Living with Wolves

by sheswalkinginbeauty

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Notes

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A wolf pack has a definite social structure and rules of conduct. The pack leaders are the alpha male and female. These two animals are dominant over all the other wolves in the pack.

"My apologies gentlemen, I'm not usually late."

All heads whipped around the sudden opening of the door.

Amidst the proposal of new budget campaigns by a skinny kid in a sports jacket, Owen Grady's then sleepy eyes focused on the woman he had never seen before.

Dressed in an all-white ensemble, her strong, fiery hair trailed just a bit below her shoulders. Her porcelain span of skin and swan-like neck was visible from the blazer and long skirt she was wearing.

An air of I-own-this-fucking-room hangs about her as Owen's gaze followed the stranger.

No, you don't, sweetheart. He thought in a very cocky manner.

He was so fazed by the woman's arrival that he was unaware that he stopped tapping his pen on the paper. Or the slight parting of his mouth as he watched, she strode across the room.

The echoes of her heels reverberated on the floor tiles of the conference room. An eerie sense of silence befell the room. Everybody transfixed on her as much as him.

The woman sat on the empty seat at the far end on his right. She placed her items on the table in front of her, ignorant of him or anyone in the room. She brushed her bright red hair away from her shoulders as she settled in her seat. Her phone, notepad, and pens placed neatly on her area on the table.

Who is this woman?
No one bothered to make the proper introductions for him. Owen saw her raised her perfect
groomed eyebrows at the kid, whose name he had somehow forgotten.


Connor, who was obviously stunned all but scrambled for the papers in front of him. His pen fell to
the floor, making Lowery, who was sitting next to him, cringed. When Connor bent to pick it up,
he hit his head on the table with a crunchy thwack!

Owen felt sorry for the kid.

"At ease Connor. I'm sure she doesn't bite." Owen joked, trying to lighten the mood that befell on
the room since her arrival.

That seemed to work because everyone in the room laughed.

Everyone except her. Owen noted, not that he's looking at her again.

The kid, Connor, smiled at him as he pushed his glasses on his nose and continued.

"Furthermore, we acquired 64% of our revenue from last month."  

Connor's prepared speech had dulled when he met the stranger's penetrating scrutiny.

She was the only woman in a roomful of powerful and influential men in the building. From his
seat on his father's chair, she faced him. If she didn't notice him from her entrance, she does now.

On the other hand, all Owen could think was, fucking hell.

She was exquisite.

Her short and straight hair framed her delicate face. Owen can't see the color of her eyes from the
distance, but it nailed him completely immobile to his seat. She had an upturned yet elegant nose.
Her jawline, so angular and sharp that he decided he would happily cut himself with as he ran his
fingers on it. She had an adorable cleft chin strutted out with every confidence. And lipstick-stained
lips that Owen imagined ruining with reckless kisses.

For what seemed like an eternity, the intriguing woman looked away and focused on the bar graphs
in front. She was religiously taking notes every now and then.

Anxious by some peculiar reason, Owen cleared his throat and sat straighter in his seat. He diverted
his attention on the screen, the statistics was making his head spin.

If anyone told him he's gonna be sitting on the Chairman's chair a year from now, he would laugh
his ass off at them. Then maybe, shove his foot right in their mouths. Not that the idea of air-
conditioned rooms and spreadsheets don't interest him. But Owen Grady enjoyed his war
adventures.

As a kid who was destined to be the runner of a successful empire, Owen craved the uncertainty
and thrill of life. A life without owning mega billion dollar companies. A life without expensive
cars or luxurious vacations, humongous villas or special treatments. Owen didn't like being chased
around by silver spoons, maids and butlers. He believed that earning achievements were sweeter if
pursued by perseverance. Hence, he joined the navy, the profession that was close to him by heart.
And he didn't regret it for a single bit.
At such a young age, Owen knew he had a bigger house than his classmates and friends, yet didn't grow up a brat. Mrs. Grady made sure of that. He went to public school, had normal friends who never treated him differently. He always took the bus, (until his dad gave him the old school Mercedes Benz, a family heirloom, on his 16th birthday. During summer vacations he would send his resumes on any job openings his dad's companies would offer. He worked as a maintenance guy, a canteen helper, an IT guy, even as a janitor. He realized that every job was important, every job was essential in the company. Owen enjoyed every moment of it.

When he went to college, he applied and became a part-time associate in Grady Corp. His parents always emphasized and taught him the beauty of a simple life. A lesson for which he was eternally grateful.

When he told his dad that he wanted to join the navy, Senior Grady was supportive.

"I knew you'll take after your mom." Alan mused that night when he told him.

No questions asked. Alan Grady was the best dad and person he could ever meet in his life. He recalled how his dad would boast while wearing his a "Proud NAVY Dad". A shirt he had no shame in wearing to the office or whenever he would video call him. Owen could always count that his father would be there smiling proudly at him when he looked back.

Owen settled on a simple yet serene life by living outside the city. At his grandparent's farmhouse. Far from the estate and villas he grew up in. A life in total solitude.

When he was not serving his country, he would tend to his farm animals and sometimes train dogs for the military. It was bliss. Up until a week after his last tour.

Joseph Baylor, his dad's lawyer and close friend called him. Having just landed from serving his tour and losing some of his troops, Owen wasn't ready to hear another bad news. Even so, he gathered his pent-up courage, hopped in his car and drove an hour to the city.

Owen loved his old man. Even with business tycoons bowing at his feet, Alan Grady remained a generous and grounded man. So, that tumor that ended his life was such a cruel punishment for a man who lived his entire life helping others. The only Gradys. Her mom, a loving woman and notable army lieutenant succumbed to her injuries from a car crash. He was 10 years old. And he was in the car with her. There never was a day that they don't miss her. His dad told him that he loved his mom so much that he never thought of getting remarried with anyone ever again. Over the years, Owen kept a tight-knit relationship with his father. Thus, imagine his depression when they told him that Alan Grady, only had months to live.

The elder Grady didn't have the guts to tell Owen until his three-month mark. He said he doesn't want his son to see another parent die in front of his eyes. And that was enough to make the untouchable, Owen Grady cry.

On his deathbed, his hand clasped by his son. He told Owen that being his only heir and family, Owen will inherit all his properties. Including the position as CEO and Chairman of Grady Corporation. Yet, Owen still wasn't bound to take over if he doesn't want to. His father was still trying to give him the freedom Owen always sought for. Owen would be well provided for even if he didn't take the position to which he just shook his head.

"Of course I'll take over, Dad. That's your life's work. You didn't have to imply or ask. I'll take it."

His dad was silent, before he mumbled a breathless, thank you.
"Thank you kiddo. Not for, you know, taking the responsibility. I know your heart Owen and I'm with you whatever decision you will have. And I'm always gonna be proud of you. Thank you for being my son.

The only regret in Alan's life (he told Owen this) was not being able to see his future grandchildren. With whatever strength he still has, Alan smacked his son's head for this. Owen chuckled, despite being teary-eyed.

"One day you are gonna meet someone and she'll knock you down on your stubborn ass."

The proud smile lingered on Alan's withered lips even after he finally closed his eyes.

"I need a full decent report on this proposal first thing in the morning." The redheaded woman reiterated from her seat, interrupting Owen's trip to memory lane.

"But-"

"Spare me the details of your incompetence Mr. Peters, get it done."

Wow. She is feisty.

Owen cocked at eyebrow at Lowery, who had a sneer on his face. His assistant and friend for years was slowly nodding at him as if to say "She has barely even started."

Connor turned beet red before muttering a "Yes, Miss Dearing."

Owen's eyes bulged for a bit, apprehension dawning on him.

Ah, so this is the infamous Claire Dearing. He had an instinct that she might be.

He heard enough stories about the company's "resident shrew"- a nickname given by Lowery. Her name was omnipresent.

Whether be it in the halls, elevators, meetings and colleague dinners.

Owen found himself getting more curious as Lowery provided his four-year's worth of company tête-à-tête. His dad never told him about her, ever, which peaked his curiosity even more.

Owen was yet to meet the person behind the praises of their associates and subordinates. He was curious to know the woman who turned the company into her own fucking playground. He was anxious to know the woman responsible for the company's ascending net worth for the past years. But most importantly, Owen wanted to thank the person who sent wreaths of his mom's favorite flowers for his dad's funeral.

When he took over the company two weeks after his dad's funeral, Dearing was in France. His associates told him that Alan assigned her there to arrange business misdealing. She was there for half a year by contract, so she couldn't leave for the funeral.

And now, the Claire Dearing stood before him, looking all immaculate and stirring all kinds of hell in him that he has yet to discover.

"-But, I have a few suggestions." She stood from her seat with the grace of a queen and trotted towards the screen. Owen found himself staring at her again while she pointed out business terms. She was undoubtedly a woman of style and substance.

Connor nodded with nervous enthusiasm on her every word. His earlier jitters dissipating. The men
"Here boss," Lowery whispered, leaning sideways to drop a black handkerchief in front of him. "You got a little drool over there." he gestured to the side of his mouth. His face twitching as he suppressed his chuckle.

Owen scowled loud enough for the whole room to hear. All heads turned to him with Dearing's eyes penetrating him the most.

A quite nervous, Connor asked from where he resumed his seat.

"You don't approve Owen?"

"No." he shook his head at him, trying to recover himself. "No. I mean everything sounds great, but... Could someone give me this year's and last year's investor relations reports? I only have the ones from-" He trailed off as Lowery handed him his tablet.

"-The first quarter of this year. Before we agree on taking any actions, I need to review that." he finished.

For starters, Owen actually knew what he's talking about. Aside from his Dad's mentorship, he studied Business before shifting to Behavioral Studies. After he graduated, he enlisted in the NAVY.

"Claire could help you." Simon Masrani, one of his dad's best friends and board of directors chipped in.

"Of course... But who's Claire now?" He still asked, although he had an idea who she might was. His gaze was deliberately avoiding her.

Lowery let out a snicker before covering it with a loud cough. The room fell silent once more. His colleagues' catching each other's nervous glances. Simon made no effort to answer his question. But Owen could see delight twinkling in his eyes, his fingers curled around his lips.

"Mr. Grady, I don't think we've met." She declared in that daunting cold, tone of hers. She was holding her chin up a bit higher and clasping her long fingers together in a very pompous manner. As if she was better than anyone in the room.

Owen finally acknowledged the Aphrodite in the room, who was standing at the end of the table across him. She was holding her chin up high, her long, pale fingers clasped in front of her. Owen allowed himself to linger once more on her figure.

"Oh, you're Claire?" He feigned surprise. "Well then, I'm Owen." His hands pointed to himself in an introductory manner.

"I know who you are Mr. Grady." Claire quipped. He could tell she was struggling not to roll her eyes.

"Please. Call me Owen."

She pursed her lips in impatience.

He raised one eyebrow at her, smiling smugly at her. "So?"

"So what, Mr. Grady?" The way her sultry voice coiled around his surname was like honey to his
ears. Yet, her expression remained cold and distant and to his surprise, he was liking it.

He leaned back on his chair, pushed his chair away from the table to rest his left ankle on his right knee. "When can you hand me the report?"

"You can expect it no later than tomorrow afternoon."

"Tomorrow? " He clicked his tongue and slanted his head at her, his eyes challenging. "See, that wouldn't work for me. Miss Dearing. I would appreciate it a wee bit earlier."

Lowery kicked his foot under the table like some sort of warning.

"I'll be sure to give it to you before the day ends then, Mr. Grady," Claire exclaimed in a very polite way, that it seemed fake.

"Call me Owen, sweetheart. Mr. Grady is my granddad." A mild irritation lurking in his voice at her lack of disobedience.

"Okay." Claire hummed. Her red, red lips into a tight, horizontal line.

He pushed on, waiting for her to do what he just asked her, his arms crossed. "Great."

"Fantastic."

"Outstanding." The corner of his lips twitched with burgeoning interest.

"Is there anything else you would need Mr. Grady?

The committee held their breath as they watch the first interaction between their superiors.

They know about Owen from when he used to tag along with his dad before he shipped to some war zone for the NAVY. They were aware of the boy growing up and having both of his parent's strong set of personalities. Being stubborn and impulsive in nature. Attributes that drove their former CEO out of his mind and what they heard had kept him alive during his NAVY days.

On the other hand, they know of Claire Dearing. The Claire Dearing, who finished two majors at Harvard at the same time. The Claire Dearing, who graduated with honors. Alan Grady's trusted, second in command. The woman accountable for keeping Grady Corporation afloat. The woman you won't want to mess around with- for it'll probably be the last thing you ever will do.

Two people from opposite sides of the spectrum. The ice and the fire. Their virtues and principles sundered by being raised in different circumstances and environment. Yet, they both shared one common deadly trait. One that can either be their doom or their new source of entertainment- the penchant need to control.

They were two alphas determined to win dominance over the other.

After a moment of overwhelming silence, Owen stood up from his seat. He leaned forward, fisted his hands on the table. All the while, holding Dearing's fixed and ambiguous glare.

He smirked. "Meeting adjourned. Thank you, everybody, for your time."

Everyone eagerly gathered their things and bee-lined for the door.

"Well, while this has been very... Delightful..." Simon muttered to Owen, who was putting all his paperwork in his backpack. "Claire, won't you come here."
Owen didn't look up from his task, but did when the tip of a nude stilettos came into his view.

"I want to you to meet Alan's son… er... Formally. This is Owen." He stood between the two and patted his left hand on Owen's right shoulder.

Standing a few good inches below him -even with her heels- he can smell the wisp of her vanilla scented lotion. From up close, she looked even more ethereal. Radiant even, reminding him of such pleasant times. Like how her hair was the color of all the red, orange flowers at his mom's garden where they used to run around. Or how her eyes reminded him of the thick green foliage of the camping site he and his dad used to go fishing. Tiny specks of golden freckles on her cheeks and nose were visible despite her light make up. The curvy bow of her lips was sinful and unforgiving. Owen was certain he will have haunting dreams about those lips.

"There's no need for that Simon but it's nice to meet you." she trained her eyes on him.

"Pleasure's all mine, Claire." He replied, his calloused hand engulfed her warm dainty ones, grasping it lightly.

"And I would like to offer my late condolences."

Owen noted the softness that passed her features at the mention of his dad's latest passing. He appreciated it.

"Claire, I want you to bring him in, continue showing him the ropes."

"What?" She turned to Simon, bewilderment laced her voice. "Why can't you do it?"

"My resignation my dear Claire. In two weeks, I'm off to the world." Simon extolled; his eyes gleamed with excitement at the two.

Unlike her, Owen knew this. He knew the agreement between his dad and his godfather. On his hospital bed, his dad summoned Simon Masrani and made him promise to file a resignation. Alan persuaded him to "enjoy life, before you got too old." They weren't getting any younger, his dad added.

Claire remained silent but nodded and smiled at the kind man.

"I should be going. Hold the door would you Mr. Cruthers." Simon motioned for Lowery, who was talking to someone on the phone. His assistant was about to leave the room to achieve a better cell phone reception.

"Owen… and Claire, welcome back." Simon nodded at the two before exiting the conference room. Lowery trailed behind him and let the door close by itself.

And then there were two.

She went back to her seat to retrieve the stacks of folders handed to her all throughout the meeting. All the while typing something on her cell. Owen reached for the remote control so he could switch off the monitors. He doesn't have to do it; he was sure that the maintenance guys always clean up after every meeting. But he suddenly had an inkling to do their job for them. He fumbled with the control for the blinds for a bit, muttering a curse when the device rang a deep error sound.

"Shit!"

"You need help with that?" He looked up and noticed Claire was already just a few distances away
from him. Her stance remained cool, calm, and collected.

"Nope. I got it." He pressed another button and the blinds started to go down, slowly shadowing the room from the city. "See?" He assured her and dropped the remote on the table.

She rolled her eyes at him and made her way towards the door.

"I look forward to working with you, by the way."

And with that Claire halted midway and turned squarely at him, with a look that was meant to scare him, he reckoned.

"Let me get something straight Mr. Grady." She sauntered over to him. He tried not to stare at the alluring way her hips swayed and focused on her eyes instead to distract him from, well, her. It didn't help.

"If you're one of the assholes who will try to belittle me, you better find another hobby because I am not going anywhere." Her deep forest green eyes boring into his sea greens, both un-blinking and unnerving.

Owen was slightly taken aback by the blatant accusation. Not that he didn't expect it. Being in the business for so long, she must have at least a dozen people every day belittling her just cause she's a woman. But no. Owen was, won't and never will be on that idiot list.

Claire had earned his respect- something he prided on not giving away freely- since he heard what she did. Her signature marked all the papers that his dad never got to sign. She was the glue that kept the company from falling apart.

Owen wanted to defend himself, but held his tongue. No matter how wrong, she was to think that lowly of him. Claire Dearing was becoming fascinating and he was determined to find out why. But, at the back of his mind, he knew he had to "up" his game cause she didn't look like the type easily appeased with small talks.

"Such indict Miss Dearing. You don't know me yet." His interest and wonder with this woman growing rapidly with each passing minute.

"I don't look forward to babysitting you. But unless you know how to properly run this company, I will endure just that. I'm not letting you burn this place to the ground." She surmised in that authoritative and calm voice of hers, her eyes never leaving his.

"Fantastic. How about we discuss this over dinner?" he reiterated smoothly, smiling smugly at her once again.

She snubbed and gave him a slow once over. From his wrinkled basic white shirt, brown cargo shorts and his boat shoes.

Dearing raised her eyebrows and scoffed at him. "Have a good day Mr. Grady." She turned to leave and almost bumped with Lowery, who flattened himself against the door and immediately looked anywhere but Claire.

"Good gracious man, what the heck did you do? Don't anger it." Lowery stated once she's out of earshot.

Owen shrugged and dug deep into his pocket to retrieve his phone. "What time's my free schedule tomorrow?"
"Uh-huh. Let's see. You will have another meeting tomorrow morning with Verizon but they always talk nonsense after each meeting. But I can get you out at... 12:00 to 13:00, then you have to meet new bidders at 14:00 with Zara but her Claire's back so you'll be doing it with her instead." His assistant narrated off from the calendar on his tablet.

"Okay." he nodded before holding his phone near his mouth and spoke, "Find the nearest Tailor shop." He tucked his sunglasses on the collar of his shirt and walked past his friend. The automated response muffled as he walked back to his office.

Unbeknownst to him, Lowery remained on the spot. He took his stylus from his pocket and accessed the Notes application on his tablet. He added another numeral after Claire's name:

Claire Dearing- 11
Owen Grady- 1

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry if it's feels like all cramped into one. it's supposed to be oneshot only but while writing it, I gained a few more ideas (which are kinda sexy ones too). So, if anyone liked this, I could probably do more. The rating would change too. But this was fun. Please correct me for any grammatical errors or anything. :)
Hey! Thank you so much for reading this and the reviews! and I apologize for the delay, I can't believe it's been almost a month.

There are plenty of wonderful things to say about wolves, about the way they communicate and care for each other. Unfortunately, the competition for the alpha female is not one of those things. There is no way to sugarcoat it. It is a brutal competition for the right to pass on one’s genes. The males are comparatively laid back, sorting out their status through threats and bluff. The females draw blood.

(www.livingwithwolves.org)

There are a thousand words that best describe Claire Dearing. Yet there were only three that she prided herself in learning at such a young age.

One, she's determined, a trait she got from her estranged father. When Ron Dearing was still living with them he worked as a bank manager. Claire remembered the time when a hardware store
wouldn’t exchange a faulty drill, they sold his dad. The item had already passed its 6-month warranty period, but her dad won’t take no for an answer. She stood by the sideline as she watched him negotiate his way to exchange the item. At the end of the lengthy discussion, her dad got what he wanted and even got discount coupons for the rest of the year. “People can always be persuaded champ, you just have to say the right words,” he said to her on more than one occasion.

Two, she was passionate. Her mom was a History professor at a local college. Due to unavailability of babysitters, she and Karen tag along and sit in on their mom’s classes. Claire never thought that the angel of a woman she knew at home could be intimidating in front of an audience. The amphitheater halted in its track upon her entrance. Everyone clambering for their respective seats the moment she cleared her throat. And the moment Margaret Dearing started her lecture, her mom was born to do this. Claire felt everyone hanging to her mom’s every word. Even though Claire didn’t understand a single word her mom was teaching the class, she couldn’t forget the impact of her mom’s presence. Everyone was in awe of her. And young Claire vowed to be like her when she grew up.

And last but not the least, she was punctual. Claire followed a calculated routine every day to achieve that discipline. It was a routine she perfected since she was 19. It was easy. She would wake up at 6:00am sharp. Next, she will put on her running gear that she already prepared the night before. Claire would run circles around the city for an hour before going back to get ready for work. She would take a 10-minute shower. Claire always eats breakfast first before putting on her work clothes. Afterwards, she would finally get ready and be off to work. At exactly 10 minutes before 8, she'll arrive at Grady Corp., and work until she got the job done. Claire doesn't tolerate procrastinating nor tardiness. And she would appreciate it if everyone in her staff does the same.

On this calm Monday morning, as she was about to dig in with her breakfast, she received a call from Zara. Zara Young has been her assistant for two years. She was as reliable as an alarm clock and Claire was so lucky to have someone like her at her beck and call. Claire picked up her phone and surprised by the urgency in her assistant's voice. Owen Grady scheduled an emergency meeting at 8. Claire cursed. She still has a good 15-minute to finish her morning routine and drive to work. She dumped her half-eaten breakfast in the fridge and dress up for work.

Screw straightening her hair today! She'd be dead first before being late.

She made it on time, having a few minutes to spare and do her make-up at the restroom lobby of their building. But Owen Grady is late.

Owen Grady is fucking late for another meeting.

Again.
For the umpteenth time.

Why is he always late? Claire thought darkly as she dug her manicured nails on her hand. She was about to combust in her seat. She fidgeted with her phone, as she waited for an alert of explanation from him or Lowery.

There was a slight misunderstanding with the Marketing department. Someone accidentally released a rejected draft of their new advertising campaign. Good thing their IT department had pulled it out before it went viral. The bad news was it reached their investors who were now having doubts to continue the contract. Hence, the 8 am meeting.

Claire glanced at her colleagues waiting with her at the massive conference table. The Senior Creative Manager, the IT department head and their teams. Everyone was sitting far away from her. They huddled at the far end of the table, typing furiously on their laptops. A few of them were talking among themselves, their murmurs filling the stillness of the room. Nobody was talking, nor looking at her since they greeted, "Good Morning Miss Dearing." 

Claire had a nagging impression that they were busying themselves so they won't have to talk to her. And truth was, she doesn’t blame them. It's best for everyone to stay away because her sour and hungry mood was threatening to burst any second now.

How dare he be late? And he called himself from the NAVY? Aren’t they supposed to always be on time?

She weighed her options if they could just get on with it without Owen. But she knew, she can’t. Simon Masrani’s parting piece of advice was still ringing in her ears, “You could use the help, Claire. You both do. Give him a chance.”

She tried calling the sponsors to explain but to no avail, they were either in a meeting or busy. Claire tried to appease herself by staring at the 360-view of the city surrounding them.

Not to be tooting her own horn, but Claire could say that she deserved the seat at the other end of the CEO’s chair. She had made a number of considerable contributions to this company for the past years. Her late and beloved mentor, Alan Grady had enormous faith in her. Alan trusted her counsel and "business" intuitions since day one. She smiled as she remembered the generous man.
When she started in Grady Corp., she was a wide-eyed and hungry nobody. A young adult in awe of the parade of business suits, spreadsheets, and board rooms.

Now, after all the overtime work and the missed family gatherings, here she still was. Claire Dearing established her name in the business genre. No sycophancy, nor had she slept with someone which was what most people in the business had presumed. Claire credited the success all to herself. But without the constant encouragement of Alan, she knew she'd never make it halfway.

So... How come, that the great man she had ever known was related to the most impossible human being?

Owen Grady.

Claire knew him before she even met him. Alan Grady was always talking about him whenever he got the chance. Being his assistant for a time, Claire visited his office quite often. One time, as she was waiting for him to arrive, Claire studied the picture frames displayed in his office. Alan caught her, of course.

“That’s Ellie, she’s the light of my life.” Claire jumped at the voice coming from the doorway. She looked over and saw Alan leaning on the open door with his hands in his pockets.

“Oh, I didn’t notice you were there, I’m sorry Alan, I didn’t mean to intrude.” She placed the picture frame back on top of the console table and looked at her boss, her cheeks the color of her hair.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Besides, you’re the only person I haven’t introduced yet.” He walked towards her and picked the glass framed portrait of his wife she was holding a few seconds ago.

There had to be at least ten frames of his family on the bookshelf. All of them were Alan, his wife, and a boy. Claire, having some sort of permission now gazed at them with careful consideration. Her mind already made up the scenarios on how these pictures came to be. Three childlike drawings hang in the center space between the shelves. The paper was old and crisped, but carefully preserved in the glass frame. Small sculptures and books filled up the empty spaces. Claire picked up a portrait of a young woman with blonde hair and blue eyes.

“Elizabeth ‘Ellie’ Grady. We met right after college at a convention.” Alan started.
“She’s beautiful,”

“She really was. And, she’s a tough one too. She was a first army lieutenant before she retired.” he mused, wonderment in his voice.

“Must have been hard for you when she leaves.”

“Oh yes. But it’s what she loves to do.”

She stopped and picked up another framed photo of his wife carrying a toddler. The boy was wearing a camouflage uniform and both of them were smiling.

“Ah yes, I took that picture myself. The uniform was a gift from Simon." he supplied as he took the picture from her. "I remember Owen was so excited to put it on, he cried when we try it take it from him. That damned kid.” He gushed and shook his head at the memory. The pride in his tone was clear.

“Well, I guess he loved it so much that he joined the NAVY.”

“That explains the shirt you wear sometimes.’’ She chuckled, gazing back at the display.

“Oh yeah, I like wearing it to annoy him, he doesn’t like it, see.” Alan walked past her and grabbed another frame over his head, offering it to Claire.

The picture was showing him and his grown-up son. His son was wearing a cap, board shorts and shirt that showed off his lean physique. They were standing side by side, their arms around each other's shoulders. The left side of his son's laughing face caught by the camera. Beside him was a beaming Alan, who was puffing his chest out. A finger pointing to his shirt that says "Proud NAVY Dad."

“You have a lovely family… I’m sorry for your wife.” Claire said sincerely , handing the frame back to him.

“It’s alright, thank you.”
He smiled and looked at the picture for a moment. “But look at my son, eh? Quite good-looking, am I right?” Alan waved the frame at her and a childish gleam clear in his green eyes before returning it to its spot. Claire let out a short laugh.

“Shall we go over your schedule for today, Alan?” she ignored his teasing and opened his Filofax.

“I bet you’ll like each other. You two are very much alike.” Alan teased as he made his way to his desk.

Alike? Claire didn’t think so.

Owen Grady, with his lack of punctuality, unorthodox solutions? Not to mention, his wrinkled shirts? Or his endless attempts to flirt? The stupid nicknames and that cocky one-sided smirk? Everything in him screamed recklessness. And she couldn’t help but inwardly groan at the thought of him.

The past weeks had been an excruciating “Let’s-do-this! And “No! Let’s-not” contest between the two of them. Claire has been always the rational one, most of the time. Claire lost count of the times she stormed out his office. She walked out before she could haul something to his simpering face. She would also catch the employees looking at them. Big, bright smiles as if she and Grady was entertainment. She would glower at them until they hurriedly looked or walked the other way.

She had never met a man so capable of annoying her let alone hold an argument for a prolonged period. She was aware of the nicknames, accustomed to how everyone would try to avoid her at all cost (if possible). No one in the history of her adulthood had dared to make her ask twice.

Until him.

If Claire wasn't hung up on the fact that he's making her blood boil, she'd say that Owen Grady was a breath of air. Far from all the cowering idiots and mindless men and business associate she knew. Or admit another fact that he wasn’t bad to look at either. She came to know that when they're shooting daggers at each other during their daily argument. The framed pictures on his former boss’s office did no justice to the fine specimen when she first saw him in person.

Over the weeks, Claire had overheard women employees giggling over him. Whether be it in the hallways, the cafeteria and even the restrooms. Claire had to stop herself from leaning her ear, eager to learn more. He was strikingly handsome alright. His roguish- good looks and excellent
build exuded charm and suave. The high forehead and bright, optimistic smile captivated the whatever room he was in. One would say, he’s the complete package. Even when he’s wearing those awful shorts. But there was something about him that implied dominance. Something about his laid back demeanor that could get the whole room begging at his feet. It was making her uneasy for an unknown reason.

Her phone rang on the table, ripping vibrations on the wood. Claire practically leapt to grab it, with high hopes that it was their investors or Lowery. The unexpected movement made the small crowd in the room flinched away from her in reflex. Her smirk was soon replaced by an annoyed frown upon seeing her sister's name beside the bubble icon.

‘Hey, Claire-bear!’

‘NO.’ Her fingers pressed the two letters with ire before she hit send.

Great. Just great.

‘What? I haven’t said anything yet!’

‘I know what you’re about to say. And the answer is NO. ‘ Her phone vibrated again before she can put it down.

‘But he’s perfect! He’s so much better than the last one. I swear.’

"I’m not going on a blind date that you set up again, Karen." Claire shuddered thinking about the last guy that her sister had forced her to go on a date with. Her elder sister had pestered her to try dating again ever since she got back from overseas. According to Karen, setting her up on dates provided a good distraction. It was, in her sister's words, a way of coping up with her recent divorce. Whatever that was. So, as a favor, Claire obliged. For two agonizing times.

‘Oh, C’mon baby sis. He’s tall, slim and lean, clean-cut, and writes business letters for a living. ‘

‘Sounds like your type of guy, big sis. Why don’t you date him instead?’

Contrary to popular belief, she had dated. Although, you can all count them in one hand. She had a thousand major priorities and relationships tend to get in the way of that. Her mom would always
commend her on how she’s far too mature and independent for her age. Those were the two main key points they were looking at as to why none of her relationships lasted for over a year. Over the years, she dated well equipped and established men. They either ceased communication with her or said she was too controlling. Too self-reliant. Too good. Too busy. None of them understood that her career must always come first. And if some Neanderthal cannot understand that, then she's better off without them.

‘Lol. Fine. But if I'll be getting something you should too!’ came her sister’s late reply.

‘I’m good, thanks.’ she snorted

‘Come on, Claire-bear! Live a little vicariously. What’s your type now anyways?’

Before she could smart as her way out of her sister's persistent interest in her love life, the door flew open.

“He’s here, Claire.” her assistant announced before stepping out and opening the door wider. Claire sat straighter in her chair and placed her phone down. She didn't bother covering her scowl with a polite smile. She was pissed. And it's not even 10 am yet. She stood upright and folded her arms in front of her, tapping her heel in impatience.

The nerve, Grady!

Lowery entered first, looking and laughing back at something Owen had read from his phone.

“… I’m telling you! The look on his face. Damn it, Owen, you’re officially my man.” Lowery bellowed, but stopped himself when he saw her. He held his hands up as if in surrender and took cautious steps away from her line of sight, offering Owen.

“Would you care to explain how you are 30 minutes late for the meeting you called yourself?” she fumed at him. Grady looked up upon hearing her voice, stopped and stared at her for a moment. The goofy grin splitting his sun-kissed features.

“Good morning to you too, Claire.”
“Cut the crap, Mr. Grady.”

Instead of walking to his seat, Owen trotted towards her. Never once breaking eye contact. Even as he reached her. Claire held his gaze. “Well?”

With a sly look on his eyes, he forwarded, leaning down to place his backpack on the floor. He was so close she smelt the mint on his breath. Despite the shallowness of her breathing or the blush creeping on her neck, she held her ground. Claire won't be intimidated by anyone, best of all, him.

“Take a seat sugarplum, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

She pinched her lips and frowned at him.

Owen unbuttoned his dark gray suit and addressed the room.

“How is everybody? Everybody had a good weekend? Oh, did anyone watched football?”

They all replied with an enthusiastic reception.

“Wait, the Seahawks won yesterday?

“Oh yeah!”

“They’re owning this season!”

“No need to rub it on my face, Owen.”

“I guess, you owe me 20, Ryan.”

They laughed.
You’ve got to be kidding me. Claire gaped at them in obvious annoyance. "Can we focus on the mat-"

A knock came from the door and Zara peeped her head. “Owen? Delivery is here.”

Owen stood up from his chair and discarded the jacket he was wearing. “As an apology for my tardiness and celebration for my team’s latest win, I brought breakfast.”

Zara opened the door again for two delivery guys carrying takeouts on each arm. They placed the items in the empty spot in the center of the table. Everybody rushed in, as Claire watched the commotion with disbelief. Her assistant came through the door again. This time, she was carrying two cartons of coffees for everybody. Zara handed her hers and Owen's before distributing them to the rest of the group.

“Great, I’m starving!” Lowery rubbed his hands together and grabbed himself a box of pancakes. The rest of the men followed his lead.

“Aren’t you aware, Mr. Grady that we’re supposed to have a meeting?” Claire cast an accusatory look at him. The people hesitated, all of them looking at Owen.

“Don’t let the food go cold guys. Eat up.” he ordered before he reached out to the table to grab medium-sized boxes and opened them. The box was a variety of mouth-watering pastries and muffins. Claire felt her stomach grumbled at the sight.

“Here. Thought you might like this.”

“I already ate.” she lied through gritted teeth.

“Then eat again... Oh! Try the vanilla shortcake, it’s my favorite.” He offered, taking another sip from his coffee.

“I don’t like muffins.” She swallowed, trying to keep her mouth from watering.

His hands lingered in the air, trying to pick one. “Who doesn’t like muffins?”
“Me.” she said stubbornly.

“Yes, you do.” He grabbed one and took a huge bite. “Ugh!”

“What are you doing Mr. Grady?”

“Um, eating?” he answered between his chews then swallowed. "And please, are we still on Mr. Grady? It’s Owen.”

“Don’t change the subject. We got a situation. How can you be this calm!” she hissed, trying to keep her voice down. Their colleagues, too indulged with their own breakfast and small talks to pay attention to them.

“Oh, I already took care of that.” He disclosed as if it was nothing. He reached in again and pilfered another one from the box in front of her.

“Wha-what? Ho-how? I don’t believe you.” Her brows furrowed in disbelief.

Owen swallowed and the side of his lips turned in that familiar upward motion. “Eat, and I’ll tell you.”

“No.” She leaned back against her chair, blew and took a quick sip of her coffee.

“Oh, Claire.” he mocked. "Scared of a little extra calorie?” he then tilted his head and pouted at her.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “You know what Grady?” Claire grabbed a tissue and plucked the unhealthiest looking muffin from the box and bit into it. “Happy?”

He shrugged but kept the smug look on his face. “Have as much as you like, they’re vegan anyway.”
Claire craned her neck from side to side as she waited for the coffee maker.

What a long day.

After-excusing herself from the morning meeting she retreated to her office. She told Zara that she's not to be disturbed unless it's a matter of life and death. Claire gratified herself on the amount of paperwork she has to read, authorize and review.

The industrial clock on the far side of the wall of the company's break room read 9:45 pm. Its incessant and loud ticking reminded Claire of her solitude. She stifled a yawn and leaned her forehead against the cupboards. She reminisced about her day, the events playing in her head like a broken record.

After finishing their breakfast, Owen narrated the story. He had managed to persuade the investors over the weekend. And the reason for his tardiness was treat them over for a morning coffee. After that it was a done deal. Everything was taken care of.

When Hendricks asked him to elaborate, Owen told them that it happened over the weekend. It was pure luck for Owen to see Hal Mckenzie and Jim Daniels hangs out at his favorite bar. They were with some of their peers, drinking beers and shouting over the screen. Owen approached and paid for two more cases of Corona. He then wagered- wagered! Claire couldn't believe it - Hal and Jim to give Grady Corp. Another chance if the Seahawks won. Both men agreed and shook on it and the rest was history. Claire sat there, shaking her head at his obvious bluff of a story. Because, how can someone put a stake that high? Where was the logic in that?

Claire thought that it was just a lure, a diverting story to cover how good he actually was at his job. But why though? Yes, the man was hard-headed and impulsive. Especially when arriving at corporate decisions. But Owen Grady was smart, he knew what exactly what he was doing. Claire had to stop herself from gaping up at him when he would come up with a better solution that she had.

“Claire?”

She knew that voice, it had been her distant companion during late working nights such as this. She
opened her eyes and turned around.

“Don’t mind me, I’m just checking that all the lights are out before I go down.” said the small and fragile-looking utility man dressed in security overalls.

“Oh, of course, Joe, I’ll make sure I switched them off this time. You want some coffee?” She smiled, apologetically.

“Thank you, but I already have one downstairs. Ring me if you need help or anything.” he gave her a friendly, wrinkly smile.

“Sure, thank you. I’ll be out of here after this.”

“Okay. Good night Claire and have a safe drive.” He exited from where he came and Claire was alone again.

Joe Carter has been here longer than she had and the man was pushing to his 70s with no intention of retiring. Claire decided that tomorrow she's going to talk to the HR to put Joe's shift in the morning. And suggest that they should give him a raise.

A slight beep from the coffee maker alerted her, and the strong, hot aroma engulfed her drowsy senses.

Claire looked around for the cup she always used and realized she must have left it back at her office desk. “Shit.”

Still, she continued to scramble for a clean cup in the cupboards and cabinets but found nothing.

“Fine. Come here, beauty.” Claire removed the glass pitcher from the appliance and made her way back to her office.

“Okay, easy now Claire. Not a spill. Easy. It’s not that far. Easy.” she waddled her way through the
dimly lit hallways. Claire had been a nuisance for the man during the last few years. And if she would have to call Joe to mop up her spill again- after seeing him all but limped his way- was just inhuman. She wasn't as heartless as everybody thinks she is.

“Just a little more. Nearly there, nearly there.”

“Burning the midnight oil, Claire?” a throaty voice echoed behind her ear.

She jumped from fright. The tight hold of the handle loosened, spilling delicious hot coffee on her exposed skin. She screamed in agony.

“Claire!”

"I’m so sorry! Are you okay?” A man leaned down, wiped her feet with his hands before putting his muscled arms behind her knees. Blinded by the darkness and the pain, she didn't argue. The man hoisted her up his chest. He removed her black pumps in a rush until she heard it fell with a heavy thud on the floor. She was clutching her foot with one hand, trying to ease the burn.

They navigated their way around and into wider corridor, past her office. Claire came face to face with the intruder, a worried and apologetic look on his handsome face.

“What the hell!” She cried.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t know you were holding something.” Owen pushed open the men’s comfort room. He sat her on the cold granite countertop and opened the faucet to her reddening feet.

“What do you think I was tiptoeing for, jackass?” Claire growled at him. She pulled her knees together and fanned her feet. The water was soothing the pain. Owen didn't say anything but helped her wash her feet. She then noticed a tiny amount of blood coming from the scab on her skin. The diluted red liquid flowing e water. "It's bleeding. Damn it."
“I’m so, so sorry. Where’s the first aid kit around?” Owen asked, catching more cold water to her feet.

“Third floor, at the clinic.”

“Fuck. There’s one at my office. Let’s go.” Before she could protest, he scooped her up like she was nothing and proceeded to his office.

With the blinds drawn out, the room lighted by the scatters of city lights around them. Owen carried her to the lounge chair in the room, switching on the reading lamp after he set her down.

“Stay here, ok. And don't touch it.” he ordered.

As if . She glared at him while drying her feet on the plush carpet beneath her. Owen disappeared into his en-suite bathroom.

With nothing else to do, Claire observed her surroundings to try and distract her from the pain.

Everything remained as she left it all those years ago. Neat and organized. The opulent desk remained situated right by the floor to ceiling glass windows. The small living room, with its dark couch and armchairs stood at the center of the room. The display bookshelves stood on the wall beside the door. The only foreign thing was Owen’s suit jacket draped across the armrest of the three-seater couch.

He emerged moments later, holding a white pouch with a red cross on it and an ice bag.

“Why do you have a first aid kit?” Claire questioned before she could stop herself.

“Why won’t I?” He walked over to his mini-fridge and pouring cubes in the ice bag.

“Everybody should have a first aid kit within their person Claire. Here, let me see.” He handed her the ice bag, stretched her feet up on the matching stool and, knelt to look at her foot.
Owen placed the medical supplies on the table and attended the long shallow cut at the bridge of her left foot. She hissed as he lifted it.

"Okay, it's just a graze. No shards of glass in sight, you will be fine." His face was serious, that it almost wasn’t him. "But I’m gonna clean it okay?"

“I can do it.” Her pride resurfacing despite the burning and sting.

“Of course, you can.” He chuckled, dabbing the cotton on the antiseptic.

“Let me.” she insisted, reaching for the cotton between his fingers.

“No.” Owen extended his arm away from her.

“Yes.”

“Claire.” He warned, a stern look on his features.

She let out a deep breath and secured the ice bag on her good foot instead. Good thing she was wearing pants today or she would have fought harder to clean her wound herself.

“This is gonna sting ok?” He offered her a small, almost weary smile. “Ready?”

Claire nodded.

She flinched when the cotton touched her skin. An on instinct, she grabbed Owen's shoulder, tugging him closer. The mischief that dawned on his face was not to be missed.

“Now, now, let me finish before we got to a little something’, something’ ok?”

“You are unbelievable!” She made a move to pull her leg away but Owen caught it.
“No, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I’ll behave, promise.” He laughed. Claire watched him as he dabbed the torn skin, surprised by how gentle he was being.

“What are you doing here anyway? I saw everybody left.” Claire asked after a while, her eyes following the slide of cotton on her skin, the pain fading bit by bit.

“I did.” He muttered while blowing warm breath on her wound with much consideration. “I was already on the freeway when I realized I don’t have any of my house keys.”

“I thought you have a place in the city?” She saw him bit his lip as if he’s trying to hide another joke but for her sake, didn’t.

“I do. I stayed there this weekend.” He threw the used cotton on the table and soaked a new one with antiseptic again.

“Tell me something Mr. Grady. Why would you spend an hour drive when you own and can afford any condominium units in the city?” Claire asked, watching his every movement.

He gave a small, short laugh before shrugging and explaining in that same hushed tone. “I missed my animals.”

“You… missed your animals?” she asked incredulously as if she wasn’t sure she heard him right.

“Yeah. Humans are overrated species. Besides, it’s quieter there. You should drop by sometime.”

“I-“ her automatic rejection was cut off when he got up and sat on the stool where her feet were resting a while go. Owen hunched and placed her left foot over his knee. Two handy-sized tubes of ointment on his hand. The white dress shirt he’s wearing strained against his muscles. Claire swallowed and averted her eyes and focused on his jacket strewn on the couch.

She could recall the first time she finally saw him wear a suit. It was two Mondays ago. Claire was finishing a building tour to their client when he arrived from the lobby. He was wearing his usual aviators, the phone lodged in his ear. The dark business suit was accentuating his athletic build.
She felt her mouth parted. Owen hung up as he caught her eye. The teasing smirk brightening up his face. Claire was on the verge of saying her appreciation for following the dress code. But held it back when she noticed him alternating his casual clothes and business suits, a few days later.

“I’m sorry for scaring you like that... But you were walking way too slow.” His eyes stayed with the task at hand. His fingers gliding effortlessly against her skin.

Claire found herself staring at his hands again and frowned upon realizing it. “I should’ve thrown that bloody coffee at you.” she quipped, earning a chuckle from him. He dipped his fingers in healing cream and softly traced the outline of the cut.

Once he finished, he wiped his hands on his pants. He opened the tube of anti-burn cream and applied it to her healing skin. He did the same with her right.

He raised his eyes on her and smiled. "There. All done. It’s probably best if you don’t cover this til tomorrow. Wear flip-flops or something.”

Something about his eyes pushed the indignation out of her, even just for a mere moment. She saw a glimpse of the person the employees kept on praising. She saw the man Alan Grady was always talking about; the kind, gentle and sincere man that was Owen Grady.

“Thank you… Owen.” she whispered, as if her voice were an octave higher, she’ll break the room.

“Hey, that’s the first time you said my name!” He beamed, with all the charm of an American heartthrob. She felt him lightly grip her heel which was still resting on his thigh.

“Don’t get used to it.” she rolled her eyes, trying to hold back her smile.

He chuckled before blurting out. “I like your hair like that.”

“Yeah, well, you should thank yourself for that. "Early meeting", my ass.” She accused, although, now, there’s a playful tone in her voice.
He laughed as she smiled at him. Owen crouched over her foot again and blew a warm breath on her injury. Claire watched him, hypnotized for some reason. When he sat straight, Claire found herself staring back at him.

The air around them was suddenly charged with the unnameable yet familiar tension. The kind of palpable energy that always happen after they stopped glaring at each other. The silence lingering in the air was deafening and unbearable. She didn't dare to look away first. And neither was he. His eyes fell on her heaving lips and Claire felt her cheeks grow hot. She felt the very air suffocating her, rendering her breathless. The heart beating in her chest was loud enough to dull the warnings in her brain. Her eyes faltered to his lips, and for a moment she thought that kissing him would be her ultimate relief.

She didn’t notice him until it was too late.

He rolled his chair, attempting to close the distance separating them. But the knobbed foot of the stool got stuck in the carpet. It forced to suddenly kneel on the floor and bumped his face on her thigh with an oof!

She gasped at the contact.

“If you’re going to have sex, you don’t have to spill the damn coffee.” Joe berated from the doorway of Owen’s office. In his hand were the remaining handle of the broken glass pitcher and the pair of her black suede Jimmy Choos.

“Oh no, we’re not-” Claire defended, all the blood rushing to her head.

Owen stood up briskly and faced the elderly. “Hey, Joe!” He stated in a high pitch voice, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Hey, Owen. I’ll just leave your shoes here, Miss Claire. You kids get on with whatever you’re doing.” He waved his hand dismissively and shook his head, smiling at the two them and left.

“And switch the damn lights off when you’ve finished!” He shouted from the hallway.

Owen looked down from where she still sat, his nervous laugh fading on his lips. He added in a sober tone. “Let’s give him a raise.”
Hehe. Don't worry! The next chapter's gonna be a continuation (sort of) of what happens next right after this. Stay tuned. Thank you for the favorites, the follows and the reviews! Please tell me what you think about this chapter and please point out any of my errors, I uploaded this in a hurry, usually I wait for like a week to upload my next chapters so I can really delve into it and add or delete some unnecessary parts that has nothing to do with the plot. But thank you and I appreciate everything.
Chapter Notes

First off, I am not familiar with any business lexicons so I have no idea what I'm talking about but I would like to think that Grady Corp. have hands around Investments, Telecommunications, Real Estates and Global Trading. If anyone didn’t notice the change in rating, THIS IS YOUR WARNING.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A wolf’s howl could mean a lot of things:
when they’re trying to communicate each other, when rallying for a hunt, when mourning for a lost member and sometimes, as a declaration of territory or a sign of protection.

“Are you sure you can drive?” Owen asked again. This time, his hands were firmly tucked inside the pocket of his suit if they betrayed him again and grabbed her out of whim.

“I scalded my feet, I sprained them. I’m fine.” Claire reminded him flatly, rummaging in her bag for her car keys.

Owen would have believed her if he didn’t notice how she was slightly favoring her right foot as they walk side by side out of the deserted lobby elevator and into the underground parking lot.

The valet reception area abandoned apart from a cup of half-full coffee and chips. Outside the glass enclosure were two vehicles glinting visibly under the glare of a few lit LED lights. His car parked on his designated spot near the entrance and few spaces across from his was her car.

Claire walked, more like limp, to the automatic glass door that wouldn’t budge then to swing door, rattling the obviously locked handle.

“Where are the keys to this?” she turned around to face him and peered over the wooden desk and key drawer. “Damn it.”

Gleeful, Owen answered, “Joe’s probably still not finished with his rounds. Unless you wanna wait for him.” after our little fiasco upstairs. Seeing her flustered was making him happy for some reason.

“We can use the fire exit in the lobby. Come on.” She puffed impatiently and didn’t wait for him to follow her back to the elevator.
Claire abruptly paused from opening the door of the Fire Exit, forcing him to stop too. She adjusted her feet in the overly large pair of disposable and thin slippers which she had hidden in his en suite bathroom, underneath the sink, for his dad all those years ago. She had agreed with him that it was best not to wear her heels for precautionary measures, even though she already checked for fragments of glass that might be concealed inside the sole. Besides the stickiness it absorbed from the coffee was not at all soothing. They left it to dry in her office bathroom.

“You don’t have to hover over me, I can manage on my own.”

Owen smiled at her tenaciousness and let her walk a few steps down the flight of stairs but frowned when he heard her cursed at something her left foot had stepped on.

“Alright, that’s it.” He trotted down towards her in three easy steps, wrapped his forearms around the back of her knees and picked her up.

“Hey! Put me down! I said put me down! Owen!” She squirmed against his embrace, her voice echoing in the confined space and the hand which was also holding her bag went instinctively around his neck for support.

“If you hit your head or something and died in here, they’re gonna point to the last person you were with which was me and testifying why you broke your neck isn’t at the top of my to-do list.”

In truth was, he was extremely guilty. If he wasn’t so keen on seeing her reactions to everything, she wouldn’t have let go of that glass pitcher, and cut and almost burnt her feet in the process. The idea of him scarring her filled him with self-reproach. It was not the impression he was thinking of leaving on her.

Owen hoisted her up further to his chest as to try to make up for his stupidity.

She practically weighed like air. Seriously, he doesn’t get it why he was around by women whom he knew and dated, could still be obsessed with their weight.

“On the contrary, that doesn’t sound too bad.”
“Oh, you would enjoy that, wouldn’t you?” He chuckled and gripped her legs tighter to him as he went down the steps with much ease, his naval training coming in handy.

“Oh yes, please. It’ll save me a lot of time of my day spent on arguing with you. I can get so much done.” Owen would have thought she was teasing him if her facial expressions and tone weren’t dull.

“Aww. But I do enjoy our little “talks”.” Making little quotation marks in the air, still holding her bridal style down the last steps.

“Hmm. Isn’t that sweet, Grady.” She fleered, rolling her eyes as Owen pushed for the door handle using his back.

He bit his lip to fight the dorky smile he’s been trying to hide for the past hour. “What happened to ‘Owen’? I like ‘Owen’.”

“I told you, don’t count on it. And for the record, I’m just letting you carry me because I don’t want my feet to get dirty.”

“Whatever you say, Ma’am.” He snickered and adjusted her place in his arms as they neared her parked car which she was staring at. Maybe she wasn’t aware of it but the hand that wasn’t latched on to his neck and holding her bag rested on the lapels of his suit. Somehow the aromatic combination of coconut, milk, and vanilla on her clothes and skin made sense. It was a heady mix that’s been teetering him on the edge of losing all coherent thoughts and reservations.

He swore under his breath.

“-just so we’re clear. What? What was that?”

He gaped at her. He wasn’t aware what she was ranting on about, having zoned out again in her presence.

“Nothing. Just, you are the most stubborn person I have ever met.” Placing her down gently on the
driver’s side of her car. “Truly. Damn woman.”

Without her heels, she barely could even reach his chin. She had to take a step back to look at him squarely in the eye, an amused and roguish expression on her face.

“Thank you. Would you have me be anything but?” Her voice grew bubbly, the hand on his neck lingered and slowly drew down to the pocket of his jacket, to his hip. He caught the small bite on her lips.

Did she just… check him out? Astounded for but a minute, he felt himself grin widely. He probably was reading too much into it but before he could open his mouth to point it out, she clicked the unlock button on her key and opened her door, hiding her body behind it.

“See you tomorrow Mr. Grady, and don’t worry, I won’t press charges.” Her hand curled around the door as she regarded him through long, curled eyelashes.

There it was again. The smile he had been subconsciously and anxiously waiting for the past month. The smile that he knew this time that he was the cause of.

Throwing logic out the window, he found himself pulling her to his arms but for an entirely different motive now. As if in slow motion, he angled his head, closed his eyes and finally pressed his quivering lips against hers.

Sweet Lord.

If she was taken by surprise, she recovered quickly because she was kissing him back with the same ardent passion and reckless abandon. She opened her mouth against his ministrations, her hands flying to his hair, and aligning her body with his. He pushed her body against the door of her car and raked his fingers along the tresses of her wavy hair that’s been driving him out of his mind ever since this morning, the other gripping her waist.

As if he wouldn’t get any more uncomfortable in his tightening jeans, she hiked her knee up against his waist, pressing herself closer to him and softly brushing her pant-clad center against him. An animalistic groan rumbled from his chest and he bit her bottom lip in approval. Owen grabbed her knee before leaning his forehead against hers, out of breath. He trailed slow, open-mouthed kisses down the length of her jaw and neck while she fumbled for the button of his pants. And Owen thought he might pass out. He bucked his hips against her wandering hands and she whimpered. She was on the verge of pulling himself out but stopped when a ringing tone invaded his ears, getting louder by the minute. Who calls this time of hour?
“No, no, no. Don’t take that” he pleaded, his mouth still pressing heated kisses on the deep v of her long-sleeved blouse, her black bra peeking through.

“I left mine at home.”

He stopped un-tucking her blouse from her slacks and looked at her as if she had grown two heads, furrowed his eyebrows because Claire Dearing never went anywhere without her cellphone. It would be the end of the world before she would ever part with it. It sure wasn’t his because he always put it on silent mode during evenings, the shrilling alarms it makes in the middle of the night reminded him of bad memories in the navy.

“What do you mean?” His mind getting foggy and blurry around the edges.

“It’s time to wake up.”

He woke up with a start, the morning sunlight peeking at his bedroom window and blinding one eye. He rolled to the side shutting off the blaring alarm clock that read 7:03 on his bedside table, the roosters’ synchronized crows rang in his ears. He lied on his back and became very aware of an unpleasant feeling settling in his stomach and lower torso, the blanket hitching up and viscid.

Fucking hell!

Ever since meeting her, she had been a constant character to his dreams. Just what he predicted she would be. With each morning making it harder and harder to bear. Pun intended.

He remembered everything that happened four nights before: the coffee jar breaking, his clumsiness, his dad’s slippers, him carrying her all the way down the fire exit and her smile as she said goodbye and goodnight to him. Except the flirting and the kiss, everything but that damn kiss that didn’t happen. He groaned yet again remembering the dream, remembering all the dreams he had of her in hurried flashbacks in his head. His lower half twitched again in response.

By 8:04, dressed up in a three-piece grey suit, his backpack in one hand and a tumbler of his coffee, he went out to the elevated deck of his back porch, a breeze of warm wind blowing on his face.
The mornings out here were the best. The sun was reverberating golden rays on the expanse of green land he now owned. Acres and acres of soil, towering trees, and bushes surrounded the land, hiding it from plain view, far from the prying eyes of travelers driving on the way. Isolation, just the way he preferred it. His grandparents’ bungalow of a house stood in the middle of it; a stable barn erected on the farthest left of the fence and from it, a man dressed in a fairly appropriate farmer’s outfit walked out.

“Morning Owen!” greeted the Hispanic and soft-spoken man from over the fence separating cobblestones and grassy hills, all the while holding a dutch hoe in his left hand.

“Hey Mario, how are Blue and Charlie today?” He asked his prized mares, closing the screen door behind him. He dropped his things on the rocking chair, ducked below the wire fence and stood beside him, looking at the animals roaming freely.

Mario and his wife have been with Owen’s family since his grandparents bought the place and have provided assistance when he’s away.

“They’re doing great, no more tantrums this morning, but I wouldn’t bet on it. TV predicted a storm comin’ in a few days.”

“In this weather? it wouldn’t be the first time they were wrong. Are there any barrels left?

“We’re almost out of hay, but I already ordered. There’s a fresh batch coming tomorrow. I also de-wormed the goats yesterday. The vets said I should do it once a month.”

“I’ll help you with that. Thank you.” He got his wallet from the back of his pocket and handed him a couple of bills. “Here, we need to stock up on those feeds, I also need new bulbs for the chicken’s coop. And how many times do I have to tell you, you can live in the spare room by the barn, you don’t have to walk here every day.”

“Nah. I and the Missus enjoy the walk.”

“Well, my offer remains open. If you--“

“Owen, get off the grass!” They whipped around when they heard a hoarse shout a woman on their left. The woman dressed in a cotton blouse, homespun skirt, and apron which she was holding on the edge to keep the birds feed.
“Good morning, Mrs. Legazpi!” He waved a hand at the approaching caretaker, a badling of geese along her wake.

“You’re gonna ruin your shoes, get off, you bull-headed boy.”

“It’s fine, Mrs. Legazpi. I’m just gonna wipe ‘em off. Feeding time?” he opened his palm and asked for the grain of poultry food on her hiked skirt.

“Oh no, you’re dressed up so handsomely, don’t ruin it. Go to work, we got this.” Pushing a chortling Owen with an unoccupied hand to the edge of the fence back to his house. “When did you get so heavy?”

He chuckled and regained his footing, stooped down between the barrier and up to get his stuff on the rocking chair on the porch.

“What’s her name anyway?” the 56-year old woman interrogated, her husband was suddenly beside her, their elbows resting on the spaces between each fence while they waited for his answer.

“Huh?” he turned around, confused. Digging through his mind the last time he brought a girl home.

“The lady you’re trying to impress.” Mario jibed in, adjusting his straw hat on his graying head.

“What made you think there is one?” throwing his backpack on his shoulder, he regarded them with a quirked eyebrow.

“Please, I changed your diapers when you were a babe and I know how much you hate wearing those things.” She answered and waving her hand up and down his attire.

“What are you two talking about? First off, I’m not trying to impress anyone. And second, I’m always impression-able even without a tie, even without anything on really.” he jeered at the old couple who shook their heads at him. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“You have a safe drive!” They waved goodbye and was about to resume their posts when Owen added that he left breakfast on the table for them.
Mario shouted something back but he was already far enough to hear it.

The weather drastically changed during his drive, heavily darkening the already polluted air of the city. Much to his surprise, his anticipation of a heavy traffic jam that always seemed to occur during the rainy season on the intersection a few blocks from his office was absent. The travel to his work only took the usual 45 minutes of his day. The shortcuts Lowery taught him were excessively useful especially during the rush hour.

Owen cranked up the volume of his radio, bobbing his head in tune with the music as he neared the entrance of the underground parking of his building.

The architecture stood gloriously compared to the other skyscrapers. With its forty floors and economical and environmental-friendly glass and concrete façade. He and his family’s pride and joy. The Grady Corporation in its big San Serif letters on top of the building and above the revolving entrance doors flaunted in a way that was not to be missed by potential business partners and passersby.

A lot has changed on the exterior of the building and the establishments beside it, that for the first few weeks of Owen’s employment, the building was a foreign site, a piece of architecture he had forgotten he was a part of.

Just as he was about to turn and drive down the cave, a loud honk and speeding car appeared out of nowhere, making him abruptly hit the brakes. His body jerking forward from the action. Motherfucker.

He glanced at the unwelcome interrupter and who would be it other than Claire Dearing herself, in all her perfect being. They scowled with total vexation at each other from the transparent windows of their cars. Raising one defeated hand up, she reversed her car a few feet away and giving him permission to enter first.

He beeped a greeting at the staff inside the reception area who nodded back at him with a wave, Claire’s silver Mercedez trailing behind him. He noticed a 2-seater grayish cobalt Audi parked on the usual empty spot across from him.

“Is it always gonna be like this? You almost-killing me every morning?” She accused besides him when they both got out of the car and were walking in the same direction towards the parking lobby.
Oh, honey, I bet it’s the other way around.

“Mind you, I was there first until you show up- you know what, forget it.” he’ll let this one pass. For now.

“Good morning Miss Dearing. Morning Owen.”

“Good morning Artie, could you do me a favor? could you have my car washed down that place at 6th before I leave tonight?”

“Sure thing, Miss Dearing.” The flustered bell boy accepted her key and hid it inside the drawer, avoiding her eyes.

She thanked him before standing at the corner near the elevator to answer a call. How is it that even in the most hidden corner of the world, she could get a reception?

“How about you Owen?”

He turned to him after watching her for a minute and feeling sorry for whoever she was talking to this early in the morning.

“Nah. I’m good. The rain’s probably gonna ruin it by the end of the day, thank you though. Say, whose ride was it? The Audi?” Giving a small nod to the new vehicle outside.

“Oh, some guy from Ibris Trading Co., They just came in 10 minutes before you guys arrived and mentioned a meeting with you and with Miss Dearing,” Artie announced, referring to the tablet in his hand. The blush on his cheeks not lost on Owen this time.

“My, my, my. Artie’s got a little crush on feisty Miss Dearing.” He whispered low, leaning his elbow on the counter.
“No Sir! No! I don’t have a death wish.” Both men quickly glanced at Claire’s back who was still reprimanding another poor fellow on the other end of the line.

“Besides, I won’t have a chance against the competition,” Artie stressed a devilish light in his young eyes.

“Oh yeah? Who’s the competition?” Owen asked, chuckling with interest.

“-wait one second, Grady? Grady!” Claire barked from inside the elevator. He whirled his head towards her direction.

“Are you coming?” her redhead peeking outside the lift, a hand covering her phone.

His eyes widened shortly, his distracted brain not missing a beat to form a coitus innuendo to her words. Get a grip, Grady.

“See you later Art.” Running and Pressing the Up button to try to hold the door.

As the doors closed in front of them, his mind flash-backed to one of his dreams, resembling this one. The elevator, the emergency button, him on his knees. Fuck. He knew he should’ve gotten himself off this morning. Calm down, Owen. Calm down.

“Do you know we have a meeting with Ibris?” He started, staring at their reflections on the doors. She swiped her card on a tiny screen that would take them to their office without interferences from other employees hurrying to get to their floors.

“That’s what I was asking my team about. They’re not expected here until next week. Now, my schedule’s all ruined, again.” She complained, both hands on her phone, typing whatever havoc into it that only she could solve. The distraction allowed Owen to probe with free gusto.

She straightened her hair today, the reddish and golden strands longer now from when he first met her, fell just below her armpit. She had her blazer wrapped around her bag, leaving her lean arms exposed on the black halter dress she’s wearing. The matching killer heels on her feet also wasn’t to miss. Smiling to himself, he reminisced the day after that night. She didn’t wear flip-flops just like what he prescribed her to do but the sandals that garbed her feet suggested that she was at compliant to him, in her own way.

“Are you almost done salivating, Grady?” She interrupted; nose still buried deep on her phone.

“What can I say? I can’t help it.” Not the best way to appease his biological urges, he thought. He
shrugged and tucked his hands inside his pockets, their intensive eyes meeting on the mirrored doors.

“Ran out of shorts?” Smirking her dreamy crimson lips on him at their reflection. Breathe.

“What made you say that?”

“You’ve been wearing a lot of suits these days.”

*What is with his suits that intrigued people?* “I knew it. Been checking me out lately, Dearing?” He teased, leaning his elbows on the railings behind him, looking at her directly.

“Wait, let me check my itinerary…oh wait, no, there isn’t one that mentioned that. Isn’t that a bummer.” She stated, sarcasm dripping on her voice.

Before he could reply with a much clever comeback, they heard a ping and both stepped out the elevator, Claire’s phone already pressing against her ear. “Talk to me.”

Lowery who was waiting by the door, suddenly stood beside him, clapping his hand on Owen’s shoulder in what he felt like a pity gesture, “You know when people told me that soldiers get kinda crazy after deployment, I didn’t believe them. Til now.” their eyes following Claire’s retreating figure.

Trust your instincts. In an environment where everything could be compromised, put your only trust in your damn instincts. Owen rarely doubts and doesn’t mull over second thoughts. His decisions whether be it in his career or life choices were straightforward and cogitated with a distinctive finality that he’s more than willing to accept whatever consequences it might bring afterward. He learned that from the Navy.

And from the view of things, that pull kept heightening to a tenfold.

Elijah Mills. Owen doesn’t like that guy. He doesn’t like him at all. There’s something oddly conceited about the way he talks and carries himself, the offset attempt in sugar-coating his points was also suspicious enough and the shrewd way he kept glancing at Claire when he got the chance made Owen want to slap his eyeglasses off his face with the bind of contract laid in front of him.

For the past hour, the man’s assistant was pitching in bartering their fleet of cargo ships to Grady
Ibris has been one of the company's top mergers since his dad but with the new management, namely Owen, they have to convince him again why they must stay that way.

The panel in the room heeded and nodded but Owen kept a straight face. Something just doesn’t add up.

“All right. Thank you, Mr. Mills. I see nothing much had changed. Except that your sales were better than last quarter. I couldn’t see the point of this meeting if we’re just gonna continue and sign your contract.” Claire concluded when their presentation ended, the last words felt like it was directed at him.

“it’s nothing. It’s always been a pleasure.” He appealed smugly.

“Owen?” Steve, the head of his Logistics department turned his attention on him. The final decision rested solely on the Chairman.

“Listen, Mr. Mills, here at Grady Corp we highly consider the environment, consider the services it offers and more importantly considers the people, their needs and yet remaining adaptable to change.” He ventured, browsing through the pages of the contract in front of him.

“Absolutely. But what’s your point?”

Owen felt a little satisfaction explode in him from the frown that formed on his forehead.

“My point is, I don’t see Ibris reflecting those aspects. Anymore.” Owen shrugged and heard the small crowd silently gasped.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m afraid, I cannot sign.” He said with an undisputed conclusion, closing the book and putting the pen on top of it.
“What… Mr. Grady would like to say is thank you for an exemplary contract Eli—“ Claire conciliated, like the businesswoman she was.

Eli? Who the fuck is Eli?

“But could you give us a few days to make this decision as a board?” She continued.

“Sure thing Claire.” He stood up and shook her hand a little longer in Owen’s eyes. He found himself standing as well. Their positions on the table making a perfect triangle.

“Thank you, Mr. Mills.” Owen offered his hand.

“Thank you for having me. I’ll be seeing you again Owen.” He smiled, and gripped his hand more firmly and shaking the others’ hands as well.

“Zara will see you out. Zara?”

“Right this way sirs.” Zara stood up and escorted the two men out the conference room but not before Mills pressed a farewell and swift kiss to Claire’s cheek who was clearly horrified from the intimacy.

“I’ll see you, Claire.”

Owen suddenly felt the familiar urge to shield her and take cover, a feeling that seemed to had embedded itself to him, thanks to his navy days.

And then hit someone (preferably him) with a canon and throw him overboard in a shark infested area.

“Meeting adjourned. We’ll have this discussion on Monday. Thank you, everybody.” Owen said stiffly when Zara and their guests left. He piled his things in a rush to get out of the room but leaving the Ibris contract on the table.

As usual, the panel hurriedly collected their things and went out the door without a word.

Just as he was about to exit,
“A word, Mr. Grady.” It wasn’t a question, it’s not even a request, it’s an order.

He stopped on his heel and back at her. Lowery, being the only person in the room who was not in distress to flee from them, stood in front of him and mockingly moved his hand in his chest as a sort of benediction. “May the Father be with you.” He whispered so only he could hear.

“Lowery, leave us.” Evident menaced in her voice.

“Yup. Leaving!” He almost sprinted to the exit and closed the door with a silent click.

“What is it now?” Claire started, one hand was on her side, the other was squeezing her chair with nude manicured nails and white knuckles.

“What’s what now?” He loosened his tie because he suddenly felt hot and angry for some reason and her dress was not helping.

“Ibris Trading has been our partner for years, they’re a huge asset—“

“I’m very aware of what they bring to the company, Claire.” He cut off, matching her cold and impassive tone.

“Then I don’t see the reason you can’t sign.”

“They’re not a total loss, we got a hundred trading firms under our wing who got much more potential, could produce more results and at such a great cost too.”

He was unconsciously approaching her sentence after sentence, their eyes in total lockdown.
“Are you serious? Alan started-“

“Well, my dad isn’t here anymore, so unless you wanna magically piece back his ashes to sign the contract, please, be my guest.” He spat angrily, panting.

She stood right there, open-mouthed, shocked. If Owen wasn’t in an ocean of emotions now, he would’ve bottled the moment.

“Are we done here? I have to get home.”

“Owen, I...” she took a step towards him, and suddenly his mind went on overdrive on her, all of her, he felt everything in him went rigid, more.

“Don’t.” He warned and stepped back. He won’t be liable for his next actions if she took another step. “Don’t come any closer. Just. Not now Claire.”

He didn’t see her reaction because this time, he was the one who walked out.

Never meeting anyone’s eyes upon his exit, Owen then took out his phone and speed-dialed a friendly number.

“As I live and breathe, Owen Grady!” Came to the excited greeting.

“Hey, I’m gonna need that favor. Now.”

“About fucking time.”

“I’m here girl, I’m right here.” He soothed and combed through her shiny brown hair. “That’s it, Charlie.” The horse neighed softly in response and he smiled before an aggravated pair of hooves stomped on the nearby stable alerting him of an unattended affection.

“Hey! Hey! You’re alright Blue, you’re alright.” The horse’s dilated eyes calmed down at the sound of his voice, “That’s it, that’s it.” The muscular grey head leaned on his hand before slowly
moving away from him to resume eating her leftovers.

Blue and Charlie have been with him since early adulthood. They were a gift from his Dad who as a teenager grew up being a stable hand for his grandfather at the same farmhouse he’s currently residing. Both horses stayed sprightly and competitive although being over 15 years old and were Owen’s favorite pets.

“Alright, everybody settled in?” He shouted at the top of his lungs to the perturbed animals on his barn, an old oil lamp on his hand.

“Besides, it’s just a little rain, you guys.”

And as if on cue, a bolt of lightning suddenly cracked and lightened the sky, making some of the animals let out anguished cries.

Knowing that they probably don’t understand him, he said, “Stay put, okay.” Owen grabbed a rectangular dry wood from his right and bolted the door.

Well, the weather prediction was partly correct this time. Instead of a few days, it rained heavily after a few hours of sunny skies. The downpour got more vicious by each minute, the wind making spooky howling sounds. The roof and doors were flapping with violence when he got home from work. He was surprise he got home safely. Since he knew the Legazpis leave at 6pm, Owen immediately went to check on his animals who were clearly restless and panicky from the harsh weather.

The wood provided little protection from the fierce gust of wind and rain. Already soaked to the bone, He threw it away and ran back to his house, his rubber farm boots sinking in soft land.

After a quick shower, lighting the fireplace and securing all the windows, doors and outdoor furniture, he called to check in on Mario and Nerissa who lived just down the road. Remembering that their old house wasn’t really storm-proof, he decided to pick them up and let them shelter with him. He barely could hear them from the static interruptions on both phones.

“I’ll be there in 5 minutes! Hang on ok, hang on,” he shouted over the mouthpiece before placing it on the bench next to him while he put on his boots.

“No, no, no Owen! We’re actually-“ the line beeped and another struck of lightning shook the sky, cutting all power within the vicinity.

“Hello? Hello! Mario! Are you there?! Shit.” He grabbed his raincoat and keys from the tray and ran for the door.
Only to halt and come face to face with the last person he wanted here.

Dripping wet from the obvious stroll in the rain, the silver car nowhere in sight. Her auburn hair was dark and plastered to her forehead like a wet blanket and still, in the attire, she wore to work today which was clinging to her flawless pale skin but the redness of her lipstick on her ever-sexy lips remained on point and unbothered.

“What the actual fuck Owen Grady!” Claire hollered at him, momentarily drowning out the angry roars of the storm.

Chapter End Notes

I have no experience writing about this stuff, so I would love some pointers and tips. Was it a little cliche? too soon? Thank you for reading and you guys are awesome!!!

These wolf facts are quite fascinating so I put them in. I hope it’s ok. And fun fact, upon my research I actually found a real website called Living with Wolves!! haha
Many dominance and submission displays are not violent or aggressive, as the subordinate wolf will quickly adopt a submissive posture. Often, subtle messages, like an authoritative stare from a dominant wolf and, in response, an averted glance by a subordinate wolf, are enough to keep individual status understood. Alternately, especially if willingness to submit isn’t demonstrated, assertive aggression may ensue.

(www.livingwithwolves.org)

18:04

The pitter patter of the rain hit the pavement with silent plops, filling the streets’ puddles with murky, city water. The strong wind wrestled with the downpour, marking droplet shapes on skirts and tweed jackets. People flew from different directions, seeking the nearest shelter from the abrupt rain.
Located at an unpopular street in the city was a local pub called The Den. It stood between a Mexican dessert diner and a dusty bookshop ran by a middle-aged couple. It was hardly noticeable if not for the flickering outdoor signage.

There were only 20 people employed in it. They served not only decent food but also top notch and cheap libations. The Den had been providing an escape for the hard earners of the family. To employees who settled for jobs they didn't want. To college kids every once in a while. And to former soldiers who never left the war.

Owen Grady parked his Mercedes on the empty lot across it.

The drizzle was drenching the suit jacket he’s using to cover his head. As he fed the parking meter, a familiar looking pink car parked two cars from his own caught his attention. Owen leaned over to get a better look at the plate number and smirked to himself. Owen ran towards the entrance of The Den, his Oxford shoes dipping in rain water on the uneven road.

Upon entry, he's comforted by the smell of leather, fir trees and roasted marshmallows. The stony hearth was alive with dancing fires, warming him, welcoming him. He wiped the dew on his arms and his hair. He shivered a little from the shift in temperature and took a quick gander. The place was nearly full even with the disagreeable atmospheric conditions.

Even as an old, abandoned diner years ago, Owen saw potential on it and decided to buy the place. And of everything he owned, this was certainly in his top five.

As outdated it was on the outside, The Den expiated all modern efforts inside. The interior was a gallery wall of bricks, fake mutilated animal heads, medieval shields, swords and hunting guns. Facing the hearth were a leather brown couch and lounge chairs. An elevated industrialised island bar stood at the center of the room. Put on display behind it were keg rows of german beer- their signature drink. Black Windsor dining chairs, reclaimed tables littered the area surrounding the bar. Candle-like chandeliers illuminated the space, bathing everything in warm white glow. This is almost romantic, he thought.

“Boss man! ‘Bout time you show up here!” Someone shouted over the country music playing from the jukebox and blubber of the crowd. Owen gazed up to the tall French man who was wiping shot glasses behind the counter. Several people turned around at the holler. The usual customers waved at Owen, tipping their foamy drinks and beckoning for him to join them.

“Hey man! How are you?” He greeted his longtime friend a one armed hug.
“Good, good. Been wondering when are you gonna show up in here.” his friend raised an
inquisitive eyebrow at him.

Barry Sembene was his former colleague and shipmate. Like him, Barry settled for a quiet,
peaceful life, lands aways from the high tides, steel ships and gun powder. He had the intention of
owning and supervising, but with the death of his dad, Owen decided to consign his friend.

"Busy with ties and suits and stuff." he sat on the barstool in front of him. "Any bar fights I
missed?"

"Unfortunately, none. You know I’d call you if there was one.” Barry continued drying the crystal
shot glass. “Let me get you a beer."

"Thanks man." Owen looked behind his shoulder, "So, anybody came in to see me?"

Barry snickered as he grabbed an empty mason jar from the exposed industrial shelves. "Yeah, I
saw your chick came in."

"Oh yeah?" Owen’s throat slobered at the sight of the golden liquid being poured in his glass. The
bitter yet genuine taste doused his earlier outburst, calming him, making him gulp all of it at once.

Barry’s eyebrows shot up all the way to his head, he assumed, “Bad day at work?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.” he shrugged, the glass clanked on the granite when he finished.
“Another.” Owen slid the drinkware back to Barry who he could feel was watching him with
curious eyes.

Of all the years he knew Owen, Barry had known specific moments not to probe his friend for his
personal. Owen would willingly do that on his own, but with a little alcohol in his system. The last
time

Barry saw him this anxious was when he found the health condition of his dad. He and Lowery
were here, at this same spot, as Owen drank a whole barrel of beer. All night, they listened to him
as he doted stories about his father. They consoled as he told them how bad he was as a son for
leaving his dad and how everything was in his hands now.
“Mr. Owen Grady.” A familiar voice loomed behind them, making both men looked up. Owen smirked, turning around in his chair to greet the newcomer.

“Almost didn’t recognise you with the fancy suit, Grady.”

Both men sat there, silent and snickering. With an eye roll and peeved tone, the newcomer said,

“Go on, say something about the car.”

“No, no. It’s cool, it’s cool. Say, uh, Barry, can you give our friend a drink here. Somethin’, I don’t know, pinkish?”

“Oh, definitely. May I offer you a Margherita? Or a Cosmo for the lady? I’ll add those little pink umbrellas for free.” Barry gibed in and both immature men laughed at their own shenanigans.

“Ha-ha. Hilarious, guys.”

Franklin Webb’s life had been saved by Owen a number of times before. Franklin was still 21 years old when he joined Owen’s troops. Franklin had a gawky body appearance, making him the last in individual standings. Owen, seeing Franklin's unwavering dedication, volunteered to train him extra sessions. It was also Owen's team that led the rescue of him and other recruits from rogue Somalian mercenaries. It was the encounter that made Franklin stick with naval computer works.

“If I’d known you’re a big fan of Hello Kitty I would have bought you one before coming here. You know as a Welcome Back gift.” Owen jested, shaking his friend’s shoulder.

“What happened to your car, man?” Barry asked between his laughs. He handed their friend a mug of beer identical to Owen’s. He turned around and pour a wooden bowl of mixed peanuts for them.

“My sister misinterpreted my permission for her to borrow my car. She decided to “Pimp-my-ride” thinking I would be away for years. Now, can we talk about other stuff now? Besides the car?”
“Yeah, yeah. How are you Franklin?” Owen chuckled, stood up and hugged his comrade.

“I’m alright. Three more weeks and then I’m off again.” The curly-haired and olive-skinned System Analyst replied, hugging him in return.

“Great to see you in one-piece man. How’s the captain? It’s still Anderson, right?” Barry, who also greeted him with a hug, commented before giving Owen another refill of his glass.

“Yup. Still him. Still a pain the pass.” He sighed as if relieving a flashback of memories.

“Always was.” Owen grinned as Franklin shuffled around the contents of his backpack.

"Now, for the main events gentlemen..."

The glass halted on his lips when he noticed the black dossier Franklin was pulling out of his backpack.

A customer sitting at the other end of the bar beckoned Barry for a shot of tequila. “Anyway, you guys get down to business, I’ll be with you in a moment. Anything else I can get you before I go?” Barry asked, the hand towel he’s using to wipe the counter a while ago now rested on his left shoulder.

“We’re good man, thanks.”

Barry nodded. “Alright. I’ll be back.”

“Here you go.” Franklin dropped the folder on the empty counter in front of Owen. “Got everything in there. Birthday, SAT scores, pets’ names, favourite teachers. CCTVs, doctor appointments, exact times they went to the grocery store, you name it. What is this about anyways?”

Owen squinted as he read the files. The low lights provided enough illumination to make out the words:
Mills, Elijah Stephen

Born: 15 September 1984

Birthplace: Pittsfield, New York

“I don’t know. I had a hunch.” Owen replied, sipping from his mug again and flipping through the pages. Mills was a Stanford graduate majored in Legal and Financial Management. He started the business ever since he was in college and Ibris started to grow from there. He was already popular with top companies before acquiring and expanding Ibris Trading. Having established hundreds of charities and foundations, Mills was an overachiever and philanthropist. It wasn’t a bad resumé, Owen thought with disbelief.

“Well, whatever that hunch was, you’re right.” Franklin held another folder, a thinner one compared to what Owen was skimming now. “Check this out.”

He felt his hazel green eyes widened as read sentence after sentence. Owen felt his fists clenched, not at all mindful that the glass in his hand would break in half.

“I don’t know about the right business terms but that looked pretty bad.” Franklin added as he chewed on some pistachios. "Someone's hiding this so this isn't on anybody's record. He's pretty good. But not good enough from me."

That son of a bitch.

“What’s with the snooping?” Barry asked when he returned, angling his body so he could read the scattered sheets. Owen felt both the men's eyes on him as he reread the pages over and over again. He wished it wasn't real.

He heard Franklin summarized the files for Barry. “See, this is the reason I have trust issues. People are so messed up.”

“So, what you mean to say is you can’t date someone unless you ran by them in your little stalking computer?” Barry teased but kept on reading the files himself, a frown now forming in his head.
“I don’t call it stalking, the more appropriate term is Research.”

“Yeah right. Don’t romanticize your creepiness.”

“No, seriously-"

Owen zoned out on them. He didn't hear anything. Not the next tracks playing on the jukebox, nor the rounds of laughter from the people. The angry blood boiling in his veins had tuned everything out. He knew there was something off about him. Owen walked away from his friends and leaned on the wall beside the kitchen door. He dialled Lowery’s number in haste.

“Sup Owen?” Lowery chirped, the rain muffled but louder on Lowery's reception.

“Lowery, I need you to cut ties with Ibris and everything with Mills on it. Inform the board. Tonight.” He breathed; his hands fisted on the sheet of paper he didn’t know he was still holding.

“Um.” his assistant hesitated, "Oh yeah, you sure?"

“Yes.” he said, his tone firm and clipped.

“May I know the reason before Claire could kill me? Both of us?” Owen heard the hurried friction of pen against paper on Lowery’s line.

“I can’t go into full details now. But I’m gonna tell the management next week, okay? Set a meeting for me, will you?”

Outside, the sky had started to open, endlessly pouring wrathful of waterfalls. Could this day get any worst?

“Of course.” Lowery replied before his tone turned bubbly. “I knew you liked her. That’s why you’re always so persistent in trying to gauge her eyes out.”
He frowned, “I like who?”

“Man, you got it bad.” Lowery chuckled.

“I got what bad?”

“Owen, Owen, Owen.” Lowery clicked his tongue, amusement on his voice. "Who told you?” His assistant continued gushing over the phone.

“What on earth are you on about? Look, I just found out the fucker’s been sucking us dry right under our noses.” He snapped, clearly not in the mood for this guessing game.

That seemed to sober him up.

“Shit! For real?”

“Yes. Don’t tell anyone. I haven’t got my mind around it yet. But terminate remaining and future contracts with Mills or anything related to him. I don’t want to wait for the board to weigh this decision but can you tell them for a general meeting on, say Monday? I want everybody in. No questions til then.” He pinched both sides of his nose, sounding exhausted and livid. Maybe that glass of beer wasn't a good idea.

“Yeah, sure boss.” Lowery cleared his throat, "I mean I just thought it was for another reason… but I’m on it. I'm writing the email right now.”

“What could possibly be the other reason?” He sighed in exasperation. If there was something more felonious than this...

“Well, at first I thought, someone told you that he’s Claire’s ex-boyfriend. I mean, it could be possible with all the tension you two always have. But you know, stealing from the company is a more valid reason too.”

What. The. Hell.
“What?”

Owen wasn’t ready for the unfamiliar feeling that resurfaced in his chest. It swelled inside his chest, dangerous and unwelcome.

“I knew there was something fishy about him. I mean, who would be crazy enough to date Godzilla… I mean, Claire. It happened a few years ago but still... right? Man, this storm’s really starting.” Lowery babbled without pausing for breath.

"Say that again?"

“I said this storm’s an ass! I can barely hear you from here. We’re stuck at the office.”

“No. Not that, the one about Claire and Mills.” Owen felt his blood ran cold, his fists clenched even further. He felt betrayed. And possessive and furious.

“Well, yeah. I heard they were together before she even got into GC. That’s all I know. I swear. I’m surprised they’re still civil with each other. Or at least trying to. Did you see them this morning at the meeting?”

The unwanted kiss flashed before his eyes, making him want to punch a fist-like shape through the wall.

"-Of course, you did. She clearly doesn’t want that kiss but she was too polite to say so..."

Back on the bar, Barry and Franklin hooted with a loud whistle, making him turn around. They were still hunching over the files with such special attention.

“Damn it! Why do bad guys always seem to get the perfect women?” He heard Franklin wailed, sipping his beer as they continued reading the files on the counter.

His head was starting to swim. Owen rubbed his temples as he said, ‘I’ll see you on Monday,
Lowery. Thank you."

“Yeah. See ya boss. Storm’s coming, be safe.” he hung up.

Owen folded the paper and tucked it inside his pocket for safekeeping. He didn't trust himself from tearing it to pieces. He walked back to his friends with a stiff neck, and asked Barry for a glass of cold water.

“What a tool.” Franklin muttered as they turned their attention to Mills’ real estate properties.

"A rich tool." Barry added, handing Owen his drink.

Owen leafed through the dossier, looking for something. And he found it. With tensed fingers, he detached the page from the pile.

A group of people wearing the same shirt stood smiling at him. They were standing in front of a backdrop for Red Cross Blood Drive 2010.

But it wasn’t the bright face of his dad who was carrying a baby that struck him first. Nor the hypocritical face of Mills, with his round glasses. Nor was it on the beautiful redheaded woman Mill's filthy paws were wound upon.

What caught his attention was the headline of the paragraph section. He could feel himself, shaking with unconstrained anger. He wanted to punch him, make him bleed and smash the ugly glasses on his pretentious face. If it wasn't for Owen's self restraint, he would've driven to Mills' address and confront him for it.

*I'm gonna fucking kill him.*

18:17

Approximately seven miles from The Den, upped by thirty-two floors, was her sanctuary. She hung
her bag and her coat on their assigned rods before taking off her shoes and placing them by the sidetable. The beige polyester carpet alleviating her aching feet and tired soul. She moaned at the looser constriction on her still mending feet. Claire fell down her couch with a plop, breathing out her relief.

Finally.

It was very rare for her to have a full weekend without take at home work. After endless meetings, paperwork and people she had to play nice with, Claire was expecting this time off. She knew that the storm was coming this weekend. Claire was looking forward to it. And being the organized person she was, Claire already drew out the activities. This included reading, watching Grey's Anatomy, bubble baths and that 20-year old Cabernet.

Who said she wasn’t a romantic?

She poured herself a glass of white wine before walking towards the window. The heavy downpour, with its large pellets, was assaulting the glass. Its thickness was disembowing the blaring car horns and other city noises. She tarried and observed the scurry of lifeforms protecting themselves from the storm.

Claire never understood why, but she always finds comfort in a bad weather. Growing up, she never understood why women would shriek when the noises cracked the sky. Whereas her, took pride in herself that she actually enjoyed them. Claire was complacent that she wasn't one of them.

When she was young, she and Karen share a room. Karen would cry and get under the blanket whenever thunderstorms strike the sky. She remembered consoling her sister.

“It’s just a storm Karen, it can’t hurt you.” Claire rested her hand on Karen’s shaking knees.

Her sister sniffed, rubbing her hand on her runny nose. “Easy for you to say, you’re not scared of anything, Claire.”

What wasn’t to like anyway? The sound of raindrops, thunder, the lightning were soothing. It was a fair distraction for her more-than-busy brain. Her fondness for it grew as the years aged with her.

As her mind went back over the events of the day, she couldn’t help but be bothered by him.
Of all the years that Grady Corp. has affiliations with Ibris, Eli never went to a single meeting. It was always his assistant or other representative who was in attendance to do the job for him.

So, what changed now?

Buried memories flooded back in crashing waves. In an unconscious movement, her unoccupied hand grazed her right thigh. Her breath hitched in her throat as she remembered the faded scar, the only mark, that flawed her skin.

It had been years since she last saw him and it was not, at all, good. But Claire had decided to look past that and held her chin up higher. After all, no man was worth her tears. Ibris was and still remains an excellent investor for future projects at Grady Corp.

If Mr. Owen-I-am-smarter-than-all-of-you-and-look-how-macho-I-am- Grady would only sign the contract.

Over the previous months she’d known Owen, she had seen him distressed, annoyed, but never angry. Best of all, not angry at her .

Earlier when he turned his back on her, she stood there for a few moments. Still as a statue, recounting the last time anyone walked out on her, which was never.

Claire felt embarrassed and almost… empathetic. His bravado mask slipped, the pained and sad expression evident in his hazel green eyes. For but a split moment, she wanted to run after him and apologise. And she almost did. Her leg and arm muscles twitched for the anticipated movement. But Claire remembered herself and held back.

Claire Dearing never apologizes.

She frowned at herself, aware for a fact that for an escalating times already, she'd been surprised by Owen Grady .

What is it about him that bothers her?
The question lingered in the air, slapping her with a strange, confusing emotion. She took a swig of the sparkling liquid, downing it empty. She relished in the fuzzy feeling before going back to her kitchen for another glass.

The landline in her unit suddenly rang. Its asynchronous high pitch screech shattered the noises of the rain and her reverie. Leaning sideways to grab the telecom from the handler, she hailed in her strict, business tone

“Claire Dearing speaking.”

“Claire, I’m sorry but you weren’t answering your cell.” the British accent of her assistant distinguishable from the other line.

She felt herself grip the phone tighter.

“It’s alright Zara. What is it? Something wrong?” She had explicitly made it clear to Zara that she wasn't allowed to call her home phone this weekend. Unless it was of the utmost significance.

“First, I need you to calm down.”

Claire felt her stomach drop all the way to the floor. “That’s unlikely going to happen now. What happened?”

“Have you checked your email yet?”

“No, not yet-” she mentally scolded herself, "This is what you get from coming home early, Claire!"

"-I just got home. Will you just tell me?"

“Owen mandated to discontinue anything and everything with Ibris or Mills in it.”
“What?!” she felt anger sipping into her bones. "What do you mean discontinue?"

"Check the email. I'm sorry boss. I know you've been looking forward to this deal."

She marched to where she hung her bag and produced her phone from the organized pouch. So much for a quiet and phone-free weekend.

“I got the news from Lowery. He said Owen’s gonna talk to the board on the general meeting on Monday.”

8 missed calls and 12 texts all from Zara and 2 from the other members of her team. And there was it, the logo thread of an envelope with Lowery Cruthers name on it. The blood in her system went to a boiling point.

She swore. "You've gotta be kidding me."

Owen Grady was gonna be the death of her.

“A few of us are stuck in the office, waiting for the rain to stop and then Owen called. Lowery already informed Mills’ assistant. We all heard him and he hung the phone before Ibris could complain. Lowery said, it was Owen’s order and he's not allowed to say anything more. Owen's pretty pissed. I've never seen him pissed. This was so unlike him. After Lowery hung up, Ibris then called me to set another meeting. "Resolve the unmentioned issues," they said. I told them I’ll get back at them and refer it with you first. What will you have me do Claire?”

“Claire? Claire? Are you still there?”

All Zara heard was a door closing rambunctiously.

NOW
The strong wind propelled the never-ending rain shower to their direction. It drenched his porch, drenched his water-proof clothes but drenching her even more. Small debris circled with the air around them. The howling air, furious as it slapped against their bodies and their clothing. But he couldn't care less. He couldn't care less about anything right now. Because Claire Dearing stood there. Hellfire in her body language. Her fierce, fierce green eyes that render him speechless more than he would care to admit.

He was gawking at her, his arm suspended in the air while trying to put his coat on.

Owen lowered down his arm and stared at her. She was still standing angrily- he might add-between the two tarnished columns of his porch.

He's invited her to come over and visit him many times before. But all were in jest, half jokes meant to irritate her. The invitation seemed to irk her the most compared to his other flirty implications.

Albeit knowing the reason she barged in on him, he still asked in his most deadpanned voice. "What are you doing here, Claire?"

She was mute, and still, and very angry.

"Don’t you know there’s a storm?" he almost shouted over the wind, his free hand still holding the door open.

“What am I doing here? Don’t be daft Owen, you’re pretty smart!” Claire took a step towards him. Her wet, furry slippers making loud squishing sounds on the wooden planks as she got closer.

He couldn’t help it.

“Cute slippers. Where’d you buy ‘em?” He smirked.

“Your jokes do not interest me Mr. Grady.”
He went back inside, leaving the door open for her to enter at her own pace.

“Oh? You sure? That’s too bad.” He removed his boots and made his way over the kitchen drawers. Guided by the rays of the sinking sun and the fire on his hearth, he looked for the flashlight and fresh batteries. Eyes on everything but hers.

“How dare you do that without my consent!” She roared in the angriest tone he ever heard yet.

“Well, I just did. Not that big a deal.” He shrugged but his hands were fumbling so much that the batteries won’t fit.

“No big a deal? We’re supposed to be a team!”

“A team.” he scoffed. "A team? Oh yeah? Is that what we are now? I thought you work better alone?” He slammed the offensive thing on the counter, the batteries sliding to the floor.

The hell with a flashlight, he could get his phone and find a towel himself.

“As a matter of fact, I do! But somebody always ruin it for me.” She barked from behind his back. Her naked feet were making loud, wet stomps on his hardwood floors.

“Well, we can’t always get what we want now, can we?”

Where are those damn towels? He couldn’t possibly have used them all for the windows... wait, oh yeah. Damn it.

He shut the bathroom counter and made his way across the hall of unoccupied chambers to his room.

“That doesn’t mean you get to do whatever you want because you felt like it!” she scolded him and still following him. “This isn’t the maritime forces where being impulsive keeps you alive Mr. Grady!”
“It sure isn’t, sweet cheeks.” He replied in his flattest tone. He turned around the narrow and dark hallway into his bedroom.

The sheer curtains tucked and on the sides, allowing light into the room.

“Would you stop with the stupid nicknames!”

“What? You don’t like ‘sweet cheeks’?” Owen picked up his phone from his bed and looked back at her. She paused on the doorway of his bedroom.

“Urgh! Why are you so-?”

“Appealing? Devilishly charming?” He supplied, smirking at her before typing in Mario’s home number.

“-Infuriating!”

“Aww. That’s the nicest thing you ever said to me.” He tilted his head at her while holding the phone to his ear.

The usual voicemail that he had set up for them answered him. Owen muttered a sigh of dismay. He made a mental note to himself to buy them a satellite phone.

“It’s not a compliment.”

“It is to me.” A slow smile reached his lips before he walked to his bathroom to retrieve the towel he used this morning.

“Are you always this stupid or do you just show off when I’m around?” she shouted from her position in the doorway. Both feet never crossing the threshold, she was leaning forward so he could hear her.

Ambling back to where she remained hot headed and wet on his bedroom door, he handed her the towel.
He could not fathom how she was able to look as beautiful as she was dry. Her hair was damp and curled from the temperature. Her shins and feet covered with specks of mud. Her porcelain features remained comely and sharp. As usual, his nervousness and bewilderment made its way through a smug comment.

“Don’t go ruining my floors now, Claire. Take the towel.”

A bilious expression covered her face. She continued to glower at him, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I’ll leave this here. When you decide that you don’t want to freeze to death anymore, it’s yours.” He dropped the towel on the armchair beside the door and stormed past her.

What is with this woman and her stubbornness?

“Ibris is good for the company, they have been for the past five years!” she objected as she followed him back to the main room. Her voice echoed in the now-darkening corridor that held the Grady Family pictures.

Owen lapsed into a silent mode as he ambulated back the main hall. He reoccupied himself by trying to contact the Legazpis, and failed to do so. It kept going back to voice mail. He was on his third try when Claire screamed, her voice steady and stern,

“What is your problem with Mills anyway?! Please do enlighten me with your wisdom!”

Problem? Problem’s a little understatement for that criminal.

With that, he turned around to look at her.

Her burning emeralds perused him. It was a warming, intensive connection, palpable even with the low light. It was pinning him to his spot.
“Look Claire, I admire your passion and what you’ve been doing for the company all these years, I really do. But you don’t have to go here, through the eye of the storm and defend that son of a bitch to my face! You’re a better woman than that!” He snapped at her. His chest rising and falling with all the constrained rage.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, Grady?!’’

“Why don’t you go ask your ex-boyfriend, I mean, you can speak to him now right? Since your restraining order against him was lifted and all.”

The ounce of light coming from both ends of the hallway enabled him to see the emotion that crossed her face. A countenance that sent many of his subordinates off- with tails between their legs. She was angry at him. And for a minute, he's disarmed and didn't know what to do.

“How did you know that?”

Owen had a feeling that it was a rhetorical question but he chose to answer anyway. His insides shook with a strange coldness. He reckoned it would only be okay and settled with once he strikes Mills in the face.

“I worked for the United States Navy Claire, give me some credit.”

“It doesn’t give you the right to pry on my life, or on anyone’s for that matter!”

“Oh yeah? Why don’t you tell me the fascinating story? I’m dying to know!” His voice was now a tumultuous pitch dripping with heavy sarcasm.

Owen couldn’t recall the last time he’d been so discombobulated. His mind resembling Jackson Pollock paintings all at once. She trekked towards him, a few feet away.

“I don’t owe you anything.” her blazing eyes fixated on him, and for another moment, he felt helpless, like he's some kind of hauled prey- hers. He felt his breath hitch. His chest banging with wild intention in his chest.
“Don’t come any closer.” his fingers clamped into white-knuckled, vise-like grips.

“Who do you think you are-?” Claire ignored him, jutted her chin out and jabbed a disapproving finger at him. He could see her lips quivering from this close. The goosebumps forming on her skin, She was cold. Where’s that damned towel? His concern for her wellbeing distracted him again.

“Stop.” He warned, his voice quiet, almost begging. His senses getting overwhelmed by her. Their eyes remained locked in an unwavering stare down.

“Coming in here with your stupid clothes and your stupid decisions. Thinking you can boss me around?” she piped, her eyes wild with fury, her hands balled into tight fists on her sides.

The roaring thunder and rainfall were a solid match for their unyielding stance. Inside his house, they carried with their own competitive encounter. If not, with more ferocity.

“Welcome to my life, princess.” A sardonic grin appeared on his face. He turned around into the living room, eager to put as much distance between them.

“Don’t turn your back on me while I’m talking to you!’’

At some point, she reached him and held out her hand, snatching his arm, pulling him towards her...

And he snapped.

Owen grabbed her waist and his impatient lips met her trembling ones in one furious kiss and by God .

Owen cupped his hands on her delicate face and gave himself through the kiss. As much as he could give her.

She tasted even better than she looked. A sweet mixture of rain, vanilla and something heavenly that was all her. Their teeth clashed. Tongues battled. Lips bitten, both driven by arduous hunger
and thirst that could only be satiated by the other. By her.

Owen could hardly think, she was kissing him back! He wrapped his arms around her warm, damp-from-the-rain dress, pulling her in. His hands wandered to her waist, her thighs. His body hunching over hers in a possessive and desperate language, as if he couldn’t get enough. And now, he couldn’t. He wouldn’t.

Her wintry fingers weren’t idle either. It danced on his hair, his stubble and his neck as she pushed him closer and closer. His lips now softening their assault on hers. She whimpered and tugged on his hair.

At the back of his mind, he wondered if he was dreaming. Like all the cruel fantasies he had of her the past few weeks. Any moment now, he would wake up, frustrated and deeply aroused. But the soft moans that escaped her dreamy lips reminded him that he was not.

Thunder and flash of lightning trembled outside, illuminating his entire house. And that must have brought back her to her senses because she pulled away from his embrace.

As a soldier, he's hardwired to be instinctive and always be ready. But the hard slap she gave him was totally uncalled for and stupefying.

Owen was catching his breath, as was she. His lips bruised from her nibbles. His left cheek sting even more. He saw her eyes widened into saucers, before taking a step back, realising her actions.

With his left cheek stinging from the contact, and his ears slightly ringing. Not to mention, the black hole opening up in his chest, he looked at her, apologetically but somewhat not. “I told you, don’t come close to me.”

She gripped the collar of his shirt, yanking him down towards her height. He braced himself for another blow. But his hearts was still racing. His mind and body couldn't comprehend anything but the feel of her warm body against his. It was making him hard. He forced his body to heel. The years-worth of enforced control useless as he stood before her. Owen was more than willing to surrender and oblige this time.

Hesitance passed her features. A quick rest to comtemplate the weight of her actions, he thought.
But her eyes turned dark, a look of total wanton and unbridled desire.

He gulped.

The ruckus brought by antagonistic weather was remotely lost in his ears. Her sultry voice was the only sound that mattered.

Claire licked her lips. His eyes followed the action and felt himself harden even so. She uttered, hushed and low,

“I’m never the one to follow your orders, Grady.”

And she crashed her sweet lips to his with more urgency and great effort than he had kissed her moments ago.

Chapter End Notes

Hehe. I have to keep you hanging, haven’t I? Tell me what you think? Shall I continue to that part? Or just leave it like this? I haven’t much experience writing sexy scenes so it’s a bit of a pressure. If you have pointers and how-to’s, please give me some. I really want something to happen between them and I hate disappointing any of you.

I also would like to credit Sherlock BBC series (which by the way is my favorite series) for “soldiers who never left the war.” It was so good. And the prompt “are you an idiot or do you just show off when I’m around.” Was from Pinterest.

Thank you so much for reading! And Clawen will be back for sexy times. I’ll do my best. ;)}
The wolf's strongest personality trait is its capacity for making emotional attachments to other individuals. This ability to form emotional attachments to other individuals results in the formation of the pack, or family, as the unit of wolf society.

- https://wolfsongalaska.org/chorus/node/20

The scenery would have awed her if not for the blustering winds and continuous drizzle that blurred the lightly tinted windows of her Mercedez, as it exceeded the required speeding limit in every country. Nevertheless, one can trust Claire Dearing to remain completely comprehensible about her surroundings.

With slender, fair hands gripping the leather of her steering wheel, she drove past skyscrapers, concrete aesthetics, slippery muddy roads, country houses, small, family owned establishments and all manner of impressively high shrubs and plants, until it all cleared up to a wide acreage of land.

The weather continued sending thunderous shakes which clearly mirrored her sentiment; that not even the ancient tree that stumbled on the middle of the road, blocking anyone and anything on both sides from crossing through or how the drizzle suddenly turned torrential could weaken her resolve.

She hasn’t been herself but she knew the house when she saw it, having mentioned by her former
boss for one or two times. The Grady Farmhouse, which she retrieved from her copy of company records, visibly stood amidst the broad span of plains and foliage. Looking between the prostrated tree and the house only a walking distance of maybe just a mile or two, she decided to continue by foot.

The warm rain turned icy on her skin, freezing the veins in her system. She held her purse which housed her keys and phone tightly on her underarm. The annoying sounds of her cream cottony pair of slippers which was now sludgy (for it kept on sinking in soft, wet earth), in the color of burnt umber and her ringing ears were her only company on the desolated road.

A part of her mind kept telling her that she was probably overreacting and all of this was for a good reason because however, she knew his decisions were missing common sensible judgment sometimes, they were always for the great welfare of most. And because, despite her indifference and hostility towards him, there wasn’t a time she’d been in Owen.

But if he thought that he could dodge this deal (like all the other times he had) he was wrong, for Claire wouldn’t be held liable for the stupid actions she had taken no part of. And that was enough reason for her to reach the boiling point.

In spite of that, the shards of icicles that had taken refuge in her for so long had started to melt when she saw him. Claire couldn’t help but feel the slight tickling in her bones that tend to bother her when he’s in her presence. Her determination was threatening to crumble down, her reasons becoming vague. She was nervous, for some reason. Nevertheless, she found it in herself to push on, letting him have a huge piece of her mind, brazenly trolling him in his own house with dirty feet. The hell with Mills, she couldn’t give a hoot about him but she couldn’t stand idly by and watch her colleagues’ hard work go to waste or yet add another chance for them to hate her guts even more than they already did. Because at the end of the day, when she’s all alone in the confines of her apartment, she was insecure. What most people think of her and whether they’re satisfied or not by her leadership were the “Corporate Ice Queen’s” hidden concerns.

But after their exchange, she couldn’t focus (which was a rare, if not, a non-existent occasion for the woman) when and after she willingly met his kiss. Much to her surprise as well as his, she could tell. Every nibble on her lips, every skilful stroke of his tongue and caress of strong hands on her warming body quieted all excuses in her mind. Til it wasn’t.

The slap resonated between the two of them as if it’s meant for her as well, angry at herself for not
feeling horrified. What are you doing Claire? She mentally berated herself. You came here for answers! Not to make out with the boss. You are NOT one of those women.

She was a mayhem of emotions, burning her face red as her stomach. Her whole body tickling with a sudden emotion that was suddenly fuelling her making her want to storm out or strangle him, not necessarily in that order. But then, she raised bewildered eyes at him and the unmistakable regret and honesty, the vulnerability in his kind, green eyes vividly betrayed the harshness of his words and actions. And at that split second, she saw herself in him.

The sky kept making percussive noises in the atmosphere as time seemed to stretch between them; An edict to allow both their identical masks to finally slip, if only for this moment, to make way for the destructive wildfire risking to burn them both.

And she can’t shake the feeling it will bloody hell be fucking worth it.

The coldness that seeped in her system dissolved into something akin to liquid fire as she felt him ran his calloused yet gentle hands on her face, arms, waist, and thighs, acquainting themselves on every crevice of her body, therefore melting away all her inhibitions.

His fingers lingered on the bottom of her dress, slowly inching it higher and higher to where he was desperately needed. She deliberately pressed herself even closer to him, both moaning upon contact on the shape quickly forming inside his denim pants, halting his actions on her dress. He pulled away, letting her outfit bunched on her hips before giving the skin a tight squeeze. Claire gripped the edge of his sweater. It was not yet off of his arms when she crashed her lips to his again, and eventually, with his help, they threw it somewhere in the living room. A deep grumble echoed from his chest when she laid her glacial hands on the prominent muscles of his chest before circling her arms on his shoulder blades to his nape, forcing him closer.

He pulled Claire towards him if that was still even possible. Pushing her against the kitchen counter, his hips pinning her against the wood in a way that made her quiver more with want. His lips never lost its eagerness on hers even as he wiped aside the dinnerware and cookbooks on the surface that she noticed earlier. The objects landed on the floorboards boisterously, making her smile. Claire felt his own forming on his but stopped it playfully by sucking and biting down his upper lip. She heard him moan before he grabbed her from behind and perched her atop the island.
The height leverage allowed her to level her face with his, their foreheads resting against each other’s as they both try to catch their breaths.

“You’re gonna catch a cold if you don’t take a shower.” His hands slowly crept up her waist, the dress following.

She hid the appreciative smile by leaning her forehead on the rounded part of his shoulder. “I won’t.”

“Are you sure? We can stop.” He breathed, his hands stopping their explorations, brows folded and a shaky smile. The gentleman (that Claire had observed many times before) ensued in him regardless of his obvious wanton state and she got the feeling that Owen would stop once and if she said the word. But Claire doesn’t need the chivalry. Not now nor any time tonight at least.

“I can… shower… after.” She affirmed in between each press of hot and french kisses from his jaw line to the pulse on his neck.

He chuckled, brushing his lips against her temple “Can I join you?” his dextrous fingers had started making circular motions on her chest through the lace, making her stick them out and whimper in frustration while he lightly sucked the area connecting her neck and shoulder. She bit her lip.

“Mmm... Maybe.” her own voice sounding foreign to her ears. She held his chin between two fingers and flicked her tongue against his swollen lips.

Claire heard him cuss as her slim hands freely roamed his bare chest, trailing down from the display of faded scars on strong muscles to the button of his jeans. “Don’t do that.”
Lightly nipping the outer shell of his ear; her nail tantalizingly pursued the zipper of his jeans. “Make me.” She said boldly. He groaned, clamped his hand on her wrist and parted her mouth with his tongue again.

Her breath jammed on her throat when she felt her world being tilted and automatically locked her knees around his waist, two muscular arms went to support her weight on her ass as they shuffled to the end of the hall, back to what she presumed was his room.

He set her down at the side of the bed, mouths still ravaging one another. Claire couldn’t remember the last time she’s been kissed like this or be kissed like this, for that matter.

His hands rubbed on her sides, making goosebumps on her already fervid skin until he disrobed her of her damp and sticky dress before she urgently helped him with his pants. Owen picked her up again and gently laid her down on the plush bed.

The two raging storms were now futile in her senses, perhaps subdued by her curiosity which was the defense mechanism the functioning part of her brain was making up to justify her following actions.

Her eyes fluttered closed when his lips started peppering slow, wet kisses from the spot below her ear to her collarbone, throat, and down to her sternum, his mouth intentionally ignoring the pebbled patterns straining against her bra; His fingers playing with the ribbon of her matching lace underwear before slipping a finger under the hem and making those feather-light rounded motions that did nothing to calm the pinging sensation on her lower abdomen.

There was a reason Claire liked having control; it enabled her to get the results she wanted in the way she wanted them. But being relinquished (somewhat) of that at the moment was refreshing and kind of erotic. With others, she always insisted be on top because it allowed her to have more in control of the experience which, in her experience and opinion, was only just a work of friction, usually brisk, lousy acts and with short-lived desires that she can’t wait to get it over and done with. But how long has it been? She tried to remember the last time someone held her hand or be this intimate and fully possessed by someone.
“Owen.” She sighed uncontrollably, arching her back, as he kissed the spot below her navel. One hand clawing the blue sheet underneath them, the other in his hair, pulling it before feeling him smile against her skin.

“I like it when you say my name.” He trailed kisses from her abdomen until he reached the small decorative knot of a ribbon on her underwear. He tugged it between his teeth, making her hips bucked on instinct. He gave small nips against the dainty lace which now felt really uncomfortable and unwanted against her sex; he then scraped his teeth against her heat before flattening his tongue on her labia, lapping up the moisture he was the cause of. She moaned loudly.

However, he stopped, much to her discomfort, and paid attention to her inner thighs but stopped on the torn skin of her scar, kissing it softly making her gasp at the sweet gesture. Owen continued his journey north, settling on her still covered chest, biting down and licking her through the thin fabric.

Claire bit back another moan from coming out, realizing what he was doing and what he was not. Owen fucking Grady was teasing her, making her want to beg. Two can play at this game, she thought.

Smirking and releasing her hold on the bedsheet, she raised a hand to the waistband of his boxers before slipping it to fully grasp his erection. She saw his eyes dilate before he dropped his head on her cleavage, his weight carried by his elbows. “Fuck.”

He felt enormous as she slid her palms up and down his shaft, every stroke seemingly elongating it even further. With a nervous and intrepid hand, she pushed his boxers down to see him in all his glory and groaned as a word of approval.

When she finally averted her eyes, he was already looking at her, a hint of a blush staining his cheeks, his famous one-sided smirk lighting his face. Licking her crimson lips, she gave him a mischievous look as she thumbed the tip of his member, her hands still in a solid clutch.

“Heart fu… damn it, Claire.” He kissed her soundly before resuming his head’s position on her chest, pulling her strapless black lacey bra forcefully down to free her breasts, taking one puckered nipple on his mouth, nipping and sucking hard. Claire paused from her own teasing to relish in the
feeling, body arching from his touch before resuming her hand’s previous actions, speeding up a little, the other pushed his head further to her.

She felt his hands lingering on the waistband of her underwear and before she can comprehend what’s happening, the piece of cloth torn and ripped away and Owen’s middle finger was inside her, teasing her there.

Claire almost screamed.

Her labored breathing and erratic heartbeats were so loud, she thought someone might hear them despite the storm howling pandemonium outside. He continued thrusting his digit in and out, chasing her first climax. She tilted his face and kissed him hard to try to muffle her shouts of pleasure. He groaned before adding another, his palm rubbing deliciously on her bundle of nerves, and Claire thought she might lose her mind, moaning against his open mouth when it was over.

His fingers kept pumping in and out of her as she rode out the wave. Humming, she opened star-glazed eyes and saw Owen hovering over her, a look of wonderment spoiling his face before he swooped down and kissed her sweetly. His erection now slick but still hard and digging in her thighs, making her want to go at it again.

In a flush of movements and rush of adrenaline, Claire flipped them, much again to his surprise. She aided him in removing his boxers and sat provocatively on his lap. Claire started to rub herself on him, still wet from his doing mere minutes ago and she was appreciated for her actions when Owen gripped her hips and started to move with her.

She leaned backward, both her wrists on his knees, as she continued to taunt him and Owen threw his head against the headboard, hissing, with white-knuckled grips on her waist before massaging both her flushed breasts. With languid motions, she slid along the length of him, purposefully grinding her sensitive spot on the veins popping on the skin.

They both gasped, eyes opened from delight when the tip nearly entered her. She could take him now, she thought. While she was entertaining the idea, Owen took advantage and flipped them again, fluttering her face and neck with kisses, his sex giving small thrusts against the crook of her inner thigh.
He stopped again, making her blink her hazy orbs up at him. They held a lustful yet genuine gaze, a wordless communication passing through them. There’s no going back. They could ponder the questions and deal with repercussions later. What mattered was right here, right now and satisfying the unspoken and physical desire between them, if just this once.

“Beautiful.” he suddenly whispered between their heavy breathing.

Claire felt warm all over. She smoothed her fingers in his hair, scratching his scalp then pulled him down, their lipstick-smeared lips a whisper from each other, she muttered, sensing his hesitation, “Don’t stop.”

Getting the final confirmation she knew he needed, he crashed his lips to hers for probably the thousandth time tonight. She felt rather than heard his free hand, which wasn’t gliding over her curves, reached beside the end table and fuss over something.

He stopped with a curse. Abruptly standing up with his knees, he fished out a box from the drawer. Claire adjusted her position on the bed, laying her head against the mountains of pillows leaning on the headboard and watched him.

“Unopened? You flatter me, Grady.” Biting her lower lip to prevent another amused snicker.

“God, not yet. But I sure fucking hope so, Dearing.” He let out a short laugh before tearing open the sealed package and quickly putting the latex on, aligning his body with hers and kissing her chin as she giggled.

“Good poi-ahh!”

With no heeded warning whatsoever, he plunged forward, consuming her completely. A round of
bad language suddenly echoed the room as they stayed still. Her eyes widened, the clever comeback dying on her lips, as she revelled in the new and electrifying sensation. She could feel him throb inside her and how hard and thick he was, really thick, filling her walls to the brim. Her hands went to his back, nails digging on muscles, leaving streaks of angry red lines and half-crescent marks. Locking her feet around his thighs, she egged him on, bucking her hips excitedly as he began to move with excruciatingly slow and deliberate precision.

“Jesus, Claire.” He buried his face on her neck, hissing curses in every thrust.

Her purrs got louder in her ears as they both found a synchronized rhythm, Making her moan in a very unladylike customary.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulder and rubbing her chest against his, their hearts beating against the other, she whispered saucily in his ear. “Keep going.”

He maintained the leisurely pace, yet each plunge un-taming her even more. His hands massaged and played with her jiggling breasts, adding more to her pleasure. She raised her hips to encourage him to speed up. A deep growl vibrated on his chest making him close his teeth down on an erect nipple.

“No. No. I’m allowed to take my damn time.” He panted in tune with his pumps before running his tongue in between her breasts, voicing out their understanding that this might be the only night this will happen.

But Claire was becoming insatiable, her patience was not her best talent. Playfully pursing her lips and firmly fastening her thighs around his obliques, she intentionally clenched her vaginal walls around him and heard his breath got caught in his throat.

“ Fucking hell. Claire” An obvious mix of pain and caution in his tone. Underneath his brooding figure, she saw his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Craning her neck up, she kissed him there before trailing her mouth to his.
“I guess we’ll be here for a long time then.”

“Oh yeah?” He smirked, his features softening a little while still continuing their coital embrace.

“Uh-huh.” She moaned when he dove deep before pulling out all the way and doing it again. “Cause I really don’t say ‘Please’. she tugged on his bottom lip as she tightened her walls again.

With a low, primal grunt, he gave in. He clutched both her meandering fingers with one hand and pulled it above them. His bruised lips were relentless against hers, her tongue fought his, ardor for ardor before he really drove into her; long, hard and rough.

She allowed herself to scream.

This time she really was on fire, consuming every cell in her taut, sweaty body. His hands, lips, and hips spread flames everywhere, sending her toes curling and back arching to meet every rock until the iron bed frame was banging on the adjacent wall along with them. Their bodies were hugging each other in a hurried climactic frenzy as if trying to make up for the time they hadn’t.

Owen’s hands released its grip on her wrists only to interlock their hands together above their heads, stretching her body even further, making her gasp against his mouth.

Trails of intense flames started pooling on her torso, slightly slowing down her efforts, and returning her hips on the bed. Mumbling a ring of affirmation, she clung to his hands hopelessly. His tongue dipped in the hollow depth of her collarbone as he moaned her name.

A rippling sensation overcame her senses and she let go, seeing the entire galaxy behind shut eyes. She beamed up at him when she opened them, a genuine smile painted on his perfectly sculpted face. Still rigid and buried in her, he brushed their lips together as she placed her hands on his lower back to her hips, pumping weakly. The movement allowed her an apt time to recover as Owen continued, hitting every spot with particular slowness that she felt her arousal building again. He gained speed not a minute too soon, impatient for the both of them.
Claire released his hands and treads her fingers on her breasts to her hair before gripping one of the bars on the bed frame, her hips raising a fraction of an inch from the bed and Owen catching it with restless grips, torturing her down.

Not soon after, another wave was peeking, begging for another sweet release. She bit down on his right deltoid, her teeth marking the spot, making him yelp.

Two hands suddenly framed her face a series of explosions billowed through them. Claire kissed him, silencing their cries of euphoria.

Owen leaned his forehead against hers, contended sighs bubbling on their lips before he started showering kisses all over her face. “Don’t go” she almost wanted to say but he pulled himself out of her and lie on the space on her right.

They were both splayed on their backs, their lungs attempting to finally restore their normal breathing when she mouthed soundlessly to hot air “Oh my god.”, still, mind blown.

“Did that flatter you?” He tittered but not in the usual way she found complacent. No, he sounded shy and nervous and out of breath.

“No.” She chuckled and with the remaining strength she still has, she ran a hand on her forehead.

“Good lord woman, you’re so stubborn. It’s driving me crazy.”

He pressed a gentle kiss to her chapped lips before resuming his position.

“Thank you.” She exhaled, lips quirking upwards as she heard him move and seconds later felt the touch of a velvet fabric on her nakedness.
A moment of stillness resumed and only but the sound of their even breaths and the heavier and endless rainfall resonated the night, lulling her to content sleep.

Her eyes started feeling heavy when he heard him mumbled, his voice laced with drowsiness he’s obviously fighting to avoid, “Whatever… If I’m lucky, we still got that shower.”

Claire smiled despite herself, before finally drifting off.

As if he’s being chased by an extinct predator, the dirty-blonde haired boy ran as fast as his little legs could carry him. He flew past the nursery and to the family home in such a hurry that he didn’t notice the uncoiled garden hose on the ground and fell down, knees first, on the grassy earth. He gave a sharp, shrill cry. His lips and knees trembled, his green eyes teared up a little but he managed to get back up and up the flight of stairs to enter the back door of their kitchen.

It was a hot summer night when young Owen, who was busy watering the plants inside the nursery, noticed the green trellis beside the Tulips and David Austin roses were turning white. It took a half a minute for his 6-year old mind to understand what’s happening, and he carelessly threw the water can away, sprinting towards the screen door exit.

“Mom! Mom!” He cried out into the vacant room.

“What’s the rush little man?” The calm and chuckling voice of his mother came from the corner and he turned around. The woman’s expressive sea blue eyes widened as he ran to her.

“Owen! What happened? What happened sweetie?” She suddenly knelt to his height and criticized the damage on his scratched knees.
“I’m okay. Come, Mom! It’s blooming! Come look!” He said between puffs of breath, grabbing her hand to try to pull her up.

“No Owen. What happened?” She held back before tucking a stray of sweaty hair away from his forehead and reached for the hand towel on the counter to wipe the cloud of debris on his wound.

“I just tripped. It’s fine. Now, come on! We’re gonna miss it, Mom!” He whined, his little arms stretching backward as he tried to make her mom move.

“We’ll clean this after ok.” She stood up and gripped her son’s hands before shouting at the archway connecting the kitchen to the dining room. “Hey Honey? Get the first aid kit for me, will you?” A faint okay could be heard from upstairs before his mom turned to him again, the worry on her face now absent, “Now, let’s go.”

The two Gradys trekked hurriedly towards the greenhouse under the white light offered by the moon and outdoor lanterns lining the way to the greenhouse. Ellie Grady laughed as they went along, seeing his son’s enthusiasm and how adorably he told her to watch out for the water hose that caused him to trip.

When they approached the trellis, he eagerly pointed a chubby finger on the vines down below and frowned.

“Did we miss all of them?!” He couldn’t keep the disappointment and sad tone in his voice when he noticed the flowers in his line of sight had already bloomed when he dashed to inform his mom. He had waited anxiously for it to bloom ever since he and his mom had planted it.

“No sweetie. Look at this one.” Ellie stood up from her sitting position and crouched, leaning her hands on her knee caps while she stared at one of the buds starting to flower.
“Where? Where? I can’t see it, Mom. Oh, Hang on!” The boy fussed, grabbing a tall empty tin bucket and positioning it beside his mother. Ellie carried him up by his underarms and together, they held their breath as one of the last moonflowers gradually opened its white petals for mother and son to ogle at.

“Did you know Moonflowers are one of the few flowers in this world that bloom in minutes? Most flowers bloom for days, months, years even.” She apprised.

“Wow.” Owen marveled, nodding and tucking his earth-covered hands firmly behind his back to prevent himself from reaching out and plucking it.

“It really is huh, kiddo?” He turned to his mom who was already looking at him with the same lovable expression she always had.

“Yeah. Can we plant more?” Owen said giddily, looking at another blossoming flower.

“Absolutely. But we have to wait for five or six months so it’ll be the right time for them to bloom.”

“Aw man! But why?”

Her mom gave a short laugh and said, “All flowers are like that Owen. There’s special time and season in order for them to grow and bloom properly, so people can really see them at their best.”

“At their best? You mean there are people who don’t find flowers pretty?” He queried, screwing his eyebrows together. He has never met anyone who dislikes flowers.
“Well, some people can’t appreciate them especially when they haven’t bloomed yet.”

“That’s alright. They’re always pretty to me.” He pouted and raised himself a few inches trying to see the last buds of moonflowers blooming. They were high above his reach consequently he extended out his arms to his mom so she could carry him.

“Of course, you do sweetie, because you’re so special.” Ellie lauded, kissing his pink cheeks.

Owen wiped his right hand clean on his shorts and slowly traced his fingers on one of the petals he could reach and stammered unconsciously, “Bee-tiful.” He was in that stage in his childhood where he still was having a hard time pronouncing his consonants and vowels.

“Yes, be-au-tiful.” Ellie corrected.

“Be-au-tiful.” Owen repeated, still in awe of the power of nature. He mentally counted the months he could plant them again before his mom interrupted.

“Can I tell you something, Owen?” Ellie bounced on her feet so she can catch his son’s unflagging attention. He nodded as she set him down to sit on the bucket he was standing minutes ago. She sat down on his level again.

“Women, Girls, they are all like flowers. You have to always respect them and treat them with much care. Always. And sometimes, you have to wait for them for a long, long time, but be patient because it’s gonna be worth it.”

“But girls are gross and mean Mom.” he blurted out with such innocent disgust that his mom couldn’t help but laugh.
“Oh, you’re just saying that now, kid.”

“I mean it. Jessica was being mean, she took Glen’s puzzle the other day that’s why he punched her. And Monica, she ate glue last week.” He explained and tried to defend his school friend.

“I know. But remember this, girls, boys too, we’re all just misunderstood creatures and we have to try our hardest to understand them. No matter what. Don’t exchange meanness with meanness. And if you do, you have to apologize right away. Okay, Owen?” She smiled yet again and clasped his hands between hers. Ellie was aware that she was probably throwing caution to the wind giving her child this advice but she knew Owen was empathic even at such a young age.

“The people around you, especially the women, you have to treat them with so much respect as if all of them are your friends and family and fight for them when they cannot do it for themselves, better yet even when they can. Alright?” Owen felt himself nodding back, his mom’s words echoing in his young mind and etching itself to memory.

“One day when you’re older and you found yourself liking somebody, you’re gonna realize all of this.” Ellie reasoned out, looking at her son intently for him to know that this was a serious subject that will later help him with his life.

“Okay.” the boy nodded again before adding, “But if I ever will like somebody, I want her to be like you.”

Her kind-hearted eyes glazed with adoration and mirth. Ellie kissed him and said “No Owen. Find someone better than me.”

No matter how clouded some of the memories of his mom were, Owen could still remember that night (well most parts of it anyway) and the two things that left an impact.

He remembered how he first fell in love with nature. The little white flowers that he had taken care
of for so long unfolding right before his curious eyes. Second, his mom’s evident compassion and love for him. His dad would always point out that his mom could brighten up the room. Young Owen didn’t know what he meant by that back then. But thinking about it now, he could recall the certain glow she always possesses and her words that still echo in his mind: ‘Respect people. Respect women.’

However, for the time being, he’s trying his best to loop that last bit to himself.

He had woken up first. The grumbles of thunder which were still whirling chaos outside was a better wake up call from the weakened shrieks of the alarm clock on his end table. The morning was cold and wet with the wind continuously sweeping light rain across the partial darkness of his surroundings. The power must have come back sometime in the night since it was providing harsh light for the two occupants. He carefully reached over her sleeping figure and lowered down the glares of the lamp on her side. Owen dawdled for a few minutes to study her delicate features, knowing full well that he might never have the opportunity again.

A sudden realization overcame him, gripping his insides a little too tightly that he feared another squeeze, he wouldn’t be able to breathe. After everything that transpired on probably the most memorable night of his days, he wasn’t ready to find out if she regretted it. The thought filled him with a pang on his chest as he continued to gaze at her slumbered state. But wouldn’t it be something if she did not. He shook the hopeful thought before lightly grazing his lips to her hair, committing the way she looked, smelt and felt to memory before cautiously getting up from the bed and covering himself in sweatpants and his Navy shirt.

With painstaking movements of a soldier in a mission, he traipsed across the room and picked up the strewn clothes off of the bedroom floor. Owen felt himself blush when he caught hold of her torn underwear. He folded it neatly before tucking it with the clothes he would launder.

No matter how he would prefer her to parade in his house sans of clothing, Owen grabbed the smallest articles of clothing he could find in his closet, laid them on the armchair and engaged himself in his weekend morning routine.

It stopped raining but the sky remained pallid, the sun hiding behind the grey clouds and the wind continued thrashing about, making whistling noises as it went. By the time he finished feeding his animals and doing the laundry, he heard movements from somewhere inside the house and the unmistakable batter of his shower going off. He went to the kitchen to prepare them breakfast, but
not before cleaning up the utensils, reading materials and his sweater loitering on the floor.

While he was laying layers of pancake, eggs, and sausages on the dinnerware, she walked in. Greeted him good morning and smiled politely.

He barely could focus on making his morning coffee, (as if such a task required that much attention before, but now, by some event, it did), he couldn’t concentrate on anything. Period. Not now. Not when Claire Dearing was sitting on one of the stools in his bar island, fresh from her shower, her usually ironed locks were now unkempt and wavy as it cascaded over her shoulders and looking like she just fell out of a magazine and instigating havoc and at the same time, a sense of calmness on an uncharted territory.

She was wearing his old black henley yet the shirt that he meticulously picked out for her was still too big and he tried not to think of his blue boxer shorts which she had rolled up to her waist to prevent it from falling down her mile-long legs, hidden behind the counter separating them.

They engaged and fell on an easy conversation about the weather and where her car was before talking about the elephant in the room.

He was leaning on the sink as he studied her from the rim of his mug as she indulgently read Mill’s folder, which she extracted from him. The cup of coffee and plate of half-eaten banana pancakes lie abandoned in front of her. He watched as her eyes move word after word, her eyebrows knitting together in obvious ire and comprehension. Owen drifted his eyes back and forth towards her and the grim weather in case she suddenly looked up from her reading and caught him staring at her.

In his defense, it was not like his fault that she was that damn magnetic and attractive. Even without an ounce of make-up on or the straight-edged clothes she always seemed to have, she still managed to appear ravishing. So, supposing if she caught him, he’ll blame her for giving him the best night of his sex life.

“That son of a bitch!” She exclaimed all of a sudden and Owen gave her a timid smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.
“You’ve gotten to that part huh?”

“We’ve been their partners for years! Years! How can I not notice this?” She held the sheets of paper in one hand before throwing them on the surface in anger.

“The man’s a total creep. Even my friend had a hard time retrieving that piece of information.”

“And to think, we’ve been thinking, I’ve been thinking of extending our contract...” His brows raised on the word ‘we’ before she corrected herself with an eye roll.

“I should have known. Eighty million Owen, eighty million worth of private and ghosts accounts...” She shook her head in disbelief. “Could you believe that the bastard’s always organizing these galas and fundraising skits every two months? and all of them was a trick, a lie. All those people...” she trailed off, avoiding his eyes. “Your dad and I, we trusted him. Alan had faith in me and I disappointed him.”

Owen could almost hear the admission of regret and apology in her pensive voice. This was the first time he saw her this exposed and insecure and he almost couldn’t believe it. Claire Dearing always knew what to do, given every situation. Hell, she even went all this way to confront him just because, beneath that nonchalant exterior, she cared; For her people, for his company. Placing the empty mug on the sink and leaning forward on the counter in front of them, he assured,

“Hey. Hey. Look at me, Claire. Don’t blame yourself. Nobody’s to blame here but him. Okay? It isn’t your fault” Ducking his head to try to catch her solemn eyes. “And don’t worry about my dad, I’m sure disappointment is the last thing he’s feeling now.”

She gave a small smile and a nod, and he felt relieved.

“Well then, what shall we do about it?” She cast her eyes at him, sad and indignant yet enthralling. Owen felt something kick him in the stomach. “I have an idea, but I think you may not like it.”
“Go on.” She implored in that strict tone he always hears in meeting rooms. She nestled her body on the backrest and crossed her legs in front of her, allowing him to finally glance at the glistening skin he’d been enchanted by.

He collected himself quickly, flipping the papers and rereading the transaction numbers between Grady Corp and Ibris, his mind making an impulsive decision.

“I’m gonna buy Ibris, all their shares and its other affiliations, everything. Until there’s nothing left for Mills to sink his teeth into then fire the bad employees starting with that asshole.” He quipped and for the first time since their working relationship started, he was silently asking for her permission.

But she sat there, looking heavenly in his clothes with that familiar sober and authoritative expression on her face meant to terrorize his poor employees. She blinked before a knowing smirk brightened up her whole façade. He felt himself mirroring her.

“You’re not so bad when you think things through Grady.”

“Well, stick around ‘cause I still got a few tricks up my sleeve.” He teased.

She scoffed and instead of retaliating back, she grabbed a mouthful of pancakes from her plate.

“Let me have some of that.” Owen arranged the papers, tucking them away and pulled the plate between them. Happily munching down a whole cake in one bite, a deep frown entrenched itself on her perfectly freckled face.

“Hey! Those are my pancakes.” Her outstretched hands reaching for the ceramic before he shielded it with his hand.
“Let’s share. I don’t have any stocks left.”

“But I’m hungry.”

“So do I! Look, I haven’t eaten anything since yesterday and someone worked up my appetite pretty well last night.” He jested, waggling his eyebrows in a risqué way she might not approve.

“That’s not funny.” She crinkled her nose at him but her eyes fleet with repressed delight before they turned sober, sinking herself on the chair once more as she allowed him to finish the plate.

“Your sheets, I uhm. I can buy you a new one in case the mud stains, you know, won’t come off.” She stammered before rolling her shoulders and lifting her dimpled chin, simulating aloofness.

Owen felt pride swell in his chest when he noticed the red rush blooming in her cheeks. He winked at her. “You can mess my sheets anytime.”

Claire pursed her lips and nodded at him, “Right.” her blush rushing her face. The shit-eating grin proliferated itself on every pore in his skin, making him feel light and strong all over.

“Well, at least let me wash the dishes.” She heaved the bar stool back, stretching her arms as she did so. Owen shook his head in disagreement.

“No. My house, my dish-” he stopped mid-sentence as his eyes caught a clearer glimpse of the rounded lesion on her right thigh from when she was about to stand up.

A restraining order filed against him after the subject engaged in an altercation with his past
relationship and accidentally firing his registered gun at her. The subject stayed in prison for three
days before his attorney processed his bail.

The scar faded yet distinct on her otherwise milky skin. Owen knew a great deal about scars
(having a hundred of them himself) and as he pieced two and two together, his vision darkened
with fury.

She froze and hurriedly lowered her hands, tugging the shirt down.

Owen straightened his back and rounded the bar, stopping in front of her. With considerate
intention, he fixed hooded green eyes on wide-set ones in a steady intent look, hearing her take a
depth breath. He was lost for a moment before whispering, promising. “I’m gonna fucking kill him
if he ever touches you again.”

She smirked, letting her breath tickle his chin. “Not if I kill him first.”

In a courageous move, Owen swept her fringe to the side with a gentleness that doesn’t seem to
surprise both of them anymore. Owen wasn’t the one for grand romantic exploits and reverence
(much would be his mom’s disappointment) But with her, for whatever reason, he was voluntarily
doing everything by the book. She, amazingly, leaned to his touch.

With that, he lightly clasped the back of her neck and pulled her to him, his mouth already looking
forward to the connection.

Until.

Three obnoxiously loud knocks.

“Owen? Owen? Are you there?”
Both hot-blooded adults were left paralyzed on their spots.

“I’m sorry for not coming as soon as I can.” The voice continued, and Claire sprung away from him.

Owen cursed, recognizing the voice of the notorious woman behind the door. “Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Holaaaaaa! I’m sorry for the delay. I promised to post this before the end of 2018 but I had to take a step back and really think about this chapter. I felt like I needed to write this in Claire’s point of view to assure my readers that Owen was not being forceful with regards to his behaviour towards her or anything like that. On a side note, I totally cringed on using God’s name in vain. I don’t use that when I swear so it’s kinda weird writing about it, sorry about that.

Anyway, congratulations to our main man Chris Pratt on his recent engagement, although my heart broke a little. That’s one hottie taken from us. Again. 😞

Tell me if I totally butchered this story and I’ll dig up a hole and disappear forever. Thank you so much for reading! Pointers and your thoughts are always welcome! You guys are the best!!!

***Also, I have no idea why my chapter 1 end notes would always appear every time I post a new chapter. Are you having that problem as well? It’s getting kinda annoying.
Author's Not- What the heck. I’ll leave a long note down below. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this one. 😊

Wolves are famous for living in packs, therefore, a lone wolf is one that, for whatever reason, has no pack or prefers solitude to the company of others.

"I bet you 20 dollars that I can say the rest of your schedule within or under 50 seconds." boasted his assistant interrupting Owen as he looked out the window into the jammed streets, bored out of his own mind.

"Raising the bar on yourself, aren't you Lowery? Ok. How many are there?" He quickly looked over his shoulder and caught Lowery as he counted the items listed on his tablet, mouthing the numbers as he did so. "12. You got a dozen more appointments for the rest of the day, Boss."

"What do you think Dan? Think he can do it this time?" Owen asked, in playful disbelief at the chauffeur beside him.

"Don't know Sir, but I wouldn't mind a bottle of beer after work." The third-aged man in sunglasses and black suit cracked a smile, stopping at the headlight beside the Chicago theatre.

"Let's see what you've got. Hold on. Let me switch the timer." Owen nodded, adjusting his wristwatch to a stopwatch mode while Lowery started his mouth 'warm-ups'.

They had had a little made-up game of "How-Many-Things-Does-Owen-Have-To-Do-Today since the start of the month; mainly to motivate themselves for the taxing day ahead and to ease the lack
of mobility during the traffic jam which. It was his assistant's idea, having heard Eminem on endless repeat on the car radio and getting semi-inspired by it as he called it. Having nothing else to do and with little entertainment in his hectic schedule, Owen decided to play along.

"Just so we're clear, I'll start on the things from haven't done yet. So, I'm not cheating."

Owen's free wrist bent backward, his palm showing and making a give-me gesture. Lowery handed him two crumpled ten-dollar bills.

"Ready… and… Go"

"All right, 12:30 pm Sales talk the crap out of JVR Global. Have a meeting slash lunch with the executives at the GC Chicago branch. Then go over and meet Ian Malcolm at 13:10 then AT and T VP at 13:45, 14:30 on the Trump tower, heaven knows how long that'll take. You're free till 4 pm but you'll be meeting the lawyers, yours and Mills, at the office again at 16:10. Then 17:00 Skype conference call from one of the companies you're buying, afterward, Call Barry then Franklin Webb-"

"Ten seconds…” Owen raised his folded elbow, slightly inclining his body towards his assistant burbling sentence after sentence at the back seat.

"-18:00 short appointment with the Alan Grant Foundation, make an appearance at St. Bernard's and sign free scholarships for University of Illinois and 20:15 dinner meeting at the Renaissance Hotel with some guys from Make-a-Wish. And the plane would be ready to leave when you please AND BOOM!"

"Stop! 47.28 seconds!

Dan managed a slow, sarcastic clap before returning to the traffic ahead. Owen handed his assistant his money back and produced a 20 from his slack's pocket.

"Wow, we really are so pathetic,” Lowery said with a self-deprecating snigger. "We need to get laid."

Both men on the front seats laughed at the pained, pitiful expression on his face. "What? Say, Dan, you know any good joints in this city?” Lowery insisted, moving closer to the middle console
"Can't say I do. I'm happily married."

"You're no fun. How about you Owen? Shall we explore the city before we go back to Cali tonight?"

Owen wasn't sure about the getting laid part though but instead of bursting his friend's bubble who has worked nonstop with him and very well deserves a night off he agreed, "Yeah sure." dismissively.

"See, that's why he's such a good boss!" Lowery cried, pointing a finger at Owen all the while looking at Dan. "You are a good boss! I could kiss you, man!" shaking Owen's shoulder before brashly shouting "We're getting laid tonight!"

In truth was, he was still reeling from that night with Claire. Even after a month. Owen usually doesn’t mull over his escapades longer than an hour but maybe it was the unexpectedness of it all that made the memory linger longer than necessary.

It was the very first time he brought someone over the farmhouse (well, she actually stormed in, but he was sure as hell wasn't complaining again) where he swore that he would never desecrate with any of his relationship and flings. Now, he could not un-see his house without memories of her in it and quite surprised with himself by how much he wanted her in it again.

Owen thought that once he slept with her, his infatuation would finally diminish, just like with the other women he had forgotten and bedded on one too many drunken, careless nights. But for some inexplicable reason that he didn't want to bring into the light just yet, spending the night with her had fuelled if not ignited the attraction he felt. She's a goddess, a celestial being who has stirred strange sensations unknown to him. At the back of his mind, he knew he was goner; knew that he had and would never have that level of intimacy and passion with another person ever again.

He remembered going to work on that Monday after their secret rendezvous, distracted but euphoric but his hopes to flirt and score a proper date this time went down the drain when he saw no recollection of their tryst in her eyes. It shouldn't leave him with an upset feeling in his stomach because they had agreed to never let it happen or talk about it, but it did anyway. Owen felt restless, having to endure the fact that maybe he put more investment on it than she had. So, he brushed it off, delving deep into his job just as she was doing inexplicably well. They managed to get into an argument later that day with him deliberately initiating it this time, a pretty petty way to try to get a reaction her, he just now realized. But he could not help it. Her, not wanting anything to
do with him and their conflicting suchlike personalities made her more fascinating and irresistible in his book that he sometimes disagrees with her just for the sake of seeing her ready-to-pounce attitude and her green, green eyes, alive with pride and heavenly fire. It's frustrating, disturbing and... new at the same time.

Nevertheless, it was his demoted ego that made him choose to say his next words,

"Drop us off at Uptown later, will you Dan?"

"They don't know how to take care of you, I do." Claire declared while fidgeting with her gold Parker and absent-mindedly staring out at the silhouette of the clouds splayed across the clear blue sky hidden behind the cream-colored curtains of her office.

It was a typical day of the busy weeks she's been having. Her Samsung and pen were practically extensions her hand, And frankly, she loved the chase and adrenaline of it all.

"I've seen your potential and you know very well for a fact that I don't get impressed that easily." She wheedled, confident about her standing business offer for the person on the other end of the line.

"I don't know yet Claire, can I think about it?" Hearing a slight moment of hesitation in her voice, she added,

"Come on Erica, you're the best person we know. Heck, this job was practically made for you. You're amazing, talented and hands on. You're perfect!" Claire implied, chuckling as the woman on the phone laughed again before continuing to express her now-softening misgivings.

The loud scrape of the wooden door against the tiled floor made her swivel her chair around to face whomever it was and found Zara peeping her head from behind the door, her voice low to a whisper, she nodded for Zara to continue. "Claire, your sister wanted to know if dinner's still on next weekend?" Claire nodded curtly, half-hearing her but held her thumb up as confirmation.

"Look, I just don't want to see my friend's talents go to waste." She said, a hand resting on her heart in jocular concern.
The potential recruit laughed and sighed, defeated. "You know how to practically butter me up to
don't you? I'll just pretend you're not bribing me."

Claire smiled, biting down on the knuckle of her forefinger, "So… it's a yes?"

"I don't think anyone had ever or can say no to you, Claire."

"Excellent! I'll set a meeting right away. Hold that, is the 20th ok? My assistant would call you for
the place and time."

"All right!"

She penned ‘Erica Burnard- Ibris new Vice President of Accounts!!! smiling to herself again.
Persuading has always been the highlight of her many business skills. That and her ability to hold
her psyche together which in present time proved a real advantage.

"By the way, I'm not usually one to entertain gossips, but I've heard about that Owen Grady." She
could hear the playful tone of the woman residing a few buildings away that the splitting grin on
her face melted into a nervous frown.

"What about him?"

"Is he as stunning as his pictures in the tv? He seemed popular among the women in my
department as well."

Claire rolled her eyes in an un-eager attitude yet the discreet pinkness of her cheeks spoiled it for
her.

"A military man in Dolce and Gabbana, my, my, my."

"Still a fine piece of ass since I married him. Alright. No need to get your corporate panties in a
twist. Or whatever is it these days."
"Right… How's Neil again?" she teased monotonously before hearing Erica's chuckles vibrated through her headset.

"Still a fine piece of ass since I married him. All right. No need to get your corporate knickers in a twist. Or whatever is it these days."

"Bye Erica."

"See you, Claire."

She removed the Bluetooth headset off her ear and leaned back on her chair, head tilted up towards the ceiling, her shoulders stressed from exertion.

The past month had been nothing but a hurdle; days and hours of nothing but phone calls, arduous meetings and a desk-full of new and amended contracts. Owen stayed true to his word, acquiring the shares and stocks of a dozen companies under Ibris and negotiating with a lot of their business peers for the full and legal transfer of management that they hardly ever saw him or Lowery.

Ever since the paperwork went out of the Grady Corp's new acquisitions, several affiliations and charitable institutions found out about Mill's dishonesty and they filed left and right embezzlement cases against him and some of his accomplices, attracting the attention of the press and putting Grady Corp in the spotlight again much especially on its 'debonair' heir. The cases were still ongoing and Mills was apprehended but wouldn't commit to his crimes even with the pieces of evidence laid out against him. His unmistakable pretentiousness led to him being banned on any Grady Company premises until further notice.

She peered at her clock and noticed the hands nearing 10 to 5. A low grumbling sound from her stomach reminded her that she hasn't eaten her lunch yet. She groaned, annoyed at herself for forgetting again. Maybe she needs to start putting down ‘Lunch’ in her itinerary just as her sister jokingly suggested. She then checked her to do lists, noting that her next call appointment was not for another 30 minutes. She grabbed the red paper bag containing the take-out Zara ordered for her and opened it. Naturally, the Bolognese pasta had run cold. Not wanting to disrupt her assistant, who when she saw her passed her desk stood up hastily and insisted to do it herself to which her boss shook her head No. Plus, it would be a quick break to stretch out her legs, numbed from sitting since 7 am this morning.

She has yet to enter the hallway leading to the cafeteria when she heard volumes of deep laughter. From the double glass door entrance, she saw a group of their male employees huddled over something or someone at the breakfast nook of the cafeteria, clearly amused with the story they
had just been told. Then she caught a glimpse of the narrator amidst the group, the amusing story still tumbling from her thin lips.

At first, Claire thought she was Owen's cousin. There was a certain familiarity in the air between her and Owen strengthened through years of countless barbecue dinners and other mainstream family events which Claire made herself scarce of. She knew the Grady family background, having studied them with Alan Grady's lawyers when they were looking for another heir (because they didn't think his only son would comply) therefore she knew the woman couldn't be his cousin. A very distant one, she could be. Or a past lover. Nevertheless, family or lover, thank God for the mystery woman, for if it was not for her impeccable timing on that fateful morning, the two adults in the farmhouse could have re-enacted certain night-time activities albeit the unspoken plan. And Claire still was not at peace with herself as what to feel.

Claire tried her best to avoid her but with her being around, roaming the office grounds in her ankle boots and shoulder-padded blazers, it was a grueling challenge. Getting caught with her hand still hot in the cookie jar (if said cookie jar was over 6-feet tall of pure muscles, charm and was a damn good kisser) was not her idea of a good first impression.

Christianne was beautiful. Going by the second glances and stares from the employees when she visited their Chairman, she was an eye-turner. Long, dark hair, petite in height, strong cheekbones, daring black outfits and what could everyone in the office could see, a strong, don't-fuck-with-me persona.

On multiple occasions when Owen was in the office, Christianne would go with him along with Lowery, who at first meeting with the woman, was practically drooling like a fish out of water which Zara would gladly point out to him in front of large crowds. Her appeal among their male employees was palpable; their tongues twisting and eyes gawking at her semi-exposed chest when she would talk to them.

But then their "little crush" ceased sometime during the middle week of her coming and going in the premises. And Claire scoffed, proving another very typical behavior of men: ogling on their shiny new toy then losing interest after a certain amount of time.

But Claire doesn't have a problem with the sudden and rather impulsive addition to their employees or the averted attention so as long as people show up to work and could get their job done.

Claire walked to the counter island, quietly and asked the resident cook to heat her lunch and willing herself invisible for a few good minutes before,
"Hey, Claire!"

And failing.

She could feel the eyes boring into her back, she groaned before turning around, covering her grimace expression with a polite smile.

"Hey, how are you?" She asked before noticing the men around her straightened their backs and moved farther away from the female within their midst, parting in the middle for the two women to have a clear view of the other. She leaned an elbow on the backrest of her seat in an intimidating manner she wasn't aware of.

The men cleared their throats and adjusted their ties and dress shirts in scamper movements resembling perfect little schoolboys who became cautious in the presence of the school disciplinarian.

"Pretty good. You haven't seen Owen, have you?" Christianne queried with a straight face although Claire saw the slight twitch of the corners of her lip.

She couldn't help the hot flow of blood that rushed to her neck and cheeks. "Uhm no."

"He's been looking for you. He said he couldn't even go to your office or your cell without people hauling him in the other direction."

"I see." She slightly rounded her chair when the cook approached with a hot plate of Bolognese pasta, offering her a grateful smile. "Haven't seen Lowery either. Where are they now?" She asked flatly and not in the way she was curious or whatever.

"Oh, he had to take an important flight to Chicago last night, but I think he'll be back later."

"Okay, I'll make sure Zara informs me the moment he gets back. Thank you."

"If I didn't know Owen any better, I'm sure he-" she was cut off by the sudden flash report playing on the screen.
"And now, for the latest news of Grady Corporation and Ibris former CEO, Elijah Mills. Reporting to you live from Chicago, Michael Davids with the latest scoop in this corporate scandal."

"Turn it up!" someone shouted from the room. Claire inclined her head on the television mounted above the lounge chairs. Some of the staff employees walked closer, snacks in their hands as a blonde anchorman in a business suit appeared.

She felt cold, well colder, as the man continued on with his story. Her hands held the edge of her seat in a choking grip, her stomach felt like it digested acid, and the pasta that's been appetizing a few seconds ago dried on her mouth like cement. Hesitant and unbelieving eyes averted to her direction and she had the feeling of riding the roller coaster. Only there was no seatbelt.

“Mills, you son of a bitch,” Claire muttered, pushing her plate away and sliding down her seat, phone in hand and fully aware of the looks of incertitude from the people around her.

She made her way back to her office when suddenly, a man she had never seen before stood blocking her office door, Zara looking appalled beside him.

“Miss Claire Dearing, can we talk?

The browned haired, Danish-looking woman grabbed his forearm as she let out a shrill laugh that would irritate Owen if he wasn't slightly intoxicated.

"I don't believe that! You are such a liar!"

Owen took a quick gulp of his beer. "I am not! Chivalrous men like me never lie."

"Ahh, you're a gentleman?" She flirted, the sharp heel of her stilettos seductively running down the hem of his pants.

"In my spare time, yes." He smirked, playing the empty bottle of beer in hand, oblivious to the
 incessant vibration of his phone in his pocket that stopped before he could get to it.

"So... where are you staying?" The woman giggled, tipsy and scooched closer to him while he automatically placed an arm on the backrest of the booth behind her. Owen tried to focus on anything but the stench of cigarettes coming off her mixed with the blue fruity cocktail she has drunk.

"Well-"

"Owen! OWEN!"

The distinctive voice of Lowery yelled from somewhere behind him and the powerless panic and earnestness in his tone made him sober up and fully turn around in his seat.

He frowned when he saw him, the button of his dress shirt still half done; Clearly out of breath from running to him or something he didn't want to know. The phone's lit screen was swaying back and forth whilst he ran and had dimmed down when he reached him.

Lowery never got to the rest of his sentence when upon the first words out of his mouth, Owen abruptly stood up and left the bar and the woman without even so much as a second glance.

"It's Claire."

"Elijah Mills, former CEO of Ibris Trading had been fired by his board led by Owen Grady, multi-billionaire son and only heir of Alan Grady, of Grady Corporations. Mr. Grady, for the past month, had bought all of Ibris', its shares and dealings, basically stripping Elijah Mills off of all of his legacy and in the last stages of legalisation. But get this, this is the part where it gets interesting, Vice President of GC, Claire Dearing had been romantically involved with Elijah Mills. Was Dearing involved with Mill's schemes? Schemes that involved stolen millions of dollars from high-earning companies. A representative from Grady Corp had yet to formally offer a statement on this turn of events."

The television switched on yet muted, its reflected image dancing on the wide window Claire was staring at. She wasn't paying attention to it, instead, her eyes followed the car lights driving around the city, a bottle of Sauvignon in one hand and an open almost empty bag of chips on her lap.
Her phone had rung nonstop ever since she got back from the office that she had to switch it off and hid it in her closet. It was kind of liberating if she said so herself, thinking that maybe she ought to do it once in a while. She exhaled a deep breath and chugged straight from the bottle, allowing the liquid to drown her memories. But flashbacks still impelled forward. The argument. Mills's hands on both her arms in strong deadly grips. Her pushing him away with all her strength and the gun he always carries on his pocket. She vigorously shook her head as if it could somehow finally erase the scar in her memory.

Her talk with one of the new associates of the Grady firm advised her to stay out of the Bloomberg News for tonight because he had ties with one of the channel’s executives.

Of course, they will bring it up. How could they not? Claire has had a fair share of dealings with a number of media nonsense, their spineless and demotivated stories. Yet she stayed on top of it all with chin held up high and square shoulders. But in this case, it was a sensitive subject. One she hoped they would forget just as she barely did. The only option she had to clear her name was to let the public know of her history with Mills and she was on edge to reopen that chapter in her life again.

Claire could almost see the business headline tomorrow, ‘Immoveable Corporate Bitch Queen Claire Dearing linked in massive business scams. She bit her lip, hard enough to draw blood to prevent the warm sensation threatening to fall from behind her eyes. She took a huge gulp from the bottle, scrunching her face on the bitter taste.

Minutes passed by and Claire continued to watch the walk of life below her.

She recalled an incident at the office from a former employee months ago. His snide and degrading comment was the last straw for him from being fired. "You're gonna die all alone in that ivory tower as cold you bitch." He was let go 3 days after when the financial department finally had proof that he had neglected his reports and duties. Fucking men.

Before she went and switched off her phone though, she called Karen. Her elder sister by three years asked how she was, talked about the latest family gossip and her nephews before going 10 minutes straight, reminding her the importance of having and believing in other people.

"It's not a weakness when you ask people for help Claire. You don't have to shoulder the world's biggest problems alone… I admire your high sense of self-subsistence, Mom and I really do but everybody needs help. Even you. Plus, it's not a bad thing to show you care about people, you know... I know you care about them even if you say you don't… And I’ll kick Mill's ass when I see him."

Her sister, even the thousands of miles between them, as always, has a point.
At the corner of her eye, she read the reverted letters of her name and two very familiar faces. She whipped her head and all but tumbled for the remote. The marquee reading “CEO of Grady Corporation finally released a statement about the involvement of Claire Dearing"

"...I can tell you that our team is currently handling the sooner imprisonment of Mr. Elijah Mills and his associates in this crime. Miss Dearing is a trusted confidant and colleague of mine and my late father. And I speak with verity when I say that we're absolutely faithful that she had nothing to do with this, she is innocent. Of the years she worked for the company, she had not let anyone down. I never mistrusted her nor ever doubted her loyalty. As we all do in Grady Corp. we wouldn't be where we are now if it wasn't for her devotion and commitment for her work and for the company. That’s all I have to say." Owen declared, genuinely smiling. His charisma luring the group of reporters and flashing cameras that surrounded him. The anchorwoman reappeared again yet, her words distant again on Claire.

Suddenly, trembling fingers curled on her parted lips, becoming wary that the loud intake of breath she heard came from her throat. With wobbly and semi-drunkenness stature, she headed over her closet and retrieved her phone, ignoring the missed calls and hundreds of messages before sending a text to Zara, beaming with warmth as she did so.

Owen put the car on neutral but didn't kill the engine. He stayed inside the car for a short 8 minutes, cranking his neck from side to side to try to get rid of the mild headache from this morning's early flight back. To say that he's exhausted would be a cliché and the understatement of the millennia because having just a total 10 hours of sleep for the last month, was not at all recommended.

Breathe Owen.

He grabbed his things from the passenger seat and approached the small reception area towards an energetic and simpering Artie.

"Good morning Owen Sir."

"Morning Artie, may I inquire as to why are you such in a happy mood today?"

"Saw you on tv the other day..." Artie handed him and Lowery's mail for the past week they had been in and out-of-town.
"And?" Owen continued, shuffling through the envelopes.

"Ask her out already! Damn it, dude!" The young man encouraged, exasperated.

"As much as I'm delighted that you're keeping tabs on my romantic life, please don't." Owen chuckled. "By the way, is Miss Christianne here already?"

"You know, she's gonna be so mad at you if she hears you. But yeah. She likes to hang out at the cafeteria. Where'd you get that woman anyway?" Artie jibed, shaking his head as Owen entered the lift. A mischievous smirk played on his face as he swiped his card on the screen, the doors closing in on him.

"You don't wanna know, young man, you don't wanna know."

He saw Zara holding file folders, tucked and balanced under her each arm the second the elevator reached their floors. He greeted her cheerily. "Zara! Why are you still here? I've given you the week off!"

The British woman stopped on her tracks and turned to him. "Oh, hey Owen! How are you?"

"Oh, you know, tired but still handsome. Thanks for asking." He deadpanned smugly to which she let out a short laugh. "Why are you here?" He repeated, hooking his backpack on his shoulder before holding out his hand to help her. "You're getting married this weekend!"

"Still lots to do." Obliging him with half her load. "Oh, I have to text Claire, You're here. She told me to text her the moment I got hold of you." She raved with obvious glee, tapping seldom keys on her phone with her free hand.

The corners of his eyes crinkled, a subtle upward quirk of his mouth suddenly rubbing away his haggardness. If he's amused by that note, he showed little trace of it. "Aww, your boss missed me?"

"I guess we'll never know." Zara winked, snickering. "But I did miss all the bickering. Seems like the day wouldn't be complete without you two going at each other's necks. It's quite entertaining, really. I've never seen her get mad like that at someone."
He let out a chortle before nodding at the guy who waved at him. The floor's deserted with only five groggy people sipping their first morning coffees. Then they fell eerily quiet.

"I saw you on the news.." Zara started. "What you said about Claire-"

"You don't believe me?" He exclaimed in a quiet, negating tone.

"You haven't let me finish! No, I do believe you. A lot of guys here thought so too. I mean, we knew Claire even longer than you did but we agree with you. Even though she's… you know, kind of pain in the arse sometimes, she cares about us, about this company in her own little odd ways. Claire never accepts help, so I make it my way to discern what needed helping and what not. Anyway, if you ever needed someone to back you or her up in court on that statement, a lot of us here would be willing to do that for her."

Owen knew Claire's reputation among his employees, her icy and authoritative stature towards everyone but never had he heard someone openly talk respectfully about her before. He felt an ounce of pride took over him that someone could see and appreciate her just as much as he did. "I'm certain it wouldn't come to that point."

They reached her office, all glass walls, file cabinets and modern furniture, a smaller one next to Claire's closed one and dropped the bundles of paper on her desk.

"I hope so too, but in behalf of her, thanks for that Owen."

"Hey, we're a family here. That's what families do." He smiled at her.

"Speaking of families, I forgot to give you…” she leaned down and drew something from the compartment under her desk.

She handed Owen a dainty white envelope with gold lace trimmings on the outline; a melted wax with the monogram A and Z sealed the flap of the envelope. "- your invitation. Are you bringing a plus one?"
Claire arrived at the office a little later than her usual time in. Thanks to the bottle she finished last night, her head was now aching. She removed the sunglasses off of her eyes and walked towards the elevators. Artie greeted her, his usual low voice becoming a little too loud in her opinion. "Good morning Miss Dearing."

"Morning Artie." Massaging the bridge of her nose as she pressed hard on the elevator button.

"I would like to inform you that Owen just arrived. Zara told me to tell you in case you didn't check your phone.

"He is?" She glanced back and true enough, saw his car. She looked up at Artie who had a cunning look on his face. "What?" Glaring at him unintentionally.

"Nothing Miss Dearing. Have a good day." clearing his throat and proceeding to arrange the pencils on his small desk. Or pretending to.

Upon reaching her door, she saw Zara stood up from behind her desk and cried out. "Owen's here. He told me to call him once you arrived."

"He told you?" She asked, curious to know why her assistant was taking orders from Owen. "Where's Lowery?"

"Lowery took the morning off, they just landed like two hours ago but he said he's gonna be here sometime after 10. I am to be Owen's assistant till the nerd comes back."

"Okay. I'll just check my messages then I'll come by his office. In the meantime, can you get me a latte and the pancakes down the street?"

"Huh?"

"Actually, make that two orders of pancakes, and an extra black coffee, with 1 teaspoon of milk and no sugar." Claire added, remembering how he liked his coffee. She hung her blazer on the couch to avoid her assistant's inquisitive look.
"Pancakes? Black coffee? But you never liked- oh! Oh! " Zara said with cheerful liveliness. "I'll be back in a jiffy!"

She went to check on her emails, already sorted out by their importance by her assistant. She muttered a quick "Thank you Zara." before going over by them one by one. A number of them were from newspaper journalists demanding her opinion of the recent findings in Mills' case but most consisted of the usual business threads. She didn't notice the time. Not until Zara went back, and in her hands were her meal. The aroma making her head spin.

"I already told Owen you're here. Shall I call him to go to you instead?" her assistant laid down her breakfast on the coffee table, Claire shook her head.

"It's fine. I'll go to him. I'm just sending this email. Thank you, Zara."

"You're welcome. I'll be in the office when you need me." Zara chuffed excitedly, her eyes shining in evident amusement before walking off.

She waited until Zara closed the door before she stood up and grabbed the bags but not before passing her reflection on the decorative mirror. She emplaced the bags on the nearest surface to tuck her wavy hair behind her ears and un-crease the folds on her orange dress.

His office stood on the other end of the hall from hers, making them the only two office spaces with the 360 view of the city. The large board meeting room dividing their walls. From a few paces away, she heard a loud resounding blow, kind of like someone throwing a desk on the opposite wall. And another one, and another one. The employees walking with her turned their heads on the commotion coming from the end hall where his office was- but never stopped to eavesdrop.

She stopped the passing woman who works in the Human Resources, "Vivian, call someone from security." The woman nodded and jogged to the reception desk out front as Claire knocked loudly on the wooden door similar to hers in a futile attempt. "Mr. Grady? Owen? Owen!" she half-shouted with panic in her voice, garnering the attention the employees in the room before she finally decided to throw the door open.

The books on the shelves were on the floor as were some of the potted plants that décor his office; the chairs overturned and the floor lamp beside it, the papers, pens, and bottles of ink scattered on the carpet below his desk like someone just wept his office table clean; Jackets and a striped tie were strewn on the floor. But what struck her the most were the people on the floor.
Claire couldn't see their faces. But she knew who it was. The situation seemed to have reddened her rather colorless cheeks; Owen’s self-satisfied laugh echoed as he simultaneously said "Fuck me." just as she opened the door.

From her view on the door, the woman had her hair in a high ponytail today; her body was above his opiate place on the floor. Her thighs on either side of his head, a rather provocative position she only saw in the Kama Sutra book her sister gave her as a Christmas joke while his rough hands that Claire tried not to think too much were gripping her waist.

They both turned their heads towards her. Claire instantly locking with his, her eyebrows raised in an all-knowing fashion, her face a total look of stony disapproval.

"Oh, good morning Claire!" Christianne greeted like nothing was happening, leaning slightly on her left so she could look at her.

Owen wriggled out of Christianne's thighs, his hair standing up in all directions, his face beet red like he had finished a rigorous exercise.

"Claire, I-

"Mr. Grady, Ms. Christianne, I apologize but I knocked. I'll come by sometime later." She interjected, managing to sound placid and unabashed, one hand on the doorknob, the other keeping the bag of breakfast firmly hidden behind her back.

Chapter End Notes

I MISSED YOU. I AM SORRY. I can't believe February is over already! I had to go over a lot of personal issues for the past few weeks which meant less writing time. So, if ever this chapter is trash, I apologize. I kept re-reading this everyday to make it readable and un-cringe worthy. Haha. And a shout-out to the ever-amazing Elise-Collier for checking up on me! Thank you.

You, my readers, are the best and I love you all. And I would also like to announce that I already started on Chapter 7 so you won't wait that long. Please leave a review, a like or a critique. As a writer, it would really help us out to know what you think and to keep us motivated in writing the next chapters. :(
Submission

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a lot of italics, please bear with me. Here's a 15-page chapter for you. Also I recommend (if you're using your phone) reading in Reader View. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The “They-Must-Be-Cousins” theory was definitely crossed off the list. Crossed off, shaded heavily, strike through repeatedly and scribbled off the paper leaving an angry, black hole. She was not his cousin. Definitely not his cousin. Claire tried to get the memory off her mind but in doing so, reminded her that it was taking its precious time to bother her.

Claire prided herself as someone who was far from the norm of emotional, dependent women who doesn’t need to get herself out there to feel appreciated, or as a woman who needed something or someone to feel alive. But now, she felt stupid. Stupid and ashamed when her mind automatically replayed the fateful night, he spent with him and how, against her better judgment, didn’t actually hated it. Nevertheless, she should have known, with his ruggedly handsome looks and appealing demeanor, that he's involved in a relationship. Typical of acts of men. What useless, boneheaded devils, Claire felt white-hot rage fuel her blood. She gripped the bag of breakfast in one hand, ready to throw it on the nearest trash can or his face if she saw him in the next minutes.

Zara’s excited smile fell when she saw her stomp back to her office. “What happened?” Her aggression shown on her face, she took a step back, struggling a little to regain her professional composure.

“What time will the Chinese be here?”

“Noon,” Zara answered instantly without even looking at her calendar.

“Okay, don’t let anyone in my office until then.”

“Absolutely.” Zara nodded like the perfect and reliable assistant she was.

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**SUBMISSION**

“There is no better way to know us
Than as two wolves, come separately to a wood.”- Ted Hughes
Nothing beats the feeling of being in the ocean, he often told himself. As a nature lover, what Owen looked forward to (besides his job) was to see the sullen-bluish green color of the water, wide and almost boundless; the sea spray briny and thick with the smell of seaweed and fish and not to mention the scenery of the rising and setting sun as it kissed the horizon; a one hell of a view from there according to hearsay. When the time came for his very first deployment, he was over the moon, kind of like a little kid inside a magical toy kingdom. Complacent that he won’t be getting seasick for the first few weeks, he kept his medication at the bottommost part of his duffel bag, under his bunk bed, when strictly it should have been with him as commanded. Come what may, he learned his lesson on the fourth day when he sped towards and over the railing to barf his guts out; the taste and feeling being worse than his biggest hang-over. He thought, with great certainty, that nothing would and could ever top the worst first days at sea.

That was until he saw Claire standing by the door and looking at him, them, tangled in a tactical wrestling position, her face a countenance between discomfort, regret, and anger; Her eyebrows scrunched together, lips in a pursed red line and her eyes, hot damn, her eyes were fierce and ready-to-kill. And yet he must be out of his mind to still think of her beautiful after the embarrassing episode he had put her through.

Owen pushed the woman off him and walked to her in three easy steps, his explanation on the tip of his tongue when she spoke and apologized for interrupting them. Claire exited before he could say another word, the door automatically shutting behind her.

He looked back at his friend who had an amused expression on her Chicana features. He glared at her with such spite that he was starting to regret calling her for help a month ago…

*Both hot-blooded adults were left paralyzed on their spots when they heard loud knocks from the door.*

*I'm sorry for not coming as soon as I can." The woman's voice continued and Claire sprung away from him.*

*Owen cursed, recognizing the voice of the notorious woman behind the door. “Fuck.”*
Rubbing the back of his face in aggravation, he walked towards the door and let his guest in.

“Were you becoming deaf or something?” his guest joked, immediately shoving her coat and bag in Owen’s arms upon her entry.

“Nice to see you too.” Owen snuffed, dropping her things on the couch near the door.

He felt her gaze instantly falling on Claire’s from his kitchen counter. She turned to him and gave him a wink at the corner of her eye.

“Claire, this is Christianne. Christianne, Claire.”

“Christanne? Really? Who are you? my grandma?” she spat before beaming at Claire and extending her hand for her to shake. “Hi, Claire!”

“Not at all.” extending her hand over the counter, “I’m Claire Dearing. I’m sorry for-“

“Oh no, no, don’t apologize for anything. You have no idea the worst things I’ve caught Owen doing.” Christianneelbowing him on his side. He rolled his eyes and moved past her, next to Claire’s to grab a new mug from the cupboard.

“I called but the phones were down. I just got hold of my uncle a while ago. They live near the by-road.”

“I see. I hope they are all right...I’ll wash.” she insisted in a soft voice when he tried to pry her fingers away from her empty cup.

“I got it. My house, my dishes,” he muttered so only she could hear.

“Yes... they were.” He took a quick glance at his friend whose eyes were shining with mischief. He glared at her once more.

“I was actually planning to head there first, but I just couldn’t wait to see my pal here.” Owen
reached his hand across the counter to hand his friend a cup before he turned around again to finish the dishes.

Fucking Miss Christianne.

“By the way, the silver Mercedes on the road, by that fallen tree, that’s yours, right?” She finally sat on the bar stool across from them.

“Um, yeah. Is it ok?”

“Besides the mud covering the mags, Should be fine. A few folks were moving the tree when I was on my way here.”

Switching the faucet off and drying his hands, Owen leaned on the counter and stayed silent on the ordeal. He contemplated her things on the couch, the black coat looked new but the brown canvas military rucksack had seen better days. And from Owen’s experience, the contents of that bag were not always a good thing.

“That’s good to know... Well, it looks like you two have something to talk about. So, I’ll just be... I’ll just get my things and I’ll walk back to my car.”

“Your clothes are still in the laundry.” Owen wished they couldn’t hear the appeal in his voice. He didn’t want her to leave just yet.

“It’s ok. You guys talk. Can I borrow your phone charger?”

“Sure, it’s on the nightstand.” She gave him a small smile. Owen felt his own lips imitating hers.

They watched her leave, waited for the bedroom door to close before his other guest got up and punched him in the arm, chuckling.

“Ow! What the fuck! What was that for?” He hissed, rubbing his exposed bicep.
“Owen Fucking Grady’s got a fucking girlfriend. Finally! Never thought I’d live to this day.” she teased, keeping her voice low.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Hmm. Let’s see…” her eyes traveled from his head to his feet slowly, her method of a once over. “If I’m honest with myself, I’ll say you like this woman.” winking at him through the rim of her cup before tipping it at him.

“Don’t use your weird mind-reading shit on me.”

She scoffed, taking another sip of her coffee.

“It’s not mind-reading, it’s basic Psychological Science. Seriously, how old are you? 5?”

“Did Mario and Nerissa made it to the shelter okay?”

“Yes, Tiya told me don’t you worry about them.”

“That’s goo- why are you looking at me like that? Cut it out.”

“Out of breath, red cheeks, rigid posture, dilated eyes when you’re talking to her, low but soft deep voice…” she winked at him. “Want me to “evaluate” her?” she continued with a sinister smile and waggled her eyebrows.

“I already did. I mean no, not directly. Franklin did it for me. “

“And?”
“She’s clear, which was not a surprise to me. Owen avowed without a trace of doubt, pouring her another cup before preparing his own. I studied human behavior as well, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Not as good as me though.”

“Yeah, whatever... Christianne.”

Before Owen could get out of her way, she stood up on the supporting legs of her stool and punch him.

“Why do you always hit me?” he whined, taking a step back away from her.

“Call me Christianne one more time, I’ll tackle you to the ground. And we both know who always wins.” she threatened amiably, taking a bite of the apple she stole in his fruit stand.

“That’s because I never hit a woman.”

“Quit your whining,” she pushed cup away before adding excitedly, “So, how do we do this?” She rubbed her hands together like some villain (which she really was moments ago) plotting her next evil schemes.

“For a doctor, you’re extremely violent.” he accused under his breath.

The sound of a ringing phone and distant laughter and his companion calling out his name from behind him brought him back to the present.

“I said, have you eaten your breakfast yet?” the woman asked, unmistakable humor transparent in her voice.

The randomness of her question made him pause from re-arranging the books on his shelf. He turned towards her. “What? No. Not yet. Why?”
“You should eat. Or at least drink coffee. It helps with anxiety,” she smirked, grabbing her blazer from the upturned chair on their right.

“I’m not anxious.”

“I’ll ask someone to bring you one. And please, we’ve been through this, I evaluate people’s minds and body language for a living, there’s no point in lying to me,”

“You’re the worst.”

“Can I just tell you that I cannot even begin how happy I am seeing you so…like this for a woman! This is amazing.” She chastened, putting her jacket on and covering the naval and ocean wave marks on her skin which she got during her time in the navy with him. Owen had strongly advised against hiding them when she comes “to work at his building” said it was her battle scars in a way. But she argued, saying she didn’t want others to get the notion that she and Owen worked together which, of course, will raise many questions on what her job was beforehand, jeopardizing her secretive profiling on Owen’s employees.

“I hate you.” he glowered at her once more, arranging his tie before aligning the seats neat and upright in their earlier positions.

She laughed and patted him in the shoulder. “Time to make your move, beefcake. Now go, get your woman.”

**********

He didn’t get to talk to Claire because men in business suits had arrived a little too early for their lunch appointment. Not that he was bothered by what she thought of him anyway. He said to himself.

The executive staff was attending with him along with Lowery who just arrived. It was the typical meeting with him cracking jokes every now and then to lighten the funereal-ness of it all. Owen never did like long meetings, the accounting and statistics bored the hell out of him. But what always made it worth his while was having an excuse to look at Claire, solidly within her element, passive and substantial that Owen always caught himself staring long after she stopped talking.
“There’s an awesome barbecue restaurant near here. How about we treat you gentlemen for some certified Californian cuisine today?” Owen heard Antonio, their Chief Finance officer, exclaimed beside him.

“Excellent idea. You guys are not in a rush or anything, are ya?” Owen addressed the group of people in front of him.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. We don’t want to disturb you of your daily schedule.” the one named Mr. Fujidenzo with the jet-black hair and friendly eyes replied timidly.

“Nah. Of course not. Besides, we haven’t eaten lunch yet.”

“Oh definitely! You’ve never been to California downtown if you haven’t tried that!” Lowery chimed in, already packing his things on the table.

“If you insist. We would love that. Thank you, Owen.”

“All right, let’s do it.” he stood up and the rest of the table followed. They walked towards the door and Owen held it open for everyone before noticing Claire still sitting on her designated chair and taking her time to cram the meeting’s papers inside the folder.

“Miss Dearing, are you coming?” one of the men asked for him.

“Actually, gentleman, you go ahead. I still have lots of catch up to do.” she smiled at the man.

By the time everyone was out of the room, Owen lagged behind, waiting for her.

“You can leave the door, Mr. Grady,” Claire muttered monotonously, her back to him.

“And lose the opportunity to act like a gentleman? No way.” he chuckled somewhat cautiously,
“Listen, earlier this morning, at my office—”

“Mr. Grady, you don’t have to apologize for anything.” she simpered, now looking directly at him with her impatient, deep-set green eyes.

What he really wanted to say was, I’m sorry you saw that. But nothing happened, nothing was happening. Well, except my ass getting beaten up. But instead,

“Who said anything about apologizing?”

“Well, aren’t you?”

Yes. “No.”

“Okay. Then, we have no problem.” she stood a few steps away from and gawked at him with intolerance, one he had witnessed and been on its receiving end more times than he could count.

“Why? Were you jealous?” crossing his arms in front of his chest and leaning his body sideways on the door, and blocking her exit.

“I have not gotten that low yet.” Claire looked somewhere past his shoulder “Will you move out of my way?”

“Have lunch with me... with us. With us.”

“I bet you can dazzle them with your charm yourself. I’ve had enough of it already, luckily.” she taunted back at him perching the folder on her hips, still frowning at him.

“It’s so nice to hear you’ve been charmed by me. Thank you.” he awed, placing both his hands on his chest.

“That was sarcasm.”
“Come on Claire. Even my VP needs a break.” He teased her, making no move to lean away from the door.

“Wow, you just persuaded me.”

“That a yes milady?” Owen raised an eyebrow at her, his lips shaping that one-sided smirk.

“Get out of my way or I’ll poke your foot with my heel, Mr. Grady.” She said lazily with a forced smile.

If there was someone she could really rely on, it would be her (sometimes evil) sister, Karen who lives in Wisconsin with her two sons and Zara Young, her assistant ever since she got promoted.

Zara was a year younger than her and Claire could never have a more perfect assistant who does not only do her job fantastically well but also knows her as a person, not just as the company dictator. And if there was anything, she could do for her to return the favor, she would gladly do so. And that was the reason she was canceling and exchanging her Friday night to attend her secretary’s bachelorette dinner at a popular lady's bar in the city.

“One order of Daiquiri please.” she sat the bar stool at the far end of the room and watched Zara sitting on the improvised throne on their rented space surrounded by her bridesmaids. A few of them Claire could recognize from work and some, she couldn’t with their strong accents and posh outfits.

Zara was working at the top of her game in the United Kingdom for some Real Estate firm before she decided to move here with her then-boyfriend (and now fiancé) Alec when he here. It wasn’t the first time Claire wondered how could someone leave the life they’ve known, their work and families for what? for love? Claire was happy for her friend she really was and wouldn’t have the nerve to complain because it brought Zara here. Yet she could not digest the idea of why and how someone chooses something that could be temporary over a lifetime of achievement. It was just too much of a risk she could not imagine herself doing. But that was just her.
“They said marriage changes people for the better, do you believe that?”

It took a few more seconds for her eyes to adjust and recognize the woman who leaned her elbows on the space next to her drink. Without her usual padded shoulder blazers, her arms were showing. Her right arm wreathed with tattoos of what looked like billows of the ocean and a naval anchor on the rounded part of her shoulder. She also cut her hair short, ending just below her jaw. She looked like a different person. If it wasn’t for the dark and heavy eye make-up, she wouldn’t recognize her.

“Christanne?”

She mumbled something under her breath and Claire only got the words “Kill him” and “calling me that.” above the loud and sudden shrieks of the women around them.

“I didn’t recognize you. You look great!” she complimented sincerely and watched her as she ordered her drink and sat beside the empty chair on her right.

“Thank you. So, what do you think?”

“About what?”

Christanne tipped her chin towards the group of hyper, screaming women. “Marriage.”

“Oh. Um.” The three people who should have been her role models on how to love were forever traumatized by severe experiences of what they thought was their happily ever after and that made a huge alteration on some of her views in life. “I don’t know.” Claire took a deep breath before saying the next words, “My dad left our mom when I was in high school and my elder sister got divorced, so I don’t have a lot of references to look up to.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s quite all right.” She assured her. Christianne called for the bartender to order them another round.
“So, you don’t believe in marriage?”

She shrugged, taking another Daiquiri off the tray. “I didn’t picture the rest of my life being told of what and what not to do.”

Christianne’s mouth curved into a whimsical grin, like she was fighting to keep secret she was on the verge of telling. “You sounded like a close friend.”

“Ah, let me guess, she’s not too keen to hold a relationship either?”

“Yeah. He is.”

“Well, in that case, to lone wolves,” she said in jest, clinking their glasses together.

“Which reminded me”, Christianne angled her body towards her seat so she was facing Claire. “I never got to explain for this morning, when you saw me with Owen.”

“Oh no, I shouldn’t have interfered with what’s been going on with you two ever since. I’m extremely sorry, I didn’t know and I feel humiliated and awful.”

“Wait, you think.” before she could even finish her sentence, her face lit up, slapped the table and held on to Claire’s shoulder as she doubled over with mirth.

Claire felt her eyebrows drew together in one embarrassed frown. “Was it something I said?”

“Oh man. You’re funny!” she said breathlessly when she calmed down. “I mean he really is good-looking, Square jaw, good bone structure, tall, muscles. I don’t date men but if I do, it would be him. It would gross me out because we were childhood buddies, but I think I could do it.”

Oh. She tried to hide her relief and surprise and manipulated her voice to sound monotonous and
formal, “You grew up with Owen?”

“You grew up with Owen?”

“Yeah, we used to run around the farm every summer when they visit. My mom’s sister and her husband take care of the farmhouse whenever Owen’s away.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“He’s a great guy, lots of issues but really great. Never seen him so riled up with a woman.”

“Well, he is infuriating.” she screwed her face in a grimace.

“Funny, he said the same thing about you.” Christianne’s approving smile gave Claire the impression that the idea, even just a small concept, of her and Owen, was something she should welcome and explore. And honestly, it was starting to make her uneasy. Claire let her mind dwell on other details like how her current drinking buddy has a different way in opening communication that doesn’t feel forced and uncomfortable, it made Claire receptive and open on what else she has to say.

“I never knew why we only talked just now. You’re easy to talk to.” Claire uttered, smiling at her.

“If you stopped avoiding me, we could have had this conversation weeks ago.” she speculated correctly, in between last guzzles of the yellow liquid.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.” Claire chuckled before looking back at the posse of women who did not even notice them gone. “Thank you for keeping me company, Christianne.”

“Oh, my pleasure but please don’t call me that. Owen likes to remind me that I had a hard time saying my Ts when I was a kid. Call me Zia.”

For a person who hated the idea of large formal gatherings, Owen found the wedding ceremony beautiful.
The Young-Allerton nuptial had been administered in a remote location away from the crowded and busy city of California. The event, not attended by more than a hundred fifty guests in their black-tie attire, imparted a sort of distraction from the fast-lane lives of the guests whom all live in the city.

One would think that glowing happiness of the bride and groom in the 11th century-old Victorian Glass Conservatory sitting in 300 acres of grounds, surrounded by an astonishing view of well-built outdoor pagodas, ancient forestry and flower gardens, or the sun setting behind the blue mountain spilling a grand combination of bluish-orange light all over the land would be enough to hold everyone’s attention.

But not his.

Yes, the black strapless velvet dress she was donning for the reception was alluring and hair in a low messy bun like a golden halo with the strands framing her face, yes she was a head turner. But the air of light-heartedness and practical bliss strongly etched on her otherwise normal and cold disposition were what drawn him the most. She was sociable, more than usual, and looked carefree. He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“What do you think will happen if you just keep staring at her?”

Owen peered over his shoulder and caught Lowery leaning over the open bar with a childlike grin up at him and raised eyebrows. “I wasn’t staring.” he turned around on his seat and faced him with an annoyed scowl.

“You’re right, gawking was the right word. You better make your move though boss, because there are other tough guys here too. Hey Z! Love the hair.”

“What’d I miss children?”

Owen turned back around and saw Christianne prepped up in a blue long-sleeved cocktail ensemble, a tall glass of beer in one hand and the other holding a black sequined purse: so unlike of her.

“Owen’s insecurity.” His assistant answered smugly to which Owen poorly contradicted with a weak reply.
“You could practically have the whole room begging for you yet you chose the hardest one to tame,” Lowery added.

“Leave him be, Cruthers.”

Zia greeted Lowery with a fist bump before the woman went and sat in between him and his assistant, leaning their elbows on the elevated island, overlooking the array of colorful dresses and tuxedos on the dance floor.

“For example, the blonde haired one, Zara’s cousin is looking at you all day. I would know because she’s the hottest girl in the room.”

Owen took a quick glance from behind his back and noticed the woman who just averted her eyes away from him. He shrugged at Lowery and took a swig from his beer.

“Why aren’t you attend the ceremony?” Lowery asked Zia.

“I had to meet another intel of mine on some employee background checks.”

“Oh, you still haven’t found the ‘spy’?” his assistant’s giddiness about the idea evident in his voice.

Unlike the rest of his employees, Lowery was the only one who knew about her part at Grady Corp. Owen’s distrust of the people around him was another reason he also called another friend to help with his own private investigation.

“Spy? God, what is with men and their childish fantasies.” the woman beside him exasperated, probably rolling her eyes at Lowery.

“Any luck Zia? I haven’t talked to either Franklin or Barry yet.” Owen finally voiced out his own
“Results come out maybe tomorrow. Don’t you worry ‘bout a thing.”

“Dudes, ok enough. We’re at a party. Stop thinking about work.” Lowery crouched down as he began his gossip. “Now, have you heard about the guy from Finance that got sassy with Claire?”

The three engaged in the amiable chat between bottles of beer, the revel around them not dissuading for a moment as the moonless night finally sunk in. Lowery was on the middle of telling his seventh joke when something or someone bumped his back, pouring cold, sticky liquid inside his neck and to the insides of his dress shirt. “Son of a-” He stood up turning around to face his assailant.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I lost my balance. I didn’t mean to!”

The blonde woman in the purple dress whom Lowery was talking about earlier giggled embarrassingly, batting her fake eyelashes up at the three of them. Lowery quickly gave him the table napkin before introducing himself, slightly pushing a very vexed Owen out-of-the-way. “Oh, he doesn’t mind... Lowery.”

Owen glared at him.

The woman didn’t shake Lowery's extended hand but rather focused on Owen, biting her lip. “I’m really sorry, I wasn’t supposed to spill it. Can I buy you a drink instead?”

Coming over to introduce herself was one okay thing but to do it on purpose in the most inconvenient, immature way possible? Not the best way to gain nor hold his attention. Still, he offered a polite smile to the woman. “Why don’t you take my seat and I’ll be right back.” He pulled away from the group, took his jacket and excused himself to the restroom.

He made his way between a gallery of Renaissance paintings down the corridor connecting the ballroom and the other side of the building. At the center between the male’s and the female’s restrooms was a Victorian parlor area with modular vintage furniture and an elegant chandelier above it.

Owen stripped his wet shirt and hung it between the jet hand dryer to dry. He was wiping the
remaining viscidness of the fruity drink down his shoulders and back when he heard voices from outside the hall. Owen was not always one to eavesdrop but with nothing else to do in the empty and silent stalls, his ears decided to against his will.

The disembodied voices resonated on the granite walls; their voices became clearer as it drew closer to the wall where he was at, he leaned his body against it until he was now sure that it was a couple. The woman sounded irritated by something the man had replied.

“Can I drive you home tonight?” the man’s deep voice sounded desperate.

“I have a room here.”

“Well, can I walk you to your room?”

Poor guy. Owen thought, letting the water ran at the spot on his shirt to remove what smelt like a Pina Colada cocktail.

“What’s your name again?”

“Glen.”

“Okay Glen, let’s make this easy for you ok. I don’t know what gave you the impression that I’m interested for you to stalk me all the way here. I’m supposed to say I’m flattered but I’m not.

Atta girl.

“Playing hard to get? I know you didn’t come with someone; I’ve been watching you all night.”

And that is where you really lost your chance, buddy. A creepy move, really creepy.
“Are you so sure of that? Now, if you please move away, Sir.”

He removed his hand away from the dryer so he could clearly hear. There’s only one person within the vicinity that he’s a hundred percent sure would call someone Sir even if that someone was being a nuisance and an asshole. He took a peek outside and unmistakably saw a very disgruntled Claire holding her purse under her armpit and in front of her was a guy in a pale blue suit.

A devilish idea came to him and without really planning it, he barged out the door and pretended to be upset over the damp white dress shirt on his hands. “Honey, do you think this stain would- Oh hello.” Owen stopped walking and met the man’s horrified eyes. He simpered and extended his hand, I’m Owen.”

The man who looked like a cartoon character stammered his name out and shakily shook Owen’s hand. Owen glanced at Claire, whose eyes shone with rare and challenging playfulness. Encouraged, he padded over, pulled her by the waist and pecked her on the lips, so chaste he thought he imagined it. “Hi, baby.”

Something crossed her eyes and she stunned him when she circled her arms around his bare shoulders, making him stumble a little when she pulled him down her height. “What took you so long, teddy bear?”

He smiled, pressing his cheeks against her in the annoying way couples do. They turned to the man again, obviously more embarrassed now with his big dark eyes. Owen swore he could see slight perspiration dripping down the man’s face. “I have to apologize for my state of dress, she’s used to seeing me naked, but you’re not. Are you babe?” He stood up straighter and pulled Claire closer to his side, quite amazed when she played along by resting her left hand on his chest, a cunning smile on her perfect face.

With that, the man left, mumbling incoherent words as he backed up the hallway. When his figure disappeared, Owen released Claire, sidestepped away from her to shake his shirt to air it out.

“Do you always use your body to intimidate your species?”

“My species?” He swiveled and caught her cheeky smirk. “Now, don’t pretend you didn’t like that.”
“I want to ask why you’re half-naked, but I remembered that I don’t care.”

“I always feel so happy with your lack of concern for my body.” he joked, deliberately flexing his muscles.

“Ok fine, what’s the story?” she breathed, nestling herself on one of the cushions.

“Apparently, some chic thought it was sexy to introduce herself by spilling her drink on me.” He replied, finally slipping his shirt on.

“Oh, what I wouldn’t give to be you.”

He let out a chortle at her sarcasm and walked to the nearest mirror to put and fix his bow tie when he heard her get up and say, “So uh, thanks anyway, I’m heading back.”

He regarded her again, his eyes running on her figure. “What do you think Spongebob would say if he saw you alone again?” That halted her upcoming steps. “Besides, I actually need that favor back.” smirking at her through the mirror.

She smacked and pursed her cupid-bow shaped lips at him, maybe contemplating the offer he thought and he smiled again when she said, “Just this once, Grady.”

Being within each other’s proximity for the last hour had fended off unwanted attention from both sexes ogling them in the room. Just as what he had intended. Not that he was aware of the salacious glances thrown his way by most of Zara’s entourage (it was Claire who pointed it out many times throughout the night). Owen would be all right with just sitting with her but she was touching him, raking her hands through his hair and whispering things on his ear that during few moments during the night, he forgot they were just all for the show.

“Another please!” She clamored at the bartender serving an old couple at the other end of the bar. The young man looked at Owen, silently asking for permission if he should indulge the fuddled and flushed woman sitting beside him.
“And here I thought you hated tequila.” Owen chuckled and nodded at the lad, holding up two fingers. “I lost count. How many have you drink, Claire?”

She wiped her mouth with the piece of cloth laid in front of her and gave him a beguiling smile. He’s got to give it to her that even at a drunken state, she remained a prim woman. There wasn’t any unwanted attention around them now but he seeing her sway a little drink after drink, Owen sat closer to her as a regard now for her safety, his hand guarding behind her seat in case she leaned back and lose her balance. Again.

The party had ended half past 1 am with only the catering staff folding the table cloths and a few remaining guests dawdling on the tables, too drunk to continue. Lowery and Zia already left to their separate hotel rooms at the nearby establishment, where he had also booked a room.

Surprisingly, they were getting along, no sarcasm and argumentative remarks, so far. It was nice to know that they could be... congenial with each other. The arguments were exciting, no doubt about that, but this is so much better. They talked about the farm, the places they have been for work, his days in the navy and the time when Grady Corp didn’t have an Owen Grady yet. He found himself hanging on to her every word.

“It’s good to know that you’re so opposed to orders even back then.” she wrinkled her nose before biting the lime wedge from her drink.

"Hey, you’ve no idea how an ass my old commander was.” There wasn’t any unwanted attention around them now but he seeing her sway a little drink after drink, Owen hovered closer as regard now for her safety.

“Good thing you weren’t kicked out.”

“No. But I had to mop the entire ship.” Owen chuckled at the memory and they watched as the barista pour their drink on two small crystal glasses. Claire rested her head on her folded arms. Owen hesitated again, studying her for a minute, considering if it was a wise decision to give her another when she’s clearly drunk as a lord.

“Why don’t you let me take this one?” She raised her head at that, beaming at him in her semi-
drunken nature. Good thing he has a high tolerance for alcohol or they would end up on a ditch somewhere. Or a bed.

“And here I thought we’re having such a great ‘ol time. Don’t ruin it!” she reached for it but Owen moved his hand away. “Give it to me! I can handle it!”

He gave in, not wanting her to fall on her face squirming for her drink. “Fine, woman! This is the last one okay?” She nodded with closed eyes, her body staggering a little.

“Cheers, Claire.”

“Bottoms up.”

The empty glasses banged on the counter with a clank. Owen finally removed the loose bow tie on his neck and tucked it inside his jacket hanging on the back of his seat. When he looked up, Claire was staring at him. Her eyes glistening with something he couldn’t name.

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing. Anyway, I better go. Thanks for the uh- you know” she waved her hand at him.

She made a move to stand up but Owen was ready. He caught her just in time her knees hit the floor. “Whoa, easy there, tiger.” Owen pulled her waist towards him as she chuckled, holding on to his forearms in a hard grip. He found himself staring back at her and he smiled.

“Has anyone told you, you have expressive eyes?” Claire whispered, her jade-colored eyes held his with such seriousness and honesty.

Owen lit up like the Rockefeller Christmas tree. Everything around him blurred and she was the only one in focus.

“Don’t go falling for me now, Claire.” He smirked, his eyes memorizing her beautiful face.
“Never.”

Then she closed her eyes, humming as she leaned in closer and kissed him.

Chapter End Notes


And please if you can recommend a Tumblr blog where I can submit this story, please do so. This may sound vain, but I need the encouragement. I'm trying to not lose my mojo in writing this. ;)
Male alpha wolves don’t gain their status through aggression and the dominance of other males, but because the other wolves in the pack are his mate and kiddos. And like any good family man, a male alpha wolf protects his family and treats them with kindness, generosity, and love.

-www.artofmanlinessdotcom/articles/how-to-really-be-alpha-like-the-wolf/-
Something was leaning heavily on her head and whatever it was, it needed to move.

Claire swatted her hand around to push it off but only came contact with nothing but air. She grumbled, a sound between annoyance and pain as she pried one groggy eye open.

The French balcony door was ajar, allowing a soft breeze to blow the drapes that poured a warmer glow about the room. The chirpy greetings of the birds perched on their branches (which swayed with the wind), the rumbling engine of a lawn mower and the distant murmurs of conversations hung in the air. All of these tiny noises comforted the pounding sensation in her head.

Claire slowly twisted her body to lie on her back. She stared blankly up the ceiling for a few minutes, not particularly enjoying the exhaustion ingrained in every fiber of her being; her head was about to explode any second and her mouth incomparably dry as a dessert. In addition to that, a strange sensation in her throat as if she swallowed a whole watermelon.

She made it back to her room, after all. Claire managed a small, proud smile. It was the first night she allowed herself to drink more than she ever had in her entire adult life and she won't be lying that it felt liberating. Her sister would be proud. More so, now that she knew she can trust herself not to do anything stupid. Inebriated or not.

Something on the nightstand caught the light, making her squint her extra-sensitive eyes. She turned her head and thanked the heavens that a tall glass of water was resting on the hardwood. The woman sat up to drink. The glass was still cold and sweaty as if someone just poured it. She finished the sweet liquid, lie on her back again and continued to revel in the worst headache she was experiencing, thus far.

The painted decor on the Victorian ceiling was starting to zoom out of focus when she heard it: a mummed, buzzing noise. Maybe it was just the mower, she thought sleepily. The buzzing hum insisted for the next three minutes or so before she heard the rush of running water.

For an elitist event venue and four-star hotel accommodation, they sure have thin walls, she assumed with disappointment. With closed eyes, Claire extended an arm on the wall behind the lampshade as if to test her theory. She didn't know anything about construction planning but the numbing sensation she felt on her knuckles when she knocked on the walls unmistakably disapproved her presumption. She ignored it. Until the sounds that followed made her eyebrows coiffed with confusion.

“Shadows grow so long before my eyes... and they’re moving across the pa-aage...”

What the hell?

It took her half-fuddled mind to realize it was coming from somewhere near.

“Oh, screw it!”

She sprung upright, the movement making her head spin. Claire quickly surveyed the room. Nothing was strange nor out of place. The open-plan layout of the studio didn't have a living area, making the the queen-sized canopy bed take up most of the room. Having said that, it only provided a modest space for kitchen, the closet and study table; the bathroom was behind the wall adjacent to her bed. Her purse and shoes on the kitchen counter.
The voice continued singing, accompanied by a whoosh of water every few seconds and a tinkling sound of an object hitting ceramic.

The phone, where her empty glass was, rang suddenly. She grabbed it. The frown deeply formed on her forehead when the screen read Zia Rodriguez- new message.

Zia Rodriguez? Who the heck- Oh! Christianne! Zia! Claire didn't know Zia's last name until that moment nor remembered saving her name on her phone. Maybe Zara synced it for her. However, when she tried to open the thread, her password won't register. She swiped and cleared the notifications on her screen saver before it opened up to a portrait of a baby lamb standing tall on grass; its glazed black pupils staring up at her and the corner of its mouth quirking upwards.

"I wanna tell you I love your way, everyd-ayyy, ye- eahh, I wanna be with you night and da-ayyy."

It's coming from the bathroom, alright.

Claire maniacally scrambled around the bed for something to defend herself with when her phone rang again. She never thought she would be so relieved to see the sometimes-annoying man’s name on her caller ID.

She hit the green phone icon. The usual, panicky voice greeted her as they said simultaneously:

"Owen! We found-"

"Lowery! Help me!"

She removed the phone from her ear and stared at it as if it was a liability.

"Claire? Why do you have Owen’s phone?"

And then it hit her.

She had a few drinks with some of her staff and later on, as a favor to Owen. They spent the remainder of the night talking and drinking, trying to ward off unwanted female attention. When she felt a sick feeling on her stomach, she said goodbye and then... and then... that was it. The last thing she remembered was his lopsided smile and strong arms around her at the bar. All of it were blurred images after another.

Did she return to her room with Owen?

Filled with sudden dread, she clutched her stomach, arms, and thighs, feeling for an ache that might help her figure out what happened. Green pupils widened when she realized that she was wearing the flimsy nightgown set she packed when she clearly could not recall changing into it herself.

"-Are you still there? Claire?" Lowery's nervous tone faded and replaced by an amused pitch. She felt the heat rise up to her neck and for a second, she wanted to throw the phone over the balcony.

"Yes. I'm here," she uttered in a low voice.

"Good morning! Where's Owen?"

"I… I don't know." She answered, mortified. Her eyes eventually focused on the bathroom door as the voice echoed pleasantly.
"OK um. Tell him to call me as soon as he can? Wait, never mind, I'll call him later. But tell him it's important. Like really important. Zia just informed me about it. It's funny cause we were just talking about it. I don't want to ruin his weekend though, oh shit no. Maybe I shouldn't tell him yet." He rambled in the way only Lowery can.

"Lowery?" Claire interrupted, pinching the sides of her nose to soothe her throbbing headache.

"Yes?"

"Stop talking. I'll tell him when I see him okay?"

"OK. Sorry. See you, Claire. You guys enjoy your weekend."

As soon as she hung up the phone, the bathroom door creaked open. The shower steam was engulfing its former occupant as he closed it.

Beads of water droplets rested on his exposed chest, the few hairs on it matted with moisture. His torso covered in the red hotel towel and a smaller one around his neck, which he was using to dry his hair.

Did she gasp out loud out of the horror that confirmed her suspicions? Or something else? Her heart was in her throat as her eyes voluntarily followed every muscle.

The song on his lips froze when he looked up and smiled at her as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "You're up."

Claire grabbed the sheets to cover herself, the satin mini dress felt thinner as he continued walking to the end of the bed.

"Feeling better?" he rested one hand on the knot of his towel on his waist. Claire redirected and focused wide, green eyes on his clean-shaven face. She had never seen him without his five o'clock shadow. The ruggedness (that captured the attention of many females) temporarily gone and reintroduced a chiseled and defiant jaw. For a second, she wondered what it'd be like spending the day just looking at him.

But there were other pressing matters she should concern herself about and recalling that, she snarled at him, "What the hell are you doing here!"

"Good morning indeed." He stood on the end of the bed, chuckling and tilting his head at her as he continued shuffling his hair.

"Why are you naked? And in my room!??"

"I just finished my shower, why won't I be naked?" He said dryly, flinging the towelette on his shoulder. "Don't tell me you shower with your clothes on?"

She glowered at him, not appreciating the sarcasm.

"Then again, I would know that you don't." He winked at her.

Blood rushed to her neck and cheeks, all the matter of humiliating scenarios playing in her mind. Feeling exposed, she tugged the sheets tighter around her and vocalized the thought that needed to be settled "Did… something happen.. Between…us?"

"You don't remember anything from last night?" He smirked.
"Well, I wouldn't ask you if I remembered. Now, would I?" She glared at him again, training her eyes to stay on his face and not on the dripping droplets on the pronounced division between his pectorals.

"Don't worry," He strolled to her side of the bed, a proud air about him. "It was as hot and sensual as the first time we did it."

Nervous by the minute as he placed a knee on the bed, one hand keeping the towel from slipping off his waist, she croaked, "Tell the truth, Grady!"

He smelt of soap and minted aftershave, the broad and sinewy expanse of tan skin marred by thin, long white scars. The air between them crackled with tension. Claire held her breath and edged further away.

"You want me to explain the details?" He sat down. "We had a couple of drinks and then…you kissed me. All the way from the bar up to your door. Passionately, may I add,"

She felt her forehead wrinkled to a disbelieving frown. She couldn't have done that...could she?

"Then I fumbled for your key card for a little while because you were busy biting my ear and throwing my shirt and jacket on the hallway." Owen narrated, leaning his hand on her side, now caging her.

"You sure wanna hear the best and most romantic part of the evening, Miss Dearing?" He continued in a deep, serious voice that she felt had been meant to seduce her. She saw his eyes drifting down her parted lips as she stared at him, with unfaltering attention.

"You pushed me on the wall… that wall… and you… God, you…" he chuckled, biting the corner of his lip. "You vomited just in time you reached the toilet."

The stern expression on his face dissolved as he threw a fit of laughter. He gave her personal space back by sitting on the edge of the bed, allowing her but a moment to breathe.

A sheer amount of humiliation filled her eyes. "That's not funny!" she shrieked, grabbing the pillow from behind her and smacking his arm with it. He laughed as he caught it and threw it away on the other side of the bed.

If that wasn't humiliating enough, he added, "It's true though, every word. Then you insisted to take a shower before bed."

She felt the color drain from her face. "We...showered together?"

"Well no, I didn't join you. I’m not one to take advantage of drunk women." He defended, "But I couldn't leave you alone. You should have seen yourself, slightly covered with your own vomit."

"You... undressed me?" She stuttered, equally horrified. So much for self-preservation and self-control.

"It was hardly my first time to see you naked, you know." He paused and raised his eyebrows at her. True. "But you did that all by yourself. All I did was hand you the soap and the towel and watch you not drown yourself in the bathtub, of course. Then help you get into that devil of a dress."

She buried her face in her hands, groaned loudly and fell back on the bed. "I am. Never. Drinking. Again." She muttered, looking up at the Victorian ceiling once again.
Owen laughed again, a good-natured laugh. "You had a great time though, you kept repeating it."

"I was drunk. You can't hold me accountable for the things I said or did when I'm drunk."

"Well, that's too bad because I already made up my mind." He chuckled in a low, determined tone.

Claire tucked her chin as she looked at him, "Made your mind about what?"

The doorbell echoed suddenly and she felt the shift on the mattress as he got up. Claire couldn't help it. She turned her head and watched him go, admiring the ripple of his back muscles. It made her remember how his shoulders hunched when he was embracing and taking her. Feeling an uneasiness rising up from the tip of her toes to her cheeks, she stuffed another pillow on her face. She heard the quiet stomp of his bare feet on the carpeted floor before she felt him nudge her with his knee. "Here. Drink this."

Pulling the pillow away, she saw him hover her. In his hands were a plastic cup with two white capsules on it and a glass of water and his suit laundered and in a black garment bag on top of the kitchen island.

Claire sat up slowly, deliberately avoiding his gaze. "Thank you."

"Nah, it was nothin'." He mumbled, sitting on the bed again.

He was watching her, she could tell from the corner of her eye as she swallowed the aspirin. Owen grabbed the glass from her when she finished, making her lock her gaze with him. And there it was again, that sincere expression in his eloquent, green eyes. Unsure what to make of it, she cleared her throat, "I need to take a bath."

His expression changed into something ludicrous, he waggled his eyebrows at her and joked, "Want me to join you? I won't mind another one."

"Move." She scowled at him, rolled her eyes and held the pillow to her chest as she tried getting up.

"You sure?" He joked, squinting his eyes at her.

Claire smacked her pillow on his face with showy contempt.

Grabbing the sheet, he wasn't sitting on, she pushed past him and trekked towards the wardrobe to get her clothes (she wouldn't dare to dress in front of him) and to the bathroom. And only faced him to relay Lowery's call.

When she turned around, Owen was smiling smugly at her. His biceps and abs in full display as he leaned on his arms on the bed behind him.

"You got your clothes. Why are you still naked?"

"Got distracted. Seeing you all worked up is delightful." He adjusted his body and leaned on one elbow.

"I'm not- Why do you always...Lowery called. I didn't mean to answer it. I thought your phone was mine."

"Oh yeah? What did he want?" Owen replied, reaching for his phone.
"He didn't say. But he sounded urgent. He told me that you have to call him."

His face darkened, gone was the flirty Owen she knew not minutes ago. He stood up and she watched him paced the floor as he read something on his phone.

"Is there a problem?" She asked from the bathroom door, slightly concerned. Maybe she was just overthinking but if that was Lowery and Zia then it has to do with something with the Grady Corp.

"No, no. Everything's fine." He offered her an unconvincing smile but she nodded nonetheless. She was about to close the door when Owen called out, "Have breakfast with me."

She hid behind the door and saw him move behind the counter to put his pants on.

"Why would I do that?" It came out sharper than she intended.

He peered from hanging the towel on the barstool and shrugged. "Because I'm running out of excuses why we shouldn't hang out. And there are actually some things I want to run by you. About work, if that pleases you."

Claire felt a prick of conscience. The man did take care of her even though he had a choice to leave her on her own bilious mishaps. In addition to that, of the two times they spent the night together (with the second one recently established as purely out of concern) he had been the perfect gentleman. What could be the harm?

"I'll be ready in 10 minutes." she conceded.

Besides, it was not like they're gonna get married or anything.

She entered the large archway of a smaller reception where the breakfast buffet was being held. And above the singer's acoustic and slow version of Chapel of Love, Zara's voice rung through, her diamond rings glistered as it caught the sun rays emitting from the large windows of the restaurant. "Claire!"

The English woman left her husband and walked towards her direction. The woman must have assumed she was alone because Zara insisted she sit with them, "We don't mind!"

Owen had to answer a few calls hence he told her to go ahead and reserve them a table. Claire shook her head, "No, no, that's ok. I'm actually with-"

"You look radiant, Mrs. Allerton." Owen was suddenly behind her and he leaned over to give Zara a kiss on both cheeks.

If her assistant noticed Owen was wearing the same formal attire he had on the night before, she didn't say but Claire swore she could pin the knowing grin and mischievous hint in her assistant's brown eyes.

Alec, a handsome, blonde-haired man in his late 30s joined them and shook hands with both her and Owen.

Prior to the wedding, none of them have ever met Zara's husband. But Owen was talking to him as if he had known him for a long time. They exchanged a quick, small talk about the wedding and
the scenery. Claire watched the conversation play out with silence and repressed amazement, thinking she would never learn the trick on how to make people like her instantly unlike Owen who was obviously Mr. Congeniality even outside the office grounds.

"Would you like to join us in our table?" Alec pulled Zara closer to his side, head inclining to the table for four by the center aisle.

Claire hesitated.

"Thank you but we actually have plans today." Owen beamed at the couple and turned to her, "Don't we?"

Claire looked at him quizzically and Owen replied by pressing a hand on the low of her back to her waist.

"Bummer, but maybe we could tee together sometime?"

"Definitely man. Oh, and Zara, don't show your face at the office for the next two weeks or I'll fire you." Owen kissed her cheek as he said his goodbye.

"Thank you, Owen." Zara glanced cheekily at her again from over his shoulder.

"Anyway, we really have to be goin'. Claire?"

Claire nodded before shaking hands with Alec and hugging Zara. “Last night was a wonderful service. Thank you for the invite and enjoy your honeymoon."

"You're looking a little more red than usual, boss," Zara whispered through gritted teeth as her cheek touched Claire's.

Pretending not to hear her, she replied, "I'll see you in two weeks, ok?"

"Have a safe drive, guys. Look out the road. The employees here warned us about street racers and hitchhikers." Alec reminded Owen, clapping his shoulder as a final farewell.

"I already got your bags in the car," he confirmed when they made their way outside and into the driveway.

"I thought we're having breakfast?" Claire put on her sunglasses as they walk to her car. Her hand trying to grasp for her keys in the bag.

"We are. Just not here. Keys?"

Claire loved the city, with its bustling and improved lanes but she cannot deny it in herself to enjoy a little rural sightseeing once in a while.

For the past half hour, Owen drove through nothing but forest trees and winding roads. They were heading towards the mountain from the looks of it. At several points during their drive, she asked where they were going, to which he just smiled, pulling random facts about the old shrines and shrubs of plants they had passed. It didn't take too much effort to talk, Claire thought. She answered and nodded when he was talking sense and argued and glared when he was being flirty and cocky.
Eventually, the endless orchard of wilderness all slimmed down to a wooden lodge held over the lake by thick logs and steel, with a thicket of trees surrounding it; the words "Johnny's" sculpted on the signage.

The rich smell of pine filled her senses when they entered the lobby, candelabras decorated the high ceiling supported by huge trunks of trees at the sides. For walls, the lodge combined a great deal of stone and wood, providing coziness and warmth. Tables and chairs scattered on the laminated wooden floors and at the end of the room were a wide glass entrance leading to the deck of umbrellas and outdoor dining. Although packed with couples, families with their strollers and servers and their food trays, it was still a serene and amiable sight.

"You ever been here?" he asked her, rubbing the back of his neck.

His shyness almost made Claire smile. She shook her head as they head over the reception desk.

"We used to go here. A family friend owns this place"

A voice boomed out before they could approach the platform, making them turn. A female in a ruffled blouse and pencil skirt whose blonde wavy hair was in a low ponytail, shouted over the soft ballad music, "Is that Owen Grady?!"

"Hey! How are you doin' Lex?" He hugged her tightly that her heels left the floor. Claire's eyes darted back and forth between the two.

"It's so good to see you!" The woman's attention now fell on Claire. "You brought someone! Hi!"

"Claire this is Alexis Murphy, she and her brother, Tim now own the place. Lex, Claire Dearing."

"Hi. Nice to meet you. You have quite a view here." Claire complimented and gave her a polite smile.

"Thank you, Claire. Let me escort you to Owen's usual table."

"That's not necessary Lex, don't want to keep you from anything."

Lex waved her hand at him. "Nonsense Owe. This way."

Claire walked at Owen's side, not wanting to get in between them. She stood up straighter when his hand resumed its position at the small of her back, his steps falling with her.

The radio in Lex's hand kept cracking but she paid no attention to it as the two friends chatted pleasantries.

"Here you are." she led them outside the deck, and Claire thought the mountain views couldn't get any more beautiful.

Lex sat them at the secluded two-seater table on the east balcony. "I'll make sure everything is great before they hand it to you guys. I hope you'll like it here Claire."

"Thank you. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Tell Ed I said hi." Owen leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"I will." Lex beamed cordially at them before she called for a waiter on her radio and left.
"You and Alexis seem pretty close." Claire finally said as she reached for the menu.

"I guess. My mom was best friends with Lex's mom and...at some point, we thought we have to be as well..."

"What do you mean?"

"We dated for a couple of years." He informed her casually.

A little shock from this information, Claire peeked over the laminated list to look at him. He was bobbing his head and pursing his lips in tune with the music coming from the outdoor speakers as his eyes skimmed the menu before him.

"Yeah? What happened?" She probed in the laziest tone she could muster, eyes stayed on the same letter on the menu.

"We were both young and still trying to figure what we really wanted. When I did know and decided to join the Navy, she was strongly against it. That was it. But we parted in great terms though."

She nodded in reply and yet unable to understand the small twinge of envy that settled on her stomach.

A happy-looking male waiter in his checkered uniform, big round glasses and notepad came for their orders, "Morning folks, what can I get for you today?"

Nature resonated with laughter, endless conversations and clanking of utensils on ceramic plates as the morning went on. Claire and Owen were talking about his recent business trip to Chicago and what else happened in the company during his absence while he was away in business trips before it took a playful turn.

If anyone paid attention to the two-good looking couple seated under the biggest umbrella on the deck, the listener would hear the brag show of their recent accomplishments. Although it was entirely amicable on the man’s part, it can’t be said for the woman whose chance to prove herself hadn't entirely left her.

Their orders, which consisted of omelets, French toasts, and pancakes, arrived in the middle of an all-too-familiar discussion.

"-and I already set up a meeting with Erica Burnard on the 21st." she boasted while slicing her pancakes.

"Did you really?" a great sense of irony could be detected in his voice as he munched on this French toast, one elbow on the table.

"Don't sound so surprised," she replied, smiling like the cat that got the cream.

"All right, all right. But you didn't get the green light from Ian Malcolm, I did. How about that Miss Dearing?" pointing his own fork to himself, his smirk owning him.

Claire almost choked out the blueberries on her pancakes. Her mouth hung open. "You did? Did you get the resort? THE resort?!!"
"Don't sound so surprised. I'm signing the contract in Costa Rica in two weeks." He wiped his lips with the table napkin.

"Well..." She cleared her throat. "Looks like I taught you well. You're welcome by the way. But you're still, probably the smartest idiot I have ever met." closing her mouth on the forkful of her breakfast, she grinned at him.

"Wow. Wow. Only you can manage to compliment and insult me at the same time. How do you do that? Seriously?" He snorted, pushed his empty plate so he could rest his hands on the table.

"Did you ever consider that I might know a little more than you do?" His eyes glinted like rare jades, beautiful and tempting.

"I highly doubt that Mr. Grady but you're welcome to prove me wrong."

"Oh, I'm never the one to go down without a fight Miss Dearing. " Owen snickered, a humorous air in his whole demeanor. Claire got the sense that they weren't talking about the same thing anymore.

Inadvertently, an incessant ring interrupted their peaceful morning.

Both adults reached for their phones. When she realized it was not hers, she put her phone down.

"Lowery." Owen excused himself by holding up one finger. He walked at the far end of the deck, far from anyone's ears.

She studied him as he talked on the phone. She wasn't aware that she was paying particular attention to his lips. Not until Owen winked at her. She hurriedly looked the other way.

Claire observed her surroundings. To quote him earlier, it was "a beautiful change in view." And she agreed. The meadow encircling them were lusciously green; the lake bathed with the golden hue of the morning sun as a swarm of colorful butterflies and white seed pods of dandelions danced in the crisp air around them. Feathered-animals continued their harmonize songs in their nesting trees that kept dancing as the wind blows. The people around them were deep in their own conversations with big bright smiles on their faces. Claire could see the children playing and running on the shallow part of the water, their high-pitched shrieks, and laughter distinct to her ears while their parents were on standby, with their towels on the rough sand.

When her sister got married, the thought of having a family of her own became an idea, a what if. It bothered her at the time. Moreover, when her sister had her first child. But due to the lack of- shall we say- a foeman to match her steel, she shrugged it off, forgotten, like a few bad decisions she had had. Instead, she worked hard and made herself perfect; so high above the ground no one can touch her nor bring her down.

On the lake ahead, near the buoy, she saw two snow-white swans paddling on the peaceful water and their three baby swans following them. Claire felt her lips stretch into a smile as she watched them with fascination.

"I remember when my late husband used to look at me like that."

Claire pivoted on her chair and saw an old woman at the nearby table, looking at her. She was wearing a white blouse, capri pants and a hat that covered most of her hair, gold rings circled her long, wrinkly fingers; her smile as regal and radiant as her ebony skin. Although her table had two finished plates on it, she was sitting alone.
"Excuse me?"

"Your boyfriend, over there. He sure is quite a catch. How long have you been together?" She pointed her cane at Owen who just turned his back on them.

"Oh no. We're not... He's not... We're not together." Claire amended, shaking her head.

"You're not?" The woman rested her hands on the cane, her body now fully turned towards Claire.

"No, we just work together."

"Mmm-mmm. Shame. You make one beautiful couple," The lady's soft eyes regarded her.

She didn't know what to reply without insinuating she was implying something. "Uhm...How long were you married?" she began cautiously, trying an idle conversation with the stranger.

"I was married to the same knucklehead for 57 years before he had a cardiac arrest."

"I'm sorry." She sympathized and added, "That's a long time. I've never met anyone whose relationship lasted that long."

The lady offered her a lonely facial expression. "I'm sorry for that, love."

"No, don't be."

"Can I offer you some advice though?"

Claire nodded.

"I learned that love, True love that is, isn't glamorous. Not like them books and movies. My husband and I would argue over the simplest, most mediocre things, but we're always a team at the end of the day. He has my back and I have his. That's what made it worth it." the old woman flashed her a smile, her eyes sparkling like she was envisioning a time past.

Not knowing what else to say, she smiled at the sweet elderly.

"Anyway, I've wasted your time long enough. My granddaughter's probably finished with her meeting." The old woman got up shakily with the help of her crane. Claire stood by her side, helping her up. "I'm sorry for being so bold."

"Not at all. It was my pleasure. I'm Claire, by the way."

"Jane." The woman covered both her geriatric yet smooth hands on Claire's in a soft grip.

“And Claire?” Before Jane exited the deck completely, she turned to her again and stated in a calm tone, “At least I hope you know that he likes you. You've got to be blind to not see that."

Claire watched her walk between tables before she was soon guided by a young woman. Jane pointed at her and waved. Claire waved back, mirroring her smile.

Not a minute too soon, when she sat in their table, Owen came back. A rather distracted one compared to his usual cool and I-got-this-shit-handled countenance.

Still, he attempted to tease her with a pained smile, "Look at you, making friends already."

Ignoring him, she asked for the second time today. "Is everything ok?"
"Yeah. You ready to go?" He assured though there was nothing assuring about the way he said it quickly, she thought.

The car ride from the lodge had been filled with heavy and troublesome silence. It was suffocating. Claire glanced back at him from time to time, making sure that he wasn't asleep.

"Spill it out, Owen, I'm not stupid." she exasperated when she had enough.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about." He looked at her swiftly before going back on the curvy asphalt road.

"I know Lowery. He rambles like a kid on sugar when he's nervous. If it's something has got to do with the company, you have to tell me."

He stayed quiet for a little bit but let out a giant breath right before he answered her, "What happened to that employee?"

She blinked at him. "What do you mean? Who?"

"The guy from financing who got fired. The one who shouted at you."

Oh. "You mean Mr. Nedry? That was a couple of months ago."

"Yes. What happened?" He quipped and she could tell he was annoyed for some reason.

"I wasn’t the only one who noticed it. His team kept rerunning the numbers before they mentioned it to me. They were afraid of him, I think. So I checked onto it and I found a number of discrepancy values and lack thereof on his reports.

"And?"

Claire considered him for a minute and took into account how he clenched his fingers around the steering wheel, his jaw and eyes bleak with silent hostility.

"When I try to confront him for it, he insulted me."

"What did he say to you?"

"The same thing they always say." she was cut off when three cars whizzed past them, their engines roared in breakneck speeds, making Owen blazed the horn in earnest.

"And what was that?" Owen insisted.

"Does it matter? I don't see the point of entertaining you with it." Claire couldn't see the relativity of all his questions and sudden curiosity about the company gossips; she didn't picture him as someone partial to it.

"And what about the assessment reports he submitted?" He honked the car horn again when another flying car flashed on their right. "These damned kids," he muttered.

"Antonio is still validating it when I checked up on it Friday. He told me he’s gonna drive his kid to the hospital. He was kind of, in a rush."
"He said that?"

"Yeah. I didn’t even know he had a kid. But where are we going with this?"

She saw Owen paled, his knuckles went an ugly color of yellowish white as he choked the steering wheel.

"What's going on Owen?" nervousness seeping on her every nerve.

"Tell me this. How long he's been our Head Finance officer?" he voiced with gritted teeth.

"3 years? Give or take a few months. You're making me nervous. What's going on, Owen?"

He exhaled an anxious and hurried breath, "Zia wasn't just a distraction. We studied Behavioral studies together. Her focus was on Human Psychology and she was the best among us. She worked with me in the Navy both as an assistant surgeon and Psychologist. After I found out about Mills, I had the feeling there was still more to it because it wouldn't be possible for Mills to pull this stunt alone—"

Her mouth parted in disbelief. "You hired Zia as a private investigator?"

He nodded. "Zia just found out about Nedry this morning and you confirmed it. But it turns out, he has another accomplice. And thanks to your little information, I think I might have figured out who's the other one."

"What?"

"Claire, Antonio doesn’t have any kids. He became a barren at 16. He told us this during the lunch meeting with the Chinese. He divorced his wife because of that. So, if miraculously he managed to bring up a child in a span of a week..."

"He’s lying.” Claire mumbled, outrage from the confession.

"The only way Nedry could have covered his tracks was if he had someone backing him up—"

"-And as the one incharge of our Finances, he's responsible for all our financial statements." she finished for him, not believing her own ears. Yet somehow, it all made sense. The unfinished and late, documents and all the stalling. "I have Antonio's past reports for the last two years back in the office."

"Do you mind if I drop myself there first?"

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm coming with you.” she fired up, strength in will clear on her whole composure.

He hesitated for a second but his face eventually dimpled as he gave her a side-swept glance, "Yes Ma'am."

There was a lace of amusement in the way he had said it and Claire's smirk replaced her sullen face. "Then you better step on it."

But no sooner she had said it, she heard a sharp, banging noise; a wrecking sound of metal hitting metal. Something made the car propel forward with a violent tug.

Her seatbelt restrained her from hitting the dashboard with a deadly blow.
Another earth-shattering force from their left side.

Her head hit the window with a loud and vicious thud that she saw stars in her vision.

"Claire!"

She had never heard Owen sounding so helpless.

An ear-splitting screech.

The smell of burning tires.

She wanted to call him but she can't speak.

The trees off-road got closer.

Birds lost their song.

The car spun around and around.

The sun turned grey.

She was getting dizzy and her head hurt.

The car stopped spinning.

A cloud of smoke.

A dead engine.

Silence.

Chapter End Notes

*hides behind hand* I'M BACK from a bad case of writer's block.

The reason why the men in Grady Corp "suddenly lost their interest" (mentioned in the previous chapters) in Christianne/Zia was they learned she was lesbian, and Claire, being kind of aloof with the rest of their staff was the only person who had no idea. I felt like I needed to point that out. If you need other clarifications, feel free to comment or message me.

Also, each chapter contains hints on what will happen in the future chapters, so I hope you'll stay with me. Tell me what you think about our two idiots, who finally had their first date (kuno) and that little "snippet" in the end. This story lives for your reviews!

Please correct me for any grammatical errors or anything. Thank you so much for reading. :)
Chapter Notes

This is the longest chapter yet. I hope you enjoy this one. :) -j

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is.**

-German Proverb

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When Claire was young, she learned a very important trick.

Mrs. Emily Mcdonough's class decided to join the Advance Spelling Competition. Being the top of her class, 8-year old Claire Dearing was the representative. She wrestled with five thesaurus books for a month. Broke library rules by overstaying before and after school hours in preparation. Karen, her elder sister worried over her and watched as she turned to the next page and gobbled her chips over the dining table. Her main reason? Claire wanted to impress her parents who will skip work to see her compete.

The night before the competition, Claire felt an unpleasant sensation after she peed. She didn't wake Karen (who was snoozing off the twin bed opposite hers) nor stir her parents in the other room. She strode in the kitchen, got the step ladder and snuck the bottle of Advil in her pajamas. She was grateful that the ache dulled right before she fell asleep.

On the day of the event, even after emptying the bottle of syrup, the pain became sharper. Even so, Claire, ever goal-oriented that she was, convinced herself that it didn't hurt. She smiled through her anguish, delivered the correct words and won with a landslide.

Everyone was ecstatic and proud of her. She was so over the moon that it almost masked her discomfort. It was when they arrived home that Claire broke. She fell down, clutched her abdomen, and finally admitted the excruciating pain she was in. The Dearings rushed her to the hospital. They found out that she developed a Urinary Tract Infection because of the junk food she ate the past few weeks. It wasn't life threatening so the doctors allowed her to go home after a few hours.

That night, She was relishing her victory, unable to go to sleep. The hurried whispers of their parents down the hall were also distracting her awake.

Lately, Claire noticed that their parents only talk to each other when she and her sister were not
around. They would stay silent over the family meals and activities. Karen told her not to make a fuss about it since Claire's birthday was coming up. Their parents were being secretive so they wouldn’t ruin her surprise.

An ounce of hallway light lit the room when her father peeked in.

"Why are you still awake, champ?"

She sat up, adjusting the brightness of her lamp. "I can't sleep."

"Does it still hurt?"

"She shook her head. "Not at all, Dad."

"Then why are you awake? Something wrong?" Her dad opened the door and walked to her.

"No. I was having a flashback how I won by spelling, 'bourgeoisie'."

"Of course, you do." The man laughed out loud.

"Shush! keep quiet, Karen's sleeping. She'll get mad at if you woke her up." Claire hissed, glancing at her sister's hunched back.

Ron Dearing chuckled, pressed a finger to his lips and knelt by her bed "You're right. Shush."

"Mrs. McDonough told me I can compete with the older kids for the next competition. She said I have a good chance of winning again." She whispered, pride swelling in her voice.

"You have to get better first. Did you drink your medicine?"

Claire nodded.

"Good girl. You were amazing today Claire-bear and I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, daddy. I'm gonna win next time as well." She giggled with a promise.

"I'm sure you will. But I'm not talking about the spelling bee." pinching her pink nose.

The thick fringe covered the frown on her forehead. "You’re not?"

Mr. Dearing shook his head, "I'm prouder that you were able to hold yourself up there. I'm sorry sweetie that we didn't notice. But why didn't you tell us?"
Claire shrugged in her night gown. "I wanted to compete. But it hurt right after the third round. But I wanted to win. Mrs. Mcdonough told me that she'll give my classmates 5 points in the exam if I won. So, I focused on that. I told myself that it didn't hurt so bad that I believed it."

Her dad stifled another laugh and kissed her forehead. He knew Claire was smart, both his daughters were, but his youngest might grow up as someone else's challenge yet. He hoped he'd be still allowed to see it. "Oh, sweetie. You're gonna be a handful."

It was that day Claire learned that the mind and the heart could be easily tricked. It could be easily persuaded and manipulated of an emotion you ought not to feel. That mindset helped her a great deal in life but as a consequence, it catalysed her as the antagonistic woman she was today. She was intimidating, controlled, impassive and focused.

But now, for the first time-in a very long time- she couldn't do it; Claire couldn't numb the feeling of distraction. The grip she built her entire life loosened, thus an unexplainable emotion. An emotion threatening to shake her, her beliefs and her world apart.

She was back to work after three days of hospitalisation. The doctors had advised her to take it easy due to the concussion she sustained from the accident. It wasn't anything serious and only required ample rest. Yet, they couldn't say the same for her companion.

What made it worse were the ubiquitous questions people were asking her. As if she needed another reason for him to occupy her thoughts. It was disconcerting, a daily reminder of the nightmare she was having a hard time waking up from.

The environment in the office was bleak. One can feel the waning distress and worry in the air; the laughter and chatters ceased to almost nothing. The shades drawn as if its occupants were afraid of the sun. The air-condition blew colder air still. It felt and looked like... well, an office. Whereas before, it resembled a happy gathering among friends.

Claire stared at the vase of fresh bouquet given to her by her staff. It was on the center table of her sitting area, a Welcome Back card hanging between the green stems. She never liked flowers but she was too exhausted and distracted to refuse a simple act of kindness.

In front of her, seated on the leathered armchairs were two business-clad FBI agents. Claire couldn't remember their names but she disliked the one on her right. He must have thought that the mustache gave him a more mature look (it didn't). He had a smug appearance and a faint scar on his left cheek, making him appear more distrustful than he already was. His patronizing attitude didn't go unnoticed by Claire's peers. The other one sitting opposite him looked kinder. He was somewhere between his 30's, has curly brown hair and a calm face.

Claire was on the edge. Her composure on the brink of thin ice that one un-calculated move, she knew she would lash out.

Zara and Lowery, who never left her side since that day, were already looking at her with woe expressions.

"What do you remember Miss Dearing?"

"Haven't we been through this before? We talked with the police a few days ago." Zara answered for her.
Claire offered her a thankful smile. She owed Zara her life. Both of them. Zara and her husband delayed their honeymoon after the accident. Leaving Claire with a huge feeling of guilt. But they both convinced her that they didn't mind putting it off for a month. It was an apt time for her full recovery and for Zara to finish her training her substitute.

"We're not talking to you; we're talking to her." The officer with the mustache replied, pointing his fingers at her and then Zara.

With an icy expression, she turned to him. "Officers, I appreciate what you're doing here. But as long as you're in our turf, you'll play by our rules and that includes respecting everyone in this room." She intimidated in a passive and domineering voice, squaring her shoulders. "Are we clear on that?"

"I'm sorry Miss Dearing." The quieter agent glanced at his companion who shrugged, nonchalant.

He continued, "At the scene, before it happened. What do you remember?"

Her flashbacks led to him, smiling. The left side of his face wrinkled as he told her one of his flirty jokes. That unsettling feeling on her stomach was back again. She wished nobody noticed the tremor passing through her as she began her tale again. "We were traveling back home and there were three cars speeding past us before it happened."

"Yes, 'Devil Road's known for illegal car races." Rude blonde-haired guy exhaled with a resigned air.

"In the middle of the day?" Lowery cut in.

"Yes, sir. Kids fly from different parts of town once a month for it."

The other guy informed, giving them a tolerant smile. She decided she liked this one better than sulky face on her right. "Do you remember the model or color of the cars?"

"The first one's Red with a black hood, the second one was white. I'm not sure about the models. But the third one was a grey Lamborghini."

"How about the cars that hit you?" The irritating man on her right scribbled her descriptions on the notepad.

Claire shook her head, disappointed at herself for remembering everything but that. "No. I don't remember."

"It's okay, Ma'am. Patients who survived car accidents experience a kind of trance when it happens. We don't expect you to remember that. Do we, Walters?" The kinder guy called down his companion. At least she wasn't the only one feeling that way about him.

"If you say so, Brennan." The rude blonde-haired guy, named Walters droned, looking as if he wanted to be anywhere else but here.

The soft-spoken man on her left, Brennan, turned to her again. "After that? Can you tell us what
"Claire! Claire! Please wake up! Open your eyes!"

Claire groaned, opened heavy eyes and blinked at him. Both his hands were holding her face, his eyes frantic and wild with fear. His face and pleas started to zoom into focus, tormented and desperate.

"Look at me, please. That's it. That's it." Owen breathed a sigh of relief and touched his forehead against hers. "Thank God."

"Owen." Claire mumbled, regaining her consciousness albeit slow. Her head felt like it was in half. There were grains of shattered glass everywhere; on the dashboard, her lap and feet. Owen was crouching beside her. The suicide doors on her side opened, facing the empty highway. The driver's side crushed against the trees.

Walters opened a folder and laid some pictures of her car on the table. The different angles showed the driver's side looking like a semi-crumpled tin can. A tree almost cutting the rear apart. "The report here read that Mr. Grady was driving the car back to the city. Upon investigation, after the cars hit you, Mr. Grady drifted the vehicle, spun it the other way around. So that it would be his side that'll receive the hardest impact. Is that true?"

Claire avoided the pictures, kept a straight face and looked ahead. "Yes."

"Are you hurt? Are you hurt anywhere? Claire, focus on me. Look at me. Eyes open Claire." He ordered, almost shouted at her, his hands on either side of her neck, pulling her face up at him.

"My head… it hurts… Are you ok?" she asked, noticing the cuts on his eyebrow and cheeks.

"You might have a concussion. I need you to stay focus ok? Don't close your eyes. You have to get up, can you get up? " Owen's scared eyes and hands frisking over her body for other wounds.

She nodded.

Owen released her seatbelt and helped her stand up. With cautious and slow movements, they got out of the rubble. She leaned to him as she waited for her world to stop spinning and her legs to stop wobbling.

"You're okay, I got you. I got you. Thank God." He repeated, putting his arms around her. She felt him kissed the side of her head before they ambled on the opposite direction, a few good feet away from the car. Claire kept an arm around Owen, and him around her shoulders. Both leaning against the other.

"We have to call someone. My phone slipped between the doors. Do you have yours?"
Owen pulled away to lean on the trunk of a towering maple tree.

Claire grabbed for the phone in her person and walked by the side road for a signal. After a brief and detailed call to 911, she left another call for Zara who cried on the phone.

"We'll be there okay. Hang in there. I'm so sorry Claire. Are you guys ok?" Zara said, her voice cracking with emotion.

"Yes, we're fine. A little disheveled but fine." She glanced back at Owen propped up by the tree. Terror washed over her like a cold sweat; her eyes dilated in fear.

She'd heard about this before; how the adrenaline kept people from freaking out during calamities. It must be running out because Owen was pale- sickly pale. His left arm dangled in an awkward way and the right side of his white dress shirt turned red with every exhale. He slid down and landed on the roots of the tree he was leaning against.

"Owen? Owen!" She knelt down in front of him, her phone forgotten on the rocky pavement. She pulled his shirt off his side and cursed. The skin sliced and blood flowed from the wound. She covered a shaking hand on it. "You're bleeding!"

The fresh glass cuts on his face had already dried, making his face appear grayer. But he smiled weakly at her, "And you're beautiful."

"You're an idiot! What do I do Owen? What do I do?" Claire couldn't contain the horror from her voice.

"I'm okay Claire." He breathed with closed eyes.

"No, you're not! What do I do? Let me... let me see if I have... if I have a first aid... first aid kit in my car. Or..or.. something... Wait here okay? Wait here." She stuttered, hands and teeth trembling. Claire whipped her head around the column of trees, the deserted highway for any sign of help. There were only them.

She stood up but Owen stopped her, his hand restraining her. "No. Stay."

Her knees scraped the rough ground as she knelt beside him again, panic stricken. She watched as his face turned an ashen color, their hands joining and covering his bleeding side.

"Keep calm. Help will be here soon." He asserted. His hand feeble and squeezing hers.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. No, no, no. Stay with me, ok? Eyes open, remember?" She cradled his face and shook it, horrified by his lack of reaction.

"It's gonna be ok, Claire." He took a sharp intake of breath before Claire saw him
"Then what happened?"

_Claire never felt more terrified in her entire life. "No, no, no! Owen!" She titled his head up and shook him again, with much force this time. "Wake up, you idiot! Wake up!" She couldn't hear anything except the ringing in her ears and the loud thunder in her chest. Unaware of anything besides Owen and how he was not moving, "Owen!" she shouted for one last attempt. With her knees still shaking, she stumbled where she dropped her phone and dialled Zara's number again. Her bloodied and quivering fingers smearing the screen. Tears were threatening to fall but she fought it._

"Ma'am?"

Claire hid trembling hands under the desk. It was taking all her willpower not to throw up any minute. Zara must have noticed her distress because she finished the story:

"Me and my husband came to the scene. She was on the ground beside him, trying to wake him, her phone in one hand. The cars that hit them had run off and left the scene with nothing but tire marks. We carried them to the car and met the ambulance halfway on the road. As we already declared a few days ago at the hospital."

Her assistant looked at her again and lied, "Claire, you have meeting with the Atty. Sanderson in ten minutes, do you want me to move it?"

"That's alright Ma'am, we uh, we got what we needed." Brennan interrupted as he stood up. Walter followed, arranging the crease on his coat.

"I'm sorry Ma'am that this has happened to you." Agent Brennan added, a consoling expression on his generous features. "Thank you for your time Miss Dearing."

Claire gave him a small, sincere smile. He gathered his things and turned to leave as Lowery opened the door for him.

"Miss Dearing. You're very lucky, Mr. Grady knew how to-" Walters muttered, offering his hand to her.

Something in her snapped. Lucky? Owen's been unconscious for days and she's lucky? Having enough of his impolite and insensitive attitude, she reprimanded him. "Excuse me?"

"Eric." Brennan warned his associate from the doorway.

"No, I didn't mean it like that-" regret replaced the smugness of his expressions earlier. If he didn't know he was stepping over a line before, he certainly did now.
"Sir, I trust you can find your own way out." Claire's voice, hard and brittle as she stood up, holding him down with a steady, irritated gaze.

"Here's the door, Walters." Lowery snickered from the door, opening it wide. The man walked straight out without another word.

"What a dick." He mumbled when he closed the door.

Claire reclined on her seat, noting the wall clock that read 3:03 pm. Time moved slower these past few days.

She exhaled heavily, "Zara, what else do I have today?"

"Claire." Zara started and Claire knew that tone. "You should take off early. Have a rest."

"Yeah. We'll handle this. Everything's taken care off." Lowery consoled, occupying the seat the officer vacated.

She shook her head. If she stayed in one place with no one and nothing to interrupt her solicitude, she's gonna lose her mind. She needed the distraction. Severely. "I'm fine. Where's Antonio?"

Claire told Zara, Lowery and Zia what she and Owen suspected before the crash. And like her, Zara was skeptical at first. But upon checking with the Financial, Legal departments and Zia's information, they were certain that the man was guilty.

"He's here. The jerk still had no idea. See, I knew there was something about him. I don't know why we shouldn't issue a warrant for him right now. I mean, that dickhead Walters might still be at the building." Lowery disclosed, jerking his thumb towards the door.

"It's good. Right where we wanted him."

"What's the plan here, Claire?" Zara asked, glancing at the both of them.

Claire knew that even the slightest change in the way they treat him, Antonio - meticulous as he was- would notice. "We wait for the moment. Right before Antonio messes up. We'll catch him right in the act. I don't want this to spread like wildfire before we got what we needed. Let's keep this between ourselves for now. How about Mills?"

"I saw him on the news last night. Apparently, he's in London, still fighting the cases filed against him. Our attorney says he's gonna be broke before the month ends." He said, optimistic for a second. Claire took in his appearance for the first time. Most days, he wouldn't wear a tie and his shirt untucked and wrinkled but now, he actually made an effort. He even cleaned the beard she'd been ordering him to trim. But, the dark bags under his eyes and hunched, restless posture let him down.

"We have to keep an eye on them. Lowery, do you think Zia will be ok with that?"

"Claire, please. The woman likes creeping up on people. She'll do it." He assured, resting his hands behind his head in a lazy manner."Speaking of the devil, where is she?"

"She's at the hospital. I forgot to tell you, Claire. She told me to tell you in case you need her." Zara
On a normal week, the concern and sensitivity from the people around her would be brush-offed. It would have been too much for the Claire Dearing who refuses to get help or need people. But now, due to the circumstances, she found their presence comforting. Well, almost.

"And... Owen?" She lowered her eyes, bracing herself for the bad news or lack of progress. Since her discharge, she hadn't visited him yet and to be honest with herself, she didn't want to see him. Not like that. Not with tubes and wires going in and out of his mouth and chest. A stitched-wound on his right brow. The plaster on his left wrist, a neck brace and wide bandage wrapped around his torso.

"Good news is they transferred him from the ICU. His house caretakers were there when I visited yesterday." Lowery sighed. "I'll drop by later. The art department's tagging along too. Wanna come, Zara?"

"Yeah sure. Alec wanna visit too."

"They have the best doctors there. I wouldn't worry about him." Lowery cinched, scratching the stubble on his chin. "He's a stubborn piece of ass and according to science, stubborn people tend to live longer than others." But he didn't sound certain at all.

_Claire could hear the ringing of her ears again and the raggedness of her breathing. Could hear the despair in his voice as he called out her name over and over again. She wanted to comfort him, tell him she's alright._

_Her head searched around the shadows, trying to look for the only glimmer of hope in this grey space of nature. She found him. But something was wrong. He had his back up against the tree. His body limped, his beautiful, green eyes staring at her lifelessly and the ghost of her name still on his lips. She rushed to him as tears streamed from her eyes like waterfall. But she was late. She was too late._

"Owen!"

Claire rose from the bed with a start. Sweat dowsing her forehead, her hair and pillows; sheets tangled and twisted by her hips and feet. Instinctively, she scanned the room, expecting him to be there.

The gaping black hole in the pit of her stomach came back again when she realised that he wasn't there. No Owen bugging and driving her nuts at the office for five days now. No Owen flirting with her. No Owen because he saved her, because he put himself in harm's way protecting her. She clutched the damp blanket around her. As if it will help her calm the prickling feeling on her skin or her heaving chest. She was alone, miserable and shivering inside the four walls of the room. And she could not get rid of the thought that he was, too.
It didn't take long for her in deciding her next actions. Grabbing her keys, phone and hoodie over her sweatpants, she was out the door in a heartbeat.

If one would ask the staff of St. Anthony's Hospital, Nurse Cora Lynde was as warm as the sun on the first day of spring could be. But to herself, Nurse Cora considered herself a realist and hard-to-please person.

As the head of the nurse's department, it was her sole duty to look out for everybody. And by that, she meant everybody. From sickest patient to the maintenance guys roaming around. Nobody could escape her notice. Nobody dared. That was until one late night from a week ago.

Ever since she saw her tripped out of the elevator and into the hospital suite of one named Owen Michael Grady, the stoic lady nurse has been watching her.

"The stubborn redhead is back again." She announced to her younger colleagues who chuckled at her.

"Good luck trying to tell her to go home again tonight, Nurse Cora." One said.

"Oh, I wouldn't waste my time, not tonight." She bubbled with an amused grin, noticing the now-familiar woman open the door of Room 10A from the nurse's desk.

The visiting hours were only restricted to parents, siblings and spouses. After checking with her and finding out she wasn't either of those, Nurse Cora persuaded the woman to go home. Night after night, she tried in vain but the redhead wouldn't budged. Naturally, she gave up.

She found herself curious on who would get this woman so devoted in keeping company every night. And why does he have a lot of different visitors and why would the hospital director pay him a visit?

The name looked and sounded familiar, though she couldn't point out where it was she saw it. Until, she passed by the volunteers' bulletin board and had a moment of recognition. There was no doubt that this was the same Owen Grady, minus the wires attached to his body. It was Halloween night and all the kids wore their costumes on their wheelchairs and IV stands. The man was kneeling amidst the group, a bright, healthy grin on his rather handsome face. He seemed like a great, genuine guy. No wonder, he has a lot of different visitors, she mused to herself in wonder as she studied the collage.

With queer interest, Nurse Cora would watch the woman through the glass partition. The redhead's routine was quite simple. She would arrive at the ward at exactly 9pm every night. She would read, sit, sleep on that uncomfortable armchair beside the patient. And by 5:30 in the morning of the following day, she would leave.
Nurse Cora felt the woman's discomfort as she slept on the standard, hospital armchair. Before the woman arrived on the next shift, Cora (with the help of the other nurses) changed the chair for a more comfortable one. The redhead must have noticed their efforts because she left take-outs on the nurse's desk the following night.

Nurse Cora entered the room for her rounds and felt her heart thawed a little on the scene before her.

The patient has been stable for days now. The wires no longer attached to his body but he was still unconscious. The redheaded woman was sleeping beside him. She was lying on one bent elbow, the left side of her peaceful face within view. One pale and thin hand disappeared inside his hospital gown, right where his heart was.

The nurse considered not waking her up and disrupt the almost-perfect picture. But it's almost time for her to leave and the woman would be late for whatever she might be late from. She walked over to them and tapped the her awake. "Miss, miss?"

The woman stirred, but didn't wake. Instead, she snuggled closer to the man's shoulder. Her hand crawling to the side of the man's neck, sighing with contentment.

Cora paused, smiling for all she's worth before she continued with her task. Whispering a little louder this time. "Miss, wake up. It's almost morning."

Finally, the woman blinked sleepy green eyes at her. She startled, jumping on her chair. Her whole body instantly jerked towards the patient, eyes flashing with panic.

Cora immediately calmed her down, "Hey, everything's alright, sweetie. He's fine. I'm sorry I woke you."

She sat up straighter and retracted her hand. "Good morning. I'm sorry. What time is it?"

"It's 8 minutes to 5:30."

"Oh. I should be going." But she made no move from her chair.

Nurse Cora listed his vitals on her clipboard when the woman interrupted, her voice small,

"Why won't he wake up?"

Cora knew the woman wasn't around when the doctors gave their diagnostics. It was always the elderly couple and Indian man in presence. The nurse gave her a compassionate and assuring smile.

"He's in a trauma, dear. Sometimes when people hit their head, they suffer unconsciousness for days. But I can tell you that he's gonna be okay. He's been responding very well to his treatments. He's going to be ok. You have a fighter, there."

The woman sighed and nodded "I noticed you're the nurse checking up on him every night…"

"Yes, that's correct." She stood at the end of the bed, tucked the clipboard on her side and regarded the worried woman.

"I'm leaving in a few days for a business deal, one I can't get out off. This is asking too much and I don't know if this is against hospital regulations but can I leave you my number? In case…he woke
Nurse Cora smiled at her timidity. "Of course."

The lady wrote her number on a scratch of paper and handed it to her. "Thank you so much for what you're all doing here."

"Oh, no worries. This is us thanking him for all the charity he gave the hospital." Cora beamed, pocketing the piece of paper inside her scrubs.

"Yeah, he does that from time to time." She gazed down the patient, her face blooming as she spoke before she stretched a slender hand to introduced herself. "I'm Claire Dearing by the way."

"I'm Cora. Nice meeting you, Miss Dearing."

"Call me Claire."

"Claire. Right, well, I'll leave you to it. Don't worry, I'll keep you posted." She said, tapping the pocket of her uniform.

"Yes. Thank you. I still hope I didn't get you into trouble. With me staying and all." She turned a telltale shade of red.

"Oh, not at all." Cora chuckled.

Even though she was lacking a good night sleep, her smile brightened her face. "And I never personally thanked you for the chair. Thank you again, Cora."

"No worries. I'll see you tonight, Claire." Cora walked away and only turned to close the door when she saw Claire standing beside him. Her lips pressed on the man's forehead. With closed eyes, she murmured against his skin,

"Please. Wake up."

She was nearly done.

If she could just decide whether bringing a blazer to a Central American country a wise decision. Claire took a sip of water as she studied the luggage full of clothes on her bed. Grappling with the idea if leaving the country was another wise decision too.

On top of her desk, her phone vibrated and she almost caught her feet on the carpet trying to get it.

"Zara!" She answered breathlessly.

"Claire, are you ok? Where are you?"

"I'm fine. At my place. Packing. Why?" She replied, popping her foot up to massage the toe she hit.
"I just called to remind you that your flight's in 5 hours tonight, Delta Airlines, Business class, Gate 3B."

She grabbed the ticket from her nightstand, reading it, "Yes, I got it. Thank you."

"Are you done packing yet? Anything else I can get you?"

"All good. Thank you, Zara." and added "It'll only be a couple of days. Once Malcolm has signed the contract, I'll be on the next available flight back home."

"No, take your time. This is an important deal. Besides, Lowery and Zia are here, keeping Antonio and Mills in check. You don't have to worry about anything."

She hesitated, unconvinced. "Ok. But if something goes wrong, you have to tell me right away. I don't care if you woke me up from sleep. You call me ok?"

"Yes boss. Oh, and your hotel and car rental are all ready at the resort. A resort representative will pick you up at the airport and go with you in the ferry."

"Great. Thank you again, Zara." She balanced the phone between her cheek and shoulder as she put her boarding pass inside her purse.

"And one more thing." she could hear the excitement in her voice.

"What's that?" Her eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

"Mind the door."

Before she could question her any further, Zara hung up, "Have a safe flight, Claire!"

She didn't have time to think about it because the doorbell rang. The sound vibrating from all the corners of her apartment

Claire was never the clingy kind. She made sure that her feelings were always kept at bay. But she had been through so much this past week that once she opened the door, she flung herself at her guest.

"I'm so glad to see you." Claire croaked, her voice breaking as her arms tightened around her visitor.

"I came in as soon as I can. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry Claire. Are you ok?" came her visitor's reply, confounded by Claire's sudden vulnerability.

No. But she nodded, nonetheless.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be somewhere else?" She pulled back and released her embrace, leading them to her couch in the living room.

Karen Mitchel (recently Karen Dearing again) plopped down the sofa and stretched boot-clad feet on the ottoman. The light blue eyes she inherited from her mother took in her younger sister. Mindful of the change in her composure. The youngest Dearing moved to the kitchen to prepare them refreshments and snacks while Karen made herself comfortable. "We're supposed to have lunch today, remember?" she reminded her, smiling.
Claire's eyes widened in realization. "Shit." The pitcher in her hands made a cluttering sound against the solid surface.

"Are you losing your touch, baby sis?" Karen smirked, tucking her leg below the other leg, her fingers stroking her hair.

"I'm sorry, I forgot. It's just, there's been a lot going on lately." She handed her the glass, feeling dreadful that she stood up her own sister.

"Yeah, I know." Karen took a sip from her glass and placed it on the coaster her sister provided. "No worries though, I had an emergency lunch meeting with an old client."

Karen was working as a general practice lawyer in Wisconsin before and after she married. And only came to visit whenever she has to attend conferences and meet up with her firm's clients. The Dearing sisters rarely see each other (with the youngest one's inclination to her independence). Countless of times, Claire had postponed their dates. Though, none if it were intentional, of course. Claire loved her sister, nosiness and all.

"I'll make it up to you. I swear it this time. I'll clear my schedule. How long are staying?"

"Two days. Then I'll be back next week for another conference." Karen replied, removing her footwear.

"I don't know why you think you can't stay here. I have room." Claire suggested, looking around to emphasize her point.

Karen knew her sister and she's probably the best at it. She knew how Claire treasured her aloneness. That even herself -Claire's only sister- knew her distance and limitations. Still, Karen respected her so much for it. So, if Claire was offering her precious solitude for a little company. her younger must be beside herself.

"Are you ok now? I mean, after what happened?" Karen began, edging closer to her. "Talk to me Claire-bear."

"I am."

Karen pursed her lips, raising her eyebrows at her sister's. An unspoken, Oh, really?

With a defeated air, Claire let out a deep sigh and summarized the past days. There was no point in getting out of this one, so she told her sister everything. Skipping the part where she'd been sleeping for the past week lest her overexcited sister rub it the wrong way. Which her sister always did.
Karen consoled her and almost lost it when she heard Mills' name again. She listened with perked ears. She noted (with a happy thought) that the Claire she grew up with was still there but something has changed.

When their parents divorced, it took a huge toll on both of them—especially Claire. Her sister became aloof, persistent in keeping everybody out and away from arm's reach. Trying to prove to anyone that she can bear and solve the world's problems all on her own.

And yet, the Claire in front of her now reminded her when she was 10 and Claire, 8. All russet-colored pigtail braids, oversized glasses, dusty freckles and dirty hands. Karen decided she missed and liked this version more.

"So now, I have to go to Costa Rica because of that deal. I'm figuring out whether to bring a jacket and… Why are you smiling like that?" Her face furrowed with bewilderment at her sister.

"You like this, this Owen." Karen teased, pushing Claire with her pointer finger.

"What? No!" She frowned, disapproving. "Seriously? That's what you get from what I said?"

"Well, I knew most of it from reading the papers and Zara. But they definitely left out the juicy bits and hearing you talk the way that you did about him is…very intriguing."

"I don't like him." She hissed. "Besides, he's my boss." Finally saying it out loud, made her frown even more.

"Why would that stop you?" Her sister arched her groomed eyebrows at her. "Unless-"

Claire felt her neck grow hot and focused on something rather than her sister.

"-It didn't… Why Claire Dearing!" Karen squealed, eyes gleaming with pride and joy. "You had sex!"

"I don't see the relevance of any of this." Claire recuperated in poor attempt. Neither admitting nor denying anything.

"You did sleep together! You sly fox!" Her sister cupped a hand on her mouth, cackling.

"And you're overreacting." She squinted her eyes at her sister. The offer of letting her stay expiring by the minute.

"Because! My little sister deserves to be happy and have fun and have hot and kinky sex. I bet he's sexy. I know sex-aaaay when I heard it. So?"

"I have to finish packing." She stood up, uncomfortable where this conversation was going. Besides she needed to be at the airport an hour early. And drop by the hospital before that.
"I love this Owen already!" Karen followed her to the bedroom, a skippy beat to her every step. "Give me deets!"

"I've slept with other people before, you know." She pointed out, getting her heels from the walk in closet.

"I know but I bet not with one like him." Karen teased, peering at her from the bedroom doorway.

She scoffed as a reply.

"Am I right?" Karen winked at her, elbows propped against the doorway as she finally close the lid of her luggage.

"No." She sneered and avoided her eyes, stubborn through and through.

Thick layers of sunscreen and light blazer protected her sensitive and luminescent skin. The change in weather from clement to hot wasn't exactly disagreeable. The cobblestones and pavement were wet from the light morning rain. Thus, spoiling the early outdoor activities of some guests. A gust of wind emitted by the trees provided a fresh humid breeze among the throng of people going back and forth. A cloudless, azure blue sky ascended over them as the sun bathed the whole island in one golden halo.

Absent-minded Claire watched the crowd dressed in their swimming gears and bikinis. Her mind somewhere else other than the paradise she was currently in. She sat on the canopy stripped umbrella of a place called Margaritaville- a cocktail bar and the only less crowded place at this hour.

The meeting with the supervisors ended an hour ago. Meetings were a good, fair distraction. She thought, not for the first time. But with two hours to spare until the next one, Claire's anxiousness was back in overdrive. She checked her phone, laptop every now and then for a new email or phone call that might help her with all her worry. But with the time difference in the busiest parts of the world, she wasn't betting on it.

Zara's doing an exemplary job at being her assistant, as per usual. She's been updating her every now and then about the happenings at GC. All her emails, calls and messages already answered for. Leaving Claire with nothing else to do. "It's taken care of, we got this, Claire." was her assistant's reassurance. Lowery and Zia alternated calling her as well, keeping her up to date with Antonio.

Claire anticipated that one of them might mention something, anything about their CEO. None of them did. Until she finally asked Zia during her second day at the resort.
"Any news on... at the hospital?" She asked, looking at the loaded breakfast served before her. Her lack of appetite apparent.

"I spoke with the doctors and saw his chart this evening. He's looking pretty good, all his vitals are great and back to normal but they still can't say why he won't wake up. All the wires from his body removed. The resuscitator and everything. Only the heart monitor and IV remained. He's getting there, Claire. Slowly but surely."

On her third night, she sprung from the bed. Sweaty and out of breath. Clutching her heart as if to keep it from sprinting out of her chest. She had another dream of the accident and it ended up the same grave way it always did. She called Cora, the nurse she befriended, and asked him how he was. Much to her looming worry, the nurse told her what Zia said.

Maybe, she shouldn't have come. Maybe she could ask a representative to let Ian Malcolm know they could meet halfway the country. Have him signed the releasing papers entitling Grady Corp. as the new owner of Casa Cielo Resorts.

Snap out of it Claire! She repeated to herself. Focus. Breathe in. Breathe out. She only had three days left for all the orientations and legalization process. It couldn't be that bad.

"I hope this seat isn't taken."

A shadow fell in front of her table. Claire looked up to find a tall man. Silver streaks peppered his dark hair. A pair of hipster lenses rested on his pointed, roman nose and sallow cheeks. He had deep-set eyes and a wide, amiable smile. The man was wearing a sun visor, a floral button up shirt and pair of swimming shorts on his slender frame. He settled two glasses of what appears to be some kind mixture of something green and orange on the table in front of her.

"Ah, for a minute there I thought I'll trip. I can't spill these babies. I spent my entire morning on them. Wew!" He exclaimed, putting his hands on his hips. "You definitely look like the Claire Dearing everybody's been talking about."

Claire continued staring at the stranger.

"Oh! Where are my manners? I am Ian. Ian Malcolm." The man extend a hand to her as Claire stood up and gripped his hand.

"Mr. Malcolm. I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you. It's a pleasure.

"Please, it's Ian. Sit down, sit down." Waving his hands down for her to reoccupy her seat.

"Ah! So how was your stay so far? I trust my staff are attending to your needs?" He said, pulling
his drink towards him.

"Yes. Everything's great." Claire stated as she closed her laptop and started pulling out the papers from the meeting. "Your secretary showed me the satisfaction rates from the last two months and-

"No, no, no. I didn't mean that in a business sense. No." He chuckled. "I meant, are you having fun? Are you relaxing yourself?" He shook his shoulders, smiling again at her.

"Oh, uhm. Yes. I've never seen anything like it. The view from my room is amazing. Thank you again for that." she replied, finally taking in the flurry of activities around her. The verdant color of life with its picturesque landscapes and beachfront views.

Malcolm Land Group utilized a good ¼ size of the whole island to build a family resort and theme park. Right behind the lineup of restaurants and novelty stores was a village of tiny cottages. A hotel building erected opposite those villas for individuals who preferred modern living. It also boasted well-functioning park rides, infinity pools and gigantic slides.

Claire remembered that some of the board members at headquarters were hesitant. That was before Owen pulled up the numbers and persuaded them.

Knowing Owen, she knew he wasn't about the money when he decided to buy this land. And it took the beach-front view from her hotel room to prove her correct. It was then, Claire finally understood his profound love for nature. The island was paradise, a getaway. Perfect vacation and holiday spot. If only she could enjoy it.

"Well, we thought you might need a change in scenery." Ian happily sipped his drink.

"Grady Corp's gonna take care what you have here Sir. We're not gonna change a thing you might not be comfortable with. I'll make sure of it. Besides, everything is perfect the way it is." She promised, sincere with every word.

"Oh, I don't have a single doubt that. My godson knows what he's doing. Owen is his father son, I wouldn't expect nothing less. I heard great things about you too. This resort would be in good hands." He leaned on the backrest and crossed his legs, a hint of confidence in his voice.

"Your godson?"

"Yeah! Simon Masrani and I share the duty in wiping the dirt off his chin from time to time." Ian nodded. He was stirring his drink, trying to catch the slice of lemon that settled at the bottom of his glass.

"You mean, Owen? He's your godson?" She asked, leaning forward in her seat.

"Hmmm. I know right!" He chortled, his eyes blazing with humour. "I can tell you so many embarrassing stories about him to pass the time. Where is that boy anyway?"

The mere mention of him felt like someone kicked her in the stomach and stomp her in the chest. The root of her anxiety presenting itself once again. Of course, Ian never knew. How could he? For all she knew, this island deflects all kinds of negativity. Her heart broke a little that this innocent, gullible man didn't know what happened to Owen and the danger he was in.

"Is he coming?"
Claire paused. She watched him finish the rest of his cold drink in one long sip as she thought of a smooth way to break it to him. As gently as she could.

"Mr. Malcolm, I don't know how to say this but-"

"Oh! Oh! Brain freeze!" He shouted, tilting his head up and pressing the sides of his nose. Claire stared at him, gathering up the courage to talk about it again.

When he recovered, "Anyway, you two should come for the small staff party my wife's throwing tomorrow night."

"Mr. Malcolm, he isn't-" Claire choked, feeling as if a cotton has been stuck on her throat. "He isn't-"

"Why aren't you drinking? Drink! Drink! I made it myself." Ian repeated in a proud, singsong voice, pushing Claire's drink nearer her.

Maybe she really shouldn't have come. Maybe this really was a bad idea. She should have let Lowery take over. Suddenly, she can't breathe. Her mind clouding with worry, her hands got clammy. She gripped the armchair with white knuckles as she tried to ease her fast and shallow breaths. Claire looked at her idle phone, praying that somebody relieve her of her anxiety.

"...Which is why you don't wanna drink that." A deep, husky voice remarked from behind her. Making the little hairs on her neck bristle in familiarity.

She turned her head and felt her stomach did a somersault... jumped of a cliff... skydived off an airplane... plummeted down, down, down.

"Ian insists that he has killer bartending skills."

She let out an audible gasp and stood up abruptly. The metal made a protesting sound on the cement as she pushed it back. Her thigh hit the table with a sting and her hand landed on the table to support her shudder. Ian was looking at her as he sipped his drink, curious. Yet, she didn't care.

With one good hand, he dragged the woven bistro chair beside her. His dazed, green eyes never leaving hers, his lips in that upward smirk she pretended not to think about.

"Miss me, Dearing? Of course you did." Owen Grady greeted with terrible, obvious amusement.

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Chapter End Notes

die Angst is a German translation of Fear. I used Google translate on this. If there are any Germans reading this or anybody who knows how to speak German, correct me if, I’m wrong.

Ohhhhh!! Our boy is back! I bet you saw that coming? ;) as you may know by now, i’m not an angst writer, so I couldn’t bear it on myself to leave this chapter on a sad
note. Also, I love Jeff Goldblum. His character in Thor Ragnarok was the inspiration for this version of our beloved Mathematician. I hope you weren't confused with the timeline in this story.

I'm kinda hesitant writing a vulnerable Claire but thought to myself, give her a break. She almost died. I'm looking forward to Claire finally accepting her feelings. So far, I have no plans how to write it yet. I hope this chapter made sense.

Thank you so much for reading and your lovely comments of encouragement!!! Tell me what do you think of this one. Please, correct me for any errors or anything else I've missed. ;)
FIGHT or FLIGHT

The instinctive physiological response to a threatening situation, which readies one either to resist forcibly or to run away.
The day before

He’s screwed.
Ian Malcolm was standing by the window shed of his cabin, looking down at the indoor plants. Though the row of succulents in their terracotta pots was beyond saving, he watered them in vain. Still hopeful that they might revive themselves. Last year, His grandchildren had flown on the island for his birthday so they could give them these. Unaware of the hint their mom was telling them not to give 'Pops' another plant for his birthday. They were already low-maintenance plants, he thought to himself. And only but require a little sun and water and yet, he still managed to kill them. Then again, he could always blame the changing weather on the island. Although, he wasn't sure anyone would believe that since he had hasten the doom of a dozen of plants already.

There was nothing to loathe about the Costa Rican weather though. No matter how unpredictable it may be. For him and his wife, Sarah, who decided to live on the island, it was pure nirvana. The sun-drenched weather would basked the peak hours of the day but would pour rain and thunder after. Some days he thought the rain would never stop, some days it would be hot as the Sahara desert. Be that as it may, the business was still good.

They enjoyed lazy and quiet afternoon days such as this. There was something charming about... having nothing else to do. Well, besides arranging photo albums or in his case, drowning helpless house plants.

The harmonious hum of an old record was playing in the background when his phone interrupted his task.

*He smiled when he saw the caller ID. “Looky here, looky here. Am I supposed to call you ‘Sir’ now?”*

*“Hell no.” The person on the other line’s laugh vibrated on the speaker.*

*"Just so. I wouldn't 'Sir' a kid who used to eat mud because he thought it was chocolate.”*

*Another laugh echoed on the other line, “How are you, Ian?”*
“Splendid. Splendid.” he picked up the watering can and continued with his hopeless duty.

“Listen, I know I told you I’ll be there a week ago. I’m sorry I didn’t call you sooner. Something… uh came up. But I’ll be there as soon as I can. I just have to check on someone.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Where are you anyway? Why are you not with the lady who’s scaring my staff?”

“Claire?” He asked in a surprised, gruff voice. “She’s there?”

“Well, yeah. Been here for almost a week now. I still haven’t seen her though. Why does your voice sound like you ate sandpaper? You’re not starving, are you?”

He wasn’t always around the bay when the kid was growing up but Ian knew how Grady men were- having grown up with one. He knew Grady men never lose their composure. You could never hear them raise their voice or lose their patience. It would be a rare and rather elating opportunity for him when one fell out of that pattern. So, imagine Ian's sudden delight when the kid solidified his voice over the phone. “What the hell is she doing there?!”

“Well” he heard a shuffling in the background and the sound of something heavy dropping on the floor. “Where are you?”

“I’m calling from the hospital. They uh…just released me.”
Ian paused from his errand, his tone patriarchal and sober at once. Although the boy worked for the navy, survived near-death experiences, Ian knew nothing could ever wane his worry. He had treated the boy as his own at first look at his chubby little toddler legs. “What? Why? What happened?”

“I’ll tell you when I get there.”

Ian knew that was the end of the conversation. “Ok but are you sure you’re okay now?”

“Yes, yeah. Don’t worry. Thank you, Ian.”

“I’ll ready the helipad.” before he added, “and I’ll be making the refreshments.” A hint of playful anticipation in his tone.

“God. No.” Owen’s tortured chuckle rang on the line.

Ian cancelled all his appointments for the next three days to spend time with his best friend’s son. It was also a fitting time to welcome him as the resort’s new owner. He was not present when Owen’s plane landed on the hotel building’s helipad that morning. For he, as he said before, was making drinks.

He wasn’t a bad uncle. He was the cool one. That’s what he though when he, in a very subtle manner, gave Owen the drink. The drink he’s been prepping ever since this morning. Owen declined though. He said that because of his hospitalisation, he’s only permitted to drink water. Ian no longer insisted. With which Owen seemed relieved, not liking the sight of the bubbling liquid at all.

After their lengthy morning chat of the past events, Ian offered him a tour on their new spa rooms— if he wasn’t too tired. But Owen refused, saying he wanted to take a quick nap first. Ian then left him have his rest before calling his assistant to ask the whereabouts of a certain redhead.
She was everything they defined her to be. The woman, as described in those loud whispers, was keen, ingenious and confident in every way. From her fiery red hair up to the tip of her stiletto. Though, there was a certain uneasiness about her. He couldn't point out what it is. Until he saw it exponentially grow behind her eyes when the subject of their discussion finally presented himself.

Ian bit his straw as he looked at the two adults goggling at each other. Neither one backing down. Neither wanted to.

“Well, as entertaining as this is, watching you two gawk at each other like long, lost lovers. Do sit down children.” he interrupted.

One could only count the moments Claire Dearing was dumbstruck and speechless. And this -with the humid air around them standing still, her teary eyes on his- was definitely one of them.

Claire had never felt more life-altering relief her entire life. Like the weight of the entire world had lifted from her shoulders, carrying her to a cloud of bliss and safety.

Nor blinding, teeth-gnashing, headache-inducing, hair-gripping fury.

“We’re going to the clinic.” She demanded, breaking eye contact and gathering her things with trembling hands. Owen replied with a clever comeback but she didn’t hear him past the blare pounding in her feverish ears.

“I’m driving. Let’s go.” She said, earning another stubborn protest from him. She ignored him and managed a smile at Ian “It’s so nice to finally meet you. I’m sorry that we have to go.”

Ian beamed at her and she hoped that the nod he gave her was in understanding. “Please. Go, go. I’ll see you kids later.”
“Will you save my drink for me?” she asked, an honest request and saw his face light up at her appreciation.

“Oh, I will!” before he added, turning to Owen this time. “I’ll come by later at your place.”

“Claire-” Owen began again.

“Let’s go Grady.” She sneered with clenched teeth, still avoiding his eyes.

With her pulse racing like a freight train, she stomped out. As if digging her heels on the deck would help her sort out the emotions of both terror and anger. Her only focus and the only thing keeping her upright, as of the moment, was him. And how she needed him resting on a bed, safe and sound.

When she didn’t hear the footsteps behind her, she stopped and turned around. Claire met his weary eyes again and for the first time in over two weeks studied his appearance.

A two-week stubble had grown back, reaching the top of his neck and once again darkening his features. He lost a little weight around his cheeks as well, accentuating his chiseled oval face. The wounds he detained, had healed and were nothing but faded scratches around his cheeks. His brunet hair had grown, the edges curling underneath his cap. She remembered how it felt as her fingers combed through it one bad night at the hospital. She took comfort that the bandage covering his forearm was new and neat. And yet, the beige polo shirt he was wearing was thin enough to confirm her suspicions of a gauze underneath. She felt her fury returned and heightened, almost blurring her vision. Her insides were shaking but she still managed to say,

“Don’t make me say it twice, Mr. Grady.” Keeping it polite as possible for Ian’s sake.
“For heaven’s sake man.” Ian exclaimed with a universal 'Go' hand gesture.

Owen sighed and shuffled the hair on his nape. "See you later, Ian."

When she was sure he would follow, she turned her back again and fetch the car keys from inside her purse.

“Let me carry this for you.” He jogged beside her, tapping the strap on her shoulder.

“No.” She deadpanned, icy and furious still.

“Well then, let me drive. I can drive.”

Ignoring him, she marched across the street to where she parked the borrowed vehicle. Keys dug on the palm of her hand, her heels kept making dull, scraping noises on the pavement. These small, tedious noises prevented her from completely losing it and breaking down. Claire felt more than heard his footfalls when he came up beside her again to open the car door.

“Here, allow me.” he smiled like he did nothing wrong.

She glared at him and entered the car without another word.

They took a longer route to avoid the throng of people on the streets. She was grateful that Owen couldn’t bring himself to be his usual chatty self. It gave her a fair time to recompose herself and calm her nerves.
From the corner of her eye, she could see him staring out the window. He was smiling as they passed the boulevard crowded with people. He sighed as they passed the thicket of forest trees. He liked it here, she could tell. I mean, why wouldn’t he? The island shouted comfort and simplicity. Much like the ambience of that farmhouse he kept to himself deep and past the suburbs of the city. It reminded her of the morning he drove her after spending the night, which now felt like a lifetime ago.

The drive back to her stranded car was also quiet though it was nowhere near awkward. A part of her wanted to break the silence and word by word remind him that it mustn't happen again. Workmates should never sleep with each other. It was in the basic office etiquette handbook. It was inappropriate and most importantly against her better judgment. Though, a fainter and scarier part of her contradicted. But once and for all, she dismissed it upon noticing how he avoided her eyes when he dropped her off. She didn't need another affirmation that he regretted it but to admit that it didn't sting would be a lie.

"How are you?" Owen suddenly asked in the softest voice she ever heard him speak, bringing her back from her reverie.

She didn't reply and kept her focus on the road.

“Are you okay?” He initiated again in that soft voice of his.

A sudden, unfamiliar urge sprouted, burning her throat and making her eyes feel hot.

“Okay. I’ll talk... So, get this.” angling in his seat so he could face her. "I almost had a heart attack when I woke up.” he began, chuckling.

Her calmness shattered as she brashly stepped on the break pads. She felt her chest heaved again, the small space of the car threatening to suck her remaining oxygen. “You had a heart attack??” She shouted at him, fighting off tears.
“Figuratively! Figuratively!” He amended, throwing his palms up.

She closed her eyes and inhaled one deep breath. Offering but a moment to control her emotions.

“Claire, let me drive.” He offered again. She could feel his eyes on her.

“No.”

Her hands shook as she changed the gear to Drive again. If he thought him being here would dissuade her anxiety, he was wrong. They were nearing their destination when he spoke again, edging closer to the console. Closer to her.

"Claire, I'm s-

"We're here." she cut off. The car finally screeched to a halt, spraying earth everywhere.

The clinic center stood between the car race-track and a souvenir store. Tourists swarmed the sunny sidewalk at the other side as Claire locate a shaded spot. She found the space reserved for the PWD and parked there, earning another word of protest from Owen.

She slammed the door on her way out, cutting him off. Owen made no move not until she went to his side and opened the door for him.

“Up.” She ordered, one hand on the door to support her. Eyes focusing on the driver’s side.

"This is a total waste of time, Claire."
"Get out." she repeated, finally squaring her eyes with his.

"And I'm not disabled." he complained, offended.

"You will be if you didn't get out in the next minute."

He rotated on his seat and faced her again. The trace of mischievousness back again. "Aww. Your concern is so very touching Miss Dearing."

"Get out of the car Owen or I swear to God. I would drag you out myself."

He shrugged and winked at her. "I've always liked strong women."

She puffed out an impatient air.

"I've had enough of bandages and antiseptics. Besides, I'm fine. And they look worse than I do." He titled his chin on the kids with bleeding arms walking towards the door of clinic.

"You're not going anywhere unless someone checked you first." her patience already wearing thin.

"I don't need a doctor. The doctors and nurse at home wouldn't allow me to leave if they thought I wasn't-"

"Okay! Okay! Jeez!" he stepped down and out, looking scandalised. "I'm out. Now what?"

Claire grabbed the end of his sleeve and pulled him towards the pathway. Leaving him no choice but to fall with her every step. And certainly didn't notice the goofy smile plastered on his face. Saying - without words- how much he missed her.

For an hour Claire sat at the lounge area of the clinic and stared at the door where Owen disappeared into. She left a message for Nurse Cora to get the story straight from her, but the nurse wasn't answering her phone. When the door opened, she stood from her seat. It revealed an austere middle-aged asian man dressed in a laboratory white gown, a clip board in his hand. Behind him, an annoyed-looking Owen who was now sporting a shoulder and arm sling on his left arm.

The doctor was straight-forward and didn't waste time as he explained what Owen needed. He trailed behind her, silent as a mute as she surrendered the prescription to the pharmacist. His wounds needed thorough cleaning twice a day. One in the morning and during the evening. He had to take antibiotics, pain relievers and place a hot compress on his arm. All of which he had no problem with. Until, came the issue of the medical sling brace.

He didn’t protest when she asked him where he was staying and they drove in peace. Or, at least, she did. He was fussing over the sling on his arm, mumbling complaints until she had enough of it.

“Cut it out!” She reprimanded, breaking the silence and giving him another annoyed glance.

“It’s irritating and it’s gonna crease all my shirts.” He complained, loosening the wrap on his chest a little bit.
“Since when do you care about your clothes? You wear un-ironed and dirty shirts at the office for crying out loud!”

“They’re not dirty! They're off white, there's a difference. But glad to confirm, you were checking me out.”

"I’ve seen better." She lied.

Owen didn’t bother to repress his laughter this time. “Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart...Turn left here. The one with the Sunrio signage, that’s mine.”

The cozy little cabin stood far apart the identical shacks of the village. The banana trees on either side hiding it from view. Old and rustic wooden planks made up the cabin's walls and flooring. On the small porch were two metal patio chairs and a portable fireplace between them. Round fairy lights hung from the porch's raftered ceiling. A motorcycle at the corner.

They both got out and she rounded the backseat to gather the brown bags the pharmacist gave her. Walking to his side of the car, she stood in front of him.

"Right, Owen. Listen up." he stopped fibbing with the shoulder strap for a second and looked at her.

"These are your medicines. You need to take them at a certain time. No delays, not earlier. On time. Okay?"

His eyebrows scrunched together as he read it. "What is that supposed to say?"
"Your medicine schedule, instructions how to disinfect your wounds. Here." She handed the paper to him.

"Yeah, I know that. I mean, what the heck is this handwriting?" The fold between his eyebrows deepened, his eyes skimming the sentences with difficulty.

"What are you talking about, it's completely readable."

"It looked like a herd of hens had raked their claws at it."

"Why am I not surprised." she droned, "Here." snatching the paper from him and pointing the first step of his medications.

"Clean your wounds with disinfectant. The disinfectant is the bottle with the blue label. Then apply the anti-bacterial. The anti-bacterial is the yellow one." She stepped closer to him, his neck leaning down as he read with her. "Whatever you do, do not use the tap water outside. All rooms and cabins here have filtered water. So use it."

He nodded.

"Then you need to drink your antibiotics at 7pm tonight, every night for the next five days. So, you have to eat your dinner before that time. Give me the bag, I'll show you."

"As much as I like standing under this weather, can we do this inside? I'm parched."

She followed him up the front porch steps and inside. She laid out the medicines in a neat pile on the island bar separating the kitchen from the living room. When she looked up to lecture him
again, she saw him removing the sling support on his arm. The velcro making a loud, scratching sound that was enough to make her skin crawl.

"What the hell are you doing?!!"

"It's itchy. And it's hot." he griped, eyeing the black arm aid with distaste.

"I don't fucking care. Put it back Owen!" She slid down the high chair and walked over the fridge where he was standing.

"I don't wanna wear the stupid sling."

"Stop being so childish. You heard the doctor, you're supposed to wear this for the next two weeks!" She grabbed the arm support lying abandoned by the microwave.

"When did he say that?" he asked, a clueless look looming over his face, making her almost want to throw the sling at it.

"You were there in the room!"

"I got distracted." he defended, his gaze darkening as it slowly panned down her figure. "When did you last ate?"

She glowered her eyes at him.

He reached over his side for the fruit stand and offered her an apple. "Here."
"Put it back or I’m gonna throw that to your face."

He chuckled and stood up straighter. "Let's eat! Come on! I saw the new Japanese restaurant. We can walk."

“No. You need to lie down and rest.” She watched him in disbelief as he walked pass her and grabbed his house keys from the opposite counter.

“Hang on. Let me change my shirt, though.”

"I’ve had enough of this!” she fetched her phone from her pocket and speed-dialling his assistant's number. That made him stop on his tracks.

"Claire?” Lowery answered in a groggy voice. "Everything all right?"

"I don’t know what you guys were thinking. But buy a plane ticket for Owen back to California, right now.”

"What are you talking about?” he yawned. “Owen’s in California.”

"What?"

"He's still at the hospital, Claire. There isn't much news. I'm sorry I didn't call you yesterday."
She stiffened, unwanted facts dawning on her. She locked eyes with Owen who was looking remorseful than a sinner on church. “He's here. Owen’s fucking here.”

“What! Like in Costa Rica? With you?”

“Yes.” she breathed through gritted teeth and balled fists.

"Since when? What the hell, man! He's ok? He woke up? I'm gonna call Zia. She's gonna flip."

Claire's voice dropped to a menacing sound. "Lowery, book him the next available flight. Pick him up at the airport and pin his annoying ass on an IV. Make sure he rests. If you had to chain him up to his bed. Do it."

"Right, right. On it. I'll text you the details."

After she hung up the phone, “You're going home. Right now. Pack your things.” Their eyes met over the threshold in a determined contest.

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?! You need proper rest! The next ferry will leave in 30 minutes. I’ll ride it with you."

"I need rest? What? And you don't?"

She moved over the counter again to pack his medications, not bothering to reply.
"I'm staying here til we finish the job." he added and what felt like a slap in her face. She turned around to face him, narrowing her eyes.

"You think, I can't do it by myself?"

"On the contrary, Miss Dearing." He stood opposite her, half-sitting on the backrest of the couch. "You know, I never doubted you."

"Then what the hell is your problem? You're leaving. End of story."

"No, I am not." He shook his head, pouting his bottom lip. "Not happening."

"Oh yes, it is!"

"I'm not going anywhere. That's final." He repeated with an air of determination, crossing his arms in front of him.

"Gah! Do you find pleasure on being such a pain in the ass every single time? You ran away! What the hell are you thinking, coming here!"

"Now that you asked:"

"It's a rhetorical question!" she frowned.
"Well, you shouldn’t have said that in a questioning voice.” He mumbled.

“You’re ridiculous! This shit is not funny anymore!”

“What are you shouting at me for? I didn't do anything!” Owen defended.

“You didn't- you didn't do anything? Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me! You're here! That’s what you did! When you should be staying at the hospital!”

He stared at her for what it felt like a full minute before a smile broke his face.

"Aww. You're giving me butterflies here, Claire." His palms crossed over his heart. The bandaged left wrist almost mocking her.

“You. Are such. An asshole! I don't know why I even to bothered to try!” she laughed, without a trace of humour.

"I'm fine, Claire. No big deal. Only few scratches. It'll heal. All fine. See?” he stretched and unfolded his left arm in front of her, indicating how "fine" he was. The action making her burst even more. All the fright, rage, and guilt she had been feeling came pouring out in one arduous tirade of emotions.

"You're fine? You're fine! Bullshit Owen! The last time you said that to me you ended up three weeks at the hospital. I saw you bleed to death and there was nothing else I can do. One week and you were barely alive! You had no idea what I've been... what I've been through! Do you know how... how it fucking felt! If Zara... if Zara didn't... If she didn't come on time... " she stammered, her breathing coming up short.
Her chest tightened again, blackness creeping from the corner of her eyes. With a staggering step, she fell down the barstool and held a hand on her stomach. Nausea overtaking her.

The next thing she knew, she was staring at his sobered face. His wide hazel green eyes pulling her out the abyss. He sighed. “I know how trauma works, Claire. I’m sorry that I put you through that. But you can talk to me.”

"Please go... go... go home." She stuttered.

As tender as he spoke, he held her chin between his fingers, “I'm going if you're going.”

She held the hand caressing her cheek and squeezed, regaining steady, gradual breaths. His free thumb, rubbing circles on her skin then her lip which then had ceased its trembling.

He looked even more exhausted. Claire decided she didn't like that look on him. Not a single bit. She wanted him teasing, flirting or angry at her. Not worried.

“Talk to me. Let me in, Claire.” He continued, pushing one stray lock of hair behind her ear.

As soon as he said it, she felt, as if, the fog that had engulfed her inner consciousness cleared up. Finally offering her a glimpse of a sunshine of possibilities she evaded her entire life. It was warm, ardent and promising. For a second, she wanted to melt in the safety of his arms and tell him how much he scared her. How much he was scaring her with the intensity of his stares, the warmness of him. But all of a sudden he was too much. Too bright. Too real.

With one quivering hand, she removed his hand and averted her gaze.

“Claire-“
"I have to go." She interjected and left without another glance.

The backyard was already reverberating with life when she finally arrived.

It was unusual for Claire to arrive at the middle of the party. She drowned herself with “work” for the last few hours. And by work that meant browsing the web for a new laptop wallpaper. It was a subtle way to tire herself and avoid the party she didn’t feel like participating in. But the host had called her a few times already, telling her that work will still be there tomorrow. The staff party and his self-made drinks wont.

After what probably was the fifth call, she gave in. Claire drove for 20 minutes to the outskirts of the park where the Malcolms were living.

She could hear the explosions of laughter, conversation and music from the gates. Claire adjusted the straps on her white body-con dress she packed on a whim. “Sundress-ed up, Claire. It looks like it’s going to be a hot night.” Ian warned. And he was right. Beads of sweat were already rolling down her back. Exhaling one deep sigh, she pushed the old wooden door.

After a week of staying on the island, one information topped all other statistics that had lodged itself to her brain. And that was that the Malcolms knew how to throw a proper party.

Strings of fairy lights and banderitas of assorted colors hovered above them. Thus, illuminating the cloudless, windless night. The dance floor at the center of the grounds glistened. Surrounding it, were four sets of long tables decorated with tropical plants and colourful vignettes. Tiny Moroccan lamps and bulbs hung above it as well, providing a more bohemian effect. A mariachi band played local songs, entertaining dancing and non-dancing guests alike. It was funny that the only area under a tent was the bar. A painted signage “Drinks on me” embellished its body, luring a handful of guests. From there emerged the flamboyant host and a woman in an off-shoulder floral maxi.
dress. A camera attached to her hand.

“There she is!” Ian shouted above the commotion, making some of the partygoers look in her direction. In his hand were two glasses of what looked like margaritas with slices of lime on the side.

He was wearing a short sleeve floral printed shirt and white beach shorts. A wreath of tropical flowers hung around his neck. Ian walked with the copper-haired beauty by his side. Genuine smiles on both their faces.

To her shock, when the couple approached her, the woman threw slender arms around her in a tight, bear hug.

“You must be Claire! Oh my! I heard so much about you!” The woman squealed before releasing her. “I’m Sarah.”

“Honey, this is Claire Dearing, the one and only.” Ian introduced between sips of his drink. “Glad you could join us Claire.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry I’m late.”

“Nonsense. The party’s just started.” Sarah dismissed, beaming at her.

“Food’s over there and open bar’s over there. Anyway, I gotta brag about this to Stan. So, if you could excuse me ladies,” he said, raising and indicating to drinks in his hand. “See ya later honey.” He added, kissing Sarah on the cheek.

“I made all the drinks so have as many as you like, eh?” Ian shouted when he was a good distance
way, winking at the both of them.

“Don’t drink too many though.” Sarah leaned and mumbled to her. “They might seem sweet, but they could knock you for hours.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Claire chuckled as they watched Ian’s salt and pepper hair disappear into the crowd. Sarah took a few pictures of the crowd before turning to her again. “How are you? I hope you’re alright with the heat?” Sarah started, leading them towards a nearby table.

"I'm great. Thank you for everything Mrs. Malcolm. Everyone's been so welcoming."

“Glad you’re having fun! But call me Sarah.” She laughed again, placing the DSLR on the table. “Though technically, its Sarah Harding-Malcom. I didn't take Ian's last name when we got married.”

Claire's curiosity peaked. "May I ask why?"

"Oh, you know...” She trailed off, stopped the passing server for two cosmopolitans. “Thanks Bert… Ian’s accomplishments are his as well as my accomplishments are mine...” They both took a sip.

"I get it." Claire smiled, feeling more comfortable with the woman seated beside her.

"See? I knew we're like kindred spirits.” Sarah said, squeezing her forearm in a friendly gesture. "How about you? Are you seeing someone?"

"Oh no, no. Too busy showing men how to get their jobs done." Claire smirked, feeling pride swell
"That's my girl. Of course you are." Sarah winked at her and tipped their glasses together.

“Anyway, I was talking to Owen a while ago. He told me tomorrow's the consignment meeting? You guys must be pretty excited. Ian is."

Claire nodded.

The full transfer of property and sales would happen tomorrow.

Claire narrated the events of this morning and filled her in, minus some parts.

Today was the last meeting and she couldn’t be more pleased with the decisions. Although, she felt a pang of worry when Owen didn’t show up. Lowery called her, apologizing that Owen cancelled his flight- which she already suspected. She knew she was wishing for the moon when she told him to go home, anyway. But still. He needs to rest and a proper hospital. Whatever. Don’t waste another breath, Claire.

For the first 30 minutes, she had to remind herself of Owen’s lack of punctuality. After the first hour, she was ready to swallow her pride and ask his whereabouts when he entered the room with Ian. She released one tensed breath. The room stood to their attention but his eyes immediately flew to hers. Ian introduced him to the group who came up to him to shake his hand. He wore the sling brace he hated so much. True enough, it wrinkled the dress shirt he was wearing. He sat across her. Ian sat between them, at the center of the table.

At some point during the meeting, he leaned forward and passed her notes, “Hey?” Before another one after a minute “I’m sorry for yesterday.” She glanced at Ian who was repressing a smile. His long and ring-ed fingers curled around his lips.
She ignored his notes and paid attention on the presentation. As she was writing down the names of the current investors, another scratch of paper found its way to her. “Lunch?” She looked up at Owen who quickly turned his head towards the screen, smirking for all he's worth. Claire flipped the post-it and wrote, “NO! Focus! You little dipshit.” And glowered at him for good measure.

She stole another peek at Ian again, who was nodding at something the presenter said. She slipped the note but a breeze must have blown it because Ian pealed with laughter. In his hand was the piece of paper. He passed it to Owen who didn’t look the slightest bit concerned. Whereas her cheeks redden with humiliation. When the meeting ended, she was the first to excuse herself out. Claire’s been avoiding him since yesterday’s outburst. She couldn’t remember the last time she overreacted. *That always seem to happen with him.* She frowned at the thought. Grateful that the island was big enough for them not to cross paths.

“What? You’re leaving?” Sarah lamented when she finished.

“I am. My bags all packed.”

“You couldn’t stay for the weekend? Ian’s birthday is coming up.”

“I wish I could.” Sarah’s face expressed her disappointment that Claire felt bad. So she added, “But I’ll see what I can do.”

“Please? I’m sure Owen wouldn’t mind. We want you here. Speaking of whom, he told me you grew up in Wisconsin?”

“Madison. My mom and sister still live there.” she replied, nursing the drink Sarah gave her. Claire wouldn't to gulp it all at once, no matter the temptation. The last time she got drunk out of her senses still fresh in her mind.
“Yeah? I used to teach Paleontology at UW for a couple of years. 1995.”

“Really? My mom taught History there in the 1990s.” Claire announced.

“Small world.”

The two women discussed about Madison, the island and Sarah's photography career. Claire couldn't help but be in awe of the woman in front of her. Sarah was the epitome of an independent woman who terribly was reminding her of her mom.

Around them, the party continued deeper into the night and livelier than ever.

Sarah was showing her the pictures she took that evening when Ian appeared. His feet dancing by their side. He was wearing a gaucho straw sombrero with red poms he filched from one of the players. A maraca raised in one hand, the other on his stomach. His hip swaying in tune with the upbeat music. Claire and Sarah held on to each other as they doubled over with mirth. The crowd around them hooted as well, even more so when Ian extended a hand for Sarah to take.

Claire watched the couple took the centre stage. Others joined in as well. Their feet making knocking sounds against the makeshift floor. The people who were standing by the sidelines clapped over them. Claire found herself laughing and cheering too as Ian dipped Sarah. He then covered their heads with the straw hat before he kissed her.

She took another sip before she continued browsing the camera pictures. Owen appeared in the later frames. He was wearing a blue button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled up and buttoned to his bicep and khaki cargo pants. An identical necklace of flowers also hung around his neck. There were several pictures of the trio. A particular shot made her smile. He had his arms around Sarah and he was kissing her cheek while Ian beamed at the camera. They looked like a family.

"You know, if you're gonna stare at my picture, better look at the real thing." She heard a distinct voice joked behind her.
“Were you spying on me?” she accused brazenly, watching Owen laughed and occupy Sarah’s seat.

“No. I just got off the phone with Zia.”

Claire straightened up, “And?”

“They caught Antonio transferring illegal money from headquarters to a private account. They got him just in time. He’s waiting trial along with Nedry. Zia said it’ll be quick.”

“For real?”

He nodded, grinning at her.

“That’s a good news. We can replace him with someone better. Morris would be perfect.” The cogs in her overworked brain turning. “What do you think?”

“All settled then.” he approved.

"Great. I'll arrange it first thing on Monday.”

A minute of silence ensued before Owen clapped a hand on the table and stood up. “Now, come on. That dress is being wasted sitting down.”
Claire almost spilt her drink. “You think you’re so smooth, don’t you?”

“Believe me Miss Dearing. You’re quite the challenge.”

“Does that make me special?” She criticized though amused.

“Not at all.” The corners of his lips tugged upwards, his hand opening for her. “Let’s see you can last five minutes in those ridiculous shoes.”

Maybe it was the ambiance of the night. Or the whisper of the summer wind against them. The pleasant acoustic melody of the guitars. Or the display of camaraderie that made her accept his hand.

He placed a bandaged hand at the middle of her back. The other holding her hand. He stepped closer while Claire hesitated. He let out a short, low laugh that she felt vibrated through her.

“You can relax. I won’t bite unless provoked, you know.”

“I’m not.” she scowled, earning another laugh from him.

“I’m not gonna say anything more, in case, I ruined this.” He said, smugness and mischief in his tone.

“That’s very considerate of you.” She said, sarcastically.

“Well, what can I say?”
The music slowed as they shifted from foot to foot. The lights above them incomparable to the spark behind his eyes.

“Stay for a few days.” He muttered.

“Are you still aware that we’re running companies?” She retorted, emphasizing the “S”. The mountain of paperworks’ gonna be horrendous now that’s Antonio's taken care of. She could imagine it.

“You need a break. We both do.”

“I was not the one who's been unconscious for weeks. You do. You stay.” She replied. The dark circles around his eyes and the roughness of his voice now absent. His skin glowing with a healthy, bronze tan. His scruff trimmed and maintained. Although, he looked well-rested now, he still needed to recover. And this looked like the place that could help him.

He scoffed. “I’m your boss. I’m telling you to stay.”

She craned her neck up at him. “Wow. You’re playing the boss card?”

“I guess.” he smiled sheepishly, squinting his eyes. “Did it work?”

“Not a bit, no.” wrinkling her nose.

Owen chuckled and rested his cheek against her temple. He was so close, she could feel his breath on her ear. She found herself leaning in more, allowing him to lead her through the song.
“This was a good idea. Wasn’t it?” He continued in a low voice.

“What is?”

“This. The park.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

He chuckled again before he pulled away and twirled her. “No. But I don’t wanna come across as impulsive. The prodigal son who likes spending daddy’s money. Tell me what you really think. I know you won’t bullshit me.”

His face was serious, so unlike of him that she couldn’t help but smile. “You did good. One of your many impulsive decisions that I approved of.”

He didn’t say anything but stared at her.

“He would have been proud of you, you know. Alan always spoke highly of you. I can never get him to shut up. Your impulsiveness, recklessness, not to mention your lack of time management had its merits after all.” With that, Owen threw his head back and laughed.

“And you are sensible, hardcore and controlling. I say, we make a pretty good team, Miss Dearing.”

It was a while after she spoke. Her body thrumming with nervous energy from their distance. Or lack of.
“I guess we do.” She whispered, staring up to his sincere eyes, hypnotized.

“You know what still bothers me though?” Owen snickered, pushing her away so they stand side by side.

“What?” Her left arm extended.

“That my dad never told me about you.” He tugged her back.

There was something funny about the innocent betrayal on his face when he said it that she laughed out loud.

“Not once. What the hell is that about?” He blamed but couldn’t hide the amusement in his voice.

“It is a mystery.” She said when she collected herself. The smile planted on her lips.

With one hand still on her body, Owen reached for the necklace around his neck and plucked a flower from it. He tucked it behind her ear.

“Yeah, it is.” His gaze fell down. She gulped, biting her tongue as she fought the urge not to lick her dry lips. He leaned in. The tip of his nose tracing the line of hers. His warm breath sending shockwaves to every nerve of her body. She could hear the rapid heartbeat which mirrored her own.

He sighed and moved his head to resume their previous position. To her disappointment.
“Don’t worry about my arm. I’m gonna wear that sling you love so much tomorrow.” He taunted, disgust in his voice.

She rolled her eyes. “Don't get me started, Grady. Why didn’t you wear it today?”

“And lose the chance to dance with you? No way!”

“Well. If you did, I could lead you.” She gibed, biting her lips to keep the grin from tearing her face.

He groaned. “Why are you always trying to emasculate me?”

She didn’t know how much time passed. Too occupied by how he was rubbing soothing circles on her back. The rise and fall of his chest, in sync with hers. How sturdy and warm he was against the softness of her body. A perfect contrast, she could admit.

“I never thanked you.” He muttered, out of the blue.

“For what?”

“For your work. For my dad. For everything. He halted his steps, making her stop as well. “Thank you, Claire.”

“No need to thank me. I was just doing my job.” She pulled away and looked at him.

“Were you?” the smile and twinkle in his eyes could give the stars a run for their own money.
“Were you just doing your job?”

“What made you say that?”

“You tell me.”

It was as if she left her body. His eyes locked on hers. It was as if everything became hazy when he brought their right hands and he briefly touched warm lips on her knuckles. He then rested it on his chest. Claire felt like gravity pulled her in. Did he knew?

The hand holding her back pulled her closer, one leg now between his. He slid his bandaged hand up her cheek. It was rough against her burning skin. Claire felt a squirming sensation in her stomach. The last thing she saw was Owen staring at her lips. She closed her eyes in anticipation.

Until, she felt something wet drop on her forehead.

She hasn’t open her eyes yet when the sky poured bucketloads of water. No warning whatsoever. The shrieks and the fading out trumpet noises brought her back. Owen cursed behind his laugh and intertwined their hands. Tugging them both to safety from the harsh, abrupt rain.

The rain had come and gone for the last thirty minutes. Sarah, Ian and Owen handed out towels and coffees for everybody. Everybody laughed it off, as if it was always expected. When the rain subsided, Claire volunteered to drive the staff who can’t travel back to the village via foot or motorcycles.

It was nearing midnight when she parked the car by the hotel parking lot, across the staff village.
“Thanks again, Claire! Goodnight Claire! See you guys tomorrow!” They shouted back at her. Claire waved back at them.

“They like you.” Owen pointed out from behind her.

“That’s because I offered them a ride.”

“Stop discrediting yourself too much. Come on, I’ll walk you to the lobby.” Owen put his hands inside his pockets.

The lobby was deserted, as suspected at this hour. The fixtures dimmed and only the faint pitterpatter of the rain outside broke the silence. The kid behind the reception desk, stood up clumsily from his sleep to greet them.

“Don’t let the bed bugs—or the mosquitoes bite, Claire.” Owen quipped.

She entered the elevator, pressed the button of her floor. “See you tomorrow, Grady.”

“I’m counting on it.” He smiled, pouring all the warmth of the sun on it.

The elevators closed in on her and then she was alone. Claire stared at the lit elevator button, aware of the empty feeling in her bones.

The lights in hallway were also dimmed that she had to went under a wall lamp to find her key card. Her phone dropped from her rummage and she cursed. When she bent to pick it up, something fell from her hair. The reddish-orange plumeria Owen gave her never looked more beautiful than that moment. She smiled as she twirled it in her fingers.
Then, something clicked in her. Her face contorted to a realisation. Her insides fluttered with a tingling feeling, her heart picking up a pace. Claire felt light-headed and she knew it had nothing to do with the drink she didn’t even finish. She sprinted towards the elevator and pressed the elevator buttons, down.

“Hurry up!” She exasperated as if pressing the buttons harder would quicken the lift.

The elevator pinged and she almost tripped getting in. This might have been the longest elevator ride of her entire life. She didn’t want to think. Didn’t want her rational side to remind her that this was gonna be a bad idea again. She bounced on her heels. The floor was now on the 8th… 7th… 6th… Claire was never used to letting her feelings rule her head. She’s always been level headed. The walls she built had kept away any emotional entanglement she thought was a waste of time and effort. Right now though, she could feel a section of it crumble at the thought of strong arms and hazel green eyes.

The doors haven't completely opened when she stumbled out into the empty lobby. Except the bellboy who was now snoozing on the desk.

She saw his figure running back towards the staff village. His thrown up hands shielding his head from the rain. Claire felt that sinking feeling again. Without thinking, she ran towards the revolving doors. The rain had picked up again, sending warm slashes across her skin. Her line of sight blurred from the torrent of water and low lights.

She called out, “Owen!” A helpless cry against the racket of rainfall. She seemed to have lost her ability to think. All her inhibitions evaporated with the rain. She took off her heels, ready to sprung.

When a muffled voice cried from behind her.

“What the hell are you doing there? It’s raining!”
On instinct, she turned her head and there he was looking all confused and annoyed. Claire didn’t know but she let out a choking gasp. She pushed the doors and hurried to him, wobbling knees and all.

“What’s wrong?” Owen was walking towards her. “Claire? Claire? Claire, are you hur-oomph!”

She didn’t let him finish when she slammed her body against his and kissed him. Like how she always wanted to.

He wavered for the first few seconds before he groaned and gathered her in his arms. He lifted her a few inches off the floor. She parted his lips. His tongue, as sharp as their arguments, welcomed hers. Her adrenaline on high and expressed in the torrid gesture. Their bodies so close it didn’t leave enough distance to touch each other. She could feel every delicious inch of him, her fingers aching to feel whatever part of his body. He must have read her mind because he set her down and pushed her towards a wall? a column? She didn’t know. But the hand behind her head did soften the blow. Their hands, everywhere all at once, reacquainting themselves. He pushed into her further. The hardness of his body making her bold and irrational, like she thought it would. Claire more than welcomed its weakness. She bit his lip when he pulled away.

She heard the words he was saying but all she could think was how she needed him. How she needed to lose herself to him, feel him and know he’s here, he’s okay and not a figment of her imagination.

“Are you sure?” he leaned his forehead against hers. The world finally coming into focus.

She nodded.

With her eyes on his chin and all the courage she ever had, she mumbled. “Stay with me, tonight.”

Chapter End Notes
Ohhhh! *fans over self*

This chapter has a lot of talking. I’m sorry I don’t know what came over me but I did like writing Ian Malcolm bits. I’ve read a lot about PTSDs, anxiety and panic attacks. This chapter deals with Claire’s which for me has to be out there first before anything else. Stay with me. I’m gonna make it worth it... I hope. :)

For me, love takes a lot of convincing especially for the people who's been traumatised with the wrong kinds of love. Keep in mind that Claire never had someone to look up to in terms of successful relationships. And by talking to Jane and Sarah, who have had successful love stories of their own, it made her want to, at least give it a try.

Thank you for reading and your comments, corrections are always welcome and appreciated. Chapter 11 is underway.
Without further ado.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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The gaze of the wolf reached into our soul.

-Barry Lopez

A pungent, antiseptic stench ruled the air.

Something was tickling him.

Where was he?

Why is everything so fucking bright?

The woman in from of him jumped out of her own skin.

"Wh... wh... where is she?" he heard his voice croak, rough and groggy from disuse. His eyes couldn't focus on anything.

The woman didn't answer his question but instead looked at him like he just came back from the dead - which felt like it. She pressed something at the foot of the bed.

The sounds around him were clear and distinct this time. The world zooming into some sort of
clarity. He was in a hospital, that was certain. As if a wave struck him, his memories came crashing in. Breakfast. The cars. The container van. Trees. Claire. Claire. Claire.

A sudden sense of déjà vu engulfed him. The last time he woke up at the hospital his dad was crying by his bed and his mom was gone.

With great effort, he pushed himself off the bed, his head felt like spinning away from his body. Up til now, he didn't think it was possible for his body to feel heavy and flaccid at the same time.

"Don't get up, Mr. Owen. The doctors will be here shortly." she turned to open door and shouted, "I need assistance, here!"

He shook his head before his quavering voice continued. "No. no. She... she hit her head pretty hard. " He felt his feet touched the carpet. "I have to make sure she's... she's alright."

"I need you to lie down, first. You'll hurt yourself. Lie down, son. Everything's fine." the soothing voice assured, her flabby, gentle hands guiding him to bed. "Miss Claire's fine."

"Need to... see her." he mumbled before darkness took over him again.

Owen stood in front of the elevator and observed as the numbers on the digital board change from floor to floor. He watched as it stopped on the 15th before it descended again. For a crazy minute, when the doors opened before him, he wanted to get in and make sure she reached her room in one limb.

“As if riding the elevator would do her harm.” A voice in his head mocked.

He chuckled to himself, thinking of how it may look if Ian was here who at some time during the party called him out from staring.

"You like her." Ian commented.
He shrugged. "What's not to like?"

He was talking to the resort’s analyst officer when she arrived. He halted mid-sentence when he caught a glimpse of her. A vision in her white dress. The guy he’s talking to also turned his head to her direction and Owen saw his jaw dropped. He would have laughed at the guy’s (or the other guys’ same reactions) if he knew he wasn’t doing exactly the same.

Owen relished on her farewell smile, engraving it on his mind. He made her laugh, actually made her laugh that she had tears in her eyes. The sight spread warmth and goosebumps all over him. He felt immensely proud of himself, knowing that he was the reason for her to come apart and lose control. Owen decided he’d take that every minute of the day. That and her shouting. Both of which had the same appeal to him, anyway.

Which then reminded him of the annoying feeling on his side.

He grimaced as he looked down at his shirt. The gauze had been sticking to his side for some time now. The ointment and the rain weren’t a good combination for the healing skin. For the rest of the night he ignored it, not wanting to ruin Claire’s good mood. He grumbled a sound of impatience and went to the restroom to survey the damage.

Owen removed the damp gauze and threw it. Tiny little red dots lined the side of the healing gash because of the sutures. Three weeks ago, he removed a stray branch that penetrated it, thinking it wouldn’t do any damage. Which was his biggest mistake. It made him lose 48% of his blood and he went straight to shock and then coma. He wiped his wound clean and dry and made a mental note to himself to replace the gauze when he gets home. As long as there’s no puss or blood, he should be good.

The bandage on his left arm was intact - at most. Although the part uncovered by his blouse was dirty from the barbecue grill and the rain. He stretched it out, his arm protesting the movement.
His arm definitely hurt like hell. Claire’s words rang at the back his mind and he must be losing it because in spite of the pain, he smiled. He remembered how angry she was when she saw him. And when he didn’t want to wear the sling. She was right though. He shouldn’t had ran away. The nurse must be furious when she realised he took advantage of his afternoon stroll to slip out and call Barry.

The sling was digging his chest and restricting his movements, that was a fact. Medicines had always made him groggy and grumpy and so he made it a habit to avoid them as much as possible. Yet, he still took them for her sake. He felt like a douchebag for being happy as he was though. Her worry for his well-being real and discernible in her actions.

After securing the bandage and making sure it was tight enough to numb the pain shooting on it, he went out the men’s room.

It started raining again. Owen mumbled his disbelief. The receptionist was nowhere in sight. The kid must have gone back to sleep, He thought with pity. He probably needed to review with the management about having two people at the desk during this hour.

Owen trudged around the lounge looking for a stray umbrella but didn't find any. As a last resort, he approached the high desk when a sharp reflection caught his attention.

He narrowed his eyes. Claire had come down and was outside.

She was standing at the entrance, her back to him and was removing her heels. If he didn't know any better, it looked like she was going to make a run for something. “What the?”
He called her and when she turned, he saw the apprehension in her eyes, consuming her. He felt as though his body went to shock all over again.

During his navy days, they undergo a specific mental training called Reframing. They have to interpret certain scenarios and recognize them. The challenge was keeping a clear and sound mind to assess the rightful solution. Turn the bad thought into something good. In a more mundane term, it's what people always say: Think Positive. He remembered how it sounded easier said than done. But the exercise made him sharper, tactical and more impulsive. Now, standing in this alarming position, his mind should have been ready. As a decorated naval officer, he should be.

That was not the case with Claire Dearing. Then again, nothing was ever easy with her. Owen still find it quite baffling that all his mental training flies out the window when it comes to her.

He thought back how she hit her head on the window. How the cracking sound made his blood run cold and his heart stop beating. He decided slipping into coma was much better than seeing her like this; clattering teeth, pale face, wide emerald eyes and trembling hands.

He rushed to her. His legs couldn’t close the distance soon enough. His eyes frisked over her body for fear that a limb was shedding blood over the dress she’s wearing. She looked so frail, so unlike her usual self that it more than maimed him to see her utterly vulnerable. The Claire Dearing he knew was fearless, goal driven, dauntless, beautiful, generous (even without her knowledge) and... and... she was kissing him!


Claire took his bottom lip and he was undone. Heart and brain simultaneously decided to pick up.
He moaned from her aggressiveness. Loving the way she pressed her body pressed against his, like she couldn’t get enough of him. Like she missed him. The thought filled him with giddy feeling.

Owen gathered her in his arms and she but gave in, melting into him. He grunted his approval. Every curve fitted him, like how he remembered it. Her breathy sighs rumbled against his chest and his body responded the way it knew how. Her hips started rubbing against his thighs. The soft friction making him more needy than he already was. He pushed her to the nearest vertical surface. The need for her to feel what she was making him feel was pushing his body out of control. Until he pulled away, almost painfully, remembering the look on her face.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong Claire?” He asked, breathless as she was.

She was shaking her head, her eyes trained down, her elbows on his shoulders.

“Are you sure?” He leaned his forehead against hers, still catching his breath. She nodded in a vigorous manner that his nose was bumping against hers.

“You have to tell me. You can tell me ok?” He ducked his head, trying to catch her eyes. She felt lighter since he last carried her. He wanted to punch himself, feeling her weight loss was somehow his fault. He let his thoughts ran away from her for a minute. She didn't see her eat at the party. The room service could still be open at this hour. Or the 24-hr McDonald’s which was a block away from here. Maybe they could have a late dinner...

“Stay with me, tonight.” She mumbled, breaking his train of thoughts and concern.

Owen stood there, dumbfounded. Did she say what he thought she said? She looked up and stiffened. He saw embarrassment grew in her eyes from his lack of response. He figured he must
look like a total idiot, gaping at her like a goldfish.

“We don’t have to do anything. I just want... I just want...” she continued in that quiet, timid voice.

She re-focused her attention on the button of his shirt. The blush coming up on her cheeks melted something inside of him.

He smiled, pulled her chin and took his time coaxing her lips with smoothness he never thought he could. Her cold yet pleasant hands traipsed over his sideburns, burning the skin. Their tongues swept inside each other’s mouth, reacquainting themselves on the territory.

She tasted sweet. Sweeter. Like cranberry with a mix of vodka. He pulled away again. He wanted to know, even if it’ll kill him.

“You’re not drunk, are you?”

She chuckled, chewing on her lip, “No.”

The teenager inside him wanted to pump a closed fist in the air- a sign of victory.

Her face sobered, the countless green in her eyes softened. Mesmerised, Owen felt her hands glide over the stubble on his neck. Eyes anywhere but his, she whispered her confession:
"I always have dreams. Bad ones... about that day... They... haunt me...” He raised her chin and fixated his eyes on hers. He was swimming in an ocean of green. “…Every night... Don’t die on me again, okay?”

The sincerity in them transparent as still water. He pulled her towards him again and smashed her mouth to his, searing his apology and promise with a kiss.

They heard a clanking noise somewhere the room. Reluctant, they broke apart and turned their heads to see the bellboy, standing by the desk. His eyes puffy and dazed from his nap. His cheeks red like two huge polka dots on his face. Owen wasn’t sure whether the kid was more embarrassed that his superiors caught him sleeping on the job. Or having witnessed a full make-out session.

“Let’s go.” She mumbled and tugged him towards the elevators. Her fingers hooked with his in a lazy manner.

Owen settled at the back, leaned on the hand rest. And with deliberate intent, decoded her body language. Well, at least tried to. His attempts proved to be feeble since every thought was going anywhere but his brain.

Throughout the night, he stole glances at her, smiling as she laughed and talked to Sarah. He wasn't stalking her- as she so eloquently had put out.

There was the air of overflowing confidence still about her when she walked. Her chin held high, red lipstick on, and piercing green gaze. Tiny layer of sweat glistened her neck, making her auburn waves stuck to her skin. Even after a week under the scorching sun on the island her skin remained white as marble.
She was wearing a white sleeveless dress held by two ribbon straps on her shoulders. Slender torso and legs were filling the dress in all the right places. The places he ambitiously tried to forget.

And heels. Who wears bloody heels at a summer party? Owen never had weird, nasty kinks but he felt as though he would die of torture right there and then.

After Claire walked out on him yesterday, he didn't know how to approach her. He was cautious, remembering the trauma in her eyes. Owen had his own fair share of traumatic events to know when to stay away and when not to.

He tried his luck at this morning’s meeting. Being in his domain of boardrooms and all, he felt a surge of confidence. She turned him down in the way only Claire Dearing can- by insulting him. It was the damnedest, most frustrating thing for someone like him who didn’t have to try so hard and impress others.

The air around him became thicker, alerting him of her proximity. Owen straightened up. She never looked more ravenous than that moment. Her lips bruised and her hair mussed from his grips. She adjusted the fallen strap on her shoulder before she circled her arms around him. The blush still tainting her cheeks. He held her waist in an automatic gesture, afraid that if he didn’t, he would fall down on his knees. Completely and irrevocably at her mercy.

She whispered, A hint of a smile on her sexy lips. “You’re staring again.”

Was he?

“Well, you’re very, very stare-able” He retaliated with his usual suave.

She played with the hair on his nape. Her face going solemn again at once. “Are you okay?”. 
He replied, honest to every word. “I am now.”

With a faint "Okay." she smiled up at him. It wasn't the stereotypical, polite smile she always gave him and other colleagues. The corners of her eyes crinkled, her dimples showed – a look that was genuinely sweet and timid at the same time. It was a rather likeable, pleasant smile he knew came from somewhere deep inside her. Lighting every part of him, warming him.

What were they talking about again?

He kissed her then. Slower but not less wild than the one they shared at the lobby. He cornered her, hiked the leg she’s lifting by his hip and pushed. He took pleasure on her gasp, grinning against her lips.

He felt her walked backwards, pulling him towards her and out the elevator. Their clumsy and hurried footsteps echoing in the hallway. With one good arm, he supported her weight and pushed her on the wall between the elevators, the wooden panels until they reached her door.

She withdrew from him and retrieved the keycard from her purse. Owen stood behind her, trailing open kisses on her nape. Unwilling to let a moment apart the vanilla-coconut scent of her skin. He parted her hair on the side so he could kiss the skin of her collarbone. She angled her neck, resting it on his shoulder.

“I’m having trouble enough as it is.” She rasped, one hand on his hair.
“Good.” He smirked and took the keycard from her hand before pushing them inside the room.

The generator gave a quick start when he inserted the key. Claire shoved him to the adjacent wall. Her tongue more eager than his. He did as much as he could to reciprocate. His hands roaming her dress that tormented him through the night.

He pushed her in the slightest so they could exchange their positions. Claire dug her nails on his shoulder. Her hand slid down between them and brushed her knuckles on his zipper. Repeatedly.

His eyes flew open. His bottom lip caught between her cunning snigger. "No." she mumbled against his lips and continued her teasing. Her nails scratching the tent that formed on his favourite pants.

She traveled another petite hand on his body, and played with the top button of his shirt. He closed eyes and rested his head on the wall behind him, his chest heaving like he ran in the Olympics. He can’t remember the last time he’d been so affected by someone.

He watched as she grazed the tip of finger on the outline of pectorals, tensed muscles on his stomach. His chest heaved all the more. He could feel her studying every expanse of skin, every scar, before it paused on the cut he received not too long ago.

“Hey.” He whispered and titled her chin up. “I’m okay if you are.”

She locked her eyes on his and gave a small nod. The way her eyes shone and glossed over was making him jittery. He watched as the green shades turned a tad darker. The worry in them dissolved into something near wicked.
She whispered, as seductive as he thought she could, “I’ll be gentle. I promise.”

“Please. Don’t.” He growled before attacking her lips again. His tongue and teeth all ready for her. She mewled and brought his face closer to hers. Her air becoming his and vice versa. Claire shrugged the material off him and dragged him towards the bedroom.

As soon as he kicked off his shoes, Claire held his hand and sat him on the bed. She raised her dress to her hips and straddled him. Then, her lips on his again. Not offering air to breathe in nor distance. He let his hands lifted her dress up, massaging each new exposed skin. He heard her whimper when his calloused fingers reached the lacy waistband on her hips.

He squeezed her ass cheeks; his hands might as well leave an imprint. She moaned before pushing him up towards the pillows. He obliged, making sure not to put his weight on his left arm.

Maybe he was dreaming or in a state of delirium because everything was happening in slow motion. Claire slid her body down on him before she was up on her feet at the end of the bed. Their eyes on each other, dark shades of green against the low lights and their lust. She started pushing her heels off and unzipping her dress. It hung loose. An arm underneath the cups of her breasts, she untied the straps on her shoulders. It fell on a puddle of forgotten heap on the floor. Claire stood there with her white-colored matching set. Of course, they fucking match! The see-through bra barely holding the mound of flesh of her chests and an underwear to match. A flat, pale stomach, lean cut legs formed by walking around in heels. Even the scar on her right thigh was sexy. He bit back a moan. His pheromones overtaking his rationality.

“Kiss me.” Owen dared, regaining his voice and authority, albeit slim.

Biting her lips, she crawled to him and did. He rose and leaned his body on the headboard while she sat astride him once more, rubbing the strain on his pants.
Owen, unused of feeling inferior, made a move to stand up. But with a steady hand on his chest, she murmured “Stand down, lieutenant.”

He couldn’t help it. This time, he laughed at her boldness. “Yes Ma’am.”

She settled on the pulse on his neck. His fingers were shaking even after he removed the clasp on her bra. His chest, at last, was against her softness. They both moaned. The erratic beats of her heart competing against his own. He hugged her as they kissed, his body puny under her adept touch. Claire raised her hips to make room for her hand as she reached down and released the button of his pants. She helped him kicked them off, along with his boxers.

Supported by the hand resting above his shoulder, she reached down again and grasped him. Nothing funny now, her seductive eyes implied. His eyes widened, his mouth forming that perfect "o" as she stroked him. Her small hand, although skilled, couldn’t close around him. She purred, whispering her admiration for it on his ear. He gulped and nodded, unable to do anything else, swept through with a wave of desire. A kind he had never experienced before.

Owen couldn’t understand what was happening to him. Sex has always been one of things he knew he was good at. Hell, he was great at sex. He's used to being in control in everything. But with her, everything evaporates. Owen Grady was losing, teetering, and begging for an end to the torture, but at the same time, not.

He kissed her chin and reached up to pepper kisses on her neck all the while also tugging her underwear down. He caressed the smooth skin and brought his fingers to their destination... and had to swear.

Fuck.
She was soaking.

Claire bit his ear and egged him on. She sat up again. Trembling fingers pushed inside her and she moaned.

He was getting dizzy, his member pulsing in anticipation. Claire was grinding herself on his fingers as she would on his center. He was ready to burst.

Not yet, not yet. He chanted with closed eyes.

But then, realization set in on him like freezing bucketload of water He stopped. His head fell back on the bed. “Shit.”

Claire looked at him with glazed, worried eyes, “Why? What’s wrong?”

A shiver ran down his spine. “I don’t have a… I didn’t bring protection.”

He calculated his chances. He could run down his bungalow and looked for the inexistent condom he knew he didn’t pack. He didn’t know he would be under Claire Dearing so he didn’t bother. Maybe he could borrow one from the kid downstairs -which could take 10 minutes. Or one of the novelty stores might still be open, that would take him 30 minutes or his entire life. He groaned.

Think, Owen.
With a devious glint in her eyes, Claire chuckled, interrupting his crisis. The sound jolted from her chest to his. He gripped her hips. “The monthly company check-ups, Owen... it’s safe... I’m clean.” Before she added in that soft, small voice, “Are you?”

Relief and excitement washed over him. He adjusted their positions so they would be more comfortable. His manhood pressing against their stomachs, slick, tall, hot and ready. He wanted to admit that he hadn't got the time to fool around when he's busy trying to forget what her body felt like against his. But that would probably set her off and ruin the mood. He was still, after all, sailing in uncharted waters.

Owen nodded with an honest smile he hoped she could see through. “Do you trust me?”

He listened with breathless suspense for her answer. She moved. For a second, he thought she would bolt straight out the door and... he would die.

But then her whole face softened under the dim lights. Again, with that tugging sensation on his heart.

"You’ve never given me reasons not to.” she leaned back in and gave him the slowest, most sensual kiss of his entire life.

Owen felt the earth give below him as he fell. He had never gotten so lost in a kiss before. Not like this where he had instantly forgotten every lip he had ever touched. He pressed his mouth to her, burying his hands on her hair, like she was his air to breath. His heart lost its balance, skipped beats with her every sigh. Her body fell and molded in his. His hands running on her back, her shoulders, her hair and her sides. A slight air passed through his body. Before he knew what was going on, he felt her hand on him.
Then, the head of his erection pierced throbbing tightness and warmth.

His pupils blew up. He broke the kiss and cursed, panting.

Claire moaned against his open mouth and pressed her forehead against his. He stayed still, watching the play of lust in her eyes. His ears were ringing from the rapid thuds of their chests. Thin layers of sweat rolled down between their bodies. He could feel himself pulsing inside of her - more heavy breathing on his behalf.

He wanted to move but she remained still for a few punishing minutes. Driven by his impatience and carnal yearning, he pushed his hips against hers, earning a gasp from her.

As languid as he could, Owen pumped his hips into her. She arched her back that her breasts were juggling against his, aiming him to hit harder, deeper. She yelped and dug her nails on his shoulder, the other on the headboard behind him. Assisted by her feet underneath his knees, she met him. Pelvis on Pelvis, they rock. Back and forth. Steady and accurate. Owen kept a hand on her lower back, guiding her to him- as if she needed any.

Claire grabbed his face and kissed him greedily, their lips fusing into one zealous mess. His hips became more urgent. He held her hips with one hand and brought it down to him. She whimpered, manicured fingernails scraping down his body. She gasped his name over and over again. Somehow, the sound was sexier than all his past sexual escapades combined.

Owen pushed her away from his body to lap one milky breast in his mouth, with the same passion as his strokes. He felt her white-hot heat coating him as she cried out, her body shaking with release, making him bite on one pink bud.
Owen slowed his movements and pressed his lips to her temple. His hands snaking down to intertwine with hers. Claire ran her lips down to light scruff on his Adam's apple, murmuring, "Lie down."

Still throbbing inside her, he succumbed and moved their bodies from the headboard. He felt a hand on his chest before she pushed him down the pillows.

The air whooshed as she whipped her hair to the side, and he swore he'd never seen a sexier toss than that moment.

She started to move. Deliberate, teasing and with purpose.

Claire ground down on him. Petite hands on his chest, her arms squeezing her suckable breasts together. The sight made his eyes roll at the back of his head. Noises he didn’t know he could make tumbled off his chest.

She took her time, with her promised gentleness. Owen brought his knees up again to try and get on top of her. But she flopped down on him, fast and feral. The sound of their bodies joining in a delicious slap stopped his attempts. “No. Let me.” she purred.

Owen wasn’t used to being inferior during sex but one look on her blissful face, he got the idea. She spread her legs even wider, her bended knees on either side of him.

Claire rolled her body with grace and he met every downward stroke. Pushing back in time for her
thrusts. Roll hips, push back in. Roll hips, push back in. Their synchronized rhythm hitting the right spots every single time. Her breasts, plump and rosy, bounced on her movements and he felt himself grew more solid.

Owen’s left arm stretched beside him, while the other, was on her hips, helping her root deeper into him. Her moans and subtle shifts of her body were making him lose his mind. All he could think was how perfect she was. Like a beacon of light on the harsh waters. The very first step on land after endless days at sea. Owen held on to her, making sure she was real.

A sense of sudden possessiveness overtook him. He wanted her to forget every other body she’d given herself into. The thought almost wanted him to punch a wall. As she forwarded, he sat up, earning another loud gasp from Claire. Her neck stretched up to the ceiling, her mouth open in silent ecstasy.

He groaned and pulled her face down on his and kissed her hard. His member – in a faster pace-buried itself in her.

Owen sucked the nearest skin he could reach, leaving a dark red bruise.

“Do that again.” Claire breathed between their thrusts, pushing his face on her breasts.

Owen smirked against her cleavage, loving her brazenness. He played with her nipples and sucked, his mouth painting series of love bites on the pink skin. All the time she was squirming. Her body moved up and down, her walls contracting on him. He was impossibly deep. He fell back on his right elbow and watched as his body worshipped her. His hand, fondling her arms, her waist before it settled on her breast.
Dear God. He was close. And so was she.

He sat up again. Their thrusts became wild. Their curses and cries of fervor roaring in his ears. He licked his thumb and grazed her sensitive spot, watching as her eyes blew up. He assisted her, pushed himself deeper. Farther. As her body would allow. She screamed, throwing her head back. His hand squeezed her glistening thighs before running over the scar on her thigh.

“Claire…” he warned.

Her walls clenched around him. Owen’s body twitched in response. He was ready to detonate. He clutched her hips in a tight grip, his final warning. Claire’s smiled down at him, one hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t hold back on me, Grady.” She whispered in an erotic, playful hiss.

That’s it. “Oh, fuck.”

He exploded, a million stars behind his eyes and fell back on the bed. His arm covered his eyes in a vulnerable gesture and she fell down on him. His heart beating out so fast he thought he’ll die. Owen felt her smile as she kissed the sweat off his chest. He laughed, the sound vibrating against their still connected bodies. He nervously swallowed. Claire detangled herself from his body and tucked herself under his jaw.

With every breath, Claire’s lithe figure went with him. At some point, she retrieved the covers bundled at the foot of the bed. His absent-minded fingers drew circles on the flawless skin of her back, his nose buried in her hair.
She bolted from under his chin and murmured, “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” He circled his arms around her. “But you ruined me.” he continued, without a hint of skepticism and every confidence he had.

She cocked an eyebrow at him, her tone joking. “Okay, little cornball.”

“You should know Miss Dearing that I never offer compliments after sex. You should be proud of yourself.”

“I am.” she teased back.

A chortle bubbled on his lips as his fingers curled around a fallen strand of her hair.

“You should’ve seen how distraught she was, Mr. Owen.” the nurse's voice echoed at the back of his mind.

This time he was aware that he was staring. Her profile a replica of glowing moonlight sifting through the curtains. Her make-up was long gone but the flush on her cheeks still evident. Her cupid-bow lips which still bore the imprint of his kisses, moved as she spoke about his arm. He felt his heart skip a beat. Beautiful.
"... but seriously, are you okay?" she lied on her side, one finger stroking his knife scar.

He copied her lying position and grasped her palms in his. He nodded his reply and assured her, "But, whenever you feel like you need to talk about the… accident, I'm here okay?"

"I know. Thank you." she scooched over and gave him another slow, world-shattering kiss.

His body reacted and within seconds, he was devouring her lips with the same intense passion. He hovered over and massaged the firm cheeks of her butt before bringing one leg up his waist. He felt a slight stirring down below. They both groaned but Claire held a hand between them.

"I appreciate the enthusiasm but right now, we should sleep. The meeting’s in…” she glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “...7 hours.”

He whined, "Fine."

Claire chuckled, pulled his chin down and pecked him on his pouting lips.

"How many times do I have to tell you, No. You're not allowed to go."

"Can I at least walk for a bit outside? I need sunlight and natural air." he pleaded.

“It’s twilight, Mr. Owen.” she handed him the jello he requested from her earlier.
He dug in. The red-colored dessert satisfying his craving for sugar. “Much better. Did you know that air is less polluted at night? So, it'll be healthy for me. I see it as win-win.”

The nurse grumbled. "Instead of annoying me, why don't you call someone? You can use the phone booth at the station."

"That's a good idea!" he said through the last spoonful. His mind going over the business arrangement he had with his godfather.

"Great. Call that girlfriend of yours, mmm? That poor woman. I'm sure she'll be ecstatic."

He scrunched his eyebrows at the nurse who was taking the finished food tray away from him.

"I have a girlfriend?"

Cora stopped on her way out the door and turned around to face him, her expression skeptical but wary. “You didn't hit your head that hard. But I'll call Dr. Smith.”

The early sunlight trickled through the blinds, glaring behind his shut eyes. He turned his back on what his sleepy mind perceived as the window and nuzzled closer to the pillows beside him. He was dozing off to another sleep when he felt slight rumblings vibrating on his body. Owen squinted drowsy eyes open and for a distorted moment he wondered where he was.

"8:30am meeting. " the voice trailed off before it went quiet again.

Memories of last night finally woke him up.

He smiled and leaned over her sleeping form. Her eyes were fluttering but were still closed.
Unthinking, he gave a lingering kiss on her bare shoulder.

She sighed, wriggling back to him.

Owen continued his feather-light kisses. Starting from the nape of her neck, down to the light freckles littering her back. He stopped at the middle and went up again.

"Mmmm.. Hammond hall, third floor..."

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. Trust her to talk about something relevant even in her sleep. Owen pressed his nose on the slender arch of her neck and snaked a hand underneath the blanket. He should wake her but the idea of hearing the rest of her dream sounded more intriguing and comical.

"Owen... have to."

He bit his lip to fight another round of merriment. Moving her hair over her shoulder, he kissed her nape instead.

"No... Don't kiss... Can't concentrate..."

He let his tongue dart out his mouth as he suckled her earlobe. Owen heard her suck in a breath. He simpered against the velvety skin. He fanned out his hand on her stomach, pulling her closer as he waited for another mumble. He rained kisses on her shoulders while his fingers traced her curves under the blanket.

Each touch as rousing and energizing.

She hummed before he heard her voice, awake and whole. "Enjoying yourself?"
"Immensely." he replied, peppering kisses on her arm.

She turned her body and faced him, the blanket covering her nakedness. Her hair, the perfect bedhead, all tousled up and wavy. Natural pinkish lips and long, thick eyelashes casted shadows over the golden freckles. Her eyes gleaming with contentedness. Owen had a though that his day couldn’t get any better this.

"Good morning." she greeted, biting her lip.

He had to smile. “Morning.”

"You sleep, okay?"

"The best. You?" he admitted, gilding his fingers through her hair.

She nodded and lied on her side, one hand underneath her cheek.

"No nightmares?"

"None. What time is it?

Owen looked at his wristwatch and answered, "7:12."
"We have a meeting today." she reminded him, looking down and fingering another scar on his oblique.

"I know. " he smirked. "I heard you. You were talking about it in your sleep."

Her eyes dilated, her cheeks turning a reddish color. "I was not talking in my sleep!"

"Oh, but you were."

"I was not!" she moved back from the bed, away from him, clutching the blanket with one arm.

He laughed out loud and reached for her. "You were! Come here!"

Owen pulled himself on top of her and pinned her waist down. Their giggles erupting the room. He met her eyes and felt his heart smote before him.

"I was not." she uttered in a low voice, gazing up his lips.

"No." he hovered over her, "You weren't." and he couldn't resist anymore and kissed her.
What was supposed to be a gentle morning kiss turned into a swirl of lust and hunger. Claire moaned and raked her hands on his hair. He could feel her body already radiating off with renewed sexual energy, jolts of static electricity crawling up from her skin to his. His hips jerked on the crook of her thighs. She gasped and broke the kiss, their breathing going husky all at once.

"We... can't." she said between his kisses.

He slid the blanket off her, exposing the rest of her. He pressed heated lips on her pulse point, her breasts, smiling at the hickeys he left the night before. Her hands scratching over shoulder blades, his chest, and thighs. "They won't start without us."

"I'm never late."

Owen chuffed against her cleavage. "You can tell me to stop, but you won't."

“Arrogant son of a bitch.” She squeaked, massaging his scalp.

He chuckled against her breast, the echo vibrating from his throat to his lips. she tugged harder. He licked her aerola, nibbling them with his teeth before he went further south. Her hands were clutching the pillows, her legs thrashing around as if to gain some sort of control.

He inhaled as he reached the apex of her thighs and stilled her hips. The carnal thoughts going through him inevitable as she arched her back. Emboldened, he sucked on her inner thighs, leaving new marks on her already-flushed body.
Their lungs becoming desperate for oxygen. He thought he should slow down or it would be over too soon. But she was too irresistible. He slipped his tongue between the folds and probed and kissed the sweet spot. Claire drew her knees up and fell back on the bed.

“So?” He breathed, peering at her through hooded eyes. All his logical sense froze. He licked his lips, relishing in her taste.

“Shut up and be quick about it.”

It was a good morning indeed.

"... What if we moved the sanctuary to this part of the island, I mean it would provide easier access." Claire's voice loud and clear from behind the door.

“Good morning guys.” He greeted as he pushed the glass door open with his back. Two brown bags of pastries and sandwiches clutched by his good hand. His left arm secured and sling-ed with the arm support.

The board stood up with a unison of good mornings and Mr. Gradys. It always bugged him whenever people in the room do that for him. He nodded at them before he focused on Claire.
Owen found himself fighting another smile. Of course, she wasn’t late.

After their little rendezvous, he insisted on showering together. In his words, "it would save time and water then we wouldn't be late." Claire pushed him out the door, earning grim looks from the old couple across the hall. He went to his bungalow to clean himself for the meeting and he finished five minutes past 8. On his way to the hall, he decided to stop by the nearby café to buy everyone breakfast.

He walked to the empty seat beside Claire and placed the bags down. “Sit down, sit down. Please.”

He mentally counted the people in the room. “I hope I covered everyone.”

“Thanks Owen.”

“Thank you, Mr. Grady.”

“Help yourself, guys.” Owen grabbed four varieties of breakfast before pushing the bags at the center of the table.

“Owen, dear. You know, I love you so, so, so much. But you gotta stop being late. It's disrespectful.” Sarah reproached in a affectionate and maternal tone.

Sarah and Ian were the closest people he has for parents. Ian were childhood buddies with his dad. While his mom was responsible for Ian to meet Sarah whom she was college friends with. Owen enjoyed spending time with them. Every chance he got, he would visit them on their little island. He would remember Skype calls with Sarah, Ian and his Dad whenever he's faraway. Growing up, Sarah also helped him cope with the loss of his mom. She comforted him with stories about Ellie,
the four of them, their shared values and her dreams for her son. Young adolescent Owen would go to sleep feeling loved and complete.

“I have to agree with Sarah, Mr. Grady.” Claire deadpanned beside him, hiding her smirk with the coffee cup.

He raised his eyebrows at her. Oh, it's on.

Owen leaned over the table to give Sarah and Ian theirs.

“I’m sorry Sarah. See, I had a loud evening last night so I couldn't sleep. It was pretty wild... Wew. It was some storm huh? How did you sleep, Miss Dearing?” He mocked concern, his grin stretching from across the room.

Claire choked on her coffee, she reached for the napkin.

“Yeah, that rain came out of nowhere.” Ian chided between a mouthful of croissant and coffee.

“Oh no. See! I told you honey, we should've booked you at the hotel if you weren't so attached to that cottage.” Sarah consoled, still in that loving manner.

“No, no. It's fine Sarah.” He chuckled, offering Claire her bagel. "So anyway, I thought it’ll slow down but it didn't. Kept me up all night. All night, I tell you." He felt a jab of pointy heel on his shin from under the table. Owen glanced at Claire. Although her expressions remained passive, her cheeks were blooming to a pink rose.

"Anyway, let's go down to business. Claire?"

She cleared her throat and pushed a folder towards him, "As I was saying, Mr. Grady..."

He then turned to Ian who winked at him, his eyes dancing between the two of them.

The bougainvillea vines that climbed the canopy has been providing them shade. The soft glow of the afternoon sun glinted rainbow colors on their glasses. Plates held the pinstriped cloth on their
table as the salty island wind breezed through. The courses were already devoured, leaving only traces of it on the porcelain set. On the four chairs surrounding the round table, sat three joyous adults. And a less than enthusiastic one on the other.

"My God, no, no. Come on." Owen shook his head and rubbed a hand on his face as the group burst into more laughter.

Sarah invited the two of them over a late lunch at Malcolm's residence. As a send-off to Claire, who would be leaving, Sarah prepared them her best dishes and a bottle of champagne. And for the last 10 minutes, Ian was enumerating every mortifying decision Owen had ever done when as a kid.

He would be more than happy to tell Ian to shut up but Claire was enjoying herself. She was all dimpled smiles and carefree laughter around the best people he had ever known. He was finding it hard to believe that she was the same uptight woman who scared everyone with a click of her heels. She was still intimidating. People still part whenever she walks by but something about her was... loose. It was taking all his energy not to overthink that her chirpy attitude was because of him. That she was also reeling in from the events that happened last night and this morning, like he was. Because, a larger part of him hoped that Claire would admit what Cora told him.

He watched her as she leaned forward in her chair, her hand next to his on the table. Her eyes alive with humour as Ian delighted her with another humiliating story.

"Oh, there's this one time, you're gonna love this, you're gonna love this." Ian started again; his champagne glass hoisted up into the air as he told his story. "We were spending Thanksgiving at my uncle's cabin in Colorado. All the adults were staying inside, right? Remember this honey?" He turned to Sarah whose shoulder was still shaking from the previous story.

"... and the four of us are having wine. We were talking about something when Ellie saw Owen at the backyard. His back was to us. Ellie called him and when he turned around, he had mud all over his face and hands. Turns out, he dropped his chocolate bar on the ground and decided to "make
more" by mixing it with earth and water. Owen was pretty proud of himself. He even put them in little coconut husks for us to share. The women, of course, went crazy while Alan and I laughed our asses off.

Owen groaned while Claire and Sarah broke into more heaps of uncontrollable laughter.

"Yeah. That explains it then why his clothes were always covered in gravel and dirt." Claire jibed as she drank from her glass.

"Hey, I was a curious kid!" he defended as he popped a grape on his mouth. “I think we’ve had enough stories to tell for one day.

"No, we haven't."

"Come now, Ian. We’ve embarrassed him enough.”

“Thanks Sarah. I’ve always liked you better than him.” Owen teased, winking at the older woman sitting across him.

“I’m gonna pretend, I didn’t hear that. Anyway, Claire. Can’t you stay for the weekend?”

“I wish I could, but I’ve been gone long enough.” She replied in a manner that was respectful and sincere.

“Are you sure we can’t persuade you? It’ll only take three days. I promise. Then you and Owen could go home together.” Sarah suggested as she poured herself another glass.
“If I stayed a little longer, I might not leave this place. Besides, you have Owen here.” She answered, raising an eyebrow at her.

After mulling things over, he decided to stand by Claire's decision - for him to rest before going back home. He would be spending the next few days on the island, with Ian's birthday also coming up.

“That’s too bad. No offense Owen, but I like Claire more.” Ian bounced back with mocking sarcasm.

“Ha-ha!” Owen scoffed.

“Miss Claire?” A voice interrupted from behind him.

They turned to see a young brunette dressed in a pencil skirt and corporate blouse, a walkie talkie in her hand. “I’m so sorry to intrude but the private boat arranged for you has arrived.”

Ian and Sarah tilted their heads in dismay. “Aww.”

"I don't wanna be rude but I should go. I also have to take a few quick rounds on the expansion site with Mr. Kadam." Claire added, straightening up from her chair.

"and I'll... be going with you." he joined, wiping his mouth from the glass he finished. "It was a lovely lunch, Sarah. I missed your cooking."

Sarah and Ian didn't protest. They stood up with them and exchanged farewell hugs.

"You're more than welcome to come back." she said to Claire as she hugged her.
“If you’re ever in California, call me. I’d be happy to show you around”

A sappy sensation knocked him as he watched the women’s interaction. His smile tearing his face. Sarah and Claire bore resemblance from each other - with their flaming auburn hair and ivory skin. Not to mention, their feisty and intelligent reputations.

Claire caught him and mouthed "What?" over Sarah's shoulder before they let go. He shrugged and kissed Sarah’s cheek with a promise to come back later for dinner. The group bid their goodbyes and Claire and Owen followed the woman into the service car.

The meeting with the construction manager and chief architect was brief and concise. In no time, Owen was accompanying Claire on Ian's private motor boat. Throughout the ride, they never ran out of things to talk about. Their winning cases against former employees, resort renovation plans, and global company standings. Although it was downright professional and nowhere near what he wanted to talk about, he felt at ease. Owen liked seeing her face light up whenever she counters him. Not that he always drives their conversations to the point of arguing, which he wasn't, not today.

The dock of the mainland loomed farther but still he found himself dreading the time left.

He was leaning against the dishwasher, a half-bitten apple on his bandaged hand while Claire wrote something on her tablet opposite him. The longer he looked at her, Owen felt it harder and harder to concentrate on what she was correcting him about.

“The architect was very hands on. We could alternate going back and forth on the island if necessary. But Mr. Kadam assured me that everything would go smoothly. Though we still have to build a tower to stabilize their internet connection. I just need your signature before we could press on with it. What do you think?”

“What do I think? I think you need to catch a breath.” He threw the apple on the bin. Of their own accord, his legs closed the distance between them. Claire, as always, leveled her eyes with his.
“And you, you need to focus.”

He smirked, tilting his head in a smug manner and stopped in front of her. “Do I?”

“Yes.” Her voice challenged, the corners of her mouth twitching.

“Then you gotta stop distracting me. It’s getting annoying.” He jeered.

“It’s not my fault you have an attention span of a puppy.”

Then, there it was again, the sensual look in his eyes. He cupped her cheek and uttered in the low soft voice. “I lost count on how many times I want to kiss you, today.”

She rolled her eyes. “Flattery won’t get you nowhere, Grady.”

“And where do you think it’ll get me?” He looked down at her semi-parted lips. His self-control ceasing with every shallow breath.

She craned her neck up at him to look him square in the eye. “You’re a smart boy, you’ll figure it out.”
Owen smirked before pressing his mouth to hers. Tentative at first, almost shy and cautious. Then, his yearning and passion overtook him. He angled his head to the side so he could kiss her deeper. Claire’s hand went at the back of his head, assisting him in his quest. Their tongues entwining with each other like two snakes in heat. His sling-ed arm was preventing their bodies to align against each other. Owen then slipped his left hand from its confinement and threw it behind him. He hiked her skirt to her hips and hoisted her leg under his arm. His whole body longing for her. The pointy end of her heels rubbing and digging on his thigh.

“If you don’t stop doing that, this is gonna go way out of hand.” He groaned and traced the tip of his tongue on her ear.

“I don’t want you to stop.” Her hands untucked his button up and slid them inside, rummaging tense muscles.

A grumble echoed from his chest and he grabbed her elbow as he led her through the cabin bedroom. As soon as he closed the white wooden door, Claire latched her seductive lips on his throat and he's lost again. He was rock hard. And the fact that her expert fingers was eagerly unbuttoning his pants didn’t tame the fire burning him. Claire’s pleasurable gasps rang on his ears as he removed her turtle neck. He hiked one knee on his waist and snaked one hand on the inside of her skirt. His fingers moved her underwear on the side before he inserted a finger. Claire bit his lip before breaking their kiss.

Owen pushed and wriggled deeper. He added another one, maintaining the leisure, tortuous pace. The sound of his hand on her most sensitive part making him crazier still. Claire’s head thudded on the wall behind them as she moaned and moved along the movement of his fingers. He tugged down her bra, kneading erected nipples.

“We don’t have... time.” She choked as he took her whole breast in his mouth.

They pulled apart, allowing a small distance for them to adjust their clothing out of the way.
“Hurry, Hurry.” She gasped, resting her elbows on his shoulders. She was jerking her hips to him bringing him closer to his goal.

“Don’t wait for me.” Owen grunted before bracing himself and thrusting forward. They hissed against each other’s mouths as her pulsating heat encompassed him.

“Ow…en. Fuck.”

The idea that he won’t be seeing her in the next few days made him reckless and wilder. And somebody tell him he must be exaggerating because he could tell she was too. Claire was bolder, more profane in her encouragements and praises. It left Owen speechless and harsher than he was the previous times with her. This rediscovered connection scattering his wits. Every ounce of his control was being tested by the sight and sound of her writhing for him.

He hit her pelvis with a rhythmic, harsh pattern. Speed becoming more important than smoothness.

He plunged upwards, higher. Her heels provided her some height, meeting him stroke for stroke. Their angle on the wall hitting her deeper. Claire was clinging to him as though her life depended on it. He was so aroused.

Right now, nothing else mattered but Claire and how he needed her pleasure. He watched as her face contorted into pleasure. Her perfect lips moaning his name and, for more.

Their panting became stronger, her magnificent breasts rubbing against his chest. She opened doe, green eyes. Her lust and desperation in them. With a hand still holding her thigh, Owen slipped all the way out before sliding back in. Her shout muffled by his mouth and tongue. He continued this in the next minutes as their mouths ravished each other.
Owen held her hips, keeping up his beastly pace. Over and over again. He kissed her neck. The heavenly sensation on his core heightening. Her walls swallowing him in a tight embrace. He stretched his arm to support the slamming of their bodies. Her left leg under his arm. Her hands on his butt, countering his powerful, desperate strokes. Her body went limp as spasms rolled over her body. Their hot juices coated them in blinding white bliss.

He nuzzled on crook of her neck, kissing the glistening skin. Claire dropped her head on his shoulder, one hand behind his neck. For a moment, they stayed where they were. Willing body and mind to come back from the high. Without pulling their bodies apart, he sat them down on the bed. They remained their intimate position until Owen looked out the window. They changed back to their clothes in silence with him sneaking glances every now and then. He couldn’t read her and it was driving him crazy. She stood there in front of him in a black sleeveless turtleneck (which he realized were a cover up for the path of hickeys he left) and black skirt.

Owen knew that he liked her. Way before the accident. Even before Nurse Cora told him what Claire did at the hospital. He was just too stubborn to admit it for fear that it wouldn’t go both ways. But hell, he almost died. Again. The scrapes of the tree barks were still fresh in his memory as if it was yesterday. He remembered that she was the only thing keeping him awake from the blow he took on his side. He watched her as she called for help on the side. Her face clouded with panic and worry. She was frantic, beautiful and most importantly, unhurt from the jerk who tolled her car. He realized that he wasn’t willing to die without feeling her lips on his again.

Hence, Owen Grady (who for the first time hasn’t asked a girl out for the sake of having sex afterwards) went for it. “Go on a date with me.”

Claire stopped from tying his tie and met his gaze. There was a moment of pause. The racy sound of the boat’s engine overcame the stillness of the medium-sized room. Engulfed with a dooming feeling of rejection, he added,
“It could be Breakfast, lunch, dinner. When you’re not too busy.”

Her chuckle appeased his accelerating heartbeat. “I’m busy when you’re busy.”

“Then, let’s take a day off. We can turn this boat around. Stay.” He pleaded silently.

His ability to read people seemed to have deserted him. Claire watched him in dead silence. The kind of silence enough to make him more nervous. The kind that made him wanna throw himself over the cliff for even asking such a stupid question. It was not like he hadn’t ask women out before- which he had. Women always had the same satisfactory answer for him. But Claire wasn’t one of those women. He knew that since day one.

The boat slowed down, informing him that they were nearing their destination. Claire avoided his eyes and wiped the last lipstick smudges on his mouth. Her fingers lingering on his neck.

She opened her mouth to speak when the motorboat finally came into a halt.

He wasn’t sure what Claire would think about the idea of people finding out what they’d been up to for the last 30 minutes. He sighed and walked past her to open the door. He offered her a smile despite the butterflies swirling all over his body.

They never spoke a word with each other even when they reached the airport. Claire walked in front of him in her usual intimidating stride. While Owen was getting that feeling that he did something wrong.
He gave the chauffeur a $20 tip before he walked over to her.

As he met her eyes again, he couldn’t help but think Yeah, Grady. This is what rejection feels like.

“Have a safe flight, Claire. Call me if there’s any problem.”

“I will. Thanks.”


Claire stepped closer and un-twisted the fabric on his shoulder. “Come back to work in one piece, Grady.”

“I’ll try to.” He smirked.

“Do you know Beni?”

Who the hell is Beni? “Um. Should I?” He queried, unsure of the change in conversation.
“No. Idiot. Beni is a restaurant downtown.” She continued in an authoritative tone that made him think of business meetings. But there was a slight blush on her cheeks. Kind of like the blush whenever he compliments her.

Oh.

“I’ll see you there. Tuesday. 7pm.” Claire added and raised her eyebrows at him. “Don’t you dare be late.”

“When did I ever?” He felt his smile stretched from room to room.

The weekend passed by in a blur. Ian celebrated his birthday with splendor surrounded by his family and friends. Owen reacquainted himself with Ian’s children who were also businessmen. He couldn’t remember most of it.

There was nothing else to do since Claire already settled all the deals before she left. Owen was, again, reminded how lucky Grady Corp was to have someone like her helping him run the company.

Two days. It’s been two days since he last saw or talked to her.

She was never not on his mind. It was strange feeling that hung over him, overwhelming him. And that was probably the reason why he was standing outside her building on a Monday evening- a day earlier than his actual flight.
He hurriedly combed his hair with his fingers on the mirror beside her door, straightened his pale denim button-up and bounced on his toes for warm-up. He let out another deep breath before he pressed the doorbell.

There was a slight fumbling with the locks. Without warning, panic overcame him. What was he going to say?

Owen survived the last couple of years emotionally detached. He knew that keeping his heart uninvolved would be wise and practical move. Plus, his months off-duty were always unpredictable. There was no certainty that he would stay on land for more than 6 months let alone survive offshore. As a result, he had never been around much to learn the comings and goings of a relationship himself.

The idea of relationships so foreign and unwanted to him. And so, for many events he tried brushing it off. His devil may-care reputation must remain intact. Especially in the presence of a fiery-tempered redhead. But over the course of months he knew her, he couldn't help being drawn, couldn't help being at awe with everything she does. He knew it was not just for her physical beauty but for who she was when she thought no one was looking.

The door opened and he thought he might go into a cardiac arrest.

As far as he's concerned, surprises were a good thing. He liked surprises. Although he could not say the same thing for this one.

“Hey, man. What can I do for you?” A middle-aged man with curly blonde hair stood at her door, his shirt hung open.

He found his voice amidst the churning in his stomach. “Is this where Claire Dearing lives?”

“Yeah. It is.”
“Who’s at the door, babe?”

Owen felt the color drain from his face.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this chapter made up for your loooooong wait. I've been trying to get to the ending I wanted so it took me a long time. If you guys are still here, make some noise! lol. Anyway, please correct me for any errors.

Also, tell me what you think about the progress of their relationship. Your reviews inspire this story. I get ideas when you guys make comments, so you guys are such a huge part of this.

Thanks so much for reading again!

Seriously, J.
Beta

Chapter Notes

*plays Jealous by Nick Jonas*

Also, you'll read the word 'Badinage' somewhere in the story. This means, humorous or witty conversation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**BETA**

Beta wolves are strong wolves. They are the second in command who may repeatedly challenge their alphas for rule of the pack. And on occasions, beta male and female might also entice the female and male alphas.
Two days ago

The walls of one of the most well-planned buildings in the city should conceal any kind of noise outside.

At least, he knew it should.

And yet, here William “Billy” Brennan sat by the nook of Grady Corp.’s cafeteria, bothered by the ruckus. Parting the window blinds, he peeked outside.

And like every controversy that involved money, the grounds was a jungle.

There were at least fifty media crew crowding the entryway of the building. The press trucks parked by the gutter caused car buildups from both sides of the street. Some passing onlookers stopped by and observed. Billy wasn't sure if they were more curious about the commotion or the Class-A reporters. Maybe both.

"I hope it rains," he mumbled mischievously.

He removed himself away from the window, took the last bite of his Cuban sandwich and got back to work.

Grady Corp. has always been one of those companies the world has heard of. The multibillionaire empire has been dominating all kinds of business sectors for years. Agriculture, Telecommunications, Transportations, Retails, Hotels, you name it. No wonder GC was major news to the corporate and world economy.

Billy grew up with two hardworking parents. They dedicated their lives to a corporation who only cares if they put more money in their bank accounts. They worked everyday of their lives to provide for the family of six. Businessmen were wolves in sheep's clothing. These me, Billy believed, were born out of greed and blackmail. And as much as they say they do, they don't empathize with other people, or the world. But GC's business ideals and humanitarian acts were
changing his assumptions. And he knew why.

Owen Michael Grady, CEO and chairman of Grady Corporation. Sole heir to a thousand conglomerates and millions of dollars. Billy never knew that such a short, very-American name could hold that much power and title.

A few months ago, Grady himself filed allegations of financial misconduct and breach of trust to Elijah Mills. Mills was another big name in the business. Although he was incomparable and nowhere near where Grady is in the corporate wheel.

The bureau has Mills in close watch while investigations were still open. The bureau found fragments of evidence but somebody said it wasn't enough to put him behind bars. The man was a manipulator and a little too smart for his own good. But he was cooperative with everything that's been going on. His companies remained functional even without their patriarch. But aside from the accusations against him, he's also linked to the recent theft cases of Nedry and Sere.

As the lead agents investigating the car crash with Grady, Billy and Eric Walters was automatically assigned to the case. Billy opened another the thick folder and began studying its contents.

Dennis Nedry and Antonio Sere were former deranged employees of Grady Corp. They stood accused of falsification of documents and embezzlement.

Nedry sang like a canary and confessed his and Sere's involvement. He appealed that his honest statements would guarantee him of lower charges. He wasn't. Although Sere admitted to everything, he denied all accusations relating to Mills. With enough evidence to support the trial, both gentlemen was facing 15 years of jail time and $ 500,000 bail, each.

That explained why Billy's been in the cafeteria ever since 9 am. He was to conduct follow-up interrogations against Nedry and Sere with Walters. But his new partner left for an errand and hasn't come back since 2. It's already 4pm.

The staff’s answers were more than helpful. They were aware of Nedry’s gambling activities from when he was still working. While Sere loves brothels and believed to owe a lot of money to some dangerous people. His receipts were all over the hidden compartment in his desk.

He was ready to send them to headquarters when the jury imposed a verdict not more than fifteen
minutes ago. Hence, the jungle of press outside.

He had to admit that Mills’ scandal, the car accident and recent fraud cases got him scratching the back of his head.

This could be a lot easier to solve if he had someone to talk things through. He sighed and checked his phone for a message from his partner. Nothing.

Billy went on and flipped the pages and found the scribbles about Grady and Claire Dearing.

One thing he also got from the interrogations this morning was how loved Grady and Dearing were. The two were outstanding leaders and the staff had nothing but praises for them. Billy found it admirable for some reason.

Over a month ago, he had the pleasure to meet the other half of that tandem. He recalled her domineering presence that even 'I- am - Mr. Punchline-' partner had no choice but fall back.

Billy recalled the lost look on her eyes that day, how haunted she was as she narrated that incident for them. He felt pity for her and at the same time a prick of jealousy for the man she's grieving for.

Before his investigations, he had never heard of her name. And honest to God, if he knew who he was dealing up against, he would've volunteered immediately. He believed a woman should be smart first and beautiful second for them to catch his attention.

Claire Dearing fit the bill. Attractive was an understatement for that woman with her glorious red hair. Her credentials, as flawless as she was, boasted with superiority and skill.

The phone inside his breast pocket vibrated, breaking his daydreaming. Billy didn’t bother checking the caller ID when he pressed the phone on his ear. “I'm still here at GC.”

“*I know.*”

“What do you want?” Billy replied, a little too impatient.
“You know already. You heard the verdict?”

“I did. Sere and Nedry were already in deep shit anyway. So, good news for everybody.”

“Yeah. It is. Your partner still a no show?”

“Yeah. There’s something suspicious about him too. But how’d you know about that?” His brows scrunched in suspicion.

“I have my ways. Everything’s under control then?”

On instinct, Billy took a furtive look outside the window and sighed. “Yes.”

“Good. Keep it up, Billy.”

A car pulled up suddenly at the middle of the road. From it, emerged flaming red hair and bewildered, green eyes. The crowd ran towards her. Like swarm of flies coming together for a meal. The reporters clamoured for her attention. They shoved their microphones and cameras towards her unwillingness. The valet kid he remembered interviewing, stood behind her and acted as the barrier against the pushy crew.

Billy muttered a quick, “I gotta go.” before he ended the call and ran to the rescue.

Present.

Monday evening.

The floor was quiet and empty. Well, nearly. Disrupting the peace and quiet was the rapid typing sounds of a keyboard.
Claire pressed her palms on her closed eyes while waiting for the sent alert tone of her last email. She stretched her arms above her and glanced at the clock by the shelf. 08:12 Claire groaned, realizing she lost track of time again.

It has been a long, arduous day. But Claire couldn't deny that it felt great to be back to work. The only downside was Zara, who would leave by Friday for her 2-week honeymoon. To make sure that she wouldn't have problems with the transition, Zara introduced Emma. A 23-year old woman with a well-kept afro and olive skin. After their brief introduction, Claire had her weekly meeting with the department heads. She also introduced the newest Head of Finance. She studied breakeven analysis, budget proposals and new marketing campaigns. Last but not the least, she dealt with the PR and Legal team.

Two nights ago, Artie picked her up from the airport. But before going straight home, she asked him if they could drop by the office first. Which she didn't know was a bad idea.

The press was a nightmare. Especially after the of charges against Sere and Nedry. With enough evidence from Zia, accounting team, the trial was short. Antonio and Dennis would be facing serious charges of fraud and theft.

She stood there and for the first time in her life, she had no idea what was going on. She had to squeeze among the throng of people to the entrance. Thankfully, Mr. Brennan, the field agent, was near and helped usher her to safety. But other than that, everything went without a hitch.

Her laptop beeped, signalling the end of her work. She shut the lid and gathered her belongings but not before sending a quick message to Karen.

"On my way home."

and a follow up,

"You guys better be not doing it on my kitchen."

It was a late Sunday afternoon when Karen arrived for her business conference. Lewis, her sister's "guy friend" would be attending a bidding ceremony in the city came with her. Lewis was working as an architect for a multidisciplinary design agency in Madison.
Ready to leave, Claire checked the room one last time to make sure she didn’t forget anything. Her eyes scanned her desk before it fell on the paperworks she needed Owen to sign, piling on her coffee table. She took them and decided to drop it on her way out. Upon her entry, the scents of sandalwood, leather and his perfume welcomed her. After all those weeks of vacancy, it was spotless. And it still smells like him, she thought with a pang of longing.

Seeing everything as they were, made her to remember the last time she was here. She felt her stomach churn seeing the armchair and the ottoman. Claire dropped the papers on his desk and wrote a post-it. **SIGN THIS!**

On her way out, she found herself dallying on the display shelf. Some of the frames changed and replaced by more pictures of his mother and father. There were also new ones of him and his dad. His college graduation, barbecue night at some yard she didn't recognize. There was also one with him standing between a younger Ian and Sarah.

But a 6R photo stood above the rest. She picked it up and stared at him. All heart-stopping smiles and bright eyes. He was standing on the side of a group of old people, in front of a banner painted with the words, “St. Gabriel’s Nursing Home”. There were a table of gifts behind them and a buffet table on the side. At the bottom of the picture was a cursive inscription,

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Thank you, Owen, for spending your birthday with us! Love, Everyone.
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Unknowingly, she traced his picture with her pinky finger. He always did have a penchant for helping people, young and old. She smiled, feeling a sense of warmth swell in her chest.

“*Let me know if there’s any problem and please, don’t miss me too much.*” He smirked as he stood by the check-in gate of Juan Santamaria Airport.
“As if, Grady.”

And even though she rolled her eyes at him, she found herself confirming his smug implication.

It was a difficult thing for her to admit. As well as downright pathetic since she only saw him two days ago. But she did. The quirk remarks, upward smirks. And green eyes that she couldn't decide whether they’re more hazel or sea green. There were moments when her old reservations would creep up on her. Because even though he gave the best orgasms of her life there was still a part of her that was skeptic.

Afraid.

No, terrified.

Yet, her mind drifted back to the times on the island. How everything felt simple and easy back there. The blush heated her cheeks whenever she remembers the lingering brushes of his lips. Compliant at most but rough right exactly when she needed him. The reverent whisper of her name, eradicated every thought in her overworked brain. The feeling of security as his masculine arms held her. And how she trembled under his skillful lead. How his hands felt like little sparks dancing on her skin, making her bolder with her words and actions. She remembered how they parted. How disappointed she was when he kissed her cheek as they said their goodbye.

She couldn't remember the last time she felt something like this. Or even felt something even remotely close to this. She couldn't find the appropriate words to describe it despite her extensive vocabulary. And she hated not knowing. For her, anything that couldn't be analyzed or guaranteed could not be trusted. Still, she was getting the feeling he's worth it.

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“Claire?”

She leaped and looked over the doorway to see Joe, the old maintenance guy. His faded blue coveralls resembled the wrinkles on his amiable face.

“Joe! Hi! I didn’t see you there.” She exclaimed, the frame pressed to her bosom in surprise.

The elderly man chuckled, “I’m sorry if I scared you. I’m cleaning up.”
She nodded, “I just dropped those papers.” she explained and placed the frame back on the shelf. Claire hurried to him and closed the door.

She headed towards the elevator with Joe who was dragging the vacuum behind them.

“Do you know when is Owen coming back?”

“His flight’s tomorrow lunch.” Claire tried to sound nonchalant as possible.

“That explains it.” he shook his head and smiled.

“Explains what?”

“The increase of decorations under the desks while I was cleaning up. The employees were planning a surprise for him ever since he got out of the hospital.”

“Oh, they do?” She smiled back at him.

“Yeah. He's a good man.”

"That he is."

"Me and my wife..." he picked empty cups and candy wrappers littered before continuing. we prayed for the both of you when you were in the hospital."

The declamation touched her. "Thank you, Joe. Really."

"It's nothing… Hey, I wasn’t supposed to say anything, but you think, you can keep it a secret? I don’t wanna be the old man who can't keep a secret.

She winked at him and he pressed the elevator for her. “Don’t worry Joe, you spilled to the right
“Anyway, we’re glad to have you both back.”

“Thank you again. Have a goodnight, Joe.”

“See you tomorrow. And Claire?”

She entered the elevator, pushed the Parking button and turned to him. “Mmm?”

“I don’t know if it’s my place, but you seem happier.” the maintenance man grinned at her from ear to ear.

She tapped the steering wheel impatiently as she reached the last traffic light. The ride from the office to her condo took a good 40 minutes because of the rush hour traffic. Claire dialled her sister’s number to let her know she’s near.

“Where are you?” her sister’s voice engulfed the speakers of her new car.

“Entering the basement parking.”

“Ohhhh! Okay! Good!” Karen chuffed that Claire could almost hear her jumping.

“Why do you sound so excited? Please tell me you didn’t have freaky-ass sex all over my apartment.”

“I am not! But to answer your question, we only did it the guest bathroom.” Karen giggled.

She groaned although her lips twitched. It’s been over a year when Karen separated her husband of 12 years. 7 months after their divorce, Karen tried her cards on the dating game again. Claire was happy that her sister was back to her old self again.
Karen laughed before adding, “Anyway, you don’t have to worry about that. Lewis and I would be out of your nose tonight.”

“What? Why? I was kidding!” She pressed the phone between her left ear and shoulder as she grabbed her bags from the seat and locked the car. “You two can stay.”

“It’s fine. They have an available room now at that hotel where my conference is. We’ll stay there.”

“Oh okay. But I’m not kicking you out. Stay as long as you want.”


She frowned. “Food? What food? I didn’t order anything. I thought we’re going out?” She nodded her greeting at the bellboy who opened the door for her.

“Oh, we are still going out.”

Hearing the teasing in her sister’s intonation, her frown deepened. “Then why would... you know what, I’m on my way up. Don’t pay!”

“Oh, it’s all yours, sis. See yah in a bit!”

Claire hung up the phone and ascended to her floor. She twirled the keychain of her key as she waited for the doors to open at her floor.

“You seem happier.”

Joe’s statement reechoed in her ears. The island’s lingering effect, no doubt, she thought. Claire checked her reflection on the enclosed space as if to validate Joe’s compliment.
She titled her head and squinted her eyes, not seeing it. She then took in her attire. At least, the blue wrap dress she wore to work today still looked presentable for dinner. The dress ended on her shin with the sleeves covering up to her elbows. The deep v-neckline exposed her neck, revealing pale skin and tiny hints of freckles. But if one would observe closely, they would notice the light patches all over her neck and chest. She blushed, noticing the faint red mark where the V of her dress meet.

For the past two days, she wore high necks, button-ups. In simpler terms, she wore clothing that could conceal the love bites Owen left. She adjusted her dress and slapped her cheeks. As if it’d stop the indecent thoughts from pushing through.

“Calm down, Claire.” She heard herself exhaled. “Control.”

The elevator doors opened. She fished for her house keys inside her bag while walking the wide hallway. She heard laughter, and the unmistakable voice of her sister behind her door.

The door was not locked. So, she pushed.

“-and I told him, no. You can’t have that! Anything but that!”

Voices shattered the modesty of her usual quiet apartment. Her weekend guests were busting their guts at the person sitting on the 3-seater couch in front of them. Karen was bending over the armchair by the window. Her hand slapping both her knees, her face red. On the seat next to her was Lewis who was nursing a beer in his hand, the other clutching his stomach.

The stranger had his broad shoulders and muscled back to her. The brunet long-on-top-cut hair uncombed in the back. A black thing crossed over his shoulders.

She sucked in a breath. The hearty chuckle confirmed her suspicion.

“Claire! Oh my god, You’re here!” Karen addressed, still out of breath and wiping the tears in her eyes.

But she wasn’t looking at either of them. The stranger turned around and was suddenly up on his feet. He smiled at her and Claire felt her knees weaken.
“Owen.” She breathed before she could stop herself.

“Hi.” He greeted, brushing a hand on his newly-cut hair.

She felt her mouth stretched into a close-lipped smile. She held on the doorknob, valiantly flighting the zoo in her stomach.

“Uhm. I took an earlier flight. I’m sorry I didn’t call before dropping by.” He gestured towards Lewis and Karen who had her tell-me-details-later smile on her face. “They let me in.”

“Well, we couldn’t leave you on the doorstep.” Karen gushed and stood up to get her purse. “Now that we’re all here. Let’s go get dinner. I’m starving. You wouldn’t mind Owen joining us, would you, baby sis?”

“No. No.” Claire began, finding her voice again.

“Good! Owen? I wanna hear all about this farm.”

Owen tore his eyes away from her and answered Karen. “Only if I’m paying.”

Owen suggested a downtown Italian bistro. And despite his insistence, Lewis and Karen paid for the bill. The night was vivacious with conversation and laughter.

The man was a real conversionalist. His charm and charisma oozed naturally off him. And Claire found herself admiring it once again. Lewis, who she perceived as timid, was interactive. While her older sister was obviously smitten. She had her hand beneath her chin every time Owen talks. The man was also humble. Claire felt his discomfort when Karen mentioned the Times article written about him. She kicked her nosy sister under the table. Karen Dearing had done some snooping. Owen doesn’t like taking credit for his accomplishments. So Claire usually step in to give him his due. He smiled at her and throughout the night, his hand would rest on her knee and draw random circles. She didn’t swat his hand away.

The night was getting later when Claire parked the car outside The Paramount. His place. She dropped Karen and Lewis first before she drove Owen home. The street was clear except for the few regulars on the nearby café.
She got out to help him with his duffel bag – against his protests.

“Again, with you emasculating me.” he grimaced, shutting the trunk of her AMG C63.

She ignored him and gave him his bag. Claire inspected the the sling on his arm. “You know, you can skip work for another week, right? Take a rest.”

“What? And have me missed all the action? No, thank you. Besides, if I stay in one place without doing something, I'm gonna go crazy.” he leaned his hip on the rear light. Claire noted the sudden shift in his eyes as he gave her a quick gander. “You look nice tonight.”

She cleared her throat, feeling nervous under his scrutiny. Damn it, Claire. Hold it together. “Thanks.”

Owen smirked, the one-sided smirk he always has whenever he knew that he got under her skin. “And I particularly liked that mark.” He pointed at the plunge of her dress. Claire looked down and covered a hand on her chest.

“What!” she screeched and pulled the fabric up. Owen laughed whole-heartedly.

She stepped back, still tugging her dress, oblivious to sedan coming her way.

She heard a rude, long honk then the sound of her body crashing towards what felt like a wall of muscles. He ripped them away from the open street and pressed her where he was leaning at seconds ago.

“Watch it!” Owen shouted back at the car before he faced her.

“I swear to God, Dearing. If you don’t take a look where you’re going, I’m gonna have you chained to my side.”

“Don’t look at me like that. You’re the one who-” she snarled, slightly raising her voice. “Stop smiling!”
“My god. Even angry, you’re...” Owen shook his head and smiled down at her. “God. I’m so-”

“Bipolar? Leaving?” she filled. His whole body was caging her in. She pushed him away, with no luck. Owen grabbed her hand and held it. His thumb grazing the length of her fingers. His eyes felt like he was staring at her soul. She felt the walls of her reasoning weakened.

“Leaving? Dearing, I just started.” he whispered, gazing down at her lips.

Claire held her head high and stood straighter, as if it'll mask how she's tensing up from the hazy look in eyes. She gulped. How could this man piss her off one minute then make her hot and bothered next?

Logical Claire would push him away. Glare at him for good measure and would probably step on his shoes before she leaves. Logical Claire would be horrified from the nosy glances of the strangers in the street. But Logical Claire was slipping. Her disapproving voice and other alarming noises silenced by the universe living in his eyes.

In an instant, the world around them blurred to nothing but lens flares, sucking her in a place of light and warm touches. He leaned in closer, the one uninjured arm moved up her arm before stretching beside her body. She could feel his breath on her face. Intoxicating and minty. He angled his head, making her eyes flutter.

She sighed on the first touch. Her arms circled his neck and played with the hair on his nape. She pulled him further down, her body betraying her once again. He groaned and she felt herself smile against their kiss. Owen pulled away to move his injured arm out of the way before he crushed his lips on her waiting ones again. She opened her mouth to him, her tongue dominating his. He seemed to appreciate the effort because he growled and pressed his taut body on her melting bones.

An ambulance siren wailed, bringing them back to the present. She wasn’t sure who pulled away first. Owen leaned his lips between her eyebrows and muttered. “If you don’t stop kissing me like that, I might have to take you upstairs.”

Claire looked down beside their feet and noticed the duffel bag. “You're tired from the flight. You need sleep.” Her hands roamed his shirt absentmindedly before it rested on his chest.

“I don’t think I can now.” he sighed before Claire felt his chest rumble beneath her hands. Owen
chuckled as he brushed his nose against hers.

“What’s so funny?”

“I had a dream like this,” he confessed. From the expression on his face, she would say that it was a good dream. He released her but kept a hand on her waist.

“Yeah? What happened?”

“I’d rather show you, Miss Dearing.”

“You’re a pervert.” she scoffed playfully.

“I could be anything you want me to be.” Owen wiggled his eyebrows at her, not subtle about his intentions.

“Idiot.” She rolled her eyes but unable to keep the playfulness out of her tone.

Owen guffawed and took a step back. “’I’m-”

“Claire Dearing?” a familiar voice called from somewhere on their left.

Her eyes met kind, blue orbs and wavy dark blonde hair.

“Mr. Brennan!” she called out and walked towards him. He was holding a newspaper and a cup of to-go coffee. “I didn’t know you live from around here.”

“I don’t. I was working late and decided to go to my favorite coffee house.” he pointed to the café a few feet from them. “And it’s Billy. Don’t make me feel older than I am.” he chuckled.

She smiled at him before feeling the presence of a 6-foot tall Hercules by her side.
“Evening.” Owen said a tight, low voice that surprised her. “I’m Owen Grady.” he continued and extended his hand.

Billy held his neck higher as if it’ll make him taller than he was. His voice seemed stronger and he met Owen’s stare square on. She frowned.

“Oh, wow. Mr. Grady. It’s my pleasure.”

“ Heard you were on the Nedry and Sere’s case.” Owen released Brennan’s hand. “Thank you, by the way.”

“I am. Was. I was.” Brennan put his hands behind back. “I was on the Devil’s Road investigations as well. Actually, I’m still on it.”

“You are?” Owen asked, although he didn’t sound interested.

“Yes.” She answered for Billy, confused and not liking the hostility between their stares. “I remember him and Mr. Walters asking me questions.”

“Yeah. Lowery mentioned it in the passing.” And in a total turn of events, far from the friendly man she knew him to be, Owen sneered. “You aren't the asshole, right?”

She felt her eyes widen.

Billy chuckled at them and wiped a finger on his chin. “No, no. That was my partner. You have to forgive him, he’s... homesick. He’s a new transfer from New York.”

“It’s fine. I understand.” Claire replied.

“Actually, I was to ask questions for Mr. Grady here, a week ago. But they said you ran away.”
“I did. Got more important things to do than stare at the wall and watch tv.” Owen shrugged, his eyes never leaving Billy’s.

She elbowed him in a very discrete manner.

Billy nodded. “Well, I’m glad to see you out and about. I have to reschedule that within this week. If that’s ok.”

Owen nodded and reached out a hand again. “I’ll be seeing you again, Mr. Brennan.”

"You too, Mr. Grady." Billy exchanged the gesture and turned at her. "Miss Dearing. It’s so nice to see you again"

"Thank you again for last time, Mr. Brennan. Billy"

"My pleasure. Anytime you need me."

They watched as Billy walked opposite them and into the night. At the corner of her eye, she saw Owen close and flex the hand of his injured arm. She dipped her chin and raised an eyebrow at him.

“What? Quit starin’ at me like that.” he groaned, his forehead drawn together.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re annoyed at me or something.” he complained, grabbing the straps of bags at his feet. “It’s turning me on.”

“I’m not doing anything!” she defended. “And it’s not my fault you’re easily seduced.”

“I’m gonna go now before I haul you over my shoulder and up to my room. And trust me, we’re not gonna be sleeping.” he slung his bags over his good shoulder.
“I’m gonna bite your ear off, if you do that.”

“I know you will.” he chuckled again. "Get in the car, Dearing before I count to two... One.” he took a step forward.

“You’re an idiot.” she scowled but stepped back all the same.

“I know. See you tomorrow sweetheart!” he laughed and disappeared from her view.

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Tuesday

“Please tell me, you’re either naked when I take this off or there’s a whole keg of beer at the reception.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Why are you always thinking about sex?”

He smirked. “Ask me that again, Dearing... And for the record, sex AND beer.”

She tightened the handkerchief - a little too tight for his own liking.

“Aw! Now you’re being vengeful.”

The Welcome Back party was on when Artie called the reception on their floor. “He’s here! Alpha 1 in the building, I repeat. Alpha 1 in the building.... Hey Owen! Welcome back!”

Zara, as always, made sure Claire felt in on the fun by asking her to put to blindfold on Owen. Her assistant thought it would be less suspecting, by some reason. Plus, Lowery cannot be trusted with his babbling. Claire agreed since it was the least she could do for their efforts.

She went down to find him catching up with the valet boys. Now, alone in the elevator, Owen bent
his knees so she could tie the bandanna around his eyes. He stood up once it’s done. Claire patted
the fabric around his eyes.

“Are you comfortable? Can you see anything?”

“Yes. No. Why? Are you naked?” he reached up and pulled down the band a tiny bit.

“Don’t pull! God! You are impossible!” she screeched and secured the bandage again.

“I don’t see the point of blindfolding. I mean, it kinda lets you know there’s a surprise. It totally
negates the meaning.” he complained.

"Be nice. This is the only thing I'm allowed to do!"

"Oh, ok ok. I'm sorry... But this is kinda kinky, wouldn’t you say?” he titled his head up and
peeked from under the loose part of the fabric.

"Why am I not surprised.” she was about to step away when Owen held her where she was. He
gripped her waist with both hands and pulled her to him.

“I’m really looking forward to tonight.” he grinned.

In the confined space, the scent of his aftershave was prominent. His muscly build taking much of
her space. It was making her delirious. There were no cameras on this elevator but Claire's eyes
flicked at the corners to check.

“And, don’t worry.” Owen whispered, pulling her chin up to him. His inviting mouth was so close
that if she leaned an inch closer, her anticipating lips would touch his. “I won’t tell if you don’t. It’s
your choice, Claire.”

“It's one dinner. Colleagues can have dinner. Right?” she murmured out loud, intoxicated by their
closeness.

“Exactly. Don't overthink it. We'll do this on your terms." he smiled, that felt like melted chocolate sliding down her throat.

She nodded even though he can’t see her. The digital board blinked on top of the doors and she moved sideways. “We’re almost there.”

“Hold my hand?” he gibed as he felt around for his backpack while also offering out his other hand.

“Charming, Grady. Real charming.” she stood in front of him as the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

The reception lobby was man-less, as it should be. She stepped out of the way.

“Damn it, Dearing. You tied it a little too tight! I can’t see a thing!”

"That's the purpose of blindfold, idiot."

The sight of the almighty Owen groping the walls was amusing that she let him walk on his own for a minute. She grasped his arm when he was about to knock the vase off the foyer table and guided him.

A couple of repressed snickers erupted from behind them. She led Owen pass the cubicles, glass walls and to the meeting room. Claire caught a glimpse of some of their employees walking behind them. They were holding hallmark cards, paper flowers and confetti poppers. Their heels and shoes muffled by the grey carpet tile.
“I can hear you guys, you know.” Owen called from behind him.

Claire stopped right outside the meeting room where the rest of their colleague was. Their gleaming faces didn’t hide their glee. Multicolored bunting and a banner with words “Welcome Back Owen and Claire!” adorned the walls behind them. A three-layered white frosted cake on a mail cart stood held by a grinning Lowery and Zia. Zara was holding a video camera.

Claire positioned Owen before she stood behind him and loosened the knot behind his head. Once the fabric was loose, everybody yelled at the top of their lungs,

“SURPRISE!!!”

The hundred poppers went off, making them both jolt in slight surprise. He quickly turned to her again and in a soft voice, Claire spoke “Welcome back Mr. Grady. We missed you.”

Owen beamed at her before he’s taken away by the crowd.

This video conference with Chicago. The contract papers. The new investor reports. The financial budget reports. She hadn’t expected that all these would take all her time.

The gold watch on her wrist read 7:32 pm. She was late. She was so late.

Claire picked up her phone and tried calling Owen, as she had been doing for the past 30 minutes.

“Hey! you’ve reached Owen Grady. But not really. Leave a message.”

She sent him another text instead, explaining how sorry she was and that she’s on her way.

It was not uncommon that she was the last one out of the office. After the surprise party, Zara got an emergency call from her cousin living in San Diego so she took off early.

Emma, Zara’s replacement was still getting the hang of things. The poor girl was nervous, Claire
could tell. Emma forgot to give her the signed papers that needed to be off to the courier first thing in the morning. The video conference Claire told her to reschedule to next week happened at 6pm today. Her failure to follow up on quarterly investor reports. These were among the mishaps of today.

She leaner her head on her chair while she waits for the print out of the revised itinerary she made for tonight.

Date.

The last dinner she went on was some three months ago, with Karen’s friend’s cousin. Or something like that. In truth was, she couldn’t remember his face or name anymore. She couldn’t remember the guys her sister set up for her. The only traces they left were the itineraries saved on her laptop.

She always believed that a night out would be a proved success if there was a systematic plan allotted to it. In a sense, a date was similar to a business meeting. And what was a business meeting without a list of agenda, right? Her itinerary consisted of conversation topics, foods, places and movies. She remembered showing it to her dates whenever the conversation gets dull. And they mocked and laughed at her for it.

She never returned their calls. Or their texts.

“I hope you’re smiling because you’re thinking about me naked.” a deep, thick voice interrupted her tranquility.

Claire’s eyes flew open and she almost fell back on her chair. She gripped the edge of her table and glared at her assailant who was half-sitting on her desk.

On instinct, she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“We’re on a date remember?” Owen gave her a broad grin and extended a hand for the brown bags on the empty armchair beside him. “I took the liberty of ordering for you since you’re late.” he placed the wine bottle and take outs stamped with the name Beni on top of the desk in front of her.

“I am so sorry. I was finishing up and on my way.” she fumbled and arranged the chaos of her table.

“No worries.” he assured her. “I saw Emma brought out the ‘cavalry’ so I figured you’ll be working.” He stood up and took the tupperware on the coffee table.
“Spying on me again, Grady?” she droned and grabbed the wine bottles he left on her desk.

“Keep wishing, Dearing... ” he bounced on his feet and stopped by her shelf near her desk. "Hey, what’s this? It’s got my full name on it.”

Claire whipped around and saw him pulling the paper out of the printer tray.

“Give me that!” she set the bottles on a flat surface and advanced to him.

The corners of his mouth twitched as he read it. “An itinerary?”

Her body flushed crimson with embarrassment. Still, without much hope, she reached for the paper.

“20:00 Arrival... 20:05 order for appetizers... 20:10 Appetizers arrive.” He read in a business-like tone. The length of his arms made it impossible to snatch it out of his hand. “I say Miss Dearing, this is like my time in the Navy. Very impressive.” He grinned coyly. “Good to know you’re nervous like I am.”

Claire pursed her lips, trying to appear anything but nervous and humiliated.

“I’m framing this right after tonight.” He folded the paper and put in on his pant pocket.

“What?! No! It has my name on it! People will know.” she protested and reached for the paper again. Owen dodged her.

“Relax. I’m gonna put it at home. No one ever comes to my home. Now, shall we?” he motioned his hand towards the aroma of hot, scrumptious food, making her abandon her honor.

She sat opposite him and moved the table décor on the floor. She watched him lay out the food on the table in hypnotized fascination.
“We have Cioppino, truffle risotto, angus flat iron steak, half roast chicken, shrimp and mango salad. I didn’t order sweets. I thought, we could try the dessert parlor across the street.” he handed her a plate and a fork.

“This is... amazing.” she smiled at him.

“Hey, you picked the place. I only ordered.” He shrugged and smiled back. “Eat. Before it gets cold.”

She held her fork to her lips. “What would you have, Grady?”

“I don’t know. But I’m hungry. How ‘bout split everything to half?” he grabbed the plate of steak and began knifing it.

“Sounds good.”

"You eat meat, right? I wouldn't want to ruin your diet and all."

"I don't care, put it on my plate. I'm starving," she scooped a risotto to taste it before splitting the rest of the food and sliding more of it on his plate. “Here.”

“Oi! That’s more than half, Dearing!” he reprimanded.

“You lost weight. You need your strength back.”

“Do I now?” he teased and gave her half his steak. He put an elbow on his knee and, perched his chin with a fisted hand “I know you’re worried about me.”

“Please.” She sniggered.

The badinage and comebacks continued up until the last bite. With Claire’s casual and sneaky glances thrown his way. She also couldn’t remember the last time she laughed this hard. Her jaw muscles ached from his impersonations and antics. Most of the time during the night, she avoided
looking at him so she could swallow her food. Even his sexual hints and puns, which bothered her before, were funny and whimsical. Her panic and nervousness gave way to bouncing, exhilarated heartbeats and butterflies.

“…He fell flat on his face. And it was not my fault.”

“It so was!” she laughed, putting the empty containers on the bag.

“It was not!” he retaliated, rolling the edge of the brown bags close. “Well I say, we covered just about everything.”

She patted the pillows back into their original form, “Covered what?”

He brought out the folded itinerary in his pocket and waved it at her. “We got appetizer, check. Entrée, check! Conversation about first job interview, animals, weather, check! All that’s left is desert.”

She faltered. “I... I wasn’t aware we were following it.”

And then she felt it. The familiar glow, permeating from deep in her bones to her pores, overpowering her. At that moment, she never wanted to kiss someone that badly.

“Let’s go get dessert.” He said with that twinkle in his eye

“Oh my god.”

“Shit.” he said between licks.

“Oh my god.” she repeated.

“Fuck, I know.” he grunted.

“Yes! So... good!” Claire moaned, throwing her head back.

The dessert parlor across their building closed when they finished packing up. To Owen's huge disappointment. Amused by his dismay, she suggested they hunt the ice cream truck roaming the
city. With a spirit of a kid, he agreed and left his car at the basement parking for this quest.

The two adults almost gave up their 20-minute search until they saw the truck parked a block away from her place. Owen indulged in a banana chocolate chip while she, a cherry vanilla.

The street lamps casted a warm glow on the pavement as they made their way back to her building. Both halfway done with their late hot night splurge.

“This is, by far, the best food I’ve ever tasted.” Claire moaned, curling her upper lip inside her mouth.

He chuckled, too engrossed on his own to look at her. “Me too. When was the last time you had ice cream?”

“Ugh. Too long, Grady. Too long. From what I can recall, it was Gray’s birthday. My nephew. I had a mango caramel.”

“Oh yeah. Karen mentioned his boys. Speaking of your beautiful sister, I’ve never seen a woman chug down a whole bottle of wine that much. Without being drunk.” He gave a half suppressed laugh at the memory of their dinner.

“She developed a tolerance for it during her last marriage. But, us Dearings, we never get drunk.” She prided, pointing her spoon to herself.

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Oh yeah? Need I remind you about Zara’s wedding?”

“Well. Not including… shots. Everybody gets drunk in shots… We were talking about wine.” She stammered. Good save, Claire!

“Wanna bet on it?”

“What is with you and bets?” She asked between mouthfuls.
“Come on. It’ll be fun! If you get drunk on a bottle of Madiera, you won another date with me.” He appealed smugly.

“Won?” She scorned. “And if not?”

“You get to finalized the negotiations with Chicago headquarters yourself. Your terms. I won't stop you with anything this time.”

“Wa- wa- wait. You won’t go?” Claire couldn’t hide the excitement on her voice.

“You will go. On my behalf. If you win this.”

“Are you serious? My terms? My plans for the new building? And you won't disagree with me?” she's starting to like these betting thing.

“Like the plague. And yeah, I'm serious. It’ll all be you. I won't disagree.” He enunciated, breathing out the last bit with a slight roll of his eyes.

“Okay! Deal!” She tweeted and they shook on it.

“Look at you all happy. It’s illegal... Let me get that.” Owen reached for her empty cup and threw their cups on the bin by her building.

“Thank you.”

It is a wonder what she could hear from the silence. The crisp, Californian wind breezed past them like an old friend, familiar and welcome. Cars and passersby were scarce on the normal, crowded streets of her neighbourhood. The street lamps emitted, if not, a romantic glow on their profile as they stood facing each other.

Time stood still. Yet again.

Claire considered him for a moment. Still attired in his work clothes from this morning, he looked
like the CEO he's supposed to be. Although he lost weight, the dark grey shirt accentuates his lean, athletic figure. Over it was a faded cashmere coat, black semi-tight pants and suede shoes to match. And a buckled belt. A belt!

She watched him shift from foot to foot. His hand running through his shorter hair as his mouth moved majestically. Forming words and sentences she couldn't hear. Her mind went back to all the dates she'd been thus far. None of it lasted for more than 45 minutes. Let alone, three full hours. For the first time in her life, she had no idea what to do. Or what to say for that matter. Karen was right. It has been too long since she had a proper date that she forgot what it felt like.

Should she say something? She should, right? But what? Maybe she could compliment how handsome he looked tonight. Yeah, maybe she could.

“Great!” she blurted out, cutting him off in the middle of his sentence.

“...Friday- what?” He chuckled.

Claire inwardly cringed. Way to go, Claire.

He smirked. “I said, if you're free on Friday, we'll see that Madiera bottle. I don't want you drunk on a weekday.”

Claire smiled her relief, the grip on her bag loosened. Is he... asking her out again? "I won't get drunk, Grady.” she boasted.

"We'll see about that. Thank you for tonight. I really had a great time.”

“Me too.” she replied, this time, she meant it. He didn't look away or said anything and she felt herself getting vulnerable under his stare. “So, I’ll see you at work. Don’t be late.”

“I actually have another check up tomorrow morning. Final x-rays.” He brought his left arm up and shook it. Only noticing the fresh bandage separating his thumb and the rest of his fingers.

She nodded. "I hope everything would be ok."
"Yeah, it would be. Nurse Cora says hi by the way." His face lit up brighter than a toothpaste commercial.

Oh.

OH!

Cora!

Shit!

Claire felt that jittery sensation again. As if a nursery of butterflies took flight and erupted in her stomach.

Shit! Shit! Shit! Did she tell him anything?

Her cheeks warmed up as Owen crept closer. Green and green barreled in an intense stare that her lips parted in an involuntary gasp. There was that static thing again, making a succession of short, sharp noises in the air. Claire held his gaze. Held it strongly until he leaned forward. Her eyes closed for a second when she felt his lips grazed her burning cheek. When she opened them to meet his gaze again,

“Goodnight, Miss Dearing. Friday it is then?”

“I-uh...Of course. But I also have to check... my computer. I mean, my calendar. The calendar on my computer. But Good night. I’ll see you tomorrow. At work. Tomorrow. 8 am.” she stammered, avoiding his eyes.

“Right.” he simpered with smug amusement that made her whole body blushed red.

“Yeah. Hmmm-mmm!” she turned her back to him and to the revolving doors.

Only to-be hurled back by something.

More like, someone.
She had little time to react when his mouth collided hers. His mouth was meshing with hers into a harmonised play of teeth and tongue. Hungry, creamy and fuming with passion. The feel of them sent her mind in an uncontrollable frenzy. He reached for her waist and pulled her body towards him. She felt every contour, every hard muscle. She purred. A part of her felt like she’d been waiting for this the whole night. *But oh, this was so worth it.*

“I thought I could go without wanting kissing you tonight.” he hissed when they broke for air. "Damn it, Dearing. Why are you so irresistible?"

It was her turn to slam her lips on his. Her tongue seeking his lower lip hungrily. She snaked her arms around his shoulders, fingering the short hairs of his new do.

She could feel him hardening against her thigh and she bit his lip, earning another loud grunt from him. Not the slightest bit concerned if there were looks from strangers on the streets. And by the subtle touches on the sides of her breasts, she could tell he wasn’t either. Claire felt the formation of the hot, tight ball on her abdomen. The kind that wanted to rip off his clothes and make her beg. Yes, beg. Claire Dearing, begging. Who would believe? Her sister would throw a party that even Gatsby would recoil. She angled her face towards him, allowing him to go deeper in her mouth. Her hands slid down to his chest to his locks. She tugged and he pulled away.

“I’m trying to be a gentleman here, Claire.” He said in a gruff, pained voice.

She smiled, bit her lip and looked between them, down at the shape forming in his pants. He groaned but didn’t release her from his embrace.

“It’s taking all my self-control not to go up with you and sex you up senseless.”

She couldn’t help it and asked in fake innocence. “Sex me up?”

“Fuck! Don’t say things like that. Are you trying to kill me?” He wailed and latched his lips on the pulse on her neck.

She chuckled and held his chin between her fingers to stop him from his nibbling “I’ll see you tomorrow, Grady.”
“You’re evil.”

She walked backwards to the entrance, a cunning smile to her face. His eyes glimmered with maliciousness as he followed her.

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t wanna be a gentleman, anymore.” he called out.

“Go home!” she laughed and waved. Maybe she’ll enjoy delaying her need to sort out her feelings for the moment.

Claire didn’t look back in fear that she might take him up on his offer.

Wednesday morning came easy. Claire went about her daily routine, oblivious to the little spright to her step.

Everyone noticed, of course. The jogger who always wear high-knee socks nearly stumbled when she waved back at him. The barista from the café she’s always getting her coffee from gaped at her. Artie who wouldn’t meet her eyes before, found them soft and greener today. The employees had more phrases for her other than “Good morning Miss Dearing.” They all wondered the reason why the uptight businesswoman was extra smiley today.

Her heels clacked on the marbled halls of the lobby. Bag on hand, coffee on the other.

“Good morning, boss.” Zara appeared with Emma tolling behind her.

“Zara! Emma! Hi! How are you today?”
Her two assistants stole sly glances at each other before Zara stammered, “Uhmm. Spectacular. You?”

“Great. What’s you guys got for me today?

Emma cleared her throat before answering. “Miss Claire, you and Owen have to sign these papers or they’ll issue it to default. Also, The Sun times are waiting for your RSVP. We also called Ruth and wanted to let you know that Mr. Perez couldn’t make it today. You have a meeting today at 11:00am with Erica and Bernie from Finance department and also-”

“Miss Dearing!”

The three women stopped and turned around. Jogging to them and dressed impeccably well was,

“Billy!” Claire greeted cheerfully.

“- a Mr. Billy Brennan from the FBI is here” Emma finished.

“Miss Dearing, hi. Good morning! Mrs. Allerton and... I don’t think we’ve met, I’m Billy.” the blue-eyed man extended a hand to her new assistant.

“Emma... Emma Tate.”
“Miss Tate.” Billy repeated, smiling at the three of them.

“What are you doing here? Is there any problem?” Claire queried, a slight worry in her tone. Whenever Billy shows up at the company premises, it wasn’t always a good thing.

“No, no. I’m here for Mr. Grady, actually. A few questions.” He tapped the briefcase he was holding.

“Oh. Okay. I believe he’s having his check up this morning.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Zara raised an inquisitive eyebrow at her.

“He is? Do you know what time will he be back?”

“He’ll probably be here sometime before lunch. I’m gonna let him know you’re waiting for him. In the meantime, you’re free to wait at the staff lounge.”

“Thank you. I won’t be enough trouble. I promise.” he beamed at her.

“You’re very welcome. Help yourself to anything in the cafeteria.”

“Oh. No, no, Claire. I’m good but thanks.” he declined, tucking his free hand on his pocket.
“Well, in case you get hungry. It’s on me. Emma can show you the way. Emma?”

Emma showed perfect little white teeth, “Right. Mr. Brennan, this way please.”

The two walked away into the opposite hallway. Zara, who’s been looking at her funny ever since she came, broke the silence.

“Okay. What is going on?”

“What is?” Claire hung her bag and coat on the rack before sitting on her chair.

“Mr. Brennan, no “Billy”, she made little quotation marks in the air “was totally making goo-goo eyes on you.”

Claire narrowed her eyes at her assistant. “What? No, he doesn’t.”

“Oh yeah. He does. He’s a handsome chap. With the little dark blonde curls and blue eyes he looks like a little angel. A little hunky angel.”

“Have you had coffee yet?” Claire teased and opened her drawer to retrieve her signing pen.

“As a matter of fact, no... Here, Marketing needed this signed too.” Zara then stood in front of her desk, flipping out the pages that needed her signature.

“Lowery and Zia came in yet?” she asked, her eyes skimming the sheets of paper.
“Yes. They’re somewhere here.”

Once done, Claire surrendered the bind to her secretary.

“Oh, and one more thing. Could you order me lunch from that pasta place?”

“Sure! What time are you having lunch today?” Zara held the binder to her chest.

“Noon. Also, buy 10 boxes of pizza for the whole floor.” she brought the keyboard closer to her and began checking her emails.

“Ohhhkay?” her assistant droned, “Lunch at exactly noon? Junk food for everybody? Something is very peculiar about you today, boss. But in a good way.”

“Go drink your coffee, Zara.” she ordered jokingly.

“I’m just saying. Whatever it is, keep doing it.” Zara grinned from the doorway.

She’s left undisturbed for another hour or so when someone came knocking on her door. Emma nervously poked her head on her doorway.

“Uh... Miss Claire? Owen is waiting for you at the conference room.”
Ah. He’s here. An inward smile found its way to her face. “Did he say why?”

“No. But Mr. Brennan and a sulky dude is with him.”

“Okay. I’m on my way.” she pushed her swivel chair away from the desk and walked to the adjacent room.

Someone drew the blinds out but she could see the silhouettes of the men inside. Zia and Lowery stood by the door, like personal bodyguards.

"Morning Zia, Lowery." Lowery tipped an invisible hat.

"Looking good, Claire." Zia smiled at her and opened the door.

She found the two agents, Brennan and what’s his face sitting next to each other on the long table. Her eyes immediately found his. His peeved expression melted into his brightest smile. He was leaning against the window, arms crossed in front of him. He was wearing a grey Henly shirt, the long sleeves hugging the guns on his arms. A pressed light-colored denim pants and closed shoes.

“Claire.”

“Miss Dearing.”

Both Owen and Billy stood and greeted together. Owen furrowed his brows at the latter.

“Uhm... Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Miss Dearing.” Walters nodded at her. “Please, sit down.”
“What’s this about?” She walked to the middle of the table and noticed the coloured photographs scattered on it. Her breath stuttered as she caught sight of the blood on her driver seat, the deflated airbags, and shards of window glass. Her old car had seen better days. She felt Owen beside her in an instant. His hand brushed a comforting gesture on her lower back.

“I’m sorry that we have to do this again. We have a couple of last questions.” Billy pardoned and pulled out a new set of pictures from a brown envelope. “We have the plates of the cars that drove past you the day it happened. Can you confirm that these?”

She inhaled a thick breath and looked.

The first picture was a clearer version of the red Subaru with the black stripped hood. The next one was a customized white BMW with a stuffed bear drift charm at the bumper. The last one was the grey Lamborghini she remembered. Their plate numbers readable this time.

“Yes. They look the same.” Claire swallowed.

“We ID’d the owners of these cars and we found out that they were 15-16 year old punks.” Walters commented.

“Okay. But this wasn’t the car that hit us.” she added and turned to Owen who had a hard look on his face.

“We know.” Walters answered again. “After I met these kids, we found something about the vehicle that almost killed the two of you. Unfortunately, they don’t have surveillance cameras on the woods where it happened. But the intersection before it, has.”

“Walters just got back from reviewing the surveillance cameras situated there. Apparently, the tapes went missing after the day of the accident. The local sheriff recovered them and only noticed the time between 11:33 and 11:45 missing from the log.”
“What do you mean?” Claire felt bile rise up to her throat. “This was an accident.”

“Claire.” Owen spoke for the first time in minutes. His knuckles turning white as he fisted his hands. His face was a countenance mix of terror and anger. “It wasn’t.”

“Shit!” Karen slammed her hand on the surface. The utensils bounced and the wine glass almost spilt its content on the purple table mantle. Some of the old guests passed them judgment and ire. Her sister muttered a ‘sorry’ and inched her seat forward.

As Karen’s last night in the city, Claire reserved a table for them at the Fog Harbor Beach House. This was her only chance to bond with her sister, alone, since they were always joined by Lewis. For a Thursday evening, there were a lot of people. Most of them were still in their work clothes. Others were old people and families.

“Do you have any idea who’s doing this? Does Owen?”

Claire shrugged her shoulders and picked the fork on her empty plate. “Owen has his suspicions but nothing certain yet.” She doesn’t want to delve much thought into it. Not yet. Not when she was having the best week of her life.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Nothing.”

“Promise me, you’ll be careful. Okay?”
Claire nodded and offered a small smile at her protective sister.

In a shift of mood, her sister cajoled, making Claire choke on her wine. “How is Mr. Chairman, by the way? Still checking YOUR barn?”

“What the hell, Karen!”

“Hey! I wouldn’t hold it against you. The man was a snack. I almost drooled when I first saw him. I mean, those shoulders! YUMMY!”

Claire cleaned the spill on her blouse with a table napkin. “He’s... busy, I guess. We both have been. We had a group lunch and he visited me in my office- NO! Nothing happened! I have glass doors, Karen! - before he went home today.”

“Oh! How sweet! He said goodbye! Are you gonna see him again?” she lauded in the excited tone she always has.

“Of course, I will. We work together.” Claire answered sarcastically.

“Not what I meant, baby sis.”

She gave her a stinky eye and took a sip from her glass. “This is why I never tell you things. You get all jumpy on me. It’s annoying.”

She hid behind her glass and muttered, “Maybe.”

“I knew it!” she exclaimed a folded her arms on the table in front of her. “I want to know every single detail.”

“There’s nothing to tell, Karen.” she exhaled.

“Bullsh-” Her sister halted in the middle of her favorite word. She sat tall and looked past her. The devilish glint on her eyes appearing all of a sudden. “You know what, I'll ask him myself.” Karen upped her chin in her direction. Claire turned in her chair.

The crowd hid the Dearings from his line of vision. They watched him enter the archway of the restaurant and proceed to the maître d'.

“Do you know he’ll be here?” her sister asked.

“No.” she shook her head.

“Well, he could be having a meeting.”

“At 9 pm?” Claire scoffed.
“Please. You have meetings in the middle of the night, Claire.” she reminded her and rolled her eyes.

“Touché... Should we look away?” Claire whispered. Something about this doesn't feel right.

“Absolutely not!” Karen exclaimed, looking scandalised and continued watching him like a hawk.

Amidst the noise from the crowd, Claire heard it loud and clear. “Owen!”

A woman with blonde hair lunged at him and gave him a long kiss on the cheek. Owen, although with less enthusiasm, hugged her back. He smiled at her and kissed her cheek as well. And Claire felt like getting hit by a brick. Thousands of bricks. Her eyes glued to the two as the maître d' lead them to their table, further away from where the sisters were.

“I hate her!...Who the hell is she?” Karen spat from behind her.

“Alexis. Lex Murphy.” she responded quietly and turned back to her chair. She grabbed Karen’s full glass of Shiraz and downed it in seconds.

“It’s nothing, Claire. For all we know. She could be a business partner. I’m sure she is.” Karen pacified.

“She’s an ex-girlfriend.” she snickered and crossed her legs.
A surge of ugly emotions raged through her, threatening to eat her whole and then turn her inside out. Eat her again and spit her back out. She wasn't liking it. She could feel said emotions boil under her skin. Steam was rising up from her lungs and out her nose and mouth. Her eyes blurring from the sides.

A million thoughts were running through her head. Until she felt it hit a barrier.

As far as she’s concerned, there was nothing romantic happening between them. "It's one dinner." he said so himself. She tried to appease herself with a thousand reasons and explanations. Her heart started beating faster that she could hear them pumping in her ears. It was all too good to be true, anyway. And it was her way of saying 'Thank you Again for saving me from a sabotaged car crash'. And sex, it was just sex. Flings. A moment of passion she stupidly let herself feel.

Claire threw the napkin she’s using to dab her lips and said, “Are you ready to go?”

“Claire, honey. I-what?” Karen was reaching for her hand when something behind her back held her sister’s attention again.

Claire gulped as she noticed Karen stiffened. Her blue eyes went wild with the same fury she’s currently feeling. The only difference on how they deal with their anger was that Claire was silent on it. Karen pounded both hands on the table and stood up abruptly. Her grip on the table cloth made her knuckles ghostly pale - paler than their identical skin. “BULLSHIT!”

Of course, given their miles apart, Claire knew Karen has been angry for a lot of things. But during their time living together, there were only two times she saw her older sister furious.

One was when their cousins played with Karen’s science project. They ended up destroying it. Karen failed and had to take summer classes.

The second time was when they were both standing at the porch of their old house, watching cars speed away.
Claire slowly turned in her seat and felt cold and numb. Well, colder and numb. Freezing streams of water replaced the gurgling flow of her blood. Anger went to blinding hatred and animosity.

The whole room stopped into a halt. The guests’ stares were a combination of worry and curiosity. But the Dearing sisters stared ahead. Stared straight ahead. Not meeting anyone’s.

Except a familiar and haunting shades of green.

Shades of green the two sisters thought they'll never see again.

Shades of green Claire inherited.

The tall, thin man whose hair was once the same vibrant red as hers stood next to Lex and Owen. His frail hand still clutching Owen’s tanned and strong ones. The three of them looked up from Karen’s outburst.

She could practically feel Karen’s seething fury. And all Claire could say was,

“Dad.”

Chapter End Notes

I KNOW! I KNOW! I told you guys I won’t take over a month to finish this chapter. Thank you for staying with me. I don’t wanna post a half-baked chapter so I try to make each update worth your time. I really appreciate you guys reading this. Your kudos, comments, reviews mean a lot to me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

Also, shout out to LJ, Maelys and Elise Colier for guessing about Karen and Billy. You guys are awesome!

I have to say that this story is taking a lot of my time. I’m juggling to find the balance
between this, work and other personal stuff. Is it bad that I’m already thinking of the ending?

Tell me what you guys think about our little cliffhanger, Clawen’s first date, Billy, and the car crash (but you guys know that already). And please correct me for any grammatical errors or anything.

Please stay with me and review? I promise I got more revelations (mostly about Claire's feelings) and sexy times coming. *wink wink* I’ll try to post the 13th chapter as fast as I can.
Full Moon

Chapter Notes

*plays JEALOUS by Nick Jonas A-FUCKING-GAIN*

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"...Bear in mind the full moon magnifies everything, good and bad. It's symbolic of
power at its peak, fullness, and a time when your intentions start to come to fruition."


“Dad.”

It felt like a staring contest. Impassive green eyes met their father's in an intense gander - taking her for a painful walk down memory lane.

"Don't leave, Daddy. Don't leave."

"Let go, Claire."

Claire noticed that the hand holding Owen’s, let go. The element of surprise haunting their father's gaunt face as he faced them. His lips shaped their names in an inaudible whisper.

She was the first to look away. In an unconscious movement, her eyes flitted over to Owen. His astonishment faded into that familiar affection whenever their eyes met. Claire was unprepared for the comfort that his presence imposed.

But it soon evaporated when Lex entered her sight. Both her hands rested on the round part of his shoulder in a mini embrace. She felt herself grip the end of the mantle. She watched, with a surprising great ire, as Lex's hands slid down his arm in what looked like a habitual gesture.

At that moment, Claire couldn't decide what made her grit her teeth even more. Their dad’s impromptu appearance or Lex’s hands.

She turned in her chair and stood up, as stiff as a ladder. Karen, whose soft baby blues were reddening with her anger, softened when it landed on hers. Claire offered her sister a forced, grim smile.
It's okay, you're okay. Claire reminded her with her eyes.

Her sister exhaled three big breaths and nodded in understanding. Claire got a few bills from her wallet and placed it under her plate. She could practically hear Karen counting from 1 to 20- a technique taught to her by her therapist. Feeling bad for her sister, she reached out her hand for a comforting squeeze.

The sisters walked in heavy silence towards another exit, away from the group’s direction.

"One foot in front of the other, Claire. One foot in front of the other." she reminded herself for fear that if she so much as paused, she'll trample and break down.

Her blood was roaring hot in her ears, drowning out any noise from around her. Claire held her chin up high, eyes forward and shoulders back in a stride of fake confidence.

The night air that amiably welcomed her before their dinner, suddenly became bitter. And although the crowd outside was scarce, she had never felt more claustrophobic. She shivered in her light cardigan and pulled the flaps tighter around her.

Somewhere behind her, a door opened. The wooden planks creaked, hurried footfalls and sound of faint voices. Claire heard him and it took all her will not to stop and look back.

“Claire! Karen!” Owen shouted over the night.

“I’m sorry, Owen. This is a bad time. You should get back inside.” she heard Karen reply in a calm tone she didn’t have minutes ago.

“Are you guys okay? What’s happening?” Owen asked. The worry distinct in his voice.

She could feel his eyes boring holes on her back. Their voices got fainter as she continued descending the pier steps to the parking lot. She heard scraping noises against the asphalt and the next thing she knew, Owen was blocking her way to the car. Claire stopped, and felt like throwing herself off the cliff for what she was thinking.
He looked so attractive under the starry night. His face glinting like a famous sculpture under the streetlights’ dull yellows. His uncombed hair moved with every wisp of the eerie wind. She frowned at herself and straightened up, feigning disinterest.

“Claire.”

“Mr. Grady.” Her mouth pressed into a thin, awkward smile.

A hint of intolerance crossed his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

He raised his hand as if to touch her but held back and put it in his pockets instead. The obvious concern and worry in his wide, green eyes disoriented her for a moment. He moved closer to her, and she saw the faint smudges of gloss on his cheeks. Near his mouth. Where she willingly kissed him days ago.

The vile, sickening feeling in her mouth was back again.

“Nothing.” She spat, digging her nails on her bag. Its long edges peeling the synthetic leather off of it.

“I know something’s up.”

“Owen.” Karen warned behind her.

He gave a quick glance at Karen, and ignored her. He repeated, his tone much softer this time. “What’s wrong?”

She almost wanna laugh. It would seem that even the tenacious Atty. Karen Dearing was no match for Grady.

“I told you. Nothing.” her voice- distant, even to her. "We have to go... Karen?”
Karen stood behind them, her long fingers pressing the side of her temple. And behind her, up on the pier steps, was their dad. His face was a color of unsaid emotions.

Owen followed her line of sight and encouraged her again. Claire thought his intonation couldn't be careful enough. He almost wanna believe him. “Hey, tell me what’s going on. Do you know him?”

She set her face to its usual indifference. "Not now, Owen."

“I won’t go unless you tell me what’s going on.”

Before she could step away, Owen tugged her hand. And how she wished it was forceful or patronising then she could have an excuse to lash out, even slap him. But the static was there, emanating from the sturdy hand clasping hers.

"Claire, please."

“Owen... don’t.” Karen answered for her before she stepped between them.

She snatched her hand away and strode to where she parked her car, only looking back to check where Karen was at.

Her sister was talking to Owen. Her mouth moved with a story she couldn’t hear. Owen’s eyes flickered to her, to Karen and to the man who was still standing by the staircase. His father's attention on her rather than the two adults talking to each other. She looked away again and called out,

“Let’s go, Karen.”

Karen pressed her cheek against Owen’s in a platonic, farewell gesture as he gave her a one-armed hug. He was nodding at what her sister was telling him.

As soon as he let go, his eyes caught hers and he offered a small, defeated smile. “Drive safe, okay?”
Earlier today, he received a stressed call from Lex.

The woman had been trying to talk to him since he "got out" of the hospital. When he finally returned her call, he assured her that he's alive and well. She was in town, visiting her mom and stepdad who were taking a vacation in the city. She asked him out to dinner, along with Ron, who he'd never met.

They kept the conversation light but engaging. Mr. Dearing was silent and polite, but his eyes were watchful- traits Owen found a little too familiar. Although, he could sense the tension, he didn't bring it up in the conversation. The dinner went as planned, but Owen was on the edge of his seat. When Lex stood up after dessert to go the restroom, Ron acknowledged it.

“I’m very sorry for earlier Owen, for what happened.”

He nodded and replied, “It’s okay, Mr. Dearing.”

In truth was, he didn’t know what to feel. Seeing Claire and Karen's traumatised reactions, he wanted to ask the man in front of him. But then again, he knew he was in no right to pry. Yet he wanted to, at least, understand what happened tonight.

Ron smiled and asked him the question he's been waiting to hear all night. “Do you know a place where we could talk? I want to explain myself. If you have time.”

“Of course.” What could be the harm?

“You boys finished?” Lex appeared from behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “I already settled the bill, Owen.”

Owen furrowed his eyebrows and almost scolded her, “Not cool. I was gonna pay for it.”
“Get over it, Owe.” She teased and grabbed her bag. “Ron?”

“Actually, I asked Owen out for a few drinks. If you don’t mind, honey.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure. I'll tell Mom. I'm gonna drop something off there anyway.”

Owen wiped his mouth and followed as the man stood up.

“Thank you. Can you also tell her, I might be home late? I don’t want her to wait for me.”

He saw Lex nod and kissed the man's cheek before she turned to him. Her sky blue eyes that once excited him, crinkled. "Keep an eye on him for Mom, will you? You know how she is."

“Wouldn’t wanna mess with Naomi for the world. I’ll drive him to their hotel.”

“Thanks...” She leaned and pressed her cheek against his, "Oh and I hope everything’s alright with Claire.”

Owen sighed. I wish too.

They watched as her car speed away into the night before Owen drove them to the Den. And as expected, it was in full swing. Customers and regulars huddled in large clusters all over the place. He greeted Barry who welcomed them at the door and pointed them to an empty spot by the bar.

Mr. Dearing lives in Oregon with his wife of three years. He's a nice, jolly fellow. Smart and intuitive. Kind of like her daughter. Owen smiled, laughed as the man narrated childhood stories of both Karen and Claire.

The man was tipsy and Owen had to suppress a chuckle, thinking of Claire's low intolerance for alcohol. It was on Ron’s third mug of Radeberger however, that Owen heard the sad part of the man’s story.
Ron Dearing wasn't strong, as he often seemed to be. Like most men, he committed adultery, destroying his 11-year marriage. Mrs. Dearing and Ron finalized their divorce after six months and it took most of his money. He used the remaining money to pay off his and his mistress' debts. After a year of living with him, his former secretary left him for a richer man. With his funds nearing zero, he emigrated to his relatives in California. He quit his vices, juggled jobs before he secured a position for an insurance company as an advisor. That was where he met Naomi- Lex and Tim’s mother.

Owen was a good judge of character and he knew a changed person when he sees one.

“You have to know, I love my family. I love my girls. God, I love them. But I was so young when I got married. I got confused. When I realised, I want to go back, it was too late. They left the house we were living in and her relatives won't talk to me.” he lamented.

He nodded. After a few minutes and several gulps of beer, he spoke. "It’s like what my dad used to say, 'Sometimes good people make bad choices and make mistakes. It doesn’t mean they're a bad person, it means they're human.'"

The man beamed at him. His eyes, glazed with insobriety and old age, reminded Owen of Claire's identical ones. 'Wise man.'

“Yes, he was.” he nodded and grinned at the memory of his father.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine."

The alcohol was giving him his "wiser" side. Owen continued, "He also told me that not to be hard on myself. Everybody makes mistakes, Mr. Dearing. It's okay."

The old man nodded and cleared his throat. If he was unconvinced by his comfort, Ron didn't say.

“I uh… have to confess another thing as well. Promise me, you won’t think low of me.”
"I don’t judge people by their worst mistakes, Ron. Go ahead."

"After the divorce, I lost communication with them. Even so, when I had to move to California. Until, I saw you on the news and heard her name. I knew it was my Claire even before they showed a short clip of her. They were interviewing you for her involvement in some business scandal. I wanted to do something about it and go to her. But I was a coward. but I kept an eye on her since then. I read business newspapers and articles on the net. Then, I saw you on the news again. You were in an accident, along with a woman. I got so scared. Mimi, Lex and Tim knew I had a family before I married but they didn’t know who. I was very thankful that it was a public case or else I wouldn't know what hospital you were in. We all went to the hospital to check on you but they said you were both released."

Owen listened, understanding his distress.

"- I wanted to meet you for some time now. Lex arranged it, everything. But I had no intention of using you to see my daughter. No, no. I didn't know they're both be there at the restaurant. I just... What I... I wanted to thank you, in person for everything you did for her."

The man laid a hand on his shoulder. "It’s more than what a father could ask for. You took risks I wouldn't be able to repay. So, thank you.” his croaky voice broke.

"It’s no problem, Ron."

Ron sniffed, rubbed his nose and gave him a weak smile. He banged his empty mug on the counter and called Barry who was wiping the glasses at the other end. "Mr. Barry, give us another round, would you?"

"You sure, Sir?” His friend raised his eyebrows at them, and turned to him. “Owen?"

"Its alright Barry. I’ll make sure he gets home safe.” Owen pulled the bowl of pistachios towards him and cracked a few of them open. Ron turned in his stool, facing him. The smile he had deepened as he regarded him.

“What?” Owen said as he chew, feeling a slight uneasy.

“I know dads weren’t supposed to like their daughter’s boyfriends, but for you, I’ll make an
The casualness of his statement made him choke on his snack. "You Dearings sure say the funniest things when you're drunk." Owen coughed, punching his chest.

"-But we're not in a relationship." The expected yearning in his chest struck him again in a harsh pull.

As if on cue, the French man returned with their drinks. “Yeah. But he wishes. You should hear his assistant's stories about them. I've never met her myself but I heard she's a..."

Owen glowered at his friend, Choose your next words wisely.

Barry snickered. "-very lovely person."

"I knew Lowery sneaks in here! That bastard."

Ron laughed with Barry before the older man pressed, “Yeah, but you like her... Don’t you?”

He felt the unfamiliar rush of blood on his neck and chest as two pairs of inquisitive eyes scrutinised him.

Owen looked up at Barry who was standing in front of them with the same interest of a lady with a gossip. Lowery's fucking influence, no doubt. Then at Ron, who’s expression couldn't be nothing short of amused.

After a few seconds of silence, Owen gave them a curt nod. He shook his head as he blushed. "Something terrible too."

Barry erupted in laughter, his fist pumped in the air. "Finally! Lowery owes me 50 bucks."
For the past hour, she's been making Hazelnut cookies- Karen and their mom's favourite. Her dad was the one who usually bake it for them but he was still out on his business trip. She hadn't talk to him for almost a week and she missed him. She pestered Karen who got a cellphone for her birthday to call their dad. She won't lend it to her. When Claire asked their mom, she said that their father's in a very important meeting. Claire knew that he's not to be disturbed when he's in one of those meetings. She gave up, but for sure, he's coming home since her birthday's coming up in a few days. And she couldn't explain her excitement. Their dad never fails to surprise the them on their birthday, she held on to that.

Karen sat on the counter, with a vacant look in her eyes. Claire waved her sticky whisk and Karen jerked. Claire laughed.

“Karen, how many cookies do you want?”

Her sister didn’t reply.

“Okay, I’ll have 5.” Claire’s tongue peeked from the corner of her mouth as she mixed the contents on the bowl. Her sister was so quiet. Maybe it's because of that stupid boy Karen's been crushing on, Justin. Justin Eriksen shared his lunch with Rachel Brooks at the cafeteria today. Why are boys such idiots?

She felt sorry for her sister nonetheless, so she comforted her by, "You can have 8, Karen. But I hope it tastes as good as Daddy makes them.”

She heard Karen's sharp intake of breath. Claire put down her whisk and was about to ask what’s wrong when the door opened.

“Daddy!” She shouted and in a hurry, went down the step ladder she was using for extra height. “I'm baking! I’m baking! I’m ba- Dad?”

Their mom had come down from her home office and was holding her dad’s luggage on both hands. She dropped them at the foot of the stairs before she took a seat on the landing up ahead. Her back to the family-framed wall.
“What’s going on, Mom?” Their mom gave her a forced, close-lipped smile.

“Hey champ.”

Claire wiped her hands on her flour-covered apron. "Hey Dad. Are you travelling again? Why so much stuff?”

"Wow, you’re baking?” was her dad’s only reply.

“Uhm. Yes. Won’t you come and help me? I don’t wanna burn them.” She approached her father and whispered, “It’s a surprise for mom and Karen’s no help.”

Their dad glanced behind her, where her sister was.

“Come on!” She grabbed her dad’s hand and pulled him to the kitchen, but his dad didn’t move.

“I can’t, sweetie. Not now.”

“Why?” She asked as she pushed her glasses on her nose. Her fingers smearing the lenses.

"I need you to listen to me, okay?” Her dad bent his knee to her 8 year old height, a serious look on his sullen face. From the corner of her eye, she saw her mom wiped a hand on her face. Karen, who was still silent, ran up the stairs, and Claire swore she heard a sob came out of her mouth.

"What's going on? Why is everyone crying?”

“I have to leave.” Her dad uttered, grasping both her arms.

She felt her throat tighten. “I... I don't understand.”

“I’m so sorry, Claire.”
Red-hot tears began to run down her face.

“Why? What for?” She asked again, gasping wails filled her young ears. She looked up to her mom for help. “Mom?”

Her dad stood up and grabbed his bags. Claire reached for his shirt.

“No, daddy. Don’t leave, Daddy. Don’t leave. My birthday's coming up.”

“Claire, I have to.” Her dad sighed and took off her glasses, wiping them with his handkerchief.

“Was it because I didn’t win the math competition?”

“No sweetie, no. That wasn’t it.” Her dad let out a sad chuckle as he fit her her glasses back.

“I’ll do better. I promise. I’ll win first place next time. I’ll win a thousand medals. Don’t leave. Please, don’t leave.” She wept, wiping her face with her flour covered palms, her little shoulders shaking.

Her dad pulled her into a hug. Claire wrapped her short arms on his neck as she cried. She felt her dad kissed the top of her head. “I gotta go, champ. Okay? I’ll see you on Monday. For your poem recital. I promise.”

“No. I don’t want you to leave. We can all go together.” She pleaded between hiccups.

“I love you, ok? You and Karen. Remember that.” Her dad released his embrace and cleaned her face with a handkerchief. An anguished smile on his lips. “I’ll be there on your birthday and on your competition, I promise.”

He wasn’t.
That's when she didn't believe in promises anymore.

Claire lied on her side and stared at the small gap between her curtains.

The city was still shrouded with the dusk and shadows of the new day, quiet and un tarnished yet. She got up and sat on the side of the bed, staring into an empty space.

Her phone beeped. She reached for it on the nightstand and read the text from Karen.

*About to board. I'm okay now... Are you? I'm here if you wanna talk, kay? I love you Claire bear!*

She typed,

*Glad to hear. Have a safe flight. Say hi to mom for me.*

Her mind kept swirling back to the week’s past events. Owen’s face cropping up every now and then.

Her alarm hadn't gone off yet but she got up. She dressed in her running gear, settled her headset on her ears and went out for her morning exercise.

Claire’s always been a city girl.

Whenever her mom would venture out to the city, Claire would 'negotiate' until she would let her come along. After spending an educational field trip she knew she wanted to live in the city when she grows up. So, when the offer to work in a bigger city came, Claire jumped at it without a moment too soon.

California was energizing, far from the dour memories of her old life. She remembered her first stroll in the uphill neighborhood and how her feet and legs ached for days. How exciting it was to have five-star restaurants a few distance away from your doorstep. And how the high rise buildings seemed to have a life of their own. She loved California more than any other city in the world.
But as her shoes pound on the wet gravel and the sloping streets, a sense of bereavement enveloped her. As if the city was missing something vital, as if it didn't hold the same vigour anymore. She couldn't help but compare it to the Malcolm's island.

The oceanic and mountainous views weren't the same. There was no tinge of the freshwater breeze in the air. There were less shrubbery and coconut trees shading them from the heat. Vernacular houses gave way to solid, concrete walls, buildings and townhouses. The people were missing the eager gleams in their eyes. Claire, for the first time, felt out of place.

A hint of the sun peeked over the grey clouds as she continued her sprint. The city started to wake and she was adrift in the middle of moving bodies. Establishments began to open. The air begun to smell like coffee and fresh batch of bagels. Cars were starting to congest the streets as pedestrians milled around their day. She navigated her way, running through labyrinths and narrow streets to avoid anyone.

Around a corner, she stopped, short of breath. She leaned on the street post, one hand unzipping her jacket to let the air cool her. On the opposite sidewalk, she felt her heart jammed her throat. She didn't notice that she reached this street. His street. Claire was about to run back when she saw a very familiar dirty blonde haired woman walk out of his building. The lady was wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants too large for her slender frame. Her shiny hair mussed up. Like she just woke up.

Claire felt her sweat turn colder when Owen came out in his tank top and sweatpants. He was clutching a purse, her purse in his hands. They hugged and Lex was saying something as Owen nodded at her, smiling. She felt a surge of possessiveness overcome her. She wanted to shout at them -at him, and asked him why was he letting her touch him like that.

And as if she couldn’t feel worst enough ever since last night, Lex leaned over and kissed him!

*In the fucking mouth!*

What the hell is going on?

Burning and venomous rage climbed her throat. Her heart thrashed inside its cage like an angry and provoked bull, nostrils flaring. She felt her entire body shake with anger and a strange new emotion.
She didn’t like this. This feeling of insecurity. She’s always been sure of herself. Claire knew how she looked, and call her vain, but she liked it. But now, seeing blonde hair, tanned and unfreckled skin, she wanted to be anything but herself.

A cab horn honked her out of her misery. The fat, red-faced driver rolled down his window and shouted something at her. In her annoyance, she didn't notice that she walked right in the middle of the road and was blocking it. Claire put her palms up in apology as she got out of the way.

When she checked the opposite street again, she saw them. Owen gaped at her. Claire, stung by thousand lashes, backed away as Owen started jogging towards her. “Claire! Stop!”

But she didn’t.

“Claire! Wait, please!”

She ran until she could no longer hear him. She kept the fast pace, not pausing for breath even as her lungs begged for air.

Running has always been her meditation (that and a good bottle of red wine) It's why she loves running. But even her most favorite thing in the world couldn't pacify her.

Who the hell is he to play her like that?

And why was she so stupid?

She kept running. Harder and stronger. The stale air blistered on her face. Sweat dripped down her body. Her throat was dry. Her heart drummed on her ears. Her knees and legs trembled from exertion. Sweat dripped down her body. The sweaty end of her ponytail whipped her cheeks, neck and upper back.

The sun had come out when she arrived at her building. But as soon as she stopped, her legs gave out. Blackness crept from the corners of her eyes. She stumbled, falling on her knees, the asphalt scraping the skin raw.
Somebody from the sidewalk ran out to catch her. But he wasn’t quick enough. He wasn’t quick and agile like Owen.

“Claire?” came the familiar voice, hands on either side of her face. His hands, rough and alien on her sweaty skin.

“Bi… Billy?” She croaked, regaining her consciousness. His kind face finally getting clearer.

The intercom voices boomed every now and then, reminding him again where he was.

The hospital hallway was a thoroughfare of people in lab coats and scrub suits. Their movements were so quick and agile, it was starting to make his head swim.

Each morning for the past week, Lowery scheduled him therapy sessions at St. Anthony’s. And Owen only agreed to it so he could get rid of the bandage covering his arm. It was nothing serious—an hour of stretching exercises for his full recovery. He was doing well. The pain subsided after his second visit—to his relief.

But as he sat on the beamed chair waiting for Cora to escort him to the room, he was the opposite of relieved.

“Come on, Claire. Pick up. Pick up, please.” Owen muttered on the phone in exasperation. For the past 30 minutes, he was trying to call her but her voicemail always come through.

The rain picked up late last night and albeit his initial plan to drive Ron home, he went to his place in the city. The man passed out and with Barry’s help, they carried him to his guest room. That was why, in the early Friday morning, Lex came to pick him up.

Ron was already in the car when Owen came down again to bring Lex’s wallet that she dropped by the elevator. He angled his head the wrong way so Lex caught his lips instead of his cheeks. She looked appalled as he was. They both apologized to each other. Then he heard a car screeched, and he saw Claire, in her running attire, sending daggers in his direction.
The woman could run! And if there was any exercise he hated, it was that. Bring him the weights, the tires and the pull up bars, anything but running shoes. After the fifth block, he gave up and went back to his place to fetch his car, ignoring Lex and Ron's suggestion to help.

He called Emma, Zara’s replacement, and asked her if Claire arrived at the office yet.

“She’s not here, Owen. She's supposed to join Erica with the Japanese video call at 8. But her cell was out.”

He asked her to call him as soon as she reach Claire. He hung up with an uneasy feeling at the pit of his stomach. Claire was never late. Hell would freeze first before she’d be late. He tried calling Karen, but it was unreachable.

Claire’s betrayed reaction replayed in his mind, leaving no room for anything else.

Lex has always been a good friend of him. And if he was being honest with himself, she probably was his first love.

After his first tour, Owen looked for her, in dire hopes that she still felt the same way. But as wicked faith had its way, she met someone. And he was perfect for her. Owen thought that when he meets the guy who "stole" Lex from him, he would lose it. But as soon as he saw the love sick couple walk hand-in-hand as they approach him, all he felt was a blanket of relief. Lex couldn't find a more perfect guy for herself and he was genuinely happy for her. Owen even asked for a day leave so he could attend their wedding.

Lex’s joy was short lived as his husband died to Lymphoma, a few months after their child's 6th birthday. Owen couldn't attend the funeral but he visited her as soon as his feet touched solid land. But that was that. Owen never had a sister, but if he had, he was sure that's how he felt when he kissed her.

He would have to admit that the thought of jealous Claire was filling him with frisson of excitement. But after the first two hours of not hearing from her, he was restless and distracted.

Owen threw his phone on the seat beside him. He rubbed both hands on his face. The bandage on his left hand was coarse on his stubble. He untwisted it and clenched his hand, comforted by the lack of pain.
“Mr. Owen?” Nurse Cora interrupted, breaking him out of his own absorption. “The therapist is ready for you now but you have to use the room in the next wing.”

He nodded and walked beside her.

“You okay, son?” Cora gave him a worried glance.

“Yep.”

The nurse chuckled and pried in a manner Owen didn't find too trying or annoying. “The redhead giving you a hard time? I thought you had a date with her the other night?”

“I did.” He sighed, checking his phone again. "Something happened."

"Well,” the woman hesitated before she kindly advised, "Why don't you try that flowers thing? Does she like flowers?"

Owen thought back on the lack of arrangements in her office and had to smile. "No. I don't think so."

"I wouldn't expect her too. What does she like then?"

For the six months since he met her, Owen prided himself that he was one layer closer to the enigma of Claire Dearing. Their calm and civilised badinage were enough for him to find her extremely likeable. Then she kissed him on the island and he knew it was over for him after that.

The lips, that didn’t want to laugh during these circumstances, twitched into a grin. He counted their friendly conversations and rambled,

“She reads business and history books. That woman doesn’t read anything else. I mean, what kind of woman doesn’t read romance novels, Cora? Hell, I read Pride and Prejudice, once or twice. She drinks wine like it’s her water, but she’s a lightweight. She's allergic to pecans and she doesn't eat
tomatoes. She watches and prefers action movies but is anti-gun. She would rather break her foot than wear flats. She loves the city but appreciates nature. She likes it when it rains. The stormier, the better. She’s not a hopeless romantic and she’s no damsel in distress, I’ll tell you that. Do you know how many times I volunteered to help her and she refused? She likes to argue with everything I have to say. Never takes no for an answer and stubborn as hell-”

Cora smiled, shaking her head. “Wow. I didn’t expect a one whole-ass paragraph. But it seems you got it all figured out. Good for you!”

She then pointed towards the blue door on their left. “Dr. Amanda will join you this morning. She’s a real nice lady. Don't annoy her though,” And added as an afterthought, “like you’re annoying me. “

He chuckled, the nurse's presence had somehow comforted him. “Aww. Cora, you have to admit, I was your best patient!”

“Best! You ran away and you gave me hypertension.” she laughed. ”Now, get inside. Don't make her-” out of the blue, she straightened, her face serious and worried.

He scrunched his eyebrows and turned on his heel and a part of him regretted it in an instant. Though, another part -his right fist to be exact- wanted to punch a jaw.

Her leggings and jacket were unclean and covered in pavement dust. The fabric on her knees tattered and gauzed. She has a band aid on her chin and she was hobbling as she walked.

The guy, dressed in an Underarmor running ensemble, stood behind her. He had his arm on her shoulders as he assisted her walking. She was being subtle about pushing him away. Owen felt his blood boil.

He remembered him. The FBI agent. Owen met him on his first evening back in the city. The one making puppy dog eyes at an oblivious Claire. The one, Owen felt, was making advances right now.

“-Let me take you home.”

“I’m fine Billy. Thank-.” Owen heard her say before he shouted, “Claire!”
He was unable to get a grip on his anger, and despite Cora's warning, he marched to them in long, quick strides.

“Mr. Gra-“ Owen didn’t hear the rest of the prick’s cheerful greeting because his fist collided with Brennan’s face. The guy fell down, clutching his jaw.

“Owen!” Claire and Cora yelled.

“Don’t fucking touch her!”

He turned to her, his voice softening at once. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine! What the hell do you do that for?” She pushed him out of the way and bent to help the guy to his feet.

She asked Brennan, “Are you alright?”

Owen felt hot air form in his chest. Cora appeared by his side and stepped in front of him. A few of the roaming patients and nurses stopped by and looked at the commotion.

Billy sneered, soothing his jaw as Claire helped him up. Owen’s knuckles burned from the impact. But it was soon replaced by brimming satisfaction when he noticed Brennan’s busted lip.

“Do you always punch people, Grady?”

“Only the special cases, Brennan.” He replied with the same sneer.

“Owen-“ Cora warned again. Claire stood by the agent’s side, her hand on his elbow. Owen could feel Cora restraining him.

“What happened Miss Claire? Are you okay?”
“Dehydration. I fell down. He helped me.” Claire explained to Cora, before she scowled at him.

Owen couldn't swallow his anger. His fingers curled by his sides as he fought the urge to hit him again. “So, you’re a stalker now?”

Brennan spat the blood on his lip and narrowed his eyes at him. The anger boiling in them. If he wanted to fight, Owen's more than happy to oblige.

“God, Grady! I forgot what an asshole you are!” Claire retorted, her ferocious glare not subsiding.

He glared back.

A security officer came and held a hand between the group. “Hey, hey. This is a calm, quiet place folks, let's not disturb the peace here.”

“Come on, Billy. Let’s go.” Claire held Brennan’s arm and walked to the elevators.

“I’ll be seeing you, Brennan!”

“Yeah. Fuck you, Grady.” He barked without turning his head.

Owen watched with prevailing temper as the two disappeared to the elevators. Cora and the guard assisted him to where a woman with a pixie cut waited by the blue door.

Lowery Cruthers glanced at his wristwatch then to the empty seat next to him. It’s 11:12 and his friend and boss was yet to arrive.

It was more than an hour ago, when a nurse from the hospital asked him where Owen was. It
seemed that Mr. Grady left his session 30 minutes early. Lowery apologised for his friend's behaviour before he tried calling and texting him. All were, as expected, unanswered.

Lowery glanced over at Claire who sat across him. Her face in that disappointing scowl he knew all too well. She was extra sharp today. Actually, she was back to her old self. And Lowery couldn’t help but ponder *What kind of idiot angered the wolf today?*

The door burst open, and a very upset Owen came barging in. Lowery hid his relief and slid the case files in front of him.

Owen greeted the crowd without his usual optimism. Lowery raised his eyebrows at his friend, as if to ask, *What's up?* but Owen shook his head.

“**We were actually finishing up. So glad for you to finally show up Mr. Grady.**” Claire spat, not looking at him.

It's common for Claire to begin her conversation with Owen like this. And Lowery could always count that Owen would respond in that 'I'm-trying-to-flirt-with-you-but-I'm-failing' comebacks. So, imagine everyone's surprise when he retaliated with an equal amount of sass and sharpness.

“I can be early or late whenever and if I want to, Dearing.”

Lowery's eyes widen.

“That’s comforting to know.” Claire replied and as always, undaunted.

Some of the members cleared their throats. While some, like him, swivelled in their chairs and whistled. *This is about to get ugly.*

The two scowled at each other before he called Connor again to proceed. Owen read the file in silence, scratching notes on the margin. When the kid finished, Owen told him to sit down to discuss his opinions.

And from there, followed a rapid exchange of words between Owen and Claire. Everybody held on
to their seats. Everyone knew better than to interrupt.

“-We lose some, we get some. This is the way of the world, Miss Dearing.”

“Well, Mr. Grady, if you put your head out of your ass, you would know, it’s not.” She snapped, her chair was now facing him. “What was the point of funding this operation if we’re gonna terminate it in a few years? It would be a waste of money. Waste of time. Waste of effort.”

“Well, Miss Dearing,” he copied with the same mocking cadence. “Aren’t you just a freaking ray of sunshine today?”

He continued in a diplomatic voice. “If we cut the cost we’re allocating for our biggest projects, we could make this work. There’s risk, yes. But what is that for an assured bigger profit and spike in employment?”

The majority of the board nodded. Except one.

“And what explanation do we say to our managers?”

Owen turned to her again. ”Tell them to lessen their consumption by at least 30%. It wouldn't do any damage. I build companies and I support people who make things possible. I'm pretty sure Miss Dearing, you’re not opposed to providing employment for Americans, are you? You’re not as heartless as you think you are.”

Their eyes were in a complete lockdown. It was making him nervous.

“Okay!” Lowery chimed in, looking at the group who he noticed had moved a little farther away from the table. “Why don’t we all take a quick break? Cool off-“

“Tell me, Mr. Grady. Will “caring” save them? This company?” Claire patronized. Her expressionless green eyes, freezing the already cold room.

“No-” Owen said in an un-contained hiss.
“Then I continue not to make the same mistake.”

Owen sneered, matching her ice.

Okay. Something is happening here!” Lowery gulped, his eyes darting back and forth at the two.

Claire stood up. The papers she’s stacking making rude, loud noises on the wooden table. “We’ll set another meeting for this Mr. Peters. Have your team ready by next week. Thanks everyone.”

And she swaggered to the exit, without a glance back. Lowery scratched the back of his head and loosened his tie. Beside him, he felt Owen's temper rising.

“Don’t do it, Owen, don’t do it.” He prayed in his seat.

But his boss stood up, his obvious annoyance trailing behind him as he followed the redhead out. “Meeting adjourned.”

For the past months of working for his friend, he could say that he already ‘immune-d’ himself with this scene. It was amusing to see the ever and always calm Owen Grady lose his cool over temperamental Claire. He’s been friends with the Gradys ever since middle school. And Lowery, given that history, thought he’d witnessed all his friend’s emotion. How wrong he was, watching as Owen stomped his way towards the woman. Lowery knew Owen had it bad for the redhead from the very first day. He also knew Zia had seen something but as someone who's opposed to gossip, she kept her mouth shut. She said, it's best if they heard it from Owen himself. So, for weeks and weeks, he pushed him into admitting. He teased him continuously, in high hopes he would eventually crack. He was unsuccessful. The man was all kinds of stubborn.

But then again, actions speak louder than words. And his friend has been showing it more than a lot lately.

“Right. Well, we I don’t know about you guys, but I kind of missed that.” He joked and the room let out nervous giggles.

Outside, Owen shouted something, in a tone he’d never heard before.
“Well, I have to make sure they didn’t kill each other. Take five, guys.” And he ran out in a hurry.

As a running joke he shared with their friends, he composed a checklist of this familiar scene. It's also been proof read by Zara a few months ago.

He already ticked the first few boxes:

- Cold or teasing “Good morning.”

- Sharp or witty comebacks

- Disagreements about the meeting

- The room goes silent

- One walks out

- One follows the person who walked out with a string of their past argument.

- And finally, the two will lock themselves in either of their office.

Or in this case, the ladies’ comfort room.

The employees’ heads popped above their cubicles and desk, giving him curious glances. He felt bad for their new employees who still cowered and flinched when the shouting spree began.

After Owen shut the door, they couldn't hear anything but disembodied, raised voices.

Lowery always considered himself lucky not to be at the other end of that argument.
“Alright, everyone. Lunch time. Everybody out!” He ordered. “Nothing to see here now!”

“Has it always…I mean… Are they always like that?” Emma asked beside him, watching the wall where Owen and Claire’s muffled voices rung through.

“You’ve never seen the worst of it, newbie. They’re just warming up.” He smirked.

He was furious.

And that was a fucking understatement.

"Get out!"

"No. This is my company."

On the large vanity mirror encompassing the entire wall, they stood face to face. Their erect postures radiating half suppressed rage and disapproval. Their knuckles white from clenching their fists too hard. Their faces flushed. He was biting his tongue as an effort to stay silent but she was reckless and she was bringing out the worst in him.

"Oh, wow. Wow. Of course! How could I forget!"

“Don’t turn this on me, Claire!”

“You punched a guy! IN A HOSPITAL! For Christ’s sake!” She rebutted with equal intensity.
"He deserved it! That stalking asshole. If I ever saw his face again-"

"You don’t go around assaulting people whenever feel like it. Let alone an officer! Are you fucking crazy?! Good thing, I talked him out of pressing charges. Do you know how it’ll impact the company if their own CEO goes to jail?"

"Oh, you talked to him, huh?" Owen pushed himself off the doorway where he was casually leaning against. "Stay away from him. I don’t like him."

"Who do you think you are?! He helped me! Why are you acting like you’re, like you’re-" she hesitated.

"Like what?"

Her face was beet red, her lips letting out angry puffs of air.

"Like what, Claire? Say it.” He repeated as he walked towards her.

"Like you’re jealous!"

Bingo.

"Well, what if I am?!” He swallowed, his insides shaking with his revelation.

She pressed her lips together and didn’t say anything. Her demeanour remained cold and aloof, before she hissed, “I don’t have anymore energy to argue you today. Have a good day, Mr. Grady.”

Claire strode to the door, right where he was leaning seconds ago. Her heels making clanking noises on the granite floor.

“Oh, I see. I see! Typical Claire… Real typical! Why do you always do that?” He threw his hands up in the air in a sign of total disbelief.
She stopped in her tracks and did a double back. Her tone not missing its angry beat. “Do what?”

“This! I just told you that I was fucking jealous and you do that. You walk out or, like this morning, you ran away! Why do you act like nothing bothers you?”

She pranced around him resembling a predator circling its prey. He stood his ground, unintimidated.

"I don't."

"Bullshit. I know you care, Claire!"

“I care? I care?! And you know this from what? My consent to have sex with me?”

Owen tried to regain a calmer breathing.

"Oh and let’s not forget, you met my dad. How was that by the way, Grady? Is that why you're acting like an asshole again? Because of him? Has he rubbed off on you?"

“Now, that's unfair. I didn’t know he was your dad before that. Lex-” he modulated his voice to a gentler tone. “Look Claire, this morning.. It was an accident. Me and Lex, we’re never-”

“You have nothing to explain to me, Grady.” She continued with an air of superiority. “If you think I ran away because of what I saw, you're mistaken.

“Then why did you run away, huh? Why didn’t you stop when I ran after you? Give me one damn reason.”

He stood straighter. She craned her neck up at him.

She’s not backing down, and so will he.
"I don’t owe you any explanation.” she roughly spoke before, a sort of awareness lightened her glacial, green eyes. “Wait…this. Did you get the impression that I care about you?"

An invisible hand gripped his lungs. And like a bullet, Claire charged, pitiless and unstoppable.

“Everything that's happened, the farmhouse, the island, the yacht. It was just sex. A heat of the moment kind of thing. A returned favour for saving my life. That's it. Don't think too much about it. You have casual sex, don't you? You know how that works.”

“You know that it wasn't, Claire.”

“It was! Why shouldn’t it be?”

He balled his fist, his eyes heavily fastened on hers. “Your passiveness really amazes me. God! How can you be so unfeeling?”

She shrugged with the callousness she's infamous for. “Years of practice.”

"And being unfeeling, uncaring, worked out pretty well for you?"

"Yes. Is that news to you?"

He scoffed. "You're not made of steel, Claire. At least, cut the shit when you talk to me."

Her chest was heaving from anger, her eyes blinking in rapid movements. She thrusted her jaw in a threatening gesture. The wound on her chin, visible even with her make up. For a moment, he wondered what will happen if he just kissed her.

But her voice was clear and bleak, he felt it sliced through him.

"You don't know anything about me, Grady. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.”
"Oh, oh I know enough."

"Oh yeah? After what? one date and a few meaningless fuck?!"

His ears perked up. "Meaningless? Is that what you think of me? that I like to fuck around?"

"Isn't it? I've known men like you my entire life."

"Oh, you do huh?"

She laughed, a mirthless laugh, that set his teeth on edge. "Come on, Grady. You have a damn reputation to uphold. Don't tell me, you felt something-"

"Well, I do!"

"What the fuck does that mean-"

“I want you! It’s as fucking simple and complicated as that!” he said with a quavering, desperate voice he couldn't believe was his.

The world stilled again. His voice reverberating on the thick walls like an atomic bomb - incapacitating both of them.

Owen rarely shows or expresses the depth of his feelings to anybody. But now, he felt his own pretence fall. He's done convincing himself that he doesn't like her. The continued struggle with his own superiority finally lay like a puddle on the floor.

Beneath her high-heeled feet.

Adrenaline circulated inside his body like electricity waiting to be discharged. His heart felt like it ran out of his chest. He placed an unconscious hand on it as he waited for her reaction.
Her face buckled, the emerald greens of her eyes liquified. He saw her grip the counter. Of their own accord, his legs moved, closing their distance. His quivering fingers tucked a golden strand behind her ear.

“Don’t fight this. Don’t fight me.” He whispered, his thumb delicate on the scrape on her chin. Like a true loser, he ogled, transfixed and untouched by her coldness. Owen saw her mouth move before he heard her.

Her words cutting through him like a thousand knives.

“I... If... If you think we’re gonna hold hands at the beach and watch the stars. Or have breakfast and ride away to the sunset anytime soon, you're... " she shook her head, as if to brush away a thought. "You're wrong.”

His arm fell on the space she was standing seconds ago. At that moment, he chose not to speak because if he did, his words would be a garble of incoherent sentences.

"Are we done? Can I go now?" She swallowed, squaring her expressionless eyes on his.

He was fatally stabbed in the abdomen once.

It felt like that.

"That's how is it huh? Everything you said, everything that's happened-"

“-Won’t happen again.” She finished for him.

He felt himself nod. He turned his back, scurrying straight to the door. And as if to add insult to injury, Claire added, “Let’s be honest here, Grady. You’re not exactly relationship material.”
His hand paused on the doorknob, he didn't turn when he said, “Oh, and you are?”

She didn't say anything.

In a resigned but firm tone, he added, "You care, Claire. Why is it hard for you to admit? I won't think less of you... Nobody would."

He didn't wait for her reply.

Owen unlocked the door and wasn’t surprise to see Lowery and Emma were the only people on the floor. They were sitting by wall on conference room. Their conversation halted when he came out restroom.

“Hey!” Lowery’s face fell. “Everything alright?’’

“Lowery, can you tell Chicago, Miss Dearing would go in my stead next week.” He ordered in a much controlled voice he recognised.

The only let down in his calm and collected pose was the gaping hole on his chest, where his heart's been ripped out.

“Oh-kay. Just her? I thought you wanted to go too?”

He glanced where he came from before he walked past by them, “I changed my mind.”

Everything had hit her all at once. The sabotage, her dad, Lex. Lex and her cheerleader beauty. All the rage came out quicker than light, consuming everything in her.

Words flew out of her mouth. Each of them, as harsh as the next. And from the wounded look in his face, she knew, without a doubt, that it hit their mark. She knew she went too far -even for her
standards. She couldn't help the sudden gush of pain on her body.

He walked out on her.

Claire stared as the door closed by itself. When it did, she let out a long, anguished breath and finally sunk against the wall. Her arms and legs slackened, her body felt like drifting over harsh waters. The hollow feeling was eating her stomach. She held her hands to her lips, unsurprised to find both of them trembling.

She bit the inside of her cheek as her mind recounted the heated conversation. They had arguments before, then what was so different about this one?

“I want you!” His voice, strong and impassioned, echoed in her ears.

His confession terrified her. She felt weak, her remaining walls crumbled down to ashes. It all but infuriated... and confused her. And because of her confusion, she fought back with the only emotion she perfected all these years.

Claire’s always been the subject to no control but her own. She detached herself of emotions and relationships for a reason. Being alone is a strength that can and will protect her from potential heartbreak and loss.

When their dad left the house days before her 9th birthday, it destroyed her family. Karen didn’t speak for three weeks and had to go to therapy. Their mom became depressed. It left Claire no choice but to fend for everybody. She convinced herself that it was her obligation to fix them.

A few times, she caught them crying and seeing them so wrecked and besides themselves, angered her. Because of her early experiences, she built her fences higher to avoid feeling the same way again.

But Owen knocked her off her normal equilibrium. Again.

Owen walked out on her, The scene looping in her head.
She didn't know what to say. Never had she felt so emotionally drained her entire life. Mind and heart bickered like an old married couple, constantly battling for supremacy. She was not used to doing anything else but let her mind win. "Always let your mind win, champ. Always." She had no problems with it in the past. But now, it felt like someone was tearing her apart. Bit by fucking bit.

Quickly and without warning, her eyes burn. What’s happening to her?

“Get your shit together, Claire.” She dug her palms on her eye sockets, keeping her frustrations and fears unshed.

The door creaked and she couldn’t help the hope that bloomed in her chest. She stood up. Owen?

"I'm so-" Her apology died on her tongue when an afro hair peeked in. Her assistant's innocent face came to view. “Claire? Are you alright?”

She hid her disappointment with a sad smile. She let her head rest on the wall again. “I’m fine. I'm fine. Why haven’t you gone to lunch yet?”

“I was waiting for you. Is there anything I can do before I have my break?” She could sense the hesitance of her assistant who remained standing on the doorway. Claire's planners gripped in front of her chest.

Owen's tormented expression flashed before her eyes. "You care, Claire."

“Yes. Can you cancel all my appointments for today?” She asked in the quietest and calmest of voice.

“Sure. What will I tell them?”

“Tell them...” she clutched the phone in her hand, "I just need to do something today.”
Is Lex an enemy or a friendly? Does she still like Owen? Has Ron really changed? What do you think of Owen's revelation? What do you think of Claire's reaction? Will Owen really give up on Claire? Give me your thoughts!

I'm sorry for the overdue. I was working on the 14th chapter. I've rewritten this chapter in three other ways, (I know, I'm sorry!) and this was the only plot I found acceptable. I'm a little nervous posting this one but I hope you enjoyed reading it!!

I don't like angst. I'm not really good at writing or reading one. It'll help me knowing what you guys think. But if this chapter is trash, I apologise. I'm gonna make the next chapters worth it. *cough, cough sexy times* Please, stay with me? :)

Thank you so much! Please leave a review,
Wolves and Flames

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Smut ahead. And I’m only half sorry. But I wanna apologize again for the long wait. I've had this for a couple of days now. I hope this was worth your wait. :) 

Let's get going, shall we?

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"He is hungry like a wolf. And I am quite happy to be his prey."

The café on Rose street was a charming and cozy little nook huddled between a travel agency and a laundry mat. The sun hit the glass windows, casting golden hues in the interior. It was almost empty except for a few teenagers and a grumpy employee sitting on the circular tables. Small vases of pink peonies decorated each table and crocheted peach table cloths. A strong aroma of both coffee and pastries swirled in the air enticing anyone who came near its doors. The usual jazz
music flowed from the speakers- the universal yet grim effort to evoke a sense of calmness. It worked for her in the past. But, not today.

She arrived early which she now thought was a mistake. She thought that coming in here before he would at least appease the tightness in her stomach—it didn't. In fact, it worsened it. Claire glanced down at her wristwatch for the umpteenth time, an anxious gesture. The mechanical hands on it couldn't move fast enough for her liking.

She sat by the window, absently stirring the latte she ordered not more than 10 minutes ago. Her altercation with Owen in constant repeat in her head. She couldn't find the exact words to name it. But the uneasiness was there and coordinated with dreadful sighs. The incident was blanketimg her with coldness she'd never experienced before.

Claire considered all attachments as irrational. It was something she tried evading her entire life. Not out of spite, but of fear. All those repressed emotions accumulated her walls, high enough to keep anyone out. Fear. It's always been fear that motivated her to build those walls. It was a protection, a shield to keep her from the one thing she knew she could never control.

"I want you! It's as fucking simple and complicated as that!"

She couldn't believe that it just took a furious Owen Grady to make her realize her wrongs. A part of her hated herself for this for Claire always prided herself as, in his words, passive and uncaring. She knew it was better to be aloof and indifferent than get your heart broken.

But now, her ice queen and untouchable status have been tainted by Owen Grady—a man—who's been nothing but genuine and chivalrous towards her. The honesty, sincerity and anger in his eyes felt like a pail of cold water sloshing down on her. The shame and guilt were indescribable.

She gnawed insides of her cheek, as she recalled the anguish in his ever so expressive eyes. She took a sip of her latte, its taste eased down her throat in a soothing attempt.

"I'm sorry, I'm late." she heard a rasped voice say.

She let the cup rest on its plate. She shook her head and straightened in her chair. "No. I was early."

He hesitated before asking, "May I sit down?"

She nodded, avoiding his eyes and fighting the urge to run away.

"How are you, Claire?" The redhead man with green eyes asked in a soft voice when he sat down. She could sense his eyes scanning her, could feel how nervous he was.

It didn't take her long to reach him. She didn't know what she said when he answered, but it ended up with her asking him out for coffee. Claire suspected that when she sees him, she'd be furious like Karen was. And that she would be vocal about it too. Because after all these years, everything he did affected her family, their family. Especially her.

The little voice in her mind was telling her to blame him for everything she was. For every hardship she and her family went through. But sitting there, looking at the solemn face that lulled her all those years ago, she felt like a kid again. Back at the time when Ron Dearing was the only one who could provide her the comfort she needed.

She clenched a fist on the handle of her cup, fighting another urge to cry. "I feel like shit, Dad."
A week later.

The alarm snoozed with a shrill cry, disrupting him from another dreamless sleep. With eyes still close, he clapped his hand on the bedside table until he felt his alarm clock. It took him a few minutes to finally blink his eyes awake. He groaned, lay on his back and stared at the white ceiling up ahead. The ghosts of past conversation, angry green eyes and red lips threatened to break his line of thoughts.

When his mind shed the last ounces of sleep off his body, he turned his head to the side, where his phone was. Its silence almost taunting him. For the past week, he formed the annoying habit checking his phone every now and then. He grabbed it with a hopeful heart, but he was, once again, disappointed.

With another heavy sigh, Owen rubbed his hands on his face and stood up. He was back to the farmhouse after a month of therapists and a car accident. He was happy to be back. But he couldn't deny the pang of sadness that went along with it after everyone left. Something was missing. It felt like someone had plucked a ray of his sunshine, leaving him with a cold, bitter feeling.

Owen ignored it, as he's been doing for the past week. He parted the curtains and opened the window, allowing warm, sweet air to seep through.

The sun sifted the warmest glow through a billow of clouds. Its light stretching across the glade, scintillating the land in one perfect panorama.

He leaned his forearm on the window pane as he reveled in the hard sought comfort of his home.

The rooster crowed with profound vanity on the roof weather vane. The sun rays hit his red feathers, making them look a golden red. Guarded by the wooden fences, hens, geese and ducks roamed the field down below. They were lining after Nerissa, his caretaker, who had a palmful of feeds on her apron. She waved at him; her voice muffled by the walls. "You're here! Good morning Owen!"

He waved back.

On the other side of the fence, a small herd of sheep and cattle comfortably munched the grass. And from the barn beside it, emerged Mario, in his hand was an empty farm bucket. Oblivious to him, Owen watched as he walked to an unsuspecting Nerissa and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. Nerissa, jumped and smacked his arm. The sight initiated a bittersweet feeling in him. His smile faded, making him think of her passive, green eyes. He shook his head, as if ridding himself of the sting of their last conversation. When he looked down, Mario was waving his straw hat at him. He shouted, "Hey Owen!"

He nodded with a half sincere smile.

The week went by in a scurry of strenuous meetings and paperwork. He found himself switching to full auto pilot mode. The only good news was him finishing his therapy, which meant he'd have fewer reasons to stay in the city.

A ringing tone blared from the pants he wore the night before. His heart leapt to his throat, thinking it might be her. But it wasn't, to his continuing dismay.

"Christianne."

"Fuck you, Owen." she laughed. "Yeah. Just calling to say they said they're on their way."
"Alright. I'm gonna be here all day, anyway. So, no rush." he replied as he walked to his bathroom to get ready.

"Great! I just have to pick the fertilizer, then I'm on my way."

"Thanks, Zia. You know, for helping out here."

Due to his hospitalisation, (and thus, shortage of hand), Zia has been helping Nerissa and Mario tend his farm. Owen offered to pay her, but she refused. She told him that it was kind of a therapy in a way from, as Lowery likes to call it, spying on other people.

"Don't mention it. See you in a bit!" and the line ended.

He was ready to throw it on the bed when it beeped a message. It was from Lowery this time, being his usual paranoid self.

"Yo boss, saw that annoying FBI agent Walters hanging out at Coffee Bean today, across our building. Again. It's the fourth time this week."

Knowing Lowery's tendency to overhype any situation, Owen joked.

"They serve the best bagels. I'd be hanging out there too if you stop throwing papers in my face."

and he hit Send.

A few days ago, the agents went to the office to give him updates on the investigations. The bureau thought it's best for Owen to have a security team around the area, only for precaution. He agreed. If someone was after him, it'll put anybody who interacts with him in imminent danger. Security agents would take turns. Owen knew it was best if he didn't tell anyone, to prevent paranoia. But he remembered almost saying no when Brennan showed his face.

For the sake of professionalism, Owen shook his hand when the team bids their goodbyes. He noticed, with annoyance, how Brennan's eyes wandered, like he was looking for someone else. Owen saw him greet Emma and asked her about Claire. She's not here, asshole, he wanted to say. Owen had never bitten his tongue, nor tightened his fists that hard. But he made it through the day, without casualties.

It's been a week since he last saw her in person. Claire has been staying in Chicago for almost a week. She was supposed to arrive two days ago, but the storm hit and they cancelled all flights. And so, Claire stayed. He held video conferences every other day just to catch a glimpse of her. Owen acknowledged her during said meetings, and only talked to her unless it was necessary.

A week gone without them arguing over business matters. Whenever he sensed an argument brewing, he'd stop himself and let the room vote. In more than a few occasions he felt (or imagined) her gaze lingering on him from the cyber camera. And Owen would fight the urge to give in, call her personally and apologise. He didn't.

Rejection, Grady. Get fucking used to it. He repeated to himself as he stood by the bathroom counter. The hopeless and bitter taste in his mouth, betraying his pride and ego.
Someone better give him a gold medal with emeralds and jades for being stoic and undaunted as she was. While also throwing him a standing ovation for how he managed not to stumble for his words whenever they "talk".

Even so, their time apart only worsened the ugly feeling in his gut.

He turned on the shower and let his thoughts run freely. Their argument, the way she looked like she could eat him alive and her own indifference, which were unlike any other bullet nor knife that could've killed him.

Owen's aware of that feeling seeping deep to his bone, making home with another day of not talking or arguing with her. He didn't know it was even possible to be angry with someone and yet still wanna hold their hand. Or kiss them. The urge was, if not, much stronger. Owen still found himself staring at her during their video conferences; still found himself repressing the proud grin when she's telling everyone what to do.

Her smile flashed before his eyes. That smile that was kindling inferno in his bones, melting him inside and out. And all good things followed.

Her red hair and emerald green eyes. Her vanilla and milk scent after hours in the sun. The flower in her hair, the feel of her skin and how it felt under his fingertips. The delicate softness of her hands while they danced. How the slightest of touch felt like heaven and a hellish torture. The way she openly laughed at him. And, those kill-me-fucking-now dresses.

Owen switched off the knob and wrapped himself with a towel. The room now covered with mist, fogging the glass and the mirrors. He recalled the meeting on the island. Claire called him "dipshit" on that note.

The laugh-the one he tried so hard to control for the past week- passed out from his lips.

He walked back to his room and changed into his training clothes. A former colleague will be coming out today. It's been a few months since he helped with training and he couldn't help but feel the flood of excitement. Once done, he grabbed his used pants to deposit it on the laundry bin when something fell with a soft thud on the carpet.

His wallet lie open; bills and cards poked out from its pockets. He picked it up and thumbed a crisp stationary folded neatly in one of the sleeves. He pulled it out and smiled.

It was Claire's itinerary, the one she made for him.

Owen Michael Grady

The Grady Corporation

June 15th, 2015. 8pm.

20:00 Arrival

20:05 Order for appetizers, entrée and dessert

20:10 Appetizers arrive

20:15 Start conversation... See end notes for topics.
20:30 Entrée arrives. Continue conversation.

21:00 Dessert (Ice Cream or Ice cream cake)

21:30 Home?

Below are conversation topics:

Old jobs, wrestling or football, or other sports he played, favorite animals, favorite places, ask him more about Cape Town and his 2-year stay there, allergies, favorite or earliest childhood memory, favorite weather, least favorite weather, Sarah and Ian’s love story...

It was precise, up to the very last detail which didn't surprise him. Claire Dearing wrote it after all, he couldn't expect more than less. What surprised him about her whole agenda was he didn't find it offensive or too controlling. Knowing himself, he's always been the 'Act Now, Think Later' kind of man. Always driven by his rapid impulses and trained, survival instincts. He was the kind of man who reads the rules, but breaks them anyway. But as he soon as he finished reading the bullet points, he felt...flattered. He wasn't trying to wheedle his way to her when he followed it. Owen saw it as a goodwill and effort. Claire wanted it to work between them. It was her guideline to not screw up their evening. The thought of making Claire nervous made him feel like running a twenty-mile marathon.

He shook his head and his smile melted into a remorseful frown.

Way to go, dipshit. Now, she really does hate you.

No sooner had he thought of it, an idea hit him. Without having any more second thoughts, he grabbed his phone and dialled.

The voice was energetic yet croaky from his daily consumption of cigarettes. "Good morning, Owen, sir. What can I do for you today?"

"Hey Jasper, I need a plane tonight."

The drive from the airport took an hour and a half. It gave her an apt time to compose and work on her apology speech. For the tenth time.

"You have every right to tell me to leave. But let me say, I'm..." she shook her head and tried a different, more direct approach.

"I came here to apologize for the things I said last week. It has been bothering me ever since. I overreacted and in doing so, I hurt you. I hope we can look past this and... and..."

She frowned at herself. "Geez. You're pathetic at apologies, Claire." 

Her hands, hugged the wheel in frustrating grips, fingernails denting the leather. She drove through the private road, her car trailing smoke and dust behind. Claire reminisced on the past week, how everything felt like falling into place, at the same time not.
Despite the meetings and family reunions, the past days did nothing to wane her emotional distress. It made her mind being alone. It was driving her crazy. She needed to get out.

And so, on a Thursday morning, she called in sick for work and drove for over two hours to Madison, Wisconsin. Because if there was anyone whose presence could comfort her within a mile radius it was family.

Margaret Bryne was a lovely, prim lady with natural blonde hair and the bluest of eyes. Their mom was living with her boyfriend, Richard in their new home. Richard, whom she had never met before, was a funny fellow right about her mom's age. He welcomed her upon her arrival while her mom gets over her shock. As luck would have it, her nephews, who she hasn't seen for over a year, were there too.

"What have been up to Aunt Claire?" Gray asked over the bowl of potatoes he was mashing.

"Not much. Same boring stuff. Right Zach?" She smirked and winked at the 17 year old sitting in front of them.

Claire adored her nephews. And even though she rarely sees them, Claire always makes sure that whenever she did, they'll hang out. Right now, it was making dinner.

"Hey! I didn't say your work was boring." Zach defended before grabbing one cherry tomato off her vegetable bowl.

"You did." Gray said in unison with sneaky glances at each other.

Zach contemplated first, "Well, that was before I reconsidered it."

Claire looked up from her chore and studied him. "Reconsidered?"

"Well yeah. I was planning to take Agricultural Economics."

"Who's the nerd now?" Gray sing-song-ed.

"Wow! That's great Zach! Where?"

"Berkeley."

"Congratulations! You know, our internship program is still open, you can send your credentials, anytime. I promise I won't interfere."

Zach chuckled. "I already did. Mom gave Owen my number. He called and made me."

She stopped and looked up to see the him smirking, as if he knew something he shouldn't.

"What? Owen? Owen who?" She almost shouted.

That was a dumb question.

"Owen Grady."

"Owen?"
"Yes. You didn't tell us that you work for that Grady."

"Oh yeah! Mom told me all about him too!" Gray's enthusiasm to join the conversation resurfaced.

Damn it Karen!

She cleared her throat and proceeded to mince the carrots, her voice shaking just a little. "What did he say?"

"He said he's more than happy to have me and that I should start in my convenience. He seemed like a cool, smart guy. We talked about agricultural taxes after that."

Claire found this hard to believe. Zachary Mitchell admitting someone cooler than him? "When did this happen?"

"Dunno, two, three days ago?"

"Yeah, and he invited us for some resort re-opening on an island. How cool is that? Mom told us he owns an island! An island! Do you guys know how much it costs to have an island? Let alone, keep one? He must be super rich!" Gray said in one breath and added, "You should date him, Aunt Claire. Mom thinks he's the male version of you." like it was the most casual and easiest thing in the world.

Her eyes bulged.

"I agree. I think, you should." Zach echoed with obvious jest.

"Okay." A voice announced from the archway and Margaret entered into the threshold. Her blue eyes twinkling over hers. "Stop teasing your Aunt. Let her date whoever she wants to date."

"Thanks mom."

When everybody went to bed that night, Claire was unable to sleep even though the weather was much calmer here. She went to the family room, opened a floor lamp and looked at the photo albums.

"Can't sleep, honey?" her mom interrupted. She was holding an empty glass in her hand.

"Yeah."

It amazed Claire how Karen very much resembles her. From the narrow face, kindest blue eyes and blonde reddish hair. And like her sister, their mom was an emotional lady. She told her about her talk with her dad, how civil it all was and kind of relieving. Her mom listened and told her everything was all water under the bridge. They're both happier and that's what matters.

Their midnight conversation took a lighter turn when she grabbed an old, ugly cookie jar. It was an acrylic container with an colorful swirls, vines and flowers on the top cover and body. The words "cookie jar" was the only neat thing about it. Claire decorated it as a kid and her artistic pursuit stopped then and there.

"Really? You kept that?" Claire groaned, though, amused.
"Of course I did! I love this! Remember the time when you used to wake me up at night?" Her mom paraded shameful thing in front of her and gave her a big chocolate cookie. "You said you had a nightmare about losing some kind of school competition."

"Yeah, yeah. I remember." She replied, playfully rolling her eyes. "I was a competitive kid then. What can I say?"

"And from what I hear, you still are now." The twinkle in her eyes were back. It was the kind of glimmer in Karen's eyes whenever she was into something malicious.

Claire furrowed her eyebrows at her mom and watched her fetch the wine glasses and milk from the fridge.

With that teasing flicker in her blues, she said, "Now, tell me about this Owen Grady, who I've been hearing about so much."

She exhaled a nervous sigh and refocused on the lane ahead. Green fields and rows of trees on either side. Its beauty evoking a sense of tranquility in her distracted her for a minute. Claire slowed down, appreciating its grandness, this time.

The last time she was here, the weather had been bleak; angry clouds spat howling winds and rain. The sun had slowly started its descent atop the mountains. The orange spectacle on the endless pasture was an eye candy from violent rains and winds in Chicago.

A week away from him, only deepened the cuts of her guilt and regret. Owen didn't deserve the accusations or the callousness of her behavior. She thought about calling him many times, but if she's going to apologize, she's gonna do it right. And in person.

The hundreds of trees cleared up and his ranch came into view. It was a cute looking thing, though it was nowhere near tiny. The modest size of the land, the house and the barn screamed wealthy, but, better yet, homey. This place suited him. Claire took another deep breath and steered the vehicle to her right, past his wooden gates.

Strangers' heads turned as she shifted the car into Park. There were other cars parked in his driveway too. The SUV she recognized as Zia's. The other was an orange Ford pickup truck, its truck bed's door down.

The air reeked of fresh breeze, and mown grass. The last rays of sunshine, warm and sweet on her face. Claire wiped sweaty palms on her skirt and walked to the fence. Standing behind it was a Hispanic couple who greeted her with cordial smiles and hellos. They both stopped from what they're doing. If her memory was correct, these people were Owen's caretakers. The people who were helping him tend the farm.

The man was leaning on the pitchfork in his hand. He had a straw hat on, the ends of his dark hair peeking from underneath. When she met his eyes, he doffed his hat and beamed at her. The woman next to him dropped the bucket she was holding and wiped geriatric hands on her apron. Claire suddenly felt overdressed with her pencil skirt, ironed blouse and Manolos. Claire trod, her heels digging on the rocky earth.

"Good day Miss. What can we help you with?" The woman who had a soft, motherly features asked her.

"Good afternoon." Claire greeted, her hands clasped in front. "I'm looking for Mr. Grady."
"Mr. Gra-Oh! Owen?" The old man joined.

"Oh, he's at the back." The woman supplied. "I'm sorry, Miss, but I didn't get your name?"

"Oh. I'm-

"Claire?" Someone called from behind her back.

They all saw Zia and a tall, black man approaching them. Both adults were carrying bales of straw on either arm.

"Hey! You're back! What are you doing here?"

"I-uh..." she stammered and felt her neck heat up. Quick, Claire! "I just have to... drop some papers for Owen."

The corners of Zia's lips quirked upwards. "I see."

"Yes, it's very urgent." she replied, her tone surer this time.

"Right." Zia put a hand on her hips and pointed at the man beside her. "Oh, this is Barry. Another NAVY survivor."

She reached out a hand towards the man. "Nice to meet you. I'm Claire."

"Ahh, plaisir de vous rencontrer enfin, mademoiselle." He pronounced with a perfect french diction and shook her hand. "I've heard good things."

"Merci. Comment allez-vous?" she smiled.

"Je vais bien. Je vais bien..." Barry paused as he helped Zia haul the bale into the truck. "If you're looking for Owen, he's out back with Ashley-"

Oh. She released a tense breath. Of course, he was with someone!

"-and Delta and Echo." Barry finished.

"I'm sorry?"

"You can watch. I think they're almost finish." Zia added before she lifted herself on the bed to stack the hay into a neat pile.

Claire blinked at them, confused.

"He volunteers in training dogs for the military sometimes. When he's not busy. You should see how he works." the french man said, wiping the sweat off his forehead. "The bastard always has a way with them."

"Um, okay. Where should I go?" She asked, glancing around.

"Follow the path at the back, you'll find them." Zia directed.

Claire, not wanting to be a bother to them anymore, thanked the Barry and Zia and the couple before she headed to the side of the house and had to gasp. She had never seen a more magnificent view.
Bright blends of pink, orange and purple littered the sky. Its colors, casted shadow on the endless landscape. Wild flowers of every color charmed the foliage. A wired fence separated his property from the dark spruce of trees and bushes far ahead. The slightest gust of wind toyed with her hair, and cooled her fingers. She tucked the escaped strands behind her ear, conscious with each step and intakes of breath. She felt like a kid going to the principal's office. Claire continued down the kept grass to a small hill where she could see a sizeable sheep pen.

"It's okay to feel nervous, Claire. It means you're doing a brave thing. You got this."

The wooden fence barricaded the figures from the rest of the glade. She stopped from a good distance. She could see him, his back to her. Lying beside him was a medium-sized dog. She couldn't tell its breed, but she knew it was one of those canine, people train for the military. Its long coat was a mixture of brown and black. Its head twisted towards her; black ears pointed in a vigilant angle. Claire stilled, but soon relaxed when the dog resumed its head between its paws.

She could hear Owen calling out orders as another dog raced through the obstacles. A man wearing a complete army uniform running alongside it, the leash in his hand.

"Good job, Echo! Good girl!" she heard Owen commended when the dog finished. The dog, named Echo, left her handler and ran to him in an excited gallop. The man, who must be Ashley, removed his cap before he started disassembling the tracks.

Claire observed, fascinated as Owen raised clenched fist. Echo hurriedly stopped in her tracks, her beady eyes on him. Owen turned his head and snapped his fingers on the dog beside him, "Up too, Delta."

The dogs stood in the center of pen. Their brown and black fur was glistening under the orange sky. "Last round, girls!" Owen raised his arm. "Hold!" The dogs sat down in unison.

"That is good. That is damn good."

She heard subtle clicking sounds from his hand before he produced a braided rope from his pocket. He goaded it at them before throwing it as far as he could. The dogs watched it fly, their mouths slobbering. "Hold girls..." Their heads snapped at Owen.

"Hold! Eyes on me still I say so and... Go!"

The dogs sprinted after it. Their furry bodies running side by side, dust trailing after their retreating figures. Not a minute later, they trotted back to their trainer. Both ends of the rope on either of their wet mouths.

Owen laughed, bent his knee and nuzzled their heads. "Well done today, girls. Well done."

The smile on her face spread warmth on her insides. She felt immensely proud of him for a reason. Claire took an unconscious step forward on the grass, unaware that the ground on it was soggy.

"Shit!" She yelped as her right foot plunged ankle-deep in mud. She managed to grab onto the branch of the nearby small flowering tree.

But the branch snapped!

And she fell down. The right side of her torso and leg dipped in murky soil.

The dogs barked, alarmed by the sudden movements. Claire felt her blood turn cold and she closed her eyes. The last thing she expected today was getting mauled by angry K9 dogs. At least, let her
apologize to him first!

She saw Owen whipped his head. He looked about him in puzzlement before his eyes landed on hers. And he softened immediately. "Claire?"

He commanded the dogs to heel before he jogged to her. His face twitching with suppressed laughter.

She felt the redness of her hair seeped to her neck and cheeks. Fuck me! Fuck me! Fuck me! She used her remaining dignity to pull herself before she felt a hand on her arm.

"Can I help you with anything, Miss Dearing?"

She would've glared at him if she hadn't humiliated herself into the next century. He pulled her up and wiped the streaks of mud off her arms. "You okay?"

Claire scrambled in her position, trying to look as decent as possible. With a small voice, she exclaimed, "Yeah." then repeated in a much louder, composed voice. "Yes! Thank you."

"You didn't sprain anything again, did you?" His playful simper coloring her cheeks even more.

She tested her foot, grimacing at its grime. "No. No, I don't think so."

"I have a garden hose somewhere..." he trailed off, stretched his neck over the potted plants. "Over there. Hang on, let me get it for you."

He switched the faucet, pulled the hose from its handle and offered it to her. "Here. Better stand on the cement to scrub it off. I don't know about your clothes, though. But I think I can find you something."

She removed both her heels and balanced herself on the cleaner foot. "There's no need." She thought of the set of clean clothes in her luggage. "Thanks."

The dirt peeled off and Claire, still embarrassed, kept her head down and focused on it. She could almost feel his amused expression as he stood beside her.

"Everybody okay?" Ashley appeared, holding the dogs' leashes. The animals sat on either side of him, their long, pink tongues out.

"Yeah!" Owen started. "Claire, this is Jerry, an old friend. That's Echo." He tipped his chin to the smaller dog with a darker muzzle. Echo's ears perked up at the mention of her name. Owen then pointed and scratched the dog's head standing near him. "And here's Delta."

She nodded at Jerry, her cheeks still red. From up close, Claire could say that the dogs were still young. No more than eight months old. They looked far and less threatening now.

"How do you do, Ma'am?"

Jerry released the leashes and the dogs dashed to the nearby meadow. They were jumping, chasing butterflies and each other. Claire stole a glimpse as the two engaged in a small quick talk. Owen grew a pencil mustache, flattering his already roguish features. His stubble, as scratchy it was to look at, reached most of his neck and jaw. She itched to touch it, remembering how tempting it felt on her fingertips, her neck... And lips.

"... Anyway, thanks for today man, always appreciate it."
"Anytime. Same time again, next week." Owen gave Jerry a one-armed hug before he let out whooping whistle. Delta and Echo stopped playing and scampered back to the group. Owen said his goodbyes before Jerry fit their leashes and was out of sight.

"Sorry about that."

"It's fine. I, uh, thanks." Claire returned the hose to him. "Here."

"So..." he drawled. "What else can I assist you with, Miss Dearing?" He was saying her name without the formality and sharpness from their conference calls- to her great relief.

"Uh..." The crimson blush in her cheeks were back again. Her prepared words dying in her mouth. "I... Uh... Wanted to... The thing that happened..."

"Yes?"

In past circumstances, she would find the smug look on his face infuriating. But as Owen gradually invaded her personal space, she wanted to kiss it off of him. Her words in-existent. She craned her neck to square her eyes on his. She felt vulnerable, smaller and less intimidating without her heels. "The uh... I came here to say that..." Stop looking at me like that for goodness sake!

He smirked, raising his eyebrow.

"That I...I..." she squirmed and gave in. "I have the progress reports from Chicago."

"You do?" His smirk deepened. "And this can't wait until Monday?"

Her blush crept up her chest as she justified her lie. "No... No, it can't. Management wants it sorted out immediately."

"Right. Of course."

He didn't look convinced.

"And the plans... The plans for the new building. I needed your signature." Which was partial truth.

"Whatever you want Miss Dearing," he backed off and twisted the hose back to its reel. "Well then. I guess you're staying for dinner?"

"Oh no, no, no. I shouldn't. It'll be quick."

"I can't rush or make hasty decisions, you know that. And as you said, this couldn't wait until Monday, right?" He grilled with that stupid, boyish grin.

"Ye-yes. No, no." This was getting way out of hand. She should have just apologized and then leave. For heaven's sake, Claire!

"Yes? No? What it's gonna be, Miss Dearing?" He closed their gap and her lips parted in a faint gasp.

"I'm-"

"Owen?! Owen!" someone shouted from over the house.

Claire finally exhaled.
Up the stone steps and the outdoor porch, they saw Barry. He was clutching a phone in his hand.

"Ow- oh, hi Claire!"

She raised her hand in a small wave.

"What's up Barry?"

"Jasper called! He said that the storm's worst. The government cancelled all flights to and from Chicago. If you still wanna fly tonight, you gotta get moving."


"I'll call him back. Thanks Barry! Stay for dinner?"

"Nah man!" Barry waved and returned to the house.

Claire found her voice again. "You're flying to Chicago? Is there something wrong?"

He smiled at her, that wistful close-lipped smile. The butterflies in his garden must've found a way to sneak inside her body because her stomach suddenly swarming with it.

"Not anymore."

After getting her clean clothes in the car, she took a quick shower in his guest bedroom. When she finished, she went out to find everybody driving off. That was when Owen excused himself to take his shower.

After Claire retrieved the files in the car, she busied herself with the hallway gallery. The frames, all black and gold, hung in an organized pattern on the wall. Diplomas and other special certifications joined the mix of familiar faces. She lifted her neck and crouched down to study each frame. Claire stopped at the frame right beside the guest room door.

The people were standing in the front of a house. This house. The picture's taken during an afternoon, judging by the soft shadows on their faces. Alan had his arm around Mrs. Grady. Between and in front of them was Owen. He had his arms drawn out in a 'macho' pose, legs astride. Curly haired and scrawny little kid, but just as handsome. Claire moved on to the next frame where Owen was holding the cake and wearing a birthday hat. The cake had a messy calligraphy of "Happy Birthday Mommy!". Beside him was Mrs. Grady, poised to blow the cakes, her eyes smiling.

"That was her last birthday."

Claire beamed at the fondness in his voice. She turned to see him leaning against his bedroom doorway. His hair was still damp from his shower. Owen swapped his work clothes to his usual wear; casual brown pants and a clean Henley shirt. Its sleeves striving hard to contain the bulge of his crossed arms.

He crossed the threshold in easy steps. Their arms brushed as he stood next to her, calling the goosebumps on her skin. His musky masculine scent filling her senses, making her light headed.

"I baked that cake for her. Me and dad."

"That's very sweet of you." she complimented as they stared at the picture.
"Thanks. Everyone thought so too."

"How was it?"

In a deadpan voice, he replied, "Like shitty cardboard, actually."

Her mouth formed a lopsided pout, the smile threatening to break. But it was Owen who broke first. Claire felt a fluttering sensation as she laughed with him. They walked to the kitchen as Owen told her the short story of how he and Alan insisted on cooking the cake. His mom found the gesture, sweet and even finished two slices to humor them.

"… The blueberries were crisped."

They shared a heartfelt laugh as he prepared the pans in the kitchen.

"How does Bolognese pasta sound for dinner?"

"Pasta sounds great. I'll help." She made a move to stand next to him when Owen stopped her.

"No," he said with firmness.

"I wanna help."

"And I appreciate it. But you are my guest. Go, sit at the counter there and look pretty."

She narrowed her eyes at him, stifling her grin.

Owen put his palms up. "Hey, it's just a suggestion. I'm not telling you what to do."

Claire let the man do his work and as he did, he recounted the week's events. She did the same and updated him on the progress of the new building, the island and other business matters. She felt more at ease as their conversation lengthened. The tension she anticipated to be there was absent.

It was amazing watching him cook. He moved like one of those celebrity chefs in cooking shows. He even had a towelette on his shoulder. Claire joked that she had never felt so de-feminized her entire life. Owen laughed again; the sound felt like satisfying a week long craving. She couldn't help but feel elated, as his shoulder shake of laughter, his eyes crinkling.

Despite her insistence, he did everything. From boiling the pasta, mixing the sauce and washing the dishes. The only help she did was pick the drink, lay out the cutlery on the counter and help him dry the dishes.

After they ate and dried the dishes, he grabbed two coffee cups for the champagne and they went to the adjacent hall.

Claire figured since he's the only one living here, the 8-seater, dining set wasn't practical to dine in at. But with a view like this, she found it hard to believe that Owen couldn't make an exception.

The transparent walls allowed her to take advantage of the scene before her. The acres of land now covered in the warmest of shadows were welcoming and homely. A few stars already dotting the sky. If she's captivated earlier, this was next level.

"Beautiful." Owen commented. She turned to see him already watching her. A thoughtful, soft glitter in his expressive eyes. He inclined his head to indicate, "The view. Beautiful. Am I right?"

From this light and angle, his eyes looked greener than the forest. The golden specks in them
stealing her breath away. "Yes. Very."

He clapped his hands as he said, "Alright, let's get this over with, Miss Dearing."

Owen lined the chairs on the opposite side as she laid out the blueprints on the table. The papers kept rolling so he grabbed some books from the kitchen to hold them down. And they went to work.

Claire pointed the subject of concerns from her last meetings while he listened. The famous crease on his forehead deepened as she talked. Owen borrowed her pencil and wrote his notes on the areas that need revisions.

At one point, Owen grabbed more books and stacked them on either side of the papers.

Claire still found it surprising that he knew when to be stern and when not to. She watched him. No, more like, ogled. Claire Dearing was ogling and smiling behind the rim of her cup as he discussed his suggestions. His body stretched on the table, the contours and muscles defined his built. Claire hoped he didn't notice her staring.

"… You mean, leave it as an empty corner?" She tilted her neck to read the diagram he drew.

He pushed himself off the table and drank his cup. "Yeah. Exactly. Then we don't have to worry about the exposed pipes."

"Right, because it'll be an empty space. It's kind of aesthetic, to be honest."

"Yes. But can we relocate the IT department next to the Server room?"

"We can do that, yeah." She nodded and placed her empty cup down. Her mind, already making mental notes.

"Can we also split this room? Find a way to adjust some of these areas?"

"Sure. I'll tell Mr. Kadam first thing on Monday."

"Also, can we maximize the space for the lobby? We need it more open. I don't like these walls. It feels like a cage. What do you think?"

Their arms grazed each other and Claire relished on its heat, before Owen moved. She cleared her throat, "My thoughts exactly."

Owen raised his cup to her and winked. "Great. I'll-"

By some unknown wind or force, the stacks of books lining the table toppled with a loud crash.

And the large blueprint copier was rolling back in in swift speed!

On instinct, she jumped and reached for it!

Only, she wasn't the only one to do so.

Their bodies bumped against each other, with her, caging him. His hand covered hers- warm, big and pleasant. Their fingers halting the villainous papers. They both stood still. Owen's head veered towards her. His chin almost touching the bridge of her nose. She saw his adam's apple bobbed, his eyes fluttered to her lips and Claire stopped breathing.
He squeezed her hand and Claire felt the huge surge of sparks emitting from his skin. She jumped back, as if electrified-

Only for her elbow to knock her cup to the ground.

"Shit!" Claire looked down, horrified. "I'm so sorry." She squatted and bent to pick up the broken cup.

"No, it's my fault. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-" Owen apologized, averting her eyes and ducking in beside her.

She was quick to counter him, "No, no. Don't apologize. Shit, I'm not myself today."

He chuckled as he picked the ceramic pieces, "Claire, you have to move. You'll step on broken glass. I got this."

Owen stood and she followed. He was still avoiding her eyes as he walked away, "I'll go get the broom. Don't touch anything."

The weeklong nagging of her mind was louder now. He has to know that she didn't mean it. Any of it. He needed to know that she was sorry. And that, despite her constant denial, she had, indeed, felt something.

Claire watched as he threw the remains of her cup in the trash bin in the room. Before he could disappear into the kitchen, she shrieked,

"I'm sorry!"

Owen turned around, smiling at her. "It's fine, Claire. No worries, I've got plenty of cups-"

"No, Owen. I'm sorry." Her heart felt like it might combust. Her fists tight beside her as she willed herself to keep herself from trembling. "I'm sorry for what happened. The things I said-"

He stood straighter now, realizing what she was talking about. "No. I should be the one apologizing. I shouldn't have shouted at you like that-"

"No. Don't apologize. You were right. I shouldn't have said those things. You have to know...that I didn't mean them. I'm sorry-"

Something crossed his appearance. Claire gulped, but remained resolute. Her palms sweating as she rambled for the right words.

"I was angry and confused. And I was not even sure why. My dad, he surprised me and Karen. I was worried for Karen. Then your ex-girlfriend was there. And I don't know what happened... I've never been... I have never felt... Anyway, my point is-" she gaped at him. His eyes darkened into stormy greens. He was awfully silent as he traipsed back to her. "My point is-."

The atmosphere felt hotter as he grasped her neck and pulled her to him. Everything else faded away the second he crashed his lips to hers.

Her eyes fluttered close on impact. His fingers hooked on her chin, angling her head to kiss her deeper. His other hand skidded under her jacket before he took her waist and lifted her to the table. The paper scrunching under her weight.

Owen's hands slithered all over her stomach, her ribs, and back. He made a hasty removal of her
light blazer. Claire had never felt more focused in her entire life. The feel of the swell in his arms, his chest and neck, the roughness of his stubble making her whimper with dying need and satisfaction. She opened her mouth wider for him and she heard him growl. The tightening in her abdomen followed, aching and pulsing, making her feeble and lightheaded. She wanted more.

And as if he could sense it, he sat her on the edge of the table and pressed his hardness to hers. Owen grabbed a fistful of her hair before he pulled away. He slid his hands on down her neck, the path zapping with electricity. Claire combed his hair, their foreheads resting together, their chests gulping much needed air.

"Owen, I'm sor-"

"I know."

And smashed their lips again.

Claire rested her arms on his broad shoulders, her nails digging on flesh as she started bucking her hips to him. Owen laid her down the table. Her back meeting the solid wood, her legs still resting on the edge. He stepped between them as he kissed her throat and upper chest, his hands roaming her stomach, hungrily. She could feel the heat coming off his body and felt herself quiver as he fumbles for the clasp of her bra.

"Owen." She mumbled as his bare rough hands cupped her.

He rolled her bra and blouse over her head. His tongue, licked, fondled and sucked with want. She arched back, her hand pushing his face towards her. Claire bit her lip as he lapped on one breast. The right hand massaging the free nipple. She felt his other unoccupied hand slid down. To the button of her pants. Owen released her breast to mutter, "I've never seen you wear jeans before."

"Right now, you have to take them off." She heard herself say.

A guttural moan rumbled from his chest before he kissed her. Owen pulled down her zipper before he slipped his hand. Claire purred, her mind beyond comprehension. He lowered her pants before his fingers grazed the moistness in her underwear. Claire crumpled the sheets of paper underneath her as Owen rained kisses on her chest and neck, his tongue dampening every inch of skin. A finger traced her folds and she raised her hips, telling him what she wanted. Claire felt him smirk before he swept the lace aside and inserted his finger.

They both gasped at the delicious intrusion. Claire hummed as his mouth enclosed on her breast again. The stroke of his tongue synchronized with each push of his finger. Owen pumped his hand, his thumb flicking her clit as he uttered incoherent words in her ear.

"More, more." She moaned, rolling her hips against his hand. Owen obliged and added another finger.

"More."

And he added another. The feeling was so full.

"More."

Owen chuckled, his mouth vibrating against her collarbone. "I can't fit my whole hand in there, baby."

Her heart soared at the nickname. "Then maybe, I don't want your hand."
He growled before he gathered her in his arms. Her legs wrapping around his waist in an automatic gesture. Claire kissed him, her tongue frenzied as she chased him. Her whole body quivering for the connection.

With the grace and efficiency of a man on a mission, he walked them back the hallway and to his bedroom. Owen pressed her on the wall of the doorway. His hands slipping inside her pants again before he removed them completely. He threw it away where it landed with a faint thud.

Crisp night air greeted her thighs. The sound of ripping fabric snapped her eyes wide open. She groaned and released his lips. The 80-dollar underwear purchase was a no match for his tough hands. The fabric was torn at the down center and only held together by her hips. She felt him smirk against her neck.

Owen dropped to his knees, his breath warmed her, inching closer and closer. He kissed her inner thighs and paid particular attention to the scar on her leg. Claire buried her fingers in his hair as he slipped his tongue on the hole he made. His nose and mouth were in her heated flesh, dark green eyes on hers. His light beard scraping her skin. It was the most erotic scene she had ever seen.

Her hand formed a fist on the wall, as Owen raised her left leg on his shoulder, digging deeper. She closed her eyes as his tongue probed. The little bites and wide lick driving her remaining sanity to the window. Owen yanked her hips towards his open mouth. Nibbling, sucking with the same carnal drive as all the other times. Her orgasm peeked. She clenched his hair and pulled him away from her, his mouth glistened with moisture.

"Bed. Now." She mumbled before she lost control.

Claire unhitched her leg from his shoulder, pulled him by the hand and hurried to his bedroom.

Once they were, Owen jerked her back against him. His front against her back. She arched her body, her hands instinctively going around his neck. Owen dipped his tongue on her ear and sultry whispered, "You want this?"

She nodded.

"Are you sure?" He asked, his hand going around, her waist as he kissed the curve of her shoulder. Her heart thawed at his hesitation, she turned her head and kissed his jaw. "I'm very sure."

She crawled a hand between their bodies and grasped his manhood in her hand. Claire bit her lip and swayed her butt on its girth, loving how he was heating up for her. Her hand pumped-agonizingly slow- that he growled, pinching her nipples.

"Bed." She rasped, removing her hands from his body.

He did as he's told and Claire, finding this position very familiar, grinned for all she's worth. She was standing at the foot of his bed, while he waited on his elbows. His dark green orbs on her and he was still clothed.

She didn't know what came over her, but she turned around and bent down while removing the last piece of her clothing, keeping her hooded eyes on his lustful expression. Owen swore loudly.

"You're going to be the death of me, I fucking knew it."

She turned and joined him on the bed and he rose as she settled on his lap.
For a moment, they stayed there. His hands slowing on her burning skin. Claire cradled his face. His hair matted with slight perspiration. His face enlivened with anticipation, desire and something else that made her melt.

Without taking his eyes off her, Owen tilted his head to kiss her palm. She gasped at the unexpected charge of affection. Their eyes, both wide, unblinking and frank in their intentions.

The movements that followed, now confident and crazed with an understanding she'd finally acknowledged. Claire slid her hands to his jaw, across the stubble on his neck, down to his chest. Their eyes locked for a moment, just long enough for her to savor the feeling of being in his arms. Her palm remained on his chest, his heartbeat going off the charts as her own.

Claire gave slow kisses on his face, and he sighed, hugging her. Her hands getting eager as his clothes came off, his muscles clenching under her hands. She forced his shoulders back on the mattress as her lips and tongue moved southwards. Owen's hands traced her body, leaving a flaming, squirming path.

They both whimpered when she clutched the standing flesh of his arousal.

"Claire-

"Shush. No more talking." She lifted her hips and lowered herself to him.

Her body opening up to fit all of him, to the brim, so hot and fucking loaded.

They both gasped at the connection. Owen's fingers wrapped around her hips as she settled down, down and deep. An uncontrollable moan slipped from her hips as she started to move her hips.

"Claire-" Owen huffed below her. He looked down the junction of their bodies before his head fell on the pillows. "Fuck."

She smiled as she continued her movement. His shoulder and the iron bed frame now served as her brace. Owen held her in a squeezing grip. Her pelvis met his in gyrating motions, her knees on either side of him.

His eyes heavy and lustful, as he took her eyes and body in, never letting go. His mouth ajar, his face scrunched with obvious pleasure. The scars on his chest and torso glistened with sweat and raw sexual appeal. He had never looked sexier than that moment.

*He's beautiful.* She thought with a complacent smile that formed on her face.

Claire leaned a hand behind her as she surged forward, backward, their lust guiding her body. Owen's mouth parted with every downward stroke. He pushed his hips as she went down, each thrust hitting that delicious ache in her belly. His lips pulled back in a snarl whenever she'd hit his pubic bone. His hands touching, groping skin, breasts and ass.

A deep tight sensation lingered in her stomach, threatening to burst. Her sighs grew louder, her legs frantic and clumsy. Owen reached for her hand, kissed her fingers before putting her pointer and middle fingers inside his mouth. Claire bit her lip again as he sucked it before trailing them down her cleavage, erect nipples and her belly button.

She moved faster now as she watched as her fingers- still guided by his hand, massaged her folds. His eyes on hers as he licked his lips. Her eyes roll at the back of her head before she burst, without any more delay.
She fell down while Owen continued his soft thrusts. His body flushed under hers. His chest marked with battle scars and her fingernails. Claire smiled against his chest. Tongue and mouth licking the light trail of hair on his pectorals. Her energy, rebuilding itself as she met his pace.

Claire held on the frame, her breasts dangling in his face, as his body ravaged hers. Faster and harder. She matched his strokes with equal hunger. He sat up and took her mouth in his, the position filling her in a whole new other way.

"I'm… I'm coming again." She panted as she tugged his lower lip.

He groaned before he flipped them. The mattress squeaked under the change of weight. Her back met felt the softness of his sheets before she arched up as his pace passionate and brutal. The sound of the iron bed frame slamming on the wall competing with their labored breaths. Claire grasped his hair, his name tumbling from her lips.

He held her body as Owen pulled out and dove back in. Pulled all the way out and dove back in. Over and over again until she finally screamed, and coating his pulsing member in her white heat. Owen kissed her, his moan rocking her already trembling body. His thrusts slowed, but remained hard.

How are you still going? She gasped between welcoming his new thrusts. She didn't realize she'd spoken it out loud until Owen smirked and whispered, "Your fault."

He coiled her legs around his ribs and ground into her. Claire arched her back as he rested on his elbows, her breasts squished against his. His mouth hovering hers. "More, baby?"

Her reply was lost in her whimper.

Owen wrapped his arms around her as he pummeled in her. Claire yelped as he brought her hips down, hard. Her senses lost to all sensations, but him. Her body accepting what he was giving. Her hands clung to his neck as she neared her peak for the final time that night.

Their grunts became louder, huskier. Thrusts never slowed down; the desire was blinding them both. Owen knelt before her as he pounded his hips with great precision until Claire didn't know where he started and where she began. Claire pulled him down to her lips as she felt molten liquid shattering her reservations. She screamed against his mouth.

Then it was all over. She was a heap of ecstasy beneath his arms. Owen's mouth hovered against her, as they continue to gasp their euphoria.

"Oh my god." She exhaled with closed eyes.

"Yeah." His breath tickling her neck.

"Oh my god."

"Heard you the first time." Owen leaned his forehead against hers and pelted her face with abrupt kisses. She giggled and with her jelly arms, pushed his body off her.

They lie face to face as they both try to catch their breaths. Thin rolls of sweat exuding from their body. Owen lifted a hand to tuck her sweaty fringe to the side.

She smiled. "Hi."

"Hey, beautiful."
Claire reached a limp hand and caressed his cheek. "I don't think I can drive home tonight. Not after that."

Owen cackled and turned his head to kiss her wrist, "Good! Why did you think I hold on for long as I could?"

"Idiot."

Their chuckles quietened as her fingers raked his wild hair. Soft green eyes, a universe of green, gold and blue, never left hers. Claire shifted until she could snare his lips in a gentle, passionate kiss.

Owen held her cheek, his thumb rubbing smooth circles on the skin. He sighed against her and she felt her heart flutter.

Claire's never been one to voice out her real emotions without coming off as angry, sarcastic or cold. She always let her actions- it this instance, her lips- speak for everything she couldn't say.

When air became a necessity, they broke apart. Her forehead against his, unwilling to move. It was after a while when he spoke.

"You okay?" Before she felt his lips press on her eyebrow.

Claire nodded and nuzzled close to his neck. "I have a proposition." She said in a small voice.

"Oh, do you now, Miss Dearing?" his smile stretching from across the room.

"How about..." she downcast, her eyes and focused on the faint scar on his collarbone. "I ask you out to dinner again? I may not be a good cook as you are. But I promise, it's better than shitty cardboard."

He laughed and gave her a peck on the lips. "Where?"

"My place? Anytime this week? If you're not too busy."

"Okay." He said simply, his nose brushed against hers. "It's a date then?"

She grinned. "It's a date." The word didn't sound weird to her now. "After work? I'm sure I'm free Wednesday night."

He nodded. "Can I at least bring something to this anticipated conclave?" He sat up to retrieve the covers that fell on the bed. Claire tucked them under her arms before they resumed their positions.

"You can." She teased.

"Oh?" He whispered and kissed her nose. "And what is it, Miss Dearing? Do tell."

Claire leaned in, whispering against his lips. "Stamina. Lots and lots of stamina."

She laughed as the flock of farm animals surround her, their wings flapping in the humid wind. Their impatient sideway eyes on her as they waited for a single drop of their breakfast.

After breakfast (and an hour or so of coupling), Owen went to do his chores. Since it was Sunday, his caretakers didn't come to work, leaving him to do their morning routines. Claire wanted to help. He then lent her his plaid shirt since all the clothes in her luggage were "too office-ish".
Claire grabbed a handful of grains from the bowl Owen gave her and scattered them on the ground. The feathered animals clucked below her. She threw more and watched the hens, geese, ducks and little chicks scrambled for it.

Who knew she’d enjoy any activity that involved wet earth?

"What's so funny?" Owen called from behind the fence. He was donning coveralls, but instead of wearing the long sleeves on his arms, he had it tied around his waist.

"They're so cute! Look at them!" she bubbled, tossing the feeds like a priest with holy water. "What's next?"

Owen laughed and ducked under the fence. He walked and tugged her waist.

"Well, I thought you wanna learn how to ride." A mischievous look in his boyish smile.

She couldn't help but blush, thinking about this morning's events; how her innocent morning kisses drove them both wanton in a matter of seconds. She got so scared that they're going to bust the bed. Claire Dearing does not beg nor say please. Ever. Until that morning.

He chuckled. "As much as I'd like what you're thinking, I wanna be productive today. At least, until 3…" and added, "And you certainly didn't need lessons for what you did this morning."

Claire felt a boost of confidence. She wound her arms around his neck. "I don't, huh?"

Owen tugged her closer, his hands crossed over her hips in an amorous, lazy embrace. He muttered in her ear. "You're amazing. I don't think I ever come like that my whole life."

"Thank you. I don't think I've ever ridden someone like that my whole life." she flirted, biting her lip.

He groaned. His hand following the curve of her jeans. "I was gonna take you horseback riding. I don't think I can do it now without picturing you--"

"What?" She cut in. "You have a horse?"

He gleamed like the sun above them. "Yeah. Two thoroughbreds, but they're retired. You ride?"

"I used to work at this summer camp years ago."

"Aw man! I was so looking forward to teaching you. Is there anything you haven't done yet?"

"Well, now that you mentioned it. I haven't--" her tenor now playful and seductive. Her fingers, leaving light touches on his tanned skin.

"No! Don't answer that! I can barely concentrate on anything with you here." he took the sack of poultry feed from her. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

Chuckling while also admiring the view of his backside, she followed him to the barn.

To her surprise, the interior was clean, modernized and properly ventilated. She expected hay strewn everywhere, muddy floors and foul smell. But it was all dry brick floors, steel frames and an elongated ceiling illuminated by drop lights. Boarding stalls on the left, bales of hay on the far side, sheep and cattle pens on the opposite. Chicken coops and drinking trough on her right.

Two pairs of hooves stomped in attention when they approached. Claire stopped on between the
stalls and goggled at their stance.

The one near her has a chestnut colored body, thick black mane and a white strip on its long face. The horse brayed and pushed its muzzle towards the small opening of its door.

"What are their names?"

"Well, that's lovely, classic lady is Charlie."

Owen ambled on the next stable. A long face with white and gray mane poked out. It nudged his face as he patted its muscled neck. "And this one, here's called Blue."

"They're beautiful." she scratched Charlie's head who was blowing hot air on her hair.

"Thanks. I got them when I was 23. "Owen collected the tacks for both the horses, Claire moved out of the way as he fastened them. Blue first, then Charlie.

"They were gifts from Dad. They need to exercise every day, being race horses is all. I've been looking forward to breeding them next month."

He gave her Charlie's reins, "Shall we? It'll be a quick stroll to the edge of the forest.

Claire smiled, patted the large beast before she mounted in one easy stride. She led Charlie out the barn.

Owen scoffed behind her. "Show off."

She laughed.

"Why don't we make this interesting?" He opened Blue's cage and hopped on her, wrapping her reins on both his hands.

"Ugh! What is with you and bets, Grady?"

"Only with you, Dearing." He galloped in front of her and maneuvered Blue's body towards them, "If I win, you get to stay for one more night."

"And if I win?" She quirked her eyebrows.

He shrugged, "Your choice."

"Alright. Let's go, farm boy."

"You lied!" Owen heard himself screeched against the wind. His laugh bursting from his throat. He watched as Claire and Charlie galloped perfectly a few feet beside them.

"I have never!"

"You told me it was only a summer job!" Owen accused as they circled each other.

"Yes. A summer job for 3 years... Shall we go again?" Claire batted her eyelashes at him.

The past hour was a play by play demonstration of their egos. Yet, it was missing its usual severity and squabbles. He was enjoying these playful moments with her. Owen threw her another fake glare. "No. You've humiliated me enough."
She laughed and sat straight up, Charlie huffing below her as they made their way back.

The sun was touching the horizon again, signaling the end of another blissful day. Everything about this weekend felt surreal. His kisses and her kissing back reassured him that it was not. He didn't want this weekend to end.

He studied as her hair blustered against the afternoon wind that it looked like real flames. Her face flushed with sweat, her freckles somehow darker against her alabaster skin. Carnation pink lips celebrating her victory. Owen felt his chest hurt. She was excruciatingly beautiful.

He dismounted Blue and ushered her back to the barn. Claire and Charlie in front of them. She refilled the thorough on each stable as he removed the saddles and stirrups of both horses.

While he was storing the gears in the saddle closet, he heard her mumble to Charlie. "I know. You were amazing. We sure showed him, girl." He snuck a peek behind the cabinet door and saw her cooing the animal. She moved to the next stall and did the same to Blue. "I'll ride you, next week. Okay?" She said with finality and brushed a hand on Blue's neck.

The stupid smile was back on his face again. Next week? That was a good thing.

"Stop conspiring them against me." He jibed as he approached them.

"Yeah, but I win!" She squealed with an enthusiasm of a child.

Chuckling and rolling his eyes, he said, "And so you did. Now. Stop rubbing it on me."

With Claire's help, they gathered the loitering animals outside and sheltered them in. Owen observed how serene and radiant she looked compared to last time he saw her. It was like a heavy load's been lifted off her shoulders. His heart swelled at the thought that it was because of him.

She was keenly excited about the comings and goings of the farm and Owen indulged her. Answering her back to back question. In the middle of their conversation, Claire found his hand and interlocked them. The act so spontaneous and natural, it caught him off-guard. Her pliant and miniature hands occupying the spaces between his fingers in a perfect fit. He hoped she didn't see him gush over it.

"... And I'll help you with dinner."

"What? No, no way-" he said almost automatically, but he froze when he processed her words. "You're staying?"

"I can't?" She grinned.

"No, no. Of course." He felt like he could jump from the roof.

"Good." She stopped at the porch and turned her body to his. Pliant, miniature hand still in his. "I, uh… in case I forgot to tell you… I had a good time today."

"Glad you did."

Her arms found their way on his neck again. "Thank you for the great accommodations, Mr. Grady."

"Anytime, Miss Dearing." He replied, a bit preoccupied by the electricity shooting up his arms. He tugged a fallen strand behind her ear and heard her breath jammed in her throat.
Without warning, his mind went numb. Why did it feel like he hadn't kissed her for too long?

Like a magnet, Owen was hopelessly drawn to her, unable to escape, his heart banging on his chest. He swore he could see its outline as it tried to get out of his chest.

Owen noticed the new shade in her emerald eyes. Her lips parted in a moan as if she could sense the change in his mood. The blood rushed towards his nether regions. Her chest, clad in his shirt, heaved as he brought them closer. His thumbs were caressing the skin above the waistband of her jeans. Claire stood on her tiptoes. Owen took a big breath before and finally he swept his waiting lips on hers.

The touch of them instantly sent his mind into overdrive. He curled his body over her, pouring the whirlwind of affection raging through him. Her tongue pushed its way between his teeth, reigniting the fire inside him. His hands dipped under his shirt, and roamed the heated, velvet-like skin of her stomach and ribs. Claire moaned, her fingers running through his hair as the kiss grew more urgent. He drank her in, for as long as his lungs permit.

He released her lips only to latch them on her neck.

"So... Dinner?" he asked even though he knew the answer. Her nails scratching the area between his shoulder blades. She shook her head before he grabbed his hand.

Owen kicked the front door with his foot as Claire pulled her towards his house, to his bedroom. But instead of going straight to the bed, she led him to the bathroom. He felt his excitement grew tenfold.

"Is this a way of telling me that I smell?" he mumbled against her neck.

Owen would've viewed her giggle as sweet and innocent if she wasn't ripping their clothes off in a hurry.

"You asked for hot shower sex the very first time I came in here."

He could hardly remember his reply. Or what his name was, for that matter.

Their clothes flew across the room as their lips and bodies connected in a delirious frenzy. The occasional grind of her hips, kisses and sighs, turning him into a rock.

Claire stepped away from him and entered the shower. She tested the water first as he stood behind the glass, salivating over her sopping form.

He stood corrected; nothing can and would ever top this weekend.

"Well, aren't you coming?" she threw him a sensual glance through the steamy glass. Her hair and eyes almost black.

He chuckled before joining her; the warm water drenched him within seconds. He felt her relax as his body touched hers. Her hands guiding the soapy sponge on their bodies. Owen watched, as her dark eyes traveled south. He wasn't sure if she was aware of it, but she licked her lips and the loofah paused on his shoulder. Owen grazed her shoulders, the scent of his soap covering her. She was intoxicating.

"You're spoiling me, Claire."
She lathered the sponge on his body, its rough touch stiffening him even more. His erection now stood in full salute. When she reached between his thighs, she abandoned the sponge. Slippery hands soothed his need. His breathing shortened in an instant. Claire bit her lower lip as she fought her smile. And he couldn't take it anymore.

With a growl, he captured her mouth in a needy kiss. His hands went to his breasts, tweaking her already alert nipples. She moaned and sucked his lip. The hold on his hard, male heat, persistent. Her thumb grazed the tip before she pulled away and knelt. And he thought he's gonna pass out.

He found his words, despite the cloud of lust over them. "You don't have to do that."

Her hand didn't release him and she stared, examining him. "I wanna know how it feels like."

She sounded as if, she was asking permission.

*What it feels like?*

"What do you mean?" he winced as her hand pushed back, a little too hard.

With seductive green eyes, Claire dragged her lips on his length. He arched his hips, his fingers going through her soaked hair. She let out her tongue and tease the underside and tip before she closed her mouth on him.

Owen wasn't responsible for the noises that reverberated his bathroom walls that night.

His head thrown back, mouth up the ceiling as he panted. Her mouth slick, tight and so very hot, her teeth nipping every now and then. The first few times were ungraceful and klutzy but *holy fuck* did she recovered.

Owen writhed; he stretched his arms on the walls beside him as not to push his hips down her throat. The water rolling down the flawless skin of her back as she knelt before him. Her hair tendrils of black on her shoulders, he ran a hand through them as he panted. He had never felt so powerless before, but god did it feel right being powerless under her.

Owen watched with heavy breaths as he disappeared and reappeared from her mouth. Her right hand assisting her. Owen bucked his hip once, twice and she moaned, it vibrated on him. She pulled away to trace the vein popping on the side, under the head and around it. Owen felt a shiver run through him. He put a warning hand on her shoulder.

"Claire."

She didn't budge and instead pushed him further in. Until he felt her throat.

"Please, stand up." he pleaded.

She did it again. *Fuck!*

He started seeing stars in his vision, but before he could explode, he grabbed her arm and pulled her up.

His lips were vicious and greedy and Claire took it all in with, if not, with the same violent energy. His body collided with the back wall, her hand cushioning his head.

"Turn around." he heard himself order. He was on fire, and he wanted Claire in every way he's allowed to.
He saw her smile before she pressed her back to his front. Her hands weaved behind his nape, making her pert breasts jut out.

"If you're in any way uncomfortable, just say so, okay?"

She nodded, kissing his jaw line before his lips.

With a gentle hand, he pressed her abdomen back to him. His throbbing flesh sandwiched between her ass. Claire braced herself on the wall, the water raining between their bodies. He positioned himself, and with bent his knees, he entered her.

Series of moans and curses resonated on the tiled walls.

He squeezed her thighs as he tried to get his bearings. His instincts telling him to go faster. Claire extended her arms on the wall and pushed back. She straightened her legs, and bent her body forward- the angle making him hit deeper. Owen closed his eyes to savor the feeling.

With each controlled and sturdy movements, her body caved, drawing his need better. Deeper. Harder. Claire pushed back, burying him. Her body slapping against his slippery skin. Again, and again and again. Each push, grind and sigh made him more impatient. His hands fiddled over her body, committing every curve to memory. He pulled out before plunging back in. Pulled out and plunged back in.

Owen snaked a hand between them and placed a finger between her folds. She gasped and moved his hand towards her liking.

Claire tossed wet hair until left side of her face visible to him. She bit into her outstretched arm as he continued his slow, penetrating strokes.

"Go faster. I wouldn't break. I promise."

He heard a rough moan rumbled from his throat and shoved his entirety to her. Claire yelped; her body straightened up in surprise. He wrapped his arms across her shoulders and her hips as he forced her down. His chest rubbing against the smoothness of her back. Claire dug her nails on his thighs, her head lolling against his neck. She, on her tiptoes, pushed down with each moan.

Owen kissed the back of her ear as he felt the inevitable pull of their release. Claire grunted and he started showering kisses on her jaw and neck, any skin he could reach.

He felt her heat clamping down on him in agonizing fire and slowness.

Owen wanted to see her come apart.

He turned her around, backed her up against the wall and reentered her.

Their tempo continued, fierce and mindless. Claire kissed him as she wrapped one leg on his waist. Owen held it and supported it with his elbow. His palm flattened on the tile as he thrust. He was deep.

"Yes." She breathed.

He pinned above their heads as he slurped the fullness of her breast. The water now slashing against his back. When his neck couldn't take it anymore, he stood up and watched her face contort with raw pleasure. Her lips repeatedly tinged with the syllables of his name; it was music to his ears.
Claire pushed her face to his, holding him tight as his pace hastened. Owen held her tight as her body shook. He might have screamed her name.

Her orgasm came first before his, like a crashing wave drowning them both. His body jerked as he emptied himself in her. They fell down on the floor in a mass of bones. Owen kept his arms around her as she sat on his lap.

"You're something else, Grady." she said as she touched their foreheads together.

His mind automatically went to her kneeling down on him. "Speak for yourself. That was... That was... holy shit."

Claire hugged him and rested her forehead on his shoulder. Their breathing calmer.

When he had enough strength, he reached for the shower knob and switched it off. He stood up with her and wrapped her in one of the dry towels on his rack. It engulfed her form, the towel was too large for her frame.

"There. Now you look like a wet burrito."

She chuckled and pulled his neck to hers in a swift kiss.

"Thank you."

"Are you hungry?" he asked against her lips.

"No, not at all. You?"

"Me neither."

"Can we stay in bed for a while?" Claire continued in a soft, quiet voice.

Owen gave her another kiss on the lips and smiled. "Good idea."

The bottle of beer in her hand was halfway empty. She stood by the wide glass window of the condo. Her financier paid no expense. It was fit for a queen. "I could get used to this."

The city of California oozed with life as the night rolled in. Down below, people paced. Everywhere all at once.

"Yeah, yeah. Go little ants. Your efforts will always be worthless, no matter how hardworking y'all are." She mocked.

The undetected phone they gave her rang on the shelf. She groaned when she read the ID. "Great."

She answered it on the fourth ring.

"Well, well, well. Been wondering when you're gonna call me again."

"Save it."

"Oh! Somebody's a little cranky today." she teased as she put her feet up the sturdy and high-class mahogany table. "Why don't you come over, bring your friend. We can have some fun."

"I don't have time to fuck around. Boss asked me, it's done-"
Typical men always underestimating her. "Of course, it's all taken care of. Have a little faith, would you boys?"

"If you messed this up, it's gonna be our heads on the platter." the voice on the phone hissed.

"It won't be." she replied, rolling her eyes at her comrade's lack of faith. "I got this."

"You better be. We can't afford any mistakes."

"We won't." she sniggered. "They trust me."

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Chapter End Notes

Dum-dum-dum-dum!!!! I just couldn't leave this without my usual cliff hanger. Hehe. Tell me guys what you think about our couple. Are they finally getting together? Will there be sexual tension at the office? Or would Claire act all "mighty" again?

Tell me what you may want to read in the next chapters. We're near the end guys.

Thank your for always reading! Please leave a comment down below. Your reviews keep this story alive! -J

edit: also I'm guilty of using the phrase, "Just a suggestion. I'm not telling you what to do," from Anne with an E series. ShirBert inspired me for Clawen's slow burn and hidden glances. Go check it out on Netflix or the CBC website! IT'S SO FUCKING GOOOOOOD!!!!!!!!!!
I’m back from my hiatus (I’m sorry bout that by the way) THANK YOU ALL FOR YOUR ENCOURAGING WORDS. I’m so happy to be back. Anyway, I just read this twice so if there are any corrections, please tell me so. Enjoy this chapter and tell me what you think! -j

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The wolf in my heart never let the world see the lamb in my soul – but sometimes you see it in my eyes.

Mondays and Tuesdays were hassle, as it always has been. Project managers, investors, potential mergers filled the empty slots of her days.

As boring as it may seem, Claire enjoyed meetings. No, scratched that. She loved meetings. Spending hours discussing jargons and formalities with like-minded individuals appealed to her. But right now, that appeal was distant, hazy like the smog clouding the building.

For starters, she was grateful that nobody was sitting next to them because, well... fuck him! And his hands!

Literally and figuratively speaking.

It started during the Monthly Performances meeting. The dead hour when everyone got dull and sleepy after their lunch break. It made her smile and even squeezed his hand in amusement. But as the afternoon progressed, his fingers hitched up higher, naughtier. By the end of the day, her focus and breathing were requiring much more effort.

Instead of sitting at the centre of the table, Owen positioned his seat beside her. And if anyone thought the arrangement was weird -considering they're just about to rip each other's throat the week before- nobody commented on it. Until she pointed it out.

"The sun was hitting my eyes. What do you want me to do?" He reasoned with pretend annoyance. "I couldn't block out the sun!"

"That's what these thousand-dollar blinds are for Mr. Grady." She countered as she pointed the remote on the curtains.

He shrugged and rolled his chair towards hers... "It was passing through."

"Really?" her face and tone, incredulous.

"Yes. See?" He replied before he squinted his eyes at her in a playful fashion.

The men in the room snickered but soon, dispersed when she narrowed her eyes at them. "If you say so. Let's get started."

It wasn't like that she didn't try pushing him away- which she did. With every fibre in her being, she fought him. But Owen was intuitive. He knew the exact moments when she'd try to pull away. She tried stabbing him with her heel, and pinching his hand away, to no avail. With all hope lost, she hoped- at least- that her glares would stop him.

But by the aloof expression on his face, she was certain he wasn't intimidated. He had his shin
resting on his opposite knee, which provided an excuse for his arm to be visibly bent. Everybody perceived that his hand was innocently resting on his chair. When in reality, it was anything but. His hand was drawing all kinds of doodles like an unsupervised toddler with a crayon.

Clearing her throat, she positioned her laptop as a potential shield from the prying eyes. Much to her relief, everybody was attentive to the meeting. Their faces, docile and completely oblivious to the squirming sensation in her abdomen.

Underneath the table, his masculine fingers continued to the underside of her skirt. He slithered upwards, downwards and up again until he reached the source of her longing. She felt hotter, her core anticipating a slight poke, a brush, anything.

*Focus, Dearing.*

Claire reached for the water bottle in front of her as Owen's fingers reached her thigh once again. Her cheeks reddened. Claire slapped his hand away to gain some sort of control. Claire sighed, thinking that she was successful when he didn't react. She tried rolling her seat away, but he trapped the wheels of her chair, preventing her to do so. He then rested his hand on her inner thigh, his pinky poking her through the cotton. Her breath hitched.

From the corner of her eye, she saw his lips quirk upwards.

*Bastard.*

"- which reminds me, the groundbreaking ceremony and auction is tomorrow night." Lowery, who was sitting across them, announced.

Her ears perked at that.

"What ceremony?" She queried, concerned of the possible interruption on her schedule.

Claire turned to Lowery who was downing a loose tie. His graphic tee undershirt visible on his office top. She decided, she's gonna lecture him about it tomorrow.

"Is that tomorrow already?" She added as a follow up question.

Owen must have sensed her anxiety because he ran his fingers away from her dainties.

"Yeah. Nobody told you?"

"No. I guess, Emma and I might've overlooked it." She doubted it. There has to be an explanation for her assistant to forget such an important event. "I'll call them later to confirm."

"Well, that explains why they're also asking me if you're coming. But yeah, it is tomorrow... also Ellen Jefferson's expecting you to be there, Owen. She said she's not going to give her speech unless you're there to present her."

"Didn't I say no to that already?" Owen's fingers rested on her knee.

"Yes. But she asked again."

The room full of men whistled.

"After all these months, Jefferson still on your tail, huh, Owen?" Leonard Hendricks, the head of their engineering department, quipped. His comeback earned another round of chuckles and high fives from the guys to which she rolled her eyes. Owen shrugged off their comment as he inched
his seat closer to her. His fingers resuming their assault in feather-light touches.

"I am flattered. But Lowery could tell Miss Jefferson that you..." Owen jerked his chin at Hendricks. "could attend in my place."

Claire frowned at his resignation. "As a member of the board and now, one of the founders Mr. Grady, you should attend." She then turned to Hendricks. "I mean no offence, Leo."

Hendricks blinked at her before he found his voice. "Uhm... none taken Miss Dearing."

Owen allowed his finger to press onto her. It was a quick movement, she thought she imagined it. But the look on his face told her otherwise. Claire never sat firmer in her chair.

"You think so?" He grinned.

Claire felt the sweat roll down her neck. Her breasts, touching the wooden table. "I know so." She squeezed her legs together, grateful that the table was high enough to hide his antics. Any thoughts in stopping him gone from her head.

"Yeah?" He urged, and fingered her heated lips through the cotton.

"Yes..." Her voice, strangled.

"Well then, if that's the case..." he turned to the whole group again, "I think Miss Dearing should come too." He removed his damp finger and traced it down her leg. His face was lighting up like a damn Christmas lantern.

"Yeah! I guess, that's why they called me for both your confirmation. A couple of us received invitations too. Should be fun. Free booze." Lowery chattered and the group cheered.

Her body felt like it was catching fire as his adept fingers went back to her swollen folds.

"What do you say Miss Dearing?" Owen asked, his voice deep and low.

She couldn't concentrate on anything but she managed to say, in her tightest voice, "Fine."

Lowery scribbled something on his tablet. "That settles it! Okay. I'll RSVP you both. I can tell Emma and I'll have her resend the invitation to your email."

His finger rubbed between the folds, before trailing them down her knee again. "Yes." she sighed aloud, her eyes widened.

The room was now looking at her with quizzical expressions.

"I-uh." She cleared her throat. "Thanks, Lowery."

Lowery stared at her for a full minute before his eyes diverted to the group. "Uhm. Okay?"

The men, once again, fell into a conversation on the prestigious event. Claire was tuning it out as Owen's pushed a finger through her underwear. She immediately grabbed his hand, making him stop. Her insides sensitive from the fabric and his seduction. Owen finger's thrusted, issuing a purr from her throat.

Claire leaned towards him- a safe distance. Not close enough for anyone to suspect and not far enough for her to mumble the words she never thought she'd say.
"Don't make me come."

He turned his head away to her other ear, his voice dropping to a low grumble. "Well, you shouldn't be so damn tempting all the time." as he did that, he inserted another finger in her.

Claire bit her lip to fight off another involuntary moan. She straightened her laptop screen, so it looked like she was showing him something.

"And this skirt…" Owen dragged his fingers and Claire felt her own legs part in submission. His fingers finally sweeping her underwear and delving in her heat. Claire gripped his knee as he prodded, and teased her. She crossed her legs to lock him as moisture threatened to burst on the leather seat.

With feigned interest, Owen nodded and interacted with the other five people in the room. His fingers not desisting on their expertise. She stifled another moan by biting the cap of her pen. And as his fingers massaged her, Claire came to realise what everybody's been talking about.

The craving for another person.

She thought that after spending the weekend with him, the yearning she felt would lessen... It didn't. Instead, it grew tenfolds. And Claire welcomed it with open arms. This newfound intimacy didn't feel forced. They weren't weird together, like she anticipated it would be.

It felt like organic and very grounding thing that kept growing with each time she spent with him. Even if it was just laughing over his breakfast table. Or finding omission errors in their accounting reports. He was... different. In a damn good way.

Claire always found it difficult to comprehend intimate relationships. She never understood why her sister and her few friends gushed over their lovers. Claire would roll her eyes and think them petty for depending their happiness on someone. But despite her prejudice, (also, it'll get Karen off her back) she tried it. She entered relationships, which after the years proved to be disappointing and unsatisfactory. This drove her to make the premature assumption that men were unnecessary in her life.

Until him.

How deprived she might be on her sexual relationships in the past made up for the fact that Owen Grady was hot for her. As she was to him.

She remembered how they drove in their separate cars back to the city on early Monday morning. Her self control, tested when he kissed her that morning. The wonderful sense of comfort she felt as Owen engulfed her in the tightest of hugs before they drove off was still looping in her senses.

The man was sex in human form, there was no denying it. Her lips and legs still burnt, still ached even after days. The love bites on her body were reminders of her pleasure and his unmatchable skill. Claire found herself daydreaming about it for a few minutes on her day.

The need to be near and feel more of him was close to being unbearable. Her tendency to fight her logical instincts, subdued by his charisma and sweet kisses. She wanted to keep him close, in any way possible.

Claire was suddenly washed with enlightenment by what her sister meant. The eldest Dearing's words echoing back to her, "One of these days, Claire dear, you're gonna bite your tongue. I'm so looking forward to that day. And I'd be here, taking pleasure in telling you, I fucking told you so."
"… it's a good idea. Right, Miss Dearing?" Hendricks interrupted.

"Mmm?" she sighed, although it was anything but an answer to her colleague's question. "What? I'm sorry?"

Beside her, Owen chuckled and retreated his wet fingers down her thigh until they were no longer on her body.

"Is it okay to reschedule that product pitch by the Marketing department?"

"Um. Yes?" she faltered. "Yes!"

"Great! All settled then. Meeting adjourned." Owen announced to the group and he stood up, ready to leave.

The room followed him, tucked their seats under the table and collected their effects. The ache on her lower stomach making her stationary on her seat. She could only scowl at him and adjust her skirt on the right place.

In his usual gesture, Owen held the door for them as he thanked everyone for their work today. She followed suit, keeping in mind to keep her legs together and her face grave.

"Miss Dearing." Owen smiled, the hand he used to tease her inside his denim pockets.

"Mr. Grady."

"Thank you for work today." She could tell he was fighting the urge to break character. Claire clicked her tongue and spoke in the most business-tone she had, "I wish I could say the same."

"Is that a challenge, Miss Dearing?" His smile broke as he stepped closer. The faint scent of his clothes and perfume enveloping her.

"Maybe." Claire kept her eyes off him as she surveyed the empty floor.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Stuff."

"Can I join you?" he demanded, his mischievous eyes on hers.

"No. But I-uh…" And without thinking, she brushed the hand on the bulge forming in his pants. "I'll be thinking of you." She heard his sharp intake of breath before she passed, making sure she added a little sway to her hips as she walked.

The bright yellow outlines of her clock read 12:07 am, marking the end of last week's work. The green tea, which helped her with said tasks, lie cold on the desk in her home office. Claire stretched her arms on the ceiling as she let out a tired yawn. She stood up from her chair and walked to the kitchen, switching on her hallway lights as she did so. She was emptying her cup on the sink when the dull alert tone of her phone broke the stillness of her apartment. Her bewilderment melted into a grin when she saw the message.

You sleeping?

Claire smiled, imagining him lying on his bed with his ratty sweatpants and bare chest.
Yes. She typed.

Not long after she hit send, he called.

"Hello?"

"Liar." Owen greeted. "Why are you still up?"

"Why are you still up?" She replied, balancing the phone on her shoulder while she washed her cup.

"Just got off the phone with your nephew."

"My nephew?" Her eyebrows creased in confusion. "Wait, Zach?"

"Yep."

A sudden dread overcame her, making her drop the cup with a loud clank on the sink. "Why? what happened?"

"Nothing, nothing. It's for their school newspaper." He paused as she heard a hiss of a can being opened in the background. Owen continued, "Her girlfriend's the editor in chief. He's helping her write this article."

Claire sighed in relief but couldn't help but feel obligated to apologize. "I am so sorry he bothered you."

"No, no. It's no trouble."

She heard a fridge door close as she dried her hands on the towel. "I'm surprised Zach even talks to you. He doesn't... well, he's not the talkative type like-"

"-Gray, yeah." he chuckled. "They're good kids."

"They are." She smiled like the proud aunt that she was and leaned over the kitchen counter. "So what was the interview about?"

Claire listened as he recounted the night's events. Zach called him as he pulled up in his building. Zach's questions were all about his take on the economics of modern agriculture. He narrated how Gray stole the phone a couple of times to ask him about the new video game Owen recommended. Claire could tell, that from the tone in his voice, Owen was fond of her nephews.

The conversation continued with Owen recalling his answers to Zach, as she nodded. His answers extensive and profound, it all but surprised her.

"-You said that?" She interrupted him during the pitch on the usage of sustainable green materials.

"Well, yeah."

"I don't get it."

"What?"

"That you let me or Lowery speak on your behalf during conferences and interviews."

"Oh...kay? What's that supposed to mean?"
"I don't usually say this to other people other than me, but Owen." She exasperated, "You're not so bad if you use your brain. You're quite intelligent if you wanna be."

The phone rang from his amused laughter. "How did that admission taste on your lips?"

"Like vinegar." She scoffed. "But no, I'm serious. Next time we're bidding something, I'm gonna let you lead the team."

"I AM leading the team!" He reiterated, his tone teasing, "-if you're not interrupting me every two seconds."

"I'm not."

"Yu-huh!"

"Am not."

"Yes!" he was laughing. "Stop denying it, woman!"

"Fine!" She conceded, laughter also bubbling from her lips as she made her way back to her room. "I won't interrupt you."

"Yeah, for how long? the next 20 minutes?"

It was her turn to smirk. "You know me well enough, Mr. Grady."

"Unfortunately, I do, Miss Dearing." He answered, sarcasm dripping in his voice, making her laugh yet again.

"But You have my word that I won't interrupt for the next 20 minutes in our next bidding."

"Thank you!" He sounded relieved. "I knew getting you in bed would put me in your good books!"

"Oh is that the only reason you're… what do you call it? 'sexing me up'? To get in my good books?"

He laughed- a heartfelt laugh. "You know that it's not."

Claire felt the warm, giddy feeling covered her entire body again like a cloud. Who would've thought that she, self partnered and sufficient woman that she was, could be influenced by such teenage - like frenzy?

"You are an idiot." She replied, shaking her head.

"As you keep reminding me." He paused for a few seconds before, "I hope you don't mind me talking to them."

She frowned, unsure of the change in conversation. "Talking to them? Zach and Gray?"

"Yes."

"Why would I mind?"

"I don't know. I just..." he hesitated. "I don't want you to think I'm rushing you into anything you're not comfortable with."
Claire felt her smile widen, sensing his coyness on the topic she was starting to welcome. "You're not. But thank you for the thought."

A comfortable silence ensued on both ends. Claire, once again was at lost on what to say. Yet, she knew she didn't want to end the conversation.

"I was looking forward to tomorrow." He started, his voice in that mere whisper that made her heart skip.

"I'll cook for you some other time." She heard a slight rustling of sheets before he replied,

"Do we really have to go?"

"Yes. It'll be rude if you, of all people, didn't come."

"But we made plans." He whined but corrected himself. "You made plans. I like your plans."

Claire chuckled, rolling her eyes. "What makes you think I already have a plan?"

"Well, don't you?"

"Touche, Mr. Grady." She clicked her tongue and sat up on her bed. Her back to the tufted headboard. "Consider us going to the gala another date then."

"Fine. Does this mean I get to pick you up?"

"Don't you have that appraisal with Ibris?" She reminded him. This morning, Matthew Carter, the new CFO of Ibris arranged a last minute meeting with him and the new board. "You have to go there, Owen."

He paused and gave another impatient groan, "Alright. I'll see you at the gala?"

"You bet."

"Looking forward to it then."

"Me too." She smiled, stalling.

"Okay."

"Okay." she mimicked, lifting her bed covers although she was anything but sleepy.

"So, Good...night?"

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. You sleepy though?" his voice, small and husky.

"No, not really." She answered, her gaze fell to the beam of city light sifted by her curtains.

"Can we talk for a bit?"

The adolescent tone of his voice elicited a girlish laugh out her lips. "Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

She hinted the smile on his voice. "Insufferably...irresistible."
"I'm gonna add that to the list of 'Nice Words Claire Dearing Told Me'. I'm irresistible eh?"

Claire settled on her pillow, twirling the loose thread on her covers. Her smile making residency on her face. "Sometimes."

"Including today?"

He was raising his eyebrows, she was certain about that. "Ugh! Don't tell me you waited all day to bring that to the conversation?"

His laugh reverberated on the speaker, making her melt yet again. "It's not my fault you always look so... ravenous in everything you wear."

"So, it's my fault?" She remarked, trying to sound offended.

"Of course! I don't see why it's mine," he said with a teasing laugh.

"Moron." She huffed. "Don't do that again, Owen. I swear to God-"

He laughed. "Why not?"

"Are you kidding me? You're really asking me that? We're in a roomful of people!" Her blush starting to creep up on her neck. "It's improper."

He jested, chuckling. "Okay, okay! I'm sorry?"

"You should be!"

"I'll be glad to finish the job tonight, if you want." His voice was on the borderline of comical and serious.

The twinge in the pit of her belly he started this morning was making another comeback.

"You're impossible." she said more to herself than him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I can make it up to you now." he promised with a light laugh.

"Oh yeah? How?" She playfully urged, biting her lip.

"Well, I could drive by. Then you can kick me out on the morning."

She doubled back in another heap of laughter.

"I appreciate it, but no. We have work. Although I like the kicking you out part."

"Of course, you do! So should I? I'll be there in 10 minutes."

"NO!" She glanced at her clock. The lights blinking, 1:34. "We should probably go to sleep."

He sounded like a kid whose lollipop got stolen. "Thought you weren't sleepy yet?"

"I'm tired now. It's been a long and very hard day." She declared, and faked a yawn for effect.

"I'm gonna ignore the innuendo cause I'll get uncomfortable. But that's gotta be the worst fake yawn I've ever heard in my entire life."

"I AM tired!" She chuffed and teased him even further, "But, wew. It's just... is it me? Or is it hot
in California all a sudden?"

He groaned.

"My AC's probably broken."

"Mine's not. You can sleep here." he affirmed, sounding hopeful.

"Nah! I'm just gonna remove my shirt to sleep better."

"Damn it, Dearing!"

She let out another playful chortle, "Don't dance with the wolf if you're not prepared to blush, Grady."

"God, you're sexy."

"I know."

"The minute I get you to myself, there's not gonna be talking... nor sleeping. So yeah, better take your rest now."

"Promises, promises." She grinned, a devilish idea coming to her.

"Oh, I always keep my promises." His voice, deepening.

I know, she thought. "See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight Claire."

And she slept, feeling at ease and in high spirits like some kid being told that Christmas came early.

Wednesday morning was humid with a slow, city breeze coming off to cool him every now and then. The sun was already high enough, pouring brilliant rays of orange on the azure sky. The reflection of it, making his eyes hurt.

He decided to wear his casual clothes for today. The tailored suit Lowery picked up for him wasn't suited from what looked like another hot day. He drove through the blaring car horns and crowd's cry, unbothered by its noise this time.

Owen removed his aviators, threw it on the dashboard before he stepped out from his car. He noticed Claire's shiny car parked on the opposite side from his. His face cracked a smile, remembering their midnight call. He threw his jacket on the backseat and strode to the valet desk, whistling as he did so.

"Morning guys!"

"Morning! Somebody's cheery." Joe remarked, gripping the plastic handle of his mop.

"What are you talking about Joe? I'm always cheery." He defended, pressing the elevator button. "Hey there, Art. How'd your date go?"

The young bellboy stopped arranging the keys and turned to him. A smug look on his face. "Good, good. I got laid."
Owen raised his hand for a high five. "Nice! What'd I tell you, huh?"

"Thanks for the tip on that bar."

"Hey, It was all you, man. All you." He replied before stepping into the elevator.

"I'd say, you should probably get laid too…” Artie pointed out craning his neck as the door closed on him. "but it looks like you already are!"

Owen chuckled and hiking the strap of his backpack on his shoulder. "That I am."

The floor was already packed with his colleagues. They greeted him a good morning, others raised their coffee cups in acknowledgement. He smiled at them, offering compliments to anyone who passed by him.

"Morning, Owen." Lowery greeted as he approached him with a sheet of paper. "Let's go over your schedule for today. I already printed out another copy, it's on your desk."

Lowery read him his commitments and schedule for the morning. His ability to talk a hundred words per minute was useful, given their jam-packed day. He thanked him as they enter his office.

"-Also, Hawkins called. He wanted to know if you can make it to New York next week for golf and that Walmart meeting."

"Yeah, call Jasper for the plane. I wanna be out of there as soon as it's finished."

"Copy that."

"Thank you Lowery. Why don't you-"

A knock came from the door before a dark-haired beauty poked her head behind it. "I just wanna say hi to the big boss."

"Zara!" Lowery shouted.

"Hey Mrs. A! Come in Come on in!"

Zara walked up to Lowery first and gave him a friendly hug. "Can't believe I'm saying this, but I missed your snotty ass, Young. Oh no, It's Allerton now."

"Yes, well, don't let Claire see you in that ghastly shirt. Hey Owen!"

"Hey Z!" He gave her a one armed hug and noticed the bright glow hanging about her. Owen beamed at his friend. "How's the married life treating you?"

"I would highly recommend it." She smiled back.

"You coming in today?" Lowery added as he spread out the contracts that needed to his signature.

"Of course! Why else would I be here? Where's Zia?"

"I've no idea. Where's that woman?" His assistant asked, particularly no one. "She owes me gas money."

Owen shrugged, making a mental note to himself to call her later since he hasn't seen her since Monday- which was odd.
"Well, I can't stay long. I better go before Emma cries over Claire's emails again. And also to tell Owen, he's been summoned."

"She asked for me?" Owen grinned, Claire never asked for him at the office. Ever. If she was asking for him, it has to be big. Lowery appeared confused and swiped at his tablet to see if he missed Claire's word.

"She rescheduled another 10 minute meeting with Patrick Kadam today. But I still have to pick up the prints down at Engineering."

"New prints? Why would you need new prints?" Lowery asked.

"Claire asked for reprints since her copies were torn."

Owen pretended to smile at something he read from his phone.

"Owen, Claire said be there in 5 minutes." Zara reminded.

He felt a sly grin form on his face. "Be there in 3."

"Great! I'll be off. It's so good to be back."

"Welcome back! I got tons to tell you. I'll call Zia so she can join us for lunch." Lowery offered.

"I was hoping that." and she winked at them before she turned her leave.

"Lowery, please set up the boardroom for today's meeting."

"Will do, boss. Breakfast?" His assistant assumed as they walked back to the door.

"Yep. My usual coffee and a chicken sandwich please. Grab something for the yourself and the team as well."

"Alright. See you in a bit… And please, " he whined before walking backwards on the opposite direction. "if you could please, don't fight with her today? It's been so good these past couple of days. cause she wasn't biting anyone's ears anymore."

"I'll try not to." Owen called from behind his back as headed towards her office

"Try harder, Owen!"

As he approached her closed door, he couldn't help the impish grin on his face. He gripped the bronze handle and pushed, only for his jaw to drop to the floor.

The cream-coloured blinds hid the 360-view of the city, blocking the harsh rays of the day.

Her office was neat, nifty and elegant. Everything was in its particular order and hierarchy. It was a perfect reflection of her character. No flowers. No memorabilia or frames. Everything was in complimentary muted color. The only standout on the neutral scheme was her red dress and even redder hair.

She was leaning on the small meeting table on the right side of the room. Hands flat on the glass surface, the plans laid out held together by actual paper weights on its sides. She didn't turn her body when he opened the door. Too absorbed by the lines and measurements they studied together that fateful night. Her hair in their loose curls, reminding him how it spread out on his pillows. His thought process halted as she faced him, allowing him to wholly appreciate her outfit.
The dress fell on her calves. A slit running up her middle left thigh, exposing toned muscles as she walked. The deep v-shape of her dress revealed the smooth porcelain skin of her neck down to her cleavage. Thin straps of thread held her dress. He figured, he could snap them apart. The gold strappy heels that made her taller than she really was, was not helping his restraint... or his ability to breathe.

"Oh, Mr. Grady." She acknowledged, a come-hither look playing on her eyes and lips. "Good morning."

"I-uh. Um-" He stammered as he stood frozen by the doorway, mouth ajar.

"I requested another short meeting for the things you want for the new sanctuary for the resort. Like we discussed last weekend." She continued, prancing around her office like a matador with the red cloth. She reached for a binder on her top shelf, her gaze avoiding him "You're gonna stay there?"

"The view's pretty good here, thanks." He retaliated, leaning on the doorjamb.

She didn't appear the slightest of fazed as she read whatever it was on the binder. "Shall we have this meeting with you on the door then? I mean, it's a very interesting door."

He chuckled and walked towards her until he was across her, the table between them. Every inch of him fidgeting to touch her. Every rational thought was finding it hard to arrive to his brain. The vanilla whiff of her lotion and perfume exuding off of her was driving him to the cliff.

"Didn't know that that dress is allowed in our dress code." He murmured, his eyes attached to soft curve of her shoulder.

"It's not." She closed the binder and placed it on the table. Her attention was now the crumpled blue prints on the table.

"You're breaking one of your sacred rules? Color me surprise, Miss Dearing." he teased.

"What are rules if we're not to break them from time to time, Mr. Grady?"

He smirked, sensing her playful attitude. "Indeed."

"If it's too distracting, I could go grab my blazer." Her finger pointed to where her coat was hanging on the coat rack.

"No, please. It's no trouble." Owen shook his head. He knew, this was payback for what he did yesterday. He knew he wasn't gonna win this one. Not when she's dressed like that. But that doesn't mean he'd give her the satisfaction to know that she already did.

She batted her eyelashes at him, the playful glint on the corner of her eye. "Well, if you insist..." She arched her neck, and tossed her hair off her neck. Owen swallowed the thick gust of saliva on his tongue. "How's your morning so far, Mr. Grady?"

"It's looking up. As always. Thanks. You?"

"Great! But I'd say, it's a particularly hot morning." She tilted her head, her eyes scanning over him from head to toe.

It's pathetic but he felt the rush of energy where it wasn't needed the most at that moment.
"Is it?"

"Mmm-mmm."

"That AC of yours still not working?"

"Management's looking onto it." She disclosed, crossing her arms in front of her, pushing her breasts together. His denim pants now constricting him.

"I have a spare bedroom for tonight, should you want." He leaned his arms on the table, steadying himself on one foot.

"Thank you... but I can't."

"Why not?" he felt the knot on his eyebrows.

"I have a date tonight. Tux and gown night. Quite important."

His ears perked up, his smile stretching from across the room. "Oh yeah?"

"Yes. He might let me stay with him for the night too."

"Ain't he the luckiest son of a bitch." He jabbered, enjoying their flirtatious banter.

"No." she leaned her toned arms on the table, and in doing so, squished her breasts together again. He sucked in an audible gasp. Claire stared at his lips for longer than a second before she added in a low, seductive voice, "At least, not yet."

The suggestion in her bright green eyes made him curse under his breath. He glanced over her door and gave another tortured whisper. "Damn your glass doors."

Her whole face softened as she erupted into a melodic laughter. "Mission accomplished."

She stepped back and stood straighter, her aura sobering. "In a more serious note, let's review your last notes before Patrick gets here."

"I can't look at that without picturing you on my barn table." He said in a matter of fact tone to which Claire rolled her eyes. She retrieved a yellow post it and stuck it into his scribblings from the weekend. "Try to get through this day, maybe I'll let you again."

"I'll hold you to that, Dearing." He winked at her and saw the small blush on her cheeks right before Zara opened the door for Kadam and his crew.

The function hall was a showcase of fairy lights and batches of white flowers. At the centre of the room, was the elevated podium where a band was playing. Rows of white covered seats and tables furnished the expansive marble floors. People in their most impeccable wear roamed the room. Their wine glasses glinting and clinking during their conversations.

She arrived some thirty minutes ago. She has been smiling and talking to people she knew from her office and their other affiliates. It became overbearing at some point that Claire deliberately unmute her phone. As soon as she did, her phone welcomed messages after messages, she had to excuse herself. She sought her little hideout and sat on the windowsill. The two humongous blue curtains on either side of her allowed her anonymity. Claire sighed in relief. After responding to her emails, she remained on the spot, observing the festivity.
Her mind drifted to Owen and how he was late again. Surprisingly though, it didn't surprise her anymore. She sipped her Rose in silence, thankful for the quietness.

Until she heard a rough and annoyed voice,

"-will. You better be at the office tomorrow! So help me God, I-" the man with grey hair and short beard halted his words when he saw her. He was wearing a pinstriped suit that looked expensive enough to tell her that he was important. He ended his call before he addressed her, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know someone was here. It's usually my spot when an employee is-"

"It's fine. It's fine. " Claire smiled at the stranger. "I'm sorry for taking it. It's a little-"

She nodded. "Oh, I'm sorry. My name's-"

"You're Claire Dearing of Grady Corp., I know." the man extended his burly hand on hers. She gripped it with equal pressure. "Heard so much about you even down in San Jose. You're a legend."

"You're from San Jose?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Westgate & Pollard."

"Westgate and Pollard Inc.? San Jose?" she stood up from her excitement. "I applied for your internship program a couple of years ago."

"You did? Please don't tell me we didn't hire you."

Claire chuckled and shrugged. "You didn't that's why I'm at Grady Corp now."

"Ahh! Damn it! I knew Alan Grady. I attended his funeral. Man, I still get sad over it."

"I know. Everyone misses him." she mused, remembering her old friend and mentor.

"But the prodigal son returned eh? Alan's only boy?"

"Yes. Owen." she nodded.

"Yes, Owen Grady. Is he coming tonight? I didn't have the chance to approach him during the funeral."

"He is. He's supposed to be here..." she checked her watch. "45 minutes ago."

The man chuckled. "I'll drop by his table later and introduce myself. Anyway, it's nice to meet you in the flesh, Miss Dearing."

"I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"I'm-" suddenly the angry blare of his ringtone interrupted them. He produced it from his pocket and cursed. "Shit, I'm sorry I have to take this. I'll see you later, Claire."

"See you." she called out after his retreating figure before she saw Lowery enter the hall. She craned her neck, expecting a pair of hazel green eyes following him. But he was nowhere to be seen.
"Where is he?" she asked him when she beckoned him over.

"He had to drop something at his place. Driver's with him. So he won't be late-r." replied Lowery just as a passing waiter walked by them with glasses of red wine on his tray.

Up on the stage, the music stopped as a smart-looking man rose to the podium. In a deep, pleasant voice, he announced that everybody should take their seats.

She separated with Lowery and went to the seat with her nameplate on it. She strike another small talk with the other guests on her table. The smart-looking man reappeared and introduced the head of Social Affairs. Edgar Stinson was a man in his early 50's. His bald patch highly comical and noticeable especially with the stage light on him. He was a pleasant man, Claire had talked to him before he was even head of Social Affairs of Empire Land Holdings. They clapped him as he began his introduction. During the middle of his speech, her phone rang an annoying alarm. She ignored it. But it rang again and again. Feeling the daggers sent her way by the people around her, she decided to sneak a peek.

"Red is now my favourite color." The recent text read.

Her lips formed into a familiar smile and looked down the deep shade of red of her attire. Claire turned her head about the room in search for its flatterer. When she didn't, she texted back.

Red, huh? What was it before?

She didn't have to wait that long for his answer.

I have no fucking idea. But it's red now.

Claire bit her lip to stop another idiotic smile and focused on Stinson's raspy voice.

"-And now, I have to admit, my ego feels good cause I got to stand here before this guy so…"

Her phone vibrated again, indicating another text.

You look beautiful, by the way.

In the background, a round of chuckles befell the room as she thought of her reply.

"-Everyone, ladies, please give your hands for the dashing Owen Grady."

At the mention of his name, she looked up. The room erupted into a loud applause as Owen entered the hall, a warm ray of spotlight on him. He had switched his faded blue jeans and plain shirts for a three-piece suit and a decorative tie knot. He trimmed down his beard but she could still make out its roughness on his defined jaw. His hair combed and styled like those Hollywood actors. The majestic wrinkles on his face visible on his forehead and eyes as he dazzled the whole room. He was strikingly handsome. Claire finally understood what the phrase, "It's so beautiful, it hurts." meant as he walked up the stage.

The room watched with her as he descended the podium. Owen smiled, raised his hand in a small wave. His eyes scanned the crowd before it landed on hers. Claire raised her eyebrows at him, the corner of her lips tugging upwards as he focused his gaze on her. Owen gave her a knock-you-on-your-ass smile before he finally tear his eyes off.

"Thank you, thank you Eddie," He turned to the side, his hand adjusting the microphone. "But, come on dude, you're way better looking than I am. I heard you stole Ian Malcolm's date back in
Junior High."

The audience laughed.

Owen unbuttoned his jacket. And like a switch that’s been switched on, his wacky demeanour matured. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's a real honour to be here. First of, I'd like to congratulate ELH for yet another milestone-

His sonorous voice piqued everyone's attention in the room, herself not excluded. Each word smart and concise as the next. Claire listened as Owen recited his speech, his notes lie useless on his front pocket. Occasional chuckles and claps eventuate from the crowd during his ten-minute spiel. She couldn't take her eyes off him. His magnetic appeal palpable in his stance as much as his words. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach upon a flick of a gaze of his calm, hazel greens. His genuine, megawatt smile thawing the coldest and hardest parts in her.

It was then that Claire realised something for certain. For the first time in her independence, she wanted someone by her side. She wanted to explore that uncharted territory of serious, adult relationships. She wanted to make an effort to make it work. And she wanted it to be with him. Claire Dearing wanted Owen Grady.

Pride swelled in her chest as he finished. Owen handed and presented a small, bronze sculpture of a spade dug in soil to Jefferson. Her long, wavy brunette hair cascading over the white sequinned gown she's wearing. She was a prim woman, with a regal nose, thin lips and slim figure. Claire watched—with great amusement— as Jefferson pressed her lips on Owen's uncomfortable cheeks. His nervous laugh obvious to anyone but her. Jefferson took the stage and Owen disappeared behind the sidelines. For the past 10 minutes, Claire refocused on Ellen's declamation. But before Jefferson's speech reach its penultimate part, Claire received another message. She peeked from underneath the table to read it,

Help me. he texted.

What now? And where the hell are you?

I can't fix my tie.

She sneered but couldn't help her amusement over it. Why'd you remove it anyway?

I had to wash off Jefferson's lipstick stains on my cheeks which smelt like cigarettes, by the way. Now, I can't get my tie knot back.

No. Claire smirked and clapped as Jefferson finished. He took longer than a minute to respond so she busied herself with the appetiser they laid on her table.

Her phone buzzed.

"Can you help me?

And another follow up text,

Please?

And another.

I'm well behaved, I promise.
She sighed. **Fine. But you have to know, you're pathetic.**

**Ha! Thanks! The lounge bar by the entrance.**

Claire offered polite smiles to the group before she grabbed her purse and left the table. She walked out into a wide hallway filled with an illustrative diagram of the company. Also nailed on the stark wall, in blue glass frames were ELH's accomplishments. Familiar and less familiar faces beaming down at her. Her heels made loud clanking noises on the tiled floor. As she walked towards where he said he was, she wondered what if they pushed through their date, tonight.

He was right. She already made a plan. It was already planned out the moment she got out of his house last weekend. Claire never had a guest come over before, except her family and Zara. So, as usual she went into an overdrive of preparations, and her own fair share of overthinking.

And even though she knew, Owen didn't care for the tissue folds or the candlelights, Claire was still nervous. She had never gone past a second date for years. How do people prepare a table for a date in the first place? She didn't wanna come across as too trying nor too laid back. The only reliable reference she got was from movies. And also, her nosy sister Karen. She decided going for a simpler one. The grocery list was ready and on her bedside table. The table decorations were out of their boxes for the first time in years.

"Everything's gonna be fine, Claire." She said to herself. "Owen is - shit!"

Masculine, cold hands suddenly propelled her into a dark corner. With her heart in her throat, she instinctively wrapped her hands on her assailant's biceps. The white rows of teeth and the tamed stubble eased her shock.

"What the fuck! Grady!" she hollered.

The ounce of light coming from the windows allowed her to see his mischievous eyes. "I'm what?"

"Asshole! You almost killed me!"

"Naah." He dropped his head and kissed the ridge on her collarbone, her eyes shutting for a second. "I'm too fond of you." Her temper waned as he whispered on her jaw. Her hands forming a circle around his shoulders as he continued raining kisses on her neck.

"Thought you needed my help with something?" She breathed, her fingers diving on the little hairs on his nape.

Owen grabbed her waist and pulled her towards him. His lips going straight for her pulse. "I do? Can't remember."

Claire stifled a moan and angled her head. She slid her hands on the undone tie around his neck. "Owen…"

"Mmm?" His hands were now following the curve of her dress. Her heartbeat picking up the pace.

"We have to go back." She sighed and slightly pulled away.

Owen groaned. His lips halted its torture and his hands remained on her hips. "I hate parties."

Claire gave a short laugh. She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards a better lighting. Owen followed with little hesitation.
"Can't you tie your own tie?" She asked as she positioned the blue and white tie under his collar.

"I can. But this old woman who rode the elevator with me, thought a simple knot didn't match my whole outfit. So, who am I to deny a lady's request?"

"Is that so?"

He nodded. "Plus, it looked so good. And you wanted me to look presentable."

"You should've brought her." She joked as she copied the tie's previous Trinity knot.

"I've thought of that. Mrs. Coy is pretty hot with her grandma hair and hunched shoulders. She'll definitely throw everyone off guard. And you might get jealous."

She laughed at the absurdity. Her? Jealous? "That's gotta be the funniest thing you ever said to me."

"Ri-ight. Cause you don't?" It was his turn to roll his eyes.

She stood straighter and levelled her eyes at him, as though it'll make her statement truer. "I don't."

He cocked one eyebrow but didn't say anything. She was getting the impression that neither of them believed her. Without warning, Lex Murphy's dark blonde hair and bright smile flashed in her face. The unfamiliar punch drove in her stomach again.

Fuck! Was that... Was she jealous? Of her?

She was almost finished when Owen mumbled, his eyes on her face,

"Fair enough. But you don't have to be jealous with anyone, anyways..." his tone turned serious. And Owen was never serious even if he can't help it. With that, Claire raised her eyes at him.

"You're crazy if you think I'm interested in anyone but you." He smiled- that warm, almost shy smile of his, that's making her feel like a 16 year old with a crush again. "I only want you, Claire Dearing, I thought you knew that by now."

A stampede rampaged in her stomach. His soft eyes sweeping her into a land of possibilities and sincere promises. Even with her 4-inch heels, he was still taller than her. Claire stretched her neck to him. Still speechless, she pulled him down using the tail of his tie and brushed her lips to his.

I want you too. She tried telling him through their kiss.

She felt Owen's smile as he opened his mouth, his tongue searching hers. Claire angled her head to kiss him better. His arms wrapping around her waist. His hand pushing the back of her head as an attempt to deepen their heating kiss. Sensing his earnestness behind his pants, she pulled away with a slow smack.

"Later... Let's go, handsome."

The lights' been dimmed, casting a mysterious, romantic glow on the auditorium. Half of the audience already left, the night a bit extravagant after their long day. Cutleries were set aside, new wine glasses brought in. The bartenders served quality drinks to the folks who didn't give a damn that it's still work day tomorrow.

After the programme proper, the band took the centre stage again. Their solemn and classic
renditions enchanting the vibrant audience. But it was Sam Cooke's "Bring It On Home To Me" that brought out the "romantics" out of every man in the room. Colleagues paired up with each other, swaying to the soft melody on the floor before the stage. Their whispered conversations and pleasantries could still be heard amidst the song.

The low lights of the room and the flock of people on the floor enabled them to be unnoticeable.

She pressed her cheeks on his shoulder as he glided them. The spicy scent of his aftershave soothing her into what could she could only identify as bliss. The vibrations from his chest as he lip-sync was turning her insides into melted butter. His breath, warm and ticklish her ear. He belted out the last notes of the song and she threw her head back and laughed. Owen settled his hands on her waist,

"Having fun, Miss Dearing?"

"No. Of course, I'm not."

"This is a date, right?" he asked.

"It is."

Owen chuckled, his thumbs drawing circles on the exposed skin of her lower back. "Good. So, can we go now?"

"Why? I thought you're enjoying yourself? Besides, you're dancing and in a suit." She held him at arm's length as she took a quick gander. "This isn't too bad."

"Ha-ha! We're so full of compliments today, aren't we? But uh..."

"What?"

He leaned towards her ear, his breath turned hot and shallow, it sent waves of shivers down her spine. "I wanna do these things with you. And these people, well, they might not like it."

His mouth lingered and Claire, intoxicated, pressed herself closer to him. Right now, she couldn't care less if somebody saw them intimately attached to the hip. "5 minutes." She whispered against his earlobe before giving a kiss on it. "5 more minutes."

Owen growled and pressed their hips together. His fingers fiddling over her the length of her arms, waist and hipbones. He dropped his head on her shoulder and hissed. "Well, since you asked so nicely."

She rested her forehead on his shoulder as he led them through the song.

"You're so beautiful." His tone, soft-spoken it was making her heart beat faster. Owen paused their dancing and added, "Did I say that out loud?"

She smiled, pressing her lips where her forehead was seconds ago. "You did."

"Oh well." He shrugged and continued their slow dance. "You wanna know something though?"

"What?"

"I can't wait to get this off you."

She pulled away from his embrace and looked down her floor length dress. It was store bought
from when she was in New York. It was a long-sleeve dress, with a plunging neckline. The back held together by a button on her nape, her lower back bare and smooth under his hands.

Her lips curled as he started to feel him through his dress pants. Owen's hands sliding down her back, down her ass and back up again. He had the annoying, boyish grin on his face.

She rolled her eyes. "Such a gentlemen, you are."

"Blame yourself." He was now tracing his nose on a lose strand by her face. "When it comes to you, all my thoughts evaporate."

Claire arched her back, aware that she was brushing her barely-clad chest against his. "If you like this dress then you'll definitely like what I'm wearing underneath."

He groaned. The hands on her waist tightened. Her forehead resting against his. "God damn it, Claire. Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

She bit her lower lip, taking pleasure from his squirming. "I have some."

"Mmmm."

In a bold move, Owen dipped his head until she felt his mouth against that spot on her neck. His kisses made her close her eyes. Her calm breathing turned into short gasp when the his expert tongue suck the spot below her ear. Claire felt the undeniable pull of their attraction again, charging and frantic. She let out a silent moan. Her chest rising and falling as he continued leading them through another slow dance. His lips trailing kisses from the love bite he left to her collarbone. His thumbs on the underside of her breasts.

"I want you." He pulled away and Claire opened her eyes. His eyes had already darkened, his smug expression turned feral, if not, more aroused. "Anyway I can have you."

Claire removed his hands off her body and stepped back. Her eyes, steady and promising, "Let's go."

The digital alarm clock by her bedside table gave an annoying, loud cry. With closed eyes, her hand scrabbled its way from wristwatch and books to find the snooze button.

But somebody reached out and beat her to it, the clock stopped. She heard a manly groan and felt the whoop of air as he retracted his arm from her side. Claire's eyes blinked open, and she felt the corners of her lips turn upwards.

Owen.

He was facing her. His warm, taut body naked from the top. A blanket draped over his hips, his boxers peeking from under the duvet in a very alluring way.

Claire rested on her left arm as she admired his sleeping form. His eyes moving under closed lids, his scruff looking rougher in the morning light. Faded traces of her lipstick were still visible on his mouth, his neck and his pecs. His hair, a mess from his various sleeping positions. She raked a hand through it, parting the light brown strands so it would resemble normalcy. Owen moaned in his sleep before he lied on his stomach. Discoloured scars and the long, red stripes trimming his chest and arms. Claire kissed an ugly red blotch on his shoulder, guilty as a sinner in church.

Her face flushed as she remembered their vigorous activities. Activities that made her body stiff
and ached in the zones she'd never known before.

She remembered teasing him mercilessly in the car. Her hand climbing nearer the promised land. He was swearing the whole ride back, his hands torn from focusing on the wheel and touching her. Claire feared for her life when he floored the gas pedal that she immediately retracted her hand. She was sure they'd broken a thousand traffic laws last night. When they reached her elevator, she had to restrain herself from ripping his clothes. Owen stood behind her. His erection rubbing against hers as he listed out the things he'd be doing to her. It only egged her on on her devious conquest. As soon as her door closed, clothes came off in record speed. Mouths muffled each other's lusty comments.

If there was something she learned from Owen Grady that night, it was you could never sexually frustrate him without paying for it.

Maybe it was the wine that made them eager than usual. Maybe not. But she knew they've never been that rough before. Mindless. Animalistic. All inhibitions and reservations about sex, gone and forgotten. Owen had brought out her out of her timid, plain shell. Like he had poured a bottle of some type of sexual water, making her all kinds of hot and messy.

Love bites smeared her thighs, neck and breasts. Foreplay was set aside for the next rounds. Their flushed, sweating bodies moved together in a perfect, mind-blowing rhythm. Tongue, mouth and hands couldn't get enough. Fingernail and bite marks etched his body from when she was begging him to end his torment. Claire lost track of how many times she screamed his name. They lie exhausted afterwards. Their breaths mingling together as they slept side by side. The room reeking of sweat and their love-making.

Owen moved and rested on his stomach, his lips slightly parted.

With the tip of her finger, Claire trailed the hollow part where his spine is. The muscles clenching and relaxing at her touch. She did the same to his arm, starting from the round part of his shoulder down to his knuckles. He muttered something incoherent but remained asleep. She kissed the pulse point on his neck and whispered, "Wake up."

He didn't budged hence Claire started leaning her body towards his. "Wake up, Owen Grady." She mumbled against his tanned back, accentuating each word with kisses.

Owen made a sound of protest before lying on his back. His chest rising up and down in a steady rhythm. Red marks and more battle scars flowing the toned muscles. Reminded by how he had unraveled her with his mouth and hands alone, she traced each mark. It was time to return the favour.

She lowered her lips and pursued each scar with open-mouthed kisses.

Claire felt the rush of blood on her cheeks, neck, chest and abdomen as she continued her task. Owen still oblivious his breathing calmer than ever. Maybe she did tire him out- as he had openly admitted the night before. Still, she pursued. As slow as she could, she pulled the covers covering his lower half. The bump on his boxers wakening her lust.

Nobody had quite the effect Owen had on her. Nobody made her wanna do the things she's doing to him now.

You and I are good together, Claire. He said, right after they finished their third round. She nodded, delirious but still aware
That he wasn't just talking about in a sexual way. It made him more irresistible in her eyes.

With aching triceps, she poised over him. The night gown she managed to wear before they fell asleep slid down to her stomach.

Claire kissed his chin, down his chest and hard stomach. She stopped before the waistband of his boxers, long enough to see any signs of stirring from him. There wasn't any. Claire pushed on, emboldened by his compliments the last time she did this.

His member stirred when her lips touched it. She gave feather light kisses on his thighs before going back round again. The ache in her core pulsing in anticipation and remembrance of what he did the night before. Her thighs burnt and still sensitive from his side burns.

Claire opened her mouth and nipped him through the fabric. Her tongue slipping past its confine to lick him. She heard him grunt but still, didn't rouse. Claire pulled down his boxers. His swelling member sprung free, its girth mesmerising her. She kissed the tip before dragging her lips down his whole length.

"Uhhh."

Claire looked up and saw a still disoriented Owen gaping down at her. His voice still croaky. "What are you doing?"

She closed her hand on his burgeoning erection, "Waking you up."

He let out a deep chuckle, she felt it went straight to her core. "And you think that's the best way?"

Claire didn't answer right away. Instead, she swallowed him, as far as she could go.

Owen hissed, his hand bunching her hair.

She smiled, letting him go with a loud pop. "Isn't it?"

"Shi-it!" He cussed, his mouth pointed towards the ceiling.

Claire opened his legs and rested between them, her eyes never leaving his as she did it again. Her tongue making his thickness slick with her saliva. She had never felt more powerful than that moment. Owen, real life Adonis, was writhing underneath her and encouraging her to keep going. Claire trusted her instincts and sucked him. Her cheeks hollowing as she pulled him deeper. Her unoccupied hand kneading him mercilessly. Owen's hands flew to her head as she bobbed up, down, up down. Her mouth following her hand's downward movements. He tasted divine. The musky scent of his soap and him was a heady combination she couldn't get enough of. Claire set her hands behind his hips, and forced his pelvis on her mouth. He was starting to grow thick. Well, thicker.

"Claire, fuck… Baby." He panted, raising his hips and assisting her.

She felt like a vixen, the moistness between her legs was starting to make it harder to concentrate. As far as blowjobs go, Claire had never given one before, until Owen. She had thought of it- due to Karen's over excessive retelling of her very own escapades. But neither of her lovers made it past the "I can trust you" stage. Nor had they made her feel like how Owen was making her feel. She was on blazing fire.

Owen's fingers moved from her temple to the straps of her gown. He tugged at it. Without taking her mouth off him, Claire slid the silk off her. Owen kicked it down and out the bed. He sighed as
she flattened her tongue on the angry vein. She was enjoying and tasting every bit of him. Her name garbled between his heavy sighs. He was a sight to behold. Owen reached down and played with her breasts, tweaking them into hardened rose buds. She moaned, nibbled his tip only to enclosed him in her mouth again. She was stretching her lips wide to fit him. Owen bucked his hips, once, twice, the pace getting quicker. He reached down, his hand squeezing her ass. He gave it a light slap, making her yelp in lust. She pushed him down her throat, her eyes watering.

He swore, panting her name. "Babe, baby..."

"Mmm?" She hummed again, her words vibrating off him as she continued. Both her hands assisting her.

"I don't… want to…fuck!… cum in your mouth."

"Why not?" Claire teased, bringing him til the back of her throat, earning a loud grunt from him. God, she was becoming insatiable. She did it again, and again. His manhood became thicker as she suck, bite, and lick him. His fingers dove in her hair, pulling at them from time to time. She started holding his hips down as his breathing became harsher.

"Tell me if you're close." She mumbled, her mouth so full of him.

He swore and roughly pulled her by her underarms, she had no choice but to fall against him. Owen smashed his lips on hers, his tongue outlining the corners of her mouth.

He was pinning her down with his lips. So hard their teeth were clashing. Claire chased his tongue with hers as she straddled him. Her silk creating a delicious friction against his centre, they couldn't help but moan.

She was too busy grinding her wetness against his that she didn't notice his legs tangling with hers. Without warning, Owen rose and threw her gently so that her head was at the foot of the bed. With hasty movements, that didn't give her enough time to think, he pulled her underwear and plunged. Claire covered her mouth with a fist to silence her scream.

"No." Owen grumbled, shoving her hands to her side as he rolled his hips. "I'm going to hear you scream."

"Owen…" she moaned, meeting his deep strokes. Every nerve lit by electric shocks and fire. She thrashed her legs around.

He leaned down, his mouth to her ear as he rooted deeper into her. "We'll go slow this time, baby."

And he did.

He fucking did. From his kisses, to the movement of his groin. It almost made her lose her mind. She threw her head to the side, her lungs gasping for him to go faster.

She tried raising her hips but Owen was relentless. He kept up the languid pace, yet he was hitting her spots. All she could think about was how lucky she was that he took interest in her. Out of all the hot bimbos googling at him, he chose her. Claire Dearing, the uptight, icy bitch corporate queen of the 21st century.

Owen leaned his forehead against hers, his lips catching her laboured breaths. "If you keep spreading your legs like that, I'm gonna lose all this gentleman shit."

"Faster, harder."
He shook his head, tugging her lower lip between his teeth. "No."

She arched her back and hugged his torso with her thighs. Although she didn't care, she reasoned, "We're gonna be late to work."

"I don't care." He emphasised with each push, his hands, she was sure, were leaving imprints on her hips.

Profanity wasn't always in her vocabulary, but she let out a loud one as he ground down on her.

He grunted, leaning down so he could lap her breast with his skilled mouth. He released her hands as he cupped her breasts. Claire pushed his face closer, her body couldn't get enough of him. She spread her legs even further as he continued the tortured pace. His hands now holding down her clumsy thighs. Their synchronised moans shattering the solidarity of her apartment. His words, her name, pushing her to the brink.

She came with a loud cry, her nails digging on Owen's biceps. He didn't stop as her body twitched in ecstasy. He was still rock hard, her walls were quivering, pulling him in deeper. She slackened, her back hitting the mattress. Owen stood on his knees and looked down their meeting bodies. Her moisture dripping between them.

"Fucking hell, Claire," He whispered, his eyes were almost black as he shoved his entirety up to her womb. Claire yelped, her hands going round his backside to assist him. "Please."

"Please, what?" He grouched, his tempo, deeper and slower.

"Faster, Owen."

Owen dropped his head and put one breast in his mouth. "I like it when you beg."

"Stop teasing me. Please." She raised her hips again, her whole body arching to meet him.

"Very well." He grinned, before crushing his lips on hers.

Claire cried as he increased his speed. He grabbed her legs and put them in his shoulders, the angle hitting her in all the right fucking places.

He was so deep. Fuck.

Claire bit his lip as she start feeling her own climax again. She dug her nails his arms as Owen pummelled her. He pounded into her with the same force they had last night. Her thighs squishing her breasts in whole new delicious way.

She sighed before dragging her teeth to his chin. *Right there, so good.*

"Baby…"

She smiled against his ear and traced the outline with her tongue. Owen released her legs from her shoulders and pulled them in a sitting position. Claire flattened her toes on the bed as Owen adjusted them. She spread her legs and ground her pelvis against his, her arms leaning behind her. She tilted her head back, as his fingers played with her nub.

"I couldn't get enough of you." Owen laid a hand on her lower back and brought her closer. His fingers torturing her sensitive nerve.

"Me too." She admitted, her tongue tracing his jaw. She was so close.
He nuzzled in to her neck as he moaned, his body curving against hers. The force of his hips making her buck harder on him. Back and forth. She held on to his shoulders as she bounced down on him. Her breasts caught by his lips and hands. Their hips dancing together in luscious harmony enough to make her go crazy. Claire felt the rush of warm liquid. She gasped out loud.

He cursed, grabbed her hips and slammed her body down on his. Over and over again. Their bodies making slapping sounds as it hit each other. Claire stood on her knees as she clamped down on him, her wall tightening and swallowing his member. Her own hands massaging her breasts and rubbing them against his. He kissed her again, their tongues copying the passion of their lower halves.

Christ.

Claire pinned him down the pillows as she sought their sweet release. Their strides precise and speeding up. Owen was grunting and hitting her body mid air with the same ferocity as he did last night. She held down his shoulders as her body started to shake. The look of utter desire in his eyes enough to satisfy her for a lifetime. Owen jarred into her, clinging to her as if she was the last life vest in the ocean. His dexterity making her whole body bounce.

She felt her walls tighten as his shaft pulsed. Claire yelled as their white heat drowned them both in a sweet, fast, simultaneous tides. Her insides shook as she finally felt it oozing down and out of her. Owen's body jerked beneath her, his own seed filling her. She collapsed, her strength finally waning.

For a moment, she lay there on top of him, her mouth buried on his neck. Her body heaved with him, their lungs breathing hard in the silence of the early morning.

"You can wake me up like that every time." He started when his breathing turned normal.

She laughed and rolled to lie beside him. "Thanks for the workout."

"Anytime, seriously." He said and scooched closer to kiss her.

"I'd offer you breakfast, but we're gonna be late."

He groaned, tucking his head beneath her chin, his hand on her waist. "Remind me, why we have to work again?"

Claire giggled, her hand sifting his sweat-matted hair. "Because you own the company and you love ordering people around. Especially me."

She felt him grin against her neck. "I can still order you around in here. We don't have to be working."

"That won't be a very productive day."

"Between you and me, we could figure something out." He stated, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Aren't you tired of me yet?" She chuckled.

"Never." And he kissed her nose, her cheeks and neck. His arms pulling her closer to him. "I could do this all day."

Her phone started blowing up just as she was starting to get comfortable. She reached an arm towards the side table as Owen continued tickling her with kisses.
There were new emails and texts from her assistants.

He groaned. "I hate your phone."

Claire giggled and tried to push him off her. When she was sure that her legs won't give up, she stood away from the bed. She picked his dress shirt from the window and put it on.

"You're kicking me out, aren't you?" He chuckled, grabbing the wrinkled sheet below his feet. His still-clouded eyes following her.

"If you must know, you naked and on my bed isn't good for my concentration."

"As you are mine, Dearing."

She set the last few buttons and straightened her coverup. The sleeves were too large for her frame, the hem falling a few inches before her knees. Owen grumbled another curse. "Wearing my clothes is not helping me either."

She scoffed, garnering the remaining clothing off the carpeted floor. She smirked as she hoisted her underwear last night. It was still held together. She made the right choice of tossing it before Owen could rip it apart. She picked up her dress, his pants and untwisted the tie still wrapped on the foot of her bed.

"Nor bending over." He rested his hands below his head, settling against her pillows.

"I'm not-" Claire hung the pieces of clothing on the nearby chair. "That reminds me. I have to update my fertility shot tomorrow."

He looked confused. "Okay."

"You don't know what it means, do you?" She playfully asked.

"What does it mean? besides the scientific fact?"

"It means, Mr. Grady that I can't have sex in the next seven days."

He bolted from his sitting position. "What?!"

The look of complete horror on his face was adorable, she couldn't help but laugh. Claire walked towards the bed, crawled on all fours up to him. Grasping, his chin between his forefinger, she kissed him.

"Not funny." He mumbled against her puckered lips.

She gave him another quick kiss before sucking his bottom lip and pulling it between her teeth. "Get out, Grady or I'll make that happen."

Claire was only ten minutes late and she only felt half bad which she thought was an improvement. She apologised to the men and sent quick orders to Zara and, she didn't miss anything important but Lowery still filled her in.

Not after an hour later, Owen arrived. He came barging in with his usual optimistic attitude and pot luck of breakfast. In an instant, everybody seemed to loosen up. The austere looking boardroom suddenly looked like a school cafeteria. Owen apologised to the group who, Claire knew for a fact, didn't mind at all.
The meeting took quick pause as Owen distributed their sandwiches and beverages. The twelve members in the room had their very own coffee personally handed out to them. Owen, being the thoughtful guy that he was, knew who preferred Cappuccino over black coffee. He knew who's allergic to nuts and who's not. Claire watched him with a deeper respect than ever before.

When everybody was busy with their own meal, Owen gave her the orange juice and a healthy breakfast bowl.

"Thanks." She smiled behind her cup.

"Anytime, Miss Dearing." He then boldly winked at her, earning another beaming smile from her.

At the corner of her eye, he saw Lowery smirking at them. He quickly recovered and knotted his thick eyebrows over the tablet in his hand.

The meeting went on for another hour with periodic pauses as the group laughed at something Owen had said. Claire found herself alongside them as well. She felt light-headed, pride oozing in her veins as she observed Owen being, well, Owen.

He was bright, communicative and an empathic listener to his peers. He knew when to joke and when to roll up his sleeve when times get difficult. He doesn't blame anyone for setbacks. But genuinely gives advice on how to properly handle it next time. Owen was a great leader, everybody could see that. And Claire felt a strong urge to kiss him in front of all these people.

She focused on her work as the day dragged on. Their own commitments keeping her from seeing him. But when they do, she would give him a sly smile. And he would brush his hand on any body part he could come contact with.

Before the day ended, Zara and Emma entered her office. In their hands were folders of agreements and contracts needed reviewing. Emma ran through her schedule for tomorrow. She noted with an ounce of pity that Emma looked frightened. Her words and hands trembling. Her back and jaw tense. It made Claire think, was she as scary as everybody deemed her to be?

"Thank you Emma. You did great today." She smiled.

Emma's doe-brown eyes dilated at her words. The poor kid didn't look like she haven't got a compliment from her before. Zara, who was sitting across the young woman, nudged her with her shoe. Emma stuttered a quick thank you before Claire told them that she'll see them tomorrow.

For another 30 minutes, she stayed on her desk, writing her notes on the files her assistants left her. When she's finished, she compiled them and delivered them to Owen's office.

To her surprise, his lights were on. The blinking cityscape hidden by dark curtains. His things were still here. The Jansport backpack sat on the chair in front of his massive oak table. Binders and paper sheets were lining on a neat pile on a connecting desk. His jacket was hanging on the master's chair. An unfinished cup of coffee lie cold beside his running laptop.

Claire proceed towards the centre desk and placed her folders on the empty spot. She acquired a post-it littering beside his telephone to write,

Need your notes on this as well. Needed 9 am tomorrow! - Claire

Her lips formed into another playful smile as she tear another note. This time, she wrote,

Raincheck date? Tomorrow night? :)}
For a moment, she thought of the best place to put it and almost automatically, opened his drawer.

Above his staple wires and paper clip organiser was a blank white folder. Claire pulled it out, thinking it was empty. But sheets of paper slipped out.

"Shit!"

Way to be sneaky and romantic, Claire.

She bent to pick it up. Words and pictures printed on it formed together. Her eyes widened as her brain processed the words. Claire felt her blood ran cold when she figured it all out.

Her eyes skimmed the contents, one by one, her hands shaking as she flipped them. She was too absorbed, too horrified to notice the man entering the doorway.

"Claire?"

She lifted her watering eyes at him, her whole body trembling.

An unfamiliar cloud seemed to cover his features as he understood what she was holding. His eyes, the soft hazel greens, became unfathomable.

Claire gripped the papers even tighter. Her nails tearing holes in them.

She couldn't speak.

She couldn't move.

She needed explanation.

She needed to breathe.

Owen spoke, his tone dreadfully quiet. "You're not supposed to see that."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

We’re getting on to something guys. Hang in there, hang in there. :)
Bite, Biting, Bit, Bitten

Chapter Notes

IT’S HERE.

First and foremost, HOLY SHIT! THEY’RE FILMING JURASSIC WORLD 3. I'm so hyped! I could barely write. Anywaaaayyy, Let me know what you think of this one and please do correct me for errors :)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY BRYCE DALLAS HOWARD! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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BITE, BITING, BIT, BITTEN

The heart is a strange beast and not ruled by logic

-Maria V. Snyder

The most disturbing tour he had been was in Baghdad. It was his last.

It was a high risk mission due to the terrorists and juveniles posing as citizens. One normal afternoon while his troop was patrolling the empty streets of Haifa, they heard a deafening crash. On instinct, they formed a circle, raised their weapons, and began searching for the danger.

Owen ordered his men to scatter and scan the rooftop. The street was silent, the sun was glaring in the sky, parching the soldiers even more. Sweat dripped down his forehead to his fingers where he was holding the trigger. Even with the tactical scarf around his neck, he could still taste the blend of dust and sand on his tongue.

A pained cry echoed from the alley, immediately calling out their attention. A local boy- no older than eight- came running out. The boy whipped his head around before his eyes landed on his team. On Owen's. In that second, he knew something was wrong.

The left side of the boy's face was wet with fresh blood, flattening his curly hair. Owen lowered his weapon to see better, but his finger remained on the trigger.

Woods, his assistant troop leader shouted to the boy to stop. But the boy didn't, even with the guns pointed at him. The boy kept running towards them, his hands up and in total surrender. As he got closer, Owen saw the boy's tear stained face, blood and sweat mixing with it. He was crying for help. He held a hand to cover his face until Woods shouted at him to keep them up. The boy was crying as he raised his scrawny arms.

"At ease, Woods. He's not a juvie." Owen ordered him and his men to cover him as he rushed to
the boy.

When the boy reached him, Owen knelt down and surveyed his wound. It wasn't deep, only a long gash by something sharp. Like glass. They weren't allowed to interact with locals, but he decided, at that moment, fuck it. He shouted for someone to call Zia who was conveniently traveling with them. All the while, the boy was pleading with him and pulling him up. The boy was pointing at the wide open door in the middle of the alley. His words garbled and breaking.

For three months of his deployment, Owen took the time to learn a few basic words and sentences. When his brain picked up what the boy's real concern was, he drew up his weapon and ran towards the door. His men followed him.

What he saw wasn't different from all the gore his Navy days provided. Owen was, as horrible as it sounds, used to it.

They were in a grocery store. The shelves upturned, food and all kinds of merchandise spilt and littered everywhere. At the center of the rubble, a man was lying on the floor, a bloody kitchen knife lay beside his head. Blood oozed out of his neck wound, puddling the checkered floor with bright red fluid. Shattered glass beads were everywhere. The cashier register on the table stashed away, broken and empty.

Owen knelt down beside the man and untied the scarf on his neck. He applied pressure to the wound as he shouted orders to call Zia again.

With a gasping breath and in fluent Arabic diction, the man whispered, "My family." His eyes were wide, seemingly foreshadowing his demise. Owen assured the man that help was coming.

"What's your name, Sir?" He asked in his broken Arabic.

The man swallowed before answering him. "Faraj."

"Faraj, you're gonna be alright. I'm Owen."

The man has a healthy and athletic build and could nowhere be older than 35. Owen assumed that they were right about the same age. The man's hair and nose resembled the kid who ran out to them. His kid.

Owen shouted for Zia again, his men standing guard by the door. He stopped when the man grasped his wrist.

Faraj whispered a name this time, "Nahdi. My wife."

Without taking his hands off him, Owen looked around to see if there was anyone else in the room. Woods, ran past him, down the aisle and hollered at him. A wounded woman was lying unconscious beside the Coca-Cola fridge. Owen told Woods not to leave the woman and attend to her wounds, if she has any. He then asked her if she was alright, to which Woods said, "Yes, but she's unconscious. And she has a shallow wound on her shoulder. It's not fatal."

Owen translated it to the man who offered him a grim smile.

Barry rushed through the door. Behind him were Zia and the kid. Owen told Barry to take the kid out the street and stay with him as they take care of, what he assumed were, his parents.

Zia knelt down and opened her medical kit. She spoke to the man in her professional medical tone. Faraj raised a trembling hand for Owen to grasp as Zia continued examining him. Another medic
arrived and helped her as Owen offered words of comfort to Faraj. He was praying and was repeating the words, "My family."

It happened a little too fast. The vice-like grip on Owen's hand slackened. Faraj's chest stopped rising. His breathing halted and the fearful look on his black eyes became distant.

Zia removed a hand from the wound and checked with her stethoscope. Owen didn't need confirmation. He nodded at Zia and Owen placed Faraj's hands on his chest. Owen bowed his head for a quick prayer.

Then they heard it, an ear-splitting screech from somewhere in the store. Woods fell down on his ass, the shelf of mops and brooms following him. The woman had woken. She was pushing Woods away to get to them.

Owen saw how she stiffened. He saw how her eyes bulged and the horrible gasp passed out of her lips. In that split second, he saw the woman's world fell apart.

Owen had attended a couple of his friends' funerals and saw how their families mourned. In all his years of service, he had never seen it like this.

The woman, with her bleeding shoulder, covered the body. She shook Faraj's shoulders in a vigorous manner, as if it'll wake him up.

She was repeating the words, "My love, don't leave me. Don't leave me."

Zia stepped in and motioned for her shoulder. But the woman shook her head and pushed her hand away. She continued to wail and hug the body. Her head resting on his stagnant stomach. "I love you, I love you. Don't leave me."

The pain stricken face of the woman haunted him for days, even after the end of his contract. And after careful contemplation, he realized that love always ends in tragedy. He realized love was inevitable as death.

Seeing the widow's pain, solidified the idea of relationships for Owen. He didn't want someone to suffer for him, so he made himself emotionally unavailable. It was protection, but not for him. He made a promise to himself to always protect the ones he cared about, even if it meant being alone.

But he failed. He knew that now as he gaped at Claire from his doorway.

The room was dead quiet. Words failed to form in his brain. No whispering noise or rustling to combat the feeling of dread in his gut as he stood there.

He may be over analysing it. But Owen was almost certain that he was seeing the widow's pain again through a pair of green eyes.

His eyes traveled from her face, to the sheet of paper in her shaking hand. If Owen wasn't scared before, he sure was now. Although it wasn't because of the contents of the sheet she was reading.

"Watch yourself, Grady. You don't wanna end up like Daddy, do you?"

And

"You will wish that you died serving the Navy instead."

And
"We're coming to get you."

And

*Go back to your cow shit. You don't belong here.*

Another was a magazine cutout picture of him. His eyes crossed out and a bullet hole penned in the middle of his forehead.

There were many others. The same graphic and hostile texts now lying all over his desk and on the floor. Claire was squeezing the papers with tight, white knuckles. The vile things written on it weren't bad as the others in his possession.

"Claire." he stated, holding her teary gaze. The unshed tears and anger in them disarming him.

Owen didn't expect her to be this mad. In truth was, nobody's supposed to know about these, especially her, of all people. He made that very clear to Zia. Besides, they were harmless. He had had more life threatening scenarios than this. What could a few malicious words and magazine pictures do to him, anyway?

"Claire, I-"

"Owen what…" her voice broke and he felt like someone stabbed him. "What the hell is this?"

He paced to the center of the room and maintained their distance, wary of her posture. "Just silly pieces of paper. They're awful jokes. It's nothing."

"Nothing?" her voice heightened to fifty octaves. "NOTHING? They're fucking death threats, Owen!"

He sighed and rubbed a hand on his face. "I know."

"Since when?" She asked, her whole body was shaking. He wanted to hug her. "When did you receive this?"

He recalled seeing the first threat on his car seat. "Monday evening."

"How many?"

Including the ones in his phone and in his car? "Thirty-three."

She trained her eyes on him. Like a hawk on its prey. She was angry. "Where did you find them?"

"Zia found it. At the farm."

"Where else?" Claire interrupted with gritted teeth.

"The parking lot in the Den."

"Where else?"

He exhaled, his eyes downcast. "Here."

Claire gasped and fell down the chair, her eyes blown. He'd seen this look before. On the island. When he showed up in that tent. She asked in her trembling, angry tenor. "How?"
"We don't know yet."

Claire didn't say anything, her hand was still clutching the papers. He didn't know how long they stood silent. He ran a hand through his hair before finally swallowing his courage and approached her.

He dragged the opposite chair across her and rested his elbows on his knees. Claire's pupils constricted, her parted lips were still trembling. The uneasy feeling swelled up inside him, ripping him apart.

"Claire." He enclosed her tight fists with his own.

"Don't."

He let out another agitated sigh before pressing a long kiss on her knuckles. The electric charges he anticipated was there, holding him for a quick second.

"Hey, look at me."

She didn't, instead, Claire exhaled a long, anguish breath.

"Look at me Claire."

She raised her eyes at him. God, her lips were shaking.

He leaned further, forward and continued in a soft voice. "I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm sorry for not telling you."

"Why didn't you then?"

He shrugged. "I didn't want you to worry."

"Great job!" She yelped. Her face contorted with anger and worry. "What the hell, Owen!" He felt something shatter inside him as her voice broke again. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were all red around the rim. She let out a choking gasp before Owen nestled her body towards him and into his lap.

She didn't object as he held her tight. Her legs hanging on his side. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He comforted with his sincerest apology. "I'm sorry, Claire."

Claire nuzzled her face into his neck, her arms wrapped around him in a tight embrace. "I don't know why..." Her voice, shaky and out of breath. "But I'm scared. I'm so scared, Owen."

"I know baby. I know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He cooed, pressed a loving kiss on the side of her cheek.

"Tell me."

He was on his way to home after that morning with Claire when he received a call from Zia. She didn't get into details over the phone so Owen had no choice but to follow her instructions and drive to the Den. Still dressed in last night's gala suit, he was in the best mood which earned a quizzical eyebrow from Barry. All that changed when Zia arrived. She gave him a handful of ugly posters she found on his farm. Zia told them that it was Mario who found the first note- nailed to the fence gate. Mario didn't tell his wife in fear of her reaction and concern for Owen. So, Mario called Zia and gave it to her.
Zia told him to still be cautious and on alert for anything out of the ordinary. Owen thought nothing of it, until he found another note slipped through his car window. Zia told him to check his pockets, which he did. And they found it, tucked in the same jacket he was wearing the night of the gala with Claire. In an instant, Zia and Barry spared no effort in installing cameras at the farmhouse and in his condo. Any argument from him was invalid. Zia was gonna pick them tomorrow for further evaluation so he compiled them into one folder. It was maiming to see others' concern for him. He wasn't used to it and he didn't like it.

After he finished, Claire didn't say anything. And he thought it was a good thing.

He cradled her close until he could feel her heart beat a normal rate again. He didn't move until he was sure she wasn't shaking anymore and her breath was steady. Owen didn't know how much time passed. Nor he did care. He could stay like this forever.

Claire raised her head from where it was resting on his neck. "Your legs are cramping."

Her concern manifested in her deep-set, jade colored eyes. "I don't care. Are you okay?"

"I'm not the one receiving death threats, Owen..." He could hear her sarcasm.

"You have to go to the police."

He scoffed. "What, and give Brennan another reason to drool over you? No thanks."

Suffice it to say, he was still on the fence about handing it to the police. His instincts told him not to trust them, and he will stand by that decision.

"He does not." Claire defended, looking repulsed.

"Uh, yeah, he does."

She rolled her eyes at him and mumbled in exasperation, "Men."

"I don't like other men drooling over you." He asserted.

"Don't change the topic Owen. This is serious. You have to report this."

"It's not that big a deal."

"Don't say that." she reprimanded, narrowing her eyes at him.

"It's not. Trust me."

"No. Owen. Please. I'm serious." Claire bumped her fist on his shoulder. "You gotta stop putting yourself in danger."

"I don't."

She pushed him at arm's length, the frown on her forehead deepening. "Could you at least think about it?"

He shrugged and with every confidence in his voice, "I got Zia and Barry."

"I know. But please, Owen." She urged, her hands tight beside his neck. "It'll make me feel better, if you talk to the cops."
Owen saw how her face turned even more somber. Her jaw tensed, the lines of her cheekbones became prominent. The little knot on her forehead deepened as she stared at him, panicked and frightened.

He sighed, defeated. "Fine. I'll call them tomorrow."

A genuine, dimpled smile replaced her serious expression. Claire grabbed his face with both hands and pressed a swift kiss on his lips. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Claire touched her soft hands on his cheeks, her thumbs rubbing smooth circles on the rough skin. Owen, overwhelmed with a sudden frisson of emotion, tilted his head to kiss her palm. Their eyes not leaving each other- not that he was planning to.

Claire leaned her forehead against his, her breathing finally calm and sedated. "Are you sure, okay?"

"As long as you are." He spoke, his words ringing with truth.

With closed eyes, her thumbs fleetly over his lips and chin in a mindless manner.

"You don't have to worry about me." He added, kissing the pad of her thumb.

Claire nodded and snuggled closer to him. He could feel her warm breath on his neck, her hands intertwining on his shoulder.

He breathed her in, the signature vanilla oozing from her clothes and skin, lulling him. Just as when he thought she'd fallen asleep, she stuttered,

"I care about… I care about you. You know that... Right?"

The innocent admission startled him, forcing him speechless. Yet he couldn't deny the pleasant, welcoming feeling overflowing in his veins.

"I know, baby." He closed his eyes, his lips reaching for her skin. "I care about you too. A whole damn lot."

Owen felt his heart thud a terrifying beat on his chest. He leaned forward yet again, until his lips touched hers in a lingering kiss. She stiffened, but melted into him as he lead them.

It was soft and slow. Their mouths meshing together in an electrifying motion that swept him off his feet. He poured himself through the kiss. His lips offering comfort in ways that words could never be. Claire moaned and buried her fingers in his hair as he engulfed them in an intimate embrace.

Owen opened her mouth by touching his tongue on her lower lip. She whimpered and rubbed her hands on the stubble on his neck. The sensation was addicting. She was addicting. He caressed her upper lip with his, his tongue seeking refuge with her. Claire angled her head as he drew her closer, his arms locked around her. She whimpered as he nipped her lip. Claire slipped her hands underneath the collar of his shirt. Her nails scratching the skin between his shoulder blades. Owen sat straighter, his patience tested as he felt her body heat up, her kisses more urgent.

Although, sex in the office was definitely one of the hottest things on his list, it wasn't the right time. He was thankful that she pulled away first.
"You're gonna be okay, right?" She asked again, a little short out of breath. Her fingers clutching the fabric on his shoulders.

He nodded, brushing his nose against hers. "I'm tough as a nail."

"We are okay, right?" She coaxed, a slight blush coloring her pale cheeks.

Owen understood how much it meant for Claire- the woman, who, just like him, had sworn to stay out of relationships. She cared about him! Four words. He never knew four words could bring him so much joy.

He smiled, barely containing the happiness flooding him. The insinuation that they were a "we" was making him feel giddy like a kid with chocolate. "We are better than okay."

"And we are gonna talk about this tomorrow."

He was not looking forward to it, but he agreed, "Fine."

Owen leaned back and gave her a kiss on the forehead, wondering to himself how he ever lived a life without her.

"I don't wanna be alone tonight." Her voice, still soft-spoken, murmured.

"I don't want you to be."

She nodded and for the first time that night, Owen felt her tensed shoulders, loosened. Without taking her eyes off his chin, she mumbled, "You can grab an overnight bag on our way."

He grinned at her bossiness. "Yes, Ma'am."

Something was cooking.

Owen groaned as the darkness in the room began receding. He burrowed his head beneath the pillows, moaning as he did so. Lavender scent invaded his senses.

He had never washed his beddings with lavender before, so why would his pillows smell like one? That's when something in his head clicked.

Claire.

He turned his head as his hand reached for her space. But it was cold and empty. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the new light sifting through the curtains. The smell was stronger this time. Owen sat up, yawned and scratched his chest. He took a quick gander about the room and felt himself smile. Everything was... well, very Claire. From the pristine white sheets to the decoration lining her shelves and walls. In a way, it resembled her office. He walked to the chair where his clothes were neatly folded. Owen put on his clothes before he went out the room. In an instant, he felt his lips curl at the sight of her.

Claire.

She had her back to him. Her golden hair styled in a messy bun, little tendrils brushing her face and nape. She was wearing a matching silk ensemble. The shirt was sleeveless and thin. The shorts ended on her upper thigh, offering him a view of her flawless stems. The god-awful cotton slippers she persuaded him to wear last night on her petite feet.

Claire continued her little dance as she cooked. The stereo in her living room was playing an upbeat old tune he couldn't name. She was humming and tapping her feet in tune with the music. She was
breathtaking. Unobserved, Owen leaned on the doorjamb and crossed his arms, enjoying the show.

He noticed the breakfast bar boasting with strips of bacon, pancakes and fruits. Toasted slices of bread, butter and jam surrounded the bountiful presentation. Two sets of cutlery set up, complete with folded napkins, coasters and placemats.

"Watcha cooking?"

She turned around and beamed at him, "Oh, hey! You're up!"

"Good morning."

"Morning! Hungry?"

"Perpetually." He smirked.

"Okay! Sit down, Lord Byron. Pancakes will be ready in five minutes."

"What are you doing?" He jeered as he watched her attempt in tossing the pancake. The poor sucker folded in the pan, making him chuckle, "You're doing it wrong."

Claire whipped her head and narrowed her eyes at him. "For your information, Grady, I happen to flip a successful one, a few minutes ago."

Owen laughed and finally walked towards her. "Oh yeah?"

She stretched an unoccupied arm and handed him a plate with three pancakes atop each other. They weren't the perfect circular shape, but he could tell they're cooked.

"Not bad."

Claire smiled up at him, like a proud student in class.

Owen placed the plate beside the coffee cups and clapped his hand together. "Alright. Let me see how you do it."

Her attention went back to the deformed pancake on her pan. "Do what?"

"Flip it." he challenged.

Claire arched her eyebrows at him, challenge accepted. She then poised herself in a what's supposed to be a tossing position.

"It's gonna burn if you don't do it now."

"Move away. You're making me nervous." she dismissed, waving her free hand towards the bar stools.

For once, he did as he's told. He could see her lips counting. Owen leaned his chin on his hand, regarding her with amusement.

"Today, Dearing." He teased.

"Shush! Stop pressuring me!"

Claire tipped the pan a little crooked and Owen knew what was gonna happen. As if in slow
motion, he watched as it landed on the tiled floor.

She shrieked in frustration.

"My, my." He clicked his tongue. "I finally found something you're not good at."

"I hate you." She grumbled as he laughed yet again. Owen picked up the fallen pancake and took a massive chomp, earning a disgusted look from Claire.

"Owen! No!"

To his surprise, it was warm, soft, and creamy. With the pancake still in his mouth, he complimented her, "It's good."

"That came off the floor."

"So?" He said between mouthfuls before swallowing.

"Gross."

"Trust me babe, I've eaten dirtier things than this."

Owen caught her mouth turning upwards before she turned her back on him. He took another bite, finishing the piece. "This is the best and dirtiest pancake I've ever tasted."

She giggled as she fetch the eggs from the fridge.

"Care for some eggs?"

"Yes, please." He answered.

"How'd you like them?"

"Sunny-side up. Or I could just drink them."

She wrinkled her nose again in disgust. "Remind me not to kiss you in the morning."

The unexpected insinuation and wonder in her voice made him smile. "Well then, can you kiss me before I drink 'em?"

"Maybe." She grinned and it was contagious.

"Well, can I have one now?" He stood and leaned over the countertop. His lips pursed.

She giggled but didn't resist. Still holding the three eggs between her fingers, she leaned over and gave him a sweet peck on the lips. Her lips tasted like orange juice, but she broke away a little too soon.

"That's it? Come on, that's how you greet your mother, Dearing. Give me a proper good morning kiss, woman." He taunted.

"Ha-ha!" She mocked, but leaned in just the same. She crossed her arms behind his neck and pulled him deeper. Owen smiled through the kiss and brushed his lips, once, twice before he pulled away.

"Good morning, Grady." Claire hummed, a sparkle in her eyes and smile.

"Morning, baby." He said, the nickname falling off his lips involuntarily. The blush that stained
her cheeks made him wanna leap.

"Don't distract me anymore."

"I'll try not to." He leered, giving her one last smack on the lips.

He was fidgeting; he wasn't used to sitting around at home. He switched on the coffee maker and pour it into an empty coffee cup. He aligned the utensils in place and poured himself a glass of water. Owen sat and watched as she moved around her kitchen.

"What else should I do?"


"Ah, my line. How original of you." he mocked, rolling his eyes.

"What can I say? You're rubbing off on me." Her carnation pink lips curved into a playful smirk.

"Is that a good thing?" he waggled his eyebrows at her.

"We'll see." And she winked at him.

"Pfft! Tease."

"I'm surprised you got up early." Claire implied, as she set the hot plate in front of him. She grabbed the hand towel off the counter and wiped her hands. "I thought you always sleep in."

"What makes you say that?" He blinked, holding out her seat for her.

"Well, since you're always late at the office." She pointed out without her usual derogatory tone, as she gave him the plate of pancakes.

"I know. I'm sorry… I've tried all the less scenic routes going to the Columbarium. I'm always getting stuck either way. I kept asking Lowery for directions, but he's useless in that part of the town."

"San Francisco Columbarium? In Loraine Court?"

She had stopped sipping her coffee and was looking at him with sympathetic eyes.

"Um, yeah. I drop by sometimes before I go to work." He took strips of bacon and placed it on her plate. "It's where-"

"-Your parents are buried."

He nodded, occupying himself with preparing her plate.

"That's why you're always late? To go there?"

"Yep… My mom, she, uh… she loved flowers-" he distributed the pancake on her plate before grabbing for himself. Claire was still speechless, so he went on, "So I made it a habit to visit whenever I can… Usually before I go to work."

It was then he realized he never shared that fact with anybody. "I never told that to anyone before." He chuckled, a little skittish.
"I'm glad you told me. Thank you, Owen." Claire reached for his hand and squeezed.

"I should probably talk to Jasper about that helicopter ride next time."

She shook her head, "No. Take your time. I'll handle the morning meetings. Do what you have to do."

"Thank you." he smiled gratefully.

"I have one favor though..." she hesitated as she grabbed the plate full of eggs.

"What is it?"

"Can I go with you sometime? I haven't been there since-"

The suggestion produced a childish grin on his lips. He nodded, "Okay."

She gave him another dazzling smile. "Thank you. Now," Claire grabbed the maple syrup, oats, and bananas. "Prepare to be amazed, Owen Grady."

He stood beside her and observed how she garnished their breakfast. She was putting all her efforts on said task, as if it was a spreadsheet. The little knot on her forehead was making his heart ache.

"Ta-da!"

"Very nice, Miss Dearing."

They ate between meaningful conversation. Owen found himself absorbing her every word. This is nice, he thought to himself as he lost himself with the food and her stories. He found her easy to talk to, despite their different opinions. Even though their bickering had ceased, he still found her invigorating. And he loved seeing her laugh, even if it's at his own expense.

The morning light poured through the curtains, casting an ethereal glow about her. The freckles powdered her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. The cupid-bow lips, pink and enticing. And here he thought she could never get more beautiful.

They sat, side by side, still in their nightwear. When they finished their meal, Owen helped load the dishes in the dishwasher. Their conversation ensued, delving into various topics. The time forgotten, again.

"The key to a perfect pancake flip-" Owen modulated his voice to sound like a lecturer. He grabbed the unwashed pan. "-Is in the wrist. You have to be quick. A lighter pan helps too."

Claire's lips twisted in a playful scorn. She snatched the pan away from his hand and rinsed it. "I knew you'll be smug... Actually, I realized... Of the 6 six years I've lived here, this is the first time I've cooked."

"You never cooked for yourself?" He asked, handing her the forks.

"Well, I do. I mean... I never cooked for my guests."

"What? Why?"

"For starters, nobody comes over. Well, except Zara and Emma. But that doesn't count cause they usually come here for like 5 minutes-"
He noted that there wasn't any sadness or regret in her voice. Like him, Claire didn't mind being alone.

"-And when Karen's in town, we usually go out." She sighed, bending down to stack the remaining dishes in the dishwasher. "You are the first guy I ever cooked for."

Pride catapulted in his veins. "Really?"

"Yes. Really."

He craned his neck down and Claire raised her head, meeting him.

Owen grabbed her waist and gave her a sensual kiss. She tasted of pancakes, and berries and everything lovely. Claire stood on her tiptoes as he felt her wound her arms on his shoulders. When he pulled away, she still had her eyes closed. Her lips still puckered.

"What was that for?" She purred, opening her eyes.

The flutter of her bright, green eyes was so breathtaking. So warm and safe that made him feel like he was finally home. He felt the murmur of his heart on his chest. The warm, fuzzy feeling spreading to the tips of his fingertips. "For the best breakfast I've ever had."

Starbucks was booming at 7 am that Friday morning. A group of women sat on the long bench, giggling over the young man sitting alone opposite them. Employees dressed in their office suits traded gossips on the nearby table. Their chatters competing to be heard above the morning ruckus. The bartenders behind the counter were nothing but energetic in appealing everyone's requests.

Standing in the middle of the queue were Lowery and Zara. Their attention on either of their phone and tablet.

"… We both are thinking it." He started.

"What makes you think I have the same train of thought as you?" Zara joked beside him, her nose buried in her phone. She was double-checking the schedule that Emma wrote down for Claire. "But, do go on. What are we both thinking about?" She patronized.

"That they're hooking up!"

"Owen and Claire?" She said under her breath.

"Don't sound so surprise! Of course! Who else would I be talking to?" he almost shouted. The woman in front of them -who looked like his grumpy Aunt Minda- gave him a stink eye. Zara elbowed him and he muttered a quick apology.

"They're hooking up. I'm telling you. It's a matter of time before one of us catches them…"

"Well... I caught them first." She boasted, finally pocketing her phone and facing him.

He scowled. "Correction. You saw them at the cafe in the morning after your wedding. You didn't even know if they came from the same room. That wasn't "catching" them. I, for one, can attest that they slept together. What else could Claire be doing, answering Owen's phone at 7 am in the morning?"

"Uh-huh. Where's your proof, Cruthers?" Zara crossed her arms.
"Proof? I sent the screenshot of the call duration to you. Where's yours?"

"I saw them leave together." She justified. "And my annoying cousin told me she kissed him in the bathroom gallery."

"Oh yeah, your cousin's words... That's proof alright." He simpered.

"Fine."

"Ha!" Lowery clapped his hand, startling her. "I would just like you to acknowledge the fact, that I win." He bragged.

Behind the counter, the blonde bartender, whose nameplate says Lisa announced their names. Both of them claimed their orders, but not without him grazing his palm on the bartender's fingers. The woman smiled and he winked at her. He faced Zara again, who he caught had a smile on her face.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing." She replied, a little too quick for it to be "nothing.."

"Wanna make another bet, Cruthers?"

"And win again? Sure."

They crossed the street and he saw another brunette babe passing by. Before he could make a flirty comeback, Zara groaned and pulled him by the sleeves to their building.

"What's it gonna be, Allerton? He goaded as they nodded at Martin, the receptionist.

"50 bucks, and Claire would slip."

"50? What are you? College student? How about a 100?" He waggled his thick eyebrows at her.

"Wow, you're very confident of yourself, huh?"

They reached the elevator and swiped their access cards on the screen.

"A hundred and we caught them in his office."

"I'm gonna pretend that this isn't weird as it sounds. But you're on, Cruthers." She shook her head and added with a laugh, "God, we're such horrible friends."

"I agree." he chuckled. He could imagine either Owen or Claire finds out about their "little betting game". Owen would laugh about it, for sure. But Claire.

Lowery thought back to another bet he had with Barry Sembene, the manager of the pub Owen owned. He lost 50 dollars to that French bastard for making Owen admit he likes Claire.

"But this is gonna be the last time I'm betting on them. I promise you, Zara. They can get together or not. I won't care anymore."

Zara mirrored his chuckle. " Really? You mean that?"

As impossible as Claire may be, Lowery wanted her and Owen to be together. Something about them... clicked. He couldn't explain it. Their chemistry was so transparent, to the point that it started to irritate him. Lowery wanted to scream at them, butt their heads together so they would
catch up with each other. Lowery knew Owen's backstory, his shortcomings and strong points. And damn it, he wanted a normal life for his friend. Owen deserved that.

"No." He confessed with a chuckle. "Seriously though. If those two aren't together by the end of the year, I'm gonna kill somebody."

"You and me both." Zara laughed as the elevator doors opened.

The floor was still deserted except for old Joe, Vivian from HR and Emma.

"Speaking of together, together. You don't have any other British friends here in the city, do you?"

Zara glared at him. "You can have my other noisy and annoying cousin, Juris. She's in town."

"Perfect."

She groaned, but then jumped like a kid when she saw Emma.

"Emma! Tell me all about it!" A new sense of eagerness was in her voice. Before he could ask either of them, a voice shouted from the hallway.

"Cruthers!"

It was Zia.

"Hey!" He greeted with open arms, treading purposefully down the hall. "Where you've been for the past few days?"

He took one look at his friend and scrunched his eyebrows. He had never seen Zia this pissed. He grimaced and pulled her towards his office. "What's going on?"

"Lock the door." She ordered, walking towards his desk and pulling out a binder. Never had Zia looked so disturbed and anxious, it was making him nervous too.

He turned the knob and studied her. "What's up, Z?"

"Did Owen tell you anything?"

"Tell me what?"

She pulled him down roughly by his collar and for a second, he thought she was going to kiss him. "Listen Cruthers, this is strictly confidential. And if I heard even a slightest pip from your mouth, I'm gonna finally put a muzzle on you. And it's not gonna come off for a week."

"I'm hurt. You know you can trust me. Zia, what the hell is going on?"

She released him and Lowery winced, arranging his shirt.

What he liked about Zia was that she never sugarcoat things. She always went straight to the point. And as she slammed the papers one by one, he finally understood her uneasiness. Not for themselves. But for Owen. He fell down his chair.

"Are these real?"

She nodded.
"Where'd you find these?"

"Every-fucking-where." Zia grabbed the coffee from his hand and took a quick sip.

He felt his blood run cold as he flipped through them. He cursed. "I thought death threats only happen in spy stories."

Zia exhaled a deep breath, as if she was contemplating something. "I need you to do something, Lowery."

When Zara first worked with Claire, she gave herself a four-week probation. She had never met someone as controlling as Claire.

One morning, after failing to reschedule an appointment, Claire got mad at her. She wanted to quit after the first week. She remembered crying in the corner when Alan Grady saw her. The old man was a good mentor to them. He was the humblest, most understanding man and she was sure everybody would agree with her. Alan invited her out to lunch to talk. Now, Zara never badmouthed Claire, no matter how mean she was to her. Alan consoled her before helping her realize that there was more to Claire than her spiteful reputation. Alan understood Claire, more than anybody was willing to try. Not only did he talked her out of quitting, but he also made her see Claire behind the icy stares. The reputation Claire was trying hard to maintain was a facade of who she really was. And Zara began to see it. Claire Dearing was passionately-driven, compassionate and vulnerable.

Not soon, Claire began to trust her more and she cherished it. Zara finally could tell she made a friend with Claire Dearing. And she could say the same for her.

As long as she's been Claire's assistant, Zara had never seen her friend act the way she did. Especially when Claire's around Owen. There was something magnetic about them, even when they were ready to cut each other's head off.

The first months were a disaster. Zara could tell Claire's distress. And yet, it was somewhat refreshing to see Claire, the woman who always got what she want, get turned down.

Lately, though, the playful banter has become more obvious. Zara caught the silly smile that replaced Claire's scowl whenever Owen teases her. Zara detected the sneaky, flirtatious winks and flushed cheeks. The way how Claire's seat was now facing Owen's. She knew Lowery noticed it too, which explains his newfound confidence in catching them first.

But thanks to Emma, Zara would win this time. 'Cause she knew something the nerd didn't.

The cafeteria was a hubbub of activity. Employees crammed the venue, each one eager to rant about their morning. Their voices muffled by the sound of cutleries and plates ringing about the space. An array of food stations lined the walls while dining sets and diner booths crowded the area.

It was turning out to be a normal day at the office. Claire arrived on time, her amicable smile was hard to miss. They discussed this over lunchtime. But as she and Emma was rounding up their crazy theories, their colleagues beckoned them over.

The diner booth could only sit six persons, so they pulled up chairs for them. As suspected, she and her colleagues were knee deep in gossip within minutes.
The group of women sitting around the table had a great admiration for Owen. Prior to the changes in Claire and Owen's "relationship", these women always sided with. They were always quick to judge Claire even without hearing her side of the argument. That was the reason that Zara avoided hanging out with them in the past. However, when Claire and Owen got into a car accident, they changed their perspectives.

The women persuaded her young apprentice about the incident she saw this morning. Their collective groan and hopeless pleas made Zara laugh.

"Zara, stop shitting with us!" Marian, from accounting, screeched. Her falsetto voice making Zara tug on her ear.

"I wasn't the one who saw them." Zara exchanged a sly look with Emma, who curled her lips, hiding her own smirk.

Lowery kept, Emma up to date with the gossips circulating their floor.

While Zara and Lowery were out getting their breakfast, she received an enthusiastic text from Emma.

Since her car's been in the repair shop, Emma had to commute to work today. And during said walk, she passed by Owen's condo building and saw Claire leaving his apartment. She was in her last night's clothes while Owen was in pajamas. Long story short, Emma saw Owen opened the door for Claire and Claire pulled him for a kiss. Emma was all hyped-up that she had to tell somebody. And Zara was more than willing to receive each detail.

"I've never been this happy for someone before." Emma exclaimed.

"You saw Claire getting out of Owen's apartment?" Vivian whined, turning to Emma.

"Mmmm!" Emma laughed, sipping her juice. "I almost got hit by a car staring at them."

The group echoed their disappointment, heartbroken.

"I can't believe it. The most eligible bachelor in California is finally taken. I'm so depressed." Angelica, who was working for the legal team reiterated.

"Well, fuck me." Sarah complained, she was the oldest one in the group. "Now either of us don't stand a chance now."

Zara chuckled. "You have a husband for 5 years, Sarah."

"So?"

"Too bad for you ladies." sighed Nico, who worked for the Sales team. "I told you they're gonna end up either way. Good thing, I gave up my fantasies."

"Please, Nico. You still couldn't get your eyes off Owen's ass whenever he walks by."

They laughed and huddled around Emma for more juice. Their voices drowned by the other. Zara leaned back in her chair, chipper than her usual attitude around them.

"But, can't argue. I think they're good together." Marian said.

"I agree. Claire seems happy. I mean, she isn't as mean and bitchy anymore."
"No shit. If I was dating Owen fucking Grady, I'm gonna be in good spirits too. I mean, have you seen those thighs?" Nico mused.

The group squealed in agreement.

"Claire keeps getting everything. How very surprising." A sarcastic, nonchalant tone interrupted them.

They all turned their heads to see Courteney Rivers sitting at the adjacent booth.

Every company has that bitter, spiteful woman everybody pretends to like. In Grady Corp, it definitely was Courteney. Courteney has been pining for the vice president of account for years. A job strictly endorsed by the board not to see fulfilled.

"Well, that's because she deserved it." Emma argued, her tone normal, but Zara could tell the woman was shaking.

"Hmmm… If you say so."

"Nobody invited you to sit here, Rivers." Zara scowled.

"Careful now, Zara."

With that, Courteney stood up and flipped her chestnut brown hair and stood over them. "Your boss should stop acting like she owns this company."

Zara felt the group's nervous stares as she narrowed her eyes at the woman standing in front of them. Courteney continued,

"Now, we all know how Claire got the job in the first place."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Sarah chimed in.

She sneered and walked to their table. "Y'all stupid. But I was the only one who never once believed she didn't sleep with Alan. And now, his son? Talk about Dearing climbing the food chain."

Zara gnashed her teeth together. Insulting Claire was one thing, and now Alan?

"Piss off, Rivers." Nico barked, his squeaky, soft voice turned solid and manly.

"Yeah. Fuck your jealous, bitter ass." Melissa, another colleague added.

"It's the truth." Courteney's thin lips quirked upwards and Zara thought she was seeing red in her vision. She wanted to slap her.

But then, they heard a strident laughter from the nearby table.

He had his back to them, but judging from the domineering stance and the air around him, they all knew who it was. The clean-shaven man dressed in a dark suit slid off his chair and stood behind Courteney. If there was a word between amused and angry, that was what his hazel green eyes implied. Owen Grady was unrecognizable without his famous five o'clock shadow.

The women around her paled. But not as much as Courteney. Zara wanted to laugh.

"How are we doing ladies?" He greeted with an amiable, genuine smile.
"Owen, I-" Courteney stammered, her caramel eyes, wide.

"Ms. Rivers-" he cut in, his tone stone cold sober, surprising her. Surprising them. Zara had never heard him speak that tone before. "-Seeing you're already finished with your lunch, can I see you in my office? In five minutes?"

"I... Um. I'm... sure, Owen."

"Great. See you later, ladies." He nodded at them and split. Courteney followed him without another word or glance.

Anguished sighs fell on the group as the two disappeared into the building. But Zara found herself grinning, mainly because of the Sweet Green bag in his hand. Zara had helped Lowery order Owen's lunch a couple of times so she knew that the bag wasn't his. She'd wager that it was the Kale Caesar Salad- without the chopped romaine- and a bottle of sparkling water. None of the women around here knew about it. But it was the meal she had been picking up for Claire, for the last few years.

When they returned to the office, they saw Courteney exit the HR's office and back to her desk, her head hung low. Minutes later, they saw her with a box of her belongings. Adler Morrison, the security crew on duty trailing behind her.

In her office, Zara was trying hard to appease a very nervous olive-skinned woman.

"He's gonna fire me, he's gonna fire me." cried Emma as she paced around her desk. "What am I gonna do, Zara?"

"Calm down, honey. Owen's not gonna fire you." She placated. "Courteney's out of line. For a long time. We all saw this coming."

"Yes, but-"

"Emma?" Zia called as she shut the door from Owen's office. "Owen wants to see you."

"Oh my god." She put her head in her hands, her Afro hair spilling between her fingers.

She patted Emma's shoulders, in what she hoped was a calming gesture. "Emma, it's okay. I know, Owen. You didn't do anything wrong."

Her assistant nodded and stumbled towards Owen's office. Zara gave her a thumbs up when Emma looked back.

"How's the paperwork coming, Zara?"

"Ugh! Don't remind me."

As mysterious as Zia was with her at first, she couldn't have guessed that they're gonna be as close as they were now. Over the months, and stressful events, she developed a sister-like friendship with Zia. The three of them (including Lowery) were inseparable. That may be the case, Zia has always been lock-lipped when it comes to the real score between Owen and Claire. No matter how she and Lowery pushed her, Zia never caved. Zara admired her for it, and soon she dropped goading her. But she can't say the same for Lowery. The two women fell into their usual chit chat when a voice interrupted them.

"Zara?"
She craned her neck and saw Claire coming out of her office, her eyes on the paper she was reading. "Yes, Claire?"

"Can you reschedule my meeting with Erica on Tuesday mor- oh, Hi Zia!" Claire greeted with zeal, her features soft and calm.

"Hi Claire! How are you?"

"Good, good." Claire's bright, smiley features, sobered. "Have you talked to him yet?"

Zara never meddled in their conversation. Claire would tell her what she wanted to tell her.

"I did."

"And?"

"He says he'll think about it."

Claire pressed her lips into a thin, polite smile. A smile Zara knew to be fake.

_Uh oh, trouble in paradise._

Her boss turned to her again. "Zara, kindly put Hevac Industries on my 8 am. Tuesday. I already checked with Erica, so we're good to go. Also, I need the accrual reports from accounting in two hours. Tell Courteney to give it to my office."

"Um. About that, boss..." Zara stood from her desk before Claire could turn on her heel.

"What?" her eyes switching from her and Zia.

"Courteney... she uh-"

"She got fired." Zia supplied in her cool, I-don't-give-a-shit tone.

"What?!" Claire's forehead wrinkled into a confused frown. "Why?"

"We don't know. Owen called her into his office and the next thing we know she's cleaning up her desk." Zara explained. She saw Claire's green eyes widen in disbelief even more.

"Wait, what? Owen fired someone?"

"I know. Couldn't believe it myself." Zara extolled with equal disbelief. She didn't dare tell her what happened in the cafeteria.

"Why? What happened?"

The door to Owen's office burst open and teary eyed Emma, walked out. Behind her, was Owen, whose eyes immediately fell on Claire's.

"Miss Dearing."

Claire gave him a curt nod, a hint of a flirty smile on her face. "Mr. Grady."

"Can I have a quick word?" Owen demanded, his voice, diplomatic and plain. "And oh, please bring the revised management reports from this morning's meeting?"

"I'll be there is a sec." She turned to her again. "Zara, kindly tell Vivian or anyone from HR to go to
my office after I finish my meeting with Mr. Grady?"

"I will."

The three women stood. Their gaze following Claire's even as she disappeared into Owen's office.

"You alright, Em?" she asked as she sat on Emma's desk.

The girl bobbed her head, sniffing. "Yes. Just shocked, I guess."

"What happened?" Zara interrogated. "What did Owen say?"

"Nothing. He's not mad. He didn't say anything. He seemed like his usual self. And he asked me why my car's in repair."

"And?"

Emma brought a folded piece of paper from her pocket. "He gave me a 10,000 check for it. So, I can finally take it out the shop."

It was a fine Sunday evening.

The sky was a spectacle of violet, pink and orange. Contrast to it was the vast verdant spread of trimmed grass of the field. The sun, a tiny orb in the cloudless sky, its light keen to shed its last warmth of the day. Birds twittered in their nests. Their cries were pleasant and whistling in tune with the summer air. The curtains graciously danced with the wind coming from his open windows. Its balmy and fresh breeze blanketing his house with the fragrance of mown grass and oak. Amidst this grandeur of the landscape, her face radiate more warmth, more beauty than he had ever seen.

Being near her made him feel like liquid. Like he was all over the place, unmanned, weak and molten. Dressed in his off-white Henley shirt, Claire continued her impressive movements. Each grind, each thrust sensual and raw with pleasure. She sighed with content above him. Her knees on either side of him. Her soft moans were driving him insane.

The television was still rolling out the credits. The ballad instrumental music from it, serenading their silent night. He and Claire have been watching a movie, sitting on the opposite ends the sofa. Midway through the movie, the room was a cacophony of his pleasured grunts.

He was still flaccid by the time she straddled him and started her hip movements. Claire took her time with her teasing. It was so brazen and erotic that it didn't take his body too long to respond.

His heart banged in his chest as her fingers ran up to his sternum and down again. Owen swallowed thickly as she writhed her hips with his. Pubic bone meeting pubic bone. His sweatpants rubbed against her thighs, the ties loosened. Her ministrations were steady and inviting he could barely think.

She forced her lips on his, but upon contact they soften. He wrapped his arms around her, pulled her closer, until the material of his shirt scraped his bare chest. She was rubbing her soft breasts against his strained muscles, making him want to go soon, faster.

"You're so beautiful." He managed to whisper even with the shortness of his breath.

Claire shut her dark green eyes and rested her forehead against his. Her long, shaky breath stealing
his own. He clumped her shirt behind her with a tight fist, her areola sticking out through the fabric. Her toned curves visible through the outworn fabric. He bit his lip.

*How did he get so lucky?*

Owen groaned and ducked his head to nibbled one breast. She moaned and arched her back, giving him as much of her. He lapped onto it hungrily, like a starving man at a banquet. Her hands clasped either of his ears, pulling him closer as he bit, suck and lick. He did the same to the other twin as she gyrated her pelvis against him, offering no mercy to his burgeoning load.

He leaned back up and stared at her parted lips and closed eyes, his hand thumbing the scar on her thigh. He stretched his hips up, and greeted her downward stroke. Over and over again.

Claire whimpered, her movements gaining speed. He cursed and stretched both his arms on the back of the sofa. Owen felt his eyes roll the back of his head as he watched himself disappear inside her flesh. She kissed the line of his jaw to his Adam's apple. Her lips warm and plump on his heated, sweaty skin. She bit on her earlobe, her throat thrumming with pleasure on his ear. Their incessant craving for one another, unquench despite the last two days.

As he thrust upward, Claire flexed her inner walls and he cursed yet again and tilted his head up the ceiling. The fierce friction between their bodies was the only thing he could comprehend. The only thing that mattered.

Claire dug her nails on his shoulder and he couldn't last any longer. Owen held her hips as she lunged forward, her lips latched on to his neck. He reclined on the sofa as he raised his hips. Meeting hers, reaching, chasing the final lap. Claire picked up the pace and soon she was writhing above him, her toes beneath his bent legs. Her nails raking the hard muscles of his chest. She groaned before chanting his name in heaving puffs. "Owen, please…"

He simpered, remembering how she boldly implied that she doesn't say, Please, the very first time they had sex. He remembered how he lost control, then, all thoughts halted by the need to claim her and lose himself.

She leaned her arms back on his knees, her lower lip between her teeth. They volleyed back and forth in painstaking and slow pace. He growled before bringing her lips onto his. His hips carrying the same amount of feral intensity. He felt Claire's fingers slid down his nape to the back of the sofa, the leather squeaking under her nails.

I care about you, you know that right? Her sweet, timid voice reverberated in his ears.

Owen raised his shoulders off the couch and hugged her. His arms bounding her in, deeper as he felt the powerful and inevitable tide coming to drown him. Drown them both.

His self preservation shattered as he felt her muscles contract him further.

"Claire…"

Her cries vibrated on his body, adding more to the fulfilling and heated sensation. And he followed, his breath leaving his lungs as he ignited inside her.

They lay there, mangled by their lovemaking. Their bodies limp and burning. The weight and warm feel of her body on his was a comfort he never knew he needed. The air reeked of sweat, sex and… her- his favorite smell.

"Has it… has it… has it always been like this?" She panted, her body rising with this.
"Hm?" His mouth was open at her neck, tasting her.

"The sex, has it always been this… Mind blowing?"

Owen felt a deep chuckle rumble from his chest. "I have no idea. But with you, it's definitely special."

"I bet you say that to all of them."

"You'd be surprised." He amended, truth ringing in his words. He wasn't sure she believed him.

The moderate, crisp air drifted about them, kissing their still heated skin. He made himself decent, as she still sat on his lap. He held her, his lips on her temple, refusing to let go. Claire released a deep breath before burrowing herself in his neck. Owen could feel the wheels in her head turning.

"What are you thinking?" He whispered, his thumb rubbing circles on her calves.

Claire sat up, fingering the hair on his nape. She held his eyes, her expression sated but wary. "I'm finding it hard to believe you've stayed single after all these years."

He brushed a fallen strand off her face and confided, "Well, nobody was worth the effort." and added in a careful tone, "You?"

She shrugged, her pinky finger outlining his beardless jaw. "Nobody was worth my time."

He felt the grin form on his face. "Well, I am honored."

Claire let out a soft giggle. "What makes you think you're the only guy I'm seeing?"

"Low blow, Dearing." He laughed out loud, but caught up to her. "Wait… we're seeing each other? Like dating- dating?"

Her grin was bewitching. She circled her arms on his shoulders in a half hug. "You don't want to?"

Owen felt the smile split his face, his insides tingled and crawling with butterflies. He pulled her into a giant hug, delirious with contentment.

"Finally." He muttered before he crushed his lips to her.

Slow, deep, until he felt her rub herself on his sweats again. He moaned and she pulled away, "Jesus, Claire. Give a man a moment to breathe."

She laughed, gave him a quick kiss on the lips and stood up. Owen retied his sweats back into place as Claire put on her underwear. The shirt she pilfered from him fell just above her knees. The sleeves ended a few inches to her elbow. Owen liked seeing her in his clothes, he pondered. As much he liked her being here.

Claire saucily walked to his kitchen and pour a glass of water for herself and afterwards, for him. He kept his gaze on her, entranced by her eyes alight with humor and mischief. She knew what she was doing.

"Thank you." He muttered as she handed him the cold glass.

"You're welcome." She walked back to the kitchen and grabbed an apple from the counter. "I'll help you with dinner."
"Nope! Nu-uh!" He protested with conviction, standing up and trotting to her.

"I wanna help."

"I know you do. But you're my guest."

She gave him a pointed look before raising her hands in defeat. "Fine. I'm gonna take a shower."

He loved the straightforwardness in her voice. But as much as wanted to join her, he's beat.

"Towel's on the cabinet."

She shrugged, "I'll just use yours."

He felt his smile widen. "Fair enough."

Claire disappeared into his room and he busied himself with the chicken and coconut rice. Owen set the table and washed the dishes, whistling as he did so. While waiting for the rice to cook, he took out his laptop and caught up with his emails. He was on the last two when he received an email from Zia.

**Owen,**

**Talked to Brennan and Walters. No progress. But I'm sending you these, just in case.**

Below her message was a zip, encrypted file. He opened it studied the contents. The captures were blurry and pixilated, but he could make out the figures. The CCTV video was a footage in the Den. Two thug-looking guys wearing caps, kept going back and forth for a whole hour. Owen saw himself arrive and enter the premises. One of the guys leaned on the trunk, surveying the crowd while other one took quick pictures. He then saw the photographer slipping something in the opened window of his car. They walked away casually. It was the first of the death threats he received.

Owen rubbed a hand on his face and reviewed the other screen captures in the folder. All of them nothing but clouded photos. He emailed them to Brennan, and copy-furnished Zia.

Much to his annoyance, Claire persuaded him to call Brennan and Walters. The two immediately got in touch with Zia to investigate the case. He was still anxious about the confidentiality and told the agents to try to keep this off the radar. And he was trying his best not to worry, Claire even further.

He heard her footsteps in the hallway. "Hey, you showered okay? Rice is gonna be ready in 15."

Claire emerged, wearing another shirt and shorts of his. Her hair was damp and he could smell the soap exuding from her skin. She was holding his phone in her hand. Her expression, dark and hooded.

He closed his laptop. "You okay?"

"Lex called." She replied, her tone formal and distant.

"Okay? What'd she say?" Owen frowned. Lex never called.

"I didn't answer it." Claire gave him his phone before turning her back and sitting on the couch. She switched on the tv and tucked her legs under her.
"I should probably call her back." He said to himself and turned to her again. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

If he didn't know any better, he'd say that she was jealous. His face cracked a smile.

"I won't call her, if you don't want me to."

"Call her. It might be important." She sighed, flipping through the channels and not looking at him.

Owen smothered his laugh. "I'm gonna put her on loudspeaker."

"Whatever." He heard her mutter.

Owen couldn't help the grin on his face. He found Lex's number and dialled. It was on the second ring that she answered.

"Hey Lex!"

"Owen!" She greeted with her usual enthusiasm.

"Sorry, I missed your call. What's up?" All the while his eyes remained on Claire, who settled in the Mexican-dubbed show on the screen.

"It's fine. It's fine. Hey, listen. Timmy's gonna be in town. He wanted to ask if you're free sometime this week to get toge - hey! Hey! Get off the phone, doofus!"

He heard an annoyed and deep rumbling before the voice on the phone changed. "Owen Michael Grady, you son of a bitch!"

Only one idiot would call him by his full name. He laughed. "Timothy Francis Murphy, you bastard!"

"Where the hell are you? It's been a while." Said the chirpy voice on the line.

"I know, I know! I'm at home." he answered, happy to hear from his friend.

"Alone?" Tim teased.

"No." He replied, an idiotic grin on his face as he observed Claire's posture. Stiff and annoyed and… jealous.

"Of course you're not, you asshole!" His friend cackled. "Listen, me and my wife's staying till next weekend. What do you say to losing a few poker chips?"

"I'm pretty sure you're talking about yourself. But that sounds great! I'll call you tomorrow once I checked my schedule."

"Good! Good! You can bring your friend."

She saw Claire exhaled, making him wonder if she really was paying attention to the tv. "I'll have to ask her."

"Alright. I'll see you, Grady."

"I'll see you, man. It's so good to talk to you."
"You too. Talk to you soon! Here's Lex."

"Moron." Owen heard Lex said to Tim. "Owen? So, I'll see you this week?"

"You betcha." He nodded.

"Can't wait. See you!"

"Bye."

He hung up.

"So…” he started, his tone humorous but cautious. "That was Lex and his younger brother, Tim…”

"I know. I heard." She switched the channels again.

Owen let out a low chuckle and joined her on the couch. He rested his arms on the back of the sofa, behind her. His amused laughter threatening to ripple into the tensed air. He watched her for a minute. Claire was impatiently prodding the remote towards the television, her posture rigid. "Damn it!" She hissed, "You need new batteries."

He couldn't help himself. Owen decided it was now or never. "You're jealous."

She whipped her head at him, her nostrils flared. "No, I'm not."

He bit his lip, happiness bursting out of him like rainbows. He repeated, much more confident this time. "You're jealous!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes, you are!"

"No! I'm-"

In a flash, Owen grasped her legs and tugged her over his lap. Claire yelped in surprise or annoyance, he didn't know. But before she could say another word, he pulled her face towards him and pressed her lips on his.

His hand found its way to the back of her head. She fisted her hands and tried to push him, but Owen tightened his hold on her. He was smiling through their kiss, his laugh subdued by her lips. Her hands eventually found their way around his shoulders. Owen maneuvered her legs so she was sitting astride him once more. He drew her chin sideways, diving deep into her sweet, sweet lips. He pulled away with a laugh.

"It's not funny." She murmured, short-winded. Her eyes were downcast as though being jealous was something to be embarrassed about.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Dearing…" He tilted her chin up, her green eyes stationing him home. "I only want you."

She inhaled and gave a lingering kiss on the corner of his lips. Claire hugged him even tighter. "You're gonna drive me crazy, Grady."

Owen pressed her forehead against hers, his heart was an orchestra in his chest once more. "Lucky me."
She rolled her eyes, her tone playful. "Idiot."

Her face radiated with heart aching, knees-shaking beauty. Her cheeks flushed a healthy pink color. The freckles that captivated him since day one dotted her statuesque features. Her dimples deepened as she smiled like never before, illuminating every part of him. Owen felt the air knocked out of his lungs. His heart lurched and stuck in his throat.

And between its erratic beats, a revelation found its way into its steadying rhythm.

*I love you.*

Owen stilled as his brain processed the words. He gaped at her, overwhelmed by the wonderful emotion slicing through him.

*I love you.* The voice inside him repeated, its tone firmer this time.

Of course he did. Why did it take too long for him to realize?

"What is it?" She scrutinized, her forehead creasing in that innocent way he always found beguiling. "What's wrong?"


She raised her eyebrows at him, holding it steady as if she's waiting for him to explain.

But he didn't say anything. Instead, he dipped his head and kissed her. He coaxed her mouth in a long, possessive kiss. His recently discovered feelings, adamant to make itself known. His tongue opened her mouth, running the tip into every crevice of her sweetness.

Claire fought him, her tongue twisting with his. She snuggled closer to him, until he could feel the stampede raging on her chest. She moaned and angled her head to the side, her hands roving his chest and arms. Owen drew her further, his hand locking on her lower back. Her adept fingers tangled in his hair, skimming down to the rough skin where his stubble was, days ago.

It was baffling that no matter how much he squeeze her or pull her into his arms, she still wasn't close enough. His hand softly closed around her neck. He pressed his mouth harder, deeper, until she forget whose air she was breathing. Electricity charged through his skin, and for a moment when they come apart, he'd forgotten where he was.

When he recovered his breath, he fixed his eyes on hers. I love you, the words gripped his throat, begging to be said.

*Not now, Grady.*

"You don't have to be jealous of her, or anyone Claire."

The glimmer in her eyes was making it hard to breathe. In her embrace, his world stilled. Owen was at peace. He was content. Anchored. Happy. Her scent, the feel and weight of her in his arms, spread a familiar tingling sensation over his body. He sucked in air before admitting another fact he was sure he felt from the very beginning. "I'm all yours."

Her soft lips formed into a knowing smile, making him dizzy with unbridled joy he never knew he was capable of. "Good."

The Japanese restaurant was approaching closing time as the group jeered into another round of
The male server returned with their bill, and handed it to Tim, the nearest person to him.

"Nope!" Owen stood up from his seat and stole it from his friend's hands. "I got this."

"Grady!"

"Owen, no!"

"I owe you, Murphy. I got this." He said as he signed his name and gave his Amex.

"Hmph! Fine! I'm getting the next bill, you sneaky little shit head." Tim snorted at him and threw him his used chopsticks.

Owen's relationship with Tim Murphy went way back. Owen considered him as one of the closest friends he still has. They, somehow grew up together, with their mothers being good friends. Their families went to trips together and spend holidays together. Tim was the first to notice when he and Lex decided to get together. He was also the first to know when they broke up. Despite the lack of communication and other circumstances, Owen knew he'd always have a friend in Tim.

"I'd like to see you try, fish legs." Owen teased back, using Tim's nickname from when they were kids.

"Fish legs?" Maureen, Tim's wife queried.

Owen crowed at the jet-black haired beauty sitting beside him. "Oh, you didn't know the story, Maureen?"

"No! No! You bastard!" Tim whined.

"What do you say Lex?" Owen looked across the table, "Can I do the honors or you should?"

"Mmm!" Lex drank the last of her wine before saying, "No, go ahead, Owe."

Owen recounted the incident when they were hanging out as kids. Tim and Lex's grandfather and his dad used to go fishing on this lake. Being a small kid, Tim always gets into "accidents". He "accidentally" stepped into a bucket of freshly-caught tilapias. He fell, face down as young Owen and Lex doubled with laughter from their own prank.

"I hate you both. These two. Just 'cause they're both older than me, they're always conspiring against me." Tim accused when he'd finished. "Good thing you didn't end up together."

"Oh yeah. Too bad." Maureen commented, her bright eyes regretful.

Owen laughed, "Nah. We're good as friends. Aren't we Lex?"

Lex paused for a minute, as if surprised by his question. "Of course! Can you imagine? Gah!" She shuddered and the group chuckled.

They exchanged a few pleasantries before Lex said she had to put Ed to bed and that Owen has a long drive back to the city.

"Let's do this again, alright? What do you say to barbecue at the farm? After I got back from New York this week?" Owen suggested as he hugged Tim.
"It's on the planner, Grady. I'm hoping to meet Claire soon. Ron's told me all about her."

The mention of her name brought another big smile on his face. "Yeah. She looks forward meeting you guys."

"Me too, me too."

Owen shook his hand as he said his goodbye. He kissed Maureen's cheeks before he and Lex made their way to the parking lot. The place had been packed this evening. Other guests had no choice but to park their cars on the opposite parking lot.

The evening air was stale. The sharp shadows lengthened by the amber glow of the streetlights. The trees and green shrubbery looked sinister in the dim evening light. Owen shrugged off his jacket as an attempt to cool himself from the dryness of the evening. Sidling beside him was Lex talking on the phone.

"Tell Julie, I'll be there soon, honey…. Yes… Uncle Tim and Aunt Maureen went ahead, you'll see them tomorrow…. Yeah…" 

As his thoughts reverted back to Claire, he took out his phone to send a text.

**Hey. Just checking up on you. Dinner was good.**

"-I'm walking back to my car with Uncle Owen… Okay…" Lex continued her conversation.

He waited for a couple of minutes before sending another one.

"Don't tell me you're still at the office."

Her reply was quick this time.

**Hey. Glad to know dinner was great. Yes. Re-checking the cargo delivery schedules for next week. I already have a list pointers to discuss with the New York. I'll bring it to you early tomorrow, so you won't have to miss your flight.**

He frowned and checked his watch, surprised to see it's a quarter to 9 already.

**No. Wait for me there. I'm driving back.**

Beside him, Lex hung up her phone. He barely noticed the jingle of her keys in the breezeless evening.

**Miss me already, Grady?**

He smirked and texted back with,

**Always. ;)**

Her response was immediate.

**Come get me then.**

Owen found himself laughing in the dead of night.

**Oh, I will. Be there in 45 minutes.**
At the corner of his eye, he caught Lex, who had an inquisitive manner about her.

"What?" He asked as he slid his phone in his pocket

"You're looking well... happy."

Owen didn't say anything but smiled at her. He felt the vibration of a new message, but he fought to reach it as a respect to Lex. She was timid and quiet, which was unusual about her.

"Everything okay, Lex?"

"Yeah. Everything's... Um... I've been wanting to talk to you about that morning... when I picked up Ron."

"What about it?"

"I know..." she looked nervous. "I know I said that... you know what? Forget it."

"What is it, Lex? Come on, you can tell me." He urged in a hushed undertone.

"Was it just me?" The uneasy feeling he felt that morning reintroduced itself as she looked up to him.

"Was it just you what?" He felt his eyebrows forced together in a pronounced frown.

What is happening?

Lex gulped in a huge breath before she stepped closer to him. He felt the touch of tip of her heels on his dress shoes. An array of sweet fragrance enveloped him, suffocating him. Lex took another step, a hopeful expression in her face. Her eyes fell to his lips and Owen knew what's gonna happen.

But before she could go for the kill, he took hold of her shoulders and leaned away as if she had an infectious disease.

"Lex, what are you doing?" He rebuked, yet his tone was gentle.

"I still like you, Owen." She took hold of his waist, as she continued gazing up at him. "I don't think I ever stopped."

"No, no Lex..." he felt like someone poured a bucket of cold water on his head. "It's the wine talking."

Owen removed her hands from his body and staggered backwards. As soon as he did, he noticed the slumped movement of her shoulders but still, she didn't move from her spot.

She shook her head. "No, no. I don't think so..."

"Lex, I don't know what to say."

"Is it still possible that..." but then she sighed an angry puff of air, "You know what? Forget it."

Lex sidestepped from him and Owen, feeling it was the right thing to do, called out,

"Lex..."
She faced him again, embarrassment and hurt visible in her soft features. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry Owen. I just thought-

"No, don't apologize. I'm sorry. It's just -" Claire's flaming golden hair, green eyes and sweet dimples flashed before his eyes.

"I think I know…" Lex wrapped her arms around herself in a hug. "It's… it's Claire, isn't it?"

He gave her a short nod.

"I understand." She sniffed, her eyes shifting on his face.

Owen felt the gust of the now-cold, wind stroke his face. His mouth opened to offer her some words of comfort, "I-

"You love her, don't you?"

Without hesitation, he said, "I do."

Lex appeared to be contemplating it, before she nodded again. She offered him a genuine smile. "Well then, that settles it."

"Lex, I'm sorry. I didn't know-"

"No. I should be one apologizing, not you, Owen."

"Don't worry about it."

"Have you told her yet?" She's staring at him, that pensive look on her big blue eyes.

"Not yet. But I will."

She leaned in for a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Let's forget this ever happened, okay?"

"Already forgotten." He beamed.

"I'm happy for you, Owen. I truly am."

"Thank you."

He watched her safely get into her car before he retrieved out his keys from his jacket. Before putting his key into the ignition, he retrieved his phone from his back pocket. There's a new message from Claire. But before he could open it, his phone beeped and switched off on its own.

"Ah, shit."

He scrambled around for a minute inside his compartment to find a charger before giving up.

He revved up his old Mercedes on the empty road, his radio a white noise in the background.

"dramatic changes…"

He couldn't help but recalled Lex's conflict. He felt bad for her somehow. He and Lex ended years ago and Owen made it a habit of not getting back to his exes. Lex was an exception years ago. But he was a changed man. A new man. So much has happened and he didn't regret anything.

Owen breathed huge sigh of relief. He wondered what Claire's reaction would be like. He
chuckled, thinking about that night when he called Lex to confirm their dinner. Claire Dearing was jealous. Who would have believed?

"-people out."

His thoughts recurred back to Claire-as it did for the last few months. The impish smile made his way to his face again. The week had been nothing but short of amazing. The work days were arduous and frustrating. The only silver lining was the meetings he got to attend with her. He had to admit, their flirtatious office interactions were thinly veiled. Claire seemed to be enjoying it as well as him. It didn't seem to surprise him when he overheard people talking about him and Claire. He didn't mean to eavesdrop, but the women's voices were so loud he had no choice but do so. He found the whole ordeal funny at most, until Rivers insulted his Dad and Claire. It was the first time he felt the power and satisfaction of his position. He chose not to tell her, at least not yet.

With his past relationships, everything felt like automated, forced. But with her, every day was a challenge. He would rake his head on how to appease her, make her laugh, make her feel the things she was making him feel. It was like everything he had known before her wasn't important. Claire was the strongest person he'd ever known, but nobody realizes the warm person beneath. She was vibrant, intimidating, beautiful and witty. And he was hers. He loves her, the words made him smile.

"-have no word. The site-

As his car entered the freeway, Owen ruminated on the past couple of days with her. He had never been this happy. Claire permeated every waking thought in his brain. A single touch never failed to send electric shivers down his spine. It always persists, branding his soul with light-headed feeling. Sometimes, he still found himself, loss for words.

Out of nowhere, a wave of anxiousness surged in him. The ominous feeling in his gut resurfaced. He remembered the widow in Haifa, the car accident, the dead driver by the cliff and the death threats.

What if the people after him was after Claire too?

Not trusting where his thoughts were leading him, he turned up the radio.

And felt his mind instantly shut down, his breath officially leaving his body.

His eyes wide, mouth agape, praying that the voice behind the radio was anything but true.

"But we can confirm that one Grady Corp employee perished in the blast."

The glisten of cold sweat covered his entire body, like a thick, heavy blanket. The taste on his tongue turned to ash. His heart roared a scared beat on his hollowed chest.

"-as of now, we have no word yet from Mr. Owen Grady, owner, CEO and President of Grady Corporation."

His limbs became dead weight that he had no choice but abruptly slam on the breaks. The car horns blared behind and past him on the freeway. The air, knocked out of his body. His brain was screaming one name and one name alone,

Claire.
Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry? LOL. Don't kill me. XD I got them into confessing mode, how'd you like it? What do you think of Owen's realizations? What do you think happened with Claire? What do you think of Lex?

I've been distracted, so I hope this chapter wasn't shit. Thanks so much for reading this.

PS. ALSO, I enjoyed writing Lowery's and Zara's perspective, it gave me a better insight on what they thought was happening with Claire and Owen. :)

P.P.S. IM SO EXCITED FOR JURASSIC WORLD:DOMINION!!!!!!!!!!!!!
I hope everyone is safe while reading this. Warning, this chapter is pretty cheesy, pretty smutty, and pretty angst-y. I had a different ending in mind before posting this, but I'll reserve that. I'm sorry for dragging this on but I think we only have a few chapters left for this story. Tell me what you guys think! And please do correct me for errors! :)

LIFEMATE

We are all wolves howling to the same moon.

- Atticus
It was the longest, most aggravating 45 minutes of his life.

“Come on!” He shouted as he blew his car horn.
He was still in Jackson Square, the traffic holding him up. The street was filled with ambulances, fire trucks and police cars. He could still see the smoke billowing from what he knew was the building. His phone was still off because he couldn't bear it upon himself to stop and buy a car charger.

The only (sort of) comfort he had was the radio covering the news.

“Police had already acquired the CCTV footage. And it appeared that the blast happened at 9:12pm at the Basement Parking lot. We are still confirming the number of employees who were in the building.”

Owen was contemplating the odds of leaving his car on the nearby lot and make a run for it when the cars moved.

He was nearly there.
The buildings and establishment cleared. He could hear the media commotion, the siren alarms of the vehicles. And he finally saw it.

The building was still intact. But an ugly, black spot was covering the entrance leading to the basement entrance. There were still firemen coming out of the building, their faces charred with soot. The once vacated courtyard flocked with people. The yellow tapes barricading the perimeter, stood above the crowd. Firefighters, police officers and medical personnels hither and thither orders and movements. Media reporters stood in the front line. Their simultaneous voices ringing in his ears. It was chaos.

Owen experienced a great deal of nerve-wracking moments in his life. Back in the NAVY, his officers consistently told him that he was impulsive, reckless. He was always the one who went with his gut even if it meant disobeying orders or putting his life in jeopardy. He remembered how the NAVY was his life back then. How his mates were his family, how he was protective of them, as they were to him. Owen was always the first in line to volunteer. He’s always the only one to go back for a fallen troop. The only thing that kept him from getting sacked was his top records- in trainings and on the field. He was, as his commanders always tell him, “a good pain in the ass”. Owen’s acclimated to the fear, the danger, the adrenaline. Hell, Owen lived for the peril. He thrived on it- as it was the only constant thing in his life.
But this, all this was new.

Fears he’d recently discovered, resurfaced. Its sinister claws crawled up his throat, threatening the life out of him. The empowering feeling that she was in danger was back. Like that time in the car, when his first and only instinct was to keep her safe. The surge of adrenaline, the angry pump of his blood, his senses on high alert. All that mattered was Claire, safe and sound and in his arms.

He slammed on the brakes, not caring where he parked his car. His eyes trained on the smoke coming out of the basement parking. The blue and red lights flashing all around him was making his head spin. The burnt stench became stronger as he threw the door close. Owen felt his heart running out of his chest, his sweat turned cold. He ran to the building, his mind fighting the negative thoughts. Please, please, please.

Two cops caught up to him and halted him, their hands raised.

“Who’s hurt? Tell me, who’s hurt?” he yawped, his body shaking with nerves.
“Sir, you’re not allowed-” The woman police officer started.

Without looking at her, he declared, “Former Lieutenant Commander Owen Grady. And I own the building.”

He’s astounded by the authority in his voice. As far as he’s concerned, he had never pulled rank before and as soon as he said it, he left like a jerk. The police officers straightened, realization rising behind their wide eyes.

“Sir.” They raised their hands in salute.
Owen nodded. He ordered, “Let me in.”

“Sir, we have to go the other way around. We have strict orders, to keep you safe.” The woman officer turned to her partner, “Get Walters or Brennan…”

She faced him again with an apologetic countenance. “Sir, this way please.”

Then he heard his name, shouted above the racket. And like a big wave of flood, the journalists, photographers surged towards him.

“MR. GRADY!”
“OWEN!”

“HE’S HERE!”

“MR. GRADY! BBC HERE!”

“TELL US ABOUT THE DEATH THREATS, MR. GRADY!”

"WAS IT TERRORISM?"

Despite the worry clouding his face, he couldn't help but glower at them.
Fucking media. He cursed inwardly.

A line of police officers came to his aid. They formed a fence line, pushing the zealous camera crew away from his face. Their clamor was irritating than anything he had ever experienced.

Another officer pulled the tape as he ducked under. He was restless as he trotted away from the crowd. His mind blank, his mouth wired shut. The fearful thoughts looping around his mind.

A couple of medics flew past him as he frantically searched for a certain redhead. The woman officer was still escorting him when he spotted his friends.

Lowery, Zara and Zia stood around and opened ambulance door, away from the loud audience. He felt a slight relief after seeing that they were no longer dressed in their work clothes. They stood in a semi-circle, blocking his view of someone sitting on the car step.

He felt his stomach drop all the way to his feet.
“Claire?!” He shouted over the dry wind as he jogged towards them.

They turned their heads and Owen felt dread overcome him when he saw the woman sitting between them. Her Afro curls, which was usually free, was up in a bun. Her cheek was reddening, her lip busted. Her fingers curled around a hot mug. Claire’s young assistant sat with a thermal blanket over her small shoulders. Her eyes wide with fear and trauma. Her companions weren't looking good either. Behind her eyeglasses, Zara's eyes were puffy and red. Lowery's normal friendly expression, aloof. While Zia, who wasn't easily bothered by anything, appeared shaken. Shadows of despair crowding their faces.

“Owen!” They greeted, the relief in their voices clear and evident.

He felt his throat closing up. No Claire.
He held a hand on Emma's shoulder, a terrified expression clouding the young woman's vibrant face. “Emma, are you okay?”

She gave a weak nod.

“You okay, man?” Lowery asked and he didn't know how to answer him.

“We thought you were here!” Zara sniffed, grabbed his shoulder and engulfed him in a hug. Her friendly comfort felt empty and disconnected, the sinking feeling was back again. “None of us could contact you.”

“Where’s Claire, Zara?” he repeated as he pulled away.
Nobody answered him. “Where is she? Where’s Claire? She was here. She was working late.” He couldn't help the desperation in his voice.

The people standing around him shared nervous glances with each other.

“What the hell is going on? Somebody, answer me!”

A timid, soft voice shook behind them. “I'm so sorry, Owen. I'm so sorry.”
He squatted down to the young woman on the ambulance step. “What happened, Em?”

“I was having coffee with a friend. We were hanging out at Starbucks across the street when Claire called me...”

Everybody was listening to her. Owen had an inkling that Emma was talking about what happened for the first time. He felt a sense of compassion for the girl. Emma was the new girl but she was already a likeable employee. And she was trying her best to do her job- which he greatly appreciated, as do Claire.

“She apologized for calling in so late, but I said it’s okay... She asked me where was the revenue reports. I forgot to send her the copy so I... I went back here... I sneaked in and accessed my email on the lobby. When I heard a loud noise... And next thing I know... Next thing I know, someone was waving a light in my face. And there's smoke everywhere I don’t... I don’t know what else happened.” Her voice choked as tears brimmed her eyes. Emma put her head in her hands. Her body shook as Zara laid an arm around her shoulders.

Owen stood straight. Closed his eyes. Breathed in and then out. Opened.
The noises around him swaddled, as if he's submerged in water. He clutched the phone in his hand. His tone concealing the apprehension running through his veins. “Has anyone tried calling her?”

“Service is down right now, boss. They’re speculating it was a terrorist attack so they had to take measures.” Lowery supplied.

He turned to Zara. “How about her apartment?”

“Nobody’s answering her home phone. I told Alec to stay put. In case Claire called our house.”

“Stay with Emma. I’m gonna check her apartment again. She must be there.”
She has to be.

They nodded at him, despondent. It was then that Owen was reminded with another gut wrenching feeling.

“They didn’t mention it... I have to know. Who...” he started, his eyes fleeting over their sad appearances. The question drying his tongue. “Who was it? That they mentioned on the news?”

He heard Zara let out a sob, while Lowery turned his back on them as he cursed, kicking the cemented floor.

Zia cleared her throat and placed both hands on her hips. Owen saw her face twist. “Bernie was still sick so Joe took the shift tonight.” She informed, lowering her head and wiping her eyes. “I’m sorry, Owen.”
Owen swallowed the ugly feeling building in his tongue. He wanted to scream. He took an anguished breath. “What about his family? Were they informed yet?”

Zia nodded, sniffing. "A couple of officers went to their house."

“Okay... Anyone else hurt? Who else was here?”

“Artie and two security guys are in the other vans," she inclined her chin to two adjacent ambulances in the distance. "They're okay. Scratched, but okay.”

Owen nodded, somewhat relieved. “Lowery,” he called.
“Yeah?” Lowery went back to the group, rubbing his face with the back of his wrist.

“I’ll cover every expense for their medical. Including Joe’s funeral arrangements.”

And just like that, his friend was back in his assistant mode. He took out his phone as Owen listed out:

“-Clear my schedule for tomorrow so I could talk to Joe’s wife. Give me Joe’s family records. Pay for his mortgage and his loans. If he’s paying for a car loan, pay it in full. I know he’s helping his grandson get into college. Get me a file on that boy and ask Mary to apply him for a Grady scholarship. Arrange a $10,000 cheque to his wife every year for the rest her life. Tell our investors that we’re gonna move our meetings to next week. I’m sure they will understand. Arrange a video conference tomorrow. I want every department head. Everyone is not allowed to work until authorities have searched the building. This building would be off limits till then. Those who can work from home, it’s fine by me. But I will still grant a $1,500 emergency pay leave for every employee in the building. Nobody comes here until I say so. Effective immediately.”

“Got it. Should someone from Legal go with you?”
“Yes. Call Uncle Cory.” He faced Zia again. “Can I borrow your bike?”

“Of course, here.” she threw him the keys. “It’s parked by the east entrance. Be safe.”

He was ready to run to the other side when he heard it. A distressed, but angry voice called out from the crowd. It made him stop on his tracks. His skin prickling with familiarity.

“What happened?!”

"Ma'am!"
"No! No! Stop touching me!"

"Ma’am. This area is off limits."

"My people are in there! Let me in! I work here!"

He whirled his head towards the noise and felt his lungs exhale a huge sigh of relief. “Claire!”

As soon as he said it, her head snapped in his direction. "Owen?" The food bags that she was balancing on her arms fell to the pavement.

“Let her in!” he heard a male voice ordered.
The officer keeping her pulled the yellow tape so she could duck under. "Owen!"

His eyes screened her from head to toe, to make sure she's unharmed.

Then, everything became fuzzy- the lights, the cars, and the people. His legs rushed towards her-not fast enough. He could hear the yammering of his heart. Her voice calling out his name. The emerald green eyes, tethering him and breaking him, all at once. The adrenaline, the relief in seeing her was enough for his heart to burst.

“Owen!” he heard her say as she closed in on him. “What happened?”

His chest barreled into her body. She gasped at the force, but eventually melted into him. Her scent and the warmth of her finally calming him down. The rapid beat on her chest lulling him.
“You’re here. You’re okay.” He felt, as though, she had pulled him out of the water. Everything else faded away as he held her, and breathed her.


He shook his head as he cupped the back of her head. He let her feet down, but didn’t let go.

“Owen?” she sounded alarmed, her hands suddenly grasping his biceps, wanting to pull away. “Owen, you’re shaking. What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

He shook his head once again and murmured against her shoulder. "I'm so glad you're safe."
She felt her arms wound around him tighter. Owen more than leaned into her, burying his nose on her neck. She is comfort and safety all at once. She is home.

“Are you alright?” her tone still heightened, she rubbed her hands soothingly down his back.

“I’m fine now.” He gulped, his voice hoarse from relief.

“Look at me, please.”

Owen leaned back and pressed her forehead to hers, savoring the feel of her in his arms.
“Are you okay? What happened?”

His fingers found the small of her back, he sighed. “Where were you?”

“I went out to buy the guys some dinner. I walked to the restaurant. I left my car here. I saw sirens and ambulances on the way back.” she explained, still in the circle of his arms. She turned her head to where Lowery and the group were. “Is anyone hurt?”

Owen released her, but clasped her hand in his. Claire made no protest.

“Is everybody okay?” she vexed, squeezing his hand. He stared at her, her question hanging in the air between them.
“Owen, please answer me. Did everybody make it out okay? Artie? Mike and Adler? Joe?”

He swore he paled at the mention of the old man’s name. He hesitated before answering, her green eyes compelling him to. “They are at the back. Lowery said they're okay. I haven’t checked in on them yet.”

She nodded, a hand to her chest. “Thank God, thank God. I’ll go with you. Joe probably wants his dinner.

“Claire, Joe didn’t...”

"What?"
He swallowed the bile rising like acid in his throat. He felt numb. “He didn’t... He didn't make... it, Claire.”

“What?” Her face ashened, as she took a step back. “No, no, no. We were talking an hour ago. He was just messing with me... Lowery?”

Lowery cleared his throat, “I’m sorry, Claire.”

“Zara?”

Instead of answering her, Zara pulled her into a hug.
The heavy weight of his conscience fazing him as their tortured gazes connected.

How could he had let this happen?

Behind him, a male voice interrupted. “Sir Owen Grady?”

He turned to see Brennan, Walters and the woman cop. Kevlar vests strapped to their chests.

“Yes?” he greeted Brennan without his usual sneer.

“We’d like a few words with you? If that’s okay.”
Owen gave a quick glance back at Claire who was sitting and talking to Emma.

“Alright. But be quick about it. It’s been a very tiring day.”

“Of course.”

They walked a few distance away from the women, Lowery tailing behind him.

“Mr. Grady,” Walters started, “Where were you when it happened?”
"I was having dinner with my friends, just outside the city."

"Did you notice anything out of the ordinary this morning?"

He went over his mind for the last couple of hours. "No."

"We need to review the CCTV footage in your building, but we need your permission for that." Brennan disclosed to which he agreed. "The security room took minor hits, but we can check out the logs as soon as they cleared out the debris.

"We're gonna interview the employees that were here as well. Mr. Grady, we are linking this to the
death threats you received this week. We don't know who leaked it to the press. We are sorry. We already informed the mayor that this wasn't a terrorist attack. Once we get that out, the media's gonna leave you alone soon enough."

Owen nodded, “Whatever it is you needed. I suspended work. Could someone check of all the building?”

The woman police officer butted in, “Yes. Of course, Sir. We already arranged the team tomorrow. We’re gonna have the bomb squad on standby. It’ll take three to four days at most.

“Thank you.” He lauded, offering them a small smile. “Would that be all?”

“Yes. Of course.”
“Mr. Grady.” Walters shook his hand as well.

“Thanks for your service, Agent Walters.”

“You have my number, Mr. Grady. If anything comes up, call me.” Brennan grasped his hand in a vice-like grip that was almost respectful.

“Thanks, Brennan. I appreciate it.” For the first time, Owen meant it.

But before the officers dispersed into their other duties, the woman reached out a hand to him. “I’m so sorry for your loss, sir. I’m sure he was a great man. We will do anything we can, to help.”

“Thank you.”
Lowery watched them fly in different directions. Suddenly, he felt the drain of his energy. The long drive and adrenaline finally slowing him down. He's afraid that if he stopped moving, he will fall asleep.

“I still don’t trust that Walters guy.” Lowery mused from beside him.

He shrugged. “To be honest, I still don’t trust any of them.”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t blame you though.” Lowery said, looking pensive.

“What did they say?” Claire asked immediately when he was within reach. The sorrow that darkened her eyes a while ago had been replaced with outrage. “Did they know who did this?”
He didn't respond to her question, partly because he didn't know. “Zia?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask a favor? You too, Zara?”

"Of course."

“Can you go to Claire’s apartment tonight? Grab her some clothes? Meet us in my building in 20
“WAIT! WHAT?” Claire screeched beside him.


“WAI-Wai- wait! What’s happening?” Beside him Claire continued voicing out her objections. He ignored her.

“Great. Thank you. Zia can drop you off your place.”
“What are you talking about?” Claire argued, irked. “Don’t I have a say in this?”

“You do.” he quipped, completely worn out by the evening’s events. “Just not tonight.”

She scorned. “Why can’t I go with them myself?”

Owen narrowed his eyes and answered her with the same impatient tone. “You’re crazy if you think I am letting you out of my sight again.”

He shifted his eyes away from her, it was then he realized his affectionate words and actions. It was almost funny how their assistants were trying to act calm and resolute around them. Zara who was crying her eyes out a while ago was staring at them, mouth agape. Lowery appeared rattled but was quick to reestablish himself. But right now, he really couldn’t care less if they figured it out.
“I could pack my own stuff.” she said, stubborn as hell.

“Claire, I don’t want to argue tonight. Just... Come with me.” He pleaded, removing his jacket and draping it over her exposed shoulders. “I want you safe. Please, Claire.”

He saw the quick shift in her mood, her whole stance softening.

Now that the roles have been reversed, Owen realized that Claire was right in acting the way that she did with him. When he showed up -cocky and unannounced- in the island, she made no reservations in expressing how mad she was. Owen remembered how she practically dragged him out the car to the clinic. And he, being the child that he was, revelled on her concern. Now, he felt like a world-class idiot. A worried, world-class idiot.
She reached for her clutch and gave Zia a set of keys. Zia took it willingly, eyeing the two of them with concealed amusement.

“I have a spare laptop on my study desk. Could you also get that?” Claire requested.

“Of course.”

“Lowery, please make sure Emma goes home safe.” he said. "And can you ask the woman officer to go with them? To be safe."

“Sure thing.” Lowery assured. “You need anything else?”
“No, we’re good. Thank you, man. I’ll text you where we are.”

“Take care. Call us if you need anything.” Zara hugged him again.

The group said their goodbyes to each other. But before he and Claire drove off, they checked on Artie and the security guys. After making sure they’ll be taken care of and dropped off at their houses, he and Claire made their way to his car.

As they neared the barricade, the media came swooping in again. Owen wrapped a protective arm around her waist as police officers lined between them. Claire gave him a ‘thank you’ forearm squeeze, but didn't look at him. Two agents stayed with them until they reached his car. Owen went to the passenger side and opened the door for her, as a gesture of goodwill.

Before she entered, she turned to him, breaking the silence. “Where are we going?”
“You’ll see.”

She pursed her lips, “Why do I feel like, there’s still something you’re not telling me?”

“There’s not.” he replied, honest to every word. “Get in.”

Owen saw a flicker of emotion crossed her face. She raised a hand, her thumb caressing his stubble-less jaw. He shut his eyes for a moment and grasped her hand, leaning in more into her welcoming touch.

“You know, you can talk to me, right?” Her soft voice eliciting the first genuine smile on his face.
“I’m right here, okay?”

At the moment, he didn’t care if anybody saw them. Owen leaned down and kissed her lips. “I know. Get in the car.”

It was still dark outside; the sun was still hidden behind tumultuous clouds. The gusty wind carried the drizzle, making staccato noises against the tall window. It was as soothing as the sound and weight of her sleeping next to him.

He had been awake for quite a while now. Pessimistic thoughts occupied his brain until he’s wide awake, a victim of their torture. Instead of distracting himself with his calls and emails, he focused on her sweet, gentle breathing. His eyes studied the contour of her face, basking in her natural beauty. From the delicate arch of her eyebrows, to thick eyelashes. The shadows were fluttering over her cheeks. The diamond-shaped freckles under her eyes and dusting her translucent cheeks. They looked like constellations, effervescent and endearing. And they were squeezing his heart. Owen admired the rise and elegant lines of her nose, also speckled with golden spots. He finished his observation on her lips- carnation pink and rather inviting. As gentle as he could, he traced each divot with his thumb. His troubles melting away when she hummed and it parted at his touch.
That’s when he felt his control relinquish. Owen touched his lips on her plump ones for the gentlest kiss he had ever given.

“Hmm...” she hummed sleepily; her eyes still closed, her hand resting on the side of his face.

“Shush. Sleep, baby.”

“You... Sleep... Too.” she murmured before her breathing stabled again.

If anyone told him that Claire Dearing would be his entire world, he would have never believed them. But then again, thinking about the months of squabble and unrequited flirting, he'd always wondered.
Yes, he swore to be a bachelor for as long as he could help himself, but here he was—puny with even the slightest of glances. His heart wasn’t ready for the thrumming beat whenever she’s around, or when she's touching him. With Claire, his confidence was always rebutted, his control always countered. How could someone be everything he never thought he’d needed?

Owen pulled the quilt higher over them, the redolent of pine and vanilla. He gathered her in his arms, resting his body on the comfort of her embrace. His nose was taking in the scent of her hair, her skin, her clothes, her. Hard-wiring everything to memory. Claire purred, snuggling closer, her even breath warming his chest. He never knew it was possible to still crave closeness when she’s right here, squished in his arms.

“I love you.” he mouthed in a silent declaration, the words liberating him. He kissed her forehead before repeating it again, in the same hushed tone. “I love you, Claire.”

A violent noise trembled the room, jolting her awake. Claire rubbed her eyes as she adjusted to the light—or lack of—coming from the windows. Her hand absently sliding on the strange sheets, as she listened to the rain and thunder cracking the sky.
Despite her logy state, memories of last night came. Owen went to his place to pack some clothes and other essentials. Outside the hallway were Walters and two other agents. Their presence reminded her of the hostile situation they were in. It all felt surreal, like she was dreaming within a dream of a dream. She couldn’t even begin to fathom how scared she had been though it wasn’t for her.

The clock ticked to 5:58 am and as much as she was feeling lazy, Claire staggered out of bed. She walked towards the chair bearing a clean towel and her bag before going to the en-suite bathroom. As the hot water cascade down her body, her thoughts made the habit of reverting back to Owen.

She remembered how dreadfully quiet he had been all night. They drove through in silence even as they arrived at a townhouse near downtown. The silence bothered her, because if there’s one thing she knew about Owen, it was he never misses an opportunity to talk. But who was she kidding? Even she was still unnerved about it.

“Hey Joe, wait! I’m going out.” she shouted as soon as she saw him checking the lock
at the lobby entrance.

“Bout damn time!” he exasperated, turning his head up the ceiling. “You’re always going home so late, Miss Claire. It’s not healthy.”

Joe has always been quiet around her. So, Joe lecturing her was something that made her smile. “I’m gonna grab a quick dinner. Have you and the guys eaten yet?”

Joe pulled a half-eaten twinkie from one of his pockets, a grateful smile on his wrinkled face.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “That’s not dinner, Joe. Come on, tell me what you want.”

Joe appeared to be thinking about it before, “I saw this commercial about pasta in this
Garden restaurant…”

Claire felt the smile erupting from her lips. “Olive Garden?”

“Yes. That’s it!” Joe exclaimed, swinging the mop he picked from the floor.

She laughed at his innocence. “I’ll bring back your Olive Garden but don’t you dare lock me out!”

He rolled his eyes as he swept the spot she walked on. “You know what, maybe I will. That way you can go home.”

“Ha-ha!” she jeered, before adding, “Owen’s coming, but I’ll text him to use the basement entrance.”
Joe stopped and leaned his forearm on his mop, his eyes twinkling. He raised his hands in surrender. “Fine, fine. Are you sure you won’t bring your car?”

“It’s a quick walk.” she winked as she paused at the revolving doors.

“Okay, I’ll be waiting for you, Miss Claire. Walk safe.”

The trace of his friendly smile etched into her memory forever. She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned the shower knob off. She took a deep breath to recompose herself, centering on hazel green eyes, strong arms and a sweet smile.
Her body moved as if on auto-pilot. She dressed herself in jeans, ruffled blouse before examining herself in the mirror. She looked paler than usual. The freckles dotting her nose and cheeks appeared darker, like pepper on water. The red, thick strands of her hair, which she liked keeping on a neck-length, reached past her shoulders now. Claire rummaged her bag for a hair tie before putting it up in a messy ponytail.

_Breathe, Claire_, she reminded herself in the mirror. _Take it, easy._ and closed her eyes, perceiving the smell of the scented candles diffused about the room. After cleaning up, she headed out.

Claire didn’t have a chance to roam around last night. Nor was she confident enough to ask Owen. After he told her which room they were sleeping in, he kissed her good night and disappeared into the house. Despite the lack of light, she caught glimpses of French decor, and paintings.

The sky was still gloomy as she made her self-guided tour. Like the bedroom, the house was well lit and maintained. The dark floors had been swept, carpets rubbed clean, plants thriving and watered. But she could tell that no one’s inhabited it for a few months. She also noted the lack of his possessions in his room, unlike the one he was using at the farmhouse.

His room was on the top floor, right where it opened up into a conservatory stairwell. Canopies of trees and top levels of apartments were on display behind the glass.
Series of Renaissance paintings, old memorabilia, tokens and family pictures nailed the walls. Years worth of the Grady family history presented to her. She slid her hands down the iron wrought fence, perusing each picture with spright interest.

One photograph made her stop. It was a nursery picture of Owen, he looked, no older than six. His left front teeth missing, his chubby cheeks, pink and healthy. The same hazel green eyes held so much life and happiness. She felt herself smile and wondered, what was he like as a kid?

She went down the stairs to the second floor and found two more bedrooms, a living room, and the study. It was massive for a typical Californian townhouse.

“Oh-huh... Yeah... Yeah... No, I’ll email them later...” she heard him say from somewhere inside the house.
Claire followed his voice down the couple of stairs and in the foyer and found him in the dining hall and kitchen. And through the huge glass windows, she could make out an old greenhouse, a few feet away from where they were now.

Owen was sitting on the edge of the table, his back to her and arms folded.

“Did you call Joe’s wife?” His voice reverted in the empty home. Claire remained hidden as she spied on him. He was wearing a light denim jeans. The small shirt tightened around his back muscles. His hair tousled, and he smelled faintly of the shampoo she just used. Beside his laptop and coffee cup was an opened newspaper.

“No, tell her, I insist... When can I see her?... Okay... Okay... Thank you, Lowery. Call me, anytime... Bye.”
He hung up and expelled another deep breath.

“You have a beautiful home.”

Owen twisted his hip to face her, the lines on his face immediately cleared when he saw her.

“Hey.” he greeted with a smile that added a little color on his face. Still, it cued the butterflies in her stomach.

“Hi.” she said, mirroring his soft tone. She stood over the threshold, gazing at him. “I didn’t mean to snoop around.”

“It’s fine. You found anything interesting?”
“Yeah. You were a chubby kid.” she tried to joke and felt her heart leapt as Owen shortled and sat on the chair.

“I’m still cute, though.”

They considered each other for longer than a minute. He looked... tired, like he hadn’t slept at all.

“You sleep, good?” he asked.
Yes. Always. *When I’m with you.* Claire nodded her reply and tilted her head at him, leaning it on the slab of wall. His fingertips following the rim of his cup.

“Everything okay?” *Stupid question, Claire.*

He smirked, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yeah. Everything’s great.”

“I don’t believe you.”

The heartfelt laugh that came off his lips was honey to her ears. Despite the dark circles under his eyes, his face brightened. Claire ambled towards him, as if pulled by an invisible rope. Owen shifted his chair so he's angled towards her, waiting. Their eyes never leaving each other.
She stood over him, his tortured eyes softening under her scrutiny. It was almost too much to bear. Claire felt her chest constrict, praying that she could take away all his troubles. She leaned her knee on the space between his legs and grasped his face with both hands.

*Let me take it all away,* she tried telling through her eyes. But the longer she gazed at him, the more she's having trouble thinking what she wanted to say. And when the words became unreachable—as always was the case with Owen—Claire bent down to kiss him.

She felt rather than hear his groan of appreciation. His throat rumbled beneath her fingertips. Her palms enjoying the light scruff that grew overnight. Owen’s hands skidded up her knees, to her thighs and waist. He roughly pulled her down so she was sitting sideways on his lap. She dug her fingers in his hair, loving another grumble from his chest. Owen held the back of her head as he angled deeper into her mouth. Each brush, each suck and flick of her tongue—she hoped—was easing his apprehensiveness. He tugged on her lip as she pulled away.

“What can I do to make you feel better?” she whispered, licking sweet remnants of his lips.

“You’re already doing it.”

And clashed their lips again. This time, at his own pace.

Owen opened her mouth with incessant determination. It made her moan and arch her back, the warm sensation tightening in her core. He ravaged her lips, as she did his. Their tongues entwined in a fervor display of dominance. She held him in her mouth, consuming, swallowing everything he was giving. He tasted like coffee, and heaven and Owen.

“I am all yours.”
He admitted to her a few days ago. And Claire remembered the wonderful feeling that came after he said it. Like a flower bloomed in her chest, bursting with light and everything good in the world. Its intrepid vines were wrapping around her, tangling herself to him.

Her hands snuck inside the collar of his shirt, clawing on the sinew shapes of his back. He whimpered and granted her closer to him. Owen changed her position so that she was straddling his lap. She moaned as his hand snuck inside her blouse. His warm, rough fingers tracing the dip on her spine, until it lingered beneath the lock of her bra. His intentions, known. Claire kissed him harder, her tongue outlining the edges of his teeth. She could feel him. The effect he was having on her was the same for him. She groaned and started bunching his shirt off his back.

She wanted...

She wanted him.

Right now.
On this table...

Like she had never wanted anything before.

Then,

A vibration of his phone rung through the hall, breaking them apart.

“I have to get that.” he murmured against her mouth, breathless, gasping.
“I hate your phone.” She cursed, making him laugh again. The irony, not lost on her.

Owen didn’t push her away even as he reached for it. His hand rested on her spine, feathering smooth circles underneath her shirt.

“Talk to me... Yes, this is he...”

Claire couldn’t hear past the persistent rain outside. She moved but Owen held her right where she was. She stilled, enjoying the rise and fall of his body against hers. Claire arranged herself on his lap so she wasn’t goading him. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, her senses giddy and filled with everything of him. Owen held a hand on her thigh, securing her to him.

When did it come to this? She asked herself, intrigued.
Claire couldn’t remember the last time she felt like this. Everything was bursting with life, the songs were sweeter, the days brighter. She felt alive and at the same time vulnerable.

As far as everything goes, she was content with her career. Claire was fine being alone, she couldn’t emphasize that enough. But there’s always this constant feeling of longing in the deepest, inwards parts of her mind. A longing for something she didn’t know yet. Everything had been working perfectly until he barged into her life.

Owen Grady was a stranger. A man she only knew from adoring stories and pictures. Then he became the boss. Then, he was a rival, an arch enemy. Someone who always knew exactly which buttons to push to make her go nuts. He became someone who kept bothering her more than she cared to admit. Whether he was a good or bad distraction, she couldn’t remember now. It was sort of, almost magical how he turned from being a nuisance to the one person she couldn’t not think about. Claire found herself sneaking glances at him, trying to catch that playful glint in his eyes. Claire never knew it was possible to still want and like a person even when that person’s being an all-around ass hat.

Owen has made her aware of how empty and miserable she had been. He made her aware of the life of discontentment she was settling with. The silly smirk and expressive eyes she couldn’t help but look forward to now. And it felt like everything finally came to light. Like she was waking up from a long, deep sleep. The large, obscured question mark in her life was finally being answered. He incited and unlocked part of her. The keys lost forever. There was no going back to that
emptiness now.

“Okay... No, no... No one comes in... Tell Tom to take care of the press. I can’t handle them... Yes...”

Claire nuzzled his neck, suspiring his manly scent. She felt him kiss the side of her head. She reciprocated by pressing another one on his neck, right by the pulse. She has never good with flourishing words and compliments... And intimacy. But she hoped Owen knew how much he’s starting to mean to her.

“Yes... Alright... Have them send it to my email... Okay... Bye.”

She leaned her forehead against his cheek, inhaling him. I could get used to this.

Owen threw his phone on the nearby chair, making her look and sit up. “Now, where were we,
Miss Dearing?"

She giggled, resting her arms on his shoulder, her hands dangling behind the chair.

“Breakfast.”

She saw the evil hint in his smirk. So she added, "Real food. Do you have groceries here?"

“Yeah. The door beside the dishwasher.”

She stood- much to his disapproval- and trod towards the pantry door. “Who’s staying here?”
He heard Owen followed her, bringing his empty cup. “No one. But, Jasper Kennedy, my pilot, and his wife take care of this place for me.”

“I see.” she reached up, picking up the bottle of cooking oil, the salt and pepper from the shelf. "I'm cooking."

“What! No!” he shouted, appalled. "My house, my-"

She cut off, "What is it with you and not letting people cook for you?"
"First of, I allow people to cook for me. I don't want you cooking for me."

Over her shoulders, she raised her eyebrows in a question.

“No. Not that there's something wrong with your cooking. It’s just, I like... doing things for you."

She grinned at him. "Well, we have a problem Mr. Grady because, I like doing things myself... Do you have eggs?"

"That you are… Yeah, egg trays." Owen sidestepped and pointed to the fridge. " 
"Why is it that men don't like independent women?" she asked as she fetch four eggs from the tray, her words, teasing.

"For the record, I love that you’re independent. It's one of the greatest things about you. I like the fact that you don't need anyone. I like that you're so effortlessly bossy. And since I'm being extra honest here, your independent-ness never fails to be a fucking turn on-“

She laughed, laying the ingredients on the white counter.

"And as much as I like you being with me, I do not want to change you or own you, Claire."

Her lips curled and she stood on her tiptoes, instigating a kiss- an action he looked more than happy to oblige. "Since you asked so sweetly and nicely …"
As they moved around the kitchen, she noticed their synchronized movements. They moved like two people who knew each other well. She cut the vegetables as Owen heat up the pan, instructions thrown over. A few occasional hip bumps and sly grazes occurred, even though the kitchen was spacious.

Yet, she could feel their avoidance of the topic they should discuss. Some ways, she was grateful they hadn’t because she knew bringing it up will sour their good morning.

As they placed the plates back in the cabinet, Owen voiced, “I uh... I have to go somewhere. I can’t leave you here alone. Will you go with me?”

There was a certain innocent helplessness to his question. She straightened up from placing the spoon in the drawer.
“I’m surprised you have to ask.” she nodded, even though she had no idea where they were going. She was getting used to all this wild spontaneity.

“Thank you. Do you have a coat?”

“Um...” her mind made a quick inventory of the contents of her bag. “I don’t think so.”

“It’s fine. I can find you something. You won’t mind the old, cabinet smell. Would you?” The shy smile that reflected in his eyes somehow appeased her.

“No. Go for it, Grady.” and she couldn’t help but give him another kiss.

It was still raining. The wind, still howling sending strays of leaves everywhere.
She removed the leaves that fell on the bouquet of flowers she purchased. Owen looked behind his back and offered her a bittersweet smile, but then he frowned.

“Hey, keep it on! You might get a cold.” he scolded, reaching behind her head and throwing the hood over her head.

Claire patted her fringe and adjusted the trench coat he lend her. “Is it okay for me to wear this? I’m not…” overstepping or anything?

“Yeah.” He shook his head in disapproval as they trudged on the wet cobblestones. “Besides, looks good on you.”

When he said that Claire could borrow a coat for the rain, she was thinking of his old hoodie. Not his mother’s old trench coat which was, odd to fathom, a perfect fit.

The raining subsided into a sprinkle but Owen still insisted she cover up and bring his umbrella.
Claire had a certain knowledge of Grady properties. She never visited any, but from the army of cleaners she hired for her Alan, she knew they were large properties. As a wealthy and distinguished family, the Gradys ought to have the best. She expected nonetheless. But Claire had never been so grateful to see a Grady family property the size of a small greenhouse.

The Grady Mausoleum was simple yet still had the signature Grady flair. It was well thought of. From the classic Doric columns and the double arched windows. It almost didn't resemble the identical mausoleums surrounding it.

Without warning, an old memory came back.

*She knocked first before peeping her head inside.*

“Hey! You asked for me?”
Alan Grady was sitting on his chair. He raised his head from his laptop. His eyeglasses hung low on his nose.

“Hey, kiddo.” he beamed with his usual cheeriness. “Do you know any good architects?”

She entered his office, quite surprised by his question. “Um. I could call Daniel Cross for you.”

“No, no.” he dismissed, gesturing his hand. “I want someone who’s an expert in Roman architecture and, you know...”
She smiled. “Not after your money?”

He clapped his hand. “You know me so well.”

“I’ll call an old friend.” she assured him, writing down her note. “Can I ask what is for?”

“Over my dead body, kiddo.” Alan quipped, winking at her.

It was exactly a year and a half before Alan told her. She remembered that she was in her hotel room. Claire called him via Skype to inform him that the French took the deal and they're ready to sign with GC.
Owen unlocked the gates and they entered. The interior was reeking of scented oils and candles. It was all polished marble, from the walls and floor.

At the center of the room was a round skylight. The gloomy sunrays enhancing the light in the space. A circular wooden table stood there. On it was a large pottery vase, the flowers were starting to wilt. The plaques were on the opposite side of the door, straight across. The black marble that held scribbling of four names were imperial and magnificent.

How can something be so beautiful and yet so lonely?

Owen shook the droplets off his own coat before removing the dry flowers. Claire placed the white bouquet and collected the fallen petals littering the table. Owen went outside to throw them away.
Claire stood at the end of the room, reading the epitaphs. She produced a napkin from her coat and wiped the little cobwebs on them.

At the corner of her eyes, through the window, she saw an elderly woman approaching Owen. She pointed to a large chunk of tree that fell on one of the tombs on the grass. Owen gave her his umbrella and walked to where she’s pointing.

Claire smiled to herself. The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

"You raised a good man there, boss.” She whispered as she stood over Alan Grady's plaque.

“I’m sorry it took me a while to come here. So... I met your son. He’s, uh...” she chuckled. “He’s everything you mentioned. Everything’s good. He’s doing so well with taking care of your
company. He’s a pain in the ass, but he picks up so quick. I must say, I am impressed…I’m keeping him on track, Sir. Don’t worry.”

A harsh glint on her left caught her eye and she moved to the adjacent plaque. Claire found herself cleaning the name of Lt. Elizabeth Sattler Grady.

She looked at the door for Owen and waited for two minutes for him to come inside. When he didn’t, Claire continued the monologue. “Hey Mrs. G. I mean, Miss Ellie. Lieutenant. I mean Mrs. Grady…”

“I, uh borrowed your coat. I hope you don’t mind. Your son... He could be a little persuasive… Alan worried that Owen wasn’t what you hope him to be. But I could assure you that everyone could agree with me that he is a great man... I’ll keep him out of trouble, I promise.”

She wiped the plaques of Owen's grandparents before lighting the candles.
“Hey!” Owen’s voice echoed in the marbled hall. “You don’t have to do that.” He strode towards her, debris and twigs on his wet coat.

He scoffed before standing next to her. They fell into a self-conscious silence before Owen spoke, “Thank you for coming with me, Claire.”

“I told you, I want to.”

"Thank you." he said, grabbing her hand.
She chuckled as another memory played in her head.

“What?”

“I remember when I was still an intern in the company. There were only 5 of us who qualified for the last interview. And these four men knew each other so they made fun of me. They're spoiled little assholes who had connections with some of the board members. And your dad, he walked into the HR room. You remember his big, brooding voice, right?”

Owen smiled with her, all white teeth and dimples. “Yes.”

“He called out their names, and asked them to stand up. I thought I was the only who wasn’t hired. I was about to cry. Until your dad asked them to leave. Turns out, he heard what they said about me. And I got the job.” she laughed as she ended her recollection.
“I’m glad you did...” he beamed at her, “But where are they now?”

“Who knows? Why?”

“So, I can wring their necks.”

There must be certain rules not to laugh at a cemetery, but she still did because, for a moment, Owen was back to his old self.

“You ready to go, Miss Dearing?” Owen climbed his hand down her arm until he could intertwine their fingers together.
“Are you? We can stay for a bit longer, if you want.”

“No, I’m good. Thank you. Let’s go.”

Owen Grady could be so easy to deal with sometimes.

Her fist was stinging but she fought the urge to check the scab as she bellowed, “Where is he?!”

Mad was an understatement.
She’s surprised she hadn’t caught fire yet. Her heels were making furious stomps against the floor. Her nails were biting the insides of her twitching palm. Her composed and sense of professionalism, gone, as she searched the floor for his brunet hair.

“Where is he?!”

The employees gaped at her. Their morning greeting, stuck in their throats. Nobody answered her, but someone pointed to his office.

As if she had a disease, the employees parted on either side of her,

She threw the door open, not hiding her anger.
“Ah, Miss Dearing.” Owen sneered as he saw her. She scowled.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Grady?”

“Um.. Good morning? Claire?” Lowery greeted, sounding reluctant in his address. He was sitting in his chair, while Owen was standing by the window.

“Lowery,” she started in her most controlled voice. "Would you give us a minute?"

“We’re not finished here.” Owen reprimanded, frowning.
“Oh, we are buddy.” Lowery stood up. “I’ll leave you two alone. I’ll be outside.” he left and closed the door.

“What can I do for you, Miss Dearing?” he placated with gritted teeth.

“Cut the crap.”

He sat on his chair, unconcerned by her anger, which annoyed her even more. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She scoffed crossing her arms, “You don’t know? Care to explain why are there three agents following me?”
“It’s their job.” he answered simply.

“Well, I could grab my mail without them breathing down my neck.”

Owen frowned, his brows knitting together. He and Lowery were studying damage reports when he received a text from Zia. Claire found out about the security he assigned for her... And that she wasn’t too happy with it.

Work resumed three days after. After a thorough search for other explosives, the authorities gave them a go-signal to go back. But they weren’t allowed in the basement parking since investigations were still ongoing.
He also received Joe’s autopsy reports before he went home last night. It showed that he died of skull fracture and traumatic injury in his spine. He and Claire also met with Joe’s widow yesterday to personally offer their condolences. Before Mrs. Carter could protest, he shouldered every expense for the funeral.

Claire had been staying with him, and he couldn’t be even more grateful. But he wasn't going to take anymore risks. After a thorough check, he hired two former colleagues to keep an eye on her. With the advice to be as discreet as they possibly could. Owen was sure she would be against it. He had never wanted to be wrong his entire life.

“I don’t need protection.” she spat as she stood over his desk, fuming at him.

“Don't fight with me on this, Claire.” It came out sharper than what he intended.

“If there’s anyone who needs protection, it’s you, Owen.”
“I can protect myself just fine.” he convinced her, complacent.

Claire followed him as he retrieved a binder from the shelf. He had been looking for the variance report all morning.

“As do I! I don’t want them following me around. It’s a total violation of my privacy!”

“It’s not a total violation of your privacy.” He argued back, “They’re only looking out for you. I’m only looking out for you.”
He went back to his desk, Claire still on him. He was lucky that he had an excuse not to look at her. He's exhausted, he just wanted everything to be over with. The last couple of days was swallowing him in the worst possible ways. To top it all off, Claire wasn't going easy on him.

“Oh yeah? Does thier job include following me to the bathroom?”

He jabbed her with the same mockery. “Well, yeah.”

“This is insane-”

He shrugged before opening his drawers on the other side his desk. “You could say that.” He pulled a stack of papers and found the figures he’s been looking. Claire was huffing in front of him.
“-And you’re overreacting.”

May be he was overreacting. But his pride wasn’t going to admit that. He cocked his eyebrows at her in disbelief and reminded her, “I’m overreacting? You punched a guy, Claire.”

She pinched her lips and didn’t say anything. He took that time to say his reason.

“Claire, I’m not taking anymore chances. Especially with you. I want you safe. The security stays. So let’s drop it, okay?

Everything was hitting all over again. The guilt turned his guts into ice, haunting him, sucking him into a dark abyss. He fell down his chair and rubbed a hand on his face. He wanted to be out of here. With her. Somewhere far away.
“Owen-“ there was a warning in her tone.

A knock came from the door, deferring the tension between them. Lowery’s head popped in, his eyes wary. “Hi. I’m sorry again, guys. But Owen, the detectives are here.”

Owen placed his fingers on his temple, massaging the overnight lines that formed. He nodded at Lowery. “Give me 5 minutes. Tell them to wait for me in the boardroom.”

“Copy.” And he’s gone as quick as he came in.
Owen hated the ugly feeling settling in his stomach. As much as he loved arguing with her, he hated leaving their argument unresolved.

“Let’s talk about this, later, okay?” He tried in a softer tone.

“I’m going to my place, tonight.”

His stomach dropped. “Claire, no.”

“I sort of hope you told me about it first. Then I wouldn’t be all paranoid.”
She wasn’t looking at him. Fuck.

“Claire-“

“It’s fine. I have work to do. You have work to do, I’ll see you later.”

And she left, without stopping or looking back, leaving him as hopeless as before.
The brief took most of his afternoon.

Twilight was fast approaching when they’ve finished. The floor was vacant as he and Lowery made their way to the elevator. Lowery swiped his access card on the screen and down they went. The migraine pounding in his head worsening by the hour.

As soon as they reached the lobby, Owen dialled her number again. And for the hundredth time, it went to voicemail.

He sent another text to Zia who assured him that Claire hadn't left her building since she left an hour ago.

“Damn it.” He muttered under his breath.
Though it was quieter the past few days, the ground was still covered by the press and police. He and Lowery went out the east entrance and into the parking lot to avoid the crowd.

“So…” Lowery drawled as they walked into the silent night. “You and Claire huh?”

“Huh?” His head whipped around to face his friend, acting surprised.

“Well, I know, this is not the best time, but uh…” Owen saw the smile threatening to break his face. “You two? You’re together? Like, finally?”

He diverted his attention on the lamp post ahead. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”
“Oh, come on, Grady! We’ve been friends for a very long time.”

Owen answered a half relieved sigh as Lowery's smile broke.

“I’ll take that as a yes. You son of a bitch!”

He groaned, “If you tell anybody about this Lowery, I'm gonna kill you.”

Lowery feigned hurt. “Hey! Why does everybody think I’m such a tattle tale?”
“Uh… Because you are?”

Lowery seemed like he was thinking about it, before he shrugged in agreement. "I guess, you’re right. But it’s not like everybody didn’t know from the start.”

He asked, his eyes narrowing at his friend. “What do you mean “from the start”?"

Lowery made a "tsk" sound, pushing his glasses up his nose. “My friend, for someone as successful and intelligent as you, you could be pretty dumb.”

A sarcastic laugh resounded from his chest.
"We never thought we'd find out this way. This is wrong timing. Definitely a wrong timing. But, man! I was so looking forward in winning that bet with Zara."

"Fuck you, Cruthers." he smiled with a dismissive shake of his head.

Lowery’s cackles resonated on the empty lot. They went their separate ways to their cars, Lowery’s Ford parked across him.

“You wanna know my opinion, though?” His friend shouted over his car door.

“I have a feeling that if I say no, you’re still gonna say it. So, humor me, Lowery.”
Lowery stood over the step of his truck, his arms resting on the door. “It’s about damn time, Grady. You look fucking good together.”

It didn’t 20 minutes for him to get to her place.

The overnight bag he always kept in his car felt heavy in his hand. Owen let it touch the floor as he pressed the doorbell for her unit. He shifted from foot to foot, his frazzled brain attempting to form the words he wanted to say. He heard movement from behind the door before the locks turned.

“Hey.” He greeted, as soon as the door opened to her, his tone soft,
“Hey.” She copied, her gaze falling on the bag he picked from the floor.

For but a moment they lingered in the doorway, neither wanting to break eye contact. His words choking him, nevertheless, he found them.

“Can I come in?”

Claire sighed, moved inside, leaving the door open. He followed her and brushed a hand on his neck. No sooner as he entered, he felt the hot blow of wind on his neck. Good thing, he left his jacket in the car.

“AC’s down. On-going maintenance.” she answered his silent question.
He withheld a sassy remark.

“Why do you have your bag?”

“I figured since you’re here…” he imposed carefully, as though he’s walking on eggshells. He didn’t finish his sentence, but Claire gave him curt nod.

Seeing that as a form of permission, Owen placed his bag on her dining chair before following her to the bedroom. He stood in the doorway, and loosened his tie as Claire moved about the room.

She was wearing her work clothes but without the blazer. Her cut arms visible in her tank top. The black heels which he was sure she wanted to hurl at him earlier by the side table.
“Have you eaten yet?” She asked, as she walked to her closet.

“Yes.”

"Hm."

Owen leaned on the doorway watching her fold her clothes, not looking at him. Her shoulders were stiff, her face expressionless. Owen was itching to touch her.
“So…” he began, “Uh… how was… your day?” The last part an octave higher than his normal.

“Crammed.” Claire retorted as she folded a pair of pants, not looking at him. “You?”

“Pretty shitty too. ”

She shrugged, still frigid in her actions. But Owen sensed the change in her tone. “At least you weren't almost charged with assault.”

"Yeah. Bobby said great punch, by the way." A smirk found his way to his mouth. His ex colleague's busted lip and swollen cheek flashing in his mind.
She met his eyes, finally. Her beautiful face lacking the tension they had earlier. Her red lips twitched and Owen cracked.

"Remind me not to walk behind you again."

A long groan passed from her lips before she covered her face with her hands. "Oh God. Was he okay?"

"He'll live. Good to know you can throw a punch, Miss Dearing."

Claire chuckled and it felt like a weight lifted off his chest. She threw the coat hanger on the bed, and hung her head to the side. Claire gave him a heartfelt and come-here smile.
Owen pushed himself from the doorway and bellied up to her, smiling like a fool. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Owen tuck a fallen strand behind her ear, his fingers lingering on her skin. “Are you still mad at me?”

“I’m always mad at you.”

He laughed and enveloped her in an affectionate hug, his arms crossed over her waist. “I’m sorry for not telling you.”

“I’m sorry, too.”
Her vivid sea green eyes, compelling him to fall for her harder than he already was. Owen traced his nose along the line of hers, her eyes closing at the contact. “Can I kiss you now?”

His lips trailed south, nearer and nearer to the red lips that. But Claire held his chin as soon as he puckered his lips. “Dinner first.”

He groaned as Claire walked away from him. “I’m not hungry.”

“Owen, I haven’t seen you eat all day.”

“That’s not true.” He defended. He had coffee this morning.
She raised her eyebrows in disapproval. “Coffee is not a meal, Grady. Sit down.”

He followed suit and sat on the counter.

“I only have…” she trailed off as she inspect the cupboards. “Pesto and pasta.”

He smiled at her thoughtfulness. “It’ll do. Thank you.”

Claire prepared the ingredients on the counter, her concentration keen and steady. She heated the
oven for the garlic bread and opened a sealed box of pasta.

“What happened with the meeting?”

He shrugged as he picked two glasses from the cupboard. “Nothing of importance.”

“You can’t keep avoiding it, you know.” She said as she mince the garlic.

He sighed, his headache coming on again. The pain felt like someone was squeezing his eyes out of his head.
She paused and stood at the center of the kitchen. Her persistent gaze on him. “When I told you that you can talk to me, I wasn’t kidding, Owen.”

“I know.” He conceded and told her about the meeting.

Brennan and Walters arrived with Ken Wheatly, Chief of San Francisco Police and two forensic officers.

The bomb residues they found were high-grade remote control bomb. They found one of them by the entrance to the basement and the other, by the south column, near the valet reception. Owen was thankful that his dad hired the best structural engineers in the world or the building would’ve toppled off. Although they’ve interviewed the nearby establishment and witnesses, the testimonies were inadequate.
On the bright side of things, they made progress with the dead driver by the cliff. They found the identification of the driver.

“His name was Mickey Kavesh, 24 years old, from Santa Maria. Got sent into probation for beating his ex girlfriend and selling drugs.”

“Where are we on that?” He sat upright as Walter slid the folder to him.

“Before the accident, he had only $84 in his account. Three days after, he’s richer by $100,000. We acquired CCTV footages of everywhere he’s been for the past two months before the accident.”
“We found traces of the illegal transfer.” Brennan added.

He flipped through the pages. Kavesh’s mugshot wasn’t something he wanted to linger on.

“Who’s the Provisioner?”

Brennan cleared his throat, “It was from an account of a dead guy who owned a manufacturing company in the 90s. They closed down in ’03.”

Owen closed the bound report and felt a headache coming again. “Why can’t we find sufficient evidence from all this? “ He gestured to the clutter on the desk, sarcasm dripping in his voice. “Am I missing something here, gentlemen?”
“I apprehended Mills, I found two guys stealing from my company. My VP and I got into a car accident. I went into a coma and my building almost got blown up.” He emphasized, his eyes travelling on their blank faces. “What does that tell you gentlemen?”

The group was silent.

Owen ran his hand down his face again in dismay. “Any update on Mills?”

The people in the room shared looks.
He frowned. “What is it?”

“The jury grant him bail, Sir.” Wheatly revealed, his hawk-like features looking remorseful.

“What!?” He fumed, clenching his fists. “Why wasn’t I told?”

“We received the memo this morning.”

When he finished, Claire was silent. Best of all, she was calm as the sea. But he had a hunch she was doing that for his sake.
“—That fucker Mills will go to jail. I’m not gonna rest until he is.” He snarled, pushing the empty plate away from him.

“I don’t understand something.”

“What?”

“I mean. Isn’t it obvious? Somebody’s covering for somebody.” She stated, deep in thought.
“Exactly. All this is making my head spin.”

Owen was aware of the silence that befell them. He pressed the glass in his right eye, the cold soothing the throbbing pain.

“You okay?”

He opened one eye and said with a clenched jaw. “Yeah.”

“Let me see.” Claire dropped the towel she was using to dry her hand and grabbed hold of his hand and the glass. She stood on her tiptoes, leaned over the counter and kissed his closed eye. “Better?”
The affectionate gesture emitting a sly grin from him.

“Loads.” He flirted back.

“Can I ask a favour?”

“Okay.”

“I’m not comfortable with “bodyguards”. She admitted with a hard inflection.
“Claire, it’s for your own good. Whoever’s after me is after you too. We have to be careful. You have to be careful. “ He added, his voice firmer and commanding.

“But-“

“Please, Claire. Don’t fight me on this. Your safety is the only thing keeping me sane, right now.”

She blinked at him and drew a deep breath. That’s when he knew he won the argument.

“Okay, well… I guess, can you can leave me Zia? It would make me comfortable in this situation. I don’t like strangers following me.”
Owen thought about it for a minute, but he approved. “Okay.”

Claire’s features brightened, like a kid who was given a candy. “Okay!”

It was infectious. “Okay.”

“Thank you.”

He suppressed a laugh. God, he’s so whipped.
“I still think we still have to stay in the townhouse.” He looked around her pristine, clean apartment. “It’s safer there. They hadn’t done a full sweep here yet. And your AC isn’t working.”

“I came here to get some clothes. I was coming back to the office.” Claire stood up and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Wait, you were?” He gawped.

“Yes. You’re not the only one worried here, you know.”

Owen rose from his seat and stood in front her. He tilted her chin up at him, his thumb rubbing the skin below her lip.
“I’m so sorry. I’m so caught up with everything that I forgot-“

“You don’t have to apologise, Owen.” Claire squared his gaze, knocking all the breath left in his body. But not as much as her next words.

She continued in that sincere but wobbly, gentle voice that was making his head spin- this time, in a good way.

“I’m scared that you’re gonna do something stupid and end up getting hurt. I have never…” Claire seemed to gather her words.

“I have never wanted to put myself in someone else’s power before… I’ve never been good with hearts and flowers. I needed to be alone because I’m more comfortable that way. Alone is what protects me. It served me well all these years…”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her.
“-But, here I am, with you. And I’m still trying my best to fend off my usual prejudice because, for as long as I can remember, I want this.”

The weight of her stare (and words) was impaling him in the best ways possible.

“You want this too, right? I’m not hallucinating everything you’ve said or anything?”

After everything that’s happened, after everything he’d said, she was still questioning his motives? Did she really think he wasn’t invested in this?
He could hear the heartbeat in his ears, her confession enlivening him. The three words, he’s been holding back for what seemed like forever, was burning at the tip of his tongue.

Instead of answering, he craned his neck down her height and pressed his aching lips to hers.

Then the world melted around them. She was unmanning him with every sigh. Her hand alighted down his week stubble, the feel of them was driving him out of his mind.

Her breathless sigh thrummed in her throat, her lips grew more urgent. Owen pulled her closer, his arm on the low of her back. Their tongues, in a fierce, passionate battle -tasting, claiming. Owen grasped her hips and hoisted her up the counter. Then they were height to height, lip to lip. Claire coiled her calf around his thighs as she pressed herself closer. His fingers went to the end of her skirt and underneath. Her black thigh-highs turning him on even more. Claire bit his lip as he grazed his palms closer to her heat before bring them out again.

“Still think you’re hallucinating, Dearing?” He whispered against her lips when they pulled apart for air.
Claire laughed, her hands on his nape. “Always.”

He was readying his lips for another mind blowing kiss when his phone rang in his pocket.

He groaned and leaned his head on her chest, her hands massaging his scalp as she laughed.

“Answer it.” She ordered between her giggles.
“Ugh!” He pulled away, but stayed where he was. Claire’s legs resting on either side of him. “We’ll continue this later.” Owen laid a hand on her knee as he answered the phone.

It was Zia.

Owen, where are you?” She sounded edgy and rushed, as if she was running.

“I’m with Claire.”

“At her place?”
“Yes.”

“Bobby and I are coming to get you. You have your gun?”

“Yes.” He backed away from the counter and in two shakes, he picked up his bag. He could feel Claire eyeing him with great concern. “What’s going on, Zia?”

He took the mouthpiece away for a second. “Claire, grab your bag.”

“What? Why?”
“We found an abandoned vehicle parked on Memphis Street. A block from there. We went to check it out. The owner of the diner thought it was a drunk man sleeping in the vehicle. But a few kids started noticing a foul smell coming from it-”

“Fuck.”

Clare got back from the bedroom, her bag in her hand, her face, pallid. She put on her a pair of slippers and was grabbing for the keys.

“Looks like poison, but he didn’t die in the car. I’m sure of that. The guy had no identification, no license. Nothing. We called Brennan. They’re there now. As they were checking the car for prints, they found something.”

“What?” He stood by the door, his other hand getting his gun from the bag.
“A whole dossier about of you and…” she trailed off, unfinished.

Owen braced himself for the real blow. “And?”

“And Claire.”

Joe’s funeral was a large gathering.
Their colleagues filled the space in the chapel and afterwards, Mrs. Carter’s cottage in the city. It was a beautiful ceremony, everything accounted for with the best service possible. Owen spared no effort.

They arrived together and Claire was by his side for most of the day. She wasn't oblivious to the curious glances towards them. And frankly enough, it wasn’t bothering her.

After they rushed out of her apartment yesterday, he’s been restless. Zara and the guy she punched met them at the lobby. They followed them until they were safe at the townhouse. Owen never cared to explain anything about it. He hadn’t eaten all day. He hadn’t spoke more than ten sentences. It was scaring her to death.

Many times through the service, she offered gentle squeezes on his arm. Claire's rewarded with a small smile. They paid their respects to Michelle Carter before they left. And when they arrived at his townhouse, he gave her a quick kiss before retreating to his study.
Claire sat by the window in his bedroom, watching the quiet street down below. The silence was disarming. The feeling of helplessness seeping deep into her bones. It was the first time she found her solace unbearable.

Her phone was vibrating once again. She didn’t need to see that it was another message from Karen. For the past few days, her phone’s been blowing up from missed calls from her family. She hadn’t returned any of them yet cause she was certain that they’re gonna ask about her and what happened. And she wasn’t sure yet how to answer that. Owen had been secretive with her and it felt unfair that she was pouring her heart while he succumbed to silence. It reminded her of her own reticence, when she would rather bottle up her feelings than talk about them.

"Oh, fuck this!" She cursed, standing up. Claire stomped her way down the stairs to where he said he was.

"Owen!" She howled, opening the door. "Owen."
hands pinched like a temple under his chin. Owen looked up at the sound of her voice... And she felt her world fell apart.

His beautiful hazel green eyes were red-rimmed. The dark circles under them prominent in the low light. His handsome features burdened and gloomy. He perked up when he saw her, "Hey, what's wrong?"

She decided that her frustration and anxiety weren't a good combination. "What the hell are you doing?!"

He stammered, visibly confused. "Um..."

"You're not sleeping, you're not eating and now, you're not talking?! What the hell, Grady!"
"I'm just..." he deflated, his eyes low.

"You're just what?!!"

"I'm..." he exhaled and settled in his seat. "I don't wanna fight, Claire."

"Well, what do you wanna do?"

He didn't answer her.
"Tell me, cause I will honestly lose my mind." She modulated her voice until it’s nothing but a whisper.

Claire marched to him until she was within his space. The right side of her hip touching the desk. He’s still wearing the clothes he wore to the funeral. But the sleeves were folded and his jacket was nowhere to be seen.

“Owen, talk to me.” Her voice shook, even though she’s trying to keep it steady.

He expelled a long, deep sigh. “If I’d taken those threats seriously, like you asked me to… Joe wouldn’t.”
“This isn’t your fault, Owen.” She interrupted before he could finish the thought.

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s not, Owen. How could you think that?”

“What if it is?”

“No. Don’t do this to yourself. The world is full of bad people, you of all people must know that. And we are never, ever responsible for any of their actions. This is not your fault. It never is and it never will be.”
“Yesterday…” she saw and heard the guilt oppressing him for the past couple of days. “Fuck… if anything happened to you, I would never forgive myself.”

“Tell me.”

“They saw one of the guys that left a note in my car back at the Den. He’s dead. And they found pictures of me, of us in his car. Files about you and me…” he took a moment. “He had a rape drug, ropes and gag... He had a card to your floor. He was gonna kidnap you, Claire.”

She covered her mouth with both hands as the horrified gasp came out.

“And I kept dreaming about these scenarios. What if you were still there when… What if I didn’t go after you? What if they took you and it's all my fault.” The vulnerability manifested on his tone and face.
She was speechless.

"I'm supposed to know what to do. I trained for this. I'm used to this. The war, the uncertainty that I'm gonna live the next day, I yearned for it, Claire. But now, I don’t…” he paused.

Claire reached out and raked her hands through his hair and down his haunted face. She wondered if it was possible for her to carry his burden herself. It pained her to see him this way.

“‘It’s alright, Owen. I'm okay.’

He leaned into her, rolling his chair to close the remaining distance. He hugged her waist, his
mouth pressed against her stomach. Claire bent her neck and kissed the top of his head. “It’s okay.” She said, soft-spoken, hugging him back.

“I’ve never been this coward to fight…” His hot breath tickled her stomach. “I’m scared, Claire. Fuck, I’m so scared because now, I have you.”

And at that moment of weakness and honesty, something shattered inside her. The final walls that was holding her up, protecting her, collapsed. Hotness formed behind her eyes. And before she could stop it, a traitorous tear fell. Her vision blurring as she still attempted to hide her pain. Pain for Joe, for him, and for everyone involved. She heard the choke that came out as her heart cried for him.

Get a grip, Claire.

Owen stiffened and eased back. His face dropped and in an instant he was back to his old self- her safety blanket. “No, no baby. Don’t cry.”
“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She whispered, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. Her chin trembling like a small child.

“IT’s okay. Come here.” And he pulled her down to his lap.

And through her hazy thoughts, she realized she wasn't scared for herself. Rather, she's terrified for him. Owen has been beating himself up because of her. Overwhelmed by him and all the craziness that's been going on, she let her defenses fell. Muffled sobs wracked her body as her emotions came pouring. One after the other. Years of pent up emotions finally relinquished through salty tears.

Her noisy sobs echoing through the house. She clutched his collar as her body shook with great sobs. Claire burrowed her face in his neck. Owen hugged her to his chest, murmuring consoling words in her ear.
Her crying subsided into silent hiccups. Her body, now calm and comforted by the steady heartbeat under her palm. “I’m sorry.” She apologized in a tearful chortle.

He wiped the tears on her cheek. “Why do you feel like you have to apologize or hide your feelings to me?”

She sat up, “Because I’m the one who’s supposed to be comforting you. Not the other way around.”

“And you did. Thank you.” He reassured, kissing her blotched face. “Thank you for being you, Claire.”

She melted into him as he kissed her temple, the fold between her eyebrows and her closed eyes. His lips trailed down her nose, her cheeks and to her jaw. Slow, sensual presses that were stirring something in her. Claire heard his breath alter into shallow, heavy pants. Or was it her?
She locked eyes with him for a split second, lost in his hypnotic stare. Her gaze drifted down to his lips and back to his again. Claire noted the reluctance fighting the desire behind his eyes. She moved first.

She sighed against his mouth upon contact. He didn’t take too long to reciprocate. His hand went to the back of her head. His tongue found hers, exploring, kissing her back.

Claire felt him swivel his chair again, until her back hit the edge of the desk. She moved her legs to straddle him, gasping as she became aware of his body… And her effect on him. Owen moaned against her mouth. Her dress hitched up as he skimmed his hands higher and higher. And then put them off completely, as if to restrain himself.

“Claire-“
“I need you.” She demanded, her lips assaulting his jaw and the spot on his neck.

Owen grumbled an incoherent curse and cocked his head to the side, giving her easier access. He ran a hand down her spine, her waist and ass. She was unbuttoning his dress shirt whilst raining his neck with open mouthed kisses. Owen squeezed her waist before forcing them on his. His erection deliciously probing her, making her go wild.

Gathering enough oxygen, she kissed him again.

Her lips were feverish against him. His scent invading her senses, leading her on. She responded with more reckless kisses, overwhelmed by the magnitude of her feelings. She missed this, missed them being like this; mindless and desperate. A heady, dangerous combination.
She bit his ear as he temptingly unzipped her dress, the rustic sound torturing her. Owen trailed his fingers, following the line of zipper, making the goosebumps rise on her skin. He slipped his hands under the sleeves, sliding them down her shoulders and off her heated body. They broke apart so Owen could lift her and remove the clothing. She was standing in front of him with only her matching set and 4-inch heels. Her chest heaved as a wave of lust illustrated his face.

“Come here.” He ordered, pulling her by the back of her thighs.

The leather squeaked under their weight, as Claire settled herself on his lap again. Her lips fell on his again, her tongue coaxing his apart. Owen remained a hand underneath the lock of her bra, fidgeting with it, teasing her. She clutched the sides of his face, begging him- silently- to be closer.

With their lips still attached, she removed his shirt and threw it behind her. The pencil holder rattled, falling to the floor. A light laugh vibrated on their lips before Owen grasped her legs and wrapped them around him. He stood, with her hands on her ass.

“Bed?”
Claire shook her head and lead them back. With one hand on his nape the other, outstretched, was finding the desk. He sat her down in the middle before she pulled him down for another kiss.

The heat coming off their chest was making her lose all self-restraint. As if reading her mind, he cupped her. She leaned and threw her head back as he lick her neck down her breast where it nipped at the aerola through the fabric. His calloused hand was rough and hungry as he kneaded her breasts into shape. His fingertips zapping with electricity with every touch. She let her legs fall beside him, as her nails frisk the bump on his pants. He bit on her nipple and bucked his hips against her hand. Claire popped the button and slipped her hand inside, sighing at the warm, thick heat. He was magnificent.

Owen pulled away. His eyes dazed and blown into dark green orbs. His mouth bruised with her lipstick and her kisses.

“What’s wrong?”
“I… I’m…” he stuttered and she could see the affliction in his eyes. “Claire, I…”

He shook his head before smashing their lips again, his words, unsaid.

This time, his kisses were gentler, sweeter. She felt her insides liquify, her heart bursting with warmth.

Owen unhooked her brassiere, freeing her breasts, at last. The nippy air raised goosebumps on her skin. He closed a wet mouth on a hardened nipple, as she fell backwards. Her arm supported her, the other pulling his mouth closer.

Claire made a work of his belt and pants, eager for the wanton touch. He helped her with her underwear - eagerly, she might add. Owen pulled her on the edge of the table and then he was inside her. Hot, rigid and heavy.
Claire stifled a scream as her whole body arched up. She hugged his shoulders. Her mouth was open against his ears, her hips bucking of their own accord. She was already slippery and he hasn’t started yet. Her walls sucked him in as he moved, tentatively at first. Every thrust eliciting a moan from them.

What would it take for them to be like this forever?

Owen muttered lewd curse as he held both her knees and spread them an inch apart. He added more pressure on his hips and she thought she’s gonna lose her mind.

Claire bit on the round part of his shoulder as he moved her to the edge of the desk. He eased himself in and out with rash, ardent precision. Back and forth. His breath whistling in his teeth. Claire let go of his shoulders and fell on her elbows. Each touch fuelling the fire that was burning inside her. Owen gripped her thigh, the other on her hip as she met him. The wide desk accommodating her heaving body, her hair falling on the edge. His dark, carnal eyes locked with hers as he plunged deep, making her whimper openly.
“I’ve missed you.” She revealed, her hand tracing the line of his abs down to the light patch of hair above his crotch. Her nails scratching his sweaty skin.

A deep roar boomed from his chest, searing straight into her. They moaned before Owen leaned down, capturing his lips with hers. Their mouth, more eager now. She squirmed as he quicken his movements, his hand crawling between them. And she gasped as it flicked her nerves.

Her body tightened under his delicious torment. He stood up as he drilled into her. Her body sat up as Owen plunged himself entirely. She couldn’t think, her vision blurred by a blinding light. Claire clawed at his shoulders in a desperate hold, gasping at each stab of pleasure.

Owen removed his head from her neck so they were resting- forehead to forehead.

“You know, you’re important to me, right?” He grunted between vigorous thrusts.
She nodded, inarticulate and delirious.

Owen cupped the back of her head, holding her to him. Claire was more than willing to succumb. He kissed her, chaste and possessive, their teeth clashed.

“And I’m not gonna let anything happen to you.”

She nodded again, biting her lip so hard she tasted blood. Her body convulsed, her walls contracting him further, deeper into her. She stretched her neck up the ceiling as her body bowed before him, their pleasure rocking her body. He gave a loud grunt as he crushed her into his arms.
Claire gasped out his name as he reverently screamed hers in return.

Owen rallied his power for one more world-rocking orgasm before they reposed. Their breaths and bodies mangled in a post-coitus bliss. For hours, they lie together in bed, wholly awake, talking.

Approaching midnight, he heard her stomach grumble. And he got up, offering to cook for her. The instant Mac and cheese was a hit. He continued relishing her company.

As much as he loved seeing her breathless, Owen enjoyed seeing her ramble. Their topics varied in length and breadth. Owen was always catching himself as he gaped at her with wonder. He had never met a woman on the same intellectual wavelength as he. He couldn't help but notice how easy this all was. How comfortable it was, her with him.
It couldn't get any better than this, he thought.

All his sense of cautiousness pushed back at the back of his mind. For the time being.

Their conversation led to their mortifying drunk stories. Seeing as Claire didn’t have much, she shamelessly dragged her sister. Tears welled up in her eyes as she sketched out every detail with youthful enthusiasm. They were both pealing with laughter. With grim realization, it was the first real laugh he had for a week.

He persuaded Claire to return her family’s messages. He knew she left them on voicemails for the last couple of days. Claire texted and had a brief call with her dad first. Owen was happy that Claire was restarting her relationship with her dad. Afterwards, she texted Karen, who immediately called. He was washing the dishes as he listened to the conversation.

“I’m fine… yes… no… I don’t know… I am… Yeah, yeah. I’m staying with him… Yeah… He’s
here.” Claire said into the mouthpiece, a pink blush rising to her cheeks.

He leaned to his side as Claire put her phone on loudspeaker. “Hey, Karen.”

“Hey, Owen! How’s it going? Are you okay?”

“Great, great. You?”

Claire circled the counter and stood next to him.
“I’m pretty toast. My sister told me, you cooked her Mac and Cheese.”

“I did. I did.” He couldn’t help but grin. “Why are you still up?”

“I’m sewing Gray’s costume for a school play. He’s Ulysses Grant.”

“An awesome role! Tell him, break a leg.” He whisked his hands and reached for a clean cloth to wipe the dishes.

“Thanks! Oh, and Zach’s so excited to come see you in November!”
“I’m more excited to have him. Tell him, he doesn’t have to look for a place to say.”

“Oh no, Owen. You don’t have to—“

“I want to. Besides, we have free accommodations for all our interns. He’s gonna be all set. Ask your sister.” He looked up to see Claire smiling at him.

“Yes, we do. No need to worry.”

“Alright! I could kiss you two! Thank you!”
“You’re welcome! Come with Zach on November. We can all check that new wine place. Bring Lewis and Gray.” He offered as he placed the last dishes in the cabinet.

“Oh, I will! In the meantime, you two, be careful, okay?”

“I will. Don’t worry about Claire. I’ll chain her up, if I have to-”

Claire groaned, rolling her eyes. “I got her, Karen.”

“You better! I may love you, but if you hurt her Grady, I will cut off your di-”
The rest of her sentence was muffled as Claire put it back to phone mode. “Okay!”

She pressed the phone to her ear. “Stop, Karen… No! I’m not telling you anything… Yeah, talk to you soon, Karen. Tell Mom, I’m okay. I’ll talk to you guys tomorrow… Okay… Bye.”

Owen hung the towel on the oven handle. “Always nice to talk to your sister.”

“Sorry about that. That was embarrassing.”

He chuckled as he drew her by the waist, back to him. “It’s cute. The way you look after each other. Plus, she’s got nothing to worry about. I’m pretty attached to my, uh… my tool. I’d like to
That uttered a mischievous smile from her. Claire wound her arms around his shoulders and blurted, “I’m pretty attached to it too.”

“Oh, you are?” He leered, his hands sliding lower than her waist. The smoothness of her satin pyjamas sending new charges to his body.

“Mmm… Especially when you do that thing…”

He pressed his hips to hers. Claire laughed and secured her hands on his biceps. Owen could peek at her top from their height. He was becoming insatiable. But before he could collide their lips again, the phone rang.
He expressed his annoyance in a loud groan. Claire giggled and withdrew from him. She handed him his phone with a quick kiss on the cheek.

He made a mental note to hide every cellphone in sight whenever he’s with Claire.

“Mr. Owen Grady, sir?” came a taut voice on the other end.

“Yes, this is he.”

“I’m sorry for calling so late. This is James O’Donnell. I’m a pathologist from the California’s Medical Examiner’s office. You requested a second autopsy report for your employee, Mr. Joseph Carter.”
“Yes, I did.” He stood upright, earning a puzzled look from Claire.

O’Donnell hesitated, “I-uh. Is it possible that you can come and get the results for yourself? I’m located at 24th beside St. Anthony’s.”

“What’s wrong?” He took a step back as he felt his body stiffen like a log.

“Mr. Grady, we found firearm-related injuries to his skull and hip. He died from hypovolemic shock before anything else. It wasn’t included in the report they gave you.”

TO BE CONTINUED...
Hey! I’m sorry for the delay! I wish this chapter makes up for it. I feel really bad updating once a month. But I’m trying to write as fast as I can but with work and school, I sometimes can’t find the time. But thank you so much for reading this! This means a lot!

Two days ago, I woke up to the news of Irrfan Khan (who played Simon Masrani) died. What a loss. This chapter is dedicated to his memory.

Stay with me for a couple of chapters more. I’m hoping you are all well and safe. Do correct me for grammatical errors. I hope you enjoy this one. *evil smile*

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**A WOLF'S HIDE**

A wolf is no less a wolf because he's dressed in sheepskin and the devil is no less the devil because he's dressed as an angel.

-Lecrae
The house was silent and empty-as it had been for the past decade and a half.

He had his chin on his palm. His other hand, tapping the right arrow button on his keyboard. The screen was flashing picture after picture of his life. Summer in the farmhouse. Winter in England. Malibu beach. Her blonde hair tied in that low, messy bun. Her awful hat. The boy with the same eyes as him, dressed in a diminutive army uniform.

Alan Grady was passing time-figuratively and literally speaking. The thought made him chuckle.

"How very apt, under these circumstances." he said to himself.

He clicked Next and the screen brightened into an old home video.

A four-year old Owen was playing in the sand box Malcolm set up last week. His chubby fingers seized handfuls of sand. He looked at it with wonder, his face flushed and cherubic.
"Do you know what's that called, Owen?"

He heard his own voice extolled.

His son looked up, waved his closed fists at the camera he's holding.

"Sand, Daddy!"

"That's right, buddy."

"Alright Owen, look what I found." Ellie showed up from behind the corner. In her hands were a plastic red pail and a yellow scooper.

The toddler squealed as he snatched the play toys from his mother. The video stopped on her smiling, angelic face.

"Not long now, Ellie." He mumbled. A sated smile shaped his lips, the laugh lines outlining his pallid face.

As heedful as he could, he moved to the decanter and pour himself a glass of water. He smiled to himself. Many times, his nurses almost faint when he'd pretend that the vessel held anything but water. Though according to his doctor, he's allowed to have a considerate glass every now and then.

The pain has subsided, for now. But when it doesn't, it felt like a giant ball of rock shoved up his skull through his mouth. Then, after a few gruelling seconds, when he thought he's okay to the pain, someone reaches up and pull it out of him.

The chemo helped his condition. But Alan Grady already accepted his fate. And to be frank, he was quite relieved.

A soft knock rapped the door.

"Come in."

"Alan?" One of his nurse, peeked her head from behind the door.

"Yeah?"

The young man behind the door stepped in. He was in his casual clothes, rather than the blue scrubs his other nurse was always wearing. Alan insisted that he only needed one caretaker, but another friend insisted. He was too weak to argue and refuse.

The young man could pass as a civilian if not for the clipboard and his antiseptic whiff. Alan didn't mind, in fact, he recommends it. He had traumatic experiences with lab coats and scrub suits. Alan would have to talk to Frida, his other nurse, to dress in casual clothes starting tomorrow.

"You have a visitor, Sir."

"Ah, yes." He croaked, straightening in his chair and pushing his keyboard away. "Send him in."

He nodded and sidestepped to reveal a long time friend.

Alan stood up, still with that cautiousness, anticipating the rush of pain. But it didn't happen. His doctors advised him to use a wheelchair-to which he had a strong opposition.
Alan trudged around the desk and hugged his friend. The same morose expression that everybody seemed to have smearing his friendly face.

"Stop with the long face Simon. It doesn't suit you."

"Alan." Simon Masrani greeted him but the sadness was clear in his round eyes.

"Where's the whiskey I told you to bring too?" He jibed, eyeing the briefcase clutched in his Simon's hand.

"We're doing this sober all the way, my old friend." His friend replied with a tone of amusement.

Alan laughed and traipsed to the small round table. Simon sat on the chair opposite him and opened his laptop.

"Now," He rubbed his palms together. "onto business."

"I hate myself for doing this." Simon said more to himself than to him

"You're a distinguished lawyer and businessman. And you're my friend. There's no other person more perfect for this."

Simon glowered at him. His eyes, black and playful. "Don't butter me up, Grady..." Simon turned serious, "How will you do this then?"

"Owen gets all my properties. The company, this townhouse, the farm, everything. He's gonna own 45% shares of all my companies. Whether he decided to work there or not. He's to be Chairman of the Grady foundation and my other charities. Everything under my name would become his. The usual."

As his only son, it's automatic to have everything he had but it's good to see it in paper too.

"For my second will, if in case, Owen didn't take the job... I want Claire to be CEO and President of Grady Corp. For as long as she wants."

Simon paused, quite taken by surprise. "Claire? Claire Dearing?"

"Yes. Claire Dearing." He stressed.

His friend broke into a smile. "Okay... But what makes you think Owen won't? Take the company?"

Alan knew Owen and he approved of his son's dream of living a normal, simpler life. But he sort of wish, it was the other way. Owen always had a habit of settling for less than he deserves. Alan knew his son had a knack for the business, and he could say that without a hint of prejudice. Owen had the brains and finesse to run the company, if he wanted it. He was positive that the board would also vouch for him.

"If he does, I want Claire to guide him. Have her teach him until he's caught up."

"I agree. I will see to it." Simon's pensiveness was back. "Anything else?"

"I also have something to sent to both of them."

With great effort, (and despite Simon's volunteering to do it for him) he pushed himself off the table. Alan staggered to his desk and grabbed a box from his drawer.
"You can open it." He assured, handing the black velvet necklace box to him.

Simon stood up and approached him. His friend studied the contents of the box. The cushion held two, identical hard drives the size of his pinky finger.

"They're to receive that a year after my death and I want both of them to look at it together."

Simon nodded and placed the box aside, just as Frida showed up for his hourly pills.

Simon wrote the rest of the will for the next hour, the legal terminologies blurred after the other. When the table was clear from the clutter, Alan opened a bottle of Chardonnay. He took his medicine and indulged himself a glass while Simon drank up.

"-Speaking of that kid, he's not tied up? With someone?" Simon drawled, the tie around his neck, loose. "There are women in the NAVY, for sure. Someone who can match his stubbornness."

"No." He shook his head, jabbing his finger. "That damned kid. Always wanting to go off on his own. Always wanting to do things his own way. He swore he's gonna be alone forever. Do you believe that-"

Simon scoffed pouring himself another glass.

"-But I have a feeling he's gonna change his mind. Who wants to live alone, anyway?" Alan argued, every bit optimistic.

Simon laughed, tipsy.

"I swear, he very much of reminds me of..." Alan trailed off, a stupid idea hitting his deteriorating brain.

"Reminds you of who?"

A wistful smile made its way on his dry lips as he recalled the daughter she never had. "Claire."

Simon coughed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Claire and Owen?"

He nodded, nursing his wine glass.

"Huh." Simon stared at the distance, as if he's picturing it. "Wouldn't that be interesting."

"Can you imagine the two of them?"

They both cackled, knowing the similar, infamous reputations of the two young adults.

"It's too bad we don't have arrange marriages, now..." Alan mused, chuckling to himself.

"Well..." Simon jested as an afterthought, "You can always ship them off to my country. My mom and you would have a blast planning it."

The old gentlemen heaped with laughter.

"But have they met each other yet? Before you sent Claire to France, two weeks ago? Have you set them up for a date?" He was curling his finger on his lips.

"My granddaughter, has this term for something like that.. Something about cute meet? meet cute?"
"That's ridiculous term." Alan laughed.

"I know, kids these days... So? Owen and Claire?"

Alan shook his head. "No, no. I didn't let them meet."

His friend frowned. "What? Why? Owen was home a month ago, right?"

"Yes. To tell you the truth, I sort of planned it that way."

"How so?"

Alan shrugged. "Owen understands the importance of things and people. He appreciates everything up to the very last detail. And he tends to value them, people and things, even greater, if they're unexpected. I want them to meet... cute meet each other in their own way. Besides, it's more romantic that way."

"Ah. The old, Alan-Grady-Matchmaking ploy. I like it." Simon sipped his glass, his features twinkling with the same delight as him.

It was all good timing.

Not a month ago, they needed to close a huge deal with the French. It was a huge asset, their most important investment yet. Alan was certain if there was one person to get the job done, it was Claire. Besides, he didn't tell her about the chemo yet- and he probably wasn't gonna.

Working and being friends with Claire enabled him to see the person beneath. She's not as strong as she always pretends to be. Alan knew what her father did, why she pursued in a male-dominant field. She had gone through so much and Alan was not ready to be another person to cause her pain. He loved the kid too much.

A longing smile plastered his face as he played out the possibilities.

"Those two... They're gonna kill each other but they're gonna be perfect... I just know it."

____________________________________________________

She was aware of the warm breath blowing her hair.

Her eyes adjusted to the ray of light sifting from the curtains of his bedroom. She stretched her sleepy legs, but it came in direct contact with his. Her mouth lifted into a genuine smile.

She twisted her head to kiss his arm, which she was using as her pillow. Her right hand lazily rested on his upturned palm. Claire moulded herself to him, sharing his body heat. She spun in his arm, slow and quiet to not rouse him. God knows how much Owen needed a full, peaceful and uninterrupted sleep.

Claire watched him, content by the serenity gliding over his handsome features. Her mind wandered back to nearly a year ago. Back when, they're still arguing over, well, everything. She remembered how she wanted to hurl something in his direction and slap the sneer off his face. Everyday had been a display of dominance, it was as paramount as breathing. Claire never knew a person could push all her buttons ALL at the same time. He was the most impossible, the most aggravating person she had ever met.

Claire allowed a soft smile to permit her lips.

How much has changed. And it felt like a large, obscured picture was finally cleared. A grey cloud
hovering over her head was finally being brought to light. Hopes and happiness filled the vacant space. Owen had unlocked a part of her, the keys lost forever.

She lie on her stomach, her head resting on the pillow, scooting closer to him. The tip of her nose touched his, the evenness of his breath warming her face. Claire found herself mesmerised by the artistry of his lips.

Underneath the blanket, she pressed her cold toes against his. Her shins tangled with his strong calves.

*How come he's always warm?* She pondered to herself, feeling a small tinge of jealousy. Owen sighed, pulled the duvet around them and drape his arm on her hip.

As careful as she could, she laid a palm on his cheek, feeling the roughness of his sideburns. *These things are magic,* she thought. It wasn't a day ago when she felt its smoothness. Still, beard or no beard, everything suited him. Claire couldn't decide who she liked more; clean-cut Owen or roguish Owen.

She exhaled an amused, soft chuckle. It was like choosing between Owen being a gentleman and him being… well, *not* a gentleman.

But in truth was, Claire benefitted from both sides. She admired him for opening doors, not only for her but, for everyone. Owen wouldn't hesitate helping someone in need. He was selfless and kind, even to strangers. Owen is an exceptional human being, through and through.

But when situations needed him to be aggressive, he'd definitely be. Owen never yelled at their colleagues. He was a patient, effective leader. When he didn't like how something had turned out, everyone would know in an instant. Claire knew the exact moment he meant business. Owen would remain silent, and would clench his jaw in that unpleasant, domineering way. And his employees knew that it universally meant, "Stop fucking around and give me results".

She never knew she could get aroused by something as petty as that.

A heat rose to her cheeks remembering their venereal stunts on the study. And on the barn table. On the gallery hallway at the farmhouse. In his bathroom. Their respective beds.

Owen is a great, attentive lover, a seducer and an A plus flirt. He always made sure to bring her pleasure first. He would always cover her with a towel or blanket when the first line of goosebumps line her naked skin.

*If sex has a deity, it would definitely be him.* She stunned herself, as it was the highest compliment she could ever give or will ever give someone- sex wise. Claire made the mistake of mentioning it to her sister in passing. And Karen, being the nosy woman she was, wouldn't stop harassing her.

"*You're not saying anything, which means he's that good.*"

"*Stop, Karen.*"

"*Oh come on, Claire! I'm dying with curiosity... So?*

"*No! I'm not telling you anything.*"

Owen stirred from his sleep and Claire moved an inch to see if he'd woken.

Though with closed eyes, the pupils were fluttering underneath. His lips separated as his forehead
creased into a frown, his breath hitched. She placed a finger between his brows and his breathing evened again. She kissed his cheek, a feather-light kiss, and inhaled his scent, unable to stop herself. Her hand lingered on his stubble, her thumb rubbing smooth circles on the coarse skin.

Two midnights ago, they drove to the Coroner’s office, to retrieve Joe's autopsy files. She didn't need further explanation when she read the file herself.

Someone shot Joe. They killed him before the bomb detonated, before a portion of the basement fell on him.

Her fears resurged in bilious waves as she processed the words. But she managed to keep her tears at bay that night. Claire wouldn't give Owen another reason to be more scared for her than he already was.

From out of nowhere, she's reminded of that time in the hospital. When Owen was unconscious, pale with wires attached to his body. The constant beeping of his heart rate monitor was the only hope and comfort she ever had in the room. The anxiety, uneasiness and the fear for him was something she has yet to learn and accept.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Owen spoke, interrupting her reverie.

Her eyes snapped to his, and for a second, she's worried that he had read her thoughts. "Hey." Claire rested her hand on the light beard on his neck. "You should sleep."

Owen pulled her by the waist. Dazed, sleepy hazel green eyes was gaping at her. "You should too."

Her eyes flitted over his hips lips, only a hair away from hers. Owen really had the most angular, perfect lips. Her thumb brushed over his lower lip, it parted at her touch, his breath skipped -and it was an enough permission.

Claire pressed her lips on his - not swift that it felt insincere, yet, not hard to imply something.

But his arms went around her at once, and he cupped her jaw. Butterflies took flight once again as his lips opened hers. His hand roamed her body, to the side of her breasts, her waist, hips and around her butt. Owen lifted her thigh and draped it over his hips.

They broke apart, their foreheads resting against each other. Owen hugged her to him, his nose buried in her chest.

"You're the best distraction."

"I'd rather hope you don't need anything to distract you from." She admitted, cradling his head. "Everything's gonna be okay, Owen."

He burrowed himself underneath her chin and gave quick little pecks on the skin.

"Sleep." She ordered in a soft spoken voice, raking her hand on the soft waves of his hair. "I have to get up."

"No, you don't. Please stay with me a couple of minutes more."

And she did. The minutes passed into an hour, their bodies warm and snuggled as two souls should could be. Claire had never let anyone to be close to her like this. Never allowed herself to be this vulnerable. At times, she still wondered, Why? What has happened to her? And why was it that with Owen, everything was challenging in a more intimate and whole other level? He was like a
Claire listened to his breathing and found contentment in his arms. This was what must having an addiction felt like. A single touch, a quick glance and the intoxication was inevitable. His arms brought her a sense of peace she had never known before, calming the most turbulent parts of her.

She gazed at the wall clock right beside the door and noted the time. Claire kissed the top of his head before laying it on the pillow, careful not to wake him up. Claire got out of bed and went downstairs to cook them breakfast.

She set up the coffee maker before grabbing the jar of oatmeal and the milk from the fridge. Claire stood on her toes, reaching for the pan in the second cupboard from her left. She got the wooden spoon from the drawer beside the sink. Claire placed the pan on the electric cooktop, poured the milk and oatmeal and stirred. She took the cinnamon from the spice rack and sprinkled in on the pan. She set up the heat to the lowest setting.

Next, Claire opened the fridge again and rinsed the blue berries and sliced the bananas. She opened another drawer for the placemats and set it up on the island. The coffeemaker beeped. Claire went over to uninstall the pot and pour a cup for herself. She proceeded to serve the oatmeal in a blue ceramic bowl. As she was garnishing it with the sliced fruits, Claire stopped. Taken by surprise on how she moved with familiarity around his kitchen. She was yet reminded of another fact that it has been a week since the bombing. It has been a week that she's staying over.

Owen wanted to keep an eye on her, more so, now, when they don't know their enemies. Claire was fine with it because it also allowed her to do the same. She had to assure her excited sister that they didn't move in together. Yet, she still felt bad for enjoying their newfound living situation.

Zia, Emma and Zara have been helping her get her clothes from her unit. And even though, Owen wouldn't let her go alone anywhere, she filed for another replacement for her car.

That's two cars now in a year now, she thought with frustration.

As they agreed, Zia kept an eye on her. It still felt strange to her at times, but it got easier as the week progressed. In a way, she was like Zara, but add the tattoos on her arms and that air of discipline one can only find on NAVY personnels. Zia has been a great friend, to her and Owen and she'd proven that, many times already.

They have no further updates on the cases, making Owen more wary than he already was. Brennan and Walters were frequent in visiting the office. She joined a meeting once and she couldn't help but feel Owen's dispirited outlook from the lack of progress.

The table sat six edgy people. The food that was already set up for their lunch meeting, yet, they're left untouched.

Zia and Lowery stood by the wall while she and the other agents sat around the table. Owen paced the floor as Brennan discussed the possible explanations.

"-the guy we found right by Miss Dearing's street was from Jersey. He was a high school dropout and did probation for a couple of years."

Owen stopped at the head of the table, peering at Brennan. "And?"

"He doesn't have credit cards, passport and even a driver's license."
Do you think he's been set up?" Zia chimed in, arms folded and a cynical frown on her face. They all turned towards their right. "Have you checked the facility he did probation at? The plates in the car?"

Walters stepped in. "The plates were fake, as expected. Yes, we checked the facility but-"

A palm landed on the table. The plates, glasses and utensils bounced off the wood with a loud clang. It made her shoulders jump. She turned to see Owen, his jaw set, lips pinched together, and a deathly glare for the agents.

"If I hear another 'but' or any sentence with uncertainty from the FBI or the San Francisco Police, I will sue someone."

Owen added in a harsher tone,

"How come the bodies keep piling up and we're nowhere near an answer? It's been a couple of months since the accident in Devil's road. Then, a couple of weeks after that, our top suspect's driven off the cliff. A thug was stalking Miss Dearing. A bomb went off in this building and my friend's been sh-"

Owen stopped. Nobody except her, Zia and Lowery knew the real cause of Joe's death. He decided telling the authorities wouldn't be the best option since, someone was trying to cover it up.

"-killed. Why do keep coming here with half assed reports?"

Brennan appeared embarrassed but remained professional. "Sir, with all due respect-"

"No. Stop wasting my time anymore. If neither of you or any of the department can give me the right answers, don't show up here. Meeting dismissed."

Owen left the room, the door swinging behind him.

A sense of edginess and dread hovered the room. Nobody moved. Lowery cleared his throat and went out the door, followed by Zia.

Brennan leaned forward in his seat. "I'm sorry, Claire. We're doing the best we can. But these guys, they're always one step ahead."

That was not reassuring, she thought. Still, Claire nodded, speechless and still surprised by Owen's outburst. It wasn't the first time she saw him frustrated, but, something about this was different.

"Thank you for all your efforts. We appreciate it."

Both gentlemen stood up and shook her hand. Claire walked them to the elevator.

"These suspects... They know we were coming. They know exactly where to be in the right time and in the right place. They came in prepared. And it's inspiring how they manage to cover their tracks. But one of these days, they'll slip. And that's our chance."

"Thank you again Agent Walters for doing this. And I apologise for Mr. Grady's behavior."
Walters shrugged with a bittersweet smile. "He's frustrated, as we all are."

"Rest assured Claire, we're gonna get to the bottom of this." Brennan said, pressing the elevator button.

"We will appreciate it. Thank you again."

Both agents entered the elevator but as it was about to close, Brennan held the open button. "If there's anything you need, I'm here-"

An uneasiness crept inside her stomach, making her frown. In the corner, she noticed Walters. He raised his eyebrows at his partner as if saying, 'You did not just said that'.

Brennan must have realised this because his cheeks reddened. He corrected himself, "Call us if there's a problem."

I hope not, she wanted to say. "Thank you."

And the agents were out of her sight.

"Is that another reason Owen doesn't like those men?" Emma interrupted from beside her.

"What?"

"That good-looking blonde likes you, Claire."

Claire ignored her observation and smiled, "Have you eaten yet, Em?"

"I had coffee with the guy from security."

"Oh, I didn't know you're dating someone." she winked at her.

"I... I'm not." Emma blushed before she handed her a folder. Emma's dedication to work was inspiring. Claire forced her assistant to take a leave of absence after the incident but she declined. Claire respected her for it. Emma has the makings of a successful business person. If only she could be remember what her schedule was. Claire chuckled as she watched Emma leave.

Instead of walking back to her office, Claire went straight to his. Only for Lowery to tell her, "He's in the rooftop."

"It's unlawful for someone to look this beautiful. Especially this hour in the morning." A small voice interrupted her flashback.

Claire looked up to see him leaning on the archway, arms crossed in front of him. He's fresh and already dressed up in denim pants and a faded shirt.

"What are you doing up?" She scowled. "You're not suppose to wake up until I wake you up."

"Then you should've stayed in bed with me."

"I want to cook breakfast." She grabbed another empty bowl and emptied the rest of the oatmeal.
"Don't think I don't know what you're doing, Dearing." He accused, a smile on his lips.

"Oh?"

"Don't 'oh' me." Owen chuckled and sauntered to her. He smelt of soap, and fabric softener.

When Owen started his early mornings and late nights in the office, he seldom eats. It became a major issue for her. So, she and Lowery came up with ways on how to feed him. That involved his favorite dishes and them, cooking for him.

"You're making this for me so I have no choice but to eat it."

"Me? Doing things for you?" She raised the cup to her lips, hiding her victorious grin. "Never."

Owen laughed, rolling his eyes.

Claire dragged the placemat with the bowl on top of it. She patted the counter, for him to "sit".

"You are so enjoying this, Dearing."

"Of course, I am. Eat."

"Join me." He said, pulling the bar stool.

Claire grabbed the lighter bowl and rounded the island to her seat. Owen yanked her closer to him, the feet making screeching noises on the floor. His body, half facing her. He lifted the spoon to his mouth and exaggerated his chewing. Claire watched him, pleased with herself. They ate in comfortable silence, his hand, resting on her knee. After sometime,

"Done." He declared with a tone of pride, pushing his empty bowl away.

"Good." She stood up and reached for his bowl.

"Nu-uh!" He hid the bowl with his body. "I clean up, you get ready for work."

Claire smiled with an 'Okay, thank you' nod.

She cherished moments like this; the normalcy. The past few days felt like the calm before the storm. So Claire wallowed in these tiny, moments of peace. But as if on cue, the phone in his pocket buzzed, disrupting their almost perfect picture.

Owen sighed, reached behind him and answered. Claire propped her hip on the counter, listening.

"Talk to me... Yes... Yeah... yeah... Okay... That's good."

A fire blazed his eyes and Claire stilled.

"We'll be there in twenty."

"What is it?" She asked as soon as he hung up.

"The agents found out who they are."

She didn't need to know who was he referring to.

"They're part of a group called "Tenebris Bellator" which translates to "dark warrior" in Latin."
Eric Walters explained, sliding the folder on the desk in front of Owen.

Clair tilted her head, reading from Owen's side. Before Brennan gave her his copy.

"They're mercenaries comprised of a bunch guys who faked their own deaths. It makes them undetectable. FBI, CIA, Russian and Iranian operatives have been looking for them the past five years." Walters informed with regained confidence.

"So, they're terrorists?" She asked, sitting erect on her chair.

"Not... exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"They only have a specific "targets", Miss Dearing. They're notorious for the disappearances of some big-named corporate heads. They're the ones you hire if you want a rogue employee or business partner to disappear. Take out-"

"Take out the alpha and the rest of the pack follows." Owen added, nonchalant. His realisations and disapproval residing over his forehead.

The astonishment was clear in Walter's posture, as it was with Claire's. "You know them?"

Owen nodded at her. "We had to rescue a fallen Ranger who was accompanying a New York executive. It was a few years ago. The executive was never found and the ranger was hanging on for dear life when we got there. They're highly-skilled criminals who's an expert in everything. Killing, Hacking, Kidnapping, Sabotage, Blackmail, everything."

"Yes." Walters confirmed.

The chuckle that passed from Owen's lips was anything but mirthful. "They tried to blow up my building as a warning shot for what they're capable of."

Brennan, who remained quiet for the last thirty minutes of the meeting finally spoke. "That's 90% likely."

Claire felt a cold rush of blood enwrap her entire body.

"The driver who almost killed you in Devil's Road was a new member. We're guessing that it was his initiation right to the group. But the guy we found in Memphis street, wasn't."

Everything was starting to make sense now. But there was one question that was still haunting her, "If they're part of the same group, why were they killed?" She asked again.

Brennan sat forward in his seat. "World-class syndicates are well-known for their manifesto, "They leave no loose ends.""

"That doesn't explain why the guy in Memphis was poisoned, though. He didn't get to finish the job." Claire interjected and noticed the slight wince in Owen's expression.

In that distraction, she missed the look exchanged by the two agents. But Owen was quick to point it out.

"What is it?"
"We're speculating that someone was trying to beat him up to the job." Walters said. "We reviewed the CCTV footages in the area. We interviewed the administration in your building. Three weeks ago, they called the contractor because of the problem with the exhaust units. The engineer's office was a good two hours away from Financial district. But then, two guys showed up thirty minutes later."

Something in her head clicked. "So, the AC, everything was-"

"It's all orchestrated, Claire. They're the ones who tampered it." Brennan supplied.

She felt livid. She felt like punching a wall and crying afterwards. Claire glanced at Owen who had the same, dangerous expression.

"We saw the footage and we're running ID on the other one, right now. But they were smart, they knew the corners where the cameras were." Walters finished, and it sounded like he's asking for someone to pat him and tell him how a good dog he was.

Owen nodded and piled the papers inside the binder. "Thank you, gentlemen."

With that, he stood up and the agents followed. Zia showed them out the door.

Claire walked to the window, admiring the high sun and the life below her. Somehow, it felt unfair that the world was still turning despite the turbulence in her life right now.

Owen flopped into the seat across her, pinching the side of his nose. Claire kept her eyes on him, broaching the subject she knew he was trying to not think about.

"Say what's in your head."

Owen lifted his troubled guise up at her. He exhaled a deep, anxious sigh. "Tenebris Bellator… they're ruthless, Claire. They're protected by bad cops, business tycoons and politicians. That's why nobody caught them. They're like an old gangster squad, untouchable and powerful. It's highly possible that they're after me. Why now? I don't know. But they're threatening you too to get to me."

Hearing him say it out loud made her blood pound with unvaried stages of terror. She kept her back to the wall. Her hands tucked behind her, so he wouldn't notice how they were trembling.

With a painstaking motion, Owen stood up and walked to her. He leaned against the glass as he reached for her hands.

Warm sparks danced from his hands to hers. Claire ran her thumb over his knuckles- calloused with scars of hard work and violence. She couldn't help but feel how small and fragile her hands were in his.

"Promise me, you'll be careful." He but whispered, the worry in his face transparent.

Claire wanted to scold him and roll her eyes at his self-neglect. "You say you're the one they're after and you want me to be careful. Can you be selfish for once?"

The small smile from him appeased her a bit.

"They can't hurt me-"

"Stop saying that." She interrupted, her voice firm. It didn't choke a syllable. Brava, Claire!
He sighed before his face hardened once more. "You know, when I read what Mills did to you, I almost lost it."

She was not surprised with the sudden change of their topic. If they had it their way, they would've drive Mills to prison themselves. But Claire knew they need sufficient and valid evidence.

Still, she soothed him, not liking the fierce light in his calm greens. "Owen, it was a long time ago."

"Doesn't matter to me. He hurt you, abused you. And thinking about it again makes me wanna... I wanna punch the daylights outta him. After knowing what he did to you, I wanted to hurt him like I have never wanted hurt anyone before. I had his address, I was ready to go."

"You're really not subtle man, aren't you?" She tried to joke.

"I don't have time for subtle. Especially with that dick."

She could feel the anger rising in him again. Claire reached up and brushed a hand on his hair. Owen took a step closer to her, as her fingers smoothed out the ruffles. Her hand lingered on his shoulder.

"If it's any consolation to you, I broke his glasses and kicked him so hard in the nuts, his eyes almost popped out of his head." She smiled at the memory of Mills rolling on the floor of his apartment lobby.

Owen chuckled. "I wish I saw that."

He intertwined their fingers together. And in doing so, he closed off their remaining distance.

"You're the only person that can hurt me right now, Claire. Please, for the sake of my sanity, let me protect you, okay? I'm not asking you to move in with me, but... Can you stay with me for a little longer? At least, until I've figured this out?"

She stared at him in disbelief.

"I thought that that was non-verbally settled, Grady. I don't know why you're still sweet-talking me about it." She teased. "Do I have to give you a memo?"

He laughed, his head thrown back. "I guess not. It's still nice to hear you say it though." The sparkle was back in his eyes and smile. She had a vague feeling, she was reflecting it with her own as well.

"God, you have no idea." Owen then shook his head and didn't finish his sentence. He traced a finger on her cheek before parting her fringe to the side. His features perked up, brightening and blinding. "What do you say we go on a date?"

She raised her eyebrows at him. "A date? Like, right now?"

"Yeah! It felt like ages since we had one."

"So, the breakfast and dinners at your place don't count?"

"Oh, they definitely did." He said with a laugh, grabbing her waist. "But I wanna take you out. Some place."

"We have work." She reminded him.
"Come on, Dearing. Let's be cheesy and foolish teenagers for a day."

He sounded so excited, it felt cruel to say no to him. Claire giggled, circling her arms around his neck. She had a feeling it was already a lost battle.

"Where are we going, Grady?"

He beamed, that famous dimpled grin that was making her feel lightheaded.

"I don't know yet. I thought I could just wing it." he shrugged.

"Sounds perfect."

The way he was looking at her, overflowed her with relief she hadn't felt in ages. She craned her neck at him, hands dangling behind his nape. Owen smiled. His whole face twinkled with mischief and something else that makes her wanna dance and jump.

His eyes darkened, his breathing shallowed as hers stopped. She swallowed and dropped her eyes on his lips. Even with her heels, she was still shorter than him.

The familiar cracking in the air was imminent again. And Owen must've caught it because he bent his head down -lips ready- to relieve them both off it.

But the door swung open.

"Cla-" Zara's voice halted.

And they did too.

Their lips stopped mid-air.

The conversation from the other side of the room became less muffled.

They stood there, paralyzed.

Frozen on the spot.

Caught red-handed.

Claire heard Lowery, who wasn't in her peripheral yet, hollered "Why are you standing there looking like a- OH HELL NO!"

The employees in the background stretched their necks towards the open door. Claire saw their jaws dropping to the floor. Somebody screeched an high pitch squeal. She thought somebody was clapping, applauding in the background. Then everything became silent. One could hear the thrumming noise of the AC or a pin drop. Or her heart beating out of her chest.

Claire removed her hands from Owen's neck and stumbled backward.

"Perfect timing. Where's Emma?" Owen quipped, sounding and looking confident. Whereas her, her pale cheeks and neck were blushing a much deeper hue than her hair.

"She's uh… she's in the uh…” Zara sputtered, before a glittering smile brightened up her face. "In the copy room."

Beside Zara, Claire saw Lowery took out his wallet, mouthing the bills as he counted.
"Okay." Owen said with a nod before continuing in that silvery tune. "Clear mine and Miss Dearing's schedule for today."

Her assistant looked like someone gave her a candy. "Of course! Anything you need." Zara chirped. "Claire?"

"Yes. As…” she cleared her throat, feigning confidence. "As Mr. Grady said."

"Alright!"

"Thank you… Miss Dearing, lead the way?" Owen crowed, opening his hand to let her walk and exit first.

Claire grabbed her phone from the table and avoided their assistants' eyes as she passed them. Pairs of eyes followed her to the elevators and Claire felt herself blush even more. She could practically see Owen's smile from behind her, the skip to his every step.

"What do I tell Zia?" Lowery asked, his phone in hand. "She's with your security in the other room.

"Tell her, it's okay. We'll see her and you guys tomorrow."

Owen swiped his card and stood beside her. The same, amused smile configuring his face.

"Enjoy." Lowery snickered, as he, demonstrably handed money to Zara. Claire narrowed her eyes at them.

"Bye-eee." Her assistant waved a hand, her fingers curling, a triumphant gleam in her face.

The elevator doors closed and a short silence befell them.

"Well…” Owen began, his amused reflection seen in the mirrors. Claire turned her head to him, their eyes locking. "That was-"

Seeing the colourful mirth in his face made her flush. And her stern expression immediately morphed into a coy smile.

"What?" He said, his the corners of his mouth jerking to a grin.

And they burst out laughing, the raucous sound reverberating in the enclosed space.

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The weather and traffic were coordinating with their activities. Everything about today made her forget all her troubles.

Before leaving the company, Owen pilfered a basket of snacks from the cafeteria. He still didn't tell her where they were going. Not until they reached Golden Gate Park where portable carnival set up camp.

Around them were donkey rides, food kiosks and game stalls. The mob of locals and tourists filled the garden. Lollipops, popcorn and chocolate covered apples on their hands. Bicycles and roller skates roamed around the field. The colors of the bunting flags above them reflecting the merriment. Hers, included.

They checked out the Ferris wheel first. She luxuriated in the golden afternoon and the easy flow of happiness below her. Though, it can't be the same for Owen. Owen Grady, multi-billionaire and Pride of the NAVY was skittish around heights.
There's a reason why I didn't join to the Airforce, Claire.

She had her fun by rocking the booth they were in. Owen clutched the rails, his lips pale, eyes closed tight. He had his own revenge later on though. One of the hotdog vendors was sprinkling water on the pavement, cooling off the heat. Owen thought it was hilarious to push her under the hose. She was too late to reach and the water drenched the bottom of her dress and heels in the process. She threw the pair of Manolos at him and it hit him square in the chest. He doubled back, hurt, before he ran after her. People stared at them, thinking why two grown adults were chasing each other around the grass.

Owen then showed (more like bragged) his strength on the High Striker. She sat on the empty ring toss booth 's seat across him. Her legs crossed, elbows resting on the platform behind her. She watched him beat mark after mark, the veins on his arms swell with every hit.

The series of "dings" attracted more females than she would've liked. After a good five minutes in the game, a small crowd of females completely hid him from view. She let them ogle at him for a few minutes more. But at some point, the bell stopped ringing and she figured that he's done. The group of women parted as Owen found her.

"There you are." He stated, acting oblivious to the giggling and whispering crowd behind him.

She rolled her eyes at him and added in a sarcastic tone. "Here I am. Hurray!"

Owen snickered and kissed her on the cheek. He put his arm around her shoulders before they went off to check another game booth. Claire curled her lips, hiding the possessive grin from the disappointed women.

The botanical garden was next. They walked, hand in hand as Owen tried to entertain her with made up scientific names of the plants around them. Afterwards, he persuaded her to go paddling with him in Stow Lake. Owen held her heels as she assisted her in and out of the boat. He was so excited to teach her the basics of rowing. And she tried to understand, honest to God, she did. But she zoned out after the correct positioning of the elbow, leaving Owen to do all the work. The rowing movement allowed his arms and torso to bulge under the cotton. A thin layer of sweat ran down his arms and neck. It was distracting her for the rest of the ride. She issued a silent thank you to whoever designed the shirt he was wearing.

At the end of the afternoon, they settled on the meadow near the conservatory. Owen laid out the thermal blanket that he had in his car on the grassy field and the basket of goods.

Claire was basking in the touch of the sun's warmth on her exposed shoulders. For the thousandth time that day, she felt the smile outline her lips. She clutched the plush stuff toy on her lap, raking her hand on the faux fur. Its lifeless, animated eyes gazing up at her. She traced a finger on its snout, down to the pink tongue poking from its mouth.

Owen won it in one of the shooting games. It was the highest prize and Claire couldn't help but tease and criticise him. Since he used to work with guns for a living, he, in a way, cheated.

She chuckled, recalling the boyish expression when he gave it to her.

"A very cute but dirty puppy for the pretty lady." He cooed, hiding behind the animal's ears.
"Why, thank you." She laughed, grabbing the toy. He was smiling at her, that smug, lopsided smirk he always had. "But this is a wolf cub, Owen."

"Do you have to correct me for everything?" He groaned, acting offended.

Instead of answering, Claire took him behind a nearby ticket booth, pulled him down and kissed him.

"Thank you for my dog or wolf." She breathed against his lips, slightly out of breath. "I love it."

And the smile he gave her was so irresistable that she had to give him another kiss.

"They don't have snow cones, so I got you an ice cream instead." Owen announced as he approached her from behind. In his hands were two ice cream sugar cones. One was chocolate, the other a pinkish, white treat. "I got you their strawberry vanilla instead."

She straightened up. "Thank you."

Owen removed his shoes and sat cross legged on the sheet. They ate in a comfortable silence, as they observed their surroundings.

In a few distance from where they were, were families, couples in their picnic blankets. A farther distance away were tourists as they hither and thither. Their faces sweaty, burnt but exuberant.

"When I was a kid…" Owen started, still staring ahead. "Me and my mom used to go to places like this. She would make me play every game until I win."

She smiled, picturing the memory. "Where's your dad?"

"He would go with us sometimes, but work always holds him up."

Claire knotted her eyebrows, putting the hand holding her treat on her thighs. This was far from the Alan she knew.

"He was kind of a workaholic back then. But after my mom died, he started going home earlier. Sometimes he won't go to work and fetch me at school. He'll ask me to skip class and we'll go to the movies."

That sounded like Alan.

"But me and my mom understood what he was doing. And this must sound as bad as it does, but I kind of liked how he wasn't always with us."

"How so?"

"Because I get to spend every moment with my mom. I was thankful I got to spend everyday with her. Not a moment wasted, you know. It was just us. It was comforting that we had our own thing-very separate from Dad."

Claire noted the love and adoration in his voice. "You must miss her."

He sighed, staring at the grass with a blank expression. "Very much. But, after she died, my dad was with me every step of the way. We became closer. He was my best friend."
"I know. He wouldn't shut up about you." She chuckled, presuming eating. "Everyday there's always gonna be a new story. Owen this, Owen that. It's sweet but sometimes I did wonder if it's all true."

He squinted at her and pursed his lips- a smouldering look, she presumed, was to entice her. "And? Now? What do you think?"

"Still debatable." She teased back, biting into her scoop.

He leaned back, gazing at her with that curious look in his eyes. "You know, thinking about it. I'm sure I heard your voice before. One or two times when I called Dad. And funny thing was, whenever I ask him who's he talking to, he's gonna change the topic."

"I'm sure he has his reasons for not talking about me."

"Maybe he did. But one thing's for sure…" He exclaimed, swallowing the last of his sugar cone.

"Hmm?"

"If he ever talked about you, I would've gotten out of the NAVY way earlier."

"You are a terrible charmer, Grady." She scoffed, rolling her eyes. "But I doubt that."

"It's true." He asserted in an as-a-matter-of-fact voice.

"Ha! I'm not falling for it."

"If you're not falling for it," he taunted, smirking at her. "Then why are you smiling, Miss Dearing?"

She chuckled, racking her brain for a pathetic excuse to explain the idiotic grin on her lips. "I love this ice cream flavor."

"Pfft!" He scorned before his features light up. "Can I taste?"

Claire sipped the melted vanilla on the edge of her cone before giving it to him. But Owen tugged her arm that she almost lost her balance. All her senses shut down as he met her sticky lips.

His tongue entered her mouth. Claire pulled back, unaccustomed to the display of affection. But Owen held the back of her neck, securing her mouth to his.

He pulled away, licking his lips. "Mmm, the best ice cream I've ever tasted."

"You're an idiot." She murmured, still reeling from the kiss.

"Yes… and I'm in love with you."

As soon as he said it, she saw his eyes widened into bowling balls. Claire drew back, astonished.

"Did I… Did I just said that? Out loud?" He fumbled, his cheeks and ears turning into a shade of pink.

"I… Uh… yeah."

"Ah, damn it!"
And she couldn't help the smile that etched her face. Or the heights her heart just took.

"Fuck me. I had a plan for... for when I'm telling you." He shook his head, blushing like she had never seen him before.

She almost wanted to laugh out loud but decided against it, lest he got the wrong idea. The last guy she's expecting to be punctual and organised actually made a plan? Owen Grady made a plan? And for this?

Claire couldn't keep the glee in her tone. "You? You made a plan? For when you tell me?"

He avoided her eyes and nodded. "Yes."

And she didn't think that he could blush even more. She tilted her head at him, urging him to go on.

"I was gonna dress up, coat and tie. And ask you to dinner in your favourite restaurant. And we're gonna drive to this hill where you can see the stars. And I'm gonna have some background music playing in the car when I say it."

Claire felt the smile splitting her face.

"Whatever. I may be overthinking it." He casted his eyes down, back to the grass. He stretched his legs in front of him, avoiding her gaze. Disappointment clouding over his posture.

Never had she seen him insecure of himself.

Claire wrapped her cone with tissue paper before she put it down.

She leaned forward, her heart beating so loud in her chest. She hooked her fingers on his chin, turning him to face her. "You're not overthinking anything, Grady." She whispered before latching her lips to his.

This might be the sweetest kiss she had ever received from him. His lips was creamy from his chocolate treat. His mouth ravaged her in a new, electrifying beat. Claire sucked on his bottom lip, issuing a groan from his throat. He pulled her body over him that she was almost half-lying on his torso. His hand glided to her hair down to her neck.

Claire couldn't put the best words to describe the emotions he was bringing in her. Was it possible to feel so lost, yet, somehow, at the same time, felt found?

She pushed the back of his head to hers and squeezed his shoulder. She slanted her head to the side, allowing him to kiss her with much more depth. Claire didn't care if they were being indecent, and by the hand buried in her hair, she knew, he didn't either.

_He loves me! He loves me! He loves me!_

The words kept flashing in her mind like a broken lightbulb. The wonderful colors of warmth drowning her in a sea of happiness she never knew she was capable of.

They broke apart, chests heaving for air, their foreheads resting against the other. Owen gave her a fleeting kiss on the lips again. His green orbs, ever so expressive, brimmed with the spark she had always noticed but couldn't name.

"I love you, Claire. I think I've always known… From that moment I saw you walk into that
boardroom. I still remember what you wore and how you carried yourself. You were gonna rip me a new one, I just know it. I have never met someone as bright, as beautiful, as generous and as tough as you. You are the most amazing person I know... I'm so in love with you, it's crazy. And it felt good to finally say it."

She stared at him, her heart chasing out the words she wanted to say. Does she love him? Her lips couldn't find the answer because she was too focused on his.

"And it's okay if you won't say it back. I'm not pressuring you... I just wanted you to know."

A surge of overflowing happiness enveloped her, as if her blood's made of raindrops and sugar. Her stomach churned with thousands of butterflies. Her knees were feeling shaky, she's grateful that she was sitting down.

She smiled at him, her heart expanding under his scrutiny. Her eyes glistening with a newfound light. "Like I said, always the terrible charmer, Grady."

Claire circled her arms around his neck and stretched her neck up for another kiss. He granted her. His lips were twitching under hers, smiling and kissing her nonetheless.

His arms wound around her in a big, warm and protective embrace. She could feel how fast his heart was racing beneath his shirt. The world melted around them as he squeezed her back, his arms crossing over her waist.

What would it take for them to stay in this moment forever? Safe, happy and without an ounce of worry?

The people around them thinned as the evening went on. They stayed at the park for another hour before packing their belongings.

"I had so much fun today."

He gave her a sweet kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad. You ready to go?"

"Yeah. But I have to use the bathroom first."

His eyes diverted to the compound behind him. "I'll go with you."

"Stay here. I'll be fine. It's only a few feet away." But she knew that stern tint in his eyes. Owen gave her a light peck on the lips.

"I'll be right outside."

As much as she detested the precautionary measures, it was necessary. And if it was the other way around, Claire knew she'll be doing the same to him. Claire nodded and offered him a reassuring smile. "Okay."

The queue inside was five minutes long. She looked overdressed compared to the summer clothes of the women around her. As she was washing her hands, she caught a glance of herself in the mirror and stopped. The blush was heating up her cheeks. Her eyes, large and unusually green. A wide smile was permanent and goofy.

*He loves me!*

She didn't know she could be this happy over three simple words. The feeling was like a broad belt
of sunshine in an endless winter - dazzling and fierce in its entirety. It made her feel complete. The warmth she tried so hard to repress in the past, was now flowing freely through her.

The sky had already turned darker when she got out. For a moment, she couldn't see him and a pang of paranoia hit her. But Owen reappeared from behind a cart on her right. He was holding two bottles of water, his countenance dimmer than a while ago.

"Something wrong?"

"What? No. Nothing." He smiled at her, "You ready to go?"

People started crowding the parking as well. Everyone, eager to go home after the day. The drive back to the townhouse - though filled with small talks on occasion - was dreary quiet. An old love song was playing on the radio. Owen hummed into it before grabbing the hand on her lap and played with it. The traffic got bad later on, though she didn't mind.

They arrived past eight in the evening. And as it had been for the past week, Owen went to search every room first. She was behind him, and she felt like a worthless back up. If anything were to happen for real, she didn't know how she could help him. Though Owen had taught her how to load and fire a gun two days ago, she hadn't actually fired a real one. Yet.

Claire set her stuff toy and bag on the kitchen counter as Owen grab another glass of water. She removed her heels, letting it fall on the floor with a loud thud. Claire walked behind him and enfolded him in an embrace. She pressed her cheek on his spine, the broad muscles relaxed under her touch. She slipped her hands underneath his shirt and trekked through little hair on his chest. She felt a shiver ran through him.

"Thank you for today, Mr. Grady." She mumbled against his back, before kissing it. Her hands following the line of hair down his abdomen.

He swivelled in her arms and kissed the top of her head. "You're very welcome, Miss Dearing. I had a lot of fun too."

Claire tugged him down by the neck until her nose was inches from his lips. Her tone seductive, "I'm ready to go to bed now."

He let out a deep, roaring chuckle. His hands held her waist. "Bed, huh?"

Claire bit her lip, her hands skimming over the stubble on his neck. "Unless you got better ideas?"

She saw the evil smirk on his face before he bent his knees and grabbed her thighs. Owen had hauled her over his shoulder, like a weightless sack of flour. Claire yelped, pounding her hands on his back.

"Put me down!" She screeched with a laugh that was echoing throughout the house.

"You asked for it, you're gonna get it, baby."

"Owen..."

They had abandoned the art of cleaning some ten minutes ago. The water in the bathtub was lukewarm, the suds covering half of their body. He had his shoulders propped against the slope of the tub with her back leaning on to his chest. She was sitting between his legs. Her own legs, astride as he goaded her with his expert fingers.
"Owen..." she called out again, involuntarily.

He groaned in reply, the sound vibrating against her back. Claire turned her head to the side, her lips immediately contacting with his skin. She trailed her tongue on his jaw, to his ear as his finger continued its unholy ministrations.

"You're so beautiful..." He mumbled against her hair, the dark tendrils plastering on her neck and shoulders. Owen parted it to the side as his other fingers went in and out of her folds in the slowest of rocks. His free hand was massaging her breast, pinching the erect nipple. Claire gripped his thighs as he added another finger. "...I'm so fucking lucky."

She sucked on his earlobe as she panted. His delicious erection digging on her lower back. Claire wanted nothing more for him to buried himself in her. His muscled chest was heaving against her shoulder blades. The fingers inside her curled, and pumped in and out. He was grunting with lewd remarks as he did so. She clasped the hand holding her breast, as her body arched. Claire ground her hips, spurring him to be more aggressive. She felt, more than heard his moan. He sucked the skin on her left shoulder as he slid another finger.

Fuck.

Her moan was a little louder this time. Owen hummed as he moved towards her jaw, his three fingers spreading her. "You feel so good."

She whimpered, her hands gripping the wonderful hands on her body. Claire felt him smirk against her neck before his hot, minty breath tickled her ear. She purred, her nails scratching his legs.

"What do you want, baby?"

"You."

*Only you. Please.*

Owen gave a soft kiss on her cheek before he grasped her hips and lifted her a few inches off his body. Claire used the side of the tub to raise herself. Her knees were still shaking from the heights he brought her not five minutes ago.

And he brought her down, the tip of his engorged member sliced through her. She kept still, gnawing on her lips to prevent herself from screaming. Owen dragged her down... and then, it was all him.

She gasped, her knuckles whitened as she held on the tub. Water sloshed on the floor, the bubbles gone.

Owen cursed, pulling her hips to his. She steadied herself, her legs bent beside his knees, her feet under his thighs to support her. Owen reclined his body on the slope of the tub. And she moved up and down, his hands guiding her to him. Their breaths husky and short, filled with unbridled pleasure.

Claire let go of the sides and gripped his ankles, forcing herself on him. Owen roared, waves of water, splashed out the tub as he sat up and forward. The top parts of his knees and thighs surfaced on the water. He held her by her breasts as he pushed himself deeper into her, every thrust hitting the her deep. Claire welcomed him, her heat caving him in. Her body carened forward as he poked her with a rough push. But Claire caught herself, her hands gripped the front brim of the tub.

Owen was grunting behind her, his strokes slow, glorious and hungry. The water was making them
clumsy that they had no other choice but to cling to each other. Owen braced his feet on the tub, his hands clasping the sides. He cursed out loud at the new position. Claire rose in and out of the water to meet him, her head looking over her shoulder, watching him. Owen's lips parted whenever she went down, his eyes heavy with passion and lust. She rested her elbows on the porcelain as she forced her body backwards.

Owen dug his fingers on her waist as she felt her walls closing him in. He groaned as he measured his pace, his body rising from the water. And he stopped altogether.

"Turn around, baby. I want to see you." He growled, slipping his girth out of her.

She straddled him in frenzy, water falling on either side of them. He had his arms on either side of the basin, behind her, caging her in. His pupils were wide, sexy and brooding. It was the same shade that always sent her toes curling and her body shaking for many hours.

Owen plunged into her once more, without warning. Claire felt her torso rise out of the water in pleasure. His mouth ducked down reaching for a nipple and he sucked, nibbled with an animalistic appeal. Claire wrapped an arm around his shoulder blades, the other, still gripping the edge of the tub. Their moans echoing off the bedroom suite. Owen let go of her breast and kissed her mouth. His tongue possessing her in rabid need. She rode him, rotating her hips, her body absorbing everything he was giving. Their harmonized moans, drowning out sound of the water spilling around them.

"I love you." she heard him whisper as he pulled away and Claire felt her heart expand with emotion.

She opened her eyes and met his glazed ones- full of promises, hunger and passion. Claire felt the air knocked off of her, the liquid golden sensation flooding her once again.

"And I would never, ever let." 

Before he could finish his sentence, Claire smashed their lips again. Her face angled to kiss him deeper, hands buried in his wet hair. She pulled at it as her body became desperate.

Owen hastened his movements as her body spasmed around him. Her body so attuned with his. Their connection was natural and primitive, unlike she had ever felt before. It was everything she never knew she needed.

The entire galaxy exploded in her vision. Claire screamed, her neck stretched into the ceiling. Her body was quivering with release but Owen continued for a few more thrusts. His hand slid down her butt and snuggled her into him. His grunts bolder, louder.

"Jesus, Claire."

Until he finally trembled, with a garbled cry of her name.

Claire remained coiled in his strong embrace as they restored oxygen back to their lungs. Their breaths, now in perfect unison.

"You are phenomenal." He muttered, resting their foreheads together.

Her palm rested on the side of his face. Claire had always reserved her judgment in every aspect of her life. But now, the compliments and gratitude became easier for her to give. "As are you."

Owen brought both her hands on his lips and kissed each pruny finger. He pulled away and reached
behind him for a towel. They both stood up from the bathtub, laughing on the mess on the wet floor.

He swaddled his towel around her first before grabbing one for himself. They dried themselves, their flushed and satiated appearances reflected on the vanity mirror.

But in a split second, a shadow fell on his face. His eyes became distant, and his smile fell. Before she could make a comment, he shook it off.

As they both got dressed, Claire felt today's activities finally taking its toll. An unexpected yawn contorted her face and she rubbed her hands on her eyes.

"You tired?" he asked, carding a damp strand of hair off her forehead.

"Kind of. You?"

"This might sound a little hypocrite of me but..." he rubbed at his nape, looking guilty. "I have to answer of few emails."

She chuckled, raising an inquisitive eyebrow at him, "When did you start becoming me?"

"You're a bad influence." He beamed at her. "You need anything downstairs?"

She shook her head.

Owen leaned down and gave her a quick peck. "I'll be only an hour. Sleep baby."

And he left.

Claire settled on his sheets, his scent engulfing her with the welcoming warmth. She hugged his pillow, nuzzling her nose deeper into the case.

She was back in the park. But it was empty.

Claire was standing in the middle the bridge in Stow Lake, alone. Although the sun was high up in the sky, the glare wasn't as heated and blinding as it's supposed to be. The trees and bushes swayed yet, it was windless. Then she heard it. His laugh, accompanied by another tenor sound she didn't know she could hear again.

Claire turned to the sound, and she was in the picnic grove. Owen and Alan was nudging each other, barbecue tongs in hand. Smoke was coming from the grill. It smelt like pork chops. A Coleman cooler sat beside them and three lounge chairs. Both gentlemen turned to her, joy in their faces.

But Owen's smile was blinding. He reached out his hand, offering it to her. He drew her to him and her heart catapulted in an instant. His arms, always felt strong, safe... home.

"I love you, Claire." He muttered on her temple.

She tipped her head back to say it back. But she saw how he paled. His hazel green, expressive eyes dilated, his mouth opened in shock. His complexion became grayer as if someone was draining the color from him. The hands she always deemed to be warm and comforting turned cold. Something wet was pressing against her stomach.

When she looked down, his shirt was bleeding with fresh blood. Her hands immediately covered his wound, she whipped her head around for help. But everything disappeared, including Alan.
They were back in the woods. Back in Devil's road. The wreckage that was her car lie abandoned behind her. Owen was still standing in front of her. His face had gone paler by the second until his eyes glazed and they both fell down. She shook him, tears blocking her vision.

A beeping sound woke her.

Claire opened her eyes and saw the wolf cub stuff toy staring at her. Behind it, was the wide window of his bedroom, darkness still encompassing it.

Her heart was beating fast, her brain buzzing with the events of her dream. On instinct, her hand reached for him on the bed next to her.

But it was cold and empty. Like the Owen in her dream. She sprang up, her ears perking up for any sound in the house. She glanced at the clock on his bedside table and noticed his phone. And a glass of water.

Something was wrong.

"Owen?"

Claire threw the covers aside and wandered to the bathroom. He wasn't there. Panic was starting to rise to her chest. With bare feet, she went to the study, where he said he was before she went to sleep.

The door was open, which gave her a slight relief. She pushed the door open and the ropes twisted in her stomach.

Although nothing seemed to be out of place, Claire couldn't help the foreboding sense in her gut. She ran down the stairs, calling his name.

Then she heard it.

The rapid fumbling with the front door lock.

It doesn't make sense. Why would Owen want to break in to his home?

Claire walked to the foyer, her heart in her throat, knees wobbling.

Something doesn't feel right.

Claire managed to grab the vase on the console.

"Owen?" It was barely a whisper. She couldn't move, her legs felt like lead.

The mechanism of the door wouldn't budge.

And the person behind it was getting desperate. He kicked it.

Shoulder banged it.

Multiple times.

Where is Owen?

A familiar voice shouted their names.
And the door burst from its hinges.

The French guy she met at farmhouse and Zia's faces came into view.

Their guns hoisted in the air.

Their faces damp with sweat and palpitating worry.

"Claire!" Zia yelled before she crossed the room to hug her... or hold her up. "Are you okay? Where is he?"

What is happening? she wanted to ask but her mouth cannot form the words.

"Barry, check the rooms! Find him!"

Barry nodded and jogged to the stairs, his head turned up, gun in the air.

And Claire didn't know what happened next.

The infernal pain in his head dulled out the rest of his senses. His eyes was still groggy, his throat, parched, his lip felt swollen. He ran his tongue on it and he flinched at the tang of rust. He was sitting cross-legged on the shaky floor, his head hung low. It felt like someone pulled his brains out and put them back in. He could still smell the drug they suffocated him with, he gagged. His hands, restrained by handcuffs on a pole behind, the metal biting his wrists as he pulled. His eyes adjusted to the dark, but not quick enough. His gaze wandered to the small opening in the room, a wash cloth covering the light emitting from it.

A cranking sound echoed below him and Owen's hit with a sudden doze of nostalgia. And although, he couldn't see more than the shadows of a dark room, he knew where he was. The stale, sulphur smell of the air. The lulling sway of the floor below him. The faint scent of seaweed, and squawking gulls in the far distance. Owen Grady spent a great deal of his life in ships and he knew when he was in one.

And then, a voice he recognised, cracked in the dark.

"Owen?"

Chains rattled in the small room. Owen whirled his head, trying to locate the sound. His body froze as he processed what was happening.

It can't be. He couldn't be here. He was in retirement with his wife, for almost a year now. Owen felt his stomach drop all the way to the ocean floor.

"Si- Simon? Simon!" Owen shouted, "Are you okay?"

"Hey, kiddo," he coughed, "I'm fine."

A radio squeaked from his left. Owen stayed still, as another familiar, voice rang,

"He's awake."

And Owen felt his blood enraged in murderous ripples. The thick cloth covering the window fell, allowing little light into the room. But he didn't need it to identify the traitor.

"Brennan, you fucking son of a bitch!"
To be continued...
Chapter Notes

Yes, you're not dreaming. You can hurl things at me, I won't mind. LOL. Here's the second to the last chapter. This is probably the hardest chapter for me to write. I did my best. Thank you for sticking up with me!!!

Also, please note the ship jargons in this one:

- bulkhead- walls in a ship
- Deck- flooring in a ship
- port-window in a boat/ship
- moor- a parked boat/ship

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The lion may be more powerful, but the wolf does not perform in the circus."
Claire looked over her shoulder and wrinkled her nose at him — her way of acting cute. He chuckled and crossed his arms in front of him. He watched as she disappeared into the ladies' bathroom.

Owen felt the warmth of his smile envelop him like sunshine.

Wherever did he find the courage to tell her how he feels?

But truth was, Owen couldn't remember the words he said. He figured he sounded like a total idiot—a cheesy, fumbling idiot. He wanted to curl to a ball and jump off a cliff.

But heaven forbid...

She had no right to look that carefree and beautiful today. The radiant glow in her face made his heart ache and thrum with a explosive beat. She had outshone everything and everyone today. Her smile and eyes mirrored the happiness enshrouding him. She was too bright, it was almost blinding to stare.

He couldn't remember the last time — or if there ever was such a time— he said I love you to someone. Or even felt nervous around a woman. His palms were sweaty, his lungs felt like they were running out of oxygen. Self-consciousness wasn't something he was. He was Owen Grady, after all. He was always sure of himself. His words were always flawless. But he was stammering like a grade-schooler in the principal's office.

Owen had always been careful around Claire. He didn't want to push her into anything she wasn't prepared for. After that bar talk with Ron Dearing, he finally understood what made her the way that she was. The cocoon she always tried to hide herself in, was her only protection. She grew up without healthy, loving relationships. Claire must have been questioning his motives, or the integrity of it all.

Hence, he took cautious steps. Still, he revelled in it, like the only kid allowed in a huge playground. The arguments and deathly glares were incomparable to making up and her sweet, loud laugh. The littlest things that she does could eradicate any personal and professional afflictions.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Without looking at the caller ID, he answered. His voice reflecting the happiness within.

"Hello."

"It's been a perfect day, hasn't it, Grady?"

And as quick as that, his day turned sour.

Owen stopped leaning on the tree he was using as his shade. He put his phone away from his ear to glance at the ID.

It was an unregistered number.

Owen felt a drip of cold sweat on his nape as he scan his surroundings.

"Who is this?"

"Oh. Don't spoil the fun yet." The man in the phone continued in that husky undertone.
"What do you want?"

A sinister laugh vibrated in his speakers, making Owen shake his fist in anger. "Ha! I've heard of your promptness. Feels good to experience it firsthand. God, I'm having goosebumps right now."

"Don't fuck with me." He hissed, eyeing the entrance for Claire, vigilant.

"But it's so much fun. I usually let my flunkies do this sort of thing, but I've gotta see it for myself."

"I swear to God, if you-"

"If I what?" The man sniggered before his tone turned bleak. "Careful with your words, Grady. Don't wanna ruin such a perfect day. Especially that sexy blue dress of hers."

He stilled even more. Owen inhaled a deep, agonising breath. "Tell me what you want."

"Brennan, you fucking son of a bitch." He yelled, infuriated. His voice shook the empty, dark berth. "You fucking traitor!"

Brennan ignored him as the voice on the radio cackled, "Yeah, he's awake, alright."

Even with the blood pounding in his ears, Owen listened to the conversation. Owen studied Brennan's face in the dark, looking for a slight indication, empathy, anything. But he sounded intimidated.

"What would do you want me to do?" Brennan mouthed on the speaker, and still avoiding his glare.

"Where are the boys?"

"They're en route."

"Good. Call Gasmen, ask him to give me an update on the ground."

"Copy, sir."

His mind was whirling into a dozen realisations. Brennan was in the Devil's Road case. He could easily wipe or steal the CCTV footages.

Then there the bombing at the basement. It made sense that for months, Brennan has been going in and out of the office, giving him apt time to study the building. And Joe, for God's sake. Joe. They fucking shot him!

His wrists chafed against the metal cuffs. He was seething with fury. "You fucking assholes!"

The voice on the radio howled with laughter. "I'll see you soon, Mr. Grady."

And the line went dead.

Owen narrowed his eyes on Brennan. "That's how it is huh? You piece of shit! You were on this from the very beginning!"

Brennan didn't say anything, his dark expression unreadable. He walked towards the small room to where Owen could now see Simon.
Brennan laid a hand on Simon's shoulders and gently pulled him, so the old man was leaning on the wall.

"Don't touch him." Owen spat. "Let Simon go. He had nothing to do with this. You have me."

Billy gave him an irritated scowl. "You're not in control here, Grady."

"Then who the fuck is? Your friend on the phone? Who's been stalking me like he has a fucking high school crush?"

The floorboards creaked as Brennan made his way towards him. The single beam of light from the port window allowed Owen to see Brennan's sneer. He crouched down from where Owen was sitting on the floor.

"Doesn't feel good, does it Grady? Feels weird not be the one calling the shots, eh?"

Owen equaled him with a smug snigger of his own. "At least, I knew how it felt."

His smile fell as a harsh glint masked Brennan's eyes.

Bingo.

With a patronising tone, he added, "Can you say the same for yourself, Brennan? Tell me, how does it feel to be a pup-"

He would've ducked if he could. But Brennan swung his arm back in a flurry of motion. And his balled fist connected with his jaw. The adrenaline, anger and shock hindered the sharp pain. He shook his head and mocked, "Did I hit a nerve, Brennan?"

With a clenched jaw, Brennan stood up and kicked him in the stomach. Owen doubled forward, coughing.

Simon, who he figured was sitting on the farthest corner of the cabin, cried, "Owen!"

Owen chuckled, his tone challenging and demeaning. "Must be an advantage to you, eh? I bet you can't deck me without these cuffs."

"You think you're so tough, Grady…" his voice was pensive, envious. It triggered another smile from Owen. ":-The wonder boy who grew up to have everything he ever wanted… But we're about to see how brave you are."

Owen craned his neck for a much cleverer comeback but Brennan hit him again. He felt the blow this time, his eyes blurring on the impact. "That was for the day at the hospital, you fucking dick."

Brennan stormed off, closing the watertight hatch behind him.

"Geez, kid. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He replied and grounded his teeth, his head starting to swim into focus again.

"Do you have a death wish?"

Owen leaned back his head on the pole tethering him, a smirk on his busted lip.

"You're smiling, aren't you?" Simon scoffed. "Was there a point for letting him beat you up like that?"
His grin became wider. "Of course."

"What?"

"I'm getting to know our enemies."

"There's something familiar about him, though." Simon mused. "I didn't get a good look on his face, but he sounded familiar. What did you say his name was?"

Owen spat the blood from his lip. "Billy. William Brennan. He's a fucking FBI agent."

"No. No, that's not it."

Owen frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I've met him before. I know it."

---

**Ten hours missing**

Voices.

Voice everywhere.

And tapping. Endless tapping.

Claire stirred from her dreamless sleep. The soft sheets that smelt like him; a laden of his lemon aftershave and fresh Downy detergent. She sighed, allowing the scent to cocoon her in a myriad of comfort.

Claire sat up with a start.

Two things hit her at once.

One, she didn't remember how she came up here.

And two, and the most crucial of it was, he isn't here.

A surge of fearful thoughts came invading her senses again. As a form of habit, her hand slid across the vacant, cold place that was his side, seeking comfort.

To her relief, the pounding migraine from earlier was gone. She looked at the the glass of water on the bedside table and had to scowl. The water looked cloudy, as if something dissolved in it. Claire fought the anger rising on her throat and staggered out of bed.

The room felt bleak, empty, alien without him. Though the sun (visible in his windows) was at its peak, a shiver ran through her. And before she knew it, she was traipsing to his closet.

Her fingers felt the rows of clothes in an absent-minded manner, loving how the room smelt of him. Claire stopped and unhooked a plaid dark blue sweater. She put it on over her dress shirt, allowing the fabric to cover her entire frame.

For a moment, she wanted to scream, break down and throw a chair out the window — not necessarily in that order.

Claire was angry… and scared. She never knew it was possible to feel two overbearing emotions at
the same time. She wrapped her arms around herself, allowing herself a moment to succumb to despair. Because once downstairs, she could never allow herself to be.

She shook her head, as if to get rid of the negative thoughts. Claire went downstairs to where she knew all the actions were.

It was strange to see the once empty and private walls swarming with people. The blabber continued as she stepped into the room.

The dining table resembled a feast, only if that feast was laptops, papers, empty coffee cups, and wires. Three large monitors lined the center of the table. It almost looked like a barrier, dividing the two teams apart.

There were ten people in the room. Zia who was leaning over the curly-haired dude Claire met a while ago. Franklin Webb, the IT specialist, fresh out of the NAVY due to his broken knee. Claire recognised Bobby, the guy she punched a few days ago. He was sitting opposite them, frowning over his own computer. The other guy, Francis, the other security detail Owen appointed to her. Standing by the windows overlooking the greenhouse was Barry. He was talking to the phone, looking as frantic as she was. Lowery sat at the center of the table, a coffee cup hovering over his lips. His laptop was open along with sheets of paper scattered about the table. Sitting next to him was Zara, who was also holding papers of her own. They looked like they were comparing data. She recognised Martha and Andrew, from the IT department. They're huddled together with their own equipment. And Emma, who came out from the powder room. It wasn't part of the company protocol to help with the investigations. But everybody wanted to offer their contributions. Each screen was being monitored by the best in the company.

Zara stood up and walked to her, concern clouding her face. "How are you feeling, boss?"

"The next time, somebody slipped a medicine to my drink, I'm gonna lose it." she threatened.

Zara blushed a light shade of pink. "Sorry."

She gave an understanding nod. She'll admit that the few hours of sleep wasn't all bad. "Did you contact Donna?"

"Yes. They finished the press briefing twenty minutes ago."

"How are they handling it?"

"It's…" Zara hesitated, "manageable."

"How's the new security? Did they arrive there yet?" She looked at Emma who fumbled with her notes before giving it to her.

"Ah yes. I already forwarded your authorisation to HR. Here are the resume in case you want to check. They employed five security personnels from the agency you picked."

"Okay. Well done. I want everyone out the building at exactly six pm."

Her assistants nodded before they dispersed. Claire walked towards Zia and Franklin's station.

Zia and the team didn't take the death threats lightly. And as the logical, counteractive measure they saw fit was to put a tracker in Owen's belongings. Lowery installed a high-militay grade tracker on Owen's laptop a few weeks prior. Zia did the same to his car. Owen wasn't aware that they did. That's how they found out that Owen left the townhouse and drove to Pier 39 at quarter to
four.

Zia, Barry and Lowery were hanging out at the Den when an alarm beeped from his phone. Thinking that it was one of those "we'll watch the sunrise" dates, they waited before following him. They weren't out of their car yet when Barry sprung open the passenger door and ran towards the vacant car. The driver's door was still open, the engine was still running. They called the authorities and left Lowery on the scene. Zia and Barry went to check on her at the townhouse and the trackers they installed. They found his phone in the bedroom but his laptop was gone.

"Any luck?" Claire asked them, peering over their screen.

Zia shook her head and folded her arms in front of her. "I'm hopeful that they would activate the GPS on his laptop anytime soon."

She nodded, and observed the x-rayed map of United States. Tiny dots of green and thin lines connecting each state. On the left side of the screen were map coordinates. On the left were transport surveillance in San Francisco. Claire felt the sunken feeling again, these were the kind of scenarios she could only see from movies. It was more horrifying and incomparable in real life. They were sitting ducks until Owen's abductors accessed his laptop.

"Are we sure that they will?" Lowery asked. "I'm not trying to be skeptical. We've been looking at this for hours. What if I didn't install it correctly?"

"You did and they will." Franklin chimed in, optimistic. "If they so much as check the time, it would send a conservative signal from their location to here." he tapped on his monitor.

"But will they know that we're tracking it?"

Franklin's cheerfulness didn't dim. "Unless one of them was in the military, but I doubt it. I doubt it."

She nodded again. "Do we have news on Simon?"

Claire circled the table and went to where Martha, Andrew and Lowery were. "Mrs. Masrani is out of the hospital. She's okay, a bit frazzled but okay."

As if Owen missing wasn't hard enough for everyone, Claire learned of Simon's abduction a few hours ago. Only four hours after Owen.

According to the Mrs. Masrani, she and Simon were in their Los Angeles home. Simon went out to get takeouts. Masked men broke into her home while Simon was still out. They tied her to the chair, gagged her and kept asking for a box. Simon arrived at the scene and they knocked him out cold before taking him.

"Is Mina with her already?" Claire asked, thinking of Simon's daughter.

"Yes. Along with her husband. They took her in the meantime while police are searching the house. The kidnappers appeared not to have taken anything."

"Is it possible to have someone watch them too?" Claire looked at Emma who was already on her phone. "Give them two guys."

The young woman nodded. "I'm on it, Claire."

"Martha, how are we doing?" She crouched down at the blue screen of alphanumerical numbers.
"Yeah. We asked the banks to freeze Owen's bank accounts and assets to avoid suspicious transfers. We also doubled the security measures for all company files in case someone tries to hack it."

"That's great." Claire complimented, patting them on the shoulders.

"Oh and Claire," Lowery called, reaching a folder on the console table. "An officer dropped this an hour ago."

"What am I looking at?" Claire queried, flipping through the pages.

"Owen's car had no prints except for his, no sign of damage in the exterior and interior. Although, they did found a speck of dried blood on the pavement. But authorities couldn't use it for evidence since it's a parking lot."

"Emma, Kindly call Brennan or Walters for me—"

And then she heard it.

A subtle ping, it was almost impossible to detect. Franklin raised his arms in the air, as if in celebration. "Got him."

Claire's heart soared as she practically leaped towards Franklin. And everyone followed and crowded over.

"It's working!" Franklin exclaimed again.

A red dot was circling the map, right over Hunter's Point.

And as soon as everyone got their confirmation, they stumbled back to their desks in a hurry. There was a nervous excitement in the room.

Zia reached for her phone lying in the middle of the mess and speed dialled a number. "Brennan, he's at Blandy street, near Hunter's point. Don't ask me why I know! Get a team over there! Now!"

Claire closed her eyes in relief.

We're coming, Owen.

---

18 hours missing

They left the window uncovered, allowing a single ray of afternoon sunlight in the space. He stretched his neck up, trying to catch a glimpse of, well, anything. But the cuffs were biting his wrists, rubbing the skin raw. He fell back and sighed in defeat. At the far end of the cabin, Simon was still sleeping, his legs stretched before him. Or resting his eyes, Owen doesn't know.

A barrel-chested goon with an army-haircut went awry was seating on a plastic chair by the hatch. His head was leaning on the steel wall of the cabin. The goon was wearing his wristwatch. It was a gift from his commanding officer and his sailor friends for his 29th birthday. Owen had been hearing its endless ticking for what he assumed was eight hours now. The guy let out a loud snore as he lolled his head to the side. A small automatic pistol, holstered on his ankle boots.

Simon hurled and coughed across him, making Owen snapped his eyes on him.

"You okay?" He asked.
Simon looked up, his face green with nausea. "Never did like cruise rides. And the food service here is ghastly terrible. It's a bad first impression." he joked.

Owen cracked a small smile in his attempt.

They docked a few hours ago. Owen could tell from the steady sway of the wooden deck he was sitting on. Where? He had no idea but judging from the sun ray pouring from the port, they couldn't have gotten out of the bay that far yet. A foreboding sense in his stomach envelop him. They didn't know who their captives or their motives yet. The only person they saw was the drooling Johnny Bravo and Billy Brennan.

Brennan. The thought of him walking free made his blood gurgle with fury. Everything was making sense now. Of course, Tenebris Bellator needed inside men within the Bureau. And being one of top agents in the FBI, Brennan had to be one of their most prized possession. How many times did they twist the law? How many criminals have they set free? Owen's body shook with rage.

He remembered the day at the hospital—when he saw Brennan and his filthy paws on Claire. Owen had never been more determined to break someone's bones before. Now, it was the only thing keeping him awake.

The churning sound of the watertight hatch startled Johnny Bravo. He sprung in his seat and straightened up as the hatch revealed a Middle-eastern guy and a man in dreadlocks. Both men were wearing luxurious ironed suits and backpacks.

The middle-eastern guy clapped Johnny Bravo on the shoulder and chuckled. He spoke with a flawless New Jersey accent, "You look scared for a minute there, Sulli. Inspecting someone else?"

Sulli, alias Johnny Bravo, shrugged off his hand. "Fuck off, Levi."

Dreadlocks, who looked more serious than his partner proceeded to the table on the corner. A few feet from where he was sitting. Owen watched as the one called Levi patted the bulkhead for the light switch.

"And… let there be… light!" He exclaimed before a glare of light radiated the entire deck.

Owen squinted as his eyes adjust to the brightness. He took in his surroundings.

They were in a ship alright— an empty crew quarters without the beds and interior. The only furniture in the room was the study desk and the plastic chair where Johnny Bravo sat.

Dreadlocks didn't glanced at him but went on to work. He dragged the chair by the hatch and pulled out two laptops from his bag. It took Owen a moment to notice that one was his.

Johnny Bravo clicked the hatch closed again and stood guard. Levi leaned on the table, peering at him. Owen fixed his stare, at the same time, engraving their faces in his memory. Levi had jet-black hair, strong jaw, dark eyes and looked no more than twenty-five. He had a distinguishable chip in his front left teeth. The other guy, who he hadn't learnt his name yet, had blonde dreadlocks for his hair. A bonnet covered the top part of his head. He had a tattoo of an anchor on his neck, beside his Adam's apple. Black stencils covered the entirety of his hands.

Levi's lips quirked upwards, the gap between his front teeth. "Mr. Owen Grady. Pleasure to finally meet you. I heard wonderful things."

Dreadlocks clicked his tongue, snapped his fingers and pointed to the laptop. "Levi, quit playing
around and get to work."

"I have to say..." Levi started again, excitement in his voice. "The defence system in your building is impeccable. It was nothing we've ever seen... Or hacked into."

Owen gnashed his teeth, his expression dissolving into pure hatred. "You killed Joe?"

"Whoa! Whoa!" Levi raised his hands in defensive move. "I didn't kill anybody. I didn't pull the trigger. Tell them, Ricky."

"He didn't kill anybody," Ricky aka Dreadlocks conciliated. He didn't sound he was lying. "They leave the big jobs to bigger boys."

Levi opened his hands. "See? Although, I must say, it was pretty heroic death. So, cheer up."

Dreadlocks groaned with impatience. "Would you please get to work? I don't want to be any longer than I need to."

Levi cleared his throat before turning his torso to grab the laptop behind him.

"I'm assuming this has a password, Mr. Grady." Levi flipped him the laptop and showed the opening screen with the dialog box. "Would you do me the honours?"

"Sure. Type 'Fuck me'. All Caps, two words with exclamation point in the end." Owen loured, his lips copying his captor's sardonic smile.

"Alright."

Without warning, Johnny Bravo walked across the deck and reached Simon. He slapped him across the face with brutal force, over and over again. Simons pained yelps rang in his ears.

"No! No! Stop! STOP!"

Johnny Bravo sneered at him and held Simon's bruised face by his sweat-matted hair.

"Now, let's try this again. The password, Mr. Grady?" Levi asked again.

"No, Owen. Don't." Simon rasped, his lip swollen, his cheeks turning a dark shade of purple.

He looked away. Resisting them would only hurt more. They must have kidnapped Simon too so they'll have someone to torture. They wanted him to comply and give them the information they needed.

"Moonflower. Capital M. One word."

Levi's smile was like a cheshire cat. "See? That wasn't so bad. Was it, Mr. Grady."

Levi typed the password, whilst holding the laptop with one hand and still facing him.

"And we're in! Wow, wow wow! Mr. Grady They told us you were rich. But not this rich! Look at this Ricky boy, he has more dough than the fucking people in the planet."

When the voice on the phone told him to bring out his laptop at Pier 39 he knew what it meant. Money. His laptop held security codes and complete access to all his bank accounts. Including his companies'.
But three things happened at once.

One, Levi's happy whistling stopped. His tanned face, paled like a sheet of paper. "Wh-what? The fuck is this, Grady? Why is it locking me out?"

Two, A phone rang in the room—a text alert tone on Dreadlock's phone. He was silent while he read it but then he stood up, knocking the chair backwards.

Three, heavy footsteps echoed in the passageway. The dog lock turned clockwise in a hurried attempt. The hatch hit the bulkhead with a loud clang. And Brennan's face came into view. Behind him were two other men. Brennan was angry, sweaty… and nervous.

What's happening?

Owen glanced back at Simon who was as bewildered as him.

Is someone coming to rescue them?

Brennan hauled him up by the collar of his shirt. The handcuffs restrained him back and down. The metal dug on his already scraped skin. He winced from the pain.

Brennan shouted, "What did you fucking do, Grady? !" And he punched him in the stomach. Owen fell down, face and body forward.

"It's the laptop! It's rigged. Some kind of Navy tech." Dreadlocks hissed as he and Levi assembled their things.

"Why didn't you nerds check it? Throw that fucking laptop away, Morrison!"

From the floor, Owen saw Levi opened the port. A rush of warm, salty air flowed right in before Levi blocked it and chucked his laptop to the open sea.

"Un-cuff them! We've got three minutes before the San Francisco Police gets here! Go!"

One of the men rested a boot on his spine, pushing him down. His right cheek pressed further against the wooden deck. Another man was doing the same to Simon.

"Let Simon go, Brennan! He had nothing to do with this!" He reasoned, as they strapped his hands again.

"Get them to the back! NOW! Or we'll all be dead!"

Brennan sounded scared. Owen took a quick look around. And every Johnny Bravo and the techs had the same frantic expression. This justified the idea that whoever they were working for, whoever he was, they're afraid of him.

Two men grabbed him by either elbows and pulled him in the narrow passageway. He thrashed around, elbowed Johnny Bravo II, trying to break free. They moved in a hurry. They had Simon was grumbling behind him.

At the harbour, the briny wind sprayed on his face, he could almost taste its saltiness on his tongue. The sun illuminated the waves, the rays scattering over its deep turquoise color. For the briefest moment, Owen felt at peace. Until, he heard police sirens wail in the distance and a blanket fell over his eyes. The dark, thick fabric impaired him, his shouts muffled.

"Go! Go! Go!" Brennan kept shouting.
The dock creaked under their combined weights. One of the men grabbed his elbow and pushed him over. For a minute, his feet felt nothing but air and he had a strange notion that he's sent over a cliff. But his feet landed with a loud thud on something steel and damp.

Another boat.

He felt and heard Simon's grunts next to him. Behind them, one of the men shouted a racial slur to Simon. "-Or I'll blow your brains out!

Owen whipped around and kicked behind him. His foot landed on someone's muscle. He heard the body drop and cursed at him. Owen took his chance and even though he still couldn't see anything, he kicked and kicked. His shoes landed on the body, head, feet, blow after blow. He heard the men coming for him but he didn't stop.

Cold air swooped behind him before he felt the harsh sting of electricity from his hip. Now, Owen had only been tasered two times. One was when he, Lowery and Barry were drunk. Lowery fired at him, thinking it wouldn't work. The second and the last time was in training.

Fifty-thousand volts rocked his body, the agonised scream finally emerged from his chest. His knees gave up and he fell on his side.

"Owen! Are you okay?" He heard Simon shrieked near him. "Owen!

A few more feet landed on the deck before Owen felt the rumble of the engine beneath them. Simon's body rolled over, knocking him, as the vessel began to sail. He felt the dampness wetting through his lower leg. Voices were above them, harsh whispers he could not make out.

"Owen, are you… Owen, talk to me! Are you okay?!

"Never better, uncle." He groaned, lying on his back.

"Take them to the rendezvous point. Check the both of them for anymore wires. I'll meet you there!" Brennan ordered.

Owen heard the engine spurred a louder sound and the swoosh of the water vibrated beneath them.

They're moving farther away.

26 hours missing

The highway was empty, except for the Ducati zapping through it.

He was racing through misty dawn. The moon was a massive, glowing white orb at the peak of the mountains. He revved his throttle through ancestral trees and nocturnal animals.

The Ducati was his most prized possession— the only good thing he ever gave himself from all this. Even with the thick leather jacket, the strong gusty air permeated through him.

His phone buzzed on the holder. He glanced at the Caller ID on the dashboard and slowed down.

Billy clicked and his partner's voice rang through the headset under his helmet. "Where are you?"

"Surveillance." He lied.

It was funny how after everything he's done, it sometimes still felt weird to lie. "Have you
interviewed witnesses?” He still asked despite knowing the answer.

"There aren’t any."

He acted displeased. "It's the middle of the day! How can there not be witnesses?"

Walters grieved a heavy sigh instead of replying. Billy felt a little sorry for the man. He imagined him, his hands pulling at his hair.

At first, it was funny watching his new partner aggravated and chased his own tail around. Billy watched him go after the littlest details. Walters was good. He went close by a fraction but Billy managed to evade him before he could piece everything together. He didn't feel good about this mission. Honestly, he didn't feel good about any of this.

"Look, check the traffic in and out from 5 am to 3 pm. There has to be something."

"Alright."

"In the meantime, Keep an eye on Rodriguez." He took the bend in the road, loving the sharp wind blowing his face. He'd take his motorcycle over any expensive boat any day.

"Why?"

His partner, always asking the wrong questions. I couldn't tell you, Walters. "Don't know. I have a hunch."

"Okay. I gotta go, Sarge's here."

"Yeah. Call me."

His finger hovered over the button when Eric added, "Oh, and Claire Dearing's looking for you."

Brennan floundered, even for a bit. "What? Why?"

"Don't know." His partner sounded delighted. "But I need you to get over here. She's starting to scare me."

There wasn't a law preventing agents to joke during an assignment.

"More than you already were?"

"Fuck you, Brennan." He faked a laugh before he hanging up.

He chuckled as his phone rang again. Billy didn't bother looking at the called ID.

His joke got caught in his throat when he heard the flat, cold voice in the speaker. "Are you on your way?"

He crouched down and saw the outline of the villa standing on the plateau from two kilometres away. "10 minutes, sir."

"Good. Morrison and Cross?"

"They came with Masrani and Grady. They arrived more than two hours ago."

"Alright. Keep them there. I'll be there in thirty minutes. Don't let them mess up this time." And he
ended the call.

Billy gulped a nervous lump in his throat and stepped on the pedal. That doesn't sound good.

Like a well functioning government, every mafia has a leader. In Tenebris Bellator, they're called as the Principal.

Billy was a low-paid messenger boy in Boston when he came upon a wounded man in an abandoned alley. That man turned out to be the right-hand of the former Principal. In return for saving his life, the man offered him money and recruited him to the Commission. For the first time in his life, Billy wasn't only making ends meet. He was earning money more than he could count. He owed them a great deal. If it wasn't for them, he would be rotting in his childhood home with his starving family.

Though, at what cost? He had asked himself.

When he had enough money, he joined the Academy. And as a result, his position in the Commission went up. From being the unwanted neophyte, he became their top insider; he became important to them. It was nice to feel important. Although he had injured many on the job, Billy never killed anyone, he was against it. Though, he knew it doesn't make up with the fact that he was helping all these criminals.

Billy liked the former Principal. For starters, he was a nice, old man. But his involvement in illegal gambling and narcotics made him a dangerous man. A very dangerous man. He died of heart attack several years ago.

Billy thought of leaving the Commission. But the framed picture of sisters in Boston University was holding him back. What would happen to them if he bailed?

Over the years, he managed to relocate his parents and other siblings to other safe locations. He would do anything to protect them from the shit show he got himself stuck with. Billy knew what they were capable of. They had tentacles stretching far wide across oceans. He had come so close, he couldn't go back. Not now.

Billy never trusted anyone in the Commission. He kept his distance and only present himself when necessary.

After the former Principal died, it became harder for him to quit. The man who proceeded him was much younger, much more cautious, and much, much worse.

The new Principal was a business prowess. He was a powerful man. He's the head of many prostitution rings, drug dens and bootlegging dealerships. He was the Owen Grady of the Underworld. Billy only saw him twice in his life but was always participative in the business. The Principal would sometimes call him every now and then to check. He was a hands-on man.

The Principal was a perfectionist, a narcissist who doesn't do well with others' mistakes. He was very much mindful of that. Good examples were Kavesh, the newbie they sent for the kidnapping attempt in Devil's Road. And Kowalski, the guy near Claire's apartment. Both guys were eager to impress, and by so doing, afforded mistakes the Principal could not let pass.

Billy was grateful that he wasn't in charge but he still felt the panic when he received the call from Zia. He almost fell off the taffrails of the Panthera, a dry cargo ship owned by their employer. He never ran so fast his entire life. Grady looked clueless so he must have no idea. He couldn't imagine what would've happened if their kingpin arrived on the scene. He'd get away with it for
sure, given his connections within the bureau himself but still. Nobody messes with the Principal's plans.

Billy pulled at the iron-wrought fence of the manor. Sculpted at the center of the gate was a lion's head, its mouth bared. Under the two lampposts, stood two guards. Billy showed his badge and they let him in. The manor was big enough to fit three apartment buildings. He had only been here once, back when they were planning the bomb attack on Grady Corp. He parked the bike and got the Walgreens from the tail bag.

Mac and Spalko stood by the entrance, playing cards. The heavy smell of booze and cigarettes was surrounding them. Brennan gave them a quick nod before walking past the archway and the huge parlour. The staircase leading to the wine cellar was made out of stone, like half of the house. The wine cellar's lights were off but he could make out the figures shackled on the opposite columns. Billy turned the switch and blinding lights burst in the room. The cellar was wide as it was long. Aside from a few barrels and the small rack under the stairs, the shelves lining the stoned walls were empty. He switched the lights.

He glanced at Grady who was, unsurprisingly, returning his stare. Simon Masrani had his eyes closed. His shackled hands crossed over his stomach, his legs outstretched. He noted the pale complexion from when he last saw him. Billy was familiar with the symptoms.

Aside from the purple bruise on Simon's face, both gentlemen looked okay. Their clothes, matted with sweat, were filthy from the tugboat. But otherwise, they're fine.

Billy opened the bag and produced two water bottles and a box of Dramamine. He placed one water bottle a good distance from Grady before he walked to Masrani. He nudged him with the bottle in his hand. The man jerked away on instinct.

"Here." He offered him the bottle and a tablet. "Don't worry. They're for motion sickness."

The old man continued gawking at him. Billy popped two tablets himself and swallowed. He showed his tongue to Simon, letting him know that it's not what he thought it was.

"Not much of a seafarer myself." He added in a consoling tone. Billy knew he could get shot for this. "Take it. It won't make you sleepy, I promise."

Masrani glanced behind his shoulder— at Owen— for permission. Billy didn't follow his eyes. But he guessed Grady thought it's okay because Masrani downed two tablets and drank the water he gave him. He gave him a grateful nod. "Thank you."

Billy stood and sat on one of the stair steps overlooking them. Grady still hasn't touched his bottle, to which he had no problem with. He could die of thirst, for all Billy cared.

"I know you." Masrani muttered, making him raise his eyes back at him.

Billy felt uneasy. The man's round eyes penetrated him, as if he's seeing through the horrible things he did.

"You're the nurse. One of Alan's nurses—"

He tried to maintain a straight face as he stared back at the man who revealed him.

"—Your hair was brown back then and you wore glasses."

Across him, Grady leaned forward. "What the hell are you talking about?"
Masrani kept staring at him. "He took care of your father, Owen. I remember him because he kept interrupting our conversation to give him medicine. Alan liked him. He even offered to pay for his med school, should he want."

"And he was fooling him." Owen remarked with a greater venom in his voice. Angry was an understatement from the murderous expression on his face. "You deceive a dying man for money."

"I didn't accept it." He defended and focused on the chipped stone on the floor. The guilt and shame creeping from his stomach was throwing him off guard. "I was a nurse years before I got into... this, before the agency."

Due to his healthcare background, the Principal appointed the task to Billy. The Principal never bothered to use force on Alan since he was already terminal. Billy thought the Principal was pretty reasonable when he wanted to. Billy became his duty caretaker for almost eight weeks. When they got the confirmation and information they needed, he resigned from his post.

Billy had to agree that the world lost a great man when Alan Grady died. He wasn't there when it happened (thank God). But Billy remembered him. He was kind, gentle and wise, way beyond his years.

"I never gave your dad the wrong medications. If that's what you're worried about, Grady, I assure you of that." He defended again and added in a good-hearted tone. "He was a good man."

"Alan told me that you were too." Simon noted with a hint of disappointment.

Billy almost said "I'm sorry." because he truly was. Instead, he hung his head in humiliation. He tried to square his gratitude to Alan Grady by sending those "written warnings" to his son. Even though he hated Owen Grady, Billy meant no harm with those death threats.

He was trying to warn Owen of an attack and possible kidnap scenarios. But nobody needs to know that. Especially the Commission, who just assumed that someone else was after Alan Grady's only son. As soon as the Principal realized that, he proceeded with his plan.

The heavy double doors upstairs opened and then closed with an intimidating bang. He could almost see Mac and Spalko shuffling in their seats to look presentable. Though the Principal had no problem with drugs and alcohol, he doesn't like smoke that much. His lungs were weak, he told them, so he banned smoke in any of his place.

He heard stomping and shouting and bodies dropping. Brennan stood and fetch the empty water bottle from Simon. He threw the garbage behind an empty barrel, out of sight.

"If you're gonna drink that later, hide it for now." He said to Grady who was still glowering at him. "Oh for fuck's sake, Grady." He threw the bottle behind another barrel as the door to the cellar opened.

Billy leaned on the staircase to get out of their way. Two suit-dressed men descended. The one wearing glasses has a silly smirk on his face. The man behind him was the burly man himself. Both men were wearing a three piece suit worth of a whole year's rent. Behind them were their "muscles". Billy never bothered with the names of the bodyguards. For him, they were Tweedle Dick and Tweedle Dumb. Trailing after them, like scared puppies were Levi Morrison and Richard Cross. The IT geeks.

"Brennan." Elijah Mills nodded at him.

"Mills."
"Looking… good." Mills faked another smile.

Billy inwardly rolled his eyes. Mills was a recruit by the Principal himself long before Grady busted his misdeeds. Grady's estranged employees, Nedry and Sere had no idea that they're directing the stolen money to the Commission's construction funds. But both employees were clean and were not part of the Commission. Though, they want to be.

Too many months, he's been covering for this asshole. He was silently wishing Grady was loose so he could punch Mills and do them both a favour.

"My, my, my!" Mills started. "Look who we have here?"

"Two men you could never be." Billy saw how Grady's eyes turned into raging storms. "We missed you at the annual board's meeting, Mills."

Mills' shit-eating grin faded. His jaw and fists, clenched.

Grady taunted, baring his teeth in a cringe. "Tsk. My bad. I forgot you're blacklisted. What's up loser?"

Billy would've laughed at Mills' pissed reaction, if it wasn't for the man behind him.

"Mr. Owen Grady." The Principal greeted with an enthusiastic voice he rarely has. "I heard many things."

A pronounced frown form over Grady's cool features. "You- you're the… You're the guy from Westgate—"

"Westgate and Pollard, San Jose, right!" The Principal continued with a giddy tone. "Vic Hoskins, at your service." The Principal mocked a bow.

"What do you want with me?"

"Look at this guy! He is so like you said, Eli!" Hoskins laughed and slapped Mills on the stomach. Mills laughed, pretending not to be anything but hurt. "Straight to the point. I appreciate that! I appreciate that!"

The Principal walked closer to Owen and rested his hands on his knees. Grady didn't appreciate the "talking down". He raised his head, squaring the Principal's gaze. Billy felt the lopsided smirk twisting in his cheek.

Grady's got balls. I'll give him that.

"I got no problems with you, kid." He admitted before he turned on his heel and looked down at Masrani.

"Simon, my old friend."

"Hoskins."

"You know him?" Grady butted in.

"He's a former board member and business partner of Alan."

"Yeah. We had good years together." Hoskins stood between the two prisoners. "Before your old man decided to get a little smarter and started sleuthing."
"Yeah, because you're a lauderer and a thief! A loan shark! You lend illegal money and charges over the top interests!"

The list is a hundred times longer than that, Billy thought.

"You're a disgrace, Hoskins! Alan sent him to prison countless of times."

"And yet, here I remain. Can't say the same to him."

Grady struggled against his cuffs to reach the man standing before him. "You don't have the right to talk about my father."

At the corner of his eyes, he noticed Tweedle Dumb touching his gun.

The Principal laughed at Grady.

"You remind me of him, kid… Now," he clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "I took the liberty of opening the safety deposit box he left you. I hope you don't mind."

"What are you talking about?"

Billy saw how the remaining color in Masrani's face faded. "How did you get that?!"

"Don't worry, my friend. Your wife is with your daughter. No harm will come to her or them… Yet."

The Principal turned to Grady again. "Do you know what this is?"

"You told me it's been safe guarded by Simon since my dad died, so how the fuck should I know?"

Billy gave a quiet chuckle and shook his head. No one, not even Mills could have the nerve to talk to their leader like that. He's starting too root for ballsy Grady.

The Principal appeared amused. "Months before your pops died, he gave something to Simon for safekeeping. A flash drive I'm sure, containing the location of where my money is. Thanks to Mr. Brennan over there—" the Principal pointed to him. "We would never have this intel."

He opened his hand and Morrison tripped himself before giving him the velvet box.

"Problem is, the drive's heavy with encrypted passwords. There are only three password attempts before the drive burns itself and I lose all my money. My tech guys, lead by Mr. Morrison, x-rayed it and found two small bomb units wired inside the case. Dissecting the drive will trigger it, spilling acid, losing all data. And I lose my money. I couldn't risked it… And we don't have any more spare time for tricks, do we Mr. Morrison?"

"Ye- yes." stammered Levi.

Without taking his eyes off Grady, Hoskins took out his gun and fired two shots. Closed range. Billy had barely a minute to deflect. The gun went past flesh and ricocheted off the brick walls.

Mills jumped. Tweedle Dick and Tweedle Dumb looked unfazed. Ricky fell on his knees, whimpering. Masrani vomited. Grady didn't move, he stared wide eyed, and appeared more attentive now.

Morrison had no chance. He fell in a bloody slump on the floor. Dead, his lifeless eyes (or what remains of it) staring back at Grady.
"You see, Mr. Grady. I don't forget. I don't like mistakes. I'm a very impatient man." Hoskins wiped the splattered blood on his gun on his dark pants. "So, let's make this simple, gentlemen. Help us with the password. It's as easy as that."

"I don't know it." Grady replied, his voice firm.

"Why should I believe a man trained to endure torture?"

"Because it's the truth."

"Can I give you another motivation?" He cocked the handgun and pointed it to Masrani. Billy held his tongue from saying something.

Billy's eyes diverted back and forth at the two. He was sure, Hoskins would pull the trigger.

Don't be a dick, Grady. Don't be a dick. He's gonna kill you. Both of you. Brennan tried telling through his eyes. But Grady remained resolute, his voice stern. "I don't know it."

The Principal's eyes locked with Grady in a challenging stare down. "I'm prepared to believe you any minute now."

Masrani interfered, "Neither of us—"

Before Masrani could finish his sentence, a loud gunshot pealed the room.

The bullet landed two feet above the man's head. The brick from where the bullet lodged was smoking.

Simon was shaking as Grady yelled in desperation. "I don't know it!"

"Take a very good guess. I know you're a smart guy. And Mr. Cross will be with you." Hoskins turned his head to a still-shaking Ricky. "Mr. Cross?"

Ricky took a cautious step forward, avoiding the puddle of blood and set the laptop on the wet bar at the end of the room. Hoskins handed him the box. "I don't need to remind you the consequences too, do I, Mr. Cross?"

The man gulped before he set out his equipment. Billy went around a column to check. Ricky's hands were trembling as he inserted it to the hub. The screen turned blue and a dialog box opened. "We're good."

"You first, Mr. Grady." The Principal announced, the gun still in his hand.

Billy heard him take a deep breath. "Echo, Lima, Lima, India, Echo, Two, Ten, Sixty-seven. All caps and no spaces."

And so Ricky typed,

ELLIE21067

Everyone seemed to hold their breath in anticipation.

The prompt window showed up. Ricky released a shaky sigh. "It's not correct."

"Again. Simon. Take your luckiest guess."
Simon was quiet for a few seconds before, "Whiskey. With the 1 replacing the 'I'. Capital first letter."

He saw the beads of sweat forming on Ricky's forehead as he typed,

**Whiskey**

Billy closed his eyes, wishing for everyone's sake's that Masrani is correct.

The laptop made an error sound.

Hoskins clicked his tongue in impatience.

At the opposite end of the room, Mills stood up from his seat. Every person in the room snapped their heads at him. Mills unbuttoned his blazer and wiped a hand on his lower lip, a glass of red wine between his fingers.

"You have a suggestion, Eli?"

"Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

Mills' voice, now confident, echoed through the hall. "Owen was in the NAVY for a couple of years. He couldn't have known what his father was up to. Simon, I mean, sure. He was Alan Grady's strictest confidant. But neither of them worked for him."

Billy saw how Grady's cool, suave facade finally dissolved into pure horror. "No!" He struggled with his cuffs, clanging them on the tiles. He tried to get up but the wires wrapped around his ankles prevented him to do so. "No! You bastard!"

Mills dramatic pauses made Billy wanna hit him himself. Mills seemed to relish the attention as well as Grady's restlessness.

"Neither of these men worked out his schedules, got him coffees, reminded him of deadlines. If there's one person in this whole damn world that knows Alan Grady better than these two men, it's her."

Billy straightened up, realising what Mills was saying.

"What do you mean?" the Principal asked.

"I think it's time for Miss Claire Dearing to join the fucking party."

She couldn't sleep.

She was lying on her side, one palm underneath her cheek. The stuff toy's beady eyes stared back at her. It was a much better company than her thoughts. She burrowed her nose on the collar of his shirt. Claire felt the tight ball lodged in the center of her chest again. She hugged the plush wolf to her chest. The stuff toy Owen got for her gave little comfort, but it was comfort nonetheless.

Whatever havoc they did with the ventilation system, they fixed it. She was back to her apartment despite her team's protests. She wanted to have, feel that sense of control again and she thought being here would somehow restore it. It didn't.
They almost had him. Claire arrived some ten minutes later with Zia and Lowery. The site was crammed with the entire San Francisco Police Department. But no Owen. Not even a trace of him. They were back to zero. Wheatley, the chief of police ordered to detain the cargo ship and search for evidence.

They found it.

At the bottom of the bay.

Owen's laptop.

TV reports were also claiming that Owen's abduction was also linked with Simon's. It was plausible. As two key players of the Grady group of companies, Owen and Simon were their most prominent assets.

Claire rose from the bed. There's no use of skulking around when there's so much at stake. She slapped her cheeks, willing her psyche to "snap out of it" and switched on her laptop. For what seemed like hours, she sorted our her emails. She reviewed performance and accounting sheets and signed renewal contacts. The distraction was ineffective.

She closed her laptop and leaned her chair back. She found herself staring at the wide windows in her home office.

It was almost unfair that the world seemed unaffected by her problems. Claire drew a long breath before she finally stood up and prepped for a numbing run.

Claire lifted the shirt over her head, her heart lingering for the smell. She fetch her tights, donned a sports jacket and her trusted Nikes. After she had worn out twenty of them for the last year, Claire decided to invest on a study pair of shoes. As the saying goes, Good shoes take you to good places.

Before going out the door, she sent a quick reassuring text to Zia. As part of security measures, she, or Barry will come over to drive her to the office. Claire, tired of arguing back, went with it.

I'm going out for a run. Be back in 45.

She offered a small smile to the bellboy waiting for her at the reception. Bobby and Francis, her appointed detail were nowhere to be seen. They usually were dozing off in the lobby or at the car parked by the curb.

Half the stores in her street were still close. Claire paused for a quick stretch, adjusted her watch and double knotted her laces.

And she ran.

The air, humid and sticky, was making her hair slap across her cheeks. She pumped her legs, her arms swinging beside her. Her clothes, slick with perspiration, clung to her skin as she broke into a series of sprints. Her shoes were kissing the pavement with hard, grueling pace. The sounds, re-echoing the rapid beats of her chest. Her ponytail swayed, slapping her flushed cheeks. Claire ran and ran, like waves chasing the shoreline, like a prey seeking for refuge.

Twenty minutes in.

*I'm gonna find you, Owen.*

Claire ran faster. As quick, hard and far as her legs could carry her. She turned around corners;
avoided the usual crowded streets and streetlights. Her lungs heaved for, sweet, warm air. But she didn't stop. She willed her body not to stop. Her thoughts, occupied by a name—the only motivation she needed.

The sky was starting to open up. The sun was pretty but was emitting everything but warmth. She could see the eastern shoreline and lengthened her strides even more. Her watch was beeping so hard, warning her she was going too fast. Her shoes landed on the track, her throat, rasped and dry. She could feel her legs shake, her heart monitor beeping at an alarming rate.

She ordered her body to move as she passed other runners.

The American flag at the end of the trail served as her finish line. She could feel her lungs screaming with each footfall. Her sweaty fists tightened as she moved onward. Forward. Never stopping. She heard other runners behind her, their puffs of breath matching her own.

But at the corner of her eye, a runner running from the other direction, fell down with a loud cry. The man was rolling on the sand as he clutched his toes and shin.

Due to her motion, she went past him.

The man yelped again in pain.

Claire slowed down and hurried over.

"Hey! Are you okay?" She panted, kneeling over the man. His face contorted into agony.

"I think, I twisted my heel." He replied with a foreign accent.

Claire hid her frown. She was never a professional runner. But she knew that he couldn't have twisted his heel from the stride he had before he fell down. A few people approached them and started asking questions as well.

"You okay?"

"What happened?"

As polite as she could, she asked the man to remove his shoe to check. From behind her, fellow runner reached for the workout towel around his neck. Claire opened her hand to receive it. "Tha-

But another fellow runner, grabbed the back of her head in a choking move. He covered her nose with the towel. For a moment, the panic set in. But Claire fought and wracked her brain on the right defence technique. But the odour of something putrid

overpowered her senses. Claire tried to claw her nails on the guy behind her, thrashed her arm and hit the groin.

Claire tried to grasp the remaining consciousness in her brain. She tried to make out the faces of her assailants. She could have sworn one of them was familiar.

The darkness was closing in fast.

Nausea crept up towards her stomach, to her throat.

The man hardened his hand, her head was swirling. She felt her legs and arms give up and everything went to black.
Owen hung his head, the past hours finally taking its toll on him. Opposite him was Simon who was sleeping on his back.

They removed the cuffs and ropes tied around them earlier too. They moved them to a basement cell a couple of hours ago.

From what he heard from the other men, the "Principal" (as they like to call him) was very particular about smell. And the foul smell of the middle-eastern guy, whose face he blew up was making him gag.

They're afraid of him. He could finally conclude.

Whoever this Hoskins was, everybody seemed to draw back in fear of him. Even Mills who was trying his best not to be.

He hated this. He hated being as helpless as he was. He just wished Zia was doing the thing he implicitly told her to do:

Keep an eye on Claire. Do everything you can to know where she is at all times.

Guided by the light from the small window on the top wall, he inspected the empty wine barrels, he stood up. He examined the room.

Two rows lined each wall of were wine barrels. This wine cellar was smaller from where they were a couple of hours ago. Owen followed the rows and noticed a powder residue on the croze of one barrel. Though he had an idea what it was, he dipped his pink finger on it and raise it up to window, to get a better look at it.

He heard a car pull up outside, the asphalt rubbing against the tires in an annoying screech. He wiped the cobwebs on the dusty window and saw the figures went out the car. Men, dressed in running attire…and a woman. Owen felt the hair rise from his neck when he recognised her. A terrifying realisation dawned on him.

He pulled himself up by the railings on the window and swore, waking Simon. "No! No! God damn it!"

He jumped down and ran a frustrating hand on his hair. He overturned a barrel and used it as a step ladder. He gazed out the window again, his face pressed on the bars, like a prisoner. The men and woman outside were oblivious to his outrage. Simon hurried beside him, craning his neck up.

"Owen! What's wrong?"

A man, in white basketball shorts, opened the back door and carried an unconscious body. Her vibrant golden red hair recognisable to him even from the other part of the world.

"God damn it! No! Claire!" He felt hot, angry tears form behind his eyes but he held on, his arms still holding him up.

"Where should we put her?"

"Upstairs." said the traitor. "But let's check her first. Make sure she doesn't have a wire on her."

The man carrying Claire, gleamed with malice, "I'll be happy to do that."

"No! Don't touch her! Don't touch her!" He screamed, almost begging.
The woman rolled her eyes. "I will do it."

The door from the cell burst open. "What the hell is going on?"

"Hey! Come down from there, Grady!"

That was the breaking point of his patience.

The group outside disappeared from his view as they went in the house. And Owen felt ballistic. He never wanted to murder anyone before. He let go of the railings and when he turned around, he punched the guy coming after him. So hard, he heard the bones in his face crack. The man fell down, crying in pain. Blinded by betrayal, rage and everything ugly in between, he beat him again and again.

He managed to knock the one more guard, not a scratch on him. But four more men came through. Simon tried to help but Johnny Bravo held him back and punched his stomach. Owen threw his fists. He landed punch after punch but they outnumbered him. They ganged up on him down and kicked him. He felt a rib crack. He bit his tongue to keep from screaming.

Simon yelled, pleading. "No! Stop it!"

Her head felt like lead. Her neck sore. Her throat was dry and there was still that foul smell tarrying under her nose. Something uncomfortable was holding her hands together behind her back. She groaned as she opened her eyes. Her lap and Nike shoes came into view. She felt the acidic taste in her mouth and she gagged.

"Bout time you wake up, boss."

She looked up, her eyes widening. "You." Claire murmured in disbelief.

The woman, sniggered.

"YOU!" Claire shrieked.

Emma Tate, her assistant removed the scrunchy holding her from coiled hair together.

"I trusted you!"

"Your biggest mistake, really."

One thing was going through her head. Emma was in the room when they finally tracked Owen's laptop. That's why they didn't reach him in time!

"You told them! You warned them! You warned them about the tracker! That's why they got away! How could you?!"

"How could I not?" Her young assistant retorted. "I've waited too long for this. The corporate bitch queen bowing at my feet."

Claire remained silent, her eyes shooting daggers in her direction. Her assistant was far from the persona she was at work. Emma was much more confident now, if not, complacent. It made her look unpredictable thus, more dangerous.

"Why would you do this? We were good to you! Owen was good to you!" Claire emphasised, the betrayal and anger pumping her drugged brain.
Emma shrugged and sat on the table behind her. "For my own satisfaction..." Her fingers playing with the chain around her neck. "And a bit of revenge for a beloved brother who fell into depression after you got the job meant for him."

"What do you mean?"

Emma chuckled, "How did you do it?" She curled a finger on her mouth, feigning curiosity. "How did you seduce and trick an old man in giving you the job?"

And then it hit her, like a veil being lifted over her eyes.

She saw the HR room again, all these men mocking her for being the only woman in the room. One man was silent. He was sitting alone at the corner of the room, looking all kinds of nervous. She remembered him because of the checkered purple tie he was wearing. He had the same shade of brown skin as Emma. Same forehead and coiled hair.

"Ah. You do remember him. Did you also know that he killed himself five months after that?"

She didn't know what to say. "Emma, I-"

She didn't see it coming. The once kind, loyal and sweet Emma she knew from the office, slapped her. Her eyes watered from the impact. Something sharp caught her lip before Claire tasted blood. She hadn't turn her head back yet when the door opened.

"I missed something, didn't I?" Came the familiar voice. A voice that once sent a cold shiver down her spine.

"Hello, my darling Claire." Elijah Mills beamed. His glasses reflecting the lights from the ceiling, but Claire could note the smug glint in his eyes. "How are you?"

She found her voice, thick with hatred and disgust. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Oh, how I've missed you." Mills laughed and she felt her anger ascend to dangerous heights.

"You'll never get away with this, Mills."

"Oh, but we already have."

And as if on cue, the door swung open. Claire felt her shoulders slackened. As if the last hope was finally lost and irrecoverable. Because, staring back at her, and looking as resigned as she was, was Billy Brennan.

Owen was right. They couldn't trust anybody.

That's why he was first in the scene, why he looked so off when they arrived at the pier. She felt hot, red anger boil in her veins. Her voice dropped to a seething whisper.

"Where's Owen?"

Billy avoided her eyes and cut the rope holding her to the pole. Her hands remained zip tied. Claire didn't take her eyes off him.

"Oh yeah! I almost forgot, you two..." Mills gestured with his hands, amused. "You're together. How... cliche."

Billy turned to Emma and said, "He wants her in the library."
Emma gripped her upper arm, hoicking her up with force. Brennan walked behind them, silent, and Mills, was on his phone, behind him. She didn't struggle but instead, take the scene around her. They were in a house—a manor—and guessing from the senile stench in the air, she could assume that it wasn't much habited. They went downstairs and lining the walls were modern paintings.

Claire tried not to look observant and maintained a straight face. She won't look weak, not in front of them. Claire held her head, and squared her shoulders. They ambled along the hallway at the side of the house. The dark wallpapers cleared up and opened into a series of columns and a victorian archway. The glass walls in on the west side of the house reflected the dark verdant forest outside. They entered the large archway and into a roomful of books, that reached up to the ceiling. Expensive chandeliers dangled from the high ceiling.

Claire saw the man on leaning on the huge timber desk. His scruffy grey beard and penetrating glare, were all too familiar.

He was the man at the party talking to her while she was waiting for Owen.

"Miss Dearing. How wonderful to see you." He was leaning against the table, a wine glass in hand. He put his glass down when she approached. "I never got to introduce myself at the party. I'm sorry for that."

Mills tugged her forward that she almost stumbled. And this time, she resisted. "Don't touch me, you son of a bitch. I can walk by myself."

She walked towards him but maintained a good distance. A three seater leather sofa and large coffee table separating them.

The man before him laughed, his hand touching his protruding belly. "Let me introduce myself properly. I'm Vic Ho-"

"Where's Owen and Simon?" She asked, her voice like steel and returned the man's nonchalant stare.

The man's lips crinkled into a conceited smile. He nodded at Brennan who left the room without another word.

"Would you like a drink?"

"I'll have one. This is gonna be fun." Mills chirped. He went to the decanter to pour himself a shot. His nasty eyes making her all kinds of uncomfortable. "Mr. Hoskins has French Beaujolais. Isn't that your favourite, sweetie?"

She was so tempted to retort with another degrading comment when she heard shuffling in the room.

Her mask slipped and a horrified gasp came out her lips when they dragged bruised Simon and Owen into the room. The bulky men behind them push them so that they were kneeling on the carpet. Their hands, tied behind their back. Both men were disheveled. Her heart dropped to her shoes as her gaze stayed on Owen.

The long sleeved shirt and pants she last saw him wearing was dirty with grime. He has bruised cheeks and cuts on his eyebrows and lips. His hair, matted with sweat and something wet… Please, don't be blood.

For a moment he looked relieved to see her.
Until he wasn't.

The soft hazel green eyes darkened and dilated with beastly rage.

"Did you hit her?" He accused Mills, rising from his knees. The man behind him pulled him back but Owen cussed at him, unwavering, "Fuck off! Did you hit her?"

Mills didn't correct him. Instead, Claire felt his arm around her shoulders, His face was so close to hers, she could feel his breath. As an instinct, Claire swatted him with her body but his hand closed on the round part of shoulder, holding her down. Bourbon and Mills were not a good combination. The bad memories came flooding in.

"I would never. Would I, sweetheart?" He took a long sip from his glass. His lips, only a hair from her cheeks. She pinched her lips together, trying to look anything but affected.

"One way or another Mills, I'm gonna free of these cuffs and I'm gonna break your fucking face." Owen threatened.

Mills was gaslighting him. "I remember good times, such good times. But, do tell me, is she still stiff? She's always been a stiff. I mean, I wouldn't blame you if you thought she was... mediocre. Just as you can't blame me for needing pleasure somewhere else, right?"

She wanted to vomit.

"I'm gonna kill you."

Claire shivered, partly from Mills' hands on her body, but also by the low timbre of Owen's voice.

*He meant it.*

"Children, while this has been so amusing to me, let's get down to business."

Mills stepped away from her as he poured himself another glass. Emma walked towards her and seized her arm, forcing her forward. To the man at the center, to Hoskins.

Hoskins placed his glass on the desk behind him and grabbed a laptop… and a velvet box. He showed it to her, and Claire's eyes widened in recognition. It didn't go unnoticed by the man in front of her.

"I knew you'll recognise this."

"What did I tell you, huh?" Mills bragged.

The velvet box was Alan's.

Claire knew that inside it held two, top grade thumb drives she gave him as a gift. One drive has a black matte protective case and one was silver. Alan refrained from hiring another assistant after she left. She persuaded him to secure his documents, personal and business accounts in a place he could easily access. So, Claire put everything he might need on the black thumb drive. She set everything for him. Both thumb drives have passwords on them to prevent anyone — but Alan and her — to access it. She left the silver one empty.

But how did these men get it? The last time she saw it was on Alan's office shelf before she left for France.

The answer coughed from behind her.
Simon. That's why they needed Simon. To open these.

These men must have also assumed that Owen's laptop has the files they're looking for. But it didn't.

Hoskins revealed the box and Claire had to hide her surprise and relief.

Before she left, she was a hundred percent sure that the cushion had two slots reserved for each drive. Claire gave a quick mental thank you to Simon for changing the cushion. He made it look like it only held one, not two.

Whatever it was on that silver one, it was safe and protected, far from the greedy hands of these criminals.

Her relief was short-lived though, because they got the right one. The black flash drive held Alan's business dealings and accounts. She remembered putting all of them there.

"We need a password, Miss Dearing. We tried it with these two gentlemen... And I know for a fact that you know what the damage will be in case we didn't get the correct one."

The drives were strictly designed for security. She knew the repercussions. They did two attempts which meant they only have one more left before it disintegrate itself. Claire was starting to hate Alan's need for dramatic effects. Still, she resisted.

"What makes you think I do?"

"Oh, I don't think, I know."

"I don't-" Claire's speech ended when Hoskins removed a gun from his back pocket. He waved it to her face and Claire fought the fear rising from her skin.

"Consider this motivation, Miss Dearing."

Hoskins nodded and two men grabbed Owen and hurled him on a chair by the glass window. They cuffed him on the wooden arms. His seat was facing them and Claire felt the air knocked off of her as Hoskins raised his gun.... and pointed it at Owen.

"I don't like the smell of blood on the carpet." He said, leveling her eyes with his dark, maniacal pupils. "When I shoot, and it's gonna hit him I'm sure, he'll fall down three storeys... What's it gonna be, Miss Dearing? I'm an impatient man and I get tired quickly."

There wasn't any fear in Owen's face and posture, only wrath and fury. Still, it didn't pacify her.

"I'm sorry." She heard herself say, her teary eyes boring into Owen's. "I'm so sorry."

Everything was suddenly happening in slow motion. The sounds around her deadened.

Hoskins' smile and heavy perfume insinuating the vomit rising from her stomach.

Her legs felt like jelly, her wrists were raw with flesh wounds from the zip ties.

Her breathing slowed as she felt Owen's eyes never leaving hers. She wanted everything to get over with. She wanted them safe. Simon said something but she didn't hear him. Hoskins moved to make room for her, his gun still at hand.

For a moment, everything is still. The room was watching her every move.
She raised her hand, her finger hovering over the first letter when she heard a subtle tap hitting the glass.

A sharp whoosh of wind.

The glass pane behind them, cracked.

Something heavy fell to the ground.

*What was that?* Was her last thought before everything went from shit to worst.

Every other person in the room ducked for cover. The sporadic rat-tat-tat froze her.

Claire had never heard a gun fired before. What she assumed was something like the action movies or those video games Zach was always playing with. It was nothing like that. The fear and the shock narrowly registered with her as the walls around them shattered. She couldn't hear past the ringing in her ears and her own heart beat.

Somebody tackled her to the ground as a round of gunfire rung, breaking the glass hiding them from the world. Panic, curses, and heavy ammo wailed around her.

"Stay down!" She heard Brennan shout at her, the sofa protecting them from the heavy rounds. Brennan's hand was on her back, keeping her down. The butt of his pistol was cold against her. Her eyes immediately found Owen who toppled his chair to the ground, squirming to break free of his cuffs.

The bullets ricocheted off the cushion and furnishings that it came out as dull thumps. Beside her, Hoskins was covering his head and shouting at his men. The men finally retaliated with their own gunfire.

Brennan's hands left her as he fired his own gun. She crawled to Owen.

"Go! Go! Go!" She heard someone roared, before she felt someone grabbing her shoes, and pulled her up.

"No! No! Get off of me!"

She resisted, kicked and threw her fists. But tough hands grabbed her hair, yanking back with force and she screamed in torture.

"Come here!" Hoskins snarled as three of his men surrounded him.

She looked at Owen, her lips trembling. He was still on the ground, struggling to escape his confines. "No! Claire!"

"The back! To the back!" One of the goons screamed. They were pushing, pulling her, their rough hands marking her pale skin. In front of her was Hoskins, his head ducked, gun hoisted up.

The heavy fire echoed as they ran through the house. One of the men hauled her to his shoulder, and she pounded her fists on his back. He pushed her inside the car but not before her shins hit the metal step of the back seat.

"Let go! Let go!" She squallled, trying to wrench her hands free.

Hoskins was now red in the face, but, unharmed. He extended his arm and tugged her hair again. "You're coming with me, you bitch!"
The other men behind her grabbed her legs and pushed her inside. One man sat beside her. The other was on the passenger seat, and the last one, on the driver's seat. The car roared to life.

No, no.

She was screaming, kicking, slamming her bound fists on them anywhere she could reach. "Let me go!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Hoskins grabbed both her arms.

Claire glared at him and spat.

Hoskins was stunned. Claire saw a vein popping out of his forehead. He swung the back of his hand and whacked her right across the face. So violent, she felt her brain moved from her cranium. Her vision was getting foggy, blackness was creeping from the side of her eyes.

Owen.

He had no time to think who was firing at them; whether they were his or Hoskins he didn't know. Owen couldn't afford the time to think through it, not when he's seeing Hoskins whisked Claire away.

"No! Claire!"

Around him, the ruckus continued and he struggled. He was banging his arms on the wood, trying to break it so he could free his hands.

"Come on! Come on!"

The ceiling blurred above him as someone grabbed the foot of the chair. Whoever it was, was dragging him towards safety of the couch, shielding them from the bullets.

He was not gonna die like this; helpless and tied like a fucking slave. Owen thrust his feet towards who was dragging him.

"Stop it Grady!"

"You traitor! Get your hands off me!" He growled at Brennan who was kneeling beside him.

"Shut the hell up, Grady!" Brennan iterated, inserting a key to both his cuffs.

Owen was still as Brennan helped him. Wait, What?

Once free, he held his wrists, massaging the blood back to them. He tried to process what Brennan was doing.

"You fucking kicked me."

"I had to. They were listening."

Over a day ago, he was beating him to the ground, now, he was shoving Owen a glock from his pocket. Followed by a full round of magazine and a set of keys. Owen didn't need to be told what to do. He loaded the gun and waited for the instructions.

Around them, the rapidity of the shots, halted. Then heavy silence returned, allowing him but a
moment to center himself. They had their back to the sofa. Beside him, Brennan was checking his 
bullets.

He looked around, trying to find an escape route. Glass, furniture, statues and books, were 
everywhere. Empty shells of bullets scattered the ground. And bodies. Owen peeked and checked 
on Simon who was lying on his stomach, his eyes, scrunched close.

There were two Johnny Bravos on either side of him lying next to him, dead. He could see the 
soles of Mills' shoes as crawled away from sight, with him was the real traitor, Emma.

He tried to get up but Brennan roughly pulled him down, just as bullet wheezed past where his 
head was. Brennan peered through the other side of the couch. More Johnny Bravo were coming 
up the other door to the library. And Brennan was shooting at them.

But they're cornered. The shells bounced off the sofa like a hailstorm.

Owen heft his own gun in position, aiming. He drew out a sharp breath, reacquainting himself on 
the feel of the cold metal between his finger.

A bald man sneaked and emerged from their left. His gun, ready to fire.

"Get back!" Owen shouted at Brennan, backing him on the sofa with his arm. Owen pointed his 
gun but before he could fire, a swift whoosh of wind passed by his ears. He would know that silent 
M40 rifle pew anywhere. The bald man staggered, a hand on his neck and fell down.

Then it was quiet again.

They both turned their heads on the dark pines outside. Someone was unmistakably perched up 
there, fighting with them. A tiny flashlight blinked from one of the ancient trees. It didn't take him 
more than a second to decipher that it was a morse code for "Ready to Party". It was the signal he 
and his troops used to have.

"Your pals have the greatest timing ever." Brennan reached out and stole the rifle off the dead 
guy's body. He checked the magazine before passing it to him.

"Listen to me. Their getaway car is a black jeep parked at the back. They're gonna use the straight 
path in the forest leading to the lake. Hoskins has a yacht. You better get to her before he gets to 
the yacht. My motorcycle's parked out front. You hear me, Grady?"

He nodded.

Brennan then gave him his earpiece. "Put this on, I'll patch this to them."

He hesitated. "Simon?"

"I'll get him to Rodriguez. Go! I'll explain later!"

Owen was running out of time. Every minute he's wasting was putting Claire in more danger. He 
had no choice but to trust Brennan.

He shuffled to his knees, put the radio on his right ear. He placed the rifle on his shoulder and hid 
the glock behind his pants.

He winced, clutching his ribs and kept running to the entrance of the house. From all this 
commotion, he almost forgot that he got beat up a few hours ago.
More guys were waiting for him at the porch, automatic weapons ready. And they fired.

"Fuck!" A bullet grazed his arm and he ducked behind the columns.

A few feet away, next to the bushes of ivy was the black Ducati. A full-throated rumble rushed through the bushes. The black jeep was almost invisible against the shadowed trees and landscape.

He fired and managed to hit three guys before the remaining men pointed their weapons to the forest. Owen snuck a look over his shoulder and saw the bodies fell one by one before his eyes. The coast was finally clear.

Owen sprinted towards the vehicle, cursing at his damned ribs. He gripped the keys on his palms, holding on to it like it was his life.

The engine gave a beautiful, humming kick start. And soon he was riding through the jungle. The moon was bright, the wind was crisp like a cold water sliding down his throat. The jeep's headlights were still too far ahead but then disappeared.

They switched it off. They fucking switched it off!

Owen shifted his gears, his body rising up and down the uneven path.

The radio cracked in his ear, Owen pressed it.

"Make a right in one kilometre. It'll get you to her quicker." Zia's voice rung through the speaker.

"How-"

"Her shoes. They're linked to her running app. We took it from there."

"You are a fucking genius, Zia!" And turned his bike to the right. "Simon?"

"He's with us. He's okay. A couple of our guys are following you."

Twigs and fallen branches crunched beneath him, the bushes rustled beside him. The moonlight was illuminating everything but his track. He could smell the lake. He still couldn't see a single thing.

"Where is she?!"

"There's a downhill."

"How far?"

"If you turn on your left. But it's steep. You can't-"

He countersteered and braced himself on the slope. He clutched the handlebars as it shook out of control.

"Why did I bother?" Zia exasperated.

He passed by a stream, the rocks were making it more slippery. He was out of breath and his ribs felt like fire.

"How far!?!"
"You're closing in on them from the left. One meter."

He stepped on the gas. And he caught it, a tiny reflection of the window. Someone was rolling it down… Then the muzzle of a handgun came out the window.

He heard Claire shout, "Owen!"

Owen swivelled the handlebars and banked a hard left, his knees skidding the earth. The bullets hit the nearby trees. The front tire spun a perfect circle as he pivoted right back.

He could hear the back up cars in the distance, their headlights offering a beam of light in the darkness.

The rifle slung over his shoulder was harder to navigate so he pulled the glock and aimed at the side mirrors.

He heard Claire screamed, "No! No! Don't hurt him!"

Owen pulled up behind them. The rear window opened and one Johnny Bravo lifted a rifle, a Mossberg 500.

Oh shit.

He tried his best to evade them but a bullet caught the front tire and the engine. The vehicle lurched and went berserk. Branches, saplings and leafy stems were starting to scrape his shirt and arms. Up ahead, he could see a large tree trunk, looming closer and closer.

"Fuck!"

He jumped out, rolling on the mushy earth. The Ducati crashed into the trunk and exploded.

"No! Owen! Fuck you! Get your hands off me!"

He picked up his gun, rose to his feet and ran. The bullets zapped past his head before it stopped. The jeep disappeared into the woods again.

"Zia! Where is she!"

"Continue straight ahead, they're pulling up at the lake."

Owen willed his body to move, run. One foot in front of the other. His arms were swinging in a perfect angles beside him. The pain from his ribs shot up, more excruciatingly this time. His shoulder stung from an unchecked wound. But his mind couldn't focus on himself.

Claire was still in danger and at the hands of the cruelest person he'd ever encountered. She was his goddamn universe and they'd have to break his legs first before he would stop.

Hence, he ran. Like the devil was after him. He ran like it was the only thing his body knew how to do. He was huffing and puffing, sweat and blood rolling over his eyes.

The lake came into view, a perfect reflection of the starry night above. The moon was shimmering its light over the calm waters. Sprouts of trees surround it, like a rigged cloak of dark canvass.

Claire was screaming, hitting Hoskins who had a vice-like grip on her. He was only a few distance away that he knew he could get a clean shot. He extended his rifle at the two remaining Johnny Bravos surveying the woods.
Perfect.

They couldn't see him.

He targeted the bloke who destroyed Brennan's bike. The rifle gave a quick, sharp sound. The bullet hit the spine and the man fell on his face. The other guy, a smaller guy, blindly fired through the woods. Sparks emitting from his gun. Owen slid down his tree and aimed. Owen exhaled a long breath before pulling the trigger. The bullets hit the man on the chest before he staggered backwards.

Owen rushed towards Hoskins who was dragging Claire by her hair. She was clawing his arms, kicking and punching her bound hands. Her screams were pumping the adrenaline in his system, fuelling his muscles. His blood was on fire. His heart was beating in his chest, pounding so hard as if, it was trying to get out. Out to her.

He gripped the gun on his hands, the only thing he felt connected to at that moment.

"You can't take him, Owen. Stay put!" Zia cried on his headset.

He couldn't.

"HOSKINS!"

His last guard turned and Owen didn't hesitate, he fired two shots; throat and legs. Despite the lack of light, the fear in Hoskins' eyes was visible. He immediately pulled Claire in front of him. He pulled down the hammer of his pistol and put the muzzle on Claire's reddening cheek.

His eyes met Claire's—bright and blown. Her lips, in a tight, solid line, her jaw clenched in determination.

"What are you gonna do about this, huh?" Hoskins hissed, wrapping his meaty hands on her delicate neck.

"Go, fuck yourself." She fumed before Hoskins tightened his hand around her neck. She raised her hands.

Owen raised his gun, his teeth bared in a threatening hiss. "Let her go. It's over."

"Why? Because of the agents surrounding this fucking mountain? Boy, you have no idea. I own the fucking FBI. I own the fucking police."

"That's what they made you think. This ends now, Hoskins."

Something flashed in Hoskins dark eyes and he dug the gun on Claire's cheeks. Claire clasped her hands on the bicep choking her. Though her features remained hard, Owen felt his heart explode as a tear rolled down her face.

Although futile, he repeated with gritted teeth. His finger never leaving the trigger. "Let her go. We can talk about this."

Behind Owen, the bushes fissled, footsteps echoed. He could hear the distant radios in each agent. Somebody pulled up beside him. Owen didn't bother to look.

Hoskins' harsh laugh echoed in the still country air and over the hills. "You sound like your dad… But we both know Gradys' are shit with their word."
In his head, Owen was calculating the chances. With a handgun to her cheek, Hoskins other hand was closing on her neck. Shooting his hands was not an option, the bullet might still hit Claire.

Even with her petite frame, she was shielding Hoskins vital parts. He couldn't shoot him without Claire getting hurt. But if Hoskins so much as turned his head to the side, he could get a small chance. His biggest concern was Claire keeping as still as possible.

Hoskins was walking backwards. He was taking Claire closer and closer to the lavish yacht moored on the water. He followed them, the old, wooden wharf squeaked below them.

"Tell me, boy. What do you remember from the accident?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know much about her. But people told me she was a very sweet woman. Always giving, always caring." They were closing the yacht at the end of the dock.

He felt the hair on his arms rise a terrible shiver. Owen faltered shouting, "What the hell are you talking about?!

"In my defence, I didn't know my predecessor would take my word so seriously. I almost felt sorry when they told me you were in the car with her. But then I realized, it was a good thing. What are the odds that I get to kill Alan's wife and his legacy at the same time?"

The hot burning anger expanded in his chest, numbing the physical pain but instigating another. "You... you killed my mother? YOU KILLED MY MOTHER?!"

"Yeah, but you lived. Alan didn't know it was me, of course. I wouldn't have to do it but your father he still wouldn't leave me alone. So, I had to-"

And then something happened, too quick for both of them to comprehend. Hoskins hold must've loosened because Claire, slapped his gun hand. On instinct, Hoskins fired, and hit himself on the collarbone.

He wailed in pain but tried to grab Claire who crouched and struck him in the groin. She slid away from his grasp and fell on the water with a splash.

His queue.

And Owen didn't waste anymore second.

The bullets sputtered out of his raised gun in a series of blows. It hit the man on his hands, his shoulders, his stomach and chest. Owen poured the rage, frustration, his fear and anxiety as his hand, ever so steady, recoiled from the force. The man propelled backwards with each shot, his mouth in an angry snarl. Blood was soaking his perfect suit, the wounds, Owen was sure, were beyond repair. One last shot on his chest and the man fell on his back and moved no more.

The silence that ensued was more deafening than the gunfire that occurred.

His eyes went to the lake, right where Claire jumped and felt something wrong in an instant. She hadn't come out yet. But the ripples on the seemingly peaceful water were still there.

"Claire!"

From the distance, someone barked, "Bring the lights!"
But he was already on his feet and running. He threw the rifle and pistol and without hesitation, he plunged head first. The cold water seeped through his clothes, rendering him frozen for a millisecond. Even with the moonlight, everything was pitch black. It was almost impossible to gauge the depth of the lake.

He resurfaced above the water and hollered, "I NEED A FLARE!"

The dock was already swarming with men in full vest. A man was running towards him, red torch in hand. Owen took a gulp of air and dove again. Air bubbles rose to the surface as he cleaved the water with powerful strokes. He ignored the severe pain on his bleeding shoulder and ribs. Both of which were stinging from the salty water. The flare provided little light but he pursued his rescue.

A beam of light emanated from the surface, and Owen was finally able to see.

Not far ahead, may be five feet below was the seabed. He could make out the figure lying sideways on a nearby rock. Her arms and legs careened over the water, eye closed, body still. Blood was oozing from a wound on her pale neck.

Owen extended his hand to try and grab her arm. As soon as he caught her elbow, he threw the flare. He put both his arms under her armpits, planted his foot on the rock for the push and glided upwards.

With every willpower he could muster, he kicked and swept the water. He couldn't afford to panic now. But his shoulder felt livid and his sides like someone was dismembering it from his body.

Yet, he fought.

He fought with everything he got.

Like it was the only thing his body could ever do.

The surface was getting nearer.

Someone jumped to water to help them.

He reached them. He wanted to take Claire away from him.

But he held on to her.

His arms were squeezing her to him, offering warmth to her frozen limbs.

*Please.*

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I know, cliche amiright? I hope this chapter answers all the questions from the build up :D I also have never been to California so feel free to criticise the descriptions. :) I also
uploaded this in a hurry so feel free to correct, shout, criticise, fight me. Like really. Get me.

Love you guys! I hope everyone is safe and healthy. - J

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