Tom.”

“I have a feeling she’d say the same about you.”

“I think I needed this.”

“Needed what?”

“A nice little break. Not work and a holiday without family drama. Don’t get me wrong, I love them, but we can’t seem to get together without something happening.” Her tone changed, growing cold and hard. “My mom’s a right bitch.”

“I’m glad you don’t associate with her anymore.”

“She keeps turning up though. Like a bad fucking penny.”

“She’s not here now.”

“No, she damn well isn’t.” It was as if the clouds parted and she was all sunshine and smiles again. “Because I’m having a wonderful time. Even if I haven’t seen you all night.”

“I suspect Mum wanted you for herself.”

“That’s okay.” She almost swayed in place, but he couldn’t say it was in a drunken way. It was more like she’d been pleasantly loosened up and wasn’t holding herself with rigid control. “As long as you aren’t cross with me.”

“Why would I be?”

“Because I was stupid earlier and you don’t look like you’re having the best time.”

“Claude, that’s not down to you.” He saw that the platitude wouldn’t satisfy her. And since he was already bending the truth, he decided to press his luck again. “I was a little perturbed at Mum. She invited several of these guests with an eye to set you up.”

It wasn’t an utter falsehood, but it only danced around the edges of the truth. But he hadn’t been able to come up with a plausible lie to explain his behavior. He hadn’t even realized she’d been paying that much attention to his expressions.

“Why?” She seemed utterly bewildered by the idea and he had to suppress a strong urge to take her in his arms and show her why.

“Because,” he began carefully, seeking to mollify Claudia while at the same time nipping any urge to speak directly to his mother about it in the bud. “She likes you and assumes everyone should be paired up to be happy. I’m sorry, Claude. I didn’t see it myself until after we’d arrived. She meant well.”

“That was kind of sweet.” He sent out an internal prayer of thanks that she hadn’t been angered by
the meddling. “But I hope she wasn’t expecting anything, because there hasn’t been a hint of flirting. Thank goodness.”

He chuckled, wild relief flooding through him. He hadn’t supposed she was interested in anyone his mother had put in her path, but hearing her confirm it left him feeling rather giddy.

Hoping he wasn’t showing his glee, he asked, “None of them to your liking?”

“Well no, but there is zero interest on their parts either. I’m not sure your mom took personalities into account.”

His mother had gotten at least one thing right, Claudia didn’t seem to understand the attraction she held for others. He’d seen several instances of flirtatious body language from interested parties, but she didn’t pick up on any of it. At least his mother’s meddling had led to some new information.

“She’s probably quite pleased with herself, so maybe we keep that detail to ourselves?”

“Aww I won’t say anything to her, Tom. She’s such a kind woman and I know she just did it wanting to see me happy.”

“What do you say to going back out there if I stay on hand to fend off any misguided arts administrators?”

“I suppose now that dinner is over she can’t exile you to the other side of the table.” She giggled, allowing Tom to help her down off the counter.

“Most everyone will probably leave soon, so you shouldn’t need me hanging about too long.”

“You’re such a dummy sometimes.” Smiling up at him, she slipped her arm through his. “I never mind you hanging about.”

As the headed back into the fray, he didn’t disguise the broad grin her statement had evoked. And if it was the first true smile many of the guests had seen from him, well then he’d let them make their own inferences as to what that meant. Claudia was on his arm and clearly had no romantic designs on any of the guests, so his night was picking up.

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As it was well past midnight by the time everyone left and they’d helped clear away the party mess, Diana had insisted they stay the night.

“I couldn’t in good conscience send you two off so late knowing you have so far to go.”

Claudia, at that point looking extremely sleepy, didn’t argue as she was ushered into one of the guest rooms.

“My girls have left enough things here over the years that I’m sure I have something comfortable for you to sleep in,” she prattled as Claudia followed mutely behind her. “Though you look about to drop and I don’t suppose you’d be picky.”

She mumbled an agreement and Tom, trailing behind the pair, had to suppress the urge to simply scoop her up and carry her to bed. He’d only feel comfortable retiring to his own room when he saw Claudia safe and tucked in. At least his mother didn’t shoo him away, one boon of having her in on the big secret.
“You two don’t have anything on tomorrow, do you?” She needed a sensible reply so she directed the question to her son.

“No, there’s no timetable for getting back.”

“Good. Tonight was good fun, but this gives me a chance to get you both for a little while longer without interference from anyone.”

After she rummaged around in the dresser, Diana pressed a bundle of clothes into Claudia’s arms and gave her some final instructions. “Bathroom’s to the right of your room and Tom’s right across the hall if you need anything. Get some rest, dear.”

“Thanks, Tom’s mom.” She gave the older woman a peck on the cheek and a smile before closing the door behind her.

“I appreciate this, Mum.”

“I’m being selfish about this too, I do want to spend more time with you. Your safety is just a bonus.”

He knew it was the other way around, but just gave her a kiss before wishing her goodnight and disappearing into his own room. It was always nice to be back under her roof, maddening at times, but nice.

Before climbing into bed, he rummaged through his own castoffs for an old, threadbare pair of sweatpants to sleep in. They were tighter than he would have liked, as he was now more muscular than in his younger years. But they’d do fine for sleep. He eschewed a shirt, as he’d likely just chuck it off while he slept anyway.

It didn’t take long to revert to his teenage habit of flinging his clothes pell-mell, most landing in a heap on the bed. For some reason it was easier to be messy here than in his own home.

He should have been sensible and tried to sleep, but before he realized it, he was pacing around the room. What he really wanted to do was check and make sure Claudia made it to bed in one piece. But just as he was telling himself it was overkill, he heard a tentative knock on his door. Wondering why his mother would knock so quietly, he was startled to see Claudia when he opened the door.

If possible, she looked even sleepier than before in an old t-shirt that hung almost as long as the shorts she was now wearing. “I’m sorry, but can you find me an extra blanket? My room is freezing,” she whispered, eyes glancing down the hallway.

“Mum doesn’t usually open the vents in these rooms unless she knows she has company coming. I suppose it just hasn’t had time to heat up properly. Sorry, Claude.” Ushering her in, he went to rummage through the closet.

“I don’t want to be any trouble, but my teeth were chattering in there.” He heard her sit on the bed as he searched around, certain there were some quilts on hand.

“It’s no trouble. We do actually want you to be comfortable, you know.” He emerged from the closet empty-handed, but gave Claudia a reassuring smile. “She’s moved them since I was here last. Let me just check the hall linen closet. I’ll be back in a jiff.” She simply nodded as she was overcome by an enormous yawn.

It was only the work of a few minutes to find not only the quilt he’d been searching for, but a soft woolen blanket as well. The last thing he wanted was her shivering all night.
These should—” the words caught in his throat when he returned and saw her curled up across the foot of his bed, already sleeping. Her face was pillowed on his discarded sweater and she looked so sweet and serene it took him a moment to register that he couldn’t gape at her all night.

“Claude.” He knelt next to her and gently shook her shoulder. In response to her wordless moan of protest, he called her name a bit louder. When that earned him no response, he moved to scoop her up, deciding he’d have to carry her to bed after all.

“Mmm no,” she begged when she felt herself being moved. “Too comfy here.” She then proceeded to burrow her face in his sweater and readjust her position.

Feeling a bit like the parent of an exhausted toddler, he kept his voice soothing and calm. “At least get under the covers for me then, okay?”

“Kay.” The syllable tumbled out as if it were merely a reflex. She didn’t even open her eyes as he helped maneuver her up onto a pillow and under the blankets. He didn’t know what to make of the fact that she held fast to his sweater, now clutching it like a little one would a favorite stuffed animal.

She stilled almost immediately, breathing settling into an even rhythm. Deciding that they’d simply swap beds, he allowed himself the luxury of brushing the curls away from her face and pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead before leaving with the blankets. He’d gladly play musical beds with her if it meant she’d sleep soundly after all the excitement and anxiety that day.

No sooner had he entered the room, however, than he realized that it was too frigid to be comfortably livable. It felt like it hadn’t been heated at all that season. No wonder Claudia had come in search of something warm to add to the bed.

When he stood on the bed to check the vent, however, he began to suspect a bigger problem. No matter how hard he pulled, the vent wouldn’t come open. It was stuck, and until it could be opened, the room would be uninhabitable. He went over his options, deciding almost immediately that he wasn’t going to wake his mother for something so ridiculous. He could just use the third guest room and they could get the vent sorted in the morning.

But when he was confronted with a shrink wrapped mattress in the room down the hall, he was beginning to wonder if the gods were against him sleeping or if they just wanted him to do it in one very specific spot. He could have kipped on the couch, but after a frustrated moment of silent contemplation, decided Claudia would never let him hear the end of it. Instead, he merely toted the blankets he’d been hauling around for what felt like a week now back to his room and slid into bed beside Claudia.

She had her back to him and looked as if she hadn’t moved an inch since he’d left her.

As he drifted off to sleep, he decided that he damn well had better make his mind up soon. All of this would have been a hell of a lot easier if they shared a bed as a matter of habit, rather only when family visits didn’t go to plan. Surely it had to be less work to be Claudia’s significant other than what he was putting in dancing around his feelings. That and he wouldn’t feel guilty about wanting to snug up against her and follow her into a deep, untroubled sleep.

He had to make his feelings known and it had to be soon. Yet another thing his mother had been right about.

Sleep began to cloud his thoughts and he had the fleeting idea that may this had all been her doing. Keeping the vent shut, making sure the other guest room wasn’t an option, maybe it had been another of his mother’s well-meaning machinations. If that was the case, he couldn’t bring himself to
be too mad at her. True, it was manipulative and coldly calculating, but no real harm had been done. Claudia probably wouldn’t be happy about a deception, but she had willingly shared a bed with him before so he prayed it was just down to a peculiar set of coincidences.

The thoughts, however, drifted away as slumber overtook him. His breathing fell in time with Claudia’s and he suddenly didn’t care how it had come about. Hopefully next time though she would be fully conscious when she made the choice to sleep in his bed.

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Claudia woke gradually the next morning, too comfortable and drowsy to care about getting out of bed too quickly. She hadn’t slept well the night before the party and her body clearly had taken the rest it needed. The night before was a sleepy haze and she was glad Diana had insisted they stay over.

She languished amongst the warm blankets for several minutes before cracking her eyes open and realizing she wasn’t in the room she’d been assigned the night before. She was in Tom’s room. Gradually she remembered being cold and seeking out an additional blanket. With a groan, she also vaguely remembered pulling a Goldilocks and deciding Tom’s bed was just right.

She couldn’t tell if he’d slept there with her or not, as she’d ended up sprawled across the middle of the mattress and could have mussed up the covers all on her own. Either she’d kicked him out of his own bed or she’d forced him to share with her. Neither option left her feeling anything other than rude and selfish.

Lingering upstairs as long as her grumbling stomach would allow, she eventually made her way down to the kitchen. Tom and his mother’s voices told her that’s where they were and the tantalizing smell of coffee urged her to put aside her guilty feelings, temporarily at least.

“Ah there you are, dear,” Diana beamed, ushering her into a vacant chair and fetching her coffee.

“Tom, I’m sorry I appropriated your room last night.” She didn’t want to wait for any of the usual morning pleasantries before addressing her terrible behavior.

“No apologies necessary. You were exhausted and it didn’t help that the heat doesn’t seem to make it to your room.” He gave his mother a pointed look. “We’ll need to take a look at that vent. Right now that’s probably the coldest room in all of Britain.” He turned back to Claudia and patted her hand. “I’m just glad you didn’t try to stick it out in there. You might have gotten hypothermia.”

“Still. It was so rude of me.”

“Honestly dear, it’s my fault. I had no idea I’d given you such horrid sleeping conditions. Next time you stay with me I promise to have all that sorted out.”

“Thanks,” Claudia mumbled, focusing on the mug Diana had placed in front of her.

“Now what would you like for breakfast, darlings?”

“Anything Mum. I’m starved.”

“You still have the appetite of a teenager.” The reproach was mild and loving, more a mother musing aloud than scolding him. “Claudia? You’re the guest.”

“I don’t mind making something for us. I mean you’re going to the trouble of hosting us.”
Tom smiled as the two squared off. “Nonsense, you’ve only just woken up and I’d love to say I cooked for Chef Rey. I won’t hear another word about it. You just enjoy your coffee.”

“Okay then.” She seemed a bit dazed, but accepted the situation with good grace. Tom chose to sip from his own mug rather than meeting Claudia’s gaze for fear of laughing aloud. His mother was a force of nature in her own right and it was amusing watching the two women interact.

“Don’t just sit there like some artistic layabout,” his mother directed her comment directly at him. “Come and help me.”

“But I’m a guest too.”

“You may not live here, but you’re certainly not a guest. You’ve already had two cups and you’ve been for a run. You’re awake and you’re helping me with breakfast.”

“Yes, ma’am.” This time he caught Claudia’s eye and gave her a knowing wink when Diana’s back was turned. It felt like this was an old conversation, more a familiar ritual than actual grousing. It made her smile.

She visited with the two of them as they bustled about preparing food. Thanks to Tom’s reassurances she was no longer mentally berating herself and was able to enjoy watching mother and son interact. They were cheeky with one another, but there was an undercurrent of genuine love evident as well.

She repressed the pang of regret she always felt seeing a mother interact with her child in such a loving way. It had been a long time since Judy had treated her daughters as anything but a sordid problem, but Claudia remembered how it had been when her father was alive. Feeling the beginnings of tears prick at the corners of her eyes, she redirected her attention back to Tom and Diana.

The three of them had a simple, but excellent late breakfast and she enjoyed herself immensely. But they couldn’t delay their return any longer and afterward went upstairs to change.

Before they left, Diana made them both promise to let her know when they made it home safe. She watched as Tom said a final goodbye to his mother, the woman murmuring something to him she couldn’t make out. It was probably just a promise to call her soon or something else mothers around the world entreated of their children.

She waved at them as they drove away, Tom again taking driving duty. “She’s wonderful, Tom.”

“She’s a right pain sometimes, but overall yes she is rather wonderful.” He turned onto the highway and let out a deep sigh. “You’re a champ for going along with her demands. She usually ends up getting her way.”

“She’s been so welcoming to me. It really means a lot.” She’d been gazing out the window, but out of the corner of his eye he saw her turn to face him. “Listen, I really hate that I forced you into an awkward situation last night.”

“I’m not upset, Claude. I’m just happy you’re not mad that I didn’t settle myself on the couch.”

“That would have been silly. We’ve shared a bed before. And after hearing about all the trouble you went through to try to find other accommodations, I can’t fault you. Poor thing, I probably kept you up too late.”

“I got plenty of rest, I assure you. So no more beating yourself up about it, all right?”

“Okay, okay.”
She relaxed back into her seat, confident that he’d meant what he’d said and didn’t harbor any ill will about the night before. Barely suppressing a snort of laughter, she realized his habit of apologizing long after an issue was done was rubbing off on her. She supposed it wasn’t the worst habit to have picked up.
"How about tonight I try my hand at that pizza dough we're looking to use? You can have free reign over the toppings and I'll work on getting the consistency right. I think I'm quite close."

They'd been at work all morning and Tom voiced his idea as they took a coffee break. Their second season was scheduled to start after the new year and he was grateful to find them coming together almost daily in preparation. Claudia's kitchen was as much of a permanent workspace as he'd had in years and he relished returning to it. There was something so comforting and routine to it now and though he loved his career, he saw this time as a nice change from his semi-transient existence.

And he vowed to enjoy their routine for the next few weeks until it was happily interrupted by Jules’ little family. They’d agreed it was best to push through and get everything done before they were set to arrive, knowing Claudia would want to spend as much time with them as possible. And without work on his plate, he’d be able to help her squire Moira around.

She brought him back to the present with an unexpected reply. Rather than the ready agreement he'd hoped for, Claudia instead blushed and began apologizing. "I can't, I'm sorry. I have... I technically have a date though it isn't a real one."

Desperately hoping his face didn't betray the panic that consumed him, he was relieved to hear he sounded quite normal when he replied. "Claude, how can you have a date that isn't really a date?" Had she met someone? And if she had, why was this the first he was hearing about it?

A completely irrational jealous heat had begun to churn in his stomach as he was reminded of his mother's insistence that Claudia wasn't just going to fall into his lap after suddenly deciding she loved him. He knew it was madness to feel he had any right to know the details of her personal life and yet he couldn't quiet the snarl in the back of his mind at the thought of anyone but him taking her out.

"It's this charity thing. Weaver wrangled me into offering a date for this auction his sister was running. It was for a good cause and I couldn't think of a real reason not to participate." She sighed and tucked a curl behind her ear, a losing battle she'd been fighting all morning, as it kept springing back a moment after being moved. "And the guy wants to take me to dinner tonight. It'll probably be awkward and interminable, but I can't dodge it forever."

"Why didn't you tell me you were doing an auction?"

"It was while you were doing the show and I suppose..." she trailed off, eyes narrowing and searching look replacing the embarrassed one from moments before. “Well why does it matter anyway? It's one night. We can hang out tomorrow."

"What if I'd wanted to bid?" Nothing would ever happen if he just kept hoping without any action. His blood pounded in his ears waiting for her response, and though he wasn't surprised, he was a bit chagrined to see she didn't take his meaning.

"What? To spare me a boring evening with a harmless fan? You didn't have to do that."

"No," he tried to keep the riot of emotions he was feeling out of his voice. There was no need to let her know just how desperately he'd wanted to broach the subject. "I would have bid for the pleasure of taking you out."
She snorted with laughter, still not making the connection. "Ever the gentleman. You can write the charity a check if you're feeling generous, but you hang out with me for free all the time, Tom."

"Hanging out wasn't what I meant, Claude. I don't think I made myself clear enough. I would like to take you out on a date."

He'd actually voiced the words and immediately he wondered if he'd gone a step too far. Time seemed to freeze as he waited for her to respond. Slowly, she put her mug back onto the table and when she spoke it was in a strained tone he didn't like the sound of.

"But... you don't. We..." Her face screwed up in concentration trying to find the right reply. When a polite one didn't come to mind she just blurted it out plainly instead. "Part of me is flattered, but I'm not going to be your new fuck buddy, Tom. That is a colossally bad idea and I'm shit at the casual thing, so it would be a complete cock up and not in a fun way."

"Claude, that's not what I was—" She interrupted him, clearly picking up steam.

"Look at all the women, well, at least all the ones I know about. Are you friends with any of them still? Not really. You're civil and could probably work together again if you had to, but I wouldn't call you mates." And no matter what the press releases had said about staying friends with Taylor, she knew the two had had no contact after the breakup.

"Claudia, I'm not—"

"I'm not saying it makes you a bad guy, Tom! Not at all. But if you just need to get laid, you can set your sights away from me. God knows it's been too long since I've been properly fucked, if I'm being brutally honest here, but that doesn't make this any better of an idea. So I'm sorry, but the answer is no."

"The answer to a question I hadn't bloody asked!" He was standing now, towering above her still seated form. "I wanted to ask you on a damn date. Like normal people go on. But you just... you're so... goddammit Claudia you don't make anything easy, do you?!"

With one last exasperated, strangled exclamation, he stormed out, slamming the front door behind him. He hated himself for such a juvenile response, but her words had shown she still hadn't understood him. Putting some distance between them was the only sure way he wouldn't shout out something impetuous out of sheer frustration. As he walked into the brisk winter wind, he realized he'd need a plan, a damn good one too. Because not only did he need to make his intentions clear, but he had to also do it in a way that would ensure a positive answer to his question.

Months of waiting for a good time and he'd fucked things up so royally he wasn't immediately sure how to move past it. He clearly hadn’t anticipated how much it would take to get her to accept that he saw her as anything but a friend. He should have known, with Claudia the best approach was the direct one. And however direct he thought he was being, it hadn’t been enough. But he desperately wanted to believe he could salvage things.

After Tom took his rather dramatic exit, Claudia tried to make sense of his odd behavior. She figured she'd wounded his pride with her frank assessment of the situation. But it didn't make what she’d said any less true. And she'd be lying to herself if she said she'd never considered it. One look at Tom and she knew the sex would be amazing... at least for her. He just exuded this aura like he was a fucking sex god. But for her, fucking always tangled up with deeper feelings and with someone like Tom she couldn’t put herself in a situation like that. If she wanted more and he didn’t, well that would devastate her. It would be best not to even go down that road.
Claudia sighed, closed her eyes, and lolled her head against the back of the sofa. Once Tom had left, she’d found herself completely disinterested in work and had ended up in the living room as she considered the situation. It hadn’t gone well at all, but surely Tom would fume for a day or two and then see the sense of her words. But they’d never really had a fight before, so she wasn’t sure how he’d handle it. She prayed he’d get over it quickly, because she was finding the feeling of knowing he was upset with her hard to bear.

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She went on the predictably boring date, struggling to keep the conversation going. The man who had won the bid, Martin, seemed nice enough, but didn’t seem to get over his shock of sitting across from her. He looked a little punch drunk the whole night and it was a constant battle to keep him talking. And it was an effort for her not to resent him for being the cause, albeit indirectly, of a row with Tom.

When she escaped to a taxi, checking her phone for the first time in hours, there was nothing. At the very least she'd expected an apology email or text. Tom never seemed to miss an opportunity to apologize, no matter what the situation. But it was another three days before she heard a peep out of him.

And when she got the simple text asking if he could come over, it didn’t exactly fill her with confidence that he was over it. Agreeing against her better judgment, she tried not to fret too much as she waited for him to arrive. She also tried to ignore the part of her that was just a little too eager to see him again.

When he came in without knocking, she tried to smile as she normally would, but it felt incredibly false on her lips. For his part, Tom looked a wreck, his normally clear eyes bloodshot and fatigue shown on his face. She wanted so badly to inquire about it, but was worried that she’d been the ultimate cause, so she kept her mouth shut.

He lingered near the hall door rather than taking a seat, shifting his weight restlessly from one foot to the other. Finally he cleared his throat and spoke. “Claude, I’d like to apologize for the other day.”

She should have known. Apologies were this man’s default reaction when anything went amiss. She’d just been a few days late in her estimate.

“It’s fine, Tom. Really we can just—”

“Please let me say my piece.”

“Okay.” Now the nervousness was back. This sounded beyond ominous.

“I’m sorry I went about this the wrong way. The truth is, I was being a bit of a coward by asking you the way I did. I should have known it would have been best to tell you the whole truth of it. And that truth is that… is that I care for you deeply. And I’ve known for some time now that I’d like us to become more.”

“More?” Using flowery language and dressing it up didn’t change things. Friends with benefits, fuck buddy, they meant the same thing and something she still wasn’t interested in.

“Yes. Much more. And I know I’m stupid to take even the tiniest risk that you’ll hate me for the suggestion, but I’ve found myself unable to put the idea aside.”

“Tom, it’s not that I don’t… I mean it’s not you. I don’t want that with anyone. I never have really. It’s been relationship or bust with me and it wouldn’t matter who pursued me that way, I wouldn’t
want something casual with anyone. So please understand it’s not you.”
“A relationship is what I’m asking for, Claudia.”
“What?”
“In my ill-conceived attempt to ask you out the other day, well, I see that you didn’t understand what
I was really asking. So I was hoping to make myself plainer.” He cleared his throat again and ran a
hand through his hair. “Claudia, would you please accompany me on a date at your earliest
convenience?”
She felt numb with shock and couldn’t find her voice for several moments. “I don’t understand,” she
finally mumbled stupidly.
“I find myself unable and unwilling to consider pursuing anyone else when I can’t stop thinking
about you. You’re a tremendous friend and partner and I would like it to become more, Claudia. Or
to at least try.”
“No.” The single word hung in the air like a tangible barrier between them.
“If that’s your decision, I respect it, but can I ask why?”
“Why? How is that not obvious to you?”
“Listen, I know I don’t have a stellar record—”
“Oh, like I do?” She shook her head sadly, as if she pitied him for his clear ignorance about the
situation. “I don’t know how to do things properly. I’m too distant, too wary, too independent. I
don’t know how to be part of a couple. I’ve heard it all, Tom. Trust me, my exes haven’t been shy
about letting me know what my failings are.”
“Is that all?”
“All? That’s not enough for you?” Smiling ruefully, she slumped down into a nearby chair. “No, it
isn’t. You’re this notorious bachelor and god I can’t blame you, Tom. It has to be basically effortless
to get someone to jump into your bed, I get that. You don’t even have to try and go the relationship
route. Why bother?”
“You’re not a bother, Claudia. As I said, I haven’t had the least interest in anyone else in over a year.
The idea seems repellent to me and it’s because I can’t move away from the thought of you.”
“Wait. You haven’t anything in over a year?”
“No. Claude, I only want you.”
“Don’t be stupid. Were you not listening earlier? I’m terrible at this and you’ve set your sights on me.
Why?”
He weighed telling her the full truth right then, but decided that she’d have even more trouble
accepting a declaration of love. No, that was a bridge best crossed when and if he made it beyond
her initial refusal. “You have every right to tell me no, but at least make an informed decision. Do
you remember when we talked about running towards something instead of away?"
"Yeah."
"Before I could even see it myself, I started running back to you, Claude. I don't tell you that to try


and guilt you or anything, because your decision won't change that. But over and over again I want
to come back to you. I've never felt that before. I find myself craving your company above all others.
The damn thought of you, even your stubborn parts, makes me smile. And the only reason I didn’t
act on these feelings sooner, is that I didn’t want to ruin things between us. You’re too special to
me.”

“And yet you risk it now. Why?”

“If there was even a small hope you’d be willing to chance it with me, I had to try. If you don’t want
me that way, I’ll do my best to pretend I never brought it up. The last thing I want is to make you
uncomfortable.”

“Well mission fucking failed there,” she all but spat it back at him. The anger in her words took him
aback. “I wasn’t dumb or deluded enough to see you as an option, Tom. Jesus fuck, you’re a
goddamn movie star.”

“What if I wasn’t? Would we still be having this conversation if I wasn’t’?”

“Yes! I have two boxes, Tom, and you were firmly in the non-romantic camp. All the other stuff is
just… it’s just more reason to keep you where you’ve been.”

“So you’re not saying no because of my career. You’re saying no because of me.”

“I’m not saying you’re this terrible guy.” Feeling wearier than he had in years, he took a seat on the
couch. When she spoke again all the fight seemed to have leech away. “I’ve only wanted more
with one person in the friendship camp before. She ended up marrying my sister.”

“So you… Nali?”

“Yeah. We hung out and I found myself more and more attracted to her and before I could get up the
nerve to ask her out, she met Jules and the rest is history.” She shot him a warning look when she
spied the look on his face. “Don’t give me those pity eyes of yours. I got over it. Turns out it was just
a stupid crush, but I haven’t exactly warmed to the idea of moving someone once they land in side A
or side B. So it’s not you, Tom.”

He stayed silent for several minutes, attempting to contemplate all sides of her argument. It didn't do
any good, since he kept coming to the same shattering conclusion. She didn't want him. And it hurt
in a physical way he'd never experienced. The hope he'd been hanging on to had kept the worst of
his despair away and now it came crashing down in full force.

"All right. I'll um just see myself out then." He stood and for the first time in ages wanted to escape
her presence as soon as possible. It would take him some time to get past this and that would require
solitude above all else.

When he turned to get one last glimpse before leaving, the pain on her face almost did him in. After
everything it hurt her to see him so upset. Very few people knew how soft Claudia's heart really was.
"None of that, Claude," he said after a tear slid down her cheek. "We'll be back to normal now." He
was an actor. At the very least he could make sure she thought he was okay.

Resisting every impulse to pull her into his arms and kiss away each and every tear, instead he turned
and was out the front door in a few quick strides. He may not have gotten the date he truly wanted,
but at home there was a bottle he'd get acquainted with instead. The sad part was that the last time
he'd been compelled to get good and truly drunk, it had been because he feared he wasn't with the
right person. Now he knew who that was and she wouldn't have him. It was time to drown his
sorrows.

Chapter End Notes

There’s another chapter ready to go - it’s just awaiting final edits, so don’t despair too much about leaving these two hanging.
Chapter 34

By the time she glanced at the clock, she realized she'd been sitting in the same spot for over two hours just running it over and over in her mind. It was a complete shitstorm and there was nothing she could see that would fix it. This whole damned absurd idea of his was doomed to failure before it even began, surely he had to see that. She'd ruin him in a number of ways and he had to understand that, even if it hurt him to do it. This was better for everyone in the long run. He'd find some nice young starlet who worshiped him once he got over this. She tried to ignore the stab of fear that accompanied such a thought.

She desperately needed some kind of distraction, but pie crust wasn't going to do it this time. Instead, she filled her tub with the hottest water she could get and hoped the pain would suffice. It didn't. No amount of bath salts or expensive fragrance oils could make the hollow ache blooming in her chest go away. Every time she closed her eyes she saw his stricken face and the sad little smile he'd given her just before he left.

Maybe she could find an escape in sleep. But as she huddled beneath the comforter, listening to the oppressive silence of the house even that eluded her. Tom's face, still beautiful despite the pain it displayed, kept intruding.

It was a beautiful face, there was no denying it. And when he had several days' worth of auburn stubble on his cheeks as he'd had that night, well she'd admit it was a sight to behold. It suited his angular features, a bit too pretty when clean-shaven...

Fuck. No, she told herself. You cannot lust after the man that you just rejected. It wasn't right.

And yet her mind, given a new avenue to explore that didn't offer all the appeal of a sidewalk of broken glass, ran with the idea. It seemed that only part of her brain gave a fig about what was decent.

She couldn't stop ticking through images. Tom on her couch with the soft smile he got after a good meal. Tom in a crisp suit, talking her through a photo shoot. Tom in the threadbare blue shirt that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. His trousers rarely did either.

And she was absolutely sure he'd be good in bed. He'd take care of her and she knew it. Probably quite generous with his mouth, her libido reminded her. That tongue was surely good for more than just reciting prose.

Before she even realized it, she'd slipped a hand beneath her panties and blindly sought to release the pressure building there. As thoughts of Tom's stubble grazing her thighs crowded in with a hundred other fantasies, her fingers rubbed frantic circles over her clit. It wasn't long before she was shouting his name as the orgasm overwhelmed her senses.

As soon as the euphoria receded, she felt guilty and ridiculous. She didn't have a right to think of him that way, not even privately. Any right to him had been rejected soundly earlier that evening. For the thousandth time she reminded herself it had been the right choice, the safe one.

But now that the desire had been sated, she still kept seeing him and the place he'd made for himself in her life. She'd been reluctant to allow him in as far as she had, but he was patient and persistent. He was also kind and smart and loyal almost to the point of stupidity.

Tom would make someone very happy one day. But again the merest thought of some nameless waif
on his arm left her gut churning. She'd have to fucking get used to it though, because he wouldn't pine for her forever. Hell, he might have even picked up someone after he'd left her place. Maybe some physical distraction from the emotional turmoil.

Yes, she'd just have to learn to ignore the bile that accompanied the very idea. Because the alternative was cutting him out altogether, which didn't bear thinking about. He wasn't hers and she'd be confronted with the consequences of that sooner or later.

But he wanted to be. He wanted more, more with her and although it made little sense, he'd looked so certain. It was either a passing fancy or a feeling that would evaporate once he had his damn more. It might take a little longer than usual, but eventually he'd see her as she really was. And she was a mess, or at least that's what they'd all told her as they left.

But Tom had known her for a while now. He'd seen a lot of her not-so-nice bits and hadn't bolted. A flare of something akin to hope sparked inside her. What if he did know what he was asking and still wanted it anyway?

The idea consumed her and she lay restless for hours more. It was hope, there was no other word for it. The part of her not convinced that anything with Tom beyond friendship was doomed to fail was suffused with a desire to accept his request. She longed to feel his arms close around her in an embrace that couldn't be mistaken for just friendly. The few glimpses she'd had of him newly awoken, pajamas rumpled and face soft from slumber told her how miraculous it could be to wake up beside him. It could be amazing, but whether it would be was an unknown.

And the unknown was what held her back. If she was unwilling to lose the friend Tom, what made her think the boyfriend would be any easier to get over? It wouldn't and she damn well knew it. But something told her it was worth the risk and that voice began to drown out all the others.

By the time she scrabbled for her phone it was almost 2 AM. He'd be asleep, she told herself, and there was a possibility, however unpleasant, that he wasn't alone. Instantly feeling guilty for it, she selected his number and let it ring, heart booming in her chest.

After four rings she heard a muffled thud and a long moan in Tom's deep baritone. And despite the fact that the noise could have indicated any number of emotions, her libido instantly perked up at the sound of it. After a few moments of silence, she heard a sharp cry before the call was abruptly disconnected.

Like the moan that had preceded it, the cry could have meant any number of things. But at that moment she could only think of the bad ones. What if he'd been so startled by her call that he'd fallen out of bed and hurt himself? What if he was having an attack of some kind? What if he threw his phone against the wall rather than speak to her again? Her weary mind wasn't so tired as to stop the endless parade of possibilities.

After only a few minutes, she decided there was nothing else to do but check. She dialed his number again, but was sent straight to voicemail. Damn. Shit. Fuck.

Now nearing panic, she pulled on some nearby leggings and a sweater. She'd moved to fumbling around her drawer for a pair of warm socks before she'd even thought to turn the light on. Somehow she managed to get her feet into some tennis shoes and grabbed her purse before flying out the front door.

Panic squeezed her chest as she drove, thankful that at least there was no traffic so early in the morning. She made record time, but had to park three blocks away, as everyone was already in for the night. She let all pretense of normalcy drop as she sprinted over the frigid pavement to her
destination.

Trying and failing to catch her breath, she let herself through the gates, but stopped short of entering the house. She rang the doorbell and willed him to answer. Even if there was someone in his bed, she'd at least know he was all right. The thought both soothed and angered her. But she didn't hear anything, nor did a light go on anywhere in the dark house. She entertained the idea of pounding on the door until she got a response, but that was guaranteed to wake the neighbors.

In the end, she fumbled for the key he'd given her and entered, suddenly overcome with fear of what she'd find. The insistent beep of the security system shook her out of her temporary paralysis and she rushed to the panel to enter her code.

The panel's LED switched to green as silence once again took over the house. In darkness and without Tom's reassuring presence it looked almost alien. She shook off such unnecessary thoughts as she made her way upstairs. The closer she got to his bedroom, the clearer a lone sound got. It was something between a rumble and a cough and she was instantly sure it was him. But it was a distressing sound all the same, so she opened his door without preamble.

She found him half hanging off the bed, noise coming from his mouth. Well the part of his mouth that wasn't smashed into his area rug. Heart in her throat, she rushed over and tried to pull him up. But he was as solid and leaden as a steel beam. It was only after struggling to move him back onto the bed, bit by bit winning the battle against gravity, that she smelled the alcohol.

The terrible noise that had spurred her into action abated once she had him off the ground. Panic slowly gave way to anger as she watched him doze on despite all the commotion. She made no headway trying to wake him either.

After several minutes of unsuccessful attempts, she gave up and sat on the edge of the bed with a defeated thump. Her emotions had run riot over the past hours and she was downright exhausted now that the adrenaline had abated. Against her better judgment, she slid into bed beside him and closed her eyes. Just for a few minutes, she promised herself, not even bothering to pull the covers over him as well.

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When she cracked her eyes open next, sunlight streamed in through the open curtains, illuminating the empty other side of the bed. "Goddammit," she muttered, rolling over onto her back.

Swearing and chastising herself internally, it was another minute before she sat up. Managing to startle the shit out of her, Tom sat in a club chair opposite the bed, silently watching her every move. And he looked like shit. No, she decided shit was too generous a word as she studied him further. He looked half dead, but still gave her a big smile once she caught sight of him.

"I'm hazy on some... well, all of the details about last night, but I'd like to know what I did to wind up with you in my bed."

"You asshole!" She almost shouted it, ignoring the flood of relief that he was okay. Now was anger time. "I thought you were dead or... or... something. I called you and you picked up, made a horrible kind of shriek and hung up. Then you wouldn't answer and I got worried, so I came over."

"You're in some ungodly contorted position hanging off the bed and I still thought you might be dying. I probably pulled something getting your heavy ass into bed only to realize you were just stone drunk!" She took a steadying breath and tried to calm herself. But yelling about this was easier than
trying to take back her words from the night before. "I couldn't wake you and I must have fallen asleep."

"Why were you calling me, Claude?" The question came out quietly, in stark contrast to her loud account of the story.

"I... I don't think we should talk about that now." She was now worried that he'd forgotten everything about the night before and that she'd only make things worse by admitting the truth.

"That's your choice," he enunciated each word slowly, as if choosing his words very carefully. He stood and sauntered into the adjoining bathroom. The infuriatingly sexy body language sending her mind into turmoil. Surely he couldn't know why she was really there, what she had done the previous night while thinking about him.

He reappeared after few minutes, toothbrush hanging out of his mouth. But it took a few beats for the teeth brushing to register, as he'd removed his shirt and was left only in the trousers he'd worn to her place. She didn't imagine the raised eyebrow when he caught her staring at his well-muscled torso.

"I have a fresh toothbrush if you're interested," he said managing to look imminently fuckable despite the foam trickling out of the corner of his mouth. Seeing him in this new light left her speechless.

"I'm going to hop in the shower really quick. I feel like garbage, but when I'm out we can talk, okay?"

When she just kept staring dumbly at him, he added. "Suit yourself. But please do me a favor and at least take your shoes off. It's painful seeing you in bed with them on." He turned and went back into the other room. She heard him mutter, "of course that may just be the headache hurting me," before turning the water on.

She gave him a few minutes to get into the shower before venturing into the bathroom. She did need to brush the metallic taste out of her mouth and silently cursed him for the rush of adrenaline that caused it. Keeping her eyes firmly forward, she cracked open the package he'd left for her on the counter. Thankfully she could only spy the vague outline of his body through the shower door, but all the same she rushed out as soon as her task was done.

Rather than return to the bed, she went down to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. She did, however, kick her shoes off in the hall and found her discarded purse in the process. While the coffee brewed she checked her messages, happy to see nothing had arisen that required her attention.

He watched for a moment as she scrolled through her emails before coughing softly. Some of his previous bravado had gone and he now looked slightly contrite. "Something must have gone awry when I tried to answer your call." He held up his phone and she spied a large crack across the dark surface. "Dead as a doornail, I'm afraid."

"You scared me."

"I'm sorry for that, Claude. It was kind of you to come and check on me." Thankfully, he'd put on a t-shirt after his shower and she was actually able to focus on his words.

"I..." She struggled with where to begin and ended up going with something easy. "I made coffee."

"You're an all-around life saver." He poured them both a mug and set about fixing hers the way she liked it. She accepted it in silence, again unsure where their talk would start.

He bid her to follow him into the living room, but instead of joining him on the sofa, she took a seat in one of the overstuffed armchairs nearby. He took several gulps, the caffeine working quickly to
make him look a bit less haggard.

After a few minutes he looked at her again, heart constricting at the sight of her legs tucked beneath her and a throw draped across her lap. She looked anxious, but he was more than happy to have her here at all. "Why'd you call me last night, Claudia?"

"Depends on what you remember, Thomas." She wasn't making any assumptions and wouldn't say much until she knew more. No sense in making it worse than it had to be.

"I remember you turning me down and I remember going home and opening a bottle of Irish whiskey. After that there's only bits and pieces."

"Right." He did remember and the prospect had her heart racing. She had no idea what to say. Hell, she hadn't known what she was going to say on the phone either, but that didn't matter now.

"Claude, you called at two in the morning. Why?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"I have a fantastic remedy for that, but you won't like the after effects." He nodded to a mostly empty bottle.

"You're an idiot. What if you'd have hurt yourself?"

"Next time I promise not to drink alone." He winked before his expression grew serious again. "Talk to me, Claude. We'll be all day at it at this rate. Why couldn't you sleep?"

"You."

"That was what I figured. What about me kept you from slumber?"

"I... worried you'd run off and brought a woman home after what happened."

"And?"

"And it upset me." She whispered the words.

"I told you, Claude. I don't want anyone but you. I went straight home to drown my sorrows."

"I wasn't being rational about it." She meant the thoughts of other women, but also knew it applied to more than that.

"Nor was I. All I got for my trouble was a massive hangover. Although the consolation of waking up next to you far outweighed the consequences. But I didn't want to bodge things up further so I waited for you to wake up across the room."

"How are you even real, Tom? You're so goddamn perfect it makes my heart hurt sometimes."

"I'm not, Claude." In the stories Prince Charming never got rejected by his love and went on a bender afterward. "I'm just possessed with laser focus once I know what I want. And that is you in any capacity you're comfortable with. And I'm trying my damnedest not to further endanger my chances with you. I realize I didn't handle any of this properly."

"What if we try and even then I decide we'd be best as just friends?" She couldn't assume that if they started this, that one of them might not realize it had been a colossal mistake. And though she'd asked about the scenario where she made that decision, her real fear was that he would be the one to
break things off. Already that thought terrified her.

He gulped audibly, but she didn't for one second question the sincerity of his reply. "Yes, even then. I'll do whatever makes you the happiest." It had taken a long time for him to get to such a point, where chasing his own dick no longer gave him the thrill it once did, but he meant what he'd said. Any piece of Claudia was worth whatever price she asked of him.

Tom watched as her eyes raked over his face, seconds ticking by at an interminable pace. While she processed his words, he took in the details of the moment. The stab of pain he felt watching her hugging her knees to her chest, looking so stricken and alone in the great big chair. The curl that seemed intent to escape its place behind her left ear, the tiny spray of freckles that dusted her cheeks. They all begged to be cataloged and stowed away, because there was a chance she was about to decide this little diversion was over. And while he would respect her wishes just as he said, it didn't mean his current memories would go to waste.

She couldn't think of a reply as the blood pounded in her ears. It was worse than when she ran. God only knew what her heart rate had climbed up to. And Tom, patient saint that he was, seemed content to let her work through things in quiet. His simple answer had been so earnest that it almost hurt her physically to hear it. Part of her wanted to have him make demands and assume she would just fall into his arms once his intentions were declared. It would have been easier to resist him that way, but this… this was something she hadn't expected.

Finally, she took a ragged breath and said it. "Ask me again."

"Ask you..." His eyes widened with comprehension. "Claudia, would you let me take you out on a date sometime soon?"

"Yes." Her heart didn't calm at the word, but she felt better almost instantly. A bit dizzy, but certainly better.

Watching his face transform with boyish wonder, she smiled back, hesitantly at first and then wider. "Friday?"

"I would like that. Try and be sober for it, okay?"

"I hear and obey!" He inclined his head with an accompanying wince of pain.

"I need to... we should take things slow to start. Okay?"

"I can handle slow. Claude," he reached over and took her hand. "You have no idea how happy I am to even hear that you're interested in trying."

"This still scares the shit out of me, Tom, I'm not gonna lie."

"I know it does. I feel that too to some extent." He'd just had a lot longer to wrestle with the implications and come to grips with his feelings. Claudia didn’t have that luxury. "I'll do whatever I need to do to make this easier for you, okay?"

She nodded, temporarily rendered by the affection that shown from his eyes. He was one of the truly good people she knew and it still rather astounded her that he'd chosen her. Even when he was hungover, he made a point to keep her feelings his primary focus.

"So also maybe don't drink a whole bottle of alcohol every time we have a fight? My heart can't stand that kind of strain."
He squinted at her and smiled softly. "You really were worried, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I'm lucky I made it out of the house with all my clothes on."

"You say lucky and I say disappointed."

"Shut up. You haven't made it to the see me naked stage."

"A man has to have a goal."

"Ah, so this is all just to get into my pants after all." She laughed as she said it, but the sex issue did give her some anxiety. But that was a panic for another day.

"Keep me waiting as long as you like. I want whatever parts of you you're willing to give." It would have been so easy to just confess it there and then. But a declaration of love might do more harm than good now that they'd settled into some kind of stasis.

"Sweet talker."

"I have only just begun. Believe it or not, I've been restraining myself for a while now, but the desire to spout poetry at you is there nevertheless."

"I don't need poetry, Tom."

"Well nobody needs poetry, Claude. That's the whole point. I'm positively ecstatic that I now have a date with a talented and beautiful woman and sometimes that calls for flowery language."

"Okay, well you have fun with that." She rose from her seat, embarrassed to feel her cheeks flush. "I'm gonna let you get some rest."

He stood along with her, gentlemanly manners still intact, but gently took her hand when she moved to go. When she turned back to face him, he moved in close and ran a finger along the line of her jaw. All jesting was gone from his voice now. "You are a beautiful woman, Claudia. I'm absolutely enraptured by you on a daily basis. I'd advise you to get used to hearing that from me."

"Right. Okay." She had that dizzy sensation again looking up into his blue eyes. "I'm gonna... I need to... yellowfin. Nate put some yellowfin aside for me at the market and I should go pick it up. Now."

God, she was gorgeous, all flustered and stammering. It was a side he didn't get to see very often.

"Shall I pick you up at seven on Friday then?"

"Seven. Good. Yes." She pulled away and he watched on amusedly as she got her shoes on. After a botched attempt to leave without her purse, she finally made it out the front door.

He stood staring at the door for several more minutes, an enormous grin writ across his face. If he hadn't already planned their excursion he'd likely be panicked, but thankfully all he needed to feel was excitement. Two days and he'd be able to take her out with no pretenses between them.

Deciding he could contemplate the details that still needed attending to just as easily while he worked, he moved to the kitchen, still in a bit of a fog. But someone once gave him excellent hangover advice, so he set to work on the greasiest breakfast he could manage. And if he didn't stop smiling the whole time, well nobody had to know it but him.
Chapter 35

Claudia’s nerves were getting the best of her and she damn well knew it. She'd changed four times already and Tom wasn't due to pick her up for another half an hour. Her heart felt like it was ramped up to hummingbird speed and she couldn't remember being this nervous about a first date. Ever.

Reminding herself that it was just Tom didn't help either. Because this wasn't just the Tom she'd known before. That was a friend and this was romantic option Tom, which was a completely different prospect. And she had to admit it meant an entirely new set of issues for her as well. Being a superstar's friend was light years away from being their girlfriend. And shit, she wasn't even to that stage yet. What if they went through all this just to have him realize the reality of dating her wasn't to his liking? It left a pit in her stomach just thinking about it.

He ended up saving her from dress change number five by arriving twenty minutes early. At least the stunned and pleased look on his face when she opened the door told her that he appreciated what he saw.

"Claude, you look amazing."

It took her a moment to move past the statement and to register what he was wearing. And it wasn't the suit she had expected. He had on a steel blue cable-knit sweater, dark jeans, and a well-worn pair of boots. Even the black pea coat he wore over it didn't look like one of his usual ultra chic choices.

"I think I'm overdressed?" She led him inside, suddenly feeling like she'd already made a colossal misstep.

"That's my fault. I should have told you what I had planned, but I wanted it to be a surprise." He looked her up and down again and swallowed hard before continuing. She found it wasn't an unwelcome feeling. "I didn't expect you to go all out like this. Shit. That sounded bad, but I just know dressing up isn't your favorite thing."

"If the occasion warrants it I don't mind. I know you usually wear a suit when you go out and I didn't want to look shabby next to you."

"That is excellent to know, but you know I never think you look shabby, no matter what."

"You're sweet to say that, Tom." She fidgeted, again feeling out of place, because no matter what he wore he managed to make it look like couture and if she was honest it had always been a bit intimidating.

"Plus, I wanted you as comfortable and warm as possible for where we're going."

"So I should change?"

"I mean I'm having second thoughts about that now that I see you in that dress, but I also don't want you to succumb to exposure. So yes, that's probably best."

"Okay... umm just give me a few minutes. Make yourself at home." She knew how dumb it sounded even as she said it. He'd been to her house countless times, but this felt new and different and she knew it was coming off as stiff. She only made it a few steps towards the hallway before stopping herself.

Taking a deep breath, she turned around and just looked him in the eye. The movements felt jerky,
but she forced herself to give him an explanation. "I'm being weird and I'm sorry. I don't want you to think I'm not excited about this, because I am."

"This is new for us. It's okay, Claude. Just treat it like we're hanging out if that helps."

"Nope. You wanted a real actual date and we're gonna do that. I'm just worried I'm gonna fuck this up, Tom. It's why I said no to you the first time."

"You're not, Claudia. You can't, because I'm just happy to spend that kind of time with you."

"I promise though that I can be normal about this once I have some time. I mean my stomach still gets a little twisty when I think about sex, but... shit it's not that I don't want to or anything. And now I've brought up sex and we're so not there yet, because I'm still wrapping my head around being able to even touch you now." Her breathing had quickened and she was starting to feel dizzy. "Oh fuck, why can't I stop talking?"

He took two of his gigantic strides and pulled her into a strong hug. "Hey Claudia, please don't overwhelm yourself. We don't have to go out if you don't want. I apologize for making it worse by not giving you enough info ahead of time."

"Can you maybe just hold me for a minute?"

Without a second's hesitation he drew her closer. "Until you tell me to stop."

She tried to refocus her thoughts on the objective: first date. He hadn't already bugged out when she'd started to panic, so that was a plus. And there always was the surprise of where he'd chosen to take her. She wouldn't get the answer to that question unless she calmed the fuck down and stopped over-thinking everything.

And without her even noticing it through her haze of unease, they'd made it to the okay to touch each other stage, which she'd been half dreading and half anticipating. He was hugging her and it wasn't weird... well it wasn't too weird. And even with the slight unreality of the situation it was a damn comforting hug. The man was basically good at everything. Before her brain could follow that train of thought into the bedroom, she shut it down and took a steadying breath.

"I'm okay now, I think."

"Tell me what you need now, Claude." He kept a hold on her, now rubbing the small of her back soothingly. Yeah she could probably learn to get used to this.

"I'm gonna go change into something more appropriate and apparently it needs to be warm. And then we can proceed as planned?"

"We can absolutely do that. And hey," he brushed one of her curls off her face and waited for her to look up. "You look stunning. I would be honored to don a suit at a later date and take you out on the town. The only reason I didn't choose that for tonight is that I wanted to keep things simple so we can get used to the idea of being together as a couple."

She nodded and felt a stab of reluctance as she left the circle of his arms. But if his enthusiasm was to be believed, there'd be time for more of that later. And she did believe him. The initial shock of the idea had worn off and she saw that he'd been nothing but sincere with her. And so far he'd been patient as she worked through everything.

This time choosing an outfit was a quick affair. As he'd asked, she went warm and started with a pair of fleece leggings under a pair of jeans. Next she layered a long-sleeved white tee beneath a thick
emerald green sweater. She'd bought it last year and only now realized she'd been remembering his compliment about how the color looked on her. Maybe the idea of him as more had been knocking around in her head for longer than she'd originally thought. She completed the outfit with an ancient pair of Doc Martens and decided that she was as prepared as she was going to get.

Downstairs he helped her into her jacket and she felt the stirrings of something good amidst the uncertainty of everything else. It was excitement. Tom had planned a surprise for her and she could see how eager he was to show her how they could be together. Nothing had prepared her for this, no matter what hints or signs there may have been.

"I didn't think you were an option, Tom." He was rooting around in her hall closet looking for a scarf when she spoke.

"Pardon?" Her heart swelled when he turned and looked at her with the most interested look. Like hearing what she was about to tell him was an absolute necessity.

"I... it's not that I... I never thought of you as someone who I could ever be with, so it's like my head just filed you in the friend section and moved on. It's not that I don't think you're wonderful and kind and funny and enthusiastic and beautiful... because you are. I just want you to know why this is taking time for me."

"Claude, I'm happy to get any kind of glimpse into how your mind works, but please understand you don't owe me any explanation. You want to work through this slowly and that's what we'll do. And for the record, I think you're all those things too."

Seeing her blush and start to stammer a reply, he decided to get things moving rather than let her wallow in being uncomfortable. "Now if you'll find yourself a scarf we can be off."

A task to focus on helped her pull out of the temporary paralysis she'd felt hearing Tom's compliment. Grabbing a soft gray scarf from the hook he'd completely overlooked, she asked the question she'd been trying to resist. "So where exactly are we going?"

"One of my favorite spots in London." The sheer enthusiasm radiating from him was so endearing. "I know how much you love water and it has a pond and it's by the river if we wanted to walk along that too."

She reached a hand up and cupped the side of his face, running her thumb slowly across his cheek. "You're really very sweet, you know that?"

Leaning into her touch, he briefly closed his eyes before taking her hand and pressing a kiss to her palm. It was such an achingly tender gesture and although small, meant a great deal to her. Grand declarations were all well and good, but the little things had always counted to her.

"I'm mad about you, Claude. I don't want to scare you off, but it's the truth." He still held her hand, as if willing her to stay with him.

"Just give me a bit to catch up to you."

"You can have whatever you like from me." It looked like he was going to say more, but instead moved to leave, keeping her hand in his as they headed out to the car.

She'd never heard of Lavender Pond, and if she had, she would never have expected it to house an actual pond. But a patch of woodland surrounding a quaint pond was exactly what it was. Aside from a few brick homes glimpsed through the bare trees, they could have been in the middle of the countryside. It felt so isolated and calm, she instantly saw the allure it held for Tom.
"So you've never been here before?" They hadn't said much as they walked down the tidy brick paths that snaked through the park, but it wasn't an unpleasant silence. Only genuine curiosity had prompted his question. He never felt the need to fill silences unnecessarily with Claudia.

"I had no idea this even existed. It's beautiful." The little park nestled against the Thames was quiet that night. He'd told her how much he enjoyed twilight there that she'd been excited he chose it for their first official date. It was cold as hell, wind whipping her curls around haphazardly, but she was bundled tight and decided the chill was worth it.

"You should see it in the spring when everything is blooming. It's gorgeous. I'd like to take you back then if that's all right." He felt sure mentioning something in the future like that would spook her, but he hadn't been able to stop himself from blurting it out.

Instead, she let out a laugh, burst of white erupting from her mouth as it escaped into the frigid air. "That would be nice." Without turning her sight from the path ahead, she reached over and took his hand. Maybe he wasn't just bullying her into this after all.

They stopped at the edge of the pond, Claudia fascinated by the thin crust of ice that had developed. "I didn't see a lot of this growing up," she explained. "Ice and snow are still kind of magical to me, which I know is so stupid, but—"

"It's not. You can still be awed by something a lot of people take for granted. I think it's wonderful."

"Thanks." He could almost feel the heat radiating from the blush staining her cheeks.

"Claudia," he drew her closer, tugging at her coat's lapel. She looked up at him quizzically and his stomach gave a little jump getting to be near her in this new context. "I'd like to kiss you now."

She started chewing on her lower lip for an instant before she abruptly stopped, as if she realized her lips would be needed for what he had in mind. Nodding slowly, she stilled as he put his hands on either side of her face. He leaned in slowly, wanting to give her time in case she changed her mind.

But before he could make contact, she fell away from him and toppled down the slightly sloped bank. It all happened too fast for him to grab her, but slow enough that he saw every bump as she hit a few rocks on the way down.

The ice cracked beneath her and when she finally stopped she was flat on her back in the shallows of the pond. Without another thought he rushed forward to pull her out, grateful to see her struggling to sit up under the weight of her now sodden wool coat.

Teeth chattering, she gave him a weak smile as he helped her stand. "Told you I'd manage to fuck this up."

"It was an accident, Claude, not your fault. Unless this was your way of getting out of kissing me." The statement was only half jest, as he now felt uneasy about the attempted kiss. What if she had thought it was too much too soon?

"No, I was actually looking forward to that. I was trying not to fall, but apparently I'm shit at that."

"Let's get you warmed up." He wrapped an arm around her and began walking briskly towards the car.

"Listen, I'm sorry about all this. I can get a cab home. I don't want to ruin your seats."

"Don't be daft, Claude. And my house is closer, so we're going there. You need warm water and dry clothes as soon as possible."
"Tom, you don't have to..."

"I know I don't, but I want to. You can't stop shivering and I'm not just going to push you into a cab and say good night. You can forget that."

"Okay," she managed weakly and tried not to think about his leather seats.

He got her in with only a modicum of fuss, helping her shuck off her boots and soggy socks by the front door. She stayed quiet as he led her to the master bath and offered her a choice. "Bath or shower?"

"Umm shower I think." She stood in the middle of the large tiled room, managing to look like a very becoming drowned rat.

"One hot shower coming right up." He reached inside and turned the knobs to get it started. "Just chuck your wet clothes in the tub and I'll see to them. I'll get you something warm to wear in the meantime." He couldn't seem to stop babbling nervously, suddenly very distracted by the idea of Claudia in his shower. "Towels are over there." He actually pointed at the towel rack. Idiot. "Do you need anything else?"

"A bit of privacy?" At least there was the hint of a smile on her face.

"Right. Of course. Sorry." He moved to leave, but lingered at the door. "I know you think you screwed this up, but honestly I'm just happy you're still entertaining the idea of us." And with that at least said, he gently shut the door behind him and started rummaging through doors to find something suitable for her.

When she emerged, she'd used up every drop of hot water and felt marginally better. Although she could tell there were several bruises forming already and the next few days likely wouldn't be too pleasant. She ended up using three of his towels, but figured he wouldn't mind. Tom wasn't usually one to sweat the small stuff. She was even able to find a hairdryer under the sink and did her best to get the curls to behave, but that was a losing battle on a good day, so she settled with getting them dry. And as she was replacing the dryer where she'd found it, she saw the toothbrush she'd used earlier in the week sitting next to Tom's on the counter. The sight pleased her more than she could say.

He'd laid out several things for her, but after squeezing into a pair of boxer briefs, she realized there'd be an issue. Tom was just too damn skinny. The underwear had only fit thanks to the forgiveness of elastic. She left the pajama pants on the bed and pulled on the remaining garments. In addition to the boxers, she donned a blessedly roomy t-shirt, thermal Henley shirt, a fluffy robe, and a thick pair of woolen socks. Figuring he'd seen her in less, she headed downstairs.

She found him in the kitchen, his back to her, fiddling with the kettle. "Umm the pajama pants you left were a lovely idea, but my hips are larger than yours."

He spun around, an almost guilty look on his face. "Shit. Sorry. I didn't think about that. I can look again and see if—"

"It's fine, Tom. I'm almost warm again anyhow."

"And I have something to get you the rest of the way there." She raised an eyebrow at him suggestively and was delighted to see him flush and stammer once he realized how his words could have been interpreted. "Not like that, Claude. Jesus, I haven't even successfully kissed you yet. I meant coffee or tea or cocoa or something warm to drink."
"Sorry, I just couldn't resist that one. Cocoa would actually be perfect right now." She slid onto the nook's bench, strangely unsure of what to do with herself. It had become more complicated the minute he put a romance on the table and she suddenly felt unsure of her place in his space. She was in a different role now and it was strange, like being back to stage one when they’d first met.

He shuffled about, preparing their drinks and she noticed that he'd changed into pajamas as well. It was a comfort to seem him so readily informal and she was grateful for the change. It somehow made him seem more approachable. Like this he wasn't the Tom she had to share with the fans and media, he was simply himself. With a feeling of awe, she realized he'd been sharing himself with her little by little, a luxury few others shared.

But rather than say something insightful or sweet, her errant mouth came up with something she longed to take back as soon as it came out. "It's odd how you can go to a friend's house a hundred times and never see their bedroom. And now I've been in your shower even and it feels weird." She rushed to explain when she saw his crestfallen expression. "Not bad weird! We're just changing things rather than starting from scratch. I'm still adjusting."

"I can understand that. We can go as slow as you need, Claudia. I meant it when I said this wasn't just some passing thing for me. You're not something I'm trying to get out of my system."

"I see that now. I feel bad that I assumed the worst of you to start. I behaved abominably and I said some terrible things. I'm so sorry, Tom."

He chuckled and shook his head remembering the colossal misunderstanding. It was easier to see the humor in it now. "We got a good story out of it at least."

He saw the distress still writ on her face and continued in a more serious tone. "And you don’t need to apologize. It was nothing I hadn’t said to myself a hundred times before I realized no amount of logic was going to stop the way I felt about you. I don’t think I’m good enough for you, Claude. That’s the simple truth."

"It’s not though! I used the things printed about you to cover up the fact that I couldn’t understand that you really wanted to be with me, that I was scared shitless. It wasn’t right."

"Well you’ve apologized and I accept it, but there are no ill feelings. Will you take me at my word on that?"

She nodded, giving him a weak smile. He could see how heavily that had been weighing on her, even despite her excitement over their burgeoning relationship.

Seeking to move past the unpleasant topic, he held two mugs up and motioned towards the lounge with his head. "Come on. I have a hot drink, a warm blanket, and a fire for you."

"Tom?" She pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, chin resting on her knees. There was no indication she’d even heard his last statement. It struck him as a protective kind of stance and he braced himself for the worst. But her question a moment later made him rethink that initial assessment.

"Would you… could I maybe get a full tour of the house soon? So we can get past the weird?"

It may have taken such a defensive posture for her to be able to get the question out, but she’d made the effort. Now that she’d brought it up he realized there were whole floors of her own home that he’d never so much as glimpsed. It was a practical suggestion, though he suspected it was more sentimental and symbolic than anything. She was actively seeking ways to remove the barriers
between them and his heart skipped a beat seeing how small and vulnerable she looked, that she allowed him to see it.

Gently setting the cups down on the counter, he crossed to where she sat perched on the edge of the bench. He traced a finger down her jaw before hooking it under her chin and nudging her face up to look at him properly. “What a perfect idea.” He could feel the tension begin to leave her when she saw he wasn’t going to rebuff the idea. Unable to resist himself, he pressed a kiss to her forehead before continuing. “We’ll put that on the agenda for tomorrow though. Getting you a look at the guest bedroom or the gym isn’t my highest priority just now.” He held out his hand and when she put her smaller one in his, he drew her up. “Now I need to be sure you don’t get pneumonia.”

“Okay.” The smile she gave him was still shy of her usual one, but it lifted his spirits nonetheless. She seemed to be actively combating her instinct to close herself off and he couldn’t be more grateful.

He fussed around as he got her settled on a chaise near the fireplace, now the one seemingly unsure of where he should end up. He just didn’t want to make any assumptions and would rather be too cautious than ignore her request to move slow. She took pity on him and patted the spot beside her. "Get over here, you dork. You can't make me sit all by myself on a first date and there's plenty of room."

He pulled back the blanket and sat down beside her. After a moment's contemplation he asked her to stand up as he decided on the best position for them. She watched with a fond smile as he propped himself against the back and stretched out his impossibly long legs. He beckoned her to sit in front of him and drew the blanket up over her when she settled. With a fire beside her and Tom's body heat behind her, she finally felt thawed out.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against his chest, feeling his arms close around her after a few moments. "Better," he asked softly.

"Much. Thank you." She thought that they'd finally broken the touch barrier properly. It felt okay to be snuggled against him like this in a decidedly not-just-friends kind of way. Well, more than just okay if she was thinking beyond what was just permissible. It was more, because they were more now.

"My pleasure. I'll admit I didn't plan your mishap, but am nevertheless enjoying this result."

"This kind of thing is new to me. I've never... whatever with someone who was a friend first. I know I'm awkward about all this, but it's... I mean this is good, Tom. I want you to know that I'm happy about the change even if I don't always show it because my brain is too busy trying to recontextualize you. I think I just have to get used to this kind of thing and I'll be able to be normal again. It's just that—"

He stopped her with a shush that wasn't unkind, but firm. "Claude, however you are is fine. I know this is an adjustment."

"Thanks." He pressed a kiss to her temple and she couldn't remember feeling that treasured by a partner in a very long time.

"Now finish your cocoa and get warm."

"I'm starting to think I'm a little too warm and comfy. I'm liable to nod off any minute."

"That is allowed, you know."
"Yeah and I'd trap you down here all night."

"One, it isn't trapping if I'm here willingly. And two, I think it might be good for us to... before we start talking about sex. I mean maybe we need to sleep together not platonically, but without any expectations."

"Like bridging the gap?"

"Yeah." He sighed in relief, happy that he'd gotten his belabored point across.

"I'd need some rearranging if you really want me to sleep here."

"I'm more than amenable to that."

"Are you staying seated or laying down?"

"How do you want me?" The whole thing was rather absurd, but he was starting to understand what it would take to coax Claudia into a relationship. And there was a kind of logic to it even if he did wish they could go straight to the happy couple bit.

"Umm if you could stay like that I can," she turned around to face him and to his great surprise settled into his lap, knees on either side of his hips. "Is this okay?"

"Okay is a word you could use. I would go with perfect or miraculous, but okay works too."

She gave him a contented smile and curled up against him, head resting in the crook of his neck. And although he could feel her breasts pressed against his chest, he reminded himself that they were working up to such things. Now he could be perfectly content to enjoy the weight of her on him and how it felt to be able to wrap his arms around her without having to sulk off guiltily afterward.

"Hey, Tom?" Her question was a bit muffled by his shirt, but he thought he heard the hint of a smile in it.

"Yeah, Claude?"

"You've got a good hold on me now, right?"

"I do indeed." Hopefully in more ways than one.

"So if you can make sure I don't fall off or anything, I think we could try that first kiss thing again."

"You know if you want," she added. And if it was anyone else he would have sworn there was timidity in it, which he'd rarely seen Claudia display.

"I do very much want." He kept a firm hold on her waist and brought his lips to hers before anything else disastrous could occur. Tasting chocolate, he restrained himself and kept it soft rather than scare her off. Claudia, on the other hand, had a different idea, putting her hands on the back of his neck and pulling him even closer. She kissed back deeply, almost hungrily before backing off just as quickly.

Pulling away, she looked down and apologized. "Sorry, I got carried away."

He gently tilted her chin up so she would meet his gaze. He'd noticed she avoided eye contact as a defense mechanism and he wanted to try and lure her out of that habit. "No apologies necessary. That was even better than I could have hoped."

"I uh... I've been thinking about that a lot ever since you asked me out." She settled back down and
he pulled the blanket up to make sure she was adequately covered. He heard her let out a contented sigh, happy to be the cause of it. "So sleeping together on the first date. I was not expecting that."

"Not like we haven't done that before."

"True." She wiggled her hips around and he had to remind himself yet again that this wasn't about sex. No matter what his cock was trying to tell him. "But this is a tad more intimate than before."

"A fact I'm infinitely grateful for. It just feels right with you here like this."

"Yes it does."

"So date number two will definitely take place indoors. I think my heart stopped when you started falling."

"My ass is going to be black and blue tomorrow," she groaned. "We definitely need to avoid potentially hazardous situations in the future."

He tried not to think about the color (or anything else for that matter) of her ass, but should she request it, he'd be more than happy to inspect the state of it. "Knives you handle like a pro, but uneven ground is a hazard. Must remember that."

"So where are we going for date numéro deux?"

She felt his chest rumble beneath her as he let out a low sort of growl. "Right now it looks like anywhere that will require you to speak copious amounts of French, because that was incredibly sexy."

"Tell you what, if you're a good boy I'll take you to Carcassonne the next time you get a vacation. I can show you around en français. I'm an excellent tour guide."

"I will hold you to that."

She nuzzled his neck and pressed a kiss to his jawline. "I like being able to do that," she admitted.

"I rather enjoy it too. God Claude, do you have any idea how wonderful you feel in my arms?"

"Enjoying this, are you?" He could feel her lips quirk up in a smile against his skin.

"Immensely."

"Thanks for warming me up."

"What did I tell you once? That I'm full-service."

"I was lucky to have you that day." She hesitated before continuing, but now that the thought had come up, she knew it would fester if she didn't address it. "That's something we haven't talked about now that we're together. The... the children thing I mean. Is it... does it bother you now?"

The question sounded so frightened that he tightened his arms around her more out of reflex than anything. "No, sweetheart. There are so many options open to us when... if we go down that path. It doesn't upset me in the least."

"I'm not young and shiny and new, Tom."

"You're perfect as you are. I don't want you with a list of caveats. I simply want the woman I... I've
come to care for." He heard a strangled sob and moved her into a more upright position to better look
her in the eyes. "Is that what this is really about, darling?"

"I bet Taylor could give you babies," she began to cry in earnest, trying to gulp down air, yet unable
to catch her breath.

"Oh no, Claude, none of that." His stern tone surprised her. "This is not a compare and contrast
situation. I'm no longer with her. You are the only one I want. I can't make that any clearer. Just. As.
You. Are. Will quoting a cheesy movie convince you?"

He at least earned a snort of laughter from her at that. He continued in a softer voice. "I know it must
be difficult, since society seems hell-bent on equating a woman's reproductive capability with her
value, but believe me when I say that doesn't matter to me. You are a whole person, no matter what
your feelings are saying to the contrary."

He wiped away the tears, happy that no more fell to replace them. "Probably shouldn't have brought
that up on a first date," she finally croaked. "I should write a damn book about all the shit you
shouldn't do."

"I'm glad you did. It was obviously bothering you and needed to be discussed." And the fact that she
even thought about it in relation to him was a miracle.

She took his face in her hands and gazed at him with a look of such affection it made him almost
swoon. "How are you so perfect?"

"I'm not, Claude, I can assure you."

"It sure looks that way from where I'm sitting."

"My view could be categorized with the same adjective."

"You're a dork."

"I thought I was perfect. Now I'm a dork?"

"You can be both. They're not mutually exclusive. And if I'm being honest, I've always had a
weakness for dorks."

"You can add lucky to the list of descriptors then as well."

Rather than respond verbally she simply pulled him in for a kiss. When they pulled apart she
whispered a soft, "thank you," as she settled back into her previous position, this time tucking her
head beneath his chin.

"I'm gonna go to sleep now, okay?"

"I think that's a sound idea, beautiful. Dream of me if you can."

"I'll see what my brain can do. Goodnight, Tom."

"Sleep well, Claudia."
Chapter 36

Several hours later, he felt her stir and sit up. Worried that she was having another moment of panic, he opened his eyes to see her struggling to extricate herself from the robe.

“You okay, Claude?”

“Too hot,” she mumbled, still half asleep.

“I can help.” He tugged at the sleeves and helped her remove it, tossing it onto the floor. But when the task was done she still didn’t settle. She gazed around blinking, looking mildly confused about what she wanted or possibly where she was. “Jumper too?” She nodded and he helped separate the thermal from the t-shirt beneath. Despite his best efforts to hold the hem of the other shirt in place, he still got a healthy glimpse of her stomach as she pulled the Henley off.

Once that garment joined the robe on the floor, she seemed content. And seeing as they were already awake, he decided a position change was in order. His back had already begun to protest the angle it had been subjected to. He put his hands on her waist to hold her in place while he slid down into a fully reclined position. “Sorry, but I had to move,” he explained.

“Can I stay here?” She was now perched atop him, legs still straddling his waist and still strangely upright. Drowsy and soft now, all anxiety seemed to be gone in the wake of a few hours of sleep. She could bloody well do whatever she liked in that position as far as he was concerned. But he saw the beginnings of uncertainty creep into her words and rushed to reassure her that she wasn’t an inconvenience.

“You’re perfect right there, gorgeous. Are you more comfortable now?”

“Mmm yeah. You’re like a space heater, Tom. I didn’t need that many layers.”

“You ready to go back to sleep or did you need something?” She still seemed restless and he was hoping she wasn’t getting second thoughts and was trying to find a good way to escape.

“Touch me, Tom,” she almost whispered the request.

He slid his hands beneath her shirt and ran them over her stomach, waist, and lower back. She hadn’t asked for more and he’d promised not to rush her. The sigh she let out felt like a pressure release and as he gently caressed her skin a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“So soft and so warm, Claudia. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to touch you like this.”

“You really want me.” It was both a statement and a question, like she was truly coming to grips with the reality of it. He saw that those four words were at the crux of all the awkwardness and panic she’d been exhibiting. Maybe she herself hadn’t even understood that, but in the quiet of his darkened lounge he instantly saw the truth. Later he’d probably berate himself for it, but now he just wanted to reassure her.

“More than anything, darling. You have been my dream for a long time now.” He didn’t go any further. Now definitely wasn’t the time to admit the whole of what he’d discovered about his feelings for her, but she at least had to know what he’d said aloud.

Her eyes slipped shut as she replied. “You have me.”
Such a simple beautiful reply infused him with warmth and happiness. Over the past week he’d felt like he was constantly on the verge of losing her completely and as much as he’d wanted more, he’d been afraid of jeopardizing their friendship. That fear had helped him understand the depth of his feelings, because if he’d willingly torture himself by having her only at arm’s length if it meant he could keep her in his life… well he knew what that meant. But she hadn’t run away from him after all and the idea was sheer bliss.

“Are you mine, Claudia?”

“Yes.”

“Can I hear you say it?”

For this she opened her eyes and leaned down to look at him properly. She looked like some kind of goddess to him, face partially lit by the embers of the fire and her hair a wild riot of curls. “I’m yours, Tom.”

She kissed him, and although it wasn’t the frantic rush of heat from earlier, it felt like this truly was their first kiss. They were on the same page now and she finally understood. Her kiss was sweet and soft, just like the woman herself. She was giving herself to him and telling him in a way that she wouldn’t mess up with words. Because words had been failing her of late, but this, this he couldn’t mistake. Nor could she. She couldn’t chalk this up to a misinterpretation of what he wanted.

“You’ve made me so happy,” he murmured between kisses.

“I didn’t see at first.” She pulled away and put her hands on either side of his face. The expression of pain on her face made him ache. “I’m sorry.”

“We’re here now though and that’s what matters.” And he loved her. She’d find that out sooner or later when the time was right, but for now he knew and that meant they could get past an infinite number of apprehensions and mishaps.

She sat back up, reveling in his hands on her skin. The touch had meant so much to her and she wanted to bask in it while it was still new. The hands she’d guided as they worked were now worshiping her and it was so gloriously different and wonderful. He’d seen the possibilities of this long before she did, but thank god she’d been the only one closed off to it. Nothing had felt so sublime in such a long time.

He pulled her from her reverie when he moved one hand to gently cup her mound. “May I touch you here, my sweet? I want to show you how happy I am, how amazing you’ve made me feel. Would you let me?”

Eyes wide with wonder that had finally replaced the fear, she nodded and replied softly. “Yes.”

Grateful that he’d put her in a pair of his boxers, he parted the fabric at the apex of her thighs and worked a hand through the opening. She arched into his touch as he gently probed her slick heat. “God, Claudia you’re so wet, darling.” She only moaned in response as he explored her core, dipping two fingers in shallowly. It was humbling to see her so enraptured because of his touch, because of him and the idea of them being together.

He found her swollen clit easily and began massaging it, keeping his touch light. This had to be perfect for her and despite the passion he felt for her, he wanted to draw things out so she’d get the full enjoyment. It was about her and thanking her for allowing him to have her. He traced his finger up and down over the pearl, only graduating to slow circles when she begged for more.
He kept his eyes focused on her and cataloged every response he saw, adjusting his pace or pressure accordingly. He found himself hungry for details about her, details that he’d previously not been privy to aside from the ribald comments she’d made occasionally. This was the beginning of a thorough study of Claudia’s body and mind, a study that would hopefully take him years to complete. The desire to know her and to please her was so intense it almost took his breath away. And now she was his to touch and taste and venerate.

Picking up his pace, he decided he’d built her up enough and set to work in earnest. He splayed his free hand across the small of her back as she leaned back, grinding into his dexterous fingers. Moving two digits back inside of her, he began sweeping his thumb over her clit in ever faster circles as the fingers worked in and out. Within minutes he was rewarded with a keening cry as her walls clenched around him. A fresh rush of arousal coated his fingers as she rolled her hips as the aftershocks hit.

When she finally stilled, he withdrew his hand, careful of her sensitivity. She slitted open her eyes enough to watch him lick her juices from his hand. Watching his tongue work methodically to lap up every bit of her moisture left her mesmerized. Before he was done, he brought his index finger to her lips and coated them with her sweetness before pulling her down for a kiss. Over the next few minutes they alternated between cleaning the rest of his hand and trading eager kisses.

Eventually she laid down on top of him, a gigantic yawn snapping her mouth open. “You need rest, sweet girl, especially after your dunking. I can’t have you getting sick on me.”

“But—” she gestured at the erection straining against the cotton of his pants.

“Shh, darling. You gave me such a beautiful gift tonight. We have all the time in the world for more.” He kissed her forehead. “And I can tell I’ve exhausted you for now.”

“Thank you. I… that was amazing.”

“Thank you for saying yes to me.”

“We’re an us now.” The dazed wonder in her voice made his heart swell. When the night began he’d never expected to end it with her sprawled atop him, relaxed and unequivocally his. “Can we tell Luke on Monday?”

“We can tell him tomorrow if you like.” The idea of getting Luke involved made it feel so official and he’d jump at the chance.

“Yeah. Tomorrow would be good.” She took one of his hands in hers and clutched it to her chest like it was a lifeline. He didn’t mind, happy to offer her whatever comfort she needed from him. “Let’s have him over for dinner.”

“Wonderful idea. Here or your house?”

“If we do it here I’ll need to run home to grab some fresh clothes at least.”

“I like seeing you in my clothes though.” The admission sent a thrill through her.

“I can guarantee you there is nothing in your wardrobe that will accommodate my hips.”

“You can stay in boxers. That’s fine by me. All the better for me to get a good look at those hips of yours.”

“Perv.” She giggled, making the admonishment a gentle one.
“When it comes to you I absolutely am. But if you want, you can bring some things here so you’ll always have something to wear if we wind up at my place.” He tried to make it sound casual, likely failing miserably. It had probably been apparent how hopeful he was that she’d do just that. The thought of making space for her in his home was intoxicating, as was the reality of having her in his bed.

“You’ll let me have a drawer?”

“Darling Claudia, you can have whatever you want.” And he meant it to apply to much more than an allotment of storage space. “But we can work out the logistics tomorrow. Or later today as I suspect it now is. You need to sleep.”

“So do you. I can’t be responsible for bags under the movie star’s eyes.”

Once again, he pulled the blanket over them and cradled her to his chest. Making sure she was comfortable and safe left him with a contented feeling that surprised him with its intensity. It was a job he was now grateful to have and ready to devote himself to completely. “Goodnight, my sweet Claudia.”

“Night, Tom.”

-XXX-

When she woke again the fire was completely out and the sky glimpsed through the hall window told her dawn wasn't far off. She nuzzled the side of his face and tried to wake him gently. "Tom," she whispered. The idea of her trying to climb down with him still asleep conjured several possible sleep-addled mishaps and she thought it best to avoid them.

But he didn't stir at first. "Tom, wake up just a sec for me."

He grunted, but she knew she'd done the job when his hands went to lightly grip her waist. "Hmm," was all he said in response.

"Take me to bed, Tom. I wanna sprawl out."

That did the trick. His eyes snapped open and he carefully sat up, taking her with him. Now that he was conscious, she felt more comfortable disentangling from him and getting to her feet. When she was fully upright, she reached for his hand and tugged him along as they moved upstairs.

As she slid beneath his covers for the second time in a week, she marveled at the difference in how she felt now verses when she was fuming mad at him for his drunken slumber. She watched as he fiddled with the curtains on both windows before joining her.

"As requested, my darling. One bed for sprawling."

He stayed a polite distance away, unsure of how she wanted to be situated. "You're too far away," she protested and moved to put her head on his pillow, pressing her body flush against his side.

"You are full of surprises, Claude," he murmured.

"No, it's just that you're warm. I don't want to get cold again. That's all."

"Mmmhmm, I see."

“Don’t get any crazy ideas or anything, Hiddleston.”
“Crazy like kissing you?”

“With all that stubble that could interfere? I don’t know.”

“What if we just try?” She nodded and let out a small giggle before he covered her mouth with his, leaving her breathless when he withdrew. “How was that?”

“For some reason I forgot what I was meant to be paying attention to.”

“I can go shave if that would help…”

“Don’t you dare,” she ran a finger down his cheek. “I have a very strong affinity for you with scruff on your face.”

“I have a strong affinity for you period,” he rumbled as she laid her head back down, this time on his chest.

“This is nice,” she murmured a few minutes later in a dreamy tone.

“You know this is what did me in, don’t you?”

“Hmm?”

“Thanksgiving.”

“What do you mean?” She was tired, but she didn’t think she was that tired. The non sequitur didn’t offer her any kind of explanation for his cryptic statement.

“You honestly didn’t notice, did you?” When she didn’t respond, he chuckled and explained. “When we shared a bed at Nana’s house we tended to… I suppose seek each other out while we slept. Every morning I’d wake up rested and content, only to find us tangled together.”

“Tom, I think I’d remember if we’d done some kind of extreme cuddling like that.”

“You’re a sound sleeper, sweetheart. And I didn’t want to ruin what had become one of the best friendships I’d ever had, so I always tore myself away before you woke up.” He slipped a hand beneath her shirt and rubbed her lower back, as if making up for all the time he’d been denied such a simple luxury. “But I couldn’t shake the memory of how good it felt to hold you like that.”

“I thought it was the damn mattress,” she admitted after a few quiet moments. “I even called Nana later to find out what kind it was, since I couldn’t remember sleeping that well in years.”

“Me neither. And it was almost torture once I finally admitted to myself that you were the magic ingredient, Claude.”

“I feel like such an idiot when I look back on all the things I ignored or tried to ignore about you.”

“Like what?” The idea that she’d even entertained the idea of them together intrigued him.

“Like how it became more and more difficult to see you on screen with a beautiful woman.” It was the first time she’d voiced the sentiment in those terms to herself, let alone aloud. “I made up a lot of excuses for turning things off in the middle.”

“Once I stopped lying to myself I don’t know that it was much easier for me. I know how twisted it was, but when you swore off dating I was grudgingly relieved, though I felt terrible about it.”
She ran her nose along his jaw, inhaling his scent as if she wouldn’t know it in her very bones. No, it was simply for the pleasure of being able to do it. And as much as she enjoyed this new facet of their relationship, she couldn’t muster any regret for what had come before, even the things that had temporarily kept them apart. “We don’t have to lie to ourselves anymore.”

“Thank heaven for that, because now that I have you, I have no intention of letting go.”

“Do I look like I’m trying to get away?” She punctuated her words by hitching her leg up and draping it across his thighs.

“I’m the luckiest man alive then.”

He held her fast as she drifted back off to sleep, the stress of the last few days tugging her down into a deep slumber. And though he tried to fight it himself, it inexorably worked its magic on him as well. Despite the sun rising on the outside world, the pair of them fell asleep, wrapped around one another as if they were the only people in the world that mattered.

-XXX-

It might have been a small sound or something her dreaming mind created, but something woke her with a start. She sat up, bleary eyes searching for details in the too dark room. Surely she hadn't slept all day?

As her heart worked overtime through a combination of confusion and panic, Tom's large hand worked beneath the fabric of her shirt to rest on her lower back. His touch didn't immediately set her thoughts to rights, but it did calm her significantly.

"S'matter, love?" Though his voice may have been husky with sleep, his eyes were locked in on her when she looked back at him.

"Did we... what time is it? Shouldn't still be dark." The uncertainty of not knowing whether she'd slept through an obligation or not was starting to ebb away, but her internal clock was still telling her something was off.

She heard him fumble at his nightstand and a soft glow illuminated his sleep-creased face after a moment. "It's just after nine."

"In the morning?"

"Mmmhmm." He slid the phone back onto the table and rolled to face her. "Everything okay?"

"Why's it so dark?"

"That's my fault. I wanted to be sure you got enough of a rest, so I pulled the blackout curtains closed."

"Oh." With an explanation for her disorientation provided, her heart fell back into a more regular rhythm. The previous night's events came back to her as well, as she registered that Tom's warm hand had never left her skin. Even through the gloom she could see the concern evident on his face. "Sorry. I got confused."

"Nothing to apologize for, darling. Why don't—"

Before he could finish the invitation, she was settling in beside him, head invading his space to rest beside him on his pillow. "Hmm I could honestly get used to this. Soft sheets, excellent down
pillows, and an undeniably sexy bed warmer." He gave her a growl of approval, pulling her closer and resting his forehead against hers. "I like sharing your bed, Tom."

"And I love having you here. I'm warm and comfortable with the most amazing woman beside me. It's quite a feeling."

"Even if you're sleeping in later than usual because of me?" She raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. "Because at this point you'd normally have been up for ages already. Are you sure you don't want to pop out for a run?"

He slid a wiry arm beneath her and flipped them over so she was resting atop his frame. "I assure you, I'm completely sated as I am. Many of my normal morning activities would be torture in comparison to my current position."

He didn't miss the brief moment of hesitation that caused her brow to furrow at his words. "What is it, Claude?"

"Completely sated? We haven't even..." Jesus, she really could throttle her brain for bringing the thought to the fore again. How in the hell could she possibly satisfy someone like Tom? Fresh anxiety rose in her chest.

"None of that, if you please." He slid the hair away from her face and brushed his lips gently across hers before continuing. "It's you, Claude. I want you. Even if you decide you'll never be up to anything more physical than what we've already done, then I'd keep on wanting you. Whatever pace you need is fine. So when I say completely sated, know that I don't do so lightly."

"Tom, not to be indelicate—"

"Perish the thought." He grinned up at her like he was expecting and even wishing for a rebuke. She didn't disappoint and shot him a dark scowl before scrambling to climb off him. But his hands had moved to gently cradle her waist and kept her in place. "Be as indelicate as you like, sweetheart. I adore it."

Still huffing with mostly mock indignation, she finished her original thought without even noticing that he'd managed to diffuse her anxiety in that effortless way he had. "What I was trying to say, was that I can feel the physical reminder that there's at least part of you not thrilled to wait for me to decide when we're going to do more than just sleep together."

"That," he nodded in the direction of the sizable bulge in his sweatpants, "will either go away on its own or can be attended to in the shower while I entertain one of the lascivious daydreams I've constructed around you. Don't worry about it."

She planted an elbow on either side of him and rose up slightly to get a better view. "You rub one out in the shower thinking about me?"

"One... hundreds. Honestly I've lost count. But that's not my point. I'm not ruled by it and you shouldn't guilt yourself over it."

As he tried not to succumb to the moment of fear, she caught him by surprise when she swooped down and kissed him hungrily. It was several moments before she pulled away and her eyes burned into his again. "I'm still scared and part of me doesn't understand how I'm this lucky, but I want you, I think in all the ways you want me."

"My miracle," he murmured. "Claudia, you're my miracle."
“I just worry,” she began haltingly. She could all but hear his answer, but it was something she had to say, as if it had to be exorcised. “I’m not... well I mean you’re used to... shit. I’m trying to say that I don’t have what you could call a sculpted body.”

“Please don’t worry about that, darling.” She’d been averting her eyes and when she finally looked back at him her heart skipped seeing his expression. It was a strange amalgam of lust and concern and would have verged on comical if she hadn’t been feeling real anxiety over the issue.

He continued in that patiently loving tone she’d already come to enjoy. “All that sculpted nonsense is just that. It’s not real and often used to hide the ugly individual beneath. You’re sexy and beautiful and real. You’re right that I’m not as used to that as the other, but I assure you I’m looking forward to real more than I should probably admit.”

She nodded, the movement jerky, before burying her face in his shoulder. The tension left her body as his arms closed around her and he hoped the doubt was dissipated, if not eradicated. These things weren’t usually quickly dealt with, but he planned on having a long time to convince her of his words.

“Thank you,” she murmured against his skin and sighed happily. It seemed the act of getting it off her chest lessened the anxiety significantly.

After a few minutes she stirred, stretching with an adorable little grunt of satisfaction. “I need to brush my teeth and whatnot, but I don’t wanna get up.”

“What if you do that and I run and grab us something to eat?”

“You wouldn’t be averse to spending the day in bed?”

“I wouldn’t mind spending the day on a glacier if I’m with you, Claude.” Her cheeks got pleasantly flushed at his declaration. “Did I mention that I’m a sentimental romantic?”

“I’d gathered as much. Can I tell you a secret?” He nodded and wondered what the hell it was. “I like that,” she admitted.

“And why is that a secret?”

“Because if you asked them, most of my friends would say I don’t care for romance very much. But that’s because it’s always been easier to pretend I don’t when my exes haven’t taken the effort. It uh... takes the sting out of it, publicly at least.”

The tone she used was matter-of-fact, but he detected the emotion below the surface of the terse explanation. “I don’t want you to ever make excuses like that for me, Claude. You deserve everything I’m capable of giving you.”

“I’m still getting used to the idea. It’s been a long time since I’ve had that.” She cleared her throat and sat up, a defiant look on her face. “So in the spirit of letting my new boyfriend spoil me, I will let him bring me breakfast in bed.”

“Hear, hear.”

“Will you hurry back? We don’t need anything elaborate.”

“I will make all due haste,” he replied with the smile that he couldn’t seem to wipe from his face.

In the end he didn’t make time for anything other than fruit, scrambled eggs, and toast. But they both
ate heartily, as it was long past their usual breakfast time. Once he cleared the dishes away he
completed his own bathroom chores, happy to have her curl up next to him when he made it back to
bed.

“Hmm much better,” he sighed.

“You we’re gone for five minutes, you nerd.”

“I’m smitten. Time moves slower when the smittee is out of sight. It’s a known fact.”

“Cambridge is going to come and take your degree away if you keep making up dumb words like
that.”

“Not suitably sophisticated enough for you? What about ‘There is the heat of love, the pulsing rush
of longing, the lover’s whisper, irresistible— magic to make the sanest man go mad.’”

“I’m not sure I appreciate the insinuation that I drive you crazy.” Despite the critical note to her
words, he noticed a corner of her mouth curl as she tried to suppress a smile. And she hadn’t balked
at the mention of love, which he filed away for future reference. It had been a quote, but he took it as
a positive sign all the same.

“I told you I was mad about you, but it’s only in the best way. What about this? ‘It feels right to
notice all the shiny things about you. About you there is nothing I wouldn’t want to know. With you
nothing is simple yet nothing is simpler.’”

She hummed in agreement, pulling closer to him. He should have known something straightforward
would be to her liking.

“What I’d really like to hear,” she began, tracing a finger down his arm, “is about those fantasies
you’ve had about me.”

His mouth immediately went dry hearing how husky her voice had become. Spouting someone
else’s words was one thing, but admitting just how adept he’d become at picturing Claudia in any
number of erotic scenarios was quite another. And as if she wished to distract him further, she
scooted up and started pressing soft kisses to his neck.

“Come on, tell me,” she murmured.

“They uh... well they mostly um... begin rather like this. I’ve wanted you in my bed for quite a while
now.”

“What happened next?” He could feel her warm breath on his skin and his thoughts scattered at her
close proximity. Anyone who assumed he’d be a suave seducer hadn’t taken Claudia into account.
Feeling every bit a nervous teen, he realized this was so new, because he’d never felt this depth of
feelings with anyone who came before.

“We made love,” he answered simply. “I’ve considered numerous permutations, but that’s what it
always boiled down to.”

“Show me.”

He rolled over onto his side, breath catching in his throat seeing the certainty and longing on her
face. There was definitely lust at play, but it wasn’t a hasty, foolhardy reaction. She was choosing
him just as he had chosen her.
She took his face in her hands and kissed him almost reverently. There was no haste, both taking the opportunity to savor one another. As the kiss deepened, her tongue mingled with his and he sent up a silent prayer of thanks that he’d been allowed to have her in such a way.

After several sweet minutes, she’d nudged up the hem of his shirt and her hands roved over the planes of his back. He took the hint and pulled away from her only long enough to remove it. As soon as it was gone she began kissing random spots across his clavicle, chest, and shoulders.

None of the reservations she’d voiced before seemed to be in evidence as she sat up and shucked off her own t-shirt. Seeing her like this for the first time, he felt as if his breath had been stolen. It only lasted a moment, but the feeling was more powerful than even he was prepared for.

With an almost shy smile, she climbed atop him and returned her mouth to his. She pressed her body against his and he hoped she enjoyed the sensation as much as he did. They’d embraced several times in the last hours, but now there was nothing between them, no physical or emotional barriers.

His hands wanted to be everywhere at once, burying themselves in her wild curls, wandering over her naked flesh, and slipping beneath the scant fabric that still covered her. Wanting the last taken care of, he flipped her onto her back and gently dragged the offending garment down past her hips, eventually flinging it across the room.

She let out a giggle as it smacked against a far wall, but as he looked back down, seeing her enticingly laid bare before him, all humor left him. His eyes greedily took her in and he knew he’d never tire of the sight.

Instinctively he lowered his mouth to one of her rosy nipples, just needing to explore her body. Judging by the way he already felt, there wouldn’t be time now for as thorough a study as he’d like, but there was always later. She let out the most arousing little moans as he lathed at the nub, occasionally sucking it gently and he was in heaven.

Feeling her hips move restlessly, he slid a finger into her soft folds and began exploring the slick heat at the apex of her thighs. That earned him a deeper and more pleading moan. “Tom, please. More.”

That word meant so much to him. Not just signaling a change in the current activities, but the expansion of their whole relationship. And he’d certainly felt more for her than anyone else that had come before. They all paled in comparison to the brilliant, loving, and achingly sexy woman spread out before him. And she was his. That was the real magic of it.

Unable and unwilling to deny her request, he made quick work of his sweatpants, trying his damndest not to come on the spot when she wrapped her deft little hand around his cock.

“I can’t believe I do this to you,” she murmured as her hand slid slowly up the shaft.

“The mere thought of you does this to me, love. I’m honestly amazed I haven’t come yet simply from seeing you in the flesh.”

She arched up and kissed him, drawing the tip of his cock between her thighs. She was wet and ready, just as eager as he was. Nudging against her opening, she pleaded into his ear. “Go slow, please. It’s been awhile and you’re... you’re big, Tom.”

“Are you sure you want to?”

She almost cried that this perfect man, admittedly one breath away from orgasming, was offering to stop if she needed to. “God yes,” she panted, forcing him to meet her gaze. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything more in my life. My body just isn’t used to you yet, so I need slow to start.”
"I can do that." He kissed her deeply as he entered her, gauging every gasp and moan to see if she was okay. When he was fully sheathed in her warmth, he stiffled. "All right, darling?"

She nodded, a sheen of sweat now coating her lovely face. "Just give me a minute."

"I haven't hurt you, have I?"

She giggled again and wrapped her arms around his neck. "No. I'm just too close already. I don't want to come on the first stroke like some kind of horndog teenager."

"You feel better than I could have ever imagined, Claude."

"Hmm you do too, Tom."

He had to stop himself from telling her how much he loved her. He didn't want her to think it was something he'd say in passing in a hormone-laden state, so he settled for trailing his mouth down her throat.

"Oh god, I don't care." She suddenly begged. "Please move."

So he did, slowly pumping his hips, picking up speed as he felt her nails dig into the flesh of his back and buttocks. As soon as he'd pull away, she'd draw him back eagerly. It took a supreme effort of will, but he managed to hold himself on the brink until he heard her cry out in ecstasy.

He let go as she clung to him, almost sobbing with relief and with the awareness of how momentous a moment it was. When the aftershocks subsided, they stilled, Tom settling some of his weight atop her, keeping the rest on his forearms.

He trailed kisses over her face, happy to see her eyes flutter open after a few moments. "Wow," she croaked.

"Yes, wow sounds about right."

"That was... everything."

He gently rolled them over so she was resting atop him. "Thank you, my gorgeous darling."

Nuzzling the crook of his neck, she shifted position and let out a displeased sort of mew when he slipped out of her. "Are you tender, baby?"

He slipped a finger to gingerly probe her folds, surprised when she began to rut against them. "Ah," he chuckled. "Already want another?"

"Mmmhmm," she moaned. He nudged her legs apart further and began rubbing slow circles over her swollen bud.

"My insatiable darling," he crooned in her ear, gratified to see how needy she was for his touch. "You're so sexy like this, you know."

She moved against his fingers ever so slightly, hips working to increase the friction. Words left her and she plead for more with breathy sighs and insistent fingers. She cupped her own hand over his, not guiding him, just seeking another connection.

He could tell she was close as he pulled her down for a kiss with his free hand. Within moments she stiffened against him and let out a wordless cry. When she sagged limp in his arms, he withdrew his
hand and held her tight.

They stayed like that for several minutes. Tom lost track of the time, as he was precisely where he wanted to be and had no need to measure the minutes. After some time, she stirred and rolled off of him with a little *oof* of effort.

“Well that was basically the best first or any other time I’ve ever had,” she declared, pulling the sheet back over them before resting her head on his chest.

“We’re something special, you and I.”

“I think so too.”

“I must say, as much as it drove me mad some days, knowing you as a friend has made this all so much sweeter.”

“How long have you wanted more?”

“That first press junket did me in. I was a goner for you well before then, but I wouldn’t admit it to myself. And then you were just so damn selfless and stubborn and perfect, that there was no turning back for me.”

He continued, enjoying being able to finally talk about all of it with her. “At first I thought I could ignore my feelings rather than risk chasing you away, but that didn’t last long either. I wanted you in every way, Claudia.”

“You could have just about anyone, you know.”

“Nobody else is you,” he said simply.

“Tell me this isn’t just a dream. I’d given up on ever feeling anything like this and then you turned everything on its head. I’m so happy, Tom. It’s almost too much.”

“It’s real, sweetheart.”

They lapsed into silence, something he wasn’t generally used to. He didn’t feel the normal drive to go and see and do that normally compelled him. It was the same drive the told him to enjoy work while he could, in case the offers stopped coming. But now, now he was honestly content to enjoy doing nothing with the love of his life curled around him.

He was studying the tiny freckles dotting her shoulders when she reminded him of their discussion the night before. “I’m going to grab a shower. Once you take care of inviting Luke to dinner you can join me if you like.”

“If I like,” he scoffed. “You’d better be grateful I enjoy that kind of cheek.”

She slid off the bed, grinning back at him. “I hear you talking and yet it’s not getting you any closer to joining me.”

“Get the water warm for us. I’ll be there to lather you up in no time.”

He rolled over onto his back after watching her saunter off into the bathroom. A bubble of laughter erupted from his throat at the thought of how stupidly, incandescently happy he was. Not trusting his voice, he chose to text Luke. He hoped the invitation sounded casual and he made it sound like they wanted to try out a new recipe on him. Within minutes he agreed and Tom all but raced off to the
bathroom.
They let Luke get settled into his barstool with a glass of wine, both having agreed to tell him over dinner. Claudia found it difficult not to touch Tom in the ways she was now able. Working next to him as always already felt different, as she was now keenly aware of his proximity and body heat and the smell of his body wash. She was even a little perturbed by the distraction he posed, but only marginally. The thrill of knowing everything had changed obscured most of her consternation.

"We're doing a curry, Luke. I hope that's all right." She tried not to sound off, but by the way he quirked his eyebrow in response she had a feeling it was a failure.

"What's going on with you two?" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, gaze tracking between the two of them.

She was dumbfounded by the direct question. Neither had prepared for it, but clearly the change in their circumstances was more than visible, even if Luke couldn't put his finger on the specifics.

Tom answered, a large grin encompassing his face. "Claude and I are together."

"Oh. Well it's about time." He visibly relaxed and took a sip from his glass.

"What?" Robbed of his dramatic reveal, Tom looked a bit deflated.

"We've been treating you two like a couple for a while now. Seems like everyone saw it but you."

"You what now?" She was more than a little confused.

"We've been working your accounts in tandem, just making sure we didn't contradict anything that... well that might develop. And we've prepped strategies for it as well. In my opinion it was inevitable, but you didn't seem in a hurry to figure that out for yourselves."

"Inevitable?" It now felt like he was seven steps ahead of them and it was their damn relationship. She'd only just decided on it the night before.

"I saw how close you were getting and that you work so well together." He shrugged with a nonchalance that rankled her for some reason.

Tom put a hand on the small of her back, sensing her agitation. "Luke, this all sounds a little Machiavellian to me. We only just had our first date last night."

"Okay officially sure that's true, but did neither of you honestly not see the potential of this ages ago?"

"He did," she admitted grudgingly. "So now I'm the idiot who had to be hit over the head with it before I recognized it? Great. It was bad enough that it was just Tom, but now it's the whole damn firm and god knows who else!"

Tom shot Luke a murderous look as the other man finally caught on. The smug almost apathetic way he'd taken the news wasn't well-received. "Claude, I didn't mean to imply—"

"This wasn't some game, Luke. I... this has been hard for me to wrap my head around and Tom's been really patient with me, but to hear your whole office has been treating it like it's a non-issue pisses me the fuck off."
"I'm so sorry, Claudia, truly I am." His pained expression did lend credence to his words. "I thought it was plain to everyone how happy you make him and I'm probably too invested in something that wasn't my business until it actually happened. For what it's worth, I'm extremely happy for you both."

"I'm sure you meant well," she conceded after a deep breath. "But in future maybe don't just assume you can map our whole lives out, yeah?"

"I will do my level best to rein myself in. I am sorry, Claude."

"Yeah yeah, it's done. I'm kind of regretting opening a nice bottle of wine for you, but I'll probably get over it."

He grinned at her and defiantly took another sip. "I'll buy you a case to replace it. Then can we consider that my penance paid?"

"I'll think about it." She went back to chopping vegetables.

"Must have been a hell of a first date if you call me over the next day." While Claudia's attention was elsewhere, Tom grinned broadly at his friend.

"I nearly drowned," she deadpanned.

"Even with that and the risk of hypothermia, it was still the best first date I've ever had." Now that Luke was in on it, he couldn't be bothered to temper his enthusiasm. Despite rolling her eyes, she leaned in when he kissed her on the temple.

"Drowned? Listen, I don't need to hear about any weird kinky shit you guys get up to unless it's leaked to the press, okay?"

They didn't return to the subject of their new couplehood until after dinner. The three of them retired to Tom's lounge with the remains of their second bottle of wine. When Tom drew her down into his lap it was a bit odd at first with Luke there, but she rolled with it, simply laughing as she tried not to spill her wine.

"So I take it you two are exclusive?"

"We haven't actually—" Tom began, but she cut him off decisively.

"Yes." Based on everything he'd admitted to her, she was sure this was a no-brainer. That was confirmed when he broke into such a luminous smile it almost hurt her eyes.

"Can I put my professional hat back on without risking getting kicked out?"

"Go ahead," she'd calmed down and the arm Tom had draped across her waist was doing wonders for her mood.

"Might I suggest a small outing soon to let people see you together? I could do a press release, but that makes the whole thing look cold and clinical. Let the public ease into the idea of you before Tom's next red carpet event. If I get inquiries I can certainly confirm that you're together, but it gets the word out in a much more casual way."

"That makes sense," Tom nodded his agreement, looking positively enraptured at the prospect of going out in public with her and broadcasting the relationship.
"How are we going to handle press for the show?" Their second season was being scheduled for shooting already and she had no idea how this changed things for them on that front.

"No different, I suppose. Except that I'll probably keep the solo interviews to a minimum. The pair of you together will be a much bigger draw. And I'm afraid we may as well allow the personal questions. People aren't going to ignore you as a couple."

"People are still going to care by the time promo time rolls around?"

"Oh god yes. Claude, because Tom's involved they'll care a lot. Not that you're not wonderful, but —"

"But he's the big A-lister. I get it, Luke. No need to spare my feelings on that account. I'm perfectly happy with my career status."

"Christ, that's good to hear. I dread couples that are at... shall we say differing levels of fame. You wouldn't believe some of the jealousy I have to work around purely because one has more Google searches."

"I'm still me. Nothing's changed in my personality overnight. I will gladly support Tom in his megastardom and be perfectly content where I am." As it was, she had no idea how he stayed sane amidst his shooting schedule, press events, charity activities, and everything else. If that was what it took for her to match him in fame, then she'd stay where she was, thank you very much.

She felt Tom kiss the back of her neck before speaking directly to Luke. "You protect her no matter what. I mean it, Luke. If you have to sacrifice me to keep her safe, then you do it without hesitation." The conviction in his voice gave her chills.

"Whoa, you make it sound like people are going to be shooting literal bullets at us. Tom," she swiveled to face him, "I'm a grown adult and I'm already Prosper's client. They can treat me like they always have and we'll be fine."

"Sweetheart, there will be some who want to attack you just because you're with me. And yes the attack might employ words instead of a more tangible threat, but words can do harm just as easily."

"Claude, people might try to use your sexuality against you." Luke looked embarrassed to even bring it up, like he was already apologizing for the media's short-sightedness.

"But I am bisexual. Tom knows that and it isn't an issue. We're monogamous and my sexuality has no more bearing on that than his does."

"We all know that, but some might bring it up in an effort to get clicks or retweets or a higher circulation. You could be painted as the bi tramp that has ensnared poor hapless Tom with your wicked sexual wiles."

"Fine." She sighed heavily, knowing there were a lot of misconceptions out there that could be used against her. "Can we get in front of it? Maybe get the message we want out rather than wait for someone to hurl it back at me like I've been keeping it secret? Which I haven't, by the way."

"I know you haven't, Claude. And I'm sorry to bring this up now and dampen your happiness, but I have to be prepared. We'll see about getting you an interview in Out or something. It would be better with the two of you."

"I'd be happy to be a part of that," Tom declared, pulling her closer.
"Not Out if you can avoid it. The gay male community hasn't always been super supportive of queer women, especially ones that they think can pass for straight."

"I'll look around."

"I'm sorry, darling." He murmured it, suddenly sounding wary and upset. "All this is only necessary because of me."

"So? How many times do I have to tell you that I'm a grown-ass woman and I made my decision to be with you based on all the information at my disposal?"

She stood, tears now threatening to spill past her lashes. "I don't have to be coddled. And Jesus, would you stop acting like you're some consolation prize because your life is the way it is. You're not fucking less because people care who you're dating. Goddammit Tom, you make me so fucking mad sometimes."

Unable to hold them back, the tears began to fall as her voice rose. She knew she was overreacting even while it was happening, yet she couldn't take the loathing note in his voice when he talked about himself like that. "You are worth any of this shit we have to prepare for. Yeah I was a bit reluctant to start something with you, but that wasn't why."

Wiping her face, she turned to Luke. "I'm glad you know and I'm glad everyone else will too. I'm proud of him," she pointed at Tom. "He pisses me off sometimes, but he's good and kind and talented and you will not diminish him in some half-baked attempt to protect me. You hear me? If you wouldn't give a tabloid story a reply before, you don't do it now." She took a long, slow breath and smiled ruefully. "I'm gonna be a shit hostess and go to bed. I'm tired. You two can strategize as much as you want. When you have a game plan that doesn't involve Tom impaling himself on a sword we can have a meeting."

Leaving both of them staring in mute surprise, she pecked Tom's cheek before leaving the room. As she climbed the stairs she heard them begin to speak quietly. Let them hash and rehash everything all night. She was past the point of caring and she'd be damned if she'd let it diminish the joy she'd felt. That happiness would be defended, and fiercely. The best thing to happen to her in years wasn't a career boost or exciting new job. It was Tom, simple as that. No matter how mad she got when he thought of himself as more trouble than he was worth, she wasn't going to lose sight of that. And she certainly wasn't some damsel in need of defending.

It was too much to worry about finding something to sleep in, so she just shed everything in a pile on the floor and retreated beneath the covers. She wasn't lying about how tired she was, but sleep would be a long way off. Her racing pulse and scattered thoughts would see to that.

After twenty minutes or so she heard the door crack open, a thin sliver of light spearing across the floor. "Claude?" It was so soft and so plaintive she almost started crying again.

"Yeah?"

"Can I... I mean I can sleep in another room tonight if you want."

"Smartest idiot I know. Of course I want you with me."

"But we just—"

"Had a fight or whatever you want to call it? Yeah we did. Doesn't mean I'm mad enough to kick you out of bed. Trust me, you'd know if I was."
She heard him chuckle softly and begin removing his own clothes. Once under the covers, he tentatively put a hand on her hip. Wanting to send a clear message, she slid over, pressing her body against his.

"It was all me, you need to understand that."

"All you what, Claude?"

"My reluctance. It was about me, not you. I... I'm risking a lot with you. I fuck these things up, Tom. But in the end I couldn't say no to you. I didn't want to."

Tears welled in her eyes again, but this time it wasn't out of anger. He cradled her face in his large hands, so tenderly it caused a fresh wave of emotion. "Please don't cry, sweetheart."

"You need to understand," she repeated. "You have to."

"I hate seeing you upset, darling."

"Well I hate it when you think that you're not worth the circus follows you. Because you are, Tom. I'm the lucky one here. This press bullshit isn't why I hesitated, okay. You don't need to protect me." She seemed almost frantic, and he knew bland reassurances wouldn't work.

"Ah, but that's my instinct with you. I appreciate you clarifying things, Claude, but nothing you say is going to dampen that desire to keep you safe." She needed to hear the truth.

"The media doesn't matter to me! You do and nothing they say can change how I feel being with you."

"God, you're amazing, you know that."

"Don't try to distract me with a compliment." Despite her warning, he did notice that the tears had abated at least for now.

"I'm staying on subject. You don't know how... how moved I am that you care so much. But despite your protests, I will take you into account when I'm making decisions like this. And it's not that I think you need to be protected in the way you think. We're a unit now. You don't have to go it alone on this or anything else. I know you're bloody strong, but don't discount my help just because you think you should. I'm lucky too, darling, and you need to hear that just as I needed to hear what you had to say. I'm just sorry it came up like this and upset you."

"You apologize too damn much," she grumbled after his words had taken some of the wind out of her sails. At least she'd said what she wanted to say and she thought he'd understood, even if he was still being stubborn as hell.

"Probably." He kissed her forehead gently and wrapped an arm around her. "I would apologize for that, but I don't want to get kicked out of bed."

"Can I even kick you out of your own bed?"

"Darling, you can do whatever you like with me. I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm head over heels for you."

"I'd gathered that. I've got some of that going on too, but I took mine to the literal level."

"So falling into the pond was just a way of telling me you liked me. Well let's refrain from
demonstrations like that and keep it to verbal declarations for now on, shall we?"

She nodded, laughing despite herself. He was too charming for his own good, she'd always thought so. "Stupid dork, you're not supposed to make me laugh when I'm still kind of mad at you."

"I will do whatever it takes to stop you crying, so for once I make no apologies."

"Luke must think I'm crazy."

"No, he's damn impressed by you. He too informed me, in much less colorful language, that I was being unreasonable. We're a team and I wasn't acting like it."

"So you admit I'm right?"

"Partially at least. I think we both need time to get used to this."

"Yeah. I'm sorry I got shouty, but it goes all through me when you devalue yourself like that and take all the blame."

"I just get worried about losing you."

"Don't. I'm here and we're together. You don't have to walk on eggshells around me. Moving slow doesn't mean treating me like a breakable little doll."

In all reality it meant that she didn’t allow herself to go too far down the rabbit hole thinking about their future for fear of getting too ahead of herself. To see if this would really work meant facing some of the not-so-nice elements of their lives. And he had to believe she was up to it, really up to it, rather than constantly trying to shelter her.

"You’re the strongest person I know, Claude," he said quietly.

"Then do me a favor and treat me like it."

"You stand in front of the bullets for enough people. I want to do that for you."

"I don’t always show it the best way, but I do appreciate the sentiment, Tom. I’m not at all used to it."

"We both have adjusting to do. As much as I’ve been longing for this moment, I wasn’t completely prepared for the reality of it. The fact remains that I’m going to have to stop myself from throttling anyone and everyone who has even a cross word to say about you."

She chuckled and kissed him. "At least you’ve admitted you have a problem."

"You’re anything but a problem, my dearest darling Claudia."

"I’ll accept that if you get it through your thick head that I feel that way about you too."

"Deal."

"So on a slightly less emotionally exhausting note, Jules and co will be here in a week and a half. You probably need to prepare yourself for full-scale interrogation."

"They’ve already met me."

"They met my friend Tom. Now you’ve been upgraded and the stakes are higher. Jules is probably
gonna threaten you, just so you know.” She pronounced it so breezily he could tell she wasn’t unduly concerned.

“I will take that under advisement. But I am glad you brought that up. Will I need to... I mean I know they’re staying with you, so if I need to sleep at my place those nights I can.”

“They’re going to be on a different floor on the opposite end of the house from our room. I think we’ll be fine.”

Her use of the word our didn’t escape his notice and he did a little internal jig at the sound of it. “I just don’t want to make things awkward with your family.”

“They’ll be fine.”

“That’s a relief, because I’m already quite spoiled by being able to sleep next to you.”

“It’s been one night!”

“And the handful in Georgia. By all accounts I knew I was a goner when I tried ice cream for the first time too. I’m quite steadfast when I commit to something.”

“I’ve noticed.” She leaned closer and kissed his grinning lips. In a quieter voice she asked, “Are we okay?”

“Of course, darling.”

“If I start messing things up you’ll tell me, right?”

“You’re not messing anything up. Claude, I’m already the happiest I’ve ever been and it hasn’t even been a week. It’s going to get better, not worse. I fully believe that.”

“You’re quite optimistic.”

“Because you’re quite amazing.”

Her reply was cut off by a large yawn. Before she could protest his statement, he plowed forward. “I know you’re tired. Let’s get some rest, okay?”

She nodded, burrowing even closer to him. He’d noticed she liked to start the night with her face nestled in the crook of his neck and he had to say he liked it quite a lot too.

“Next time we have company over let’s not stage the emotional equivalent of the Olympics. I’m too tired even for sex with you, which is really saying something.”

“I’m glad we talked about it though. You’ve never been inclined to hold back your opinions and I don’t want that to change. Even when it wears us out a bit. But I see your point too.”

“What’s the absolute latest we can push off work and still be done before my family comes in?”

He considered the question, hoping she was thinking along the same avenues he was. “Wednesday maybe, aside from the few things we’ve committed to before then. We can cut a lot of time by not having to worry about commuting. But we’ll still have to put our noses to the grindstone.”

“Let’s be lazy until then if we can and enjoy each other.” And get to know each other better now that this avenue of their relationship was open.
“Would you like to run off and take a quick trip together?” He’d escort her to the moon if she wanted it. He felt her tense unexpectedly at the offer though. “What is it?”

She sighed and shook her head a little. “I really don’t want to sound like a bitch.”

“Be honest with me, love. I know your intentions aren’t cruel.”

“Well that sounds like something you did with Taylor. Everything is deceptively easy when you put real life on pause.” She continued in an even tone and he was happy to hear none of this upset her. “And it’s not that I don’t want to vacation with you, because I do. But I want us to fit each other into our lives now that we’re more. I want to do stupid everyday things with you, because I can now. So just bumming around London with you for the next few days sounds perfect. Does that make any kind of sense?”

“It does. I want that too, more than anything.”

“It was a really romantic suggestion though.”

“Oh my romantic tendencies are not hampered by geographical location, I assure you. I plan to bring the romance to stupid everyday things too.”

“We’re of an accord then.”

“It seems we are.”

After a few beats the two of them began to shake with laughter. The stupidly giddy and punch-drunk feeling they had wasn’t going away anytime soon by the look of it. They were both constantly awed by the other and so happy it seemed to pour from them in giggles and snorts of mirth. They held onto each other as it worked its way through, only subsiding into wheezing sighs after several minutes. Claudia felt it was all too happy and surreal to be contained and though her belly ached from it, felt better when it finally tapered off.

“We’re crazy, you know that, right,” she finally gasped.

“Yeah.”

“Just as long as you know.”

After the burst of laughter Claudia felt even wearier than before. But it was the good kind, like one got after completing a momentous task. And yes, some of it came from emotionally draining discourse, but Tom was right that it had to come up sooner or later. Hopefully their future disagreements would end so civilly.

“We need to go to sleep now,” he said after a few minutes.

“I’m trying, but you keep being sweet and dumb and distracting me.”

“I can’t help being either of those things, I’m afraid.”

“And I’m willingly dating you.”

“Listen, I’m absolutely aware of how stupidly lucky I am in that regard. But I will commence to shutting my mouth so we can get enough rest for what is shaping up to be an epically lazy Sunday.”

“I feel honored you’re even willing to be lazy with me... or something. But for real you need to shut up now. Okay?”
Rather than replying with words, he brushed his lips across her forehead, both eyes, nose, cheeks, and finally her mouth before settling back into position.

It was with an odd amalgam of feelings that she dropped off to sleep a few minutes later. She’d never had an argument with a significant other, even ones she’d won, and felt so damn buoyant afterward. It was new and kind of scary, but she was starting to believe that doing relationships wrong in the past didn’t have as much to do with her own failings as she’d thought. It just hadn’t been as part of the right couple.
When he woke alone he had a moment of panic, stupidly wondering if it all had been a dream. But as he rolled over, he caught a hint of her shampoo and the reality came flooding back. No dream could be so vivid or fulfilling. And if the smell wouldn't have reminded his still sleepy mind, the satisfying pull of sore muscles when he sat up would have done the trick.

Unsurprisingly he found her in the kitchen. It gave him such a visceral rush of happiness to see her, again in a pair of his underwear, but this time paired with a tank top of hers. He came behind her, slipping his arms around her waist as he peeked over her shoulder to see what she was making.

"Good morning, gorgeous." The giggle he got rubbing his stubbly cheek against her smooth one was intoxicating. The nervous air was now completely gone and she seemed simply happy and relaxed now. It was a blessed relief.

"I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I love that."

"What?" Whatever it was would be added to a list of things to repeat over and over again.

"Being hugged from behind while I'm at the stove. It does things to me."

"And why shouldn't I know that?"

"Because now you can use it against me in unspeakable ways." She kept moving the sizzling contents of the skillet as he tried distracting her by pressing kisses slowly down her neck.

"I would never," he exclaimed in mock horror. When she wouldn't be deterred from her task, he simply rested his chin on her shoulder and watched. "What are you making?"

"Chorizo. It's going in our omelets."

"I would offer to help, but I'm so very comfortable right here..." He trailed a hand in the air as if to emphasize the inevitability of his choice.

She just chuckled and leaned back to graze her lips across his cheek. He really had no intention of moving unless she requested it, so he was happy to observe from this hitherto unseen vantage point. And in addition to the visual entertainment, he had the physical pleasure of holding her warm, soft frame while she worked. This had to be what heaven was, he decided.

"These," he ran a finger under her waistband and popped it gently, "are becoming a habit."

"I really do need to leave some PJ pants here."

"They all perished in a freak moth migration. And nobody makes them anymore. So you'll probably just have to keep wearing my underwear instead. It's tragic really."

"Is that so? How'd you hear about this moth business at my place?"

"Am I the only one subscribed to the moth-related news alerts? Honestly, Claude, I'm rather appalled at your insect ignorance."

"How is it you're famous again? You're a terrible actor! I demand a recast with someone who can sell me on that stale-ass moth story."

Chapter 38
"Oh no, madame. You agreed to work with me exclusively last night. How quickly you forget. I knew I should have recorded you for posterity."

"Better step up your game then, Hiddleston."

"What if," he leaned in and spoke softly into her ear, "I told you how sexy it is to see you in my underwear? That I am now in possession of a brand new kink after seeing you fill them out in a whole new way?" His voice had gotten low and husky as he went, sending a delightful shiver down her spine. "Would that read as more believable?"

"Much." She swallowed audibly and leaned back into him. "But just to be thorough I think we should workshop that idea later. In great detail."

"You're demanding, but fair." She went back to her task, but by the gooseflesh that had broken out on her arms, he could tell she was moved by his words. Settling into silence, he congratulated himself as she continued.

When she started to softly hum some song or another he felt the vibrations in his chest. For some reason the simple proximity of her in such a relaxed state moved him. He even felt the beginnings of tears prick the corners of his eyes. He knew how much trust in him it had finally taken in order to move into this kind of intimacy. And it hadn't been easy for her, but she'd seen something in him, in the potential of them together that propelled her forward. She could grouse about how difficult it was to go from friends to more, but he knew it was that progression that helped him truly understand what she was giving him in even just this tiny moment. Gratitude swelled in him at the thought of it and it was something he never would have seen without knowing her as he had. Nobody who had made it to this point with her after only a handful of dates would appreciate what this meant, not really.

"Thank you," he murmured it into her ear.

"For?"

"This. Us, I suppose. I know you thought I was half mad when I asked you for more, and I know I don't have the most stellar history, but you're giving me a gift by being with me."

She turned around and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You're not a bad prize yourself, sir."

"I'm getting the better end of this partnership, I'm sure of it." He brought his face close and rested his forehead against hers. "There may be some trying stuff coming when we go public. If I knew a way to head it off I would, but there will be some negative reactions."

"Tom, what is it I keep telling you and the PR wonder boy? I'm a grown adult. That potential for whatever might happen was factored into my decision. I went into this with both eyes open. And I know you're just trying to prepare me for the worst, but consider me properly prepped. We've already talked about this far more than we should." She pushed a curl back from his forehead and was sure to hold his gaze when she continued. "You are worth any media unpleasantness that may come my way."

It took him a moment to reply and in the silence she saw a storm of emotions in his eyes. But he elected to keep it light for the time being. After the heavy conversations the night before he didn't want it to monopolize their first lazy Sunday together. "Yep. Definitely the luckier one out of the two of us."

"Now are you done trying to scare me off? I'm hungry."
"Not scaring off, darling. I just didn't want to surprise you."

"I'm sufficiently warned. Okay?" He nodded and watched her turn back to the stove. But this time she put him to work, pointing at the browned meat. "Drain the grease off that for me, please?"

"Yes, chef." He kissed her neck again for good measure before reluctantly pulling away from her. There would be time to get his fill of holding her, he reminded himself while part of him knew he'd likely never be fully satisfied on that point.

In a matter of minutes she'd pulled roasted potatoes out of the oven, sliced an avocado, and had his omelet plated. It was a show he never tired of watching, like a dance that only she knew the steps to.

"Go sit down and eat," she ordered when he stood nearby with his plate. "I'm right behind you. Two minutes to the window, I'd guess."

"Window?"

"Restaurant speak. Go while it's still hot!"

He complied, quite enjoying the demanding edge to her voice and true to her word she joined him in a few short minutes. "As usual, this is amazing."

"Thank you." He could still manage to make her blush, it seemed.

"So I was hoping we could take Luke's advice today." He kept his eyes on the last of his potatoes, not wanting to see a potential negative reaction from her. As amenable as she'd been to Luke’s suggestion, he didn’t know if she’d be okay with implementing it so soon.

"Yeah, I think that would be good. Get out of the house and then come back and thoroughly warm each other up. Any place in particular in mind?"

"Queen's Park market?" It was one of her favorite local farmers markets and he hoped the familiar atmosphere would keep her relaxed.

"Oh that's perfect! I need to restock my honey and I want to look for a couple other things too."

She finished her meal with gusto, looking back up at him when her plate was clean. He had an odd look she couldn't quite place at first. Then it hit her.

"You're waiting for me to freak out, aren't you?"

His eyes got all soft in a way that made her swoon internally. "I just know you enjoyed that our first date was quiet and private and I don't want to push you too fast."

"Tom, I'm in this. I was on the fence before, but I'm decided now and we told Luke and I'm really kind of excited to test out the public waters today."

"I'm so pleased to hear that, sweetheart.” Placing his hand atop hers, he gave it a squeeze. Pleased had been an extreme understatement. He was euphoric not only about letting the world know they were together, but that she seemed past the ready to run at any moment stage. When Claudia made a decision she good and truly made it, he’d seen it happen before, but when his heart was on the line it was infinitely harder to wait for everything to fall into place.

"So hurry up and finish your breakfast so we can go! I don't want all the good stuff already picked over. You're like a glacier over there." She was impatiently fidgeting in her seat.
"Do you want me to run you home for some clothes?"

"You washed what got soaked Friday night. I can wear that."

"Could you maybe not change out of those boxers though?"

"Ooh Tom Hiddleston, I think you have a fixation! Which is funny, since you don’t seem to actually wear the ones you own."

“And how could you possibly have noticed anything regarding my undergarment proclivities over the course of our friendship, Ms. Rey?"

“It’s not exactly hard to miss. You sit with your legs about a mile and a half apart, Mr. Hiddleston. And I was your friend, not a nun. I could aesthetically appreciate the visual.” She leaned across the table and kissed him gently. "And I will keep these on if you hurry up."

"Will you take them off if I slow down?" He arched an eyebrow at her and gave his best smoldering gaze.

"You've offered to escort me shopping and that's what you're gonna do. The sooner we finish at Queen's Park, the sooner I can get rid of all my pesky clothes and wallow in your bed."

"Excellent plan."

-XXX-

We have some news on the Hiddleston front, ladies and gents. It’s no surprise that some fans spotted him at the Queen’s Park farmers market on Sunday. Nor were we floored to find he was with his culinary costar, Claudia Rey. We were, however, surprised that the two were spotted holding hands and even exchanging a kiss or two while they browsed the stalls.

Hiddleston, notoriously secretive about his romances—at least up until his summer dalliance with Taylor Swift last year—hasn’t been spotted looking even remotely romantic with anyone since the breakup. But the few intrepid fans that talked to him on Sunday said he was relaxed and happy, staying close to Rey even as he posed for pictures.

“If he wasn’t holding her hand, he had an arm around her or a hand on her back. He seemed completely smitten,” one fan gushed online.

Rey has been linked to Hiddleston in the past, but the pair have both denied anything beyond friendship. But it seems that they’ve either taken a step in a new direction or are finally going public with something that’s been going on for a while. It honestly doesn’t matter to us, because a romance-addled Hiddles makes for lots of entertainment, if his time with Swift is any indicator.

If you recall when they broke it off in 2016, Swift’s camp made a point of blaming Hiddleston’s need to be more public than she would have liked. Can you see our eyes rolling over that one? Yeah over a year later and it still sounds fake. Sure, Taylor. Perhaps Rey, who seemed completely unconcerned that anyone may be watching, is a better fit for the perennial bachelor. Or maybe they’re just friends with benefits. Who knows? We don’t yet, but we’ll be on the lookout for anything else that might clue us into either the star’s or the chef’s intentions.
And rest assured, we already have an intern or two on baby bump watch. Both Rey and Hiddleston are just a handful of years away from the big 4-0, so if kids are on the table they'll probably need to start soon. But if they go the traditional marriage before kids route, we're watching for a ring too.

"Well," Luke began, expression unreadable, "your outing was noticed and several gossip sites have run with the story. There are some pictures, but since you went knowing that was a possibility they're just straightforward candids.

"What's the tone of the coverage?" Tom held one of her hands and looked like he was asking if the diagnosis was cancer or not. Sometimes he was dramatic and didn't even realize it, she thought fondly. A lot of her frustration and anger had abated once they were able to go out in public without any noticeable issues. And she'd already perused the online pieces mentioning them and satisfied herself that there was nothing particularly vicious.

"Ranges from neutral to positive. Most are rehashing the Taylor stuff, but really only one we could find that was outright hateful. But it was on a Taylor fan site, so that's not unexpected."

"Ooh did they liken me to the whore of Babylon or something equally as creative?"

Luke chuckled at her question, but Tom was not amused. "If they post one slanderous thing about you I'll take them to court."

"You will not!" Geez he was harder to train than a puppy. "You're not going to police the internet for me, so just get that idiotic idea out of your head. I think it's funny. This is not email hacking or stalking me, so we let the small stuff go. Right, Luke?"

"Correct. You are honestly my star pupil." He turned to Tom with a bemused smile. "If I'm unavailable or in a coma or whatever, Claudia is your media filter. No big decisions on your own. You mean well, of that I have no doubt, and I know you care about her, but don't let that cloud your judgment."

"Claudia had nothing to do with my split from Taylor."

"And we've already gotten that story out. Shouting about it again only make the story bigger."

"Tom, it's really very gallant what you're trying to do, but ultimately unnecessary." She leaned over and kissed him softly. "Trust me, okay?"

"So that's how it is now. I admit it's a bit like seeing your parents kiss... or your kids... or something." He sat back, grinning in a way that contrasted with his words of protest. "That's all I have for you as of now. But the next event I have scheduled for Tom is the Golden Globes. Will Claudia be joining you?"

Tom immediately looked to her for a decision, but she could see the raw hope on his face. Actor or no, sometimes she could read him like a book. "I'd love to, but I'm afraid I haven't been asked." She sighed wistfully and looked at her nails.

"Well before whatever upcoming gross, florid romantic gesture happens, I am ejecting you from my office. Just email me when you have the answer sorted out. Feel free to continue the public jaunts if you want or just go about your business as you normally would. The word is out, so we've accomplished our task."
She thanked Luke and ushered Tom out. The sullen expression he was suddenly sporting worried her, but she knew he'd talk about whatever was bothering him when he was ready.

They parted in the parking lot, each off on separate assignments for the day. "My place tonight, right?" He seemed to shake off some of his funk at her question, looking down at her with a soft smile.

"Yes, ma'am. I wish you were coming with me."

"You can make it one afternoon without me."

"Debatable."

"At least try for me, okay? Then I can promise you a memorable evening."

"You're perfect, you know that?"

"I'm absolutely not, but you're biased."

"Totally and completely biased, yes. I'll be over as soon as I'm done with this blasted interview."

"Okay." He stayed close to her, unmoving despite his pending appointment. "Go! You can have your fill of me tonight."

"Ah, but my darling Claude, I shall never really have my fill of you. I can already tell."

"I think I can live with that. But you do have to go now. Luke will have my ass if I make you miss an interview."

"I will be the only one having your ass, but I do concede your point." He bent down and covered her mouth with his, kissing her soundly before pulling away. "Tonight," he promised after finally breaking their contact.

He didn't get into his own vehicle until she pulled away, watching her as she went. It was a strange sensation for her, wanting so badly to stay in the presence of another. Even when a relationship had gone well she never felt this reluctance to part. And to hear him tell it, Tom felt it too. This was an altogether different proposition, and one she wasn't afraid of, strangely enough.

-Honey, I'm home,- Tom called as he walked down the hall, happier than he'd been all afternoon. When he emerged into the kitchen Claudia's expression told him just how amusing she'd found his greeting. That is to say her face was stony, but she was pursing her lips together trying not to smile. The scowl only lasted a few seconds. "How is it that I'm willingly dating someone that corny?"

"You're an incredibly lucky woman," he asked pulling her into a hug.

"Yeah I am." She stood on her toes and kissed his chin before settling back against his chest. "I'm afraid I wasn't able to get your martini made before you got here, so you have to make your own drink. And just for the record, I do not vacuum in high heels and pearls."

"You're perfect as-is, I assure you." He kissed the top of her head, chuckling as she rolled her eyes at his sentimentality.

Reluctantly she pulled away and moved back to the stove. Something red was simmering away,
giving off a heavenly waft of garlic. She took a wooden spoon and gave it a stir before turning back to him.

“How’d it go?”

“Fine. Boring and predictable, but fine. Though he did ask about you.”

“What about?”

“Just asking whether we were together. Probably just a follow-up after yesterday. And you’ll be happy to know I refrained from bursting into song or dancing while I confirmed that we were. But it was a near thing.”

She shook her head and smiled. “You are such a sap.”

“Take pity on me. I’ve been pining for you for ages. Let a man enjoy his good fortune.”

“I plan on enjoying the man himself later, will that suffice,” she asked, her voice laced with saccharine sweetness.

“More good fortune!” He pronounced the statement in ringing tones, rushing over to sweep Claudia into a twirling hug before putting her back down again. “You’re cooking, so its down to me to make drinks. Would you like anything in particular?”

“No, surprise me.” As he busied himself at the bar, she pulled a loaf of bread out of the oven and put it on the counter to cool. “I’m glad you’re out of the funk you were in earlier,” she said in what she hoped was a casual tone.

“I was mad at Luke, not you, love.”

“Why?”

“He brought up the Globes before I had a chance to ask if you’d be my date. I know large crowds aren’t exactly to your liking and Luke rather cornered you today, but I was hoping—“

“I’d love to.”

His face lit up, blue eyes sparkling in the most endearing way humanly possible. How in the hell she’d originally thought she could say no to him, she really wasn’t sure. Seeing him like that, so happy at something she could give him was a better feeling than she ever expected.

“Will you have a lot of events scheduled around it?”

“I’m not up for anything, so if I do it would be minimal.”

“Then why don’t we make a getaway of it? Go out early and stay somewhere on the beach maybe?”

“That sounds perfect, Claude.” He brought her a gin and tonic, still beaming at his good luck. “What’s for dinner?”
“Just some arrabbiata sauce over penne with some gorgeous fennel sausage I found. I made rosemary bread too.”

“Can I help?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a salad if you want to put one together.”

“Yes, chef,” he grinned and gave her a quick kiss before going to the refrigerator.

After the meal was finished and cleared away (Tom had insisted on helping), they did as they usually did and migrated to the living room. Only this time when they sprawled out on the sofa, Claudia found herself safely ensconced in Tom’s arms, cuddling under a blanket. She had to admit this was preferable to the space they’d used to keep between them.

“That sauce was amazing. Have you ever considered opening a restaurant?”

“Your jokes are terrible. Just be advised I’m keeping you around for other reasons, okay?”

“Like what?”

“Like how sweet and romantic you are. How good you make me feel and how soundly I sleep when you’re next to me. You know, junk like that.”

“Hmm. I’ll keep that under advisement.”

“But I did have news on the restaurant front, now that you mention it.”

“Oh?”

“I had a call today from Alton Brown. He wants to open a new restaurant in Atlanta and wants me to run the kitchen.”

He felt his throat constrict and panic started clawing at his chest. He knew it was inevitable that they’d have to spend time apart, mostly to accommodate his shooting schedule. But this didn’t sound like a quick job. This sounded permanent and he knew how badly she’d wanted to work with Brown.

Keeping silent, he waited for her to give additional details.

“He wants to do a really good take on Southern cuisine without watering it down to make some weird fusion food. He offered me full reign over the menu and a say in the design of the space even.”

“It would be close to your family.” It sounded stilted and strange, but it had been the only positive he could immediately think of. He didn’t want to dash cold water on what sounded like an amazing opportunity for her, even if it felt like his world was crumbling.

She swiveled around and peered up at him, eyes searching his. “Oh god Tom, no! I’m not... I turned it down. My life is here.”

“Oh.” Air rushed back into his lungs just as relief forced him to let out a giddy bark of laughter.

“There’s more, but I don’t want you to freak out on me again, okay?” She repositioned herself and climbed into his lap so she could keep an eye on him. Never would she have expected such a reaction, but she saw she could have told the story a better way.

He nodded, now vaguely distracted by the news she wasn’t moving back to the States.
“I told him I was very flattered and that it sounded like a great idea, but that I wasn’t interested in the
day-to-day grind of head chef.”

“Thank god,” he sighed, unable to stop himself from saying it aloud.

“Jesus, Tom. You’re shaking.”

“I just had a nasty scare.”

“Do you think I’d skip town less than a week after starting this with you?”

“I wasn’t exactly thinking rationally.”

“No, you weren’t.” She pulled him down to meet her and kissed him deeply before continuing. “Are
you okay to hear the rest of my story or do you need a minute?”

“I’m okay. I’m sorry I panicked, sweetheart.”

“I should have led with the fact that I wasn’t moving. I’m just excited to tell you all of it.”

“By all means then.”

“Well, I’m not even sure what made me say it, but I asked him how much he was investing. Then I
asked if he’d have me as an equal partner. I have the money and his name means a lot in that city...
but I suppose mine does too.”

He felt her excitement now that his own worst nightmare wasn’t breathing down his neck. Green
eyes sparkling and cheeks prettily flushed, he didn’t know how anyone could resist her.

“I offered him three months. I’d still create the menu and help with the design, but I’d also hand-pick
an executive chef we could trust to run the kitchen. He still gets me to do most of what he originally
intended and now he’s cut the risk to his capital in half.” She hesitated, a slightly guilty cast to her
features. “I mean I would need to go there, commuting would be out of the question for something
like this, but—“

“But three months is nothing. You’ll be too busy to miss me terribly,” he gave her a smile and a wink
before continuing. “And I’m sure I can find some project to distract me. And we can talk as often as
you like. This is doable, Claude. And it sounds like an amazing opportunity. He took you up on your
offer, yes?”

“Yeah. He was really honest and said he didn’t think I had that kind of capital or he might have
considered the option himself. But I’ve been quite smart with what I’ve made.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

“When will you be gone?”

“Probably February through April next year. I will be able to come home sometimes though.”

“Darling, we’ll get through this. And at the end of it you’ll have a restaurant to show for it.”

“I don’t want to leave you though,” she said in a small voice. He knew it had probably taken a lot for
her to admit that aloud. And as hard as it was to hear the uncertainty in her voice, he was buoyed by
the fact she’d said it at all.

“February is still a few months down the line. We get the holidays together and I’ll make sure our
trip to LA is quite memorable.”

“I know. I just didn’t think we’d have to hit this bump quite so soon.” She offered a weak smile and a halfhearted laugh. “We still have the new couple smell and everything.”

“What, sex?”

It earned him a genuine grin. “Shut up.”

“I know what you mean though. I’m not enthusiastic about the distance, but I am excited for what you’ll be accomplishing.”

“What if I go through all this trouble and nobody comes? What if I fail?”

“Oh sweetheart, I don’t think you understand what it’s like to be on the receiving end of one of your recipes. You’ll be able to pick and train your staff before handing it over to them. It honestly sounds perfect for you and I have faith that you’ll do whatever is in your power to succeed. And I’ll support you however I can.”

“You don’t think it sounds like a crazy, impulsive scheme?”

“I think it’s going to let you go back to something you love without a lot of the drawbacks that had you leave restaurant kitchens in the first place. Yes, a business venture like this is a risk, but that doesn’t make it crazy.”

“You could give professional pep talks, you know that?”

“I’m so excited for you to do this, Claude.”

“I think it’ll be mostly good. Just hard to not be with you. You’ve been in London so much lately that I’ve gotten spoiled.”

“I did have an idea about that, but I can’t make any promises.”

“What?”

“Well, off the top of my head I don’t think I have much on for those months. And I was thinking that I could move my home base to Atlanta while you’re there.”

“Really? You would do that for me?”

“I won’t lie and say it’s a completely selfless suggestion.” He started to relax now that she hadn’t rejected the idea immediately. “I was thinking we could rent somewhere close to wherever you two choose for the restaurant, make it as easy on you as possible.”

“Yeah, being cooped up in even a nice hotel for three months sounds awful.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, he rejoiced inwardly at the idea of showing her how it could be to live together. And as was usually their way, the prospect of such a thing outside of their normal lives in London made it less frightening a risk to take.

“I’ll look into that tomorrow and we can hopefully get some tentative plans made, okay?”

“Okay.” She laid her head on his chest and already he could tell she was back to being more eager for the new project than apprehensive about the separation. “Even if you can’t make it work with your schedule, it means a lot to me that you offered.”
“You have given me so much, and not just since we got together. I would be selfish if I didn’t want to reciprocate.”

“I’m lucky you’re my partner, Tom. I always was, but I’m doubly so now.”

“Claude, you deserve my best.”

“I do,” she admitted after a few quiet moments. “And I have from the others before you, but I can’t say I ever got more than lip service on that front. So thank you for saying it and actually meaning it.”

He kissed her forehead and drew her closer. “There have been a lot of changes for you in the past few days,” he murmured. “Even when it’s good that has to be overwhelming. Why don’t we watch something mind-numbing and go to bed early?”

“I have one condition.”

“Name it.”

“That I don’t have to move. I’m quickly finding that you make excellent furniture.”

“Easiest concession ever.”
“Okay, so they land at 10:15 on Tuesday and I figured the grownups will need a rest, so we can get them settled here and then kidnap Moira.”

“She won’t be too tired?”

“Airplanes are like a sedative for her. She’ll be raring to go. We’d be doing Jules and Nali a favor by wearing her out.” Claudia turned away from the cookie dough she’d been prepping to freeze. She was in full Christmas nesting mode, excited to be the hostess for the first time in years. “You sure you’re up to the whole shebang?”

“What? Meaning the baking and babysitting and the general whirlwind coming our way?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m looking forward to it actually.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course. I like the idea of seeing family Christmas Claude. But it’s mostly just that you’ve promised me cookies.”

“Yeah uh huh. Well you’re not getting them now. I want to have enough prepped so I can keep the chaos restricted to decoration only. The last thing I want is Mo trying to make dough.”

“You always think of everything.”

“In that vein, I did want to ask what your... um our plans were for the big day. I’m sure you have family stuff too.”

“Emma is having us all over on Christmas Eve. I figured that keeps us free to do Christmas here. And we can watch Mo open presents in the morning and you can feed everyone until we’re all ready to pop.” He saw the uncertain expression on her face and felt the need to be abundantly clear. “Of course you’re invited along with the rest of the family. My sisters are dying to meet you.”

He rushed forward, eyes now focused on the dough in front of her. “I mean I understand that it’s a big step for you and that we haven’t been together that long, so if you’d rather stay home, I get that. I just want to show you off, which is a bit neanderthal of me, but there you have it.”

“You know, you’re stupidly cute when you’re asking me things you think I’m going to say no to.”

“Are you saying no?”

“No.”

He looked up and smiled. “Are you saying yes?”

“Yes.”

The smile cranked up to eleven. It did something to her heart to see him that happy. “That’s perfect then! They will be over the moon at getting to meet you.”

“And I will try not to cock it all up.”
“You won’t, darling.” He came behind her and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“Not fair,” she grumbled.

He ignored the comment and continued in a soothing tone. “You can’t possibly mess it up, because you’re wonderful and they all know how happy you make me. And Mum already adores you.”

“Not fair that you got to meet mine as a friend.”

“I did rather luck out on that, didn’t I?”

“You did.” She turned around and hugged him back. “I am happy to get to know them though. A bit anxious about it, but excited too.”

“Good. And I’ve already done the presents, so I’ll say they’re from both of us to save you another heart attack or two, shall I?”

“And I’ll do the same with my people and we can make it through our first Christmas together unscathed.”

“I do love it when a holiday doesn’t lead to loss of limb.”

“You’re better than a dose of Xanax.”

“Let me tell you, that’s exactly what a man likes to hear when he’s trying to get his girlfriend into bed.”

“You’re not trying terribly hard though.”

“Always just assume I am, okay?” He brushed his lips against hers and continued. “And to kill two birds with one stone, what do you say to a hot bath? It will relax you and get you out of your clothes, so it’s a win all round.”

“Will you read to me?”

“I’d be happy to.”

“But I want to make a little change from the last time you did it.”

“Which is?”

“That you join me in the tub.”

“Oh I can absolutely oblige you on that request. In fact,” he motioned to the cookie dough she’d been wrapping, “is this ready to freeze?”

“Uh yeah.”

Before she could ask about the non sequitur, he’d hoisted her up and slung her over one shoulder, grabbing the plastic wrapped confection with his free hand. After he unceremoniously stashed it in the freezer, he took his squirming, laughing parcel upstairs.

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Surprisingly, Tom was the one that woke Claudia on Christmas morning, rather than Moira, as she’d expected. It felt like it had only been a few hours since they’d poured themselves into bed after
getting home from Emma’s and she wasn’t very inclined to listen to even Tom’s voice.

“Darling, wake up for me please.”

The resultant reply was something akin to a grunt and god help him even that sounded cute coming from Claudia. He tried again.

“I wanted to have a moment with you before the day begins and I have a feeling Moira won’t wait much longer.”

This time she rolled over and buried her face in the crook of his neck. The groan she let out threatened to derail his plans in favor of something a bit more carnal, but he refocused and kept going.

“Claude, you can’t wallow in bed all morning.”

“Too early,” she mumbled. At least whole words were a step in the right direction.

“I know, but this is the calm before the storm. Don’t you want to be awake and braced for Moira?”

“Why are you so damn perky? We stayed up so late.”

“I’m excited. First Christmas together is rather momentous.”

“Oh god,” she lamented. “You’re too sweet to be mad at.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.”

“Okay.” She opened her eyes and let out a deep sigh as she stretched. “Okay. Okay. I’m up. Sort of.”

He kissed her soundly, gratified that it seemed to perk her up further. “Happy Christmas, Claude.”

“Happy Christmas.” She wriggled closer, enjoying the warmth he always emitted, like her own personal space heater. “Next year we’re staying in bed until noon. I’ve decided.”

He liked the idea of next year and that she was so casually certain they’d be spending it together again. “I can agree to that.”

She took a few more minutes before she was properly awake, eventually sitting up with another languid stretch of limbs. “This is already the best Christmas I’ve had in ages. And it’s because I’m with you, Claude.”

“You’re so soppy in the morning.” But she smiled and gave him a sweet kiss. “Good thing I like mushy romantic types. And as tired as I am, I’m glad you woke me. I wanted to give you one of your presents alone.”

“Oh?” He couldn’t imagine what she could give him that had to be opened in isolation.

She scrambled out of bed, suddenly very alert. Before she disappeared into the closet, he spied a grin that was equal parts excitement and insecurity. Within a minute she’d reappeared and placed a heavy box in his lap. He waited for her to climb back under the covers before he began.

The shiny paper was quickly removed to reveal a plain white box. When he opened it, the thick leather-bound book he pulled out didn’t give him any further clues. It was unblemished by title or author and looked almost like a scrapbook. Rather than gawk stupidly at it and stay confused, he
cracked it open, nothing that Claudia offered no additional information.

The random page he opened to was a recipe, but accompanying the expected measurements and instructions, he found a handwritten addition below it.

_We made this cake in our second episode and you were so excited to learn the proper technique for zesting. I think I’ll always remember how your eyes crinkled when you smiled after decimating a whole stack of lemons. You are so wonderfully excited by things many would call mundane, but I love how you’re almost always able to find joy in simple things. Zesting put you on top of the world that afternoon and I’m so glad I got to see it._

He finished reading the passage and looked up at Claudia. She was gnawing on her lower lip and wringing her hands. Flipping through the pages, he saw that a note accompanied each recipe and they were all ones they’d made together, whether on the show or off. The thick, creamy pages were covered with her neat handwriting, reminding him how each recipe connected them.

“Claude—”

“I just... I wanted to show you how important you are to me and for you to see how much we’ve already done together. Food is more than just the ingredients and you quantify that for me.”

“This is the most thoughtful present I’ve ever received. I love it.” He didn’t want to ruin the moment by telling her that she was the one he loved, but he hoped she had at least an inkling. As it was, a great well of emotion seemed stuck in his chest. He wasn’t prepared for the depth of what her gift had meant to him.

“You don’t think I’m a weirdo?”

“God no. I think you’re sweet and considerate and that this is perfect.” He wrapped an arm around her and drew her close. “Thank you, my darling.”

“You almost caught me writing a few times, you know.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah. I’m not great at sneaking.”

“You’re perfect, Claude. This is so amazing.”

“I’m so glad you like it.”

They were able to snuggle a few minutes more before they heard a thunderous knock on the door, followed by a loud thunk, the sound of shushing, and then ominous silence.

“I think that means Mo is up and ready for presents.”

“Does your family do breakfast before or after?”

“After. I wasn’t what you would call a patient child.”

“I can’t imagine that,” he exclaimed in mock surprise.

“Meanwhile little Tom would probably trade all his presents for a Christmas pudding.”

“That sounds about right.” He laughed and pressed a kiss to her temple. “Come on. If we make her wait too much longer we may have a full-scale riot on our hands.”
The day turned out almost as perfect as if had been ordained by a screenwriter. Mo, raised to have a healthy respect for others, was content to wait her turn as they all opened presents. She even took it upon herself to fetch and deliver them to the correct recipient, practically bouncing around the room as she went.

It took them a good hour to work through the packages, and they were all laden with items by the end. For his part, Tom kept his more dramatic impulses in check, and refrained from showering Claudia with too many extravagant items. The one item she seemed most affected by, a stylist to prep her for the Globes, had seemed almost utilitarian to him. But as she explained later, it was the fact that he wanted her to feel confident enough to make a good impression on their first official appearance together. She’d been more nervous about preparing for the show than she’d let on.

Breakfast turned into a massive affair after the presents were attended to and Tom was happy to be a part of the chaos and even more delighted when everyone stayed in their pajamas. A times he was sous chef and others Moira wrangler to ensure the child’s enthusiastic help didn’t cause any issues.

Jules and Nali sat at the table with the baby and watched on in fond amusement. They said part of their present had been enjoying some peace and quiet when Tom and Claude carted Moira around the city. They could relax without feeling guilty, knowing the girl was safe and having the time of her life. And every night when the trio came home, they were regaled with stories and made to look at every picture the girl insisted on taking with her aunt’s phone.

It turned out that breakfast morphed into a veritable buffet they grazed on for the rest of the day. Claude hadn’t been able to stop herself from making everyone’s favorite everything and nobody seemed intent to resist anything. It was holiday gluttony at its finest. Tom had never been so grateful to be between projects, as he didn’t have to contend with a disapproving trainer the next day.

As dusk fell, he pulled Claudia aside as they took a break from their holiday movie marathon. “Fancy a walk? I’m ready to burst and I need move around or I may never leave the couch again.”

“That sounds nice. I could do with some fresh air.”

When they told the others of their intentions, Jules made it clear that Moira wasn’t to invite herself along. The girl’s face looked a tad sullen at being excluded, but she let them go upstairs to bundle up without a word of protest.

Once they were appropriately layered, they took the same route they’d run over a year before. Neither had to say it, they both just instinctively headed towards the park. Even at their sedate pace, they made it before the cold had become too much to take.

Stopping on the Serpentine Bridge, Tom wrapped his arms around her and sighed happily. “I’m so happy, Claude, and it’s down to you. I love my work and I’ve had some big highs from it, but nothing has felt as good as being with you.”

“Oh good, it’s not just me then. Because everything is better with you and I’m glad I’m not the only one with that going on.” She smiled up at him, again marveling at how comfortable she felt being this honest with someone so soon. There was still one hurdle she couldn’t tackle just yet, it was still too scary, but she went as far as she dared. “You mean so much to me, Tom.”

“You mean the world to me. I’m glad we weren’t quick to jump into this. I think it’s made where we’re at now all the better.”

“I think so too.” Resting her cheek against his chest, she was strangely reassured by the steady thump of his heart. Just feeling how solid and warm he was beside her gave her the nicest feeling of
contentment. There would be times she wouldn’t be able to have him physically with her like this and it wouldn’t be enjoyable, but she knew with every fiber of her being that it wasn’t insurmountable. Distance was an inevitable inconvenience, but it wouldn’t break them.

They stayed like that for several minutes, until he roused her. “Claude, look.”

She pulled away a bit and looked around to see fat flakes drifting down around them. “It’s snowing,” she stated, unable to keep the wonder from what was an unnecessary declaration.

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. “I’m going to have a devil of a time getting you to come to bed tonight, aren’t I?”

“I think I’ll be too tired to stay up very late, so it might not be that difficult. You think there will be enough in the morning for a snowball fight?”

“God I hope so.” Anything that put that kind of excitement in her voice was worth doing, even if it meant he’d end up half frozen and sore by the end of it.

“I love this city so much, Tom. London is the only place I’ve really felt at home as an adult.” She tugged at the lapels of his jacket until he met her gaze. “I don’t want to leave, okay? We can work anywhere, but I want this to be home.”

“Home is wherever you are, Claude. I’m glad you want it to be here, but honestly I’d move to Lapland if that’s where you chose.”

“Well there is a lot of snow there...”

“I mean it,” he said earnestly. She had to understand that it wasn’t a flippant comment.

“I know you do,” she said it quietly. His certainty didn’t scare her, if anything it made her want to blurt out words that she’d been holding back. But this had to be different. This wasn’t going to be a rash declaration, because she’d done that before and it hadn’t worked. Time would be the ultimate judge. If both of them could weather long location shoots and jobs like the one she was taking in a few weeks, then she wouldn’t be able to shut herself up. It was difficult not to jump in headlong, but she told herself that day would come soon.

So because the words were temporarily off the table, she showed him the only way she could. Drawing him down, she kissed him with an intensity that left him breathless. It was several minutes before they separated themselves, and on his part only because he couldn’t continue, even in the now dark and deserted park. Luke would surely frown upon public fornication.

“Let’s go home.” She murmured it against his neck, warm breath contrasting with the cold air. It seemed Claudia’s thoughts were following the same track as his, because as much as he wanted to see her enjoy the snow, other activities were now more desirable.

Something on their faces must have shown, because Jules and Nali accepted their cursory excuses for making an early night of it. The pair even promised they would clean up the kitchen and pack away leftovers before they retired. Even Moira took the news well, though she looked drowsy enough to actually need sleep, nestled between her parents on the sofa.

Tom and Claudia made it upstairs without a mishap, but it was a near thing. Before the door was even properly closed, they were frantically scrabbling at each other’s clothes. Both of them felt an urgent need to prove something to the other, something they had yet to say aloud. Neither could deny that progress had been made, but they had to reaffirm that it was okay the most important words remained unsaid.
Their clothes fell in heaps around them until they were bare to one another. Tom took her face in his large hands and kissed her with so much love that it warmed her very soul. She knew it had to be difficult for him not to verbalize everything that was in his heart, but she also knew she needed more time to admit what they felt now was going to be permanent. It still had a temporary too-good-to-be-true quality that she prayed wouldn’t fade away with time and proximity.

But as he kissed her tenderly, she let all those complex thoughts drop away. This wonderful, kind, funny man was hers and she was damn well going to enjoy him.

As urgent as they’d been just moments before, they both seemed to settle into an almost languid stupor as they made it onto the bed. There was no rush now, no reason not to completely savor each other. It wasn’t that there was any less of a desire to have him inside her, but there was something else too, something that promised a little patience would reward them both.

It took them several hours to exhaust themselves completely, as breathless moans and whispered endearments gave way to languorous limbs and contented grins. Tangled together amongst heaps of disheveled sheets and blankets, Tom enjoyed the lovely quiet Claudia always brought to his head. After they made love, he didn’t find his thoughts stray to scripts or shooting schedules or interviews. She offered an oasis of peace for his overclocked brain, because even if he had dozens of items that needed his attention, for a time it was okay to ignore everything that wasn’t her. It was a new and welcome feeling he’d never experienced before they got together.

“I take back anything bad I’ve ever said about your running,” she declared out of the blue. She shifted, stretched with a satisfied little grunt, and repositioned her head next to his on the pillow.

“I don’t follow.”

“Anything that gives you that kind of stamina in bed can’t be completely evil.”

He chuckled and planted a kiss on her forehead. “Does this mean you’ll be joining me tomorrow morning?”

“Hmm no, I’ll leave it to you. Besides, someone has to stay and keep the bed warm for when you come back half frozen.”

“You would do that for me?”

“I would and will.”

“Then I’ll be sure to make good time if I’m running back to a gorgeously sleepy you. There is nothing quite so endearing.”

“You’re a weirdo.”

“I’m the only one that sees you like that. It means a lot that you’re so relaxed with me, Claude.”

“It’s easier than I thought it would be,” she mused after a few moments. “I worried it would be different when we changed, that I’d always be afraid to not look all dolled up around you all the time.”

“If you’re not happy and comfortable then I’m not doing my job very well. I love seeing you content and relaxed.”

“Good. Then I’ll wear PJs to the Globes.”
“Darling, you wear whatever you please. I will be ecstatic to show you off in anything.”

“You’re serious too, aren’t you?” She peered over at him, a strange look in her eyes.

“Of course.”

“I was kidding. I’m gonna get all dressed up and we’re gonna take a billion pictures before I inevitably take off my heels and get tipsy at the afterparties. But I do appreciate the sentiment, Tom.”

“I might actually have fun this year since I won’t be moping about going to parties instead of being with you.”

“Did you really?”

“Luke can attest. I only went to the ones I absolutely had to and rushed off to your room as soon as my obligation was done.”

“I got drunk when you won, because I thought you’d stay out partying all night to celebrate rather than come and hang out with me.”

He chuckled and rolled over onto his side, facing her. “We were incredibly obtuse people.”

“You say obtuse, I say stubborn and dumb.”

“Be that as it may, we’re together now and I’m looking forward to the chance to not only enjoy the ceremony with you, but also our vacation together.”

The thought of having him all to herself in some cozy beach bungalow was intoxicating. She pressed in close to him, enjoying the body heat now that her own skin had cooled down. “If this mini vacation has been any indicator, we’ll have an amazing time. And you won’t even have to share me with family.”

“I’m glad they came. I’ll get you all to myself in due time.”

“Thank you for being so great about all this madness. You’ve been so wonderful letting Jules talk your ear off and Moira treat you like her own personal jungle gym and god, you’ve even been great with the baby.”

“I’ve enjoyed myself. I don’t get to see my own nieces very often, so I would never stand in the way of you getting some quality time with yours.”

“We will have to set some ground rules for Atlanta though.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll have to make it clear to everyone that they can’t just pop in unannounced just because we’re in town. We’ll be hard pressed to find a moment’s peace otherwise.”

“I’ll leave that to you. I don’t have it in me to give Nana orders on anything and I think Nunk could break me over his knee if he was so inclined.”

“Aww baby, you’re not scared of my grandma, are you?”

“Let’s just say I have a healthy respect for her and do not want to get on her bad side.”

She laughed and nuzzled his neck. “She adores you, they all do.”
“That’s all well and good, but you’re the one I really care about. Do you adore me, Claude?”

“So much it kinda scares me,” she admitted, all laughter gone now. “Tom, I hope you know that. I’m happier than I thought I’d ever have a right to be.”

“I am too, sweetheart.” Before she could reply, a large yawn overtook her. “We’ve had a long day and it’s late. We should probably get some sleep.”

“Probably,” she agreed with another, smaller yawn before proceeding to shift positions until she was comfortably arranged. She usually ended up partially draped over him and tonight was no exception. And where he normally would have found the close proximity too distracting for real rest, with Claude it became a comfort.

After she settled, it was another minute of drowsy silence before she spoke again. “I love working and all, but this lazy existence we’ve led for the past few weeks has been nice.”

“We should take time to do this occasionally. Recharge the batteries, I suppose.”

“Yeah. I think it’ll be good for us.”

They both drifted off considering how wonderfully strange it felt to have something to look forward to other than a bustling professional schedule. They’d been so driven for so long that the idea they could take a rest because they needed it, much less wanted it, was almost a foreign concept. Being together had already changed things significantly and the prospect of even greater changes was more exhilarating than frightening, probably the biggest surprise either could imagine.

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