

THE IMPORTANT DECISIONS

By Hannah E. Moore

SCENE I

(The scene takes place in a school classroom. Everything is clean and orderly, the students in uniform. The students look just as prestigious as the classroom, sitting up straight and working silently beneath the eyes of their straight-laced teacher, who is currently writing directions across the blackboard. Corinne sits in the back corner, hunched uniquely in her seat and looking outcast among the students sitting around her. Her uniform seems just a bit more disorderly, her clothes a little wrinkled, a small stain on one sock, her black shoes scuffed. She doesn't seem to be concentrating on her work, in contrast to the other students in the room enraptured by their current assignment. Her ponytailed hair seems ratty and perhaps unbrushed. She's occasionally doodling [pen in her right hand], and sometimes staring off into space.

Finishing his scribbles with a flourish, the teacher sets down his chalk and after glancing over the students, exits the classroom by moving off-stage. The moment she has left the room, the students relax their postures, stop working, and turn to chat with each other. Corinne is the only one who doesn't seem to alter herself in any way.)

TOMMY

(Looks at Corinne, then turns to Joe and Matthew)

Okay, so what's her deal? She used to be *hot*.

MATTHEW

Who?

TOMMY

(nods towards Corinne to indicate her)

Her- Chelsea something.

JOE

Corinne Thomas.

TOMMY

What?

JOE

Her name is Corinne. Not Chelsea.

TOMMY

Whatever. What's her deal now?

JOE

I don't know- she's just not social anymore.

TOMMY

Okay, I get *that*. But why?

MATTHEW

Wait— I remember her! She used to be a cheerleader, right? She was hot, Tommy's right. What happened with that?

JOE

You guys are so...

TOMMY

Prioritized?

MATTHEW

Realistic?

JOE

Try shallow.

MATTHEW

Didn't her mom, like, get cancer or an ulcer or something?

TOMMY

I thought her mom ran off with that old dude- the writer or actor or whatever.

MATTHEW

Or was that her sister?

TOMMY

Her sister must be hot then. On a scale of one to ten, how hot do you think her sister is?

MATTHEW

Didn't you date her, Joe?

JOE

What? Where'd you get that?

MATTHEW

I don't know.

JOE

No- we're friends... she's practically my little sister. She and Dustin had a thing for a while, though.

TOMMY

But you know her then?

JOE

Yeah, kind of.

TOMMY

So- is her sister hot?

JOE

Okay, seriously, Tommy. Just chill out.

TOMMY

I'm just curious.

JOE

Why does it even matter?

TOMMY

Because prom is coming up in a month or two. There's no way in Hell I'm taking Elle. I dumped her to get rid of her, not to get stuck going to prom with her as a last resort.

JOE

Okay, I get that. But what's that have to do with Corinne?

TOMMY

Well, if her sister's hot, I've got myself a date. I'm sure you could arrange for me and her sister to meet or whatever so I can make sure we'll look good together.

JOE

You do realize that she doesn't have a sister.

TOMMY

Wait, so her sister's the one who died?

JOE

No! Good, God. She never had a sister.

MATTHEW

So who's Tommy going to take to prom then?

TOMMY

(looking back at Corinne and shrugging)

Well, you know, she's not *that* bad herself. I mean, she's still got the potential to look like she used to, right? It would be like that one movie... with that chick? Whatsername.

She was... all creative or something and he made a bet with his friends about making her Prom Queen. Elle made me watch it with her once- it was some chick flick or another- I get them all confused.

MATTHEW

I know which one you're talking about! 'She's All That'.

(TOMMY and JOE give MATTHEW a funny look)

What? That girl was hot!

JOE

(shaking his head hopelessly)

I swear, sometimes I wonder about you two...

TOMMY

Whatever. Spill, Joe.

JOE

Spill what?

MATTHEW

Her story! If Tommy's going to take her to prom, he's got to know she's not a complete psychopath first.

TOMMY

(nodding head in agreement)

Exactly.

JOE

I don't know what's really going on with her anymore.

TOMMY

Well, you've at least got to know why she threw in her pom-poms.

JOE

Best guess is that it had to do with her mom. She told me that she was just tired of cheering- but she'd spent most of her life doing it, and I know she loved it. She quit a few months after all the dramatics with her mom- I doubt that that was just a coincidence. It fits together a little too well to not be related.

MATTHEW

What happened with her mom?

JOE

She just ran off one day—with a partner at Cori's dad's law firm. They split for Florida, When the guy's wife found out— well, she wasn't exactly thrilled, you know? She found

them at a hotel and introduced Mrs. Thomas to the guy's gun. Then she told the guy that if he loved Cori's mom so much, maybe he should spend the rest of eternity in Hell with her.

TOMMY

Wow. Hardcore stuff.

JOE

Yeah. The woman got convicted on two counts of Manslaughter and got a life sentence.

MATTHEW

Well, at least it wasn't *her* mom that was completely crazy- so she's probably not either.

JOE

Honestly, guys, just leave her alone. She doesn't need to put up with you two and your antics.

TOMMY

What antics?! I just want to take her to prom! I happen to think that it would be good for her to get out and re-socialize. And what Junior wouldn't want to go to Senior prom? Especially with the starting marking back of the soccer team?

JOE

I'm serious, Tommy. Just leave her alone.

TOMMY

Whatever. Just chill out.

MATTHEW

You make it sound like you want to ask her- is there something you want to tell us and Sabina?

JOE

Very funny, Matthew. You guys are idiots- she's practically my little sister, okay? That's almost sick to even suggest 'us'.

(The bell rings, and the students gather up their things quickly, chatting and laughing noisily as they race out into the hallway and to their lockers and next classes. Cori is slowly getting her things together as the others race each other out. Joe notices and also slows his pace, telling Matt and Tommy to go ahead. He'll meet up with them later. Once they are the only two people left in the room, Joe grabs the last of his stuff and makes his way over to Corinne, who is just about to leave.)

JOE

Hey, Cori.

CORINNE

(Looking slightly surprised, but otherwise unfazed)

Hey, Joe.

JOE

What's up?

CORINNE

Nothing—you?

JOE

Same.

(Pause.)

So—that research paper. It's ridiculous, isn't it?

CORINNE

Yeah. 10 pages. I got French Architecture. You?

JOE

Chinese mythology. I regret taking AP World History now. Granted, yours sounds much more boring than mine. At least I have awesome stories.

CORINNE

(shrugging.)

Oh well. I probably won't do much of it, if any at all.

JOE

Really? Why not?

CORINNE

Just, you know. Busy.

JOE

(Trying to find out what she's so busy with.)

Oh? Are you getting back into cheerleading again?

CORINNE

No.

JOE

Got a new boyfriend?

CORINNE

Definite no. It's just... lots of little things and all.

JOE

(Settling for nothing, and not wanting to pressure her.)

Okay.

(Pause.)

How's your dad doing?

CORINNE

He's fine.

JOE

Do you guys still come into the Lotus? I never see you anymore when I'm working, or in the reservations book.

CORINNE

We've mostly just been ordering in.

(brief pause)

JOE

Cori... is it really that bad?

CORINNE

Is what that bad? The food at the Lotus?

JOE

No; getting over your mom. Or, not *over* it, but passed it. I mean, I know you'll never forget her—she was practically my mom too, and I know I won't ever forget her- but it's been what, now? A year? A year and a half? You were doing okay for a while there, after she left, and then it wasn't long before it started going downhill again, and this time you got even worse then when she first left.

CORINNE

Things just changed.

(pause)

JOE

That's it? Is that really all you're going to tell me?

CORINNE

There's nothing else to it, Joe.

JOE

So, you're telling me that just because 'things changed', you've abandoned all your friends, decided not to have ANY, and refuse to wear anything but pants and long sleeves, even when it's nearly 100 degrees outside? That's not you at all.

CORINNE

What's that supposed to mean?

JOE

You were the girl who was always the first to befriend the new kid. The one that loved going out with her friends, was talkative, popular, and never without something to do. Summer was your favorite season simply because you loved lounging around in shorts and tank tops. You used to wear an outfit, and then the next day, everyone else would be imitating it. Now you're wearing the most generic and nonspecific things you can get your hands on. You don't talk to anyone at all, except me, occasionally, when I hunt you down to make sure you're doing okay.

CORINNE

I'm just not into any of that anymore.

JOE

Okay, fine. I give up. I just wish you'd tell me what was going on. I can't help you if I don't know what the problem is. You're like a little sister to me, Corinne, and I hate seeing you like this. I know you hate being like this too. Just tell me what's going on so I can help.

CORINNE

Nothing's going on, Joe- my priorities have shifted, okay? I swear, I'm fine. There's nothing for you to help me with.

JOE

Your priorities have changed to ignoring all your old friends and flunking out of Academy? That's rich. Real rich.

(pause)

I don't understand what you're so afraid of.

CORINNE

(insistent)

I'm not afraid of anything.

(pause while Joe exits)

I'm absolutely terrified.

(Lights off. END SCENE.)

SCENE II

(Just outside their World History classroom, Corinne is standing in front of an open locker. She's pulling a few books out of her backpack and putting them into the locker, using only her left hand. Her right hand isn't doing much but doesn't look all too

obviously suspicious either. Her right forearm is bandaged beneath the sleeve of her long-sleeved blouse. Her hair is once again pulled into a ponytail, and bangs fall into her face.

It's early. The hallways are silent and also empty, another sign that school hasn't started yet. After a few moments, light footsteps are heard, and then Joe appears from around the corner of the lockers. He walks up to her with a smile on his face, his backpack over one shoulder, and a gift bag in one hand.)

JOE

Normally the birthday girl looks a whole lot happier.

CORINNE

Joe! What are you doing here so early?

JOE

(the last part is in good-natured humor.)

I was going to go in and talk to Coach Walker about the Wellington game, but he's not here yet. Plus, I was going to stick this in your locker before you got here. Apparently, my plans have been foiled.

(JOE hands CORINNE the gift bag, a present for her birthday.)

CORINNE

(Looking at the gift bag and unable to keep herself from smiling at the fact that he'd remembered and gotten her a present.)

What is it?

JOE

Well, if I'm not mistaken, it is customary for one to open a present in order to discover its contents.

CORINNE

You shouldn't have gotten me anything.

JOE

Of course I should have! That's what big brothers do. Besides, I wanted to.

(He ruffles her hair gently)

How's it feel being 17?

CORINNE

Not much different from being 16.

JOE

(motioning towards the present)

Are you going to open it?

CORINNE

(Playfully)

Are you going to throw a fit if I don't?

JOE

Probably.

CORINNE

I guess I'll open it then.

(CORINNE hangs the handles of the bag loosely over her right wrist, rather than grasping the handles in her hand.)

JOE

(noticing she's favoring her left arm over her right.)

What happened?

CORINNE

Hmm?

JOE

With your arm.

CORINNE

I'm lost... who said something's wrong with my arm?

JOE

No one. But it just seems like you're using your left arm a lot, especially considering you're right handed.

CORINNE

(avoiding the question, but trying to act casual and amused.)

Have you been watching reruns of CSI again? You're going all 'investigative reporter' on me.

JOE

You're avoiding the question.

CORINNE

Nothing's wrong with it—I fell and scraped my elbow. It's sore.

JOE

(concerned, and knowing that there's more to it.)

Did you put antibiotics on it?

CORINNE

Joe, calm down. It's not that big of a deal.

JOE

Here, let me see it; if it's hurting you that much, you might want to see a doctor about it. Make sure it's not infected...

(he gently grabs CORINNE's right hand, but she flinches away.)

CORINNE

Look, Joe, I've gotta split... but I'll open this later and I'll see you in World, okay?

(JOE reaches out and grabs her hand, more firmly this time, pulling her back towards him. She wriggles slightly, but he holds on. JOE pushes her sleeve up to her elbow and sees the entire forearm is covered in a bandage. A few small spots have bled through.)

JOE

That looks like more than nothing, Cori.

CORINNE

(finally pulling her arm back and pushing her sleeve once more over the bandage, looking uncomfortable. She takes a step back, trying to explain but not wanting to.)

Joe...

JOE

Corinne Marie Thomas: stop right there. I'm not an idiot, and you're a terrible liar. So, stop lying to me and tell me what's really going on.

CORINNE

(Looking upset and almost tearful)

I can't, Joe. I can't tell you- you don't understand. You wouldn't.

(A few people have begun snailing their way into the building and through the hallways. CORINNE looks around, hoping no one's heard or seen anything. Joe grabs her left arm and pulls her carefully into their World History classroom, shutting the door behind them to ensure their privacy and solitude. He drops his backpack on the floor near the door. She slides hers into an empty seat.)

JOE

Do you really think I'm just going to sit idly by and let you get hurt? If that's what you think... well, if that's what you think then you really don't know me well at all.

CORINNE

You don't have much of a choice. You can't always be the hero, always the knight in shining armor. There are some things that people just have to deal with on their own.

JOE

At least tell me who it is, then.

CORINNE

I don't know what you're talking about...

JOE

I'm not blind, either. I've seen some of the bruises, now your arm. I've seen you hiding them, and now you're hiding something even worse. You've been hiding something for a long time. I just can't believe it took me this long to figure it out. I mean, I had suspicions, but I never really thought you'd stick around this long if someone was really doing this to you.

CORINNE

(Suspecting he means abuse, but not completely positive as to what he's talking about.)
Do what to me? What suspicions?

JOE

Who's abusing you, Cori?

CORINNE

What? No one... that's... that's ridiculous. Insane. Honestly, you watch too much TV...

JOE

It's your Dad, isn't it? You don't talk to anyone else enough for it to be them, and surely your dad would have done something about someone beating you up all the time. Unless, of course, he was the one doing it. If he wasn't involved, he would have noticed. Would have done something

CORINNE

(trying to make excuses now, obviously fumbling for an excuse)
NO! It's not like that at all! The bruises... my arm... it was all an accident. None of this was my Dad's fault.

JOE

So tell me how it all happened. Enlighten me. Your black eye last month, now your arm. It seems like you've been in an awful lot of 'accidents', Cori. In fact, you've probably been in more 'accidents' than a crash dummy.

CORINNE

It's really not like that!

JOE

You said it was all an 'accident'.

CORINNE

You're trying to twist my words now, Joe!

JOE

I'm trying to understand!

CORINNE

Don't. You don't even need to worry about it. I'm fine!

JOE

Cori. You realize it's not going to get better unless you do something. Unless you tell someone. So tell someone. Tell me.

CORINNE

No. No... I can't.

JOE

Why not? Because then he'd stop? Because then you'd actually be able to get back to enjoying life rather than spending every minute scared? You don't have anything to lose. You can't love it, Cori. Just—

CORINNE

What? Just admit that I hate it? Fine, Joe. Fine. I dread going home. I dread him coming home. I hate not being able to do anything anymore, not even homework. I hate crying myself to sleep every night because I never know if it's really over for the night or if he just wants me to think it is before he comes back in to hit me again. I hate spending every second trying to convince myself that it won't ever happen again, that this was the last time, even though I know it's not. I hate how I can't find anything to be happy about. How no matter what I do, it's never good enough for him. I hate how he never tells me he loves me anymore, how he never gives me hugs like he used to. I hate not having my mom there when I have a problem. I hate not having chocolate chip pancakes on Saturday mornings. I hate how empty the house is without her, and how cold it is now that no one is ever over, because we *can't have* anyone over. I hate having a secret like this. I hate how the only times he even speaks to me is to tell me how useless I am, how horrible I am, how it's all my fault. I just hate it. And I even hate hating it.

JOE

Cori... *(he grabs her and hugs her)* look, everything's going to be okay now. You don't have to hate any of it anymore, because I'm going to make sure it stops. I'm going to make sure he never hurts you again. We'll call the cops, CPS, whoever it takes, and we'll get you far away from him. You don't have to be scared of him anymore. You don't have to be scared.

CORINNE

(pulling away and shaking her head no)

We can't tell anyone. You have to promise- promise me right now that you won't ever tell a soul, so help you, God.

JOE

We have to tell someone. You can't keep living like this- who knows how far he'll go next time? Next time you could end up in the hospital for sure, or worse- you could end up dead. Is it worth that? Is that what you want?

CORINNE

Don't you understand, Joe? He's my Dad. Do you not realize what would happen if I told anyone but you? They'd take me away. I'm not 18 yet, Joe. They'd put me in foster care and I'd never see my dad again. I may never see you again, either. Or Abby, or Colby, or Scout, or anyone. I know I've pushed everyone away, that I've isolated myself, but at least this way, you guys are still there. My dad loves me, Joe, I know he does, even if he doesn't say it. He's just hurt and confused. He misses my mom, and he doesn't know how to deal with it. He blames me for her running off. It's my fault. If I would have been a better daughter and tried harder, she would have stayed. She never would have died, and I wouldn't be in the situation I'm in. So, don't you see? Do you see that it's my fault?

(Brief pause as CORINNE looks at JOE for a signal that he understands. There are tears in her eyes, and she looks like she's about to have a breakdown of desperation.)

You can't tell anyone what I've told you, okay? Promise me you won't tell. I've already had to lose my mom- I can't lose my dad too.

(Lights off. END SCENE.)