We Write Our Own Deliverance

by UniverseOnHerShoulders

Summary

Since university, Clara Oswald has been pouring her heart and soul out to Marcus MacAllister, her enigmatic Scottish pen friend. For years, they have shared relationships, friendships and family dramas as they have unfolded; their innermost thoughts and feelings recorded on paper and delivered to each other’s doorsteps.

There’s only one problem: Marcus MacAllister has been dead for five years.

Unable to break the devastating news to Clara, his brother, Professor John Smith, has kept up the letter-writing for her sake, only his fiction is under threat: Clara is visiting Scotland, and she is determined to pay him a visit. When the truth is revealed, hearts will be broken and lives will be changed forever - some for the better, and some for the worse…

Notes

So, here it is... my new work! I hope you all enjoy it, it's an absolute joy to write and seeing my two favourite dorks getting to know each other again is wonderful. Anyone who gets the reference in the title gets virtual cake.

Huge thanks to Alex for being my wonderful beta reader, and to Chrissi for her unwavering enthusiasm for this fic, and her patience over the last year as it went from idea to plan to page.
Chapter 1

Dear Marcus,

I still can’t believe what you said in your last letter about your students — I know they’re only a little younger than you, but they should treat you with respect! I don’t think any of my Year Teens would dare to cheek me the same way your first years do, but that’s possibly because they’re terrified of me. That or they see me as their pal and do my bidding out of some weird kind of peer pressure. Not sure which, but it works. This week we’re starting Pride & Prejudice and I’m not relishing the prospect of trying to teach it to a bunch of socially aware — albeit inept — teenagers; not sure they’re really going to be keen on the old “rich men just need wives” vibe. Don’t get me wrong — I love Jane and always have, but it’s difficult to reconcile her views with those of a modern society, and teaching a bunch of kids about such inherently gendered binary oppositions is just…

Aaaaaaand there I go, off on one again! I sometimes think about ripping my letters up and starting over when I go off like that, but you never seem to mind me being weird, which is always good. (Plus, sometimes it makes you laugh, even if that makes me grumpy…) I laughed out loud at your story about the drunk student mistaking you for their brother — how much had they had to drink?! Was it dark?! I would be mortified if that happened to me, but still, better a sibling than a parent…! On the subject of which; I’ve had to deal with Courtney Woods’ parents again today, and they still seem entirely unwilling to recognise that their daughter is as disruptive as she is. What’s maddening is her work is promising and she’s obviously bright, but she just won’t knuckle down — probably because she’s too busy trying to make others laugh, which is sometimes funny, sure, but it’s not fair on the others! I’m not a totally sour bitch — I have just as much of a sense of humour as the next woman — but there’s a time and a place for telling me that my face is too wide, and period four on a Thursday is not it. (Shut up. I can almost sense you laughing — my face is not wide!) Thank god it’s almost the holidays… I might have to take up jogging again with Danny; he’s a surprisingly effective personal trainer and who knows? Maybe my face could do with slimming down.

On the subject of Danny — things are going well. I think. He knows almost all of my little quirks and idiosyncrasies and hasn’t yet run screaming for the hills, so that’s a definite bonus, and completely unlike Nina. When he finds out about my side interest in being a dominatrix, though… (I joke, I joke, although I’m definitely bossy enough!) I think he said something about going out for drinks tonight with Amy and Rory, who are as sickeningly in love as ever, so we have that to look forward to. Thank god I’m not single anymore; dealing with that level of saccharine sweetness as a singleton was nothing short of an ordeal. At least Danny and I can do some revenge-kissing, even if PDAs make my stomach clench sometimes — I mean, there’s that worry of “what if a student sees us?!” We’d never live it down, and it’d be all over Facebook within hours… thank god for bars that ID you at the door. (Although I wouldn’t put it past Courtney to get a fake ID just for the specific purpose of embarrassing us… she seems to have some godforsaken sixth sense about me and Danny.)

I-

“Clara?” Danny’s voice cut into her reverie and she jumped, her hand jerking her pen across the page and leaving an ugly, splattered line in its wake. Looking up, she found her boyfriend leaning in the doorway to her classroom, grinning at her apparent surprise and holding up a takeaway cup of coffee. “Sorry, didn’t mean to… you weren’t on our bench, so I thought I’d come and find you.”

“Right,” she managed, feigning a laugh and tucking her hair behind her ears, abruptly recalling their plan to meet for lunch at the nearby park and feeling a swooping sense of guilt. “Sorry, I… got caught up.”
“How much marking have you acquired since yesterday evening?” Danny wandered over to her desk, making a great show of setting down the coffee cup, and Clara felt a sudden, irrational urge to hide the letter she had been working on as he cast his gaze down at the neatly ruled notepad that he knew signalled only one thing. “Again? You’re writing to Marcus again?”

“He is my pen pal,” Clara said defensively, scowling up at Danny and feeling the usual stab of irritation she felt whenever the subject was broached and Danny voiced his objections to her ongoing friendship with Marcus. “That’s sort of how it works, yes.”

“Pen pal,” Danny scoffed, and Clara couldn’t tell if it was with fond exasperation or simply patronising annoyance. “Aren’t you a little old for penpals?”

“It was a university-approved scheme,” Clara said through her teeth, for what felt like the hundredth time. “He was assigned to me; I was assigned to him. What was I supposed to do when we graduated? ‘Oh, sorry, I know we’ve spent three years exchanging intimate life details, but I’m an adult now, so nice knowing you’?”

“You’d better not be giving him intimate details about us,” Danny warned, leaning down to cast a critical eye over the letter, and Clara fought the urge to swear at him. This was why she typically favoured writing to Marcus from the comfort of her own home, well away from where Danny could pry into what and how she wrote to her friend. But she’d needed an escape from the stress of the morning, and so instead she’d picked up her pen and started writing, knowing she would find a sympathetic and objective ear in Marcus — Scottish, shy, and several hundred miles away, yes, but still a keen listener. “PDAs make your stomach clench?”

“Sometimes, yes,” she admitted, fighting the desire to yank the letter out of his line of vision and insist, loudly and angrily, that it was private. “Especially if any of our students were to see.”

“I really don’t see what the issue is with them knowing,” Danny’s facial expression abruptly changed to one of great hurt. “Are you ashamed of me?”

“No!” Clara said at once, and it was only half a lie — she wasn’t so much ashamed as him as she was of herself, and her startlingly vanilla choice of man. He was staid and solid and dependable, yes, but also not particularly her usual type. “No, I just… can we please not have this argument again? Not before we have to have drinks with Amy and Rory this evening?”

“You can go on your own,” he snapped, his gaze furious and reproachful as he spat: “I wouldn’t want you to be ashamed of me, or cause you any embarrassment.”

“Danny,” Clara said in desperation, reaching for his hand to try and placate him. “Danny, come on, please don’t be like this.”

“I’m not being like anything,” he tugged his hand away and sent her untouched coffee cup flying in the process, spilling scalding liquid across her desk and soaking her notebook in the milky liquid before she could react. At her cry of distress, his sour mood melted away in an instant, and he looked at her with abject horror. “Clara, I’m s-”

“I think you should head back to your class,” she said warily, getting to her feet and lifting the sopping notebook free of the puddle it had found itself in. “The bell’s going to go any minute.”

“But I-”

“Go.”

He didn’t need to be told twice and sidled out of the classroom looking like a kicked puppy, his head
visibly bowed and his expression downtrodden. Clara sighed, crossing over to the window and laying the sodden book on the sill in the hope it might dry in the warm July sun. Leaning her head against the lightly warmed glass, she took a shaky breath, wondering why the mere mention of Marcus was enough to render Danny — kind, good-hearted Danny, who worshipped the very ground she walked on — quite so touchy. He couldn’t be jealous, surely? He couldn’t be enough of a fool to think that she felt anything for her friend other than… well, friendship?

Closing her eyes, she clenched and unclenched her fists for a few moments, willing herself to calm down before the final lesson of the day commenced. When she finally felt that her composure had re-established itself, she turned back to her desk only to realise that she needed to clear up the remains of the coffee spillage, and, with a groan, she resigned herself to the long trek to the caretaker’s cupboard, praying she wouldn’t be late for her own lesson as a result.

“So,” Amy Pond asked, looking down at her significantly shorter friend with a look that was somewhere between pity and bemusement. Clara knew that, logically, her five-foot-two frame meant she was eternally doomed to be the smallest of her friends, and yet there was something about Amy’s five-foot-ten that sometimes, just sometimes, made her resent her short stature all the more. This was one such occasion. “He’s still having issues with Marcus?”

“Well,” Clara said dourly, stabbing the glacé cherry in her cocktail glass with her straw. “And, as ever, it turned into the usual argument.”

“The ‘Oh my god, are you ashamed of me?’ one?”

“The very same,” Clara grimaced. “I don’t know what he wants! He knows we can’t be like… out and proud about it at work; the students would have a field day. They already do; Tanya told me that her brother found some exceptionally lewd graffiti in the PE toilets, and I shudder to think about what they tweet or Facebook or whatever about us.”

“Remind me what your profile picture is?” Amy asked, taking a sip of her wine.

Clara rolled her eyes. “Me in Kew Gardens. I did learn from the great bikini incident last year, thank you.”

“Such a shame,” Amy pouted, tilting her head to one side and tipping her best friend a wink. “It was a wonderful photo of you.”

“Aren’t you already spoken for?” Clara teased, raising her eyebrows as she spoke.

“Alas,” Amy deadpanned. “But flirting with you keeps me sane, so I am cursed to continue, even though your miserable bisexual arse is currently pinned down by a Maths teacher of a sterlingsly jealous disposition.”

“I really don’t see what the problem is,” Clara sighed, taking a fortifying sip of her cocktail before continuing: “I’m not exactly writing Marcus love letters! Or sexy letters!”

“Have you thought about it?”

Clara nearly inhaled her drink. “Jesus, Amy! No! He’s nice-looking and all, but a total nerd, and I like him, yeah, but not in… not in that way!”
“Are you sure?” Amy asked, her mouth twisting up into a smirk. “Because you’ve gone very, very red.”

“Amy, it’s dark in here.”

“Yes, it is.”

“So, you can’t tell if I’m red or not.”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“Oh, my god. It’s like you want to end up wearing my drink.”

“I’m just saying-”

“I do not want to fuck my Scottish pen friend.”

“What about this Scottish friend?” Amy asked, and Clara rolled her eyes rather than dignify the comment with a verbal response. “Damn. Worth a shot.”

“I don’t see what I can do to make Danny stop being like this,” Clara groaned. “I’ve tried everything; I’ve let him read my letters before I send them; I’ve let him read Marcus’s replies; I’ve asked him specifically what I can and can’t discuss. And now… now he’s wrecked my notebook, and I’ve had enough.”

“Has he apologised?”

“He tried,” Clara grimaced. “I wasn’t having any of it, though.”

“Fair enough,” Amy shrugged. “You’ve done what you can, so I think that, for now, complaining about him is a good plan.”

“Agreed.”

“And-” Amy’s attention was caught by someone approaching from the other side of the bar. “Maybe Rory can advise?”

Clara resisted the urge to groan. She hadn’t exactly wanted to spend time with a happy couple that evening, but her best friend now seemed to be one half of a package deal, and so she would have to grit her teeth and bear it.

“Sure,” she said with resignation. “Sure, why not.”

When she arrived home late that evening, she found a sad-looking bunch of roses propped against her front door alongside a flat, rectangular package wrapped in fancy-looking paper. Sighing, she stooped and picked both items up, fumbling with her keys and stepping inside, where she flicked the light on and looked down at the parcel with a distinct sense of irritation. There was a small note attached, somewhat unnecessarily, since she already knew who the gifts would be from.

Clara,
I’m sorry for being such an arse and for ruining your notebook. I found this in a little shop in Bloomsbury and thought it could serve as a replacement, or eventual successor if you like the coffee-stained look. I love you, always.

Danny xxx

She felt her mood alleviate a little as she unwrapped the book, revealing a beautiful, weighty notepad, the cover of which was embossed with an antique-style map of the world. As her fingers travelled over the raised ridges delineating national borders, her breath caught in her throat as she was struck with an idea. A mad idea, but one that just might work.

Abandoning her new item of stationery, she stumbled into the lounge and thumbed through her satchel to recover her still-coffee-marked book, tearing out the letter she had commenced earlier to Marcus. It was a little smudged, but still legible, and, fumbling for a nearby biro, Clara began to scribble down a message beneath it.

Please, she prayed silently. Please let this work.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In the depths of North Scotland, John Smith eagerly awaits the daily post. Today, however, it brings bad news...

Chapter Notes

The response to chapter one of this fic has been phenomenal! Thank you so much to everyone who commented, left kudos, or shared it on Tumblr. Now, shall we see how our favourite Scottish stick insect is doing?

John Smith was not the kind of man who generally kept to a routine. In his younger, wilder days, he’d have scoffed at the idea altogether; it was, after all, the 1970s, and punks did not have bedtimes, or mealtimes, or anything else that could be pencilled into a diary at the same hour each day. Yet, as he’d grown older, he’d become fond of the odd timed habit — coffee first thing in the morning; dinner at six p.m.; a bath, hot water permitting, every other day — but all of these were mere actions he preferred to carry out as and when he felt the urge to. There was no real reason or joy to repeating them when he did; it was merely a facet of his largely solitary existence.

The only real routine he refused to stray from was the one he kept to each Wednesday and Saturday, when his letterbox would rattle and he would find a neatly handwritten envelope on the doormat containing a letter addressed to a name that was not, by rights, his to use. He would sit and write a meticulously crafted response in the tone and handwriting he had perfected, and then he would commit to making the five-mile journey to the nearest post office, which was by no means an easy destination to reach in the winter months, despite his recent commitment to buying what his sister had deemed a “suitable” car. He had to admit he felt a slight sense of gratitude for her intervention on the last point; when he’d found himself trapped by a particularly vicious winter storm, he had been able to circumnavigate the claggy mud and fallen trees with ease in his 4x4 and make the last post of the day with time to spare.

He was ruminating on the fact it was Saturday and he was due a letter as he sipped his morning coffee, but, when the usual rattle of the letterbox came to the accompanying excited bark from Idris, he still felt a rush of childlike excitement. It had been years now, and yet the novelty had not quite worn off of having someone who wanted to write to him. Well. Sort of.

“OK,” he grumbled good-naturedly, getting to his feet and beginning to wend his way towards the hall as Idris continued to announce the post’s arrival. “OK, girl, I know!”

Reaching the cavernous hall — it was more of an entry hall than a hallway, if he was feeling particularly pedantic or keen to put his more annoying friends in their places — he stooped, fending off the overexcited golden retriever who was dancing around his legs and snatching up his post from the doormat before she could trample on it with careless paws. Ripping open first the outer envelope and then the inner and immediately handing both to Idris to chew on by way of appeasement, he
settled in to read what lay within, only the soft sounds of his dog’s teeth snapping together semi-
regularly breaking the anticipatory silence.

Usually, he would rush straight to his study to craft a response. He would perhaps pause long
enough to make himself another cup of something warming or fetch himself a snack, but otherwise
he was a creature of impeccable habit when it came to answering the letters. Not today. Today he
sank down onto the hall floor, Idris’s attention immediately switching from the envelope to her
master, her cold nose pressing against his neck as she pawed at him with concern.

“I…” he said, half to her and half to himself, his eyes staring dead ahead in horror. “Oh, this is bad.”

Idris whined as if in response, licking his cheek and pawing at his lap more insistently.

“She…” he looked at his dog with great sombreness. “She wants to meet me.”

Idris only blinked at him, although there was something distinctly wise about her gaze.

“Clara,” he explained, as though there were other women with whom he corresponded and who may
wish to visit him. “Clara wants to meet me. Not-Me. Marcus-Me.”

Idris whined again, lifting her paw up to shield her eyes as though embarrassed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” John asked crossly, knitting his brows together and affixing his
dog with a stern look. “Does that mean I should be embarrassed? You’re far too cheeky, you are.”

Idris wagged her tail, licking his face again, and John feigned a look of great affront.

“Ew,” he told her firmly, although he couldn’t resist pressing a quick kiss to the top of her muzzle.
“That is not hygienic. And this is bad. You’re not taking this seriously, are you? You just want a
walk.”

At the mention of the W-word, Idris began bouncing around the hallway excitedly, and John sighed,
running a hand through his silver hair and wondering on the best course of action. Ignoring his
hyperactive dog, he got to his feet and reached for his antiquated landline phone, dialling a number
he knew by heart.

“Hello?” an acerbic voice on the other end asked, sounding only slightly distorted by the lack of
clear mobile signal.

“It’s me,” he sighed heavily. “Are y-”

“Are we doing social phone calls now?” the woman on the other end asked with disdain. “Because,
if so, I’m not keen. You couldn’t do social if your life depended on it; and besides, I’m greatly
enjoying being a hermit.”

“You are now you’ve had that hideous Internet mast installed.”

“Yes, well, you try being a hermit without access to Netflix or Pornhub, dearie; it does get rather
boring.”

“Missy,” he groaned. “Didn’t need that image. Can I come and see you, or not? It’s not me being
social, if that helps. It’s about me being antisocial and offloading my problems onto you.”

“You’re not helping much with my period of hermitage.”

“Well, you did insist on living on my land.”
“Our land,” Missy replied at once, her tone fierce. “Ours. Ma and Da left it to both of us, remember.”

“Ours,” he acquiesced guiltily. “Can I come and be a miserable Scots git or not?”

“Absolutely,” his sister hesitated for a few seconds. “Can you bring me a newspaper or something? I’m terribly bored out here, you know.”

“But you—”

“Netflix is terribly fun, but not always an intellectual challenge, John darling. Newspaper. Please. And if it’s one that you’ve done the crossword puzzle in, then believe me; hell hath no fury like a woman who finds the cryptic half-done.”

Slightly over an hour later, and somewhat sweaty from his exertions — first in digging through the recycling pile that lay beside the back door, and then from trekking uphill through the dense Scottish woodland — John finally arrived at what constituted for Missy’s… well, “house” might be an overly generous term, so he tended to think of it more as a “dwelling.” It was a large wooden shepherd’s hut painted a deep shade of crimson, with a set of black-painted French doors in the middle that clashed horribly with the traditional design of the place, but not as much so as the small, yet obtrusive-looking mast that had been installed at one end of the structure, ostensibly to provide his sister with sporadic contact with the outside world, but actually, as he knew now, for… well, he would try not to think about that again.

Just outside the anachronistic French doors, on a small deck constructed from dark-stained wood, his sister was sat on a deckchair, reclining in a position that was just a hint too artful to be entirely natural. Her eyes were covered by dark glasses, which unnerved him, since knowing where Missy was looking was — at times — imperative to avoid incurring her wrath or falling victim to her fits of temper.

“Big brother,” she drawled, making a great show of stretching out, cat-like. “How nice of you to drop by.”

“Missy,” he rolled his eyes and chucked the newspaper at her, half-hoping it would catch her by surprise, but she only raised one hand and languidly snagged it out of the air a good twelve inches from her head, shaking out the pages and looking — despite her best efforts not to — pleased. “One newspaper, as requested.”

“Excellent,” Missy smirked like a cat that had got the cream before saying, in a phony American accent: “Sit down, brother mine. What issues can I help you with today?”

“Don’t talk like that,” John rolled his eyes. “You’re not one of those cliché helplines.”

“I should be.’

“Should not.”

“I give great advice.”

“You do not!”
“No, I do not, my advice is complete pants, but I’d have lots of very happy customers. Or very dead ones.”

John shuddered a little, finding himself as discomfited as ever by his sister’s weirdness. “Right,” he said uncertainly. “Look, I’m here about… Clara.”

“Ah,” Missy’s smirk, if anything, intensified. “Sweet little Clara. How is she, these days? Still with that tremendously dull chap of hers?”

“Yes,” John said, reaching into his backpack and extracting Clara’s latest letter, handing it over to Missy with the utmost reluctance. “Here.”

“Why is it brown?” Missy frowned, raising it to her nose and sniffing it. “Is that…” her tongue darted out, sliding along a margin in an animalistic action, and John resisted the urge to snatch it out of her hands. “Coffee? She’s not gone fully Jane Austen and started trying to age her notepaper for authenticity, has she?”

“I doubt it,” John rolled his eyes. “Did you have to lick it? Even Idris managed not to do that.”

“How is the darling little doggy?” Missy cooed, looking over at her brother, her attention momentarily diverted from his problems. “Where is she?”

“At home,” John raised his eyebrows rather pointedly. “I don’t think she’s quite recovered from her last visit.”

“Oh, come now,” Missy pouted. “Davros and Rassilon were only playing.”

“I cannot believe you managed to tame two majestic Scottish beasts and call them… that.”

“Hey,” Missy shrugged. “Crazy lady has crazy wildcat minions with crazy names. It all adds to the vibe, man.”

“Right,” John rolled his eyes again. “Can you be less crazy for two minutes and just read what she said? Namely the last part?”

“Fine,” Missy clicked her tongue and looked down at the letter in front of her. “Now then…”

To John’s considerable horror, she adopted an over-the-top English accent and began to read aloud:

“Marcus, I know this is very unlike me, but I’ve been keeping a secret from you for a while now. I think Danny feels threatened by us writing to each other like this, and I don’t know what to do to try and make that better… or, at least, I didn’t until just now, when I realised that I could introduce you to him! Properly, in person. We could come up to Scotland, and he could meet you and be completely reassured that you’re not… oh, I don’t know, a catfish, or a creep, or anything like that, and that I’m not madly in love with you. Please say yes — I know it’s kind of out of the blue, but we’ve been writing to each other for nine years now and it would be wonderful to finally meet you. Let me know your thoughts? Best wishes, Clara.”

Missy put down the letter and let out a long, low whistle. “Well, now you’re for it.”

“I know,” John groaned, burying his head in his hands and letting out a long, self-pitying sigh. “How can I get out of this?”

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you started up this mad little scheme,” Missy noted sweetly. “Maybe you should have—“

"The Assistant is not sure if the content is complete or if there is any missing text."
“I couldn’t tell her the truth!” John snapped, looking up at his sister and affixing her with a dark look. “It would’ve killed her… I couldn’t do that to her, not after everything!”

“What, so keeping up this fiction was kinder?” Missy arched an eyebrow. “John, you know I’ve never fully approved of your strange little scheme, but you always knew a day like this would come! I told you — and I’m not the only one! — to break things off with her; to stop replying… and you wouldn’t! Maybe she’s right, you know.”

“About what?!”

“Being in love,” Missy shrugged. “Only it’s not her, is it? It’s you — in love with the idea of this younger woman who thinks the sun shines from… well, from the paper you write on.”

“I am not!” John snapped, appalled by the suggestion. “I just… she’s my friend!”

“Only she’s not your friend, and she never was,” Missy shot back. “It’s not you she’s been writing to; it’s Marcus! She has no idea who you are; she has no idea who John Smith is; and now she’s in for a bloody rude awakening unless you can fob her off somehow!”

“Well, how am I meant to do that?”

“I don’t know,” Missy sighed. “I’m not your keeper; you’re a big boy now. Why not just lie? That’s what you’ve been doing perfectly successfully for the last god knows how many years, why stop now?”

“It’s not lying,” John argued weakly. “It’s… strategically skirting the facts of the matter.”

“For what, John?”

“To protect her from the truth!” he threw his hands in the air in exasperation. “She poured her heart out in these letters, how could I tell her that… that…”

“John,” Missy said softly, as he began to cry. “John, don’t do this to yourself…”

“How could I tell her about Marcus’s accident?”

“John…”

“How could I tell her about him… him… d-d…”

“John, I know, I know,” Missy reached over and took his hand by way of an apology. “I miss him, too.”

“You do?”

“Of course I do,” she smiled sadly. “He was my brother too, you know.”

“I know,” John breathed. “I just… I just…”

“Keeping the fiction alive means you don’t have to let go,” Missy breathed, with surprisingly tactful insight. “I know. But it’s not fair on her, or you, and now she’s going to get her heart broken, whether you like it or not.”

“She’s not,” John countered fiercely, a plan beginning to take shape in his mind as he snatched the letter back from his sister. “Because I have an idea.”
“Oh no.”

“Oh yes.”

“Tell me,” Missy looked disdainful. “Does this involving lying, deception, and your slightly dodgy mate Nardole?”

“It might,” John grinned. “It just might…”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Desperate to stall the inevitable, John pays a visit to an old friend in the hope that he may be able to provide a solution to the Clara problem...

Chapter Notes

Time to meet the Doctor's dodgy mate Nardole...

John knocked on the door in front of him with trepidation, trying not to consider the myriad ways the discussion he was about to have could go wrong. As he shuffled nervously from foot to foot, trying to ignore how his heart was pounding in his chest, there were no signs of life from behind the ochre-painted door, and he raised his fist to hammer on it again more loudly, feeling his pulse in his teeth as he did so. He might be meeting an old friend, but he was laying himself open to judgement, and, if there was one thing he did not deal with well, it was judgement. Years of trying to overlook his younger sister’s jibes had not endowed him with a sense of patience, nor warm reception to criticism, and he was not relishing the prospect of inviting judgement to be heaped upon him voluntarily.

After his louder knock, there was the faint sound of grumbling from inside. A moment later, the door swung inwards to reveal a short, balding man, who was attempting to put on his rimless glasses while simultaneously tying his dressing gown around his rotund stomach. When he caught sight of John, the expression on his face soured, and his mood visibly deteriorated another few levels when his irked mood caused his co-ordination to falter, and he jabbed himself in the eye with the arm of his glasses.

“Ow,” he muttered sourly, finally succeeding in putting on the offending eyewear and scowling at John with all the more ill will, and the Scotsman had the good sense to look apologetic. “What are you after? Whatever it is, I’ve not got it, I’ve not seen it, and I’m sure that as it’s probably patently illegal, a fine and upstanding moral gentleman like me would never-”

“Good morning to you too, Nardole.” John held up a bag of doughnuts by way of a peace offering. “I brought snacks. Can I come in?”

Nardole’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, but he stepped back and beckoned his friend inside, nonetheless. Feeling the usual stab of concern for his own well-being that always accompanied entering his friend’s flat, John stepped over the threshold and let his eyes adjust to the gloom as he followed Nardole along the hallway and into the cramped, messy kitchen, where he dumped the bag of doughnuts on the side and flung himself down in the only vacant chair in the room. On the table, an open strongbox was overflowing with loose cash, and there was a small heap of what looked like automotive parts, lying beside the key to a Ferrari. John felt a small rush of envy, followed by a strong sense of exasperation at his friend’s antics.

“I wouldn’t look at those too closely,” Nardole said pragmatically, reaching for the kettle and filling it from a clanking, wheezing tap. “Plausible deniability, and all that.”
“Please don’t tell me you stole another car,” John asked, his tone equal parts amusement and horror. “What’s the excuse for this one?”

“I didn’t steal it,” Nardole rolled his eyes, his contempt for John’s attitude almost tangible. “I bought it off a gentleman at the university on behalf of another interested buyer. Problem was the cash wasn’t clean, so… well, I had to use my initiative.”

“Remind me why I continue associating myself with you?”

“You know why,” Nardole flicked the kettle on and turned to affix John with an unsettling, probing stare. “You remember.”

“No,” John said firmly, holding up a hand, warningly. “We are not going to discuss this. I was being rhetorical.”

“Well, don’t be,” Nardole shot him a dark look, reaching into a cupboard and retrieving two dubiously clean mugs. “What do you want, John? I haven’t had to endure the misfortune of your company in a while.”

“You wound me,” John deadpanned. “I need a favour.”

“I suspected as much.”

“It’s about Clara.”

Nardole sighed, leaning forward and resting his head against the cupboard in front of him. “Clara, Clara, Clara. You know, she’d have shot you in a jealous rage if—”

“She would’ve done no such thing,” John snapped, his stomach twisting uncomfortably at the mere mention of… well. Her. “Stop mentioning her. This is not about her, this is about Clara.”

“Fine,” Nardole muttered, opening a nearby tin and retrieving two teabags with a feigned air of nonchalance. “What about her?”

“I need a favour.”

“Another one?”

“Yes, another one.”

“So, getting me to forward her letters to you isn’t enough?”

“You know why you have to do that… she’s not stupid, she knows I’m not likely to live on a country estate, and—”

“I?”

“What?”

If Nardole had had eyebrows, he would’ve raised them skywards. “You said ‘I.’”

“Me. Marcus. Whatever. He isn’t the sort of person to live… well, where I do. He’s a tutor at the university, he’s not earning a lot, and he’s—”

“Dead.”
“Yes, I know,” John closed his eyes, swallowing the rising hurt he always felt whenever his brother’s fate was mentioned. “And I know that this is the one thing I can do to honour his memory, and so, god forbid, I actually want to do that.”

“I’m not sure how lying to that poor girl is honouring him.”

“Because it is!” John almost shouted, but Nardole didn’t so much as flinch. Instead, he turned away, lifting the kettle from its base as it boiled, and began to immerse himself in the process of making the tea. “I’m sorry, I just…”

“I know.”

“It’s important that I-”

“You don’t owe me any more explanations. That hour you spent outlining the hare-brained scheme to me five years ago was quite enough, thank you very much. The less I know, the better.”

“But I-”

“What’s the favour?” Nardole asked, all emotion vanishing from his tone and being replaced with the pragmatism that signalled he wanted to get down to business. Ducking down into the fridge to retrieve a bottle of milk, he poured it into each mug with a flourish and expanded on his previous statement by adding: “What do I need to do for you?”

“Clara wants to come here,” John said with resignation, as his friend handed him a scalding mug of tea. Taking a cautious sip, he clarified: “To Scotland.”

“Why?” Nardole asked with dull horror, his mug frozen halfway to his mouth. “There’s midges and bagpipes and tartan and… miserable Scottish people who expect you to do their bidding.”

“And dodgy English blokes who con people out of luxury cars,” John snarked back, and Nardole had the good grace to blush. “She’s coming to see me.”

“By which you mean Marcus.”

“Yes.”

“And I presume you would like me to be Marcus?”

“No,” John fought the urge to grimace. Nardole was as unlike his brother as it was possible to be, and the thought of getting him to keep up the pretence in person was oddly sacrilegious. He was not unaware of the irony, but there was — in his view — a difference between a lie on paper and a lie in person. He would like to avoid the latter, if at all possible. Not to mention that he’d sent Clara several photos of Marcus a few years earlier, and Nardole’s resemblance to his brother was entirely non-existent. “I would like you to stall her.”

“How am I meant to do that?!” Nardole looked horrified as he leant back against the worktop, sipping his own tea. “She doesn’t have a clue who I am! Unless…”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you want me to steal her vehicle and-slash-or freeze her bank accounts and thus render her unable to travel.”

“Also unable to pay rent or buy food or get to work.”
“And your point here being…”

“We want to stall her, not render her homeless, Nardole,” John made a face of disdain. “Besides, I think the idiot boyfriend is coming with her.”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy?”

“No,” John said at once, but he felt the tips of his ears turn red. “I just happen to think he’s a pillock, and, according to her latest letter, she’s starting to think that, too. He thinks I’m in love with her, or she’s in love with me, or something equally preposterous. This whole trip is meant to be an anthropological experiment in reducing his level of jealousy.”

Nardole said nothing for a moment, then asked, hopefully: “Can I freeze his bank account?”

“It’s tempting,” John admitted, his mouth twisting into a sly smirk. “But you probably shouldn’t.”

“Damn,” Nardole sighed, looking so genuinely sorrowful to be denied that John was almost tempted to give him permission to meddle in Danny’s financial affairs. “So, what am I supposed to do? How am I meant to put off your lovely English lass?”

“She’s not ‘my’ anything.”

“Well, she sort of is. She’s more yours than she is mine.”

“You’re digressing from the point. Again.”

“Stop arguing semantics with me, then.”

“Fine,” John rolled his eyes. “I need you to take a phone call from her and pretend to be Marcus.”

“What?!” Nardole yelped. “So, pretending to be him when she visits, that’s off the table, but lying on the phone? Oh no, that’s totally fine and dandy?”

“This is one very small lie for the greater good,” John said, wearily. “She can’t exactly speak to me, can she? I don’t exactly sound young, and I’m not as well up on youth slang as you. Please, Nardole. It’s a five-minute phone call to say that you’re unwell or on holiday or some other excuse and that she absolutely cannot come and visit.”

“Can I have something horribly contagious?”

“If you really must.”

“Can it be leprosy?”

“Leprosy is neither that contagious or plausible,” John noted. “Maybe stick with something less horror-inducing.”

“But.”

“Look, can I give her your number or not?”

“Well, not my real one,” Nardole affixed John with the kind of look that more than adequately conveyed how stupid he thought his friend was. “I’ll need to get a burner first.”

“A…”
“A cheap and cheerful phone intended for short-term use. I wouldn’t be where I am if I kept one number like a regular human being, would I?”

“Yet you’ve lived here… how long?”

“John, can you not be a facetious moron for five minutes?”

“Sorry. When can you get a burner?”

Nardole sucked his teeth, mulling over the issue. “Next two hours.”

“Jesus.”

“When do you need this phone call to happen?”

“Well, not within the next two hours.”

“Good,” Nardole looked pleased. “Can we break into the doughnuts instead, then?”

“Yes,” John chuckled, reaching for the bag. “Yes, we can.”

“I have mentioned that I think you’re generally rather insane for continuing this scheme, haven’t I?” Nardole asked with concern, setting his mug down beside the strongbox and shifting a large pile of what looked very much like official paperwork off the chair opposite him. “Because I’d like to mention that again, just as a disclaimer, so that when she inevitably works it out, I can say that I told you so, and perhaps win her heart.”

“Do you especially want her heart?”

“No, but I want bragging rights,” Nardole grinned and took a seat, flipping the lid of the box of cash closed and snatching up the Ferrari key, spinning it around his finger idly. “And the ability to have the moral high ground.”

“Have you ever, at any point in your life, had the moral high ground?” John asked highly. “I mean, you’re waving around the key to an immorally obtained Ferrari.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Nardole took a sip of his tea, then reached for a doughnut, biting into it appreciatively. “Goo’ ‘ough’uts.”

“I owe you a lot more than doughnuts if this scheme works out,” John muttered, dropping his gaze to the tabletop. “But that’s a big if.”

“Ca’ I ha’…” Nardole swallowed, and continued more clearly: “Half your land?”

“No.”

“Your car?”

“No.”

“Half your wealth?”

“What wealth?” John snorted. “Chance’d be a fine thing.”

“Well, what can I have?”
“Undying gratitude,” John deadpanned, then, at Nardole’s incredulous expression, added: “And something *legal* of your choice.”

“Fine,” Nardole muttered. “Can you keep providing me with doughnuts?”

“Absolutely.”

“What if this all goes belly-up?”

“Then you’ll lose your supply of doughnuts, so how’s that for incentive?”

“You’re a very sneaky man, you know that?”

“I do,” John grinned wolfishly. “It’s why you like me.”

“Who said I like you?”

“You haven’t locked your cash box, and I’ve been here over ten minutes. That’s basically a declaration of love.”

Nardole narrowed his eyes fondly. “You’ve got me there.”

“That I have.”

“Now,” Nardole paused, then continued in a broad Highland brogue: “Do I need to work on ma wonderful Scottish accent for this wee lass?”
Waiting for a response to her suggestion that she, Danny and Marcus meet had been the longest few days of Clara’s life. Her mind had wandered to dark places as she wondered whether perhaps this might be too much for her friend, or too soon, or not soon enough, or if he’d even want to meet her at all, or if he’d be busy, and she’d been caught up in one such worry when the envelope had arrived bearing Marcus’s handwriting and she’d felt her stomach drop in nervous anticipation. She’d stashed it on her hall table, unwilling to read it before work, and then tried to go about her day as normal, ignoring the growing anxiety bubbling away in the pit of her stomach.

That had been earlier, and now she paced back and forth in her lounge after work, reading and re-reading the few lines of text on the immaculately-folded paper and feeling like punching the air in jubilation.

Scotland is always a wonderful decision — not that I’m biased! — and you could do much worse than pay a visit with Danny, who I think would love it. Instead of trying to embark on the process of logistics via letter, why not give me a ring to discuss it? You can reach me on 07789 827347 any evening this week.

Her hands shook as she held the paper, and she sank down onto the sofa, trying to allay her nervous excitement. She was going to ring Marcus. She was going to hear his voice after years and years of imagining what he would sound like based solely on the way he wrote.

Well. There was one very small obstacle to overcome first.

The doorbell rang and she got to her feet, smoothing down her slightly crumpled work skirt and forcing herself to smile her widest, most optimistic smile. Folding the letter up and placing it back into its envelope, she headed into the hall and answered the door, finding Danny stood on the doorstep with a shy grin on his face.

“Hello,” she said warmly as he stepped forwards and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Thanks for coming over.”

“Not at all,” he wrapped his arms around her waist, before pulling away and frowning. “Is everything OK? You’re shaking. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said nervously, moving back to allow him to enter the flat. He took her hand as he stepped inside, giving it a reassuring squeeze before looking down at their intertwined fingers, of which hers were visibly trembling. “I’m fine, I promise.”

“Oh my god,” Danny turned deathly pale, dropping her hand like he’d been burned. “Are you breaking up with me? Is this about Marcus? Are you leaving me for him?”

“What?!” Clara let out a yelp of incredulity. “No! Of course I’m not, why would I… no! It’s about
Marcus, but I’m not leaving you for him!”

“I just…”

“For the millionth time, I don’t know why you’ve got this idea in your head, but I’m not in love with him!”

“Well, what’s going on, then? Because you’re shaking and you’re clearly terrified and if he’s done something, then I swear to god…”

“Don’t be so negative,” Clara scowled, leading him into the lounge and standing in the centre of the room with her hands on her hips. “It’s nothing bad, so stop leaping to wild conclusions.”

“I wouldn’t be doing any leaping if you’d stop being evasive,” Danny rolled his eyes condescendingly as he sank down onto the sofa. “Can you please just-”

“Don’t speak to me like I’m a student,” Clara snapped, her mood souring with each passing utterance leaving her boyfriend’s lips. “I’m not one of the kids, I’m not here to be patronised, I’m your girlfriend.”

“Yes,” his expression softened. “And I’m worried about you.”

“Well, you don’t need to be, because I actually invited you over to suggest going on a minibreak.”

“We can’t afford a minibreak,” Danny scoffed. “We can barely even afford two flats; I don’t understand why you won’t let me-”

Clara moved to cut him off, keen to avoid having that particular argument again. “Not abroad,” she clarified. “Here. A staycation, if you will.”

“Is that a patented, English-Teacher-Approved Clara Oswald Word?”

“Maybe,” she grinned then, some of his sudden good humour infecting her. “I was thinking Scotland.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” she said quickly, keen to launch into her well-rehearsed spiel. “We could fly up to Edinburgh, see the sights, and then hire a car and do some of the Highlands.”

“Clara…”

“And,” she soldiered on, determined to finish her pitch before he could make any negative comments. “Marcus has invited us to drop in.”

Danny’s expression darkened at once, his brows knitting together in consternation as he looked up at her with quiet anger. “Really?” he asked. “You want us to go on a romantic minibreak to visit your pen pal.”

“Not just for that,” she said defensively, folding her arms over her chest and trying to look calmer than she felt. “To see the country, too. It would be a flying visit, Danny, he’s very busy.”

“So why does he want us to visit?”

“Because he’s known me for nine years and it’s really becoming quite ludicrous that we have yet to meet.”
“Whose idea was the trip?” Danny asked abruptly, ignoring her reply. “Yours, or his?”


“Well, I don’t know, did he suggest going up so that we can spend the night at his and you can do some bed-swapping?”

“You’re totally being unreasonable.”

“Am I?”

“Yes!”

“So, whose idea was it?”

“If you must know, it was indirectly Amy’s,” Clara snapped. “And then I made a rough plan, sketched out itineraries, looked at flights. I thought it would be nice to actually spend some time together, and for you to meet some of my friends.”

“Your male friends.”

“For god’s sake, I don’t belong to you!”

“No, but I-”

“You don’t have an issue with Rory!”

“Rory has been in love with Amy since they were four years old, I very much doubt you’d turn his head.”

“Oh, great,” Clara shot back. “Am I really that undesirable?”

“Of course not!” Danny looked wounded when he realised the implication of his words. “You’re beautiful, I just meant-”

“You just meant that I should morph into a nun and forsake spending time with anyone of the opposite sex ever again, lest I secretly want to shag them. Oh wait, given the whole ‘I like girls’ thing, I guess I’m also prohibited from spending time with women as well. So, if you want me, I’ll just be in my prison cell wearing a bloody tent and forsaking the rest of humankind until the day I die.”

“Clara…”

“Don’t bloody ‘Clara’ me!” she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears. “God, I never thought that you of all people would be like this! He’s a friend, Danny, OK? He’s a friend, and he has stuck with me through some unbelievably shitty things. He’s listened to me and respected me and never once tried to overstep that mark, and it is so bloody hurtful that you keep insinuating that I don’t want you because I want him! It’s like you think you know more about my psyche than I do, like you know more about how I think or what I want or who I want to be with, and it’s patronising! I love you, Danny, and I’ve told you that so many times and yet you won’t believe me, won’t acknowledge that, and keep accusing me of wanting to cheat on you and do you have any idea how much it hurts?”

“No,” he said lamely. “No, I don’t, you’re right-”

“Not done,” she growled. “I love you, OK? I love you, but the constant negativity and accusations and barbed comments and green-eyed monster-ness all need to stop, because I cannot and will not
deal with it any longer. I love you, but I am not enduring that because you seem to think it’s a display of how much you care. It isn’t. It’s a load of possessive, sexist bollocks.”

“Sorry,” Danny said with staggering sincerity. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t’ve… I should never have patronised you or been so jealous.”

“No,” Clara sniffed. “You shouldn’t.”

“Hey, I’m trying to apologise here, give me a chance.”

“Sorry,” Clara blushed. “Carry on.”

“I was wrong to make assumptions and wrong not to trust you. I am sorry for doing that; of course I trust you, you’re my girlfriend and you’ve never given me any cause to doubt you. It’s just after Jess…”

Clara grimaced at the mention of his ex-girlfriend, despite the many years that lay between the two of them.

“…after Jess, you know I’ve had difficulties sometimes. And I’m terrified of losing you — you’re too good for me, and I’m constantly worried that you’re going to work out what a useless, boring bloke I am and move on to someone incredible who is actually worth of your love.”

“OK, this apology is turning into you wanting me to stroke your ego.”

“Sorry,” Danny said again, looking guilty. “I’m an insecure mess and I am sorry about that and I will do better in future. Going to Scotland would be lovely, even if we are at risk of being eaten by midges, and I would love to have the privilege of meeting Marcus with you.”

Clara smiled, feeling herself well up again involuntarily at the raw sincerity of his words. “OK,” she murmured, letting out a relieved breath. “OK, shall I open a bottle of wine and fire up TripAdvisor?”

“That would be nice, yeah,” Danny got to his feet. “But first…”

He folded her into a hug and she relaxed into his embrace after a fraction of a second, resting her forehead against his shoulder and taking a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked, resting his hands against the small of her back. “I’ve not done anything.”

“You listened,” Clara murmured. “And you’re trying.”

It wasn’t until two days later that Clara finally worked up the courage to call the number Marcus had given her. She curled up on the sofa, her phone in her hand, and stared at the piece of paper for so long that the words etched there blurred into one indistinguishable mass. She was nervous, certainly, and excited too, but there was something else unquantifiable that lurked around the edges of her consciousness — some deep-rooted fear that perhaps Marcus wouldn’t like her voice, or her, or would find her altogether too loud or obnoxious and rescind his invitation. She knew she was being irrational, and yet still… she worried.

“Come on, Oswald,” she muttered to herself. “Stop being a coward. Phone the damn number.”
With trembling fingers, she dialled the eleven digits and then let her thumb hover over the green button onscreen for a good few seconds.

“Come on,” she repeated, willing herself to be brave. “Do it.”

Before she could think twice, she pressed the green button, and listened as the line connected, and then began to ring. It was answered almost at once, and Clara felt her heart stutter at the familiar little click.

“Hello?” an unfamiliar voice asked in a broad Scottish accent. “Marcus McAllister speaking.”

She let out an elated little squeak, her eyes filling with tears at the sheer joy of hearing his voice for the first time. “Sorry,” she said breathlessly. “It’s… it’s Clara.”

“Clara! Oh, I’ve been waiting for your call all week. How are you?”

“I’m good, I… oh my god, I can’t believe it’s really you, I can’t believe I’m actually speaking to you!”

“I know,” there was a soft chuckle from his end. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? Only been nine years.”

“Indeed,” she smiled, even though he couldn’t see her. “Damn that distance, eh?”

“Ach, I know,” there was a small huff of amusement. “You’ll be ringing about your trip, I suppose?”

“Yeah,” Clara chewed her lip, struck by a sudden sense of nervousness. “Danny and I are coming up on the twenty-eighth.”

“Oh no,” Marcus said with genuine contrition. “Oh, I can’t believe that, it’s the worst luck.”

“Why?!” she asked, feeling as though she had been doused with a bucket of cold water. “What is it?”

“Have you already booked?”

“Yes, there were only two seats left on the flight we wanted… why?”

“I was thinking you’d call first… I’m away in Paris at a conference.”

“Oh,” she said, fighting to keep her voice even. “Oh, well, not to worry. I hope it goes well.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise you’d be coming up so soon, or that you’d have-”

“It’s fine,” she said tightly. “I’ve ah… I’ve got to go, I’m making pasta and it’s boiling over.”

She hung up and tossed her phone onto the sofa beside her, trying to quell the rising feeling of bitter disappointment in her chest.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In the wake of the disastrous phone call, Clara and John vent their feelings... but for the first time, not to each other.

“So,” John asked, eyeing his friend expectantly over the top of a dubiously-clean mug of coffee and feeling a lurch of wary anticipation for the news he was about to receive. “How did it go with Clara?”

“Well,” Nardole cleared his throat and dropped his gaze, using a fingertip to slide loose coins across the table-top in with guilty, fervent focus. “It was… alright.”

John felt his heart sink, recognising Nardole’s tone and behaviour as classic signs of evasion and knowing at once that there was something his friend wasn’t telling him. “What happened?” he demanded, his mouth feeling abruptly dry at the prospect of Clara’s anger, or worse, sadness. “What did she say?”

“She said it was fine, in that voice people always do when it obviously isn’t fine. She sounded slightly she was going to cry, actually, so I hope you’re happy with yourself, sir.”

“Don’t call me ‘sir,’” John intoned, hating how old the word made him feel. “It’s been-”

“Residual habit,” Nardole shot back, his face a mask of guilt. “She’s upset, John. Stop trying to avoid that fact. She’s annoyed because you’ve let her down.”

“Well, better this than the let-down of, ‘Hello, I’m John Smith, I’ve been writing to you while pretending to be my dead brother for five years,’” John scowled, and Nardole shrugged by way of non-verbal acknowledgement. “I’m sure I can fix it.”

“How?!”

“I don’t know,” John sighed, realising that, despite his good intentions with regards to making reparations, he had no practical ideas. “A well-timed letter and a new book?”

“You can’t buy her off, si- John.”

“I’m not trying to!”

“Well, what would you describe your idea as?”

“…not buying her off?” John hedged, taking a sip of his coffee to avoid having to speak again.

“She seemed pretty hacked off,” Nardole raised an eyebrow. “So, you’re either going to have to go all-in on the gift and buy her a Ferrari or a first edition Jane Austen or whatever the hell she’s into, or you’re going to have to let her cool off for a while first.”

“How long do you reckon ‘a while’ would be? Roughly?”
“She’s your pen pal,” Nardole observed, then added in a bitter tone: “Oh wait, no she isn’t…”

“Yes, alright,” John rolled his eyes, irked by his friend’s cutting comment. “Nice passive aggression. I get your point.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

John pulled out his wallet and began leafing through it with an increasingly waning sense of optimism. Finally, his fingers closed around a single piece of currency, and he squinted at it in an accusatory manner, as though its low value was its own fault. “What do you reckon I can get down at Leakey’s for a tenner?”

“At a guess, five editions of Mills & Boon, or a cookbook from four decades ago.”

“Very helpful. In lieu of either of those choices, can I er… can I have a loan?”

“Which you would be paying back… when?”

“Urm,” John grimaced, trying to do the mental maths. “When I get the advance on my next book?”

Nardole let out a yelp of bemusement. “And that’ll be… when? When hell freezes over?”

“Excuse me,” John feigned a look of great hurt. “I’ve been working on something, I’ll have you know. My big break could be just around the corner.”

“Right,” Nardole shook his head, snorting with mirth, and John felt a stab of hurt in response to his friend’s lack of faith in him. “Look, just… you can borrow a tenner, but do recall my interest rates.”

“You know what…” John dithered for a moment. “I’m sure I can get something excellent for a tenner. I’ll just have to comb the shelves with due diligence.”

“Yeah… good luck with that.”

“…” Clara scowled down at her ice cream, watching a toffee-flavoured drip make a bid for freedom down the cone towards her hand, before intervening at the last possible second and catching the offending rivulet with her tongue. “He sounded so upset, but it doesn’t counter the fact that we won’t be able to see him.”

“Babe, he does have a legitimate reason,” Amy observed from beside her, licking her own ice cream with relentless determination. “It’s not like he’s just all, ‘No, actually, I think you’re annoying and I don’t want to have to deal with you.’”

“I know it’s not his fault he’s busy, and I know we should have checked before booking-”

“So, why didn’t you?”

“Because!”

“Because what?!”

“Danny wanted to book and he’s already being touchy as hell about this whole thing, so asking him
to hold on while I phoned Marcus and had what was potentially going to be a three-hour conversation when the airline only holds tickets in reserve for fifteen minutes would’ve gone down like a lead balloon!"

“Fair point,” Amy acquiesced. “Have you broken the news to him yet?”

“No,” Clara said sourly, taking another lick of her ice cream. “Because he’s either going to be triumphant and smug, or faux-empathic, and I’m not sure which is going be worse to deal with.”

“Come on, if he sees that you’re upset…”

“He’s still going to be smug about the fact that Marcus can’t see me, because it means he has less ‘competition.’”

“Competition?” Amy smirked maddeningly. “Well-”

“‘Competition,’” Clara reiterated with irritation. “In very heavily inverted commas.”

“Ah,” Amy lapsed into pensive silence. “I mean, you still need to go to Scotland.”

“We’re going to.”

“Well, good,” Amy elbowed her playfully in the side, and Clara nearly dropped her cone. “Because it’s a wonderful place.”

“Not that you are in any way biased,” Clara noted, and Amy laughed. “It should be nice. Just me, Danny, and two million midges.”

“Ah, they’re not so bad,” Amy shrugged. “You get used to being treated as a foodstuff after a while.”

“Good to know,” Clara said drily. “I’ll bear that in mind when I’m being eaten alive.”

“Failing that, there’s repellent,” Amy took a bite out of her ice cream, then noticed Clara’s look of horror. “Wha’?”

“Who *bites* ice cream?!”

Amy swallowed, then said defensively: “Me, when it’s about to drip all over my hand and I’m tired of licking.”

“I could and should say something smutty here.”

“I’d dispute the ‘should’ part of that assertion, Oswald. Now, watch it, you’re dripping.”

“Now who’s being smutty?” Clara teased, but set to work polishing off the remains of her rapidly liquefying ice cream, crunching on the cone with satisfaction. “I’m still just… I don’t know. Put out about Marcus.”

“He’s busy, babe. You can’t expect him to cancel a conference just because you’re dropping by.”

“I know, I know,” Clara sighed. “And, frankly, Paris is probably much nicer in summer than Inverness.”

“Rude.”
“Just being honest,” Clara quirked an eyebrow. “I mean, the architecture, the culture, the food…”

“Yeah, alright, point taken,” Amy rolled her eyes. “I don’t blame him either. Is he speaking, do you know?”

“No idea,” Clara admitted. “Does one speak at an art conference? Or would it all be like… I don’t know, observed drawing?”

“Isn’t that basically *Pictionary*?”

Clara snorted. “Yeah, I suppose so. I don’t know, my knowledge of art tuition and conferences on the matter is pretty basic.”

“Can’t you ask one of the art teachers at school?”

Clara affixed her best friend with a look of incredulity. “No,” she said firmly. “They’re all slightly odd and smell of incense and talk about having ’inner children.’”

“Sounds creepy.”

“They are. Very.”

“Is Marcus that weird?”

“No, Marcus is a sensible human being who happens to teach art to 18- to 21-year-olds in a university setting.”

“Ah,” Amy held up one hand, looking pleased with herself. “You wouldn’t know if he smelt of incense though, would you?”

“Well,” Clara dithered. “His letters don’t…”

“Have you been *smelling* them?!”

“No!” Clara blushed furiously. “Just… incense is quite a pervasive smell, I would’ve noticed if his letters smelt of it.”

“Sure.”

“Stop being mean to me,” Clara pouted. “You’re not supposed to be mean to me, I’m sad about not getting to see my best friend.”

The words left her mouth before she could really think about them or their implications. Yet even as she voiced the thought aloud, she felt a small rush of satisfaction and clarity that yes — this was true; yes — Marcus was indeed her best friend; and then the realisation that oh *hell* — Amy was going to tease her about this for years to come.

“Hey,” Amy widened her eyes and adopted a look of great hurt. “I thought *I* was your best friend.”

“You are! But he’s… also my best friend.”

“Maybe I should fight him to the death.”

“Mm,” Clara felt a warm flush of relief that Amy didn’t seem to mind in a serious way. “You could toss the caber or something equally Scottish to compete for my hand in best-friend-ness.”
“Good plan,” Amy looped her arm through hers. “Maybe avoid calling him your best mate to Danny, though.”

“Believe me, I intend to. I don’t want to have to deal with any more of him being a prat.”

“I never really had him down as the jealous type,” Amy frowned quizzically. “Are you sure-”

“I don’t know what it is,” Clara sighed. “Something about Marcus… it just pisses him off. He’s got no issue with Adrian or anyone at work, even though Adrian is patently in love with me — it’s just Marcus.”

“Could it be because you actually acknowledge that Marcus exists, whereas Adrian is just like… a lovelorn puppy that you can feasibly ignore? And, indeed, do?”

“I guess,” Clara’s face fell. “God, how did I end up like this? I don’t do jealous boyfriends, I don’t do sulky boyfriends… I’ve had enough shit to deal with without having to tread on eggshells around him. Clara Oswald does not do treading on eggshells.”

“I mean,” Amy made a face. “There’s like, acquiescing that some topics are sensitive and skirting around them, and there’s being scared to mention things.”

“And this is the latter.”

“Yeah, that’s some bullshit right there. Are you sure it wouldn’t be better to just…”

“What?”

“Dump Danny?”

“No,” Clara shook her head at once, rejecting the notion outright. She had considered it, in idle moments of mental darkness, but never seriously. “No, he’s a good boyfriend in every other sense.”

“If a little boring.”

“Hey!”

“You’re not denying it.”

“I mean,” Clara chewed her lip. “Boring is good, sometimes. After Nina, I need someone boring and dependable.”

“Really? Because you seem to be, in the nicest of ways, bored.”

“I’m not bored, I’m comfortable.”

“Sure you are.”

“Can you stop being patronising?”

“I’m not!” Amy protested. “I’m just concerned for your romantic and sexual well-being. Speaking of which, is the sex still boringly vanilla?”

“Oh, my god. Amy, I am not having this discussion with you. Nope. No way. Not happening.”

“Why? We already had it once.”
“Yeah, because I was drunk!”

“Drunk words are sober thoughts.”

“Babe, can we not?” Clara begged. “I don’t want to spend more time dissecting every aspect of my relationship, because I do enough of that when I’m on my own, and, quite frankly, it’s exhausting. There are bridges I will cross when I get to them, but, for now, we are having a girly day out, and that is what I want to focus on.”

There was a long, terse silence while her best friend mulled over her words.

“Fine,” Amy said with resignation. “Girly day it is.”

In the draughty chill of his study, safely ensconced away from the heat of the summer sun, John flicked on his rickety desk lamp and flipped through his sketchbook until he found a clean page. Running his hands over the smooth, thick paper and taking a deep breath, he reached for a pencil and twirled it absently in his fingers as he tried to work out what he could draw to allay Clara’s upset and convey his apologies to her in an adequate and compassionate manner.

Stalling her had been a necessity, yes, but that did nothing to assuage his guilt over the matter. He knew now that his only hope lay in making reparations, and, with a sudden flash of inspiration, he had an idea.

Adjusting the lamp, he put pencil to paper, and began to draw.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Clara and Danny travel up to Scotland, and Clara's stubbornness gets the better of her... with potentially disastrous consequences.

There had been an argument on the way to the airport, in muttered voices in the back of a swelteringly hot taxi, Clara’s thighs sticking to the cracked faux-leather seats as she sweated in the potent combination of inclement summer heat and her boyfriend’s anger. She’d been advised, once, that arguments should not be considered to be competitions, with clearly defined winners and losers, but, if she’d been keeping tally — and she had — she’d lost that particular row. Which explained her surly, dour attitude at the airport itself, and the second argument over the seating arrangement, and then the third argument on the plane, which had been carried out in hushed voices accompanied by accusatory glares that had only served to infuriate them both further. From time to time, they’d attracted reproachful looks from nearby strangers who’d overheard a snippet of their terse conversation, and it was for that reason and that reason alone that Clara had won that argument by suggesting an immediate ceasefire, if only for the sake of courtesy to other passengers.

The source of the arguments had been, to Clara’s considerable lack of surprise, visiting Marcus, or the lack thereof. She’d tried to be casual when she’d mentioned that he would be unable to meet with them; tried not to let her disappointment become a tangible thing which lay between her and Danny, as unassailable as a wall, and yet he’d flown off the handle at once and accused her of a litany of perceived slights. Thus, they found themselves arguing again once they reached Edinburgh. In the yellow glow of the lights on the bus to their hotel, their argument recommenced again, reaching a hushed crescendo during which Clara pressed the bell and stopped the vehicle several stops early, disembarking before Danny could stop her and heading off into the warm July night.

As she stalked the cobbled streets of the Old Town, she felt an irrational flush of pride that she had at least won that argument. There was no way that Danny could claim otherwise, because he wasn’t the one who had delivered the final, winning hand of getting off the bus and vanishing. It was petty, yes, but it was better than losing her temper at him so absolutely that she lost control of her volume levels and shouted at him on a Scottish bus — not that she had any doubt that such incidents happened often — and so, while she felt a small stab of guilt, it was assuaged by her certainty that she had, in a small way, done the right thing. She didn’t know where she was going or what she would do now, but she was sure that the city would provide for her, and, with that in mind, she made a conscious effort to turn her feet towards food, or the promise thereof.

Spotting a McDonalds, she ducked inside and closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the cool of the recycled air being pumped around the interior, but when she took a deep breath and stepped towards the counter, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Danny was sat at a table in the centre of the space, surrounded by their luggage and looking forlornly up at her like a kicked puppy.

“Oh, my god,” she blurted, unable to contain her shock. “What are... what are you doing here?”

“You go to McDonalds when you’re stressed,” he mumbled wearily, rubbing the back of his neck and looking down at the table as she stepped closer. “Or hungover. Or sad, or angry, or anything
else. And this one seemed the most likely bet, because it’s closest to where you... went off.”

“I…” Clara was lost for words. She was angry at him, certainly, and hurt, and tired of arguing, but there was something deeply touching about his attention to detail, and the fact he knew her well enough to anticipate her movements. “That’s… yeah.”

“I ordered you the usual,” he slid a tray across the table and she took a seat opposite him tentatively, her mouth quirking into a shy smile as she took in the red container of fries perched besides a box of McNuggets. “I thought you might be hungry after walking around so much.”

“Arguing so much, you mean,” Clara shot back, snagging a chip and munching on it ruefully. “I’m sorry. I don’t… I hate this. I don’t want us to argue all the time, it’s not good for either of us. And I especially don’t want to argue on holiday. So, truce?”

Danny kept his gaze fixed on the grey tabletop, remaining silent for longer than was necessarily comfortable. “Are the chips cold? I can get you fresh ones.”

“Danny,” Clara reached over and placed her hand over his, squeezing lightly. “Danny, I’m trying to say sorry.”

“I know,” he mumbled, looking up at her for the first time, and she felt a stab of guilt when she saw that his eyes were wet with tears. “And so am I. I’m sorry for being a prat, and for arguing, and if the chips are cold, I’m sorry for that, too.”

“They’re not cold,” she assured him, opening the box of McNuggets and swivelling it around so that he could take one. “Go on. Have a peace nugget.”

He smiled a little then, turning his right hand over in hers and giving it a squeeze as he reached for a nugget with his left. He held it aloft, as though it were a glass of wine, and toasted: “To no more arguments.”

Clara tapped her chip against it in a mock-toast. “To no more arguments.”

While arguments were strictly vetoed, there had been some… discussions on the matter of going to Inverness. Danny had argued that there was little to no point; Clara had argued that seeing the Highlands was a fundamental part of visiting Scotland; and Amy — both to Clara’s considerable chagrin and bitter satisfaction — had chipped in via text and insisted that they visit her home city. Which is how it came to be that they had hired a car and spent the better part of a baking hot four hours driving across the Cairngorms, with Clara magnanimously ignoring Danny’s silence and instead focusing on finding the optimum driving music on the radio, and taking occasional photos out of the window to send to Amy.

By the time they reached Inverness, it was almost dark, and they wove through the streets on the outskirts of town in search of the Airbnb that Clara had booked the previous evening from their Edinburgh hotel.

“God, what a dump,” Danny muttered to himself, and Clara was almost inclined to agree when she spotted a familiar road sign that made her heart miss a beat. Danny misinterpreted her silence as judgement, and said defensively: “What? It is, we’ve been driving around for half an hour and all we’ve seen so far is grim 1960s developments.”
“No, I…” Clara turned her head to look back at the sign once they’d passed it, and that was all it took for Danny to put the pieces together.

“That’s his road, isn’t it?” he asked, and his voice was surprisingly low and even. “Marcus?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you…” he swallowed, evidently deciding to be the bigger person. “Do you want to maybe… I don’t know, do a drive-by?”

“Yeah,” Clara said, shrugging and forcing herself to act casual. This was kind of Danny; or, rather, it was either kindness or a carefully orchestrated trick to see what her reaction would be and then break their strict rule about not arguing. She hoped the former. “Yeah, why not? Get a sense of the place.”

Danny executed a neat three-point turn and then drove back towards the road, turning down it and slowing the car down to a crawl as Clara squinted in the semi-gloom to make out the numbers.

“Which one is it?” Danny asked, as though reading her mind, but Clara had already seen the house, and all she could do was gape in shock. “Clara?”

“It’s…” she pointed over to Number 12 with a shaking hand. Number 12, where the windows were ablaze with light. Number 12, which was most definitely currently occupied.

“He’s there?”

“Yeah,” she breathed, and before she could stop herself, she’d undone her seatbelt and scrambled out of the mostly stationary car, stalking over to the front door and hammering on it loudly. When it was answered, she began shouting immediately, too hurt and angry to keep her emotions in check. “You complete arsehole! You told me you were in Paris and yet here you are, _not in Paris_, and you lied to me, and-”

It was then that she looked, for the first time, at the man who had answered the door. He was short and rotund and completely bald, with a pair of glasses perched on his nose, and he was definitely _not_ Marcus.

“Oh,” she mumbled in contrition. “You’re… I was expecting someone else. Who are you?”

“That depends on who you might be.”

“I’m Clara Oswald,” she affixed him with a wary stare. “You?”

“Oh,” the stranger looked abruptly panicked and began to shift nervously from foot to foot. “I’m _urm_… in that case, yes, I’m Marcus MacAllister.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not, you’re right.”

“So, who the hell are you? Where’s Marcus?”

“Oh, hell,” the stranger muttered. “I knew this would happen; I _warned_ him, but did he listen? No, he did not.”

“Who _are_ you?” Clara repeated, starting to shake in the face of the stranger’s air of mysteriousness.

“Nardole Dellora. I’m a… friend of Marcus’s.”
“No, you’re not, because you just decided to pretend to be him when I told you who I was. A friend wouldn’t do that.”

“Damn, you’re good.”

“Thank you,” Clara said drily. “Now, please note that if you want to shag me, my boyfriend is in the car, and also you are really not my type.”

“I…” Nardole let out an indignant squeak. “No! Not at all, I… god, this is… look, since you’re going to find out anyway and it’s not my place to tell you, come in and I’ll make tea and phone the necessary people.”

“Now you’re scaring me.”

“Well, I promise I don’t bite,” Nardole looked abruptly weary, and at the sound of a car door slamming behind Clara, his attention shifted. “Is that your boyfriend? He can come in and wait too, if it makes you feel any safer.”

Clara turned and took in the sight of Danny, leaning against the bonnet of the car and looking — she noted, with a rush of affection — every inch the ex-soldier that he was. “Danny,” she called. “Danny, something weird is going on.”

“What kind of weird?” he growled, immediately heading towards her and placing a reassuring arm around her waist before turning his attention to Nardole. “Who the hell are you?”

“Nardole Dellora.”

“What the hell kind of a name is that?”

“Well, what’s yours?”

“Daniel Pink.”

“Yeah, because that’s so much better,” Nardole rolled his eyes. “Look, please come in and sit down, OK? I will call the necessary people to sort everything out.”

“What do you mean ‘sort everything out’?” Danny asked suspiciously. “What are you planning on doing to us?”

“Making you tea,” Nardole shot back. “And then calling my friend, who will explain things to you about Marcus.”

“What is there to explain?” Clara asked, her voice high with terror. “What… what do you mean?”

“Please,” Nardole said tiredly, stepping back and holding the door open for them. “Come in.”

Clara remembered very little of the next hour, consumed as she was by panic. She remembered gripping onto a mug of hot tea and sitting in a living room which seemed to be organised chaos. She remembered Danny by her side, his hand on the small of her back as she trembled and tried to recall how to breathe. She remembered hushed conversations in the next room, and the light fading to black around them.

It wasn’t until there was a knock at the front door that she felt herself return to life once again, as Nardole looked suddenly guilty and got to his feet.

“That’s…” she whispered. “That’s…”
Danny pressed a kiss to her forehead, his presence comforting her as she clung onto him like a lifeline. “It’s OK,” he assured her in a soft, calming voice. “It’s going to be fine, all this drama is just-”

A silver-haired man in a black jumper full of small holes stepped into the lounge, a sheepish expression on his face. “Hello, Clara,” he said in a trembling voice. “I’m ah… well, I am, for all intents and purposes, Marcus MacAllister.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The truth emerges, piece by piece, and Clara makes a decision that will change everything...

“Sorry,” Clara said in an incredulous tone, beginning to shake her head in stupefied disbelief. “I think there’s been some kind of mistake — Marcus MacAllister is my age, he’s young, he’s not…” she broke off, letting the last word hang, unspoken, in the air between them. “Who are you?”

“I’m Professor John Smith,” the stranger said, running his hand through his hair and making it stand on end. “Or-”

“Sorry, but no one is actually called John Smith,” Clara said flatly. “That is not an actual, real name that people have. What are you actually called?”

“Well, that’s what I was christened, and what I am, in fact, actually called. Although you would know me as Marcus MacAllister.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Clara shook her head again, this time in wilful ignorance, choosing to fail to comprehend his words. “I really… it’s not… you’re not…”

“Clara,” Danny said, and she was surprised by the ice-cold fury in his tone. She had seen him angry before, yes, but never like this — usually his temper was hot and quick, not this bitter thing that smouldered between them. “I think what he’s saying is that he’s catfished you.”

“I’ve… what?” John asked, his brow furrowing as he looked down at the pair in evident confusion. “What on earth does that mean?”

“Catfishing,” Danny said in a low, dangerous tone. “Pretending to be someone you’re not. Manipulating someone using a false persona. Using that persona to construct an entire narrative which is based on fiction and deceit, in order to lie to someone and make yourself seem more desirable. There’s a whole MTV show on it. We could go on it, couldn’t we Clara? He said he was a professor — I’m sure his university would be very interested to know what he’s been getting up to.”

“I’ve not been catfishing you,” John said in a calm voice. “Not for reasons of maliciousness or selfishness, anyway.”

“So, you admit it? You have been catfishing her, and making her feel like crap by telling her you were in Paris so your lies wouldn’t be uncovered?”

“Danny, stop it,” Clara snapped. “If you speak for me again, I’ll detach something from you.”

Danny lapsed into a surly, sour silence, resentfully allowing Clara to speak again.

“Explain,” she said, feeling abruptly and bizarrely composed. “Explain, now, who you are, or so help me god, I will go to your university and tell them everything, and I will have you kicked off the faculty staff and stripped of your pension for harassment, deceit, and generally being a complete bastard.”
“I…” John began, looking nervously between Clara and Danny before sinking into the armchair opposite them and putting his head in his hands. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Why did you invent Marcus? That would be the most logical place to begin.”

“I didn’t invent him.”

Danny let out an incredulous, disbelieving snort. “You’ve literally just admitted to lying to—”

Clara elbowed him hard in the side, and he fell silent once more. “You told me that you’ve been deceiving me,” she reminded him. “Indirectly, but you did; you admitted to lying. So, tell me, and tell me right now, why did you invent Marcus MacAllister?”

In lieu of a response, John reached into his pocket and withdrew a battered leather wallet, thumbing through it in silence for a few seconds before extracting a photograph and holding it out to Clara.

“What?” she asked, wrinkling her nose. “What is it?”

“Just…” he sighed impatiently. “Just look at it.”

Clara reached out and took the proffered item, looking down at it and feeling a lurch of recognition. There was Marcus — the Marcus she knew from photos — with a dark-haired woman and, stood beside them, someone who was undoubtedly John. Both he and the woman looked proud, their arms looped around Marcus’s waist, and Clara realised with horror what she was looking at.

“Oh, my god,” she breathed, looking over at John in shock. “You’re… he’s… you’re his dad?”

John looked indignant, and through gritted teeth growled the word: “Brother.”

“You can’t be, he’s much younger than you are.”

“Twenty-four years, yes.”

“So, you’re clearly his dad! Is that his mum? It is, isn’t it? Oh, my god, you’ve been catfishing me as your son, that is so beyond creepy—”

“Will you please hear me out?” John rolled his eyes in exasperation. “That’s my sister, for your information. Marcus was younger, yes, because he was adopted by my parents when his died. His dad worked in the shipyards with mine, before the industry shut down and everything went to shit. His family lost everything and well… you don’t need to know the specifics, but his parents made their choices, and we ended up with a new baby brother — different parents, different surname, see? I was twenty-five, so I wasn’t very interested — I was away a lot of the time, playing music and doing art and being a slightly rubbish hell-raising punk. Missy — that’s my sister, the woman in the photo — she was only seventeen, so she was at home with Marcus a lot. She was mad about him; used to carry him around with her and play with him and read to him, all of that sort of thing. People would think she was his mum, not his sister.”

“You’re really not doing much to explain why you’ve been catfishing me as your baby brother,” Clara said.

“Because you asked me to explain how I was related to him!”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not!” John protested. “Bloody hell, woman, I’m getting there!”
“So, get on with it!”

“Fine!” he shot back. “Right, don’t yell at me, but first there’s more family context, OK? So, after my punk days, I was more or less skint, so I moved home and spent time with Marcus and just… fell in love. Not in a weird or creepy way; just… you couldn’t spend time with him and not. He was the sweetest little boy — kind and caring and a bit hyper, yeah, but he was so bright and aware and focused. You just wanted to love him and be loved by him; it was impossible not to. It broke my heart when I moved out and… you know, adulthood really got going and such. I’d spent a long time trying to be an artist, but I needed a steady income to support myself, so I started working at the university. Teaching part-time at first, then full-time. When Marcus came along, eighteen and all grown-up and making his own decisions, wanting to do Physics with Art — as you know, sorry — everyone thought he was nuts, but I didn’t mind because I got to teach him. Not that he’d ever admit to anyone that I was his brother; oh no, that would’ve been far too uncool for him. But things were good: we hung out once a week or so, we chatted via email, everything was great.”

“So, when did you start pretending to be him?” Clara asked, her tone still accusatory. “Was he ever even in the pen pal scheme?”

“He was,” John’s mouth quirked up into a sad smile, and it was then that Clara began to feel a dawning sense of comprehension; a niggling sense of foreshadowing as to what John was on the verge of telling her. “He talked about you so much, Clara. Every week, it was ‘Clara this’ and ‘Clara that.’”

“Oh,” Clara worried at her lip, hating herself for the question she was about to ask. “So, what happened?”

“He ah…” John passed his hand over his face, taking a deep breath, and Clara prayed to god that her suspicions were not about to be proved right. “He… he did a year out. I mean, during his undergrad, he did a year in industry — again, sorry, as you know — and he just… loved it. Decided to do a Physics postgrad, and, of course, you know, I was devastated to be losing him as a student, but he promised we’d still hang out. He was a bit less embarrassed about me by then; bit more mature. But he still wanted to have a good time, so he decided he was going to go out for Halloween.”

“No…” Clara breathed, reaching for Danny’s hand and squeezing it almost subconsciously.

“He was with friends, and they were on their way to a party. Their, ah…” John swallowed. “Their taxi was hit by another car. Drunk driver. Marcus… he was badly hurt. They got him to hospital, but by the time we got there…”

He didn’t finish his sentence. He didn’t need to — the look on his face said enough.

Clara felt her eyes fill with tears, and she swiped them away, determined not to let herself show any vulnerability until she had the answers she needed. Marcus was dead, and that was alone was almost too much for her to process, but not only was he dead, the man in front of her had been assuming his identity for the better part of five years. Before she could mourn her friend, she needed to understand why John might have been moved to do that. She needed to remain logical before she gave herself over to her emotions.

“Why did you…” her voice cracked, and she sniffed hard, attempting to regain her composure. “Why did you lie? For all that time, why did you pretend to be him?”

“It wasn’t planned,” John said, looking her in the eye for the first time, and she was taken aback by the guilt and sadness that she saw laid bare in his gaze. “Please believe me, it wasn’t planned; it wasn’t some dastardly scheme. We were clearing out his place and there on the doormat was this
letter and it was from you, talking about your life and asking him questions about his and seeming so
full of light and hope and kindness. Missy said I needed to tell you, but I sat down with a pen and a
piece of paper and I just… I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t write the words; I couldn’t make it real. So,
instead, I just… I don’t know, it was like being on autopilot — I just wrote a reply, like he would,
and sent it.”

“And then?” Clara asked, her tone gentler. “Why did you carry on?”

“Because I didn’t know how to tell you, once I’d done that! How could I just spring that on you?
‘Oh, you know that letter I sent you? That was from me, pretending to be my dead brother. He died a
month ago.’”

“So, you carried on pretending to be him?”

“It… seemed easier. Kinder. And besides, I… I came to care about you. Almost immediately, I could
see why he did, and I came to share his feelings. I don’t know how to explain it, either, but I felt
like… I felt like I was keeping part of him alive when I wrote to you. He would’ve wanted that —
me to be kind, and to love others.”

“Right,” Danny said suddenly, getting to his feet and narrowing his eyes at John. “Did you just admit
that you’re in love with my girlfriend?”

“No!” John said, looking stricken but getting to his feet nonetheless, a reflexive action based on
subconscious machismo. “No, I don’t mean it like… like that, I mean loving others as in showing
them compassion!”

“So, pretending to be your dead brother, that’s showing compassion?”

“I-”

“Lying to my girlfriend, that’s showing compassion?”

“No-”

“Telling her now that your brother has been dead for five years, and you’ve been deceiving her all
this time, that’s showing compassion?”

“No, of c-”

“You’re a real piece of shit,” Danny snarled, and without warning lunged forwards.

Clara couldn’t tell anyone why she did it. Perhaps it was the explanation John had given her, or the
way he had told his story. Perhaps it was pity, or perhaps it was his talk of compassion. Perhaps it
was simply the fact that she wanted to know more about his motivations, or the man that Marcus had
been, or the man that John was. But she made a split-second decision and stepped in front of Danny,
deflecting his fist with her forearm and shifting his momentum, causing him to stumble towards the
sofa with an almost-comical look of shock.

Emotions flickered over Danny’s face, his expression moving from fury to concern to confusion to
sadness and then back to fury. “What the… what…” he stammered, blinking at Clara, who was
breathing heavily and scowling down at him. “I could’ve hit you!”

“But you didn’t,” she said coolly, turning to face John, who looked astounded. “Are you alright?”

“Am I…” he asked, looking at her with awe and trepidation. “Yeah, fine. How did you…”
“After-school taekwondo. Knew it’d be useful one day.”

“Clara,” Danny interjected, his voice dangerously calm. “Clara, get in the car.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Get in the car.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re going back to London before this man can continue feeding you lies.”

“Danny, he’s not… I want to talk to him!”

“He’s talked. He’s said his piece. What else is there to say?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t just leave!” she argued. “I-”

Danny turned and walked out of the room before she could stop him, and she shot an apologetic look at John.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, heading outside in pursuit of Danny, only to find her suitcase and handbag on the kerb and their hire car accelerating in the direction of the main road. “What…”

“I’m sorry,” John said from behind her, and she jumped. “I know you want to talk but now might not be the best time. Would you like a lift to the station?”

“Why…” Clara frowned. “Why would I want to go to the station?”

“I thought you might want to go after him.”

“Well, the dickhead has left me here for saying I want to talk to you,” Clara said bitterly. “So, let’s talk.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In the wake of Danny's departure, John and Clara discuss the how, the what, and the why of the situation.

“Urm,” John stammered, hovering somewhat awkwardly in front of his unanticipated guest and trying to work out whether she bore him any ill will or not. He hadn’t been overly worried about threats of physical retaliation earlier in the evening — not from her, at least — but the knowledge that she was trained in taekwondo had unsettled him, and there was a lingering worry that she might yet decide she had had enough and throw him to the ground. Or maybe that was judo. Either way, he was nervous. “So. Would you like to maybe… come back inside?”

“No, let’s have this conversation in the road, so all of your friend’s neighbours can hear,” she shot back, and his composure must have flickered because, a moment later, she added in a gentler tone: “Sorry. Yeah, inside would be good.”

Reflexively, John reached for her suitcase and began to wheel it inside, and Clara looked for a moment as though she were about to protest before instead picking up her handbag and following him with a weary expression.

“I’m, ah…” he began, as they crossed the threshold and he leant her case against a wall in the hallway. “I’m sorry about Danny.”

“Yeah, me too,” she mumbled, hovering in the middle of the space and looking abruptly… well, he wasn’t sure. Embarrassed, certainly, but something else he couldn’t quite put a finger on. She sniffed and swiped her hand across her eyes, and it was only then that he realised that it was sadness.

“Anyway. You wanted to talk, so you might as well get on with it.”

“You were the one who want-”

“Can we not do this? Because I’ve had enough of it from him, and he’s not the one who’s been lying to me for five years.”

“Sorry,” he said at once, feeling chastised. “Sorry, I just… I’ll talk, but I don’t know what you want to talk about. I mean, there’s my work, your work, Scotland, London…”

“Let’s start with why you lied to me.”

“Ah,” John felt a swooping sense of guilt as he took in the sight of her accusatory stare. “Urm, should we maybe sit down?”

“Why? Are you worried I’m going to walk out and leave you?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, it’s not like I have anywhere to go, is it? Or any transport. Or anyone nearby who actually gives a shit.”
“I do.”

“You do what?” she raised her eyebrows. “Have somewhere to go? Have transport? Yeah, great, I’ll just elope with you. I’m sure my boyfriend will be thrilled. That’s if he even still is my boyfriend.”

“Why on earth wouldn’t he be?”

“Because he’s a prat,” Clara flung her hands in the air. “I don’t know! He seems to be so obsessed with the idea of us breaking up that I can’t help but feel he wants to! Now, answer my bloody question — you do what?”

“Oh,” John sucked in a breath, feeling awkward as he confessed: “Give a shit.”

“About?”

“You.”

“Oh, Christ,” Clara said in disdain. “Like this needed to get any weirder.”

“Clara,” he said defensively, his tone coming out a little sharper than intended. “Regardless of who I was pretending to be, I’ve been writing to you for five years. I know every aspect of your life and, funnily enough, as I’m not made of wood, I, in your eloquent words, give a shit.”

“What, so you’ve got a better way of phrasing that?”

“I would reasonably argue that I have a duty of care towards you, yes, particularly as you are stuck in my neck of the woods for reasons which are my fault, and you also know no one up here except for me.”

“I don’t know you,” she mumbled sourly. “I know Marcus.”

“Marcus is me, I am Marcus,” he reminded her in a monotone. “At least for the last few years. You know me, just through the lens of Marcus.”

“Right.”

“See, this is why I don’t try to do nice things,” he said with irritability. “Because they inevitably blow up in my face and I end up regretting it.”

“Oh, so you had a duty of care but now you regret knowing me?” Clara spat. “That’s just charming, isn’t it?”

“No,” he said at once, sighing. “No, that’s not what I… look, why don’t we go into the lounge and Nardole can make us a cup of something and we can actually talk like reasonable human beings?”

“Because I’m not your butler,” a voice interjected, and both of them jumped as they took in the sight of Nardole, leaning in the lounge doorway and observing them both with a look of protracted disinterest. “Also, I know what you’re about to do, and the answer is no.”

“What am I about to do?” John shot back, arching an eyebrow. “Go on, you tell me, if you’re such an expert.”

“You’re going to offer to let her spend the night here, and then drive her to the station tomorrow morning.”

John scowled. “Alright, there’s no need to show off.”
“I’m not staying here,” Clara said firmly, but Nardole only ignored her.

“It’s not happening, anyway. There’s sensitive stuff in this place; she could cause all sorts of problems.”

“I’m not-”

“Well, I can’t take her back to mine, can I?” John pointed out. “That’s only going to piss off the boyfriend even further.”

“Can you stop talking about me like I’m not here?” Clara all but shouted, and both men turned to look at her. “I’m not staying with either of you. I’ll get a hotel.”

“Clara, it’s late,” John reminded her. “You can stay here, OK? Nardole’s just whining, he wouldn’t mind.”

“I wo-” Nardole began, but John shot him a dark look. “-uld not mind at all.”

“Why can’t I stay at yours?” Clara asked John, and he was momentarily lost for words. “Other than it would piss Danny off?”

“It’s a while away, even by car.”

“So?”

“Look, the main issue here is that it would really, really annoy your boyfriend, and frankly I’m not up for doing that any further given that he already hates me.”

“I mean…”

“As do you, so, really, I’m not up for further shooting myself in the foot-slash-feet and losing you entirely by taking you back to the dump that is my place.”

“I think he’s embarrassed because he lives in a small castle that’s falling down,” Nardole added helpfully, and John had to resist the urge to strangle him. “And he doesn’t want you to get rained on or crushed by falling masonry.”

“It was not falling masonry,” John groaned. “It was a piece of plaster, and you didn’t die, did you?”

“No, but-”

“Sorry,” Clara interjected. “ ‘Small castle’?”

“It’s not a castle,” John scoffed. “He’s over-exaggerating. Large house, yes.”

“Why did you think he was using my address?” Nardole smirked maddeningly at Clara. “Couldn’t have you writing to his estate, could he?”

“There’s an estate?” Clara shot John an incredulous look. “Bloody hell.”

“It’s nothing special,” John felt his cheeks burn, embarrassed as ever by people’s enduring perceptions of him. “Really. It’s nothing of note. Can we please just… move on?”

“Is this why you started writing to me?” Clara asked, her tone serious, but her eyes full of something that seemed almost akin to playfulness. “Because you were rattling around your big old castle, alone, and you needed a hobby?”
“How do you know I’m alone?” he shot back. “I might have a harem of women to cater to my every whim.”

“Yeah, so that’s why you’re catfishing Blackpudlians by pretending to be your brother.”

“Good point,” he acquiesced, although not without a grimace. “Look, we’ve digressed from the real issue here. Nardole, are you going to let us stay, or not?”

“Hang on, this is an ‘us’ now?” Nardole shook his head fervently. “No, no, no. There’s one spare bed and I’m not having you sharing. She might kill you in your sleep.”

“Or he might kill me,” Clara pointed out. “I’m still not entirely sure you’re not both going to kill me, and then Danny is really going to feel bad, isn’t he? So, on second thoughts, actually… I’m sure my jugular is sliceable.”

“I’m not going to…” John sighed. “I’m not going to hurt you, Clara. Duty of care.”

“Fine. Still not sharing a bed.”

“Wasn’t planning to. I’ll take the sofa.”

Clara hesitated for a moment, considering this idea. “Fine,” she said after a few seconds. “But if anyone asks — and by ‘anyone,’ I mean Danny — then I stayed at a hotel, which you paid for.”

“Fine,” John acquiesced with an easy shrug. “Completely fine with me.”

The next morning, Clara rested her head against the edge of her train seat, staring out of the window and trying not to worry too much about what was awaiting her when she returned to London. John had dropped her off at the station with an awkward, mumbled farewell and a half-hug that had both been entirely unsatisfying and entirely inappropriate at once, and he’d pressed an envelope into her hand by way of goodbye as she turned away from him and headed towards her platform. She’d not opened it yet, focused as she’d been on buying tickets and coffee and manoeuvring herself and her luggage onto the train, but she looked down at it now, curious as to what it contained.

The previous night had been… she couldn’t find an appropriate adjective, not even to recap the situation to herself. John had talked about his brother for what felt like hours, and she’d tried to understand, but no matter how much effort she made, she simply couldn’t comprehend what had driven him to lie for as long as he had. An illogical part of her wanted to speak to Marcus — the real Marcus — about what John had done, in the instinctual way that she had responded to crises for the better part of the last decade, and yet her rational brain knew that the option was no longer there; that her friend was not even technically alive; and that the man who had lied to her was not, despite his insistences, the man who she had become friends with.

Sighing, she picked up the nondescript brown envelope and turned it over in her hands, her fingers seeking the flap and edging it open millimetre by millimetre, smoothing the paper down as she went to avoid rips. Tipping it up, she was surprised when a small rectangle of cardboard slid out, a classroom scene depicted on it in bright colours and stark black lines. Squinting down at it, she recognised the teacher stood at the front to be herself, and she smiled a little as she realised that John had drawn this for her, undoubtedly with the intention of presenting it to her as Marcus as an apology for being unable to see her. There’d been a change of plan, yes, but the sentiment behind the apology
was still there — although she wasn’t sure that she was yet ready to consider forgiving him, hand-
drawn illustrated apology or not.

Reaching for her phone, she clicked the lock button and checked the screen in the hope that there might be a message from Danny — something, anything, to indicate to her where he might be, what he thought of her, or whether he was even still technically her boyfriend. Instead, her lockscreen taunted her — the two of them in happier times, their arms slung around each other’s shoulders as they sat on a park bench. She remembered Amy taking the photo, laughing in the April sun, and she felt her stomach lurch.

Unlocking the device, she opened her messages and typed out to him: *Where are you?*

The response was almost instant, and monosyllabic. *Home.*

*What’s going on?*

*I thought I made that obvious. We’re having a break.*

Clara clenched her free hand into a fist, her nails biting into her palm and leaving crescent-moon shaped indentations in the soft skin as she fought to keep herself from crying.

*We are?*

*Yes.*

There was no concern there; no asking of where she was or how she was or whether she was alright. Switching her phone off, Clara stowed it in her handbag and then got to her feet, heading in search of the dining car and hoping to god that there would at least, for the sake of her sanity, be wine.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Clara is forced to make a decision, but her choice will have life-changing consequences...

When Clara disembarked the train at Kings Cross that evening, exhausted and still residually drunk from the wine she had consumed onboard, she felt her spirits lift when she caught sight of her best friend, leaning against a ticket machine and looking — for once — appropriately serious. As she stumbled towards her, trying to juggle her handbag and her suitcase and the newspaper she had purchased at Edinburgh to while away the time between trains, Amy stepped forwards with an air of quiet composure, taking Clara’s case and setting it aside before wrapping her arms around her tightly. Clara couldn’t help it — the warm familiarity of the embrace and the fatigue of the journey, combined with Danny’s curt words and the knowledge that her life was in the throes of crashing down, and she burst into tears.

“Oh, Clara,” Amy murmured, stroking her hair and letting her sob against her shoulder. “Oh, babe. I’m so sorry.”

“I j-just wanted t-to fix things and n-now they’re all b-broken…” Clara managed, faintly aware that people were staring at them but finding herself unable to care. “Everything’s g-gone wrong and it’s my f-fault.”

“It’s not,” Amy assured her in a low, fierce tone. “It’s not your fault that your boyfriend is a prat.”

“B-but…”

“No ‘buts,’” Amy said sternly, pulling back and placing her hands on Clara’s shoulders before affixing her with a pragmatic look. “Come on. Let’s get you back to mine, OK? Back to mine and you can have a nice cup of tea and a cry and let it all out.”

Clara nodded, childlike in her acquiescence to Amy’s bossiness, and allowed herself to be led out of the station and into a waiting cab. A faint sense of alarm overtook her then, and she grabbed her best friend’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze as she mumbled: “But… this’ll be ex-”

“It’s fine,” Amy told her in a firm voice. “Besides, I’m not taking you on public transport like this. You’ll be embarrassed, and other people will be nice, and you’ll get hysterical. This is the better option.”

Clara nodded, slumping down in her seat and resting her head on Amy’s shoulder as central London slipped past in an endless parade of tree canopies, bright lights, and reflections. As they approached Shoreditch, the ostentatious buildings fell away and the streets became thronged with revellers enjoying their Friday night, and Clara slouched even lower, unable and unwilling to share in their celebratory mood.

“Not long now,” Amy murmured to her, pressing a quick kiss to her temple. “Almost there.”

Clara nodded and closed her eyes, letting the visual world fall away and focusing on the alcohol
moving sluggishly through her system, giving an unreal feeling to the evening and making her head ache in apprehension of tomorrow’s hangover. There would be the hangover, and then there would be the recollection of what had happened with Danny, and she groaned and curled up, clenching her fists against her sternum in a bid to try and hold together the shattered elements of her life as they threatened to slip from her grasp.

“Babe?” Amy said softly, startling her out of her introspection after what felt like seconds. “We’re here.”

Clara opened her eyes and blinked in the gloom of the back street that Amy lived on, trying to focus on Amy’s murmured words to the taxi driver so that she could ascertain the cost of the trip and pay her back later on. Unable to hear, she resigned herself instead to opening the car door, stepping out onto the street and realised the long journey and the wine had left her unsteady on her feet. Almost at once, she stumbled over the edge of the pavement, finding herself sprawled on the rough tarmac a moment later with a burning sensation in both of her knees.

“Clara,” Amy said with concern, scrambling out of the car with the luggage and helping her to her feet with concern as she waved the driver away. “God, your knees are wrecked. Come on. Let’s get you inside.”

“I can manage,” Clara mumbled, as Amy looped one arm around Clara’s shoulders, slung her handbag over the other arm, and somehow managed to wheel the suitcase along behind them as she led them towards her flat. “I can walk.”

“Clearly, you can’t.”

“Can,” Clara insisted, pushing Amy away half-heartedly and taking a slow, halting step forwards, looking down at her knees and seeing that her best friend’s assertion was correct: they were bloody and full of grit, and she felt a bitter sense of triumph at the sight. See, Danny, she thought to herself. Look what you made me do.

“Fine,” Amy shrugged and trudged on ahead of her, unlocking the door to her place and then waiting on the threshold for Clara, who made it inside with a palpable sense of relief. “Tea?”

“Please,” Clara mumbled, sidling past her into the lounge and taking a seat on the sofa, before stretching out her legs and wincing. “Ow.”

“OK, we might need to deal with your knees first.”

“No,” Clara shook her head, unwilling to face first aid without tea to keep her calm. “Tea, then knees.”

“You’re the boss,” Amy said with a sigh, vanishing in the direction of the kitchen, and Clara began to pick pieces of grit out of her knees with her fingertips, noticing then that her hands bore the effects of her fall, too — her palms were raw and scraped, and she clenched and unclenched her fists, feeling them sting with the motion.

“Ow,” she whispered again, mostly to herself, and she felt her eyes fill with angry, bitter tears. “Stupid woman.”

“You’re not,” Amy said pragmatically, returning to the lounge with two mugs of steaming tea and a first-aid kit. “Now, are you going to explain what the hell happened, or am I going to have to withhold your hot beverage until you do?”

Looking over at her best friend, Clara resigned herself to the inevitable, taking a deep breath, and the
words began to spill out of her in a long, unchecked stream of consciousness: the arguments with Danny; the fateful decision to go to Inverness; the truth about Marcus; and then that final decision, the one that had apparently changed everything — her desire to talk to John, and her desire to understand. Her curiosity had got the better of her, and now it had seemingly cost her everything — one of her best friends, her relationship, her happiness, and even, she thought in a moment of hysteria, her uninjured knees.

When she was done, she was on the verge of tears once more, her breathing rapid and panicked, and Amy affixed her with a sympathetic look from her position on the floor where she had decamped for the sake of cleaning Clara’s war wounds, but had failed to shift from once she had become enthralled by the story.

“Jesus,” her best friend said, sounding horrified by the whole thing. “Danny really is a Grade A prick.”

“I just… I don’t understand him. I can see why he’d be upset about Marcus if Marcus was… well, who I thought he was, you know? Young and handsome. But he wasn’t. He was old, Amy, and grey, and I just… I don’t understand why Danny thinks John’s a threat.”

“You care about him, don’t you?”

“Danny?”

“John.”

“I…” Clara hesitated, unsure whether she did or not. “I don’t know. I cared about Marcus, but then this… this has just changed everything, and now I have no idea.”

“But you must care about John, too, or you wouldn’t have wanted to stay and talk.”

“Well, I wanted to know about Marcus. And besides… he seemed kind of…”

“ Weird?”

“Lonely,” Clara admitted, chewing her lip and feeling surprised by her own honesty. “Like, he seemed lost and scared and he seemed worried I was going to just… I don’t know. Cut and run.”

“Babe, you kind of have.”

“I have not!”

“Well, are you going to ever speak to him again?”

“I don’t know,” Clara confessed, sighing as she realised that she would have to make a decision about that as well as about Danny. “I’m angry at him for lying, even if I do understand why he did it, but I just can’t reconcile the fact that he’s the one I’ve been writing to for years and he’s the one I considered my friend. At the end of the day, yeah, Marcus was my friend, but if it’s John that I’ve been writing to then maybe we could be friends as well?”

“Christ, don’t tell Danny that.”

“I don’t intend to, don’t you worry.”

“Have you heard anything from Danny? Other than the shitty texts while you were the train?”

“He won’t answer my calls,” Clara dropped her gaze to her lap, picking at a hangnail. “I tried over
and over in Edinburgh to get hold of him, and I just... couldn’t.”

“Do you want to be with him?”


“Are you sure...” Amy hesitated. “Are you sure you don’t just want to be with him because you’re scared of being alone?”

“No!” Clara said at once, glaring down at her best friend. “How could you say that? I love him!”

“Even though he does things like this, and sulks if you speak to other men?”

“He’s just... protective.”

“Jealous.”

“So he cares, shoot him.”

“Clara,” Amy said softly. “Clara, this isn’t a healthy relationship. You need to think about what you want, and whether that’s going to mean being with him or not.”

“I know,” Clara closed her eyes. “I know, I just... I don’t know what I want.”

She felt Amy take her hands tenderly in hers and give them a gentle squeeze. “There’s time to work it out,” her best friend promised her. “There’s so much time.”

The summer holidays had, if Clara was honest, proved to be a blessing. Clara had been able to let her hands and knees heal; pay a visit home, carefully timed to avoid her stepmother; prepare for the coming school year by buying and reading new books she didn’t strictly need; and try to make sense of the tumultuous emotions she’d been wrestling with regarding her relationship with Danny.

She’d heard nothing from him, nor seen him so much as post on social media, so, in light of their apparent relationship hiatus, she’d spent several hours over several days in her flat, making copious pages of notes on how she felt and what she thought and where she wanted their relationship to go. There was a list of pros and a list of cons; there was a mind map of potential problems with colour-coded solutions, and there was, taped to the bookcase in her lounge, the most important note of all: Just SAY it.

Because she’d made up her mind. If he could change his behaviour — not his whole personality, not his whole self, but just his behaviour and just a little — so that his jealousy and protectiveness was under control, then she could and would be with him. Alright, so their relationship wasn’t the passionate love affair that historic romance novels had led Clara to expect. Alright, he wasn’t the sort of man she would usually have gone for. But he loved her, and she loved him — it had been slow to develop, yes, but Danny was impossible not to love, and each day she had found herself a little more enamoured with him. That sentiment could only grow, and all she had to do to sow the seeds of their future together was pick up the phone and call him.

Standing in her lounge on the day that she had deliberately pencilled into her diary for the specific purpose of doing so, Clara looked around at the assembled notes tacked and pinned to every
available surface; looked at the framed photographs which adorned her bookshelf; and looked at herself in the mirror.

“You love him,” she told her reflection in her best teacher voice. “Amy is wrong; you are not afraid of being alone. You love him, and this will work.”

Without further hesitation, and praying to god that this would be the time that Danny answered the phone, Clara dialled his number and listened to the line ring.

“Clara?”

She felt her heart soar. He’d picked up. That was the first obstacle overcome. “Hi,” she began nervously, trying to steady her breathing. “Urm, it’s me. Obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Well,” he clicked his tongue in the way she knew he always did when he was thinking. “I can be there in a couple of minutes, so—”

“No, no. Not while you’re in the room.”

“Oh, stupid me. The very idea.”

His tone was light enough to reassure her, and she chanced mimicking his teasing brusqueness: “Can you just… shut up. And stay shut up. I have things to say… not all of them good.”

“So, wouldn’t it be better if I was actually there?”

Clara smiled fondly at her own reflection. “Oh, Danny, everything would be better if you were here, but maybe… maybe not this chat. OK. Urm. OK. Before all of the stuff I need to say, before all of the stuff we did wrong… I love you.”

“I love you,” Danny said immediately, and she could practically see his relieved little smile.

“No,” she shot back, irrationally exasperated. “Not like that. Not like it’s automatic. Not like it’s how you end the phone call, the sign off, the pat on the back. I love you. This is me making the decision to commit, but you have to understand that there are some things I need from you, and an automatic ‘I love you’ is not going to be enough to convince me that this can work out.”

“Right. But just so we’re clear… I do love you.”

“And I love you,” she said reflexively, despite her words of seconds earlier. “I’ll never say those words again. Not to anybody else, ever. Those words, from me, are yours now.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, and Clara furrowed her brow.

“So, urm, that’s a thing.”

The silence was growing oppressive now, and fear was beginning to creep into Clara’s mind, heavy and all-consuming.

“OK, Danny, please speak to me. This is… this is killing me.”

“Hello?” a stranger’s voice crackled through the handset, unfamiliar and full of an emotion Clara
couldn’t quite place. “Hello, is someone there?”

“Hello?” Clara asked, feeling a surge of annoyance at herself that she hadn’t bothered to check where Danny was, and that he’d now evidently handed his phone over to a friend for… well, reasons she couldn’t fathom. “Urm, yeah, who is this?”

“I just picked up the phone. I’m sorry. I found it.”

“Oh,” Clara felt a sudden, swooping sense of panic. Danny would never leave his phone somewhere. Not mid-phone call, not without hanging up. “Urm, can you please put me back on the phone to Danny? I was talking to Danny, to my boyfriend. Where is he?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“OK,” Clara could hardly breathe, and yet somehow she managed to ask: “Urm, what are you sorry about? Could you please just pass the phone back to-”

“He was crossing the road. I found the phone, it must have just got thrown. The car, it just came out of nowhere…”

Clara’s own phone clattered to the carpet, and instinctively, she began to run.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Clara struggles to deal with her grief, and worse still, her guilt.

There was no “before.” Thinking about it hurt too much to contemplate, so Clara found herself trapped in the horrors of “after” — one long, meaningless stretch of time that was indivisible and intransigent and marked only by her absolute certainty that what had happened had been her fault. She’d said as much to the paramedics when she’d arrived at the scene and found Danny being placed on a stretcher and wheeled into the sterile confines of an ambulance. She’d said it again during the brief ride to the hospital, clutching his hand and alternately berating herself and praying to a god she didn’t believe in that the kind of miracle she had always eschewed might now be granted to her.

Of course, the same thing had happened way back then, the first time her life had been marked by loss, and there had been no heavenly intervention then. No flash of light, no angels, no miraculous reprieve. There had been pain and there had been suffering and then her mother had died, despite the prayers and the doctors and the clinical trials, and with Danny it had been no different. They’d wheeled him away from her; time had stopped; and then a kindly nurse had taken her into a room and imparted the sad news in an appropriately sombre tone. There had been lots of euphemisms; lots of gentle language designed to lessen the blow of the fact that her boyfriend was dead, he’d been alive but now he was not, and, despite what she thought, it was not her fault.

Only it was. No one had seemed to understand that. Not the nurse. Not the police, when the hospital had fetched them at her insistence. They’d only listened to her with barely concealed condescension and then all but patted her on the head and dismissed her in her grief, even as she’d held her hands out and begged to be arrested in attrition for her actions. Not even her counsellor, whose insistence that she had not been at fault was beginning to seem a little strained in the face of Clara’s repeated assertions that she was, in fact, directly responsible.

What no one seemed to understand was that, if she hadn’t been on the phone to Danny, and if her own selfish needs hadn’t pushed her to make the call, he wouldn’t have been distracted. He wouldn’t have stepped into the road without looking; wouldn’t have found himself in the path of the car that struck him. After all, how could it have been the driver’s fault? Danny had been listening to her at the cost of his spatial awareness, and when the police told her they were contemplating pressing charges, she’d wept and pleaded with them not to. She was culpable. Not some unknown driver she had never so much as seen. Her.

Flowers had arrived in a slow trickle that swiftly turned into a flood as the news rippled through her students, who had otherwise been enjoying their summer holidays. She felt guilty about that, too. Guilty that she’d tainted their memories of this glorious, balmy summer with the loss of someone they’d admired. She’d thrown the first bunches of lilies into the bin, resolutely unwilling to fill her flat with their heady, cloying aroma, but the bin had filled and she hadn’t the energy to empty it, so instead she’d filled vases and glasses with water and reluctantly made do, covering the surfaces in the blooms that were delivered to her door alongside trite words of sympathy from people she barely knew. She didn’t want kindness. She didn’t want compassion. She wanted someone to acknowledge that she was at fault; someone to condemn her; someone to reinforce that she was the awful person she knew, deep down inside, that she was. She’d pushed Danny away and taken him for granted,
she’d refused to compromise on matters, and she’d inflamed him with her decisions, and now he was dead. She’d never be able to apologise. She’d never be able to make things right.

There was the trope, she knew, of women who had been widowed crying into their pillows at night, screaming in their bathrooms when they thought people couldn’t hear them. She didn’t understand the stereotype. She cried little and often, at the smallest of matters, and the screaming was becoming so much of a problem that her neighbours had complained to… well, she didn’t know, but they’d sent a man from the neighbourhood watch round, and he’d looked at the lilies and the cards and her lank hair and sunken eyes and stuttered some insincere words about being sorry for her loss, but could she please keep the noise down, thank you?

She didn’t know if Amy called her dad, or if she had in one of her early morning stupors of half-wakefulness, half-sleep. She’d tried to keep it from him for as long as she could, unwilling to taint his retirement with any more death than he had already been privy to, but when he turned up — her stepmother, for once, blissfully absent, and she adored him for that — she’d dissolved into sobs and clung to him like a lifeline. More than just a comforting presence, he’d been stoic and dependable when it came to the funeral, sitting with her as she struggled to plan the service, find appropriate pieces of music, or make sense of the multitude of costs to cover. He’d done this before, of course, and she’d thought she understood the intricacies of a death, but she was wrong. Between the funeral and the flowers and the horrific, gut-wrenching visit to Danny’s flat, there was so much more to be dealt with than she remembered, and she realised then how much she had been spared in the past; how shielded her father had kept her, and she didn’t know whether to be angry or grateful or simply… sad.

Grateful though she was for his presence, however, Clara found her father unwilling to leave. She understood, of course. He had seen her experience grief before, and undoubtedly his recollections of her prior torment had tinged his view of his once-again bereaved daughter. She’d expected him to be overwhelming in his understanding; to be patient and calm and too much for her to handle with his sense of misplaced compassion, but, to her surprise, he was quiet and contemplative, recognising her unwillingness to talk about Danny outside of the appointments they kept together to discuss coffins and headstones and hymns and floral arrangements. He talked about the weather, about the news, about Blackpool, and the fact he was trying was touching, but what she really wanted was to be alone. She wanted to be alone with the sadness that sat around her shoulders like a mantle, able to let it consume her in some kind of noble act of self-sacrifice rather than risk it tainting those around her like a poison.

There was only one option for being alone, and so Clara rejected sleep and took to a vigil of constant wakefulness in the small hours. At first she would simply lie there, staring at the ceiling and wondering what she would say to Danny if the opportunity presented itself by some miraculous feat. For a night or so, that was a kind of bittersweet comfort, but inevitably her silent conversations turned to memories, and then the pain grew too much to bear. For some nights after that, she just lay awake, refusing to allow herself to sleep, suffering the exhaustion as a penance.

When the realisation came that she wanted to talk about matters, she’d known her father would never understand. He’d been distant — in every sense of the word — for so long that he had barely known the man Clara had shared her life with, and his relentless positivity would not have allowed for the recollections Clara had which were not boundlessly cheerful; those that featured arguments or disagreements or periods of sulking. Yet Clara knew that those things needed to be remembered — Danny was not a martyr, nor a saint, and he would not pass into such status in death, unsullied by parts of his personality that could be conveniently brushed aside. His memory would be holistic to the point of pain, for Clara at least, but she found opposition to such an attitude wherever she looked.
Her father, wrinkling his nose in distaste as she recalled an argument with Danny just after the taking of a photograph that sat in her lounge.

Amy, once so eager to criticise Danny for his bland niceness and changeable moods, looking at her with bemusement over a cup of tea as Clara talked about times that she and Danny had disagreed.

Rory, shying away from the subject altogether.

Other teachers, with whom she was unwilling and unable to share such thoughts, lest they see the darkness and the guilt inside her and punish her with the removal of her job. The job that loomed on the horizon, both unappealing and motivating at the same time. With the return to work she would be tested, yes, but she would also find a reason to live once again.

There was one person, she supposed. One person who might understand what she was feeling. One person who, by way of a technicality, she was not speaking to out of the sheer principle of the matter; yet, that didn’t mean she should deprive herself of the therapeutic act of getting her feelings out. So it came to be that each night, in the small hours, she would lie in bed with a notepad, scrawl out a messy “Dear Marcus,” and then set to writing a letter she would never send. It helped, in a perverse way. She knew there was a bitter irony to her actions, and yet she couldn’t bring herself to care. As she wrote, the guilt that weighed her down alleviated for a brief time, and the long, rambling letters she produced laid out all the things she could not hope to say aloud.

This dysfunctional routine was, as ever, turned entirely upside down by the arrival of her twin. That was Bonnie’s way, and always had been; from the first moment she had somersaulted and announced her existence to the world via the grainy screen of an ultrasound machine, she had been keeping Clara on her toes. She was just back from some high-powered conference with the UN, Clara knew not where, but when she knocked on the front door she looked exactly how she always had; the mirror image of her, lips daubed with the usual red lipstick, and, when she held out her arms to her sister, Clara fell into them with the utmost gratitude. Bonnie would put an end to the sleepless nights. Bonnie would put an end to the feelings of isolation that were threatening to choke her. Bonnie would, as she always did, make things better.

Bonnie would also, Clara would later discover, hold her hand throughout the entire funeral, speaking to those present with quiet, confident words that Clara could not find. Clara was almost regretful that they had not thought to use their old trick and swap clothes for the day, so that she could have permitted Bonnie to deal with the litany of well-wishers and sympathisers under the guise of herself, but she knew that her sister’s immaculately made-up, healthy face would never have passed for her own, with its dull skin and dark circles. She’d chewed off what little lipstick she’d been wearing, and now as she worried at her lip it drew blood.

“Hey,” Bonnie said softly, as they sat in the back of a sedan car on the way to the wake. What a misleading word; there would be no waking, there would be no blissful bringing of life. There would be people there to commemorate the dead, and, as the day went on, even the dead would be forgotten for the sake of the living. “You’re doing really well.”

“Mm,” Clara said absentmindedly, looking out the window. “Not as well as you.”

The words were harsher than she’d intended them to be. They’d been meant as a compliment, but they tumbled from her lips like an accusation.

“You can do this, you know,” Bonnie said magnanimously, ignoring her sister’s tone. “Survive this.”

“What if…” Clara managed, her voice cracking, “What if I don’t want to?”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

As Clara continues her downward spiral, an intervention takes place... one that involves asking for help from an unlikely source.

After the funeral came the things Clara had loathed after her mother had died. Furtive looks. Her father making phone calls that ended abruptly when she entered the room. More appointments with her counsellor somehow appearing on her calendar — appointments Clara had neither wanted, booked nor paid for. Coming home to find her room in fractional disarray, just enough to let her know that it had been rifled through in search of... well, she didn’t like to think about that too intently. She knew she didn’t want to be here anymore, but she hadn’t considered the specifics of the matter, or thought to act on them. She also knew that such protestations would fall on deaf ears, and so she let her sister continue to make the checks, continue to let her sleep on the other half of the double bed Clara was coming to loathe, and continue to let her father stay on her sofa, like the sentinels of her own sanity, standing between her and some kind of promised land that they thought she was so determinedly focused on reaching.

It was not, as she had explained to her therapist when she found herself motherless at the tender age of eighteen, about wanting to die. It was about wanting things to stop, which was a different matter entirely. It was about wanting everything to stop — all the pain and the grief and the sadness and the hyper-fixation of others on the burden of her loss, and the constant need to continue to do things like work and study and pay for things and eat and shower, a never-ending parade of mortal demands that were stark reminders of her mother. Her mother, who would never go to work or pay a bill or cook a meal or take a shower again, and yet Clara’s body, treacherous and cruel, continued to make demands of her, and she needed a break. She needed time to curl up and heal, time that would never be granted to her, and so it was after Danny’s death that she came to feel the same.

Only this time... well, this time she had savings. She was hell-bent on refusing to go back to work; on retreating to bed and refusing to eat or wash; on refusing to do anything that might require the suspension of her mourning. She knew how irrational she was being and found herself not caring, unable to reconcile the sense of loss she was feeling with the relationship she had had with Danny, and yet she was still unable to lift herself from her stupor. Perhaps it was the guilt, she wondered idly to herself. Perhaps her brain simply had faulty wiring. When she floated both theories to Bonnie, her sister only took to escorting her to her counselling sessions, holding her hand like you might with a small child, and not even the stunned looks of fellow passengers on the Tube were enough to lift Clara from her fugue of depression.

She sat down with Dr. Moon every week and talked about her feelings dutifully. She forced herself to cry and pretend to be making progress, but she knew that, if it hadn’t been for Bonnie, she’d have stopped going. She supposed that her sister was picking up the bill, in that kind but slightly condescending way she so often did — “Oh, no,” Bonnie would say, making a great show of getting out her card, “let me!”; the insinuation that she was treating her impoverished, schoolteacher sister hanging between them — and she supposed also that she should be grateful, but really it was an annoyance. She wanted to be left alone. She wanted to have time to herself, and she resented having to lay her feelings out for a stranger to unpick for the sake of her sister’s desire to do something.
It was in a fit of bitterness and pique that she decided to go back to work, phoning the school’s HR officer and loudly insisting that she was able to, that she would go part-time if necessary, but please, god, let her get out of the flat and do something. They’d phoned her back some hours later and imparted the quiet news that her request had been approved, but Clara had found herself wondering if it was only pity that had moved the headteacher to agree. Pity, and a desire to avoid an employment tribunal, not that Clara had the energy for such matters.

Her father and sister had been surprised then supportive in turn, sitting with her as she shopped online for set texts and stationery and new clothes — her old ones hung around her diminished frame uncomfortably, and she supposed that looking the part might make her feel more in control. When they arrived, she’d dressed in the drab hues of blue and brown and green that she’d chosen, a world away from her old wardrobe choices, but they fit, and so she sighed and resigned herself to becoming Boring Miss Oswald.

Boring Miss Oswald sat down and made her usual lesson plans, her usual notes, her usual annotations. She prepared worksheets and picked out YouTube videos to illustrate her points. She went through all the motions of preparing for a new term, although the usual spark of enthusiasm she felt was absent. Perhaps this was what she was cursed to now. Emotionless, impassive teaching that bore no trace of sentimentality or passion. Perhaps this was all she would ever be from now on; a husk of her former self, unable to feel and unable to do anything other than follow the motions of a life.

Any hope she held that such thoughts might be alleviated by her return to work was abandoned on her first day back. Arriving in the building, she felt only a crushing sense of loss at the absence of Danny from the corridors, and, as if in response, the students parted around her like the Red Sea, their usual milling and chatter abandoned in the face of her tangible grief. She had wanted to feel normal. She had wanted to be normal, but no one seemed to understand that. That “no one” included the head, who swept her into his office upon catching sight of her and imparted the information that there was to be a memorial assembly in Danny’s honour, that he hoped it wouldn’t be too much, that the students needed something to channel their grief, and Clara was forced to nod and bare her teeth in an approximation of a smile as she was led to the hall and seated to one side of the stage.

She sat there as students read poems or short pieces of prose. She sat there as they sang out of tune and played tracks by Danny’s favourite band. She sat there, her face impassive and unmoving, unmarked by so much as a tear, and it was only afterwards, once she had escaped the confines of the enormous wood-and-glass room, that she allowed herself to cry in absolute silence in the toilets, one hand pressed to her mouth as she leant against the wall and doubled over, feeling her loss as keenly as a physical wound. The feeling returned; the latent, longing ache for everything to stop, and she balled her hands into fists as she tried to remind herself that it was unfeasible, it was selfish, and that she could not entertain the notion.

Cowled by the expression on her face, her students that day lapsed into silence, exchanging concerned looks when they thought Clara couldn’t see them. She knew those looks. She had been privy to enough to know that they meant nothing more than pity — pity, so often born of compassion, but so often born of a lack of respect, too. If she could command nothing else from them, she would command respect, and so she raised her voice and allowed herself to lose her temper at the assembled teenagers who, she knew deep down, only meant well; but, nonetheless, she felt a bitter surge of triumph as the pity on their face gave way to careful neutrality, and they set to their assigned tasks in mute shock.

When she returned home, exhausted but triumphant, to her father and sister’s expectant looks, she couldn’t tell them the truth. She mumbled something about the memorial and about the students’ being kind and then retired to bed, already dreading the coming days. If she had to follow the
motions, she would. Perhaps things might improve, and some feeling might return.

She did not, however, cling to much hope.

John had long since resigned himself to henceforth only receiving bills and the occasional junk mail when the letter arrived one rainy Thursday in early October. It bore his own name and a London postmark, and that alone was reason for his heart to lurch uncomfortably in his chest, as he knew only one person in London, and he wondered what could have prompted Clara to write to him once more. Or, at least, he had assumed it was from Clara, but then he noticed the address, written in an unfamiliar hand, and confusion clouded his thoughts.

“What’s this?” he asked Idris, taking a seat at the bottom of the stairs and ripping open the envelope with rising trepidation. He looked over at his dog for moral support, which was less than forthcoming as she plonked herself down at his feet and thumped her tail lazily against the hall floor. “Who could this be from?”

He extracted a piece of paper and a second envelope, and he looked between the two for a moment. The letter bore the same unfamiliar handwriting as the first envelope, while the second bore only his name, but he could tell that it had been written by Clara. Consumed with curiosity about who this cover letter could be from, and why a letter from Clara needed its own introduction, he unfolded the sheet of paper and read the few lines scrawled there.

Dear John,

I hope you won’t mind me writing to you like this. Clara has told me about what happened between the two of you, and while it is difficult to understand and I’m not going to try, I understand that she means a great deal to you, and you to her. You might not believe that, but I found a box of letters under her bed addressed to you, so I know that she has been thinking of the two of you and what you shared.

I don’t know if she ever sent any of them, so I don’t know if you are aware of what happened, but sadly Danny was hit by a car on 13th August, and he passed away shortly after. Clara has, if I’m honest, fallen apart, and while I don’t know you, I know that the two of you had some kind of bond and you understood each other, especially as you have both lost people you care about. Clara won’t talk to me or our dad, but she might talk to you about things because doing it via letter may seem less scary than talking face to face to one of us. Please, John. I don’t know you, but I know that you could redeem yourself by helping my sister. I have included one of her letters — I haven’t read it, as it’s addressed to you — but I strongly suspect I know what it contains.

Please. Save her.

Yours sincerely,

Bonnie Oswald

“Oh, my god,” John breathed, looking down at the letter and feeling his heart break. “I never…”

He ripped open the second envelope and began to read its contents, his eyes filling with tears as he did so. Words and phrases jumped out at him, and consequently he had to read the letter twice to process what Clara was saying, but still, as incoherent and train-of-thought as it was, he understood
her pain, and understood how badly she needed help.

Without hesitation, he picked up his phone and dialled the number he had long since memorised, praying it would ring, praying that he wasn’t too late, praying that she hadn’t…

“Hello?” a weary voice asked. “Who is this?”

His heart soared, and he couldn’t help but smile with relief. “Oh, thank god. Oh, god. I was so… Clara, it’s John.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

John has a surprising suggestion for Clara. What's even more surprising is her response...

Clara pulled the phone away from her ear and blinked down at the screen in confusion for a moment, her brain taking several seconds to recall the fact that the previous number she had held for John had been false, and this was, apparently, the real thing. Raising the phone again, she swallowed nervously and forced herself to try to sound upbeat.

“Oh,” she said in a bright, sunny voice that felt entirely at odds with the crushing numbness radiating from her very core. “What a nice surprise. How are you?”

“I’m… fine,” John sounded wrong-footed by the question. “I’m not phoning about me, though; I’m phoning about you.”

“What about me?” she asked, flinching at how confrontational her words had sounded. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to… sorry.”

“I…” there was a long pause, and for a moment Clara worried that the line had disconnected before she checked the screen and saw that she was incorrect. When John finally spoke again, he sounded wary. “Bonnie wrote to me.”

“She did what?” Clara’s eyes widened, and she thanked god in that moment that her sister had had the good sense to return to work some days previously. Or at least, she’d said it was work. All of a sudden, her insistence that she needed to leave made sense. Clara swore under her breath, vowing that she would have words with her twin the next time she saw her. “What did she say?”

“She told me.”

“Told you what?”

“About Danny.”

“Oh,” Clara said again, unsure what else to say in a bid to reconcile the fact of her dead boyfriend with a phone call from her still-alive but somewhat deceptive pen pal. “Right. Yeah. That… happened.”

“I’m sorry,” John said with sincerity. “I really am. I know he and I didn’t see eye-to-eye when we met, and I know he wasn’t keen on me, but he seemed like a good man, and you loved him. Losing a partner is never easy.”

There was something in his tone, some undercurrent of sadness, that made Clara wonder whether he spoke from experience. If she weren’t still seething about Bonnie’s actions, she might have asked about it; as it was, her energy was still focused on righteous anger at her twin, and the sense that John was going to say something significant, be it negative or positive. She wasn’t sure which would be worse.
"Bonnie shouldn’t have told you,” Clara said, taking a deep breath and clenching and unclenching her free hand at her side in an effort to keep her cool. “It wasn’t her news to tell.”

“Well,” John said in a bemused tone. “Were you planning on telling me?”

The directness of the question took Clara’s breath away. For weeks, people had pussyfooted around her feelings, speaking to and about her in euphemisms, treating her like she was made of glass, and now for the first time, someone was willing to be blunt with her. Someone was willing to treat her like a normal person, rather than a ghost of her former self. She couldn’t help it; she let out a pleased little laugh. “No,” she admitted, her mouth quirking into a grin. “No, I wasn’t.”

“Why do you sound so happy?”

“Because you’re not treating me like I’m about to fall apart. You’re actually talking to me like I’m a functioning adult.”

“Well, if you’re so keen on me doing that, I’d also like to mention your letter.”

“What letter?”

“The one Bonnie included with hers; the one which mentioned lots of really worrying things, but most notably that you don’t want to be here anymore.”

Clara’s blood ran cold as she realised precisely what her sister had done, and why. “Well,” she gave another laugh, but even to her own ears, this one sounded forced. “London is rather a dump, and going back up to Blackp—”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” John snapped, and she flinched at the sudden harshness of his tone. “You and I know damn well what you mean.”

“Who the hell are you to pretend that you care?” she shot back. “You lied to me, remember? For years. You don’t have any right to get up on your high horse and act like you’re superior.”

“I’m not acting like I’m superior,” he retorted bluntly. “I’m bloody worried about your mental health.”

“Can I remind you that my boyfriend just died, and I am therefore entirely permitted to have a breakdown?”

“Breakdown, yes,” John said, his tone suddenly softening, and she was surprised by the tenderness she heard there. “Suicidal ideation, no.”

“I’m not suicidal.”

“So, how would you describe yourself?”

“In need of a break.”

“…go on.”

“Just… needing things to stop, just for a little bit.”

“So, the idea of actually being dead, forever and ever, is—”

“Wholly unappealing and entirely repulsive,” Clara admitted. “But I need some time to stop and think and heal.”
“Are you working?” John asked. “If so, can you take time off to do that?”

“I’m part-time,” Clara sighed, running her hand through her hair and realising it was in dire need of a wash. “But it’s not… it’s not the same now. I don’t know how to describe it, but it’s like the spark has gone and I just… I’m just going through the motions. Doing things because I have to, not because I want to.”

“I know that feeling,” John murmured, and again, she was on the verge of asking him about it when he spoke again. “Clara, I think you need to talk to someone.”

“I’ve got a counsellor.”

“Yes, and given your letter, I would argue that they aren’t helping. ‘Someone’ like a friend, or family mem-”

“I’m not inflicting this on my family,” Clara said at once, her eyes filling with tears at the mere prospect. “They’ve… they’ve seen enough.”

“Of?”

“The inside of my head. I’m not doing that, not again.”

There was a pause. “What about Amy?”

“What about her?”

“Well, have you tried discussing it with her?”

“Amy doesn’t really do serious conversations,” Clara admitted. “Especially not about things like mental health.”

“Well, that’s very imm-”

“Don’t,” Clara said softly, shaking her head even though John couldn’t see her. “Don’t, because there’s a very good reason for it.”

“Which is?”

Clara sighed, wondering how vague she could get away with being. “She’s got her own issues to worry about, and they’re a lot more major than mine.”

“Self-injury?” John asked quietly, and Clara felt a rush of affection for him in that instant; for how quickly his flippant tone had dissipated in the wake of her concern for her best friend.

“No, ah,” Clara cleared her throat, offering simply: “PTSD. Long story.”

“Ah. That’s… a lot to deal with, yes.”

“So, she doesn’t need the burden of worrying about my mental health, too.”

“OK, but you need to talk to someone about this, Clara. You can’t just let it keep eating away at you like this, it’s not going to do you any good.”

“Don’t you think I don’t already know that?” Clara cried, bursting into tears against her will. “You think I don’t want to be better, and to actually be able to feel things properly again? You think I enjoy feeling like this? I don’t! I want to be normal again; I want to be myself! I want to be able to
mourn like a normal person, not all… I don’t know, not like this, not like it’s taking my life over!”

“Why is it taking your life over?” John asked, maddeningly calm in the face of her frustration. “Or why do you feel like it is?”

“Because it’s my fault,” Clara said in a rush, the self-loathing bubbling up her throat and choking her. “He was on the phone to me and he stepped out into the road and I didn’t… I…”

“That wasn’t your fault,” John assured her. “You didn’t cause anything. You didn’t make him do anything. What happened, happened; independent of you or your actions. You shouldn’t feel guilty about it.”

“Well, I do.”

“Clara, look…” there was a long, terse pause. “I know that you probably never want to see me again, and that you probably think I’m the worst human being in the world, but ah… if you think it would help, I could maybe drive down and see you.”

“But that’s…” Clara blinked, stunned by the selfless offer. “That’s over five hundred miles.”

“Well, I’m not going to walk it, if that makes you feel any better.”

“What?”

“The Proclaimers? Ach, never mind. Look, I can come down, if you want me to. If not, just tell this interfering old Scot to go to hell.”

“I…” Clara considered the offer. John was far from a neutral third party. She had poured out her woes to him — well, Marcus — and he had not known Danny in person like Amy or Rory had; he had known him only from what she had told him, and from their brief encounter. Perhaps from that point of view he was the ideal person to speak to; he would be sympathetic, and kind, and yet also aware of how difficult Danny could be. He wouldn’t just be intent on telling her to move on, or to remember him fondly, or to try to paper over the cracks in their relationship for the sake of his legacy. She could be honest with him, and he could be honest with her. “Yeah,” she decided, throwing caution to the wind. “Yeah, why not?”

“Really?” he sounded taken aback by her acceptance. “Are you sure?”

“What?” she teased, feeling a sudden rush of confidence. “Does the idea of driving five hundred miles suddenly not appeal?”

“No, it’s not that, I just…” he chuckled. “I didn’t think you’d actually accept.”

“I’m trying this new thing called ‘spontaneity.’”

“And here I was thinking you were being recklessly impulsive.”

“To-mah-to, to-may-to.”

“When would my presence be required?”

“Urm,” Clara glanced over at her calendar reflexively, already knowing it was empty. “Whenever, really. I only work Monday to Wednesday.”

“So, would tomorrow suit?”
“Gosh. Urm. Don’t you have… I don’t know. Stuff to do? Affairs to put in order?” Clara waved her hand dismissively, as though John could see her. “That sort of… general thing?”

“No,” he said, and she could hear the amusement in his tone. “I do not. I only have to find someone to dogsit, and I already have a certain someone in mind.”

“Would it be Nardole?”

“For his sins, yes.”

“Is he… not a fan of dogs, or?”

“Well, Idris isn’t exactly what you’d call ‘trained,’” John said, by way of explanation. “And she’s not used to small houses, but given it’s him or my lunatic sister, who has two exceptionally aggressive wildcats who hate all dogs with a passion, then it’s the only viable solution.”

“Ah, I see.”

“So, is tomorrow acceptable?”

“Are you sure you’ll be OK with the long drive?”

“I’ll be fine,” he paused for a moment, then admitted: “I’ve done it before, a long time ago.”

“Well then,” Clara said, smiling despite herself. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Pull over and give me a ring when you’re almost here, OK?”

“Will do.”

“And drive safe.”

“Again, will do.”

John hammered on the door of Nardole’s flat for the fourth time in five minutes, looking down at Idris and rolling his eyes as she panted in the chill early-morning air. “Don’t look so pleased with yourself,” he told her. “I know you like winding Nardole up, but there’s no need to look so happy about it.”

By way of response, she only wagged her tail and nuzzled her nose into his hand, giving him an affectionate lick. John patted her head, and then pounded on the door again, contemplating whether it would be acceptable to add some shouted cursing or if it was too early for that sort of thing.

“Come on,” he muttered, starting to get annoyed. “Nardole, you useless lump of a man, why are you never awake when I need you?”

“He’s not in, hen,” a voice interjected, and he spun round to find a passer-by stood on the pavement, eyeing him warily. She looked to be in her late forties, and she was wearing an enormous raincoat that dwarfed her tiny frame. “He went away yesterday, said he’d be gone all weekend. Is there anything I can help ye with?”

“I need someone to…” he looked from Idris, dopey and disobedient, to the prim-looking woman and
back again. “Never mind, actually. If you see him, can you tell him that John says he’s a waste of space?”

The woman wrinkled her nose. “Fine,” she said tartly, looking somewhat amused by the whole affair. “I’ll pass that on to him.”

“Thanks,” he muttered, heading back to the car and opening the boot to permit his dog entry. She curled up on the muddy tartan rug he kept there, chewing on one of the toys he’d chucked in that morning to keep her occupied on the drive to Inverness. “What are we gonna do with you, lass?”

An idea came to mind. A truly insane one, but still; the only viable solution he could foresee.

“So,” he asked his dog, cupping her face in his hands and stroking her ears. “How do you feel about a wee jaunt down to England, hey?”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

John arrives on Clara's doorstep with a four-legged plus one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clara was starting to think that John had got lost somewhere between the M25 and Shoreditch. He had called her from a service station with the news of his arrival in the Greater London area, she’d felt an irrational surge of excitement to see him, and then he’d promptly failed to arrive during the next two hours. There hadn’t even been the excuse of heavy traffic, particularly given the late hour, and her anxiety had begun to creep in when finally, to her blessed relief, there was a knock on the front door and she sprang to her feet.

She wasn’t sure what she expected when she answered the door — perhaps to find John covered in oil, or mud, having had to change a tyre — but she did not expect to find him stood there with an overnight bag and a golden retriever. She wasn’t sure who looked more sheepish, him or the dog.

“Urm,” he began uncertainly, fiddling with the strap of his bag and making a pointed effort not to look her in the eye. “So… well… I… ah…”

Any reticence John felt was clearly not shared by his dog, who bounded over the threshold and flung herself down at Clara’s feet, rolling onto her back and wagging her tail with aplomb.

“Hello,” Clara said with bemusement, crouching down and stroking the golden retriever. “Oh, you must be tired.”

“I am,” John said, sounding exhausted. “You have no-”

“I was talking to the dog,” Clara deadpanned, before looking up at him through her hair and grinning. “Kidding. Come on in, I’ll make you a coffee.”

She tried to straighten up, only to find that Idris was entirely unwilling to allow her to do so, pawing at her arms insistently in a demand for continued attention.

“Oh, hell,” John groaned, looking embarrassed. “Idris, no. Come on, be nice to the lady.”

“She’s OK,” Clara assured him, getting to her feet anyway and ignoring the golden retriever’s whine of rejection as she turned and headed into the lounge, beckoning for John to follow her. “Not that I’m not pleased to be gifted with a dog to cuddle, but to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Nardole was away,” John confessed with a sigh, stepping into the flat and closing the front door behind him. Idris remained where she was on the floor, taking up the entire width of the hall, and he stepped over her with a roll of his eyes. “So, I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Oh,” Clara smiled knowingly as she plonked down in her favourite spot on the sofa, looking up at John, who was hovering in the doorway, looking around the room with poorly disguised curiosity. It was only then that Clara realised that it had been a while since she last dusted, and a thin layer of
grey fluff was coating the assorted contents of the room, save for the sofa and the corner of the coffee table she used most frequently. There was a vase of half-dead lilies on the side, and she couldn’t recall the last time she’d hoovered. “Oh. Urm. Sorry about…” she waved her hand at the mess, her cheeks burning as she did so.

“It’s fine,” John said at once, edging into the room and taking a seat beside her. “Still a damn sight cleaner than most of my place.”

“Ah, yes,” Clara raised an eyebrow. “Your castle.”

“It’s not a castle,” he protested, and she could tell from his irked tone that this was an argument he was used to having. Still, he was still the only conversation partner she’d had recently who didn’t treat her like she might burst into tears at any moment, and that in itself was refreshing. “It’s a large house, at best.”

“It must be difficult to keep it clean,” Clara shrugged, opting to change the subject to something less likely to irritate him. “And heat, and upkeep.”

“At times, yeah,” he admitted. “Especially on my own.”

“No cleaner or butler or housekeeper or maid or…” Clara swallowed, chancing the question: “Wife?”

“That’s a bit sexist, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“Assuming my wife would do the cleaning.”

“Might be you doing the cleaning and her doing the DIY,” Clara retorted, cheekily. “Frankly, that seems more likely.”

“Why?”

“Because you seem like power tools would scare you.”

“Rude.”

“Do they?”

“…that’s not the point,” he growled, then looked around the room and groaned. “Sorry, my bloody useless dog hasn’t quite mastered the art of ‘heel.’ Idris, come.”

There was a distinct lack of movement from the hallway.

“Idris,” he called again, a little louder. “Come here, girl.”

There was still no response.


There was the scampering of paws and, a few moments later, the golden retriever tumbled into the room, standing to attention in front of Clara with her ears pricked forwards expectantly.

“How in god’s name…”
“Is she allowed on furniture?” Clara asked, looking to John for guidance. “Because I don’t want to-”

“She’s not really ‘allowed’ to do anything, but she just does it anyway.”

“Up,” Clara said, patting the cushion beside her, and instantly there was a flurry of yellow fur and Idris had arranged herself across Clara’s lap like an oversized golden blanket. “Good girl.”

“What are you, the dog whisperer?”

“Might be,” Clara stuck her tongue out, starting to stroke Idris’s head slowly. It was soothing, and she allowed herself to be lulled into a semi-trance by the repeated motion. “Isn’t the lack of training going to make her a nightmare in a hotel?”

“Ah,” John cleared his throat, twisting his hands together in his lap. “We, ah… won’t be staying in one.”

“What do you mean?” Clara frowned at him, not understanding. “Why not?”

“Kipping in the car is going to be a better bet.”

“Why?”

“Because we tried several places on the way here and none of them would take us,” John admitted, his cheeks flushing red as he dropped his gaze and addressed the floor. “That’s why we were late. So, we’ll just park up somewhere quiet and spend the night in the car. I’ve done it before, it’s not a problem.”

“You can’t do that!” Clara protested, scandalised by the very notion. “It’s October! You’ll freeze!”

“I have a hot water bottle,” John said feebly, gesturing to Idris, whose tail was thumping lazily against the sofa cushions. “If I can get her back from you, that is.”

“You’re not sleeping in a car, John. It’s London, and it’s October. You will get mugged, or hypothermia. Probably both.”

“What do you suggest doing instead?”

“Well, this isn’t a very long sofa, but I’m sure you’ll find it more comfortable than a car seat.”

“What?!” he yelped, looking somewhere between taken aback and scandalised. “I can’t… you can’t…”

“Why?” she asked in bemusement. “You put me up in Inverness… or, at least, Nardole did. Whatever. I needed a place to stay and you both made sure I had it, so let me return the favour.”

“But I can’t…”

“Why? Because my boyfriend just died? Please, I’m not about to jump you in the night.”

“I…”

“What?” Clara asked in exasperation. “Will your wife mind?”

“As she’s been dead sixteen years, somehow I doubt it.”

“I…” Clara began guiltily, opening and closing her mouth before taking a steadying breath and
offering: “I’m sorry.”

“S’alright.”

“I didn’t…”

“I know,” he rubbed the back of his neck, still refusing to look at her. “I just… I don’t want to impose on you.”

“You won’t be.”

“But Idris…”

“Is a very welcome cuddly companion. We could take her to the park tomorrow.”

“Which park?”

“Take your pick,” Clara shrugged. “Does she like chasing deer?”

“She’s scared of them.”

“You live in Scotland.”

“Yes, so there’s a lot of them. And she’s terrified of them.”

“Some mighty hunting dog you are,” Clara told the canine on her lap, who only looked up at her with reproachful brown eyes. “You are very cute, though.”

“She’s a daft girl,” John chuckled. “Are you sure we can stay?”

“Of course,” Clara smiled, then remembered something. “Wait, I believe I promised you coffee.”

“Aye,” John’s eyes lit up at the prospect, before he looked down Idris and grimaced. “Only then my dog took to crushing you.”

“It’s OK,” Clara wriggled out from underneath her, getting to her feet and trying not to feel guilty for disturbing the half-asleep dog. “Milk? Sugar?”

“No milk, four sugars.”

Clara raised an eyebrow, appalled by the notion.


“Fine,” she tutted as disapprovingly as she was able. “Be right back with your cup of hot sugar.”

Turning and heading to the kitchen, she was surprised to hear a soft thump behind her followed by the pitter-patter of paws as Idris trotted after her.

“Hello,” she said conversationally to the golden retriever as she flicked the kettle on. “You seem to like me, don’t you?”

Idris, by way of response, wagged her tail.

“He says you aren’t trained,” Clara said in a low voice. “But I reckon you’re smarter than you let on. Can you sit?”
Idris sat.

“Lie down.”

She lay down, looking up at Clara in a way that seemed willing, nay, even eager, for more commands.

“Sit up,” Clara asked, and when Idris had, she crouched down and held out a hand. “Paw.”

Idris placed her paw in Clara’s palm, looking almightily pleased with herself as she did so.

“Good girl,” Clara murmured, stroking her and grinning. “Sneaky girl.”

She straightened up and retrieved two mugs from the cupboard, adding coffee granules and then hot water. Heaping sugar into John’s, she shuddered at the thought of how sweet the drink would be, then walked carefully back into the lounge with both mugs, Idris tailing her.

John was stood by the bookcase, skimming his fingertips along the spines of the assorted titles.

“I thought you said Idris didn’t do ‘heel,’” Clara teased, and he jumped, spinning around with a guilty look. “Relax, it’s a bookcase, not my knicker drawer.”

John turned a violent shade of maroon, then looked down at his dog, who was stood obediently at Clara’s side. “How are you doing this with my dog?”

“Magic,” Clara teased, setting their mugs down with a wink. “Or, maybe… I’ve learned how to be firm from dealing with hundreds of unruly teenagers, and, frankly, she’s much better behaved than most of my students.”

“Witchcraft,” John decided, taking a seat again and reaching for his mug. “Definitely witchcraft.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Clara rolled her eyes, sitting down and letting Idris scramble up beside her before picking up her own mug. “Look, I’m… I’m sorry about your wife. I didn’t… I wouldn’t have…”

“It’s fine,” John said at once, waving his free hand dismissively before taking a gulp of coffee. “You weren’t to know. Why would you? Marcus never had a wife.”

“But you did,” she said measuredly, blowing on her coffee then taking a tentative sip. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“‘It’?”

“Her.”

“Oh,” he dropped his gaze, turning his mug around in his hands and running his thumbs over the blue-and-white pattern. “I don’t know, I thought I was here for you, not to talk about myself.”

Clara felt a sudden surge of affection for the awkward, gangly Scot sat opposite her. Were it not for the mugs of scalding liquid they both held, she might even have hugged him.

“You are,” she murmured. “And now I understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Why you were so keen to come down and check that I was alright.”
There was a long pause, and when John spoke again, his voice was quieter than it had been before.
“Well,” he confessed. “I know what it’s like to not have anyone.”

“But your sister…”

“She’s not great at feelings, especially not after we lost Marcus. She helped out as much as she could, making sure I was eating by sending me food parcels, that sort of thing, but the feelings side was out of her comfort zone… not to mention the fact that she didn’t like my wife all that much. I think she was jealous, really; felt like I’d been lured away from Glasgow and from home. I understood, but it meant I dealt with a lot of it by myself.”

“Was it…” Clara flushed, suddenly aware of how personal her question was, and she took a faux-nonchalant sip of coffee. “Was it sudden?”

“In a way, yes,” John paused. “But in a way, also no. She’d been ill before, but it came back, and it took hold before we could do anything.”

“I’m sorry,” Clara said, quietly. “That must have been difficult.”

“One minute she was fine, you know?” John looked up at her with tears in his eyes. “One minute she was fine, and then she had this pain in her stomach, and she was so bloody stubborn, you have no idea, so I had to force her to go to the doctors by going with her, but from there it was straight to hospital and she… she never came home.”

“I’m sorry,” Clara said again. “Did you have… were there any kids to worry about?”

“No,” he swiped at his eyes discreetly, and Clara pretended not to notice, letting him have a drink and compose himself. “She’d been ill before, just after we got married.”

There must have been a questioning look on Clara’s face, because he elaborated:

“Cancer. Ovarian. It didn’t kill her, but it did kill our dreams of having any wee ones. The second time… ach, well, the second time it just killed her.”

“What was she like?”

“Mad,” he grinned then, but there was still sadness in his eyes. “Absolutely barking mad, but brilliant. Mind like a super-computer. And drop-dead gorgeous to boot; could never believe she’d fallen in love with a stick insect like me. She used to get so cross when I said that, but I couldn’t. Women like River don’t fall for men like me, not in the real world.”

“Was that her name?”

“Aye. River Song. Sounds like a name from a fairy tale, doesn’t it? I used to tease her about that, before we got married, and then she got drunk on our wedding night and confessed she’d upgraded it. Her words, not mine.”

“‘Upgraded’?”

“She was born Melody Teich.”

“Teich?” Clara frowned at the unfamiliar word. “Where’s that from?”

“It’s German for ‘pond.’ She said ‘River’ sounded less like she should have waterlilies and frogs floating around in her.”
Clara laughed at the mental image. “She had a point.”

“She was the one who wanted to move out to the Cairngorms. She loved old buildings, and she fell in love with our place the moment she saw it. Ma and Da inherited from Great-Great-Uncle Braxiatel or something, and it was just… it was a total wreck, falling down, and they wanted to put it up for sale, but River being River broke in for some photography project she was doing. She came back with four rolls of film, babbling about it with so much enthusiasm that Ma and Da decided to gift it to us to do up. Course, the locals weren’t keen — I wasn’t from round there, and she was English, which was even worse — but they warmed up to the idea eventually. I think they’re actually quite fond of me now, and Missy, too — Ma and Da apparently stuck some sub-clause in the old ruin’s paperwork that means I can’t sell it without her consent, so it’s half hers, too. Marcus had his share, too, but after the accident… well, yeah.”

“What’s it called?”

“What’s what called?”

“Your place.”

“Oh,” John smiled and took a gulp of coffee before explaining: “Ùine.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Ùine. U-with-a-grave-accent-i-n-e.”

Clara attempted to repeat the word, without much success, and thanked god that John didn’t seem the mocking sort.

“The first sound is like…” John thought for a second. “Somewhere between the vowels in ‘book’ and the ‘ur’ in ‘burn.’ Does that help?”

“Maybe?” Clara chewed her lip, keeping his words in mind as she attempted a second go: “Uw-ne.”

“Close enough.”

“What’s it mean?”

“Well.”

“That’s a bit vague, isn’t it?”

“In what way?”


“Hang on,” Clara frowned, putting her mug down and affixing him with a long stare. “If you’ve got an estate, aren’t you like… I don’t know, a laird or something?”

John turned maroon again. “Maybe.”

“Oh, my god. You are, aren’t you?”

“John Smith, Laird of Ùine,” he muttered in a small voice, so quietly she could hardly hear him. “And I think I’m technically ‘The Much Honoured,’ too, but that makes me sound a bit… vain.”
“Wow.”

“Don’t.”

“That’s…” Clara considered her words carefully. “Really cool.”

“Glad you think so,” he ran his hand through his hair, his embarrassed look turning into a pleased one. “River mainly liked it because it made her name even longer. The Much Honoured Doctor River Song, Lady Úine. She used to try and get them to write it on everything.”

Clara snorted. “I like her style.”

“It never fit on utility bills.”

“I can imagine it didn’t,” Clara smiled, then yawned widely. “You know, we should probably both get some sleep.”

“But we haven’t started talking about you yet.”

“Well, we can do that in the morning. You must be exhausted.”

“A little,” John admitted, holding up his mostly empty mug. “Even with the coffee.”

“Well, then,” Clara smiled, stretching as much as she could without disturbing Idris. “I’ll go and grab you some pillows and a blanket, OK?”

She got to her feet and padded off in the direction of her bedroom, the golden retriever following her like a shadow. She retrieved two pillows from her wardrobe and stuffed them into clean pillowcases, then piled them atop two blankets and returned to the lounge.

“Here you go,” she said, dropping them onto the arm of the sofa. “If you need anything else, my bedroom is just down the landing.”

“Thanks,” John said, getting to his feet and hovering awkwardly. “You really didn’t need to-”

Clara stepped forwards impulsively and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head against his chest and feeling him freeze under her touch. After a moment, he relaxed enough to reciprocate the gesture, and she smiled to herself. “Thank you,” she murmured, closing her eyes and enjoying the safe, secure feeling that came with being held. “For coming. You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

“Still. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Clara stepped back and gave him a shy little smile. “I’ll see you in the morning, OK? Not too early.”

“Not too early,” he agreed, and Clara nodded, heading into the hallway only to find Idris following her again. “Ach, Idris. Come here, the nice lady can’t be dealing with you clambering all over her bed in the night.”

“No, really,” Clara said quickly. “It’s fine, she can if she wants. I mean. If that’s alright with you, and you don’t mind.”

There was a short pause, and then John nodded. “Aye, alright,” he acquiesced, before pointing to his
dog and addressing Idris directly. “Don’t you go getting ideas about doing this at home, now.”

Chapter End Notes

You would not believe the amount of time I spent researching Scots Gaelic to get the estate name.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

John and Clara spend time together, but an unexpected visitor changes everything...

As they drove home from Richmond Park the next day in companionable silence, Clara realised that, for the first time since Danny’s death, she had spent time just… being normal. Doing something that other people would do, without worrying how she would be perceived, and without — although she felt a pang of guilt at the realisation — thinking about Danny. It was strange: the sudden awareness of the fact that, for several hours, she hadn’t been consumed by sadness, or guilt, or regret; she hadn’t been plagued by thoughts of how she should be acting and should be speaking and should be looking, appropriate to her role as a recently bereaved person. She had just been… living. Walking, talking, and even, she was a touch embarrassed to admit, laughing.

Her cheeks flushed pink and she looked down at her lap as she recalled sauntering around the park with John, the two of them sharing the scant few anecdotes they hadn’t already told each other and reminiscing on the ones they had. Even though Clara had made the assumption that John’s tales would be untrue, narratives he’d constructed to uphold the fiction of being Marcus, he’d assured her of their veracity — and, in some cases, their age — and she’d found even more good humour in the knowledge that such situations had actually happened, and John had experienced first-hand some of the awful, amusing, and awkward behaviour from students that she’d read about in his letters.

They’d tentatively discussed his art, in between throwing sticks that Idris had been enthusiastic but incompetent at returning, and he’d shyly smiled when she’d admitted to keeping hold of his apology drawing from the disastrous first meeting in Inverness, seeming pleased but surprised that she’d liked it. It had been a hobby, he’d explained; something that captured his attention when he was a youth, only it had progressively taken over his life and he’d realised it was something he could make practical use of and fashion into a career. When Úine had been gifted to him and River, he’d had to adapt his scribblings into something that generated a steady stream of income, and so he’d turned to teaching in order to facilitate the propping-up of the old ruin, converting at least some of the rooms into a vaguely habitable home before… well, before life got the better of him.

From the back of the car, something cold and wet pressed against Clara’s neck, and she yelped in surprise as it broke her reverie, the initial contact being swiftly followed by a warm, wet lick. “Idris,” she complained, trying and failing to sound firm. “Nearly home, girl. It’s alright.”

There was the soft thudding of the golden retriever wagging her tail, and Clara slipped her hand between the seats to allow Idris to nuzzle at it.

“She really likes you, you know,” John intimated, marking the first time he had spoken since they’d left the park. “I mean, she’s usually pretty dopey with strangers, wanting to be stroked and admired and such, but she… she does what you say. And she’s never done that with anyone, not even me.”

“She obviously has good taste in people,” Clara said with a grin, twisting in her seat and stroking the golden retriever properly. “Don’t you?! Yes, you do!”

She sensed rather than saw John rolling his eyes.
“Don’t you do that.”

“Do what?!?” he complained. “I’m not doing anything; I’m concentrating on driving.”

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me.”

“Well! You’re soft on my dog.”

“And you’re not?”

“Yeah, alright,” he said with fond exasperation. “I have an excuse though; she’s been my salvation, really. I’m soft on her because she’s been nothing but soft with me, even when I was a wreck.”

“When did you get her?”

“Few years after River died. Missy complained that I was bothering her too much — don’t look at me like that, Missy says things like that and it’s fine, she’s just… blunt,” he waved his hand dismissively, and Clara turned back to face the windscreen, curling her legs up beneath her and concentrating on John. “She said I should get someone to talk to, or someone to spend time with, but I think she meant a girlfriend, not a dog.”

“Dogs are less effort. At least in some ways.”

“Aye,” he chuckled. “Idris was a bit of an impulse buy, I’ll admit. Chap down the pub’s dog had had puppies and he was keen to get rid of them — she was a working dog, and he wasn’t the sentimental sort. I just thought I’d go and have a look, you know? Go and see them, just because… well, if nothing else, puppies are cute.”

“Of course.”

“Got there and this little thing comes racing over to me, tries to clamber up my trousers, and then proceeds to fall asleep in my arms,” he cast a loving look at his dog’s reflection in the rearview mirror. “That little ball of fluff was Idris. I had to wait a couple of weeks before I could bring her home, but I used to visit her… I think my pal was a bit startled that I kept coming back every day just to see a dog.”

“I bet she was adorable, though. Little golden ball of fluff.”

“She was,” he grinned. “She is.”

“Don’t you get lonely?” Clara asked before she could stop herself. “Up in the forests in your castle?”

“It’s not a castle.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

John shrugged noncommittally. “I suppose. Missy is nearby, so there’s that.”

“Yeah, but… rattling around the place, just you and your dog. Don’t you get bored? Or crave someone to talk to?”

“Don’t you?” he asked, and Clara blinked, startled to have the question turned back around on her. “You live alone, don’t you?”

“That’s different,” she said defensively. “I have work, at least.”
“And how many of your colleagues have you socialised with lately?”

There was a long, tense silence.

“I have Amy,” Clara mumbled, looking out of the window to avoid John’s gaze, which she was certain would be triumphant. “And Rory.”


“I think you missed a couple of jobs out, but yeah,” Clara raised an eyebrow. “What about her?”

“I was always amazed by her in your letters,” John admitted, with a shy little laugh. “How she went from someone who made your coffee a couple of times a week to... well, your best friend. I remember you saying, early on, that there was no way she’d ever want to be friends with you because you weren’t cool enough for someone like her.”

“Funny how things change,” Clara admitted, making a face. “She had this air of just being... I don’t know, cool and creative and different, and I was really... not. And then we got talking and she wasn’t stuck up or anything, she was just... normal. A perfectly normal person, who’d just curated this whole air of being incredible, but was actually just surprisingly human.”

“It’s funny how people can take us by surprise.”

“It is,” she smiled, biting her lip before chancing: “You took me by surprise.”

“Did I?”

“Well, yeah. I wasn’t expecting Marcus MacAllister to be a middle-aged bloke called John.”

He barked a laugh. “‘Middle-aged’? Ach, you’re far too kind.”

“I try.”

John pulled into the car park in the centre of her estate, putting the handbrake on and cutting the engine. “Plans for lunch?” he asked casually, although his cheeks were still tinged pink from her compliment. “Because if you don’t feel like making something, we could order in.”

“Someone wants to live decadently.”

“Someone wants you to eat,” he said seriously, and Clara blinked a couple of times, thrown by the sudden change of tone. “And that same someone ideally wants to not have to wash up.”

She forced a laugh, disconcerted by the sudden care in his tone, and opened the car door, allowing Idris to bound out after her. As they headed upstairs to her flat, she lapsed into silence, acutely aware of the worried looks that John was giving her.

“I didn’t...” he said suddenly, just after they reached the halfway point on the way up to the flat. “I didn’t mean any disrespect with what I said.”

“I know.”

“I’m just worried about you.”

“I know.”

“And I want to make sure you’re taking care of yourself.”
“I know,” she said again, for want of anything better to respond. “And it’s appreciated, really.”

John nodded, apparently satisfied with her answer, and they continued the ascension of the endless flights of stairs in renewed, companionable silence, Clara mulling over John’s words as they went. He cared about her. She’d known that when he’d offered to come down and see her, so why were his words a surprise? Was it because she was worried about being pitied? Was it because she was concerned about his motives? Was it because-

She stuck her key in the front door on autopilot, stepping into the hallway beyond and freezing. Neatly arranged underneath her coat rack was a pair of shoes that had not been there when they’d left that morning, and a raincoat was hung above them – one she’d bought herself, and wrapped, and gifted one Christmas. Before she could say anything to warn John, or even process the information herself, her dad had stepped into the hall from the lounge, his arms crossed and his expression serious.

“Clara, there you…” he caught sight of John, stood just behind her and looking sheepish, and raised his eyebrows skywards. “…are. Who might this be?”

“Urm,” Clara opened and closed her mouth uselessly several times, trying to formulate a clever lie and failing. “This is…”

“John Smith,” John supplied, leaning past her and offering his hand to Dave to shake. Her father looked at the proffered hand with distaste, and after a moment’s awkward pause, John retracted it. “I’m a… friend of Clara’s.”

“Would you be the friend who’s been sleeping on the sofa?”

“Urm,” John’s polite smile flickered, but only for a second. “Yes, although that was strictly only for last night.”

Dave’s look of incredulity only intensified, and Clara realised abruptly how the situation looked.

“Dad,” she blurted, needing to defuse matters before they escalated any further, or before any further misinterpretations could occur. “Dad, why are you here?”

“Your sister seemed concerned about you — indeed, as we all are — so I thought I’d come down to check on you. I see now that my presence isn’t required… or maybe it is.”

“Why are you talking like that?”

“I see you have someone to take care of you,” Dave said icily, affixing her with a bemused glare. “But really, Clara. Isn’t it a bit soon?”

“Dad… what?”

“Clara,” John said warningly, as Clara felt her heart sink and the shock of her father’s accusation rob her of the ability to speak. “I think he thinks…”

“How dare you?” Dave said, his expression curling into one of fury as he addressed John directly. “How dare you take advantage of my daughter?”

“I…” John stammered. “I… what?”

“She lost her boyfriend two months ago! You ought to be ashamed of yourself — she’s grieving and vulnerable!”
“I’m not…” John looked thoroughly discombobulated by Dave’s assumption. “We’re not…”

“I wasn’t born yesterday!” Dave exploded. “God, you’re old enough to be her father!”

“Dad,” Clara finally managed, the whole situation feeling faintly surreal. “Dad, he’s not… we’re not… he’s just a friend.”

“He was on the sofa ‘strictly only for last night’?” Dave arched an eyebrow, his eyes taking on an unpleasant gleam that she had never seen before. “Come on, love. I’m not an idiot.”

“Dad, he came down last night from Scotland and had nowhere else to sleep!”

“I was going to find a hotel today,” John added contritely, and Clara shot him a surprised, wounded look. “Really, Mr Oswald. I’m not… I don’t have any inappropriate intentions towards your daughter. Far from it.”

“He’s really just a friend, Dad,” Clara reiterated, her stomach clenching, and she could only pray that her father would understand; that he’d realise John wasn’t interested in her in that way. “I can’t believe you’d even…”

“Bit weird, still, isn’t it?” Dave sniffed. “Bloke of his age wanting to be friends with you?”

“Do you know what?” Clara snapped, finally losing her temper as the sting of his words settled over her like a mantle, suffocating her and wounding her in equal measure. He really believed what he’d accused her of; he really thought that John was some kind of predator and she was a helpless victim. “Get out, Dad.”

“What?” her father looked hurt by her sudden change in mood. “Why?”

“I can’t bloody believe you! You turn up here unannounced, accuse me of… I don’t even know what, of being some kind of loose woman and throwing myself at the nearest bloke; you accuse my friend of taking advantage of me, and then you say it’s weird that people want to be my friend. Yeah, thanks a bunch, Dad. That’s really going to help with my grieving process. That’s really going to make me feel bloody good about myself. Suggesting I’m an unlovable, undesirable tart.”

“I didn’t mean… I wasn’t…”

“Just go,” she shouted, her eyes filling with furious tears, loathing him and herself in equal measure in that instant. “Just go, OK? I don’t need your help; I don’t need your concern. I need to be left alone.”

“Clara-”

“Now,” she snarled, and her dad held up his hands submissively, sidling out into the hall and slipping his shoes on.

“I’m sorry,” he called, and she knew she should’ve followed him, for politeness’ sake if nothing else, but she didn’t care. “Clara, I’m-”

“Go.”

There was a long, terse silence, and then the sound of the front door opening and closing.

“I’m sorry,” John said softly, as the fight went out of Clara and she sunk onto the sofa with her head in her hands. “I didn’t… I shouldn’t have…”

“Now,” she snarled, and her dad held up his hands submissively, sidling out into the hall and slipping his shoes on.
“Go,” she said quietly, not looking at him. “Please.”

“But I…”

“Did you not hear me?” she stared fixedly down at the floor and repeated the words in a monotone. “I said go. I said I wanted to be alone. That includes you.”

“I just want to-”

“I never asked you for any of this!” she snapped, beginning to cry tears of frustration. John had destroyed entire aspects of her life and he’d seemed on the verge of fixing it, only now other parts were crashing down around her, and it was his fault. “I never asked you to give a shit and come and save me, that was my sister’s doing! I never asked for you to come down here and crash on my sofa and give my dad the impression that I’m screwing you, but somehow, that’s what happened! I need you to leave, and I need you to take your bloody dog, and not come back. OK? Do you understand me?”

“I know you’re upset, but-”

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that; don’t you dare lump me in with all the other broken humans you’ve had to deal with, because I swear to God, I will eviscerate you and I will do it cheerfully. Go. Get out. Because you have about thirty seconds before I start ripping this room apart, and if you’re in it when I do, then I will not be held responsible for my actions.”

John looked from Clara to the door and back again, chewing his lip. She could feel the anger broiling under her skin, and she clenched her fists until her nails bit into her palms in a bid to keep her temper until the deadline she had offered him elapsed.

“Fine,” he said softly, reaching for his bag and slinging it over his shoulder with a look of defeat that somehow only served to irk her more. She’d not expected any grand gestures, but she’d expected a degree of resistance to her demand. “But when this has passed… you know where I am.”

“Don’t you understand?” she asked, with a bitter laugh. “I won’t be running back to you.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“Get. Out.”

John sighed, heading for the front door with Idris at his heels. It had barely closed behind him when Clara reached for the nearest framed photo and threw it at the wall with all her strength, broken glass raining down on the carpet along with the shattered remains of her hope.
“What are you doing here?” a familiar Scottish voice called on Monday morning, and Clara jumped, swivelling around in the queue at her local coffee shop and trying to work out where exactly the speaker had concealed themselves. As she blinked tiredly in the dimly lit interior, her eyes finally alighted on Amy Pond, stood several places behind her and eyeing her with unimpressed incredulity. As she ducked out of the line and took several steps back to join her best friend, she groaned internally at the thought of the cross-examination that was inevitably about to occur.

“Nice to see you, too,” she shot back at Amy, then gestured at the lanyard hanging around her neck. “I work near here, remember?”

“No, I mean…” Amy waggled her eyebrows. “I thought you had a visitor.”

“Yeah?”

“So, shouldn’t you be on…” Amy gesticulated vaguely. “I don’t know, annual leave, or something? Spending time with him?”

“No.”

Amy looked somewhat taken aback by the blunt response, and Clara sighed before expanding:

“No, because my annual leave is way too precious for that, and also no because I no longer have a visitor, as he left on Saturday.”

“What do you mean, ‘left’?”

“Gone. Returned home. Adios, goodbye, adieu, farewell. Left.”

“Oh,” Amy blinked several times. “Why the hell did he leave?”

“Because I told him to. My dad turned up and had this massive go at me about it, and I realised how totally inappropriate it was to have a male friend now that Danny’s… well, you know. So, I sent John home. Seemed the proper thing to do.”

“If it’s inappropriate for you to have male friends, does that mean Rory is getting banished back to Leadworth?”

“Rory isn’t sleeping on my sofa. Rory is also disgustingly in love with you, so he’s fine.”

“John was sleeping on your sofa?!”

“Shh!” Clara hissed, scowling at her best friend with vitriol as several nearby customers affixed them with curious looks. “Yes, he couldn’t get a dogsitter and no hotels would take him and his dog, so he crashed at mine. See? Inappropriate. Totally inappropriate. Your face is screaming it at me.”
“My face is mainly just pleased you were spending time with someone other than me.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Babe,” Amy sighed. “Don’t get me wrong, I love you to pieces. But you need to make friends with other people, and John seems to really care about you. He seems like a good candidate for a new friend.”

“I mean, aside from catfishing me.”

“Yeah, that aside. Didn’t you say he was driving down to see you?”

“Yup.”

“Well, that’s a pretty sweet gesture, isn’t it? Like, I love you and all, but even I would have got on a plane. And even I would’ve required slightly more than a few hours’ notice to do that.”

“He’s just lonely and looking for someone to cling to,” Clara argued. “He doesn’t have anyone else.”

“And nor do you. It’s a perfect friendship match.”

“I thought I had you. You’re my perfect friendship match!”

“Well, other than me!” Amy rolled her eyes. “You can’t cling to me forever, babe, attractive though that prospect is. Why in god’s name did you send John home? He’s not one of your students, you know; you can’t send him home to change his trainers or get his homework.”

“Well, I did.”

“Fancy explaining why?”

“My dad insinuated that I was screwing him, and essentially told me I was an insensitive tart for doing so, especially so recently after Danny. And he was right.”

“You were sleeping with John?!”

“What?!” Clara yelped, looking aghast and earning herself several more nosy stares. “No! I mean he’s right, it was inappropriate for me to have male company staying in my flat so soon after Danny!”

“Babe, you spent way too long listening to Danny and internalising his ridiculous sexist bullshit about having male friends. You—”

To Clara’s considerable consternation, she found herself bursting into tears; loud, hysterical ones that drew the unwanted attention of other patrons, all of whom paused in their consumption of coffee to gape at the sobbing woman in their midst.

“Oh, shit,” Amy mumbled, looking repentant and seizing Clara by the elbow, towing her gently, but determinedly outside. “Hey. Hey, it’s alright. I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“No,” Clara gulped, as the door swung closed behind them and she squeezed her eyes shut in a bid to stem the flow of tears. “No, you’re right. I shouldn’t have listened to what he said, and I shouldn’t have got so used to it, but that’s what happened, and I feel… I don’t know, I just feel awful, and like I’ve disrespected his memory, and… and…”
“Hey,” Amy stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Clara, pressing a kiss to her temple. “Hey,” she murmured. “Hey, it’s alright. It’s alright, babe.”

“No, it’s not,” Clara mumbled into her shoulder. “I’ve hurt John, who probably thinks I’m a Grade A bitch, and I yelled at my dad as well.”

“Oh, bloody hell, Oswald,” Amy groaned, but her tone was fond as she chided: “You genius.”

“He deserved it,” Clara muttered. “Making insinuations…”

“Well, I don’t care; why don’t you give him a ring after school and apologise for being a prat?”

“I guess I should,” Clara sighed. “What about John?”

“I’m not giving you any guidance on that front,” Amy said pragmatically. “Mainly because I know that if whatever you choose to do backfires, and it was my suggestion, then it’ll undoubtedly be my fault.”

“Will not,” Clara protested, feigning great affront. “Would I do that?”

“Would, could… have,” Amy raised an eyebrow. “Now. We are going to go inside and get coffee, then you are going to work, and when you next have some free time, you are going to work out a strategy on how to address this gigantic cock-up, OK?”

“Yes boss,” Clara acquiesced. “Coffee first, though.”

“Coffee first.”

“Sorry,” Missy quirked an eyebrow as she surveyed him over the top of her favourite floral teacup. “She sent you home?”

John sighed impatiently as she took a dainty sip of her tea. “Yes, what part of that are you finding difficult to grasp?”

“The part where you were staying with a frankly gorgeous young woman and she told you to leave and you… actually went.”

“What the hell was I meant to do? Outstay my welcome?”

“Put up some kind of a fight,” Missy looked unimpressed, and she set her cup down to point at him in a confrontational manner. “Argue. Remind her you’re not one of her students. Dear Lord, didn’t you say she’s basically a midget? It’s not like she could have made you leave, the height difference alone would have caused problems.”

“She’s not a midget,” John said defensively. “She’s just… petite.”

“How short is ‘petite’?” Missed asked, affixing him with a bemused stare, and John gesticulated vaguely to somewhere below his chin. His sister let out a yelp of mirth by way of response, her mouth twisting into a smirk. “That’s just short, John.”

“I don’t understand why you seem to think I did the wrong thing.”
“Because you were totally in with a chance.”

“A chance of what?!”

Missy said nothing, only continued to smirk in maddening silence. The penny dropped, and John rolled his eyes at her non-verbal insinuation.

“Jesus, Missy!” he wrinkled his nose, horrified by the very idea. “Her boyfriend just died!”

“Yeah, and?”

“So, she’s grieving!”

“Exactly! You could’ve been the shoulder to cry on! Hand to hold! Dick to-”

“You’re disgusting.”

“No, I’m trying to break you out of your fifteen-year dry spell. When was the last time you got it wet? Does it even still work?”

“Oh, my god,” John put his head in his hands, wishing he hadn’t gulped down his tea so quickly. At least then he could’ve drunk that to avoid having to look at his sister. “Do we have to have this chat? You’re my sister, not my urologist.”

“You have a urologist?” Missy looked positively gleeful, lifting up her cup and arching an eyebrow coyly. “So, there is a problem with it?”

“That was hypothetical!” John flung his hands in the air, his cheeks beginning to burn. “You’re my sister, can we please stop talking about this?”

“Sure,” Missy set her teacup down without touching the remnants of her tea. “Though if you need my Pornhub login, I’d be happy to-”

“No,” he said firmly, finding the courage to look her in the eye again. “Because that might involve finding out what sort of porn you’re into, and I don’t need any more therapy.”

“Or I could just tell you that I’m actually rather partial to-“

“Stop talking,” he begged, putting his hands over his ears. “Please. For the love of all that is holy, I do not need to hear about it. Or think about it. I never want to think about you doing anything even vaguely related to what’s below your waist. Please. For the sake of my own sanity.”

“You’re such a prude.”

“You’re my sister, it’s essentially my job to go around threatening to shoot anyone who touches you.”

“Although let’s be honest, I’d be more likely to do that to you, John.”

“What do you mean, ‘more likely’? You literally did threaten to shoot River. With a harpoon gun, if I recall correctly.”

“It’s not my fault that we were in an antique shop and I happened to be inspired,” Missy said tartly, examining her blood-red manicure. “Brother dearest.”

“So, why aren’t you threatening to shoot Clara?”
“Because she’s cute, and if you turn her down then frankly I’d quite like a shot.”

“I don’t have a shot. I don’t want a shot. Even if I did, she sent me away, remember?”

“I’m sure she’ll get over it.”

“What makes you think that?” John asked. “You’ve never even met her.”

“I haven’t, but you are rather charming. Not to mention good looking.”

“Urm…”

“For goodness sake, there’s nothing Freudian going on here, but do recall that I knew you in your youth, and that girls tended to lose their minds when you so much as deigned to breathe in their direction.”

“Right.”

“Not to mention I had to share a wall with you and River in that godforsaken hotel in Aberdeen, and she expressed her adoration for your looks in lots of ways that I needed a great deal of alcohol to try and ignore-slash-forget.”

“Not this again.”

“Look, I’m just saying, John,” Missy rolled her eyes. “Don’t give up on Clara yet. She may be stubborn, but she’s also lonely, and vulnerable, and-”

“If you say ‘sexually frustrated,’ then so help me, I will break something. Ideally your favourite teapot.”

Missy’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would. Better stop talking then.”

“She’ll come crawling back,” his sister summarised. “Just you wait and see.”

There was a mewing, yowling sound from outside the shepherd’s hut, and Missy grinned as John felt his stomach sink into his boots.

“Oh, Christ,” he said warily. “Is that…”

“My little loves!” Missy got to her feet and tripped lightly over to the doors, flinging them open and permitting entry to her two enormous cats. Or, as John privately preferred to think of them, her henchmen. Hench-cats. Whatever.

The two of them bounded inside and immediately froze, staring up at John with visible animosity, their fur fluffing up as they flattened themselves to the ground and hissed at him furiously.

“Now, darlings,” Missy cooed, scooping up the nearest bundle of malicious fur, which immediately went limp in her arms. John hadn’t bothered to learn which hell-cat was which; they were both equally savage. “Johnny is here for some advice, so we’re going to be nice to him! Yes, we are!”

“I might ah…” he got to his feet, stepping over the cat still crouched on the floor and avoiding the paw-swipes of the one in Missy’s arms. “I might be off. Thanks for the tea and the chat.”

“Trust me,” Missy said with a grin, pressing a kiss to her cat’s head. “I’m right. She’ll come back.”
“Yeah, well,” John muttered, stepping outside into the freezing October rain and putting his hood up. “Excuse me if I don’t hold out a lot of hope.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Clara and John reflect on being apart, and a decision is made...

What neither John nor Clara had thought to factor into their optimistic view of reparations was the sheer unyielding stubbornness of the parties involved. They were both aware of their own natures, and some degree of each other’s refusal to acquiesce to the views, demands, or insistences of others, but never had this facet of their personalities clashed quite so spectacularly, nor caused quite so many problems for them.

Clara was, in a word, miserable. She knew full well that she had alienated her father and nipped a blossoming friendship in the bud, and, despite Amy’s constant assurances of her ongoing presence in Clara’s life, there was something about the auburn-haired Scotswoman that was incomparable to the reassurance of her dad, or the warmth of John. Marcus. John. Whatever.

Unwilling to sit around and wallow in the melancholy that had been lapping insistently at the edges of her consciousness since the argument in her flat occurred, Clara threw herself into work as a meaningful distraction, and, to a degree, found herself satisfactorily occupied. Or, rather, that would be occupied for as long as she was reading, or teaching, or asking questions to her students. In moments of idleness, however, the melancholy would creep up on her as insidiously and cloyingly as fog, robbing her of the ability to think rationally or feel anything other than an aching sense of loss. It was with the aim of avoiding moments of quiet that she returned to work full-time after the half-term holiday, unwilling to sit at home and mope, instead seeking the noise and bustle of Coal Hill in order to keep her mind occupied and stave off feelings of loneliness or isolation that threatened to take her over when she found herself sitting alone of a morning.

She wasn’t sure whether her students sensed a shift in her behaviour, or whether they were simply being their incontrovertible teenage selves, but they kept her busy. There was a constant stream of questions, requests, breakdowns, late essays, missing homework assignments and behavioural issues for her to deal with — enough to keep her mind in the classroom, as long as she was there. It was not until she reached the staff room at break time or lunch that she would feel the aching sense of loss creeping in again, looking around at the assembled teachers sat in groups based on gender, department, age, or other factors, and realising that, without Danny, she found it hard to fit in. It had never been the case before — indeed, when she had arrived at Coal Hill, she had integrated seamlessly with a fringe group of staff with whom she had shared attributes — but now she struggled to think of things to say, or to approach other members of staff without feeling certain that they would look at her with pity. On the days when she tried to make conversation, the looks of raw, untempered compassion were enough to make her want to scream, and so she kept herself to herself, eating in her classroom and refusing to socialise with her peers.

It wasn’t until many days later, when she discussed the situation with Amy, that the truth of the matter was pointed out to her.

“Hang on,” her best friend narrowed her eyes at her, setting down her glass of wine and arching an eyebrow at her across the table they’d managed to find only after ten minutes of searching. “You’re saying they all treat you weirdly now Danny isn’t there?”
“Well, yeah,” Clara rolled her eyes at her friend’s lack of comprehension and gave a sarcastic little wave. “Hello, pitiable and tragically widowed English teacher.”

“I mean,” Amy chewed on a hangnail, thinking for a moment. “Yeah, that could be part of it, but, equally… you’ve done The Thing.”

“Could you narrow that down fairly substantially?”

“You know. The Arsehole-in-a-Relationship Thing.”

“Again… that isn’t helping. Going to need specifics.”

“God, you’re dense,” Amy looked bemused. “You know; you got into a relationship with Danny and suddenly he was super-exciting and-”

“You did meet him, right?”

“Shush. He was super-exciting and you wanted to spend time with him and so you did, only you sort of… eschewed everyone else.”

“I did not!”

“Did so.”

“I didn’t eschew you!”

“I’m one half of a couple; couples always have couple friends. At work, however…”

Clara felt herself blush as she realised the veracity of Amy’s statement. Her best friend was right; she and Danny had kept to themselves, heading off at lunch to eat in the local park, or sitting together and talking in a world of their own. She’d undoubtedly alienated the rest of the staff, and now it was little wonder that they kept away from her, driven by a mixture of pity and lingering contempt.

“Can’t you just come and work at Coal Hill?” Clara implored, not for the first time. “You wouldn’t act like I’ve got the plague.”

“You really think unleashing me on impressionable teenagers would be a good idea?”

“You wouldn’t have to teach; you could be a receptionist or an administrator or something. Please. Go on.”

“Again, you really think unleashing me as the bright and happy face of the school would be a good idea?” Amy grinned wickedly. “Horrendous plan.”

“Can’t you just… I don’t know, drop in at lunch and be my buddy?”

“Babe, you’re not a five-year-old. I’m not coming in at lunch to mother you. You could come out with me at lunch, but-”

“But you’re off being scathingly critical of the city’s latest trendy cultural offerings. Yeah, I know.”

“You know… don’t yell at me or anything, but you could take up writing to John again.”

Clara wrinkled her nose, reaching for her glass and taking a fortifying swig of wine. “Or I could not.”
“Why?”

“Because that involves apologising.”

“Oh yeah, and god forbid you do that.”

“I just…” she sighed. “I just feel guilty, and I’d rather just leave him be and let him recover from me being a bitch in his own time, unencumbered by me apologising and messing things up again.”

“In other words,” Amy mused. “You’re being a stubborn pain in the arse.”

“I am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Just ring the damn bloke. Or write to him. I don’t care. Whichever. Anything that’ll stop you moping.”

“I am not moping.”

“I would dispute that assertion.”

“You… I… I’m not… oh, shush.”

“You know I’m right,” Amy smirked, taking a sip of her wine. “Admit it.”

“I hate you sometimes, Pond.”

As far as John’s melancholic solitude was concerned, he was predominantly occupied with sitting in his study, putting his head in his hands and groaning about his singular and intense lack of any inspiration to draw. He knew he needed to; he knew he needed to work to get his feelings out — and potentially pay the bills — but he was completely and utterly lacking in the inspiration or motivation to do… anything. His apathy was not limited to art; it had crept outwards from the study and now extended to cooking, thus rendering making anything more complex than toast unfeasible; walking Idris, who had taken to running around the house instead; and shaving, meaning that the lower half of his face was now covered in several weeks’ worth of whiskers he hadn’t quite mustered the energy to remove.

It was almost a blessing when Missy knocked on the front door in early November, holding a bag of groceries and looking instantly and utterly repelled by his current appearance.

“Dear god, man,” she wrinkled her nose. “What happened to you? Have you been sleeping under bridges as a recreational pastime?”

“No,” he snapped, scowling darkly at her. “Just been busy.”

“Doing what?” Missy’s eyes slid past him, to the pile of unopened post on the hall floor, and then
back to him as she conducted a non-verbal appraisal of his wrinkled, stained T-shirt. “Taking care of… precisely nothing, apparently.”

Idris, usually reticent around his sister, bounded forth from the kitchen at that point, bouncing around Missy’s ankles and barking excitedly before plonking down at her feet and looking up at her pleadingly.

“What does she want?” Missy asked, but her expression softened as she reached down and petted the golden retriever’s head with her free hand. “Why is she looking at me like I’m her Lord and Saviour?”

“Probably wants a walk.”

“Hang on,” Missy’s attention snapped back to him, and she glared at him so vehemently, he physically recoiled. “Are you telling me you’ve not even so much as left the house recently?”

“Correct. Why?”

“That’s appalling. You need to get outside and get some vitamin D before you get rickets or keel over with SAD.”

“What do you care?”

“I’m your sister,” Missy put one hand on her hips and tried — and, indeed, succeeded — to look stern. “And I say so.”

“Baby sister.”

“Not that much of a baby.”

“You’re younger than me.”

“Ach, not this again. Move out of the way, man,” Missy pushed past him, into the gloomy interior of the house, and headed towards the kitchen. Groaning, John trailed after her, coming to a halt in the kitchen doorway as she looked around the room in stunned horror. “John, did a bomb go off in here?”

“No, why?”

“You’re saying ‘why’ an awful lot for someone who purports to not be a defensive arsehole when stressed.”

“I’m not stressed.”

“Depressed, then.”

“I’m not depressed, either.”

“Well, clearly you are,” she leaned down to examine a slice of bread he’d abandoned on a plate the previous night. “This has mould.”

“Does it?” he hadn’t noticed that the previous night. Cons of eating by candlelight, he mused. I might be saving on electricity, but I’m apparently not doing much for my digestive system.

“Right, I’m making you food, then I’m making you eat it. And then I’m going to walk your bloody dog, and, while I’m doing that, you can remove that monstrosity from your chin and put on
something clean. So help me god, I might even do your laundry, although I draw the line at your pants.”

“What mon- oh, the beard.”

“Is that what you’re calling it? Here I was thinking a bird was nesting on your chin.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Of what? The ability to grow hair on your face? Your ravishing good looks?” Missy’s voice was dripping with sarcasm, and she dumped her bag of groceries on the worktop with a thud. “Stop being a miserable bastard.”

“I’m Scottish,” he said defensively. “It’s what I do.”

“So am I, and I’m here to be a ray of sunshine, so you can damn well make an effort to do the same,” she rolled up her sleeves and began shifting dirty crockery and assorted used cutlery into the sink, turning on the hot tap and adding a generous slug of washing up liquid. “You can start on that. Go on.”

John hesitated for a moment, caught between the idea of rebelling against her so-called authority and thus incurring her wrath or conceding to her wishes and risk prompting her smugness. He opted for the latter after several seconds of consideration — smug was far easier to deal with than glee, at least as far as Missy was concerned. He sidled over to the sink and began to scrub at a plate, staring out of the window absentmindedly as he did so.

“If you can stop being stubborn and scrub a plate, you can stop being stubborn and speak to Clara, you know.”

He jumped, and the offending item of crockery almost slipped from his hands. “What?”

“Well, have you tried just… you know, talking to her?”

“How do you know I’m not?”

“Because there’s no way things can have got this bad if you were.”

“How-”

“I’m not an idiot, John,” Missy sighed, and when he turned to look at her, she was sweeping crumbs off a work surface with an expression of resignation. “I’ve seen you have a breakdown before, and this is getting damned close to one.”

“I’m not having a breakdown,” he said robotically, holding up the dripping plate by way of evidence, then realising it only supported Missy’s argument. “I’m coping.”

“I’m not having a breakdown,” he said robotically, holding up the dripping plate by way of evidence, then realising it only supported Missy’s argument. “I’m coping.”

“You’re neglecting yourself, and worse still, Idris. That’s not coping.”

“It’s my life,” he shot back. “I can do what I want.”

“I will not let you ruin your life — again — over some silly English girl from London-”

“Blackpool.”

“-some silly English girl from Blackpool, who you’re too sodding stubborn to speak to and try and clear the air.”
“I’m not being stubborn.”

“So, why don’t you call her?”

“Because she won’t want to hear from me. She told me to go, remember? Here I am, going! Going, going, gone, in fact.”

“God, you’re a prat.”

“Excuse me?!”

“You made a friend, and you cocked it all up, and you are continuing to cock it up further because of your pride.”

“I am not cocking things up. Nor am I being proud.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Missy said, but there was a hint of fondness to her tone. “Now, can you get scrubbing, please? I’m going to need things to cook with, and you’re going to need things to eat off of.”

Later that evening, the weather rolled in over Ùine: the wind whistled through the gaps in the house, and rain lashed at the windows as though determined to break through and lay waste to everything within. John hardly noticed; he was in his study, hunched over his desk with his pen flying over the page, outlining the face of a woman he both knew intimately and yet hardly knew at all. Idris slumbered at his feet, her body providing a welcome source of warmth, and he lost himself in the work, creating sketch after sketch until, finally, he was happy enough with one to reach for a hazel marker.

The doorbell rang as he uncapped the pen, and he swore under his breath as the sound crashed around the house, sticking the lid back on and getting to his feet. Stomping along the corridor to the entry hall and unbolting the door, he wondered precisely what his sister’s rationale would be for disturbing him for the second time in a day — undoubtedly, her hut would be leaking, or some other “emergency” that required her presence in the house — and cursed as he did so.

Yanking the door open and finding himself immediately drenched by the driving rain that forced its way inside as he did so, he was rendered speechless as he took in the woman stood before him.

“Clara?” he blurted. “What the hell are you doing here?”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Arriving on John's doorstep in the storm, Clara is suddenly struck by uncertainty...

Clara had only walked the short distance from her car to the front door, and yet she was already soaked through. Her coat had proved useless against the rain when she’d stopped at a service station several hours earlier, and so she’d abandoned the garment in the back of her borrowed car, stepping out in Ùine and resigning herself to the lashing horizontal rain and its determination to render her clothes sopping wet.

Now, as she stood on the doorstep in the semi-shelter of John’s porch and felt the chill emanating from the gloomy interior, she was regretting that decision. Through the darkness and the storm, she could make out a shell-shocked look of horror on John’s face that was the mirror of hers, although whether that was due to her bedraggled appearance or simply her presence in Scotland, she couldn’t tell.

“I, ah…” she began, abruptly feeling rather foolish. The wind howled around her, penetrating her sodden clothes, and she raised her voice to ensure she could be heard. “John, I wanted to say sorry.”

“You drove for ten hours just to say sorry?”

“Yeah,” she wilted under the force of his incredulous gaze and mentally kicked herself for her own stupidity and impulsivity with each passing minute. “Was that… should I not… I can just… I’ll go.”

“Where the hell to? You can’t drive back like this!”

“There’s a caravan park, isn’t there? And hotels, and if all else fails, lay-bys. I’m not fussy. I can sleep in the car.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re soaked through!”

“Yes, and?” she shrugged, fighting the urge to cry. She’d expected him to be glad to see her, not this confused animosity. “I shouldn’t have come, I’m sorry. I’ll leave you be.”

She turned away, regretfully leaving the shelter of the porch, before closing her eyes as the rain hit her face and she took a step towards the car.

“Ach, no,” John said gruffly, reaching out and placing a hand on her shoulder to stop her. She froze, looking at his hand in surprise, and he let go of her as though he’d been burned. “Clara, no. I was just… it’s just a surprise to see you. You don’t have to go.”

“Really,” she said miserably, refusing to look at him. “Really, it’s fine. You’re not obligated to facilitate my idiotic impulse trips.”

“Clara, I’m not letting you get back in the car and drive anywhere — you must be shattered. And you’re soaking; you’ll catch your death if you don’t warm up.”

“Forgive me if your castle doesn’t exactly feel toasty and warm.”
John sighed, and she looked at him then, surprised to find his mouth twitching into a smile. “If I light a fire to warm you up, do you promise not to call it a castle again?”

She hesitated for a moment, weighing up the proposal. Driving anywhere while this sodden and shattered was wholly unappealing, and he really did seem sincere in his offer, much to her surprise. “Yeah,” she decided, with a nonchalant little shrug, as though it were no big deal. “Yeah, alright.”

“Good,” he grinned widely at her. “Now, do you have a bag? Because there’s no point us getting dry and then coming back out for it.”

“I, urn…” Clara turned back to the car, darting out into the full force of the rain before John could protest or try to stop her under the guise of chivalry. She ducked into the backseat, grabbing the bag of assorted supplies she’d thrown together that morning, her handbag, and the still-dripping coat she had cast off earlier that evening, wrapping the former two in the latter as some defence against the driving rain. Shoving the lot under her arm, she locked the car and headed back to the porch, noticing then the strange look that John was giving the vehicle.

“What?” she asked, looking from him to the car and back again in blind incomprehension. “What’s that face for?”

“You…” he blinked a couple of times. “You have a Land Rover Discovery 4?”

“More to the point, you know what a Land Rover Discovery 4 looks like?”

“Missy convinced me I needed a 4x4 last year, namely of the Land Rover variety. The guy at the dealership was talking this one up, until he realised I didn’t have that kind of budget, and I realised I don’t have that kind of budget, and I ended up buying my ancient relic off Autotrader,” he gestured behind her, and Clara turned and squinted into the darkness to make out a well-loved looking Land Rover that was, at a guess, older than some of her students. “Is there a lot of call for high-end off-roaders in Shoreditch?”

“It’s not mine, idiot,” Clara rolled her eyes in bemusement. “Borrowed it off a friend. Can we continue this conversation somewhere that doesn’t have rain that’s trying to penetrate my skin?”

“Oh, right,” John’s cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink, and he moved aside, allowing Clara to step over the threshold and into the gloomy chill of the house’s interior. She shivered, and his look of embarrassed guilt intensified. “Sorry, I’ve been in my study all evening, so it’s the only… the house is… I can’t afford to…”

“It’s fine,” Clara assured him, suppressing another shiver and following him as he led the way through the hall and into a wood-panelled room with a thick crimson carpet, the furniture an oddly eclectic mix of antique and new — or at least, newer. John flicked a concealed light switch, revealing that in the middle of one wall was a fireplace large enough for Clara to stand in, and it was this that he headed over to, turning his attention to a basket of logs that lay beside the stone hearth and beginning to pile assorted pieces of wood into a small pyramid shape as Clara looked around her.

The walls were a warm shade of amber, patterned in an unusual hexagon design that she had never seen before, and every few feet or so hung a grand, impressive-looking portrait. Some of those depicted were severe and Victorian, men with whiskers and military uniforms who scowled down at her from their gilded frames, while others seemed newer, including one of a woman with a mass of golden curls, sprawled on an ottoman against a backdrop of red silk.

“Is that your wife?” Clara asked hesitantly, looking back at John, who was now fiddling with a box
of matches. He paused in his endeavours, nodding once in a barely perceptible motion before settling back to his task.

Resigning herself to the silence, Clara continued to let her gaze scan around the room, finding a painting on the far wall that could only be of John in his youth. His alone stood out amongst the other portraits due to his singularly unique garb, eschewing the formal military style for a leather jacket and gazing at the artist with a look of supreme disdain. Clara wasn’t sure why, but she was almost certain that it was a self-portrait.

Moving from her position in the centre of the room, where a puddle was developing around her feet, Clara moved towards a sideboard that ran almost the length of one wall, the teak-coloured wood covered in a multitude of photographs in mismatched frames. There were black and white ones of a boy and girl that she ascertained almost at once to be John and his sister; even older-looking photos of a couple she presumed to be their parents; and then there were newer ones — John in the seventies, a silver hoop in one ear; Missy in what looked to be the eighties, her eyes daubed with blue eyeshadow… and then, amidst it all, a younger boy with floppy brown hair and a shy grin: Marcus. His photos were scattered among the others: here making a sandcastle on the beach; there playing football with John; here in a school portrait. She smiled to herself as her eyes found the photographs that showed a roughly linear evolution to the young man she had first started writing to, and she was about to comment when her eye was drawn by three other images. The first showed John in an outdated-looking tuxedo, with the woman from the portrait at his side in a glittering red dress; the second depicted John and his wife on what could only be their wedding day, both of them looking jubilant as they were showered with confetti. And then, the most recent shot: a girl with a mass of dark hair and icily pale eyes, looking up at the camera with a smirk. Clara’s heart stopped.

“I thought you said you didn’t have kids,” she called, trying to ignore the way her heart was hammering as she looked down at the girl, who looked so familiar and yet so… alien.

“I don’t.”

“So, who’s she?” Clara lifted the frame and turned to John, holding it out and arching an eyebrow.

“Her?” John snickered. “You actually think that this old wreck could produce offspring with cheekbones like that?”

“Who…”

“That’s Regan,” he dusted his hands off and stood up, and Clara was dimly aware of the fire crackling to life behind him as she set the photo back in its place. “Missy’s daughter.”

“Missy’s…”

“Daughter, yeah. She lives in America with her dad. Kind of a touchy subject with Missy, but I like having her photo on the family shelf. It’s where she belongs, not some sodding penthouse in New York.”

“Sorry but… Regan?” Clara wrinkled her nose. “As in… King Lear’s daughter?”

“Ah,” John cleared his throat, looking a touch embarrassed. “She’s actually technically ‘Morrígan,’ but it’s a bit… doom-laden.”

“Why?”

“The Morrígan is a figure from Irish mythology. Big on war and death,” he rolled his eyes. “Missy’s ex was a fan of dramatic flair.”
“Clearly,” Clara dropped her gaze to her sodden trainers, biting her lip. “Your wife was really pretty.”

“Thanks,” John mumbled, although he sounded pleased. “She would’ve been happy to hear it.”

“Did you paint her?” Clara asked, looking back up at the portrait, and then across to John’s, noticing for the first time that the two were facing each other from opposite walls. “And yourself?”

“Aye, I painted her,” he admitted. “And myself, although that was back in my punk phase. I mainly just hung it for some light relief from the miserable old bastard ancestors.”

Clara laughed. “Stick it to the man.”

“Yeah, something like that,” he chuckled. “The fire’s going so, ah… I’ll go stick the kettle on and you should change out of your wet things. There’s a fireguard somewhere we could hang them on to dry.”

“Sure,” Clara smiled, stepping closer to the fire, which was now crackling away merrily, and extended her hands to it to warm them. “That sounds good.”

“Tea?”

“Please,” she said, and he nodded before heading out of the room and pulling the door closed behind him. Clara looked over to the leaded windows, realising that closing the curtains would probably be beneficial both to keeping the place warm and her own privacy, and she moved over to them and dragged the heavy drapes shut before peeling off her sopping jumper and top and laying them down on the edge of the hearth. Rooting around in her bag, she located a dry T-shirt and hoodie, and she slipped those on before stripping out of her soggy jeans and socks and replacing them with an oversized and well-loved pair of joggers and clean socks. Sinking down on the worn sofa nearest the fire, she rolled her shoulders a couple of times and then wrinkled her nose, before reaching under her shirt and removing her bra, laying it atop the pile of already-steaming garments beside the fire and exhaling in relief.

There was a scrabbling sound from the direction of the kitchen and then Idris appeared on the threshold, bounding over to Clara joyously and flinging herself down at her feet, tail thumping the carpet in delight.

“Hello,” Clara said warmly, reaching down and stroking the golden retriever’s head. “Did you miss me?”

Idris huffed by way of response, and Clara laughed. “I missed you, too,” Clara leaned down so that she could continue stroking the canine more attentively with both hands. “My bed was cold and lonely without my giant hot water bottle.”

Idris huffed again, rolling onto her back, and it was then that she froze, looking at the fire with wide eyes.

“It’s OK,” Clara soothed, as Idris continued to stare. “You’re sa-”

Without warning, the golden retriever lunged forwards and snatched up Clara’s discarded bra, racing off with it in her jaws and looking thoroughly pleased with herself. Clara swore, getting to her feet and wondering precisely why dogs had a sixth sense for this kind of thing.

“Idris,” she called, as the dog tore out of the living room and disappeared into the bowels of the house. “Come on, girl. Don’t be silly, come back. Come back and you can have belly rubs.”
Nothing.

“Come back, and I’ll find out where John keeps the treats.”

Silence.

“Please come back, this is already awkward enough without you-”

“Urm,” John interjected from the doorway, where he was stood holding a tray in one hand and her bra in the other, his fingers gripping onto the extreme edge of a shoulder strap as though it might come to life and bite him. “I think this is yours.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Clara felt herself turn maroon. “Sorry, it was kind of damp so I… and then Idris…” she darted across the room and snatched it back, adding it to the pile of wet clothes again and avoiding John’s gaze. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he assured her, setting the tray down beside her and then dragging a large metal fireguard in front of the now-roaring flames. As he set to work hanging her damp clothes over it, he asked in a nonchalant voice: “Now that you’re dry and warm, I’d like to reiterate my earlier question. Did you really come all this way just to apologise?”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Clara tries to explain her feelings to John, who does his best to understand.

For a long few moments, the only sounds in the room were the fire crackling and the storm outside. Clara looked over at the steaming mugs of tea, unwilling to look at John, and she clenched her hands into fists before relaxing them and repeating the motion over and over, trying to straighten out her thoughts to form a coherent sentence. For the sake of something to do, she rearranged her damp clothes in front of the fire, and tucked her hair behind her ears out of nervous habit.

John, to his credit, sat and waited patiently. He didn’t repeat his question, or ask if she’d heard him, or try to prompt a response; none of the things Danny had done in moments such as these. He only remained silent, his breathing slow and even, and his hands entered her field of vision as he lifted his mug into his hands and took a sip, the sound of him swallowing seeming impossibly loud.

“I…” Clara began, taking a shuddering breath and trying not to tremble. “You have to understand I didn’t know this would happen.”

“Didn’t know what would happen?” he asked quietly, and finding herself reassured by his tone, she looked up at him for the first time since the question of her presence was posed.

“That I wouldn’t be able to give you up. You’re like… an addiction.”

“Am I?”

“Yes,” she said at once, surprised by how fierce she sounded, and she felt the nerves leave her. “You absolutely are.”

“In what sense?”

“Ever since I first started writing to Marcus, he became a way to get away. Someone to listen, to whom I could paint stories about myself without any of the inconvenient interruptions or digressions that verbally telling stories has. It was completely asynchronous, and he was completely neutral, and he was… he was my safe space. He was the person I could trust to listen and not judge me; the person I could tell my secrets to. It was my way of escaping.”

“But… I’m not him.”

“I know, John, but you’ve been him for long enough to know how to carry that on,” Clara confessed. “You’ve been listening to me for years; you’ve been giving me advice and caring and not judging and just…”

“Now you want me to keep listening.”

“Yes,” Clara admitted, against her better judgement. She ran her hand through her hair and sighed. “Is that crazy?”

“No,” he reasoned, then added in a carefully neutral tone: “Selfish, yes; but crazy, no.”
“I don’t…” she shook her head, horrified by the accusation and needing him to understand. “I don’t want to be selfish. I want to listen to you.”

“Why?”

“Because I care.”

“Not just because I’m your escape, and you feel like you owe it to me?”

“No,” she denied, because it was true. Yes, she wanted to escape, but she didn’t want to escape alone. She wanted to get to know John in the same way she had known Marcus. “No, it’s because after all this time of you listening to me, yes, I’m addicted to that, but also I want to get to know you. I don’t like this power imbalance, I don’t like the fact you know every facet of my life but I know almost nothing about yours. I want us to be on an equal footing, rather than one of us knowing everything and one of us being left in the dark.”

“Why? Clara, I’m not my brother, and you don’t owe me anything.”

“But I want to,” she paused, realising how her words sounded. “That is, I don’t want to owe you anything, I just… I want you to be a part of my life, the way I’ve obviously been a huge part of yours.”

“What makes you think you’ve been a huge part of mine?” he asked, his tone measured and non-confrontational.

She affixed him with a look of sadness. “John, you’ve been alone here for years. Can you look me in the eyes and honestly tell me that you didn’t look forward to hearing from me? Didn’t wait for my letters?”

John dropped his gaze then, and that was all the confirmation that Clara needed.

“Please,” she said softly, reaching over and putting a hand on his arm. He flinched so violently she worried that his tea would spill, but he swore under his breath and set the mug down, pulling away from her touch. “I’m sorry I sent you away, and—”

“You want to stop depriving yourself of a safe space by getting back in touch with me.”

“No,” she corrected, placing her hand on his forearm again and sliding it down until her palm was resting against the back of his hand. This time he didn’t pull away, simply stayed where he was in a state of passive immobility. “I’m sorry for depriving you of your own safe place to escape to.”

“You’re not…” he mumbled unconvincingly, as she turned his hand over and laid hers against his, meshing their fingers together and squeezing reassuringly. “That’s not…”

“If you can look at me and tell me, right now, that the last few weeks haven’t been awful, then I will go, now, and you need never hear from me again. But we both know that would be a lie.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because your pulse jumped when I touched you,” she breathed. “And I’d be willing to bet it’s been racing since I rang the doorbell.”

“I…” he swallowed thickly. “Clara…”

“John.”
“I missed you,” he breathed, removing his hand from hers and dropping his gaze to his lap. “Happy now?”

“No,” she leaned over and pulled him into an awkward hug, feeling him tense up as she embraced him. “Happy now.”

“Are we going to have to do a lot of this? Hugging?”

“Maybe.”

“Because I’m not a hugger.”

“You are now,” she pressed her face into his shoulder and screwed her eyes shut, determined to enjoy the brief physical contact before he inevitably pulled away. “Besides, I’ve got ample time for you to learn.”

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” he asked, as she relinquished her hold on him and leant back against the sofa cushions, reaching for her own mug and taking a sip of tea. “Teaching pudding brains?”

She snorted at the term, almost choking on her drink. “Well, yeah,” she shrugged, gesturing vaguely with her free hand. “I just kind of… took off.”

“What?!” he yelped, looking appalled. “Clara, you can’t do that! What if they think you’ve gone missing?! What if they think I’ve kidnapped your or someth- oh my god, did you steal that car?”

“Excuse me?!”

“That very nice and very expensive car outside. Did you steal it?”

“Jesus, no,” she rolled her eyes. “I’m a slightly messed-up English teacher, not a carjacker. It’s my friend Martha’s. She’s big into outdoor pursuits.”

“Doesn’t she need it back?”

“Not immediately, no.”

“How can you be that certain?” he narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously.

“Because she’s on holiday,” Clara blushed. “Also, I… may have borrowed it without asking.”

“So, you did steal it?”

“I did not steal it. I borrowed it. I left a note; besides, she’s got a whole fleet of the things. She won’t miss one.”

“Bloody hell, what is she, a mafia boss?”

“No, she’s a doctor,” Clara raised an eyebrow. “She just happens to like surfing and big cars. Or, more specifically, she favours the former and her husband the latter.”

“Is he a career criminal?”

“Mickey? Jesus, no — quite the opposite. He works for the police. Big car fan.”

“You stole a car from a police officer’s wife?!”
“I didn’t steal it!” Clara said in exasperation. “I borrowed it. Besides, he’ll understand.”

“Still,” John frowned. “I can’t believe you drove all this way just to… abscond from life. Which I’m still not happy about you doing, by the way.”

“I’ve done it before,” she muttered sulkily. “People know I’m fine, I just need to get away from it all.”

“Right,” John looked bemused by her admission. “When and why did it happen before?”

“When my mum died,” Clara took a sip of her tea. “And just after… well, just after… you know. Danny.”

“How far did you take off?”

“Urm,” she felt the heat rise in her cheeks. “The first time, Switzerland, and the second time, Cornwall. For the record, the latter was probably nicer, though lacking in mountains.”

“So, this is an apology, an appeal for friendship, and an impromptu holiday-slash-attention-grabber?”

“I think you’re being very judgemental.”

“I think you’re being very overdramatic.”

“Look, they know what I’m like, OK? My family know me. I left a note, so they’ll know I’m safe.”

“What are they like?” John asked, and Clara could only blink at him, blindsided by the change of subject.

“What?”

“Your family.”

“Oh. Urm. Well, you already know most things about them.”

“I know, but… you know, a quick summary wouldn’t hurt.”

“Well, Dad is great, but his choice in women since Mum is questionable. Gran is a low-level alcoholic, but great fun at parties. And Bonnie is… well, Bonnie.”

“Meaning?”

“Successful and boring and well-meaning in a patronising kind of way.”

“She can’t be all bad; she’s the one who brought us back together.”

“I know,” Clara sighed, not really wanting to have to explain her complicated relationship with her twin. “It’s just… difficult. She’s always been the high-achiever.”

“Oh, yeah, because you’re such a low achiever…”

“I don’t run a political think tank that has significant political sway over the Labour Party.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, ah. She’s a good person, just… busy. Too busy for me, a lot of the time.”
“So, you take off like this…”

“So, they can see me,” she confessed, against her better judgement. “So…”

“So that they look past her, and so she looks past everything else,” John nodded sagely. “I know that feeling.”

“How could you?”

“For years I hoped you’d see me, not Marcus,” he said sadly. “And now…”

“Now, you got your wish,” she gave him an encouraging smile. “And I’m here, seeing you.”

“Which is in itself… actually kind of weird,” he rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. “I never thought you’d be sat in my living room, looking around at these miserable old paintings.”

“Don’t forget the cute family photos.”

“And those,” he grinned, then looked over to where her clothes were steaming in front of the fire. “Have you warmed up yet?”

“Mm,” Clara closed her eyes and nodded. “Yep. Does it rain this apocalyptically hard very often?”

“It’s Scotland,” he joked. “What do you think?”

“Let me guess; when it’s not raining, it’s snowing?”

“Exactly.”

Idris padded into the room then, still looking thoroughly chastised, and arranged herself on the carpet in front of the fire.

“She looks… guilty.”

“I told her off for the bra incident. She’s probably been skulking in the kitchen since.”

“Poor darling,” Clara reached out and rubbed Idris’s stomach with her foot. “Was John very cross?”

Idris only looked up at her with large, sorrowful brown eyes.

“It’s OK, angel, I’m not cross. You can come and snuggle with me.”

The canine needed no second invitation; she bounded onto the sofa and settled down with her head and forepaws on Clara’s lap.

“Not for the first time, I’m going to complain that you’re soft on my dog,” John teased. “Very, very soft.”

“That’s because she’s such a good girl!” Clara cooed, stroking Idris’s ears and earning a sleepy tail wag in response. “Aren’t you??”

“Despite stealing your underwear.”

“Yes, despite that.”

They lapsed into companionable silence, Clara caught up in stroking the dog sprawled across her lap, and when she next looked up she realised that John was looking at her with an unreadable
expression.

“What?” she asked, frowning a little as she tried to place the look in his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he forced a smile that was wholly unconvincing. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Liar. What is it?”

“It’s just…” he sighed. “I’m so used to being alone here. To only sharing with Idris, or before… well, before, with River. It’s strange having another human here after all this time.”

“Hasn’t Missy ever lived here with you?”

“No, she flat-out refused to set foot in the place once River had been here. Wouldn’t even come over for dinner.”

“They didn’t get on, then?”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” John snorted. “She lives out on the estate in a shepherd’s hut, so she’s probably enjoying this storm even less than we are.”

“Well… I hope I prove to be a pleasant house guest for as long as you’ll have me.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

On her first morning in Scotland, Clara gets to know John better... and spends quality time with Idris.

When Clara awoke the next morning, it took her several seconds to remember where she was. The usual cacophony of traffic noises and building work that served as a soundtrack to her life in London was gone, replaced by a heavy, luxurious silence broken only by the occasional sound of a birdcall from outside the window. The quiet in itself was not unwelcome, but something was missing from it, and it was then that she realised that the rain had stopped at last. The wind had dropped, and the constant pattering that had lulled her to sleep so swiftly the previous night had ceased, leaving in its stead a calm and soothing stillness.

Rolling over on her blow-up mattress, Clara looked over at the glowing remains of the fire, grateful that John had insisted she sleep down here in the warmth rather than chancing one of the bedrooms upstairs. While the flames had long since died down, left untended as she slept, the room had retained its warmth, but nonetheless Clara sat up, reaching towards where she’d left her jumper the previous night and pulling it on. Beside the makeshift bed, Idris perked her head up as she realised that Clara was awake, and she laughed as the canine placed a tentative paw on the mattress beside her, looked disconcerted by its wobble, and instead lay down as close to the edge as she could get, one leg extended towards Clara in a plea for attention.

“I know,” Clara said softly, scooting over and curling up beside the golden retriever, nose to nose. “Funny wobbly mattress.”

Idris let out a soft huff and nuzzled Clara’s face sleepily, evidently pleased that her owner’s houseguest was still present and correct. Unused to the novelty of having a non-human companion, Clara rested one hand on Idris’s side and simply lay there for a while, stroking absentminded patterns on the canine’s side as she relished the silence of the surroundings, coupled with the warmth and safety of being in bed. The only discernible sounds were the far-off ticking of a clock, snippets of birdsong, and the rhythmic thudding of Idris’s tail against the floor as she lay beside her new human friend, and Clara closed her eyes, letting the tranquillity lull her back into a light sleep.

“Clara?”

John’s voice startled her, and she sat bolt upright immediately, blinking in the sudden brightness as she realised he’d opened the curtains a crack.

“M’awake,” she mumbled blearily, raking her hands through her hair and trying not to yawn as she focused on him. “Wassup?”

“Sorry, I didn’t realise you weren’t awake,” John said, trying and failing to suppress a grin before holding aloft two steaming mugs. “I brought you a cup of tea.”

“Oh,” she smiled, touched by the gesture, and attempted to shuffle across the mattress to him before conceding defeat on the unstable surface and getting to her feet, pacing over to him and accepting the proffered mug with gratitude. “Thank you, that’s really kind of you.”
“You’re welcome,” he smiled, then tilted his head to look down at Idris, who was twisted into an improbable shape with her legs in the air and yet was still sound asleep. “Clara, I think you broke my dog.”

“I think I genuinely might’ve,” Clara sunk down on the sofa and sipped her drink, thankful for its warmth. “She stayed with me all night.”

“She’s very protective of you,” John mused, looking down at his dog fondly. “She’s not usually like that with anyone other than me.”

“Is she usually this… clingy, with you? Not that it’s a bad thing, it’s really nice; I’m just curious.”

“No, she’s not usually like this at all,” he admitted, crouching beside Idris and stroking her head. She wriggled a little but stayed sound asleep, and Clara smiled. “She was when she was a puppy, but I think she could tell I needed her to be — it was still so soon after I lost River. She seemed to grow out of it, but it’s like… I don’t know. Like she can tell—”

“Like she can tell that I need someone or something to cuddle,” Clara finished, with a shy smile. “Dogs are smarter than people sometimes.”

“That they are,” John chuckled, then looked up at her shyly. “We could take her for a walk today, if you fancied?”

“I’d like that,” Clara looked over at Idris, who had stirred at the mention of the word ‘walk.’ “Is the weather going to hold?”

“I think it’s meant to, but if we take coats then we should be fine.”

“Urm, I should probably confess that mine isn’t exactly waterproof. There’s a reason I wasn’t wearing it yesterday.”

“Ach, you can borrow one of mine, you’ll be fine.”

“Won’t it be a bit…” Clara looked from John to herself and arched an eyebrow. “Huge on me?”

“Would you rather look silly with no one to see you except me, or would you rather get wet and probably cold?”

“Good point, well made,” Clara acquiesced, feeling her cheeks flush and taking another sip of her drink. “Borrowing one of yours is a plan.”

“You know what else is also a plan?”

“Mm?”

“Breakfast,” John looked abruptly bashful. “Stay here.”

“Why?”

“Just… stay here.”

“OK.”

“Stay here. Don’t argue.”

“I’m not.”
“Right. Good,” he looked a touch sheepish, and set his mug down. “Be right back.”

With that, he turned on his heel and vanished down into the hall at top speed, leaving a bemused Clara and half-awake Idris behind him.

“Your master is weird,” Clara told the sleeping golden retriever seriously. “Very, very weird.”

She crossed over to the window and pulled the curtains open wider with her free hand, looking out at the estate for the first time in daylight. The previous night, it had been impossible to see anything beyond the glow of her headlights or the light emanating from the porch, but now she could see the rolling hills cloaked in pine forest, and the sun, piercing through the slate-grey sky to throw a watery light over the scene before her.

“Wow,” Clara breathed, leaning forward and placing her forehead against the ice-cold glass, looking from left to right to drink in as much of the view as possible. The forest stretched as far as she could see, the vivid green of the pine needles and dull purple of heather at their base looking renewed and jewel-like in the wake of the previous night’s storm. As she followed the natural undulation of the landscape, her eyes alighted on the distant, snow-capped peaks of the mountains that had given the area their name.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

She jumped, twisting around to find John holding a tray of buttered toast, assorted cereal packets, and two mismatched bowls, looking thoroughly pleased with himself and his offerings. At the sound of rattling crockery, Idris finally awoke fully, and she bounded to her feet and bounded around his legs excitedly.

“Don’t creep up on me like that!” Clara said.

“Not my fault you were falling in love with the view. It’s impossible not to, really. Idris, down, or I’m going to fall over.”

“It’s amazing,” Clara admitted, as Idris ignored John’s words completely and continued to trail him hopefully. “I’d not get anything done, though.”

“The temptation to just sit and watch the world go by is... pretty strong,” John shrugged. “You learn to ration it, though — you can lose whole days just watching the light change over the hills.”

“Isn’t that an artist’s dream?”

“It can be,” John wrinkled his nose. “It’s nice to look at and appreciate from a visual point of view, but I’m more about drawing people than landscapes.”

“Fair enough,” Clara took a seat on the sofa, and John set the tray down, pushing his dog’s inquiring nose away from the food. “Urm, has she been fed this morning?”

“Not yet, but I’ll feed her after we’ve eaten.”

“Poor girl,” Clara murmured, reaching for a slice of toast and watching the canine’s eyes follow the food in her hand as she lifted it to her mouth and took a bite. “We’re teasing her, then.”

“She’ll live,” John said brusquely, but he grabbed a slice of toast and held it out to her, the golden retriever taking it from him with the utmost care before setting to work wolfing it down. “See?”

“But I’m the one who’s soft on her? Yeah, OK...”
“Well,” John rolled his eyes impatiently. “Shut up and eat your breakfast.”

“You know I’m right.”

“Shut up.”

Stepping out of the house later that morning and into the damp, chill air of the Cairngorms, Clara inhaled deeply, trying to clear her mind. The landscape was dripping wet still, wrung out by the rain of the previous night, and she was suddenly grateful for the oversized raincoat that John had produced from the back of a cupboard and handed to her — it almost reached her knees, yes, but it kept out the worst of the wind and the wet, and that was what counted.

“OK,” she said brightly, as Idris sprinted around the driveway excitedly, getting under their feet and barking with enthusiasm. “Which way?”

“I tend to just let Idris do her own thing,” John shrugged, pulling the front door closed behind them. “And then follow her lead.”

“Aren’t you going to lock up?”

“Nothing inside worth nicking.” John raised an eyebrow, visibly bemused by her city-inhabitant ideology. “And there’s no one around to nick it, anyway.”

“Yeah, but…” Clara stammered, horrified by the mere thought. “You shouldn’t… you can’t just… that’s…”

“Clara, the nearest human being other than ourselves is my sister, who as a general rule wouldn’t cross the threshold even if the building was on fire and I was trapped inside.”

Clara shuddered at that image. “Thanks,” she said drily. “Maybe she’s fibbing to you and slowly stealing your valuables, one by one.”

“I wish her well in that, because there aren’t any. Believe me, I’ve looked.”

“Hmph,” Clara retorted, and John shot her a smug look. “Now, are we walking, or are we discussing your house being burgled?”

“Sorry, boss,” he shot back, voice dripping with sarcasm, before turning his attention to Idris. “Go on, girl!”

The golden retriever took off like a shot into the forest, and John set off after her with Clara trailing behind him, trying to watch where she put her feet to avoid tripping over. After a few minutes of staring resolutely at the forest floor and placing each foot with elaborate care, she realised she was potentially missing the world around her, and looked up to find… well, a distinct absence of John, or Idris.

“Shit,” she muttered to herself, cursing herself and cursing John and cursing Scotland to hell and back as she felt her heart rate skyrocket. She was lost in a forest of indeterminate size, in November, in the cold, and she was surely going to die of hypothermia, or-

“Clara?” John reappeared ahead of her, and she realised that there was a concealed dip in the
landscape that had hidden him from view. “Sorry, I’m not used to having someone with me, do you want me to slow down?”

“No, it’s fine,” she called back, trying to slow her breathing back to normal as she headed towards him. “Thought I’d lost you for a minute.”

“The forest plays tricks on you,” he reassured her. “I’ve ended up lost a fair few times, but I tend to just wander until I find a landmark and then use that to re-orientate myself.”

“Is Idris not of use for finding the way home?”

“Usually, but this was back before I got her. I used to head out on long walks my own after River died, wander about to try and get my head straight. It’s peaceful out here; less stifling than the house.”

“I can believe that,” Clara looked around them. “It’s just… so quiet, though.”

“Quiet is nice,” John teased. “You’ve been in London too long.”

“Maybe I have,” Clara said thoughtfully. “Maybe I have…”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Worried about Clara, John does some digging... and makes a shocking discovery.

Chapter Notes

Surprise bonus chapter this week to thank you all for being brilliant!

Try as he might, John could not shake the nagging concern that Clara had left her life in London behind at such short notice that the ones she cared about must be worried. Even though she repeatedly assured him that she had left behind notes about where she was going and alerted the relevant people, with each repetition of this nugget of information she sounded less and less confident in her assertion, and he was beginning to feel pangs of guilt that she was safely ensconced with him while those who knew her were undoubtedly worried.

It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy having her around — her company was welcome, and there was something magical about rediscovering the estate through her eyes. He’d spent so long in Úine that his sense of wonder had long faded, but seeing Clara react to the sun setting over the pine forests was enough to inspire him to see the world around him anew. He took pleasure in showing her local places he hadn’t been in years, and watching her react to them with curiosity and awe sparked a sense of joy in him that he hadn’t experienced since… well, since Idris was still a puppy.

Yet, while Clara was a charming, clever and witty houseguest, she was the antithesis of what he had expected her to be in the wake of all that had happened to her. She was perpetually pleasant, always happy to talk about culture or his life or the estate, or even just to sit with him quietly in the evenings with a book retrieved from the library. The only times her façade of happiness faltered were those moments when she thought he wasn’t paying attention; in those brief instants, he would watch as the mask slipped and her smile faded and her eyes would focus on something far, far away. He knew that look; he knew the effort of upholding the illusion of coping, and he knew that it would inevitably give way. He knew that Clara was running from her past, and he tried not to care, but still it niggled away at him; the omnipresent knowledge that she may at any time up and leave for pastures unknown, or finally lose her composure and fall apart in a way he wasn’t sure he would know how to handle.

In moments alone, he tried to rationalise her behaviour. When River had died, hadn’t he wanted to up and run, too? Indeed, had he not done so? He’d taken off around the Highlands, driving for miles each day until he was as far away from Úine as it was possible to be, but he’d had to face the inevitable reality in the end; he had to return home and put to rights all that he had left behind. Clara would have to do the same when she returned to London, although she had given no indication of when that might be. He didn’t object to her ongoing presence, but there had to be some kind of eventual end to her stay with him; she would have to return home at some point, if only to put her affairs in order.
Or did she? He tried to weigh up how he would feel about having her there all the time, like a small, slightly bossy lodger. He could charge her rent on a room, pay off some of the bills, have someone other than Idris and Missy to talk to… but, somehow, the idea seemed uncomfortable to him. The thought of having a woman in the house again after all this time alone was a prospect that he couldn’t wholly reconcile with his conscience. This had been River’s house, and even now he experienced an odd little thrill of guilt when Clara asked about her, or pointed to objects that betrayed his wife’s former presence in the house. He tried to think of what River would have made of Clara, but his imagination only conjured an image of his wife, smirking and pointing out how pretty his friend was; this did little to assuage his worries. Clara might indeed be pretty, in a short and wide-eyed way, and River would definitely have noticed that, but that didn’t mean that he felt any more at ease about matters.

John’s worries came to a head one drizzly afternoon when Clara had taken Idris out for a walk and he furtively googled Coal Hill School’s phone number on his archaic PC with the intention of allaying his concerns. Looking around him and feeling guilty, even as he dialled the number, he listened to the line ring and was on the verge of just hanging up when a cheerful-sounding woman answered in a bright tone.

“Hello, Coal Hill School. You’ve come through to Reception. How can I help?”

“Urm,” he mumbled, feeling abruptly foolish. “I’m, ah… phoning up about Clara Oswald.”

“Oh,” the woman’s tone suddenly grew more serious. “I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose-”

“I know where she is,” he blurted, realising that it sounded vaguely as though he’d kidnapped her and mentally kicking himself. “She’s safe, she’s just… taking some time, having a holiday.”

“Is she…” the woman’s words were careful and measured. “Is she with you?”

“No, she’s with a friend,” he lied, unwilling to give away too much. “But she’s OK. Did she tell you-”

“Please pass on a message to her,” the woman said in a concerned tone. “Please let her know that we’re all very worried about her. What she did was so unlike her. We miss her tremendously.”

“What… she did?”

“I thought you… she resigned, with immediate effect.”

“Oh,” John swallowed, trying to process this information and failing. “I’ll, ah… I’ll be sure to let her know.”

“Thank you.”

He hung up before she could say anything more. Clara had resigned. She’d left the job she loved, and the students she had so deeply cared about, for… what? For him? For Scotland? For the sake of her sadness? There was no way of knowing and no way of asking her without revealing what he’d done, and so, conflicted, he rang his sister in desperation.

“What?” Missy snapped, answering the phone on its first ring. “I’m busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Skinning a grouse.”
“Have you been shooting my game again? Without permission?”

“Do recall, brother dearest,” Missy said sweetly, her voice dripping with both sarcasm and menace, “that legally this place is half-mine.”

“Sorry.”

“And also that nobody else is shooting ‘your’ game, so, really, I was just performing some vital population control.”

“Right.”

“Why don’t you organise a shoot?” Missy suggested, sounding hopeful. “That’d bring in some income, and god knows you need it.”

“Because,” he growled, “that involves them staying in the house, and, frankly, that’s a no. Look, I’m not phoning you to talk about grouse.”

“I was never under the impression that you were. What do you want?”

“You’re so nice to me.”

“I’m your bitchy younger sister, it’s sort of my prerogative.”

“God, you’re annoying,” John groaned. “It’s about Clara.”

“What about her?” Missy paused. “Have you murdered her? Because if you need me to come and help you dismember and hide the body, I’m in.”

“You sound far too enthusiastic about that.”

“Well. I could use my skinning skills.”

John shuddered at the mental image. “No. No, it’s nothing like that. She’s, ah… well… I phoned her school.”

“Moving into serious stalker territory, dear.”

“Shut up. She quit her job.”

“And you’re telling me this… because?”

“She resigned, Missy. That’d be like you voluntarily upping sticks and leaving Davros and Rassilon behind. Same level of devotion.”

There was a beat of silence. “And you want to bring it up with her, but you don’t want her to know that you called the school?”

“Precisely.”

“I’ll be over in a couple of hours.”

“Oh, Christ. No, you won’t.”

“Don’t be like that. I’ll be nice. Aren’t I nice?”

“Missy, you literally told River that if she ever broke my heart, you’d break both her legs and leave
her in the Highlands to die of exposure."

“Yes, and?”

“It was at my wedding. During your speech.”

“So, it was… memorable.”

“Look, just… be nice, OK? For the love of god, be n-” he frowned, even though his sister couldn’t see him. “Hang on, you’re willing to set foot in the house now?”

“It’s been over twenty-five years. I’ve got to do it eventually.”

“Does this have anything to do with you having a little crush on Clara?”

“Am I really that transparent?”

“Absolutely.”

Clara arrived back at the house with an exhausted Idris at her feet, the two of them both lightly damp from the rain that had started minutes earlier. As she stepped inside and shrugged off her coat, Idris froze, staring at a pair of black lace-up shoes that were arranged neatly under the coat rack with a look of terror.

“Hey,” Clara murmured softly to the golden retriever, trying to ignore the way her own heart was racing in response to the unfamiliar shoes; they hadn’t been there when she’d left. There was someone here, someone new, and Idris was terrified of them. Surely it couldn’t be a burglar? A burglar wouldn’t be stupid enough to-

“Clara,” John said, stepping into the hall and smiling weakly at her. “How was your walk?”

“Whose shoes are they?” she squeaked, gesturing to them with a shaking hand. “Why is Idris so freaked out by them?”

“Oh,” he blinked owlishly, rubbing the back of his neck before explaining: “They’re my sister’s. She dropped by.”

“I thought you said she hadn’t been in the house in years.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” he shrugged, and she recognised his attempt to look casual. “She’s in the lounge. Why don’t you come on through and say hello?”

“I…” she froze, unsure about the invitation. From what he had heard about Missy, it seemed like a daunting prospect. “Urm…”

“There’s cake, and tea.”

“Cake?”

“She made us one, yes.”
“Oh,” Clara inhaled deeply, steeling herself and trying to appear braver than she felt. “Well, I guess I should come and say hello, in that case.”

John smiled tightly at her, leading the way to the lounge with Clara trailing behind him and Idris trailing behind them both. Entering the welcome warmth of the room, Clara’s eye was drawn immediately to John’s sister, who was sat on the sofa nearest the fire and looking across at the shelf of photos with icy-blue eyes tinged with sadness.

“Missy,” John said softly, and the woman jumped, her gaze shifting at once to Clara, and she smiled. “This is Clara.”

“Hi,” Clara said shyly, giving an awkward little wave and feeling self-conscious as Missy’s eyes drilled into her. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“And I you,” Missy’s grin only intensified, and there was something faintly wolfish about it. “He’s hardly shut up about you for the last five years.”

Clara and John blushed in unison, both of them dropping their gaze to the carpet. “C’mon,” John muttered, audibly embarrassed. “Why have you always got to embarrass me?”

“Because it’s fun,” Missy trilled, before her attention switched back to Clara. “Now, are you going to be a good girl and tell us why you resigned from your job, or am I going to have to threaten you with the cake knife?”

Clara’s head snapped up and she gaped at Missy in horror, unsure how this stranger could possibly know what she’d done. John shuffled from foot to foot beside her, and she realised that he knew — that Missy must have told him before she arrived back.

“I…” she began, swallowing uncomfortably and fighting the urge to cry. “I… how could you possibly know that?”

“Oh, please,” Missy rolled her eyes. “You’re staying with my brother — the first person to do so in sixteen years. Of course I did my homework on you. Which is ironic, because you won’t be seeing any homework ever again, will you?”

“I…” Clara shook her head, ignoring Missy’s callous remark. “How could you possibly… this is none of your-”

“I phoned the school,” Missy gave a nonchalant little hair-flick, then made a show of examining her nails. “They were very helpful.”

“You…” Clara clenched her fists, trying to stop herself from trembling. “How dare you?”

“And I emailed your friend, the hot ginger one,” Missy continued in a casual drawl, as though Clara had not spoken. “Says you took off without warning, stuck a note through her letterbox telling her not to try to find you. She’s not stupid, though. She worked it out — although she was very glad to receive confirmation of your whereabouts. Says if you turn up dead then she’ll know where to point the detectives.”

“This is…” Clara spluttered, starting to feel dizzy with panic. “This is insane, how did you-”

“As for your daddy dearest, he didn’t answer his phone, but your sister’s organisation was very helpful. Reception put me straight through to her, and she was so, so relieved to know where you’d gone. She’d had an idea, too — they’re bright, these women in your life, although you do seem rather transparent — but she was relieved to know you were safe, and that you hadn’t been
dismembered or dumped in a loch.”

Clara, unable to listen any longer, turned and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

After Clara discovers that John knows the truth, she tries to come to terms with her past choices.

John didn’t try to follow her, and, for that, Clara was supremely grateful. She raced upstairs to the bedroom John had assigned to her on her second evening in Scotland — he’d insisted the air mattress was no substitute for a real bed — and flung herself down on the mattress, ignoring the way it groaned under her weight. The room was still residually warm from the fire John had lit that morning in the grate, which was now little more than glowing embers, and the chill was starting to creep back in, clinging and insidious, but Clara barely noticed it as she pulled the eiderdown over her and curled up, too shocked to cry.

Had she made a mistake in resigning? She hadn’t thought so at the time, but now she was here with infinite amounts of time to reflect on things, so many of her choices in London seemed rash and impulsive. She’d wanted time to think, to breathe, and handing in her notice had seemed the only way to do that. Yes, she should have stayed; should have worked out her notice period; and yet she’d taken off instead, unwilling to face another day in the building which served as a constant, uncomfortable reminder of Danny. She’d left her students, for which she felt a pang of guilt, but realistically they were better off without her — she’d been nothing but useless the past few months, and they deserved a good teacher, a teacher who was able to focus on the here and now without crying, and she had been unable to do that for more than a few hours at a time. Everyone had tried to be so understanding, and yet, somehow, that had only made things worse. Being pitied was anathema to her; she’d endured enough of it before, and to suffer through it again was more than she could stand. She’d marched into the head’s office and slapped down her letter of resignation, then she’d walked out of the building with a satchel of her belongings and not looked back.

In retrospect, perhaps she could have just asked for more time off, or a sabbatical. Perhaps then she wouldn’t have had the impending, looming threat of financial instability looming over her every waking moment, even now she was hundreds of miles from London. It was easier to not think about it in Üine, where she was unencumbered by matters such as bills or travel costs, but the reality was that she knew she wouldn’t last long in London without a job. The flat might have been paid off — thank god for Bonnie’s precognisant decision to invest in property many, many years prior — but she knew that her sister would not be so keen on letting her live there if she was bumming around with no proper job to speak of. Faced with the inevitable prospect of homelessness, it seemed a better choice to stay with John a little longer, to gather her thoughts, and to try to work out a plan. Not that she wanted to make one, but she knew eventually she would have to face the bitter truth of the matter and return to the city she had once considered her home.

Perhaps sooner than she had thought, if John now knew the truth. If he knew the truth, and Missy knew the truth, they were undoubtedly sat downstairs discussing her as though she were a particularly interesting piece of gossip. She wanted to go downstairs and swear at them both, but something about the look of absolute concern on John’s face when he’d looked at her was enough to rob her of her anger at him, leaving only a burning malice towards his sister. Missy had had no right to do what she did, to play detective with Clara’s life, and now… well, now John knew the truth, knew that she was a fool who made poor choices, and –
She couldn’t keep lying to herself; she knew that he was already aware of what she was. She’d turned up on his doorstep at the drop of a hat, and he’d tolerated that — nay, *facilitated* it — so did that mean he accepted her? Or did that mean she’d simply disregarded what he wanted and imposed her wishes on him? Maybe the time had come to leave, because surely he wouldn’t want her to stay now that he knew what a hopeless case she was. No job. No prospects. Not even a particularly tenuous grasp on reality as she felt her sense of touch with the outside world slipping away the longer she spent in Ùine. It was like being in a bubble, isolated from the world around them, and, while it was calming, she felt a jarring sense of being out of the loop.

Out of control.

Oh, the bitter irony of a control freak losing her grasp on the world around her.

She could feel it almost tangibly, the last vestiges of her composure slipping away, and she turned her face to the pillow, starting to sob. The last of the daylight faded around her, leaving her plunged into chill, dank darkness, but she scarcely noticed; her senses narrowed until all that she was aware of was the bed around her and her own sense of sorrow.

She didn’t know how long she’d been crying when she heard her name. It had been long enough for it to get dark, certainly, but more than that she did not know. She half thought she may have imagined hearing it, but then the sound came again.

“Clara?” That was John’s voice, muffled by the door, but still definitely him. “Clara, can I come in?”

“No,” she mumbled, rolling over and pulling the quilt over her head. She didn’t want to see him, not after everything that he now knew, and certainly not after spending so much time crying. “Go away.”

Despite her refusal, there was the soft *click* of the door opening, and a second later something sprung onto the bed beside her. She yelped, then realised it was only Idris, who promptly curled up and tucked her head under Clara’s chin, the canine’s presence helping to drag her awareness back to the here and now. She stroked the golden retriever’s head, focusing on that and that alone, and felt a little calmer.

“She’s been worried,” John said from the doorway, and Clara realised she needed to face the inevitable. She tugged the quilt away from her face, blinking hard with puffy, sore eyes, and tried to focus on the shape of him. He was framed by the light from the hallway, and it took a moment for her eyes to make him out in the unaccustomed brightness. “So have I.”

“Don’t be,” she sniffed, surreptitiously dabbing her cheeks with the corner of the eiderdown. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem very fine,” he countered, taking a hesitant step into the room and shivering. “Clara, it’s freezing in here. You’ll catch your death.”

“Maybe I want to,” she curled around Idris, the golden retriever snuggling into her obligingly. “Besides, I’ve got Idris now. Stop fussing.”

“No.”

Before she could stop him, he’d crossed over to the fireplace and crouched before it, reaching for the box of matches he’d left on the hearth and piling kindling into the grate.

“Don’t,” she protested, feebly. “It’s fine.”
“I’m not letting you freeze to death on my watch,” he growled, settling alight the pile of twigs and then heaping logs atop it. As the flames licked their way along the wood, he turned to her in the flickering amber light and looked at her with… something she was unused to. Compassion, yes, but compassion devoid of the patronising undertone of pity. “There.”

“Thanks,” she muttered, looking down at Idris in lieu of trying to read into the look he was giving her. “You didn’t need to.”

“I wanted to,” he hovered for a moment, uncertain, and then perched on the bed beside her. “I want you to be comfortable here.”

“How did you stay here?” she blurted, gesturing to the room around them, and they both understood that, by extension, she also meant the house and estate. “After River?”

“Ahh,” he looked away from her then, staring into the flames. “Duty, I suppose. It reminded me of her, but I wanted that. And besides, I didn’t stay — not at first. I did the same as you; took off for a while. It took that to make me realised how much I wanted — needed — to stay.”

“Do you think I should go back to London?” Clara asked in a small voice. “Am I doing the right thing?”

“You mean by running away to spend time with a mad man in a castle?”

“It’s not a castle.”

His mouth quirked up into a smile, pleased by the comment. “It’s a small one. I should start admitting that.”

“You should,” Clara returned his smile shyly. “Am I doing the right thing, though?”

“I don’t know,” John admitted, shrugging. “It’s up to you. Are you… healing?”

“I think so. But I feel… kind of out of it, too.”

“It can be hard, being here. We could maybe go into Inverness tomorrow, how’s that? Help you get
back in touch with the world.”

“That would be…” she considered the suggestion. A quick dip into the world she’d left behind, of culture and politics and news and… other people. “Nice.”

“Well, then,” he nodded decisively. “We have a plan. Would you like a drink before bed?”

“No, but…” she blushed, hoping he couldn’t tell in the half-darkness. “Could you stay?”

“Stay?” his brow furrowed. “Stay where?”

“Here,” she clarified, turning a darker shade of red. “With me. Tonight. Not… not like that. I just… I don’t want to be alone.”

There was a beat of silence. “Clara…”

“Please,” she begged, her eyes filling with tears again. “Please, I promise I’m not going to do anything. I just… I don’t want to be on my own.”

“OK,” he acquiesced after a moment, reaching over and stroking tousled hair off her face with a gentle hand. “Hey, don’t cry. It’s alright. I’ll stay.”

She nodded in wordless thanks, and he stood up, kicking off his boots and then settling down atop the eiderdown on the other side of Idris, laying on his back with his hands folded atop his chest as he stared up at the canopy of the bed, high above them.

“Comfy?” she asked in a small voice, and he nodded.

“Comfy,” he affirmed. “Very comfy.”

“John?”

“Mm?”

“Thank you. For everything.”

Clara awoke in the night in a state of panic, acutely aware of the lack of another human presence by her side. John was no longer there. He’d left her alone, and there was suddenly not enough air in the room, not enough oxygen to allay her terror, and she couldn’t catch her breath. She sat up, her chest rising and falling erratically, and it was then that he spoke from the darkness.

“Clara? Shit, Clara, it’s alright, I’m here, I’m just tending the fire, OK? I didn’t want you to be cold. I’m here, I’m right here. It’s OK.”

Relief washed over her, instantaneous and reassuring, and as her eyes adjusted she made out John’s form, hunched over the hearth as he piled on fresh logs before slipping back over to the bed and taking up his former position, sentinel-like.

“Alright?” he murmured, reaching over a still-slumbering Idris and taking Clara’s hand.

“Mm,” she asserted, smiling sleepily as her breathing, bit by bit, returned to normal. “I am now.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Just as Clara is starting to feel put together again, two unexpected guests arrive and throw everything into disarray.

For Clara, waking up the next morning was, in turn, both disorientating and comforting. There was the initial confusion of who the slumbering figure beside her was, before then the memory of the previous night returned to her: pleading with John to stay, him capitulating, and then, most soothingly of all, the realisation that his hand was still in hers, their intertwined fingers resting on Idris’s back as she lay between them.

The golden retriever huffed sleepily when she noticed that Clara was awake, and nuzzled her nose against her neck in search of affection.

“Morning, cuddly girl,” Clara murmured, using her free hand to stroke the canine. “Good girl, staying put all night. Keeping me safe and warm.”

From the other side of his dog, John stirred in his sleep, turning his face into the pillow and mumbling indiscernibly to himself as he did so. Clara felt a rush of grateful affection that he’d stayed put all night, his hand not leaving hers as he strove to provide her with reassurance.

“Hey,” Clara breathed, pressing a drowsy kiss to Idris’s head. “Why don’t we go and make your master something to eat, huh?”

Idris regarded her with serious brown eyes, blinking solemnly in a way which Clara took to signal agreement, and she slipped her hand out of John’s before scooting to the edge of the bed and swinging her legs out. The remains of the previous evening’s fire were still glowing in the grate, so she heaped logs onto the embers to ensure John didn’t freeze while she cooked, before scrambling into her dressing gown, anticipating the bitter chill that permeated the rest of the house. Stuffing her feet into her slippers, she opened the door of the bedroom and sidled out into the hall, pausing for a moment as she waited for the thump that would signal Idris jumping down from the bed, and a moment later the canine was stood expectantly at her feet, looking up at her in eager anticipation.

“Come on, then,” Clara said with fondness, heading downstairs with her four-legged companion trotting obediently behind her. “Let’s make John some breakfast in bed. Something to say thank you.”

Idris let out a pleading half-whimper, and Clara laughed.

“Yes, OK, and something for you. Obviously.”

Padding into the kitchen on slippered feet, Clara immediately set to work retrieving eggs and bacon from the fridge, coaxing the ancient hob to life, and checking whether the bread had mould. Pleased to discover it didn’t, she laid out her ingredients on the cleanest stretch of worktop she could find before turning her attention to Idris, who was sat in the middle of the floor and affixing the bacon with a pleading look.
“You can’t have raw bacon,” Clara said firmly, moving the packet out of reach. “Cooked bacon, possibly, but not raw bacon. And, if you do have any cooked bacon, it’ll just be between the two of us. John doesn’t need to know.”

Idris whined.

“And in the meantime, you can have your normal food. Stop looking at me like that.”

As the golden retriever perked up, capering around her feet, Clara opened a tin of dog food and spooned it into the canine’s bowl, adding a handful of kibble on top and then grimacing at the smell.

“Ew,” she told the now-blissfully happy dog, placing the bowl down before sticking her hand under the tap and dousing it in soap. “That smells nasty. I can see why you prefer bacon.”

There was no response, Idris being intent on demolishing her breakfast, so Clara rolled her eyes and set about cracking the eggs, melting butter in a frying pan, and searching for clean plates, humming under her breath as she did so. It wasn’t until she’d finished cooking and had begun plating up the food that she became aware of another noise in the kitchen — one that she was unaccustomed to.

Idris was growling.

“Idris?” Clara said softly, putting down the spatula she was holding and moving to stand beside her. “What’s wrong? Hey? What is it, girl?”

She placed a gentle hand on Idris’s head, feeling the tension that thrummed through her, and it was then that Idris began to bark — loud, angry, warning barks, of the kind that Clara had never heard her make before.

“Hey,” she began, trying to ignore the way her own heart was pounding as adrenaline flooded her system. This wasn’t like Idris — she was protective, yes, but never loud, and never borderline aggressive like this. “Idris, it’s alright, it’s—”

The doorbell rang, the clanging sound echoing through the house, and Idris took off towards the front door like a shot. Clara had to admit, the prospect of following her was wholly unappealing, and yet she knew she needed to discover what had so agitated John’s dog. Taking a deep breath, she sidled out of the kitchen and down the hallway, finding Idris stood beside the front door, still barking at maximum volume.

“Alright,” Clara muttered, casting a quick glance towards the stairs and hoping the noise wouldn’t be enough to wake John. “Idris, it’s alright, be quiet.”

Her heart in her mouth, Clara reached for the door handle, yanking it open and trying to appear braver than she felt, and Idris bundled through the door at once, continuing her chorus of angry semi-aggression as she circled around the people stood on the doorstep.

“Alright,” Clara muttered, casting a quick glance towards the stairs and hoping the noise wouldn’t be enough to wake John. “Idris, it’s alright, be quiet.”

Her heart in her mouth, Clara reached for the door handle, yanking it open and trying to appear braver than she felt, and Idris bundled through the door at once, continuing her chorus of angry semi-aggression as she circled around the people stood on the doorstep.

“Jesus,” Clara blurted, looking between the two unexpected guests. “Amy? Bon? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Can you…” Bonnie looked down at Idris nervously. “Can you… make her stop?”

“Shit, yeah. Sorry,” Clara took a step towards her sister. “Idris, hey. Hey, it’s alright. They’re friends, they’re OK.”

Idris’s hackles remained up, and she growled at Bonnie directly, the sound low and dangerous in her throat.
“Idris!” Clara wrapped her left arm around her sister, and then reached for her best friend with her right. It was an awkward embrace, the three of them crushed together at a strange angle, but it was enough to reassure Idris, who finally fell silent and affixed them with a wary look. “There. Good girl. See? Friends. I’m alright. We’re alright.”

“Ah… nice dog,” Amy said apprehensively, looking from the golden retriever to Clara. “She seems really protective of you.”

“She is,” Clara crouched down and held out a hand to Idris, letting the dog nuzzle into her palm for reassurance. “Sorry. She wouldn’t actually hurt you, she’s just not used to strangers.”

“Clara?” a sleepy voice called from inside the house, and she swore under her breath, straightening up and ducking back into the hall, where John was descending the stairs in last night’s crumpled clothes. “Clara, what’s all the noise? Is everything OK?”

“We ah…” she cleared her throat. “Amy is here. And my sister.”

“What?” John yelped, his eyes falling on the clock in the hallway. “Jesus, how is it nearly noon?”

“It’s nearly noon?” Clara asked sheepishly. “Ah. That might explain… well, precisely nothing, but look… my sister and friend are here, so be nice.”

“Idris wasn’t being nice.”

“Idris is a dog, and also very overprotective of me. You. Me. Whatever. Shush.”

“Don’t tell me to shush in my own home,” he grumbled. “Why are they both here?”

“I don’t know that yet, because your dog was trying to scare them off.”

“Ah,” he made a face. “Right. Sorry. Has she stopped doing that now?”

“Yes, thanks to me.”

“Good,” he lingered for a moment at the bottom of the stairs, visibly unsure of how to proceed, before his nose twitched and he sniffed the air. “Do I smell bacon?”

“Shit. Yes, and eggs. It’s in the kitchen — go. Eat. Keep mine warm. I know exactly how many rashers are on each plate, so don’t even think about trying to steal any.”

“Yes, boss,” he mumbled, heading towards the kitchen. “And, uh, yell if you need me.”

“I will,” Clara stepped back onto the porch. “Sorry,” she said brightly to the guests. “Come on in.”

Amy and Bonnie exchanged a look before following her inside, letting her lead the party of three into the lounge and then standing awkwardly in the centre of the room.

“Please, sit,” Clara said, kneeling in front of the fireplace and setting to work lighting a fire as Idris stayed close to her side, still not entirely sure about the strangers. “Get comfy. Do you want a coffee? Tea? Anything?”

“Urm,” Bonnie began, hovering for a second longer before taking a seat on the extreme edge of one of the sofas. Clara tried not to feel annoyed by her sister’s reticence to touch anything. “No, thank you.”

“Amy?”
“No, we stopped for Costa in Perth.”

“Ah,” Clara tried to nod sagely. “Was it a… nice drive?”

“Not really,” Amy muttered sourly. “I had to fly to Glasgow to meet her. Glasgow. In the world’s smallest passenger plane.”

“That’s…” Clara fished around for the appropriate response, trying not to laugh at Amy’s visible disgust. “Not good.”

“No, it’s not.”

“So, why did you come all this way? Via Glasgow?”

“Why?” Bonnie asked incredulously, letting out a bitter yelp of bemusement. “Jesus, you really have no idea, do you?”

“No idea about what?”

“Jesus. Jesus. You are just… unbelievable.”

“Bonnie, I have no idea-”

“No, you don’t,” her twin snapped, getting to her feet and beginning to pace angrily. “You have no idea about anything. You really are a massive bitch, you know that? You just piss off whenever you feel like it, leaving the rest of us worried sick about you. All we had to go on was some bloody vague note about ‘going to find yourself,’ and we didn’t know what that meant! Dad has been beside himself, worried that someone’s going to find you hanging from a tree somewhere; Amy’s been on the phone to me four nights a week begging me to get involved; and then, just when I was actually starting to feel sympathy for you and considering helping, I get a phone call and learn that, no, you’re not having a fucking breakdown, you’ve gone on a jolly to Scotland with the lunatic bloke who’s been lying to you for the last five years!”

“Bon-”

“No. Shut up. Stay shut up. You are a selfish cow. Alright? I’m just throwing that out there. Do you like doing this? Does it give you some kind of kick? Do you get off on having everyone worry about you? God, this is like when you buggered off to Switzerland and the whole family thought you’d been fucking murdered until you turned up with a goddamn bag of chocolate and acted like nothing ever happened. Do you enjoy doing that? Being the centre of attention?”

Clara couldn’t help it. She felt her own temper flare in response to her sister’s anger, and before she knew what she was doing, she was on her feet, squaring up to Bonnie.

“You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” she snarled. “Being the centre of attention? It’s always all about Bonnie; oh yes, Bonnie, the golden twin; Bonnie, the good twin. Did you know? Bonnie’s just been liaising with the United Nations. Bonnie’s just been in discussions with the Shadow Cabinet. Bonnie’s just got back from a charitable visit to schools in developing countries. Don’t you ever think about how shit it is living in your shadow?”

“It’s not my fault you’re-”

“If you say ‘jealous,’ so help me god, I will slap you.”

“Well…”
“No one ever sees me,” Clara shouted, her eyes filling with angry tears. “They never see me, they only see you. It’s like I’m not there — like I’m just an extension of you to be patted on the head and congratulated for sharing the same DNA. I’m my own person, Bon, but no one bloody sees me as one!”

“I do,” Amy said quietly, and both sisters turned to look at her in unison. She was stood beside the sideboard, one hand on the wood, looking between them both wearily. “Clara, I do.”

“Well…”

“And John does. Which is why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Clara admitted, trying to take deep breaths and regain her composure. “Yeah, it is.”

“You’re not having a breakdown, or running away,” Amy said. “You’re trying to put yourself back together.”

“Yeah,” Clara said again, nodding brusquely before opting to try and change the subject. “Why… why are you here?”

“Bonnie invited me,” Amy looked over at Bonnie, who had lapsed into surly silence. “And your dad ordered her to come.”

Clara swallowed, feeling a rush of guilt at the thought of her father worrying about her. “Is he… is he really worried?”

“Yeah,” Bonnie muttered, sourly. “Worse still, it’s giving Linda a lot of ammunition, you know?”

“I’m sorry,’ Clara murmured, holding out her hand to her sister, who pulled her into a hug. “Bonnie, I’m sorry.”

“And me,” Amy piped up, some of the seriousness dropping away from her voice as Clara concentrated on embracing her sister. “I was worried, too.”

“Both of you. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have just left how I did.”

“You’re not going to come back, are you?” Bonnie asked in a low, soft voice, pressing a kiss to her twin’s forehead.

“Not today, no,” Clara confessed. “I need a little longer to put myself back together.”

“OK,” Bonnie said measuredly. “Well, in that case… why don’t you show us around?”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Clara has bad news to break to John. Bad news of the "you've forgotten a very important day of the year" variety.

After the unexpected visit from Amy and Bonnie, during which John kept a respectful yet wary distance, life in Úine lapsed back to how it had been before for John and Clara, with the two of them co-existing in the same house, sharing evenings by the fire and long walks around the estate, and competing good-naturedly for Idris's affections. From time to time, Clara made the effort to check in with her family by text or by email, and John seemed content to let her be, knowing she would keep them up to date as and when necessary. It wasn’t until she received a spate of phone calls over one particularly gloomy afternoon that his curiosity was piqued, and, as they sat in front of the fire that evening, both of them curled up with worn paperback novels and mugs of tea, that he broached the issue.

“So,” he began, clearing his throat a little, and Clara groaned inwardly as she recognised his tone. She knew that tone. She’d used that tone often enough on her students, and she steeled herself for the inevitable interrogation that she knew was bound to follow his casual opener. “You, ah… seemed pretty popular this afternoon.”

“Did I?” she asked with a carefully cultivated air of nonchalance and a strong sense of suspicion. “What gave that impression?”

“All the phone calls,” he raised his eyebrows meaningfully. “You kept creeping off to answer them.”

“Did I?”

“Clara, what’s going on?” he asked, and, to her surprise, the questioning tone vanished and he sounded weary of her evasion. Worse still, there was an undercurrent of concern to his words — one that took her by surprise. “Are you going back to London?”

“No,” she said at once, and she watched as relief crept over his expression, raw and untempered. “No, I’m not. I’m not going anywhere.”

“So, what was it about? Is everyone alright?”

“Yeah, they’re fine,” she dropped her gaze to her lap, studiously examining her fingernails and feeling her cheeks flush. “It was ah… well… it’s my birthday. Today.”

There was a beat of silence, and then John asked in confusion: “But your birthday is November the twenty-third.”

“Yes,” Clara frowned down at her lap, feeling her blush intensify. “That’s today.”

“Shit,” he muttered, and she chanced a glance at him then. He looked stricken with guilt, and she felt abruptly awful for having mentioned the subject at all, rather than coming up with some clever lie. “Clara, I’m so sorry.”
“It’s fine,” she gave an uncomfortable little laugh, feeling the need to alleviate the awkwardness that had now settled over them. “Really, it’s fine. It’s not a big deal.”

“Of course it’s a big deal!” John met her gaze then, and she was taken aback by the remorse in his eyes. “I’m so sorry, Clara. Why don’t we do something tomorrow? I won’t attempt to cook or anything, because you don’t deserve to have that inflicted on you, but we could go into town. Have a meal?”

“That would be…” Clara hesitated for a moment, taken aback by the offer. It wasn’t unappealing, certainly — the prospect of courting civilisation in order to celebrate seemed rather tempting, in fact. “Nice, actually. I’d like that.”

He beamed at her, his earlier guilt forgotten as he sprang up from the sofa and headed towards the hall with childlike excitement. “Excellent. I’ll make a reservation for us now.”

Before Clara could say another word, he had disappeared in the direction of the phone, leaving her alone with a half-asleep Idris.

“Well,” she told the slumbering golden retriever, resting a slippered foot on the canine’s back to warm her toes. “How’s that for a surprising birthday plan, hey?”

Idris looked up at her through half-open eyes, before getting clumsily to her feet and wandering off in pursuit of John.

“Thanks,” Clara muttered to herself, feeling distinctly rejected. “Happy birthday to me, left all alone by both human and dog friends.”

Idris padded back into the room with her favourite teddy bear clutched in her jaws, depositing the slightly damp and well-chewed item on Clara’s lap with great care and then wagging her tail. It was clear that she considered this a gift of great significance, and Clara was touched by the gesture.

“Is this for me?” Clara asked, picking it up and turning it over in her hands before cuddling it to her chest to show her gratitude. “Thank you, girl.”

John sidled back into the room looking triumphant, casting a confused glance at the ratty toy in Clara’s hands before stating: “One table booked for dinner at the Boat.”

“At the what?”

“It’s a pub. Inn. Gastropub. Eatery. Whatever the place in town is currently branding itself as — can’t keep up any more. What matters is that the food is decent, the beer is cold, and the music is tolerable.”

“Well, that’s a glowing review if ever I heard one,” Clara deadpanned. “Have you considered a career as a restaurant critic?”

“Ach, don’t you start.”

“I think you’d really excel at it.”

“You’re far too cheeky, you are.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“Clara,” he said, suddenly serious. “I really am sorry for forgetting. I lost track of what day it was,
I’m sorry.”

“John,” she sighed. “Really, it’s fine. I didn’t want to make a big thing of it anyway, it’s my first birthday without… well, you know. Without Danny.”

“Oh, god, I didn’t even…” John chewed on his lip. “Would you like me to cancel the reservation? We can stay in if you’d prefer, do something a little bit more informal?”

“No, it’s fine,” she smiled. “Dinner would be nice. I can manage dinner.”

“It’s official, then,” John offered her a small, shy smile. “Tomorrow is going to be your Birthday 2.0.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, it is. Now, go to bed.”

“Excuse me?!?”

“Well, if tomorrow is Birthday 2.0, I need to work on finishing your presents. Bed. Now.”

“What are you, my dad?”

“No, I’m your friend, and I have plans. Actually, Plans. Plans with a capital P.”

“Do they involve fireworks, serenades, spontaneous holidays, or grand gestures?”

“No,” John assured her. “I’m not telling you what they do involve, because spoilers. But I need you to go to bed.”

“Can I take Idris?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well then,” Clara grinned, getting to her feet and feeling rather like a child on Christmas Eve. “I will see you in the morning.”

“Yes, indeed,” John returned her smile, and as she passed him on her way towards the stairs, he reached out and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her into a brief hug. “Happy Birthday 1.0.”

Taken off-guard by the unexpected embrace, Clara found herself leaning into him, closing her eyes and relishing the physical contact. “Thank you,” she breathed, wondering how long he would tolerate this for. “And thank you in advance for tomorrow.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he pressed a quick kiss to her forehead before pulling away, and she couldn’t help but feel a sense of loss as he let go. “Now, bed.”

“Alright, alright,” she rolled her eyes. “I’m going, keep your hair on.”

“See you in the morning, birthday girl.”
As Clara sat at their table the next evening, looking down at the dinner menu in front of her and resting one foot against Idris’s back as the golden retriever thumped her tail contentedly against the floor, she couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of contentment. This birthday — or, she supposed, more accurately this “non-birthday” — had been much less over-the-top than those of previous years, and yet it was still one of the best she could recall having. John had woken her with breakfast in bed, which had been surprisingly edible considering his loud declarations about being unable to cook, and, while she was eating, he’d vanished and returned with an envelope and large rectangular present, wrapped untidily in brown paper.

Once she’d finished her food and the accompanying mug of tea, she’d set about opening both to discover a hand-drawn card bearing an image of Idris surrounded by autumn leaves and flowers, and a large, framed portrait of herself, brightly coloured and highly detailed and bearing John’s signature at the bottom. There had been happy tears, and, when she had composed herself, a dog walk, with a packed lunch atop a nearby mountain. They had come back to the house, lightly damp from the rain that had set in, and she’d worked on making herself look vaguely presentable for the first time in weeks.

“You’ve gone very quiet,” John said softly, snapping her attention back to the present, and she realised she’d zoned out completely while staring at the menu. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” she said, running a hand through her freshly washed hair and offering him a warm smile. “Just thinking about how nice today has been.”

“You’ve had a good time, then?”

“Yes,” she assured him, reaching over and taking his hand in hers. It was a natural, easy gesture, yet he blinked down at their intertwined fingers as though unaccustomed to such actions. “I have.”

“Good,” he gave her hand a quick squeeze. “I hope you’ve worked up an appetite after all that bloody rock-climbing you were doing on the way back down the mountain.”

“It wasn’t rock-climbing,” Clara pointed out. “It was more…”

“Scrambling,” he chuckled. “Frightened the life out of me — thought you were going to break your neck.”

“Too agile for that. I’m basically a mountain goat, keep up.”

“Sure,” he raised an eyebrow. “Just glad you’re still in one piece. So is Idris.”

At the sound of her name, the golden retriever perked up, sticking her nose out from under the table and looking up at them both, expectantly.

“Talking about you, not to you, lass,” John told her in a gentle tone, reaching down with his free hand and scratching her head. “God bless dog-friendly pubs. You’d have been miserable missing Clara’s birthday, wouldn’t you?”

Idris gave a soft woof of agreement, and John smiled fondly.

“I…” Clara swallowed, still processing his words of a moment before. “Are you really glad I’m still in one piece?”

John frowned, uncomprehendingly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, letting go of his hand and going back to perusing the menu. “I’m
just…”
“Surprised I care?”
“Yeah,” she mumbled, both hating and loving him for understanding. “A little.”
“Clara, I thought I’d made it perfectly clear by now. I care for you very much.”
“You don’t have to.”
“I know, and I don’t care because I have to. I care because I want to.”
“But…”
“Clara, regardless of everything that happened, including… you know, everything with Marcus… I still care about you. I thought I’d made that perfectly clear by now.”
“Oh.”
“Please,” he said, softly. “I want you to have a wonderful birthday knowing that you are cared about.”
“I…” she blinked, her eyes filling with unbidden tears. “I know that now.”
“Good,” John reached for her hand again, and smiled encouragingly. “So, why don’t we order champagne to start with and then go from there?”
“John…” Clara bit down on her lip, suddenly struck by the realisation that this would be an expensive meal that John could scarcely afford. “You don’t have to… the estate…”
“Clara, I insist. Please.”
“I don’t mind paying half.”
“It’s your birthday.”
“But you…”
“Clara, it’s been a very long time since I’ve been able to buy a wonderful woman dinner. Please. Let me.”
She hesitated, caught between acceding to his wishes or sticking to her guns. “OK,” she decided unwillingly. “But, if you go bankrupt and I have to bail you out by paying the bills, I reserve the right to say, ‘I told you so.’”
“I’d expect nothing less,” he shot back. “And, ah… you don’t have to pay my bills.”
“What if I want to?”
“I refuse.”
“God, you’re stubborn.”
“Says you?”
“Yeah, alright,” Clara laughed, resolving to stop worrying and just enjoy the meal. “Fine, we’re both stubborn. Now, are we going to order, or are we going to sit here thinking about it for a while
longer?"
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

John and Clara celebrate Christmas apart, but firmly in each other's thoughts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hours stretched into days stretched into weeks. Clara’s intentions of returning to London, once an absolute certainty, ebbed and faded in her mind until they were nothing more than the vaguest of plans, and she settled into building life... well, with John, but not in the sense that most people would have understood it. They lived together and yet not-together, both of them enjoying enough of a degree of independence to claim a lack of co-dependency, and yet spending enough time in each other’s company to have developed a degree of non-verbal understanding, both of them able to convey their feelings with a look, or a raise of the eyebrows, or a tilt of the head. Clara was learning how to smile again, and John was learning... well, learning how to socialise, how to make small talk and be polite after years of living alone in slovenly widowerhood.

They bounced off each other, simpatico in their tastes and opinions and very personalities; she provided the optimism to his pessimism, and he kept her feet on the ground. She taught him about literature and poetry and theatre, and he reciprocated with ad hoc lessons on art and design and music, alongside mountainside talks on geography and botany and whatever else took his fancy. He liked to show off, as did she, and their newfound audience of each other provided a welcome opportunity to do so. They could be loud, they could be brash, they could have furious arguments about culture, and yet they could also be silent — comfortably so, as the two of them trekked up a forest path or down alongside the rushing waters of a stream, both of them caught up in their own thoughts as they focused on placing their feet and appreciating the world around them.

Clara was, slowly but surely, crafting her own little place in John’s world — she’d long since admitted the fact that the clothes she had brought with her from London were wholly impractical for her time in Úine, and she’d spent a day in Inverness in search of fleeces and sensible walking boots and a proper raincoat. Upon her return, she’d found John looking stricken by her absence, and she’d given him another impromptu hug and promised that, next time, he could come shopping with her, even if he would be bored to tears by it. He’d seemed pleased, and he’d smiled when she’d modelled her new, unflattering-but-practical clothing, clapping along to the record he’d put on as background noise and encouraging her to give him a twirl. It was silliness of the most light-hearted kind, but it was enough to make Clara feel... well, normal. A feeling she hadn’t had in so long, yet had now condensed down until its very essence was concentrated on the house, and the estate, and Idris, and... John. Because she couldn’t deny it any longer — he was a fundamental part of her life now. He made her laugh, he didn’t judge her when she cried, and she didn’t even need to speak for him to understand when he needed to take her hand, or let her hug him, or simply sit with her head on his shoulder.

He’d been reticent, at first, when touched; unsure, visibly discombobulated, and keen for the contact to end. But, as time had passed, he’d grown better at it — had stopped flinching, stopped pulling away, and stopped protesting. Now, he initiated contact. He actively reached for her of his own volition, and she let him, knowing that with the cool feeling of his skin against her own would come
a lulling sense of calm and safety. He kept her from slipping inexorably back into the past, and she in return did the same — keeping him in the present, keeping him from dwelling on his wife and his own loss, and the aching void that she knew never truly went away.

As much as they pretended they did not, they depended on each other. It was a fact they were both circling around, but they knew that they were each other’s focal point.

Which was why, when the time came to make the decision, Clara was torn between spending Christmas with her family or Christmas with John. She wanted to see her sister, her dad, and her gran — Linda was the exception to the yearning she felt for home — but she didn’t want John to be alone. She didn’t want him to feel abandoned, and she was acutely aware that while he would suffer without her, in the same way she would suffer without him. He kept her together. He helped her to cope. Without him, she could not guarantee that she would not break down over the festive period.

But he urged her to go. She had half-expected him to cling to her, physically and emotionally; instead, he had encouraged her to go, to spend time with her loved ones, and to not worry about him. He had Missy, he assured her, so he wouldn’t be truly alone. They would reminisce about Christmases past, enjoy Christmas present, and be misanthropic about the fate of Earth come Christmases future. Clara couldn’t help but feel a sting of disappointment that John hadn’t fought for her to stay, but she tried to push that aside as she made plans to return to Blackpool to celebrate the festive period.

When the day came to depart, they botched their goodbye. An awkward hug, a mumbled farewell, and then she was in the car, pulling away and willing herself not to look back. Over the low thrum of the engine, she could hear Idris barking on the driveway, and, even though the golden retriever couldn’t hear her, she vowed aloud to return. Would the dog understand that? Would she think she’d been abandoned? Was that how John felt? She tried not to dwell on it, finding her eyes filling with tears as she ruminated on the subject, and she clenched her hands on the wheel and willed herself to stay strong as she headed south, towards everything she’d left behind over the previous few months.

For them both, the festive period was uncomfortable. John found his sister was intent on moving into the house, albeit temporarily, and he had to consent to her feeding her monstrous cats on the front porch, well away from Idris. Now untroubled by a lack of walks or food, his dog had returned to her previous state of nervousness around Missy, and that alone unsettled him — his constant, ebullient companion was reduced to a whimpering wreck, and he realised one evening that she was representative of his own feelings. He missed Clara, and he had expected to feel that way. He had not expected to feel the absence of her presence as keenly as a wound; had not expected to feel as though a part of him was missing. Over the previous few weeks, he had grown accustomed to her presence at his side, to her near-constant chatter, to her warmth and her smile and her laugh. Without her, he felt the darkness encroaching on the edges of his mood, and felt himself sinking back into the sporadic depression he had been plagued by in the years prior to her arrival in his life.

Missy tried her best to understand, but how could she? She was unattached. She was unencumbered by friends or lovers or a spouse; she was, and always had been, the master of her own solitude, living alone and entirely in her own little world. He’d pitied her for that, once, but now it seemed appealing. Now, as she was unburdened by loss, he came to almost despise her for her upbeat manner and over-enthusiasm for all things Christmas-related. He should have insisted that Clara stay with him. He should have been selfish. He should have been sharing a terrible Christmas meal with her, and wearing paper crowns with her, and exchanging gifts with her. Missy’s girlish glee was
exhausting, and he couldn’t help but wish that he was, at least, completely alone instead.

That was not to say he was not grateful of her presence, at times. He was grateful that she had offered to cook, and that she agreed with his opinions on much of the Christmas television schedules. He was grateful that she had not insisted on bringing her cats into the house, and that she wasn’t forcing him into a ludicrous Christmas jumper.

But he was most grateful for her presence on Christmas Eve, as they stood atop a small hill not far from the house. He had never brought Clara here, and perhaps never would, but his thoughts on that grey afternoon were not on his friend. As he looked down at the two carved granite memorials, he reached across the space between them and took his sister’s hand.

“I miss her,” he said quietly.

“I know,” Missy murmured, stepping closer to him and resting her chin on his shoulder as his attention shifted to the newer of the two edifices. “And God, I miss him.”

“Me, too,” John breathed, closing her eyes and resting his cheek against her hair. “Me, too.”

For Clara, the Christmas period was interminable. There was celebrating, and there was merriment, which was intolerable enough in itself at the best of times, but there was also the jarring presence of her stepmother, and not even the solidarity that came from having Bonnie at her side was enough to counter the loathing she still felt for the woman.

Having her twin with her — without animosity — for the first time in months was both familiar and unfamiliar. They lapsed into their usual means of silent communication, able to speak volumes with a look or a single syllable. They shared a bedroom, as they had in their youth, and, after a night in split single beds, they pushed the two together and curled up in each other’s arms as they once had in the womb. Clara began to forget where she began and her sister ended, the two of them serving as two parts of a whole, and they unconsciously regressed to dressing the same way, behaving the same way, and speaking the same way, until even their father could not tell Bonnie from Clara, nor Clara from Bonnie. Their grandmother, infinitely wiser, would sit in the corner and encourage his erroneous guesses, winking at the two of them in a way that conveyed that, despite her perceived senility, she knew precisely who was who.

Bonnie was, if Clara was honest, the only positive to returning home. Since their argument in Scotland, things had shifted between the two of them, and, for the first time in a long time, Clara no longer felt second-best. Bonnie would not discuss work, no matter how hard their father or Linda tried to draw her into discussions about politics or her professional life, and Clara was grateful for that, adopting Bonnie’s code of silence and remaining tight-lipped on the subject of Scotland, her resignation, and John.

She missed John, of course. She couldn’t not — he had become as much of a symbiotic part of her as Bonnie was, and she missed his presence, his terrible jokes, and his gruff honesty. While she relished being back with her family, she looked forward to escaping back to Scotland following the completion of her duties as daughter — namely those of being merry, being festive, and bringing cheer. Not that she was totally successful in accomplishing them, but she was willing at least to try.

Nobody mentioned Danny, to her great relief, and she strongly suspected that her twin may have had
stern words with the family about it. She didn’t dare to broach the subject, lest she start crying, but, upon making the realisation that her sister was, as ever, determined to protect her, she hugged Bonnie a little more tightly that evening as they lay in bed together, silently conveying her gratitude. She didn’t want to ruminate on the past any more than was strictly necessary; it was already difficult enough to be back in her childhood home, devoid of their mother’s physical presence and instead tainted with Linda’s, while their mother was confined only to photographic evidence and their own memories. As they slept each night, her picture watched over them, and facing the memory of her was all-consuming enough that Clara was able to forget about Danny for several hours a day, and forget about John, and merely pass the time with her sister reminiscing on Christmases past.

When the time came to return to Scotland, Clara was almost relieved. The loss of her sister by her side would be jarring, but their renewed bond would be sustained via promised Skype calls and constant WhatsApp messages. There was no cause for concern in leaving her family, or rather there wasn’t until Dave observed that it was no longer proper for Clara to continue using Martha’s Land Rover, and instead insisted on gifting her the broken-down heap of an estate car he had previously been driving. With some considerable reticence, an arrangement was brokered and Bonnie departed Blackpool for London in the 4x4 that Clara had grown accustomed to, as she slipped north in the unfamiliar vehicle, trying to come to terms with the quirks of the new-but-old car.

As she drew closer to the border, the weather worsened, and, as the miles passed, dark clouds closed in on the horizon and a lashing rain began to fall, limiting the visibility and dampening Clara’s enthusiasm to be back in Úine. As she crept along the A9 at well below the speed limit, she cursed the weather, cursed Scotland, and cursed the useless car she found herself in, trying not to let panic set in as the road wound its way around crags and glens, lochs slipping by unseen outside her window.

Once she entered the Cairngorms themselves, she allowed herself to relax a little, reassured that she was approaching familiar territory. After she passed Dalwhinnie, she exhaled in relief as she reasoned that she would soon be back in Úine, and whilst she was concentrating on the excitement of seeing John and Idris again, a tree branch crashed into the road ahead of her.

Swearing aloud, she yanked the steering wheel sharply to the right, but even as she did so, she felt the wheels lock and the car begin to skid.

The last thing she remembered was the sudden proximity of the metal barrier at the side of the road.

Then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Figured it was about time I broke the fluff streak...
In the wake of Clara's car accident, she finds herself alone and terrified. Or at least, she is, until a familiar face arrives at the hospital...

“Can you hear me?”

The voice sounded far away, and terribly urgent. That was strange. She didn’t feel like anything was particularly urgent at all, not while she was engulfed in this warm, blissful feeling of… well, she couldn’t put a name to it, but somehow that didn’t seem to matter. Whatever it was, it was peaceful, serene, and safe, and she let it wash over her deliciously.

“Shit, she’s losing consciousness again.”

Was she? She didn’t remember ever being conscious. Or unconscious. Or even a physical being. Whatever this feeling was, it was accompanied by a deliciously appealing sense of weightlessness and placelessness, and she felt as though she was floating through a void of… nothingness. Nothingness of the best possible kind.

“Stay with me, hen. Come on. Stay with me; don’t you dare give up.”

Give up? What was she giving up on? She was just floating. Floating wasn’t giving up, or giving in, or giving way. Floating was just floating.

“Come on, come back to us.”

Come back? Come back where? There was only the nothingness, and the tranquillity of it, and- And Scotland. And John.

Her memories returned in a crashing wave: the storm, the unfamiliar car, the falling branch.

The accident.

She opened her eyes and tried to move, panic surging through her system as she fought to remember how to breathe. There had been a crash. She’d been trying to get to John’s, and there’d been an accident, and-

“Easy, now. There we go, you’re back with us,” a female paramedic with dark hair was crouched beside her, and she realised she was still in the car, albeit its damaged remains. “It’s alright. You’re going to be alright.”

“What-” she attempted, as an oxygen mask was placed over her face. “What… happened?”

“You swerved to avoid a branch,” the paramedic jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “And your
wheels locked. You hit the crash barriers pretty hard.”

“Am…” Clara tried to move her head, feeling an irrational need to appraise the situation. “What…”

“Whoa,” the paramedic leaned forwards, placing a gentle, but firm hand on either side of her jaw to immobilise her. “I need you to stay nice and still for me, please. Don’t move your head.”

Clara whimpered an assertion, closing her eyes and beginning to cry. She couldn’t feel any pain yet, but she couldn’t feel anything, and her terror clutched hold of that information and her panic began to escalate. She started to hyperventilate again, and the paramedic let go of her jaw with one hand, instead placing it reassuringly on her shoulder.

“It’s alright,” the woman said again in a low, soothing voice, seemingly unbothered by the ongoing storm. “We’re going to get you out of here as soon as we can.”

“How b-bad is it?” Clara asked, still fighting to catch her breath. “Am I g-going to die?”

“No, you’re not going to die. I won’t let you.”

It took Clara a moment to realise this was a joke.

“Your car is a bit of a wreck,” the paramedic admitted with a grimace. “But I think you’re going to be just fine. Can you tell me your name?”

“C-Clara,” she managed. “C-Clara Oswald.”

“You’re not from ’round here, are you?”

“N-no,” Clara admitted, as someone out of her field of vision handed the paramedic a cervical collar. “B-Blackpool.”

“What brings you up here, Clara?”

“S-staying with a f-friend. He’ll be w-worried if I d-don’t arrive...”

“That’s alright, we’ll make sure once you’re safely in hospital that we get hold of him and let him know what’s happened. Do you want us to call anyone else?”

“P-please. My p-phone…” she gestured to the footwell of the passenger seat, where she’d stowed her handbag before setting off. She prayed it was still there, and relatively unscathed.

“Right,” the paramedic said pragmatically, fitting the collar onto Clara and then reaching over her with fluid ease and snagging the handbag, passing it over her shoulder to, Clara presumed, an unseen colleague. “There we go, that’s that safe. I’m Alice, OK? I’m Alice, and we’re going to get you out of this car and into the ambulance and safely up to the hospital in Inverness. Does that sound like a plan?”

“Y-yes,” Clara managed. “H-how bad is it?”

“You, or the car?”

“M-me.”

“Can you tell me where it hurts?”

“I c-can’t really f-feel anything.”
“Aye, that’ll be the cold. Can someone fetch me an emergency blanket?”

Clara closed her eyes, trying to ignore the discomfort of the plastic collar around her neck and the icy chill creeping over her as the rain soaked through her clothes.

“Clara?” Alice’s voice was full of concern. “Clara, come on stay with me.”

“Mm,” she mumbled. “Will… will do…”

“Clara!”

She felt reality slip away from her, as smoothly as water, and she welcomed unconsciousness like an old friend.

“This is Clara Oswald, twenty-eight, involved in an RTC — her vehicle collided with a metal crash barrier at approximately 40 miles per hour. GCS 11, briefly KOed at scene, then lost consciousness again before being transferred to the ambulance. Some respiratory difficulties due to panic, Sats 80%, pulse and BP stable. Body temp was 35 degrees at scene, has now risen to 36.5. Query fractured clavicle, some lacerations due to broken glass, and possible internal bleeding from impact.”

Clara blinked sluggishly in the glaring white light, trying to process the information she’d just overheard as she came to. The clavicle was… oh, god, she should’ve paid more attention in Biology at school. Or more attention to Casualty. Whichever.

“Clara?”

Alice’s face appeared in her field of vision, smiling encouragingly. “Hello again. You’re in safe hands, now, OK? I’m passing you over to my colleagues in the Emergency Department.”

The trolley she was being wheeled on came to a halt, and Clara found herself being lifted across onto a hospital bed as though she were unable to move for herself. Was she unable to move? Now that she was warmer, feeling was beginning to creep back into her limbs, and that in itself was enough to reassure her.

“Clara?” an unfamiliar woman leant over her, her expression pragmatic but kind. “I’m Doctor Stewart. Can you tell me where it hurts?”

“Urm,” Clara swallowed, trying to localise the dull, aching pain that was settling over her as the last vestiges of unconsciousness fell away. “My right arm, I think. My chest. My face.”

A thought occurred to her. A silly, inconsequential thought, in the grand scheme of things, but she blurted it out nonetheless.

“Oh, my god. They said lacerations; am I going to have scars?”

“It’s unlikely, they’re not severe,” Doctor Stewart flashed her a reassuring smile. “We’ll do our best to make sure you don’t.”

“Thank you,” Clara exhaled in relief, then flinched as she felt a stab of pain from her ribs in response to the movement. “Ow.”
“OK, I’m going to examine you and then hopefully get that collar off you, if we can. Is that alright?”

“Yeah,” Clara breathed. “Yeah, and… can you call my family? And my friend?”

“I’ll make sure one of the nurses gets on it,” the doctor moved out of her line of sight. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“John. John Smith. It’s… it’ll be on my phone.”

“Alright, we’ll make sure the necessary people are contacted. Will they have far to come? That’s not a local accent.”

“My friend won’t, he’s down in Úine, but my family… they’re Blackpool, they’ll be… they’ll be hours…”

Unbidden, she began to cry, each sob sending sharp pains through her chest as she realised exactly how long it would take them to arrive. In Bonnie’s case, she’d probably already be back in London, and it would be even longer until her twin would be by her side, holding her hand and reassuring her that she was going to be alright. She could feel herself starting to hyperventilate again, and the pain from her ribs was making her head swim.

“It’s alright,” the doctor soothed. “We’ll call them, and they’ll be here as soon as they can. It’s going to be OK.”

Miserably, Clara mumbled an assertion. She needed to keep it together and focus on the positives.

John was close by, and undoubtedly he’d be here as soon they called. He’d never let her down before.

__________________________________________________________________________

“Clara?!”

John’s voice startled her from her morphine-aided doze. Opening her eyes hazily, she focused on his approaching figure with some difficulty, noticing that he was holding a sad looking bunch of flowers as he closed the curtain of her cubicle behind him.

“John,” she mumbled, reaching for him with her good hand and starting to cry again. She wasn’t sure if it was the panic or the painkillers or genuine relief, but her gratitude for his presence was overwhelming. “John, you’re here, thank god, you’re here…”

“Of course I’m here,” he placed the flowers down at the foot of the bed and then moved to her side, taking her hand in both of his and pressing it to his lips. “Hey, don’t cry! I’m here, it’s alright, no crying. Oh, my Clara. What happened? Hey?”

“Crashed the car,” she said in a small voice, her lip wobbling. “Didn’t mean to… was an accident…”

“I know,” he left one hand in hers and used the other to stroke the hair off her face tenderly. “I know, it’s alright.”

“Car’s not alright,” she sniffl ed. “Car’s a write-off.”
“Well, the car isn’t important,” John reminded her. “Are you alright?”

“No,” she shook her head, grateful that they’d finally removed the collar from her neck an hour ago. “No, m’not.”

“What’s wrong? Do you have to have surgery?”

“No,” she whimpered, trying to pull away from him and failing. “John, my face is all cut up and ugly.”

“What?”

“You shouldn’t even look at it, it’s ugly, John. I’m ugly, I’m all bloodied and—”

“Clara Oswald,” he said in a gentle tone. “You could never look ugly to me.”

“I am,” she wailed in a low, distressed voice. “John…”

“I’m right here,” he promised her. “I’m right here, you’re alright.”

The curtain around Clara’s bed swished open and the doctor stepped into the cubicle, looking momentarily surprised by John’s presence. Her eyes flickered down to their entwined hands, and she smiled knowingly.

“You must be John Smith,” she said in a bright tone. “Clara’s hardly shut up about you for the last hour.”

“Has she, now?”

“Since we gave her the morphine, yes,” Doctor Stewart grinned. “She’s a talker, this one.”

“Am not,” Clara mumbled, feeling herself turn maroon. “Shu’up.”

“How is she?” John asked, ignoring Clara’s sulky comment. “Other than the cuts?”

“She’s remarkably alright, given the circumstances.”

“What happened? They said on the phone that there had been an accident…”

“Clara, do I have your permission to…”

“You can tell him,” Clara said at once. “It’s fine.”

“She swerved to avoid an object in the road and instead hit the traffic barriers. Luckily, she was nowhere near the speed limit due to the bad weather, or this would have been much worse. She’s got superficial lacerations to her face and right arm, and her clavicle is fractured.”

“Her…”

“Collarbones. It happens a lot in car accidents when people hit the seatbelt. There was some concern that she may have internal bleeding, but we’ve ruled that out, although her ribs are badly bruised.”

“How certainly have you ruled it out?” he asked, his tone hardening.

“Absolutely certainly.”

“Because if anything has been missed…”
“I can assure you, nothing has been missed,” Doctor Stewart said in an icy voice. “We have taken — and indeed, will continue to take — excellent care of Clara.”

“Good,” John’s bravado of seconds before dissipated, and he ran a hand through his hair with a sheepish expression. “Sorry, I just…”

“It’s fine, you’re worried. It’s only natural,” the doctor shrugged. “I’ll give you both some privacy.”

She stepped out of the cubicle and Clara blinked up at John, exhausted and sore and yet still relieved to see him.

“Clara…” he fell silent for a moment, wringing his hands nervously, and she was stunned when she realised he was near to tears. “God, I was so worried, you have no idea…”

“John…”

“I can’t lose you,” he confessed, his voice breaking and tears beginning to slide down his face. “Clara, I can’t lose you… not after… I can’t. I’m not strong enough.”

“John-”

“I was so scared I was going to find you dead, or in a coma, or-”

“John.”

He fell silent then, the panicked flow of words spilling from his mouth ceasing as he looked at her with uncertainty.

“Come here,” she held out her good hand, and he took hold of it once again, clinging to it like a lifeline. “I’m alright.”

“I know, but-”

“John?”

“Mm?”

“Shut up.”

She pulled him nearer and pressed her lips to his, not caring about the pain in her ribs or the way her the monitor attached to her was beeping with increasing urgency as her heart rate skyrocketed. One of John’s hands came up to cup her lacerated cheek with the utmost tenderness, and when she finally pulled away, he was smiling at her with an endearing expression of surprise.

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

“To clarify: that wasn’t just the effects of the morphine, was it?”

“No, you prat.”

“Good,” he breathed. “So, you have no objections to me kissing you again?”

“None,” Clara’s gaze flickered over to behind John’s left shoulder, and she blushed. “But, ah…”
“But I might.”

John whipped around to find Doctor Stewart stood in the entrance to the cubicle, her eyebrows raised and a smirk playing over her features.

“Don’t worry,” she assured them, tipping them both a wink. “Just… try to keep her heart rate somewhere near normal.”


“Well,” the doctor rolled her eyes. “For my sake… try.”

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone is wondering, Alice is O'Donnell from Under The Lake/Before The Flood. Also, fun fact: John and Clara were not meant to kiss at this point, but went ahead and did it anyway, because idiots.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

As Clara awaits her family's arrival at the hospital, she and John discuss their relationship. Will they be able to keep it a secret?

“John?” Clara said softly, in between drifting in and out of a painkiller-induced daze. He wasn’t where he’d been seconds — minutes? hours? — before, and she felt herself starting to panic in his absence. “John, where-”

“Hey,” he moved into her field of vision, taking her hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze, and she felt her breathing began to even out almost at once. “It’s alright, I’m here. I’m right here, you’re safe.”

“Please don’t leave me.”

“I’m not going to leave you,” he promised her, his voice low and reassuring as he pressed a kiss to their clasped hands. “I’ve got a duty of care.”

“Thank you. I…” her voice cracked as she looked over at him, realising that while his presence was comforting, there was someone else she needed in that instant. Several someones. “I… John, please don’t take this the wrong way, but I want my family.”

“I know,” he soothed, stroking his thumb over the back of her hand. “I know, and they’ll be here soon, I promise.”

“When they…” she felt her cheeks flush crimson, and dropped her gaze to her lap, focusing intently on the clinically white bedlinen. “When they arrive, we, ah… we probably shouldn’t tell them.”

“About?” Clara lifted up their entwined hands by way of explanation, and John let out a small noise of comprehension.

“Ahh,” he chuckled. “Right. Will I become the bad guy, otherwise?”

“Probably,” she admitted in a small voice. “Dad might not be very happy, and I just… please, don’t think I’m ashamed of you, I’m not; I just know what they’ll think and they’ll try to act like I’m not in my right mind or that this is something stupid and meaningless and I just… I can’t deal with that, not on top of everything else.”

“Are you in your right mind?” he asked, his tone teasing, but nevertheless she rolled her eyes.

“No,” she shot back in a scathing tone. “I’m clearly having a psychotic breakdown after my incredibly traumatic car accident. I will come to and realise that I am in fact profoundly attracted to… oh, I don’t know. Chairs. Love a good chair, me.”

“Well, I have a lot of chairs back at home,” John deadpanned. “So, when that happens and you come back to your right mind, you could come and have your wicked way with my chairs.”
“Can I come and have my wicked way with you instead?”

“Mm,” he turned a delicate shade of pink, visibly surprised by the suggestion. “Maybe when you’re better.”

“But—”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he breathed, meeting her gaze and holding it. “Clara, I won’t ever hurt you. Not in any way. Not ever again.”

“That’s quite the promise, you know.”

“Well, it’s one I intend to keep,” he moved closer to the bed, perching beside her and placing one hand gently on her cheek, his palm resting against the least-lacerated part of her skin. “Seeing you like this…”

“I’ll be alright,” Clara insisted, trying to appear braver than she felt. “I’ll be fine, really, I’ve had worse.”

“Don’t,” he closed his eyes and leaned down, resting his forehead against hers. “Don’t try to pretend that everything is fine, because this could have been so, so much worse.”

“But it wasn’t,” she reminded him, letting go of his hand so that she could place hers on the back of his neck. “And I’m alright.”

“No, you’re in pain.”

“John, I was in pain for a long time before I met you — Actual-You, not Marcus-You — and do you know what helped with that?”

“You were in pain?” John looked stricken. “Why?”

“Emotional pain,” Clara rolled her eyes. “Keep up.”

“Oh,” he grimaced. “What helped?”

“You, you idiot.”

“Oh,” he grinned, kissing her quickly lest they invoke Doctor Stewart’s wrath. “Well. That’s good to know.”

“You can be dim sometimes, you know that?”

“Is it my fault that I’m still stunned that a beautiful woman is actually interested in me?”

“I’m not.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Beautiful. I’m really not beautiful, and especially not right now.”

“Oh,” John looked tangibly relieved. “Clara, you are beautiful. You might not believe me, but you are.”

Clara was on the verge of replying when the curtain swished open and Doctor Stewart stepped inside.
“Your family is in reception,” she informed Clara, looking between the two of them with a mischievous grin. “Thought you might like some warning.”

“Thanks,” Clara blushed, tucking her hair behind her ear with her good hand and trying to smile. “How do I look?”

“Like you’ve been in a car accident,” the doctor shot back. “Which is fair enough, all things considered.”

“Well, do I look like my dad is going to have a dad-type nervous breakdown about it?”

“Urm,” Kate squinted at Clara a little, giving her a quick appraisal. “You don’t look that bad, but he probably will anyway. Dads do that.”

“True,” Clara laughed, then winced. “Ow. Gotta stop doing that.”

John gave her a sympathetic smile as he stepped away from the bed and retreated to the chair in the corner of the cubicle. “Could be an idea.”

“We aren’t prohibiting laughing,” Doctor Stewart assured Clara. “Just do it in moderation. Now, shall I send your family through?”

“Please.”

The doctor nodded and stepped out of the cubicle, and Clara exchanged a nervous look with John.

“They’re going to go bal-”

“Clara?!” her dad all but ran into the cubicle, skidding to a halt and letting out a yelp of horror when he caught sight of her. “Oh my god.”

“Dad,” she began, in what was intended to be a light tone, but instead she found herself bursting into tears, reaching for him like she had when she was a child. “Daddy.”

“Oh, love,” he sank down beside her on the bed, wrapping his arms around her and letting her sob against his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“W-why?” she managed, nuzzling her face into his neck and clinging onto him like a lifeline. “My fault.”

“The car,” Dave began to stroke her back slowly and reassuringly, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “If I’d let you take Martha’s car instead of my old heap of a thing…”

“Oh g-god,” Clara hiccoughed as realisation dawned. “Your c-car… it’s a w-wreck…”

“Don’t worry about it,” her dad soothed. “It was old and beaten-up anyway, so now it’s gone to the great scrapyard in the sky.”

“Dad, that’s a terrible analogy,” Bonnie said, and Clara’s turned her head to take in the sight of her sister leaning against the foot of her bed. Bonnie’s expression was one of attempted nonchalance, but her red-rimmed eyes betrayed her concern. “Hey, you.”

“Hey.”

“You scared the shit out of me.”
“I’m sorry.”

“You always have to upstage me,” Bonnie teased, stepping closer. “Plus: how dare you, we’re not identical now.”

“We will be again soon,” Clara promised, patting the bed next to her, but instead Bonnie plonked down at the end of the bed. “What are you sat down there for?”

“Dad’s taking up all the room.”

“Sorry,” Dave mumbled scooting over, and it was then that he caught sight of John. “You.”

“Yes, me,” John granted him a weak smile as Bonnie moved to sit beside her sister. “Hello.”

“You… she was on her way to…”

“Dad, if you’re about to try and blame John for any of this, then I’d like to remind you that moments ago you were blaming yourself, and that both attempts to apportion blame are unreasonable.”

“But, if you hadn’t been-”

“Dad!” Clara snapped, her patience wearing thin. “Stop it. He was the first person who got here, and he calmed me down when I was panicking about my face, and most importantly *it was not his fault.* I was the one driving.”

“Hmph,” Dave said, sniffing in a way that fully indicated to both of his daughters precisely what he thought of John’s presence. “Well, thank you for getting here so promptly, Mr Smith.”

“You’re welcome,” John said in an icily polite tone. “I just wanted to be absolutely sure Clara was alright.”

“Which you’ve done, so you can leave.”

“Dad!”

“I’m not leaving,” John replied with a casual shrug, but Clara could tell he was barely keeping his cool. “I’m not going anywhere without her.”

“I’m sorry?” Dave frowned uncomprehendingly. “What…”

“He means that I’ll be going back to his when I’m discharged,” Clara said.

“What?” Dave’s scowl intensified. “Why would you… we need to get you home, look after you…”

“Will Linda be there?”

“Sadly,” Bonnie muttered under her breath, earning herself a reproachful look from Dave that she ignored. “She’s at home ‘minding Gran’ as we speak.”

“Gran doesn’t need minding.”

“She does, and so will you,” Dave said sternly. “So, you’ll be coming back with us.”

“Dear God, if Linda will be minding me…”

“Of course she will, she’s your stepmother.”
“Dad, I’m not coming back to Blackpool. It’s not happening. Especially not if Linda is involved.”

“Well, you’re not bloody going back to Scotland.”

“Dad, she’s in Scotland,” Bonnie pointed out. “Keep up.”

“That’s…” Dave bristled. “That’s not the point. I won’t have you going back to that castle.”

“It’s not a castle,” Clara said automatically. “And I am going. You can’t tell me what to do, and that’s where I want to be.”

“You…” Dave shook his head dismissively, getting to his feet and starting to pace back and forth across the narrow cubicle. In the corner, John looked to be on the verge of arguing with her dad, but Clara shot him a warning look and he opted to remain mercifully silent. “You’re not well. You’ve had a shock. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Jesus, Dad,” Bonnie’s tone was disbelieving. “She doesn’t want to come with us, and she’s not a kid anymore. We can’t exactly make her.”

“We can try.”

“No, Dad. You can try. I’ll be helping my sister to do what she wants.”

“Bon…” Clara began, reaching for her sister’s hand. “It’s…”

“No, Clara. I’m sorry, you can be a drama queen, but there’s no way that I’m going to let him do this. Dad, we’re not ten years old. You can’t tell her what to do, or where to go, or who to be with. Clara’s got free will, and she wants to go back to Úine.”

“But she’s not… Clara, you’re not…”

“I’m not what, Dad?”

“You’re not doing this properly!” he exploded, turning to face her with tear-filled eyes. “You’re not grieving properly; you’re not doing this right!”

“Because you did?” Clara shot back, her own temper flaring. “God, you got with Linda how soon after Mum?”

“So, I know! I know what it’s like to throw yourself into things when you’re still broken and I… I can’t let you do that!”

“Dad, please,” Clara implored. “I need to heal and put myself back together and being in Úine is helping me do that.”

“I’m not blind,” Dave said softly, and the sudden change in tone was unsettling. “I see the way you look at him.”

“Dad…”

“John, I see the way you look at her. Can you both tell me, honestly, that nothing is going on? Can you promise me that you’re only friends?”

There was a beat of silence. “No,” Clara breathed, unable to lie to her father directly. “No, we can’t.”
Dave’s face crumpled in stupefied horror. “Oh, God. Clara…”

“Dad, please.”

“Clara, you don’t know what you’re doing-”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

“-he’s old enough to be your father-”

“So, you know he’ll take good care of me, then.”

“Bonnie, tell her that she’s being ridiculous.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Bonnie folded her arms, shifting her attention to John and arching an eyebrow. “As for you… I don’t know how new this is, but if you hurt her, then just be aware that I will break your legs, slash your tyres, and do everything in my power to ruin your life. And know as well that Amy will say — and do — the same thing.”

“I understand,” John swallowed, then looked at Clara with a nervous grin. “So much for not telling them.”

“Was never one for following the rules,” she mumbled, feeling her cheeks burn. “Sorry.”

“You take bloody good care of her; do you understand me, John?” Dave said in a low, hollow voice. “Promise me that. And I don’t just mean her injuries, I mean her heart.”

On the way home from hospital with Clara, Bonnie asks John a question with dangerous consequences...

“Clara?” Bonnie asked quietly, curled up in the back of John’s ancient Land Rover with her injured sister safely ensconced beside her. “Clara, are you sure about this?”

“About what?” Clara asked sleepily, the rocking of the car and the painkillers they had given her before leaving the hospital making her drowsy. “What do you mean?”

“About John,” Bonnie looked over at her in the darkness with gentle concern. “About everything.”

“Bon…”

“I’m not going to nag, or judge, or cast aspersions on either of you. I just want to be sure that this is what you want, and that you’re going to be happy together.”

Clara glanced into the front of the car, where John was focusing on the road while singing along to a CD of punk music he’d dug out of the glove compartment. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“I don’t like to bring it up, but Danny-”

“I know it’s soon, and I know what people will say, but I think I’ve always known this.”

“Known what?”

“How I feel about John.”

“Only you didn’t feel it for John,” Bonnie reminded her. “Not to start with. You felt it for Marcus. By the way, Amy is going to be so smug when she finds out about this — after all your bluster about not being madly in love with your penpal…”

Clara blushed at the word “love.” She hadn’t considered it in relation to John yet, and she didn’t want to rush into using it, but she supposed that was what she felt — the deep-seated feeling of safety and calm when she was with him, and the connection they felt when they were together. Yes, she had always cared for Marcus, but there was something about John, too — something that served as a kind of gravity, pulling the two of them together. He had taken over his brother’s letter writing out of care and compassion, and that same care and compassion was what made him a good man. A good man who made her happier than she’d felt in a long time.

“I don’t…”

“Sorry, I didn’t… is it too soon?” Bonnie asked, and Clara nodded, taking her sister’s hand and closing her eyes. “He cares about you, though.”

“Mm?”
“When I was visiting with Amy… Clara, the way he was with you, it was obvious. And now? This?”

“What?”

Bonnie gestured vaguely at the car.

“Bon, he’s just driving.”

“Clara, he made you a pillow nest in the back seat of his car so you wouldn’t be jolted about on the way home. OK, and also so you wouldn’t have a panic attack, both of which are pretty compassionate things to do.”

“Mm.”

“And he let me tag along, even though he probably just wants to get you home and ravish you.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And Clara is wounded,” John added, and Bonnie let out a yelp of shock. “Sorry. I promise I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop.”

“You were listening to music!” Bonnie protested. “How…”

“Sorry,” he said again, sounding suitably embarrassed to have been caught out. “You’re right, though. I do care for your sister enormously.”

“Well, good. But one last thing, and I don’t like to bring this up either-”

“Bon, don’t then,” Clara pleaded, knowing full well what her sister was about to say. “Please, don’t…”

“-but weren’t you married?”

The car skidded to an abrupt halt, but before either Bonnie or John could speak, Clara was consumed with panic as she recalled the same occurring in her own car hours earlier, and the impact of it hitting the barriers. The air in the vehicle’s interior seemed to be sucked away, and she doubled over in her seat, gasping and choking and fighting for breath as though she were drowning in water rather than surrounded by the oxygen her body so acutely needed.

“Clara?”

Someone was saying her name, although it seemed distant and incomprehensible. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t think, she couldn’t so much as move — all she could recall was the crushing blackness and the slow advent of pain that had come with regaining consciousness.

“Clara? Shit.”

She was going to die, she was sure of it — she’s survived the accident, but now she was going to die in the back of a Land Rover, saturated in oxygen that her body was suddenly unable to inhale.

There was a soft click and then she was being lifted by unseen hands, moved out of the car and held safely in someone’s arms.

“Breathe,” a stern voice instructed, and she tried, she really did, but she couldn’t quite manage it. “Come on, it’s alright. You’re safe. Breathe for me, Clara.”
She could see the stars overhead, their glow the only luminescence on the dark road. There was the sound of twigs snapping underfoot and then the sky was intersected with a myriad of bare branches, blacking out half of the stars and framing the rest.

“We’re off the road now,” the same voice said, and after a moment of incomprehension, she realised it was John. “Clara, we’re off the road, OK? We’re safe, we’re not in any danger. I promise.”

“She’s going to get cold—”

That was her sister, sounding shaky but protective.

“She won’t, she’s got my body heat, and besides, she’ll be baking if she’s panicking—”

“-we should take her back to the hospital—”

“-don’t be daft, she’ll be OK once she can breathe.”

She blinked hard a couple of times, and through the gloom she made out the face of her sister.

“Hey,” Bonnie said in a low, soft voice, taking her hand with the utmost tenderness. “Breathe with me, OK?”

Clara nodded mutely, and did her best to copy her sister’s slow inhales and exhales. As she felt herself calm down, little by little, she became aware of the fact that she was in John’s arms, held against his chest as though she weighed no more than a feather.

“John?” she asked, her voice small and frightened. “John, what happened?”

“I wasn’t exactly expecting Bonnie’s question and I braked,” he explained. “Sharply. It scared you, and you started hyperventilating, so we got you out of the car to calm you down.”

“Aren’t I heavy?”

“Not really.”

“Right answer,” Bonnie quipped, although Clara could hear the residual traces of concern in her twin’s tone. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked John about that, I had no right.”

“You had every right,” John said in a weary tone. “But that was in the past. River has been dead a very long time, and, as my sister keeps telling me, it’s time I let her go.”

Clara began to shiver as the cold night air started to seep through her sweat-soaked clothes. “John…” she began uncertainly. “Can we have this discussion…”

“Shit,” he muttered. “Sorry, you must be… are you OK to get back in the car?”

“No more braking hard,” she pleaded. “That’s all I ask.”

“Of course,” he smiled down at her, a quick turn of the mouth, and then set off back towards the abandoned vehicle. Settling her in the back and securing her seatbelt, he made a great show of getting back into the driver’s seat and turning up the music he’d been listening to as Bonnie got in beside her, taking Clara’s hand and smiling reassuringly.

“I’m sorry,” Bonnie said again. “I really am.”

“Don’t be,” Clara attempted a nonchalant shrug, but it only elicited a screaming protest from her
fractured clavicle and she winced. “You have every right to be worried.”

“Still. I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“You asked about Danny.”

“Yeah, but you’re my sister. I’m allowed to ask you rude and intrusive questions.”

“On the subject of Danny,” Clara swallowed. “He’d be unbelievably angry about this.”

“Yes, I think he would,” Bonnie admitted. “Is it bad that a little part of me is thinking ‘good’?”

“No,” Clara said shakily. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“He wouldn’t want you to sit around and be sad forever.”

“No, but he also wouldn’t want me to move on with John.”

“Are you really going to let the opinions of a dead man stop you from living your life?” Bonnie asked, and Clara blinked at her, stunned by her sister’s frankness. “Because, if you are, then you’re actually stupider than I thought.”

“Excuse me?!”

“I want you to be happy,” Bonnie murmured. “Please. That’s all I ask — is you to be happy. I’ve missed my sister. I’ve missed my beautiful, smiling, wonderful twin. But, when you’re with John — the person I knew comes back, and you start to look alive again.”

“Bon…”

Clara reached for her sister, pulling her into a hug and clinging onto her as though frightened they might be forced apart. Lulled by the sounds of both of their hearts, she closed her eyes, and slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When she awoke, she found herself disorientated. She was back in her bedroom in Ùine, in her pyjamas, and there was sunlight, watery and faint, trickling in around the edge of the curtains. Her entire torso seemed to ache, while her face and arm felt hot and uncomfortable, but there was a more pressing concern in that instant than her physical discomfort.

She was alone.

Just as she began to feel the stirrings of a panic attack, the door opened and John stepped into the room, carrying a tray laden with breakfast goods and two steaming mugs of tea, and she smiled at him warmly.

“Hey,” he said, visibly relieved to discover she was awake. “How you feeling?”

“Sore,” she mumbled, struggling into an approximate sitting position. “Panicky.”

“Sorry, Bonnie went out early to try and reclaim your stuff from the police station, and I thought you might like to wake up to breakfast in bed. I didn’t think you’d wake up before I was done.”
“It’s alright,” she smiled as he set the tray down carefully on the covers beside her and then slipped into bed in his dressing gown, careful not to knock over the hot drinks. “What happened last night?”

“You fell asleep on Bonnie, and you looked so peaceful that we carried you in when we got back and she got you changed. She slept in here, I slept in my room.”

“You could’ve stayed.”

“It might’ve been a touch squashed.” His cheeks turned pink, and he rubbed the back of his neck in a way that she knew he did when he was nervous. “Besides, I’m ah… I’m old-fashioned about these things.”

“You’ve slept with me before. I mean. Not like that, but you have.”

He went a darker shade of red. “Only because you were upset, and I couldn’t very well leave you.”

“What an ordeal for you,” she said drily. “You poor thing.”

“Clara…” he reached for his mug of tea and made a great show of looking down at it, blowing on the hot liquid and watching the steam unfurl into languid patterns as he did so. “I don’t want to rush you into anything.”

“Is that because you’re respectful or scared?” she asked with a forced sense of casualness, picking up her own mug and taking a hesitant sip.

“A little of both.”

“I’m not going to pounce on you,” she assured him, reaching over and putting a hand on his knee. He jumped at the physical contact, but she left her hand where it was. “OK? And I don’t want us to rush into anything either, but I care about you very much, and equally I respect that, you know, this was River’s house and you probably feel weird about things.”

“Does that bother you?” he blurted, blushing again as he spoke. “That it was her house?”

“Why would that bother me?” Clara frowned. “Does the thought of Danny bother you?”

“Only insofar as he didn’t treat you well.”

“Well, did River treat you well?”

“Yes!” John looked offended by the question. “Of course!”

“Well then, I have no issue with her.”

“You’re really not bothered by the house?”

“John, I care for you, and this house is part of you. Moreover, River is part of the house and part of you, and I accept and respect that.”

“God, I don’t deserve you.”

“John, I’m terribly sorry, but I’m exactly what you deserve,” she took his hand in her own and gave him a shy smile. “Now, can we please just eat breakfast?”

“Yes, but, ah…”
“What?”

There was the sound of scrabbling paws on flagstone tiles, and then Idris burst into the room, visibly overexcited to be reunited with Clara. Scrambling up onto the bed, she overlooked the tray of food in favour of sticking her nose in Clara’s face, nuzzling her neck and cheeks with boundless enthusiasm and wagging her tail at a million miles an hour.

“Hey,” John said warningly, putting his mug down and taking Clara’s for safety’s sake as she tried to keep Idris’s attention away from her injuries. “Idris, easy girl. Easy.”

He took hold of the golden retriever’s collar and gave it a gentle tug, redistributing Idris’s weight so that she was no longer on Clara’s lap. Thrown by her owner’s intervention, the canine paused and seemed to re-evaluate the situation, gently pressing her nose into the hollow between Clara’s right shoulder and her collarbone and whimpering softly.

“Sore,” Clara said by way of explanation, stroking Idris’s head to reassure her that she wasn’t too severely incapacitated. “No touching, OK? Sore.”

Idris whimpered again and lay down with her head and front paws in Clara’s lap, resting her nose against her human friend’s hand.

“Good girl,” Clara hummed softly. “Good dog. Are you going to be my helper dog while I get better?”

Idris wagged her tail lazily, and — apparently satisfied that Clara was in no immediate danger — turned her attention to the tray of food John had brought upstairs.

“Uh oh…” John grimaced, lifting it out of reach and tossing her a single piece of bacon as a pre-emptive peace offering. “Not for dogs. For poorly humans.”

“Well,” Clara said, looking at Idris’s pleading brown eyes. “Maybe for dogs, too…”
Bonnie stayed by Clara’s side for a good forty-eight hours after leaving the hospital. She and John circled around their patient like planets orbiting a sun, both of them providing sustenance and blankets and painkillers as necessary until Clara felt that she couldn’t so much as breathe without eliciting a flurry of concerned questions. While it was nice to have her twin with her, Clara yearned for the moment when Bonnie would return to London and leave her and John to each other’s company, although when the moment finally came and she watched her twin’s car slipping away down the driveway, she found there was a lump in her throat.

“She’ll be back soon,” John assured Clara, adjusting the supportive arm he’d placed around her waist as she leant against him on the front porch. “If you’d like her to be.”

“I know,” her throat closed up as she battled the urge to cry. “I know, just…”

“It’s always difficult to say goodbye.”

“Yeah,” she breathed, resting her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes in an attempt to regain her composure. “It is.”

“You know, we should head back inside before you catch a chill.”

“I’m not made of glass,” Clara reminded him for what felt like the millionth time. “And you’re just as susceptible to chills.”

“I’m not injured.”

“Injured,” Clara reiterated emphatically. “Not immunocompromised.”

“How can you be so sure?” John asked, starting to head back inside and letting Clara cling onto him as they went. “You might have been. All that windscreen glass…”

“John, I sincerely doubt that there was anything so dangerous on my windscreen that it’s destroyed my immune system in the last three days.”

“Ach, I’m just being protective,” he complained, drawing to an abrupt halt in the hallway and looking down at her. “Could you be less difficult?”

“Nope,” she teased, putting one hand on his chest. “Not a chance.”

“Well, I’ll have to make you.”

“How are you going to do that?”

She was expecting a kiss, but the intensity of this, their first completely private moment, surprised...
her. There was no need to creep around or kiss chastely now that Bonnie was gone, and when John pulled away, Clara was left short of breath.

“Shit,” he muttered, instantly concerned. “Sorry, was that…”

She grabbed hold of his T-shirt and yanked him down for another kiss before he could continue fussing over her, and this time it was him that was left reeling when she drew back with a smirk.

“Complaints?” she asked, but he only shook his head dumbly. “I’m not made of glass, John. Some things are off the table for now, but kissing you? Kissing you is very much on the table.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“John, you have met me, right?” Clara arched an eyebrow. “If anything was uncomfortable or painful… you’d know.”

“And I’d stop.”

“Exactly,” she smiled. “So, please stop worrying.”

“Can’t help it,” he said gruffly. “I’m a worrier by nature.”

“I’d noticed,” she grimaced. “For now, can you maybe worry about the temperature? Hallway: not warm.”

“Ah,” he looked stricken by the realisation, and led the way into the lounge, sinking into a seat beside the fire with Clara on his lap. “Better?”

“Much.”

“It’s a shame that you’ve ended up sat on me; I was going to make us a cup of tea.”

“Tea can wait.”

“Or get you some paracetamol.”

“OK,” Clara grimaced. “Unfortunately that might not wait, but I can get it—”

“Don’t be daft,” John shifted her gently onto the sofa beside him, tucking a blanket around her legs and then resting his hand momentarily against her cheek. “Stay there, I’ll be back in a sec.”

“John, I can walk, you know.”

“Shush, I’m enjoying playing doctor.”

“Sounds oddly sexual.”

He rolled his eyes, getting to his feet and affixing her with a stern look.

“Stay.”

“I’m not a dog!”

“Fine: stay, please.”

She raised her eyebrows in bemusement as he slunk off to the kitchen, his expression thoroughly chastised. Clara grinned, leaning back against the sofa cushions and curling up underneath her
blanket, grateful for its warmth after standing out in the cold December air to wave Bonnie off.

Properly alone with her thoughts for the first time since returning to Úine, she found her gaze drawn to the portrait on the wall — the one she had been studiously trying to overlook. As she looked up at the painting of John’s wife, she tried to reconcile what she and John were doing with what he had had before. They were… well, were they together? They hadn’t had that discussion formally yet, but what was this if it was not being together? Was he her boyfriend now? Partner? Lover? There was so much to consider, so much that went beyond breath-stealing kisses and kind gestures; so much that had yet to be categorised in either of their minds or given a concrete label.

“I’m sorry,” Clara breathed, addressing the portrait directly and trying not to feel foolish as she did so. “I’m not trying to… I don’t know, impede on your territory. But I care for him. Very much.”

She wasn’t sure what she was expecting — some kind of miracle, perhaps, with the painting going fully Harry Potter and having a conversation with her about John — but it wasn’t for the power in the house to cut out.

John stumbled back into the room seconds later, holding aloft a torch that had seen better days and swearing profusely. “OK,” he began. “I have no idea what happened, but the good news is, the kettle was close to boiling, so would you like some mostly-hot tea and painkillers while I poke about in the fuse box and hope for the best?”

“That would be nice,” Clara acquiesced, and he disappeared back towards the kitchen, leaving her alone with only the roaring fire as a source of light. From the floor, Idris blinked up at her in sleepy confusion, and Clara reached down and scratched her ears. “You might have to be my hot water bottle tonight. Again.”

The canine barked softly, leaning her head against Clara’s leg and wagging her tail. The two of them remained in companionable silence until John returned bearing two mugs of tea and two painkillers, and Clara smiled up at him gratefully.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, knocking back the tablets and taking a swig of tea. “Are you off to be heroic and mend the electrics now?”

“Well, I’m off to try.”

“Try not to get electrocuted.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I need you alive for New Year’s Eve tomorrow.”

John blinked at her, mystified.

“New Year’s kiss?” Clara raised an eyebrow. “I’d like one, please. With you. So don’t get fried.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised, flashing her a quick smile. “Back in a mo.”

As he turned and headed off to restore the power, Clara looked down at Idris and grimaced. “He’s going to end up zapping something, isn’t he?”

Idris let out a single woof, and Clara laughed.

“Well, fingers crossed it’s nothing important.”
Mercifully, John managed to avoid zapping anything — either himself or any of the fuses — while attempting to restore the power to the house. He’d fixed the issue after an hour of tinkering with the assorted wires and switches inside the fuse box, and then returned to the lounge to find Clara asleep on the sofa, her empty mug on the floor at her side and Idris curled up on her legs.

It was impossible not to care for her. He’d tried — he’d tried to tell himself, in those first few weeks of her being in Scotland, that it wasn’t appropriate, that she was too young for him, and that she’d never be interested in an old wreck like him. He’d tried to convince himself that his feelings were friendly, and that his concern was normal for someone he’d known for such a long time. And he’d almost succeeded — he’d almost been able to lie to himself that what he felt for her was nothing more than friendship, but then had come the accident, and seeing Clara lying in that hospital bed, broken and terrified, had cleared away any possible misconceptions about what he felt for her. His heart had stopped and he’d wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and soothe her pain away, to make sure that nothing and no one ever hurt her again, and to let her know that she was safe, and that she was loved. And by nobody more than him.

On New Year’s Eve, John woke up with Clara in his arms, her head snuggled into the space under his chin. When she slept, she had no awareness of her injuries — she wanted only to be close to him. When she awoke, she would wince when she thought he wasn’t looking, but he knew that neither of them regretted the physical intimacy that came with her holding onto him, and that having her in his arms was intoxicating enough to make him wish that she were well enough to cling to him like that at all hours of the day.

They stayed in bed for as long as they could that morning, Clara’s head on his shoulder and her hand stroking lazy circles on his sternum as they talked about everything and nothing, passing the time, lapsing into comfortable silences and occasionally languidly kissing. By the time they got up, it was past noon, and, by the time midnight rolled around, they had passed the day reading and watching terrible festive films on John’s flickering, ancient television set. Clara was slumbering in his arms as twelve o’clock approached, and he was almost loathe to wake her, but he knew she would be upset about missing the advent of the new year, so he shook her awake gently.

“Hey,” she mumbled sleepily, one of her hands clinging onto his jumper and the other coming up to rub her eyes. “Is it midnight?”

“Nearly,” he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Very nearly. Are you OK?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Not in pain?”

“Nothing intolerable.”

“I can get you something to help, if you’d like.”

“No, it’s OK,” she smiled up at him, and although he knew that she was only being brave for his sake, he didn’t have the energy to argue. “I want my midnight kiss, not my midnight drugs.”

He chuckled, shifting her more comfortably onto his lap and stroking her hair once she was settled. “I can do that.”
“Do you promise?”
“I promise.”

On the TV screen, the countdown began.

Ten... nine... eight...

“John...” she breathed, smiling radiantly. “Thank you, for everything.”

...six... five... four...

“Thank you.”

...two... one...

As fireworks exploded onscreen, she kissed him, shifting on his lap until she was straddling him and wrapping her arms around his neck. He knew what her intentions were — even he, in his state of perpetual obliviousness, could tell what she wanted — and he broke away from her after several seconds, turning his head away.

“Clara...”

“Please,” she whispered, trying to kiss him again, but he moved away. “Come on, please, John...”

“Clara, you’re hurt.”

“I’m not made of glass, remember? I’ll be alright...” she attempted to reach for the buckle of his jeans, and he looped his fingers around her wrist gently, holding her still. “Come on...”

“Clara,” he murmured, pressing a chaste kiss to her hands as she ground down against him. “I don’t expect this of you. You don’t have to do this.”

“I want to do this.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you until you’re better,” he told her in the gentlest tone he could manage. “OK? I won’t die from that.”

“I might,” she muttered sulkily, trying and failing to pull her wrists from his grasp. “You’re no fun.”

“Clara, I promised you in the hospital that I would never hurt you again.”

“I fail to understand how fucking me would hurt me.”

“Don’t,” he growled, and she scowled. “Don’t call it that. Don’t cheapen it.”

“What do you want, a euphemism?”

“I want to wait until you’re better. I want you to not have to worry about injuring yourself any further. I want you to know I’m never going to pressure you into this.”

“I...” she visibly deflated, her eyes widening with confusion and sadness. “I want you.”

“I know,” he flashed her an apologetic smile. “And I want you. But just... Clara, that can wait. Honestly. It’s not at the top of my priority list.”

“What is?”
“Making sure you feel safe with me. Making sure you feel cared for. Taking you on dates. Romancing you.”

“Sex is romantic.”

“So are flowers. So are long walks at sunset. So are blanket forts and terrible films and homemade cakes.”

There was a brief silence as she blinked up at him, weighing up his words.

“You’re really happy to wait?” Clara asked, in a very small voice. “Really, really?”

“Yes, really, really.”

“Oh.”

“Good ‘oh’ or bad ‘oh’?”

She shrugged. “What if I go mad from lust in the meantime?”

“Well, we might have to find things to do,” he gave her a pointed look, and for all her earlier attempts at seduction, she nevertheless blushed. “In the meantime… can I have another kiss? A not-trying-to-get-into-my-pants one?”

“They’re nice pants!”

“Yes, they are. But I would like to sit on the sofa and snog my tiny-” he hesitated for a fraction of a second, but the world felt… right. A natural progression of what they were to each other. “Partner.”

“What am I, a cowboy?”

“Would you prefer ‘girlfriend’?”

Clara’s face lit up as though illuminated from within, and she nodded emphatically. “Yes,” she enthused. “Yes, I very much would.”
As December slipped away and January trudged rainily on, Clara grew increasingly frustrated. The weather was unrelentingly awful — constant driving rain falling in sheets, with a howling wind that whipped across the hills, causing the incumbent weather to lash against the ancient stonework of the house. She knew, logically, that it was too dangerous for her to go outside — she was unsteady enough on her feet as it was, and one gust of wind or misplaced spray of rain could prove deadly if it struck at the wrong time, or the wrong angle — and yet she resented being trapped inside all day. John would sidle out at lunchtimes to give Idris some exercise, leaving her alone with a book, and they would both return absolutely soaked to the skin, shivering and, yet, pink-cheeked.

She yearned to go with them. John’s library of literature was enormous and engrossing, but it was wholly different experience to enjoying the forests. She wanted to go out and experience the landscape in the storm — she wanted to go out and see if it felt different to be back out among the trees at sunset now that she was, she supposed, the mistress of Ùine. It felt strange to even entertain that notion; the idea that now that she was with John, she was, to a degree, an integral part of the estate. It was an intoxicating idea, born partly of the heady, swooning influence of power, and partly of her love for John and the land, but it was something that she could not explore given her housebound state.

Worn down by her complaints, John promised her a hike when the weather broke and she was strong enough to walk long distances. Both of those things seemed far-distant; BBC Weather painted a pessimistic picture of the long-term weather forecast, and there was a constant throbbing ache across her collarbone and ribs as the bones knitted back together and healed themselves. The skin on her face and arm felt tight, itchy and uncomfortable, and, while she knew it meant that she was recovering, it was still a source of discomfort, and the dodgy hot water system in the house for once provided a source of relief as she pressed ice-cold flannels against the offending lacerations.

She knew she should be happy, but somewhere between her physical discomfort and her informal, for-her-own-good house arrest, she was instead stifled and irritable and frustrated. She tried to spend most of her time sleeping, and she knew that John eyed her with concern when he thought she couldn’t see him, yet she couldn’t bring herself to care. Sleep was comfortable. Sleep was unaffected by her injuries. When she was asleep, she no longer felt trapped — in her dreams, she was able to fly; able to leave the house and soar over the estate, unburdened by physical form.

“Clara?” John asked tentatively, sometime in mid-January. The days had long since lost any sense of meaning. “I’m going to take Idris out; are you going to be alright on your own for a bit?”

“Yes,” she shot back, wearily. They had had this discussion, in almost these exact words, every day.
for the past two weeks, and, more than anything, she wanted John to stop fussing. “I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t just nap.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” he dithered, visibly disconcerted by the hostile glare she was now affixing him with. “Because it’s not good for you.”

“Nor is being stuck in here.”

“Clara, you know why it would be a bad idea to go out in this.”

“Yeah,” she muttered, knowing she was acting like an irrational, sulky teenager but no longer caring. “And?”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” he murmured. “I couldn’t stand that.”

“Well, something already has,” she said sourly. “It can’t really get much worse.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Stop telling me what to do.”

“I…” he blinked. “I’m sorry.”

“Go on,” she curled up as comfortably as she was able, pointedly not looking at him as she spoke. “Off you go.”

“I…” he edged closer, leaning down and planting a quick kiss to her forehead. “I’ll be back soon.”

“OK.”

“Clara…”

“What?”

“Take care of yourself, OK? Won’t be long.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

He looked to be on the verge of speaking again but, to Clara’s relief, headed out into the hall instead, Idris at his side. She didn’t mean to be so abrupt with him, but she was sore, and she was exhausted, and she was beginning to feel claustrophobic.

Only when she heard the front door slam behind him did she get up and shuffle towards the kitchen, determined to stick the kettle on and find something — anything — to relieve the discomfort in her chest.

Once she’d filled the kettle and flicked it on, she set to work pawing through the cupboards in search of pain relief. She was certain there had been a box of tablets the hospital had sent her home with, and she was fairly sure they’d come with a warning about drowsiness. Painkillers that would send her to sleep seemed a wholly appealing prospect, and she whooped delightedly when she finally located the box, all but ripping it open and popping two tablets out from their blister pack.

Knocking them back with a glass of water, she set about making a cup of tea, then padded back to
the lounge while a gentle, warm sensation lapped at the edges of her consciousness. Taking a seat by
the fire and sipping her tea, she could feel her eyes beginning to close, and she set her mug down,
allowing herself to doze.

What felt like seconds later, her eyes snapped open, and she could only stare in shock at the figure
sat on the sofa opposite her.

“Hello, Clara,” Danny said, conversationally, affixing her with a distinctly bemused look.

“I…” she rubbed at her eyes, as though that might help alleviate the weirdness that came from
finding her dead boyfriend sat opposite her. “Danny, I don’t wish to be rude, but you died.”

“I know. I was there.”

A terrible thought struck her. “Wait, am I dead? I only took two tablets, have I had an allergic
reaction or an aneurysm or—”

“Not that I know of, no.”

“So, what are you?”

“My goodness, always the control freak.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Always wanting to have a handle on things, even when they’re entirely out of your control.” Danny
got to his feet and, for the first time, Clara realised that he was semi-translucent. She let out a small
huff of comprehension. “What?” he asked.

“You’re a ghost.”

“Again, I know.”

“Why are you…” Clara swallowed uncomfortably, wondering whether she had finally lost her mind.
“Why are you here?”

“Thought I’d drop by,” he shrugged, then smirked. “Also, painkillers can have some wonderful side-
effects. You probably should’ve read the packet.”

“You’re…” she sighed as she finally wholly understood what was happening. “You’re a drug-based
hallucination.”

“Yes,” he grinned, looking positively gleeful about the matter. “But you’re still uncomfortable, aren’t
you?”

“No,” she lied. “Why would I be?”

“Seeing me in John’s house. It’s written all over your face.”

“Stop it.”

“I can’t. I’m the physical manifestation of your guilt. Well. Not physical. Semi-physical.
Metaphysical. Metaphorical.”

“If this is going to get all A Christmas Carol, then I’d really rather not.”
“You don’t get a choice. I’m your guilt, Clara. You can’t evade me. I’m going to say all the things you don’t want to hear, like that you shouldn’t have moved on so quickly, and that you shouldn’t be falling in love again, and that you’re dishonouring my—”

“Stop it,” she said in a low voice, even though she knew she was only talking to herself and her own psyche. “Just… stop it.”

“How can I? I’m you, and everything you can think, I can say better.”

“Don’t paraphrase Annie Get Your Gun at me.”

“Why?” Danny raised an eyebrow, and she scowled. “Am I making you feel guilty?”

“No, you’re mainly just annoying.”

“You can’t get away from me. You do understand that, don’t you?”

“Of course I can.”

“You really should have read that label.”

“What…” Clara blinked, uncertain what he — or, rather, her psyche — was insinuating. “What do you mean?”

“Please. Pain relief would be pointless if it only worked for five minutes, wouldn’t it? No, I’m here for the long haul. How long have we got, do you think? Four hours? Six?”

Clara closed her eyes, as though that would bring permanent relief. “I could get rid of you,” she said determinedly. “I can.”

“How do you intend to do that?” the apparition rolled his eyes. “Being sick won’t help.”

“No, it won’t,” Clara got unsteadily to her feet, heading for the front door. “But a shock to the system might.”

“Clara…” Danny sounded worried now, his whole demeanour changing, and she realised her own mind wanted to protect her. There was a bittersweet irony to that fact — first it tormented her, and now it sought to keep her safe. “Clara, you can’t go out there. You know it’s not a good idea, it’s dangerous and you could get hurt.”

“For a ghost, you’re really giving me mixed messages.”

“I’m not a ghost, I’m your conscience.”

“Well, my conscience can piss off.”

She shrugged on the nearest coat and stuck her feet into a pair of wellies, before yanking open the front door and yelping as a spray of driving rain whipped across her face.

She stepped out into the storm, finding herself instantly soaked to the skin. The jacket she’d picked — a weak, summer-weight thing, several sizes too big — inflated around her as a gust of wind seized it, and she was dragged several steps towards the forest before she had the chance to plant her feet and stand her ground. She could barely see anything ahead of her, blinded as she was by the torrential rain, yet she struggled forwards, determined to make it to the tree line and any shelter it could offer.
Each step was a Herculean effort as she fought against the drag of the wind and the ice-cold rain lashing against her. She was already exhausted by the time she reached the trees, panting like she’d run a mile and knowing that it was only thanks to the last vestiges of the painkillers that every bone and muscle in her body weren’t screaming in agony. She looked around for any sign of the apparition she’d seen inside, but what little she could make out of the driveway was empty.

She smiled to herself in bitter satisfaction, turning away from the house and taking a tentative step further into the forest. The water-laden moss underfoot was as treacherous as ice, and yet she battled on a little further, enjoying the feeling of freedom that came with finally being out of the house for the first time in weeks. She was drenched, and she was freezing, but she was free.

John was almost back to the house when Idris came to an abrupt halt, freezing with her nose in the air as she focused her attention on… well, he had no idea. If it was a squirrel, then it evidently had some kind of death wish — nothing should be out in this storm, including him and his dog.

Without warning, the golden retriever began to bark, loudly and unceasingly, in a way that he had never heard her do before.

“Idris,” he complained, trying to quash the sense of unease that was creeping over him. “Give it a rest.”

She growled and then lunged at him, and, for a moment, John felt his heart stop before her teeth closed around the edge of his coat and she began tugging him insistently towards the right-hand side of the driveway. There was no denying it now — he was scared of her. She’d never behaved like this, not even when she was a puppy, and her sudden aggressive determination was frightening.

“What’s the matter with you?!” he asked, trying to sound more commanding that he felt. “Idris, stop it!”

She let go of his coat and resumed her barking, and he rolled his eyes, before she lunged for his coat again and recommenced her dragging. It was then, and only then, that John realised what she wanted.

“Fine, I’ll follow you. Stupid bloody dog.”

Evidently relieved, she ceased barking and ran off a little way, turning and looking back at him to ensure he was behind her. With a weary sigh, he began to trudge after her, keeping her a metre or so ahead of him in the downpour and thanking his past self for choosing a golden retriever — her fur was a bright flash against the dark forest floor.

She led him for what felt like miles, but could only have been metres, her attention switching between him and their unknown destination and communicating the urgency of… well, whatever their apparent task was. Without warning, she bounded out of sight behind a tree, whimpering loudly.

“Idris,” he groaned, sighing heavily and following her with reluctance. “Bloody weird d-”

Clara was curled up with her back against the tree trunk, shivering and drifting in and out of consciousness. Idris was nuzzling and licking her face with concern, letting out soft yelps of worry as she pawed at Clara’s legs and looked to John as though imploring him to help.
“Clara? Christ, Clara, what happened?” John dropped to his knees beside her, feeling his heart stop. He reached for Idris and pushed her gently away from Clara’s face, before realising he owed his dog a debt of gratitude and stroking her as he continued: “Clara? Shit, Clara, talk to me. What happened?”

The golden retriever let out a soft huff of reproach.

“Sorry,” he gave her ears a quick scratch and then turned his attention wholly to Clara. “Clara? Shit, Clara, look at me. What happened, hey?”

She blinked at him, visibly disoriented. “J-John?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, pulling off his gloves before placing his hands on her cheeks and flinching at how cold her skin felt. “It’s alright. I’m here.”

“John,” she repeated weakly. “M’sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he pressed a kiss to her forehead, then lifted her into his arms and cradled her against his chest. “Clara, don’t be; it’s alright. We’re going to get you inside and warm you up.”

“M’sorry,” she mumbled again, resting his head against his shoulder and continuing to repeat the word. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.”

“Idris,” John looked down at his dog, fighting the urge to cry. “Idris, where’s home? Can you take us home?”

The golden retriever bounded a little way away, and John set off after her, praying to a god he hardly believed in to lead them home safely.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

This really wasn't how John envisaged taking Clara's clothes off for the first time.

John stumbled over the threshold of the house with Clara cradled in his arms, slamming the front door behind them with his foot and looking down at her face for any sign that her condition may have worsened. Her eyes were closed and her hair was plastered to her face, and if he didn’t know better he might have thought she was only sleeping, but she seemed — to his substantial relief — to be stable. With a trembling hand, he cupped her cheek and she made a small sound of complaint as his ice-cold hand came into contact with her equally cold skin.

“Sorry,” he whispered, carrying her towards the lounge with the utmost care, Idris following at his heels. “Clara, I’m so sorry.”

She turned her face towards him and opened her eyes for a moment, the effort involved visibly herculean. “D-don’t be,” she whispered, her lips quirking into a sad smile. “My f-fault.”

“No,” he said fiercely, setting her down on the sofa beside the fire and propping her head up with the first cushion within reach. “Don’t think like that.”

“Was,” she mumbled stubbornly, and he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. “Was my f-fault.”

“Shh.” He stroked the soaking strands of hair off her face, unzipping her useless, impractical coat and peeling it away from her shivering form. “Save your strength.”

For a second, it seemed as though she might be on the verge of protesting, before her eyes fluttered closed and she nodded once in silent acquiescence. John’s hands hovered over her torso, unsure how to proceed, and he dithered for a moment before pressing a guilty kiss to her forehead. Stripping off his own coat to avoid dripping on her already prone form, he tossed it to one side and slicked down his wet hair, wanting nothing more than to hold Clara close and never let go, but knowing that leaving her in her wet things would be a foolhardy endeavour.

“I will be right back,” he vowed, making a mental inventory of what he would need. “I promise. Idris, stay with her, OK?”

Idris gave a half-bark of assertion, and, before Clara could voice her confusion, he darted out of the room and raced upstairs, all but sprinting into her room and starting to paw through her drawers in search of a change of clothes for her. Locating the necessary items, he moved into the bathroom and seized three dry towels, before making a final stop at the airing cupboard and retrieving several of the enormous blankets that he reserved for the coldest of winter nights.

On his way towards the stairs, Idris began to bark, and he felt his heart stop, half-running and half-falling down the remaining steps and tumbling back into the lounge with his precious cargo clutched to his chest. Clara was knelt on the floor, seemingly having tried to get up, and she was keening and struggling to breathe as Idris stood beside her like a sentinel.

“Clara?” he asked, dropping the dry clothes onto the sofa and crouching beside her. He shouldn’t
have left her alone — if he’d stayed with her, she wouldn’t be panicking as much as she was. “It’s alright, come on, you’re OK. We’ve got to get you dried off.”

“You…” she broke off, her chest rising and falling as she hyperventilated, and he let her wrap her shaking hands around his forearm, clinging to him hard enough to hurt. “D-don’t go. P-please don’t go.”

“I’m not going anywhere now. It’s alright.”

“Promise?” she asked, her grip on him relinquishing only fractionally.

“I promise. Come on, love. We need to get you out of these wet things, OK?”

Clara nodded after a moment’s consideration, allowing herself to be lifted onto the sofa, and John set to work. Her fleece was unzipped and cast aside, then her shirt, and it was only then that John realised how truly soaked she was. Drips of water were running from her bra over her stomach, and Clara blinked, evidently confused why the methodical undressing had come to a halt.

“Clara…” he swallowed, dropping his gaze to his lap and trying hard not to blush. “Am I alright to take your bra off?”

“I…” she hesitated for a moment, her fingers probing over the damp material in an attempt to ascertain the severity of the situation before she nodded. “Yes, I s-suppose.”

“You suppose?”

“N-now is n-not the t-time to argue s-semantics with me.”

“I’m not, I just want to be absolutely sure you’re alright with me doing so.”

“Well, t-this isn’t h-how I imagined you first t-taking off my b-bra, you know, but it’s O-OK.”

“I know,” he smiled sadly, taking both her hands in his and giving them a reassuring squeeze. “May I?”

“Y-yes.”

With careful hands, John reached behind Clara and undid the clasp of her bra, pulling the sodden garment away from her skin and grabbing one of the towels he had retrieved from the bathroom. He wrapped it around her shoulders as he discarded the dripping undergarment, and Clara gave a nervous, breathless giggle.

“You’re all r-red.”

“So are you,” he shot back, poking his tongue out at her and feeling somewhat more normal as balance was thus restored. “How you feeling?”

“W-warmer.”

“Good. The next stage is getting you out of those jeans.”

“My, this is r-romantic.”

“Isn’t it just?” he chuckled, glad that she felt strong enough to make jokes. “At least they’re not skinny jeans.”
“T-true.”

“If I stand you up to take them off, are you likely to fall over?”

“Not if you h-hold on to m-me.”

“I can do that.”

John helped her to her feet, winding one arm securely around her waist and taking a deep breath.

“I’m not about to j-jump you,” Clara teased. “D-don’t worry.”

“I know, just I don’t usually take women’s trousers off before I’ve had the chance to take them on a proper date.”

“Always unc-conventional, that’s us.”

He laughed nervously and then unzipped her jeans, undoing the button and then starting to peel them down her legs with some difficulty as the sodden material had adhered to her skin. Clara helped what little she could, wriggling her legs as much as she was able, until finally they were off and laying in a soggy puddle at her feet.

“Are your pants wet?” John asked, forcing himself to be pragmatic. “Or do they need to come off too?”

“Why d-don’t you feel them and f-find out?”

John looked down at her, quirking an eyebrow. “Really? Is this the time or the place?”

Clara rolled her eyes, displeased by his refusal to rise to the bait. “They’re n-not.”

“Goooood,” John lowered her back onto the sofa and tugged off her wet socks, then wrapped her in one of the enormous, ancient blankets he’d fished out of the airing cupboard, leaving only her head poking out. “Better?”

“Don’t I get c-clothes?”

“Not until you’ve stopped dripping.”

“You’re making this t-too easy for me.”

“Shut up,” he mumbled, feeling himself turn maroon. “Stop shivering and dry off a bit and then you can have some dry clothes.”

“You’re wet, t-too.”

“Hm?” he put a hand to his head and remembered his wet hair. Reaching for another towel, he draped it around his shoulders and then held out a hand to Idris, coaxing her over and then throwing the remaining towel over her back. She looked up at him with distinct bemusement, but plopped down at Clara’s feet and buried her nose in the offending item nonetheless.

“It’s for your own good,” he told his dog, sternly. “You’re all soggy, too.”

“She’s a g-good dog.”

“That she is,” he smiled, taking a seat beside her and towelling his hair in an attempt to stop it
dripping. “She led me to you.”

“You’re a good g-girl,” Clara said, resting a foot against Idris’s towel-covered back. “Aren’t you?”

The canine’s tail thumped lazily against the floor, and there was a comfortable moment of silence before Clara leant her head against John’s shoulder.

“Urm,” he began uncertainly, suddenly acutely aware of the fact that she was wearing nothing more than a towel. “Clara…”

“Shh,” she closed her eyes, hitching the blanket higher around herself and resting her palm on his chest. “Comfy.”

“We should get you dr-”

“Cold,” she mumbled, and that was all it took for him to decide to throw caution to the wind and put his arm around her shoulders. “Better.”

“What were you doing out there, anyway?” John asked, kissing the crown of her head. “I told you it was dangerous.”

“Oh,” she sounded embarrassed. “Took some painkillers. Must’ve had a funny turn.”

He knew there was something she wasn’t telling him, but it wasn’t the time or place to force the issue. “You scared me.”

“I scared myself.”

“You’re safe now,” he promised, and she nodded. “Always.”

They lapsed into silence once more, and he realised that she was still shivering, although trying to pretend she was not.

“Hey,” he breathed, gently lifting her onto his lap and letting her settle against his chest. “It’s alright. Warmer?”

“Much,” she tucked her head underneath his chin, wincing a little as she did so. “Is this OK?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I’m in my pants.”

“Would it help if I was in mine, too?”

She let out a nervous laugh. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Problem is,” he made a face, then deadpanned: “To undress, I’d have to move you, and I’m actually quite comfortable as we are.”

“Are you now?” she pouted. “Well, that’s a shame.”

“Mm,” he kissed her quickly, unable to resist. “Isn’t it just?”

“More kisses please.”

“Excuse me, you’re maybe-dying of hypothermia.”
“Well, you’d better play doctor and give me mouth-to-mouth then, hadn’t you?”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Oh, always,” she smirked, and then kissed him, soft and sweet and shy all at once. He placed his hands on her waist, the bare skin still faintly cold under his fingertips, and he was losing himself to the moment when-

“What in the name of sanity have I just walked in on?”

He whipped his head around to take in the sight of Missy, stood in the doorway with a dripping purple raincoat in one hand and an oversized handbag in the other. She looked as though she were caught between shock and smugness, and he fought the urge to swear at her.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, as Clara flushed scarlet and wrapped her blanket more securely around herself. “Don’t you ever knock?”

“No, because I wasn’t expecting you to be… well, whatever this is. Almost-shagging.”

“Missy…”

“Not that I’m not pleased for you, because it’s nice to know it still works, but…”

“Missy, what the hell do you want?”

“My hut is leaking, so I’m here in search of a cup of tea and a dry place to spend the night. And, it would seem, an explanation as to what the hell is going on.”

“Missy, she went out in the storm—”

“I can speak for myself,” Clara interjected, finally regaining the power of speech. “I went out in the storm and John had to rescue me.”

“I was going more for an explanation for the snogging,” he said.

“Oh,” Clara dropped her gaze, chewing her lip nervously. “Well, I’m…”

“She’s my girlfriend.”

Missy let out a snort of derision.

“What are you, fifteen?”

“Hey!” Clara protested, visibly offended by the remark. “I objected to ‘partner.’”

“Why?”

“Because we’re not cowboys or buddy cops,” John rolled his eyes. “What’s the problem with ‘girlfriend’?”

“Nothing,” Missy shrugged, then added, mockingly: “Just sounds a bit like you should be fingering her behind the bike sheds at school.”

“Missy!” John scowled at his sister. “Look, if you’re spending the night, can you just… not be a bitch?”
“No deal, hombre.”

“Well, can you at least try?”

“Fine,” she muttered, examining her nails then drawling: “I suppose putting the kettle on might be a start.”

“Yes,” John said tartly. “It would be.”

“Can your girlfriend please put some clothes on, then?”

“Fine,” Clara rolled her eyes. “If I absolutely must.”
In the wake of Missy discovering their secret, John and Clara have a heart to heart.

“You know,” Clara breathed later that evening, nuzzling into John as they lay in bed together. “We aren’t very good at keeping us a secret.”

“No, my sister is just bad at knocking,” he shot back, taking her hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. She meshed their fingers together and let their entwined hands fall back onto the covers, grateful for the physical contact. “How are you feeling, by the way?”

“Fine, why?”

“I know you aren’t, so can you actually be honest with me for five seconds?”

“I am being honest. Why are you so worried about me? I’m fine. Really, absolutely, one-hundred-per cent fine.”

“Clara, you could have frozen to death out there, and I’ve already nearly lost you once. I can’t… I can’t go through that again. I can’t keep having that heart-stopping moment of thinking I’ve lost you.”

“John…”

“Don’t,” he mumbled, turning his face away from her, but she still caught a glimpse of the tears that had welled up in his eyes. Her heart panged as she realised she was the cause of his upset, and she pressed a kiss to his chest in silent reassurance. “Don’t tell me I’m being a sentimental old fool.”

“I don’t think you’re being a sentimental old fool,” Clara sat up so that she could meet his gaze, placing one hand gently on his chest and stroking her thumb over his sternum through the thin fabric of his T-shirt. “But I’m not as breakable as you seem to think I am.”

“Clara, with respect, you’ve got a broken clavicle and bruised ribs.”

“Yes, and that is absolutely nothing to do with how resilient I am, John. Resilience is about more than physical health.”

“You? Resilient?” he scoffed, and she felt a rush of irritation at his dismissive tone. “You had a breakdown when Danny died; you stopped functioning and fell apart. That isn’t exactly-”

“I fell apart because my boyfriend had just died,” Clara said through gritted teeth, her mood swinging from contentment to anger in response to his abrupt change in attitude. “You had one when River died, why was that any different?”

“It just is. There's nothing special about me. I am nothing, but I'm less breakable than you.”

“Why?” she folded her arms and scowled down at John, her temper fraying more with each passing second. “Because you’re a man? Because you’re Scottish? Because you’re older than me? Don’t you
dare try to pull any of those excuses with me, because I will lose my shit at you.”

“It was nothing to do with any of those reasons,” he said reasonably. “It was because I had fair warning that River was going to die.”

“You still fell apart. You said so yourself. You left Úine because it was too painful.”

“Clara, that isn’t—”

“I don’t really know what point you’re trying to make here about your own resilience, but you’re failing.”

“Why are you pissed off?” he blinked up at her with genuine bafflement, and his inability to understand matters only served to make her angrier.

“Because you’re implying that I’m weak and I can’t handle things! You have no bloody idea of the things I’ve dealt with, so stop acting like you’re some kind of superior human being!”

“Clara…” John frowned, his eyes wide and confused. “I don’t… why are you so angry? I was trying to be nice.”

“Well, stop it.”

“I just want to keep you safe!”

“I don’t need you to do that! I can keep myself safe, I’m not a child!”

“But that’s… it’s my job,” his eyebrows knitted together. “To keep you safe and to look after you.”

“No, your job is to care for me and to let me make my own mistakes, so that I can learn from them. If you can’t do that, then we have a problem.”

“Why are we even having this argument?”

“Oh, is this an argument now?”

“Yes, because you seem determined to make it into one!”

“Oh, so it’s my fault?”

“Jesus, what’s wrong with you? Why are you lashing out at me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me!” Clara shouted, losing her self-control. “Stop making this about me!”

“I don’t understand what you want from me! I love you and I want to look after you, I thought I’d made that perfectly clear.”

“I…” Clara felt her anger dissipate in an instant. “You… love me?”

“Christ, of course I do! What do you think all this has been about? You think I don’t care for you? You think I’m doing this because of… god, I don’t even know?”

“I don’t know,” she confessed, her voice little more than a whisper. “Guilt does strange things to people.”
“Is that what this is to you?” he asked in a hollow voice, and she realised he had misunderstood her words. “Is this just guilt?”

“No,” she shook her head. “John, no, that wasn’t what I…”

“Clara, I love you and I want to be with you and if you don’t want that, or you’re doing this out of some misplaced sense of duty, then I think you should leave now.”

“How could you think that?”

“Because you’re giving me mixed messages! I don’t know what to think any more, you’re confusing me and what you’re suggesting… the thought that you don’t want-”

“You mean you actually think I don’t care? You think I’m doing this to just… I don’t know, follow the motions? Do the right thing?”

“God knows.”

“John, I thought I’d made it very clear to you what I want.”

“To have sex with me.”

“Jesus, is that really what you think of me?” she felt her eyes fill with tears at the bitter accusation. “You really think that’s all I want?”

“I don’t know!”

“I…” she blinked, feeling a single tear trickle down her cheek. “I’m going to sleep in the spare room. I can’t be in the same room as you if that’s what you think I’m after.”

“That’s right, run away. Your usual MO.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you lashing out now?”

“Because I thought you loved me!”

“I do, John,” she whispered, her voice cracking as she got out of bed and seized her dressing gown from its hook. She cast a final look over at John as she stuffed her feet into her slippers, finding him open-mouthed in shock. “I just don’t like you very much right now.”

Before he could reply, she fled to the spare room, flicking on the watery overhead light and drawing the bolt across on the door. It was chilly and unwelcoming and there was a pervasive musty smell, but it was better than being back with John when he seemed so determined on being… well, whatever that was. Argumentative? Difficult? Prickly? She wasn’t sure how to categorise it.

Determined not to dwell on their argument, she set to work assembling a fire in the grate, lighting a match with trembling fingers and watching as bright orange flames licked their way across the kindling. She hadn’t meant to lash out at him. She hadn’t meant for her confession to slip out, either. She’d anticipated saying she loved him for the first time in an entirely different way — without the backdrop of an argument or her near-miss with hypothermia, for a start. As she stared unseeingly at the flames, there was a knock on the heavy wooden door.

“Clara?” John called, and the door handle rattled. “Clara, I’m sorry.”

She said nothing, closing her eyes and fighting the urge to sob.
“Clara, come on,” he pleaded. “Clara, love. I’m sorry, please let me in.”

He tried the door handle again, but she only clambered into bed, pulling the duvet over her head.

“Clara? I know you can hear me. Please. I’m sorry, I was just… I shouldn’t have lashed out, I shouldn’t have been such an idiot.”

There was a long silence.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he vowed. “OK? I’m sorry. Sleep well.”

She lay in the dark for a long time, lost in her own thoughts, before finally falling asleep.

John wasn’t sure how to make things up to Clara the next morning, but he reasoned that making her breakfast seemed like a sensible place to start. Missy had already returned to her hut, and John had no idea how much she had overheard of his and Clara’s argument the previous night—maybe none of it since she was usually a sound sleeper. Either that, or she’d chosen to be uncharacteristically discreet, pretending nothing had happened. Either way, she had seemed to be in a hurry to leave.

He stuck the kettle on, laid the table, set about frying eggs and bacon, and was about to crack open a tin of baked beans when she appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, looking exhausted and nervous.

“Uh,” she began, rubbing her eyes blearily. Idris raised her head from her basket in the corner, but didn’t move; she seemed to understand that this was not her moment. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he said softly, smiling warmly at her and holding out his free arm in a silent invitation. “Morning.”

She dithered for a moment, visibly uncertain whether she should embrace him or not, before crossing the room and leaning against his side. He rested his hand gently on her waist, pressing a kiss to her hair and casting a quick glance over at the frying pan to make sure nothing was burning.

“Morning,” she breathed, resting her head against his chest and closing her eyes. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

“I just… I wasn’t expecting Missy to find out so soon,” Clara sighed. “And I’m aware that she’s important to you, in the same way Bonnie and my dad are to me. It kind of threw me.”

“I know,” he gave her an encouraging smile. “I’m sorry for being so overprotective of you. I just… worry.”

“It’s alright,” Clara shrugged, opening her eyes and focusing determinedly on his chest. “I know why you are, and it’s appreciated, just… I can handle myself. I know taekwondo. And I’ve watched lots of Bear Grylls, so I’m basically a survival pro.”

John grinned at her weak joke. “Says the woman who just ventured out into the apocalypse.”

“Yeah, alright,” she grimaced, looking up at him and poking her tongue out. “I make poor life
choices when left unattended, I know.”

“Hey, you said it, not me.”

“Idiot.”

“Your idiot.”

“Always,” she dropped her gaze, her cheeks flushing. “Did you really mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“What you said last night?”

“You mean…” he placed his hand against her cheek, thumb stroking over the skin gently. “About loving you?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course I meant it.”

He wasn’t sure what kind of reaction he was anticipating, but it certainly wasn’t her bursting into tears.

“Hey,” he said gently, wrapping both his arms around her with the utmost care. “Hey, no tears.”

“I just…” she sniffed, continuing to sob. “I never thought… since when?”

“I think the first time I knew was the moment I saw you sat in Nardole’s lounge,” he admitted. “And saw the way Danny treated you and realised that I wanted to kill him for doing that, because you deserved — deserve, present tense — so much better.”

“Oh.”

“Is that…” he swallowed, as she scrubbed the hem of her sleeve over her eyes and he magnanimously pretended not to notice. “Is that alright?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Is loving you… alright?”

“Of course, it’s alright, you daft old man.”

“And…”

“I love you,” she breathed, with a shy smile. “Even though that scares me, I do.”

“It scares you?” he frowned. “Why?”

“Because it’s like a fire and it’s taking me over and I’ve never felt like this before. Not ever.”

“Is it…” he paused, trying to find the right words. “A good fire?”

“Yes,” Clara wrinkled her nose. “You know what isn’t, though?”

“What?”
“Breakfast. Stop cremating it.”

“Shit,” he muttered, turning his attention back to the stove and setting about rescuing the breakfast. With his back to her, he chanced the question: “So, you do love me?”

“Yes, I thought we’d ascertained that.”

“Even when I’m a prat?”

“Even then.”

“Even when I burn breakfast?”

“Even then.”

“Even-”

“John, you could grow another head and I wouldn’t care. I love you, and I want to be with you. Stop worrying.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Clara uncovers a secret in John's study.

Clara wasn’t entirely sure what compelled her to step into John’s study one particularly overcast January afternoon. It had always been the one place in the house she had been wary of entering, as she knew what the room meant to him and what it symbolised. It was the place where he worked, yes, but, more than that —it was the place where he breathed new life into ideas and crafted them into something that was not only beautiful, but practical. It was where he made what little money he had, and as such it seemed like a curiously intimate room to enter; like there was a barrier between the personal and the professional, and, by crossing the divide, then some new level of intimacy or awkwardness may be unlocked.

She had been wandering the house while John walked Idris in yet another rainstorm —she could have chosen to go with them, but one look at the horizontal driving rain had robbed her of the desire to step outside, even if the prospect of fresh air had earlier seemed appealing. Instead, she had gone exploring: ambling around the house with curiosity, examining the numerous paintings on the walls, and creeping into rooms that looked as though they’d been closed up for years. Each was like stepping into a time capsule, everything immaculately neat, but covered in a film of furry grey dust that Clara endeavoured not to disturb, lest she spoil the peace of the rooms with sneezing fits.

She had never realised precisely how big the house was — her experience of the space was largely limited to the parts that John used, which amounted to the kitchen, the lounge, the library, their bedrooms, and a bathroom. The hall was the pulsing artery at the heart of the house that connected the six inhabited rooms and the multitude of unused ones, but Clara have never before been drawn into the darker depths of the building; never been tempted to explore in such depth. Not until today.

Using her phone as a flashlight, she’d counted bedrooms and peered at faded portraits; she’d admired antique furniture and anachronistic Ikea soft furnishings from some time in the previous two decades. She’d thought about opening the curtains and letting the grey afternoon light fall on some of the rooms she uncovered, then thought about moths and dust and reconsidered that plan. Her exploration had not taken quite as long as she’d anticipated, however, and finding John still unreturned from his walk, she’d looked at the study door and decided to sneak a peek inside.

It was almost exactly as she’d expected. There was a beaten-up looking leather armchair in one corner, with a hole-ridden hoodie slung over the back of it, carelessly. There was a large desk adorned with a sketchpad of enormous size, and the odd few marker pens were scattered around the edge, spilling out of an open drawer and even onto the floor. To one side of the sketchpad was an oval frame with a picture of River, and beside that was a three-part frame with worn chrome edges. In one section was a photo of Marcus at university; in another was a little girl that Clara dimly recognised as Missy’s daughter; and in the third…

There was a photograph of them. It was nothing spectacular —a selfie she had taken a few weeks earlier, with her face turned up to John and a blissful smile on her face. He’d asked her to send it to him, but she didn’t realise he’d printed it off and placed it here, in the place where he locked himself away from the world a couple of times a week with the intention of earning a crust.
She settled down in his desk chair, using her feet to swivel the seat from side to side. She toyed with the idea of raising or lowering it, but then John would know she had been here, and she felt a deep-seated sense of certainty that he couldn’t and shouldn’t know that fact. She did, however, bend down and retrieve the pens from the floor and return them to their drawer—he was unlikely to notice the gesture, and, even if he did, it was worth it to remove the risk of him slipping on them in the semi-darkness.

The impulse to look in the desk was unexpected and irrational. It was seated, perhaps, in her inherent curiosity—or nosiness, depending on who you asked—and her desire to gain a deeper understanding of who John was when he wasn’t with her. Before she could tell herself it was a rude and invasive thing to do, she’d opened another drawer, casting an eye over the assorted smaller sketchbooks held within and feeling a rush of disappointment. She pulled one out and flipped it open, and her heart skipped a beat.

It was her. On each page, in a myriad of poses and with tens of different facial expressions. It was a study of her, and how she looked, and as she flicked through, page by page, she couldn’t help but be amazed. John must have been contributing to this in fits and starts, snatching drawing time when he could, and it was incredible.

Replacing the sketchbook when she reached the end, she moved to the next drawer down, finding it full of sundry supplies, and then the next.

She froze, knowing at once that she had stumbled on something serious. The drawer was half-full of white envelopes, each branded with the bright logos of utility companies. This was not for her. This was something she should stay out of, something she should-

*FINAL DEMAND*

The words jumped out at her from an envelope near the back, and, before she could stop herself, she’d reached for it and drawn out the offending bill. It was dated for two months previously, and it was for… well, her eyes watered as she read the sum, and she wondered how—or if—John had been able to afford such a sum. She shoved the letter back into its envelope and reached for another, discovering yet another demand for money and yet another exorbitant figure.

She’d known, hadn’t she? She’d watched enough home-improvement programmes and documentaries about country houses to know that the costs of keeping such places running were often sky-high. She’d seen John’s frugal lifestyle and understood that the place was a drain on his finances, but it had always seemed such an abstract notion, unconnected to the man and the place she knew and loved. But now? Now it was concrete, and she felt the worry creep over her, insidious and cloying.

Returning the desk to how she’d found it, Clara crept out of the study and pulled the door closed behind her, unsure whether to broach the subject with John. Perhaps instead she should just get a job nearby? Something part-time so that she could contribute to the cost of the house and of food and of other sundry essentials. Or maybe…

“Hello? Clara? Where are you?” John called from the hallway, and she jumped as she heard the front door slam behind him. Arranging her face into something approximating neutrality, she followed the sound of his voice and forced a smile.

“Hey,” she said as brightly as she was able, leaning against the newel post at the foot of the stairs and watching as he stripped off his jacket and wellies. “Nice walk?”

“Bloody freezing, and soaking to boot,” he grimaced, shaking his head like a dog and causing a
That evening, she decided to broach the topic — or, at least, try to. Adopting a warm, pleasant tone and a carefully neutral tone, she looked into the fire and half-asked, half-stated: “It must be expensive keeping this place running.”

There was a brief pause, and she chanced a look at John. He seemed somewhat taken aback by her words, but not hostile, and she considered that a good start.

“Well,” he said uncomfortably, dropping his gaze to his hands and clenching and unclenching them. “Yeah, it can be. But I make do, because it’s worth it.”

“Does ‘making do’ involve only living in the rooms we do now?”

“And my study, yeah,” he let out an awkward half-laugh. “Before you arrived, it was actually even fewer.”

Clara felt a sudden lurch of guilt as she grasped the implications of his words. “Shit, I didn’t… my room…”

“No!” he said at once, shaking his head. “No, I didn’t…”

“It must be expensive having to heat and light another bedroom for me,” Clara realised aloud. “I’m sorry, I didn’t-”

“Clara, it’s fine. I didn’t even mean your room — I meant the library. Hadn’t been in there in years; didn’t see much point.”

“There’s always a point to reading. And besides, I’m still sorry.”

“For what?!”

“Making you use and pay for more rooms.”

“You make it sound as though I’m being charged by the square metre, or I’m being forced into it.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t,” he looked baffled. “Please explain.”

“I’m a whole other person,” she began. “I-”
"I’ve got that far,” he joked. “I mean, I had noticed. You’re a small other person, but yes, a person, nonetheless."

“Shut up,” she rolled her eyes, annoyed by his refusal to take the matter seriously. “I mean that I’m using more water and making you heat more rooms or at the very least use more logs, and then you’re having to buy food for me, and power things like my phone charger.”

“Clara.”

“-and it isn’t fair, I’m not contributing anything to the household, despite the fact I’m living here, and I feel awful.”

“Clara, I don’t mind. I honestly don’t. I like taking care of you,” John paused, making a face. “Don’t yell at me about feminism; you know what I mean.”

“But…”

“I like being able to provide a safe place for you. And I love having you here, because I love you, and that in itself is enough.”

“What if I wanted to contribute? Financially?”

“I don’t expect you to do that.”

“But if I really wanted to? If I wanted to find a part-time job and give you some money towards my upkeep?”

“Then I wouldn’t stop you,” he shrugged. “But you honestly don’t have to. And besides, there’s not a lot of work around here, and I’m not…”

“You’re not what?”

“A charity case.”

“I never said you were,” Clara said, softly. “I just feel guilty, like I’m taking advantage of you.”

“No,” he said fiercely. “Not ever.”

“But…”

“Please, don’t worry. I’m coping, OK? You don’t need to fret about me.”

“But I do worry.”

“I know you do,” he reached over and placed a hand on her cheek. “But please. Having you here; loving you, and being loved in return, that is all I ask.”

“John…”

“I would consider it a personal insult if you tried to pay me,” he said firmly. “OK?”


“Thank you,” he scooted closer and placed an arm around her shoulders. “Now, please… no more worrying about money. I would like to spend the evening appreciating my nearly fixed tiny girlfriend.”
“Just because you’re a stick insect,” she groused. “I’m not that tiny.”

“You’re quite small.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are too,” he reached over and pulled her onto his lap. “It means I can do this, though, so I’m not complaining.”

“I should hope not,” she smiled up at him, resting her forehead against his. “Or else.”

She resolved to push her worries to the back of her mind. For today, at least.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

John resolves to make this Valentine's Day special.

John was not, as a general rule, one for romantic gestures. He could just about manage to make the odd meal, rustle up breakfast in bed, or buy flowers — John Smith was not a sentimental man, thank you very much. And yet something about Clara communicated to him exactly what she would think if the impending celebration was overlooked, and so here he was, stood in a gift shop in Inverness and staring at a row of saccharine-sweet teddy bears with a rising sense of nausea. Each bear was cuddling a red heart adorned with embroidered white words, and, as he read along the line, it seemed to only get worse.

*My #1 Woman*

*My One & Only*

*Love of my Life*

*My Huggy Bear*

*Snuggle Bum*

He fought the urge to gag. If he gave any of those to Clara, she would almost certainly dissolve into tears of laughter, and the offending item would be given to Idris to be chewed to death. Besides, the words “My Huggy Bear” in relation to Clara was enough to make him feel vaguely ill, not to mention embarrassed, and he turned and walked out of the shop without a second look. Cliché Valentine’s-themed presents were definitely out, but that left him with limited options.

Chocolates? Too impersonal. Flowers? A nice complementary gift to something larger, but a little underwhelming on their own. Lingerie? He had no idea what size she might be, other than “perfect,” and he reasoned that probably wouldn’t help the assistants in any of the frankly terrifying-seeming underwear shops on the high street. Not to mention the fact that he had no idea of her preferences — women seemed to have endless opinions on things like clasps and straps and lace and colours and how much of your arse things revealed. As he gazed over at the window display of Ann Summers, he had to admit that the prospect of Clara in something as red and skimpy as they were selling seemed appealing, but, then again, those bits of lace looked entirely lacking in support, and it seemed an impractical choice. Lingerie was, for now, out.

That left him with one option. One option that scared both him and his wallet.

Jewellery.

Not that Clara wasn’t worth it — she was worth every penny, and every second of his time. But he knew, as he had with lingerie, how particular women could be about such matters, and so he tried to call to mind images of what he had seen Clara wear as he headed towards the nearest jewellers, giving the window displays a summary check as he entered to check that this was not the sort of establishment that was so far out of his price range that he might have to sell a kidney.
“Can I help you, sir?” an assistant with blonde hair and a wide smile enquired as he crossed the threshold. She looked to be about the right age to be able to discern Clara’s jewellery tastes, so perhaps she could be trusted.

“Hi,” he said awkwardly, casting a glance over her name tag. “Rose, I’m looking for a gift for my partner for Valentine’s Day.”

“OK,” her face brightened. “What kind of thing does she usually wear?”

“Urm,” John shuffled over to a display cabinet, looking at the necklaces held within and trying to spot anything similar to what he recalled Clara wearing. “Usually stuff like this — like a chain, with a charm thing on.”

“Pendants are very popular,” Rose nodded sagely. “Is it usually quite discreet, or bigger statement pieces?”


Rose laughed. “If you can’t remember, that usually means they’re smaller and more understated. Do you know what metal she prefers?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well, if she has a lot of silver jewellery, you don’t want to get gold — she won’t wear it,” Rose said in a pragmatic tone. “And vice versa. Equally, some women don’t like one or the other — I don’t like gold, it clashes with my hair, but my mum’s a massive fan. Was a dream come true for her when I started working here.”

“I’ll bet. Is she in and out every week eyeing stuff up?”

The saleswoman let out a yelp of laughter. “You think with this accent that I’m local? Nah, she’s back down in London, but she sends me links to the stuff she likes. I’ve got a WhatsApp chat that’s solidly just items of jewellery and heart-eyed emojis. Mental, I tell you.”

“Well, what kind of stuff does she like?”

“My mother is not the pinnacle of taste. Believe me. What metal does your other half like? That’ll help us narrow it down.”

“Silver, I think. Or silver-coloured, at least.”

“Right. So, discreet and silver-coloured… how about that?” Rose pointed to a silver chain bearing two interlinked rings. “I have one similar and I like the fact that the rings are so intrinsically connected. Is that silly?”

“No, not at all.”

“Plus, it’s great to fiddle with. I tend to when I’m nervous.”

“Always good,” John chuckled. “It’s nice, but I don’t think it’s quite right for Clara.”

“Is that her name?”

“Yeah,” he grinned. “Clara Oswald.”

“What’s she like? Tell me about her.”
When John finally left the shop almost an hour later, a small red bag containing a smaller red box clasped protectively in one hand, he offered a silent prayer to the gods that Clara would like her gift. That was one thing he could tick off his list.

Only three items to go.

In his excitement to give Clara her present, the next few days passed in a blur as he planned and schemed and tried to keep everything under wraps. When the day itself dawned, he woke up early — earlier than Clara, at least, although that was somewhat usual — and headed downstairs, returning only when he had assembled a breakfast that seemed worthy of the importance of the day. It was nothing fancy — croissants with locally sourced butter and jam, hot coffee of the expensive variety, and then, balanced beside the breakfast items, a long, thin vase holding a single red rose. It was probably all tremendously clichéd, but John didn’t care.

“Morning,” Clara mumbled as he re-entered her bedroom. “What-”

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” he murmured, setting the tray down beside her and producing her card from his pocket. “My love.”

“You do Valentine’s Day?” she blinked at him in sleepy surprise, her mouth twisting into a pleased smile.

“I do with you.”

“Well then, it’s good that I anticipated that,” she reached into her bedside cabinet and retrieved a card of her own, exchanging it for the one he was holding out to her. “And forward-planned.”

“Isn’t it just?” he ripped open the envelope with near-childish glee, discovering a card bearing… “Is that… Úine?”

“Yes,” Clara blushed. “Do you like it? If you look down at the bottom…”

At the bottom of the landscape depicted on the card were two figures in silhouette, with a dog beside them.

“I didn’t draw it, as a disclaimer,” she said quickly. “I got someone I used to teach to do it. Sorry.”

“It’s alright,” his voice cracked a little at the thought she had put into it. “It’s… it’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“Read the inside, you prat,” she teased, but her cheeks flushed with pride nonetheless. “And I’ll open mine.”

He was dimly aware of her opening her own envelope as he flipped the card open and read the words contained within.
To John,

Thank you for being the other half of me, and making me feel whole again. I love you.

All my love, today and always,

Your Clara xxx

He looked up with misty eyes only to discover Clara looking at her own card with a similar expression. He had drawn Idris, surrounded by Scottish flora and Clara’s favourite flowers, and she could tell she was pleased as she read what he’d written to her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, reaching for him and wrapping her arms around him. “For being so sweet.”

“There’s more to come, yet.”

“There… is?”

“Oh yes,” he felt himself turning a fiery shade of red. “But first: breakfast.”

John kept Clara in suspense until it was time for dinner, at which point he banished her into the lounge and set about cooking. Well, preparing food, at least; he offered a silent prayer of thanks to Marks & Spencer. By the time the first course was ready, he had to admit that he was not perhaps as terrible a chef as first expected, and he called Clara to come and eat with a hint of pride in his voice as he headed into the previously defunct dining room.

“Where are you?” Clara called from the direction of the kitchen, sounding wholly exasperated by his disappearance. “I’m not playing hide and seek for food, I’m not Idris.”

“Dining room!”

“Wh-” she stepped inside, looking around at the room that had days earlier been covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. Now, the woodwork had been polished until it shone, there was a fire in the grate, and the enormous table was set for the two of them, with a large bouquet of red roses in a vase between their place settings. “Oh, my god.”

“Do you like it?” he hovered nervously behind his chair as she stepped further inside. “Scrubs up alright, doesn’t it?”

“When… how did you…”

“While you were on the phone, mainly. Or asleep.”

“Did you really do all of this for me?”

“Yep.”

“And the flowers…”

“For you, also.”
“This is…” she paused, lost for words. “Amazing. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he felt abruptly embarrassed, and dropped his gaze to their plates. “We should… ah… probably eat before it gets cold.”

“Yes,” she breathed, all but running over to him and standing on tiptoes to kiss him. “We should.”

It wasn’t until they were curled up together on the sofa after dinner, Clara’s roses now on the coffee table and emitting a heady, luxurious scent, that the time came to give Clara her present.

“Clara?” he said softly, and she made a little mm of assertion. “I’ve got something for you.”

“What?”

He reached under the nearest cushion and retrieved the box he had been carefully hiding from her for the previous few days, presenting it to her with an embarrassed little flourish. “Happy Valentine’s.”

“You know,” she said, trying and failing to sound stern. “Breakfast and roses and champagne and dinner was more than en- oh.”

She had opened the box and caught sight of what lay within. John looked down at the silver chain and its accompanying leaf-shaped pendant, then cast his gaze over to her to gauge her response. To his horror, her eyes were full of tears, and he wondered for a fleeting moment if he had made a terrible mistake.

“What’s wr-”

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed, lifting it out of its wrappings with trembling fingers. “Oh, John, it’s… it’s beautiful.”

“Would you like me to put it on you?”

“Yes,” she said at once, handing it to him and lifting her hair off her neck obligingly. “God, you’re just…”

He undid the clasp with the utmost care, wrapping the chain delicately around her throat and then ensuring it was fastened before letting go and allowing the pendant to fall against her décolletage. Clara allowed her hair to fall over his hands, and he swallowed, suddenly acutely aware of how close she was to him.

“Clara…” he said, his mouth dry. “I…”

“Shush,” she murmured, kissing him before he could speak again. “Please, for once, just… shush.”

For once, he did as he was told. He closed his eyes and kept kissing her, noting the taste of champagne still on her tongue and reaching for her instinctively, his hands coming to rest on her waist. When she began to move, he was on the verge of objecting and pulling her closer, but as though she had read his mind, she only rearranged herself so that she was straddling his lap, her arms wrapping around his neck as she began to roll her hips against him.

“Clara…” he breathed, pulling away from her enough to catch his breath. “I…”
“Shush,” she said again, reaching behind her and undoing the zip on her dress with maddening slowness. “I want this. I’ve always wanted this.”

He could take the time to consider her words. He could wonder how long “always” implied.

He could, but he was rather more focused on her as she slipped her arms out of the sleeves of her dress, allowing the fabric to fall away from her and then looking up at him with a coy expression, keeping her arms held loosely across her chest. He’d known, of course; he’d noticed the was the dress hung against her skin — he was only human, after all — but it was still a delicious thrill to discover she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. As she smirked up at him and placed first one arm and then the other on his shoulders, revealing herself to him completely, he couldn’t help but stare.

“Happy Valentine’s, John,” she murmured. “I think we should take this upstairs.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Clara has an idea - one that John is less than enthusiastic about.

Clara could still hardly believe it. She would lay awake each night, her head on John’s chest, listening to the steady metronomic beat of his heart and trying to reconcile the difficulties of her past with the easy contentment of the present. She had never meant to fall in love with Marcus, or by extension with John, and yet here they were — a tangle of limbs wrapped in soft cotton sheets, as inseparable and incontrovertible as anything she could imagine.

Of course, she held Danny in her thoughts from time to time, delicate and wary, but for the most part her focus lay on John, and on experiencing the present. It did not do to dwell on memories and forget to live, that much she was certain of. She would spend a few moments each day ruminating on what had been, in the same way she knew that John thought of River, and she knew that neither of them begrudged each other the luxury of remembering.

She hadn’t expected to fall in love with John. All those years ago, when she had first put pen to paper and written to Marcus, she had never expected this to come of it. She had been seeking friendship, yes, but instead she had stumbled headlong down the rabbit hole and ended up enamoured with a man she scarcely knew; enamoured, yet scarcely even knowing it herself, not to start with — and enamoured with a man who was both not who she thought and yet was. A paradoxical mess of contradictions that she hadn’t the energy to unpick, but one that had brought her John.

John. Her Valentine’s card to him had not been metaphorical in its language — he was, as far as she was concerned, the other half of her. As surely as she knew her own name, Clara knew that John would understand her without her needing to say so much as a word. They moved around each other fluidly, their very thoughts simpatico with each other’s, and there was a sense of completeness she felt with him that she had never experienced before. Being with him was electrifying and yet comfortable — he was the part of her that she never knew was missing, and she loved him fiercely with every fibre of her being.

The fear of losing him pulsed through her with every breath she took. She was in a constant state of anxiety that he might one day realise she was unworthy of him, or that she was a bad person, or that he would simply grow bored of being with her. The first time they had made love, she’d been half-afraid that he might ask her to leave afterwards, having gained the one thing that most men wanted from her. When she’d awoken the next morning to find him still in bed beside her, she’d turned her head away and cried, silently and softly, until he’d stirred and placed his arms around her, reassuring her without so much as a word. Even now, every night they spent together felt like a gift. Every moment they spent in each other’s arms was both an eternity and a heartbeat, the laws of time stalling in the face of their love. It was a miracle. This feeling, this certainty, this indescribable pull she felt connecting the two of them — it was nothing short of a celestial intervention. Not that she’d have told John that — he’d have told her about probability, and mathematics, and science, when she knew that something like this could not be of this world. She was not a great believer in the religious, but this seemed to be some kind of proof that there was such a thing as fate, if nothing else, and fate in itself signalled that something greater and more mysterious was at work.
Dressing something up and describing it as fate can have consequences, however. Consequences, and a refusal to attribute blame to anyone or anything mortal.

The idea came out of nowhere. Clara was lying in John’s arms, post-coital, sleepy, and satiated, when she was struck by a flash of inspiration and sat bolt upright, clutching the sheets around her bare torso in an attempt to stave off the February chill. She grinned down at her partner, feeling electrified with the sudden energy that so often accompanies bright ideas.

“What?” John asked, looking profoundly nervous in response to her sudden, enormous smile and fervent expression. “What is it?”

“I’ve had an idea.”

“What kind of idea?” John grimaced. “Because if it involves the Kama Sutra or anything you see in porn films, count me out. My back isn’t up to it.”

She rolled her eyes in fond exasperation. “It’s not a sex idea.”

“More’s the pity.”

“You just said your back wasn’t up to anything fun and sexy.”

“Well, it isn’t up to… sex yoga.”

“My idea doesn’t involve sex yoga. Whatever the hell sex yoga might be.”

“Well, good,” he chuckled. “What is it, then?”

“So, you’re…” she paused, then chanced the plural pronoun instead: “We’re short on money, right?”

“…right.”

“And we have a big house with lots of empty rooms and a seriously stunning backdrop of, you know, the Cairngorms.”

“…right…”

“And we’re in love, not least with the scenery, so you know… why not take all that romantic scenery and this big romantic house and open the place up as a wedding venue? Nothing huge or fancy, but think about what a stunning location it is, and how amazing it could be for couples who want something off the beaten-”

“No.”

“Oh, come on. With the afternoon light coming through the trees, and the fires roaring, and the whole place decorated with flowers, it’d be-”

“No,” he reiterated more sternly. “I’m not opening my house up to strangers.”

“I’m a stranger,” she argued, determined to make him listen, and she raised her chin defiantly. “You
opened the house up to me, and you fell in love with me. Why would letting other people bring their love here be any different?”

“It just is,” he growled, his expression growing darker by the second. “It isn’t happening, Clara.”

“We could do it, though. We’d need some initial investment from the bank but I could always ask Bonnie for a loan instead, or she could help us with the business plan to present to the bank. Once the place was up and running, we could manage it, and it’d be relatively easy to do. We might need some local people to help, but think about it — we’d be providing jobs! Giving back to the local economy!”

“Clara-”

“And I think it would be a real positive for the house — we’d be able to fix that leaky bit of roof, and heat the place, and think about how many people we’d be making happy! How many amazing days we’d be facilitating!”

“-Clara-”

“It would be so magical, I really think—”

“We’re not bloody doing it,” he snarled, and the vitriol in his voice was enough to make Clara freeze and then edge away from him, shuffling over to the edge of the bed and clutching the sheets around her defensively. “Jesus, don’t you listen? I said no. No means no.”

“B-but…” she stammered, feeling her eyes burn with shocked tears in response to his sudden change in mood and sensing, somehow, that crying would only inflame the situation. “I j-just thought...”

“You thought wrong! Worse, you didn’t bloody think at all! What, you think you can just prostitute my house out to strangers? My house, where I lived with my wife? God, you speak about it like it’s part yours. It isn’t. And if this is your ambition, it never bloody will be. It’s not a cash cow. It’s not a project. It’s not going to be your labour of love. It’s my home.”

“I just thought…”

“You just thought what? You’d just gentrify my house? Make it into one of those pretty little Pinterest places? God, you bloody English — you’re all the same.”

“Fuck you.”

“Language.”

“Oh, don’t you ever tell me to mind my language. And don’t you dare lump me in with the rest of all the little English people that you think are so tiny and silly and predictable.”

“What, because trying to exploit me and the place I love isn’t the kind of thing I’m allowed be angry about?”

“I don’t understand why you’re suddenly furious about this, John! I’m not a bloody mind reader. Instead of shouting at me, why don’t you talk to me? Why don’t you actually explain how you feel instead of just attacking me?”

“Because you wouldn’t understand!”

“Why not? Why wouldn’t I understand?”
“Because you’ve never loved like I have! You thought you loved Danny — you didn’t. He was just… I don’t know, he was some kind of game you were playing, but what River and I had? That was something meaningful — something special. That meant something. This house meant something to us, and you want to just undermine that and open up the house I shared with her so that random strangers can come in and take photos in front of our furniture and our portraits and our lives, without knowing any of what the two of us had. You want her to just be swept under the rug and become a background detail in other people’s love stories, like she didn’t matter and like I didn’t love her and… I won’t allow it.”

“You…” Clara blinked at him, his tirade leaving her lost for words. “How can you say that? How can you say I never loved Danny?”

“Because you didn’t. We both know that you didn’t, so stop lying to yourself.”

“How dare you?” she asked, surprised to find that her tone was completely calm. “How dare you say such a thing? What, you think I didn’t love him? You think I fell apart when I lost him because I didn’t love him?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying. I think you fell apart out of sheer bloody guilt, not anything else.”

“You have absolutely no right to tell me who I do and do not love. You aren’t the judge of my feelings; you aren’t me. You don’t know what I’m feeling, and you don’t get to tell me that you do.”

“Really? Because right now, I can read you like a book.”

“So, tell me what I’m feeling. Tell me what I think about you.”

“I think you think you’re in love with me,” he said softly, his lip curling in contempt. “But I don’t think you know how to love at all, because all you see in a relationship is the opportunity for self-improvement. You thought being with Danny would make you a better, more patient person — a better teacher, a better partner. You think that being with me will make you… what? Richer? Chance would be a fine thing. More grounded? More down-to-earth? What a fun little experiment. But I don’t think you know what it really means to love.”

“But you do?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And you’re the expert, aren’t you?”

“Well…”

“You’re unbelievable,” she got out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown, tying it around her waist with shaking fingers. “Don’t follow me.”

“Wait…” the anger dissipated from his face as he realised what was about to happen, and she found herself hating him all the more for that. The fact that his words were borne of anger, and so he seemed to consider them free of consequences “Where are you going?”

“I don’t love you,” she deadpanned, her tone bitter. “I don’t care about anyone other than myself, so I’m going to go and be a selfish bitch at the B&B in town.”

“Clara-”
“Go to hell, John.”

“Clara!” he looked as though he were on the verge of getting out of bed, so she hurled her slipper at him, hitting him on the shoulder and eliciting a look of surprised consternation.

“Don’t come after me, John. Or I swear to God, I will not be responsible for my actions.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

In the wake of John and Clara's argument, a knock on the front door is about to change everything...

John didn’t sleep that night. He hadn’t meant to lose his temper at Clara quite so spectacularly, but the prospect of having strangers here, in his house — it was intolerable. The thought of people who wouldn’t respect the place — small children with sticky hands, rude wedding guests smoking cheeky cigarettes, ill-mannered people with light fingers — being here was anathema to him, and he felt sick to his stomach at the very idea. He wanted to keep the house safe. More than that, he wanted to keep River’s memory safe, and untouched by the presence of thousands of strangers, all of whom would see the house as nothing more than a venue for the love of… well, their respective bride and groom. Úine was not a part of anyone else’s love story. It was not for the romantic consumption of others. It was his, and it was still — in his heart — River’s, and he would be damned if that was going to change.

But then came Clara, who was… a law unto herself. She was quiet and respectful of the house, careful to take heed of his non-verbal cues in order to fit herself around the edges of his memories and preserve the sanctity of the place. She’d never tried to assume ownership of the place, or make anything other than the slightest suggestions about keeping it clean, and thus she’d never conflicted with his desire to preserve the place — until now. Now she seemed to think that she had some kind of God-given right to tell him what to do and attempt to control him, to control the house, and he wasn’t going to stand for that. She was a guest here, and she had no right to tell him what to do.

Or did she? He had never anticipated that she would fall in love with him, or he with her. He had never accounted for the possibility of falling in love again, and the ability to reconcile a desire to protect his past with River with a desire to create a future with Clara eluded him. He had been most particular about some matters, and Clara had acquiesced to them willingly, often without him needing to verbalise them. She didn’t sit in River’s armchair. She didn’t touch his wife’s jackets, left untouched in the hall for nigh on seventeen years. And she’d somehow understood his one most deep-seated and yet never-vocalised need: they never made love in his bed. It was always Clara’s — always him who would creep down the hall to her, and afterwards they would lie in the curiously impersonal-yet-personal room that had once been reserved for guests, neither of them feeling the need to speak.

Perhaps he had wronged Clara in doing so. Perhaps in seeking to keep hold of the past, he had treated her badly. He had expected her to let go of Danny and move on, and yet here he was, clinging to the memory of his dead wife and forcing Clara to fit in all the spaces that River’s ghost did not inhabit. As he lay alone in the dark that night, the imprint of the sole of her slipper on his bare shoulder and his heart aching for both of the women he loved — one lost, one almost-lost — he resolved that, come sunrise, he would head into the village and make amends.
He was awake and dressed before the sun had fully risen, but, as he prepared to leave the house, tugging on his boots with one hand while holding a scalding mug of coffee aloft in the other, there was a knock on the front door. He froze, thinking of one person and one only, and he half-ran, half-fell towards the door, yanking it open with pathetically eager enthusiasm.

Bonnie and Amy were stood in the porch, both of them looking equally sombre.

His mug crashed to the stone floor, shattering on impact, as he realised what might have caused them to bear such an expression.

“Is she…” he managed, feeling himself beginning to hyperventilate. “Oh, my god, she’s…”

“Alive, fuckwit,” Amy snarled, and he felt his heart soar in relief. “No thanks to you.”

“So…”

“We’re here to get her things,” Bonnie added in a pragmatic tone. “So, move.”

“Her… things?”

“Yes, her things,” Bonnie spoke to him in a deliberately slow, loud voice, as though he were stupid. “The things belonging to my sister, Clara Oswald. The things that she owns.”

“But… why?”

“Why do you think?” Amy rolled her eyes. “She’s gone back to London.”

“She’s…” John felt his stomach drop. “She’s… what?”

“She didn’t especially want to spend time with you, John. Not after you accused her of being a heartless bitch who was incapable of love and repeatedly asserted to her that she had no place in your life. She had nothing left up here, so why would she stay?” Bonnie raised an eyebrow at him. “Now, are you going to let us in, or am I going to have to use force?”

“I…” John stepped back, his shoes crunching over the broken coffee mug, and he was fleetingly grateful then that Idris was cooped up in the kitchen, unable to injure herself on the shards. “Yes. Sorry.”

“Good,” Bonnie said curtly, crossing the threshold and casting an eye over the interior of the house. “We’ll make a start. I would suggest staying out of our way.”

“But…” John began, yet both women ignored him and started to make their way upstairs. He raced after them, ignoring Bonnie’s warning in favour of pleading with them. “When did she leave?”

“Late last night, not that it’s any of your business,” Amy called over her shoulder. “None whatsoever, in fact.”

“Is this her breaking up with me?”

“That’s not our place to say.”

“So, that’s a yes?”

“It’s not our place to say.”

“But-”
“We don’t speak for her,” Bonnie reminded him. “The only reason we came back to this shithole was to get her things so that she didn’t have to face the man who made her fall in love with him, then sidelined her and treated her like shit and accused her of things because he was hurt.”

“I…”

“What?” Amy asked, her disdain for him almost tangible. “You’re what?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry,” Bonnie repeated incredulously, as they reached the landing. “You’re sorry.”

“Yes,” he nodded fervently. “I’m sorry, please can you tell her that?”

“I think so,” Bonnie smiled, and he returned the gesture, pleased that her anger seemed to be fading.

“And I’ll add in my own apologies.”

“What… why?” John asked.

Bonnie seized the front of his shirt and slammed him back against the nearest wall with a surprising amount of force for someone of her stature.

“I warned you, didn’t I?” she growled. “We both warned you that, if you broke her heart, or if you hurt her, then we would bring the fucking rain on you. And you made a big, big mistake. You underestimated me. You underestimated my warning, and you hurt my sister, and we would very, very much like to make you pay for that, in lots of painful and sadistic ways. And we could, you know? We gave the matter a great deal of thought on the way here, and worked out precisely how we’d like to hurt you. But, instead, I think being without Clara is going to be suffering enough for you. Do you understand? That’s your punishment: your punishment is simply living. And I think that you’re the sort of man who is going to find that the cruellest fate of all.”

She let go of him and John crumpled of the floor, beginning to weep involuntarily. Bonnie was right — any physical punishment they meted out would fade into inconsequence compared to being bereft of the woman he loved, and the prospect was unbearable.

“Jesus,” Amy said contemptuously, looking down at him. “Let’s just get her things and go.”

He was aware of the two of them moving off into Clara’s room and beginning to pack up her possessions. He was aware of it, yet it hardly seemed important now. The crushing, damning realisation that he would have a future without Clara was such an all-consuming thought that he could focus on little else. He knew he should be trying to speak to the two women now ransacking Clara’s room, trying to persuade them to let him talk to Clara, and yet he knew it would be a hopeless case. She didn’t want to see him. Was this the end? Was this her way of ending things? Or was she simply demanding space? Would she call him in a few weeks, happy and cheerful, having got over the matter entirely?

He feared, deep down, that she wouldn’t. What he had accused her of was inexcusable and unforgiveable — and, worse still, he knew his anger had frightened her. She wouldn’t have admitted it to him, but he know how harsh and cold his fury could be. He was a monster, and he had lost her. He had let his desire for preservation overcome his desire to make a new future, and this would be his fate; he would remain alone, for good, by way of penance.

He didn’t realise he was still crying until Bonnie crouched beside him and he realised that he could see her only blurrily.
“Hey,” she said, with surprising gentleness, and he looked up, noting that she was clutching the holdall of possessions Clara had arrived here with. The finality of the matter overcame him, and he dissolved into sobs once more. “John, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” he asked, wiping his eyes on the backs of his hands. “I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“You should,” she concurred, her gaze full of pity. “But still, I’m sorry. And… Clara wanted you to have this.”

She opened her palm and revealed a long silver chain bearing a leaf-shaped pendant. He reached for it with trembling hands, winding the necklace around his fingers and clutching it like a lifeline.

“For what it’s worth,” Bonnie whispered. “I think she just needs time. Don’t give up hope just yet.”

“But you…”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I still want to kill you. But my sister seems to love you, and I think if you can understand that and can understand what you did wrong, then maybe there might be some chance of things working out. But you both have to want that, and, for now, she’s too hurt to want much other than not being here.”

“Tell her I’m sorry.”

“I will.”

“Tell her I love her.”

“I will.”

She straightened up before he could speak again, heading downstairs with Amy in silence. As they stepped outside and closed the front door behind them, Idris bounded down the hallway, having overcome the dog-gate in the kitchen, and looking agitated and panicked.

As John watched, feeling his heart break, she flung herself down on the doormat and began to howl.

The car door nearest to Clara’s head was yanked open, dragging her out of the exhausted reverie she had been in since the previous night.

“Hey,” Bonnie said softly, slinging a holdall into the footwell beside her. “All packed up.”

Amy followed suit, and then the door slammed shut again. Her sister and her best friend scrambled into the front seats, and, as the engine started, Clara chanced sitting up, feeling a deep-seated need for one final look at Úine before she left. It was then that she noticed the mournful sound emanating from the house, and after half a beat she realised what it was. Idris was saying farewell.

Clara rested her head against the glass of the window as Bonnie put the car into gear, and it was then that the front door opened and John appeared, looking… well, there was no more apt word that she could think of other than “broken.”

Their eyes met, and she could see the shock laid bare there, as he realised how close she had been to
him as Bonnie and Amy retrieved her possessions. She felt an irrational urge to apologise to him for the deception; a sudden need to speak to him and explain, but as he stepped outside and began to run towards the car, Bonnie pulled away, accelerating down the drive.

The sound of the engine was not enough to drown out his scream of loss.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Missy stages an intervention.

Chapter Notes

Hello my weekend is crumbling around me but I promised you all an update so here it is.

John had never felt like this before. Losing River had not brought with it the same tangible sense of suffering that came with knowing that the person you loved was still out there, still thinking about you, and quite possibly still wanting to be with you. Losing River had been a final, permanent severing of the bond between them; losing Clara was a constant, unceasing tide of sadness that ebbed and flowed, but remained entirely all-consuming as he curled up on the sofa in the lounge, clutching her favourite blanket to his chest and weeping silently.

She was gone. His ineloquent way with words and his inability to leave the past where it belonged had joined forces, and now… well, now he was doomed to this. He’d never thought his words would have the impact they had, and he cursed himself to hell and back for his lack of forethought. He should have known how Clara would respond. He should have considered how cold and cruel he would sound. He should have tried to apologise, or gone after her, or thought to check the car, or…

On and on his internal monologue continued, berating him, condemning him, mocking him, until he feared it would drive him into madness. He lay where he was, darkness falling around him, and thought about those final moments — about realising how close she had been to him and what a fool he had been. The agony of watching the car drive away from the house was insurmountable, immeasurable, and unbearable — just the recollection of their eyes locking and seeing the pain laid bare in her expression was enough for him to know that it would haunt his dreams. He had hurt her, and she had tricked him, and, while he knew that her actions were justifiable, it still stung. He still wished he had been able to speak to her a final time and offer his apologies, rather than relying on Bonnie and Amy to transmit his words back to her — if they even did. He should have insisted on being allowed to speak to her. He should have demanded the right to have a conversation with her. He knew, deep down, that doing so would only have caused more damage than he already had, but he couldn’t shake the lingering regret of not being able to find some closure, or being able to hear her voice for a final time.

Her voice. Already, the house seemed bereft and empty without it. The silence stretched on for what felt like years, and yet he knew, logically, that it had been mere hours since she had left. There was no laughter left in the place. There was no light. He would remain here, alone and miserable, until his inevitable death, and never again would he be blessed with the joy of her company. Bonnie might have told him that he was in with a chance, that Clara may forgive him, and yet he had no doubt that she was only being kind — no doubt that Clara’s stubbornness would keep them apart, and rightly
so. He had been a complete bastard. He had treated her badly, and this was his punishment.

On the rug beside him, Idris let out a mournful yelping sound and then padded closer to him, shoving her cold nose into his palm in a gesture borne of comfort, and yet also need. He groaned, knowing what she wanted, and dragged himself to his feet, staggering on unsteady legs towards the front door and yanking it open.

“Off you go,” he mumbled, gesturing outside. “Do your thing.”

She looked up at him uncertainly then bounded outside, taking off at a run and disappearing into the trees.

“Idris!” John shouted, panic creeping into his tone. “Idris?!”

There was no response, and he sagged against the door as he realised that in the space of a day he had lost both Clara and now his beloved dog. Feeling his will to live seep away, he closed the front door and headed back to his previous seat in the lounge, curling up with Clara’s blanket and closing his eyes to a world he didn’t want to be in any longer.

The next thing he was aware of was a hand connecting with his cheek; the raw, stinging pain eliciting an involuntary yelp of shock by way of response. His eyes snapped open and he realised that someone had turned the lights on — not only that, they had lit a fire and were now standing over him, hands on hips.

“What the hell are you playing at?” Missy barked, her lower lip curling in disdain as she cast an eye over his crumpled clothing and the blanket he was clutching like a lifeline. “What is this?”

“What is what?” he mumbled, rubbing his cheek and sitting up. Idris was curled up on the rug in front of the sofa, looking up at him with concern, although she thumped her tail contentedly when he looked over at her. “Why did you slap me?”

“Well, I tried saying your name, but you were out for the count. I was a bit worried you’d done something silly, so I thought a nice little smack might be beneficial — and it was.”

“That hurt.”

“Good.”

“Why are you even here?”

“Because your bloody dog came and got me,” she rolled her eyes, as though that should be obvious to him. He cast a surprised look at Idris, who lay down and buried her nose in her paws. “And good thing, too. You were undoubtedly about to freeze to death — don’t you ever heat this place?”

“I try not to, it saves on the bills.”

“Sure. And don’t tell me, it keeps your moody Scottish laird act going, because woe is you, alone in this huge, crumbling mansion,” Missy rolled her eyes again, then put her hands back on her hips. “What the hell is going on, man? Where’s your lass?”

“She’s not ‘my lass,’” he said miserably, realisation crashing over him once again. “And won’t ever
be, not ever again.”

To his considerable embarrassment, he dissolved into tears. Missy took a seat beside him, placing an arm around his shoulders and letting him lean against her as he wept.

“What happened?” she asked, her tone surprisingly gentle. She might be bizarre and calculating and totally off her trolley, but she could be dependable when necessary, and he silently thanked god for that. “What can I do?”

“I… ah…” he hiccupped, knowing that Missy would undoubtedly berate him upon hearing his explanation, and yet knowing he needed to be honest with his sister. “She had ideas about the house and I… well, I lost my temper and shouted at her about… you know, me and River.”

“Shouted what exactly?”

He felt himself turn maroon. “Just… silly stuff, like that this was mine and River’s home and nothing to do with Clara; that she wouldn’t understand what River and I had because she’d never felt real love; and that she… urm, that she couldn’t feel real love anyway because she only ever really wants to use people, including me and Danny.”

“Jesus Christ,” Missy looked at him with horror, not bothering to conceal her judgement, and for once he felt he deserved it. “You actually said all that?”

“Yes,” he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck and feeling a surge of shame. “Yes, I did.”

“God, no wonder she’s cleared off, you absolute prick.”

“Hey!”

“What? You want me to sugar-coat it and tell you that the nasty English girlie was overreacting and you were a great and upstanding boyfriend to her? Well, I won’t, because you weren’t. Not always, and definitely not by shouting all of that.”

“You’re meant to back me up here!”

“Yeah, except I’m not going to, because it sounds like you were a total bastard, and so you deserve getting your miserable arse dumped. If you said all that to me, I’d have dumped you — that isn’t how you treat people! Especially not good people like Clara!”

“Like it or not, he’s still Regan’s—”

“Don’t you dare mention him,” Missy snarled, her former warmth dissipating in the wake of his words. “Don’t you ever, ever use that name in my presence.”

“Like it or not, he’s still Regan’s—”
“Shut your mouth,” Missy scowled at him with such venom that he physically recoiled. “This is why you alienate everyone you’ve ever loved. Do you understand that, John?”

“I… what?”

“You have no idea, do you? You talk down to people and treat them so irreverentially; you judge them and act like you’re this morally superior being when you’re not; you’re a rude, unkind arsehole with a saviour complex.”

“Hey! I do not have a saviour complex!”

“Really?” Missy arched an eyebrow artfully. “River was a broken-down wreck of a woman before you came along, especially after growing up in that bloody Kovarian Institute or whatever it was called. Clara was falling apart after her ma died and her boring boyfriend got run over. And as for me…”

“What about you?”

“You’ve always been there for me, John, but at the cost of your own happiness.”

“You’re my sister, it’s kind of my job.”

“Still. A lot of brothers wouldn’t have been there, especially not after everything that… he did.”

“Well, I don’t have a saviour complex,” John repeated. “Not towards you, anyway.”

“What would you call it, then?”

“Brotherly love,” he shot back. “The other two…”

“As for the other two, you know I’m right. You like women you can save.”

“And you like men who destroy you, your point?”

“Can you stop making cheap shots at my past and actually admit responsibility for driving your nice, attractive, good-hearted girlfriend away?”

“I thought you didn’t like her!”

“I like her a lot more than I liked River!” Missy flung her hands in the air in exasperation. “God forbid someone such as Clara actually likes my idiot brother, and then said idiot brother fucks everything up like the monumental tosser that he is!”

“You hated River, so you know… that isn’t saying much.”

“Well, I like Clara, alright? And not just because I fancy her. Speaking of which, am I in with a chance now? Or has she sworn off us Smiths forever?”

“Please don’t try to seduce Clara. For her sake, if nothing else — you’re terrifying.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Are you meant to be making me feel better? Because you really aren’t, you know.”

“Well, what do you want me to say? Or do?”
“I don’t know!” John sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Help me win her back?”

“Well, do you have any ideas about that?”

“None whatsoever. Plus, I think Amy and Bonnie would kill me before letting me go anywhere near her. I’ve got to wait for her to come to me, I think.”

“Is that likely to happen?”

“Which part?”


“For the love of fuck, do not make a sex joke,” John groaned. “I don’t know if she’s likely to want to ever speak to me again. I wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t; I’m a useless piece of shit.”

“Getting a bit mopey, John.”

“I just got dumped by the woman I love, I think I’m allowed to be mopey.”

“You got dumped, yes, for being a miserable bastard with no empathy. Ergo, my sympathy for you is very, very limited.”

“Look, if you’re not going to help, and you’re not going to make me feel better, why exactly are you here?”

“Mainly to stop you dying of hypothermia or self-pity. Also to feed your dog.”

“You hate my dog.”

“Yes, but she’s important to you, and, if Clara takes your miserable arse back, then you might be upset if your dog has starved to death in the interim. She’s fond of Idris.”

“That’s…” John blinked at her. “Weirdly nice of you.”

“I am nice.”

“No, you’re mainly just weird.”

“Look, do you want me to make you and the dog dinner, or not?”

“Urm…”

“And we can strategise about Clara.”

“Fine.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Clara reflects on John's words, and starts to question herself.

“Babe?”

Bonnie’s voice was low and soft, and Clara knew her sister was determined to pull her from the state of introspection she had slipped into somewhere after crossing the border with England. John’s words had to have a glimmer of truth, or else why would he have said them? Why would he accuse her of lacking the ability to feel real love if it wasn’t true? He knew her. He understood her. He was an objective judge of the matter, and thus she was inclined to believe his words. She’d always known she was selfish and headstrong and bossy, but now… well, she knew she was worse than that. She knew she used people for her own gain, and the accusation weighed heavily on her conscience, colouring her relationships and friendships with a dark and bitter hue that soured her happy recollections.

“Clara?” Bonnie reached over from the passenger seat and placed a hand on her cheek, breaking her reverie and forcing her to focus on the interior of the car rather than her own flaws. “Hey. You’ve been quiet.”

“I’ve just lost the man I…” she fell silent, unable to say the word “loved.” Not after what he’d said. “Never mind.”

“You haven’t lost him,” Bonnie assured her, stroking a thumb over her cheekbone. “He was upset, he didn’t mean what he said.”

“Yes he did, and he was right.”

“Right? About what?”

“About me.”

“Babe, I’m going to need more than that to be able to help, you know.”

“Bon, be honest with me… do I use people?”

Her twin’s expression softened and she undid her seatbelt, scrambling into the back of the car before taking a seat beside Clara and putting her arms around her.

“No,” Bonnie whispered fiercely, pressing a kiss to Clara’s hair. “No, not ever.”

“But I do. I’m using you now,” Clara mumbled, starting to cry. “You and Amy… when I called you…”

“What, you really think we’d be here if we didn’t want to be?” Bonnie scoffed at the very notion. “You aren’t using us; we love you and we want to support you and that is why we’re here. Not because we have to be, and not because you’ve made us do anything.”
“I used Danny.”

“For what?”


“You loved Danny,” Bonnie reminded her. “Regardless of what John said, I know you did love him in your own way. Perhaps not in the same way you love John, but you did love him. I only had to look at the two of you to see it.”

“I think we could all see it,” Amy added from the driving seat. “Bon, can you put a seatbelt on? The warning light on the dashboard is driving me mad.”

“Sorry,” Bonnie grimaced and buckled up as directed, then turned her attention back to the matter at hand. “Regardless of what you felt for Danny, it was rooted in your own love and compassion. Just like you show us love and compassion every damn day. Remember when my boyfriend dumped me in sixth form and told everyone I was a slag, and you punched him in the face and got detention? That was an act of love.”

“That was an act of anger.”

“Clara, why are you so convinced that you’re some kind of… god, I don’t know, sociopath? You are capable of love, in so many different ways.”

“Like what?” Clara mumbled miserably, unable to think of a single example. “I’m not, Bonnie. I think I am, but I’m really just using people.”

“Clara,” Bonnie closed her eyes, resting her forehead against her twin’s. “Regardless of what that man said to you, you are absolutely capable of love and I will not hear otherwise. Example one: as previously cited, punching Shane Doyle. Example two: everything you did for Mum when she was ill. Example three: going to Dad and Linda’s wedding, even though the woman is a troll bitch from hell, because Dad asked and you wanted to make him happy. Example four: all the students you’ve ever helped, including that really sweet gay kid last year. Example five: everything you’ve ever done for Amy.”

“She’s got a point,” Amy chimed in. “You’ve made a huge difference to me, even if you don’t think so. I was lonely as hell in London before I met you — I only knew Rory, which in such a big city isn’t a lot.”

“None of those were love,” Clara countered. “More…”

“If you say ‘duty’ then, so help me God, I will scream,” Bonnie said in a stern tone. “Besides, you don’t even know exactly what John meant when he said… what he did. Maybe he meant romantic love.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel a whole lot better. I’ll be dying alone, but loved by others.”

“Clara, stop being such an ingrate.”

“I’m sorry?!”

“Clara, I’ve loved you since the first moment we came into being. And I know that you have, too — remember the scan Mum used to show us? With us holding hands?”

Clara nodded a silent assertion.
“You have always loved me, fiercely and unconditionally,” Bonnie continued. “Even when I’ve been a cow. Even when you’ve had things going on. Even when it’s been difficult to show love at all — you have loved me. And, honest to god, if I ever see John’s face again, I will tell him exactly what I think of his bullshit allegation, because you have never once loved me under duress or according to a set of conditions, and he is absolutely full of shit.”

“Bon…”

Her twin meshed their fingers together and gave her hand a squeeze. “‘Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove,’” she recited from memory. “‘Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom.’”

“Did you just quote a Shakespeare sonnet at her?” Amy said with incredulity from the front. “Because I’m fairly sure that that particular one is about marriage.”

“It’s about love,” Bonnie shot back. “All love. Pure love. And Clara, unaltered and unbending love is what you have always shown me.”

“And me,” Amy added. “I was a bloody nobody when we first met, and you were always kind to me. Even when I had no money and no hope and you had to buy the coffees six weeks running, you never complained. You never changed how you acted towards me, and you never treated me like less of a person when I was struggling.”

“Amy…”

“No,” Amy said sternly. “Listen to me: I refuse to let you go around beating yourself up and convincing yourself of things which just aren’t true because one bitter, jaded man said so. You are capable of love. You are deserving of love. And if John can’t or won’t see that, then that is his fault — not yours.”

“I don’t deserve you both,” Clara mumbled, feeling her eyes fill with tears as she felt a rush of gratitude towards the two women she was sharing a car with. “I really don’t.”

“No, what you don’t deserve is John treating you like shit,” said Amy.

“I second that,” Bonnie added. “You really did not deserve that. and I will make him pay.”

“Mm,” Clara hummed noncommittally, closing her eyes and resting her head on Bonnie’s shoulder. “I guess.”

“Well, we know you didn’t,” Amy emphasised. “So, don’t let that man tell you any differently, and don’t let him make you feel like a bad person.”

The three of them lapsed into comfortable silence, and Clara allowed her mind to wander, thinking back over the previous few months. There had been her initial dramatic arrival in Úine, unannounced and dripping wet, and then the slow integration into John’s life. Timid touches. Warm hugs. Learning to share a space together, the two of them orbiting around each other like astral bodies. They had understood each other, as surely and completely as Clara understood her twin, and she had relished that closeness — that ability to understand and be understood without the need for words, or overt declarations, or grand gestures. It was simply… being. Being, and being together.

Now? Now, she had lost that. She knew that she still had Bonnie — her other half, with whom she had shared a womb and a life and, even now, a connection that was as innate as breathing. And yet the loss of John was still as keen as a wound — she had lost her soulmate through his own stupidity, and, while she should not be blaming herself, she was.
Or should she be? She had failed to respect his boundaries or his space; it was little wonder he had grown angry with her and lashed out. She should have known what the house meant to him; should have understood why her suggestion was tactless. She had managed to fit herself around the memory of River in the weeks and months that had preceded their row, so what had changed between them?

Perhaps, deep down, she had grown tired of living with a ghost. Perhaps she no longer wanted to live in the shadow of another woman, and that had subconsciously driven her words and her actions. She had tried to understand and tried to accommodate John’s wishes; she had striven to note when he tensed up and what prompted it, and sought not to repeat those words or actions, and sought to avoid places or items that might cause him to consider her to be overstepping the mark. She had woven a life for herself in Scotland that had been based on careful avoidance — of the subject, of the memory, of the words — and that had been... imperfect, certainly, but better than her life in London without Danny had been.

Clara knew she could overanalyse what had happened between her and John and seek to apportion blame for hours, but it came down to the fact that she and John were equally culpable: he for refusing to let go of the past, and her for broaching the subject in an insensitive manner. She should not have been so overconfident in her suggestions — should not have treated the house as though it was hers. She had grown so comfortable there that it had become an integral part of her, yet she’d known deep down that she’d been playing a dangerous game to allow it to become so.

Had she been insensitive, in using the plural pronoun and making assumptions based on their future? Had she been unreasonable? Maybe she was not as culpable as she had previously considered. Of course, there was her perceived “sin” of arriving in Ùine unannounced and taking over John’s space, yet he was the one clinging to his past. She had never expected him to forget his marriage, not completely, and yet his refusal to discuss his emotions surrounding River had led them to here: her speeding away from Scotland, and him brooding in his castle, undoubtedly alone save for his dog.

Perhaps that was the problem: he had been alone for so long that the reconfiguring of his life to include another human being was an alien concept. Perhaps he was simply too set in his ways, too determined to memorialise his wife to consider moving forwards and creating a future for himself. She wanted to hate him for that, wanted to loathe his stagnation and stubbornness, and yet she couldn’t. All she felt was love, and sorrow, and loss, and she yearned for it to pass, although she knew it never truly would. There was no overcoming this sort of pain. There was only the hope that it would fade to a dull, consistent ache that was more easily overlooked, and she knew that time was the only healer that would be able to render the matter less raw.

“Clara?” Bonnie whispered, carefully stroking her hair with one hand. “Are you napping?”

She closed her eyes all the tighter, and wished for the blissful ignorance that would come with sleep.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Amy makes a surprising confession, and the matter of where Clara is going to stay is raised.

Upon arriving back in London, there was the sudden, unanticipated uncertainty of where Clara was to stay. She mostly stayed out of the discussion, half-listening while laying passively in the back of the car as her twin argued with Amy, the car parked in a side road as they each presented their own home as being the optimum place for Clara to... well, they seemed to be using the word “recover” rather a lot, and it seemed fitting to a degree. Putting herself back together again after losing John would be nothing short of a recovery, but it was something she now knew that she would not be doing alone.

How had it come to this? How could it be that she had somehow gone from being a paragon of opinions and wit to being... well, little more help than a small child, unable and unwilling to join in with the grown-ups' discussion and instead opting for apathetic inertia? There was only one possible root cause, and her mind skirted around it uncomfortably, although she knew what it was. John.

Thoughts of him were unavoidable, no matter how intently she tried to focus her mind on the cut and thrust of the debate unfolding before her. She wondered what he was doing and how he was coping with her departure; she wondered whether Idris would be missing her already; and, most of all, she wondered whether he would make any attempt to fix the mess he had created. Somehow, she doubted it —in her time with him, he hadn’t struck her as being confident or competent enough to be able to admit fault in his own actions, particularly not ones with this degree of gravitas. The odd small disagreement between them? Copping culpability to that fell within his remit, but something as serious as this seemed well beyond the realms of the fixable —or, rather, she knew it would seem it in his eyes. His words had fallen between them like a heavy and insurmountable obstacle, and she could barely see a way forward.

"Urm," she said softly, growing tired of listening to the two women sat in the front of the car bickering. Neither of them paid her any heed, so she cleared her throat and said more loudly: “Urm, you two? Excuse me?”

They finally fell silent and turned their attention back to her in anticipation.

“Can’t I just go back to mine?” she suggested optimistically, wanting nothing more than the familiar reassurance of her own home and her own company. “Please?”

Bonnie shifted uncomfortably, looking down at her nails rather than at her sister. “About that…”

Clara felt her stomach lurch at the prospect of her own flat being unavailable for any reason. “What? What’s happened to the place?”

“Nothing bad! It’s just dusty and musty and… well…”

“What?” Clara asked again, already feeling a sickening sense of foreboding as to what Bonnie was about to say. “What is it? Spit it out.”
“I don’t want you to be alone,” Bonnie said with magnanimity, looking up and meeting Clara’s gaze with unwavering confidence. “OK?”

“Why?”

Bonnie and Amy exchanged a look, before Amy turned her attention back to Clara and her expression softened in a way that was perhaps intended to be comforting but instead was nothing short of patronising. “Babe…”

“Don’t,” Clara snarled, immediately riled by the tone taken. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a child, because I’m not. Talk to me like a grown-up, or don’t talk to me at all.”

Amy sighed, running a hand through her hair and saying unwillingly: “We don’t want you to be alone because we think it would be a risk to you in your current state.”

There was a long, terse pause as her words sunk in. “So…” Clara blinked at them in stupefaction, unable to grasp what they were saying. “You really think that I’d…”

There was another much longer silence.

“Clara,” Bonnie began, her tone verging on desperation. “You have to understand-”

“You really think I’d be shallow enough to kill myself over a man?”

“You lost the will to go on after Danny,” Amy pointed out, and Clara shot her a filthy look. Her friend held up both her hands defensively, giving a casual little shrug. “Hey, I’m just saying.”

“And we all know that this isn’t going to be any different, so we want to supervise you,” Bonnie added. “OK?”

“I’m not a fucking child,” Clara snapped, feeling herself beginning to lose her temper. “I don’t need to be supervised and I don’t need you to make sure I’m not left unattended with any sharp objects or rope-like materials.”

“Of course not,” Bonnie said, in a maddeningly calm tone that only served to rile Clara further. “But you need someone with you to look after you.”

“Jesus Christ, Bonnie, I’m twenty-eight years old, I don’t need looking after!”

“You did before,” Bonnie said in a voice that wavered only fractionally. “After Danny… I don’t even want to think about what would have happened if Dad and I hadn’t been there for you. God knows, you’d probably have just wasted away and we’d have found your lifeless body weeks later.”

“Don’t be so over-dramatic, you wouldn’t have-”

“I can’t lose you,” Bonnie said in a rush, her eyes filling with tears as she reached for Clara’s hand and gripped it like a lifeline. “OK? I can’t… I can’t lose you. Not after everything.”

“Bon…”

“Please. I…” her twin’s voice cracked, and a single tear ran down her cheek. “I couldn’t bear it.”

Clara felt her heart pang uncomfortably and she sat up, leaning forward until her forehead rested against her twin’s. “You won’t,” she vowed in a low voice. “Bonnie, I promise you, you won’t. I’m going to stick around and annoy you for a good long while yet.”
“You’d bloody well better,” Bonnie mumbled, pressing a kiss to her sister’s forehead. “Look, you’re coming back to mine, alright?”

“I can manage!” Amy protested, sounding both thoroughly exasperated and yet weary of the whole subject. “Jesus, I’m pregnant, not completely incapacitated, you know. I can manage Clara living with us.”

“You’re…” Clara’s attention snapped to her best friend and her mouth fell open in shock. “Wait, you’re…”

Amy pressed a hand to her mouth, looking gleeful yet guilty. “Whoops. Wasn’t how I was planning on telling you.”

“I…” Clara blinked in stupefaction, looking from Amy to her sister, who looked somewhat abashed. “Hang on, did you know about this?!”

“I might’ve, yeah. We were… trying to work out a way to tell you.”

Clara punched Amy lightly in the shoulder. “You bitch, that’s for telling my sister about this before me.”

“Well, you’d only have raced down here and insisted on buying half of Mothercare for the little one.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t have complained, but I didn’t want to infringe on your time with John, or make you feel like you were having to choose between being an honorary auntie or being a girlfriend.”

“Well, I’d have noticed eventually, you know?” Clara deadpanned, arching an eyebrow. “When it got to the stage at which you looked like you’d swallowed a planet.”

“This is true.”

“Congratulations, you,” Clara beamed, giving Amy and awkward hug over the back of the driver’s seat. “I know how much you’ve wanted this. And also… I will therefore be going back to Bonnie’s, because I really don’t want to have to share a bathroom with a pregnant and vomiting woman. No offence.”

“Full offence taken.”

“Look, I’ve actually won this discussion,” Bonnie interjected. “So, can we make a move in the direction of my place?”

“I suppose so,” Amy quipped, starting the engine. “In the meantime…”

“I have a lot of questions,” Clara said eagerly, buckling her seatbelt and finding herself glad to have something positive to focus on. “So many questions.”

In general, Bonnie’s house was not the kind of place that Clara would typically choose to spend her free time. It was large and modern and there was a lot of monochrome —and yet, today, it was the
most comforting place she could imagine herself to be. She was stood in the lounge with a soft black blanket wrapped around her shoulders, looking up at a new addition to the room: a wall of silver-framed photographs, arranged fastidiously in chronological order and each meticulously hung in perfect alignment. On the left were photographs from their parents’ wedding day, their birth, and their infancy, and as Clara let her gaze pan across the display, she found the most recent addition was a selfie of the two of them taken in Ùine some months before.

“Hey,” her twin said softly, standing behind her and wrapping her arms around Clara’s waist. She rested her chin on her sister’s shoulder, and Clara felt some of the anxiety leave her in the warm familiarity of her sister’s embrace “Admiring my memory wall?”

“Yeah,” Clara leaned back against her sister, her eyes fixing on a photograph of the two of them with their mum on the first day of school. “What inspired this? It doesn’t really go with the whole… clinical vibe.”

“The clinical vibe got boring,” Bonnie shrugged, dismissively. “I wanted to have something here that was actually significant, so I wanted people who I loved to have a place in my home.”

“Like a shrine?”

“Don’t make me sound creepy,” Bonnie teased. “But, yeah, I suppose so.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, both of them admiring the photographs and allowing memories of happier times to wash over them.

“I miss Mum,” Clara admitted after a few moments, her voice little more than a whisper. “Still. I wonder what she’d make of all of this.”

“All of what? The photos?”

“My string of failed, crappy relationships with men,” Clara shrugged. “And women, actually. I’ve not exactly done much better in that department.”

“You’re doing better than me,” Bonnie reminded her. “You know, what with my absolute and complete lack of a girlfriend.”

“You’ll find someone,” Clara promised her, then added: “If not, there’s always cats.”

“This is true.”

“So, if all else fails, we could just move in together and be the Single Lady Cat Twins.”

“We could,” Bonnie chuckled. “Let’s not give up on love just yet though.”

“Why?” Clara closed her eyes. “Things with John aren’t going so well, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“He’ll come to his senses,” Bonnie assured her. “He’d be mad not to—you’re beautiful and smart and kind and he does know you’re capable of love, he’s just an oversensitive prat.”

“I don’t know,” Clara sighed, wondering whether her sister was right or not. “We’ll have to see.”

“I’m always right,” Bonnie deadpanned. “Remember that.”

“You…” Clara swallowed, turning to face her twin and hugging her properly. “Bonnie, I’m sorry.”

“What?” her twin frowned, returning the hug, and yet Clara sensed her confusion. “For what?”
“I’ve… I’ve not been the best person to you, these last few years.”

“Clara…”

“And I feel shitty about it, and I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologise,” Bonnie murmured, letting Clara cling to her and stroking her hair. “It’s alright. I forgive you.”

“Yeah, but now I’m impeding on your personal space.”

“The hug is nice, actually.”

“I meant your house.”

“Clara, it’s alright,” Bonnie reassured her, pulling away and putting her hand on her sister’s cheek. “I want you here. You wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“I just feel bad about it.”

“Please, please, don’t.”

She dithered, uncertain how to proceed. “I want to build a life for myself again,” Clara chewed her lip. “And, if John isn’t in that life… well, I don’t know how I feel about that, but I want you to be in it. Please.”

“And I will be, OK?” her twin smiled. “You don’t ever have to worry about that, because I will be here for you, no matter what.”

“Even while I’m moping about John?”

“Even then, Clara.”
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Missy and John formulate a plan to help him win Clara back.

“Are you even thinking about apologising?” Missy asked, setting down her teacup with a flourish before affixing him with a worryingly measured look. Coming from his sister, expressions such as those tended to be accompanied by long, drawn-out interrogations on subjects he would really rather not be cross-examined about, and then inevitable arguments over her treatment of such matters. He’d been subject to them frequently after River’s death, and he’d sincerely hoped that his eventual furious response them had discouraged Missy from using the technique again. At least the fact he was at Missy’s place meant he could leave if necessary—he considered that a small mercy. “To Clara, that is, although I think I’m probably due several apologies, too.”

“Why do I owe you any apologies?!” he asked with incredulity, aiming to distract his sister from her topic of conversation by encouraging her to talk about herself. “What have I done to you?!”

“Inflicted your miserable, mopey, ‘Oh, poor me, I scared Clara away by being a prick but now I feel sorry for myself and want lots of sympathy’ presence upon me and caused me to actually have to spend time worrying about you —how’s that for starters?”

“Missy, need I remind you that you’re my baby sister, and I’m meant to be the one worrying about you.”

“Let’s be honest, John, aside from when You-Know-What happened, you’ve been the one who’s required much more worrying about.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you have a predilection for tragedy,” Missy shrugged, and he narrowed his eyes at her, warningly. “And a flair for drama.”

“Yeah, but I can cope with things. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“What, you mean like you coped before?” she asked, and the sudden softness of her tone took him by surprise. “John, we both know that you didn’t, so don’t try to lie.”

“What do you care?” he said gruffly, dropping his gaze to the table to avoid having to see the concern etched on her face. He turned his cup around on its saucer, running his thumb over the handle and swallowing thickly. “You’re my cold, heartless, psycho sister.”

“Yes,” she said with a maddening amount of patience, taking a sip of her tea. This was entirely unlike his sister, and he wasn’t sure whether to be more nervous about her words or her manner. “The key word there is ‘sister.’ I’m still related to you — however much I don’t deserve to be — and I’m still worried about you. Clara made you happier than I’ve seen you in a long time, and that made me happy.”

“Yeah, she made me happy… until she didn’t.”
“Yes, until you drove her away by being an absolute arsehole and making the sort of comments that frankly, I’m surprised she didn’t slap you for. I bloody well would have done.”

“You’re really quite shit at being comforting, has anyone ever told you that?”

“Yes. You. Many times.”

“Well…” he dithered for a moment. “That, again.”

“John,” she said sternly, putting down her cup and reaching over and taking his hand. He blinked down at their entwined fingers, disconcerted and, yet, comforted by the unfamiliarity of her touch. “I know that sometimes I can be… difficult. But you’re my big brother and I care about you, alright? Much more than you know.”

“Missy…” his voice cracked, and he cursed himself for losing his composure. “I was the one who was meant to look after you — I promised Da that I would…”

“I know,” she edged her chair around the table until they were shoulder to shoulder, then slipped her arm around him. “And you have.”

“But-”

“John, you were the one who got me away from Harry.”

“Well, yes… but Regan-”

“John…” she sighed, resting her head on his shoulder, and he allowed himself to relax a fraction. “He might’ve been a bastard, but I know he would never hurt my daughter. He thinks she’s… oh, I don’t know. A goddess incarnate, or similar. The day he lays a finger on her is the day I kill him.”

“Missy, I really don’t deserve praise for doing the right thing.”

“You do,” she shrugged, then said in a small voice: “Because a lot of people who knew me didn’t do the right thing.”

“I’m really not the hero you’re trying to make me out to be.”

“John, you are to me.”

The confession was soft and rushed and unexpected, and they both blinked at each other in muted surprise once the words had left Missy’s mouth. John felt a rush of affection for her, but he was unsure how to express it in a manner that wouldn’t leave her panicked or embarrassed.

“Really?” he asked, opting to raise his eyebrows in a manner that she knew would find teasing, but not humiliating.

“Delete that memory,” she said at once, hiding her face in his shoulder and groaning loudly. “Delete it, or your ego is going to grow, and I’m never going to live it down.”

“Missy,” he pulled his sister into a proper hug, ignoring her muted yelp of surprise. “Sometimes you can be very sweet.”

“I’m not sweet, I’m the queen of evil.”

“Nope, I’m pretty sure you’re sweet.”
“Evil.”
“Sweet.’
“Evil.”
“Sweet.”

“I’m going to thump you if you say that again, and I’d also advise letting go of me before I have to physically harm you.”

“Sorry, no can do,” John clung to her all the tighter, relishing the moment. “This is actually a really nice hug.”

“Fine,” she groused. “We can prolong the hug. But I would like it on record that you’re still a prat.”

“You’ve said. Several times.”

“How are you going to win Clara back?”

“Who says I’m going to win her back?”

“Your head, your heart, and your di-”

“Hey!” he protested, yet continued the hug. “Be nice.”

“You know I’m right,” she said, and she could tell by her tone that she was smirking. “You need to win her back, or you’re both just going to be absolutely miserable as sin until you die. Failing that, I’m going to have to seduce her to cheer her up.”

“You are not going to seduce my Clara.”

“You Clara? Well, how telling. Think of it as friendly motivational competition, brother dear.”

“Fine,” he rolled his eyes, acquiescing to her nagging. “I really will have to win her back, won’t I?”

“Absolutely,” Missy pulled away from him, getting to her feet and heading towards a cupboard in the corner of her hut. Reaching inside, she extracted a large wall chart bearing a calendar, several neon packets of Post-Its, and a handful of marker pens in a variety of colours, before sitting back down at the table with her haul and uncapping a pen with her teeth. “Right, first things f-”

“Hang on,” John held up a hand, blinking down at the assembled materials in awe. “What the hell is all of that?”

“I forward-planned.”

“You…” he couldn’t help it. He started to laugh. “You really are incredibly devious, you do know that, right?”

“I do,” Missy grinned, wolfishly. “Now, are we going to make plans to win your tiny girlfriend back, or are you just going to sit there and compliment me?”

“Fine,” he groused, reaching for a pen of his own and holding it aloft warily. “Making plans it is.”
Four hours later, as John headed back to his house with a spark of hope in his heart, he had to admit that it had been a productive afternoon. There had been brainstorming, and weighing up of options, and lists, and calendar dates being circled. There had been colour-coded Post-Its stuck on different days of the months to come, and a multitude of neatly written instructions in various shades of marker pen. All of the above were now clutched under his arm with absolute care, and he vowed to find a place in the house to pin up his and Missy’s plan to win Clara back.

He had stuffed up. He knew that — he had known it from the second that the accusatory words had left his mouth. Even if Clara hadn’t reacted the way she had, he still would have fought to make it up to her and to show her that he was sorry for what he had said. He wasn’t good at these things — at feelings, or expressing himself, or being tactful — and now he had managed to alienate the second woman to ever love him, driving her back to London and rendering her heartbroken. He thanked god that Missy’s gentle prodding had helped him to hone his thoughts and ensure that his plan to apologise to Clara was successful, and, although he wouldn’t have told his sister, he was grateful for her intervention. She might be strange and — at times — terrifying, but she had the advantage of an innate understanding of her own gender, and he sincerely hoped that her suggestions would be positively received by Clara, and that Missy hadn’t provided him with any less-than-helpful hints.

Opening the front door and stepping over the threshold, he was surprised to find that Idris was not waiting for him, bouncing around his heels and barking joyously as she usually did. Heading towards the lounge, he clicked his tongue softly, then paused to listen for the sound of her claws scrabbling for purchase.

“Idris?” he called softly, when no response was forthcoming. “Idris, where are you, hey girl?”

Momentary panic overcame him, and he pushed the door to the living room open with a shaking hand only to find his dog curled up on what had been Clara’s spot on the sofa, her nose and paws buried in Clara’s favourite blanket. As he blinked down at her in stunned sadness, she raised her head and let out a sorrowful whimper, before burrowing back into the blanket with a resigned huff of despondency.

John felt tears burn at his eyes, and he swiped a hand over them carelessly, feeling the foolish urge not to let his dog see him cry. As he took a step forwards and reached for Idris, he realised he had forgotten about the calendar he had previously been clinging to like a lifeline, and could only watch in horror as it tumbled to the floor. He felt his heart sink into his boots as he saw the Post-It notes fluttering away from the poster and landing on the worn rug like autumn leaves, all of his careful planning in tatters.

Sinking to his knees, numb with disbelief, he put his head in his hands and screamed. Screamed in rage, screamed in sadness, screamed in agony. Screamed for Clara, for himself, and for everything he had lost. He felt himself beginning to cry out of sheer instinct — a physical manifestation of the guilt and remorse and self-loathing he had been carrying around for the past few days — and he no longer cared that Idris would see him lose control. He took a deep breath and screamed again, feeling himself break down as he curled up into the foetal position.

He sensed Idris’s change in mood at once — sensed a change in her acuity, a change in her perception of him. There a soft thump as she launched herself off the sofa, and then she laid down beside him, pressing her face against his arms in a display of overt concern for his well-being. Soft whines of distress left her mouth as she pawed at him, and he rolled onto his side and opened his arms to her, letting her crawl against his chest and cuddling her as though he were a small child once again, clinging to a favourite teddy bear rather than a real, living, breathing dog.
She tucked her head under his chin as he continued to sob, letting out quiet sounds of worry from time to time and resting one paw on his shoulder, the contact human-like enough to elicit another wave of hysteria. He buried his face in her fur and wept, pressing kisses to the top of her head in gratitude that in his hour of need, she was there for him.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Clara is determined to plan a stable future for herself, but an unexpected message throws that into doubt...

“So, Clara,” the male interviewer on the panel sat back in his chair and affixed her with a kindly expression. She knew what was coming, but that didn’t make the prospect any easier. “You’re doing really well, just a couple more questions to ask now. We notice that there’s a small gap in your employment history between November last year and now. Could you possibly shed some light on that? Unfortunately, we’re required to check, for-”

“Safeguarding purposes, I know,” Clara mumbled, looking down at her lap and wondering how best to explain the situation to the two strangers sat before her. Applying for this job had been a stupid idea. Even if she lied now, once they requested a reference from Coal Hill, they would discover how abruptly her employment ended, and that would be that: no job for her. She had been a fool to just up and leave as she had — she should have thought about the future, rather than selfishly focusing on the present. “Look, I…” she was horrified to find her eyes fill with tears as she thought about losing Danny, and about falling in love with John, and about everything that had happened in between.

“It’s alright.” One of the female interviewers, Susan-something, reached into her bag and handed her a small packet of tissues. Clara extracted one and dabbed at her eyes as surreptitiously as she could manage, keen to preserve her dignity and composure. “Was it something in your personal life?”

“Yes,” she paused, taking a deep breath and then explaining: “My boyfriend, who I worked with, was killed in an accident. I went back to work but found it very difficult, so I resigned and left quite abruptly. I don’t know if they’ll tell you that when you request a reference, so… I’m telling you now, just in case.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Susan murmured, looking more sympathetic than Clara had expected. “We’ll take that into account, now you’ve told us. Are you sure that you feel able to come back to work? There’s no reason to rush into anything if you aren’t ready.”

Clara nodded emphatically. “It’s the right time. I’ve had a few months to clear my head and work through everything, and now I really just want to get back into a school and do some good.”

“But not as a teacher?”

“No, not as a teacher,” she offered them a weak smile. “Having seen what loss is like from an adult’s point of view, I want to help kids to deal with it.”

“Which is commendable,” the male interviewer looked impressed. “Now, do you have any questions for us, Clara?”
“Hey,” Bonnie said, as Clara yanked open the car door and climbed inside the blessedly warm interior out of the spring rain. “How did it go?”

“Alright,” Clara wrinkled her nose. “They asked about the gap in my employment history.”

“I said they would.”

“I know. I still cried.”

“Ah.”

“They seemed quite understanding, so there’s that?” Clara grimaced, then groaned and put her head in her hands. “God, why am I doing this, Bon?”

“Because you’re a good person who wants to give something back to students, and also re-enter the workforce as a productive member of society.”

“Are you insinuating I’m currently not productive?” Clara deadpanned. “That seems rude as I’ve been keeping house for you for two weeks.”

“You know what I meant,” Bonnie started the engine, and Clara put her seatbelt on automatically. “I think going back to work will do you good; it’ll give you something to focus on that isn’t your love life or your crushing sense of self-pity.”

“Hey!” she protested. “It is not crushing.”

“Babe, you literally just cried in a job interview.”

“God, you’re annoying.”

“God, if you keep winding me up, you can walk home,” Bonnie smacked her twin’s arm playfully as they pulled out of their parking space. “Be nice, sis.”

“Yes, boss,” she mumbled, rolling her eyes. “Can we get coffee on the way back?”

“You are actually like having a five year-old, you know that?”

“Well, can we? I’ll pay, don’t worry about that. I just want to spend time with my sister on her rare and precious day off.”

“They’re increasingly less rare,” Bonnie mused, then caught Clara’s guilty expression. “No, that’s not a bad thing! Means I get more time with you, and more time to… be normal.”

“You aren’t normal, you’re a high-flying woman of means.”

“Shut up, I’m normal now, aren’t I?”

“You’re picking up your tragically widowed and then tragically suddenly single twin from a job interview for a job that is way out of her comfort zone. In a Mercedes. On your day off from meeting with the government to discuss trade policies. While wearing… where’s that coat from? Enlighten me?”

Bonnie mumbled something unintelligible.

“Sorry? Didn’t quite catch that. Bit louder?”
“Burberry,” her twin added more clearly, then grinned fondly at her. “You’re so mean to me.”

“Oh, always,” Clara reached over and took her sister’s hand on the gearstick, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you. For helping me with everything.”


“You don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t, but I want to. You’re the other half of me. If you look bad, we both look bad. Sometimes literally — remember when you dyed your hair green?”

Clara laughed. “If anyone else could hear us, they’d think we hated each other.”

“We do,” Bonnie said with absolute seriousness. “Clara who? Can’t stand the bitch.”

“Bonnie who? Oh, that cow who works with the government? The snooty one? Ew.”

Bonnie looked to be on the verge of replying when Clara’s phone chimed, and she reached for it automatically, checking the notification and freezing. Her breathing became faster and shallower, and she squeezed her eyes shut as though that might help.

“Clara?” Bonnie pulled the car over, killing the engine and reaching for her sister. “Clara, what is it?”

“It’s…”

She held the phone out to her twin, her hand shaking.

**John Smith:** Hi. Just wanted to send a quick text to see how you’re doing. I hope you’re alright and that London is taking care of you, I miss you. John x

“Is he…” Bonnie blinked at the screen in stunned stupefaction, her face contorting into a mask of fury. “Is he fucking serious?”

“He misses me,” Clara said in a tremulous voice, caught somewhere between anger, shock, and longing. “He-”

“Don’t,” Bonnie said firmly. “Don’t you dare let your head be turned by some stupid text message claiming he misses you.”

“But-”

“Clara. What he’s saying is stock ex-boyfriend bullshit.”

“Is he even my ex-boyfriend?” Clara’s lip wobbled, and she fought to keep calm. “I thought we were on a break.”

“Does he know that? Do you? You just called yourself ‘single.’”

“Yeah, temporarily! And mostly as a joke!”

“Well, this is a conversation you need to have with him… but not if he’s going to come out with trite, meaningless drivel like, ‘I miss you and I hope you’re OK.’”

“Isn’t it good that he’s trying, at least?”
“I suppose,” Bonnie sighed. “But it also isn’t fair on you. Look at you; you’re a state, and that’s after one text.”

“Because I love him, Bon.”

“I know,” her twin said softly. “I know. But after everything—”

“I can’t just make it stop.”

“I know,” Bonnie repeated. “Look, why don’t we go for coffee like you suggested? We don’t have to talk about John. Or talk at all. But I think it might help.”

Clara nodded and lapsed into silence, trying to reconcile that last argument between her and John with the three simple words in his text.

*I miss you.*

He missed her? How could he have the gall to miss her when it was his own arrogance and stubbornness that had driven her away in the first place? How could he dare to make her feel bad with the words, as though she had simply upped and left entirely unprovoked? She had left because of what he said. She had left because of what he did. She had left because he had hurt her; it had not been an impulsive flight of fancy, or a sudden whim. And yet... she still felt guilty. The thought of him alone in Úine with only Idris and Missy for company was an uncomfortable one, and she prayed that he was looking after himself. His concern for her seemed sweet — albeit unwelcome and misplaced — yet she knew full well that he was the one that should elicit concern. She had a support network. She had friends. She had family. She had the entire population of London, unfriendly and anonymous as they were, to consider as potential friends. He had no one besides his weird sister and faithful dog.

She did miss him. Of course she missed him — it was a tangible sense of absence that weighed her down each day from morning to evening, and plagued her dreams at night. She wanted nothing more than to return to Scotland and confront him, but she knew the inevitable conclusion of the argument would be their reunion, and that was an impossibility until the anger and hurt had faded on both sides and they were able to have a reasonable conversation without capitulating to their feelings in a non-critical manner. They needed to be able to analyse their relationship. They needed to be able to make sensible choices. And, for now... well, that was entirely implausible. The pain was still too raw, and Clara knew how her desire to return to Úine would be received.

Her dad’s anger upon learning of John’s words had frightened her. She recalled him shouting down the phone at herself and Bonnie, as though by doing so, his fury might be transmitted back to John. He had pleaded to be given John’s phone number to tell him exactly what he thought of the bastard for breaking his daughter’s heart, but she had abstained from giving it to him, not wanting to burn her bridges just yet. His righteous anger had been welcome, particularly when he had arrived in London with an array of her favourite things and held her tight, promising that this too would pass, but she knew that, if she expressed a wish to return to Úine, his temper would be directed at her. As far as he was concerned, she had had a lucky escape. As far as he was concerned, John was a bastard of the worst sort, and Clara was well shot of him — a view shared by her sister, by Amy, and by Rory.

She couldn’t just take off, anyway. Amy needed her, and Bonnie was enjoying spending time with her. She had a potential new job on the horizon, and she was rebuilding her life slowly, but surely. Going back to Úine was a terrible idea. A terrible, dangerous, appealing idea. She couldn’t quite shake herself free of the lure of it, but she clenched her fists as tightly as she could at her sides and willed herself to ignore the notion. Coffee with Bonnie. She was going for coffee with Bonnie, and John should be overlooked and forgotten about.
It wasn’t until she was sat at a table in Costa Coffee as Bonnie ordered their drinks that she dared look at her phone again.

Hi. Just wanted to send a quick text to see how you’re doing. I hope you’re alright and that London is taking care of you, I miss you. John x

John wanted to know she was alright. Surely that was positive? He was concerned about her well-being, although that seemed to be a perpetual feature of her existence at present — everyone was concerned about her well-being, including herself.

He hoped that London was bearable. It wasn’t Scotland, but, in some ways, that was beneficial. London and Úine were as different as chalk and cheese — she had gone from a forest playground to an urban jungle, and yet the distractions the capital posed were welcome. There was always some theatre production or film or arts festival to attend; always someone to see or chat to; always somewhere to visit. She was never bored — not for long, anyway — and it left her little time to dwell on matters, except when she was in bed at night, Bonnie slumbering beside her, and she was lost to her own thoughts.

He missed her. He’d signed off with a kiss.

He missed her.

He missed—

Clara Oswald: London is not too bad and I am doing OK, Bonnie is keeping me busy. It’s nice to spend time with her. I miss you too. Clara xx

She hit send before she could think about it, and was greeted with a loud groan. Looking up, she was confronted with her exasperated sister, holding aloft two mugs of coffee and looking thoroughly bemused.

“Jesus wept, Clara,” Bonnie exclaimed. “What the hell did you do that for?”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Clara finally admits something to Bonnie... and to herself.

As the days slipped into weeks, Clara began to abandon all hopes of a reconciliation with John. He texted her from time to time, and there had been a phone call which she hadn’t felt brave enough to answer, but other than polite small talk, there was nothing forthcoming from him. No apology. No words of comfort. Most hurtfully of all, no words of love. It was like they were strangers exchanging tokens of polite chit-chat on the Tube — there were plenty of asinine comments about the weather and the news and how they both were, yet she knew that neither of them was being particularly honest about the latter. She was loathe to confess to him how badly he had hurt her, and she knew he would be equally loathe to acknowledge it, and so they muddled through, stilted and uncomfortable and skirting around their feelings.

Clara should’ve been happy, and, in many ways, she was. She’d been offered the job she’d so awkwardly interviewed for all those weeks before and, despite her initial nerves, she was now flourishing in the role. Students trusted her — perhaps it was something about her honest, open face, or her diminutive height, or her frank words — and she enjoyed listening to their problems and providing them with comfort, guidance, or advice. Being able to make a tangible difference to their emotional well being was different to trying to teach stubborn teenagers the nuances of Shakespeare — and yet, somehow, it felt natural to her. The thought of standing in front of thirty students she didn’t know was enough to strike terror into her heart, and even the thought of returning to Coal Hill, cap in hand, was enough to make her break into a cold sweat, and so she would remain in her present position, regardless of her father’s digs about wasting her education. This wasn’t wasting it. This was using her own emotional intelligence to help others, and it was a new challenge, certainly, but not a waste of time or effort or education.

Her father was a constant source of aggravation and stress. He was openly gleeful about the so-called “end” of her relationship with John — despite her repeated assertions that it was not an end, but rather only a pause — and he took great delight in slagging off John’s words, character, dress sense, wealth, or any other number of “fair targets,” whenever the subject was broached — which, given her father’s seemingly one-track mind, was often. She’d stopped picking up the phone, letting it go to voicemail instead, and, when her father had threatened to come and visit, she and Bonnie had formulated a lie about going away for the weekend, and had instead camped out in the lounge with Netflix and snacks, determinedly not answering their phones and pretending not to be in.

Despite her best intentions of moving out of Bonnie’s place and back into her own flat, as time had passed, she had found herself increasingly reticent to leave. Her twin seemed in no hurry to hasten her out the door, and thus she had built a life for herself in her sister’s spare room, living out of a suitcase and somehow loving every second of the experience. It was like an ongoing sleepover, and, while disagreements occurred, they never lasted long and could usually be overcome with a bottle of wine, a packet of biscuits, or a well-timed surprise hug. It was a constant comfort to have Bonnie with her, and she felt an enormous sense of gratitude to her sister for enduring her presence, something she tried to mitigate by picking up her fair share of chores and cooking dinner as often as she was able. And yet, still, she felt as though something was missing.
In times of idleness, or just before sleep, or first thing in the morning, she would allow her mind to slip back to the Cairngorms, to Úine. She would think about Idris, and the estate, and her enormous bed in its cavern-like room. She would remember the simple joys of walking around the library, knuckles trailing over the spines of the books held within; of hiking through the rain-soaked forest as the sun slipped below the horizon; of playing fetch with Idris and watching her return with consistently bigger sticks each time. She tried not to let her mind dwell on John, and yet it was inevitable — he would enter her thoughts uninvited, the memories tinged with sadness, familiarity, and longing. She recalled their lazy winter days lying on the sofa together, wrapped around each other and both curled up with a book. She recalled cooking together in the evenings, moving fluidly around each other like water. She recalled kissing him, and the feel of his hands on her bare skin in the darkness, and she would bite down on her lip to keep herself from crying.

She missed him with every fibre of her being, even though she knew she shouldn’t. She felt a pervasive sense of guilt about the matter, knowing full well that she shouldn’t miss someone who had treated her so negatively. And yet… before the argument and before things had turned sour, there had been the good times, and the kindness, and the love. He had not treated her poorly out of deliberate cruelty, but rather out of a neglectful lack of concern, and that seemed to make all the difference in her mind. That was how she legitimised her grieving for a man who had hurt her so intensely. He had not done so on purpose. He had not been unkind with malicious intent. And yet still she felt guilt and a crushing sense of loss. She didn’t dare to try and voice her feelings to Bonnie or Amy — she was certain they would not understand her conundrum — and so she suffered on, alone and confused and hurt, until finally it became more than she could bear.

Her confession happened unexpectedly. She was watching television with her sister after work, both of them a couple of glasses into a bottle of white wine, and they were talking — or, rather, gossiping, as they often did under the freeing influence of alcohol — about anything and nothing. Work. The news. Colleagues. Friends. Old flames. New flames.

“Hey,” Bonnie nudged her and pointed to the screen, and Clara turned her attention back to the TV with some difficulty. It was a late-night repeat of some BBC comedy from years prior, and she’d barely been paying attention. “Doesn’t that bloke look like yours?”

“Look like my what?” Clara asked, squinting at the screen. She knew vaguely what Bonnie had meant, but it seemed safest to request clarification nonetheless. No point putting her foot in it without due cause.

“You know,” Bonnie giggled, reaching for her glass and taking a sip. “Your bloke. John.”

“He’s not my bloke,” Clara said sombly, staring at the man onscreen with curiosity. He looked much like John — albeit John ten or fifteen years ago — and his accent was similarly Glaswegian enough to be jarring. Where the similarities ended was the language; this was some political satire show, and the vulgarity spilling out of the stranger’s mouth was enough to make Clara quirk an eyebrow. She was used to the casual cursing of students, and to uncouth men in bars, but this was something else altogether. She bit back a giggle at the sudden ridiculousness of the situation. “Besides, John never told me I looked like a sweaty octopus trying to unhook a bra.”

“Oh, of course not,” Bonnie deadpanned. “You’re more like a highly adept octopus trying to unhook a bra. Succeeding at unhooking a bra.”

Clara smiled fleetingly at her sister. “Precisely.”

“He really does look like John though.”

“Yeah,” Clara shrugged noncommittally, not wanting to be drawn into anything. “I guess.”
“Sorry, I shouldn’t-”

“No, it’s fine,” Clara ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass. “You can mention him, I don’t mind. I’m not going to cry or anything.”

“Liar.”

“What?”

“You think I can’t hear you at night?” Bonnie raised an eyebrow, reaching over and placing a hand on her sister’s arm. Clara blinked down at her twin’s hand, disconcerted by the sudden physical contact. “Come on, Clara. I’m many things, but blind to my sister being upset is not one of them.”

Clara blinked up at her twin in stupefaction for several seconds, and before she knew it, her face had crumpled and she had begun to cry. “I just…” she mumbled, hating herself for losing her composure. “Bon…”

“Hey,” her sister said softly, gathering her into a hug. “It’s alright. I’ve got you.”

“I just… I miss him. Is that wrong? Missing him after everything?”

“No, not at all.”

“I still love him, even though I know that it’s stupid to.”

“I know. No, it isn’t.”

“I don’t want to love him, but I can’t make it stop.”

“You don’t have to make it stop if you don’t want it to,” Bonnie murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple. “You’re not obliged to, not at all.”

“But…”

“You’ve said it yourself — this isn’t the end. Not if you don’t want it to be. So, there’s no point to stopping loving him if you’re going to work things out, which I know you are.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because the two of you together were just…” Bonnie shrugged, trying to find the appropriate word. “Right.”

“Yeah, but I bet you said that about Danny.”

“No, I thought Danny was an arse, I was just too polite to tell you,” her sister grimaced. “You and John, though… you two were just perfect together. Are perfect together. Will be perfect together, once you’ve both had time to think and lick your wounds and gather your thoughts and get your shit together.”

“He’s not even tried to apologise yet.”

“I know, but I don’t doubt that he will do. He’s probably just formulating a huge, overblown, romantic plan. I’d be willing to bet good money on it.”

“Really?”
“Yeah!” Bonnie nudged her. “Come on, the man’s crazy about you. There’s no way he’s going to throw that away. I bet he’s holed up in his castle strategising as we speak.”

“That or he’s moving on and not thinking about me at all.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” her twin scoffed, her disdain for the idea evident. “That man was so in love with you that it was borderline sickening. There is no way in hell that he has moved on or forgotten about you. Stop putting yourself down, and have a little faith in love, and yourself, and him.”

“Why? Love is just a shitty illusion.”

“Jesus wept, you really need to stop drinking wine. It makes you maudlin and sentimental and not in a good way.”

“It does not. It makes me pragmatic and sensible.”

“Yes, if you say so,” Bonnie reached for her glass and placed it on the coffee table, well out of reach. “No more wine tonight. You need to stop moping and start trying to win John back. The polite texts are great, but what are you actually actively doing?”

“Why should I be the one to do anything? He’s the one that messed up, so he’s the one that needs to make it up to me.”

“That kind of attitude is not going to help.”

“But it’s true.”

“No, it’s not. This process is going to be a two-way street — you both need to commit to making things work. You can’t just expect him to do all the legwork. I’m not saying he shouldn’t apologise and grovel, but you need to make it worth his while. You need to show him that it’s worth it. You need to make overtures that if he makes an effort, there’s a chance it could work out. Stop being hostile and polite and British about it.”

“But-”

“No bloody ‘ifs’ or ‘buts.’ You need to fix this. Both of you, together. I know you feel like you weren’t in the wrong, and, OK, I would agree that you weren’t, but you need to work with John to find a solution. So… off you go. Work on it.”
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

John enacts a grand plan to win Clara back, but will it work?

“John, how long has it been now?” Missy asked with studious casualness one evening, putting her feet up on his coffee table and surveying him through narrowed eyes.

He knew full well what she was talking about. How could he not? Clara occupied his thoughts, night and day, yet he thought it prudent to play dumb. Missy could be lethal when she had a cause to obsess over.

“Since what?” he asked, avoiding her gaze and instead taking a long sip of his drink.

“You know full well what, John.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Why was I gifted with a moron of a brother?” Missy groaned in fond exasperation. “Clara Oswald. About five foot nothing, all eyes and hair, worshipped the ground you walked on. Cute, intelligent, put up with you being miserable and Scottish. Ringing any bells?”

“You know I was winding you up, right?” John rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know who you mean. Funnily enough.”

“Well, I’d be concerned if you didn’t. You did have sex with her, it would frankly be rude if you couldn’t remember what her name was.”

“You are far too overly invested in my sex life.”

“That would be because I don’t have one,” Missy reminded him. “Although I did just order this new v-”

“Stop talking,” he pleaded, holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Before I have to bleach my brain of this entire conversation. Why are you asking about Clara?”

“Well, your birthday has been and gone. Did you even hear from her?”

“She texted, yeah.”

“Right. I thought our plan involved you winning her back enough to at least merit a card from her on your birthday,” his sister looked suspicious. “What have you messed up?”

“I’ve not ‘messed up’ anything,” John said defensively. “I’ve just been… taking things slowly.”

“Slowly? This isn’t slowly, this is glacial!”

“Well, I don’t just want to rush into things and have her end up thinking that I’m an overt, unsubtle, desperate prick who will spend his time crying himself to sleep until she’s back in my life.”
“I mean, she wouldn’t be wrong. Besides, it’s that or she thinks you’re profoundly uninterested in her and that you don’t care about her life at all. Which is the message I would currently be getting, if I was her. Which, thankfully, I’m not, because it means I can actually reach high shelves.”

“Hey! She texted me this morning, I’ll have you know!”

“About?” Missy quirked an eyebrow. “Was it a nude?”

“You’re bloody incorrigible. No, it was about the weather.”

“Oh, Christ, that’s not exactly love poetry, is it?” Missy looked scandalised. “Seriously, how did you win her over to start with? What were you putting in those letters? Micro-particles of airborne love potion?”

“Shut up.”

“Has she even told you about her new job?”

“No, but you have, repeatedly, and I have also repeatedly told you that I can’t bring it up because then she’ll know that you-”

“We.”

“You,” John said more loudly, “have been stalking her on social media. So, no, I haven’t brought it up.”

“Well, what in god’s name do you talk about? We had a plan, John!”

“Yes,” he said hopelessly. “Yes, we did, but every day I feel like I’m not good enough for her. Every day, I feel like shit when I remember all the things I did and all the things I said to her. Every day, I feel like she deserves someone and something better than me. I’ve barely bloody worked in months, the house is falling apart, and I’m a wreck. She deserves more than that.”

“The house is not falling apart. Not any more than it has been for the last… what, twenty years?”

“The roof is leaking,” John confessed in a whisper. “It started over the winter and I tried to make do and patch it up, but it’s… it’s definitely beyond my limited DIY abilities now.”

“Jesus,” Missy looked horrified. “How bad is it?”

“Pretty bad.”

“Do you have anything in the bank at all?”

He let out a short, bitter laugh. “Chance would be a bloody fine thing.”

“How are you paying the bills?” Missy’s look of incredulity intensified. “How are you buying food?”

“Credit cards,” he looked down at his feet guiltily. “Mainly.”

“Jesus,” Missy said again, edging closer to her brother. “So, basically, you’re financially up shit creek?”

“I mean…” he dithered for a moment, then sighed. “Yeah, essentially.”
Missy thumped him in the arm.

“Ow!” he protested at once. “What was that for?!”

“Being a prick who can’t manage his finances. What material have you got?”

“What do you mean, what material? I just told you I haven’t worked for months.”

“You have all those doodles.”

John’s eyes widened as he realised what she meant. There were countless pages of illustrated versions of stories Clara had told him — tales about students and teachers, about stifling-hot classrooms, about playground spats. And there were drawings of her. But he couldn’t use those — it would be immediately evident to Clara that he had used the anecdotes she had trusted him with, and how would she react to that?

“You know, she might be flattered,” Missy said, as though she’d read his thoughts. “As long as you make it out to be a big romantic gesture and not a way of saving your own arse, money-wise.”

“Or, she might think I’m a dickhead.”

“She already thinks you’re a dickhead.”

“Good point, well made.”

“You have nothing to lose… except a roof and a house and an estate. And I know what this place means to you.”

John’s mind immediately flicked to River, then to Clara. He recalled the happy memories created here, and he tried not to think about what it would be like to lose the place — how crushing it would be, and how it would rob him of what little joy he had left in his life. The house was intrinsically tied up with his happiest memories, and being without it would be like losing a part of himself.

“What would I need to do?” he asked, wearily. “If I wanted to publish? Do people even still buy art books? Do people even still like my work?”

“I mean, people will always want pretentious-slash-funny-slash-novelty art books, and your illustrations fall into the latter two. Might be good to publish in early summer, ready for kiddywinks to buy it for their teachers as an end-of-year gift.”

“How do we even go about doing that?”

“I think you still have some favour left with Ohila.”

“Was she the weird one who dressed all in red?”

Missy rolled her eyes. “Yes, but, more importantly, she’s the ‘weird one’ at Karn Publishing.”

“Right.”

“Do you want me to call her?”

“Could you?”

“Sure. Let’s see what we can get together.”
The next few weeks passed in a blur of selecting illustrations, mocking up layouts, choosing fonts, and checking proofs. It had been years since John had last put together anything that would be both commercially available and commercially viable, and, although he would never have admitted it, it was humbling to see his work coming together in printed format, and to know that it would soon be available in shops across the country — at least, if all went according to plan. Karn Publishing had advised that anything they put together would take at least a year to be ready to sell, far too late to help with his money situation, and so John had gritted his teeth and opted to self-publish, using Ohila and Google for reference whenever he ran into problems — which, given his lack of technical and publishing expertise, was often.

Missy and Ohila were doing their best to talk him and his work up to bookshops, and at least two chains appeared to be falling for their charms, although he prayed that he wouldn’t be expected to attend any promotional events. He wasn’t a talker, and he certainly wasn’t a people person — with notable exceptions. Clara was one such case, and he spent a large amount of time agonising over what to include in the book and what to leave out, and the extent to which she would be flattered or insulted by his use of her school-based anecdotes.

Missy was right. As long as the book was correctly presented, and as long as it was nothing but complimentary… surely it couldn’t be interpreted as anything less than an act of love? Surely Clara would see that, and understand that the book was not only a financial lifeline for him, but also a love letter in 150 pages — each illustration inspired by her words, with many drawn before he had even realised the depth of what he felt for her. Looking back at the drawings, his feelings were obvious — there was no explanation other than love for the amount of time and ink he had dedicated to Clara, but he had been blind to his own emotions for so long that recognising them at the time had been almost impossible. Now? Now he knew he loved her — but was it too late?

He knew that framing the book as a grand gesture was imperative, and that the dedication would be the central way of doing so. He agonised for weeks over the appropriate wording, spending many hours hunched over his battered, ancient old Mac with a photograph of Clara beside him, trying to work out what he would say to her if only she was in the same room as him. He deleted, he rewrote, he edited, he deleted more, he rewrote again, and, finally, he had something he was happy with.

For Clara Oswald,

*My impossible girl, my muse, and my better half. These were drawn before I knew I loved you, and should’ve been a sign.*

*I hope this book is more of a love letter than anything I could say out loud.*

As he sent off the appropriate documents to the website he had selected to publish his book, he couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of contentment. Things were about to change for the better — he would have enough money to pay off his credit cards and fix the roof, Clara would forgive him, and everything would work out. He’d made plans with Missy, and the first two copies of the book would be dispatched ahead of the rest — one copy for him, and one for Clara, delivered straight to her door. She would receive it, and she would understand, and they would reconcile. He would finally feel complete again, and Clara would understand that he was committed to making this work and to leaving the past where it belonged.

With a renewed sense of purpose, John began to count down the days until the first copies would be
The knock at the door was somehow both expected and unexpected. John had been waiting for it for so long that it almost felt like an auditory hallucination, but, when it came again, he dropped the mug he had been scrubbing into the sink and raced to the front door, yanking it open with a child-like grin.

“Mail for ye,” the postman said, handing over a rectangular package with a flourish. “Aye, you look proper keen an’ all.”

“Been waiting for this for a long time,” John said with a grin. “Thank you!”

“Enjoy!” the stranger said as John closed the door, sinking down on the hall floor and ripping the wrappings away with glee.

The front cover, the dust jacket, the illustrations inside — none of that seemed important. What he wanted to see was what Clara would see — the dedication.

Flicking to the appropriate page, John felt his heart stop. There’d been a mistake. This couldn’t be right — how could it say that?

As he cast his gaze over the words for the tenth time, he understood with crashing realisation what had happened.

Two documents.

Two identically named documents; one that was mere weeks old and one from many, many years before.

And now, inscribed in ink and paper before him…

_For my darling wife River,

Thank you for opening my eyes to the world, and teaching me to live in the moment. I will never stop being enthralled by the wonders you show me._
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Clara receives a parcel in the post - one that will change everything.

The book’s arrival had been first unexpected, and then joyous. Clara had ripped open the surprise package with curiosity, read the name on the book’s cover, taken in the glorious, full-colour illustration on the front — a small, dark-haired schoolteacher she recognised at once as herself — and then felt her heart soar. This was it, why John had been so distant — he had been working on this labour of love. She had opened it at the midway point, flicking through the illustrations with fascination, and recognising some of her students as she did so. It was bold, and it was less than subtle, but it was brilliant. Wondering idly if there was a foreword that might shed some further light on the book, she’d flipped back to the beginning of the book, taking in the title page with pride, and then she had come to the dedication, and her heart had stopped. Her world had stopped. The crux of the matter was spelled out in black and white, there on the cream-coloured page in beautiful italic lettering.

“Clara?”

Bonnie’s voice sounded far-off and echoing. Clara didn’t even turn her head towards her sister; she only clung to the book all the tighter and began to rock backwards and forwards, her eyes staring straight ahead and her chest feeling curiously numb and hollow. He had done this on purpose. He had done this to hurt her. He had made the decision, and he had published this, and-

“Clara?”

The book was wrenched from her hands, and Clara knew her sister would be making a summary assessment of it, trying to work out why it had evoked such a strong reaction from her. She knew that her twin’s attention should be drawn to the offending page, so she raised her head then, looking up and taking in the sight of her sister doing as she had done — skimming through the pages with interest. Bonnie looked as Clara had moments earlier — engaged, smiling, and positive. She had missed it. She hadn’t seen the lexical dynamite that had blown Clara’s world apart.

“The dedication,” she whispered, her voice shaking as she did so. “Look at it.”

Bonnie frowned and then turned to the appropriate page, her expression souring as she read the words. The book was dropped to the floor with a bang and kicked away, and Bonnie crouched beside her sister at once.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, pulling Clara into a tight, reassuring embrace. “I’m so sorry, he’s a bastard.”

Not wanting solace or comfort, Clara pushed Bonnie away, crawling over to the book and snatching it up once again. Opening it and resting it on her lap, she gritted her teeth then ripped out a handful of pages, setting to work shredding them into confetti. She could tell that Bonnie was looking at her with concern, caught between knowing whether to intervene or not, and yet she didn’t care. She didn’t want this book to exist any longer. She didn’t want this book to see the light of day ever again. Methodically, she yanked out another clutch of pages, her fingers dancing over the paper as she
reduced it to torn-up scraps, each bearing the pen-and-ink evidence that Clara had thought proved that she was loved. How wrong she’d been.

“Hey,” Bonnie said softly, reaching over to her, but Clara only slapped her hand away, not wanting to be touched at that moment. Her sister sighed, then turned her hand over expectantly, palm up. “Can I have some pages, then? Two pairs of hands are better than one.”

Clara dithered, then tore out a chunk of paper and handed it to her sister. They fell into an easy rhythm, neither of them speaking, but both setting to work destroying the book John had so callously sent. Clara felt a bitter sense of satisfaction as she ripped up a myriad versions of her; a myriad versions of her students; a myriad versions of a life she no longer wanted to live. This was her past. John was her past. And if there was a future… well, she didn’t know what it was going to be like, but it would surely hurt less than this feeling did.

Both twins continued to make their destructive way through the book, back to front, until all that remained was the title page, the page bearing the dedication, and the cardboard cover with its lurid dust jacket. Clara peered down at the hurtful words with furious contempt, ripping it apart not seeming quite enough for this… thing, this callous, cold, calculated thing that was intended to hurt her all the more.

“I know,” Bonnie said with absolute calmness, taking the destroyed remains of the book out of her hands and heading towards the kitchen. Clara got to her feet and followed her sister as though on autopilot, arriving in the kitchen as Bonnie closed a drawer and stepped outside into the garden, tossing the book into an empty concrete planter on the patio. “Want to do the honours?”

She held out a cheap plastic lighter to Clara, who blinked at the proffered item with mute dissociation before reaching for it and clicking it experimentally. An orange flame flicked out of the top corner, and she smiled at it — not just at the flash of colour itself, but at what it represented and at what it could do. It could hurt. It could destroy, and that was what she needed it to do. Crouching, she pressed the flame to the corner of the front cover, watching the remains of the book smoulder and then catch, and she straightened up, standing with Bonnie as they silently watched the words and the designs burn, crumbling to ash and then falling into glowing white and grey embers. Soon, a sad little pile was all that remained of the once-impressive book.

“That is what that man is to you now,” Bonnie said quietly, her voice low and calm. “Nothing. He is nothing. He is a filthy, undeserving piece of shit who isn’t worthy of your love.”

“He is,” Clara concurred, knowing her sister’s words to be true and accepting them with resignation. “I just…”

“Don’t,” Bonnie said quickly. “Don’t let it upset you.”

“I’m not upset,” Clara said mechanically, and she realised as she spoke that it was true. She wasn’t upset. She was just numb. “I’m not even angry. I’m just…” She shrugged, words, for once, failing her entirely.

“Numb?” Bonnie suggested. “Well, good. I mean, not good, because it’ll catch up with you eventually, but… well, it’s good that you seem alright for now.”

“I hate him,” Clara confessed in a whisper, her voice shaking with emotion. “That’s how I feel. I hate him for sidelining me to start with and making me play second fiddle to his wife. I hate him for ever making me think we had a chance to be happy. But I hate him the most for that bloody book. For sending it over and rubbing my face in it.”
“He’s a bastard.”

“He is.”

“He doesn’t deserve you.”

“He doesn’t.”

“And…” Bonnie hesitated, looking nervous before asking: “Is this it, then?”

“Yes,” Clara said decisively, clenching her fists at her sides and raising her chin defiantly. “Yes, it is. The final straw.”

“I don’t blame you,” her twin said softly, wrapping an arm around her waist, and Clara sagged against her side, suddenly craving contact. “Absolute piece of shit of a human being. Sending it to you… Jesus. That’s just cruel. That’s just gloating.”

“Exac-”

Clara’s phone rang, and she knew, even before she drew it out of her pocket, who it would be. Taking the phone out and staring at the contact picture with distaste, she looked to Bonnie for guidance.

“Give him hell,” her sister said simply, shrugging as she spoke. “Absolute hell.”

As Clara clicked connect, she stepped away from Bonnie and raised the phone to her ear, letting the caller speak first.

“Clara?” John’s voice was enough to make her heart skip a beat, despite her anger. She took a deep breath, and tried to quash that feeling of happiness. “Oh, thank god. Clara, have you received anything in the post today?”

Something about the urgency in his tone was enough to convince her that he deserved to be tormented, at least a little. “Like what?” she asked, in as casual a voice as she could manage. “I mean, there was a bank statement, a DVD from Amazon, some advertising flyers from local takeaways…”

“Like a rectangular package, probably in cardboard.”

“Oh,” she forced herself to sound nonchalant. “Yeah, I did get something like that.”

“Don’t open it,” he blurted at once. “Just… please, don’t open it.”

“Why would I not open something with my name on?” she scoffed, trying to sound both puzzled and contemptuous. “Where would the fun be in that?”

“Clara, there’s been a mistake,” he sounded panicked now. “I need you to not open that parcel.”

“You mean the parcel I opened half an hour ago?”

“I…” he fell silent for a moment. “You… you did?”

“Yes, John. Thank you so much for sending that over. It was lovely.”

“Really?”
“Yeah!” she enthused, trying to sound as upbeat as she could. “It was so lovely to receive a book all about me, all about stories I’ve told you, and then dedicated to your dead wife. I mean, what a thoughtful gesture. It’s really convinced me that you’ve moved on, and it’s really convinced me that you care about me. What woman wouldn’t want that?”

“Clara, it was a mistake,” John said in a rush. “Clara, it wasn’t supposed to say that—”

“What, did it miss off some fawning accolades? It’s pretty clear to me what it was supposed to say, John. Not just the words, but the whole fucking thing. Rubbing my face in it. Spelling it out that you aren’t interested in building a future together.”

“Clara, you’ve got it all wrong, that’s not—”

“What even was I to you?” she snarled, her temper fraying. “Was I just a source of inspiration? Something you could adapt into your brand-new comeback book, something to make money out of? God, you’re a piece of shit. I actually thought I meant something to you and this whole time, you’ve been working on this. Taking my stories that I told you in confidence and using them for profit. You’re disgusting.”

“That isn’t how it is!”

“Well that’s how it fucking looks, John!” she spat. “God, I’ve never felt so fucking humiliated in my life. The entire country is going to see this — my former students are going to see this! — and they’re going to read the bloody dedication and think what a poor, gullible twat Miss Oswald was, and how she’s been taken for a ride by some messed-up Scottish artist who has no respect for anyone other than himself.”

“Clara…” John said miserably. “Clara, please—”

“I never want to see you again. I never want to hear from you again. I never want anything to do with you ever again.”

“Please don’t do th—”

“It’s over. Alright? Do you understand me? Let me make it nice and clear, anyway. Don’t phone me. Don’t text me. Don’t email me. Don’t write to me. Don’t try to come to London and beg and plead to see me. Don’t even think about turning up at my new job, which you never even fucking asked about, or bothering Amy or Bonnie. You are dead to me. Do you get that? Dead and buried. You publish your bloody book, and then you take that money, and you fuck off and leave me alone. Forever.”

She hung up before John could say another word, clutching her phone in her fist and breaking into sobs.

“Oh babe,” Bonnie said, engulfing her in a hug before she could fall to her knees on the paving slabs. “Come on. Let’s get you inside. I’m calling Amy. You’re going to be alright. I promise. You’re going to be OK.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Clara decides to make a stab at being normal.

If Clara had thought that she was falling apart before, it was nothing compared to what she was feeling now. Leaving Ùine behind her had seemed easy, but living without John was nothing short of outright impossible. With Danny, she had at least had the sense of closure that came with knowing he was dead — there wasn’t the constant niggling thought that he was out there in the world, getting on with his life, and not thinking about her. There wasn’t the knowledge that he’d done something to hurt her on purpose, and that he no longer cared for her. He was just… dead; just tragically, peacefully dead. John’s continued existence was a far greater source of pain, and despite her repeated attempts not to dwell on the matter, she couldn’t seem to not.

A “mistake.” That was what John had said about the dedication — that was his weak excuse. Even if it was true, and that he had just made some kind of error, then how had it come about? To Clara, the insinuation that the two women were directly comparable stung. Were they so identical in John’s eyes? Were they interchangeable versions of the same person? Clara had never wanted that — she’d never wanted to be seen as someone that could be replaced or was a replacement for another. She wasn’t a bargain-basement stand-in, and she wasn’t some kind of identikit doll that could be moulded into the shape of other people. She had wanted — as she always had — to be her own person who was important due to her own merit, something that years in Bonnie’s shadow had strengthened by virtue of lack of occurrence. And, yet… John had somehow either confused Clara with River, or, worse, done what he did out of malice.

It shouldn’t matter to her. She knew that — she wasn’t stupid when it came to these matters. She’d read enough trashy self-help books and online articles to know that dwelling on the issue was not the way forward, and that she should try to move on. She knew it shouldn’t bother her when their relationship was now over, but she wanted and needed answers. She had never been the kind of woman to leave a stone unturned in her quest for facts, and she was attempting to reconcile that with the need to lay this idea to rest and try to move on with her life. She knew what she should do, but not how to do it, and so she still spent each night lying in bed running over the relationship and John’s book in her mind, wondering about his motivations. Perhaps she should have listened to him before she ended it. Perhaps she should have demanded a full explanation, and then left him nonetheless. Then, if nothing else, she would have had a degree of closure. Then, she would’ve been able to move on with her life, instead of spending hours trying to reconcile the man she had loved with the man who had done this — a man who had broken her heart and left her a shell of the person she was.

She still made an effort, of course. Society expected that of her, and thus she delivered: she woke up every morning, ate breakfast without tasting it, and went to work. She advised students, drank poor-quality coffee, came home. Smiled at Bonnie’s stories about work, nodded and laughed in the right places, then went through the motions of recounting her day. Students, colleagues, people on the Tube. Hilarious, weird, kind, rude. Laugh, frown, swear. Her whole routine was nothing more than an automatic process, her body and brain carrying her through the motions out of necessity. She didn’t hesitate. She didn’t deviate. She just followed her routine and let her brain do its thing, leaving enough free space for her to think about John as she got on the Underground, or prepared a drink, or
ate dinner.

John had said he loved her — more than that, he had shown her that fact through a million tiny actions… or so she’d thought. Valentine’s Day, the long walks in the forest, evenings by the fire — she’d really been wholly convinced that he cared. She’d really thought she was important to him, and that had been her fatal error. She’d thought she had a place in his life, but instead… instead, she’d been nothing more than a passing flight of fancy, something with which to amuse himself. She’d been the source of inspiration for a book she didn’t even know he’d been illustrating, and now she felt like a fool. She felt used. She wanted to forget the whole sorry affair, but, instead, all she found herself doing was dwelling on it for hours on end as she went about her day, running over every conversation and every action and everything she’d thought, at the time, to be authentic and built on a foundation of mutual love and respect. She became obsessed with trying to find the cracks in the illusion; some kind of hint or giveaway of what was to come. She searched, and she searched, wracking her brains and exhausting herself into the small hours as she ran over her own memories with a fine-toothed comb, but there was nothing that should have served as a red light. There was nothing that had indicated what was to come; somehow, that was both a comfort and a torment. She couldn’t have seen it coming, and so it was all the more devastating when it all came to a crashing end. She’d thought he loved her, but he was too wrapped up in the past to love anyone other than the memory of his dead wife — too caught up to consider changing.

The sentiment of feeling as though she had been used became all-consuming. All the touches and the kisses they had shared, all the intimate moments in bed together — they felt wrong, now, sullied by what Clara now knew, and she yearned for the day her body would no longer feel tainted by the echoing memories of John’s hands on her skin. She wanted to be free of him, completely, and so, despite the warm summer weather, she took to the habit of taking long baths in a bid to remove the feel of him from her body. She began to spend countless hours in the bath; the tub filled almost to the brim with scaldingly hot soapy water and a book clutched in one hand. Sometimes, she read — more often, she did not — but the warm familiarity of holding a novel seemed to bring a degree of comfort to her aching heart.

If Bonnie considered Clara’s newfound behaviour bizarre, she thought it prudent not to comment on it, and, for that, Clara felt grateful. She would eat dinner with her sister each night and then slip away to the solace of the bathroom, allowing the thick steam and heady aroma of expensive bath products to lull her into a stupor as she curled up in the porcelain confines of the tub, resisting the urge to scour at her skin. She had done that once, early on, and the ensuing angry welts had taken days to heal — days spent sweltering in long-sleeved blouses and black trousers as the June sun beat down into her tiny office, days in which she swore not to give into temptation again. Now, the water seemed enough. It became normal behaviour… until it wasn’t.

Clara had thought — hoped, certainly — that her sister would fail to notice her habits. She had been enjoying the silence on her twin’s part, the lack of comment, the lack of condemnation — and then, one day, it came. Bonnie sat her down with a sombre expression and laid out her concerns in clear, non-judgemental language… yet still it stung. Being faced with her own decisions had never been something that Clara had felt comfortable with, and her sister’s words were a reminder that her own decisions and her own foolishness had led her here. If Bonnie wanted her to stop her proclaimed “weird habits,” then she would — she would go out, she would socialise, she would have fun. She would commit to being “normal,” whatever that was, and she would continue to reflect on matters in her own time, in the privacy of her own bed. She didn’t want to let this go, regardless of her need to. How could she even begin to? Her heart ached in her chest and her stomach constricted at the least reminder of John — she couldn’t just move on in the way that everyone seemed to expect of her.

Nonetheless, Bonnie demanded normality and some kind of social life, and so Clara would give her that. She got dressed up, she did her makeup with a shaking hand, and she looked in the mirror at a
woman she hardly recognised. It had been so long since she’d bothered to make an effort that her own reflection seemed like that of a stranger. She forced a smile, tried a nervous little laugh, and then she grabbed her handbag and headed to the nearest bar. It had been months since she’d last been out to anywhere like this — rural Scotland did not lend itself to chic city bars — and she felt acutely out of place as she stared around at the assorted clientele, all sipping wine and chatting and paying her not a modicum of attention. Wine was something she could do. Wine was something she knew — lord knew, she’d spent enough time with a glass at her side as she’d marked student essays. So, a glass of wine it was, and it slipped down a treat. A second, a third, and her head began to feel lighter. There was no sense of loss hanging over her, and she smiled sincerely for the first time in what felt like years. John? John who? She was full of infinite potential, and she was-

On the floor, apparently, but that was alright. People were looking, people were staring, but this wasn’t her fault — if some of them had spoken to her when she’d come in, maybe she wouldn’t have needed to drink alone or drink so much so fast. She dragged herself to her feet and mumbled something along those lines, then staggered out into the street and leant against a nearby wall, trying to steady herself mentally and physically. She wasn’t sober enough to be embarrassed, and the hurt she had been burdened with for so long seemed to still be absent from her chest, and so she took a fortifying breath and turned her feet towards another bar she knew was local.

The patrons here were different — less uptight, less judgemental. No one seemed to mind that she stumbled through the door and nearly fell to the floor, and it was too loud for the bartender to hear how her words slurred into one. She just pointed at the bottle of vodka she was interested in, held up approximately the right number of fingers, then set about working her way down the line of shots. She’d not done this in years — not since university, if her memory served correctly — and yet the alcohol slipped down her throat with ease, cold and clinical, bringing with it a wonderful sense of numbness and a bodily lack of care. By the end of the line of glasses, she could hardly remember her own name, let alone anyone else’s, and by the time she crawled into a taxi at the end of the night, it was an effort to recall Bonnie’s address. She was sure the cabbie was giving her strange looks as she hummed a tune to herself, but she didn’t care — she handed him a tenner at the end of the journey, with firm instructions to keep the change, and then staggered up the steps to Bonnie’s front door, trying and failing to fit her key into the lock.

She was giggling to herself still when the door was yanked open and she tumbled over the threshold, landing on the doormat at her sister’s feet, and she realised then that Bonnie had been crying.

“Where the hell have you been?” her twin shouted, pulling her fully inside and slamming the front door. “I’ve been out of my mind with worry, you weren’t answering your pho- are you even listening to me?”

“I was having funnnnn,” Clara slurred. “Being normal, like’oo said.”

“Jesus, how much have you had to drink?”

“Nuff.”

“Clara-” Bonnie began, crouching to her sister’s level and looking her in the eyes, but Clara wasn’t listening. She turned away from her twin and moaned as her stomach contracted and she vomited onto the carpet, closing her eyes and starting to cry silent tears of shame.
Clara cracked one eye open experimentally, then the other. The early morning sunlight filtering into her room around the edges of the window blinds seemed agonisingly bright, and she groaned, pulling the duvet over her head and burrowing into the sheets. Her head was pounding, and her stomach was churning, and she thought, for one awful moment, that she might be sick. How much had she had to drink last night? She remembered being in a bar, and she remembered the first few glasses of wine, but then… nothing. There was a huge hole in her memory, and she hoped to god she hadn’t done anything embarrassing.

“Morning, sis,” Bonnie’s voice, cold and angry, cut into her pained stupor, and before she could respond, the duvet had been yanked away from her. The chilly pre-noon air made her yelp, and she resisted the urge to curl up into a foetus-like ball of self-pity. “How are you feeling? Marvellous, I hope.”

“Bon…” she croaked, discovering that her throat was unwilling to co-operate, and her mouth tasted of sand and… oh, no. “What…”

“So, time for your morning-after debrief. You vanished for several hours, scared the absolute living shit out of me, and then threw up on the hall carpet. Several times. I had to put you to bed and then spend a happy hour cleaning up a puddle of your sick, which was mainly wine, vodka, and half-digested pasta, and was really fucking gross. I mean, honestly, it was really great. Absolutely how I wanted to spend my Friday night after my bloody moron of a sister went missing for several hours. I did think about coming in here and sleeping with you to make sure you didn’t choke on any more of your own vomit, but frankly you stank, and I didn’t fancy having you clinging to me all night and breathing sick-breath over me, so I FaceTimed your phone and left it on the bedside table.”

“Oh,” Clara muttered, wishing she still had the duvet so she could at least blush in private. She had a vague recollection of kneeling on the doormat and emptying her stomach on to the floor, and even that was enough to make her want to curl up and die. “Urm, sorry.”

“You should be,” Bonnie shot back, striding over to the windows and yanking the blinds up. Clara let out a yelp of protest that her twin magnanimously ignored, putting her hands over her eyes in an attempt to prevent the sun from assaulting her senses too aggressively. “You’re not a bloody teenager, Clara. You can’t do things like this anymore.”

“You said…” Clara rasped, longing for a glass of water. She wondered if Bonnie might fetch her one, or whether her sister was still too furious to consider the idea. Instead, she cleared her throat and continued: “You said that I should be normal.”

“Yes,” Bonnie said patiently. “Normal. By which I meant, ‘Go out and have a glass of wine with me or with colleagues.’ Not, ‘Go out and get catatonically drunk and vomit on my carpet.’ You’re not at university anymore. This isn’t acceptable behaviour.”

“You… you maybe should’ve been more specific about that,” Clara tried to joke, only to be met with
a furious glare in return. “Right. Sorry. And sorry about the carpet. Really. I don’t remember it, but I feel awful. I mean, in general and about the carpet.”

“Jesus, I don’t even care about the carpet!” Bonnie flung her hands in the air, and her voice cracked. “I mean, yeah, it was gross, but I’ve cleaned up your sick before, it’s not a big deal. It’s more the fact you vanished on me for hours and I was… I was worried something…”

“Bon, come on…” Clara fought the urge to roll her eyes in response to her sister’s misplaced concern. “I keep telling you, I’m not in imminent danger of offing myself, especially not over a bloke. I’m not giving him the satisfaction.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe a self-proclaimed ‘incredible liar,’” Bonnie muttered, turning away and dabbing at her eyes surreptitiously. “I can’t lose you. I keep telling you this and you just… don’t seem to care.”

“Of course I care! How can you even say that?”

“You don’t! God, you just think about yourself, all the time, and you forget that you’re also a part of me!”

“I’m not a part of you!” Clara almost shouted in exasperation, frustrated by Bonnie’s words. “I’m your sister, but I’m not part of you!”

Bonnie’s expression soured even further. “We’re the same. We started at the same time from the same bunch of cells. We shared the same womb. We shared — still share — everything. We are, and always will be, a ‘we.’”

Clara sighed, sitting up and wrapping her arms around her knees. She realised then that she was still in the previous evening’s clothes, and set to work attempting to wriggle out of her dress. “I know,” she said, softly. “Bon, I know. But sometimes I need to be a ‘me,’ not a ‘we.’ And last night was one of those times.”

“And last night could’ve ended terribly,” Bonnie confessed in a whisper, looking down at her twin with tears in her eyes. “Anyone could’ve taken advantage of you. Anyone could’ve hurt you.”

“But they didn’t,” Clara finally succeeded in peeling the clinging fabric of her dress over her head and chucked the offending item in the vague direction of her laundry basket. “And I’m OK. Hungover, but OK.”

“Good,” Bonnie dithered for a moment, then perched beside her sister on the bed, twisting her hands in her lap. “Please don’t scare me again.”

“I’ll do my best,” Clara promised, leaning over and wrapping an arm around her twin’s waist. “Love you.”

“Love you, too, even when you’re a prat.”

“Rude.”

“Also, Clara, in the nicest of ways, you still smell quite strongly of sick.”

“Oh.”

“And your makeup is all over your pillow.”
“Ah.”

“And I would strongly advise a shower.”

“Too hungover to shower. Standing for that long is not a good idea.”

“Fine, I’ll run you a bath, Lady Muck.”

“I have mentioned that I love you, right?”

“Yes, but not often enough considering I had to clean up your sick last night.”

“Love you.”

Bonnie got to her feet with a chagrined expression, shaking her head in fond exasperation. “I know you do,” she reached over and scruffed Clara’s hair. “Now, I’m going to go and run you a bath, then you’re going to get in it and I’m going to make you a coffee.”

“You’re spoiling me. I should get pissed more often.”

“Mm, and then you’re going to do the washing and try to get all that foundation and eyeliner and lipstick out of my good bedlinen. And then you’re going to go downstairs and do Round Two of scrubbing at the sick stain. And if that fails, we’re going to be going online and finding a nice professional carpet-cleaning company, and you’re going to be paying the bill.”

“I hate you.”


“Yes, Mum.”

John didn’t remember the last time he left the house, or walked Idris, or even had a shave. Each day consisted of the same routine — roll out of bed, make himself coffee, draw until his hand cramped up, and then crawl back into bed. It was repetitive, and it was mind-numbing, and it was exactly what he deserved as atonement for his idiocy. He’d driven Clara away for good and made foolish, self-destructive mistakes and now he no longer deserved to be happy. As he dragged himself downstairs, he reasoned — not for the first time — that a life of dreary monotony was all that he deserved, and it was punishment for his-

His routine stalled as he realised that the coffee was used up. He’d had another jar, somewhere, from happier times — he recalled with fondness wandering around the supermarket with Clara, picking up bargains and not-bargains and some items which were just outright frivolous. There had been coffee, hadn’t there? Her favourite, that was what she’d said as she’d snagged it off the shelf and stuck it in the shopping trolley. He pawed through the cupboards in desperate search of it, his hunt proving fruitless, and it was then that the penny dropped. He’d been using it — without even thinking, he had tipped it into the coffee jar as he’d been working on his book all those weeks ago. He’d been drinking it for all this time, without even noticing, without any reverence for the fact that Clara had picked it, and now yet another link to her had been severed. Another reminder of her was gone.

He snatched up the coffee jar and threw it at the wall in fit of self-loathing and fury, the ceramic
shattering with a *crash* and tinkling to the floor like a snow flurry of porcelain as he screamed in rage. Idris merely raised her head from her basket, accustomed to his increasingly erratic behaviour, then let out a soft bark of support. Or possibly judgement. It was hard to tell, and he was probably overthinking things anyway.

“What am I meant to do?” he asked his dog, as though she might have the answers to his problems. He looked down at the golden retriever in desperation. “How am I meant to move on?”

“Maybe you’re not,” a familiar Scottish voice drawled, and he turned towards the doorway and took in the sight of his sister, leaning against the wall and appraising the situation with ill-concealed judgement. That was all he needed — his sister getting involved again. She seemed to have a predilection for turning up at strange moments and voicing her opinion — it was a habit he had naively hoped she’d eventually grow out of. “Dear god, you look like Father Christmas. Only belligerent, and Scottish, and smelly.”

“Shut up.”

“Seriously, you smell.”

“I do not.”

“I can smell you from here.”

“Shut up.”

“I will not,” Missy looked affronted by his bluntness. “I’m just being honest with you: you smell. You need a wash, and a shave. Also, to stop sulking, and to stop throwing things, and maybe to leave the house before you keel over due to a vitamin D deficiency.”

“I do not have a vitamin D deficiency.”

“John, if you get any paler, you’re going to become transparent. And I, for one, do not need to discover what your innards look like.”

“What do you care?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she sighed theatrically. “Maybe it’s because you’re the only goddamn person I have left on this miserable earth?”

“Not true,” he protested, holding up a hand. “You have-”

“Fine, you’re the only one I have left *in Scotland*. And despite the fact you’re a miserable arse who thinks only of himself and his weird English sort-of ex-girlfriend, I love you. Alright? I’m not saying it again, but I do. So, I’m not going to let you… recluse yourself to death.”

“That isn’t a verb.”

“John, shut up. Really. Stay shut up.”

“Sorry.”

“You are going to have a shower, and a shave, and then we are taking Idris with us and going shopping. When did you last eat?”

“I had some pasta… yesterday. Possibly. Maybe the day before,” John tried to cast his mind back, and failed. “Dunno.”
“Dear god, how did you ever survive widowerhood?”

“Poorly. You and Nardole did a lot of strategic intervening, remember?”

“Right. Speaking of, where is the little baldy? He could be a useful butler for you — make sure you got out of the house occasionally, and ate food that wasn’t mouldy.”

“The last I heard, he was trying to avoid the police down in Liverpool.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, ah,” John shrugged, realising he missed his slightly chaotic acquaintance and resolving to try and contact him at some point when things seemed a little less overwhelming for them both. “What are you going to do while I shower?”

“Remove the decomposing food from your fridge, probably.”

“How do you know it’s decomposing?”

“Call it a hunch.”
Clara attempts normality for the second time, and is marginally more successful.

Clara had promised Bonnie that this wouldn’t happen again. Well... she’d sort-of promised. She’d given her sister repeated assurances that this Friday evening wouldn’t end the same way the previous Friday evening had, and that she certainly had no intention of being sick on any more carpets. But now she was here — in another bar with another glass of wine — and, suddenly... those promises didn’t seem all that important anymore. She leaned forward and took a sip of her sauvignon blanc, wondering how much she would need to drink for her to forget the source of her troubles.

John.

No matter how much she tried not to think about him, her thoughts would always unconsciously circle back around to him, entirely unbidden, and render her mute as she clenched her fists and strove to banish the memories that threatened to overwhelm her. Where was the good in remembering the good times now? Where was the point in recalling all the gentle words and cherished moments they had shared? He didn’t want her. He didn’t love her. He believed her to be all the things she had spent her life trying to change about herself. How many times had she been called selfish? Narcissistic? An egomaniac? She had tried, with all her might, not to be those things that others accused her of being — she had fought to think of others first and to make a change; to try to be a better person and to love others wholly and unconditionally.

And yet still... all John had been able to see in her was the negative — not only the negative aspects of her character, but also the negative space around her. He had been intently focused on the people that she was not — the one person that she was not. She would never be a positive to him. She would never be herself. She would always be in the shadow of a greater woman and a greater love, and she needed to remember that when she started to feel maudlin and sentimental about matters. It was no good to yearn for him when she knew that he was not doing the same.

The memories were still sweet, she supposed. Not sweet in the sense of the adjective when one used it with regard to children — the memories were not cute, nor adorable, nor fluffy, nor sprinkled with pink glitter. No, they were sweet in the sense that they were still tinged with happiness and joy; still sweet in the sense that they brought her small amounts of solace in the darkness of the night as she cast her mind back over the previous few months and fought to find things that would render her time in Scotland as productive. She had happy memories, and so her time there had not been wasted, and she could, she supposed, selectively edit her recollections. A walk with John and Idris became a walk with the golden retriever alone. A night curled up in his arms by the fire became a night with a good book. A night in bed, limbs entwined under the sheets, became-

She sighed. Those were memories she couldn’t amend to fit her own narrative. After Danny, yet before John, she had resigned herself to a life of celibacy, or disappointing casual sex with anonymous strangers picked up in seedy bars. She had never expected to find herself so acutely wanted by someone as much as she had been by John, and she missed the way he had looked at her, touched her, kissed her. Never again. She would never experience the thrill of being desired again, because, after this, she resolved to never love again, nor ever be loved. Love, she now understood,
only brought hurt and suffering. Her heart was too fragile to experience any more loss, so she swore, then and there, with her glass of wine as witness, that she would commit to a life of spinsterhood. She’d always hated that word, but now… now it seemed fitting. A miserable, archaic word for her miserable impending lifelong solitude.

She reached for her glass to toast her own bitter decision only to find it empty, and, as she raised a hand and tried to attract the attention of the barman, she was torn out of her reverie by the sudden rush of noise that now surrounded her. The bar had been almost empty when she’d slunk in after work, but now… she didn’t know how long she had been lost in her thoughts, but patrons were milling around her, engaged in lively conversations that elicited snatches of laughter and gasps of surprise and the kind of sounds that normal humans with unbroken hearts made. She remembered being involved in those, once. It seemed like millennia ago.

The barman finally caught her eye, but, before she could gesture to her glass and mime what she wanted, his gaze scanned upwards to someone unseen and he nodded a silent assertion to a nonverbal instruction, disappearing to the other end of the bar.

Swivelling on her stool, Clara was ready to lay into the unknown patron who had distracted him from the imperative task of bringing her more alcohol, only to discover that the guilty party in question was a nervous-looking girl in her early twenties, who was hovering uncertainly behind Clara, as though wary she might be about to get an earful. She was dressed like many of the students Clara dealt with, and, for a moment, Clara struggled, through the pleasant haze induced by her first glass of wine, to make sure that this was not a student. No, it couldn’t be. They wouldn’t be old enough to be in here, and there was something about this girl that indicated that she had life experience — which was more than many of the teenagers she dealt with had.

“Shit, you’re even prettier than I expected,” the girl said in an awestruck rush, then clamped her hand over her mouth, looking mortified. Through her fingers, she mumbled sheepishly: “Sorry. Mouth. Brain. Not connected. Not effectively, anyway.”

“That’s alright.” Clara attempted a smile, and fell somewhat short. She wasn’t in the mood for chitchat. She was in the mood for wine. Somewhat sourly, she asked: “Any particular reason you just hijacked my drink order?”

“I didn’t,” the girl said, plonking herself down on the adjacent stool to Clara’s, entirely uninvited and yet… not entirely unwelcome. She leaned back and tried to look casual, but her expression was nothing short of smug. Clara had to hand it to her, she was bold. “I asked for what you’re having, twice over.”

“How? I didn’t hear you say anything.”

“I used to work in a pub,” the stranger shrugged, then made some odd gestures with her hands that looked bizarre and nonsensical. “I know all the hand signals.”

“There are not hand signals. That’s not a thing.”

“There are so!”

“Why are you even buying me a drink?” Clara demanded to know, caught somewhere between pleased and suspicious. Company was not unwelcome, but she would have preferred company she had already had the measure of — this girl was an unknown quantity. “I can buy my own drinks.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got that total ‘hunched over the bar looking miserable’ vibe going on, and I try to make it a priority to not let anyone drink alone, especially if they’re sad. And especially not if they’re
“How did you know I was pretty?” Clara narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “You only saw me from the back.”

“I got that vibe,” the girl informed her, gesturing vaguely, then dropping her gaze with a hint of embarrassment and explaining: “Also, I might’ve seen you come in and I might’ve been sat in the corner trying to work up the balls to come and talk to you. Metaphorical balls, anyway. I don’t usually talk to women as pretty as you; I tend to just make a fool of myself. Which I’m totally doing now, so… good work, ten points to me, falling into the same old weirdness.”

Clara tilted her head to the side, trying to gain an understanding of this stranger. She seemed sweet, in an earnest, awkward kind of way, and Clara had more than a sneaking suspicion of her intentions. Still, she was pretty, and she had ordered Clara a drink, so… ah, sod it. She could make the effort, at least. Follow the motions.

“I’m Clara,” she found herself saying, extending a hand to the girl. “You?”

“Bill.”

As their hands met, the barman reappeared and topped up both their glasses, and Clara reached for her glass with her free hand and took a grateful swig. Bill gave her hand a gentle squeeze, and Clara couldn’t help but smile.

“What do you do, Bill?” Clara asked, swirling the wine around her glass and running an appraising eye over her newfound drinking companion.

“I, urm,” Bill cleared her throat, the hint of a blush creeping over her cheeks. Clara wondered what on earth she could do that she found so embarrassing. “I work in the canteen over at the uni.”

“What one?”

“UCL,” Bill wrinkled her nose distastefully. “Lots of medical types. Dunno how they can eat while reading their textbooks, but they do. Looking at all those diagrams and stuff would put me right off my grub.”

Clara laughed at the image. “They’re keen, then?”

“Yeah, very. Too much so, if anything.”

“In what way?”

“I’m invisible,” Bill shrugged, looking resigned to this fact. “I don’t exist beyond a hand doling out the chips. They probably just look at my hand and see tendons and bones and tissue and all that, anyway. Not, you know, an actual person’s hand.”

“Well, I’d acknowledge you, if I was there.”

Bill was properly blushing now. “Thanks,” she mumbled, and Clara had the feeling that she was unaccustomed to receiving compliments. “Where do you work?”

“I work in Student Support for a… school,” Clara gestured vaguely, not wanting to name the place. “Provide advice and guidance, that kind of thing. Help out kids who need support — you know, those that are struggling or there’s stuff going on at home.”
“Nice,” Bill looked suitably impressed, and Clara felt a smug, selfish little thrill. “I bet it’s rewarding.”

“Yeah,” Clara tried to look nonchalant. “It is. I used to be a teacher, but this is… different. Better.”

“Why’d you change?”

“A man.”

Bill’s face fell, and Clara wanted to laugh for one absurd moment. She knew that face, and she knew now that she was entirely right in ascertaining Bill’s intentions.

“Two men, actually,” she clarified, mainly to see how her new companion would react. “Both of whom broke my heart, but in entirely different ways.”

“Oh?” Bill was straining to appear polite. Clara had to hand it to her, she was keeping her emotions in check rather successfully, considering she believed her aspirations of seduction were currently crashing and burning.

“One died,” Clara took another long sip of her wine. “And the other was still madly in love with his ex. We had a fight — he told me I was cold and incapable of love, and that I used people. And so… I left him, just for a bit. And then he published a book about all the stories and things I’d told him, but he dedicated it to his ex, and I really left him.”

“Sounds… messy.”

“It was. Is.”

“Is that why you’re drinking alone?”

“It might be, Bill.”

“Might?”

Fuck it. If she would never experience love again, then casual sex might be the next best thing.

“The other reason,” she purred, licking her lips and widening her eyes just so. “Is that pretty young things like you buy me pity-wine.”

“Oh?” Bill was turning increasingly more maroon as she began to cotton on to Clara’s intentions, and understand that perhaps, her goals were not all that unattainable. “That’s…”

“I don’t suppose the pity-wine could extend to a pity-snog, and then maybe a pity-shag?”

Bill. Crimson. Spluttering. Unable to believe her luck.

“Y-yeah,” she managed after a moment. “We could. Absolutely do that.”
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Clara had thought she was at rock bottom. She was wrong.

Upon waking, Clara was not, at first, initially sure where she was. She was approximately horizontal and naked, and her head hurt, but that was about as far as she could get with regard to her immediate physical surroundings. There was a bed — or, at the very least, an item of soft furnishing, which was always a bonus — and she thought she could feel bedcovers, but otherwise… not a clue. Her more immediate concern was that it was beginning to get light, which was an unwelcome development given how much her head was pounding, and-

“Morning,” a chirpy voice piped up from beside her, and she nearly fell out of bed in shock as she was struck by the recollection that she had not, in fact, spent the previous evening alone. She came to a physical halt somewhere on the edge of the bed, clinging on for dear life and trying to regulate her breathing. “Shit, sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I…” Clara rolled over, taking in the sight of a woman — Bill, possibly? — who was curled up with the majority of the duvet bunched around her to preserve her modesty. Well. She was cute. Shy, but cute. That was something. “That’s… OK. Urm. Hi.”

“Hi,” the stranger’s mouth twitched into a shy smile, and Clara grew increasingly certain that her name was Bill. She certainly hoped so, anyway. “Urm, did you sleep OK?”

“Yeah,” Clara yawned, rolling her shoulders and trying to force herself into feeling fractionally more awake. Snippets of the previous evening’s events were coming back to her, and she fought the urge to blush. “You?”

“Yeah, great. This bed is super-comfy,” her bedmate’s cheeks turned pink, and she dropped her gaze to the sheets. “And your house is amazing, by the way.”

“My…” Clara felt a crashing sense of horror as she realised that this was her room, in Bonnie’s house, and that that meant her sister was somewhere in the vicinity, undoubtedly either fully aware of her actions and judging her already, or about to be aware of them.

“What?” Bill frowned, sounding somewhat panicked by Clara’s response. “You’ve not got kids or anything, have you? Because it’s totally OK if you have, just like… I’d kinda like to put some clothes on before they burst in on us.”

“Not kids, no,” Clara managed, sitting up in bed and smoothing her hair down, praying her sister would have a modicum of decency and not embarrass her. “But I have got-”

Her bedroom door was yanked open, revealing Bonnie stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. Bill yelped in stupefaction, then fell out of bed and took the entirety of the covers with her.

“Urm,” Clara began, rearranging her limbs artfully and trying to look as dignified as she could while naked. “Hi, sis. Knocking is a thing, you know.”

“Mm,” Bonnie smiled a polite, chagrined smile, leaning against the doorframe with a theatrical
flourish. “You not fucking your conquests on my sofa is also a thing.”

There was a strangled squeak of horror from Bill’s direction, which Bonnie ignored as she continued:

“As is you not having exceptionally loud sex in the room next door to me in the small hours of the morning.”

“It was not exceptionally loud,” Clara protested, trying to repress the irrational urge to giggle. “And, if it bothered you that much, there was always the option of earplugs.”

“There’s always ball gags too,” Bonnie deadpanned, eliciting another squeak from Bill. “Can you please just… in future, be a bit more considerate? And maybe pre-warn me, so I don’t wake up to… well. Sounds. Explicit ones.”

“Absolutely,” Clara concurred, keen for her sister to leave before Bill expired a gay death on her bedroom floor in response to the discovery that she had, in fact, slept with one half of a set of identical twins. “I can definitely do that. One hundred per cent.”

“Good,” Bonnie dithered for a moment, a smirk playing over her features. “Oh, and Clara?”

“Mm?”

“She’s cute, you know, so I might be persuaded to make you both coffee. As thanks for you being so receptive to my feedback.”

“Thanks,” Clara mumbled, shooting her sister a grateful look. “We’ll be down in a moment.”

Bonnie tipped her a wink and then backed out of the room, leaving Clara and Bill alone together. Clara scooted over to the edge of the bed and looked down at the woman tangled up in her bedcovers, trying not to laugh.

“There’s…” Bill looked on the verge of hysteria, her cheeks burning a fiery shade of maroon and her eyes as wide as saucers as she blinked up at Clara in awestruck reverence. “There’s two of you.”

“Yes.”

“And she thinks I’m cute.”

“Yes. You are.”

“And we…”

“On the sofa, yes.”

“Why?”

“Urm, we kind of both had a pressing need and it kind of superseded the necessity of climbing the stairs. Although we did do that afterwards, apparently, and then… said need took hold again.”

“How did she…” Bill groaned, putting her face in her hands. “How did she know? About the sofa?”

“I think we left our clothes down there,” Clara shrugged, trying to appear more nonchalant than she felt. “Subtlety was never really my forte.”

“Right,” Bill squeaked. “So, your very attractive and possibly somewhat-gay sister knows that we…
“There’s no ‘possibly’ involved, and she also most likely saw you naked, just prior to you falling off the bed.”

“Right,” Bill nodded sagely. “I am so going to hell for the thoughts I am currently having.”

“Don’t worry,” Clara reassured her, getting to her feet and pulling on a dressing gown with a self-satisfied little smirk. “So is a large chunk of the population of Blackpool.”

“Is she really gonna make us coffee?”

“Probably,” Clara silently thanked god for her twin. “She was always fairly chill on this front. She might even stretch to breakfast if you’re lucky. Hungry?”

“Starving.”

Clara threw a second dressing gown in Bill’s vague direction, then reached for her hairbrush and started dragging it through her hair.

“Was...” Bill chewed her lip as she pulled on the soft, fluffy garment. “Was she this chill about your exes?”

“Which exes?”

“The uh... men.”

Clara felt her heart skip a beat as she realised what Bill was insinuating.

“The ones you mentioned last night? Them.”

“Urm,” she realised her hand was shaking, and set the brush back down, flexing her fingers in a bid to stop the trembling. “It never really... this kind of...”

“Sorry,” Bill mumbled, looking embarrassed. “I shouldn’t have... it’s none of my business...”


“Sure?”

“Yeah,” she forced herself to smile as Bill stepped out of the room and headed towards the kitchen, then sunk down onto the bed and put her head in her hands. Last night, the idea of casual sex had seemed appealing — it was a fun prospect with no strings attached, and it was entirely free from any more meaningful expectations. Now? Now, she wasn’t so sure that sleeping with Bill had been a good idea. What if John found out about it? The idea seemed unlikely, but she wouldn’t put it past Bonnie to send him a gloating text telling him that Clara was getting under other people to get over him. How would he feel about this? Would he care? Or...

Her breathing hitched as she realised exactly what she was doing, and she felt herself beginning to slip towards a panic attack. She was using people. She was doing exactly what he’d accused her of; she’d used Bill for a good time and to further her own selfish ends by attending to her physical needs. John had been right. She wasn’t capable of caring for others, or for being compassionate. She was an egomaniac who cared only about her own narcissistic needs, and never thought of others. Shaking, she clenched her fists until her nails bit into her palms, trying to will herself to stop
panicking, and yet all she felt was acute self-loathing and crushing anxiety.

Bonnie called her name from downstairs, yet she barely heard her. All she could focus on was the memory of the night before — of drinking with Bill, of stumbling out of the cab, of heading inside, and…

She closed her eyes, fighting back tears. Why had she done that? Why had she used Bill like that? She seemed like a sensible, kind-hearted young woman and Clara had simply used her for her own satisfaction. She’d taken advantage of Bill’s wide-eyed awkwardness and evident crush on her, and now she would have to go downstairs and face her while making painful, forced small talk.

Her stomach clenched and she ran to the bathroom, falling to her knees beside the toilet and throwing up. Closing her eyes, she scraped her hair off her face, finding her skin drenched in sweat, and she fought to take deep, steadying breaths between convulsions, yet still she felt… wrong. Her anxiety felt like it was clawing its way up her throat, robbing her of the ability to breathe — she was in a room full of oxygen, and yet she was going to drown, unable to inhale and exhale, unable to keep herself alive. She could hardly catch her breath, hardly get enough air into her lungs to keep herself functioning, and yet still her body continued to force her to empty her stomach; still she threw up until there was nothing left and she was dry-heaving, her stomach muscles screaming in protest.

“Please,” she begged aloud, her voice strangled and breathless as she implored her body to comply with her wishes and allow her to regain an ounce of composure. “Please, I can’t…”

She slumped back against the bathroom wall, finding herself shivering and rubbing her arms in a bid to try to calm down. She felt wrong. Everything about this felt wrong — being in London, being at Bonnie’s, sleeping with Bill, the drinking. Not being a teacher, not being with John. Being alive. It all felt wrong, and acutely uncomfortable, and she felt abruptly uneasy in her own skin — as though someone had filled it with a layer of sand, and it no longer fit her like a glove. She could feel her sense of self and her grasp of reality unravelling, the room disintegrating around her as her world narrowed to her own body and the sense of wrongness she felt being held within it.

The next thing she was aware of was something cold and wet pressing against her neck, and she yelped as the bathroom rushed back into existence.

“Clara?”

She blinked hard, confused by her own reflection staring back at her. It took her a moment to process that this was Bonnie, crouched at her side and dabbing her face and neck with a cool, damp flannel.

“Hey,” her sister breathed softly, cupping her cheek with a shaking hand. “Welcome back.”

“I… what…”

“I found you like this twenty minutes ago.”

“No,” Clara mumbled, pulling away and shaking her head. She’d only been in the bathroom for a few minutes. “Just now.”

“I’ve been up here with you for twenty minutes. I sent Bill home when I realised what was happening.”

“M’fine.”

“Clara, you stared right through me like I wasn’t even there.”
“M’fine.”

“I’ve never seen you like that before. Not since Danny.”

“No-”

“No, I actually think this was worse. I could reach you after that. You saw me. This…”

“My skin doesn’t fit right,” Clara blurted, dissolving into tears. “I’m… wrong. Don’t know how. Wrong.”

“You’re not,” Bonnie whispered. “You can never be wrong.”

“M’wrong. He was right. John was right. Wrong. Wrong. Don’t want to be here. Not right. Wrong.”

“Oh, babe,” Bonnie wrapped her arms around her, and it took Clara a moment to realise her sister was crying too. “What are we going to do with you?”
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

On a night out, Clara makes two mistakes, including one that could have fatal consequences...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As it transpired, the simplest solution was the most effective. Clara was led, somewhat less than kicking and screaming, to a doctor. Surveys were completed, questions were asked, and a diagnosis was affirmed. Clutching her green prescription with a relieved hand, Clara had left the office with her sister by her side, headed to the nearest pharmacy, and collected several boxes of tablets that promised to, if not fix her, at the very least remedy her anxiety and help overcome her crushing sense of hopelessness. Happy tablets. Making-it-all-go-away tablets. Tablets of the sort that she had taken and loathed before, but her opinions counted for nought in the matter, and so she had resolved to simply do as she was bid and knock them back with water twice a day, until she was appropriately zombified to no longer elicit Bonnie’s concern.

And, for a while… it worked. These tablets were not like all the ones that had come before, and she felt newly invigorated. She went shopping for baby clothes with Amy, and helped her and Rory to decorate the nursery. She went for dinner with Bonnie and traipsed around art galleries with her arm linked through her twin’s. She gave up the Tube in favour of walking through the sweaty, sticky heat of London in summer, taking in the sights and sounds of the city, feeling a fresh sense of purpose and relishing her new life free of anxiety.

Of course, the thoughts of John remained. The medication might be magical, in her view, but it was lacking in amnesiac properties. While she thought of him from time to time, the matter seemed far less pressing than it had before. John was a nice, abstract idea that she felt only faintly connected to, like a childhood memory or a fairytale. The past few months didn’t feel real, and they didn’t feel important, and the recollection of them certainly didn’t feel like the kind of thing that was worth ruining her happiness over. John had undoubtedly moved on, so why shouldn’t she? She shouldn’t have to mope around and mourn the relationship for the rest of her life — she wasn’t him, and she wouldn’t allow herself to be trapped in the prison of her own loss. She would move on. She would enjoy her life.

She called Bill, once or twice a week, and the pair began to spend time together — proper time, time not spent in bed — getting to know each other as friends. They talked about science and art and literature and trashy television and celebrities and a whole litany of other topics, and neither ever mentioned that first night spent together, or the aborted morning after that had culminated in Clara’s catastrophic breakdown. For that alone, Clara was grateful. While the deterioration of her mental health had been necessary as the catalyst for change, it was not the sort of thing she wanted to be reminded of. She didn’t need to discuss it, and she didn’t need to be treated with kid gloves — something Bill seemed to understand. Clara felt a rush of warmth and affection for her newfound friend every time she thought about her, and she relished spending time in Bill’s company, boundless fountain of optimism and positivity that she was.
Between the excitement surrounding Amy’s imminent new arrival, Bonnie’s joy at Clara’s seeming recovery, Bill’s unwavering happiness, and the soft, rose-coloured haze that had settled over her thanks to the medication, it was easy for Clara to forget that she was, deep down, still hurting. John might seem distant and far-off, but the memory of his words and the pain they had inflicted was still a raw, open wound that seemed to pulse in the core of her very being, occasionally sending sharp, agonising flashes of recollection through her mind and rendering her temporarily speechless. Her heart would skip a beat and her breathing would catch and she would place a hand to her chest, as though holding herself together, before trying to resume her life. Pushing away the pain was the only way she had ever been able to cope with anything. Her mother’s death. Danny’s. Now this. No good ever came from dwelling, so suppressing her emotions seemed to be the most sensible choice.

She would move on, she resolved. She would move on, and she would heal, and she would concentrate on being the best version of herself that she could be. She would continue to strive for excellence in her job, she would be a better sister to Bonnie, she would support Amy once her baby was born. She would, perhaps, even find love again, although she was not actively going to seek it. If it happened, it happened. She would never again pine for someone. She would never again chase someone. She would be a passive participant in the world of romance, and, if it fell into her lap, then so be it. She wouldn’t be making any grand romantic overtures. She wouldn’t be driving more than eight hours to be with someone. She wouldn’t be absconding from her life and her responsibilities in the name of so-called love with someone who didn’t care about her. Never again. Que será, será.

It was with this ideology in mind that she found herself ensconced in the corner of a gay bar late one Friday night with Bill by her side, nursing a meagre half-pint of cider that was all she was permitted to drink while medicated to the nines. There seemed to be some kind of an event happening, but sometime between having that thought and considering asking Bill what it was, the unmistakeable strains of Dancing Queen began to play, and Clara inwardly groaned as she realised that they had managed to pick an Abba-themed evening to have a quiet drink.

“Did you know about this?” she asked her companion, who only grinned wolfishly.

“Maybe,” Bill said with a coy wink. “Maybe not. Come on, everyone likes Abba.”

“It’s cheesy.”

“It’s classic. Come on. I bet you’ve seen Mamma Mia.”

“The film or the stage show?”

“Both?”

“You’d be right, but that doesn’t mean I wanted to sit and listen to quite a lot of pissed gay men singing Super Trouper at maximum volume.”

“Totally do.”

“Totally don’t,” Clara argued. “At all.”

“You’re no fun. I’m going to volunteer us for karaoke.”

“No, you are not.”

“Am so,” Bill stuck her tongue out then got to her feet, heading towards the small makeshift stage that had been erected and reaching for the sign-up sheet. Clara fought the urge to groan aloud, and felt the sudden need for another drink. It was a bad idea, and her doctor had been most insistent about the rules, but if she was going to have to sing in front of people, another half-pint of cider
couldn’t hurt, could it? It was only the one, and it would fortify her enough to consider making an absolute fool of herself.

Getting to her feet, she began to weave her way over to the bar, shouting her order and then returning to the table with the ice-cold glass clutched carefully in one hand. Bill affixed her with a bemused look.

“Is that a good idea?” she asked. “I thought-”

“If you want me to sing in public, then this is a necessity.”

“But-”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

Two hours and several karaoke songs later, Clara had to admit that she felt more than fine. She felt euphoric; she felt on top of the world. She’d had two more glasses of cider, and Bill had stopped protesting when Clara had started buying her more drinks, and she’d also sung at least half an album of Abba’s greatest hits onstage in front of an adoring crowd. This was excellent. She needed to do karaoke far more often.

“Another song?” Bill asked, leaning against her and wrapping an arm around her waist. Clara bumped her hip against her friend’s, buzzing with adrenaline.

“Why not?” Clara grinned, casting a quick glance over at the crowd, and then asked them: “Another one? Do you want another one?”

They roared their approval, and Clara felt a rush of excitement as the karaoke machine loaded the next song on the album.

They passed me by, all of those great romances
You were, I felt, robbing me of my rightful chances
My picture clear, everything seemed so easy
And so I dealt you the blow, one of us had to go

Now it’s different, I want you to know...

Bill was singing, but Clara was frozen to the spot as the lyrics played across the screen.

One of us is crying, one of us is lying
In her lonely bed
Staring at the ceiling
Wishing she was somewhere else instead...

“Come on,” Bill mouthed encouragingly, not missing a note. “Sing!”

One of us is lonely, one of us is only
Waiting for a call
Sorry for herself, feeling stupid, feeling small
Wishing she had never left at all…
Memories welled up, raw and sharp. Memories of John, and, worse than that, thoughts of John now. Was he holed up in his crumbling ruin, waiting for her? Was he hoping, deep down, that she’d call? Were they both regretting their decisions, and had she acted in haste?

It was too much for her mind, still reeling from the alcohol, to process. Clara needed oblivion. She needed to breathe. She needed…

She bolted off the stage and headed outside, snatching a mostly full bottle of wine from a nearby table, ignoring the angry response from the table’s occupants, and taking long, reassuring swigs of the cheap alcohol as she hailed a taxi. Climbing into the backseat and managing to blurt her address, she continued to take small sips as she got her phone out, her fingers trembling as she dialled a familiar number.

It was a bad idea. She knew, full well, that it was a bad idea, and yet… something about the song had triggered a painful, uncomfortable ache in her chest that she couldn’t dull with alcohol, although that was certainly helping.

She pressed the green button before she could think twice. The line rang four times, and then:

“Hello?”

“Hi,” she said, then burst into tears, realising what a wreck she must sound and yet hardly caring. “Hi, sorry, s’me.”

“I know,” god, his voice sounded so soft and concerned. How dare he? How dare he act like he gave a damn? It was an uncomfortable thought but… maybe he did. “Clara, are you alright?”

“M’fine,” she mumbled, taking another long gulp of wine and wiping her eyes carelessly on the back of her hand. “M’fine, just… miss you.”

“Clara,” John sounded genuinely worried. “Are you drunk?”

“A bit,” she admitted with a sigh. “Lil bit. M’in a taxi. Was in a bar and was singing and a song came on and I got stupid and upset so m’going home.”

“Are you on your own?”

“What do you care?”

“Clara, I don’t want anyone taking advantage of you.”

She let out a mirthless yelp. “Right. You can talk, Mr Hypo… Hypo… whatever. S’me anyway, I can’t talk. M’a horrible person. I… I slept with someone. M’a bad person, John, I slept with them to try and get over you, but it didn’t work and I’m not over you and I miss you and-”

“You slept with someone else?” he didn’t sound as angry as she’d expected. More… concerned. Why was he so concerned about her? Did he still care? “Did they hurt you at all?”

“No,” Clara breathed. “No, they didn’t but it didn’t make me feel better and it’s because m’still in love with you and m’sorry, m’so sorry, I shouldn’t’ve left… shouldn’t’ve fucking everything up…”

She gulped down the rest of the bottle, some of the dark liquid seeping out the sides of her mouth. The taxi driver shot her a judgemental look in the rear-view mirror, and the vehicle suddenly seemed to tilt sideways. She started to sob, loud and uncontrollable and desperate as she wailed into her hands.
“Clara, are you alright? Do you need me to call someone?”

“No,” she whispered, realising she was sprawled across the back seats “No, I need you here… I need you b…”

The world went black.

Chapter End Notes

*One of Us* by ABBA just fits the two of them so perfectly, both within this fic and within the show’s canon.
For Clara, fading back into consciousness was unpleasant. Every part of her seemed to hurt — not the superficial kind of pain that was fleeting and ignorable, but a “sore down to the bones” kind of throbbing ache that seemed to increase and decrease with each heartbeat. Her head felt as though it were being split in two, and, when she eventually contemplated opening her eyes, she found herself blinded by… well, she didn’t know, but the sensation invoked was similar to having spikes driven into her eye sockets. It took a couple of minutes of agonised blinking before she could focus on anything, but when she did, she realised she was in a hospital room, plugged into a bewildering array of machinery.

Panic lanced through her, instant and white-hot. What had happened? What had she done? She remembered singing, and then staggering out of the club alone, and-

“Hello,” a voice beside her said softly, and Clara jumped, turning instinctively towards the sound and then flinching as her head screamed its protest to the sudden movement. Closing her eyes until the nausea subsided, when she opened them again, she discovered that Bonnie was sat on a plastic chair next to the bed, her eyes red-rimmed and full of tears. “You Grade-A idiot.”

“I…” Clara began, realising that her throat was red-raw and her attempts to speak were fading away into nothingness. “Wh…”

“Don’t try to talk too much,” Bonnie advised, her words accompanied by a maddeningly sanctimonious expression. “The doctors said your throat would be sore afterwards, so try to rest it.”

“Why?” she managed to rasp, after several seconds of swallowing and concentration. “Why…”

“Why might you be sore? I don’t know, maybe because they shoved a tube down your gullet and used it to remove the contents of your stomach before you died of acute alcohol poisoning. But if you meant why did you have to have several doctors and nurses work to do that, then that would be because you’re a fucking idiot who decided to down a bottle of wine while on antidepressants, and you ended up passing out in public.”

Clara felt the faintest of recollections stir in the back of her mind at Bonnie’s words. There had been a taxi, hadn’t there? And-

“You were in a black cab,” Bonnie said, as though reading her thoughts, and her twin was unable to keep the judgement out of her tone. Clara would, at any other time, have bristled at her sister’s attitude, but this seemed very much deserved. “The driver thought you’d just passed out, but-”

“But then I managed to attract his attention,” a second voice interjected, and Clara froze as John stepped into her line of vision, smiling apologetically as he caught sight of her look of panic. “I
shouted down the phone until he noticed.”

“Wh…” Clara felt her head begin to pound all the more, the blood rushing in her ears, and she clenched her fists in a bid to hide how badly her hands were shaking. How could he be here? Why was he here? And why did he look so… concerned? The memory of phoning him came back to her — her fingers unsteadily picking out the number, and then his voice, so soft and reassuring and hundreds of miles away only… now he wasn’t hundreds of miles away, he was here, and she’d said things on the phone that she regretted. Things about Bill. Things about missing him. And yet… still he was here. What did that mean? Did he forgive her? Was he being the bigger person? Her head hurt too much to begin contemplating any of the thoughts swirling around her brain, and yet contemplate them she must. He was here, whether she liked it or not.

“I couldn’t just leave you like that,” he shrugged, looking oddly humble considering — she realised — that he had quite possibly saved her life. “I have a duty of care.”

“You…”

“Here,” Bonnie passed her a glass of water and watched, mum-like, as Clara raised it to her lips, the water trembling as she did so. If only she could stop shaking, Clara might be able to pretend that this was all completely normal. That ending up in hospital because your ex had saved your life was something that happened every day, and she could deal with it. “You know what, I’m ah… going to give you two some space. And possibly get the nurses to do the same, if I can. I reckon you’ve got maybe ten minutes before they get insistent about checking that you haven’t died, so… g’luck.”

Before either of them could protest, Bonnie had got to her feet and darted out of the room, leaving them alone together and studiously avoiding each other’s gazes. Clara looked down at her lap, willing herself to find something intelligent or pragmatic to say, but finding only inane platitudes that were entirely unsuitable for expressing to John the gravity of the situation. She’d never expected to see him again, and certainly not like this — certainly not after he’d just saved her life. She’d also never factored in that, if she did encounter him again, he would look so… emotional. He seemed upset to see her like this, but she was terrified to read too much into that; terrified to get her hopes up, lest he confess to only being here out of a misplaced sense of duty, rather than anything more profound. Instead, she forced a smile. She willed herself to stop shaking. And she resolved that, no matter what happened, she would not cry. She’d cried enough over this man, and she would not do so again now. This time was for talking, not for weeping.

“Clara, I was worried,” John finally admitted, his voice shaking with emotion, and that was enough to unsettle her. “I hadn’t heard from you for weeks and then, suddenly, when you rang, it was just… god, my heart soared, you know? Seeing your name on my phone, I thought I was hallucinating or you were going to berate me or something, only then you spoke and it was so much worse than that because you obviously weren’t alright, and I was terrified. I thought you’d been mugged, or raped, or stabbed, and then when the cabbie picked your phone up… Jesus, I was so relieved to know you were safe, to some degree, and you weren’t just lying in the street somewhere for anyone to take advantage of. The thought of that… I couldn’t…”

“Why are you here?” Clara managed, cutting him off before he could get any more choked up and swallowing hard against the tears that fought their way up her own throat. She needed to know what his motivations were. She needed to understand why he’d come all this way. She took another sip of water, trying to feign an air of casualness that she didn’t feel. “You didn’t have to…”

“I wanted to check you were alright.”

“But… you could’ve just messaged Bonnie and asked her. Or Amy.”
“Clara, I did message Bonnie.”

“And?”

“And once she realised that I was the one who actually made sure you got to a hospital, and once she worked out why I’d done it, she told me to come down. So, here I am.”

“She did what?!” Clara yelped, spilling her cup over her lap and then waving John away when he looked to be on the verge of dabbing at the growing puddle. She felt the cool liquid seep into the blankets covering her thighs, only half-noticing as she stared at John in horror. “She… she had no right to…"

“She had every right to,” John finally met her gaze, and Clara was surprised by the concern she saw in his eyes. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting — sadness, perhaps, or judgement, or anger — but the intensity of what she saw instead took her breath away. “I had no idea how bad things had become.”

“They’re not bad,” Clara bristled, sitting up a little straighter and trying to regain a modicum of dignity. “I’ve got a job, and friends, and a godchild on the way, and-”

“And you’re on antidepressants.”

“Excuse me! So are lots of high-functioning, happy, successful people.”

“A lot of high-functioning, happy, successful people are on them and are not having their stomachs pumped because they’ve had several ciders while doing karaoke… and then downed a bottle of wine.”

“Shut up.”

“No, I won’t,” he sighed, running a hand through his hair and looking, in her opinion, suitably chagrined. “Clara, I had no idea… why didn’t you talk to me? Why didn’t you call me before last night?”

“Because I was angry,” she confessed, feeling foolish even as she spoke the words aloud. “Because I thought that it was your job to call me. Because I thought you were the one who fucked things up so you should make amends. Because I’m stupid, basically.”

“No, that’s me,” he sighed again, sinking down into the chair that Bonnie had so recently vacated and putting his head in his hands. “The book… the book was a genuine cock-up on my part. I tried to explain on the phone before, but it really was supposed to be for you.”

“John, I don’t-”

“No, please,” he implored her, and when he looked up she could see the earnestness in his expression. Something about the way he was looking at her was enough to convince her, and she felt some of her anger melt away in response. “I want to explain. It was supposed to be a grand romantic gesture to win you back, only instead my disorganised file system ended up messing everything up beyond belief.” He reached into an inner pocket of his coat and extracted a crumpled piece of paper, holding it out to her with an embarrassed look. “That’s what it should have read. I didn’t know until I got the proof, and we changed it in subsequent editions, I just… didn’t know if it ever got to you. So.”

Despite her reservations, Clara reached for it. Taking the paper, she skimmed her fingers over the faded print, mouthing each word silently as she read.
For Clara Oswald,

My impossible girl, my muse, and my better half. These were drawn before I knew I loved you, and should’ve been a sign.

I hope this book is more of a love letter than anything I could say out loud.

“How long have you been carrying this around for?” she asked quietly, feeling her heart break as she realised the veracity of his words and how much her callous attitude and brutal severing of ties must have hurt him.

“Since you ended things.”

“How quickly did you get on a flight once you knew what had happened?”

“Well, I think I probably gained more speeding tickets in one drive to the airport than the average Scotsman accrues in a lifetime.”

“John, why are you here?”

“Because I love you. Because I’m an idiot and I’m inept with words and I’m thoughtless and I’m stupid, but I love you.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what else to say. Clara Oswald, for one of the first times in her life, found herself at a loss for words.

“Yes, oh.”

There was a long, drawn-out silence, neither of them entirely sure of how to proceed in the wake of his admission.

“Could you just…” Clara wavered for a moment, then held out a hand to him. Without hesitation, John took it, meshing his fingers through hers and giving it a reassuring squeeze, understanding instinctively how badly she needed the physical contact. It was such a warm, familiar gesture with so many positive connotations that she couldn’t help it — her composure crumbled and she found herself sobbing like a child, reaching for him with both arms.

“Hey,” John murmured, moving to sit on the bed beside her and placing a tentative arm around her shoulders. “Hey, don’t cry.”

“I…” without thinking, without considering how he might respond, she clambered onto his lap, tucking her head under his chin and curling into his chest like she used to. He felt scrawnier than she remembered, and his stubble tickled her scalp, but otherwise it was as though nothing had changed. “I can’t help it. And I think I’m allowed.”

“You are,” he assured her softly, pressing a lingering kiss to her crown. “You absolutely are allowed. It’s alright.”

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed, bunching her hands into his faded old T-shirt and burying her face in the fabric. “I’m sorry, John. I’ve made so many mistakes and none of them were stupider than leaving you.”

“Are you saying…”

“God, do I need to say it? I love you, and I’m also an idiot, but I want to be with you more than
anything.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally, eh? ;)


They had been sat together, curled up in the warm familiarity of each other’s arms, for what felt like mere seconds when a nurse finally bustled into the room, followed by a somewhat sheepish looking Bonnie. Clara would have moved away from John if she had the inclination or the energy, aware that her sister would undoubtedly pass judgement on their embrace, but instead Bonnie only gave her a small, knowing smile and took up her previous seat beside the bed.

“Really,” the nurse said in an exasperated tone, clicking her tongue and magnanimously ignoring the fact that her patient was now ensconced on her partner’s lap, rather than laying on the regulation hospital bed as she should be doing. “Miss Oswald, pretending to collapse like that… it was very dangerous, it could’ve detracted from the time I gave to other patients. Real patients, with real medical emergencies.”

It took Clara a moment to realise that she was not the Miss Oswald being addressed, and in that time, Bonnie had turned maroon. “Sorry,” she mumbled, though there was a wicked glint in her eyes. “Just… thought these two lovebirds needed some time.”

“That’s all very well and good,” the nurse rolled her eyes, taking out a blood pressure monitor and applying it to Clara’s arm, narrowing her eyes at the readout before taking out a pen light to check Clara’s pupils. “But you could’ve just said that, rather than stage the whole amateur-dramatics version of Casualty.”

“Sorry,” Bonnie said again, her contrition giving way to glee. “Look, though. Love.”

“Very nice, dear,” the nurse’s attention snapped fully to Clara for the first time. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh,” Clara blinked, disconcerted to finally be acknowledged. “Urm, sore. Embarrassed.”

“Good,” the woman shook her head. “Silly thing to do, wasn’t it? Drinking like that? You’re lucky they got you here in time. A little slip of a thing like you should be careful with how much she drinks, especially while on medication.”

Clara had the distinct feeling that this would have been the sort of conversation her mother would have had with her if she were still alive, and she fought the urge to giggle. “Right,” she concurred instead, trying to sound appropriately contrite. “I should. It won’t happen again.”
“Glad to hear it. Is this handsome chap going to be looking after you?”

“I…” Clara frowned as she realised that she had no idea what would happen now regarding her and John. “I don’t know. He will, or my sister, but… I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Well you need to, because we need the bed.”

“Hey!” Bonnie protested. “Come on, that’s a bit unceremonious, isn’t it? Turfing her out already? She was unconscious an hour ago!”

“Sedated, not unconscious. She’s doing well, her sats are normal, and there’s nothing wrong with her other than a hangover and a healthy sense of embarrassment. She will be fine.”

“She’ can hear you,” Clara reminded them, and John snorted. “I don’t mind going home.”

“Clara…” Bonnie looked appalled by the very notion. “You need-”

“To be somewhere familiar, and to have some privacy,” Clara lowered her gaze. “Please.”

The nurse gave a satisfied little nod. “I’ll fetch the discharge forms.”

The journey home was uneventful — another black cab, only this time Clara was propped up between John and her sister, both of them sat like watchful sentinels, one of her hands held loosely in each of their laps. Upon arriving at Bonnie’s, Clara affixed her sister with a pleading gaze, and with a soft, murmured excuse, her twin melted into the background, disappearing to — well, Clara didn’t know where, but she was grateful, nonetheless.

John took a tentative seat on the extreme edge of the sofa as Clara hovered in the doorway, looking around himself with wide, inquisitive eyes and taking in the small, everyday items that signalled Clara’s continuing presence in the house. Her phone charger looped around the leg of the side table. A paperback on the coffee table. Her favourite mug on the side, still bearing the coffee residue of the previous afternoon.

“So,” he began uncertainly, as she sank down beside him and closed her eyes for a moment against the summer sunlight filtering through the window. “You’ve been living here?”

“Was that a declarative or an interrogative?” Clara intoned flatly. “Because putting a question mark at the end of a statement is highly ungrammatical.”

“You are such an English teacher.”

“Not any more, I’m not.”

“At heart you are.”

She hummed a non-committal response, opening her eyes and tucking her legs underneath her. John scooted further back in his seat, trying to appear casual and failing only slightly.

“I suppose what I’m asking is… do you like it here?”

“It’s nice, yeah. Living with Bonnie is different — we haven’t lived just the two of us since
university, so it kind of reminds us of back then and our misspent youth.”

“‘You’re both getting on?’”

“More or less,” she shrugged, feeling a sneaking suspicion as to where this line of questioning was going. “There’s the odd argument about taking the bins out or washing up or eating the last packet of crisps, but otherwise… yeah, we get on.”

“Is it better or worse than my leaky old castle?”

Clara’s mouth quirked into a smile despite herself. “It’s not a castle.”

“It’s a small castle.”

“Are we saying that out loud now?” Clara looked up at him, grinning properly. This was familiar ground. This felt much less like an interrogation and much more like the old, teasing banter they used to exchange of an evening. “Here isn’t better or worse. It’s just different.”

“And how are you?”

She snorted, unable to contain her contempt any longer. “Jesus, you’re not my counsellor. You don’t need to ask me all these questions, you know? Just talk to me like I’m a person. Talk to me like I matter. Don’t talk to me like you’re trying to assess if I want to off myself imminently.”

“Do you?”

“God, no! I mean, for a while things weren’t great, but Bonnie helped — Bonnie got me help.”

“I know, but I… I just worry about you.”

“I know you do, John. But if anyone should be worrying, it’s me. I’ve had people around me — you’ve been up in Ùine with no one.”

“I’ve got Missy.”

“No one else. No one — dare I say — ‘normal’?”

“I’ve been coping,” John said with what was intentioned to be a casual shrug, but something about his tone and the way he refused to meet her gaze communicated to Clara that he hadn’t been. She hadn’t expected him to, but she’d hoped for something approaching honesty. “In my own way. Walking a lot. Drawing a lot. Cuddling Idris a lot. She misses you.”

“Who’s looking after her now?”

“Missy is feeding her.” He ran a hand through his hair. “They’ve actually kind of warmed up to each other. Apparently worrying about me is a unifying force.”

“How bad was it?” Clara asked quietly, needing to know the impact her behaviour had had on John. He had seen her at her lowest — it was only fair that she be told about his experiences. “How bad did you get?”

“I didn’t eat for a while. Didn’t clean. Didn’t wash. Didn’t shave. Didn’t walk Idris. Didn’t do a lot.” John’s eyes widened, as though his own confession had taken him by surprise, before his expression turned to a look of guilt. “But I snapped out of it.”

“I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be.”

“No, I am. You said some cruel things but I didn’t respect your boundaries, which is what provoked you, and I overreacted to what you said. I didn’t listen to you, or let you explain. I just… did what I always do and flew off the handle. Twice, actually, including the book.”

“Clara—”

“No. We are both equally culpable here and we are both going to have to work together to fix things.”

John reached over and placed a hand on her cheek. “Is that what you want?” he asked with raw sincerity, and she felt her heart lurch as she leaned into the physical contact. “Please, I just… I just can’t quite believe it, I’ve been hoping for so long and…”

“John,” she turned her head and pressed her lips to his palm. “John, I want this. I want you. I thought I made that very clear.”

“I know,” his cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink. “I just… worry.”

“Well, don’t. Because I’m not about to change my mind any time soon.”

“I…” he paused, chewing his lip and then blurring: “Did you really sleep with someone else? You mentioned it on the phone and I can’t stop thinking about it, were you just saying it to hurt me or—”

Clara’s cheeks burned, and she dropped her gaze to her lap. “I did, yeah. I’m sorry, it was a stupid mistake and I thought it would help, but it didn’t. It just made everything so much worse and I felt awful afterwards and—”

“Who… who was it?”

Clara frowned, unsettled by the question. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, please don’t turn into that person. Please don’t get all shitty and sanctimonious on me, because can I remind you, we weren’t a thing at the time. We were two separate people who were not in a relationship, and it didn’t mean anything anyway. It was just casual sex.”

“Who was it?” John repeated, his expression irritatingly pleading. “Just… please.”

“God, I met her in a bar. Her name was Bill. Do you want her name, address, date of birth, blood type, and family tree? Because I can deliver on the first three, but the fourth might be difficult, and, as for the latter… yeah, no chance.”

“No, I… hang on, ‘her’?”

“Yes, her. If you’re now going to get all happy and cheerful and leery because I ‘only’ had sex with a woman and ‘it doesn’t count’ because ‘at least it wasn’t actual sex with an actual other man’ then, so help me god, I will knee you in the balls so hard that you will never walk again.”

“No, just… was it…”

“I am not giving you a blow-by-blow account for you to wank over, John.”

“Can you stop being righteously indignant for two minutes?”
“Not especially, no.”

“Clara, I just want to check that it was consensual, decent sex, and that she treated you well, and that she’s not fallen hopelessly in love with you to the point that I’m going to start getting death threats.”

“Oh,” Clara blinked, wrong-footed by his measured response. “Urm, yes to the first, yes to the second, and no to the last two.”

“Good.”

“It doesn’t… bother you?”

“We were apart,” he shrugged, his expression neutral. “You were well within your rights.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” John settled his arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer to him, and she felt some of the tension leave her muscles. “Please, don’t be. You were trying to cope.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“Clara-”

“Please… can you just say you forgive me? I need to hear that, as stupid as it sounds.”

“I forgive you.”

She exhaled, settling back against his chest and closing her eyes. “Thank you. It means a lot, I’ve felt bad about it and just… yeah. I suppose the big question I should be asking is… where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know,” John admitted, chewing his lip as he considered his response. “I don’t want to rush into anything, and, besides, my place is a complete state.”

“We could try to take things slowly?”

“We could, but we did that for years, remember? The letters?”

“I know, but… that was different. That was Marcus. And it might work out differently this time.”

“So, if I go back to Scotland… you’ll wait for me to sort my life and my place out, and then you’ll be happy to go on dates and exchange phone calls and be what I think other people call ‘normal’?”

“Of course I will, John. And I don’t care how long it takes.”
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Find themselves once again separated by distance, John and Clara revive an old habit.

The ensuing period of time seemed, to Clara, utterly interminable. She had been a teacher, and she was accustomed to the long, dragging boredom that inevitably began to creep up on her come the beginning of August, but this? This was something else entirely. This was a new-but-old feeling — that of her heart being in the wrong place, and being absolutely elated, but terrified by the discovery of this fact. She tried to be pragmatic about matters in a bid to prevent her heart and hopes from soaring too high. She tried to remind herself of the same feeling months before, and how that had ended for her — in heartbreak and in sorrow — and she tried not to get her hopes up or to over-idealise what she had now found once again with John. She loved him, and he loved her, but that was not enough to sufficiently smooth over the cracks in their relationship. The damage was still there, and it could not be ignored, yet Clara did not expect it to be.

Determined that the cracks, if not forgotten, could at least be mended, she did what she had always done in times of great crisis: she turned to literature. First Jane Austen, and then the Brontë sisters, and then, when she found herself uncommonly disheartened by the outdated attitudes held within their novels’ pages, she turned to other texts. She went to the local library and checked out every book she could find on relationships — or, at least, every one that was not centred around tantric sex, or divorce, or marriage — and then struggled home with an overflowing tote bag, holing herself up in Bonnie’s study and making copious pages of notes, all neatly arranged in multicoloured bullet points. When she ran out of books, she took first to YouTube — the students she worked with had spent many hours expounding the values of “tutorials,” whatever they might be, to her — and then to Google, scouring the corners of the Internet in an attempt to make herself into a better “me” and, thus, make her and John into a better “we,” even if such a clichéd notion made her shudder.

The hours of studying were interrupted by the occasional ping of her phone, and she would reach for it and place it on her lap, mirroring the covert behaviour she had so often witnessed in lessons, and smile to herself as she read the latest message from John.

She didn’t quite believe it when the first envelope arrived. She’d thought that she and John were being twenty-first century now, what with texting and calling and, on occasion, Skyping, but still… the letter was an unexpected windfall. Even as she read the handwriting on the envelope, holding the letter in her fingertips as though it were made of glass, she felt her heart skip a beat. She knew that writing. She knew that deep-blue, luxurious — needlessly so, she would have once argued — stationery.

My dearest Clara,

We fell in love by letter, and, as I find myself falling deeper in love with you, I wanted that tradition to continue. We might be hundreds of miles apart, but please rest assured that I hold you here in my heart as tenderly as the first time I was ever able to hold you —although under greatly changed circumstances.

When I first knew I loved you, I considered myself a hopeless old fool, enamoured with the idea of a woman I could not have. I tried to tell myself that you were nothing more than an unattainable
fantasy, and that to you I was cut from the same cloth—I was a pale imitation of my brother, and yet I had fooled you into believing in me. My only regret now is that I did not act upon my feelings sooner, and I apologise for letting my haggard, hardened old heart ache with longing for as many years as I did. Perhaps, if I had been honest with you sooner, we could have avoided some of the pain we have felt along the way, and we would both have been spared the agony of parting.

I am sorry, and will be sorry until the day I die (hopefully many years hence) about the hurt I have inflicted upon you with the callousness of my actions. Please know that it was never my intention to make you feel small, or second-best, or lesser than another. I became lost in the past, and failed to look to my future. All those years before, when I felt you were an impossible wish of mine, I allowed myself to retreat to the solace of my memories, and even with you by my side, I was unable to find my way back. Losing you showed me the way. Losing you reminded me of the pain of loss, and that was enough for me to realise that living for the sake of ghosts was no way to live at all. I do not want to hide among ghosts any longer. I do not want to be a slave to the tending of the flame of memory. My past is my past, and while it was an enormous part of my life for many decades… you are my future. I want to commit what remains of my life to you, and while I do not ask you to do the same for me, I want you to know that I am, and always will be henceforth, hopelessly yours.

Please accept my apologies for having to leave you to return to Ùine, but I could not inflict the place upon you as is. There is darkness and filth everywhere, including about my person, and I want to present to you the idealised version of your future prospects, rather than a broken-down castle and a broken-down old laird to match. I miss you with all of my heart, and Idris echoes that sentiment—she will not leave your blanket, and I cannot adequately explain to her that, in fact, her beloved mistress will return soon. Perhaps on our next phone call I could put you on speaker to allow her to hear your voice—it would relieve a modicum of her melancholy! She senses I am somehow reinvigorated, and yet still… still, she looks at me with big sad eyes that make me think of you. I hope that you do not have the same expression on your face as you read this, even though we are far apart, because I cannot bear to think of your sadness—we will be reunited soon, once I have something to show you that I am proud of. It will not be long, I swear.

Until then, know I love you with all of my heart.

John

Before Clara had finished reading the words that looped in spindly, elegant handwriting across the page, she was crying. By time she stroked her fingertips over where John had signed his name, she was shaking, and she sank onto the sofa with the letter held against her chest.

“What?” Bonnie asked, stepping into the lounge and drying her hands on a tea towel, frowning at her sister’s apparent distress. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s…” Clara swallowed thickly, willing herself to stop crying. “It’s from John.”

“Do I need to kill him?” Bonnie asked at once, her entire body tensing with the apprehension of what she was needed to do. “Or injure him? I’m not fussy.”

“No!” Clara said at once, wiping her eyes on the hem of her T-shirt and taking a deep breath. “No, not at all, it’s nothing… it’s not anything bad. It’s a love letter.”

“Oh,” the fight went out of Bonnie at once, and she raised an eyebrow quizzically. “Do people still do that?”

“Apparently so,” Clara dithered for a moment. “Do you have any stationery? Like, proper stuff? Fancy stuff?”
“Only stuff with my monogram on.”

“You have a monogram?”

“I’m important,” Bonnie stuck her tongue out. “Of course I have a monogram.”

“Shut up,” Clara rolled her eyes. “Can I use it and just... scribble the B into a C?”

“Don’t see why not. Study, top drawer. Surprised you haven’t located it while doing all your research.”

“Been a bit preoccupied,” Clara reminded her twin. “You know, self-growth is actually quite time-consuming.”

“*Theoretical* self-growth,” Bonnie reminded her. “You won’t know if it’s actually worked until you’re physically back with John and—”

“Can you stop being a pedant, thanks?” Clara shot back. “I have a letter to write, and the last post to catch. You’re wasting precious time.”

“God, love is disgusting.”

“Isn’t it just?”

John had not, in all honesty, truly expected a response to his letter — that had never been his intention. He had not written it to elicit a reply from Clara, but rather... well, he wasn’t sure. It was something for her to treasure, and a way to express his feelings in a manner that was somewhat more permanent than a text message or an email. When a thick cream envelope landed on his doorstep one morning, he stared at it with a degree of consternation before reaching for it and slitting it open with a finger, drawing out the paper within and sinking down to his usual letter-reading seat at the bottom of the stairs.

*Dear John,*

*It feels strange to start a letter like that, and not have it be a ‘dear John’ letter as all those old, cliché novels always foretell. This is, of course, absolutely not one of Those Letters, so please set your mind at ease, as I know all too well that you must be feeling anxious to receive unsolicited post from me—even though you wrote to me first, most unexpectedly. I admit to being somewhat surprised by your letter, although not in a negative way—when Bonnie found me crying after reading your heartfelt words, I think she was concerned she may have to make a visit to Ùine, but rest assured—I explained that you had written to me, but kept the words you gave me to myself. Those words came from the heart, and they are not to be shared with others. (Upon which note: Missy, if you are reading this, please stop now.)*

*I am not as eloquent as you are, nor as able to express myself quite so beautifully, despite the many years I spent studying the romantic correspondence and works of the greats. My feelings towards you remain, as they have been for many months—nay, years—those of absolute, utmost adoration and love. You are a good man. You may not consider yourself to be, but you are. You have grown in the time I have known you as your true self, and I do not doubt that, as we grow old together, you will continue to grow in wisdom and compassion. You are, to me, the epitome of a gentleman. You*
are a walking lesson in grace and humility; you are kind, generous, and have an insatiable curiosity for life. You have never judged me. You have never condemned me. You have never shown me anything other than unwavering friendship—and later love. For that, if nothing else, I owe you a great debt.

Your words regarding time were thought-provoking. While I wish, as do you, that we could have enjoyed more time together than we currently have—such a fleeting resource, time, and so fickle—I think that it was imperative that we grew as people first. Our suffering and our trials have helped to forge us into who we are today, and while I loathe the hurt caused to those around us and to each other, without it I would not have you. Without it, we would be miserable and divided, rather than... well, in this instance, divided by distance, but still cherished with the utmost reverence. I miss you with every beat of my heart, and I await the day I receive word from you—perhaps by letter?—that I can return to Úine. Until then, I am sure that you will call me upon reading this, and I look forward to hearing your voice; the moments that I do are the best of my day.

Until I see you again, know that I love you with all of my heart.

Clara
Clara had never been a particularly patient woman, and as the long days of separation passed, she found herself becoming frustrated with the seeming lack of progress or impetus on John’s part. He was vague and nonspecific in his messages and phone calls, and very little appeared to be occurring that would allow them to reunite as soon as possible. Each day she would question him, and each day his answers would grow vaguer, until she felt herself beginning to abandon all hope of a reunion altogether. Resigning herself to the fact it may be months before she could return to Úine, she eventually set to work preparing for the impending school year instead, and she was in the middle of making a stationery shopping list one morning when the knock on the door came.

“Bon?” she called, yelling into the depths of the house in the hope that her twin might be more willing to interrupt her morning routine and answer it. “Did you order something? Is that for you?”

“I’m in the shower!” came the muffled reply, and Clara groaned as she realised she would have to drag herself away from the Paperchase website and her colour-coded wish list. Getting to her feet and hauling herself through the house, she yanked the front door open with considerable irritation, then froze, her mouth falling open in shock. An enormous bunch of red roses was being held aloft at head height in front of her, and, as she stared at them in wonder, they were moved aside and she shrieked.

“Hello,” John said with a somewhat sheepish grin. “Could you maybe not deafen me?”

“Shut up, daft old man,” Clara flung herself into his arms, and he was forced to juggle the bouquet to avoid scratching her with any thorns. “You could have called ahead and warned me, you know.”

“And spoiled the surprise?”

“I could’ve put my makeup on then,” Clara reasoned, then gestured to her worn-out old jeans and sweatshirt. “And clothes that are actually, you know, fit for purpose.”

“Well, I happen to think you look beautiful.”

“Yeah, but you have to say that.”

“Do not.”

“Do so.”

“Do not.”

“What are the chances that I’d hit you with this bouquet if you didn’t say that?” she asked, arching an eyebrow, and he laughed.

“Quite high,” he admitted with a grin. “Now, can I come in?”
“Oh,” she felt her cheeks turn pink. “Yeah, sure. Bonnie is-”

“Here,” her twin interjected, and Clara spun around to find her twin stood in the doorway to the lounge, smirking widely and decidedly not fresh from the shower. “Hi, John.”

“Hi, Bonnie. Thanks for not telling her.”


“Hang on,” Clara’s eyes narrowed, and she waved one finger accusingly at her twin. “You knew he was coming and you didn’t think to maybe warn me so that I wasn’t wearing my day pyjamas?”

“Well, he fancies you whatever you look like, so I figured it didn’t especially matter.”

“Thanks,” Clara raised an eyebrow. “How was your ‘shower’?”

“Wet,” Bonnie stuck her tongue out. “Stop being bitchy and go and get ready.”

“For what?”

“Things,” John said mysteriously. “Surprise things.”

“Surprise things make me stressed. Do I need a ballgown, lingerie, swimsuit…?”

“Do you even own a ballgown?” Bonnie asked, rolling her eyes as she spoke. “John, please at least inform her of what her clothing choices should be, or she’s going to be a nightmare.”

“Well, nice summer dress? Would that be doable?” he shrugged. “I’m not an expert, but I think that would work.”

“I suppose I could make that happen,” Clara grinned, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek before stepping back into the hall, taking the bouquet from him and heading for the kitchen. “You can come in, you know.”

“Coffee?” Bonnie asked John pragmatically as he crossed the threshold, and Clara shot her sister a look of gratitude. “Tea? Other hot beverage? Or a cold one?”

“Coffee, please,” he decided after a moment, following the two of them towards the kitchen and visibly relaxing a fraction. Clara lay her roses down on a countertop, retrieving a vase and filling it with water as John took a seat at the table. She could feel his eyes on her as she unpeeled the wrappings of the bouquet, then began to trim the leaves and stems in the way her mother had taught her many years before. She was dimly aware of Bonnie moving around her — filling the kettle, fetching mugs, chatting to John — but she could feel his attention as acutely as if it were physical contact; his eyes were boring into her back, and she knew for a fact that he wasn’t paying attention to Bonnie’s meaningless chatter.

“You seem… different,” he said out of nowhere, addressing her directly, and Bonnie lapsed into silence. “Very different.”

“I feel different,” Clara replied, snipping the base off a stem and pointedly not looking at him as she did so. This seemed like the sort of conversation that might be easier without eye contact. “Happier.”

“Because of me?”

“Because of lots of things.”
“Have you been…” she heard him swallow, uncomfortably, mid-sentence. “… drinking?”

“No,” Clara placed the bloom in the vase, reaching for the next and ripping the lower leaves off of it with slightly more force than was necessary. “I haven’t.”

“Bon? Has she?”

“She isn’t my minder,” Clara snapped, setting the scissors down with a bang. “I can look after myself.”

“Sometimes you can, yes,” Bonnie replied tartly, and Clara resisted the urge to swear at her sister. “John, she’s fine. Really.”

“I just don’t want…” he began, trailing off uncertainly.

Clara turned to face him then, expecting to find his expression sanctimonious, but instead she found his face contorted with worry. “What?” she asked, her tone softening. “Don’t want what?”

“I don’t want to cause any more hurt.”

“John, unless today is going to revolve around taking me to River’s grave and delivering a five-hour speech about how great she was, really, that isn’t likely.”

“It doesn’t,” he smiled wanly. “I was thinking more… picnic. In a surprise location. The food’s in the car.”

“That sounds nice,” Clara returned his smile. “But please. Stop worrying about me.”

“Clara, I’ve got a duty of care.”

“I know you have,” she rolled her eyes fondly. “And I love you for it.”

The picnic, as it transpired, turned out to be in the grounds of Kensington Palace. John had packed an ageing wicker hamper with a motley selection of homemade and shop-bought treats, and the two of them lounged on a worn picnic blanket and nibbled, and talked, and relished each other’s company. There was something profoundly electrifying about being physically reunited that both exhilarated and terrified them in equal measure, and they spent the first half-hour avoiding each other’s touch, frightened by the sparks that seemed to fly whenever they happened to bump elbows or brush hands. Each accidental bump or nudge was like receiving a shock, but, as they ate, Clara found herself craving the spark all the more. Reaching for John, she wound her arm through his, both of them acutely aware of their raised heart rates as they sat in silence, both focused on the view and their food, before John shook his head and pulled away.

“This isn’t enough,” he said, and before Clara could request an explanation from him, or protest, he had pulled her onto his lap, resting his cheek against her temple and exhaling contentedly. She could feel his heart hammering against her back, and she relaxed into the embrace, the tension leaving her body as he wrapped his arms around her waist. His arms, exposed by the shabby T-shirt he had picked out, settled against her own bare skin, and she sighed, leaning back against him more comfortably.
“Better?” she asked softly, and he nodded wordlessly, clinging to her all the more tightly and burying his face in her hair as though breathing her in. “Are you…”

“I just…” his voice was thick with emotion. “I missed holding you. I miss holding you, present tense.”

“Touch-starved,” she murmured, twisting in his lap until she was facing him, her thighs either side of his. “I had Bonnie and you had…”

“Missy,” he let out a breathless chuckle. “Not one for physical reassurance.”

She looked at him for a moment, understanding passing between them silently, and then wrapped her own arms around him, closing her eyes and holding him as tightly as she was able. “Does this help?” she asked softly, resting her forehead against his shoulder and inhaling the warm, familiar smell of him. “Being held?”

There was no response, but she felt something splash into her hair once, twice, three times.

“Please don’t let go,” he implored after several moments, his voice breaking. “Please.”

“Never.”

After what had felt like hours spent around Kensington Palace, there had been a too-hot Tube journey, and then a trip on the London Eye. Dinner had been nothing fancy — fish and chips, almost too good to eat — but enjoyed, nonetheless. And then came the doorstep, with its damning finality; a place that had earlier been a location of great joy was now suffused with immeasurable sadness as it served as the emblem of parting.

“I have to go,” John reminded Clara, trying and failing to unwind her arms from around his neck. “I promise that it won’t be long now.”

“Please don’t go,” she begged, child-like, but no longer caring, her eyes full of tears. “Please.”

“Clara—”

“Stay the night,” she blurted, looking up at him pleadingly and willing herself not to sob. “I don’t mean… you know I don’t…”

“I don’t expect that,” he murmured, running a hand through his hair and visibly wavering. “Would it really be alright to stay?”

“John, please. Please don’t go. I just… I need you, please.”

There was a beat of silence as he considered her words, and then he nodded once, a sharp jerk of the head. Afraid he might change his mind, Clara unlocked the front door and shepherded him inside, taking him by the hand and leading him upstairs.

“You know I don’t have any pyjamas,” he noted as she towed him determinedly after her. “Or a toothbrush.”

“You can sleep however you like, and you can use mine.”
“You really are very hell-bent on me staying.”

“You seem very determined to leave,” Clara shot back at him as they stepped into her room, her tone sharper than intended. “If you really want to go, you can.”

“Clara…”

“Really. You can.”

“You were begging me to st-”

“If it’s that much of a burden for you…” she could feel herself starting to cry again, and she turned her face away from him in a bid to hide her tears. “You can go.”

“Clara,” he said softly, peeling off his T-shirt and taking her into his arms. Something about being held against his bare skin soothed her, and she closed her eyes and tried to relax. “I’m not going anywhere. I just don’t want you to feel rushed.”

“I want you,” she said in a small voice. “I mean. I don’t want… we shouldn’t… not yet… I just want you here. Please.”

“I know,” he let his hands wander to the zip of her dress, looking down at her with a silent question, and when she nodded he slid the zipper down, allowing the fabric to pool at her feet. “Do you want to use the bathroom first, or shall I?”

“I will,” she chewed her lip, shaking her hair back from her face and feeling abruptly and inexplicably nervous. “You just… I don’t know, chill.”

“Gotcha.”

When she returned, minutes later, she found John laid half under the duvet in his boxers, skimming through one of the books from her bedside table with a look of distaste. “Enjoying it?” she asked, her mouth quirking up into a fond smile.

“It’s alright,” he cleared his throat, then grimaced guiltily. “Not a fan of Austen.”

“I will convert you,” she resolved, undoing her bra and slipping it off through the sleeves of her nightshirt. “One day.”

“You do realise I have seen you without clothes on before, right?”

“Yes, but it’s called modesty.”

“You weird woman.”

“Shut up,” she chastised, climbing into bed beside him and curling up against his chest. “You love me.”

“Yes,” he affirmed, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I do. Very much.”
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Clara finally receives the summons she's been waiting for...

When the call came, Clara was ready. She’d been ready for the occasion for weeks, waiting with eager anticipation to be summoned back to Scotland, and so she merely threw the last few items she would need into her pre-packed suitcase, gave Bonnie a long, reassuring hug, and, with tears in her eyes, then took off for Kings Cross with a mounting sense of anticipation and apprehension.

As she bought her train ticket and an overpriced coffee and took up a seat on the platform, she tried to assuage her own nerves with an internal pep talk. Everything would be fine. She was returning to a place she adored to be with the man she loved — there was no need to be nervous, or feel quite so acutely… well, she didn’t know how she felt. Enthusiastic? Nervous? Optimistic? Worried? She wanted to be excited, and yet something about capering around the platform like an overexcited spaniel seemed wrong at her stage of life, so she settled instead for nervously jiggling her knee up and down and sipping her coffee, ruing her decision to order a caffeinated beverage. By the time the train arrived, she was veritably vibrating with energy, and it was with great difficulty that she settled down in her assigned seat and half-focused on a book, determined not to waste the eight hours she was about to spend confined with strangers. She could have — should have — flown, she realised in retrospect, but there was something intrinsically poetic about long train journeys that appealed to her, and so she curled her legs up underneath her and took a steadying breath as the train pulled out of London.

When she stepped off the train in Inverness, she at once regretted her decision not to allow John to collect her from the city. Despite it being August, torrential rain was coming down in sheets and the visibility was minimal, and, as she squinted up at the departure boards, she prayed that the local service she needed would still be running in such godawful weather. Locating it at the bottom of a column, she involuntarily beamed from ear to ear and purchased a ticket, her fatigue giving way to genuine enthusiasm as she boarded the smaller, more aged train to Aviemore that would reunite her with John.

Mercifully shorter than the journey from London, she sat in comfortable silence in the corner of a compartment, her head propped on her hand as she stared out of the window and watched raindrops speed across the glass of the window to pass the time. She picked first one, then two drops, and traced their journey with her eyes or her fingertips, and, if she looked mad — well, so be it. She was excited, and she was on edge, and she was about to be reunited with John — if all things went according to plan, at least. She prayed every second of the journey that rain would not impede their way any more than was strictly necessary, and, as they pulled into Aviemore a mere five minutes later than the scheduled arrival time, she offered a brief non-verbal sentiment of thanks to… well, whoever was smiling down on her and her journey.

As she stepped off the train, the rain — as though by some unseen signal — ceased, the clouds
parted, and a ray of late-evening sunshine shone down over the small station. Wet-slick and oily-looking from the rain, the tarmac and the otherwise slate-grey sky seemed one and the same, and a few seconds passed before she noticed the awkwardly loitering figure leaning against a wall under the shelter of the station roof, holding a bedraggled bunch of flowers and smiling at her shyly. Half-walking, half-stumbling towards him, she let out a shaky laugh and breathed in a trembling voice: “hello.”

“Hello,” John said, beaming from ear to ear and sweeping her into a hug. “Missed you.”

“Missed you,” she hummed contentedly, wrapping her arms around his torso and closing her eyes. The exhaustion of the journey, the long and protracted wait to be reunited — none of that seemed to matter now. What mattered was being here, and being with John. Pulling away a little, she stood on tiptoes and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth, then reached for the flowers from his arms, quirking an eyebrow as she did so. “For me?”

“No, for one of my other well-travelled English girlfriends.”

She laughed, resting the bouquet in one arm and giving him another kiss. “Thank you, they’re beautiful.”

“Was the least I could do.”

“Can we maybe get in the car before we continue this conversation? I’m not sure how likely it is that this miraculous reprieve from the storm will last.”

“Right,” he looked a touch sheepish and reached for her case, wheeling it to the car park and stowing it in the back of his Land Rover. Clara scrambled into the front, holding her flowers between her knees as she buckled up her seatbelt, then gazed around at the landscape receding into the distance. Content to let her be with her thoughts, John started the engine and began the drive back to Úine, occasionally reaching over and placing his hand on hers but allowing the companionable silence to persist. It endured until they arrived at the estate, and then Clara caught sight of the brightly coloured sign by the crumbling gates.

“’For sale’?!” she asked with abject horror, feeling as though she’d been stabbed as they cruised down the long, bumpy driveway. He hadn’t mentioned this — not on the phone, not by letter — and somehow that was almost worse than the revelation itself. “You… John, no! You can’t… you can’t sell up!”

“Clara,” he said calmly, switching off the engine in front of the house and turning to face her. His expression was weary, and she could tell at once that this had not been an easy decision to make for him. “It isn’t feasible to keep the old place going. You know that and I know that, and we both have for a very long time. We can’t keep lying to ourselves.”

“But you love it here!”

“I know, and-”

“And all your memories are here, this is totally unreasonable to do this to yourself! To go through all the trauma of moving… it just isn’t a good idea!”

“Clara-”

“John, I won’t let you do this.”

“Clara, will you listen to me for two minutes?” he asked with exasperation, rolling his eyes as he
spoke. “The house is for sale, yes, and some of the land, but I’ve got a plan, alright?”

“What sort of plan?”

“The kind that involves doing up one of the outlying cottages.”

“The what?”

“I think they belonged to… ach, I don’t know, gamekeepers or locals something. They’re half falling down, but the gatekeeper’s lodge is out on the north side of the estate and I thought… well, it might be more manageable for the two of us. I’ve been working on making it habitable; I just need your help and your input. Especially on decorating, because I’ve got no sodding clue what colours go together or what sort of furniture you’d like or… well, anything like that.”

Clara considered the matter for a moment, then grudgingly asked: “Can we still have a library?”

“Absolutely. The books are going to need to go somewhere, so why not? I’m thinking a study-slash-library.”

“Also… what about Missy? Where’s she going to go?”

“There’s another wee place out on the east side of the estate — no bloody idea whose it was — but she’s taken me up on the offer of taking it over. That ridiculous shepherd’s hut is just… impractical. It’s way past its best, and I don’t think it’ll last another winter. She’s all in favour of having a witchy little cottage in the woods, don’t you worry.”

Clara nodded, getting out of the car and taking a deep breath to try and recover from the shock of the news. She’d missed being in Scotland, and she’d missed this — the unpolluted, crisp mountain air, so different from what she was used to in London. She was on the verge of speaking again when the front door burst open and an overexcited bundle of yellow fur tumbled out onto the drive, barking loudly and racing across the compacted gravel towards Clara. It took her a moment to register what it was, but then she crouched down and opened her arms, allowing Idris to nuzzle against her as the loyal companion continued barking joyously.

“I think,” Clara said breathlessly, stroking the golden retriever’s head and trying not to let herself be knocked over by the dog’s exuberant affections, “someone missed me.”

“She’s not the only one,” John reminded her, then looked up at the increasingly darkening sky. “Shall we head inside before the heavens open?”

“Ah,” Clara grimaced, standing up and taking John’s hand. “Could be a good idea, yep.”

Allowing him to lead her inside, she sighed contentedly as they crossed the threshold, the warm familiarity of the house washing over her and feeling like a reunion with an old friend.

“Tea?” John asked, Idris alternately bouncing around his heels and nudging Clara’s legs with her nose. “Or coffee?”

“Tea, please,” Clara smiled, remembering abruptly how tired she was and longing for the reassuring warmth of a hot drink. “I’ll be in the lounge, OK?”

“Sure,” John pressed a quick kiss to her temple, then headed towards the kitchen, leaving Idris hovering at Clara’s side as she stepped into the lounge. It seemed tidier and cleaner than she remembered, and as she looked around at the familiar portraits, she couldn’t help but feel a stab of sadness that they would all soon be consigned to an attic or storage container somewhere. This was
John’s past, and it should be celebrated.

An indignant little *woof* from Idris recaptured her attention, and she sunk down on the sofa, patting her lap and laughing as the golden retriever clambered onto her legs, resting her chin against Clara’s shoulder. “Hello,” she hummed, wrapping her arms around the dog as though she were a human. “I missed you, girl.”

Idris let out a soft huff, as though agreeing with her, and licked from her jaw to her ear.

“No face licking. I don’t care if he lets you, it’s unhygienic.”

“What’s unhygienic?” John asked, appearing with two steaming mugs. “Oh, my god. You look…”

“Don’t.”

“No, that’s painfully cute,” he set both drinks down and then reached for his phone, snapping a quick photo and then leaning over and scratching Idris’s head fondly. “What were you saying is unhygienic?”

“Letting her lick your face.”

“She only does it when I’m sad.”

“That’s… not really an excuse.”

“Don’t deny an old Scot his soppiness.”

“Would you like *me* to lick your face?”

“Well…” he mused, then grinned at her look of indignation. “Hey! Kidding, obviously not. I mean… unless you wanted to.”

“What am I, a Labrador?”

“You’ve got the puppy-dog eyes.”

“Do not make me set your dog on you.”

“…good luck with that,” John affixed his dog with a bemused expression. “She’s too daft.”

“Is there going to be room for her in the new place?” Clara asked, envisioning the golden retriever bouncing around a tiny cottage, and grimacing.

“Of course there is. As if I’d leave her behind.”

“And for your things? Your family portraits, your stuff…?”

“Clara, I don’t much care for any of those things.”

“But they’re important,” she looked up at him earnestly, realising the hypocrisy of her encouragement to keep hold of his past. “They’re part of you.”

“Yes, but the furniture is largely ancient and the artwork… well, it’s much more Missy than it is me. It seems only fair to let her appreciate it for a bit — I’ve been living with the ancestors for too long.”
“But…”

“Clara, the only things I care about having in the cottage are you, and Idris.”

“You can’t sit on me.”

John smirked, and Clara threw a nearby cushion at him.

“Don’t be smutty,” she chided, but grinned, nonetheless. “I just want you to be comfortable and not to have to completely erase your past.”

“Clara, I want a future.”

“I know.”

“I want a future with you.”

“I know, John.”

“I think, after all these years, it’s time I stopped living in the past.”
“God,” John stepped into the hall and shrugged off his jacket with a grimace, shaking his head in consternation. “You know, some of those bloody guests up at the house are just… ridiculous. One of the Americans asked me if I was Irish. Irish! In bloody Scotland! I’ll have you know this was my sodding ancestral home, thank you very much!”

Clara bit back a laugh from her seat on the sofa, reaching down onto the floor and holding her hand out to Aurelius, their new puppy. “Aren’t they silly?” she cooed to the tiny black Labrador as he nuzzled her palm, tongue flicking over her skin in search of potential treats. “Silly guests are silly, aren’t they? But they like it here, so that’s good. Plus, we don’t have to look after them. Even better.”

“Are you fawning over the puppy again?” John asked suspiciously, stepping into the lounge and narrowing his eyes at them, before allowing his gaze to flick over to where Idris was laying in the corner, her expression bemused as she gazed ruefully at Clara. “Is Clara ignoring you, hey?”

“I’m not ignoring her! We had a twenty-minute cuddle while you were out, at the end of which I discovered darling little puppykins had, while out of my sight, shredded every roll of toilet paper he could reach in the bathroom cabinet. Idris is, if anything, an enabler to his chaos.”

“Please remind me why we got a puppy?” John asked with a groan, trying and failing to look sternly down at Aurelius. “Why did we think that was a good idea? We have a nice, warm, beautiful home, and we introduced a small hurricane to it.”

“I seem to recall something about, ‘Oh Clara, let’s just go and have a look at them, we won’t get one,’” she reminded him with a grin. “That went well, didn’t it?”

“Shut up,” he muttered, but leant down and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead, nonetheless. “How’s prepping for work going?”

“I forgot how much there was to do,” she sighed, gesturing vaguely at the pile of novels on the coffee table and then flopping her head back against the sofa cushions in exhaustion. “I’m getting there. The academic stuff is mostly ready; it’s the pastoral side I’m going to need time to work on.”

“Well, I have faith in your abilities.”

“Are you sure the kids aren’t going to just dismiss me as some…” she attempted a Scottish accent. “Wee English lassie?”

John snorted, and she threw a pillow at him. “Hey! They might, especially if you try to talk like that. Just be yourself, and be authoritative, and you’ll be fine.”

“I’m holding you to that.”
“If not, set Aurelius on them.”

They both looked over at the puppy, who was determinedly chewing the head off his new teddy bear, and dismissed the idea as one.

“…or not,” Clara mused, grinning up at John. “You haven’t forgotten Missy is coming for dinner tonight, have you?”

An expression of horror flickered over John’s face, and Clara rolled her eyes.

“You forgot, didn’t you?”

“No,” he lied, then admitted: “Yes.”

“Good thing one of us is organised, then, isn’t it? One of the chefs up at the house gave me a recipe for soufflés to try.”

“Thank you,” John said with relief, plonking himself down beside her and sighing. “My organised girlfriend.”

“Oh!” Clara beamed, leaning over and snagging something — two somethings — from the coffee table. “We’ve been invited to some exciting social events.”

“That sounds… vaguely ominous.”

“They’re fun ones. Firstly, Bonnie and Bill’s wedding, and, in my case, the accompanying hen do,” Clara handed John the first invitation, and, once he’d appraised it, the second. “And secondly, Melody’s christening.”

“They left that late, didn’t they?”

“Amy’s finally been coerced into it by her in-laws.”

“Ah. Are we still godparents?”

“Of course.”

“I can’t believe they think we’re suitably wise and serious people to serve as godparents.”

“Speak for yourself,” Clara teased, and John chuckled. “I think we’re doing pretty well at being wise and serious. You’ve been great with Regan since she came back.”

“I’m related to her, though. And it doesn’t matter if I’m weird, because she’s Missy’s daughter, so anything I do is sane in comparison.”

“This is true,” Clara grimaced, reaching over and placing her hand on his arm. “Look, we’ll be fine, OK? Stop worrying.”

“Sorry.”

“Now, go and get changed. Take the puppy with you, or he might eat something else.”

“Yes, boss.”

“I’ve mentioned I love you?”
“Yes, boss.”

Clara quirked an eyebrow.

“I mean… I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

And so it comes to an end! This fic has been harder to write than Tuning In On You, but I’ve loved it nonetheless. Thank you to everyone who has stuck with it, and I look forward to bringing you my next work: No Escaping When I Start, coming 30 October!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!