

Twenty Minutes in LA

By Kate Simon

All Cassie wanted was to get home. The airport was packed, but that was to be expected. This was LAX. She'd flown in from Monterey and had twenty minutes to make her connection to Denver. Then Denver to Charlotte and Charlotte to JFK. She'd be lucky if she made it home tonight. She had to be there because Phil Dunbar was expecting a briefing at the board meeting first thing in the morning. She'd be tired, but she was prepared.

Cassie Parker was the vice president of marketing for the most famous jewelry company in the country. She'd been in Monterey to meet with a designer Cassie was anxious to sign. Dunbar had agreed to the trip with no small amount of coaxing from Cassie. Dunbar had given her a hard time ever since she'd been promoted. He thought his protégé, Fred Reynolds, should have gotten the job. Fortunately for Cassie, she'd made a good impression on Gina Herbert, the primary shareholder. Luxe Jewelers started as a family business in the roaring twenties, catering to the rich and jaded of the day. Their art deco designs were unparalleled and still fetched huge sums at auction. The problem was their customer base was shrinking. Dunbar and his cronies were all about high end glamour. Cassie was trying to expand to a more moderately priced line.

She finally made it to her gate and flopped down in the first available seat. She pushed her carry on aside and looked at the display. Her flight was on time but they hadn't started boarding. She pulled out her phone and sighed. She hit the contact button and braced herself.

"Are you back yet?" Dunbar growled. No hello.

"I told you I'd be at the meeting tomorrow. I'm still in LA."

"What the hell are you still doing there? You should have wrapped this goose chase up by now."

"I'm in the airport," she said through clenched teeth. "I'm checking in. The meeting went well and I have some exciting designs to present to the board tomorrow."

"You better." The line went dead.

“Ahhh! Asshole!” she said a bit too loud. Cassie heard snickering and looked to her left. The man in the next seat was smiling. “Sorry.”

“No problem. Your boss?”

“Yeah.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Been there.”

“Excuse me?”

“I had a job I hated.”

“I don’t hate my job.”

“Yes, you do. I was you. I know the signs. Swearing at the phone. Living out of a suitcase. What do you do?”

“Marketing VP for Luxe Jewelry,” she said with a bit too much emphasis

He smiled and nodded. “Impressive.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a photographer now.”

“Now?”

“I was a lawyer.”

“Seriously?”

He brushed his hand over his goatee and smiled. “Don’t let the scruff fool you. I was a blue suited corporate lawyer for twenty-five years.”

Cassie couldn’t help but return his smile. It was a very nice smile. As was the rest of him. Close cropped hair, salt and pepper goatee and the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. She extended her hand. “Cassie Parker”

“Tom Strong.”

“Of course you are,” she chuckled.

“I’ve taken a lot of heat for my name over the years but it makes me easy to remember.”

“It’s not the name,” she said and then gasped. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.” She could feel her blush. “Please write my babbling off to exhaustion after a long business trip.” She realized she was still holding his hand and pulled away.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Cassie Parker.”

“It’s very nice to meet you too, Tom Strong. Why aren’t you a lawyer anymore?”

“I hated the work. I was good at it. Hell, I was great at it, but I didn’t want to do it anymore. It was all about finding legal ways for our clients to screw people over. I finally got to the point where I couldn’t imagine spending the rest of my life doing it. So, my partners bought me out and I made my hobby my job. That was five years ago. I never looked back.”

“What do you photograph? Portraits?”

“Sometimes.” He grabbed the camera on the seat next to him and aimed it at her.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I’m a mess.”

He clicked off a few pictures and pulled the camera aside. “No, you’re not,” he whispered. It was a quiet, deep sound she heard over the din of the gate. Her heart skipped. This man had a way of knocking her off balance. She tried to regain her composure.

“Ah...what else?”

“Sorry?” he said as he set down the camera.

“You said sometimes you do portraits. What else do you do?”

“Right now, I’m a guest lecturer. I’m headed to Philly to talk to photography students at the Art Museum.” He pointed to the gate next to hers. His flight to Philly was scheduled for twenty minutes after hers.

“The Philadelphia Art Museum? Rocky steps?”

“That’s the one,” he smiled.

“Wow. Impressive.”

“Thanks. The director likes my work. She’s arranged for a showing next week.”

“Whoa.”

Tom chuckled. “That’s what I said when she called. I’m pretty new for someone like her to take an interest in my work. After the classes, I will help curate the show.”

They were interrupted by the gate attendant announcing Cassie’s flight was beginning to board.

“Well, that’s me. I have to go.” She extended her hand. “It was really nice to meet you, Tom. I wish you great success with your show.”

He took her hand and didn’t let go. “Thank you, Cassie. It was great meeting you.” He leaned close so only she would hear. “Cassie, if not now, when?” He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a business card. “Let me know how your meeting goes.”

Cassie looked at the card and then up and the gate lines disappeared. All she heard was her own breathing. All she saw was his blue eyes. The gate attendant announcement brought back all the noise and she got in line. The boarding pass machine turned green as it registered her phone pass. As she entered the boarding bridge, she turned. He was still watching.

Tom made himself comfortable in in his aisle seat. At least as comfortable as he could be in an airline seat. He wouldn't complain. It wasn't first class, but it was free. The museum was footing the bill.

He'd been thrilled when the museum director, Prudence Holiday, contacted him about being a visiting instructor. He was floored when she wanted to set up a showing. In the freaking Philadelphia Art Museum. He still had trouble believing it. Prudence Holiday, had a maverick reputation and was a hero in Philly. He'd read how she'd taken out a shooter with a shopping cart. She must be a hell of a woman. She'd seen his showing at the Pennington in LA and decided he needed to come to Philly. He was more than happy to do so.

Tom opened his laptop and linked into the airline Wi-Fi. His camera was synced and the last few pictures he'd taken popped up on his screen. Planes taking off, travelers, sales people selling ten-dollar aspirin. He liked the one of the little kid covered in Cheetos dust and his mother's look of resignation.

Then there was Cassie. He caught her mid protest. Her hair was a bit mussed but her smile was natural. He even caught a bit of a blush on her cheeks. He didn't think she realized what a beauty she was. Maybe he shouldn't have said what he had. Who was he to tell her she hated her job? She did, but it wasn't his place to say so. The email icon blinked. He opened up his mail and smiled. There was an email from a cparker. She'd seen his email address on his business card.

"What did you mean if not now, when?"

"I'm sorry if I was out of line."

"I don't want an apology. I want to know what you meant?"

"I saw the same thing in you that was in me. I was twenty-five years into a career and I thought it was too late to change. Finally, I had enough of placating people I couldn't respect. I changed my life. I've never been happier. I wish that for you."

Tom waited for a reply, and waited. He accepted a ginger ale from flight attendant.
“Ah, crap,” he thought. “I went too far.”

“I guess that’s nice of you.”

He smiled at his screen. *“I’m glad I didn’t offend you.”*

“No. You just caught me on a rough day.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“It’s not like you could tell my boss, is it?”

“I’m a vault.”

“Okay, here goes. I’m pushing to sign a new designer who could design a mid-price line for us. Luxe is known for high-end, red-carpet jewelry. But you can’t sustain a company with selling only to the top one percent of the population. My boss doesn’t understand that not everyone can afford a seventy-five-thousand-dollar necklace.”

“Who spends seventy-five K on a necklace?”

A few moments later a picture came attached to the next email. It was a picture of Cassie smiling and wearing a colorful necklace.

“I couldn’t resist trying this on. It was part of large show. It sold, eventually.”

“Did you buy it?”

“HA!”

“It is a nice picture.”

“The necklace is from the legacy collection.”

“The necklace was nice too.”

“Very funny.”

"I'm not laughing. You're a beautiful woman." He attached one of the pictures he'd taken of her. *"See what I mean?"*

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make me look like that. I look so different."

"That's what you look like. The camera doesn't lie."

"Well, you're a great photographer."

"I won't argue you that."

"Ha. Modest and humble."

"No, I understand my strengths and weakness. Photography. Strength."

"Weakness?"

Tom could almost see her smile. *"Singing. I love it but I can't carry a tune in a bucket. What about you. Strength?"*

"Determination. When I want something, I do everything I can to achieve it."

"Excellent quality. Weakness?"

"People pleasing."

"Oh."

"I'm a work in progress."

"Aren't we all."

"Tom, I'm going to try and get some rest. I'm exhausted and I need to be ready for tomorrow. I made my company pay for first class so I'm going to stretch out."

"Did it piss off your boss?"

“He hasn’t seen the expense report yet, but it will.”

“Good for you! Cassie, I wasn’t kidding when I said I want to know how your meeting goes. You have my contact information. I’ll be working in Philly for the next few weeks, but I’m reachable. I really enjoy talking to you.”

“I like talking to you, too.”

Tom saw an attachment come through. He opened it and saw a pic of Cassie stretch out in her first-class seat and smiling.

Cassie dragged herself out of bed and jumped in the shower. Even though she'd managed a few hours' sleep on the plane, she was exhausted. She was ready for her meeting with the executive staff. The collection of sketches by Emma Moretti were brilliant. It was a botanical collection made of sterling silver and semi-precious stones.

Emma was a designer and managed the LA store of jewelry superstar, Michaela Turner. Emma's collection of industrial chic jewelry was very popular for Turner's store. Cassie met with both of them over the weekend at Turner's Carmel location. She'd been surprised that Turner was willing to let Emma branch out on her own.

"Ms. Turner, Emma's work has been Emma Moretti for Michaela Turner. We would be looking for an exclusive line for Luxe."

"Please, call me Mike. Everyone does. Emma's work has done extremely well in my stores. I wouldn't stand in her way to make this deal." She smiled at Emma. "Her designs will make your company a lot of money."

Cassie smiled at the thought of that meeting. Exclusive rights to Emma's collection would give them a great advantage for the next holiday season. Now, if she could get Dunbar to see the wisdom in her plan.

She grabbed her coffee mug on the way to her waiting car. She would need the fuel for the day. She connected with a familiar number. "You got the package? Good. I have a meeting at nine."

Cassie dropped her things in her office and checked in with her assistant. "Helen, what's the mood?"

"Phil's been a bear."

"More than usual?"

"Very growly. He kept asking me if I'd heard from you."

“That putz! I called him every day I was gone. I was getting us the next big thing, not sunning my ass on a beach.” She opened up the portfolio. “Look at these.”

Helen had been with her for ten years. She had a great eye and a talent for wading through the sea of administrative BS. “Wow. These are beautiful.”

“Now, if I can get Phil to see what you do.”

The usual people were milling about the conference room, pouring coffee and reviewing their notes. The heads of sales, distribution, and manufacturing were all ready for their weekly chewing out by Phil Dunbar.

Phil had taken over as CEO ten years ago when the Gordon Herbert died. The last of the original family, Gordon was a fixture in high society, along with his wife, Gina. Phil loved being the tag along at parties and events. There was nothing Phil loved more than seeing his face on the society pages of the New York papers. He looked up from his agenda and noticed Cassie taking her seat.

“You’re back.”

“I am.”

They went through the boring bits first. Charlie from sales was particularly raked over Phil’s coals. Sales were down again.

“What the hell, Charlie?” yelled Phil. “You’re down again, five percent in the last month. What are you going to do about it?”

“Ah, well, Phil. The major holidays are over. The only thing coming up is Mother’s Day and nobody drops five grand on a necklace for Mom.”

“It’s your lousy sales team! You need to fire the lot and get people who get the job done!”

Charlie sat back in his chair. It was the same lecture he got every month.

Phil drilled Cassie with a look that said it was her turn on the grill. “Well..?”

Cassie held her tongue. He couldn’t give her the courtesy of a complete sentence. She directed her attention to the rest of the meeting. “As you know, I’ve been working on a plan to build a mid-range line that will appeal to a broader customer base.” She paused and opened her portfolio. “This weekend I met with designer Emma Moretti. She has designed very successful lines for Michaela Turner.” Most looked at her and nodded. Everyone knew Michaela Turner. “She has designed for us a line of botanical inspired pieces that I’m sure

will be best sellers. She passed the portfolio to Charlie, who paged through and nodded. Phil pulled the portfolio in front of him and flipped through shaking his head.

“These are crap.”

Cassie held her tongue again. It took everything she had. She reached into her briefcase and pulled out a box. “Ms. Moretti made us a prototype.” She opened the box and revealed a beautiful cuff bracelet made from sterling silver. The leaf designs were set with peridots and the flowers were set with citrines. “This would be a mid-line piece with a price point of two hundred dollars.” Charlie took the piece and examined it. He nodded his approval. “So, you could sell this, Charlie?”

Charlie smiled. “I could sell the crap out of this, Cassie.”

“What are the production numbers?” asked Fred. Phil’s protégé may have no taste, but he knew his way around production.

“To maintain the quality, we would need to use Turner and Moretti’s production people. They could produce the volume we would need and still maintain the quality you see here.” She passed out reports to each person. “These are the licensing agreements, production figures, manufacturing targets and profit margins.”

“This says designs by Moretti? Where is Turner in this?” asked Charlie.

“She’s approved Emma going out on her own.”

“So long as we use her manufacturer,” said Fred.

“Turner doesn’t own the manufacturer, but they are very supportive of their suppliers.”

“What does Turner get out of this?” was Phil’s first question.

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit,” he replied as he tossed the bracelet in Cassie’s direction. She grabbed it off the table and checked it for damage before slipping it on her wrist. “She’ll have a back-

end deal with Moretti. Luxe has been the finest jeweler in the country for over one hundred years. We are not going to pollute our legacy with this cheap crap.” He looked at the others and smiled. “I’ve done my own research. Moretti is actually a Gallo.”

“Why do I know that name?” asked Charlie.

“Because the Gallo family is one of the richest in the country. Made their money in computers. Moretti married the son. We don’t need to fund some broad’s hobby.”

Cassie thought her head would blow off her shoulders. It didn’t matter if she could show Emma’s designs would make them millions. Phil wasn’t having it. She pulled out another set of reports and passed them around. “I’ve also done my research, Phil. You took over Luxe ten years ago. Sales have been down every year since.” She pointed around the room. “It didn’t matter who was sitting in these seats, you were always right there. Sales are down forty percent. If there isn’t a shift in direction, Luxe will fail and fail soon.”

“How dare you!” he yelled.

The others were paging through the report and then looking at Phil. Every number was accurate. Cassie had Helen prepare the report before she left for California.

“You’re fired!”

She gathered her things and smiled. “No, I’m not. Gina also has a copy of that report and my proposal for the Moretti designs. I didn’t want to go over your head, but this is about saving Luxe. I believe you’re about to have a long and painful conversation with the Chairmen of the Board.” She stood to leave and held up her wrist. “By the way, the bracelet is mine. It was so beautiful I bought it.” She looked at Phil and smiled. “I have the receipt.”

Tom plugged in the address for the Art Museum into the GPS. The director had arranged for a rental car so he'd have wheels for the next few weeks. She'd also set him up in a very nice suite for the duration of his visit. He glanced at his portfolio on the passenger seat. As confident as he was in his own work, he hoped Prudence Holiday would feel the same way.

He made the short walk from the parking lot to the front of the museum. Several people were running up the famous steps. One was standing on a Rocky plaque and jumping up and down, like Sylvester Stallone. He looked down at the seventy-two stone steps and shook his head.

"Nah," he said to no one.

Tom entered the museum and took a moment to take it all in. This was one of the most famous museums in the world and soon it would be displaying his work. He smiled and shook his head. Five years ago, he was a miserable corporate lawyer. Now this. It didn't feel real. He pulled out his ID and showed it to the guard.

"Tom Strong. I have a ten o'clock with Director Holiday."

"Your case, sir." The guard unzipped it and inspected the contents. It was Tom's life's work, but nothing dangerous. He made a call, then signaled another guard. "Follow me, sir." He led Tom to a private elevator and punched in a code.

"This will take you directly to the top floor." The doors opened to a woman in her late twenties with short dark hair.

"Mr. Strong, I'm Susan Pearson, Ms. Holiday's assistant."

"It's very nice to meet you." He extended his hand and she seemed surprised by the gesture.

"Oh, yes," she said with a nervous laugh as she shook his hand. "I hope you've had a comfortable trip."

"Yes, thank you. The hotel is very comfortable."

She led him into the office of Prudence Holiday. He would have expected something a bit grander from the director of one of the world's most famous museums. She was a slight woman with her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"Mr. Strong. Welcome to Philadelphia!"

He took her extended hand. "Thank you, Ms. Holiday."

"Oh, please. It's Prudence."

"Tom."

"I'm very excited for the work we will do together."

"I admit to being surprised when you contacted me. My work is not what you'd normally find here." He pointed to a painting that hung behind her desk. "You see something more like that." It was a painting of a man with longish grey hair on a black steed. "I admit I don't know the artist."

She smiled like she knew a secret. "Tell me what you think of it."

"Well, it's an excellent painting. It reminds me of something medieval, but I don't think it's very old. I doubt the old masters would have made his eyes so blue."

"Well done. That's a portrait of my husband, Vince. I told him when we met, he reminded me of a knight on a horse, so I had this commissioned. He said it made him too self-conscious to hang it at home so I keep it here." She pointed to a small framed photo on her desk. It was the man in the painting, sitting on a large Harley with Prudence hanging on to his waist. "This was on our honeymoon." Tom saw her lose herself in the memory. She turned to him and smiled. "Well, to business. I saw your show in LA and I knew I had to have your work on display here."

"I'm very flattered. I'm so new to the profession."

She waved her dismissively. "Talent is talent. Knowing talent when I see it is my job."

"Yes, ma'am," he grinned.

She pointed at his case. "Your portfolio, let me see what you brought me."

Tom placed his case on a conference table and unzipped it. He watched Prudence laser focus as she examined each photo. She reached into her desk and pulled out a large magnifying glass. He clenched and unclenched his hands as she reexamined each picture. What was she seeing? Did she have second thoughts close up?"

She set down the glass and smiled. "I love being right."

"Excuse me?"

"I knew when I saw your show in LA that you are the next big thing in photography."

"I'm flattered."

"Save the false modesty, Tom. You're good and you know it."

He chuckled. "I never expected someone like you to know it."

"You have an artist's eye."

"Thank you."

Prudence zipped up the portfolio. "Okay, Susan will take these and have them prepared for the show. I'll show you where you'll be running your classes."

Tom looked back and forth between the women. Things were moving very fast.

Prudence smiled. "Don't worry. You'll have final say on the framing and placement. But Susan is very good at this. I'm sure you'll approve her selections. Now, to the auditorium."

Tom followed Prudence out of her office, suddenly feeling he was in over his head.

Carrie was going over the latest marketing reports and they were just as dismal as they were last month. She was convinced the Moretti designs were the answer to saving Luxe from fading away like so many of their competitors. She wasn't sure what the holdup was on approving the designs. They needed to get ramped up to be prepared for next Christmas.

She was still absorbed in her reports when her office door flew open. Gina Herbert appeared. She never just walked into a room or, God forbid, knock. Gina made an entrance. She saw Helen standing behind her, shrugging her shoulders.

"Hello Gina, what a surprise. Can Helen get you anything? Coffee?"

"No, I'm here to talk about the report."

Cassie nodded to Helen who closed the door behind her. "I can explain anything on the report."

"That won't be necessary. It was very clear. Dunbar has been draining the company. I called an emergency meeting of the board. He's out."

Cassie's breath caught in her chest. She'd expected something like this, but not so fast. "Gina, my only interest is the economic health of the company."

"I know that, sweetie. You've worked hard for Luxe for ten years."

"Fifteen," said Cassie, her heart now in her throat.

"While the board appreciates your efforts, they don't approve your end run around the chain of command."

"Chain of Command?!" she said way too loud. "The next person in my chain was Phil. What was I supposed to do?? Go to Phil and say I know you're stealing from the company?"

"The board feels better with Fred Reynolds at the helm, and Fred, well..."

"I'm out?! You're firing me? I brought you the best young designer in the country and you're kicking me to the curb!"

Gina pulled an envelope out of her bag. “Don’t worry. This is a very liberal severance.”

Carrie looked at the envelope and looked back at Gina. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t back me. You’re the primary shareholder. The board wouldn’t do this without your approval.”

Gina leaned back in her chair. “The truth is I needed a way to get Phil out. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome. Now get out of my office, while it’s still my office.”

Cassie watched the door close on her career.

Tom looked at his students and took a deep breath. He'd never felt so inadequate to a task. Prudence stood at the podium and nodded to Susan, who dimmed the lights.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to Photography in the Real World. If any of you think this is a reality TV course, you are mistaken. This course will involve studying the work of Mr. Thomas Strong." She paused long enough to indicate Tom standing next to her. "When I first saw Tom's work, I was struck by his capturing the beauty in simplicity. He is a gifted photographer. Listen to him . Learn from him. For those of you from the local universities, don't focus on a grade. Think about how you can incorporate this course to make your work more uniquely your own. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Thomas Strong."

Tom stood and acknowledged the applause. He leaned over to Prudence and whispered, "You didn't mention grades."

"We'll talk about that later. Have fun," she smiled and walked to the back of the room. Instead of leaving, she took a seat in the back next to Susan. No pressure.

"Thank you, Director Holiday. I'm very happy to be here in Philadelphia, or as I've been corrected several times, Philly."

The students chuckled.

Tom grabbed some index cards from his case. He put a stack at each side of the long desks. "Please take one of these and pass them along. I'd like your name and number on the front. On the back I'd like you to help out a newbie to the city and write down your favorite places to go. I understand there are certain rules for cheesesteaks."

The students seemed to relax as they gave thought to where he should visit. This was more than tourist information. This would tell him what his students liked best about their city. It would be helpful as a tool to help them see their city in a new way. He was surprised to see Prudence and Susan filling out cards. He collected the cards and set them aside. He opened his laptop and linked it to the screen behind him. He clicked on a photos of an office building.

“This is where I used to work.” He clicked on multiple angles of the building, one after the other. I photographed this building for months before I finally resigned.”

A student raised her hand. “Were you a staff photographer?”

Tom smiled. “No. I was a lawyer.” He chuckled at a few audible gasps. “Yes, four years in college, three years in law school and twenty-five years into a career and I walked away to do this.” He clicked to the next picture and was pleased to hear a few more gasps. It was a photo of the Walt Disney Concert Hall at dusk. The light reflected perfectly off the multiple curves, making it look like a wild animal. Another hand went up.

“Yes sir?”

“I think we can all agree that is a fantastic picture but I have to ask. You must have been making a good living as a lawyer. One really good picture isn't...well, you know.” The girl next to him slapped the boy's shoulder.

“That's a perfectly legitimate question. Yes, I made a butt load of money as a lawyer.” Again, the students smiled. “I walked away from it because I didn't want to do it for the rest of my life. Being a lawyer, for me, was a job. Being a photographer is my passion. No, I don't make nearly what I did as a lawyer but I am infinitely happier. You don't get into the arts, like photography, for the money. You do it because it speaks to a part of you that can only be articulated through your work.”

Tom went through the rest of the days photos and asked the students to each bring their favorite photograph to the next class. It didn't have to be one they took, just a photo that meant something to them.

“I see our time is up. I look forward to seeing you all on Thursday.”

He packed up his things and realized his legs felt like water. The adrenaline in his system was calling out for a soda and a seat. He looked up to see Prudence standing next to the podium.

“Well done, Tom.”

“Thanks. I was really nervous.”

“You did well. You were open and honest with the students and they respect that. What were the cards about? You don't need that many recommendations for the perfect cheesesteak or who has the best dim sum.”

“No, but I want to see what they think of their city. Then I'd like to use the Museum van for a couple of field trips. I want to show them how to see things in a different way.”

Prudence smiled. “I love being right. You're going to be great at this.”

“Thanks. Now let's talk about those grades.”

Cassie sat on the balcony of her townhouse and sipped her coffee. She finished the news of the day and sighed. She'd always thought having the time to sit with her tablet and drink her morning coffee would be great. What it was, was boring. She watched her neighbors leave for work. She'd lived here for ten years and she couldn't tell you one name. She only knew them by 'pretentious sports car', 'yappy dog' and 'couldn't park straight to save their lives.'

Now what? She was still blind angry at Gina. How could she side with the board against her? She had been a loyal employee for fifteen years. She had no recourse. Just a hefty severance package and no reason to change out of her pajamas.

Cassie should have known better. Luxe wasn't her family. It was just a job, like being a fry cook. A fry cook with fifteen times the salary. Now she was unemployed for the first time since high school. Working was all she'd ever known. She had no hobbies, few friends and no family.

"God, this is turning into a pity party," she muttered. She picked up the tablet and scrolled a few more pages. There was a picture of the Philadelphia Art Museum and a beautiful photograph of a building. It was an ad for a showing for the photographs of Tom Strong. She couldn't help but smile. She'd thought about the charming stranger she'd met at LAX. She had his information. Should she? She grabbed her briefcase from the hall where she'd dropped it. She pushed aside her brilliant proposal and dug out Tom's business card. Should she really? He was probably busy. She looked at herself in the hall mirror. "Why not?" She took a deep breath and dialed Tom's number.

"Hello?"

"Tom, it's Cassie Parker. We met a few days ago at LAX."

"Cassie, it's good to hear from you. How was your meeting?"

"How's Philly treating you?"

“It's terrific. My students are really interesting. You're evading my question. How was your meeting?”

She paused, wondering if she should tell him.

“Cassie, what happened?”

He could tell before she said anything. “Well, I went all in.”

“And?”

“I'm unemployed.”

“What? Oh, Cassie, I'm so sorry. I hope I didn't influence you.”

“No. The truth is I wouldn't have changed a thing.”

“How are you doing?”

“I'm still mad as hell. All that work I did to try and save the company and they dismissed it.”

“They're wrong and your right.”

Cassie could hear a grin in his voice. “Yes, damn it.”

“Are you angrier about losing the argument or the job?”

She paused for a moment and chuckled. “You know, you really are a pain in the ass.”

“I've been told that more than once.”

“I bet.”

“So, what's the plan?” he asked.

“Plan? I've been unemployed for twenty-four hours. There's no plan. I'm plan-less.”

“Good. Come to Philly.”

“What?”

“Come to Philly. You can take some time to regroup and I can give you a behind the scenes tour of the museum.”

“You're really pushy.”

“I've been told that too. Say yes.”

Cassie smiled. She could stay in her townhouse and sulk or she could spend some time with a charming man. “Okay.”

“Okay? Great! I'll send you the details for the hotel I'm at. And before you say it, I'm not making any assumptions. The museum gave me a car for the duration. It will make getting around the city easier.”

“No assumptions?” she chuckled.

“No assumptions.”

“Fine. I'll text you when I make my reservation.”

“I'm looking forward to seeing you, Cassie.”

“I'm looking forward to seeing you too.” She disconnected the call and realized the truth of what she'd said.

Tom was reviewing the choices Susan had made to frame his prints. Each one was leaning up against the wall where they would hang. It had taken some time to decide on what order they should appear, but he thinks they had it done. Prudence had given him a prominent gallery for his showing. He'd never dreamed he could have reached this level of recognition. The opening for his showing was in three days. Cassie would be here for the opening. He checked his watch and realized he couldn't think about now. He had to focus on his class starting in thirty minutes.

"Susan, I think they can go ahead with the installation. I have to get ready for my class."

"Sure thing, Mr. Strong,"

"Tom, please," he said.

"Okay, Tom," she smiled.

Tom had gotten a variety of pictures from his students. He'd organized them into a slide show for the class.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for all your submissions and we are going to go through them today." He saw a few of the students looked uncomfortable. "Don't worry about showing your submission. You're displaying to your fellow students. You can all learn from each other."

Tom pulled up the first picture. It was of an older woman doing dishes, but looking back at the photographer with a big smile. "This was submitted by Mr. Simon. Why don't you tell us about this picture."

"It's just an old family picture, nothing professional."

"A picture doesn't have to be taken by a professional with an expensive camera to be a great picture. This woman makes me smile. Who is she?"

“She was my grandmother, Florence. This picture reminds me of who she was, hardworking but smiling. She was fun to be around.” The young man’s eyes filled. “I miss her.”

“That’s what makes it a great picture. It embodies the emotion of this woman and shares it with all of us. Well done, Mr. Simon.”

He continued through the slides, showing pictures of landscapes, children’s parties, and pets. The last picture was long known to Tom, and always affected him. “This next picture may be known to some of you.” He put up the picture and heard a few gasps. It was a picture of a young, wild-eyed girl, with a big bow in her hair. She’d been asked to draw a picture of her home. The blackboard was covered with circular scribbles. “Ms. Alexander, can you tell me why you submitted this picture?”

“It’s what got me interested in photography. I first saw it in a history class. I know it’s from World War II. It was like the whole war was in that little girl’s eyes.”

“I am very familiar with this picture. Her name was Tereska and she was asked to draw her home. Her home in Warsaw was bombed. She was injured by shrapnel which caused brain damage. She spent the rest of her life in asylums for mental patients. She died in 1978.” Tom zoomed in on Tereska’s face. “This is war.” He sighed and turned off his computer. “A plus, Ms. Alexander.” He took a sip of water and tried to calm his breathing. “Our next class is a field trip and no I’m not saying where. Bring your cameras and be ready to shoot.”

The students filed out but he noticed one person was sitting in the back of the class. Cassie. He practically jogged up the aisle. He took her by the hand and pulled her to her feet. “Your early.”

“The airline changed my flight.”

“I’m glad,” he said as he pulled her into a tight hug.

Cassie was surprised at the Tom's enthusiastic greeting. "Hello to you, too," she smiled.

"Have you had lunch? They have a pretty great cafeteria."

"I could eat."

"Great. Let me get my stuff." He went back to the podium and grabbed his jacket and computer. "Speaking of stuff, where's yours?" He led her out of the classroom and toward the elevator.

"At the hotel. I've already checked in. I had the option of an early commuter flight so I took it."

"I'm glad."

"You said that."

"So I did."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He found them a table with a view of the famous stairs. "You saw the slide show. I was really pleased with the student's submissions, but the last one..."

"The little girl. I've seen that picture before."

"It always affects me. Knowing what happened to her during the war, where she wound up after the war. It's just awful."

Cassie could see the pain on his face. She didn't know what to say, so she reached for his hand. He took her hand in his.

"I'm very glad you're here."

After lunch, Tom took her on the promised tour. They sat in front of a Monet, *Path on the Island of Saint Martin*. “You're awfully quiet.”

“I feel like I should be. Being around these is like being in church.”

“I understand,” he smiled.

“I want to walk down that path past the tree line. I want to see what's there.”

“Great art makes you feel. Love, pain, or in your case, curiosity.”

Cassie chuckled. “What does it make you feel?”

“The same, but also, inadequate.”

“What do you mean? Your work is beautiful.”

“My work is going to be displayed in the next room. I wouldn't be on a level with these masters if I lived five lifetimes.”

Cassie turned to him. “Tom, is the Van Gogh in the other room the same as this Monet?”

“What? No. But they're both great masters.”

“Yes, they are, even though they are unique unto themselves. Your work has value. It's uniquely, Tom Strong.”

Tom chuckled. “You're not saying I'm a great master.”

Cassie smiled and took his hand in hers. “Who knows? In one hundred years, maybe?”

Tom laughed out loud, then caught himself. One does not laugh in church. He lifted her hand to his lips and gave it a kiss. “That is very kind.”

“Are you going to let me take a tour of your exhibit?”

“Not now. It opens tomorrow. Canapés and champagne.”

“Oh my. So fancy,” she smiled.

“Actually it is. I don't think I mentioned it's formal. I'm so sorry.”

“Don't worry. This isn't my first rodeo. I won't embarrass you.”

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. “You never could.”

When they were done inside, they walked around the building. Tom fired off shots with his camera. He showed her a few of the shots. He never took pictures of the usual. Curves of the Corinthian columns as the sun started to set, a little girl playing the fountain as her mother tried to retrieve her. “These are great,” she smiled.

“Thanks.” Tom took a quick glance at his watch. “It's getting late. We should get back to the hotel. I'm sorry but I have some prep work for tomorrow's class. Our reservation is for seven o'clock. How about I pick you up at six thirty?”

“Sounds great.”

Tom knocked on her door and Cassie let him into her room. She was wearing a scoop neck black dress, that was tight around the waist and flared out just above her knee. “Wow,” he whispered. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you.”

“I wish I had my camera.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “It's not my Nikon but it will do.” He took her by the hand and led her out to the balcony. There was just enough light for him to fire off a few shots. He looked at the results and smiled.

She ran her hand down the lapel of his dark blue suit. “You look pretty wow yourself,” she smiled.

“Thanks,” he smiled.

Cassie took the phone from his hand and slipped it back into his pocket. “No working tonight.”

He gave her a soft kiss. “It's never work. I made reservations at “Le Jardin. Prudence says it's great.”

“Prudence?”

“Prudence Holiday, the art museum director. To be honest, she made the reservation for me. It's hard to get a table.”

“That was nice of her.” Cassie suppressed her irrational flash of jealousy.

Le Jardin was located in a refurbished hundred-year-old bank building. It was a beautiful space that had stayed true to its art deco design. They were seated next to an elaborate mosaic. “This is beautiful,” she said as she saw Tom looking around. “You're dying to take some shots.”

He smiled. “Guilty. But not tonight.”

“Go on,” she grinned.

Tom pulled his phone from his pocket and snapped quick shots of the mosaic, the elaborate coffered ceiling, and then one of her. He had such a relaxed smile as he took each shot. Cassie wondered if she'd ever been that happy with her job. He tucked the phone back in his jacket.

"Okay, no more. I have to admit it's a hazard for anyone in my life. My camera is an appendage of my body.

"Am I in your life?" she smiled.

"I hope we can figure that out."

The waiter came with the wine list and they agreed on a Malbec.

"Tell me about your class," she asked

Tom gave her a broad smile. "It's been great. I was very nervous at first but it seems to be going really well. The students are very engaged in the material. I'm having fun sharing whatever I know with them."

"I'm sure it's a great deal, considering you had a show at The Pennington Gallery."

Tom smiled. "Somebody's been googling."

"I couldn't resist. You're very talented. I particularly liked your landscapes."

"Thank you."

Cassie thought it was adorable that a mature man with a salt and pepper goatee would blush. The waiter brought their wine and took their orders. They lifted their glasses. "What should we drink to?"

"How about new friends?"

She touched his glass to his. "To new friends."

Tom still couldn't believe Cassie was here. There had been something about her when he met her in LAX. Even his camera couldn't capture what it was about her that fascinated him. He'd inserted himself in her life, telling her she was unhappy with her job. Now she was unemployed. He hoped it wasn't because of him.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“With the meeting?”

“Yes.”

“I showed them a plan to bring on an excellent jeweler who could design a beautiful, mid-priced line for us. She designed this.” She held out her wrist for Tom to examine the bracelet she was wearing. It was delicate gold chains woven with fresh water pearls.

“That's beautiful.”

“I thought so too. Emma's work is lovely and I had to stop myself from buying too many pieces for myself.” She sighed and took another sip of her wine. “The CEO turned me down flat.”

“That seems foolish.”

“I thought so too, but I knew he would. I was prepared, at least I thought I was. I'd prepared a report that showed how the company profits had declined every year since the CEO took over.”

“I bet he didn't like that.”

“You could say that. Again, I thought I had my bases covered. I sent a copy of the report to the last family member and shareholder of Luxe. She agreed with me. She'd shown the report to the rest of the board and they agreed with me. He was killing the company.”

“Was?”

“They canned him.”

“I don't understand. Why did it cost you your job?”

“Because the rest of the board didn't like me doing an end run around the chain of command. They gave me a generous severance and showed me the door.”

“That doesn't make any sense.”

“I didn't think so either, but here I am, unemployed and wondering what's next.”

Tom reached for her hand. “Yes, you're here. Why?”

Cassie pulled her hand back. Now it was her turn to blush. “Well, when we met...I got the impression...the pictures.” She tried to compose herself. “You wanted to know how I made out with the meeting. I saw an ad for your showing...”

He took her hand back into his. “Cassie, I'm glad you're here. Delighted, in fact,” he said with a wink.

Cassie chuckled and blushed a flame red.

“But I still want to know why. Why did you decide to come here.”

“When we met in the airport, something felt, well, different. I saw the ad for your showing and I thought ‘Why not?’ That's when I called.”

“I'm very glad you did. Honestly, I've thought a lot about you since we met. Those few minutes at the airport gate felt different. I couldn't see anyone else. That's why I needed pictures of you.”

“Needed?” she smiled.

“I knew if I didn't take your picture, I'd always regret it.”

Cassie smiled and lifted her glass. “Here's to no regrets.”

Tom held Cassie's hand as they walked down the hall to her room. "Tomorrow, we have a bus to Independence Hall. I can pick you up at nine, if that works for you. We leave for the hall at ten." He looked down at her high heels. "Those won't work on cobblestones."

"Don't worry. I came prepared."

"Of course you did," he smiled.

"Thank you for a lovely evening." Cassie leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. He ran his hand up her arm and kissed her again. He might have continued the kiss if he hadn't heard the elevator and a hotel guest walked by them.

"I see you tomorrow," said Cassie as she gave him another quick kiss and closed the door behind her.

Tom couldn't stop smiling as he pressed the elevator button. There was something about Cassie. Something he couldn't yet describe. All he knew was he had a lot more to learn.

Tom was more nervous than usual for his class because Cassie had taken a seat in the back of the room. “Okay, everyone, we will meet in the parking lot in ten minutes. The museum has provided us with transportation. What I want you to remember is to take shots of what interests you, not what you think I want to see.”

“Are you going to tell us where we're going?”

“Not yet. I don't want you go into this with any preconceived notions.”

A few minutes later, Tom took a seat next to Cassie. “Well, here goes nothing,” he whispered.

She covered his hand with hers. “Don't worry. I'm sure it's going to go well.”

“How are you so sure?”

“It has so far, hasn't it?”

“Yeah.”

“So there's nothing to say it won't continue.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I'm really glad you're here.”

The driver pulled into the assigned lot for tourist busses. Tom stood and faced his students. “Welcome to the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall park.” He could see some of the students roll their eyes. “You've probably all been here at some point. I want you to walk the grounds like it's the first time. Watch how others are taking it in. Let yourself go. Then meet back here at one. I've made reservations at Ralph's.” Some of the students nodded. Others looked concerned. Ralph's was probably the most famous Italian restaurant in the city. It wasn't cheap. “And lunch is on me.” A collective cheer went up from the students.

The students filed out of the bus and spread out among the tourists. Tom grabbed his camera bag and reached for Cassie's hand. “Are you ready to play tourist?”

“Actually, I've never been here, so yes.”

“It's pretty amazing. Whenever I'm here I always wonder what the people who were here in the 1700's would think about all these people.”

“I imagine they would think we were all quite strange.” She touched her sleeveless top. “And a shockingly lack of dress.”

“I think you look lovely.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “How many times have you been here?”

“I went to Drexel before law school. I used to come down here with my camera and just wander. I think this is where I fell in love with photography. I would imagine the people who were walking these streets three hundred years ago.”

“But you still went to law school.”

“Yeah. It had been my direction for my entire academic career. My parents had invested a lot of money in my education. I didn't consider changing my course an option.” Tom took a few shots as they walked toward the Liberty Bell.

“Where did you go to law school?”

He turned his head toward the crowd and mumbled something.

“Excuse me?”

He faced her with a small smile. “Harvard.”

“Are you embarrassed?”

“No, I just don't make a deal about it.”

“It's very nice of you to take twenty-five people to lunch. That has to be pretty pricy.”

He leaned close and gave her a crooked smile. “I was a very good lawyer.”

Cassie watched as the boisterous students filed into the upper level of the restaurant. They never stopped talking as they took seats at the long tables.

“I take it things went well,” said Tom.

“It was just like you said. Let go of your preconceived ideas and well... I got some great shots.”

“Great. I'm looking forward to seeing them. Pick your five best and send them to me. We'll discuss them at our next class.” Tom noticed one girl looked down at the screen of her camera. “Is there a problem, Ms. Ramsey?”

“I'm looking at my favorite shot, but I'm afraid it won't meet your criteria.”

“Show me,” he said.

The girl came around the table and handed Tom her camera. He looked at it and nodded. He leaned over so Cassie could see it. It was a photo of a photo. Cassie could see why the student found it fascinating. It was taken in the late 1800s. Instead of the typical posed shot, it looked like a modern-day candid. The man was outside and looking directly into the camera.

“Tell me why this photo fascinates you. There was a large display of all the men who belonged to a small business man's organization. All the other photos looked the same, posed and self-important. This one looked like a man who'd worked his way up.” She looked at the picture and smiled. “He looks like someone I would see out on the street, not two hundred years ago.”

Tom smiled. “You understood the assignment. You looked at your surroundings in a new way.” Cassie could see the relief in the girl's face. “Maybe you should look into him further. You have a name at the bottom of the picture.”

She smiled. “I will.” She looked at Cassie and smiled. “Mr. Strong, you've never introduced your girlfriend.”

Before Tom could say anything, she extended her hand. "Cassie Parker. It's very nice to meet you."

After the girl returned to her seat, Tom leaned over to Cassie and whispered, "My girlfriend?"

"I thought it sounded better than I'm the woman he picked up at LAX."

"So do I," he smiled and gave her a wink.

Tom opened a bottle of wine and poured two glasses. Cassie was sitting on the bed and kicked off her shoes.

"That was quite the day," she said as she took a deep sip.

"Yes, it was," said Tom

"The students really seemed to enjoy the day."

"The cannoli helped."

"It wasn't that and you know it."

"They did seem to get the point I've been trying to make. This class wasn't about F-stops or developing prints. It was about letting your eyes see things in a new way."

"I'm really happy for you. Speaking of cannoli, where's mine?" she asked.

Tom grabbed two plates from the kitchenette and opened the bakery box. He placed a cannoli on each plate.

Cassie reached out her hands. "Ooo. Gimme." She looked at the plate. "A fork?"

"Oh, no no," he said. "This is how you eat a cannoli." He picked it up and took a bite. A few shell crumbs hit the plate. "It's a Philly thing."

They were cleaning up the desert dishes when Cassie's phone rang. "Hello?"

A woman with an Italian accent answered. "Hello, Cassie. It's Emma Moretti."

"Emma, how are you?"

"Distressed."

"What's happened?"

"That's what I want to ask you. I got a call from a Fred Reynolds at Luxe. He said he was in charge of my account and wanted to finalize the details. I never signed. We were waiting to see what your board said. When I said I wanted to work with you, they said you quit. What's going on?"

Cassie held the phone to her chest and whispered "those bastards". "Emma, I'm sorry I didn't call you. The meeting didn't go as planned The CEO didn't see our vision. I tried to convince him and the board. They didn't like...my methods. I didn't quit."

"They fired you?"

“Yes.” Cassie smiled at the string of Italian invectives. “Emma, Emma, it's okay. I'm okay. I'm just so sorry we won't be working together. But I am sure that your line will do well with Luxe.

“Diavolo no,” said Emma. “I won't work with that arrogant man. He talked to me like I was an idiot. I've been doing this work since I was teenager.”

“I'm so sorry, Emma. I'm sure any company would love to have you.”

“No, I've had offers before. You see my vision. I only want to work with you.”

“Emma, I don't have a company to back me.”

“We can do this on our own. I know my husband will back me for the startup costs.”

Cassie looked wide eyed at Tom and shook her head. “Emma, let me think about that and I'll call you back. And I promise to call you soon.”

“What was all that about?” he asked.

“The jeweler I was trying to sign found out I was fired. She was not pleased.”

“I heard her. So what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean? I have no company backing. I'll just wait until she calms down before I call her again.”

“Do you really need it?”

“To call her? Of course.”

“No, the company. Do you really need the company?”

“You have to sell the product to picky buyers, make sure the manufacturer is on schedule. Then there's the marketing. It's a huge job.”

“One you've been doing for years. Don't tell me you don't have a phone filled with contacts.”

“I do. But there's also the matter of the logistics, contracts, all the legal mumbo jumbo.”

“Well, I am well versed in mumbo and jumbo.”

“Excuse me?”

“Have I mentioned I'm an excellent lawyer?” he asked with a sly grin.

“Once or twice. But you were a lawyer.”

“Still licensed in California. I couldn't see wasting all money on my education only to let my license lapse.”

“It would be a lot of work, a lot of traveling.”

“You're smiling.”

“What? I am?” Cassie look into the mirror and saw her smile and a bright red blush. “She did say her husband would back the start up costs.”

“Would the husband have the capital?”

“Oh yeah. I met him during my trip. His name is Gallo. His grandmother left him very well off. His mother owns Rimark computers.”

Tom sat down next to her on the bed. “Okay, the funding is there. You know what needs to be done. The only question is do you want to do it?”

“Wow. I'll have to talk to Emma and her husband, Jonathan.” Cassie stopped and shook her head. “No. You're not practicing anymore. You're a very popular and very busy photographer. “

He took her hand. “Cassie, I could make the time for you.”

“Tom, that's very kind of you.”

“Just think about it for now. But I think you should call her back. I thought she was going to jump through the phone.”

“You're right.” She picked up her phone and hit recall button. “Hello Emma?”

“Yes, Cassie. Have you any ideas on how we can fix this?”

“I may have. I need to do some research.”

“I've done well with Michela Turner and you know she supports me having my own line. My husband will back us as well. Tell her Jonathan.”

Cassie heard the phone on speaker.

“Hi, Cassie. Emma filled me in. I can back startup costs and whatever I can't I know my parents will, in fact, they may insist. Emma is a genius designer. I want this for her as much as she wants it.”

Emma took the phone off speaker. “Cassie, think about what I said. I know we can make this work. We have everything we need, except a lawyer. We'll need someone to write contracts. My husband is a defense attorney,

Cassie looked at Tom and smiled. “Turns out I know a guy.”

Tom was surprised he was sad this was his last class. This experience had been so much more than he had anticipated. He waited for his students to take their seats. He smiled at Cassie in the back row. "Hello everyone. I want to thank you all for your time and attention in this class. You've all surprised me at your outlooks on your city. I bet you've surprised yourself too. Thank you for making this class a wonderful experience. I'm sure you're all waiting for your final grade." He pulled a stack of manila envelopes out of his briefcase and began to passed them out. The students opened their envelopes and were surprised to find one of their own pictures.

"Mr. Strong, what's up with picture?"

"Each of you will have one of your photographs displayed at tonight's showing. The photos will be displayed and available for purchase by the members. Half the proceeds will go to the museum, since they will incur the cost of printing and framing. The other half will go to you. You'll also find tickets so you can see them yourself." A surprised murmur moved through the crowd. "If any of you chose not to participate in the showing, let me know." No one came forward. "Okay then, let's dismiss early so we can all get into our Sunday best. Thank you again for making this class a wonderful experience for me and for teaching me where to get the best cheesesteak."

"Pat's," yelled on student

"Geno's," yelled another.

"The debate rages on," he chuckled. "I look forward to seeing you all tonight."

Tom gathered his things and waited for the rook to clear before he walked up to where Cassie was sitting. "That's done."

"You're sorry it's over."

"Yes. It was a lot more fun than I expected."

"Even the grading part?"

"Most everyone did very well. Except for those two women who sat up front. They spent more time looking at their phones than they did me or the lessons."

“Not true.”

“Excuse me.”

“They may not have paid attention to the lesson but you were definitely on their radar. I had a perfect vantage point.”

“Huh. I never noticed.”

Cassie smiled and kissed his cheek. “I know.” Tom smiled and took her hand.

Tom adjusted his bow tie and smoothed his lapel. It had been a few years since he'd worn his tux. It had been a long time since the obligatory events for clients. Now, important people would be coming to see his work. At least he hoped they would.

The only thing that took the edge off his nerves was knowing he would have Cassie on his arm. He knocked on her door and he learned the definition of breathless. Cassie stood before him in a long V neck black gown. Soft blonde curls framed her face. Around her neck was a delicate V shaped weave of gold threads shaped like leaves, wrapped around light green stones. On each wrist were matching cuffs. "Wow," he whispered and kissed her cheek. "You look amazing."

She smiled. "Thank you."

He pointed to the necklace. "Is this from the designer, Emma?"

"Yes. She said her mother-in-law like it so much that her father-in-law had her make a set with emeralds. It's called the Irish Witch collection. I have no idea why." She picked up her purse. "Shall we?"

He took her hand as they walked to the elevator. "She's going to make you rich."

"I haven't said I'd go forward with it."

"You will," he smiled. "You're too smart not to."

Tom stood frozen, looking at a large banner hanging in the atrium displaying one of his photos with just his last name underneath. There were posters on either side of the doors with his own picture next to "The Works of Tom Strong". He became aware of Cassie tugging on his arm.

"Tom, are you okay?" she whispered.

"I think I just entered an alternate universe."

"No, this is real. You deserve it."

He heard people yelling his name. He saw photographers waving him over to them.

"Come on, they want your picture."

Tom grabbed Cassie's hand before she could protest. He tried to not look like a total doofus as he smiled for the press.

"Who's your date, Tom?" shouted a photographer. Tom tugged on her hand and nodded, indicating she should speak for herself.

"Cassie Parker," she answered.

"That's beautiful jewelry," said another photographer.

"It's by Emma Moretti."

They waved to the photographers and walked into the museum. Tom was amazed at the crowd. A petite woman with long dark hair made her way toward them. "Tom, it's a great turnout."

"So I see. I'm surprised."

"Don't be. Your work is wonderful." She turned to Cassie. "Hello, I'm Prudence Holiday."

"I'm so sorry Prudence. This is Cassie Parker. Cassie, Prudence is the museum director."

"It's very nice to meet you Ms. Holiday."

"Tom, you need to mingle. You're a hit." Prudence smiled and rubbed her hands together. "Oh, I do love being right."

Tom held on to Cassie's hand for dear life. He'd never expected anything like this. He'd had showings before, but nothing on this scale. The congratulations of guests were great but nothing beat the look on Cassie's face. She was looking at his favorite picture of the coast of Carmel.

"Tom, these are wonderful. It's so beautiful, it makes me want to go there."

He thought, "Me too, with you." Tom hadn't pushed for anything with Cassie passed a few delicious kisses. She'd had a lot of upheaval in her life in the past few days. All he said was "Thank you."

They toured the rest of his photos, accepting congratulations as they went. His landscapes were very popular but it was his portraits that garnered the most attention. A little girl holding her father's hand, looking over her shoulder and smiling at the camera. A police officer in full body armor, sweating under the bright sun. The most compelling was the portrait of a thirty something woman with long black hair, staring directly into the lens. She was standing in the park, hands on her hips. She wore no makeup. Somehow you could see the woman's strength, pain and resilience all in one photo.

They walked into the small room next to the main room and saw an assembly of Tom's students. Above their pictures hung a banner reading "Photography in the Real World : The Students of Tom Strong."

One excited student ran up to him. "Mr. Strong, look at this. He point to a several blue dots next to his photograph of Independence Hall. "I've sold three prints. Can you believe it?"

"I can, Terry. It's a great shot."

Tom looked around and saw several of the students had blue dots on their name plates. He couldn't have been prouder if they had been his own sales.

"Are you selling any of your prints?" asked Cassie.

"I donated my new shots of the museum."

"What's the cat post canary grin?"

"Prudence said they're going to use them on their next brochure."

She gave him a discreet kiss. "Congratulations."

Cassie smiled as Tom talked about the showing. It had been a great night. Tom was the star of the evening. She thought he looked like a movie star in his perfectly tailored tux. Of course, his blue eyes to die for didn't hurt.

Always the perfect gentleman, he opened her hotel room door for her, then handed her back the key card. "Would you like to come in for a coffee? I have decaf."

"That'd be great. I'm wired enough from tonight. I'll be up all night."

Cassie put a pod in the machine and set a mug in place. She made a second mug for herself. She lifted her mug to his. "Congratulations on your great success tonight."

"Thank you. And thank you for being there with me." Tom took a sip of his coffee and set it down. He took Cassie's from her hand and set it next to his. He slipped his hands around her waist. "Have I told you how beautiful you are?"

"Couture does that for a girl," she smiled.

"The dress is nice too," he said before he gave her a soft kiss. "Cassie, I...said no assumptions and I meant it."

"Tom, you've been nothing but a perfect gentleman, attentive, respectful, a mother's dream date."

He chuckled.

"But I think it's time you help me out of this very expensive dress." She smiled and pulled off the cuffs around her wrists. She turned around so Tom could help her with the necklace.

"I heard quite a few women comment on your jewelry." He unzipped her dress. She turned and let it fall to the ground.

"Do you really want to talk business now?" she smiled.

"Hell no." Cassie squealed and laughed as he picked her up and set her on the bed. His tux joined her dress on the floor.

Tom held Cassie close. It had been a hell of a night. First the showing and then Cassie. She had been a revelation. This elegant, cultured woman was part fireworks. He kissed the top of her head and smiled.

“You're not asleep,” she murmured.

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. He saw a twinkle in her half closed eyes. “Neither are you.” he laughed as he flipped her on her back. He gave her a passionate kiss before working his way down her body. “So beautiful,” he murmured.

“Tom?”

“What are we doing?”

He glanced up from a particularly delicious part of her. “If you have to ask, then I'm doing it wrong.”

“This whole thing is crazy.”

“You want to talk...now?”

“I think I do,” she whispered

He placed a loud kiss on her thigh.

“What are you doing?” she laughed.

“Marking my place.” He pulled himself up to her and pulled her close. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Tom, I haven't done this in a very long time.”

“Excuse me?”

“Not this, I mean this,” she said pointing between them. “This feels different.”

“I know what you mean. I've thought so from the first moment in LAX but I didn't want to scare you.”

"I'm not scared and that's scary. Am making any sense?"

"Not really."

"I'm ready to jump into this, whatever this is, head first. That's not something I do. I think I'm nuts."

"You're not nuts. I think we've lucked into meeting the right person at the right time and I think the crazy thing would not be seeing where this takes us."

"You really think so?"

"I really do. Now if you'll forgive me, I don't want to lose my place."

Cassie sat on the balcony on Tom's condo. He had a much better view. Her view was of a parking lot. His was of boats bobbing up and down in the harbor. Tom set out a plate of croissants. "Ah, perfect," she said as she took a bite. "Are you ready for our meeting? Emma is fiery but she's also sharp as a tack and her husband is an attorney"

He took a sip of his coffee. "Remember Mumbo jumbo expert?"

"Ah, yes," she said as she raided her mug in salute. She was sure Tom had all the documents to start her new company, Emma Morretti, LTD. Emma had agreed to start small, with Cassie making contact with a few reliable contacts. Then, the jewelry trade show in Vegas in June. Marina Sokolov had already agreed to model.

Her phone rang and Cassie smiled. "This is going to be good." She hit the button. "Hello Fred."

"Cassie, sweetheart, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Fred, and I'm not your sweetheart" She looked at Tom and mouthed "just yours."

"Of course, of course. You have to know I had nothing to do with your hasty departure from Luxe."

"What do you want, Fred?"

"I'd like you to come back. The Luxe I see for the future needs your insight."

Cassie laughed. "Translation: You want to work with Emma Moretti but she won't touch you."

"You did recruit her on Luxe's dime."

"If you had bothered to read any of the paperwork I brought back, it all said that I would be her liaison with the company. No me, no deal."

"Emma is very adamant about that so we'd like you to return. Your office is waiting for. Although I am sorry to say your assistant Helen packed her bags shortly after you did."

“She is the best and I didn't want to start my new company without her. She's excited to be working in California.”

“What?!”

“I tell you what, Fred. Come see us at the convention in June. Emma Moretti LTD.”

“You can't do this!” Fred screamed so loud Tom could hear him.

She shot Tom a smile. “My excellent lawyer has assured me that I can, so I did. Good bye, Fred.”

Cassie took another sip of her coffee. “That was fun. You know you were right.”

“About fun?”

“In the airport. I hated my job. Now I get to do the parts of the job I loved the way I loved doing it.” She set down her mug. “You know this thing you have about always being right is a pain in the ass.”

Tom took another sip of his coffee and smiled an adorable crooked smile. “But I'm worth it.” His smile turned half panicked. “Right?”

Cassie stood and set his mug on the small table. She sat down in his lap and gave him a tender kiss. “Right.”