OCTANTE, HUITANTE

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ACT 1

CHAPTER 1

Monday, February 8, 2027.

Tom abandoned his polite circuit of the room and scanned the crowd for his husband.

Across the office, Charlie stood with perfect posture and perfect French, though his gaze kept flicking toward the exit.

“Close your mouth, dude. You look like a blow-up doll.”

Tom turned toward Lukas, who was wiping his mouth with a cocktail napkin. “You’ve had three quiches.”

“Five,” Lukas said, swallowing a sixth in one bite. “You know I’m bulking.”

Hazel swept between them in dark green silk, balancing a bourbon and three folders.

“The New York group just left,” she reported. “We have signatures on three retainers. By next Monday, this stops being an experiment and starts becoming a real nuisance.”

Julian appeared behind her, listening to the room. “Hm. The acoustic panels still aren’t in. The glass is throwing the room back at itself.”

Hazel flipped through one of the folders. “We are running a firm, not tuning a cello.”

“The distinction,” Julian said, “is less meaningful than you think.”

Tom took a glass from a passing tray without looking.

Across the room, Charlie found him.

He gave Tom the slightest nod.

Tom answered with one of his own.

Charlie's shoulders had crept up toward his ears. A guest asked him a question, and his answer came a beat too late.

Tom crossed to him and leaned in as if he had something private and ordinary to say.

"I think you're done, honey."

Charlie looked up, eyes glassy under the track lighting. "I'm functional."

Tom almost smiled. He touched two fingers to the inside of Charlie's wrist. Charlie's pulse was racing.

"Come with me."

Charlie hesitated, then let out a breath and followed him.

Tom steered him down the hall and into the quiet of his dark office. He pushed the door shut, muffling the party.

Charlie sank onto the leather sofa. Tom helped Charlie out of his jacket, then draped it over him like a blanket.

"I just need ten minutes," Charlie mumbled.

Tom crouched in front of him and kissed his forehead. "You can have twenty."

Charlie's eyes were already closing.

"I'm right outside."

Charlie nodded. Tom stayed another second, then slipped out and eased the door shut behind him.

The guests had started to leave. Staff gathered empty glasses and stacked plates. Near the elevators, someone was arguing cheerfully with Lukas about whether champagne counted as dinner.

Hazel reclined barefoot at the end of the conference table.

“The room survived. Did your husband?”

Tom frowned. “He will.”

The conference phone rang once before Tom hit speaker.

“Tom. It’s Graham. I’ll keep this brief. The anchor group is withdrawing.”

“What?” Hazel sat up.

“They’re invoking section four. The disbursement scheduled for tomorrow won’t clear.”

“That… is not what I was told,” Tom said through his teeth.

“Circumstances have changed.”

“Last Tuesday I sat across from your principals, Graham. I walked them through every exposure point myself.”

“I know.”

“Do you.”

Tom’s phone vibrated against his thigh. He pulled it halfway from his pocket.

Tremblay.

Call me now.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” Graham said. “That’s all I can tell you.”

Tom looked from the message to the conference phone.

“Right.”

The line died.

Hazel exhaled through her nose. Tom was already tapping Tremblay’s name.

Tremblay answered immediately.

“Listen without interrupting. Another complaint has put the sponsorship file under review.”

“Fuck. Another one?”

“Different allegation. He’s flooding the file—they’ll have to take it seriously.”

Tom pressed the heel of his free hand to his forehead. He’d known Michael would make good on his threat. But how was he supposed to have defended their marriage when he didn’t even know what they were going to be accused of?

“What does that mean for tonight?”

“Nothing yet. Best case, they’ll ask for a full documentary response. How quickly can you finish assembling proof of your life together?”

Hazel dragged her laptop closer.

“We already have proof of address, bank statements, travel records, photographs, and messages from last time. We just need affidavits from people who can attest to the relationship.”

“Charlie needs to know,” Tremblay said. “If they question the marriage, he answers for himself. So do you.”

“…I’ll handle it.”

“Tom.”

He shut his eyes. “I mean I’ll talk to him.”

“Good. Eight-thirty tomorrow.”

Tom lowered the phone.

“Get me every clause tied to the withdrawal,” he said. “And every investor Michael can still touch.”

Hazel watched him. “Tell Charlie.”

Tom was still working out how to do that when the door opened.

Charlie came in with his jacket folded over one arm. He looked between them.

“Whoa. What happened?”

“The anchor investor pulled out.”

"…Oh."

Tom touched his elbow. "There was also a complaint about the sponsorship. The file's under review again."

"*What?* Review for what?"

Hazel's hands paused over the keyboard. "They're saying you married Thomas for immigration."

Charlie looked back up at Tom, and Tom saw it happen: the turn inward. The old, brutal math.

What did my existence just cost everyone?

"Char," Tom said. "It isn't true."

"I know."

Hazel shut her laptop. "We can start in the morning."

"Tonight," Tom insisted.

"You need sleep."

Tom shot her a look. Charlie slid his jacket back on.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

Charlie stopped just inside the entryway. Tom locked the door, turned, and took one look at him.

"Come here," he said softly.

In the bedroom, Charlie stared somewhere past Tom's shoulder as Tom helped him out of his tie and dress shirt.

Tom pulled a pair of sweatpants and an old T-shirt from the dresser and handed them to him. "I'll make tea."

Charlie nodded and took them into the bathroom.

By the time Tom came back, Charlie was sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees.

Tom handed him the wide-rimmed mug.

“You’ve been awake too long.”

Charlie took a sip. “I need to be useful.”

Tom sat beside him. “You are. Always.”

Charlie stared into the mug. “Mhm.”

“Hazel is handling the corporate side tonight. Tremblay wants the documents started in the morning. We just have to prepare.”

Charlie frowned. “What exactly did Tremblay say?”

Tom made himself slow down. “A new complaint put the file under review again. At minimum, they’ll want the same things as last time. Proof of our life together.”

Charlie tightened both hands around the mug. “Another interview.”

Tom almost reached for him. Charlie saw it and leaned in first, resting his shoulder against Tom’s arm.

The relief that went through Tom was a little humiliating.

“I hate this,” Tom whispered.

“Me too.”

After a moment, Charlie said, “Please don’t sort my life out while I’m asleep.”

Tom winced.

Charlie pulled back enough to look at him. “Please.”

“We’ll deal with it together in the morning,” Tom said.

Charlie studied him for another second. “Okay.”

He set the mug on the bedside table and slid under the covers. When Tom joined him, Charlie curled into his side. Tom pressed his face into Charlie’s hair and inhaled.

Within minutes, Charlie was asleep.

Tom wasn’t.

Tuesday, February 9.

At two, Tom was still awake. The radiator ticked. Charlie slept with one hand over Tom's chest.

We'll deal with it together in the morning.

At five-fifteen, Tom gave up on sleep. He made coffee in the dark and read Hazel's overnight summary by the faint light of his screen. Then he stood in the bedroom doorway and watched Charlie sleep.

He could wake him now.

Two more hours wouldn't change anything.

A little after seven, Tom made Charlie's tea and left it on the kitchen counter before going to get dressed.

Charlie appeared at seven-thirty with both hands wrapped around the mug.

"You let me sleep."

"You needed it."

Charlie looked at him. "Tremblay is calling at eight-thirty."

"Yeah. Car's at eight."

Charlie nodded and took a long sip of tea.

"Okay," he said, and went to get dressed.

The meeting with Tremblay was short and answered almost nothing. They still didn't know exactly what Michael had alleged, only that the complaint was detailed enough to require a formal response.

By ten that morning, Tremblay was gone. They worked until the windows went black.

Hazel rebuilt the chronology. Every time Charlie hesitated, Tom had the date.

At nine, Hazel told Charlie to go home.

Tom was taking a call in his office doorway when Charlie came past in his coat. Their eyes met. Tom raised one finger, but the voice in his ear kept going.

Charlie waited.

Tom mouthed, *I'm sorry.*

Charlie shook his head: *Don't be.*

He reached out and straightened Tom's collar.

Then he went home.

Charlie made tea and opened his word processor. For a while, the cursor was the only thing that moved.

Tom came home after three in the morning. Charlie took his hand and led him to bed.

Before sunrise, Tom was gone again.

Wednesday, February 10.

Charlie had made little progress. He was supposed to be drafting a chapter on Feldman and silence as duration. Instead, he sat alone in an apartment far too large to be that quiet.

He shut the laptop and went into the living room.

Cheddar was asleep on the back of the leather sectional, one paw hanging over the edge.

Charlie sat beside him and rested a hand on the cat's back, feeling him breathe. After a moment, Cheddar opened one eye, decided Charlie wasn't interesting enough to warrant full consciousness, and closed it again.

He stayed a few minutes longer before going into the kitchen.

The refrigerator was full. Fresh herbs stood in water on the top shelf. Charlie reached for the chuck roast.

He could not speak to investors. He could not stop Michael from moving through institutions the way he did. But he could cook well enough.

He set the roast on the counter. The apartment soon filled with a smell that made it seem lived in again.

By one, the beef was tender. Charlie portioned it into two glass containers and wrapped them in a dish towel.

He called the car service, as Tom had asked. No metro or bus for now.

He pulled on his boots, gathered the warm bundle against his chest, and went downstairs.

Charlie found Hazel near the printers, a phone pinned between her shoulder and ear.

“No,” she said. “Then tell him to read the contract again.”

She ended the call and turned. When she saw Charlie, her face loosened.

“Charlie,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

He lifted the containers. “I brought lunch.”

“Marry me instead.”

Charlie smiled. “I think that would complicate things.”

“Only marginally.” She lifted a corner of the dish towel and peered underneath. “What is it?”

“Bourguignon.”

Hazel shut her eyes briefly. “You’re a saint. He’s in the conference room. He’s been terrifying people since he got here.”

Charlie glanced toward the glass-walled room. “Has he eaten?”

Hazel gave him a level look. “That man is sustained by inherited pathology.”

Charlie carried the food toward the conference room. Tom stood at the end of the table, one hand braced against the wood. Tie gone, stubble darkening his jaw.

Charlie opened the door.

Tom turned, and his shoulders dropped.

“Char,” Tom said, pulling his earpiece free. He ended the call and crossed the room. “What are you doing here?”

“I brought lunch.”

Tom looked down at the containers, then back at Charlie. “You shouldn’t have come up alone.”

“I took a car.”

“Door to door?”

“Yes.”

Tom exhaled through his nose.

From the doorway, Hazel said, “He brought bourguignon. If you make this a crisis, I’ll hit you with a chair.”

Charlie set the food on the table and peeled back the lids. Steam rose, and Hazel was at the table before it cleared.

“Move,” she said, reaching for a plastic fork.

Charlie pointed at Tom. “Sit.”

For a few minutes, nobody spoke. Hazel ate standing up. Tom took one bite, then another. Some of the strain left his face. Charlie sat beside him and let himself enjoy that, just for a moment.

Under the table, Tom’s hand found Charlie’s thigh. Charlie covered it with his own.

The ceasefire lasted fourteen minutes.

Then a young paralegal knocked on the glass door, clutching an iPad to her chest.

“Building security called up,” she said. “There’s a reporter in the lobby.”

“Which outlet?” Hazel asked.

“Le Journal. He says he has questions about Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery’s sponsorship file.”

Hazel was already reaching for her phone. “Security can remove him.”

Tom stood, catching Charlie’s hand and pulling him to his feet.

“We’re leaving.”

“Thomas, if the press knows—”

“I know.”

“We should call Tremblay.”

“I said I know.”

Tom stopped. His grip loosened at once.

“Char,” he said, his voice lower now. “I’m sorry. Please.”

Charlie met his eyes. Tom’s hand was trembling.

Charlie let Tom guide him through the side corridor, away from the glass.

They reached the freight elevator. The doors slid shut with a metallic thud.

Tom turned to him at once. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Okay.”

Tom cupped Charlie’s cheek. “Lunch helped. Coming here was not a mistake.”

“What does the reporter actually know?”

Tom frowned. “I really don’t know.”

The elevator reached the loading level. Tom kissed Charlie gently.

“Go home,” he said against Charlie’s mouth. “I’ll have security walk you to the car. Lock the door. I’ll handle this.”

CHAPTER 2

Thursday, February 11.

Tom usually woke at five-thirty. Today his eyes opened at four-forty-five and stayed open.

The city beyond the windows was dark. Charlie slept curled into his side.

Tom watched him for a moment. Charlie's face was calm. Tom saw the reporter waiting in the lobby anyway. Saw the article spreading. Saw what came next.

He eased out of bed.

Charlie's phone and laptop sat on the coffee table.

Tom had set up the laptop himself. He'd knelt on the rug with the open box between them, Charlie cross-legged beside him with tea, while he added Charlie's university and personal accounts to one clean mail client, saved the passwords, and synced the calendars.

At the time, it had felt intimate.

Now he carried both devices into his office and shut the door.

The laptop woke without resistance. The phone's passcode was the date Tom had defended his master's thesis.

If he changed the mail rules at the server level, both devices would obey.

That should have been enough to stop him.

He entered the filters one by one.

Michael Montgomery. Tremblay. Investor. IRCC.

Government domains. Media addresses.

Skip inbox. Archive automatically. Mark as read. No alert.

He kept going. News alerts off. Browser notifications off. Social media notifications off. Mail previews off. Unknown callers silenced. Message notifications restricted to a small circle of people. Calendar sync disabled.

He could stop. Undo all of it. Walk back into the bedroom. Tell Charlie everything the moment he woke.

He knew that.

He turned off one more notification.

By seven, Tom was at the stove flipping pancakes. Charlie drifted into the kitchen wearing Tom's sweatpants and an old T-shirt, his hair crushed flat on one side.

"Morning," he murmured, wrapping both arms around Tom's waist.

"Morning, angel."

Charlie made a sleepy sound against his shoulder blade.

Tom killed the burner and turned in Charlie's arms. He kissed the flattened side of Charlie's hair, then handed him the mug waiting on the counter. The tea was cool enough to drink. Two capsules sat beside it.

Charlie swallowed the pills, took a sip, and reached for his phone by the fruit bowl.

"I changed some settings on your phone," Tom said.

Charlie's hand stopped. "You did?"

Tom slid a pancake onto a plate. "A tighter Focus mode. I narrowed what can get through."

Charlie looked at the phone. "Why?"

Because I woke before dawn and used your trust against you.

"So you don't get ambushed by garbage all day," Tom said. "News alerts. Unknown numbers. Social media. Anything likely to become noise before you've even had breakfast."

Charlie frowned. “Thomas, I can ignore a headline.”

“I know. But you shouldn’t have to spend half your day sorting garbage from everything that matters. You wanted to work today.”

Charlie studied him for a second.

Then his expression softened. “You did that for me?”

Tom tried not to choke on a laugh. “Obviously.”

Charlie left the phone where it was. He slid his arms around Tom’s neck and kissed him slowly.

Tom kissed him back, one hand settling at the base of Charlie’s spine.

There’s more. I changed your email too.

Charlie pulled back just far enough to look at him.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Tom touched his forehead to Charlie’s. “Eat breakfast.”

Charlie smiled. “Yes, sir.”

Tom turned back to the stove.

Behind him, Charlie ate his pancakes and hummed an unfinished fragment under his breath. His phone stayed beside the fruit bowl.

Tom flipped the next pancake.

By nine, the office was coming apart.

The *Le Journal* piece had already been picked up by two smaller outlets. Secondary investors were calling to ask whether they should be worried while making it clear they already were.

Hazel paced the conference room with her headset crooked over one ear. Tom stood at the far end of the table, his coffee untouched. The secure line lit up.

Hazel hit speaker. “Tremblay.”

“IRCC sent a PFL,” Tremblay said. “We have thirty days to respond.”

Hazel swore.

“How did it come through?” Tom asked.

“To counsel this morning. I need to speak to Charlie today.”

“No.”

Hazel stopped pacing.

“No?” Tremblay said.

“You do not call him in the middle of the day while he’s alone and drop this on him.”

“The letter concerns both of you.”

“I’m aware.”

Tremblay went quiet for a second.

“Here’s what I’ll do. I’m sending the letter, the evidence checklist, and the preliminary response outline to both of you and Hazel. I won’t call him without warning this morning. That is the compromise you’re getting.”

“Fine.”

“Tom.”

“What.”

“If we answer this badly, the application can be refused.”

Tom wrapped one hand around the untouched cup. It had already gone cold.

“I know.”

The line went dead.

At eleven-thirty, Charlie dropped his bag onto the sofa in the graduate lounge. Priya and Sarah looked up.

“You’re here.”

Charlie blinked. “Yes?”

Priya winced. “That sounded more loaded than I meant it to. I thought you might stay home today.”

“Why?”

Priya stared at him. “Oh. Did you not…?”

“What?”

She tapped through her phone and handed it over.

HEITMEYER-MONTGOMERY FIRM HIT BY INVESTOR LOSS AMID QUESTIONS OVER SPONSORSHIP FILE

Charlie read it twice.

“Charlie?” Sarah said.

He handed the phone back. “I need to make a call.”

He crossed the quad and found an empty bench near the Arts Building. The wood froze through his jeans.

He pulled out his phone and called Tremblay.

“Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery.”

“I need the truth.”

“Are you somewhere private?”

“Yes.”

“A Procedural Fairness Letter was issued this morning. We have thirty days to respond.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the application can be refused.”

Charlie looked down at the dirty snow around his shoes. “Even if they believe we love each other?”

“Yes.”

Charlie said nothing.

Tremblay continued. “They don’t have to decide the relationship isn’t genuine. They can refuse if they determine immigration was the primary purpose of the marriage.”

“And Thomas knows this.”

“Yes.”

“What happens now?”

“We build the response. Documents, chronology, evidence. If the officer isn’t satisfied with the paper record, they may call you for an interview.”

“You emailed me?”

“This morning.”

Charlie looked at his phone.

“Right.”

“Charlie?”

“Thank you. I’ll call you back.”

He ended the call, called the car service, and went home.

At noon, the apartment was quiet enough for Charlie to hear his own breathing.

He dropped his bag by the table and opened the laptop.

Tremblay had said he’d sent the email that morning.

Charlie typed *Heitmeyer-Montgomery* into the search bar.

Three messages appeared.

A. Tremblay — IRCC Procedural Fairness Letter / Response Deadline / Requested Documents
A. Tremblay — Preliminary Response Outline and Evidence Checklist
M. Lefevre — Request for Comment re: Thomas Montgomery / Sponsorship File

Charlie frowned.

All three were in the archive. All three were marked read.

Charlie had never seen any of them before.

He opened the first. Allegation summary. Response deadline. Document list. Thirty days.

The second had arrived at 9:16.

We need to prepare both of you ASAP. I want the first round of evidence assembled today. Please confirm availability this afternoon.

Charlie went into the mail settings.

There it was.

Tremblay. IRCC. Investor. Michael Montgomery.

Government domains. Media addresses.

Skip inbox. Archive automatically. Mark as read. No alert.

Charlie stared at the wall. His phone was charging on the counter.

He could call Tom.

Instead, he crossed to the piano.

He played the same progression over and over until he could breathe normally again.

Tom came home at seven with two paper bags under one arm and a stack of library books against his chest. The smell of garlic and tomato sauce reached the room before he did.

“You’re early,” Charlie said.

Tom smiled. “I said I would try.”

He set the food down first, then the books. Charlie crossed to the counter and looked at the titles. Modernist theory. Musicology. Two were from the restricted archive Charlie had complained he couldn’t access without a miserable amount of paperwork.

He looked up. “Thomas?”

Tom leaned one hip against the island. “I found a loophole.”

“I called Tremblay,” Charlie blurted. “I saw the article at school. Then I came home and found the archive.”

Tom’s hand froze over the bags.

Charlie’s mouth was dry. “How much did you change?”

Tom braced one hand on the counter. “I… Mail rules. Notifications. Unknown numbers.” After a pause, quieter: “Your calendar.”

“My—” Charlie stopped. “You went into my laptop while I was sleeping.”

Tom held his gaze. For a moment, he said nothing. Then: “Yes.”

“You hear yourself,” Charlie said.

Tom gave a small, bitter nod. “Perfectly.”

“Everyone else knew before I did.”

“That’s not what—”

“That’s what happened.”

“I was trying to buy you twelve hours of peace.”

“I was already scared,” Charlie said. His voice came out thinner than he wanted. “It doesn’t— You telling me wouldn’t have made it worse. This does.”

Tom winced. “I’m sorry.”

Charlie came around the island but stopped short of him. “Put it back.”

Tom looked at him.

“Everything you changed. And you can’t decide what I can handle.”

“I won’t.”

Charlie shook his head. “I know you mean it. You always mean it, and then you just—do something else.”

Tom opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Charlie turned away.

Tom picked up the laptop from the table.

He removed the mail rules first. Then he restored everything else. The news alerts, browser notifications, social media notifications, mail previews, unknown callers, and message banners. He resynced the calendar.

Charlie didn't watch.

By the time Tom closed the laptop, the food was going cold on the counter.

"It's back."

Charlie nodded. "Okay."

Neither of them moved for a moment.

Tom hesitated. "…I still don't like them talking to you like that."

Charlie almost smiled. "You're allowed not to want things."

Tom looked at the paper bags. The steam had softened the tops.

"I was thinking."

"That's never a good start."

"Don't go in tomorrow," Tom said. "Just—work here. One day. I'm not saying hide or anything. I just… don't walk into it."

Charlie looked at the books on the counter.

"Tomorrow. Not longer."

"Tomorrow."

Tom hesitated.

Charlie crossed the space himself and rested his forehead against Tom's chest.

Tom wrapped his arms around him.

Friday, February 12.

Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, wind pulled snow from the ledges in long white streamers.

Charlie pressed a dissonant chord into the Steinway.

On the kitchen island sat an empty mug, two punched-out duloxetine blisters, and a yellow note in Tom's handwriting.

Enjoy your day. Lunch at one. I love you.

At exactly one, the door chimed.

A thermal bag from a bistro Charlie liked waited outside. He carried it to the island and opened it. Hot soup, bread wrapped separately, and a small turnover.

He left it there.

At the windows, pedestrians leaned into the wind with scarves over their mouths. A bus dragged a grey sheet of slush through the intersection.

Charlie rested his forehead against the glass.

Behind him, steam rose from the open bag.

He went back to the piano and played a little louder.

At six-fifteen, the deadbolt clicked.

Tom came in carrying his briefcase and a thick folder. His tie was loose, his shirt open at the throat.

Charlie looked up from the piano.

"Hey," Tom said.

He set down the briefcase, crossed the room, and kissed Charlie's hair.

"How was writing?"

"Good." Charlie looked at the folder. "Tremblay."

"Yes."

Tom sat on the sectional and opened it. Charlie joined him.

Hazel had marked the pages with sticky tabs, each labelled in her handwriting.

Charlie looked at the first page. “Oh.”

“Tremblay wanted us downtown tonight to start building the response. I told him we’d do the first pass here and meet him tomorrow.”

Charlie looked at him.

Tom caught it. “I should have asked.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

Charlie looked back at the paperwork.

“They’re going to look at how our life works,” he said.

“I know.”

“They’re going to see that you handle most of the money. You arrange the cars. You run the apartment.” Charlie swallowed. “On paper, this looks like you’re my warden.”

Tom shut the folder.

“Stop.”

Charlie looked at him.

“We are not doing this by catastrophe.”

“But the file—”

“We will deal with the file.”

“If they ask why you manage everything—”

“Then you tell them the truth.”

“Which truth?”

Tom leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“Morning tea. The piano. Cheddar stealing my side of the bed.” He looked at Charlie. “The way we actually live.”

“Will that be enough?”

Tom didn’t answer immediately.

He opened the folder again.

“One pass tonight,” he said. “No script. Just the truth, in order.”

CHAPTER 3

Wednesday, March 3.

Nineteen days later, Charlie stood at the foot of the bed in a black suit while Tom tied his tie.

“Too tight?” Tom asked.

“It’s okay.”

Tom undid the knot and started over anyway. The second looked identical to Charlie, but Tom gave it a small, satisfied tug. He held Charlie’s overcoat open. Charlie slid his arms in, and Tom settled the collar before looping the scarf around his neck and pulling it snug.

Tom picked up his briefcase. “Car’s here.”

They took the elevator to the garage. A black SUV idled twenty yards away in the half-dark.

They had made it halfway when a man stepped out from behind a concrete pillar.

A flash detonated across Charlie’s vision.

“Mr. Montgomery!” the man shouted. Another flash. “Is it true your husband is being questioned by IRCC?”

The second flash left a white shape floating in front of Charlie’s eyes. A high, thin ringing started in his ears.

Tom stepped in front of him. “What the fuck? Get out of here!”

The man backed up a step, camera still half-raised. “I’m just asking for comment—”

“I said get out!”

Tom's voice cracked against the concrete. The photographer scrambled backward, then turned and ran up the exit ramp.

"Fucking—" Tom yanked open the SUV door. "Get in."

Charlie climbed inside. Tom followed and slammed the door behind them. His hand closed around Charlie's hard enough to hurt.

The SUV pulled out of the garage.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie," Tom said. "Fuck. That never should have happened."

Charlie tried to focus on his voice. There was a slight delay to everything.

"Charlie."

"I'm fine."

"You're not. Shit. That was my fault. I should've had security down here weeks ago. I didn't think—"

"You couldn't have known he'd be there."

"I should've known someone would try."

Charlie looked down at their hands. His own was shaking beneath Tom's.

"Look at me," Tom said.

Charlie did.

"Your ears?"

"Still ringing. A little. It's fading."

Tom nodded slowly. His grip loosened, but he didn't let go. He reached for his phone with his free hand.

"I'm calling Pierre."

Tremblay was waiting beside the metal detectors in the lobby, a paper coffee cup in one hand.

"Five minutes," he said once they were through. "Answer only what they ask. Do not guess. If there's a silence, let them fill it."

Charlie nodded. His throat was dry.

“They’ll push you on cohabitation and finances,” Tremblay continued. “If they ask whether Tom overmanages your life, tell the truth. Don’t protect his ego.”

Tom looked at him.

“Am I wrong?”

A security door buzzed open before Tom could answer. An officer stepped through with a clipboard.

“Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery?”

Charlie went cold beneath every layer Tom had put on him.

“Just be honest,” Tom said quietly. “If you panic, ask her to repeat the question.”

Charlie looked at the officer, then back at Tom.

The officer opened the door wider. Charlie started toward her. Tom moved with him.

“Sir.” She held up a hand. “You’ll have to wait here.”

Tom stopped, his lips tight.

Charlie took a breath and followed the officer. The steel door swung shut between them.

Room 4-A was windowless and overlit. The table was laminate. The chair was bolted to the floor.

“Coat, please,” Officer Varga said, not looking up from her tablet.

Charlie fumbled the sleeve for a second before getting it off. He tried to hang it on the plastic hook, missed, fixed it, then sat. He folded his hands together, then apart, then together again.

Varga tapped her screen. “For the record, please state your full name and country of origin.”

“Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery. I—I was born in France.”

She began with the timeline. Charlie answered as carefully and honestly as he could.

Varga's stylus slowed. "You seem very devoted to Mr. Montgomery."

Charlie let out a small breath. "He is—" He stopped, then said it anyway. "He is my world."

It sounded worse out loud.

Varga tapped her tablet, then opened the paper file beside her at a section marked with coloured tabs.

"Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery," she said, "this office considers affection. It also considers timing, motive, and how a household functions." She set several documents on the table, squaring them with unnecessary precision. "Help me understand how these fit with what you've just said."

She slid one page forward. "You do not maintain an independent Canadian bank account."

"No."

"You are not listed on the title or lease for your current residence."

"No, but that's—"

"The majority of written communication with counsel has gone through your husband's office."

Charlie stared at the paper. "That's just because it's easier. He—it's faster that way."

"Who keeps your passport?"

Charlie blinked. "I can get it whenever I need it."

"That was not my question."

Heat crawled up his neck. "It's in the safe."

"And who knows the code?"

Charlie opened his mouth, then closed it again. "I—" He stopped. "He does."

Varga made a note.

“You married shortly after receiving a departure order,” she said. “Since that marriage, your housing, finances, travel, legal communication, and immigration response appear to have been organized primarily by Mr. Montgomery.” She looked up. “Why should this not be read as a marriage entered into to secure your status in Canada?”

The fluorescent hum seemed louder, like it was pressing on him.

“He helps me.”

“A structure in which one spouse assumes practical control over the other’s entire life is not simply help.”

“He doesn’t control me,” Charlie said quickly. “He just—he handles things. I don’t like—” He broke off. “That’s not what this is.”

Varga turned a page. “From this file, it appears that when the state moved to remove you, Mr. Montgomery responded by marrying you and assuming nearly every practical function of your life.”

“He was protecting me.”

“From removal?”

“Yes—” Charlie shook his head. “No. I mean, yes, that too, but—” He stopped. “From everything.”

Varga watched him. “If you wanted to leave the residence for a week, manage your own affairs, and communicate privately with counsel, could you?”

Charlie stared at her.

In theory, no one would stop him.

“Not right now,” he said.

“Because you are not permitted? Or because you would not be able to function?”

“He makes it quiet,” Charlie said. “C’est lui qui s’en occupe. I don’t have to—I couldn’t—”

“Je respirais plus, and he made—”

He stopped, one hand lifting from the table before falling again.

Varga didn’t move.

“He made a wall,” Charlie said. “Around it. Around me. I don’t—that sounds—”

Varga stopped writing. “A wall.”

Charlie shut his eyes.

Un, deux, trois, quatre.

“What you are describing,” Varga said, “is a marriage in which daily function flows in one direction.”

Cinq, six, sept.

“He’s my husband,” Charlie said. It came out sharper than he meant.

Varga gathered the papers back into the file. “I suggest you think carefully about how you describe this marriage to this office in the future.”

Charlie didn’t remember deciding to stand.

Varga opened the door. The hallway felt dim after the fluorescent glare.

Tom was exactly where Charlie had left him.

Charlie caught the front of Tom’s jacket, fingers bunching in the fabric. “She—” He swallowed. “She saw right through me.”

Tom’s hands lifted, then stopped short of touching him.

Over Charlie’s shoulder, Tom met Varga’s eyes in the doorway.

Then he turned them toward the exit without a word.

Friday, March 5.

The apartment changed slowly.

Tom came home at two in the morning. He turned the deadbolt and stood in the dim entryway.

Charlie was asleep on the sofa, curled in on himself inside one of Tom's old sweatshirts, his knees drawn tight to his chest. A mug of cold tea sat on the side table. Across the room, the Steinway's lid was shut.

Tom set down his briefcase. He slid one arm under Charlie's knees and the other behind his back, lifting him from the cushions. Charlie stirred with a sleepy sound and turned into him, his face pressing into Tom's shoulder.

Tom closed his eyes.

He carried Charlie into the bedroom and laid him down beneath the duvet.

Tom brushed the bangs from Charlie's forehead. The folder in his briefcase still held a version of their life that looked worse on paper every time he opened it. But for tonight, the apartment was locked, and Charlie was asleep.

Tom turned off the lamp, pulled the door mostly shut, and went back to the kitchen to work.

The doorbell chimed.

Tom had left less than an hour earlier for the office. Charlie was at the kitchen island with a mug of cold tea, staring at nothing. The chime sounded again. He stood, crossed the apartment, and opened the door.

Pierre stood in the hall holding an envelope and a clipboard.

"My apologies, Monsieur. Registered post. It requires a signature."

Charlie nodded and signed. He thanked Pierre, then shut the door and looked at the envelope.

It was addressed to Maxence Caillat.

The return address was Swiss. At the top left, embossed in dark ink, was the crest of a cantonal execution authority.

He turned the envelope over. Then again. He took two steps into the foyer and his knees simply gave out.

He hit the floor hard. He tore at the envelope. Inside was a formal notice.

Conformément à votre inscription au registre de notification des victimes, nous vous informons que Monsieur Jean-Luc Caillat fait l'objet d'un examen en vue d'une libération conditionnelle...

The page slipped from his hands.

The apartment vanished. He was nine again, hiding under the kitchen table, looking at his mother's shoes between the chair legs.

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut.

Papa est au magasin. Maman est sous le porche.

Charlie opened his eyes. He tried to breathe and couldn't. The phone was too far away.

He did not know how long he stayed there before the front door unlocked.

Charlie's hands flew to cover his head.

Tom stopped in the doorway. Then he rushed across the apartment and dropped to his knees.

"Hey. I'm here." Tom reached out slowly. "It's me. Pierre heard you fall. He called me. What happened?"

Charlie flinched when Tom touched him, but Tom didn't pull away. By degrees, he gathered Charlie up until he was folded against his chest, shaking so hard it moved through both of them.

"You're safe," Tom murmured into his hair. "I've got you."

Charlie clutched the front of Tom's shirt. Tom held him, one hand moving in slow circles on his back, and that was when he saw it, a single page on the floor, half under Charlie's knee. He reached past him and picked it up.

He stared at the letter for one long second, then set it down carefully.

"He's getting out," Charlie managed at last. "Thomas—" His voice broke. "Il sort. He's getting out."

Tom closed his eyes. "No. He isn't."

Tom stayed on the foyer floor with him until the shaking eased into an exhausted tremble.

When he finally lifted him, Charlie clung to him, every muscle locked. Tom carried him into the bedroom and lay down beside him fully dressed, rubbing his back.

Only when Charlie's breathing had deepened did Tom slide carefully out of the bed. He stood in the dark, looking at Charlie's shape beneath the blankets.

Then he went back to the foyer to pick up the letter.

Saturday, March 6.

At three in the morning—nine o'clock in Geneva—Tom sat alone in his study.

The Swiss notice lay open beneath the desk lamp. Charlie was asleep down the hall.

At the centre of the page was the name.

Jean-Luc Caillat.

Tom had found a Geneva firm with a weekend emergency number. He picked up his phone and dialled.

A lawyer answered on the third ring.

"I need Swiss counsel," Tom said. "Immediately."

"For what kind of matter?"

"A conditional-release review involving victim notification. My husband is the registered victim. I need to know how we intervene."

"We can review the notice and explain the procedure to you. Without his formal authorization, however, we cannot act on his behalf."

"I'm not asking you to act without him. I'm asking what can be done."

"That depends entirely on what he wants. We can map the deadlines and identify his options. Anything beyond that requires a signed mandate."

“Map the deadlines.”

“We can do that. But retaining us does not make your husband our client.” The lawyer paused. “Does he know you’re calling?”

Tom looked toward the closed study door.

“Mr. Montgomery?”

“Send the engagement letter. I want the procedure before noon, your time.”

He ended the call.

The engagement letter arrived a few minutes later. Tom read it once, signed it, and sent it back.

On the legal pad beside the Swiss notice, he had already written Caillat’s name and started a list of action items.

Tom closed the notice. He left the lamp burning and went back to the bedroom.

Charlie had turned onto his side. Tom set his phone on the nightstand, slid beneath the covers, and wrapped an arm around Charlie’s waist. Charlie moved toward the warmth without waking.

Tom held him with his eyes open, waiting for the screen to light.

By Sunday evening, the panic had stopped shaking Charlie’s hands and settled into his bones. He was tired in a way that made thinking feel too expensive.

Half-finished bowls of soup crowded the coffee table. Damp towels lay in a stack by the bathroom door, and the heavy curtains remained drawn against the daylight.

Charlie was curled into the corner of the sofa under a blanket, Cheddar asleep against his thigh. Tom came in from the kitchen carrying two mugs. He set one beside Charlie and sat down.

“I need to tell you something,” Tom said. He reached out and took Charlie’s hand. His fingers were freezing. “Yesterday, I retained legal counsel in Switzerland for the release review.”

Charlie stared at him.

“Without asking me.”

“I couldn’t leave it sitting there. I only asked them to map the process. To tell us what can actually be done.”

Charlie looked at Tom’s cold hand around his.

“You’re handling it,” Charlie whispered.

Tom pulled him in instantly, wrapping both arms around him. Charlie rested his forehead against Tom’s collarbone. Every muscle in Tom’s body was tight.

“I’m trying,” Tom said, the words vibrating rough and hollow in his chest.

The next four days looked peaceful from the outside.

Tom smiled more easily. He slept harder, one arm loose around Charlie’s waist, certain he had done the difficult thing and done it well.

Charlie moved in the opposite direction.

The piano stayed shut. The laptop remained closed on the island, gathering a fine brightness of dust in the afternoon light. He stopped reaching for books, stopped opening the curtains, and let the shape of each day arrive already decided.

On Thursday afternoon, Charlie sat on the floor with his back against the cold radiator, one of Tom’s oversized sweatshirts hanging loose around him. Down the hall, the study door stood open.

Tom was on a call. Charlie could hear him pacing slowly across the rug, his voice measured and focused.

He sounded alive in a way Charlie no longer did.

Charlie worked his thumb over the stiffness in his knuckles.

He did not have to call McGill. He did not have to follow up with IRCC or speak to Switzerland or see Jean-Luc Caillat’s name written in formal type.

Friday, March 12.

The message came in the morning.

Tom sat in the study with three windows open across his monitor, one of them the Geneva firm's secure portal. Somewhere in the kitchen, the kettle had begun its low murmur toward a boil.

The portal chimed. Tom clicked.

Re: Conditional-Release Review / Caillat, J-L

Mr. Montgomery,

We have spoken with the cantonal execution authority. The conditional-release review will proceed in the ordinary course. Any participation must come from Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery directly or from counsel expressly authorized by him.

Our prior outreach, undertaken on your instructions, has not been accepted as formal victim participation and will have no effect on the review. We strongly advise that neither you nor any third party contact the authority again unless Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery expressly instructs it.

Tom read the final paragraph twice.

He leaned back and pressed his knuckles to his mouth.

The kettle clicked off in the kitchen.

CHAPTER 4

Friday, March 12.

Down the hall, Charlie stood at the kitchen island with a mug of tea between both hands.

“Char.”

Tom’s voice cracked on the single syllable.

Charlie looked up, his face blank.

Tom stopped across from him. “I got a message from Switzerland. The review is proceeding on schedule.”

He paused.

“I told counsel to contact the authority and try to stop the review. They wouldn’t accept it because it didn’t come from you. Counsel says if anyone keeps pushing without your instructions, it’ll only complicate things.”

Charlie set the mug down.

“You went behind my back.”

Tom took one step forward automatically. “I was trying to protect you—”

“Don’t.” Charlie’s voice came out louder than he meant it to. He looked down at the counter. “Don’t say that.”

Tom stopped.

“You handed my father to your lawyers,” Charlie said. “Without asking me. You just—you decided.”

“I was trying to stop him.”

“You could have asked me.”

“You were terrified,” Tom said. “You weren’t sleeping. You could barely look at the letter. I couldn’t ask you to make that decision too.”

“That wasn’t your choice to make,” Charlie said.

He turned toward the hallway.

“Move.”

Tom did.

Charlie walked to the bedroom. Tom followed only as far as the doorway.

Charlie pulled a duffel bag from the closet and laid it open on the bed. He packed his old sweaters, his jeans, his underwear. He left the cashmere and the silk shirts untouched.

Tom watched from the doorway. For once, there was nothing he could make easier by intervening.

Charlie zipped the duffel, lifted it, and walked back through the apartment. At the front door, he put on his coat.

“Charlie—”

Charlie stopped with his hand on the door.

“I don’t know what you thought you were doing,” he said. “But it wasn’t for me.”

He opened the door and left.

Tom stood in the silence. On the island, Charlie’s tea was still steaming.

Tom crossed to the island and gripped the marble edge hard enough to hurt. He bowed his head.

The wind had sharpened by the time Charlie reached Hazel’s walk-up. He had taken the metro, carrying his own bag. By the time Hazel opened the door, his face was pink from the cold and his hair damp at the temples. He stood on her front step with the duffel hanging from one hand.

“Charlie?” Hazel stepped back and pulled the door shut behind him against the wind. “What happened?”

Charlie let the duffel fall to the floorboards.

“Tom retained lawyers in Switzerland without telling me,” he mumbled. “He tried to fix the release review without me.”

Hazel looked at him. For a beat, she didn’t move.

“No,” she said.

“They wouldn’t consider it,” Charlie said, staring past her. “They told him they would only deal with me.”

Hazel was already reaching for her phone. She called Tom. He answered on the first ring.

“Hazel—”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Charlie leaned his shoulder heavily against the wall. On the other end of the line, Tom said nothing.

“You contacted a foreign authority about his father’s release,” she said. “Without telling him. Through lawyers he never authorized.”

Tom was quiet for half a second too long. Then: “I was trying to keep him safe.”

“Tom.” Her voice came out like something being set down very carefully. “He is standing in my hallway with a bag.”

Tom exhaled on the other end, rough and audible.

“I know,” he said.

“You don’t get to manage this one.” Her voice had dropped. “You do not call him tonight. You do not come here. Tomorrow, Charlie decides what happens next, because this is his. Do you understand me?”

Silence. Then, very quietly: “Yes.”

Hazel ended the call.

For a moment the house went silent. Charlie stood where he was, coat still on, his arms hanging uselessly at his sides.

Hazel looked at him. The sharp anger had left her face. She crossed the hall and stopped in front of him.

“You can stay here as long as you need,” she said.

Hazel picked up the duffel and set it by the stairs. She glanced back at him once, reading the absolute exhaustion in his posture.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “we find out what the options actually are.”

Charlie looked at her.

“Okay,” he said.

Hazel reached out and gently took his coat.

Nearly an hour later, after Charlie had fallen asleep on her sofa, Hazel let herself into the penthouse with her own key.

She opened the study door without knocking. Tom looked up, lit blue by the laptop screen. His face was colourless. He held his phone in one hand, Charlie’s name open on it.

“Don’t,” Hazel said.

“I wasn’t going to.”

Tom locked the screen and set the phone down.

Hazel crossed the room.

“You’re sending Swiss counsel one email,” she said. “You will withdraw every instruction you gave them and make it clear that they are not authorized to take another step without Charlie’s written consent. Copy Charlie. Copy Tremblay.”

Tom nodded once.

“How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. Neither do you. That’s the problem.”

Tom dragged a hand over his face.

“Tomorrow morning, Charlie hears his options from counsel,” Hazel said. “Then Charlie decides what happens.”

Tom looked up. “Is he all right?”

“No.”

Hazel let the silence run.

“And tomorrow, you do nothing unless Charlie asks you to. You wait.”

“Do you think he’s done with me?”

Hazel turned toward the door. “I think that’s the wrong question to be asking tonight.”

She left him there.

Tom sat alone in the blue light.

Then he pulled the keyboard closer and drafted the email. He withdrew every instruction, confirmed that counsel had no authority to act without Charlie’s written consent, and copied Charlie and Tremblay.

He read it once.

Then he hit send.

Charlie sat at the battered kitchen table, both hands wrapped around a mug of tea. Hazel leaned against the counter in her court clothes, watching him.

Nancy moved between the stove and the sink. Her red hair was escaping its clip. She hadn’t stopped moving since Hazel had called from the duplex to say they were coming over.

Without Tom.

“Eat, sweetie,” Nancy said. She set a small plate in front of him.

“I’m not hungry.”

Nancy smoothed a hand over his hair. “He loves you.”

“I know.”

The back door opened. David took off his muddy boots and pulled out a chair.

“Tom is a fixer,” David said. “Always has been. He sees a fire, he throws money and lawyers at it.”

Charlie looked down at the table. “I’m not a fire, Dad.”

David leaned forward. “Did you tell him that?”

“More or less.”

“And what did he do?”

“He let me leave.”

Nancy stood behind David and rested her hands on his shoulders.

“It’s fucking suffocating,” Hazel said. “The way he decides for you.”

“Hazel,” David warned.

“I’m not leaving him.”

“No one said you should,” David said. “Let him sweat it out. You don’t have to make this easier for him.”

Nancy kissed the top of Charlie’s head. “Now, eat your potatoes.”

Saturday, March 13.

Hazel was already in the conference room when Tom arrived.

She did not look up. She only pointed to a chair halfway down the table.

A few minutes later, the door opened. Charlie came in wearing a dark coat, its shoulders damp with melted snow. He draped it over the chair across from Tom.

Hazel closed her laptop. “Before we begin, let’s be clear. Tom is here because Charlie agreed to it.”

“Understood,” Tom said.

He opened his briefcase, took out Charlie’s Swiss passport, and set it on the table.

Charlie looked at it, then at Tom. He picked it up and put it in his pocket.

Hazel looked at Charlie. “Still comfortable proceeding with him here?”

“Yes.”

She slid a packet across the table.

“The first page is the mandate. It authorizes Geneva counsel to act for you in the release review. No one else gives them instructions.”

Charlie read the page before signing it.

“Tremblay is working through what leaving Canada would mean for the sponsorship file. He filed the response to IRCC on Thursday,” Hazel continued. “You don’t book anything until he gives you his assessment. If you travel, he’ll prepare what you need for re-entry, but he cannot guarantee admission.”

Charlie nodded.

“Swiss counsel believes conditional release is the likeliest outcome. If it’s granted, they can submit your statement and press for strict conditions on your behalf.”

“How much did the interference hurt?”

“It created noise,” Hazel said. “The authority did not treat it as participation by you. Tom withdrew every instruction last night. Nothing else moves without your written authorization.”

Charlie turned to his husband.

“Why didn’t you tell me before you contacted them?”

“You were terrified,” Tom said. “I told myself asking would make it worse.”

“Thomas…”

“Fuck, I know. I just—”

“Okay,” Hazel interrupted. “We are not resolving the marriage at this table. Statement.”

Charlie opened the folder.

He began with the kitchen table. The chair legs. His mother's shoes.

Hazel let him get through it before bringing him back. "Charlie. What did he do?"

He took a breath and started again.

By the time they finished, it was afternoon. Tom hadn't said a word in hours.

Hazel read back the central paragraph and suggested three changes. Charlie shook his head at the last one. Hazel crossed it out without argument.

"This is strong," she said.

Charlie pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes.

Then he stood, gathered his coat and the folder, and walked to the door.

"I still want you here," he said without turning around. "I don't know if that's crazy or not."

He opened the door and left.

Hazel waited until it closed before looking at Tom.

"Don't ruin that."

"I won't."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

Charlie made it halfway down the hall before Hazel caught up with him.

"You're doing the thing," she said.

Charlie took one more step before stopping. "What thing?"

Hazel folded her arms. "The leaving-before-your-body-knows-you're-leaving thing."

Charlie didn't answer. Hazel steered him toward the kitchenette.

It was empty. She filled the kettle and switched it on. Charlie stood by the counter with his arms crossed, staring blankly at the tile backsplash. When the kettle clicked off, Hazel made the tea and pressed the mug into his hands.

“You did well in there,” she said.

Charlie stared into the steam. “I made it through a victim statement without dissociating in front of my husband. The bar is in hell.”

“It remains a bar.”

Hazel leaned against the counter across from him and watched him for a moment.

“Say it.”

Charlie swallowed. “I thought there was a line he wouldn’t cross.” He turned the mug in his hands. “I thought he understood that some things weren’t his to touch.”

Hazel said nothing.

“The worst part is that I know exactly why he did it. I know what fear looks like on him. I’ve watched it for a decade.” He stopped. “That doesn’t make it better.”

“No,” Hazel said. “It doesn’t.”

Charlie looked down at his tea. “I want it back. I don’t want a different marriage. I want this one, with that man. I just want to be the one who decides when I need saving.”

He ran his thumb over the rim of the mug.

“I love that he—” He stopped.

Hazel waited.

“He reheats my tea without asking,” Charlie said. “He sits by the piano while I practice even though he thinks classical music is boring unless I’m the one playing it.”

“That’s indefensible.”

“I know.” Charlie smiled. “I miss him. I miss him so much, and he’s right down the hall, and I put him there.” He shook his head. “Fuck. He’s so stupid.”

“He’s an idiot,” Hazel said. “A spectacular, well-intentioned idiot. And I could kill him for this.”

Charlie looked at her.

“I’m not telling you to forgive him,” she said. “I understand why you want to. That’s all.”

Charlie let out a long breath. He set the mug beside the sink.

At the threshold, he stopped and looked back. “Thanks.”

Hazel waved him off. “Please. I live for catastrophic interpersonal fallout with international legal dimensions.”

Charlie shook his head and left.

Monday, March 15.

Around two in the morning, Tom lay on the left side of the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Charlie had never been a loud person, but now there was nothing.

At three-thirty, Tom gave up on the bed.

He moved through the apartment without any real destination. Headlights passed below, dragging pale strips of light across the floor. In the dining area, the Steinway stood closed beneath the pendant light.

Tom stopped beside it. He rested a hand on the bench. For a moment, he considered sitting down.

He let his hand fall and kept moving.

In the office, Tom opened his laptop and stared at the full inbox.

He opened Hazel’s email. It contained exactly what he expected: the hearing timeline, procedural notes, travel confirmations, and, at the bottom, a line all by itself:

Do not interfere.

Tom read the sentence twice. His throat burned.

He lasted twelve minutes at the desk before he was on his feet again.

He wandered back into the dining area and sat on the piano bench before he could overthink it.

He lifted the fallboard. Lowered one finger. Hesitated.

Then he pressed a single key.

The note rang through the apartment.

Tom snatched his hand back and lowered the fallboard.

Back in the bedroom, he picked up one of Charlie's sweaters from the chair. He sat down with it in both hands.

It still smelled faintly of unscented detergent and warm skin.

Tuesday, March 16.

The air outside Montréal–Trudeau cut straight through Charlie's coat. He carried his own bag, his passport in his pocket. Tucked in the document sleeve Hazel had given him were the Swiss hearing notice and the papers Tremblay hoped would get him back into Canada.

He had asked Tom to come. So far, Tom was trying.

At check-in, Charlie answered the agent's questions himself. At security, Tom's hand lifted on reflex as Charlie emptied his pockets, then stopped halfway. Tom shoved his hand deep into his coat and took a small step back.

Charlie cleared the scanner. When he straightened, Tom caught his eye—*Are you all right?*—and Charlie nodded, bending to pull on his boots.

On the plane, business class felt offensively calm. Tom stayed in his seat, leaving Charlie to pull Hazel's folder from his bag.

The statement lay there in clean paragraphs, suddenly more frightening in print. For the first hour, Charlie read and marked the margins. He crossed

out one memory. A few lines later, he restored another, though it made the sequence harder to explain.

Every so often, his breathing caught and the pencil stalled.

Tom did nothing. Once, when Charlie hovered too long over a line, Tom's fingers flexed hard against the armrest.

By the time Charlie closed the folder, his eyes ached from the cabin light. He reached across the space between their seats and laid his hand over Tom's. Tom's fingers laced through his at once, the grip immediate and anchoring.

During descent, the clouds broke. The Alps appeared beneath them in hard white ridges, severe and brilliant in the morning light.

The air in Charlie's lungs suddenly felt paper-thin.

Timber. Snow. Locked doors.

The old numbers flashed at the edge of his mind. *Soixante-huit. Soixante-neuf.*

He stopped them before they could carry him backward. He looked down at his left hand, at the plain gold ring against his dark trousers.

He tightened his grip on Tom's hand. "I'm ready."

Tom lifted their joined hands and kissed his knuckles. "Okay."

The landing gear dropped with a heavy mechanical thud. The plane lowered toward Geneva.

CHAPTER 5

Wednesday, March 17.

On the drive from Geneva, Charlie rested his head against the cold window. Outside, the winter landscape passed in long stretches of white fields and low wooded hills, towns gathering around church spires before falling away again. Beyond them, mountains sat pale against the horizon.

When they passed a timber house half-buried in snow, Charlie looked away.

Beside him, Tom's hand moved an inch across the seat, then stopped. Slowly, he drew it back to his own knee.

At the hotel in Bern, Charlie hesitated at the desk, then gave his name and answered the clerk's questions. He picked up the keys and handed one to Tom.

The elevator rose in silence.

In the room, Charlie set his bag on the luggage rack. Tom stayed near the door.

"The hearing begins at nine tomorrow morning," Tom said. "You can still change your mind."

Charlie looked up.

"About the screen," Tom clarified. "Or the video room."

"I know."

Tom put his hands in his pockets and crossed to the window.

Charlie sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Hazel's folder out of his bag.

He opened it to the first page and began reading.

They crossed the square a little after three. The cantonal building stood at the edge of the old city.

Charlie stopped at the bottom of the steps. Tom waited beside him.

After a few seconds, Charlie made himself climb. Tom followed.

Inside, the foyer was bright and ordinary. Counters, polished floors, a security desk, a potted plant. A guard checked their identification and directed them to the review rooms on the second floor.

They walked down a wide corridor lined with closed doors. Tom held out a hand, palm up.

Charlie took it.

At the far end of the corridor, local counsel rose from a bench and introduced herself in French. She led them into a small conference room and set down two folders.

“Today is logistical only,” she said as they sat.

She walked them through the sequence. Charlie’s written observations were already before the panel. Jean-Luc’s counsel would have an opportunity to respond.

“An interpreter will be present,” she said. “You may answer in French, German, or English. You can participate by video from a separate room, or sit behind a screen in the hearing room. We can also request a separate waiting space. If you prefer, your written observations can stand without live participation.”

Charlie looked down at the page. “I know. I—want to be in the room.”

“And the screen?”

Charlie shook his head. He didn’t look at Tom.

“Understood,” the lawyer said, making a note. “Separate arrival and departure arrangements remain in place. You may change your mind tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” Charlie said.

The orientation ended in the hearing room itself. It was smaller than Charlie had expected.

The lawyer pointed out his chair. It sat slightly off-line from where Jean-Luc would sit, angled just enough that Charlie would not have to look directly at him unless he chose to.

Charlie stared at it.

Tom stayed by the door.

Charlie crossed to the chair and put his hand on the back of it. He couldn't picture Jean-Luc sitting there tomorrow, or imagine what his own voice would sound like in this room.

He stayed where he was anyway.

They spent the late afternoon mostly in silence.

Charlie sat at the hotel desk with his notes spread in front of him, going over the statement again. Across the room, Tom answered two work messages on his phone, set it face down beside his laptop, and left both untouched.

Just past seven, Charlie answered a video call from Hazel.

"The schedule is confirmed. They'll open with the panel and the procedural record. Your observations may not come until after lunch, but assume they could move faster."

Charlie wrote that down. Tom sat on the edge of the bed behind him.

"Sleep if you can," Hazel said, then hung up.

For a moment, Charlie sat looking at his tired reflection in his laptop's dark screen. He reached for the printed statement and pulled it closer.

"My name is Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery," he read quietly. "I am twenty-seven years old. I am here to provide observations regarding the conditional-release review of Jean-Luc Caillat—"

The sentence broke. A cold prickle spread across his scalp.

“Charlie.”

He looked up.

Tom was still seated on the bed, hands braced against his knees.

Charlie stood and moved between Tom’s knees. He lifted both hands to Tom’s face, and Tom leaned into him.

“I’m so scared,” Charlie said.

Tom’s eyes closed. “Me too.”

“I’m still doing it.”

Tom opened his eyes. He kissed the inside of Charlie’s wrist. “I know you can.”

“We need to eat,” Tom said.

He crossed to the small glass table by the window and picked up the room service menu, then brought it back to the bed and held it out.

“What looks good to you?”

Charlie sat down and wiped his eyes. “I don’t know.”

Tom looked at the page.

“All right,” he said. “We have… Älplermagronen. Or maybe the Zürcher Geschnetzeltes?”

The words came out mangled. Charlie let out a sudden, startled laugh.

Tom looked up, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Was it really that bad?”

“That… was a massacre,” Charlie said. “That second one sounded like a disease.”

Tom sat beside him. “Do you want to try the disease? It comes with salad.”

“Okay,” Charlie said.

Tom reached for the bedside phone. Charlie pulled his knees up.

“I’ll call,” Tom said. “Just tell me how to say it.”

Charlie fed him the syllables. Tom repeated them into the receiver.

On the other end of the line, the attendant hesitated. “Entschuldigung, mein Herr?”

Tom tried again, leaning hard into the consonants.

“Perhaps the chicken?” the attendant suggested in English.

Tom pulled the receiver away from his ear and looked at Charlie. “Maybe you try.”

Charlie smiled as Tom handed him the phone. His free hand found Tom’s wrist. Tom turned his hand over and linked their fingers together.

“Ja, grüezi,” Charlie said. “Wir hätten gerne zweimal das Zürcher Geschnetzelte, bitte. Und eine Kanne Tee.”

“Und Rösti dazu?”

Charlie looked down at their joined hands.

“Ja,” he said, after a second. “Bitte.”

He hung up. He didn’t let go of Tom’s hand.

Tom’s thumb moved back and forth across his knuckles.

“What’s rösti?”

“Potato cake,” Charlie said. “You get it everywhere here. I used to like it.”

The food arrived twenty minutes later. Charlie ate most of the rösti.

After the cart was wheeled back into the hall, Charlie looked across at the desk. His statement was still spread out where he had left it.

Tomorrow.

Charlie barely remembered brushing his teeth or changing.

When he crawled under the duvet, Tom hesitated. Charlie tugged him into bed and nuzzled into his chest.

“Stay,” he murmured.

“I’m right here.”

Charlie closed his eyes.

Charlie woke to the cold. The duvet was pulled up to his shoulders, but the space beside him was empty.

Tom sat at the desk with his phone pressed to his ear.

"…I understand, but the collateral is siloed. Yes. Okay. I'll send it by eight your time. Thank you, Martin."

Tom set the phone down and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

Charlie sat up. Tom turned toward the bed. His hand hovered over the laptop lid.

"I woke you," he said.

"No." Charlie pushed the blankets aside. The floor was cold through his socks. He crossed the room and stopped beside Tom's chair.

The screen was crowded with spreadsheets and a thread of emails from Hazel. Red figures ran down several columns.

"How bad is it?" Charlie asked.

Tom looked up at him. The skin under his eyes was bruised dark.

"We've been bleeding out for more than five weeks," Tom said. "I haven't been able to replace the capital."

Charlie stared at the screen. Then he reached out and pushed the laptop shut.

"Come back to bed," he said. "You look like you're going to break in half."

"Charlie, I have to—"

"You have to stand behind me tomorrow."

Tom hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah… Okay. I'll get up early."

He set an alarm on his phone, then followed Charlie back to bed. Charlie slid across the mattress and wrapped an arm over Tom's waist.

Tom sighed. His hand closed around Charlie's wrist and held him there.

Thursday, March 18.

Bern was damp and grey. Charlie kept his eyes on the pavement as they crossed the square, matching his breathing to his footsteps.

Tom walked beside him, half a step back. Charlie didn't look at him. If he looked at him, he'd lose the thread of what he was doing, which was walking forward.

Swiss counsel waited near the security checkpoint with Hazel. Hazel had taken the overnight flight from Montréal. She looked it around the eyes, though Charlie suspected she'd gut him before admitting it. She gave him a short nod and fell into step.

Charlie set his bag in a grey tray, presented his passport, and passed through the metal detector. On the second floor, they stopped outside the hearing room.

The lawyer caught his eye. "Your statement is already in the file. You answer only if you wish to. If you need a pause, tell me."

Hazel pressed her hand briefly to his sleeve.

Charlie closed his fingers around the handle and pushed the door open.

A long table stood at the front, with smaller tables for counsel and observers. Jean-Luc's chair was off to one side, behind a low partition.

Charlie took his seat. Tom and Hazel were directed to the back.

The interpreter leaned in. "French, German, or English?"

"German," Charlie said.

The officials entered and began the formalities. Charlie let the language move past him until the side door opened.

Jean-Luc entered under escort.

He was older. Charlie tried to see only that.

Then his father lifted his head.

Charlie looked back at the front of the room.

The official at the centre acknowledged his written statement. She explained that he could address specific points if he wished, and that her colleague on the left would guide the questions.

“Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery,” the other official said.

Charlie stood.

“You may begin with a brief opening statement.”

He opened his mouth. Nothing came.

He looked down at his hands for a moment, then back up.

“My name is Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery,” he said in German. “I was born Maxence Caillat. I am here because Jean-Luc Caillat is my father, and I was in his care when he killed my mother.” He took a breath. “I believe he remains dangerous. I will answer your questions.”

“Thank you,” the official said. “We’ll begin with the history. Your family lived in Paris?”

“Yes. He moved us here when I was five. He… said he was going to write a book.”

“Did he?”

“Um. No. He stopped working.”

“Your statement mentions some financial difficulties during your time in Switzerland. Can you speak to that?”

“Well. He stopped buying heating oil. We wore our coats inside through two winters.” Charlie’s thumb moved over his wedding band. “Then… the electricity went out. My mother taught me piano on a keyboard we’d brought from Paris. Until the battery died.”

“And food?”

“He said she was starving us, but she wasn’t. He controlled everything.”

“You did not go to school.”

“He… said he would teach me himself.”

“Did he?”

“No.”

Another panel member leaned forward, consulting her notes. “There are references to physical violence prior to the incident.”

“Yes.”

“Can you describe it?”

“The—I mean. He hit us.”

“You were nine years old at the time of your mother’s death.”

“Yes.”

“Your statement indicates you were present.”

“Yes.”

“Can you speak to the period immediately following—before authorities were contacted?”

Charlie’s eyes stayed on the front of the room.

“He left her. Where she fell.”

“For how long?”

“Four days.”

“And during that time, you were confined to the room?”

“He sat in the armchair and told me not to wake her. Or I would join her.”

“You did not witness the dismemberment.”

“No.”

“How were you discovered?”

“He went to town. For alcohol. And… someone called the police. Because he looked unstable. When they checked his file, there were welfare flags from Paris, so they came to the house.”

“And what were you doing when they arrived?”

Charlie looked at his hands.

“Eating cereal.”

“One final question. You said you believe he remains dangerous. Can you tell us why?”

He had planned this answer. New words came out before he could stop them.

“Because—I know what that smells like. After four days. He sat there and —he watched me and he was not frightened and he was not sorry and he was not anything.”

He sat down. His stomach churned.

“…Thank you, Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery.”

The panel recessed.

Charlie didn’t move until Jean-Luc had been escorted out.

Then he put both hands on his knees, looked at the laminate floor, and breathed.

They were called back that afternoon.

Charlie took his seat. Tom and Hazel took their places at the back.

Jean-Luc was brought in under escort and shown to his chair. In the afternoon light, he looked smaller than he had that morning.

The officials entered and completed the formalities. One of them began reading from the written determination.

Charlie listened without moving.

Conditional release denied.

Off to the side, Jean-Luc’s face darkened. As the escorts came toward him, he turned his head, scanning the room.

His eyes found Charlie.

Charlie looked back.

That was all.

The escorts led Jean-Luc out. The door shut behind him with a flat, ordinary sound.

Charlie stayed seated for one breath. Then he stood and turned.

Tom was at the edge of the observer seating. Charlie crossed the distance and held out his hand.

Tom took it. His grip was too tight.

Hazel touched Charlie's arm lightly. "Certified copy comes through local counsel."

"Thank you," Charlie murmured.

On the stairs, Charlie kept his free hand on the rail.

They walked out into the damp Bern air together.

The drive back to the hotel passed in silence. Bern slid by the car window. Charlie stared at the passing tram wires.

Hazel went to her own room. By the time the hotel room door clicked shut behind them, the adrenaline crash hit. Charlie stood frozen just inside the doorway.

Tom took off his overcoat and moved around the room. He crossed to the desk, unscrewed a bottle of water, and held it out.

Charlie took it. The first swallow hit his empty stomach like a stone. By the third, the metallic taste in his mouth began to fade. He handed the bottle back.

Charlie fumbled frantically with his tie. Tom watched, his hands at his sides. When the knot finally gave way, Charlie pulled the silk free and let out a long breath.

"Do you want to sit, or shower?" Tom asked.

"Sit."

Tom nodded. "Okay."

Charlie crossed to the bed, sitting on the edge harder than he intended. His hands were still shaking.

Tom stood for a moment. Then he sat down next to Charlie, leaving a six-inch gap between them. He kept his hands flat on his own knees, his breathing metered.

Charlie stared at the carpet. The harsh white light of the hearing room was still burned into his retinas.

“I feel sick,” Charlie said.

“Yeah,” Tom said.

Charlie’s eyes burned. He sat perfectly straight, crying silently.

Tom finally spoke. “Can I hold you?”

“Please.”

Tom closed the distance, wrapping an arm around Charlie’s shoulders and drawing him against his chest.

Charlie folded into him. He pressed his brow hard against Tom’s shoulder, his hands twisting into Tom’s shirt.

Tom held him. Slowly, the panic began to subside.

“That time away from you…” Charlie said.

“I know. I’m right here.”

Charlie nodded against his collarbone. “You almost ruined everything.”

Tom’s arm tensed instinctively before he forced himself to relax. “I did. I’m sorry.”

Charlie let out a long breath.

“You stopped,” Charlie said.

“I stopped.”

Charlie lifted his head to look at him.

“Don’t do that to me again.”

“I won’t.”

Charlie studied his face. He leaned up and pressed a quick kiss to Tom's cheek. Then he rested his head back against Tom's shoulder and closed his eyes.

"It's over," Charlie murmured. "Phew."

Tom pressed his face into Charlie's hair and inhaled slowly. "Yeah. Phew."

They didn't talk much after that.

They changed without speaking and lay on top of the covers. Charlie faced the wall, his body still humming. Tom kept a careful distance behind him.

Charlie finally rolled onto his back. "Closer," he whispered.

Tom shifted until they were pressed together.

Sleep finally pulled him under.

CHAPTER 6

Thursday, March 18.

In the dream, the hearing room warped. The bright lights dimmed to a sickly yellow, the windows vanished, and the white walls darkened into the wood of the chalet. Water knocked in the pipes.

Charlie stood. At the far end of the room, Tom waited beside the table. Relief hit Charlie so hard his chest ached. He moved toward him, the floor dragging under his shoes like packed snow.

Tom held out his hand. Charlie took it.

Pain shot through his arm. Charlie looked up. For one second, it was Tom's face. Then the features became the blank face of Jean-Luc Caillat.

Charlie jerked back, but the hand pulled him forward.

"Non," Charlie tried to say, but his voice was gone.

Jean-Luc smiled.

Charlie woke shoving hard against the body beside him.

Tom caught himself and recoiled. "Charlie." His voice cut through the dark. "It's me."

Charlie scrambled upright, gasping. The room had no shape beyond a sliver of streetlight beneath the curtains. The phantom grip still burned around his wrist.

"Lâche-moi!"

Tom stayed exactly where he was. "It's me, Char. It's Tom."

Charlie's breathing came in ragged pulls. He pressed himself against the headboard, searching the dark. The voice was right. The voice was Tom's.

“I’m coming closer,” Tom whispered.

Charlie nodded. “Please,” he choked out.

Tom moved toward him. Charlie grabbed the front of Tom’s shirt, and Tom wrapped both arms around him.

“It was you,” Charlie said hoarsely. “And then it wasn’t.”

“I know.” Tom spoke against his hair, one hand moving slowly over Charlie’s back. “Do you want to count with me?”

Charlie nodded against him.

“Septante.”

Charlie tried to slow his breathing. “Huitante.”

“Nonante.”

“Septante.”

“Huitante.”

“Nonante.”

Slowly, the dark began to assemble itself back into a hotel room: the outline of the desk lamp, the radiator ticking by the wall.

“Don’t let go,” Charlie whispered.

“Never.”

Charlie let his weight settle into Tom’s hold.

After a long silence, Tom murmured into the dark, “Septante.”

Charlie sniffled. “Huitante,” he whispered back.

“Nonante.”

Friday, March 19.

By the time they reached Trudeau, the sharp edge of Bern had dulled into exhaustion. Entering the inspection hall, Charlie’s shoulders locked. His file was still flagged.

Tom shifted toward him, but stopped the movement almost before it began. His fingers flexed once, then went still.

At the booth, the officer scanned Charlie's passport, paused at her screen, and pointed toward the frosted glass doors of secondary inspection.

Charlie went cold. He looked back at Tom, whose knuckles were white around the handle of his bag.

"I'll be fine," Charlie said quietly.

Secondary inspection was a painfully bright blur of repetitive questions. Charlie kept his palms pressed flat against his thighs under the counter and answered as well as he could until the officer finally slid the stack of paperwork back to him.

"You're admitted," she said.

When Charlie pushed back out into the main terminal, Tom was pacing. He stopped mid-step. His gaze dropped to the returned passport in Charlie's hand, and he let out a rough breath.

He nodded.

Charlie answered with his own.

The drive back into the city was quiet. Montréal slid past the tinted windows in a wet, grey blur of dirty snow and hunched pedestrians.

Tom unlocked the apartment door and pushed it open. Charlie followed, holding the leather folder against his chest.

Once they were inside, Tom closed the door and looked at it.

"Where do you want it?"

"The safe."

Tom nodded and went down the hall. Charlie followed him into the bedroom and through the closet.

Tom slid back the panelling to reveal the digital keypad. He stepped away from it and folded his arms tightly across his chest.

“Zero-eight-two-eight.”

Charlie blinked. He stepped up to the safe and pressed the rubber buttons.

Zero. Eight. Two. Eight.

The mechanism whirred. The steel bolts retracted, and the door opened.

August 28th.

Charlie placed the folder on the shelf and turned. Tom hadn’t moved. His fingers dug into his own biceps.

“Our first kiss,” Charlie said.

“It’s been the code since you moved in.” Tom swallowed. “It’s your life, Charlie.”

Charlie turned back to the safe and pushed the door shut. The bolts slid into place.

“Thomas.”

“Yeah.”

“Come here. Please.”

Tom let out a shaky breath and moved forward.

He unfastened Charlie’s cuffs and slid the suit jacket from his shoulders. Charlie caught his hand and led him out of the closet.

Tom switched off the overhead light and lay down beside him. Charlie pressed his face into Tom’s chest.

“Don’t make me fight you and the rest of the world at the same time ever again.”

Tom pulled him closer and kissed his forehead. “I won’t.”

Monday, March 22.

In the war room at the firm, legal pads and half-empty coffee cups covered the glass table.

Tremblay sat with his half-moon glasses high on his nose. Hazel had three folders open and a pen tucked behind her ear. Beneath the table, Tom's knee rested against Charlie's.

The Swiss matter was closed. The leaked article was still spreading, but Hazel was dealing with it. The immigration file remained.

Hazel looked at the speakerphone. "All right. They're joining now."

Charlie straightened. The line connected.

"This is Officer Nadeau with IRCC's Montréal office."

"Hazel Heitmeyer, counsel for Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery. Thank you for making the time."

"We've reviewed the additional materials. Those have now been added to the file. Based on the materials currently before us, refusal on the paper record is not warranted at this time."

Charlie leaned back.

Hazel nodded. "And the hold?"

"The hold is being lifted. The application will return to regular processing, subject to final eligibility review. Written confirmation will follow."

Hazel confirmed that no further action was required, thanked the officer, and ended the call.

Tremblay removed his glasses. "That should be the end of that particular bureaucratic experiment."

Charlie turned his hand over on the table. Tom laced their fingers together.

Hazel rolled her eyes.

"Wonderful," she said. "The federal government is bored with you for the moment, and MIFI is asleep. Next problem. Michael is still trying to kill the firm. I've covered payroll so far with the last of the personal funds we could move."

Charlie looked at his sister, then at Tom. "Which means…?"

Hazel pressed her lips together. "Last resort."

Tom was silent for a moment. Then he squeezed Charlie's hand once and picked up his phone.

Payton answered on the second ring. "Tom."

"My anchor investor withdrew," Tom said.

"…And you're calling me."

"Three years ago, you asked whether to hold or exit the Asselin position, and I told you to hold. You held. And you've never mentioned it since, which means you've been saving it."

The line went silent.

"Why would I step into a family feud?"

"Because my general counsel is challenging the withdrawal today. If the justification doesn't hold up, anyone still defending it looks reckless. Michael's overextended, and he knows it."

"And the brand risk? Your name's been in the press."

"The hold is lifted. The application is back in regular processing," Tom said. "The immediate risk is contained."

"How much of the firm?"

"Enough that you have standing. Not enough that I'm working for you."

Payton considered that. "Send me the numbers. If it holds up, I'll bridge you through the week. The position conversation happens on my timeline."

"Understood."

"And Tom. We're even."

The call ended.

Hazel took the phone from Tom and set it on the table. "Good," she said, already making notes. "Try not to waste the next sixty minutes bickering. I need everything sent over before Payton remembers he has standards."

Charlie smiled. Tremblay closed his folder.

Tom’s knee remained against Charlie’s beneath the table. Their hands were still linked on the glass.

Charlie squeezed once without looking at him.

Tom’s fingers tightened around his.

That afternoon, Charlie returned to campus.

The Roddick Gates filled the windshield, flanked by students in dark coats trudging through salt-stained slush.

Tom pulled over near the gates and left the engine running, his hands on the wheel.

“I’ll be close,” he said.

“I know.”

“I never should have told you to hide at home. You were right. Hiding made it worse.”

“I get why you did.” Charlie picked at the strap of his messenger bag. “Part of me wishes you could sit in the back of my seminar. It would be ridiculous, but…”

“I could glare at anyone who looks at you.”

“Mhm. You’re very good at that.”

Outside, a student in a red scarf hurried past the sedan.

“If I skip class over a tabloid rumour, it just proves them right.”

Tom reached across the console and rested his hand at the back of Charlie’s neck.

“Let them see you,” he said. “Exactly as you are.”

Charlie held his gaze and nodded. When he opened the door, cold air rushed into the car.

Charlie slipped into the seminar room. The conversation nearest the door faltered when he walked in.

Across the table, Priya smiled at him too quickly.

“Hey, Charlie,” she said, a fraction too loudly.

“Hi, Priya.”

Charlie crossed to his usual seat. A blue-and-white business site filled Sarah’s laptop screen. She clicked into another window as he approached.

“How, um… how are you doing, Charlie?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

He gave her a polite smile, sat down, and took out his notebook and pen.

Jason glanced over and cleared his throat. “Crazy weather out there today, huh?”

“…Yeah. It’s cold.”

Professor Mehta strode in and dropped her canvas tote at the head of the table. Charlie had never been so grateful for the start of a class.

“All right, everyone, let’s get started,” Mehta said, pulling out a stack of papers. “We’re picking up where we left off last week.”

Charlie fixed his attention on Professor Mehta. From the edge of his vision, Sarah glanced at him again.

By the time Charlie exited the seminar room, everyone else had already left. His blood still ran too hot to go straight to the car, so he detoured down the hall.

Priya, Sarah, and Jason looked up from their scattered papers when he opened the door to the graduate lounge.

“Hi,” Charlie said, sparing them the wait.

Priya set down her highlighter. “Charlie.”

“Yeah.” He sat beside her on the couch.

Sarah leaned forward. “Are you okay?”

Charlie didn’t have the energy to lie. “Not particularly.”

Jason shifted. “I’m sorry,” he blurted. “About all that stuff. It’s—”

“It’s… not great,” Charlie supplied. “And mostly false. Please don’t ask.”

Priya nodded. “Okay.”

“Of course,” Sarah said. “You don’t have to explain.”

After a moment, Priya poured coffee into a chipped mug and pushed it toward him. “It’s terrible today.”

Charlie wrapped his hands around the mug and took a sip.

Eventually, the conversation started up again: reading loads, departmental bureaucracy, the usual complaints. Nobody stared.

Twenty minutes later, Charlie passed through the Roddick Gates. The sedan was waiting in a legal spot down the road.

He climbed into the passenger seat. Tom scanned him for damage.

Charlie reached across the console and kissed Tom’s cheek. Tom’s hand twitched against the steering wheel.

“No fires to start,” Charlie said, buckling his seat belt.

“You handled it?”

Charlie rested his head against the seat. “Yeah.”

Tom put the car in drive. His grip on the wheel finally eased as they pulled away from the curb.

Thursday, March 25.

The penthouse had finally stopped feeling like a fortress.

Tom strode into the living room, his encrypted phone in one hand as he checked his watch. “Hazel is still insisting we host tomorrow,” he said. “I have a call with London in five minutes. Do you want to order the groceries?”

Charlie sat up a little straighter. “I can do that.”

Tom unlocked the iPad, opened the delivery app, and set it on the coffee table. “Get whatever we need. And add whatever you want. I’ll be outside.”

Charlie took the tablet. Tom slid the glass door shut behind him and lifted the phone to his ear.

One item at a time, Charlie built the cart: steaks, imported cheese, artisanal bread, blood oranges. He added an expensive box of chocolate truffles for Hazel.

Finally, he added a bag of sriracha popcorn.

He tapped the cart icon.

$412.50.

Through the glass, Tom paced, one hand cutting through the air as he argued about capital and leverage.

Charlie’s finger hovered over the “Edit” button. He could drop the total by a hundred dollars in ten seconds and breathe easier. He hunched over the screen, elbows digging into his knees.

If you wanted to be greedy, I’d let you.

He stared at the number.

Then he tapped “Confirm Purchase.”

A green checkmark appeared.

Order received.

Charlie set the iPad face down on the coffee table and leaned back against the cushions.

Ten minutes later, the glass door slid open. Tom tossed his phone onto the kitchen island and rolled his neck.

“All good?”

“Mhm. Done.”

Tom sat beside him and cupped the side of Charlie’s face.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Charlie leaned into his palm.

Friday, March 26.

Charlie was in the kitchen in socks and Tom’s old navy sweater when he heard Tom moving around in the bedroom.

He’d been back for twenty minutes. Long enough for the coffee to brew and the butter to soften. The white box from the patisserie sat on the counter, an envelope propped against it.

Tom appeared in the doorway in grey sweatpants, his hair flat on one side.

“You went out,” he said.

“For you.” Charlie nudged the envelope across the counter.

Tom picked it up and opened it where he stood. His eyes moved over what Charlie had written. He set it down, crossed the kitchen, and rested two fingers against Charlie’s neck, just beneath his jaw.

“Sit down,” Charlie said after a moment. “It’s your birthday.”

Tom sat on the stool. Charlie set out plates, cut the bread, and laid out the salmon. They ate. The light shifted across the counter. At some point, Tom turned Charlie’s hand palm up and threaded their fingers together.

Later, Charlie lit the candle on the cheesecake. A single flame in the bright kitchen.

Tom looked at it, then at Charlie. He leaned in and blew it out.

“…I need a cigarette.”

“You had three last year. Are you even allowed?”

“The third was your fault.”

They took their drinks out to the balcony. Montréal was wet and pale below them, the city going about its business. Tom lit the cigarette, and they passed it back and forth. Charlie coughed hard on his first inhale.

Tom took it back. “Okay?”

“It’s still disgusting.”

“Yeah.”

Tom looked out over the skyline. Charlie watched the side of his face.

“Finish that and come inside,” Charlie said. “You have cake.”

Tom stubbed the cigarette out in the empty saucer between them.

“Okay, honey.”

Charlie caught Tom’s hand as they stepped back through the door.

Inside, the apartment smelled of bread and coffee and a little smoke.

CHAPTER 7

Friday, March 26.

By evening, the penthouse was full of Heitmeyers and noise. Alex and Julian argued about the architecture of the Bell Centre over the game playing low on the television. Hazel and David stood outside at the railing.

From the end of the sectional, Charlie watched Tom attempt to slice the second birthday cake without destroying the delicate piping.

Nancy slipped into the kitchen and nudged him aside with her hip. “Hand it over.”

Tom surrendered the knife and the counter space. “Yes, ma’am.”

Nancy made one clean cut and slid the first slice onto a plate. She wiped the blade without looking up.

“You made a real mess of things, Thomas.”

Tom lowered his eyes to the marble counter.

“I know why you did it,” Nancy continued. “You panicked. You thought building a wall would keep him safe. But Charlie doesn’t need a bunker.”

“I learned that.”

She cut a second slice and pressed both plates into Tom’s hands. “You’re family, Thomas. You make him happy.”

Tom looked up. “Thank you.”

Nancy levelled a look at him. “But if you ever try to manage my son’s life behind his back again, I will help Hazel hide your body.”

Tom’s eyes moved briefly to Hazel beyond the glass.

“Understood.”

“Good.” Nancy picked up her own plate. “Now go bring your husband some dessert.”

Monday, March 29.

One week after agreeing to bridge the firm, Payton came to inspect what he had bought.

Charlie sat at the grand piano in the centre of Heitmeyer-Montgomery’s lobby when the street doors opened. The room had been designed around the instrument, and Payton’s gaze went to it before Hazel intercepted him.

“The bridge has stabilized first-quarter operations,” she said, falling into step beside him. “Transition costs came in under estimate and the acquisition pipeline held. EBITDA is ahead of where Michael expected us to land.”

Payton nodded once, then looked past her.

Tom stood near reception, watching Charlie.

“Tom,” Hazel called.

Tom turned toward them. “Julian kept the original structure where he could.” He gestured toward the exposed brick. “I think it complements the instrument.”

Payton looked back at the piano. “I assume there’s a business case for that.”

“Events. Recruitment.” Tom adjusted his suit jacket. “Charlie?”

Charlie met his eyes across the room.

“Only if you want to,” Tom said.

Charlie rested his hands on the keys and began to play.

The notes carried cleanly through the lobby. Payton remained beside Hazel through one phrase, then another. His gaze moved from the piano to reception, then back to Tom.

“The acoustics are good. Take me upstairs.”

“Happily.” Hazel turned toward the elevator.

Before following her, Tom crossed the lobby and stopped beside the bench. Charlie kept playing but glanced up.

“Thank you,” Tom said softly.

Charlie nodded and turned back to the keys. Tom rested one hand against the polished edge of the piano for a moment, then went to join his partners.

Thursday, April 1.

Three days after Payton toured Heitmeyer-Montgomery, Michael summoned them to the Montgomery headquarters on Peel.

It looked exactly as Charlie remembered. White and beige, like the Westmount house. Reception staff polished to the point of abstraction.

Tom walked on one side of him, Hazel on the other. He matched Charlie’s pace, neither half a step ahead nor behind. Hazel looked ready to audit God.

They were shown into the boardroom.

Michael Montgomery sat at the head of the table. He did not stand.

“Thomas. You brought a delegation.”

Hazel sat without invitation. “You requested a meeting.”

Michael ignored her.

Tom sat beside Charlie. His hand found Charlie’s beneath the table.

“I hear you found interim capital,” Michael said.

Tom said nothing.

Michael let the silence sit. “Payton.” He unfolded his hands. “Bridge financing is a courtesy extended to men who make themselves briefly interesting.”

“Your point?” Tom asked.

“Only that survival and victory aren’t the same thing. You launched under scrutiny. Gave the market every reason to wonder whether your judgment has become… sentimental.”

Hazel opened a folder. “Do try to be concise. We have calendars.”

Michael’s eyes moved to her for one second, then returned to Tom.

“Enough of your first-year pipeline still comes through firms that return my calls. I can constrict your referral stream without touching a single existing contract. And if I raise questions with Payton, he starts asking whether he bought into a growth play or a family problem.”

Charlie knew what that meant. The last time Michael made calls, their anchor investor had walked and Hazel had covered payroll with the last personal funds she could move. Payton’s money had bought them time, not safety.

Tom frowned. “You asked us here to threaten us with things you’ve already tried.”

Michael sat back.

Then he looked at Charlie.

“And this remains the centre of the problem. You’ve become expensive. My son has always had a weakness for you.”

Charlie took a moment before answering. “He’s not weak. He’s just not afraid of you anymore.”

“Is that what you think you did?”

Michael held Charlie’s gaze, then turned to Tom.

“This is what you’ve reduced yourself to. Sitting there while someone else speaks for you.”

“This is me not interrupting.”

One corner of Hazel’s mouth lifted.

“Payton won’t enjoy being embarrassed,” Michael said. “Men like him love volatility until it costs them.”

“Then it’s fortunate he invested in me,” Tom said, “and not in you.”

Hazel closed her folder and stood. “All right. We’ve reached the end of what’s useful here.”

Charlie and Tom rose with her. They were almost at the door when Michael spoke.

“Thomas.”

Tom stopped.

“You are gambling your inheritance, position, and credibility on a man who still doesn’t understand the cost of the room he’s standing in.”

Tom turned just enough to look back.

“I’m done caring what the room costs.”

Thursday, April 8.

One week after walking out of Michael’s boardroom, Charlie stood outside the doors to Redpath Hall while the committee finished its pre-defence meeting on the other side.

Hazel adjusted her cuffs. “You do not need to impress them. You need to be legible.”

A few feet away, Alex pushed off the wall. “Deeply moving. I’m changed.”

Nancy twisted a tissue to shreds between her fingers. “Can he not go in yet?”

David touched her wrist. “Nance.”

“I know. I just—my God.”

Tom had not touched Charlie since they arrived. He stood half a step to Charlie’s left, his shoulders rigid beneath his dark suit.

Charlie looked at him. Tom held his gaze, hands flat at his sides. Charlie’s skin buzzed with the need for Tom’s hand at his back, but Tom stayed exactly where he was.

“I’m going in,” Charlie said.

Tom nodded. “Yeah.”

The doors were heavier than they looked. Redpath Hall opened around him, cavernous and dim. He kept his gaze on the aisle runner and counted his

steps until he reached his chair at the front.

His family filled the first rows. Hazel took her seat. Alex slouched beside her. Lukas, André, and Matt sat a few places over. Charlie looked up just long enough to find Tom beside Nancy, hands folded in his lap.

The Pro-Dean called the open session to order. The PA system emitted a thin, high-pitched whine.

“The candidate will now provide a summary of the thesis, followed by the approved practice-based component.”

Charlie stood. At the edge of the platform, partly in shadow, the Steinway waited.

He walked to the podium and set down his handwritten notes, spending three agonizing seconds nudging the pages until their bottom edges were parallel with the lectern. He pressed his thumbnails into the sides of his index fingers, drew one careful breath, and began.

He gave the title—*The Architecture of Absence: Cognitive and Cultural Resonances of Silence in the Post-Romantic Era*—and outlined the project. Then he reached the sentence he’d rehearsed until it no longer sounded like language.

“Silence,” he said, fixing his gaze on the bridge of the Pro-Dean’s glasses rather than his eyes, “is an architectural construct.”

He dropped his gaze to the podium to simulate a natural pause, then looked up again.

“Focusing on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century piano and orchestral repertoire, I examine how withheld resolution, extended decay, and structurally charged pauses transform silence from expressive ornament into formal argument. Drawing on cognitive research and cultural theory, as well as close analysis of the scores, I treat silence as part of the composition rather than a gap within it. A pause can change what listeners expect and how they understand what follows. My research asks how that understanding shifted after Romanticism.”

He held the two-second pause he’d scripted.

“And what it costs, formally and culturally, when that argument goes unheard.”

He moved away from the podium. Twelve steps to the Steinway.

Charlie sat, adjusted the bench height, and began. The piece was dissonant and technically brutal—violent intervals, dense mathematical clusters. The crescendo built until the sound filled the hall from the floor up.

Then he ripped his hands from the keys.

Silence.

One. Two. Three.

At four seconds, someone coughed lightly. Then nothing. The committee waited for the next movement. One examiner glanced at her program. Another kept his eyes on the Steinway.

Fifteen seconds. Twenty. Charlie did not move. He breathed shallowly through his nose. The rustling programs silenced. The examiner who’d looked away looked back.

He let it run. Let them feel the weight of it.

At exactly twenty-eight seconds, he struck a single resolving major chord.

The room unclenched. He stood and returned to the podium.

“Thank you,” he said.

The Pro-Dean cleared his throat. “All right. We will now move to the examination.”

Charlie exhaled. From the centre of the audience, Tom watched him.

The first examiner, a philosopher with half-moon glasses, spoke first.

“Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery, I want to stay with your theoretical chapter. It’s the most ambitious part of an ambitious project, and I’m not fully persuaded by the bridge between its two central vocabularies.”

He glanced down at the dissertation. “You draw on Sartre to argue that absence becomes legible when consciousness expects something that isn’t

there. Then you bring in *ma*—the interval itself treated as positively structured. Those are not, to my mind, the same account, and your chapter moves between them rather quickly. So tell me clearly: is silence in your argument negative, positive, or are you using incompatible vocabularies because each is useful in a different paragraph?"

A small rustle came from somewhere in the audience. Charlie kept both hands on the podium. He pressed his thumbnails hard against his index fingers.

"I..." Charlie started. He looked at his notes, which suddenly offered no help at all. He looked back up. "I don't think they can be. Reconciled, I mean."

He swallowed, forcing himself not to look toward the centre of the audience where Tom was sitting.

"The chapter may move too quickly across that line," Charlie admitted, the words feeling like a concession. "Sartrean lack and *ma* aren't secretly the same thing. One begins with what's missing; the other asks what the interval itself can hold. It's... part of the object."

The philosopher's pen stopped. He didn't look convinced, but he didn't interrupt.

"A listener," Charlie pushed on, trying to find the rhythm, "may first register a withheld cadence as something expected and absent. But if that interval is extended, given structural consequence, it starts functioning as more than lack."

"Functioning for whom?"

Charlie blinked. "For the listener."

"Which listener?" the examiner shot back. "Historically? Analytically? Phenomenologically? You're moving between those levels."

"The historical—" Charlie stopped himself. That was a trap. "No. Analytically. Analytically first." He dragged a breath in, his mind racing to un-tangle the threads. "I can't claim a listener in 1908 would have described their experience through Sartre or *ma*. That's anachronistic. Those are my analytical vocabularies."

He lost the thread for a second. The philosopher just waited. The silence stretched.

“Sartre describes the first pressure of expectation,” Charlie forced out, finding the groove again. “But *ma*... *ma* helps describe what that interval becomes once it’s no longer experienced only as missing content. I’m moving between phenomenological states, even if the historical listener wouldn’t have had the language for it.”

The examiner looked at him for a long moment. Charlie gripped the podium, waiting for the floor to drop out.

“So,” the philosopher said slowly, “your dissertation isn’t actually offering an ontology of silence.”

The word *ontology* had looked defensible on paper. In the room, spoken aloud, it suddenly seemed enormous. Arrogant, even. If he said yes, he had to prove it. If he said no, he was admitting his introduction overreached.

“Not...” Charlie hesitated. “Not in the strong sense. No. It doesn’t define what silence *is*. It explains how silence becomes legible as structure, across competing modes of listening.”

“That’s a better claim,” the philosopher said. “More modest, but more precise. It’s already implicit in your later chapters. Your introduction should make it explicit.”

“Yes,” Charlie breathed.

The music psychologist looked up. “I’d like to test whether that distinction holds across your methodology. You use predictive processing and expectation research throughout, and at moments the dissertation risks sounding as though contemporary cognitive models can explain the historical listener directly.”

She tapped a page. “What exactly is the status of the psychology here? A historical claim, a universal claim about perception, or a modern explanatory model?”

Charlie rested his hands on the edges of the podium.

“A modern explanatory model,” Charlie said. He stopped, realizing that wasn’t enough. “But—constrained. By historically specific listening practices.”

He looked down at his notes, then pushed them a fraction of an inch away.

“Some basic cognitive patterns of expectation help explain why these compositional strategies grip our attention at all,” he said, working the thought out as he spoke. “But what actually *counts* as a resolution, and what its delay means... that has to be historically learned. The psychology can describe a constraint. It can’t supply the interpretation.”

She tilted her head. “Then why not keep the psychology out of it and stay with historical aesthetics?”

Charlie glanced at the Steinway, then back at the psychologist.

“Because historical aesthetics can only tell me what critics, composers, and audiences *said* silence meant,” Charlie said. “It can’t, by itself, explain the bodily reality of it. It doesn’t explain why a withheld resolution grips a listener’s attention before their conscious interpretation even catches up. The dissertation isn’t only about what silence meant on paper. It’s about how it actively organizes attention.”

“And you’d call that a mechanism?”

Charlie hesitated. “I’m not sure. That may be too strong.”

“A constraint, perhaps?”

He considered it. “Yes. That’s closer.”

The psychologist looked at him for a beat, then made a note on her pad.

The music historian leaned in. “I want to turn to archive and scope. The archival work is excellent, but ‘Post-Romantic’ becomes an elastic category in some of your framing. Your examples move from piano literature to orchestral repertoire, and occasionally your language sounds as though you’re making a transhistorical claim about listening itself. Why these composers? Why this repertoire? And where does your archive stop?”

“The archive,” Charlie started, reaching for the safety of his drafted defence, “is deliberately concentrated. It’s primarily Austro-German and French repertoire from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a focus on works in which delay, non-resolution, and decay are formally overdetermined.”

“Overdetermined by what criteria?” she interrupted.

Charlie blinked, the prepared paragraph vanishing from his head.

“By...” He tapped his index finger against the podium once. “Repetition. Proportion. Return structure.” He mentally scanned a score, pulling the next criteria directly from the music. “Orchestration. And... whether the silence changes the listener’s relationship to the form, rather than merely heightening sentiment.”

She didn’t write that down. She kept her eyes on him. “That’s still quite abstract.”

A heat crawled up the back of Charlie’s neck. *Abstract* was a polite academic word for *evasive*.

“If you take Schumann, for example,” Charlie said, finding his footing. “In Schumann, a pause may intensify expression, but it doesn’t fundamentally change what the listener expects the piece ultimately to *do*.” He brought his hands up, unconsciously shaping the phrase in the air. “But in some of the later repertoire I examine... the silence begins changing the expectation itself. It becomes something the listener actually has to count with.”

He let his hands drop, realizing he’d finally found the edge of his own argument.

“That’s also why the archive stops where it does,” he continued. “Not all charged silence belongs to the Post-Romantic. But in this specific repertoire, the pause begins changing what the listener believes the piece still owes them. That’s what makes the silence load-bearing.”

The historian looked at him for a moment. Then, she picked up her pen.

“That’s the boundary I was asking for,” she said. “Your introduction should give it to the reader before the archive begins testing it.”

“Yes,” Charlie agreed quickly. “Yes, it should.”

“Then what becomes of the more universal language in your first chapter?” The philosopher chimed back in, peering over his half-moon glasses.

Charlie’s stomach dropped. He had spent four months writing and defending that universal language.

Then he exhaled. “I cut it.”

The philosopher raised an eyebrow.

“Any sentence implying silence has one stable ontology across repertoires goes,” Charlie said, the words tasting like copper. “The claims in the introduction become working definitions. Explicitly limited to the corpus.”

“Good,” the philosopher said.

The historian turned a page. “I want to return to the performance component. The written argument is exceptionally controlled. The performance is riskier, and I’m not yet convinced the risk is fully theorized.”

From the front row, Charlie caught the faint sound of Alex letting out a low, *“Oooh,”* before Hazel glared at him to shut up.

“It was effective,” the historian continued. “But effectiveness isn’t self-justifying. You designed a silence long enough to become socially uncomfortable in this hall, during this ceremony, while the audience didn’t know whether the piece had ended. That produces something. But why should I call it an analytic demonstration rather than a controlled embarrassment of the room?”

“I think,” Charlie said carefully, “that it risks being both.”

Her eyes narrowed.

Charlie gripped the edges of the podium. His heart was hammering against his ribs. “The performance manipulated convention. It used the recital setting, and the audience’s training not to applaud, to intensify the delay.”

He took a breath, forcing his voice to stay level.

“If my claim were that silence is innocent, the performance would refute me. But my claim is almost the opposite. Silence becomes powerful when it starts reorganizing the field of attention. What I needed to show was the point at which a room stops experiencing non-sound as waiting... and starts experiencing it as form.”

“Or as coercion,” she countered.

“Yes,” Charlie said. “As coercion.”

“And you’re comfortable with that?”

“No.” He looked at the faces in the front row and then back to the committee. “But my comfort isn’t the object of study. The discomfort is. It’s not proof of the thesis by itself, but it’s evidence that the threshold has been crossed. In this room, the silence exerted force. The performance was designed to make that force available for analysis.”

The psychologist cut in, leaning forward. “But again—you say ‘evidence.’ Evidence of what? A perceptual threshold? Social convention? Anxiety in a formal room? Those aren’t the same thing.”

“No,” Charlie said. “They’re not.”

He looked around the cavernous space of Redpath Hall. At the heavy wood, the Pro-Dean, the committee sitting in judgment.

“That’s why I staged it here,” Charlie said. “In a laboratory, I could isolate the expectation violation, but I’d lose the etiquette—the pressure not to move or applaud or admit you weren’t sure what was happening. Here, the institution was part of the silence.”

He looked directly at the psychologist, gesturing to the space between them.

“Here, everyone knew the etiquette. They were trained listeners, but they were also watching me defend a dissertation in front of a committee. I don’t think I can separate their response to the silence from the pressure of the room.”

The psychologist stopped writing. Her pen hovered over the paper.

“The performance doesn’t prove silence becomes form at twenty-eight seconds,” Charlie said. “It shows that this room, under these conventions,

crossed a threshold—and it lets us examine what made it cross. A demonstration that isolated only one of those dimensions would contradict the dissertation's central claim."

The historian looked down at her notes, letting the quiet stretch. Then she looked back at him.

"Well," she said softly. "That's a serious answer."

The Pro-Dean shuffled his papers. "Are there any final questions?"

The historian lifted one finger. "Only a small one. Define your corpus much earlier in the revision. The specificity strengthens the project. It doesn't diminish it."

"Yes. I will."

The philosopher added, almost dryly, "And reduce your ontological ambition by at least fifteen percent."

Charlie nodded.

The Pro-Dean cleared his throat. "Thank you. Unless there are further questions, the committee will now deliberate. We ask that the candidate and the gallery step outside."

CHAPTER 8

Thursday, April 8.

Outside the doors, Nancy paced a small circle. Alex held his phone, but the screen had gone dark. Hazel sat with her hands folded, staring at the seam between the doors.

Charlie stood with his back against the wall and counted the ceiling tiles.

Eighteen across.

He counted them again.

Still eighteen.

Tom stood two feet to his left. Not touching him.

Charlie's hands had nowhere to go. He pressed his thumbnails into the sides of his index fingers and kept his eyes on the ceiling.

Twenty minutes later, the heavy wooden doors opened.

They filed back into the hall. Charlie returned to his place in front of the podium.

The Pro-Dean adjusted his glasses. "Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery, the committee has reached a unanimous decision. I am pleased to inform you that you have passed your defence, subject to minor revisions."

Passed.

The rest of the sentence vanished.

Nancy came halfway out of her chair with both hands over her mouth. David caught her by the arm before she could cross the aisle, laughing silently as he pulled her back.

Alex scoffed. "Minor revisions? Cowards."

Hazel caught Charlie's eye and gave one definitive nod.

Charlie turned.

Tom was waiting.

He did not step forward.

Charlie closed the distance.

Tom caught him. Charlie pressed his face into Tom's jacket and stayed there. Tom's chest hitched once against his cheek.

"You did that," Tom said.

Charlie held on and let the weight go.

They spilled out of Redpath Hall into the evening. Hazel and Alex bickered as they followed Nancy and David toward Alex's red beater.

Charlie made it halfway down the front steps before his body informed him that it was done.

He stopped.

Tom moved to his shoulder, close enough to catch him if he tipped, and waited.

Charlie looked at him. Tom's hands remained at his sides.

Charlie brushed his fingers against Tom's wrist. Tom turned his hand over and linked their fingers in a tight grip.

In the back of the hired SUV, Charlie kept his eyes closed, his hand resting in Tom's. Streetlights passed in orange bands behind his eyelids.

"Are you alive?" Tom asked.

"I… don't know."

Tom's thumb swept over his knuckles.

When they reached the penthouse, the windows were full of city light. Charlie stopped in the entryway and did not move.

Tom set the keys on the console and came to him. With slow, careful hands, he eased the jacket from Charlie's shoulders and hung it beside the door.

"Bed," Charlie said.

Tom nodded. "Okay."

In the bedroom, Charlie sat on the edge of the mattress and fumbled with his cuffs. One came free. The other did not.

He let out a sharp, frustrated breath.

Tom took half a step forward.

Stopped.

His hands closed into fists against his thighs.

"Do you want me to—"

"Yes," Charlie said quickly.

Tom crossed the distance and worked the stubborn cuff free. Then he moved to the tie. Charlie had said yes; Tom did not make him say it again.

When he finished, he stepped back.

"Can you manage the rest?"

Charlie looked up. Tom held himself so rigidly it looked painful.

"I can manage."

Charlie changed and slid beneath the covers. Tom returned from the bathroom a few minutes later in sleep trousers and a white T-shirt. He stopped beside Charlie's side of the bed.

"Do you feel a little better?"

"I think so."

Tom slid in beside him. Charlie shifted toward the warmth. Tom opened an arm, and Charlie tucked himself against his chest.

"You passed," Tom murmured into his hair.

A tired laugh escaped Charlie. "Apparently."

Tom's hand moved slowly over his back. "I'm very proud of you."

Charlie turned his face into Tom's chest and listened to the heartbeat beneath his ear until he lost count.

Friday, April 9.

In the morning, Charlie woke on his side, half-curled toward Tom's place in the bed. He reached out before opening his eyes.

Cool sheets.

Charlie sat up. The adrenaline crash had turned his bones to wet sand. He dragged yesterday's T-shirt over his head and went barefoot down the hall.

Tom was in the kitchen, already dressed for work. His laptop sat open on the island. Beside it, one of Charlie's mugs waited on the counter.

Empty.

His duloxetine was still in the cabinet.

Tom looked up. "Good morning."

"Hi."

Charlie opened the cabinet and pressed the capsules through the foil. He filled the mug from the tap and swallowed them with cold water.

Tom closed the laptop. "You should take it easy today."

"Okay."

"What would you like to do?"

"I… should probably look over the committee notes."

Tom nodded. "Okay." He retrieved his briefcase from the far end of the counter. "I have a board call at the firm that I couldn't move. Call me if you need anything."

Charlie stared at him. He set the mug down too hard.

Tom's eyes flicked toward it, then returned to Charlie's face.

Charlie crossed the kitchen and stopped in front of him, chin raised.

For one suspended second, Tom's gaze dropped to Charlie's mouth. His hand twitched at his side.

Then he took half a step back.

"Charlie. You don't have to do this because you think I'm upset."

Charlie had crossed the kitchen to kiss his husband goodbye.

The humiliation was instant.

"I wasn't—"

"I know yesterday was a lot. I'm not asking anything from you."

"Right."

"I think it's better if I go."

Charlie folded his arms. "Fine."

Tom's eyes moved over his face once. "Have a good day, Char."

He left. The deadbolt engaged with a low click.

Charlie stood alone in the kitchen.

Charlie spent the day trying to be reasonable.

Dr. Mehta's email was waiting in his inbox: three pages of preliminary revisions spanning the introduction, the methodology, and Chapter Eight. The longest section concerned Chapter Eight.

Charlie printed the notes, sat in the office, and read the first paragraph four times without retaining a single sentence.

When hunger finally drove him into the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator. Fresh fruit and cut vegetables filled the shelves, each container labelled with a date in Tom's handwriting.

Charlie stared at them.

He closed the door and drank a glass of water instead.

Later, he sat at the piano and rested his fingers on the keys. He did not press them.

He checked his phone often enough that, by two-thirty, he had stopped pretending there was a reason. One logistics email from Hazel. A meme from Alex. Three texts from Nancy.

Nothing from Tom.

By four, the apartment felt massive and hollow. Charlie sat at one end of the sectional with his phone facedown beside him and listened to the building settle.

The lock turned at six.

Charlie's head snapped up.

Tom stepped inside and hung up his coat. He walked as far as the edge of the living room and stopped ten feet away.

"Hey," Tom said.

"Hi."

"Did you get through the notes?"

"Some of them."

"Good."

Tom shoved his hands into his pockets. "We can order in. Or go out, if you'd rather."

"Why are you over there?"

"I'm not very far away."

Charlie frowned.

"You didn't make my tea this morning."

"I was trying to give you space."

"I don't want space."

"I know." Tom's voice broke on the word. "Fuck. I'm sorry."

Charlie wiped a tear from his face. "Then why are you doing this?"

Tom looked down. "Because I don't trust myself. I don't know how to do it halfway."

Charlie stood slowly.

“I was angry,” he said. “I’m still hurt. But I forgive you.” His voice broke. “I don’t want you over there. I just want you.”

Tom swallowed. “Tell me the rules.”

“The tea stays. The meds stay. You touch me before you leave.”

Tom closed his eyes.

“You look after me,” Charlie said. “All of that stays. But you ask before you make big decisions. And if I say no, you stop.”

“Yes.”

“Even if you think I’m wrong.”

“Yes.”

“Even if you’re scared.”

“Especially then.”

Charlie covered his mouth with one hand and cried.

Tom took one involuntary step forward, then stopped.

“Thomas.” Charlie held out his hand. “Please. Come here.”

Tom crossed the room and wrapped both arms around him. Charlie made a broken sound and buried his face in Tom’s chest.

“Fuck. There you are,” Tom breathed into his hair.

Charlie clutched him harder. “Don’t disappear on me again.”

“I won’t.”

“I hated today.”

Tom pressed his mouth to Charlie’s temple. “So did I.”

Charlie looked up at him.

“Make me tea.”

Tom kept one arm around him and took him into the kitchen.

He filled the kettle with one hand, the other still resting at Charlie's waist. When he turned, he pressed Charlie back against the marble island.

"Kiss me," Charlie said.

Tom did.

Charlie opened his mouth and let the stupid, unbearable silence of the day empty out into the kiss. Tom held him tightly.

When they broke apart, both of them were breathing hard.

Tom rested his forehead against Charlie's. "Did you eat today?"

Charlie made a face.

"Can I fix that?"

"Later." Charlie leaned into him. "I want my husband back. And I want my daddy."

Tom groaned into his neck.

The kettle clicked off. Tom made the tea exactly the way Charlie liked it and placed the mug in front of him. Charlie curled both hands around the heat for a moment, then set it aside.

He touched Tom's jaw.

"Take me to bed," Charlie said. "I'm asking."

Tom bent, slid one arm behind Charlie's knees, and lifted him from the floor.

At the bedroom door, he paused and searched Charlie's face once more.

Charlie cupped his cheek. "I'm yours. And you're mine."

"Yeah."

Tom carried him into the bedroom and kicked the door shut behind them. The rest of the penthouse went quiet on the other side.

Tom carried Charlie through the bedroom and nudged the bathroom door open with his foot. He set him down on the bathmat but kept one hand at

the small of Charlie's back while he reached into the stall and turned on the shower.

Steam began to cloud the glass.

Tom turned Charlie toward him and caught the hem of his shirt.

"Up."

Charlie raised his arms. Tom pulled the shirt over his head and let it fall to the floor. His fingers found the button of Charlie's jeans, then stopped.

"Please," Charlie said.

Tom undid them. Charlie stepped out of his jeans and reached for Tom's shirt. He managed the first button, but his fingers slipped on the second.

Tom covered Charlie's hands with his own. Together, they worked their way down. Then Tom shrugged off the shirt and dropped it beside Charlie's.

They stepped under the water.

"Tell me what you want, honey."

"Wash my hair?"

Tom poured shampoo into his palm and worked it through Charlie's hair. His thumbs pressed slow circles into Charlie's scalp.

Charlie leaned into the touch. "Mhm."

"Good?"

"Yeah."

Tom guided him beneath the spray and rinsed the soap away. Water ran over Charlie's face and down his chest.

"Hold me," Charlie said.

Tom pulled him in. Charlie wrapped both arms around his neck and pressed as close as he could, skin against skin beneath the falling water.

"I missed you," Tom said into his neck. "Fuck, Char. I missed you."

"I missed you too."

For a while, neither of them moved.

Then Tom reached for the soap. He washed Charlie slowly, his hands passing over Charlie's shoulders and chest, down his arms and across his stomach.

"Turn."

Charlie turned because he wanted to.

Tom washed his back and legs, then drew Charlie beneath the spray again. When the soap was gone, Charlie faced him and pushed Tom's wet hair out of his eyes.

"Now you."

Charlie took the soap. He traced it over Tom's shoulders and the hard planes of his chest, taking his time. By the time he reached Tom's arms, his own were beginning to ache.

Tom noticed. He took the soap from Charlie without comment, kissed his knuckles, and finished quickly.

The water began to cool.

Tom shut it off and pulled a warm towel from the rack. He placed it over Charlie's shoulders.

Charlie drew it around himself. "Thank you."

Tom kissed him. "Always."

He took the ends of the towel and dried Charlie's shoulders, then his chest and stomach. Charlie stood still and let himself be cared for. Tom turned him and dried his back before kneeling to do his legs.

When he stood again, he wrapped the towel securely around Charlie's waist and took another one to his hair.

Charlie cupped his face. "Take me to bed."

Tom bent at once, one arm behind Charlie's knees and the other around his back.

Charlie let his head fall against Tom's shoulder.

The bedroom was dark except for the city light peeking through the curtains. Tom laid him on the mattress. The towel around Charlie's waist came loose and fell open.

Tom dropped his own towel. For a moment, he only looked.

"Thomas."

Charlie held out his hand.

Tom took it and came down beside him. He kissed Charlie's forehead, his cheek, then finally his mouth. Charlie held Tom's face between his hands and opened for him.

When the kiss broke, Tom rested his forehead against Charlie's.

"Tell me," he said.

Charlie knew what he was asking.

"Your mouth," he said. "Then I want you inside me."

Tom's eyes closed for a second. "Okay."

He kissed Charlie again before moving down his body. His mouth lingered at Charlie's throat, his chest, the soft skin beneath his ribs. Charlie threaded his fingers through Tom's damp hair and arched beneath him.

"You're beautiful," Tom murmured against his stomach.

Tom moved between Charlie's thighs. His hands closed around Charlie's hips, but he waited.

"Please, Daddy."

Tom turned Charlie onto his stomach and drew him up onto his knees. He kissed the base of Charlie's spine, then spread his thighs farther apart.

The first touch of Tom's tongue made Charlie gasp and grip the sheets.

Tom held him down but did not force him still. He waited until Charlie pressed back toward him before doing it again.

"Okay?" Tom asked.

"Yes."

Tom's mouth returned to him.

The pleasure came slowly at first, gathering each time Tom's tongue moved over him. Charlie pressed his face into the pillow, breathing through the heat building beneath his skin.

Tom paused.

Charlie looked back over his shoulder.

"More," Charlie said.

Tom obeyed.

Charlie's fingers twisted in the sheets. His body moved helplessly toward Tom's mouth, and Tom followed every movement until Charlie was trembling.

When Tom finally pulled away, he pressed one last kiss to Charlie's lower back.

"Turn over for me."

Charlie rolled onto his back.

Tom sat between his legs and touched Charlie's face before reaching for the lube. He warmed it between his fingers, then worked one inside him slowly.

Charlie let out a breath.

Tom watched his face. "Good?"

"Another."

A second finger joined the first. Tom took his time, curling them until Charlie's hips lifted from the mattress.

"There we go," Tom murmured.

Charlie caught him by the back of the neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Tom kept his fingers moving as Charlie opened beneath him.

"I need you," Charlie whispered.

Tom stilled.

"Tell me how."

“Like this.” Charlie wrapped his legs around Tom’s waist. “I want to see you.”

Tom kissed him again. He withdrew his fingers, slicked himself, and pressed the head of his cock against Charlie.

“Look at me,” he said. “Stay with me.”

“I’m looking.”

Tom pushed inside him slowly.

The stretch made Charlie’s hands clamp down on his shoulders. Tom stopped at once.

“Okay?”

Charlie breathed until the sharpness eased. “Yeah. Keep going.”

Tom entered him the rest of the way and stilled himself. For several seconds, they only looked at each other.

Charlie touched the wet hair curling against Tom’s forehead. “Move.”

Tom began carefully, his body held close over Charlie’s. Each thrust was slow and measured, as though he still didn’t quite trust himself with what Charlie had given him.

Charlie tightened his legs around him.

“More.”

“Charlie—”

“I said more, Daddy.”

Tom’s next thrust drove deeper. Charlie cried out and pulled him closer. Tom kissed him hard.

“Yes,” Charlie breathed against his mouth. “Like that.”

Tom found the rhythm Charlie wanted. The bed shifted beneath them. Charlie held on to his shoulders, feeling every thrust through his hips and low in his stomach.

“I love you,” Charlie said.

Tom faltered.

Then he buried his face against Charlie's neck and breathed him in as he held him tighter.

"I love you too." His voice broke around the words. "God, Char."

Tom reached between them and wrapped his hand around Charlie. His strokes matched the rhythm of his hips.

"Thomas."

"I've got you."

The pleasure broke through him. Charlie came with Tom's name in his mouth, his legs locking around Tom's waist.

Tom followed a moment later, going still deep inside him with a broken sound against Charlie's throat.

For a while, neither of them moved.

Tom's weight remained braced above him. Charlie ran a hand down his back and felt his breathing gradually slow.

When Tom began to pull away, Charlie caught his wrist.

"Don't go far."

"Just the bathroom."

Tom returned with a warm washcloth. He cleaned Charlie's stomach and thighs, then dropped the cloth beside the bed and climbed beneath the sheets.

Charlie moved into him at once. He tucked his head beneath Tom's chin and threw one arm across his stomach.

"Better?" Tom asked.

"Yeah."

Tom's hand travelled slowly up and down his back.

Charlie closed his eyes. The last thing he felt before sleep took him was Tom's hand still moving, still there.

CHAPTER 9

Saturday, April 10.

Charlie woke with Tom wrapped around him from behind. The duvet had trapped them both. Charlie lay still, listening to the slow rhythm of Tom's breathing and the faint hum of the city far below the glass.

Yesterday, the bed had been cold on one side. Today, Tom was everywhere.

Tom stirred. He pressed a sleepy kiss between Charlie's shoulder blades through the cotton of his T-shirt.

"Morning, angel."

Charlie smiled into the pillow. "Hi."

He turned in Tom's arms. Tom propped himself up on one elbow, his hair sticking up in every direction.

He touched Charlie's cheek. "You're here."

"I'm here."

Tom hesitated. "I owe you a real apology."

Charlie held his gaze, then nodded.

"I got used to being afraid for you," Tom said. "I told myself I was keeping you safe. I knew better. I did it anyway."

Charlie looked down.

"I let you do some of it," he said quietly. "Because I was scared too. And…" He swallowed. "I'm sorry I made you grovel so much. I know why you did it."

"Hey. No." Tom tilted Charlie's chin up until they were eye to eye. "You didn't make me do anything. I deserved it. I'm serious."

Charlie turned his cheek into Tom's palm. "Okay."

Tom bent and kissed him.

They stayed in bed until the intercom started buzzing.

Charlie felt Tom frown against his neck. "Ignore it."

"It's Hazel."

"Exactly. She can survive the hallway."

The buzz came again, longer this time.

Charlie slid out of bed, pulled on a pair of Tom's grey sweatpants, and crossed the apartment barefoot. He hit the panel.

"I have croissants," Hazel's voice crackled through the speaker. "And Tom's phone hasn't moved in twelve hours, so I'm conducting a wellness check. Let me in."

Charlie smiled and hit the release.

Hazel entered in a beige wool coat, carrying a large bakery box. She set it on the island and looked Charlie over—rumpled hair, bare feet, Tom's sweatpants.

"You look less haunted."

"I feel less haunted."

Tom came into the kitchen in a black T-shirt and dark joggers. He kissed the side of Charlie's head and reached around him for a coffee mug.

Hazel rolled her eyes. "Oh, good. You're a person again."

Charlie smiled into his tea.

"I handled that badly," Tom said, picking up the pastry.

"You did. And I'll keep bringing it up to humble you."

Charlie carried his mug around the island and leaned into Tom's side. Tom's arm came around his waist.

"Are you two done?" Charlie asked.

Hazel selected a croissant. "No."

“Never,” Tom said.

Hazel left after breakfast with the remaining croissants. Tom and Charlie drove to Drawn & Quarterly.

Inside, the air was warm and smelled of paper and damp wool. Students drifted between the tables.

Charlie headed for the non-fiction section. Tom stayed near the front window, his hands in his coat pockets.

At the end of the first aisle, Charlie looked back.

Tom was watching him, waiting.

Charlie smiled and crooked two fingers. Tom crossed the store to him.

“Hold this.” Charlie dropped a thick hardcover into his hands.

Tom accepted it without glancing at the title. “Yes, sir.”

For the next twenty minutes, Tom followed half a step behind him while the stack in his arms climbed steadily toward his chin.

At the counter, the clerk asked Charlie a rapid question in French about the loyalty program.

Beside him, Tom said nothing while Charlie declined the program and tapped their debit card against the machine.

Outside, the wind whipped down the street. Charlie hunched into his coat as they turned the corner.

“You’re freezing.”

Charlie opened his mouth to argue, then shivered so hard his teeth clicked.

“Give me the bags.”

Charlie handed them over. Tom took both in his left hand and opened his overcoat with his right.

Charlie stepped into the space against his chest. Tom folded the coat around him, shutting out the wind. Charlie slid his arms around Tom’s waist and pressed his cold face into his sweater.

“Better?” Tom murmured into his hair.

“Mhm.”

Foot traffic split around them. Charlie stayed where he was.

After a moment, he tilted his face up. “Last time, you just picked me up.”

Tom winced. “I remember.”

“You carried me off like I weighed nothing.”

“I am trying to improve.”

Charlie let more of his weight rest against Tom. “This is good too.”

Tom kissed his forehead. “Let’s go home.”

The bath was already drawn when Charlie came out of the bedroom in his robe. Steam clouded the mirror. The room smelled like their body wash.

Tom sat on the edge of the tub, waiting. He stood when Charlie came in but kept his hands at his sides.

“Are you getting in?” Charlie asked.

“If you want me to.”

“Come in.”

Tom undressed and stepped into the water. Charlie let the robe fall and followed, settling between Tom’s legs. He found Tom’s wrists beneath the water and drew his arms around his waist.

The temperature was exactly right. Of course it was.

Charlie exhaled until his lungs were empty.

“Hi,” Tom said into his hair.

“Hi.”

Tom’s thumb moved in slow circles over Charlie’s forearm. Charlie watched the ripples cross the water.

After a while, he rested his head against Tom's shoulder and closed his eyes.

"Better?" Tom asked, kissing the back of his neck.

"Don't make me get out," Charlie said. "We live here now."

Tom's chest shook with a quiet laugh. "I'll have Pierre forward the mail to the tub."

Charlie smiled. His eyes stayed closed.

Tom held him until the water began to cool, long after the cold had left Charlie's skin.

Wednesday, April 14.

By Wednesday, Charlie had stopped waiting for the quiet to break.

Pikolo Espresso Bar on Parc Avenue was narrow enough that he had to turn sideways to carry the tray between the tables. He brought three coffees and an English breakfast tea back to the corner they had claimed.

"You are a lifesaver," Priya said, taking her latte as Charlie squeezed into the chair beside her. "We should be buying you coffee for the next month."

"It's no problem." Charlie wrapped both hands around his tea.

Jason took his cup and stirred in an irresponsible amount of sugar. "I'm still recovering from your defence."

"You weren't the one defending."

"You held that silence long enough that I started reviewing my moral failures."

Priya laughed. "The whole second row leaned forward."

Charlie looked up. "They did?"

"All at once," Sarah said. "About halfway through. I don't think you could see it from the piano."

He couldn't. "Good," Charlie said quietly.

“Your husband’s suit was also upsetting,” Jason added.

Priya groaned. “He’s been talking about it for six days.”

“It fit perfectly. I’m allowed to notice. You looked completely unfazed.”

Charlie hid his smile in his tea. “I am occasionally fazed.”

Sarah watched him over the rim of her cup. “How are you doing?”

“I passed.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

Charlie ran his thumb along the seam of the mug. “Tired,” he admitted. “I still have revisions.”

He opened his laptop and pulled up Chapter Eight. Only a few pages of committee notes remained.

“How much do you have left?” Sarah asked.

“Just these.”

Charlie read the first sentence. Then he read it again.

The words were French. He knew every one of them. Together, they meant nothing.

Behind him, the espresso machine released a sharp hiss of steam. Charlie flinched. The café seemed to pull away from him, the voices around the table flattening into noise. His fingers lay motionless on the keyboard, too heavy to lift.

“Charlie?”

He blinked. Priya was watching him.

“You okay? You spaced out for a second.”

Charlie straightened and closed the laptop. He could finish at home, where it was quiet.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Just thinking about the revisions. Please, continue analyzing my husband’s suit.”

Jason sighed. “I’m mourning my own wardrobe.”

At home, Charlie sat at the piano with his hands in his lap.

The low partition. Jean-Luc's voice. The door shutting behind him.

The keys had stopped meaning anything.

The kettle clicked off in the kitchen. A minute later, the scent of jasmine reached him. Tom came into the living room carrying two mugs.

He set his coffee on the side table and held out Charlie's tea. Charlie took it. Tom sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched. He did not ask what was wrong.

The first sip was too hot. The second tasted like jasmine. By the third, the keys looked like keys again.

Tom drank when Charlie drank and waited when he stopped.

When Charlie's mug was empty, Tom took it and set both cups aside.

"Do you want to play something together?"

Charlie looked at him. "You want to try?"

Tom tapped one key with his index finger. "You could teach me something. Like Chopsticks."

Charlie looked at the Steinway, then at Tom's finger.

"Chopsticks," he repeated.

He positioned Tom's hands over the keys, leaving him with one index finger on each note. "Hit these two."

They made it through four bars before Tom struck three keys at once. The chord crashed through the room.

Charlie laughed.

Tom looked down at the offending keys. "That wasn't it?"

"Not remotely."

Tom reset his fingers. "Again."

They tried again. It got worse.

"Okay," Charlie said, still smiling. "Something else. One finger for you."

He guided Tom's left hand into the lower register and showed him the eight-note bass line from Pachelbel's Canon.

"Just keep playing these. Nice and slow. Don't stop."

Tom started from the beginning. Eight notes, then eight again. When the rhythm steadied, Charlie brought his hands down over the higher keys.

The melody entered above the bass. Tom missed one note and caught the next. Charlie played over him until the apartment was full of music.

Thursday, April 15.

Charlie found Tom in the kitchen just after midnight.

Only the light above the stove was on. Tom stood beneath it in shirtsleeves, his phone lit in one hand. His thumb wasn't moving.

"What happened?"

Tom glanced up. "Nothing."

"That's not your nothing face."

"I didn't know I had a nothing face."

"You have a lot of faces." Charlie crossed the kitchen and leaned one hip against the counter beside him. "What's wrong?"

Tom turned the phone toward him. There was no message open. Only a contact card.

K. Montgomery

Charlie looked up.

Tom locked the screen. "It's her birthday."

He set the phone on the counter, then picked it up again. "My calendar reminded me at midnight."

"Were you going to call her?"

Tom laughed once without humour. "I haven't decided."

"That's a lie."

Tom looked at him.

“You’ve decided six times,” Charlie said. “You just keep changing your mind.”

“That obvious?”

“Always.” Charlie reached past him for the kettle. “Chamomile?”

Tom nodded.

Charlie filled the kettle and switched it on.

“Tell me why you want to.”

“Because it’s her birthday. I always call her on her birthday.”

Charlie stepped in front of him and wrapped both arms around his waist. Tom held him a little too tightly.

“And?”

Tom placed the phone on the counter. Their reflection hovered in the black screen.

“Because I hate abandoning things.”

Charlie was quiet for a moment.

“Tell me why you don’t want to.”

“Because I’m angry.” The answer came too quickly. “Because the last time she saw me, she couldn’t even look at me. I’m her only son, and she couldn’t even look at me.”

“You think if you call her, she gets to pretend that didn’t happen.”

Tom nodded. “Partly.”

“And the other part?”

Tom frowned.

“If I don’t call, it feels like the end. Like…” He looked down at the phone. “Like I couldn’t fix it.”

Charlie lifted both hands to his face.

“Not calling her this year isn’t the same as giving up forever. It means you’re not ready this year.”

The kettle clicked off.

Charlie kissed him, then stepped away to pour the water. He dropped a tea bag into each mug and handed one to Tom.

Tom closed both hands around it without drinking.

After a moment, he picked up the phone and unlocked it. His mother’s contact card appeared again. His thumb hovered over the call button.

Then the screen went black.

Tom set the phone face-down on the counter.

Charlie took a sip of tea.

“Next year,” Tom said.

“Maybe.”

They stood at the counter with their shoulders touching.

At last, Tom tried the tea. His face twisted.

“Ugh. Leaf water.”

Charlie smiled into his mug.

CHAPTER 10

Friday, April 16.

Tom stood at the kitchen island fastening his watch. Across from him, Charlie sat on a stool in one of Tom's old sweaters and a pair of sleep pants, his mug held between both hands. He hadn't taken a sip.

"Meetings until three." Tom snapped the watch closed and glanced over. "You?"

It took Charlie a second to understand the question.

"Mehta still needs the updated draft for the committee."

"When?"

"Next Saturday at eleven fifty-nine." Charlie rubbed his thumb along the rim of the mug. "If I miss the portal, they can't clear the dissertation in time for June."

"Do you want me to move anything around?"

"No. I have a week."

Tom watched him for another moment, then came around the island and kissed his hair.

"Call me if you need me."

"I will."

Tom left. The door clicked shut behind him.

Charlie remained on the stool for another minute. Then he set down the untouched tea and stood.

His knees went loose.

He caught the counter before he fell. The marble edge dug into his palms. Morning light struck the glass and came back at him from every direction, white and sharp. He squeezed his eyes shut, but the glare stayed red behind his eyelids.

The refrigerator stopped humming.

In the sudden silence, Charlie could hear every breath scrape through his throat.

Make more tea. A normal task.

He opened his eyes and crossed to the kettle.

Kettle. Water. Switch.

Charlie lifted it from its base and carried it to the sink. A little water shifted inside.

He stopped in front of the faucet.

Water came next. He knew that.

His hand wouldn't move.

Charlie stared at the tap, trying to remember what happened after water.

His fingers opened.

The kettle struck the marble edge of the sink with a crack and rolled onto its side. Water leaked through the fracture and spread across the counter.

The sound went through him.

His next breath stopped high in his chest. He tried again and got less air. Tea rose bitterly into the back of his throat.

Charlie backed away until the island struck his spine.

Call Thomas.

His phone was in his pocket. He could feel its hard outline against his thigh.

His arm would not move.

"Thomas."

No sound came out.

He slid down the cabinetry. A drawer pull caught his shoulder on the way, and the tile was cold through his sleep pants when he reached the floor.

Charlie pulled his knees against his chest and buried his face in them. His breath came back hot against the fabric.

Tom made it through his first two meetings before he checked his phone and saw that Charlie still had not answered.

That, by itself, was not catastrophic. Charlie could disappear into work when he was deep in revisions.

But Tom had texted twice.

You eat anything?

How's Chapter Eight?

Nothing.

By half past twelve, Tom was catastrophizing.

He called once. It rang all the way through.

No answer.

He was already on his feet before the line disconnected.

The drive back was torture. Every red light held him too long. At each one, he checked his phone. Nothing.

When he stepped into the penthouse, one of Charlie's mugs still sat on the island.

"Charlie?"

Tom moved through the kitchen and found the kettle on its side near the sink, a shallow crescent of dried water marking the marble.

Then he saw him.

Charlie was folded into the base of the island, rigid and silent, his arms locked around his knees.

Tom stripped off his jacket and crossed the room. Then he dropped into a crouch in front of him.

“Hey,” Tom said, keeping his voice low. “It’s me.”

Charlie shuddered.

Tom reached out slowly and set a hand against the back of Charlie’s neck. Charlie leaned into the pressure.

“I’ve got you,” Tom murmured. “Can I pick you up?”

The smallest nod.

Tom slid one arm under Charlie’s knees and the other around his back. Charlie came up stiffly. The instant he was off the floor, he clutched at Tom’s shirt and buried his face against Tom’s shoulder.

“I know,” Tom whispered, pressing a kiss to his temple. “I know, baby. I’m here.”

He carried him to the bedroom.

The room was still dim from the curtains they had not opened that morning. Tom set Charlie on the edge of the bed only long enough to pull back the duvet and reach for his phone. A moment later, a low wash of pink noise filled the room, soft and insulating.

Tom went back to the kitchen for a moment, then sat beside Charlie and pressed a glass of water into his hands.

“Drink.”

Charlie drank in small, shaky mouthfuls while Tom kept one arm around his waist.

When the glass was empty, Tom set it on the nightstand.

“Lie down, honey.”

Charlie folded without protest, disappearing into the pillows.

Tom stretched out beside him and drew him in, then rolled over him enough to let Charlie feel the heavy, undeniable shelter of Tom’s body between him and the rest of the world.

Charlie let out a broken sob.

Tom caught the tears with his thumb and kissed the damp tracks away.

“Shh,” he murmured against Charlie’s skin. “I’m right here. You’re safe.”

His hand moved slowly along Charlie’s spine. Charlie counted under his breath.

“That’s it,” Tom whispered. “Nice and slow.”

Charlie’s fingers tugged at Tom’s shirt, then loosened.

The tension in his body began, little by little, to give way beneath Tom’s weight.

Saturday, April 24.

Tom had stripped Charlie’s world down to the studs.

At first, improvement came in humiliatingly small increments, but by Wednesday, Charlie could sit at the kitchen island for half an hour before the light became unbearable. By Thursday, he could follow a conversation without losing entire pieces of it. On Friday morning, he had opened his university email and answered Professor Mehta himself.

Tom had watched from the other side of the island.

“Do you want me to ask her for more time?”

Charlie shook his head.

“Char.”

“No.” He swallowed. “I can finish it.”

Tom had looked at him for a long moment.

Then he nodded.

By Saturday afternoon, the shutdown had eased. His thoughts still came slowly.

Tom sat propped against the headboard, finishing a muted call for the firm. Charlie was slotted between Tom’s legs, Tom’s arms wrapped around him.

He wore one of Tom’s oldest sweaters.

Then he remembered.

Chapter Eight.

The revised section for Professor Mehta.

The portal closed at eleven fifty-nine.

Panic flared in his chest. He reached for his laptop on the nightstand.

Tom’s arm pulled him closer. “Char?”

“One thing.”

Tom studied the side of his face.

“You still don’t want me to contact Mehta?”

Charlie shook his head. “I just have to finish this.”

“If it gets too much, you stop.”

Charlie nodded.

Tom cautiously returned his attention to his call.

Charlie dimmed the display and opened the working file.

It took him several seconds to remember where he was.

He scrolled through Chapter Eight until he found the paragraph he had abandoned the previous week. It ended halfway through the argument, one sentence hanging open above a blank stretch of white.

The thought behind it was still there somewhere. He could feel its shape. He just couldn’t reach it.

Charlie opened the French source from his research folder.

The words swam at first. He read the same paragraph again. And again.

There.

The passage explained the Sartre point perfectly.

I’ll paste it in to hold the structure, he thought. Just a placeholder.

He copied the passage and dropped it into the blank space.

Then he put his hands back on the keyboard.

Nothing came.

Charlie stared at the first sentence of the French passage. He knew he was supposed to transform it into the argument in his head. He could remember that there had been another step after this.

What step?

He scrolled upward.

Then downward.

The unfinished gap was gone.

The paragraph above connected to something. Something connected to the paragraph below. There was text where the empty space had been.

The page looked finished.

A small, exhausted relief loosened something inside his chest.

Charlie hit Save As.

Chapter8_Mehta_FINAL

A tremor ran through Charlie. Tom ended his call and tossed his phone aside.

“Everything okay?”

Charlie looked at the full page.

“Done,” he whispered. His throat felt like sandpaper.

He opened the graduate portal.

The submission page was familiar enough that his hands knew it better than his brain did. Upload file. Confirm document. Declarations.

Charlie read the first declaration.

The words reached his eyes and stopped there.

He clicked the box.

The second was the same.

Click.

He knew what these questions were. He had answered them before. Somewhere beneath the fog, familiarity registered as understanding.

He clicked through the final confirmation and pressed Submit.

A green banner flashed across the screen.

Submission received.

Charlie snapped the laptop shut.

The effort cost him the last of his strength, and the machine slipped from his grip.

Tom caught it, dumping it onto the nightstand. He hauled Charlie fully against his chest, wrapping him up completely. Charlie went limp, his head dropping under Tom's chin.

"Sleep, honey," Tom murmured.

Charlie did.

Monday, April 26.

At 8:07 in the morning, the iPad on the nightstand pinged.

Tom reached across the bed. The lock screen showed two previews:

From: Professor Haimanti Mehta
Subject: Please read as soon as you are able — submitted chapter

From: Associate Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
Subject: Request for preliminary meeting regarding submitted chapter

Beside him, Charlie stirred, fingers curling into the sheet.

Tom turned on the mattress, pulling Charlie against his chest. "Charlie. Baby. Wake up for me."

A small sound caught in Charlie's throat. He winced, his eyes opening, unfocused.

“I’m right here,” Tom said, his hand smoothing down the tense line of Charlie’s spine. “You’re safe.”

Charlie shifted into his warmth.

“Listen to me,” Tom kept his voice level. “You have two emails. One from Professor Mehta. One from Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.”

Charlie went entirely still.

“I haven’t opened them yet. Do you want to read them, or do you want me to?”

Charlie shut his eyes, pressing closer against him. “You.”

Tom unlocked the screen.

Professor Mehta’s email was first. She had caught an unattributed passage in the draft of Chapter Eight Charlie had uploaded on Saturday. It wasn’t his voice, and because the file had been formally submitted through the portal, university policy gave her no discretion to handle it informally. She had notified the faculty office, though she noted she believed it was exhaustion rather than deliberate deception, and urged him to compile every outline, draft, and source file showing how the error happened.

The second email was from Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies—cooler, flatter, written in pure administrative dialect. They requested Charlie attend an expedited review meeting on Wednesday, May 5, at 10:00 a.m. with the Faculty Disciplinary Officer. He was permitted an advisor.

Tom checked the timestamp: 8:00 a.m. Monday.

Charlie had uploaded the file late Saturday afternoon. For a file to move from submission to disciplinary review in thirty-six hours, Mehta had either escalated it instantly, or someone had flagged it to jump the queue.

Tom locked the screen and set the iPad aside.

Charlie was trembling, the colour gone from his face. “She referred it.” His voice was stripped bare. “Next Wednesday is—”

“A preliminary meeting,” Tom said, bracing him as Charlie tried to sit up too fast. “An initial review. Not a finding.”

Charlie's breath broke apart anyway. "They think I plagiarized."

Tom caught him by the waist, pulling him securely back against his chest as Charlie swayed. "Easy. I've got you."

Charlie's hands caught fistfuls of Tom's shirt. "They're going to open a misconduct file. They'll stop the chapter. They'll think I lied." His breathing hitched, coming too fast, too shallow. "They'll think I put it there on purpose."

Charlie went rigid. "The portal. The French passage. Oh God." He buried his face against the curve of Tom's neck, his voice breaking. "Oh God."

Tom held him and felt the guilt rise in his throat. He had been sitting right beside Charlie on Saturday; he had watched him submit through delirium and hadn't stopped him.

He cupped the back of Charlie's head. "Look at me. Baby, look at me."

Slowly, Charlie lifted his face, eyes wide with panic.

"I know you didn't do it on purpose," Tom said.

A broken sound tore from Charlie's throat. "I pasted it to hold the structure. I was going to rewrite it. I just—I don't remember the end. I don't remember what I was doing."

Tom gathered him closer against his chest.

"My brain just stopped," Charlie sobbed.

Tom pressed his mouth to Charlie's forehead. "They haven't decided anything yet."

Charlie stared at him, terrified, desperate to believe it.

"And if next Wednesday is too fast, we don't agree to the expedited date."

Charlie let out a shaky breath that hitched into another sob. "They'll still think it when they see it. The passage. They'll see it and think it."

"Maybe for one minute. Then they'll see the drafts. The notes. The timeline of the file. And they'll see exactly what it was."

"I didn't," Charlie whispered, pleading into Tom's collar. "I didn't."

Tom pressed their foreheads together. “You never have to convince me.”

Charlie sagged, the fight draining out of him, his face hidden against Tom’s neck as his shoulders shook.

“I haven’t replied to anyone. And I haven’t called Hazel,” Tom said.

Charlie’s fists knotted tighter into Tom’s shirt. “Please. Help me fix it.”

“We’re going to fix it,” Tom murmured. “First, we call your sister. All right?”

“Yes. But... please don’t yell.”

“I am perfectly composed.”

Charlie let out a wet little laugh against his skin. “You’re behaving in a composed way. That is not the same thing.”

Tom picked up his phone, switched it to speaker, and dialled, keeping his arm locked around Charlie’s waist.

Hazel picked up on the third ring. “If one of you is dead, I’m going to be furious.”

“We have a situation,” Tom said.

Hazel was instantly sharp. “What happened?”

Tom looked down at Charlie and waited. Charlie drew in a ragged breath, leaning his full weight into Tom.

“Professor Mehta found pasted text in my Chapter Eight,” Charlie said quietly. “She referred it to the faculty office.”

Thirty-eight minutes later, Tom hauled the door open before Hazel could knock.

“Casualty report.”

“Bad,” Tom muttered. “But he’s lucid enough to be terrified.”

“And where exactly were you when he uploaded a compromised file to the portal?” she asked. “Meditating? Alphabetizing spreadsheets?”

“I was holding him. I didn’t look at the screen.”

“A tactical failure,” Hazel snapped. “If you’re going to stand watch, Montgomery, try watching.”

“Hazel, stop.”

Charlie’s voice came from the living room. Hazel brushed past Tom without apology.

Charlie was folded into the corner of the sectional, half-swallowed by the Sadness Shroud. The sleeves were pulled over his hands.

Hazel dropped into the opposite armchair and held out her hand.

“Laptop.”

Tom rolled his eyes. He went to get it from the bedroom and came back with it already open.

Hazel snatched it. “I’m reading. No drama until I finish.”

Tom sat down next to Charlie on the couch. He slid a hand into Charlie’s hair.

Hazel opened the emails first.

She read Mehta’s message, then the one from Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Her expression did not change.

Then she opened Chapter Eight and scrolled.

“There.”

Charlie lifted his eyes to the screen.

La condition de l’absence n’est pas un vide naturel…

“I remember,” Charlie whispered. “I was going to rewrite it. I just—the paragraph looked finished enough, and I couldn’t keep all the steps in my head, and then…”

Tom scowled. “The timing is ridiculous. She refers the file and GPS is already holding a slot for next week by eight this morning. That’s not normal.”

“No,” Hazel said. “It isn’t.”

Tom pulled out his phone.

“Don’t,” Hazel warned.

Tom looked up. “I’m not marching into the meeting with counsel. I know better than that.”

“Do you?” Hazel asked.

“I’m just letting Tremblay know and asking him to ask some questions. That’s it.”

Hazel was quiet for a moment.

“Fine,” she said. “Just information.”

Tom typed quickly. He sent his message, then shoved the phone back into his pocket.

“I can still have counsel on standby,” he muttered.

“You can have counsel standing on the moon if it comforts you,” Hazel said. “If you pull some stupid god-complex shit again—”

“They are threatening his doctorate!”

“Thomas.”

Tom looked down. Charlie’s eyes were red.

“If I show up with lawyers, I look guilty,” Charlie said. “I have to tell the truth. And it can’t look like I’m hiding behind our money.”

“They’ll hear everything,” Tom said quietly.

Charlie nodded and turned his face into Tom’s chest.

“I know,” he whispered. “I just need you to be there, okay?”

Tom kissed Charlie’s forehead. “Always.”

Hazel opened the leather satchel at her feet and pulled out a legal pad.

“Good,” she said. “Now we proceed like sane people. Here is the frame. One, the passage is there. Two, it was not cited. Three, the explanation is cognitive failure during drafting. Four, we document the sequence with

drafts, notes, local revision history, and anything else that shows how the chapter was built."

Charlie stayed pressed against Tom, listening.

Hazel's gaze flicked once to Tom. "And Thomas does not buy a procedural sledgehammer because he feels guilty."

"Hazy," Charlie said softly into Tom's shirt. "Leave him alone."

Hazel exhaled through her nose, then made a small notation on the pad.

"Fine," she said. "Walk me through Saturday afternoon again. Slowly."

They spent the rest of Monday taking the disaster apart.

Hazel commandeered the coffee table. Tom moved between the kitchen and the living room, making tea that went cold and toast Charlie only dismantled.

Charlie answered her questions from where he sat folded into Tom's side. Whenever the fog swallowed a detail, the tears came. He couldn't help it.

Hazel would write *unclear* in the margin and move on.

By early evening, the truth on the page was ugly.

"This reads like negligence." Tom frowned at the pages.

Hazel did not blink. "Because it was."

Charlie winced and curled deeper into himself.

"It was," he whispered. He stared at his hands. "I didn't mean to use it as mine. But I submitted it."

Hazel set down her pen.

"I know, Char. I'm sorry. But if we don't call it what it is, the disciplinary officer won't take us seriously."

Tom pulled Charlie closer.

"Tomorrow we get documentation," Hazel said. "A doctor who can describe what state you were in."

She began packing her bag. “I’m going home to shower and change. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

Tom followed her to the door.

Hazel turned and shoved a finger into his chest. “If you mess this up again, they’ll find your hands. Only your hands.”

Tom glared at her. “You’re delightful.”

Hazel glanced past him.

Charlie had retreated all the way into the corner of the sectional again, the hood of the old sweater pulled over his head.

Hazel scowled. “Get him settled.”

Then she was gone.

Tom’s phone buzzed before he had made it back to the living room.

Tremblay.

My sources say your father’s foundation has raised questions about pausing scholarship funding. Dean’s side wants updates on anything that could become embarrassing.

Tom read the message twice before lowering the phone.

He walked back into the living room slowly.

Charlie had not moved. He was still curled beneath the grey hood, small against the dark windows and the city lights beyond them.

Tom sat beside him. He needed Charlie awake for this.

“Char,” Tom said quietly.

Charlie tipped his head back. His blue eyes found Tom’s in the dim light.

“What is it?”

“Tremblay looked into the timing,” Tom said slowly. “He does not think the university process itself has been formally tampered with. But he does think my father is leaning on the institution indirectly.”

Charlie went very still.

“My father’s foundation is attached to a major graduate initiative involving GPS,” Tom continued. “Advancement is suddenly nervous about that money. That nervousness appears to have rolled downhill. People who normally would have let a file sit for a week now want updates on anything that could become awkward.”

Charlie stared at him.

“So the meeting is faster,” he said faintly, “because they’re scared.”

“Yes.”

Charlie frowned. Very softly, he said, “Your father.”

“He is trying to widen every vulnerability he can find,” Tom said. “If this becomes a formal misconduct finding, it becomes one more piece of material he can feed into the existing narrative that you’re unstable, deceptive, dependent, compromised—whatever serves him on the day. Media. Immigration. Anyone already looking for a reason to read us badly.”

Charlie looked down at Hazel’s notes on the coffee table.

“He wants me to collapse before I get in the room,” he whispered.

Tom reached up and cupped the side of Charlie’s neck, his thumb resting warm against his jaw.

“That’s what he’s counting on.”

Charlie leaned forward and pressed his forehead against Tom’s shoulder.

“I know you’ll fight him for me,” he murmured.

Tom closed his eyes briefly and bent his head against Charlie’s hair.

“I will.”

Charlie’s voice shook.

“But I still have to walk in there myself.”

Tom’s hand moved along the back of his neck.

“Yes.”

Charlie breathed in against his shirt, then out.

“I have to prove what happened,” he whispered.

Tom turned and pressed a kiss to his temple.

“No,” he said quietly. “You have to tell the truth about what happened. We build the proof around you.”

ACT 2

CHAPTER 11

Tuesday, April 27.

The air on Mount Royal was cold.

They took the Olmsted Path. It was the longest way up to the Kondiaronk Belvedere, but also the gentlest: a wide gravel trail that climbed the mountain in slow, forgiving curves.

Charlie took it one slow step at a time. The world still reached him in pieces, but the rhythm of walking was pulling him back into his body.

Tom kept to Charlie's left, his body between Charlie and the worst of the wind coming off the slope. He had bundled Charlie up before they left.

Charlie leaned into him as they climbed.

"Legs okay?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded against his coat. "Mhm. Cold feels good."

When they finally reached the lookout, the trees opened onto a broad stone-paved plaza. Below them, Montréal stretched all the way to the St. Lawrence River.

Charlie stepped up to the stone balustrade, one hand still around Tom's sleeve. Tom wrapped his arms around Charlie's waist from behind and pulled him against his chest.

"We did it," Charlie said, looking at the skyline. It was the clearest thought he'd had in days.

Tom buried his face in Charlie's cold hair. "We did."

After a few minutes, the wind began to bite through Charlie's coat. He shivered in Tom's arms.

“Inside,” Tom said, turning them toward the chalet.

The chalet was cavernous and warm. A scattering of tourists and locals sat at the wooden tables.

“Sit, honey.” Tom guided Charlie to a chair near the stone fireplace. “I’ll get us something hot.”

Charlie sank into the chair. He watched Tom cross the room to the small café and gift shop counter. Tom spoke to the cashier, pointed to the menu, then to a display against the far wall.

When he returned, he set a steaming paper cup of Earl Grey tea in front of Charlie.

Then he set down a small plush grey wolf.

Charlie blinked at it. Tom took the seat beside him.

“It looked soft,” Tom said. He nudged it across the table until it touched Charlie’s hand. “And I wanted to buy you something with absolutely nothing to do with immigration, academia, or my family.”

Charlie picked it up and brushed his thumbs over the dense fur.

“Thank you, daddy.”

Tom reached across the table and covered Charlie’s hand with his own.

“Drink your tea, honey. Then I’ll take you home.”

Hazel had spent the morning calling private clinics across Montréal until someone agreed to an urgent house call. Dr. Lévesque arrived just after two with a battered leather satchel.

Charlie sat at the dining table, Tom beside him and Dr. Lévesque across from them.

“We’re here to get a picture of where you are cognitively right now. Nothing too difficult.”

Charlie nodded.

The screening was brief and humiliating. Forward and backward digit sequences. Delayed recall. Short reading passages followed by simple questions. Halfway through speaking, Charlie lost the thread of his own sentences. Dr. Lévesque read a string of numbers, and by the end, the beginning had evaporated.

Tom said nothing, but when Charlie's breathing hitched, he pressed his knee against Charlie's beneath the table. Across the room, Hazel watched from the kitchen counter, arms folded over her chest.

When it finally ended, Charlie sat with his palms flat on the table.

Dr. Lévesque looked over his notes. "You're oriented. Intellectually intact." He set down his pen. "But today's performance shows significant impairment in working memory and executive function. What I'm seeing is entirely consistent with severe burnout."

Hazel spoke up from the counter. "Just don't make him sound like an invalid."

"The letter will state that the impairments observed could plausibly account for serious errors during drafting."

"Thank you," Charlie said quietly.

After the doctor left, Hazel gathered the timeline, Mehta's email, source PDFs, and Lévesque's notes into a silver folder on the table.

"One sentence," she said. "How did the passage end up in the uploaded chapter?"

Charlie looked down at his hands. "I pasted a source passage into the draft as a placeholder when I couldn't finish the paragraph. Then I uploaded the file before I rewrote it."

"Again."

"I was in burnout. My working memory failed. I thought I'd finished the section."

"Shorter."

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. "I used it as a placeholder. Then I crashed."

Hazel tapped the folder with her pen. “That one.”

Charlie covered his face. “Nothing about this feels good.”

“Clear isn’t good. Next Wednesday, you answer what’s asked, and you let the folder do the rest.”

Charlie stared at the silver folder—six years of work flattened into cardstock. He shoved back his chair and stood. “I can’t do this.”

“Charlie—”

“I can’t walk into a room and tell them my brain broke. They’ll think I’m incompetent. They’ll see exactly what his father put in the papers. They’ll think I’m unstable.”

His knees buckled. He dropped to the floor before he could fall, pressing his palms flat against the hardwood.

Tom was there before Hazel could move. “Hazel.”

She caught Charlie’s face, nodded once, and stepped back into the kitchen.

Charlie leaned his forehead against Tom’s shoulder, his breath hitching. “I’m so stupid. He’s going to win. He’s taking the doctorate.”

“Char,” Tom said, his hand firm on the back of Charlie’s neck. “Look at me. Your brain burned out. That’s what happened. It doesn’t make you stupid, and it doesn’t undo the work.”

Charlie didn’t answer, just leaned his weight into him until his breathing slowed.

Hazel came back over and set a glass of water on the floor beside them.

“One piece at a time,” she said quietly. “You’re allowed one advisor in the room. That’s me. Tom drives, he waits outside, and he’s right there when the door opens.”

Charlie picked up the glass with both hands.

“I’ll be right in the hall,” Tom said.

Charlie stared into the water, then bowed his head. “Okay. Okay.”

Wednesday, May 5.

In the eight days since Dr. Lévesque's visit, Charlie had answered the university's email himself and accepted the expedited appointment. He could manage the small things, but every attempt to return to the dissertation stopped at the same few lines. He read them, lost the thread, and began again until the words no longer meant anything.

Dr. Lévesque's finalized assessment had arrived on Friday. Hazel had printed it and added it to the silver folder.

The corridor outside the Faculty Disciplinary Officer's office smelled of rain and overworked radiators.

Charlie stood outside the frosted glass door in a soft black sweater beneath a black blazer. For one last moment, he leaned back into Tom's chest, Tom's hands resting at his waist. Hazel stood beside them with the silver folder tucked under her arm.

At 9:56, the door opened.

An administrator with a clipboard stepped out. "Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery? The Disciplinary Officer is ready for you."

Charlie's heart stuttered.

Hazel turned to him. "Ready?"

Charlie looked from Hazel to the half-open door. He closed his eyes and leaned back against Tom's shoulder for one more breath.

When he opened them, he looked at Hazel.

"If it's just the DO…" he said softly. "I think I should do this myself."

Hazel studied him, then gave one short nod.

Charlie took the folder. His hands were shaking.

He turned to Tom. His jaw was locked.

"Right here," Charlie whispered.

Tom leaned down and kissed his hair. "Always."

Charlie drew one deep breath.

Then he stepped out of Tom's arms, crossed the threshold, and walked into the room alone.

The Associate Dean sat across the conference table. She was in her mid-fifties, wearing a sharp grey suit.

Charlie set the silver folder down and clasped his hands in his lap. *Stay in the chair.*

She glanced at the file in front of her. "For the record, this is an initial disciplinary review regarding an unattributed passage in the chapter you submitted Saturday. You elected to proceed without an advisor. Is that correct?"

Charlie swallowed. "Yes."

"Help me understand how the passage remained in the uploaded file."

The hum of the fluorescent lights buzzed in Charlie's ears. He focused on the corner of her desk blotter.

"It was a placeholder. I pasted the source while drafting, meant to rewrite and cite it, and failed to do that before I uploaded the chapter."

"Why?"

"Because I crashed." Charlie opened the folder with stiff fingers and slid the timeline and Dr. Lévesque's assessment across the table. "I am autistic, and I was in severe burnout. My working memory failed. I could still follow the logic of the argument, but the connection between intending to complete a task and executing it broke down. The unfinished work stopped registering as unfinished."

The Associate Dean read the assessment in silence. "So you are not disputing that the passage constitutes plagiarism."

"No. Uploading the file was my responsibility."

She read the final paragraph of Dr. Lévesque's letter twice, then folded her hands. "I'll speak plainly, Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery. This file has attracted more administrative attention than a matter like this normally would."

Charlie nodded once.

“That is irrelevant to my decision. This assessment supports your report of severe executive dysfunction. It does not suggest you were unaware of citation expectations.”

“I was aware,” he said.

“Under the Code, the presence of an unattributed passage constitutes plagiarism. I am required to make that finding.”

Charlie’s chest seized.

“However. This is a single passage. You acknowledged responsibility immediately, provided contemporaneous medical documentation, and nothing before me suggests a sustained attempt to deceive.” She capped her pen. “Accordingly, I am resolving this matter by admonishment. It is an official finding, but it does not rise to a reportable disciplinary record, provided you submit a corrected version of the section by Friday.”

Charlie blinked. “Yes. Of course.”

She made a final note in the file. “I advise you not to return to substantive submission deadlines until your physician is satisfied your functioning has stabilized. That concludes our meeting.”

Charlie gathered his papers with clumsy fingers, missed the opening of the silver folder once, and shoved it closed.

He managed an automatic “Thank you” and pushed through the door.

Tom was already on his feet in the hallway, Hazel right behind him. Charlie made it two steps into the corridor before the latch clicked shut and his legs gave out.

Tom caught him under the arms, pulling him in and bracing him before he hit the floor. Charlie buried his face against Tom’s coat, clutching the heavy wool with both hands.

“I’ve got you,” Tom murmured, holding him tight. “I’ve got you.”

Hazel plucked the silver folder from Charlie’s slack fingers. “Well?”

“Admonishment,” Charlie managed, his voice muffled into Tom’s shoulder. “I fix it by Friday.”

Tom let out a long breath, his hand cupping the back of Charlie’s head. “Not destroyed.”

Charlie just pressed deeper into his collar, nodding.

Hazel tapped the folder against her thigh. “Good. Then we go home. Sleep first. Then you fix the section.”

Outside the building, Hazel pressed the silver folder into Tom’s hands. “Call me when he wakes up.”

She waited beneath the awning until Tom got Charlie into the car.

The drive home passed in silence, rain ticking against the windshield. At every red light, Tom reached across the console, waiting until Charlie put his hand in his.

Inside the apartment, Tom’s keys hit the table with an impossibly loud metallic clatter. Charlie stopped just inside the door, still in his blazer, and reached out.

“Can we lie down?”

“Yeah. Come here.”

Tom eased the blazer from his shoulders and guided him to the sectional. Charlie crawled beneath the duvet, holding out one hand until Tom joined him. He slept for hours curled into Tom’s chest.

When Charlie woke, the room had gone gold with dusk. Tom was awake beside him, propped against the cushions.

“Morning.” Tom brushed the hair from Charlie’s forehead. “How do you feel?”

“Like I got hit by a truck.”

“Accurate.”

The file still needed fixing.

Tom fetched the laptop, then sat behind Charlie on the couch and wrapped both arms around his waist. He rested his chin on Charlie's shoulder. "Go on. I'm right here. Finish it."

Charlie opened Chapter Eight. The copied text sat there, insulting in its simplicity. He highlighted the block and deleted it.

The argument beneath it was still his. He rewrote the paragraph in his own words, added the citation, and stared at the blinking cursor.

He checked the clock in the corner of the screen. A half-sob, half-laugh escaped him.

Tom frowned. "What?"

Charlie tipped his head back against Tom. "Five minutes." His voice cracked.

Tom kissed just below his ear. "Five minutes at the end of a six-month siege. Your brain was bleeding out. You did beautifully."

Charlie closed his eyes. He attached the corrected file to an email to the Associate Dean and hit send.

Tom reached past him, snapped the laptop shut, and tossed it aside. Charlie turned and climbed clumsily into his lap.

Later, showered and swallowed by Tom's clothes, Charlie padded into the kitchen. Tom was on his phone, ordering Italian from down the street. He looked up, clearing his throat, before a harsh cough tore out of his chest. He muffled it against his wrist.

Charlie narrowed his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Just tired."

A suspicious flush sat high on Tom's cheekbones, but Charlie was too exhausted to interrogate him.

They ate on the sectional, legs tangled. Tom silently nudged warm bread onto Charlie's plate until it was gone.

When the empty containers were pushed onto the coffee table, Tom sank against the cushions. Charlie stretched out over him, ear pressed to Tom's

chest.

“No one gets to do that to you again,” Tom murmured. “Never.”

Charlie looked up. “Thank you. For seeing me. Even when it’s hard.”

Tom brushed the hair from his face and kissed him gently. “You’re all I ever see.”

CHAPTER 12

Wednesday, May 5.

Long after Charlie's breathing leveled out, Tom remained awake. He kept one arm around his husband, his thumb resting over the pulse in Charlie's wrist.

At 11:42 p.m., his phone vibrated on the coffee table.

Without loosening his hold on Charlie, Tom reached for it. A secure message from Tremblay lit the screen.

Montgomery Holdings PR just blasted out three major press releases about new Foundation grants. Check your email.

Tom locked the screen and let the phone fall onto the cushions.

His throat scraped when he swallowed. He ignored it.

His father wasn't finished. Of course he wasn't.

But not tonight. Probably not tomorrow.

Tom buried his face in Charlie's hair, drew one deep breath, and closed his eyes.

Thursday, May 6.

The sun over Sherbrooke Street was bright and unsparing, throwing hard shadows beneath the Roddick Gates.

Charlie stopped at the edge of the McGill campus. Students streamed beneath the stone arches, every inch of open pavement washed in sharp light.

Hazel was already waiting beside a woman with a camera bag at her feet.

“Status report,” Hazel demanded as they approached. She held up a garment bag. “Mom wants mantel-quality eight-by-tens, which means we are not slouching today.”

“I don’t slouch…” Charlie murmured, shifting half a step closer to Tom.

The photographer offered him her hand. “Anne Lachance.” She smiled. “Let’s get you robed, Charlie. The light is perfect right now.”

Convocation was still nearly four weeks away, so the regalia was borrowed. Charlie looked from the scarlet robes to the Tudor bonnet—the floppy, slightly ridiculous hat required for PhD graduates.

It should have made him laugh.

Instead, his mouth went dry.

A few minutes later, he stood beneath the gates in full regalia. People passed on either side of the camera. Charlie could not find a direction to look that didn’t leave him in someone’s line of sight.

Tom’s hand found his. His fingers closed around Charlie’s and squeezed.

“Breathe.”

“Okay,” Charlie whispered.

“Do. Not. Slouch,” Hazel ordered from the sidelines. “Future doctor of musicology.”

Charlie faced the lens. At the last second, his eyes shifted just to the left.

Tom gave him one small nod.

Charlie lifted his chin and looked straight into the camera.

Anne’s shutter clicked.

By evening, Montréal’s traffic crawled beyond the penthouse glass in silent ribbons of light. Inside, Charlie was jammed into the far corner of the sectional, aggressively tugging a cashmere throw over his knees.

With the graduation photo shoot over, the adrenaline had abandoned him. The Tudor bonnet had not helped.

At the other end of the couch, Tom read his tablet, glasses low on his nose, glancing over every few minutes. Charlie kept his eyes stubbornly on the wall.

On the coffee table, the laptop chimed brightly.

Charlie flinched. Another chime followed. Anne Lachance, delivering the high-resolution evidence.

“No,” Charlie said, dragging the throw to his chin. “I’ve changed my mind. We’re not opening them.”

“We paid for those.”

A third chime. Charlie leaned forward and slammed the lid shut, dropping his head into his hands. “I can’t do it. I looked like I was being sentenced to wizard school.”

Tom covered his mouth, but not quickly enough.

“I was there, Thomas,” Charlie glared through his fingers.

“All right—” Tom tossed his tablet aside and hauled Charlie, blanket and all, across the sectional and fully into his lap. He reached for the laptop.

Charlie grabbed his wrist. “Wait. You look first. And you can’t say anything for thirty seconds. And if they’re awful, you have to lie.”

Tom flipped it open with his free hand. “I’m not lying to you.”

Charlie buried his face in Tom’s sweater. The trackpad clicked twice. The silence that followed was agonizing.

Then Tom let out a low snort.

“Oh God,” Charlie groaned into the fabric. “You bastard. You just laughed at me!”

“I’m just looking at the lighting. Char, look.”

“Tell me about the hat first.”

Tom hesitated. “It’s… present.”

Charlie made a miserable sound and tried to wriggle away, but his legs were tangled in the throw. Tom held him tighter.

“Look at the actual photo,” Tom laughed. “You look incredibly handsome. Distinguished, even.”

“Distinguished,” Charlie repeated suspiciously. He kept both hands firmly over his eyes, then slowly parted his fingers.

He was standing beneath the Roddick Gates, the scarlet robes startlingly bright. The black bonnet perched on his head looked absurd, but somehow less catastrophic than it had felt. He looked like someone who had earned the right to stand there.

Charlie let his hands fall. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Tom murmured.

“The hat is still a disaster,” Charlie noted. “But I think Anne earned her fee. Mum is going to lose her mind over this.”

“We should warn her neighbours before you send the email.”

A shaky laugh slipped out of Charlie.

Tom clicked to the next photograph. The scarlet robes were gone. Hazel had confiscated the regalia at the end, leaving just Charlie by the gates.

Tom sucked in an uneven breath.

“Mhm?” Charlie turned his head.

Tom was staring at the screen, his mouth slightly open.

“Oh no,” Charlie muttered. His face burned. “Stop.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tom said. “You can’t just drop this on a Thursday. You look like a tragic prince.”

Charlie covered his face with both hands, letting out a mortified squeak. “I’m closing it.”

“Don’t you dare. I’m literally just some guy. I can’t believe you married me.”

“You are not ‘just some guy,’” Charlie shot back, muffled behind his fingers.

“I am compared to you.” Tom kissed his throat.

Charlie squirmed and laughed. “Shut up.”

Tom finally lifted his head, keeping one hand flat against Charlie’s chest. “You’re gorgeous.”

Charlie peeked through his fingers. “Okay,” he said softly, lowering his hands. “Fine. That one’s nice.”

“Yeah.”

Tom clicked through the rest of the gallery, then pushed the laptop shut. “You did good today.”

Charlie was quiet. He had stayed in the light. Now he was here, warm and annoyingly over-loved on his own couch.

He rested his hands over Tom’s arms and sank his weight back.

Friday, May 7.

A chest-deep cough dragged Charlie awake. Tom’s side of the mattress was empty, a bar of bathroom light stretching across the floor.

His body, it seemed, had waited until Charlie was safe before it stopped cooperating.

Charlie found him at the vanity in a white dress shirt and black trousers, one hand braced against the marble. With the other, he reached for a tie, grimacing as he swallowed.

“Thomas.”

Tom flinched. “Morning,” he rasped.

Charlie pressed the back of his hand to Tom’s forehead. His skin burned. “You have a fever.”

“I have a nine o’clock acquisition meeting.”

“Put the tie down.”

“Char, I have to—”

Charlie plucked the silk tie from his hand and dropped it on the counter, then started unbuttoning Tom’s shirt.

“Charlie.”

“You are not going to the office.” Charlie pushed the shirt from Tom’s shoulders, let it fall, and dug Tom’s phone out of his trousers.

“I need to send an email.”

“You need to sit before you fall.” Charlie planted both hands on Tom’s chest and steered him backward into the bedroom. “Sit.”

Tom sat on the edge of the mattress, looking up at him. “My throat hurts,” he admitted.

Charlie stepped between Tom’s knees, running both hands through his damp hair. “I know. I’m taking care of you.”

He swapped Tom’s trousers for sweatpants, Tom lifting his hips just enough to help, then eased him back against the pillows. Charlie handed over the phone just long enough for Tom to fire off a terse cancellation email, then took it right back.

When Charlie returned with tea, lozenges, and broth, Tom was staring at the ceiling. Charlie climbed onto the bed.

“I’m not hungry,” Tom mumbled, turning his head.

“Eat.”

Tom winced as he swallowed, but after a few spoonfuls, the line between his eyebrows eased.

By early afternoon, the fever spiked. Tom stopped fighting it, his breaths coming in shallow pulls beneath the duvet.

At three, his eyes half-open and unfocused, Tom’s hand emerged to weakly grip the hem of Charlie’s T-shirt. “Charlie.”

“I’m here.” Charlie eased over him, threading a hand into his damp hair.

Tom’s arms closed around Charlie’s waist, his face pressing into Charlie’s neck. “I couldn’t fix it,” he whispered. “I was outside, and I couldn’t do anything. If they had pushed it further—”

Charlie cupped Tom’s face, holding it until Tom’s eyes met his. “You did what I asked.”

Tom searched his face.

“You stayed,” Charlie said. “You held the line exactly where I needed it.”

Tom’s eyes closed. “My angel.”

“Sleep.”

Just after twilight, the fever broke in a wash of sweat. Tom’s breathing deepened.

Charlie coaxed him awake for a few swallows of water and swapped his damp shirt for a dry one. Once Tom was settled, Charlie slid down until his head rested in the hollow of Tom’s shoulder. Tom was instantly asleep again.

Charlie watched him for a moment, pressing a kiss to his throat.

“I’ve got it,” he whispered.

He pulled the duvet around them both and closed his eyes.

Saturday, May 8.

Tom woke slowly. The fever was gone, leaving behind a sore throat and heavy limbs. He lay still for a moment and took stock.

Nothing felt urgent.

The room was dim and warm. Charlie lay beside him on his side, already awake and watching him.

“Morning,” Charlie whispered.

Tom reached across the sheets and rested his hand on Charlie’s hip.

“Morning,” he replied, his voice rough.

Charlie’s mouth curved. “You sound terrible.”

“I feel terrible.”

Tom buried his face against the side of Charlie’s neck. The last twenty-four hours returned in fragments.

He lifted his head. “You took my phone.”

“I had to. You wouldn’t stop.”

“Mhm.” Tom brushed his thumb over Charlie’s side. “You held the watch.”

“I did.”

Tom kissed him slowly, then rested his forehead against Charlie’s.

Charlie was here. Safe. Solid in his arms.

And at this point, if Charlie caught whatever Tom had, it would hardly be because of one kiss.

Tom would just have to take care of him.

What a hardship.

The penthouse stayed quiet until early evening.

Charlie sat at the kitchen island with one leg folded beneath him and his phone facedown beside his elbow. Across from him, Tom twisted the cap from a bottle of sparkling water.

Tom glanced up. The cap stopped turning.

“What did you do?”

Charlie winced. “That’s a terrible way to start a conversation.”

Tom gave him a look.

Charlie slid off the stool. “I texted Matt.”

“Why?”

“I told him the investor situation was stabilizing.” Charlie folded his arms, then unfolded them. “And that he and the others could bring beer and pizza over tonight if they wanted.”

“Charlie.”

“I told him you were sick yesterday. He knows.”

“You’re coming off a crash.”

“I know.”

“The noise alone—”

Charlie crossed the space between them and rested his palm against Tom’s chest. “You need your friends.”

“That’s not the point.”

“It’s a little bit the point. You got sick the second it was safe. You need one night where people come over and act stupid in your living room.”

One corner of Tom’s mouth twitched.

“And this is home,” Charlie continued. “If I get tired, I can disappear.”

Tom curled a hand around the back of Charlie’s neck.

“If your battery drops, you tell me. No pretending.”

“No pretending.”

Tom studied his face, then bent and kissed his forehead.

The buzzer went off.

Charlie jumped. Tom’s mouth twitched again.

“Go,” Charlie said.

Tom’s friends arrived the way they always did: loud and carrying too much food.

Matt came in first with three pizza boxes. Lukas followed with a case of beer against his shoulder. André came last, one hand in his coat pocket.

“There he is!” Matt boomed. “Risen from the dead.”

“It was a cold.” Tom frowned and took the beer from Lukas before he could redistribute it across the floor. “Shoes off.”

Matt looked past him and spotted Charlie near the kitchen. “Hey.”

Charlie waved. “Hi.”

Lukas grinned at him. “Look at you. Vertical.”

André shrugged out of his coat. “How’re you doing?”

Charlie opened his mouth, caught himself, and said, “Tired. But okay.”

André nodded once. “Glad you’re here.”

“Glad you’re here too.”

They moved into the living room. Hockey went on low. Beer caps collected on the coffee table. Matt took over half the sectional, Lukas stole the good throw blanket and was told to go to hell, and André sat in the armchair.

Tom wrapped an arm around Charlie’s shoulders. Charlie tucked his legs beneath himself and let the noise build around him.

It was easier than he had expected.

No one asked him to be anything. The game carried on. The pizza boxes emptied. The conversation moved fast and sideways and doubled back on itself.

Once, without breaking the conversation, Tom moved Charlie’s empty plate before it could slide from his lap. Later, he tugged a blanket over Charlie’s legs.

No one said anything.

An hour in, Charlie’s thoughts stopped lining up quite right.

Tom let another few minutes pass, then leaned toward him.

“You want some water?”

Charlie almost said no.

Then he stopped. His thoughts had gone fuzzy around the edges.

“Yeah. Please.”

Tom got up and returned with a glass. Charlie took it and sat with both hands wrapped around it.

Maybe it was the exhaustion. Maybe it was the relief of being back to normal.

Whatever it was, the words came out before he thought about them.

“Thank you, daddy.”

A beat passed in silence.

Then Matt made a sound like he'd been kicked in the dick.

Tom sighed. He plucked the water from Charlie's motionless hands, set it on the table, and pulled Charlie back against his side.

"Not. A. Word."

That was the wrong thing to say.

Matt collapsed sideways into the cushions. Lukas doubled over, guffawing. André closed his eyes, said nothing, and smiled like someone had just handed him a loaded weapon.

Charlie covered his face and groaned.

One corner of Tom's mouth lifted. He rubbed Charlie's upper arm in a way that would have been comforting if Charlie's skin weren't on fire.

Matt eventually surfaced from the cushions. "I just want to say—"

"Fuck off," Tom said.

"It's nothing bad! I was going to say, I think it's great. Really. Beautiful, even."

"Jesus," Tom said.

"I'm being sincere!"

"I know. That's worse."

André opened another beer and lifted it toward Charlie before tipping the bottle back. Lukas wiped his eyes and held out a hand to Charlie for a high-five.

"Go to hell," Charlie muttered through a smile.

The Goons left just after eleven-thirty. When the door shut behind them, the apartment exhaled.

Charlie stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by the wreckage. His body had made it through the night on momentum and stubbornness. Now that the door was closed, everything in him dropped at once.

Tom came back from locking the door and stopped.

“Hey.”

Charlie turned toward him slowly.

Tom took one step toward the coffee table and reached for the bottles. Then he looked at Charlie again and changed direction.

Charlie met him halfway. “Leave it.”

“Okay.”

Charlie folded himself against Tom’s chest, his forehead pressed to Tom’s shirt. Tom’s arms closed around him.

“It was loud,” Charlie mumbled.

“I know.”

“I liked it—I just—”

“Yeah.”

Charlie breathed him in for a moment. Then he tipped his head back.

“I was good today.”

“You were,” Tom said quietly. “So good.”

Charlie held his gaze. “Then take care of me.”

Tom’s eyes changed. “How?”

“Bed.”

Tom kissed the side of his head.

He got Charlie a glass of water first. Charlie drank because Tom placed it in his hand and waited until he finished. When the glass was empty, Tom set it aside, slid both arms around Charlie, and lifted him from the floor.

Charlie wrapped his arms around Tom’s shoulders and buried his face in his neck. For the first time all night, he stopped trying to hold himself together.

Tom adjusted his grip and carried him down the hall.

CHAPTER 13

Sunday, May 30.

Tom parked at the curb. They walked up the path together through the front garden, where new hostas pushed through the damp soil.

Before Charlie could ring the bell, the front door opened.

Nancy stood there in an apron dusted with powdered sugar. The moment she saw Charlie, she burst into tears.

“Oh, my beautiful doctor,” she cried, throwing her arms around him.

Charlie caught her, laughing in surprise, and pressed his face into her shoulder. “Hi, Mum. I did it.”

“Of course you did,” Nancy said, pulling back to kiss both his cheeks. “Final revisions accepted Friday. Graduation Wednesday. Look at you.” Then she spotted Tom behind him and reached for him. “Get in here.”

Tom let himself be pulled down into the sugary hug.

Inside, David was by the patio door, barbecue tongs in hand. He nodded to Tom.

At the island, Alex tipped his beer toward the powdered sugar on Tom’s shirt. “Thomas Montgomery. Finally defeated by pastry.”

“It’s camouflage.”

Alex pulled Charlie into a one-armed hug. “Congrats, Doc.” He released him and turned to Tom. “Swiss counsel. Slashing his tires would’ve been cheaper.”

Tom slid an arm around Charlie’s waist and said nothing.

Nancy swept past them with a tray. “Thomas is a saint.”

“Saint Thomas of Escrow,” Alex muttered.

David clapped Tom on the shoulder. “Alex. Go flip the grill.”

The front door opened again a few minutes later, and Hazel marched in wearing oversized sunglasses.

“All right,” she said, heading straight for Charlie. “Report.”

“All good,” Charlie said, hugging her.

She squeezed him tightly. “Good. I refuse to celebrate final dissertation clearance with a corpse.” Then she turned to Alex. “Do you own a shirt without grease on it?”

“Do you own a personality outside litigation?”

“Coats off. Plates out,” Nancy ordered. “No antagonizing each other in my kitchen.”

Charlie took a stack of plates and followed Hazel and Alex into the dining room.

David set his tongs down and waited until they were out of earshot. “Alex talks too much. But he wasn’t wrong.”

Tom straightened automatically. “I know—”

“Thomas.” David’s voice was gentle, but it stopped him. “Your father never asks.” He glanced toward the dining room. “You’re learning to.”

Tom stayed very still. “I’m trying.”

David nodded. “Good. Come on. Dinner.”

The dining table was crowded and loud. Charlie sat in the middle of it, talking over Alex and passing dishes down the table. Beneath it, he rested one hand on Tom’s thigh. Tom covered it with his own and threaded their fingers together.

Nancy came in holding the lemon tart. “Move. Hazel, your wineglass is in the way.”

“Finally,” Alex groaned.

Nancy cut the first slice and set it directly in front of Charlie.

“Eat, Doctor.”

Tuesday, June 1.

By Tuesday afternoon, the penthouse was quiet again. Charlie was stretched out on the sectional with his head in Tom’s lap while Tom read from his tablet.

The door chimed.

Tom set the tablet aside. Only a handful of people had clearance to come up unannounced. Charlie lifted his head, and Tom went to answer it.

Julian stood in the hall carrying a large cardboard tube. He wore his usual navy turtleneck under a dark suit jacket. He walked straight to the coffee table.

“I require a consultation,” Julian said.

Charlie sat up. “About what?”

“Hazel.”

Julian opened the tube, pulled out a roll of paper, and spread it across the coffee table, smoothing the corners flat. It was a preliminary layout revision for his triplex in the Plateau, marked with precise pencil notes.

Charlie pointed to one section. “This is new.”

Tom leaned in. “You’re extending the east wall.”

“For a climate-controlled wardrobe addition,” Julian said. “Silk doesn’t do well here in winter.” He indicated another notation. “I’m also reinforcing this corridor. Hazel paces when she prepares for litigation.”

Tom studied the plans again. “You’re serious.”

Julian said nothing.

Tom picked up his phone, called Hazel, and put her on speaker.

She answered on the first ring. “If this is about a lease, I’m already angry.”

“Draft issue,” Tom said. “I need your eyes on something. Come over before anyone signs anything.”

“…Ten minutes.”

Twelve minutes later, Hazel strode through the door carrying her briefcase. She stopped inside the room, her eyes narrowing at the plans spread across the coffee table.

“There is no draft,” Julian said.

Hazel set her briefcase beside the chair. “Then what am I looking at?”

Julian gestured for her to sit. “A cohabitation proposal.”

Hazel sat. “Explain.”

Julian detailed the inefficiencies of maintaining two apartments and outlined the wardrobe, corridor, and climate modifications he had planned specifically for her.

“Building approval is already in progress,” he added. “I dislike preventable delays.”

Hazel leaned over the plans. Her fingertip travelled from the wardrobe addition to the reinforced corridor.

“You designed this around me.”

“Yes.”

“Before you knew I’d agree.”

Julian waited.

Hazel’s finger stopped over the corridor. “And if I say no?”

“Then I withdraw the revisions, and nothing changes.”

Hazel sat back. For once, she didn’t have a comeback.

Then she reached into her blazer, pulled out a pen, and uncapped it. With one clean stroke, she signed the bottom corner of the page.

“The merger is approved in principle,” she said.

Tom laughed. From the sectional, Charlie pressed his face into a cushion.

Hazel capped the pen. “When do I move in?”

The corner of Julian’s mouth moved.

“Upon completion of the HVAC installation,” he said.

Hazel nodded as if this were entirely reasonable.

Wednesday, June 2.

Morning light stretched across the floor. Charlie woke in the middle of the bed, the little wolf plush watching from the dresser, and lay still.

He found Tom in the kitchen, already in his suit, waiting at the espresso machine.

“Morning, honey.”

Charlie crossed to him, wrapping his arms around Tom’s waist and pressing his cheek to his chest.

“How’s the battery?” Tom asked, holding him close.

Charlie closed his eyes. “Full. It still feels unreal.”

Tom kissed the top of his head. “It’s real. Today you walk across that stage in that ridiculous hat, and I intend to enjoy every second of it.”

The espresso machine hissed.

“Come on,” Tom said. “Let’s get you dressed.”

The bespoke gunmetal suit was laid out on the bed. After Charlie pulled on the trousers, Tom held the crisp white dress shirt open for him. Charlie lifted his arms, letting Tom guide them into the sleeves and button the front.

“You’re calm,” Tom noted, tying the silver tie.

Charlie met his eyes in the mirror over Tom’s shoulder. “I think so.”

Tom reached for the jacket, settling it onto Charlie’s shoulders. The weight was immediate and grounding.

Tom smoothed the lapels. “Look at me,” he said softly. Charlie did. “You do not have to make yourself smaller in that room. Not for anyone.”

Tom turned him gently toward the mirror.

The suit sat cleanly across Charlie's shoulders, dark and exact. He held his own gaze until the edges blurred.

"Maxence… is gone," he whispered.

Tom stepped up behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist until they became one dark shape in the glass. "I know," he murmured, resting his chin against Charlie's temple. "He got you here. But he doesn't have to do it anymore."

Charlie exhaled slowly. Beneath Tom's arms, his shoulders lowered without folding inward.

"Ready?"

Charlie turned to face him with a smile. "Yes."

Tom held out his hand, and Charlie took it. They walked down the hallway together, fingers locked.

When the elevator doors opened, Charlie stepped inside without looking back. In the mirrored wall, he met his own gaze one more time, lifting his chin and holding it as the doors slid shut.

At the entrance, a marshal checked Charlie's name off a clipboard and pointed him toward the graduate assembly area. Tom stopped at the barrier.

"I'll see you in there," he said.

Charlie nodded. For one second, his fingers tightened around Tom's. Then he let go and followed the other graduates through the doors alone.

Tomlinson Fieldhouse filled slowly. Charlie sat in the front row with his academic robes over his suit and his hands in his lap.

One hand had closed around a fistful of black fabric. He released it and smoothed the creases over his knee.

The Chancellor stepped to the podium. Names began.

Charlie waited. Around him, graduates rose with their rows, filed out, and returned. The names reached him one at a time and disappeared. The robes

dragged at his shoulders. The lights washed the stage white. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth and stayed where he was.

When his row was called, he stood with the others.

The walk to the stage was longer than he expected. He kept his hands flat against his sides. At the steps, he gripped the railing once, briefly, then let go.

The marshal waved him forward.

“Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery, Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology.”

Charlie crossed the stage.

At the centre, he turned toward the audience.

He found Tom in the third row. Tom was already on his feet, not applauding, just standing—watching Charlie with an expression he didn’t bother to moderate. Beside him, Nancy had both hands pressed to her mouth.

Charlie held Tom’s gaze for a second.

Then he turned, accepted the scroll, shook the Chancellor’s hand, and walked back down the steps.

Charlie returned to his seat with the scroll in his hands. He ran his thumb back and forth over the ribbon and barely heard the next few names.

Eventually, the final degree was conferred. The Chancellor gave the closing remarks, the room rose, and the graduates were released row by row.

Charlie followed the stream toward the exit. By the time he cleared the last row of seats, families were already pushing forward through the crowd.

Tom reached him first. He didn’t say anything. He caught Charlie by both shoulders and held him at arm’s length for one brief beat, then pulled him in. Charlie pressed his face into Tom’s neck and stood there.

“Hi,” Tom said.

“Hi.”

Nancy arrived next and cried without apology. Charlie held on while she clutched at his robes and called him sweetheart twice. David put a hand on the back of his neck, said nothing, and that was enough.

Hazel appeared at his side, straightened one fold of his robe, and kissed his cheek.

“Well done,” she said.

Alex was behind her. “Don’t make it weird,” he said, and hugged Charlie anyway.

They were outside twenty minutes later. The late-afternoon air came off the mountain cold and clean. The crowd thinned behind them. Tom walked beside Charlie with one hand at the small of his back, not steering, just there.

Charlie slowed at the bottom of the steps.

“Battery?” Tom asked.

“Nearly gone.”

Tom nodded. He texted someone—the car, probably—without breaking stride.

Charlie looked back once at the building. The doors were still open. People were still streaming out, clutching flowers, finding each other in the light.

He turned away.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

Thursday, June 3.

Charlie woke in the middle of the bed. For one brief second, he was warm and half-dreaming.

Then his body remembered itself.

Beside him, the mattress shifted.

Tom moved closer and pressed his mouth to the back of Charlie’s neck. “Shh. I’ve got you.”

Charlie lay still and listened to Tom's heartbeat.

"I spent the entire ceremony yesterday waiting for the fire alarm to go off," Charlie whispered.

Tom hummed. "I was watching for surprises."

"The silence is almost worse," Charlie admitted, his fingers twisting into the duvet. "It just means he's calculating."

"Let him calculate," Tom said. "Nothing happened. We take the win. Today, he doesn't exist."

Little by little, Charlie's grip on the duvet loosened.

Then Cheddar launched himself onto Tom's chest.

Tom let out a muffled grunt. The orange cat yowled for breakfast.

Tom squinted up at him. "No."

Cheddar headbutted Tom's chin and began to purr.

Charlie laughed. He reached over and scratched Cheddar between the ears. "You're a menace."

Offended by the continued lack of breakfast, Cheddar sprang off the bed and disappeared into the apartment.

Charlie folded into Tom's shirt, still laughing, and let his eyes drift shut.

When he opened them again, Tom brushed his thumb across Charlie's cheek. Charlie slid one hand into Tom's hair and pulled him down.

They kissed. Tom followed it with two smaller kisses, one to Charlie's lips and one to his nose, then rested his forehead against Charlie's.

"Tea?" Tom asked.

"Mhm."

They walked to the kitchen. Tom prepared Charlie's medication first, then fed Cheddar under close supervision while Charlie filled the kettle. Once the cat was occupied, Tom moved to the espresso machine.

Morning sunlight came through the tall windows. Charlie leaned against the counter while Tom measured the beans with his usual precision. Their eyes met, and Tom smiled. The machine hissed; the kettle clicked.

Tom poured his Americano. Charlie dropped a tea bag into his mug. Beyond the sliding glass doors, the terrace had filled with sunlight.

“Outside?” Tom asked.

Charlie nodded.

Tom opened the door. The air was cool. Up here, the traffic was only a low hum. They walked past the potted evergreens to the couch in the corner, facing Mount Royal.

Tom sat down on one end. Charlie sat beside him, pulled his legs up beneath his oversized shirt, and leaned into him. Tom put an arm around his shoulders. Charlie rested his head against him. Steam rose from his tea.

Mount Royal rose green beyond the buildings. The trees along the boulevards were fully leafed.

They drank in silence. Charlie closed his eyes and tipped his face toward the sun.

“I can feel you staring,” he said.

“Just looking at the view.”

Charlie smiled and took a sip of his tea. “Do you have anywhere to be until this evening?”

“No,” Tom said. “Nowhere.”

The wind lifted Charlie’s hair and carried the smell of the river. Tom kissed his temple. Charlie found Tom’s hand on the cushion and laced their fingers together.

“Can we just stay here all day?” Charlie asked.

“As long as you want, honey.”

They stayed until both mugs were empty. Tom gathered them.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. He kissed Charlie’s head and went inside.

Charlie stretched out on the cushions. He closed his eyes against the bright light and put his arms over his head, letting his shirt ride up. The breeze moved across his bare legs.

The glass door slid open. Charlie kept his eyes closed and reached both arms out.

“Miss me?” Tom asked.

“Come back.”

Tom sat down. Charlie threw his legs across Tom’s lap and pressed his face into his chest. Tom put a hand in his hair.

Charlie lifted his head and kissed him. It wasn’t the soft kiss from bed. Tom held the back of Charlie’s head, anchoring him.

Charlie shifted until he was fully straddling Tom. Tom put both hands on his hips.

“Okay?” Charlie asked.

Tom’s hands stilled. “Yeah.”

Charlie leaned down and kissed him again, opening his mouth against Tom’s. Tom slid his hands beneath Charlie’s shirt. His palms were hot.

“Can I?” Tom asked, catching the hem.

“Yes.”

Tom pulled the shirt over Charlie’s head. The wind moved across his bare chest. Tom’s hands paused against his waist, and Charlie reached for the bottom of Tom’s shirt.

Tom raised his arms. Charlie pulled it off and pressed his palms flat against Tom’s chest, feeling his heartbeat. He leaned in and kissed the hollow of his throat.

“Tell me how.”

Charlie answered by rolling his hips forward. Tom made a low sound.

“Like this,” Charlie said.

Tom pulled him down into a kiss and slid one hand beneath the waistband of Charlie's boxers. Charlie gasped. He could feel Tom hardening beneath him.

Tom shifted them, laying Charlie back against the cushions and moving over him. He hooked his fingers into Charlie's boxers. Charlie lifted his hips, and Tom pulled them down and free.

Tom pushed off his sleep pants and moved between Charlie's thighs. Charlie wrapped his legs around him.

Tom reached between them. "Look at me, honey."

Charlie did. Tom held his gaze and began to move his hand. Charlie gripped his shoulders and kept his eyes open as long as he could.

They moved together slowly, then less slowly. The breeze came off the mountain. Charlie pulled Tom down and kissed him.

When Charlie came, he buried his face in Tom's neck. Tom followed a moment later, catching his weight on his forearms before lowering himself against Charlie.

They lay still. Charlie kept his hands flat against Tom's back. The sun was warm. Below them, the city went about its morning.

Eventually, Tom kissed the side of his head. "Bath."

Charlie made a small sound but didn't move.

Tom smiled. He stood and offered Charlie his hand, pulling him to his feet. They walked through the glass doors and down the hall to the bathroom. The air inside was cooler, and Charlie shivered when his bare feet met the marble floor.

Tom leaned over the deep soaking tub and turned the taps. He tested the temperature with his wrist and poured a measure of soap beneath the running water. Charlie leaned against the counter. The muscles in Tom's back shifted as he bent over the taps.

Tom turned off the water. "Ready?"

He stepped into the tub first and slid down against the sloped end. Charlie climbed in after him, settled between his legs, and leaned back. The water was hot. Tom crossed his arms securely over Charlie's stomach.

Charlie closed his eyes and let out a long breath. The water lapped against the porcelain.

Tom dipped a washcloth into the water and drew it slowly over Charlie's chest, then across his shoulders and down his arms.

Beneath the water, Charlie found Tom's free hand. He laced their fingers together, squeezed once, and held on.

CHAPTER 14

Thursday, June 3.

That evening, Tom stood by the door, checking his watch, house keys looped around one finger. He was dressed down for once—jeans, a dark sweater, his hair still a little unruly from Charlie's hands twenty minutes ago.

Charlie leaned against the kitchen island.

"You're sure you don't want to come?" Tom asked. "Lukas swore he'd keep the offensive jokes to a minimum. He's a liar, obviously, but he swore it."

Charlie smiled. "Hazel's on her way with wine and a list of legal grievances she needs to air. I think I'll be plenty occupied."

Tom huffed a laugh.

Charlie tilted his head. "What?"

"Nothing."

Tom still made no move toward the door.

"Come here," Charlie said softly.

Tom crossed the room and stopped just short of touching him.

Charlie caught the front of Tom's sweater and tipped his face up.

"Kiss me properly," he murmured.

Tom cupped his jaw and kissed him slowly. Charlie pulled him closer and Tom followed.

When he finally drew back, his thumb brushed Charlie's cheek.

“If she gets to be too much,” he said, “text me. I can always demote her to mascot.”

Charlie laughed. “Go. You’re keeping the driver waiting. And try not to let Matt talk you into Amway.”

Tom’s mouth twitched. He caught Charlie’s hand before it could fall, turned it palm-up, and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist.

Then he stepped back and pointed two fingers at Charlie in mock warning.

“Behave.”

Charlie smiled. “No promises.”

The bar was already loud by the time Tom arrived, its televisions tuned to three different games.

Lukas, André, and Matt had taken over a corner booth. There were nachos on the table, and all three of them looked far too pleased to see him.

Lukas spotted him first and lifted his glass. “There he is. Montréal’s most feared financier.”

“Formerly,” Matt said.

Tom slid into the booth and sighed.

“No, no,” André said, leaning back. “We’re being very respectful tonight.”

“We are?” Lukas asked.

Matt shoved a beer toward Tom. “We just have one question.”

Tom took the glass. “I’m not answering it.”

“You are, though,” Lukas said. “Because it happened.”

Tom drank.

André slapped one palm against the table. “Look at him. He knows exactly which part.”

“There are so many humiliations to choose from,” Tom said evenly.

“Not for you,” Matt said. “For us.”

Lukas was delighted. “You looked insane, by the way. Like all your dreams came true.”

“That is not an inaccurate reading,” André said.

“I could still leave.”

“No, you can’t,” Matt said. “We need details.”

“There are no details.”

“Bullshit,” Lukas said. “Is this new?”

Tom’s mouth betrayed him.

“Oh, he’s smiling,” Matt said. “He’s done for.”

“This is fucking amazing,” Lukas said. “Does he do that often?”

Tom laughed then, brief and unwilling.

“You do realize this is all your fault,” he said.

Lukas blinked. “Mine?”

“Not yours.” Tom tipped his glass toward Matt. “His.”

Matt pointed at his own chest. “Mine?”

“Yours specifically.”

André frowned. “What the hell did he do?”

“You made the joke,” Tom said. “Months ago.”

Matt stared at him. Then he went very still.

“Oh, no.”

Lukas turned toward him. “What joke?”

Matt covered his face, already laughing. “Oh, no way.”

“Matt,” André said. “What joke?”

“At his house.” Matt dragged both hands down his face. “I asked if he made Charlie call him daddy.”

Lukas gasped as if he’d been stabbed.

Tom lifted his glass. “And here we are.”

André dropped his head into one hand. “No fucking way.”

Matt folded against the booth, laughing. “You’re saying I started this?”

“I’m saying you put the idea in his head.”

Lukas collapsed over the table. André groaned. Matt was nearly crying.

“Oh my God,” Matt wheezed. “That is absolutely my greatest achievement.”

“Your greatest achievement,” Tom said, “is surviving this long.”

Lukas pointed across the table. “So he just—he took that and ran with it?”

Tom answered by taking another drink.

André sat back. “Jesus Christ.”

Matt wiped his eyes. “Every day?”

Tom said nothing.

Matt’s jaw dropped. “Every day.”

Tom reached for a nacho. “I’m not discussing my marriage with you like it’s a case study.”

“It’s worse than that,” Lukas said, still breathless. “It’s folklore now.”

Tom tried to hide his smile behind his beer.

Matt pointed at him. “There. That face. He likes it.”

Tom sighed. “Still your fault, Matt.”

Lukas lifted his glass. “To Matt, then. For whatever the hell is happening in your apartment.”

“And to Charlie,” André added, “for figuring out Tom’s trigger word.”

Hazel let herself in with her key, dressed in silk pyjama pants, a ratty T-shirt, and a camel coat draped over the whole mess.

Charlie lowered his book.

She kicked off her shoes, dropped her coat over a chair, and stopped in front of the sofa.

“Why are you wearing day clothes?”

“It’s seven o’clock.”

“Put your pyjamas on.”

Charlie considered arguing. There was no point. He set the book aside and pushed himself off the couch.

Hazel followed him down the hall, brushed past him in the bedroom doorway, and threw herself diagonally across the bed, her face turned toward the ceiling.

Charlie sighed and opened the dresser. He pulled out a pair of worn grey sweatpants and one of Tom’s old university T-shirts.

Hazel rolled her head toward him. “There it is.”

“There what is?”

“The thing where your pyjamas are just Tom’s clothes.”

Charlie’s face warmed. “Shut up. They’re comfy.”

He peeled off his sweater and pulled the oversized black T-shirt over his head. The hem hit the tops of his thighs.

“That shirt is a tent,” Hazel noted.

“Get off our bed,” Charlie shot back, pulling on the sweatpants.

Hazel sat up with exaggerated annoyance. At the doorway, she caught the edge of the duvet and yanked it straight.

“You’re welcome.”

“For what?”

“For not pointing out that you clearly nap on his side.”

“…I hate you.”

Hazel made a dismissive sound and wandered back into the hall before he could throw a pillow at her.

The built-in cabinets in the old dining room were still filled from top to bottom with liquor. Hazel opened one.

“What are we having?”

“I don’t know.”

“You never know.” She crouched to inspect the lower shelf. “Do I always have to make the decisions?”

“Tom has mint,” Charlie offered. “He made chutney recently.”

Hazel stood. “Are you suggesting mojitos?”

“We have limes, too. I think.”

“Only the bourgeoisie has limes when they don’t need them.”

In the kitchen, Hazel hacked at the fruit with the blunt confidence of someone who rarely cooked, free-pouring the rum and ignoring the jigger entirely.

“He’s going to ask how we drank half the bottle,” Charlie said.

“Then he shouldn’t have left me unsupervised.” She slapped the lid onto the shaker.

Out on the terrace, the city was still bright in the long June evening. Charlie handed Hazel a blanket, and she spread it over both their laps, tugging the edge until their shoulders bumped.

The mojitos were freezing and almost entirely rum. Far below, a siren wailed and faded.

“So.” Hazel took a sip.

“You’ve had one sip.”

“I can multitask.” The joke left her voice. “How are you, actually?”

Charlie rested his head against the cushions. “Tired. But… better than last week.”

Hazel nudged his knee beneath the blanket. “And Tom?”

“He’s been… very him.”

She smirked. “Hovering. Aggressively paternal.”

“Checking whether you’ve eaten every hour. He has a system.”

“He’s insane.”

“A little,” Charlie laughed. After a minute, he asked, “What about you?”

Hazel took a longer drink. “Julian finished his floor. He sent photos of the bedroom.”

“Did it help?”

“No.” She traced the rim of her glass. “Maybe.”

Charlie smiled into his drink.

“Stop,” she warned.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You’re being loud with your face.”

Hazel groaned, leaning her head back as though exhausted by her own brain. “I hate it. I keep ending up at his building. Three nights this week. And I’m not—I don’t do that.”

Charlie pressed his lips together.

“Stop looking at me like that. He bought a bread basket.”

Charlie blinked. “What?”

“A bread basket.” She sounded genuinely offended. “For his kitchen. He told me it matched the structural lines of the concert hall. Beechwood,” she added flatly.

Charlie laughed.

Hazel glared. “I’m being serious.”

“I know. That’s why it’s nice.”

She opened her mouth to argue, then closed it. “It is,” she muttered, sinking lower on the couch. “That’s the problem. Because I can see it. The whole stupid thing. His apartment. My clothes there. That bread basket.” Her mouth twisted. “And I don’t hate it.”

Charlie let the silence sit.

Then Hazel sat upright and snapped, “Speaking of unpleasant things. Have you had sex yet?”

Charlie choked on his drink. “Hazel.”

“What? It’s a reasonable question.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“You’ve both been through a month of hell. I’m asking whether the marriage is back to normal.”

Charlie set his glass down very carefully. “You know what? Yes. This morning. On this couch.”

Hazel recoiled. “What?”

“You asked.”

“On the outdoor furniture?” she hissed. “Like animals?”

Charlie shrugged beneath the blanket. “The inside one, too.”

The penthouse had gone quiet. Hazel had softened around the second drink, staring at a photo of a shelving unit Julian had just sent.

“You’re making the face again,” Charlie said over the rim of his glass.

“What face?”

“The one where you pretend you’re annoyed because admitting you think he’s cute would kill you.”

“It’s shelving, Charlie. I’m responding to shelving.” She went back to her phone, and a second later, she smiled.

Charlie let himself have that.

Then the front door opened. Through the glass doors, Charlie watched Tom stumble slightly, pat Cheddar on the head, and head for the terrace.

Hazel made a soft, exhausted sound and pushed herself upright. “Oh, no. I know what’s coming. I’m getting an Uber.”

“Hazel—” Charlie laughed.

“Goodnight.” She leaned down to press a quick kiss to Charlie’s hair, gathered her things, and patted Tom’s arm on her way past. “Don’t break him.”

The front door closed behind her.

Charlie set his glass down, suddenly, stupidly aware of the oversized shirt against his skin. “Hi.”

Tom stopped in front of the couch. His throat moved. “Hi.”

His voice was low, roughened by whiskey. He looked at the shirt where it hung on Charlie’s thighs, then back to his face.

“Did you have fun?” Charlie asked.

Tom gave the smallest shake of his head. “No.”

Charlie almost smiled. He let the blanket slip from his lap. “Come here.”

Tom moved at once, stepping into the space between Charlie’s knees. One hand braced on the sofa back; the other came to Charlie’s waist and stopped.

Waiting for permission.

Charlie lifted a hand and slipped his fingers into Tom’s hair. Tom closed his eyes, lowering his forehead to Charlie’s shoulder. His hand spread wider against Charlie’s waist.

“I’m trying,” he whispered.

Charlie tipped Tom’s face up. “I want you to want me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Always.”

Tom kissed him hard, pulling him to the edge of the cushion. Charlie made a small sound against his mouth, and Tom answered by deepening the kiss, his hand sliding into Charlie’s hair.

“Bed,” Tom said.

“Take me there.”

Tom kissed him again, then scooped him up, one arm beneath his knees and the other around his back. Charlie melted against him, sliding a hand around the back of Tom’s neck as he carried him down the hall.

Tom pushed the bathroom door open with his shoulder. He set Charlie on the marble counter. He put his hand on the hem of the oversized black t-shirt.

“This,” Tom said. “Drives me insane.”

Charlie smiled.

Tom leaned in until their foreheads touched. “You did that on purpose.”

“You left me with Hazel,” Charlie said. He started on Tom’s shirt buttons.

Tom laughed. “How much did you drink?”

“Less than you.” Charlie pushed the shirt off Tom’s shoulders.

Tom pulled the black t-shirt over Charlie’s head. Then he hooked his fingers into Charlie’s sweatpants and pushed them down as Charlie lifted his hips.

Tom stripped. He was slower than usual, his balance just slightly off. He stepped between Charlie’s knees and reached into the glass stall to turn the handle. Water hit the tile.

Tom held out his hand. Charlie slid off the counter, and they stepped into the spray.

The water was hot. Tom reached for the shampoo, pouring it into his hand.

“Turn.”

Charlie turned around. Tom worked the soap into Charlie’s hair, his thumbs pressing into Charlie’s scalp. He was less precise than normal, his hands heavier from the drink.

“Good?” Tom asked.

“Yes.”

Tom pulled him back under the water to rinse, keeping one hand over Charlie's eyes. Then his hands moved to Charlie's shoulders. His wet palms slid down Charlie's spine. He pulled Charlie back against his chest.

"Okay?" Tom asked, his mouth near Charlie's ear.

Charlie reached back and put his fingers in Tom's wet hair. "Yes."

One of Tom's hands flattened across his stomach. The other travelled lower and closed around him.

Charlie gasped, his hips jerking forward. Tom made a low sound and tightened his grip just enough to pull another gasp from him.

"Tom," Charlie breathed, nearly lost beneath the rush of water.

"I've got you." Tom's other hand stayed firm against his stomach.

Charlie's legs began to tremble. Tom felt it and released him.

He guided Charlie around and braced him gently against the cool marble wall. Charlie shifted his weight, and one foot skidded across the wet tile.

Tom caught him around the waist before he moved an inch.

"Easy."

Charlie caught his breath. They stood still beneath the falling water. Tom's wet hair clung to his forehead, his attention fixed entirely on Charlie.

"I love you," Charlie said.

Tom kissed him. It tasted like whiskey and water. Charlie put his arms around Tom's neck.

When they separated, Tom reached behind him and turned the handle. The shower stopped. Cold air closed around them.

Tom opened the glass door and took a towel from the heated rack. Charlie stepped out, and Tom wrapped it around his shoulders, holding the edges together against his chest.

Water ran from Charlie's hair. Tom brushed it back. A single drop travelled down Charlie's neck and disappeared beneath the terrycloth.

"Bed," Tom said. "Now."

Charlie let the towel fall to the floor.

They walked to the bedroom. It was dark except for the city lights in the tall windows. Tom backed Charlie into the edge of the mattress and followed him down onto the cool silk sheets.

He braced himself over Charlie and kissed his jaw, then the length of his throat. His hands moved over Charlie's chest. Charlie arched beneath him and threaded his fingers through Tom's damp hair.

Tom moved lower. He kissed Charlie's stomach and moved both hands around his hips. At the tops of Charlie's thighs, he stopped.

"Here?" Tom asked.

"Yes."

The first stroke of Tom's tongue pulled a sound from Charlie before he could stop it. His back lifted from the mattress, one hand catching in the silk sheets.

Tom held his hips and took him into his mouth.

"Thomas—"

Tom hummed. The vibration went straight through Charlie. His fingers grasped the sheets.

Tom took his time. Every time Charlie tried to quiet himself, Tom changed something—the pressure of his tongue, the angle of his mouth—until another sound escaped.

"That's it," Tom murmured, pulling back just far enough to speak. His voice was wrecked. "Let me hear you."

Then his mouth closed around Charlie again.

A few seconds later, Tom's rhythm faltered.

"Thomas?"

Tom pulled back with a strangled sound and went rigid.

Charlie pushed himself onto his elbows. Tom shuddered, his forehead dropping against Charlie's thigh, and Charlie understood.

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

When Tom finally lifted his head, colour had spread across his cheeks. He looked away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t—” He stopped and swallowed. “Fuck. I feel like a teenager.”

Charlie stared at him for a moment.

“Thomas.” Charlie reached down and cupped his face between both palms. “Come here.”

Tom moved up the bed until they were face-to-face. Charlie traced the line of his jaw.

“Do you know what that just told me?” Charlie asked.

“That I have no self-control around you?”

“That I never have to wonder whether you want me.”

Tom met his eyes. The embarrassment eased from his face.

“Never,” he said.

Charlie pulled him into a kiss. Tom cradled the back of his head and kissed him until they were both breathing hard again.

When he drew away, he reached into the nightstand and set the bottle of lubricant beside Charlie’s hip.

“I’m not done with you,” he murmured.

Charlie’s breath caught.

Tom kissed his way down Charlie’s body again, slower now but no less certain. By the time he sat between Charlie’s thighs, Charlie was already trembling.

Tom took him into his mouth once more. One hand slid beneath Charlie’s hips and lifted him slightly, changing the angle until Charlie cried out.

Charlie gripped Tom’s hair and Tom hummed in response. Tom’s free hand moved along the inside of his thigh. He lifted his head.

“Can I?”

“Yes.” Charlie opened his legs farther. “Please.”

Tom slicked one finger, returned his mouth to Charlie, and pressed inside him slowly.

Charlie went taut. His cry broke around Tom’s name as the pleasure crested. Tom stayed with him until the tension left Charlie’s body in small, helpless tremors.

Then Tom moved up the bed and pulled Charlie against his chest.

Their breathing slowed together. Tom’s eyes were half-closed now, exhaustion settling over him.

“Stay here,” Charlie said. He kissed Tom’s cheek. “Let me.”

Tom started to move. “I’m fine.”

“Stay.” Charlie put one hand flat against his chest and pressed him back into the pillows.

He climbed out of bed. His legs were shaky in the cool air. In the bathroom, he turned on the dimmest light, soaked a washcloth beneath the warm tap, and wrung it out.

When he returned, Tom was exactly where Charlie had left him.

Charlie sat on the edge of the mattress and wiped Tom’s chest and stomach. Tom rested one hand lightly on his thigh.

“You don’t have to,” Tom said, his voice thick with sleep.

“I want to.”

Charlie finished, turned the cloth over, and cleaned himself. He dropped it onto the nightstand.

Tom caught his wrist and pulled him back beneath the sheets.

Charlie leaned against his side and rested one hand over his heart.

“Thank you,” Tom murmured into his hair.

“Go to sleep.”

Tom spread one hand across Charlie’s back. He fell asleep first, his body warm against the silk sheets.

Charlie listened to the steady beat beneath his palm. City light moved slowly across the ceiling.

He closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 15

Saturday, June 5.

Charlie stood in the walk-in closet in his shirtsleeves, eyeing two suit jackets with suspicion. One was simple black, almost severe. The other was gunmetal bamboo silk that looked liquid in the low light.

Tom leaned against the doorframe, already dressed, his dark tie loose against a crisp white shirt. His jacket lay on the bed, his top button undone.

“You’re glaring at them.”

“They’re both right, but in different ways.”

“Gunmetal.”

Charlie glanced over his shoulder. “You didn’t even think about it.”

“Didn’t need to.” Tom crossed the room and rested a hand on Charlie’s hip, looking at their reflection. “If I have to sit in a concert hall while half the cultural establishment stares at you, I want them to know exactly what they can’t have.”

Charlie snorted and bumped his shoulder against Tom’s chest. “You’re jealous of no one.”

“That’s what you think.”

“You’re the only person who’s ever been interested in me.”

“Liar. I had to fight off that guy at the club, remember?”

Tom took the gunmetal jacket from its hanger and held it open. Charlie slipped his arms into the sleeves, letting Tom pull it over his shoulders and straighten the collar.

“You look beautiful,” Tom said.

“Shut up.” Charlie smiled anyway.

“Just stating facts.” Tom picked up a silver-grey tie from the bench and looped it around Charlie’s neck. His fingers moved quickly as he formed the knot, his knuckles brushing Charlie’s throat. “You’re less nervous than you were this morning.”

“I’m trying not to be weird about it,” Charlie admitted. “It’s one thing to be onstage because I have to be. It’s another to willingly walk into a room full of people who actually know how to behave.”

Tom tightened the knot, then rested his hand against Charlie’s chest. “You don’t have to perform for them.”

Charlie looked at himself in the mirror. The sharp lines of the suit made him feel more solid.

“Shoes,” Tom prompted.

Charlie sat on the bench. Before he could reach for them, Tom crouched, took the nearest oxford, and slid it onto his foot.

Charlie looked down at him. “You’re doing that on purpose.”

Tom glanced up, perfectly innocent. “Doing what?”

“Kneeling like that.”

“Charlie.”

Charlie caught his breath. “We have a concert to get to.”

“We do.” Tom finished the laces and stood. “Which is the only reason you’re still wearing those clothes.”

The drive to the Maison Symphonique took less than twenty minutes. Tom had hired a car for the evening. Charlie sat beside him in the back, watching Montréal slip past in the soft early-evening light.

Tom’s hand moved across the leather seat and found his.

Charlie looked down at their joined hands, then over at Tom. Tom was still watching the street ahead, his thumb moving over Charlie’s knuckles.

Charlie squeezed back.

By the time the car stopped outside the hall, Charlie had almost forgotten about the crowd waiting for them. Then the driver opened the door, and their private bubble broke.

The lobby was all pale stone and glass, packed with people in tailored jackets and expensive silk. A donor Charlie vaguely recognized from a McGill event was holding court near the staircase, speaking just a little too loudly.

Charlie hesitated inside the doors.

Tom offered his arm. Charlie took his hand instead.

If anyone was staring, Charlie didn't have the bandwidth to notice. The room was too bright and too loud, thick with cologne and overlapping conversations. Tom stopped to greet two board members whose names Charlie instantly forgot. Charlie nodded when he was supposed to and dodged a question about his department.

Inside, the hall was dim, the Steinway gleaming under the amber stage lights.

Tom sat beside him and laid his hand over Charlie's on the shared armrest.

The lights went down. Conversation dwindled into silence. Once the orchestra had quieted, the conductor and Olena walked out.

She crossed the stage in stark black, her dark hair pinned back, looking entirely uninterested in playing the charming virtuoso.

The first half carried Charlie out of himself. He listened with his whole body, Tom's hand warm over his in the dark.

After intermission, Olena returned to the piano.

The opening of the Scriabin was volatile, stripped of its usual romanticism.

Charlie tracked the architecture of her playing: the tension in her shoulders, the way she held the dissonances open and made each resolution feel almost reluctant.

Tom leaned closer. "Good?"

Charlie couldn't look away from the stage. "Incredible."

Olena hit the lower register hard, the pedal thickening the sound into something raw and granular. Charlie smiled.

Tom saw it.

The Scriabin ended. Olena let the last chord decay into the silence.

Tom leaned close enough for his breath to touch Charlie's ear. "You're vibrating."

Charlie turned to him as the applause began. "She's insane. The way she plays with the empty space."

Tom was smiling now. "I know."

"You do?"

"I know because you look like you're about to hunt her down in the lobby and fight her about pedal technique."

Charlie laughed under the applause.

The rest of the program passed in a blur. When the final piece ended, the hall came to its feet. Charlie stood with them, clapping until his palms stung.

As the house lights came up, Tom checked his phone. "Valois wants us backstage."

Charlie's pulse jumped. "Tonight?"

"Apparently." Tom pocketed his phone and caught Charlie's hand again. "Let's go."

The green room was close and overheated.

Henri Valois stood near the low, modern sofas, his silver hair wilder than usual, talking loudly enough to fill the room. Beside him was Olena, her dark hair hastily pinned up and a towel draped over the shoulders of her black concert gown.

“Ah!” Valois boomed when he spotted them. “The doctor arrives. Olena, this is the man I told you about. Dr. Montgomery.”

Henri never got his name right.

Tom’s hand moved to the small of Charlie’s back. The pressure said what he didn’t have to. *I’m right here. You’ve got this.*

Charlie stepped forward and offered Olena his hand. “It’s an honour.” The first syllable caught in his throat, but he pushed through it. “Your phrasing in the second movement was extraordinary. You didn’t rush the decay of the final chord.”

Olena shook his hand, studying him with sharp, appraising eyes. “Most conductors try to rush me there. They hate the dead air.”

“The silence is structural,” Charlie said. Talking about the music made the words come more easily. “It gives the chord its boundary. Rush it, and the whole room collapses.”

Valois pointed at Olena, deeply vindicated. “You see? He understands! He defended an entire dissertation on this exact thing.”

Olena’s attention sharpened. “The architecture of the silence. Yes. You play?”

“He doesn’t just play,” Valois interrupted grandly. “He bleeds on the keys.”

Behind Charlie, Tom laughed under his breath.

Charlie lifted his chin. *Occupy the room.*

“I try to stay conscious of the space,” he said. “Your use of the pedal in the lower register—you let it get muddy on purpose.”

Olena smiled. “Exactly. It’s supposed to be ugly. I didn’t come here to play a music box.”

She picked up a bottle of water and took a drink. Then her gaze shifted past Charlie, and her eyebrows rose.

“And who is the very handsome bodyguard?”

Charlie stepped aside, bringing Tom into the conversation. “This is my husband, Thomas.”

Tom offered her an easy smile as they shook hands. “Just here to hold his coat. The Scriabin was incredible, but I’ll leave the technical analysis to you.”

Olena looked between them and smiled. “A husband who knows when to yield the floor. You are a very lucky man, Charlie.”

Her attention returned to him.

“Henri sent me your recording. The Vienna Summer Chamber Series needs a replacement pianist later this month. I’m giving them your name.”

Charlie stared at her.

“If they contact you,” she said, “answer quickly.”

Valois disappeared into a throng of donors, and Olena was cornered by a group of intense-looking musicians. Charlie hit his social wall less than a minute later.

Tom glanced over. “Battery level?”

“Blinking red.”

Tom extracted them with ease, keeping a hand against Charlie’s back as he guided him into the corridor.

When the green room door clicked shut, Charlie let out a breath.

The lobby had emptied except for a few staff resetting the space. They stepped out into the cool night air, the pavement shining from an earlier rain, and Charlie slid into the back of the waiting car, tipping his head against the leather and closing his eyes.

As the car pulled away, Tom loosened his tie and rested a hand on Charlie’s knee. Charlie covered it with his own.

“You did well,” Tom said.

Charlie kept his eyes closed. “I sounded like a starstruck undergrad.”

“You didn’t.” Tom’s thumb traced a circle against the side of his knee. “You stood your ground, and then you started arguing about silence like your life

depended on it. It was impressive."

Charlie laughed, covering his face with his free hand. "She was terrifying."

"She was," Tom agreed. "But she wants you in Vienna. That's amazing."

Charlie looked out the window at the blurred streetlights. "Backstage adrenaline. Everyone's theatrical. People say things they don't mean."

Tom looked at him. "Sure."

Charlie scoffed. "You're enjoying this way too much."

Tom turned his hand beneath Charlie's, lacing their fingers together. He lifted Charlie's knuckles to his mouth and kissed them. "Immensely."

By the time the private elevator doors closed around them, the post-concert adrenaline had bottomed out. Charlie leaned against the mirrored wall, eyes shut. Across from him, Tom stood with his jacket unbuttoned and his tie loose, looking far too pleased with himself.

Charlie opened one eye. "You're doing that smug face."

"I don't have a smug face."

"You do. You're doing it right now."

Tom stepped closer as the elevator hummed upward. "You walked into a crowded room, got misnamed by Valois, and instead of bolting, you stood there and debated music theory with a world-class pianist." His voice dropped. "Yeah, Char. I'm a little smug."

The penthouse was dark except for the amber entry lights. Tom locked the door and dropped his keys in the bowl. Charlie stood in the foyer, whatever remained of his energy finally gone.

Tom crossed back to him. "Bath?"

"Please."

Tom kissed his forehead and headed down the hall, already shrugging off his jacket.

Charlie followed slowly, working his cufflinks loose. He found Tom at the marble counter with both taps running, pouring an absurd amount of

expensive sandalwood-and-bergamot soak into the tub.

Charlie leaned against the doorframe. “You take the bubbles very seriously.”

“It’s a foundational pillar of this household.” Tom set the bottle aside and caught Charlie’s tie. “Hold still.”

Charlie obeyed. Tom loosened the knot and pulled the tie free, then started on Charlie’s collar.

By the time Charlie stripped off the rest of his formal clothes, the tub was a white drift of foam and the mirrors were fogged with steam. Tom, already down to his boxers, shut off the taps.

Charlie stepped in, sinking until the foam reached his collarbones.

Tom switched off the overhead lights, leaving only the dim wall sconces, and climbed in behind him. Charlie sat between his knees, resting his head against Tom’s shoulder. Tom wrapped his arms loosely around his waist.

His fingertips moved over Charlie’s forearm beneath the water.

“Henri got my name wrong,” Charlie said into the dark.

Tom’s fingers stopped. “I know.”

“And then she looked at me like I was an actual peer. Someone with opinions worth arguing with.”

Tom pressed a kiss to the side of Charlie’s head. “You are someone with opinions worth arguing with.”

Charlie tipped his head back against Tom’s shoulder to look up at him. “You’re really proud of me?”

Tom cupped Charlie’s face with one wet hand, his thumb passing over his cheek.

“Charlie. You were terrified, and you stepped up and held your ground anyway. That’s the part I’m most proud of.”

Charlie held his gaze, then turned his face to kiss Tom’s palm.

They stayed in the water until it cooled around them.

The storm began shortly before midnight. Charlie stood barefoot in the kitchen in Tom's old sweatshirt, watching the first real sheet of rain sweep across the city, a lukewarm mug of tea in his hands.

Behind him, Tom worked at the island. Lightning flashed over the mountain. Seconds later, thunder rolled through the building hard enough to ripple Charlie's tea.

"Having fun?" Tom asked without looking up.

"It's dramatic."

The next flash came closer, turning the city negative for a split second. Tom pulled his phone out, scrolling the radar with the focused patience of someone who already knew the answer.

"Staring at it isn't going to change the storm," Charlie said.

Tom set the phone facedown. "I know."

The next thunderclap hit without warning, sharp and physical. Charlie flinched.

Tom looked up, waiting.

Charlie abandoned his mug and crossed the kitchen. Tom caught him immediately, wrapping an arm around his waist and pressing a hand to his back. Charlie tucked his face against Tom's neck.

"It was loud," Charlie muttered.

"Yeah."

Another rumble shook the glass. Tom pressed his mouth to the top of Charlie's head.

"I'm not scared of it," Charlie said into his collar. "I just hate the jump scare."

"I know."

Lightning flashed white.

The power went out, cutting everything to total blackness. For a second, there was nothing but the rain and their breathing. Charlie's hands found

Tom’s shoulders.

“Okay?” Tom asked.

“Yes.” A beat. “That was a lot.”

Emergency lighting flickered on in the hall. Outside, several surrounding blocks had gone dark.

“Candles,” Tom said.

They raided the drawers by flashlight. Charlie dragged blankets into the living room while Tom lit tapers and tea lights until the room glowed amber. Charlie dropped onto the blankets in the middle of the rug, looking up at Tom at the edge of the light.

Thunder cracked, rattling the glass. Charlie reached up and grabbed the front of Tom’s shirt.

Tom came down with a rough sound, catching his weight on his forearms. Charlie pulled him into a kiss, and Tom answered it instantly—thorough and heavy, one hand sliding beneath the sweatshirt to press against Charlie’s bare back. Charlie arched into his touch, curling his fingers at Tom’s nape.

Charlie let his head fall back, staring at the ceiling. “I want s’mores.”

Tom went completely still. He lifted his head, his eyes dark in the candlelight. “There’s stuff in the pantry?”

“Top shelf.”

Tom kissed the corner of his mouth and got up.

They sat cross-legged on the floor, toasting marshmallows over a pillar candle. Tom turned his skewer with a patience that was objectively excessive for a marshmallow. Charlie watched him, feeling fond in a way that was almost embarrassing.

Charlie’s marshmallow slid sideways off the skewer and landed, fully molten, on the tray.

“That’s yours,” Tom said without looking up.

“I know it’s mine.”

Tom's marshmallow came out golden and perfectly browned. Without comment, he built the s'more and held it out.

Charlie took a bite.

Tom rested an elbow on his knee, watching him eat.

"Matt's right," Charlie mumbled. "You're a simp."

Tom's mouth curved. "Eat your s'more, Charlie."

The candles eventually burned low. Tom extinguished them, leaving only the greenish spill from the hall. Charlie pulled the duvet over them, settling on the rug with his back against Tom's chest, Tom's arm locked around his waist.

"Love you," Charlie said.

Tom pressed his mouth to the back of his neck. "Obviously."

CHAPTER 16

Tuesday, June 8.

The email arrived at 4:17 p.m. Charlie was deep in annotations, debating whether it was late enough to justify making tea purely to procrastinate.

He almost deleted it.

The sender line looked institutional and Austrian. He assumed it was an administrative error, or perhaps another academic disaster disguised as an opportunity.

Then he read the subject line: *Invitation to Perform – Vienna Summer Chamber Series.*

Charlie stopped.

By the end of the first paragraph, he was standing. Halfway through the second, he sat back down. By the third, he was staring blankly at the screen.

It was real.

The Vienna Summer Chamber Series wanted him for a guest engagement from June 15 through June 21. One of their pianists had withdrawn unexpectedly, and Olena Zastavna had recommended Charlie after hearing the recording Henri sent her.

Just like she said she would.

Charlie read the message again from the bottom up, searching for a line revealing that it had been sent in error to a Charles with a more stable nervous system.

Nothing changed.

Charlie grabbed his phone.

are you busy

Tom replied almost immediately.

In a meeting. Are you okay?

Charlie stared at the screen.

maybe. can you come home at a normal human hour

The typing bubble appeared.

What happened?

Charlie looked back at the email.

i think something good

This reply took slightly longer.

I'll be home by six. Don't spiral before then.

Charlie smiled.

that is a hostile request

Do your best, honey.

The clatter of keys dropped into the bowl. When Tom appeared in the office doorway, he took one look at Charlie and frowned. Charlie sat rigidly at the desk, hands folded in his lap, the laptop glowing in front of him.

"What happened?" Tom crossed the room.

Charlie just turned the laptop toward him.

Tom scanned the screen, then looked up. "Vienna?"

Charlie let out a shaky breath. "That appears to be what it says."

Tom caught Charlie around the waist and drew him out of the chair. He sat down and pulled Charlie onto his lap. "They invited you because you're good enough," he murmured against Charlie's jaw.

Charlie closed his eyes, his shoulders drawn together.

“Do you understand me?” Tom pulled back to meet his gaze. “No pretending this happened by accident. They listened, and they asked for you.”

Charlie nodded slightly. “Okay.”

Tom rested his forehead against Charlie’s. “When?”

Charlie whispered the dates.

“All right. I’ll move things.”

Charlie blinked at him.

Tom looked faintly offended. “Of course I’m coming.”

Charlie finally slumped against him, the last of his rigid tension breaking. “I want you there. My brain just... went straight to you.”

“Then I’m there.”

Charlie let out a breath that was almost a laugh. The email remained open on the desk, its formal Germanic politeness somehow more terrifying now that it had been spoken aloud. “I should call my mother. And then I need to answer them.”

“After I read your draft,” Tom corrected.

Charlie frowned. “Why?”

“Because you’re going to apologize for accepting.”

Charlie lingered in the warmth of Tom’s lap for one second longer, then reached for his phone. Nancy answered on the second ring.

“Sweetie? You don’t call at this hour. Is it Thomas?”

“Thomas is perfect, Mum,” Charlie murmured, smiling as Tom made a mildly insulted sound behind him. “But something did happen.” He looked at the glowing screen. The words felt ridiculous, too big for his mouth. “I got invited to perform in Vienna.”

Nancy made a sharp, startled sound.

Charlie let out a genuine, nervous laugh. “A chamber series. In June. I’ve checked the email three times.”

“My God.” Her voice softened. “Oh, sweetheart. Of course they invited you.”

Tom stepped up beside him, and Charlie instinctively leaned into his side. “It’s just...” He swallowed. “It’s Vienna. It’s a little deranged.”

“You were always going to end up in some ridiculous European city doing beautiful, serious things,” Nancy said warmly. “You’ll need to bring your proper shoes, of course. Not those tragic ones you insist are fine.”

Charlie closed his eyes. “Mum.”

“I am not sending my son to Austria dressed like an escaped graduate student.”

Tom made a small, approving sound.

Charlie shot him a look. “Don’t encourage her.”

“It was a supportive face.”

Nancy huffed playfully. “Is Thomas going with you?”

Charlie met Tom’s eyes. “Yes. He’s going to help me draft the reply so I don’t embarrass myself.”

“Good. Charlie, I’m so, so proud of you. I’m very glad somebody out there listened carefully enough to hear what we’ve always heard.”

Charlie swallowed hard, scrubbing at his eye with the heel of his hand.

“Call me when you know more,” she said. “And I want to see exactly what you’re packing so I can object properly.”

“Goodnight, Mum.”

Charlie ended the call, letting the phone hang loose in his hand.

Tom kissed the side of his head. “So I’ll choose the shoes?”

For just over five hours, it was true.

By nine-thirty, they were on the sectional with the laptop between them.

“You can delete that apology,” Tom said, tapping the screen.

“It isn’t an apology.”

“You’re apologizing for the short notice *they* gave you.”

Charlie frowned at the sentence, then backspaced.

They were still debating whether *delighted* sounded excessive when Tom’s phone buzzed. He answered and walked toward the window. Charlie watched the easy warmth vanish from Tom’s shoulders, his entire posture going rigid against the glass.

“Who is representing them?” Tom closed his eyes. “Fuck. Okay. Thank you.”

He hung up and turned around. “A major counterparty is moving against our restructuring. Hazel checked opposing counsel—it’s the insolvency firm my father keeps on retainer when he wants to break something quietly.”

“Michael.”

“Almost certainly.” Tom grabbed his laptop and jacket. “I have to go.”

Charlie couldn’t settle after the door clicked shut. He made tea, sat at the piano for ten minutes without touching the keys, and stared at the Vienna invitation until the words felt impossibly thin.

Tom returned just before midnight, slumping onto the sofa and pressing both hands over his face.

“How bad?” Charlie asked quietly.

“They’re asking for an emergency receiver to take control of the firm before payroll clears,” Tom said, voice rough. “Hazel can argue the law, but the filing attacks decisions I made personally. I’m the only witness who can put the numbers into evidence, and they can call the hearing on forty-eight hours’ notice.”

Charlie looked down at his lap. “So you can’t leave.”

“If I’m in Vienna, I’m six thousand kilometres away when the summons lands.” Tom leaned in. “I’m trying to find an angle around it, Charlie.”

Charlie knew he meant it.

Until that moment, Vienna had contained two people. Tom beside him on the plane. Tom in the hotel. Tom somewhere in the hall while Charlie sat at a piano in a city whose name alone made his stomach twist.

Now Tom disappeared from it, leaving Charlie entirely exposed.

Charlie's fingers curled into the sofa cushion. Pressure rose in his throat, and he swallowed hard against it, keeping his eyes on the floor.

"Okay," he managed softly.

Tom turned quickly. "Charlie—"

"I know you're trying."

Over the next two days, Tom worked every angle he could find. He emerged from the office only long enough to ask whether Charlie had eaten or gone to bed before disappearing inside again.

Charlie loved him for it.

That made the disappointment worse.

By Thursday night, the verdict landed.

Hazel slid a printed motion record across the marble island. Tom pressed his palm flat against it, staring down without a word. At the piano, Charlie let his hands drop into his lap; he didn't need to hear what Hazel whispered to know.

She gathered her files, pausing beside the piano to squeeze Charlie's shoulder. "I'm sorry. We ran out of legal runway."

When the door clicked shut, Charlie walked over to the island. Tom hadn't moved.

"I can't go," Tom said.

"I know."

"If I get on that plane—"

"I know, Thomas." Charlie could have tried telling him it was fine, but he was too tired to make it believable. He leaned against the counter, voice

dropping. “It feels like he wants me there alone.”

Tom looked up.

“He knows how hard Switzerland was. He knows Europe is the edge of the map for me. If he’s behind this—”

“He’s behind the attack on the firm,” Tom said gently. “We don’t know that he saw the invitation.”

Charlie swallowed. “It still leaves me without you.”

Tom stepped around the island, resting a warm palm against the side of Charlie’s neck. “I’m sorry.”

Charlie leaned into the touch, closing his eyes. When he spoke, the words came out quiet and hurried. “If you can’t come... can you at least take care of everything?”

“Name it.”

“I don’t want to land there and have to figure out where I’m going, or argue with a taxi driver, or realize I forgot something. Everything printed. Not just on my phone. The hotel, a car waiting inside arrivals—”

“With your full legal name on an enormous sign,” Tom murmured.

A miserable, breathy laugh escaped Charlie. “I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

Charlie stepped into him, burying his face beneath Tom’s chin and wrapping both arms around his waist. “I don’t want to go without you.”

“I know.” Tom’s arms locked around his back.

“Can I call you too much?” Charlie asked into his shirt.

“There’s no such thing.”

“Before the performance? After? At three in the morning when I decide Vienna is horrible?”

“Especially then.”

Charlie breathed out slowly. “And you’ll tell me if anything happens here? Everything?”

Tom hesitated—barely a fraction of a second. “Everything.”

“Okay.”

Tom kissed the top of his head. “I’ll handle the rest.”

“Please,” Charlie whispered.

The weekend collapsed into forty-eight hours of practising, packing, legal calls, and contingency planning. Tom worked in the piano room while Charlie practised. The apartment felt precious, but the air hummed with the tension of a coming strike.

Charlie walked into the study and found a slim leather folder on the desk. It contained flight details, airport-transfer confirmations, venue maps, and a typed page titled *Contingencies* in Tom’s ruthlessly elegant font.

“You made me a dossier,” Charlie said.

“I built you a supply line,” Tom corrected without looking up from his laptop. “If my father gets the chance to make this harder for you, we don’t give him an inch.”

On Sunday night, they packed together. Tom folded Charlie’s shirts into exact rectangles while Charlie sat cross-legged on the bed with his Swiss passport and Canadian work permit beside him.

Charlie checked the expiry date on the passport again, then slid it into the travel wallet and returned the work permit to Tom’s folder.

“Do I need the navy jacket or the black one?”

“Both.”

“Really?”

“One for the flight. One for the program dinner.”

Charlie packed both.

When he returned from the bathroom, Tom was slipping a heavy cream envelope into the garment bag's inner pocket.

"What was that?" Charlie asked.

"Nothing." Tom resumed zipping the bag. "It's for later."

"The letter?"

"Maybe."

Charlie didn't ask again.

Monday, June 14.

The car arrived at eight that evening. Montréal still held the early-summer light, the trees along the avenue green. Charlie's suitcase stood by the door. He had his passport, his music, and the leather folder.

He and Tom stood facing each other in the entryway. Charlie adjusted the strap of his bag twice.

"You're staring," Charlie said.

"I know."

"I'm only gone a week."

"I'm aware."

Tom straightened the collar of Charlie's jacket, then left his hands at the sides of Charlie's neck. "You have everything?"

"Yes."

"Passport."

"Yes."

"Music."

"Yes."

"Phone charger."

Charlie blinked.

Tom stared at him.

"…It's on the kitchen counter."

Tom closed his eyes. "Jesus Christ."

Charlie's mouth twitched.

Tom retrieved the charger, tucked it into the outer pocket of Charlie's bag, and zipped it himself. Then he gripped Charlie by the hips and pulled him close.

"Call me when you land," Tom said. "If the panic starts, call me before it gets bad. I don't care what time it is. You are not doing this by yourself just because I'm not physically there."

Charlie wrapped his arms around him and held on.

"I know."

Charlie buried his face against Tom's chest. "I still don't want to go without you."

"I know, baby."

Charlie pulled back enough to look at him. "Go tear his lawyers apart."

Tom's mouth curved into a sharp smile. "Count on it."

He kissed Charlie hard.

Charlie picked up his bag and left.

He slid into the back seat of the car, his hand wrapped around his phone. Forty floors above him, the penthouse windows were impossible to distinguish from the rest of the tower. As the car pulled away, Charlie watched the building recede through the rear window.

He took out his phone.

leaving now. i already hate this.

The typing bubble appeared immediately.

I know. I love you. Go show Vienna why they asked for you.

Charlie read the message twice, then leaned his head back against the seat as Montréal moved past the window.

Tuesday, June 15.

It was late morning in Vienna and barely dawn in Montréal.

Vienna was beautiful in a way Charlie found almost offensive. The airport was orderly, the June light pale and cinematic. Beyond the terminal windows, everything looked composed.

Charlie stood just past baggage claim with his jacket folded over one arm and the leather folder held against his ribs. He had landed forty minutes ago.

Tom answered before the second ring. Behind his voice, Charlie could hear the sharp crosstalk of a legal war room—Hazel issuing instructions, keyboards clattering.

“Hi, baby,” Tom said.

Charlie rested his head against the concrete pillar behind him. “Hi. I landed.”

“Was the flight all right?”

“It was fine.” Charlie looked at the polished floor and the efficient strangers moving across it. “I feel weird.”

“Tell me.”

“The plane was too quiet. The landing was too abrupt.” Charlie pulled the folder closer against his side. “I knew you weren’t going to be here, but apparently my nervous system didn’t.”

Tom listened. The noise on his end receded until Charlie could hear only his breathing.

“Your driver is waiting outside arrivals,” Tom said. “He has a sign with your full legal name.”

Charlie let out an unwilling laugh. “I hate that.”

“Do you want me to have him put it away?”

Charlie imagined walking out and trying to identify a stranger in the crowd.

“…No.”

“Thought so. The hotel has your early check-in. There’s tea in the room, and I sent the updated venue contact to your phone.”

“You’re deranged.”

“I’m organized.” A pause. “How alone do you feel right now?”

“Less than I did thirty seconds ago.”

Tom let out a breath. “Good.”

Charlie closed his eyes for a moment. “I’ll call you when I get to the hotel.”

“I’ll answer.”

Charlie slid into the back seat of the waiting car and watched Vienna pass in pale, immaculate fragments beyond the window.

He called again from the hotel. The room had high ceilings, cream walls, and an enormous window overlooking a narrow street. It was elegant, beautifully arranged, and aggressively impersonal.

Tom picked up immediately. “Hi.”

Charlie dropped his bag beside the armchair. “You’re doing very well in your self-appointed role as a transatlantic emotional-support line.”

“It’s a transatlantic resistance line,” Tom corrected. “Unpack your suit.”

They stayed on the phone while Charlie unpacked just enough to claim the room. Tom didn’t fill the silences. When Charlie talked, he listened. When Charlie fell quiet, Tom stayed on the line.

By the time they hung up, the loneliness was bearable.

The first rehearsal was that evening. Charlie dressed slowly: black trousers, a thin black knit, the better jacket, and the silver ring Tom had slid onto his finger.

His phone buzzed.

Eat something before rehearsal. You promised.

Charlie smiled.

You're not here. Your powers are limited.

I'm still right. Go eat.

Charlie slipped the phone into his pocket and went to find something.

CHAPTER 17

Tuesday, June 15.

The venue was serious and acoustically exact. The stage wood gleamed, the lights were discreet, and the silence felt curated. Every few minutes, the bell of a passing tram reached them through the open stage door.

People greeted Charlie by name with professional respect. Apparently, his competence was considered settled.

Sabine Keller, the program coordinator, talked him through the week: rehearsal times, entrances, the reception after Friday's performance. Then she pointed out the cameras mounted around the hall: one above the balcony, one at stage right, another angled toward the keyboard.

"We record the performances for the series archive," she said. "Public release is optional. You left that part undecided."

Charlie looked toward the nearest lens.

Being watched was one thing. A recording meant it could happen again later, in rooms he would never see.

"You can say no," Sabine added.

He looked back at the stage. He had come all the way to Vienna.

"No," he said. Then, realizing how that sounded, "I mean—yes. You can release it."

Sabine nodded once and made a note. "Good."

The pianist sharing part of the program was Klara Weiss, understated and terrifyingly good. Charlie heard her play for less than a minute before deciding he hated her on professional grounds.

She stepped away from the rehearsal piano and gestured toward it. “It’s brighter than it sounds from the audience.”

Charlie sat and tested a few measures. She was right. The upper register came back at him hard, while the bass seemed to disappear into the room.

“It changes when the hall is full,” Klara said.

“Better?”

She considered that. “Different.”

No one else seemed remotely close to collapse. Charlie was handling that part for the group.

Ten minutes into his practice-room slot, the walls had swallowed the hall, the tram bells, everyone. His breathing was the loudest thing in the room, and he couldn’t seem to pull any of it below his collarbones.

He set his bag on a chair, sat at the bench, and called Tom.

“Hi, baby.”

Charlie pressed the heel of his free hand into his forehead. “I know you said call whenever, but this is a stupid reason. I’m in the practice room.”

“How is it?”

“Beautiful. Awful. Very Austrian.”

Tom laughed quietly. “Understood.”

“They all know my name in a competent way,” Charlie said. “I feel like I’ve committed fraud on an international scale.”

A door shut on Tom’s end, abruptly cutting off the noise of the Montréal war room.

“Charlie.”

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. “I know. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. But you’re waiting for someone to walk in and tap you on the shoulder.”

Charlie swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“No one is coming to tap you on the shoulder,” Tom said, his voice dropping into that absolute, unshakeable register. “You didn’t sneak in. You didn’t buy a ticket. They invited you.”

Charlie tried another breath. It caught in exactly the same place.

Tom heard the ragged edge of it over the line. “Put me on speaker.”

Charlie fumbled with the screen and set the phone down on the lacquered wood next to the music desk. “Okay.”

“Put your hands on the keys.”

Charlie opened his eyes. He lowered his hand from his forehead, leaning forward until his fingers curved over the cold ivory.

“Okay,” Charlie whispered.

“Are they there?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Tom said. “The room is yours. Take it.”

Charlie drew a breath. This time, the air bypassed his collarbones and made it all the way down into his lungs.

He looked at the phone, sitting in the ring of light on the black lacquer. “I miss you.”

“I’m right here,” Tom said softly.

“Okay. Okay. I’m going to rehearse now.”

“Eat after.”

“Yes.”

“And call you later.”

“Any hour.”

“I love you.”

“I love you more.”

Neither of them hung up.

“Go play,” Tom said at last.

“Okay.”

Charlie ended the call. He left the phone resting on the wood, flexed his fingers once, and began.

Thursday, June 17.

By the third day, Vienna had acquired a rhythm.

A text sent to a sleeping Montréal before coffee. Left out of the hotel, right at the pharmacy with the green awning, then across the tram tracks. Rehearsal, a Melange from the café two doors down, and half an hour back in the hotel room to call Tom once the East Coast was awake.

By Thursday, he no longer checked the map for the final turn. He sent pictures of terrifyingly ornate ceilings, and short, panicked texts whenever he remembered how good Klara Weiss was.

When Tom answered the FaceTime call that evening, he was in the penthouse kitchen, wearing a black sweater and reading glasses. Voices murmured in the dining room behind him. Cheddar yowled off-screen, sounding personally wronged by the time difference.

Hazel crossed the background carrying two legal pads.

“Tell Vienna I hate it for stealing you,” she said, not breaking her stride. “Emergency hearing denied. Receiver motion’s still alive for Monday.”

“Is that good?” Charlie asked.

“It means Michael doesn’t get to take control of the firm today.”

“I’ll pass your hatred along to the Austrian government.”

Hazel vanished out of frame.

“Everyone is hanging out with my husband while I’m suffering artistically,” Charlie said, propping his phone against the hotel headboard.

Tom glanced up from the cutting board, a defensive litigation matrix glowing on the laptop open next to him. “I’m hosting a war council, not a dinner party. And you are in Vienna.”

“That is not the point.”

Tom smiled faintly. “Come home and complain in person.”

Friday, June 18.

At noon, Charlie’s phone buzzed.

It was six in the morning in Montréal. Tom was already awake; the receiver motion had him, Hazel, and half the firm working before sunrise.

How nauseous. Scale of 1 to 10.

how did you know

Because you are predictable before performances.

rude

Did you eat.

Charlie sent a picture of the remains of lunch—soup, bread, fruit.

Good. Call me before you leave for the venue.

At 6:08 p.m., dressed except for his jacket, Charlie sat on the edge of the hotel bed. His music case rested by the door. He stared at it for a full minute before picking up his phone.

Tom answered on the first ring. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Charlie dragged a cold hand through his damp hair. “I forgot how to play the piano.”

Tom made a low sound, a door clicking shut on his end. “That is going to make tonight very difficult.”

“Thank you for your support.” Charlie pressed the heel of his hand hard into his thigh to stop the tremor in his leg. “I feel like I’m about to throw

up.”

“Are your hands cold?”

“Yes.”

“Go run them under warm water before you leave,” Tom said, his voice dropping into that deep, exact calm. “How many measures until the muscle memory takes over and you stop thinking about the room?”

Charlie closed his eyes, mapping the score in his head. “Eight. Maybe ten.”

“Ten measures,” Tom said. “You can survive ten measures of being terrified. Walk out, adjust the bench, and just get through the first ten.”

Charlie breathed out, feeling the knot in his chest loosen a fraction. “Then I settle.”

“Then you settle. And I remain deeply offended that I do not get to watch the first idiot in Vienna realize what you sound like live.”

Charlie laughed, a short, breathless sound that forced him to fold forward. “You’re insane.”

“I know.”

Charlie looked back at his music case. The terror was still there, but it had shrunk back down to a manageable size. “I wish you were here.”

Tom did not answer immediately. “I wish I was too. Call me after.”

“I will.”

“No matter how late.”

“I know.”

“Good. Go play.”

Sabine leaned through the backstage doorway. “Two minutes.”

Charlie nodded. Past her shoulder, the camera mounted low at stage right pointed its lens directly at the keyboard, cold and blank. When the stage manager touched his arm, he walked out into the glare.

The Steinway waited. Bow, sit, adjust the bench, hands over the keys.

In rehearsal, the empty hall had bounced the Rachmaninoff back at him with clinical sharpness. Now, the bodies in the seats drank the opening phrase before it could reach the balcony. For half a beat his fingers locked, certain he'd misjudged the room entirely. He forced himself not to lunge after the fading resonance. He gave the next phrase its intended weight, and the wood answered.

By the second piece, the space made sense. The soft passages could actually shrink; he didn't have to throw sound up into the rafters. The hall was doing the carrying.

In the fourth, he clipped an entrance a fraction too early. His reflexes panicked—ready to crowd the tempo, muscle the phrase back into symmetry, blot out what everyone had just heard. Instead, he forced himself to visualize the next ten measures. He swallowed the urge and let the beat empty itself out before laying the next chord down clean. Nothing broke.

By the Adagio, he was done playing defence. On the return, he let the silence hang a beat longer than he ever had in rehearsal. A sharp, terrifying suspension where nobody shifted in their seat, until he finally tipped the cadence into resolution and felt the room exhale with him.

Tom would have loved the acoustics. He'd have sat in the centre aisle in that severe dark suit, looking completely ruined the way he always did when Charlie played in public. As the sixth piece surged under his wrists, Charlie stopped playing to the camera at stage right. He stopped bracing for the mistake. He felt the massive, vibrating weight of the instrument beneath his hands, and finally took the room.

The final chord rang out, and for a second the silence held. Then the hall rose.

Charlie took his bows on stiff legs, his shirt damp against his ribs, the lights blurring hot around the edges.

The green room was a blur of dry white wine and compliments he smiled through without absorbing. Then Klara stepped into his path, glass in hand.

“In the Adagio,” she said, “you held that return.”

Charlie caught his stage smile before it slipped. “I thought I’d lost them.”

“No. You made us wait.”

He let out a shaky breath. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She tipped her chin toward his right hand, where he was gripping his phone like a stress ball. “Go call him.”

“I was just—

“You’ve checked the time four times in thirty seconds.”

“Discreet, then.”

“Appalling,” Klara said mildly, raising her glass once before drifting toward the donors.

Charlie pushed toward the exit, already calculating how quickly he could get back to the hotel.

Back at the hotel, Charlie shut the door. The latch clicked, and for the first time all evening, nobody was looking at him.

His ears were still ringing when he called Tom.

Tom answered instantly. “Hi.”

Charlie leaned his head back against the heavy wood of the door. “Hi.”

“How was it?”

Charlie laughed, the sound breaking in the middle. “I don’t know.” He slid down the door until he was sitting on the floor, still in his jacket. “I think it was good. People stood up. A man said something horrible in a flattering way. There was wine.”

Tom let out a long breath. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Charlie folded forward over his knees. Tears struck the black fabric of his trousers.

“Hey,” Tom said softly. “Hey.”

Charlie wiped at his face with the heel of his hand. “I’m fine. I’m not upset. I just—”

“You don’t have to make sense yet.”

“I wanted you there.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Tom paused. “Tell me everything anyway.”

Sitting on the floor in his concert clothes, Charlie tried to explain it: the first phrase disappearing, the occupied hall swallowing the sound, the entrance he had almost crowded.

“But you didn’t,” Tom said.

“No.” Charlie closed his eyes. “I let it empty out. And in the Adagio, I held the return longer than I did in rehearsal. Klara noticed.” He swallowed. “She said I made them wait.”

Tom was silent for a second. The faint hum of the Montréal kitchen sat on the line.

“I know exactly what that sounds like,” Tom said quietly. “You took the room.”

“You weren’t there.”

“No,” Tom said. “I wasn’t.”

Charlie leaned his head back against the door again.

He told Tom about the strange Austrian canapés. He told him about the sixth piece, and the moment he realized Tom would have loved the acoustics. By the time Charlie ran out of things to say, his ears had stopped ringing. His legs ached from the floor, and his jacket had gone cold against his back.

“You should sleep,” Tom said.

“I know.”

“Is the letter still in the garment bag?”

Charlie looked around the empty hotel room. “You admit it exists.”

“I’ve already said too much.”

Charlie pushed himself off the floor, his knees popping, and crossed to the closet. He pulled a sealed envelope from the front pocket of the garment bag. His name was written across it in Tom's handwriting.

"Open it after we hang up," Tom said.

Charlie sat on the edge of the bed, tracing his thumb along the sealed edge. "That sounds dangerous."

"Probably. Tomorrow, you eat breakfast, reply only to the emails that matter, and walk around Vienna like the insufferably gifted person you are. Then you come home to me."

"Okay."

They stayed on the phone for another ten minutes before finally hanging up.

Inside the envelope was a single sheet of heavy paper. Tom's handwriting was clean and severe.

My angel,

I was wrong in Bern. I made a decision I had no right to make. I'm sorry.

I hate that I missed your performance. I will hate it more if you apologize for going.

I hope you terrified them. Come home to me when you're ready.

I love you so much,

Tom

Charlie read it once. Then again.

He let out a long, shaky exhale. He kicked off his shoes, shrugged out of his cold jacket, and lay back on the coverlet with the letter resting against his chest.

Saturday, June 19.

Charlie woke past noon with Tom's letter folded beneath his palm.

By late afternoon, Vienna had stopped feeling like a test. The tram bells no longer pulled his shoulders toward his ears, and at the café near the venue,

he ordered without rehearsing the German first. He spent an hour in the cool quiet of a church while an unseen organist tested three low, reverberating notes, sending Tom photos of light across the flagstones and his shoes pointed down streets he hadn't planned to take.

Tom answered every time. Then, while Charlie stood beneath a rain-streaked bronze horse in a crowd of tourists, a single message arrived:

Come home.

Charlie stared at the screen until it dimmed.

Monday, June 21.

Tom called at four. Charlie answered before the second ring.

"The motion was dismissed," Tom said without preamble.

Charlie stopped in the middle of the pavement. "What?"

"Hazel got our records into evidence, and my testimony held. They didn't get their receiver."

Charlie closed his eyes against the swell of relief. "So you're okay."

"Bruised."

"Thomas."

A pause. "Intact."

"You won," Charlie whispered.

"We survived."

"No. You won."

Tom was quiet long enough for the distant street noise to return. "Come home."

Charlie looked down the street that had finally stopped feeling foreign. "Tomorrow."

Tuesday, June 22.

He landed in Montréal beneath silver summer clouds, the city looking brutal and familiar.

Traffic crawled from the airport, and by the time Charlie dragged his suitcase down their quiet hallway, exhaustion had worn him down to the bone.

Before he could touch his keys, the door opened.

Tom stood in the threshold—sleeves rolled, tie gone, dark socks on the hardwood. He looked wrecked: shirt creased, shadows under his eyes, clearly having waited there listening for the elevator.

Charlie dropped the handle of his bag. “Hi.”

Tom stepped forward, caught him by the front of his shirt, and pulled him hard across the threshold. Charlie hit his chest, and Tom’s arms locked around him with enough force to blot out the rest of the apartment.

“I’m home,” Charlie murmured, his voice catching against Tom’s collar.

“Thank God.” Tom pulled back just enough to look at him, murmured, “You’re freezing,” and kissed him before Charlie could answer.

Charlie clung to Tom’s sleeve, kissing him back until they were both breathless.

Somewhere deeper in the apartment, Cheddar let out a sharp, offended yowl.

Charlie rested his forehead against Tom’s shoulder, letting out a faint laugh. “I missed you.”

“I know.” Tom’s hand stayed fisted in the fabric of Charlie’s jacket. “Did you bring the letter?”

“It’s in my bag.” Charlie looked up into the exhaustion lining Tom’s face. “You were still there, you know. Even six thousand kilometres away.”

Tom’s mouth softened. He kicked the door shut behind them and lifted the heavy shoulder strap off Charlie.

“You got on that stage,” Tom said quietly. “You did it.”

“We both did what we had to do.”

Tom looked at him for a long moment. “I’m proud of you, Charlie.”

The words went straight to Charlie’s chest. He stepped back into Tom’s space, tucking his cheek beneath Tom’s chin as the early summer light pooled across the entryway floor.

“Do you need sleep or food?” Tom murmured into his hair.

“Both,” Charlie said. “You?”

“Both.”

“Tea first?”

“Tea first,” Tom agreed. “Then we’ll negotiate.”

CHAPTER 18

Thursday, July 1.

The movers handled the heavy furniture up the exterior wrought-iron stairs of Julian's Plateau triplex without breaking a sweat. Hazel's wardrobe, however, remained barricaded on the sidewalk.

"No one touches the garment bags except us," Hazel decreed from behind dark sunglasses, an iced coffee sweating in her palm. "Actual us. Not the movers."

"You trust strangers with a vintage sectional," Julian noted from the top landing.

"I trust professionals with furniture. I don't trust anyone paid by the hour with silk."

July first in Montréal meant half the city moving at once, the narrow street baking in midday heat and choked with trucks. Hazel conscripted Tom, Alex, and David for the boxes, while Julian installed himself upstairs to direct traffic.

Tom hauled a massive wardrobe box toward the winding metal stairs, dark sleeves shoved to his elbows, sweat catching at his throat. He never made a performance of helping—no sighing, no commentary, no pointed looks at Julian doing nothing. He just picked things up and carried them.

It was deeply unfair.

Charlie watched him a second too long.

"Don't," Hazel said without looking up from her clipboard.

"I'm standing on a sidewalk," Charlie said, taking a deliberately slow sip of his drink.

“You are staring at your husband while he performs manual labour.”

By noon, Charlie grabbed a cold bottle of water from the cooler and headed inside.

The narrow stairwell was suffocating, trapped with dust and old plaster. Halfway up, Tom was wedged at an awkward angle, easing a heavy carton around the turn while Julian peered down over the banister.

“A little left,” Julian instructed, hands in his pockets. “You’re catching the moulding.”

Tom cursed softly, his shirt dark across the shoulders and a damp curl sticking to the back of his neck.

“You could actually lift something,” Alex groaned from three steps below, buried under a leaning tower of shoe bins.

“I am preventing structural damage,” Julian replied breezily.

Tom gave a breathless, exasperated laugh, muscled the box around the corner, and caught sight of Charlie. His gaze dropped immediately to the bottle. “Helping, or observing?”

Charlie felt his face go warm—entirely the heat. “I brought water.”

Alex peered around his boxes, looking between them. “Oh. So that’s what’s been happening all morning.”

“Alex,” Charlie warned.

Tom grinned. “It’s the rolled-up sleeves, isn’t it?”

It was not not the rolled-up sleeves.

“If everyone is quite done having a moment,” Hazel’s voice echoed up from the street, “I would still like my clothes before dinner.”

Tom hoisted the box and kept moving. On his way back down, he took the bottle, drank half of it in one long pull, and handed it back with a quiet, “Thank you.” As he passed, his shoulder brushed heavily against Charlie’s.

Charlie stayed pinned to the cool stairwell wall for a moment longer than strictly necessary.

By two o'clock, the last load was inside and the truck doors slammed with metallic finality. Everyone except Hazel collapsed onto the pavement in various states of ruin.

"That will do," Hazel said, surveying the third-floor windows before clapping once. "Dinner."

Charlie dug the last unopened iced coffee from the cooler and pressed it into Tom's hand, watching condensation bead against Tom's scraped knuckles. Tom exhaled a grateful breath and nudged Charlie's hip with his own as they fell into step behind the others, drifting toward the nearest brasserie, entirely too exhausted to care about anything except food.

Sunday, July 4.

The scent of caramelized onions, Scotch bonnet peppers, and toasted peanuts still hung heavy in the penthouse. The platters of jollof rice, chicken yassa, and zaalouk were scraped completely clean, the quartz island an empty graveyard.

At the sink, Charlie rinsed the last dish under hot water. Tom appeared beside him with a towel, taking it without a word.

"You didn't have to cook for three days," Charlie said.

"Your father had three helpings of rice, and Alex ate enough suya to hospitalize a normal man. I consider that a successful acquisition of goodwill."

"Is that what this was?"

Tom continued drying the already dry platter. "You looked beautiful eating the tagine."

Charlie hid a smile. "It was incredible. All of it."

In the living room, Hazel and Nancy talked shop on the sectional while Julian nursed a sparkling water, and David quietly examined the bonsai by the glass.

Then there was Alex, beer in hand, scanning the bookcase.

“Global Market Synergies,” Alex muttered. “Quantitative Easing. Bach. Liszt. God, you two are boring.”

He paused.

Wedged between an Urtext edition of Chopin and a row of corporate reviews sat a blinding metallic red spine.

Alex slid it out.

The cover featured a man in a three-piece suit, a woman pressed against his chest, and neon lightning fracturing the sky.

“What the fuck is this?”

Hazel dropped her head back against the cushions. “Alexander, put it back.”

The sponge slipped from Charlie’s hand into the suds. He covered his face. “Oh God.”

Tom looked over and laughed so sharply he had to brace himself against the counter.

“*Velvet Thunder*,” Alex read, a massive grin breaking out. “By Raven Blackthorne. Holy shit. Is this porn?”

“Alex—”

“‘His voice was deep, dark, and dangerous,’” Alex read aloud. “‘Like melted chocolate poured over a gravel driveway.’”

The room absorbed this in stunned silence.

Charlie made a strangled sound and buried his face straight into Tom’s shoulder. Tom’s chest shook with helpless laughter.

Alex flipped a page. “Wait. She’s talking to a pigeon. She’s telling the pigeon he smells like bad decisions.”

“She’s lonely,” Charlie’s muffled voice came from Tom’s shirt. “She’s very poor and the pigeon is all she has.”

Hazel choked into her wine. “You never told me you read the whole thing.”

“She was processing her feelings!” Charlie protested, refusing to look up. “She’d just touched his pectoral muscle.”

“His ‘diamond-wrapped-in-velvet pectoral muscle,’” Alex corrected, turning pages feverishly. “I need everyone to know he owns the satellites that watch her sleep, and she signs the contract anyway.”

Charlie lifted his head, flushed. “She had nowhere to go! He bought her building.”

“He also condemned it,” Alex pointed out. “And demolished it. *While* she was standing in his office.”

David turned slowly from the bonsai. “Charles. You read this.”

“I read a lot of things!”

“You enjoyed it,” Hazel accused, delighted.

Charlie looked at Tom, who was grinning down at him without a shred of mercy.

Dignity was entirely gone anyway.

“The sequel is better,” Charlie said.

Thursday, July 8.

Priya’s group text landed at seven.

UM DR. HEITMEYER-MONTGOMERY EXPLAIN THIS VIRAL EXCELLENCE RIGHT NOW???

Curled into the corner of the sectional, Charlie tapped the link. The German title was long, but the video was unmistakable: the Vienna Summer Chamber Series had posted the professional recording of his Rachmaninoff.

It had been live for less than a day, and the view count was already climbing past fifty thousand.

A year ago, that level of visibility would have triggered a full systems collapse. Charlie waited for the panic to hit, but nothing came. Nobody in the comments was dissecting his past or his immigration status; they were talking about his phrasing, his touch, and the voicing of the final chord in the *Moments musicaux*.

One timestamp caught his eye: *Listen to how long he makes us wait.*

Charlie read it twice, a sudden warmth unfurling in his chest. *Tom could see it.*

“Thomas,” Charlie called.

In the kitchen, Tom locked his phone and crossed the room immediately. “What is it? Battery drop?”

“No.” Charlie shifted to make room. “Come sit.”

Tom dropped onto the couch, an arm wrapping instinctively around Charlie’s hip to pull him close. Charlie handed him the phone.

It took Tom a second to process the thumbnail—Charlie at the gleaming Steinway in his concert black. The corporate strategist vanished in an instant.

“They posted it.”

“Priya sent it,” Charlie said, suddenly feeling very shy. “It’s... doing numbers, apparently.”

Tom barely glanced at the views. “Can we watch it?”

“That’s why I called you over.”

Charlie cast the video to the screen, and the acoustic warmth of the hall flooded the penthouse. On-screen, Charlie stepped into the lights—pale, serious, but appearing far calmer than he remembered feeling.

Beside him, Tom let out a low, rough breath.

An entrance in the fourth piece arrived a fraction early. Charlie felt a phantom spike of heat beneath his skin, but on-screen, his hands simply caught the phrase and carried on. Nothing collapsed. Tom didn’t flinch—maybe he hadn’t noticed, or maybe he didn’t care.

By the fifth piece, Charlie was watching Tom more than the television. When the held return arrived, Tom drew in a sharp breath, holding it through the suspension.

“There,” Tom whispered. “The part Klara noticed.”

On-screen, the phrase finally resolved.

Tom turned his head, his gaze pinning Charlie in place. “You really did make them wait.”

Charlie’s face burned. Playing for hundreds of strangers in Vienna had been terrifying, but having Tom watch it right beside him felt intensely exposed. He ducked, instinctively tucking his face toward Tom’s neck.

Tom’s arm gentled. “Do you want me to pause it?”

Charlie looked back at the screen. “No.”

Tom threaded their fingers together and let the music speak for itself.

The final chord bloomed and decayed through the speakers. The silence held—a breathless, suspended beat—before the hall rose to its feet. Tom reached for the remote, pausing the frame on Charlie’s flushed face under the stage lights.

For a long moment, Tom just looked at him. Then: “You’re incredible. I was furious I had to miss that room realizing what you sounded like live. I’m still furious.”

Charlie gave a faint, fond smile. “I know.”

“But I get to see it now. With you.”

Charlie looked at the frozen screen, then turned and pulled Tom into a lingering kiss.

“Read the comments,” Charlie murmured against his mouth when they parted.

Tom picked up the phone, skimming the top replies. A slow, deeply smug grin spread across his face.

“Oh, they love you,” he murmured, his thumb stroking over Charlie’s hip. “Too bad they don’t get to take you home.”

Charlie laughed, the residual shyness dissolving completely, and caught Tom by the front of his shirt to pull him down onto the cushions.

Friday, July 9.

Early summer light cut across the kitchen island in long, pale strips. Charlie sat on a stool in one of Tom's old shirts—collar too wide, one shoulder slipping—watching Tom glare at the electric kettle like a personal adversary.

"Eighty-two," Tom muttered.

Cheddar sprang onto the counter, snagged a stray croissant flake with shameless precision, and bolted.

Charlie snorted. "Feed your son."

Tom reached for the cat food without comment while Charlie opened his laptop, scanning his inbox half-asleep.

Then he froze.

Faculty of Music, University of Toronto.

He sat up straight. The chair was writing to ask if he'd discuss a nomination for a visiting fellowship in performance studies: protected research time to develop his dissertation on silence into a book, dedicated funding, and a small performance series.

And near the end, the line that made his breath catch: *We recently encountered your Vienna performance...*

They had seen the recording, and then they had actually gone looking for his scholarship.

Tom set a steaming mug of tea beside him. Charlie turned the screen around. "Look."

Tom leaned over the marble to read. Halfway through, he pulled the laptop closer and started over from the top.

"Charlie."

"What?"

"This is extraordinary."

"They're only asking if I'd *discuss* it," Charlie murmured, looking down.

“Because they want to nominate you.” Tom looked up, his face breaking into an open, disbelieving smile. “Charlie, they came to *you*.”

A terrifying flutter opened under Charlie’s ribs. “How much do we hate Toronto?”

“Considerably less than we did five minutes ago.”

Charlie let out a surprised laugh.

“If you want this, we’ll make it work,” Tom said gently, holding his gaze. “Don’t turn it down for my sake.”

“I don’t want you having to uproot—”

“We don’t know what either of us would have to do yet,” Tom interrupted softly. “We’d figure it out.”

Charlie pulled the laptop back toward himself and wrapped both hands around the warm mug. The sentence about Vienna was still glowing on the screen.

This time, he didn’t try to hide his smile.

Charlie pulled his knees up on the couch, resting his chin on Tom’s shoulder. An office of his own. Protected research time to turn his dissertation into a book instead of watching it vanish into an institutional repository. Work that was completely his.

“Let me see,” Tom said, taking the laptop onto his knees. He scrolled through the terms. “The stipend is generous. Research time, travel funding, and a lecture-performance series built straight around your dissertation.”

Charlie watched him, feeling that terrifying flutter again. “It sounds like they actually read it.”

“It sounds like they built the chair for you.” Tom scrolled toward the bottom. Then his thumb stopped.

The easy pride dropped instantly from his face.

“What is it?” Charlie asked.

Tom stared at the fine print. "*Supported through the Laurentian Arts Initiative.*" He reached for his phone. "I know that name."

He moved swiftly through searches—the initiative's homepage, a gala, an annual report. Charlie watched Tom's face change as he scrolled down a list of major benefactors and stopped.

Tom tilted the screen toward him.

The Montgomery Family Foundation.

Charlie stared at the black type. "Michael."

"It's one of his," Tom said quietly. He searched two more pages, hunting for an explicit connection, but found nothing. He set the phone down. "It doesn't prove he had anything to do with this. The department could have chosen you entirely on its own."

"Yes."

Tom looked back at the screen. At the bold header: *University of Toronto.*

"You just built the firm here," Charlie said softly.

Tom said nothing.

"And Toronto is five hundred kilometres away." Charlie met his eyes. "He wants us in two cities."

"We don't know that."

"You thought it."

"Yes," Tom admitted. "I thought it."

"Do you think it's a coincidence?"

"I don't know." Tom almost never said those words.

Charlie shut the laptop.

The machine sat on the coffee table like an unexploded shell for the rest of the day. Charlie drifted to the piano, playing the same four bars of a scale until his fingers cramped. In the office, Tom took calls behind a closed door, never mentioning Laurentian again.

By late afternoon, the light had thinned across the floor. Charlie opened the laptop once more.

He tried to picture the office in Toronto. Instead, he saw departure boards. Weekend commutes. Tom working out of airport lounges. Exhausted Sunday nights spent counting down the hours until someone had to catch a train.

Tom came out of the office and sat beside him.

“I could still take it,” Charlie said.

“Yes.”

“You’d stay in Montréal.”

“For some of the week,” Tom said steadily. “We could split our time. I can move meetings, work remotely—”

“Stop.” Charlie rubbed both hands over his face. “You’re already dividing yourself in half.”

“If you want this, Charlie, we’ll make it work.”

Tom meant it. That was what made it hurt.

“I really wanted it,” Charlie whispered.

Tom’s hand held Charlie’s ankle. “I can make calls Monday. Find out if Michael has any direct ties to the committee.”

“And if he doesn’t? If no one on faculty has ever spoken to him, does that mean he didn’t orchestrate it?”

Tom looked at him in silence.

“Can you prove he didn’t do it to separate us?”

“...No,” Tom said quietly.

Charlie nodded. The dream of the office was already tainted; Michael was already sitting in it.

“I can’t do this one,” Charlie said.

Tom paused. “Are you sure?”

“No.” Charlie let out a miserable laugh. “I’m just sure I don’t want to spend the next two years wondering if every bad week was the point.”

Tom nodded. Charlie pulled the laptop onto his lap and hit *Reply*.

His first draft was six lines long and sounded like an apology. He backspaced every word. The second was brief: thanking the chair for the extraordinary interest in his work, and politely declining the nomination.

His finger hovered over the trackpad. Tom didn’t intervene.

Charlie clicked Send.

The draft vanished. A hollow wave of relief arrived first, followed immediately by the sharp, quiet grief of mourning something he would have loved.

Tom shifted closer, his shoulder pressing against Charlie’s.

“I hate this,” Charlie said into the quiet.

“I know.”

“He might not have done anything at all.”

“I know.”

Charlie buried his face against Tom’s shoulder. “And it still worked.”

Tom had no answer for that, only wrapping his arm around Charlie and pulling him close as the room went dark.

CHAPTER 19

Friday, July 9.

Afternoon sunlight caught in the leaves of the Japanese maple. The Toronto letter sat in Charlie's sent folder. He hadn't opened it again. He had thought about it every twenty minutes anyway.

Charlie picked up the shears, set them down, and reached for the copper wire instead. The newest branch was still pliant beneath his fingers. He wound the wire around it and eased it a fraction toward the window.

By three, he was back at the piano, fighting La Valse. He didn't notice how tightly he was holding himself until his jaw began to ache.

He stopped mid-passage and pulled his violin case from its place against the wall. At the click of the latch, Cheddar opened one eye, assessed the situation, and left the room.

Charlie tucked the violin under his chin without warming up and dragged the bow hard across the strings.

The squawk was appalling.

The apartment went silent.

Then Tom laughed from somewhere down the hall—one startled bark that sounded torn out of him.

Charlie folded over the violin, laughing into the strings.

When he returned to the piano, he left the Ravel closed. He propped his black leather notebook on the stand, opened to a blank page, and played until something sounded worth writing down. He made a note in the margin, crossed out two measures, changed the phrase, and tried it again.

Somewhere in the middle of it, he stopped thinking about Toronto.

An hour later, Tom appeared in the doorway. His tie was gone, and his sleeves were rolled to his elbows.

“Finished for today?” Charlie asked.

“I escaped.” Tom nodded toward the notebook. “How is it?”

“I don’t know yet.” Charlie looked back at him. “You laughed.”

“It was a shocking sound.”

“That was the point.”

Tom came around behind the bench and kissed Charlie’s temple. “I had an idea. If you’re up for going out.”

Charlie narrowed his eyes. Tom’s ideas had a way of requiring reservations. “How bad?”

“Not bad.”

Charlie waited.

“We can stay in,” Tom said.

Charlie looked at the piano, then at the half-filled page in his notebook.

“Yeah, okay.” He stood. “But I’m allowed to complain.”

Tom was already heading for the door. “I know.”

By four-thirty, they were at Atrium Le 1000.

Charlie stopped at the glass. Children crossed the ice with humiliating ease. An older man glided past the boards.

“No,” he said.

Tom stood beside him, holding two hot chocolates.

“Not even a little?”

“Thomas.”

Tom offered him one of the cups. “You don’t have to.”

“You brought me here.”

“It’s fun. And relaxing. And kind of like skiing, if you think about it hard enough.”

Charlie hid his frown in his drink. “You played for McGill. You were captain.”

“I was.” Tom’s mouth curved. “And you came to every home game.”

Charlie could still see him cutting across the ice, moving so quickly that everyone else had seemed briefly delayed.

He looked at Tom. He had always looked at home out there.

“…Fine.”

Ten minutes later, Charlie sat on a bench at the edge of the rink, a helmet strapped beneath his chin, glaring at his skates. Tom crouched in front of him, already wearing his own.

“They feel wobbly.”

“They are.” Tom pulled the laces tighter and tied them again.

Charlie watched his hands. “You’re enjoying this.”

“I’m enjoying that you’re trying it.”

The first touch of blade against ice was a betrayal.

Tom stepped onto the rink like it belonged to him. Charlie clung to the boards and only let go when Tom held out both hands.

“Look at me,” Tom said gently. “Not at your feet. Bend your knees a little.”

Charlie tried. One blade slipped sideways, and Tom caught him around the waist before he hit the ice.

Charlie landed half against his chest, breathing hard.

“You all right?” Tom asked.

“No.”

“Would you like to leave?”

“…No.”

Tom helped him upright again. “Small steps. Just feel the push.”

Charlie shuffled once, then again. On the third push, the ice carried him farther than he expected.

It was ugly, but it was movement.

He kept his eyes on Tom, who skated backward in front of him without effort.

Charlie tipped sharply and caught the front of his shirt. “Don’t let go.”

“I’m not. Not yet.”

They made their way around the rink. Tom’s grip loosened by degrees until Charlie reached the far side and realized he was moving alone.

A few feet opened between them. Tom was grinning now.

Charlie was watching that grin when one skate went out from under him.

He went down hard. His palm slapped the ice, and the cold soaked through his trousers all at once.

Tom reached him almost immediately and dropped to one knee. “Shit. Did you hit your head?”

“No.”

Tom stood and held out both hands. Charlie let himself be pulled upright.

“Anything twisted?”

“No.”

Tom steadied him and searched his face.

Then, and only then, he started laughing.

Charlie giggled into his coat. “You can’t laugh! You let me fall!”

“You nearly made it all the way,” Tom said. “That was, like, ten feet.”

Charlie caught him by the front of his shirt and kissed him.

Tom kissed him back.

“Done?” Tom asked.

Charlie looked at the ice, then at him. “Again.”

When Charlie pushed off, shaky and ungraceful, Tom stayed close—near enough to catch him, far enough to let him try.

Charlie sat at the Steinway, picking through a loose jazz progression while Tom leaned over his laptop at the kitchen island.

“I had another idea,” Tom said.

Charlie kept playing. “That’s usually expensive.”

“Probably.” Tom turned the screen slightly. “Madame Bouchard at the municipal arts office mentioned an emergency-grant pilot months ago. Small sums, rapid decisions for community programs—the unglamorous things traditional arts funding hates paying for. My father killed it at the Foundation because there was no building or gala to put his name on.”

Charlie’s hands slowed. “Nothing people can photograph.”

“Exactly. So I’m thinking of funding it myself. But I wanted you to look at it first.”

Charlie turned on the bench. “Me?”

“You know when I’m being ridiculous.”

Charlie eyed the bottom of the screen. “I can already see three sub-tabs under Public Launch.”

Tom smiled faintly. “Come here.”

Charlie closed the fallboard and sat beside him on the sofa. Tom set the laptop on the coffee table between them.

“Tell me what you hate,” Tom said.

“The gala.”

“It’s standard Foundation template—”

“Cut it.”

Tom hit delete.

“The launch event?” Charlie scrolled. “Branding? Catering? Commemorative materials?”

“Gone, gone, gone,” Tom muttered, keys clattering as rows vanished. “What does that leave?”

“The actual grants.” Charlie studied the bare budget. “Pay for the things nobody wants to photograph. Repairs. Supplies. Bus fare. Accessibility. Paying someone instead of expecting them to volunteer forever.”

Tom began typing immediately. “Three thousand cap per request. Bilingual, half-page form.”

“Personal statement?”

“Most grants ask for one.”

Charlie frowned, picking at the seam of his trousers. “I hate it. It feels like making people perform how bad things are.”

Tom highlighted the field and backspaced. “No narrative requirement.”

“That easy?”

“The principle is.” Tom stared at the empty field. “The implementation probably isn’t.”

Charlie nodded. “Then we ask someone who actually has to use it.”

Tom smiled. “Fair.” He returned to the spreadsheet. “Seventy-two-hour turnaround for urgent requests, and we ask Bouchard to handle referrals.” He looked over at Charlie. “Better?”

“Much.” Charlie glanced at the stripped-down document. “Are you calling her now?”

“Before I rebuild the gala.”

Tom put the phone on speaker between them. Madame Bouchard answered on the fourth ring.

“Thomas? You are rescuing me from my husband’s baseball game.”

“I’m here with Charlie,” Tom said. “I want to revisit that emergency pilot. Fund it personally. Charlie has spent the last twenty minutes making the proposal less embarrassing.”

“It had a lot of tabs,” Charlie offered quietly.

Bouchard laughed. “Thomas likes architecture. Tell me what survived.”

Tom gave her the bones: three-thousand-dollar micro-grants, half a page.

“No personal statement?” Bouchard asked.

“I just don’t think they should have to prove their misery to qualify,” Charlie said quietly.

A pause hummed over the line. “No,” Bouchard agreed. “They should not. But don’t lock the form yet. Sometimes people need room to explain something your questions don’t account for. Talk to someone who actually applies for these things before you decide what stays.”

Charlie looked at Tom.

“We will,” Tom said.

“Good. The city can explore matching and referrals, but seventy-two hours will require a dedicated administrator. Send me a preliminary structure by Monday.”

They said their goodnights and ended the call.

Charlie looked at the screen. “This will make your father furious.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Charlie studied Tom in profile as he shut the laptop. “Why me, Thomas? I don’t know anything about grant administration.”

“I was building an institution,” Tom said, resting a warm hand over Charlie’s knee. “You were thinking about the person who needs bus fare on Tuesday. You notice what I miss. And I trust you more than anyone.”

Charlie reached over, fingers tracing the line of Tom’s face. “You have a civic reputation to maintain.”

“I don’t care.”

Tom leaned in, catching his mouth. Charlie melted into the kiss, one hand sliding into Tom’s hair as Tom shifted closer, his breath coming uneven.

“Bedroom?” Tom murmured against his lips.

Charlie smiled. “Surprise me.”

CHAPTER 20

Saturday, July 10.

The rain had settled into a grey drizzle over Montréal.

Charlie woke to Tom sitting against the headboard in sweatpants, his phone in one hand.

“Morning, angel.”

Charlie shifted closer. “You’re working in bed.”

“Barely.” Tom set the phone on the nightstand. “Bouchard followed up.”

Charlie blinked awake. “Already?”

“She sent the questions she needs answered before she can take the pilot to the city.”

Charlie groaned and buried his face against Tom’s side.

Tom’s hand slid into his hair. “Too early?”

“We had sex on a piano bench, and now the municipal arts office wants paperwork.”

“Those… are separate but conceptually related events.”

Charlie started laughing into his shirt.

Tom kissed the top of his head. “Wanna see?”

Charlie pushed himself upright. “Yeah.”

Bouchard’s email was brief. Before Monday, she needed to know who the pilot was for, how grants would be awarded, and who would oversee it. If the structure held up, her office could explore matching funds.

Charlie read the message twice.

“We’re actually doing this.”

“Yes, we are.”

He handed the phone back. “Tea first.”

Charlie opened the spreadsheet at the kitchen island while Tom ground the coffee and put the kettle on. A few minutes later, Tom set Charlie’s tea and medicine beside the laptop and took the next stool with his coffee.

Charlie wrapped both hands around the warm ceramic and stared at Bouchard’s questions.

“What?” Tom asked.

“We need to do what she said before we answer any of this.”

Tom’s mouth curved. “Find someone who actually has to use it.”

“A teacher. A community program director. Somebody who actually has to keep one of these programs alive.”

“Bouchard would know people.”

“Can you ask her?”

Tom reached for his phone.

“Not somebody whose job is grants,” Charlie added. “Somebody whose job gets screwed up when the grants are bad.”

“That is an extremely specific demographic.”

“You know what I mean. And if they think the whole thing is stupid, I want them to tell us.”

Tom unlocked his phone. “That may be harder to arrange.”

“Thomas.”

“I’ll explicitly request hostility.”

Charlie kicked his ankle beneath the island.

Tom laughed and started typing.

Before noon, Bouchard replied. She had someone in mind.

Nadine Beaulieu ran the music program at a public secondary school in Saint-Michel. Bouchard had worked with her before and would ask whether she could speak to them that afternoon.

Charlie read the message over Tom's shoulder.

"That sounds like the right person."

He pulled the laptop closer.

"Let's find out what we got wrong."

The Saint-Michel school was locked for the summer, the air conditioning cut for July. Nadine let them in through the side loading doors, her keys clattering against her belt as she led them down a dim, stifling hallway past the gymnasium.

Her music room at the end of the hall smelled of dust and old brass. Cases lined the wall with curled masking-tape labels, and half the stands were patched with silver duct tape. She cleared sheet music off two chairs, motioning them down.

"Bouchard said you wanted seventy-two-hour decisions on small emergency grants," Nadine said, remaining standing. "Show me."

Tom opened the laptop.

Nadine scrolled through in silence. Charlie watched her face, looking for a reaction, but she gave nothing away as she reached the four questions: What do you need? What will it cost? What will it be used for? How urgent is it?

"The form is fine," she said. "As long as there's somewhere to explain something you didn't think to ask."

Tom added a note.

Charlie exchanged a quick look with him.

Nadine pulled a battered black case from the stack, set it on a table, and popped the latches. A French horn lay inside. "Valve assembly needs replacing. Estimate was seven hundred and forty dollars. It's been sitting here since March because my repair budget is zero."

“So you’d apply for the seven-forty,” Charlie said.

“Would you reimburse me?”

Tom paused. “We hadn’t decided.”

“If I had seven hundred and forty dollars to float a repair shop, the horn wouldn’t be in a box,” Nadine said flatly. “Everyone assumes small programs have money to spend first. We don’t.”

“We could pay the supplier directly,” Tom added, typing. “Or release the funds in advance on an approved estimate.” He looked down at the horn. “I could write a cheque for this one right now.”

Nadine snapped the lid shut.

“That’s kind,” she said coolly. “But no.”

Tom’s fingers froze over the keyboard.

“This horn would get fixed because Bouchard introduced us and I gave up a Saturday to talk to Thomas Montgomery,” she said, without heat. “What about the teacher she didn’t call? Build the fund.”

Tom stared at the closed case for a second, then nodded.

Nadine tapped the screen. “Who reads the applications?”

“An administrator screens them,” Tom said. “Then a review committee.”

“Who’s on it?”

“We have a municipal rep, outside advisers…” Tom hesitated. “And both of us.”

Nadine looked at Charlie, whose name sat neatly beside Tom’s on the governance tab. Charlie shifted, pulling his elbows in.

“If I apply, I know who’s reading,” Nadine said. “I know Charlie is a musician. I know Bouchard likes you. I know you have enough money to fix the horn out of pocket. So I write the application to flatter you.”

“That wouldn’t influence the decision,” Tom said.

Nadine gave a faint shrug. “How would I know that?”

Charlie stared at the four simple questions, seeing the trap immediately. “You’d still have to make us like you.”

“I’d certainly try.”

“And if someone isn’t good at that,” Charlie murmured, “they still need the money.”

Nadine looked at him with quiet approval. “The form is fine. The problem is who gets to say no.”

The room went still under the low hum of the fluorescent lights. Tom clicked the governance tab closed.

“Would you advise the pilot?” Tom asked.

“Is that volunteer work?”

“No,” Charlie said, speaking so fast Tom looked over. Charlie picked at the edge of his notebook. “We’d pay you.”

“Yes,” Tom affirmed. “We would.”

Nadine tilted her head. “And if someone tries to add six pages of paperwork? Or make people perform their trauma?”

“You tell us,” Tom said.

“If someone tries to add a gala?”

“We already killed the gala,” Charlie promised.

A brief, genuine smile broke across Nadine’s face. “Send me the next draft.”

They stepped out into the thick, humid heat of the empty parking lot. Nadine locked the heavy fire doors behind them.

Tom stood with the laptop tucked under his arm, staring back at the brick facade.

“She told me no twice.”

“I know.”

“She was right. I would have paid for the horn on the spot.” Tom ran a hand over his jaw. “We can’t be the ones deciding.”

“Probably not,” Charlie said quietly. “Hazel might know how to structure it.”

Tom pulled out his phone and put it on speaker. Hazel answered on the second ring.

“How do I fund something without running it?” Tom asked without preamble.

A short silence. “Probably fiscal sponsorship,” Hazel replied. “An existing non-profit holds the capital and administers the grants through its own board. You can propose the criteria and advise on design, but they have final authority.”

Tom frowned. “What stops them from bloating the budget or bringing back the gala?”

“You restrict the grant and choose your partner carefully. After that, Thomas, you live with not controlling every outcome.” A pause. “Assuming you find an organization willing to take this on. Bouchard needs a structure by Monday, not an empire built before breakfast.”

Charlie muffled a laugh against his knuckles. Tom shot him a dark, fond glare.

“I’ll start making calls,” Hazel said. “Don’t expect me to produce a nonprofit by dinner.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You were.”

She hung up.

The wet asphalt radiated heat. Charlie watched Tom stare down at his phone, the familiar restless tension settling in his shoulders.

“I liked that it was ours,” Tom said quietly.

Charlie’s amusement softened. “Me too.”

“We can still build it.”

“Yeah.” Charlie looked up at the quiet school, picturing the French horn locked in its case upstairs. “We just don’t get to keep it.”

Tom was quiet for a beat. Then he reached out and took Charlie’s hand, lacing their fingers together as they walked to the car.

Monday, July 12.

Hazel had told Tom, a week before her birthday, that she wanted “excess.”

Tom had asked no follow-up questions. That should have warned everyone.

At seven sharp, a black stretch limousine pulled up to the curb outside the penthouse building, long and glossy in the warm gold of a Montréal July evening.

For a second, nobody moved.

Then Hazel smiled.

Nancy let out a delighted laugh. “Oh, he was serious.”

Alex stared at the car. “No.”

Tom adjusted his cuffs. “It’s your sister’s birthday.”

Hazel came down the steps in black silk, her bare shoulders catching the warm late sunlight. She stopped beside him and looked at the car.

“You rented a limousine.”

“You said excess.”

She smiled through her lipstick. “I did.”

Julian helped her into the back.

The others followed. Charlie slid into the far corner, and Tom sat beside him, broad and warm in a dark summer suit. The city blurred behind tinted glass.

Across from them, Nancy ran a hand over the leather seat. “I feel like I should be doing something more sophisticated.”

Alex crossed his arms and frowned at Tom. “I can’t believe we’re becoming these people.”

Hazel looked out the window, pleased and unreadable.

Charlie turned to Tom. “Did you do anything normal for tonight?”

“No.”

Charlie smiled and shifted closer. Tom slipped an arm around his shoulders.

The restaurant was tucked inside an unmarked luxury hotel downtown. A hostess in black whisked them straight to a candlelit private room, where Tom pulled out Hazel’s chair and received a sharp, suspicious glare for his trouble.

Halfway through dinner, a server appeared carrying an enormous glass bowl of white and deep crimson flowers.

Hazel froze.

Tom stood.

Nancy beamed, Alex slouched back with the grim satisfaction of a man settling in for an execution, and Julian watched with quiet amusement.

Tom took the bowl and set it carefully beside Hazel. “They’re for you.”

“I had gathered,” she seethed.

Charlie bit back a smile.

Tom rested one hand on the back of her chair. “I know you hate speeches.”

“I do.”

“You’ve done extraordinary work for the firm,” Tom said, ignoring her. “Most people settle for being right or being feared; you insist on both. And when I mishandled Bern, you were harder on me than anyone else in this room. I’m grateful for your judgment, Hazel. Especially for never letting me mistake protection for virtue.”

A rare, quiet vulnerability flickered across Hazel’s face. It vanished in an instant, but Julian caught it, and so did Charlie.

She scowled directly at her plate. “Great. At least you know that. Now sit down.”

Tom sat.

Nancy was openly emotional. “That was beautiful.”

Hazel took a sharp drink of Pinot Noir. “Don’t make this embarrassing.”

“Too late,” Alex said.

Dessert arrived for Hazel: a delicate, untouchable tower of spun sugar. When Nancy reached for her phone with a pleading *“Don’t move,”* Hazel let out a long-suffering sigh, but softened her face just enough to let her mother take the shot.

Outside, the street had gone cool and dark. Julian carried the floral monstrosity while Tom slipped an arm around Charlie’s waist, drawing him against his side.

“How are you doing?” Tom murmured, kissing his temple.

“Good,” Charlie smiled faintly into his collar. “I liked your speech.”

Alex stared down the block, hands in his pockets. “I want fries.”

Nancy brightened instantly. “Greenspot?”

Hazel turned toward the car with an exhausted wave of her hand. “Fine. Birthday second course.”

Saturday, July 17.

Tom and Charlie went to Jean-Talon Market. The aisles were already packed.

The noise and the motion hit Charlie all at once.

Tom stopped beside him. “You with me?”

Charlie took a breath. “Yes. Let’s go.”

At Hamel, the vendor greeted them in French. Charlie answered, asking about a soft cheese. The woman behind the counter cut them a small piece

and passed it over on the tip of her knife. Charlie tasted it first, then held out the second piece to Tom.

Tom leaned in and took it from Charlie's fingers.

Charlie looked at him. "Well?"

Tom considered for a second. "Dangerously good."

Charlie asked for a wedge, thanked the vendor, and waited while it was wrapped in kraft paper.

"What?" Charlie asked.

Tom slid it into the basket. "Nothing."

At the next stall, Charlie reached for a basket of apricots. "You're staring."

"You're so beautiful when you buy groceries," Tom said.

Charlie set the fruit into the basket carefully. "That… is a deranged thing to say."

They bought bread, sausage, Roma tomatoes, hot sauce, and fresh basil. Twice the crowd pressed too close. Each time, Charlie planted his feet, squeezed Tom's hand, and kept going.

In the early evening, they drove toward the Lachine Canal with the windows down. The paths were busy, the water moving dark under the lowering sun. They walked until Charlie stopped in front of the Dairy Queen.

"I want ice cream."

Tom looked at the DQ sign and smiled. "All right. Weather's perfect."

The restaurant smelled of sugar and fryer grease. The floor was sticky. Tom ordered and Charlie tapped their debit card.

They took their Blizzards out to the car and parked along a quiet stretch of the canal. Charlie took a spoonful of Oreo Blizzard and tipped his head back against the seat.

He felt a spot of cold vanilla at the corner of his lip. He turned his head before he could wipe it away. Tom was still holding his own cup untouched, already looking at him.

“Thomas,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Kiss me.”

Tom set his Blizzard in the cup holder. He reached across the console and cupped Charlie’s face, thumb brushing the corner of his mouth before he leaned in and licked the ice cream away.

Charlie made a soft sound and Tom kissed him.

Charlie turned toward him, pulling one knee up onto the seat, his cup tilting dangerously in his hand. Tom took it from him, shoved it next to his in the console, and brought both hands back to Charlie—one at his neck, one at his waist, pulling him across the space between them into his lap.

Charlie caught Tom’s shirt in his fist.

Tom pulled back by an inch. “We *are* in public. Tell me if you want me to stop.”

Charlie laughed softly, breathless. “If I wanted that, you’d know.”

Tom kissed him again, his hand sliding under the hem of Charlie’s shirt. Outside, the canal moved dark and slow beyond the open windows.

When Tom finally pulled back, both of them were breathing hard. Charlie stayed close.

“Thank you,” Charlie said.

“For?”

Charlie looked at him for a moment. “All of it. I know it was a regular day, but…”

Tom pulled him closer. “It wasn’t small.”

“No,” Charlie said against his lips. “It never is.”

They drove home in the dark. Tom drove one-handed, his other hand on Charlie's thigh.

ACT 3

CHAPTER 21

Sunday, July 18.

The café in Verdun was narrow and polished, its front windows blurred by the light rain outside. The city beyond dissolved into grey pavement and streaks of taillight-red.

Tom sat on the inside of the banquette, a half-finished coffee cooling on the table. Charlie sat across from him, his foot hooked comfortably around Tom's ankle underneath.

The bell above the door chimed.

A woman in her early forties stepped inside, neatly dressed despite the rain. She folded a light jacket over one arm and joined the short line at the counter.

Her eyes swept past their table.

Tom noticed and looked over. The woman stepped out of line and walked toward them, her surprise breaking into a smile.

"Thomas?"

Tom blinked and searched her face. "I'm sorry, do we…"

She gave him a forgiving smile. "I wouldn't expect you to recognize me. It's been twenty years. I'm Sofia. Elena's daughter."

Tom rose and extended his hand. "Sofia. Wow. Of course."

She shook it firmly, then looked at Charlie.

"And you must be Charlie."

"It's lovely to meet you." Charlie slid over to offer her the empty space beside him.

“Just for a minute.” Sofia sat and draped her jacket over the back of the banquette. Tom lowered himself into his seat again, still staring at her. “I was visiting my mother this morning. I’m meeting a colleague nearby, but I couldn’t just walk past without saying hello.” She smiled at Tom. “She still talks about you constantly.”

Tom’s fingers closed around his coffee cup.

“How is she? She wasn’t at the house the last time we were there.”

Sofia’s smile slipped.

She studied him for a moment. “Thomas,” she said gently. “They… didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“She hasn’t worked there for months. Her hips finally gave out. She needed both replaced. Your parents…” Sofia hesitated. “Well. They decided they needed someone with more mobility. They let her go right before the surgery.”

“Where is she now?”

“Here in Verdun. She’s in an independent living residence. She recovered beautifully from the surgery.” Sofia’s smile returned, softer now. “Honestly, she’s thriving.”

Tom looked down at his cooling coffee. His shoulders drew inward by a fraction.

“Sofia.” He cleared his throat. “Could you… when you see her, could you tell her I’m sorry?”

“For what?”

“I—everything.” His gaze stayed fixed on the table. “For not being there when she had the surgery. For not calling. I wanted to apologize for my mother making her work the night of our wedding, but I never got the chance, and then I just…” He swallowed. “I should have checked on her.”

“Thomas, she isn’t angry with you. She knows exactly who your parents are.”

Sofia reached into her purse, pulled out a pen, and took a napkin from the dispenser. She wrote down a number and slid it across the table.

“She would be thrilled to hear from you. Anytime.”

Her phone buzzed. Sofia checked it and sighed.

“That’s my colleague. I have to go.” She stood. “But it was wonderful to see you.”

She leaned over to give Charlie a quick hug, then stepped around the table. Tom stood to meet her. His arms came up a beat late, one hand settling uncertainly between her shoulder blades.

“Call her,” Sofia said warmly.

She slipped her jacket back on and disappeared through the door into the rain.

Tom sat down again.

He stared at the blue ink bleeding slightly into the paper napkin. Around them, the noise of the café seemed to rush back into the space she had left behind.

Charlie watched him for a few seconds.

Then he stood, moved around the table, and slid into the banquette beside Tom. He slipped his arm through Tom’s and rested his head against Tom’s shoulder.

Tom let out a long breath.

He leaned his weight into Charlie and kept staring at the napkin.

Tom dropped his keys in the bowl by the door. He was halfway through shrugging off his light jacket when Charlie caught him by the wrist.

Charlie walked backward, drawing Tom into the kitchen until his lower back met the edge of the marble island. He stepped fully into Tom’s space and wrapped both arms around his waist, locking his hands at the small of his back.

Tom rested his hands lightly on Charlie's hips. "Char."

"Thomas."

Tom let out a breath that ruffled Charlie's hair. "I just need a minute to figure out what to say."

Charlie pressed closer. "I'm right here."

Tom's gaze dropped. He bent and pressed a long, quiet kiss to Charlie's forehead. He stayed there, his breath warm against Charlie's hairline, until it began to slow.

Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out the crumpled napkin. He unlocked his phone and entered the number.

His thumb hovered over the call button. Then he pressed it.

He put the phone on speaker, slid his hand back to Charlie's waist, and held on tight.

The line rang twice.

"Hello?"

Elena's voice came through slightly distorted, but Charlie knew it at once.

Tom's throat moved. "Elena?"

"Thomas? Oh, my goodness. Thomas, is that you?"

"It's me." Tom's voice softened. "I'm sorry it took so long."

"Don't you dare apologize. Sofia just texted me that she ran into you. I am so happy to hear your voice."

Charlie smiled and buried his face in Tom's shoulder.

"It's good to hear yours, too," Tom said. His shoulders lowered a fraction. "I heard you moved to Verdun."

"I did. It's a beautiful place. And I have a kitchen all to myself. No one to tell me how much butter I am allowed to use."

She laughed. Tom closed his eyes for a second.

"Are you with Charlie?" She asked.

“I’m right here, Elena,” Charlie called, turning his head toward the phone.

“Oh, wonderful! Listen to me, both of you. You are coming over tomorrow morning. I am making breakfast. Don’t eat before you come. Ten o’clock. Is that understood?”

Tom rested his chin on top of Charlie’s head, and Charlie felt his shoulders finally loosen.

“Yes,” Tom said, smiling. “Ten o’clock. We’ll be there.”

Monday, July 19.

The hallway of the Verdun apartment building was quiet.

Tom knocked. Charlie stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him, their arms brushing.

When the door opened, Tom’s arm went rigid against Charlie’s.

Elena stood in the frame, not fragile at all. She leaned lightly on a cane, but her spine was straight and her chin lifted.

“Mr. Thomas,” she said, her voice catching.

Tom stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. When he pulled back, he gave her a small, uneven smile.

“Just Tom, Elena. Please. We don’t have to follow my mother’s rules anymore.” He glanced at Charlie. “It’s just Tom. And Charlie.”

Elena’s eyes shone. She rested her palm against Tom’s cheek.

“Thomas,” she murmured. “Mi amor.”

Then she turned to Charlie. She didn’t hesitate before pulling him into a hug that left him blinking in surprise.

When she released him, she immediately patted his ribs. “You are way too thin. Come. Both of you.”

The apartment wasn’t large. Family photographs crowded the wall beside the kitchen and a cardigan hung over the back of a chair.

Elena pointed Charlie toward a cutting board. “Wash your hands. You can slice the avocado. Not too thin.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you.” Elena pointed her spatula at Tom. “Sit.”

Tom sat at the small wooden table without arguing.

Charlie washed his hands and started on the avocados while Elena stood at the stove, flipping golden arepas with an easy turn of her wrist. She corrected his knife angle with a tap to his elbow and informed him that she intended to feed him until he couldn’t walk.

Charlie laughed and let her fuss.

Whenever he glanced toward the table, Tom was watching them over the rim of his coffee. Once, Charlie caught him smiling. Tom lowered his eyes to his mug.

When the food was ready, Elena carried it to the table and rested her cane against the back of her chair. Charlie sat beside Tom, their knees touching underneath.

For a while, nobody spoke. Forks scraped against plates. The refrigerator hummed behind them.

Tom set down his coffee. The mug clicked against the table a little too loudly.

“I’m sorry.”

Elena stopped with her knife poised over her arepa.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” Tom continued, his voice low. “When they let you go. When you had the surgery. I should have been paying attention. I should have called.”

Charlie slipped his hand beneath the table and squeezed Tom’s thigh.

Elena set down her knife. She leaned forward and covered Tom’s hand with hers.

“Sofia told me about the immigration review,” she said. “You had a great deal to carry.”

“I still should have called.”

“Yes,” Elena said. “You should have. But you called now. You came.”

Elena squeezed his fingers. “I’m not angry with you, Thomas.”

Tom turned his hand beneath hers and held on. “They let you go right before your surgery.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean—” His voice roughened. “After everything you did for them. For me.”

“Your mother is a cold woman. Your father is a hard man.” Elena kept hold of his hand. “When you were a boy, I used to pray for you. I would look at you and think, How will this child survive them?”

Tom lowered his head.

“Look at you now,” Elena said. “You fight for your family. You love this boy.” She nodded toward Charlie. “It is a miracle, Thomas, that you walked out of that house with a heart at all.”

Tom lifted his face. His eyes were wet.

“It wasn’t a miracle,” he said quietly. “You were there.”

Elena pressed her lips together and nodded once. Then she patted his hand, released it, and picked up her knife.

“Eat,” she commanded. “Before it gets cold.”

An hour later, they stepped out of the apartment building and onto the Verdun street. The morning was warm and wet, the pavement shining beneath a low grey sky. Charlie’s shirt clung between his shoulder blades.

Tom stopped beyond the lobby doors and looked back through the glass.

“Ready to go home?” Charlie asked.

Tom laced their fingers together. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

The drive home was quiet. The radio stayed off. Cool air moved through the car, drying the rain-darkened shoulders of their light jackets.

Tom drove with one hand on the steering wheel, his eyes fixed on the wet grey highway. His other hand covered Charlie's on the centre console, his fingers locked tightly.

Charlie shifted once. Tom's grip closed harder, so Charlie left his hand where it was.

The elevator doors opened onto the penthouse. Tom didn't move until Charlie touched his arm.

Inside, the apartment was dim, the tall windows framed by lowering storm clouds. Cheddar lay curled along the back of the leather sectional with one paw over his nose.

Tom locked the door. He toed off his shoes and let Charlie peel the damp jacket from his shoulders.

Charlie's hands lingered there. "Mr. Thomas," he murmured.

Tom looked at him.

Then he crossed the room and sat heavily on the couch. When Charlie joined him, Tom folded sideways, buried his face in Charlie's chest, and took one long breath through Charlie's shirt.

Charlie shifted against the cushions and gathered him closer.

Tom was heavy against him. His shoulders rounded inward, his face stayed hidden, and one hand lay slack against Charlie's ribs. Charlie couldn't remember ever seeing him stop holding himself up.

Rain began to tap against the glass.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Charlie asked.

Tom shuddered once against him.

"I spent my whole life trying to figure out how to make my mother look at me."

Charlie moved his hand slowly down Tom's spine.

"I thought if I was quieter, or smarter, or exactly what they wanted…" Tom's fingers flexed against his side. "It didn't matter."

Charlie didn’t interrupt.

“And then we walked in there today, and Elena didn’t ask us for anything. She didn’t make us earn it. She just…” Tom swallowed. “She fed us.”

Charlie rested his cheek against the top of Tom’s head and held him tighter.

Tom was quiet for so long that Charlie thought he had finished.

“What was so hard about that?” he asked.

Charlie closed his eyes. “I don’t know.”

Tom’s hand twisted in the fabric of his shirt.

Charlie reached behind him for the throw blanket and pulled it over Tom’s back. He kept one arm around his shoulders and the other hand moving slowly between his shoulder blades.

After a while, Tom’s grip loosened. His breathing lengthened and evened out until Charlie knew he was asleep.

Charlie stayed where he was, holding him while the rain fell over the city.

Tuesday, July 20.

Grey light filtered through the rain streaking the windows. Charlie crossed the kitchen in bare feet and folded himself against Tom’s side. Tom tipped his head, pressing a kiss to Charlie’s temple as he nudged a second mug across the counter.

Charlie wrapped both hands around the warmth. “Did you sleep?”

“Enough.” Tom checked the clock once, then set his phone face-up on the island.

Charlie noticed. He leaned against the stone, watching water bead against the glass. “Are you heading in?”

“Later. We’re sharing breakfast.”

Tom picked it up, his posture going rigid as he read the message once, then immediately again.

“Thomas?” Charlie lowered his mug.

Tom looked up, his throat working. “Tremblay.”

Charlie’s stomach dropped.

“They accepted the supplemental package,” Tom said, his voice catching slightly on the words. “No interview. No further evidence. The marriage has been accepted as genuine, and the sponsorship review is closed. Permanent residency is moving to final processing.”

“So we don’t have to prove it anymore?” Charlie whispered.

Tom set the phone down, crossed the space between them, and pulled Charlie to his chest.

“Not the marriage,” Tom said into his hair. “That part is done.”

Charlie let out a broken, shuddering laugh, his fingers fisting deep into Tom’s shirt. “Jesus. Okay.”

They stood locked together while rain drummed against the glass. On the island, the screen lit up with another banner.

Charlie drew a ragged breath against Tom’s neck. “I kept waiting for them to find something missing. It feels like it’s been dragging on forever.”

“Tremblay says congratulations. And not to make him repeat himself.”

A real smile finally broke through Charlie’s shock. “We should call Hazel.”

Monday, July 26.

Passage took sixteen days to become real, which Tom called intolerable and Hazel called a minor administrative miracle.

Charlie spent most of those sixteen days waiting for people he had never met to answer emails.

The first organization Hazel approached declined. The second wanted to use its standard six-page application. The third—the Fondation des arts communautaires de Montréal—went through three rounds of revisions with them before agreeing to administer a six-month pilot through its existing staff and board.

Nadine signed on as a paid adviser. Bouchard's office approved the municipal referral arrangement. Tom transferred one hundred and fifty thousand dollars into a restricted grant and received no vote over where it went.

The Fondation gave the pilot a name.

Passage / Fonds Passage.

At seven fifty-nine on Monday morning, Charlie sat barefoot at the kitchen island with his laptop open in front of him. A bar of summer sunlight stretched across the marble and warmed his forearms. On the other side of the island, steam curled from Tom's coffee.

At eight o'clock, the application page went live.

Four questions.

What do you need?
What will it cost?
What will the money be used for?
How urgent is it?

And, beneath them, an optional box:

Is there anything about this request the questions above don't capture?

Charlie read all five from beginning to end, although he knew every word.

Then he refreshed the portal.

Nothing.

He refreshed it again. The click of the trackpad sounded unusually loud in the quiet kitchen.

Tom looked at him over the rim of his coffee. "You know someone has to apply first."

"I know."

"You're refreshing anyway."

Charlie clicked a third time.

"Yes."

At eight twenty-three, the first file dropped into Charlie's queue. He sat up so fast his knee cracked against the underside of the island.

Tom lowered his mug. "Something?"

"The first one."

Emergency electrical repair. Verdun. $1,200.

The applicant had attached an audio file. Charlie hit play, and a man's harried voice filled the kitchen: "A lighting track over stage left died during rehearsal. We've got a youth production opening Friday, and right now half the stage is black. Estimate's attached. If you can pay the electrician directly, that'd be a lifesaver."

Charlie listened twice. "He didn't say a single thing about himself."

"Was he supposed to?"

"No." Charlie looked at the stripped-down form. "That's the point."

Under Adviser Comment—Non-Binding, Charlie typed: Urgent. Within scope. Recommend direct payment to supplier.

Tom leaned an inch closer to the screen.

"You're allowed to look," Charlie murmured.

"I gave up the right to have opinions."

By noon, the sun had shifted across the counter, and their mugs were long cold. Other needs trickled in. A dance collective repairing subflooring after a pipe burst; a choir that had lost its basement. Charlie worked through them quietly, typing notes, passing them down the queue.

Then three arrived in rapid succession.

All three hovered just under the three-thousand-dollar ceiling. An orchestra outreach initiative, a museum access program, and an emergency community engagement symposium.

Charlie was still staring at the identical syntax when Tom's phone buzzed on the marble.

Tom checked the screen. His mouth flattened. He answered and tapped the speaker icon. “Michael.”

“Thomas,” Michael’s voice came smooth through the small speaker. “I see your little project is operational.”

“It opened this morning.”

“So I understand. I’ve encouraged three organizations to apply. All three have established boards and longstanding civic ties. I would expect Charles to take that context into account.”

Tom frowned. “You’re calling to lobby active applications.”

“I’m calling to prevent worthwhile institutions from being disadvantaged by an ideological process.”

Charlie pulled the laptop closer, his heart thumping hard against his ribs, but his voice came out surprisingly level. “Michael.”

“…Charles.”

“I’m notifying the Fondation you called.”

“I don’t see why that’s necessary.”

“Because you just admitted you’re directing them.”

“They are independent bodies,” Michael said smoothly. “I’d hope your personal feelings about me wouldn’t penalize institutions that have served this city for decades.”

“They won’t,” Charlie said. “I’m recusing myself from all three.”

“Because of a phone call?”

“Yes.”

Charlie opened a message to the Fondation administrator, typed his formal recusal in three sentences, and clicked send while Michael was still breathing on the line.

“Is there anything else?” Tom asked coldly.

“No,” Michael replied after a pause. “I imagine we’ll speak soon.”

The line disconnected.

Charlie stared at the black phone screen. The adrenaline left him feeling hollowed out. “I think he wanted me to reject them.”

“Maybe.” Tom picked up the phone. “Or recommend them. Either way, he gets to say he moved you.”

Charlie looked at him. “It isn’t our fund.”

“No.”

Within ninety seconds, the three applications vanished from Charlie’s queue, redirected elsewhere.

At four in the afternoon, Charlie was waiting for the kettle to boil when the portal chimed.

The Verdun lighting grant was approved. The Fondation had issued payment directly to the electrician; work was slated for eight the following morning. The kids would have their Friday show.

Charlie read the notification twice. “Thomas.”

Tom appeared in the doorway. “What is it?”

Charlie turned the screen around. “They get to do their show.”

Tom looked from the monitor to Charlie, the lingering stress around his eyes softening.

Charlie scrolled down. Another decision had appeared beneath it.

The museum access program had been approved.

He stared at it for a moment.

“One of the three?” Tom asked.

“Yeah.” Charlie read the decision again, then let out a slow breath. “Good.”

Tom’s mouth twitched. “Good?”

“I didn’t want Michael deciding the answer.” Charlie closed the notification. “That includes me deciding the opposite just because he

called."

Charlie glanced back at the empty space where Michael's files had sat. "He's going to keep doing things like this."

Tom walked over, stepping behind Charlie's chair. "Let him."

Friday, July 30.

Charlie stood barefoot at the kitchen island with a mug of tea warming his hands. Tom sat on the stool beside him, scrolling through emails.

The intercom buzzed.

Tom crossed to the wall panel. "Yes?"

Pierre's voice came through. "Bonjour, monsieur. My apologies for the interruption. There is a special courier here for you."

"Send him up."

A minute later, the door chimed. Tom returned carrying a heavy cream envelope.

He laid it on the counter between them and withdrew his hand.

Charlie set down his tea and slid one finger beneath the flap. The card inside was thick, its lettering engraved into the stock.

The Montgomery Foundation Annual Gala

Friday, August 20. Black tie.

Across the top, beneath the Foundation's crest, their names appeared in elegant script:

Mr. Thomas Montgomery and Dr. Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery

Charlie ran his thumb over the raised lettering.

"Well," he said. "That's insane."

Michael's parting words returned to him.

I imagine we'll speak soon.

“So this is soon.”

Tom’s mouth flattened. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Charlie said. “I’m fine.”

Tom came around the island. “I can call his office right now and tell him to go to hell. We never have to see any of them again.”

Charlie rested his fingertips on the invitation.

Michael wanted him in the room.

Fine.

He raised his eyes to his husband.

“We’re going to a party,” Charlie said.

CHAPTER 22

Friday, August 20.

Charlie stood in front of the full-length mirror in the master bedroom, adjusting a cufflink beneath the sleeve of his black tuxedo jacket, then the other.

Tom stepped in already dressed in a similar tux. He crossed the room and adjusted Charlie's bow tie.

"Ready?" he asked softly.

"I think so."

Tom's fingers paused against his collar. Charlie covered Tom's hand with his own.

"I'm glad we're a team," Charlie said.

Tom smiled. "You know you don't need anyone to hold you up in that room."

"I know." Charlie held his gaze. "But I want you."

Tom kissed him. "You have me."

"All right," Hazel announced from the doorway, "enough marital intensity. Chop chop."

She stood tall in a red evening gown, Julian a step behind her in a black dinner jacket.

Tom checked his watch, then reached for Charlie's hand.

"All right," Tom said. "Let's go ruin his evening."

The hired car was waiting downstairs to take them to Salon Windsor.

Salon Windsor was a terrifying monument to Kathy Montgomery's aesthetic.

It was all cream and gold, glittering beneath crystal chandeliers. Mirrored doors caught the light from every angle. Floral arrangements rose from the tables in disciplined white abundance. The air smelled like champagne.

Charlie knew immediately: *This is exactly where arts funding goes to die.*

As soon as they crossed the threshold, Tom's hand moved to Charlie's back. The pressure cut through the noise of the room and steadied Charlie before the first wave of adrenaline could sharpen into anything worse.

They began to move through the crowd.

Tom's gaze swept across the room once. Several men glanced over, registered the two of them together, and adjusted accordingly. One started toward them. Tom redirected him with nothing more than a smooth nod and a courteous expression. The man veered off without protest.

Hazel appeared at Charlie's elbow with a champagne flute. Julian stood beside her.

"Three of Miller's old allies are here," Hazel murmured, her eyes moving across the crowd without ever appearing to stare. "Two people from the municipal arts board. And someone from the symphony endowment has already tried to ask me whether Passage is real."

Charlie blinked. "Already?"

Hazel tipped her glass. "Passage just entered territory Michael considers his. Of course people are curious."

Tom's thumb pressed into Charlie's back.

Hazel continued dryly. "Also, Katherine is near the orchids pretending not to monitor every social movement in the room, which is frankly insulting to anyone with functioning eyesight."

Near the centre of the ballroom, Kathy stood with one hand resting lightly around the stem of her glass.

"She knows exactly what this is," Tom said quietly.

“Of course she does,” Hazel replied. “And so does half this room.”

Charlie swallowed and forced his breathing to stay even.

“Good,” Hazel said, almost to herself. Then, to Tom: “I’m going to make a round. If anyone useful engages, I’ll keep them occupied.”

Tom nodded once. “Don’t overcommit.”

Hazel gave him a cool look over the rim of her glass. “Thomas. I am never anything but strategic.”

Then she was gone.

Julian tipped his head back and studied the ceiling.

“Interesting,” he said.

Charlie turned to him. “What is?”

“The room,” Julian replied. “The reverberation is longer than I expected. Too much reflective surface. Disastrous for speech intelligibility. Quite flattering for strings.”

A startled laugh escaped Charlie before he could stop it.

The hard lines of Tom’s face softened.

“You good?” Tom murmured.

“Yeah,” Charlie said softly, leaning the slightest fraction into Tom’s warmth. “I’m good.”

“Target acquired,” Hazel interrupted, moving back toward them as quickly and elegantly as possible. “Three o’clock. Moving fast.”

A man cut a straight path through the crowd, completely ignoring the donors trying to catch his eye. Charlie recognized him from a few months ago, across the firm’s lobby.

Payton stopped in front of them and shook Tom’s hand.

“Your father sent the invitation directly to my office,” Payton said to him. “A handwritten note suggesting I attend to observe the ‘shifting landscape of local philanthropy.’ A very polite way to invite me to a public execution.”

Tom's hand didn't move from Charlie's back. "And you came anyway."

"I was going to say no." Payton glanced at Hazel. "Then your Counsel called and suggested it would be entertaining to watch Michael Montgomery swing and miss."

His attention shifted to Charlie.

"Payton," Tom said. "My husband. Dr. Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery."

Payton shifted his glass and extended his hand. Charlie took it.

"The doctorate is complete?"

"Defended in April," Charlie said.

Payton released his hand and took a slow sip of his drink. "I see." His eyes flicked once toward Tom. Then he set down his glass and adjusted his cuffs.

"Table four," he said. "I want an unobstructed view of whatever is about to happen."

He turned to go, then paused, already half into the crowd.

"Good luck, Doctor."

Tom stepped back into Charlie's space.

"Ready?" he asked softly.

Charlie leaned back a fraction, pressing his shoulder into Tom's chest.

"Yes," he breathed. "Let's go."

A spoon tapped once against crystal at the front of the ballroom. Heads turned.

Michael Montgomery stepped onto the stage. Beside him, Kathy's hands were clasped tightly in front of her.

Michael delivered the opening remarks. Civic duty, stewardship, legacy, responsible investment, the Montgomery family's longstanding commitment to shaping the city with intelligence and vision. The room watched him back with small nods and lifted glasses.

Then: “Of course, it is always encouraging to see renewed enthusiasm for cultural philanthropy in this city.”

“Speaking of legacy,” Michael said, “our family has recently expanded. My son Thomas was recently married.”

Dozens of pairs of eyes locked onto Charlie.

“My son’s husband is a man of considerable accomplishment. A scholar. A musician. And now, it seems, the singular voice on what this city’s cultural life is worth.”

Michael smiled. “Charles. We are delighted you could join us tonight. Would you please?”

He extended one hand toward the black grand piano to his left.

A woman near the front froze with her champagne flute halfway to her mouth. A few people murmured. Even Kathy shifted.

Then the applause began. It spread through the room in a soft, expectant patter that made everything worse.

Tom said nothing, but the question was obvious: *Tell me what you want.*

Charlie met his eyes. He reached for Tom’s free hand and laced their fingers together. His own hand was shaking. He squeezed anyway.

Tom’s eyes closed for a fraction of a second.

Then his fingers opened, and Charlie moved toward the stage alone.

The ballroom tracked Charlie as he crossed the parquet. At the edge of the stage, Michael stood with his hands loosely clasped. At the back of the room, Tom hadn’t moved.

Charlie sat. Adjusted the bench. Bought three seconds.

He didn’t have to do this. The realization arrived with startling clarity: he could stand up, take Tom’s hand, and walk out. But Michael had counted on that. Refuse, and Michael would smile and call it nerves. Play something polite, and Michael won: Charlie Heitmeyer-Montgomery, performing parlor tricks on command.

His hands were shaking.

Fine. He would play. But Michael didn't get to choose what.

Suggestion diabolique.

He rested his fingers on the heavy, unfamiliar keys.

Play like you are trying to save your own life. Valois's voice surfaced with sudden, stark clarity.

Charlie drew one slow breath, and struck.

Prokofiev cracked through the cream-and-gold ballroom like an act of violence. Charlie drove his weight into the keys, his right hand snapping through the jagged upper line while the left hammered relentless accents beneath it.

Someone shifted near the front. A champagne flute hit a table too quickly.

They had expected something charming—something that could disappear politely beneath crystal, white flowers, and conversation. Charlie gave them rhythmic carnage instead. He shortened the pedal, cleared the edges, and leaned into the instrument as the tremor in his hands vanished into the architecture of the piece.

He looked up. Michael was staring.

The restless chatter had evaporated; even the servers had frozen along the walls.

Play like you are trying to save your own life.

Once, maybe. Not tonight. Tonight, Charlie wasn't begging to survive the room; he was answering it.

Michael's easy clasp had broken, one hand locking hard around his opposite wrist. Beside him, Kathy turned her gaze from Charlie to Michael, quietly measuring the crack in his composure.

Charlie hit the final run with everything left in his shoulders, hammering the brutal last chord into the soundboard.

He lifted his hands.

Silence held the room for one beat. Two.

Then someone near the centre tables began to clap. Another joined. Applause spread unevenly through the ballroom—loud in places, hesitant in others. A few people rose. Others stayed seated, glancing toward the stage or toward Michael as though trying to work out what, exactly, they had just witnessed.

Charlie stood. He found Tom—clapping, his expression unguarded and fierce. Kathy was applauding too, though her eyes had already shifted back to Michael.

Michael joined in after a beat. His face gave Charlie nothing.

The adrenaline dropped out, leaving Charlie hollowed out and desperate for air. He stepped away from the piano without bowing.

Tom met him halfway across the floor, catching him as Charlie collided hard against his chest.

“I’ve got you,” Tom murmured into his hair, his voice rough. “Fuck, Char. That was unbelievable.”

“Get me out of here.”

Tom pivoted them toward the exit, an arm clamped around Charlie’s waist.

A silver-haired man in a tuxedo stepped into their path. “An extraordinary performance. I wonder if we might speak next week about Passage—”

Hazel materialized between them like a blade. “Monsieur Delorme. You will find me in precisely seven minutes by the left champagne tower, where you may express an institutionally useful interest in community arts funding.”

Delorme blinked, caught off guard. “Of course.”

“Go,” Hazel said without looking back. “I’ve got the room.”

Julian appeared at her elbow, adjusting his spectacles. He glanced over the ballroom. “Nobody knows what to do now.”

Hazel followed his gaze. Near the stage, two Foundation trustees had closed in around Michael. At another table, three people were talking at once.

Someone Charlie didn't recognize was already watching the doors he and Tom were trying to reach.

"Good," Hazel said. "Confusion is useful. Leave."

Near the stage, Kathy was still watching Michael.

Tom pulled Charlie against his side and guided him out the double doors.

The August air was damp against Charlie's face as the car pulled away from the curb. Downtown blurred past the glass. Beside him, Tom sat close enough that their thighs brushed, giving Charlie quiet room to breathe as the tremor in his hands began to settle.

"Where do you want to go?" Tom asked softly.

Charlie watched the streetlights streak across the window.

"The firm," he said.

Tom nodded to the driver, giving the Mile End address, then looked back. "Just us?"

Charlie pictured the potential chaos. A tired smile tugged at his mouth.

"No. Invite them."

Tom grinned and pulled out his phone.

Charlie leaned his head against Tom's shoulder, peering down at the screen:

Charlie just annihilated my dad in front of the entire Montréal elite. Firm now. Bring reinforcements.

Charlie groaned, hiding his face in the crook of Tom's neck. "They're going to be so loud."

"They're going to treat you like a god," Tom murmured, pressing a kiss to his hair.

By the time the elevator dumped them into the quiet Mile End loft, Charlie's breathing had finally evened out. He draped his tuxedo jacket over

a chair while Tom yanked his bow tie loose, unbuttoning his collar with a slow, wicked grin.

“That was one of the best nights of my life.”

Forty-five minutes later, the freight elevator shuddered and clanged open.

Hazel marched out first, heels dangling from one hand. “My blood pressure is at stroke levels,” she declared, crossing the concrete in stocking feet. “I need alcohol that doesn’t cost three hundred dollars a glass.”

Julian drifted behind her, spectacles pushed up, inspecting the exposed pipes overhead. “The room underwent a rapid, delicious realignment.”

Hazel lobbed a shoe at his head. Julian dodged without looking up, the heel skidding under the conference table.

“WHERE IS HE?” Matt’s roar preceded him by two seconds. He lunged across the threshold, scooped Charlie up in a rib-cracking bear hug, and lifted his feet clean off the floor. Charlie wheezed, clutching Matt’s shoulders, laughing helplessly.

“Put him down, you animal, he’s a national treasure!” Lukas yelled, stumbling out behind them with two bags bursting with chips and drinks.

Matt set Charlie back on his feet with a clap to both shoulders. “Did he cry? Tell me he cried.”

“He was medically paralyzed by his own hubris,” Hazel supplied dryly.

André entered last. He set an unmarked bottle of amber liquid on the table. He caught Tom’s eye with a sharp nod. “Eighteen-year-old Macallan. Appropriate for a regicide.”

Matt raided the kitchenette, returning with an absurd assortment of tumblers and chipped mugs. André poured with liberty. Lukas was already chewing neon cheese puffs as he took his glass, and Matt slung an arm over Charlie’s shoulders.

“All right,” André said, lifting his tumbler. He looked straight at Charlie. “To the Virtuoso.”

“To the Virtuoso!” Matt and Lukas bellowed.

“To my brilliant, terrifying brother,” Hazel toasted, barefoot on the floor.

“To optimal acoustic dominance,” Julian murmured, clinking his glass against hers.

Tom stood beside Charlie, their shoulders pressed together. His dark eyes were unguarded and intensely bright.

He raised his glass. “To my incredible husband.”

Charlie met his eyes, clinked their rims together, and drank.

The scotch burned beautifully all the way down.

The ride back to the penthouse was quiet.

Charlie rested against Tom’s side, the taste of scotch still warm at the back of his throat. Tom held his hand on the seat between them. Neither spoke.

In the elevator, the celebration still rang faintly in Charlie’s ears. By the time the doors opened, the city outside the floor-to-ceiling windows had gone blue-black.

Tom locked the door. He turned and leaned back against it.

He stayed where he was, watching Charlie walk into the centre of the living room.

Charlie turned and walked slowly back across the hardwood. Stopped inches away. Reached out and caught the front of Tom’s open collar between his hands.

“You’re quiet,” Charlie said.

“Tell me what you want.”

Charlie slid his hands up Tom’s chest and threaded his fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck.

“I want you to look at me,” Charlie said, pinning him against the door. “Just me.”

Tom groaned, his eyes dropping briefly to Charlie’s mouth. “I am,” he said. “Fuck. You know I am.”

Charlie pulled him down into a kiss.

CHAPTER 23

Sunday, August 22.

The aftermath of victory was quiet.

Around two in the morning, the penthouse was still. Charlie slept with his face pressed into Tom's shoulder.

Tom lay awake in the dark, one arm around Charlie's waist, watching the shadows of the skyline move across the ceiling.

Then his encrypted phone buzzed. A single vibration against the nightstand.

Tom waited to see if Charlie would stir. His husband sighed and shifted closer.

Without moving his arm from Charlie's waist, Tom reached out and picked up the phone.

An email notification glowed across the screen. He opened it.

The sender field read only: K. Montgomery.

Tom stared at the name.

The email contained a temporary decryption key. The subject line read:

Forensic review. Start with Cayman schedules.

His thumb hovered over the attachment.

He could open it. Charlie was asleep. He could look first, figure out what Kathy had sent, decide what mattered before Charlie ever had to see it.

Beside him, Charlie's face was slack with sleep, one hand resting against Tom's chest.

Slowly, Tom locked the phone.

He didn’t enter the key.

He set the phone back on the nightstand and lay there in the dark.

It was 3:12 in the morning. The city was black. The penthouse was silent. Cheddar was curled in an orange comma at the foot of the bed.

Tom lay flat on his back, one arm behind his head, the other around Charlie.

He pressed the side of his index finger to the bridge of his nose. He tried to slow his breathing, but it stayed shallow. If he shut his eyes, he saw only the subject line, looping, a silent dare.

Next to him, Charlie lay perfectly still, tangled in the top sheet, his cheek half-buried in Tom’s shoulder.

Tom hesitated. He wanted to let him keep that peace for a few hours more.

Then he reached over and brushed the hair from Charlie’s forehead. He put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder and squeezed once.

“Char,” he said, barely above a whisper.

Charlie blinked twice. “Thomas?”

Tom turned the phone so Charlie could see the email.

Charlie squinted at the light in the dark, then read the sender. The subject. The decryption key.

Finally, he said, “You’re going to have to repeat that.”

Tom snorted. “Kathy sent me something.”

Charlie looked at him, then at the phone again. “The key?”

Tom scrolled to the end of the email. There it was: a random alphanumeric string, six lines long.

“Wow. She didn’t even try to make it look normal.”

“No.”

Charlie sat up. His hair stood out in all directions. He took the phone, read the message again, and held it in both hands for a second, frowning at the

screen.

“How long have you been awake?”

Tom considered lying, then didn’t bother. “Since it came in.”

Charlie looked at the clock, then at him. “You woke me up.”

Tom nodded once. “I didn’t want to do it alone.”

Charlie set the phone down on the duvet. He reached out, wrapped both arms around Tom’s neck, and pulled him in for a hug.

“Thank you for waking me up.”

Tom closed his eyes.

Charlie pulled back and picked up the phone again. He didn’t open the attachment.

“Why now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because of the gala?”

“Maybe.”

Charlie frowned at the sender field. “Do you think she’s helping us?”

Tom let out a quiet breath. “I think Kathy helps Kathy.”

“So she thinks Michael’s losing.”

“Maybe.”

“Or she wants us to think he is.”

Tom looked at him. “Exactly.”

Charlie shifted against the headboard. “Could whatever’s in there be fake?”

“Some of it. Altered. Incomplete. Taken out of context.”

“A trap?”

“Possibly.”

Charlie stared down at the phone. “And if there’s information about people who have nothing to do with Michael?”

“Then we don’t spread it around.”

“Can we even give any of it to Hazel?”

Tom rubbed a hand over his face. “I don’t know. That’s a lawyer question.”

Charlie nodded slowly.

“Okay.” He held the phone between them. “Together?”

Tom looked at him.

“Together.”

Charlie read out the decryption key while Tom entered it.

The index loaded in the encrypted app, row after row of tidy folders:

OFFSHORE STRUCTURE

BOARD MINUTES

KYC DUE DILIGENCE

PHILANTHROPY VEHICLES

CA HYPO SCHEDULES

IRCC LEVERAGE

Charlie stopped.

Tom felt his stomach drop.

Neither of them touched the screen.

“Thomas.”

“I see it.”

At six-thirty, pale grey light pressed against the windows. Tom sat at the island, shoulders hunched, the laptop open to the index.

Charlie sat beside him, sipping his third cup of matcha.

Tom scrolled through the list of folders again.

“You’re vibrating.”

Tom pushed his glasses up his nose. “This is enormous.”

“Mhm.”

“I recognize some of it. Some of the documents line up with things I already know happened.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “But I can’t tell you what half of this means. I don’t know what’s missing, what’s been altered—”

“Or why she gave it to us.”

The index mapped a private architecture of Montgomery Holdings, thousands of pieces of information.

“Whatever this is,” Tom said, “we’re not figuring it out today.”

Charlie reached across the island and laid his hand over Tom’s.

Tom turned his hand beneath Charlie’s and laced their fingers together. Halfway down the screen sat the isolated IRCC LEVERAGE folder.

“That part goes to Tremblay.”

Charlie nodded. “I want him to see it.”

“And nothing else goes anywhere until Hazel tells us what we can legally do with it.”

“Okay.”

Tom picked up his phone and called Hazel.

She answered on the first ring. “What.”

“Kathy sent me an encrypted archive.”

Silence.

“How much did you open?”

“Not much.”

“Good. Stop.”

Tom glanced at Charlie.

“Don’t forward it,” Hazel continued. “Don’t copy it. Don’t email me screenshots. Bring the device to the office.”

“When?”

“Eight.”

“Hazel—”

“Thomas. You are not conducting a forensic investigation before breakfast.”

Charlie covered his mouth, failing to hide a smile.

Tom sighed. “Eight.”

“And bring coffee.”

She hung up.

Tom set the phone down and closed the laptop.

Sunlight slanted through the conference room windows, cutting across a tray of coffee, a box of pastries, five legal pads, and Tom’s closed laptop.

Hazel stood at the head of the table. Tom sat beside Charlie, while Tremblay’s face filled the video screen on the far wall.

“Before Thomas gets creative,” Hazel said, “nobody touches the archive.”

Tom looked offended. “I haven’t touched anything.”

“You’ve had it for five hours.”

“I opened folders.”

“Exactly.”

Charlie hid a smile behind his coffee.

Hazel turned the laptop toward herself. “Kathy sent us material we can’t authenticate and may not have been entitled to possess. So nobody forwards it, copies it, leaks it, or starts calling government agencies.”

“Or journalists,” Tremblay added from the monitor.

Tom folded his arms. “So what are we allowed to do?”

“Preserve what she sent. Then I bring in someone independent to verify it before we rely on any of it.” Hazel pointed at him. “You, specifically, are finished investigating.”

“This feels targeted.”

“It is.”

Tremblay adjusted his glasses. “There is one section I can look at now. Anything concerning the sponsorship file, if Charles authorizes me to review it.”

IRCC LEVERAGE.

Charlie set down his mug. “Yes. I authorize it.”

“Good.”

Hazel started typing.

Charlie watched her for a moment. “Can I ask something?”

“Always dangerous, but yes.”

“What does Michael actually care about losing?”

Hazel stopped typing.

Tom looked at him.

“Money,” Hazel said.

“Does he?” Charlie frowned. “He has more than he could ever spend. He didn’t start coming after Thomas because of money. He started when Thomas put Heitmeyer first.”

Nobody answered immediately.

Charlie looked down at the coffee cooling between his hands. “I think it’s the name. What survives him.”

Hazel leaned back in her chair. “Maybe.”

Charlie looked up.

“It’s worth remembering,” she said. “It is not, however, a theory we build evidence around. We find out what’s actually in there first.”

“Right.”

She returned to the keyboard. “I’m retaining forensic review. Once that starts, we document everything and we don’t quietly decide later that we preferred not knowing.”

Her hand paused over the trackpad.

“Charlie?”

He knew why she was asking him.

Beside him, Tom stayed quiet.

Charlie thought of the ballroom. Michael applauding after everyone else, his expression unreadable. The months of scrutiny. The folder labelled IRCC LEVERAGE.

“Do it,” Charlie said.

Hazel hit enter.

CHAPTER 24

Sunday, August 22.

On the second court at Midtown Sanctuaire, Lukas was losing his mind.

“What the fuck!” he yelled, throwing both hands in the air. “I want Hawk-Eye on that line!”

Tom merely bounced the ball twice, asked, “Ready?” and when Lukas accused him of cheating, served anyway. Scrambling left, Lukas planted a forehand directly into the net and swore loudly enough to turn heads on the adjacent court.

At the net, André shook his head. “What’s up with you today? You’re playing loose.”

“Just felt like hitting,” Tom shrugged, jogging to retrieve the ball.

Lukas pointed his racquet at him. “See? That. He’s cheerful. I don’t trust it.” He waved off André's reminder that Tom had been cheerful for months. “Not like this.”

Tom ignored them. They played another set. Lukas inevitably lost—prompting Matt to blame Lukas, and Lukas to blame Tom, the court, the sun, and institutional corruption.

He was still criticizing Lukas’s backhand in the locker room when he pulled his sweaty shirt over his head. A sudden silence fell, broken only when Lukas let out an actual, genuine squawk.

Tom paused with the shirt in his hands. “What?”

“You should, uh.” Matt pointed vaguely behind him while André just nodded toward the mirror.

Tom turned. *Oh.*

Four narrow scratches ran beneath his left shoulder blade, with another set crossing the top of his right shoulder, stark red against his skin. Behind him, Matt made a strangled noise, muttering a faint, "Jesus Christ."

Examining himself in the mirror, Tom tried—and completely failed—to suppress a smile.

“Does he know you’re in here telling us about this?” Lukas demanded, clutching his chest.

“I’m not telling you anything,” Tom replied, reaching for his clean shirt.

“That is a witness statement!” Matt yelled, pointing directly at Tom’s back.

“I’m proud of you,” Lukas said solemnly as Tom finished dressing.

“Goodbye.” Tom walked out, leaving André still staring blankly into the middle distance.

Charlie was at the Steinway when Tom came home.

Tom didn’t say anything at first. He came up behind the piano bench and watched the slow shape of Charlie’s hands over the keys.

“You’re early,” Charlie said.

“Finished up quick.”

Charlie nodded and stopped playing. Tom sat beside him on the bench, close enough that their thighs touched.

Charlie glanced over.

Tom’s hair was still damp from a post-match shower. He was trying not to smile.

“Okay,” Charlie said. “What happened?”

“You didn’t see my back this morning.”

Charlie blinked. “What?”

Tom leaned in, his voice low. “You marked me up last night.”

Charlie stared. His already-pale face went nearly translucent.

“Oh my god,” he said very softly.

Tom reached out and ran his hand up and down Charlie’s spine. “It’s fine.”

Charlie shook his head, eyes wide. “It’s not—I mean, it’s not—I’m sorry.”

Tom laughed. “Char, I’m not mad. I’m bragging.”

Charlie covered his mouth with both hands. His ears burned bright red, his shoulders folding inward. “I didn’t mean to. I mean, I know I—but I didn’t realize— That’s so—”

Tom nudged his knee. “You want to see?”

Charlie lowered his hands. “Maybe?”

Tom stood, turned his back to him, and lifted his shirt.

The scratches were as advertised. They mapped across Tom’s skin in sharp, parallel lines, just starting to fade at the edges.

Charlie made a sort of animal noise.

Tom let the shirt fall and started laughing again. “Jesus, Char. That face.”

“I did that?”

“You did that.” Tom turned around, still grinning.

He held out his hand and pulled Charlie to his feet, then wrapped both arms around him, laughing quietly into the top of his hair.

“I don’t mind,” Tom said. “I really don’t mind, Char.”

Charlie made another tiny, helpless sound.

Monday, August 23.

Shortly after two, Charlie was tapping his pen against his bottom lip, deep in thought. A youth choir desperately needed funding for its rehearsal space, and Charlie was still working out which immediate costs to recommend when—

His phone buzzed.

Glancing down, he expected to see Hazel's name, but the screen read *Tremblay*. Charlie dropped his pen.

“Hello?”

“Charlie. I’m sorry for calling without notice,” Tremblay said. “Are you able to speak privately?”

“Yes. I’m home.”

“Good.” Paper shifted on the other end of the line. “I found the discrepancy in your historical file.”

Charlie stood up. “The actual problem?”

“I believe so.”

His pulse knocked hard against his throat. “How?”

“Kathy’s archive showed me where to look,” Tremblay explained. “But none of what I’m showing you came from Kathy’s files. It was already in your immigration record and in documents I obtained from the Heitmeyers’ old records.”

Charlie stared blankly at the abandoned grant application on his desk. “Okay.”

“I would rather walk you through it in person.”

“When?”

“This afternoon, if possible.”

Reaching automatically for his laptop bag, Charlie said, “I’ll call Thomas.”

He ended the call and immediately dialled Tom, who answered before the second ring.

“Hey. Everything okay?”

“Tremblay found it.”

“The—the glitch?”

“Yes.” Charlie shut his eyes. “Please come home. I need you.”

“I’m coming. Do you need anything before I get there?”

“Just you.”

The seventeen minutes felt much longer than seventeen minutes. Charlie put the grant application away, took it back out, and then put it away again. He went to the kitchen and filled a glass of water, drinking half of it standing at the sink and leaving the rest untouched.

Charlie looked at the clock. Nine minutes.

He sat at the piano but didn’t lift the fallboard. Twelve. His phone remained silent. Fifteen.

At seventeen minutes, the front door opened. Tom came in fast enough that his tie had gone crooked.

“Hey.”

Charlie stood as Tom crossed the room and wrapped both arms around him. Charlie held on, and neither of them spoke for several seconds.

Then Tom pulled back. “You ready?”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah.”

Tom drove one-handed through traffic, his other hand clamped over Charlie’s on the console.

In the top-floor office, Tremblay already had the thick dossier spread across his desk.

“What happened?” Charlie asked as they sat.

Tremblay adjusted his glasses. “When you entered Canada at fourteen, you were granted temporary humanitarian entry because returning you to Switzerland posed an immediate risk. Nancy and David’s adoption was finalized under Québec law—legally, you became their son. But the final federal step, the adopted-child permanent residency filing, was never submitted. You remained a Swiss citizen.”

Charlie’s stomach dropped into freefall. “Everyone thought I had PR.”

“The assumption was carried forward for thirteen years,” Tremblay confirmed quietly. “The discrepancy stayed buried until now.”

Charlie lowered his gaze to the desk, his eyes snagging on a clipped memorandum. Four words in narrow, slanted handwriting stopped him cold, pressed so hard into the paper the letters had dented the grain:

Rapid psychological deterioration.

Tremblay kept explaining procedure, but Charlie couldn’t hear him.

“Who wrote this?” Charlie’s finger shook against the edge of the page.

Tremblay followed the line. “Marcel Deschamps. The attorney who coordinated your emergency transfer and the early adoption work.”

“Did my parents know he wrote that?”

“I don’t know,” Tremblay said softly. “The note references reports from Lausanne and communications with Nancy and David. There may be more in the underlying files.”

Beside him, Tom leaned forward, his voice clipped and dangerous. “And Deschamps just didn’t finish the filing?”

“The record is absent,” Tremblay said. “I cannot yet tell you why.”

Charlie touched the indented ink. *Rapid psychological deterioration.* He didn’t remember deteriorating at fourteen; he only remembered fragments.

“Can I have a copy of that?”

“Of course.”

Tom frowned. “Where does my father fit into this?”

“The archive shows Michael discovered the discrepancy and exploited it,” Tremblay said steadily. “He didn’t create the flaw. The failure predates him by thirteen years.”

Tom leaned back, his expression grim. “So somebody left a fourteen-year-old kid in administrative limbo, and my father pulled the thread.”

“That is what the evidence supports.”

Tremblay closed the top leaf of the folder. “I can petition IRCC to retroactively correct the historical record using the adoption orders, though I cannot promise a timeline. Your spousal application with Thomas proceeds independently.”

Charlie barely registered the options. His mind was still caught on the name at the top of the memo.

“Where is Deschamps now?”

“Retired. Senneville.”

Charlie swallowed against the dryness in his throat. “Do you have his number?”

Tremblay regarded him for a long, quiet moment, then reached for a business card. He jotted a number across the back and held it out.

Charlie’s fingers closed around it.

The drive home was silent. Tom didn’t try to make him talk, leaving Charlie to just hold the photocopy on his lap. *Rapid psychological deterioration.* Every few minutes, he looked down at it again, but the words stayed the same.

At home, Tom made tea while Charlie sat at the kitchen island with Tremblay’s card beside his phone. For a while, neither of them said anything. When Tom set the mug down in front of him, Charlie turned the card over.

Marcel Deschamps. A phone number in Tremblay’s handwriting.

“Do you want me to call?” Tom asked.

Charlie looked at him, then at the card. “No. I just…” His fingers closed around his phone. “Stay here?”

Tom moved beside him until their shoulders touched. Charlie entered the number one digit at a time. His thumb hovered over the call button, and then he pressed it.

It rang three times.

“Allô?” The voice was older, clipped, and impatient.

Charlie cleared his throat. “Hello. Is this Marcel Deschamps?”

“Yes. Who is calling?”

“My name is Charlie Heitmeyer,” Charlie said, watching the call timer tick upward. “But thirteen years ago, my name was Maxence Caillat.”

For three seconds, the only sound was the electronic hiss of the connection. Charlie glanced at Tom.

“Are you recording this call?” Deschamps asked.

The impatience was gone.

“No.”

“Is anyone else listening?”

“My husband is here. No lawyer.”

“Because if someone sent you to extract an admission of negligence, you need to route all communication through my professional-liability insurer —”

“Mr. Deschamps, please. I’m not suing you. Tremblay found the mistake, and he’s trying to correct it. That isn’t why I called.”

“…Then why are you calling?”

Charlie looked at the photocopy on the island.

“I saw your note from Lausanne. The one that said I was deteriorating.”

The line went quiet.

“Tremblay told me you were the one who got me out on an emergency measure,” Charlie continued.

“I did what I believed was necessary,” Deschamps said.

“I need to know why.” Charlie swallowed. “I don’t remember those years. I don’t remember what I was like. I need to know what you saw that made you take that risk.”

Another silence.

“You really don’t remember?”

“Only fragments.”

Deschamps exhaled slowly. “This is not a conversation for the telephone. Are you in Montréal?”

“Yes.”

“I live in Senneville. At the end of Avenue de Senneville, the house with the wrought-iron gates. Do you have a car?”

“We do,” Tom said.

“Come tomorrow morning. Around ten. I will put the coffee on.” A pause. “Charlie?”

“Yes?”

“I am glad you are safe.”

The line clicked dead.

Charlie stared at the phone. The call timer vanished. He let out a long breath.

Tom covered Charlie’s hands with his own.

Tuesday, August 24.

The gates to Marcel Deschamps’s Senneville estate stood open. Tom guided the sedan up the curved driveway and killed the engine. Neither of them moved.

Charlie stared through the windshield at the sprawling stone house. “What if I don’t recognize anything?” he asked. “What if I don’t remember what he tells me?”

Tom looked at him. “Then we listen, and you decide what to do with it afterward.”

Charlie nodded once. He gripped the door handle, but didn’t pull. “I need —”

“We can leave,” Tom said quietly. “Right now. Just say the word.”

“No. I need to know. I just need a minute.”

“Take as many as you need.”

Charlie closed his eyes, took a long, measured breath, and opened them again.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They stepped out into the warm morning air. Humidity hung over the property, carrying the faint smell of the lake. Tom stayed beside Charlie as they walked to the front door.

Before Charlie could knock, the door swung inward.

Marcel Deschamps stood in the frame, leaning heavily on a cane. He was a small man with stark white hair and sharp, dark eyes.

He stared at Charlie. His mouth opened, then closed.

“Maxence,” Deschamps breathed.

He caught himself.

“Charlie.”

Deschamps blinked hard, his eyes glassy. “Forgive me. It’s just—you look so well.”

Charlie swallowed. “Thank you for seeing me.” He glanced toward Tom. “This is my husband, Thomas.”

Deschamps looked at Tom for the first time, then back at Charlie.

“Of course,” he said, stepping away from the doorway. “Please, come in.”

CHAPTER 25

Tuesday, August 24.

They followed Deschamps through the foyer and into the kitchen. Tall windows lined the far wall, with Lac des Deux Montagnes lying still beyond them.

“Please.” Deschamps gestured toward a round oak table. “Sit.”

Three white cups sat on matching saucers, each with a silver spoon. Tom pulled out a chair for Charlie, then took the one beside him.

“I hope you don’t mind watching me work,” Deschamps said, propping his cane against the counter. “Coffee is a process I prefer not to rush.”

He measured whole beans into a grinder. The machine filled the kitchen with noise. Under the table, Tom moved his hand to Charlie’s knee.

Deschamps tipped the grounds into a glass press. The kettle clicked off, but he waited before pouring.

“The French have many faults,” he said, “but at least they know boiling water is no way to treat coffee.”

He poured in a slow spiral, fitted the lid, and checked the clock on the wall.

“Four minutes.”

He remained by the counter.

“You said last night that Thomas is your husband. How long have you been married?”

“Almost a year.”

“And the immigration trouble came first?”

“It accelerated our timeline,” Tom said.

“By several years,” Charlie added.

Tom’s thumb pressed once into his knee.

Deschamps’s mouth twitched. “Deadlines have their uses.”

At exactly four minutes, he lowered the plunger. He carried the press to the table and filled each cup.

“Cream? Sugar?”

“Black, please,” Charlie said.

“Same,” Tom said.

Deschamps stirred a spoonful of sugar into his own. The spoon touched the saucer with a soft clink.

“When you called last night,” he said, “I could not make your voice belong to the boy I remembered. I had never heard it before.”

Charlie curled both hands around his cup without lifting it.

“The boy I knew in Lausanne was skeletal. Silent.” Deschamps turned the spoon between his fingers. “Nothing like the man who came to my door this morning.”

Tom’s hand remained on Charlie’s knee.

“I’m glad you brought your husband,” Deschamps said.

“So am I.” Charlie covered Tom’s hand with his own.

Deschamps nodded and took his first sip of coffee.

“I suppose you have questions about what happened in Lausanne.”

“I need to know what you saw.”

“Very well.” Deschamps settled back in his chair. “But drink first. Some conversations are better had with fortification.”

Charlie lifted his cup. The coffee was hot enough to sting his lip, but he swallowed anyway and set it down. Beside him, Tom’s shoulder rested against his. Deschamps ran his thumb along the handle of his own cup.

“First, you should understand what the facility was. It was clean. Inspected. The children ate three meals a day and attended classes. No one there believed they were abusing anyone.”

“The staff were civil servants with too many children and not enough time. Everything depended on routine. Wake at six. Breakfast at six-thirty. Classes, lunch, recreation, dinner, bed.” Deschamps paused. “For many children, it was merely inadequate. For you, it was making you worse.”

“In what way?”

“If a child woke screaming and disturbed the dormitory, he was separated from the others. If he became aggressive, he was separated for everyone’s safety. If he stopped speaking, no one interfered because quiet was easier.” Deschamps tapped one finger against his cup. “Different problems. The same answer every time: isolation. Therapy meant another appointment with a doctor responsible for eighty other children.”

He took a sip of coffee. “I first saw you six months after you were placed there. The Heitmeyers had retained me to explore the adoption. I had read the reports. I expected you to be frightened and withdrawn. I still wasn’t prepared.”

“For what?”

“The reports called it selective mutism. During my visits, it was total. I never heard you say a word. You wouldn’t make eye contact. You had lost so much weight that your clothes hung from your shoulders. You ate only enough to keep them from feeding you by force.” He sighed. “The staff called them your ‘episodes.’ You would sit in a corner for hours and stare at the wall. If anyone tried to touch or move you, your entire body locked. Your breathing became so shallow that they would check your pulse.”

Without deciding to, Charlie drew his elbows closer to his sides.

“The doctors described you as ‘profoundly disturbed,’” Deschamps continued. “They believed the trauma had permanently altered your development. That you might never be capable of what they called normal function.”

“Did you believe them?”

“I believed the condition they described. I did not believe they could know what you would become if you were taken out of it.”

Charlie loosened his arms.

“On my third visit, they were preparing to transfer you to a long-term psychiatric facility for minors in Zürich. More hospital than prison, they assured me. Children sent there generally remained for years. Some until adulthood.”

“You thought that would happen to me?”

“I thought that if they moved you again, eventually no one would be able to reach you.” Deschamps turned his cup slowly between his hands. “Every solution they offered was more isolation. I thought you needed people who would keep coming back.”

“The Heitmeyers.”

“Yes. They had already met you twice. They were determined to adopt you, but the ordinary process was moving too slowly. Resolving your biological father’s rights alone could have taken another year.”

Charlie swallowed. “So what did you do?”

Deschamps set his cup down.

“Did you break any rules?” Charlie asked.

“No. I made several people use rules they would rather have ignored.”

“How?”

“I asked the Swiss authority to treat the medical evidence as an emergency. I collected sworn reports from the facility and the physicians. I sought an urgent interim order instead of waiting for the ordinary timetable. Then I pressed the Canadian authorities to admit you temporarily while the adoption proceeded.”

“Pressed how?”

“Relentlessly.” A faint, humourless smile crossed Deschamps’s face. “I called people who did not wish to hear from me. Then I called them again. I

escalated every file I could escalate and demanded written reasons whenever someone said no.”

“Was any of that illegal?”

“No. Unwelcome is not the same as illegal. I falsified nothing. I did not smuggle you across a border. Every official involved signed something. Every decision had legal authority behind it.”

“So where did it go wrong?”

Deschamps’s smile vanished. “Afterward.”

Charlie waited.

“Once you were safely in Québec and the adoption was finalized, I closed my file without obtaining written confirmation that the final judgment had been added. I believed successor counsel had completed the remaining federal work,” Deschamps said. “I should have verified it myself.”

The French press stood between them on the table. Four minutes exactly. Deschamps had watched the clock to make coffee.

“You didn’t check,” Charlie said.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I believed the dangerous part was over.” Deschamps exhaled through his nose. “Because I was tired. And because I was arrogant enough to assume that something routine would take care of itself once the extraordinary work was finished.”

“It didn’t.”

“No.” Deschamps sat back. “That is how I remember it. But thirteen years is a long time, and I have my own interest in remembering myself favourably. Tremblay should compare everything I have told you against the surviving records.”

Charlie frowned. “You think you might be wrong?”

“I think I was your lawyer. That does not make me an impartial historian.”

For a while, only the clock on the wall made any sound.

“You don’t remember any of this, do you?” Deschamps asked.

“Not like that.” Charlie rubbed his thumb across Tom’s knuckles. “I know you’re talking about me, but it feels like you’re describing a file with my name on it. When you talked about the corner, I felt something. I don’t know what.” He shook his head. “I can’t see the room. I don’t remember you. I know it happened; I just can’t get from knowing it to remembering it.”

Deschamps accepted that without comment. Charlie studied the cooling coffee in front of him.

“I think you saved me,” he said.

Deschamps didn’t move.

“I also think you should have finished it.”

Deschamps lowered his eyes. He didn’t argue. “Yes,” he said.

Deschamps planted both palms on the table and pushed himself upright, reaching for his cane. “After you called last night, I went through what I still have of your file,” he said. “Most of it is boxed upstairs, but I found something I thought you should have.”

He crossed to a small secretary desk in the corner, opened its top drawer, and returned with a yellowed envelope covered in faded international stamps. Charlie accepted it carefully. “What is it?”

“A copy of the final Swiss psychological evaluation. It was completed three weeks before you left Lausanne.”

The facility’s name was printed in the upper-left corner. Charlie turned the envelope over, slid his thumb beneath the unsealed flap, and drew out the stiff paper. His name appeared at the top in rigid typeface.

CAILLAT, MAXENCE.

Below it sat a dense paragraph of French. A red stamp cut across the bottom of the page.

INSTITUTIONNALISATION RECOMMANDÉE.

The paper stopped halfway out of the envelope. Tom's hand closed around Charlie's knee, and Charlie slid the evaluation back inside. "Not here."

"You don't have to read it at all," Tom said.

"I want to." Charlie tucked the envelope into the inside pocket of his jacket, its stiff edge pressing against his ribs. "Just not here."

"Of course," Deschamps said.

"You said the Heitmeyers had already met me before you intervened."

"Yes."

"How did they find me?"

"They were working with an international adoption agency. They had specifically agreed to consider older children—children most prospective parents passed over."

Charlie waited.

"When Nancy saw your file, she noticed that you had been born in Paris and that your mother had taught piano." A faint smile appeared on Deschamps's face. "Apparently that was enough to make her insist on meeting you."

Charlie had never known.

"They visited three times," Deschamps continued. "The first visit was difficult. You wouldn't speak. You barely acknowledged either of them."

"Nancy went back?"

"She returned the second time with a portable keyboard."

Something stirred in Charlie's hands.

"She didn't ask you to play," Deschamps said. "She didn't ask you to talk. She sat beside you and played simple scales."

The mechanical sound of old keys reached his ears. Charlie's breath caught.

"Char?" Tom turned toward him.

"I'm okay." His voice sounded distant, even to him. Deschamps waited while Charlie closed his eyes, but the sensation weakened as soon as he

tried to examine it. “What happened the third time?”

“Nancy played again,” Deschamps said. “And you moved closer.” Charlie opened his eyes. “You still didn’t speak to her. You barely looked at her. But by the end of the visit, you were sitting close enough that your shoulders almost touched.”

“She reached me,” he said.

“Yes,” Deschamps said. “I believe she did.”

Charlie thought of Nancy at the piano. Nancy singing badly while she cooked. Nancy crying at every school concert as though she had personally composed the program. Before any of that, she had sat beside a silent fourteen-year-old with a portable keyboard and asked him for nothing. Charlie pressed his palm against the envelope inside his jacket.

“Keep the report,” Deschamps said. “It belongs with you.”

“I’ll read it when I’m ready.”

“Tremblay should have a copy.”

“He will.” Charlie pushed his chair back, and Tom stood with him. “Thank you for seeing me.”

Deschamps leaned on his cane. “I’m glad you came.”

Charlie hesitated near the kitchen doorway. “And thank you for telling me the truth.”

“You deserved an honest account.”

They walked back through the foyer, and Deschamps opened the heavy front door, letting the warm August air into the house. At the car, Charlie turned. Deschamps remained in the doorway, one hand resting on his cane.

Tom guided the sedan out through the gates and onto Avenue de Senneville.

Warm lake air moved through the open windows whenever the road curved close to the shoreline.

Charlie reached inside his jacket and withdrew the envelope. In daylight, it looked strangely ordinary. Yellowed paper. Faded stamps. Thirteen years

contained in something small enough to hold in one hand.

“Can you keep this until we get home?”

“Of course.”

At the next red light, Tom took the envelope and slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket. He pressed his palm briefly over it before returning his hand to the wheel.

A few kilometres later, Charlie laid his hand palm-up on the console between them.

Tom took it.

“There’s too much of it,” Charlie said.

Tom waited.

“Deschamps. Everything before him. Everything after. Mum and Dad.” Charlie watched the lake through the window. “I know I have to sort through it. I just—” He rubbed his thumb against Tom’s hand. “Not today.”

“You don’t have to do it today.”

“When we get home, can you take over for a while?”

“Of course. Anything.”

Charlie held his hand. Then he rested his head against the window and closed his eyes.

The penthouse door clicked shut. Charlie dropped his keys into the bowl by the door.

Cheddar appeared from the hallway, wound once around their ankles, and trotted toward the living room.

Tom removed his jacket and took out the envelope.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

Charlie nodded. “Tomorrow.”

Tom carried it into the bedroom and shut it inside the top dresser drawer.

When he returned, Charlie was still standing beside the door.

“Shoes off,” Tom said. “Then the couch.”

Charlie obeyed. By the time he reached the sectional, Cheddar had claimed one of the cushions. Charlie sat beside him and rested a hand on his back.

Tom heated soup and cut two slices of bread. He brought both bowls to the coffee table, sat beside Charlie, and began to eat without turning on the television or trying to start a conversation.

Charlie managed half the soup. Cheddar made one unsuccessful attempt on his bread.

They did not talk about Lausanne.

When Tom collected the dishes, Charlie lay back and closed his eyes.

A while later, water began running in the bathroom.

Tom added a few drops of eucalyptus oil. The sharp scent drifted into the bedroom with the steam.

Charlie found him there. He had loosened his collar and opened his cuffs but gone no further.

Tom held out his hand.

Charlie crossed the room and took it.

“Let me.”

Tom helped him out of his clothes and folded them onto the bench. Then he guided Charlie to the tub.

“In you go.”

Charlie stepped over the edge and lowered himself into the hot water. Tom pulled a stool alongside the tub and sat down, still dressed, his sleeves rolled to his elbows.

Charlie let his head rest against the porcelain.

Tom placed one hand in the water. Charlie found it and held two of his fingers loosely beneath the surface.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

The tension gradually left Charlie's face. The muscles across his shoulders loosened. Whenever his mind started back toward the envelope, he concentrated on Tom's hand in his and the eucalyptus hanging in the air.

The water had begun to cool when Charlie opened his eyes.

"Thomas?"

"I'm here."

"Can you take care of me in bed?"

"Do you want to sleep?"

Charlie shook his head.

"I want you to touch me." He drew Tom's hand closer. "I don't want anything but you."

Tom lifted their joined hands from the water and pressed his mouth to Charlie's knuckles.

"Okay."

Tom stood and opened the drain. Then he took a bath sheet from the rack and held it open.

Charlie stepped out of the tub and into the towel. Tom wrapped it around him, rubbed warmth back into his arms and shoulders, then knelt to dry his legs. Charlie rested one hand on Tom's shoulder for balance.

By the time they reached the bedroom, his body felt pleasantly heavy.

Tom turned down the duvet and switched off the overhead light. He stripped, climbed into bed, and waited.

Charlie lay on his side. Tom lay behind him, one arm beneath the pillow and the other across his waist.

For a while, neither of them moved.

Tom's breath warmed the back of Charlie's neck. The report remained shut inside the dresser. The room was dim and quiet.

Charlie found Tom's hand and drew it across his stomach.

Tom kissed the place behind his ear but kept his hand still.

Charlie guided it lower.

Only then did Tom begin to touch him.

The movement was slow. Charlie held Tom's wrist, tightening his fingers when he wanted more, easing them when he needed less. Tom followed every small adjustment without making him explain.

Charlie kept his attention on what was there: Tom's chest against his back, the cool sheet beneath his knee, warm breath along his neck, the movement of Tom's hand.

"Easy," Tom murmured.

"Daddy..."

Tom's breath caught. His mouth pressed against Charlie's shoulder.

"I'm here."

Charlie kept his eyes open. He held on to Tom's wrist and stayed with every movement.

Pleasure built gradually. When he came, it was quiet—his body stiffening against Tom's before releasing again into his arms.

Tom held him until his breathing slowed.

"Okay?" he asked.

Charlie nodded against the pillow. "Mhm."

Tom left only long enough to bring back a warm washcloth and a glass of water. He cleaned Charlie up, helped him drink, and climbed beneath the duvet again.

Cheddar appeared at the foot of the bed, circled twice, and curled up against Charlie's ankles.

Charlie turned into Tom and tucked his face beneath his chin.

He was asleep within minutes.

They woke once near sunset. Tom ordered dinner without asking Charlie to choose and brought him a plate in bed.

Afterward, Charlie curled against him and went back to sleep.

Wednesday, August 25.

Charlie woke first. He slipped out from under Tom's arm, crossed the hardwood floor, and took the envelope from the top dresser drawer.

Sheets shifted across the mattress behind him.

"Morning," Tom murmured, voice rough with sleep.

Charlie turned with the envelope in his hand. "I'm reading it now. If I don't, I'll spend all day deciding when."

Tom pushed himself up, pulling a T-shirt over his head.

"I want you here," Charlie said. "On one condition."

"Name it."

"Promise me you won't try to dismantle the Swiss child welfare system."

Tom looked at him. "You know I can't make promises I can't keep."

Charlie raised his eyebrows.

"Fine. I promise."

Charlie sat on the edge of the bed. Tom joined him, their shoulders pressed firmly together.

The evaluation was in French. Charlie unfolded the stiff paper and translated aloud, keeping his voice quiet:

"*Patient presents profound withdrawal consistent with severe trauma. Social engagement minimal. No verbal response observed during evaluation."*

Tom frowned. He sat a little closer.

"*Physical presentation suggests significant nutritional deficiencies. Sleep disrupted by recurrent night terrors. Dissociative episodes increasing in*

frequency and duration."

The clinical words didn't unlock a story. Only jagged, unattached sensory shards surfaced: the chemical sting of an institutional hallway. Sickly green walls. A coarse blanket scratching his collarbones. A nurse with a dark mole beside her mouth. The hollow rattle of metal wheels over linoleum.

None of it formed a coherent past.

"*Current interventions have produced no measurable improvement,*" Charlie read on. "*Without transfer to specialised psychiatric care, prognosis is poor. Institutionalisation recommended.*"

The red ink stamped beneath was stark: *INSTITUTIONNALISATION RECOMMANDÉE.*

Charlie lowered the paper onto his lap. The bedroom fell into a dead quiet.

"I thought it would do more," Charlie whispered.

"The report?"

"Make me remember."

"Did it?"

"Just pieces. They don't fit together." Charlie smoothed his thumb over the fold. "Deschamps didn't exaggerate."

"No."

"That's enough of it for one morning."

He slid the document back into its envelope.

"Let's put it away," Charlie said. "In the safe."

In the closet, Tom popped the hidden panel and stepped back to give Charlie the keypad. Charlie punched the code, and the heavy steel door swung open.

Inside sat the quiet anchors of their life: their passports, the deed, Tom's grandfather's watch, and their marriage certificate in its protective sleeve. Charlie slid the Swiss envelope into the safe, resting it squarely beside the certificate.

He pushed the door shut, the bolts engaging with a dull, final thud.

Tom caught him around the waist, pulling Charlie back against his chest and resting his chin in his hair. “Are you hungry?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“It’s past noon,” Tom murmured. “We should eat. Something comforting. Swiss? Or French?”

Charlie looked back over his shoulder, surprised. “You remembered the food in Bern.”

“I remember everything you love.”

“Tartiflette,” Charlie decided, a faint smile finally surfacing. “We’ll have to track down proper Reblochon at Les 5 Saisons, but it’s like the rösti you liked. Only richer.”

“Then we’re buying cheese,” Tom said, kissing Charlie’s temple. “We’ll even bake it in that ceramic dish Hazel gave us.”

Charlie took his hand, the last of the morning’s chill receding.

They left the report locked in the dark, and went out into the afternoon.

CHAPTER 26

Wednesday, October 6.

In thirty minutes, the car would be downstairs. Not long after that, Charlie would be sitting across from Dr. Osei with the Lausanne report between them.

First, he needed a shirt.

Charlie pushed his damp hair away from his forehead and pulled on the deep-blue cashmere sweater Tom had bought because it matched his eyes. His phone buzzed on the bathroom counter.

Car downstairs at 2. Driver has your tea. I love you.

Charlie typed back.

thank you. love you too.

Six weeks earlier, Charlie had told Tom he wanted a new therapist—someone who worked specifically with complex trauma. Tom had returned with three names, their credentials and availability, and a comparison chart because of course he had.

Charlie chose Dr. Osei.

After the first appointment, he had asked Tom to make Wednesdays simple: a car at two and Tom nearby when he came out. Tom had added the tea himself.

Charlie pulled on dark jeans and wool socks. He collected his therapy journal from the nightstand, then crossed into the closet. Behind the concealed panel, he keyed 0-8-2-8 into the safe.

The display flashed green.

The Swiss envelope still rested beside their marriage certificate. Charlie took it, closed the safe, and slid it into his messenger bag.

In the kitchen, a note was propped against the coffee maker in Tom's bold handwriting.

Eat something.

Charlie smiled, took an apple from the fruit bowl, and ate it standing at the counter.

The elevator ride gave him time to get his breathing under control.

Twelve, eleven, ten.

The numbers gave him something small and harmless to think about.

Outside, a black Lincoln waited at the curb. The driver opened the rear door and held out a paper cup.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery. Your tea."

"Thank you, sir."

Charlie settled into the leather seat with his messenger bag across his knees. The car pulled into traffic and headed toward Côte-des-Neiges.

He had seen enough therapists since the adoption to know how badly it could go. There were the ones who wanted him to focus on the positive. The ones who tried to CBT him out of panic attacks as though he simply hadn't reasoned with himself hard enough. Dr. Phillips had actually helped, until she retired.

Dr. Osei didn't fill his silences or tell him what he was supposed to take from them. After six sessions, Charlie trusted her enough to bring the report.

That put her comfortably ahead of the field.

The Lincoln stopped in front of a red-brick building. The driver glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

"Have a good appointment. I'll see you next week."

"Thank you, sir."

Charlie stepped into the cool October air, adjusted the strap of his bag, and went inside.

The waiting room on the fourth floor was quiet and softly lit, its walls painted sage green. Charlie hung his coat on the rack beside the door, then folded Hazel's cashmere scarf over the hanger. He adjusted the ends until they hung evenly.

His messenger bag rested against his ankle while he waited.

At exactly three o'clock, Dr. Nadia Osei opened her door.

"Charlie."

He followed her into the office and took his usual place on the left side of the burgundy couch. Dr. Osei settled into the armchair across from him.

"How was your week?"

Charlie rested both hands on his messenger bag.

"I've been thinking about something you asked me last week. About Thomas."

Dr. Osei nodded. "What about it?"

"I think I may have taken it the wrong way."

"How did you take it?"

Charlie unbuckled the leather flap of his bag.

"Like you thought I needed him in order to read the report."

He pulled out the yellowed envelope and placed it on the table between them.

"I asked what having him there made possible," Dr. Osei said.

"I know." Charlie rubbed his thumb over one of the envelope's frayed corners. "But that isn't what I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"That if he made it possible, I couldn't have done it without him."

“And could you have?”

“Yes.”

Charlie looked down at the envelope.

“I don’t know. That’s not the point.” He paused. “I could have read it alone.”

Dr. Osei said nothing.

“I just didn’t want to.”

He sat back against the couch.

“That should be allowed to be different.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” Charlie frowned. “I think so.”

“What makes you uncertain?”

He looked toward the window. Rain had begun to stipple the glass.

“Needing people has generally meant they get a vote.”

“A vote in what?”

“Everything.” Charlie gave a small, humourless laugh. “Where I lived. What I was called. What school I attended. Which country I belonged to. People made decisions because I needed them, and then told me the decisions were for my own good.”

“And Thomas?”

“Thomas likes making decisions.”

Dr. Osei’s mouth shifted slightly.

“He likes arranging things,” Charlie amended. “Cars. Appointments. Food. If I let him, he’d organize my entire life into a comparison chart.”

“Do you let him?”

“Sometimes.”

“What determines when?”

“I do.” Charlie hesitated. “Usually.”

Dr. Osei waited.

“He gets it wrong sometimes,” Charlie said. “He does things before asking. We fight about it. But when I tell him to stop, he stops.”

He looked down at his wedding ring.

“When Deschamps gave me the report, I said I didn’t want to read it there. On the way home, I asked Thomas to hold it. Later I told him I couldn’t face it that day, and he put it away. The next morning, I asked him to stay.”

“What would he have done if you’d asked him to leave?”

“He would have left.”

Charlie pictured it.

“He would have paced outside the bedroom until he destroyed the carpet, but he would have left.”

Dr. Osei smiled. Charlie touched the corner of the envelope again.

“He likes taking care of me,” he said. “Probably too much.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“I like it.”

The admission sat between them. Charlie shifted against the couch.

“I don’t like how much I like it.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes it very easy to stop paying attention.”

“Do you stop?”

“Not anymore.”

He considered that, then shook his head.

“Not often.”

The clock on the wall ticked into the silence.

“I asked him to stay while I read it,” Charlie said. “He didn’t assume. He didn’t take it out of my hands. He just sat there.”

“What did that give you?”

Charlie looked at the envelope.

“Someone who knew me now.”

His throat tightened unexpectedly.

“The report was about a child who couldn’t speak, barely ate, and sat staring at a wall for hours. Thomas has never known me like that.” Charlie rubbed his palm against his jeans. “He only knows the person who survived it.”

Dr. Osei remained still.

“I think I wanted him there so I didn’t have to be both people by myself.”

The words left Charlie staring at the carpet.

After a moment, Dr. Osei asked, “How does that feel to say?”

“Awful.”

She waited.

“True,” he added.

His phone buzzed once in his pocket. Charlie pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

I’m here when you’re ready.

Some of the tension left his shoulders.

“Thomas?” Dr. Osei asked.

Charlie nodded. “He always picks me up. He remembers everything.”

Charlie returned the phone to his pocket. When he looked up, the envelope was still sitting between them.

“He wasn’t the first person to do that,” he said.

“To do what?”

“Sit with me without asking for anything.”

Dr. Osei waited.

“Deschamps told me something about my mum.”

Charlie picked at a loose thread on the messenger bag.

“When Mum and Dad first came to Lausanne, I wouldn’t speak to them. I barely acknowledged them.”

“Do you remember that?”

“No.”

“What do you remember?”

“Nothing about them.”

He pressed his palm against the wooden arm of the couch.

“On their second visit, Mum brought a keyboard. A small one. She sat beside me and played scales.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. That was the idea.” Charlie swallowed. “She didn’t speak to me. She didn’t try to touch me. She just played.”

“Deschamps said that by the third visit, I’d moved close enough that our shoulders almost touched.”

“Do you remember doing that?”

“No. I remember the keys.”

“The keys?”

“The mechanical sound.” Charlie flattened his palm against the armrest. “I don’t know if it’s a real memory or something I made from what he told me.”

“It may not be possible to know.”

“I know.”

He looked toward the rain-streaked window.

“She never told me.”

“Have you asked her?”

“No.”

“What has stopped you?”

Charlie considered lying.

“She’ll cry.”

“And you?”

“I might.”

Dr. Osei nodded. Charlie glanced at the clock. Their hour was nearly over.

“If I don’t ask her today, I’ll rehearse it until Christmas.”

“Do you want to ask her today?”

He looked once more at the envelope.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I do.”

Charlie returned the report to his bag and fastened the flap. Dr. Osei stood with him.

“I’ll see you next week.”

“Unless this goes terribly and I flee the country.”

“In that case, send an email.”

Charlie smiled. “I will.”

Tom was waiting beside the car when Charlie pushed through the doors. Charlie crossed the pavement straight into his arms, and Tom folded around him.

“Home?” Tom murmured into his hair.

Charlie pulled back just enough to search his face. “Actually... can we go to Mum and Dad’s?”

Tom hesitated for a fraction of a second, reading the quiet resolve in Charlie’s eyes, before giving a single nod and opening the door.

A grey October sky hung low over the city, scattering yellow leaves against the curb as they drove.

When the car pulled up outside the house, Tom shifted into park but left the engine running. He turned in his seat, his hand finding Charlie's cheek. "I'll wait here," he said softly. "Take as long as you need with her."

Charlie let out a quiet breath. He leaned across the seat to kiss him, lingering for a moment before stepping out onto the cold pavement.

Nancy answered the door in reading glasses, her eyebrows drawing together in surprise. "Sweetie? Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, Mum." Charlie kissed her cheek and stepped into the warm hall.

Peeking past him through the sidelight, Nancy spotted the car idling at the curb. "Where's Thomas?"

"He stayed in the car," Charlie said. "He knew I needed to talk to you alone."

Nancy's eyes narrowed as she took in the tension held in Charlie's shoulders. "All right. Come into the kitchen."

Charlie set his bag on a chair, rubbing his cold palms together. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Do you still have the keyboard from the orphanage?"

Nancy went entirely still, her eyes closing for a brief, pained second. "...Deschamps told you."

"He said you brought it on your second visit to Lausanne. That you sat on the floor beside me and played." Charlie took a seat at the table. "Do you still have it?"

Pulling off her glasses, Nancy looked mildly offended. "Of course I still have it. Stay there." She vanished into the basement, leaving Charlie to sit in the quiet kitchen and listen to cupboards banging and the scrape of boxes across the concrete downstairs. A curse drifted up from below.

A few seconds later, she reappeared carrying a battered black nylon case against her hip. “Your father has attempted to throw this away approximately twenty times.”

“I heard that!” David’s muffled voice floated down from upstairs.

Nancy raised her chin toward the ceiling. “Then hear that you were wrong!”

The zipper jammed halfway around the case, but Nancy yanked it free to reveal a cheap portable keyboard. Its white keys had aged to butter-yellow and one corner of the housing was bound in black electrical tape. Charlie stared at it, resting two fingers against the plastic.

Nothing came. No flood of memory.

“What did you play?”

“Scales,” Nancy said softly. “Your Swiss file said you played piano, but not what you knew. I couldn’t think of anything else.”

“Deschamps said I wouldn’t speak to you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Or look at you.”

“No.”

“Did you know if I could even hear you?”

Nancy shook her head, tears threatening at the corners of her eyes. “I hoped.”

Charlie traced the edge of an octave. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“The doctors told us not to bring up Lausanne unless you asked,” Nancy said quietly, folding her glasses over her thumb. “And then you came home, and there were doctors and school and nightmares... time passed, Charlie. Eventually I just didn’t know how to give it to you.”

Charlie swallowed against the knot in his throat. “Why did you keep playing if I gave you nothing back?”

“Because you stayed in the room.” When Charlie looked up, Nancy murmured, her eyes on the yellowed plastic, “The first day, every time we

came within ten feet of you, you bolted. When I played, you stayed. You didn't look at me, but you stayed until I lifted my hands."

"And you kept coming back."

"Especially then."

Charlie pressed his lips together, his vision blurring. "Deschamps said by the third visit, I sat beside you."

"You did."

"Did I play?"

"No."

"Did I look at you?"

"Not once."

"Then how did you know I wanted you there?"

Nancy offered a trembling, watery smile. "Because when I first brought the keyboard, you sat against the far wall. On our next visit, you dragged your chair over until it touched mine." Her hand rested lightly over his on the table. "That was enough."

Charlie stared down at the battered case between them. "Does it work?"

Nancy fished an ancient adapter from the pocket and plugged it into the wall. As a low, faint electric hum whispered through the grille, she let out a breathy, startled laugh. "Apparently."

Charlie pulled his chair in, their knees brushing under the table. "Play what you played."

Nancy hesitated, then centred her right hand over middle C. Eight thin, reedy electronic notes climbed through the kitchen air.

Charlie closed his eyes, bracing himself. No images flashed. Then he felt it: through the fingers he still rested against the plastic casing. The hollow, mechanical *clack* of the unweighted keys bottoming out.

His breath hitched.

When Charlie opened his eyes, Nancy's hand had stilled on the high C, and she was watching him with breathless anxiety.

"Again," he whispered.

Nancy began the scale once more. On the second octave, Charlie lifted his hand and joined her. She faltered for a fraction of a beat, a quiet sob catching in her chest, before finding the rhythm again.

Their fingers moved together up the cheap keyboard, hers tucked beneath his.

Friday, December 24.

At eight o'clock on Christmas Eve, nobody knocked.

Tom looked toward the foyer anyway, just a momentary turn of his head before catching himself and smoothing the dish towel over the stove handle. Charlie caught it from the piano bench.

The penthouse was far warmer than it had been a year ago. A crooked balsam tree from Atwater Market brushed the ceiling beams, its lights reflecting in the dark glass like stars over the city. Beneath the lower branches, Cheddar slept with one paw draped over a silver package.

The wall clock flicked to 8:01. Charlie lifted his hands from the keys.

"They came at eight last year."

"Come here," Tom murmured, dropping the towel and opening his arms.

Charlie crossed the room and stepped straight into his chest. Beneath Charlie's cheek, Tom's heart was running slightly too fast.

"Pierre would call before sending anyone up," Charlie murmured against his collar. "And Hazel threatened bodily harm if we mentioned immigration before January."

"I know." Tom's arms locked around Charlie's back. "None of that seems to have reached my nervous system yet."

Charlie slipped his hands under the hem of Tom's shirt, resting his palms against warm skin. "Then we'll wait it out."

They stood beside the island while eight o'clock drifted into 8:03, then 8:05. No elevator chimed. Far below, a car horn sounded, swallowed by the falling snow.

Slowly, the thudding beneath Charlie's ear levelled out.

Charlie leaned back. "Better?"

"Yeah." Tom's gaze drifted toward the tree. "Though *your* animal is currently vandalizing your gift."

A soft, unmistakable *riiiiip* drifted from beneath the balsam. Cheddar had rolled onto his flank, one claw hooked through a silver ribbon, steadily shredding the foil paper.

"Traitor," Charlie gasped.

Tom lunged. Charlie caught him around the waist, laughing helplessly as Tom scrambled to rescue the package without dragging Charlie across the hardwood with him. By the time Tom hoisted the box out of reach, Cheddar had already darted beneath the piano to groom an innocent paw.

"You see?" Tom breathed, breathless and triumphant. "This household requires my firm executive oversight."

Charlie took the box and placed it high on top of the bookcase. "This household requires taller shelves."

Tom caught Charlie by the hips before he could step down and smiled.

"Merry Christmas, honey."

Charlie glanced at the oven clock: *8:12*.

The hour had become ordinary again.

He looped his arms around Tom's neck and pulled him down into a slow kiss.

"Merry Christmas, Thomas."

Saturday, December 25.

At eleven the next morning, the elevator opened and the Heitmeyers arrived all at once.

Nancy led with a massive roasting pan despite Tom's assurances that lunch was covered. David followed with three bottles of wine tucked against his chest, Alex balanced a precarious tower of gifts under his chin, and Hazel and Julian trailed behind, still bickering over who had forgotten the cheese.

Within five minutes, the penthouse smelled of melting snow, cinnamon, turkey, and the sharp rosemary Nancy had packed around the bird.

"You catered Christmas?" Nancy asked, eyeing the covered platters along the island.

"Supplementary food," Tom corrected. "You brought an entire turkey."

"Because I know you." Nancy pushed the heavy pan into his hands and kissed his cheek. "Put this somewhere warm."

Charlie watched from beside the tree as his family effortlessly colonized the room. Alex's wet socks were drying by the hearth, a crushed bow lay on the coffee table, and someone had set a sweating wine glass directly onto one of Tom's architectural monographs without a coaster.

Tom clocked the glass. He stared at it for three long seconds.

Then he walked right past it.

Charlie hid his smile behind his mug.

Lunch stretched into the afternoon, loud and cramped. They knocked knees beneath the table, passing bowls in both directions while Nancy argued that Tom's potatoes were suspiciously smooth.

"Pommes purée," Tom maintained.

"Does French make them taste more expensive?" Alex asked.

"Yes," Charlie said. "That's how French works."

David nodded solemnly. "Can confirm."

By mid-afternoon, they had drifted to the living room, surrounded by discarded paper. Hazel produced a narrow box wrapped in forest green.

“From me. Julian contributed emotional support.”

Julian raised his coffee. “I approved the ribbon.”

Inside lay a minimalist silver watch—clean, pale face, no numbers, and a blue second hand ticking in silent, precise increments.

“Hazel. It’s beautiful.”

“Give me your wrist.” She fastened the clasp snugly beneath his wrist bone. “Now you can be late with authority.”

“I’m never late.”

The entire room turned to look at him.

“I am *infrequently* late.”

“You operate in a private, highly exclusive time zone,” Hazel said, leaning over to kiss his temple. “Merry Christmas, baby brother.”

Across the room, Tom watched them with an expression so openly tender that Charlie felt his face grow warm.

Hazel’s phone buzzed against the sofa cushion. She glanced down slightly.

Tom straightened. “What?”

“Forensic accountants,” she said quietly. “On schedule. Final review lands January tenth.”

Tom held Charlie’s gaze across the room. “January.”

“Right,” Nancy announced, dusting crumbs from her skirt. “Nobody move. Photograph.”

Tom immediately began gathering crumpled wrapping paper from the floor.

“Leave it,” Nancy ordered.

“It looks like a detonation.”

“It’s Christmas,” Nancy said.

“It can be both,” Hazel offered.

Tom surveyed the crowded sectional. “There are a lot of Heitmeyers.”

“You married one,” Charlie said, taking his hand and pulling him into the frame. “Accept the consequences.”

Julian propped the phone against a book on the console, tapped the ten-second timer, and vaulted over Alex to squeeze onto the end of the sectional.

“Alex, pick up the cat!” Nancy barked.

Alex scooped Cheddar from a nest of tissue paper. Cheddar immediately lodged a back claw against Alex’s windpipe.

“Your son is resisting arrest!”

The camera flashed just as the cat violently detached itself. Alex yelled, Hazel dissolved into laughter, and Julian caught Cheddar mid-air as David blinked blindly into the flash.

“Again,” Nancy commanded.

Two orderly shots later, Nancy surrendered the phone and sat beside Charlie, swiping through the results. The final shot was respectable—everyone smiling, nobody moving, even Alex presentable.

Charlie reached over and swiped back to the first frame.

David’s eyes were shut. Nancy was bent double with laughter. Hazel had both hands outstretched toward the airborne cat, and Alex was shouting directly into Cheddar’s belly.

And Tom wasn’t looking at the lens at all. He was looking at Charlie, his mouth curved, completely unguarded.

“Send me this one,” Charlie said.

Nancy frowned. “The disaster?”

“It’s not a disaster.”

“Alex looks possessed,” Hazel observed from the floor.

“I’m putting it in the foyer,” Charlie told Tom, who had leaned down over the back of the sofa.

Tom studied the glorious, chaotic mess on the screen, then pressed a soft kiss to Charlie's temple.

"Okay, honey."

Charlie tapped save.

CHAPTER 27

Tuesday, December 28.

Charlie woke to the scent of butter, cinnamon, and coffee, and Montréal buried under a blanket of quiet snow.

He reached for his phone: twenty-eight on the twenty-eighth. The family chat had been active since midnight—twenty-eight gold balloon emojis from Hazel, a chaotic singing voice memo from Nancy with David questioning the lyrics in the background, and an offer from Alex to administer twenty-eight shots under medical supervision, to which Tom had replied: Absolutely not.

A metallic clatter echoed from the kitchen, followed by Tom's sharp: "Cheddar."

Charlie padded down the hall.

Tom stood barefoot at the stove in dark sleep pants, an apron blazoned with KISS THE COOK in glaring red letters, and a streak of cinnamon batter across one forearm. The whisk lay on the tile, and Cheddar was crouched at the edge of the island, methodically gnawing on a stolen strawberry.

Tom looked up, the focus dropping from his face. "You're supposed to be in bed."

Charlie walked behind him, catching the waist ties of the apron and tugging him back. "You haven't said it yet."

Tom turned in his grip, his expression softening as he framed Charlie's face with warm hands. "Happy birthday, honey."

He kissed him—slow, thorough, and unhurried—before brushing a thumb over Charlie's cheek.

"Back to bed."

Charlie peered into the pan at two golden slices of brioche. “Those look suspiciously competent.”

Tom gave him a look.

“Better than the protein pancakes.”

“They were fine.”

“They bounced, Thomas.”

Tom turned him gently by the shoulders. “Bed.”

Charlie took two steps toward the hall, then paused. “What did you plan?”

“You said you wanted quiet. Breakfast. Present. Lunch. Cake. Dinner. No visitors. Hazel can call after four.”

Charlie leaned against the island. “Do I have to choose lunch?”

“No.”

“Dinner?”

“No.”

“Good.” Charlie met his eyes. “I don’t want to choose anything today. You pick. I’ll just tell you if you’re wrong.”

Tom’s mouth curved. “So I’m choosing, but you still have veto power.”

“Obviously.”

His expression shifted, darkening slightly. “Everything?”

Warmth crept up Charlie’s neck. “Everything.”

Tom pointed the spatula toward the hall. “Bed. Take your accomplice.”

Breakfast arrived on a wooden tray: brioche French toast piled with berries and maple syrup, two lit candles—a two and an eight—standing in the centre, and Charlie’s morning medication resting beside his tea.

Tom set the tray across Charlie’s lap and climbed in beside him, Cheddar taking up an observant position at the foot of the duvet.

“Make a wish,” Tom said.

“Wishes only work on cake.”

“Close enough.”

Charlie closed his eyes. He wished for the exact same room next year. The same man beside him; the same cat planning a felony at the end of the bed. It felt embarrassingly greedy, but he made it anyway and blew out the flames.

Tom stole a blueberry from the tray.

Charlie fed him a forkful of syrup-soaked toast, watching Tom’s eyes stay locked on his face as he chewed. They finished the plate together, moving the tray just before Cheddar could launch a coordinated offensive, and Charlie swallowed his tea and pills.

Tom took the dishes away and returned with a narrow package wrapped in brown paper.

“You said nothing excessive.”

Charlie looked at the package, then at him. “I remember.”

“Open it.”

Charlie stripped the paper away. A hardcover bound in deep crimson cloth slid into his palms, silver lettering gleaming across the front: *Velvet Thunder*.

Charlie froze. “No.”

Tom was already grinning without mercy.

Charlie cracked the cover. Across the title page, in dramatic, looping script:

For Charlie—

May your love always be louder than the thunder.

—Raven Blackthorne

A sound somewhere between a gasp and a laugh tore out of Charlie. “You found her?”

“I found her agent.”

“Is she actually a reclusive billionaire?”

“Her agent declined to comment.”

Charlie stroked his thumb reverently over the silver ink. “This is the greatest thing you’ve ever bought me.”

“I bought you a violin.”

“This is signed.”

Tom laughed aloud.

Charlie placed the book carefully on the nightstand, then shifted across the sheets, climbing straight into Tom’s lap.

Tom drew him in by the waist. “Twenty-eight.”

“Ancient.”

Tom pushed Charlie’s hair back from his forehead. The humor disappeared from his face.

“I’m glad you were born.”

Charlie went still.

The words landed somewhere deep and tender.

He touched Tom’s cheek. “I love when you say things like that.”

Tom’s eyes softened. “Good.”

Charlie pulled him down into a kiss.

He tasted coffee and maple syrup on Tom’s mouth, holding Tom’s jaw between both hands while Tom’s fingers gripped his hips, pulling him flush.

When Charlie finally broke away, breathless, the red letters of the apron were crumpled between their chests.

Charlie hooked a finger under the neck strap, his pulse thudding high and sweet in his throat.

“What happens next?”

“You said I was choosing.”

“I did.”

Tom glanced toward the foot of the bed.

Cheddar was washing one paw.

“First, the cat leaves.”

Charlie laughed.

Tom lifted him from his lap and set him against the pillows. Then he gathered Cheddar from the duvet.

Cheddar objected immediately, extending all four legs and catching one claw in Tom’s shirt.

“This is oppression,” Charlie said.

“He ate half a strawberry and attempted to steal your breakfast.”

“He’s celebrating.”

Tom deposited him in the hallway and shut the bedroom door.

A muffled yowl followed.

“He’ll survive,” Tom said.

Charlie watched him cross the room.

Tom stopped beside the bed and pulled the apron over his head.

“I liked that.”

“Too late.”

He dropped it onto the chair.

Then he caught the hem of his shirt and pulled it off.

Charlie started to sit up.

Tom put one hand against his chest and pressed him gently back into the pillows.

“Lie down.”

Charlie did.

Tom’s hand remained over his heart for a moment.

“If anything’s wrong, you tell me.”

“I will.”

Tom took Charlie's wrist and guided his hand above his head.

"Both of them."

Charlie placed the other beside it.

Tom looked down at him.

"Yes, Daddy," Charlie said.

"Good boy."

Tom bent and kissed him. He held Charlie's wrists against the pillow with one hand while the other slid beneath his shirt.

Charlie opened for him. Tom's palm travelled up his side, warm against his skin, before catching the hem.

"Arms up."

Charlie obeyed.

Tom pulled the shirt over his head and dropped it beside the apron. He kissed Charlie again before reaching for the waistband of his sleep pants.

Charlie lifted his hips.

Tom drew the fabric down with his underwear and tossed both toward the floor.

His gaze moved over Charlie without disguise.

A year of being looked at that way had done nothing to make it less effective. Heat spread across Charlie's chest.

Tom bent over him. His mouth found the hollow beneath Charlie's throat, then moved lower.

He kissed Charlie's chest. The soft place beneath his ribs. His stomach.

Charlie's hands shifted against the pillow.

Tom looked up.

"Where did I put those?"

Charlie returned them above his head.

“Sorry, Daddy.”

Tom kissed one hip.

“No, you’re not.”

He kissed the other.

Then his hand closed around Charlie.

Charlie’s hips lifted before he could stop them.

Tom pressed them back into the mattress.

“Stay.”

Charlie gripped the pillow.

Tom’s thumb moved once over the head. Charlie’s breath caught.

Then Tom lowered his mouth.

Charlie’s whole body tightened.

Tom took him slowly, one hand firm around the base and the other resting across Charlie’s hip. His tongue moved with deliberate pressure.

Charlie tried to keep still.

Tom drew back until only the head remained between his lips, then took him deep again.

“Thomas.”

Tom hummed.

The vibration went through Charlie so sharply that one hand left the pillow.

Tom caught it before it reached his hair.

He lifted his head.

Charlie made a frustrated sound.

Tom turned Charlie’s hand over and kissed the centre of his palm.

“Put it back.”

Charlie obeyed.

“That’s my boy.”

Tom returned his mouth to him.

He gave Charlie no chance to recover. His hand and mouth found a rhythm, changing whenever Charlie’s breathing began to settle.

Charlie’s thighs started to shake.

“Daddy.”

Tom held his hips firmly against the bed.

The pleasure gathered low and fast. Charlie twisted his fingers into the pillowcase.

Tom took him deeper.

Charlie came with Tom’s name breaking in his mouth. His back lifted from the mattress, every muscle pulling taut before releasing at once.

Tom stayed with him until the last tremor passed.

For several seconds, Charlie could hear only his own breathing.

Tom kissed the inside of his thigh, then moved back up the bed.

Charlie reached for the front of Tom’s sleep pants.

Tom caught his wrist.

“No.”

Charlie stared at him. “It’s my birthday.”

“Yes.”

“You can’t stop me from touching you on my birthday.”

“Apparently I can.”

“That seems unconstitutional.”

“You can ask Hazel at four.”

Charlie reached again.

Tom returned his hand to the pillow.

“You said I was choosing.”

“I’m reconsidering the arrangement.”

“No, you aren’t.”

Tom kissed him.

Charlie smiled against his mouth.

“No work today,” Tom murmured.

“I wasn’t going to work.”

Tom glanced pointedly toward his own lap.

“I was going to help.”

“Later.”

Tom kissed him once more, then reached into the nightstand.

“Onto your side. Face the windows.”

Charlie turned.

Snow continued to fall beyond the glass. The buildings nearest the mountain had faded into pale silhouettes.

Behind him, Tom removed the rest of his clothes. The mattress shifted as he pressed himself against Charlie’s back.

Tom kissed his shoulder.

“Lift your leg.”

Charlie drew his top knee toward his chest. Tom arranged a pillow beneath it, leaving Charlie open without requiring him to hold himself there.

“Good?”

“Yes.”

The lubricant bottle clicked open.

Tom’s first finger pressed inside slowly.

Charlie breathed out. Tom’s other arm came around his waist, holding him securely against his chest.

“Easy,” Tom murmured.

Charlie relaxed into him.

Tom worked the finger deeper before adding another. His mouth stayed against Charlie’s shoulder, kissing him whenever the stretch made his breathing catch.

Charlie reached behind him and caught the back of Tom’s neck.

Tom curled his fingers.

Pleasure went sharply through Charlie’s body.

“There,” he gasped.

Tom did it again.

Charlie pressed back toward his hand.

“Greedy,” Tom murmured.

“It’s my birthday.”

“That defence cannot apply to everything.”

“It can today.”

Tom laughed softly against his neck.

He worked his fingers in a slow rhythm until Charlie’s thigh began to tremble against the pillow. Then he withdrew them.

Charlie opened his eyes.

Tom shifted closer behind him. The hard length of him pressed against Charlie’s body.

“Stay like this,” Tom said.

“Yes, Daddy.”

Tom slicked himself. He lifted Charlie’s thigh slightly and positioned himself behind him.

The first push made Charlie grip the sheet.

Tom stopped.

“I’m okay,” Charlie said.

Tom kissed his shoulder. “I know.”

He pressed forward again.

The stretch came slowly. Charlie felt each inch of him, the pressure easing into fullness as Tom entered him.

When their bodies met, Tom stopped.

Charlie looked out at the snow. Tom’s hand spread across his stomach. His mouth rested against the back of Charlie’s neck.

“Breathe, baby.”

Charlie let out the breath he had been holding.

Tom withdrew partway and pushed inside again.

The angle was deeper like this. Charlie’s hand slipped from Tom’s neck and closed around his forearm.

Tom began slowly. Each thrust was measured, his body held close behind Charlie’s.

Charlie let himself follow the movement.

Tom knew him. He slowed when Charlie tightened and pressed deeper when Charlie moved back toward him. When Charlie’s breathing changed, Tom’s hand travelled down his stomach and closed around him.

Charlie gasped.

“Too much?”

“No.”

Tom stroked him once.

Charlie’s fingers dug into his forearm.

“Again.”

Tom’s mouth curved against his shoulder.

“I thought I was choosing.”

“You are. Choose that.”

Tom did.

The next thrust drove deeper. Charlie cried out and turned his face into the pillow.

“That’s it,” Tom murmured. “Let me hear you.”

His pace increased.

Charlie could no longer separate the movement of Tom’s hand from the drive of his hips. Each sensation folded into the next until there was no space left between them.

“Daddy.”

“I’ve got you.”

“Hold me.”

Tom’s arms drew him against his chest.

Charlie turned his head. Tom met him awkwardly, their mouths catching at the wrong angle before finding each other.

Tom thrust harder.

Charlie’s cry broke against his mouth.

“There,” Tom said. “That’s what you needed.”

Charlie could only nod.

Tom’s next thrust struck the same place as the last, then again.

“Cum for me,” Tom said.

Charlie’s body locked around him.

The second orgasm hit harder than the first. Charlie clutched Tom’s forearm and let Tom hold him through it, his body shaking inside the circle of Tom’s arms.

Tom’s rhythm faltered.

He buried his face against Charlie’s shoulder and breathed him in.

“Inside,” Charlie managed.

Tom hesitated for half a beat.

“Still?”

“Yes. Please, Daddy.”

Tom drove deep and stayed there. For a long moment, neither of them moved.

Tom’s arm remained around Charlie’s waist. Their breathing slowed together.

Outside the windows, the snow kept falling.

Tom kissed the back of Charlie’s neck.

“Happy birthday, honey.”

Charlie laughed weakly. “Thank you.”

Tom withdrew carefully. Charlie rolled onto his back and watched him leave the bed.

Tom returned with a warm washcloth and a glass of water.

“Very romantic,” Charlie said.

“You’ve already had candles.”

Tom cleaned him gently, wiping his stomach and thighs before dropping the cloth beside the bed.

He held out the water.

“Drink.”

Charlie took several swallows and handed it back.

Tom set the glass on the nightstand beside the signed book. Then he climbed beneath the duvet and pulled Charlie against him.

Charlie tucked his head beneath Tom’s chin.

CHAPTER 28

Wednesday, December 29.

“Why are there chips twice?” Hazel asked. She had arrived with a laptop and a bag of clementines; the laptop was open, but the clementines remained untouched.

“I asked everyone to confirm what they’re bringing,” Charlie said, leaning over to see her screen. “Lukas replied first.”

The party had been Hazel’s idea, but hosting it at her place was out of the question. *“Our apartment is a security risk,”* she had pleaded earlier in December, referring to Julian’s sprawling architectural model currently dominating their dining table. *“There are individual trees. There are people smaller than my fingernail. One drunk sleeve and the entire municipal population loses its roof.”*

With Hazel's evenings consumed by the Michael review, they had split the duties. Charlie handled the guest list, food coordination, and entertainment, while Hazel took on decorations, lighting, and whatever distinction existed between arranging a table and setting one. When Charlie had first shown Tom the combined guest list, Tom had beamed at the mix of names.

“Both groups? I love that.”

Since sending the potluck invitations on December twelfth, replies had trickled in while Charlie meticulously built the trivia board, one category at a time. Now, sitting with Hazel, there were only two food entries left to confirm and one music clue he still worried was unfair.

“I’ll ask Jason about dessert,” Charlie decided, texting him: *Could you bring dessert? Bought is fine.*

Jason quickly replied with a photograph of a supermarket brownie box and a question mark.

Perfect.

That evening, Charlie found Tom folding laundry on their bed. “Hazel and I finished the food list,” Charlie said. Tom set down a towel to review it, and after crossing out two complicated items and adding three smaller ones, they settled on a final prep list of ten lines—several of which just involved opening containers.

“And the trivia’s nearly finished,” Charlie added.

Tom grinned. “Do I get an advance copy?”

“No.”

“A hint? A single category?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I’m funding the snacks,” Tom pointed out.

“The integrity of the board is paramount,” Charlie said, closing his laptop. “You’ll play with the team I assign you, and you’ll like it.”

Friday, December 31.

At four, Charlie was waiting for the mushrooms to stop releasing water.

“Now?”

Tom looked into the pan. “Nearly. Keep them moving.”

Charlie stirred. Beside him, Tom rolled another meatball between his palms and set it on the baking sheet.

“The recipe says five minutes.”

“The mushrooms don’t know that. Stir.”

Charlie gave the pan another minute. The wet hiss changed to a quieter sizzle. When he dragged the spoon through the middle, the bottom stayed visible.

“There,” Tom said.

Charlie took it off the heat.

They worked on opposite sides of the island, sharing the sink and getting in each other’s way at the fridge. Tom handled the meatballs and potatoes. Charlie made the dips, cut the bread, and, once the mushroom filling had cooled, spooned it into small squares of pastry and folded them closed.

His first parcel split when he pressed the edges together.

“Less filling,” Tom said.

“It seemed wasteful to leave room.”

“The room is for the cheese.”

Charlie looked at the bowl of grated cheese he had forgotten.

“Right.”

Tom stepped beside him and folded one, wetting the edge before sealing it without flattening the whole thing. Charlie tried again. This one held.

“Good,” Tom said, and returned to his tray.

By the second row, Charlie had stopped measuring each spoonful. By the third, he could fold the parcels without looking down.

He gave Tom the team assignments as he worked, keeping the categories to himself.

“Matt and Priya.”

Tom laughed.

“What?”

“Nothing. Who else?”

“Sarah and Lukas. André and Jason. You and Julian.”

Tom considered that. “Hazel isn’t playing?”

“She’s keeping score.”

“That seems dangerous.”

“I know.”

Charlie pressed the last edge closed. The parcels were uneven, but they stayed shut when he moved them onto the tray.

Tom looked over. “Save me one.”

“There are twenty-four.”

“Lukas is coming.”

Hazel showed up at six armed with wine, cut flowers, and a box of silver stars she swore she had always owned. By six-thirty, the apartment was dim and twinkling and Charlie had moved the bread back to a spot where guests could actually reach it.

The buzzer started going off at seven, and the foyer quickly disappeared under a mountain of winter coats.

Matt arrived carrying a precarious stack of wings, followed closely by Priya with a salad and Sarah clutching a chocolate cake wrapped in a tea towel. Jason proudly deposited his supermarket brownies on the counter next to André’s wine. Last came Lukas, who walked in double-fisting two massive bags of chips because, as he loudly pointed out, the word had appeared twice on the spreadsheet.

It took exactly ten minutes for all hosting protocol to completely collapse.

Nobody actually sat in the living room. Instead, the guests clustered tightly around the kitchen island, abandoning their plates by the windows and returning to the spread to graze on different food. Charlie spent the first twenty minutes hovering anxiously by the sink with a roll of paper towels tucked under his arm, waiting for a spill, until Sarah finally just kicked a stool his way.

“Sit,” she instructed. “You’re brandishing paper towels.”

Charlie sat.

At nine, he slipped into the bedroom for his index cards. Before heading back, he pulled one of Tom’s dark suit jackets from the wardrobe. Over his

sweater, the shoulders swamped him and the sleeves fell past his knuckles, looking considerably more theatrical than intended.

He tucked the notes into the breast pocket anyway.

Tom spotted him first from the hall. “Oh, honey.”

“What?” Charlie asked, tugging self-consciously at a cuff.

Tom just smiled, hopeless and fond.

Matt turned around. “Are we doing trivia or hosting a telethon?”

“Trivia,” Charlie said, pushing his sleeves back to tap the trackpad. “The pledge drive is later.”

Six blue columns illuminated the screen:

Hockey. Music. Montréal. Velvet Thunder. St. James. Hazel Quotes.

Hazel lowered her glass. “No.”

“Everything is sourced,” Charlie said.

“That does not comfort me.”

Teams scrambled into place: Matt and Priya claimed one end of the sectional; Sarah and Lukas took the other; André dragged a chair over for Jason; while Tom and Julian settled on the rug by the coffee table.

“Thomas is barred from the St. James category,” Charlie announced.

Julian adjusted his spectacles. “I have inferred a great deal.”

Charlie cleared his throat, checking his cards. “The team that answers correctly chooses the next clue. Please raise your hand and wait to be called on. You may confer, but—”

“Hockey for two hundred!” Matt barked.

“I haven’t finished the rules.”

“Sorry.”

Charlie looked down, having lost his place entirely. “Whatever. You know how it works.”

Matt and Priya claimed the hat-trick clue; André immediately identified the opening flute in Ravel's *Boléro*; and Julian swept *Velvet Thunder* for six hundred by naming Cirque du Soleil as Raven Blackthorne's alleged former employer.

"Wait," Jason said, skimming the paperback Charlie tossed him. "She hunts rare truffles in Burgundy?"

"Allegedly," Tom supplied.

Matt pointed at the board. "Hazel Quotes for four hundred."

Charlie read: "'He was medically paralyzed by his own—'"

"Hubris!" Matt shouted.

"Hand," Charlie reminded him.

Priya yanked Matt's wrist into the air. "Hubris," Matt repeated.

"Correct."

Hazel marked her legal pad. "I stand by that diagnosis."

Order survived for perhaps three more clues. Then everyone stopped waiting for Charlie to call on them. Priya clocked Chopin from the opening bar of the *Revolutionary Étude*; Julian named Habitat 67 before Charlie finished the prompt; and when a Daily Double appeared, Lukas and Sarah spent two full minutes aggressively debating how much nonexistent money to wager.

Matt began shouting an alternate, rogue score while Hazel methodically docked him points for "belligerent commentary."

By the time Charlie closed the board, André and Jason had officially won by two hundred, though Matt insisted he and Priya had taken the night by six hundred.

The blue glow vanished, and the room relaxed into easy, post-game disorder. Priya read purple prose from *Velvet Thunder* aloud; Sarah carved cake with a butter knife; and Hazel ate brownies straight from the plastic container at the island.

In the kitchen, Charlie spotted a single warm mushroom parcel left on a baking sheet. He picked it up and dropped onto the rug beside Tom.

“Saved you one.”

Tom looked up, the lines of fatigue around his eyes softening completely. “Thank you.” He bit into it, caught a flake of pastry before it hit his trousers, and held out the other half.

Charlie shook his head. “That one’s yours.”

Tom finished it, his shoulder leaning solid and warm against Charlie’s. Charlie stretched his legs under the coffee table, content to sit quietly inside the noise.

At five to midnight, Hazel commandeered the television for the countdown. Matt circulated with wine while Julian opened sparkling water. Charlie draped Tom’s jacket over the back of a chair and returned to Tom’s side, setting their glasses on the console.

Lukas started counting down at fourteen, got immediately shouted down, and started over at ten with the whole room joining in.

“Three! Two! One!”

Tom caught the nape of Charlie’s neck, pulling him close. Charlie was laughing into the first kiss, the contact catching the corner of his mouth before Tom adjusted and kissed him deeply.

“Happy New Year, honey.”

“Happy New Year, Thomas.”

A noisemaker blared directly into Charlie’s ear as Matt smacked Tom’s shoulder hard enough to interrupt the follow-up kiss, and Hazel shoved between them to pull Charlie into a fierce hug.

“Happy New Year, baby brother.”

“Happy New Year, Hazy,” Charlie murmured.

When she let go, the room had dissolved into raised glasses, overlapping embraces, and arguments over whether Lukas had ruined the countdown.

Charlie sank onto the sectional beside Tom, tucking his feet under the table and taking a brownie from the passing box.

Across the room, the oversized jacket hung loosely from the chair, entirely forgotten, as Charlie rested his head against Tom's shoulder and watched the new year settle in.

Monday, January 10, 2028.

At ten on Monday morning, Hazel laid a stack of printed files on the conference table and opened her laptop.

"The forensic review is complete," she said, remaining standing. "The core financial documents match independent filings. A reporter won't have to take Kathy's word for any of it."

She brought up the Montgomery Foundation records on the wall screen. "Donors were told sixty percent of gala contributions went directly to designated community programs."

Charlie remembered the white flowers, the crystal champagne flutes, and Michael standing beneath the chandeliers lecturing on stewardship. "How much actually went?"

Hazel advanced the slide. "Seven percent."

Tom leaned back, stunned. "Seven?"

"Legitimate expenses took a minor cut," Hazel said. "The rest moved through consulting, licensing, and event-management contracts that route directly back to Michael and his associates. The Foundation wasn't distributing capital; it was cycling it through his own network."

"Jesus Christ," Tom muttered, staring at the screen.

Hazel closed the slide and tapped the thickest dossier on the table. "The financial scheme is ironclad, but we need to establish boundaries. The financial records are entangled with employee files, surveillance memos, and personal correspondence regarding people entirely outside the Foundation."

"My immigration file," Charlie said.

“Yes.”

Tom’s whole body went rigid, his voice going cold. “He used that file to threaten you. If reporters see what he did—”

“No.” Charlie set his hand flat over the folder. “He doesn’t get to use it again. Neither do we.”

Tom turned to him, dark and conflicted.

“My immigration history doesn’t need to become public for people to understand he stole from charity,” Charlie said, his voice quiet but immovable. “If the financial evidence proves fraud, use the financial evidence. Keep the employee records private. No personal correspondence unless it establishes the paper trail. We already know he’s cruel; we don’t need to perform it for the press.”

Tom rubbed a hand over his mouth. “If it’s all true, why are we shielding him?”

“We aren’t shielding him,” Charlie said, looking down at the names under the cover. “We’re protecting everyone else he kept a dossier on.”

The hard anger didn’t leave Tom’s face, but the focus shifted. He turned his palm up on the table; Charlie slipped his fingers into it, grounding them both.

Hazel closed the dossier with a decisive snap. “A narrow disclosure won’t necessarily destroy him. He will likely stay extraordinarily wealthy. Montgomery Holdings could survive.”

“I don’t care about his net worth,” Charlie said. “I care that people were told their money was helping programs that never saw a cent of it. That’s what people need to know.”

Tom looked back at the screen. “That’s enough.”

Hazel opened an encrypted email client. “I have contacts at the *Financial Post* and *Le Devoir*. Once I transmit the verified financial packet, we don’t control where the reporting leads. We can limit what we hand over, but not what they uncover.”

She looked directly at Charlie. Tom said nothing, leaving the choice entirely in Charlie's hands.

"Make the introductions," Charlie said.

She glanced at Tom. He squeezed Charlie's hand once, hard. "Do it."

Hazel typed two recipient addresses and hit send.

The screen blinked, and the file was gone.

Wednesday, February 2.

At 9:02 that morning, a strip of winter sunlight had reached the coffee table. Tom's phone lay in the middle of it, face-up and silent.

Charlie sat beneath Tom's arm with a book open on his lap. He had read the same paragraph three times.

"You're doing it again," he said.

Tom looked away from the phone. "So are you."

Charlie glanced down at the unchanged page.

"That's different."

The phone lit before Tom could answer.

One chime. Then another, close enough to overlap.

Tom picked it up.

The first alert was from the *Financial Post*.

DONORS WERE PROMISED 60%. RECORDS SHOW 7% REACHED NAMED PROGRAMS.

Tom opened it immediately.

"It's live."

Charlie closed his book and leaned closer. Before the article finished loading, another notification appeared.

"*Le Devoir* too," Tom said.

A message from Hazel followed.

Both investigations are live.

Tom opened the *Financial Post* article.

They read it together.

The promised sixty percent. The seven percent that had reached the named programs. The consulting contracts, licensing fees, and event-management companies whose ownership led back through the Montgomery structure. The article linked to corporate registry records and described invoices verified independently of the archive.

Charlie scrolled.

There was nothing about his immigration file.

Nothing about the surveillance material. No employee records. No private correspondence included simply because it was ugly.

Michael's name was in the headline.

Charlie's wasn't in the article at all.

He returned to the beginning and read the headline again.

For years, Michael had treated his life as something that could be filed, withheld, released, or used. This story stood without it. The numbers were enough.

Tom's phone began vibrating with new messages. Payton. Two members of the firm's board. Three numbers Tom didn't have saved.

He ignored them.

"I thought this would feel louder," he said.

Charlie looked up. "How does it feel?"

Tom considered the question.

"Like he can't put it back."

Charlie rested his hand over Tom's.

"No," he said. "He can't."

Tom turned the phone face-down on the table and drew Charlie closer.

It vibrated once against the wood.

Then again.

Neither of them reached for it.

CHAPTER 29

Friday, February 4.

The story had slipped out of their hands entirely.

The *Financial Post* and *Le Devoir* pieces had cascaded across every national wire, cross-referenced against the Foundation's corporate filings by reporters who didn't need any coaching. The seven-percent figure led every headline Tom refreshed, though Charlie knew that wasn't what he was tracking.

On the coffee table between them lay a legal pad with nine names scribbled in Tom's upright hand.

Tom's phone rang against the wood.

"Payton," Tom answered, flicking it to speaker. "Charlie's here."

"Good. Three Foundation donors have demanded complete records. One of their general counsels called me this morning."

Tom leaned forward. "Why you?"

"They know I backed the firm. They wanted to know if you had anything to do with the press."

"What did you tell them?"

"To read the bylines."

Charlie let out a quiet, dry laugh.

"Who called?" Tom asked.

"No."

"Payton."

“They didn’t call you, Tom. Don’t volunteer.” A rustle of files came over the line. “They’re consulting outside counsel. That’s all I know.”

“And Michael?”

“Hasn’t reached out.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“It’s the answer you get.” A beat. “If that changes, I’ll call.”

The line went dead.

Charlie reached for the yellow pad. “Nine?”

“One is Hazel.”

“Eight, then.”

“I wasn’t going to call them,” Tom said.

Charlie set the pad back down. “You haven’t yet.”

Tom looked at the list—eight people who owed him favours, eight people positioned to pull board seats or expedite a freeze before anyone realized a thumb was on the scale.

He flipped the pad facedown.

Charlie closed his laptop and stood, extending a hand. “Kitchen. You need something that hasn’t gone cold.”

Tom looked at the abandoned sandwiches and half-empty mugs, then let Charlie pull him to his feet.

As they crossed the room, the phone vibrated against the table behind them.

Tom didn’t turn around.

Charlie cleared the mugs and legal pad off the table to make room for takeout just as Tom’s phone buzzed against the wood.

Tom answered, snapping apart a pair of chopsticks and tapping the speaker.

“Michael’s lawyers sent letters to three former Foundation employees this afternoon,” Hazel said without greeting. “Alleged NDA breaches, threats of

injunctions and damages. One of them leaked the letter straight to the *Financial Post*."

Tom's hands stilled over the cartons. "Do they have counsel?"

"Our lawyers gave the reporters a contact number to pass along. Independent representation at our expense, completely unconditioned, names withheld unless they choose otherwise. Both papers received litigation threats too, but nothing is being pulled. There's nothing more for you to do tonight, Thomas."

She hung up.

Tom set the chopsticks down.

Charlie sat opposite him. "What is it?"

"I used to get summaries of letters like that." Tom looked at the darkened phone. "At Montgomery. Legal would report an employment dispute, say it was resolved, and that was the end of it."

"Did you know who they were sending them to?"

"No." He rubbed a thumb along the edge of the table. "I never asked."

Charlie waited.

"For years I told myself it wasn't my division." Tom looked up at him. "But I was vice-president. I sat in those meetings. Someone would say a problem had been handled, and I let that be enough."

"You walked away."

"Eventually."

Tom looked back at the phone. "I should have asked."

"Yeah," Charlie said quietly.

He reached across the table and covered Tom's hand.

"Three people opened those envelopes tonight because we leaked the archive."

"Michael sent them."

"Because of what we did."

Charlie was quiet for a moment. “Do you wish we hadn’t sent it?”

“No.” Tom turned his hand beneath Charlie’s. “Do you?”

“No. But that doesn’t make this part okay.”

“No.”

Tom picked up his phone with his free hand and typed to Hazel: *No names come back to us. Even if counsel thinks it helps our strategy.*

Her reply appeared almost immediately. *Already firewalled.*

Tom turned the screen toward Charlie.

Charlie read it and gave a small nod. “Of course she did.”

He nudged one of the cartons toward Tom, then pulled his chair around the corner of the table until their knees touched.

Tom picked up his chopsticks.

Wednesday, April 12.

Ten weeks of closed-door interviews, formal summonses, and opaque police queries ended at 8:43 on a Wednesday morning when Hazel called.

“Turn on the news.”

Charlie grabbed the remote. Every channel carried the same live feed: cruisers barricading a heated driveway in Westmount. Glass, concrete, the steps dark with melting slush.

Tom sat slowly on the sofa as Charlie dropped beside him.

“—executing an arrest warrant at the residence of Michael Montgomery. Charges confirmed by the DPCP include fraud over five thousand dollars, unauthorized use of a computer, and interception of private communications —”

The heavy front door opened.

Michael emerged flanked by two officers, his wrists cuffed in front of him.

Tom's fingers began an involuntary, frantic tap against his knee. That was the door he and Charlie had walked out of the night Tom resigned, his company phone left on the glass table behind them, Charlie's hand trembling in his grip. Tom hadn't looked back then.

He couldn't look away now.

Charlie covered Tom's hand, stilling the tremor beneath his palm.

Michael kept his chin high through the shouting press pack. At the curb, he turned toward the cameras, the glare catching his profile straight-on—and for a sharp, suffocating second, Tom recognized the terrifying familiarity of his own face in his father's.

"...Police have confirmed his son, Thomas Montgomery, among the alleged surveillance victims."

The chyron flashed: **SON AMONG ALLEGED SURVEILLANCE VICTIMS.**

"Mute it," Tom said.

Charlie cut the audio instantly.

Tom's phone vibrated on the coffee table.

Kathy.

Brunch. Rosélys. 10. Alone.

Tom checked the corner of the screen: 8:47. "She knew."

"Looks like it," Charlie murmured, reading over his shoulder.

"Come with me."

"If you want me there."

Tom looked at the four clipped words again. "No. She'll just talk around you."

"Probably." Charlie's thumb brushed the back of Tom's knuckles. "You don't have to go, Thomas."

"I know."

On screen, the muted cruiser pulled away, red and blue light flashing against the wet pavement.

At 8:54, Tom typed: *I'll be there at ten.*

By nine-thirty, he had his coat on in the foyer.

"I'll text when I arrive," Tom said. "And when I leave."

"If you want me, call," Charlie said, stepping into his space. "I don't care what she asked."

"I know."

Tom pulled him in. Charlie flattened a hand between Tom's shoulder blades, holding him solid and anchored until the elevator chimed down the hall.

Tom kissed him once before stepping into the car.

Charlie stayed in the threshold, watching until the doors slid shut between them.

Kathy sat in a corner banquette with a clear sightline to the entrance, wearing a tailored cream suit, her hair immaculately set. Half of her mimosa was already gone.

A waiter appeared with black coffee before Tom could even reach for the menu.

"I took the liberty," Kathy said. "Eggs Benedict, smoked salmon, hollandaise on the side."

"Yes."

She folded her hands on the linen. "I assume you saw."

"I watched."

"Then there's no need to describe it."

"Were you at the house?"

"I left your father on Monday. Two investigators arrived asking where he kept his passports. I answered them, then arranged to have my things moved to an apartment in Old Montréal while he was at the office."

Tom studied her. “You didn’t warn him.”

“No.”

“Did you know about the Foundation?”

“I did not know it was seven percent.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

Kathy set down her glass. “The Foundation was mine before Michael transferred administration to Holdings. I cultivated the donors. I hosted the galas. My name was on every envelope.”

“And when the disbursements stopped making sense?”

“I received summaries.”

“Did you believe them?”

“I accepted them,” she said evenly.

The waiter set down two plates, which neither of them touched.

Tom leaned in. “Why send me the archive that night?”

Kathy smoothed the corner of her napkin. “Because I watched your father lose a room he believed he owned.”

Tom remembered the ballroom—Charlie alone at the Steinway, Michael stranded by the stage as the applause rolled over him.

“Charlie played,” Tom said.

“Michael intended to humiliate him. He misjudged both Charles and the room.”

“Charlie.”

“Charlie,” Kathy amended smoothly. “It convinced me that remaining tethered to your father’s judgment was no longer prudent.”

“You flagged the immigration folder separately.”

“Michael had no right to touch that file. I thought your marriage was reckless and I still do. But that did not give him licence to deport Charlie to make you obedient.”

“Why am I here, Mother?”

“I would like the possibility of contact,” she said. “An occasional lunch. An invitation to broader family events, where appropriate. I don’t expect to be welcomed into your home, and I certainly don’t expect Christmas.”

“You need people to see us together.”

Her eyes cooled. “In the coming months, every room in this city will be watching to see if my son speaks to me. Of course that matters.”

“There it is.”

“It is not the *only* thing that matters.”

Tom looked at her untouched plate. “Why didn’t you reach out before today?”

“Would you have answered?”

“No.”

“So I waited until I had left him.”

Tom looked at the woman across from him—who remembered his breakfast down to the side dish, but had waited over a year to ask how he was surviving.

“I’m not giving you an answer today. I’ll speak with Charlie.”

Her eyebrow arched. “You require your husband’s permission to lunch with your mother?”

“No,” Tom said, sliding his chair back. “You’re asking to enter a life Charlie and I built together. He gets a say. There isn’t a version of me you get to separate from my husband when it suits your social calendar.”

Kathy watched him, calculating. “Very well.”

Tom stood and pulled on his coat.

“Thomas.”

He paused.

“I did not know it was seven percent.”

Tom met her gaze one last time. “You knew not to ask.”

Kathy offered no defence, and Tom left her alone at the table.

The April wind caught Tom as he cleared the hotel doors. He called before he hit the corner.

“Hey,” Charlie answered on the first ring.

“I’m out.”

“How was it?”

Tom glanced back at the tinted glass facade. “She walked on Monday. Investigators showed up asking where he kept his passports, so she packed while he was at Holdings.”

A beat of quiet on the line.

“She wants back in,” Tom said.

“What did you tell her?”

“That I wasn’t deciding today. I’m walking back.”

“Okay,” Charlie said softly. “Come home.”

In the elevator, Tom caught his reflection in the mirrored wall. His tie had drifted slightly off-centre. He reached to straighten it, stopped himself, and let his hands fall.

The doors slid open.

Charlie came down the hall in sleep pants and an oversized sweater, one sleeve pushed past his elbow, hands damp from the sink. He took one look at Tom’s face and crossed the foyer.

Tom pulled him in before shedding his coat, the cold wool bunching between them as Charlie slid a warm palm under Tom’s collar, fingers anchoring against the back of his neck. Tom buried both hands into Charlie’s sweater, leaning heavily into his warmth until the elevator chimed and descended behind them.

“She wants access,” Tom murmured into his shoulder. “Occasional lunches. Broader events. Made a point of saying she doesn’t expect Christmas.”

“That’s specific.”

“She admitted being seen with us matters. Claims it isn’t the only reason.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I don’t know.”

Charlie tilted his head back, searching Tom’s eyes. “What did she say about the archive?”

“She kept it for self-defence. Sent it after the gala because she saw Michael lose the room when you played—she knew humiliating you hadn’t worked. And she said he had no right to touch your immigration file.”

Charlie’s eyebrows rose. “Her exact words?”

“Yeah.”

“Did she call me Charles?”

“Once. I corrected her.”

“And?”

“She took the correction.”

Charlie stared at him for a quiet second. “Huh.”

Tom loosened his grip on Charlie’s sweater, though Charlie kept his hand resting against Tom’s neck. “What do you think?”

“I think she gave us the records that broke him,” Charlie said carefully. “And I think she watched him destroy people for years before she handed them over.” He glanced toward the living room, where the television sat dark and silent. “I don’t know either.”

“We don’t have to answer her today,” Charlie added.

“I already told her that.”

“Good.”

Tom looked past him toward the blank screen. “I thought this morning would feel different.”

Charlie waited.

“I wanted him arrested. I still want him stopped,” Tom said, his voice dropping. “But when that officer put a hand over his head to guide him into the back of the cruiser...” He broke off, his throat working.

Charlie’s thumb moved once, grounding, against the nape of his neck.

“For half a second, I wanted to drive up to Westmount.”

“To do what?”

“Tell them not to touch him like that. Tell him—” Tom stopped, his hands clenching at his sides. “I don’t know.”

“Did you want them to let him go?”

“No,” Tom said instantly. “No.”

Charlie nodded.

“I hated watching it,” Tom said, staring at the empty wall. “I hate him. And he’s still my dad.”

“Yeah,” Charlie whispered. “I know.”

After a moment, Charlie reached up, undoing the top button of Tom’s overcoat. “You’re still wearing this.”

Tom looked down, as if realizing the heavy wool was still on his shoulders. Charlie eased the coat off him, hanging it in the closet while Tom’s phone remained forgotten in the pocket.

“Coffee?” Charlie asked.

“Please.”

Charlie took his hand, leading the way into the kitchen.

Charlie played four measures, stopped, and restarted from the top.

By the fifth repetition, Tom crossed the rug and sat beside him on the bench.

“I’ve been thinking about my mother,” Tom said.

Charlie let the final chord fade beneath his fingers. “Sounds dangerous.”

“I don’t want her back in our lives,” Tom said. “Neither do I want to tell her she can never speak to me again. Text only, to my phone. No calls unless I ask. She doesn’t contact you directly, and she never comes here.”

“No spontaneous dinners,” Charlie added. “No staged photo-ops.”

“Agreed. And I don’t have to answer.”

“You stop whenever you want.”

Tom pulled out his phone and typed:

You may contact me by text. Do not contact Charlie directly or come to our home. We are not agreeing to visits or public appearances. I will answer if and when I choose.

He showed Charlie.

“‘If and when’ is hostile,” Charlie noted.

“Is it unclear?”

“No.”

“Then it stays.”

“I didn’t say I disliked it.”

Tom tapped send. Three pulsing grey dots appeared almost instantly, hovered, disappeared, reappeared for three agonizing seconds, and vanished.

Nothing came through.

“She can take an instruction when she wants something,” Tom murmured, setting the phone facedown on the soundboard. He paused, looking at his hands. “I want to call Elena.”

“Want me to stay?”

“Yes.”

Tom picked up the phone again and set it flat on the soundboard, tapping speaker.

It rang four times.

“Tomás.”

“Hi.”

“I saw.” Elena’s voice was slightly tinny through the small grate, but her kitchen was audible behind her—the clink of a spoon, the hum of a refrigerator. “Charlie is there?”

“I’m here, Elena,” Charlie said toward the phone.

“Make sure he drinks water. When his chest gets tight, he stops drinking water.”

Tom rubbed a knuckle against the bridge of his nose. “I'm right here.”

“Then go get a glass.” She paused. The spoon settled against ceramic. “How are you doing?”

Tom’s thumb traced the bevel along the piano’s edge, back and forth over the polished walnut. “Do you remember him teaching me to skate?”

The line went very quiet. The distance between their apartments suddenly felt vast.

“At the outdoor rink by the tracks,” Elena said softly. “You had those double-runner blades because your ankles kept giving out.”

“He was patient.” Tom’s voice stayed low. “He spent two hours holding my coat by the collar so I wouldn’t fall. I kept thinking about it this morning while they were walking him down the steps. Was that bullshit? Was he just performing?”

“No,” Elena said. “He loved you on that ice. That is the terrible part, Tomás. If he had hated you from the beginning, it would be simple. You could throw all of him in the garbage. But he was patient, and he loved you, and he still did what he did. Both are true.”

Tom didn’t answer. His hand had curled into a fist against his thigh. Charlie didn’t say anything; he just laid his palm open on the bench between them. Tom’s fingers found it, locking on hard enough to whiten his knuckles.

“You do not let him ruin the skating,” Elena told him, her voice firming up. “He does not get to take that back just because he became a monster later.”

Tom exhaled, his eyes shutting against the sunlight hitting the floorboards. “Thank you.”

“Come over Sunday and bring a level. The shelf in the pantry is still crooked.”

“I told you, the bracket was stripped—”

“Then buy a new bracket.” She cleared her throat. “And you will need to help me bring the hard suitcase down from the closet.”

Tom’s eyes opened. “Why?”

“I bought a ticket yesterday.”

Tom sat up straighter, his grip on Charlie’s fingers tightening again. “A ticket where?”

“To Cali. Clara is turning sixty in September. She told me if I do not come, she will give my share of our mother’s silver to our cousin Mario.”

“When are you leaving?”

“End of August.”

“For how long?”

“November.”

“I—November?”

“Tomás—”

“That’s three months. You never go for three months.”

“I have only ever gone for ten days, staring at the clock the entire time, spending half the trip crying because I have to pack again,” she said. “Clara is sixty. I want to sit on her porch. I want to drink coffee without looking at a calendar. I am allowed to go home for a season.”

“You have a return ticket?”

“November twelfth. Avianca.” A soft, exasperated sigh. “Stop it. Do not start saying goodbye to me in April, Thomas. You are doing it very loudly, and you haven't even seen the suitcase yet.”

Tom pressed his free hand to his forehead. A rough, startled breath shook out of him, halfway to a laugh.

“There,” she said. “That is better. You and Charlie will come for dinner this weekend. You will carry the bags when the time comes. But I swear to God, you will not stand at the departures curb at Trudeau looking like an abandoned dog.”

“I don’t look like an abandoned dog.”

“You look like you're waiting for the rain to drown you,” Charlie murmured from beside him.

Tom shot Charlie a dark look, but the panic had lost its teeth. “I’m hanging up on both of you.”

“You will not,” Elena said. “Not until you tell me what time you are coming on Sunday.”

They talked for ten more minutes—debating baggage weight, the price of flights, and what gifts to bring—before hanging up.

Tom left the phone on the piano, his fingers still threaded through Charlie’s. The apartment was quiet again, the morning sun stretching across the floorboards.

Tom nodded toward the sheet music. “What were you playing?”

“Nothing yet. Just four measures. I was trying to figure out what comes next.”

“Play what you have.”

Charlie turned back to the keys. He played the first phrase, fragile and clear. Yet at the end of the fourth measure, he paused, took a breath, and went back to the start, changing a single note to let the chord ring open.

Tom stayed on the bench beside him, their shoulders touching, and listened.

CHAPTER 30

Friday, April 14.

The fifth measure had consumed most of Charlie's afternoon. He sat curled at one end of the sectional, the manuscript balanced on his knee, his pencil hovering over a note that had already proven wrong in three distinct ways.

Beside him, his phone lit up:

Schulich School of Music — Postdoctoral Fellowship Offer

His hand went motionless.

Dear Dr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery,

We are pleased to offer you an appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Musicology Area, Department of Music Research, Schulich School of Music, for the period September 1, 2028 to August 31, 2030...

Charlie read through the paragraph, reached the period, and immediately started over.

When Professor Mehta had urged him to apply back in the autumn, Charlie had still half-expected the academy to lock its doors the moment McGill was no longer obligated to host a doctoral student. In March, he'd sat through a fifty-three-minute gauntlet with the committee, answering questions about the dissertation, the book it might become, and what he wanted to teach.

Now an offer was sitting in his inbox.

Two years of fully funded research. Unrestricted access to Schulich's historical instrument collection. And at the bottom: *One independently taught graduate seminar, Tuesdays and Thursdays.*

The questions began catching fire before he could stop them. Silence not as an absence of sound, but as an active, deliberate physical choice. The

acoustics of restraint. Taking *The Architecture of Absence* apart and rebuilding it into a book and putting the ideas directly under the hands of living musicians to see what held.

He wanted it. He wanted it desperately.

Then his eyes snagged on the header: *Funding and Appointment Terms.*

His grip tightened on the phone. He wouldn't walk into another trap.

Charlie set the phone aside, pulled his laptop onto the cushion, and opened their conflict register.

He dug into the funding codes first, then the trust administering the endowment, then every faculty member on the committee. He pulled annual filings, cross-referenced trustees, and ran each name through the master index of Michael's corporate subsidiaries, shell boards, and known proxies.

Nothing.

No Laurentian Arts Initiative. No Montgomery satellite funds. No familiar board members lurking two degrees removed.

Charlie cleared the search and ran it again from scratch.

The lines stayed clean.

On his third pass through the registry, he forced his fingers off the trackpad.

Charlie dropped his head into his hands, the breath rushing out of him in a stunned, disbelieving laugh that echoed through the quiet room.

Charlie lowered his hands and reached for his phone. He took a screenshot framing the subject line, his name, and the opening paragraph of the offer, sending it to Tom without a word.

The message went to *Read* immediately. The typing bubble flickered once, vanished, and Charlie's phone rang.

"Hi," he said.

"Is this real?" Tom's voice was low and urgent. In the background came the sharp click of an office door shutting.

“Yes.”

“You checked the funding?”

“Three times. No foundations, no familiar board members, nothing tied to Michael. It’s clean.”

A heavy silence filled the line, punctuated only by Tom’s breathing.

“It’s at McGill,” Charlie said. “I wouldn’t have to leave.”

“I know.”

“I can teach my own seminar.”

“I know, baby.” A chair scraped sharply across the floor on Tom’s end. “I’m coming home.”

Charlie laughed. “Thomas, you’re at work.”

“I can leave.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I’m coming home,” Tom repeated, his voice softening around the edges.

Charlie looked back at the email on his laptop, the relief finally catching in his throat. “Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The line went dead.

Charlie set the phone aside and pulled his manuscript closer. The fifth measure remained as stubbornly unresolved as he’d left it; he stared at the ink for a full minute, hovered his pencil over the staff, and changed nothing.

Across the room, Cheddar was curled in a patch of afternoon sun on the sectional.

“Thomas is coming home,” Charlie told him.

Cheddar opened one slit of an eye, judged the announcement uninteresting, and went back to sleep.

Charlie carried the pages over to the piano. He played through the four completed measures, halted where the fifth was supposed to open, and let his hands fall into his lap. Sitting still was impossible.

Before he could talk himself into another attempt, the front deadbolt clicked.

The front door slammed shut with the heel of a shoe.

Tom dropped his briefcase by the console, coat hanging open, tie pulled crooked, his dark eyes locked on Charlie before he'd even cleared the foyer.

"Say it."

Charlie stood from the bench. "They offered me the fellowship."

Tom closed the distance and hauled him clean off his feet.

"McGill," Tom breathed into his neck, spinning him once before Charlie could even get his arms hooked around his shoulders.

"Thomas!" Charlie gasped, laughing straight into Tom's collar as Cheddar scrambled under the sectional in a blur of orange fur.

Tom kissed him—hard enough to knock Charlie back against the edge of the soundboard—before finally letting his feet touch the floor. His hands framed Charlie's face, thumbs smoothing over his cheekbones.

"Dr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery," Tom said, his voice thick with pride. "Postdoctoral Fellow, Schulich School of Music. I'm telling everyone."

"You have to let me sign the offer first."

Tom froze, his hands stilling against Charlie's face. "You haven't accepted?"

"You arrived twenty-four minutes after I sent the screenshot." Charlie tilted his head, deadpan. "Besides, I thought you were my sugar daddy. Why do I need a job?"

The colour surged instantly from Tom's collar to the tips of his ears.

Charlie dissolved into a laugh, catching Tom by the front of his crooked tie. “I’m joking. I’m joking.”

“That wasn’t funny.”

“It was a little funny.”

“Charlie.”

“I want it,” Charlie murmured, rising on his toes to kiss the sternness off Tom’s mouth. “Very much.”

Tom’s hands came to his waist. “Then take it.”

“I will. But I want half the salary to go to Passage.”

Tom blinked. “Half?”

“Post-tax. Before you start running the deductions.”

“I was going to ask.”

“I know you were.”

Tom searched his face, his tone shifting into something cautious and gentle. “Char, that’s a significant amount. You don’t have to give your income away out of some lingering guilt over having money.”

“It isn’t guilt.” Charlie smoothed his palms flat against Tom’s chest. “Passage started with your capital. We designed the pilot together, but you funded it. This is money I earned with my own research. I want to put it into something we built.”

Tom studied him. “You could keep every cent. Open your own accounts. Build an investment portfolio that belongs entirely to you.”

Charlie wrinkled his nose. “I don’t want an investment portfolio. I don’t want to think about markets or whatever terrifying spreadsheets you look at for fun.”

“They aren’t terrifying. They’re beautifully organized.”

“Thomas.”

“They have conditional formatting.”

A smile tugged at Charlie's mouth. "You take care of us. I trust you, and I know how rare that is. But Passage matters. If I'm making money we don't need to survive, I want half of it doing actual work."

Tom looked at him for a long, quiet beat. "Okay."

"And the other half stays ours," Charlie added.

"Ours," Tom agreed softly.

He leaned down, cupping the back of Charlie's neck, and pulled him into a kiss that was slow, deep, and completely sure.

Charlie kissed him for a long moment before planting a palm flat against his chest.

"Wait. I haven't actually accepted."

Tom closed his eyes. "Right."

Charlie laughed, slipping out of his arms to retrieve the laptop. Tom sat beside him on the sofa, their thighs pressed together. At the bottom of the offer was the acceptance portal; Charlie attached his electronic signature, drafted a concise confirmation to Professor Mehta, and hovered the cursor over *Send*.

Tom's hand rested on his knee.

"Ready?" Tom asked.

Charlie clicked. The email sent.

Tom leaned in, kissing his temple. "Postdoctoral fellow."

Charlie closed the laptop, set it on the coffee table, and caught Tom by the knot of his loosened tie. "Bedroom."

Tom's eyebrows went up, but he let Charlie haul him to his feet. At the threshold, Tom reached for the knot.

"Leave it," Charlie said.

Tom's hand dropped.

Charlie pushed the door shut behind them, slipped his hands beneath Tom's suit jacket, and shoved it off his shoulders onto the bench.

"Sit."

Tom sat on the edge of the mattress, a slow, knowing smile touching his mouth. "You have a plan."

"Yes. And you don't get to know what it is." Charlie stepped between his knees, unbuttoning Tom's shirt from the collar down. When Tom reached instinctively for his waist, Charlie caught both wrists. "I didn't give you permission to touch me."

Tom froze, the smile fading into something darker. "No."

Charlie let go. Tom placed both palms flat on the mattress beside his thighs and kept them there.

Charlie parted the linen, leaving the dark silk tie hanging against Tom's bare chest. He ran a finger down the length of it. "You left work like this?"

"More or less."

"Were you in a meeting?"

"Yes."

"With whom?"

Tom didn't hesitate. "I have no idea. I saw the screenshot; everyone else in the room became irrelevant."

Charlie smiled, caught Tom's face, and kissed him thoroughly, taking his time until Tom's breathing roughened. He trailed his mouth down the side of Tom's neck to the hollow of his throat, feeling Tom's knuckles bunch hard against the duvet.

"Can I touch you?" Tom murmured.

"Not yet."

Charlie pulled his sweater over his head, kicked out of his trousers and underwear, and stepped back between Tom's knees. Tom watched him, unshielded, his hands pinned obediently to the bed.

Charlie climbed into his lap, straddling him. Tom was already rigid beneath his trousers; when Charlie ground his hips down, Tom let out a sharp breath through his teeth.

“You’re being very obedient,” Charlie murmured, rolling his hips again.

“You set the rules.”

Charlie caught the tie, pulling Tom into another kiss while he reached down to unfasten Tom’s belt. Tom lifted his hips just enough to help Charlie push the fabric down before Charlie wrapped a hand around him, stroking slow and firm.

Tom dropped his forehead against Charlie’s shoulder, a choked oath slipping into his collar. “Fuck.”

“You left a meeting for me.”

“I would’ve left the country.”

“Excessive.”

“You got the fellowship.”

Charlie tightened his grip, and Tom’s hips bucked involuntarily against his palm. Charlie stopped, looking down at him.

“Sorry,” Tom muttered. “You said don’t move.”

“I changed my mind.” Charlie took Tom’s hands from the mattress and placed them on his own hips. “Hold me.”

Tom’s grip locked on, anchoring him as Charlie moved in his lap. After a minute, Charlie slipped off, grabbed the lubricant from the nightstand, and climbed back aboard. He coated two of Tom’s fingers and guided his wrist behind him.

Tom worked with slow, deliberate patience, easing inside while his free arm wrapped around Charlie’s waist. Charlie rocked back into the stretch, his forehead resting on Tom’s shoulder, mapping the pressure until he drew a sharp, full breath.

“Enough,” Charlie whispered.

Tom withdrew, and Charlie coated him before rising on his knees.

“You sure?” Tom asked, eyes dark, hands at Charlie’s waist.

“Yes.”

Charlie positioned himself and sank down. The initial stretch made him pause, breath catching, but Tom remained motionless beneath him. Charlie lowered himself the rest of the way until he was seated flush in Tom’s lap.

They stayed still for a moment, letting Charlie adjust, the silk tie trapped between their bare chests.

When Charlie began to move, it was awkward on the shifting mattress, but he found the angle quickly. He set a slow, punishing cadence—rising and sinking, controlling every fraction of an inch while Tom gripped his hips.

“That’s it,” Tom rasped. “Take it. Fuck.”

Charlie picked up the tempo, the friction dragging over the exact point that made his thighs shake. Tom slipped a hand between them, his thumb stroking over Charlie’s cock in time with the rhythm. The sensory overload hit fast—Charlie’s quads burned, his rhythm faltering as his strength gave out.

Tom kissed his cheek. “Want help?”

“Not yet.”

Charlie managed three more uneven rises before his legs gave a violent tremor.

Tom caught the corner of his mouth with his lips. “Ask me.”

Charlie hooked both arms around Tom’s neck, his pride giving way to the heat. “Help me.”

“How?”

“Fuck me, Daddy.”

A low, broken sound tore from Tom’s throat. His restraint snapped cleanly; he planted his feet on the floor and drove upward.

Charlie cried out, clutching Tom’s shoulders as Tom took over the rhythm, lifting Charlie’s weight effortlessly with deep, punishing thrusts. The tie

twisted in Charlie's fist. Tom brought his hand back to Charlie's cock, stroking him fast and relentless.

"Stay with me," Tom growled into his neck.

"I'm here—"

The pressure fused into a single blinding point. Charlie came hard against their stomachs, his channel clamping down in violent spasms. Tom held him through the tremors, his own rhythm turning ragged and uneven.

"Char—where?"

"Inside," Charlie gasped, burying his face in Tom's shoulder. "Stay inside."

Tom drove deep twice more and held, locking his hips as he spilled into him, trembling against Charlie's collarbone in harsh, shuddering silence.

For a long time, neither of them moved. Charlie lay heavy across Tom's chest, his fingers still loosely tangled in the tie.

He glanced down at it. "You're still half-dressed."

Tom lifted his head, breathing hard against Charlie's neck. "You told me not to move."

Charlie burst out laughing, the sound weak and exhausted.

Tom carefully shifted Charlie onto the mattress and stripped off the rest of his clothes, though one black dress sock survived until Charlie pointed at his foot.

"Very professional," Charlie murmured.

Tom kicked it toward the bench. "You seemed satisfied."

"Moderately."

"Liar."

Tom padded into the bathroom and returned with a warm cloth and a tall glass of water. He cleaned Charlie with familiar care, made him drink every drop, and slid beneath the duvet. Charlie curled into his side immediately, slinging a leg over Tom's thigh and resting his palm over the beat of Tom's chest.

“Can I tell people now?” Tom asked after a quiet stretch.

“Tomorrow.”

“Hazy already knows I left early.”

“Hazy probably had the announcement before Mehta emailed me.”

“Fair. Dinner?”

“Indian.”

“Done.”

Tom reached for his phone on the nightstand without moving his arm, pulling Charlie closer.

ACT 4

CHAPTER 31

Saturday, April 15.

They were still lingering around the kitchen island half an hour after breakfast. Charlie checked his sent folder one more time, making sure the acceptance to Professor Mehta hadn't vanished.

"Still can't believe it," he said.

Tom stole a strawberry from his bowl. "I can. You should go out with your cohort tonight. They'll want to celebrate."

"Without Tom," Hazel called from inside the open refrigerator.

"I wasn't inviting myself," Tom said.

"Good. Your presence makes graduate students sit up straighter."

"I'm wearing sweatpants."

Hazel glanced back. "And yet."

Charlie laughed, pulling out his phone to drop the news into the group chat: *i got the mcgill postdoc... drinks tonight?*

A volley of all-caps replies hit the screen before he could set it down, locking in McKibbin's at eight.

After breakfast, Charlie had to talk Tom down from a three-paragraph announcement to four sentences. By late afternoon, Charlie was at the piano when Tom brought over his phone.

Please convey my congratulations to Charles.

"She followed the rule," Charlie said.

Tom stared at the screen, then typed back: *Thank you. I will.*

At seven, Charlie stared blankly into the closet and gave up.

“Help me? I don’t want to think about clothes tonight.”

Tom straightened from the doorway. He dismissed the navy button-down as too formal, pulling out a worn chambray shirt, dark jeans, and brown Chelsea boots.

When Charlie slipped the shirt on, Tom stepped in close, fingers hovering over the front. “May I?”

Charlie nodded. Tom took his time working up from the hem, leaving the collar open and rolling each sleeve twice.

“There.”

Charlie leaned back against him, laughing as Tom rested his chin atop his head.

“You look beautiful,” Tom said, kissing his hair. “You’re also going to be late.”

“Shit.”

In the foyer, Charlie gathered his keys, phone, and wallet. “You’ll come get me? Even if it’s late?”

“Text me when you’re ready. I’ll be there in ten.” Tom looked at him. “Any time.”

He drew Charlie in, and Charlie rose onto his toes to meet the kiss.

“Have fun,” Tom said.

“I will.”

The hired car dropped Charlie outside McKibbin’s five minutes before eight. By the time their first pitcher was half empty, he was wedged into a corner booth with Priya, Sarah, and Jason over two stripped baskets of fries.

“So when do we start calling you Professor Heitmeyer-Montgomery?” Jason asked.

“It’s a postdoc, not a professorship,” Charlie said, smiling into his beer. “And never.”

“Yesterday you were an unemployed doctor of musicology,” Jason said. “Today you’re an unemployed doctor of musicology with a McGill fellowship. Level up, my friend.”

“I still can’t quite believe it. After Toronto, I wasn’t sure I’d trust another offer.”

“You did your homework,” Sarah said firmly. “They chose you.”

“Because somebody at McGill finally developed taste,” Priya added, raising her glass. “Unlike Toronto. God, is that arrest footage everywhere or what? Michael Montgomery in handcuffs.” She lowered her voice. “They’re saying he had people under surveillance. Was Tom really one of them?”

Charlie took a slow drink. “Yes. But that’s about all I can tell you.”

“Things are safer now?”

“Much safer.”

“Jesus,” Jason muttered. “Your life is a movie.”

“Speaking of Tom,” Sarah said, “how is he coping with an entire evening alone in the penthouse?”

“He has a life beyond me, you know.”

Priya and Sarah exchanged a look. Jason took a slow drink of beer.

“What?” Charlie asked.

“Charlie,” Jason said, “that man is so whipped I’m surprised he can walk upright.”

“He has a job.”

“He *owns* the job,” Sarah said.

“He has friends.”

“Who complain that he vanishes the second you text,” Priya countered.

“He has hobbies!”

“Name one,” Jason said.

“Hockey.”

“One.”

“I am not doing this.” Charlie threw his hands up as the three of them dissolved into laughter. “Fine. He likes me. What a terrible cross for him to bear. Can we talk about literally anything else?”

“Gladly.” Sarah reached across the table. “Have you actually settled on your research, or are you just rehashing the dissertation?”

“Both, sort of.” Charlie set his beer down. “The dissertation was musicological, mostly, but it drew on psychology and anthropology—arguing that silence does structural work rather than just punctuating a score. Silence as architecture.”

“And now?” Sarah asked.

“Now I want to test why it works on actual people. Listening studies, performance experiments. Instead of asking what silence does in the score, I want to see what happens to human psychology in real time—expectation, social discomfort, anxiety.”

Priya pointed at him. “You’re going to induce panic in controlled laboratory conditions.”

“Ethical use of grant funding,” Jason approved.

Sarah leaned forward. “Okay, but where do you draw the line between structural silence and just... nothing happening?”

“That’s the problem.”

Just before midnight, pleasantly buzzed on two shots and three beers, Charlie texted Tom: *10 minutes pls.*

On my way, Tom replied instantly. *Take your time saying goodbye.*

Charlie tucked his phone away. “Tom’s coming to get me.”

Priya clutched her chest. “The billionaire summons, and you must away!”

“I’m the one who texted *him*,” Charlie laughed.

“Of course,” Sarah said. “Interrupted him right in the middle of his one hobby.”

“Lunch Monday?” Charlie asked as Jason slid out of the booth to pull him into a hug, followed by Sarah and Priya.

“Monday, noon,” Priya said. “And we’re doing this again when you actually start.”

“With fewer shots.”

“Coward.”

Outside, the cool April air cut through his buzz just as the Lincoln pulled to the curb. Tom pushed the rear door open from inside.

Charlie slid into the leather seat, grabbed the front of Tom’s shirt, and kissed him before he could even ask how the night was. Tom made a soft, surprised sound against his mouth, his hand coming up to settle warm at Charlie’s waist.

When Charlie finally broke away, he buckled in and leaned heavily against Tom’s shoulder as the car glided into traffic.

“It was perfect,” Charlie said. “Priya is at war with her first-years, Jason still wants to chop six words off my dissertation title, and Sarah spent twenty minutes arguing about where silence stops and just nothing happening begins.”

“Is she wrong?”

“Completely. Mostly.”

Tom laughed.

“They were really excited about McGill, too. Obnoxiously excited. It was nice.”

“They’re proud of you.”

“Yeah.” Charlie watched the storefronts slide past in the dark. “They asked about your dad.”

“Did that bother you?”

“No. That was the weird thing. We talked about it for two minutes, and then we just moved on.” Charlie looked over at him. “It didn’t feel like he was in the room with us anymore.”

“Good.”

Tom found Charlie’s hand on the seat between them. Charlie laced their fingers together and closed his eyes.

He had gone out because he wanted to, stayed until he was ready to leave, and now he was going home.

Tuesday, April 18.

Late Tuesday afternoon, Tom and Payton were finally closing out their third hour in the conference room.

“I think that covers the Cayman subsidiaries,” Tom said, shutting the final folder.

“Agreed. Filings will be drafted by Thursday.” Payton capped his pen and leaned back. “Before I forget—Richard Hargrove sent me tickets to his suite for the Canadiens game tomorrow night. Do you follow hockey?”

“I captained McGill.”

Payton’s mouth twitched. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Hargrove’s suite is practically on top of the ice,” Tom said, already sitting forward. “Seven-thirty? We should do drinks at our place beforehand. We’re right by the Bell Centre—logistically, it just makes sense. I’ll invite a few of the university guys.”

Payton studied him. “All right. Sounds fun.”

Tom already had the group chat open.

“Matt is in,” Tom reported as notifications fired off. “Lukas says—quote—‘TABARNAC YES. What time? I’m leaving work now.’ It’s four; he doesn’t get off until six. And André wants to know what to bring.”

“The game is tomorrow night.”

“Right. They need time to plan.”

Payton folded his arms. “What did I just agree to?”

“A great time.” Tom looked down at another buzz and laughed.

Payton picked up his cold coffee, resigned, and took a drink.

Wednesday, April 19.

Payton had expected a quiet pre-game drink.

Charlie opened the door barefoot in an oversized cream sweater—a brief flicker of relief that vanished the moment Payton looked past him.

The penthouse had been completely overrun. A massive blond man sprawled across the sectional, another paced behind the couch shouting about a 2019 power-play percentage, and Tom stood in the centre of it all, grinning broader than Payton had ever seen. Over by the window, Hazel sat nursing white wine while a man in a dark turtleneck watched the commotion from a very safe distance.

“Payton!” Tom started across the room. “Let me introduce—”

“So this is the guy you do insider trading with?” the man pacing behind the couch barked, pointing right at him.

Tom closed his eyes. “That’s Lukas. Matt’s on the couch. André’s by the island.”

André offered a hand. “Good to meet you. Tom says you’ve never been to a hockey game.”

“Well, I do a lot of athletic training—”

“Not the same thing,” Tom, Matt, and Lukas said in unison.

Within ten minutes, André had thrust a whiskey into Payton’s hand. Within twenty, Payton had lost the plot entirely. The room was loud with five-year-old trades, disputed save percentages, and defensive formations argued at a

volume Payton didn't know Tom possessed. When Matt shoved Tom's shoulder, Tom shoved him right back.

Lukas mounted the sectional's arm, brandishing a throw pillow. "Worst offside call in playoff history! The ref was blind. *Clinically.*"

"You can't be clinically blind and ref in the NHL," André called over.

Matt jumped up to demonstrate player positioning, his elbow catching the floor lamp behind him.

It hit the hardwood with a violent crash.

Payton flinched. Hazel closed her eyes.

"That was already loose," Matt offered.

Hazel set her wine down and stood. "Out. All of you. Now."

"We have time—" Tom started.

"You have forty minutes before puck drop, a twelve-minute walk to the Bell Centre, and Matthew just knocked over your lamp. Move."

To Payton's amazement, they obeyed without question. Lukas snagged a final handful of chips, Matt grabbed his jacket, and André dutifully cleared his empty bottle into the kitchen.

Tom paused at the threshold, where Charlie leaned against the frame, quietly amused.

"Have fun," Charlie said.

Tom kissed him, hand settling at his waist. "You too."

He stepped into the hallway, where Matt was already arguing with Lukas about elevator etiquette, and the door clicked shut behind them.

The penthouse fell quiet.

Hazel exhaled.

Julian retrieved Clue from the bookshelf and set it on the coffee table.

“Colonel Mustard is mine,” Hazel said, returning to her armchair. “Non-negotiable.”

Charlie righted the fallen lamp and folded his legs beneath him on the couch. “I’ll be Mrs. Peacock.”

Julian chose Professor Plum and began dealing.

René-Lévesque Boulevard was a sea of red jerseys surging toward the Bell Centre. Lukas hadn’t stopped talking since they left the penthouse.

“—and his glove side has been garbage since the trade,” Lukas insisted. “Statistically provable. I have the numbers.”

“You don’t have the numbers,” André said.

“I have the numbers in my heart.”

“That’s not where numbers go,” Tom said.

Matt slung a heavy arm over Payton’s shoulder. “You holding up, Wall Street?”

“I understand roughly forty percent of this conversation.”

“Generous,” André murmured.

The suite hovered over the ice behind floor-to-ceiling glass, complete with two rows of plush leather seats and a catered spread along the back wall.

“Holy shit,” Matt said, heading straight for the shrimp.

Lukas pressed his hands to the glass, reverent. “Payton. *These seats*.”

André claimed the best chair in the house without a word.

“Please,” Payton said dryly. “Make yourselves at home.”

“Already done,” Matt mumbled around a mouthful of food.

“Your client has impeccable taste.” Tom handed Payton a cold beer and took the seat beside André.

When the Canadiens took the ice, the roar vibrated up through the concrete floor. Tom was completely transformed: he slapped the armrest on the

opening faceoff, bolted upright when a winger broke away down the lane, and gripped his head in agony when the shot went wide. Matt stood for most of the period, sloshing beer whenever he gestured, while Lukas supplied arena-volume commentary. André watched in monk-like stillness until a defenceman made a play along the boards—at which point he surged to his feet so fast his chair slammed the back wall.

"Yes," André said simply. Then he sat right back down and resumed watching in silence.

Midway through the second, a whistle blew after a violent collision along the glass.

Payton leaned toward Tom. "Wait. Why is that a penalty? The other guy did the exact same thing thirty seconds ago."

Four heads snapped toward him at once.

"The difference," Tom began, gesturing, "is the first contact was incidental —"

"It's about body position," Lukas cut in. "Shoulder was up—"

"It's boarding," Matt declared. "He drove him from behind."

"Interference," André said without taking his eyes off the ice. "Not boarding."

"It is literally boarding!"

"His skates were set, Matthew. That changes the call."

"Since when?"

"Since the rules were written."

Tom turned back to Payton. "Basically—"

"I just got four completely different explanations."

"Three of them were wrong," André said.

"Mine wasn't," Tom, Matt, and Lukas fired back in unison.

They glared at each other and instantly devolved back into bickering.

Payton laughed, raising his beer. “Okay. I get it now.”

Tom flashed a triumphant grin.

“Don’t make a thing of it,” Payton warned.

The Habs protected a one-goal lead through the final minutes. When the horn sounded, Matt grabbed Lukas around the waist and lifted him clear off the floor.

Outside the Bell Centre, they stopped on the plaza to say goodbye. Matt and Lukas left first, still arguing about the second-period interference call. André shook Payton’s hand.

“Good seats.”

Then he headed for the metro.

Payton and Tom were the last two standing.

“Good night, Payton,” Tom said.

“Good night.” Payton paused. “Your friends are insane.”

“Yeah,” Tom said, smiling. “They are.”

Tom walked home with the post-game crowd and let himself into the penthouse.

The Clue game was still going.

Charlie sat cross-legged on the couch with a notepad in his lap. Hazel leaned forward in her armchair, rifling through her cards. Julian sat on the floor with his chin propped on one hand.

“Who’s winning?” Tom asked, dropping onto the couch beside Charlie.

“I am,” Charlie said without looking up.

“He’s been winning for an hour,” Julian said. “It’s relentless.”

“It’s not over.” Hazel shuffled through her cards again.

Tom looked over Charlie's shoulder. Nearly every square on the notepad had been crossed out.

"Great." He rested an arm along the back of the couch. "I'm on your team now."

"Absolutely not," Hazel said. "That is completely against the rules."

"What rules?"

"There are rules, Thomas. Written rules. In the box."

"Nobody reads the rules."

"I read the rules," Julian said.

Hazel caught Julian by the arm and pulled him closer. "Fine. Then we're a team too." She looked at Tom and Charlie. "And we are going to eviscerate you."

Julian blinked once and shifted closer to her.

"You can't form an alliance because we formed an alliance," Charlie protested, laughing.

"Watch me," Hazel said.

Charlie shifted closer to Tom and tilted the notepad between them, letting him into the game without another word.

CHAPTER 32

Saturday, May 6.

Charlie had whittled Week One down to thirty-two pages and was actively debating whether to cut more.

Silence, Form, and Listening. He loved the seminar title; it was currently the only part he didn't hate. A score of Webern's *Bagatelles* lay open beside Mahler's Ninth, crowding out a cold cup of tea. For twenty minutes, he had been toggling the opening article from *required* to *recommended* and back again.

He settled on *recommended*, then scrolled to the top.

"Good afternoon," he practiced aloud. "I'm Dr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery, and—" He winced. Nobody called him that unless Mehta was teasing him. He cleared his throat. "Hi, I'm Charlie. Welcome to—"

"Are you practicing saying hello?" Tom asked from the doorway.

Charlie looked up. Tom had changed into dark jeans and a black sweater. "No."

"You've introduced yourself three times."

"They'll already know my name," Charlie said, turning back to the screen. "It's on the timetable."

"One would hope." Tom crossed the room, leaning over his shoulder. "Why is the reading optional?"

"It's *recommended*."

"Which means optional."

"Do they need to read it?"

“It would make the discussion considerably easier,” Charlie admitted.

“Then assign it. Charlie, you’re the instructor. You’re allowed to give homework.”

“They have other seminars, research, jobs—thirty-two dense pages is a lot.” Charlie pointed at the screen, where he had typed: *Students are encouraged to read—*

“Why are you ‘encouraging’ them?” Tom asked. “It’s a syllabus, not a polite suggestion.”

“It sounds less hostile.”

“You’re asking them to read thirty-two pages, not abandon their families.” Tom paused. “Do you want them to read it?”

“Yes.”

“Then assign it.”

Charlie hovered over the trackpad. “I want them to like the class.”

Tom waited.

“...And me,” Charlie added quietly.

“Ah.” Tom touched the back of Charlie’s neck. “They’ll like you. You’re prepared, you care whether they get it, and you won’t make them feel stupid for asking questions.”

“Very low bar.”

“You’d be surprised. And if they complain about thirty-two pages, they’ll survive.”

Charlie sighed, deleting *recommended* and typing *required*.

“There,” Tom said. “Your reign of terror begins.”

“Thank you, Thomas.” Charlie scrolled back up, rubbing his forehead. “I know the material. I just don’t know how to run the room. At the piano, if I ran out of things to say, I made the student play again. In department talks, people ask questions and I answer them. I don’t know how to make an entire room start asking them.”

Tom considered that, letting the silence sit without offering an easy platitude. After a moment, he checked his phone. “Lukas is already at McKibbin’s. He sent a photo of an empty glass with the caption *abandoned*.”

“He’s been there twelve minutes.”

“Eleven.”

Charlie saved the document and shut his laptop. “Give me five minutes.”

“Take ten. He can wait.”

Charlie laughed, snagging his notebook off the desk and sliding it into his coat pocket on the way out.

McKibbin’s was packed to the doors. Lukas threw both arms up the moment they reached the booth.

“Finally.”

“It’s been fourteen minutes,” André said.

“Thirty-seven emotionally.”

Charlie slid in next to Tom, their knees knocking under the table. As he shed his coat, his notebook slipped from the pocket onto the bench.

“You brought homework?” Lukas asked.

“It’s my syllabus,” Charlie said, tucking it aside.

Matt leaned over the table before Lukas could interrogate further. “Never mind that. I bought a wardrobe in Outremont. Solid maple. Indestructible.”

André took a slow drink.

“Stop doing your face,” Matt demanded.

“I only have one face.”

“Where is it now?” Tom asked. “In one piece?”

Matt hesitated.

“Tell them about the stairs,” Lukas wheezed.

“I measured the front door!”

“And the stairwell?” Charlie asked.

“I knew there were stairs.”

The food arrived, and Tom shoved the basket of fries into the centre. Matt snatched one, bit down, and instantly froze.

He shot up a single finger.

Lukas stopped mid-sentence. André reached for the ketchup. Tom poured Charlie more beer. Matt breathed heavily through an open mouth in agonizing silence while the pub roared around them.

Finally, he swallowed. “Anyway. The landing.”

Lukas collapsed over the table, howling.

Matt plowed ahead through wedges, angles, and taking the wrong hallway door off its hinges—carrying the maple monster “long enough to identify several weaknesses in our friendship”—until the wardrobe ended up in six pieces across his living room floor.

“Are you putting it back together?” Charlie asked.

“Obviously.”

“He’s waiting for the wood to heal,” André said.

“It’s solid maple.”

“That isn’t how wood works,” Tom told him.

Lukas tapped Charlie’s notebook. “So what are you actually teaching?”

“Silence, Form, and Listening.”

“How’s the professor life?” Matt asked.

Charlie picked at his napkin. “The material is fine. I just don’t know how to stand in front of fourteen graduate students and make them talk.”

“Teach us,” Matt said.

“You’re drunk in a pub.”

“University was mostly being drunk in pubs,” Lukas pointed out. “I already have a question: what is silence?”

Charlie looked at the three of them. “What do you think it is?”

“Nobody talking,” Matt said.

“No sound,” Lukas offered.

“An absence,” André said.

“Then what happened when Matt burned his mouth?” Charlie asked. “He stopped talking, but nobody else jumped in. Why?”

“He held up his finger,” Lukas said.

“The story wasn’t finished,” André countered.

“Exactly. Nothing was being said, but you were still listening. A musical pause works the same way—it’s shaped by expectation, rhythm, harmony, physical cues.”

Matt pointed at him. “Like at your defence. You stopped forever before that last chord.”

“Twenty-eight seconds,” Charlie said.

“I thought we were supposed to clap,” Lukas said, “but Tom looked ready to murder anyone who breathed, so I held back.”

“The harmony hadn’t resolved,” André said. “And Charlie’s hands were still poised over the keys.”

“All of that told you the piece wasn’t over,” Charlie said. “The silence was active.”

Lukas raised a hand. “What happens when you ask the class a question and nobody answers?”

Charlie grimaced. “That’s the nightmare.”

“Wait,” André said simply.

“For how long?”

“Until somebody gets uncomfortable.”

“Sounds cruel.”

“Worked with Matt’s fry,” André said.

“We were worried for his life!” Lukas insisted.

“No, you weren’t,” Matt shot back.

The table dissolved into a full-blown debate over whether the unfinished story or the agonized finger had held the room. Charlie mediated, corrected Lukas twice, and pressed André to defend his point.

Matt leaned back, thoroughly pleased with himself. “I learned something. The silence is still part of the action.”

“Look at that,” André told Charlie. “You taught us.”

“And if they still don’t answer,” Lukas added, “stare down the loudest one until they panic.”

Charlie pulled his notebook over. At the top of Week One, he had scripted a twelve-minute introductory lecture. He drew a clean line through it and wrote:

Play the passage first. Ask what they heard.

When he looked up, Tom was watching him with a quiet, private smile.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Lukas groaned loudly. “Look at them having a marital experience over french fries.”

“I can multitask,” Tom said smoothly.

“Can one task be helping me rebuild my wardrobe?” Matt asked.

“No.”

“There’s the limit,” André said.

Charlie closed the notebook, slid it into his pocket, and left it there for the rest of the night.

The pavement was damp beneath the streetlights when they finally emerged. Matt hugged Charlie hard enough to lift his heels off the concrete.

“When you teach this class, leave me out of it.”

“The fry is already in my notes,” Charlie said.

“Absolutely fucking not.”

Tom took Charlie’s hand, laughing, and steered him toward home.

Cheddar met them at the penthouse door, voicing a long, aggrieved complaint about his evening of neglect. While Tom hung their coats, Charlie carried his notebook straight to the desk. Tom followed with two glasses of water and sat in the armchair by the window, where Cheddar turned two small circles before collapsing across his thighs.

Charlie opened his laptop. He had originally scripted twelve minutes of introductory remarks, followed by the syllabus structure and historical context—half an hour of talking before anyone heard a single note.

He highlighted the entire lecture and hit delete.

He moved the Mahler recording to the top: *Play once without the score.*

Beneath it, he typed: *Do you think the phrase is finished? What told you to keep listening?*

Then he found his apology for the reading length and deleted that, too.

“I know how to start,” Charlie said.

Tom looked up from his book.

“I play the passage before I explain a single thing. Then I ask if the phrase is finished.”

“And if nobody answers?”

“I wait.”

“How long?”

“Not twenty-eight seconds,” Charlie said.

“Probably wise.”

“And thirty-two pages are still required.”

Tom nodded gravely. “Monster.”

Charlie saved the document and shut the lid. There was an entire semester left to build, but for the first time, he could actually picture walking into the room, dropping his bag, and pressing play.

Tom shifted Cheddar to the wide arm of the chair and held out a hand. Charlie crossed the room, curling sideways into his lap.

“You can keep reading,” Charlie murmured, resting his cheek against Tom’s shoulder.

Tom kissed his temple, reopened his book, and turned the page. Charlie stayed right where he was.

Tuesday, May 30.

The penthouse was quiet. Tom was reviewing quarterly projections, reading glasses low on his nose, while Charlie stretched across the cushions with his feet against Tom’s thigh, tracing intervals in a Messiaen score.

Charlie’s phone buzzed on the glass. The caller ID froze his hand: *Tremblay.*

Tom shut his laptop as Charlie put the call on speaker.

“Good evening, Dr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery. Mr. Montgomery,” Tremblay said crisply. “I have the final notification from IRCC. Processing is complete. Your electronic Confirmation of Permanent Residence has been issued. You are officially a permanent resident of Canada.”

Charlie stared at the phone. “Finalized?”

“Finalized. The physical card will follow by mail, but the e-COPR in your portal is legal proof of status.”

Charlie closed his eyes. Tom’s hand moved to Charlie’s ankle.

“And the adoption records?” Charlie asked softly.

“Still undergoing administrative correction,” Tremblay said. “It doesn’t touch the status confirmed today. You’ve done the work required of you, Charlie. It has been a privilege to represent you both.”

“We appreciate everything,” Tom said.

“That’s what you pay me for. Good evening.”

The line went dead, leaving only the soft tick of the mantel clock.

Charlie looked toward the hallway. “I want to print it.”

In the office, the portal document was waiting: *Electronic Confirmation of Permanent Residence.* Charlie read his name, the date, the confirmation, then sent the file to the printer.

He carried the warm sheet down the hall into the walk-in closet, breathing in cedar and Tom’s sandalwood cologne. At the back wall, he punched *0-8-2-8* into the safe.

Inside, sitting beside their marriage certificate and his weathered Swiss passport, was the yellowed Lausanne envelope with its glaring red stamp: *INSTITUTIONNALISATION RECOMMANDÉE.*

For years, that piece of paper had felt heavy enough to crush him. He stared at the red ink, waiting for the familiar cold panic to seize his chest.

It didn’t come.

Charlie set the e-COPR down, completely covering the red stamp under crisp white paper. He placed both back inside, swung the heavy steel door shut, and spun the lock.

When he returned to the living room, Tom hadn’t moved. He hadn’t reopened his work or checked his phone; he was simply waiting.

Charlie sat down, slotting his shoulder beneath Tom’s arm. Tom pulled him in, and Charlie leaned into him—not collapsing, just finally letting his full weight settle. He rested his cheek against Tom’s chest and laid a hand on his thigh.

Charlie closed his eyes, and Tom held him fast.

Tuesday, July 11, 2028.

Tom stood at the edge of the living room, one shoulder against the doorframe, holding a plain white envelope between both hands. His thumb passed over the same corner again and again.

Charlie sat cross-legged on the floor, trailing a piece of ribbon in slow figure-eights. Cheddar tracked it, his body coiled into a compact loaf, only the tip of his tail moving. He had been considering the attack for nearly five minutes.

“You want it,” Charlie murmured. “You absolutely want it.”

He flicked the ribbon upward. Cheddar’s paw shot out, pinned it to the hardwood, then released it and looked away.

“Noted.”

Charlie let the ribbon fall and smiled up at Tom. “Come down here.”

Tom sat beside him, stretching one leg out. Cheddar sniffed the envelope.

“This is for you,” Tom said.

Charlie took it. “Should I be worried?”

“No. Open it.”

He slid his finger under the flap.

Inside was an itinerary from Montréal to Kansai International Airport. Beneath it were photographs of a ryokan in Arashiyama. One showed a room opening onto a little garden, a pine reaching low over the moss.

“Oh,” Charlie breathed.

“You love bonsai.” Tom watched him instead of the photographs. “I thought you might like to see where some of them come from.”

Charlie studied the photograph. He could almost feel himself sitting in that open doorway.

“I do. This sounds wonderful.” He looked at Tom. “So what’s wrong?”

“The dates don’t line up.” Tom pointed to the itinerary. August 12 to 21. “I wanted us there for the twenty-eighth. But you start September first, and

you'll need time before that."

The twenty-eighth was their first kiss. Tom had remembered it in a dozen different ways.

Charlie looked at the little garden again. Then he set the papers on the floor and put both hands on Tom's face.

"We can kiss here on the twenty-eighth."

"I had intended to."

Charlie smiled and kissed him now. Tom's cheek was warm against his palm.

"Yeah?" Tom asked when Charlie drew back.

Charlie picked up the itinerary. The return date gave him room to unpack, see Elena before she left, and finish preparing for September.

"These dates work."

His PR card had arrived the week before. He had checked his name, the photograph, and the dates, then held the card longer than he needed to.

He made a small, excited noise and reached for his phone.

"Okay. Research time."

Cheddar sat on the photograph.

"That's the room," Charlie told him. "You're not coming."

The travel books arrived the next morning. By two o'clock, Charlie was sitting on the bed with four guides fanned open to dog-eared pages, his laptop balanced on one knee, and a notebook filling with his neat handwriting.

Tenryū-ji — Sōgenchi garden, borrowed scenery.
Ryōan-ji — fifteen stones; look from different positions.
Saiho-ji — reserve ahead; sutra copying before the garden.

He followed a map with his finger, then went back to a photograph. The gardens looked different in every season. Beneath one entry he wrote: *allow*

time to sit.

Tom leaned against the bedroom doorframe, coffee in hand.

“Did you know the moss temple visit starts with copying sutras?” Charlie asked.

“I did not.”

“You trace the characters. Then you walk through the garden.” Charlie turned the laptop toward him.

Tom smiled and came to sit beside him. Charlie moved a book before the coffee could find its way onto the quilt.

“How much have you planned?”

Charlie glanced at his notebook. “Possibly too much.”

There were arrows between destinations, opening times in the margins, and three alternatives for a rainy afternoon.

Tom read over his shoulder. “You gave sitting twenty minutes.”

Charlie followed his gaze. Beside allow time to sit, he had written *10:40 — leave for Ryōan-ji.*

He drew a line through the departure time.

He crossed out the next two departure times and the arrows connecting them.

“What do you want to do?” Charlie asked.

Tom considered the photographs. “Eat. Walk around with you. Sit in that room.”

Charlie wrote *sit in the room* beneath the garden entry.

Thursday, August 10.

Julian arrived early to collect Cheddar.

He stood in the penthouse foyer in a black turtleneck, his sleeves pushed above his elbows, holding a cat carrier in one hand.

“The carrier has good ventilation,” he observed, setting it on the floor and unlatching the wire door. “I’ve lined it with the fleece blanket Hazel specified.”

Cheddar sat on the console table, at maximum distance from the carrier. His tail swished.

“He doesn’t like it,” Charlie said.

He retrieved Cheddar’s favourite bedraggled felt mouse and held it out. Julian accepted the mouse and placed it inside the carrier.

“The spatial constraints are temporary,” he told Cheddar.

Cheddar remained unconvinced.

“He’ll have the spare room to himself at first?” Charlie asked.

“Door closed. Then he can explore when he’s ready.”

Charlie nodded. He lifted the orange tabby from the table. Cheddar planted a back paw against his wrist and became suddenly possessed of several extra joints. Tom held the carrier steady while Charlie guided him inside.

“We’ll bring you something from Japan,” Charlie murmured.

The elevator opened behind them, and Hazel stepped into the foyer.

“Daily updates,” she announced. “Photos, feeding times, general temperament reports, litter usage. I’ll set up a shared album.”

Tom handed her the bag of feline supplies he had packed. “Great. Thank you.”

“Maybe not the litter thing,” Charlie said as he closed the carrier door.

Hazel crouched beside him. “He’ll be fine.”

Charlie slipped a finger through the wire. Cheddar sniffed it, then rubbed his cheek against the metal, apparently willing to forgive everyone if released immediately.

“I know.” Charlie stroked the little patch of fur he could reach. “Send the pictures.”

“Oh, you’re getting the pictures.”

After the elevator doors closed behind them, Charlie picked up the ribbon from the floor.

The console table looked oddly bare.

CHAPTER 33

Friday, August 11.

Tom packed for them both, laying their clothes across the bed in outfits. Charlie had asked him to do the folding after watching one of his own attempts spring open inside the suitcase.

“You make it fit,” he had said.

Now Charlie sat opposite him, choosing what to keep. Kyoto’s August forecast had persuaded him to remove two sweaters. Tom held up a linen shirt, considered a pair of trousers, and set them together.

The toiletry bag was already assembled. Charlie added sunscreen, then tucked a paperback and his travel notebook into his carry-on.

His seminar notebook lay on the dresser.

Charlie looked at it, then zipped the carry-on without it.

Tom glanced at the paperback. “That’s the reading programme?”

Charlie smiled. His first seminar reading was chosen. He had listened to both recordings again, adjusted the opening question, and made notes for when he returned. By the time Tom finished folding the trousers, Charlie had thought of six more things he could revise.

He glanced at the notebook on the dresser.

Then he picked up the linen shirt instead.

The work would be waiting when they came home. He wanted to find out what else he might do with a morning.

They retrieved their documents from the closet safe. Charlie checked his Swiss passport and PR card, then slid them into his travel wallet. Tom

checked his own passport and placed it beside the printed flight confirmations and train information.

Charlie turned the card over once before putting the wallet away. In Vienna, he had carried a file explaining why he should be allowed home. This fit inside a pocket.

He zipped the pocket closed and returned to the bed.

“Got everything?”

Tom considered this, his hands on his hips. “Hm. Should we bring the melatonin?”

“You already put it in.”

“Did I?”

Charlie pointed. Tom looked into the toiletry bag and made a satisfied sound.

“You can stop checking now,” Charlie said.

“One more thing.”

Tom put a hand on his waist and drew him close. Charlie’s knees met the edge of the mattress. He rested his hands against Tom’s chest, feeling the quiet movement of a laugh before the kiss.

By 9:47, the suitcases were closed and standing beside the bedroom door. Charlie sat in the office armchair with his paperback while Tom finished his handoff.

The email to Hazel was fourteen paragraphs long. Tom had drafted it three times, detailing every active file and a decision matrix for emergencies. He added two final words to one subsection, then reread the next line.

Hazel knew that file. She had negotiated the last revision herself.

He left the line alone and pressed send.

The out-of-office message came next.

Thank you for your message. I am currently out of the office and will not be monitoring email. For all matters related to Heitmeyer-Montgomery, please contact Hazel Heitmeyer.

The cursor lingered after *will not be monitoring email.*

Tom read the sentence once more, then set the message to activate at midnight and closed the email client.

His work phone sat beside the laptop. He picked it up, opened the top drawer, and placed it inside. The screen lit as he began sliding the drawer shut. His hand stopped on the handle.

Behind him, Charlie laughed softly.

Tom turned. "What?"

Charlie held up the paperback. "You won't think it's funny."

"Let me see."

Tom closed the drawer, then the laptop. The monitor went dark, leaving only the pool of light from the lamp beside Charlie.

He crossed the room. Charlie angled the book toward him.

Saturday, August 12.

The alarm went off at 4:15 a.m.

Tom had already been awake for twenty minutes, listening to Charlie breathe. He silenced the alarm, but Charlie stirred anyway, making a small sound of protest and burrowing deeper against his chest.

Tom pressed his nose into Charlie's hair and inhaled. "Time," he murmured.

"No."

Tom smiled in the dark and squeezed Charlie's hip. "C'mon."

Charlie mumbled something and pushed himself upright. A pillow crease marked his cheek. Tom kissed it.

They showered together. By 4:50, they were dressed and standing in the foyer with their luggage beside them.

Charlie looked once toward the living room, where Cheddar usually watched departures from the back of the couch. Then he took Tom's hand.

Tom locked the door behind them. The elevator carried them down to the car waiting at the curb.

The predawn streets of Montréal were nearly empty. Charlie rested his forehead against the cool window, Tom's hand warm on his thigh. At the airport turnoff, he lifted his head.

At Montréal–Trudeau, Tom managed the luggage while Charlie found their documents. He handed over his passport at check-in, answered the agent's questions, and tucked it away again while Tom lifted the bags onto the scales.

They moved through security. Around them, families rearranged jackets and carry-ons.

Their gate was at the end of the concourse. Outside the windows, the sky was turning grey-blue. Charlie checked the departure screen, then the itinerary.

Tom settled into a seat. Charlie dropped beside him and rested his head against his shoulder. Tom's arm came around him.

"Nervous?"

"Excited," Charlie corrected. "I've never been to Asia."

"You'll love it. It was made for you."

Charlie smiled. "Mhm. I think it came first."

Tom kissed his hair.

Charlie thought of the room in the photograph. They would be tired when they reached it. There would be wrong turns and menus he couldn't read, things he had misunderstood in his research. He wanted to be there for all of it.

He folded the itinerary and put it away.

The waiting area filled gradually. When the gate agent called their boarding group, Charlie straightened and retrieved his passport. They walked down the jet bridge with their fingers interlaced until the corridor narrowed and they had to go single file.

Charlie went first. Tom followed him onto the plane.

Sunday, August 13.

By the time their local train reached Saga-Arashiyama, Charlie had stopped trying to calculate how long he had been awake. They had landed at Kansai on Sunday, taken the airport train to Kyoto, and changed trains there. Each stage had briefly revived him. Now the warm air on the platform made him want to lie down.

Beside him, Tom frowned at the directions copied from the ryokan's confirmation email.

Charlie leaned over the page. "That way."

"Are you sure?"

"No. But that's the street name."

They looked at the sign together. Tom turned the suitcase and followed him.

At the inn, a woman greeted them and showed them where to leave their shoes. Charlie thanked her, trying the words he had practiced. She answered in English and led them down the hall. He followed in his socks, grateful for the cool floor beneath his feet.

Their room held tatami mats, a low lacquered table, sliding doors, and an alcove with a single white flower. The woman showed them the bathroom, explained when their futons would be laid out, and pointed to the tea. Charlie concentrated on each instruction so it would survive the exhaustion.

Then they were alone.

He crossed the room and slid open the doors to the garden. Moss spread unevenly between weathered stones, broken by the low reach of a trained pine. One branch nearly touched a rock. He crouched to look at the space beneath it.

“There’s your garden,” Tom said.

Charlie stood, smiling, and Tom’s arms circled his waist. He covered Tom’s hands with his own.

Insects sounded beyond the doorway. Somewhere down the hall, a door closed. Charlie leaned back against his husband and let his tired weight settle.

“We’re here,” he said.

Tom kissed the side of his head. “We are.”

Charlie looked out at the garden.

“Thank you for giving me this life.”

Tom’s arms tightened around him. “You too.”

Monday, August 14.

Charlie’s body insisted it was mid-afternoon and coffee should be happening, but his phone said 3:47 a.m.

He lay awake for a while, watching Tom sleep. One hand rested on the empty part of Charlie’s pillow. When Charlie eased out from beneath the bedding, Tom’s fingers moved across the cotton.

He brewed the tea provided and slid the doors open. Outside, he sat cross-legged on the wooden engawa, letting the cup warm his palms.

The garden revealed itself slowly as the sky greyed. First the stones, then the moss between them, then the crooked pine. This morning he noticed a brown needle caught in the green, a little hollow holding water, the rough bark at a bend in the trunk.

Footsteps sounded behind him. Tom lowered himself onto the deck, holding his own cup. His hair stuck up at the back.

“Sorry,” Charlie whispered. “Did I wake you?”

“You weren’t there.”

Charlie moved closer until their knees touched.

Tom took a sip, then stared down into the liquid. “Tastes like grass.”

“It’s sencha.”

“It’s grass.” He took another sip, determined to enjoy it.

Charlie laughed and reached for his hand. Tom balanced the cup on his knee and threaded their fingers together.

The light changed while they sat there. A bird called beyond the wall. Charlie watched a drop of water slide from the tip of a pine needle and disappear into the moss.

Beside him, Tom drank more tea without further complaint. His thumb moved once across Charlie’s knuckles, then rested.

They sat there as the first direct sunlight hit the pine tree, holding hands and drinking grass.

Wednesday, August 16.

The days found their own shape around the research Charlie had done. They woke early, became hungry at inconvenient hours, and sometimes returned to the ryokan before they had reached the last name on his list. On their third morning, Charlie drew a line through the last name on Tuesday’s list and did not copy it onto Wednesday’s page.

The bonsai nursery occupied that morning.

It sat at the end of a residential footpath, the entrance marked by a wooden sign and a low gate. Beyond it, terraced platforms held hundreds of trees in ceramic pots. A hose lay across the ground. Somewhere behind the rows, water struck leaves with a soft, continuous hiss.

Charlie stopped walking the moment they entered.

He had seen photographs. None had prepared him for the number of different shapes gathered in one place: a trunk twisted almost back upon itself, pale roots gripping stone, the broad little canopy of a maple. Some trees stood at eye level. Others were small enough to fit in his hand.

Tom stopped beside him. “Where do you want to start?”

“I don’t know.” Charlie breathed. “Everywhere.”

He began with a maple. The leaves overlapped closely, but beneath them he could follow each branch back toward the trunk. He bent slightly, looking through the canopy. Behind him, Tom stepped over the hose and waited.

Charlie moved along the first row, then doubled back. He had missed a tree with a shallow blue pot and an exposed curve of root. Up close, the bark held ridges too fine to see from the path.

The nursery owner appeared after twenty minutes, carrying a watering can. He wore rubber clogs and a faded shirt, with a damp patch near the collar. He set the can down and greeted them.

Charlie hesitated, then offered the greeting he had practiced. The man smiled, answering in English, and introduced himself as Takeda.

“First time?”

“In Japan, yes.” Charlie looked back at the maple. “We have a Japanese maple at home. I’m learning.”

“You have a picture?”

Charlie found a photograph on his phone and held it out. Takeda looked, enlarged the image with one finger, then pointed toward the trunk.

“Another picture? Lower.”

Charlie searched. Most of his pictures had been taken from above, to catch the leaves. He found one from the side and offered that instead.

Takeda nodded. Then he gestured toward the nearest tree.

They moved through the rows together. At a pine, he asked Charlie to crouch a little. From that height, the roots became more visible at the base of the trunk, spreading into the soil.

“Nebari,” Takeda said.

Takeda pointed out the trunk’s movement, then lifted a hand beside a branch to show its direction. Charlie followed the line with his eyes. He asked a question about the wire on another tree, and Takeda led him closer so he could see where it curved beneath the needles.

The work was visible when he knew where to look.

“How long has this one been here?” Charlie asked.

Takeda looked at the pot, considering. “With me? Twelve years.”

“And before that?”

The man shrugged and smiled. “Longer.”

Charlie looked again at the pale edge of a healed cut, the fresh needles, the water still clinging to the lowest branch. Twelve years in these rows, and Takeda had been out watering it that morning.

Tom stood a few paces behind them and raised his phone.

“Am I in that?” Charlie asked.

“A little.”

Takeda stepped aside, apparently amused by the arrangement, and Charlie laughed. Tom took the photograph.

Before they left, Charlie thanked Takeda and repeated the word for roots once more. This time he earned a nod without a correction. He walked out slowly, turning back at the gate for one last look.

Tom put his hand against the small of Charlie’s back.

“Good morning?”

“Very.” Charlie reached for his hand. “How many photographs?”

Tom checked. “Forty-three.”

“Of the trees?”

“Some.”

That afternoon, they crossed the city to Higashiyama and wandered the shops along the streets leading uphill toward Kiyomizu-dera. People moved past them in both directions, carrying paper bags and drinks.

Charlie paused at a ceramics display. The bowls were arranged on wooden shelves, some smooth and pale, others dark with rough patches in the glaze.

He picked up a tea bowl and felt the uneven surface beneath his thumb.

The vendor said something he did not understand, then gestured for him to turn it. Charlie did. The underside was unglazed, warmer in colour than the rest.

He nodded, smiling, and set it down carefully.

“That one?” Tom asked.

“Maybe.” Charlie picked up another. “I like this one too.”

Tom waited while he compared them. Neither matched the cups at home. Charlie found that he liked that about them. He could already imagine one beside a score on the piano, the other on Tom’s desk.

Then he saw the little blue bowl.

The glaze deepened toward the bottom, its rim slightly uneven. He lifted it in both hands and turned toward Tom.

“Elena.”

Tom’s expression warmed. “Yes.”

They chose that first. Then the tea bowls. Then a small dish Charlie thought Hazel would like, and another purchase two shops farther up the street. Tom accepted each wrapped parcel as it emerged.

“We can distribute these,” Charlie offered, holding out his hand.

Tom passed him the smallest bag.

The street grew steeper. Charlie’s shirt clung between his shoulder blades, and the bags shifted awkwardly when they reached the steps. Tom took the little one back and held out his hand.

Charlie took it and moved closer as the steps narrowed.

They climbed slowly. Twice Charlie stopped to look back over the roofs. The shop signs and people below had become a moving pattern of colour. Farther away, the city spread beyond anything he could take in at once.

When he turned around, Tom was looking at him.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Charlie smiled and reached for his hand again.

At the temple, he put the guidebook away. There were directions to follow, tickets to keep, people making room for one another. The wooden buildings stood against the green hillside. Beneath the main hall’s broad veranda, the supporting timbers disappeared down toward the trees.

They stood near the railing for a while. Charlie rested his fingers against the worn wood. A camera clicked beside him; someone called to a friend. Beyond those voices, he could hear the insects in the trees.

“That was worth the hill,” Tom said.

“You’re allowed to put the bags down.”

“I’m beginning to think I should have brought a suitcase.”

Charlie laughed and helped him find a space for them at their feet.

They continued toward Otowa Waterfall. Three thin streams fell beneath the main hall, and a queue moved forward gradually. Charlie joined it. Tom followed, shifting the bags into one hand.

Charlie had read about the wishes people brought to the water: a long life, money, success in studies, fortunate love. Standing in line, he found that the possibilities did not arrive as separate things. He wanted to grow older. He wanted the work waiting in September. He wanted Tom there when he came home from it.

Ahead of them, a woman returned her ladle and stepped aside, her companion reaching for her arm. Charlie watched them move away together.

When it was his turn, he took a ladle from the rack and held it under the rightmost stream.

The water struck the ladle, spilling over its edge before he steadied his hand. He drank. For a moment he stood with the cool taste in his mouth, thinking of no exact words at all.

Then he returned the ladle and moved aside.

Tom took one. He looked at the three streams, then held it under the same one.

Charlie watched the water gather. Tom drank, returned the ladle, and came back to him. His hand found Charlie's as they walked away.

"What did you wish?" Charlie asked quietly.

Tom looked at their linked hands. "I think you know."

In the evening, they ate at an eight-stool restaurant. A menu in English lay beside the one in Japanese, and Charlie took longer than he needed to choose because the pictures had made him hungry for everything.

"You pick," Tom said.

Charlie looked up. "For both of us?"

"You've been considering that menu for ten minutes. I trust you."

He chose, checked with Tom, and pointed out their order when the chef came over. The man nodded and repeated it back. Charlie understood enough to nod too.

Their knees brushed beneath the counter. Behind it, the chef worked over a grill, then turned to lift a pot lid. Steam clouded his glasses. He took them off, wiped them with the edge of a cloth, and went back to the stove.

Small dishes arrived in sequence: grilled fish, pickled vegetables, rice, a clear broth. Charlie cupped the soup bowl in both hands. His feet were tired. The warmth reaching his palms made him realize how long he had been holding them stiffly around shopping bags.

Tom slid one of the parcels farther under his stool.

"The blue bowl survives?" Charlie asked.

"The blue bowl has had excellent supervision."

They talked about Takeda and the temple steps. Charlie tried the word for the roots again. Tom attempted it with him, badly enough that Charlie

laughed and had to set down his bowl.

“You didn’t listen.”

“I was taking pictures.”

Tom brought up the album. There was Charlie crouching beside a pine, Charlie looking at Takeda’s hand, Charlie laughing over his shoulder. Between them, there were trees Charlie had not remembered noticing.

He enlarged one photograph. “That’s beautiful.”

“It was beside the one you liked.”

Charlie looked at him, then back at the picture. “Send me that one.”

The chef placed a final little dish before them. For a while they ate without talking. Charlie could hear the scrape of a chair at the end of the counter, the low conversation of the couple beside them, the hiss when something met the grill.

Tom set his chopsticks down and stretched one leg beneath the counter. His knee remained against Charlie’s.

“We did a lot today,” Charlie said.

“Do you want less tomorrow?”

Charlie considered the question. “Maybe. I want to see what time we wake up.”

Tom laughed, and Charlie leaned against him briefly before sitting up to finish his food.

Charlie finished the last of his rice, then reached for his phone.

Most of the day’s options had already passed or closed. Two were still possible. He turned the screen toward Tom.

“Gozan Okuribi. We can see Toriigata from Arashiyama if we head back soon.” He scrolled down. “Or there’s a karaoke place near the station.”

Tom considered this. “I know if it’s me against you, you’re winning, so we’re doing the historical thing.”

Charlie frowned. “That isn’t how we’re deciding.”

“It’s completely fine. I still wanted to see you do karaoke.”

Charlie looked back at the list.

“…It’s also on tomorrow’s.”

They walked back toward the ryokan with the last of the crowd thinning around them. Charlie kept glancing toward the dark line of the mountains, though the fires were already fading.

“That was beautiful,” he said.

Tom looked at him. “Worth beating karaoke?”

Charlie smiled. “I didn’t know they were competing.”

“Everything is competing with karaoke.”

Charlie laughed softly. “You’ll survive.”

“I’m not worried about surviving. I’m worried about what song you’re going to pick.”

“You should be.”

CHAPTER 34

Thursday, August 17.

They had left the ryokan early enough that the air was merely hot rather than punishing.

By eight, they were sitting beside a café window with two completely different interpretations of breakfast between them. Tom had ordered black coffee. Charlie had ordered sencha and, after several minutes studying the menu, a slab of thick toast covered in honey and butter, topped with vanilla ice cream and sliced fruit.

Tom looked at it.

Charlie looked at him.

“You want some.”

“I absolutely do not.”

Charlie cut through one corner and held out the fork.

Tom ate it, then nodded.

Charlie smiled and cut another piece.

They spent the rest of the morning slowly. A bookshop. Two streets Charlie wanted to see because he had marked them on the map before they left Montréal. A small shop where Tom waited patiently while Charlie examined stationery with an attention he ordinarily reserved for manuscripts.

Shortly after lunch, Charlie stopped beside Kyoto Station.

“All right,” he said.

Tom looked at him. “All right what?”

Charlie folded the map and reached into his bag. He produced two tickets and held one out.

Tom took it.

For several seconds, he did not say anything. Then he looked up.

“Char.”

Charlie’s stomach gave a pleased little turn.

The ticket bore the crest of Kyoto Sanga F.C.

“I thought we could go to a football match.”

Tom looked down again, his thumb passing once over the crest. His face had done something almost embarrassingly soft.

Charlie immediately became interested in refolding the map.

“You’ve followed me around botanical gardens and nurseries for three days,” he said. “And you drank tea you hated.”

“I didn’t hate all of it.”

“You described one as lawn clippings.”

“It tasted like they smell.”

“So.” Charlie tucked the map away. “Football.”

Tom caught the back of his neck and kissed his forehead.

“Baby.”

Charlie flushed. “Yeah, yeah.”

Tom kissed his forehead again.

Charlie took his hand. “Come on.”

The train carried them west out of Kyoto. By the time they stepped off at Kameoka, Tom had already explained the shape of the J.League season, corrected himself twice, and opened the stadium map on his phone to see where they were sitting.

Charlie let him.

By kickoff, the drum from the home end was thrumming directly through the soles of Charlie's shoes, vibrating through the concrete stand that still held the day's heat.

Football was supposed to feel slower in person. It didn't.

On television, the pitch had always looked vast and leisurely; here, the speed was ferocious. The geometry rearranged itself in blinks: two flat lines dissolving into four, passing lanes opening where Charlie was certain none existed, then vanishing before he could even register who had stepped into the void.

He leaned toward Tom's ear. "Why not forward?"

Tom pointed without looking away. "Watch seven. Opposing midfielder."

Charlie tracked the run. The midfielder was already shading laterally, cutting the angle.

"He'd choke it before the ball arrived," Tom said. "Backwards opens a fresh lane."

Thirty seconds later, the ball went back, swung wide across the backline, and punched sharply forward through a seam that hadn't been there two touches ago.

Charlie looked over. Tom was already watching him, smug and completely delighted.

"Okay," Charlie conceded with a faint smile. "I see it."

By the second half, Charlie was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, tracking the off-ball movement as intently as the ball itself. Tom had diagnosed offside rules, pressing traps, why a completed pass could still be a tactical disaster, and why the spectator three rows behind them had been loudly wrong for an hour.

When the left-back tucked inward, Tom spent twenty unbroken seconds explaining inverted fullbacks—without looking at the field once.

Charlie tapped his forearm. "Thomas."

"What?"

“The match.”

Tom glanced grudgingly at the grass. “I can watch both.”

“You demonstrably cannot.”

“I like looking at you.”

Charlie rolled his eyes, but left his hand resting warm on Tom’s sleeve.

Midway through the half, space tore open down the left wing. The noise in the stadium surged into a roar as the cross curled in and the ball ripped the back of the net.

The stand shook.

Tom was on his feet before Charlie could even track the finish, hauling Charlie upright with an arm clamped around his shoulders.

“Did you see that run?” Tom shouted over the din.

“Yes!”

“From the blind side!”

“I saw it, Thomas!”

Grinning, Tom pressed a hard, spontaneous kiss to the side of Charlie’s head—before abruptly catching himself, glancing around at the packed terraces, and letting his arm slide to a slightly more decorous grip. Charlie’s grin only widened.

Eight minutes from time, Kyoto got caught on the break. The stadium collapsed into a collective, hollow groan as the ball rolled in for 2–1.

Tom dropped back onto the plastic seat, scowling. “That was bullshit.”

Charlie tilted his head. “Was it?”

“Yes.”

“Tactically?”

Tom stared at the centre circle for a second. “...No.”

Charlie laughed so hard the woman in the next seat turned with an amused smirk.

“They were caught too high,” Tom muttered defensively.

“Ah.”

“Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You said ‘ah.’”

Charlie leaned his temple against Tom’s shoulder, letting the post-match heat settle around them.

The final whistle blew at 2–1. Tom remained personally aggrieved on Kyoto’s behalf the entire walk to the station, and every time his indignation threatened to wind down, Charlie fed him another tactical question just to hear him go.

They ate dinner standing beneath an awning near the river, paper trays warm in their hands.

Charlie had chosen something fried from a stall largely because he could smell it from half a block away. Tom bought another portion after Charlie ate most of his.

By the time they started walking again, the city had gone dark around them. Light from the signs spilled across the pavement above narrow entrances. Bicycles passed occasionally, their tires whispering over the street.

Charlie felt a pleasant heaviness in his legs. The day had lasted exactly long enough.

Tom stopped.

Charlie took two more steps, then turned back.

“What?”

Tom pointed to a sign above a narrow stairway. Among the Japanese characters was one word Charlie could read without assistance.

KARAOKE.

Charlie looked at Tom.

Tom looked at Charlie.

“No.”

“You put karaoke on your list.”

“I put a specific karaoke place on my list.”

“So?”

“So I researched that one.”

Tom was already smiling.

Charlie looked up at the sign again.

“This could be terrible.”

“Perfect.”

“Thomas.”

Tom took his hand.

“Come on.”

Charlie pushed open the door and stopped.

No stage. No bar. No crowd of strangers waiting to watch them humiliate themselves. Just a cool, private booth washed in blue television light, air conditioning humming overhead, a padded bench, and two microphones on a low table.

Charlie glanced back. “Oh.”

“Better, isn’t it?” Tom nudged past him and shut the door.

He sat on the bench, tablet already in hand.

“Thomas. What are you doing?”

“Queueing a track.”

“I’m not singing.”

“You can sing.”

“I can carry a tune in a private room. That is not singing.”

“It is in here.” Tom tapped the screen with suspicious speed.

The television lit up: *Versace on the Floor — Bruno Mars.*

Charlie stared at the title, then at Tom. “Absolutely not.”

Tom picked up the mic, entirely unbothered, as the synthetic opening chords washed through the speakers.

He started singing.

Not catastrophically off-key, but hovering with cheerful imprecision somewhere near the intended melody. Charlie clapped a hand over his mouth.

Tom pointed a stern finger at him without missing a beat, stood, and crossed the tiny room to hook an arm around Charlie’s waist. He sang the next verse directly into Charlie’s face—his voice rough, slightly too low, and carrying the unshakable confidence of an executive who hadn’t hit a clean pitch in two minutes. A high note cracked. Tom just laughed into the mesh and kept going.

Charlie’s laughter dissolved into helpless affection. Tom knew he was terrible, which made the shamelessness infinitely worse.

At the pre-chorus, Tom tilted the mic toward him. Charlie shook his head. Tom kept going, straining upward as the melody climbed until his voice threatened to give out entirely.

“Thomas,” Charlie groaned.

Tom held out the mic again.

Charlie took it, the metal casing warm from Tom’s grip. The smug satisfaction on Tom’s face gave the game away instantly.

“You planned this.”

“I hoped,” Tom murmured.

The line arrived. Charlie took a breath and sang it quietly, his eyes fixed on the lyrics on the screen.

His pitch was clean. Tom watched him with an intensity that shrunk the six-foot room to inches.

“Yeah, Char,” Tom whispered.

Charlie glanced over. The teasing humor in Tom’s face had vanished, replaced by something dark, arrested, and entirely unguarded.

Oh.

Something shifted behind Charlie’s ribs.

He didn’t have Bruno Mars’s vocal power, but he understood music. He understood cadence, tension, and the precise psychological weight of an unresolved beat. He knew exactly how long a silence could hang in the air before a listener begged for release.

He let the next phrase hover, dropping his voice lower, letting the room wait on the pause.

“Charlie,” Tom breathed.

Charlie stepped in, pressing his free hand flat against the centre of Tom’s chest. “Back.”

Tom’s eyebrows twitched, but he took a step backward. Charlie followed, singing the verse straight into Tom’s throat, guiding him across the booth until the backs of Tom’s knees struck the low chair.

Charlie gave a gentle push. Tom sank into the seat.

The sheer shock on Tom’s face nearly broke Charlie’s composure, but the heat climbing Charlie’s neck had stopped being shame.

Tom reached up, fingers reaching for Charlie’s waist.

Charlie caught his wrist, lifted it away, and set it firmly back on the armrest.

Tom swallowed hard, his chest rising and falling.

Charlie stepped between his knees. He didn’t force the higher register; he dropped the phrase down an octave, letting the restraint and breath do the work. He braced one hand against the wall beside Tom’s ear, his mouth inches from Tom’s, and finished the final run looking directly into his eyes.

The backing track faded into dead silence.

Charlie lowered the mic, and his bravado evaporated in an instant.

“Well?” he whispered, suddenly nervous.

Tom caught him by the hips and hauled him down across his lap.

“That,” Tom growled against his mouth, “was fucking unfair.”

Charlie let out a breathless laugh, clutching Tom’s shoulders. “You picked the song.”

“You weaponized the phrasing.”

“I was interpreting the score.”

“Bullshit.”

Tom crushed their mouths together—a hard, thorough, dizzying kiss that left Charlie gasping against his collar.

When Charlie finally pulled back, Tom stared at him for three charged seconds.

Then Tom stood, lifting Charlie onto his feet in one fluid motion.

Charlie blinked. “Oh.”

Tom kissed him once more—sharp and decisive—and locked an iron grip around his hand.

The hallway lights were blinding after the booth, but Tom didn’t drop his pace, pulling Charlie toward the exit with single-minded focus while Charlie hurried behind him, smiling into the dark.

Tom had behaved with excruciating discipline through the train ride, the dark walk from Arashiyama station, and the polite bow to the woman at the desk. Charlie found it considerably more terrifying than reassuring.

They left their shoes in the entryway and padded down the corridor in their socks, Tom’s hand resting flat against the small of Charlie’s back. Inside, the futons were already laid out side by side on the tatami, a single lamp glowing low in the alcove. Beyond the sliding shoji screens, the garden was pitch black.

The latch clicked shut.

“You were very quiet on the train,” Charlie murmured.

Tom exhaled through his nose. “You’re enjoying this.”

“A little.”

Tom took half a step forward; Charlie lifted a single finger. “Wait.”

Charlie crossed the mats with unhurried steps, caught the hem of his own shirt, and unbuttoned it down to the waist.

“Char.”

“What?”

“You know what.”

Charlie stripped the shirt over his head and let it drop onto the floor. He stepped closer, resting two fingers beneath Tom’s chin, tipping his face up.

“Kneel.”

Tom stared at him before dropping slowly onto his knees at the edge of the futon.

Charlie leaned down and kissed him. Tom’s hands clamped hard to Charlie’s hips, dragging him flush against his chest with a low, rough rumble in his throat when Charlie caught his lower lip between his teeth.

Charlie pulled back, breaking the kiss. Tom’s grip remained locked to his waist.

Charlie looked down pointedly until Tom slowly lifted his hands, resting his palms flat on his own thighs.

“Very good,” Charlie murmured.

“Char,” Tom warned.

Charlie unfastened his trousers, pushing them and his underwear down together and stepping free. Tom’s gaze travelled over him.

“Touch me.”

Tom’s palm smoothed up the back of Charlie’s thigh, drawing him in. He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the ridge of Charlie’s hip, looking up with

dark, strained patience.

Then Tom took him into his mouth.

Charlie's hips rocked forward; Tom met him, humming low against him as his hand anchored Charlie's hip. Charlie's thighs began to shake, his fingers tightening in Tom's hair until he gave a sharp tug.

Tom released him with a quiet breath, resting his forehead against Charlie's stomach.

"Not yet," Charlie whispered. "Clothes off."

Tom rose, stripping his shirt and kicking his trousers across the tatami in a hurried rush that nearly caught his ankle.

Charlie smiled despite himself.

"Don't," Tom muttered, shedding the rest.

"I didn't say anything."

Tom was rigid and aching. Charlie crossed to the low table, picked up the small bottle of lubricant Tom had packed next to the melatonin, and pressed it into his palm.

"What do you want?" Tom asked, voice rough.

Charlie looked at the bedding. "Behind me. Stay close."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Charlie lowered himself onto his stomach, drawing one knee up, cheek resting against the pillow. Tom kissed Charlie's spine while his slicked fingers worked between Charlie's thighs, easing inside with slow, familiar care.

"Okay?"

"Yes. Keep going."

Tom worked slowly, hitting the deep angle that sent a jolt straight through Charlie. Charlie muffled a groan against his forearm, rocking back into

Tom's hand until the heat bordered on unbearable. He reached back blindly, catching Tom's wrist.

"Enough. I want you."

The plastic cap clicked. Tom coated himself and knelt between Charlie's thighs, blunt head pressing at the entrance.

"Ready?"

Charlie nodded into the pillow.

"Use your words, honey."

"Yes. Please."

Tom pushed inside with agonizing slowness. Charlie's breath caught as his body yielded to the thick stretch, Tom pausing halfway until Charlie drew in a long breath of sandalwood and skin.

"More."

Tom drove the rest of the way in, burying himself to the hilt. He braced his forearms on either side of Charlie's head, breath hot against his neck.

Charlie deliberately clenched around him.

Tom groaned into the sheet.

"There," Charlie whispered. "Now you can complain."

"You're an absolute menace."

"You picked the song."

Tom withdrew almost to the head, then thrust back in. Charlie's breath was knocked completely out of him.

"Quiet now," Tom murmured against his ear.

"Mhm."

Tom set a rolling, measured cadence, pressing Charlie deep into the futon. Charlie reached up, hooking a hand behind Tom's neck to drag his mouth down to his. Their kiss turned bruising and desperate as Tom drove deeper.

A sharp cry slipped past Charlie's lips. Tom went rigid, locking his hips.

They held still in the sudden quiet, listening. The hum of the wall unit. The cicadas buzzing in the garden. Nothing in the hall.

“Paper-thin walls,” Charlie whispered against his lips.

Tom’s chest shook with a soundless laugh. “Then don’t make a sound.”

“You first.”

Tom shifted his hips forward an inch, drawing a muffled gasp from Charlie.

Tom’s thrusts deepened, losing their careful cadence, the futon sliding faintly over the tatami. Charlie bit his own forearm to choke back the noise, the pleasure building. Tom reached underneath, fingers closing around Charlie’s cock, stroking in time with the drive of his hips.

Charlie arched, breath coming in ragged gasps. He looked back over his shoulder, catching Tom’s dark, strained gaze.

“Stop being careful,” Charlie whispered.

Tom’s hand stilled. “Can I?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Tom drove in deep, hands gripping Charlie’s hips, the pace turning urgent. Charlie buried his face into the bedding, muffling every sound as Tom crowded over him—skin against skin, the slide of their bodies in the humid room.

Tom stroked him fast, relentless. “Cum for me, baby.”

The pressure snapped. Charlie came with a hard, full-body shudder, clamping down around Tom and forcing a strangled breath against the back of Charlie’s neck. Tom kept stroking him through the contractions, his rhythm breaking apart.

Charlie reached back, fingers sinking into Tom’s hip. “Inside. Stay inside.”

Tom drove home and held, his whole body locking as he spilled into him, shaking, his forehead pressed into Charlie’s shoulder.

For a long time, the only sound was the harsh rattle of their breathing.

Gradually, Tom eased his weight down, resting his cheek against Charlie's back. "That was completely unfair."

Charlie let out a weak, wrecked laugh. "You survived."

"Barely."

Tom withdrew slowly, pressing a kiss to Charlie's hip before padding into the washroom. He returned with a steaming cloth, cleaning Charlie with quiet care before sorting himself out. He handed Charlie a glass of cold water, waited until he drank, then slid beneath the light summer quilt.

Charlie rolled into him, tucking his head under Tom's chin. Tom's arm came around him, thumb tracing slow circles over his hip.

Outside, the garden rustled in the night wind.

"Your singing was still atrocious," Charlie murmured into his collarbone.

Tom kissed his temple. "And yet, look where we are."

Charlie tilted his chin up. "Did you get what you wanted?"

"More," Tom said softly, drawing him in closer.

A low hum started in Tom's chest—the opening bar of the song.

Charlie slapped a palm over his mouth. "Don't you dare."

Tom laughed against his skin, turning his lips to kiss the centre of Charlie's palm, and Charlie left his hand there until sleep finally took them.

CHAPTER 35

Saturday, August 19.

The rain broke over the garden in seconds, dark patches blooming across the gravel. Charlie stood at the threshold, the scent of damp earth and moss drifting in through the open screens.

Behind him, Tom set down his book with a quiet thud. “Are we going out?”

Charlie watched the water roll off a bamboo spout. “I don’t think so.”

“Good.”

Smiling, Charlie slid the screen nearly shut. He left a two-inch gap of cool, wet air as the downpour began to drum against the wooden engawa.

Tom stepped up behind him, pressing a slow kiss to Charlie’s neck. Charlie leaned back against his chest, covering Tom’s forearm with his hand.

“Thomas.”

Tom hummed against his skin, his arms settling around Charlie’s waist. Turning in the circle of his embrace, Charlie brushed a damp lock of dark hair from Tom’s forehead.

“I like you on holiday,” Charlie said.

Tom smiled faintly. “I’ll try not to take that as an insult to my usual disposition.”

Charlie laughed, kissing him once before reaching back to pull the shoji screen completely shut. He took Tom’s hand and led him down to the futon.

Afterward, the storm quieted to a restless murmur. They lay tangled beneath the light summer quilt, Charlie’s cheek resting over Tom’s chest. Tom’s

thumb traced lazy, thoughtless arcs along the dip of Charlie's spine.

"What are we doing tomorrow?" Tom asked, his chin resting against Charlie's hair.

"I want to draw the garden."

Tom's hand stilled. "You draw?"

"Not well."

"Then I look forward to it."

Charlie smiled against his skin. "We can walk afterward. If we feel like it."

"I feel like that."

Charlie tilted his chin up. Tom was looking down at him. Charlie rested a palm against the evening stubble on Tom's jaw.

"I'm going to miss this room," Charlie murmured.

"Me too."

"I'm looking forward to September, though."

The admission surprised even him.

"I keep picturing the seminar," Charlie said softly. "I want to be in the room when they hear the music, and I want someone to completely disagree with me about what they just heard."

Tom stroked his cheekbone. "You look happy thinking about it."

"I am. Terrified, too."

"Sounds about right."

Letting out a quiet breath, Charlie sank back down against Tom's chest. The lecture halls on Sherbrooke were waiting, but he didn't need to think about that just yet.

Under his ear, Tom's heartbeat was steady, and outside, the rain tapered until he could track each drop striking the stones below.

Sunday, August 20.

Charlie sat at the garden's edge with a notebook he had bought at the market and a pencil from the ryokan's writing desk. He considered the pine tree and added another branch to his drawing.

The result was, by any objective standard, terrible.

The trunk listed to the wrong side. The branches had acquired a set of angles the real tree did not possess. He frowned, erased one, and redrew it. The tree was now slightly less wrong but newly lopsided.

Tom's shadow fell across the notebook.

He had come from inside, barefoot, holding a cup of instant coffee made with a sachet from the convenience store down the street. He looked over Charlie's shoulder.

"They have character."

Charlie looked up. "They have scoliosis."

Tom let out a surprised laugh and sat beside him, setting his coffee well clear of the page.

"I'm trying to get that bend." Charlie pointed with the pencil. "But every time I look down, it changes."

"The tree?"

"In my head." He looked at his drawing. "Apparently there's no room in there for a pine."

Tom leaned closer. "I can see which bit you mean."

"You're being kind."

"I am. I can also see it."

Charlie tried again. This time he left the first line in place and drew lightly beside it. The tree acquired two trunks, neither especially convincing, but the second came closer to the bend he wanted.

"Draw me the lantern," Tom said.

Charlie drew the lantern. It looked like a mushroom.

Tom laughed again, delighted enough that Charlie abandoned the eraser.

“It’s yours,” he said.

“I’m keeping it.”

“I was afraid of that.”

Tom waited until Charlie had finished, then accepted the page. He looked at it once more before putting it between two pages of his paperback.

The drawing had failed to preserve almost every proportion in the garden. It had preserved the morning rather well.

That afternoon, they went out without a plan. Charlie left the notebook behind, and Tom left the little stack of printed directions on the table.

They reached the bamboo paths in Arashiyama with other visitors moving around them. A family stopped for a photograph; one of the children darted ahead and was called back. Charlie and Tom stepped aside to let them pass, then continued with their fingers loosely linked.

The stalks rose far above their heads. Charlie tipped his face upward. Light passed between the leaves in shifting pieces, catching the smooth green lengths, then disappearing when the breeze changed. Somewhere overhead, two stalks knocked together.

Tom stopped when Charlie did.

“Hear that?” Charlie asked.

Tom nodded. They stood until it happened again.

Farther along, they came to Nonomiya Shrine. Charlie paused near the dark wooden gate, then bowed before entering. Tom followed him. They moved slowly, making room for people who had come to pray.

Charlie stood for a moment beneath the trees. Footsteps sounded on the path outside, with leaves rustling overhead. When he turned back, Tom was a few paces away, waiting.

He reached for Tom’s hand as they left.

“Back?” Tom asked.

Charlie looked along the path. “A little farther.”

Tom smiled. “Okay.”

That evening, dinner arrived in their room on lacquered trays, accompanied by warmed sake. Charlie rearranged a corner of the table to make room, moving his notebook and the little dish they had bought for Hazel. They ate while the daylight faded, Charlie already aware he would miss having so many small things to taste at once.

After dinner, Tom produced a deck of cards to teach him gin rummy, but the lesson didn’t survive the sake. By the third hand, Tom was casually inventing rules to cover his cheating, and Charlie abandoned his cards entirely, crawling around the table into Tom’s lap.

“Distraction tactics,” Charlie whispered against his mouth. “I want a rematch.”

“We’re going home tomorrow,” Tom murmured back.

“At home, then.”

Later, they left the unfinished game on the table and lay side by side on the futon. Tom was describing a card game Lukas had attempted to teach the Goons.

Charlie’s eyes grew heavy. He lost the thread of the story but kept listening to Tom’s voice, warm with amusement whenever he repeated something Lukas had said.

“Don’t stop,” Charlie murmured. “Love your voice.”

Tom’s fingers moved slowly through his hair.

“I haven’t reached the part where André takes over.”

Charlie smiled without opening his eyes.

Tom kept talking. When he finally reached over and turned off the lamp, Charlie was already asleep.

Monday, August 21.

Their bags stood packed by the door. The cups were washed, the trays collected, the futons put away. Charlie had checked the little blue bowl one last time before Tom wrapped another shirt around it.

Now he stood at the open doors, trying to memorize the garden.

He studied the pine's crooked trunk, the stone beside it, the shallow hollow where water had gathered. His drawing had missed nearly all of them. The photographs were better, but they could not hold the warm air on his arms or the sound from beyond the wall.

Tom appeared behind him. His arms circled Charlie's waist, his chin settling on his shoulder.

Charlie leaned back and covered Tom's hands with his own.

"Thank you," he said softly. "For bringing me here."

Tom pressed a kiss to his hair. "Thank you for coming."

Charlie smiled. "I was fairly eager."

"I noticed."

They stood a little longer, Tom warm at his back. Charlie wanted to keep all of it and was glad, suddenly, that some of it was coming home with him.

The alarm on Tom's phone sounded.

Charlie took a last look, then turned. Tom slid the doors closed. They picked up their bags, thanked the woman at the desk, and put on their shoes.

At the end of the street, Charlie checked the way to the station. Tom waited beside him with the suitcase.

"Ready?"

Charlie folded the map. "Yeah."

They retraced the route through Kyoto to Kansai, then travelled home through Vancouver. Charlie watched the dates on their itinerary stop behaving intuitively. After all those hours in the air, Montréal would still be Monday.

By eleven that night, he was past trying to make sense of it.

Trudeau's arrivals hall held patches of quiet between people waiting for bags, embracing relatives, and looking for the right exit. Charlie followed the signs with Tom beside him. His passport and PR card were back in his wallet, packed away after they cleared customs in Vancouver. They collected their bags and headed for the doors.

Then they were through.

A black sedan waited at the curb. Charlie was against Tom's side before the door had closed. He dropped his head onto Tom's shoulder and let the car carry them through the dark city.

Tom's arm came around him. Neither of them spoke on the drive.

At the penthouse, Tom's key turned in the lock. Charlie kicked off his shoes.

Cheddar sat on the kitchen counter. Hazel had brought him home a few hours earlier. He stared at them with the measured indifference of someone who had been excellently fed and was considering whether to mention it.

Charlie smiled and held out a hand. "Hey, Cheddar."

Cheddar headbutted his palm, pushing hard enough to move it, then walked away.

"We missed you too," Charlie murmured.

Tom set the bags down and adjusted the thermostat. The apartment felt cool after Kyoto. He led Charlie to the bedroom, where the familiar height of the mattress required less negotiation than the futon.

Charlie sat on its edge and exhaled.

Tom changed into sleep pants, then came to stand between Charlie's knees.

"Shirt?"

Charlie lifted his arms. Tom eased it over his head, helped him out of the rest of his travel clothes, and found the soft, oversized sleep shirt Charlie liked. When it fell past his hips, Charlie let out another long breath.

"Thank you."

Tom touched his cheek. “Bed.”

Charlie crawled beneath the covers. Tom climbed in beside him, and Charlie found his spot with his ear over Tom’s heartbeat and one hand resting against his chest.

Cheddar jumped down somewhere in the hallway. A moment later, a small weight landed near their feet.

Tom’s arms closed around him. Charlie’s shoulders eased; his breathing deepened.

“I love you,” Tom whispered, kissing his hair.

Charlie was already slipping under, but he burrowed closer anyway.

Tuesday, August 22.

Elena opened the door before Tom finished knocking, taking in their exhausted faces.

“You should both be asleep.”

“We tried,” Charlie said, leaning into Tom’s arm. “My body thinks it missed dinner.”

“Then it is fortunate I made breakfast.”

She pulled Charlie into a hug before turning to Tom. He set his bag down and held her close—almond soap, clean cotton, her grip firm between his shoulder blades.

Inside, an open suitcase overflowed with rolled clothes and enough gifts to provision a small village. At the kitchen table, Sofia looked up from a spread of old photographs.

“Welcome back. How was Japan?”

“Beautiful,” Charlie said.

Tom set the paper bag on the counter. “We brought you something.”

Elena wiped her hands on a tea towel and carefully unwrapped the ceramic bowl, its blue glaze deepening toward the bottom. Tom remembered Charlie

weighing it in his hands at a Kyoto market, murmuring her name.

“It practically had its own seat on the train,” Charlie added. “Thomas wrapped it in four shirts.”

“It was fragile.”

Elena touched Tom’s cheek, then Charlie’s, before placing the bowl on the shelf beside a childhood portrait of Sofia. “There. Now sit before you fall asleep standing.”

Over plates of arepas, eggs, and avocado, Elena laid out the logistical battlefield of her trip. Charlie countered with stories from Japan.

“And your first seminar is September fifth?” Elena asked Charlie. “Are you ready?”

“Preparing and being ready are different things,” Charlie admitted. “But I promise there will be actual music.”

“Tell me how the first class goes,” Elena said warmly. “And send pictures of your office. I want to see where you put your books.”

After breakfast, while Elena and Sofia bickered over cousin identification at the table, Tom rinsed plates at the sink. Charlie dried beside him, their shoulders brushing.

“Okay?” Charlie murmured.

Tom looked at the blue bowl resting on the shelf. “I’m going to miss her.”

Charlie’s hand brushed the small of his back. “Yeah.”

Before they left, Elena pressed a warm container of arepas into Charlie’s hands with strict orders to reheat them properly. Charlie said his goodbyes, giving them space, and Elena followed Tom to the door.

Tom held his jacket, the words catching in his throat. He set it down. “Come here.”

She stepped into his arms, resting her cheek against his shoulder as the background hum of the apartment faded out.

“Have a good time,” Tom whispered. “Send pictures.”

Elena drew back gently, cupping his cheek. “We’ll have breakfast the moment I return.”

CHAPTER 36

Tuesday, August 22.

The Plateau triplex was a collision of its inhabitants—Julian's architectural journals stacked with precision above Hazel's disheveled legal texts.

That evening, Charlie and Tom shared the couch beneath Hazel's clashing prints while Alex loitered behind them with a beer, right until the buzzer announced Nancy and David. Nancy marched in carrying a casserole dish wrapped in a tea towel, David trailing behind with red wine and a pastry bag half-hidden against his leg.

"I know you said not to bring anything," Nancy said, kissing Hazel's cheek and holding Charlie until she'd thoroughly inspected his face for jet lag.

Dinner was a crowded spread—Nancy's casserole beside Julian's salad, a warm baguette Hazel tore in half with her bare hands. Charlie talked about Kyoto, using the tablecloth to map the roots of a particular nursery tree, Julian leaning in over the temple joinery.

When the casserole was down to a scraping of sauce, Nancy set down her fork. "September first. That's still the day?"

"The fellowship starts on the first. I teach the following Tuesday, after Labour Day," Charlie said.

"What are you teaching?" David asked.

"A graduate seminar. *Silence, Form, and Listening*."

Alex lifted his beer. "I would be exceptional at the first part."

"You'd fail immediately," Hazel said.

Charlie smiled. "It's about what happens when music stops making sound. How a performer makes us anticipate the next phrase across a pause."

“Like when you lift your hands and we’re waiting?” Nancy asked.

“Partly. I’m sorting out which questions still work from the dissertation and which need new evidence. Two years should be enough time to find out.”

Nancy was around the table before he finished, pressing her face into his shoulder. Charlie hugged her back, laughing when she squeezed harder.

“Mum. Breathing.”

“I know. Just a second.”

Across the table, Tom watched them with his mouth softened at the corners.

When Nancy finally sat back, David cleared his throat, turning the stem of his wine glass. “I don’t understand most of what you’ve written,” he said. “I did try. But you’ve worked very hard, Charlie, and you still get excited enough about it to forget your dinner.” He raised his glass. “To Charlie. And the next two years.”

Hazel caught Charlie’s eye over the rim of hers, giving him a small, fierce nod.

Dessert was Nancy’s contraband *tarte au sucre*. Alex tipped his chair onto two legs to Julian’s quiet horror, David retreated to the armchair by the books, and Nancy commandeered Charlie’s phone to review travel photos.

Tom leaned close to Charlie’s ear. “Your lunch is going to be enormous.”

Charlie laughed into his fork.

“Share with the class,” Hazel demanded.

“No,” Tom said.

“Classified information,” Charlie added.

Alex reached for another slice of tart. “Disgusting. But they’ve always been like this.”

“There were years of pining,” Nancy corrected. “Terrible, obvious pining.”

“Mum.”

“I have photographs.”

By ten, Hazel had cleared the table and chased them toward the door. Outside, the night air carried the tinny, repetitive scales of someone practicing a trumpet from an open balcony.

“Métro?” Tom asked.

Charlie caught Tom’s free hand, their fingers lacing together around the weight of Nancy’s leftovers. “I’m glad we’re home.”

Tom squeezed back. “Me too.”

Friday, September 1.

Charlie arrived at McGill twenty minutes early. His office sat on the second floor at the end of a corridor smelling faintly of coffee and warm paper, someone practicing scales behind a closed door.

He stopped before his nameplate:

Dr. Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery
Postdoctoral Fellow, Musicology Area
Department of Music Research

He read all three lines twice before fumbling out his keys.

The room was modest: a wooden desk beneath a window that stuck halfway, bookshelves, two visitor chairs, and, in the corner, the digital keyboard Tom had given him. In all his imagining, there had been no stubborn sash or dented desktop, but the real room felt better.

By the time Mehta knocked, he had unpacked and repacked the same three books.

“Settling in?” she asked, taking a seat.

“The chair and I have reached an agreement.”

After confirming his teaching schedule—fourteen students, starting Tuesday—she turned to his research proposal.

“You’re proposing to compare what people hear with what they see,” she said.

“Initially. A performer’s hands staying poised or moving away. The same sound, asking listeners when they think the phrase has ended.” Charlie hesitated. “I need help with the experimental design.”

“That’s a useful thing to know at the beginning,” Mehta said. She advised him to bring a tighter selection of examples next time, and offered a measured nod regarding the book: “Give yourself room to revise the argument before you revise every sentence.”

After she left, Charlie opened the draft titled *Introduction*. He stripped away the dissertation’s lingering qualifications and moved an unsupported claim into his notes. On a clean page, he typed:

What makes a silence feel like a continuation?

Beneath it, he began two lists: what the score could prove, and what he would have to ask listeners to tell him.

For the first time that morning, he forgot to watch the door.

Tuesday, September 5.

Tom stopped the car outside the music building with time to spare. Charlie pulled his bag onto his lap and leaned across the console to kiss him, but as he started to pull away, Tom’s hand slid to the back of his neck, drawing him in for a second, slower kiss.

Charlie checked the dashboard clock. “You’ve left me only eighteen minutes.”

“Terrible,” Tom said.

Charlie smiled, opening the door. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Inside the seminar room, Charlie set up the playback and wrote a single question across the board: *What continued through the pause?* When the students settled in with their notebooks, he asked them to leave the score closed and simply listen. His voice sounded surprisingly steady.

He played two recordings of the final movement of Mahler's Ninth—the same passage, differently paced. Charlie had listened to them so often he'd almost forgotten they could be heard any other way.

"What changed?" he asked.

A student near the window described the second performance as suspended; another immediately countered that it felt final, cutting off expectation before the rest even arrived. Rather than steering them toward his prepared outline, Charlie abandoned his notes and let the disagreement run. When they finally opened the score, one student realized she had mistaken a lingering violin line for silence.

"Good," Charlie told her. "Now we know what you were following."

By the time the room emptied, he had used less than half his outline. His tea sat cold beside a board covered in four incompatible descriptions and a crooked diagram.

Charlie photographed the board for his records, wrote a note in the margin of his plan—*Leave time to listen again*—and texted Tom: *I think it went well.*

The reply arrived before he'd even zipped his bag: *Tell me everything tonight.*

Friday, September 15.

Charlie now knew which stairwell was quickest and which printer insisted it was out of paper while visibly full, though he still slowed outside his own door.

Before office hours, he gave half an hour to Passage, reviewing an after-school workshop proposal from the Fondation's merit packet and flagging a transport issue in the attendance plan before packing the portal away.

At 10:07, Amélie knocked. She carried a laptop and a score excerpt covered in pencil, sitting across from him with one hand anchored to the paper.

"I think I've made an argument I can't prove."

"Show me," Charlie said.

Her draft described a passage resisting closure, but halfway through, she had swapped the musical analysis for a claim about grief and the composer's life. When Charlie asked what sound had prompted the shift, she pointed back to the score: a recurring figure she kept expecting to return.

"Start there," Charlie told her. "You can keep grief as your response. But if you want it to explain what the music does, we need to know how you got from one to the other."

Amélie flipped the sheet over and sketched a new sequence. "This is a different paper."

"It might be a more manageable one."

She left absorbed in the back of the page. Charlie was still smiling when he turned back to his desk and reopened his own draft.

Halfway down the second page of his introduction, he caught himself doing the exact same thing: jumping from a description of the score to an assumption about what listeners expected without showing the steps between.

He read the paragraph twice. There was plenty to do.

Charlie had rehearsed the invitation for days. When he finally made it that evening, he tried to sound casual.

"You could come see my office," he said. "If you want."

He stood at the kitchen counter slicing an apple. Cheddar sat beside the cutting board, observing a territorial violation Tom no longer contested.

At the island, Tom stopped typing.

"Yeah," he said evenly. "I'd like that."

"Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Of course."

Charlie pushed a piece of apple toward him. Tom accepted it, then turned back to his screen. The cursor blinked in the same place.

Cheddar leaned forward to inspect the remaining pieces.

“Those aren’t yours,” Charlie told him.

The cat appeared unconvinced.

Saturday, September 16.

The campus was quiet. Charlie used his access card and held the door for Tom, who followed him upstairs in dark jeans and a navy pullover.

At the end of the corridor, Tom stopped.

He read the nameplate once, then again. Charlie had expected a joke about the length of his name.

“It’s small,” Charlie warned, unlocking the door.

Tom stepped inside. He looked at the keyboard, the books on the shelves, Charlie’s cardigan hanging over the chair.

“You’ve put your things here.”

“That was broadly the plan.”

Tom smiled. His hand closed around the back of one of the visitor chairs, then loosened.

Charlie shut the door. He showed him the stubborn window and the keyboard headphones. On the desk, his seminar plan lay beside the book outline. He turned a closed student folder face down before moving the other pages closer.

“This is what I’m working on,” he said.

Tom looked where he pointed. “That’s the question from the pub.”

“Still the question. I’ve become much less certain about how to answer it.”

“Is that good?”

“Apparently.”

“Come here,” Tom said.

Charlie pushed him gently toward the chair. Tom sat, and Charlie climbed into his lap, winding his arms around his neck. The chair shifted under their combined weight.

“That,” Charlie said, “is not the height adjustment.”

Tom steadied them with one foot.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said. “I am so fucking proud of you.”

Charlie could have made another joke. Instead, he pressed his forehead against Tom’s and held still.

Then he kissed him.

When they broke apart, Tom’s thumb moved along his face.

“What time are you finished Tuesday?”

“Twelve-thirty.”

“I can pick you up.”

Charlie looked at him. “From here?”

“If you want.”

Charlie glanced around the office. Tom had been looking at everything as though Charlie had personally built the room.

“Okay.”

Tom smiled.

“You look very pleased with yourself.”

“I’m picking my husband up from work.”

“You’ve picked me up from work before.”

“Not from this office.”

Charlie kissed him again.

Tuesday, September 19.

Tom arrived five minutes early.

He stopped at the far end of the corridor instead of going to the seminar room.

Through the closed door, he could hear Charlie's voice, though not the words.

A few minutes later, the door opened.

Tom looked away instinctively.

Students came down the corridor in twos and threes, still talking about the recording. One passed close enough to nod at him. Tom nodded back.

Eventually the stream stopped. Tom looked toward the room.

Two students were still inside, packing their things. Charlie was winding the laptop cable around his hand.

Then he looked up.

He saw Tom.

His whole face softened.

Tom smiled.

He glanced once in each direction, with the furtive air of someone about to do something considerably more illicit than enter a university classroom.

Charlie's mouth twitched.

Tom slipped through the doorway.

"You're early," Charlie said quietly.

"Five minutes."

Tom stopped beside the desk rather than touching him. His eyes went briefly to the board.

"Good class?"

"I think so."

"You think so?"

Charlie tucked the cable into his bag. "Someone made me change my mind."

Tom smiled. “Then definitely terrible.”

“Obviously.”

One of the remaining students shouldered her bag and said goodnight. Charlie answered her. The other followed a few seconds later.

Tom waited until the door closed behind them.

“Ready?”

Charlie looked at him.

There was something almost absurdly satisfying about this.

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “I’m ready.”

After that, Tom came whenever he could. Sometimes he was early, sometimes late, but he never interrupted. If students lingered, he stayed down the corridor or waited near the entrance until Charlie was finished. Somehow, without being told, he knew when Charlie wanted him close.

Charlie loved it.

Occasionally, students saw them together in the corridor or beside the car.

Nobody asked who he was.

Charlie didn’t volunteer it.

He had no idea that they had begun talking about him anyway.

The first response papers arrived on the twenty-ninth. By nine that evening, Charlie was curled across the sectional with his legs in Tom’s lap and an old accounting textbook serving as a writing surface, while Cheddar occupied far more cushion than his size justified.

Tom looked up from his laptop. “You’re fidgeting.”

“I’m grading. These students are smart, but this draft...” Charlie rubbed his forehead with the back of his wrist. “I don’t want to write it for them. I just want to show them where the connection is.”

He jotted a note in the margin—*Which earlier event makes you expect the return? Show us*—just as Tom shut his laptop.

“Are you planning to work all night?”

“I want to finish this one.”

“I have alternatives,” Tom murmured, leaning down to kiss Charlie’s knee.

“That doesn’t help.”

“I wasn’t trying to help.”

The next kiss landed higher up his thigh, throwing Charlie’s handwriting into jeopardy.

“Thomas. One minute.”

Tom sat back, keeping a warm hand around Charlie’s ankle until the final comment was down. Charlie gathered the papers and slid them into the folder.

“Done,” Charlie said, handing it over.

Tom set the stack on the side table. Sensing the shift, Cheddar opened one eye, assessed the room, and prudently vacated the couch.

“Rude,” Charlie noted.

“He knows us.” Tom leaned over him, bracing an arm beside Charlie’s shoulder to pull him into a slow, lingering kiss, his hand slipping beneath the hem of Charlie’s shirt. When he started to ease back, Charlie caught his collar.

“Where are you going?”

“Suggesting a better piece of furniture.”

Charlie considered this. “The office chair?”

Tom laughed against Charlie’s shoulder. “Absolutely not.”

Charlie kissed his temple, took his hand, and led him toward the bedroom, leaving Tom to reach back for the hallway light as the door clicked shut behind them.

Monday, October 2.

Passage had outlasted its original six-month pilot, successful enough that the Fondation made the Montréal microgrants permanent and launched a second, broader intake for community arts across Québec. With the new provincial stream, the old three-thousand-dollar cap was gone, and Charlie's non-voting advisory role had stretched north along with the map.

Which was how a fourteen-thousand-dollar application for a youth music project in Kuujjuaq ended up on his desk: four guitars, a keyboard, recording gear, freight. At the bottom, all the people required to make any of it useful had been compressed into a single, absurd line: Volunteer support.

At seven that evening, Charlie dialled into the conference line with Mireille, the Fondation's program administrator.

"Anna speaking," a voice answered over distant chatter in Inuktitut and the scrape of a door.

"Anna, it's Mireille. Charlie Heitmeyer-Montgomery is here advising on the music portfolio."

"Clarification call," Anna said immediately, "or are you asking us to change the submission?"

"Clarification," Mireille said smoothly. "No revisions requested."

"Good. Go ahead."

Charlie leaned into the mic. "Who is covering those volunteer hours?"

"Peter covers some instruction when he's in town. I handle the organizing around my day job."

"Is that sustainable through the winter?"

"No," Anna said flatly. "The loaner laptop is failing, the space is borrowed, and Peter can't cover sessions when he isn't here. We can share a guitar. We can't share hours."

"Then why isn't staffing in the budget?"

"Because this isn't our working budget. The real one included coordination, instruction, repairs—nearly double this. Then we read your guide. Every

example showed physical equipment, so we gave you what you wanted to see.”

Charlie looked down at his notes. He had co-written that guide over three weeks in May.

“The examples weren’t intended as a ceiling,” Mireille interjected.

“Maybe not to you,” Anna said. “To us, they made equipment look like the only safe answer. We cut the coordinator so we wouldn’t get flagged.”

“Do you still have the working budget?” Charlie asked.

He caught himself a second too late. The call was for clarification, not an invitation to supplement the file.

Mireille cut in cleanly. “We need to confirm how the adjudication committee treats a materially altered budget before asking more of you, Anna.”

“If we submit the real number,” Anna said, “does the committee decide we asked for too much and fund nothing? Or disqualify us for missing a deadline? Our board meets again next Wednesday, and we are not writing another introduction to Kuujjuaq to justify paying an instructor.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Charlie said.

“There’s a session that morning,” Anna added, keys rattling on her end. “If someone wants to see what we actually do, come listen. But we aren’t putting on a dog-and-pony show for grant money.”

“If authorized,” Mireille warned.

“Understood,” Charlie said.

The line disconnected.

“You almost asked for the draft,” Mireille said into the silence.

“Because our guide broke their application.”

“Perhaps. But reopening an intake requires a defensible institutional rationale. Inviting revisions would delay the round. And if every honest budget comes back twice as large, we still have the same pool.”

“Then the committee is funding fiction,” Charlie said.

Mireille sighed. “Draft a memo outlining what the guide distorted, what data we need, and how to collect it without procedural bias. By Wednesday.”

“Fine.”

“And Charlie? Do not book a flight.”

The line dropped. Charlie pushed Cheddar off his notes and stared at the application guide. The sample budgets were clean, concrete, effortlessly costed. He had been so proud of that clarity.

Thursday, October 5.

The Fondation signed off just after four. Along with the visit came a formal clarification window for the entire provincial intake: applicants could submit revised budgets restoring costs they had removed in response to the guide. The higher totals would be considered, though Mireille guaranteed nothing.

Charlie’s mandate was rigid. No coaching. No drafting. No promises. No spending his own money.

By six, his suitcase was open on the bed. Tom was already wedging a travel kettle between rolls of heavy wool socks.

“How’s the parka?” Tom asked.

“Seems fine.”

Tom picked up the printed authorization letter off the desk. “You’re taking the actual terms of reference.”

“It outlines what I’m authorized to do.”

“What do you say when they ask whether Peter’s travel counts as instruction or freight?”

“That I can’t classify it for them.”

“And when Anna asks how much room is left in the pool?”

“That I can’t advise her.”

Tom dropped the paper onto the open suitcase. “Good luck with that.”

Charlie sat on the edge of the mattress. “I keep looking at the other thirty-one files. God knows what they stripped out to match the guide I helped write. Anna was just the only one fed up enough with southern grant theatre to say it out loud.”

“You asked the question,” Tom said, sitting down beside him.

Charlie stared at the boots beside the suitcase. “I don’t want to step off the plane with a clipboard, looking like an auditor who needs them to explain why heating costs money.”

“Then don’t carry a clipboard,” Tom said. “Listen to the kids. Take notes after dinner. Do not balance their ledger on the floor of a gym.”

Charlie gave a short laugh. Tom’s shoulder knocked against his.

“You’ll be fine.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No,” Tom admitted. “You’ll probably get something wrong. Listen when they tell you what it is.” He pulled Charlie against his side. “Call me when you touch down.”

“I will.”

“And eat real food.”

“Mutual agreement,” Charlie countered, meeting his eyes. “No protein bars at your desk at midnight.”

“Deal.”

Charlie caught his wrist, holding it for a second. “And no checking the flight tracker every five minutes.”

“I’ll exercise restraint.”

CHAPTER 37

Sunday, October 8.

When the cloud ceiling broke, the forest was already gone. Stunted black spruce clung to low gullies, giving way to slate, pale lichen, and water with no roads near it.

Near Kuujjuaq, the Koksoak tore through the rock. Charlie had spent three nights measuring satellite tiles against the St. Lawrence, but on the descent, the scale came apart. The river spread nearly a mile across—black water and exposed tidal mudflats slicing through the grey plateau like an inland sea.

The wind on the tarmac hit him in the sinus cavities before his boot found the second metal stair. Cold, smelling of kerosene and dry gravel.

Inside the compact terminal, English and rapid Inuktitut overlapped beneath the fluorescent lights. Luggage churned off the belt alongside cargo totes and beat-up guitar cases. Charlie dragged his roller bag out to the idling Auberge van, where the heater blasted against his shins for the entire ride across the plateau.

By the time he got his keycard and dropped his pack onto the hotel desk, his phone had buzzed twice.

Tom: Landed?

Tom: Restraint lasted five minutes. Do not make me call dispatch.

Charlie dialled before taking off his coat. Tom picked up on video with a wooden spoon in one hand.

“You’re alive,” Tom said. “How’s the cold?”

“Aggressive. The coat works, but the scarf was a decorative mistake.” Charlie propped the phone against the hotel lamp. “The river isn’t a river. It’s an ocean.”

“That big?”

“I don’t even know what else to compare it to.”

Tom squinted through the camera, taking in the beige wood-veneer headboard and the industrial radiator. “Did you unpack the kettle?”

“It’s already boiling.”

“Good. What are you having for dinner?”

“Whatever the dining room downstairs is serving that doesn’t require me to go back into the wind.” Charlie pulled off his boots with his heels.

Tom’s mouth twitched. “Where’s the notebook?”

“In the bag.”

“Zipped?”

“Zipped.”

“Tomorrow is Thanksgiving,” Tom reminded him. “Most things will be closed. Which gives you most of a day alone in a remote northern village you aren’t authorized to audit.”

“I brought three books.”

“You’ll read two by midnight and be pacing the lobby by breakfast.” Tom rested his forearm on the counter. “Stay inside until the sun’s actually up. And don’t start interviewing the front-desk clerk about recreation funding.”

“I won’t.” Charlie sat back against the headboard, watching the faint reflection of the stove burners in Tom’s glasses. “I have nothing official until Tuesday anyway.”

“Good. Go eat before the kitchen shuts down.”

“Eat your pasta.”

“I’m on it. Call me from the pillow.”

“I love you.”

“I love you more, honey.”

The screen cut to black. The room went quiet except for the steady hum of the radiator beneath the window. Charlie left the notebook zipped in the front pocket of his bag, grabbed his key, and went downstairs.

Back in Montréal, Tom was systematically addressing the hobby problem. He had a job, friends, a hockey league, and Charlie—nothing he could reach for alone on an empty afternoon.

Unable to think of anything himself, Tom had sought outside help.

Julian had already arranged the tools before Tom arrived. Tiny pieces filled shallow trays across one end of the dining table, sorted by material and size. Two brushes lay perfectly parallel. Beneath the lamp sat Julian’s latest architectural model, its unfinished rooms open to inspection.

Tom stared at it. “You do this voluntarily?”

“You asked to observe one of my hobbies,” Julian said, handing him a pair of tweezers. “At least wait until we have walls before condemning it.”

“Fair enough.” Tom sat.

Julian showed him the miniature shelving unit he was assembling. Up close, the careful joins were impressive. Tom understood the satisfaction intellectually. His fingers, however, lacked finesse.

“You’re holding it like a support beam,” Julian said. “It’s three millimetres wide.”

Tom loosened his grip. The piece stayed where it was supposed to.

“Now align the edge,” Julian instructed.

“It is aligned.”

Julian peered over his glasses. “At full scale, that lean would be visible from the street.”

For the next hour, Tom followed directions. He measured twice. He learned how little paint constituted too much paint and discovered that glue could travel from tweezers to three unrelated fingers instantly.

The result was, annoyingly, quite good.

“Structurally sound,” Julian decided, turning the finished shelves beneath the lamp. “Disturbingly precise for a first attempt.”

Tom photographed them and sent the picture to Charlie.

I made this.

The reply came almost immediately: *really? it looks good*

Thank you.

did you enjoy it?

Tom looked at the shelves. He had enjoyed the precision. He had enjoyed spending the evening with Julian without a contract or family crisis in sight. But his shoulders ached, and his legs had wanted to move for the past forty minutes.

Not especially.

there are hundreds of other things to try, Charlie replied.

Tom put the phone down to find Julian watching him. “You’re making Hazel’s face.”

“I have never had Hazel’s face.”

“The expression,” Julian clarified. “She wears it when she thinks she has reached the conclusion before I have.”

Tom leaned back and stretched his shoulders. “I hate this.”

Julian looked at the miniature shelves in dismay.

“Not the shelves,” Tom said quickly. “The shelves are excellent. I mean sitting here. I sit at a desk all day. I don’t want to develop recreational sitting.”

Julian considered the chair. “Then sitting appears to be the design flaw.”

Tom stood and gathered their coffee cups. “One hobby eliminated.”

“One shelf is hardly a representative sample.”

“It was a successful trial. Thank you.”

Julian removed his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “At least the millwork can remain.”

Tom carried the cups toward the kitchen, smiling. Behind him, Julian placed the tiny shelves inside the model.

Monday, October 9.

Anna texted at two: *Going down to the river before dinner. Be out front at three if you want to see it from the ground.*

At three, an older 4Runner with mud-caked rocker panels was idling at the curb. When Charlie hauled the door shut against the draft, Anna glanced at his down jacket.

“My husband vetted the gear,” Charlie said.

“He did all right. Wind’s worse by the water.”

She took the gravel road out past the fuel depot, lifting two fingers off the wheel at an oncoming pickup. Beyond the last buildings, the plateau broke open into the basin.

The Koksoak at low tide was mostly mud. Half a mile of slate-grey silt, dark wet stone, and exposed gravel banks spread below them, cut through by shallow, fast-moving channels carrying the smell of frozen iron.

“Tide’s all the way out,” Anna shouted over the engine noise and the gale. She pointed toward a dark shelf of rock thirty feet above the silt line. “Water comes back over that ledge before eight.”

Charlie pulled off a glove with his teeth and framed the expanse with his phone. On the screen, the scale vanished—it looked like a grey puddle in a ditch.

“Don’t bother,” Anna said. “A five-inch screen makes everything look like dirt.”

“I’m trying to show Tom.”

“Send it anyway. He’s your husband?”

“Yeah.” Charlie hesitated, thumbing back through his camera roll. He turned the screen toward her: Tom leaning against their kitchen counter with an espresso mug.

Anna leaned across the console, squinting against the windshield glare.

She paused. “Oh.”

“What does ‘oh’ mean?”

“Nothing.” She zipped her collar up to her chin. “You didn’t mention he looked like that.”

Charlie looked down at the screen. “He looks like a banker who works too much.”

“He looks like someone who pays for good coats,” Anna said, deadpan. “Anyway. The river.”

“The river.” Charlie jammed his glove back on before his fingers went stiff.

Across the flats, the shallow channels had already begun to reverse, dark water nosing inland with the returning tide.

“You know what Kuujjuaq translates to?” Anna asked.

“Great river.”

Anna glanced sideways at him. “You actually read the introduction.”

“Every word.”

“Good. I hate writing that paragraph. Every southern grant demands three hundred words on geography before they’ll look at a spreadsheet. Like we have to prove the town exists before we can buy strings.”

“Mireille likes the context,” Charlie said.

Anna glanced at him.

“It’s institutional protection,” he added. “If an auditor asks why freight costs ten thousand dollars, she points to the geography paragraph.”

“Freight costs ten thousand dollars because the airlines charge what they want,” Anna said flatly. “We shouldn’t need to write tundra poetry to justify air cargo.”

She swung the truck back toward the gravel turnoff.

“Tomorrow’s at ten. Peter’s meeting us at the Auberge once he drops his kids.”

“Thanks for the drive,” Charlie said as she dropped him at the Auberge doors.

“It wasn’t a site visit.”

“Understood.”

“See you at ten.”

Upstairs, his ears still burning from the wind, Charlie sent the photo of the mudflats with no preamble: *it’s about three times wider than this*.

Tom’s reply arrived ten seconds later: *Nice mud. Eat something warm.*

Tom’s phone lay faceup on Nancy’s counter. Charlie’s photograph remained on the screen: dark flats and a band of water too narrow to account for the message beneath it.

It’s about three times wider than this.

Tom had answered, but he hadn’t put the phone away. Nancy set a bowl of apples beside it and handed him a peeler. “You said you make a good pie.”

“I do.”

“Prove it.”

The kitchen was sweltering, heavy with rosemary from the oven and the sharp sweetness of simmering cranberries. A roasting pan occupied the oven, and every available surface held some part of Thanksgiving dinner. David came through twice to check the roast and was sent away twice. From the dining room, someone yelled to ask where the corkscrew was.

“Second drawer beside the sink,” Tom called back.

Nancy didn’t say anything, but she smiled as she stirred the cranberries.

Tom rolled up his sleeves and went to work. The apples needed to be cut evenly. The filling needed more acid. His first arrangement of pastry strips across the top was almost symmetrical. Almost. He peeled them off.

“What was wrong with those?” Nancy asked.

“The spacing.”

“No one else would have noticed.”

“I did.”

“Yes,” she said. “That is generally the problem.”

The second crust behaved.

“You’re very quiet today,” Nancy noted over the simmering cranberries.

“I miss him.” Tom hadn’t intended to say it aloud.

“Of course you do.”

Tom sighed. “He sounds good.”

He brushed the crust with egg wash.

“Is this another hobby experiment?” Nancy asked.

“How do you know about that?”

“Julian showed us the little shelves.”

“They were three millimetres wide.”

“So he mentioned.”

Tom slid the pie onto the lower oven rack.

“You know you’re allowed to be bad at a hobby,” Nancy said.

“I’m not bad at this.”

“That was exactly my point.”

By the time the pie came out, Tom was dusted with flour and the kitchen smelled of cinnamon and the roast David was finally permitted to carve. The pie was beautiful. The crust had browned evenly, and when Nancy cut

the first slice, it held together cleanly. She took one bite and pointed her fork at him.

“Damn good pie.”

Tom smiled.

Before he left, Nancy pressed a plastic container into his hands.

“Two slices,” she said. She opened the front door for him. “One is Charlie’s.”

Tom carried the pie to the car. Cinnamon clung to his shirt, and his feet ached from standing at the counter. He pictured making the same pie alone in his own kitchen the following Sunday.

Out of habit, he opened his calendar.

After a moment, he locked the phone and set it beside the pie.

Tom had been home twelve minutes when the phone buzzed on the nightstand. He answered one-handed while working his tie loose.

Charlie appeared sideways, squinting into the lens, before the frame flipped upright. “Sorry.” He propped the phone against the hotel lamp. “Hi.”

He was sitting on top of the white duvet, hair flat and damp from the shower, swallowed up in an oversized black crewneck.

Tom let his hands drop from his collar. “That’s mine.”

“You packed it.”

“I packed four of yours.”

“I know.” Charlie rubbed the cuff between his thumb and forefinger.

“How was dinner?”

“Arctic char. Salty.”

“Eat enough?”

“I ate.”

Tom sat on the edge of the mattress and kicked off his shoes. “Nancy sent me home with pie. Put your name on one of the slices.”

“She made pie?”

“I did.”

Charlie smiled. “You baked with Nancy?”

“I did.”

“I wish I’d been there.”

“I wish you were here.” Behind Charlie, the hotel room was all beige veneer and cold lamplight.

Charlie drew a bare knee up beneath the crewneck. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” Tom watched him—tired, washed out, small in the shirt. “I want to do something with you.”

Charlie looked up.

“Over the phone. I want to see you.”

Charlie’s lips parted, colour creeping along his cheekbones. He dropped his gaze to his covered hands.

“Do you want that?”

A beat stretched before Charlie looked back at the screen.

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to tell you what to do?”

A nod.

“Say it.”

“Yes.” His voice caught. “Please.”

Tom carried the phone to the pillows, propping it against the headboard. “Push yours back. I want to see all of you.”

Charlie reached out, angling the lens toward the ceiling.

“Down. A little more. Right there.”

Charlie settled back, his hand drifting toward the corner of the duvet.

“No,” Tom said. “Stay on top.”

Charlie flushed darker, but he let the covers drop and lay back against the pillows. He watched without blinking as Tom pulled his shirt free, stripped out of his trousers, and leaned back against the headboard.

By the time Tom looked back at the screen, Charlie had gone completely still.

“Take off my shirt,” Tom said.

Charlie caught the hem, held it for a beat, then hauled the crewneck over his head and dropped it to the mattress. He was down to dark briefs, visibly hard.

Tom’s hand closed around his own cock. Charlie’s gaze dropped instantly.

“Those too.”

Charlie hooked his thumbs under the waistband, kicked them free, and immediately clamped both hands over his lap.

“Hands at your sides, Charlie.”

Charlie let his hands fall flat to the sheets. He was flushed from collar to navel, narrow hips pale against the white duvet. He lasted five seconds under Tom’s gaze before ducking his face toward the pillow.

“Look at me.”

When Charlie turned back, Tom was already stroking himself. Charlie’s throat worked, his breathing suddenly loud through the speaker.

“Do you like watching me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to touch yourself?”

Charlie blinked, startled. “Me?”

“Yes.”

His hand lifted off the mattress, hesitated midair, and dropped back down. “I don't know.”

“Have you ever?”

Charlie looked away, colour high in his cheeks. “No.”

Tom kept his voice steady. “Want me to show you?”

A pause, then a quiet, rough: “Yes.”

“Palm flat under your ribs. Slide it down.”

Charlie followed the line of his own stomach until his fingers hovered just above his cock.

“Take hold of yourself. Not too tight.”

The moment Charlie closed his fist, his breath caught. He copied Tom's grip, eyes darting between his own lap and the screen.

“Just hold it. Don't move yet.” Tom demonstrated—one slow pull up, then down. “Like that. Up.”

Charlie moved his hand.

“Back down.”

Charlie followed, lips parting on a faint gasp.

“Again.”

“Like that?”

“Just like that. Slower—you don't have to force it.”

Charlie found a halting rhythm, his hips shifting tentatively into his palm. A small, surprised sound slipped out of him, and he froze.

“Don't stop,” Tom said. “Use your thumb. Run it over the head.”

Charlie dragged his thumb across the tip. His whole body jolted.

“Thomas.”

“Again.”

Moisture caught beneath the next pass, smoothing the friction. Charlie’s breathing broke into ragged hitches.

“Show me your hand.”

Charlie hesitated, trembling, before lifting his palm toward the camera. The lamplight caught the slick sheen across his fingers.

Tom’s breath hitched. “Good boy. Put it back. Use that.”

Charlie wrapped his slick fingers around himself, and the first stroke tore a broken groan out of him. He twisted his free hand into the duvet, hips lifting off the mattress to meet his fist.

“Watch me,” Tom ordered, matching his pace, stroking harder. “Faster.”

“Daddy—” Charlie’s voice was strained, frightened by the sudden momentum. “I don't know what to do.”

“You don't have to know. Just keep moving.”

“I want you here,” he gasped, his rhythm faltering before catching Tom's lead again. “I want it to be you.”

“Look at me, Charlie. Don't stop.”

Charlie arched, thighs trembling. “I can't—”

“You can. Come for me.”

Charlie’s head snapped back into the pillows. A sharp cry broke from his throat as his body locked, release spilling hot over his stomach and fingers. Tom held him through the tremors with his voice, stroking to the finish seconds later, Charlie's name rough in his chest.

Silence settled, thick and heavy.

Charlie lay sprawled across the duvet, one forearm thrown over his eyes, chest heaving in the stark hotel light.

Tom picked up the phone. “Charlie.”

“I’m here.”

“How do you feel?”

A dry swallow. “Embarrassed.”

“Did you like it?”

Charlie dragged his arm down just enough to peek through his lashes. “I can’t believe you saw all of that.”

“I loved watching you.”

Charlie covered his face again, but not before a soft, overwhelmed smile broke.

“Get some tissues,” Tom said gently. “Then put my shirt back on.”

Charlie got up on unsteady legs, cleaned himself off, and pulled the black crewneck back over his head before finally slipping under the covers. He propped the phone on the pillow beside his cheek.

“You really liked it?”

“I really did.”

“I only wanted to because it was you.”

“I know, honey.”

Charlie studied Tom's screen, his gaze drifting up. “Your hair.”

Tom ran a hand through it, only tangling it worse.

“You look completely ruined,” Charlie murmured.

“I feel it.”

“I feel human again.” Charlie pulled the duvet to his chin, eyelids drooping.

“Go to sleep. The pie's waiting in the fridge for when you get back.”

Charlie hummed a faint protest, already drifting under. Tom watched the slow, steady rise and fall of his shoulders until he was out cold, then cut the call and let the room go dark.

Tuesday, October 10.

At ten, Anna set her laptop in the centre of one of the Auberge’s dining tables. Peter arrived a minute later, followed by Maggie, the association’s

treasurer.

“We start with the schedule,” Anna said, sliding the timetable over. “What can you actually commit to, Peter? Without leaving work early, cancelling family obligations, or praying another musician drops out of the sky?”

“Three Thursdays a month.”

“Then we write three.”

“People want every week,” Peter said.

“I want every week too. I don’t want us promising Thursdays we don’t have.”

Charlie opened his notebook. The initial application had compressed each Thursday into a tidy two-hour session. Anna and Peter began accounting for the reality on either side of it: forty-five minutes of setup in a borrowed room where gear couldn't be stored, and an hour afterward to transfer and label audio on a laptop that crashed without warning.

When they reached communication, Maggie tapped her pen. “Where are Peter’s outreach hours?”

“That takes five minutes,” Peter said.

“Per kid. If the parent answers on the first ring. Twelve kids, callbacks, every week.” Maggie didn't look up from her ledger. “Ninety minutes.”

Peter looked betrayed. “I thought you were on my side.”

“I’m the treasurer.”

Anna keyed in the numbers. At the bottom of the spreadsheet, the cell recalculated: $28,640.

Maggie turned the screen slightly, as if the figure might soften from another angle. “We applied for fourteen.”

“We applied for the version southern grant officers recognize.” Anna looked at Charlie. “If we send this, does the committee decide we changed the project after deadline?”

“The clarification notice allows applicants to restore operational costs they stripped to fit the ceiling,” Charlie said. “My report will document that the

first budget omitted the labour required to deliver the schedule.”

“Will that keep them from rejecting it outright?” Maggie asked.

“No.”

“Could asking for twenty-eight kill our chances entirely?” Anna asked.

“It could. I can document why the number doubled and confirm whether the plan is workable. I can't guarantee how the table reacts.”

Peter reached for the printout. “Take out my repair hours.”

“Peter, no—”

“I’m already doing them for free. If this gets us tossed, the hours don't matter anyway.”

“If we cut them, we’re right back where we started,” Anna said. “Balancing the budget on your back.”

Maggie tapped the total. “If they reject this, we have nothing.”

“And if they give us fourteen thousand, we have new guitars locked in a closet while Peter works for free until he burns out.”

“Then cut sessions,” Maggie said. “Don’t cut the hours around them.”

Peter hissed air through his teeth. “I hate fewer.”

“So do I,” Anna said. “But I’m not signing off on another promise we can’t keep.”

She opened a second column.

The second keyboard went first, then the backup guitars. When that wasn’t enough, they trimmed the calendar. Peter’s prep, outreach, and bench time stayed in both columns. So did the replacement laptop.

“Can we submit both?” Maggie asked Charlie. “A full budget and a core budget?”

“I’ll ask Mireille if the guidelines allow tiered submissions,” Charlie said. “If they do, the option goes to every shortlisted applicant.”

“Fair enough.” Anna closed the laptop halfway. “The board votes on both versions tonight. Tomorrow you visit the school. You’re not there to decide we deserve the larger sum.”

“I know.”

“What are you there to do?”

“Observe what exists. Ask questions. Write a factual report.”

Peter gathered the loose printouts. “Don’t sound too prepared. You haven’t heard the laptop fan yet.”

CHAPTER 38

Tuesday, October 10.

Tom stared up the climbing wall. It continued farther than seemed reasonable.

“How high is that?”

“Twelve metres,” Janelle said. She checked the figure-eight tied through Tom’s harness, then tugged the locking carabiner on her belay device. “Once you start, stop looking at the top. Find the next hold.”

“You’ll be fine,” André said.

Three moves from the ground, Tom’s arms were already doing more work than the rest of him.

“Use your legs,” André called.

“I am.”

“You’re hanging from your hands.”

Tom shifted his weight onto one leg and pushed. The next hold came within reach.

The route began to make sense. Right foot there. Turn the hip. Push instead of pull.

Near the top, he reached with his left hand and came up short.

“Your other foot,” Janelle called from below.

“It is occupied.”

“Move it to the yellow hold beside your knee.”

Tom found it, pushed upward, and caught the final hold. He matched his other hand to it and stayed there for a second, breathing hard.

Then he looked down.

That was a mistake.

“Sit back in the harness,” Janelle said.

Tom forced his hands to release the wall. The harness caught his weight, and Janelle lowered him steadily to the mat.

His forearms burned. Chalk marked the front of his shirt. He was grinning.

André handed him a water bottle. “Well?”

Tom drank half of it. “Again.”

André looked unbearably smug. “I knew you’d like it.”

The second route required more thought. Halfway up, Tom came off the wall twice at a sequence that seemed designed without reference to human limbs.

After the second fall, he let Janelle lower him.

She tied in.

“Watch what she does with her hips,” André said.

At the same point, Janelle turned one side of her body toward the wall and pushed through her right foot. The hold Tom had been unable to reach arrived beside her hand.

“Oh,” Tom said.

Janelle looked down. “Exactly.”

When Tom tied in again, the move worked.

The satisfaction was immediate and physical. Each move either worked or it didn’t. His body told him when he had wasted strength and when he had found the efficient line. By the time he touched the final hold, he had stopped wondering what time it was.

Later, Tom sat on a bench near the lockers, unlacing his rental shoes. His forearms still trembled faintly.

“Next week?” André asked. “Tuesday works for me.”

“I’m working late,” Janelle said.

“Thursday?”

“I have dinner.”

André pulled out his phone.

Tom felt the evening turn instantly into logistics. A minute ago, there had been only the second route and the next hold. Now there were three calendars, travel time, equipment rentals, and a recurring block he would have to protect whether he wanted to climb that day or not.

“Stop,” he said.

André looked up. “We’ve proposed two dates.”

“You were about to create a group calendar.”

Janelle glanced at André’s screen. “You were.”

André put the phone away.

“I liked this,” Tom said, pulling on his street shoe. “I just don’t want to do it every Tuesday at seven.”

“You can come alone,” Janelle said. “There are auto-belays. Or you can boulder.”

Tom considered it. He had enjoyed climbing more than the miniature furniture or the pie.

“I might come alone. But I’d still have to come here, rent the equipment, and plan around the gym. I’m looking for something I can start when I discover I have forty minutes.”

“Something at home,” Janelle said.

“Or close enough that forty minutes doesn’t become an entire evening.”

André sighed. “Right. No calendar.”

Tom stood and hoisted his bag onto his shoulder. His arms ached pleasantly.

He still hadn’t found the thing he could reach for on an empty Sunday afternoon. He had, however, found something he wanted to do again—and something he wanted to tell Charlie.

Wednesday, October 11.

Between classes at Jaanimmarik, voices moved through the halls in quick shifts between English and Inuktitut. In a converted classroom at the end of the wing, the tables had been shoved against the walls, the youth association’s entire inventory locked into a single supply cupboard at the back.

Peter showed Charlie a stripped tuning peg on one of the borrowed acoustics. “That one still plays. Mostly.”

As the students filtered in, Anna pointed a thumb toward Charlie. “He’s here from the Fondation to see how the room runs. He doesn’t decide the grant, and he isn’t taking photos.”

Noah looked up from a scuffed MacBook. “But you write the report?”

“Yes.”

“So you basically decide what they hear about us.”

Charlie uncapped his pen. “If I get something wrong, tell me. If you don’t want your name on something, tell me that too.”

Elisapie rested flat palms on an unpowered keyboard. “This track isn’t finished. Don’t put in there that we’re performing it. We’re not.”

“Understood.”

“Do you play anything?” someone called from the doorway.

“Piano.”

Peter shoved the acoustic into Charlie’s hands before he could decline. A student by the door snorted: “Oh, he’s setting you up.”

“Then this will be educational,” Peter said.

“For whom?”

“Everyone.”

Peter nudged Charlie’s index finger into position. Charlie dragged a thumb down the strings—one rang clean, the rest buzzed like angry wasps.

Noah glanced over. “Third string. You’re killing it, man.”

Charlie reset his grip, arched his wrist, and tried again. A clean, ringing C-major filled the corner. He stared down at his fingers, surprised.

“Okay, pianist,” Elisapie said with a dry laugh.

“That’s my entire set.”

The room settled into its own pockets of noise: Peter working through chord fingerings by the cupboard, Elisapie running a stubborn five-note phrase, two kids huddled over a phone arguing about a beat, and Noah hunched over the laptop.

Noah waved Charlie over. “Listen to this.”

He played two bars of a rough drum track. In the first pass, the sub-bass hit square on the beat. In the second, Noah delayed it by half a second.

“Again,” Charlie said, leaning in.

Noah looped them.

“The second one.”

“Why?”

“You make me wait for it.”

Noah grinned. “Right? Hits way harder.” He dragged a MIDI block farther down the timeline. “Now check the drop—”

The track hitched. A bar buzzed, choked, and went dead. The spinning beachball appeared over the waveform.

“No, no, no—” Noah hammered the trackpad. The window froze, went white, and vanished back to the desktop. “Fuck.”

“Language,” Peter called automatically.

“This laptop is cursed. It’s actually evil.” Noah forced the DAW back open. The recovery prompt restored a session from forty minutes ago, missing the entire verse. He rested his forehead against the edge of the aluminum case. “Of course.”

“You can redo it,” Anna said, appearing behind them.

“I know.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

Noah didn't look up. “I know.”

At four, Anna dragged two tables into the centre of the room. “The board votes on the budget tonight. If the Fondation only gives us half, what can’t go?”

“The laptop,” Noah said instantly.

“Guitars,” Peter countered.

“The room,” Elisapie said, louder than both of them. “Obviously the room.”

“Why obviously?” Noah asked.

“What are we gonna do with a laptop and four guitars if the door is locked? Play in the snow?”

“All right,” Anna cut in before it could turn. “Stop. We’re not voting each other off the island.” She pointed at Noah. “What does the computer let you do?”

“Finish things without losing forty minutes of work every time the fan kicks on.”

“Peter?”

“Beginners don’t get very far without someone showing them where to put their fingers.”

“Room?”

Elisapie crossed her arms. “It means we have somewhere to go. Otherwise we’re just loitering in the hallway until the janitor kicks us out.”

Anna wrote each point down. Beside her, Charlie let his notebook lie closed.

When the cables were coiled and the desks pushed back into rigid school rows, Noah paused at the doorway, jacket half-zipped. “Are we on for next Thursday?”

“I’ll post in the group chat as soon as I know,” Anna said.

“That sounds like a no.”

“It means I don’t know yet.”

Elisapie zipped her parka. “Will you know tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

Peter clicked the latches shut on the last guitar case. “Should I hold the evening open?”

“Hold it,” Anna said. “Don’t promise it.”

Once the door swung shut behind them, Anna walked to the supply cupboard, turned the key in the padlock, and slid it into her pocket.

“That,” she said to the empty room, “is the answer I want to stop giving.”

They stayed in the classroom for the extra hour Anna had booked. Maggie joined them by speakerphone, Anna’s phone set at the edge of the table.

Mireille’s guidance had arrived while they packed the gear. The Fondation wouldn’t accept two competing budgets. The application could, however, identify expenses that could be deferred if the committee offered partial funding. The request itself would remain $28,640.

“The laptop stays,” Peter said.

“Then the second keyboard and two of the guitars move to phase two.” Anna marked the cells.

“Coordination stays,” Maggie said through the speaker. “And room access. If we don’t have the room, none of the rest matters.”

Anna nodded and kept typing.

When she reached the final showcase, marked mandatory in the original schedule, she stopped.

“No.”

Peter looked over. “No?”

“Elisapie just told us not to turn unfinished work into a concert.” Anna looked at the line again. “We never asked them.”

She deleted it and typed:

Optional sharing session, with format and participation determined by participants.

Charlie watched the cursor blink at the end of the sentence.

He became aware of the folded page tucked inside his notebook.

“I brought something,” he said.

Peter looked up.

Charlie pulled out the sheet. “A few names in Montréal. Producers, guitarists, songwriters. In case there were gaps.”

Peter took the page.

His eyes moved down the list once.

“Guitar and songwriting, no.”

Charlie blinked. “Okay.”

“We start with local people.”

“Right.”

Peter tapped one of the names farther down. “Production, maybe. If Noah wants help and can’t get what he needs here. But we ask him first.”

Charlie looked at the page in Peter’s hand.

He had spent nearly an hour on it.

“Okay,” he said again.

Peter handed it back.

Charlie folded the sheet along its original crease and slipped it into his notebook.

Anna glanced over. “You came prepared.”

“Apparently too prepared.”

The corner of her mouth moved.

She typed:

Local and regional instructors engaged first. Outside specialists contracted only where requested by participants.

They worked through the remaining lines. By the time Anna sent the file to the directors, the room had gone quiet except for the laptop fan and Maggie occasionally shuffling papers through the speaker.

“Let me see your site description,” Anna said.

Charlie opened his notebook to the paragraph he had drafted before flying north and slid it across the table.

She uncapped a red pen.

Halfway down the first page, she stopped.

“The association’s music room?”

Charlie leaned closer.

“Borrowed classroom,” Anna said, crossing it out. “We don’t have a music room.”

“Right.”

A few lines later, she struck through *every Thursday*.

“We don’t have every Thursday either.”

Charlie nodded. “Right.”

She kept going.

Then her pen stopped again.

The proposed program would introduce participants to music production and collaborative music-making.

Anna drew a line through the entire sentence.

“No.”

Charlie looked at the page. “Too broad?”

“Wrong.”

He looked up.

“Noah is already producing music,” she said. “Elisapie is already writing. The kids already play together whenever they can get through that door.”

Charlie looked back at his sentence.

Introduce.

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

He took his pencil and crossed it out himself.

Anna resumed reading.

Near the bottom of the page, she stopped again.

Participants require reliable access to space, equipment, and instruction to continue work already underway.

She tapped the sentence with the end of her pen.

“That’s closer.”

Charlie looked at her. “Closer?”

“You’ve been here three days.”

He let out a short breath. “Fair.”

Anna capped the pen and pushed the notebook back across the table.

Back at the Auberge, Charlie dropped his backpack, sat on the bed, and called Tom.

Tom answered from the sectional at home. Cheddar occupied the cushion beside him.

“Long day?” Tom asked.

“Yes.”

The word caught in Charlie’s throat.

He told Tom about the crashed laptop, the missing labour, and Anna’s corrections to the section he had drafted.

“When we started Passage,” Charlie said, rubbing his eyes, “you said I noticed the things that disappear from a budget.”

“You did.”

“I noticed after Anna had already removed them because of a guide I helped write. After she had to explain it to me.”

Tom was quiet for a moment. “What did you change?”

“I’d written that the project would introduce them to music production. They’re already making music. I turned them into beginners because the language fit.”

“What does it say now?”

“That they need a reliable place to continue work they’ve already started.”

“That’s better.”

“I’m scared I’m only getting better at the wording.” Charlie looked at the crossed-out sentence in his notebook. “I replace *introduce* with *continue*, and suddenly I sound like someone who listened.”

“Then don’t let the report stop at the wording.”

Charlie stared at the page.

“We asked them to be honest,” he said, “and the committee might punish them for it.”

“Put that in.”

“I can make clear that the increase isn’t a new project. It’s the real cost of doing the project without Peter working for free. And I can ask for the guide to be rewritten—with paid review from applicants, not another favour.”

“Will you ask the Fondation?”

“Yes.”

Charlie closed the notebook.

“And now I’m doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Turning it into something I learned.” His voice began to shake. “They already knew. I get to come home with a policy recommendation, and Anna still has to tell those kids she doesn’t know whether they’ll have a room next Thursday.”

The tears arrived before he could stop them. He lowered his face.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Tom said softly.

“I’m okay.”

“I know.”

Charlie pressed the heel of his hand against his eye. “I just want a hug.”

“I’m saving one for you.”

Charlie laughed, but it broke on the way out.

The heater hummed while Tom stayed on the line and Charlie’s breathing steadied.

“I hate doing this when you aren’t here,” Charlie muttered.

“I know. Go wash your face. I’m right here.”

When Charlie returned from the bathroom, he sat against the headboard.

“Better?” Tom asked.

“Mhm.” Charlie drew one leg beneath himself. “What about you?”

Tom told him about the climbing wall.

“So you liked it.”

“I want to do it again. But I don’t want another calendar. I want something I can start without arranging it three days earlier.”

Charlie considered him. “You already have one.”

“One what?”

“A hobby.”

Tom frowned. “Which is?”

“Running.”

“That’s exercise.”

“Only because you treat it like exercise. You run when you’re stressed. You run when you need to think. Nobody makes you do it.”

“I like measuring it.”

“You can still measure it. Go somewhere because you feel like going there. Listen to something you actually want to hear.”

“Like what?”

“A podcast. An audiobook.” Charlie paused. “Spanish lessons.”

Tom went completely still.

“For Elena,” he said.

Charlie nodded. “You could learn while you run. Whenever you want. No calendar.”

Tom sat forward. “I could do that.”

“You already do half of it.”

Tom picked up his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at shoes.”

“Thomas. You own running shoes.”

“My current pair are old.”

Charlie laughed—a real one this time.

The room in Kuujjuaq no longer felt quite so far away.

In the restaurant downstairs, Charlie ate half his dinner before finally opening his notebook to a blank page.

Lessons from Kuujjuaq.

He immediately crossed out the heading and wrote a new one.

Changes required before the next provincial intake.

He started a list. Name preparation, coordination, maintenance, and freight as eligible costs. Explain how partial funding works. Let applicants identify expenses that can be phased. Accept working budgets alongside the Fondation template.

He paused, then wrote the question that had exposed the failure in the current round:

What have you left out because you thought we wouldn't fund it?

It was better than silence, but that didn't make it the right question.

Beneath it, he added:

Ask applicants whether this is the right question.

Then:

Paid review before publication.

He drew a heavy line beneath the list. Finally, he wrote:

Same information and opportunity for every applicant.

He circled the last line.

Charlie closed the notebook. It wasn't reform yet. It was only the argument he had to make when he got home.

Thursday, October 12.

Charlie's suitcase stood packed beside his chair when Anna arrived at their corner table, her laptop already balanced on one forearm.

"The board approved the revised submission at the full $28,640, with two non-negotiable conditions," she said, pulling up the file. "First, the final

sharing session remains strictly optional for participants."

Charlie amended the line in his report.

"Second: if the Fondation offers a partial award, they don't get to slash line items and assume we'll bridge the deficit on goodwill. Any reduced sum requires a formal renegotiation of scope."

"Agreed."

"You wrote that the budget is scalable." Anna eyed his draft.

"I meant phased."

"Not the same thing. *Scalable* tells them they can cut the total without changing what we've promised to deliver."

Charlie struck the word. "Phased."

"Better." Anna tapped the bottom-line total. "Submit that version."

"And your recommendation?" she asked.

"That the full twenty-eight thousand be approved. That the revision restores operational labour omitted because of the Fondation's flawed guidance."

"Will the committee care?"

"I don't know," Charlie said honestly.

He closed the report.

"One more thing. I'm recommending that the provincial guide be rewritten before the next intake. I want people who actually run these programs to review the draft."

"Paid?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"I haven't secured the allocation yet."

"Then you don't know whether you're asking me."

"You're right." Charlie nodded. "If the review budget is approved, I'll send you the scope, rate, and deliverables. You can decide then."

“Then I’ll tell you if I have time.”

Anna shut the laptop.

“Thank you,” Charlie said. “I know this visit created extra work.”

“It did.”

“And thank you for correcting the record before I put my version in front of the committee.”

“Make sure they read what we submitted,” Anna said, “not what they expected to find.”

“I will.”

Nothing outside the file had changed yet. The guide was still wrong. The committee could still offer less than the project required—or nothing at all. Anna still couldn’t tell the kids whether there would be a session next Thursday.

But the submission no longer made Peter’s labour disappear, called a borrowed classroom a music room, or promised a performance no one had agreed to give.

Outside, the airport shuttle idled at the curb. Charlie gripped the handle of his suitcase and stood.

Tom bought the shoes on his lunch break. He compared six pairs, read the specifications for four, and bought the second pair he tried on.

By late afternoon, he stood outside in his running clothes. Out of habit, he opened his tracking app. The blank fields waited for him: Distance, Target Pace, Estimated Time.

Tom closed it.

The first beginner Spanish lesson started in his headphones. A voice spoke a phrase. Tom repeated it, botched it, listened to the slower version, and tried again. Still not quite. He laughed under his breath and started running.

At the first intersection, his usual route continued straight. Tom turned left just because he felt like it. There was no pace target, no required distance,

and nothing to optimize before returning home.

His legs found their rhythm. He turned down a street he normally passed without entering, letting the audio prompt him. He repeated the next phrase badly, rewound it, and tried again. It wasn't anywhere near ready for Elena, but it was getting better.

For the first time, his mind had something to follow without having anything to solve. Twenty minutes later, navigating an unfamiliar block, Tom realized he was smiling.

He kept going.

On the flight home, Charlie read Anna's final amendments once more.

Then he closed the file.

There was nothing else he needed to do with it in the air.

He put the notebook away and looked out the window.

Tom was waiting at arrivals.

Charlie saw him before he saw the exit sign.

He crossed the space between them with the suitcase trailing badly behind him.

Tom took the handle, set it upright, and opened his arms.

Charlie went straight into them. Tom buried his face in Charlie's hair and breathed in. The cold and the long flight clung to him, but underneath both was Charlie.

The hug was as good as promised.

CHAPTER 39

Tuesday, October 17.

It started during the seminar on Webern's *Bagatelles*. Charlie stood at the whiteboard, dry-erase marker in hand, circling the pitch groups a student had called out from the score.

"Naming the collection is only the first step," Charlie said, turning to the seminar table. "It doesn't explain why your ear groups those specific events together. What else are you tracking?"

One student pointed to a bowing indication; another tapped a rest. They listened to the recording again, comparing where each of them felt the boundary fall.

"Is that similar to how Mahler uses silence?" Amélie asked, her pencil balanced between two fingers.

"It's a useful comparison, but you'd have to demonstrate it," Charlie said. "With Mahler, we were tracking harmonic expectation. Here, you're working with register, articulation, the sudden changes in timbre across four string instruments. Which events are you actually connecting across the gap?"

"Could that be an essay topic?"

"A close comparison, yes. Keep the scope narrow enough that we can hear the argument."

Amélie kept her hand up. "Isn't that what your dissertation was on? I saw it in the university repository—could we read one of your case studies?"

"You looked that up?"

"It was on the syllabus."

Charlie caught himself and laughed. “Right. Fair point. I can post a short section alongside a counter-reading so we can see where they clash.”

Across the table, a student leaned toward her laptop. “Wait. Did you play in Vienna?”

Charlie’s shoulders dropped. “Please don’t play that.”

A wave of quiet laughter went around the room. Charlie capped his marker. “Back to the first *Bagatelle*.”

They spent the next twenty minutes pulling the piece apart, Charlie pausing to ensure they didn’t confuse Webern’s early, intuitive pitch sets with the formal mechanics of a twelve-tone row. By the time he checked the clock, they were five minutes over.

“All right,” Charlie said. “You’re free.”

Chairs scraped back as the room dissolved into the usual rustle of coats and bags. A student pushed open the rear door, where Tom was waiting in the corridor with a paper coffee cup. Tom caught Charlie’s eye and smiled.

Charlie smiled back, turning to give Amélie a quick citation for the reading.

Across the room, the student who had pulled up Vienna was looking back and forth between her screen and the hallway. Her desk mate leaned in, caught the display, and let out a quiet, sudden, “*Oh*.”

When the student realized Charlie had seen her looking, she snapped her laptop shut. “Sorry about the tangent earlier. The Vienna performance was incredible.”

“Thank you,” Charlie said, keeping his voice light. “I appreciate that.”

She packed up quickly, and within a minute, the last stragglers had drifted out into the hall.

Tom stepped inside, leaning against the doorframe.

Charlie set the eraser on the ledge. “You’ve been made.”

Tom glanced back toward the empty corridor. “I gathered.”

Charlie shook his head, a dry smile surfacing as he stacked his scores and zipped his laptop into its sleeve.

“Ready?” Tom asked.

Charlie slung his bag over his shoulder. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Tom was parked down the block. Charlie climbed into the car, shut the door, and looked at him.

Tom’s lips were pressed together.

“You got recognized.”

“I noticed.”

“She found Vienna first.”

Tom closed his eyes briefly. “Of course she did.”

“And then apparently continued researching.”

“A dangerous skill in a university student.”

Charlie stared at him.

Tom’s mouth twitched.

“Don’t.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re about to.”

“I’m sitting here.”

“That has never stopped you.”

Tom laughed, and Charlie hid his face in his hands.

“Oh my God.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I’m a little sorry.”

Charlie lowered his hands. Tom was still smiling, but more carefully now.

“Are you actually upset?” he asked.

“Embarrassed.”

“With me?”

Charlie considered it. “With the entire internet.”

“That’s a fairly large opponent.”

Charlie laughed and leaned back against the seat.

Tom reached for his hand. Charlie let him take it, and Tom kissed his knuckles.

“I can wait farther away,” Tom said. “If standing by the door makes things weird.”

Charlie looked at him.

The offer was casual, but Tom meant it. He would move down the corridor, wait downstairs, sit in the car. Whatever Charlie asked.

Charlie glanced back toward the building.

He thought of looking up after class and seeing Tom outside the doorway with his coffee. Of finishing his work while Tom waited without hurrying him. Of packing his bag and knowing the day had reached the part where they went home together.

“No,” he said. “I like you coming to get me.”

Tom’s expression softened.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Charlie squeezed his fingers.

“Maybe don’t become a research topic.”

“I’ll work on that.”

“Thank you.”

Tom started the car.

A Spanish voice immediately resumed through the speakers, speaking much too quickly for Charlie to catch more than three words.

He frowned at the dashboard.

“Were you listening to this while you waited?”

“Mhm.”

“I understood *pero*.”

Tom glanced at him. “Excellent.”

“And I think she said *entonces*.”

“Practically quadrilingual.”

“Fuck off.”

Tom laughed and pulled away from the curb, still holding Charlie’s hand.

Friday, October 20.

The penthouse smelled of toasted sesame and the sweet char of galbi. At the stove, Tom flipped short ribs in the pan, while Charlie curled into the corner of the couch with his seminar notes.

When his phone lit up on the coffee table, it was Anna.

The Fondation’s grant approval had cleared that afternoon, but Anna’s reply made the reality of it hit: they were starting November second. Attached was the first official session notice. *Thursdays.* Peter’s prep hours were covered as legitimate billable work now, and Anna had already blocked out paid time next week to reach out to families.

Tom looked over from the stove. “Char?”

Charlie swallowed, tilting the screen toward him as Tom slid the pan off the burner and crossed to the couch.

“It’s Anna,” Charlie said, his voice catching unexpectedly. “They’re starting. On Thursdays—just like the kids kept asking.”

He managed a ragged laugh, pressing the heel of his hand over his eyes as the relief caught up with him. Tom pulled him in against his side, letting Charlie bury his face against his shoulder.

“Happy tears?”

Charlie nodded against the cotton of Tom's shirt. "She actually has the funding to do the work. I almost recommended the smaller allocation."

"But you didn't," Tom murmured, his hand resting firm on Charlie's neck. "You called her."

"I'm glad I did."

Charlie stayed there for another minute before sitting up to tap out a quick reply—thanking Anna, celebrating the date, and sending his best to Peter.

Right on cue, Tom's stomach rumbled audibly against Charlie's knee.

Charlie looked up. "Did I interrupt dinner?"

"It's only just ready."

Charlie followed him into the kitchen to set out bowls, nudging Cheddar off his intended seat. The cat had already reclaimed the cushion before the rice hit the table, leaving Charlie to eat his first few bites standing over the counter, still buzzing from the screen.

Tom finally scooped Cheddar down to the floor, caught Charlie by the wrist, and pulled him into the chair beside him.

A stack of colour-coded folders crowded the conference table on Rue Bernard. Hazel had brought the old FALLEN EMPEROR binder, newly papered over with a label reading *Supplementary Records — October 2028*.

Tom watched her smooth the tape into place. "A retreat from excellence."

"An adjustment for the audience."

Julian spun a pen against the table; Charlie sat beside Tom, coat folded across his knees.

"Napoletana," Julian proposed. "Their margherita has not failed us."

"Seven?" Tom asked.

"Yes," Hazel said. "Alati-Caserta first, before they close. The cannoli are non-negotiable."

"Agreed."

“Give me your hand.”

Julian reached across the table. Hazel shook it with grave finality.

“Witnessed,” Tom said.

“Sealed.”

The door opened before Charlie could laugh.

The prosecutor introduced herself as Maître Bouchard, shook hands, and unpacked a legal pad and her copy of the records index across from Hazel. “Thank you for arranging access to the material here.”

“Of course,” Hazel said.

Charlie caught Julian’s eye. “Coffee?”

“Yes.”

Charlie stood and reached for his coat. Beneath the table, Tom caught his hand, giving his fingers a single, firm squeeze before letting go.

“Oat milk latte,” Hazel rattled off without looking up from her notes. “Extra shot, mocha drizzle, whipped cream, cocoa on top.”

Charlie pulled out his phone. “That’s dessert.”

“It’s infrastructure.”

“Black for me,” Tom said.

Bouchard looked up with a faint smile. “Black, please. Thank you.”

The door clicked shut behind them. Hazel waited for their footsteps to clear the corridor before flipping open the binder.

Bouchard turned her attention to Tom. “Let’s start with the entries you recognize yourself.”

The elevator delivered them to the lobby. They passed the piano and stepped out onto Bernard, where a gust lifted the edge of Charlie’s coat before he zipped it.

Julian waited while he found the zip’s other half.

“That was anticlimactic,” he said.

“The meeting?”

“Our participation in it. I’ve attended more dynamic structural inspections.”

Charlie laughed. Julian’s mouth moved by about two millimetres at the corner.

They walked toward Le Dépanneur Café. A cyclist passed close to the parked cars; farther along, someone was carrying a folded chair into a shop. Charlie’s shoulders lowered as they left the building behind.

“Did you need to be there?” he asked.

“No. Hazel wanted company before they started.”

“Same.”

They reached the crossing and waited for the light.

“I kept thinking I ought to stay,” Charlie admitted.

Julian looked at him.

“In case Tom needed something.”

“He asked for coffee.”

Charlie smiled. “He did.”

“We can manage coffee.”

The light changed. They crossed with a woman pushing a stroller, then continued along the pavement in an easy silence.

Inside the café, warm air fogged Charlie’s glasses. He wiped them on his cuff while Julian caught the door behind them.

“Two large black coffees,” Charlie told the barista. “Two Earl Grey. And an oat milk latte with an extra shot, mocha, whipped cream, and cocoa.”

The barista paused. “I can do oat milk, the shot, and cocoa.”

Charlie weighed the risk of facing Hazel. “That will have to do.”

“Will it?” Julian asked.

“We’ll find out.”

They stepped aside to wait. Julian pulled out his phone, scrolling with one thumb. “The building’s been getting attention.”

“Which building?”

“The one we just left.”

“What kind of attention?”

“Architectural press. Two mentions last month. One asked for drawings and photographs.”

“Julian. That’s huge. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I just did.”

Charlie leaned in. “Show me.”

Julian brought up the link. Charlie enlarged a photograph of the lobby—the piano sat right where they’d passed it ten minutes earlier, but above it, the open staircase cut a geometry he had walked beneath without bothering to look up.

“They liked the light,” Charlie said.

“Partly. The original plan had a closed corridor. It would have made the ground floor pitch black.” Julian swiped to another photo, gesturing with both hands to map the sightlines before catching himself and shoving one hand back into his pocket.

Charlie smiled. “That’s your building. People are noticing your decisions.”

Julian looked back at the screen. “Quite a few people made decisions.”

“You can tell me about them, too.”

Julian hesitated, then showed him where the engineer had altered a span, and where the contractor had fought over a joint. Charlie listened until the barista slid the first drink carrier across the counter.

Hazel’s compromised latte arrived last, dusted with cocoa around the lid. Julian carried it separately.

“Structurally unsound,” he said.

“It has fewer floors than she requested.”

“Still a liability.”

Outside, Charlie tucked the carrier against his coat, keeping his footing on the sidewalk. When they reached the doors, he stopped on the threshold to look up at the facade.

Beside him, Julian followed his gaze, the quietest hint of satisfaction touching the corner of his mouth.

When Charlie and Julian returned, Bouchard was already capping her pen, the table a sprawl of open records. Tom had pushed back from the table for the first time in hours.

Charlie set the black coffee beside him, and Tom caught his wrist in a brief, grounding grip. “Good timing.”

Hazel lifted her cup. “Where’s the cream?”

“The café exercised judgment,” Julian said.

She took a sip, glared at him, then took another.

Bouchard slid the revised index into her file. “This narrows what we still need to clarify. I’ll coordinate through the investigator on the outstanding records and arrange witness-prep meetings separately.”

Hazel jotted down the last two items, nodding. No promises, no grand resolution—just a shorter list of questions and a file handed over to the prosecution.

Bouchard thanked them, took her cup, and left.

Hazel leaned her head back against the wall, eyes shut, while Julian began clearing empty cups. Tom hadn’t moved; his thumb traced the edge of the closed binder.

“What is it?” Charlie asked softly.

Tom stared at the black vinyl. “I knew what he was doing. And she kept asking which parts I’d actually seen with my own eyes.”

Hazel opened her eyes. “That’s what makes it usable in court. The paper trail does the heavy lifting; you just anchor what you witnessed.”

Tom looked at the binder. “I know.”

He sounded worn through. Charlie rested a hand on his forearm, and Tom turned his palm up to catch his fingers.

“I’m hungry,” Charlie said after a minute.

Tom looked over, the line of his mouth finally easing. “You’re always hungry.”

“I’m reliably hungry. An important distinction.”

Hazel stood, scraping her chair back. “Good. We’re leaving before somebody sends another email.”

They collected the cannoli from Alati-Caserta before six, Hazel doubling the order from four to eight while the box was still being folded. Julian accepted the revised quantity without a word.

By seven, they were packed into Pizzeria Napoletana, coats crowded onto wall hooks. Hazel slid the pastry box beneath her chair, checked that nobody’s boots were near it, and opened the menu. The room was loud and hot, the aisle just narrow enough that Julian had to keep his knees angled out of the waitstaff’s path. Tom uncorked the wine and filled their glasses.

For the first few minutes, the meeting followed them. Hazel dissected a question Bouchard had asked about the company chart; Tom answered without checking his notes or reaching for his phone.

“He was good today,” Hazel told Charlie. “Stayed in his chair. Didn’t bark too loud.”

Tom took a sip of wine.

“You were both good,” Charlie said.

Hazel nodded sharply, accepting the correction.

The pizzas arrived, Charlie pulling a slice onto his plate before anyone could drift back to the case records.

Julian asked about the instruments in Kuujjuaq, and Charlie told him about Peter teaching him a chord on a string that had refused to sound properly.

“You’re admitting this publicly?” Hazel asked.

“It was a very good chord by the end.”

“A musician of your standing.”

From there, Hazel moved on to criticizing a colleague’s wedding plans, while Julian offered fewer social opinions and considerably more data on the structural load a temporary platform could hold. When Charlie brought up Julian’s magazine feature, Hazel was already pulling up a photo Julian had left out of the final submission.

“That one’s better,” she said, holding out the screen.

“That one shows the bins.”

“It shows the building being used.”

Julian considered the screen. Charlie watched him quietly change his mind without announcing it.

Beside Charlie, Tom’s shoulders had finally dropped. His phone sat face-down by the wall, his wine half-finished. When Charlie leaned into his side, Tom turned and kissed his temple.

They took their time finishing. Tom covered the bill when it came, and Hazel retrieved the pastry box from the floor.

Outside, the cold hit immediately. Charlie wound his scarf higher as they crossed toward Parc Dante, the autumn wind rattling dry leaves along the pavement.

Hazel popped open the white bakery box on a bench. Charlie took a cannolo, the crisp shell shattering under the first bite. When Tom reached over to brush a stray crumb from the corner of his mouth, Charlie caught his eye.

“You missed.”

“Where?”

Charlie tapped his lower lip. Tom leaned down and kissed him.

“Gross,” Hazel observed, already carrying the box toward the path. “Keep moving.”

At the court, two older men were gathering up their bocce balls under the streetlamps. Hazel stopped at the wooden rail to watch a stray ball roll across the crushed stone toward the smaller target ball, settling just past it.

“This,” she said, gesturing with her half-eaten cannolo, “is gay bowling.”

Julian pulled up beside her. “It is not gay bowling. Bowling requires pins.”

“It’s rolling a ball at a thing, and it’s European.”

One of the men glanced up from his crate. Charlie coughed into his scarf to choke back a laugh.

“Bowling is about knocking things down,” Julian corrected patiently. “Bocce is about proximity, not destruction. You’re trying to get close to the small ball—the *pallino*.”

“Gay bowling.”

The man with the crate grinned, holding out a dark green ball. “You want to try?”

“Yes,” Hazel said without hesitation. She thrust the bakery box into Charlie’s chest. “Julian. Other end.”

“Why?”

“I need a target.”

“You have the *pallino*.”

“It’s tiny. I trust you to be visible.”

Tom wrapped an arm around Charlie, who cradled the pastry box against his coat.

“You can stand beside it,” Hazel called out. “And evaluate my form.”

Julian sighed, but he walked down the court anyway, stationing himself beside the target with his hands in his pockets and failing entirely to look put-upon.

Hazel squared her shoulders and sent the ball down the lane. It clipped the side rail with a sharp clack, veered left, and died three yards short of the marker.

“Gay bowling,” she announced.

The owner of the ball stepped up beside her, miming a smoother release in the air with his wrist. Hazel listened, uncharacteristically attentive.

From the far end of the court, Julian looked down at her ball stranded in the dirt, then back up at Hazel.

“Proximity,” he said. “Not destruction.”

CHAPTER 40

Saturday, October 21.

The bookshop was warm enough to fog Charlie's glasses when he stepped inside. He stopped by the entrance to wipe them while Tom went ahead, following the direction of his nod toward the fiction shelves.

Charlie found him holding a paperback with a dark red cover.

"This looks like one of yours."

He took it.

Raven Blackthorne. *Midnight Collateral.*

The man on the cover wore an open-collared suit and stood in front of a building that appeared to be on fire. A woman beside him held a diamond necklace and looked surprisingly unconcerned about the building.

Charlie turned it over.

"Oh, excellent."

Tom leaned down to read over his shoulder.

"He owns an island."

"Of course he does."

"And she's been hired to catalogue his private art collection."

"Terrible judgment on her part," Tom said.

Charlie tucked the book beneath his arm. They wandered for another ten minutes. Tom found a history book, read the first page, and added it to their small pile.

Outside, the wind had sharpened. Charlie tucked his chin into his scarf and slipped his free hand into Tom's.

"You know he's going to buy her something horrifying," Tom said.

"Probably."

"A port."

"That would be useful."

"For cataloguing paintings?"

"You have to get them onto the island."

Tom laughed. Charlie leaned against his arm as they walked.

At home, Cheddar stood in the foyer demanding an explanation.

"Work," Charlie told him, bending to scratch the cat's head. "And literature."

He dropped a paper bag of books onto the kitchen island. "Arepas for dinner. We have Elena's recipe."

Tom paused unfastening his watch. "Arepas?"

"Mhm." Charlie propped his phone against the fruit bowl. "She sent a voice note because Sofia's written instructions were apparently 'unnecessarily complicated.'"

He tapped play. *"You will know when it feels right,"* Elena's voice declared.

Tom smiled. "That sounds like her."

"Sofia's version contains measurements."

"Helpful."

"I'm using both. Grab that bowl above you, then sit and read me the first page of this disaster." He tapped the paperback.

Tom set the bowl on the counter, sat on a barstool, and cracked the spine. "*The island belonged to him.*"

Charlie dumped flour into the bowl. "Strong start."

"*The storm belonged to him too, though no court could prove it.*" Tom stopped reading. "No."

Charlie started laughing. "Keep going."

Tom read another paragraph. By the time the heroine arrived at the pier, Charlie was nearly spilling the water.

"She's afraid of the boat," Tom said. "He's going to buy her the ocean."

"That will make the boat worse."

Tom read until Charlie recruited him to slice avocados. They fell into an easy rhythm—Charlie shaping dough, Tom setting plates. When the first arepa hit the hot pan, Tom peered over Charlie's shoulder.

"You're frowning at it," Tom noted.

"I want it to work."

"It will."

Charlie flipped the dough. It was perfectly browned. He shot Tom a triumphant look. "There."

"There," Tom agreed.

After snapping a quick photo of the batch for Elena, they ate at the table, knees touching. The arepas were uneven. Tom deliberately chose the thickest one, split it, and took a bite.

"Well?" Charlie asked.

"Very good."

Talk drifted to Tom's day—an overlong meeting, a document with three versions all labelled *final*.

"Which one was actually final?" Charlie asked.

"None of them."

"Academic standards."

"I thought you'd appreciate that." Tom reached for more avocado. "How's the book?"

Charlie glanced at his bag by the door. “The introduction is getting shorter. Mehta keeps asking me which claims actually need to be in the opening. Some belong much later. Some apparently belong nowhere.”

“I’m showing her the new version tomorrow.”

“Can I read it?”

Charlie hesitated, then retrieved the folded pages from his bag. The margins were crowded with his pencil marks. He smoothed out the paragraph he’d rewritten that morning and slid it across the table. “This bit.”

Tom wiped his hands. He read slowly:

A score can tell a player how long to wait. It cannot entirely decide what the waiting will do. A listener may hear a delay, an ending, or the expectation of another entry. In the repertoire examined here, those possibilities become part of the work’s formal design. Their performance depends on decisions the written rest leaves open.

Tom looked up. “I understood that.”

“Good. It used to be three pages.”

“What does the player decide?”

“How the phrase carries through the rest. How much motion remains. How to approach the next sound—if there is one.”

Tom tapped the paper. “I’d want an example here.”

“There is one on the next page.”

Tom flipped the sheet. “I like hearing you talk about it.”

“I talk about it a lot.”

“I know.”

Across the table, Tom’s sleeves were pushed up to the elbow, a smudge of flour lingering near one cuff. His watch was still abandoned on the kitchen island.

“I like having you to talk to,” Charlie said.

Tom caught his eye. “You’ve got me.”

The phone buzzed against the kitchen counter. Tom was drying the cast-iron pan. He set the towel on the counter and picked up the phone.

The screen showed Hazel's name. Below it, a single message.

45.4396123, -73.756359

One brow. Fractional lift.

He copied the coordinates. Pasted them into the maps application. The screen loaded. A pin dropped on a location in Montréal's western suburbs.

Tom frowned. He typed back: *A library in Dorval?*

The response took eleven seconds.

Tomorrow. Noon.

After a moment, Tom locked his phone. He set it on the counter, picked up the dish towel, and finished drying the pan.

From the living room, he could hear Charlie at the piano.

Tom hung the pan on its hook. He crossed the space to the dining room, where Charlie sat at the bench, his shoulders moving in time with his bare feet on the pedals.

"Your sister's insane," Tom said.

Charlie's hands paused on the keys. He turned on the bench and looked up.

Tom held out his phone. Charlie took it. His eyes moved across the screen, then he shrugged and handed it back.

"I'm free tomorrow. We can make a day of it."

"Mhm." Tom pocketed the phone. His hand found the top of Charlie's head, fingers moving through the messy hair.

"Noon, then," he said.

Sunday, October 22.

They drove west along Lakeshore, Tom's hand resting on Charlie's knee until the Dorval Library appeared beside the cultural centre.

In the courtyard, Hazel stood with stilettos planted on the pavers, arms crossed beside Julian, who had his hands clasped behind his back.

Tom pulled into the lot. “What are we betting? I say she’s suing them for telling her to shut up.”

“Right,” Charlie said, opening his door. “Because you two are so different.”

“Take that back right now.”

They crossed the lot, the silver light of the St. Lawrence gleaming beyond the soccer field.

“Hi, Hazy,” Charlie said, catching her in a quick hug. “Do you know someone who works here?”

Hazel nudged Julian in the ribs. He absorbed the blow without flinching and adjusted his glasses.

“What do you think of this library?” Julian asked.

Tom and Charlie took in the low concrete facade.

“It’s… architecturally sound,” Tom offered. “A little boring. Nineties?”

“Ninety-six,” Julian confirmed. “Solid bones, aging mechanicals. But north-facing clerestory skylights would diffuse natural daylight across seventy percent of the main floor. And replacing the static shelving with modular units on locking casters makes the entire collection reconfigurable.”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “Wait. Are you—”

Hazel couldn’t hold it. Grinning with her whole face, hands balled into fists at her sides: “We have a contract!”

Charlie cheered, throwing his arms around both of them. Hazel sank into the hug easily; Julian received him the way a column received a lateral load.

When Charlie stepped back, Tom moved in with an extended hand. “Well done.”

Julian nodded, taking it. “Shall we go inside?”

Inside, the library was as promised: functional, carpeted, and slightly dated. Julian walked the perimeter as though stepping through his own blueprints, Hazel half a step behind, until they completed a full circuit and spilled back through the automatic doors.

“Park’s two blocks west,” Hazel announced.

They walked along Lakeshore in natural pairs: Hazel and Charlie ahead, talking over each other in rapid bursts of laughter and gestures, while Tom and Julian followed in easy silence.

Pine Beach opened as a green corridor between the houses. Hazel marched across the grass in her stilettos and dropped onto a swing without breaking stride.

“Charlie,” she commanded.

Charlie took the rubber seat beside her, looking out across the St. Lawrence as Tom stepped up behind him. With measured pushes, Tom built Charlie’s momentum by degrees, catching and lifting him into a smooth arc that held him weightless at the peak before bringing him back down.

Beside them, Hazel craned her neck. “Higher.”

Julian didn’t adjust.

“Julian. *Higher*.”

“The current arc is optimal for the chain length,” Julian said, hands meeting her back. “Additional amplitude would produce lateral oscillation at the attachment points.”

“I don’t care about attachment points! Higher!” Hazel kicked out, the swing lurching until she squealed.

Julian caught her on the return, braced his feet, and shoved her forward with everything he had.

Tuesday, October 24.

The gym on Sherbrooke occupied the second floor of a converted textile building. At six-forty on a Tuesday morning, the room was half-full. Tom

stood at the squat rack in the far corner.

The barbell sat across his shoulders. Two hundred and twenty-five pounds. His feet were shoulder-width. His spine was neutral as he retraced the last minutes of yesterday's last meeting.

Rep seven. Eight. His work phone buzzed on the ledge beside his water bottle.

Tom carefully racked the bar and reached for the towel. He answered the phone as he blotted his face.

"Montgomery."

"Tom." Payton's voice came through the speaker. "I just saw Q3."

Tom couldn't help smiling. "Not bad for a comeback."

"That's an understatement. I think we should celebrate. Properly."

"Oh yeah?"

"Come to New York. I'll host. We'll have dinner, talk next steps, enjoy the city."

"Good timing. I'll check with Charlie, but the end of the month should work."

"Perfect. I'll send details. And—Tom. Bring your goons."

Charlie sat at the kitchen island with a stack of student papers. A red pen rested between his fingers. He was annotating a paragraph about Schoenberg when the key turned in the lock.

Hazel sat beside him. She didn't look up from her phone.

"Hi," Charlie smiled. He set the pen down and crossed the kitchen. He tilted his head up. Tom set his briefcase aside and kissed him deeply.

"Yucky," Hazel said, without looking up.

Tom released Charlie but kept a hand at his back. "Payton called. He wants us to visit. End of the month."

Hazel's phone hit the marble. "SAKS FIFTH AVENUE."

“Jesus,” Tom winced. He hung up his coat and moved into the kitchen. “Indoor voice.”

Charlie sat back down at the island. “That sounds like fun. You’re coming, then?”

“Obviously.” Hazel was already on the Saks website on her phone. “Julian has to work, though, so probably not him. Lame.”

The goons were contacted. Matt couldn’t get the time off. André couldn’t either. That left Lukas.

Tom dialled and put it on speaker.

“Yo.”

“Lukas,” Tom said. “New York. End of October. Payton’s hosting. You in?”

Lukas laughed. “Am I *in?* Dude. I’m calling in sick right now. I’ll call in dead. The M&M’s museum is in New York.”

Tom looked at Charlie. Charlie was pressing his lips together so hard they had disappeared.

“It’s a big store,” Tom said. “It’s not a museum.”

“It’s four floors.”

“Daddy Warbucks,” Hazel sing-songed. “Private jet to JFK. Yes or yes?”

“YES! Say yes!” Lukas echoed from the phone.

Tom turned to Charlie again. Charlie made a face and shook his head.

“No way,” he said. “Are you crazy? The emissions! We’re taking the train.”

Tom nodded. “The train is good.”

“The TRAIN?” Lukas’s voice climbed. “My *man*. We have an opportunity here—”

“We can get a sleeper car,” Tom rolled his eyes. “With bar access.”

“I’m in,” Lukas said.

Hazel’s mouth twisted. “Fine. But the hotel—” She had her laptop open before she finished the sentence, the website already loading. She turned the

screen toward Tom.

Tom looked at it. “I already pay you. I’m not getting you a room at the Aman.”

“It’s an investment! In team morale!”

Charlie glanced at the screen, then at Tom. “I don’t mind. It’s not a jet.”

Hazel pointed at Charlie. Tom closed his eyes.

“Three rooms,” he sighed. “Three nights. That’s it.”

Friday, October 27.

The luxury car occupied the last carriage of the train. It held four people and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot.

Hazel and Lukas sat facing each other across the fold-down table between their seats. The champagne stood between them. Hazel held her glass by the stem. Lukas held his like a mug.

“To the Empire’s new direction,” Hazel said.

She raised her glass.

“Hear, hear,” Lukas said. He raised his glass to meet hers. The crystal chimed. They sipped.

“This is how people are supposed to travel,” Hazel said. She crossed her legs, smoothed her skirt, and gazed out the window. “This is civilized.”

“I feel fancy,” Lukas said. “I feel like we should be discussing my stocks.”

On the other side of the aisle, Tom’s laptop was open on the table, displaying a spreadsheet. His left hand operated the trackpad. His right hand rested in Charlie’s.

The hand sat in Charlie’s lap, their fingers interlaced. Charlie watched the world pass. A farmhouse. A river. A stand of birches.

He squeezed Tom’s hand. Tom squeezed back.

Sushi Sho occupied a narrow storefront on East 41st Street. Payton was waiting near the entrance.

He saw Tom first. They shook hands.

“Good to see you,” Payton said. His smile was real.

“You too.” Tom stepped aside. Payton extended his hand to Charlie, then Hazel.

Then Lukas came through the door. He carried, in his right hand, a bright yellow bag.

The bag was large. It was full. Its surface bore the M&M’s logo and the cartoon faces of the mascots and the words M&M’S WORLD NEW YORK.

Payton’s smile wavered. Lukas lifted the bag.

“Payton!” He grinned. “I got you something!”

Payton looked at Tom, who was reading the menu. Charlie had turned and pressed his face into Tom’s shoulder.

Hazel raised her chin.

“Shall we sit?”

VELVET THUNDER

by #1 International Bestselling Author Raven Blackthorne

Chapter 2

Seraphina stood on the pavement, the concrete feeling as hard as the reality of her bank account. Her heart was still doing gymnastics in her chest, a chaotic floor routine that threatened to bruise her ribs. She stared at the retreating figure of Dante Storm, watching the way his suit jacket strained against the massive, tectonic plates of his shoulders.

"He's dangerous," she whispered to a passing pigeon. The pigeon cooed, a sound that reminded her of the mocking laughter of the universe. "But he smells like rain and bad decisions."

She shook her head, her messy bun wobbling like a scoop of vanilla ice cream in an earthquake. She couldn't be distracted by a pair of stormy grey eyes that looked like they could start a nuclear winter. She had an interview to do. Money to make. She had to feed Mr. Whiskers, whose appetite was as bottomless as her self-doubt.

With a deep breath that tasted of exhaust fumes and ambition, Seraphina pushed through the revolving doors for the second time.

The lobby of Storm Holdings was an assault on the senses. The floors were black marble, polished to such a mirror sheen that Seraphina worried the cleaning staff would see up her skirt if they looked down. The ceiling was lost in the clouds, or at least high enough that it had its own weather system.

In the center of the cavernous space sat a desk. It was a crescent of pure obsidian, sharp enough to cut a diamond. Behind it sat a woman who was the exact opposite of Seraphina in every quantifiable way.

She was blonde. Not a natural, sun-kissed blonde, but a blinding, chemical platinum that probably glowed under UV light. Her skin was the colour of a Dorito that had been to tanning school. Her lips were coated in a sticky pink gloss that looked like it could trap flies.

Seraphina approached the desk, clutching her notebook like it was the Holy Grail and she was a knight who had forgotten her sword.

"Ex-excuse me?" Seraphina squeaked. Her voice sounded tiny, like a mouse asking a cat for a loan.

The receptionist didn't look up. She was typing on a holographic keyboard with fingernails that were at least three inches long and painted blood-red. Click-clack-click-clack. The sound was like skeletal fingers tapping on a coffin.

"I... I'm here for an interview," Seraphina tried again, leaning over the obsidian barrier.

The typing stopped. The silence that followed was heavier than a wet wool blanket. Slowly, the receptionist raised her head. Her eyes were heavily rimmed with black liner, making her look like a raccoon that had discovered Sephora. She scanned Seraphina from her Converse sneakers to her unruly hair, her lip curling in a sneer that exposed teeth whiter than Seraphina’s future.

"You?" The woman scoffed. It was a harsh, grating sound. "You're here for an interview? Did the janitorial staff put out a Craigslist ad?"

Seraphina felt the heat rise in her cheeks, burning like a thousand suns. "No! I'm here to see Mr. Storm. Dante Storm."

The receptionist laughed. It was a cruel, hyena-like cackle. "Honey, look at you. Mr. Storm eats girls like you for breakfast. And he spits out the bones."

"I... I have an appointment!" Seraphina insisted, her violet orbs swimming with unshed tears. "He told me to come up! We met outside! We... we touched!"

"Touched?" The receptionist stood up, revealing a dress so tight it looked like it had been spray-painted onto her surgically enhanced body. "Listen to me, you little street rat. Dante Storm doesn't touch trash. Now get out before I call security. They have tasers. And they love to use them."

Just as Seraphina turned to flee, convinced that her life was over and she would have to live in a cardboard box with Mr. Whiskers, a phone rang. It wasn't a normal ring. It was the sound of a thunderclap recorded in high definition.

The receptionist paled beneath her spray tan. She snatched up the receiver. "Storm Holdings, Tiffany speak—"

She stopped. Her eyes went wide. "Yes, sir. But sir, she looks like a... yes, sir. Immediately, sir."

Tiffany slammed the phone down as if it had burned her. She looked at Seraphina with a mixture of fear and loathing.

"He wants to see you," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Top floor. Don't touch anything. And for god's sake, try not to trip over your own existence."

Seraphina didn't wait. She bolted toward the elevators, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs: Dante. Dante. Dante.

❇ ❇ ❇

The elevator was made of gold. Solid gold. Seraphina stepped inside and the doors slid shut with a hiss that sounded strangely like a warning. There were no buttons. Just a voice command system.

"Destination?" a robotic female voice asked.

"Top floor," Seraphina whispered.

The elevator shot upward. It moved so fast Seraphina felt her stomach drop into her shoes. Gravity seemed to lose its hold on her. She leaned against the mirrored wall, staring at her reflection.

"Why me?" she asked the girl in the mirror. "Look at you. You're a mess. Your hair looks like a bird's nest that was hit by a tornado. Your eyes are too big. Your lips are too pouty. You're just... plain."

She tugged at her blouse, wishing she had worn something more professional, like a suit of armor. The elevator dinged softly as it passed the 50th floor. Then the 100th. Then the 150th.

How tall is this building? she wondered. Does it pierce the atmosphere? Is Dante Storm an alien?

Finally, the elevator slowed. The doors opened, and Seraphina gasped.

She wasn't in an office. She was in a different world.