Not Yet

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/3978502.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: F/M
Fandom: Lord of the Rings RPF
Relationship: Billy Boyd/Original Female Character
Character: Billy Boyd, Grace MacPherson (OFC), Elijah Wood, Andy Serkis, Dominic Monaghan, Viggo Mortensen, Hannah Wood, Sean Astin, Margaret Boyd, Orlando Bloom, Jamie Travis (OMC), Ewan MacDonald (OMC), Alex Macrae (OMC)
Additional Tags: Friendship, Friends to Lovers, Music, Developing Relationship, original main character, Romance, Long-Distance Relationship, Friends With Hobbits, crossed wires, Unresolved Sexual Tension, Teasing, Work In Progress, lyrics, Resolved Sexual Tension
Stats: Published: 2004-02-03 Updated: 2017-07-27 Chapters: 46/? Words: 271037

Not Yet

by pippinmctaggart
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Billy is feeling lost, until he stumbles upon Grace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

River, river carry me on
Living river carry me on
River, river carry me on
To the place where I come from

So deep, so wide, will you take me on your back for a ride
If I should fall, would you swallow me deep inside

River, show me how to float
I feel like I'm sinking down
Thought that I could get along
But here in this water
My feet won't touch the ground
I need something to turn myself around

Going away, away toward the sea
River deep, can you lift up and carry me
Oh roll on though the heartland
'Till the sun has left the sky
River, river carry me high
'Till the washing of the water will make it all alright
Let your waters reach me like she reached me tonight

Letting go, it's so hard
The way it's hurting now
To get this love untied
So tough to stay with this thing
'Cos if I follow through
I face what I denied
I'll get those hooks out of me
And I'll take out the hooks that I sunk deep in your side
Kill that fear of emptiness, that loneliness I hide

River, oh river, river running deep
Bring me something that will let me get to sleep
In the washing of the water will you take it all away
"Bring me something to take this pain away"

She finished singing, holding still as the last notes died. Sighing, satisfied, she opened blue eyes and began to reach for her guitar case. She was startled by a voice coming from behind her, above her, close.

"Play it again."

She twisted, shielding her eyes from the sunlight. "Sorry, I don't--"

"Play it again. Please." The voice was harsh, edged with--what? (Pain need anger.) She couldn't see his face; it was silhouetted against that damn (blessed) late November sunshine. Brown jacket, jeans with worn knees.

She hesitated. Recalled that rough, accented voice; gave in. She disliked being trampled into playing for an audience--even an audience of one. She usually refused. She'd been coming here for months now to this deserted end of the beach, and resented this intrusion even as she berated herself for being selfish. *It's a public beach, you twit.*

But there was definitely something in that voice. Something that did not demand she play--it pleaded. She could hear it, and she softened.

She played.

She didn't close her eyes this time; closing her eyes was to keep everything for herself. She kept her eyes open because this was for him. She looked out at the lake, at the water that met the horizon seemingly without end, except it had an end--just beyond sight. In fact, you could see the far shore on a very clear day.

But this wasn't a clear day.

She sang.

'Cos if I follow through
I face what I denied

She sang the same song just as he had asked (insisted implored) without looking around for him. She wasn't even sure he was still there, except she hadn't heard him leave. Or arrive, for that matter.

And I'll take out the hooks that I sunk deep in your side

She heard a soft sound. *Oh God, please don't let him be crying,* she thought. *I can't deal with a crazy beach nut.*

*Bring me something to take this pain away*

She finished the song for the second time, and waited.

His voice, when it came, was still behind her--on her other side now, and not above her but down near the ground. He was sitting off to the right somewhere behind her. His voice was strained, awkward, as he said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Did you write that?"
She laughed. "Hell, no, I can't write that well. It's Peter Gabriel."

"But you understand it." It was not a question.

"Yes."

"It's…" He faltered, then said, "It's desolate."

"Yes." She said it quietly; nodded in case he couldn't hear her over the low waves. She raised her voice. "But it's also meant to comfort."

"Yes."

"Does it?" she asked without turning.

The silence lasted so long she thought he wasn't going to answer.

"Not yet."

"No?"

"No. But I think--it will."

"You're Scottish," she said a few minutes later, turning to lay her guitar in its case, then look back at him. Without the weak sunshine in her eyes, she could see him clearly. Good-looking was her first thought. Pale, shadowed, taut were her second, third and fourth. Familiar?

"You're perceptive," he said.

Her eyes flashed to his, and she saw humour there, too. It was going down for the third time, but for now it was still there.

She grinned. "So they tell me."

His lopsided smile was feeble. She knew it was vital to lend some strength. To reach a hand out to the drowning victim, third time sinking.

"So I take it you're here for the tropical swells, white sand and azure skies? Toronto's known for them, you know. Especially in November."

"I can see why." The smile spread ever so slightly as he took in the white-capped grey waves, the beach that was more pebble than sand, the pale cool sky. "The tourists must drive you mad."

"Yes, you do."

He laughed. A tiny one, barely a snort, but the victim got a breath of air. "Not me. Honest. Just here on business for a few days."

"That's too bad," she said, motioning him over with her head and pointing to the sand beside her, explaining, "I'm getting a kink in my neck." As he stood up to comply she reached for her guitar again. "A few days doesn't give you much time to experience the depth of Canadian culture. We'll have to give you a crash course."
As he settled himself beside her, knees up, arms folded across the tops (hiding covering protecting) she picked out a few notes. "I think this was actually written by an American, but the version I do is by a Canadian group. I'm still learning this one, so go easy on me."

He smiled.

She liked the sight.

This cramped city life is not right for a man
We're born to live free and to kill what we can
So it's off to the country where the air's fresh and clear
With a carton of cigarettes and twelve dozen beer.

So blow the horn loudly and rev up the truck
We're off to the country to murder the duck.

We climb in the truck about six forty-five
And proceed to get tanked for the long weary drive
When we get to the cabin we're all brightly lit
Can't remember who drove and can't tell what we hit.

She heard him chuckle. A rich, liquid sound and it distracted her. She hit a wrong note. "Shit. Hang on."

It's up with the dawn, though the coffee's no good
And down to the lake through the dew-spangled woods
When we get to the blind we're as happy as boys
Till we find out that Buddy forgot the decoys.

So blow the horn loudly and rev up the truck
We're off to the country to murder the duck.

We crouch without standing from nine until three
Except every few minutes we stand up to pee
At last there's a duck and we fill it with lead
Can't figure who shot it but the sucker's sure dead.

So blow the horn loudly and rev up the truck
We're off to the country to murder the duck.

She risked a glance at him. He was grinning.

Then it's back to the cabin for whiskey and steaks
Where we talk about women till nearly daybreak
No one believes what the other guys say
but we have to talk dirty to prove we're not gay.

He shouted with laughter. The change in him was complete, absolute, and she now knew who he was. It completely threw her off.

"Fuck. Sorry--told you I'm still learning it." She gestured helplessly as her mind raced.

"Keep going."
The next day the ducks have gone elsewhere in flocks
So we have to shoot beer cans and tree stumps and rocks
Bill lost his gun when he fell in the lake
And Tom shot a full can of beer by mistake.

So blow the horn loudly and rev up the truck
We're off to the country to murder the duck.

Then it's back to the city refreshed by our sport
Drinkin' gas by the gallon and beer by the quart
We have to draw straws to see who has the luck
To pick two pounds of lead out of three pounds of duck

He was still laughing, and he clapped his hands a couple times in appreciation. "Fan-bloody-tastic. That's it to a fucking 't'!"

She couldn't help but smile at him, at his enjoyment. The drowning victim was out of the water and toweling off. "Been hunting, have you?"

"Yeah. One New Year's, I swear three of us hit one grouse--we fought over whose bag it was for two bloody hours. Got totally pissed that night. Drunken stories of conquests and everything."

She chuckled. Plucked at the guitar strings with her fingers, giving him time. Waiting for him to decide what next.

He ran his hands through his hair, spiking it up. The smile was gone but was replaced by quiet, by thoughtfulness--not by a desperate hand grasping up from the water. "Do you have to be somewhere right now?"

"No. You?"

"For a change, no." A touch of bitterness lay behind the words.

"All right."

She could feel him looking at her; feel those green-gold eyes burn a spot on her right cheek, drop to sear her hand resting on the guitar. She put the instrument gently on top of the case beside her.

"Do you come here often?"

She slowly, disbelievingly turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised nearly to her hairline.

He closed his eyes, shook his head, muttered, "Ah, shite."

She burst into peals of laughter.

Falling back to lie on the sand she laughed loud and giggled long, a relief from the sudden tension. It only took a minute for him to join her, laughing as fully as earlier he had been hurting. After a minute he even collapsed back beside her (open unprotected), arms behind his head, letting the warm wet trickle from the corners of his eyes, letting the chilly air take it, cool it, dry it. Finally, still with a catch in his breath, his voice a bit high, he said, "God, I'm such a wanker."

She choked. "Don't be so hard on yourself, it was very smooth. Very James Bond."

"Ah, shut it. You know damn well I meant do you bring your guitar to the beach often."
She snickered. "Yes, I know what you meant. I just could not let that slide."

"No," he agreed. "You couldn't. Although you shouldn't take advantage of a man when he's down--I'm going to have to make you work harder than that."

"Are you down, then?"

Calmly, "You know I am."

"I'm sorry. Yes, I do." She was silent for a moment. "I try to come here at least a couple times a week. If it's not raining, snowing, or 120 degrees. Sometimes I come even if it is raining, as long as it's warm. Just leave the guitar at home. I've been doing it for months now, just me and the waves and the seagulls. No one likes this end of the beach."

"Until I came along."

"Until you came along," she said equably.

"What do you play? Not the same songs every time?"

"No. It depends on my mood. Today was Peter Gabriel, some Sarah McLachlan. REM."

"Which one?"

"Everybody Hurts."

He groaned.

"Some days it's Barenaked Ladies, U2, Coldplay, more Peter Gabriel."

"You really like Peter Gabriel."

"He's incredible. I can't do his songs justice, but I play them anyway. Usually just for myself."

"You don't play clubs or anything?"

"That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me in ages. Also the most idiotic, but nice nonetheless."

"With a band behind you, you could do it."

"Whatever. You're on mind-altering drugs, aren't you?"

"Just the green ones."

She laughed. "That explains it. Try the pink ones tomorrow."

"What do they do?"

"Flowers and clouds and happiness and light. The world is a wonderful place, full of love and kindness. But you don't hallucinate about people's musical abilities."

"They sound even worse than the green ones."

"Sucker for punishment, aren't you?"

"That's me."
"If you want misery, go spend the afternoon wandering a shopping mall surrounded by cold concrete and glass. You have no reason to be so wretched. You're on the beach, it's a beautiful day, which is a miracle in itself in November, and you've just heard *Hunting the Duck* by Buddy Wasisname and the Other Fellers."

He started to laugh.

"See?" She grinned. "It doesn't get a lot better than that."

"You've got a point. I certainly never expected to find a wee ginger singing Buddy Wasisname--"

"And the Other Fellers. Don't forget the Other Fellers."

"Buddy Wasisname and the Other Fellers. Didn't even cross my mind when I left the hotel."

"No, I shouldn't imagine it did," she chuckled.

"That's one of the best band names I've heard in a while."

"My other favourite is the Crash Test Dummies."

He smiled. "Yeah, that's good too."

"What were you expecting?"

"When?"

"When you left your hotel."

"A solitary walk along the beach that would accomplish absolutely nothing except to make me even more tired."

"Solitary or lonely?" she asked.

"Both, I think."

"Solitary's good."

"Yeah. Lonely's not."

"No." She sighed. "No, it's really not."

"You're there too, aren't you?" he asked quietly.

She surveyed the sky above them. "Yes. Both. More lonely than solitary today. But it's one day. Tomorrow's a different day. Could be worse, will hopefully be better. It's an overused cliché, but one day at a time really is the way to go sometimes."

"What if tomorrow's worse?"

"Then it's worse. Wait. The next day's a different day."

"Does that really work?"

"Not usually. But I keep trying."
Lyrics from *Washing of the Water* by Peter Gabriel, *Hunting the Duck* by Zeke Hoskin.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Billy loses control, and Grace helps him regain it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They were silent companions for many long minutes.

"What song do you play when one day at a time doesn't work?" he finally asked, as if he wasn't quite sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Do you want me to tell you or sing it?"

"Bloody silly question. Sing it."

She sat up, picked up her guitar again.

Excuse Me
You're wearing out my Joie de vivre
Grabbing those good years again
I want to be alone

Excuse Me
I'm not the man I used to be
Someone else crept in again
I want to be alone. . .

Excuse me please
I'm looking for Lost Angeles
Soaking up the sin again
I want to be alone. . .

You got the money, that's okay
Who needs a Cadillac anyway
I got the medicine, make you see the light
Call me in Alaska if it all turns out right

Excuse me please
You're standing on my memories
Stealing souvenirs again
I want to be alone

You got the money, that's okay
Who needs a Cadillac anyway
I got the medicine, make you see the light
Call me in Alaska, if it all turns out right
She continued playing the chord progression for a minute, then finally laid the guitar down again. "That song is mine. I don't mean I wrote it--it's Peter Gabriel again. But it's...me when I'm down. When I'm lonely, not solitary." She paused. "When things are close to the surface." She went silent, deep inside her own thoughts.

Finally she turned her head to look at him. One arm was flung across his face, hiding his eyes. She waited.

He didn't move.

"All right there, Billy?"

"Yeah. I--" He hadn't been moving, but she could still tell the exact moment his whole body froze. He swore under his breath. "Damn fuck shit fuckdamndamnfuck."

"Easy there. Don't hurt yourself," she said with a smile.

"You knew. I should have known you knew." Once again his hands went into his hair. He stared fixedly up.

"Billy."

No response.

"Billy."

He turned his head to look at her.

She met his eyes easily, and frankly said, "I didn't know until you laughed. I mean, really laughed, at Buddy Wasisname, at 'we have to talk dirty to prove we're not gay'. You don't look like you."

He groaned. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you want me to tell you right now?"

"No. Not yet." Silence, then--"Wait. Yes."

"You look like shit."

He angrily said, "I should have stuck with no, apparently."

"Sorry. But you look tired, and pale, and hung over, and like you've lost your last friend. I didn't recognize you until you laughed, which is the only way I've ever seen you."

"Where?"

"T.V. The odd newspaper article. You guys are everywhere right now. And it's exactly why I didn't ask. Why I didn't ask what's wrong, or did you want to talk about it. Because it's not fair. I know who you are, and you don't know me. And I won't ask, Billy. Just so you know."

"Fine. Great." The razor edge was back in his voice. "So who the hell are you, then?" He sat up, knees back up (protecting), arms around his head, elbows digging into those knees.

She sat up too. "Grace."
He froze again. "What?"

"I'm Grace."

She heard him snarl something that sounded like, "Grace. Fucking hell. Of course." And then, to her everlasting horror, he started to sob. It sounded harsh, painful.

"Oh God--Billy--don't..." She reached out a hand to him, but couldn't bring herself to lay it on his head. Instead, she reached for his right hand, dangling where his arm was still over his head. She held his pinkie. Held on for dear life.

He cried. He turned his hand and gripped hers tightly, the ring on his fourth finger digging into her skin. She shifted closer, covered his hand with hers, stroking it with the side of her thumb.

He sobbed uncontrollably.

She tentatively put an arm around him, awkwardly gave his shoulders a squeeze. "I'm sorry, Billy. Tell me what to do."

He suddenly turned in to lay his face on her shoulder. Before she knew what happened her arms were around him, her hand in his (spiky soft) hair. She held him as tightly as she could, could feel him shaking, could feel his arms clamped around her waist. If he gripped her any harder, his fingers were going to leave a bruise. Her breath caught at the knowledge of just who was in her embrace. She swallowed, waited until the butterflies subsided.

"I'm sorry," she finally murmured. "Billy, I'm so sorry." Whispered into his hair. Rubbed gently up and down his suede-covered back. "I'm sorry." Laid her cheek on top of his head. "Shhh, it'll be okay." Cradled him. Rocked him a little. "Shh, come on, now. Relax. Take it easy. It'll be all right, I promise. I don't know how yet, but it will. You'll see. Shh. Come on, calm down. It will be all right." His shuddering began to ease as he allowed her voice to soothe him. "That's it. That's better." She stroked his hair. Gave him time to gain control.

"Grace?" His voice was barely recognizable.

"Yes?"

"Really?"

"Really what?"

"Grace."

She smiled for him to hear. "Yes, Billy, my name really is Grace. Why?"

He shook his head against her neck. "Not yet."

She hugged him even tighter. "God, you're just the king of 'not yet', aren't you?"

"Grace?"

"We went over this already."

"No--"

"All right. What?"
"I'm sorry."

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

She kissed the top of his head then fondly said, "Shut the fuck up."

It surprised a tiny snort out of him. Then he shut up.

For all of two minutes.

"Grace?"

"Yes, Billy?"

"You were dead on before. What you sang. Try for four out of four?"

"You sure? Because I've been biting one back for ten minutes now." His drying tears itched on her neck.

He nodded again. "I'm sure."

Grace began to softly, gently sing, without her guitar.

_So go to sleep you weary hobo_  
_Let the towns drift slowly by_  
_Can't you hear the steel rails humming?_  
_That's a hobo's lullaby._

_Do not think about tomorrow_  
_Let tomorrow come and go_  
_Tonight you're in a nice warm boxcar_  
_Safe from all the wind and snow_  

_So go to sleep you weary hobo_  
_Let the towns drift slowly by_  
_Can't you hear the steel rails humming?_  
_That's the hobo's lullaby._

The last note was carried away on the wind. Billy shifted but said nothing.

"Hey," she said. Gave him a squeeze.

"Mmm."

"Don't go to sleep."

"Yeah."

"No."
"M so tired."

"I know," she said softly. "How long since you've had a full night's sleep?"

"Don't know. Week? Or so."

"Or so?" she repeated, questioning.

"Maybe more."

"Let me get you back to your hotel, Billy. Then you can sleep."

"No." His voice was clearer. "I'm not spending any more time in fucking hotel rooms."

"Well you can't sleep here."

"Wanna bet?"

"Billy, falling asleep here would be an incredibly stupid thing to do. Don't be stupid."

He sat up, taken aback by the tone of her voice. "What?" He scrubbed his red eyes with the heels of his hands. "What the hell are you on about?"

"Billy, use the wits God gave you, just for a minute." She knew she sounded angry; toned it down. "You're proposing to fall asleep in the lap of a complete and total stranger on the beach in an unfamiliar city. You, Billy Boyd. Does that sound wise? What do you think your friends would say if you ran that past them?"

He didn't know whether to be offended or amused. He was both, really—in equal measures. "First—what do you mean by 'you, Billy Boyd'? What difference does it make if it's me? And second—"

"It makes a big difference, and you know it."

"And second--" he paused, then actually smiled at her. "If I ran it past Dom, he'd want to fall asleep in your lap too. He'd kill me if I tossed away the opportunity."

She shook her head, fighting the smile creeping past her guard. "Stop it."

"He would. Trust me."

"I'm trying to make an important point, here!"

"And third."

She waited. Grew curious. "Third?"

"I trust you."

"You shouldn't."

"No. But I do."

"You shouldn't," she murmured, turning away uncomfortably, fiddling with the latches on her guitar case and putting her guitar away.

"I really shouldn't." He paused. "Why not, according to Grace?"
She shifted onto her knees. "Because you're you. And I'm not."

"You're not me? Newsflash."

She surged to her feet, struggling in the sand (grit pebbles). Stood over him. "Fine. If you're going to be obtuse then I'll be blunt. You're famous. I'm not. I could fuck you over. You don't know that I won't go straight to the press."

"Will you?"

"No! But you don't know that!"

"I do now."

"For all you know, I could be stalking you!"

"I found you here, remember?"

"Oh my God." She pressed her fists into her eyes. "You're insane."

"Possibly. Grace?"

She muttered unintelligibly to herself.

"Grace." 

"I can't believe this. You're a fucking lunatic."

"Could be. Grace!"

She whirled to look at him. "What?"

"Sit."

"No. I'm not sitting with a barking mad..." She waggled her fingers, searching for the word. "Freak, who wants to sleep in a stranger's lap. No."

He casually stretched out, hooked a foot around her ankles, and yanked with enough force to bring her tumbling down.

"Ow! Sonofa--What the hell was that for?" she yelped.

"Have I got your attention?"

"My attention? You just dumped me on my ass and you ask if you've got my attention?" she practically squeaked.

He sighed. "Apparently not."

"I could have broken something, you know. Did you think of that? I'm going to have a bruise."

"At least your tongue is fine," he muttered. He inchwormed his way on heels ass hands the few feet over to where she was rubbing her elbow. "Grace, as you so eloquently put it, shut the fuck up!" He sat forward, lifting his palms off the sand (cutting gravel), gripped her chin in one hand. "Quit your jabbering. I'm not just screwing around with you. This goes beyond now."

She stared at him, taken aback by the intensity in his voice, her blue-grey eyes wide.
"Are you listening?"

She started to speak, serious now. "Billy, I think…" Trailed off at the warning look on his face. "All right. I'm listening."

"Thank you. Grace, you were four for four."

"So? It's just songs--"

"Just songs my arse. Have you not noticed much of our talk has been sentences of four words or less?" He waited until she nodded, eyes locked on his. "It's because we don't need more. I wish to hell I knew why--it's a little frightening. The only person I've ever had that with is Dom--and it took us a month to reach that point." He gently rubbed the side of his thumb against the line of her jaw. "You understand me. I know what you mean when all you say is 'Yes'. This goes beyond today. It must."

"But you're leaving," she whispered. "This only works here."

"Bullshit. It'll still be just you and I anywhere else. On the phone. The rest of it won't matter."

"Why? Why--beyond today?"

"Because you make me laugh, and--"

She interrupted him. "Dom makes you laugh."

"Shut it, I wasn't finished. Because of the not-yets I have to tell you. I need to find out what song you've got for me. Dom doesn't give me songs. And I want to know what song you're singing for yourself."

"I can't." She pulled away, tried to move away.

He grasped her wrist, held her. "I know I'm not the only one with not-yets. I know what you were singing when I found you, remember? I know you sang Everybody Hurts."

She stilled, not looking at him. "Yes."

"I trust you."

"I know."

"And?" He let go of her wrist, took her hand.

She looked down at them, joined. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

"That's why I don't know how to answer."

"Let's just…go for a walk. See where we wander. Talk. Get the sentences down to two words or less. I can't do anything else right now."

"And I'll give you songs."

"Aye. Although from two words you won't know what song."
"You give me one word, I'll know."

"Will you?"

"I don't have words of my own. But I have everyone else's."

"Don't sell yourself short--you're pretty good with your own. I particularly liked 'Shut the fuck up'."

She laughed. Then sighed. Still holding his hand tightly, sitting cross-legged, she folded over to rest her forehead on the sand.

"My God, you're bendy."

"Pilates."

"You have to meet Dom."

"Okay. Let's wander. When did today get so complicated? I just wanted oatmeal for breakfast, a little time on the beach, maybe a nice Chai latté. That's not unreasonable, is it?"

"What's so complicated?"

"Well, I did have my oatmeal this morning…"

"And you may not have noticed, but that's beach you're practically kissing there."

"So it is."

"We can get you a latté. What's the problem?"

"Maybe this will work after all."

"Something not many know. I can be very practical." He let go of her hand and rubbed up and down her back a few times. "All right, Grace?"

"Yes." She reached out without sitting up and tapped her guitar case. "Your turn."

His hand left her back and she felt him moving around behind her. Heard the latches on the case.

"How do you know I play?"

"I don't know. Read it somewhere, I guess."

"Oh God. You've read that shite?"

"Not much. I don't believe anything I read unless it's confirmed by at least three thousand and twenty-seven unreliable sources--or two impeccable ones."

"Two?" He started to randomly pluck the strings.

"I won't believe you play until Dom confirms it."

He chuckled. "I'm fucked, then."

"Why are you here?"

"Toronto?"
"Yes."

"Good. I'm not ready for anything deeper."

"Not yet."

"I'm going to hear that a lot, aren't I?"

"Yep." There was a smile in her voice.

"Thought so."

"So?"

"Press shite. No, forget I said that. I love PR--life wouldn't be complete without it."

She sat up abruptly and poked him in the chest. "Don't do that."

"Sorry."

"I mean it. Don't you dare try and shit me. Don't think you can brush me off."

"I was being ironic. But yes. You're right."

She grabbed the edge of his jacket, snagging sweater as well. "I know you were being ironic, you twit. It was the 'forget I said that'. I don't have to forget it. I'm not sharing today with anyone. I promise you that."

He smiled. "I know."

She let go of him. "Good." Sat back. "So when's your PR 'shite'?"

"Tonight at eight. Tomorrow at two, four and six-thirty. Flight out next morning."

"Then?"


"God."

"Yeah."

"How do you do it?"

"By getting very 'prima donna' and insisting on a day off in every city when it's mad like this. Today's my day. Got burned out on the last tour, and it wasn't that long ago. In L.A. I get to go surfing." He grinned.

"Good job you're waiting. The surfing's not so great here today."

He laughed. "No, not really."

"Am I getting a song?"

"I'm waiting for you to stop talking."

"Jackass."
"I'm hurt."

"Shut up and sing."

He started fingerpicking, looked thoughtful. Suddenly he smiled. The melody changed to a minor key, the rhythm slowed.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound*

She rolled her eyes. "Oh please."

"Shut it and listen. Listen to what I'm singing, please."

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound*
*That saved a wretch like me*
*I once was lost but now I'm found*
*Was blind but now I see.*
*'Twas Grace that taught my heart to hear*
*And Grace my fears relieved*
*How precious did this Grace appear*
*The hour I first believed.*
*Through many dangers, toils and snares*
*We have already come*
*'Twas Grace that brought me safe thus far*
*And Grace will lead me home.*

He leaned over and nudged her with his shoulder. "Sorry. I didn't play what you needed. But I sang what I needed to say."

Impulsively she threw her arms around his neck. "You're wrong. You're a lovely bugger."

He laughed. "That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me in a long time," he echoed her earlier words.

"Your friends are neglecting you then."

"I've always thought so."

"Sing me something Scottish. You've a fantastic voice."

*Just when every ray of hope was gone*
*I should have known that you would come along*
*I can't believe I ever doubted you*
*My old friend the blues.*

*Another lonely night, a nameless town*

He was surprised to hear her singing quietly in harmony, her eyes closed. He kept playing but said, "You know it?"
"And love it. Keep going."

If sleep don't take me first, you'll come around
'Cause I know I can always count on you
My old friend the blues.

Lovers leave and friends will let you down
But you're the only sure thing that I've found
No matter what I do I'll never lose
My old friend the blues.

Just let me hide my weary heart in you
My old friend the blues.

She was really impressed. "You've a wonderful voice. Really good. And you're two for two. It's just too bad that song isn't Scottish."

"What do you mean?"

"The Proclaimers just covered it. It was written by an American, wasn't it?"

He grinned. "Damn."

"Cheater. At least I told you mine was by an American."

"It was still done by a Scottish band. They have the accent. You were singing it."

"Not the same. Here I was expecting some Robbie Burns-type folk tune, and you hand me a damned Yankee song."

"I'll do better next time," he promised, smiling.

"You'd better. And I'm glad I didn't hear you first."

"I've been playing a long, long time."

"I'm going to have to practice."

"You can practice on me."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Billy and Grace leave their mark on each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He kept up a quiet, unobtrusive thread of minor chords. He seemed to take comfort in simply having a guitar in his hands. "I didn't believe your name was Grace."

"I noticed."

"You didn't ask."

"No. I told you I wouldn't."

"Do you believe in God?" Conversational.

"I think I believe there is a God, yes. Beyond that--I don't know."

"I don't either. I walked past a church on my way here. Figured it couldn't hurt--maybe it would help, who knows? When I walked down the beach--down further, past the breakwater--I was praying. Using all the words I learned as a kid. God grant me mercy, peace, love, grace, serenity. You appeared in front of me. You sang that song. You smiled at me. And then you said your name was Grace. It scared the fucking shite out of me. Please tell me your middle name isn't Serenity."

She smiled, quietly said, "No. It's Cadence."

He cocked his head. "Grace Cadence. That's lovely. I've never heard that before."

"Musical mother. I'm sorry you were freaked out. I'm surprised you didn't run away."

"I considered it," he chuckled. "But why pray if you're going to run from your answer?"

She opened her mouth. Closed it again. Somewhere in her chest something tightened.

He didn't notice (ignored) her silence. "I asked God to grant me Grace. I'm going to have to think about that some more."

In a thick voice she said, "Are you trying to make me cry, Boyd? If so, by all means keep talking."

"Ah, no, don't cry. I'll stop. Just wanted you to know that. One of my not-yets. Tell you what--let's get that latte. I think the temperature's dropping." He handed her the guitar, watched as she put it in its case, closed the latches. "How does that sound?"

She swallowed. "Good."
"Where do we go?" He stood, picked up her case, held out his free hand to her. He helped her to her feet.

She let go of his hand, turned away from the lake. "Depends. Where do you have to end up later? Your hotel?"

He nodded. "On Front St. at Yonge."

"Royal York?"

"Fairmont, I think?"

"Yeah, that's the one. They changed the name a few years ago, but I'll never get used to it, it's always been the Royal. Best bloody hotel in the city."

"We're lucky. Last hotel we stayed in was total shite."

"Poor lamb. All right, we'll go up Yonge, then it's just a quick trip back down the subway."

"Whatever you say. It's your city, you're now officially my guide."

"Is this a paying position?"

"No, but I tip in lattés."

"That'll do."

They left the beach, headed for the nearest subway. She tried to take her guitar case but he swatted her away and switched it to his far hand.

"Hope you've practiced running for a train with one of those. I'll not be responsible for the kneecaps you break."

"I've steered a fucking frigate through the Pacific. I'm sure I can handle a guitar case," he grinned.

"Ah, but you didn't exactly have to precision park your frigate, did you? We'll see."

She had to admit--but only when he directly asked--he managed quite well with it. They actually did have to run down the last few stairs, to the next platform, and onto the subway--but all was accomplished without casualties. Until they were rocking (jostling bumping) to the motion of the subway car, and he succeeded in whacking a man rather solidly in the shin.

"Ah, sorry, mate," he apologized sincerely. It wasn't until she saw the subtle flash of satisfaction as the man stepped away from where he had been very nearly pressed up against her that the innocent look failed to convince.

She leaned in to quietly say, "Bloody fantastic, Billy. Oscar-worthy, I'd say."

"He needed a lesson about personal space."

"Remind me not to invade yours."

"Invade my what?" He raised his eyebrow, wiggled it.

"Oh, bite me."
"Love to."

"Fuck me," she sighed.

He nearly choked.

"I mean--I didn't--bloody hell." She tried to ignore the hot blush creeping up her cheeks. "That's it. Not another word. One more and I will fucking well leave you down here and you can find your own way home."

His face was perfectly serious, but his voice quivered as he said, "Not a word."

The car came to a halt at the platform and she picked up her guitar case, butting it lightly against his thigh. "Get your impertinent Scottish ass off the train."

They resurfaced on Yonge St. a few minutes later, and she pointed him towards a café. "Head in there--I'll meet you inside in a minute."

"Sure. What do you want? I'll order it for you."

"Chai latté, no foam, no cinnamon, one sugar. I'll be right back."

When he turned toward the café, she went the opposite direction, entering a nearby music store.

Five minutes later she rejoined him, laying her case under the small table he was at, resting her feet lightly on it as she sat down. He pushed her cup towards her. "Thanks." She took a careful sip and burned her tongue anyway. "Shit!"

"Let me guess. You do that every time, don't you?"

"Every damn time. How'd you know?"

"Elijah does the same thing. Gets the same look on his face." He was smiling.

"You guys really are close, aren't you?"

"Some more than others. But yes."

"You're unbelievably lucky."

"Yes."

"I'm glad you know it."

"I do."

She pushed a small bag across the table. "Here. You can't go on the rest of your junket without this. It's second-hand, but it was the closest shop."

He opened the bag and withdrew a CD. It had a red cover, with Peter Gabriel in a 1980's blue suit.

"Track six."
He flipped it over to look, then met her eyes. "It's the song you were singing. *Washing of the Water*," he read.

She nodded. "Keep listening to it. The real song is so much better, obviously. Let me know when it works."

"Comforts?"

"Yeah."

"I will."

"Depending on what your not-yets are, you may want to skip track two for a while."

"*Love to be Loved*?"

"It'll kill you if you're in the wrong place. Cut you to bits."

"And in the right place?" he asked.

"Most fantastic song ever written."

"Tell me when I should try it."

"You'll know."

"Thank you, Grace."

"Promise you'll listen to it? All of it?" she insisted.

"Do you really need to ask that?"

"No?"

"No."

"Okay."

He picked up his cup and sipped (no burn). "This is shite."

"Really? Do you want to try something else?"

He shook his head. "Not the coffee. This," as he gestured between the two of them. "Don't you hear it? We're fucking saying goodbye already. Why? There's no need. Today's only Thursday, I don't fly out until Saturday."

"I don't know. I feel like…" She stopped, looked intently at her cup. "Never mind."

"What?"

"No. It'll sound really stupid."

"Out with it, woman."

She sighed. "I'm only telling you because there has to be total truth for this wandering to work. Don't you dare laugh at me." She fixed him with a stare.
"I wouldn't dream of it. And we can believe in each other implicitly."

"All right. I think I feel...like you're this little Scottish fairy--" He opened his mouth, but she was already holding up her hand to forestall him. "Pixie. Okay? Not fairy. Pixie."

"That's better," he muttered. "Just."

"You're this Disney-esque Scottish pixie with a foul mouth who's invaded one of my more lucid dreams. It's surreal...funny as hell...heartrending...R rated...too good to be real, really...and when we get back on that train and it takes you to your hotel and then it takes me home, I'll go to sleep tonight and I'll wake in the morning and all that will be left is this half-remembered, warm, slightly disturbing feeling that I dreamed about a foul-mouthed Scottish pixie who found me like I haven't been found in years."

He didn't look at her. Took her hand across the table, lacing his fingers with hers.

"Yes. All of it. Well, except for the Scottish part, of course. But yes. And, well--you're not a pixie. More of a...a naiad. Yeah. A naiad that swears like a fucking sailor." He smiled gently. "How could I laugh at you? That was bloody fantastic, Grace."

She smiled back at him, a little sadly. "So how does this not end like that? I don't want to say goodbye already either, especially to someone who knows what a naiad is. But how do we go beyond?"

"We talk. I'll call you tonight, after the PR shite. Can I do that?"

She nodded, already reaching down to open her guitar case, retrieve paper and pen. She took a piece of paper and tore it in half. On one piece she wrote a phone number and two email addresses. On the second piece she wrote the exact same number and addresses. "This is my home phone. I have voicemail. And you can reach me at either of the emails. " She folded it, handed it to him, nodded as he tucked it in his back pocket. Then she passed the duplicate list. "And when you wash those jeans without checking the pockets, you can say, 'Fuckshitshitfuck--oh wait! I also have it in my jacket!' So there you go."

He chuckled. "Actually, it's 'Fuck damndamndamn fuck'. But probably exactly what will happen." He took the pen from her fingers, turned her hand over, and slowly bared her wrist to halfway up her forearm.

Her stomach fluttered.

He wrote a phone number on the inside of her wrist. "My mobile. It's always on. Even in interviews, sometimes, goddamnit. Bonus points if you ring during an interview. Bean did once."

He shifted his grip on her arm, wrote an email address below the phone number. "My private address. Don't you dare give it to Dom, he'll just send me porn."

"Don't give me ideas."

"Sending me porn?"

"Giving your address to Dom, you nut."

"A nut now, am I?" He still held her wrist. Slowly he began to write on it again.

She followed the movements of his hand, the pen. Mesmerized.
"When I'm locked in my hotel room tonight, climbing the walls after the press, I'll call you. And we'll use short sentences. And you'll tell me to bloody well sit down, have a drink, stop being such a wanker. And I'll smile. And you'll sing to me. And...I'll sleep."

"Yes," she murmured.

"Yes."

They were silent as he continued to tattoo her wrist. His name in blueblack ink (thickly darkly) not easily washed off.

He finished. Pulled her sleeve back down.

"Afraid I'll forget your name?" she said softly.

"You could."

"Not bloody likely."

"Would you get a tattoo?"

"Not that; not there. But maybe. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Did it hurt?"

"Hell yes. If I could do it over, I'd pick somewhere a little more...fleshy than my ankle." He grinned. "So you won't wear my name the rest of your life? I'm desolate."

"I wouldn't wear my own name for the rest of my life. Mind you, it could come in handy at times."

"If you ever had amnesia," he agreed.

"Alzheimer's."

"A one-night stand who's bad with names."

He caught her off-guard with that, and she laughed loudly. One or two people stared. She dipped her head, still laughing, and muttered, "You're fiendish."

"I try." He grinned.

She took a long swallow of her latté. "You should probably head back to your hotel soon."

"Yeah."

"Try and enjoy tonight. Keep smiling. Think about...I don't know. Dom kicking your ass for not being the happy little hobbit."

"I'll think of you."

She winced exaggeratedly. "I think my blood-sugar just spiked."

He threw back his head and laughed delightedly, drawing more looks. "That was uncalled for, wasn't it?"
"Yes. And thank you."

"You're welcome. What about tomorrow?"

"What?"

"When can I see you tomorrow?"

"You have your press stuff."

"Yeah, but not all day. I'm free until 1:30. And then tomorrow night's interview shouldn't take that long."

She was surprisingly pleased.

"Grace?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not a pixie. I'll be here tomorrow."

"I know."

"So?"

"Of course. Call me when you wake up. I'll pick you up."

"Good."

"And you'll call me tonight?"

"Yes. It might be late."

"I know."

She was working on her computer, Frank Sinatra playing in the background, when he called well after midnight.

"Grace?"

"Hi Billy."

"I'm sorry it's so late."

"It's fine--I'm up."

"I'm glad."

"How did it go?"

Infinitesimal pause. "It was great."

"Billy."
"It was okay. Really. Maybe not great, but Elijah and Andy were in rare form. Kept everything going."

"Including you?"

"Mostly. They were flying. We did the handshake, autograph, hugpicturekiss, answer the same questions over and over thing. Poor Andy's never going to be able to use his own voice ever again. Everyone wants to hear Gollum. Which I understand, it's brilliant. But it's hard for him after a while."

"And Elijah?"

"Gets a lot of giggles. Even from grown women, sometimes. But he's an old hand at all of this. It also helps that he's such a geek--he's so bloody sincere!"

"Billy!" She laughed. "That's not nice!"

He chuckled. "It's true--and he's always the first to say it. He absolutely revels in his geekiness."

"What's the best question you got tonight?"

"Oh, I did have a good one, actually. One of your papers asked if Pippin was ever worried that his parents didn't know why he'd just disappeared."

"Interesting. Good question."

He waited. "Don't you want to know the answer?"

"Only if you feel like it."

"Not at first. He had no inkling how extended his journey would be. And then I think he'd feel a little guilt, but would rationalize it. You know, since they all left at the same time, his parents would know he was with his cousins and Sam, and would be looked after. And finally there would be a few moments when he'd be heartbroken, thinking he'd never get back to them, that they'd never know what he was fighting for."

"In front of the Black Gates. 'So it ends as I thought it would.'"

"Exactly."

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"You're pacing, aren't you?"

A pause. "Yeah."

"Don't."

"How did you know?"

"I can hear it. Go sit on the bed or something."

"You're supposed to tell me to get a drink."
"Oh, right. Quit being such a wanker and get--"


"Go check out your mini-bar. It's got to have something good." She could hear him opening the bar door, hear faint clinking sounds as he looked through the bottles.

"What the hell's 'Black & White'?"

"It's horse piss. Pass that one by, my friend."

He laughed again. "Good thing I've got your help, isn't it? We'll go with the Glen Livet, then."

"Much better," she said fervently.

"Like whiskey, do ye?"

"The good stuff, in small doses."

"What's your favourite drink?"

"Depends what I'm doing."

"Dancing," he suggested.

"Rye and ginger."

"Watching football. Sorry, I guess for you it'd be ice hockey, wouldn't it?"

"More likely, yes. Canadian beer, of course."

"Quiet night out with friends."

"Hmm… in a pub, lager or stout. In a bar, White Russian."

"Under a summer moon on the beach."

"Ooh, good one. Cherry brandy."

"God, that stuff is foul," he protested.

"Yes, it is. But it and the moon and I go back a long way."

"I'd like to hear about that sometime."

She smiled. "Not yet. Billy, you are sitting down now, aren't you?"

"Yes, Grace. Stretched out on the bed."

"Good."

"Do I hear music in the background? What are you listening to?"

"Frank Sinatra--at the moment, *Imagination*."

"You like the old stuff?"
"Some of it--Rat Pack boys, Bing Crosby. You?" she asked.

"I don't know how anyone can not like it. I don't listen to it terribly often, I confess, but I enjoy it when I do."

"How's the Glen Livet?"

"Good. A little too cold, but that's really neither here nor there. What other music do you listen to that I might not have guessed?"

"My collection includes Kermit the Frog, Stompin' Tom Connors, and bagpipe music. Not together, though."

"You're twisted. I'm Scottish and even I don't have bagpipe music on CD."

"We can change that, you know."

"No, we can't. Who or what is a Stompin' Tom Connors?"

"He's Canadian. An original. His songs include 'Bud the Spud' and 'The Hockey Song'."

He laughed out loud. "Those I need to hear."

"Then you shall. Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"You need to relax. You're still wired."

Silence. Then--"Sorry."

"Don't be stupid," she said fondly. "Just relax. Why don't you get ready for bed? Put the phone down, I'll wait."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Go on."

She heard him lay the phone down, faintly heard noise in the background. She took the time to shut down her computer. Put some paperwork away. Sank into the sofa. Waited.

"Grace."

"Still here."

"Good."

"All set?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now climb into bed--and nothing suggestive, mister. The plan is to get you to sleep."

"Damn." His grin was audible.

"Laying down?"
"Yes."

"Blankets tucked up to your chin?"

"Almost. I do have to hang on to the phone."

"Oh. Right. Are the lights out?"

"No, hang on…okay."

"All right." She lowered her voice, softened it. "You've probably done exercises just like this in the theatre. It's simple relaxation techniques. Just follow my voice." She spoke slowly, leaving silence between every sentence. Measured. "Close your eyes. Take a deep breath in through your nose, filling your whole chest with air. Let it out slowly through your mouth. Feel the tension drain out of your forehead…run down your neck…leave your shoulders…flow down your arms…straight out your fingertips. Your shoulders are down. Your arms are limp. Your fingers are completely relaxed, slightly curled. You hang on to the phone, but there is no tension in your hand." She paused. Quietly asked, "How are you doing?"

"Mmm. Good."

"Good. Take another deep breath in…and out… Feel your spine loosen, the muscles down either side release…there is nothing solid in your back anymore…you couldn't sit up if you tried. Your hips are loose…your thighs jelly…your calves melt into nothingness…your ankles empty…your toes boneless. Your entire body is made of water. If it weren't for your skin, you would float away, run away, soak into the ground. You would become part of the soil…of the grass…of the trees under the sun. As you breathe in and out, feel the warmth of the sun on every inch of your body. It warms and soothes and cleanses." She waited.

A minute later--"Mmm."

"Can you feel the sun?" she murmured.

"Mmm-hmm."

"Go to sleep. Fall into it. Let it take you under."

"Sing."

"One. Then hang up the phone and sleep."

"Mmnf."

Quietly, softly, she began to sing.

Lullaby and goodnight
With roses bedight
Bright angels around
My darling shall stand
They will guard thee from harm
Thou shalt wake in my arms
They will guard thee from harm
Thou shalt wake in my arms
Lullaby and goodnight
Thy mother's delight
Bright angels around
My darling shall stand
Lay thee down now and rest
May thy slumber be blessed
Lay thee down now and rest
May thy slumber be blessed.

"Hang up the phone now, Billy," she whispered, barely audible. "Sleep well."


Smiling, she went to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from Brahms Lullaby (Cradle Song) by Johannes Brahms.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Billy and Grace spend hours sightseeing and talking.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The following morning she was absently stirring her oatmeal and watching Duck Dodgers man (bird) his spaceship when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, oh great goddess of sleep."

"Billy! You're awake already?"

"And feeling fit as a fiddle. You're a miracle worker, you know that?"

"Sleep well?"

"Like a fucking log, for nine solid hours. I may have to put you on retainer."

"As what?"

"As…as my personal sleep guru. Although I would loan you out to friends who need help," he said easily, casually.

"You'll loan me out. That's lovely. Thank you so much."

"Not to just anybody, now. Only the very closest of friends."

"Oh, well, that's all right then," she said sarcastically.

His voice deepened. "Thank you, Grace. I needed that."

"I know. You're welcome."

"So when are you coming?"

"Can I finish my breakfast, please?"

"No. Get your bahookie over here."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your arse."

"Billy?"
"Yeah?"

"I doubt this information will ever be necessary again, but--I am not a morning person. Get too energetic and I may have to kill you."

"Noted, oh ye of little faith. Now get over here. Time's wasting."

She walked into the lobby of the (Fairmont) Royal York and looked around. Granted, it was a very large lobby--but no, no sign of him. Sighing, she wandered over to the reception desk.

"May I help you?"

"Mr. Billy Boyd's room please?"

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid I can't give that information out."

"No, of course--sorry. Can you ring him and tell him his taxi is waiting?"

"Certainly." The receptionist turned, contacted his room, relayed the message. Hung up frowning, turned back to her. "Mr. Boyd says he didn't order a taxi."

She laughed. "He'll figure it out in a minute. Thank you for your help." She felt the receptionist's suspicious eyes on her as she walked away, taking a seat in a comfortable chair. She waited, watching the elevators.

Finally he walked out, checking his watch and then beginning his scan of the lobby. She was glad of the moment to study him. The shadows had definitely lessened--he looked much more rested, fairly bursting with energy. He wore all black, from his leather jacket to his shoes. The green stone pendant around his neck gleamed. He spotted her, came striding over.

She stood as he approached, put her hands on her hips, tapped one foot. "'Get your balookie over here' he says," she mocked him. "Mr. Slept-Like-A-Fucking-Log. Mr. Hurry-Up-Time's-Wasting. Mr. Taxi?-I-Didn't-Order-A-Taxi. Leave me sitting here being stared at by the receptionist like there's a restraining order against me."

Laughing, he pulled her into a hug. "It's bahookie, actually. Been waiting long?" he teased.

She hugged him back. "At least ninety seconds."

Arms still around her, preventing her from backing up, he leaned back to look at her. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine. Once I finished satisfying the whims of a sleep-deprived hobbit."

"Poor girl. You were satisfying, though." He lightly kissed her on the end of her nose.

Surprised, she pulled away. Hissed, "Shut up! Don't say things like that so loud! And don't twist my words." She started to head for the door. "You coming?"

Amused, he followed. They stepped outside and he immediately stopped to do his coat up. "God, it's cold out here! It looked so nice from inside. What the hell happened?"
She laughed at him. "The end of November in Toronto is what happened. If you don't like the weather, wait ten minutes and it'll change--usually for the worse. Don't worry, tomorrow it'll probably be six degrees and raining, just like home."

"That's more like it. What are we doing? Sledding? Ice-fishing? Snowboarding?"

"You're a very funny man, aren't you? What time is your thing this afternoon, and where?"

"I've got no idea where, they're sending a car to pick us up here at one."

"So we've got two and a half hours or so. Are there any restrictions?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to sightsee? Is there anything you absolutely hate? How crazy is it for you, walking around on your own? Do we need to hire a bodyguard to protect you from your hordes of fans?"

"Miss Sarcastic this morning, aren't we?" he teased. "I don't like heights. I'd like to see the city, but I don't really want to spend the next two and a half hours outside. And I may get stopped by one or two people, but you'll be an adequate bodyguard. It only gets mad at the big events--or if Elijah's there," he smiled.

"Well, we'll just have to leave Elijah behind then. Is being a bodyguard a paid position?"

"No. But again, I tip well."

"You celebrities are all alike. No respect for the little people."

"Next topic, Grace," he said calmly.

Her eyes flicked up to his. He was looking down the street. "Why?"

"Not yet."

She nodded, turned; they started walking. "How much don't you like heights? As long as you're not near the edge you're okay, or being more than a metre off the ground turns you into a gibbering idiot?"

He smiled. "No, I'm not quite that bad. Just don't try and get me to go bungee jumping. Dom tried in New Zealand. He's probably still got my boot print on his arse."

"Understood. Well, if you're feeling brave we could go up the C.N. Tower."

"Sure. Let's go for it. I'm in the mood for adventure."

They turned that direction to walk the few blocks to the base of the tower.

"I've decided it's time for you to catch me up. You know things about me, time to return the favour."

"Okay," she said warily. "Like what?"

"Like, do you have a last name, Grace Cadence?"

She laughed, relieved. "As a matter of fact, I do. MacPherson. Pleasure to meet you."
"MacPherson? That's Scottish!"

"You noticed," she teased. "But not for many, many generations. It does explain the red hair, though. Also, the other side of my family is Irish. Double cursed."

"It's no curse."

"Easy for you to say. You weren't called carrot-top or pumpkinhead as a kid."

He winced. "Pumpkinhead?"

"Yep. Breathe a word of that to anyone and I'll fucking kick you."

"Understood. Not a word. Family?"

"Extended--vast numbers. Immediate, two parents, one older brother."

"Everything good?"

"Mostly. Not as close as we once were. Too many changes. My brother and I are better than we used to be. Used to fight like cats and dogs, until I moved out, learned to smoke and drink, and suddenly I was a real person."

"You smoke?" Surprised.

"Used to. I quit last year, finally. Not easy. I still miss it sometimes. You?"

"I've never been a regular smoker, but I occasionally indulge. I won't if you're around."

"Don't worry about it. Here we are."

They entered the C.N. Tower, walked the distance up to the ticket counter. He muscled her out of the way. "Bugger off. I tip well, remember?"

"That's better than is necessary."

"I said piss off." He turned his back on her, bought the tickets.

"No, you said bugger off."

"Do you want this ticket or not?"

They were able to get straight onto an elevator. Grace made a beeline for the back corner, standing with her spine pressed into it, gripping the handrail. "Don't stand by the windows," she cautioned. "We go up fast. Stay back here and you should be fine."

He stared at her white knuckles. "What's wrong?"

She grinned at him, her eyes fixed on his. "I don't like elevators. I'm very conscious of the fact that I'm one cable-snap away from death." The other passenger standing in front of them shifted uncomfortably. "Sorry. Also, that heights thing? Me too."

"Gibbering?"

"Potentially."

"Then what the hell are we doing here?"
"As long as I don't see it, I'm quite alright. There are certain things I just can't do, but other than that, I refuse to let it stop me."

"You're mad."

"You don't like heights either, and you're here."

"You don't see me with a death grip on the rail, do you?"

"That's the elevator, not the heights. It's only the journey, not the destination. Or some sort of crap like that."

"What can't you do?" His head turned as the doors closed.

"Sky-diving, bungee-jumping. Rollercoasters that go upside down. Rappelling. Helicopters. Anything where I can see the ground between my feet. Or actually, the lack thereof seems to be the real problem. I went up in a ski-jump tower once. The trip up--fine. However, then I discovered one is intended to leave the tower by hurtling oneself down the hill face first. The only other option was an outdoor, open metal grillwork staircase with very narrow steps. It was a close call, but I finally decided on the stairs. When one is going down narrow steps, it is very difficult not to watch your feet. Try it, you'll see. I made it about halfway down when some dumb--" with a lightning glance at the other passenger, she lowered her voice, "double-poxed shit-for-brains rat bastard decided to jump up and down to see if he could make the stairs rattle. He could, the pillock. I sat down. It took them nearly half an hour to get me the rest of the way down."

"Is he still alive?" The green eyes twinkled.

"Yes. But only because my plan involved chucking his body off the end of the ski jump, and I realized that meant going at least halfway up the tower. I got drunk instead."

The elevator came to a stop. Her knees nearly buckled. He grabbed her elbow. She unlocked her fingers from the rail and headed straight through the doors, muttering, "Out, out, out." He followed.

She took a deep breath, let it out, grinned. "Made it."

"I don't know why you do this to yourself."

"Not doing it would piss me off."

"God, you're stubborn."

"Probably. I prefer to call it persistent."

He laughed.

"So, now that we're here, go have a good look around--it's a fantastic view, and you get to see the entire city from inside. I am done talking for a while."

"You did kind of run on a wee bit, there."

"Yeah, well…"

"I know. Gibbering."

They wandered around, enjoying the different vistas laid out in the cold clear sun below them. She
didn't go as close to the windows as he did—but he didn't go right up to them either. Neither of them went anywhere near the section of thick glass floor. They were mostly quiet. Comfortably so. He asked the occasional question about something he was looking at, or about the city itself, which she did her best to answer. She had to pull a leaflet off a rack when he asked how high up they were. "553.33 metres, or 1815 feet, 5 inches. That bit of glass floor is supposedly strong enough to support fourteen large hippos. Want to test it?"

"No, thanks. You?"

"No. I gained a little weight last week. Don't want to push it."

After a while she left him on his own, staring out at the lake, just able to see the far shore. She walked to one side, to watch the barges down in the docklands. Some time later felt a presence behind her. They stood in silence, watching the ships, for a long time. Eventually he said, "Why did they have to do away with masts and sails?"

"Ugly, aren't they? Clumsy."

"Incredibly. All the elegance is gone."

"You should come back when the tall ships visit. Doesn't happen often, but it's a sight when it does. You'd enjoy it."

"How many?"

"Some years just a few, big events twenty or more, sailing the Great Lakes."

"God, that would be fucking amazing."

"Yeah. You are so lucky to have had the opportunity to sail one." A pause. Then, "Still…"

"Still?"

She softly began to sing so only he could hear.

*Out of my window looking in the night  
I can see the barges flickering light  
Silently flows the river to the sea  
And the barges too go silently  

Barges, I would like to go with you  
I would like to sail the ocean blue  
Barges, have you treasures in your hold?  
Do you fight with pirates brave and bold?  

Out of my window looking in the night  
I can see the barges flickering light  
Starboard shining green and port is glowing red  
I can see the barges far ahead  

Barges, I would like to go with you  
I would like to sail the ocean blue  
Barges, have you treasures in your hold?*
"Do you fight with pirates brave and bold?"

"That's pretty."

"I don't know where I learned it. I think I've known it forever, and just forgot about it until now. Wanderlust doesn't care if the ship is elegant. As long as she sails."

"Wanderlust, hmm?"

"Painfully so. Out of necessity, mostly penned away. But yes."

"What gets to you?"

"Ships. Train whistles. Jet trails in the sky. Pictures of places I've always wanted to see."

"Such as?"

"...Not now. Not yet."

"All right."

They fell silent again.

Finally, without discussion, they turned toward the elevator to leave. She took up her place in the corner. This time he stood directly in front of her, close, hands beside hers on the railing on either side of her. His eyes locked on hers and held them.

"What else are you afraid of?"

"Uh...Umm..."

"Focus."

"Right. Umm...Heights. Elevators. Tornadoes. Walking down Yonge St. at night by myself. Spiders and centipedes. Well, I'm not really afraid of them, I suppose. But they really creep me out. Couldn't watch Shelob, those scuttling legs did me in."

"I hope you don't go looking for tornadoes just because you're 'persistent'."

"Don't be silly. We actually don't get many here. I don't even know why they frighten me. Maybe I was traumatized by 'The Wizard of Oz'. I also, before you ask, try not to walk down Yonge at night too often. I should be able to, and it pisses me off I live in a world where I can't, but I'm not stupid."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"You're making fun of me."

"No. I'm glad to hear you're careful."

"I don't have much choice. It's not like I'm six foot four and three hundred pounds."
"You don't have to be, you know."

"You mean self-defense?" He nodded. "I know to use keys to aim for groin, throat, eyes. Beyond that, I don't know that I want to know. You know?"

"I could teach you to lay a man out on the ground and stop just short of breaking his arm. Put you in control until help arrives."

She stared. "You could?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. An interesting thought. I'll think about it and let you know."

"Okay."

The elevator came to a rest. His hand was already under her arm before her knees quavered. "Out you go."

"Yes. Outside. Need to sit down for a minute--somewhere low to the ground." He followed as she left the tower. She sat on a concrete wall outside. "Just for this moment, concrete is my friend. I love concrete."

"I have absolutely no right to say this to you, but I'm going to say it anyway." He sat down beside her. Looked at his hands. Said nothing.

"Billy." She put her hand on his arm, waited until he looked at her. "You can say whatever the hell you want to me. If I don't like it or I think you're full of shit, I'll let you know. But say it."

He searched her eyes, then nodded. "This thing you do--" He gestured from her to the C.N. Tower above them. "This mad, stubborn, persistent, bull-headed, whatever you want to call it, thing you do. Don't take it too far. That's all."

"Too far? What do you mean?"

"Pick your battles. Make sure pushing yourself is worth it and you're in a safe place. Today--no matter how frightening it was to you, you were safe the whole time. Even if you lost it, nothing could have happened to you. Keep it that way."

"You're speaking from experience."

"Not personal. I knew someone who did what you do--didn't want to let his fears stop him. He was claustrophobic. Decided to go cave diving with some friends anyway. He panicked and drowned. He didn't pick his battle; it wasn't worth it."

"God. I'm sorry, Billy."

"I didn't know him well--we just went to the same school. It completely fucked up his friends though. It was a stupid thing to do."

"Don't worry, I won't be pulling a stunt like that. I'm a true coward at heart. If there's any actual risk of personal danger I run away. It's only what makes me feel frightened that I fight, if you know what I mean--and even then, only to a point. In fact, I bet you take a lot more risks than I do. Surfing, some of the stuff you've done in your movies."

"Possibly," he conceded. "But there's always a safety team standing by. When I surf, I try not to go
alone. Don't get me wrong," he added, taking her hand from where it still rested on his arm, folding his fingers around hers. "I'm not saying never take risks. A little gamble really gets the blood pumping," he grinned. "Just...I don't know. I'm contradicting myself."

"I know what you're trying to say. Live, but use your fucking brains."

He hooted. "Yeah, that's it."

"Thought so."

She snatched her hand away as two young women approached diffidently.

"Excuse me? Are you Billy Boyd?" The second one quickly said, "Could we bother you for an autograph?"

He smiled easily. "Ach, it's no' a bother. I'd be glad tae." He stood up, moved toward them, took the paper and pen they held out.

She sat back and watched, curious, knowing she was watching the actor at work. He was charming, friendly, attentive—and yet... She studied his face, trying to find what was different. The accent, for one thing. Thicker. The eyes shuttered. The smile, the laugh, only went as far as the corners of his mouth instead of vibrating (sparking flashing) through his whole body. He gave each of the girls a quick impersonal hug, said a truly sincere thanks, turned back to her and with a barely perceptible motion of his head indicated it was time to move along. She rose and they walked on.

"All right, Billy?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. I've never seen you with your fans before and I don't know if you always do that."

"Do what?" Genuinely perplexed.

"Become 'Billy Boyd: Celebrity Actor' instead of just Billy."

Silence for a moment. Then--"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Steel.

"Don't be an ass," she said calmly. "I'm not criticizing. I have no idea what you need to do, to be in the public eye so much."

"I don't need to do anything."

She stopped walking. After a few paces he stopped and turned, a little frustration showing around the edges. "What?"

"Surely you're not serious?"

He walked back to her, stared down at her, jaw muscle clenching. "Either tell me what the fuck you're on about, or drop it. Pick."

She pushed him out of the middle of the sidewalk. Leaned up against a building. "Listen to me and listen closely. I am not attacking you. I'm just trying to sort out what I saw."

"And what do you think you saw?" Chilly.

"You were distanced from them, holding yourself back. Just a bit. Oh, they would have had no
idea—you were kind, sweet, very charming, nothing but smiles. The taller one has a big crush on
you now, if she didn't before," she smiled. "Expect a fan letter from her. But it only went this far." She moved her hand up and down, palm towards her, right in front of her nose. "Everything was
totally contained. Except your accent, of course."

"My accent."

"Yes, the way it changed."

That caught his attention. "It did?"

"Yes. Billy, come on--you can't tell me you're not at least partially aware this happens. My calling
you an actor is not derogatory! It's what you do--it's part of who you are. If you can use it…" She trailed off. Her head dropped. She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. "Aw fuck. I'm saying this
all wrong. I'm not good with words."

"Start over." He sounded calmer.

"No. There's no room in my mouth for my other foot."

His finger lifted her chin until she was looking him in the eye. "I thought we agreed we were going
to say what we thought. It doesn't mean we won't occasionally piss each other off. But let's leave
this one for now. I want to think about what you said. I don't know about this, I need to work on it."

"Oh God."

"Relax." He finally smiled. "Where does a bloke get something to eat in this town? I'm starvin'."

She sighed, pushed off the wall, linked her elbow through his. "You men are all the same. We'll go
to the Market."

"To the market?" he teased, regretting his anger, wanting to get back to the previous good humour.
"How very…medieval domestic."

She snorted.

Not quite what he was aiming for, but it was a start. "I'm not going to have to kill my own pig first, am I?"

"No, but you may have to wrestle your own bean sprouts into submission."

"Bean sprouts?" he looked dubious.

"Yes. Nasty little buggers, those sprouts."

He unhooked his elbow from hers and put it around her neck, pulling her head in to his chest.

"Hey! What's with the headlock?" She skipped awkwardly beside him.

"We hobbits may eat sprouts, but only as an accompaniment to other, more substantial foods. Foods
that no longer resemble the animals from whence they came. Foods that might come with
chips, or a little bag of crisps. Understood?"

She poked him in the ribs as he let her go. "I understand you hobbits are very demanding! Who
exactly is the tour guide slash bodyguard here? Hmmm…let's see. Who lives in Toronto? Oh, that's
right--not you!"
He laughed. "Sorry, my mistake." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "You're not really going to make me eat sprouts, are you?"

"I just might," she tossed back. "Unless…"

"Ah shite."

"Hmm…yes. Unless."

"Be gentle. I have to be on camera in two hours."

"On camera? I thought it was another meet-the-press?"

"No. Taping some interview show for the telly."

She grinned. "Excellent."

"Why do you suddenly sound like Mr. Burns on 'The Simpsons'?" he asked suspiciously.

"Unless."

"Damn."

"It'll be about your movies?"

"Not as such. All three of us are on, but it's some sport talk show. There's a fourth guest as well, but I don't know who."

"Is this show called 'Off the Record'?"

"Yeah. I think that's it."

"Perfect!" she crowed. "Okay. Bean sprouts and nothing else for dinner, unless…"

"You're killing me here, Grace."

"At some point during the show, you have to use the phrase…umm…'go to bed' in a sentence. Yeah. 'Go to bed'. Just work it into the conversation. It's a very open format--topics are given, but you can say whatever you want; if you can get a word in edgewise. I'll also accept 'in bed with', although that makes it easier for someone practiced in improv."

"Easier? Humph. What if I do it but they don't air it?"

"It's live-to-tape. The only editing is for graphics and to bleep out language. It will be aired as long as it's not downright pornographic."

He laughed. "You're going to ruin my reputation."

"I'll enhance it."

"If I don't do it, I eat bean sprouts for dinner." She nodded and he grinned. "And if I do, what do I win?"

"My everlasting respect."

"No, no, no," he shook his head at her. "If I do it…you come to my six-thirty taping. Then out with us after."
"OTR doesn't air until six," she objected.

"Then be dressed and ready to go, and when you hear it--which you will--come down." It was definitely a challenge. "Unless you want to call it all off?"

"Not a chance in hell."

"We're doing a music show tonight--MuchMusic, I think? Wear something skimpy."

"I am not wearing something skimpy," she choked.

"Damn."

"Pervert."

"Wanting to see a gorgeous bird--" he avoided the fist aimed in his direction without knowing which word earned it--"in something lovely and scanty doesn't make me a pervert, it makes me a bloke."

"Yeah, no shit, eh?"

"I reckon Elijah'd love to see you in something scanty."

"Scanty? What the hell kind of word is that? And I'm old enough to be his mother!"

He snorted. "Hardly. And it's a perfectly acceptable word."

"Well--his much older sister, at least."

"So? He's still a bloke."

"Would you stop it? I am not wearing anything skimpy. I don't even own anything skimpy."

"I'll miss out on lunch if you want to go shopping."

She gritted her teeth, stepped abruptly in front of him. Placed her fingers on his chest, stood nose to nose, on tiptoe. "Nothing skimpy. Or scanty. End of conversation, do you understand?"

He dipped forward to again kiss the end of her nose. "You're so easy to wind up."

Flustered, she retreated so quickly she nearly tripped. "Cut that out!"

His hand shot out to steady her. "Why?"

"God, you've got reflexes like a fucking cat. What do you mean why?"

"Why should I cut it out? I'm having fun."

She snorted, turned, walked away. "At least one of us is."

"Oh pish. I'm teasing you, yes. I'm keeping you off-balance, and that freaks you out. I'm flirting with you, and you're loving every second of it, you just don't know how you want to react."

She opened her mouth. Closed it again. Sighed. Waited for him to fall into step beside her. "You're right, of course, damn you. I don't think I like it when you're right."

He chuckled. "For some reason, not many people do. Am I making you truly uncomfortable,
though? I don't want to do that."

"No. I'm just not sure…"

"About what?"

"We bounce back and forth between serious and silly so fast I'm not always one hundred percent sure where we are. I'd feel a total idiot taking something seriously when you're just teasing me--and I'd feel horrible laughing at something you meant seriously."

He nodded. "Yeah, I see. I think I've been taking how well you read me for granted, assuming you always know where my head's at."

"I really don't." She made it sound like a failure.

"How could you, daft woman? We just met yesterday. Okay. I'll be a little clearer which end of the spectrum I'm coming from."

"All right. And I'll stop getting so defensive over the flirting."

"Defensive? So I am making you uncomfortable."

"Oh, look!" she said, deliberately making it obvious she was changing the subject. She flung her arm out like a bad Shakespearean actor. "Yonder lies the Market!"

"Is that a not-yet, by any chance?" he asked wryly.

"You got it."

"All right--but only because I'm hungry. We'll be talking about that one."

She opened one of the doors in to the St. Lawrence Market and ushered him through.

He temporarily forgot what they were talking about. "Holy fucking hell." As far as the eye could see stretched stall after stall and shop after shop of fresh produce, meats, breads, fish. "I think I probably could get a live pig here, couldn't I?"

"Possibly. It's not always this packed, there's a special market fair on this weekend. Come on, there's a deli down this way." She took his hand and led him as she threaded her way down aisles, around sacks and crates, to a small deli tucked in one corner. "Do you eat meat?"

"Oh yes."

"Good." She turned to the man behind the counter. "Two Montreal smoked meat on rye, please." She whispered to Billy, "You can hear your arteries clanging shut while you eat these, but oh my God, are they good. If only we could get poutine here, we could die happy."

"What's poutine?"

"Shit, I didn't think of that--I should have taken you for some poutine! Well, next time you're here, we'll get some. Don't let me forget."

"I'll try. It might help if I knew what it was."

"French fries--chips to you, my lad--"
"I know what French fries are, you smartass."

"Sorry." She grinned unrepentantly. "Getting giddy from hunger. French fries and cheese curds covered with gravy."

"Are you serious?"

"I know, I know, it doesn't sound that great--but you have to try it. The cheese curds go all stringy…mmm. Yummy."

"That sounds…weird."

"This from the man whose country invented haggis."

"Point taken."

The sandwiches were ready. They took their plates over to one of the tiny tables, sat, and started in on their food.

"Mmm…God, this is fantastic," he rolled his eyes. "Do you think they deliver to Scotland?"

"I have my doubts."

"This and crisps--that's potato chips to you, wee lass." She grinned at him, stole one of the potato chips off his plate, stuck her tongue out as he lightly smacked her hand. "Eat your own. I'm bloody well in heaven."

"Good. The happier I can make you while you're here, the more likely you are to come back for a visit."

"Oh, I'll be back. I don't know when, but it'll happen."

Softly. "Good."

He raised one eyebrow. "You could come visit me too, you know."

"In Scotland?"

"Or L.A. when I'm there."

She looked wistful, but said nothing.

"Couldn't you?"

"Let's figure that one out when the time comes."

He was quiet for a moment. Looked thunderstruck. Slowly said, "I can't believe what an absolute fucker I am. I've not asked you what you do. For a living."

She smiled. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"Yes there is. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. If it were exciting, I would have told you. It's not. I work at home--that's how I've been able to be at your beck and call, of course." She grinned at him.

"At home? What do you do?"
"You know when you're doing a search on the internet, and you get news stories?"

"Yeah."

"I create the meta-tags, or basically pick the keywords out of all the articles, to be found by the search engine."

He looked blank. "I had no idea that was a job."

"Somebody has to do it," she laughed. "So all you internet junkies can get your fix."

"Seriously? You have to read everything and…"

"And pull out all the key words, then enter them into the code of each major page. That allows the search engines to find the articles that correspond to the main subjects."

"That is really amazing. How long does it take?"

"Depends on the number and length of the articles. An hour or so per paper."

"Per--how many do you do?"

"Five. Three major dailies, two bi-weekly locals, which I also proofread. It averages to about 7 hours a day--the proofreading takes longer. I'm trying to get more."

"Wow. I'm never going to look at those search engines the same way again."

"I'm glad. It's good to be reminded sometimes of the invisible people."

"You're hardly invisible."

"Not to you, no. But I am to everyone who searches those pages. And that's the way it's supposed to be, it means I'm doing my job well."

"Do you have to work at a particular time, or do you set your own schedule?"

"It's best to have the majors done in the morning, but I can adjust that to suit my schedule if necessary. For example, before you called this morning, I had finished two of them. When I drop you off, I'll head home to do the rest."

"What if you need a day off?"

"I can make arrangements with a couple other people who do the same thing for other papers. Same for holidays."

"You do get holidays?"

"Oh yes. By law we have to."

"Perfect! You can come visit on your holidays."

"I thought we were going to talk about that later." Quietly.

"So you said. I just don't know why."

"Because."
"Is this another not-yet?"

She looked tense. "I'd prefer it to be a not-at-all."

"Not an option," he said firmly.

"Fine. Not yet."

"Why? And don't say because."

"Because--Damn…I just don't want to have that conversation right now, okay? I can't--just not now."

To his consternation her lip trembled and she looked away quickly.

"Grace, what's wrong?" He reached across the table toward her hand, but she pulled it away. "Come on, wee girl, talk to me."

Her voice quavered. "Let's get out of here."

"Sure. Come on." As they stood he tried to take her hand again, and again she moved away.

"Touch me and I'll cry. Give me a minute."

"No problem. Go on, you lead the way. I'd just get us lost amongst the fish."

She gave him a wobbly smile, and her eyes started to fill. "Fucking hell…" She turned and quickly led them to the exit. Outside, she took several deep breaths of cold air, getting her tears under control.

"Better?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

"No need. You let me weep all over you, I'd be willing to return the favour."

"I know. We don't have time--you have to be back at your hotel in fifteen minutes. We'd better start walking."

A few minutes later. "Will you still come tonight?"

"Only if you say 'go to bed' on national T.V.""

"You're really going to make me do it, aren't you?"

"Most definitely."

"All right. Just make sure you're ready to go when I do."

"I will be. Am I going to be able to get in after it's started?"

"I'll set it up. And you'll go out with us after?"

"Yes. Where are you going?"

"Knowing Elijah, a club. Do you like to dance?"
"Yes. You?"

"Yeah. I doubt Andy will stay long, though. He likes to call his kids when he can."

"It must be hard for him to be away from them so much."

"Yes, it is."

They arrived back at the hotel, going into the warm lobby. He turned to her. "Ye want to come up until I have to go?"

"No--I'd better get back and get my work done."

"Okay. Listen, Grace--"

"Yeah?"

"We'll talk, okay?" He reached out to lightly run his finger down the bridge of her nose. "About whatever this is that's so close to your surface."

"...Maybe."

"Do you know the band Travis?"

"Yeah."

"Go home and listen to 'Follow the Light'. I'll be singin' it to you."

She reached forward to give him a hug. Held him tightly. Then suddenly let go and walked out.

As soon as she got home she put the kettle on for a cup of tea and searched out her Travis CD's. They hadn't been played in quite some time, and she didn't remember the song. She put it in her laptop, hooked it up to the speakers, turned the volume up.

*Nobody really knows where they're supposed to go.*

*Hiding behind a wall. Afraid that they'll lose it all,*

*But it's alright, Just follow the light,*

*And don't be afraid of the dark. In the moonlight*

*You'll dance till you fall, and always be here in my heart.*

*But nobody wants to know 'cos nobody even cares.*

*Everyone's on the make, yeah and everyone's out for themselves.*

*Me I'm on the longest road. Where everything's overload.*

*But I've got my heart and soul, so don't throw me overboard*

*'Cos it's alright, Just follow the light,*

*And don't be afraid of the dark. In the moonlight,*

*You'll dance till you fall and always be here in my heart.*

*'Cos it's alright, Just follow the light,*

*And don't be afraid of the dark. In the moonlight,*
You'll dance till you fall, and always be here in my heart.
'Cos it's alright, alright now. And you're alright.
Yeah, we're alright now.

Telling herself not to be an idiot, she wiped a little moisture from the corner of her eye and sat down in front of the computer to get to work.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Barges (Author unknown)* and *Follow The Light* by Travis.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Grace gets a taste of Billy's public world, and they go dancing with Elijah.

At six o'clock she turned the T.V. on, switched to OTR. Smiled when she saw him, saw the brown suede jacket he'd been wearing the day before. It suited him. Listened as she got ready to go, not doubting he'd manage to fulfill his end of the bet. Put her hair up, did her makeup, got dressed in what she thought of as her 'club outfit'. Black low-ride pants, low-cut short-sleeved shirt in blues and greys with a bit of sparkle. It could fit into any kind of club, which meant only having to have one outfit. Sprayed on a bit of perfume, put on her rings, including her favourite thumb rings. Only five minutes of the show left. He had to get it in there, she was ready to go. Put on her favourite boots. Holy crap, he's not going to do it, I'm going to have to stay--Ah, there it is! She laughed to hear him slide it in so well, and even make a point with it. She shut the T.V. off and left.

She was let in to the studio right away. It felt very odd--it felt important. She took a seat, knowing that thanks to the delay on the subway, the taping was probably almost done. Elijah finished answering a question about his favourite video game, a topic he seemed enthusiastic about. The next question was for Billy--was Dominic Monaghan really his best friend? Or was it mostly media hype? She smiled, thinking of how many times Billy had mentioned Dom the last two days.

"He's absolutely one of my best mates. We really connected on the set, and as our characters, Merry and Pippin, spent so much time together, we spent a lot of filming time together, he and I. It's great, a real blessing to get on so well with your cast-mates." Both Elijah and Andy were nodding. "But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that life always has room for more friends. I've been very, very lucky in the people that have come into my life." He put his hands in the pockets of his black jeans. Looked toward the door.

She recognized that was for her--he must have spotted her coming in.

One more question for Andy, one more request to give them a sample of Gollum's voice--poor man--and it was over. She stayed where she was as the three actors were led out one door, as the audience filed through the doors she'd come in. Finally she went back out to the lobby, then outside. She stood comfortably in the cold (dark noise) knowing he'd come find her.

"You came."

"You did it." She turned to find him standing behind her.

He grinned. "I told you I would."

"I know you did. And I was ready to go."

He glanced at his watch. "You must have been. I couldn't get it in till the end--I was starting to think it was going to be bean sprouts for dinner."
She laughed. "I must say, you did very well. If I didn't know better, I would never have guessed you were trying desperately to fit it in! Very smooth."

"Very James Bond?"

"Very."

He chuckled. "Well, come on then. The car's around the corner."

As they rounded the building, she was a little taken aback to see a crowd of about sixty people surrounding Elijah and Andy. She hesitated. "Your world."

"It's all right," he said quietly. "Just stick by me, smile, and pretend you've seen this a million times before. We won't be long."

She fell into step behind him, followed him over.

Elijah called out, "Hey Billy, there you are! These nice people have been waiting for you!" A shrewd move that opened the crowd up to enfold the newcomer.

Billy grinned. Unlike earlier that day, this time it reached his eyes--in response to Elijah, no doubt. "Ah had a Pippin moment--turned down th' wrong corridor!" Everyone laughed, smiled. Grace heard the thicker accent, saw how he held his body compact, away from contact. Interesting. She stayed, smiling, on the outskirts. Glad not to have to wade in, glad to be unnoticed.

Finally the driver opened the rear door, the cue that the autograph session was over. The actors quickly signed a few more, good-naturedly apologized if they missed anyone. Then Billy was at her side, ushering her into the car first, before the few cameras present realized she was with them. The others clambered in with waves and shouted thanks, and they were off.

Elijah sat back breathless, laughing. He stuck his hand out, across the other two. "Hi--Grace, right? I'm 'Lij." He shook her hand, then elbowed Andy. "And this, of course, is Andy."

Well done, she thought. Like I'd know Andy immediately, but not be sure who Elijah is. This guy is a real pro. It won't do to forget that. "It's really nice to meet you both," she smiled.

Billy grinned. "It's brave of you to join us--things can get a wee bit mad when 'Lij is around."

She raised her eyebrow. "I wasn't aware I had a choice; you won the bet."

"What bet?" Elijah enquired of her.

"He had to say something particular during your taping of OTR this afternoon. If he didn't, he was going to have to eat bean sprouts for dinner. And if he did say it," she gestured helplessly. "Well, here I am."

Andy was laughing. "But you love bean sprouts, Bill. Ow!" He was still chuckling as he pushed Billy's elbow out of his ribs.

She focused back on Billy. "Is that so?"

"No. Andy's cracked up. It's all that Gollum--he's gone schizophrenic."

"So what did you have to say?" Elijah asked.

"Get this--she's bloody evil. I had to say 'go to bed.'" He made it sound slow and sexy. "On asports
"You could also have said 'in bed with'," she pointed out.

As Elijah's brows knit, trying to think where Billy had said it, Andy hooted with laughter. "That John Lennon bit, right? I wondered where you were going with that--well done, mate!"

She grinned, nodded. "He did do it very well, didn't he? I'm going to have to make it tougher next time."

Billy groaned, and the other two laughed.

A few minutes later they pulled up outside a club. Elijah said a couple people at MuchMusic had recommended it as a good one, had called to put them on the list.

"Wow," she said with a laugh, "I've never been on a list before--I feel so decadent."

"Decadent, hmm?" Billy murmured. "Wait 'til I get a few drinks in you."

They climbed out of the car. She looked up at him through her eyelashes and said, "Are you threatening to get me liquored up?"

"Most assuredly."

"Oh, good," she said, then walked away. Followed Elijah and Andy up to the club door, leaving Billy standing there with his mouth open.

Inside the club they found, to their utter delight, someone at MuchMusic had also reserved a small private room for them. They piled into it, shedding jackets and scarves on the modern armchairs. Andy stayed on his feet.

"First round is mine. Someone give us a hand?"

Billy stood again. "Sure, let's go."

Elijah sat across the low table from her. He leaned in to be heard over the music, which, with the door open, was surprisingly loud even back there. "So how did Billy meet you? He never said."

"He tripped over me on the beach."

"Really?" he goggled. "Clumsy bastard."

She laughed. "No." She also leaned in. "I was playing my guitar, and he sat down to listen for a few minutes. We just started to talk."

"Cool. If there's one thing he's guaranteed to stop for when he's preoccupied, it's music."

*So Elijah, at least, is aware all is not right in Billy's world.*

"But you were playing on the beach?"

"Yes--I like to do that."
"But isn't it cold this time of year? Yesterday was okay, but today??" He shivered as if to prove his point.

"Yesterday was bloody gorgeous. Living in California, you may not understand the level of guilt a Canadian feels if we waste a nice day indoors. We get too much shit weather here."

Andy and Billy returned with the drinks. Billy put a glass in front of her. "Here you go."

She sniffed it, smiled. "Rye and ginger. You remembered."

"Aye."

"I thought you were too tired to remember anything we said last night."

Elijah's eyebrows rose.

"We were on the phone, Mr. Wood." She grinned. "Nice assumption about me, though."

He flushed. "I assumed nothing of the sort." Then wickedly admitted, "Okay, maybe I did."

She laughed. "You Californians. You're so cheeky."

Billy sniggered. "That has nothing to do with being Californian. That's just 'Lij."

"Jackass," the younger man shot back. "Besides, I'm from Iowa."

"That's even worse," he teased. Added, "Wanker."

She ignored them. Raised her glass in Andy's direction. "Thanks for the drink, eh?" He nodded, smiling, watching.

Billy said, "As a matter of fact, I've decided to hire her as my personal sleep guru. She's agreed to be available to all my closest friends as well."

"I did not!" she protested. "That was you unilaterally deciding to loan me out, was I believe your enchanting way of putting it!" Andy snorted with laughter.

"You should share the magic. You guys know how much trouble I've had sleeping lately. She had me out like a light within--what, twenty minutes?"

"That's not magic. That's my unparalleled skill at boring people into oblivion."

"Bollocks."

Andy chuckled. Elijah giggled as he downed half his drink. When he looked up, though, Grace was taken aback by a watchful look in his eyes.

"So Grace, what does Bill have to say in his next interview?" Andy asked, grinning. "And what are the stakes?"

Billy aimed a kick under the table, but the low height limited his range and he ended up hitting Elijah instead.

"Ow! You fucker! What the hell was that for?"

Grace cuffed Billy's shoulder. "Cut that out. Someone's a little worried about the answer to those
questions, and didn't want anyone reminding me."

"Bloody right. Wanker," he said to Andy, and "Sorry," to Elijah, who flipped him off.

She giggled. "Sorry Billy, but I hadn't forgotten."

"Shite."

"What's his next television interview?"

"In New York," Andy replied. "We're doing an entertainment variety show."

"So it's likely to be mostly about Lord of the Rings?"

Andy and Elijah both nodded.

"Okay. Technically I shouldn't tell you two what he has to say in case you lead him into it, but I won't be able to see the show, so you guys'll be his witnesses."

Billy's head thunked back against the wall. She put a hand on his arm, patting it encouragingly as she continued. "All right. Is it a full twenty minute interview?" At their nods, she grinned. "Good. Then he has to say…Mount Ruapehu." Billy lifted his head hopefully. "Three separate times," she added. It thunked back again.

Andy and Elijah went into gales of laughter. "Fucking perfect!" Elijah whooped. "God, I hope I can keep a straight face while he's doing it."

"You're an actor, try acting," she shot back.

Billy lifted his head again. "You see what I have to deal with? You see?"

"Poor lamb." She removed her hand from his arm, picked up her glass, took a drink. "Now we just have to decide on the stakes."

He downed the last of his whiskey. "Someone fucking shoot me now. Come on, 'Lij, help me with the next round."

She leaned toward Andy as they left. "He is enjoying this, right?"

He smiled. "He's loving it. He'll let you know if he doesn't want to play anymore."

"Good. That's what I hoped. I'm going to make the challenges a little harder, but keep the stakes simple. I don't want this to get out of hand."

"Wise. How about…if you win, he--he has to have his picture taken somewhere odd…"

"Standing in a fountain," she supplied.

"Yes! Brilliant, yes. And if he wins--"

"It's only fair if I do the same."

"Perfect. You realize he'll do his damnedest to win that bet?"

"I know. That's why I'm not letting him pick the stakes."

"Sneaky."
Billy and Elijah were back. They put the drinks down, resumed their seats. "So?" Elijah asked, grinning.

She thanked Billy pleasantly for the drink. He glowered at her, but the effect was ruined by the twinkle in his eyes. "So we're all set." She motioned to a laughing Andy to shush. "If Billy does not say Mt. Ruapehu three times during the next interview, he has to have his picture taken--" she paused, and he cringed, "While standing in a fountain."

"Oh my God, you can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am, my dear," she put on her most innocent face. "And need I add the fountain must have water in it?"

"And if I do say it? What if I win again?"

"Then I have to do the fountain picture."

He grinned widely. "Now we're talkin'."

"You have to win the bet, first!"

"Oh, I will--believe me."

Chuckling, Elijah said, "I think you're in trouble Grace."

"I think you might be right. And here I thought this one would be harder."

"Oh, it is," Billy agreed. "But I'll do it--I want that picture."

"Aw fuck."

"Aye." He smiled sweetly.

"On that note," Andy downed the last of his drink, stood up. "I'm buggering off. It was lovely to meet you, Grace--I hope we see you again. We'll let you know how the interview goes."

"You'd better--I'll need an impartial judge. It was great to meet you too, Andy. Take care of yourself."

"Always." He clapped Billy on the shoulder as he passed him. "All right if I take the car? You guys'll get a cab as usual, yeah?"

"Yeah, go ahead. See you in the morning," Elijah waved.

Andy left, and Elijah immediately jumped to his feet. "Time's wasting--who's dancing?"

The three of them left their empty glasses on the table and went out onto the floor. The music was loud, bass-driven, pounding. Elijah was immediately into it, eyes closed, fingers separate and curled, feet shifting, hips sliding. It took Billy and Grace a little longer to let go, but soon they too were dancing with abandon. The dark club lent anonymity, allowed inhibitions to drop, while the flashing lights sparked eye contact and lit smiles.
After a few songs Elijah wandered off to buy more drinks. Grace and Billy moved closer together, not touching, but sharing movement, space. Elijah returned with a triangle of glasses held carefully between his hands. Billy handed hers over, took his own. Elijah started to dance with her, his drink in his left hand, his right on her waist. She drank. Danced with 'Lij. Looked at Billy.

Billy backed away a little. Gave them space to do their thing. Closed his eyes, held his drink in close to his chest, danced. Let the music inhabit him, fill him, carry him, move him.

Elijah pulled her closer. Let his thigh graze hers as they pulsed to the rhythm, and laughed. She saw he was getting buzzed, just having fun. She wrapped her arm around his neck, took a drink from the glass in her other hand, laughed too. Let him direct their movements.

Billy opened his eyes, turned to search them out; found them, stopped. Then gave himself a mental shake. Don't be a shite. Made himself relax. He knew 'Lij. Was pretty sure he knew Grace. Made his way over, stood close to Grace, put a hand on each of their backs, pressing his empty glass against Elijah's spine. He shouted into his ear, "Drink?" Elijah nodded vigorously. Billy leaned into Grace, moved his hand up to cup the back of her neck, asked her the same question.

For a split second, caught between the two improbably good-looking men, she couldn't catch her breath. Had no frame of reference for the experience. "My round." It came out uneven. She tried again.

Billy shook his head. "No--stay. Dance."

She held up her glass, which still held two fingers of alcohol. "Just water, then."

He nodded. "Bottled?" His breath tickled (caressed heated) her ear. When she nodded, he gave the bone behind her ear a rub with his thumb, let go, walked away.

Her eyes had fluttered closed. She took a deep breath, opened them again. Found Elijah's gaze on her, the watchful look back in his eyes, if slightly blurred around the edges. Even as they danced he pulled her closer, put his mouth by her ear. "Be careful with him," he said loudly.

She looked away, looked back. Bent her head back toward his. "Be careful of him?"

"And of you."

"You're older than you look, aren't you?"

He laughed. "I'm almost twenty-three."

"And you look it."

"I just know Billy. I've been drinking too much for this conversation. But he doesn't know what he's doing right now. He's too inside himself. Sorta." He giggled. "I should just stick to dancing."

She laughed, gave him a light peck on the cheek. "You're very sweet, 'Lij."

"Don't spread that around. I've got a reputation, you know."

Billy came back then, two drinks in his hands and a bottle of water tucked under his elbow. He gave Elijah his next drink, as Grace took his empty glass. Elijah radiated pleasure at having all his concerns dealt with in one fell swoop. One hand now freed, Billy handed her the bottle. She mouthed "Be right back," then left the dance floor to dispose of the dirty glasses. Time to take a break from the alcohol--she hardly ever drank, and was starting to feel it. Just maintain the buzz,
old girl. Wandered to their tiny room and sat in one of the armchairs for a moment, resting her feet, cooling her heated skin. She leaned her head back, closed her eyes, listened to the music.

"All right, Grace?"

Billy's voice in her ear made her jump, but as soon as it registered who it was, she relaxed again without opening her eyes. She smiled. "Fucking fantastic. You?"

"Bloody brilliant."

He was so close she could smell the Scotch on his breath. Rough, peaty, sexy. "Good."

He watched her, her head thrown back. Resisted the impulse to caress the line of that white throat. *Just the booze talking.* He crouched down on the floor beside her low chair. His lips briefly brushed her ear as he said, "Have I told you tonight you look amazing? I don't even miss the skimpy outfit."

She laughed. "I'm glad. I'd hate to disappoint you."

"The only way you're going to disappoint me is if you don't dance with me instead of the puppy soon."

Smiling, she opened her eyes, lifted her head. "That 'puppy' is a very sweet--rapidly getting rather drunk, but still very sweet nonetheless--young man."

"Is that why you kissed him?"

"Yes. Jealous, eh?"

"Oddly enough, I think I am."

Her smile faltered slightly. She leaned closer, her face beside his so she didn't have to look in his eyes, so he couldn't see hers. "This would be one of those moments I'm not sure where you're coming from."

"I know. I'm trying to figure it out myself. Either I've already had too much to drink or I need another, because I'm having trouble keeping my hands off you."

"Wow. You really know how to sweet-talk a girl, eh?"

"Oh fuck. Goddamn bloody fucking bollocks," the stream of profanity rolled off his tongue. "I didn't mean it like that, luv, I swear I didn't." He tried too quickly to correct himself. "I meant I've had a couple drinks, and I'm finding you very attractive--"

She burst into peals of laughter.

"Shite! Fuckdamndamnfuck!" He couldn't help it, started laughing too. Resignedly sat himself in the chair next to her. "I've just decided I've not had nearly enough." He picked up his glass, downed his Scotch, clapped the glass back on the tabletop.

She was still giggling, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes.

He grinned at her. "Stop your bloody laughing. I'll try one more time."

She sniggered.
"Ah, piss off. All I'm trying to say--" he paused, obviously to choose his words carefully. "Is that I think you're beautiful. Head-to-toe gorgeous. But until tonight--I don't know why--I haven't needed to touch you, or hold you, or kiss you. And now I do. I don't know if it's the Scotch, or watching you dance, or seeing your arse in those trousers--" She blushed furiously. "--But I want to snog you senseless. Are you going to slap me?"

Speech was an impossibility. She shook her head, blinking rapidly.

"Come dance with me." He stood up, held out his hand. She stalled by taking a long drink from her water bottle, giving her knees time to solidify again. Then put her hand in his and let him help her up. He firmly held on to her, led her back to the dance floor. He quickly scanned for Elijah; spotted him dancing with a pretty girl, reassured himself he was fine. Led her a little ways away. Turned toward her, pulled her close, his hands on her waist. She put one arm around his neck, the other hand on his chest. They danced to the quick, heavy beat. She looked down, still furiously trying to process what he'd said.

He was stingingly, breathtakingly aware of her body against his. Hip against thigh, her leg between his, his leg between hers. Breast brushing arm, her fingers curling in his hair. His gaze raked her face, watched it turn red, blue, white, yellow, pink under the flashing lights, saw her eyelashes tremble as her eyes darted side to side. His hands involuntarily tightened on her waist, and she looked up at him. He saw the confusion in her eyes; he softened. Dropped his head, kissed her ear, said, "Don't be scared."

"I'm not scared of you."

"What are you?"

"Trying to figure out what to do."

"Options?"

"Three."

"Number one?" he asked, rubbing the fabric at her waist with his thumb.

"Run away. Run away fast."

"Very flattering. Two?"

"Be realistic. Remind you you're leaving tomorrow, and as attracted to you as I am, we'd both walk away with our dignity intact."

"Practical. Boring, but sensible. Three?"

She didn't answer. Leaned back to search his eyes intensely.

He felt it--felt her practically trying to crawl inside him, to figure him out, to know--really know--what he wanted, what he meant. It touched him, for both their sakes. "Three?" he said, not taking his eyes from hers, knowing he hadn't said it loud enough for her to hear, but that she would feel (sense know) he asked.

Her hands went to his face, she stood on tiptoe, kissed him hard. Crushed his lips with hers.

He gave an inarticulate sound of surprise, which turned into an inarticulate sound of pleasure. His arms went around her; dancing forgotten, he kissed her back with equal heat. He teased her lips
with his tongue until she opened them. She took his lower lip gently between her teeth and tugged, then he was thrusting his tongue into her mouth (seeking finding giving), searching for hers, wrapping his around hers, humming with delight as hers returned the favour.

She pulled her lips from his, left them hovering two inches away. Eyes memorizing those lips, flicking up to his eyes. "Three. Let you snog me senseless."

"Three's good." His voice was rough. "I like three."

"Against my better judgement, so do I. I think I need another drink."

"Then let's get you one." He let go of her except for one hand, led her off the dance floor to the bar. Ordered her another rye and ginger. Didn't take his eyes off her the whole time. As soon as she had her drink, he led her back to the room at their disposal. Closed the door. "Now I can hear myself think." He still had to speak in a louder than normal tone, but at least he didn't have to shout.

"I don't want to think."

"Why not?"

"I think--this is a mistake."

"Don't think, then." He took her glass from her, leaned down to put it on the table. Stepped closer to her, lowered his lips to hers slowly, savouring the sweet ginger taste on her tongue, the light scent she wore--Smells like strawberries and cream? Couldn't be. Too damn good, whatever it is--the softness of her lips, the thickness of her hair as he threaded his fingers into it. He growled in his throat, felt the hitch in her breath as he did. Walked her backwards.

The noise he made deep in his throat nearly made her knees buckle. Felt his chin scrape hers, felt his long fingers tugging her hair, cupping her head, felt his slender body pressing her against the wall now from chest to hips. Tasted Scotch and something indefinably Billy. Knew she'd never forget it, wanted to taste it always. It was intoxicating. When he scraped his tongue across her teeth, she nipped him ever so lightly, felt him smile, laughed into his mouth.

He pulled his body away from hers as he moved his lips along her jaw line to her ear, said, "Ah, you want to play like that, do you?" Eyes closed, she tilted her head, giving him access to her neck; gave a breathy barely audible laugh. Anticipated sure retribution.

He licked (tugged pulled) her earlobe, trailed his tongue down the muscle of her neck, around to the hollow at the base of her throat, pressed a hot kiss into it. Moved back up to the tender skin under her jaw and swiftly, gently bit.

"Oh!...Oh..."

"Grace, you're driving me mad."

"Sorry."

He chuckled. "No, you're not."

"Of course not." She put her index fingers in his rear pockets, tugged his hips back toward her. "You love it."

"Every bit, you tease."
She tilted her head to the side. "Can you pick a different word? Tease really isn't fair."

"No, it's not," he agreed. The colour in his eyes deepened. "Sexpot?"

It startled a giggle out of her. "Ah--no."

He went back to kissing her neck. "Doll?" Put his hand on the back of her head. "Sugarpants?" She snickered. He tipped her head forward, down. "Angel?" Kissed the nape of her neck as far around as he could reach. She whimpered, slid down ever so slightly. "Ah, that's the spot, is it?" He leaned into her a little more, holding her up. "Lovely." Kissed her nape again, just to hear that sound. "Mine."

"Not yours."

"Yes, you are."

A throat cleared loudly behind them, making Billy start. They hadn't heard the door open. He whipped his head around, keeping her head where it was, tucked down into his chest, blocking her from view. Released his breath when he saw Elijah.

"Hey, guys. Umm--"

Billy turned back to Grace. "Bugger off, 'Lij."

"It's my round. Wanna drink?"

She giggled into Billy's chest.

"You're drunk, 'Lij. Stop drinking and go dance."

"'M not drunk."

Billy said for her ears only, "I'm going to fucking kill him."

Grace laughed out loud.

Billy loosened his hold on her enough to turn and look at Elijah again, who was artlessly studying the ceiling.

"You know, Billy, if you guys wanted to go rent a room--I mean, head out of here--" he nearly ruined it by giggling, "I'll be okay on my own. I can get back to the hotel."

Billy's hand snaked out, grabbed a fistful of Elijah's shirt, hauled him in. He successfully fought to keep the smile off his face. "Funny, aren't you? You are going to go get a bottle of water, go back to dancing your fool head off. And when I leave, you will be coming with me. You know the rules."

He pouted, blue eyes wide. "Aw, you're no fun, Bills."

Grace stepped away from Billy, took Elijah with her. Leaned in so Billy couldn't hear. "I have to disagree with you on that one, 'Lij. He's actually an awful lot of fun," she grinned. Elijah, who by this time was several drinks up on them, giggled hysterically. "Give us five minutes, we'll be back dancing. Sorry we abandoned you. You will stay with us, right? Billy meant it about the rules, you know."

"Of course I know." He spoke up for Billy to hear. "I'm drunk, I'm not an idiot. Do you have a
younger sister?"

She laughed, wrapped her arm around his neck. "I'm afraid not, but I adore you for asking. Go find that girl you were dancing with." She gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek, released him, gave him a little shove toward the door. As he left, closing the door with great deliberation, she returned to Billy, slipped between his arms, laid her head on his shoulder. "What are the rules?"

He leaned against the wall, took her with him. "What?"

"The rules. I told him you were serious about the rules. Was I right?"

"Yeah. If we don't have a car and driver, we don't go alone if we've been drinking. Since Andy took the car, I'm not leaving without 'Lij, and he'd damn well better not leave without me if he knows what's good for him."

"He won't. He was just messing with you."

"That's what I figured." He smiled. "So what was that kiss for?"

"He's such a doll. He asked if I have a younger sister."

"Yeah, that's 'Lij." He kissed the top of her head. "We should go soon. Keep him from drinking too much more, and you and I need to talk."

"About what?"

"Everything, dear heart."

"I like that one much better than sugarpants," she laughed.

"Why not 'mine'?"

"Your what?"

"Everyone's a bloody comedian tonight."

"Because I'm not yours."

"Would it be so bad?"

"Yes. I'm not anybody's. Not anymore." There was an edge to her voice that he could hear even over the music.

"All right." Nudged her chin up with his thumb, kissed her deeply but gently. Felt her relax again. "You smell fantastic."

"Strawberry."

"I was right. I could eat you up."

"I wouldn't suggest it--I doubt it tastes like strawberry."

He lightly flicked her neck with his tongue, enjoyed the quiver it produced. "I've already tasted it several times tonight. No, it doesn't taste like strawberry. But you still smell fantastic."

She put her hands on his jaw, lifted his head, lightly kissed him. Drew back just to look at him. Ran
her thumb over his lower lip.

He surprised her by taking it into his mouth, sucking on it, gently nibbling, swirling the tip of his tongue around her ring. She closed her eyes. He wetly released her thumb, slid his lips down her palm to the inside of her wrist. Licked the dark shadow of his name still tattooed there.

When he slowly pulled back, she swiftly reached up to kiss him hungrily, fingers going up to tighten in his hair. His hands traveled rapidly, from her arms to her face to her back under her shirt against bare skin.

Grace groaned, broke the kiss, tried to pull away. He held her fast.

"What's wrong?"

"This is too much."

"I'm sorry. Am I pushing you?"

"Pushing me? Good God, no. You're turning me on."

He growled. "Fuck the rules. Let's go."

She shook her head. "No. I can't. I really, really can't. Not this fast." She leaned her forehead on his chest for a moment, then gripped his wrists tightly and stepped away. Held them up together in front of her, feeling his rapid pulse under her fingers. "I'm sorry, Billy. It's--it's two days. It's too many not-yets out there still. It's your world versus my world." She held his knuckles to her forehead as she again said, "I'm sorry."

He opened his hands to lay them on either side of her head, thumbs on her temples. She kept hold of his wrists. His voice was as caressing as it had been rough a moment ago. "Don't be sorry. Grace, don't ever be sorry for showing me you're as attracted to me as I am to you. And you're absolutely right. There are far too many things to be said for this to go further tonight." He bent over to kiss the top of her head. "Why don't we all go?"

"I promised Elijah we'd be back to dance with him."

"Then let's go dance."

Grace downed her drink and followed him.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Grace is developing a habit of helping hobbits. Billy talks his way into her apartment and learns what she's been hiding.

They finally dragged Elijah out of the club an hour later. Grace walked down to the corner to hail a cab while Billy tried to disentangle himself from Elijah's tenacious (tentacle) arms. "Lij! You're strangling me, man. Let go!"

"Billy. Thanks, dude." He sounded mostly sober, but tired.

"Don't call me dude. You know I hate it."

"I know. But you listen to me when I say it."

Billy quietly said, "I always listen to you, 'Lij."

"You do, don't you? Unlike some of those other pricks," he barked out a laugh.

"Everyone's got their own set of troubles, you know that."

He sighed. "Yeah, I know. I'm being an asshole, aren't I?"

"A bit. You'll get over it."

"I'm sorry. And I'm sorry if I got in the way tonight."

"You didn't, you wanker. We had fun. She likes you--said you're a real doll."

He brightened. "Did she? I like her too. And it was fun, wasn't it? Listen, Bills--what happened between you and Emily…are you okay?"

Billy considered it. "I'm definitely better. I don't want to get into it--" Elijah waved off that thought, "--but suffice to say it's still going to take some time. And that, young grasshopper, is the end of the lecture for tonight. Grace has a taxi."

"Yes, Uncle Billy," Elijah smiled. It was his way of acknowledging the special bond they had. He didn't let anyone else talk to him the way Billy did--like a naïve, inexperienced kid instead of a young man steeped in Hollywood most of his life. Sometimes it was nice to feel young again. And Billy could usually be counted on for good advice.

All three of them climbed in the cab, Grace in between the two men. "So you're off to L.A. soon, 'Lij? Looking forward to going home?"

He leaned his head on her shoulder. "Yeah. I get to see my family."

She reached up to stroke his hair, hugging his head with her arm in the process. "I don't know how you guys do it--all the traveling, spending ages on location without even your family along to support you."
"They come sometimes. Hannah spent a whole month in New Zealand with me. We even put her in a few scenes."

"Did you really?" she smiled. "That's awesome."

"Margaret came too, right Billy?"

"Yes."


"Elijah?" she whispered.

"Mnfrmph."

"It was very nice to meet you, 'Lij."

He nuzzled his head into her neck, let out a little snore.

"I forgot to warn you," said Billy, laughter in his voice, "He can fall asleep anywhere, anytime."

She turned her head to look at him without disturbing Elijah. "Apparently. Good grief. She paused. "Is he always this…I don't know--sweet? Innocent?"

"God no. You caught him on a good night--or a bad one, I'm not sure. Usually has a mouth like a stevedore and enough nerve for three people, that one does. I think this press tour is getting to him a wee bit. It has all of us."

They finally arrived back at the hotel. Grace looked down at Elijah. "How exactly are we going to get him to his room?"

Billy chuckled. "Watch and learn." He leaned across (against) her, put his mouth near Elijah's ear. "Oi! Wake up, 'Lij, time for Feet!" he called loudly.


Her lips trembled as she kindly said, "No, sweetie, I don't."

"You're Grace."

"Yes."

"Which city is this?"

"Oh, you poor thing. Let's get you inside and into your bed, eh? Come on."

He giggled as he climbed awkwardly out of the cab. "This must be Canada. You said 'eh'."

She turned to the front, asked the cabbie, "How much?"

Billy interrupted. "No--can you wait for us, please?" He got out of the opposite side of the cab.

She clambered after him. "I'm just taking the subway, Billy, I don't need the cab."

"Yes, you do--"
"No, I don't--I'm taking the subway."

"You are not. I'm seeing you home, and I don't want to take the subway. The cab stays."

"Autocratic, aren't you?" She crossed her arms.

"I prefer to think of it as being masterful."

"Yes, because that's much better."

"Of course it is."

"In Billy's world, maybe."

"Which is the only world there is, luv." He grinned. "Can we have this conversation after we find 'Lij?"

She whirled sharply, looking around. "Oh my God--"

"Relax, it's okay. He went inside. But he's probably curled up asleep in the middle of the lobby floor."

"You stay with your precious cab, then," she said, relieved. "What room's he in?"

"Mother hen, aren't you? 518."

"Piss off," she chuckled. Left him standing outside and went in search of Elijah. She found Billy wasn't so far off after all--the blue eyes were already closed in tranquil slumber, as he sprawled in a chair right inside the main doors. A porter looked at him in worried confusion from a few feet away. She hurried over, apologized to the poor man, knelt down beside Elijah. Rubbed the back of his hand. "Elijah?"

No response.

She picked up his hand and shook it. Said louder, "Wake up, 'Lij."

Nothing.

Sighing, she put her mouth by his ear and loudly said, "Oi! Wake up, 'Lij, time for Feet!"

He stood up, swaying slightly. "Feet. Okay. 'M ready." Looked around. "Fuck. You guys have to stop that, it's not fair."

She laughed, took his hand, led him toward the elevator. "We have to go with what works, sweetie."

"Excuse me--Mr. Wood?" A perky young voice a little ways behind them.

Grace heard him whisper to himself, "Shit. Shit. Fucking shit."

She gave him a nudge, hissed, "Keep going. Don't stop." Turned with a friendly smile, blocking the girl from advancing. Hoped she was staying in the hotel--she was too young to be out this late on her own. "Hi, I'm Grace, I'm Mr. Wood's assistant."

The girl tried to look past her, but Grace moved a step toward her.
"I just wanted to tell him what a fan I am--maybe an autograph?"

"I'm so sorry, but he's really tired." Without patronizing, she lowered her voice conspiratorially. "They've really kept him running the last few days. And he has to be up ridiculously early in the morning." She heard the elevator door open behind her--and then close. Rummaged in her pockets for a pen. "Do you have a piece of paper?" Waited as the girl nodded, pulled it out; handed her the pen. "If you'll write your name down, maybe a short message, I'll give him that piece of paper--" the girl's face brightened, "--and I'm sure he'd be pleased to leave you an autograph at reception. Would you be able to come back tomorrow and get it?"

"Well--yes--that would be great!" she scribbled quickly on the paper, handed it to Grace. "Thank you so much!"

"Okay--" she glanced at the name, "Okay, Ashley, tomorrow you ask at the reception desk for an envelope with your name on it."

"I will--and thanks again, ma'am!"

"My pleasure." She turned and went to the elevator, hit the button. Heard the girl walk out the other way, and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Ma'am indeed.'

She found Elijah standing outside the elevator on the fifth floor.

"Thank you, Grace," he said quietly, eyes red from tiredness. "I just don't have the strength. Not right now."

She smiled warmly, rubbed his arm. "It's all right. Can you do a quick little autograph, though? I tried to make her happy, told her we'd leave one at reception for her to get tomorrow. I hope that's okay?"

"That's fantastic." He offered a small, relieved smile. "Come on, I've got some pictures in my room somewhere."

She laughed lightly as she followed him to his door. "You're not asking me to come up and look at your etchings, are you?"

He chuckled. "Would it work?"

"I'm afraid not, sweetie."

"Nah, Billy'd kill me anyway. I like that you call me sweetie." He ran his keycard through the lock. "Billy wouldn't kill you. But he called me a 'mother hen'."

"Maybe. I think it's nice. Warm in a strange city." He ushered her in, started rummaging through a briefcase. He jumped when the phone by his hand suddenly rang. "Holy fuck! Who the hell is that at this time of night?" Picked up the phone but said nothing. Then grinned, waggled his eyebrows at Grace. "No, she just came up to see my etchings. No, etchings, you Scottish shit! Yeah, same to you. I'll have you know she just saved my ass from a fangirl. Nah, she'll tell you about it. Yeah, she'll be down in a few minutes. When's the car coming tomorrow? Okay. Yeah. Yeah, I will. Yes, Billy! Oh, screw off so I can go to sleep, willya?" He laughed. "Yeah. Tomorrow." He hung up the phone. "Billy says to tell you he and the cabbie are having a wonderful time together, and not to rush or anything."

She gasped, laughed. "That bastard!"
"That's Billy. Aha! Here we go." He pulled out an 8X10 glossy, found a marker.

Grace handed him the piece of paper, wandered over to perch on the arm of the sofa, smell the flowers on the coffee table.

"Aw, that's really nice. Did you read what she wrote?"

"No. Just 'Ashley'."

"It's very sweet. I'd better write something more than just my name." He uncapped the Sharpie, thought for a minute, his tongue between his teeth, then spent a moment writing. Signed his name with a flourish, blew on it to make sure it was dry, handed it across to Grace. "Think that'll be good enough?"

It was a great headshot of Elijah, and she told him so. Across the top corner he'd scrawled 'For Ashley: My most understanding Canadian fan. Love, Elijah.' "I think she'll love it. I'll leave it with reception on my way out." She stood, headed toward the door. He followed her. "Get some sleep, 'Lij. And you make sure you take care of yourself on the rest of this tour, you hear me?"

He smiled. "Promise. And I'll keep Billy out of trouble."

"You'll keep him out of trouble? What's that phrase? Something about the blind leading the stupid?"

He laughed out loud. "Since he's not here, I get to be the blind, right?"

"Sure, why not? I'd better run, he'll be having a fit."

He gave her a big hug. "Thanks again for looking out for me. We'll see you again, yeah?"

She kissed his cheek. "We'll see. I'd like that, though."

"Me too. Take care, Grace."

"Bye sweetie." With a grin and a wave, she left. Down in the lobby she was given an envelope, wrote 'Ashley' on the front, and left it with instructions. Then she quickly headed outside, only to stop short at the sight of no cab and no Billy.

"The man had children. He wanted to see them grow up." Billy walked up behind her.

"Very funny, Mr. 'The-Cab-Stays'."

He shrugged. "Actually, his shift was over. He was going to wait, but I didn't have the heart to make him. After all, no telling how long it was going to be." He grinned. "Could you have taken any longer? It's brass monkey weather out here."

"And it didn't occur to you that for one more night at least, you live here? Your own warm little bed right inside those doors?"

"I'm seeing you home, remember?"

She sighed. "That's very kind, Billy, but you don't need to do that. I know where I'm going. You
"Well, I wasn't going to stick you with that cab fare--and I'm not letting you walk down Yonge Street by yourself at night."

"You remembered."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "It was this morning, wee girl." He kissed her nose.

"Oh. Right."

"Come on, enough standing around, let's go and catch the subway."

"Umm…yeah, well--slight problem with that. We've missed the last one."

"You're having me on."

"Ah--no. Sorry."

"Shite! I'm going to hurt 'Lij tomorrow."

"It wasn't his fault!" she protested.

"Right. The fangirl."

"Exactly."

"You'll rescue him from fangirls, but you won't rescue me?" he teased.

"You didn't need rescuing."

"And he did?"

Quietly. "I think so."

"Oh." Pause. Then, "How'd you do it?" She told him. He kissed her cheek, said, "You handled that very neatly. Maybe you should be in PR."

"No thanks," she laughed. "She called me ma'am."

"Silly twit. Let's go find another cab. Which general direction do you live?"

She turned him around so he was facing north, but held him there for a minute. "Preparations must be made first." Pulled a knit cap out of her pocket, pulled it down over his head.

"What are you doing? Keep your--"

She cut him off. "I've got a scarf. See?" She put it over her head, covering her ears. "Might as well stay warm."

"Where the hell was this when I was standing outside for an hour freezing to death?"

"An hour, was it? Curious, as I was only inside for--what? Fifteen minutes? And it was in my pocket, because you didn't deserve it."

"But I do now?"
"We'll see."

They started walking.

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"When we get to my place, are you going to insist on coming up?"

"Probably. Have to make sure there are no lurkers outside your door, don't I?"

"Not highly likely, I have to say."

"Besides. We've got talking to do, and I won't last outside much longer."

"Delicate, aren't you?"

His arm shot out and before she could dodge, once again pulled her into a headlock. "Not delicate. Sensitive. There's a big difference, you know."

"Sensitive. Sorry. At least you're keeping my ears warm."

He laughed, let her go. Took her hand in his. "Is it all right if I come up?"

She re-adjusted her scarf after its man-handling. Quietly said, "I don't really want you to, no."

"Why not?"

She didn't answer. Looked at the ground as they walked.

"We both decided nothing goes anywhere fast. I meant it. We're just going to talk."

"It's not that."

"Then what?" He gave her arm a bit of a swing, gently teased her, "Your flat a mess?"

"Yes. But that's unavoidable. Listen, Billy--"

"What? Come on, woman, out with it."

"My place is really...small. And it's...well, it's a bit of a dive--a shithole, to be precise. It's demeaning, but it's where I live right now. So don't pretend there's nothing wrong with it, don't try and tell me it's not so bad. The minute I can, I'm getting the fuck out of there. I detest it with every last fibre of my being, and if you make light of it I'll kick your ass down all three flights of stairs so fast it'll make your head spin."

"Hmm. I'm not sure you were clear enough on that. So, if I tell you it's a lovely little nest--"

"They'll find your body in the lake."

He chuckled. "Understood." Pulled her closer, put his arm around her shoulders.

"The only reason you're being allowed to come up is I don't want to let you go yet--and it is too cold to stay outside."

"Tell me why you hate it."
"Because it's a dump! Okay, okay. Don't give me that look. It's the size of a shoebox. It has two windows, one of which is cracked, and I fully expect it to fall out if I close a door too hard. There's no carpet, only chipped linoleum, and no matter how hard I scrub, the whole place looks filthy. There are mice if I don't keep the traps set and centipedes no matter what I do. It's freezing in winter, roasting in summer, and smelly the rest of the time. Does that explain it?"

"Why are you angry?"

"Because I hate living like that! No one should have to live in that rattrap, it's disgusting! Fucking slumlords. Why do you think I try and go to the beach every day? So I don't go stark raving mad staring at those four filthy walls."

"So tell me why you live there. I'm not being a smartass--I'm asking. You're not one to be indifferent to your surroundings. So why?"

"Indifferent? I just finished telling you what a hellhole it is!"

"Wrong word," he admitted. "You're desperate to get out--why don't you? What's stopping you?"

"Why can you never find a fucking cab when you need one?" she cried.

"Relax--we haven't really tried yet. Let's stand on this corner for a few minutes. Keep your eyes peeled."

"Fine." She hugged her arms around herself.

"You're uncomfortable telling me about this."

"You're just getting that now?" she sniped.

"There's no need for that."

"Why are you pushing this?" she ground out.

"Because you're making me." He went on relentlessly. "There has to be total truth for this wandering to work, remember? Your words. Why would you try to screen this when it's so wound up with what you are right now?"

"And what am I?"

"I don't know! How could I when you're hiding half of yourself? At the moment, you're really fucking, frustratingly guarded. God, it's like the bloody Great Wall of China. Let me in, goddammit."

Suddenly still, she quietly said, "I'm not trying to shut you out, Billy. I don't want to shut you out, I swear."

He stayed silent. Let her decide.

She suddenly threw her arm up in the air, yelled, "Hey! Taxi!" A cab pulled up in front of them. They climbed in, and Grace huddled toward Billy. He put his arm around her, pulled her in tight. She gave the cabbie her address. They didn't speak the entire trip; Billy knew she wouldn't in front of the driver. She rested her head on his chest.

When the cab pulled to the curb, she started to get out her wallet.
"Put it away. I've got it."

"No. It's my turn."

"If you let me get it, I can expense it. We get traveling costs for these tours." He stopped her hand in her pocket. "Please."

She hesitated. "All right. Thank you."

"No--thank my agent. She's the one who insisted on that little perk," he smiled. Then quietly asked, "Am I coming in?"

"Yes."

He climbed out of the cab after her. Looked around him. Restaurants, a Laundromat, a billiards hall, a carpet store, several bars, and, right across the street, a gas station. And Grace, standing staring at him, arms folded.

"What? It's a city street. Nothing special, nothing unusual. Which is you?"

"Up here," she muttered. Unlocked a door beside the carpet shop. They climbed three flights (as she had warned) of stairs. It was cold, and there was an odd chemical smell--probably from the shop. She unlocked a door to the right. "Welcome to Hell." Flicked on a light.

It was definitely small. And yes, it looked dingy. And it was cold. "Nah, Hell's hot. This is just Purgatory."

She looked at him sharply, a half-formed laugh in her throat. "That implies I'll get out."

"You can always get out. The question is, which direction will you go?" he grinned.

"Guess we'll have to wait and see. Take your coat off, I've got blankets. I'll see if I can get any heat out of this bugger." She turned a thermostat, then hauled back and kicked the baseboard heater. It clicked. "You fucking son of a bitch--" kick "--whoring toad-spotted hedge-pig--" kick "--thrice-damned fen-soaked puttock--" kick "--goddammed piss-ant--" It finally hummed into life with the final kick. "Right. Blankets. Keep moving your extremities and they won't freeze."

"Good God", Billy said, awed, as he absently stuffed the toque in his pocket. "Could you teach me to swear like that? I could curse Dom out and it would take him ten minutes to realize it."

She gave a weak laugh. "I've got a few of those, yes. I practice daily on that piece of shit. Here," she handed him a blanket, "Have a seat on the sofa--it's that slightly oversized chair there." She tossed his jacket on the bed in the other corner. Turned on a small, warm-coloured lamp, flicked off the glaring overhead light. He watched as she lit a huge candle in a jar. "It helps with the smell from the store downstairs. Drink?"

"Something hot?"

"Tea?"

"Lovely."

She moved to the tiny kitchenette opposite, plugged the kettle in, got mugs from the cupboard.

"I thought you said you work from home?"
"I do."

"Where's your computer?"

"In the desk drawer at the moment. Laptop. Only thing of value I own, and only because I can write it off on my tax return. I lock it in the desk when I'm gone just in case."

"Good idea. So you never answered my question."

"What question?"

"Why are you here? What's keeping you from leaving? It's not the nicest place I've ever seen. So why?"

"Milk or sugar?"

"Both. Dammit, Grace, come on."

"Because it's only $500 a month in downtown Toronto. Including utilities. And here I don't need a car."

"So you're a little broke."

"More than a little. I'm strapped. Tapped out. Totaled." Her voice was edgy again.

"The job doesn't pay that well?"

She had her back to him. He saw her shoulders tense as she fiddled with the sugar spoon. "On the contrary, it pays quite well. It's just unfortunate that the government gets to keep it all."

"Credit?"

"They won't touch me with a ten-foot pole. Don't you get it? I--"

"No," he interrupted, fed up. "I don't 'get it', because you're not telling me--you're just waltzing around it." He tossed the blanket aside, rose, walked over to stand behind her. "Just say it. Straight out, right now."

She dropped her head, said in a low voice, "Billy, I'm eighteen thousand dollars in debt. And the government garnishes my wages thanks to a false tax return. That may not sound like much to you, but I'm up to my nose. One more inch and I drown."

He put his hands on her shoulders, squeezed, leaned her back against his chest. "What happened? You're not irresponsible."

"How would you know?"

"Because I saw how you wigged when you thought we lost 'Lij. Because you can work at home and meet deadlines without having someone standing over you cracking a whip. Those are not the qualities of a reckless git."

"What happened is that I'm an idiot. A stupid, naïve, gullible, asinine, gormless sucker. And yes, irresponsible too. I sat back and let myself be taken for everything. You don't get much more irresponsible than that."

He reached around either side of her and began making the tea. Rested his head against the side of
hers. "And you say you're not good with words. What do you mean 'taken'?

She watched his hands with the tea things. "I let him clean me out. Bank account, maxxed credit cards, line of credit--everything. Give him his due, he was brilliant. Even fucked around with my tax return to get a bigger refund cheque."

"Fix your tea," he quietly instructed. She automatically added sugar and milk, stirred it. "Come on, wee girl, let's sit down." Directed her toward the tiny sofa. Waited until she sat, handed her a blanket. Sat himself beside her, pulled the other blanket up. "Start at the beginning. Who is 'he'?"

"Michael. I met him at a music festival. Within a week I was half in love with him. That was my first mistake. God, I was so witless. He must have seen me coming a mile off, a great big neon sign over my head shouting 'Please screw me over--I'll even help!' in capital letters."

"Go on."

"Three months later we moved in together. He moved in with me--my lease. Everything was great for…oh, six, seven months, or so. We opened a joint chequing account. Merged our credit cards--under mine, of course, I had the better interest rate. He opened a line of credit, which I co-signed. It's unbelievable I let him do all that, I know. He did it carefully, spread it out over months. And I was more than happy to be blind, apparently."

"Did he have a job?"

"Oh yes, regularly added to our account, helped pay bills. When I tried to find him later, it turned out the job was under the table--no paper trail, no taxes, no legal information whatsoever. As I said, he did my tax return. Got me a huge refund. The kicker was, I was so grateful--I thought I'd been doing it wrong for years. Turns out--not so much," she said bitterly. "He added his income to mine, then created quite a number of deductions and donations and expenses. You'll note I said 'created'. It was the most creative fucking accounting I've ever seen. I promised the government they'd get paid back first, as long as they wouldn't throw me in jail. They audited me for the previous three years--gave me a damn ulcer--but didn't find anything wrong, so that's why they agreed to it. I think I got lucky, got a sympathetic auditor--if there is such a thing. Hence the wage garnishing."

"I take it he just…disappeared."

"Drank his coffee, said 'See you tonight, darling,' and I never saw him again. Or my money."

"What did you do?"

"Waited. Got angry. Called his boss. Called the police. Cried. Holed myself up in my nice spacious apartment until the rent was due. Panicked. Spent a month trying to find him. Failed."

"What did the police do?"

"Nothing." At his incredulous look she said, "Well, what could they do? They tried to find him, but he was gone. He could be anywhere. Under any name. Besides, there really wasn't much they could get him for. His name was on the chequing account, the credit cards, the line of credit--he just took his money. In fact the only truly illegal thing he did was my tax return, which would land him in prison if we could find him--and if I could prove he did it, which I can't. It's no good. He's gone, and so is every last dime I had saved."

"Eighteen thousand dollars."

"No, he took over twenty-four, all told. I sold my car, other stuff, paid three grand to one of the
credit cards, and I've repaid the government with the rest. They'll be finished with me in a few months, I hope. By which time the credit card debt will be right back up again, the whoring pirates."

"How long will it take you to catch up?"

"Hard to say. On my current budget, just over two years. But I don't know if I can live like this for another two years." Her eyes filled with tears, and she angrily swiped them away. "Fuck."

"What about your parents?" he asked quietly. "Can they help you out?"

"No. And I'm not telling them."

"What? Grace, you can't be serious? I thought you said things were pretty good between you and your parents?"

"They are." She stared ahead, trying to will the telltale tears away.

"Then how can you possibly keep something like this from them? Don't you think they'd want to help their only daughter?"

"You don't know anything about my family." Edging towards anger.

"I know they're still your parents."

"And that's why I told them Michael's gone, that I moved, that he left me with a few bills. But I'm 32 years old, Billy. I'm old enough I should be able to look after myself--and if I can't I'm not going to make my parents suffer for it. I'm not going to let them go into debt to bail me out. I won't do it," she choked.

"Ah, don't cry, dear heart. Come here." He put his empty mug down, took hers from unresisting hands. Pulled her into his arms, kissed her hair as she sobbed. "You are probably the single most stubborn, pig-headed, obstinate, willful person I have ever met. Ssh, luv, it's okay."

"No it's not," she refuted, weeping. "I hate this, and I don't know what to--to do! I'm trying to be adult, and deal with it, but I don't kno--know how. I've been on my tiptoes for the last eight months and the water's c-cold and I'm so tired." She cried even harder, her whole frame shaking.


"Of cour--course it is. I let him--"

"Stop. You didn't 'let' him. He deceived and betrayed you. He committed a fraud, for God's sake. He's in the wrong, not you."

"I should have known--"

"That's shite and you know it. He's a con-man, Grace, a shyster, a swindler."

"If you say 'tricksy', I'm leaving," she sniffled.

He laughed, tightened his arms about her. "That's my wee girl. God, I wish I knew how you do that. My point is, from the sound of it, you're not the first he's done this to. Ninety-nine people out of a hundred wouldn't stand a chance against someone like that. Surely the police told you that."
"Yeah."

"But you didn't believe them."

"No. They were just being nice. Thought they'd keep me from getting hysterical, probably."

"I guess you don't believe me either, then."

Silence.

"I told you I would never lie to you. You can believe my truth implicitly, remember?"

"...Yes."

"Good. Now look at me."

"No."

"Yes." He pushed her away, sat her up. Took her face between his hands, rubbed at her drying tears with his thumbs. "Look at me." Waited until she raised red eyes to his. "Are you still in love with him? Is that why you keep blaming yourself?"

"No."

"Not even a bit?"

"No! I stopped loving him when it finally hit me he wasn't coming back. You don't love someone who betrays you--they don't deserve it," she said harshly.

"No." Quietly. "I guess they don't."

"Billy?"

"Aye?"

"Will you let go of my face now?"

He smiled. "Sorry." Ran his hands down to her shoulders, her arms. "What can we do?"

"About what?"

"To get the water down to--well, at least your neck. So you don't have to tiptoe."

She shrugged, hunched down a little. "Nothing. I'm living on as little as I can now. I don't remember what brand names look like. I've never clipped so many bloody coupons in my life. It sucks." She rubbed her nose in annoyance.

"All right, further budgeting is out. A line of credit is out. I don't suppose you'd consider--"

"Don't you dare--"

"A wee loan? Just enough to help you get out of here?"

"Fuck off, Billy." She struggled to untangle the blanket, lurched to her feet.

He grabbed her wrist. "Hey--"
She furiously yanked free. "Goddammit, Billy. I won't ask my parents for money, what the hell makes you think I'd take it from you?"

He stilled. "Right."

"Sorry," she bit out. Picked up the mugs and took them to the kitchen. Stood in front of the counter, staring out the cracked window.

Silence reigned for several minutes.

"Where's the loo?" he finally asked.

"Door on the other side of the bed," she said shortly. Stayed facing the window as he crossed the room in a few strides. Heard the door close, leaned on the counter. Swore, "Bitch. Stupid, fucking pillock." She heard the toilet flush, the pipes erupting in a shriek (groan rattle). Heard Billy give a surprised, alarmed shout. Nearly a scream, but she'd never tell him that. "It's all right," she yelled, wiping her eyes. "They do that."

"All right for you," he muttered as he emerged. "I nearly had a bloody heart-attack."

"I'm sorry. I forgot to warn you."

"You need to hang a sign. 'Caution: Beware the plumbing from Hell'."

"Purgatory."

"Right. 'Caution: Plumbing on loan from Purgatory. Use at own risk'."

"No one else has ever been in here. I'm not used to giving warnings."

"No one?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Ah well. I'm young, no harm done."

"No. I mean… Billy," her voice wavered. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." He came over to where she leaned against the counter, gathered her into his arms. "We say everything. We know the potential is there to get pissed off."

"I'm not a charity case."

"Oh for--Grace, you little wanker. It wasn't charity. Do I feel bad for you that this shite happened? Of course I do. Would I like to help you out a bit, when I have that ability? Yes. And if you won't accept a wee loan, fine. No need to jump down my throat."

"I know, I'm sorry," she wailed.

"Shut it, I'm not finished. We can find a way to at least make this more bearable. Just because you're stuck in this situation doesn't mean you have to--let…him…" He trailed off. Then quietly, slowly said, "I think I get it. You take money, he wins."

"That's--ridiculous," she said weakly.

"Is it? It makes sense. Or rather, it doesn't, but I understand it. And now I understand why you're
being so unbelievably stubborn."

"Would you quit calling me that?"

"Let's go back to the sofa--I'm getting cold."

"Fragile, aren't you?" she sniffed.

"Not all of us bathe with penguins. Your bathroom's a fucking icebox."

"I know. I forgot to warn you about that too."

"Yes, you did."

They went back to the sofa, curling up together, spreading the blankets out.

"What would you do? Besides the atrocious heating and plumbing issues. What's the first thing you'd change about your flat? Quick!"

"Paint," she said immediately.

"What colour?"

"Fresh."

I'm not sure that's a colour, but never mind. Second?"

"Umm…"

"First, paint. Second? Come on!"

"Fix the window?"

"Third?"

"Billy…"

"I'm just trying to understand how you feel, what you dislike the most. Third?"

"Why?"

"Third."

"Curtains, I guess. Pestilential 24-hour gas station across the road."

"Pestilential, even. Good word. What's your favourite thing you own?"

"My guitar." No hesitation.

"Second?"

"My grandmother's quilt."

"Third?"

"My soup bowls."
He looked at her askance. "Really?"

"Yes. They're funky, cheerful. Not much else here is."

"If you say so. Strange girl. What's your favourite place?"

"The lake. The beach."

"Why am I not surprised at that?" he smiled.

"Does that mean we're done with Twenty Questions?"

"Impertinent little wretch."

"I am, aren't I?" She tucked her head under his chin.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Grace learns why 'Washing of the Water' did a number on Billy and they grow even closer. Then they say goodbye.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few minutes later she said, "May I ask a question?"

"I suppose." He kissed her temple.

"Will you tell me a not-yet?"

He hesitated. "Any particular one that's bothering you?"

"Why did 'Washing of the Water' knock you on your ass?"

He breathed out evenly. "The big one."

"You can pick a different one."

"Would you mind?"

"Of course not! You had several--pick any of them."

He was silent for a moment, then sighed deeply. "No. It's only fair. I dragged you kicking and screaming--nearly literally--into telling me yours. And I do want…need…you to know this. But will you do something for me first?"

"Probably."

"Sing?"

"I'll sound like shit after crying."

"I don't care."

"Just don't say I didn't warn you about something." She pulled the blanket off, went and got her guitar from its case where it rested against the wall by the door. There wasn't room for all three of them on the tiny sofa, so she sat a few feet away on the corner of the bed. Started picking the strings, adjusted the tuning slightly. "You want to give me something to go on?"

"You said you could do it with just one word."

"Yes."
He smiled. "You."

"As in--me?"

"As in you."

"Bastard."

He laughed.

She looked at him for a moment, deep in thought. Started to play as she said, "That's a hard one to start with, but see if this will do for now."

Is this where I come in?
When your head is in your hands
Would you rather be alone
If you do I understand
Well, honestly I'm sorry
I tracked mud across your plans.

Is this where I rush in?
For I am your saving grace
Healer of the hurt
Descending on your space
My wings caught in your door
And my halo in your face.

Is this where I come in?
And there are troubles here
Within the walls of this room
No one's said a word and it's deafening
All of our silence
Is hardly music to the ears.

Is this where I come in?
When you send up the flares
I'll send in the clowns
When you are broken down
Well I'll be there with bells on
I'll be ring ringing out your cares.

"Incredible. Love the inept angel--it's you. God, you're really fucking good at this."

"Mostly because it's you. I have a tougher time with other people."

"You do realize any time I need something and I don't know what, I'll be calling you?"

"Okay."
"You sure? I'm not joking."

"I know."

"Come back," he patted the blanket beside him. "Leave the guitar out, we may need it again."

"Do you realize what time it is? You have a flight to catch in a few hours."

"I know. I'll sleep on the plane. Or when I get there. I've seen New York before." He pointed to the cushion.

She laid the guitar down. "I should probably clarify something. If I can't see you, or I haven't talked to you for a bit, I can't find it in one word. You know that, right? If you call me out of the blue and say…say…"

"Airplane."

"Airplane. And I have no idea what you've been doing or thinking, I'm going to tell you to go back on your little pink pills."

"Green pills. But if we have talked?"

"Then I'll give you a song."

"So I just said airplane. What's the song?"

All my bags are packed and I'm ready to go  
I'm standing here outside your door  
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye

But the dawn is breaking it's early morn  
The taxi's waiting he's blowin' his horn  
Already I'm so lonesome I could die.

So kiss me and smile for me  
Tell me that you'll wait for me  
Hold me like you'll never let me go

'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane  
Don't know when I'll be back again  
Oh babe, I hate to go.

She hadn't even picked up the guitar.

Billy just sat there looking at her, awe (laughter pain) on his face.

She went over and sat beside him again. He leaned against her, into her. She put her arms around him. He laid his head on her chest over her heart. They stayed like that for long silent moments.

He sighed. "I said airplane, not jet plane."

"If you'd pointed that out right away, it would have carried more weight," she teased softly.
"You scare me just a little, you know that?"

"It's the songs, not me. I just happen to know them."

"Wrong. It's you too. You pick them out of the air between us."

"Do you want a drink?"

"No. I want ye to come with me."

"I can't."

"I know. But I hate to wake you up to say goodbye."

"So I won't go to sleep."

"Smartass."

"Unfortunately, far too often."

They were quiet again. She kissed his hair softly. Stretched her legs over his so they half-sat, half-lay entwined.

"Her name is Emily," he began quietly. He unconsciously began to rub the tips of his fingers with his thumb. "We met in Edinburgh when I was doing a production at the Traverse. Dated. I left for more than a month--when I came back we picked right up again. We'd go out for drinks at night, go hiking on the weekends. She came with me when I went surfing a couple times, and didn't complain once about it being cold sitting on the beach. We were all sunshine and roses and April in Paris." Grace smiled at the description. "She said she understood that I couldn't be around all the time. Made my time at home a joy. We laughed together, played together, fought together, slept together, ate together. Lived together. I had to leave again. Asked her to come with me; she didn't want to leave home. Didn't like the idea of all the publicity. I said fine, I understand, it'll be better this way anyway. I'll have a safe, normal place to come home to. I loved her, of course. Even started hinting to the press that I had someone in my life." She tightened her arms around him, began to stroke his hair.

"That feels nice. So to make a long story a little less boring, we took a holiday together. I took her to L.A., she met Dom, 'Lij, a couple of the others. We stayed a month. It took me forever to convince her to stay that long. I only managed because it was our schedule, our priorities; no press events. Ironically enough, it turns out she likes the publicity. A week after we got there she met some American wanker from the telly and was shagging him every chance she got. She just forgot to tell me, is all."

"Oh, Billy."

"She's still there. I heard she moved in with him. Guess she decided she could leave home after all. It was Elijah who found out she was cheating on me. He knows someone who knows someone and of course nothing travels faster in Hollywood than dirty gossip. Poor 'Lij was afraid to tell me. But he's got a good heart, and he didn't want to see me being made a complete fool of. A bit late for that, of course."

"How long had you been together?" she asked quietly.

"A year."
"What did you do?"

"I said unforgivable things. Tried to insult her, humiliate her in front of her American fuckwit. I even tried to go after him once, after a few drinks--Dom had to haul me away. In other words, I was a dickhead, a complete and total bastard."

"Understandable, I think."

"She wasn't in love with me. She wanted a celebrity. Oh, she cared about me in a way--but she played me from the start. Pretending to not want the glitz, the premieres, just to hook me in. Sure, maybe it wasn't all intentional. But she still took the one thing guaranteed to flay me and used it freely. She tore apart the trust I had in people who seemed to like me for me."

"How long ago was this?"

"Two months. The first month I was a mess. I did a couple of premieres in there, and it was just hell. I'm better with it all now, but I still have my days where I just…hurt. I'm bitter, angry. I don't like the way I am right now; I'm not this person. I should be able to forgive, wish her well, move on, leave her behind. But part of me wants her to suffer as much as I have--and I think a tiny, unbelievably deranged part still loves her. Like you said, she betrayed me, she doesn't deserve it. But…"

"You gave her your trust. She owed you her loyalty," she said firmly.

"What I don't understand is why I trust you. You said you wouldn't share this and you wouldn't lie to me, and I believe you. You could easily have been another Emily."

"That's why you got so upset when you realized I knew who you were."

"Yeah. And when you called me Celebrity Actor. I'm not fond of the word celebrity right now."

"Because you think she wanted 'Billy the Celebrity', not just Billy."

"I don't just think so. She made it clear by her actions. But to me there is no difference."

"You do present a difference, though," she said gently. "I saw it again tonight with that crowd. You keep yourself separate. You don't connect--not with what's intrinsically you. You give them a lot, in fact you give them exactly what they want; friendly, smiling, laughing, joking, sincere Billy Boyd. But you don't give them what's in here--" she tapped his head with one finger, "--or here--," tapped his chest over his heart. "And I think that's probably very wise. If you give yourself away, what's left?"

"You're not mine. Not anybody's," he echoed her earlier words with new comprehension.

"Yeah. A little different, but yes."

"And my accent changes?"

"Definitely. It gets thicker, more 'Highland laddie'."

"I'm going to have to ask Dom why he never told me."

"Maybe he accepts it without a second thought. Don't overthink this. Just do what you always do--it's made you well-loved."

"And a target, apparently."
"Don't let her change who you are."

"Clarify."

"Emily fucked up. She could have had a wonderful, thoughtful, loyal man. Whatever is missing in her or her life that led her to toss that away for a bit of glam is her problem. Her loss. Her bloody stupidity. Let her keep it--don't claim responsibility for things that aren't yours. Be who you truly are and the people who can appreciate that for all its worth won't budge. Like Dom, or your sister, or 'Lij. And oh my God, I sound like a sanctimonious prat. Or Dr. Phil. Shoot me now."

He smiled. "You never listen to yourself, do you?"

"Not often. Why?"

"'Don't claim responsibility for things that aren't yours.' That's rich, coming from you."

"It's not the same thing."

"Yes it is," he said indignantly. "It's exactly the same bloody thing. You're taking blame on yourself for the shite he did."

"No, I'm taking the blame for what I didn't do."

"Semantics."

"But important ones. I should have known what he was doing, I should have stayed in control of my own finances."

"And I should have seen Emily for what she was, should have picked up on the clues that she was cheating on me."

"…Oh."

"Finally," he muttered."

"But--"

"No. Stop." He twisted to sit up, looked at her, took her face between his hands, his fingers in her hair. "Just stop. Let's make a deal, you and I. Right here, in your own little corner of Purgatory. We'll stop being fucking martyrs. We have the right to be angry--and hurt--and to need a friend. But no more accepting."

"No more accepting?" she whispered, then dropped her eyes. "I don't know if I can do that."

"Why not?"

"Because…because--I don't know…"

"Use someone else's words."

After a moment she sang.

Though it takes all the strength in me
And all the world can see
"I think I know what you mean. But spell it out. What's the cost of no more accepting?"

"If I--refuse to accept any blame--I can't…" she stumbled over her words, throat tightening, "I have to face--what he--" She stopped.

"The enormity of what he did to ye."

Her eyes filled. She swiped them away, angry all over again. "Yes. I loved him, and he *used* me. He betrayed me. But it's worse, it's beyond betrayal. I don't know a word for beyond betrayal. Treachery? He took everything of myself I offered him, everything of myself I gave; laughed at me, flipped me off. *And then left with it.* How could he do that to me?" she cried.

"There it is." He pulled her into his arms. "That's the one I'm fighting too. There was *some* truth to our relationship--she cared for me in some way--so how could she do that to someone she cared for at all?"

"People suck," she sniffled. "They're all shits."

He laughed sadly. "You're not. I'm not. There's a few decent ones left. The trick is finding them. Now," he let her go again, gripped her shoulders. "Our deal. No more accepting. We face the fuckers, heads held high. Metaphorically *and* literally. We'll be our own little support team. 'Victims of Treachery'."

"No. Not victims."

"No. Of course." He cupped her cheek with his hand.

"P-W-B-U-B-W."

"What's that?"

"People Who've Been Used By Wankers."

He laughed out loud. "A wee bit long, but I like it. Group motto--"

"No more martyrdom."

"No more."

She leaned her head into his hand. "God, we're damaged."

"Aye, we are that."

"Kind of pathetic, really."

"And kind of miraculous."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm glad you think it's so great."

"The miracle is that it's different circumstances, different people, different worlds. But we found
each other. Dom knows me better than anyone else on earth--but not in this. He told me not to get so bent out of shape over a 'bit o' skirt'. To go shag some pretty young thing, and I'd soon get over it. He's not in the same place. And then I found you. God lent me Grace. And I'm incredibly grateful for the things you've shown me, you've shared with me. Yes, I'm damaged. But I know I won't always be. That'll do for now."

Before he could blink she was kissing him hard, her tears on his cheeks. Said against his lips, "Good words." Changed to flighty, light feathery kisses. "So glad…you found me…"

"We found we." He captured her enticing, roving lips with his own. Kissed her deeply, his tongue tasting hers again. *God, she tastes* "So good."

"You have irreprovably altered me. You know that?"

"Mmm. See? You have good words too."

"We'll talk a lot. So you can tell me to shut it." She slipped her tongue in and out of his mouth.

"And you can give me songs." He scraped her lower lip with his teeth.

"And you can flirt with me."

"Aye. Flirting's fun." He trailed his tongue along her jaw, pausing to nip gently.

"And you can talk me down when I'm gibbering."

"You can tell me to stop pacing. Help me sleep."

"Help me forget where I'm living." She flicked his earlobe with her tongue, ran it up the very outer edge of his ear.

His breathing deepened. "Keep me sane on these tours." Kissed down her neck.

"When you change--when life changes--and you move on--tell me. Don't just stop calling."

"Grace," he murmured, hand in her hair. "That won't happen."

"It might. It certainly could. Think how much you've changed since the beginning of Rings. Promise me you won't just disappear."

"I promise. I promise I won't just disappear. You too." Pressed a kiss into the base of her throat.

"I'll always be on your side. No matter where we wander--no matter where--I'm in your corner. Against anyone or anything."

"Loyalty."

"Complete. There's a song for that…"

He kissed the nape of her neck, nibbled, licked. She moaned. Her grip on him loosened; she leaned into him.

"Billy…"

"I love hearing that sound you make when I kiss you here--" he demonstrated. "I love the way you say my name like that. It's so fucking sexy."
"Billy…"

"Yes," he growled, "Just like that."

"Stop."

"What's wrong?" he nuzzled her neck.

"If you don't stop now," she murmured, eyes still closed, "You're going to miss your flight."

"I've got two hours yet."

"I know."

"Then what--oh."

"Yes."

"I wish you hadn't said that."

"Why?"

"Now I don't give a tinker's wee fuck about my flight."

It drew a snicker from her. "A tinker's wee fuck? I don't know what the hell that means, but I like it."

Billy let go of her completely, leaned his head against the back of the sofa. Grace relaxed into the corner beside him. After a minute he said, "So. I'm going to insist on something here, and I'm beggin' you not to fight me on it. It's really important to me."

"All right. I won't fight you."

He lifted his head, opened one eye. "You don't even know what it is."

"If it's that important to you, it doesn't matter." She smiled sweetly, even as she was still trying to catch her breath. "I'm sure I don't need to warn you not to abuse this."

"No, you don't. I'm asking you not to call me." Before her surprise could turn into something else, he continued. "Email me--the oftener, the better. But let me make the phone calls. I can cover them, even if we get caught up in long, rambling, pointless conversations. I'd hate to think I'm making things harder for you from wanting to hear your voice."

She looked away. He was afraid she regretted promising not to fight. But then she looked back, and there was quiet relief on her face. "Thank you, Billy. This really goes against the grain--"

"I know it does."

"But I have to be realistic. I can't afford to call Scotland."

"I know. Will you do something else for me? It's a lot easier," he reassured her as she raised an eyebrow. "Can you email me a list of the songs you've sung and who they're by? So I can get the disc, or download it if I can't find it. You're going to be good for my CD collection. Dom and Lij'll be jealous."

"You might have trouble finding some. They're Canadian, I'm not sure how much international
exposure they have. But let me know which ones you need, and I can get them for you."

"That would be great. What's the song for loyalty?"

"What?"

"You said complete loyalty. 'There's a song for that'."

"You want me to sing it?"

"Bloody silly question."

She got up, sat on the end of the bed again, picked up the guitar. "I'm not sure how this one sounds with just me. It's a multi-track song."

"Shut it and sing."

I'll give you countless amounts of outright acceptance if you want it.
I will give you encouragement to choose the path that you want if you need it.
You can speak of anger and doubts, your fears and freak-outs and I'll hold it.
You can share your so-called 'shame-filled' accounts of times in your life and I won't judge it.
And there are no strings attached.

You owe me nothing for giving the love that I give.
You owe me nothing for caring the way that I have.
I give you thanks for receiving, it's my privilege,
and you owe me nothing in return.

You can ask for space for yourself and only yourself and I'll grant it.
You can ask for freedom as well or time to travel and you'll have it.
You can ask to live by yourself or love someone else and I'll support it.
You can ask for anything you want, anything at all and I'll understand it.
And there are no strings attached.

I bet you're wondering when the next payback shoe will eventually drop.
I bet you're wondering when my conditional police will force you to cough up.
I bet you're wondering how far you have now danced your way back into debt.
You can express your deepest of truths, even if it means I'll lose you and I'll hear it.

You can fall into the abyss on your way to your bliss, I'll empathize with.
You can say that you'll have to skip town to chase your passion and I'll hear it.
You can even hit rock bottom, have a mid-life crisis and I'll hold it.
And there are no strings attached.

You owe me nothing for giving the love that I give.
You owe me nothing for caring the way that I have.
I give you thanks for receiving, it's my privilege,
and you owe me nothing in return.

"Ask anything of me, and if it's in my power, I'll do it." She said simply, "You've become the other half of my brain. You know, the less freakish half."
"You are so…" he trailed off, shaking his head. "Now I'm the one without the words. Do you have any idea how strong you've just made me?"

"Strong?"

"With that kind of unconditional support, I can do anything."

"You twit, you already have that. Dom, your sister. Ring a bell?"

"No. I have a best mate I cherish, and I have a sister whom I adore. But they have their conditions."

"I do too, you just haven't spotted them yet."

"Oh really? What are they?"

"I don't know, you're the one that looks for them. Look, don't make too big a deal out of this," she warned.

"It is a big fucking deal to me, Grace."

"You're--" She stopped. Looked at him. Put the guitar aside, returned to the sofa where she kneeled on the floor in front of Billy and took his hands in hers. "Okay. Let me just say this, and I'll leave it up to you."

"See?"

"What?" She was confused.

"Anyone else would have meant 'Let me just say this, so I can change your mind to my way of thinking.' But you…you're just offering, and you really mean that you'll let me hang on to whatever I feel if I want to."

"You're losing it, pet."

"No. I'm finding it. What did you want to say?"

"What? Quit screwing with my head. Shut the fuck up for a minute and let me think." She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips.

He smiled, waited.

"I support you, yes. Without question? Almost entirely. I am allied to you. Someone picks on wee Billy, they're going to have to deal with me. Someone hurts you, they're going to have to answer to me. This is, of course, metaphorical. I couldn't take out 'Lij, let alone someone who could pick on you. But you know what I mean. I'm in your corner. But I can't fix you, Billy, and I can't save you. And if you expect me to, I'll only let you down. Damaged, remember?"

"You haven't changed the way that I feel. But I think I can reassure you." He pulled on her hands until she stood up, then scooped her into his lap. She let out a squeak of surprise, smiled, snuggled into him. "I don't need fixing. I don't want to be fixed, it sounds like what you do to a poor dog whose roving days are over." She snickered. "And I don't need to be saved. But I may occasionally need a life preserver to help me float until I can swim again. Can you give me that?"

"Yes. Yes, Billy, I'll do my best to give you that."

"That's all right then."
"Will you come to the airport and see me off?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Practical reason: it's very difficult for me to get to and from the airport."

"Okay. Not-practical reason?"

"I might embarrass both me and you by bursting into tears in front of the whole terminal."

He buried his face in her hair. "All right. Then I want an email waiting for me when I get to New York."

"Done. It's New York, then L.A. when?"

"What's today?"

"Saturday."

"New York for three days not including today. I think we fly to L.A. late Tuesday night. A bunch of us are surfing on Thursday. I'm in L.A. for a week, which will be nice. Maybe see Sean and Viggo. Spend some time with Dom. Tell him all about you," he grinned.

"If you can't be nice, lie."

"Well, first I'm going to call him a fucking fen-soaked--what was it?"

"Puttock."

"Right. Fen-soaked puttock. And when he asks what the hell that means, since I have no idea I'll just tell him to shut the fuck up. And I'll tell him you taught me both."

"Don't you dare!"

"He'll have an immediate and profound respect for you."

"Billy--" she said warningly.

"And then I'll call him a whoring, toad-spotted hedge-pig--my, that one rolls right off the tongue--and mention you have several more you wanted to teach me."

"Billy Boyd! If you do, so help me, I'll--"

There was laughter in his voice as he said, "And he'll be disappointed I didn't learn them right away. But he'll understand when I tell him we were distracted by other things when I spent the night at your place."

She sat bolt upright. "You don't--can't--" Was reduced to inarticulate noises.

He laughed, that rich, warm chuckle. "How do you expect me to resist winding you up when you make it so damned easy?"
"You--you…"

"Go on. Are you going to teach me another?"

Her voice shook as she said, "Oh, I'll teach you a lesson, all right."

"Mmm, yeah?"

"Oh yes." She turned to face him, straddling him. Her knees clamped his thighs together. At the exact moment she grabbed his wrists and spread his arms wide, she also took his mouth in a searing, possessive, demanding kiss.

He groaned, his mouth opened beneath hers. A shudder ran through him.

She tightly held him immobile, pinned. Plunged her tongue into his mouth. Then withdrew, hovering a few inches away. Waited until his eyes opened, until he lifted his head, his shoulders, trying to reach her. She kept a constant few inches between them.

"Grace." His voice was rough.

"I love it when you say my name like that," she whispered. "It's so fucking sexy." She kissed him again, deeply, forcing his head back against the sofa. Stopped. Took a deep breath. Let go of him. Sweetly said, "Now that's how to wind someone up." Climbed off his lap, patted his cheek, and walked over to the kitchenette. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"Grace MacPherson, get your arse back over here."

"No."

"You can't do that!" he protested.

"You may now call me a tease, if you wish. Yes, it would be fair this time. You enjoy winding me up, I enjoy winding you up. It's not my fault that my methods are a little more effective."

"A little too effective. I hope you're planning on bringing breakfast here."

She giggled with delight. "If it makes you feel any better, I got myself going a little bit too. I shall have to refine those methods, I think."

He grinned. "Serves you right."

"I know. It was hardly a complaint. What would you like for breakfast?"

"You."

"I'm not on the menu, angel."

"What I had in mind was far from angelic."

"What exactly do you do in restaurants?"

He laughed. "Wouldn't you like to find out?"

"Perhaps not. I'll put some oatmeal on, eh?"

"That's great."
Five minutes later when the oatmeal was bubbling away on the stove, she returned to the sofa, only to find Billy with his head back, eyes closed, mouth slightly open. She carefully sat beside him. Watched his chest rise and fall. Memorized his face, his hair, the shape of his ears, the curve of his jaw. Ran feather-light fingers across his shoulder, up his throat, traced his lips. Followed his cheekbones. Finally rested her hand on his forehead. Checked the clock, left him to sleep for another five minutes.

"Billy."

Not a twitch.

"Billy, dear. Wake up."

He snored.

"Billy." Loudly. "Wake up--time for Feet!"

"Mnph. Okay. Where's the car?" he sat up groggily. Looked at Grace. "You're only allowed to do that to 'Lij."

"Wow. You guys were really well-trained."

"Too well. It's been a couple years, that shouldn't still work."

"Apparently Elijah isn't the only one who can conk out anywhere, anytime," she smiled. "I'm sorry to wake you. But if you slept any longer you would have felt worse when you woke up."

"Aye. Power-naps are the key. How long was I out?"

"Not long. Twenty minutes or so."

"I'm sorry--I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"Don't be daft," she laughed. Added, "It gave me a chance to look at you without you bloody well teasing me."

"Staring at me in my sleep, hmm? Kinda kinky."

"No. Just making sure I'll remember."

"There's pictures of me all over the fucking internet. If you forget, just download one of those."

"Any porno?"

He choked. "Not that I know of."

"Damn."

"And what about me?"

She cocked an eyebrow. "What about you?"

"What if my memory goes? Any pictures of you out there?"

"Highly unlikely."

"So do you have a picture I could take with me?"
"Do you carry one of Dom?"

"No."

"Then you don't need one of me."

"I don't want to look at Dom's ugly mug. I want to look at yours."

"Thank you so much."

He clapped the heel of his hand to his forehead. "Bollocks. Fuckdamndamnfuck. Why do I keep doing that?"

"It's a rare gift, that is."

"Are you going to give me a picture or not?"

"Not."

"But--"

"Let's wait and see who wins the bet, shall we?"

"The--oh, right. The fountain picture. I'll wait then. You'll be sending me that picture in a few days anyway."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"We'll see about that. Come on, the oatmeal will be ready."

He followed her to the kitchen, held the bowls as she spooned the porridge in. "Are these your treasured soup bowls?"

She chuckled. "Yes."

"I like them. They are funky. Very surfer-girl."

"I hate to break it to you, but I'm not a surfer-girl. It's just an ocean pattern."

"And I hate to break it to you, but in Billy's world, anything to do with the ocean has to do with surfing."

"I'll keep that in mind. Eat."

They stayed leaning against the counter to eat, talking a bit, quietly, about nothing. Watching each other. Eyes flitting from lips, to eyes, to hands--away and back again.

She finally said slowly, softly, "This is hideously uncomfortable."

"Yeah."

"I have so much I want you to know that I can't say any of it."

"Yeah."
"What do we do?"

He took her empty bowl from her hands, put them both in the sink. Drew her into his arms. Laid his cheek against her hair. "We don't worry about it. We'll have time to say everything we want to say, even if it's not today. Don't forget that."

"I'll try."

They stood in each other's arms for a long time.

Billy's cell phone rang. His eyes flew to his watch, but he wasn't late. He let go of Grace to get his phone out of his jacket on the bed.

"Yeah?" He rolled his eyes. "Hello, 'Lij."

Grace tittered, covered her mouth with her hand.

"I know I'm not in my room, 'Lij. I went out for breakfast." He pulled a face at her, as if to say 'How was that?' She gave him a thumbs up. "I'll be back in--" he watched her as she mouthed 'half an hour', "--half an hour. It won't take me long to pack. I'm not like you, you young punk, I don't empty everything out of my suitcase and toss it around the room." He sighed. "No, Elijah, I'm not going to miss the car to the airport." His eyes suddenly widened, and he held the phone out to Grace, shrugging. "He wants to talk to you."

She flushed, took a deep breath, took the phone. "Good morning, Elijah."

His voice was filled with laughter. "Morning, Grace. Are you coming to the airport with us?"

"No, I'm not."

"Shit. I wanted to say thanks again for helping me out last night. You were a lifesaver."

"My pleasure. Did you have a good night's sleep?"

"I always do," he laughed. Then asked diffidently, "You okay?"

She smiled, said warmly, "Yes, thank you, sweetie."

"And Billy? Is he all right? Or should I call the airport and have them stock our plane with extra whiskey?"

She chuckled. "No, I don't think that'll be necessary."

"Good. That interview is on Monday. We'll be calling to let you know who won."

"Excellent." She met Billy's eyes, grinned. "Billy swears he's going to win. Just remember--Mt. Ruapehu three times."

"Got it. Well, I'd better run--I have to pack my shit up."

"Okay. Say goodbye to Andy for me."
"I will for sure. Bye Grace--take care."

"You too, Elijah. Bye." She turned the phone off, closed it, handed it back to Billy. "I'll call a cab for you."

After checking the number and making the call, Grace turned back to him. "Ten minutes."

He held out his arms again and she wordlessly walked into them. Held him tightly. He kissed her hair. "It's pretty phenomenal, you know. After two--no, three--days we have an awful lot. Trust. Loyalty. Understanding. And no regrets?" The last was a question.

"None."

"We have music. We have implicit truth. We have flirting. We have PWU--no--"

"PWBUBW."

"That's it."

"You're right. And I'm grateful, believe me, I am. I just wish I knew without a doubt that I'll see you again. You're taking a lot of me with you when you go, and I'm a little worried about it. I'm not yours."

"And I'm leaving a lot of me here. This goes beyond. It has to. You'll see me again."

"Okay."

"And remember, Grace. No more martyrs. You did nothing wrong."

"I'll try. You too."

"Me too."

"I'm in your corner."

"I know. You've given me strength. I won't forget."

"We've said all this already."

"Aye." He smiled. "We're filling the silence until the cab comes."

"I'd rather fill it like this." She reached up and kissed him gently, sweetly, warmly. They didn't part until a buzzer sounded.

"Tell me I'm hearing things."

"Yes. The door--it's your cab."

"Damn. All right." He turned away to put on his jacket. Grace went to the kitchen window, opened it, stuck her head out to let the cabbie know he'd be right down. "I want an email waiting."

She returned to his side. "It'll be there."

"I'll call you."

"You'd damn well better, Mr. Boyd."
"If anything important crops up, call me--I'll call you right back. Day or night, if you need to talk."

"Okay. Same for you. If you're climbing the walls of your hotel room, you call me. I'll tell you to stop being such a wanker."

"Reassuring to know that. You're going to regret it."

"Calling you a wanker?"

"Telling me to call you from my hotel rooms."

"No, I won't. Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"Leave."

"Very nice. Such hospitality."

"The cabbie's waiting."

"I don't care. It's my money."

"How can I miss you if you won't go away?"

He laughed out loud. "Well done."

"Leave 'em with a smile, eh?"

He leaned in, gave her a quick kiss. "See you, Grace."

"See ya, Billy."

The door closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grace set her fourth mug of tea on the scarred work surface of her desk. It had been several hours since Billy's departure. Sinking into the chair, she opened up her laptop and logged onto her email, then pulled out the piece of paper on which she'd copied Billy's email address from her arm. She entered it into the box at the top of the screen, smiled simply at typing his name, and then laughed at her own sentimentality. Rubbing her gritty eyes, she tried to think what to type.

Saturday
To: Billy Boyd
From: Grace MacPherson
Subject: Girlz! Girlz! Girlz!

Or not. Hope you're not too disappointed. I trust you made (make) it safely to New York, dearest of dearies. My Scottish fairy--er, pixie--has disappeared, leaving my apartment darker than before he arrived.

This is going to be the most incoherent email ever in the history of the Internet. Don't say I didn't warn you about this one. I've already done 3 hours work, on top of no sleep. You'll be lucky if you understand one sentence out of three.

My own personal paranoia about privacy (how's that for alliteration?) is about to creep in here. If this offends you, ignore. My financial woes? Keep it between us, eh? Mum. Mute. Zipped. The PWBUBW group relies on anonymity. No, wait--that's not right, is it? Confidentiality. That's the one.

Did I tell you before you left how very hot you are? I should have. That concludes the porno part of Girlz! Girlz! Girlz! Heartbreaking, I know. Deal with it, pet.

I'm going to bed now. (Don't go there--porno part just ended.) The Barenaked Ladies had it all wrong.

Who needs sleep
Tell me what's that for
Who needs sleep
You have to live with what you're getting
There's a guy been awake since the Second World War.
They're whoring rat-kissing liars. I need sleep. Make sure you get some too. You've got some quick thinking to do Monday. I miss your adorable face.

I'll send you a real email tomorrow, when I've restored a few brain cells.

Amazing Grace
(humble and subtle and really damn funny all in one)

Saturday
To: Grace MacPherson
From: Billy Boyd
Subject: Re: Girlz! Girlz! Girlz!

Amazing Grace. Yes.

Get some sleep, woman. That was practically incomprehensible.

No worries. PWBUBW (did I get it right this time?) members never tell each other's tales. You want someone to know, you have to tell them. I'm not doing your dirty work for you. (Unless you beg.)

As an aside, can we increase the porn level in these emails? (The words dirty and beg in such close proximity brought this to mind.)

I slept much of today away. Andy & 'Lij were arguing on the plane, I didn't catch a wink. They're such wankers. I think they did it on purpose. 'Lij wants to go dancing again tonight, and I will undoubtedly get dragged along as punishment for having such a wonderful night last night. It's a pisser you won't be there. (Eloquent bugger, aren't I?)

A companion to rat-kissing? Rat-arsed. Fond favourite of mine from years gone by.

Gotta run. Elijah is at the door, and if I don't send this before he gets in here, he'll hijack it.

Find those brain cells and email me.

Bills
(not particularly subtle)

P.S. Girlz! Girlz! Girlz! was risky. I nearly deleted it as spam. But fuck, did I laugh.

P.P.S. PIXIE, goddammit!
Sunday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Girlz! Girlz!

Way to go. You laughed, and hurt the feelings of one of the poor Girlz! Now she's quit. Hope you're happy.

I got some sleep, you'll be glad to hear. Slightly more comprehensible this time around. Unfortunately, I still can't find those brain cells. I swear I can hear them sniggering at me while I look for them. They picked a fine time to play hide-and-seek. Maybe I should see if they'll do a game of hot/cold?

Did you end up going dancing last night? Without me? Bastard. I bet you did your Saturday Night Fever routine when I wasn't there to see it, too, didn't you?

You are indeed eloquent. Let me sum up your email:
Girlz! dirty beg porn wankers pisser bugger rat-arsed fuck PIXIE goddammit
It boggles the mind.

Say hi to Elijah and Andy for me. Give 'Lij a kiss. No, really--a great big wet sloppy kiss. Only don't tell him it's from me. Let me know how that goes.

Speaking of sloppy kisses, as far as the porn level goes, whatever flips your trigger, pet. Although judging from the summary above, you won't have far to go to increase the level of filth.

It's sunny today (of course--try to sleep at night, there's a fucking gas station outside your window; need to sleep during the day, the sun shines white, when does the world get DARK??) and although it's a bit cold, I'm off to the beach. Feeling the need for a bit of space today. Toad-spotted shoebox. Besides, it's supposed to snow tomorrow. I'll probably stay in, make a cup of tea, kick the shit out of the heater, and curl up with a blanket and a good book. Crap, that sounds dull. It would be much nicer to curl up with a good Billy. Enough with the schmaltz.

What were you up to today? And what time is 'the' interview tomorrow? (Just so I know when to expect a call telling me I've won the bet.)

Have a lovely day, pet, and good luck with your PR shite. Knock 'em on their asses.

Thinking of you,

Amazing Grace

Sunday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy Boyd
Subject: Observations from NY

It's about time Girlz! went off on her own anyway. She'll have a much better career going solo than trying to drag those two talentless, fat-arsed other Girlz! Girlz! with her.
Try the game of hot/cold with the brain cells, it might work. After all, with the size of that flat, how 'cold' can you get, really?

Yes, went dancing last night, in my white wide-lapelled suit. Not only were you not there, but I had a piss-poor time to boot. Andy didn't come at all, and 'Lij surrounded himself with adoring little fangirls all night, so I mostly sat and drank. It wasn't pretty. Luckily I was left mostly to myself. I couldn't have put up with the fangirls for more than 30 seconds last night. Just didn't want to be there.

Do you really want to play the summary game? We can do that:
Pissed swear bastard boggles (sounds like filth to me) sloppy kiss porn fucking toad-spotted shit crap shite asses
You little sailor, you.

Here's something to make your day. I gave 'Lij a kiss for you. Didn't tell him it was from you. If I'd just given him a peck on the cheek it wouldn't even have fazed him, but--just for you--I gave him a big wet one, even licked his cheek a bit. You should have seen his face, wee girl. He scrubbed his cheek, asked if I was drunk, asked if I was Dom, and then told me to fuck off. It was priceless. Of course, you owe me one now. EEEUWWW. I licked 'Lij.

Today's itinerary was…bizarre. We opened a new theatre, had a press-conference type thing, more formal than the meet-the-press ones. Then a party at a music publishing house. So all in all an odd, busy, headache-inducing (and yet still a little fun) day.

Tomorrow's interview tapes at 3 but isn't aired until 11 or 12. I assume since the guys are checking up on me that it doesn't matter if they air me saying it three times? After all, it's hardly my fault if they cut it because I sound like a complete idiot. There's something else on tomorrow as well, but I can't remember what. After days like today I'm lucky when I can remember my name. That tattoo might come in handy after all.

And finally, down to my observations:
It's cold
New York is kind of mingy
Air Canada needs to hire more staff
A few members of the press dress super-stylin' as 'Lij says
A few members dress in the dark
Music publishers are shallow, insincere, obvious wankers
I miss you
November sucks
I can't wait to go surfing
I suddenly crave strawberries

I'm very tired all at once. I'm off to bed, dear heart. I'll (we'll) call you tomorrow. I'm not 100% sure when, as I don't know what I've forgotten. Hope the beach was welcoming, and I'd love you to curl up with a good Billy, too. Soon.

You miss me,

Bills

P.S. Not just any good Billy. A particular good Billy. A good Billy who, after a while curled up with you, wouldn't necessarily be good anymore. So there.
Tuesday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Where are you?

Where did my wee girl go? We called to let you know the result of the bet (teaser teaser), but I couldn't reach you. I hope you didn't use that old trick of giving out a false number. I also hope everything's okay. Email me.

Yours,

Bills

Wednesday (very early)
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Where are you?

I'm so sorry I missed your call, Billy. Yesterday--no--fuck, Monday was a hellish day. You're sleeping (probably) in L.A. right now, and God I wish I was there with you. Ah well, c'est la vie, eh? (And how Canadian is it to mix French and 'eh'?) Anyhow, forgive me, I beg all three of you, and tell me who's going fountain-hopping? I want to hear all about it. Call me when you have time.

Grace

Grace hit the send button, and leaned back in her chair, scrubbing her hand over red, aching eyes. She started violently and nearly knocked over her empty glass when the phone rang. Her heart in her mouth, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Grace--it's Billy."

"God, Billy, you scared the hell out of me. It's three in the morning, I thought someone was dead!"

"I'm sorry, luv. I just got your email, so I knew you were up. Why are you still up at three in the morning?"

"Why are you? Don't you have interviews in the morning?"
"It's only midnight in L.A."

"Oh. Right. How was your flight?" she asked.

"It was fine. Why are you up?"

"Couldn't sleep. What did you forget?"

"What?" He tried to keep up with her.

"Your email. You said you had the interview, and there was something else you forgot. What was it?"

He gave up. "What's wrong?"

"What? I'm confused. Which day do you go surfing?"

"Grace, shut it," he said with well-repressed frustration. "What's wrong? What happened yesterday?"

"What do you mean?"

He clenched his teeth. "Don't do that, Grace. In the email you sent not ten minutes ago, you said, 'Monday was a hellish day'. Tell me why."

"Nothing, really--"

"Grace, don't lie to me!" He suddenly changed tack. Gently said, "You've been crying. What's wrong, dear heart?"

Silence. Then a small noise.

"Ah, no, don't start again, wee girl."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "Don't do that, it's not fair."

"Shh, take it easy. I'm sorry. I didn't want to make you cry again. It's all right. Tell me."

"I got a phone call from the bank. Seems there's another loan I'd forgotten about."

"Fucking hell," he breathed.

"Yeah."

"Shh, it's okay, stop crying. How much?"

"Three thousand. I don't know what to do," her voice shook.

"We'll figure something out--keep your head up."

"I can't. The water's too damned high."

"You'll get through this, Grace."

"That's a fucking platitude!" she cried. "It doesn't mean shit!"

"You're right. I'm sorry. Come on, take it easy. I wish I was there with you."
"Me too," she said in a small voice.

"Grace, I swear I'm going to help you through this. I won't let you go under."

"I found a song today. It had to be today. God, it hurt, Billy."

"What song?"

"I'm emailing it to you. Okay. Go check your email. I'm going to go blow my nose."

He smiled. "All right. Go on."

He crossed over to where he'd set up his laptop. Opened his email, found her message waiting. She had attached a link to the song, as well as the lyrics. He waited for the player to connect.

To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Song from Hell

But good God it's beautiful.

Heaven bent to take my hand and lead me through the fire
Be the long awaited answer to a long and painful fight
Truth be told I've tried my best but somewhere along the way
I got caught up in all there was to offer
And the cost was so much more than I could bear
Though I've tried, I've fallen
I have sunk so low
I have messed up
Better I should know
So don't come round here
And tell me I told you so
We all begin with good intent love was raw and young
We believed that we could change ourselves the past could be undone
But we carry on our backs the burden time always reveals
In the lonely light of morning in the wound that would not heal
It's the bitter taste of losing everything
That I have held so dear, I've fallen
I have sunk so low
I have messed up
Better I should know
So don't come round here
And tell me I told you so
Heaven bent to take my hand nowhere left to turn
I'm lost to those I thought were friends to everyone I know
Oh they turned their heads embarrassed pretend that they don't see
But it's one missed step you'll slip before you know it
And there doesn't seem a way to be redeemed
"Oh Grace. Don't listen to that again. Not for a while."

"No."

"You should sleep."

"Don't you dare tell me things will look better in the morning," she sniffled.

He smiled. "I wouldn't dream of it. I know they'd find my body in the lake."

"Too fucking right."

"Seriously, are you going to be able to sleep, wee girl?"

"I think so."

"Good. I'll let you go, then."

"No--wait."

"Aye?"

"Will you sing to me?" she whispered.

"What would you like to hear?"

"Anything--just get that song out of my head."

"Okay. Just a short one, then you sleep."

"Yeah."

He began to sing quietly, slowing the song a little from its usual tempo.

Please don't go rushing by
Stay and make my heart fly
Please don't go rushing by
Stay and make my heart fly
‘Cos I never seem to notice time
When you’re with me
You can tell it to the birds
I’ll tell the bees
I can’t do any more
To get inside your door
I can’t do any more
Please let me inside your door

"Thank you, Billy. I’m so glad you called."

"Aye, me too. We’ll call ye tonight about the bet."

"I’d like that."
"Goodnight, Grace."

"Night, Billy."

The phone rang the next day while she was working. She stopped her timeclock before picking up. "Hello?"

"Hey Grace."

"Hi Billy," she said warmly. "How are you?"

"Good. You?"

"I'm here. As good as can be expected, really."

"Hang in there," he said quietly. Resumed a normal voice. "So we're here to give you the good news."

"I won the bet? I'm surprised--"

"Afraid not." She could hear the grin in his voice. "I may have sounded like a total wanker, but I did it. You can just email me that picture, thank you very much. Oh, and the guys have a request--can you show us a little leg while you're hopping around in that fountain? We want to get it enlarged."

She could hear the hoots and hollers in the background. Surprised herself with genuine laughter as she said, "You most certainly can *not* enlarge it. And you'll get just as much leg as I want to show."

She could tell he was speaking away from the phone, to the others. "She doesn't like the idea of the enlargement. I *told* you we should have stuck with wallet-sizes."

"Keep this up, Mr. Boyd, and I'll wear a snow suit."

"Okay, okay," he laughed. "Just send the picture, we'll be good." She heard someone in the background shout, "I won't!" Billy called back, "Shut it, 'Lij."

"Who is there with you?"

"Andy, 'Lij, and Dom." There was a chorus of "Hi Grace!"

She giggled. "Tell them I said hello."

"You tell them."

"Oh God."

A few seconds later Andy was laughing quietly, saying, "How's it going?"

"Hey, Andy. Would you quit egging those boys on?"

"I know, outrageous, aren't they? I say you take the picture wearing body armour." A chorus of boos this time, followed by the sound of something soft hitting Andy and the phone. "Bugger off,
"Lij!"

"So he actually did it, eh? From the fuss Elijah is making, I'm not sure I trust his account to be impartial."

He laughed. "Yeah, he did it. The first time he said Mount Ruapehu was flawless, he was telling a story about filming up there. The second time was a bit abrupt, maybe, but still not bad. The third time he just sounded like a total nutter."

She heard Billy in the background shout, "Hey!"

"Hold on, Grace," Andy said, grinning. "Lij is about to piss himself here." There was the sound of a sudden scuffle, accompanied by gales of laughter.

Finally Elijah came on. "Don't listen to him, Grace."

She smiled. "Don't worry. You didn't hurt him, did you sweetie?"

"Just a little," he boasted cheerfully. "How are you?"

"I'm good, how are you? I hear you had a crowd of admirers dancing with you again the other night."

"Ah, Billy exaggerates."

"Somehow I doubt it. So do you guys have another interview anytime soon? I'm going to have to come up with a bet I can win for a change."

"I'm not sure what he's got coming up--but I'll find out for you."

Billy suspiciously called out, "What are ye talking about, Elwood?"

"Nothing--fuck off and mind your own business! This is my part of the call. Any idea yet what it's going to be, Grace?"

"Not yet. If you think of anything, let me know."

"I will. I'll get your email from Billy."

"I'll make sure he gives it to you. Have you seen your family yet?"

"I did. I went over there for lunch. It was fantastic."

"I'm glad."

"Thanks for asking…you call me sweetie, what can I call you?"

"Grace." Billy again.

"Ignore him," she laughed. "You can call me whatever you want--within reason, of course. I won't take it kindly if you decide to call me Bitch Queen."

Elijah giggled. "Even if I considered that--which I wouldn't--Billy'd kill me."

"Actually, he'd probably piss himself laughing, but let's not test that theory."

"Ow--Billy! Fucker!"
Background noise, then Billy on the phone again. "Not that I'm against the idea, but why do I have to kill him?"

"Do you always eavesdrop like this?" she asked indignantly.

"Aye. Why do I get to kill him?"

"You don't get to kill him! I simply suggested he not call me Bitch Queen."

He hooted with laughter. "Bitch Queen?"

Dom (she assumed) in the background shouted, "Bitch Queen? Who's a Bitch Queen? And when do I get to meet her?"

"Billy," Grace said, trying not to dissolve into giggles, "Tell Elijah I told him so."

"You told him so what?"

"Tell him, dammit!"

"Hey 'Lij--Grace says she told you so." Giggles. "What did you tell him?"

"That rather than you killing him if he called me Bitch Queen, you'd piss yourself laughing. Thank you for proving me right, by the way."

He laughed again. "Any time, wee girl, any time. Hold on, I think it's Dom's turn. It was the Bitch Queen that did it."

A moment later, "Hi Grace, I'm Dom."

"Hi Dom--I'm Grace," she copied him with a smile. "I'd just like to point out I'd rather not be called Bitch Queen, in case that wasn't clear."

"Damn. What can I call you?"

"Good grief, why do you all have something against my name? As I told Elijah, whatever you want, within reason. I hold the final veto on your choice."

"All right. Penelope."

"What?"

"I'm going to call you Penelope." Laughter from the others.

"Wow. All right, if that turns your crank, you go right ahead."

"Billy told me--" scuffling noises "--Bugger off, William. 'Lij, sit on him, would ya?" More noise, 'Lij laughing loudly, Billy complaining equally loudly. "All right, shut the hell up. I'm trying to have a conversation with Penelope, here."

"Have you guys been drinking?" she asked, bemused.

"Not yet. We get just a bit mad when we've been drinking. We thought we'd call you first."

"Thank you. I think I appreciate that."

"Billy told me you play guitar and sing--"
"He's miles better than I am."

"Don't interrupt."

She snorted.

"He said you play guitar and sing, you're even more afraid of heights than he is, you live in Toronto and hang out on the beach, you're really into music, you eat something disgusting-sounding involving cheese and gravy, you dance sexy--no, 'Lij, keep sittin' on him--you're good with fangirls, and you swear like a sailor. Did he forget anything important?"

"Yes," she said with just the slightest tremor in her voice. "I'm thirty-two, I'm very bendy, I'm a bit of a computer geek, I won't get a tattoo on my forearm, and I'm a bloody fantastic snog."

He shouted with laughter. It took him a minute to be able to speak again. "I wonder why he forgot to tell me that."

"I think you should ask him."

"I think so too--hey, Andy, 'Lij, let him up."

"You've got both of them sitting on him??"

"Well, he knows that ju-jitsu shit..."

A muffled, "It's not fucking ju-jitsu, you great wanker. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Whatever. Come here."

"What the fuck do you want?" Billy's voice was much closer.

Dom at least had the scruples to lower his volume a bit. "Penelope--ow, cut it out--Penelope and I were just wondering why you didn't tell me she's thirty-two, bendy, and a bloody fantastic snog?"

Silence.

Grace started to laugh, tried to stifle it.

Billy voice was strangled. "Because I didn't know she was thirty-two. Give me that phone."

"Dom, don't you dare," she said quickly.

"No, I don't think so, Billy," Dom said smoothly. "Everyone else has had a chance, it's my turn now."

Amused and a little put out, Grace said, "Well, you could have phrased that a bit nicer. I'm not a playground ride, you know."

"That's not what I hear."

She choked on a laugh. "You--you filthy--"

"I've worked hard at it. But I'm actually just trying to get you to swear at me. I've heard it's... educational."

"I'm not sure you'd be able to keep up."
"Is that a challenge, Penelope?"

"Oh God, no. I've enough wagers going on at the moment, thanks."

"Yeah, about this picture--"

"Not you too."

"Just remember Billy's getting on in years. No nudie pics, you might be too much for him. Give him a heart attack."

"I don't think that's a concern. Is he still there?"

"No, he's taking a piss," he said easily.

"You're missing that filter, aren't you, the one that blocks information people really don't need to know?"

"I think I must be."

"Count on it, doll."

He deliberately lowered his voice. "Doll? Mmm. Are you flirting with me?"

"No. You frighten me too much."

He sighed. "Why do I keep hearing that?"

"I think it has to do with the fact that you call people Penelope."

"Just you, love, just you."

"I feel so damn special," she said wryly.

"Listen, before Bills comes back--what the hell is he doing in there, anyway?"

"Dom--filter please."

"Right. We're having a surprise birthday party for Billy next month. Can you come?"

"Oh, when's his birthday?"

"August 28th." Dom was perfectly unruffled.

"...Um, Dom? Next month is January."

"Which is why it'll be a surprise. You'll come, yeah?"

"Ah--no, I'm afraid I won't be able to. Let me know when it is and I'll give him a surprise call, though."

"C'mon, Pen, it's over a month away--plenty of time to plan."

"It would be if I could come, but I really can't--"

"Penelope, Penny love," he wheedled, "He'll want you to be there, you know he will, you can get time off work or whatever the problem is, can't you?"
"No, I--"

"I'm going to keep at you--"

"Dom, listen for a minute--"

"I'm going to keep asking and asking, just think what a brilliant surprise it would be to have you walk through the door--"

"Why do I have a feeling it's more so you can inspect me than for him? Now shut up for a minute--"

"Now why would you say something like that--"

"Dom, shut the fuck up!"

"You sweet-talker."

"Oh my God. One more word and I'll hang up, I swear I will."

"Come on, Penelope--"

She hung up. Sat there for a minute trying to take in the fact that not only did she hang up on one of Billy's friends, but that she hung up on Dominic Monaghan. She very much feared she was dead.

A minute later her phone rang again. She took a deep breath, picked it up. "Yes?"

"You hung up on me," he said disbelievingly.

"I told you I would."

"I didn't think you actually meant it."

"Your mistake."

"I can see that. I think I need to re-evaluate you."

"Perhaps. What was the initial evaluation?" she asked curiously.

"I don't put them into words. Sorry."

She nodded. "They're yours."

"Well--yes. Good. If you understand that, we should do fine," he said thoughtfully.

"Is Billy with you?"

"No, I stepped outside."

"Good. Dom, I obviously don't know you. I automatically like you because Billy loves you--and I think I like you anyway. So don't be offended when I say drop the idea of me attending your party. I can't. I'd love to, but it's not going to happen."

"After what I've said to you, you're afraid that would offend me? You're amusing. You haven't embraced the full concept of 'the Monaghan', Penelope." She could hear the mirth in his voice.

"You're really going to keep calling me that, aren't you?"
"Every chance I get."

"You're an odd, odd little man, Dom."

"Watch who you're callin' little, love," he growled.

She laughed. "Sorry."

Grace suddenly heard Billy's voice. "Dom, what the fuck are you doing out here? Would you give me my fucking phone back, please? Gobshite."

"Uh-oh," he said in a sing-song voice. "Wee Billy's miffed with his Dommie."

"You whoring puttock."

"Ooh, is that one of Penelope's? C'mon Pen, just swear at me and I'll give the phone back."

"Go ahead, Grace," Billy called over the line. "Curse him out. I certainly won't stop you."

"All right," she grinned. "Ready?"

"Yesyesyes!"

"You're way too excited about this. You need a hobby."

"This is my hobby."

"That's sad. You great skiving crook-pated pox-marked ruttish hairy-backed sheep-biting beslubbering flax-wench. Happy?"

"Oh my good God. Billy, we're in the presence of greatness. Not presence. She's not here. But."

A bit of noise, then Billy was back, saying, "That must have been first-class, he's babbling."

She chuckled. "I think it was the 'sheep-biting, beslubbering flax-wench' part that really got him."

He laughed out loud. "Sheep-biting? That'd do it. Give him a mental image he won't soon shake."

"Serves him right."

"I hear you hung up on him."

"Also serves him right."

"Anything I should know?"

"No, not at all. I warned him I would do it and he didn't believe me. So I did it."

"Good for you! I thought you two would get on."

"Oh, he's great. A tad overwhelming at first," she grinned, "But great. Now I just have to get used to being called Penelope."

"Sometimes I do wonder about him."

"You should. I take it from the lack of protest he's not with you anymore?"
"No. Listen--how are you feeling today, dear heart?"

"Tired. Discouraged. Angry."

"It can only get better."

"Until they find the next loan."

"There’s positive thinking," he teased gently.

"I'm a bit short on positivity at the moment."

"Nice word. Would you like to borrow some?"

"I think I need to."

"Ah, my poor wee girl. Consider yourself hugged, all right?"

"Thanks, Billy. I needed that."

"Don't be discouraged. God, if I ever found the bastard, I'd--"

"You'd hold him down while I kicked the living shit out of him, right?" she interrupted.

"Ehm--yeah. That's what I was thinking."

"Thought so." He could hear her smile.

"I hate to say this, dear heart, but I'd better go. We're going out for dinner and they're waiting for me."

"What subtle sign did you get?"

"The door opened a crack and a giant blue eye stared at me."

She chuckled. "Elijah."

"Got it in one."

"Thanks for calling--it was a laugh, and it helped."

"Anytime, Grace, you know that."

"I know. Will you give 'Lij my email address? He asked for it."

"You sure?" he grinned. "He's a computer geek, he may never quit sending you crap."

"I'm a computer geek too, remember?"

"Oh--right. Okay."

"And I'll send you the picture, but it may take me a while to find an indoor fountain."

"Indoor? Cheater."

"It’s December in Toronto! While I will gladly humiliate myself for you, I will not risk pneumonia. If I could even find a fountain with water in it at this time of year, which I wouldn't. So yes,
indoor."

"Fine. Cheat. But now you have to not only email it to me, I want a glossy as well."

"Now you're pushing it."

A distant shout came through the line. "Billy! Shift yer arse!"

She laughed. "Not so subtle."

"No. I have to go. Email me tomorrow."

"I will."

"Chin up, Grace."

"Thanks, Bills."

"Bye, Grace," he said softly.

"See ya, Billy."

Grace pressed the 'talk' button on her phone to end the call. Tapped the handset against her chin as she replayed the conversations in her head, not wanting to forget a word. With a little smile, she tossed the phone onto the bed beside her, restarted her timeclock, went back online, and resumed working.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Who Needs Sleep?* by Barenaked Ladies, *Fallen* by Sarah McLachlan, and *Make My Heart Fly* by The Proclaimers.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Grace trades emails with Billy and Elijah. She pays up on the lost bet.

Finally finished with work for the day, Grace got up from her desk for a stretch. She flipped on her little transistor radio, the one that ran on batteries in case of emergency, and reminded herself yet again it might be a really good idea to buy some batteries. She hummed along to the song that was playing, picked an apple out of the bowl on the counter, and rinsed it under the tap. She stood in front of the window as she crunched into it, and absently ran a finger of her other hand down the crack in the glass. She idly wondered, not for the first time, why she'd mentioned it when Billy had asked what she'd change about her apartment. An odd thing to choose, really.

She returned to her desk, opened her email, and began typing.

Thursday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Secret Web Cam

Did I get your hopes up and then mercilessly dash them? Sorry about that.

Hi dearest Billy. It's Thursday, which means you're surfing. You don't know how lucky you are, my little merman. (That's mer-man, not Merman. Mind you, I haven't heard your Ethel impression.) It's -8 degrees and snowing here. Feel guilty yet? Here's me, tramping around in the ice and snow, risking life and limb to get you your cheesecake fountain photo. (Suck your tongue back in your mouth, it's not done yet.) I did find a hotel that's willing to let me splash around in their decorative statuary, but not until tomorrow. They were planning on draining it to clean it anyway, so as long as I get there before 11 am, we're covered. That way if I track dirt in, it doesn't matter. However, it turns out there were two little problems I hadn't thought of--one, I don't have a camera anymore, and b) if I'm IN the picture, I can't exactly take it, can I? Even if I could, I'm useless with a camera anyway. I have a lovely collection of thumb photos and headless people, if you're interested sometime. Anyway, I called in a favour. Feeling remorseful yet? But you won't get the photo right away--if I'm doing this, I'm bloody well making it worthwhile. What do I mean by that, you ask? Stay tuned--same bat-time, same bat-channel.

I had fun talking with you & the guys yesterday. They all seem remarkably levelheaded and genuine for a bunch of actors. (Hee hee.) Dom's a hoot. Filthy mouth on him, but then look who's talking. If both of you are ever in Toronto together in the summer, I'll have to take you windsurfing up at the cottage. Granted, it's not 'real' surfing (or so I've been told), but it's the best I've got. We'd have a ball.

I'm strangely wordy today. Sorry.
I also really am an amazingly fantastic snog, you know.

Warm thoughts,
Grace

P.S. I never did thank you (and congratulate you) for giving Elijah that kiss for me. Well done, Billy! I only wish I'd been there to see it. Do you want me to let you off the hook and tell him it was my plan? Is he perhaps harbouring any odd ideas?

Thursday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Hmm…Web cam….

You jest, wee one, but that's not a bad idea…

I'm exhausted. Out of surfing shape. Typing with one finger. This will be short.

ANYTHING YOU CAN DO I CAN DO BETTER YES I CAN! There, that's my Ethel impression. Be grateful I didn't send a sound file. Be grateful I don't know how to send a sound file.

No, I don't feel the least bit guilty you're walking around in snow. It's not my fault you live in Toronto. Besides, I've earned it, putting up with Elijah for the last two weeks.

(I can't believe I'm caving like this…) I hope getting this picture isn't honestly a pain in the arse for you. If it is, stop. If you're just having me on--carry on.

Bat-time, bat-channel. God, yes. Love it.

The guys--genuine? Absolutely. Levelheaded? Don't lay money on it. Walking attention deficit disorders, they are. No idea if that's spelled right. And I find I don't care. Sorry, Ms. Editor.

They also enjoyed talking to you. Which brings me to a mild complaint. I got the third degree about you from Dom. What the hell did you two talk about? Once he'd had a few drinks he kept going on about 're-evaluating pre-conceived misconceptions' (sp? don't care). Of course, he'd had a few, so it took me a while to figure out that's what he was slurring--er, saying. Any idea what he was on about?

You're Andy's hero, by the way. Know why? Go on, guess.

Windsurfing? Love to.

Cottage? What cottage?

Wordy? No, you're just balancing me out.

Amazingly fantastic snog? Preaching to the choir, dear heart.

Elijah harbouring odd ideas? A chill just ran down my spine. Perhaps you'd better come clean. You've frightened me now.
Next email will be longer, promise.

As ever,
Bills

Friday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Glad You're Still Alive

…and that the sharks didn't get you. Maybe you should take up an exercise program. Water ballet, perhaps? Although, if I may be so bold, you're hardly out of shape, pet.

Yes, a web cam is a very bad idea. That was the point. It was, and is, a JOKE. End of discussion.

'God, yes. Love it.'--was that the porno portion of your email? Very titillating. More please.

MISS Editor says your spelling is quite impressive. Or is it your spell-checker? Either way, very nicely done. (Patronizing little bitch, aren't I?)

Andy's hero, eh? Hmm...because I'm embarrassing you on national television in two countries? Yeah, that's got to be it. (Wow. When I put it that way, I'm quite proud of myself.)

When Elijah emails me I'll confess the kiss was my idea. It will be okay, don't be scared. Auntie Grace will take care of everything.

Cottage. You know, small house-type dwelling, often in rural area, usually used for holidays. This one happens to belong to the MacPherson clan, it's been in the family for eons. Three tiny bedrooms, a wood-stove, one boathouse (sadly, sans boat), one dock, one lake. Okay, well, the lake isn't exactly ours. But the rest of it is. I hardly ever get up there anymore, and I miss it more than I can explain. Shut up, Grace.

So. I know you're dying to ask. Yes, I spent some time earlier today splashing around in a fountain. Drew a bit of a crowd--two people stopped to watch. Biggest audience I've ever had when I've been half naked. And that's all I have to say about that. I'll let you know as soon as they're ready.

And as for Dom, you'd know better than I what he was talking about! All I know is, when I hung up on him, he said he'd have to re-evaluate me. I don't know where he had me pegged, or why I surprised him. Does he normally trust his judgments of people? Maybe it pissed him off to think he was wrong? I don't know, I'm just making it up here. Hey, I have a great idea--ask Dom.

What's on the agenda for the next few days? Anything exciting? Wait a minute...you're in Los Angeles. La-La Land. Hollywood. How could it not be exciting?? Do tell all--pretend you're an exposé rag. Start exposing! (Okay, that came out REALLY wrong, but I'll leave it just for the image.)

Take care of yourself, have fun with your boys, and don't forget you miss me,
Hi Grace!

First things first--what the hell was in that email you sent to Billy earlier? I was with him when he got it, and he didn't stop laughing the entire time he was reading it! Although I should give you a word of warning--you might be in trouble. At one point he made a particularly rude noise and said something to the effect of "All you have to say? You think so, you little..." Watch your back.

Regarding his interviews, they're actually sparse this week. It's more events, openings, things like that. He does have an interview Monday, but it's with Dom, and while I'd trust Dom with my life, I'm not sure I'd trust him not to fuck up a bet. He'd probably either leave an opening wide enough to drive a truck through, or he'd torpedo the whole thing. Unless you can think of a way to use him? (I'm supremely relieved he's not here to read this--he'd have a field day with that.) Let me know if there's anything I can do to help. I like the way your wicked little mind works.

Listen, we're having a surprise birthday party for Billy at the end of January. (His birthday's not until August, that's Dom's idea of a surprise.) Will you come? I don't know yet what or where, but it'll be a private little shindig, if that helps convince you. Say yes, dollface--there'll be dancing.

(Interesting. Apparently I've decided to call you dollface. Now is the time to object if you're not keen. Otherwise, tough.)

I hope we'll talk again soon! If you need anything, here's my mobile number, just call. Take care.

Elijah

---

Friday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: All you have to say??

That's all you have to say? I don't think so, wee girl. You cannot use words like half naked, audience, and watch, and then just innocently wander off to another subject! It does NOT work that way! I want descriptions, play-by-play, play-on-play, instant replay. Graphic, detailed, flesh-coloured commentary.

You're a cruel and heartless wench.

I'm off for a cold shower.
Now I *really* miss you,
Bills

P.S. I'll send you a real email in the morning.

Grace laughed out loud at Billy's email, already knowing how she was going to answer it. She re-read Elijah's message, a smile on her face. *That boy really is too sweet for words. His fucking cell number, no less.* While she sat and thought, wondering what to do about that, debating whether the smart move was also the one her heart was whispering to her, she picked up her guitar and started playing, the music covering the distracting noise from the street outside. A few minutes later she laid it aside, and began typing.

Saturday
To: Elwood
From: Grace
Subject: Shrug

Hi sweetie!

Sorry, I have no idea why Billy was so giggly. I may have been a bit mouthy (sadly, my usual state) in my email, but there was nothing *that* amusing. Did you check his glass for something stronger than orange juice?

Thanks for your cell phone number. I have to say, I'm touched you're showing me that amount of trust. (Unless you're the type to lose your phone and have to buy a new one every month anyway. In which case--bite me.) However, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt for now, and return the honour. Here's my home number. Just remember the time difference, please! Billy's first call came at three a.m. I think he'll have to get one of those watches that shows you the time in twenty-one cities. But if you ever need any help with your fangirls, just ring me up. I'll be here. (Always, eternally, endlessly, ad nauseum, HERE.)

As for 'dollface'--if you must, I won't protest. Too much. Although I should warn you, I'm generally not considered particularly doll-like. Unless there's a doll named "Malibu Stacey's Pint-sized Foul-Mouthed Friend". No? Well there you are, then.

Thanks for the warning that Billy's out to get me, by the way. I'm not the least bit surprised, I'm afraid I teased him dreadfully over this picture! I did the fountain thing yesterday, and made brief but suggestive mention of the fact. I'm very lucky we're a continent apart today, that's all I can say.

I'm liking the idea of involving Dom in the next bet somehow. Preferably without him *knowing* he's involved, if possible. Otherwise he might want in on it, and if I lose again I don't think I'd ever recover from the payback! Do you think he'd mind being used? Oh, and is it televised? I'll need someone to verify the success or failure for me--gotta keep Billy honest, right? I'll think hard today and let both of you know by tomorrow.

And thank you, sweetie, for the invite to the Big Birthday Bash. Dom actually mentioned it on the phone the other day, but as I told him, I'm afraid it won't happen. Maybe next year, eh?
Have a great day, and I'll email you tomorrow.

Call your mother.

Take care,
Grace

P.S. That wet kiss Billy planted on you on Sunday? All my idea. I promised him I'd confess.

---

Saturday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: All you have to say??

>>You're a cruel and heartless wench.

I ignore you.

Amazing Grace

---

To: Grace
From: Elwood
Subject: Holy hell, dollface

I'll answer your email later, I'm running out the door. But I had to tell you--when I got your email? I was on the phone with my mother.

You're good.

Elijah

---

Saturday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: I'm crushed.

You ignore me? You've hurt my poor wee feelings, you have. Want to make it up to me? Stop ignoring me, tell me how hot I am, and send me the damn picture.
What's wrong with the webcam idea? You're a computer geek (You said it, not me!), you could hook yours up, and I'm sure Elijah would help me with mine. Then we could talk and be able to see each other. I could get my sister one as well--she's always complaining she doesn't get to see me often enough. Wouldn't that get her goat? I'll ask Elijah what we need.

Titillating. Mmm, lovely word. More? No, those 1-(900) calls cost too much.

For the record, you are neither patronizing, nor a bitch. Just a wee smartass.

No, you are not Andy's hero because you're humiliating me on television. But thanks for the reminder. It's a little more interesting than that. He says you're the first complete stranger he's met in about six months that hasn't asked him to do the Gollum voice within a half-hour of meeting. I hadn't noticed, to be honest, until he said that. I then realized you've never once asked me about being Pippin, or filming, or living in New Zealand, or what Russell Crowe's really like. I've discovered that's part of the reason I'm so fucking comfortable with you, I can relax, I'm not waiting for the questions to start. I have nothing against people who do ask questions, I'm grateful for their interest, but it truly is a relief not to have to face them constantly, not to have to answer them. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you. And I am curious to know--why haven't you asked? (I am being serious, in case there was any doubt. You can return the favour, please, Miss Smartass.) Why haven't you asked any of us anything?

Your cottage sounds…quiet. Peaceful. Intimate. Sounds like summer. Do you go up in the winter? Or is it not year-round? What's your favourite part of being there? Picture? As you can tell, I'm curious. Or do you not want to talk about it at all? I am sorry you miss it.

I asked Dom what he was blathering about when he was drinking. Why he was interrogating me. (Honestly, there should have been a bright light shining in my eyes and a haze of stale cigar smoke in the air.) You're right, he's usually pretty close with his first impressions, and he counts on that. But I got a very useless answer, the wanker. This is what he thought would be helpful: "I had her behind Door #1. She started out behind Door #1. She should have stayed there. Or maybe moved to Door #2, that would have been fine. But suddenly there she is behind Door #4. And I only had 3 doors set up." That's all I could get. And yes, he had been drinking again. Can you explain that to me? Besides the obvious, that his initial impression of you was wrong. What the fuck is that nonsense? However, I am glad you've knocked him off-balance. It's fun to watch.

Shite, I have to go--we've got a video game convention this afternoon, and the car will be here for us any minute. I'll expose later. I'm in LA until Tuesday, so I'm sure I will think of something worth disrobing for.

I'll be back,
Bills

Sunday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Picture attached--Warning: Epic Email

Sorry, Bills, it's not THAT picture! It's one of my cottage, as you requested. This is taken from the very end of the dock, so you can't see the lake. But I'm fairly sure you can imagine what a lake looks like, eh? The boathouse is out of shot, but it's just a little tiny building that looks like a
garage. We keep the sailboards, fishing tackle, lawn chairs, etc. in it. The sailboards actually belong to my cousins, but I conned them years ago into letting me use them. I've already sort of described the cottage. The big window on the left is the living room, the bedrooms are on the right, and the kitchen is out behind. The screened-in porch is an absolute necessity in spring and summer (blackflies and mosquitoes), but it's really nice to sit in and watch the sun set. And yes, it's winterized. As long as the road in has been plowed, I love to go up in the winter. Go cross-country skiing, take my uncle's snowmobile out on the lake. And while it is indeed quiet and peaceful in the summer, you should hear the silence in the winter. It's complete, total and absolute. No birds, no insects, no water lapping the shore. On a still day it sucks you in, beats you around the head until you are sense-less, and leaves you blind, deaf and dumb. When you desire to be like that, it's fantastic. It's very oppressive when you don't. But then someone fires up a snowmobile, snaps the spell, you go inside for hot chocolate by the woodstove, and all is well.

My favourite part of being there? Hard to choose, and most of them involve relaxing completely. But I guess my favourite is to be up there on a really hot summer day, and practically live in the water. Windsurfing, diving, swimming, drying out on the dock only to get hot and jump in all over again. I don't know about Scotland, but I'm sure you've had days like that in LA, eh? And let me tell you, the first chance I have, I'm gone. Straight up there, for as long as I can. It's about 2 ½ to 3 hours from downtown, in an area called the Haliburton Highlands. (I really have no idea if it looks like the Scottish Highlands or not. Maybe someday you can tell me.)

But enough about the cottage. I've got good news for you, pet--you'll get your pictures tomorrow. My photographer friend is developing them today, and I'm picking them up either tonight or tomorrow morning. Assuming they turn out all right, I'll let you decide whom to share them with--keeping in mind you can NOT post them on the Internet! Please be kind to me. You're so sweet and wonderful and nice and understanding, I'm sure you won't embarrass me, right? Right? (Please say right.)

Wow. Between the Andy/you thing, and the Dom thing, you do ask some tough questions. I'll answer yours first, Dom can wait until the next email. It was very easy for me to not ask Andy to do the voice. You had mentioned early on that it got a bit hard for him, having to do it constantly, and that stuck with me. Besides, it's not like it tells me anything about who Andy is--it's just a voice. If I want to hear it, I'll borrow the damn DVD. Simple. (Although I have to confess, hearing Gollum say "Bring it on!" on Off the Record was priceless.)

As for you--perhaps a little harder, not asking you about those experiences that have affected you so much, because that would tell me about who you are. Who all of you are. (Except the Russell Crowe thing. I really don't give two hoots what he's like, I'm afraid. No offense intended if he's a friend!) But you've been asked all these questions a million times (this goes for the others as well) and I'm sure you don't want to hear them again from me. Who am I to expect you to slog through it all yet again just to satisfy my curiosity? I can learn about you in other ways, through other conversations--and I'm sure if there's a story you, or Elijah, or anyone else wants me to know, you'll share it. I have no need or desire to push you guys to talk about stuff you don't want to, the very idea makes me uncomfortable. And as much as I hate to admit it having loved the books my whole life, the entire universe is not about Lord of the Rings. Your lives encompass more than those few years, as important as they may have been to you. So that's it really. I hope that makes sense to someone besides me. And look--not a smartass in sight!

We'll deal with Dom's oddity next time. See if he tells you anything else in the meantime.

One last thing before I go. A little bird told me you & Dom have a televised interview tomorrow. You know what that means, don't you? It's bet time. And this one's not going to be so easy! Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is as follows. If the interview is less than five minutes
long, this bet is postponed, because that's just not enough time. But assuming it's more than five minutes, here's the plan. Dom will know nothing about this. I won't tell him (obviously), Elijah & Andy won't tell him, and you cannot tell him. He must go into this interview completely oblivious to what you're attempting. And what IS that, you ask? Tee hee. You have to get Dom to say he loves you during the interview. You cannot ask him if he loves you, and you cannot say you love him first so he just repeats it. You just have to get him to the point that he says it. And what happens if he doesn't is your next question, yes? I can read you like a book. If you do not succeed and Dom does not say he loves you, go buy yourself a sketchpad. For every minute of the interview, you have to sit in a public place and seriously & artistically sketch stick people. So, if the interview is 10 minutes long, you sketch for ten minutes. If it's a half an hour, you play Picasso for thirty minutes. It must be a busy, public place where people will see what you are doing, and you will act as though you seriously think it's Very Important Art. And, of course, there must be evidence! One of the guys has to go with you, snap a couple pictures in situ, and I get copies along with your precious sketch. Of stick people. Obviously if you win the bet again, I have to do the same thing, following all the above criteria. If there are any major objections to this bet, let me know today so we can sort it out before the interview. I promised Elijah I'd email him with the details, as well.

I think I'd better end here for now, deariest. Something tells me I'll be hearing from you soon! Have a wonderful day, and good luck tomorrow.

As ever,
Grace

P.S. I warned you this was fucking epic, dude.

---

Sunday
To: Elwood
From: Grace
Subject: The Next Bet

Hi sweetie! I finally came up with something for tomorrow's interview, and I think you're going to like it. Firstly, Dom can't know about it. You can, of course, let Andy in on it if he's interested, but no one can breathe a word to Dom, including Billy. If the interview's too short we'll have to postpone, but if it's more than five minutes long, then Billy has to get Dom to say he (Dom) loves him. Either "I love you" or "I love Billy". He can't ASK Dom if he loves him, and he can't say it first so Dom just echoes him. He has to elicit the information freely and carefully and without tipping Dom off. What do you think? Is this even possible, or is there no way Dom would ever say it in an interview? Let me know. I think it could make for a fun time, anyway! You'll have to watch it for me and let me know how it goes.

Anyway, if Dom doesn't say he loves Billy, then Billy has to take a sketch book, go sit in a very public, high foot-traffic place, and in all earnestness sketch stick people. The reactions from the people going by should be priceless. And of course someone has to go along, make sure he stays long enough (as long as the interview lasted), and take a couple pictures for me!

So that's the new bet--I've already emailed it to Billy and told him to let me know if he has any problems with it. And if you think of anything--good or bad--let me know!
Deviously,
Grace

Deviously,
Grace

Sunday (late)
To: Grace
From: Elwood
Subject: Re:The Next Bet

I love it! It's fantastic--and yes, Dom would absolutely say he loved Billy, if he wanted to. So Billy just has to make him want to! It won't be easy, though, don't worry. And I can already picture him sitting--on Wiltshire? No. The beach? Or outside the Chinese Theatre?--drawing stick people. Fucking perfect. Dom's going to pee himself laughing when he finds out. And if Billy wins the bet, I'm assuming you pay the same piper? It's hardly fair to make you sit outside in the middle of winter, though.

By the way, I was very relieved to hear that kiss Billy slopped on me was from you. I wish I'd known--I would have enjoyed it more! (Insert eyebrow waggle here.)

Thanks for your phone number, Grace. I promise I won't call at 3 in the morning! I must admit I have lost my phone before, but not with any regularity. I'm bad with house keys. In NZ I kept locking my keys in my apartment, and Sean Astin would get a locksmith in to save my ass. And no, I don't give my cell number to everyone. But I've got a feeling about you, I think you're going to be around for a while. You're not a fly-by-night. (I love that phrase. Fantastic imagery. For some reason I always picture a massive white owl mid-flight.) I really don't see you screwing Billy over like that, no matter what's between you, which is none of my business so don't think I'm going there, because I'm not. Of course, I've been very wrong before. But not this time. Right?

So the fountain picture is done, is it? When do we get to see it, huh? Come on, when? Send it now! Don't worry about teasing Billy. Not only does he deserve it for all the abuse he deals out, but he's a very good sport.

Listen, dollface, about this birthday party for Billy. Is it the flight that's the problem? He mentioned heights bother you. Because we could look into a train trip. Or we could do it in New York so you could drive down! Everyone has to come from all over anyway, it really wouldn't matter where we actually hold it. We could just rent a really big-ass hotel room and when you're drunk you don't care if you crash on the floor anyway! You have to be there, you see. (Cue dramatic music.) Forget Billy wanting to see you again--so do Andy & I, Dom wants to meet you, and after telling Hannah about you hanging up on Dom, she does too. (Fade to sappy music.) We want to get to know you. Don't make me beg, I'm not good at it. Tell me what the problem is and we'll fix it. (End music.)

I'm sure we'll be calling you tomorrow night to let you know how the interview went, so we'll talk then.

Take care dollface!
'Lij
Sunday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: I detest you. (Also on the epic side.)

You are cruel to me. First you raise my hopes sky high, implying I'm finally getting the fountain pictures (IS it plural? You keep saying pictures plural. Am I really getting more than one?), only to unceremoniously (thank you spell-check) dump me into despair. And then, just as I'm dragging myself back up the slippery slope, you decide to toss yet another bet at me. Haven't I endured enough embarrassment to satisfy your lurid and twisted imagination? I have to get Dom to say he loves me? (Shouldn't be that difficult, to be honest, he's said things like that a number of times before.) But you have no idea the rapid rise in rumour and speculation when he says shite like that. That whole 16 favourite things? Absolutely nightmarish. I'm going to need therapy. (Preferably from my sleep therapist, but it's too late to call her now when it's not completely necessary.)

All right, enough of taking the piss. I'm finished! Thanks for your 'epic' email. It could have gone on a lot longer than that and I would have been happy. It's almost like talking to you, except that I can't interrupt. Pity, that. (Just kidding. Don't ignore me again.)

Your cottage looks fantastic. You're very lucky you have somewhere to go outside the city to get away and relax. It's too bad you can't get to it now, when you probably need it most. But it's only a matter of time--and at least you know it's there and waiting for you. I would love to go with you sometime--especially in the winter. The idea of all that silence is particularly appealing these days. I have to say though, I can't quite picture you snowmobiling! I saw some racing on the telly once, it looked insane. (It's amazing what ESPN 5 shows in the middle of the night.) Ah well. I guess when your winter lasts so long you have to find something to do, eh? Any other good snow sports I should know about?

(Oh bugger. I just realized I wrote 'eh'. It's contagious.)

Back to the (hopefully plural) pictures for a minute. Go pick them up! Right now, woman! I don't care what time it is!

Your friend is a photographer? You didn't mention this before. Professional, or are you just calling him/her that because they were holding the camera? If your friend's a professional, I obviously won't put them on the Internet. Oh, who am I kidding? We both know I'd have no idea how to do that! But Elijah might. Or Dom. So it's still important, I guess. And of course I won't embarrass you. Not much, anyway. But knowing about the bet, the guys are rather insistent on seeing them--hope that's all right. (Then again, you did use the phrase half naked. Maybe 'Lij is too young. And Dom. Dom's too young. And Andy's married. So I guess I'll just keep them for myself.) How did you manage to convince your friend to spend an entire morning taking snaps of you playing in a fountain? Mind you, the idea of watching you cavort half naked sounds like the best possible way to spend a morning to me, so perhaps it didn't take much convincing.

About the not asking questions thing. Yes, dear heart, you do make sense. You just surprise me. No, on second thought, it doesn't, really. Not when it's you. While some people try not to ask the same questions everyone else asks, it's still bloody questions, non-stop, all the time. And yes, I know I'm whingeing, I know it's part of the job. But very, very few people seem to get that there is a life for us outside Rings. Hopefully the more movies we all do, the further we'll be able to move from being hobbits (or elves, or whatever). And it's not that we don't want to talk about Rings, we all love it and are incredibly proud of the work we did, to be part of it, but…I don't know. It's quite
hard to explain to someone who's not on the inside. I think the three of us felt an immediate
comfort level with you because you didn't force--or even nudge--us back there. There are times
when all we want to do is go over the good old days (usually when we've been drinking heavily),
and times when we don't want to hear one more word about it. And for myself, I feel a profound
gratitude when I don't have to if I don't want to.

And on a related matter, Elijah told me he gave you his mobile number. Believe me when I say
that's big. That does surprise me. And it says a lot about you, and how much you've gotten through
to him.

As for Dom--who knows what's in that head sometimes? Usually he & I nearly finish each other's
sentences, but I am not with him on this. I am not sure why it matters so much that you didn't stay
behind Door #1. I didn't know he had doors. Now he's backtracking, which is also unusual for him.
I tried talking to him about it today because I'm a nosy sonofabitch, and he back pedaled and said
he hadn't talked to you long enough for anything. End of story. He's so odd.

Back to those pics for a moment--GO GET THEM! Email me!

I should go. I need an early night for a change. I'm still not sleeping the greatest. I'm going to try
that relaxation routine you talked me through on the phone in Toronto.

As far as the bet goes--you're on, wee girl. I think the interview is supposed to be about 20 mins. I
won't breathe a word to Dom. But when I win he's going to want a copy of the picture of you out
'sketching', for being used this way. I (most likely we) will call you tomorrow and give you the
outcome. And if you don't trust me, if 'Lij isn't otherwise engaged I'm sure he'll be glad to give you
an impartial report if necessary.

Have a good day tomorrow. Keep your chin up. I haven't forgotten what you're going through, and
my brain is working on it every chance I get. And remember, I'm

thinking of you,

Bills

Monday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Fountain pic attached

And this time I'm not taking the mickey! This is the first of four I will send. If I was truly a cruel &
heartless wench, this is the ONLY one I would send. But since I'm mostly hiding behind the big
stone lady (a shepherdess is my guess, thanks to the staff in her hand), I won't do that.

Please take note, however--fountain has water in it, I'm in the water. Debt fulfilled. But if I hear
one--just one!--complaint about wearing a sarong, or that the bathing suit top isn't a bikini, that
unwise soul will regret it. A lot.

For a long time.

Next email.
To: Billy  
From: Grace  
Subject: Fountain pic 2

This one's my favourite. It looks very cool in black & white, eh? Btw, yes, Jamie is an honest-to-goodness professional who's been bugging me to help out with some catalogue pictures for a while, so I finally caved. I just stipulated that it had to be in the fountain, and had to include some black & white for me! And that's why you can't post them (besides the fact I'd kill you). Jamie knows I'm sending these to you, and that's totally cool. You can show them to anyone you like (be nice be nice), but they are copyrighted and have been sold, so you can't sell them or post them in a public forum.

You see what I do for you? I'm being sold. Ick.

Next email.  
Grace

To: Billy  
From: Grace  
Subject: Fountain pic 3

While the pretty blue water splashing in this one looks quite nifty, I'll have you know this was a result of my falling on my ass. Yeah, go ahead and laugh. When I die of pneumonia because I had to take the subway home, still damp, in below zero temps, then we'll see who's laughing. (Well, it'll still be you, because I'll be dead. But you know what I mean.) And this pic led directly to the next.

Next email.  
Grace

P.S. Did I mention the water was REALLY fucking cold??

To: Billy  
From: Grace  
Subject: Final fountain pic

And the last one, just for you. Believe me when I say this one will not be sold. A little cheesecake for Billy & co. Since I was on my ass and soaked to the skin anyway, I decided to have a little fun. So there's your leg shot. Enjoy.

Talk to you (hopefully) tonight, and I'm
Grace hit the send button for the final email. Trying not to think about the impending reaction from the other end, she decided it was high time she went outside for a bit. She threw on her coat and scarf, laced up her shoes, and fled the apartment, locking the door behind her.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Billy and the boys call Grace about the photos and the third wager. Grace shares the fact of her debt with Elijah and Dom. Billy has a chat afterwards with Dom and Elijah and enlists their help.

Grace picked at the strings of her guitar, trying to commit the melody to memory. When the phone rang, she glanced at the clock, was surprised at the late hour. She put her guitar down. "Hello?"

"Hey, wee girl."

"Billy."

"The very same. How are you?"

"Not bad. How are you? Still having fun with your little friends?" she teased lightly.

"Even as we speak. They're in the other room right now, drooling over the pictures you sent. Well, I don't know for sure that Andy's drooling, but the others definitely are. Thanks for sending them, dear heart. They're fantastic."

"I'm glad you like them. I would have been a little put out if you hadn't."

He laughed. "Put out? After what you went through to get them? I'm sensing understatement."

"Perhaps a bit," she grinned. "So was it worth the humiliation of sounding like a wanker on TV?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. And I have to say your photographer friend is really good. I bet Viggo'd like these."

"Viggo?"

"You know--had a scruffy little role in Rings, gets to shag the pretty elf?" he kidded.

"He gets to shag Legolas? I know who he is, you great twit. Why on earth would he like pictures of me?"

"And thank you for that image," he groaned. "God. No, he's a photographer himself. I'll have to send you a copy of his book. He'd especially like the second one, where you're taking the staff from the statue. It's fantastic."

"That's my favourite. Somehow Jamie managed to make the statue look less like stone, and me more so. It's a cool effect."

"It's a great lighting effect. What sort of lighting did you have there?"

"Just those big umbrella-type ones. I don't have a clue what they're called."
"I can't remember either. I should know," he said wryly, "I've seen enough of them."

"Don't complain about being so pretty everyone wants to take your picture."

"Pretty?" he choked. "I can't say I'm usually referred to as the pretty one."

"No?" she responded, feigning surprise. "I find that hard to believe. Then who is?"

"You just said it a minute ago. That would be the elf again." She could hear the grin in his voice. "In or out of the ears, Orli is generally considered the prettiest."

"People obviously have no taste, then," she said decisively.

"Of course, now that you're around--"

"Oh, don't even--" she tried to interrupt him, but to no avail.

"My vote has definitely changed. Especially after looking at the last photo."

She laughed. "You liked your cheesecake shot, did you?"

"Yes, I do. We do." He was grinning again. "It reminds me of a '40's Hollywood glamour poster. You know, the Betty Grable type. The bright colours, your lovely smile…your great legs."

"Let's not get carried away--"

"I'm serious, actually. Why do you think no one's grabbing the phone out of my hand? They're still on my computer. I'm glad when you landed on your arse, you stayed there and posed for that one."

"Did you laugh at the one where I was falling?"

He chuckled. "I have to admit I did. The look of surprise on your face was priceless."

"I figured you'd like that one. Your nasty streak."

"You said your friend Jamie's been asking you to do this for a while?"

"Well, not in a fountain, but yes. He's big on bright colours, as you saw, so he wanted a redhead. I nearly had to beg for the black and white, but it was worth it. What the hell, if I had to have my picture taken, might as well get some good ones and make a buck, right?"

"Why didn't you do it before?"

"What, model? I'm not particularly comfortable in front of a camera. Besides," she chuckled, "At five foot one, I'm hardly typical model material."

"You're photogenic, and you'd never know from those pictures you're uncomfortable," he assured her. "You look totally at ease, which really translates well. I think Jamie knows you well too, doesn't he? It seems so in these, anyway."

"Can you really see that?" she asked, awe tingeing her voice. "Wow. Yes, I've known him for years, I went to university with his brother, and we've been friends ever since."

"And did he stick with you through all the shite with Michael?"

"As much as he sticks with anything. He's not the most reliable person, is our Jamie. But he's got a
"Good heart."

"How are you doing with that today?" he asked quietly.

"Okay. I re-worked my budget. I'm going to have to cut out my trips to the beach, I can save the subway fare. It will make a difference of a couple thousand over the next two years."

"Hang in there. I've got an idea, but I need to work on a plan."

"What kind of plan?"

"Don't sound so suspicious!" he grinned. "Be patient."

"You're lucky I trust you, or I really wouldn't trust you. What happened with the interview today?"

"Dom's an idiot," he said flatly.

"You mean I finally won?" she asked delightedly.

"Aye. I worked my arse off, but the closest he got was 'Aw, Bills--you're so cute.' Bastard."

She laughed. "That'll teach you to say 'It won't be that hard'."

"No kidding. So now--" he raised his voice, obviously shouting into the other room, "--thanks to that fen-soaked puttock of a Manky gobshite!" His volume dropped again. "I have to go sketching tomorrow morning. And both he and 'Lij insist on coming along. I've told them only if they keep their fucking distance. You got that?"

"Me?"

"No--'Lij. Want to talk to him?"

"Sure," she chuckled. "I think you need to take a moment anyway."

"I need to take something, but I don't think it's a moment. Say hello, Grace."

"Hello."

Elijah's voice. "Hi, Grace."

"Hi 'Lij. How are you?" she smiled.

"Awesome pictures, dollface."

She could hear Billy in the background. "Dollface?" She laughed. "Tell him to go look at the photos again."

"Billy, Grace says get the fuck outta here."

"'Lij!" she protested. But she could hear Billy laughing. "So how was he in the interview?"

"Oh God, it was hilarious, Grace. He sounded like he was desperately trying to suck up to Dom, and Dom could not figure out what the hell was up. It was close, I thought Billy had him at one point, but no. Apparently the minute the camera was off Dom nearly beat the shit out of him! Billy explained the bet, and Dom hasn't stopped laughing since. It's the best one yet," he grinned.

"Well, I think so, but that could be because I finally won! You're going with him to take the
"pictures?"

"Yeah, Dom and I are both going."

"Oh, because *that* won't draw attention," she said dryly.

"No, no, we'll stay away from him. Right now we're just torturing him, trying to make him think we're going to be all over him, snapping pictures in his face. It's fun watching him lose it."

"You're evil."

"Probably. Look who's talking," he teased her.

"Elijah?" she said suddenly.

"Yeah, dollface?"

"Have you ever heard of the band Rush?"

He hesitated, thrown by the sudden change in topic. "Yeah. Why?"

"They have an album called *Fly By Night*. Guess what's on the cover?"

"I don't kn--you mean...a white owl? Get the fuck away. Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Is *that* where I got that image?" He was mystified. "How the hell--I couldn't even tell you I'd ever seen it. How fucking bizarre is that?"

"I'm not going to screw him over, 'Lij. I don't know what's going to happen beyond the odd phone call, but I would never willingly hurt him."


"Sorry. But I need you to know that."

"Okay," he said softly. "I'm going to hold you to it."

"Yes. I'm not another Emily."

Another pause. "So he *did* tell you about her?"

"Yes. She's a silly little idiot."

"Nicer words than I'd use," he snorted.

"She needs to grow up and learn what loyalty is."

"What does it mean?"

"What?"

His voice was quiet. "Loyalty. What is it to you?"

"I've got your back. Against anyone, anywhere. Always. Simple as that."
She could hear the smile in his voice. "I knew there was a reason I liked you. But you sound like you're spoiling for a fight."

"There are people I could kick, yes. We've all been betrayed by someone to varying degrees."

"What degree were you?"

"High."

"I won't ask for details. Recently?"

She hesitated. Felt like she was poking a loose tooth with her tongue, only to find it wasn't as painful as she thought it would be. "I'll tell you the basics--"

"You don't have to."

"I know. Shut up, I'm talking."

He laughed. "All right. Hang on a minute." She heard him cover the phone with his fingers, speak to someone in the room. He came back on a few seconds later. "Sorry. Dom's itching to talk to you, but he'll give us a minute. Go ahead."

"Now I'm thrown off."

"Bullshit. Talk."

"Basics--fell in love, moved in together, happy happy joy joy, he disappeared, took all my money with him, nearly got me tossed in prison, and now I'm deeply in debt. He didn't know loyalty from his arse, either," she rattled off quickly.

"Oh, Grace--"

"Elijah Wood, you can stop that tone of voice right there." Her own was hard.

"Got it. What happened to him?"

"Absolutely nothing, as far as I know."

"That fucking sucks," he said angrily.

"Yes, sweetie, it does. And that's why I can't make the party. A new loan cropped up a few days ago. I'm afraid L.A. or even New York is a bit of a laugh right now."

"Yeah, I can see that. I'll back off."

"'Lij, no, that's not what I meant--"

She sounded upset. "Relax, dollface, I know. It's my clumsy way of apologizing for pushing it. How long ago did he up and go?"

"Eight months."

"What do you do now?"

"Pay it back."

"What, all of it?" He was indignant. "That's hardly fair!"
"My name's on everything. I'm financially responsible. Or not, as the case may be," she added wryly.

"How will you do it? Have you got help?"

"I just have to spend as little as I can over the next few years and sock everything I can into payments. Then I can go back to having a life. And this is starting to feel very, very weird, I think it's time to change the subject."

"All right. Only--if there's anything I can do--"

"There isn't." Her voice softened then. "But thanks."

"Anytime. I'll do my best to get some good pictures of Billy for you tomorrow."

"Thanks, sweetie."

"I'll get Dom for you. You take care of yourself, you hear me?"

"You too. Don't let the fangirls catch you. Unless that's the sort of fun you're looking for, of course."

"Only sometimes," he laughed. Yelled, "Dom! Get your ass in here!" Warmly said, "Talk to you soon, dollface."

"Bye, 'Lij."

A minute later she heard Dom's voice. "Hey, Penelope."

It made her smile. "Hello, Dom."

"Nice pictures. Very sexy."

"No they weren't!" she protested. "Not the first three, anyway."

"No, they weren't. 'S a shame."

"Which picture was door number one?"

"Told you about that, did he?" Dom said neutrally.

"Do you mind?"

He hesitated, then said, "No. I don't think so."

"He's confused," she explained earnestly. "So am I. I'm not sure what you thought I was. I'm sorry if I disappointed you."

"Don't be thick," he said, smiling. "I'm not sure what I thought you were either. I placed you before I talked to you--it was stupid."

"Behind door number one?"

"Yes. But you're not. I told Billy you were new, door number four, but I don't think you're that either. I think you're really a door number three. With a different colour."

"Ah. That makes it all so clear."
"Can you explain what I am?" he challenged.

"No," she answered frankly. "I would need to meet you. I need eyes."

"You must have had a field day with Elijah and Billy. They've got eyes coming out of their…well, heads."

She laughed. "You don't have to explain what I am. Just tell me which picture goes with which door. It gives an impression without having to resort to concrete words."

"In other words, it gives me an out if I balls it up again."

"I would have put it much more elegantly, but yes."

His grin came clearly across the line. "Dom Monaghan's never been considered elegant."

She snorted. "It's the scruff. Step closer to the razor next time."

"I'll have you know women love this."

"I've only ever heard guys say that," she teased.

"Women loved Aragorn, and he was stubbly," he insisted.

"Yes, and while many women, if they met Aragorn, would shag him senseless, many more--and I'm among the latter--would just hold him down and give him a good scrub and a shave."

"You're destroying my illusions."

"I doubt you have that many anymore. But you're avoiding the subject."

"You're tenacious."

"I know. Door number one?"

"The fourth picture. With the legs."

"Door number two?" she asked.

"First one, where you're hiding."

"Number three?"

"Black and white. With the staff, and you looking up at the statue."

"And door number four?"

"I don't think there is one. Now I think you're mostly door number three. With a bit of the picture of you falling on your arse thrown in. Does that tell you anything?"

"A little, I think," Grace said thoughtfully.

"What?"

"I though we agreed that these things don't go into words?"

"You're smart. Try."
"Bastard. Let's see." She paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts. "You originally assumed I was either a shameless flirt, or a little loose. Mostly in reaction to Emily, I would guess. After all, Billy goes to Toronto for three days and comes back talking about this 'Grace' freak. I get that. It's not right, or fair, but I can understand it."

"Interesting. Continue."

She couldn't tell anything from his tone of voice. "Then apparently I did or said something to change your mind about it. I doubt it was just hanging up on you, but I don't know what else. You would have been happy if I turned out to be a door number two. Shy, maybe? Not a threat, at any rate. But you say I'm not, I'm a door number three, which was the black and white photo, correct?"

"Correct."

"I'm not sure what door number three is. Umm…quiet? Cold? Artificial?"

"Bollocks."

"I really don't know, Dom. I can take a stab at how you see the third picture, of me falling--I would guess clumsy, goofy, maybe spontaneous or childish. But I don't know what door number three is."

"I suppose you want me to try?" he asked, realizing he could hardly refuse now.

"You made me, so yes."

"Well, the third picture struck me as being not childish, but child-like. That's the only angle I can find a word for. As for door number three… The problem is, how much of what I'm seeing is the photographer? Serious. Thoughtful. Guarded. Hidden depths. Ehhm….Whimsical. Vulnerable. See, I don't like putting it into words, how can you be guarded and vulnerable at the same time?"

"Billy is. Easily hurt, easily angered."

"Did he get angry with you?" Curious.

"Yes. I pointed out there's Billy and there's 'actor Billy' and he nearly hit the roof. Did he not ask you about it? He was going to. He wanted to know why you've never told him his accent changes when he's around his fans."

"He knew that."

"Actually, no, he really didn't."

Dom shouted away from the phone, "Billy--come here a minute, mate!" Pause. "I don't care! Shift your arse!" Muttered to Grace, "Obstinate bugger."

"He calls me stubborn. I must be really bad."

"Billy, you wanker, why are you telling Penelope you don't change your accent with fans?"

She could hear Billy through the line, if a little muffled. "What, you think I do too?"

"Of course you do. You mean it's not intentional?"

"No. Why are you discussing this? You're supposed to be figuring out which door Grace is behind."
"We did that," Dom told him. "Except she didn't tell me if I was right."

Grace protested, "How am I supposed to do that?"

"What do you mean how?" Dom asked. "You just say yes or no."

Billy said, "Give up, Dom, she won't."

She said, "It's not that I won't--"

"He can't hear you, Penelope. No worries. I'll ask Billy later."

"There's no need to waste your time discussing this. You'd do better to convince him it's not a bad thing to have 'actor Billy' to fall back on."

"I'll try. I'm not sure how he could do it without knowing it."

Billy's voice, muttering, "I'm not either."

"Thank you Billy, that'll be enough. You're excused. Out you go."

"Quit pushin', you great pillock."

Grace heard a door being slammed. "Rather forceful, aren't you?"

"Ah, you like that, do you?"

"Be careful," she grinned, "You might get pushed back."

"I'm counting on it, Pen."

"Why exactly did you slam the door on him, anyway? We're hardly saying anything intimate."

"Mmm," he hummed. "Intimate."

"You're easily aroused, aren't you?"

"Mmm," he gave a breathy sigh. "Aroused."

"Oh for Pete's sake. Dom, what did you want to talk about? This is going to cost Billy a fortune."

"Hang on. Aroused. Can't think."

She grinned. "Typical man."

"Ouch."

"Get on with it, you twit!"

"I know I said I'd drop it, but I want to ask you about the party--" Dom began.

"Oh God," she groaned. "Not this again. You guys are killing me. I just went through this with Elijah."

"Well, I would hardly know that, would I?" he said with exaggerated politeness. "I'm glad he's working on you, too."
"Not anymore, he's not," she said firmly, annoyance tickling at the edges of her brain.

"What, he gave up already? Git."

"Yes, after I asked him to. And now you will as well, correct?"

"Incorrect. Penelope--"

"Dom, stop--"

"I just want to--"

"All right, Mr. Monaghan, I'm going to tell you a little story," she said, frustrated.

"Oh brilliant, story-time!" he said like an eight year-old.

"Seeing as I've never even met you, I'm not pleased about sharing this right now, but I can't think of any other way to get it through to you. You don't seem to understand the word 'no'."

"I'm known for that."

"No fucking doubt. Now listen, and listen carefully, because I'm not going to repeat this and I don't want to discuss it."

"You sound like my Mum."

"Dom--" she ground out.

"Easy, don't blow your top. Go ahead, I'm listening."

She released a deep breath. With clenched teeth said, "Thanks to me being naïve, and someone else being a thieving bastard, I am very deeply in debt. To put it in perspective, after having the debt increased unexpectedly the other day, I can no longer afford to take the fucking subway to the beach every day, which really pisses me off. I will not be attending any fucking party, whether it's in L.A., New York, or anywhere else."

"New York?" he asked, sounding at a bit of a loss.

"Elijah's idea. Nice, but a non-goer. So for the last time, drop it. Can I talk to Billy now, please?"

She wanted Dom to go away, felt the telltale tickle at the back of her eyes, needed him not to say anything.

"No. Penelope--"

"Dom, put Billy on," she said, a little desperation seeping in.

"No. Listen to me just for a minute. Please, Grace." His voice was quiet, softer, deeper.

It did her in. Her throat tightened, and she didn't trust herself to speak.

"I'm sorry, all right? I had no idea. You hear me? Grace?"

"Yes." She fought back tears, suddenly horribly embarrassed. "I know you didn't, that's why I'm telling you."

"Aw, fuck," he moaned, "Don't do that. Bloody hell, please don't cry."
"I'm not crying." She angrily swept away the tears.

"Grace, I'm sorry."

"Quit calling me Grace. My name's Penelope, goddammit."

He chuckled. "Right. Sorry. You've heard the last on the subject."

"Good. Thank you."

"Sorry," he said again.

"Shut the fuck up."

"Anything else I should know? So I don't do this to you again?"

"No. This is the only thing I'm touchy about."

"You're not touchy. It's a big problem," he said gently.

"Bigger for me than I care to discuss right now."

"Understood. I'll put Billy back on."

"Thank you. And Dom?"

"Yes, Pen?"

She hesitated. Finally settled for, "Sorry. It's late."

"Oh fuck, that's right! What time is it there?"

"One-thirty. I'm easily excitable when I'm tired."

She could hear the grin in his voice. "Lucky Billy."

It surprised a laugh out of her. "Why you--"

"That's better," he cut her off. "We're good, yeah?"

"Yeah. Yes, we're good, Dom."

"Lovely. Talk to you soon, Penelope, here's Bill."

"Bye, Dom." She knew she wasn't intended to, but she overheard him quietly say, "Sorry, Bills. I fucked up."

Billy said, "What?" Then, "Grace? What's going on?"

"Nothing. Please tell him he didn't fuck up."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I over-reacted."

"What did he say?" he asked sharply.
"Nothing! Really, Billy. God, this is getting out of hand. Elijah and Dom were bugging me to come for a visit, they were just having fun. I over-reacted, got annoyed, told them to cut it out, and why didn't you warn me that's just waving a red flag at a bull in Dom's case? So I told them I'm broke."

"You told them?" he was surprised.

"Just the basics. I think I'll probably wind up telling them the rest sometime. I'm astonished to find I don't mind them knowing."

"You don't have to dance around it," he suggested.

"Maybe that's it. Or maybe it just doesn't matter because I'm never going to see them."

"Don't count on that. But good for you."

"Actually, I feel bad," she admitted. "I told Dom just to shut him up. That wasn't right."

"I have no doubt he was pushing it," Billy assured her. "He gets a kick out of doing that."

"At any rate, they know I'm skint. Humiliating, but there it is."

"They're good lads, dear heart. Don't be distressed."

"I know they are. It just wasn't in my plan."

"Aye. You sound tired."

"I am. I was up early this morning."

"Next time no one else is allowed to talk to you. They just take up my time."

"That was probably a good thing, tonight. So you're going sketching in the morning. When do you fly out, and where are you headed this time?"

"You're tired, so I'll let that one pass," he said dryly. "My flight's at noon, to London. A couple interviews, but mostly business. Drop by the agent's, pick up a couple scripts. Nothing too exciting."

"Are you in another hotel?"

"Yeah, but one I'm comfortable in. It's not so bad. And then--finally--back home."

"Do you have an apartment?"

"I did. The one I had with Emily. But I moved out. That is a secret known only to me and the guys, and now you--well, and my sister, of course. And my agent. And--"

"Very secret," she smiled.

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I bought a wee cottage just outside of Glasgow. I haven't even stayed in it yet, it closed just as I had to leave. Margaret took care of moving everything for me. It's weird how excited I am--I can't wait to get there and make it home."

"That's wonderful--congratulations, Billy. How long do you have?"

"Until after Christmas. Then I'm off to a con in Milton-Keynes--"
"A con?" she asked, confused.

He grinned. "Sorry. Convention. This one's called ComicCon, it's mostly for comic books, but they include fantasy films these days as well, there are so many collector items involved."

"Oh. Okay," she said blankly. "And then?"

"Japan for a week. And then back to L.A. for two weeks at the end of January."

"Wow. They keep you hopping, don't they?"

"It's not so bad. I've nearly a month off. Lots to do during that time, but at least I can stay put for a change."

"Live a normal life for a while?"

"Precisely."

"I don't know if you want to hand your address out, but if you'd like to find some mail in your very own mailbox--" she started hesitantly.

"I've got it saved in my phone. Got a pen? I love the idea of mail in my mailbox. If I even have one," he laughed.

She went to her desk for pen and paper, and copied it down as he read it out. "It won't get there before you, but at least you can look for it for a few days when you get home."

"Sounds wonderful. I'll get my email hooked up as soon as I can. It may take a few days, I don't know. Depends what magic Stewart can weave."

"Who's Stewart?"

"A friend. Also the guy that runs my website. He'll get me sorted. But you can reach me up until I leave London--and of course you have my mobile."

"Yes. L.A.'s a long way away too, you know."

"I know. But this time there'll be an ocean in between. It makes it feel a lot further," he said quietly.

"Yes, it does."

"It's late. I'll let you go now. Give me your address and I'll make sure 'Lij sends you the stick people proof, and the finished masterpiece, of course." He saved it straight into his phone.

"Billy, will you do me a favour?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Tell Dom it's all right? He really didn't fuck up."

He smiled. "Sure you don't want to torture him a wee bit first?"

"I'm sure. Not on this one."

"All right. I miss you, wee girl."

"I miss you too, Billy."
"I'll talk to you soon."

"Okay. Fly safe."

He chuckled. "I'm hoping to. You keep treading water, you'll make it."

"I'll take your word for it."

"You do that. Goodnight, Grace."

"Goodnight, Billy."

---

After hanging up, Billy stood for a moment, thinking. Then he went out to the other room to find only Elijah and Dom.

"Andy gone, then?"

"Yeah," Elijah spoke up from the depths of the sofa. "He had to get to bed, he's tired."

"Good, then I won't have to kick him out. I want a word with you two." He stood in front of them, arms folded.

Dom and Elijah shared a glance, then Dom snickered. "Cut it out, Bills, you look like a prat. I said I was sorry. Is she pissed?"

Billy sighed and flopped into a chair. "No. On the contrary, she said to tell you that you didn't fuck up. She was ashamed she told you like that."

"What? For fuck's sake, why?"

"Not sure. She said she told you to shut you up. I personally don't see anything wrong with that. You do talk too much sometimes, Monaghan."

Elijah spoke up. "We didn't know, Billy."

"I know. What the hell were you two bugging her for, anyway?"

Elijah shifted. "What did she tell you?"

"You were nagging her to come here for a visit. If you want to see her so much, go to Toronto."

Dom blithely said, "We were trying to surprise you, you wanker. We wanted her to come down while you're back at the end of January."

"Oh. Well, thanks. I'm thinking of stopping over there for a few days then anyway. Maybe get her up to her cottage, she misses it. I'm trying to come up with some way to help her out that won't get me shot."

"What do you mean?"

"She hasn't even told her family. And I made the stupid mistake of offering her a wee loan," he sighed.
"You dumb fuck."

"No kidding. She tore me a new one."

"Rightfully so. What--"

Dom looked up, interrupted Elijah. "How exactly did someone walk out with all her money?"

Billy told them the details, none of which Dom had heard.


"Aye."

Elijah thoughtfully tapped his fingers on his knee. "If the problem is money, but she won't take a loan, there's not much left we can do, is there?"

Billy noted the 'we' with a smile. "Her flat's pretty rough, I'd like to smarten it up a bit. She hates living there, which isn't helping. But how the hell do we do that when you guys are here and I'm in Glasgow?"

Elijah stilled. Flicked a glance at Dom. "Let me think about it. I've got a glimmering of an idea, but I've gotta check something first."

"What?"

"No. Let me look into it. I'll call you next week. How big is her place?"

"She called it a shoebox. That's appropriate."

"All right. I'll let you know."

"Fine. Now if you two don't mind, I have to be up early tomorrow to pack and go draw stick people." He dropped his head back briefly and closed his eyes, missing the mouthed conversation between Dom and Elijah.

Elijah stood. "Yeah, and since I'm coming with you, I'd better get some sleep too. I'll pick you up--when? Nine or nine-thirty?"

"Make it eight-thirty. I have to be at the airport by ten."

"Right. See ya then."

"Night, 'Lij."

As the door closed behind him, Billy raised his head, raised an eyebrow at Dom, who was still sitting comfortably in the chair opposite him. "Was there something you wanted?"

"What's with you and Grace?"

He groaned. "Do we have to do this now?"

"Yes. You're leaving tomorrow."

"Which is why I want to sleep."

"So talk fast."
"Bugger. I knew this was coming."

"And I know you've been avoiding it," Dom said pointedly. "Why?"

"Because I'm not sure what to tell you. Are we 'dating'? No. It's too soon after meeting, too soon after Emily. Did I kiss her? Yes."

Dom laughed. "I gathered that from the fantastic snog comment."

Billy grinned, said, "It's true. God, I could kiss her all night. Do I want to shag her? Probably. But I'm not going to any time soon. We're both just too fragile, Dom. You know the mess I've been. Other than that--she makes me laugh almost as much as you do. She has this uncanny ability to pick a song out of thin air that perfectly captures what I feel, or says something I need to hear. She's not the best singer in the world, yet she understands me. And I understand her. It's--we connected, you know? Like you and I did."

Dom was smiling. "Don't know what to tell me, hmm?"

"Ah, shut it. You asked, I'm trying to cooperate."

"So what's the plan?"

"I honestly don't have one," he admitted. "I'm hoping she's in my life as a friend, at least. I trust her."

"That's pretty good, two months post-Emily."

"It's fucking unbelievable. The afternoon I met her, I nearly fell asleep in her lap. She's the one who pointed out that wasn't necessarily a smart thing to do. I believe her exact words were 'Use the wits God gave you, just for a minute'."

Dom's laugh rumbled in his throat. "She's got nerve, that's true."

"She's honest, Dom. She hates to hurt anyone's feelings, but she'll call it as she sees it. We do that--you, me, 'Lij, the others--but the rest of our world? You know it's rare."

"You get tired of people kissing your arse after a while," Dom agreed.

"It's how Emily sucked me in. She seemed real."

"I think she was, Bill," Dom said quietly. "At first. She did care about you. But I don't think she loved you like you loved her. And I think she fell arse over tit for that wanker. It blinded her."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying...you think she deliberately misled you. I don't. I think she was a naïve little girl who was blindsided by that fucker's glitz."

"Grace said something like that. Why is this the first I'm hearing of this from you?"

"Because you would have ripped my head off before. I find it interesting that you're not now."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Don't get pissy. I don't know what it means. Maybe you're getting over her."
Billy was silent for a minute. Then said, "Grace says you don't love someone who betrays you. They don't deserve it."

"Do you agree?" Dom asked curiously.

"Yes."

"There you go then. A month ago you would have given a much more qualified answer. 'Lij is taken with her, isn't he?"

Billy finally smiled. "Like a younger brother. She calls him sweetie, and he revels in it. She looked after him a bit in Toronto and he wasn't expecting it, I think that's what really drew him in. I hope this 'plan' of his isn't one of his larger-than-life schemes."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Dom promised.

"Do that, would you? I don't want to fuck this up."

"What did you want to do to her apartment?"

"Her wish list was paint, fix a window, and get curtains. I don't know how she sleeps in there, there's a petrol station right across the street with flaming spotlights shining straight in her windows."

"Not everyone likes it pitch bloody black like you do," Dom grinned.

"You know I got over that. But even so. You could practically film in there."

"Anything else?"

"If I could, I'd get her some carpet. It's shite lino, and fucking freezing as well."

"Do you have any idea what she'd like?" Dom asked skeptically.

"No. But I'd like something to do with the ocean. She has these bowls she loves, and she loves the beach. And I'd have to put something to do with surfing in there," he grinned.

"Of course you would. I'll let Elijah know, in case he actually does have a good idea. He probably knows someone who could put it together. It would look like whale-sick if you tried."

"Very nice. Whale-sick?"

"Watery and nauseating."

"Gobshite."

"Tosser." Dom laughed.

"It was good to see you again."

"I know."

"You back in England anytime soon?"

"Christmas with the family. You'll come down?"

"Yeah, that'd be great. I'll spend Christmas Day with Margaret and fly down when she takes off for
her skiing trip."

"I thought you were going with her?"

"I was going to, until I got the cottage. I want to stick around and do some work."

"You want help?" Dom offered.

"Sure. What about your mum?"

"Nah, she won't want to help."

"Idiot."

"She won't be mithered if I come up for a couple days. I get on her nerves if I'm underfoot for too long at a time. I'll call you and let you know when."

"Good. Now will you bugger off so I can get some sleep?"

"There's gratitude for you."

Billy followed him to the door and they gave each other a thumping embrace. "See you, Dom."

"Tomorrow, you twat. 'Night." Dom left.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Billy shows up on Grace's doorstep, sort of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#).

At the sound of the phone, Grace put down her soup spoon, quickly swiping a thumb across her lower lip. She walked over to her desk and picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, wee girl," Billy said cheerfully.

"Billy! This is a surprise. What, didn't get enough of me on the phone last night?" she teased.

His grin came across clearly in his voice. "Not by a long shot. Which is why I was thinking we should sit down and have a good long chat."

"What, at this time of day? You're cracked!"

"No, I was thinking more like this afternoon. Say, around four-thirty?"

"Billy. What are you talking about?" she asked suspiciously. "I thought you were flying out to London today?"

"I am. My flight leaves at noon. And I don't have long, here; someone is making me go out and draw stick people. Because I haven't embarrassed myself enough for her recently."

"Poor lamb. So if your flight leaves at noon, how exactly were you planning on chatting at four-thirty? Your flight will have barely hit the east coast by then."

He winced. "Can you please not say 'hit' the coast?"

She laughed. "Sorry. Reached."

"Much better. And as a matter of fact, I won't even have gone that far. At four-thirty I hope to be in a restaurant in Pearson Airport buying you dinner. What do you say?"

Grace sat down on the sofa. "What? I don't understand--"

He chuckled at her confusion. "The airline fucked up my flight. Overbooked it like mad, the bloody bastards. And I have to be in London by noon tomorrow at the latest, so they offered me another flight with a three or four hour delay in New York. I told them to make it a flight with a delay in Toronto and they had a deal. So I'm on my way. Now, that's four-thirty Pacific Time. So...what? Seven-thirty your time."
"But--"

"You can get to the airport, can't you? I know you said it's difficult, but you can do it, right?"

"I--well--"

He laughed at her again. "C'mon, Grace, spit it out. I have to run. Will I see you at seven-thirty?"

"Yes! Yes--I'll...I'll get there," she stammered. "Do you need anything? Can I bring--anything..." her voice trailed off as she realized that was a pretty silly question.

But Billy didn't laugh at her. He simply said, "Just you, wee girl. Just you."

At seven-forty Grace saw people begin to trickle through the gate. She nervously straightened, eyes scanning, fingers twisting her silver thumb ring. Couples, dark-suited businessmen, a woman with two children--and finally there he was, his black jacket and jeans looking familiar and yet their quality cut setting him apart from the grungy youth behind him. She smiled, waited for him to spot her from under the brim of his baseball cap. The moment he did, he made a beeline straight for her, letting the strap of his bag slide down his arm. As he reached her he dropped it to the polished floor and enveloped her in a hug.

His arms around her waist and his face in her hair, Billy said with a smile, "Hello there."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Hello to you too," she said softly. "It feels longer than a week."

"Ten days."

"That's why it feels longer, then."

He chuckled and leaned back so he could look at her without releasing his hold. "I missed you, too."

"Silly boy. With all L.A. has to offer? You weren't spending your time very profitably then, were you?" She studied the logo emblazoned across the front of his cap--Soundscape Music.

"On the contrary, it went swimmingly. Exhausting, though. Give a lad a break and lead him to a restaurant, will you?"

"Me?" She raised her eyebrows. "You've spent more time in this airport than I have."

Billy's face fell. "Bugger. I wasn't looking around last time--I've got no idea..."

"You really are helpless sometimes, aren't you?" She shook her head mock-sadly.

The corners of Billy's mouth twirched. "Helpless? You sure that's the word you want to use?"

"Oh yes--quite sure." Unable to keep the grin off her face any longer, she slid her arms down until she was grasping him by the shoulders and turned him.

He let go of her waist and allowed her to direct him around until he was facing the other way.
Grace stood on her tiptoes and propped her chin up on his right shoulder. As her right arm snaked around his waist to balance herself, she rested her left arm on his left shoulder and pointed down the concourse.

Billy followed her finger. Sighed deeply, dropping his head. "All right. I'll give you helpless."

Her laugh bubbled up as she said, "Oh, and if the whacking great neon sign that says 'Restaurant' is a little hard on your tired eyes--" she nudged him a little to the left, "--there's always the gigantic fork and spoon over there."

"Think you're funny, don't you?"

"Yes," she giggled.

Billy laughed out loud. He dropped his shoulder out from under her chin and turned back toward her. Lifted his hands to her face and let his fingers trail down her cheeks. Still smiling, he leaned in and gently, quickly kissed her.

When his lips left hers, Grace slowly opened her eyes, pink tingeing her face. Without looking back up at him she leaned over and picked up his bag. "Let's get you some dinner, eh?"

As she began to walk away Billy grabbed her jacket and hauled her back against him. He steadied her as she nearly stumbled. "Don't get shy with me, Grace."

"Let go!" she protested. "You big bully, just because you've finally found someone shorter than you are--"

He threw back his head and laughed.

"--You're always pushing me around. Well one of these days, mister, I won't stand for it anymore and then you'll really be in--hey!" she ended on a squeal as Billy leaned down and scooped her up. She grabbed at his bag as it fell down her arm. "Put me down!"

One arm under her knees and the other behind her shoulders, as she clutched at his jacket he put his face next to hers and gave her a cheeky grin. "See, now you're not standing for it."

"Now who thinks he's funny?"

"Shush."

"And why exactly should I--"

He tipped her backward just enough to plant his lips on hers again, the brim of his cap hiding their faces from casual view. Straightened up grinning. "Now why didn't I think of shutting you up like that long ago?"

Grace saw someone walk by, smiling, and she turned pink once more. "I don't know. Careless of you."

"Yes, it was."

"Put me down, Billy, this isn't a good idea."

He cocked his head. "Are you calling my manly brawn into question?"

"Never. Just your sanity."
"Oh. Well, all right then." He lowered her knees, let her feet drop gently to the ground, but kept a firm grip around her shoulders. "I mean it, Grace. Don't get all shy with me, we've come too far for that. What's up?"

She flushed again, but met his gaze with a wry smile. "Do the words bloody airport not mean anything to you?"

"Oh, I see. Afraid of a little public affection, are we?"

"Not afraid. Just...just--oh bugger. Why can I never find a word when I need one?"

"Because there isn't one. You're being daft," he said, not unkindly. He gave her a squeeze. "We don't have much time. Let's not waste it, yeah?"

She nodded slowly.

"I'm going to kiss you again. All right?"

She nodded wordlessly, her eyes on his.

Billy leaned down and lightly kissed her, then drew her into another hug. "There now. Was that so bad?"

"Now you're just mocking me," she muttered into his shoulder, smiling nonetheless.

"Why yes. Yes, I do believe I am. Now would you quit stalling and let's go get some dinner?"

"Stalling?" she said hotly. "Me?"

Billy grabbed his bag out of her hand and walked away whistling.

A few minutes later they were seated in a small booth in a tiny Italian-style café. Billy shoved his baseball cap in his carry-on as he tucked it under their feet, then produced a white plastic bag wrapped over on itself. He grinned and pushed it across the table toward Grace.

"A present from Elijah and Dom."

"What? What is it?"

"Open it. Not," he added as she started to do so, "that it will help you much."

She pulled out a black plastic videotape. It was unmarked. She raised an eyebrow. "You say this is from Elijah and Dom?"

Billy nodded, grinning.

She shoved it back to him. "Then I think you'd better keep it. I blush easily."

"Yes, you do," he chuckled. "But I think you're safe with this one. Besides, they'd never forgive you if you refused it. They ran their arses off this morning to get it copied over in time."

"What is it?" she asked curiously, taking it back.
"Me, in my most recent role. It's a short film, with a very limited budget, but I think the director's an up-and-comer, and I think I really managed to bring Picasso to life."

"Picas--they videotaped you sketching this morning?" she squealed. Recalled where she was, flushed a bit, and dropped her voice. "Good God, I think I love them. What a fucking brilliant idea. There had better be a VCR somewhere in this airport."

"No, you're just going to have to be patient and wait 'til you get home." He suddenly looked concerned. "Oh bugger. Do you have a VCR at home? Fuck, I didn't even think--"

"Relax." She smiled, reached across the table to pat his arm. "Yes, I have one. It's older than dirt, and only works every second Tuesday, but I'm in luck--that's today."

"Good." He looked relieved.

She pulled her arm back as the waiter arrived at their table to take their drinks order.

"Drink?" Billy asked her.

"Sure. Whatever you're having."

"Beer?" When she nodded, Billy turned back to the waiter. "I'll have a Bud, please. And--"

"No, no," Grace groaned. "Have you forgotten what country you're in? Seriously."

Billy grinned and glanced at the waiter, who was smiling. "Apparently I've made a faux pas. Go on then, educate me."

She shook her head sadly, a twinkle in her eye. "Does American beer compare to British beer?"

"No," he said automatically.

"There you are then. Where do you think Canada's beer-brewing forebears came from?"

"Hmm. I'm guessing not Milwaukee."

"What do you like? Light or dark?"

"With dinner, light." He sat back, smiling.

Grace turned to the waiter. "Do you have any Sleeman's?"

"Yes, we have the Cream Ale and the Honey Brown." He lifted his pad and waited.

"Two Cream Ales, then, please."

"Certainly." The waiter jotted it down and left.

Grace sat back in the booth, folding her arms in a posture of disgust.

Billy started to chuckle.

"Bud?"

"Forgive me, I'm a Philistine."

"I'll say. I take it you haven't heard this country's favourite joke. I thought everybody knew it."
"Obviously not. Care to share it, so I don't humiliate myself like that again?"

"How is American beer like making love in a canoe?"

He raised his eyebrow, his smile growing. "In a canoe?"

She nodded, her lips twitching.

"I don't know. Tell me."

"It's fucking close to water."

Billy shouted a laugh. "I've heard a different version before. I like yours better."

"You're developing a good sense of humour, then."

"Thank you, I've been working on it. Of course, now that the joke's done, I'm left with an important question."

She looked at him sideways, suspecting what was coming. "What's that?"

"How exactly does one make love in a canoe?"

"You're just trying to find out if I've ever done that," she accused.

"That obvious, was I?"

"Sadly, yes. To answer your question--I'm guessing one does it very, very carefully."

"Nicely done," he grinned.

"Thank you."

The waiter made a timely appearance with their beer. Billy immediately lifted his, tilted it towards Grace in a silent toast, and took a deep swallow.

She waited.

He took another sip, looking thoughtful.

"Well?" she inquired.

"Tsk tsk," he clicked with his tongue. "You really have to learn to be patient, wee girl. One cannot pronounce judgement on the quality of a fine ale hastily."

"Oh please. It's better than Bud, right?"

"Right," he laughed. "It actually is really good. Very pale."

"Lighter than what you normally drink?"

"A wee bit, I think. I like it, though."

"Try the honey brown next, then."

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"
She snorted. "On two beers?"

"Good point. You'll have to try harder."

"I would, if you were staying longer than--when is your flight out, anyway?"

"Eleven-fifteen. We've got a couple hours."

She said nothing, just lifted her glass and took a sip.

Billy raised his eyebrow at her. "Penny for that thought."

She looked down, then met his eyes again with a little smile. "It was pretty selfish. I'm glad the airline fucked you over."

He chuckled. "I am too. At the moment, anyway. I can't guarantee I won't be a bit pissy tomorrow when I'm really jetlagged, though."

"No doubt. Where's my penny?"

He automatically started to dig in his pocket, and then noticed the look on her face. Pulled his hand out again and nudged her under the table with his foot. "Very funny."

She giggled. "Sorry. Since I can't watch it until later, will you at least tell me how the sketching went?"

"Well--"

Just then the waiter returned to take their order. Grace sighed and sat back, resigned to staying in the dark a little longer.

Billy's eyes danced, he knew she was itching for details. He gestured for Grace to order first. When she was finished he made his own request, and shifted forward in his seat when the waiter left. "So where was I? Ah yes," he continued before she could speak. "This morning." He paused to take a long slow sip of his beer.

Grace crossed her arms as she watched him. She knew he was trying to wind her up, as he put it. She was determined not to let him.

He finally put his glass down. His tongue darted out and in again, sweeping up a drop of beer. He noticed Grace's eyes follow the movement, felt a sudden warmth at the reminder of her attraction to him. It took him a long moment to realize he was staring at her soft pink mouth, at the dip in her upper lip. He gave himself a mental shake, allowed himself a small smile.

Grace just waited.

Billy cleared his throat, forgetting his plan to stall and tease her. "This morning. Yes. It was--good. A little embarrassing, but that was to be expected. We had to go early, but it was still busy. Probably why none of the press found us, either."

"Where were you?" She played with the corner of the placemat.

"Don't ask me," he grinned. "'Lij drove, and he and Dom bickered for blocks about where to do it. I got completely turned around. All I know is, 'Lij brought me a little stool to sit on, and since we didn't have time to go buy one, Dom loaned me a sketch book. A great big one, so I could prop it up on my lap for all to see." He mimed holding it to show her.
She laughed, leaning forward now.

"And I sat there for twenty minutes, as agreed, drawing little stick people, scribbling buildings and trees and cars, and hell, Grace, a five year old could have done a better job. Don't you dare--" he pointed a finger at her, his eyes sparkling, "--Dare laugh at me when you get it. I'm an actor, not an artist."

"I'll keep that in mind," she promised, trying not to laugh just at the thought. "So what kind of reactions did you get from people going by? Did anyone stop?"

"Oh yes," he nodded. "Several people. Including one lovely old granny who gave me directions to the community centre where she takes art lessons."

"You're kidding," Grace nearly choked on her beer.

"If only I were," he sighed.

"That is fantastic. Fucking priceless."

He rolled his eyes. "Dom thought so too."

"Where were they? Dom and 'Lij. Very close?"

"No--close enough, though, for the video camera."

"So what else happened?"

"Ah, but if I tell you, it'll ruin the video."

"No it won't. Come on, what else?"

"Nope. That's all you're getting. Trust me, I can't do the rest justice by describing it. People's reactions, the faces they were making--you'll just have to wait and see for yourself."

"Oh, fine," she tried to grumble, but almost immediately started laughing again. She sat back. "I know we made a bet, but part of me can't believe you actually went through with it."

"A Scot," he said haughtily, "does not welsh on a wager."

"But I bet you cursed me a few times while you were sitting there."

"Soundly. At great length."

Before Grace could respond, the waiter arrived with their food. Both Billy and Grace were famished, Grace because it was long past her usual supper hour, and Billy because with the flight mix-up and the subsequent rush to the airport, he'd missed lunch entirely. For the first few minutes they said little beyond 'How is it?' or 'Pass the salt, please.'

Finally Grace took a sip of her beer, grinned, and said, "Well, I feel better now. How about you?"

"I think I forgot to breathe."

She laughed. "Don't they feed you on these flights?"

"Not what you'd call food, no." He cocked his head. "I meant to ask--did you have any trouble getting here?"
She shook her head and took another bite of her dinner.

"Grace."

She looked up at him, still chewing.

He smiled at her. "There may still be things about you that I find mysterious, but this isn't one of
them. Answer me."

"I did."

"No you didn't, you shook your head. I know very well that's how you try and sidestep me."

She sighed and put down her fork. "I'm going to have to find a new way, apparently."

"No, you're bloody well not. You're going to have to answer, it was a simple enough question. So
I'm assuming you had trouble. What happened?" He finished off his beer.

"See, this is precisely why I just shook my head, because I know exactly how this conversation is
going to go."

"No you don't," he disagreed.

"Yes I do. I say nothing happened, and you say 'Don't lie to me'. I say I'm not, and you say--"

"That's crap," he interrupted.

She grinned and said, "Exactly. So I say I didn't have any trouble whatsoever, all right? It's just a
bit of a complicated trip. And you say 'What do you mean complicated?' and I say a bus and two
trains, and then you say 'Oh, Grace, I'm sorry', and I say shut up and you say 'No, I mean it, I'm
sorry, I should never have asked you to come', and I say what's that supposed to mean, are you
sorry you asked me here, and you say 'As a matter of fact--'"

Billy was laughing. He cut her off, saying, "All right, all right. Smartass."

"I just figured shaking my head was easier." She shrugged, flashed him a bright smile, and took
another bite of food.

"You're way off, you know."

"Oh, really?"

"Aye. I would never have said I shouldn't have asked you to come."

She chuckled. "No, probably not. But I was pretty damn close with the rest of it, wasn't I?"

"Maybe. Maybe not," he said, pretending to be cagey. "You'll never know, will you?"

"I'll take that as a yes."

The waiter returned to check on them, so Grace took the opportunity to order their next beers. He
wrote it down, took Billy's empty plate, and left.

"I'm glad to hear I'm still mysterious. I was afraid you already knew me inside and out," Grace
smiled, as she continued to work on her dinner.
"Inside and out? No." Billy shook his head. "We're connected, I know the person you are. But there are things I still don't understand."

"Like what?"

"Like...like why do you work at home typing on a computer all day? Is that what you want to do for the rest of your life? It's a good job, but I can't see it fulfilling you."

Grace was taken aback, wasn't sure how to respond. "Well--"

"What do you dream of, Grace?" Billy asked intently. "If you could do whatever you wanted, right now, what would you do?"

She laid her fork down slowly. "I don't know. I've never really thought about it."

"That's shite. Everyone thinks about it at some point."

She disagreed. "I don't. I used to be happy, to have what I wanted. Now there's no point thinking about it."

"There's always a point to dreams," Billy said softly. "Even if they're not reachable--they can still show you what it is you need to be happy."

She made a face, shoved her plate away. "No. Dreaming now just reminds me--shows--makes me feel even worse about where I am. Maybe someday...there you go. How about I just dream of the day when I start dreaming again?" She tried to laugh it off.

He shook his head. "You should know where you want to go. Even if you rule out your dream being an actual possibility--and I'm not sure I agree with that--you have to be ready to leap all over the chance when it's presented. It doesn't have to be on a grand scale, Grace. It's a matter of what do you want to be proud of in ten years' time? In twenty? What don't you want to look back and regret when you're eighty? That's a real dream, not some bloody fantasy of fame and fortune."

"Says the man who's conveniently already there," she said wryly.

He pounced on that. "Exactly. And how the hell do you think I got to where I am?"

She wasn't sure what he was getting at. "You went to drama school, didn't you? I thought I read that somewhere."

"Yes, I went to the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. After I left school at sixteen to go work in a factory for seven years to bring some money home."

"Really? I didn't know that," she said quietly.

Billy paused while the waiter returned with their beer and cleared away Grace's plate. When he left, Billy leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "Did you know my parents died when I was young? I haven't really mentioned it."

"I did know. But you didn't bring it up, so neither did I."

"Thank you for that. I'd like to tell you about it some time--but not tonight. Not yet."

She smiled gently. "No. Not yet."

"Margaret and I went to live with our grandmother. We weren't left with much--what came out of
the estate and the life insurance. All Gran had was the social security. But when I was sixteen, I
thought, 'Right. I'm the man of the house now.' I quit school and apprenticed as a bookbinder."

"A bookbinder?" she repeated, surprised. "Were you acting as well?" She, too, leaned her elbows
on the table, leaned forward, rested her chin on one hand.

"No. I acted through school, but once I started working, I quit acting altogether. It wasn't a 'real'
job. Besides, the hours in a factory in Glasgow didn't leave much time for anything but a couple of
gigs a week with the band we had, and maybe a game of footie on Sunday afternoon with the lads."
His eyes were on the corner of the table by Grace's elbow, but he was looking right through it. He
was seeing one of those Sunday afternoons in Glasgow, or maybe the face of someone he hadn't
thought of in a long time.

She left him to it.

When he finally looked up again, visibly gathering his thoughts, she softly said, "So what
happened? How does a football-playing sometime-musician factory worker wind up in drama
school?"

He gave her a little smile. "How did we get here? This was supposed to be about you."

"You always make it about me. It's finally your turn."

"All right. But I'll be getting back to you," he warned, grinning. "How did I get to drama school?
Indirectly. My girlfriend at the time got tired of my whingeing about how factory life wasn't for
me. Once I'd learned the job, the skills, become proficient at them, there was no challenge left. I
started to feel stifled, you know? But I'm too...I don't know. Laid back, I guess? For my own good,
and I was doing some complaining, but little else. I'm too willing to go along for the ride. So the
girlfriend gave my arse a swift kick, got me moving, got me taking chances. I applied for the
following year, and we decided life needed to be lived in the meantime. I quit the factory, and we
embarked on a grand world tour. Which," he suddenly laughed, "I just remembered started in
Toronto."

"Well of course it did. Because it's the centre of the universe." She winked.

"Right. Yes, now I remember, that was our reason exactly."

"I thought so. And the grand tour lasted the whole year?"

"No. Three months, maybe? We were in Florida, and we'd already run out of money," he laughed
again. "We were a bit unrealistic in budgeting the trip. In that we had no budget. So Amy cut hair
on the beach to make money. And one day I got a phone call from Margaret. She said there was an
envelope for me from RSAMD, and when she opened it, it was an offer for a space in the current
year's program. I spent another month in Florida, and then I flew home and started that fall. But my
dream was never to be a fucking star, Grace. It was just to be a good actor, to stay in work. And
that would have taken every bit as much energy and time as I've put in where I am now. I'm just
lucky that by doing my job well, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Luck. I can't count on luck."

"Of course not. That's why it's called luck," he smiled. "But luck was only at the end. I took the
leap first. It can be done, Grace. The chances can be taken." He paused. "There must be a song for
that. Isn't there?"

She nodded, not quite meeting his eyes. "A couple. Solsbury Hill by Peter Gabriel."
"I know *Solsbury Hill*. But I didn't know that's what it was about."

"When he made the decision to leave Genesis and go solo."

Billy smiled. "See? Another big chance. Will you sing it?"

Grace glanced around, but no one was seated too close to them. "No."

She quietly began to sing something else entirely, and she sang slowly.

*I am sick and I am dull*
and I am plain
how dearly I'd love to get carried away
*oh but dreams have a knack of just not coming true*
and time is against me now

*Who and what to blame?*
anything is hard to find
when you will not open your eyes
when will you accept yourself?
*for heaven's sake*
anything is hard to find
when you will not open your eyes
everyday you must say
*how do I feel about the past*

*Others conquered love - but I ran*
*I sat in my room and I drew up a plan*
*but plans can fall through as so often they do*
*and time is against me now*

He frowned. "That's awfully negative. You have more courage than that."

"No I don't."

"You most certainly do. You have courage enough to be on your own and try and fix the mess you were left with."

"I thought that was stubbornness?" she asked wryly.

"That too. But Grace, those words are without light and hope. That's not really where you are, is it?"

"Not without, no. But in short supply? Yes."

"Then what is it you need?" he asked with intensity, leaning further toward her. "What would give you hope back? You of all people shouldn't be without hope."

Half annoyed, she wondered what he meant by that. "I just told you I'm not without. But I don't know, Billy. I don't want dreams just to watch them fail."

Billy quietly said, "Bloody hell, Grace. Not everything fails. Just…take a little leap of faith."

"That's easy to say."
"I know it is. But you'd be amazed at how things will work out."

"Oh yeah," she said bitterly, surprising him. "They work out great."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Taking a 'leap of faith' is what got me into this fucking mess in the first place," she nearly spat out.

"You mean Michael?"

"What do you think?"

"Don't get mad at me," he said gently, not put off. "I want to ask you a couple of things. Will you do your best to answer honestly, like we promised?"

"I can hardly say no now, can I?"

"No, you can't," he said equably. "First question. When you and Michael decided to move in together--whose idea was it? Who suggested it first?"

"What does that matter?"

"It matters. Who?"

"I don't remember."

"You could at least pretend to think about it," he said, a little sharply.

She turned her face away.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Accept Yourself* by The Smiths.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Billy nearly chokes on the foot in his mouth, and Grace gets another glimpse of the discomforts of celebrity.

He sighed. "Come on, wee girl. Take a minute and think."

Still staring at the picture on the wall above them, she finally said, "His."

"Do you remember what he said?"

She looked down at her hands, twisting the ring on her thumb round and round. "He said…"

"Go on. It's all right."

"He said he loved me." Her voice was low. "He said he hated leaving me to go home. That I was home, and would I move in with him so he never had to leave home behind again."

"Bugger. He was…determined."

"Yes. Yes, he was."

"And what was your first reaction?"

"You know I moved in with him," she muttered.

"Yes. But that wasn't my question."

She finally looked up at him, frowning.

He reached across the table, covered her hands with his, stilling her fingers. "He said move in. What was the very first thought that flashed through your mind? And don't tell me you don't remember, because I know you do."

Her frown deepened.

Billy lifted his hand, and with one finger smoothed out the furrows between her brows.

Grace sighed, relaxed ever so slightly at his touch. She thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I thought--I guess I thought it was a little fast. But I was head over heels and he said all the right things and I agreed. And what the hell does this have to do with dreams, anyway?"

"Well there you are then. That's why it didn't work out," Billy said firmly, as if it were perfectly clear.

"What are you talking about?"
"Your decision--your leap of faith--wasn't for you, it was for him. That's why it didn't work. You have to be true to yourself." He squeezed her hands tightly. "You have to do what's right for you."

"That sounds awfully selfish."

"Looking out for yourself doesn't mean doing what you want all the time," he explained earnestly. "Sacrificing your own desires to help someone else is one of the greatest things a person can do. But when it comes down to a life decision, to the question of what do you need in your soul--then yes, you have to do what's right for you and you alone."

"Billy, he was planning all along on robbing me blind. Any decision I made--"

Without really meaning to, he cut her off. "He was planning on robbing you blind, but that doesn't mean that following your instincts couldn't have saved you. If you had decided not to move in with him, he might have moved on, thinking you weren't an easy enough mark. He might have just up and left right then. You don't--"

"Oh, that's great, Billy. That's just what I need," she said angrily, yanking her hands from under his.

"No, Grace, that's--"

"Do you think I don't know that? Do you think I don't know how badly I fucked up? I'm so glad you believe all the shit that comes out of your mouth."

"Grace, would you--" he quickly said, but she continued, tears pricking at the back of her throat.

"I know I fucked up, and I know I've got shit judgement, and I don't fucking need you to tell me that. And if you don't believe what you say, then keep your fucking mouth shut." A lone tear traced down her left cheek, making Billy's stomach clench. The second she reached for her jacket, though, he was on his feet in a flash, rounding the end of the table, sliding into the booth beside her, trapping her.

"Grace, shut it," he said urgently.

"Get the hell out of my way," she choked.

"No. Shut the fuck up and listen to me. I said that completely wrong. I'm sorry."

"Whatever. Let me out."

"No." He tried to put his hand on her shoulder but she pushed him off. "Grace, please. Just give me a minute. Let me get my foot out of my mouth and kick myself in the arse with it instead."

"Be my guest," she said flatly.

"I believe every word I've ever said to you," he said fiercely, intent on convincing her and rescuing the evening from certain disaster. "I said that in the worst possible way. I meant it as an example, not to say that anything could have been different, given who and what he was. Of course he'd made the decision to steal from you before he'd ever met you. Of course he was playing you, was playing on your feelings. You didn't do anything wrong, you didn't do anything to cause it. I said that before and I'll say it again." He gingerly reached out to her again, was relieved when she didn't immediately pull away. He left his hand on her shoulder.

She didn't say a word, though.
"Grace, what I meant was--was..." Billy paused again, needing to get his words right. "The intentions, the truth behind your decisions--that's what matters. You're absolutely right, his plan was to fuck you over, and it's not like you could have convinced him otherwise. But your head warned you to slow down, while your heart was urging you on. All I'm trying--so amazingly unsuccessfully--to say, is that you do have good instincts; the leap of faith can come when your head and your heart agree." He was speaking softly now, and his fingers kneaded at her shoulder. "That's when you know it's worth taking the risk. You didn't fuck up, he did. And your judgement is not shite. You knew enough to trust me, didn't you?" He smiled hopefully at her, willing her to respond.

She stared down at the table. "You drive me crazy, you know that? I'm all over the map when you're around."

"I know. And I'm sorry. I know that hurt--I didn't mean it to." He gently pulled with his fingers, felt her initial resistance, felt her let it go. He pulled her against his chest, even though she still hadn't looked at him. Her shoulder dug into his sternum, but he left her there, put his arms around her and hugged her so tightly she grunted. "God, I'm sorry, Grace. And I want you feeling better about it all. I don't like hearing you talk like that."

"I was. I am," she said quietly. Her arm went up and curled around Billy's neck. "But hearing that fr--" She abruptly stopped.

"From me."

"No." She paused. Then, "Yes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't--" he started wretchedly.

"I know, I know. Maybe we should just forget this whole conversation ever happened, eh?" She turned her face into his chest. "I'm sorry too. For thinking I couldn't believe you, no matter how briefly."

"You can, dear heart. Implicitly, remember?"

"I know. I won't forget again."

"All right. Let's go back in time and pretend I didn't fuck that up quite so spectacularly." He stroked her hair. "Will you do me a favour?"

"Yes. What?"

"I love it when you do that. Will you sit up, look at me, and tell me we're all right?"

She immediately straightened, faced him, put her hand on his cheek, stroking the subtle roughness under her thumb. "Oh, Billy--yes, we're all right. I promise we're fine." She leaned in and kissed him softly on the lips.

When she pulled away, Billy smiled. "What happened to 'bloody airport'?"

She smiled back, skimming a finger lightly down the bridge of his nose. "You're making me shameless."

"Good. Then my work here is done." He put his arm across her shoulders and tucked her against his side. They leaned back against the booth. "Since we're going back in time, let's go back to where I asked you about your dreams."
"Isn't that where we got into trouble in the first place?"

"Well, yes. But this time I'm just going to ask you to think about it. Over the next few days, weeks even. Think about what your dream job might be, or think about what you'd do to keep yourself on an even keel. Where you'd live, or what you'd do to relax, for fun. What you want to be proud of in ten years."

"But I don't--"

"I know," he kissed the top of her head. "I know you said it makes you feel worse about where you are. But don't compare it. Don't think of it as where you're not now. Just...where you might go someday. Or not, you might only ever learn from them. I'm the first to admit not all dreams come true. But if you never have dreams in the first place, nothing will ever come true, will it?"

"I--I suppose."

"Just think about it, wee girl. That's all I ask."

She hesitated, but finally agreed. "All right. I'll think about it. But I warn you," she added sternly but with a lift in her voice, "if I suddenly decide I have to quit my job and live on a commune raising emus in South Dakota, on your head be it."

He laughed. "I think I can accept that risk. Thank you, Grace. Now--how about some pudding?"

"Pudding?"

"Dessert. You use so many British terms here, I'm not sure which ones you don't."

"But if you call dessert 'pudding', what do you call pudding?" she asked, finally smiling again.

"Pudding."

"That must get confusing."

"Oddly enough, it doesn't. What do you say?"

"I don't know--I don't know if I have enough room for more."

"Ah, sure you do." Billy lifted his arm from around her shoulders and signaled to the waiter, who had been leaving them to what was obviously a private moment. He came over, dessert menus in hand, and waited while they made their choices.

Grace decided on cheesecake, and ordered tea to go with it. "Tea, Billy?"

He still hadn't made up his mind and was studying the menu intently. "Tea? Yes, please. What's 'Butter Tart Pie'?"

"Do you know what butter tarts are?" she asked. When he shook his head, she said, "They're basically caramelized brown sugar in pastry. Very yummy. But sweet."

"Sweet's good."

She laughed, making him turn and look at her, pleased. "I mean really sweet." She looked to the waiter, asking, "It's just a large tart, right?"

He nodded. "Yes, with pecans. And it comes with vanilla ice cream."
"Oh, that's good," she nodded. Explained to Billy, "It'll cut the sweetness a bit."

"Ice cream will cut the sweetness? Oh, this I have to try."

As the waiter took their menus and left, Grace said, "We're going to have to take you for a jog around the airport so the sugar high wears off before your flight."

He laughed. "We might, at that. I'm going to need to sleep most of the trip, or I'll never make it through tomorrow." He had sat up straight while reading the menu, but now he relaxed back, pulling Grace close again.

"You said you had to be there by noon?" She leaned her head on his shoulder.

After draining the last of his beer, Billy said, "This one was good too--closer to what I normally drink. But yes, I have an interview in the early afternoon. Luckily it's at my hotel, so if I'm late getting in I can just meet with them right away. And they'll have to put up with a travel-filthy me."

"I'm sure you'll be fresh as a daisy," she smiled. "Who's the interview with?"

"I know this sounds terrible," he said sheepishly, "But I have no idea. I have four--or is it five?--over the next two days. One's with the Guardian. One's with someone from the British Film Institute's magazine. The third I knew but I've forgotten. And the other two I have no idea, they were just added a couple days ago."

"Who sets them up?" she asked curiously. "Your agent?"

"No, my publicist."

"You have a publicist? Wow. That sounds so…"

"Hollywood?" he suggested dryly.

"Well--sorry, but yes." She grinned. "What does a publicist do, anyway?"

"Depends how big a star you are. If you're Tom Cruise, or Julia Roberts, your publicist does anything you ask. Pick up your dry cleaning? No problem. Need personal hygiene products? All over that."

Grace laughed. "Ah, the glamour."

"My publicist, however--her name's Aude--sets my public schedule. Interviews, openings, premieres, flights, hotels, special events, charity events. Her job is to keep me in the public eye, keep my name out there, help me with my image."

"In what way?"

"She makes sure the shite publications don't sneak anyone through. You let the tabloids anywhere near you, you're asking for trouble. She checks out events I'm invited to, makes sure they're legit. You know, that someone calling their little group a charity really is a registered charity, not just a bunch of crackpots trying to get close to an actor."

"What?" She was incredulous. "Do people actually do that? That's sick!"

"Aye. It's not common by any means, but it's been known to happen. Aude also," he grinned, "will rip on me on occasion if she thinks I'm being a twat."
Her smile deepened. "Why? What did you do?"

"Got drunk at a party," he said succinctly.

Grace straightened up to look at him, gave a wicked chuckle. "I know there's more to that story."

"Aye, unfortunately. Dom, Elijah, Orli and I all got absolutely trolleyed. Sean was there--"

"Sean? Which one?"

"Astin. Mr. Responsibility, bless him." Billy looked up as the waiter approached with a tray bearing their desserts and a large china pot of tea. He raised his eyebrows as his pie was set in front of him. "This looks fantastic."

The waiter set down a small pitcher of milk. "If you need anything else, please let me know. Enjoy your dessert." He left, after being thanked by both Billy and Grace.

Grace gestured to the pot of tea. "Weak or strong?"

"Strong, please." Billy took a bite of his pie. Rolled his eyes. "Good god. You Canadians make unhealthy food, but holy fuck, is it good."

She laughed. "I'm glad you like it. Someday I'll introduce you to the healthy stuff, but not today."

"No, not today. I'm too busy eating Butter Tart Pie. You weren't kidding about the sweet, were you?"

"Nope. I warned you."

"That you did. Now I'm curious. What's the healthy stuff? Go on, give me a full Canadian menu."

"I'll save that for an email. Here's a sample of ingredients, though--fruit, fiddleheads, and cedar planks. Now, can I hear the story of the drunken debauchery, please?"

"What the hell are fiddleheads? And since when is wood an ingredient?"

"You'll just have to wait and find out, won't you? Finish your story."

He sighed, smiling. "I was hoping to get away from that, it's not very flattering."

"Even better." She reached for the teapot, lifting the lid to check the strength. "Shall I be mother?"

He chuckled. "I don't know why, but that phrase absolutely tickles me, always has. Please do."

She poured him a cup, then filled her own. "Go on, then."

"Sometimes I could wish you weren't quite so persistent. All right. Where was I?"

"You, Elijah, Dom and Orlando got hammered," she said helpfully. "And Sean was there."

"Right. Poor Sean didn't know which way to turn. His first instinct is still to look after 'Lij, but Dom was in the worst--or best, depending on how you look at it--shape. So Sean took Dom outside for some fresh air and to pour some water down his throat. Which left the three of us unsupervised."

"Why am I guessing that's dangerous?"
"No, no, we weren't that bad. It's just--well, when he's pished, Orli tends to forget not everyone is his best friend. So he got a slap or two."

"Good grief, what was he trying to do?"

"He tried too hard to pull a girl. And then he tried to pull that girl's girlfriend."

She winced. "Oops."

Billy laughed. "Yeah."

"And you and 'Lij?"

"We apologized profusely--and drunkenly--and at great length. Dragged Orli back to our table. And then we--ehm..."

"What?" She grinned in anticipation.

"Well, we kind of--" Billy blushed slightly.

Grace had never seen him look so sweetly guilty. *Like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.*

He continued. "We kind of tied him to his chair."

A laugh bubbled up her throat. "You didn't."

"We did."

"What with?"

"Our ties. And his."

"Ooh. Insult to injury."

"And then we left him there. Went to the bar for another drink."

"Heartless bastards. What did he do?"

The corners of his mouth curled up at the memory. "Shouted at the top of his lungs. Luckily it was loud in there, you couldn't hear him until you got close to the table."

"How long did you leave him there?"

"Oh, just a few minutes."

"And then you untied him?"

Billy turned redder. "Not exactly."

"Oh my god," she giggled. "What did you do?"

"Well, we went back to the table with our drinks to sit down."

"And?"

"And...we sat on Orli."
"You what?"

"'Lij sat on one knee and I sat on the other. He nearly lost it, tried to bite 'Lij when yelling at him didn't work. Tried to--well, injure me with his knee."

Grace nearly snorted tea out her nose. Quickly swallowed so she could safely laugh out loud.

Billy grinned at her. "You all right?"

"You're unbelievable. How long did you sit on him?"

"Only a few minutes, really. Although I'd wager it felt longer to him. We're really damned lucky there was no press allowed inside, or there'd be pictures of it all over the internet."

"You mean there isn't? I'm devastated."

"Sorry, luv. Anyway, then Sean came back with Dom in tow." He started to chuckle. "You should have seen the look on Dom's face. He didn't know whether to laugh or be pissed off he wasn't in on it."

"Why doesn't that surprise me? What did he do?"

"Dom? Came bounding over and tried to sit on my knee."

She laughed. "And Sean?"

"Poor Sean. He untied Orli, nattering all the while about how we were worse than his kids and how he could dress us up but not take us out. Then he looked at Orli and Dom and said he couldn't even dress them up. He was trying not to laugh the whole time."

"You guys are insane. What did Orli do?"

"Sean took him out for some fresh air, or I think he would have tackled 'Lij. I just hid behind Dom."

"Coward," she grinned.

"Not at all. Just 'out of sight, out of mind'. Besides, for some reason Orli had the notion that the whole thing had been 'Lij's idea."

She raised her eyebrows. "I wonder where he got that?"

Billy said nothing, simply grinned and winked.

"Yeah, I thought so. Remind me to never turn my back while you're around."

"Piffle. You're perfectly safe with me," he avowed.

"I bet that's exactly what you said to Orlando right before he found himself lashed to his chair with your tie."

He laughed. "And tip him off like that? Never. Is there any more tea?"

"A bit. I thought you wanted to sleep on the plane?"

"Good point." He poured the last of the tea into her cup. "So what are you up to tomorrow?"
"Nothing spectacular. Work. I might go to the library for a few hours." Grace pushed her empty
dessert plate to the empty side of the table, pulled her tea cup closer.

"A few hours? They let you take the books home these days, you know."

She smiled. "Funny man. I go once in a while and spend some time reading magazines and papers.
Then I get my books to take home. Sometimes something I read sparks my imagination, and I can
find a book on it."

"What do you like to read?" He leaned one elbow on the table, turning a little to look at her more
easily, sipped from his water glass.

"Lots," she said, warming quickly to the subject. "Novels, history, biographies, just about anything
really."

"What was the last biography you read?"

"Golda Meier's." She raised her eyebrow, an expectant smile on her face.

Billy knew a challenge when he saw one. He wrinkled his nose in concentration. Hesitated, then
said, "She was--Prime Minister of Israel at some point, wasn't she?"

Grace tilted her head and grinned in enjoyment and acknowledgement of a challenge well met.
"Yes, during the sixties and seventies. Incredible woman. My favourite quote was 'Don't be
humble--you're not that great.'"

He laughed. "Excellent. I know a few people I should pass that along to. Last history?"

"Umm…it was a while ago. I think I had one on Lawrence of Arabia--and one on the War of
1812."

He cocked his head. "Which one was that?"

"Between Canada and the U.S."

"Canada and America fought a war?" He was surprised.

"Yes. In 1812, oddly enough."

"Smartass. Who won?"

She grinned. "Depends who you ask. But since the Americans tried to invade and we stopped them
and we are not currently part of the U.S., I'd have to say we did."

"A sure claim to fame, that is. And the last novel you read?"

"Terry Pratchett. 'Small Gods'."

"I love him," Billy exclaimed. "He's got to be one of the funniest authors ever, no matter what
genre."

"He really is," she agreed eagerly. "And you have to love an author who spits out a book a year but
keeps the quality right up there. You never have to worry when you pick one up."

"Fantastic. We'll have to pass on recommendations."
"I'd like that," she smiled, then looked up as the waiter approached.

"Can I get you folks anything else?"

Billy glanced at Grace, who shook her head. "No thanks, I think we're done." As the waiter cleared away the last of their dishes, Billy checked his watch. Asked her, "Can I convince you to go for a walk with me? I should stretch my legs a bit before I sit for the next seven hours."

"Of course. You know, it's incredible. It used to take a month of living hell to cross from Europe to Canada. It *killed* people. Now it's a matter of a long nap."

"Are you telling me to stop my bitching?"

"What? No!" she protested, flustered. "No, I just-"

He laughed at her, leaned over to kiss her nose, his signal he was teasing.

She blushed, lightly dug her elbow into his ribs. "You're mean to me."

"Oh, I am. Just terrible. Absolutely horrid."

"Shut up."

"Yes, ma'am." He took her hand, held it between both of his.

"Don't call me ma'am." She shifted closer, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"Yes, m--I mean, okay." he smiled. "Don't move." He placed her hand on his thigh, let go of it, and twisted ever so slightly to reach back and pull out his wallet. He extracted a credit card, laid it on the table, and left his wallet sitting in front of him. Took her hand again.

"Billy?" she asked a minute later, her voice quiet.

"Yes, dear heart?"

"It's going to be a long time before I see you again, isn't it?"

He squeezed her hand, stroking the inside of her wrist with his thumb. "Longer than ten days, yes."

"London, Glasgow, somewhere I can't remember for the comic book thing, Japan, then L.A., right?"

"Right." He kissed the top of her head.

She sighed.

"You'll hear from me, wee girl. A lot."

"I know."

"Probably at the most inconvenient of times."

She smiled. "No such thing."

"Three in the morning wouldn't be inconvenient?" he teased.

"Oh. Well, maybe."
"Don't worry, I'll try and avoid that."

The waiter came with the cheque. Billy took a quick glance, then handed over his credit card.

"Grace?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I pop you in my suitcase and take you with?"

She snuggled closer, tucked her face into the space between his ear and his shoulder. He lifted his arm and put it around her, accommodating her with a cuddle. Her voice was muffled against his shirt. "I wish you could."

"Do you have any idea how tempted I am to buy you a bloody plane ticket?"

"But you won't, right?"

"No?"

"No." She paused, then her smile curved against the skin on his neck. "Not yet."

He laughed. "All right."

The waiter returned with Billy's receipt. Billy nudged Grace to sit up, then sat forward to sign the slip. Slid his card and his copy into his wallet, pulled out a couple of U.S. bills, and returned his wallet to his pocket. As he did so, they both thanked their waiter as he cleared away empty glasses.

Billy tossed the bills on the table then got up. "Ready, then?"

She scooted across the bench, dragging her jacket behind her. Billy retrieved his from the other side, and they left the restaurant.

They hadn't gone more than twenty feet before Grace abruptly stopped, looked at Billy, and swore.

He frowned. "What?"

"We're idiots. Be right back."

He waited, wondering what she was on about, as she disappeared inside the restaurant. When she came out, grinning, he immediately saw why. He slapped a hand to his forehead. "Fuckdamndamnfuck. That could have been really bad."

She handed him his carry-on bag. "Forgetful, aren't you?"

"Apparently. Thanks, wee girl, this has a present for Margaret in it that I wouldn't have liked to lose. And Aude would have had a fit if someone had got hold of my pants and auctioned them off on E-Bay."

She laughed. "Would have been interesting to see how much they went for."

"Don't even joke about it. Have you got your video?"

"Yes." She patted the pocket on her jacket.

"Good. Let's walk, then."
As they wandered down the side of the terminal, trying to avoid the crowds and luggage carts, Billy stayed between Grace and the wall, his head down.

"Feeling vulnerable?" she asked, not looking up at him.

"What the hell are you--ah, fuck. Yes, I am," he admitted.

"Why?"

"I don't mind being recognized. I don't even mind being approached by fans wanting autographs when all I'm trying to do is live my life. I'm astounded sometimes by how much they seem to care. But I don't want that today, Grace. Not when we have so little time."

She was surprised by the frustration in his voice. She discreetly touched his sleeve. "Relax, Billy. No one's even tried--"

"Three people are watching us right now," he cut her off. "I shouldn't have--I should have just hustled you right into that restaurant. Fuck. This walk was a bloody stupid idea. I should have put my fucking cap on. What the hell was I thinking?"

Sure enough, a young girl and her mother approached, all tentative smiles. Grace backed away a bit, feeling for Billy, who had a cheerful smile plastered on his face as he chatted with them in his thicker accent, signing an autograph. And then someone else was coming, and she started looking around, desperately trying to think of a way out.

And then she found it. Or hoped she had, anyway. A security guard just a little ways down was watching them, a slight frown on her face. Grace made directly for her, glancing back at Billy who had looked up as she walked away. She was a little surprised by the sudden flash of anger (anxiety disappointment) in his eyes.

"Excuse me," she said quietly. "I'm with that gentleman there--" she indicated Billy, who now had two teenaged girls and a father and son around him.

"Who is he?" the security guard asked, still frowning.

"His name is--well, he's an actor," she stammered, not sure what, or how much, she should say. "I hope you can help us. This trip was completely unscheduled, he didn't have a chance to make arrangements for--anything beforehand. Is there anywhere he--we can go, with a bit more privacy, until his flight?" she pleaded. "Otherwise that crowd's just going to keep growing."

"That's not acceptable," she said firmly, and Grace's heart sank. Until the woman continued, "We can't have crowds without the proper staff to supervise. What flight is he on?"

Grace wracked her brain, trying to remember the number, but couldn't. "British Airways, to London. 11:15."

"Follow me. His last name?"

"Boyd," Grace said meekly, hardly daring to breathe, following in her footsteps.

When they got to Billy, the group surrounding him had grown to ten, and he didn't even look up at her.

The guard quietly, politely said, "Excuse me, Mr. Boyd. We're ready for you now, if you could follow me, please?"
His head did come up at that, his gaze flickering from Grace to the guard and back again. "O' course. Thank ye." He smiled at the fans around him, handing back the paper in his grip to a star-struck twenty-something girl who blushed as she took it. "Thank ye so much," he said to everyone in general, "it's really kind, but Ah'm afraid Ah've got tae run."

Someone said, "Have a good flight."

He laughed. "Thanks--Ah hope Ah will!" And with a little wave and a "Bye!" he followed the security guard away, Grace bringing up the rear as unobtrusively as possible.

"Next time," the guard said decisively, "It might be advisable to stay in the departures lounge."

"She's not departing," Billy said equally decisively, cocking his head toward Grace. "And I'm here solely to meet with her." He paused, then said, "But I do apologize for the inconvenience I've caused. It was unintentional."

As she led them down a smaller, side corridor, the guard thawed a little, finally smiling. "Lord of the Rings, right? You were one of the hobbits."

Billy relaxed a little too. "Yes, I was."

"It took me a minute. My daughter loves those movies. I have to admit, I enjoyed them too."

"Thank you very much. How old is your daughter?"

"Sixteen. I think she's probably seen them ten times each." She stopped in front of a door marked '3B'.

"That's wonderful," Billy said genuinely. "I'm glad she enjoyed them so much."

"You can use this room until your flight," she said, unlocking the door with a key from the set at her waist. "It's just a conference room, but all our private lounges are already occupied. I'll send someone with some water for you, I'm afraid that's the best I can do."

"No, no, this is fantastic," Billy assured her. "Thank you so much. Is there a clock in there?"

"Yes, but I'll come get you a half hour before your flight and take you back to security."

Billy shook his head, amazed. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this--"

Completely won over at last, the security guard blushed a little and laughed. "You're not the first celebrity we've had to rescue. And you won't be the last." She ushered them through the door, closing it behind them.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Billy and Grace continue to explore their mutual attraction, and he talks her into a visit to Glasgow. They say goodbye--again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grace glanced around, taking in the fake ficus trees, the oversized chairs around the long sturdy wooden table, the sofa on the far side. She walked over, tossed her jacket on one of the chair backs, and turned to face Billy. Hands behind her, she hopped up onto the highly polished table top, her legs dangling. "C'mere, Billy."

He dropped his bag with a thump and walked into her arms, laying his head on her shoulder, suddenly weary. "I'm sorry, dear heart."

"You thought I was buggering off on you, didn't you?" she asked quietly, amused.

"Yes--no--I don't know. I guess so. I thought you were abandoning me, but then I realized no, you wouldn't do that. But maybe it scared you off. I didn't understand why the security guard."

She smiled. "Sorry about that. I didn't know what else to do. I just told her the crowd would keep growing. She didn't like the thought of that in her terminal."

"Luckily for me. Thank you, Grace. Rescuing hobbits seems to be your new lot in life."

"I'm fine with that." She rocked him slightly. "Relax, hon."

He turned his head, pressed his forehead against her neck. His breath huffed against her skin, then he said, "I'm trying. Sing?"

She continued to cradle him as she thought. She smiled, and started singing.

_Slow down, you move too fast
You've got to make the morning last
Just kickin' down the cobblestones
Lookin' for fun and feelin' groovy_

_Her voice was light (sweet gentle) in his ear._

_Got no deeds to do
No promises to keep
I'm dappled and drowsy and ready to sleep
Let the morningtime drop all its petals on me
Life, I love you
All is groovy_
His hum rumbled against her neck. "Lovely. That's it."

"I know."

"You do." He lifted his head, opened warm green eyes to look down at her, smiling again. "I don't know how, but you do."

"Oh, that one was easy," she brushed it off. "You can't stay tense listening to that song--it's too soft and light. It sets free something inside."

"Aye." His eyes dropped to her lips.

She released him, only to move her hands up to cup his face. "Better?" She tightened her knees against his hips.

"Better," he murmured, leaning in.

There was a loud knock at the door. Billy swung away, pulled away, every line in his body signaling instant tension and frustration and even anger. "Bloody fucking hell." He started toward the door.

Grace quickly caught at him, slid off the table, and gave him a gentle shove in the opposite direction. "Sofa. Go sit."

"No, I'm bloody well going to--"

"Shut the fuck up, Billy," she warned with a smile. "Sit. Now." She went and answered the door, but even in his annoyance he noted how she only opened the door narrowly, how she stood directly in front of it as she spoke quietly to the person outside. A moment later she said, "Yes. No, that's great--thanks very much." And then she had a tray in her hands, was turning back in and nudging the door closed behind her with her foot.

Billy sat on the couch, picking at a loose thread on his jeans, and watched her.

She came round the end of the table, set the tray down. "Water?"

"Are they coming back?"

"No. I put the 'Antisocial' sign out."

He glared. "Not funny, Grace."

She went over, sat on the sofa, and then flopped sideways to land with her head in his lap. "Yes it was. A little." She batted her eyelashes at him, a pert little grin on her lips.

Unwillingly, he felt one corner of his mouth turn up. "You're impossible."

She raised a hand, pressed the tip of her finger to his chin. "You're just figuring this out?"

"I'm slow."

"Apparently. And I seem to recall a certain someone saying 'We don't have much time. Let's not waste it, yeah?' Ring any bells?"

He closed his eyes, leaned his head against the back of the sofa. "Yeah. Maybe one."
She sat up, dropped a light kiss on his cheek, then got to her feet and crossed to the table. Picking up the slim stainless steel pitcher, she poured two glasses of water, carried them back over. "Drink this."

He opened his eyes, lifted his head, took the glass she held out. "Why?" He couldn't help a little smile.

"I don't know. Because we don't have any tea." As she sipped, she stood in front of the sofa, looking at the print hanging above it.

He chuckled. "All right. As long as there's a reason." He drank deeply, draining the glass, then leaned over and set it on the floor at the end of the sofa. Crossing one leg over the other, he hooked his foot around the back of her knee and pulled gently, enough to bend her knee, but not unbalance her. "You coming back to me?"

She immediately turned to put her glass on the table. Sat on the sofa, but at the far end from Billy. "Come here, then."

"What?"

"If you didn't get your walk, you can at least stretch out. Just don't fall asleep."

He gratefully curled up against her, his back pressing into her side, his feet hanging off the far armrest. She wrapped her arms tightly around him, and he leaned his head on her arm. "Why?" he asked.

"Why what?"

"Why can't I fall asleep?"

"Because then you'd have trouble sleeping on the plane."

"No I wouldn't."

"Are you that tired?" she asked softly.

"No." Then, "Yes."

"Poor thing. I thought you had a chance to relax while you were in L.A.?"

"Not really. Things to do, people to meet, as they say. And when I don't see the lads often, we tend to overdo it a wee bit."

"I can imagine. Is that why you're wound up tight as a drum?"

"I'm not," he refuted automatically.

"You are too. You're practically vibrating."

"Will you let me fall asleep in your lap someday?" he asked softly, almost inaudibly, ignoring her statement. "Because I can't think of anything I'd like more. Except," he added, "except maybe waking up in your lap."

"Oh, Billy." She kissed his hair. "Yes. Someday. When we've time."
"Time," he snorted. "So much for that, then."

Realization dawned. "That's what this is."

"What what is?"

"You. Why your hands are fists, why that vein in your temple is throbbing." She lifted one hand to stroke it soothingly.

His eyes closed almost as if in pain.

"Let it go. I know you're tired, I know you're stressed, I know you just want this press junket to be over. It almost is. And I know we don't have much time, but don't put so much on it--everything isn't so important it has to be now. We've got phone calls and emails. It'll do."

"I just want to go home, Grace," he muttered.

"I know you do." She caressed his cheek.

"And I want you with me."

"No you don't." She smiled.

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't," she repeated, chuckling, ruffling his hair. "You need a lot more time to become immune to my stubbornness and impossibility first."

"Immune to you?" he said in a low voice. "I hope not." He suddenly twisted in her arms, pulling at her until she was awkwardly bent to the side; he stretched himself taut to reach up and kiss her hard, his fingers tangling in her hair, holding her head down.

It took a few minutes for her position to reach the painful point. When it did, she tried to pull away, but Billy's fingers on the back of her head prevented her. She gently pushed him away with both hands. "Billy--"

"Grace, don't--"

"Shh." She put her hand over his lips, her pulse skipping when he opened his mouth to lick her fingers, when his tongue drew the tip of her forefinger in and he sucked on it.

"Billy," she protested breathily. "I need to move. My back's about to cramp up." She pulled her hand back as his mouth released her finger.

He immediately raised himself up with one arm, bringing his knees up underneath him. "Sorry, luv." He waited while she pushed herself upright, twisting a little to stretch out the sore muscle. "All right?"

"Fine," she smiled up at him.

He lowered himself down onto his hip, one leg bent underneath him. Reached out to her, tenderly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Come here," he murmured.

She shifted closer, lifting her leg over his to get as near as she could. Lifted her face and kissed him hungrily, her arms sliding around his neck as her tongue slid into his mouth.
His hands clutched at her as her tongue stroked his, his fingers digging into her waist, pushing her shirt up a few inches so he could feel her skin. She shivered as he ran his palm over the flat of her back, the heat traveling up her spine, and as he kissed her harder, she made a little noise into his mouth.

He tore his lips from hers to whisper raggedly, "Oh Grace, you're so lovely." He kissed his way along her jaw and down her throat. "I don't want to leave." He nuzzled her neck, gave it a gentle little bite, making her tremble. "I want you."

Her hands went into his hair. Her head tilted back.

His fingers traveled over her, barely touching, skimming along until they clasped her face and he lifted her head, plunged his tongue into her mouth, and just as quickly withdrew. His slender fingers stroked down her throat, their slightly rough tips evidence of his years of guitar. "You're unbelievably sexy," he murmured. The top button of her shirt came open beneath his hands, and he placed a kiss in the hollow of her throat. "Sensual. Soft." The second button slipped open. He kissed down below her collarbone. "Hot." Third button, and he was kissing the tops of her breasts. "Passionate." He cupped one of those breasts in his hand, massaging gently.

Grace moaned.

The sultry sound nearly undid Billy, and he drew a deep, shuddery breath. "I need you," he rasped, then pressed his lips against her neck again as his hand slid inside her shirt, his fingers teasing her nipple to hardness through the lace of her bra.

"Billy. Please. Don't--"

"Don't what, Grace?" he asked against her ear, his tongue darting out to flick her earlobe before he urged, "Tell me."

"Don't leave," she whispered. Her hands went to his head, her fingers in his hair, and she pulled him up to kiss him fiercely.

Billy pulled away after a minute to catch his breath. He pulled her into a tight embrace, burying his face in her hair. "I have to."

"I know. But don't."

"Oh, Grace," he said with a half-laugh. "I wish I'd found you years ago. Before life got so hectic."

"If you'd found me years ago, you wouldn't have looked at me twice," she murmured, curling her legs up until she was sitting in his lap. She felt rather than heard, the catch in his breath. "It needed to be now."

"Aye. It did, didn't it?" he said huskily. "Please, wee girl, come visit me while I'm home. I can't wait until God only knows when to see you again." He slid an arm underneath her and lifted her a bit while he repositioned himself more comfortably, stretching his legs out.

"I can't."

"Why?" He looked down, saw a tempting expanse of pale skin through her still-open shirt, lifted a finger to gently trace across it. "And don't you dare tell me it's just the plane fare, or I'll bloody well throttle you."

She chuckled quietly. "It's a number of things. It's too short notice to get time from work. And
Christmas is very soon--it's too important in my family to wander off like that. And yes, Billy, it is partially the plane fare." As his hand came up and pretended to strangle her, she giggled, turned her face in to his chest.

"You work from home. Bring your bloody laptop with you. And come for a week, you can be home in time for Christmas." He rubbed her shoulder. "You're going to shoot that down too, aren't you?"

"'Fraid so. Christmas is a long story, I won't take our time to explain now. But I start having stuff to do by the eighteenth. And I am not bringing work with me if I come!"

"If?" he questioned ominously.

She smiled, kissed his chest through his shirt. "When. I am not spending nine hours a day working during my first ever trip to Europe."

"Well--I suppose that's fair enough. All right, it's not going to happen this time. I admire your loyalty to your family." He ran a hand down her side, across her hip, caressed her thigh. "But Grace MacPherson, listen to me closely. When other circumstances allow, you are coming to visit me. And no fucking plane fare is going to stop that. I'd buy you ten tickets, if it meant getting you, and your blushing and your singing and your laughing and your tears and even your stubbornness, by my side. Understood?"

She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. "I understand. And thank you. But--"

"No buts."

"Too bad. And shut up, it's my turn. I'd need to contribute at least a bit. I can't explain it, but I would really feel like shit just letting you fly me over, Billy. It wouldn't be right."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he growled, kissing the top of her head to take the sting out of his harsh words. "Do you know how selfish that is?"

"Selfish?" she protested. "How the hell do you figure that?"

"Grace, I could buy you your plane ticket right now. Do you think I don't understand what it would mean for you to save money to put toward one? I know damn well it would mean taking the cash from somewhere else, probably from paying back your debt. And I know how you feel about that. But you're willing to let me carry the guilt for making your life harder, instead of just swallowing your bloody pride over not taking a fucking gift."

"Billy--"

"And besides," he continued relentlessly. "It's not like I'd be doing it just for you. It would be every bit as much for me."

She tried to lift her head to look up at him, but he put a hand up and trapped her against his chest. "Billy, I--"

"So when time permits, Grace, you will bloody well accept the fucking ticket, get your little arse on a plane and you will come to Glasgow."

"Billy, would you just--"
"No. I don't want to discuss it anymore." He was actually getting a little angry, although he was trying not to let it show, was trying to keep his tone conversational. "Just drop it for now, Grace. It'll be months away anyway, so leave it."

She finally batted his hand away, sat up to glare at him. "Shut the fuck up, Boyd! God, you really don't like to let anyone else get a fucking word in edgewise, do you? All right, okay? All right, I'll take the fucking ticket and bloody well come visit you in fucking Glasgow! Happy now?"

"Ecstatic!" he snapped; then snorted, and the frown slowly cleared from his face as he started to chuckle. "You just agreed. What the hell are we shouting about?"

"I don't know about you," she said grumpily, "but I was yelling just to be heard over your nattering."

His tension released into a long laugh, and he wiped the corners of his eyes.

Grace looked at him sideways. "You really are tired, aren't you?"

"You mean it?" he asked, looking at her fondly.

"That you're tired?"

"That you'll come."

"Yes. You were spot on. I'm ashamed of that, and I'm sorry." Her eyes dropped.

"Nothing to be ashamed of, dear heart. Pride and stubbornness can be useful tools to get you through the rough spots. Just don't get carried away."

"At least, not with you, eh?" she asked wryly.

"Exactly."

"I'll try."

"That's all anyone can do." With one finger under her chin, he tipped her face up for a kiss.

A moment later she pulled away, studying his eyes. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Uh-oh. Aye, go on."

"If I come to Glasgow--"

"Why the hell do ye keep saying 'if'?"

"Sorry. It's just--it sounds so foreign to my life. Hard to believe, that's all. When I come to Glasgow--"

"Much better, thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you finished?"

He grinned. "Continue."

"If it takes as long to plan as this conversation is taking, I'll be fifty before I get there, but when I come to Glasgow, what are the first three things you want to show me?"
He raised his eyebrow, a twinkle in his eye. "I'm glad you asked--"

She quickly cut him off. "And none of them had better include the words 'zipper', 'pants', 'bed', or 'motel room by the hour'."

He laughed. "Damn. Foiled again."

"I'm on to you, Boyd."

"Oh, I hope so," he said suggestively.

"Fuck me," she sighed. Then, flustered, "I mean--ah bloody hell. I'm really good at saying that at the worst possible moment."

Billy worked hard to keep his voice even. "From my point of view, that was far from the worst."

She poked his side. "Whatever. Get on with it."

He chuckled, kissed her forehead. "First place I'll show you? My new house."

"Lovely. Second?"

"My local. Of course, now that I've moved I may have to find a closer pub. But I'll have one by the time you come."

"Undoubtedly. Third?"

He hesitated. "Not sure. Probably…either the RSAMD, or…or a council estate in Cranhill."

"What's that?"

"Where I grew up."

She was surprised. Softly said, "I would like that very much, Billy."

"Well, it could be educational, at any rate," he said lightly.

"Oh, I like learning new things. Are there night classes?" she teased.

"What, at the Advanced School of Billy Boyd? Aye."

"And will I graduate with honours?"

He nodded gravely. "If you apply yourself diligently, then yes, there's a good chance."

She laughed delightedly. "I'm very good at applying myself, Professor Boyd."

"I'm glad to hear it," he croaked, caught off-guard.

"So what do you think? Am I getting better at flirting? I've been doing my homework," she grinned.

"Definitely A level. Coming along nicely." He took a deep breath. "Now it's my turn. I'll make this quick--someone should be here soon to tell me it's time to go. I have a question for you--do you like surprises?"

"Good ones, yes."
He rolled his eyes. "Well, no one likes bad ones, smartass. So you wouldn't go mad as toast if I, say…just showed up on your doorstep some day?"

"Mad as toast. That's fantastic. But what do you mean?"

"It wouldn't happen often," he said hastily. "In fact, it might not ever work out. But I was thinking, if I found myself with a day or two free, say on my way to or from L.A. It's not hard to switch a flight."

Her smile grew. "That would be really fun."

Billy gave her a quick kiss. "I'm glad you like the idea. Here's the part you may not like. What if I show up and you're away?"

"I hardly ever go away right now. So I'm sure I'd mention it in an email if I was going to."

"And what if you're just out for the afternoon?"

Her smile faltered a little. "What are you asking?"

"Ye need to think about this and give me your answer later. Would you be willing to give me a spare key to your flat? Then I can show up and not have to worry about sitting on your step with my luggage for two hours while you're out for a walk. And I can surprise you properly."

"Billy--"

"Don't answer now," he interrupted. "I know what a short time it's been. And I know it's the key to your home. But I don't live here--and I could surprise you--and you can trust me--and I won't steal your soup bowls." He kissed her hard, quickly. "Take your time and think about it."

Her hands on his face, she reached up and kissed him back.

Something in the way she touched him, moved slightly against him, turned Billy on. He made a noise deep in his throat and his fingers traveled back toward the skin exposed by her still partially-open shirt. He caressed her throat, traced the hollow at its base, smoothed down between her breasts. His lips left hers to follow along her jaw, dropping light quick kisses as he made his way to the nape of her neck. His breath hot on her skin, he kissed open-mouthed the spot he'd quickly learned made her whimper.

She did. Then unsteadily murmured, "Billy."

"Yes. Yes, Grace."

There was a knock at the door.

Billy dropped his head against hers, breathing a single word. "Shite."

She twisted her head to kiss the first bit of skin her lips came in contact with. "So soon." She sat up and quickly did up her shirt.

The knock was repeated.

"Coming--be right there!" Billy called. He let Grace go. "Will you walk with me? Or are you heading out?"

"I'll come." She got to her feet, held her hand out to help him up. They donned their jackets, Billy
grabbed his bag, and they left the room.

It was the same guard, come as promised, to deliver him to security prior to boarding. She was friendly, but didn't speak to them as they walked, and she stayed slightly in front of them. Grace thought perhaps she was leaving them time for any last minute things that needed to be said.

"I'll email you," she murmured.

"You'd better. I'll call you before I leave London."

"Okay. You need anything, you call." She had to step behind him in single file for a moment, but she could hear the smile in his voice.

"I will, dear heart."

"Shh, Billy," she warned, glancing around. Studying the back of his neck, she came to a sudden decision. She pulled her keys out of her pocket and worried one off the ring as they walked. She put the keychain back in her pocket just as she was able to walk alongside him again. "I'll email Elijah, but when you talk to them, tell him and Dom thanks for the video. And thank you, too, for letting them do that. I'll guard it with my life."

"I know," he smiled. "I think 'Lij is still going to send you one of my works of art."

"Really? Cool."

Billy put his hand on her back to usher her through a small crowd. He discreetly caressed her with his thumb, although he doubted she could feel it.

They arrived at security, and Grace felt her stomach clench. But Billy turned to their escort.

"I want to thank you for your help," he told her.

She smiled. "My pleasure. But next time I'd suggest arranging a private lounge in advance."

"I'll do that," he laughed. "Believe me, I'll do that."

"Mr. Boyd?" she asked suddenly. "I hate to ask, I know you have to go--"

"Your daughter?" he smiled.

She laughed, relieved. "Otherwise I don't dare go home."

"Well we can't have that--I'd be happy to. Do you have any paper?"

The guard pulled out a little notepad and pen, handing them to Billy.

Checking the daughter's name, Billy quickly signed the autograph, handed it back. The guard thanked him, and said, "You only have a moment, I'm afraid. Then head to that gentleman there--" she pointed out another security officer, "--and he'll check you through." After a repeated thank you from Billy, she left.

"Billy," Grace said urgently, her hands trembling. "You have to go--it's almost time for your flight."

"I know. I'm debating whether or not to kiss you again," he said softly.

"Don't. It's all right." She pressed the key into his palm. "I thought about it. Come when you can."
Billy looked down, took in what was laying in his hand. Swiftly pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you, Grace. If you change your mind, just say the word, I'll send it straight back. But you can trust me."

"I know," she whispered into his ear. "Now go. If you miss your flight, you're screwed."

"Tell me about it." He let her go, put a hand to her cheek. "Take care, dear heart. Until soon."

"Bye, Billy." She dug her fingernails into her palm and offered him a clear, bright smile. "Kick London PR ass."

He laughed. "I will now." With a quick caress of her cheekbone, he turned and hurried away.

Grace watched him go, the smile frozen to her face in case he looked back. She hoped he wouldn't.

He didn't.

She left.

Grace dropped into her seat, a little breathless. She'd run to catch the bus before it left, not wanting to wait even the short time until the next one. She closed her eyes briefly, exhausted. She had been perfectly truthful with Billy earlier when she'd told him she was all over the map when he was around. Everything was so much more intense, there was so much more crammed into their short time, and she went from high to low and back again so fast her head was still spinning. And she already missed him.

She shifted in her seat, looking out the window at the lights being left behind. *That's enough of that,* she told herself. *Don't, don't, don't. What was it he'd asked me to email him? Oh, right. A Canadian meal. That's easy enough. And I still have to send the list of songs I've sung.*

As she started mentally listing them, her eyes spotted lights moving in the sky. A plane climbing. Suddenly she had *Leaving on a Jet Plane* playing in her head and before she could help it tears started to her eyes and she had to press a hand hard to her mouth to keep from sobbing out loud.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)* by Paul Simon.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

More emails fly, and Grace soothes Billy's jagged edges.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Grace pulled the blanket tighter over her lap, shivering, and opened her email. As she skimmed her new messages, marking several for responses, she sipped her hot tea and wriggled her toes in their thick socks. Finally finished reading, she began to type.

Wednesday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Jetlag much?

Good morning, dearest Billy. Well, good afternoon in London. I hope your interviews are over and that you're catching a quick nap; you must be exhausted. Were you able to sleep on the plane at all, or did the brat behind you keep kicking your seat? I hope you made it to the hotel in time to sneak a shower before your interviews like you wanted to. How did they go? For your sake, short, I hope. Be thankful you're not still here, it's freezing cold today!

I just wanted to say thank you for coming yesterday, Billy, and also for dinner. I don't know if I said that last night or not--I may have been a little too distracted by actually having you there with me. You're not good for my concentration, you know. Do something about that, will you? Anyway, as per usual, words are letting me down, and all I can find to say is thank you, and I hope you know your flying visit meant an awful lot to me.

You are like Georgia
(always on my mind)
Grace

P.S. Wow. Who knew I could be so horribly sappy? Sorry about that.
P.P.S. Am watching the video. Fan-fucking-tastic. You were absolutely right, it had to be seen to be believed! More later.

Wednesday
To: Elwood
From: Grace
Subject: Elwood Productions, Inc.

You are the best sweetie on the face of the earth, you know that? Thank you--you and Dom both--for thinking of taping Billy yesterday. It is too fucking funny for words! You guys had me laughing so hard I cried. The best one was that gorgeous blonde--what was she, 7 feet tall?? I'm SO glad I don't live in L.A.!--that patted him on the head. God, I nearly pissed myself. And judging by the really bad camera work for the following five minutes, I'm guessing you did too? And that guy that stopped to talk to him--any idea what he said? Billy looked like he couldn't decide whether to deck him or laugh at him. Fucking priceless, sweetie. You're awesome. Thanks for your help (aiding & abetting?) with the wagers. If there's another one, I'll be sure to let you know!

Well, Elijah, thanks again for the best laugh I've had in ages. Who's got the distribution rights for Elwood Productions, Inc.? I think you're going to be big, sweetie--real big. :) Take care of yourself, and say hi to Dom for me. Or you could give him a big kiss for me. You know, whatever.

Going to watch the video again,
Grace

Wednesday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: Jetlag Much?

Hello, dear heart. A very quick note before I fall into bed. Today has been a bit of a blur.

Thanks for your email. I hope you didn't have any trouble getting home last night. There was no rotten child sitting behind me on the plane--for which I am eternally grateful. I managed to sleep for part of the trip, but not as long as I wanted--and no time for a nap this afternoon, either. On the plus side, I did have time for that shower. Which made for 3 less smelly interviews this afternoon (only 2 left for tomorrow) and a party at the agency tonight. Isn't it awful that I'm not even sure what the party was for?

God, I'm tired. I think. I've changed time zones so often in the last few weeks I don't know which way is up. Ah well--not again for a while. I'm sure you know this but because I am tired my brain is insisting I need to tell you anyway. Glasgow is the same time zone as London, which is 5 hours ahead of you. But you already knew that, didn't you? So now it's your turn to call me at 3 a.m.! (I just don't guarantee I will answer.)

As for yesterday, dear heart, you are more than welcome. I am glad you could get there. It did me a world of good to see you and talk to you again. You may call it sap, but I call it sweet, and I have re-read your email 3 times already and knowing I have a certain key on my key ring has given me a smile all day.

Now that was sap.

Time for bed. Four hours tonight on top of only three on the plane last night is not enough but it's
the best I'm going to do.

If I ever need a codename for you, I am going to call you Georgia.
Yours,
Bills

P.S. I am glad you enjoyed the video. That's the last bet for a while, right? Right??

Thursday
To: Grace
From: Elwood
Subject: Re: Elwood Productions, Inc.

Hi dollface! I'm glad you liked the video, Dom & I had a great time making it. We would have spiffed it up on the computer if we'd had time, but it was pretty good as it was. Not bad for a directorial/cameraman/production debut, huh? We were about a half a block away, though, so the sound is shit. You also can't really see it on the tape, but so many people walked by and like, a minute later did a double-take down the road! Billy couldn't hear us unless we shouted--which, as you'll have heard on the tape, we only did once or twice. And yes, that Amazon blonde fucking KILLED Dom & I, patting him on the head like a five-year-old! Unbelievably funny. Oh, and the guy that stopped to talk to him--I don't know what he said, I meant to ask Billy about that myself, but I forgot. If you find out, let me know.

Speaking of forgetting, before I do--Dom wants your email address and phone number. Okay if I pass them along?

I have a surprise on its way to you. I couriered it yesterday, so it should arrive tomorrow. Let me know if it doesn't. It's nothing major, so relax!

Well, I gotta run, dollface. Email me when you get a chance and let me know if you got your little package. I hope you enjoyed your time with Billy yesterday--I know he was looking forward to seeing you. Take care!

Cheers,
'Lij

P.S. If Billy can lick my face, I can give Dom a kiss for you. News at 11.
A package? Elijah Wood, what did you do?? No, really, tell me. Aw, come on, tell me!

Batting my eyelashes,
Grace

Thursday
To: Grace
From: Elwood
Subject: Re: Elwood Productions, Inc.

You can bat your lovely eyelashes all you like, you'll just have to wait. For pete's sake, it's only one day! Courage, Camille.

Cheers,
'Li

Thursday
To: Elwood
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Elwood Productions, Inc.

Camille, dollface, Penelope…I'm going to forget my own fucking name at this rate. You have until tomorrow, sweetie.

Toodles,
Grace

Thursday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Sap Much?

You nearly left me speechless, dearest one. Enough said. (And codename? I feel like a spy.)

Look at you, partying all over the globe! I hope you enjoyed the one at your agency, even if you didn't know what it was for. And no, I don't think that's awful at all--I think it's completely understandable. Hell, Billy, if I had your schedule, I'd forget my own name inside a week and completely lose my mind within a month. (No smart comments, please.) I don't know how you do
I'll have you know that video nearly killed me. You looked so serious, and intent, and adorably pleased with yourself. The people stopping to look were so funny, looking for the most part like they thought you were off your rocker. But that little old lady, I'm assuming she's the one who told you where you could find some art lessons? The one in the pink sweater? She was absolutely priceless. Sweet and lovely and smiling at you like you were her own grandson and she wanted to take your picture home and put it up on her fridge! Just…perfect.

Well, I should probably go get some work done. I'll email you again before you leave London, though. I hope your other two interviews go (went) well today, and whatever else you're doing is going to be a total and utter success--because I said so.

Thinking of you,
Grace

Grace was wrapped up in a movie on TV that night when the phone rang. Setting aside her glass, she absently picked up the handset, still focused on the screen. "Hello?"

"Hi Grace."

"Billy! I wasn't expecting to hear from you tonight." She muted the sound on the television. "Good grief, what time is it there?"

"Two. Am I interrupting anything?" he asked quietly.

"Just a wild and crazy party for me and all my blankets."

"You treat your blankets well."

Grace turned off the TV. "If they leave, I freeze to death. I want to keep them happy."

"You're a little odd, you know that?"

"So I've been told. What's wrong, Billy?"

"Who says anything's wrong?"

"You do."

"No, I didn't," he protested half-heartedly.

Grace sat back into the corner of her small sofa, pulling her feet up on to the cushion under the blanket. "An unexpected phone call at two in the morning, and you haven't laughed at me," she said gently. "Did something happen, or just a bad day?"

He was silent. Finally said, "Bad day. I just wanted to hear your voice."

"I'm sorry, hon. Did you want to talk about it?"
"Nothing to talk about, really. I woke up on the wrong side of the bed is all, I guess. A day of frustrations and arguments and fuckups. None of them major, but all on the same day." His voice was gravelly, edgy.

"Isn't that the worst? Who did you argue with?"

"My agent. Then Stewart."

"Nothing terminal, though?"

"Nah. I just hate it when they both get at me at the same time."

"Were they picking on wee Billy? Can I yell at them for you? I'll do it."

She could hear a small smile in his voice. "You would, too, wouldn't you?"

"I told you I would," she agreed. "Anyone picks on wee Billy, they have to deal with me, remember?"

"Aye. I remember. It feels fantastic."

"What got fucked up?"

He snorted. "If it hadn't happened today, it would have been funny. I went to the agency to pick up a few scripts. They had already couriered them to me at the hotel. I went all the way back to the hotel to find two, not three scripts, both of which are for female roles."

"Wow. Your agency trying to tell you something?" she grinned.

"No. They're getting cheap. Instead of a real courier service they used someone's fourteen-year-old daughter. She got them all wrong."

"Poor girl."

He dryly said, "Only if I get my scripts before I leave tomorrow. Otherwise dead girl."

"You nasty man. The fault lies with the fucking idiot who didn't make sure she had it straight before sending her out."

"I know," he exhaled noisily. "Ignore me, I'm pissy."

"I don't suppose either of the scripts you got calls for a redheaded Canadian, does it?"

"Afraid not, luv."

"Damn," she sighed dramatically. "Keep your eyes out for me."

"If I keep them out, how will I see it?"

"A joke? Did you just make a joke? 'Cos I could have sworn you just made a joke--"

He finally laughed. "All right, all right. Cut it out! I call for a little sympathy, maybe a shoulder to cry on, and what do you do? You mock me mercilessly."

"It's what I'm good at."

"That and helping me get to sleep. Now that I'm not grinding my teeth anymore, want to give it a
"You want me to grind your teeth?" she teased.

He grinned. "Smartass."

"Also good at that, yes."

"You could write a book on it, wee girl. 'Smartassing For Dummies'."

She laughed delightedly. "Oh, I could! That would be fun! Now, the question is do I try the international version, or just stick to my strengths and write the Canadian edition--'Smartassing For Dummies, Eh'?"

"Oh God, I've created a monster."

"No. I was monstrous long before I met you."

He laughed out loud. "Of that I have absolutely no doubt."

"Thank you. Very kind of you to say so, I'm sure."


"Anytime, hon. Ready to try and get to sleep now?"

"I think so."

"Go climb in while I get my guitar. I think I've got just the ticket."

"Good." He sounded relieved.

She put the phone down on the small table beside her sofa. Got her guitar out of its case, gave it a quick tuning check. Picked up the phone again. "You there?"

"Yes."

"All tucked up nice and cozy?" she smiled.

"Sure."

"Okay. Relax. Have a good stretch, then let it go," she said, pitching her voice softer and lower. "Close your eyes, take a deep breath. Where are you tense?"

"My shoulders. Neck."

"All right, hon. Remember that little relaxation routine we went through on the phone in Toronto?"

"Yes."

"Go through that again while I'm getting set here. Let the tension drain from your neck, down and out your toes. Feel it drain away with your heartbeat. I'm going to put the phone down--I'll play the first couple lines, then pick up and make sure you can hear me okay. I'm not sure how this will work."

"Okay." There was less of an edge in his voice.
I am heading for a time of quiet, when my restlessness is past
Grace picked up the phone again. "How is it?"
"I can hear the guitar fine," he said. "But you're not quite loud enough."
"I'll try again." She repositioned the phone and sang a little louder.
I am heading for a time of quiet
"How's that?" she asked.
"Perfect, dear heart."

I am heading for a time of quiet, when my restlessness is past
And I can lie down on my blanket and release my fists at last
I am heading for a time of solitude, of peace without illusions
When the perfect circle marries all beginnings and conclusions
And when they say that you're not good enough
Well the answer is you're not
But who are they, or what is it
That eats at what you've got
With the hunger of ambition
For the change inside the purse
They are the handcuffs on the soul
And worse
I am heading for a place of quiet
Where the sage and sweetgrass grow
By a lake of sacred water
From the mountain's melted snow

She picked up the handset again. "How are you doing, hon?"
It took him a minute to answer. When he did, his voice was thick and shaking. "You floored me with that one, Grace."
"Oh, God, I'm sorry Billy, I didn't mean to upset you--"
"No--no. That was...unbelievably beautiful. Fucking incredible. Will you sing it to me again?"
"Are you sure?"
"Please."
She put the phone down again and repeated the song. With a little smile, she changed a couple words for Billy, slowing it down even further.

I am heading for a place of quiet
Where the gorse and heather grow
By a lake of sacred water
From the mountain's melted snow

"Are you okay, Billy?"
"Aye. Thank you, dear heart. And thank you for that different verse, I loved it." He sounded
mostly under control. "Whose song is that? I have to get a copy."

"Well, the lyrics and melody are by Paul Simon, it's called *Quiet*. But the guitar accompaniment is my own."

"It was lovely. It's where I'm trying--where I desperately want to be."

"Make it--in your new house. It can be your refuge, your haven," she said softly. "A place you can go to, to be quiet, after the craziness of your world."

"Yes."

She sighed. "I've made you think too much, haven't I? Now you'll never get to sleep. I shouldn't have--"

"Oh yes, you should have," he interrupted her quietly. "And I'm so glad you did. I haven't felt at peace for a minute in the last forty-eight hours, and now I do. Know any more lullabies? You'll send me right off with one of those," he smiled.

"Oh geez. Let me think… All right, this isn't really a lullaby, but my mom used to sing it to me at night, and I've always loved it."

*In Dublin's fair city*  
*Where the girls are so pretty*  
*I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone*  
*She wheeled her wheelbarrow--*

"Grace?"

She stopped, surprised. He'd never interrupted her mid-song before. "Yes, Billy?"

"You sing that beautifully--but can you sing something else?"

"Of course."

"How about the hobo one again? I liked that one."

"Okay." She sang the first lullaby she had ever given him, days (years eons) ago on the beach. When she finished, she heard him sigh deeply.

"Mmm. Thanks, luv."

"Anytime, Billy, you know that."

"You're a good woman. Do you know that?"

"I know you're sleep-deprived," she said with a smile. "Goodnight, dearest Bills."

"No, wait."

"No. It'll keep until tomorrow. Goodnight."

"But--"he mumbled.

"Goodnight," she said gently.
"Night."

Dial tone.

Grace sat for a moment on her sofa, staring at nothing. Finally pushed down the feeling of loneliness that had been following her all day, put her guitar away, and went to bed. She huddled deep under the blankets and closed her eyes, hoping sleep would not be too long coming.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Quiet* by Paul Simon and *Cockles and Mussels* by James Yorkston.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Elijah and Dom call Grace and convince her to host a surprise party for Billy. More emails are exchanged.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grace burst through her door, slamming it behind her and immediately went to her heater, giving it a swift kick. Puffing, she kicked off her boots, set her groceries on the counter, dropped the long poster tube she'd picked up at the post office, and began stripping gloves off her red hands. She removed her jacket, hung it up, and set about putting away her groceries. That done, she plugged the kettle in, and while she waited for it to boil, checked her email.

Friday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Grace=Valium

Then again, you're better than Valium any day. (And I mean that in the best possible way.) Thanks for helping me sleep again, wee girl. I am still a bit of a wreck today, but not nearly as bad as I would have been without you. I downloaded the Paul Simon song today--I like it better the way you sang it, but this will do until I can coerce you into the recording studio.

Good news. The script fuckup has been rectified. A very red-faced young lady came to the door first thing this morning (any earlier and she would definitely have still been in my bad books) with three scripts for me. And yes, before you ask, I was very nice to her. So at least now I have reading material for the next while.

Today there has been much less shite, thank God. The two interviews, but they came to the hotel, so I didn't have to budge. I called Stewart and apologized for yesterday, and my agent called me and did the same. So all is now mostly right with the world.

Sorry this is so short, wee girl, but I am off to dinner and then to see Ian's new play. Sorry, that's Sir Ian, to the likes of you and me!

If you have time, send me an email. After tomorrow morning (far too early) I won't be able to access it for a while, unless I find a cyber café near the house. Hopefully it won't be more than a week. But I will call you anyway. So make it a good one--tell me everything you're doing this week!

Take care of yourself, dear heart. I remain,
Yours,
Bills

P.S. I've been listening to the Peter Gabriel album you gave me. I think I'm a convert. Which one do I get next?
P.P.S. Love To Be Loved only made me THINK about throwing myself from a bridge, and not actually do it. That's good, right?

Later that day, Grace was working at her computer when her phone rang. She hit the timeclock she used to keep track of her hours, then picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hey, dollface."

"Elijah! What a lovely surprise. How are you, sweetie?"

Before he could answer, she heard Dom bellow in the background, "Wotcher, Penelope!"

She laughed, asked Elijah, "'Wotcher'? What's that?"

"God only knows. I'm great, how are you?"

"Good. Thank you so much for your package, I did get it today. Billy's quite the little artist, isn't he?" She grinned, looking up at the stick-person drawing she had already pinned to her wall.

"It arrived safely, then?"

"It did. The tube did its job perfectly. Thanks so much for sending it, sweetie, I really appreciate it. Someday I'll even get it framed."

"I'm glad you got it--I thought you'd get a kick out of it," he smiled.

"I most definitely did. So what's up?" She leaned back in her chair.

"We need your help."

"Name it."

"Can I have that in writing before I tell you what we want?" he asked archly.

"On second thought, no fucking way. Start talking."

His grin came clearly across the line. "I didn't think so. Okay, I need you to not freak out."

"Elijah Wood, what have you done?" she demanded.

"Nothing!" he protested.

"Was it Dom? It was Dom, wasn't it? What did he do?"

"Dom didn't do anything either! Way to not freak out, dollface."

She heard Dom shout, "Shut your trap and listen, Pen!"
"Do me a favour, 'Lij, walk over there and kick him in the shin."

"No thanks. You obviously haven't met him yet."

Dom yelled, "Can we get on with this?"

Elijah laughed. "All right. Will you promise not to jump down my throat, and let me finish?"

"What do you take me for?" she asked indignantly.

"Hello?" Elijah replied in disbelief. "Were you here for the first part of this conversation?"

"Fine. Go ahead. Talk. Just let me know when I'm allowed to respond, eh?"

"You're lucky Dom's not on the phone. You'd really regret saying that."

"What? She'd regret what?" Dom piped up. "Give me the bloody phone."

"Piss off, you sonofabitch. You're not helping! All right, Grace--"

Silence.

"Grace?"

Silence.

Elijah sighed. "How old are you? Okay, it's about the party." He paused, cringing, waiting for her to explode. Nothing. "Wow. Maybe we'll get through this yet. Can I ruin a surprise for you in order to get Billy really good?"

Silence.

"Oh, for--It wasn't rhetorical, Grace. You may respond now," he said with extreme politeness.

"Are you sure?" she asked with unholy glee. "I wouldn't want to jump down your throat."

"You are infuriating, you know that?" he said, laughter in his voice.

"I know. Yes, you may ruin a surprise for me, if it means getting Billy."

"As I think you know, he's coming back to L.A. at the end of January."

"Yes. And you're having a surprise birthday party for him. Only seven months ahead of schedule."

"Right. Except now he's decided--here's where I ruin your surprise--" he explained, "--to drop in on you for a few days. Including the weekend we were going to have the party."

"Oh, so you want me to make sure he knows I'm not available then?" she said easily. "I can do that."

"No! No--on the contrary, we want you to take him out somewhere for the day, and when you get back to your place, we'll all be there for his surprise party. It would be fantastic!" He held his breath, praying she responded the way he and Dom had predicted.

She sounded disappointed. "I'd love to, 'Lij, but my apartment seriously isn't big enough for more than five people. I'm sorry. I'll tell him I'm away at the end of January, though, and then he'll go straight to L.A."
"Can you think of any other place in Toronto we could do it?" he asked, like he was thinking off the top of his head. "How about that hotel we were in, it was amazing. It's just--I think he suspects something is up. Orlando's not good at keeping secrets, I think he might have let something slip. Or even better--" he made it sound like a sudden brainwave, "--is there somewhere outside the city? It would suck if we got nailed by the press. A cabin we could rent, maybe?" He and Dom crossed their fingers tightly.

"Well," she hesitated. "There's my cottage…"

Elijah wordlessly punched a fist into the air. Dom grinned, and thumped the arm of his chair in triumph. "That would be cool," Elijah said calmly. "He'd never suspect you were in on anything, since you supposedly don't know he's coming."

"Uhh--" she said uncertainly. "How many people are we talking?"

"Not too many…maybe twelve, tops?"

"We've only got three beds and a bunkbed. That's eight, if they're very friendly. And a sofa. It's not enough."

"Ah, sure it is," he said breezily. "We can bring some air mattresses, blankets--and the drunk people get the floor. Oh, this'll be fucking perfect, Grace--he'll never see it coming!"

"Well," she said slowly, "I guess…It would be kind of fun to surprise him like that," she admitted. "But--"

"Oh, don't worry about the details right now," he rode over her words. "We'll figure them out, never fear. It'll be awesome, trust me."

"What days are we looking at?"

"January twenty-second to twenty-fifth. In there somewhere. I'll find out for sure when Billy's planning on 'surprising' you and let you know."

"Can I talk to Dom for a minute?"

"Oh--sure. Here he is." Elijah held the phone out to Dom, shrugging at his look of enquiry.

"Hey, Penelope."

"Hi Dom. How are you?"

"Any better and I couldn't stand myself. What's up?"

"Is this really a good idea?"

"The party? Absolutely!" he assured her.

"It's just--'Lij seems a little…offhand about it."

"Trust me, Pen, it'll be fantastic. We'll plan it all out, take care of everything. Don't worry. All you'll have to do is get us there, and then get Billy there."

"Are you sure?"

"I just said so, didn't I?" he challenged.
"Don't get shirty with me, Mr. Monaghan! I don't know. It's just…this is a little…scary."

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice suddenly more gentle.

"I'm not sure, to be honest," she admitted. "I'm not--not comfortable in the world you guys inhabit. I don't know any of you except Billy and 'Lij, a little. I don't even know you."

"You do a little. And you will a lot. We'll give you final say on everything, it won't get out of control."

"That's not it--"

He snorted. "Like hell it isn't."

"Fuck. Maybe it is."

"It's all right. I don't blame you, we dropped it on you out of nowhere. Look, we'll let you go for now. Think about it--and think of the look on Billy's face when he shows up to surprise you, and ends up walking into a room full of his nearest and dearest. How can we not do that for him?"

She smiled. "Shall I get the violin?"

He winced. "Too much?"

"A little. But yes, that does sound good. All right."

"All right what?" he asked, just to be sure.

"We'll do it."

"Yes!" he shouted. "That's my Penelope!"

"Not yours."

"Okay, whatever. Billy's Penelope."

"Wrong again."

"See, this is where you fuck up my door number three."

She smiled. "Sorry."

"No you're not," he disagreed good-naturedly. "You love turning me arse over teakettle."

"Maybe a little. But only because it's such a challenge."

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said dryly.

"Of course you will, that's how it was meant."

"'Lij was right, you're infuriating."

"You would know. Listen, Dom--"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really sorry about earlier this week--you know, on the phone."
"Bollocks. Don't be an arse."

"It was dirty pool, and I'm sorry," she persisted.

"Then so am I for being a prat. Are we done?"

She smiled again. "I guess we are."

"Good. We'll call you again soon with an update."

"Sounds good. Billy's very lucky to have you two."

"Isn't he just?" Dom agreed cheerfully.

"Say bye to 'Lij for me."

"I will. See ya, Pen."

"See you, Dom."

---

Friday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Grace=Valium

Good morning, deariest of dearies. I hope you had a better night's sleep and are feeling more yourself today.

I'm glad you got your scripts--anything exciting on tap?

I got some good news today (for a change!). I now have a whopping grand total of 8 papers to do every day! Which of course gives me a couple more hours a day. It'll really help. I was actually looking at going out and getting a second job, but it wouldn't have been easy with no car and no transit pass anymore. So that's a relief.

I'm so glad I've indoctrinated you into the world of Peter Gabriel! As for what album next, *So* is a good one. It has one of my favourites on it, *In Your Eyes*. Did you ever see the movie "Say Anything" with John Cusak? It's famous for a scene where he's standing outside the girl's house and he holds a boombox over his head and just blasts *In Your Eyes*. Fantastic moment. Anyway, other than that, I would suggest one of the collections. *Shaking The Tree* is excellent, as is the newest 2-disc collection called *HIT*. I don't have it, but I've seen the track list, and it's got some old and some new, and would give you a good idea where to go next. You won't have any trouble finding them, not with the London and Glasgow music shops at your disposal!

How was *Sir* Ian's new play? I would love to see him in the theatre. There are certain actors you just *know* would be amazing on stage. Ian McKellen, Ian Holm, Judi Dench, and Derek Jacobi. My idea of heaven on earth would be those 4 in the same play. The only way it could possibly get any better is if they were joined by a certain young Scottish actor whose star is rising. I kind of fancy him, he's really hot. :)
Don't worry about the email. I can be patient for a week. If I have to. I guess.

Okay, I'm going back to a previous email that I don't think I ever properly answered. Way back on Sunday, I think.

Yes, I can drive a snowmobile. I find it fun for short periods of time--too long and I get bored/frozen. And I agree with you, racing them is insane. As for other snow sports--how does snowsurfing grab you?

Any time you want to talk about Lord of the Rings or any of your other projects, you go right ahead--I'll be more than happy to listen. This hasn't really come up, at least not when I've been comfortable mentioning it, but I'm a huge Rings fan, I've loved the books since I was fourteen. And since I try to read them once a year…I've read them just a few times. So, if you feel the need to talk, I'd enjoy hearing about it. And if not, that's obviously very cool too.

As for Elijah giving me his cell phone number, I gathered that was pretty big. But what do you mean I've 'gotten through to him'? I don't quite follow--it's not like we've ever talked about anything personal, except my finances.

So. You asked about my week. I'll answer, but I warn you now--keep this email, it'll be a cure for your insomnia.

Sunday--did laundry. Putrescent Laundromat across the road's a rip-off, but no car means I have to use it. Played on the computer for a while, downloading guitar tabs. Did Pilates. Watched TV. It snowed.

Monday--went to pick up your fountain photos. Walked around for a while, just to stay out of the apartment. Worked (7 hrs). Made dinner. Read. Played guitar. Spent ages on the phone with you and your strange friends.

Tuesday--worked (6 hrs). Took a little field trip to Pearson airport. Had a lovely dinner with a friend, who went to an awful lot of trouble to come see me.

Wednesday-- worked (8 hrs--busy news day). Watched a certain video several times. Emailed lots.

Thursday--work. Pilates. Guitar. Sang a Billy to sleep.

Friday--Add more papers to work. Yay! Picked up groceries, stick-people drawing from the Post Office. Nearly lost three fingers due to frostbite. Email you with my remaining digits.

WAKE UP! I warned you it would be deathly dull. And speaking of our phone call (referencing 'Sang a Billy to sleep', not 'deathly dull'), I have a question, if you're willing to answer. Why not Cockles and Mussels?

You owe me a new computer. This one got sprayed with tea when I read your 'recording studio' joke.

Well, I'm going to go to bed now. (Wish you were with me. Wait. Did I say that out loud?) Take care of yourself, and enjoy your new house. I hope it brings you peace, happiness, security, and most of all…home.

Missing you,
Grace
Saturday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Until soon (everything's braw)

This will be obscenely short, dear heart, and I apologize. I'm running late, I have to leave to catch my flight in about ten minutes, and I am a slow typist. So I'll just do the easy ones now and come back to the rest when I can.

More papers for you to do--congratulations! You're braw. How did you get them?

Peter Gabriel is braw. When I get to Glasgow I'm going shopping. I'll let you know what I get.

Sir Ian's play was braw. And your hot Scottish actor (you're braw) would also be in 7th heaven to act with those four. Practically a wet dream.

What the hell is snowsurfing?? Sounds braw.

I'm glad you're a Rings fan. Know what? That's more braw than I can say.

You getting through to 'Lij--take too long. Later.

Your week--more. Tell me everything. Take an hour to tell me about one day. Detail, wee girl, detail. Because detail is braw.

_Cockles & Mussels_--Mum used to sing it to Margaret & I a long, long time ago. I can't hear her anymore, so it really shouldn't matter. I guess I just didn't want to think about her at that moment. And don't you dare apologize. I think it's braw that your mother used to sing it to you, too.

Recording studio only sort of a joke. Owe you a new computer, my arse.

Going home is very braw.

I'll email you the second I'm connected, but I'll call you in the meantime. And yes, everything is done being braw. Except you.

Missing you too,
Bills

---

Saturday (late)
To: Elwood
From: Grace
Subject: What have I done?

Hey, sweetie. It's late, and I need to get something off my chest.
About this party--I'm second-guessing the whole thing a bit. Is this really going to work? Won't he get suspicious if you guys start grilling him about when he's coming to visit? And why would I need to take him out for the day? And how the hell am I supposed to get him (or, for that matter, you guys) up to the cottage, three hours away, when I don't have a car? And what about everyone else who's supposed to be coming? If I'm with Billy, I can't get everyone up there. I'm thinking we may have to drop, or at least drastically change, the whole idea. Email me when you have a minute, and we'll discuss it.

Take care,
Grace

P.S. After you give him his kiss, you may certainly pass along my email address and phone number to Dom. You are too bloody sweet for words to ask first--and I thank you for that. Just tell him, no porn.

Sunday
To: Grace
From: Elwood
Subject: Parties and Music

Good afternoon dollface. Would you please stop worrying about the party?? We told you, we'll organize everything. Any concern you could ever have shall be addressed, I promise you. I'll keep you posted--in fact, I'll email you later this week with the list of what's sorted so far. It's going to work, trust me. Have I ever lied to you yet? (Let me check…no, we're good.)

Billy says you're really into music. What do you listen to? Did you know I've been toying with the idea of starting my own label? It's something I've been wanting to do for a few years now. I even moved to New York for a bit to try and get it underway, but too much of my life is here in L.A., so I'm just going to work from here.

Well, I have to run dollface. Email me back when you have a minute--and quit worrying!

Cheers,
'Lij

P.S. Elwood Productions presents the 11 o'clock news. Our top story--actor Elijah Wood was spotted kissing fellow ex-hobbit Dom Monaghan yesterday. When questioned as to his motives, he insisted, "Grace told me to!"

P.P.S. Phone number and email address passed along. Prepare for porn.
Hiya, sweetie. There's something you need to understand here, so I will obligingly point out what a moron I am. If you haven't already noticed (you know, in case you're a deaf mute) I'm a bit of a worrier. Current affairs have only exacerbated this problem. As a result, I worry. A lot. About everything. If you're going to deal with me, you're going to deal with a worrier. That being said, I don't think you understand the logistical dilemmas we are faced with for this party. Also, your guests will be aware they are not staying at a hotel, yes? While it's cozy, and fairly comfortable, luxurious the cottage is not. Rustic would perhaps be a better word. There are spiders.

Okay, I'm through. For now. I hope.

On to the good stuff! It's a much shorter list to say what music I don't listen to, so we'll start there. I don't do rap. Or country (with notable exceptions). I don't really do Motown or blues in my own personal listening, although I can appreciate and enjoy them, especially live. I used to love going to see blues bands at the Toronto Jazz Festival. I don't like heavy metal/hard rock anymore, although for a short period of time in my early teens I did. (God, I'm old.) Other than that, I listen to (or will try) just about anything. My overriding comprehensive favourite is Peter Gabriel. (I've already begun indoctrinating Billy. If you stand still too long, I'll come after you next.) I love folk music, anything with Celtic influences. There are some great rock/alternative bands out there. Jazz. World music, like bagpipes, Uillean pipes, African music, aboriginal music that can curl your toes. I love anything that tells a good story (like a lot of folk music does), or a singer that has a unique voice or sound. I like knowing who I'm listening to without needing a DJ to tell me which of four identically sounding bands it is. I love music with strong lyrics, that makes me feel--be it happy, sad, goofy, or near-suicidal. I would rather feel my heart and soul ache listening to a good song, than forgo the pain and not be able to remember what I listened to 30 seconds ago. It's one of those killer songs that drew Billy's attention that first day on the beach. And that's why he was drawn in--the song is real, the lyrics deeper than 'baby, baby, ooh I love you so, baby baby'. That kind of songwriting pisses me off, it's a cheat. You want to say 'I love you'?

Some day when I'm awfully low
When the world is cold
I will feel a glow just thinking of you
And the way you look tonight.

Now that says I love you. That's for real.

Oops. Got a little carried away there, didn't I? Sorry about that, sweetie. I'll leave it on the off-chance you're remotely interested in any of that. Just be thankful I caught myself this early, I could go on for hours. Same question back to you--what do you listen to?

I think it is really amazingly fantastic you're starting your own label! Are you going to focus on semi-established independent artists, or risk the unknowns? Or both? How the hell do you even know where to begin? That's fucking huge, sweetie. I'm astounded, and so excited for you! Do you sing or play any instruments yourself? Planning an album to launch the label?

Well, that's all for now. Sorry about the fussing and futzing and general obsessing. Learn to deal, sweetie, learn to deal. (And yes, I'm telling myself the same thing.)

Toodles,
Grace
Grace closed down her email, shut her laptop, and got up from the desk. Stretching, she wandered to her kitchen and looked through her cupboards, trying to decide what to have for supper. She was glad Elijah seemed to enjoy hearing from her, because she had a lot of fun with their email conversations. She realized she was looking forward to Dom's, as well.

She glanced at her watch, realized it was 10:30 at night in Glasgow. She wondered what Billy was doing.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *The Way You Look Tonight* by Jerome Kern & Dorothy Fields.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clicking the send button, Grace finished off the last article of the day. She felt a little guilty for rushing through it, but she had promised Billy a detailed account of her day, and it was probably going to take some time. Especially since, in her usual manner, she was going to go a little further than he had probably intended. She grinned at the thought, and opened her email.

Tuesday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Is going home still braw?

Hi, dearest. Well, you've had a few days in your own home. Billy's pad. Boydworld. Billyland. The Billydome. Boyd Towers. (Okay, I'm done.) So, how is it?? I know you won't get this for a few days, and it'll be a while before you'll have a chance to answer, and knowing you you'll call me (I've got my money on tonight, but the odds are pretty good for tomorrow night too) and I'll hear all about it before you even get this, but… That was far too long. Where was I?

'Everything's braw'. You're adorable. That made me smile.

Never apologize for short emails. Know that I appreciate that you make the time at all when you're so busy.

You said you were going CD shopping when you got home. Have you had a chance? If so, what did you get?

Ooooh. Hot Scottish actor having a wet dream. Mmm.

Time out.

Okay, I'm back. (Lol.)

Guess what I received from L.A. on Friday? Some fantastically gorgeous stick people artwork. I've tacked it up on my wall, and just so you know, someday I'm going to have it framed. You have a real talent, there, m'boy.

Snowsurfing does sound good, doesn't it? I've never done it, but I'd love to try it someday. It's windsurfing on snow--usually on a lake or somewhere where the wind can pick up. Apparently you just fly--it looks amazing.

Yes, unfortunately when you tripped over the weird redhead on the beach, you tripped over a freakish little Lord of the Rings fan. Just be thankful I've stopped quoting it in conversation. 'Cos when I was younger, I used to, you know.

_Cockles and Mussels_--I'm sorry. But I promise I won't apologize. Rats, that's dropped my batting average. Now I'm only--what? 14 for 15? I'll have to work on it.

All right, Mr. Boyd. You want detail? You want a day in the life of? You got it. (You'll regret it,
but you've got it.) I'll go with yesterday (Monday).

I woke up around 8:30. Stayed in bed until nine like the lazy arse I am, just thinking about stuff. What was the weather supposed to be like, would Jamie still want to go out like he said he would, what were you doing at that very moment (2 pm Monday. I want to know.), what groceries did I need, where the fuck was my thumb ring. You know, important issues with which to start your day. I finally dragged myself out of bed, had a shower (fruity shampoo and strawberry body wash--how's that for detail?), and brushed my teeth. I turned on the TV to the weather network to see if it was a walking day. Saw some international weather (Glasgow 4 degrees and raining--sorry, pet), then ours (-5 and sunny, perfect for walking). Put oatmeal on for breakfast since it was a walking day. While it cooked, I popped in a Pilates tape and did a 20-minute set, plus some extras. Ab work. Unfortunately, I may be bendy, but I still can't find my abs. Am intrepid explorer. Will continue to try and discover where they went.

Put oatmeal in surfer-girl bowl (happy?), sat down to watch Bugs Bunny. I often watch cartoons in the morning, they make me smile (Looney Tunes, especially). Besides, I don't like watching news programmes before I start work. If I'm reading the same story I've heard on TV, my brain can sometimes play tricks on me. Like thinking I've already pulled out a tag, when I haven't, I just heard it on the TV.

Finished my breakfast, watched the end of Bugs (a favourite--the Barber of Seville--love it). We're up to 10:30. (You said you wanted detail!) Turned on the computer, started the timeclock, worked for two hours. I normally start a little earlier if I'm planning on going for a walk, but as I said, I was a lazy arse on Monday. And guess what I came across in one of the entertainment sections? That's right, an article on Rings. And guess whose name came up? You got it. I turned you into a meta-tag yesterday, Billy. Did you feel it? For a single, brief moment you came under my professional fingers. It's not the first LoTR article I've done, obviously, but it's the first with your name in it since we met. It was very thrilling.

Finished four papers, quit for a while. Walked down the street to a couple shops for groceries (milk, cheese, bread, pasta, stuff to make marinara, salad, fruit). Took groceries home, put them away, had lunch (sandwich and an apple), made a cup of tea and worked for another couple hours. Went for my walk. Hiked way too many blocks to the park, only to sit on a bench exhausted. Will have to find closer park. No problem, though--am intrepid explorer, remember?

Finally made it back to the double-poxed shoebox. Called Jamie, who had forgotten he'd said anything at all about going out. Called him a selfish bastard. It worked, he begged to take me out for a drink. I reluctantly agreed. Aren't I terrible? But really, he deserves it. Such a flibbertigibbet.

Did another couple hours of work. Made my fan-fucking-tastic marinara for dinner. I'm not a very good cook, but I've got marinara nailed. Marinara and oatmeal--what more does a person need, really?

While it cooked, I spent some time tearing this nasty-ass place apart looking for my thumb ring. Finally found it behind the toilet. I must have taken it off to shower or something, and it rolled (or those fucking pipes vibrated it) off. It's been missing for a few days now, so I'm very glad to have found it.

Ate dinner (marinara on linguine, salad), watched some local news. Played my guitar for a bit. Then went to meet Jamie. Walked the few blocks to the pub, and it was freaking cold. The temperature really dropped after dark. I couldn't feel my face by the time I got there. I know walking everywhere is good for me, but if I'd known it was going to be that cold, I would have taken the damn subway. Jamie was late (as per usual). We had coffee first to warm me up, then I
had a beer (Sleeman's Steam Ale). We talked for ages--his work, mine, his new sexmobile (a minivan), a mutual friend that just had a baby, his brother (who I went to university with), music--all the usuals. We played best 2 out of 3 on the pool table (Jamie 2, Grace 1--but at least I won one!) and I had another beer. We talked a little longer, and then I walked home. I know, I know, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. And at least the beer kept me a little warmer. Or maybe I was just walking with the wind, I don't know. It was good--it was the first time I've been out and had a couple drinks since I went dancing with you & Elijah. Hmm. That sounds rather pathetic, doesn't it? Ah well. C'est la vie. (See? I'm bilingual.)

When I got home I watched a bit of TV, then I played on the internet for a bit. Found a new Peter Gabriel site, which made me happy. And finally, I went to bed.

So that, my dearest, is a day in the life of Grace MacPherson. Hopefully that has cured you of your desire for detail!

Well, now that I have carpal tunnel syndrome from typing this email, I'm going to quit. I hope you're having a good time in your new home. I can't wait to hear all about it--probably tonight, unless I miss my guess. Email me when you can.

Missing you heaps,
Grace

Having completed her email to Billy, Grace decided she'd better double-check that last paper she'd worked on, afraid that maybe she hadn't done a thorough job on it in her haste to finish. It was still a little too early for her supper of leftover marinara anyway.

Half an hour later, she had just re-sent the final article and was shutting down her laptop when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Grace."

"Hiya, Billy. How are you?" she asked, smiling.

"I'm good--you?" There was a smile in his voice, as well.

"Good. I had my money on the right night."

"Sorry?"

"Never mind--you'll have to wait for the email. So," she said, grinning, "where are you calling from?"

He sounded happy, his voice full of pride as he said, "I'm coming to you live, direct from the Copacabana Lounge of Billy's Blue Flamingo Palace."

She laughed. "You didn't tell me you were moving to Vegas. Billy's Blue Flamingo Palace, eh? I have to admit I didn't think of that one. Very chi-chi."

"You want chi-chi, you should see it when the dancing girls go through."

"Did Girlz! Girlz! Girlz! get back together just for you?"
He chuckled. "Yeah. They couldn't hack it solo, had to reunite. It's like a made-for-TV movie around here."

She giggled delightedly. "Just make sure it's suitable for network viewing. Enough already! How is it?"

"How's what?"

"Twit." She pushed her chair back, leaned back and propped her feet on the desk, taking care not to kick her laptop.

He laughed again, unable to contain himself. "It's fan-bloody-tastic, luv. I've got a lot of work I want to do, but just the fact that it's mine and there's no one else here--it's like having a secret hideout again. Like I'm fourteen again, and trying not to get caught drinking by my Gran."

"Just as long as you don't get caught playing 'I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours' with--what was her name again?" she teased.

He sighed, said fondly, reminiscently, "Wee Sally Ross. A sturdy young lass, but very kind. Not a single snigger passed her lips. I remember I was eleven. I gave her my Princess Leia action figure."

Grace's voice shook at his wistful tone, but she managed, "Now that's love."

"Aye. Of course, it's not like I was going to be caught dead playing with Princess Leia anyway. I would have gotten the shite kicked out of me."

"I'm glad it all worked out for you."

"Me too."

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you planning on telling me anything about your house?"

"Palace," he teased.

"Sorry--palace?" she chuckled.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything!" she exclaimed, laughing. "Start talking!"

"Well, I'm on a quiet little road. I'm outside the city proper, so I'm going to have to buy a car. I've rented one for now," he told her.

It sounded to Grace like Billy was pacing. "Where are you right now?" she asked.

"My kitchen."

"Go to your front door."

"All right," he smiled with anticipation. "Why?"

"Just go."
"Okay… All right, I'm there."

"Open the door and tell me what you see," she instructed. She heard him comply, snicking back the lock.

"It's dark, so not much. Two steps down to a flagstone walk, which leads to the gravel drive. Some shrubs on either side of the walk. There's a low stone wall across the front of the property, with the road right beyond it." The pleasure in his voice was plain.

"Sounds lovely," Grace said. She got up from her desk, moved to her sofa and curled up in the corner, pulling a blanket over her lap. "What does the outside of the house look like?"

"It's stone. Limestone? Sandstone?" he wondered aloud. "I'm not sure. Warm, yellowish-coloured stone, though. With stone and wood trim, and a steep little slate roof, and two ridiculously tall stone chimneys. And little--what do you call them? Finials? On the peaks. The front door is white, surrounded by lots of trim. I haven't decided yet if I'll paint it another colour or not."

"It sounds straight out of a fairy tale," Grace smiled. "How old is it?"

"It was built in 1864, but it's all modernized inside. I think it looks more like a movie set than a fairy tale."

"Ah, now that makes sense," she laughed. "And what's around you? More houses?"

"No. This is the best part, Grace. Trees. Nothing but grass and trees. I have neighbours just down the road on either side, but I am surrounded, past the lawn, by forest." The relief, satisfaction, and joy in his voice would fade, she knew, as the novelty of living there wore off, but for now he was enthralled, and it captivated her.

"Tell me about it."

"I've only been here three days, and I've already gone for a tramp twice. It's not a big forest, but it's fantastic. In one direction it's almost all deciduous, and it's very light and open and a pleasant sunny little stroll. In the other direction, it must be older, or something. And there's more fir trees. But it's dark and close, and if I didn't know it was in southern Scotland, it would seem downright sinister. It's fucking amazing."

"It sounds incredible. How close are the trees to your house? How big is the lawn?"

"Well, one side of the house has the drive, lined by a row of privet. Then there's a stretch--maybe ten, fifteen feet?--of grass, and then the trees." He tried to describe it accurately for her, knowing she was attempting to build a picture in her mind. "The drive leads behind the house to the garage. It's made of the same stone as the house, and is big enough for a car and to store a bit of junk. Right behind the house is a stone patio, off the kitchen. Past that, it's probably…fifty, or a hundred feet of grass, then trees again. It's about the same on the other side. I'm going to have to contract in some landscapers, I just won't be here enough to look after the lawn properly."

"Sounds like a good plan. Is that it for the outside?"

He thought for a moment. "I think it is, yeah."

"All right. Now turn around." She leaned her head back against the sofa. "Starting at the front door, give me the grand tour. Pretend I'm there with you."

"Oh, but you are," he said softly.
"Billy--" She closed her eyes.

"It's true. But all right. There's a wee hallway with a closet at the end, facing me, and a door to the right."

"What colour is it painted?"

"Beige. Practically the whole sodding house is beige--except for the bathroom, but I'll get there in a minute," he said, amused. "Most of it's going to go. I was going to paint myself, but there's too much, so the painters are in next week. I'm having the hall floor redone at the same time--right now it's tile, but it's cracked and there are pieces missing. I'm having flagstone put in."

"Perfect. What's through the door to the right?"

"The sitting room." She could hear him moving into it. "It's beige, with a pine door and trim. At the front of the house is a huge bay window area, and it's all surrounded in pine."

"That sounds gorgeous." She suddenly sang a few lines of a song.

_FROM my Home Sweet Home, home sweet home
just a place to take a rest, just a place to make my nest
-- I call it my home

"I changed the lyrics slightly," she said, "but that came to mind. Peter Gabriel."

"Is there more?"

"Yes, but it doesn't apply here. It's actually a very sad song. Is there a window seat in the bay window?" she asked.

"No."


"You know, I was actually thinking of putting one in," he admitted. "Dom's coming up at Christmas, I thought it might be fun to build it."

"Yourself? I'm impressed. A do-it-yourselfer, are you?" she teased.

He laughed. "Not quite, no. But it's a bench, how hard could it be for two grown men?"

"Oh good Lord. I wish I was taping this conversation."

"All right, Miss Smartass," he grinned. "That'll be enough out of you."

"Go on, then," she snickered. "Carry on with the tour. What colour are you painting in here?"

"Well--" he hedged.

"You're painting it beige again, aren't you!"

"Dark beige. With a warm tinge, to go with the pine. It'll be very den-like."

"Oh, that does sound nice. What colour is your furniture?"

"Brown leather."
"Perfect."

"Thank you," he chuckled. "So, at the back of the sitting room are the stairs and another door. Which way do you want to go?"

"Upstairs."

He climbed.

As he did, Grace asked, "How high are the ceilings?"

"Not very, as it's an older house. High enough for me, not necessarily for anyone over six feet, if they wanted to go through doors or up the stairs and not bash their skulls," he grinned. "Now. We come up to a wee landing. It's currently beige. I'm going to paint it mauve."

"You're kidding."

"Yes. It's going to be blue, with white trim. There's crown molding everywhere in this house, I love it. And the floor here is hardwood, which is grand. So, immediately to your right is a tiny little shower room. It's white tile, so it can stay that way. Then there's the door to the attic, which is just a bare bones storage room. Rafters and floor joists and all. Then we have the utility room, which will house the washer and dryer, as soon as they're delivered. It's getting a fresh coat of white paint. You with me so far?"

"I'm with you," she smiled.

"Then there's a wee closet, and then--opposite the stairs, now--is a bedroom. It has a nice big window, a small walk-in closet, and the most hideous wallpaper I've ever seen."

"What does it look like?"

"It's pink. With fruit on it, Grace. Fruit. It makes my teeth hurt, it's so sweet in here."

She laughed. "Yeah, that really has to go. What's on the windows?"

"Blinds, which are fine, and net curtains, which aren't. They're going too," he vowed. "There will be no net curtains in my house. Ever. This room is also going to be blue, but darker than the landing."

"Navy?"

"Not quite. More like a dark…slate, I guess."

"Nice. How come there's no plaid in your house yet?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh, there will be, don't you worry. Possibly in this room, even, because I think there's a plaid that would look great with the blue. In which case, plaid curtains and bedspread."

"Excellent. Next?"

He walked back into the landing and through the last door. "Second bedroom. No closet, but it has a skylight. And a wee tiny window that looks out front. Guess what colour it is?"

"Hmm. Beige, by any chance?"

"Got it in one. It's going to be red."
"Red?" she squeaked.

"Aye. For Dom, he loves red. So does Elijah, for that matter. So that's their room, when either comes to visit."

"How do you sleep in a bright red room?"

"With very thick curtains," he grinned. "Besides, it won't be too bright. It's quite a dark red. The painters are starting up here, so I've already finalized all these colours. It's just downstairs I haven't quite decided on yet."

"So yours is the blue bedroom?"

"Tsk tsk. We're not done with the house yet, are we?" he reprimanded her teasingly.

"You have three bedrooms? Good grief, whatever are you going to do with all that space?"

"I'm going to have people come stay with me," he said, suddenly quietly. "As often as possible."

"Oh--oh."

"Aye. All right," his voice perked up again. "On with the tour. This bedroom is also going to house my library. I'm going to build bookshelves on either side of the wee window. I suppose library is far too grand a name," he suddenly laughed. "We'll just call it my book repository. My collection isn't big enough to deserve a library."

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"It's your house. You can call it whatever the hell you want," she grinned.

"Well now, that's very true, isn't it?" he said thoughtfully. "All right then. It's the Blue Flamingo branch of the Boyd Library."

"It should have a plaque," she averred.

He chuckled. "It should indeed. Okay, we're back downstairs now--"

"I thought you said there was another bedroom?"

"Who's conducting this tour? You or me?"

"I guess that would be you," she laughed.

"I guess it would," he said loftily. "So we're back in the sitting room. From here we go into a little--I don't even know what you call it. A little square hallway, I guess. There are four doors that open off it. And it's in the centre of the house, so it's remarkably dark. I think I'll paint it a bright yellow."

"With white trim?"

"But of course."

"Excellent," she said happily. "I like your taste in colours."
"Thank you." He nearly choked on his reply, praying she would feel the same after she saw her newly decorated apartment at the end of January, if Elijah's plan worked out. Which reminded him, he really needed to call Elijah and get that ball rolling. He cleared his throat. "Left or right?"

"Umm…right."

"To the right is the bathroom. This will be my main bathroom."

"Is this the one that's not beige?"

"Very much so," he grinned. "As a matter of fact, it's white and bright mint green."

"Mint green?" she repeated faintly.

"Very mint."

"Oh bloody hell. Tell me you're not keeping that," she begged.

"We-ell…"

"Billy."

"God no. Far too circa-1952," he laughed. "It's going to be dark green--forest, or hunter, or whatever the hell they call it this week. With the white tile to keep it from becoming a cave. There's a built-in claw-foot tub, so eventually I'll have a showerhead installed."

"With a plaid shower-curtain, right?"

"Did you hear that? That was me rolling my eyes. All right, just for you, I'll get a plaid shower curtain," he chuckled.

She smiled happily. "Oh, good."

"All right, after the bathroom, we have the door into the kitchen. When you first go in, immediately to your right is a little mudroom, which leads outside. I'll be using this door most often, as the garage is in back there. The mudroom just has scaffy wood paneling, which I'll probably eventually replace, but I can't be arsed now."

"It's just a mudroom," she agreed.

"The kitchen isn't huge, but it's big enough. I'll be doing the most work in here, as I'm having the floor done, painting, and I'm tearing out a window."

"Tearing out a window?"

"To put a larger one in. One of the cupboards is coming out to make room."

"And this is being done before the painters come?" she asked, confused.

He laughed. "No. It should be, I know, but I just came up with the idea today. It'll probably be next year before I get around to it."

"I see. And what about the floor?"

"It'll be flagstone, same as the front hall. But it'll have some sort of finish to make it easy to clean, apparently. I don't know, I was a little overwhelmed by that point."
"Wow. You've been busy. What happened to just hiding out and relaxing for a bit?"

He paused. Sheepishly said, "I know. It's just--I've been on the run for so long, it's hard to just…
stop. I'm slowing down gradually, though."

"Promise?" she asked quietly.


"Okay. So what colour is the kitchen?"

"It's currently beige--"

"Of course it is. Silly of me, really."

He chuckled. "It was, yes. It's beige with glossy dark green tiles. I didn't like them at first, but they're growing on me. I think I'll keep them, and repaint the beige in something else. White, maybe, although then it'll look like the bathroom."

"You could always stick another colour in, on the cabinets or something," she suggested.

"Yes, I could do that I suppose. Maybe something more modern. What's modern?"

"I don't know… Steel?"

"Steel?" he asked, a little skeptical. "For cabinets?"

"Well," she amended, "painted. To look like brushed steel or something. I don't know. I'm not very good with interior design. Why don't you ask your painter what he thinks? I bet he'd come up with something really good," she suggested.

"I will, he's coming tomorrow. Hmm…brushed steel," he said thoughtfully. "I shall think about that one."

"Or you could always change the tiles."

"Augh! Now how am I supposed to make up my mind?" he complained. "Stop it!"

"Sorry," she laughed. "Perhaps you should move on with the tour."

"Yeah. Almost done anyway. So we just go back into the little hall--"

"Which will be yellow," she supplied.

"Which will be yellow. And we go through the last door and into my bedroom."

"Ah ha! There it is."

"Here it is. And it is the beigest room I've even seen in my fucking life," he said with a grin. "Beige carpet, beige walls, beige drapes--and my current duvet is beige."

"Wow. That's, like, the dullest room ever."

"Yeah, you're telling me. It's hard to drag my arse out of bed. I just cease to care about anything, I'm just sucked down into the vast nothingness that is beige."

"Oh, you'd better do something about that. What will the press say if you suddenly become Mr.
"I'd worry more about what Aude would say," he grinned.

"No doubt. She might drop you for a more exciting client. So what are you going to do in there?"

"Well now, that all depends," he teased suggestively.

She flushed bright red, glad he couldn't see her. Was eternally grateful she hadn't chosen that moment to sigh, 'Fuck me'. Miracles never bloody cease, she thought.

"Paint, Mr. Boyd. What colour paint are you going to do in there?"

"Damn," he sighed with mock disappointment. "I was really hoping you were going to say 'Fuck--'"

"Well I didn't," she quickly interrupted him, her voice strangled.

"More's the pity. What do you think of stripes?"

"Stripes?" she repeated, a little flustered.

"Yeah. Everything else in the house is just one plain colour. I think I want something different in here. I was thinking vertical stripes in some natural colours--green, taupe, gold. Or does that sound horrible?" he asked, unsure.

"It sounds a bit...I can't quite see it. Wide stripes or thin? And dark or pale colours?"

"I don't know, really. I don't think I want perfectly even stripes, though--so maybe all different widths?"

"Yeah, that would look good," she agreed. "And maybe nothing too dark, then, or it might be overwhelming. That sounds excellent." She was enthusiastic.

"All right," he said, pleased and encouraged. "I'll run that by the painters tomorrow too."

"Lovely. So is there a nice big window in there?"

"One, yes. Someday I might put in another, but it would mean knocking through the stone wall."

"Sounds tricky."

"Yes. So I'm leaving that for now. Other than that, there's two walk-in closets, and that's it."

"Oh Billy," she said warmly, smiling, "I'm so happy for you. It sounds wonderful."

"Yes, the walk-in closets are a real gem--"

"The house, you twit, the house."

"I know."

Chapter End Notes
Lyrics from *Home Sweet Home* by Peter Gabriel.
Billy quietly said, "This house is wonderful, Grace. And I'm glad you're the first person I've really shared it with."

"I thought your sister had been there?"

"She has, but while I was away. It feels right to share it with you--you know why, I mean, you--you know--"

"Yes," she said softly. "I know. A place to 'lie down on your blanket and release your fists at last'." She quoted the Paul Simon song she'd sung over the phone a few nights before.

"Aye. And you know how much I was looking forward to getting here."

"Yes, I do. How was your first night? Did you have trouble getting to sleep?"

"It was terrible," he admitted. "I couldn't shut my brain down. And it was too quiet, I've been in one city or another for so long I couldn't fall asleep without the noise of traffic. My ears were empty, and it kind of drove me batty."

"What did you do?"

"I unpacked my stereo at three in the morning and spent an hour setting it up. I put a CD on and was asleep in about fifteen minutes."

"Poor Billy," she said sympathetically. "And you're still trying to catch up from the junket as well, aren't you?"

"I am. I've been trying...last night I was in bed by ten-thirty. Last time I was in bed that early, I had 'flu," he joked wryly. "It didn't help. I was awake by fucking five o'clock."

"Go to bed early again tonight. Soon."

"I'll turn into a sloth."

"Hardly. Let the blandness work its magic on you for a few days. Billy?"

"Yes, wee girl?"

She gently said, "We've been on the phone for ages."

"I know. I don't have email yet."

"How long until you get it?" She slouched down on the sofa a little, stretching her legs out across the cushions in front of her. Rearranged the blanket so her stocking feet weren't sticking out.

"Stewart promised by Friday," he said glumly.
"That's not so far away. And you're going to find several messages in there from me."

"I'm glad."

"And don't forget to watch your mailbox. I sent you a little something last week, you should get it any day now."

"Good. I've been here three days, and I've already gotten--the only thing I've gotten is--a bill," he groaned. "At least I shouldn't get as many circulars out here. Waste of bloody paper."

"Billy, we really should--"

"A few more minutes," he interrupted her. "I've been doing all the talking. Do you have to go?"

"Have to? No."

"Good. Then a few more minutes won't hurt."

"But--"

"Grace," he said, his voice low, "I haven't spent three entire days by myself in I don't know how long. I'm--having trouble adjusting. Don't make me spell it out."

"All right," she said calmly, even as her heart turned over. The only time she'd ever heard Billy sound so vulnerable was that first day on the beach, and he'd wound up sobbing in her arms. She also realized something else. "Billy, can I ask you something? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Go ahead," he said cautiously.

"This is your first time back since Emily, isn't it?"

He was quiet.

"I'm sorry. Never mind--"

"No, it's all right. You just surprised me, that's all. I should have realized you'd remember," he gave a pained little laugh.

"I just thought of it. It's not just all the traveling, is it? It's also that last time you were home, you were with her and you were in love and happy."

"A bit, yes."

"I'm sorry I didn't realize it sooner," she said softly. "It must be hard."

"A little. It's just... weird, I think. We were together for quite a while. You get used to it, ye know?"

"I know."

"I mean, she never came on the road with me. So you'd think I'd be more used to her not being around," he rushed on. "And it's not like we lived here together, for fuck's sake. So I don't see her everywhere, I don't picture her in the kitchen, or in my tub, or standing in the doorway waiting for me. But--I don't--I just..." he floundered.

"She was part of your everyday life in Scotland, in Glasgow," Grace said gently. "You're home,
and she's not there--it's bound to leave a little hole. It hasn't been all that long since you left. You miss her."

"I do," he said miserably. "I'm sorry."

"Billy Boyd, what the hell are you apologizing for?" she asked incredulously, but not unkindly. "You have nothing to be sorry for--and you certainly don't owe me an apology."

"But--"

"No. Don't."

"Grace--"

"Billy, please don't. Don't say anything you might regret when life gets back to normal. Whatever that is," she added with a forced smile.

"God, Grace," he groaned. "There is no normal. Not anymore. Don't you see?"

"I don't know if I do or not. But I'm trying."

"Fuck," he whispered. "Fuck. I know you are, dear heart. Sometimes I think you see better than I do. What do I do, Grace? Tell me what to do."

"Bloody hell, Billy, I can't--"

"Yes you can. And if you don't know, make it up. Tell me what to do," he repeated desperately.

"Oh God, Billy…"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Grace."

"No. All right, we can do this. We can. Curl up somewhere comfortable. Your bed, or the sofa. Go on."

"Where are you?" he whispered.

"Sofa."

"...All right."

"Where are you, Billy? Tell me."

"Sitting room. Leather sofa. My back's against the arm," he said, clinging to detail.

"Feet up?"

"Yeah. Tell me what to do."

"All right," she soothed, thinking rapidly. "Listen to me, dearest. Are you listening?"

"Yeah." His voice was edgy.

"I don't--I'm guessing, Billy. I'm guessing from what you've said and how you sound. What I think I'd feel if I were you. I wish I could see your eyes. But when you wake up tomorrow and everything looks much better, you can ignore this--"
"Tell me what to do." It was fast becoming a mantra.

"Close your eyes. Lean your head back against the arm. Do you have a pillow?"

"Yeah."

"Put the pillow behind your head. Don't let your neck get sore. Are you warm enough?"

"Yeah. I'm coming apart here, Grace. Tell me," he urged, his voice rough.

"You're not. You're not coming apart," she said vehemently. "I won't let you. Do you hear me? I
won't let you."

"God, Grace--"

"Shh. The first thing I need you to do is relax, okay? You're not coming apart, but you are wound
up tight as a fucking drum." She forced her voice to soften, kept it even, trying not to let any of the
worry she felt seep through. "Close your eyes and breathe deeply, and listen to me."

"What do I do?"

"You listen to me," she let her voice sharpen, just for a moment, just to penetrate. "You need to
slow down, hon. You're going to relax, all right?"

He took a couple of deep, shuddering breaths. "All right."

"That's better."

"Tell me."

"Tonight, when we get off the phone, you're going to go to bed. Do you have anything to take to
help you sleep?"

"I think so."

"Good. Take one. Put in a CD--"

"What one?" he asked, still sounding overwhelmed.

"I--I don't know what you have," she said, at a loss. "Umm...a soundtrack would be good--or do
you have any Sting? Fields of Gold?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do, actually," he sounded slightly surprised.

"Good. Listen to Sting, then. Stretch out on the bed under your covers and listen to Sting, and let
his music wander through your body. It will lift you up and carry you into sleep."

"What about tomorrow?" he asked apprehensively.

"Shh. You're supposed to be relaxing, remember? Tomorrow you're going to sleep as long as you
can. I think you're exhausted, Billy, and I think you need to let yourself sleep as much as your body
wants to for the next little while. So tomorrow when you wake up, I want you to roll over, close
your eyes, and go back to sleep. Okay?"

"Okay."
"Good. Then, when you do get up, I want you to eat something good and solid, all right? Bacon and eggs, or oatmeal. Can you do that?"

"Yeah. I've got porridge."

"That's good. Then, if it's not raining, I want you to go for a walk. And while you walk, I want you to think, Billy."

"About what?"

"About Emily," she said, her voice gentle even as her fingers picked at a thread on her blanket. "I want you to calmly and rationally figure out why you miss her so much. Why this hit you so hard, because I don't think it's simply that she's not there. You don't need to tell anyone if you don't want to--least of all me," she assured him, jerking the thread loose. "But I'll be here if you want to. Or I'm sure Dom would be more than willing to listen. But I think this really caught you off-guard, didn't it?" She closed her eyes, willing away the misgivings that assailed her.

"Yes."

"I'd guess a lot of that's because you're worn down. You need to take better care of yourself, you hear me?"

"I wish you were here to help."

"I do too, hon--I do too."

"Oh, Grace--" he whispered.

"Shh. Relax. Pretend you're leaning up against me, not the arm of the sofa. That's me right behind your pillow, and I've got my arms wrapped around you so tight. All right. After your walk, after you look really hard at what it is that makes you miss Emily so much--and you need to be honest with yourself, Billy, which is why I said you don't need to tell anyone, you have to be brutally honest with yourself--after that, I want you to come back inside and eat again. If it's lunchtime, have lunch, if it's teatime, have your tea. For the next couple days, I want you to eat and sleep."

"I think I can manage that," he said with the tiniest of smiles. "But--oh, fuck, the painter's coming tomorrow."

"That's all right. That's a good thing. You can show him all your ideas, ask him about the kitchen and the bedroom. He'll have colour samples, won't he?"

"I assume so."

"You can pick your natural colours for the bedroom. Make sure you get something very earthy, something very Scottish. That would be cool, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. I guess it'll be good."

"Are you relaxing, Billy?" she asked softly.

"I think so. What else do I do tomorrow?"

"You said Dom was spending Christmas with you?"

"Yeah."
"When is he coming?"

"I'm not sure."

"Call Dom tomorrow," she suggested gently. "Talk to him. Even if it's just about nothing--but talk to him. And see if he wants to visit you sooner. That would help, wouldn't it? To have Dom around? Or what about your sister?"

"No, Margaret works the other end of the city. It would be too much of a pain for her."

"All right. See what Dom's got on. But even if he can't, you'll be fine. You know that, don't you?"

"Not right now, I don't," he said, his voice low.

"Oh hon--you'll be fine, believe me. I have total faith in both your natural good spirits and in your ability to bounce back after some sleep. Do you remember Toronto?" she asked, smiling. "You went from a rough time on the beach to being way too chipper for me the next morning. Told me to get my--what was it? Balookie? Over to the Royal York."

"Bahookie," he corrected her, and she heard a weak smile.

"Bahookie. That was it. You're going to have to teach me some more Glaswegian before I come visit, you know. Otherwise who knows what horrible faux pas I might make."

"Like me with the Bud?" The smile sounded slightly stronger.

"Exactly! Because I wouldn't want to embarrass myself like that."

He actually quietly chuckled at that. "Don't worry--I'll protect your delicate sensibilities. I know what a timid little flower you are."

"I am. Horribly, painfully shy."

His voice sounding a little closer to normal, a little less like he was about to fly into a thousand pieces, he said, "In some ways you are, aren't you?"

A little taken aback by Billy's shift in topic, she said, "Well--maybe in some ways. But isn't everybody, in one way or another?"

"I suppose."

"What time is it there, Billy? Eleven-thirty, right?"

"Yeah."

"Go take your sleeping pill. I'll talk to you for a little longer and then you can go to bed, okay?"

"Okay. Will you get your guitar out?"

"Sure, if you want me to."

"I do."

"All right. Go on, then." She put the phone down and quickly got out her guitar and gave it a tuning. Tried to remember how she'd positioned the phone last time. Picked it up and waited for Billy.
It took a few minutes for him to return. "Grace?"

"I'm here."

"Sorry. I got ready for bed. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not," she assured him. "That's a good idea. Have you locked your doors?"

"Aye."

"Turned out all the lights?" she smiled.

"Aye. I'm in the Room of Utter Blandness now."

She softly laughed. "Good. Get into bed, then."

"Aren't you going to ask me what I'm wearing?"

"There's the Billy I know and blush for."

"Well?"

She chuckled. "You're really going to make me ask, aren't you?"

"It would make me feel better." She heard the smile in his voice even as she heard his sheets rustling as he got into bed.

"Oh, now that's not fair!" she exclaimed, grinning.

"Well, it would."

"Fine. But you owe me one, mister."

"Deal."

"Well, go on, then, what are you wearing?" she sighed, pretending to be put-upon.

"No. You have to ask nicely. Like you really want to know." He was still restlessly rustling.

Grace dropped her voice, put a bit extra breath into it. "But I do want to know, Billy. I've spent enough time in bed with you, even if over the phone. I think I should know what you wear."

The rustling stilled, and he murmured, "Mmm... You know how to properly distract a fellow, don't you?"

"I'm learning, yes. So--what are you wearing, Billy?"

"Just a t-shirt and my shorts," he smiled.

"Well that's hardly the detailed description I was looking for."

"What, are you serious?"

"Of course I am. Don't start what you're not willing to finish, dear boy," she teased throatily, a little surprised at her own boldness.

"Good God, I wish you were here with me right now," he croaked.
"Oh, but I am, remember? Tell me what you're wearing."

"Just--a t-shirt." He almost tripped over his words, imagining as he was that she was sitting next to him, was watching him from under her lashes. "A cotton t-shirt."

"What colour?" she murmured.

"Ehm--brown. It has a white tree on it. It says 'Fellowship Forests' and 'Carbon Neutral' underneath," he answered, starting to calm down again. He could feel the effects of the sleeping pill just starting to flutter at the edges of his consciousness.

"Short sleeves or long?"

"Short."

"Mmm. Do you know, I've never seen your bare arms?"

"No?" he asked quietly, eyes closing. "I'd like to remedy that."

"So would I. I bet you have lovely arms. I'm going to kiss inside the crook of your elbows, where the skin is so thin and soft."

"God, your voice is dead sexy, Grace," he growled. "Don't go any further or sleep is going to be the last thing on my mind."

"All right," she said softly. "What else are you wearing, besides your tree-hugger t-shirt?"

He gave an involuntary little chuckle. "Cotton shorts. They're just plain old grey cotton shorts, I'm afraid. Nothing sexy in that."

"I would beg to differ."

Billy suddenly yawned hugely. "Oh--sorry luv. It's not the company."

"I know. Sleeping pill kicking in?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad. What else are you wearing?"

"Nothing."

"Mmm. No socks, or jewelry?"

"Socks to bed? Never. But I'm wearing my ring."

"Which one, the plain silver one?"

"'S gold, actually. White gold." He yawned again.

"Where did you get it?"

He hesitated. "Not yet. At least, not tonight."

"Okay. You getting sleepy, hon?"

"Yeah."
"How about I sing you a song now, and then we'll hang up so you can sleep?"

"Okay."

"What kind of song would you like to hear?" she asked.

"One word?"

She smiled. "You love testing me, don't you?"

"I don't mean to test--" he protested groggily.

"I know, I'm just teasing. Yes, one word. Pick one you really want to hear."

He thought for a moment. "Comfort."

"Oh, Billy--" she whispered.

"Just sing."

"All right. But if I were there I'd kiss your forehead."

"Thanks, luv. I can almost feel it."

"I'll check and make sure you can hear me. But if you're falling asleep, hang up."

"I will. Sing."

Grace placed the phone on the table next to the sofa and turned a little towards it. She started playing.

I'll do what I can do.

She picked up the phone. "All good?"

"All good," he mumbled.

"Hang up if you're going to fall asleep," she warned. "You don't want a twelve-hour phone call on your bill."

"I will. If I do--thanks, dear heart."

"You're welcome, Billy. You're very welcome." She repositioned the phone and began the song.

I wanna comfort you
I wanna comfort you
Just let your tears run wild
Like when you were a child

I'll do what I can do
I wanna comfort you
You put the weight on me
You put the weight on me

When it gets too much for me
When it gets too much, much too much for me
I'll do the same thing that you do
And I'll put the weight on you
I'll put the weight on you
I'll put the weight on you
And I'll do the same thing that you do
I'll put the weight on you
I wanna comfort you
I wanna comfort you

Hoping that he'd hung up, that he was already fast asleep, she nevertheless went straight into a second song, because if he was still on the line then he needed it.

For a moment you forget
and a smile comes to your face.
Aah, but it doesn't last too long.
It's like a string you got tied
around your finger
reminding you of
everything that's wrong.

I won't try to say I know what you're feeling.
I won't try to second guess you.
I won't try to give advice you won't be needing.
I'm only here to comfort you.
I'm only here to comfort you.

And I'd love to be the reason
a smile comes to your face,
even if it doesn't last too long.
And I'd love to take that string
you've got tied around your finger
reminding you of everything that's wrong.

I won't try to say I know what you're feeling.
I won't try to second guess you.
I won't try to give advice you won't be needing.
I'm only here to comfort you.

She picked up the phone. Didn't hear a dial tone, so she whispered, "Billy?"

"Mmmph. Waited to tell you. You are. You do. G'night, luv."

"Goodnight Billy. Sleep well."

He hung up.

She got up, replaced the handset on its base to recharge, then curled up again on the sofa. She pulled the blanket completely over herself, even over her head, scrunching down as far as she could. She chewed on a fingernail, not a usual habit for her. And she worried.
Lyrics from *Comfort You* by Van Morrison and *To Comfort You* by Bette Midler.
Chapter 18

Half an hour later she threw back the blanket, shivering a little at the sudden rush of cool air. She retrieved the phone, pulled out her address book, and double-checking it carefully, punched in a phone number.

"Hello?"

"Hi--Elijah?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes?" He responded coolly, not knowing as yet who was on the line.

"It's Grace."

"Oh, hey, dollface! How's it going?" His entire demeanor changed, and his pleasure bolstered her courage.

"Pretty good--how are you? Am I calling at a bad time?"

"Nope, perfect timing as a matter of fact. I just got out of a meeting. What's up? Oh--" he suddenly half-groaned and half-laughed. "You're not worrying about the party again are you? Because believe me, plans are progressing perfectly--"

"No, that's not it. Although I would like to hear these plans at some point," she smiled. "No, I was wondering--well, I hope you don't mind, but--well, I thought maybe--"

Elijah laughed. "Spit it out, would you? You're making me nervous."

"This feels rather inappropriate, but would you be able to give me Dom's phone number? Or, if not, which I would totally understand, could you ask him to give me a call?"

"Is everything okay?" he frowned.

"Yeah, it's fine. It's just--I don't know what I should say, here, but…I think Billy might like to talk to Dom. I just wanted to ask him to give him a ring."

"Oh, okay. Well, if you want to chat for ten or fifteen minutes, you can talk to him. He's on his way to meet me," he suggested.

"Umm…I kind of--have to go," she said awkwardly. "But I could call you back in a while--"

"No," Elijah interrupted her smoothly. "We'll give you a call. You'll be home for the next little bit?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll be here. Thanks, sweetie."

"No problem, Grace. Talk to you soon, then."

"Okay. Bye."

Grace tossed the phone on the end of the bed and went to the kitchen to look for something quick for dinner, as it was getting later. She had barely even opened the fridge door when her phone rang.
Sighing, hoping whoever it was wouldn't want to talk long in case she missed Dom's call, Grace walked back over and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, dollface," Elijah grinned.

"'Lij? What are you doing?" she asked, confused. "Is Dom there already?"

"No. I just wanted to chat with you for a bit. I'm sorry I was so thoughtless."

"Thoughtless? What? No--I had to go--" she stammered, embarrassed.

"Relax, Grace. Next topic, huh? Want to know where we're at with the party?"

"But--"

"Just say yes, Grace," he smiled.

She sighed, gave in. "Yes."

"All right. We've figured out the basic logistics. Dom and I will fly in. You will pick us up in a car that we're going to rent from whatever place is nearest to you. We'll do some shopping, you know, hit the grocery store for food and booze--"

"Grocery stores don't have booze."

"What? What do you mean? Where's the booze?" He sounded slightly panicky, as if all of Canada had gone teetotal and he hadn't heard.

"Well, the liquor is at the liquor store, and the beer is at the beer store," she smiled.

"The beer store?" he repeated in disbelief. "You have stores that just sell beer?"

"It's the only place you can buy it in Ontario," she told him.

"What's the beer store called?" he asked, starting to laugh.

"The Beer Store."

"Get the fuck out."

"I would, but it wouldn't change the fact that you buy liquor at the LCBO and beer at The Beer Store."

"What the hell is the LCBO?"

"I think it stands for the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, or something like that. It doesn't have a catchy name, so it's just the liquor store."

"That is the funniest thing I've heard all week. Wait till Dom hears this, he won't fucking believe it."

"What's the big deal?" she protested, laughing.

"Grace. You have a store that sells nothing but beer. Dom has dreams about that, you know."
"Then his dreams are going to come true, aren't they?"

"I'll say!" he exclaimed, giggling. "All right, excellent stores notwithstanding, we do our shopping and then we pick up another car--"

"Another one?"

"Yes. And you, dollface, have a job to do between now and then. You'll have to make up a series of maps--really, really detailed maps--showing how to get from downtown Toronto to your cottage, from your cottage to the airport and back, and from your cottage to the car rental place. Detailed enough that someone who's never been to any of these places will have absolutely no trouble finding them."

"Why?"

"Because. You are going to drive us up to the cottage. You'll be in one vehicle, and I'll be driving the other. You'll make sure we find it, give us the tour, show us the ropes, set the rules. Then you will take one vehicle back to Toronto, return it to the rental place, and wait for Billy to 'surprise' you," he explained.

"But--"

"Meanwhile, we will have the other vehicle, and your very detailed maps, and we'll go back down to the airport to pick everyone up and get them up to the cottage. I'll drive, though, I don't think we want to make Dom do that."

"But--"

"And that way," he continued relentlessly, grinning, running roughshod over her feeble protests, "You'll be home waiting when Billy arrives, we and all our supplies will already be in position, and when he says 'Ta dah! I'm taking you to your cottage!' you can drive him straight up and we'll give him a freaking heart attack, he'll be so surprised. Brilliant plan, isn't it?"

"But--"

"Just say yes, Grace," he said again, laughing at her uncertainty.

"What if everyone flies in at different times?" she asked weakly.

"We're trying to book everyone from L.A. on one flight, and everyone from Scotland on one flight. It'll make it much easier. But I'll let you know about that later."

"Scotland?" she repeated, bewildered.

"Didn't I tell you who's coming?" he asked, surprised.

"No."

"Oh my God, no wonder you're freaking out a bit. Sorry, Grace. Okay, from Scotland it's Billy's sister, Margaret, and her fiancée. Can't remember his name right now, it'll come to me. And an old friend of Billy's. And from L.A. we have myself and Dom, obviously, Hannah, Sean Astin, Orlando, and Viggo, which is a surprise to all of us. I'm trying to convince Liv to come from New York, as well, but she doesn't like to fly without her husband, and he has a gig that weekend. So she might not come. See, not too many."
"No…I guess not…"

Elijah wondered if he was pushing too hard. "I'm serious about planning it all, Grace. I really don't want you to worry over this. If I'm not sure something will work, or if I'm not sure it's a good idea, I'll check with you, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, 'Lij."

"Now, how many people will you be bringing? Just so I can factor them into the arrangements. And will they be coming up with us, or on their own?"

"Uhh--" she stammered, taken aback. "Well--no one."

"What?" he asked, surprised. "But--"

"No. It's your party."

"So? It's your cottage. God, Grace, bring whoever you want, it would be fine, really. If you trust them, that's good enough."

"I--it's just…" She floundered, desperately wanting to veer away from the dangerous precipice of this conversation that she did not want to have. "Okay," she finally said, just to head him off. "I'll let you know."

"Perfect. Any other questions?" he smiled.

"Not right now."

There was something odd about her tone. Elijah frowned. "What's going on, dollface?"

"Nothing. Really. Actually, I do have one question--these maps…just how detailed do you want them? Like, just the road names and everything, or do you want landmarks as well?"

"Landmarks would be awesome. I'm not very good at judging distances in kilometers, so it'll give me an idea where I am. Listen, are you sure--?"

"Okay, landmarks it is," she interrupted him. Was grateful it was Elijah on the phone, not Billy, because he'd never let her get away with that. And speaking of Billy… "Any sign of Dom yet?"

"Yeah, he just got here a minute ago. Want me to put him on?"

"If you wouldn't mind. And thanks for all the details, sweetie, I feel a little better about it all now. Maybe this will work after all," she smiled.

"I'm glad. It's going to work out fine, dollface, trust us. Here's Dom."

A moment later she heard Dom's smooth gravel voice. "Hey, Penelope. How's things?"

"Hi, Dom. Umm…I'm all right."

"You sure? 'Lijah said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. But I'm not sure how to start."

"Hang on--let me go somewhere quieter--back in a sec, 'Lij…" he said away from the phone. Grace could tell he was walking as he said, "Too much traffic out here. Let me get into the courtyard. Are
"You sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she smiled. "Thanks."

"All right, I can hear you better now. What's up, Pen?"

"First off, I just want to say I feel really uncomfortable about this, because it's totally not my place and I'm sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong, but I'm worried about him, and I thought maybe you'd be the best person--"

"Whoa, whoa, Penny," he interrupted her rush of words. "Worried about who?"

"Billy."

"Why? What's wrong?" he asked immediately.

"I was talking to him tonight. He was telling me about his new house, and then we got to talking a little bit about Emily, and oh God, I hope he doesn't hate me for this--"

"He won't," Dom soothed. "And if you'll let me say it, your nose belongs here."

"No, it doesn't, not really, but I can't help it. He kind of fell apart, Dom, I mean, he said he was coming apart and--"

"He said that?"

"Yes," she said miserably. "That's not Billy, is it?"

"No," he answered quietly. "It's not."

"I really think he's just more exhausted than anything else, I think he's been on the go for too long, and the whole Emily thing fucked up his sleep, on top of all the travel, and he's kept himself going because there was always something to do, something to focus on, but now he's all alone and it's quiet and he's so tired but I don't think he's sleeping. I made him take a sleeping pill while I was on the phone with him, and I'm sure he was out the second he hung up, but I'm still concerned. And I thought maybe you could call him tomorrow, if you aren't in the middle of filming or something, and just talk to him. And don't…I mean, I don't want him to think--"

"All right, Pen, relax. You're getting all wound up yourself, and that's no good."

She took a deep breath.

"I'll call him," he assured her. "I'll check in on him. And if he guesses I've been talking to you, which he probably will, I'll just tell him you mentioned he was tired. He can't quibble over that, no matter how pissy he's feeling."

"Thanks, Dom," she whispered.

"Do you think he needs company?"

"Yeah. Eventually. He said you were going for Christmas, so I told him to call you and ask you if you could come a bit early, but I don't know if he will or not…"

"Probably not. Stubborn arse. Let me think--I'm flying home Friday. I was going to visit him after Christmas Day, but I could head up before. I'll see how he sounds when I call him tomorrow."
"Yeah, that would be good. Maybe a good night's sleep will take care of most of it. I mean, it's not like he's horribly depressed or anything. But he just sounded...he asked--" she stopped.

"He asked what?" Dom prompted.

"I don't know if I should--"

"You've already gone this far," he pointed out kindly. "And this is coming from your heart. There's nothing wrong with that."

"He asked me to tell him what to do. Over and over, he just kept saying 'Tell me what to do, Grace', and I did, but the more I think about it, the more I doubt I helped at all, I just got him to go to sleep, and I don't know what tomorrow's going to be like for him. I'm worried about him, Dom."

"I know you are. He'll be fine, don't you fret," he assured her. "I think you're right, I think he's just knackered, and I think you caught him in the midst of one of his very rare low points. He hasn't let himself stop for the last two months or more, and it's catching up to him. He was a bit off the day you met him, too, wasn't he?"

"You could say that."

"All right. I'll tell you what, Pen, I'm going to call him in the morning, it'll be afternoon over there by that time, and I'll talk to him. See how he's doing. He can't hide from both of us, now, can he?" he asked, smiling. "And then I'll call you and let you know how he is. Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Dom," she said fervently.

"No worries. He'll be fine, Grace."

"Don't call me Grace. You think there's something wrong when you call me Grace," she insisted.

He laughed. "All right, all right. Quit your worrying, Penelope love."

"I can't. It's what I do."

"A worrier, are you?" he teased. "Isn't that adorable."

She smiled despite herself. "Shut up."

"Ah, but if I shut up, then how can I wax poetic--"

"Oh no, please don't wax poetic--" Trying to play along, she pretended despair.

"Very nice. Here I am being a knight in shining armour, riding up on my white steed--not that it's a very impressive picture, I'll grant you, as my horsemanship skills are sadly lacking and add armour into that, and well, that's just asking for trouble, innit, but--"

Grace couldn't help but laugh. "You're a lunatic, do you know that?"

"That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me today," he said mistily.

"Poor lamb. I'll have to call you madcap more often."

"Madcap!" he exclaimed. "Would you? I love it."

"Have I ever told you that you frighten me, just a little?" she teased.
"Yes, I believe you did. Just wait till you meet me, Pen. You'll forget all about that Billy bloke and run off with me into the sunset," he grinned.

"Run? Or bounce along behind you on your arthritic steed while your armour clanks and you cling desperately to his mane to keep from sliding right off?"

He sighed deeply. "You've just completely ruined the romantic image I had."

"I'm sorry, doll. Would you like me to fix it for you?"

"No, actually, I'm kind of having fun with this one. Reminds me of…what was his name? Sir Somebody-or-other from The Sword In The Stone, the Disney one. The one who kept falling off his horse."

She laughed out loud. "King Pellinore! Oh good grief, yes--that's fucking perfect!"

"Pellinore, that's it. Somehow I knew you'd know," he chuckled.

"And are you forever haring off, chasing the Questing Beast?"

"I'm sure Billy would say I am," he said wryly. "Haring off, anyway. Speaking of which, I'd better run."

"Spot the Questing Beast, did you?"

"I did. And it's going to take me an hour to get my rusty arse up on my poor decrepit horse, so I'd better get started. You going to be all right, Penny?"

"Yes. Yes, Dom, I am. Thank you for that."

"Anytime, darlin'. I'll call--wait, have you got a pen? I'll give you my mobile number."

"One sec… Okay, go ahead."

He told her, checked she had it written correctly, then said, "You need anything, you call. But I'll ring you tomorrow after I talk to Billy. Sound good?"

"Sounds great."

"And thank you for calling me, Pen," he said quietly.

"Yeah. I knew you'd help. Say thanks to 'Lij for me."

"I will. Bye, Pen."

"Bye, Dom."

Grace put the handset back on the charger, sure it must be nearly out of batteries. She felt like she'd been on the phone for half the day, and she was starving. She went into the kitchen, opened a tin of soup into a saucepan, and put it on the stove to cook. Leaning on the counter, hands bracketing the sink, she watched the traffic go by on the street below as her soup slowly warmed.
The next day, Grace was up early after a poor night's sleep. She made herself a rare cup of coffee and watched cartoons for a while, but they didn't amuse as they usually did. She quickly gave up on them and left the apartment for a short walk. The weather was overcast and raw, but there was snow forecast for later in the day. Besides, later she'd be waiting for Dom's phone call once he'd talked to Billy.

So Grace walked in the cold air, skirting around puddles of slush, passing shops that weren't even open for business yet, thinking about what time it was in Glasgow and what time Billy might have slept until, and what he might be doing at that very moment. She wondered if the painters were there, if he was looking at colours for the bedroom, if he was considering brushed steel for the kitchen. If he was following her half-assed advice and was going for a walk, just like she was. If he was happier today or if he still felt he was about to fly apart. Stopping abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk, she wondered when, exactly, had Billy Boyd wormed his way so far into her heart that she could think of nothing but her concern for him? She slowly made her way back home.

By midafternoon Dom still hadn't called. Grace was nearly finished her work, but was becoming increasingly distracted by the clock. He'd said he'd call in the morning, hadn't he? Even accounting for the time difference, it was lunchtime where he was. Half-way through the evening in Glasgow, too. Finally, wondering if he'd just forgotten to ring her, she dialed his cell phone number.

"Hi, this is Dom. You know the drill. Leave your number and I'll ring you back."

The voicemail picked up right away, and she wondered if he was talking to Billy, or if his phone was off.

"Umm--hi, Dom, it's Grace. Sorry, I mean Penelope. I was just wondering if you talked to Billy at all today. Just me worrying again. Umm...yeah, that's all. Give me a call when you have a minute. Thanks, bye."

Resolved to be patient, Grace sat in front of her computer again. After all, maybe Dom had tried to call earlier but Billy was out, or with the painters. She was just being silly. Concentrate, girl. Get your bloody work finished.

An hour later, Grace had finished her work for the day and was sitting on the end of her bed restlessly picking at the strings of her guitar. Finally she gave up, put her guitar to the side, and grabbed the phone. Again consulting her address book, she dialed Billy's number, figuring an end to her fretting was worth the small expense.

"Hi, you've reached Billy Boyd, and I'm afraid I can't take your call right now. Please leave your name, number, and a brief message, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks."

She almost smiled at the business-like tone to his message, then realized it was his business phone.

"Hi, Billy, it's Grace. I just wanted to call and see how you're doing today, and see how your meeting with the painters went. Give me a call when you get this? And sleep well tonight if I don't talk to you before. Bye."
She hung up. Slowly put the phone back on its base. Sat there and tried to list ten different reasons Billy wouldn't be answering his phone. She came up with fourteen, all very good possibilities, ones that should have eased her mind and shown her how silly she was being. Just because he said his phone was usually on and he wasn't answering meant absolutely nothing. Maybe he'd left it at home while he went for a walk. Okay, so it was well after dark in Glasgow. Maybe he was spending the evening with Margaret, and turned it off so they could talk uninterrupted. That would be wonderful, actually. Or maybe he'd gone for a pint at the pub, but it was so noisy in there he couldn't hear it ring. But every time Grace came up with a logical, rational explanation, she heard Billy's voice in the back of her mind, pleading, 'Tell me what to do, Grace.' And she couldn't put the worry aside.

After a barely-tasted dinner, she tried Dom's cell again. Still no answer.

At midnight Glasgow time, she tried Billy. Again, no answer.

Frustrated and more worried than she wanted to be, than she thought she probably had a right to be, she called Elijah.

"Hello?"

"Hi, 'Lij, it's Grace."

"Hi, dollface." He sounded surprised to hear from her. "How's it going?"

"Been better, sweetie. I know this is probably a stupid question, but do you have any idea where Dom is?"

"I'm afraid not," he frowned. "He pissed off this afternoon when he finally got hold of Billy, and I haven't heard from him since. Not that I was really expecting to, though. Why, what's wrong?"

"He did get hold of Billy?" she asked, needing to be sure.

"Yeah, around two, I think. Why?"

"He was supposed to call me after he talked to Billy. I've been going nuts waiting, I thought he was going to call me hours ago, I've been worrying myself sick--"

"Grace, what the hell is going on?" Elijah asked, sounding concerned. "You and Dom have both been very mysterious. Is something wrong with Billy?"

"No, no--I'm sorry, sweetie, I didn't mean to worry you, too. He just had a rough day yesterday, and Dom was going to call him and talk to him and then he was going to reassure me that everything's fine because--well, you know me."

"Worry wart," he smiled.

"Yeah. I'm sure Billy's fine, and he's probably out drinking with his friends. And now that I'm actually talking to another human being and saying all this out loud, I feel like a real idiot," she sighed.

Elijah laughed quietly. "You sure know how to do anxiety up right, don't you?"

"I'm a fucking expert, apparently. I'm sorry to have bothered you, Elijah."

"It's all right. You're not a bother, trust me. If I talk to Dom, I'll make sure the jackass calls you,
okay? And quit your fussing, I'm sure Billy is fine too. You'd have heard by now if he wasn't, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose. I'll let you go, then. Thanks, sweetie."

"Anytime, dollface. Talk to you soon, okay?"

"Okay," she smiled. "Bye."

"Later, Grace."

Three quarters of an hour and two very messy crossword puzzles later, her phone rang.

"Hi, luv," Billy greeted her quietly.

"Billy," she said unnecessarily, relief filling her frame.

"I got your message--sorry I didn't get back to you earlier." His voice was soft, but flat.

Grace started to get anxious all over again. "It's all right," she reassured him cautiously. "How are you doing today? Did you get some sleep last night?"

"Yeah. About nine and a half hours, it felt good."

"Oh, I'm glad." She waited, but he didn't say anything else. "Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"How was your day, hon?" she asked gently.

"It was fine."

"Don't lie to me, Billy."

"I'm not." His voice was still monotone.

"You certainly don't sound fine. Come on, dearest, what's going on?" she softly urged. "I'm worried about you."

"Don't be. I'm just tired--on my way to bed. I took another sleeping pill. Had a wee drink. Just wanted to call and let you know I'm fine."

Grace realized his voice was flat because he was completely out of it. "Billy," she said, trying to keep the sharp tone from her voice, "don't you ever take pills and drink at the same time again, do you hear me?" She was concerned now for a different reason entirely.

"I don't," he protested lifelessly. "Just a sleeping pill. And then I wanted a small dram of whiskey. It was just a wee one."

"I don't care," she insisted. "Don't you ever do that again, or I'll--"
"Sorry. I'm sorry, Grace," he mumbled in that oddly expressionless voice. "Don' be pissed--"

She lowered her voice a bit. "I'm not pissed, Billy. Just promise me you won't do that again. One or the other, but not both. Promise?"

"Aye. I promise."

"All right. Go to bed, Billy, while you can still find it. Call me tomorrow?"

"Okay. I miss you."

She bit her lip. "I miss you, too, hon. Sleep well."

"Night."

"Goodnight, Billy."

Within ten minutes of Billy hanging up, Dom called.

"Hey, Penelope. Sorry I'm so late calling."

"It's all right. I already talked to Billy."

"My phone died," he muttered, frustrated. "I was on the phone with him so long it died, I had to recharge it before I could call you. I'm sorry--you've been going spare, haven't you?"

She couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah, a little. I even called Elijah. I felt like such an idiot."

"Fuck, I'm sorry--"

"It's all right, relax."

"I didn't even get hold of Billy until this afternoon. He said he'd been with the blokes who are painting his house, and then he went for a walk. I guess there are lots of trees around the place--and get this--" he suddenly grinned, "He got lost. In the woods. Right beside his own house."

Grace laughed out loud. "Are you serious?"

"Completely. He got himself a bit turned about and headed east when he thought he was going south. Came out two miles away and he wasn't sure which road he was on. He had to stop and ask someone. The really funny thing is he says there are other houses around his, but apparently no one fences their property, and he never came out into any of their yards. I don't know how he does it."

"What, he's gotten lost before?"

"Well, just once, really, that I know of," Dom admitted. "He's usually better than I am with direction--but if it's a cloudy day he just forges ahead and hopes he's right. Usually he is, but one time in New Zealand he got us hopelessly buggered when we were out for a hike. I thought we were spending the night on a mountain for sure. Mad bastard."
Grace laughed again. "I'll keep that in mind. Well, if he told you about getting lost, he must have been feeling better, then."

"Yeah, I think so. Couldn't you tell when you talked to him?" Dom asked curiously.

"No." Her voice lost its amusement. "He'd taken a sleeping pill with a whiskey chaser."

"What?"

"Yeah. I was a bit stern with him, I'm afraid--"

"Good. Stupid git, he should know better," Dom said calmly. "What was he thinking?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "And I didn't ask because he was right out of it. But he sounded okay when you talked to him?"

"I thought he did. I wouldn't worry too much though. If he only took one pill and only had a bit to drink, no harm will come of it."

"This time," she said darkly.

He smiled again. "Don't go borrowing trouble. Talk to him tomorrow, see how he is then. I think he's going to be fine, I think you were spot on when you said he was mostly just kippered."

"I said no such thing."

He laughed. "Tired, darlin'. He did sound a bit tired--not as much Billyness as I usually get from him."

"Billyness?" she asked, raising an eyebrow even though Dom couldn't see it.

"You know. Taking the piss outta me, he's a fucking master at it. Gets me laughing so hard I've had to leave the room."

"That I would pay to see," she chuckled. "I've never seen him go at it like that."

"I think--" Dom stopped, then hesitantly said, "It was hard to tell while he was here, we were madly busy--but I think the old Billy has gotten a bit lost in the shuffle. It's one of the reasons I can't wait to spend time with him at Christmas. See if I can find him again."

"I hope you do," she said quietly, and she meant it, even though she was afraid she might not know that Billy.

"Me too. I miss him," he said simply. "At any road, I should get going. I'm meeting a few people for dinner, and I don't want to be too late."

"What, being a little late is all right?" she smiled.

"But of course. It's fashionable, darling, and Dom Monaghan is nothing if not fashionable," he mocked himself, grinning.

"So I hear. Email me and let me know how you're doing, will you?"

"I will. Give us a ring if you need anything, yeah?"

"Yeah. Thanks again, Dom."
"Bye, Penny love."

She smiled. "Bye, Pellinore."

She heard his deep, rumbling laugh as he hung up.
Chapter 19

Grace rolled over in bed, disoriented, as her phone rang. She looked around blearily in the early morning light, spotted it on the desk near her bed. She crawled over to grab it, answering as she dove back under the covers.

"'Lo?"

"Hey, wee girl."

"Billy?"

"Who else calls you wee girl?" he grinned.

"What's wrong?" she mumbled.

"Wrong? Nothing, why?"

"Then what the hell do you want?"

"What--ah, fuck," he suddenly swore, loudly. "It's still really bloody early there, isn't it? Bugger, Grace, I'm sorry. You'd think with all the traveling I do, I'd have wrapped my brain around the concept of time zones, wouldn't you? What is it, six-thirty?"

"Billy."

"Yeah, luv?"

"Why are you calling?" she said with a little smile, her voice raspy, eyes closed.

"No, go back to sleep. I'll call you later. Well, actually, tomorrow, then. I'm in the city for the afternoon, then I'm at a play at the RSAMD tonight."

"Oh, that's good. Now tell me why you're calling."

"No, you sound terribly tired."

"Four hours of sleep will do that to a girl," she croaked. "And don't you dare hang up until you tell me why you're calling."

"Four hours!" he exclaimed, dismayed. "My poor wee girl--why were you up so late? What were you worrying about?"

"What makes you think I was worrying?"

"The only times I've known you to be up that late, you were upset about something. What had you troubled last night?"

Exhausted, still half asleep, Grace didn’t think twice about answering, it just tumbled out. "You did."

"Me?" He was surprised. "Why on earth were you worrying about me?"

"Oh, I don’t know, maybe because you were in pretty rough shape the other night, and yesterday I
couldn’t get hold of Dom, and then when you called you were looped out on sleeping pills and whiskey. No reason, really."

"Dom?" he asked faintly.

"He was supposed to call me and let me know if you were all right. But he couldn’t reach you either and then his phone died." Her voice was gravelly.

"Grace," he said quietly, "I’m sorry. I--I didn’t know I was distressing you that much. And I’m sorry if I frightened you last night. I was fine, I really was. I’ve taken a sleeping pill and a wee dram before, it just works a little faster. It causes no harm, I promise."

"I know. Dom pointed out one wasn’t likely to do much. But…it scares me, Billy. It’s probably silly, but there it is." She huddled under the blankets, suddenly cold. She always got cold easily when she was tired.

"Well--I promised you I wouldn’t do it again, and I won’t."

"I didn’t think you’d remember saying that." She shivered.

"I do. What’s that noise? It sounds like--bloody hell, luv, is that your teeth chattering?"

"Yeah. It’s fucking freezing in here. Hang on while I go turn up the radiator?"

"Of course."

Grace dropped the phone on her pillow, quickly pulled on some socks, ran over to the electric heater, and turned up the dial. When she didn’t hear it click on, she angrily struck the top of it with her heel a couple times, muttering under her breath. "Stupid fen-soaked ill-begotten piece of--"

With a final kick it hummed into life. Grace hurried back to bed, crawling in with her socks still on. She picked up the phone and ducked under the covers. "Billy?"

"You didn’t swear loud enough," he smiled. "I couldn’t hear you."

"It wasn’t that impressive. It’s too early for me to think up the good ones."

"I’ll let you go now, wee girl. Go back to sleep."

"No--you still haven’t told me why you called," she protested, yawning.

"It can wait--"

"I want to talk to you. I want you to talk to me."

"All right. You just make sure you’re under your covers. Your voice is still shivery."

"I’m under, believe me. Why did you call?"

"Just to apologize for the night before last," he said quietly. "And to say thank you."

"You don’t need to--"

"Yes, I do. Remember how I once asked if you could toss me a life preserver until I could swim again? That’s what you did, dear heart. I was losing it, and you put your arms around me and kept me together. Thank you for that."
"You’re welcome, Billy. I wish I could have done more. Are you feeling better now?"

"Aye. Miles better--a lot of it was just that I was so bloody tired I couldn’t see straight--but I couldn’t sleep. So thank you for that, too. Now that I’ve had two nights in a row with more than nine hours sleep, I’m finally starting to feel more myself again."

"I’m glad."

"You asked Dom to call me, didn’t you?" he said quietly, but with a bit of a smile to reassure her he wasn’t upset about it.

"Yeah," she mumbled. "I’m sorry. I just--I thought maybe it might help to talk to him. Sometimes a best friend’s the only one who can make sense of stuff."

"Sense and Dom don’t always go together," his smile grew. "But in this case you were right. He...well, he helped. And so did your suggestions, you know. I followed all of them."

She knew what he was referring to--the walk, where she’d insisted he think about Emily. Her stomach twisted. "Did you?"

"Aye. I thought about everything, like you said. It was--well, let’s just say it wasn’t a surprise to Dom, but it was an eye-opener for me," he said wryly.

She had no idea how he meant that, but she would not--could not--ask.

"Good," she croaked.

"You all right?" he asked, concerned. "You sound a little odd."

"I’m fine. I have to go."

He was frowning. "All right. I’m sorry I woke you. Listen, Grace--"

"Yeah?"

There was a long pause. "Nothing. Never mind. Sleep well--"

"No, what were you going to say?"

"Nothing. Go back to--"

"Billy. We say everything, remember?"

He sighed gustily. "That’s very inconvenient at times, you know that?"

"Trust me, I know."

"I don’t know what you thought I meant when I said it was an eye-opener," he said obliquely.

"I don’t know either. I don’t have to know what you mean." She huddled into her sheets.

"I think maybe you do."

"Billy--"

"Shh. Listen to me for a minute. I probably shouldn’t do this now, not at six-thirty in the morning--"
"Six forty-five--"

"Shut it," he insisted with a trace of a smile, but then stopped. Finally, quietly said, "This is important, wee girl."

"Sorry. Go ahead." She bit her lip, not sure she was ready to hear this, whatever it was.

"I don’t... Listen, Grace, about Emily--fuck, this is awkward."

She could practically hear him scrubbing his hand through his hair. "Billy, you really don’t have to explain anything," she said softly, trying to avoid the conversation.

"Maybe I don’t have to. But I want to. I don’t want there to be...misunderstandings between us."

She closed her eyes, a sudden tightness in her chest. At any other time she would have kept her mouth shut, let him say his piece and hang up and not let him know his words were affecting her in any way, but it was too early in the morning for her defenses to be active and she was too tired to do anything but pretend. "It’s all right, Billy, I understand," she said, surprising herself with how normal her voice sounded. "I know you miss Emily, and I know you still care about her, and if you want to try and get back together I think that’s wonderful--"

"Grace--"

"--and I understand that you just needed to be close to someone when you were here and I wouldn’t trade it for anything, and when I said no matter where we wander--"

"Grace--"

"--I meant it, I’m on your side and I’m certainly not expecting anything from you, Billy, so no worries, eh? And before I forget again, I’ll send you that email with the Canadian menu, so when you get your email that will be there and waiting for you, and boy am I tired, so I’m going to go now--"

"Grace, shut the fu--"

"But make sure you email me as soon as it’s hooked up, okay? I’m glad you got some stuff sorted out, and I’m really glad you’re feeling better, and I’ll talk to you soon." She hung up on his sputtering.

Billy was left staring at his phone in disbelief.

Grace hurled her phone across the room onto the sofa, curled into a ball under her covers, and wept. She was furious with herself for letting what she felt for Billy grow so far that she hurt as much as she did, and she swore to herself that it would stop right there.

Ten minutes later, her phone rang. Still only seven a.m. It had to be Billy, probably calling to apologize for no reason whatsoever. He’d always been perfectly clear that they were only wandering, he was only out for a stroll, it wasn’t going any further than that, they were too fragile. PWBUBW. It was her own damn fault for not paying closer attention to how much her affection for him had grown. Still in tears, she ignored the phone.
Eight hours later, Billy sat in his rented car on the side of a quiet street in Glasgow, not far from a small music store he’d just been browsing in. He looked down at the two discs in the seat beside him, just able to read their titles in the light from the lamppost he was parked under. He was happy with his purchases, but distinctly unhappy with their intended recipient. He angrily punched the power button on his phone. She’d not answered her phone all afternoon, and now it was apparently off the hook.

Frustrated and feeling helpless, he turned his mobile back on and hit one of the preset buttons, then held it to his ear.

"Monaghan’s Pleasure Pagoda," a familiar voice resonated in his ear.

"I hope you don’t greet casting agents like that, wanker."

"Of course not, what do you take me for? I greet them with 'Billy Boyd's Bordello of Love', naturally," Dom said cheerfully. "How’s things, then, Bills?"

Billy couldn’t help but smile a little. "You would, too, wouldn’t you? Nutter. Listen, Dom, where are you?"

"L.A., right where you left me, Billy."

"I’m serious, Dom. Are you anywhere near your computer?"

"Not at the moment, but I will be in about half an hour. Why?" Dom was curious about the odd tone in Billy’s voice.

"I need you to send an email for me."

"Still not hooked up? Tell Stew if he doesn’t do it soon I’ll--"

"Can you send an email for me or not?"

Dom was taken aback by the terseness of Billy’s speech. "Of course. If it’s important, why don’t you find an internet cafe?"

"Because I don’t have time. I have to be at the RSAMD for that play in half an hour and I’m sitting in my fucking car at the side of the road at the other end of the city."

"What, is your car buggered?"

"No, I was doing some shopping, just finished. Send an email to Grace and tell her to turn her bloody fucking phone back on."

"What’s wrong, Billy?" Dom asked quietly, fully serious at last.

"I think I really fucked up, Dom," Billy groaned. "First I called her at six-fucking-thirty in the morning after she’d been up half the night worrying over my sorry arse--"

"Silly woman," Dom murmured.

"And then I was trying to tell her a bit about--well, about what we talked about yesterday. But I guess I was ambiguous and now she’s got hold of the wrong end of the bloody stick and she thinks I want Emily back and--"
"She thinks what?" Dom exclaimed.

"She thinks I’m still in love with Emily! And now she won’t answer her fucking phone."

"What the hell did you say, Bill?" Dom asked, disgusted.

"I don’t know!" Billy shouted. "I still don’t know what the hell happened! I also don’t know what the fuck her reaction meant, and I can’t bloody get hold of her to ask her!"

"Why, what did she say?"

"Little miss calm and cool nattered on about how she understood I still care about Emily and that I just needed to be ‘close to someone’ when I was in Toronto and how she never expected anything from me! What, does she think I flew all the way to Toronto just to spend four hours with her just because I needed to be close tae someone?"

"Billy--"

"I’m ready to wring her little neck, Dom. She does this tae me all the time, she jumps tae bloody conclusions and won’t let me get a word in edgewise--"

"Sounds familiar."

"--and I want tae fix whatever the hell happened, but I can’t because she won’t answer her fuckin’ phone and I’m an ocean away, and I don’t even have fuckin’ email--"

Dom had a hard time hiding his amusement. "Shut up, Bill. I’ll send her a message as soon as I get home, yeah?"

"And tell her she’d better fuckin’ listen tae me this time--"

"Might I suggest you calm down before you talk to her?" Dom said mildly. "Your unintelligible Glaswegian shouting is hardly likely to help matters, is it? Nor is it likely to be appropriate in the middle of a play. Turn your phone off."

"Shite! Fuckdamndamnfuck! Dom, I have tae go--"

"Go. I’ll talk to you later."

"Thanks, mate."

"Good luck," Dom said, finally letting his laughter out. "You’re going to need it."

---

Wednesday
To: Grace
From: lost_goat
Subject: It’s all about the Marshmallow Pies, Penelope.

A marvelous afternoon to you, Penny love.

I just had a Marshmallow Pie for the first time in my life. I have been avoiding them because my environmental sensibilities detested the idea of petroleum-based food products. It’s just a cover-up
though, and I have discovered the real conspiracy behind the MP phenomenon. They are the crack of the food (we’ll call it that for lack of a better word) world--the so-called marshmallow filling is heroin, one taste and you’re hooked for life. Hello, my name is Dom Monaghan, and I am a MP addict. Please, please don’t tell anyone, Pen. I couldn’t live with the shame.

I need to talk to you about something, but your phone’s been busy for a while. You’re doing this all wrong--when I call someone, they’re supposed to pick up immediately, you know. That’s the way it works. Now you know.

Later,
Dom

---

Wednesday
To: lost_goat
From: Grace
Subject: 12-step Marshmallow program

It starts with admitting you have a problem. I’ll have to get you a little "Recovering Marshmallowholic" button. And a little sign to go around your neck for those days when you’re feeling fragile--"Please do not feed Marshmallow Pies to the animals". Or to the Monaghan, if you don’t like being called an animal. But something tells me you do.

Speaking of which…lost_goat? Do need your own goatherd? They’re hard to find these days, but I believe Spain has a mail-order catalogue.

My apologies for the busy phone. I didn’t get a copy of the book on "How to care for your Dominic", so I’m afraid I’m not up to speed. (Apparently I’m insisting on thinking of you as a small hairy pet today.) Can you send me a copy, and I’ll study hard and catch up? Because I’d hate to mistreat Dom Monaghan by not answering the phone again.

If it’s just about the party, is there any way it could wait a day or two?

Talk to you soon KP,
Penelope

---

Wednesday
To: Grace
From: lost_goat
Subject: Re: 12-step Marshmallow program

A "Recovering Marshmallowholic" button, hmm? Not only is that a remarkably good idea, you know, for my support and encouragement in battling my one-day addiction, but I think I should change my screenname to that. But I think if you hung a sign around my neck telling people not to feed me Marshmallow Pies, I’d have three stuffed in my mouth within an hour. Because firstly, people do what they’re not supposed to. It’s a rule, you see. And secondly, there are a few people who would shove a MP in my mouth just to shut me up. So perhaps we should forgo the sign, yeah?
Me? Like being called an animal? Don’t you know it, Penny love.

lost_goat is from two of my jobs. Lost is a TV deal, which we’re waiting for word on when we’re filming the pilot, and so far none of the cast has been announced, so mum’s the word on that one. Going to Hawaii, baby. And Goat was the name of my character in a movie I filmed last year called Spivs. Still waiting on distribution for that one. So nothing terribly mysterious, I’m afraid. Now, regarding the goatherd. I was unaware the Spanish have a mail-order catalogue. Is this like the Russian mail-order catalogues, only slightly different? And the important question--are there lovely dark-eyed female Spanish goatherds in this catalogue of yours?

I shall put together a copy of the "How to care for your Dominic" manual and send it to you very soon. You’ll have to work hard, you know, you’re a little behind the rest of the class.

I’ll gladly be your pet if you’ll stroke me behind my ears and feed me Marshmallow Pies. NO! Not Marshmallow Pies, dammit! I will beat this addiction if it kills me! Treats. Feed me treats.

As for getting through on your phone, it’s not about the party, Penelope. It’s about you not talking to Billy. There’s something rotten in the land of Denmark, and if you won’t talk to him, I hope you’ll talk to me. I’ll call you at 7:30 your time. Please answer.

Gazing up at you pleadingly with my large pet-like eyes, Dom

P.S. KP?

Wednesday
To: lost_goat
From: Grace
Subject: Denmark? It’s all the fish.

Shove a Marshmallow Pie in your mouth? I can see where a person might, perchance, occasionally be tempted. Not that I would, of course.

Congrats on the TV show--that’s fan-fucking-tastic. I won’t breathe a word.

Goatherds come in all types, you know. Women are really branching out into new jobs these days. We’ll have to get you one (a goatherd--you want a woman, you’re on your own), because I don’t want my little goat getting lost before I have a chance to feed him treats. What is a treat for a goat, anyway?

Sorry, Dom, I’m not in the mood for talking tonight.

KP=King Pellinore.

Talk to you soon,
Grace
Dom’s phone rang just as he was reading Grace’s email. "Yeah?"

"Well, that’s better than Boyd’s Bordello, anyway," Billy snorted.

"Hey, Billy. How was the play?"

He sounded frustrated. "Fuck the play. Have you heard from Grace? I still can’t get through."

"Relax, Bill. I’m working on it."

"Working on it? What the hell does that mean?"

Dom sighed. "It means, Billy, that you’re really damn lucky to have her. She doesn’t want to talk to either of us right now, but I’ll get her to come around. It’s my famous charm, you know."

Billy paused. Then, more quietly, asked, "What do you mean I’m lucky to have her? I don’t. And she won’t talk to me, remember? Besides--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know--you’re not ready for another relationship. And maybe you’re not, but the way you two keep... Never mind. Listen, Billy, if she’s this upset, there’s something behind it, isn’t there? Would she keep her phone off the hook if she was thrilled to bits at the thought of you and Emily getting back together?"

"I guess not," he muttered. "I don’t know. I don’t know what the hell’s going through her thick little skull."

Dom chuckled. "Again, probably something you want to keep to yourself when you finally get her on the phone. Relax, Bill. She’ll talk to you eventually. Now just go home, and I’ll ring you when I get through to her."

"All right. Listen, Dom--"

"I know. I’m a fucking angel."

"I don’t know I’d go that far," Billy finally smiled a little. "But you’re a good mate."

---

**Wednesday**

To: Grace  
From: lost_goat  
Subject: You are barmy

Yes, that’s right, I just called you barmy. As in nutters. As in silly. As in round the twist. As in turn your damn phone on so I can call you. You’ve got the wrong idea about a number of things, Penelope, the least of which is how bloody much I can annoy you until you talk to me.

Come on. Please, Grace.

Dom
Wednesday
To: lost_goat
From: Grace
Subject: Re: You are barmy

7:30.
Grace

At 7:20 Grace plugged her phone back in. If Billy called, she’d never trust Dom again. She’d spent a perfectly miserable day alternating between trying to forget the entire conversation so she could concentrate on her job, and castigating herself for getting so emotional in the first place. So what if Billy got back together with Emily? How much would it change things? Well, beyond obviously ending the kissing and touching. They could--would--still be friends, would still be there to support each other, would still be able to speak in sentences of four words or less. She’d just...not hear from him as often, that’s all. And he wouldn’t be visiting Toronto anytime soon. She could deal with that. She really didn’t want anything more than that anyway--what she’d said to Billy counted just as well for her. She had just enjoyed being physically close to someone again. Living on your own, while it could offer freedom, could also be lonely. That’s all it was, for both of them. Just loneliness, and who better to turn to when you’re lonely than a friend? And with that hard rationalization, Grace managed to at least partially rebuild walls Billy had slowly, painstakingly been lowering, even if neither of them had been fully aware of it.

Her phone rang. She answered it, praying it wasn’t Billy because she really didn’t have the strength for one of their restrained arguments. "Hello?"

"Penny, darlin’, I’m glad you picked up."

"Hi, Dom," she said, with a little sigh of relief. But her relief was short-lived.

"So what’s going on with you and Billy?" he demanded. "Are you both three marbles short of a game? Lifts don’t go to the top? Dipped your biscuits in too much tea?"

"Bye, Dom--"

"Grace, don’t."

"I don’t want to talk about it, Dom," she said coolly. "And what the hell does 'dipped your biscuits in too much tea' mean anyway?"

"You know, when you leave your biscuit in your tea too long, how it goes all soggy and starts to dissolve? And then you get to the bottom of your cup ten minutes later, and there’s this lump of muck at the bottom--"

She couldn’t help but smile a little at that. "Well, that’s a new one for me. I’ll have to remember it. Not sure I like being compared mentally to a little lump of muck, though."

"Well the two of you are driving me bloody mad. You’re not thinking, Pen," he insisted.
"No one asked you to get involved," Grace suddenly snapped at him.

"As a matter of fact, Billy did. And you know why? Because you won’t talk to him and he doesn’t even have email at the moment to send you a message and he’s going spare, Penelope love, thinking that he’s hurt you."

"Well, tell him he didn’t, and drop it."

"No. If you want to lie to him, do it yourself," Dom said sharply.

"I’m not--"

"Bullshit. If he didn’t hurt you, then why won’t you talk to him? Why has your bloody phone been off the hook all day? A bit of ‘I think she doth protest too much’, Pen."

"Fuck off, Dom."

"All right, all right. Look, I’m sorry," he said placatingly. "But seriously, Penny, you misunderstood Billy, and this is all for naught. Call him. Let him call you. Sort it out. I don’t want to see Billy suffering any more than he has been the last few months, and I don’t think you need this either."

"You have no idea what I need, Dom," she said quietly.

"Then tell me, Penny love."

"I need--I need a friend, Dom. And that’s it."

He was quiet for a moment, thinking furiously. Finally said, "I see. And Billy isn’t one?"

"Of course he is."

"Then you won’t take his calls because...?"

"Because--because--" she stammered, caught.

"Go on, Pen, finish that sentence for me."

"Fuck off, Dom!" she said again, angry with both herself and the too-perceptive man on the other end of the line.

Dom sighed. "Penny, it’s not my place to fix this. You and Billy need to do that--and you’ll be able to, if you just give him a chance. You misunderstood what he was saying about Emily--"

Grace cut him off. "How would you know? You have no idea what I thought, what I think, so how the hell would you know what I misunderstood?"

"If you’ll shut your trap for just a minute, I’ll tell you! God, you and Billy never give a bloke a chance to finish a thought, do you? He’s not in love with Emily, Grace. I don’t know where the hell you got that, but he’s not. We talked a lot yesterday, and it’s up to Billy if he wants to tell you about it, but Grace, darlin’, trust me when I say he’s not in love with Emily. Call him. Talk to him," he urged.

"Dom, I don’t care if he’s in love with Emily or not! I don’t want--I just--Fuck! I just need a friend, can’t you see that?" she pleaded, her throat now scratchy with tears.
"Yes, Grace, I can see that," he said softly. "I see a lot, now. And you know what? Billy needs you as a friend, too. But friends don’t shut each other out, and you’re hurting him by shutting him out like this, love."

"I’m not shutting him out!" Her tears spilled onto her cheeks, and she hoped Dom didn’t hear her crying. "It’s just one bloody day! One day where I don’t feel like talking, is that too much for you guys to understand? Fuck."

"I understand, I honestly do. I’ve been there. But look at it from Billy’s side, Pen--he thinks he’s hurt you, and he can’t get in touch with you either to apologize or to make sure you’re okay. Think how mad you were going when you were worried about him and couldn’t reach us. How would you feel if you thought you’d upset him, and he didn’t give you the chance to explain? You really think you’d be all right with that?"

That gave her pause. She knew she’d be a wreck. "But..."

"There’s no 'buts' about it," Dom said quietly. "You need to talk to him. Don’t leave him twisting in the wind."

"Oh bloody hell... All right," she whispered.

"Can I tell him to call you? You'll pick up?" he insisted.

"...Yes."

"Don’t cry, Grace."

She choked out half a laugh. "Shut up, Dom. I am Penelope--I do not cry."

He grinned, and the warmth in his voice nearly undid her. "Oh, right. I forgot Penelopes never weep. My mistake."

"Don’t make it again."

"I won’t. I’ll have Bill call you, yeah?"

"Yeah. But--tell him--tell him I don’t want to--" she ground to a halt, unsure what she was trying to say.

But Dom had a good idea. "I’ll tell him to keep it brief, shall I?"

"Yeah," she said with relief. "Dom--"

"Yes?"

"How did a lost little goat get so kind?"

"The scientists are still trying to figure that one out," he grinned. "I keep telling them, goats are people too. I’ll talk to you soon, Penny love."

"All right. Thanks, KP."

His laugh rumbled around her, comforting her slightly even as she hung up.
Billy picked up on the second ring. "Dom?"

"Hi, Billy. You home yet?"

"Almost."

"Call me when you get home, then."

Billy’s grip on the wheel tightened. "Did you get through to Grace?"

"Home, Billy. You know how I feel about this." Dom rang off.

Billy swore and tossed his phone on the passenger seat. Damn Dom anyway, with his refusal to talk to anyone while they were driving. Dom had had a small fender-bender the year before because he’d been on his phone, and ever since then he’d been paranoid about his friends using their mobiles behind the wheel. He could have at least said yes or no to Billy’s question, the pillock.

Billy was dialing the second he was out of the car. Fumbled with the lock to his back door with one hand, phone to his ear.

"Yeah?"

"Dom, did you get through to her or not?"

"You’re home?"

"Yes!" Billy snapped, his frustration reaching new levels. "Quit fucking around!"

"I’m not, Billy," Dom said calmly. "Yes, I reached Grace. She’ll answer the phone when you call--"

"About fucking time. Thanks--"

"Billy, wait!" Dom said urgently, afraid Billy was going to hang up before he had a chance to say anything else.

"What? Come on, Dom--"

"Slow down for a minute, man. She’ll answer when you call, all right? But let me get a word in first, it will probably help."

Billy took a deep breath, shrugged his jacket off. "Yeah, all right. Sorry, I’m just--I’ve been trying all day, you know?"

"I know," Dom chuckled. "Believe me, I know. Get yourself a drink and have a seat and get a fucking grip."
Billy quirked a wry smile. "Yes, Dom." He followed the instructions, pouring himself two fingers of a fine single-malt, and dropping wearily into the armchair in the sitting room. "All right, go on then."

"Look, Bills, I don’t know how involved you meant for me to get, but--"

"You’re my best mate."

Dom sighed, a little relieved. "Good. Because I think she let slip more than she intended." He proceeded to tell Billy about his conversation with Grace.

Billy frowned through most of it, and when Dom was finished, asked, "What does that mean, she needs a friend? Doesn’t she know I am one?"

"Of course she does, don’t be a git. A lot of it was--was in her voice," he tried to explain. "This isn’t easy, you know her better than I do, but...I think she’s a little freaked out by how much she cares about you, Bill. I think--I think she frightened herself with how worried she’s been about you, and I think she’s just as scared of falling in love again as you are."

Billy nearly choked on his whiskey, but before he could protest, Dom was speaking again.

"And don’t bother saying anything, because I know it’s true. I know you, Billy," he smiled. "And I know I wasn’t very sympathetic when you found out about Emily. I was just trying to make you angry, to give you something to fight with instead of that pain you were in. I’m sorry I failed so spectacularly. And I know it hasn’t been very long, not really, and that it’s probably smart not to get involved right away--not romantically, anyway."

"Not romantically," Billy quietly agreed. "But I am involved."

"I’m starting to get that," Dom chuckled with gentle sarcasm. "I don’t know much about what Grace has been through, beyond what you told Elijah and I, but it seems to me she’s convinced herself that not only does she not care if you love someone else--meaning Emily--but that she doesn’t want or need to fall in love again. And that’s sad, Billy."

"It’s not right. She’s meant to love, Dom. She’s made to love."

"Billy," Dom said softly, surprised. "That’s the most starry-eyed thing I’ve ever heard you say."

Billy was embarrassed. "Shut it," he said gruffly.

Dom wiped the grin from his face before speaking again. "I’ll let you go so you can call her. But I wanted you to know all that. I think you’re going to have to tread carefully for a while, Billy, she seems skittish right now."

"Yeah. I just want to make sure she knows I’m her friend. She has to know that," Billy said intently.

"She does. Just remind her gently. Oh, and I promised her I’d ask you to keep it brief for tonight. She said she doesn’t really feel like talking tonight, but I pointed out it was hardly fair to keep you on edge until she does."

"Thanks, Dom. Thanks for--well, all of it. I’m sorry you got pulled this far into it."

"I’m not, if I could help," Dom said, meaning it.
"You did. I’ll give you a call in a day or two, right?"

"Yeah. And I’ll see you next week."

"Bye, Dom."

"See you, Bills."

The moment he had disconnected with Dom, Billy was pushing a button to dial Grace in Toronto. He held his breath as it rang once, twice, three times--her flat wasn’t that big, why the hell wasn’t she--

"Hello?"

"Hey, wee girl," he said quietly, determined to be gentle and kind, pushing all his frustration of the day away.

"Hi, Billy." Her voice was low, but she didn’t sound particularly upset.

"Am I calling at a bad time?" The second the words were out of his mouth, he could have kicked himself for giving her the perfect out.

"No, it’s fine."

He nearly sighed with relief. "Good. Ehm... Good." He stopped, and realized he had no idea how to begin. But before he could, Grace spoke up.

"I’m sorry about not answering the phone today, Billy."

Billy’s breath gusted out on a sigh. "I’m sorry too, dear heart. For this morning. I was trying to dance around what I wanted to say--maybe I should stick to saying things straight out, hmm?"

"Yeah. And I should let you finish a sentence once in a while."

"That depends, Billy. What did you want to talk about?" She sounded...not displeased exactly, he thought, but certainly not keen.

"About me. A little bit about why I needed your help the other night."

"Oh. Well--okay."

"I did what you said, and I went for that walk. Apparently I need to buy myself a wee compass to take along, I was thinking so hard I got myself lost," he smiled, easing into the conversation. "No one around here seems to build fences, not through the forest, and I wound up walking straight through to the other side. Took me ages to get home again."

He heard an answering smile in her voice as she said, "Poor lamb. You’d better take a canteen and bedroll with you next time, just in case."

He laughed. "I was considering a packet of breadcrumbs, myself. So I was thinking, and at first I was thinking it was a damned silly thing to be doing, actually, thinking about the ex who cheated on me and broke my heart and why the hell would I want to think about why I missed her. I just did. And it’s a good thing you weren’t there, wee girl, or you would have gotten a piece of my mind about it." He kept the smile firmly on his face, needing her to be able to hear it, to know it
was all right. "But as I kept thinking, I realized a few things about myself. Things I’m not particularly proud of, and things that I’m embarrassed to tell you, which is the reason behind the fancy footwork this morning."

"You don’t have to, Billy--" she began, with all sincerity.

"I know I don’t. But I really do want to, if you’ll let me."

"Of course," she said quietly.

"I was lonely the other night, Grace, when we were on the phone. I’m sure that’s no surprise to you. I was lonely and all at sixes and sevens with myself for being lonely. I thought it was Emily that I missed, that I needed. But it really wasn’t. I won’t pretend it didn’t hurt when she cheated on me, because I did love her. But...I think I was just as much in love with the way she loved me, and when I say it like that it doesn’t make much sense, and...fuck," he gave a weak little laugh, "this is hard."

"It’s all right, Billy," Grace said softly. "Take your time."

He searched for the right words to explain. "I think--I think it hurt my pride as much as anything else. I’m at the top of my career so far, people know me and they seem to like me, and she throws me over for some American prat on the telly. God, that makes me sound a right prick, doesn’t it?"

"Not at all," she said immediately, firmly. "You have every reason to be proud of yourself--you’re a good, decent man, Billy. And when you had no idea at all what was coming, it would be only natural to feel a little of that; she hit you out of nowhere, of course your pride is going to be damaged. It’s not like you had any signs that the relationship was failing. But what do you mean you were in love with the way she loved you?"

"She was there for me, day in and day out, always asking how my day was, always knowing if I was in a shit mood. She was there when I came home and she knew how I took my tea and she knew there are certain days of the year when it’s best to leave me alone. And I realized--I realized I don’t miss Emily, I miss having someone look after me," he admitted, scrubbing his hand roughly through his hair. "I’m a selfish bastard, I know, but there it is."

"That’s not selfish, Billy, that’s normal," she said gently, with a bit of a smile. "You’re not being fair to yourself. I’m sure it goes beyond having someone to look after you--hell, a maid could look after you. There’s nothing wrong with wanting someone to share your life, sharing who you are. And wanting to share yourself with them too. And there’s nothing wrong with feeling a bit lost when you’re tired and lonely."

"That’s sort of what Dom said. I guess...I guess I just need to...be alone for a while, Single, I mean, you know? Make sure I’m..." he floundered, not sure how to say what he meant, annoyed with himself that he was having so much trouble with his words.

"Right with yourself first?" she softly suggested.

"Aye. Aye, that’s it. So I’ll know next time, that it’s not just someone I want, that it’s that one particular person."

"That sounds like a very good plan, Billy."

"And I wanted you to know that because--because I--aw, hell, Grace, the last thing I want is to hurt you. But I did anyway, didn’t I?" he said sadly.
"No, Billy, you didn’t. I should have listened to you in the first place, and I’m sorry. But I’m fine."

"Grace--"

"Just as long as you’re still my friend, Billy," she said, her voice suddenly wavering. "I know when you were here--it wasn’t always--I shouldn’t have--"

"Don’t say that," he said strongly, frowning. "Don’t you dare say you regret any of the time we’ve spent together."

"I don’t!" she cried. "God, Billy, of course I don’t. But it’s been...so intense. And I’m not sure--"

"Tell you what, dear heart," he said, leaning his head against the back of his armchair. "Let’s not look back just yet, all right? Let’s leave what’s happened behind for a bit, and just wander forward. Can you do that? Can you just go from here, knowing I’m your friend and you’re very, very dear to me, and that there’s no way in hell I’m letting you out of my life?"

A little sob caught in her throat.

"I’m going to take that as a yes," he smiled gently. "Total honesty, Grace, even when it’s difficult. And with that in mind, if you ever want to tell me how you’ve felt today, I’ll be here."

"Not--not yet," she whispered.

"All right. I’m going to let you go now, Grace. I’m sure you’re tired after so little sleep last night, thanks to yours truly, and I know you didn’t feel much like talking in the first place. Get a good night’s sleep, and don’t worry, wee girl. We’re going to be just fine."

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"You’re--you’ll take care of yourself, right?"

"I will, I promise. In fact, I’m following your prescription for recovery to a tee tomorrow. I’ve rented some films and I’m going to do nothing but lay on the sofa like a lazy arse and eat everything in sight."

It earned a little chuckle from her, as he’d been hoping it would. "I’m glad," she said. "You’ve earned it."

"Stewart’s coming tomorrow as well, so I’ll finally have my email back. I’ll send you a message as soon as it’s up and running."

"I’d like that."

"You take care too, dear heart. And I’ll talk to you very soon, all right?"

"All right. Good night, Billy."

"Good night, Grace." Billy pressed the power button on his phone, closed his eyes wearily, and sighed. He hoped he’d patched things up between them, that they really could move forward from there. He could be patient, but he couldn’t let Grace get entrenched in the idea that there could never be anything more than a--admittedly deep and unique--friendship between them. There might never be more than that--but he wasn’t going to throw away the chance to find out. And he wouldn’t let her toss it away, either.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

A million thank-yous to elmathelas, who has not only beta'd this whole beast, but pretty much wrote half of this chapter. Thanks for letting me use your words, because they're better than mine any day.

Friday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Finally

Hello, wee girl. Marvellous news, I finally have the internet again! Stewart got me all sorted yesterday, after I plied him with a bit of fine whisky. I have internet, sound, printing, and scanning abilities, although what I'll do with that last, I am not sure. However, we're all set.

Thanks for your emails, I got all three last night once I got logged on. I loved the one with all the details of your day--I wish I could hear about every day in that much detail. Carpal tunnel my arse. And your Canadian menu sounds fantastic. Next time I'm in Toronto, I expect you to find us a restaurant that serves all this, especially the salmon. I can't quite imagine how the taste of maple syrup goes with salmon, and I have no idea whatsoever how you cook fish on a cedar plank, but it sounds intriguing.

Oh, by the way, I also got your letter this morning too--thank you for that. It's a shame letter-writing is becoming a lost art. There is something so much more personal and intimate about reading a person's words in their own handwriting. Then again, I'm not one to talk, I'm terrible at writing letters. Postcards I can handle, but put an entire sheet of blank paper in front of me, and I panic. But it was wonderful finding it on my mat this morning, much better than the circular it came with, and it's made my day.

I hope you're doing better today, wee girl. I hope you got some sleep once I finally left you alone and stopped calling you at six-thirty in the bloody morning. I'm such a fuckwit sometimes, I'm afraid you'll just have to get used to that. It's incurable, it seems. But even if the conversation wasn't easy, it was still good to talk to you. Thank you for listening...again. I hope you know how much I appreciate it.

Well, I'm a heartless bastard, but I'm afraid this is the end of the email already. I kind of pissed the morning away, but I guess I'm not too terribly worried about it, it was a good relaxing morning. But now I have to head downtown to get some last-minute Christmas shopping done, and seeing as it's the 21st, I think it's going to take some time. It never ceases to amaze me, I travel the world and I'm constantly picking different and unique things up for people, and yet somehow I always need to find a couple things I've forgotten, the last few days before Christmas. And I detest shopping in crowds. But so does everyone, I suppose.

All right, I've put it off long enough. I'm off, dear heart, and I hope to hear from you soon. Where will you be over the holiday? Just in case I need to talk to you. Take care of yourself.
Miss you,
Billy

Friday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Finally

Hi, Billy. I'm glad you're finally hooked up, I'm sure it must have been driving you nuts to be without your email, I know it would me. I'll start researching restaurants to find you one that does the salmon--but I still say your first meal upon returning to Toronto should be poutine.

You're not a fuckwit, Billy, and you know it. So you forgot the time difference one time, it's no big deal. You travel so much, I don't know how you keep track of what time zone you're in anyway. No worries. You know I'll talk to you any time of the day or night. Unless I'm being a putz and leaving my phone turned off, of course. I really am sorry about that, you know, it was a selfish thing to do, and I feel terrible for making you go through all that just to get in touch with me. And I'm glad you did, at the same time. It was good to talk to you, too.

I'm heading up to my parents' for Christmas. Jamie's driving me, and he's going to stay, since he doesn't have any family in the area. His parents live in British Columbia, his brother (the one I went to university with) is in Nunavut for a year, and his sister is in Nova Scotia. Needless to say, they don't all get together very often, so I'm taking him with me. My parents love him, so it should be fun. My mother will probably try and set him up with the neighbour's daughter, or something, and that's always amusing to watch. Cruel? Yes, but amusing. Anyway, we're headed up Sunday, the 23rd, and I'll be back home on the 27th, I'm spending Boxing Day helping a couple relatives with their website. Sometimes I can't quite believe I'm the family computer geek. Sigh. Anyway, here's the number if you need to get in touch, I'll be there most of the time. Except the afternoon on Christmas day, which is the big MacPherson gathering. Food, presents, carols, children shrieking at the tops of their lungs...the usual. Nah, it's always pretty fun, and it's nice to see all the relatives, I don't see them that much any more.

Anyway, I'd better go get my work done for the day. It's going to be a long one, it's a busy news day. So I hope you had fun shopping, and if I don't hear from you before then, I hope you have a wonderful Christmas.

You are like Georgia today
Grace

Friday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Georgia

That gets me every time, I hope you know that.

What's going on, wee girl? You didn't sound particularly happy in your email. Everything all right? I'm glad you're spending a few days with your family. Forget what you're leaving behind, and just let your mum spoil you shamelessly. You need it, and you deserve it.

If you want to talk, let me know, I'll call you.

Thinking of you, too
Billy

Saturday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Georgia

I mean it.

Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry if I was down in my email. It's just...I don't know. Christmas is hard, that's all. I'll be fine once everything is done and the 25th arrives. With no credit card, I have to pay for Christmas presents with cash, and I've been planning for months, but like you said, somehow or other there's always a few things you forget, right? I guess I'm just frustrated, and feeling really, really pissed with Michael again right now.

That being said, however, I really am fine. The shopping is done, I have more than $10 left in the bank so I won't go to jail, and tomorrow I'm going home for the first time in a couple months. And believe me, I have every intention of letting both my parents spoil me as much as they wish. :o)

Thanks, Billy.
Grace

Saturday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: Georgia

I know you mean it. That's what gets me.

I'm sorry Christmas is so rough for you, I hadn't thought about the whole gift angle. I know there's very little I can say, so I will just say I'm very glad you're not going to jail, it would make the flying visits a little more difficult to plan. And you wouldn't be able to come visit me soon. And if I ever
find that son of a bitch I'll break his fucking legs.

Missing you fiercely,
Billy

Grace tossed her bag in the van, ran back to the propped-open door and grabbed the first carton, and was loading it even as Jamie came around to get the second one.

"What is all this?" he asked.

"Christmas presents. Stuff for the party, a couple sweaters my mom's going to fix for me, my computer--the usual. Can you grab the third box, and I'll run up and get my guitar?" she asked, about to sprint up the three flights of stairs. She hadn't wanted to bring her guitar down and leave it sitting in the stairwell, as it was even colder than her apartment.

"Grace," Jamie said, standing in the middle of the sidewalk with her carton in his arms.

"Yeah?" she turned, would have kept walking backwards except that was an invitation to run smack into some innocent pedestrian walking by.

"Let me come up?"

She frowned. "We have to go, Jamie."

"Why haven't you ever asked me up? Not once in--what? How long have you been here, nine, ten months? You know you're my girl." He suddenly grinned. "You know I couldn't think less of you than I already do."

Grace snorted, the old joke disarming her as it was meant to. "More."

"You sure?" he said, carrying on the proper responses.

But Grace didn't. She looked at him, and quietly said, "Yeah. You could think a lot less of me."

"Oh, Grace. You're an unbelievable idiot sometimes." He put the box in the van, closing the door and locking the vehicle with the remote. He strode past her, snagging her hand in his as he went, and dragged her up the stairs.

"Jamie--"

"Shut up and tell me where I'm going," he demanded.

"If I shut up, how can I tell you?" she retorted, annoyed and worried and already embarrassed, and then muttered, "Third floor."

"You need an elevator," he commented, more mildly this time.

"Tell me about it. Why the hell do you think I have kickass calf muscles?"

"I'd noticed, but I didn't want to comment. You already think I'm a perv," he grinned.
"That's because you are."

When they reached the top, Jamie let go of her hand to allow her to open the door. Her fingers resting on the door knob, she didn't look up at him as she said, "Don't try and tell me it's not so bad. Just satisfy your morbid curiosity and let's get out of here."

"It's not just curiosity, you twit, and you know it." He nudged her none too gently.

Grace opened the door to her apartment and stepped through, Jamie following her. She avoided his eyes, letting him glance around while she went to check that everything was turned off and to pick up her guitar from by her bed.

"How long are you here for?" Jamie folded his arms on his chest.

"Two more years or so. Come on, let's go."

"Why didn't you tell me things were this bad?" he asked quietly.

"Do we have to do this now?" she snapped, then sighed, and set her guitar down again. "Sorry."

"This sucks, Grace."

She snorted, couldn't help a small smile. "It does, doesn't it?"

"Did he take everything?" Jamie asked, referring to Michael. He had known, of course, that they had broken up, known that Grace had changed afterward until he felt he hardly knew her anymore, but this was beyond anything he had imagined.

"Pretty much." She looked at the floor.

"I can't believe you didn't fucking tell me about this," he muttered, suddenly angry. He turned and walked out, leaving Grace to pick up her guitar, lock the door behind her, and follow him slowly down the stairs.

In the van and on their way, it was a full ten minutes before he would speak to her. When he finally did, it was to say, "You owe me an apology."

"For what?" she asked, but not argumentatively. He was right, and she knew it.

"For not trusting our friendship more than that. For lying to me this whole time."

"I never lied--"

"You lied by omission, Grace. God! What the hell got into you?" he exploded, and his foot pressed down on the accelerator.

"Slow down. I don't--it's hard to explain," she said quietly.

"Try."
So Grace slowly, haltingly, told him everything. Told him about Michael taking not only all her money, but racking up debts that would keep her in poverty for several years. Told him about the false tax return, her deal with the government to keep her out of prison, selling her car, moving to her tiny dump of an apartment. She didn't look at him the entire time.

When she paused, Jamie asked, "Who knows, Grace? Who have you told this to in the last ten months?"

"Billy."

"Who, your fountain photo guy?"

"Yeah."

"And he's the only one in that whole time? Didn't you just meet him a couple weeks ago?" Jamie finally looked over at her, frowning.

"Yeah."

"You're totally fucked up, you know that?" he growled, frustrated. "Why the hell would you do this alone? I thought we were better friends than this, I thought I knew you better than this."

"You can't say a word about this while we're at my parents', Jamie," she warned. "Not one bloody word, do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I'll just take lessons from you," he sniped.

"You're my best friend, Jamie. It's not that I didn't tell you. I didn't tell anyone."

"Since when am I your best friend?" he asked, startled out of his anger. "I thought I came a distant fourth or so."

She looked out the window, not answering. She didn't want to go there. She hadn't told anyone this part of it, not even Billy.

"Grace? When was the last time you talked to Kelly? Or Brad, or Akiko, or Sue, or even Neil, for that matter? When was the last time you talked to any of your friends from school? I know you haven't talked to my brother lately, but since he's in Nunavut I won't hold that against you. When, Grace?"

"I email Kelly regularly, at least once a month. She's in Australia, I can't call her," she said, hoping that was enough to satisfy him. Unfortunately for her, his natural flightiness seemed to have left him for the moment.

"And the others?" he insisted.

"I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because they kept calling me and asking me to go places and do things that I can't afford to do, all right?" she finally cried. "And when I kept saying no, thanks, they got tired of it and just stopped asking. They buggered off when I wasn't so much fun anymore, and my dignity has been hit hard enough, thank you very much, I wasn't about to beg!"

Jamie reached over and took her hand. "Grace, I'm sorry. I wouldn't have expected that from them."
I'm sorry they abandoned you."
"You're the only one who hasn't. You're the only one who was--" she stopped, fighting tears.
"Oblivious?" he smiled wryly.
"No--"
"It's okay. I know I'm not always swift on the uptake, kiddo. Now that I look back, I see a lot of things that I probably should have questioned and didn't. But I still wish you'd told me, because I love you. You know that, right?" He squeezed her hand.
"Yeah, I know." She swiped at her eyes. "Love you too, Jame. I just...I couldn't tell anyone. I just curled up inside myself, it hurt too much and I was too ashamed at letting myself be used like that," she tried to explain.
"You didn't let--" he started protesting, but she stopped him with a weak smile.
"I know. I'm starting to get that."
"Billy again?" he asked, far more perceptively than she was used to from him.
She stared at him. "Why do I suddenly feel like you have sides to you I've never seen, James Travis?"
He shrugged. "Dunno. Why do you? So who is this Billy character, anyway? If you've told him all this, I take it he's...going to be around?"
"No. Not so much around." She told him about meeting Billy, about their unspoken communication, about showing him around Toronto and going dancing and even about kissing him and then spending half the night talking in her apartment. She told him about the unscheduled visit and dinner in the airport.
Jamie eyed her sideways, a bemused look on his face. "Who is he, Grace? What's with all the flying in and out?"
She sighed. "You saw Lord of the Rings, right?"
"Yeah, why?"
"You remember Pippin, the hobbit?"
"Which one was he?" Jamie squinted at her, trying to remember.
"Watch the road, idiot. The one with the Scottish accent."
"Oh, yeah, all right, I know who you mean."
"That's Billy."
"You kissed a hobbit?" he asked delightedly. "You made out like a wild thing with a little bitty hobbit?"
"He's not the size of a hobbit, you moron. He's a real, normal human being, he's taller than I am," she said with exaggerated patience.
"Yeah, like that would be unusual," he teased her, and Grace knew with relief they were going to be okay. "I can't believe you're dating a Scottish hobbit actor. That's just...odd, even for you."

"I'm not odd!" she protested. "And we're not dating."

"Well he's obviously smitten with you."

"He is not! We're just friends. Good friends."

"Grace, I'm your best friend, supposedly, and even I wouldn't fly into Toronto just to see you," he pointed out with a grin.

"You live in Toronto," she retorted, cheeks pink.

"You know what I mean. Besides, people who are just friends don't make out in dance clubs and airport lounges. You've never made out with me, and I'm your best friend."

"A privilege that may shortly be revoked, if you keep this up," she warned.

"What, not making out with you? I don't think your hobbit boyfriend would like that very much," he goaded her deliberately.

Grace groaned. "Why are you torturing me? It's Christmas, you're supposed to show compassion for your fellow man."

"You deserve it for all your secret-keeping," he said a little darkly. "That's not over with, by the way. After Christmas is over, you and I are having a long chat about it all."

"Great."

"So when will you be seeing him again?" he asked curiously.

She looked out the window. "Not until the end of January."

Jamie glanced over at her. "That's a long time."

"We email. He calls me. It's all right."

"Hard to work out a relationship that way, though. Listen, Grace, I'm not sure how to say this, but...be careful, eh?"

"Firstly," she said with some asperity, "I already told you we're just friends. There is no 'relationship' to be worked out. Secondly..." she trailed off, then quietly said, "Yeah. I'm planning on being very careful from now on."

Jamie glanced over at her again, but Grace turned her head and looked out the window, and was silent for some time.

At dinner that evening it was comfortably crowded around the table, and Grace's mother was in her element. "David, would you like more carrots, dear?" she asked Grace's brother.
"No, I'm good, thanks, Mom," he answered. "But I'll take more ham, if there is any."

"I'll just cut some--"

"I'll get it, Mom," Grace interjected. "Hand me the plate?" She took the plate from her mother, got up from the table, and went into the kitchen. As she began slicing some more meat, she heard her mother in the dining room asking Jamie if he was seeing anyone. She grinned.

"No, Mrs. MacPherson, I'm not at the moment. Too busy with work, I guess," he replied easily, and Grace thought with pity how little he still knew her mother.

"With work? But you're young, Jamie, you should be having fun and dating and finding the right girl to settle down with! There's enough time to work when you're married and have your family started." She passed him the tureen of peas. "Eat up, you look thin."

Grace nearly laughed out loud.

"I'm fine, thanks--"

"Have more peas," she said firmly. "My friend Jeannette's daughter is about your age--"

Grace bit her lip to keep from giggling.

"--and she's a lovely girl. I'll see if she can drop in before you leave. When are you two leaving?"

Jamie made a strangled noise.

Smiling sweetly, Grace came back into the dining room and passed her brother the plate of ham. "Oh, we're here until the twenty-seventh. That would be plenty of time, wouldn't it?"

David snorted, shot her a look that clearly said she'd better be careful or she was going to get hers.

Grace raised her eyebrow at him. "So where are Ellie and Sarah tonight, David?"

He reddened. "They went to see a movie. I wasn't allowed to come."

She grinned. "They were afraid you'd fall asleep and start snoring again, weren't they?"

"Yeah. Wasn't my fault the movie was boring as hell--heck," he quickly amended with a lightning glance at his mother.

Feeling her nice dinner careening out of control, Grace's mother spoke up. "I hear Mark Adams is in town again, Grace. Did you know he's divorced now?"

Grace froze. "No, I didn't. That's a shame."

"You should call him. I'm sure he'd like to hear from an old friend."

She made a non-committal sound, but her mother persisted.

"After all, you're not seeing anyone, are you?"

Grace bit her tongue, irrationally hurt by the intimation that her only options left were someone else's cast-offs.

Out of nowhere, Jamie spoke up. "Actually, she is seeing someone, Mrs. MacPherson."
Grace choked on her potatoes, and Jamie cheerfully thumped on her back.

"Really?" Mrs. MacPherson frowned. "Who, Grace? And why haven't we heard about him?"

"I--I just started seeing him," she managed, shooting a burning glare at Jamie, who was apparently back to his oblivious self.

"Well why didn't you bring him with you?"

"He's out of the country at the moment."

Her father joined the conversation for the first time. "Over Christmas? Is he visiting family?"

"Yes." Grace couldn't leave it at that, no matter how much she wanted to. "Or rather, he's home visiting family. He's from Scotland."

"And how did you meet him?" Her mother continued what had quickly become an interrogation, and Grace felt the urge to kick Jamie in the shin. She noticed David was keeping his head down, too.

"Through friends," she said, telling herself it wasn't really a lie, not really, because she considered the beach and her guitar good friends.

Her father smiled. "Does he have a name?"

"Billy."

Her mother just looked at her, waiting.

Grace looked back, then crumbled with a sigh. "Boyd. Billy Boyd."

Her brother looked up. "I think saying you're dating Billy Boyd is a bit subtle for Mom and Dad, Grace," he grinned. "They haven't seen the movies."

"I'm not making it up!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. MacPherson frowned. "If you don't want to say, Grace, then don't, there's really no need to make up names. I'm sure I don't see why the secrecy, but--"

"I'm not lying," she said, annoyed, and angry with herself for being annoyed. First they force it out of her, and now they won't even believe her.

Mr. MacPherson looked at David. "Who is Billy Boyd?"

"He played one of the hobbits in Lord of the Rings," David said, talking around a mouthful of potato.

Her father looked at her closely, then sighed. "All right, Grace. We'll leave the subject of you not seeing anyone alone. Pass the ham, please, David."

Grace couldn't believe it. First she denied up and down to Jamie that they weren't dating, and now she couldn't convince her own parents she wasn't lying like a lunatic. "I'm not making this up," she insisted hotly. "I haven't seen him often, only twice in the last month, but he's at least one of my closest friends now." She thought of him sobbing in her arms on the beach, of him sleeping on her sofa in her tiny, shitty little apartment that her parents didn't even know about, thought about the way he called her 'dear heart', and bit the inside of her lip so hard she tasted the metallic tang of
blood. It turned her stomach, as the taste of blood always did, and her plate swam a little in front of her eyes. "Excuse me, please," she muttered, and quickly got up from the table.

"Are you all right, Grace?" her father asked quietly.

"I'm fine. Just tired. I'm going to go lie down for a bit." She left the dining room, not caring she was deserting Jamie, abandoning him to her mother. *Serves him right.*

Once in her bedroom, Grace pulled her jeans off and changed into more comfortable track pants, then laid on the bed, pulling the quilt up to her shoulders. It was dark, it was quiet, and she was so lonely her eyes welled up with tears. She squeezed them shut.

A few minutes later her bedroom door opened, and she waited for Jamie to flop down beside her on the mattress. Instead, she heard her desk chair being picked up and set carefully down on the wood floor beside her bed.

"Grace?" It was her father.

She debated ignoring him, feigning sleep, but decided it wasn't fair, not when he'd come all the way upstairs to check on her, and she kind of wanted to talk to him anyway. He could be so...logical, sometimes. But she didn't roll over. "Yeah?"

"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

She smiled a little despite her sadness. "Yes, Dad, I'm fine."

"We've been worried about you."

"I know Mom can't wait for me to get married. She must be disappointed I'm thirty-two and not hitched yet," she snorted.

"Are you in some sort of trouble, Grace?"

She froze, the bottom dropping out of her stomach. "What do you mean?"

"You moved and we've never seen your new apartment--and I have an idea of what your neighbourhood is like, young lady--you sold your car, and David says none of your school friends have seen you in some time."

"People don't always stay friends forever," she said quietly.

"Even so. I have to tell you, Grace, I'm very concerned about you."

"I really am seeing Billy Boyd," she said obliquely, not liking the term 'seeing', but knowing she had no hope of explaining their intense friendship to her father. "You must think I'm really pathetic if you think I'm making up stories about dating movie stars."

"Not pathetic," he said firmly. "But pressured, maybe."

"I wouldn't let Mom pressure me that much. I met him on the beach. We got to talking, I thought he was just a tourist at first. I took him up the C.N. Tower, and we had a really good time. He gave me a little video of him drawing stick people in public after he lost a bet," she suddenly challenged. "I'll show it to you if you don't believe me."

Her father surprised her by simply saying, "He sounds like a good sport."
"He is," she whispered. "You'd like him, Dad."

He was silent for a moment, and then asked, "Is Michael in jail? Did he get you into trouble?"

She felt completely breathless for a moment. She had no idea her dad would be so good at putting together the pieces. "What makes you ask that?" she hedged.

"You moved and sold your car. That suggests it's financial. And Michael just disappeared, apparently, because one day you were making plans for the summer and the next you said you weren't together anymore."

She was quiet, trying to figure out what to say, for so long he must have thought she wasn't going to answer.

"Grace--"

"I don't know where he is," she said softly.

"Tell me, sweetheart." Her father's voice was soothing, encouraging.

"Don't tell Mom," she whispered.

"Not if you don't want me to."

For the second time that day, Grace found herself explaining her predicament, her current balancing act. She told her father more of the details than she had Jamie, explaining how when she'd realized he wasn't coming back, she'd talked to a friend of a friend who was a lawyer and discovered that legally she didn't have a leg to stand on, the debt was hers. "That's why I sold the car, why I'm living where I do," she said. "I'm not in trouble--just debt."

All he said was, "You could consolidate your loans. Pay it back slowly over time, and not put yourself through this."

"I just want it over with. Two years is better than ten."

He sighed, and she could hear him running a hand over the top of his head. "You certainly inherited your mother's stubbornness, didn't you?"

She couldn't help a little laugh. "I suppose I did."

"Sweetheart--if we had any way of helping--"

"I know, Dad," she cut him off, finally rolling over to face him. She couldn't see him very well, but hoped he could see her in the light that came in from the hallway. "I know you would, and it's all right. It's my problem anyway, not yours."

"Your problems are my problems, Grace," he said quietly, and her throat tightened. "I have something for you, if you'll sit up for a minute."

She did, pushing her hair out of her face. "What is it? It's not Christmas yet."

"It's not a Christmas present." He reached over to turn on her bedside lamp, and she squinted in the sudden light as he handed her several sheets of paper.

She looked at the top one, looked up at him, dropped her eyes to the paper again, frowned. "Dad, what is this?"
"What does it look like?" he asked, quietly amused.

"It looks like a property deed."

"I wonder why." He reached over to pull the bottom paper from her hand and show it to her. It had a map on it. "As you know, the cottage is surrounded by a number of lots, and your mother and I own three. Your uncle and aunt own the rest."

She nodded dumbly.

"We are giving this one--" he pointed to a large lot across the access road from the cottage, "--to David to build a house on. They'll be building next summer."

Her head rose at that. "They're moving up there?"

"Yes. They want to get out of the city. Now this lot," he pointed to the one beside David's, "still belongs to your mother and I, and we will be leaving it treed. Privacy, and of course firewood," he smiled. "And this lot is yours."

Grace stared. "That's on the water."

"Yes. David wanted the larger lot for the house. This one is actually quite small. You could build a small cottage on it one day, but I'm afraid that's about it."

"I could--this is really mine?"

"It's really yours. To do with what you will, Grace." His careful emphasis made it obvious to her what he meant.

"I'm not selling it. I'm not," she whispered vehemently.

"You can if you want. It's yours."

"No."

"I didn't think so."

A sudden thought struck her, and she looked up at her father. "I don't--I can't pay the taxes."

He smiled at her. "Your mother and I have been paying the tax on all our land for years now. It will be no hardship to continue for a bit, for both you and David. But we can discuss more of that later." He leaned his thick hands on his thighs, preparing to rise. "And Grace--" He gave her his lopsided grin, the one she had inherited. "I'll try to convince your mother you really are seeing someone named Billy Boyd."

Grace skidded into the kitchen in her socks and grabbed the phone. "MacPherson residence, Merry Christmas!"

"May I speak with Grace, please?"
"Billy!" she exclaimed, pleased. "Is that you?"

"Happy Christmas, wee girl," he grinned. "What do you mean, 'is it me'? I thought I was the only Scot in your life."

"You are," she laughed. "I swear. But I wasn't expecting to hear from you today, you surprised me! Happy Christmas to you, too--how's your day been?"

"It's been nice," he smiled. "I'm at Margaret's, with Alex and his family."

"That's her fiancée, right?"

"Right."

"Wow. Brave of her to host Christmas dinner before they're even married and she has no choice," Grace grinned.

Billy laughed. "That's almost exactly what she said. How was your Christmas morning?"

"It's been great. My niece Sarah is having the time of her life. Santa brought her a new Barbie and some furniture, so we've been playing 'Important Business Executive Who Becomes First Elected Female Prime Minister of Canada Barbie'."

"Hmm. Do I sense Auntie Grace's influence there at all?"

She chuckled. "That obvious? But don't worry, tomorrow we'll play 'Rock Star With Morals and Ethics Barbie', and maybe even a spot of 'Olympic Athlete Who Campaigns Against Doping While She Trains Really Hard Thanks To Her Strong Work Ethic Barbie'. You know, make sure she's well-rounded."

Billy laughed aloud. "And how old is she?"

"Five. She's lapping it up, I'll have you know."

"Because it's coming from her Auntie Grace, I'll wager."

"Partially. So what are you up to for the rest of the day?" she asked, leaning against the doorjamb. "Well, it's almost time for the big Christmas dinner--"

"What are you having?"

He grinned. "Margaret's gone off her nut. Goose, roast beef, potatoes, gravy, carrots, Brussels sprouts--I don't even know what else. And plum duff for pudding."

"Oh, good grief," she groaned. "You're making me hungry. I didn't know dinners like that existed outside of a Dickens novel."

"It's probably the last time Margaret will ever do it, too, poor thing. She's going mad," he laughed. "Such sympathy! And why aren't you in the kitchen helping her, then?"

"I was, actually. But when she caught me with my finger in the brandy sauce, I was banished," he said cheerfully.

Grace laughed. "I can tell you're upset about that."
"Tremendously. And what about you, wee girl? Are you and Jamie having fun?"

"Well, Jamie is, anyway," she chuckled. "He's Sarah's boyfriend now, and so he has to carry her everywhere. Because that's what boyfriends do, you see. It's not even noon, and he's exhausted, poor boy. Mind you, so am I. Sarah's sleeping in my room and she was up at five this morning. I managed to convince her to stay quiet until six, but that was it. And now we're packing up to go to the big family thing."

"Ah, the MacPherson clan gathering. Should I let you go?"

"No, no--we're not leaving for at least half an hour. I'm fine," she reassured him. "But you know what? I'm really glad you called so I could say thank you. The books are absolutely wonderful, Billy. The illustrations in the Scottish Folklore one are just beautiful. And I'm going to do my best to finish the Scottish history one before I come, but no promises," she smiled. "But they're exactly the kind of books I love."

"You opened them then, did you?" he said, pleased. "I was looking for something for Margaret, but the second I saw them I thought of you. And when I saw the inscription in the Austen, I had to get it. I don't know if you even like Jane Austen--"

"Sense and Sensibility is one of my favourite books, it honestly is. I thought for sure I must have mentioned it, and you remembered or something. But I couldn't think when I might have."

"No, just luck, apparently."

"Luck indeed. And that inscription just blew me away. Wherever did you find it?"

"A little shop here in Glasgow. It was such a lovely edition, I picked it up to look at it for Margaret, but when I read that I nearly fell over."

"It's gorgeous."

"Read it to me?" he asked. "I posted the books the same day I found them--I barely remember what it said. Just that it made me think of you."

"Well, it had my name on it--" she teased. He grinned. "That wasn't it, and you know it."

"I know. It meant a lot to me, actually. Hold on, I'll go get it."

Billy heard her lay the phone down and hurry away. A moment later, there was a noise as if someone were fumbling with the phone.

"Merry Christmas," said a sweet, high-pitched, young-sounding voice.

Billy smiled. "Merry Christmas to you, too. Is this Sarah?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"My name's Billy."

"Hi, Billy. You talk funny."

He laughed. "I do, don't I? That's because I live in Scotland."
"Where's that?" she asked.

"Do you know what the ocean is, Sarah?"

"Yes. It's a really, really, really, big lake."

"Aren't you a smart girl! Well, Scotland is on the other side of the ocean."

"How long would it take you to swim across the ocean? Auntie Grace swam across the lake at our cottage when the boat broke."

"It would take you a long time, wee lassie," Billy smiled.

"What's that mean?"

"Wee lassie? It means a big girl, just like you."

Billy heard Grace's voice in the background. "And what are you doing, you little monkey?"

"I'm talking to Billy. He lives in--in...where do you live again?" she asked in a loud whisper.

"Scotland," Billy supplied.

"Scotland," she parroted.

"I know he does, my darling, but your mummy and daddy have told you not to touch the phone without asking, haven't they?"

"But I wanted to say Merry Christmas!"

Grace's voice was amused. "And did you?"

"Yes."

"Then say goodbye to Billy and give me back the phone, monkeyface."

Sarah giggled, and the sound made Billy grin. "Goodbye, Billy. Merry Christmas!"

"Goodbye, Sarah. Merry Christmas to you, too."

Grace came back on the phone. "Sorry, Billy. I hope she didn't talk your ear off." She was grinning.

"On the contrary. I hear you swam across a lake when you broke the boat," he teased.

"I didn't break it!" she protested. "The motor just died and stranded me. I didn't want to wait hours for them to come looking for me, so I tied the boat up and swam for it."

"You're a good swimmer, then?"

"Yes. But I also took it easy. It took me an hour to get back, I was so tired that night, I slept like a log."

Billy was startled. "An hour? How big is your lake?"

"Big. That's why I wasn't going to wait," she grinned.

"Wow. No wonder Sarah was proud of you. But I thought you said in an email your boathouse was
now without a boat?"

"It is now. That trip was actually its last. We had it towed back, and three days later it was sunk in a storm."

"Sunk!" he exclaimed. "What kind of wild weather do you have up there, anyway?"

She laughed. "That was the worst storm in something like fifty years, they said. A tornado went through the next lake over."

"Were you still up there?"

"I was." Grace sat in a chair at the kitchen table.

"You must have been frightened," he said, remembering tornadoes as being on her list of fears.

"Terrified, as a matter of fact, because I was there by myself. I thought I was going to wind up in Kansas for sure! One of the trees by the cottage came down, it scared the hell out of me. But that was two years ago, when I still went up a lot."

"You will again, wee girl," he said firmly.

She sighed. "I know. Especially--" she stopped abruptly. She hadn't meant to tell anyone just yet.

"Especially what?"

She hesitated, then decided there was no reason Billy couldn't know. She trusted him. "Especially since I now own a little chunk of land up there."

Billy was suitably flabbergasted. "You what? Grace, that's wonderful! But how--I'm sorry, never mind, that's none of my business. But that's fantastic, dear heart, I'm so pleased for you."

"No, it's all right. Our family owns a number of lots surrounding the cottage--three of which my parents own. They wanted to give one to my brother to build a house on, so they gave one of the others to me. Right now the land taxes aren't much because there's no services, no electricity or such, and my parents said they'll pay them for the next three years, by which time I'll hopefully be on my feet again."

"Grace, that is terrific. Tell me about it," he encouraged.

"Well, it's the smaller of the two lots, but it's on the water, which the other one isn't. David wanted the larger lot to build a decent-sized house, whereas I probably would--at most--only ever build a small cottage. But it's mine. And it's given me..." she stopped, unsure what she was trying to say.

"Something to grab hold of?" Billy suggested quietly.

"Yes," she agreed, relieved. "Exactly."

"I'm happy for you, wee girl."

"Thanks, Billy." She suddenly eased open the book in her hands, and began reading the old, slightly blurred inscription. "Dearest Grace: 'I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with the roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know.' Ralph Waldo Emerson. My thoughts are with you constantly. Alistair."

"Emerson. Aye, that was it," Billy murmured.
"Grace was a very lucky woman, to have this Alistair offer his rough courage," Grace said softly, smiling.

"I knew you'd understand that. It's complete honesty, isn't it? It's our say-everything policy--it's not easy, and it can occasionally hurt. But it's not gossamer, either."

"No. It really is the soldest thing I've known in a long time, Billy."

"Me too, dear heart. And don't you forget it."

She winced a little. "About last week, Billy--"

"No. Stop right there," he cut her off. "We are done looking backward, remember? No matter what, we have a firm base to stand on--and you--and I--are only moving forward." He said it carefully, kept them separate so she wouldn't protest. It was Christmas--he didn't want to spend it hearing her self-protective reassurances that their friendship was all she wanted. He could be patient. They would get past this little roadblock of hesitation, on both their parts.

"Yeah. Okay," she acquiesced. "And I'll try--I'll try to have a little more courage."

"You have plenty, Grace, you need not worry over that," he said warmly.

"Oh Billy--" she let out a little half-laugh. "You always know just what to say, don't you?"

He chuckled. "Unfortunately, I've proven that's not the case all too often. But I'll always try, Grace. I want nothing more than for you to be happy."

Grace's throat tightened. "Me too, Billy--for you, I mean," she whispered. "You know I miss you, right?"

"I know," he murmured. "Me too."

They were silent for a moment.

Finally Billy cleared his throat. "I should let you go--"

"Wait. Did you--did you get my Christmas present?" she asked.

He was surprised. "What? No--you shouldn't have, wee girl--"

"It's nothing big," she assured him. "But I'm disappointed it didn't get there in time."

"I'll keep my eye out for it," he promised. "I'll let you know as soon as it arrives."

"All right. And yes, I should go--we have to leave soon. And your dinner's probably ready."

"I think it might be. Have a wonderful Christmas, dear heart. I'll call you soon--in fact, Dom and I will call you," he grinned.

"When is he getting there?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Tell him I said hello," she smiled. "And have a great time. Good luck with that window seat, eh?"

Billy laughed. "We'll see about that. Take care, wee girl."
"You too, Billy. Merry Christmas to you and Margaret."

"Happy Christmas to you, too, Grace."

Grace hung up the phone, and with Billy's book still in hand, went to get ready to leave.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Grace burst through the door, left the keys dangling in the lock, put her shopping bags down, and dove for the ringing phone. "Hello?" she panted.

"Hey, wee girl," Billy greeted her cheerfully. "Did I bring you running from somewhere?"


"Good. I have a message for you, but catch your breath first."

"Let me just get my keys out of the door and put the chicken in the freezer," she said, hurrying over to the door to do just that, and to take off her boots. "I just got home this morning, and there's no food in the place. Damned grocery store was packed. Well, that's what I get for shopping right after Christmas, eh?" She dropped her keys in her purse and took the bag with the chicken to the kitchenette, popping the whole bundle right in the small freezer.

"Yeah, it's the same here. Dom and I went this morning to pick up masses of food because apparently my fully stocked kitchen wasn't enough for him," he laughed.

"So he made it there safely then, did he?" She took her jacket off and dropped onto the sofa with a grunt.

"Aye, he's here. Arrived yesterday with two bags and three cases of beer."

Grace laughed. "Only three? So how does he like his red bedroom?"

"He loves it, I'll have you know. He said something about black feathers and a leopard-skin rug, but I told him I'd rather not have a bordello in my house, so he's dropped that."

"That's too bad, Girlz Girlz Girlz would have felt right at home there. So what's the message?"

"Well, he won't talk to you himself because you hurt his feelings," Billy grinned.

Grace knew that this was straight from Dom, winding her up. "I did, did I? How did I manage that?"

"He says he's very hurt you don't have more faith in us, that you think we can't build a simple little window seat. He says people who live in glass houses et cetera."

Grace laughed out loud. "And what exactly does that mean? I've never even tried to build a window seat."

"That's what I told him, but he didn't take that well either," he chuckled. "At the moment he's curled up in a little ball on my sofa, sulking." From the background came loud sounds of protest.

Grace giggled. "Put him on for a sec?"

Billy said, away from the phone, "She wants to talk to you, wanker."
Grace clearly heard Dom's voice. "No. She wounded me deeply."

"Tell him I'll apologize."

"You sure you want to do that?" Billy asked her with a grin.

"Ah, why not? I wouldn't want to be responsible for crushing his poor little feelings. You're going to want him off your sofa eventually anyway."

"Sooner rather than later, I should think. Dom," he said, again away from the phone, "She wants to apologize."

"Really?" Dom asked suspiciously.

"Oh, get up, you great numptie. Here."

After a minute, Grace heard Dom's loud breathing in her ear, knew he was doing it on purpose to tell her he was on the line and not speaking to her. She took a second to straighten her face in order to sadly, weepily say, "Dom--darling Pellinore. Please, can't you find it in your heart to forgive your little Penelope? Please, Pellinore, I couldn't stand it if I thought I'd hurt you, I--I might have to do something drastic--"

Dom dramatically cried, "Penny, love, don't do it, I'm not worth it, don't top yourself!"

"Top myself?" she said indignantly, her amusement coming through loud and clear despite her best efforts. "Don't be ridiculous. I meant I might have to cry, or something."

Dom laughed out loud and said, "No, please, anything but that."

"Am I forgiven, then, dearest Pellinore?"

He sighed deeply. "I suppose. I still can't believe you have so little faith in our carpentry skills."

"And what was the last thing you built that required measuring and sawing and hammering?"

"Define measuring and sawing," he hedged.

"Ha!" Grace exclaimed. "I knew it! You've got hammering down, though, do you?"

"I totally do. You should see my hammer, Pen, it's the biggest, sexiest hammer this side of the Atlantic," Dom boasted.

Billy's voice came across the line, mild but clear. "Do I need to know what this conversation is about?"

Grace sniggered. "Have fun getting out of that one."

Dom cheerfully said, "I'm just telling Pen about my hammer. You have a big hammer too, don't you Bills?"

"Huge. 'S a sledgehammer, as a matter of fact."

Grace laughed aloud. "You two are outrageous. And you expect me to believe this little construction job is going to be a success?"

"As a matter of fact, we have plans and everything. We just have to adjust them a bit. We'll be
"Fine," he said confidently.

"I expect regular progress updates."

"You got it. In fact, if Billy can find the digital camera I gave him for his birthday and he's never used, we can even send you pictures."

"I did so use it!" Billy protested from the background. "It didn't work, it's defective!"

"Defective my arse," Dom snorted. "You're the one who's defective."

"Oh, sure," Billy said witheringly. "Grace rightly questions your ability to read a tape measure and ye greet like a bairn, but it's fine to call me defective!"

"Oh dear," Grace said with a grin. "Should I leave you two alone?"

"Nah, he'll just go off for a minute and everything will be fine again."

"Go off? I'll bloody well show you going off," Billy muttered.

Grace laughed. "What's 'greet like a bairn', anyway?"

"Cry like a baby," Dom explained. "You'll have to get used to interpreting him, every time he spends more than three days in Glasgow he starts talking another language. Downright unintelligible sometimes."

"Unintelligible? Glaikit wee bampot," Billy growled, and continued to mutter as he obviously left the room, his voice dying away.

"See?" Dom grinned.

Grace laughed. "I take it you boys are having fun, then?"

"Yeah, we are. 'S good to see him again. Just him and me, y'know?" he said, still smiling.

"I can imagine. When was the last time you two had some time to yourselves?"

"Well, we had a bit when he was in L.A., but not much. I guess the time before that would have been…bugger. Before Emily, I suppose. Over a year ago, anyway."

"Well, that's not right," Grace said firmly. "You two need each other way too much for that. You're just going to have to make the effort to get together now that he's got his own house. You can hide out there, because I guess it's a bit tough in L.A., isn't it?"

"It is," he agreed, and he sounded vastly amused about something. "Have you been reading the fansites, or something?"

"Fansites? What do you mean?" she asked, genuinely confused.

Dom chuckled. "Never mind. What do you mean we need each other? I'm not disagreeing, mind, I'm just curious what you mean."

"Billy loves you. You two are--attached at the soul, or something. It's against the laws of man and nature for you not to spend time together."

He laughed. "Attached at the soul. I like that. Yeah, that's a good way to put it."
"How is he doing, anyway?" Grace asked softly, suddenly serious.

"Good. A lot better than last week, when he lost it on you. Some sleep, some food, getting used to being alone, spending time with his sister, he needed all of those. And I like to think he needed his best mate," he mocked himself.

"Don't laugh, Dom, I'm sure he did. You're sure he's all right?"

"Yeah, he is," he said reassuringly. "Billyness levels almost back to normal."

"Good," she sighed, relieved. "I'm glad to hear it."

"You did play a part in that yourself, you know, Penny love," he pointed out archly.

"Not really, he would have gotten some sleep on his own--"

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Oh," she faltered. "I--what--"

"You were there when he needed to talk. You comforted him and pointed him in the right direction. Don't underestimate that."

"Well, that's what friends do. And it was the songs that comforted him, and he chose them," she said a little obstinately. "So anyway--"

"What do you mean he chose them? He told you what to sing?" Dom asked curiously.

"Well, he gave me the word he wanted, yes."

"I'm not following."

"He gives me a word--you know, how he's feeling or what he's thinking about, and I give him a song."

"And you can do that with just one word?"

"With Billy, yes. With you, probably not. Maybe I could get there, but I don't know you well enough," she explained. "It's nothing big, I just have a lot of songs in my head."

"Sounds pretty impressive to me. So what song would you pick for this phone call?" he asked, a challenge mild enough that she could ignore it if she wished.

"For the first part, I'd have to go with Make 'Em Laugh from "Singing In The Rain". For the second..." She hesitated, then said, "Oh, I know. He Ain't Heavy...He's My Brother. For you and Billy."

"Wow," Dom was a little taken aback. "You are good at that. I see what Billy means when he says you pick them out of thin air."

"They're just in my head. Like other people remember numbers, or trivia. I just remember lyrics."

"What are the lyrics to He Ain't Heavy?" he asked. "I know the song, but I can't come up with the words."

She started to say, "The road is long, with--"
"No, no," he interrupted. "You have to sing it."

"I'm not going to sing it!" she exclaimed.

"Why not? It's not like this is being recorded or anything, no need to be shy. Go on, just a bit."

Grace sighed. Then sang.

*The road is long*  
*With many a winding turn*  
*That leads us to who knows where*  
*Who knows where*  
*But I'm strong*  
*Strong enough to carry him*  
*He ain't heavy, he's my brother*

So on we go  
*His welfare is my concern*  
*No burden is he to bear*  
*We'll get there*  
*For I know*  
*He would not encumber me*  
*He ain't heavy, he's my brother*

"Yeah, that's it. That's fantastic. You're like a walking party trick." He paused. "I'm going to have to make use of you at..." he stopped, not sure where in the house Billy was.

"Billy's birthday party?" she supplied, glad to be back on more solid ground.

"Yes, you'll be the entertainment."

Grace laughed. "That's very nice, thank you."

"Do you actually know all the songs in your head, Pen?"

"Yeah. Most of them, anyway. Some are too difficult for me to play."

"It'll be excellent. Like 'Name That Tune', only opposite. Backwards. Sideways. Something."

She chuckled. "Do you have any idea what it is you're trying to say?"

"Not really, no," he grinned.

"Didn't think so. And I am not going to be your own personal party trick, thank you very much. I don't play in front of people."

"You play in front of Billy."

"That's...different. Besides, he's only one person, not a whole crowd."

"We won't be a *crowd*," he said, already wheedling. "I'll ask Viggo to bring his guitar up, and then Billy can play with you, how would that be?"

"Viggo plays too?"

Dom paused, then loftily said, "Because he is my friend and I love him dearly, I am not going to
answer that. Besides, off-topic."

Grace laughed. "You're off-topic."

"Oh, that's nice," he said, all loftiness forgotten. "What happened to 'darling Pellinore, please forgive me'?

"You did forgive me. So we're back to normal."

"What, you mocking me?"

Grace heard Billy's voice in the background, growing louder as he entered the room. "Mocking you? Ah, good. I've taught her well, then."

Dom darkly said, "I should have known. Everyone adores me, until you get your hands on them."

"Yeah, well," he said dismissively, "Right now I'd like to get my hands on Grace, so can I have the phone back please?" Billy realized what he'd said. "Ah fuck! Sorry, luv!" he shouted, to be sure Grace heard.

Grace laughed out loud, and Dom started chuckling with glee. "Really, Bill," he said, "Couldn't you wait until I leave the room before you start with the dirty talk?"

Billy must have made a face or a rude gesture, because suddenly Dom was howling with laughter and could barely form a defensive, "What?"

Grace said, "Is he a bit sensitive? He has a habit of saying things the wrong way sometimes."

"Oh, does he now?" Dom gasped. Mirthfully asked, "Such as?"

"What is she saying?" Billy demanded.

Grace was only too happy to tell. "The best one was when he told me I had an ugly mug. Oh, there was also the time he said I was attractive because he'd been drinking."

That sent Dom off into a paroxysm of laughter, beyond the ability to speak.

"What did she say? Give me the phone, you great fuckwit."

There was a scuffling noise, and then Billy's grinning voice in her ear, saying, "And just what are you telling him, you smartass?"

"Nothing," she said innocently, trying to stifle her giggles. "Just that you sometimes don't say things the way you mean them."

He groaned. "Ah, shite. Which ones?" In the background Dom howled again.

She told him.

"Bugger." He moaned in despair. "You realize I'm never going to hear the end of it from this wanker, you know that, don't you?"

She laughed. "Be thankful I didn't tell him the rest of them."

"I am," he said fervently. "Believe me, I am. And you ought to be grateful I didn't tell him about your habit of saying 'fuck me' at the most fascinating times."
Dom lost it once more, absolutely whooping with laughter, and there was a thud that sounded suspiciously like he fell out of his chair.

"Well, that kind of destroyed your saintliness, didn't it? Now he's going to be imagining the most perverse possibilities---"

"Quite likely," he admitted with no trace of remorse. "It is Dom, after all."

"Well, I hope you'll disabuse him of any notions he might have about my wantonness," she said archly. "Wouldn't want him to think I'm a degenerate, would you?"

"Listen to you with the big words," he said with teasing admiration.

"I've been reading the dictionary. Have to keep up with you, don't I?"

"You're doing very well indeed. I'm most interested in the words you're choosing to learn. What kind of dictionary is that, exactly?"

"It's Grace's Dictionary of Words to Amuse Billy."

"It's doing a remarkably good job," he grinned.

"Good. You see how kind I am to you, keeping you entertained? So much better to you than you deserve. Anyway Billy, I should probably go--"

"What? Already? Do you have to?" he asked, startled and dismayed. "Or is this just you saving my phone bill again?"

"Well--I have groceries to put away--and this phone call has been rather long--" she said, suddenly and irrationally apprehensive that Billy wanted to talk about matters she didn't want to discuss. Again. She just...had a feeling things were on his mind.

"I have the best rates ever, so quit worrying your head over it, all right? And you can put away your perishables while you talk to me. I've barely even gotten to speak to you, thanks to the manly wee builder over here."

"Wee?" Dom protested from the background, still catching his breath.

"Hang on a minute, Grace," Billy covered the phone with his hand, then came back on to say, "All right, we're just going for a short walk."

Grace heard Dom say with amusement, "And you call me a fuckwit," before shouting, "Bye Penny! Talk to you soon!"

"What was that about?" she asked.

"I just asked him if he minded if I talked to you in private for a bit. Apparently that was a stupid question," he chuckled.

"In private?" she said, keeping her voice light, "You afraid all the silliness will make him laugh so hard he ruptures something? It's sweet how concerned you are for his health."

"I am, you know. I'm his keeper, I have to look after him."

Grace couldn't help the sudden laugh that burst from her. "You're his goatherd. Tell him he can get rid of the Spanish mail-order catalogue, because you're his goatherd."
"What the hell are you on about?" He was bemused.

"It was in his emails. I don't know if I can do it justice," she chuckled. "He explained where his lost_goat screen name came from, and I said something about if he needed a goatherd Spain has a mail-order catalogue, and it all kind of went downhill from there."

"You mean there was a downhill from there?" he said with a grin.

"Frightening thought, isn't it?"

"Good Lord, yes. I shudder to think what might happen when you two finally meet," Billy teased her. "I think my universe might implode. Anyway, we are safe and sound and private in my bedroom now. So--"

"Are there stripes on the walls?" she asked, before he could say why he'd wanted privacy in the first place.

"There are indeed. Probably still tacky, too--the painters finished up at noon on Christmas Eve. I didn't think they were going to be able to get the whole house done before the holiday, but I guess they'd booked another job for right after, so they brought in some extra blokes and just blitzed through it," he told her happily. "I'm glad it's done, it was a bit of a madhouse in here."

"That's great." She was pleased for him. "Are you happy with all your choices?"

"Mostly. The dark green in the bathroom turned out a bit of a surprise, but I think it's growing on me. And guess what colour my kitchen cabinetry is?"

"What? Steel?"

"Got it in one," he grinned. "The guy showed me a couple different ones, and he thought it would work with the green, as long as we got rid of the effing beige, so I now have brushed steel cabinets. Ye have no idea how incredible that paint is," he enthused. "It doesn't look like bloody paint at all, you'd swear it was actually steel unless you put your nose right up to it, and quite frankly, I don't think anyone's going to be doing that, so it's all good."

She laughed at his obvious pleasure. "I'm glad for you, Billy, that sounds great. So what's the next project for your little hideaway, then?"

"Well, the kitchen floor and front hallway, sometime in the next day or two, I think. I have to call tomorrow to check on that. Listen, Grace--"

"And then will you be finished everything you wanted to do for now?"

"For now, yeah. I'll do a bit of work outside when spring rolls around. Grace, I--"

"What are you making the window seat out of, anyway?" she asked, wracking her brain to think up other questions for him.

"Pine. What the hell are you doing?"

"Me? Just putting my groceries away. Do you have curtains in the front window? Or can everyone just see right into your living room?"

"There are blinds. Grace--"

"So what--"
"Shut the fuck up!" he finally yelped, annoyed. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," she said defensively. "You wanted to talk to me, I'm talking! If you've changed your mind then hang up--"

"Oh, for fuck's sake. While you're making that a tempting option--"

"Fine. Bye, Billy--"

"Don't you dare!" he barked. "Grace MacPherson, don't you dare hang up on me!"

"Then don't--"

"Grace, what the fuck is going on?" he suddenly asked plaintively, and he sounded truly bewildered and a little upset.

"Shit. Shit. I'm sorry, Billy," she muttered. "I don't--I don't know. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me. I'm sorry."

"Do you not want to talk to me?" he asked, and he sounded so uncertain it surprised her. Unsure of his welcome was not something she'd ever expected Billy to feel.

"I do. Of course I do."

"Then what's with the nattering? Why won't you let me just talk to you?"

"Because I'm afraid of what you'll say," she wailed. "I know you want to talk about things and I don't have any courage today, I'm not Alistair's Grace, and when you want to talk about things you get me so confused and when I'm by myself I know what I think and I know what I want but when you start talking you twist me all around and I want to talk to you, you know I love talking to you Billy, but I don't have enough courage today to talk about things, and see, I can't even call it anything but 'things', and--"

"Grace, luv," Billy gently cut her off, and he sounded amused. "When you jump to conclusions, you really jump in with both feet, don't you?"

She faltered. "Ehm...often, yes. Am I making an enormous fool out of myself again?"

"Well, not entirely, no," he admitted. "I was going to talk to you about 'things', and I'm very curious to know how you knew that. But for fuck's sake, wee girl, all you have to do is say 'not today, Bills, I just want a bit of a laugh, yeah?' and I'll back off."

"Really?" she asked, a trifle suspiciously.

"Yes, really," he lightly mocked her. "After all, I wouldn't want us to get in an argument over it, or anything."

Grace snorted, then sighed. "I'm sorry, Billy."

"S all right, luv. Any particular reason you're not feeling courageous today? Anything you want to tell me about?"

"Not yet."

"All right."
"No, wait," she sighed again. "It's not...it's not anything specific. Do you ever just...I don't know. Feel fragile around the holidays? I had a wonderful Christmas Day, I really did, but...there's just so much fucking stress, you know? Especially in my family. This year. I don't know. I love my family, I love spending the holidays with them, but sometimes I wish it was a little quieter, it makes me so fucking tense, you know? And I look forward to coming home, only to get here and hate every square inch of it."

"I can imagine," he said kindly. "It's strange, it's nearly the opposite for me. I have to try and find something to do for the holidays, which is funny considering I spend the rest of the year bitching about how busy I am. But mine are often too quiet for me, and I get antsy."

Grace was almost squirming, she felt so badly. "Oh, God, Billy, I'm sorry. I sometimes forget...I'm so sorry. You must be disgusted with me for whining about my family--"

"What? God, no! Grace, everybody has a different way of spending the holidays, everybody has their own traditions, and if my holidays were different, I'd still find a way to complain about them. Believe me, I'm more than used to Christmas being quiet, and this year was great, spending it with Margaret and Alex and his family. Although, I have to tell you--I don't think I'm going to do it every year," he said, grinning.

"Why not?" she asked faintly.

"His family scares the hell out of me."

Grace couldn't help but chuckle. "Why?"

"They're just very...odd. They would say the strangest things out of nowhere. I don't know if they were just uncomfortable with me, or what."

"Uncomfortable with you? Not possible, you're far too friendly and kind for that. They're probably just weird," she smiled.

Billy laughed. "Thanks, wee girl. And they may be. Alex is a bit of an odd duck himself, but he's as kind as the day is long and he adores Margaret. And he's very quiet, but if you manage to get him going he's wickedly funny."

"He sounds like a good guy."

"He is. I'm really pleased for Margaret."

"That's great. She paused, then quietly said, "I am sorry, Billy.""

"For what, dear heart?"

"For...well, for this entire conversation, really."

"I'm not. As much as you drive me right around the bend sometimes, I'm never sorry when I get the chance to talk to you."

"Oh, Billy." She was quiet for a moment, then suddenly blurted out, "I'm learning a new song."

"Yeah? Which one?"

"You've likely not heard of it. She's a Canadian artist, her name's Sarah Harmer. It's called 'Almost'."
"Will you sing it for me?" he asked quietly.

"Just remember I'm learning it. This won't be pretty. I was going to wait until I had it down, but--but I don't want to."

"Go get your guitar."

"Yeah. Hang on." Grace put the phone on the coffee table and quickly got her guitar out of its case. She sat on the sofa, pulled the phone closer, and began to play. She didn't check with Billy--she'd done this often enough now.

I almost dialed your number,  
When I thought the coast was clear  
cause it's looked up for so long at me,  
And said call me please.

And if I am a sailor,  
than you are the warm gulf wind,  
and you've blown into this little port  
and roused my dreams again.

I see my mouth moving when I talk to you,  
I do,  
I see my lips and I feel like a kid  
I can't keep anything hid  
Cause I've been under the paper you were writing on  
you left your impression long after you'd gone  
on me,  
marks only I can see.

When we say sometime later,  
you know that we don't say when,  
You have blown into this little port  
and roused my dreams again.

I almost dialed your number,  
When I thought the coast was clear  
cause it's looked up for so long at me,  
And said call me please.

Grace set her guitar aside again and picked up the phone. "So...um."

"I like that song," he was smiling. "It's going to be fantastic when you get it nailed. You've almost got it."

"Getting there, anyway."

"And have your dreams been roused, dear heart?" he asked quietly. "I've been waiting to hear from you about them since our talk at the airport."

"Sort of. A few, I think. And a lot of it's your fault, damn you."

He chuckled. "You'll forgive me if I don't regret that. Can you tell me about them?"

"I--I was thinking about...about maybe trying to play somewhere," she said hesitantly. "But I don't
"I know where and I haven't worked up the guts to do anything about it yet. The idea scares me silly."

"Good for you, luv. I think you should do it," he said firmly. "I know it's frightening. Do you have open-mic type nights at the pubs? That might be a little easier, it's only a song or two, and odds are, you'll be miles better than anyone else there. Get your toes in the water, so to speak."

"Hmm. That's an idea. I could look into that, I suppose..."

"Do it. I'll be checking in to make sure you do, you know."

She groaned. "I knew I shouldn't have told you."

He laughed. "I will hound you mercilessly. Any others?"

"Others?"

"Dreams."

Grace hesitated. "Not yet. I--I'm still working on it. I'm not sure if it's really what I might want."

"All right. I'm glad to hear you're working on it. I didn't like my Grace to be without hope," he said softly.

"I'm not your--"

He huffed a little breath out his nose. "I'll rephrase. I didn't like the Grace I know thinking she shouldn't have hope. Better?"

"I suppose..."

"And I hope my phone number is begging you to call me. You can anytime, dear heart, I'll ring you back."

"You know, for someone who promised he wouldn't make me talk about 'things', this has been an awfully serious conversation," she pointed out.

She could hear the smile in his voice as he said, "True. All right, enough for today. I should let you go, you've probably got work to do. And I'd better see what Dom's been up to. The house has been very quiet and it's starting to make me nervous."

"No doubt," she chuckled. "And I'm not working today, since I didn't know for sure what time I'd get home. But I do have to go, I've got laundry to lug across the street. Will you email me soon and tell me all about the window seat?"

"Definitely. Knowing Dom, he'll send you a nail-by-nail commentary."

"Sounds good to me. Say bye to him for me."

"I will. You take care of yourself, Grace, and I'll talk to you soon, all right?" he warmly promised.

"Yeah. I'd like that, Billy," she said softly.

"Me too. Good night, wee girl."

"Bye, Billy."
Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *He Ain’t Heavy...He’s My Brother* by Sidney Russell and Robert Scott, and *Almost* by Sarah Harmer.
Billy walked back out to the living room and found Dom sprawled over the entire sofa, apparently napping. Billy flopped into the armchair, sighing almost inaudibly.

Dom cracked one eye open. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah."

"Thought I might have to go in there."

Billy's forehead wrinkled. "Why?"

Dom's eye closed as he casually said, "There was a bit of shouting going on, wasn't there? Seeing as you hardly ever shout at anyone, let alone a..."


"If you insist."

"I wasn't shouting," he grumbled.

Dom's eye opened again as his eyebrow raised. "Grace MacPherson, don't you dare hang up on me." He mimicked Billy's accent perfectly.

Billy winced. "Was I that loud?"

"Yep."

"Shite." He dropped his head against the back of the armchair. "Sorry."

Dom smiled at him. "She really gets you going, doesn't she?"

He snorted. "Sometimes she just...drives me mad."

Dom's eye closed again, and he grinned. "Not a very long trip these days, is it?"

"Shut it, wanker."

"So what did you do this time?"

"I didn't do anything!" Billy protested hotly, his head coming up so he could glare at the figure lounging on his sofa. "She went off her nut!"

"Oh, really."

"Yes, really. I was trying to talk to her and she didn't want to, so instead of being a normal human being and telling me that, she kept interrupting me with stupid-arsed questions about the house and the paint and the bloody window-seat."

Dom frowned, and he opened both eyes this time to look over at Billy. "She didn't want to talk to you?"

"Well, not that she didn't want to talk to me, but she didn't want me to even go near the subject of us. And how she knew that's what I was going to talk about I don't know," he groused, slouching
down in the chair.

"Probably because you can be about as subtle as an effing train wreck sometimes. You knew she was a bit skittish, Bill. It's not even two weeks since her little wig-out over Emily and you, and how she felt about you."

"You're still convinced that's what it was?"

Dom nodded. "Completely."

"It feels longer than two weeks," Billy said moodily.

"That's because you're smitten with her, Bills," Dom grinned. "You're fun to watch when you're smitten. It's wonderfully entertaining."

"I'm not smitten. Twat."

"Bill, you're pretty far gone over someone you've spent a grand total of what--maybe three days with?"

"Fuck off," he said half-heartedly.

"Why do you keep denying it?" Dom asked curiously. "It's so incredibly obvious--"

"What do you mean obvious?"

"Relax, you git. Just to me. Why you don't just admit you've fallen in love with her and enjoy it?"

"I would maybe admit to falling," Billy said a little stiffly. "But as you pointed out, we've hardly had enough time together for me to know anything for sure."

"Since when did love involve 'for sure'?" Dom asked incredulously.

"Would you stop tossing that word around? Three days, Dom."

"And you talk to her all the time and email her every day."

"It wasn't even a fortnight ago that you were telling me it was smart not to get romantically involved!"

Dom grinned. "Kind of underestimated you there, didn't I? But really, Bill, what more do you want? You trust her, she trusts you, you understand each other, you connect, you share a passion for music, you've already told me you could happily snog her senseless for days at a time, and I bet given one night alone together you'd shag like rabbits--"

"Dom!" Billy's protest was strangled.

"What? I've got a question for you though."

"I don't think I want to hear it."

"No, no, no. 'M serious this time," Dom said earnestly. "When we talked before, you said you wanted to stay single for a while, to make sure...I forget exactly how you put it, but to make sure that you were with your next girlfriend because you wanted to be with her, and not just to have someone, you know, taking care of you."
"Yeah," Billy said cautiously, not sure where Dom was going.

"So...So." Dom sat up, concentrating. "So you have to know that about Grace, right? Because she's not taking care of you, she's on another bloody continent for fuck's sake. You've fallen--sorry, you're falling for her because it's her, you know that, right?"

Billy looked down at his hands on his lap. His thumb rubbed his fingertips. "But she did take care of me. She does."

"That's a different kind of care, and you know it. What you were missing about Emily was purely creature comforts. Emily was the happy little homemaker, but Grace is under your skin, Billy, and you two already know each other better than you and Emily ever did."

"I think I know her so well, but do I, really? I don't know what she was like when she was younger, hell, I don't even know what she was like last year. She had to be a different person before the last guy fucked her over." He gave a weak laugh. "I don't even know her favourite colour."

"You can really be a close-mouthed bugger, Bill," Dom pointed out. "If you want Grace to tell you everything, don't forget you're going to have to give a lot back. You can't just keep your distance like you usually do and expect her to let you come waltzing in. Besides, you've got time--a whole month."

"Me? I am not close-mouthed," he protested.

"Bollocks. How long did I know you before you told me a single thing about your life prior to the RSAMD? How long before you told me about those kids that beat the shite out of you when you were young? For fuck's sake, I didn't even know you hate cinnamon until I made you ill with it in that French toast. You're always interested in the other person, Bill, you always want the details because you care so much, but it's bloody murder trying to get them out of you."

Billy's face was red. "Why didn't you say anything before, then, if it bothered you so much?"

"It doesn't bother me," Dom explained calmly. "It never did, because I knew whatever was necessary for me to know about you, you'd eventually tell me. But I wasn't falling in love with you; I didn't need to hear those things. And I think Grace does, every bit as much as you want to know them about her."

Billy stared at Dom. Cleared his throat. Faintly said, "I'm never quite sure if you're full of shite, or a fucking genius."

Dom laughed. "Want a beer, Bills?"

"Several."

"Coming up." Dom briefly gripped his shoulder as he walked past.

Friday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Update from the construction site

Hey Penny love, it's Dom--I've hijacked Billy's account to send you the first pics of our progress on the window seat construction. He's afraid I'm going to use his email to sign him up for all kinds of disgusting pornography and put him on every mailing list out there, but I've promised him it'll only be the most tasteful of porn, and a mailing list about how wonderful and talented and sexy I am. I just have to find it first. (But you know it's out there, Pen.)

I'd just like to point out Billy's camera works fine, by the way. Incompetent sod.

So the first picture is the before shot. That's Billy's front window, in case you weren't sure what that big shiny glass thing was.

I'm going to catch it for that one, aren't I?

We spread the plan out, it's just one of those do-it-yourself plans that you have to adjust to fit your own project, and we decided the first thing to do was take all the measurements. So when we got back from buying a tape measure, we started measuring. We figured out how much lumber we're going to need, tacked on a few extra feet (okay, ten) just to be sure, and then we went to the DIY warehouse and bought our lumber. I've never bought lumber before, and I have to tell you, Pen, it got my manly, build-it-and-they-will-come blood flowing. (Although I'm not sure who will come, not for a window seat.) Not sure about Bill's manly blood, either, I think he was more upset about the thought of all the trees that died so he could have a window seat. I told him to just plant some effing trees in the backyard and the planet would forgive him, and come on, I'm supposed to be the environmentally-conscious one, so could he quit trying so hard to be just like me? Honestly.

So once everything was measured and we had all the lumber (and can I just say driving a pickup truck is fun? I think I might have to get me one of those. Do they make electric pick-ups?) Billy and I were all set. So picture number two is our progress to date. You'll see we've only scratched the wall in one spot, and we have the bottom 2X4 laid. You know, for attaching the rest of the framework to. So we're aces now.

Billy wants me to ask you what you're up to today?

More later,
Mr. Build-All
(aka Pellinore)
(aka Dom)

---

Friday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Mr. Build-Alls

The picture I want is the two of you in your hard hats. Because I'm thinking if you're working with each other, you really should be wearing them.

That's for the window comment.
Hello, Billy and Dom, whichever of you is reading this. Or both. In which case quit arguing over the mouse! Thanks for the pictures, it's great to see a little snippet not only of the house I've heard so much about (love the colour on the walls, Billy, you were right—it looks great with the pine), but also to see your little project.

So. One 2X4, eh? Wow, you guys are just construction machines. Can't wait to see the second 2X4 tomorrow.

Okay, that was for the window comment as well.

I'm not saying a word about the camera, Billy dear. I'm perfectly willing to believe it was defective, and it's a massive fluke that it's started working again. Absolutely.

As for your manly blood—both of you—just drink beer, grunt a lot, burn some food on the barbeque for dinner, and let your tool belt pull your jeans halfway down your arse. You'll be the manliest Mr. Build-Alls ever to grace the pages of "Home Improvement--Built Barely To Code" magazine.

What am I up to today? Work, work, and more work. Holidays always seem to be busy news periods, mostly because any sad story takes on added significance around Christmas, so what might normally be one line on a communities page is now a full article on page 3. And not only is it keeping me busy, but it's actually depressing as hell—so your email could not have been better timed! Blessings upon both your heads for that.

It's snowing here today. Figures. Nothing but a little brown slush for Christmas, but three days later it's lovely big fat flakes that apparently are going to keep falling for the next two days, so I'm going to have to slip out at some point and get a few errands done because two days from now that could be a real pain in the arse. But I'm not really complaining, actually, I'd prefer to have the snow.

And you know what? I think I'll go do those errands now. So I'm going to end this here, but you lovely boys shall hear more from me anon.

Waiting for the hard hat pic,
Grace/Penelope

Friday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Hard hats

Hey Penny love, quick note because we're off to the pub, and I'm going to kick Billy's arse at the pool table. I'm calling it now, you wait and see.

Don't tell Billy, but I'm totally buying us hard hats. I can't believe I didn't think about it when we were at the DIY warehouse! It's brilliant. You'll get your pic if it kills me. Which, knowing Billy, it might. But it'll be worth it, just make sure the picture is proudly displayed on my casket, yeah?

But as for the second 2X4 crack, Pen, we'll show you. The prep work always takes the longest, everyone knows that, and now we're going to rip on the work so fast it'll make your head spin. You'll be amazed at our tool-wielding prowess, and you'll have to beg for our forgiveness. Beg, I
tell you, and while Billy may be a pushover for a pretty redhead, you won't find Pellinore so easy to wrap around your little finger.

"Built Barely To Code"—love it. The seat will be sturdy and secure enough that two people could get up to all kinds of trouble on it, but that's still effing hilarious. I've got the beer-drinking thing covered, but I'll have to get after Billy about the barbeque.

Last thing. Anon? You writing dirty smut or something, that you need to be anonymous? If so, please--do share.

Just re-read before hitting send. If I go too far, you'll tell me, yeah? Feel like I know you.

Relax, Penelope. Go watch the snow. Work will still be there in half an hour.

Yours very sincerely,
Pellinore Rex.

P.S. Billy just wandered in. He says to tell you he'll email you in the morning while I'm sleeping off my hangover. Wanker.

---

Friday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: For Pellinore (aka the pool shark)

Good morning (by the time you read this) dear Pellinore. Or, if Billy's prediction was correct, good afternoon. Explain something to me, would you? If you showed up at Billy's door with three cases of beer only two days ago, why exactly are you going out to a pub to get trashed? Much nicer to pass out in your own bed than under a barstool, isn't it? Or maybe that's just me. The big question is, who won the pool game?

I'll give you a bit of time to work on Billy regarding the hard hat picture. Something tells me it's going to take all your powers of persuasion for that one! Good luck with that, eh?

Beg, hmm? We shall see, darling Pellinore, we shall see...

You have yet to come near going too far. You'll hear about it if you do, don't worry. But I can't see that easily happening, to be honest, because I'm starting to feel like I know you too. And strangely, freakishly enough, I think I might kind of like you. Who knew?

I made a cup of hot apple cider and went and watched the snow. It was lovely. And you were right--work was still there half an hour later. Now if we could just fix it so the computer fairies took care of it so it wasn't...

Go on, Dom. Go take some acetaminophen for your hangover.

I remain
Yrs. Truly,
Penelope
Saturday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: I called it.

Good morning, wee girl. I would just like to point out it's almost 11 am and Dom is still in bed because he got completely stocious last night. I have to admit, I was not totally sober myself, but I was not the one who giggled for twenty minutes after I said he couldn't organize a piss-up in a brewery. Silly twat. I'm sorry, can you tell I've been around Dom more than a few hours? My language is none too clean at the best of times, but it gets downright blue after he's been around. I'm going to assume, my little sailor, that you are not offended. Let me know if I'm wrong, it's been known to happen.

Has Dom been keeping you properly up-to-date on the window seat? We should be able to get quite a bit of it done today, I hope. If Dom isn't too hung over. That would serve him right, if I started working on it now, the power drill and hammering would probably just about kill him. And I thank you for your support over the whole camera controversy. I still say it's not quite right, and since Dom's not quite right either that's why it will work for him. That's my theory, and I'm hanging onto it by my fingernails.

I have a confession to make. I have become addicted to weather reports and radar screens and it's entirely your fault. Every time you say it's cold or it's snowing I have to go look, I have to see the Toronto forecast for the week, I have to watch the radar loop and see if it's a big storm or a little flurry, and I bet I know Toronto's weather better than you do now. I know at a glance which shade of blue means it's tolerably chilly and which shade means you can't leave the flat without getting frostbite, and I worry about you with that shite heater. Why don't you live somewhere warm so I don't have to see the words windchill and exposure and skin freezes in 10 minutes? It is very hard on my nerves, you know, and I think it is rather inconsiderate of you. I hear the equator's nice this time of year. Peru? Is Peru warm? Why do I feel like I should know that? Or Turkey. Turkey must be warm. (Or Scotland. Not climatically (is that a word?) warm, but you'd be warm nonetheless.)

What's your favourite colour?

Guess what finally arrived in the post today? A lovely Christmas present all the way from Canada. Thank you, dear heart, the CD's are fantastic. I love that rather than just making a stack of mixes, you've made mood discs. Elijah would lecture you, he insists that a good mix must have a balanced mix of fast, slow, happy, sad, angst, and...whatever the opposite of angst is. But I disagree, because if you are in the mood for angst, you are hardly likely to want to listen to a fast, cheerful song, are you? If you are in the mood for angst, you want wailing and gnashing of teeth. I'm looking forward to listening to the 'Angry' mix, because nothing beats a really good, pissed-off song, even when I'm not angry. And I like the look of the 'Wired' disc—I'll have to play that one for Dom to wake him up. You know I'll use the 'Sleepy' disc, too. When it's too late to call my sleep therapist. Anyway, thank you, Grace, I love them, and they will be in regular rotation on the stereo.

I hear groaning from upstairs. Unless my house has a ghost I haven't yet met, I do believe Dom is up. Or, at least awake. Or, at least conscious. So, wee girl, I'm going to go scrape him up and pour him into the shower, and then I'm going to make him pots of coffee. (Okay, he isn't really that bad. I bet he has a headache, though, so the coffee still stands.)
I miss you. I know you're busy working hard, but email me when you can. Miss talking to you.

As always,
Billy

Saturday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: I called it.

Good morning, Billy. What do you mean you miss talking to me? We just talked yesterday, goofus. (Jamie says that all the time. It seems to be catchy. Sorry about that.) Miss you too, though.

You realize I'm going to totally torture Dom over getting drunk and sleeping in this morning, don't you? Or, do my best, anyway, it's a bit hard to torture via email, but I'll give it my best shot. Who won the pool game last night? Come on, give me some ammunition. And as for your language after being with him--no, you have not offended me in the slightest. I think the only way you could offend me would be to actually call me some of the worst names, and I can't quite see that happening. But fair warning--if you ever do, prepare to be roundly cursed and soundly roasted!

Make sure you (or Dom) send me another picture or two of your progress on the window seat today. You're probably working on it (or having a beer on yet another 'break') even as I type this. I wish I could be there to watch, because I bet it's highly amusing.

And you finally got the CD's! Good, I was starting to fear they'd been lost somewhere over Greenland. I pictured some cold, weary Greenlander (because really, if you lived in Greenland, wouldn't you be weary too?) having the parcel drop through his roof (because if it was dropped from a jet I'm thinking it would be traveling pretty damn fast) and miraculously the CD's were not even scratched, and he was curiously listening to Great Big Sea's triple-time version of It's The End Of The World As We Know It (the 'Wired' disc, if you're looking for it).

Okay, I really have to lay off the coffee. I had coffee this morning instead of tea because I was feeling a bit tired, but apparently I should start the 'Wired' playlist myself. Wow.

(You know it's never too late to call your sleep therapist, don't you? You've paid extra for the 'round the clock service, might as well take advantage of it.)

I can't believe you watch the radar. And I thought I was a worry-wart! But don't you fret, if it ever gets really bad, you'll hear about it. You won't want to check your email because you'll know there's yet another email from me chock-full of griping and moaning and bitching about the cold/snow/ice/whatever. Granted, this has been the worst winter in a while, but seeing as where I'm living, I was rather expecting that, and yes, that's my perky optimistic side there. So, in case you'd like an update, it is still snowing here, we've gotten about...oh, I guess nearly half a foot since yesterday? Which is, of course, enough to practically shut Toronto down, because the damned city was built without enough foresight to plan for CARS. Those pioneers, I tell you. No forward vision whatsoever. But the plows have trouble getting through because of all the cars on the streets. The main roads, like mine, aren't quite so bad, and of course I walk anyway, so it really doesn't bother
me too much. But if it keeps snowing like this all day, I won't be walking anywhere tomorrow. And I offer my heartfelt apologies for inconveniencing you with my climate. Although Peru is quite enticing. I've always liked llamas, they're all cute and fuzzy.

And you know I had to look up the average temperature for Peru, don't you? You can't say something like "I wonder if Peru is warm?" and not expect me to have to find out. The average yearly temperature is about 20 degrees Celsius, for your information, and as such has suddenly become a lot more enticing.

My favourite colour? That's very random of you. Umm...plaid. :o)

What are you doing for New Year's? Some big swanky event where you'll be sipping champagne, I bet, right? Oh, I hope so, I want to hear all about it. How long is Dom staying with you? Will you get to ring in the New Year together?

Well, I suppose I should get to work now. Highly unmotivated today, but if I have a bit more coffee and get wired again, I should be able to get through it in decent time.

Email me if you boys get bored. Now go drag Dom's arse out of bed and talk really loud right in his ear. Preferably in Glaswegian.

Snowily,
Grace

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Saturday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: For Pellinore (aka the pool shark)

A fine afternoon to you, Penny love. I will have you know I wasn't hung over this morning, I was just...tired. Because Billy kept me out past my bedtime. And the headache is purely coincidental. Paracetamol is my friend because it is a fine product and for no other reason.

Pool game? What pool game? I have no idea what you are talking about. As for why we went out to the pub when there was a perfectly good store of beer right here, I decided Billy is in danger of becoming a recluse, and it was time he reacquainted himself with the outside world, practiced his conversational skills a bit. Poor lad. He's so shy.

So. We got a bit of a late start today, because Billy didn't have lunch ready when I got up at noon, so we didn't eat until about two. I don't know what he was thinking, I mean, I told him last night I wanted bacon, lettuce and tomato on toasted rye with just a touch of mayonnaise, so why he didn't have it on the table at noon I'll never know. Instead we had cheese toast and soup. He's such a lazy arse. (Actually, it was really good, perfect for the cold wet day that is today, but don't tell Billy that, he'll be insufferable.)

Anyway, we haven't gotten quite as much done on the window seat today as we had hoped, as you'll see by the pictures. So I won't make you beg today, Pen, but if you continue to belittle our masculinity like you have been, you are so going to have to beg my forgiveness. And it had better
be quality begging, none of this lame-arsed "Darling Pellinore, please forgive me". Weak, Penny love, very weak.

But we did get half the framework finished, and everyone knows the framework takes the longest.

You like me? You really like me? Hear that, world? PENNY LIKES ME! All right, I'm done. I'm glad I haven't gone too far (yet) and I do trust you to let me know if it happens.

Will you do something for me? Sometime today or tomorrow, go outside and make a snowball for me and chuck it as far as you can. I'd ask you to make a snowman, but Billy says you live on a busy street, and I wouldn't want you to get run over by a lorry, Billy would be peeved with me. I haven't played in deep snow since we were on a mountain in New Zealand. I hope there's deep snow at the end of January, and that's all I'm saying about that.

Well, I'm off, Billy's back and ready for work. He was learning the intricate ins and outs of his new floor in the kitchen. I don't want anything to do with a floor that needs explaining.

Don't work too hard. Work is forever, but snow is fleeting. Or something like that.

Respectfully yours,
Pellinore

Saturday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Peru

Hello, wee girl, how are things in the snowy land of Toronto? Has it stopped yet? The latest radar still shows flurries, but of course it is hard to tell whether they are actually anywhere near you or not. Hope everything's all right.

What do you mean what do I mean I miss talking to you? Thought it was rather self-explanatory, myself. Miss. Talking. You. I'm going to call you tomorrow, just to make sure you're not trapped behind a wall of snow. And I'm not letting Dom anywhere near the phone, either. But don't worry, I won't ask you to talk about anything you don't want to, so leave your phone plugged in, woman.

Torture Dom all you like. I'll help, if I can. He lost all four games of pool last night, so that ought to be a good place to start. Of course, he was getting on for legless by the last game, so he may not even realize he played four games. No, he wasn't that bad, but he was definitely tipsy by the third and drunk by the fourth. I am awfully hard on him, aren't I? Oh well. He hands it out as fast as he gets it, which I will undoubtedly discover all over again today. Hmm. What other ammunition can I give you? I will work on it.


Dom and I did a little more work on the window seat after the pictures he sent you this afternoon. We've got the framework almost completely done. It is taking a little bit longer than I had hoped, but then again Dom and I haven't actually put that many hours into it yet. I will have to drag his arse out of bed before noon tomorrow, and we'll try and finish it. Because I think once we figure
out the pattern to lay the pine, it will go fairly smoothly. I hope. And then when you come visit me, you can sit on the window seat and have a cup of tea and watch the rain. I don't know if you are familiar with Glasgow's weather patterns, but most of them include rain, so that isn't exactly a wild assumption.

By the way, Dom and I listened to the 'Wired' CD while we worked this afternoon. There's some great music on there. Fast. But great. It was good music to work to. I think tomorrow we'll try the 'Cheerful' mix.

What do you mean I've paid for round the clock service from my sleep therapist? I rather thought I was behind on the bill, not prepaid. Good to know I can call her if I need her though. I shouldn't in the next little while, but maybe in Japan. I'd better start figuring out the time difference now, hadn't I?

Well, our ideas of what is bad weather are a little different, I think, so when you say it is cold, I'm never sure if I should be imagining my idea of cold, which is, you know, five or ten degrees below zero, or your idea of cold, which seems to begin at about minus twenty-five, so I look at the weather site, and then of course I'm hooked. Sucked right in.

I had no idea Peru was quite so warm. Llamas do indeed have fuzzy coats, so I rather assumed it would be cooler than that. Perhaps we should visit Peru. In December. And January. And February? When exactly does it begin to warm up in Toronto? And I must admit, I had sort of forgotten your curiosity streak is so strong. I shall be careful in future about musing on things I don't know the answer to--otherwise you will spend half your time looking things up.

And plaid is not a colour, you wee smartass. I should know. So I suppose since you're determined to be so mysterious, I'll just have to guess. Is your favourite colour...pink?

New Year's. Not really sure yet, and I know we've left it to the last moment. We have several choices. Perhaps I should ask you to make the decision for me. Yes, I think that is a very good idea indeed. I will tell you the options, and you can tell me what we should do. And yes, Dom is staying for New Year's, which is bloody fantastic, I was hoping he'd be able to. It's really good to spend time with him, just him and me. It's been a long time.

Anyway. Option number one is to stay home. You know, laze around and drink...well, not beer, not for New Year's. Which is also called Hogmanay, did you know that? Scottish New Year. We'd probably drink either a good single-malt Scotch, or wine and champagne. Eat a ton of food, watch the festivities on TV, mock everyone mercilessly (including each other), that kind of thing. Laidback and comfortable.

Option two. The city's PR people hold a very posh ball for dignitaries, politicians, entertainers, and anyone else who's been in the news the past year. I did get an invite, I have the past few years, but as I'm sure you can imagine it is deathly dull. The only upside to it is the opportunity to schmooze, as 'Lij says, and meet some new potentially useful contacts. It would mean the dress kilt and finding something for Dom to wear, if I could convince him. But it's a fantastic meal and free booze, so it probably wouldn't be that hard.

Option three. The big Hogmanay celebration in the city centre. When it's not pissing rain, it's one hell of a party. And with hats and grubby clothes, Dom and I wouldn't have any trouble. I don't know what the weather is supposed to be like, though. (Bugger. It's true. I know Toronto's weather better than Glasgow's. The 31st in Toronto is supposed to be clear and ~20 at night.) And if it's packed, it can be a bit of a crush, especially if they've got popular bands playing. And one of us couldn't drink, because we'd have to drive in because there's no way we'd get a cab after.
So those are the three options. What are we doing for New Year's, wee girl?

And what are you doing for New Year's? Something fun, I hope.

Well, I should probably head off to bed now, it's late. The house is dark and quiet (Dom went to bed some time ago) and it's good to know there is someone else here, and yet I am glad of the time to sit in the silence and the dark and be with you, even if it's only through email. When I read your messages I can hear your voice in my head, and it is the next best thing to talking to you. And apparently I should go to bed, I'm starting to get a bit maudlin.

Missing you,
Billy

Saturday (late)
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: For Pellinore (aka the pool shark)

Hey, Dom. Quick little email (because it's late) to tell you you're full of it.

Yes, you read that right, but read it again if that will help.

You were drunk as a skunk last night, and were totally hung over this morning, and don't think I don't have my vays ov vinding tese tings out. (Hmm. That works better if you read it out loud.)
And which pool game am I talking about? One of the four you lost. Pick one, whichever one you like. And that'll be the game I'm talking about.

"I'm going to catch it for that one, aren't I?"

Framework takes the longest? I thought you said the prep work takes the longest?

All right, I think I'm done picking on you. I think. I didn't get a chance to make your snowball today, but I definitely will tomorrow, and I'll let you know if I hit anything. It will depend on whether I aim at anything or not. If I don't aim at anything, I'll miss by a country mile. I throw like such a girl.

Begging? Not going to happen.

Loving the pictures, thank you for those.

And of course I like you. Twit.

Many Regards,
Penelope
Saturday (late)
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: An itty bitty one.

Hi, Billy. Just wanted to drop you a quick little note before I go to bed.

I'm glad you and Dom are making progress with the window seat. I'm looking forward to more pictures from Dom tomorrow. If I get to Glasgow I will definitely sit in the window with a cup of tea, it sounds lovely.

As for the sleep therapist—I think your flight detour to Toronto paid your tab in advance for quite a long while. Anytime, even from Japan.

Favourite colour pink? You'd better be taking the piss. Try again. What's yours?

You know, when you first said I should pick what you and Dom do for New Year's, I was going to refuse, because it's really not fair to make me decide on your activities when I won't be there to share in the enjoyment/suffering, Mr. Boyd. But you know what? I will decide, because you made it very, very easy. You and Dom are staying home, no question. Are there any Hogmanay customs or traditions? Because if there are you should do them. Or one, at least.

And I'm going to take a page from your book. It's supposed to piss rain in Glasgow on New Year's Eve. I checked.

As for my plans, not entirely sure yet. Jamie's been invited to a big party and he says if he goes he's dragging me along with him so he's got someone to talk to who's not a complete moron (I like how he said complete), but if he doesn't go then we might go to Toronto's version of the Hogmanay party, from the sounds of it. Standing around listening to music. Mind you, according to Billy's Weather Service, it's going to be way too cold for that, so we might opt for the same plan as you, and stay in. Mercilessly mocking the people on TV sounds kind of fun.

Anyway, sorry this is so short, but I'm kind of tired. Someone has been sitting in their car outside the billiards hall opposite (the one beside the Laundromat) with the music blaring and the bass turned up to chest-vibrating levels. About an hour and a half every night for the past two nights, and I personally think it's drug dealers doing a drop. Okay, I made that up, but it sounds good.

I'm off. Have a great day with Dom tomorrow.

Sleepily,
Grace

Sunday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: An itty bitty one.

Good morning, Grace. Well, good morning for you, it is just past noon here, and I'm making Dom cook lunch. Judging by the cursing coming from my kitchen, I may regret doing that, and I don't
quite understand it, because he's actually quite a good cook. Wait a minute. The light has dawned. He is trying to make me feel guilty for making him cook, isn't he? Wanker.

Anyway, hope you slept better last night, that your music-blasting neighbour wasn't back. You shouldn't joke about drug dealers, wee girl, you've just given me a whole new set of things to worry about! How is the weather today? Warmer and less snowy, I hope.

Not pink, hmm? How about...red?

Is everything all right, dear heart? You sounded a little...not like you, in your email. Well, that's not quite true, you sounded like you, but you did not sound particularly happy, and don't think I didn't notice the parts of my email you didn't respond to. Confused yet? So am I. What's up, Grace?

And what the hell do you mean "If I get to Glasgow"? I thought we covered this one already. *When*, remember? If I have to come over there and personally toss your wee arse on the plane, so be it.

I have to go, Dom's shouting that lunch is done, and judging by the smell of smoke, I'd better get in there. But I'll answer the rest of your email later, and Dom says to tell you he'll send you more pictures this afternoon.

Email me soon.

Uneasily,
Billy

---

Sunday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: I thought you said you weren't going to take your phone off the hook anymore? Come on, wee girl, either pick up your phone or email me.

Please.
Billy

---

Sunday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Penenney

Penelope love, why are you doing this to Billy again? Pick up your phone, you silly little toss-pot,
Dom was in the kitchen making dinner, and Billy was half-heartedly placing a piece of pine on the window seat prior to fixing it in place with the finishing nails when his phone rang. He tossed the hammer on the sofa and grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"Billy, it's Grace--"

"Finally. Grace, what the hell is going--"

"Shut up," she cut him off loudly, and he realized there was a lot of noise in the background; it sounded like wind. "I'm on a pay phone, I've got about one minute. My hydro's out, so the fucking cordless phone is dead too."

"Go somewhere warm," he said automatically. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Cold, but fine. I just didn't want you to think I was upset with you or anything, you'd said you were going to call."

"I did. Thank you, luv, I was getting worried. Have you got somewhere to stay--"

"Shit, I'm almost out of time, and I don't have any more change. I'll email you--"

"Go get warm. I'll call you when I get your email."

"Okay. Listen, Billy, I'm sorry--"

And then she was gone.

"Fuck," Billy whispered, staring at the phone in his hand.

Dom stuck his head into the room. "Did I hear the phone?"

"Yeah. It was Grace. Her bloody power's out."

Dom leaned on the door jamb. "Is she all right?"

"I guess so. She said so. How long can pipes go without freezing? That's all she'd need..."

"Depends," he shrugged. "Don't worry about it, Billy. She's a grown woman, she's not stupid. She'll go somewhere where there's heat, she's not going to freeze to death."

"I know that," Billy snapped. He threw his phone into the corner of the sofa. "Fuck!" He raked a hand through his hair and turned to stare out the window.

"She'll be fine, Bill--"
"I hate this, Dom," he muttered. "I really fucking hate being an ocean away."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know! I'm certainly not saying--there's no way--but I really wish she just lived across the city, or even across the country, and not across the fucking Atlantic!"

"She should have called you Pellinore," Dom murmured. "You make a much more convincing knight."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Dom put on his best imitation of Elijah's American accent. "Geez, take a chill pill, Bill."

It caught Billy off-guard, and he snorted a laugh. Then he sighed, and shook his head. "What is this Pellinore shite, anyway?" he asked, much more quietly.

Dom walked in and sat in the armchair. "When she called me to ask me to ring you. I said I was a knight in shining armor riding to her rescue but my horsemanship skills were a bit rusty, and to cheer her up I said she should forget all about you and ride off with me into the sunset, and--"

"Oh, that's nice, Dom, that's very nice," Billy tried not to chuckle. "That's loyalty for you."

Dom flipped him two fingers. "And that's the point at which she said she'd bounce along behind me on my arthritic steed while..." He screwed his eyes up, trying to remember her words. "While my armor clanked and I held onto the mane to keep from falling off, I think."

Billy did laugh then. "Good for her. So what's Pellinore?"

"It's from King Arthur. King Pellinore was a decrepit old knight who kept falling off his horse while he chased around after the Questing Beast."

"I like it. That's perfect."

"We thought so," Dom said comfortably. "So you don't mind her calling me her knight in not-so-shining armor, then?"

Billy sat on the sofa, legs stretched out in front of him. "No, of course not. I appreciate you helping her out. And me."

"That's what mates are for, Bills. Can I say something that you're probably not going to like?"

Billy raised an eyebrow. "If I'm not going to like it, why would I say yes?"

Dom grinned. "Because the suspense of wondering what it was would kill you."

"Gobshite. Go ahead."

"I've seriously never seen you like this before, and it's...it's grand. I really like her, and so does 'Lij, and I bet when she and Margaret meet they're going to gang up on you something fierce. Does she have a sister?"

Billy shook his head, his ears a little pink.

"Oh, you are in so much trouble," Dom chuckled. "If they take to each other like I bet they will, you don't stand a chance. Are you really not going to see her again until your surprise visit at the
"No. I really needed to spend some time here, get settled in my house. And she had a lot of family stuff over the holidays. The end of the week I'm off to the Con in Milton-Keynes, and then it's Japan and L.A. There's just no time."

"And she won't come--"

Billy snorted. "I'm having a hard enough time convincing her to come here for her holidays. Even if she brought work to L.A. with her, I'd never get her to take another plane ticket."

"No." They were both quiet for a few minutes, lost in thought. Finally Dom said, "Well, at least you'll have the visit. How long are you going for?"

"I just got an email from Aude with the flight information yesterday. I'll arrive in Toronto at about ten a.m. her time on Friday, so by the time I get a taxi there, and we go rent a car, it'll be noon at least before I'm sure of getting her out of her apartment."

"More likely one o'clock."

Billy looked over at him. "And I fly out Monday night. So Elijah has a designer all lined up?"

"Yeah. They're going to call you Wednesday, like I said before, and you can do a little conference call on what you want, and then Elijah said the designer'd email you her sketches to approve or change the design." Dom lifted his legs until they hung over the wide padded arm of the chair.

"I'm still not sure about leaving a complete stranger a key to Grace's flat. I don't think she'll be best pleased about that..."

"Once she sees the flat, she won't even think about that," Dom said confidently. "Besides, Elijah says this woman is fully trustworthy. A friend of a friend of his mum's, or something like that. You know he wouldn't risk Grace's safety."

Billy grinned wryly. "It's not so much her safety, more her privacy. She's embarrassed about that place, and I just know I'm going to get it for letting someone else in there."

"Oh, I see. It's your safety you're worried about."

"Pretty much," Billy chuckled. "I wish you and Elijah could be there to take some of the heat."

"Nope, we can't," Dom lied through his teeth. "You're just going to have to suck it up, Billy-boy."

Nine o'clock found Billy and Dom flaked out on the sofa watching a movie. Dom had borrowed Billy's car and driven in to rent a few, knowing Billy wasn't going to want to leave the house until he heard from Grace. Which was just fine with him—he did enough partying in L.A. where he had to, he preferred these quiet nights in where the two of them could just talk and laugh and take the piss out of each other. They'd even resurrected the idea, while working on the window seat, of making a movie together.

When Billy's phone rang, he quickly snatched it up while Dom hit the mute button on the remote.
"Hello?"

"Hi, Billy."

"Grace," he said with quiet relief. "Where are you?"

"I'm home again. Hydro's back on, finally."

"Is everything all right? No burst pipes or anything?"

She sighed. "No, luckily. When I went out I left the water running a bit, I think that helped."

"Good. Hang up, then, I'll ring you right back."

"Thanks, Billy. I'm sorry."

"Numptie. I'll call you in a minute." He hung up.

Dom hit the stop button on the movie, and got up to leave.

"Where are you going?" Billy asked in surprise.

"It's a lovely evening out. Thought I'd go for a walk."

"Dom. It's pissing rain."

"Not in the kitchen. Nice place for a stroll, your kitchen."

"Sit your arse down. It's not like she's going to want to talk about anything personal. Nearly got
hung up on the last time I tried that, didn't I?"

Dom eyed him. "You sure?"

Billy just gave him an amused, exasperated look, and hit the speed dial button. When the call was
answered at the other end, he said, "Hey, wee girl."

"Hi, Billy. How are you?"

"You sound exhausted," he said softly.

"I am, a bit. Are you and Dom having fun?"

"Yes, we are. Why are you so tired?"

"How's the window seat going?"

"Very well, actually. I'll get Dom to send you some more pictures soon. Why are you so tired?"

He could hear a smile in her voice as she said, "You're not going to stop until I answer, are you?"

"Now you're learning."

She sighed loudly, mostly for his benefit. "Well, the friendly neighbourhood drug dealer was back.
I think he was blaring ABBA with the bass cranked, it had a very disco sound last night. Do you
think drug dealers listen to ABBA? I generally like ABBA, but not at two in the morning."

Billy grinned sympathetically. "No one likes ABBA at two in the morning."
Dom snorted.

"That wouldn't have been so bad, except the hydro must have already gone out, because I woke up at three-thirty absolutely freezing."

"It went out during the night?" Billy asked, aghast.

"Yeah."

"What did you do?"

"I got up, put on track pants, a sweatshirt, two pairs of socks, and piled every blanket I own on my bed, and after about an hour went back to sleep."

"Oh, Grace," he said softly.

"It was fairly toasty, actually, until I had to get up. You know how when you were here, you said my bathroom was an icebox?"

"Yeah."

Her voice was rather firm when she said, "You have no idea what an icebox is, let me put it that way."

Billy chuckled. "I believe you. Poor wee girl. So what time were you up this morning?"

"About seven, I think. I'm not sure because the clock was out and I can't find my watch."

"Oh, Grace," he repeated, at a loss for what to say.

"Yeah, things are kind of falling apart over here," she laughed, but he heard the quaver in her voice.

"You'll be all right, dear heart." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Where did you find to go this morning?"

"Coffee shop about five blocks up. I had to go that far before anyone had any power. That's a stupid long walk at seven in the morning, do you know that? And after I went to the library for a while. I sat and read the papers until I got too worried about the pipes, and then I came home. The hydro was on when I got here."

"Is your flat warming up? Will you be able to sleep tonight?"

"Slowly. I hope so. I just hope the bastard with the stereo doesn't come back. I really need a good night's sleep."

"I know you do. You'll get one, don't worry. Would you like me to sing you to sleep?"

"Umm--not at the moment, it's only five in the afternoon."

"Oh. Right, yeah," he said sheepishly. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"Billy?"

"Yes, wee girl?"
Her voice was small, quiet. "I'm sorry about the email. I didn't realize...I didn't know I sounded so..."

"It was partially how you sounded. But it was also what you didn't say," he told her gently. "What was troubling you?"

"I--don't know, really," she admitted. "I've sort of been...all up and down lately, you know? I have a pretty good day, and then everything just goes all to hell, and then I have a good day, and then I have a rough day and I'm just so lonely I could--aw, fuck," she whispered. "I didn't say that. I didn't mean to say that. Don't--"

"It's all right, Grace. I won't push you. Just remember what you told me."

She hesitated, finally asked, "What?"

"There's nothing wrong with feeling a bit lost when you're tired and lonely. And there's nothing wrong with wanting someone to share in your life."

"I don't--"

"Don't even say that, Grace," he insisted softly. "It could be with me, or Dom, with Jamie, it could be with your mum. When you're lonely, you just want someone that cares about you. I understand that. And I do care about you, you know that, and I wish I could reach you so I could give you a big hug and maybe warm you up a bit." He paused as Dom nudged him, made a gesture. "Dom says him too."

Grace drew a deep, shaky breath. "You two are--I do want to come to Glasgow. I miss you. You're--you're a good friend. So's Dom, and I know that's a weird thing to say when I haven't even met him, but--"

"No, it's not. Dom is a good friend. He's your Pellinore, isn't he?" Billy heard simultaneous chuckles in each ear, although one sounded a little more sniffly than the other.

"Yeah, I guess he is."

"I want you to try and do something for me, wee girl."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"Such trust," he teased her gently. "I want you to try and let me know when you feel lonely, and not back away quite so rapidly."

"I haven't--"

"You did in your email. You backed away from every single mention of you, and me, in no matter what form. Even the trip to Peru." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dom raise an eyebrow. "We're not glass threads or frost-work, remember?"

"I remember," she whispered. "I just didn't realize I was doing that. I really didn't."

"It's all right. This is a bit of a strange way to have a friendship, I know, especially when we've only spent a few days together. It's going to be a bit difficult at times. Just remember, Grace," he said softly, "You are my friend. And I care very much about you."

"Me too, Billy. About you."
"I'm glad to hear it, dear heart. I'll let you go now, but can I ring you tomorrow and wish you a Happy New Year?"

"I'd like that."

"Me too." He paused. "Is it blue?"

"What?"

"Your favourite colour."

She sounded a little surprised. "Yes. Why?"

"I just wanted to know," he smiled.

"What's yours?"

"I can't tell you now, you'll just think I'm copying you."

"Blue," she said, and he could hear that she was smiling a little now too.

"Aye. I'll talk to you tomorrow, wee girl."

"Good night, Billy. Say bye to Dom for me."

"I will. Good night, Grace."

Billy hit the end button, then shut his phone off. He looked up to find Dom staring at him, grinning. "What?"

"So smitten."
Chapter 23

Grace lunged for her phone, picked it up, nearly dropped it again. “Hi—hold on—ah, fu—I mean—crap. Hello? You still there?”

Billy laughed. “That’s one hell of a welcome, wee girl.”

“Hi, Billy,” she grinned. “Sorry about that. I’ve got slippery hands, I nearly dropped you.”

“Slippery hands, hmm? And what are you up to, or dare I ask? And even more important—are you alone?”

“Billy!” she gasped, laughing.

She heard Dom wolf-whistle in the background while Billy snickered in her ear.

She started to protest. “I was just making—”

“No, no,” Billy cut her off, his voice low and breathy and obviously put on for her benefit, “Don’t tell me. Let me keep the fantastic image I have in my head right now.”

“Billy Boyd, are you drunk?” she demanded, her cheeks pink.

“Perhaps a bit smeekit, yes,” he admitted. “Not as bad as Dom. Dom’s absolutely fucking snockered.” There was a loud but unintelligible protest. “See?”

“I assume smeekit is one of those Glaswegian words you haven’t taught me yet?”

“Aye. Here’s another—gimme an hour, and I’ll be blootered too.”

“I like smeekit better,” Grace grinned. “Sounds a little more elegant. Hey, wait a minute—what time is it?”

“It is—would ye—hang on. Dom, would ye get your bloody ears out of the way, you twat! That’s better. It’s two minutes tae midnight. We are, unbelievably enough, watching the festivities from London, instead of the bloody country we happen tae be residing in at the moment, because Dom says he can only understand every third word on the Scottish coverage, and I say he’s just so fucking rat-arsed he couldn’t understand his own Mum at this point—ow! Watch it, ye silly wee cunt, ye nearly took m’eye out! Ye can just get your own bloody vodka now, see how well ye do with that when it’s all the way in the kitchen and you’re here and you’re sodding legless. And if ye think I’m helping ye get up the stairs later, ye can think again, ye can sleep on the bloody window seat for all I care—”

Grace was laughing so helplessly it took her until ‘six’ to realize the clamour in the background was Dom bellowing the countdown to midnight.

“Ah, shite!” Billy exclaimed. “Where’s my drink? What th’fuck did ye do with my drink, ye—oh, there—Happy New Year!”

Both men shouted it into the phone, and then Grace heard glasses clink, heard Billy swallow, and then two loud (one slightly off-key) voices sang Auld Lang Syne. When they had finished, Grace smiled and said, “Happy New Year, dearest of dearies.”
“Happy New Year, wee girl. Now, ye listen tae your dearie of deariest for a minute. No, Dom, bugger off, I am not kissing ye. Well, if ye wanted a New Year’s snog, ye should have said so earlier so we could have found ye a bird. Yeah, ye can talk tae her in a minute. So, m’darling Grace, this past year has been shite for ye. Total and complete shite.”

“Not total and complete,” she teased. “I met you, didn’t I?”

“Ach, you’re such a love,” he said sentimentally. “An’ it’s true. Your year definitely perked up a bit toward the end. An’ I’m here tae tell ye, my lovely girl, this next one is going tae be even better. It will bring ye joy, and frivolity, and new places and new people and a lessening tae your worries and ye cannot even comprehend the love your friends will feel for ye before this year is out. I’m so glad I met ye, because you’re a wonderful woman, Grace MacPherson, and I treasure your friendship. Dom, quit bawling on m’knee, ye wee sod.”

“Billy—” Grace murmured unsteadily.

“I know, I know, I get sappy when I’m pished. Doesn’t mean I don’t mean every word, dear heart. Here’s Dom.”

Before Grace could manage another word, he was gone, and Dom was talking loudly in her ear.

“Penny my love my darlin’, a very, very Happy New Year to you!”

She chuckled. “Happy New Year, Dom. I—“

“It’s true, y’know. ‘S true. Every word Billy said. You’re a lovely bird, you are, Penny darlin’.”

“Thank you, Dom. You’re not so bad yourself, even if you are completely hammered,” she grinned.

“I’m not! I’m only slightly ineb—binebriated.”

“Dom?”

“Yes, Penelope?”

“Can you stop yelling in my ear, pet?”

He laughed. “Am I yelling at you, Pen?”

“Just a little bit, you madcap. I take it you and Billy are having a good evening?”

“Madcap! I love it when you call me madcap!”

“I know you do, now quit shouting!” she protested with a grin.

“Sorry, sorry—is that better?” he asked with a bit less volume, not waiting for an answer. “Yeah, we’re having a fuckin’ excellent night. Wish you were here. It’d be good to see you again, y’know?”

Grace laughed out loud. “You’re so trashed, Pellinore darling. You do recall that we’ve never actually met, don’t you?”

“We have so!”

“Really? When?”
“When we—it was—umm…” he trailed off. “We haven’t, have we?”

“No, tragically enough, Pellinore, we haven’t.”

“Well, why the hell not? Billy, why the fuck haven’t I met Penny yet?” he demanded indignantly, slightly away from the phone. “Why the fuck haven’t I met the girl you’re falling in love with? I thought I was your best mate, and yet she meets Elwood before me? I ought to drum you out of the best mate corps for that, you know—what the fuck are you doing? Ow!”

A moment later Billy’s calm voice was in her stunned ears. “Don’t mind him, wee girl. He’s so effing bollocksed it’s not funny.” He paused, then grinned, “Well, actually it is pretty bloody funny. You should see him, he’s sitting on the floor because he slid off the sofa.”

“Billy—” she said seriously.

“Don’t, Grace. I’m coming tae love ye as a dear friend, just like I do Dom. His pickled tongue just said it oddly, that’s all. For fuck’s sake, I just finished telling ye what a treasured friend ye are, didn’t I?”

“But—“

“No, no. No buts, wee girl. Ye love your friends, don’t ye?” he insisted.

“Well, yes, but—“

“There ye are then. Now stop being a pain in the arse.”

“Pain in the arse? I am not!” she protested hotly.

“Ye most certainly are. An’ it’s lucky for you I love a challenge, because sometimes ye drive me mad.”

“I drive you mad? You’re the one—“

“Bollocks. I am calm and logical and serene at all times.”

“Serene?” Grace hooted. “Since when?”

“Since I said so. All right, I can’t stand the suspense any more,” he sighed dramatically. “Go on, tell me.”

“Tell you what?” she nearly wailed. “I don’t know where the fuck we are anymore!”

“Sometimes I worry about ye, wee girl. I am here in my wee stone house, and you are there in your wee Toronto flat.”

“Boyd, next time I see you I am so going to kick your arse.”

“I certainly don’t know why,” Billy said airily. “I am being my usual sweet and adorable self. So tell me.”


“Why your hands are slippery, of course. Keep up, wee girl.”

Dom’s voice came indistinctly over the line. “Slippery? Who’s slippery? What?”
“Why, hullo, Dom. I thought you’d passed out.”

“Nope. Where’s m’vodka?”

“It’s in the kitchen.”

“Oh. Never mind, then.”

“Go on, Grace,” Billy encouraged her.

“You two are pissed out of your gourds,” she stated firmly. “Out of your fucking gourds. It’d be enough to drive me to drink, if I had any.”

“Ye don’t have anything tae drink for New Year’s?” Billy exclaimed with alarm. “But that’s—that’s not right!”

Grace chuckled. “Relax, you sot. Jamie’s bringing it with him. I made the food, which is why my hands were slippery, because I was greasing a pan, thank you very much, and Jamie’s bringing the booze.”

“Ye and Jamie are staying in, then?” he asked, suddenly diffident. “And getting drunk?”

“Well, since the liquor is free, I’m planning on consuming a fair amount, yes. Not that it takes much to get me drunk anymore!” she laughed.

“Really? Good to know. So what’s the big party plan, then? Curl up on the sofa and watch films?”

“No, I think we’re going to watch the CBC’s programming, they always have some good comedy on New Year’s Eve. We’ll eat, get nice and toasty on the liquor, and then head downtown.”

“But it’s supposed to be fucking Baltic there tonight!”

“Yeah, but we’ll dress warmly, and we’re only going for an hour or so. Why, you worried?” she teased.

“You know I am,” he said flatly.

“Oh, Billy—there’s no need to be, you silly man. So…umm. Did you follow any Hogmanay customs?”

“Not really, actually. I suppose I could get Dom tae first-foot.”

“What’s that?”

“The tradition is that the first person tae enter your house after midnight should be a tall, dark-haired man, and he should bear gifts of coal, shortbread, and whisky. Well, I don’t burn coal. I might have shortbread. And I have whisky in my hand. So maybe when he crawls out of bed tomorrow I’ll make him first-foot.”

“I thought Dom had light hair?”

“Well, only by artifice,” Billy grinned. “And he’s only tall in that he’s an inch taller than me—but if ye repeat that, I’ll deny it tae my dying day.”

Grace laughed. “I won’t breathe a word, I swear.”
“Will ye call me?” he suddenly asked.

“Call you? When?”

“At midnight. So I can wish ye a Happy New Year.”

“Billy, that would be five in the morning for you,” she pointed out, amused.

“I know. I’ll keep my phone right by my pillow.”

“But—I’ll be downtown in the middle of the Square—“

“Does Jamie have a mobile?”

“Well, yes, but—“

“Use his phone,” Billy insisted. “Tell him I’ll pay him for the call. Ring me at midnight.”

“Billy—“

“C’mon, Grace, please.”

“All right, I’ll call,” she relented. “I don’t quite understand—“

“It’s just—if I don’t talk tae ye first thing—you’re going tae disappear on me.” He sounded intense.

“What am I, a bloody pumpkin coach?” she asked incredulously, touched nonetheless. “You’re drunk, hon.”

“Maybe I am. But if I don’t talk tae ye at the very start of the year, by the end of it you’ll be gone, and I don’t want ye tae be gone, Grace.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Billy,” she said softly. “I’m on your side, remember? Against anyone or anything, and your friendship is very important to me.”

“Am I?” he whispered.

“Are—are you what?”

“Important tae ye.”

“You know you are,” Grace murmured.

“I don’t—at least, I’m not sure.”

“How could you not be sure? You were the first person I ever let into my apartment, because I couldn’t let our evening end, I couldn’t let you go,” she gently reminded him. “You only have to give me one word and I can find you a song. I don’t have that with anyone else. And you—you push me—no, that’s not right.” Once again, Grace found herself stumbling over her words just when she wanted them most. “You don’t push me—well, sometimes you do, but that’s different. But you…you encourage me, you help me to do things I’m too afraid to do on my own.”

“I do?”

“I told you I was thinking of singing in public, didn’t I?”
“Oh. Yeah. I suppose.”

“Billy. I—I’m only going to say this because I’m hoping you’re drunk enough you won’t remember it tomorrow,” she said with a weak little laugh. “You’re a lot more important to me than I ever intended to allow. You’re very—you’re very special to me, Billy.”

There was silence on the other end.

“Are you sure now?” she quietly prompted.

“Yeah. I guess I am.”

“Good. Don’t ever doubt that you matter to me, Billy.”

“Thank you, Grace,” he murmured. “You’ve started my year off better than I could have hoped.”

“I think you’d better go to bed now, dearest. I think you should probably sleep off this maudlin mood you’ve gotten into, eh?”

“I suppose. But you’re still going tae call me, right?”

“Yes, I’ll still call you. And Billy?”

“Yeah?”

Grace smiled. “You’re not going to leave Dom on the floor, are you?”

“No. I’ll shove him up onto the sofa. But only because ye asked me to.”

She chuckled. “Good night, Billy.”

“’Night, Grace.”

Billy woke with a painful start as his cell phone began to ring in his ear. “Fuck. Who the fuck changed my ringer to *Auld Lang Syne*?” he muttered to himself as he rolled over. “Fuckin’ Dom, wasn’t it? Oh. No, I did it. That was stupid. Hello?” An utter cacophony of noise greeted him.

“Billy? Billy, it’s Grace—you’ll have to speak up, it’s really noisy here, and I can’t really get out,” she said loudly.

“Where are you?”

“What? Sorry, I didn’t catch that—“

“Where are you?” he half-shouted.

“In the Square. With a few thousand of my closest friends,” she laughed. “There’s usually more, but all the softies stayed home where it’s warm.”

“Are ye having fun?” he asked at full volume, smiling a bit even as his eyes closed again. He rolled onto his back.

“Yeah, we are, actually. Got nice and liquored up, and the music here has been pretty good. We’re
about a minute from midnight, by the way. It’s going to be loud, just so you know!”

“Are you drunk, Grace MacPherson?”

“I’m afraid so, Billy Boyd! Great way to start the new year, eh? We just got here about twenty minutes ago, so I’ll be—what’s that word? Smeekit? For a little while yet.”

“And what happens there at midnight?” he yelled.

“Cheering, fireworks, and everybody sings Auld Lang Syne. Probably the same as yours, right?”

“Pretty much.”

“What?”

“I said pretty much,” Billy shouted. “You’re not going to be able to hear a word I say afterwards, so I’ll say it now, and you can just talk to me. Happy New Year, dear heart! And tell Jamie thanks from me for letting you use his phone!”

“I will. Oh, here we go—ten—nine—”

Billy could hear the entire crowd counting down to midnight, and he heard Grace yell Happy New Year, Billy, before Auld Lang Syne came bellowing down the line, and even with all the noise, Billy could still just barely pick out Grace’s voice, and even drunk she sounded wonderful to him. But after the singing, Billy couldn’t hear anything from Grace, and he wondered why, wondered if Jamie was giving her a New Year’s kiss, and he rolled back over onto his side.

“Billy—” she suddenly shouted, and he twitched a bit in surprise, “—the band is just starting again. I think you’d like them, they’re pretty good. See if you can hear any of it.”

He figured she was probably holding the phone up above the crowd a bit, and even though she was likely far from the stage, having arrived so late, he could indeed hear them a little, although the sound quality, between speakers and cell, was not spectacular. And then Grace was back in his ear.

“Billy—”

“Yeah?” he shouted.

“I’m gonna go—I can’t hear you anyway. Call me tomorrow and I’ll tell you how the rest of it was, okay?”

“When?”

“What? Did you say when? Anytime after ten my time. So, after three in the afternoon for you. Okay?”

“Okay!”

“Oh, I heard that! Good. I’ll talk to you soon, then, Billy. Goodnight, and Happy New Year!”

“Night, Grace!”

Billy shut off his phone and set it on the night table beside him. Despite laying with his arms behind his head and his eyes open, a few minutes later Dom still caught him by surprise.

“What the hell is going on?” he muttered from the doorway, voice raspy and gruff.
“Fuck, Dom, you startled me. Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

“Don’t yell at five in the sodding morning. When I’m hung over as fuck. What the hell were you yelling about, a dream?”

“No. Grace called to wish me a Happy New Year.”

“Isn’t that sweet. And you had to do it at the top of your lungs?” he complained.

Billy suddenly sat up. “I’m lucky she called me at all, no thanks to you.”

“What? What the fuck are you on about?” he protested roughly, coming closer to the bed.

Billy clenched his jaw. “Do you remember your conversation with her tonight, Dom? Or were you too fucking pished to have any clue?”

“Of course I remember,” he said defensively. Then weakly added, “Mostly.”

“Do you remember telling her I was falling in love with her, Dom? Do you remember that part, Dom?”

Dom was stunned. “I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“I didn’t.”

“Oh, you most certainly did.”

Dom dropped onto the edge of the bed. “Billy,” he whispered. “Please tell me I didn’t.”

“I’d love to, Dom. Unfortunately, you did.”

“Jesus. I told her…”

“Actually, you were yelling it at me. Right beside the phone. ‘Billy, why the fuck haven’t I met Penny? Why the fuck haven’t I met the girl you’re falling in love with?’ God, Dom, after the last couple weeks, could you have picked a worse time?”

“Aw, fucking hell, Bills—I’m sorry,” Dom whispered. “I didn’t mean to—“

“Well, you did. Thanks for that.” Billy flopped back down.

After a moment, he quietly asked, “What did she say?”

“I didn’t let her say anything.” Billy grumpily informed him. “I told her you were bloody trolleyed, and when that didn’t do it, I told her I was coming to love her as a dear friend, and you just said it oddly. And then I had to drive her ‘round the twist to distract her. Luckily, I think it worked. I’ll probably find out tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Go to bed, Dom. I’ll forgive you when I wake up again.”

Dom was quiet for several minutes.

“Would you just go to bed—“
“Billy. Billy, if I’ve fucked this up,” Dom whispered thickly, “I’ll do whatever it takes—I’ll do whatever needs to be done to fix it. “

Billy sat up again, reached over to the night table, and switched on the bedside lamp. He squinted tightly in the sudden light, the pain telling him he wasn’t so far from hung over himself. When he could peer across at Dom, he saw his face similarly squinched up, but there was a telltale glimmer on one cheek. “Dom? Are you—are you crying?” he asked in disbelief.

“I feel like shite, Bills. I felt like shite when I came in, and now I feel even more like shite and I’m sorry, Billy.”

He softened. “Ah, come here, Dom.” Billy pulled him forward into a hug, gently rubbing one shoulder. “I think you’re still half-pished. It’s all right, I don’t think you fucked up too badly. It was a bit sticky, but I think it’s okay now. She called me to wish me a Happy New Year, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, but—“ he mumbled into Billy’s t-shirt.

“Besides, she said a few things that—well, I don’t know if she would have, if I hadn’t told her I was coming to love her as a friend. So that may have worked out all right.”

Dom sat back, ashamedly wiping his eyes with his t-shirt sleeve. “What’d she say?”

Billy snorted and passed him a tissue from the box on the night stand before he could give his nose the same treatment. “That I was more important to her than she’d ever meant to allow. That I was—“ Billy’s ears turned a bit pink, and he looked down at his blanket, picking at a thread. “That I was special to her.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Dom said softly. “I knew you were. But I’m glad she said it.”

“So am I. It’s—our world makes you a bit hard sometimes, you know?” Billy murmured, not certain if that was enough for Dom to entirely get what he meant.

“I know. Fame doesn’t mean shite if the people you love don’t love you back.”

Billy looked up at him with a half-smile. “Aye.”

Dom leaned forward and gave him a smacking kiss on the forehead. “See you in the morning, Bills.” He got up and left.

Billy sat for a moment longer, staring at his hands. “Aye,” he whispered, then turned out the light.

At three-thirty in the afternoon on New Year’s Day, Billy called Grace while Dom was upstairs in the shower. Billy sat on the finished window seat, knees up, watching the clouds through the bay window.

“Hello?”

“Morning, wee girl.”
“Hey, Billy,” she smiled. “How are you?”

“Not too bad. You? You sound a little rough.”

“Nah, just a scratchy throat. Must have yelled too much last night. At least the headache’s gone now.” He could hear the grin in her voice. “How was Dom this morning?”

Billy chuckled. “Would have been better if he hadn’t been up with us at five this morning. I forgot I’d left him on the sofa for the night, and my shouting woke him up.”

“Oh, no. Tell him I’m sorry.”

“I will not. Serves him right for—for getting so drunk,” Billy quickly recovered. If she wasn’t going to bring up Dom’s gaffe, neither was he.

“Such sympathy,” she teased.

“I’m a very sympathetic bloke, you know.”

“I’ve noticed. So what are you and Dom up to for the next few days? How long is he staying with you, anyway?”

“We’re actually both heading out tomorrow. I’m going to his place for a day or two, I haven’t seen his Mum and Dad in ages,” he said. “Then I’ll be back here for a few days, then I’m off to the con in Milton-Keyes.”

“And how long is that for?”

“Just the weekend, two days. Then I come home, pack, and I’m off to Japan with Viggo, Sean Astin, and Liv. We’re there a week, so that ought to be good. I love Japanese food, I always eat my weight in sushi when I’m there,” he grinned.

“I suppose Japan is the best place to—no, Jamie, it’s in the other cupboard. Hang on a sec, Billy,” she said.

Billy froze. Jamie? Jamie had stayed at her flat overnight? What the fuck was—

“Sorry about that, Billy,” Grace said breezily, chuckling. “Jamie’s making breakfast, and he can’t find anything.”

“Stayed over, did he?” Billy asked casually, lightly, and proved to himself yet again that he was an awfully good actor.

“Yeah. He’d had too much to drink to drive home, and you can’t get a cab on New Year’s, so he just crashed here.”

“Surely he couldn’t have folded himself up onto your sofa,” he commented, praying he didn’t sound ridiculously obvious.

“Good heavens, no. He’s nearly six feet tall, aren’t you, beanpole?” she teased, a little away from the phone. There was a protesting murmur in the background. “No, it was too cold to divide up the blankets like that anyway. He stayed dressed to protect my delicate sensibilities and slept in the bed.”

From the background, much more clearly this time, Billy heard Jamie say, “Delicate my ass,” and he suddenly disliked this man he’d never even met, far more vehemently than he knew he had any
right to.
Grace was amused. “Shut up and cook, twit.”

“Well, I should let you go, then—“

“No, Billy, please don’t go, he’s just starting—unless you have to—“

“No, I don’t have to,” Billy said, feeling a little mollified by the speed with which she’d protested.

“Good. Talk to me, then.”

Billy leaned back against the window frame as he heard the shower upstairs shut off. “Talk to you about what?”

“About…I don’t know. Tell me—tell me something I don’t know about you,” she said quietly.

“Where are you?”

“Sofa. Facing away from the kitchen. You?”

“Window seat.”

Grace smiled. “Is it done, then?”

“Aye. Dom’ll be sending you pictures before we leave.”

“I’d like that. Tell me something.”

Billy sighed thoughtfully. “Something you don’t know about me. Let’s see…all right. When I went to New Zealand for the first time—before I’d met any of them, except Orlando, who I flew over with—I was very nervous. More nervous than I’d ever been in my life. I mean, here I was moving halfway around the world for over a year, and I had no idea what to expect. I was nervous, keyed up, frightened in a good way, I suppose, and so excited you would have thought I was a wee kiddie at Christmas. I was in such a state I threw up in the loo on the plane, and I threw up in the loo in the airport in L.A. I’ve never felt like that before, or since. And I suppose,” he added with a weak little laugh, “that you didn’t really intend for me to tell you about my experience in puking around the world. Sorry about that.”

Grace laughed quietly. “No, I’m glad you told me. Well, okay, maybe not about the puking itself—but about how you felt. It must have been…I can’t even imagine doing what you did. What all of you did. Just picking up and going and not even knowing if it was going to be good or bad, or a nightmare, not knowing what to expect and not knowing anyone and moving to a foreign country without…without any, you know, surety. I’m having trouble thinking of anything more frightening at the moment, actually.”

Billy wondered, just for a moment, what it would take before it wouldn’t be so frightening for her, but he shied away from that thought almost as soon as it flitted through his brain. “It wasn’t that bad, really. I mean, I knew I had a job, a place to live, and a pay packet coming in, so even if it was horrible I could just get through the year, take my money, and run. But of course, what I actually got…”


“I was afraid you were going to say that,” she chuckled. “All right, hang on, let me think of something. Umm…okay, my first ever job when I was sixteen was pumping gas. I was still in school obviously, so I just did weekend and evening shifts, no days and no graveyard shifts. I worked there for…I don’t know, I think it was about six months, and then the station was robbed—“

“Robbed!” he exclaimed.

“Yep. I think they got all of fifty bucks, security measures were too tight, even back then.”

Billy chuckled. “Yeah, because it was so long ago.”

Grace laughed. “All right, point taken, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. So you quit after that?”

“I wasn’t going to—it didn’t bother me, because it had happened in the middle of the night, and I couldn’t see anyone trying to rob us in broad daylight, which was probably a little naïve, but… anyway, it freaked my parents out and they made me quit. I was pissed.”

“Why were you pissed?”

“Well, they took away my only income, and I’d just gotten used to having it,” she grinned. “I was saving up for a car. It only took me a couple weeks to find a new job, which is what my parents had figured, but it was a chilly couple weeks in the MacPherson household.”

Billy chuckled again. “I can imagine. I’ve tasted that temper of yours.”

“You have not!” she protested. “I’ve never blown my top around you.”

“You have so. Remember shouting at me when I offered you a loan? I deserved it, of course, but you still tore a strip off of me. And in the restaurant at the airport. You got pretty pissed with me then, too, and I know I deserved that one as well, but…hmm. I’m sensing a trend,” he teased. “I think I’m bad for your mental stability.”

“Oh, I know you’re bad for my mental stability,” she retorted, grinning, “But very little of that has to do with my temper.”

Billy saw Dom come down the last few stairs. “Hang on, Grace.” He waved the phone at Dom. “It’s Penny, want to say hello?” He was surprised when Dom flushed, shook his head, and disappeared into the hallway.

“Well that was odd,” he commented.

“Which part are you referring to?”

“Dom walking away. Why, was there more than one odd thing?”

“You automatically said I was Penny to him, which is funny, actually. But—did he not want to talk to me for a reason?” She thought hard, trying to remember if she’d said anything to annoy him the night before. “I don’t think I said anything wrong, but…”

“No, you didn’t, wee girl. Of course you didn’t. I’m not sure, but…I think he might be…” Billy hesitated, not sure what exactly to say. “He might be a bit embarrassed about last night.”
What, about being drunk?” she asked incredulously. “Will you put him on for a minute? That’s utterly ridiculous.”

“Sure. Let’s go for a walk, then.” Billy got up and crossed the living room. “Go easy on him, yeah?” he murmured. “I think he still has a headache.”

“I’ll be gentle,” she smiled.

Billy entered the kitchen to find Dom leaning on the counter looking out the window while he waited for the kettle to boil.

Dom didn’t realize Billy was still on the phone, just knew that he had come in. “Thought I’d have another cup of tea. Want one, Billy?”

“Sure. I’ll get it, since you’re busy.”

“Busy?” Dom frowned, turning. He automatically took the phone when Billy handed it to him, then tried to hand it back, shaking his head vigorously. Billy grinned at him, and walked away, going to sit at the kitchen table.

Dom flipped him off, sighed deeply, and put the phone to his ear, turning back to look out the window again. “Hi, Grace.”

“I beg your pardon?” She sounded outraged.

Dom chuckled weakly. “Sorry, Penelope.”

“Better. Good morning, Pellinore dearest—well, good afternoon to you, of course. How are you feeling, doll?” she asked kindly.

“I’m all right. I mean—just fine,” he said distantly. “How are you? Did you have a good New Year’s?”

“I did, thank you. What’s up? Are we—are we okay, Dom?” she asked, a little uncertain after hearing the odd tone in his voice.

“What? Yeah—yeah, of course we are, Pen. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for last night, I said—I said some stupid things. I’m sorry if I was an arse,” he said with a sudden rush.

“Don’t be silly, Dom,” she said softly. “You weren’t an arse, and you didn’t say anything stupid. I’m tickled as hell you feel like we’ve already met, and Billy explained what you really meant with the other thing, so it’s all good. Okay?”

“I really am sorry, Pen—“

“Cut it out,” she insisted with a smile. “Fine, I forgive you, all right? I don’t know what for, but if that’ll make you feel better…”

Dom couldn’t help but chuckle a little. “It does. I’d hate to think my Penny’s pissed with me.”

“Not yours, Dom. And I’m not pissed. If I were, you’d know about it,” she said wryly.

“It’s just a figure of speech, you know—calling you ‘my Penny’—I don’t mean anything by it.”

“I know. It’s just—one of those little things that gets under your skin a bit, you know? I can’t help it, it just…yeah, well. Anyway, if you’re sure we’re all right, could I talk to Billy again? I’m
getting the evil eye over here, I think it’s time for breakfast."

“The evil eye?” Dom asked blankly.

“Yeah, Jamie’s making French toast in return for last night’s lodgings. So we’re all right, Dom?”

“Yes. Yes, we’re fine, Penny love. I’ll talk to you soon, yeah? Here’s Billy.” Dom handed Billy the phone with a puzzled expression.

“Hey, wee girl.”

“Hey, Billy. I should probably get going, it appears Jamie has breakfast ready. You’re leaving tomorrow, you said?”

“Yes, but I’ll be back in two days.”

“Okay. I’ll email you sometime in the next few days then, all right? I’ll be a bit busy, I’m going to put in a bit of overtime, so don’t worry if you don’t hear from me right away,” she smiled.

Billy chuckled. “All right. Are you calling me a worry wart?”

“You’re almost as bad as I am,” she teased. “Thanks for calling, Billy. And—and thanks for talking.”

“Me too, dear heart. I’ll talk to you in a few days.”

“Sounds great. Bye, Billy.”

“Bye, Grace.” Billy closed his phone, set it on the counter. “Where’s that tea?”

Dom looked at him strangely. “Who is this Jamie guy?”

“A friend of hers. A good friend, by all accounts.”

“Apparently, if he’s making her breakfast.”

“No, no, no,” Billy said firmly. “Don’t you dare. I’m not going there, or it’ll drive me mad. He was drunk, I’m glad she had him stay instead of letting him drive. And—and—she wanted to talk to me, even though he was there. That’s got to mean something, right?” He sounded a little less sure of himself than he would have liked.

Dom cocked his head. “Yeah. Yeah, I think it does. And besides, you’re very important to her.”

Billy looked at him sideways. “Are you taking the piss out of me?”

“No.” Dom suddenly grinned. “But I think I’ll have to keep reminding you ‘you’re special’.” He added a camp little lisp to the word.

“Bugger off, you wanker. Where the fuck’s my bloody tea?”
"Hello?"

Billy hesitated, startled by an unfamiliar voice, wondering if he'd rung the wrong number.

"Hello?"

"Grace? Is that you?"

"Oh, hi Billy." Her voice was scratchy, raw, and thick.

"Good God, luv, what's wrong? You sound awful."

"Gee thanks. You call just to cheer me up?" she rasped.

"What's wrong, dear heart?" His hand actually twitched, as if to reach out for her.

"I'm sick. 'Flu, or something. I might be dying, so say your goodbyes now."

"I think I'll take a chance and wait on that. I haven't heard from you in a few days, so I was calling to check in. I'm glad I did. How long have you been ill?"

"I don't know what day it is. Since Friday. Couple days after New Year's."

"It's Tuesday. You poor wee girl, is anyone looking after you?" he asked sympathetically.

"Oh, sure, I've got 24-hour nursing care. I'm just about to climb into the hot tub," she mumbled, sniffling.

"I'm being serious, Grace. What about groceries? You have to eat—even just some soup..."

Her voice was, if possible, even rougher. "Don't—mention—food."

"Oh, luv—sorry. Are you drinking?"

"Constantly. Nothing but Scotch."

"Grace."

"Yes, Billy. Water and tea."

"That's not enough to keep you going," he protested.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll just cook up a roast, shall I?...Oh, fuck—" she croaked.

"Easy, luv. Take a sip of water." He waited patiently for several minutes.

"Sorry," she finally whispered.
"It's all right, wee girl," he said gently. "I'm serious, though, you're not going to get better if you
don't get some vitamins in your system. Four days is a long time to go with nothing but water."

"And tea."

"And tea, then."

"There's not much I can do about it at the moment, Billy," she said, sounding close to tears.

He immediately realized his lecturing wasn't helping. "Shh, never mind, luv. I know. I'm sorry.
And I'm sorry you feel so wretched."

"Me too."

"Where are you, in bed?"

"Yeah."

"Are you keeping warm? Got lots of blankets?" he asked softly.

"Yeah."

"Good. Will you do something for me, dear heart?"

"What?" She coughed.

"If you're not better by Friday, go see your doctor. It'll have been a week, and if you're not feeling
at all better, I think you should have someone check you out."

"If I'm not feeling better, I'm not going anywhere," she muttered. "I'm not taking the fucking bus
like this."

"Take a cab, Grace. I'll send you the money."

"I'm not taking a cab!"

"Grace MacPherson," he said firmly, "Don't start with me. If you're still under the weather Friday,
I'm going to start worrying even more than I am now. Then I'll wind up driving to the airport and
spending a bloody fortune on a last minute flight to come and drag your poor wee arse to the
hospital. So save us both the embarrassment and take an effing cab."

"I'll tell you what," she said weakly. "How about I just get better before then?"

He laughed softly. "That would do, yes."

"I hate being sick, Billy," she suddenly wailed.

"I know you do, wee girl. What have you done about work?"

"I've done a horrible job, is what I've done."

"You're still working?" he asked, flabbergasted. "Grace, you can't—"

"Stop right there or I'll hang up on you," she warned, on edge. "I don't have a choice, I don't get
sick days. It's either work or use my vacation time, and if I use my vacation time I can't come visit
you, and I want to come visit you, Billy. I wish I could see you."
He realized she was crying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, dear heart. Shh, it's all right," he murmured. "I'll stop hounding you. I'm just worried, and I wish I could come take care of you. Shh... How about I sing to you for a bit? We'll see if we can't get you to take a wee nap, yeah?"

There was no answer but a stifled sob.

Billy quickly racked his brain for a song to sing. One popped into his head unbidden, and he started to sing without considering the possible consequences.

*It's not that easy bein’ green—*

He suddenly realized what he’d picked, and stopped. “Aw, hell, Grace, I’m sorry—“

But she was laughing, if tearfully, scratchily. “Trust you. You always know how to make a girl feel so attractive.”

He chuckled. “I’m sorry. Give me a minute, I’ll think up another...”

“No. Sing that one? Please? I haven’t heard that in years.”

Smiling, he sang.

*It’s not that easy bein’ green*

*Having to spend each day the colour of the leaves*

*When I think it could be nicer bein’ red or yellow or gold*

*Or something much more colourful like that*

*It’s not easy bein’ green*

*It seems you blend in with so many other ordinary things*

*And people tend to pass you over*

*’Cos you’re not standin’ out like flashy sparkles in the water*

*Or stars in the sky*

*But green’s the colour of spring*

*And green can be cool and friendly-like*

*And green can be big like an ocean*

*Or important like a mountain*

*Or tall like a tree*

*When green is all there is to be*

*It could make you wonder why*

*But why wonder why wonder*

*I am green and it’ll do fine*

*It’s beautiful and I think it’s what I wanna be*

“Mmm,” she murmured, a smile in her voice. “That’s such a nice song. I like ‘friendly-like’.”

“Me too. Do you want another one?”

“I guess I should take any advantage I can out of being sick, eh?”

“You might as well,” he chuckled.

“Then yes, please.”

He heard rustling, imagined her snuggling down deeper into her blankets. “You all tucked up tight?”
“Yeah.”

Billy sang softly, lightly, longingly.

_Come by the hills to the land_  
where fancy is free  
And stand where the peaks meet the sky  
and the rocks reach the sea  
Where the rivers run clear and the bracken  
is gold in the sun  
And cares of tomorrow must wait  
till this day is done.

_Come by the hills to the land_  
where life is a song  
And sing while the birds fill the air  
with their joy all day long  
Where the trees sway in time, and even  
the wind sings in tune.

_Come by the hills to the land_  
where legend remains  
Where stories of old stir the heart  
and may yet come again  
Where the past has been lost and the future  
is still to be won  
And cares of tomorrow must wait  
till this day is done.

“Grace?” he said quietly.

“Yeah?” she mumbled, and he could hear she was nearly asleep.

“I’ll call you tomorrow to see how you’re doing, all right?”

“Okay. Billy?”

“Yes, wee girl?”

“When I come visit you,” she murmured, barely audibly, “will you take me there?”

“Take you where, luv?”

“That song. I want to go there.”

“All right,” he promised, touched. “I’ll take you. Now sleep well, dear heart, and feel better.”

“Mmph. Thanks, Billy.”

Billy hung up the phone, laying it slowly down on the leather sofa cushion beside him. He sipped his tea, thought hard, and then smiled.
The next day Grace miserably, stiffly rose from her desk chair and closed her laptop as the pounding on her door continued. She wrapped the blanket tightly around herself and shuffled over, grousing under her breath. “Who is it?” she demanded, and then coughed.

“Grace MacPherson?” a young male voice questioned.

“Yes, who is it?”

“Grocery delivery, ma’am.”

“I didn’t order any,” she muttered, and turned from the door.

“The name I have is…uh…William Boyd?”

Grace froze, then slowly turned back to the door. She flipped the deadbolt, slowly opened the door and peered out, then narrowed it again to remove the chain. She opened the door fully and stared at the bags surrounding the delivery boy’s feet.

He took one look at her and kindly asked, “Would you like me to bring these in for you, ma’am?”

“Umm—please,” she croaked, standing aside dumbly. “Kitchen would be great.” She watched, blanket clutched around her neck, as he hoisted all the bags and edged through, carrying them over to the small kitchenette and setting them on the floor. She belatedly started looking for her wallet, mind both preoccupied with thoughts of Billy and dull from the fever that had been with her for several days now.

The delivery boy, undoubtedly a university student making some extra cash, cheerfully said, “There you are then, you should be all set. If you have any concerns, please call the number on the flyer in with your groceries.” He went to leave.

Grace quickly said, “Wait, please—I know it’s here somewhere.”

He smiled at her, shook his head. “It’s fine—it’s all taken care of. Thank you anyway.” He left, pulling the door shut behind him.

Stunned, blank, Grace shuffled to the kitchen, nearly tripping over the ends of her blanket. She knelt down on the floor, not trusting herself to lean over, and looked in the nearest bag. Bread, white and wholegrain, and plain bagels. The next bag held three different kinds of tea, water crackers, saltines—thank God—and oatmeal. Another with bananas, grapes, peaches that smelled divine even with her fragile stomach, and potatoes, tomatoes and a cucumber. The next held milk, low-acid orange juice, a berry-flavoured juice and—bless him a thousand times over—ginger ale. And the final bag nearly made her cry, because it contained several different ‘flu remedies, including one that not only might help her keep some food down, but would help her sleep, too. There was a hot lemon drink that would ease the fever, some cough syrup, and two large boxes of tissues.

Grace slowly got to her feet, put the perishables in the fridge and the rest on the counter, poured a glass of ginger ale, and left it sitting on the counter to go flat. She took the saltines and went back to the sofa and her nearly-cold cup of tea. She just needed to rest for a minute, she told herself, then she’d call Billy. She curled up in the corner, turned the volume on the TV back up, and began to drift.

At least one TV show later—because what was on was not what she had been watching when she
sat down—she was startled into semi-alertness by another knock on her door. She staggered to her feet, blanket still wrapped around herself, and went to the door. “Who is it?”

“Delivery for Grace MacPherson.”

Not nearly as disbelieving as last time, she asked, “Who is it from, please?”

“Oh—uh—sorry, one second—the name is…William Boyd.”

Grace opened the door to be confronted by an enormous bundle of white tulips and narcissi, and the only thing she could think was thank heaven they came with a vase, because she didn’t think she had one anymore, hadn’t her crystal vase been broken when she moved?

The man holding them with one hand held out a clipboard with the other. “Can you please sign here for me?”

Numbly, Grace did so, then took the vase from him. “Thank you—thank you very much,” she said, unable to take her eyes from the flowers that brought spring and sunlight into her dark cold apartment.

He smiled. “You’re very welcome, miss.” He pocketed his pen, and turned to head down the stairs.

Distractedly, Grace closed and locked the door again, then set the vase on the small coffee table in front of the sofa. She wondered if Billy had picked these flowers specifically, had a suspicion he had because they didn’t smell, and she knew she couldn’t have tolerated strong-scented flowers, and how had he even thought of that? She picked up her phone and hit the speed-dial button for a small stone house in Scotland.

“Hello?”

“Billy, thank you,” she began, and then to her chagrin began to cry.

“Ah, my poor wee girl,” he smiled sympathetically. “Hang up the phone, catch your breath, and I’ll ring you back.”

“But—“

“Shut it,” he cut her off gently. “I’ll ring you back in two minutes.”


“Shh. Talk to you in a few.”

Grace hung up. She quickly grabbed a tissue and dried her eyes, blew her nose, then retrieved her glass of ginger ale off the counter and took a tentative sip. It was still a little too bubbly, but it would flatten soon. She curled up in the corner of the sofa, pulled two blankets up over her shoulders, and scrunched down to wait for Billy’s call.

True to his word, barely a minute later the phone rang, and she picked it up quickly. “Billy?”

“Hi, Grace.”

“Billy, thank you so much. I can’t believe you did that. You really shouldn’t have done that.”

He snorted, but lightly. “And why not? Hell, Grace, if there were any way I could, I’d come over and take care of you in person. I’m worried about you, in that cold miserable flat of yours. I hope
there was at least *some* food in there that appealed?"

“It’s wonderful, Billy. Well, maybe not today,” she admitted. “But with all those drugs for ‘flu, hopefully tomorrow. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it. How did you do it?”

“Looked on the internet for grocery delivery for Toronto, and instead of ordering online, I called them up and asked for some help, since I don’t know what products you have in Canada for when you’re ill,” he said with a grin. “They were fantastic, actually.”

“I can’t believe you did that,” she said again, not aware she was repeating herself. “Thank you so much. Even the tissues, I was running out, and the juice and the tea and—“

“Grace,” he interrupted her gently, amused. “You can stop. I’m glad they arrived, I’m glad I wasn’t completely out of line with what I ordered. Now I just want you to make sure you eat some of it and get better, you hear me?”

“I’ll try. And thank you for the flowers, too, Billy. You really shouldn’t have done that.”

“Piffle. A little something to brighten up that flat and cheer you up will help you feel better.”

Grace coughed, her hand over the phone. “Sorry,” she apologized raspily. “You chose them, didn’t you? The flowers. You chose which flowers.”

Billy sounded a little confused. “Well—yeah, why? Do you not like tulips?”

“No, no, no,” she said hastily, “I love them. They don’t smell. Tulips and these—I forget what they’re called. But they don’t smell, and you did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I thought you might not want—“

“Billy, that was the nicest—I mean, to think of—aw, fuck,” she trailed off, tears starting up again.

“Grace, luv, you’re off your nut. You’re running a fever, aren’t you?”

“I think so, yeah,” she sniffled.

“Go take something. Take something that’ll help with the fever, and something that’ll help you sleep, and I’ll talk to you for a bit longer.”

“I’ll let you go—“

“Don’t you dare,” he warned with a smile. “Go take some drugs and then come right back.”

“Are you sure—“

“Go.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back, then.” Grace set the phone aside and fought her way free of the blankets to find her bottle of acetaminophen, and also to take one of the anti-nauseants, knowing it would knock her out for a while. She took a glass of water, her glass of ginger ale, and a packet of the saltines over to her bedside table, retrieved the phone, and crawled weakly into bed. “Billy?”

“I’m here. Did you take something to help you feel better, wee girl?”

“Yeah.” She sniffled.
“And you’re curled up snug as a bug in your bed?”

“Yeah. Wish you were here, Billy. ‘Ccept I wouldn’t want you to catch this. But maybe you could wear one of those little masks. And bring another blanket. How was Dom’s house? How did the con thingy go?”

Billy chuckled. “I hope you don’t expect me to follow that. Dom’s house was lovely—his mum spoiled us both terribly. And I ended up staying until the weekend and going to the con from there, it didn’t quite make sense to come all the way back here in between.”

“What’s a con like? Do you like doing them? Never been to one,” she said, burrowing deeply into her covers.

“I gathered that when you asked me what a con was,” he teased. “I don’t know—I sort of like doing them, but I find them very…exhausting. It’s basically a warehouse full of vendors and celebrities doing autographs and the odd interview and it’s mad and fun and so loud my ears ring for two days, and it’s completely and utterly overwhelming. There are just so many people, and they’re so kind and it’s wonderful they come out to see us, but…it just doesn’t stop, you know? For two days straight it’s smile and sign and make pleased noises that they loved the movies, loved me, loved me and Dom, try not to be embarrassed at the young girls who are star-struck, and I hate referring to myself like that, but…”

“But it’s true,” Grace murmured. “Saw it at the airport.”

“You did a little, yeah. Multiply that by a thousand, except I have a table in between me and them, and there’s security just in case. And that’s what a con’s like.”

“Doesn’t sound like fun to me.”

Billy smiled. “But the fans of the movies really are so nice, and knowing that some of them came just to see me, it—well, that part is pretty special, actually.”

“I’ll have to go to one someday and see you in action,” she mumbled.

“I’m afraid you’d be quite bored, wee girl.”

“Doesn’t sound like there’s time to be bored. Where are you? Are you home?”

“Yes, you rang me here, remember?” he said gently.

“Oh. Right. Will you go sit on the window seat? Sometime take a picture of what you see and send it to me.”

“I can try. Why?”

“So that I can see what you see. When you look at it. I can look too.”

“Ah, dear heart. You really are ill, aren’t you?”

“No. Well, yes. But I want to see. Want to share it with you. Miss you, Billy. Hate knowing I’m not going to see you again for a long time. Miss you,” she muttered, already half asleep.

“Shh, Grace. I know. I miss you too. You know that, don’t you?” he asked softly. “You know if it weren’t for this bloody trip to Japan, I’d be on a plane straight to you, don’t you?”

“Are you coming, Billy? Will you come? It’s so quiet here, Billy,” she whispered, and Billy
suspected she didn’t even know what she was saying. “It’s so noisy outside but it’s so quiet in here. Come sing to me, Billy? I want to fall asleep in your lap.”

“Bloody hell, Grace,” Billy groaned, and for a brief moment he was tempted, was actually considering flying to Toronto and leaving for Japan from there, but he knew it would throw the carefully arranged schedule into complete disarray, and he couldn’t do that to organizers and friends alike. “I wish I could, dear heart. I really wish I could.”

“I don’t feel well, Billy.”

“I know you don’t, sweetheart. You hang up the phone now and go to sleep, all right? I’ll call you tomorrow and see how you’re doing.”

“Call me.”

“I will. You take care of yourself, wee girl.”

“Miss you.”

Billy smiled. “I miss you too. Now hang up.”

“Night, Billy,” she mumbled, barely audibly, and then Billy heard a click that told him she’d hung up.

The next afternoon, Billy dialled Grace’s number, hoping he wasn’t going to wake her up, but she answered almost immediately.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Grace. How are you feeling today?”

“Hi, Billy. A little better, thanks.”

“That’s good,” he smiled. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“It’s thanks to you. All those drugs you sent me, I’m going to have to start calling you my dealer.”

Billy laughed. “I’ve been called worse. They helped, did they?”

Grace uncurled a bit on her sofa. “I actually slept the whole night through last night, and I ate some toast this morning. I’m debating trying to nibble on a peach in a bit. You have no idea how good those smell.”

“Good. You certainly sound a little better, anyway. Just make sure you drink lots, and eat what you can.”

“Yes, Dr. Billy,” she teased, if a bit weakly.

“That’s my wee girl. Listen, I’m afraid I can’t talk—I’m expecting the car to the airport any second.”
“Oh, are you leaving for Japan already?” she asked, dismayed.

“Aye. But I’ll email you, and I’ll probably give you a quick call in a few days and see how you’re doing, all right?”

“All right. But you don’t have to call, Billy, email is good.”

He laughed at her. “The Scottish frugality runs strong in the MacPherson clan, doesn’t it? I’ll call if I bloody well want to, wee girl, and just try to stop me.”

“I don’t have to answer, you know,” she grinned.

“You’d better. All right, I have to go. You take care of yourself, you hear me, Grace? Or you’ll get an earful from me and Dom when I get back.”

“You’d sic Dom on me? Anything but that. I promise I’ll get better, Billy—and you take care of yourself on this trip too, you get some sleep.”

“I will,” he said softly, loathe to hang up. “Thanks, dear heart. I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Okay. Have a great time, Billy. Eat lots of sushi.”

“I will. Bye, Grace.”

“Bye, Billy.”

Billy hung up the phone and sighed deeply. He stood staring at the kitchen counter, lost in thought, until a knock at the door galvanized him into action. He shut the lights off, grabbed his bags, and left, locking the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *It's Not Easy Being Green* by Joe Rapposo, and *Come By The Hills*, Trad.
Grace jumped when the phone by her elbow rang. She hit her timeclock, pushed her laptop away with a sigh and a cough, and picked it up. “Hello?”

“Hi, wee girl.”

Grace sat up straight in astonishment. “Billy? I thought you were on your way to Japan? What happened?”

She could hear the grin in Billy’s voice. “Nothing. I am on my way to Japan.”

“Where are you?” She was confused. “Were you delayed somewhere?”

“No, I had a bit of time on my hands on the stopover in Amsterdam, so watch your mailbox for a postcard of the inevitable effing windmills, but right now, as near as I can figure, we’re over the middle of the ocean,” he laughed.

“You’re calling me from the airplane?” she squeaked, then coughed again.

“Yes, and before you say a word, I don’t know who’s paying for this, the studio or me, but either way I’m keeping it short, so no need for you to worry. I just wanted to see how you’re feeling—oh, bugger,” he swore with dread. “What time is it for you? I’ve crossed a lot of time zones, and I think it might even be tomorrow. I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“No, I was just doing a bit of work, you’re fine. I can’t believe you’re calling me from the plane!”

“Aren’t satellites the berrys?” he grinned again.

“The what?”

“The berrys, it just means great. Sorry—I’m not in Glasgow anymore, I’d better go back to English, hadn’t I?”

“Don’t you dare,” she laughed. “I love it.”

“So how are you feeling today?”

“Yesterday.”

“What?”

Grace smiled. “If it’s tomorrow for you, then you want to know how I was feeling yesterday.”

Billy laughed. “I take it that means you’re better. Or at least, you were yesterday.”

“I am feeling better. Still not great, but at least I can keep some food down, and I think the fever’s mostly gone.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I was getting worried about you, dear heart,” he said softly.

“Oh, Billy. Listen, I—“
He interrupted her. “Nope. Don’t want to hear it.”

“What? You don’t even know what I was going to say!” she protested.

“You were either going to thank me yet again for the bloody groceries, which is entirely unnecessary, or you were going to give me a bollocking for sending the flowers, which I refuse to listen to.”

Grace was silent.

“I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Oh, shut up,” she muttered. “That’s not fair.”

Billy laughed delightedly. “I knew it.”

“Am I that predictable?”

“No, wee girl,” he said fondly. “Believe me, you are far from predictable. But I know how terrible you are at accepting help, you stubborn little numptie. I’m just glad you’re feeling better. Now, I should go, I have no idea what the long distance rate is when you’re moving.”

“Probably atrocious. Thanks for calling, Billy.”

“You’re welcome, dear heart. I probably won’t ring you from Japan unless something comes up, but I will definitely email you. If you need to talk to me, just email me and I’ll call, all right?”

“All right. Take care, Billy. Have a great time,” she smiled.

“I will. Bye, Grace.”

“Bye, Billy.”

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Monday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Sushi

Have you ever eaten sushi, wee girl? Because if not, I hope you will let me be the one to introduce you to it. I like Japan, but the trip always leaves me staggered. The main reason I not only put up with it, but look forward to it is the heaven-sent fresh sushi.

All right, enough about food, especially raw fish, just in case you’re still not feeling well.

And how are you feeling? Almost well by now, I hope? Try and take it easy, it will take you a while to get your strength back, after so long with a fever and not much food. And make sure you get lots of sleep. And yes, I am officially done nagging at you. For now.

So far this trip is going pretty well. We opened an LoTR exhibit and there was quite a crowd. Liv, with her height and her fair skin, is absolutely idolized over here, people just adore her. As they
should, she is a lovely person. Viggo is also very popular, and everyone (but especially the 
executives who are running this little circus) is in awe of Pete. It never fails to make me laugh, 
because appearances are very important here. I am sure you can imagine these Japanese 
businessmen in their sharply pressed business suits and expensive watches and PDA’s and very, 
very serious expressions. And then there’s Pete. With his shorts (no matter what the weather, 
which at the moment is actually quite miserable), his t-shirt, his wild hair and no shoes when he 
can get away with it. And he’s so open, and relaxed, and fun, and I bet you would like him, wee 
girl, in fact I know you would, and everyone here does too, it's just that the suits don't quite know 
what to make of him or how to respond to him, and you can practically see the sweat forming on 
their foreheads, poor buggers. When cultures collide, I reckon.

Anyway, today we travel down to Osaka, we're doing a tourism/publicity thing, and then it's back 
to Tokyo again tomorrow. I am trying to get an evening off, Viggo and I want to go see some 
Japanese theatre while we’re here, either Kabuki or Nō, whichever we can find. I didn’t have the 
chance the last time we were here, so I am determined to this time.

It already feels like ages since I last talked to you. Tell me about your day. Every wee tiny detail, if 
you please. And I will email you again in a day or two.

Missing you,
Billy

Monday
To: Elwood
From: Billy
Subject: Re: Plans

Hey Elwood,

Thanks for the update. I’ll have Grace out of her apartment by 3 o’clock next Friday, and I’ll keep 
her out until the Sunday night. But tell Sunita 4 o’clock on Friday, just in case.

Just wanted to check if you got the key to Grace’s apartment? I sent it by courier right before I left, 
so it should be there by now. I still don’t know why you didn’t just give me Sunita’s address in 
Toronto, she is the one who needs to get in there after all. Oh well. You always do like to make 
things complicated.

Don’t know if I have said this recently, but thanks for all your help with this, Elijah. I love Sunita’s 
design, and I think Grace will too, and I am glad you were able to put me in touch with her. I wish 
you could be there to see Grace’s face when she sees her new flat. Ask Sunita to take a couple 
pictures of the flat for you so you can at least see it, I forgot my digital camera at home.

Let me know about the key, yeah?
Billy
Tuesday
To: Billy
From: Elwood
Subject: Re: Plans

Hi Billy,

Yeah, I got the key today, it arrived safe and sound with the CD’s. Thanks for those, man, they’re awesome. It’s great having a friend in the UK so I can get the get the import stuff without having to search Ebay for it.

As for the key, thanks very much for wrecking my surprise, but I’m sending a picture to Sunita for Grace’s apartment, so it might as well all go packaged together. I just feel like it will be safer than this lone key in an envelope.

I’m glad all this has worked out, though. I know how much you wanted to do this for Grace. It was meant to be, I guess. Still can’t believe Mom’s friend knew a designer in Toronto. So fucking weird.

How’s Japan? How’s the sushi? How’s Pete? How’s the sake?

Later,
Elijah

Wednesday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Porridge or oatmeal?

Because what’s the difference, really? I mean, is there a difference? Or is each interchangeable for the other?

No, I’m not running a fever again, Billy, so don’t even ask. That’s what I woke up wondering this morning. Odd, yes, but there you have it. I had breakfast for the first time in a while, so maybe that was it, I was hungry before I woke up or something. I’m probably going to eat like a pig for the next week to gain back some of the weight that I lost—but not all of it, because seriously, what girl doesn’t want to lose a few pounds? Not quite the way I would have chosen to do it, but every cloud and all that, right?

I’m rambling, aren’t I? Sorry. Maybe I’m a little looped out on the drugs or something. Well, not that I’ve taken any yet today—aha! Maybe that’s the problem, then. Or not.

Actually, I think I do know what it is. I’m going a little stir-crazy from being cooped up in this godforsaken rat-arsed shoebox. Cabin fever, isn’t that what they call it? Maybe tomorrow I’ll drag my skinny little arse out for a short walk. As long as it’s not, like, minus 15 degrees or something.

I’m glad you’re having a good time in Japan. Kabuki and Nō theatre sounds so exotic! I’ve heard
of Kabuki, but I don’t really know what it is, and I’ve never even heard of Nō. So make with the lesson, or I’ll have to spend hours and hours online looking it up. What kind of sushi do you like? (And it’s okay to discuss it, my stomach is mostly level these days.) I’ve never eaten sushi, not because I’m opposed to the idea, but rather because I live in a land-locked province, an awful long way from the ocean, and that makes me really suspicious about eating so-called ‘fresh’ raw fish. So if I’m ever anywhere near the ocean, you may introduce me to sushi. (Magnanimous of me, eh?) (And how’s that for a big word?) I’m afraid I’ve never really experimented when it comes to food, you’ll have to suggest new things for me to try. What’s Tokyo like? Stick your head out your window and describe what you see to me, because at the moment I can’t even picture what it might look like, and I want to know.

I used to drive my parents nuts with that. Well, just my mother really, because my father, unlike everyone else in the family, seems to be made of patience, so he’d always answer me, no matter how stupid the question. But I used to always ask ‘why’, and ‘how come’, and say ‘but I want to know’. Incessantly. And I’m not sure why I just told you that, sorry. I’ll quit the random Grace trivia.

You wanted detail on my day, but I really don’t have anything to tell, I’m afraid. Woke up at eight-thirty, had toast and tea for breakfast, worked. Napped on the sofa for a bit with some horrendous talk show in the background. Had soup and crackers for lunch. Stared stupidly at the TV for a while (Law & Order, I think), and then worked. And now I’m taking a break, having more tea and some grapes and emailing you. Just not much to tell you about, I’m afraid. Maybe next week, when I’m back to normal (whatever that is, and no smart comments, mister).

You know, in your email you told me how everyone over there reacted to Liv, to Viggo, and to Peter, how everyone loves them. But you didn’t tell me what kind of reception you got. Which I’m assuming means you received a very warm welcome indeed, but you can say these things, you silly twit. I know you, Billy, I know you’re not bragging or attention-seeking or prideful. It’s just fact. The fans love you (all of you, but also you), and I’m sure there were several thousand at least and that many of them were probably shrieking girls. I know you hate the celebrity label, but (and you’ll notice I’m saying this while you’re on the other side of the planet just in case) the fact is, you are. If you don’t feel like talking about it, that is obviously one thing, but I just don’t want you to feel like you can’t talk to me about it. You can tell me anything, remember?

Am I banned now?

Peaches,
Grace

Thursday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: Porridge or oatmeal?

Peaches?

But anyway, you should be banned. I should ban you. I should be angry with you. Calling me a celebrity, the nerve. I should yell at you. I should…
Wait. Peaches.

Georgia? Always on my mind?

Damn it, I wanted to be furious with you, and now I can’t. That is highly unfair of you to pull that one out on me, wee girl. However, I shall have my revenge. Dom may call you Penelope, but I am going to call you Peaches. Ha. Take that.

More in just a bit,

As always,

Billy

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Thursday
To: Elwood
From: Billy
Subject: What??

What the fuck was that phone message? Bloody hell, Elwood, what do you mean Sunita can’t get it all done? I thought this was all set up? I thought everything was worked out? What the fuck are we going to do now?

Japan is cold and damp at the moment.
The sushi is much the same, and yet somehow more enjoyable.
Pete is Pete, thank God.
The sake makes everything worthwhile.

Let me know what the hell is going on as soon as you can, before I have a stroke.

Billy

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Thursday
To: Billy
From: Elwood
Subject: Re: What??

Okay, relax, man. I just talked to Sunita and everything will be fine, if you can get Grace out just a bit earlier on Friday, and if you stay away until Monday afternoon. I don’t know what your schedule was after that weekend, can you steal the Monday as well? Because if so, then everything is fine. If not, we may have to scale down the plan just a bit. Let me know, and I’ll sort everything out.

Don’t stroke out on me, old man.
Have a sake and give Vig a headbutt for me.

Later,

Elijah

Thursday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: Porridge or oatmeal?

Hey, Peaches.

I am back, as threatened. And definitely porridge. In Scotland, oatmeal refers to the actual oats, the meal itself, porridge to the cooked end result. Makes sense, does it not? We are so practical, we Scots.

You know, porridge would probably be perfect for you to eat right now, if you’re up to it. It is one of the healthiest foods there is. Depending on how much cream or sugar you put in it, of course! But just how much weight did you lose, dear heart? You didn’t have much to spare, you know. Anyway, eat up, and pack the weight back on.

Wait. Stop right there. Let me rephrase that before it gets added to the list of “Stupidest Things Billy’s Ever Said”. What I mean is, eat up and get back to a healthy weight, because less than what you were can’t be healthy. There’s a reason I call you wee girl.

I hope you manage to get out of your flat soon. You have been stuck in there for nearly two weeks, haven’t you? Poor thing, you need some sunshine. I don’t know how much you get in Toronto in January, but if it appears, try and get yourself outside, even if it is just to sit on a bench somewhere. Or get Jamie to take you for a drive if it is too cold, for a bit of different scenery.

I will definitely introduce you to sushi at the very first opportunity. We will start with the common, milder kinds, and then get adventurous from there. What about Thai food, or Indian, have you ever had those? Do you like spicy foods? (And magnanimous is a very good word indeed.)

A lesson on Kabuki and Nō, hmm? Well, I can give you the basics for sure, but I’m not familiar with the subtleties of either, we only touched on it briefly in school. Nō is very slow and stylized, and is performed by men wearing masks to represent the various characters, including women. Sets are minimal, and there is a chorus that usually (I think) sits on the stage, and they narrate many of the events in a kind of chant. The plays usually tell stories from classical Japanese literature, and I think it arose as court entertainment. Probably fifteenth century? Kabuki, on the other hand, is much more colourful and energetic, and rather than masks, the actors wear bold makeup. This was from about the seventeenth century, and Kabuki plays used to take an entire day to perform. Luckily they don’t anymore, Pete would never give Viggo and I an entire day to go watch a play! They are still quite lengthy, though. And they often have dance and music in them, and tend to be about romance and adventure, rather than classical literature. You know, like feuds, revenge, thwarted lovers, all that good stuff. So. Was that lesson good enough, Miss I-Want-To-Know? Or do I need to search the bookshops for something on it? I can find out more, if you like.
And don’t you dare stop with the random Grace trivia. I love it. Why? Because I want to know.

Tokyo is hard to describe, except in the very vaguest of terms like crowded, busy, steady, neon, modern flash, technology, tradition, noise. However, Viggo has been taking pictures like a madman for some reason (he’s been here before), so he has promised me copies to show you. And in looking at them, I will be able to tell you more.

It’s not that I feel like I can’t tell you things. You know, the whole celebrity (dammit) thing. I know I can tell you anything, dear heart—total truth, right? I feel like we haven’t lived up to that lately—not on purpose, not actively trying to conceal, but I think there are things we are not saying, you know? And I suppose in a way this is one of them. I am comfortable with the fans, it is part of my job and I truly do enjoy it and appreciate their interest in us. In me, if you are going to make me say it. But when I start trying to talk about it, to explain it, even just to describe it…it just sounds so foreign, not part of my life. Billy Boyd doesn’t have girls screaming at him, wanting pictures with him, wanting his autograph, giving him gifts, it must be someone else, this can’t possibly be me. I am just a glaikit lad from Glasgow. And yet, when I am in the midst of it, it is so easy, just smiles and thank you’s and talking with people. I am not explaining it very well, am I? I hope you can sort of tell what I mean, at least. Anyway. I will try from now on not to let it keep me from telling you things. So yes, I am rather popular over here as well, although they are always a little disappointed when Merry doesn’t arrive with Pippin, or Pippin with Merry. We are scheduled on so many talk shows and for so many radio interviews, and we get in even less here than we do in the West because of the time that has to be allowed for interpreters, in radio at least. They can do subtitles on all the talk shows but the live ones, obviously. So I am being asked over and over the same questions, as I always am, but here they don’t seem to be as shy about asking personal questions, which always surprises me because it seems like it should be the opposite, doesn’t it? But it is less about the DVD and more about me, anyway. Which is odd.

I should go now, it’s late and it is going to be a long day of PR shite tomorrow. But that’s all right, we’ve got Saturday morning off to rest and maybe do a bit of shopping. (Liv may have talked me into that one.) So you will hear from me again on Saturday, wee girl. In the meantime, take care of yourself and tell me all the latest news.

Thinking of you,
Billy

Friday
To: Elwood
From: Billy
Subject: Re: What??

Just wanted to let you know I’ve arranged it. I have switched my flight to go out late Monday night, so I can keep her out until the afternoon. Say, about 4? Hope that takes care of everything. I can’t do much about the Friday, though. I don’t get in to L.A. until 11 p.m. on the Thursday, my flight to Toronto leaves at 3 a.m. Friday, and I am pushing it with only a four-hour window as it is. A delay of any kind and I am fucked. I was hoping to have time for a quick nap somewhere, but I really don’t want to rent a hotel room for an hour. But Grace will have work to do, she might have to bring it with as it is, so I don’t want to pull her away too early.
I hope this is all good. Let me know if there is anything else.

Had a sake for you. Had four, in fact, and as a result Viggo got his headbutt. I still have a headache. “Stroke out on me, old man”? Fucker.

Thanks, young grasshopper. You’re a mate. Tell Dom thanks for me, too, and I’ll email him after this weekend.

Billy

Friday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Porridge

Don’t you dare call me Peaches, Boyd. Don’t even think about it. Or they’ll find your body in the lake.

Your porridge/oatmeal argument is quite logical. I shall henceforth call my breakfast porridge. See? You’ve converted another to the Scots practicality. Although I suppose I am…what’s the word? Predisposed to it, aren’t I? I think that’s the word, hang on and let me check…yes! Go me. Anyway, I did indeed have porridge this morning, before I went for my walk. Not that I got far on my walk—like you said, it’s going to take a while to get my energy back, apparently, but at least I got out for a bit, and got some (relatively) fresh air. It felt really good. Of course, I was so tired when I got back, I had to have a nap! But that’s okay, I’ll work after dinner for a bit to make up for it. As for how much weight I lost when I was sick…I don’t want a lecture, all right? People lose weight when they’re sick, and there’s nothing I could have done about it. If you feel the need to lecture, stick it in an email and send it to yourself, because I will just yell at you loudly. At any rate, I lost just over ten pounds. Which yes, is a fair bit for me, and yes, I am going to gain some of it back. I’ve probably gained a pound or two already. Happy? I’m packing the weight back on. (You didn’t think I was going to let you get away with that, did you?)

Starting easy with the sushi sounds like a good idea. I think I’m afraid of new food. I’ve never had Thai, and the only Indian I’ve had is samosas and butter chicken. So you have much educating to do, Professor Boyd. The good news is, I like relatively spicy food, just not red-hot, burn-your-tastebuds-off, suck-back-a-gallon-of-water spicy.

Speaking of Professor Boyd, thank you for the lesson in Japanese theatre. That satisfied my curiosity quite nicely, and I went online and looked for pictures of the masks and costumes. It looks amazing, I really hope you get to see one of them. Then you can tell me all about it!

You want the random Grace trivia, do you? You’re going to regret that. But as long as we’re playing our own little version of Trivial Pursuit, you’d better add in your own contributions. Grace trivia for Billy trivia. Deal?

I will definitely look forward to seeing Viggo’s photos—be sure to thank him for me. He’s the one you said was into photography, right?

I’m glad you remember you can tell me anything. I have to admit, though, I’m not sure I
understand what you mean by ‘there are things we’re not saying’. Like what? I didn’t think there was anything we weren’t saying. Anyway, yes, I think I do see what you’re getting at with the fan thing. And you know what? In some strange way I’m glad you find it odd to think of, to speak of, that you still think of yourself as just a glaikit lad from Glasgow. I think the day that changes is the day I’ll start to worry about you, Billy Boyd. Also, the fact that you find it easy when you’re actually with your fans also says a lot about you, and about what a kind, decent person you are. And your fans give you gifts? How cute is that?? What kinds of things do they give you? If you tell me they toss their knickers at you, I am totally coming to a con to watch the fun. ;-) And what kinds of personal questions are the interviewers asking? Are they too personal? That is, are they crossing a line, or is it just that they’re not asking about the movie? Feel free to cuff me upside the head if you want me to shut up, but it’s really interesting to have this…inside look into your world, from way out here in mine.

The latest news? The latest news is that—oh look. No news.

Have fun shopping with Liv!

Missing a glaikit lad,
Grace

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Sunday
To: Elwood
From: Elijah
Subject: Re: What??

That’s awesome you’ve got the Monday! I let Sunita know, and she says those times are fine, she won’t have any problem with it. They needed the extra time for patching up the floor, I guess. You said the linoleum was actually missing in spots, right? That’s what she thought would have to be fixed, anyway.

When will you get to Grace’s apartment? If there’s time, maybe you could take a short nap there while she finishes off her work? Otherwise you’ll fall asleep on her on the way up to her cottage. You know, out there in the wilds of Canada, or wherever the fuck it is.

Thanks for giving Viggo the headbutt. Do I need to run away the next time I see him?

And young grasshopper? Fuck off, asshole.

See you soon, Uncle Billy.
Elijah

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Sunday (late)
To: Grace
From: Billy  
Subject: Nonsense.

Sorry wee girl for not emailing you yesterday. Things got a bit crazy, Liv and I were supposed to be back at our hotel after the shopping by 1 p.m., but I wasn’t watching the time and she was having fun and then we got lost and we didn’t get back until almost 1:30, and we had to leave again almost right away. And we didn’t get our sorry arses back here until nearly 2 a.m., so I just fell into bed. I didn’t think you would mind that, once you heard my sad tale of exhaustion and woe.

Today was fun, we did a tour of a movie set here, took a look at how they do things in the Japanese film industry. Which in some ways is much like the ones I’ve worked in, and in others very different indeed. They rely heavily on technology, obviously, but at the same time there is something quite formal and traditional in some of their practices. And don’t ask me what, because I couldn’t tell you. Just a feeling I got, really. A sense of pace, of patience, which I am sure you can imagine, Hollywood lacks. And I must still be very tired, because this is not making much sense at all.

So. You don’t like Peaches, then? I am devastated. You let Dom call you Penelope and Elijah call you dollface, for heaven’s sake, and you won’t let me call you by one little pet name? That’s not fair, you know. I demand my rights.

I am pleased you have seen the light regarding porridge. I shall have to work on you for other proper words. Like…pudding. Because dessert is a silly word. Or petrol. Because gas is a vapor that comes from the ground, and I think you use it a fair bit over there, don’t you? Tsk tsk. Think renewable, Canada.

Speaking of pudding, go eat some. Over ten pounds, wee girl? How much over? And no, I am not lecturing you, I know there was nothing you could have done about it. But good grief, dear heart, a stiff breeze would blow you away! I am glad I didn’t know about this while you were sick, or I would have worried even more, and even now I am concerned for you. Take care of yourself, do you hear me?

No need to be feart of new foods. When you come visit me in Scotland, I shall introduce you to all my favourites (barring the really, really spicy ones) and you shall marvel at all the world has to offer. Or all that my take-away menus have to offer, anyway.

Grace trivia for Billy trivia, hmm? I think that might be a harder deal than you know. But I will try.

Yes, Viggo is the photographer of the group. He is really good, too. I keep meaning to send you a copy of his book, and I keep forgetting because apparently I am easily distracted. But hopefully I can get his Tokyo pics before you come visit me.

There are things we’re not saying, and you know it. You know what I mean, you are just being deliberately…something. I don’t know what you are being. Stubborn, most likely. But this is a conversation I cannot do in an email, dear heart, so it will have to wait until I can see you. And until you can see me, so you can see my eyes.

The day I stop being a daft schemie from Glasgow is the day I’ll worry about me too. If you ever see it happening, Grace, skelp me one. (And there is another Glaswegian word for you, to boot. I am sure you get the gist of it, but it means slap.)

How about in return for Grace trivia I just teach you more Glaswegian?
The fans give us all kinds of stuff, actually, and some of it is downright amazing. A lot of it handmade, too, which is so kind. But we get books, drawings, photos, a lot of stuffed animals, and even things geared to each of us. Dom was given seedling trees, once, which we thought was fantastic, and he planted them that weekend in a park. And I’ve even gotten whisky before! They are so very, very generous to us much of the time. And yes, I have to admit we have received knickers before—but not tossed from the audience, thank you very much, they have more manners than that, they give them to us in little gift bags tied with a bow.

Yes, I am kidding.

Mostly.

Oh dear. This is getting long and it is getting late, and I am not even done answering your email yet. How do you do that? How do you write such wee little emails and yet somehow wrangle these long-winded epics from me?

Quickly on the interviews, with more to come some other time. No, the questions very, very seldom cross a line, and if they do we can generally smooth right past them. Dom and I together are quite good at that, as we just start taking the piss out of each other and it distracts the interviewer enough that we can move on. But personal as in, favourite foods, ever had a pet, do you have a girlfriend, if you were a tree what kind of tree would you be, etc. etc.

What do you mean there’s no news? That’s bollocks. Tell me all the news.

I am afraid the next couple days are packed, and I won’t be back with you until Tuesday or Wednesday. So have a wonderful first part to the week, dear heart, and I will talk to you then.

Wish you were here.

Yours,
Billy

Tuesday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Nonsense.

You really make me repeat myself a lot, you know that? Don’t worry about it if you’re too busy to sit down and start composing emails! I know your schedule is unbelievably hectic, and I’m just glad you have the chance to email me as often as you do.

That being said...you demand your rights? I beg your pardon? I think you might want to rephrase that, mister. Besides, you already DO call me by a pet name—two, in fact, which is one more than either Dom or Elijah. Have you forgotten about ‘wee girl’ and ‘dear heart’? Sheesh. The nerve of some people.

I think I could get used to petrol after a while. I’m just not sure about pudding...that’s always just meant pudding to me. I think in times of great stress, ‘dessert’ would just pop out of my mouth despite my best intentions. And don’t tell me to go renewable, tell the fucking government! A couple years ago they put in a wind turbine down at the lakeshore, and personally I think it’s rather
beautiful and wish they’d put more in. If they put one on the Scarborough Bluffs, it would look amazing and would also be a landmark you could see for a long way. But does the Minister of Resources listen to me? Nooooo. Jackass.

How much over ten pounds did I lose? This ought to be fun…

Just under four. Happy? But I am feeling better and I am eating just fine now, and I’ve already put a couple pounds back on so you don’t need to be at all concerned. Quit your worrying! You have much more important things to be thinking about, like what kind of sushi to have for dinner tonight and when are you flying home (that’s a question, if you missed it) and how to explain to me why Billy trivia is hard, if you can. Lessons in Glaswegian are all well and good, but not in place of Billy trivia.

You are easily distracted? Since when? You seem awfully un-distractible to me, and usually at the most inconvenient of times.

I am not being stubborn, I don’t know what you’re talking about! I’m not being anything. And if you don’t want to discuss it, that’s fine with me. Since I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about anyway.

And it is not bollocks, there is no news. What news do you think I could possibly have, Billy?

Sometimes I wish you were here so I could just yell at you and get it over with. So consider yourself yelled at, okay? Excellent. Glad that’s done.

Hope you’re still having a wonderful time, and that you’re not letting yourself get too tired no matter how packed your schedule is. But if you do, if you get desperate, or when you return to the near side of the world (You see what I did there? Near side of the world. Instead of far side. You see what I did?) you could always call your sleep therapist.

Apologetically,
Grace

---

Tuesday
To: Grace
From: lost_goat
Subject: Thursday

Good morning, Penny love! A lightning-speed message to let you know the latest on the flights. Our flight number is AAL57K, and we’ll be arriving in Toronto at about 10:30 a.m., we’re taking the red-eye. So if you would be a duck and pick up the wheels from the rental place we discussed before (it’s all sorted, you just have to show up and flash some leg—no, wait. Flash some photo I.D. That was it. My mistake.) and pick us up at the airport, that would be marvelous. Tell me where to find you, and that’s where we’ll go. Not that you’ll see us coming, in our incognito travel togs and all. I’m looking forward to finally, finally meeting you, Penelope, even though in the important ways I already have.

Did you catch all that? You might not have.
After all, it was lightning-speed.

With sincere regards,
Pellinore

---

Tuesday
To: lost_goat
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Thursday

Felicitations, dear Pellinore. I must tell you, I am highly impressed with the organizational skills you and Elijah are demonstrating. When you come out of the arrivals area, turn left down the terminal. I’ll wait for you away from the crowds at the gate, I think that might be best, eh? Head for pillar number 23, I’ll be there somewhere—and I will totally see you guys coming. I’d be able to tell it was you two if you showed up in bloody snowmobile suits. In fact, I bet I will see you long before you see me.

Turn left, pillar 23.

I’m so glad I finally get to meet you, too, Dom.

Yours truly,
Penny

P.S. If your addiction is still raging, you might want to bring your own stash of Marshmallow Pies. They’re hard to get your hands on here, even on the black market.

---

Tuesday
To: Grace
From: lost_goat
Subject: Re: Thursday

There’s no way you’ll spot us first. You want to bet? You’re on. If we win and we see you first, we get to push you around the grocery store in a trolley. If you win, you’ll get breakfast in bed on Saturday. Deal?

And you’d damn well better model a snowmobile suit for us at some point this weekend. Sounds downright kinky.

Sincerely,
Pellinore

P.S. Do you think I can get my Pies past customs? Or should I hide them in a body cavity?
Tuesday
To: lost_goat
From: Grace
Subject: Re: Thursday

Body cavity? That’s disgusting.

Bet? You’re on.

Snowmobile suit kinky? You’re one twisted man. But if you beg prettily, I could let you wear one.

Kind regards,
Penelope

Wednesday
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Almost homeward bound

Sorry, wee girl, another quick email. I fly into L.A. at 11 p.m. Thursday night, so I am afraid you won’t hear from me until Friday morning.

I’m sorry I annoyed you. Don’t apologize. We will talk about this, yeah? I will explain what I’m talking about and try to explain Billy trivia and you will explain why you are touchy over news.

Fourteen fucking pounds? That’s more than just a bit over ten, Grace, but nice try. Go eat something. And then when you’re done, eat something else. And I’ll damn well worry if I want to.

Near side/far side? You are absolutely the berrys, dear heart.

I’ll talk to you Friday.
From the far side of the world,
Billy
Chapter 26

Grace scanned the faces coming toward her, her anxiety increasing, afraid something had gone wrong. What if they’d turned the wrong way when they came out and were halfway down the other end of the terminal? She’d never find them. But she knew she’d said left, turn left and follow the hall down to post 23, and that’s where she’d be waiting for them. She’d thought it best to keep any scenes of greeting away from the hundred or more people thronged right at the arrivals gate, and Grace was watching for them very, very carefully indeed because she did not want them pushing her in a cart through the grocery store when they went. She’d studied the pictures of Dom that he and Billy had sent, thought she had an idea of his height and build, and hoped that would be enough.

Grace glimpsed Elijah first, but as soon as Dom appeared she realized with a smile she would have known him anywhere, and her smile widened as she saw that they hadn’t spotted her yet. Breakfast in bed would be lovely.

Both men wore hats, Elijah a baseball cap and Dom a knitted toque, and with their sunglasses, shapeless winter jackets, and ordinary jeans, they were entirely unremarkable. Good-looking, of course, but unassuming and casual, and no startled second glances went their way. Grace crossed her arms, leaned her shoulder against the wall, and waited.

It was hard to tell as they were wearing sunglasses, but she thought she could tell when Elijah finally found her, and knew she was right when a smile split his face. He nudged Dom, and, pulling their luggage cart behind them, they came over to her.

Elijah greeted her with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Hey, Grace. Good to see you again.”

“You too, Elijah. How are you?”

“Can’t complain.” He grinned.

A throat cleared behind them, and with a snort, Elijah let her go.

Dom let go of the cart and with a cheeky grin, swept her into a hug that pulled her off her feet. He planted a smacking kiss on her cheek. “How’s Penelope, then?”

“Other than ‘unable to breathe’, you mean?” She looped her arms around his neck, as much to take some of the weight off her ribs as to welcome him. “Hiya, Dom.”

“Didn’t you get the memo?” he asked cheerfully. “You’re supposed to be breathless at first sight of my rugged good looks. You can even swoon if you like, Penny darlin’.”

She laughed as loud as she could with the pressure on her lungs. “Put me down, or I just might. And try explaining that to airport security.”

Dom let her down, and she stepped back to survey both men. “Not bad,” she said of their outfits. “At least you’ve got winter coats. Hope they’re warm ones.”

“Don’t worry, I remembered how cold it was last time we were here,” Elijah assured her.

Grace raised her eyebrow. “But that was November, ‘Lij. It’s January now.”
“We’ll be all right,” Dom smiled at her. “I was at Billy’s while he was worrying over you in the cold, remember? We come with boots and gloves.”

“Glad to hear it. Put on the gloves before we go out, okay?”

Elijah sighed, but the twitch of his lips told Grace he was vastly amused. “Yes, ma’am.”

Quick as lightning, Grace reached up and flicked the brim of Elijah’s baseball cap. “Don’t call me ma’am.”

Elijah giggled. “Yes, dollface.”

Grace laughed delightedly. “Much better. Well, if you’re all set, shall we get out of here? I’ll go get the car and pick you guys up, then you don’t have to drag your luggage through the parking garage. Just wait inside the doors here until you see me pull up.”

“Don’t worry about it, we can—“

“In other words, I don’t want to humiliate myself by demonstrating to you that I suddenly don’t remember what kind of car it was that I drove here,” she said, her cheeks nevertheless turning a bit pink. “Or that I’m going to have to search for the license plate number that’s on the rental paperwork.”

Dom laughed out loud. “Poor Penny. All right, we’ll wait here like good little lambs.”

“Thanks. I won’t be two ticks.” She hurried out the door.

Twenty minutes later, luggage stowed in the back of the SUV, they exited the airport complex and headed down the highway.

Grace breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to be out of there. That is one scary-ass place to drive, especially in this massive beast of a car.”

“You don’t drive a lot, either, do you?” Elijah asked from the passenger seat. Much to Grace’s amusement, he and Dom had worked out a long, complicated plan as to who got the front seat when and for how long. Neither of them liked being relegated to the ‘kiddie seats’, as they called it.

“Not much in the last year or so, no. I feel a bit out of practice,” she laughed. “And I had a little car before that, I haven’t driven anything this big since I learned to drive in my parents’ station wagon. It wasn’t nearly this tall, though—this is like being in a bus!”

“Hey, Pen—you’re going to take me to The Beer Store, right?” Dom asked, sitting behind her so she could see him in the rear-view mirror. “Elijah told me about The Beer Store. I have made it a goal in life to see a store that sells nothing but beer, and you wouldn’t want to let one of my life’s goals go unfulfilled, now, would you?”

“Yes, Dom, I will take you to The Beer Store,” she grinned. “But that brings up a good point—where exactly are we going?”
“We need a grocery store, and The Beer Store to start with,” Elijah answered.

“Would you two stop saying that like it’s Mecca? Good grief, you’d think it was the first time you’d ever gone to buy beer by your very grownup lonesome,” she teased them.

“Well, it is in Canada, isn’t it?” Dom pointed out. “Besides, it’s An Adventure.”

She eyed him in the mirror. “Was that capitalized?”

“It was!” he said happily. “Lij never gets my capitals! See, wanker, it’s not just me and Billy.”

“Jackass.”

“Daft git.”

“Moron,” Elijah shot back, and was about to add another when Grace interrupted.

“Quit it, children, or I’ll stop the car right now and leave you here,” she threatened with as straight a face as she could manage.

“You know,” Dom said conversationally, “That was one of the worst threats my dad could make when we were little. Then again, that was in Germany, and the Autobahn was a tad frightening when you were seven.”

“I can imagine. Now, would you two please fill me in on what’s going on? What’s the plan after the grocery store?”

“And The Beer—“ Dom chipped in.

“Yes, yes, Dom, and The Beer Store, cut that out! We pick up food and booze, then what? It’ll help me know what part of the city to go to.”

Elijah started counting things off on his fingers. “Well, between the three of us, we need to pick up the portastudio—“

“Portastudio? What is that?” Grace asked, confused.

Dom glared at the back of Elijah’s head. “Elwood. You said you told her about the portastudio. You didn’t tell her about the portastudio, did you, you little wanker?”

Elijah turned wide innocent eyes on Grace. “I told you, didn’t I, dollface? I’m sure I told you…”

“Why is this making me very, very nervous?” Grace muttered. “You know damn well you didn’t, sweetie, so you can put the baby blues away. Dom, what the fuck did he not tell me?”

“It’s your birthday present to Billy—“

She blanched. “Birthday present? No one mentioned—“

“No, no, we’ve got it all covered,” Dom said quickly. “This just wasn’t supposed to come as a surprise to you, too,” he said pointedly, and leaned forward to smack Elijah in the back of the head.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. “What was that for?”

“What do you think, you twat? We thought of the perfect present for you to give him, Penny. We just need a bit of your time when we get up to the cottage later.”
“Time for what?” she growled.

“You’re going to give Billy a CD. And then maybe if we smile prettily enough and pester him long enough, he’ll give us a copy, too,” Dom grinned at her.

“A CD? A CD of what?”

“Of you, Penny, what else?”

Grace nearly drove off the road. “What the hell are you talking about?” she yelped.

Elijah said slowly, deliberately, “Port. A. Studio.”

She gritted her teeth. “Pellinore, dear?”

“Yes, Pen?”

“Hit him again, please.”

Dom gleefully leaned forward and slapped the back of Elijah’s head again before he could duck out of the way.

Elijah rubbed the back of his head and glared at him. “Cut that out.”

“Listen, Penny love, it’ll be fantastic,” Dom said earnestly. “It’s just a simple little digital recording mixer, nothing fancy. You do your thing, and then we hook it up to my laptop, download it, then hook the CD burner up to the laptop, and Bob’s your uncle, instant CD. Billy will fucking love it.”

She shook her head. “No. No way. No fucking way.”

“Why not?” Elijah asked in dismay. “He’s told us how good you are, and that he loves listening to you.”

“I can’t record myself!”

“Why not?” Dom challenged. “It’s not like it’s going to record execs, Pen, it’s just for Billy, and you sing for him all the time. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is, I—I—“

“Yes?”

“I didn’t have a chance to prepare!” she said a little desperately.

“Bollocks. You don’t need to prepare, you have eighty million songs in your head, and you told me yourself you know most of them. So you have a couple hours to think which ones you want to do.”

“But—“

“But nothing,” Elijah said happily, knowing they had her on the ropes. “Billy will love it. So, back to the real topic of conversation. We need food, booze, the portastudio, a couple air mattresses and some blankets, I have my interview, and then we—“

“Interview?” Grace asked, feeling distinctly dazed.
“Yeah. My agent talked me into it when she heard I was coming to Toronto. So you’ll need to drop me off to pick up the other car, and then I can go to my interview while you guys go get Grace’s guitar. And pick up Hannah and Viggo when they get here.”

“I think I need to sit down,” she said weakly.

Dom raised an eyebrow. “You are sitting down.”

“Then I think I need to lie down.”

“Poor Penny,” he chuckled. “Feeling a little overwhelmed?”

“Just a little, yeah. You two are like steamrollers.”

“You’ll get used to us,” Elijah grinned.

Twenty minutes later, Grace pulled into the parking lot of a shopping complex. “Fuckdamnfuck,” she muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Elijah looked concerned.

“I can’t park this thing. it’s too bloody big! You’re just going to have to walk, gentlemen,” she announced, and pulled into a far empty corner.

“No problem,” he grinned at her.

After shutting off the engine, Grace sat there for a minute, frowning.

“Now what, Penny?” Dom undid his seatbelt and shifted forward until his upper body was between the two front seats.

“Are you two—I mean—other than The Beer Store, do you want to stay here?” she asked awkwardly. “I—I don’t know—is your being here supposed to be a secret? And—and will it not be a secret if you go in? I mean—“

“Relax,” he said kindly. “As long as Elwood here keeps his freaky little laser beams behind his sunglasses, no one will even notice us.”

Elijah punched him in the arm. “Yeah, and as long as Dom keeps his stupid mouth shut—“

Grace couldn’t help but chuckle. “Are you sure you two aren’t related? You fight just like my brother and I used to.”

“Bite your tongue, Pen,” Dom said in mock-horror. “Now come on, we’ve got shopping to do. And even if someone should recognize us,” he added reassuringly, “odds are they’ll second-guess themselves into thinking they’re seeing things anyway. We’ve kept it quiet we were leaving L.A. this weekend.”

“All right, if you’re sure. Because I could—“
Dom rolled his eyes and climbed out of the vehicle.

Both Elijah and Dom managed to stay subdued and inconspicuous the entire time they were picking out air mattresses in the first store. The three of them conferred over which ones would be best, made their decision, and were out with their purchases in short order. The next stop was the home store for several blankets. Grace tried to insist that they had enough at the cottage, but Dom wasadamant.

“We need extras. You may be used to subzero temperatures, Penny love, but there will be people there who aren’t, and will be freezing their arses off. So more blankets it is.” Somehow he managed to deflect all further protest, and Grace wasn’t quite sure how it happened, but she found herself two aisles over with Elijah, picking out three fat foam pillows and plain—if disturbingly bright—pillowcases.

“Sweetie, we don’t need all this—“ she tried again.

“Sure we do,” he said breezily. “I like lots of pillows.”

The next thing Grace knew, she was outside holding the air mattresses and being teased by Dom while Elijah paid for everything, and she felt suspiciously like she was being handily maneuvered wherever they wanted.

After taking all the bags out to the SUV, they returned through the slush to the main doors. “Are you going to behave yourself?” she asked Dom with one eyebrow raised. “No squealing, no shouting, no trying to buy one of everything?”

“I have never squealed in my life,” he said with great dignity.

“Mm-hmm.” She quirked her lips. “Let’s go, then.” She led them to The Beer Store, its bright orange sign putting an anticipatory grin on Dom’s face.

“Any idea how much we need for the weekend?” she asked as she held the door open for them.

“Oh, probably six cases, or so…” Elijah’s voice trailed off, and Grace could just imagine his eyes widening behind his sunglasses.

Dom stood staring at the wall in front of him, entirely covered with beer bottles of different shapes, sizes, colours, brands. “I’ve died and gone to heaven,” he murmured.

“No, unless your idea of heaven is vastly different from mine, this ain’t it,” Grace grinned. “Go on, go look for a few minutes.”

Dom and Elijah walked closer to the bottles displayed on the wall, from waist height to nearly the ceiling. “How many kinds are there?” Dom asked almost reverently, and it was all Grace could do
not to snicker.

The clerk behind the till overheard his question, and cheerfully said, “The Beer Store as a
nationwide chain carries over three hundred different brands. In our location, though, we stock
anywhere between one hundred and fifty to two hundred. Where are you from?”

“Manchester,” Dom said, turning to look at him. “Don’t tell me—“

The clerk took a quick look to double-check, but easily said, “Third row down, fourth bottle in.”

Elijah counted down and over. “Boddington’s?”

“I don’t fuc—I mean, I don’t bloody believe it. Boddington’s.” He turned to the clerk. “We’ll have
a case of that, please.”

“Sure thing. You want a two-four?”

Dom looked taken aback. “I don’t know. Do I, Pen?”

Grace giggled. “Yes, Dom. It’s a case of twenty-four.”

Dom nodded. “Right then. A two-four it is. What’s a case of twelve, then?”

She cocked her head. “I don’t know, actually—half a two-four?”

“What is it Billy calls you? Oh, right—smartass,” he grinned at her.

“We should get Billy something Scottish,” Elijah suddenly said, still scanning the wall. He turned
to the clerk as well. “Do you have any Scottish beer?”

“Ah,” the clerk said, a little sadly. “We only have one at the moment, I’m afraid. McEwan’s. We
do carry Tennents, but it’s only available in kegs.”

Elijah started to open his mouth, looking excited, but at a fondly exasperated look from Grace he
thought better of the idea.

“McEwan’s,” both Dom and Elijah chorused. And Dom, obviously pleased with himself, added,
“A two-four.”

Grace had to turn away and press her fingers to her mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

“All right,” Elijah went back to examining the varieties available. “Dom gets an English beer—“

“Mancunian. ‘S much better.”

“Whatever. Billy gets a Scottish beer. Does that mean I get an American beer?”

“Do you want one, sweetie?” Grace asked with a disbelief that made both Dom and the store clerk
grin.

“Depends.” He eyed Dom sideways. “Am I going to get the crap beaten out of me if I say yes?”

Dom innocently clasped his hands behind his back and gazed up at the beer bottles above him.
“Perhaps.”

Elijah sighed deeply. “Fine. All right, Grace, we have two, we need at least four more. Go ahead.”
“Me? Why me?” she exclaimed.

“Because we’re in Canada, we should try this nectar of the gods called Canadian beer. But if you want me to just start randomly picking…” he threatened.

“All right, all right. We don’t want that, we’d wind up with something as close to water as an American brand,” she smiled sweetly, then started scanning the wall. “All right, what’s the Boddington’s? Dark, light?”

“Light. It’s a cream ale,” Dom answered.

“All right. And the McEwan’s?”

“India Pale ale.”

“Okay.” Grace considered a moment. “Well, it’s not Canadian, but how about a twelve-pack of Guinness for those who might want a stout?”

Dom immediately nodded. “Yeah, if I remember correctly, Ewan likes it. And Bill might want a couple as well.”

“Good. So three more…Okay, a two-four of Kawartha Lakes Nut Brown…one of Northern Red Maple—it’s really good, it’s got a bit of maple syrup in it…and one of the Sleeman Steam ale. Does that sound all right?”

“Sounds great,” Elijah smiled. “Do you have any really, really strong beers? We won’t tell Viggo and we’ll see how many it takes to get him hammered.”

“’Lij!” she protested.

“Nah, he’s right, Pen,” Dom grinned. “Viggo loves it when people experiment on him, especially if it’s a surprise.”

Grace’s eyebrows peaked. “Do I really want to meet this guy?”

Elijah laughed out loud. “Yeah, don’t worry, you do. So, is there anything like that?”

“Yeah…can’t remember the name…” She turned to the clerk. “What’s that one, I think it’s by Labatt’s, it’s got a higher content?”

“The Maximum Ice? It’s seven point one percent alcohol.”

“That’s the one! A two-four of that, too, I guess.”

“Seven point one,” Dom repeated curiously. “What’s the Boddington’s?”

The clerk consulted a list behind the counter. “Boddington’s is four point eight.”

“Holy shite!” Dom exclaimed before he could stop himself. “That’ll get Viggo trolleyed for sure.”

Grace had a sudden pang of misgiving when she realized they were taking no care over names, and she quickly said, “Well, we’d better get out of here. We all set, then?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

The clerk nodded. He leaned into a small microphone and said, “Boddington’s, McEwan’s, half
Guinness, KLB Nut Brown, Northern Maple, Sleeman Steam, Max Ice,” and then began ringing it in to the cash register. As Dom stepped up, pulling his wallet from his pocket, Grace went to get a cart and waited by the line of metal rollers that would carry their order from the back storage room. Her concern was realized when the clerk suddenly cleared his throat as he took Dom’s credit card and said, “I don’t mean to… You guys were in Lord of the Rings, right?”

“Yeah,” Dom answered simply.

He smiled. “Those movies were awesome. Thank you for them.” He looked to Elijah, who had wandered closer. “And you were the perfect Frodo—an incredible job.”

“Thanks, mate,” Dom’s voice was sincere, as was Elijah’s as he added his thanks. “That’s really kind, we’re glad you enjoyed them.”

As he handed over the receipt for Dom’s signature, he curiously asked, “So do you guys get up to Toronto much? I wouldn’t have thought we rate very high on your list.” He grinned.

Without turning his head, Dom casually replied, “It’s rating higher every day. But listen, mate—do us a favour?”

The clerk looked surprised as he took the receipt back, gave Dom his copy, and said, “Sure.”

“Don’t give us away until at least Tuesday, yeah? We’re here for a mate’s birthday.”

He shook his head. “I won’t give you away period.” He suddenly laughed at himself. “I wouldn’t know who to tell, anyway.”

“Thanks, man,” Elijah beamed.

Just then the beer cases began rolling through the strips of rubber that formed a flimsy barrier to the back, and Grace and Elijah began piling them on the cart.

Dom picked up the twelve of Guinness and thanked the clerk for all his help.

“No problem. Wish your friend a happy birthday from The Beer Store.”

Dom laughed out loud. “I will. I will, at that.”

After manhandling the cart through the slush and loading the beer into the SUV, they returned to the plaza yet again for their final stop, the liquor store. When they walked in, Dom sighed happily and said, “Now this looks familiar. What’s your poison, Penny?”

“Oh, I’ll drink just about anything.”

Elijah raised his eyebrow. “Really.”

Grace blushed and gave him a bit of an elbow. “Not like that, thank you very much. I just mean of all the basics—rum, vodka, scotch, wine—there isn’t one I don’t like. I’ve had alcohol all of three times since I last saw you, and one of those times was Billy buying me beer at the airport, so quit implying I’m a lush.”
He giggled at her embarrassment. “What’s your favourite, then?”

“Rum or vodka, I suppose. They’re good for mixing. Or rye.”

They headed towards the corner that held those two kinds, and Grace suddenly said, “Hey, I can teach you a few more Canadianisms.” She picked up a large bottle of vodka. “What do you call this?”

Dom wrinkled his nose. “Shite. At least pick a good brand, Penny love.”

She snorted. “All right, what then?”

Elijah picked up a bottle of Moskovskaya. “Some Russian vodkas are crap, but Orli swears by this one.”

“All right. What do you call this?” She tapped it with one fingernail.

“You guys don’t call it vodka?”

Rolling her eyes but grinning, she said, “No, the size, you twit.”

“Umm—” Elijah’s forehead wrinkled. “Large? Forty ounces?”

“Getting warmer. Call it a forty-pounder and you won’t get funny looks. And this twenty-six ounce bottle, what do you call it?” She held up a bottle of Polar Ice.

“God, I don’t know. ‘The booze’, usually, doesn’t really matter what size it is.”

She laughed. “You don’t get this game, do you? Here it’s a twenty-sixer. Or, if you want to sound like an Ontarian, a ‘twenny-sixer.’” She put the bottle back on the shelf.

Grace picked up a smaller sized bottle of rye. “See how this little one is curved? To allow it to fit in a pocket. It would have to be a rather large pocket, granted, or a jacket pocket, but that’s what the size was made for. It’s called a mickey. Gives whole new meaning to ‘take the mickey’, doesn’t it Pellinore dear?”

Dom cocked his head. “It does, rather. I think I’m going to have to mess with Billy’s mind with that one. You haven’t taught it to him yet, have you?”

“No, not so far.”

He grinned. “Don’t.”

Of course, it leads to a favourite saying at universities across the country.”

“Which is?”

She smiled innocently at him. “Is that a mickey in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?”

Elijah giggled and Dom gave one loud laugh, but when several pairs of eyes turned their way, they quieted down. Dom wrapped an arm around her neck and pulled her in against his chest. “Wicked woman,” he chuckled down at her. “Have I mentioned recently how glad I am I finally got to meet you?”

“Well, if this morning counts as recently, then yes. Lemme go.”
He released her. “Not recent enough.”

Elijah glanced at his watch and muttered an exclamation. “Shit. We’d better hurry up a bit, if we still have to go grocery shopping. Otherwise I’m going to be late for my interview.”

An hour and a half later, the grocery shopping was done and Grace and Dom were dropping Elijah at the car rental lot to pick up the second vehicle. Elijah had maps that Grace had gone over with him and he swore he would be fine. “Besides,” he insisted, “Dom has his cell phone and I have mine, so if anything goes wrong or I get lost I can call you.”

“Are you sure?” she asked anxiously. “Because I could drop you off—“

“I’m sure. I’ll do my interview and pick up the portastudio, and by the time that’s done you should have Hannah and Viggo in your clutches, and we can head up to your cottage. So go.” He made little shooing motions. “Go on. There’s a good dollface.”

With a glower in his direction, Grace climbed back into the SUV as Dom moved into the front seat again. “Let’s go, Pen.”

“Where exactly are we going?” She asked as she craned her neck to check the other way before pulling out of the parking lot.

“Well, we have to get your guitar, so we might as well do that first, yeah?”

“I can’t believe you guys sprung this on me without even asking me first,” she grumbled. “Ambush me like that. You’re like…like…you know. People who ambush.”

“Very eloquent, Penny love,” Dom grinned at her.

“Shut up.” She barely managed to keep the smile from her face, but she couldn’t keep it completely from her voice.

Dom turned a bit in his seat to look at her. “Well, you weren’t supposed to be ambushed, I thought ‘Lij had told you. But with the fuss you’re making over it, I can see why he kept it a secret,” he teased.

“Fuss? Fuss? I am not making a fuss.”

“You are so. It’s not like we’re asking you to pose nude for him, is it? Although that might be an idea for Christmas…”

“Don’t even fucking think about it,” Grace said firmly, shooting him a dirty look.

“Spoilsport. You’ve really never recorded yourself, then? Not even on a little cassette recorder?” he asked curiously, still half-facing her.

“Oh, sure I did—but it was ages ago, way back when I was about sixteen. I’ve never bothered since, because music was…well, it was just for me, you know?”

“’Way back’? Yeah, I’m surprised they had cassette recorders back then, what with it being the
Dark Ages and all.”

“Watch it, buster,” she warned darkly.

“You started it,” he countered with a wide grin. “But you’ve shared your music with Billy now. And what’s the difference between playing for him there in the same room, or if he’s listening to it while he’s, you know, on an airplane or something? There really is no difference, is there?”

“Do you want some lunch, or something? We really should get something to eat, I hope Elijah picks something up, you guys were on the go ridiculously early this morning.”

“Very subtle, Penny darlin’,” Dom said wryly. “Somehow I doubt you get away with that with Billy.”

She sighed. “Never.”

“You can talk straight with me, you know. If you don’t like what I’m saying or you want me to back off, you can say so. I’d prefer it, in fact.”

Grace glanced over at him. “You sound like Billy. A say everything policy.”

“Well, maybe not everything—for example, if by some strange chance you think I’m not the handsomest bloke you’ve ever laid eyes on, it might be kinder to just keep that one to yourself.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “I will keep that in mind.”

He looked at her sideways. “Hmm. I’m not quite sure how to take that. So what’s the difference?”

“Difference?”

“Between playing for Billy live or on a CD?”

Grace checked over her shoulder, changed lanes, and at the next set of traffic lights turned left. “I don’t know. I suppose there isn’t any. It’s just…it’s no longer my choice what songs to give him, what songs he listens to, I guess.”

“Well, you do get to choose what goes on the CD in the first place,” Dom pointed out.

“Yeah, I know. I think I just have to get used to the idea. How many songs do I need?”

He smiled at the implied acceptance. “As many or as few as you want, Pen.”

Grace pulled the vehicle over to the curb, cursing as the tire rubbed. “All right, wait here, I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get my guitar, wasn’t that the point? I’ll just be a minute.”

“What, you’re not going to let me come up?” Dom asked in surprise.

Grace’s voice was suddenly cool. “No, I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“Two people have set foot in my apartment, Dom. Someone I’ve been friends with for years, and
Billy. That’s it, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want anyone else to see the bloody dive I live in, thank you.”

“It’s not like I’m not aware of your current situation, Penny.”

“I know you’re aware of it,” she snapped. “That doesn’t make it any less humiliating.”

“Penny love,” he said gently. “Wouldn’t it be nicer if your friends really knew what you were going through? For fuck’s sake, I’m not going to think less of you for working hard to pay back a debt, you twit. Besides—” He softened his voice even more. “Aren’t I your Pellinore?”

She glared at him. “That’s not fair.”

“And it’s not like I’ve never seen shite flats in my life. Park the car, Grace.”

“That’s not fair, either,” she muttered, but pulled out from the curb to round the corner where parking was allowed. By the time she had undone her seatbelt and climbed down, landing in a puddle of slush, Dom was out and lounging against the side of the vehicle.

“Well, come on, then,” she grumbled.

Dom wordlessly followed her back around the corner to a door beside a carpet store where she went in, and they began climbing stairs.

“Is that smell from the carpet place?” Dom asked curiously. “It’s odd. Smells like a combination of wet camel and petrochemicals.”

“Wet camels? You know what they smell like, do you?”

“Well, no,” he said with a little grin. “But this is what I imagine it would be like.”

“You’re an odd man, Dominic. Yes, it’s the store. You don’t notice it as much after a while, and I sometimes burn candles to mask it, when it starts to gets to me.”

A minute later, he asked, “And how many flights up are you?”

“Three.”

“What’s on the second floor?” he asked.

“Still the carpet shop. It’s two floors high. Okay in that there are no downstairs neighbours to bother me, anyway.”

“Then who was playing the ABBA late at night?”

“What?” Grace stopped climbing and turned to look at him. “ABBA?”

“Yeah, you were on the phone with Billy while I was at his place, and he said something like, ‘No one likes ABBA late at night’. I just assumed it was a noisy neighbour.”

Grace continued on up the stairs. “No, that was the drug dealer across the street. He was sitting in his car playing his music too loud, the bass was keeping me up. It sounded kind of disco, which I thought was pretty damn funny, really, so I guessed ABBA.”
“Drug dealer?” Dom asked, sounding a little perturbed. “Are you sure you’re safe here?”

She chuckled despite herself. “I doubt very much he’s a dealer, Dom. I just dubbed him that because he was sitting around late at night in a tartoosh car.”

“Sounds a little too probable, to me. I hope you’re careful.”

“You’re sounding like Billy again. You two have a real damsel-in-distress thing, don’t you?”

“For your information—“ he said with asperity, poking a finger in her back as they reached the third floor landing, “It’s called giving a rat’s arse about your friends.”

“How about we compromise and call it over-protectiveness,” she grinned.

“How about we don’t and call it protective,” he countered.

“How about I just reassure you I’m careful and we drop it?” She put her key in the lock and opened the door.

“Deal. So this is Penny’s little shoebox, is it?”

“Yes.” Her face darkened and she turned away.

Dom shut the door behind him, walked over and made himself comfortable on the sofa. “Now I know why Billy was worried about you on those really cold days. It is chilly in here, isn’t it?” He casually looked around, not obviously checking everything out, but taking in the room nonetheless. He saw the cracked window above the sink and had to work hard to suppress a smile at the thought that by the time the weekend was over, it would have been replaced.

“The heater is turned down at the moment since I was going to be gone all day, but yes, it’s usually quite cool in here.”

She sounded like she was trying not to snap at him, and Dom saw both why Billy had felt the desire to fix her flat up a bit, and also why he was a bit worried about her reaction. “Guess you own a lot of jumpers, yeah?”

“If by jumpers you mean wool sweaters, then yes,” she said shortly. She walked over to where her guitar was leaning up against the wall by her bed, picked it up, and gestured him towards the door. “Come on, then. Guitar in hand, let’s go.”

“Don’t suppose you could give a bloke a cuppa, first, could you?” He looked up at her beseechingly.

“’Give a bloke a cuppa’?” she repeated incredulously. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Dom winced. “Too much?”

“Maybe not if you’re trying to charm little old ladies. Surely you didn’t think that would work on me?”

He shrugged. “It was worth a shot. How about—come on, Pen, I’m parched, that shite tea on the plane was hardly a proper cup, and besides, that was hours ago.”

She scowled at him. “Yeah, that works. Bastard.” As he chuckled, she put her guitar down on the end of the bed and went to the heater. “Might as well turn this on, if we’re going to be here a few minutes.” She went through her usual routine, turning up the dial, listening for the click that would
tell her it was on, and when she didn’t hear it the kicking began. “Damn it all to the seven depths, you cockered, hell-hated, gleeking, villainous, infernal, pribbling, clay-brained skainsmate!”

Dom grinned. “That truly is impressive. Maybe you should record some of those on Billy’s CD for when he’s pissy.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Grace went to her kitchenette and emptied out the kettle, filling it with fresh cold water, and then plugging it in. She stayed where she was, simply turning and leaning back against the counter. “How do you take it?”

“Bit of sugar, bit of milk if you’ve got it, but I’m not fussy.”

“That’s fine.”

Dom got to his feet. “Don’t suppose I could borrow your bog, could I?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “I don’t know, could you?”

“Loo, Penny darlin’. WC? Toilet?” he grinned.

“I know what a loo is, you jackass.” She smiled, if a bit reluctantly. “And go ahead. What—if you think I was going to make you hold it?”

He laughed as he walked across the room to the bathroom. “I don’t know. I’m not sure just how pissed you are with me.” He closed the door before she could answer.

A few minutes later, there was the familiar rattle, shriek, groan from the bathroom pipes, and Grace winced as she heard Dom’s startled, “Bloody hell!” After washing his hands, he emerged.

“Sorry, Dom,” she apologized. “I forgot to warn you about that.”

He joined her in the kitchenette, leaning his hip against the counter to face her. “I bet that sodding well wakes you up in the morning.”

“I’m used to it. If it makes you feel any better, I forgot to warn Billy, too.”

He chuckled. “Did he scream like a little girl?”

“No, he did not!” She paused, then added, “Not like a little girl, anyway. There was a bit of yelping involved. But don’t you dare tell him I said that.”

“Not a word,” he promised.

The kettle was boiling, so Grace turned around to unplug it and get mugs from the cupboard. As she did, she quietly said, “I’m not pissed with you, Dom. I’m sorry if I made you think I was.”

“It’s all right, Penny,” he said easily. “I just haven’t spent enough time with you yet to know if you’re unhappy, or if you’re unhappy with me.”

“It’s this fucking apartment,” she muttered.

“Does it make you feel this wretched every day?”

Grace poured hot water over the teabags in the mugs, then pushed one towards Dom and got a spoon out of a drawer for him. “No, not every day. I’m too used to it for that. But…I’m sometimes—reminded. Like when I came back after being away for Christmas, or…or seeing it through the
eyes of someone who’s seeing it for the first time. And I realize all over again just how much I hate it.”

“Penny,” he began softly.

But Grace shrugged and forced a brighter voice. “But, that’s just the way it is, that’s all. And sometimes it’s not so bad…or at least, it doesn’t seem it, anyway. What can you do, eh?” She opened the fridge.

“Pen—”

“Here’s the milk. Sugar’s in that little bowl to your right. Do you want something to eat?”

Dom just looked at her for a moment, then tacitly accepted her closing the subject. “No thanks. We’ll go out for lunch—what’s your favourite fast food that you haven’t had in a while?”

“Fast food?” she said with a touch of relief that he wasn’t going to press her. “I haven’t had any in…oh God, it feels like forever.”

“So what do you want? Pizza, burgers, fries…umm. What else is there?”

“Kentucky Fried Chicken.”

“Is that what you want?” he smiled.

Having fixed her tea, Grace headed for the sofa. “Seriously, Dom, I couldn’t choose if you put a gun to my head. I haven’t had fast food in so long it all sounds so effing good you wouldn’t believe it. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

Dom followed, sitting beside her. “Hell no. We had the same sort of thing in New Zealand. The caterers were great, but sometimes you just want something else, you know? For us, it was like a bit of home. So the caterers would have made this great pasta, or something, and here we were sneaking off to order subs from Subway, or a Chinese takeaway.”

“Well, I have always been addicted to anything deep fried, so it’s been hard to go without,” she smiled.

“Aha. Deep fried it is. Fish and chips? KFC?” he asked. “You name it, you got it.”

Grace grinned. “You’re spoiling me.”

“With fast food? Hardly. But you think about it and that’s what we’ll get—as long as you know where to find it, because I rather won’t.”

“Really? I’m surprised—with the level of organization you and ‘Lij have shown, I would have thought you’d have at least six different restaurants all sussed out,” she teased.

Dom leaned in a bit to nudge her with his shoulder. “I’m good, but I’m not quite that good.”

“What?” She feigned shock, and put on a melodramatic voice. “Dom Monaghan admitting he’s not perfect? What will happen now, dear viewers—will the earth spin off its axis and go hurtling through space for all eternity, or will King Pellinore, Knight Errant, ride in on his trusty steed to save the day?”

Dom stared at her, the corner of his mouth twitching. “You’re mad.”
“So I’ve been told, yes.”

“I bet you have,” Dom chuckled. “Although probably not nearly often enough. Can I have the keys to the truck? I need to get something out of my bag.”

“Sure.” Grace got up and dug the keys out of her jacket pocket. “I can’t believe you’re voluntarily doing those stairs again, though.”

“Bugger. Forgot about those,” he grinned. “Ah well, the exercise will be good for me.”

Once outside and around the corner, Dom pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and hit speed-dial number four as he unlocked the back of the SUV. “Elwood, it’s Dom. How’s everything going?”

“Hey, Dom. It’s all great. I’m just at Sunita’s place now, we’ve been going over the schedule once more, and I gave her the key. Why, what’s up?”

“Tell her to make sure it’s good. Tell her to make sure it’s really nice.”

There was a bit of a frown in Elijah’s voice. “She will. Why, what’s going on, Dom?”

Dom huffed out a loud sigh. “I went up with Grace to get her guitar. Put it this way—I just met her this morning, and I want to fix her place up. I’m surprised Billy isn’t moving her out lock stock and barrel.”

“That bad?”

“It’s a rat-trap, ‘Lij. Living here makes her miserable, and two more years…she just wouldn’t be Penny anymore.”

Dom could hear the skepticism in Elijah’s voice as he said, “That’s a bit of a hyperbole, isn’t it?”

“I know it sounds exaggerated, but I don’t think it is,” he insisted. “You should have seen the change in her just walking through the door. I’m bloody glad we’re doing this, so tell Sunita to make it something special.”

“All right, Dom, I will. And it will be, honestly. The designs look fantastic.”

“Good. Because it’s going to have to make her really happy, or the three of us are bollocksed,” Dom suddenly grinned. “All right, I’d better go, she’ll be wondering if I got lost. We’re headed out for lunch soon, and by the time we finish Hannah and Viggo should have landed. Any idea where we can meet up with you?”

“Not yet—Sunita’s going to help me find a place when we’re done here. I have to pick up the portastudio yet.”

“All right. Give us a ring, yeah?”

“Yeah. See ya.”

Dom hung up and tucked his phone back in his pocket. He quickly grabbed the box he was looking for out of his bag and jogged back up to the apartment. When he reached the door, he paused for a second to catch his breath a bit, and then lightly knocked and walked back in.

Grace was standing by her bookshelves, fingers running along the spines, obviously looking for something. She glanced over as he resumed his seat on the sofa, then returned her attention to the
shelves until, with a little puff of breath, she found what she was seeking. She pulled a magazine out from between two hardcover books, and rolled it up in her hand so Dom couldn’t see what it was. “I feel really—“ she stopped abruptly, then squeezed her eyes shut tight, her nose wrinkling. “Really bizarre about this. Because,” she opened her eyes again and looked at him with an embarrassed little smile, “You’re just good old Pellinore, and you’re here for a birthday party. But…”

Dom smiled back at her, wondering if he knew what was coming. He thought he did, but then again she’d surprised him a few times already. “Spit it out, Penny darlin’.”

Grace joined him on the sofa, curling one leg beneath her. “Since you’re here and all—“

“And completely at your mercy,” he interjected with a straight face.

She elbowed him. “My niece—she’s five—she loved The Fellowship of the Ring. And Merry was her favourite, in fact after she saw some of it a few months ago, we had to call her Merry for two weeks and she would answer to nothing else.”

“Really?” Dom looked pleased. “Usually between Merry and Pippin, Pip’s the favourite of little girls.”

“With Sarah it was most definitely Merry. Still is, but luckily we’re allowed to call her by her real name now. So I was wondering,” Grace suddenly blushed, “if you’d maybe sign this for her.”

“Of course, Penny,” he said immediately, smiling widely. “I’d love to.”

“Really?” she brightened. “You’re not annoyed I’m asking when you’re here on a holiday?”

“Don’t be daft. If I was mobbed by a crowd of strangers while we’re trying to eat our junk food, maybe I’d be a bit annoyed, but not when it’s you. Got a biro?”

“Biro. I feel like I should know that one…”

“A pen, Pen,” he grinned.

“I knew that! You just didn’t give me enough time to think!” she declared as she crossed over to her desk and rooted through the top drawer. She returned a moment later with a spongy-gripped black pen, and his lips pursed out as he took it.

“Ooh, this is a good pen.”

“Thank you, I know I am,” Grace teased.

Dom made a face at her. “What was her name? Sarah?”

“Yeah. With an ‘h’.” She sat beside him again, her feet on the sofa and her knees tucked up to her chest, and waited quietly for him to finish. When he did, signing with a flourish, she smiled at him. “Did you know you stick your tongue out a bit when you do that?”

He laughed. “Do I?” He tried to hand the pen back to her, but she wouldn’t take it.

“Keep it, if you like it. I’ve got three of them.”

“You sure? I’d hate to abscond with your favourite biro.”

“I’m sure. I go through a lot of pens, so I buy them in bulk.” Grace grinned.
Dom handed her the magazine, and she glanced at it to see a little cartoon version of himself, complete with oversized ears. “I thought you worked on a computer?”

“Aww, that is cute, Dom. Thanks for doing this, Sarah will love it.”

“My pleasure. Has Billy met her?”

Grace smiled. “No, but he spoke to her at Christmas. They had quite an interesting conversation, or so I’m told.”

He chuckled. “I bet. Now—answer the question, please.”

“What question?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“I thought you worked on a computer, doing that, you know, price-tagging thing?” he asked, his eyes twinkling, and Grace knew he was just playing with her.

“Meta-tagging, thank you very much,” she glared at him, successfully keeping the smile off her face. “I’m not a sales clerk.”

“My apologies—I guess your establishment wouldn’t exactly see high foot-traffic, would it? So you do work mostly on a computer?”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Solely. Why?”

Dom leaned forward to set his empty mug on the coffee table. “My terrible inquisitiveness. If you work solely on a computer, why do you go through so many pens you buy them in lots?” he asked, honestly curious.

Grace opened her mouth, then closed it again, and reddened slightly. “I—umm—I do crosswords. A lot of crosswords,” she said, just a shade too desperately.

Dom raised his eyebrow. “If you don’t mind my saying so, Penny darlin’, that’s a load of bollocks. You don’t have enough time around work to do so many crosswords you go through pens quickly.”

She dropped her eyes, and resignedly leaned her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands. “I write.”

“Write what?”

“Garbage, mostly,” she smiled. “I like to write stories, but I’m really not very good at it.”

“What kind of stories?” Dom cocked his head to the side.

“Whatever comes to mind. I tried a little mystery, but I somehow managed to give my murderer a watertight alibi.”

Dom laughed out loud.

“You think I’m joking, but it’s true. And I tried science fiction, until I realized I’d unconsciously stolen the plot—such as it was—from an old Star Trek episode.”

Dom grinned. “And what are you working on now?”

Grace blushed again. “What makes you think I’m working on something now?”
“You only have three pens left, for one thing. And a writer doesn’t stop writing. Not for long, anyway.”

She made a face. “I’m not a writer.”

“Sure you are—you write stories, you’re a writer.”

“You say you’re a writer and people think you’re either pretentious or delusional. I merely scribble for my own amusement,” she insisted.

Dom shook his head. “Sorry, Penelope, but you won’t convince me. The fact that you keep trying says otherwise. So what are you working on now?”

Grace stared at him. “You’re…you don’t always listen to people when they talk, do you?”

“Yes, I do,” he said calmly. “I just don’t always agree with them. What’s the story?”

“A—a historical novel. Although I use the term novel in it’s broadest sense.”

“What era?”

“Why do you—?”

“Because I’m interested, Pen. I fancy myself a bit of a scribbler myself. Only instead of fiction, I write journals.” He smiled at her. “Full of surprises, aren’t I?”

“You are, actually,” she said, feeling distinctly off-kilter. “It’s—I have two, actually. The first, which will forever go unfinished, is a sort of pioneers-in-the-wilderness early Canadiana, Little House on the Prairie kind of thing. Based on some MacPherson family legends, really. The second, which is what I’m working on now, when I work on it at all, is seventeenth century. Shakespeare’s London. Because that hasn’t been written to death quite yet, you know,” she added wryly, self-disparagingly.

“All stories have been written before, Pen,” he said in all sincerity. “It’s just the voices of the authors that change. And you have your own voice.”

Grace made a face. “That’s the problem, really. I don’t, so I wind up borrowing everyone else’s.”

“Then you’re still searching for your voice. It can take years sometimes, but you’ll get there. You’ll find it. And I would wager this past year has taken you a long way toward that.”

“Not the starving artist cliché again,” she teased, for lack of knowing what else to say.

“Adversity tests the mettle. Scarifies, refines; purified in the fiery furnace sort of thing. Strips a person of all those unnecessary blinds we put up to hide behind, reduces the distractions of luxury and temptation. It may be a cliché, but like most clichés, there’s some truth to it.”

Grace couldn’t help but stare at him again. “Who are you?”

Dom chuckled. “Just Dom.”

She shook her head. “Not just Dom. This side of you doesn’t get verbalized often, does it?”

“No.” He watched her for a moment. “No, it doesn’t.” After several long seconds had passed, he smiled and abruptly changed the subject. “I have a prezzie for you.”
“For me?” she repeated, startled and still in the more serious mindset he’d led her to.

“Yeah. What I went down to the truck for.” From underneath the cushion beside him, Dom withdrew a box and handed it to her.

Grace looked at it, and laughed out loud. “Marshmallow Pies. You did sneak them across the border.”

“Well, I couldn’t expect you to understand the addiction I was battling if you had no clue what I was addicted to, now, could I?”

“Oh, sure, so your plan is to get me hooked and then leave me high and dry without a Pie dealer, is that it?”

Dom grinned. “You could always ask your ABBA-playing neighbour with the tarterd-up car.”

“Somehow I doubt he can supply me. I’ll bring them up to the cottage with me, we can share.”

“No need—these are just for you. I have two more boxes in my bag.”

Grace smiled at him. “Thanks, Dom.”

“Anytime, Penny darlin’, anytime. Now, we should get out of here and get you some deep-fried lunch, yeah?” He got to his feet.

They donned their jackets again, and Grace picked up her guitar. “When do the others get in today?” she asked, feeling awkward about saying their names as if she knew them.

“Viggo and Hannah?” Dom preceded her out the door, watching as she locked it behind them.

“Yeah.”

He checked his watch. “Not one hundred percent sure, but I think in about an hour or so.”

“An hour?” she yelped. “We’d better hustle, then, if we want to get lunch and get back up to the airport in time!”

“Well, move your arse then,” he grinned, and they went clattering down the stairs.
Chapter 27

Two hours later, Grace pulled into the parking lot of a large suburban mall, Dom in the front seat beside her, Hannah behind, and Viggo seemingly napping in the seat behind Dom. Grace hadn’t really been able to get any kind of a read on Viggo yet—he’d been quiet, nearly somnolent since she and Dom had picked them up. Hannah, on the other hand, was bright, open and cheerful, and very much like her brother. She sat forward, looking between the two front seats out the windshield, scanning the parking lot for Elijah.

“There he is, Grace,” she suddenly said, her thin arm reaching to point off to the right. “With the baseball cap, by that van. God, what a dork!” she laughed, even as she undid her seatbelt.

“Hold on, let me park. He wouldn’t thank me for running over you right before his eyes,” Grace grinned, and pulled into a parking spot one space away from the van, leaving herself plenty of room. As she put the SUV into park, Hannah leapt from the car and into Elijah’s hug, making up for several weeks apart.

Viggo sat up straight. “Apologies, Grace—travelling always makes me sleepy.”

“No worries. You’ve come all the way from Japan, I don’t know how you’re even on your feet,” she smiled, undoing her seatbelt.

“Judicious use of napping. Ah, there’s our young co-conspirator.” Viggo slowly, almost stiffly climbed down from the vehicle, then simply turned and waited.

Elijah let go of his sister then jumped on Viggo—literally, to Grace’s bemusement. His arms and legs wrapped around Viggo’s torso, and he looked like nothing so much as a gangly cricket.

“Are you all this affectionate?” she asked Dom with a grin.

He chuckled. “Yes. The perils of living and working together with such fantastic people for so long—we bonded more than Pete Jackson ever dreamed, I imagine. I hope you don’t find it odd.”

“Odd? Good grief, no. It’s refreshing and funny and really damn cute,” Grace laughed. “Come on, we’d better get moving, though—it’s getting late.”

They climbed out of the SUV, joining the others by the van. Elijah saw them, let go of Viggo to drop to the ground, and immediately got down to business.

“Okay, Grace, go over the maps with me one more time, and then you take Dom and Viggo, I’ll take Hannah, and let’s get going. Show me on here exactly where we are?” He held out one of the maps she had printed up for him.

Grace showed him, traced the route one more time with her finger, and made him double-check the battery on his cell. Before she could even suggest it, Dom had his out and was also checking.

“It’s a bit low,” he admitted. “I’ll plug it in once we’re on the road.”

“Okay, let’s go then. And Elijah,” she said firmly, “If we hit any heavy flurries, I’ll go good and slow. Just be careful, all right?”

Elijah grinned and rolled his eyes. “Yes, dollface. Quit worrying! I have driven before, you know.”
“Yeah, but not often in snow,” Hannah said pointedly, laughing at him. “Maybe I should go with the others…”

“Driving in snow is an art, a mustering of internal fortitude and placidity,” Viggo mused slowly. “Perhaps I’ll come with you. Divide the expertise between two vehicles, Grace?”

“That might not be a bad idea,” she grinned. “You can give him pointers if he starts to panic.”

“Panic? Panic? Oh, please, that’s a load of crap. And you—” Elijah rounded on Hannah, hands on his hips. “Don’t you dare be so quick to abandon me. What kind of sister are you, anyway?”

“One that wants to live. Okay, okay,” she said placatingly as he opened his mouth. “I’ll risk my life for you. Again.” With a wicked grin and a little wave to Grace and Dom, she climbed into her brother’s vehicle, followed by a peacefully smiling Viggo.

“No, you and your sister aren’t alike at all, are you?” Grace murmured to Elijah, her eyes twinkling.

“No, we’re not,” Elijah said haughtily, pulling himself up to his full height. “For one thing, I’m much more mature than she is. Now can we get going, please? I was hoping there’d be time for a snowball fight yet tonight.”

Laughing delightedly, Grace handed Elijah back the maps, and they all set off for the temporarily quiet north.

Three and a half hours, two pit stops, and—for Grace, at any rate—much laughter later, the SUV and then the van turned in to a snowy, narrow lane.

“Are we there yet, are we there yet?” Dom bounced up and down in his seat.

“No. There’s still about two hours to go,” Grace answered, her face perfectly straight. “You might have to do a bit of shoveling to get us there even that quickly.”

He stared at her for a moment before realizing she was taking the piss, and he snorted. “No wonder Bill calls you smartass. So is this your laneway, then?”

Chuckling, she shook her head. “No, this is just the road in to a cluster of cottages, including ours. It’s not far now, though.”

“Will any of your neighbours be up here?” he asked curiously. “Will we need to worry about noise?”

“Certainly not while you’re inside. None of the close neighbours are around this month, according to my dad,” Grace explained, keeping an eye on Elijah’s vehicle in her rear-view mirror. “Sound really travels at night across the lake, though, so you might want to keep screaming and shrieking outside to a minimum after eleven, if you don’t want a visit from the Provincial Police,” she teased.

“We’ll keep that in mind,” he grinned.

“Hold on to your hats,” Grace alerted him, glancing again in her rear-view mirror. “I warned ‘Lij
about this, I hope he hasn’t forgotten.”

“Warned him about what?” Dom suddenly had a death-grip on the door handle. “What is it?”

She chuckled. “Relax. I know this road like the back of my hand. It’s just a little nerve-wracking the first time. There’s quite a turn coming up.”

“Why would a turn be nerve-wracking?” he asked quickly, his fingers not loosening at all.

“Because it goes downhill at the same time, and you can’t see the road. But like I said, I know it perfectly well, and ‘Lij will be able to see us at every second, as long as he keeps up.”

As the vehicle went around and down and Dom saw what she meant by being unable to see the road as it disappeared below them, he made a noise of distaste. “God, that’s slightly nauseating, isn’t it?”

“It is from the passenger seat, yeah,” she smiled sympathetically. She glanced behind them once more, pleased to see the van right behind, and then cheerfully said, “Buck up, little soldier—down this hill, up the next, and we’re there.”

“Buck up little soldier?” Dom repeated with disbelief. He began to laugh, and he released his tight grip on the door handle. “I think I’ll leave that one alone. So we’re almost there, are we?” He peered through the growing dusk, but the only things visible were trees, snow, and more trees. “Can’t even tell you have neighbours.”

“Not from the road, no,” Grace agreed. “You can see the cottages from the dock, though.”

“Dock?” Dom’s forehead wrinkled. “I thought you said the lake froze over in the winter.”

“It does. Most of the dock comes out in the fall and goes back in every spring, but the very first section is permanently fixed, so it stays all year ‘round. It gives a good reference point for the water levels in the lake year to year. And,” she paused, made a slow, careful turn into an even narrower lane, then continued, “And here we are. Welcome to the MacPherson Resort.”

“Ah, a resort now, is it?” He smiled. “Good God,” he suddenly exclaimed. “Look at all the snow!”

Grace pulled up beside the cottage, which looked absolutely buried in deep white. “Yeah, it really drifts at this end of the lake. I’m going to have to leave you with a bit of shoveling, I’m afraid.”

“No problem—as long as we can find the door to get in.” Dom looked faintly doubtful.

She laughed again. “Yes, Dom, we can get in, don’t worry. Come on!” With sudden excitement, Grace opened the door and jumped out of the vehicle. She did up her jacket and yanked on her gloves and stood breathing the cold air deeply.

Dom watched her for a moment from inside the SUV, wishing Billy could be there to see the look of utter happiness and contentment on her face. He wondered if there had even been an opportunity, in their short times together, for Billy to have seen that expression. Dom doubted it.

He climbed down and circled around to stand beside her. “You look pleased.”

Grace beamed up at him. “Thank you, Dom. I’m so glad you guys talked me into this, I can’t tell you how good it feels to be up here again.”

“I’m just sorry you have to leave again so soon.”
“It’s okay. I’ll be back tomorrow, and I’ll have a couple days. It’s going to be fantastic.”

Elijah bounded up. “Oh my God, I almost forgot about that corner, the one that goes down, and I know you warned me about it, but that was fucking freaky!”

Grace laughed out loud. “Liked that one, did you?” She waited until Viggo and Hannah had joined them, and then began the tour, knowing she was a bit short on time. She pointed out where they should hide the vehicle the following afternoon so Billy wouldn’t spot it, and the snow-covered shed in which they’d find plenty of dry firewood for the woodstove. Tromping up onto the small porch, she pulled the snow shovel from where it was half-buried in a drift and cleared the door, then unlocked it to let everyone in.

“Come on in—don’t worry about getting snow everywhere, Elijah can mop it up later, can’t you, sweetie?” Grace grinned.

“Me?” he squawked. “Why me?”

“Oh, I don’t know—you just seem so domestic,” she teased.

Hannah snorted loudly, and Viggo gave a single guffaw of a laugh.

With all of them finally unbooted and unjacketed, Grace gave them the grand tour, consisting of stairs to the cellar, where more firewood and some spare supplies were stored, the bathroom, the kitchen, the living room, and the three bedrooms.

“This is so cute,” Hannah said happily. “This is going to be a killer weekend.”

Viggo stood at the picture window, looking out and down toward the lake. “This is wonderful, Grace, you must love it up here.”

She joined him, smiling a trifle shyly. He was so soft-spoken, and it surprised her a little how much she felt the difference in their ages. “Yes, I do. I always have, despite the drawbacks to an old cottage and an increasingly crowded lake.”

“Too many humans,” he agreed seriously, sympathetically.

“You could say that, yes.”

“What do you get in the way of non-humans?”

“In winter?” She cocked her head. “Not too much. Birds, rabbits, deer, coyotes.”

Viggo’s interest was piqued. “Coyotes, hmm? I’m surprised, with this much civilization around.”

“Too much garbage to turn their noses up at,” she explained succinctly. “Same reason we have a bear problem in the summer. Or rather,” she added wryly, “The bears have a human problem.”

Viggo smiled down at her, and she found herself warmly smiling back.

“Hey, Grace?” Dom called from the hallway, strolling back into the room. “It’s pretty damn chilly back there. Should we fire up the woodstove, do you think?”

Grace hurried over to a thermostat on the wall. “Bugger, I forgot to turn the furnace up when we came in. There, that should help.” She turned to see Viggo already on his knees in front of the cast iron stove, picking kindling out of the basket nearby. “It’s okay, Viggo, I can get that—“
“I’m fine,” he said serenely, indeed looking quite content. “You have other things to be doing, I believe. Your guitar shouldn’t stay outside much longer.”

“Ah, doublefuck!” she exclaimed, and rushed to the front hall, only to find Elijah clomping in, stamping snow from his boots, with her guitar case and another heavy-looking, square grey plastic case in his gloved hands.

“Here’s your guitar,” he panted, handing her case over. After she had taken it, he carefully set his other burden on the floor, then shucked off his jacket and boots, shoving his gloves into the pocket of his coat.

“Is that it?” Grace asked, eyeing the grey box.

“The portastudio? Yeah. I figured I’d better get it set up, I know you don’t have a lot of time.” He picked it up again and headed to the bedroom farthest from the living room. “Come on.”

Grace followed him, carrying her guitar.

“I’ll tell everyone to keep it quiet,” Elijah said briskly, “But if we’re back here and keep the door closed, it should be fine. We’ve got two lines, one for your guitar and one for the mic, and I’ll probably have to get you to play for a bit while I sort out the levels.”

“Levels?” She nearly squeaked. “I thought this was just a ‘play and sing and record’ plan?”

“Oh, it is. It’ll just sound a lot better if we put you and the guitar on separate tracks, so we can adjust it if necessary.”

“Separate tracks—’Lij, this is starting to sound a little too complicated. Maybe we should just—“

Elijah set the portastudio on top of a wide dresser in the bedroom. “Maybe you should just get your guitar out and tune it and leave this to me,” he teased her gently. “Trust me, dollface, it’s not that difficult. I’m good with this kind of stuff—and all you have to do is play, okay?”

Grace took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. Sorry, sweetie—I guess this whole idea is just making me a bit nervous.”

“No need to be nervous, Penny love,” Dom reassured her from the doorway. “Billy’s going to love this.”

She looked over at him, returned his wide smile with a weak one of her own, and turned to take her guitar from its case.

An hour and a half later, Grace had recorded five songs on the portastudio, and Elijah was beaming. He took off the headphones and sat back, satisfied.

“It sounds great, Grace. Considering we’ve only got two tracks and we’re recording this in a bedroom with rented equipment? It’s pretty damned good.”

Grace flopped back on the bed, tired. “I hope so. Otherwise he’s just going to laugh when he listens to it.”
He will not, and you know it. How many more do you want to do? You’ll still have plenty of room on the disc.”

“None. That’s enough, I think, and I should probably get going…” She trailed off, then thoughtfully added, “Although…”

“Have you thought of another one?” Elijah asked, one eyebrow raising slightly.

“Yeah. I think I have, actually. Would you mind if I did one more?”

“Of course not,” Elijah said, business-like, and put his earphones back on.

Grace propped her guitar case by the door next to her boots, then walked into the kitchen to find Dom stirring spaghetti sauce, Viggo chopping tomatoes for bruschetta, and Hannah finishing up a salad. Viggo looked up.

“Give us ten minutes, and you can have a late dinner before you go,” he suggested.

“Look at this,” Grace said admiringly. “You guys could run your own restaurant.”

“Chez Dominic’s,” Dom said complacently.

“Why is it named after you?” Hannah demanded.

“Because I’m the only one here who’s been a chef.”

Grace turned to stare at him. “You were a chef?”

“Well, a sous chef, but yeah, before the whole acting thing really started looking up,” he explained, checking if the pasta was done. “I’m quite a good cook, really.”

She grinned at Viggo. “You’ve spent lots of time with him. Is he?”

He made a wry face. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Unfortunately?” Dom repeated, smiling innocently. “Look, if you want to do all the cooking this weekend, be my guest…”

Viggo held his hands up in surrender. Tomato juice dripped down his wrist. “Peace offering. Grace, there’s a bottle of red wine on the counter there that I brought with me. If you have a bottle opener, we can have it with dinner.”

Grace fetched the wine, but frowned when she looked at it. “What kind of wine comes with no name on it?” She held the bottle up for the others to see the small horse insignia on the label, and no other markings.

Elijah’s eyes lit up as he walked in. “Oh, what kind is this one, Vig?”

Viggo smiled. “It’s a dark burgundy, with a bit of elderberry to round it out.”
“Sounds fantastic.” Elijah noted Grace’s confusion. “It’s Viggo’s, every year he makes a new batch. My favourite was the cherry pinot noir.”

“Wow, homemade wine? That’s fantastic. Thanks for bringing it, Viggo.” She set the bottle on the counter and began rooting in a drawer for the bottle opener she knew was around.

“That’s our Vig.” Dom grinned. “A man of many talents.”

“Apparently. You are all just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

Elijah sighed loudly. “I’m not. I’m dull as fucking dishwater. I can never surprise anyone.”

Dom nearly snorted into the spaghetti sauce.

“I’m sure Billy will disagree with that tomorrow night,” Grace pointed out dryly.

Hannah set the salad on the table and then wrapped her arms around her brother’s waist and kissed his cheek. “You never cease to surprise me, ’Lijah. It amazes me what a freakish little fuck you are.”

She burst into peals of laughter as Elijah scooped her into a headlock. “Look who’s talking, you purple-haired mutant. Take it back.”

“Never!”

Elijah began rubbing his knuckles on her scalp. “Take it back!”

“No way! Viggo, help!” Hannah begged. “Lick him, or something!”

With unholy glee, Viggo immediately launched himself toward Elijah, tongue extended and wiggling.

Elijah immediately shoved his sister into Viggo’s path and backed away, ducking behind a bemused Grace. “Save me, dollface!” he shouted melodramatically. “It’s the Tongue of Doom!”

Grace laughed out loud, as Dom suddenly grabbed Elijah from behind and held him tightly.

“Come on, Vig, hurry—I’ll hold him for you.” Dom could barely speak for laughing, and for struggling with a wildly flailing Elijah.

“Don’t you dare!” the younger man shouted. “Fuck off, Viggo, get that thing away from me! Dom, you asshole, I’m going to fucking kick your ass!” The high-pitched shrieks and giggles he emitted as he thrashed about took any threat out of his words.

Grace quickly ducked out of the way, joining Hannah by the table. “Are they always like this?”

“Oh, God, no,” Hannah chuckled. “They’re on their best behaviour for you.”

Grace laughed delightedly, watching as Viggo wetly swiped his long tongue up Elijah’s cheek.
“Everything all set, then?” Grace asked as she zipped up her jacket. “Any questions, any concerns?”

“None,” Dom said firmly. “We’re fine. Besides, we’ve got your phone number, just in case. We’ll take good care of the place.”

She smiled. “I’m not worried about that. I know you will.”

Elijah handed her gloves to her. “Drive safe.”

“I will, sweetie. When did you say Billy thought he’d be getting to my place?”

“He said probably between noon and one. He’s assuming you’ll be working, and you’ll need a bit of time to finish up, so he was going to give you until about three before dragging you off. Feel free to leave earlier if you want. We’ll be ready for you by five o’clock.”

She grinned as she pulled on her gloves. “Sounds good. I’ll call you from a gas station about twenty minutes away, so you’ll know when we’re near.”

Dom pulled her into a hug. “Thanks again for letting us do this, Penny. It’s going to be such a good weekend, and Billy’s going to be surprised as hell.”

Grace gave him a squeeze. “Here’s hoping, anyway. All right, I’d better be off, I’ve got to get the car back to the rental place.” She raised her voice to shout to the two doing dishes in the kitchen. “Bye Hannah, bye Viggo. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Grace,” they chorused.

“If you need anything, call me,” she instructed Elijah. “Promise?”

“We promise.” He smiled at her warmly. “Now go. And get a good night’s sleep tonight, because sleep will be in short supply for the next few days.”

She laughed. “Why does that not surprise me? All right.” She opened the door. “Have fun, guys.”

“Bye, Penny love,” Dom called as she went down the steps. “We’ll take care of the shovelling.”

With a wave, Grace climbed into the SUV and headed for home.

At ten-thirty that night, Grace’s phone rang. She saved her work and hit the button on her time-clock, then picked it up. “Hello?”

“Hi, Grace, it’s Elijah.”

“Hi, sweetie. How’s it going?”

“Great,” he enthused. “We’ve got most of the shovelling done, just a bit left to do in the morning, and Viggo’s keeping the woodstove going, so the furnace hasn’t had to be on much—hopefully the fuel bill won’t be too high. We’re all set up for tomorrow, and everybody’s called to say they’re still coming.”
“Oh, that’s good. You’re sure you’re okay getting back down to the airport tomorrow? You’ll be able to fit everyone and their luggage into the van?”

“Oh yeah, no worries. Easy as pie. Speaking of which, that’s why I’m calling. There is one thing we forgot, one thing Dom and I didn’t even think about until Hannah asked.”

Grace frowned, concerned. “What’s that?”

“We didn’t get a birthday cake for Billy,” Elijah said, a little embarrassed. “And Hannah thinks we should have one, and I don’t know if we’ll pass a bakery tomorrow or not. I’m a bit hesitant about leaving the route you plotted out for me.”

“No, definitely not, I don’t want you getting lost. Your schedule is already tight tomorrow as it is,” she said quickly. “I’ll run out and get one in the morning, it’s not a problem. No, wait,” she suddenly corrected herself. “I can’t, that’ll tip Billy off. I’ll stop on the way up, and I won’t let him see what it is, just tell him it’s a surprise for dessert. That should work.”

“That would be awesome,” Elijah sounded relieved. “We were going to get Dom to make one, but we don’t have the stuff here. Thanks, dollface.”

“Not a problem. If you think of anything else, just call,” she smiled.

“I will. Listen, have you got another minute? Dom wanted to talk to you, if you can spare the time. I know you’re trying to get your work done.”

“Sure, that’s fine. Put him on.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow then, dollface.”


After a moment, Dom said, “Hey, Penny darlin’.”

“Hi, Dom. What’s up?”

“Nothing, why?”

Grace raised her eyebrow even though it couldn’t be seen by Dom. “We just spent most of the day together, and ‘Lij said you wanted to talk to me?”

“Oh, ehm—well, kind of, yeah.” His speech was odd; both precise and rather blurry at the same time.

“Dom, have you been drinking?” she asked gently, not wanting to offend.

“Yep. I’m a bit on the snozzled side, so gimme a minute to put this sentence together,” he said cheerfully.

Grace chuckled. “All right. Take your time, you sot.”

“Sot? Sot? On the contrary, I am the perfect picture of—”

“Dom,” she interrupted, realizing he might go on for some time. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Billy,” he answered immediately, making her stiffen.
“I don’t think—“

“No, no, no,” he nearly slurred. “’S not anything big. Just wanted to ask you somethin’.”

Grace hesitated, then cautiously said, “All right. Go on.”

“Have you seen any of his other movies? Besides the Pippin thing.”

Surprised, she snorted at him calling *Lord of the Rings* ‘the Pippin thing’. “No, I haven’t. Why?”

“He’s a good actor, you see,” Dom carried blithely on, unaware he wasn’t making a lot of sense outside his own head. “A really fucking good actor, y’know? But he isn’t.”

“Pellinore, dear?”

“Yeah, Pen?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Dom sighed loudly, as if it should be supremely evident. “*Billy.*”

“Yes, I know that,” Grace said with much patience. “Why are you telling me he’s a good actor, and then saying he’s not?”

“I didn’t say that!” he protested.

She couldn’t help but chuckle. “You did so! Now what the fuck do you mean?”

“I *mean,*” he said with a distinct air of being put-upon, “that Billy’s a fucking good actor when he wants to be. But he’s not always acting. You see?”

“Of course he’s not always acting. What are you drinking, Dom, because I think it’s time you were cut off.”

“No, you’re not listening,” he insisted. “He’s not acting with you. All right? I don’t know if you know that, and you have to know that. When he talks to you, when he’s with you, he’s not acting, okay?”

“Okay, Dom,” she said softly, touched, even though she still wasn’t entirely sure what he meant.

“Good. That’s all right, then. I’m gonna go now, Pen. See you tomorrow.”

Before Grace could even say goodbye, Dom had hung up. She stared at the phone for a moment before putting it down, and then with a thoughtful little frown, she resumed work.
Grace fumbled for the snooze button on her alarm for the second time. Why was she so bloody tired? She lifted her head off the pillow and blearily looked at the clock. Five-twenty a.m.? Good grief, why had she set the alarm for such an ungodly hour?

Then it hit her. Billy was ‘surprising’ her today, but she had a full day’s work on her plate. If she worked solidly at the computer, she could have almost all of it done before he arrived, with just a bit to do after he got there so he wouldn’t get suspicious. She hadn’t wanted to take two days off work, so she’d kept Friday, but had traded Monday with a fellow meta-tagger for the following weekend. It meant working two weeks straight, but since she worked at home anyway, it wouldn’t be that big a deal.

She wearily dragged herself out of bed, pulling on socks, slippers, and a robe over her flannel pyjamas. First item of business, as always, was kick-starting the heater, and then plugging in the kettle for tea. She pondered coffee when it was such an early start, but decided maybe she’d wait and have a cup later in the morning. She opened the bathroom door to let it warm up a bit, and flipped on the TV for some noise.

An hour later Grace stopped working long enough to eat her porridge and take a shower. It was still frigid in the bathroom, but that helped wake her up, which was the only thing that made it tolerable. With the kettle again boiling for a second cup of tea, she dressed in jeans, a turtleneck, and a warm sweater, not wanting to get chilled from her wet hair. She worked for another hour, then took another break to tidy up some; it wouldn’t do to have Billy arrive to clothes on the sofa and empty cups on the desk. She wondered how long he would hang around before telling her he was whisking her away to the cottage—knowing Billy, probably a while, just for the effect, and the thought made her grin. She looked at the clock and wondered what the others were up to at the cottage, then realized they were probably still asleep.

Growing increasingly distracted as the morning went on—by ten she’d turned her timeclock to the wall and hidden her alarm clock under the bed—Grace found half her brain focused on work, but the other half already working on what she’d pack. Too bad she couldn’t do any of it until after Billy had sprung his big news on her, she mused.

She wondered what it would have been like to be truly surprised by him, to have him just show up at her door with no warning whatsoever. Probably give her a bloody heart-attack, or make her cry, or something. Perhaps it was better this way. Billy might feel a little disappointment initially that his entire surprise had been ruined, but surely he’d forget about it as soon as he realized everything had been done to surprise him—probably the only time she’d ever manage to do it, too, circumstances being what they were. After all, it wasn’t like she could just show up at his door.

A sudden, sharp rapping at the door startled her. She nearly knocked her timeclock off the desk in her haste to turn it and see the time, but it was only 10:34—highly unlikely to be Billy, as he’d told Elijah he wouldn’t be getting to her apartment until noon or after. Probably someone looking for the next apartment over again; it had been happening a lot lately. She sighed and went to the door, her hand on the knob. “Who is it?”
“Delivery for Grace MacPherson.”

Another college kid, and this one sounded really young. A glance out the peephole showed only flowers and dark brown hair—definitely not Billy, then. She stifled her disappointment.

“Who is it from, please?” As if she didn’t know. At least he’d managed to surprise her after all, she thought.

“Umm—William Boyd, ma’am.”

Ma’am. Grace glowered as she opened the door, but cleared her expression quickly so she wouldn’t scare the poor boy away. The door swung back to reveal a gorgeous bouquet of what looked like one of nearly every flower under the sun—every one that had a delicious, heady scent, at least, because the smell of them immediately wafted around her. “Oh, those are lovely,” she spontaneously exclaimed.

“You don’t mind that they smell this time, then?” The bouquet dropped to reveal Billy—Billy with newly dark hair and merrily sparkling eyes and a Canadian accent he’d obviously been working on.

Grace shrieked, truly caught off-guard. “Billy! What the hell are you doing here?”

His face split into a wide smile. “Surprise, wee girl.”

She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. Well, at least she had an idea how she’d respond if he showed up at her door unexpectedly. She began to regain her composure, but still had to act shocked out of her wits. “What the hell?” she asked, as she continued to hug him, and as his one free arm slid around her waist. “I thought you were just getting to L.A. from Japan this morning.”

“I did. About three a.m., to be precise. Couple of hours wait, then the flight here. I’m actually a bit earlier than I expected.” He turned his head to kiss her hair. “But I’m knackered, luv. Mind if I come in?”

“I do, as a matter of fact,” she said, even as she looked around for his bag, picked it up, and took him by the hand to pull him inside. “The place is a mess—the maid hasn’t been here yet this morning, and I haven’t made the hors d’oeuvres or polished the silver or anything.”

“Smartass,” he grinned, and held out the flowers when she set his carryon down.

Instead of taking them, she pulled him into another hug. “God, it’s so good to see you, Billy. I can’t believe you’re actually here.”

“Neither can I, really. I didn’t sleep much on the way back from Japan, and I’m a little blurry on the details. Toronto, right?” he half-joked.

“No, this is Tuktoyaktuk, you must have taken a left turn at Nanisivik.”

Billy pulled back to stare at her. “Either I’m more tired than I thought, or you learned another language.”

Grace chuckled. “You poor thing. Come on, take your coat off and sit down on the sofa.” As he toed off his shoes and shucked his jacket she took the flowers from him, and she inhaled deeply of their sweet scents. “You shouldn’t have done this. But they’re beautiful, thank you, Billy.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied with a smile. “I had to have something to hide behind, didn’t I?” He
followed her further in and grunted as he sat heavily on the sofa. “So how are you, wee girl?”

“I’m pretty good.” She hurried to the kitchenette, laying the flowers on the counter. Dragging over a chair, she climbed on it and reached into a top cupboard for a vase, then turned and showed it to Billy. “This is the one that arrived with the flowers you sent when I was sick. Pretty, isn’t it?” She climbed down and put the chair away. “How are you, other than tired? Can I get you anything? Breakfast, tea, coffee?”

Billy groaned. “I could murder a cup of tea.”

“Coming up.” She plugged the kettle in, and began to arrange the flowers in the vase. “How was the end of your trip?” she asked over her shoulder.

“It was fantastic.” He suddenly yawned. “God, sorry. I’ll be all right with a cup of tea in me.”

Grace paused, then picked up the rest of the flowers and stuffed them in the vase. She crossed to Billy and stood in front of him, studying him closely, before reaching down to stroke his hair. “Come on. Come with me.” She held out her hand.

“Where are we going?” he asked, a little stupidly. “I just got here.”

“Come with me,” she repeated gently, waiting until he took her hand, and then pulling him to his feet and leading him over to the bed. “Lay down, Billy.”

He stared at her again. “You’re awfully fresh this morning, aren’t you?”

Grace choked on a laugh. “Ah—no, not quite what I had in mind. Crawl in and nap for a while. A couple hours sleep will do wonders for you.”

“But I just got here—“

“And I have work I have to finish anyway,” she interrupted him gently. “I’ll work my arse off and finish it up, and you sleep. Then when I’m done I’ll wake you and we can have a proper visit, okay? How long can you stay for? Please tell me you don’t have to leave later today?”

Billy smiled tiredly. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily. All right, I was going to wait a bit before telling you, but…I’ve rented a car, and you’re taking me up to your cottage for the weekend.”

“What?” Grace did her best to act flabbergasted. She must have been convincing, because Billy looked inordinately pleased.

“We’ll go get the car, pick up a few groceries, and then we’re getting the hell out of the city and recharging our batteries in the peace and quiet of your cottage. Sound like a good plan?”

She threw her arms around his neck again. “Can we really? Are you sure? How long do we have?” She pressed her nose into the side of his throat. “This is the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

“Then your friends ought to be ashamed of themselves.” He wrapped his arms around her. “I know how much you’ve missed it. We’ll have until Monday, I fly out late Monday afternoon.” He hugged her so tightly he lifted her off the floor a bit, and murmured in her ear, “I’d forgotten how tiny you are. I don’t remember you being this wee. I’ve missed you, dear heart.”

“I’ve missed you, too. Now put me down, and get into my bed.”
Billy grinned. “My kingdom for a video of you saying that.”

Grace flushed. “Fuck me. I mean—“ She stopped, turning bright red.

He laughed loudly even as he set her down. “And oh, how I’ve missed your ability to say that at the exact right moment!”

“Shut up,” she ground out, fighting to keep the grin from breaking through. “Get your sorry arse into bed and go to sleep.”

“Yes, Miss MacPherson. Right away, Miss MacPherson,” he chuckled, climbing into her bed with a sigh of relief. “What time is it?”

“Just before eleven.” She smoothed the comforter over his shoulder and crouched down by the side of the bed, eyes now level with his. “When should I wake you?”

“No more than an hour, or I’ll be useless for the rest of the day.” He blinked slowly. “This isn’t how my visit was supposed to go.”

Grace smiled at him and reached up to lightly rub his scalp with her fingertips. “And how was it supposed to go?”

His eyelids looked heavier and heavier. “Mm, that feels good. I was supposed to waltz in and sweep you off your feet, not pass out on your bed.”

“You did sweep me off my feet,” she said softly.

His eyes slowly closed. “Oh,” he mumbled. “That’s all right, then.”

She continued to rub his head for a few more minutes. Finally, thinking him asleep, she whispered, “I’m glad you’re here, Billy.”

“Me too, Gracie,” he breathed.

An hour later, Grace hit her timeclock and turned off her computer, finished. Well, finished enough, anyway—she’d rushed the last little bit, but not so that anyone would notice. It had been a bit hard to concentrate; she’d kept looking over at Billy, sleeping peacefully on the bed, his face turned in to her pillow. He certainly was a distracting man to have around, especially in her bed and looking so entirely attractive, and her fingers itched to touch him.

*Friends, remember, idiot?* she admonished herself fiercely. *That’s all.*

She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed beside him, and whispered his name.

He slept on.

She stroked his hair and said his name a bit louder.

He snored.
She firmly rubbed his shoulder and said, “Billy, it’s time to wake up.”

He didn’t move.

Grace sighed, then suddenly cocked her head and grinned, and loudly sighed, “Fuck me.”

“Mnfph. Hmm? Wha’?” One eye finally cracked open. “What’d you just say?”

“I said wake up,” she chuckled. “It’s been an hour—you told me to wake you after an hour.”

Billy flipped the covers up over his head. “No I didn’t. Wouldn’t have said something so completely mad. Meant tomorrow. Wake me tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow we’re supposed to be up at the cottage, remember?”

“Oh. Yeah. Can’t you bring it here?”

“What, the cottage?” she laughed.

“Yeah. Bring it here, then we can be at your cottage and I won’t have to drag my sorry arse out of bed.”

“Oh, sure, if you’ll just loan me a million dollars to rent a…” she trailed off. “What exactly would you use to move a house, anyway? Some sort of crane, I guess? And I suppose you’d need a flatbed trailer to put it on. Would a trailer be wide enough, do you think? Or maybe you’d need a—”

Billy groaned. “All right, all right, I’m getting up.” He threw back the covers and immediately shivered at the sudden rush of cool air. “Be right back. Just have to borrow your loo.”

Grace moved off the bed so he could get up more easily. “Borrow away. Just bring it back when you’re done.”

He looked at her, a smile starting on his lips. “You’re an odd duck, aren’t you?”

“So you keep telling me,” she grinned.

When Billy came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, the kettle was boiling and Grace had her head stuck in the fridge.

“Tea and lunch?” she asked.

“Tea while you pack, and then we’re going out for lunch,” he answered her.

“I can make us something, we don’t need to—“

“Out,” he said firmly. “And we’re getting something wonderfully fattening. You’re too thin, luv.”

“I am not!” she protested, straightening up and closing the fridge door. “I just haven’t gained back all the weight I lost when I was sick, that’s all. Now, how about some soup—“

“We’re going out.” He continued quickly before she could argue again. “I need some serious protein after the last few days. I’m in the mood for breakfast, although I suppose I’m a bit late for it. Anywhere around here I might still be able to get a nice big fry-up?”

Grace faltered. “Well—yeah, there’s a diner a couple blocks over that does all-day breakfast. But—“
“Perfect. Pack your stuff, we’ll go get lunch, and then we’ll pick up the car and head out.” Being so tired and having recently woken up, Billy was just getting his feet under him again. His confidence and ease with Grace were returning, and he sauntered over to join her in the kitchenette. He sensed her almost-imperceptible retreat, though, and instead of moving to kiss her as he wanted to, he simply walked past her to the tea mugs on the counter and poured the hot water. While he waited for it to steep, he scrubbed his hands over his face, feeling two days worth of stubble rasp beneath his fingers.

“Did you want to take a shower?” she asked him, getting the milk from the fridge. “It might wake you up a bit.”

“Actually, that would be brilliant,” he admitted. “After a long flight, and airports, and cabs and such, I always feel a wee bit grimy.”

“Well, you look wonderful,” Grace said firmly, although her cheeks pinked a bit as she said it.

“Thanks, wee girl,” Billy smiled warmly. “You do too—even though I still think you’re too thin.”

“You hang out in fucking Hollywood,” she protested. “How can I possibly look too thin?”

“I don’t care about Hollywood. I care about you. And you look a wee bit frail, and I’m going to do my best to feed you as much as you can possibly eat all weekend.” He suddenly grinned at her, a boyish, flirty grin that lit his face. “So consider yourself warned.”

“What, am I going to turn around every five minutes to find you trying to shove something into my mouth?”

Billy’s eyebrow rose ever so slightly.

Grace flushed brightly once more. “Pervert.”

The grin was back. “I try.”

“You succeed. Is this why you came to visit, just to torture me?” She busied herself with her tea, pouring in a bit of milk and spooning in the sugar.

“It’s definitely one reason. You’re just so easy to wind up, and you’re adorable when your face is flaming red,” he teased.

“Bastard. Go shower, and wash your mouth out while you’re in there. There’s a clean towel behind the door.”

“Thanks, luv,” he chuckled, and dropped a kiss on the back of her head as he passed.

An hour and a solid meal in their stomachs later, Grace and Billy walked onto the lot of the firm Billy had rented a car from. While they’d been eating, Grace had curiously asked him how he’d found one so close to her, considering he didn’t know her neighbourhood at all. Billy teased her that for someone whose livelihood depended on her computer, she really underestimated the power of the internet sometimes, didn’t she?
While Grace filled out the necessary paperwork as the primary (only) driver, Billy looked over a display of maps, and pulled several out.

Grace glanced over at him. “I do know where I’m going, you know,” she grinned.

“I know. But I don’t, and this way I can see where we’re at. Besides, I need a map of Toronto at home.” He paid the deposit and for the maps, and keys in hand, they went to check out their car.

“Oh my God,” she exclaimed. “I can’t drive this!”

Billy frowned. “Why not?”

“Billy, this is a Mercedes Benz! I can’t drive a fucking Mercedes! What if I hit something?”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at her. “I should hope you’d avoid that no matter what you were driving.”

“I’m serious, you nitwit,” she groaned in despair. “I’d be so nervous I’d probably drive it right off the road.”

“Grace, it’s just a car—and an older one, at that. It gets excellent fuel mileage, is easy to drive, and has a top safety rating. It’ll be fine.”

“But the insurance—“

“Was very minimally higher than a newer something called a Ciera, which I’m told is no more comfortable than taking the damn bus. Now would you stop your bloody worrying and get in?” he shooed her towards the driver’s side, grinning.

“Oh, this is such a mistake,” she moaned, but climbed into the car.

“Grace. Grace. Fingers.”

Grace glanced down at her white-knuckled hands on the steering wheel and loosened her grip, shaking out first one hand, then the other. It was the third time already that Billy had pointed out her death-grip, trying to get her to relax. “I’ll be okay once we’re out of the city,” she insisted, abashed. “Can’t believe I’m such a nerd.”

“You’re not a nerd,” he chuckled, “Just easily rattled, apparently. How long until we’re out of Toronto, then?”

“Not long. Another fifteen minutes or so, if traffic keeps moving like this. And I want to make a stop just north of Highway 7, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. What did you want to stop for?” Billy asked curiously.

She smiled. “If you’re going to surprise me, then I’m going to surprise you. We’re stopping at a bakery, and that’s all you need to know until after dinner tonight.”

“I thought we were going to the grocery store?”
“We are. This is a little something special in honour of your visit.”

“Grace, don’t—“ he protested.

“Too bad, you have no choice—I’m the driver for this little expedition,” she cut him off airily. “If it still bothers you after dinner, we’ll talk about it then.”

Billy raised his eyebrow. “Promise?”

“Promise,” she grinned.

When Grace pulled into the tiny parking lot for an even tinier bakery, she chuckled. “I can tell it’s been a while since I’ve been here.” She parked in the far corner, away from other cars.

“How?”

“That entire shopping plaza with the grocery store next door? Wasn’t here last time I stopped in.”

“How long ago was that?” Billy asked as they climbed out of the car.

She cocked her head, thinking. “At least a year and a half ago. Maybe even two years. You’re not coming in, by the way.”

“What do you mean I’m not coming in?” he protested. “Are you planning to leave me tied to the fender like a troublesome dog?”

She laughed at him. “I should, just for the image. However, I told you this is a surprise—which it won’t be if you come in, will it? We might as well get our groceries here, so why don’t you head over to the store, and I’ll join you in a few minutes. Surely I can trust you with a little grocery shopping on your own, can’t I?” she teased.

Billy simply stuck his tongue out at her and strode away, his nose in the air.

Grace found him fifteen minutes later. He was down a centre aisle, leaning with his elbows on the handle of the grocery cart, intently studying various varieties of maple syrup. She tried not to notice how nicely his jeans molded to his arse in that position. She cleared her throat and lightly said, “When in Rome, eh?”

He didn’t even look up as he smiled and said, “When in Toronto, actually. So how do you know which is a good maple syrup?”

“In my opinion, if it’s real, it’s good. If there are subtleties beyond that, I don’t know.”

He picked up a glass jar shaped like a maple leaf. “Might as well go with the obvious, then.” Setting it carefully in the cart, he straightened up and moved on. “What do we need?”

Grace had discussed that very subject with Dom and Elijah the day before. She’d realized Billy would expect to need to pick up groceries along the way, so when the three of them had done the shopping for the weekend, they had taken it into account. “Well, the basics, definitely. Milk, bread, eggs. How about burgers for dinner one night?”

“Sounds good,” he agreed. “And we need tea. And hot chocolate.”

They wandered up and down the aisles, in no particular rush but moving steadily, and quietly enjoying each other’s company even while doing such a mundane task as shopping for groceries. Grace was hard put to it trying to keep Billy from buying everything they even looked at. She
rather suspected he was trying to purchase far too much food so she’d wind up taking it home after the weekend was over, and after she’d wordlessly but firmly returned several items to the shelves, Billy got the hint. She hip-checked him lightly, and they carried on.

There was one item, though, on which Billy would not be budged. When Grace tried to protest, he shook his head. “How many dinners are we up there for?”

“Umm—three.”

“For one of them, I’m cooking you a nice dinner. And it’s my choice what I’ll be making, thank you very much, and I want steak,” he said loftily, then ruined the impression of dignity by pretending to run her down with the cart.

“But Billy,” she said, embarrassed by her protest but continuing anyway as she side-stepped the trolley. “You don’t have to—“

“Get such expensive ones?” he finished for her, and briefly, quickly lifted a hand to her cheek. “Don’t you worry your wee head about it, luv.” He leaned in and loudly whispered, “I’m not a very good cook. I have to start with the best to wind up with something edible.” And with a little flick to the very tip of her nose, he walked away, pushing the grocery cart before him and whistling insouciantly.

“You know what else we need, now?” Billy said as they were loading the groceries into the trunk of the car.

“What?” Grace hoisted her last bag in, checked everything was out of the way, then shut the lid with a click.

“Something to drink. I forgot you don’t sell it in grocery shops here.”

“Oh, you mean beer, or liquor or something?” she asked, her mind racing. They hadn’t thought of that the day before, and she was annoyed with herself that she hadn’t.

“Yeah. Maybe a bit of lager and some uisge beatha,” he grinned, waiting for her to ask.

“Sure...how about we wait and get it up there? I can’t think of an easy place to stop on the way,” she said quickly. “We could slip out to town tomorrow—I can show you all my favourite shops.”

“That sounds fine. Ah, come on, wee girl, aren’t you going to ask me what ‘uisge beatha’ is?” he cajoled, giving her a playful little shove. “I want to show off.”

She laughed. “I thought it was just some sort of liqueur. All right, then, tell me. What is ish—isk—whatever it was?”

“Uisge beatha,” he repeated, enunciating carefully. “I get to teach you a bit of the Gaelic, it means ‘water of life’. It’s Scots for whisky.”

“Heaven forbid we should spend a weekend without uisge beatha,” she teased him.

“Oh, well done!” He smiled widely, applauding. “Your genes must have given you an affinity for
the Gaelic, I’ll have to teach you a bit more.”

“I didn’t even know you knew it,” Grace said as they climbed back into the car. “You’re full of surprises, Mr. Boyd.”

“You don’t know the half of it, wee girl,” he grinned at her. “But I don’t have much Gaelic, tae be honest. Just a few words and phrases. But I’ll add it to the Glaswegian I have yet to teach you.”

Grace didn’t answer as she carefully backed the Mercedes out of its parking spot, but as soon as they were back on the road, she said, “That sounds marvelous. I’ll have to reciprocate with something ever so Canadian this weekend.”

“Like what?” He turned slightly in his seat so he could look at her more easily.

“I don’t know…how about snowshoeing? I could teach you how.”

“Perfect,” he smiled, pleased at the thought. “I’ll probably be the only actor in all of Glasgow that knows how to snowshoe.”

“I wouldn’t think snowshoeing Glaswegian actors are all that common, no,” she agreed with a laugh. After checking over her shoulder several times, she merged back into traffic on the highway. “Have you got your map handy? You can see where we are, and I’ll show you where we’re going, and you can navigate.”

“Navigate? I thought you knew where you were going?” he teased.

“I do. It’ll just be interesting to see what route you tell me to take.” She grinned. “Consider it An Adventure.”

Billy looked at her sideways. “Was that capitalized?”

Grace nearly burst out laughing, but remembered just in time to tone it down. “Why yes, it was as a matter of fact. I’m surprised you could tell.”

“Dom does that all the time. Drives Elijah mad, because he never hears it,” Billy chuckled, then pulled out the map. “All right. So we’re near Highway 7, you said?”

“Yeah, but—“

“No, no, don’t tell me. I’ll find it.”

“I have no doubt of that.”

Billy raised an eyebrow at the amused tone in her voice, but diligently studied the map. “Ha! Found it already! There it is, so we must be…” His voice trailed off as his finger traced a distance across two-thirds of the map. “Bollocks.”

“I tried to tell you, it’s a bit of a long highway. Be thankful we’re not taking Highway 11,” she smiled.

“Why?”

“It’s the longest continuous street in the world.”

“Bloody hell.”
Grace laughed, pointed out where they currently were, where they were headed, and told him to get busy plotting a route.

After the third yawn in ten minutes, Billy asked, “Any chance of a coffee along the way? I may not make it, otherwise—this nice, smooth ride is putting me to sleep.”

Grace grinned over at him. “Maybe we should have gone with the car that was no better than taking the bus, should we?”

“Heaven forbid.”

“Sure. We’ll head around the long way, go through Bobcaygeon. There’s a little coffee shop there that makes the best oatcakes.”

He looked over, surprised. “Oatcakes? I thought that was a Scottish thing?”

“It is. The owner’s Scottish,” she smiled. “If she’s there, you’ll have to have a chat with her.”

“What do ye think the odds are she’s from Glasgow?” he mused. “But don’t worry about it, not if it’s out of the way, wee girl—”

“Well, to be honest a lot of things are out of the way, because every time you want to go somewhere, there’s a lake in the way,” she chuckled. “So we’re just going around a lake or two to get there. No biggie.”

Billy assented. “Where are we on here, anyway?” He picked up the map and squinted at it. “We’ve gone through Lindsay, right?”

“Right. Bobcaygeon is the next town of any size. Which isn’t necessarily saying a lot up here.”

A few minutes later, Billy looked over at Grace. “What are you humming?”

“What? Oh—sorry,” she blushed a little. “The Tragically Hip, they have a song called Bobcaygeon. It always runs through my mind when I’m up here.”

“Sing it?”

Grace smiled wryly. “Somehow I knew you were going to say that.”

Billy laughed. “I wonder how? Go on, then.”

Grace set the cruise control on, then began to sing.

I left your house this morning about a quarter after nine  
Coulda been the Willie Nelson coulda been the wine  
When I left your house this morning  
It was a little after nine  
It was in Bobcaygeon I saw the constellations
Reveal themselves one star at a time

Drove back to town this morning
With working on my mind
I thought of maybe quitting
Thought of leaving it behind
Went back to bed this morning
And as I'm pulling down the blind
The sky was dull and hypothetical
And falling one cloud at a time

I got to your house this morning just a little after nine
In the middle of that riot
Couldn't get you off my mind
So I'm at your house this morning
Just a little after nine
Cause it was in Bobcaygeon where I saw the constellations
Reveal themselves one star at a time

“You probably saw more in New Zealand,” she said when she finished singing. “But I'm a city girl, and the stars up at the cottage never cease to amaze me. Hopefully we’ll have a clear night and can see them while we’re up there.”

“I’d like that,” Billy smiled, facing forward again.

At the coffee shop in Bobcaygeon Billy was disappointed to find the owner wasn’t in but he ordered two oatcakes anyway.

Grace sat down, giving the table a wipe with a napkin just before Billy set her coffee down in front of her.

“You sure you don’t want one?” he asked, holding up the little paper bag.

“I’m sure, thanks.” Grace’s stomach was a little too full of butterflies from the driving, and from anticipating Billy’s reaction when they arrived at the cottage, to be able to consider food.

“You’d better eat extra dinner, then,” he said warningly. He took a sip of his coffee. “Mmm, that’s good. So what were you up to while I was in Japan? You never really said in your emails.”

“Not much. I was still pretty sick for the first few days after you left—“

“Were you?” he said with dismay. “I thought you were getting better.”

“Oh, I was,” she said quickly. “I was much better than I had been, but I was kind of worn down, and still coughing and everything. So I didn’t do much besides sleep and work, and I had to put some extra hours in as well.”

“Extra hours while you were sick?” he frowned. “What kind of heartless bastards are you working for, anyway?”
“They didn’t know I was sick, Billy,” she said with a smile. “How would they, it’s not like I go in to the office every day, right?”

“Still—“

“I did the extra hours to make up for the shit job I did that first week. I went back and fixed some of the mistakes I made, added in some of the stuff I completely missed. I’m lucky they didn’t catch it before I got back to it.”

“Oh. Well…” He was only partially mollified. “I still wish you could’ve had a bit of time to get better without having to work nine hours a day.”

“Me too,” Grace agreed, taking another sip of her coffee.

Billy looked at her suspiciously. “Grace. What aren’t you telling me?”

“What?”

“How many hours a day were you doing?”

“While I was sick? Well, I’m not exactly sure, I was a bit out of it. But I think around seven or so. And of course that went up a bit when I started feeling better.”

“And with the extra hours?”

Grace met his eyes with mild annoyance. “Does it really matter now?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Why?”

“It just does,” he said stubbornly. “Spill it, wee girl.”

“Two days I did eleven hours, and the third day I did twelve. Happy?”

He softened his voice suddenly. “Of course not. I wish you never had to work at a computer that long, let alone when you’ve been so ill. Listen, dear heart, I think we need to—“

“Get back on the road?” she interrupted, knowing full well that wasn’t what he had been about to say. “You’re probably right. Just let me use the little girls’ room first, then we can be on our way.” Before he could protest, she was on her feet and heading for the washrooms.

One hour further into their trip, which Grace had filled with light but idle chatter, she pulled into a gas station and asked Billy if he’d mind running in to grab her a bottle of water while she used the ladies room.

“What, so we have to make another stop?” he teased.

They’d stopped three times already on the way up, Grace trying to make sure they didn’t arrive too early. The stop for groceries hadn’t raised an eyebrow, and neither had the stop for coffee since
Billy had requested it, but then they’d stopped at a general store in a tiny town for Grace to buy gum. This fourth stop was perhaps one too many, but she’d had no choice, needing to wait until they were no longer long distance from the cottage.

She made a face at him. “Fine, if you don’t want to—“

He rolled his eyes at her, grinning. “Oh, go on with you.”

They walked in together, Grace got the key for the ladies room, and left Billy heading toward the cooler while she went back outside and rounded the building where the washrooms were. Glancing behind her, she dug a quarter out of her pocket, picked up the pay phone, and dialed.

“Come on, pick up, Elijah,” she murmured.

“Hello, MacPherson residence.”

‘Lij? It’s Grace.”

“Hey, Grace--shut up for a second, everyone!” he yelled away from the phone. “Where are you guys, dollface?”

“We’ll be there in about fifteen minutes, so turn the lights off in ten, just to be safe. Is the van hidden away?”

“Yep, way down past here, you won’t see it.”

“Perfect.”

“So? Does he have any idea? Or did we pull this off?” he asked.

“Oh, he has no idea,” she laughed, glancing over her shoulder. “We’re going to scare the living daylights out of him. I hope he has a strong heart.”

“Fantastic,” Elijah grinned. “I almost can’t believe this worked.”

“Did everyone make it okay?”

“Yep, all here safe and sound. Already drinking, too, so hurry up,” he laughed. “We’re doing the burgers for dinner tonight, so we can just throw them on the barbeque after you guys get here.”

“All right. I’d better go anyway, he thinks I’m just in the bathroom. We’ll see you in a few, then.”

“See you when you get here. This is going to be awesome, dollface.”

“Bye, ‘Lij.” Grace hung up the phone and hurried back to the front of the gas station. She dropped the washroom key off inside, then climbed back into the car to join Billy, who handed her the water, another bottle already open and half empty in his lap.

“Thanks, Billy. I see I’m not the only one who was in need of a bit of refreshment.” She opened her bottle and took a long drink, put the cap back on and dropped it in the cupholder, then started the vehicle, backed out, and pulled back onto the road.

“I deny any responsibility for delaying your arrival at your cottage.” He grinned. “So how much further is it, anyway? It’s hard to tell how far we’ve traveled, with all these stops.”

“You’d think you were in a hurry to get there,” she teased.
“Well, I suppose I am, in a way,” he admitted, looking out the side window. “So much traveling. I’m looking forward to landing someplace quiet, even if it is only for a few days. Some place I can have some company, but just sit and not talk, if I don’t want to. You wouldn’t mind that, would you?” It wasn’t really a question; he knew she wouldn’t.

But quiet and not talking was going to be in short supply for the next two days, and Grace hoped the surprise of seeing much-missed friends would help make up for it. “Well, we’re almost there. Another fifteen minutes or so. Twenty, if the roads are bad,” she added, pretending she had no idea what to expect.

“They’ve been good so far, haven’t they?” he asked, leaning his head back against the seat and turning to look at her.

“Yeah, they’ve been fine, but these are well-traveled roads. Where we’re going, there isn’t much traffic in winter, because not too many of these cottages are winterized. So they get plowed, but not right away, and not necessarily well. And I’m not sure when it last snowed up here.” There. Not a lie to be found, but not giving away she’d just been here yesterday. She was getting good at this subterfuge thing.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked, still looking at her.

“Just looking forward to getting there,” she replied truthfully, glancing over at him.

“Me too. God, Grace—“ he closed his eyes, “—me too.”

Grace bit her lip, suddenly a little worried.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Bobcaygeon* by The Tragically Hip.
Chapter 29

The noise of the engine and the crunching squeak of the snow under the tires sounded loud to Grace as they rounded the last bend in the laneway, and she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding at the sight of the cottage standing dark and silent before them. She pulled up close to the door, and when she shut the engine off, both she and Billy sat for a moment listening to the deep quiet, broken only by the ping of the cooling engine. She couldn’t help but smile, knowing what was coming. When they climbed out of the car and opened the trunk to grab their bags, she pulled him into a hug before he could wonder why. “Thank you, Billy. I can’t tell you how good it feels to be up here again.”

He hugged her back tightly. “You’re welcome, Grace. I’m glad this all worked out. I’ve missed you—and I think we need to talk—”

Grace pulled away and leaned forward to get her guitar and one of their bags. “Come on, let’s get inside. It’s cold out here, and we’re dressed for driving, not hanging out in the snow.”

Billy sighed, but left it, knowing they had all weekend. Eventually he’d corner her into talking about where they were, where they were going.

Grace led Billy up to the door, fiddled with her key in the lock, then opened the door and held it for him. “Go on through.”

He awkwardly moved past her into the tiny hallway. “Grace? Where’s the light—” That was as far as he got, before what seemed like dozens of people were shouting surprise and lights were blinding him after the dark of outdoors and he shouted in alarm and leapt back, landing on Grace’s foot. He had a fleeting instant, in between the yelling and the light coming on, of fear for Grace, fear of thieves, and then when he could see he realized there were far too many—and besides, some of them looked awfully familiar. “Elijah?” he said in disbelief. “Dom? What the fuck? Viggo? Jesus, Sean!” He was bewildered, and couldn’t quite get a handle on the fact that these people were here, in a small cottage in the middle of another country.

“Watch your language, William,” came an amused voice with a familiar lilt, and a small woman stepped out from behind Viggo and Sean Astin. Grace knew her immediately to be Billy’s sister, would have known even without the accent.

Billy dropped their bags. “Margaret? What the hell—” and then he quickly crossed the few remaining feet and pulled her into a crushing hug. “God, it’s good to see you. What the hell are you doing here, Marg?” He let her go and looked at the others. “What the hell are all of you doing here?” And then he turned, and fixed a steely eye on Grace. "You. What have you done, wee girl?”

Grace flushed when he called her that in front of so many total strangers—and movie stars at that—but she couldn’t stop the grin. “Don’t look at me. Talk to Dom and Elijah.”

Billy turned back to them. “Dom? ’Lij? What the fuck—” and then a thought struck him, and he looked bewildered and amused. “Have you been planning this all along? At the same time as—”

“Happy birthday, Billy!” Dom said very loudly, and yanked Billy into his arms to give him a huge hug. He whispered in Billy’s ear, “Shh, you git. Don’t give Grace’s away.”

When Billy was released and could draw breath again, he was just as confused as before. “Birthday? But my birthday’s not ‘til August, you know that.”
“Exactly!” Dom said cheerfully. “We really surprised you, didn’t we?”

Billy laughed out loud, finally starting to grasp what had just happened. “Aye, that you did, you silly wee fuck. It was your idea, too, wasn’t it?”

“The surprise birthday party, yes. But Elijah planned it all,” Dom said with a grin.

Billy looked at Elijah with one eyebrow nearly in his hairline. “You’ve been busy, haven’t you?”


Billy laughed again and wrapped his arms around Elijah. “Thanks, mate. I’ll never trust you again, but thanks.”

“All right,” Dom said briskly. “You two come in and get your coats off. And Billy, you might want to see who else is here to wish you slightly early birthday felicitations.”

Billy let go of Elijah, shrugging out of his jacket. “Who else? You mean there’s more people here? Who the fuck did you bring?”

Grace wordlessly took Billy’s jacket from him, grinning over his shoulder at Elijah.

“Well, go see!” Dom shooed him. Margaret took his hand and led him away, and just before turning the corner and following the others through to the living room, Billy turned back with a look and a smile for Grace, and she knew she hadn’t heard the end of it yet for her part in the surprise. She laughed.

Then he was gone, and Dom was picking her up off her feet to hug her tightly and kiss her cheek. “Perfect! Absolutely fucking perfect, Penny love!” he crowed. From the other room they could hear Billy shouting in surprise at seeing the others—Margaret’s fiancée Alex, Billy’s oldest friend Ewan, Hannah, and Orli—who hadn’t been able to crowd into the tiny entranceway.

Grace wrapped her arms around Dom’s neck. “Need to breathe, Dom,” she gasped, and now that she was supported by her own arms he loosened his grip on her a bit, and she laughed again. “It was, wasn’t it?” she said happily. “This is going to be fun, eh?”

“It’s going to be fucking awesome.” He kissed her again, then let her down, and Elijah immediately hugged her. “Hiya, dollface. Here, give me your coat. I’ll get you a drink, what’ll you have?”

“Nothing just yet—unless you have some coffee on already?” She took her jacket off and handed it to him, then passed her guitar case to Dom. “Can you put that in the living room for me?” She stooped to pick up hers and Billy’s bags.

“Fresh pot in your kitchen,” Elijah said cheerfully as he hung her coat in the closet. “How do you take it?”

“Double double.” Grace started to edge past him with the cases, but he gave her a funny look.

“And that means…?”

“It means—um, you know, two creams, two sugars. Don’t you guys say double double in the States?”

“Apparently not in California,” he laughed. “Tell you what, I’ll pour it and let you fix it, how’s
“Sounds lovely,” she smiled. “I’ll just go dump these somewhere. Are sleeping arrangements sorted out?”

“Me and ‘Lij snagged the bunkbeds last night, but other than that, no,” Dom grinned. “Just put them in any room, we’ll figure it later.”

“All right. Be right back, then.” Grace hefted their bags and slipped down the hall to the first bedroom, leaving them by the pile of other bags already dropped off. It was fun seeing Dom and Elijah play host in her cottage—a little surreal, too, actually. She sat on the edge of the bed, catching her breath for a moment, feeling a little worn out now that the tension of the day—even if it had been a good tension—was gone. She closed her eyes, smiling, and listened to the voices raised in happiness and excitement and…well, *fellowship*, from the living room.

“Grace.”

She jumped and her eyes flew open as Billy spoke, his head sticking through the doorway. “Don’t sneak up on me,” she chided with a grin.

“Come on. You have to meet Margaret. And everyone else, too,” he added, pleasure shining on his face.

Still smiling, she said, “This is the part I was dreading.”

Billy raised his eyebrow. “Dreading?”

“I think I’ve forgotten how to make small talk.” She got to her feet and walked over to him.

He took her hand. “You won’t need small talk. Not with them.” He led her out to the living room, around the sofa, directly to where Margaret stood with a tall man Grace assumed was her fiancée, and Hannah Wood. “Marg. This is Grace,” he said succinctly as he pulled her forward.

Grace grinned as Margaret laughed. “Nice to meet you, Margaret,” she said sincerely. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Billy.”

“Ditto,” Billy’s sister said, with a fond glance at her brother. “He told us at Christmas how wonderful a tour guide you were when he was in Toronto last.”

Grace waved it off. “I only wish there’d been time for more, he really didn’t get to see much.” She turned to Alex, holding out her hand. “You must be Alex, then.”

Margaret laughed again. “I’m sorry, I don’t know where my head is. Yes, this is Alex Macrae, my fiancée. Must be the jetlag, I think.”

Alex said a quiet, shy hello, and Grace knew exactly how he felt.

Billy added, “And this is Hannah, Elijah’s sister.”

Grace grinned at her. “Hi again.”

Hannah winked. “Safe trip back yesterday?”

The girls laughed, enjoying teasing the guest of honour. Grace said, “You have no idea what went into this party, logistics-wise.”

“Apparently,” he smiled, bemused. “I see there are some stories to be told.”

“A few, perhaps.” Grace left it at that, just to tease him a little more. “So Margaret, have you ever been to Toronto before?”

They stood and talked for a few minutes, and then Billy moved her on to one by one meet everyone else. He was astonished when Viggo, instead of saying hello as expected, asked her if she’d brought her guitar back up.

“What, you two have already met, too?” he asked in disbelief. “And wait just one sodding minute, Mortensen—you told me you were flying straight to Finland from Japan. How did you beat me here? Someone’s going to have to tell me how the hell you did this, you know.”

Viggo chuckled. “Some mysteries are better left unexplained.”

“That may be true,” Billy retorted with a grin, “But not this one.”

After Billy had introduced Grace to everyone, and had a chance to say initial hellos and trade important news, Dom announced that supper was ready. Everyone trooped into the kitchen to fill their plates with barbecued hamburgers, oven fries, and salad.

Grace took one taste of the oven fries and demanded, “Dom, you have to teach me how to make these. Like, tonight. These are fantastic.”

“Why, thank you. Believe that I was a chef yet, Pen?” he winked.

“I do, and I grovel before you for ever doubting it,” she averred.

“No groveling necessary—but you can do the dishes.”

“The second you tell me how to make these, I’m up to my elbows in dishwater.”

He laughed. “They’re easy. Wash and cut your potatoes, then shake them in a bag with some olive oil, fresh rosemary, and sea salt. And then bake.”

She looked impressed. “Wow. That is easy—even I could manage that.”

“Probably. Even trained monkeys could do it,” Dom said, straight-faced.

Grace laughed out loud and dug her shoulder into his side, leaning against him a little, unaware of Orlando’s troubled eyes on her.

After dinner, Grace slipped in to the kitchen while the others were preoccupied with a story Elijah was telling. Dom had been kidding about her doing the dishes, she knew, but she hadn’t been. It was the least she could do, after all Dom and Elijah’s hard work. She’d just finished and was drying her hands when Billy poked his head in the kitchen.
“Grace, what are you doing? There’s a dozen people out here who would have helped you with those.”

“It’s okay. Listen, can you send Elijah in and stay away for a second?”

He raised his eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because I asked you to?” she grinned. “One more eensy weensy surprise that isn’t quite a surprise.”

“A surprise that’s not a surprise,” he repeated.

“Right. Because you know about it, you just don’t know you know.”

Chuckling and shaking his head, he said, “Sometimes you’re near unintelligible, wee girl. One Elijah, coming up.”

True to his word, Billy sent Elijah in almost immediately.

“What’s up, dollface? Hey, you didn’t have to do the dish—”

“Too bad, they’re done. Listen, when did you want to do the cake?” she whispered.

His face lit up. “Oh, you got one? That’s awesome! Thanks so much for doing that. Did Billy say anything?”

“No, I just told him I was getting a surprise for dessert, and then hid the box before he even saw it, so for all he knows, it’s just cookies. It’s still in the car, though.”

“I’ll run out and get it,” he said immediately. “We might as well do it and the presents now, huh?”

“Whatever you think is best—I don’t know what you had planned for tonight.”

Elijah grinned. “Nothing but talking and drinking. Anything else is just gravy. You go make sure Billy doesn’t leave the living room, tell Dom to make sure everyone knows what we’re doing without letting Bill find out, and I’ll go get the cake. Be right back.” He dashed out.

After Billy had blown out the candles—more than he thought were strictly necessary—and they’d sung him a rousing and mostly on-key rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’, everyone sat down with plates and forks once more to eat the cake Grace had brought. She sat on the floor with her plate, and a moment later was joined by Elijah.

He goggled at the sight of the slice of chocolate cake she was beginning to devour. “Wow, and I thought Billy had cut me a big piece!”

As soon as she’d swallowed, Grace chuckled. “He’s trying to fatten me up. He’s already warned me he’s going to be shoving food at me all weekend.”

“How come?” Elijah asked, taking a bite himself.
“Oh, I lost a bit of weight a while ago. He seems to think I need it back.”

“He’s fucking crazy. You look perfect to me.” He suddenly grinned. “I still wish you had a younger sister.”

Grace briefly bent her head sideways to rest it on Elijah’s shoulder. “Aw, you’re such a sweetie. Delusional, but a sweetie.” She sat up again, giggling a little as he protested, but before he could really say much she stuck a forkful of cake in his mouth.

Elijah was hard pressed not to laugh and spit it everywhere. He chewed the cake and glanced toward Billy to make sure he was enjoying himself, and was surprised and a little taken aback to see Orlando watching Grace, frowning slightly.

A few minutes later, Dom gained everyone’s attention by loudly whistling through his teeth. “Oi—listen up. In honour of your birthday—”

“In eight months,” Billy supplied helpfully.

“—in eight months, Billy, we have a few little tokens of our love and esteem we’d like to present to you.”

“You didn’t!”

“Shut up, wanker, this is my big moment,” Dom stage-whispered, then grandly continued. “We did. We thought it was about time we reminded you exactly what you mean to us. Who wants to go first?”

“Me!” Hannah said immediately, and pulled a vividly-wrapped box from where she’d hidden it behind the sofa, and passed it down to Billy. “You have some great t-shirts, Billy, but you just don’t accessorize them properly,” she grinned as he began to open the package.

Billy burst out laughing as he uncovered a pair of Converse Chucks sneakers—in a vertigo-inducing plaid. “You’re fucking kidding me—where did you find these, Hannah? They’re bloody fantastic!”

“What, you mean you’ll wear them?” she exclaimed, surprised.

“Hell, no, I’ve never seen a pair of more hideous shoes—that’s why I love them.” Billy laughed. “I bet Dom wants to borrow them, though.”

“Could I?” Dom asked eagerly. “Those are fucking mint, those are.”

After the laughter had died down, Billy opened Sean’s present, which came in a large white envelope cheerfully decorated with crayon. “Artwork courtesy your girls, Seanie?”

Sean grinned. “Yeah. They say ‘Happy Birthday, Uncle Billy’!” He imitated a high, childish voice.

“Tell them Uncle Billy loved it.” He looked down at the sheaf of papers he withdrew, puzzled. After reading a few lines, flipping a page, and reading a few more, he looked up to see both Sean and Elijah snickering. “What is this?”

Sean sat back, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee. “That, my transatlantic friend, is an attempt to get you to come visit us a little more often. It’s an alphabetized listing by county of every single surf shop in Southern California.”
“Get the fuck away!” Billy exclaimed, looking pleased as punch as he rifled through the pages again. “God, Sean, this must’ve taken you hours.”

“Days. So I’ll be really cheesed off if all my hard work is for nothing,” he laughed.

“It won’t be, I swear,” Billy promised happily. “This is amazing, man. Thank you.”

Margaret and Alex’s present came next, and consisted of one tiny bundle and one large flat one.

“Which should I open first?” Billy asked, already grinning given the tone of the previous two gifts.

His sister beamed back at him. “The wee one.”

He quickly tore the paper open to reveal a small, rather cheap-looking cell phone. His head tilted, and he looked up from underneath raised eyebrows, his lips quivering. “Go on, then. Going to tell me why you bought me a phone when I already own a much, much prettier one?”

“You own one?” Margaret said innocently. “I had no idea, seeing as I never hear from you. I thought maybe you didn’t know how to use a mobile, so I even bought you a pre-programmed one. Mine is the only number it will dial.”

Billy fell back on the sofa, laughing fit to kill. “My own sister!” he wailed. “My own sister abuses me so. Grace, make her be nice to me for a change!”

Grace smiled up at him from her lounging position on the floor. “Do I have to? This is much more fun.”

He dug his toes into her side. “Traitor.”

“Open the other one,” Grace pointed to the larger, flat package still in his lap. “I’m dying to see what that one is.” She grinned over at Margaret, who laughed merrily.

“I’m surrounded by people who take delight in torturing me,” Billy moaned, but began opening the second gift anyway.

“Yeah, and you love every second of it,” Grace retorted.

“Didn’t take her long to get you pegged, did it, Bill?” Ewan snickered, and Elijah hooted.

“When did this turn from a surprise party into a roast?” Billy demanded, keeping a straight face with difficulty.

Grace looked at her watch. “About ten minutes ago, I think.”

“Eight minutes forty-seven seconds, actually,” Dom said smoothly.

She chuckled. “Dom. The official timekeeper of the Olympics, the World Tiddlywinks Championships, and Billy’s Birthday Party.”

“The most important being the last, of course,” Billy interjected.

“Oh, of course,” Dom agreed. “So what is it, Billy?”

Billy looked down at his lap and laughed out loud again. “Let me guess,” he said, holding up a book of ordnance survey maps of Lanarkshire, Scotland. “Because I don’t seem to be able to find your house anymore, right?”
“Exactly,” Margaret grinned.

After Ewan’s present—a bottle of gin, which puzzled Billy a little, as he didn’t really care for gin and he knew Ewan knew that—and Viggo’s gift of four bottles of strangely flavoured and wildly over-proof homemade alcohols, it was Orlando’s turn. When Billy picked up the smallish present and gave it a bit of a shake, he heard a thick sloshing noise, and pondered. “Some sort of liqueur? Bailey’s might sound like that…” He tore the paper and withdrew a box, then suddenly bellowed, “Bloom, you sodding twat! Get your arse over here so I can beat the shite out of you, whelp!” And he promptly dissolved into helpless laughter.

“What is it?” Elijah demanded, twisting around and on to his knees to pick the box up out of the torn wrappings on Billy’s lap. He, too, began to laugh loudly, and held it up for all to see.

Sean, sitting beside Billy, read it out loud. “Age-Defying Crème for Men. What’s so funny?”

Elijah looked as if he laughed any harder, he’d have an accident.


Billy gasped, “Orlando, so kind of you to be concerned for my complexion.”

Orlando grinned widely. “It’s all that surfing you do, mate. The sun is so bad for your skin—especially a pasty little porridge-wog like you.”

“I’ll have you know this porcelain skin is the envy of all,” he said loftily, cheerfully unscrewing the lid of the cream and sniffing it.

“Let me try some, Bill,” Dom asked, reaching across the space between his chair and the sofa with an outstretched palm. “Never too early to worry about wrinkle defense, you know.”

Eyes twinkling, Billy peered at him. “No. Apparently it’s not.”

“Gobshite,” Dom grinned. When Billy tipped the bottle, the cream was runnier than he’d expected, and Dom wound up with a handful. “Jesus, Bill—you trying to say something, here?”

“No, sorry,” Billy chuckled. “It got away from me. Just share it around a bit.”

Viggo, on Dom’s other side, held out a hand. “I’ll try some. I enjoy a good moisturizer.”

“You guys are seriously freaking me out,” Hannah said conversationally, watching the men smoothing cream into their skin.

Dom tried to rub the remainder on his hands and face, but there was just too much left. “Bugger. All right, who wants to be slathered?”

Shifting slightly so her back was squarely facing Dom’s legs, Grace held her hands up behind her head. “Go for it.”

Dom proceeded to quickly rub the excess cream into her hands.

“See, now that feels just lovely,” Grace said happily. “I think people should share their Age-Defying Crème more often.”

Dom chuckled, but was a little puzzled when he glanced across the room to see Orlando’s smile freeze as he watched them.
“Okay, my present next, Billy,” Elijah said, passing a rather haphazardly-wrapped gift up to Billy on the sofa. “There’s actually two in there,” he amended. “One is mine, the other is Grace’s.” Obviously excited, Elijah avoided looking at her.

With a brief, warm glance down at Grace, Billy turned his attention to Elijah. “Yours, hmm? It’s not going to explode in my face, is it? Another booby-trap?”

“No, no—I swear it’s not,” Elijah giggled, and Sean explained to Grace.

“One year in New Zealand Elijah decided to try his hand at playing pranks. You know those cans where the snake leaps out when you open the lid?” At Grace’s amused nod, he continued. “Elijah coated it with talcum powder. Poor Bill was covered—it was in his hair, in his clothes, in his mouth—”

“—Up my nose,” Billy added darkly.

Grace laughed out loud. “Elijah, what a dirty trick to play!” She then added in a whisper deliberately loud enough to carry, “I’ll have to remember that one.”

“Don’t you even think about it, wee girl,” Billy warned.

She raised her eyebrows innocently. “Did I say anything about you?”

He finished tearing off the wrapping paper, and held up Elijah’s odd-looking gift. “What is this?” he asked, looking at it from all sides. It looked to be a strange, diamond-shaped radio, with small speakers top and bottom and a large round mirror in the centre.

Elijah grinned. “It’s a splash-proof CD player. You can listen to it in the shower, or take it to the beach, and you don’t have to worry if you drip some water on it.”

“Really?” Billy asked, surprised and pleased, as he fiddled with it. “That’s pretty cool. Oh, the mirror is where the CD goes—” When he’d opened it, he found a disc inside, and read the label. “‘Thursday Afternoon Sessions’. Is this your part, Grace?”

She nodded jerkily, slightly pink.

“I don’t recognize the title. Who is it?” he asked curiously.

She found herself unable to answer.

Smiling, Dom came to her rescue. “It’s a previously unrecorded artist, actually. Fairly hesitant about the whole process, you know, but luckily the moguls at Woodaghan Studios talked her into it.”

“Woodaghan—” Billy repeated, and then his eyes widened. “Grace? This is you?”

She nodded dumbly.

As Billy stared at her, Margaret exclaimed, “Oh, how wonderful! What a marvellous idea. I do hope you’ll let us hear a bit, Grace.”

“Yeah, that would be awesome,” Sean agreed.

Billy was still looking down at Grace, but now with a wide smile. “Not until I hear it first. My birthday present, I get the first listen. Thank you, wee girl.”
Flushing, Grace finally managed to say, “It was Elijah’s idea. Elijah and Dom’s. They did it.”

“Then I’ll have to thank them later, won’t I?” he said quietly, still smiling at her, looking immensely pleased.

“All right, final present of the night,” Dom said loudly. “I’ve saved the best for last, of course.”

“Of course,” Billy mocked him, reluctantly tearing his eyes away from Grace and her pink cheeks. “What is it, a llama? A motorcycle? A pet rattlesnake?”

“Close, but no,” Dom grinned. He handed Billy a neatly wrapped box, with a smaller bundle taped to the top.

Billy opened the little present first, and with a puzzled frown, pulled out two rolls of film.

“Film for your digital camera,” Dom explained with a straight face.

“Oh—right. Thanks.” Billy went to put it down beside him, and then stopped. “Wait a minute—” He suddenly lobbed the film canisters at Dom. “Fucking wanker.”

Dom hid behind Viggo, laughing.

Billy opened the box next, and pulled out a matching toque, scarf, and mittens, all in a fuzzy deep blue and green plaid. “Worried I was going to get cold up here, mate?”

“Well, yeah, since you left your hat at my place last time you were down.”

His forehead wrinkled. “I did?”

“Yeah. That black one. Don’t know why you brought a hat to L.A., anyway.”

“Black—ohh,” Billy’s face cleared. “That was Grace’s, actually. Remember?” he asked her, grinning. “After we dropped ‘Lij off at the hotel—you made me put on your hat. I guess I stuffed it in my pocket when we got to your place, because I found it when I unpacked in L.A. Dom’ll send it to you.”

“Dom’ll send it to you,” Dom mimicked. “Maybe you should just give her your new one, it would serve you right.” He turned to look down at Grace. “He’s forever picking things up and putting them down somewhere else and then forgetting them completely. How many pairs of sunglasses did you go through in New Zealand, Bill?”

Billy chuckled. “Four or five.”

“Four or five my arse. More like ten or twelve. And that’s after I went around picking them up after you. In fact, two of the pair you lost were mine.”

Grace giggled. “So the moral of the story is don’t loan him your sunglasses?”

“Not if you don’t want to lose them,” Elijah agreed, ducking the pillow Billy threw at him. “Try those on, Billy, see how they look.”

Billy wrapped the scarf about his neck, yanked on the toque, and pulled on the mittens, laughing loudly as he discovered the mittens attached to each other by a long string. “So I don’t lose them. That’s fucking fantastic, that is.”

Orlando snickered. “You look about twelve years old.”
“Then I guess that cream you gave me is working already, isn’t it?” Billy shot back cheerfully.
“Thank you, everyone—thank you for the party, for the fantastic presents, and most of all thank you for coming. This is absolutely brilliant.”

Elijah whispered loudly, “Is it time to drink yet?”

Laughing out loud, Grace said, “You bet. What’s everyone having?” She climbed to her feet and looked around expectantly.

Billy stood also, pulling off the hat and mittens, but leaving the scarf around his neck. “I’ll give you a hand.” Together, they collected drinks orders, and then made their way to the kitchen.

Once they were around the corner and hidden from view of everyone else, Billy proceeded to hug her so tightly he lifted her off the floor.

“Erg—Billy”—she managed. “Put me down.”

He ignored her request. “I can’t believe you did this. And the CD. How the hell did you manage it? I’m never going to trust your innocent act again, you tricky wee girl.”

She would have laughed if she had breath enough. “Billy—please”—she panted.

He reluctantly lowered her to the floor.

Grace breathed deeply. “Just because I’m short, everyone thinks they can crush me to death…”

Billy laughed. He put his hands on either side of her head, gave her a loud smacking kiss on the forehead. “You shouldn’t have gone to the trouble, wee girl.”

“I didn’t,” she grinned, rubbing her side. “It was all Dom and Elijah—they took care of everything, including the CD. I just offered the venue, and did some driving.”

“But how did you even know I was going to be—wait. Let me guess.” He cocked his eyebrow.

“Dom and Elijah?”

“Yep.”

“So they ruined my surprise for you,” he pretended to be hurt. He let his hands settle on her shoulders.

“They asked first,” she protested. “They asked if they could ruin my surprise in order to get you good. You don’t really think I could say no to that, do you?”

He laughed. “No, I don’t suppose you could.”

She grinned again, her eyes alight. “We really truly got you, didn’t we?”

“You really truly did,” he confirmed. He lightly kissed her on the lips, as between friends. “You ever thought of trying your hand at acting? Because I would have sworn you were surprised to see me this morning.”

She giggled delightedly. “Really? Oh, good! I was so afraid I was going to give the game away.”

“So was it all an act, then?” he asked, a smile on his face which deepened as she blushed.

“Of course not. It was—it is good to see you again. It feels like a long time.”
“It has been,” he agreed, his voice soft. “Too long, wee girl.” He slid his hands from her shoulders to her arms, tugging her closer.

“Billy—”

He stopped her by leaning in and kissing her again, still gently, but no longer quite so simply as he’d kiss a friend. His arms went around her, and he smiled against her lips as he felt her hands creep up to his neck.

Then she was pulling away, nervous and a little embarrassed. “Well, I’ll let you get your sister’s drink,” she said, falsely bright. “I’ll just—”

“You’ll just nothing.” He shook his head. “Don’t look like that, luv. You have no reason to be scared of me.”

“I’m not scared of you,” she said firmly but quickly. “You shouldn’t ever think that.”

“Then what’s with the nerves? Why are you suddenly across the room and halfway out the door?”

She frowned. “I’m standing right in front of you.”

“You know what I mean.”

Her frown only deepened. “Do we have to do this now? There’s a room full of people out there who will be wondering where we’ve got to with their drinks.”

“Let them wonder.” He smiled at her. “It’s my birthday party, I’ll do what I want. Now come on, why don’t you want me to kiss you?”

“We—you said—”

“I said what? Spit it out, wee girl.” He took her hands in his.

“You said we weren’t looking behind anymore!” she snapped, just managing to keep her voice quiet, irrationally annoyed. “You said no looking back, but here you are, right back where we left off.”

“I see.” He nodded. “I’m sorry, that’s my fault, I wasn’t very clear. This isn’t going back to where we left off last time.” He let go of her hands to rub gently, reassuringly up and down her arms.

“Believe me. This is moving forward from where we are right now, dear heart.” He leaned in and kissed her lightly, then grabbed several beers and walked out of the room.

Grace abruptly sat on a kitchen chair.

Billy finished pouring his fourth drink in the kitchen, then from the doorway surveyed the living room. A contented, pleased smile added a further warm glow to the flush already left high on his cheekbones from the alcohol. His eyes sought out Margaret, who he’d rather missed since Christmas, and he felt satisfaction like a warm reassuring weight in his stomach at the sight of her holding hands with Alex and laughing delightedly with Grace over by the table. He heard Elijah and Orlando talking loudly out on the enclosed porch, Elijah undoubtedly smoking one of his clove
cigarettes; Billy hoped he’d checked with Grace first. His eyes tracked to Viggo and Sean having what looked like a very involved conversation in front of the bookcase, and then to where Dom, Hannah, and Ewan were arguing loudly and with much laughter over something utterly ridiculous, he had no doubt. He watched his old friend flirt shamelessly with Hannah, but was not the least concerned. Ewan was a first-class ladies man, but with a heart of gold hidden carefully beneath his teasing and suggestiveness. And Billy knew despite Hannah’s youth, she was more than capable of not only holding her own with Ewan, but likely of giving back as much or more than what she took.

Billy was trying to decide which little group to join when Viggo caught his eye, and grinned. Billy walked over in time to hear Sean say, “…Native peoples actually moved northwards with the receding glaciers—” and knew why Viggo had grinned at him.

“Sean. What the hell are you on about, you intellectual prat. You’re supposed to be getting pished with us,” Billy teased, slinging his arm about Sean’s waist.

Sean laughed. “I’m working on it, Billy.” He held up his glass. “Guess what I’m drinking. Come on, guess.”


Sean wrapped his arm around Billy’s neck and yanked him closer, taking care not to jog Billy’s arm holding his own drink. “I’ll have you know I’ve shed the Mr. Safety persona for the night. Dom promised me he’d stay sober tonight as long as he didn’t have to tomorrow night as well, and I’m on my fourth G and T.”

“Oh! Billy gasped, unable to hold his grin back despite an effort. “You? Getting paralytic? Has the whole world gone fucking mad?”

Sean released him and gave him a little shove. “Oh, shut up, Boyd. How about a little support for my drinking escapades, huh? I’ll dazzle you with my…my…”

“Alcoholic prowess?” Viggo suggested helpfully, his own nose looking just a little rosy.

“Exactly. Thank you, Viggo. You’re a decent guy, you know that?”

“As are you, my friend.”

Billy burst into laughter. “I’ll just leave you two alone then, shall I?” He ducked away quickly before either of them could protest.

He headed toward his sister and Grace, but as he crossed the room Dom called him over. “Billy—come here a moment, would you?”

He detoured over. “I hear you’re the resident martyr tonight?”

Dom looked puzzled. “Martyr? What? Anyway, would you clear something up? Ewan says you’ve got a record, and I say you’ve never been inside a police station in your life. So, which is it? He’s having me on, right?”

Billy glared at his childhood friend. “You utter bastard. You swore you’d never breathe a word of that!”

As Dom yelped, “What?” and Hannah burst into low giggles, Ewan raised one hand to forestall Billy’s ire and mildly said, “I swore I’d never breathe a word to anyone in Glasgow, remember?”
Billy stared at him, mouth still open. After a moment, he managed, “No, you didn’t. You swore you’d never tell…” He trailed off, trying desperately to recall words spoken two decades earlier. “Shite. I don’t remember.”

Ewan laughed. “We swore we’d never tell a soul in the whole entire city. At the time, Bill, that was good enough because we never thought we’d get out of Glasgow, did we? But they,” he gestured to Dom and Hannah, “are not from Glasgow, and we’re not in Glasgow. Whichever way you look at it, I’m safe.”

“You always did twist things to your own ends, even when you didn’t know it,” Billy said resignedly. “Glaikit bawheid.”

“Skelly eyed schemie,” Ewan retorted with long-standing ease.

Billy hooted. “Ye hackit—”

“Wait just a fucking minute!” Dom objected, finally able to manage more than incoherent sounds. “What the hell do you mean you’ve got a record? And why have you never told me about this?”

“The plan was,” Billy narrowed his eyes at Ewan again, “to never tell anyone. But since the choob here—”

“And would you please speak English,” Dom moaned, trying not to smile.

Billy raised two fingers at him. “Since my sordid secret seems to be out… I’d just like to point out I don’t actually have a record. Not anymore, anyway.”

“But you did,” Ewan supplied helpfully.

“Aye, I did. Juvenile. So did you, you wanker.”

“But what did you do?” Dom demanded.

“There were four of us—Ewan and I, and two other mates, Jimmie and…who else was it?” Billy looked to Ewan.

“Specky Paulie.”

Billy laughed again. “Of course. Specky Paulie, how could I forget? ’Twas mostly his idea in the first place, wasn’t it?”

“Aye. Cheeky sod, he was.”

“Billy!” Dom wailed.

“All right, keep your pants on, Monaghan,” Billy chuckled. “It’s not like I’m a legendary criminal. We got nicked for public indecency and mischief.”

Dom valiantly kept down the snicker that threatened. “What the hell did you do?”

“We were around fourteen or fifteen. Jimmie’d got his hands on a bottle—vodka, I think—”

Ewan shook his head. “Gin.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Billy winced. “I remember now. Foul shite, that was. Haven’t touched the stuff since, actually.” He paused, then closed his eyes and smacked himself in the forehead. “Gin. That’s
why you gave me that bottle of gin for a prezzie, you were planning all along on spilling my secrets, you dirty great wanker!”

“Damned right,” Ewan grinned widely. “I’ve been waiting twenty years to be able to tell this story.”

“I bet you have, you gobshite. Anyway,” he continued with a grin, seeing Dom about to protest again. “We went to the park and got trousered. Bloody hammered. Specky Paulie came up with the absolutely brilliant idea to stand on the bridge over the railroad and try and piss on the trains.”

Dom laughed out loud. “You never.”

“Sadly, we did. And in our state, we didn’t notice the police car until it was too late. They hauled us in and called our families, all of whom quite happily left us in the nick overnight.”

“Worst night of my bloody life,” Ewan agreed. “Puking up gin and hung over as fuck in the morning, only to be given the bollocking of my life when Da finally came and dragged me home.”

“Jimmie got it the worst,” Billy grinned. “When his mum found her bottle of gin missing, she went off her nut and packed him off to his grandparents in Inverness for the summer.”

“And you?” Dom asked, still chuckling in disbelief.

“Gran grounded me for a month—”

“Ah, is that what happened? She never did tell me,” came a stern voice from behind Billy, and he whirled to find Margaret and Grace standing behind him, the latter looking distinctly amused.

“Ah fuck,” he groaned. “You two weren’t supposed to hear any of that.”

Margaret crossed her arms on her chest. “You were a surly bugger that whole month, and I never even knew why.”

Billy had the good grace to flush. “I told you I was sorry about that. But I wasn’t about to tell my sister I’d been charged with public indecency for getting trolleyed and pissing off a bridge!”

“Wait a minute,” Dom said slowly. “Is that why you wouldn’t piss in the fountain with Elijah and I in New Zealand? Because you’d already been nicked once for whizzing in public?”

Grace dissolved into helpless laughter, and it wasn’t long before Margaret joined her.

Billy kicked Ewan in the shin. “Thanks very much, mate.”

“Happy birthday, Billy,” Ewan grinned.
Billy sat on the sofa between Elijah and Grace, head swiveling back and forth as he tried to follow their conversation, the words of one riding right over those of the other. Grace had finally taken pity on him and she and Elijah were explaining how they’d managed the surprise party, when Dom came over and without a word flopped down full-length across all their laps, his head winding up on Grace’s thigh. He sighed loudly.

Biting back a laugh, Grace asked, “Something wrong, Pellinore dear?” as Billy muttered something about fat-arsed English wankers and tried to shove Dom off his lap.

Dom clung on. “No,” he said sadly, pathetically. “I’m fine.” He sighed again, chest rising and falling dramatically.

Elijah started to giggle.

Grace began stroking Dom’s hair. “What is it, dear? Come on, you can tell your Penny,” she encouraged sweetly.

“It’s nothing, really. Only…”

Billy rolled his eyes. “You’re such a gobshite.”

“Shh, Billy,” she admonished. “Poor dear Pellinore is going to tell me what’s wrong, aren’t you darling?” she crooned, and Elijah giggled louder.

“Oh, Penelope. You’re the only one who cares!” Dom proclaimed loudly, trying to knee Elijah in the stomach.

“I know,” she agreed, trying to ignore Billy’s poorly suppressed laugh. “Now tell me what the matter is and Penelope will fix it.”

“Elwood hid my dill pickle flavoured potato chips. You know, the ones you bought me that I was going to try for the very first time in my entire life. And I can’t find them!” he wailed.

“Aww, my poor little lamb. Come with Penny then, and we’ll go look for them.”

“In a minute,” he said, eyes closing in contentment. “This hair thing is nice.”

Grace laughed and threaded her fingers further into his hair, scratching his head. “This is what I do. I’m one of those people that Plays With Hair.”

One eye cracked open and looked up at her. “Very impressive. I absolutely heard that capitalization.”

Billy groaned. “Get off, you silly wee twat.” He gave Dom an extra hard shove, sending him to the floor, and said to Grace, “You’d best help him find his effing crisps or he’ll never leave you alone.”

Grinning, Grace got to her feet, but stopped when Billy reached out and touched her hand.

“But come back, yeah?”
She smiled. “Okay.”

Moments later she returned to resume her seat beside Billy, who was--miraculously--alone on the sofa.

"Did you find them?” he asked, elbow on the back of the sofa and his head leaning on his hand.

"Yeah. 'Lij hid them in the salad crisper in the fridge, figuring Dom would never check there."

"Don't think I would have, either," he grinned.

"The bag has a picture of a pickle on the front. It looks like a cucumber, ergo, the salad crisper. Quite logical, really." She paused as he laughed, and then asked, "Where did 'Lij go?" She tucked one leg up underneath her.

Billy watched her mouth as she took a sip of her drink. "Don't know. Don't really care, right now, either. I'm only glad to have a moment with just you. How are you doing, luv?"

"I'm doing great. How are you?" she smiled.

"Better and better, wee girl. Better and better."

She swallowed as she felt his hand brush her neck.

Grace realized she hadn't seen Billy in a while, and went in search of him. Knocking on the closed door of one of the bedrooms she heard him call, and entered to find him sitting on the bed, Elijah's birthday present in hand, listening to her CD.

He looked up as she quickly closed the door behind her, and smiled. "I couldn't wait any more, I was dying to know what was on here. You sound fantastic, wee girl."

Embarrassed, she sat beside him. "Thanks. Elijah did it all, really."

"Not all of it, unless he's developed a hell of a lot better voice than he used to have," Billy chuckled. He started the CD over again. "I love the songs you've given me."

She listened as her voice rose over the guitar, singing *Lean On Me*. "That one's pretty self-explanatory. I'm on your side."

"I don't know that I've ever heard it in a woman's voice. It's a different song in a higher key, ye know? Lovely." He looked over at her. "And it's good to be reminded." He hit the skip button to move on to the second song, *Stand By Me*, listening to the lyrics.

*When the night has come*

*And the land is dark*

*And the moon is the only light we see*

*No, I won't be afraid*

*Oh, I won't be afraid*

*Just as long as you stand*

*Stand by me*
Grace blushed. "It was a bit hard to put that on there. Hard to ask."

"I will, you know."

"...I know."

Billy skipped to the third song. "Is This Where I Come In. I remember this one. I still love the image of you as an angel, with a crooked halo and your wings caught in the door."

She chuckled. "Don't know that anyone would call me angelic, but a klutz? Definitely."

The fourth song started. "It took me a minute to place this one," he said as the guitar accompaniment began. "But this is the Paul Simon song you sang for me when I was sick of traveling, isn't it? The one I told you I wanted you to record for me. You remembered."

"Yeah. It's called Quiet."

"That's right. And the guitar--you said you wrote that, right?"

"Well--'wrote' is a bit of an overstatement, I think. 'Messed around until I came up with it', is a bit more accurate."

He grinned. "How do you think every musician writes? Every great song is nothing but messing around until it sounds good." He hit the skip button again. "Travis. Excellent song, too, and not heard as often as some. I really like how you changed this up to suit your voice, it sounds great."

"Thanks," she said weakly.

"And just listen to that--"

_But I'm standing on my own_  
And this house is not a home  
It's so sad to see you go  
Things are high, things are low  
And it's good to know you know  
If you got nowhere to go  
And you could spend the night with me  
I will sleep on the settee

_It's so sad to be alone_  
No one cares cos no one's home  
So if you're there  
Pick up the phone  
Because I'm standing on my own  
Because I'm standing on my own

"You know what that says?" he asked quietly, smiling.

"Wh--what?"

"That says I miss you. Well, you sang it, so it says you miss me. But it's right, it's really...spot on. Thank you, wee girl."

Grace just ducked her head.
Billy skipped to the last song on the disc. "You're going to have to explain this one to me, though, I don't think I recognize it." The music began, just Grace's guitar. Her voice was nowhere to be heard. "It's very pretty, but are there no lyrics to it, then?"

"Ehm--well... Yeah, there are. I mean, properly speaking, there are. Just not on here," she stammered.

He cocked his head. "Will you sing them to me?"

"Umm--no. Not yet. Is that okay?"

Billy looked curious, but said, "Of course, wee girl," easily enough. He laid his arm on her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Thank you for the CD. It's fantastic, I couldn't have asked for better, and I know I'm going to be listening to it often. Especially if I need to hear your voice a bit." He dropped a light kiss on her temple. "I'm also not going to let everyone else hear it. I think this is just between you and me, yeah?"

Grace sighed with relief and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Oh, I'd appreciate that."

"But I am going to make you play Is This Where I Come In for them later," he smiled down at her. "Margaret would love that one. Will you?"

"I suppose. If you're going to make me."

"Thanks, dear heart. Shall we go back out?"

Much later, seeing Billy, Elijah, and Hannah occupied in one corner, Dom and Viggo laughing with Margaret in the kitchen, and no sign of the others, Grace took the opportunity to slip outside for a bit of fresh air. She quickly shrugged into her jacket in the hall, tugged her boots on, and quietly opened and closed the door.

She walked down the stairs to the lake, holding carefully to the rail in case there was ice. Once on the permanent dock, she debated whether to sit at the end, but there was a bit of a wind coming across the frozen lake, so she leaned her shoulder against the leeside of the boathouse instead, shoving her hands deep into her coat pockets. Every once in a while she could dimly hear a shout or a loud laugh from the cottage, but for the most part the only sound was the wind in the trees. She smiled to hear Dom bellow something inside. It was amazing how quickly he was becoming a treasured friend—she could easily see why Billy loved him.

The noise from the cottage briefly grew louder, then softened again, and Grace realized the door had opened and closed. She smiled again. Billy had been taking every opportunity all night to spend a few minutes alone with her, and she was starting to look forward to it despite herself. She tipped her face up, looking at the stars, and waited as she heard footsteps coming down the stairs. The steps approached, and wordlessly, he slipped an arm around her and nuzzled her neck.

“Hi,” Grace murmured, proud of herself for not automatically pulling away.

It wasn’t until she leaned back that Grace realized it wasn’t Billy behind her. She whirled around with a little gasp to find Orlando standing there, jacketless, an odd smile on his face.
“Orlando—what—are you doing?” she stammered, startled and confused. “You should have a jacket, it’s cold—"

“I’m all right. You came out to look at the stars, yeah?”

“Umm—yeah.” She leaned her back against the solid wood of the boathouse. “And for some quiet.” She smiled at him tentatively, a little intimidated by his movie star status and looks. Half the people in her cottage were movie stars, but Orlando was moving in a different sphere. “You actors are a rowdy bunch, you know.”

“Just party animals, right?” he said coolly, his dark eyes shadowed further by the night.

“I—I didn’t mean anything by that, Orlando,” she said, uncertain and growing increasingly uncomfortable.

His face lightened suddenly. “Of course you didn’t. And we are partying it up in there, aren’t we? Billy seems to be having fun, yeah?”

Grace smiled again, this time genuinely. “Yeah. I’m glad.”

“And you’re having fun too?” he asked, leaning his palm on the boathouse near her head.

“Yes, I am. You?”

“I could be having a better time,” he said silkily, trailing his cold fingers down her cheek. “What do you say, Grace? I can be a lot more fun than Billy.”

Grace quickly stepped away from him and angrily demanded, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Come on, Grace,” he answered smoothly, unperturbed. “It’s not unusual to be hot for a little celebrity arse. Billy, Dom—me. Why not?”

“Dom?” she stared, shocked.

He sidled closer, and she was too stunned to think of backing away again. “Yeah, Dom. I’ve seen the way you’ve been touching him.”

Grace slapped Orlando stingingly on the cheek. “You son of a bitch.”

“Don’t be coy,” he purred as if she’d never smacked him. “Tell me what you really think. Do you really care if it’s me or Billy or Dom or Elijah? As long as it’s a hot star—“

“Shut your fucking mouth now, Orlando, and I won’t tell anyone about this little conversation,” she ground out. Humiliated, she had no intention of telling anyone anyway, but he didn’t need to know that.

Orlando leaned in so suddenly he caught her off-guard, and he kissed her, his tongue sloppily pushing at her firmly closed lips.

Grace now understood at least part of what was happening. She gave him a hard shove. “You’re drunk!”

“So what if I am? Was Billy drunk when you picked him up in Toronto? Is that what happened?” He dragged the back of his hand across his mouth and slouched closer again, his easy agility intact.

“When I picked—“ she stopped, shook her head. “I don’t know what fucked up idea you’ve got,
Orlando, but this lovely little scene is over. I care an awful lot about Billy, which is the only reason he won’t hear a word about this from me,” she snapped, furious. “It would cut him to the quick to think one of his best friends was trying to get into my pants at his own fucking birthday party!” She poked him sharply in the chest. “You get your sorry, skinny, egotistical, fucking drunken arse inside before you freeze to death, not that you don’t deserve a little frostbite in a few key spots, and you bloody well sober up and I hope you have one hell of a hangover in the morning, at which time I’ll be expecting a damn good apology!” She turned away from him, fuming.

Orlando put his hand on her shoulder. “What—“

“Get the hell away from me!” she roughly shook him off.

“But—“

“Orlando, go. Now.”

He went. She heard the snow crunch under his feet as he climbed the steps, and she stood there rigidly, shaking with hurt, anger, and disgust.

Suddenly there was another voice, and she whirled to see Dom at the top of the steps. He said something in a low voice to Orlando, who then continued on up and into the cottage, as Dom came down to Grace.

He was bundled into both his and Sean’s coats, his hands in his pockets. He walked past her without a word, stopping only at the end of the dock, and raised his eyes to look at the bright cold stars.

Grace huffily thumped her back against the boathouse, staring ahead of her down the frozen shoreline, her breath pluming white in front of her. Off to her right, Dom continued to watch the sky.

“Dom—“

“Shh.”

“Dom—“

“Shh, Penelope,” he cut her off. “Listen.”

She listened, but heard nothing except the wind rattling a tree branch against the roof of the boathouse. “What am I—“

“Shut your trap, Pen.” She could hear the smile in his voice. “Just listen for a minute.”

Grace forced herself to relax. Closed her eyes, and listened. After a few minutes, she faintly heard Billy, inside the cottage, roaring with laughter.

“There,” Dom said, startling her. “Did you hear that?”

“What? Billy?”

“Yes. That was a good thing you did, Grace.”

“I didn’t do anything,” she muttered.

Dom turned and walked over to her, leaned against the boathouse beside her, his sleeve brushing
hers. “You said you weren’t going to tell him, when you could. When you have every right to. You’re letting him have his good time.”

“How much did you hear?”

“Most of it,” Dom admitted. “I didn’t know you were out here, so when I saw Orlando—who’s been drinking fairly steadily—wander out without a jacket, I thought I’d better come after him.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you stop him?” she demanded, annoyed and embarrassed.

“I was on my way down the stairs when my name came up,” he said candidly. “I didn’t know if that was the best moment to get involved. Besides,” he grinned, still not looking at her, “then you walloped him one, and I figured you were doing just fine on your own.” A moment later he grew serious again as he said, “I’m sorry he kissed you.”

“What the hell was he thinking, Dom?” she quietly moaned. “I thought he was Billy’s friend, your friend.”

“He is, Grace. Please believe me when I say that wasn’t Orli—he loves Billy like they’re blood.”

She finally looked up at him at that odd statement. “He’s got a funny way of showing it.”

“Let me talk to him.”

“Dom, no—“

“Shh.” He dropped an arm across her shoulders and gave her a bit of a squeeze. “It’s just between the three of us, I swear. But he really fucked up, and I’m going to find out why. I’ve never known him to do anything so…contemptible. And especially not to a mate. Trust me, Penny love—there’s something behind it.”

“Fine. Just don’t let Billy find out, it’s too embarrassing,” she grumbled.

Dom was surprised. “What the blazes have you got to be embarrassed about? You didn’t do anything.”

“Of course I didn’t,” she said impatiently. “But what the hell kind of impression do your friends have of me, that Orlando would think I’m so…easy?”

“Hey,” he said firmly, letting go to stand directly in front of her and look her straight in the eyes. He was dismayed to see angry tears glittering there. “No one thinks that, Grace.”

“Apparently Orlando does.”

“Then he’s a git, and I’ll be setting him straight, don’t you worry. Come on, let’s go in. Forget what Orli said, and you’ll have your apology out of him in the morning—if it’s the last thing he ever does.”

Grace snorted. “Go ahead, Dom. I’m staying out here for a few more minutes.”

“Are you mad? It’s Baltic out here.” He jumped up and down a little.

She gave in to a small smile. “Baltic?”

“Cold. Really cold. Banished-to-Siberia cold.”
“You Brits are so delicate. No, if I come in now Billy will know something’s wrong.”

“Reads you that well, does he?” Dom shivered.

“Like a fucking book. Go on, Dom, I’ll be in soon.”

“Make sure you are. Billy would never forgive me if I left you out here to catch pneumonia.”

“I’ll be in as soon as I’m sure I won’t clock Orlando one.”

“Oh dear.” He pulled her into a quick hug. “Don’t let the cunt get to you.”

She couldn’t help but smile again. “That’s very nice, Dom.” She pushed him away. “Now get in the cottage.”

“All right.” He quickly reached the bottom of the steps, then turned to say, “Don’t be long, Pen.” He hurried up the stairs to the house.

Grace huddled further into her jacket and leaned against the boathouse again. She thought back to everything Orlando had said to her that night. He hadn’t been as overtly friendly as some of the others, but neither had he said anything that would lead her to think he held such a low opinion of her. She realized she was glad Dom was going to talk to him, was going to find out what was going on. It wasn’t like Billy—and it didn’t seem like Elijah or Dom—to love someone who showed so little respect. So maybe Dom was right, and there was something behind it other than too much booze.

She waited a few more minutes, thinking of Billy rather than Orlando, to make sure she was calm enough to head back inside. The problem was, thinking of Billy made her think about what he’d said earlier about moving forward, and it made her wonder all over again what exactly he had meant by that. Surely he didn’t mean he wanted—more, did he? Even in her thoughts she shied away from the word ‘relationship’. After all, it hadn’t been that long since he’d said he needed to stay single for a while. Just over a month, in fact. So he must have meant something else, mustn’t he? And why the fuck was she even a little relieved to find she couldn’t think of any other interpretation to Billy’s remark? Cut that out, Grace. She pushed off the boathouse and climbed the steps to the cottage.

Inside, there was no sign of Dom or Orlando, but Billy was at her side immediately.

“There you are, wee girl. You disappeared on me.”

“Sorry, Billy. Just needed some fresh air,” she smiled as she took off her jacket and boots. “Wanted to see the lake.”

“You’re mad—it’s brass monkey weather out there!” He took her hands. “Oh—you see, you’re freezing! Come sit down and warm up.”

“I’m fine, Billy, it’s not that bad out—“

“Shut it. Come on.” He led her to the sofa, at the end next to the woodstove, sat her down.

“Billy, I’m really fine—“

“Glad to hear it. Humour me, it’s my birthday.” He sat beside her, took one of her hands between both of his warm ones, and began to gently rub it.
“It’s not your birthday,” she pointed out.

“It’s my birthday party.”

She smiled. “You’re going to keep using that as an excuse to do anything you bloody well want, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely,” he grinned. “You need a drink.”

“No, I’m—“

“Elwood! Bring Grace a drink, would you?” he bellowed.

Elijah yelled back from the kitchen. “Sure! Whatcha drinkin’, dollface?”

“She’ll have rum and Coke,” Billy shouted back before she could so much as open her mouth. “And her name is Grace, Elwood!”

“That’s nice! Mine’s Elijah!”

Grace laughed out loud.

Billy frowned. “He just won that round, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” she chuckled. “I’m afraid he did.”

“Damn. He obviously hasn’t had enough to drink.”

“I think you’ve had a few, though, haven’t you?” she teased.

“A few,” he agreed cheerfully. “Enough to be quite happy. You need to catch up to me, luv, you’re not happy.”

“I’m perfectly happy, Billy.”

“No. You’re not. And I’d like to try and change that, if you’ll let me.” The words were innocent enough. But the way he looked at her when he said it—the way he kept looking at her—made her wonder for the second time that night what exactly Billy meant.

Elijah’s voice came from right beside her, making her start. “You two need a room?” When Grace looked up at him, confused, he gestured with the glass in his hand at her fingers entwined with Billy’s.

She snatched her hand away, knowing Elijah had caught them staring at each other like a couple of mooning calves. “Is that for me?” she asked coolly, reaching for the glass he held.

He grinned and let her take it. “Rum and Coke, as ordered.”

“Thanks, ‘Lij.”

“No prob. So—you two need a room?”

Billy and Grace both spoke at the same time.

“Shut it—“

“Elijah—“
He held his hands up, laughing. “No, I’m serious this time. We’re sorting out the sleeping arrangements. Margaret and Alex have already claimed one bed. Orlando’s hammered, so he gets an air mattress on the floor. Ewan has offered to take one as well. Dom and I have the bunkbeds in—”

Grace shook her head. “I still can’t believe you two chose the bunkbeds.”

“It’s fun! I haven’t slept in a bunkbed since that cabin we all rented in New Zealand—remember that, Billy?”

Billy was smiling again. “Yeah, I remember, ‘Lij. That place was great.”

Elijah sat on the floor in front of the woodstove, legs folded up and arms resting on his knees. “No, not great. It was…what was it Dom kept calling everything back then? ‘This beach is…’ or ‘Our fridge is…’?”

“Mint,” Billy supplied, laughing.

“Yes! Mint! That’s it!” he exclaimed. “Yeah, sleeping in bunkbeds again is mint. Do you mind, Grace?”

“Mind? Ah—no.”

“Excellent. So why don’t you two take the bed in our room, and Sean and Hannah can take the twin beds in the third room? Viggo will probably sleep out in the snow or something anyway.”

“But—“ Grace started to protest.

“Sounds good, ‘Lij,” Billy agreed, talking right over her objection. “In fact, I’ll come move our cases now, in case anyone wants to go to bed. Margaret and Alex might be tired, with the jetlag and all.” He bounded to his feet, and Elijah quickly got to his feet as well.

“I’ll give you a hand.” They started walking away.

“Billy! What—I’ll—“ Grace spluttered.

He turned, airily said, “Don’t worry, I’ll get your case. Don’t move, I’ll be right back.”

Billy hurried into the bedroom where Grace had deposited their bags earlier and handed his to Elijah. He picked up Grace’s and they proceeded into the far bedroom, which was crammed with a queen bed, a set of wooden bunkbeds, and two dressers. Elijah put Billy’s case on the bed and turned to him.

“Well?”

Billy grinned. “Proud of yourself, are you?”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

He laughed. “Yeah. That was very smooth—I couldn’t have done any better if I’d been able to plan it.”

“You’re still going to have to convince Grace,” Elijah pointed out.

“I think I’ll be able to. That was brilliant, putting us in here with you and Dom. No way she’d have gone for it in a room by ourselves.”
“Just remember,” Elijah said dryly, “We’re only three feet away.”

Billy grinned, punched Elijah’s arm, and rejoined Grace in the living room.

As soon as he flopped down on the sofa, Billy realized he’d made a mistake in leaving her sitting there. He’d just given her time to work up a good head of steam.

“You set me up!” she whispered ferociously, glancing across the room to where the others were engrossed in their conversation. “You fucking set me up, Billy!”

“What? No! What do you take me for?” he protested, just as quiet and every bit as vehement as she had been.

“Then what the hell was that? What do you think you’re playing at?” she demanded.

“I’m not playing at anything!” he said indignantly. Lowered his voice again when Viggo looked over. “Grace, I swear to you, I didn’t set you up. It was Elijah’s idea, I didn’t know he was going to come out with that. Did I jump all over it? You’re damn right I did. But it was his own idea.”

“Oh really? And why would Elijah be so concerned about us sharing a bed?”

Billy opened his mouth, but didn’t say anything.

Grace snorted and made to get up, but Billy locked his hand around her wrist.

“I can answer your question, Grace,” he said, meeting her eyes intently. “I’m just not sure you want me to.”

“Try me.”

“I want to put my arms around you,” he said quietly, not letting go of her wrist. “I want to curl up with you and breathe in the smell of your hair and feel you hold me. But I’m not because I know you wouldn’t want to in front of the others, I know you’d be uncomfortable, and I understand that.”

“And you told this to Elijah?” she asked faintly.

“No,” he shook his head, smiling a little. “But ‘Lij knows me. He knows there’s nothing I’d like more tonight than to fall asleep with you beside me. And waking up in your arms would be even better than waking up in your lap.”

“Billy—“

“And I know the last time we spoke about…well, about where we’re wandering—“

“Billy—“

“No, let me finish, please. We are friends, Grace—good friends—and no matter what else happens, that won’t change. Not if I can help it, I swear. All right?”

“All right,” she whispered.

“But who’s to say nothing else can happen? I’m still attracted to you, Grace, and I think you are to me as well. Let’s keep wandering forward, shall we? Slowly—but forward. Are you willing to try that, dear heart?”

“I—I suppose.”
He smiled, gently teased her. “Not quite the enthusiasm I was hoping for. But you didn’t skelp me one, so I’ll take it.” He finally let go of her. “Will you leave the sleeping arrangements as they are, then?”

She hesitated for a moment, but the drink she was nearly finished, on top of the ones earlier, gave her just enough courage to whisper, “Yes.”

“Good. I’m glad.” He smiled at her for a moment longer, then finally said, “Right. I’m going to go find Dom, I haven’t seen or heard him in ages. For that matter, I haven’t seen Orlando either.”

“I’ll go,” Grace said quickly. The last thing she wanted was for Billy to overhear anything about earlier if they were still talking somewhere. “You go spend some time with your sister. Or get Elijah to start the dancing. Tell him he promised me there’d be dancing.”

“You sure?”

I’m sure. Go on, get yourself another drink and have fun. I’ll see where Dom’s got to.”

She found Dom and Orlando on the porch, both swathed in at least two coats each, talking in low but intense voices so as not to be overheard from inside. As soon as Grace realized Dom was still with Orlando, though, she shortly said, “Billy’s been looking for you. Don’t be long,” and closed the door again. Walking into the kitchen, she made herself a strong rum and Coke, and drank half of it far too quickly before going back out to the other room to harass Elijah over his choice of music for dancing.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from Stand By Me by Ben E. King, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, and Standing On My Own by Travis.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Grace?" Dom poked his head through the doorway from outside. "A word?"

"What are you doing out there?" she asked in surprise.

"Grab your jacket and join me, will you?" He disappeared again.

Shrugging good-naturedly, Grace put on her coat and boots and went outside, only to find Dom already halfway down the steps to the dock. "Where are you going?" she called.

The only answer to come floating up on the sharp night air was, "C'mon."

Sighing, wondering if he had something else up his sleeve for Billy, she followed carefully down the steps, looking up when she reached the bottom to see the boathouse door standing open and light spilling out onto the snow. She stepped inside. "Dom, what are you--"

Grace froze.

Standing to her left, arms crossed on his chest, was Billy. To her right, looking utterly miserable as he hunched down into his jacket, was Orlando.

Dom, who looked fairly unhappy himself, closed the door behind her.

"What's going on?" she asked suspiciously.

Billy, with a quiet edge to his voice, said, "Orlando has something to say to you."

"Oh, does he?" she said tartly, turning to glare at Dom. "Remind me never to trust you with anything again."

"I didn't--" Dom began to protest in consternation, but Billy cut him off.

"Dom didn't tell me what happened, dear heart," Billy said, still quietly, watching Orlando cringe at the endearment. "Orlando did. He's explained to me, apologized to me, and now it's your turn."

"Thanks, but no thanks." Grace curtly turned to leave, but Billy caught at her arm.

"Please, Grace," he said softly, then bent his head to her ear to privately add, "Please, just hear him out. I can't bear it for my friends to be at odds. I know it's all on Orli's shoulders, but just hear him out, and if you still want to walk away, I won't say a word. Please, wee girl. For me."

She gave him a killing stare that clearly indicated she considered that next to blackmail, but turned and waited, arms folded, eyes on the floor.

There was a full, long thirty seconds of utter silence. Just when Grace was about to say something cutting, Orlando spoke.

"I'm sorry, Grace," he said wretchedly, his voice strained. "You have to understand--"
"I understand you kissed me," she snapped, "Even though you knew Billy and I are--" She stopped abruptly, with no clue how to finish that sentence. "And then you accused me of being nothing more than a starfucker and a slut."

"Grace," Billy murmured.

She compressed her lips in a fine line, and--having agreed to listen--held her tongue.

"I know I did, and I'm sorry," Orlando said in a sudden rush. "But Grace, Billy is--he's like, my brother, you know? I trust him to be straight with me when no one else is, I know he'll tell me the truth when a lot of people lie right to my face and do it with a smile. And he's never let me down. How many people do you know that have never, not once, let you down? He's one of the best mates I've ever had, and he's one of the most important people in my life."

"And this is how--" she began hotly.

"I know, I know!" he nearly wailed. "But the last time I saw Billy, he'd just found out Emily was fucking that American prick at the same time she was fucking Billy, the little whore, and--"

That got Dom's attention. "Orli, you fucking twat, shut it!"

Orlando, afraid he'd said the exact wrong thing again, blanched. But Billy merely rolled his eyes and--after a brief glance at Grace--calmly gestured for him to continue. Orlando wet his lips nervously, glancing back and forth between Billy and Grace. When she didn't object, indeed, didn't snap at him again, he took courage from that and began again. "Last time I saw Billy was right after all that, and he was a proper mess, you know? Like, distraught. She really did a number on his head, just completely fucked him up, and he was a miserable, surly bastard, nearly took off a driver's head for missing--"

"All right, you pillock," Billy cut in wryly. "We get the point, move on."

Orlando gave him an embarrassed little grin. "Sorry, Bill." He returned his attention to Grace. "I hated seeing him like that. Can't stand it, knowing there's something wrong and I can't do anything. It didn't help that I'd never liked Emily. I'd never told Bill--not until tonight--that she'd flirted with me once, tried to get me to kiss her." Orlando sat on the lifejacket locker. "So I show up here, and, you know, you and Billy are like this--" He held up one hand, the first two fingers entwined, "--but you also seem so chummy with Dom and 'Lij, and I just, like, got it into my head that you were just like Emily, you were just after celebrity tail. 'Cause the last time I saw Billy he was in a right mess over a bird, and here was another bird being all friendly with more than one of us, and I thought maybe you were using his being upset about Emily, 'cause it doesn't seem like that long ago to me that he was so wrecked over Emily, I didn't know he wasn't anymore, and then I had too much to drink, and--well..." He flushed. "Then I was sure of it, and it seemed to me I was the only one left who could save Billy from being fucked over again. I'm sorry, Grace--I'm sorry I treated you like that. Dom cut off my drinks and explained in detail just how massive a shit I've been. I hope you can forget I acted like such an arse."

Both Dom and Orlando looked worried as she walked over and stood directly in front of Orlando and crossed her arms. Dom looked like he wanted to say something, but when Billy shook his head, he subsided.

"A little egotistical of you, don't you think," she said coolly, "To assume you're right and everyone else is blind and you're the only one smart enough to protect a man with a full decade more experience than you?"
"Oi, watch it, wee girl," Billy grumbled.

Orlando's deep brown eyes dropped, but then he looked up again to squarely meet her measuring gaze. With some embarrassment, he admitted, "Yeah, it was."

"You're lucky Billy's loyalty streak runs a mile wide."

"I know I am." Orlando glanced at Billy, and the honest gratitude on his face clinched the matter for Grace.

"You're lucky mine does too," she said a little more kindly.

Orlando's head swiveled around. "What?"

Without looking at Billy, Grace quietly said, "Billy knows he has my complete loyalty. I've told him more than once that if anyone hurts him, they'll have me to deal with. That's why he sent Dom to fetch me down here, he was fairly sure that your story would be about the only one I could forgive--because you weren't out to betray him. You were trying, however misguidedly and however badly it backfired on you, to look out for him. Right, Billy?" she asked, eyes still on Orlando's.

There was a smile in Billy's voice. "Aye. That's it, wee girl."

"A little frightening, sometimes, how well he knows me," she said wryly.

"So, does that mean you forgive me?" Orlando asked, wanting to be sure.

"I do. I swear, I would never knowingly, purposefully hurt him, Orlando. Same as you."

"I'm such a prat," he sighed, his head dropping.

Billy crossed to sit beside him on the locker, touching Grace's back briefly as he passed. "Yeah," he said fondly, dropping an arm over Orli's shoulders. "You are, you silly wee cunt. You're also a good mate."

"I'm sorry, Bill."

"I know you are, and we're all square now. But Orlando?"

Orli turned his head to look at him. "Yeah?"

"You ever kiss her again, I'll rip your bollocks off and stuff them down your neck, you ken?" Billy grinned.

"Understood." Orlando nodded fervently.

"Excuse me?" Grace's hands went to her hips, and she pertly said, "I believe I have some say in who can or cannot kiss me."

"You just keep right on thinking that, if it makes you feel better," Billy teased.

"I beg your pardon--"

Looking much more relaxed, Dom finally spoke up from the corner. "What about me? Can I kiss her?"
Billy cocked his head thoughtfully. "Well, she is your Penny--"

"I'm not his--" she began, knowing it was odd she was finding the teasing a little annoying. He continued on blithely. "--so I suppose in certain proscribed areas it would be acceptable."

"List?" Dom asked.

"Cheeks. Forehead. Lips if it's five seconds or less and you keep your tongue to yourself," he answered conversationally.

"Now wait just one minute--" Grace began hotly, but they weren't finished.

"What about her elbow?" Dom asked. "Can I kiss her elbow?"

Billy raised his eyebrow. "Inside or outside?"

"Oh, outside, of course."

"Very well, then."

Grace threw up her hands in exasperation. "Oh, fuck me," she ground out. "Will you two--"

"That list is non-negotiable," Billy grinned. Orlando tried to hide his snickers behind his hand.

"List?" Dom asked curiously. "How many names are on it?"

"Okay, this conversation stops now," she insisted firmly. "Orli, you look like you're freezing. Let's go up to the cottage and get you a hot drink--"

"Can I have a word first, wee girl?"

Grace turned to look at Billy. "I'm taking him up--"

"Dom will go. Just a quick one?"

Dom grabbed Orlando's jacket and hauled him to his feet. "C'mon, Orli. You and I are suddenly superfluous."

Before she could protest, Grace found herself alone with Billy, Dom and Orlando's voices receding as they ascended the steps up the hill outside.

Billy stood, rubbing his rear end a little to try and banish the chill from sitting on the locker. "Grace," he said quietly, watching her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged, uncomfortable and still a bit annoyed. "I didn't see the need."

"Dom said you didn't tell me so that I could just keep getting pished, having fun, not have to worry about anything."

"And is there something wrong with me not wanting to see your party wrecked by an argument with one of your best friends?" she asked sharply.

"No. And I thank you for that, Grace, for keeping my evening happy."
"Didn't exactly work, though, did it?"

He looked at her appraisingly. "I still wish you'd told me."

"Why? So you could play the jealous lover?" she snapped, angry with herself, knowing she was going too far. "I've got news for you, Billy, you're not my lover. So quit pretending you are."

In a flash he was standing directly in front of her. "I don't 'play' at anything when one of my friends has been injured or upset," he said, anger barely suppressed under a calm, cool exterior. "And you'd do best not to forget it, Grace."

"Are you fucking threatening me?" she demanded in disbelief.

"No. On the contrary, I'm merely pointing out that if you mean it about not wanting to hurt me, then maybe you shouldn't say shite like that. Thanks for the fucking chat." Billy turned and walked out.

Grace gasped, feeling like she'd been punched in the gut. Ten seconds--that felt more like ten minutes--later, she raced out of the boathouse. "Billy!" she cried, seeing him already halfway up the stairs. "Billy--wait!"

He stopped, but didn't turn.

She began to run up the steps, chanted, "Wait--wait--wait--" as she went, but she'd only closed half the distance when she slipped on an icy stair and went down, hard. Surprised more than anything, it took her a moment to move. When she lifted her head, Billy was crouching beside her.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

"Um--yeah--I think so. Not the first time I've fallen on these steps. At least I didn't fall down them. Ow, fuck, I'm going to have a bruise, though, stupid ice," she babbled, letting him help her up.

Movement in the window of the cottage caught her eye, and she looked up over Billy's shoulder to see Elijah, concern on his face. He took a step, as if to head for the door, and out of Billy's line of sight, she quickly flipped Elijah the bird.

He looked startled, and then grinned and nodded. He turned away from the window and back to the party.

Her feet under her again, Billy let go, but Grace grabbed onto him before he could turn away. "Billy, I'm sorry," she said urgently. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean--I wouldn't--fuck. I'm sorry." She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him as tightly as she could. "I'm sorry," she whispered again. "I knew it wasn't fair the second I said it. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking, fucking sorry."

Billy's arms slid around her waist. "All right, Grace, all right. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Billy, I really am--"

"Enough," he sighed. "Come on, come with me." He gently pushed her away and headed back down the stairs to the boathouse.

Grace slowly followed him in. "I knew as soon as I'd said it that I crossed the line, that it would make you angry," she said to his back. "But I didn't know--I didn't--I never said you're only pretending to be my friend, Billy."
"I know you didn't. But--dammit, Grace, I don't know where I am with you," he said with frustration, turning to face her. "You let me hold your hand, hug you, let me kiss you when I said I want to move forward, you agree to share a bed with me--what the hell did you think I meant with all that? And then--with the utmost scorn, I might add--you tell me to stop pretending I'm your lover? And you're surprised that hurt?"

"I'm sorry--" she whispered.

"Grace," he said angrily, "If I'm pretending to be your lover, it's only because I want to be, and you won't--" He stopped abruptly, and then deliberately lowered and gentled his voice. "And you're still hesitant about letting me in."

She opened her mouth and then closed it again, at a complete loss for words.

Billy crossed the wooden floor to stand in front of her. "I want you, and I won't pretend I don't. But I don't care what happens this weekend--or what doesn't--as long as you'll let me in. Even a little."

"I know it's hard to believe," she said, her voice small. "But I have. A little."

"That's good," he said softly. "Do you want to let me in further?"

"I--yes. I just wasn't... prepared for this," she whispered, not meeting his eyes. "You sort of--sort of surprised me, with this whole moving forward thing."

"Prove it," he challenged, but gently.

She frowned. "Prove that you surprised me?"

"Prove that you want to let me in further. Use someone else's words, if you want. But give me something to go on, here, Grace."

She turned away, knowing what she could give him, but a sudden flight of butterflies made her voice tremble. "How--how about a 'not yet'?"

"All right," he said evenly. "But will you look at me?"

She laughed shakily. "Not for this one, no."

"Which one is it?"

"The--the CD I made you."

"The song you played but didn't sing." Billy's voice came from the side of the small room, and she thought he must have sat on the lifejacket locker again.

"Yeah. When I first thought of it, it seemed way too much. And yet... I really... I wanted you to have it, even if you didn't know you had it."

"Why?" he asked quietly.

In answer, Grace said, "It's called Push." She began to sing.

Every time I look at you the world just melts away
All my troubles all my fears dissolve in your affections
You've seen me at my weakest but you take me as I am
And when I fall you offer me a softer place to land
I get mad so easy but you give me room to breathe
No matter what I say or do 'cause you're too good to fight about it
Even when I have to push just to see how far you'll go
You won't stoop down to battle but you never turn to go

You stay the course you hold the line you keep it all together
You're the one true thing I know I can believe in
You're all the things that I desire, you save me, you complete me
You're the one true thing I know I can believe

You are just the antidote when nothing else will cure me
There are times I can't decide when I can't tell up from down
You make me feel less crazy when otherwise I'd drown
But you pick me up and brush me off and tell me I'm OK
Sometimes that's just what we need to get us through the day--

She stopped abruptly. "And then--then it's just the chorus again."

The second she'd finished he was behind her, arms around her, hugging tightly. "God, Grace. Thank you. Thank you for that," he murmured in her ear. "That goes for me, too, you know."

She shook her head. "I'm not that for you. I wish--I wish--" She floundered, but stumbled on. "I'd like to be. But I don't really know how."

"Are you kidding me?" Billy asked softly, astonished. "Have you forgotten the night I called you from my new house, completely falling apart? Or at the airport? Or when I was pissed off at everyone and everything in London, and you made me laugh? You are exactly that for me, dear heart. You're just so lovely, you don't even think twice about it."

"You're one thing I know I can believe in," she repeated in a whisper.

He saw the blush creep up her neck, and bent his head to gently kiss the side of her throat, around to the nape of her neck.

She shivered, and a tiny moan escaped as his lips brushed across that spot, the one he aimed for every time.

"I love that sound," he breathed against her skin. "Wish you'd recorded that for me, it's so very sexy. What was that line about desire?"

"Billy--" she began wretchedly, but he cut her off.

"No, it's all right. I'll back off a bit for now, yeah? Give you a chance to get used to the idea of moving forward?" he suggested softly, and his arms still tight around her sides, he rocked her back and forth in place a little. "I'll try and move slow, dear heart. Just know that I do not want to return to a standstill. We'll talk more later, okay?"

She nodded.

"Tell me."

"If--if you'll go slow… and be patient with me. I'll move forward too, and I'll try not to say too many more stupid things," she whispered.

"You've got yourself a deal, Grace, luv."
Billy, Dom, Elijah, Ewan, and Grace sat near the woodstove, talking quietly as everyone else had gone to bed. Viggo was laying on his air mattress nearby, not yet asleep but just listening to them, and Orlando was asleep and snoring on his mattress right beside them. Grace sat on the floor, leaning against Billy's legs, still stroking Orlando's arm as she had been for the last half hour. He'd lain down utterly miserable, and she had spoken to him gently for a few minutes, finally convincing him that she was no longer angry with him, and that once he'd gotten rid of his hangover and gotten some sleep, that everything would be just fine.

Dom sat on Grace's other side. "What's the stupidest, maddest thing you've ever done?" he asked quietly, grinning.

She laughed softly. "I'm very afraid it might turn out to be giving you my email and phone number. Elijah?" she passed the question along, even as Dom gave her a little shove.

He looked down at his hands. "Stupidest thing? Letting someone talk me into something I knew I didn't want to do." One fingernail went between his teeth.

Billy watched him closely. "When was this?"

"A year before Rings. I'd just turned seventeen."

Dom looked away, and Grace suspected he already knew what Elijah was about to say.

"And what did they talk you into, young grasshopper?" Billy asked, his voice low and comforting.

He hesitated, then said, "Smoking crack."

Billy froze. "What? Who the fuck talked you into that?"

Elijah shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. He's--he's dead, an overdose about six months after that."

"I'm sorry, Elijah," Grace whispered, reaching out to touch his knee.

"What happened?" Billy demanded.

"We smoked. I got fucking wasted on the shit. Turned into a fucking lunatic, broke a chair when I threw it at someone. Luckily I missed them."

Billy took a deep breath. "Your aim always was shite, lad," he said softly, and then smiled at him.

Elijah leaned against his side. "That's when I started smoking. One night, and I already wanted to smoke it again. Instead, I picked up cigarettes, and now I can't quit."

"Don't you ever fucking touch that stuff again, Wood," Dom hissed, his voice razor-sharp.

"I won't, Dom," he promised, sounding like he'd said it a thousand times before, and knew he'd have to say it a thousand times again.

"You fucking call me if you even so much as think about it."

"I will. But I don't think about it anymore, Dom, I've told you that. I don't want it. I just can't seem
to give up the cloves."

"You will," Grace murmured. "At some point, you will. If I can do it, anyone can." Having
deflected the conversation slightly, without even looking at him Grace reached over and covered
Dom's hand with hers.

After a moment, Dom turned his hand and laced his fingers with hers, and head bent, fell silent.

Billy stroked her hair gratefully.

"I didn't know you smoked," Elijah said with surprise.

"I used to. But I finally hit that spot where I just simply had to quit. You'll find that spot
eventually, too."

"Do you miss it?"

She nodded with a wry smile. "I do, sometimes, and I wish I had one. But no more than I casually
wish for things on any other day. It fades, after a while. When you try, you can call me, if you
want."

"I might." Elijah grew silent, too.

Ewan spoke for the first time in a while. "The stupidest thing I ever did--"

"Other than peeing on trains?" Grace smiled, still holding tightly to Dom's hand.

"Other than pissing on trains," he chuckled softly, ignoring Billy's elbow in his ribs. He scratched
his rough chin. "Has to be knocking over an electronics shop."

"What?" Billy stared at him, astounded.

Ewan coloured slightly. "D'you remember Jim Stewart?"

"Yeah, he went to school with us," Billy said, in part for the benefit of the others.

"Yeah. Well. He--ah--got in with a bad crowd. Bunch of blokes from the Gorbals. I didn't know it,
but they'd ram-raided three shops before pulling Jim into it, and when he brought me in, they were
planning this electronics heist. I should have walked the other way the second I caught even a
whiff of what was planned, but I didn't."

"Why not?" Billy asked, bewildered. "Bloody hell, mate, I know you. That's not you."

"No, it's not. But I didn't pay attention to that at the time," he admitted. "Listen, this doesn't go any
further, right, 'cos it'd kill my mam if it got back to her--"

"Don't be daft. What happened?"

"They rammed the shopfront with their van, two blokes went inside and collected the stuff, and Jim
and I loaded it into the van. We were in and out in under two minutes, and as far as I know none of
them ever got caught. I haven't seen any of them--even Jim--since. I didn't want to have anything
further to do with it."

"Fucking hell, Ewan--" Billy muttered. "You surprised me with that one, mate."

"I surprised me with it, too."
"It's amazing what we'll let ourselves be drawn into, isn't it?" Elijah said quietly. "Even when you're not exactly a pushover, you can still get suckered in, can't you?"

"That you can," Ewan agreed. "What about you, Grace? What's the stupidest thing you ever did?"

Grace could practically feel Billy waiting, wondering what she'd say. Even Dom finally raised his head to look at her. She chewed her lip. "I suppose I might have done something stupider before, but one thing has been… preoccupying me for a while. I trusted someone I really shouldn't have."

Ewan frowned, perturbed. "Were you hurt?"

Grace realized what he meant. "No. Not physically, not at all. No, I--he took pretty much everything I had. Including my dignity and self-respect," she added with a wry smile, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

"I don't know about that," Ewan smiled, going along with her attempt to ease the dark cloud that had come over them all. "You seem pretty together to me."

"A year and a good stiff talking-to from Billy later," she grinned.

"He's good at those, isn't he?"

"Oi, just one minute--" Billy protested, keeping his voice soft.

"He's very good at them," she quietly laughed. "When Billy gives you a talking-to, you don't soon forget it."

"Amen, sister," Elijah joined in with a smirk at Billy.

"I'll drink to that," Dom added, finally smiling again. "Well, I would if I had a drink. 'S the last time I play designated sober git."

"Git is right," Billy grumbled. "You think you're funny, don't you? Bunch of smartasses."

Grace leaned her head right back until it lay on top of Billy's knees and she could see him when he leaned forward. "Aww. And I thought I was the only smartass in your life."

"Not by a long shot, wee girl. You're just the worst of the lot," he grinned down at her.

"Oh. Well, that's okay, then. As long as I'm good at it. Or bad," she added, "depending how you look at it."

Billy ran his fingers through her hair, spread across his lap. "Definitely good at it. You're going to write the manual, remember?"

"The manual?" Dom asked with a smile.

"I'd forgotten," she chuckled. "'Smartassing for Dummies, Eh? The definitive Canadian version."

Elijah laughed, then quickly covered his mouth with his hand, afraid he'd been too loud. "I want a copy of that when it's done," he whispered. "Then I can blend in better next time I'm filming up here."

"Oh, you all get complimentary copies," Grace said breezily. "And lessons, if necessary. Pellinore can be my TA."
"I can totally be your tits and a--" Dom began, but Grace rolled her head on Billy's knees to glare at him.

"TA, not T and A, you twit."

"Ohhh," he sighed. "I get it, now."

"TA?" Ewan asked.

Billy grinned at him. "Teacher's assistant. But in Dom's case, I think tits and arse is much more appropriate."

"Wanker." Dom flipped two fingers at him.

"Gobshite."

"Porridge wog."

"Nancy ponce--"

"Time for me to go to bed," Elijah groaned. "They could be at it all fucking night."

Grace looked at her watch. "I think they have been. Don't you two ever quit?"

"No," Billy grinned.

"Never," Dom declared at the same time.

"Oh well," she shrugged. "As long as they keep at each other and leave us alone, right, sweetie?"

Yawning, Elijah nodded emphatically. "You bet, dollface. I'm off. G'night, everyone." He stood and carefully picked his way out of the room.

Dom sighed and stretched, barely containing a shout when Grace tickled the patch of bare abdomen he exposed in doing so. "Hey!" he whispered fiercely, threatening to tackle her on top of Orli. "Boyd, you want to control your bird, here?"

"Sorry. She's not mine," he said with glee, and it was all Grace could do not to laugh out loud.

"Finally he gets it," she teased.

"Fine. If I'm outnumbered, I know how to beat a dignified retreat," Dom said loftily. He climbed to his feet. "Good night."

"How will I know when it's safe for me to come in?" Grace asked, looking up at him, her head still on Billy's knees.

Dom grinned down at her. "Give me ten minutes. If Elwood's stolen my top bunk, there will be a quiet but bloody coup. Don't let the natterer keep you up all night, Penny."

"We'll be in soon. You go claim your ancestral territory, we'll tuck Ewan in, and then we'll be on our way," she smiled.

"Natterer," Billy muttered peevishly. "Look who's talking. Bloke never sodding shuts up, and he calls me a natterer."
Dom grinned, cheekily waggled his fingers at them, and bade them good night.

Ewan got to his feet also. "I'll just go change in the bathroom, and then I'm for bed as well. I'm bloody knackered."

Feeling Billy stroke her hair again as Ewan walked away, Grace quietly said, "I'm surprised you're still awake. You've had the least sleep of everyone, I think."

"When I crash, I'm going to crash hard," Billy admitted.

"You should go get ready for bed. I'll try and keep everyone quiet for you in the morning."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about it, I'm sure I'll sleep like the dead. As long as you're in the bed with me, anyway."

Grace paused. "I don't think I quite know how to take that."

He chuckled ruefully. "Bugger, I did it again, didn't I? I just meant that I'll be so cozy and comfortable with you, that I'll sleep like a bairn."

"Oh. Well, that's good, then." Grace wriggled her arms behind his calves, then wrapped them around his legs and leaned her head against the inside of one denim-clad knee. "I'm glad you're here, you know."

The smile in his voice spoke volumes. "Me too, wee girl. We're going to have a good day tomorrow, aren't we?"

"I think so, yes," she nodded slowly. "I think we are."

Elijah poked his head out of the bedroom into the hallway, where Grace was rooting around in the linen cupboard. "Grace, cut it out," he whispered loudly. "Everyone's fine, quit fussing."

"I'm just getting Viggo another blanket," she whispered back. "He's only got one."

"If Viggo went up Everest he'd only take one blanket," Elijah insisted. "He's fine. Go get changed and get in here, it's nearly four a.m."

"So go to sleep, then," she stuck her tongue out at him and crept out to the living room where Viggo, Ewan, and Orli were laying on their air mattresses, the light from above the stove in the kitchen casting just enough to see shapes. Viggo was still awake, and she snuck around the other two to crouch down beside him and lay the blanket across his legs where he could reach it. He watched her with a small, inscrutable smile, and she quietly whispered, "You might need this by morning."

"The woodstove will be out by nine," he murmured back, his voice very low.

"How do you—" she started, then smiled, and whispered, "They warned me you knew the strangest things. Yes, I'm going to stoke it now, but it will probably stop throwing any heat by eight or eight-thirty."
"I'll wake up at seven and put some more wood in."

"You'll just...wake up?"

"Yes."

"You're a very mysterious man, Viggo."

He chuckled quietly. "Good night, Grace."

"Night." She went to the woodstove, opened the creaky door as quietly as she could and stacked three logs in it, then blew softly but steadily until the flames caught. She closed the door again and shut down the damper most of the way, then checked the bodies in the living room once more, reassuring herself everything was fine, and wandered into the kitchen to double-check it as well. She was quietly tidying a bit of the mess when Billy walked in looking half-asleep. He wore a t-shirt and long soft plaid cotton trousers that were a little too big for him and hung low on his hips, and Grace quickly looked up again. He frowned at her, shoved her pyjamas into her arms, and began propelling her toward the bathroom. "Billy—" she murmured.

"Shut it. Quit stalling and come to bed, Grace."

Her stomach flipped upon hearing those words from his lips. "I was just—"

"It's late. It's time for sleep," he whispered, and as if to prove his point, yawned. He pushed her in the bathroom and closed the door.

Bemused, Grace gave in to the inevitable and changed into her pyjamas, then quickly washed her face and brushed her teeth. She nearly shrieked aloud when she opened the door and Billy—who had been leaning against it--stumbled backwards into her arms. "God, Billy," she whispered fiercely. "You scared the hell out of me. What the fuck are you doing?" She shoved him upright.

Unruffled, Billy said, "Waiting for you." He looked at her pyjamas, her plaid flannel bottoms and t-shirt, and sleepily smiled. "We're twins. Come on." He took her hand and led her, like a recalcitrant child, back to the bedroom. She glanced at the bunkbeds, but in the top one Dom's eyes were closed, and underneath Elijah was lying on his side facing the wall. He took her clothes from her, dumped them on top of her bag, and crawled into bed, holding the blankets up for her.

Grace looked at him for a moment, surprised at how nervous she was. It's not like anything's going to happen, she scolded herself, not with Dom and Elijah in the same room, and certainly not while you're wearing flannel pants. She flipped off the light, took the few steps over, and climbed into the bed. As soon as she was in, Billy lowered the blankets over her, making sure she was fully covered, and left his arm lying across her. Grace took a deep breath, let it out, and tried to relax. Billy felt it, snuggled closer to her, gave her a little kiss on the side of her neck, and immediately there was a chorus of "Awww," from the bunkbeds. Grace felt Billy shake with silent laughter, and she grinned despite her blush, and muttered, "Shut up, you two."

Dom sniggered, Elijah giggled, and then there was a maddening litany of goodnights from all three men. Dom started it, cheerfully saying, "Goodnight Elijah, goodnight William, goodnight Penelope." And of course Elijah had to copy him, sing-songing, "Goodnight Dominic, goodnight William, goodnight Grace," and then even Billy was doing it, his breath puffing on Grace's ear and neck. When Billy finished there was an expectant hush until Grace finally said, her voice trembling, "You guys are freaks." She felt Billy press his forehead into her back as he tried not to laugh out loud.
"Did you hear that, Elijah?" Dom asked mistily. "She called us freaks. I've always wanted to be called a freak Elijah, and now she's called me a freak."

"Oh Dominic," Elijah sighed loudly in the darkness. "I've been calling you a freak since the day we met. You just never appreciated it."

"But she said it with love, Elijah, didn't you hear the love in her voice? You didn't say it with love, you just said it."

"But I love you, Dominic," Elijah said, his voice sweet and sad.

"Aw. Really, Elijah?"

"Yes, Dominic."

"All right. I love you too, then," Dom said happily.

Her voice shaking with laughter, Grace pleaded, "Billy, make them stop."

"Me?" he exclaimed with a wide grin, "You got them started, you make them stop."

"Tell us a story, Penny," Dom suggested with a wicked innocence. "Tell us a bedtime story and we'll go to sleep."

"Yeah, tell us a story, Grace," Elijah chimed in.

"What are you two, five years old?" she exclaimed without raising her voice too loudly. "I don't know any bedtime stories!"

"So make one up," Billy said in her ear, but loudly enough for Dom and Elijah to hear, and they laughed at having won Billy over to their side. Grace tried to flip over, to get at him, but he held her tightly so she couldn't, and kissed her neck again while the sound was covered by the noise from the bunkbeds, and she very nearly melted back into his arms.

When she trusted her voice again, she sighed and with a very put-upon tone said, "Fine. If you insist on keeping me from my beauty sleep, I'll tell you a story."

Suddenly there was a commotion from the bunkbeds and before she could question it, Billy was nuzzling the corner of her jaw and whispering, "You don't need it anyway," directly into her ear and then Elijah was climbing over them onto the bed dragging a blanket behind him and saying, "Come on, Dom, on the big bed for story time," and Dom was landing on the floor with a soft thump to throw himself over their legs and steal their top blanket to keep himself warm.

Flustered, bemused, and feeling suddenly warm and cared-for and remarkably happy, Grace wriggled under Billy's arm to lay on her back, nudging Dom with her foot so she could turn her legs as well. He lifted his weight, let her adjust, and then dropped back down on her. "I feel like a bloody camp counselor," she muttered, and Billy chuckled beside her, still on his side, his arm across her ribs, his face so near hers she could feel his breath on her cheek. Elijah spread out beside Dom and Grace grunted at the extra weight across her legs. "Or furniture. Watch your elbow, there, sweetie, I bruise easily."

"Sorry," Elijah grinned in the dark. "You two are comfy, though."

"Glad we could be of service," Billy drawled.
"Go on, then, Penny. Tell us a story," Dom said, wriggling down between Grace and Billy's legs, leaning on Elijah.

"Give me a minute, I told you I don't know any. I can't believe it's four-thirty in the morning and I'm doing this," she murmured. "All right. Let's see. Once upon a time—"

"Oh, I like stories that start with once upon a time," Elijah sighed happily.

"Once upon a time," Grace repeated, "There was...let's see. A young frog named—named—"

"Sblomie," Dom supplied hopefully.

"Lijah," Elijah insisted.

"Named Annabelle," Grace said firmly. "Now—"

"Annabelle?" Dom doubtfully asked. "You sure? 'S kind of a silly name for a frog."

"And Sblomie isn't? Now who's telling this story, you or me?"

"You are, Penny love," he said mock-apologetically, and Grace was sure he was even hanging his head. She reached down to pet his hair, and was rewarded with a poorly suppressed snorting laugh.

"All right. Now, once upon a time, there was a young frog named Annabelle, and she went to school with all kinds of different creatures, from insects to toads, to snakes, to squirrels and chipmunks, and even a few birds showed up. Mostly goldfinches, as they were the birds most interested in improving themselves. And Annabelle made friends with many of these different creatures, even a snake although her parents had warned her to stay away from the snakes, they had a very bad reputation in the forest. But there was a garter snake that shared her rock that was so friendly and kind that Annabelle couldn't help but like him, so even though she felt bad about it, she didn't tell her parents about her new friend. Annabelle also made friends with a dragonfly, a very pretty blue dragonfly that loved to chatter and zoom about and made Annabelle laugh."

"What was the dragonfly's name?" Elijah whispered.

"Her name was...Heidi."

"A Swiss dragonfly?" Dom murmured, but subsided with a chuckle when Grace shoved him with her foot.

"Anyway," Grace continued, "One night Annabelle joined her parents in the bulrushes for dinner. And what do you think she saw laying in the centre of their dining room log?"

"Not Heidi?" Elijah asked, dismayed.

Billy huffed a laugh in her ear.

"No, not Heidi," Grace answered after a distracted moment. "But it was a dragonfly, because of course, most frogs do eat dragonflies. And poor Annabelle was very upset at the thought that one day her parents might catch Heidi, and she resolved then and there to be a vegetarian."

"A vegetarian frog?" Dom asked, valiantly trying not to laugh out loud.

"Yes. She decided no more insects for her, she would only eat plants. And to prove it to her doubtful parents, she wrapped her tongue around a waving green frond under the water and yanked it up and slurped it into her mouth. And she chewed. And she chewed. And finally she swallowed
with a great big froggie swallow and smiled at her parents. Annabelle's mum asked how it tasted, having never eaten a plant herself, and Annabelle said it was very...very...yummy. And green. Very green. And from that point on, her mum made her dad promise never to bring dragonflies home when Annabelle was around, because she was obviously a sensitive little frog and it might traumatize her to see her parents eat what could be a schoolmate."

Dom snorted, and Billy's arm across her ribs shook. Elijah said, "Aw. That's sad."

Grinning, trying not to laugh herself, Grace continued, "So one day Annabelle invited Heidi back to her pond after school."

"Oh, please don't let her dad eat Heidi," Elijah mumbled, his face buried in his blanket. Billy laughed out loud, and immediately clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Go dad," Dom whispered, and they could hear Elijah thump him through the blankets.

Grace took a deep breath to control the giggles that threatened to erupt. "And Annabelle introduced Heidi to her parents, because she hoped they would come to feel the same way she did, that they should be friends with all the insects and creatures of the forest, and only eat plants, and when she walked into the wading room with Heidi riding on her head—"

Dom laughed, and Billy kicked him, whispering, "Shh, you want to wake everyone up?" and then dissolved into giggles himself.

"Shut up, guys, let her finish," Elijah mumbled again, burrowing deeper into his blanket, and Grace wondered if he was, against all the odds, falling asleep.

"Thank you, Elijah," she said warmly, and it gave her a chance to get her voice under control again. "Now, when Annabelle walked into the wading room with Heidi on her head, her dad's first instinct was to flick his tongue out and snap the dragonfly up, but Annabelle croaked, 'No, Dad! It's Heidi!', and he sat back in his grapeleaf hammock and let what was normally dinner into his wading room, for the sake of his little girl. And Heidi chattered and flitted, and more than once both Annabelle's parents' tongues twitched, but they had promised, and Heidi really was an enchanting little thing and they grew to like her very much. And after being introduced to one or two more of Annabelle's school friends, and getting to like them too, Annabelle's parents decided to also become vegetarian, and so from that day on that little frog family ate nothing but leaves and weeds and plankton from the pond, and they were very healthy and their house was always full of friends of all sorts, and...they lived happily ever after," she finished a little lamely.

Grinning, Billy whispered, "And the moral of the story is...?"

"Umm....never eat your children's friends?" Grace offered.

He shook again, but managed to stay quiet, which was more than Dom could do. He chuckled away, threatening to progress to full-blown laughter, so Grace sat up and clamped her hand over his mouth.

"Shh! Don't you dare wake everyone up, or I'll—I'll make you sleep in the living room with Viggo and Orli, and I hear they both snore," she threatened. She carefully released his mouth, her hand still hovering just in case.

"No, no, not that," he gasped, but quietly. "Not that Bill's whistling is much better—"

"Shut it, wanker."
Still sitting up, Grace said, "Um, Dom?"

"Yes, Penny darlin'?" He rolled across Billy's legs—much to Billy's disgust and discomfort—to lay his head in Grace's lap. "What can I do for you?"

"Go to bed? And take sleeping beauty over there with you?"

"Sleeping beaut—he's not seriously asleep, is he? 'Lij?" Dom nudged the bundle of blanket that had been Elijah. "Oh, for fuck's sake—"

That set Billy off again, and he rolled to bury his laughter in his pillow.

Dom sighed deeply, then sat up and gave Elijah a gentle shake. "'Lij? Come on, little man, time for bed."

"Fuck you," came the mumbled, barely intelligible response. "I'm in bed."

"Yes, but not yours," Dom pointed out with a grin. "I don't think Penelope wants to sleep with you tonight."

Grace gave him a kick, but when Billy grunted she realized she'd hit him instead. She leaned over and gave his shoulder a little kiss, laughing a whispered "Sorry," in his ear.

"Penelope?" Elijah sounded confused. Shuffling noises indicated he was sitting up, and he'd obviously pulled the blanket off his head when his voice clearly asked, "Grace, am I in your bed?"

Grace's laugh gurgled, she was trying so hard to stay quiet. "Yes, sweetie, you are. Why don't you go back to your bunkbed?"

"Oh, yeah, my bunkbed," he said, sleepily happy. Then he suddenly asked, "But what happened to Heidi?"

"The frogs feasted on her tender little body," Dom said, "Now get to your bed, you git."

"What?"

"Dom!" Grace protested in a loud whisper. "They did not, Elijah, they all became good friends and lived happily ever after."

"Oh. Good. That's all right, then." He climbed off them, none too careful where he was putting his hands and knees. "Sorry. Sorry. Umph." He nearly fell off the bed, and then staggered to his own and tumbled in.

"Goodnight, Elijah," Grace said quietly, amused even if she was a little bruised. But there was no answer, he was fast asleep.

Billy pulled his face out of his pillow. "I think there's still one more to go, is there not Grace?"

"Yes, I do believe you're correct, Billy."

"That's me," Dom asserted comfortably, then threw himself on top of Billy, who grunted loudly. Dom gave him a smacking, rather wet-sounding kiss on the cheek, then pressed his forehead against Billy's temple. "Sweet dreams, Bills."

Billy chuckled and said, "You as well, Dom. You as well. Not too early tomorrow, yeah?"
"Got it." He sat up, reached out for Grace, and unerringly found her head with both his hands, pulling her forward for the same treatment. Besides the sloppy kiss on her cheek, he also pressed a soft little one to her forehead. "Sweet dreams, Penny love."

Grace tilted her face to kiss Dom's cheek in return. "You too, Pellinore."

Dom's laugh was low as he said, "Here's hoping I can get my rusty arse back up into that bed now." He spread his appropriated blanket back over them and disappeared, quietly returning to his bed and settling in.

Grace laid down again, and Billy immediately pulled her close. Facing each other, Billy nudged forward until his nose grazed hers in the darkness, and he softly, soundlessly pressed his lips to hers, his breath wisping across her skin. When he laid his head on the pillow again, Grace tucked her head under his chin, and with her knee between his thighs, his leg thrown over hers, she closed her eyes on a sigh. They fell asleep, Billy’s cheek on her hair.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Push* by Sarah McLachlan.
Chapter 32

Grace woke slowly, without opening her eyes. Breathing a deep sigh, she stretched her legs out a bit and groggily wished she didn't have to get up and work.

"Morning."

She let out a tiny shriek as her eyes flew open, and it took her flustered brain a moment to realize that she was at the cottage, the sun was shining behind the curtains, and Billy was quietly laughing at her.

"Did I startle you?" Despite his laughter, one arm reached across to rub soothingly at her arm.

"Scared the hell out of me," she admitted. "I thought I was at home. Not used to sharing my bed." She craned her head up and around to look at the bunkbeds, but they were empty.

Billy let his hand travel over her shoulder to her throat and lightly pressed against her pulse point, feeling her heart slow from its hammering pace. "Oh, you poor wee girl. I didn't mean to startle you that much."

"It's all right," she chuckled, recovering fairly well, considering his warm, gentle hand on her throat was making her pulse trip for an entirely different reason. "How long have you been awake?"

"Only a few minutes." He pulled her into his arms and covered her legs with one of his, snuggled up closely against her, continuing to hold her tightly until she relaxed fully into him. "That's my girl," he murmured into her hair.

Grace's response was automatic. "I'm not--"

"Don't." Billy covered her mouth with his hand. "Don't you dare say that, you wee numptie." He sounded a little exasperated, but not at all angry. "Don't say that right now, not here. It was just an expression, it slipped out. So just don't."

Grace nodded, and when he didn't immediately move his hand, stuck her tongue out and licked his palm.

"Eww, Billy!" she protested, laughing a little, reaching her arm up to scrub her sleeve against the damp spot.

"You're the one who licked me," he pointed out, amused. Suddenly his voice deepened, his eyes lowered to her lips, and before she could adjust to the change, he was murmuring, "But if you need something to do with your tongue..." He rolled to lie half on top of her, his weight on his elbows, and kissed her deeply, his tongue dipping into her mouth as one hand slid under her neck to cup the back of her head.

Caught completely by surprise, Grace's eyes fluttered shut and a tiny whimper escaped the back of her throat. One hand rose to rest featherlight against his side.

Billy swept her mouth once more before pulling back and touching his fingertips to her face, his eyes taking her in, his lips dropping little kisses on her skin after his fingers moved on.
“Billy—” she whispered, and he heard the objection beginning.

“Very few people in this world taste good in the morning,” he cut her off smoothly, his voice soft. “I happen to be one of the lucky ones. And I am fascinated beyond measure that you are, too. You have no idea...” His eyes traveled to her hair, tangled and messy on her pillow. As she opened her mouth to speak again, he let a bit more of his weight down onto her in order to lift one arm and ghost his palm over the tousled strands of red. “Your hair has a life of its own, you know. I woke up with it wrapped around my ear, I have no clue how it did that. And it looks so pretty spread over the pillow like this. You told Dom last night you were one of those people who Plays With Hair. I think you might be turning me into one, too.”

“Billy—”

He rolled onto his back and somehow managed to take her with him, and he tucked her up against himself, adjusting the blankets back around them. “Grace, luv, do you know why I keep interrupting you?”

“Because you're annoying?” she asked dryly, her cheek on his chest.

He chuckled into her hair. “A fine guess, but incorrect. I don't want you to say whatever it is you keep trying to say that sounds like an excuse why we shouldn't do this. I want this, Grace, this is the loveliest morning I've woken up to in I don't know how long, and I'm happy. I don't want you to end it and get up and run away from me again. Stay here, Grace, please.”

“This is nice,” she said quietly. “And I don't really want to go anywhere either, but—”

“I knew there was going to be a ‘but,’” Billy groaned. “Go on, then. Go ahead and just try and tell me why we should stop having a bit of a cuddle.”

“Maybe not stop.” Her voice was low, and she spoke slowly. Billy couldn't tell if she was just searching for words, or if she was having trouble telling him. “Maybe not stop, but...maybe put off? Until...later. Because I'm...I'm...”

“You're what, dear heart?”

“I'm a bit...confused, Billy.”

He sighed. “I thought we had this conversation last night.”

“We did. But---you said you'd give me time to get used to moving forward---”

“Dammit. I did, didn't I?” He made a face. “All right, all right, so you caught me out on that one. But is that any reason we can't just lie here and enjoy being together? Don't run away on me again.”

“I haven't—”

“You have too!” he said hotly. “Every time I try and say anything about you and I, you back away from me so fast I'm surprised you don't have bloody whiplash.”

“I didn't last night,” she pointed out stiffly. “I'm trying, Billy.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, then gently stroked her arm. “I know you are. I know you are, dear heart. Don't mind me, I'm a fuckwit in the mornings, my brain is still asleep. But can we please talk more about this later? Promise me you'll let me talk to you about this.” He gripped her chin and pulled
her head up and gave her a quick but thorough kiss. He let her chin go, hugged her tightly, and softly said, "Promise me."

"All right," she whispered.

"Today," Billy insisted. "Promise we'll talk about it today, not next week or next month. Today."

"But there are other people here! We can't—"

"We sodding well can."

Grace indignantly scrambled to her knees to glare at him. "What, you expect me to discuss what the fuck is going on with you and me in front of a crowd of virtual strangers? Think again, Boyd!"

She was frustrated and annoyed when he suddenly began to laugh at her.

"Grace, sometimes you can be such a—"

"Watch it," she warned darkly.

"A numptie." He sat up too, put his hand up to the side of her face and stroked her cheekbone with his thumb. "Of course I don't expect us to talk in front of everyone else, you wee idiot. That's what doors are for. There is more than one room to this cottage, you know."

"We can't just shut ourselves into a bedroom, everyone will think—"

He rode right over her words. "Everyone will think I want to spend a few minutes alone with the person I flew here to see in the first place. And they'll be right. Now quit coming up with fucking excuses, dear heart, and promise we'll talk today."

Grace turned her head away, but Billy's hand moved from her cheek to her chin and pulled her back around to face him. He ducked down to catch her eyes, and held them with his own, looking at her steadily, letting her search his.

"Promise," she finally whispered.

"Thank you, Grace," he murmured. He leaned forward and let his forehead rest against hers, his hand going to smooth across her hair.

Her eyes closed, she suddenly said, "Billy, I wish—" but she stopped abruptly when there was a quiet knock at the door.

"Dom, what the fuck—" Billy nearly growled.

"Good morning to you, too, sunshine," Dom said cheerfully. "A Scotsman does not welsh on a bet,
"And neither does a Manc."

"Or an American!" Elijah protested from the hallway, just before entering the room.

"What the hell are you talking about? You Americans welsh all the time. But here, Penny darlin', is your breakfast in bed, as agreed."

Grace couldn't help but smile as she recalled their bet from the airport. When she saw what Elijah was carrying, she even chuckled. "How much do you two think I eat?"

Billy gave up on the idea of any more privacy at that moment and rolled over to look, propping himself up on his elbows.

Elijah was very carefully carrying a large wooden cutting board loaded with cereal, juice, bacon, two kinds of eggs, toast, and coffee. "We didn't know what you'd like, so we brought a bit of everything that's out there so far." He gingerly set it down on the end of the bed.

"What, is everyone else up already?" Grace asked, embarrassed. "What time is it?"

"It's only 10:00, and no, Margaret and Alex haven't shown their faces yet," Dom answered her, going over to sit on the bottom bunk. "They were a bit jet-lagged, though, and we knew Billy would definitely be as well, so we're all trying to be quiet." He suddenly grinned. "Most people aren't keen on loud noise this morning anyway."

Billy chuckled ruefully. "Must admit I've got a bit of a sore head myself. How's Orli?"

"Olympic-class whingeing, but he ate breakfast, so he'll live," Dom said.

Billy reached for a piece of toast and was startled when Elijah leaned over and lightly slapped his hand away.

"That's Grace's breakfast, not yours," he admonished with a remarkably straight face. "You didn't win the bet."

Grace laughed at the forlorn look Billy adopted as he stared at the bacon. "Since I'll never eat all that, am I allowed to share?"

"If you want to," Elijah nodded solemnly. "It's your choice."

She looked down at Billy with a smile and said, "Go ahead. But—" she added quickly, "That coffee is mine, buddy. Touch it and lose a limb."

Billy looked up at her, winked, and swiftly snatched a piece of bacon.

Dom and Elijah stayed to chat while Billy and Grace worked their way through their breakfast. Grace tried to stop eating at one point, insisting she was full, but Billy told her she still hadn't gained enough weight back and did she really want them holding her down while he force-fed her eggs? Grumbling, she ate a bit more, but when she put down her fork for the second time, he gave her hand a quick squeeze and left her alone.

"So what can we do today?" Elijah asked from his perch on top of the bureau.
Grace raised an eyebrow. "You'd better not be asking me that question."

"Of course I am, who else would I ask?"

"This is your party! If you wanted entertainment, you should have thought of that earlier!"

"But—"

"Shut it, Elwood," Dom said resignedly. "We don't mean for the whole day, Pen, we have a couple things in mind. But is there anything we couldn't have known about? Like, you know, a great big snow-slide or ice-fishing or something?"

Grace threw her pillow at him, but he easily caught it, grinning. "You say ice-fishing like it's a joke. I bet we could, you know. I know they fish off the marina on the other side of the bay." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Really? Wow, that would be—" Elijah started, but Dom cut him off.

"Insane. But you get my gist, smart girl."

"See?" Billy piped up. "Smartass. I told you so."

She shoved the last piece of toast in Billy's mouth, laughed when he just started munching on it, and leaned back on her hands. "So, you want a bit of a winter adventure in the backwoods, eh? Well, there's snowshoeing. If I can get it started, I could take people for a snowmobile ride."

"That's the one," Elijah interrupted. "I want a snowmobile ride. I haven't had one since I was a kid in Iowa."

"All right," she smiled at him. "Assuming I can get it going, you get the first ride."

"I beg your pardon?" Billy's eyebrows were nearly to his hairline. "Could you repeat that, please? I must have heard you wrong." He started chuckling when Dom snickered.

Grace looked at him, puzzled. "What? As soon as I get it going, he gets the first ride."

Dom nearly fell off the bunk he was laughing so hard. "You're cruel, Boyd," he managed, gasping.

Grace looked over at Elijah, her forehead wrinkled. "Do you have any idea what their problem is, sweetie? They seem to be laughing at me."

Elijah shrugged and threw a handy sweater over Dom's head. "What the fuck, dickhead?"

"That phrase," Dom began, but broke down into something suspiciously close to giggles as he pulled the sweater off his head and saw Elijah's face. "Bill," he finally pleaded.

Billy coughed a few times, trying to get his own laughter under control. "I know it's not just a British thing, but--but apparently it's a bit more automatic for us. You're going to get it going and give Elwood a ride? Means something a bit...different to us."

Grace flushed bright red. "Fuck me."

Billy and Dom both collapsed, howling with laughter, and Dom had tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

"You two are perverted fucks," Elijah asserted. "Talk about one-track minds." He'd turned a
mottled pink, as if afraid Grace might think he'd taken it to mean the same thing as well.

She glared at Dom and then down at Billy. "Since you can't seem to hear certain words without this--this--" She stopped again, unable to find the right word.

"Juvenile?" Billy suggested with a grin.

"Puerile?" Dom said breathlessly, still flat on his back on the bunk bed.

"Exactly. This juvenile, puerile, crass reaction--" Her voice was hard, but there was just the faintest tremor that gave her away. "Then why don't you tell me how I should phrase it?"

"For the sake of our health," Billy chuckled, eyes twinkling up at her, "perhaps you'd best stick to 'drive', yeah?"

"Fine. Then Elijah gets the first drive on the snowmobile."

"Which brings me to my next question. How does he rate the first drive? I'm the birthday boy."

"He asked."

"Oh." Billy considered that. "All right. I get a longer drive, then."

"Fine." She finally allowed her laughter free rein, and rolled her eyes.

"Do you have to take people?" Dom asked curiously, having caught his breath. "It's not difficult to handle, is it? I mean, after all, you're not exactly bulked up, there, Pen."

"I know I'm skinny!" she complained. "Would you all quit reminding me? You're giving me a complex."

"That's not what I meant—" he protested in dismay as Billy chuckled and patted her on the knee.

"I know, I know. But it's not my fault I'm puny," she said, then blithely went on before he could protest again, "And no, the snowmobile is not difficult to drive, but I know where the trails are. If you start just driving through the forest and hit a log, it can be big, big trouble. And I'm really not keen to be known as the girl who killed the Ringbearer."

Elijah laughed. "Hardly likely to happen, dollface."

"No, not likely, but I don't want to take any risks."

"Did you spend much time talking to Astin last night?" Dom asked dryly.

"A bit, why?"

He shook his head. "Never mind. You said snowshoeing, as well? That might be good. I bet Viggo would go for that."

"Alex and Margaret would probably like to try it as well," Billy said thoughtfully. "How many sets do you have, wee girl?"

"I'll have to check. We used to have six, but I don't know if they're all still here. The good thing with that, you can go pretty much anywhere you want, and you won't get lost because you can just follow your trail home." She leaned back further, down onto her elbows, closer to Billy.
He gave her back a scratch. "Anything else?"

"Ah--left. Go left," she ordered distractedly, curling her shoulder forward. "Itch. You gave me an itch, dammit, go left."

He complied. "There?" When she nodded and pressed her shoulder back against his hand, he scratched hard. "We have snowmobiling and snowshoeing."

"There's always the inevitable snowball fight," she suggested, sighing with relief as Billy rubbed away the burn of the scratch with his palm. "And if it's warmer than yesterday we might be able to build a snowfort."

"A snowfort?" Dom repeated in disbelief.

Grace blushed. "Yeah, I know it's a bit childish, but I--"

"Childish? Hell no, that sounds fantastic!" he exclaimed. "How do you do it? Do you dig, or--"

Billy groaned. "Well, there's your afternoon shot to hell."

"Ah, come on, Bills, you know it sounds like fun," he wheedled. "Don't you remember when we tried to build that wall in New Zealand so we could ambush Bean? It would have worked, too, if we'd had enough snow."

"Fine. We'll build a snowfort," he grumbled, but he couldn't help the little grin that stole over his face a moment later.

Grace snorted, laughing at his transparent enjoyment of the idea. "So. Is that enough to augment your plans, sweetie?" Grace asked Elijah.

"Perfect." He beamed.

"Good. Now would you all get out so I can get dressed, please?"

After a late morning spent drinking tea and coffee in the living room while the woodstove blazed, talking nineteen to the dozen, everyone decided a light lunch was in order before heading outside. Dom, Orli and Ewan made soup and sandwiches and were ridiculously pleased with themselves when every last crumb was consumed. Leaving the dishes for later, everyone--including Hannah, a self-professed hater of snow--bundled up against the crisp air and headed out the door.

Grace checked in the boathouse and discovered six sets of snowshoes, as she'd hoped. Viggo had mentioned he had been snowshoeing many times, so Grace left Margaret, Alex, Sean, Ewan and Hannah in his capable hands and returned to where Billy, Dom, Elijah and Orli were arguing over the best location to build their snowfort.

"Under the tree!" Elijah insisted, while Dom rolled his eyes.

"You know nothing of the tactics of war, do you?"

"Oh, and you do?"
"Of course," Dom said loftily. "I was a hero at Pelennor, you know. Not to mention the Black Gates."

"Very handy with a sword," Billy interjected.

"Thank you, Bill. Now, the fort should go next to the cottage--"

Orli shook his head. "Wrong, warrior-boy."

Dom rounded on him. "What do you mean, wrong?" he demanded. "What would a pussy-footing nancy Elf know--"

"Three thousand years of watching the rest of you dickwads beat the living fuck out of each other--"

"Not the Tooks," Billy said, hands in his jacket pockets and looking dreamily up at the tree. "We were too busy hiding in the orchard getting legless on homebrew."

Grace nearly bent double laughing at them, and as one they turned to regard her with raised eyebrows.

"Something funny, wee girl?" Billy asked mildly.

"Oh my God," she gasped, mittened hands on her thighs. "A grumpier, more argumentative bunch of hobbits I've never met--"

"Oi!" Orli exclaimed indignantly, but it was evident he was still unsure exactly where he stood with Grace.

She straightened, grinning widely at him. "Sorry, Orli, that was uncalled-for, wasn't it?"

He laughed out loud, trying to hide his relief at her easy play.

"Watch it, MacPherson," Billy warned, his eyes sparkling and his lips twitching.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Fine, oh wise one," Dom said scathingly, crossing his arms on his chest and glaring at Orlando. "Where should the snowfort be built?"

Orlando turned in a slow circle, considering. "On the side of the hill, facing the lake. Sort of like Minas Tirith, the solid earth at your back."

"Well," Grace said, a regretful look on her face, "That might be the best place from a tactical standpoint, but I'm afraid I don't know how to build a decent snowfort on sloping ground. I'm sadly deficient that way."

"Oh. Well in that case, wherever you want is good. Doesn't really matter," he said cheerfully.

"Doesn't really matter," Dom muttered, disgusted. "Five minutes ago it mattered. Fucking elves."

Orlando grabbed him around the neck and rubbed a handful of snow into the top of his toque, a warning that next time it would be in his face. Dom elbowed him to break free, and it likely would have turned into a free-for-all right then and there if Grace hadn't whistled at ear-splitting volume through her teeth.
"Hey! I'll thank the construction crew not to take each other out before the base is laid!"

Dom and Orlando gave each other a bit of a shove and backed off, laughing and tossing out dire threats.

Grace shook her head, sensing it was only the beginning of that particular battle, and threw a red plastic mold at Orlando and a yellow one at Dom. "I don't know how big you guys want this to get, so let's start it between the tree and the cottage." She explained the way she'd grown up building forts with her cousins and their time-tested method of forming solid blocks of snow with the molds. "It takes some time, you have to step them in really gentle increments to get a good dome."

"Holy shit," Elijah exclaimed. "We're building a fucking igloo!"

Grace laughed. "Not quite, I'm afraid. More like an igloo-wannabe."

Dom cocked his head. "I wonder if Viggo knows how to build an igloo," he mused.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Billy said wryly as he packed snow into Dom's yellow mold.

Elijah shook his head. He stood directly between the beginnings of two snowforts, one begun by Dom and the other by Orlando, both of whom were now obviously in direct competition. "Hey, Grace, would now be a good time for that snowmobile ri--er, drive?"

"Sure, these guys can amuse themselves," she grinned. "I'll go see if I can get it started. I'll just grab the keys."

Elijah followed her down to the boathouse where the snowmobile was stored under its vinyl cover, but much to his dismay the machine wouldn't start. "Does it just need gas?" he asked hopefully, looking around for a gas can.

"It shouldn't. The rule is, it's supposed to be filled up before you put it away." She checked nevertheless, then made a face. "Full." Elijah looked so disappointed that she couldn't give up, and even went so far as to lift the hood and look for loose wires or spark plugs.

Elijah peered at the engine himself. "See anything?"

Grace shook her head. "I only know the basics about this thing, and it doesn't seem to be the basics. Let me try again." She closed the bonnet and sat on the long seat, turning the key. The sound of the engine turning over quickly slowed, warbled, and then died, and Grace made a noise of disgust. "Well, there's our problem--the battery's shot. Damn. I'm sorry, sweetie, but it looks like you're not going to get your snowmobile ride after all."

Elijah swallowed his disappointment to pat her knee and say, "It's okay, dollface. It's probably for the best anyway--if you'd got it started, everyone would have wanted a turn, and you would have been on it all afternoon and frozen to death and we would've had to explain to your folks that we'd killed you."

"Yeah," Grace nodded with a straight face. "That might have peeved them a bit."
"Just a bit," Elijah agreed solemnly.

Grace dismounted the snowmobile and watched Elijah immediately climb on and put his gloved hands on the throttle and brake. She chuckled and teased, "Are you going to make a 'vroom-vroom' noise, too?"

He promptly produced obnoxiously loud engine sounds and hunkered down behind the windshield. In between snarling, growling noises, he shouted, "And Wood takes over first place--he's up over the last air jump--and Wood wins the race!" He changed from engine noises to cheering crowd sounds and pumped his arms in the air. "Wood wins the inaugural MacPherson Classic!"

Grace cocked her head. "Can something be a classic if it's the first one?"

"Absolutely," he declared, nodding.

"Oh. All right, then." She was silent for a moment, then diffidently said, "'Lij, can I ask you something?"

"Sure. But you have to come with me for my victory lap. Hop on." He slid forward on the seat a little to make sure there was room.

Grace climbed on behind him and rested her hands on her thighs.

"Hold on," he chided. "Do you want to fall off the back when I pop a wheelie?"

"You can't pop a wheelie on something that has no wheels," Grace pointed out.

Elijah craned his head around to give her a look. "So you have no qualms with me winning an imaginary race or doing an imaginary victory lap, but one little imaginary wheelie is a problem?"

"Yep."

He laughed and faced forward again. "No wonder Billy's bewildered."

"Bewildered?"

"My word, not his. I think you had a question for me?"

She frowned a little. "What do you mean 'bewildered'?"

Elijah shook his head. "That can't be it. You said you had a question long before that."

Grace narrowed her eyes at the back of his head. "Fine. It's about that little stunt you pulled last night, railroading me into bed with--into sharing a bed with Billy."

Elijah cringed. "Maybe we should go back to bewildered."

"Maybe we shouldn't."

"Are you about to throttle me to death?" He raised his shoulders protectively around his neck.

"No," she said calmly. "If I was going to kill you, sweetie, I would have done it last night while there were two other people in the room to pin it on."

Elijah paused, then said, "You know, somehow that really doesn't reassure me. What's your question?"
"Did Billy know you were going to do that?"

He immediately shook his head. "No. I didn't even know I was going to until I walked up with your drink and saw the way you two were looking at each other."

"So he just took advantage of your little plot?"

Elijah smiled. "Yeah. He's--"

"He's pretty sure he told you that last night, Grace." Billy's quiet voice from the open doorway startled them both. "Checking up on me, I see?"

Grace flushed but turned her head to meet Billy's hurt gaze squarely. She knew she had to make him understand, and soon before their wander forwards was hindered, but at the same time, she was annoyed. "No," she said with some asperity. "I was checking up on me. Do you always sneak up on people having private conversations?"

A muscle in Billy's jaw clenched, then unclenched again. "You have a point. But if you wanted privacy, perhaps you should have closed the door."

"You have a point, too," Grace said a bit coolly, her stomach twisting. She couldn't tell if he'd understood her or not.

Elijah made as if to get off the snowmobile. "I'll just..."

"No, it's okay, 'Lij." Grace said, gripping his sides more tightly with her mittened hands. "Finish your victory lap."

"But you two are scary when you fight," he protested, plaintive.

"What do you mean, checking up on you?" Billy suddenly asked, his voice gruff. "And what the fuck do you mean by 'railroading'?"

"He railroaded me." She cocked her head toward Elijah, her eyes never leaving Billy's. "You convinced me."

Billy opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"I believed you last night, Billy, when you said you and 'Lij hadn't planned the whole thing," Grace continued. "But I don't quite trust my judgement anymore. So I was proving it to myself, that I really do know you, that I know when you're telling me the truth."

Billy regarded her evenly, silent.

Curious despite himself, Elijah asked, "But how do you know I wasn't lying to cover up for Billy, to save him some grief?"

Grace froze, startled. "Okay, that really didn't help."

"Shit. Sorry, Grace." He turned on the seat until he could look her in the face and earnestly said, "I wasn't, dollface--I swear I wasn't lying. Come on, you know you were right about Billy."

She slowly, deliberately relaxed her tense shoulders. "I know. I know I was." Finally she looked over at Billy again. "So? What now?"

"Now I apologize," he said quietly, still standing near the door with his hands in his jacket pockets.
"I'm sorry, dear heart."

Grace nodded. "Me too, eh?"

Elijah shook his head, bemused. "You two have the fucking weirdest fights I've ever heard."

"That wasn't a fight," Grace protested. "It's not a real fight until one or both of us starts yelling."

He laughed. "And has that happened often?"

"More often than I'd like," she admitted. "I really need to learn to control my temper a bit better."

Billy finally smiled. "It goes with the hair, yeah? Personally, I need to learn not to jump to conclusions."

"Are you going to come over here, or are you just going to stay by the door all day?" she demanded of him.

"Well now, that depends. You want to explain what Elwood's 'victory lap' is for?"

Grace cocked her head. "Why, for winning the inaugural MacPherson Classic snowmobile race, of course."

"Duh," Elijah added with a grin.

After Billy had made a valiant effort to take the title (the format of the race having suddenly evolved to timed laps) but to no avail (Grace declared Elijah the winner by virtue of his louder, more realistic snowmobile noises), and after Elijah had taken his second and supremely vital (so he said) victory lap, Grace put the cover back over the snowmobile and the three left the boathouse.

Elijah immediately went tearing up toward the cottage to see the progress on the snowforts, but when Billy put his boot on the first step to follow, Grace took his mittened hand in hers and shyly led him in another direction.

Billy followed willingly enough, secretly pleased. "You're adorable when you blush, you know," he teased.

"Shut up," she muttered, but her cheeks turned even pinker.

He laughed delightedly. "So where are you spiriting me off to, then?"

"Not far. We'll go back to the cottage, but we're taking the scenic route." She led him through a wide, thickly treed band of forest to another clearing and stopped on what was clearly the shoreline. "This is it."

Billy looked around him, but could see nothing of importance. "Sorry, wee girl--this is what?"

Grace craned her neck to gaze straight up at the bare tree branches above them. "Mine."

"Your what--" he began, and then it dawned on him. "Your piece of property."
She wrapped one arm around a slender leafless birch tree. "My tree," she said, and her voice was tinged with wonder.

Billy smiled. "They're all your trees. This is the first time you've come down here this weekend, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Time was short when I brought the others up on Thursday, and it was already dark when we got here last night."

"And how do you feel, dear heart, standing here on this lovely wee piece of land that belongs entirely, solely to you?" He leaned back against a tree and watched the play of emotions across her face.


Billy was surprised. "Torn over what?"

"Dad said it was mine to do with as I pleased, even if I wanted to sell it. I automatically said no, I'd never sell, but..."

"But now you want to?" he asked softly.

"No, that's just it, I really don't. But I'm..." Grace looked at him, unhappiness and uncertainty in her eyes. "I'm wondering if I should. I owe all this money, you know? I'm afraid I'm just being terribly irresponsible, sitting on this property when it could not only clear my debt, but get me out of that fucking apartment and with a bit of cash left over, to boot. I could get rid of my debt, instead of bitching and moaning about it, about how much I hate living like that. But..."

Billy shook his head. "You're not being irresponsible, dear heart. If you had kids who weren't eating properly when there was something you could do to change that, that would be irresponsible. This is just a matter of...of choices, you know? Of priorities. It's just a higher priority for you to keep this land in your family, rather than sacrifice it for immediate comfort. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I suppose. But still..."

Billy could see she was unconvinced. He crossed to stand behind her and wrap his arms around her middle. "It's also an investment, you know. If you sold it now, you'd be clear of debt and have a decent apartment or even a small house if you wanted. But--" he added quickly, feeling her tense. "If you hang on to it, then in just a couple years time you'll be debt-free, have a decent apartment, and own a valuable piece of lakefront property. It's the harder road to take, there's no question. But you'd come out the other side with something of true value to both your heart and your pocketbook to show for it."

She leaned her head back against his jacket, and he could hear the hope in her voice when she said, "So you don't think keeping it would be a stupid thing to do?"

He gave her a squeeze. "No, I don't. Especially when I know it's a bit of a lifeline, an anodyne for you to own it."

Grace craned her head around to look up at him. "A what?"

"Anodyne?" At her nod, he continued. "It means...a source of comfort, or something soothing. Paracetamol would be an anodyne, but so would a hug or a really good book."
"Anodyne," she repeated, tasting the word even as she turned within his arms to face him. "I like that word. I'll have to write it down."

Billy smiled down at her. "Curiosity bug."

Grace was silent for a long moment, looking up at Billy and watching his face, her eyes flicking back and forth between his.

"What are you thinking about?" Billy finally asked softly.

"I'm trying to figure out how to say something. I'm afraid it will come out wrong."

His stomach knotted, but he kept his voice even. "Go ahead. I promise I won't jump to any conclusions until you've explained."

"Well...okay. I want to ask you a little favour." Her eyes dropped to his lips, then rose again. "You know how I promised we'd talk about this today?" Her arms crept around his waist and she gave him a bit of a tug against her.

"Yeah," he said, wariness written all over his face.

"Could we--could we maybe postpone it? Just until tomorrow," she added quickly as he frowned. "I'm not putting it off indefinitely, just until tomorrow."

"Why?" Billy demanded. "And it'd better be a bloody good reason, Grace, because I can't do this much longer. I can't keep doing this dance, I--" He stopped himself abruptly, took a deep breath, and then repeated, "Why?"

She pressed her forehead to his scarf-wrapped neck. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but..." After a moment she continued, her arms tightening around his waist. "I just need a chance to get used to this. A lot has--has happened the past two days. I don't mind being confused so much anymore, but I am a bit overwhelmed. I just want today to--to--dammit. I don't know. Have a chance to get comfortable with the idea that I can stand here with my arms around you. With you touching me, and kissing me. I just want to enjoy it today, without feeling like I have to examine every single thing I think or feel so I know what to say to you. Besides," she added almost desperately, afraid she wasn't explaining herself very well, "It might take us a while to have our talk. I don't want to ignore everyone else for hours, and I don't want you to miss out on your time with them. Not when we have half the day to ourselves tomorrow."

"Grace--"

"Oh, Billy, please--please don't be angry," she whispered. He leaned back from her. "Grace, look at me." He waited until she met his gaze and then searched her eyes intently. "What aren't you telling me?" he asked softly.

"Nothing--"

Billy shook his head. "Don't lie to me, dear heart. I know all you said was true, but I also know there's something more. What is it?"

Her eyes dropped to his chin. "What if--what if our talk doesn't go well? I don't want that to happen with everyone else around. What if it all goes to hell in a handbasket and you want to leave? I just want to have today to enjoy. Please. Not--not yet."
Billy kissed her forehead, repressing a frustrated sigh. He knew Grace didn't hold out the same hope for them as he did, that she found it nigh on impossible to see ahead to a time when her debt wasn't going to be so crippling. "We will be getting back to that 'not yet' tomorrow," he warned gruffly. "But Grace MacPherson, if you doubt the solidity--the rough courage--of our friendship one more time, I swear I'm going to skelp you one. Myself, I think our talk is going to go fine, but even if it didn't, I still wouldn't just scarper."

"Scarper." She gave a relieved, shaky little huff of a laugh. "I like that word."

"I'll write it down for you along with anodyne," Billy's voice was sharper than he'd intended it to be, and he put a mitten against the back of her head to hold her still when she tried to pull away. "No, listen to me for a minute. We'll wait until tomorrow because I'd like you to get comfortable with me holding you and touching you. You feel good in my arms, dear heart, and I think you know how much I enjoy kissing you. So if a little time to get used to that would help, then I'm all for it. But Grace, consider yourself warned--I will not leave this country without sorting us out. I have to know."

"I'm sorry, Billy," she whispered against his jacket. "I don't mean to make this hard on you. Tomorrow, honest."

"Do you give me your word?"

She lifted her head to look up at him, meeting his gaze with as much courage as she could muster. "Yes."

He nodded decisively. "Fine. It's settled then, tomorrow we'll talk, but today--today we'll have fun, yeah?" He leaned back, let his arms slacken around her waist until he was only loosely looping her in. "Today we'll just play. Do whatever you want, wee girl, and let's grow comfortable with each other, all right? How does that sound?" He leaned forward and lightly kissed her nose.

"That sounds good, Billy. Thank you." Wanting to return Billy's little gesture of affection, Grace stood on her tiptoes and softly, sweetly kissed him on the lips. "Know what I want?" she asked, resting her forehead against the bridge of his nose.

"Tell me."

"I want to go back to sentences of four words or less. I think we were clearer, when words didn't get in the way."

Billy's voice was soft, a silky burr in her ear. "Maybe we should see how clear we can be with no words." Before she could even blink, he covered her mouth with his, kissing her hard. She let out a tiny sound of surprise and gripped his jacket in her mitts, her lips opening to his teasing tongue as her eyes fluttered shut. When Billy hummed his approval and tugged her in closer, she sank against him from chest to knee.

Grace let herself be lost in his kiss.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Grace ran shrieking up the hill toward the cottage, leaving Billy sprawled in a snowdrift at the bottom.

"MacPherson!" he bellowed, laughing, scrambling to his feet. "Get your arse back here!"

She turned halfway up, giggling breathlessly. "Um--no? I don't wish to die, thank you."

Billy leapt up the hill and began to chase her, and with another shriek she turned and fled. She ran straight for where the snowforts were being constructed, harbouring a vague idea that Dom or Elijah might get involved and distract Billy long enough for her to escape. When she burst into the clearing next to the cottage, however, she didn't see them so she headed for Viggo and Ewan. They had returned with everyone else from the snowshoeing expedition, and were now working at adding another course to the snow-brick wall of Orlando's fort.

Viggo held out his hand to her, and she grabbed it, leaning over to catch her breath. "Abominable snowman?" he asked sympathetically.

"Close," she gasped, watching the trees. "Billy. Dumped him--in the--snow."

"Payback imminent?" His eyes twinkled.

Grace grinned. "Certain."

The door to the cottage opened and Dom, Elijah, Sean, Orlando and Alex clattered down the stairs. Sides in the building competition had obviously been chosen, as Alex followed Orlando to the fort Grace hovered beside, while the three ex-hobbits immediately crossed to the one Dom had begun.

"Oi, Penny love!" Dom yelled (unnecessarily) across the intervening space. "Get away from the treacherous Men and Elf! You know you belong with the good, kind, lovable hobbits!"

Grace turned to look across at the other fort, but just as she opened her mouth to protest that she wasn't taking sides, Billy chose that moment to come barreling into the clearing with a battle cry that sounded suspiciously like, "For the Shire, for Right, and for Poutine!"

Before Grace could even blink, Viggo's large hands were around her waist. He easily lifted her up, setting her lightly on top of what she now saw was a double-thickness wall. Other than an initial squeak, she held her breath, afraid the snow bricks would cave underneath her weight. She held as still as she could, watching as Viggo, Alex, Ewan and Orli ranged themselves in front of her, arms crossed--or in Ewan's case, fists belligerently on his hips.

Billy came to an abrupt halt, his aggressive glee deflated somewhat by the line of bodyguards Grace had just acquired. "What's the matter, Grace, scared?" he teased after a moment, trying to provoke her into jumping down. He'd been on the receiving end of Viggo's headbutts a few too many times to risk getting near him now.

"That's The MacPherson Herself to you, Boyd whelp," Ewan growled before Grace could open her
mouth.

Billy fixed him with a gimlet stare. "Boyd whelp? Call me that in front of Marg. Go on, I dare you."

Ewan's eyes flickered nervously to the door of the cottage, and Billy grinned.

"Aye, I didn't think so." He glanced back at three pairs of eyes peering over the wall of the fort behind him. "What say, lads? Shall we return Herself to her rightful place?"

"For the Shire!" Elijah shouted, rising from his crouched position, followed quickly by Sean who bellowed, "For Right!"

A split second later Dom leaped up. "For whatever the hell else you said!"

Billy sighed. "Pay attention, Monaghan."

The three men sauntered out from behind the walls of their fort to join Billy ten feet away from the others. Sean adjusted his cuffs as he walked, making Grace giggle; she thought it probably would have looked more impressive--certainly more intimidating, at any rate--if those cuffs hadn't been on rainbow coloured, snowflake covered mittens, a present from one of his girls.

The two sides faced each other down, watching each other suspiciously, neither wanting to make the first move. Elijah puffed his chest out, and Ewan snickered at him even as Orli began rocking up and down on the balls of his feet, eyeing Dom down his nose. Dom adopted a tough-guy stance in return. Viggo and Billy stared at each other, motionless.

Grace suddenly began to laugh, clear and bright in the crisp air. "Good grief, I think I know this scene!"

Elijah cocked his head. "Scene?"

Before she could explain, Billy had one mitt off and was leisurely, regularly snapping his fingers, his face cool and distant and more than a little threatening.

Viggo threw back his head and laughed.

"I get it! West Side Story!" Elijah crowed. "That's fucking hilarious!"

"Oh," said Sean, disappointed. "I thought we were doing The Outsiders."

Dom laughed out loud. "That's it. I'm calling you 'Ponyboy' from now on, Bill."

"Do it and I'll call you 'Sodapop'," he shot back, but dropped his head and sighed again when Dom agreed with enthusiasm.

Grace was watching them, but even so she missed whatever signal passed at that moment between Billy and his cohorts just before they turned as one to rush her guardian phalanx.

Twenty seconds later it was all over. Elijah and Dom had been tripped up first, and Sean's weight was used against him to overbalance him and send him into a snowdrift under the tree. Billy made it furthest with his knowledge of martial arts and self-defense, but when Alex joined Ewan and Viggo in quelling him, it was a lost cause. They picked him up and carried him, hollering curse words all the while, over to the largest snowbank left by the plowing and shoveling, and tossed him to the top.
Billy—still shouting obscenities—rolled and slid halfway down the other side before he managed to get his feet under him. By the time he rose and dug the snow out of his collar, his opponents had returned to their posts in front of Grace, who tried very hard not to laugh at him.

"All right there, Bill?" Dom called cheerfully, once more hiding behind the wall of his snowfort.

"Just grand, thanks." Billy walked over to stand in between the two forts, facing Grace. "I don't suppose simply asking Herself to come down would work?" he asked, and with a probing finger dislodged a clump of snow from the wrist of his jacket.

Grace cocked her head. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"No," he muttered. "Of course not, don't be daft, Bill. All right, how about I offer you some incentive, then?"

Her face brightened. "Can I be Herself and Imperious Grand Pooh-Bah?"

Viggo grinned. Ewan chuckled and whispered loudly over his shoulder, "Grace? I think you mean Imperial Grand Pooh-Bah."

She leaned down to stage whisper back. "Probably. But since 'imperious' is the wrong word, then it's probably appropriate I stick with it, as that's me to a T."

Alex laughed out loud. "Imperious Grand Pooh-Bah it is, then."

Grace straightened up again and addressed Billy. "Looks like that's not going to be enough, as my fellows here seem willing to call me that if I stay. What else have you got?"

Billy glared up at her good-humouredly. "All right. Elwood over there can be your own personal DJ. Your playlist is his priority. Right, 'Lij?"

"Sure, why not?" Elijah piped up, ruining his effort to sneak up on Sean with a giant snowball in hand.

Grace nodded. "That sounds good. But I'm sure that's something one of these gentlemen could do just as well."

"Could not!" Elijah protested, and Grace grinned.

"All right, almost as well."

"What if we offer you Dom as your personal chef?" Billy demanded, hands on his hips. "None of that lot can cook anywhere near as well as Dom."

"Aww, thanks, Bills," Dom cooed. "It's always nice to know I'm appreciated."

Grace crossed her arms over her chest. "Now that is tempting."

Viggo leaned back and shielded his mouth behind one hand, waiting until Grace leaned down to whisper in her ear. Billy watched the exchange with narrowed eyes and an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach which only intensified when Grace blushed.

She finally sat up straight again and nodded. "Chef Dom is definitely part of any arrangement we may arrive at--"

Dom hooted in victory.
"--however," Grace continued repressively, gazing down at Billy. "You're the one asking me to join you, and yet all you've offered up are other people's services. What are you offering?"

Billy spared a lightning glare at Viggo, who'd obviously pointed out that fact. "Well. I could..." He trailed off, unsure what to offer. He didn't want to open either of them up to piss-taking by everyone else, but at the same time he wanted to pass this little test that had somehow been placed between them.

"He could be your personal masseur," Dom said helpfully.

"Personal waiter," Sean supplied.

"Half-arsed bodyguard," Orli grinned, and Ewan protested that he was aiding the enemy, even if backhandedly.

Elijah jumped up and down. "Billy could be your bedwarmer and slipper-fetcher!"

"He's not a bloody basset hound, Elwood," Dom said with feigned disgust, and smacked the back of his head.

Grace's cheeks were pinker than the cold accounted for, but she breezily said, "All those sound awfully good. So, Billy, what are you offering?"

He met her gaze, and suddenly everyone and everything around them faded; all he could see was the grey of her eyes and the question behind the fun. Instead of offering to be her personal assistant, as he'd planned, he found himself quietly saying, "I'll sing to you."

Grace bit her lip. "You will?"

"Aye."

"What will you sing?"

Still holding her eyes with his own, Billy began to sing.

_It wasn't in the words that kept sticking in their throats_  
_It wasn't with the angels in their quilted coats_  
_These battered wings still kick up dust_  
_Seduced by the noise and the bright things that glisten_  
_I knew all the time I should shut up and listen_  
_And I'm finding my way home from the great escape_  

_The further on I go, oh the less I know_  
_I can find only us breathing_  
_Only us sleeping_  
_Only us dreaming_  
_Only us_

The entire clearing had stilled, no one wanting to disturb the sudden intensity crackling the air. Dom looked away, though with a small smile on his lips, and Elijah dropped his snowball at his feet and stuffed his hands in his pockets, instead.

Grace shifted, preparing to hop off her wall and pronounce Billy's offering more than gladly received, but he surprised her by suddenly continuing the song, and she stayed where she was.
I hear you calling me  
Yes I hear you calling me  
Home from the great escape  
Yes I can read you loud and clear

The further on I go, oh the less I know  
Friend or foe, there's only us  
Only us breathing  
Only us sleeping  
Only us dreaming  
Only us

Grace opened her mouth, then closed it again, before finally managing to say, "Using Peter Gabriel against me. Besides, that sounds like something I should be singing."

"Does it?" Billy asked softly. "I'm glad to hear it." Remembering then where they were, and how many eyes were trained on them in amusement, affection, and curiosity, Billy decided he'd better do something to deflect them, and quick. "How about I sing this, then?" He took two steps closer to her.

On the bosom of young Abigail  
Was written the price of her tail  
And on her behind for the use of the blind  
Was the same information in Braille.

When everyone burst out laughing, Billy darted forward, yanked Grace off her perch and over his shoulder into a fireman's carry and began to run, shouting for help from Dom, Elijah and Sean.

Grace shrieked as she was hauled off her wall, and then she began to laugh. Every step Billy took pushed his shoulder into her diaphragm, and very quickly she was red-faced and breathless, giggling nearly uncontrollably. "Bil--Billy. Put. Me. Down," she begged.

"Not a chance!" he panted, dodging Alex as Sean barreled in to assist. "I'm just--returning Herself--to her rightful--place, Margaret!" he suddenly bellowed to his sister, safe inside the cottage. "Open the damn door, Marg!"

Noisy shouts and laughter and threats filled the clearing as Billy ran around and evaded the opposing forces, narrowly at times even with the assistance of his team, Grace howling from somewhere around the middle of his back. He nearly went down at the hands of Ewan, but Orlando casually stuck a foot out, tripping the stocky man just before he got his hands on Billy. The move earned Orli the nickname from his teammates (for the remainder of the weekend) of 'The Dirty Sodding Traitor'. Grace cheered him on.

"Marg!" Billy shouted again, dodging as Dom and Elijah literally leapt onto Viggo with Kamikaze cries. "Open the fuckin' door, Marg!" He ran from Viggo's struggling hands and around the other side of the snowfort.

Grace squirmed, almost dislodging Billy's grip on her. "Oh, fuck," she laughed breathlessly. "Need oxygen, you twit!" She finally tore off her mittens and jammed her hands into his back pockets, using the support to prop herself up and take a deep breath.

"Minx. You just wanted to cop a feel," Billy teased, and then spotted his sister at the cottage door. "Hang on, luv." He bounded around the wall of snow and ran up the stairs, barely evading Ewan's diving lunge, Grace shrieking and laughing and gripping Billy's arse for balance.
Margaret let them in, scolding Billy. "For heaven's sake, watch her head!"

"Close the door, Marg," Billy panted, heading for the hall. "Close it close it close it!" He hurried to their bedroom and lightly dumped Grace on her back on the bed before he slammed the door and shoved a dresser in front of it, grunting as his face turned red with the effort. As soon as the door was blocked he threw himself on the bed beside Grace, rolled half on top of her, and kissed her hard, his fingers clenched in her jacket.

Grace's laughter cut off with a sound of surprise, and then she kissed him back, his stubble seeming even scratchier than usual against her chilled skin, the snow on their clothes melting in the warmth of the cottage and dampening all they wore. They both ignored the rattle of the doorknob and the voices in the hall.

Billy pulled her hat off, kissed her ear, growled into her flyaway hair, "You're mine."

"I'm not--"

"You're mine," he insisted, one hand stroking down her hip. "I won you from the enemy, you're mine, my prize."

She pushed down her natural inclination to argue his choice of words again and decided instead to make light of it. "Listen to you. You sound positively medieval."

"It's got my blood up." His grin was feral. "Must be my Highland ancestors stirring the Boyd pride, aye?"

Grace giggled and wrapped her arms around his waist. "A Highland warrior before my very eyes. If I took off your shirt, would you be painted with woad?"

"I like a woman that knows her ancient body paints." Billy suddenly lifted his head and bellowed at the top of his lungs. "They may take my snowfort, but they'll never take my FREEDOM!!"

As Grace burst out in delighted laughter, there were answering shouts of mirth from the living room and catcalls of "Thinks he's fuckin' Braveheart in there!" and "Is that a claymore in your pocket, Bill?"

Billy buried his face into her neck, and shook with deep, heart-felt laughs.

After a few moments, Grace finally dug her fingers into his ribs through his jacket. "C'mon, we should go back out."

"Nah." Billy lifted his head and grinned at her. "Let's stay here."

"What?" She feigned amazement. "Don't you want to go out and lord your victory over the losers?"

He pretended to ponder it for a moment. "Well...I suppose you have a point there." He sat up and made a face as his wet jeans stuck to him. "Wouldn't mind a dry pair of trousers, either."

"I'm thinking hot cocoa, too," Grace smiled and sat up beside him.

Billy got to his feet and unzipped his jacket, shucking it quickly and tossing it on the bed. Turning his back to her, he undid the button on his jeans and pushed them down, stepping out of the damp denim.

Grace turned her suddenly flaming face away from the sight of his bare legs and thin boxers.
"Billy!"

"What?" he asked, reaching for his bag.

"I'm right here, you know!"

He looked at her over his shoulder. "I know. Why?"

Her voice sounded a bit strangled as she said, "You could have asked me to leave the room."

"Why would I do that?" He pulled on a dry pair of track pants and searched for a pair of socks in the bottom of his duffel. "Good God, wee girl, I'm an actor. Do you know how many times I've been half-naked in front of people? Hell, the last film I did, I'm up on the big screen in pink girl's knickers. So you seeing my arse in boxers? Not a big deal, luv," he chuckled.

"...Pink knickers?" she managed.

Billy worked on first one thick sock, then the second, and returned to stand beside the bed. He smiled down at Grace. "Aye. Very pretty they were, too."

She flushed again and didn't meet his eyes, but she did mumble, "I think you need to send me a copy of that film."

He leaned over to kiss the top of her head. "I'm flattered."

"You should be."

Billy laughed. "Send you a copy, hmm? I could do that. All right, come on, then. On your feet and change out of those wet things."

"I will as soon as you leave."

Billy crossed to her bag and pulled out a pair of trousers and socks, tossed them across the room to her, and then turned his back. "I'm facing away, and I've even got my eyes closed," he promised. "But I'm not leaving until we can both go out and face them together. Otherwise the piss-taking will be of monumental proportions. Trust me on this one."

"Well..." Grace hesitated, but Billy was facing directly away and there was no possible way he could see her. And she probably thought he was right, that it would be easier to deal with the others by braving them together. "All right. But you keep your eyes closed."

"I will." The second he heard the zipper on her trousers, though, he began raunchily humming stripper music.

"Billy!" she complained, stamping her foot when he only laughed at her. "Cut that out!"

"All right, all right," he laughed. "Just thought you might like a little motivational music, that's all. Carry on."

Grace grumbled but quickly changed into the dry clothes he'd given her, and then bent to gather all the wet things. "All right, then, Brave-arse. Let's go hang these on the rack by the woodstove. It's time we joined the others, or they'll be ribbing us for something completely different."

"Right you are," he said cheerfully, turned to drop a quick kiss on her lips, and then opened the door for her. "After you."
Grace marched out, her head held high and her cheeks aflame, but when she and Billy walked into the living room it was to find everyone studiously casual and relaxed. Elijah seemed unable to prevent the grin that he flashed up at them, but aside from his amused electric blue gaze, no one even looked at them as Grace hung their clothes by the woodstove. Dom let out a very loud, very fake snore from his position on the sofa.

"Subtle, Monaghan," Billy said dryly. He stood behind Grace and put his arms around her, crossing them over her chest.

Dom opened one eye to grin up at them. "Subtle yourself, Ponyboy. No need to get possessive, we all know you won."

Billy snorted beside her ear. "Daft git. There was never any doubt, you know."

Grace lifted her eyebrows even though Billy couldn't see them. "Oh, really?"

"Shh," he whispered, taking care that everyone could hear him. "Let me live with my delusions, yeah?"

She snickered, but before she could form a suitable response Margaret walked in, carrying two steaming cups of hot chocolate.

"Billy," his sister said firmly, straight-faced. "Quit mauling Grace and let her drink her cocoa."

"Mauling? I'm--" he began, indignant, but Margaret spoke right over him, a decided twinkle in her eye.

"I saw the state she was in when you finally let her come in, the poor girl was half frozen."

"Then I'm just being a gentleman and trying to warm her up, aren't I?" Billy retorted in triumph, accepting the first mug from Margaret to hold it for Grace to take. "Careful, it's hot," he murmured automatically, head bent over her shoulder, completely missing the smile the two women shared. Margaret set his mug on the table since his hands were currently occupied with Grace.

"Gentleman my arse," came a muffled voice, and all three heads turned to see Dom now laying face down, sprawled out on the whole sofa.

"You're one to talk," Billy pointed out. "You could at least offer the ladies a seat, you pillock."

Dom turned his head. "Offer the ladies a seat?" he repeated. "Please. We both know if they'd wanted a seat they'd have one. Prob'ly just sit on me." He glared at Grace as he said it.

She smiled angelically down at him. "Don't tell me I'm getting predictable already."

"Besides," Dom continued loudly, adopting a pained look. "I'm wounded. The Imperial--"

"Imperious," Alex corrected with a chuckle.

"Imperious Grand Pooh-Bah's goons nearly flattened me."

"Where are the others, anyway?" Billy asked, realizing three people were nowhere to be seen.

From his armchair by the woodstove, Orli contentedly supplied, "Sean's in the kitchen working on a secret dinner. Viggo and Ewan are still outside working on my snowfort."

Elijah snickered.
"We should take them some cocoa," Grace suggested. "They must be getting cold."

"What about me?" Dom complained. "I'm the one who's injured!"

"Aww, poor little Dom," she cooed.

"Watch who you're calling little, love," he growled.

"And where are you hurt, poor lamb?"

"My back. I--I think they broke it."

"You're such a whinger," Billy said, his voice dripping with scorn. "It's not like you were lugging Grace over your shoulder for half an hour."

As Dom and Margaret stared at him in astonishment and a previously silent Hannah began to howl with laughter, Billy's eyes widened as what he'd just said sunk in.

Grace craned her head to look up at him over her shoulder and mildly suggested, "You may want to consider re-phrasing that."

"Bloody buggering fuck," he groaned, eyes scrunched up tight in consternation.

Dom, awe in his voice, said, "Wow, Penny. He really jumps in the shit with both feet when you're around, doesn't he?"

She laughed out loud. "He really, really does, and it's extremely entertaining."

"I hope you're planning on apologizing, William." Margaret glared at him, hands on her hips. "You're lucky you didn't say anything like that about me, I would have beaten you to a bloody pulp."

"I know you would've." Billy let go of Grace with one hand to point to his chin. "See this big scar?"

Grace turned her head to look. She squinted. "I think so."

"What do you mean you think so?" he demanded. "It's enormous! My own sister did that to me when I teasingly, lovingly called her chubby. She hit me with a table."

"I didnae do any such thing!" Margaret exclaimed, colouring a little. "I hit you with a cushion. It's nae my fault you fell and cut yourself on that wee little table."

Grace was delighted by the way Margaret's Glaswegian accent--heavier than her brother's to start with--got thicker when she was riled. She wondered if Billy's ever did that, other than with his fans. Even when he shouted at her angrily, it was only slightly stronger.

"Fell? I didn't fall, I was knocked down by my violent brute of a sister--"

"I didnae--"

"You did too!"

"Did not!"

"Oi!" Dom interrupted their goodnatured bickering with a shout. "I'm dying over here! Perhaps you two could finish this some other time and call me an ambulance?"
"Ambulance my ass," Elijah said drowsily from his cushions on the floor. "There's nothing wrong with you a bit of attention won't cure."

"Bite me, Yank wank."

"Screw you, Brit shit."

"American twat," Orli joined in to defend his countrymen from slander.

Elijah lifted his head to look at him. "That doesn't even rhyme, dickhead."

Grace pulled away from Billy enough to turn and seek his eyes, her forehead wrinkled.

He smiled down at her. "They're just taking the piss."

"Are you sure?"

"Course we are, Pen, don't be daft," Dom said. "For fuck's sake, won't anyone do something about my back?"

From behind her book, Hannah threatened, "Shut up, Dom, or I'll fix your back with a pillow to your face."

"Oh, I can feel the love in the room," Dom moaned. "Tell my parents I died thinking of them." He pushed himself up but abruptly stopped, stifling a barely voiced curse.

Billy and Elijah immediately gazed at him sharply. "Dom?" Billy asked.

"It's all right." He subsided to a prone position again. "Just a bit stiff is all."

Billy's face softened. "Who do you want?"

"One of you guitar players?"

Billy nudged Grace. "Why don't you go on, then? He gets pissy with me for pressing too hard."

Grace looked at him, her confusion plain. "I would, if I had any idea what's going on."

Elijah, propped up on both elbows now, grinned. "Yeah, come on Billy, she's hardly had time to become fully fluent in Dom'n'Billy-speak. Give the poor woman a chance."

Chuckling, Billy explained to her. "His back really is sore. He needs a wee massage, and he wants either you or I because we have strong fingers. He's probably got a knot the size of his Prius in there."

"S at least a Beamer," Dom mumbled automatically, but the tips of his ears pinked. "Don't worry about it, Penny love. If it doesn't go on its own soon, I'll take a hot shower. It's not a big deal--" His sentence cut off with a start of surprise as the sofa dipped beside him and two small hands rubbed his back firmly.

"I don't know if I'm any good at this, but I'll give it a shot," she said, and with her fingers began to prod at his back, searching out the knot. "I take it this has happened before?"

"A few times, yeah. Filming could be a bit rough on the body. We had a massage therapist, but he wasn't always around, so sometimes Bill would fill in so it didn't get worse. Ow--yeah, right there." He fell silent, his breathing purposefully slow and steady.
Billy sat on the floor beside them, leaning against the sofa. "Remember the time Sala decided to play chiropractor, 'Lij?"

Elijah chuckled. "Yeah. At first I thought I wasn't going to walk for a week. Barrie read him the riot act, about not breaking the Ringbearer because he might actually be needed for this little scene at the end of the movie, something about a ring and *Mount fucking Doom*? But when I realized I felt better, Barrie backed off. Just told him not to do it anymore."

Sean's voice floated in from the kitchen. "And then he read you the riot act for not mentioning your back was sore."

"Yeah, he was really pissed with me," Elijah laughed. "And you, Billy--remember when you went to the dentist and had a filling done with no freezing?"

Grace swiveled her head to stare at him, aghast. "You what?"

Billy grimaced. "Talk about pissed off. I lost a filling, so I went and had a new one done. We were supposed to be filming dialogue that afternoon, so I asked for no freezing so I could still manage to talk without flapping my lips all over. It was fucking brutal, and then we never even did the scene with the dialogue. I wouldn't talk to Pete for the rest of the day in case I said something I'd regret later."

"I don't blame you," Grace said fervently. "I'd have lost it for sure. Hell, who am I kidding? I wouldn't have had a filling done without the freezing in a million years!"

"That's our Bill," Orli said with a grin. "Dedication to his art."

Elijah suddenly hopped to his feet and hurried out of the room, returning a moment later with Grace's guitar in hand. He handed it to Billy, crouched down to whisper something in Billy's ear, and then returned to his cushions, grinning widely all the while.

Billy looked amused as well, and he looked up at Grace while gesturing to her guitar. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not, don't be silly."

He quickly checked the tuning, placed his fingers where he wanted them, and strummed once. "I'm pretty sure you know this one, wee girl. Sing the harmony for me?"

She nodded, still kneading Dom's back, and waited for Billy to start playing.

*I could tell the meaning of a word like serene*
*I got some 'O' grades when I was sixteen*
*I can tell the difference between margarine and butter*
*I can say "Saskatchewan" without starting to stutter*

"You've got to be kidding me," Orli groaned, his head thunking against the back of his chair. "I ought to beat the fuckin' daylights out of you, Elwood, for starting him on that again!"

Billy continued the Proclaimers song with glee, Grace singing the harmony but not quite understanding the joke until she remembered the song was about Scottish independence; she knew Billy was a strongly patriotic Scot, and suspected Orli was a fiercely proud Englishman.

*But I can't understand why we let someone else rule our land, cap in hand*
Once I thought I could make God a bribe  
So I said I was in his lost tribe  
Getting handouts can be so frustrating  
"Get in line son, there's five million waiting"

Billy bellowed the line, joined by Elijah, who happily sang the last few lines with him since he knew the words, prompting Orlando to aim a half-hearted kick at him.

*I can't understand why you let someone else rule your land, cap in hand  
I can't understand why we let someone else rule our land, cap in hand*

When he'd finished, Orli complained, "You've got your fucking Parliament now, what do you want from me?"

Grace grinned. "I take it this is some long-standing political argument?"

Billy adopted a wounded look. "He told me I was British, once, just like him."

She tried not to laugh out loud. "Ehm--right. I'll keep in mind that's a no-no."

"Damn right it is." Billy began playing again, and when he began to sing *Flower of Scotland*, the unofficial national anthem of his country, Alex and Margaret joined in.

Grace listened, enjoying the song, and knew she was going to have to learn it so she could surprise Billy by singing along the next time. She worked on Dom's back until he rolled over with a contented sigh and squeezed her hand gratefully, and they both sat back to listen to the music, Grace humming quietly along.

When Billy finished playing *Flower of Scotland*, Alex went back outside to help Ewan and Viggo with the fort, and with a yawn Hannah announced she was going to take a nap before dinner. She disappeared down the hallway.

Dom leaned his head on Grace's shoulder. "Play some Beatles for us, Bill."

Billy sighed, but the look on his face was fond. "You always ask me to play the Beatles."

"Ah, come on, Billy," Elijah encouraged from his supine position on the floor in front of the woodstove. "I won't even ask you to play *I Am The Walrus*."

"Of course you won't. Because you know I won't play it, pillock." Nevertheless, Billy began to strum, and a moment later began to play *Here Comes The Sun*.

"Mmm," Dom hummed, closing his eyes. "Good choice. Sing with him, Penny, you two sound good together."

"No, it's okay. He sounds fine all by himself."

Elijah gave the sofa a thump with his foot. "Sing. You mold your voice to his in the most amazing way, I want to listen to it. Please?" he added almost as an afterthought.

Acquiescing, Grace waited until Billy began the second verse, and then joined in.

*Little darling the smiles returning to their faces,  
Little darling it seems like it's years since it's been here,  
Here comes the sun, here comes the sun,*
And I say it's all right.

As they sang, Orli wandered off, down the hallway and into the bedroom opposite the one Hannah slept in. Margaret rose and took several dirty mugs out to the kitchen, and low voices drifted out as she began to talk to Sean. For the next while there came the quiet, comforting sound of dishes and dinner preparations, adding a homey counterpoint to the song.

Billy finished *Here Comes The Sun*, but continued to play, picking a quiet melody that Grace knew she knew, but couldn't quite place. She watched his hands, her gaze flicking between them and his eyes, which were trained on her. When after a few moments he glanced at Dom and then smiled, Grace looked down to see Dom's eyes closed and his mouth slightly open as he slept on her shoulder.

Billy looked over at Elijah. "He's out, too. Good thing that was a quiet song, or I'd accuse them of finding us boring." He kept his voice soft.

"Everyone *was* up late last night," she whispered. "What is that you're playing? I can't nail it down."

"*Blackbird.*"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Sing it for me, wee girl?" he asked, watching her again. "I'll start over."

"No, really, it's okay--"

Billy shook his head. "You won't wake them, and I'd really like to hear you sing it. Please?"

She bit her lip, but then agreed. Billy paused to readjust the tuning on one string, and then began picking the accompaniment again, his eyes not leaving her as she sang.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these broken wings and learn to fly*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arise*

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these sunken eyes and learn to see*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to be free.*

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these broken wings and learn to fly*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arrive*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arrive*

When she'd finished singing, Billy's hands stilled on the guitar strings, and he smiled at her. "That was lovely, dear heart, you sing that so well. Thank you."

Grace coloured a little. "Thank you. I could sit and listen to you play for hours, you know."

Dom shifted, slumping more deeply against her, and began to snore.
Chuckling, Billy set the guitar aside and rose. He stepped carefully over Elijah to open the woodstove door, wincing when it creaked, and quietly laid another two logs on the bright coals. He eased the door shut again and walked over to the sofa, where he stood looking down at Grace and Dom.

"I think I'm lucky I met you first," he whispered teasingly. "Or Dom'd have an enormous crush on you."

"Don't be ridiculous."

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head, and then gently cradled Dom's head in one hand as with his other he pushed at the sleeping man's shoulder, easing him the opposite direction to lean into the corner of the sofa. Dom muttered something unintelligible and tucked one hand under his cheek, subsiding again into silence.

Billy sat down in the opposite corner and gestured Grace closer.

"You're so good with him," she said as she shifted over.

He shrugged, putting his arm around her shoulders and tugging her against him. "He's my best mate."

"Still." She strained a bit to stay upright, to not simply flop against him. "It's heartwarming to see the way you two are with each other, but the care you show him is really...special."

"Sentimental little thing, aren't you?" he smiled. "Now stop sitting like you've a poker up your backside and come here." He gave her a pull and let up only when she was reclining fully against him. "That's better."

"Billy, other people are--"

"Are not paying a bit of attention to us," he finished her sentence. "Didn't you say you just wanted to enjoy today? C'mon, give us a proper cuddle, yeah?"

Grace's cheeks pinked; after a brief hesitation she lifted her feet and put her legs across Billy's lap, turning into his embrace. She leaned her head on his shoulder, but a moment later lifted her face to his to ask, "What if someone comes in, though?"

"Then they see us. Grace, luv, everyone here knows I'm interested in you," he pointed out, and there was a wry note in his voice. "I don't fly half way around the world for just anybody, you numptie."

She bit her lip then softly said, "You probably shouldn't for me, either."

Billy bent his head until their noses were nearly touching. "And why not?"

"Because I could get used to it."

His smile was fleeting and his breath ghosted across her lips as he murmured, "Good." He tilted his head just enough to press his lips against hers.

Grace closed her eyes, but she was horribly self-conscious. It was one thing to know intellectually that every person there for the weekend was fully aware there was...something developing between she and Billy. It was quite another, she thought, to act as if it was already a done deal. Just as she was steeling herself to pull away from Billy and from his kiss, his arms tightened around her and...
his tongue flicked lightly at her lips, seeking entry. Before she quite knew what she was doing, she'd opened her mouth to him, and he kissed her firmly, one hand sliding up to cup the back of her head.

Grace couldn't help the soft sound that formed at the top of her throat, couldn't keep from leaning into him, couldn't feel anything except his smooth lips sliding against hers, damp and warm and his tongue hot as it twined around hers. He stroked his thumb across the nape of her neck, and all self-consciousness melted away as her hand rose of its own volition to caress the curve of his cheek.

Billy lost himself in kissing Grace. She smelled so good, like wood smoke and crisp air and something even more indefinably Grace than the scent of strawberries which now reminded him so strongly of her. Her mouth was slick, sleek as his tongue explored leisurely, tracing the line of her teeth, the almost metallic heat under her tongue. When she opened her mouth wide and tipped her head back, he felt a stirring in his groin and kissed her harder.

Billy felt her hand creep around to the back of his neck, felt her fingers thread into his hair, but even so he was unprepared for the passion in her kiss, for the way she curled herself into his lap and nibbled on his lower lip and made little noises into his mouth.

He finally--reluctantly--tore his mouth from hers, and in between feathering soft kisses across her jaw and up to her ear, he whispered, "There's a bedroom back there that's not being used."

Eyes still closed, Grace smiled. "Anyone could walk in."

"True." Billy nudged her head over with his nose and kissed down the side of her throat. "There's a van outside. I'll even go start it and warm it up for you."

She chuckled, if a bit unevenly. "Tempting. But those seats aren't comfortable."

"The boathouse?" he suggested, pretending desperation.

"Below zero."

"Sod that, then." He fluttered his tongue against her neck and lightly, very briefly brushed a gentle hand over her breast.

Grace's breath caught. "We could--we could bundle up."

"Minx."

"I'm being a shameless tart," she laughed quietly, but she also blushed.

Billy realised she actually was a bit embarrassed by her behaviour, and sought to reassure her. "Just shameless enough," he murmured against her ear. "I love it." He bent his head, tilted hers a fraction with a finger to her chin, and softly kissed that spot on the nape of her neck, the one that melted her every time.

Grace moaned, breathed, "Oh, Billy--"

"I love it when you say my name like that," he said, his voice low and hushed. "So fucking sexy." He kissed her there again, making a sound of pleasure when she whimpered, and repeated, "So sexy. But I'm going to slow down, luv. It's a bit too much, for here and now, isn't it?"

"I--I don't know," she whispered. "I'm sorry..."
"Shh. If you don't know, then it's definitely a wee bit too much. It's okay, dear heart. We've got time. We'll even have some time to ourselves, tomorrow, won't we?" He gently pressed on the top of her head until she dropped it to tuck it under his chin, and he wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly. "We'll take it slow and easy and just enjoy every little bit of time we have together, yeah? Because this is awfully, awfully nice too, you know."

"It is," she agreed, her voice quiet. She rubbed her cheek back and forth across his jumper until she found the most comfortable spot, and then subsided, one arm around his waist and the other hand resting on his chest. She could feel the subtle curve of his pectoral muscle underneath the thick knit, and the mental image it provided made her cheeks flush.

After a few moments of warm, companionable silence broken only by the low voices and domestic sounds coming from the kitchen and the occasional snore from Dom, Billy asked, "What do the lads have planned for tonight, do you know?"

"I was scared to ask. Dom said something about party games."

"Oh, bugger."

She chuckled. "I think he was kidding, although I wouldn't put it past him. But I think it was just more drinking and dancing and generally carousing."

"Sounds lovely," Billy approved. "Will you dance with me, wee girl?"

"Ehm--I think it'll be more of a 'everybody dancing with everybody else' thing, won't it?"

"I don't care. Will you dance with me?"

Grace smiled. "Okay."

"Okay." Billy said, satisfied. They lapsed into silence again, cuddling. Billy stroked his hand up and down her back, her arm, and together they dozed in the warmth of the cottage until Margaret came to fetch them all for dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from Only Us by Peter Gabriel, Abigail by The Corries, Cap In Hand by The Proclaimers, Here Comes The Sun by George Harrison, Blackbird by John Lennon & Paul McCartney.
Billy looked down at Grace, dozing on the sofa beside him. Affection swelled warm in his chest as he put his arm around her, gently easing her closer, and Dom smiled at them from the other end of the sofa.

Margaret watched, curled up in the armchair. "You should get to bed soon, Billy," she murmured. "You must be exhausted, you've had less sleep than any of us."

"Soon," he agreed, keeping his voice low. "I feel pretty good, though, and I should probably let the drink wear off a bit. How's Alex?"

Margaret rolled her eyes and reached down to stroke the blonde head that lay on the floor beside her. "He's still passed out. If I were a cruel woman, I'd get you lads to carry him outside and drop him in the snow."

"Good thing you're not a cruel woman, then, isn't it?" Billy teased.

Grace suddenly jerked. "'M awake," she mumbled, struggling to sit up.

"Shh, wee girl," Billy chuckled, and stroked her hair until her head dropped back onto his shoulder. "You're fine where you are."

"I shouldn't," she protested, eyes still closed, and then tucked her face against his neck, relaxed into him, and went back to sleep.

Billy smiled, rubbed one hand lightly up and down her back, and dropped an unobtrusive little kiss on the top of her head.

Dom stretched one leg out and gestured toward Grace. "So what now, Bill? What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean, what am I going to do?" Billy asked, puzzled. "When we're all ready for bed, I'll wake her up."

Dom rolled his eyes. "No, git. After tonight. Tomorrow, or the next day, or a month from now, what are you going to do about the two of you?"

Billy shrugged, his smile fading a little. "I don't know. I'm going to sit her down for a wee chat once we're on our own. Other than that, the only thing I know for sure is that she's promised to come visit me at home soon."

Margaret perked up. "Has she? Oh, that's grand! You'll bring her 'round for supper one evening, won't you?"

"Of course. I'm sure she'd rather eat your cooking than mine any day."

"I'm sure she would, too," Margaret grinned.

"No, but Bill," Dom objected, frowning. He lowered his voice to barely above a whisper when Grace stirred a bit. "You've managed to get her to take one ticket--you'll never convince her to accept another. And you can't keep flying to Toronto, you'll go broke yourself. You've got to have it partially sorted before you talk to her, mate."
"Well, I just thought it would be a big enough step forward to get her to, you know, admit she even wants to be with me. Then we'd just see how it goes," Billy said, taken aback.

"That's not going to be enough, and you know it. My God, Bill, Grace worried over every little detail of this party even though we told her time and again we had it all under control. She had a list as long as my arm of objections and concerns and when we went shopping, the look on her face every time 'Lij or I tossed down a credit card was enough to make me want to put it all back on the shelves--not that she had any clue that look was there. She tried so fucking hard to let it go, but she is not a 'go with the flow' kind of bird. And what you want is an awful lot bigger than a sodding party."

"It's not like I'm asking her to marry me," Billy protested.

"What's going on, Billy?" Margaret asked, confused and a little concerned.

Billy's eyebrows lowered. "Dom's put on his rusty armour again."

Dom looked away, and then back again. "Maybe I have. But I'm looking out for you even more, you daft git."

"How do you figure that?" He lulled Grace with a hand stroking over her hair when she shifted against his chest, and they were all silent until she settled again.

Dom dropped his voice to a fierce whisper. "Oh, come on. Like you wouldn’t be hurt, be upset, if she got skittish and ran away again? Last time was because of the past, both hers and yours with Emily, but I'm telling you Bill, next time it'll be because of the future. I don't think she's going to know how to have a decent relationship with you while she's in such deep debt. You have to show her a way to do it."

"Debt?" Margaret repeated, her voice sharp. "Billy, what have you gotten yourself into?"

Dom looked uncomfortable. "Shite. I'm sorry, Bill, I shouldn't have--will she be pissed with me?"

Billy looked down at the top of Grace's head. "I don't think so, not with Marg being my sister. But if you do that again, she'll probably want to rip your bollocks off. And I'll probably let her."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Billy," Margaret insisted. "Tell me you didnae loan her money."

"I haven't, but not because I didn't want to," he said, and his voice was quiet as he relayed Grace's entire sorry tale of betrayal and theft and subsequent poverty. With interjections from Dom and questions from Margaret, it took nearly twenty minutes, and by the end of it Margaret looked like she might get a bit teary. Billy suspected that not only did his sister feel for Grace, but that she was feeling guilty for immediately assuming Grace was after Billy's money to make her own life easier.

"I won't hear a word against her on this subject, Margaret," Billy warned.

"I wasnae planning on saying anything, William," she retorted, and then bit her lip. "But considering you've known her two months and you're a soft touch, do you blame me?"

He softened. "No. No, I don't blame you, love, I know how it must have appeared. I'm glad to know my big sister's still looking out for me."

"They couldn't get anyone else to take the job," Margaret teased, affection lightening her sad
"You're a woman, Marg, how would you feel?" Dom asked, doggedly sticking to his point. "Say you fancied a bloke that lived over here, but you couldn't even afford the cost of a phone call, let alone a plane ticket. Would you be content to--would you even let yourself--fall in love with this bloke and just 'see how it goes'?

"No," she admitted, "I probably wouldn't. But then, I can be awfully stubborn and single-bloody-minded at times. If I got it into my head that there was no future for us, or even worse that our being an item could actually be to his detriment, then there's no way I'd risk my heart--and his--that way."

"Sound like anyone you know, Bill?" Dom asked, cocking an eyebrow at his friend.

"All right, you've made your point," Billy muttered, suddenly vastly discouraged. "So what the fuck am I supposed to do? And how badly have I buggered up by fixing up her flat?"

Margaret cringed. "What have you done, you poor daftie?"

Billy told his sister about the changes that were being made to Grace's apartment in her absence. "I just couldn't stand the thought of her waking up every morning and going to sleep every night in that godawful place. She's forced to spend so much time in it, and it's sucking the fucking life out of her."

"Well, I think you've probably gone a bit overboard," Margaret said honestly, "And from what you've both said, I think she's probably going to be royally pissed off. But I also think you'll be able to talk her around, because the idea came straight from your heart." She suddenly began to eye her brother speculatively and then slowly, with a hint of surprise in her voice, said, "You really want this, don't you?"

"I--"

"He does," Dom interjected, and it sounded final. With a grin he added, "Bill is so smitten. Arse over tit."

"I am not--"

"Look at him blush!" Margaret pointed out with glee. "He really is gone on her, isn't he? Oh, thank God, I was afraid that tart Emily had buggered him up for a good year, at least."

"Marg!" Billy protested.

"What? It's true. I didnae like her anyway, the wee hoor."

"Where the hell were you people when she and I were talking about moving in together?" Billy complained fiercely, if quietly. "It would've been grand to know back then that no one liked her! Jesus, maybe I'd better have everyone fill out a fucking questionnaire on Grace, just in case by some miracle I haven't already fully and completely fucked this up!"

"Fucked what up?" Grace mumbled and blearily opened her eyes.

"Nothing, dear heart," Billy said quickly, glaring over the top of her head at Margaret. "Why don't you go get ready for bed? I'll be in in a few minutes."

"Okay. I'm sleepy."
"I know." His voice softened a little, and he steadied her as she climbed to her feet.

Seemingly oblivious to the others, Grace looked down at Billy and squeezed his hand. "You'll come soon?"

"I'll be right behind you," he promised. "Now go on--skedaddle."

"Skedaddle," Grace repeated with a sleep-blurred giggle as she headed for the bathroom. "You're so geriatric sometimes. G'night, everyone."

As soon as she was gone, Billy stared first at Dom and then at his sister. "Just to be clear, do you like her or not? And I want the bloody truth, please."

"You know I do, Bill," Dom smiled at him in an equal measure of fondness and exasperation. "Why do you think I'm being so nosy about what your plan is? I want her to stick around."

"Well, I've only known her two days," Margaret pointed out, but gently. "I like her better than I liked Emily after two days, though, so take that how you will. She seems to bring out your good side."

"Good," Billy grumbled. "So if you want to see her stick around a bit longer, then help me figure out how to do that."

Margaret nodded. "I have an idea to be going on with."

Billy quietly opened the bedroom door and slipped inside. Dom was still in the living room and Billy could hear both Orlando's and Elijah's murmuring voices from Sean's room next door.

Grace had left a small lamp on for them so they wouldn't bang into all the furniture, Billy noted with appreciation as he took his jumper off, tossed it aside, and pulled on his t-shirt. The jeans and socks followed his jumper, leaving him in only his boxers. He was just stepping into his flannel trousers when he heard Grace's sleep-husky voice behind him.

"You have a nice bahookie."

He gave his arse a wiggle, pulled his pyjamas up, and crawled into bed beside her. He was delighted to be immediately drawn into her arms. "Thank you. I'm rather fond of yours, too, you know."

Grace's eyes were closed, but she smiled. "I got it right this time, did I?"

"What, bahookie? Aye, and I'm very proud of you." He nuzzled at her cheek and when she gave a little sigh of contentment, he chuckled. "You really are tired, aren't you?"

"Hmm?" She wriggled closer and, her nose against his neck, inhaled. "Mm. You smell good tonight."

"I usually do, thank you very much. So, are you tired enough to not take any notice if I...do this?" Billy let one hand slide down and around to cup her bottom, tugging her up against him.
Grace giggled sleepily. "Do what?"

"Excellent," he breathed, grinning. "Then you'll probably doze right off if I were to do something like...this." He began to kiss her throat.

"Pardon me if I snore," she murmured, and tilted her head back, exposing and lengthening her neck.

"Smartass." Billy nipped at her earlobe, then fluttered his tongue down the column of her throat. He took a moment to enjoy the breathy little moan that produced before kissing and sucking enthusiastically at a spot just where her neck met her shoulder.

"Are you giving me a hickey?" Grace asked, lazily wrapping her flannel-clad leg over his.

Billy nodded.

"Good thing we're up here in the Great White North where turtleneck sweaters aren't suspicious, then."

"Good thing," Billy lifted his head to agree, a bit breathless. "You're surprising me, wee girl."

"I'm glad. I'd hate to think I was growing predictable."

"You? Never. I'm not complaining, mind, but why exactly aren't you protesting? Am I doing something right for a change?"

"I told you I just wanted to enjoy today, and I'm enjoying this very much," she murmured, her eyes still closed. Then, the corners of her mouth turning up slightly, she added, "Besides, I can't resist your masculine wiles when I'm tired."

"I didn't know I had wiles. I'll have to practice them," Billy said happily. "So that's the trick, is it? I'll just have to keep you in a state of perpetual exhaustion?" He gave the red mark on her neck one last quick suck for good measure and then kissed his way back up. Laying his head on the pillow next to Grace's, he gently turned her until they were nose to nose. When she didn't open her eyes but smiled and tilted her head slightly, Billy understood he'd been given an invitation. He shifted closer, threaded his hand in her hair, dark auburn and burnished gold in the dim light, and kissed her.

Grace opened her lips to his softly questing tongue, letting him in to explore the slick heat of her mouth at leisure. Content, Billy took his time, seeking out every soft curve, the sharp edges of her teeth, the ridges under her tongue as it twined and teased around his own. Grace ventured into his mouth then with darting little tastes that flickered and moved on, a little more hesitant than Billy's languid warmth had been.

He nibbled on her upper lip, sucked ever so gently on her lower, licking dipping tasting, the soft damp sounds of their kisses the only thing to break the silence. He hummed quietly in the back of his throat and felt her respond, her mouth opening wider, her body leaning into him a little more.

There was a quiet knock at the door and Dom poked his head in just as they drew away from each other. "Sorry, kids, but it's past curfew," he said, managing a straight face. "Can I come in, or should I just fetch my pillow and go find somewhere else to sleep?"

Billy started to answer, but Grace quickly clamped her hand across his mouth; all three of them knew what he would have said.
"It's your room too, Dom, of course you can come in. But would you do me a little favour first?"

He cocked his head at her. "Probably."

"Go get Elijah and tell him it's past his bedtime? He scolded me for staying up late last night, I think it's time to return the favour." Grace grinned, and Dom laughed and disappeared out the door.

She took her hand from Billy's mouth and replaced it with her lips in a soft lingering kiss that said yes and thank you and tomorrow and yes again.

Billy didn't quite know what Grace was saying yes to, but the thought of one possibility sent a curl of heat coiling low through his abdomen and toward his groin. He kissed her back, hard, saying you're welcome and me too and hell yes.

"Jesus, would you two just rent a room already?" Elijah complained from the door, but when Billy and Grace started apart and looked over, it was to see the fondest of smiles on his face.

Billy simply rolled his eyes and lazily held up two fingers, but Grace hid her face against his neck in embarrassment. The absurdity of the situation--coupled with her drowsiness--soon made her giggle, though, and her giggles quickly turned into helpless laughter.

Within seconds Dom and Elijah bounded over and leaped on the bed, just as they had the night before. Elijah, already in his pyjamas, climbed right into the bed with them, yanking the covers up to his chin and huddling close to Billy. Dom slid off the edge of the mattress and crossed to his duffel bag.

Billy, with an air of long suffering, asked, "Elwood, what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm cold," he answered as if it were the most logical of explanations.

"Poor 'Lijah," Billy cooed, sarcasm dripping from every note. "Poor wee 'Lijah, he's so cold. I don't know why he's so cold, the poor lad, all he's been doing is walking around in the dead of winter in his bloody pyjamas. Elwood?"

"Yeah?" Elijah tittered.

"Not. Your. Bed."

Grace laughed against Billy's shoulder, and without looking reached over him to pet Elijah's head.

"I know," Elijah put on a pitiful voice. "But my bed is way over there, and it's so cold. Please let me stay? Just for story time, then I'll go, I promise."

Billy sighed, "Oh, all right," but Grace lifted her head abruptly, nearly knocking him on the chin.

"Story time?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well, yeah. You have to tell us a bedtime story."

"Elwood's right, Pen," Dom chimed in from beside the bed. When Grace turned her head to glare at him, she saw that while she hadn't been looking, he'd quietly changed into his pyjamas. "Now budge up, I want in too."

"Oh, for God's sake--" Billy began.

"There isn't room!" Grace protested.
"Of course there is. Elwood just has to shift his fat arse--"

"Jackass--"

"Berk. And then Billy can squidge over a bit and take you with him--" Dom grinned when Billy immediately hauled Grace's small frame right up against him and wrapped his arms around her. "Et voila! Room for me." He quickly climbed in under the covers, then reached over and turned out the small lamp, sinking them all into pitch darkness.

Four bodies shifted and wriggled and adjusted positions for a moment, punctuated by comments like, "Ow, watch your elbows," and "Whoever's hand is on my arse can move it or lose it," and "God, your feet are cold!"

"Okay, dollface," Elijah finally announced. "I'm ready."

"Good for you."

"No, I mean I'm ready for story time," he persisted.

"That's nice. Go ahead, then."

Billy snickered into her hair.

"I don't know any bedtime stories!" Elijah protested.

"Neither do I, but that didn't stop you from making me tell one last night," Grace pointed out gleefully.

"Well," he said slowly, "I don't think I can make up a story off the top of my head like that. But I know some jokes..."

Billy and Dom groaned in unison. "Anything but that," Billy pleaded. "Knock-knock jokes and dirty limericks are not for bedtime, 'Lijah, how often must we tell you that?"

"I'll tell a story," Dom interjected, his voice firm. "Once upon a time, there was a handsome prince. He was tall, strong of jaw and steely of eye, and all the fair maidens of the land wanted him, especially when rumour went 'round that he was hung like a fuckin' stallion--"

"Dom!" Grace feigned being scandalized.

"Lucky guess. Well, wee girl, looks like it's up to you and me, aye? How about I tell you what the story should be about, and then you take it from there." He ran one hand up and down her back and then, knowing she wouldn't say anything with Dom and Elijah right there, slipped his hand under her t-shirt and repeated his caress.

It took Grace a moment to answer; the feel of Billy's warm palm stroking her bare skin nearly drove all the words straight out of her head. Finally she stuttered, "I--I suppose. If I must."

"Aw," Dom cooed from directly behind her. "Poor Penny is feeling put upon. I think we should give her a whacking great hug, don't you, 'Lij?"

"Absolutely," Elijah agreed, and before Billy and Grace could object--or even steel themselves--
they were steamrolled by two surprisingly heavy ex-hobbits.

"Oh bloody hell," Grace squeaked as Dom's weight came down on her, and then she began to giggle helplessly.

Elijah threw himself on top of Billy's side and wrapped an arm around Dom, now suddenly next to him, and squeezed, squishing them all tightly together.

"See, Pen?" Dom grinned. "We appreciate you."

"I feel so loved," she wheezed, face mashed against Billy's chest. "Now get off, before you--appreciate me to death."

"Why am I being appreciated so very thoroughly?" Billy managed.

"That's just on general principle," Elijah said cheerfully, flattening his nose against Billy's shoulder. "Because, you know, we like you and all."

"Oh, goody," he gasped.


Laughing, Dom rolled off of her, and her deep inhalation was audible in the darkness. A moment later Elijah gave a quick bounce and then climbed off of Billy.

"Ow, fucker," Billy groaned. "Jesus, Wood, time to lay off the cheeseburgers, don't you think?"

"Billy, I'm wounded," Elijah pouted.

"No. No, actually, I'm wounded. I think you cracked a rib."

"Dickhead." He gave one of his high-pitched giggles. "You love it, and you know it. You're such a whore."

"Did you just call me a whore?" Grace demanded, making Dom press his forehead against her back in an effort not to laugh too loudly.

It took Elijah a minute in the dark to realize she was winding him up, and he sounded aghast as he said, "No! No, of course not, Grace, I would never, you're not...hey, wait a minute..."

Billy was shaking with suppressed laughter. "Good one, wee girl."

"Aw, fuck. I'd better at least get my story now," Elijah grumbled good naturedly.

"All right, all right," Grace conceded with a chuckle. "What's it to be about, then, Billy?"

"Well, after a long and arduous selection process, the committee has decided it shall not be about Dom--"

"Committee wouldn't know their arse from a hedgehog," Dom commented under his breath.

"But," Billy continued repressively, "It will be about...ehm...the wee folk. And mushrooms," he added.

"The wee folk and mushrooms?" Grace repeated, disbelief tingeing her voice. "You can't be serious."
"Oh, I assure you I'm perfectly serious. On you go, then."

Elijah snorted gleefully.

Grace sighed. "Oh, fuck m--" She caught herself, and at the others' snickers, changed it to, "Monkeys. Fuck monkeys."

Elijah laughed loudly until Billy swatted him, then he managed to stifle it, and Dom had to resort to burying his face against Grace's back again.

There was a grin in Billy's voice as she said, "Fuck monkeys, wee girl?"

Dom began to shake.

"That's even worse than 'fuck me', isn't it?" she asked weakly.

"I don't know about worse, but it's definitely...original. As a matter of fact, I think that's my new favourite word--fuckmonkey," he teased. "As in, 'Oh, fuckmonkeys, I've lost my sunglasses again'. Or, 'You're such a fuckmonkey, Dom'."

Dom began to make desperately choked noises.

"I'm never going to hear the end of this one, am I?" Grace asked in mock despair. "Fuckmonkeys will follow me around for the rest of my life."

Dom rolled onto his back, laughing, gasping, and began to beg. "Oh God, stop. Please. Stop. Killin' me. Gonna make me--piss."

Grace edged away from him.

"Something wrong, Dom?" Billy asked, his voice mild. "Are you having a fit? 'S this some sort of medical condition? We're a ways from a hospital, but we could throw you out in the snow if you think that'd help."

"Shut it. Gobshite," he wheezed. "It's the idea of Penny. As Pied Piper. Only 'stead of rats following--it's a pack of--horny monkeys!" He dissolved into uncontrollable laughter again.

Within seconds the bed was creaking beneath four people shaking with giggling, snorting, stifled hilarity. It took them a long time to quiet down because as soon as one of them began to calm, another would whisper, "Oh, fuckmonkeys!" and they'd all be off again.

Finally, though--and only after a bang on the wall from the room next door--they were still, only panting breaths disturbing the silence as they lay clutching stomachs and each other.

"I hate you all," Grace eventually said in a whisper as distinct as plain speech. "Hate. Think I broke something."

"Don't worry, dollface," Elijah's voice was uneven, but his grin was evident. "We'll give you a minute to recover before you start the story."

"Hate. I'm never going to be allowed to sleep, am I?"

Dom patted her shoulder. "You can sleep after we leave tomorrow, Pen. 'S not like Billy will be entertaining, or anything."

"Wanker," Billy mumbled, curling up against Grace. "I'll keep her mesmerized with my wit
and...and. Something. I'm fascinating, dammit."

"Yes, yes, Bill, you're enthralling, we know. Now shut it and let Penny tell us a bedtime story."

"I give up," Grace sighed. "You people just don't understand the word no."

"I thought you'd figured that out from the whole 'we're throwing Billy a surprise party at your place' thing," Elijah snickered.

"Shh. I'm telling a story here. All right. A long time ago--"

"In a galaxy far, far away," Dom intoned.

Billy clumsily reached across and smacked his head. "Shut it. Y' want your story or not?"

"Thank you, Billy," Grace said, a tinge of triumph in her voice.

"Wee folk. Mushrooms. Go."

She chuckled and began again. "A long time ago, deep in the very heart of the forest, lived a mischievous, naughty, none-too-smart little fairy--"

"Sounds like you, Dom," Elijah snickered.

Dom launched himself across the bed--and therefore across Grace and Billy--trying to reach him, but Billy gave him a solid shove back.

"Ow!" Grace squeaked in protest of both actions.

"Both of you lay still and listen to Grace, or story time's over," Billy ordered. "I don't know what you two have been smoking, but Grace and I are tired. Now cuddle up and shut your sodding gobs."

Dom and Elijah murmured repentant 'sorry's, then gave themselves away by snickering as they did indeed cuddle up.

"Are you two ready?" Grace asked overly politely. "Need a pee break? Your mommies? Jammies with the little footsies attached?"

Dom snorted and poked her in the side as Elijah grinned and said, "We'll be good. But can I ask a question first?"

"You may."

"What's the fairy's name?"

"It's unpronounceable by the human tongue," she answered pertly. "So we will call him Bert."

"...Bert the fairy?" Dom managed, barely keeping himself in check.

"Yes. Must you always question my characters' names? Now, let's see. Bert lived deep in the forest under a cluster of glass mushrooms, little tiny sparkly glass mushrooms that hid under the ferns that shielded him from weather and sight and made him happy with their beauty. But Bert had a bit of a naughty streak, and to be honest, a little too much time on his hands. When the big people walked through the forest on their path a little ways away from his sparkling mushrooms, Bert liked to devise ways to make their trip unpleasant." Grace paused, expecting either Dom or Elijah
to ask how, but apparently they'd been sufficiently threatened into not interrupting again.

She continued, thinking fast to try and keep ahead of herself. "Sometimes Bert would lay branches across the path to trip unwary travelers."

Dom made a skeptical noise; Grace realized her inconsistency and quickly covered it.

"For although he was small enough to live under his sparkling mushroom, Bert was one of the fairy folk who were possessed of great strength for their size. So he would try and trip the big people with branches, or he would stick burrs to their woolens as they passed, or he would run up a tree and drop acorns onto their heads."

Billy huffed a chuckle beside her ear as Dom gave a quiet laugh.

Grace smiled, encouraged, and went on. "Unfortunately, Bert had made it such a nuisance to take that path, that eventually the big people stopped passing by, preferring instead to take the slightly longer but less troublesome path to the north. Bert grew bored without the big people to watch, and to follow, and to tease, and he began to mope about beneath his glittering roofs, no longer taking pleasure in even his usual pastimes. He still gathered the berries and nuts and tree buds and fiddleheads that were his food, but they had grown tasteless to him, in the doldrums as he was. Bert finally promised his favourite oak tree that if the big people came back, he wouldn't pester them anymore. He'd still watch them pass, maybe follow them once in a while, but he wouldn't try to trip them or drop things on their heads anymore." Grace paused in her tale to take a deep breath and figure out how the next bit would go.

Billy nuzzled his nose against her cheek. "You're doing great, wee girl," he said, sounding utterly relaxed.

"Doing brilliant," Dom agreed, clumsily patting her arm and wriggling closer to them. "My arse is hanging off of the bed, and no fat jokes, if you please."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Pudgy," Billy teased.

"Shut it, wanker."

"Git."

Elijah exhaled in annoyance. "Would you two shut the hell up? Let Grace finish her story."

"Why, so you can fall asleep before it's over again?" Dom asked.

"I will not. Go ahead, dollface."

"All right," she smiled. "So poor, sad, lonely, bored Bert had promised the oak tree that if the big people would only come back, he wouldn't be naughty anymore. Well, you can imagine his delight when a few days later a young woman hurried nervously by! He watched her from the shelter of the fern, but as he had promised, he did not pester her. The next day an old man came shuffling down the path, peering into the forest as he traveled. Bert followed him for a while, trying to figure out what the old graybeard kept looking for, but eventually he returned home to take a nap under the sun-dappled shelter of his glass mushrooms." Grace paused again and stretched her toes towards the foot of the bed. She pressed a soundless kiss to Billy's hair when he laid his head on her shoulder.

"I bet Bert starts acting naughty again," Elijah predicted with a sleepy sounding smile.
"You know Bert too well," Grace chuckled. "Over the next few weeks, more and more big people returned to using the path, and the temptation pulled at him, and he spent less and less time reminding himself of the promise he'd made to the oak tree not to beleaguer the big people anymore. Well, one day he was high above the ground collecting acorns for his supper when a big strapping young man came strolling along the path, whistling cheerfully. He passed directly beneath Bert, high up on his branch, and before Bert quite realized what he was doing, he'd started pelting the burly lad with the sparkly pebbles he had in his pockets. Well! You should have seen the poor young man start, and jump, and rub his head, and you should have heard him bellow, 'Ach! Wha' weer tha', then'" Grace imitated a broad Highland accent as best she could, earning a chuckle from Billy. "But then the tree Bert was in--for it was his favourite oak tree, of course--the tree began to shiver, and tremble, and shake. Dozens upon dozens of acorns dropped, most of them hitting the poor lad below, who began waving his arms wildly like he was battering away biting insects. 'Stop!' he shouted, whirling as fast as his heavy hobnailed boots would allow. 'Stop, ye wee de'il whae keeps knockin' on me heid! Stop, for I am sore afeart!' Bert, clinging to his branch above, could do nothing but watch in mesmerized fascination as the tree began whipping its limbs, pelting the innocent traveler with even more acorns. Suddenly the stranger flailed his arms, and began to stumble about, and he blundered right off the path and through the ferns. The tree stilled immediately and Bert dropped the rest of his small stones that he'd been pelting the lad with, collected his acorns--the few that hadn't fallen out of his lap when the tree had begun to shake--and ran down. But the big fellow was already a long ways away, still running and shouting about the 'accursed' forest. Bert hopped and skipped in glee at the entertainment he'd just had, not pausing for even a moment to wonder why the tree had driven the big person off. But his glee soon turned to disbelief, to dismay, to despair. For there, amongst the bent and broken ferns, in the midst of several enormous hobnailed boot prints, lay the sharp sparkling shards of his beautiful home. It was then that Bert realized the oak tree had done it on purpose, because Bert had broken his promise, and to teach Bert a very valuable lesson."

After a pause, Dom sighed. "All right, I'll bite. What was the lesson? What's the moral of the story?"

"Well," Grace said evenly enough, "The lesson Bert learned that day, deep in the forest, was that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

There was a moment of complete and utter silence as she virtually held her breath. Then Dom was groaning, Elijah muttering something about not believing he 'fell for it', and Billy was squeezing her tightly, laughing his head off, albeit quietly.

"Well done, wee girl!" he congratulated her with glee. "That'll make them think twice before pestering the hell out of you for a bedtime story, won't it?"

She grinned into the darkness. "I admit the thought did cross my mind."

"You ought to be ashamed, Penny," Dom said sternly. "To ruin a perfectly lovely little fable like that, just to get us back?"

Grace laughed, completely unrepentant. "Serves you right. Besides, what do you expect off the top of my head? I'm not Mother Goose, you know."

"Lucky you're not my girlfriend," he muttered, "Or I'd goose you." Before she could protest the girlfriend remark, he leaned over and gave her a raspberry on the cheek, followed by a smacky wet kiss.

"Eww, Dom!" She made a loud show of wiping off her cheek. "Good grief, how does one man have so much fucking slobber?"
"Dom's special that way," was Elijah's contribution. "Well, dollface, except for that totally unfair moral at the end, I liked the story. You should write those two stories down. But, you know, change the ending, because that was atrocious!" Without warning, he reached across Billy to tickle her side. 

Grace was hard pressed to contain her shriek, and settled instead for wriggling violently. She accidentally elbowed Billy in the stomach, and her knee came perilously close to Dom's groin as she tried to writhe away from the merciless fingers on her ribs. 

"Bloody hell, Pen, watch it!" Dom hissed, both his hands covering himself instinctively. 

"Sorry--ugh! 'Lij, stop it!" she giggled, high and breathless. 

"Elwood, cut it out! I'd like to have something to offer a bird of my own one day, you pillock!"

As Elijah's fingers stopped tickling her, Grace opened her mouth to protest that she was no one's bird, thanks very much, but Billy wrapped his arm around her neck and pulled her face-first against his chest, preventing her from saying anything at all. 

"Don't worry, Dom," he spoke over her muffled noises of mock outrage. "Someday we'll find you a bird who isn't scared off by your blinding good looks, rapier wit, and emotional sensitivity."

"Fuck you, Boyd."

"Yeah. That's what I'm talking about."

"Minny. Nebbe go." Grace gave him a poke. 

With a chuckle he released her head. "Did I squish your nose?"

"Yes," she pouted. 

"Now you know how I feel," Dom said darkly. 

"Don't be silly, you have a lovely nose. Now do you gentlemen, and I use the term loosely, have any clue at all what time it is?"

"Late?" Elijah offered, sounding perfectly cheerful. 

"Yes. So I'm going to get comfy--" she burrowed deeper into the blankets and against Billy-- "and I'm going to sleep. You twits can talk as long as you like, just be quiet about it. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Elijah whispered loudly. 

She lifted her head just long enough to demand, "And don't call me ma'am!" before pulling the covers up over her ears. She felt Billy's chuckle in his chest as she pressed her forehead against him, tangling her legs with his; felt Dom shift closer against her back and lay an arm over her side, his hand resting on Billy's ribs; felt, a moment later, Elijah's hand on her waist, his arm across Billy. She poked her head up to say, "I feel like I'm in a hobbit's smial, sleeping twelve to a bed."

Dom laughed, but Billy stroked her hair and asked, "Are you all right, there, luv? Going to be able to sleep?"

"Hell, yes. I love this. You guys are the best," she mumbled, tucked her nose under again, and within minutes slid into sleep, the warmth and solidity surrounding her more surely than any quilt ever could.
Chapter 35

Grace woke suddenly, with a start, then froze. She didn't know what had disturbed her; the cottage was silent, and by craning her neck on her pillow she could see the still forms in the bunkbeds. It was early, then. Well, early-ish, anyway, after their late night the night before. She settled back down into the mattress and the blankets, and looked over at Billy's face, tranquil in the dim light, his lashes at rest on his cheeks. She watched him for several long moments, and her mind began to churn.

Grace didn't know how she felt, not concretely. Was she falling in love with Billy? Maybe a little. Probably, a little. How could she not, really, with all that had gone between them?

But she was scared. Rather obvious, considering the land of denial she'd been living in, but there it was all the same. What exactly was she frightened by? Because it wasn't Billy himself, the idea was laughable; he was far too kind and caring and decent a human being to ever deliberately hurt her. Besides, he genuinely liked her, of that she had no doubt. So if not Billy, then what?

Distance was the first word to pop into her head, and she realized it was a multi-purpose answer. Firstly, there was the physical distance--he lived on another bloody continent, for fuck's sake. It was hardly going to be an easy obstacle to overcome. How could they possibly develop any sort of relationship over five thousand kilometers, only seeing each other every few months?

There was also the distance between his world and hers. She studied his face again, thought of how she'd seen it in newspapers and on TV and how it had been larger than life in movie theatres around the globe, and how could she possibly consider herself capable of coping with that world? Because she wasn't. She was just...Grace, a born and bred Canadian girl who stayed in her apartment most of the day and had a geeky computer job and had never been further from home than the northern United States. Hell, Billy had visited more countries in a year than she could hope to in a lifetime. He'd met royalty, partied with gorgeous actresses, done more interviews than anyone could count, had walked the red carpet and won Oscars. He was sophisticated and polished and charming and perfectly groomed and everything she was not.

The third distance was income. Billy could pretend it didn't matter, but it did--of course it did. He was... well, if not downright wealthy, at least very comfortably well-off, and with every prospect of staying that way. Whereas she--she lived from paycheque to paycheque and had once had to roll spare change to pay her rent and yes, she knew that wasn't going to last forever, that someday she'd have money again. But she didn't have any now. Right now she was living in poverty and it was humiliating and degrading and made her feel next to worthless at times. How could she and Billy possibly form any sort of a relationship coming from such polar opposites?

Because despite everything, despite all the huge obstacles between them, despite distance and experiences and finances and a multitude of little reasons that all shouted at her not to be foolish, despite the fear that had plagued her into inaction--Grace discovered she rather thought she wanted a relationship.

She reached over again and ran a featherlight hand over his hair. Seeing him again had done this to her, made her all introspective and brought to the fore all kinds of things she'd desperately been trying to suppress. So much had been said--shared--accidentally revealed--in the time since she'd last seen him, that spending this weekend with him, being able to see him grin, see and feel the warmth in his eyes when he called her wee girl, feel his hand on her back with an entirely unconscious but slightly possessive weight--it was causing doors inside her to be thrown open that she'd thought were tightly and securely bolted.
She was still scared. It would be so very, very complicated, but this depth of feeling, the way he'd snuggled himself into her heart and soul until she couldn't imagine not knowing and caring for him, all of it just—and only just—overcame her fear. And the fact that she was oh, so attracted to him, that she wanted to kiss him so badly, that he turned her on with the briefest of touches and softest of words, well, that was the kicker, wasn't it? That was what finally did her in.

Billy chose that moment to curl closer, a soft sigh and odd little snicker giving away the fact that he was dreaming. He laid his head on her chest, and a moment later shifted to lay a thigh over hers.

Grace took a slow, deep breath, and gently wrapped her arms around him. Every second since he'd shown up at her door two days ago, she'd been losing her grip on the space she'd been so carefully maintaining between them. Even when he was hugging her tightly, she'd been keeping him at bay. She was tired of holding him at arm's length.

She lightly pressed her nose to his hair and inhaled the scent of him—a combination of fruity mousse and fresh air and soap and skin and Billy. Her arms involuntarily tightened around him.

Billy snuffled and his lips hummed wordless quiet sounds against her t-shirt covered breast. Grace breathed, "Billy," into his hair, and kissed his head. She turned the lower half of her body against his, trying not to wake him but suddenly needing the light contact, as much as she could get. It didn't matter that they both wore warm flannel trousers, or that she was barely touching him. She could feel the heat of his body, the light press of his hip against her thigh, his chest against her side. She softly kissed the warm skin high on his forehead, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to prevent the tears from escaping.

Billy's arm snaked across her torso, up under her arm, his hand curving up over her shoulder until his fingertips brushed her clavicle. Grace bit her lip, held her breath. Her stomach muscles contracted sharply with a silent sob.

Billy slowly lifted his head, one eye cracked open against the dim light, to inspect her face. She could feel his gaze, and without opening her eyes she tried to turn over, still curled up with him but trying to turn her face away.

Billy was having none of it. He held her where she was; his hand lifted from her shoulder and the side of one knuckle pressed against the outside corner of her eye, as if seeking to verify what he guessed. When his finger came away wet, he somehow managed to quickly but quietly shift until he was holding her, cuddling her, stroking her mussed hair. He softly breathed, "What's wrong, dear heart? Bad dream?"

All Grace could manage was to shake her head and then she buried her face against his neck, wrapped her arms tightly around him, and held on as she silently shuddered with stifled sobs.

"Shh, luv, it's all right," he whispered directly into her ear. "Do you want to get up?"

She shook her head again and tightened her grip on him even further.

"Okay. Shush now. That's it, dear heart."

Grace tilted her head up. Her voice thick with tears and so quiet as to be nearly inaudible, she whispered, "Don't fuck with me, Billy. Promise you won't fuck with me."
"I will not fuck with you," he vowed, his voice as soft as hers. "I swear it, luv. We'll talk about this later, you're tired and you need to sleep, but I swear I'm not fucking around. I care about you, you wee idiot. Shh. Go back to sleep." He rested his hand on her head, holding her to his chest.

Grace clung to him. It took her a long time to fall asleep again.

Billy rubbed her back the entire time.

When Grace groggily woke, she knew it was only a little later, but the bed beside her was empty. When she twisted her neck on the pillow she could see that the bunkbeds were also abandoned.

Two quiet voices right outside the door made her freeze.

"Everything okay, Bill?" Dom was whispering, but it traveled clearly through the slightly ajar door.

"Yeah. Why?" Billy sounded surprised.

"I was awake early."

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing you said," Dom murmured. "But it sounded like she was crying, and I heard you shushing her."

Billy was silent for a moment and Grace knew she shouldn't be listening, but she suddenly realized there were many ways he could have interpreted her earlier tears and she desperately wanted to know what was in his mind. If he had the wrong end of the stick, she had to know so she could fix it.

"She was crying," he finally whispered. "Asked me not to fuck with her."

"What?"

"Fuck with her, wanker. As in hurt her."

"Oh. Oh, I see. Why would she say that?"

"I think..." Billy paused. "I think she's finally going to let me get closer, even though she's still..."

"Scared?"

"For lack of a better word, yeah. She hugged the fucking stuffing out of me, Dom." The smile in his voice was plain.

Grace breathed out in relief that he'd read her correctly. She couldn't help but find it a little disconcerting, although in a good way she supposed, that he'd understood so accurately what had been tripping through her head.

"That's fantastic, Bill." Dom sounded truly pleased.
"Yeah. If I'm right. I told her we'd talk later."

"Why don't you go talk now?" Dom urged. "You've been waiting for this."

"Because it might take a while," Billy whispered, "And you guys are only here for a couple more hours anyway. I've waited this long, I can be patient a few more hours."

"You're a stronger man than I am, Gunga-Din," Dom grinned. "You having porridge this morning?"

"Nah. I'll have bacon and eggs today."

"I'll go put 'em on. Come on out when you're done your shower."

Their voices faded as they walked away. The last thing Grace heard was Billy saying, "I will. Thanks, mate..."

She huffed out a deep breath, wondering if it was odd that she didn't mind Billy discussing her with Dom. She wondered if it was because of the relationship between the two men, the closeness they'd had for more than a few years now, or if it was because Grace was growing to adore Dom as a good friend herself. Either way, she was grateful for the reassurance of their conversation, whether she was meant to hear it or not.

Five minutes later Grace, dressed and with her hair scraped back into a ponytail, tiptoed into the kitchen to find Dom, Hannah, and Orlando making breakfast.

"Morning. Sleep well?" Orli asked quietly.

She smiled at him. "I did, thanks. Not quite long enough, though, I might have to try for a nap this afternoon--I'm getting too old for these shenanigans. How about you? I hope it wasn't too cold in the living room last night."

He hunched down to bump her shoulder with his. "No, it was fine. It was good."

She gave his forearm a squeeze, then crossed to Dom who was watching the toaster, which had a slight tendency to burn. "Morning."

Dom looked down at her, his smile warm. "Hullo, Penny darlin'."

Grace popped the toast up even though it wasn't done.

Dom looked puzzled. "I don't think that's quite--" He stopped in surprise when she stood on tiptoe to wrap her arms around his neck and hug him tightly. "What's this for?" he asked, returning her embrace.

"Thanks, Dom," she murmured.

"What for?"

"Just...thanks." Only a moment later she released him, pushed the toast back down, and turned away to cheerfully ask Hannah, "Anything I can do?"

Hannah looked up from the pan of bacon. "Umm...I don't know, do you think anyone will want tea?"

"Tea it is. I'll pour some juice as well."
Grace gave Dom one last hug. Everyone else had already said goodbye and were crammed into the van, and she'd spent long minutes alone in the kitchen with Elijah, thanking him for everything.

"Thanks, Dom," she said now, her arms tightening around his neck as he picked her up off the ground. "This was amazing."

"It was a great weekend, wasn't it? I hope the rest goes as well for you, Penny love," he murmured as Billy walked up. "Thanks for letting us use your cottage for our wild party, yeah?"

"Thanks for bringing everyone here," she countered with a smile. "It was really insanely surreal, but absolutely wonderful, to meet all of you. I hope--I hope I'll see you again sometime."

"Oh, I have a feeling you will." His chuckle rumbled in her ear before he set her down. He turned to Billy and they embraced. "See you soon, mate," he said simply.

"Thanks for the birthday party," Billy laughed. "Don't think this is getting you out of sending me a present in August."

"I never thought for a moment it would," Dom grinned.

"I'll call you in a couple of days, all right?"

"You'd better, Boyd." He let Billy go and picked up his carryon bag, then gave them one last cheeky grin. "Have fun, kids."

Billy gave his arse a kick as he turned to leave.

When the screened door had closed, Grace and Billy stood for a moment further, waving, but the window rapidly fogged over thanks to a bitterly cold morning outside. With a happy sigh, Billy closed the inner door to shut off the cold draft, and he shivered. "I'm going to go check the stove. Do you want any tea or coffee?"

"Tea sounds perfect," Grace answered, suddenly shy. It felt so very strange knowing they had a full day and--she swallowed--night ahead of them. "You put the kettle on, I can get the stove."

"All right," he said agreeably, and stroked a fingertip down her nose before walking away.

Grace took a deep breath, feeling a silly smile spread across her face.

A few minutes later she joined Billy in the kitchen. "No wonder you were feeling cool, it was nearly out."

Billy turned from where he was looking out the window and leaned back against the edge of the counter to watch as she crossed to stand directly in front of him. "No one was really keeping an eye on it this morning." He leaned in without touching her to inhale deeply. "You smell like woodsmoke. 'S lovely."

Without warning--for either Billy or herself--Grace stretched up to plant her lips on his and kiss him hard, her arms rising to wind around his neck. Her mouth opened and her tongue teased at his upper lip.
Billy made a pleased noise in his throat and kissed her back gladly. He opened his mouth beneath hers and as she softly, slowly began exploring the heated wetness of every corner of his mouth, he put his hands on her hips and gently tugged her in against him. He felt the heat of her body where her thighs touched his, and the sensation made his fingertips tingle with want.

He had no idea how long it was before the sound of the kettle shrieking intruded upon his gloriously preoccupied senses. Grace was kissing him passionately and thoroughly enough he fancied he could feel the brain synapses shooting off sparks, and he thought perhaps it was time they took a breather, both literally and figuratively. Maybe it was time to talk, before he completely lost all grip on reason. He reluctantly dragged his lips from hers and reached over to turn off the element under the kettle. "Grace," he murmured, and was surprised how ragged his voice sounded already. Maybe one of the things they should talk about, he thought, was her going easy on him, because good God, he wanted her, and they'd been alone less than half an hour. At this rate he'd never last the weekend.

But Grace was pressing up against him, trying to pull his head back down to hers.

"Grace," he insisted, reaching up behind his head to gently circle her wrists with his fingers and push her away.

"Billy--" she murmured, and when her eyes met his they were darker than usual.

It took all Billy's willpower, but he simply kissed her forehead. "Come on, wee girl, it's tea time."

"No, it's not. It's eleven-thirty in the morning." She stubbornly tried to move closer again.

"Grace. What are you doing, luv? Have you gone a bit mad?" His soft, teasing tone belied his words. "Don't you think we should maybe talk?"

Grace stilled. "Do you?"

"Yes, I do."

He kept holding her tightly as bright patches flared on her cheeks and she tried to pull her wrists from his grip.

"None of that, now. Let's get our tea and head out to the sofa where I can sit you on my lap, and maybe we can talk about a few things you haven't let me talk about in a while now." Rather than letting her go he pulled her in, releasing her wrists to wrap his arms tightly around her, hugging her close. "It feels so good to be able to just stand here quietly and hold you like this, and know I don't have to leave in an hour," he murmured. "Do you know what I mean?"

Grace nodded against his chest.

"We're in no rush, dear heart." He kissed her hair. "I've missed you this past month and more."

"I've missed you, too," she whispered into his sweatshirt.

"Mmm. I'm glad to hear it. I'm very glad to hear it," he added honestly. "Because I wasn't sure if you did."

She lifted her head to look up at him in surprise. "You're kidding me, right?"

Billy smiled at her. "No, I'm not kidding you. In emails or when we're on the phone and I can't see you, and you're doing that little dance you do to keep me as far away from you as possible, then no,
I'm not sure if you miss me or not."

Grace flushed, but met his eyes as she said, "Sorry, but that's crap. You know very well I missed you, dance or no. I told you more than once."

"True," he admitted. "You did. But it was hard to believe at times."

"Then believe this," she breathed, and stretched up to kiss him warmly, slowly, her lips brushing velvet-soft over his as her fingers rose to rest on his cheek.

Billy's eyelids fluttered closed and he breathed deeply, and he opened his mouth and teased at her lips with the tip of his tongue. When her mouth opened beneath his, Billy gave a little hum of approval and kissed her deeply, slow and wet and sensuous, his short scruffy beard rasping on her chin.

Grace leaned against him, a gentle but heady warmth stealing through her entire body. She could almost feel her nerves and anxieties draining away as Billy reassured her without uttering a single word.

Eventually he moved his lips from hers, dotting a trail of kisses along her jaw to her hair. He stroked the silk of his lower lip down the outside curve of her ear, kissed her earlobe, and softly said, "Okay."

"O-okay what?" Grace managed, eyes closed, head tilted to the side.

"Okay, I believe you missed me."

"I did. More than I wanted to."

"Ah, Grace," he murmured, pressing the side of his head to hers. "You have a real talent for putting me in my place and making me feel wonderful all at the same time. Come on, dear heart, let's get our tea and go have a bit of a cuddle on the sofa, yeah?"

She nodded, her chin sharp on his shoulder. "Yeah. Okay."

Grace closed the woodstove door and straightened up, dusting off the one knee she'd been resting on.

"You look even more wee than usual in your trackies," Billy commented from the corner of the sofa.

"Because they're a little too big for me," she admitted. "I think I'm going to have to shop in the kids department next time. Apparently all adults are supposed to be five foot nine."

"You haven't gained back all that weight you lost earlier this month when you were ill, either, have you?" He raised his eyebrow.

"Not quite, no."

He gestured her over, waited until she stood in front of him. He reached up to grip her waist with both hands, tugging her closer until her shins rested against the front of the sofa. "How much?"
"How much what?"

"You lost a stone. How much have you gained back?"

She cocked her head as she looked down at him. "Is that how much a stone is? Fourteen pounds? I've always wondered."

Billy chuckled. "Yes, you curiosity bug, a stone is fourteen pounds. Now will you answer my question, please?"

"I've gained back seven pounds," she said with a hint of pride.

Billy just looked at her. "That's it?"

Grace's forehead wrinkled. "Well, yeah. That's good, for me. It's only been a couple weeks."

"Have you upped your protein intake?"

"Some."

He suddenly stilled and looked very worried. "Grace, tell me this isn't financial. Tell me you have enough money to eat properly."

She didn't know whether to be amused or offended. She crossed her arms on her chest and demanded, "Are you serious?"

He began to pull back, but she grabbed his wrists and held his hands where they were on her sides.

"If you must know, Mr. Boyd," she said with asperity, but no anger, "I have enough money to eat decent meals and fresh fruit and vegetables and porridge—and you'll please take note of my easy use of the word porridge instead of oatmeal—and even the occasional bag of licorice, my secret addiction. Do I eat steak and lobster and my weight in cheese? No. Does that satisfy you, or shall I write down my daily menu for you?" She nudged him with her knees to show she was just taking the piss with him.

"Very humourous," he muttered, the tips of his ears pink and a reluctant smile hovering on the edge of taking over.

"I know, and I'm sorry." She suddenly grinned down at him. "But it was an awfully impertinent question."

Billy gave her a swift hard tug, pulling her down into his lap as she yelped. "It was," he agreed, a little ashamed, as he wrapped his arms around her and tucked her in against his body. "But I worry about you. I can't help it. And I know--I just know--there are things you haven't told me yet."

"Like what?" Grace briefly considered moving a little further down the sofa so she could see his face and perhaps not touch him quite so much. She wriggled in closer instead.

"I don't know," Billy admitted. "I'm sure you have your reasons for not telling me, and I hope they're not as daft as some of your past reasons have turned out to be."

"Oh, thank you very much," she said wryly.

"It's true, and you know it." He kissed her temple with a loud smack. "As long as you know if you ever want to talk, I'll be glad to listen."
"I know. Thank you, Billy." She momentarily turned her face into his neck, but then laid her head back on his shoulder. "The same goes for you, too, you know. If you ever want to tell me why Billy trivia is so difficult, for example."

His exhale stirred her hair. "I'd forgotten about that."

"I wondered if you had."

"And you were going to tell me why you were touchy about me asking you for the news."

"I had a bit of a problem with your choice of the word 'touchy', you know," she pointed out, fingers tickling at his ribs.

"Hey, hey!" He squirmed underneath her. "Stop it! That's not fair. If you disagree with touchy, then what would you call it?"

"Misunderstood."

Billy laughed. "Smartass."

"I've missed you calling me that," Grace said suddenly, her arm tightening around his side. "It usually means I've made you laugh."

"Ah, you do, wee girl," he said warmly, quietly. "You do make me laugh. One of the many reasons I love talking to you, love it when I can see you. Because you always make me smile."

She pressed her forehead against his chest, and they were silent for a while.

Some time later Grace shifted a little, facing more in the same direction as Billy, partially leaning back against his chest. His arm curled around her to rest on her opposite hip, and he kissed the top of her head.

"It's kind of embarrassing to admit it," she said, her voice low, but even and open. "But most of the time I really do have no news, Billy. My days are very much the same, with work and maybe a little walk and some Pilates and guitar and the occasional trek across the road to the Laundromat. And that's it. I don't--I don't do anything."

"Why is that embarrassing?" Billy asked, and stroked her hair.

"Because I have no life. I spend most of my day inside my fucking dive of a shoebox apartment by myself. I'm probably going to turn into the crazy cat lady."

"The what?"

"The crazy cat lady. You know, the old woman who lives alone and never leaves her house and owns eighty cats," Grace muttered.

"You don't even own one cat," he pointed out reasonably.

"I would if I could afford to feed it. But that's not the point!"

"No, it's not. Grace, luv, there's something that's been bothering me for a while now, but I couldn't put my finger on exactly what it was. Now I know," Billy hesitated, his thumb absently stroking her hip through the fabric of her trackies. "You don't have to answer, though, you can say 'not yet' if you want, I don't know if I'm pushing it, here--"
"Billy."

"In the two months I've known you, the only friend you've ever mentioned is Jamie. What about the others? I refuse to believe someone as brilliant as you doesn't have a whole raft of friends. Do you not see them anymore?" he asked softly, unsure.

After a long, still moment, she shortly said, "No. I don't."

"I don't want to upset you, Grace."

"It's not you," she muttered, fingers plucking at the bottom hem of her hoodie.

"Even so..."

"I want you to believe that I want--that I want to do this, wander with you," she said, stumbling over her words. "That I want to--to--you know. Move forward."

"You have nothing to prove, dear heart." His hands stilled her plucking fingers, then he twined his fingers with hers.

"I do, actually. To myself, if not to you. Because I honestly have no idea whatsoever what you'll say or think," Grace whispered, and Billy could hear a note of fear behind it.

"Is this about your friends?" he asked, dropping a light kiss on her hair.

"Them. And me."

"All right. Take your time, I'm not going anywhere." Billy felt, rather than heard, her small snort. He wondered if that was where the fear came from. "I'm not, dear heart. No matter what you say here, I'm not going anywhere."

Grace tightened her fingers around Billy's. "You haven't heard it yet."

"Doesn't matter." He shook his head. "We're solid, remember? Not frostwork or--what was the other one?"

"Glass threads," she murmured.

Billy gave her a squeeze. "That's it. We're not glass threads or frostwork. I shan't budge."

Grace leaned her head against his arm. Billy's thumb rubbed against the back of her hand, and for several long moments the only sound in the room was the muted crackle of the fire in the woodstove and the low hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen.

"Michael left at the beginning of March," Grace finally began, her voice low but steady. "I've told you a bit about it. I waited, I looked for him, I called the police. What I didn't do was call any of my friends, not at first." She paused.

Billy continued stroking her hand. "Why not?" he eventually asked.

"I guess...at first I had no idea he'd gone for good. And by the time it started to sink in, I was discovering just how deep a hole he'd abandoned me in."

"The debts."

"The debts," she agreed quietly. "But also...me. Just--the way he pretended to love me, but used me
so terribly, so...so...thoroughly. And I went a bit frantic for a while, just trying to figure out what he'd taken, what was left--which of course turned out to be precious little. And trying to figure out...well, how I was going to make it through everything. And I decided the only way to do that was not to give in, not to give one inch."

"I've noticed that stubborn streak of yours," he said wryly, teasing a little.

It won a small smile. "Yeah, yeah. Matched only by yours."

"Me? Never. I'm the world's softest touch. But go on--you decided a stiff upper lip was the route to take."

"Soft touch my ass." She shifted to dig her shoulder into his chest. "I'd bet no one could make you do something you don't want to do. But yeah, once I realized there was nothing I could do except start paying the money back, I decided to hell with Michael and everyone else and that I was going to do it by myself. Plus the feeling that--well, there was that whole humiliation factor, right?"

"And that you'd convinced yourself you were at fault," Billy added quietly.

"Yeah, that too. So when my friends called to see where I'd gotten to, to catch up, I couldn't tell them. And maybe that says something not just about me, but about my friendships too. I don't know," she said miserably. "I mean, I told you after--what? Two days?"

"Yes, but that was eight or nine months later," he pointed out. "So yes, we connected right away, but you were also--are also--so very worn down by it all. Maybe it was just time for you to let it go."

"Maybe."

"So your friends got upset that there was something you weren't telling them?"

"What? Hell, no, they had no idea. We'd just go get a coffee downtown or something, and I didn't say a word."

"What happened, then?" he pressed.

"They kept calling me to do things with them I couldn't afford to do. Like concerts, or movies, or dinner out, or a long weekend camping. And I had to keep saying no, and eventually they just...stopped asking."

There was a deep frown evident in Billy's voice as he asked, "Are you telling me not one of them asked you what was going on, that they all just buggered off and left you with the water rising up to your neck?"

Grace shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I did keep it from them--"

"Don't defend them, Grace," he said sharply. "There's no excuse for that. Jesus, that pisses me off. Loyalty is so important to you, and they all just fucked you over, like that utter shite Michael hadn't already done enough." Billy was agitated, and Grace weakly tried to ease the tension.

"But they didn't know he'd--"

"It doesn't matter!" he snapped, not even noticing that he was shouting at the very person he was defending. "They should've known you. They should've known that someone doesn't change that rapidly unless there's something going on, and they should have fucking well looked after you, not
abandoned you to the bloody wolves! Christ, Grace, that must've hurt you."

"Of course it hurt!" she finally cried. "They fucking forgot about me the second I wasn't so amusing anymore, and it really hurt, it still really fucking hurts, so can we please stop talking about how little anyone cared about me and how outside my family I haven't got anyone that apparently gives a fucking shit about me? Because this really isn't helping!"

"That's not fucking true!" Billy nearly shouted, and he grabbed her shoulders and forcefully turned her around, his fingers digging into her upper arms almost painfully. "Goddammit, Grace, how many times do I have to tell you that I care about you? Why won't you bloody well believe me?"

Grace was twisted awkwardly across his lap, and instead of answering, she tried to pull out of his grasp.

"No," he growled, his grip tightening further. "I'm not letting you run away, Grace. Tell me why you can't seem to believe I care about you. Will you explain that to me? How could you kiss me the way you did earlier and not believe you're goddamned important to me?"

She refused to meet his eyes, only whispered, "You're hurting my arms."

Billy loosened his grip but didn't let go. "Well?"

Grace said not a word, but he felt her begin to tremble.

"Ah, God, dear heart, what the hell are you doing?" His voice was filled with a quiet intensity, and he pulled her in to hug her tightly, her face against his neck. His arms wrapped around her, he kissed her hair and then leaned his cheek on the top of her head. "Stop it. Stop holding it all in, Grace. If it hurts, then bloody well let it out. You can let go with me, luv. I'll hug you while you cry and I'll still be here when you're done. I'm not going anywhere. After all," he added, rocking her a little, "You've got the car keys."

Her single choked laugh quickly turned into hard, wracking sobs.

"That's it," he murmured. "That's my wee girl."

"I'm n-not yours--" she wept.

Billy sighed explosively, but put one hand on the back of her head and cradled her against his shoulder. "You drive me mad," he said softly as she continued to cry. "You know that, don't you? Absolutely stark raving. But I hope you've sodding well figured out by now that I care about you. I've told you a number of times, in a number of ways. And what about Jamie, hmm? He's a dear friend, is he not? You let him into your flat, didn't you? And Dom and Elijah, well, it's obvious 'Lij loves you like a big sister, and Dom is your knight in rusty armour, you'll never be able to shake the bugger. Are you getting what I'm telling you, here, luv?"

Grace continued to sob.

"And besides," Billy added gently. "You told me you missed me. In fact, now that I think back through the alcoholic haze, at Hogmanay you told me I was important to you. You told me not to doubt it, didn't you, dear heart? So why does it seem you're the one doubting it?"

She shook her head underneath his chin. "I'm not," she tearfully insisted. "You are important."

"Then it's me you're doubting?"
"No!" she cried. "I don't."

With a sad little smile, Billy said, "I don't understand, luv. Can you please try and explain this to me?" He waited patiently while she cried, as her sobs slowly began to abate, as she reached for tissues from the coffee table and blew her nose.

As soon as Grace had dried her face, she curled up against him again and tried to catch her breath. Pressing her forehead against his neck, she silently asked for a bit of reassurance.

Billy understood, and began stroking her back. "It's all right, dear heart," he murmured. "Feel a little better now?"

She nodded.

"Good. That's good, luv." He slouched further down into the corner of the sofa, taking her with him, then reached and pulled down the light throw blanket that was draped over the back. He tucked it around them up to rib height, leaving their arms free. "All right. Will you explain all this to me, Grace? I have to admit, I'm more than a wee bit confused."

"I don't know how."

"Just try," he said gently. "Just start talking. We've got time for a change, wee girl, we can work this out."

"Billy." Unconsciously she curled into herself.

"Shh. It's all right." He tightened his arms around her. "What is it? Are you scared, luv?"

"No. Not scared." She burrowed even further into the covering warmth of the blanket and the circle of Billy's arms.

He kissed her hair. "I'm glad to hear that, I hate the thought of you being scared. So give me one word. Pretend I can pull songs out of the air like you can, and give me one word, we'll go from there."

She whispered something so quietly he couldn't hear her, and he bent his head down.

"Sorry? Can you say it again?"

"This is fucking humiliating!" she suddenly wailed.

"Why on earth would you be embarrassed? It's just me, wee girl."

"Exactly! It's you!"

Billy was surprised, and a little taken aback. "I humiliate you?"

"No! God, I--I don't know if you can understand this or not--not now, not anymore."

"Give me the word, Grace," he insisted.

She cringed as she muttered, "Alone."

"Of course I understand being lonely, you wee numptie--" he began, but she cut him off, shaking her head.
"No. Not lonely, although sometimes I'm that too. Not lonely, Billy--alone. In your world, you probably never have time to be alone, you'd probably kill for the chance some days."

"Some days I nearly would, yeah," he agreed honestly. "I think I know what you're saying, but explain to me the difference between being lonely and being alone."

She was silent for a moment, struggling to find the words. "If--if something goes wrong--there's no choice, I have to deal with it. No matter what it is. Leaky plumbing or hanging blinds or--or strange noises in the stairwell at night. Or if it's one of those days where you just need someone sharing the same space. Sometimes I..." She trailed off miserably.

Billy waited a moment, but when she didn't continue, he gently urged her on. "Sometimes you what, dear heart?"

"I--I don't know. Sometimes it's just hard to take, knowing I'm completely on my own. Sometimes I think it would be good if I had someone to save me from myself. But that's really what I meant before--I know I have people who care about me, really I do, but sometimes it almost doesn't matter, because I'm still alone and when I need help, I can't see past that."

"What about Jamie?"

"He didn't know about any of it until Christmas. Don't get me wrong, I'm usually pretty good at being independent--"

Billy chuckled. "You don't say."

"Well, it's better than needing someone else for every little thing," she began defensively, but Billy hushed her, giving her an extra squeeze.

"Of course it is. I just wish--" He stopped abruptly.

Grace craned her neck to look up at him. "What?"

He flushed. "Nothing. Never mind."

"Excuse me?" She sat up indignantly, ignoring her red eyes and stuffed up nose. "You make me tell you all that, and you won't tell me one little wish?"

"I don't think it's that little."

"All the more reason to tell me, then. Spill it, Boyd."

"I wish--" His ears turned painfully red. "I wish you needed me a little more." He wouldn't meet her eyes.

Stunned into silence, Grace stared at him.

"Fuck, I knew I shouldn't have--" he muttered.

Like a flash Grace leaned in and kissed him hard on the lips, her fingers threading into his hair. She continued to kiss him as she shifted up onto his lap, her knees straddling his hips, before wrapping her arms around his neck and hiding her face in his hair. "You infuriating idiot," she whispered fiercely. "You're fucking killing me here, Billy. Fucking killing me."

Startled and breathless from her kiss, all Billy could manage was, "I'm sorry--what--"
"Shut up. Do you know what you do to me, saying things like that?" Grace demanded, fighting to keep her voice steady.

"Grace, I--"

"I said shut the fuck up," she grumbled. "I'm trying to say something here, and you're messing me up."

Without warning, Billy began to chuckle. He wrapped his arms around her, pressed his forehead to her shoulder, and laughed, his control not aided by her loud sighs of exasperation.

"William Boyd, you're trying to drive me up the bloody wall, aren't you?"

"I'm really not, I swear."

Grace kissed the side of his head. "Say it again?"

"I'm really not?"

"Don't fuck with me." She suddenly felt and sounded unsure again.

Billy instantly grew serious. He pulled back until he could rest his forehead against hers, looking intently in her eyes. "Hey. I promised you I wouldn't. I promised. Okay?"

She nodded. "Say it again?"

"I wish you needed me more," he murmured.

After a moment, her eyes widened in realization. "Oh my God. You said--and then I--it's the same fucking thing."

Billy frowned. "What?"

"I--shit." She tossed the blanket aside, scrambled off him. "I need to go for a walk. I--need to move. Can we go for a walk, Billy, please?"

He climbed to his feet as well. "Of course. Just--tell me what's the same, first?"

Grace fidgeted. "I--you said why didn't I believe you cared. And I said no, it's just that I'm alone. And you said you wish I needed you more. Don't you see? We're saying the same thing. I--I need to think for a bit."

"Okay," he said quietly. "Let's go for that walk, then."
Billy and Grace stepped outside for their walk, Billy closing the door quickly behind them.

"Bloody hell, it's cold!" he exclaimed.

Despite her preoccupation, Grace couldn't help chuckling, looking at him all bundled up in his new hat and scarf and mittens. "Aren't you glad I suggested the long underwear?"

"Hell, yes." He held out one thickly-mittened hand, but quickly dropped it again. "Where are you taking me?"

"Well, you've seen the lake, you've seen the shoreline. So how about I show you my secret hideout?"

"Sounds good. I don't suppose there's a wee paraffin heater in this hideout of yours, is there?"

Grace surprised him a little by reaching out to grab his hand firmly, and she led him toward the laneway that went out to the road.

"No heater, I'm afraid. But the walk will keep you warm."

"Or you could keep me warm," he suggested, smiling, and tugged her off balance to catch her securely in both arms, laughing when she squeaked. "I bet if you put your mind to the task, you could warm--"

Grace stopped his laughter with a kiss, her nose cold on his cheek as she moved up against him, her tongue twining with his in his mouth before he could even blink. She slid her double-mittened hands around to his arse, just under his jacket, and pulled him in tight against her.

Billy growled deep in his throat, and for a brief moment pressed himself against her hip. Her gasp sucked all the air out of his mouth, leaving him breathless. He pulled back with a ragged groan. "God, Grace, why do you keep kissing me like that? I can't keep my hands off you as it is, and now you've got me wanting to lay you down right here in the snow."

Grace nuzzled her forehead against Billy's jaw, cold skin soon warming upon contact. "So don't keep your hands off me, then," she murmured.

"I don't think you understand, luv. I want you. God, do I want you," he muttered, tightening his arms around her. "I want to touch you, my fingers are itching to feel your skin again, and as determined as I am not to make you pull away, I'm afraid I want you so much I'm going to go too far for your comfort."

"And how do you know what I'm comfortable with?"

"Well, considering when we got here you didn't even want me to kiss you--" he said a trifle crossly, and he tried to push her back.

But Grace held onto him firmly, stretching up slightly to feather soft kisses across his cold jaw and
up his cheek. "Newsflash. I want you to kiss me now. In case you hadn't noticed. And I don't necessarily object to the idea of fingers on my skin."

Billy shuddered, then stiffly pushed her away. "Leave it for now, Grace."

"But--"

"Not yet."

She paused to study him intently. "All right."

"Thank you. Now come on--you wanted to walk and think, so get started."

This time it was Grace who held out her hand, and she stood motionless and silent until he took it.

They walked across the laneway and into the bush beyond. "This is the lot my parents gave my brother for his house," she explained, her voice a little more subdued than before. "I'll probably lose my hideout when they build. I hope not, though--I'd love for Sarah to be able to continue it."

"Continue? Did you build it?" Billy steadied her as she climbed over a snow covered log.

"In a manner of speaking. You'll see." She fell silent again, her thoughts obviously turning inward.

A few minutes later, Billy curiously asked, "How do you know where we're going? I don't see a path..."

Grace smiled. "I was a naughty little vandal when I was a kid."

He chuckled. "Naughty I believe. But vandal?"

She led him to a tree ahead and to the right. "Do you see it?"

Leaning over slightly, Billy inspected the trunk. "There." He pointed with the tip of his mitten. "Is that it?"

"Yep. I cut those arrows as a path in...God. Nineteen seventy-nine? Eighty? Most of them are still there, although they get harder to find every year." They continued walking, now uphill through the forest.

"Have you ever gotten lost trying to find it?"

"Worried?" she grinned. "No. I've missed it, gone past it completely. But I've never been lost--there are roads on all sides of this bush, eventually. And I've a pretty good sense of direction."

"So do I."

"That's not the story Dom tells."

"What?" Billy protested indignantly. "What did he tell you?"

"Something about the two of you nearly spending the night on the side of a mountain in New Zealand, thanks to you."

"Dirty sodding liar!"

"Yeah?" Grace's grey-blue eyes twinkled. "Which direction is the cottage in?"
Billy immediately turned and pointed behind and twenty degrees to the left. "That way."

"Not bad, considering it's the first time you've ever been here," she allowed.

"You see? I told you--"

She cut him off with a sweet smile. "I didn't say you were right, I said it wasn't a bad guess."

"Oh. Well, where is it then?" he asked, crestfallen.

Chuckling, Grace pointed behind and twenty degrees to the right. "You would have gotten quite lost, I'm afraid."

"Well, it's a good thing I've got you--I'm with you, then, isn't it?" Billy corrected his choice of words before she could. "Come on, let's push on. My toes are getting cold just standing around here."

For another ten minutes they walked in companionable silence. Billy could tell Grace was indeed thinking hard about whatever it was she was trying to figure out, as the tiny creases between her brows remained present. Once he steered her around a log in her path, afraid she hadn't even noticed it.

Finally she stopped in front of a particularly dense thicket of brush, all bare branches and twigs. "Here it is. It's had a number of names over the years."

Billy's forehead creased. "This is it?" He tugged his toque further down over his ears. "What sorts of names?"

"Well, for a few years it was 'The Hundred Acre Wood'. And then for a few years it was 'Lothlorien'," she smiled. "Come on in."

"Lothlorien. I should have known." Billy watched as she pulled back several branches to create an opening, then followed her through into her secret hideout.

"Oh, Grace, this is brilliant." Billy turned in a slow circle, looking all around him.

"Actually, it's least impressive in winter," she said quietly, glancing around as if to reacquaint herself with an old friend.

Billy looked up at the interlaced branches not far overhead, creating a latticework dome; he took in the walls of woven willow, still growing though perhaps neglected through Grace's absence the last few years; he circled around, seeing a little dell, a small den in the forest, of the forest. He wondered if she had any idea how much this hideout revealed of herself, because he could see that Grace as a young girl--and likely as a teenager, too--had had a strong romantic streak, a delight in the idyllic and whimsical and magical. "Which is your favourite season in here?" he asked softly.

"There's something about each." She shrugged a little helplessly. "In winter it's the dark branches, the framework against the snow and the sky. In spring it's the new leaves, bright fresh green, and the pussywillows, and the smell of damp earth. In summer, it's completely shaded in here, and if you can deal with the mosquitoes, it's a dark cool refuge on a hot day. And in autumn, of course it's the colours, but it's also the dry, dusty smell, and the soft rustle of leaves falling all around you."

"You're very lucky to have had this. You know that, don't you?" he murmured, moving to stand behind her, his arms sliding around her waist.
"I do, actually," she nodded, then leaned her head back against his jacketed shoulder. "I'd come here to read, or to get away from my brother if he'd been teasing me, or to write, or even just to think. Everything always felt...easier, in here."

"Would you just sit on the ground?" he asked, curiosity tingeing his voice.

"Yeah. I had--" She smiled. "I had this old sleeping bag. I'd lay down a plastic sheet, then cover it with spruce and cedar boughs, and then a thick layer of dry grass, and then the sleeping bag. It was so comfortable I could have slept on it, and I actually did fall asleep once or twice." She suddenly chuckled. "Oh, and I had a plastic bag full of milkweed silk for a pillow. I was such a geek."

"On the contrary, maybe if more kids had a refuge like that, they'd get into a bit less trouble."

"Maybe. Who knows?"

Billy let her go as she pulled away to cross the nearly circular enclosure, watched as she pulled off one mitten to grasp a wildly straying willow branch and carefully tucked it behind another.

"They're too brittle in winter to do much," she said, and then with her back to him and several feet of space separating them, awkwardly continued. "So the thing is, I think we're both kind of saying the same thing, but I don't know what to do with that."

Billy turned and brushed the snow off a fallen log that ran through the hideout, and gingerly took a seat. "And what is it we're both saying, do you think?"

She tried to tuck another branch into place, but it wouldn't bend far enough. "You said--" She hesitated.

"Go on."

Grace forced herself to continue. "You said you wished I needed you a bit more."

"I did. I do," he said softly. "Can you not look at me, wee girl?"

"Not really, no."

"All right."

She released a slightly shaky breath. "When I was talking about my friendships fading, about how it was hard sometimes not having someone to call to come...rescue me, for lack of a better word. I didn't mean just to help me with tasks that are easier with an extra set of hands."

"I know," Billy smiled.

"And--and I didn't mean just to have another breathing body around, like all I need is a pet, or something."

"I know," he repeated, more gently this time.

"I meant--I meant--" Grace stopped, and then suddenly started again with a rush, as if the only way the words could break the dam holding them back was to force their way out in a torrent. "I meant someone to help with difficult tasks and someone to share my space with me and someone to talk to and someone who thinks about me suddenly, for no reason at all, and someone who will make me laugh until I cry and talk me down when I'm wiggling out and will listen and encourage and push and challenge and will just fucking care. Someone I can be all that to in return. And I realized
that every time I thought about one of those things lately, every time I wished I had someone like
that in my life, every time I desperately needed a friend in the last two months, it wasn't Susan I
thought of, or Neil, or Akiko. It was you. And you know I'm attracted to you, Billy, so whenever I
need a hug, or want to be kissed or touched or--or--" She suddenly faltered. "I think of you."

Billy could practically hear her blushing, and he suspected that last stumble over words was
something far more intimate than anything they'd discussed so far. The thought sent blood rushing
from his extremities to points far more central, and for a moment he was unable to formulate a
response.

Grace nervously began to fill the silence. "So I'm kind of confused, because it's not like it could
ever work between us in the long run, and I don't know what to do and I don't know what you want-
"

"Whoa, hold up a minute," Billy interjected, rising to his feet. "What do you mean 'it's not like it
could ever work between us'? Where the hell do you get that idea?"

She pulled at a branch and then let it snap back into place with a crack. "Oh, come on, Billy, be
realistic--"

"I am," he said firmly. "Turn around, wee girl."

"No."

"Grace. Turn around."

There was a heavy note of something almost like command in Billy's voice, and Grace considered
refusing, but knew it wasn't worth it. That wasn't the argument. She turned, eyes locked on Billy's
knees.

"Dear heart," Billy said, so gently and kindly it almost undid her. "How could you possibly know
whether or not it would work between us, when you've never even given 'us' a chance?"

She felt defensive. "It has nothing to do with 'us', it has to do with--with everything else."

"Bollocks." He took a step toward her. "Nothing matters besides us."

"Oh, don't be naïve," she snapped.

Billy couldn't help but chuckle. "I wasn't being naïve, I was trying to be romantic. I see I'm out of
practice."

"Billy." She tried to turn away again, but he stopped her with both hands on her upper arms.

"Oh, no, you don't," he chided. He put his thumb under her chin and forced her head up, then
leaned in to kiss her slowly, thoroughly, and for a long time; he smiled against her mouth when her
arms wrapped around his waist. When he finally lifted his head again, he rubbed his icy nose
against hers. "I want to know why you're so convinced we can't work. And then I'm going to
convince you otherwise. But can we have this battle royale somewhere warmer, preferably curled
up next to a fire with a mug of tea in hand? My arse is wet, and it's about to bloody well drop off."

"Why do you automatically assume this is going to become a battle?" she demanded, annoyed, her
stomach already twisting into knots.

He kissed her toque-covered forehead. "Because you're more comfortable fighting with me than
you are trusting yourself." He poked her stomach through her heavy jacket, then turned and walked away, going to where they'd entered the hideout and holding back the branches for her to pass.

Grace held her ground. "That's not true."

"See? Fighting with me," he grinned.

"Oh, so every time I disagree with you, I'm just picking a fight?"

Billy saw her frustration, realized he was upsetting her. "No, of course not. Sorry, luv," he said immediately, feeling contrite. "I didn't mean it that way. Can we go back to the cottage, though? I'm really starting to get cold."

"Yeah. Sorry." She sounded a bit short, but right away crossed to exit through the branches Billy held. Although silent, she didn't pull her hand away when Billy took it.

Back at the cottage and divested of jackets and boots, Billy disappeared into the bedroom to change into dry trousers, while Grace slipped into the bathroom to remove her longjohns. When Billy returned he found Grace in the kitchen, two mugs on the counter, the kettle just beginning to steam.

Grace spooned hot chocolate into each mug. "Would you like marshmallows in it?"

He made a face. "No, thanks. Had enough so-called marshmallow in those disgusting marshmallow pies Dom brought. I don't know how you can eat them."

Her smile was small, but it was there. "I don't know either. I think they have a negative nutritional value. But they taste good."

"You can have 'em, luv." Billy paused, then said, "You know that thing you do, pulling a song out of thin air that is somehow you, or somehow me, or somehow us? I think it might be contagious. Can I borrow your guitar?"

She didn't meet his eyes but said, "Of course. But if you sing She Drives Me Crazy, I'll skelp you one."

He laughed out loud. "Firstly, excellent usage of Glaswegian. I see you'll be the top student at Boyd's Academy. And secondly, I wouldn't dare. I'll be in the living room."

When Grace joined him in the other room, carrying the two mugs of hot chocolate, Billy was standing in front of the woodstove he'd just finished stoking.

"Still cold?" she asked as she set the mugs on the coffee table.

"My arse is a block of ice," he complained.

"I'm sorry I kept you out so long."

"No, it's my own fault--I shouldn't've sat down and got my trousers wet."

Grace sat on the sofa. "Come here."

Billy walked over to stand in front of her, and he looked down at her upturned face curiously.
"Sit down." She patted her thighs.

"On your lap?" he exclaimed. "Not a chance, I'll crush you."

"Hardly. Sit."

He shook his head, teasing, "What am I, a puppy now?"

"Not a very well trained one, apparently. Just don't pee on the carpet. Now sit."

Billy gingerly sat on her lap, trying to hold some of his weight off her without making it obvious, but Grace put her arms around his waist and gave him a sharp tug. He gave in, turning himself sideways so his feet were up on the sofa, and relaxed into her embrace. "You tell me when I start to get too heavy," he warned.

"I will. Wow, your butt really is cold, isn't it?" she said as the chill began to seep through layers of fabric, and she cuddled him closer.

"Aye. But I'm starting to not mind so much anymore," he smiled, kissing her temple.

"Flirt." Grace leaned her head into the kiss. "So do I get to hear the song you picked?"

"Yes, as soon as my arse warms up."

She smiled. "I had no idea your arse was connected to your ability to make music."

"Oh, it is," Billy said, making a credible impression of seriousness. "It's the seat of all my creativity, so to speak."

Grace couldn't help the giggle that bubbled up. "So when you're just goofing around on your guitar, you're playing by the seat of your pants?"

He laughed, reached to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "I suppose so, yeah."

"And I guess that means you're acting out of your arse, too."

Billy groaned, rolling his eyes. "Oh my God, I've created a monster."

She grinned. "No, I was monstrous--"

"Long before you met me," he finished for her, chuckling. "I remember." He scrunched further down until he could lean his head on her shoulder. "Shall I tell you a wee piece of Billy trivia?"

"Yes, as soon as my arse warms up."

"I haven't sat on anyone's lap and been held like this since I was a wee lad. It feels both strange and lovely."

"Who was it?" She asked softly.

"My mum. I sat on my dad's lap too, but it was Mum who cuddled me. Don't misunderstand," he added quickly. "It's not that you remind me of my mum. You really don't."

She huffed one tiny breath of a laugh. "I hope not."

"It's just--no one usually cuddles a grown man on their lap, you know? It feels, I don't know, warm,
"or--ah, shite," he muttered, suddenly a bit pink. "Now I'm just getting sentimental."

"I rather like sentimental Billy," she said quietly, kissing his hair. "I think he's sweet."

"He's a jessy, is what he is."

"If that means what I assume it means, then no, he's not. He makes me want to--to get a little...sentimental myself..." she faltered.

Billy lifted his head hopefully. "Really? Go on, then."

"I want that song first," she hedged.

"All right. But then we're going to talk this out, wee girl," he warned softly. "I won't be put off anymore. I've been patient, but this time you're finally going to come clean."

Grace didn't say anything, but she nodded once, if a little stiffly.

"I'll go get the guitar, then."

Her arms tightened around him almost convulsively. "I thought you couldn't play until your bum warmed up?"

"It's warm," Billy said firmly, then relented and kissed her cheek. "I want to sing you this song. And then I--I want to see if you'll say what I want to hear you say. What I think I need to hear you say." When Grace opened her mouth to protest, he climbed off her lap and crossed the room to where her guitar case stood propped against the wall, undid the latches, and withdrew the instrument. Returning to the sofa, he sat beside Grace and quickly, automatically checked the tuning.

She pulled one foot up onto the sofa and wrapped her arms around her knee.

Billy glanced at her, then dropped his eyes to the neck of the guitar even as he began to play, strumming quietly. He sang, his voice soft, round, and full.

_I don't know where to begin_
_I don't know how to get out there to see you_
_I don't know where to dig in_
_I don't know how to get in there to feel you_

_I never thought I would win_
_I never thought much about that_
_it's been a long time coming_
_I never stopped to begin_
Thinking about the process
_it's been a long time coming_

_Baby there's something about you that_
_I can hold on to_
_I'm going to hold on to that_
_Baby there's something about you that_
_I can hold on to_
_I'm going to hold on to that_

_It's been a long time coming_
"I'm going to hold on to that

And I'm going to be there be there alright

When he finished, Billy laid the guitar aside, sat back, and regarded Grace levelly. "There's something about you, there has been since the day I met you on the beach."

She swallowed. "That's just...cliché."

"Like hell it is. You and I, we get each other, we fit, whatever you want to call it. We're good together. And I think that's surprised you, and scared the hell out of you." He was watching her intently, eyes flicking back and forth between hers. "Grace, we're friends, and nothing we say here is going to put a stop to that. But I care for you as more than just my friend. I'm--I'm falling for you a bit, luv. And dammit, I want to hold you, and kiss you, and touch you, and maybe if everything works out and if you feel the same and if I don't bollocks everything up, maybe even make love to you, because you're so fucking beautiful and you turn me on and I want you. But what I don't want is to do any of that unless you feel the same way. And just to be clear," he added firmly, "I'm not looking for a casual shag whenever I'm in town. I care about you enough, dear heart, that I want to give a real relationship a go, and if you're not interested in that, then tell me now, and we'll carry on as just very good friends. But I need you to stop your little dance now, I need you to be honest--" He stopped abruptly, frowning. "No, that's not right. You always try to be honest with me, I know that. I need you to speak plain. We have to just have it out, dear heart, lay it all on the table. Everything. Can you do that for me, Grace, please?"

She felt ensnared in his intense gaze, stunned, a little overwhelmed. "I don't--you--do you really--?" she whispered.

"Do I what?" he asked quietly but almost angrily. "Do I really want you? Want to be with you? Yes I do, you daft, infuriating, enchanting little numptie. The question is, do you feel the same? Yes or no, Grace?"

"Yes." The word was out before she even realized it, but she didn't take it back. She noted the slight widening of his eyes that was the only outward indication she'd caught him by surprise with her lack of hesitation. "But Billy--"

"No." He shook his head and put his fingers to her lips. "We'll talk about the 'buts' and the 'not yet's' and everything else. We're not going anywhere until this is sorted. But just for my own sanity I want to be crystal clear on this little item. Are you telling me you feel the same way as I do, then?"

Grace nodded.

"Tell me, dammit," he insisted.

"I'm not good with words, Billy, you know that."

"Then use someone else's."

She dropped her eyes, and her voice was low as she said, "No. It doesn't feel right, not for this. Can I--can I show you?"

He was a little taken aback. "What do you mean? A kiss isn't really what I'm after--"

"I know. I hope you'll understand this."

"Go on, then." He waited, his heart nearly pounding its way out of his chest.
Grace was still for a moment, then curled her hands into two tight fists, her knuckles white and the tendons in her thin wrists standing out. She slowly extended her fists side by side toward Billy.

He waited.

She kept her eyes on her hands.

Billy frowned, leaning in slightly as if to better hear what she wasn't vocalizing. Grace lifted her gaze and locked her eyes on his. After a moment he looked down at her hands, and had a sudden glimmer of comprehension. With a quick glance up to make sure he wasn't doing anything he shouldn't, he slowly, gently took first one fist and then the other, and opened her tightly clenched fingers. He held her hands in his and rubbed her palms with his strong thumbs, her fingers still curled over his. Even as he watched, she slowly straightened them until they lay flat, open before him.

Billy raised his eyes to Grace's face again, but her lashes touched against her cheeks as she looked down and blinked. Pulling her hands from his, she slowly, delicately cupped the backs of his hands, encircling them with her own, pressing them together until his palms met. She bent her head and kissed his fingertips, her hands enfolding his.

"Grace," he whispered, moved.

She kissed his fingertips again, her breath brushing his skin as she murmured, "That's the best I can come up with, to tell you."

"You've just given me something very lovely, dear heart. And it makes me more determined than ever that we're going to figure this out." He suddenly slid his hands from hers to cup her face, to bring her head up until he could kiss her softly on the lips.

When he lifted his mouth from hers and pulled her close, Grace slid her arms around his waist and pressed her forehead against the side of his neck. Her voice was a little sad as she said, "I don't know why you're so convinced this can be figured out."

"And I don't know why you're so convinced it can't," Billy countered. "I think we've done pretty well so far, with the phone calls and emails. We've had this entire weekend, and you're coming to visit me for two whole weeks very soon. We can do this, wee girl."

"It's not just the distance, Billy."

"You're going to try and shoot me down at every turn, aren't you?" he grumbled, slouching back into the corner and taking her with him. "So what else is it?"

"You live an entirely different life from me," she said quietly, "In more ways than one. I don't see any middle ground."

"Then you're not looking very hard," Billy said shortly, but the gentleness in his fingers as he combed them through her hair betrayed his more honest emotions.

"Prove it, then," she said, quiet but fierce. "Show me a workable middle ground between celebrity and poverty, between fame and anonymity, between wealth and rolling spare change to pay rent. Because I sure as hell can't find it."

"Say I invite you to a movie premiere with me," Billy said, his voice kind but challenging nonetheless. "Would you go?"
"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't afford the plane ticket, the hotel room, the taxis, the dress, the shoes, the hairstyle, and whatever other expenses there are that I have no idea about," she said, annoyed. "You know that."

"And what if it were in Toronto and some up-and-coming young Canadian designer gave you the dress and shoes just to have their design being worn at an event with big publicity. Would you go then?"

"I--I don't know."

"Why not?" He kissed her hair.

"Because...because I wouldn't know what to do," she muttered. "I'd be scared to death."

"Well, there's not a lot to it, to be honest," Billy smiled. "Your car drops you by the entrance, you plaster a smile on your face, you slowly walk in while photographers take your picture and entertainment journos ask you silly-arsed questions, you schmooze in the lobby, you watch a film, you go to a party afterward. Easy as pie."

"How is this 'finding middle ground'?"

"Would you go? If finances weren't a factor, would you go?"

"But the finances are a factor," she pointed out, frustrated.

"But if they weren't," Billy insisted. "Would you go with me?"

"It's a stupid question. Fine, I'd go, but only if you promised not to leave me to fend for myself."

He hugged her tightly, pleased. "I wouldn't let you leave my side. So--you know what this means?"

Grace burrowed deeper in his embrace. "I'm neurotic?"

"No," he laughed softly near her ear. "It means a middle ground between celebrity and anonymity. Not that you'll remain anonymous for long."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone's going to want to know who the gorgeous wee thing at my side is."

"You're so full of it," she snorted.

"Not entirely, actually. But Grace..." He trailed off.

"What?"

Billy absently stroked her arm. "How do you feel about having your photo in the paper, or on the internet? I need to know."

Grace lifted her head to look up at him. "Why?"

"Because, I--bugger." He stopped, sighed, then started again. "You know how I told you Emily
stayed away from the publicity, that I would just come home to her at the end of the day?"

"Yeah." She studied his face.

"You're different." His cheeks pinked a little. "I wouldn't want to come back to you at the end of the day. I'd want you with me sharing the day. But the girlfriend of a cast member of Rings doesn't exactly go unnoticed, so I need to make sure you're aware your picture will be taken, and looked at by a lot of people."

She stared at him. "Girlfriend?"

A muscle in Billy's jaw twitched. "Would you prefer female friend?"

"No," she admitted shyly, a little surprised she was saying it at all, "No, I wouldn't."

Billy was dumbfounded. "Are you saying--"

"No. Not yet, at least. You still haven't convinced me we can make this work, you've only convinced me that as hideously uncomfortable as I'd be, you could talk me into going to one of your insane events."

"So we're back to the finances," he grumbled.

"Of course we're back to the finances," she said, a little more sharply than she'd intended. "What did you expect, that with a little talking it would suddenly magically be okay?"

"No, of course not," he said quietly. "But history has shown we're not very good at discussing this. Maybe we should set some ground rules."

"I think we'd better. Such as?"

"No walking away until we both agree we're done?" Billy suggested, rubbing a hand up and down her back.

"All right. No interrupting," she said firmly.

"Agreed. Keep a lid on the tempers. If we don't like what the other's said, say so and let them explain it."

"Fine. Anything else?"

Billy sighed. "Will you answer my questions, even if they're a bit personal? It's only so we can sort this out."

Grace hesitated, but finally nodded. "All right."

"Okay. Look at us," he smiled, trying to lighten the mood a bit. "We're being terribly reasonable."

"Who woulda thunk it?" she mumbled against his neck, and tightened her arms around his waist. "I'm not looking forward to this, you know that, don't you?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I know. Thank you."

"Well, go on, then. Hit me."

"First I'm going to tell you why I think you see this as such a big barrier between us--"
"Because it is," she muttered, briefly turning her face completely toward his neck.

Billy tsk'd. "Not one for the rules, are you?"

She gave a half-hearted snort. "Sorry."

"This is what I think. I think Michael hurt you badly--"

"No shit, Sherlock--"

"And," he continued repressively, "One of the ways he did that was financially--"

"That's news--"

"Grace!" he finally yelped. "For fuck's sake, shut it and let me finish one damned sentence, will you?" The second she began to giggle, however, he realized she'd simply been winding him up. "Oh, for--" His quick fingers tickled her side, and as she began to struggle, her laughter growing louder, he grinned and said, "Think you're funny, don't you, Miss Smartass?"

She managed to sit up, and her hands immediately clamped around his wrists, pulling his fingers away from her ribs. "I do, actually," she panted, still snickering, then darted forward to kiss him briefly but firmly on the lips.

When she straightened up again, Billy smiled at her fondly. "Not that I'm complaining about your stalling technique..."

She laughed. "It was obvious, wasn't it? Okay, okay, I'll get serious."

"All right. Let's get more comfortable as well, shall we?" He wriggled down until he was lying on his back, then made room for Grace to lie beside him, half on top of him. She did, her arm over his middle and her head on his chest. "Ahh, that's better," he murmured, wrapping his arms loosely around her, trapping her leg between his. "Now. To get back to what I was saying before you so rudely interrupted me with your inappropriate and frankly bizarre sense of humour--"

Grace chuckled and poked him in the side.

"I believe I was being Captain Obvious by saying Michael hurt you financially."

"Captain Obvious?" She snickered. "I like that one."

Billy grinned. "I thought you might. What I actually meant was...well, Michael used money as a weapon, to hurt you. I think that's one of the reasons it's such a hot button with you. Like me with the word 'celebrity' after Emily. So I think you're bound and determined to keep everyone as far as you possibly can from anything to do with your finances so that no one could ever gain that kind of control over your life again."

"Michael does not control me," she ground out.

"He doesn't control you, no. No one controls you but you, Grace, and don't you ever forget that," Billy said firmly. "But he managed to wrest an awful lot of control over the external things in your life. How and where you eat, sleep, work and play--the shite you go through daily is all down to him."

"Nothing new here, Billy," Grace said--calmly enough, but her voice sounded strained.

"I know. I'm slowly getting to my point, I promise," he smiled, giving her a bit of a squeeze. "The
thing is, dear heart, everything you do right now is geared toward dealing with this monetary mess, and you're scrambling to keep up, let alone move ahead. I want to help you with that."

"I thought I told you before, I'm not taking your money!" she began angrily, trying to sit up.

Billy held her tight. "Rules, Grace."

"Fine," she spat out. She trembled with the effort, but quit struggling against his arms. "I don't like what you just said, Billy."

"I know you don't," he answered. "That's because you didn't let me finish. I'm not trying to give you money, all right?"

"You're not?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, I'm not. Now, one of the things I'd like to help you with is your flat." Billy hoped he was pulling off the perfectly cool, casual air he was going for. "I'd like to help you fix it up a wee bit, just so you don't curse it the moment you wake every morning. So I was thinking, how about we get you some paint, maybe blinds for the window and a little rug, or something? Would you like to freshen it up a bit?"

"Well--yeah, but--" There was a heavy frown in her voice.

"So you wouldn't mind terribly if I helped you out with that?"

"...I suppose not."

"Oh, good. That's good, then," Billy said, then bit his lip. "Now. Remember you said you'd answer all my questions? Well, these are the ones you're not going to like," he warned her, a little flutter of anxiety waking in his stomach.

"Get on with it," Grace growled.

"How much do you still owe to the government?"

"Three grand," she muttered.

"And how many credit cards do you have?"

"Three."

"For how much?" he prodded gently.

"Ten grand total."

"And the bank loans?"

Grace was tense from head to foot. "Two of them. One for five grand, and the one I just found out about last month for another two."

"So..." Billy quickly added in his head. "Twenty thousand. Which is roughly ten thousand pounds, the exchange rate being what it is."

"I thought you said you weren't trying to give me money?"

"I'm not," he soothed, stroking her hair off her cheek. "It's just easier for me to think in my own
currency. And what interest rates are you paying, dear heart?"

"Billy--" The anger was back in her voice.

"Come on, luv, we're almost done with the hard part. Please."

"Seven percent to the government. Fourteen on the bank loans, nineteen on the credit cards," she ground out.

"Aye, that's about what I figured," he mused, almost to himself. "And the credit card balance is the highest. I doubt we could beat the seven percent, better leave well enough alone on that, but if we could get between eight and ten on the seventeen thousand, which lets you pay down the principle faster--"

"Billy, no bank is going to give me another loan," she pointed out sharply.

"No interrupting," he said, his voice mild. "I know that, Grace, luv. And I can't co-sign because--"

"Because I wouldn't let you!"

Billy's arm flashed over her and his hand clamped over her mouth. "You really need some practice with following rules, don't you? Let me finish, wee girl, and then you can say your piece."

She nodded once, abruptly.

"I know this is hard for you," he said softly as he withdrew his hand. "But you can do this."

"I don't want to."

"I know you don't, Grace, but dammit, I'm not giving up on the chance to be with you just because you're too fucking proud to tell me about your debt!" His frustration finally showed.

"But there's nothing you can do!"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is," he flung back at her. "I can help you get a loan so you can pay it off easier and more quickly so this can stop being a bloody excuse for you to keep running away!"

"I'm not fucking running away!" she cried, angry and hurt and back to being a little scared of the intensity of what she was feeling. "Even if my debts were paid, it's still going to be a long time before I have enough money to fly to Scotland, Billy!"

"Who asked you to?" he shouted.

"You did! You're constantly saying 'when you come to Glasgow!'"

"Aye, and you've already promised to let me take care of the ticket! You'd better not break that promise, Grace MacPherson!"

"Stop it!" she yelled, and Billy suddenly realized she was in tears. "Just fucking stop it, I can't do this anymore, don't shout at me! Let me go!"

"No." He lowered his voice and held on to her tightly. "Grace, don't you get it? I don't care if you have money right now or not."

"But I do," she wailed.
"Why?" he asked, desperate to understand. "I know it's fucking shite to be skint, dear heart, but why does this have to come so firmly between you and me? It's not like you don't make a decent living, it's not like you're never going to have money again, why won't you let me cover things for now and when you're back on your feet, everything will sort itself out?"

"Because what you want to cover is not just little things, Billy!" she cried, no longer fighting to get away, but still holding herself rigidly. "If it was just dinner now and again, or an evening out, that would be one thing, but it's not. You're talking about twenty thousand dollars worth of debt, thousands of dollars worth of flights, for all I know hundreds of dollars worth of phone bills, and joining--even peripherally--a world that it takes real money to present yourself in. I can't ask you for that kind of money, and you shouldn't expect me to!"

Billy sighed deeply, realizing that she was actually right. It was too much. "Shh, Grace. Shh, now, it's all right." He rubbed one hand up and down her back, kissed the top of her head. "You're right. You're right, okay? When you put it all together like that, it is a lot of money, and I can see why it's making ye uncomfortable. Shh, luv."

Grace's tears quickly stopped, but she said nothing.

"Listen, let's focus on you paying off your debt faster, yeah?" he said softly. "We'll get that water to go down from chin level, and we can see where we're at with everything else later, yeah? I have an idea to tell you about, Grace, and I think it's a fairly good one. Will you hear me out?" He decided to leave out the fact that the idea had originally come from Margaret; time enough for that confession later.

"I suppose."

"Thank you. Now, I agree that it's unlikely a bank is going to give you a loan. But they'll give me one."

"You said you weren't--" she began hotly.

"Shut it, Grace. You said you'd hear me out," he reminded her, a trifle sharply. When she didn't say anything else, he continued. "It's the only way I can think of, luv. I'll get a loan with a low interest rate, and you use it to pay off your bank and the credit cards. It'll have my name on it simply because there's no way around that, but you'll be responsible for it. You won't be paying me, we'll set it up so you'll send the payments directly to the bank. Once the initial loan is secured, I won't even be involved."

"You can't do that, Billy," she said with a touch of despair. "You can't risk your credit rating like that. I'm not a good bet--what if I default on the loan? Then you're left holding the bag."

"On the contrary, I think you're a very good bet indeed. For fuck's sake, Grace," he said fondly and a little sadly, "I know you. You'd live in a pasteboard box on the street before you'd default on a loan. You're a responsible woman and I have no fear whatsoever of losing the money. Do you understand? I trust you."

"Billy, I can't."

"Bollocks," he said gently. "One of the things I adore about you is that you think with your heart. For good or bad, it's your heart that rules you, which probably scares the bloody fuck out of your head sometimes. But Grace, just this once, think with your head first. You know it's the most practical solution. The interest will add up a hell of a lot slower at nine percent than at nineteen. Say yes."
"I can't. You're offering this because you want to give a relationship a try, but what if it doesn't work out? What if something goes really wrong, but I still owe you money? It would be horrible."

"Let me get this straight," Billy said slowly. "You don't want to try a relationship because of your debt, but you won't consider a loan to get rid of the debt in case the relationship we're not going to have doesn't work out. Do you have any idea how mad that is?"

"Well, when you put it like that..." she mumbled miserably.

"Come on, Grace," he urged, tightening his arms around her until he thought he might crack her ribs if he hugged her any more fiercely. "Say yes. Take control and do something about it, now that you have a solution in front of you. It's not going to be fixed overnight, but if it gets you out of this pit even a few months sooner, it's worth it. Say yes. Please, dear heart. Just say yes."

She remained silent, and Billy could practically feel her struggling with the decision.

"Say it, Grace," he whispered. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

She took a deep breath, and then, her voice high and choked, finally said, "Yes."

"That's my--I'm so glad, dear heart. I'm so proud of you," Billy murmured with heartfelt relief. He pulled her up so he could see her face, stroked her cheek with his thumb. He nudged her chin up and held her stormy grey gaze with his. "It'll be all right, luv."

"Promise," she pleaded, her eyes suddenly full.

"I promise. Oh, Grace--I promise." He bent his neck and captured her lips with his, kissing her softly.

Grace kissed him back every bit as tenderly, ignoring the few tears that escaped past her lashes. When Billy's tiring neck finally forced him to lay his head back down, she laid down too, tucking her head beneath his chin. "You're very hard to say no to, you know that?"

He smiled. "Good. I'm going to keep going while I'm on a roll, then. Will you give us a shot, dear heart? I know it won't be easy, I know there will be problems to work out, but you make me happy, Grace, and I want to be with you."

"I want to be with you, too, Billy," she whispered against his chest.

"Is that a yes?"

"...Yes."

He hugged her tightly. "Do you mean it? You're not going to try and tell me over the phone next week that we're 'just friends'?"

She gave a wobbly laugh. "No, I won't. But..."

He kissed her hair. "But what?"

"I'm still not sure how we can do this, living an ocean apart. I can't do anything to--to--"

"Yes, you can," he gently corrected her. "You can talk to me, email me. Be open with me and I'll do the same with you, and that'll go a long way toward making this work. Don't forget our policy, wee girl."
"Say everything. I know."

"Complete honesty. That's how we'll do this."

"But what about--"

Billy stroked a palm over the back of her head. "No, don't start worrying about things already, luv. Let's just enjoy this for a bit first, yeah? Can you enjoy it with me?"

"How?" she whispered, cuddling even closer.

"Well--pick a thought. One that makes you happy, that you wouldn't have let yourself think before. For example, now if some nosy twat of a reporter asks me if I have a girlfriend, I will say, 'Why yes, as a matter of fact I am seeing someone, thanks very much for asking', and the thought makes me smile."

"Am I your girlfriend, then?" she asked, a mixture of doubt and hope in her voice.

Billy chuckled. "Seeing as we just agreed to a relationship, I'd say so, wouldn't you? Unless..." He suddenly faltered. "Maybe I'd best clarify. When I say I want a relationship with you, Grace, I mean an exclusive one. I don't want to see anyone else, and I don't want you to, either. You knew I meant that, right? Is--is that what you agreed to?"

She nodded against his chest. "Yes. That's what I want too. I don't like the thought of you with a Grace in every city."

"Impossible," he said softly. "I've never met anyone else like you, and that's the truth, luv."

Grace didn't know what to say, so she said nothing.

After a few moments of silence, during which Billy slowly ran a hand up and down her back, he suddenly, softly began to sing.

Grace, she takes the blame  
She covers the shame  
Removes the stain  
It could be her name  

Grace, it's a name for a girl  
It's also a thought that changed the world  
And when she walks on the street  
You can hear the strings  
Grace finds goodness in everything  

He slid his hand up under her sweater and rubbed up and down the bare skin next to her spine.

Grace, she carries a world on her hips  
No champagne flute for her lips  
No twirls or skips between her fingertips  
She carries a pearl in perfect condition  

What once was hurt  
What once was friction  
What left a mark  
No longer stings
Because Grace makes beauty
Out of ugly things

When he’d finished, Billy fell silent again, but he wrapped one leg over hers and tightened his arms around her.

Grace was afraid if she spoke she'd start crying again, so instead she reached one hand up to thread her fingers through his hair, and turned her face against his neck. She pressed her lips to his throat.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Something About You* by Five For Fighting and *Grace* by U2.
Chapter 37

Grace was awoken by something frigid on her neck, and she sat up with a little shriek to find Billy crouched beside the sofa, grinning, his nose and ears red with cold. "You're mean," she scolded, a trifle breathless.

"Oh, terribly so," Billy agreed.

"Why are you cold?" As she asked, she pressed her fingers to the tip of his icy nose.

"Because I've been making dinner, braving the Arctic air to blacken our meat over an open flame, just as our ancestors used to do," he intoned, sounding much like a Discovery Channel voiceover.

She eyed him dubiously. "You're not going to drag me off by my hair, are you? Because I don't like pain."

Billy chuckled. "No, I promise I won't drag you off by your hair. Come on, dinner's ready." He stood and held out his hands.

Grace took them, getting to her feet. "Good. I wouldn't want rugburn on my butt."

He suddenly bent over and lifted her off her feet with a shoulder to her stomach. Her head hung down behind and her legs kicked in front, his arm clamped high over the backs of her thighs, holding her securely.

"Billy!" she yelped. "Put me down, you great brute!"

"I said I wouldn't drag you off by your hair," he said cheerfully, sauntering towards the kitchen. "I didn't say I wouldn't toss you over my shoulder. This is supposed to be very attractive to you, you know--I'm being all manly and masterful. It's some sort of genetic code, for women to be drawn toward a man who's dead masculine, you see, raging with testosterone--"

Grace, whose face by this time was rather red, couldn't contain the giggles any longer. "I'm all for manly. I'll even agree to dead masculine. But 'raging with testosterone'?" she snickered. "You're so full of it, Boyd."

"That's right." He puffed out his chest as he wandered slowly into the kitchen. "Full of testosterone."

Laughing, she begged, "Please, let me down. Come on, my head's going to explode."

Billy lowered her down, held her steady while the head rush passed, her forehead against his chin. Then he turned her around to see the table.

"Billy!" she said, surprised and touched. "How did you--how long was I asleep?"

"About forty minutes," he smiled. "Have a seat."

Grace sat in the nearest chair. In front of her, the table was laden with a platter of barbequed steak, a bowl of green beans, a plate with two baked potatoes, a basket with steaming fresh ready-to-bake
rolls, a little pat of butter in a small dish, two glasses of a rich Burgundy, and two lit candles. Grace did a double-take, chuckling when she realized they were the emergency candles from the cupboard. "Expecting the power to go out?"

"Hoping, really," he grinned, sitting opposite her. "It'd give me an excuse to get romantic without being obvious."

Grace's cheeks tinged pink, and she looked down, reaching for the rolls.

"Hang on, wee girl. I'm going to teach you a bit more Glaswegian."

She looked up, surprised. "Okay. What?"

"Well--I suppose it's not necessarily specifically Glaswegian," he admitted. "But it's close enough. I'll teach you my dad's favourite grace." He suddenly looked boyish. "Let's say grace, Grace."

She couldn't help a tiny giggle even as she said, "Yeah, because I've never heard that one before. Go on, then. And say it slow."

Watching for her reaction, Billy recited, "Doon wi' yer heid, up wi' yer paws, thank the guid Lord for the use o' yer jaws."

Grace's laughter pealed through the kitchen. "I love it!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I'm totally using that at Thanksgiving this year."

He grinned at her. "I thought you'd like it. Want to hear Dad's second favourite?"

"Absolutely."

"Lord, heap blessings on the soup, Heap blessings on the stovies, Heap blessings on the Papes and Jews, The Moslems and Jehovies, Heap blessings on all gathered here, On absent friends and strangers, And, if you've blessings left, Please, heap them on the Rangers."

She blinked at him. "It's cute, but--who are the rangers?"

Billy looked horror-stricken as he passed her the platter of steaks. "Who are the Rangers? Who are Rangers?" he repeated in mock disbelief. "I can't believe you just said that to me. You heathen."

"Oh dear," she smiled, unconcerned. "I take it I've just committed the unforgivable sin of not knowing your favourite rugby team, or something?"

"Football team," he corrected. "An even worse sin, to a true-blue Rangers fan. It would be like me saying I've never heard of the Toronto Maple Leafs."

"Leaves?" she hooted. "Looks like we're both blasphemous sinners, then, doesn't it? Maple Leafs, pet. Maple Leafs."

He chuckled. "All right--I'll forgive you, if you'll forgive me."

"Deal. This steak is fantastic, Billy, thank you."
"You're welcome, luv." He helped himself to more green beans.

"So let me get this straight. Your dad said a grace asking God to bless his football team?" She sipped her wine.

Billy laughed. "Aye. Mum was not particularly keen on that one."

"Did your family say grace every night?" she asked curiously, buttering her roll.

"No, it was pretty much only at Christmas, Easter, and Sunday dinners at Gran's."

"Tell me more about them? Your parents?"

Billy shook his head. "No," he said softly. "Not yet. Soon, though--is that okay?"

"Of course," Grace smiled.

"I'll tell you about something else instead," he offered, suddenly strongly reminded of Dom's advice to be more open, to share more of himself if he expected the same from Grace. "Is there something else you want to know about?" He waited expectantly, and was a little surprised to see her look almost painfully shy. "What do you want to know?" he encouraged.

"Well, that's just it," she said slowly, putting down her knife and fork. She picked up her roll and tore a small piece off. "If--if we're going to try this relationship thing--"

"What do you mean if? We are," he said firmly, smiling.

She ate a piece of bread, smiling slightly herself, but continued to tear at the roll. "Then I want to know everything about you. I mean, I know you, but I don't know that much about you," she tried to explain.

"Such as?" he asked, watching her even as he kept eating.

"Such as...well, everything. Where you were born, what you were like as a kid, who was your first girlfriend, what was it like being a bookbinder, what did you learn in drama school, what turns you on, what turns you off, all of it. So I suppose, really, my first question should be why do you find Billy trivia hard? Or why..." She looked uncomfortable, but finished the thought anyway. "Why do you find it hard with me?"

Billy gestured toward her plate. "Keep eating," he said, and waited until she'd picked up her knife and fork before answering. "I don't find it hard with you, Grace. I find it hard with anyone. Everyone."

"Why?" she asked softly.

He ate a piece of steak, stalling for time. "When I was younger," he finally said in a quiet voice, looking at the candles rather than at Grace's face, "Glasgow was a rougher place than it is now. It was poorer, and dirtier, and more violent. A legacy of unemployment and closed shipyards and the English government having enough trouble on their own patch to give a shite about us. A bad housing estate just magnified all those problems tenfold. Luckily ours was halfway decent--safe enough for the kids to play outside all day, at any rate. But for us, growing up...well, you had to have a bit of a hard streak in you. I think the phrase is 'put up or shut up'."

Grace watched him, listening intently, her dinner forgotten in front of her.
"I mean, you had your mates, and you shared stuff with them," he continued, lost in the past. "But besides them, you tended to keep shite close to the vest, and you had to be tough and take the punches thrown your way. A schemie especially. And I was like all my mates in that, but I was lucky, you see. I had a mum and dad who were still together and who loved us, even if it seemed they were always out working. And when they couldn't be with us, we had Gran. But after they were gone, I talked even less--even with my mates. That's just the way I dealt with it. I don't know, I guess I thought that's how the man of the house should handle it. I remember the one time my emotions got the better of me at school and I wound up in tears, and I was found out. Two lads beat the shite out of me for being soft. It takes a lot to make me cry now."

Grace made a tiny, involuntary noise of distress, but Billy didn't even seem to hear her.

"So I just got into a habit--I suppose it's a bad habit, but it didn't seem so at the time--of keeping things to myself, you know? I'm a fucking master at deflecting. I'm too good at it now. Half the time--most of the time--I don't even know I'm doing it. Dom told me at Hogmanay I'm close-mouthed, and I suppose he's right--even though I don't mean to be--don't necessarily even want to be--"

Grace scooted her chair back and hurried around the table. Billy had looked up the second she'd moved, almost as if he were surprised to find her still there, still listening, and he stiffened slightly as she leaned over to wrap her arms around his neck. "Billy, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," she murmured quietly but quickly. "It's okay, we don't have to do Billy trivia, you don't have to tell me, I don't need to know--"

"What? Are you mad, or just not listening?" he asked, torn between being amused, and touched, and frustrated--although with her or himself he couldn't have said. He reached up to disentangle himself from her arms, then pushed his chair back from the table and pulled her down into his lap. "You didn't upset me," he said, gazing directly into her eyes. "And that's exactly my point; you say I don't have to tell you, you don't need to know, but you do. I want to tell you anything you want to know--maybe not all right away, and some of it might be difficult for me to just share out of the blue, but I want to, Grace. I told you, being close-mouthed is a bad habit, but it's one I'm working on breaking, all right?"

She nodded, still a little unsure. "All right. But it's okay if there are things you don't want to--"

"I can't think of anything about myself I'd deliberately want to keep from you, dear heart," he stopped her, his voice suddenly soft. "That's what our 'not yets' mean--it's a promise to each other that we will talk about whatever it is, we just...need a bit more time, for whatever reason. Okay?"

Grace nodded again. Her fingers played with the hair behind his ear.

"Good. So now you know why I find Billy trivia difficult," he smiled. "But I think I can trust you not to let me get away with deflecting quite so much, yeah?"

She chuckled, relieved. "I'll do my best."

"Somehow I thought you would. Now let's finish our dinner before it's completely stone cold. And then I've got a surprise for you for pudding."

She ducked in to kiss him quickly but firmly before getting to her feet to return to her chair. "A surprise for dessert? I thought you said I was only asleep about forty minutes?"

"You were," Billy grinned. "I cheated."
Some time--and some quiet, contented chat--later, Billy began clearing the dishes from the table, insisting Grace stay exactly where she was.

"But I can help," she protested.

"You could, but you won't. You keep that gorgeous wee arse in your chair."

"Bil-ly." She flushed prettily.

"What? Part of every good relationship is communication, and attraction. I’m just communicating to you how attractive I find you. It wouldn't kill you to give it a go yourself, you know." His eyes twinkled brightly.

Grace raised one eyebrow. "Fishing for compliments, Boyd?"

"Hell, yeah," he grinned. "You're very sparing with them, wee girl. Might give a lesser bloke a complex."

"Good thing you're not a lesser bloke, then, isn't it?" she teased. "I'm just trying to protect you."

"Oh, I see. And how does that work, then? Coffee?" He gestured toward the coffeemaker.

"Yes, please. I hope you're having some, because I'm planning on spending as much time awake with you as possible tonight."

"Oh, I like the sound of that." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Twit," she grinned. "I'm protecting you from getting a swelled head. Between the press and your fans, you must hear a dozen times a day how attractive you are."

"You think so, do you? How about the article that referred to my receding hairline?" he asked in mock despair. "Or the other one that called me an 'elder statesman'? Elder!" he moaned.

Grace chuckled. "Poor Billy. Yeah, I can see where having thousands of girls--and women--screaming your name is tough on the old ego."

He turned the coffeemaker on and then balled his fists on his hips. "Now you're doing it up a bit brown, aren't you? Thousands?"

"How many, then?"

"Three," he answered promptly.

She laughed. "Three, eh? I have a sneaking suspicion it's a few more than three."

"Maybe four," he allowed, straight-faced.

"Okay, I'll keep your fragile ego in mind," she promised, grinning. "I can't compliment you now, though. Wouldn't mean anything if I compliment you simply because you're expecting it."

"Fine," he sighed. "I suppose I can wait a little longer."

"Atta boy. So where's this surprise for dessert?"

Billy walked over to the freezer and pulled out two enormous slices of his chocolate birthday cake. "I saved these before everyone got their hands on the leftovers last night."
"Oh, aren't you sneaky?" Grace exclaimed, pleased. "I'm glad you did, it was a really good cake. Although three pieces of it in one weekend, on top of all the other food you've been feeding me--I'm definitely going to gain all that weight back."

"Good," he said firmly. "Otherwise when you come visit me--well, one good day of gale force winds would carry you halfway to France. And while I'd love to take you to France, I'd rather do it the more conventional way." He held out a fork from the drawer.

Grace took it, looking up at him in surprise. "You want to take me to France?"

Billy resisted the flush that threatened to creep up his neck, and sat back down at the table. "There are a lot of places I'd love to take you."

"Like where?" she asked curiously before taking a bite of her cake.

"Like--well, like Glasgow, but we've already got that covered. I was thinking of sometime in April for your visit by the way, as soon as I'm done filming, so you'd better dig your passport out."

Grace froze.

Billy stared at her. "Grace Cadence MacPherson. Tell me you have a passport."

She swallowed with difficulty. Carefully said, "Erm--I will."

"Grace!" he moaned.

"I've never been outside North America!" she protested. "What the hell would I have a passport for? It's not like it's required I.D. for the bloody library!"

"All right, all right--look, when can you get to the passport office?" he asked, trying not to despair at the thought of a roadblock to her visit.

"Umm--well, it depends how much a passport costs," she muttered, thinking furiously. "Assuming it's under a hundred dollars, then if I work an extra two hours a day for the next--"

"Oh, no you don't," he objected. "This is part of your holiday, and we agreed that I'm covering all the costs for this trip."

"We did not!" she exclaimed. "We agreed you'd cover the flight, since you bullied me into it."

"Bullied you? Oh, I like that. Hardly, you wee numptie--I had to beg, you practically had me on my hands and knees before you finally said okay, so don't you dare try and sneak some fine print in to our agreement here," he teased, wanting to keep their argument light in tone. "I'm paying for the whole trip, wee girl, and if I have to, I can out-stubborn you any day of the week."

"You think so, do you?" she asked, an unwilling smile stealing across her face.

"I do, so shut it." His eyes crinkled as he grinned at her. "As soon as you get home tomorrow, find out where the passport office is, and get your shapely arse in there. Fucking camp over, if you have to, just get your passport and email me how much it was, and I'll send you a money order. And the day you receive your documents, call me and we'll book the ticket then and there. Got it?"

"Billy--"

"You got it?"
"...Got it," she finally agreed, if a trifle reluctantly.

Billy beamed at her. "Good. Because I have to tell you, dear heart, after spending nearly three days with you, the idea of having nearly two weeks together is fan-bloody-tastic."

Grace blushed, but smiled back at him. "It is, isn't it?"

"Are you looking forward to seeing a bit of Scotland?"

Finishing the last of her cake, she sat back in her chair and nodded. "Like you wouldn't believe. I can't wait to see where my family came from, lo, these many moons ago."

He chuckled. "Think it'll feel like a homecoming?"

"It might. You never know." She stuck her tongue out at him. "Maybe I'll write a story about it. 'The Return of the MacPhersons'."

"Just don't get your hopes up on reclaiming any ancestral land. It's probably under a bloody car park anyway."

She grinned. "Likely. One of my cousins went to Ireland and visited what was rumoured to be land that had belonged to our family. It's an industrial area now. I think they export sheep manure."

Billy laughed out loud. "What a legacy to return to."

"Isn't it, though?" Grace rose and took both her plate and Billy's over to the sink. "Ready for your coffee?"

"Aye. Shall we take it out to the other room?" he asked, getting up from the table. "It's a bit cozier in by the fire."

"Aww," she said, teasing. "Does wee Billy want a cuddle?"

He walked over and took her in his arms, his hands linking at the small of her back. "Yes, he does. And a snuggle, and a squeeze, and a nuzzle, and maybe even a bit of petting. Willing to give it a go, wee girl?"

Grace turned a bit pink, but smiled up at him. "I'd like that."

"You would, hmm?" Billy's voice softened, lowered. "Anything else you'd like?"

"A little kissing would be kind of nice, too," she murmured.

"So it would. So it would." His lips hovered over hers, and then he stepped away. "Come on, then, and get your coffee." He turned to get two mugs from the cupboard, not quite hiding his grin.

She swatted his bottom. "Tease."

"Oh! You wound me!" He pushed the mugs across the counter as Grace snorted in amusement.

"As if. And you were teasing, so there. Cream?"

"Aye, a wee bit. Yeah, that's perfect. Ta."

Moments later they were ensconced on the sofa near the woodstove, Billy in the corner and Grace curled up against him, his arm around her shoulders.
Grace sipped her coffee. "Mmm, that's good."

"I put a wee bit of salt in with the grounds--it's supposed to bring out the flavour."

"It works. The other thing I like is to put a little cinnamon in with it."

Billy made a face. "Not for me, thanks."

Grace looked up at him. "You don't like cinnamon?"

"Hate it with a fiery passion." His smile was crooked. "I ate something with cinnamon when I was young, then went on a roller coaster and promptly threw up everywhere. Haven't been able to touch the stuff since. Even the smell will make me a bit nauseous."

"Poor Billy. It's a good thing you told me before I cook breakfast for you again. I'm a serial cinnamon user." She waited until he'd taken another sip of his coffee and then tuck her head under his chin. "What else don't you like?"

"No, it's your turn first. What's something you don't like?" His thumb rubbed her shoulder.

"Umm. Liver."

Billy snorted. "No one likes liver, numptie. Something else."

"Okay, okay. Olives. Can't stand them."

He kissed her hair. "Black or green?"

"Both."

"No Greek salad for you, then."

"Oh, I like Greek salad. I just pick the olives out."

He chuckled. "Aren't the olives what make it Greek? I hate raw onion. Cooked is fine, especially if it's caramelised, but I can't stand it raw."

Grace rested her coffee mug against his chest. "What about fish? I mean, I know you like sushi, but what about cooked seafood?"

"Love it, pretty much all kinds, I think. Lobster and scallops too. What about you?"

"I love all fish, but especially lobster and crab. They're just so sweet, you know?" She thought for a moment. "In fact, I can't think of anything sweet that I don't like."

Billy's hand shifted from her shoulder to the back of her neck, and his thumb stroked the nape of her neck. "Mmm," he murmured. "Neither can I."

Billy leaned against the arm of the sofa, Grace in front of him sitting between his bent right leg resting against the back of the sofa, and his left leg stretched out along the cushions beside her. She
lay back against his chest, the top of her head tucked under his chin, her fingers absently stroking over the back of his hand where it rested on her stomach. They’d been quiet for a while when Billy realized her fingers kept playing with his ring, the one he always wore on the ring-finger of his right hand, even though she wasn’t aware she was doing it.

He took a deep breath, reminding himself of what he’d told her only an hour before—that being close-mouthed was a habit he was trying to break. He’d tried, he really had, and he’d had modest success. But this was a bit different.

“Grace?” he murmured before he could lose his bottle.

“Mmm?” She nuzzled her nose against the inside of his shoulder.

“A long time ago…actually, I don’t even remember when it was. But you asked me about my ring. And I said ‘not yet’.”

Grace had stilled her fingers as soon as she realized they were fiddling with that very ring. “Yes,” she said cautiously.

“Shall I tell you?”

“If you’d like. You don’t have to.”

He sighed. “I know. It’s…it’s one of those things I want you to know, I just don’t want to actually say it out loud. It’s a secret, but a secret by my own choice, not for any real need, so there’s absolutely no reason you can’t know.”

“Billy,” she said gently. “If you have to convince yourself, then maybe you’re not ready.”

He laughed weakly. “Don’t give me an easy out like that. Haven’t you ever felt that? That something has been kept quiet for so long, that putting it into words will somehow change it? It’s hard to…to let someone else in, even if it’s nothing big?”

Grace threaded her fingers through his, thinking. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess I have. I had trouble telling you or anyone else about Michael.”

“Well, that’s a bit different. You were keeping it secret because you had yourself convinced it was somehow your fault,” he pointed out. “But…this is just…fact. It’s not like there’s anything ambiguous, anything to be interpreted. It just is.”

“ Doesn’t mean it’s any easier to say.”

“No.” Billy laid his cheek on the top of her head so he could look down at their intertwined fingers, at her fingers resting on either side of the ring. “It was my dad’s wedding ring,” he finally said, voice neither flat nor a whisper, but simply Billy.

Grace didn’t even look down at it, she just tilted her head up to press a firm, lingering kiss on the hollow of his throat.

For some reason, her lack of need to examine it in light of that statement touched him deeply, and he wasn’t even sure why, and it was suddenly ridiculously easy to tell her. “There wasn’t much in the way of…of keepsakes after he died. He wasn’t big on jewelry, always thought the money could be better spent on other things. He only had one watch, the one he’d always worn to work, so it was far too battered to bother keeping.” Billy didn’t even notice Grace begin stroking her thumb up and down his forefinger, their hands still clasped tight. “And Mum wanted me to have something I
could keep for the rest of my life, something to look at when I thought about him, I suppose, so instead of burying it with him she gave it to me. It didn’t fit, of course, so it was put safe in a box for...years. It was only when I started moving around different places that I got it out, I was afraid so small a box would get lost, so I had it sized to fit, and I almost never take it off. And of course Margaret has Mum’s.”

That simple comment brought home with such poignancy the scope of his loss, that Grace turned, sat up a bit, and wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly, wordlessly.

Billy put his arms around her in turn, pulling her up into his lap, and he leaned his temple against the side of her head. “There,” he said very quietly but with a hint of a smile. “That wasn’t so bad.” He felt more than heard her single huff of a chuckle.

“Atta boy,” she whispered.

He turned his face into her neck, softly said, “Thank you, dear heart,” against her skin.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You did. I’m not sure what, exactly, but you did.”

Grace tightened her arms around him and kissed his hair. "Then I hope I can do it again sometime." She cupped the nape of his neck with her palm, her thumb stroking the short hair there, and they held each other for a long wordless time.

Finally Billy nuzzled his nose against her throat and said, "You know what I think we need?"

"What?"

"A wee bit of music. Why don't you get your guitar, dear heart?"

She sat up and gave him a soft kiss on the lips. "Okay. I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

Billy smiled at her. "Not a chance, wee girl. Not a chance."

Grace kissed his nose and stood up. "Would you like a drink, since I'm up anyway?"

"How about another glass of that wine?"

"The red? Coming right up. I think I'll switch to the white, though. I'm in the mood for something sweet now," she grinned, then crossed the living room and disappeared through the kitchen doorway.

Billy relaxed back into the corner of the sofa again, a contented smile on his face.
Chapter 38

Grace leaned over the edge of the sofa and picked up the wine bottle, gesturing with it. Billy, concentrating on the melody he was picking out on her guitar, shook his head, so she poured the last of it into her own glass and settled back into her spot, curled up beside him.

Slowly, sipping from her wineglass, she reached over with her free hand and smoothed his hair once, twice, then carded her fingers through it. The room was dim, the only light coming from one lamp at the end of the sofa and the fire in the woodstove, but the odd strand glowed deep red as she passed her hand over it. "Why did you dye it dark, anyway?" she murmured, as if continuing a conversation already begun.

He smiled. "This is closer to my natural colour, you know."

"Is it?"

"Aye. It's just that the blonde streaky bits look a tich more lively on camera."

"So why the change?" She fingered a small lock that stuck out a little behind his ear.

"What, don't you like it?"

"I do--very much, actually. I liked the blonde look, too, but this looks a bit less...what's the word?" She made a small face. "Artful? Does that sound right?"

"Yeah, I think so." He kept his eyes on the guitar, but a small smile played across his lips as he diffidently said, "I had it done just after Christmas. I had a photoshoot right before I left for Japan."

"And they made you change your hair colour? How odd. Who was the shoot for?" Grace finished off the last of her wine and leaned forward to set the glass on the coffee table.

"The publicity people for my new film."

Grace sat upright so abruptly she nearly knocked the guitar neck out of Billy's hand. "Your new--"

He nodded, grinning. "I signed the contract when I was in L.A."

Her face lit up and she flung her arms around his neck. "Oh, Billy, congratulations! That's so wonderful. I'm so glad for you!"

Billy chuckled and let go of the neck of the guitar to give her a one-armed hug. "Thanks, wee girl. I'm pretty chuffed about it, myself."

"What's it about? Who's your character? Where are you filming? When--" Her questions came rapid-fire even as she tightened her arms around him.

"Easy, numptie," he laughed. "Let me breathe, yeah? The director likes the actors conscious."

"Silly man. What does he know?"

"Ha! You ought to be ashamed, Miss MacPherson. For your information, the director is a woman," he told her gleefully.

"Oh, bugger. Now they're going to take away my Women's Lib Secret Decoder Ring. Come on,
Billy, tell me something about the movie!" she urged as she let him loose.

He returned to quiet fingerpicking on the guitar. "Well, let's see. My character is a rascal of a con man with a heart of gold, and at the end the girl he falls in love with helps him turn from his life of crime and they live happily ever after. We start filming at the end of February--"

"So soon?" Grace asked, surprised. "I always thought it took ages to pull a movie together."

"It does," he nodded, and then flushed a little. "But I--ehm--wasn't their first choice for the role. I'm rather a late addition, actually."

"How could you not be their first choice? Are they insane?" she demanded.

Billy smiled at her, his face softening with fondness. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, wee girl."

"It's true," she said stoutly, and then leaned her elbow on the back of the sofa to begin stroking his hair again. "So, the end of February. In L.A.?"

He changed the tune he was playing to something lilting and lyrical. "No, we just happened to be able to meet to sign the contracts while I was in L.A. It's a London-based production, and we're filming in London, Brussels, and Paris."

"...Wow," Grace said, a little faintly. "That sounds...absolutely amazing."

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it, I've never been to Brussels before. Shall I send you a couple of postcards?"

"Would you? That would be cool. I've never gotten a postcard from Brussels before," she smiled.

"You'll get one now," he promised.

Grace traced the curve of his ear with her fingertip, and after a few moments murmured, "What's that you're playing? I don't recognize it."

"I'm not surprised," he chuckled softly. "I've been trying to finish it for two years now."

"You wrote it? Billy, it's beautiful."

"Thanks. It doesn't have lyrics yet. Maybe someday."

She remained silent, listening, the music following the warm path through her body that the wine had just created. Hand still in his hair, she leaned in behind the guitar, behind Billy's shoulder, and softly kissed the side of his neck.

"Mmm," he murmured with a smile, as his fingers continued to play his melody for her. "That's nice."

"Yeah?" Grace whispered next to his ear. "You like it?"

"I do. Very much."

"Good." She closed her eyes and kissed him again, slowly, trailing lingering kisses up the column of his throat, her tongue teasing down the tendon in his neck as he tilted his head.

Billy's fingers fumbled on the strings for a moment, and he made a rumbly, purring sort of noise in the back of his throat.
Grace kissed her way back up, opening her mouth slightly to press a hot, moist kiss against the soft skin under his jaw. She licked her way over to his ear, took his earlobe gently in her teeth, and flicked with her tongue.

Billy's breath hitched and his hands fell silent on the guitar.

"Billy?" she murmured when she'd released his earlobe.

"Y--yeah?"

"I'm just curious." She nuzzled his ear with her nose and kissed it again. "Why do you have a guitar in your hands, instead of *me}?"

"You know, I was just wondering the same thing myself," he managed, his voice only slightly uneven.

"Were you, now? And did you come to any conclusions?"

"Funny you should ask." He quickly set the instrument aside, well out of harm's way, and then immediately turned and pulled her into his lap, eliciting a little squeak of surprise followed by a giggle.

"I take it you decided to rectify the--" Her teasing was stopped short by Billy's mouth on hers in a firm kiss.

"Aye," he said against her cheek a moment later. "I did."

"I'm glad."

"Are you?"

"Yes. Yes, Billy, I'm very glad." She pulled back, just enough to rest her forehead against his, their noses nearly touching. "I mean, we spent hours this afternoon--and, you know, we've been attracted to each other from the start, and--well, now that I'm your--I mean, you're my--I mean..."

She trailed off, blushing furiously, and muttered, "Are you going to help me out here, or what?"

Billy's chuckles were warm puffs of air against her lips. "I think what you're trying so eloquently to say--ow, no hitting, wee girl--is that I've finally managed to get you to agree to be my girlfriend, and we haven't even had a proper snog to celebrate."

She closed one eye to glare at him. "*Something* like that."

"Then bring your pretty lips to mine, hen, and give us a kiss," he said, his voice as warm as his palms were on her back.

Grace started to tilt her head to comply, then stopped. "Wait just a minute. *Hen?"

Billy laughed and reached up to tweak her nose. "Relax, it's a term of endearment, you numptie. Like pet, or sweetheart. Just means I'm dead fond of you."

"Oh," she said, considering. "Well, that's okay, then."

"Not that you don't get all ruffled sometimes like a wee fat little hen on her nest, though," he grinned, then quickly grabbed her wrists before she could smack him, darted in, and kissed her hard.
Grace continued to struggle for a moment, then gave it up as a lost cause and kissed him back enthusiastically. Her lips parted beneath his even as he released her wrists, and together they settled back into the corner of the sofa for a long, leisurely kiss.

Billy slid one arm around her waist for support as he leaned her back a bit, and his other hand threaded into her hair, cupping the back of her head. She was warm and pliant in his lap, and her lips were soft against his as she dipped in and out of his mouth in little butterfly kisses. He hummed happily, then smiled when she made a little noise of surprise at the sensation.

Billy pulled back just enough to blink at her in contentment, then briefly pressed his lips against hers before tipping her off his lap onto the sofa beside him and rising to his feet.

"You're looking awfully pleased with yourself." Grace, sprawled on her back, cocked her eyebrow at him. "Considering you're walking away." She sat up again.

"I'll be back," he chuckled, crossing to the woodstove. "I'm just putting more wood on the fire."

"I'm so glad my kissing abilities are keeping you... Bugger. What's the word?"

"Enthralled?" Billy suggested, leaning over to shove a large log into the stove.

"Ooh. No, that wasn't it, but that's an even better word. However, you obviously catch my drift."

He closed the stove door and cranked the handle to latch it properly, then straightened to turn and face her, dusting his hands. His eyes twinkled. "Hey, I'm just thinking of you, you know. Trying to be a thoughtful boyfriend, yeah?"

Grace bit her lip to stop the silly smile that threatened to overtake her at his words. "Really? And how do you figure that?"

Billy returned to the sofa and sprawled out full-length, his ankles on her knees. "Don't want you to catch a chill when I start seducing you out of at least a few layers of that thick, heavy, voluminous, thoroughly annoying clothing you're sporting now, do I?"

She looked down at herself. "I'm wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and a sweatshirt."

"Exactly."

"Oh." Grace blushed, but then with a pert little grin argued, "Who says you get to do all the seducing? Maybe I'd like to do a bit of seducing for a change, hmm?"

The corners of Billy's mouth slowly curved up in a sensuous smile that went straight down Grace's spine and left her more turned on than she remembered being in a long time. Billy saw her eyes darken and his own widened a little in surprise, but all he said was, "Be my guest."

She lifted his ankles out of the way and pulled her feet up onto the sofa before putting his back down. On her hands and knees, she crawled up the length of him, keeping her eyes on his until she came to rest straddling his hips.

Billy's tongue darted out to wet his lips.

"I wonder," she mused, fingers playing with the hem of his jumper, "if I can get you as turned on as I am right now."

"Ehm--I think you just did," Billy managed.
"Easy little floozy, aren't you?" she teased, and then frowned. "Wait a minute. That doesn't reflect very well on me, does it?"

"No," he chuckled, his hands stroking up her thighs and coming to rest on her waist. "And I'm not just saying that so you won't call me a floozy again. Now get cracking on the seduction part, will you?"

"Patience, my pet, patience." Grace slid her hands up under his sweater, but his t-shirt was tucked into his trousers, and she made a face.

"What?" he grinned, head tilted on the small cushion he'd jammed under his neck. "It keeps the cold air out."

"It also keeps me out."

"Ah, I see your point. Bad spot of planning there, hmm? Think you can help me with it?"

"I suppose I could do that," she agreed, leaning over as she spoke until her mouth hovered over his. "Seeing as how you're so cute, and all." She kissed him, languid and deep, as her fingers began to slowly tug his t-shirt free.

Billy's hands tightened on her waist, his palms pressing down on the tops of her hips, feeling the bones even through her jeans. He followed her lead in the kiss, tangling his tongue with hers in a slow, lazy dance.

Billy pulled his mouth from hers with a groan, though, when she slid from his hips down to his thighs and walked her fingers up under his now untucked t-shirt. "Watch where you put your weight, there, luv," he half-gasped. "I'd hate to embarrass myself."

"Sorry," Grace murmured, but the glint in her eye led Billy to suspect she wasn't sorry in the least. She splayed her hands on his chest, using her wrists to push the jumper and t-shirt up, and leaned over to press a kiss to his sternum, smiling as his eyes closed. As her thumbs stroked his collarbones, she trailed light kisses all over his chest, her nose nuzzling the smattering of dark hair on his pectorals. Kissing down his ribs, across his abdomen, even below his navel and just above his waistband, Grace reveled in the sighs and soft noises issuing from between Billy's parted lips.

"Mmm. Feels so good, Grace," he whispered, shifting under her touch. "Been looking forward to this...hoping, at least..."

"Me too," she said against his skin.

"You have?"

"Mn hmm. During long cold nights when my defences were down. And the next day I'd pretend I'd done no such thing."

"Dear heart..."

"Sit up, Billy."

Without opening his eyes, he slid his hand up her back to cup the nape of her neck. "Grace, luv--" Without warning she dragged her tongue across first his left nipple, then his right, and then sucked it gently.
He drew in a swift breath, twitching beneath her. "Bloody hell--"

"Sit. Up." She straightened, hands on his sides urging him.

Billy sat up, awkward with his legs stretched out underneath her, but even as he tried to adjust his position she was yanking his sweater off over his head, then the t-shirt. The hem caught on his chin and trapped him with his arms curled over his head. "Ehm--" But before he could protest further, Grace was covering his shoulders and throat with hard fast kisses, using her tongue and her teeth and her lips to work him up even further.

"Jesus, Grace--" Billy managed to pull his t-shirt the rest of the way off and toss it aside, but before he could do or say anything else, she'd grabbed his head and, her palms on his face, kissed him open-mouthed and with teeth-snicking fierceness.

Billy groaned and wrapped his arms around her, kissing her back with equal passion. After a moment or ten of deep, wet, fervent attentions, he pulled his head away to catch his breath.

Grace tried to capture his mouth again. "Billy--"

"You're so sexy," he said, his voice a bit rough. "So fucking sexy, Grace. Let me--" He tugged on the hem of her sweatshirt. "Let me see you, touch you." When she lifted her arms above her head, he pulled off both her hoodie and the t-shirt she wore beneath it. Not knowing if she might feel self-conscious if he stared at her like he wanted to, instead Billy kissed her mouth, hard and seeking, as his hands brushed up her back to unclasp her bra. He slid the straps down her arms, over her hands, then dropped the lacy thing on the floor. He slid Grace off his lap and bore her down with his arms and his weight. Lying half on top of her but partway down her body, Billy finally allowed himself to look.

"So beautiful," he whispered, drinking in the sight of her bare throat, soft freckled shoulders, and her small rounded breasts. Her nipples were dark pink and already hardening as he watched. He propped himself up on his elbows and with his thumb traced around one, before bending his head and gently taking it into his mouth, his tongue swirling and flicking.

Grace curved up against him, her hands on his back, his shoulders, slipping through his hair. When he released her nipple with an extra little suction and transferred his attention to the other one, she let out a barely vocalized moan.

Billy wriggled his way a little further down, laying a damp trail of kisses as he went, before nuzzling her navel and lightly dipping his tongue into it. Grace gasped; grinning, Billy did it again. As he did, out of her line of sight he moved his hand to the top of her thigh. Fingers coming to rest just inside her hipbone, sharp even through her jeans, he dragged his thumb down the mound over her pubic bone.

"Billy--" she moaned, arching against his hand. "Please tell me this is going to end in sex, and soon."

Slightly surprised but not wanting to raise his hopes too high, he lifted his head. "What do you mean by 'soon'?

Impatient, she pressed herself against his thumb again. "Within the next hour. Preferably within the next fifteen minutes." Her breath caught and she shifted beneath him.

"Are you serious?" he asked, his fingers digging into the thin skin over her hipbones. "Grace, how much have you had to drink?"
"Not nearly enough to make this a mistake," she said firmly, opening her eyes to meet his gaze, to let him see the truth.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and raised one eyebrow. "We've been together a matter of hours--"

"Billy." Grace's head fell back onto the cushion. "Are you or are you not my boyfriend?"

"Well, yes, but--"

"And are we or are we not exclusive now?"

He nodded, then, realizing she couldn't see him, said, "We are."

"And are you or are you not attracted to me?"

"Unbelievably. But--"

"Oh my God, shut the fuck up." She raised her head, and the poorly suppressed smile on her lips belied the glare she shot him. "I want in your pants and you want in mine, and I haven't had sex for nearly a year. I am highly pent-up, William Boyd, and if you don't do something about it, I swear I'll lock myself in the bedroom and take care of matters myself."

"Don't you dare," he said quickly, the tips of his ears turning pink even as a rush of heat to his groin stiffened his prick.

She stretched underneath him, her body lithe. "Then take me to bed, Billy."

He took a couple of deep breaths. "Not sure I'll be able to walk, after hearing you say that."

She chuckled, then brushed her fingertips along his cheekbone. "I have faith in you. You'll manage."

"Too bloody right I will." He scrambled up the sofa until he could reach her mouth with his, kissing her hard and deep and fast, and then climbed to his feet and held out his hands, his eyes raking her bare skin from face to waist.

Grace took his hands and rose to stand on the sofa. Looking slightly down at him, she said, "Billy, forgive me for asking, but are you--have you been tested?"

He nodded solemnly. "I got all my A levels in Sexual Prowess, and Honours in How To Make Sweet, Sweet Love To A Woman."

Unable to help the giggle that bubbled up her throat, she gave him a push against his hands. "Now there's a practical exam. Twit."

He grinned and tugged her closer, wrapping his arms around her lower back. "All clean, I promise. You?"

"All clean. Condoms?" She leaned into him.

Billy flushed bright red, making Grace laugh in delight.

"What, did you bring an entire crate, or something?"

"Ehm--well..." He cleared his throat. "Well, you see, it's not like I took condoms to Japan, yeah? And then during the eternal flight back, well, I was thinking about you. And--ehm--well, I
wondered, you know, if things went well, and all...and I decided to think positive, just in case, so when we landed I made straight for the shops. And--well--" He turned, if possible, even more scarlet, and mumbled the rest. "The economy box was on sale."

"Atta boy," Grace grinned. She wrapped her arms around his neck and one leg around his waist, pausing to make sure he was prepared for her weight before giving a little hop and linking her ankles behind him. "So how many have we got?"

"Ehm...fifty?" He looked down at her breasts, temptingly close.

"Good grief! I don't see how we could possibly get through more than twenty in the next day!" she exclaimed, then kissed him firmly, feeling his ribs shake with laughter between her thighs.

One hand cupping her bottom and the other arm tight about her waist, Billy kept his eyes open as they kissed, open-mouthed and wet and a little sloppy. He began to carefully navigate his way through the living room, down the hall, and into the bedroom. Once there, he left the overhead light off but the door open, letting the light from the hall guide them to the bed, and he laid Grace down, climbing on top of her.

Billy stroked her cheek with his fingertips, looking down at her, just visible in the dim light. "You're so lovely," he murmured, then let his fingers trail down her throat and skim across her breasts.

She tucked her chin against her chest to look down at his hand as it cupped one firm breast. "Not exactly a voluptuous Hollywood figure, though," she said.

"If I wanted a voluptuous Hollywood figure, I would have gone to Hollywood this weekend. Am I in L.A. right now?"

"No."

"No," he repeated with a smile so warm Grace wondered that it didn't stop her heart in her chest. "I'm where I want to be, and you--" He bent his head to nuzzle the breast he still held. "You are the perfect wee handful, hen."

"It's--" She stopped and cleared her throat. "It's not the first time I've been called a handful."

Billy chuckled. "That I can well believe." He darted his tongue out then to lap at her skin, teasing around her aureole until it pebbled, before taking her hard nipple between his lips and flicking it with his tongue.

Grace exhaled and wrapped one leg over his, and began to let her hands wander, exploring Billy's shoulders and back with her sensitive fingertips.

They were finished with talking for the moment; all that was needed were soft questioning sounds, hums of encouragement and pleasure, and quiet sighs and moans. Billy spent a long time kissing, licking, teasing, exploring every inch of her torso and neck as her fingers caressed him, raising a warmth beneath his skin that was at once soothing and exhilarating.

Some time later Grace--on top now, and mapping Billy's chest with her mouth--whispered against his ribs. "Billy?"

"Mm? Feels good, luv." He tangled the fingers of one hand in her hair.

"Billy, can I touch you?"
"Yes," he breathed. "God, yes."

Her lips returned to his pectoral, but her hand skimmed down over the waistband of his trousers to his hip. She rested it there for a moment, her thumb rubbing his hipbone as she kissed her way down his sternum, before stroking down his thigh. When she drew it back up, the heel of her hand came to rest against his crotch, her fingers outlining his erection through the dark fabric. She began to gently caress him.

Billy drew in a sharp breath, held it for a moment, then released it slowly. "That feels so good," he murmured, rocking slightly against her hand, "that I think my eyes just crossed."

Grace smiled against his skin. "You'll tell me if I do anything you don't like?"

"Mmm. As long as you promise the same."

"Okay." She cupped him again and squeezed.

"Bloody hell," he groaned, then freed his fingers from her hair to grasp her arms. "Come up here. Come here."

Grace allowed him to pull her up, his chest hair tickling across her nipples as he took her mouth in a swift hot kiss. When he pushed his thigh up between hers, she felt the hardness, the heat of him high against the inside of her thigh, felt how her moan made him twitch.

Fingers scrabbled at waistbands and Billy didn't know who had reached first, him or Grace, but it didn't matter with her hand in his pants and her fingertips stroking the hypersensitive skin of his erection. He tore his mouth from hers to rasp, "Jesus, Grace--what--what do ye want? What do ye need tae be ready?"

"Well, you could take your bloody socks off, for a start," she gasped.

Five seconds later they were both engulfed in breathless laughter. Billy rolled her off him and scrambled to his feet, rummaging through his duffle bag until he triumphantly raised a box of condoms high, a small tube of lubricant packaged with it in clear cellophane. He tossed them onto the bed beside her, then quickly stripped off the last of his clothing--socks included. He was about to climb into bed again when she stopped him, her hand outstretched. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she smiled. "I just want to look at you for a minute. Do you mind?"

Billy was grateful for the dim light because surprisingly enough, he could feel his cheeks pinking. It was one thing to change clothes in front of someone, or get mostly naked for a film role, but quite another to be admired so openly by the woman one was about to have sex with for the first time. "Want me to turn around?" he teased as boldly as his unexpected self-consciousness would allow. "Want to inspect my teeth?"

"Maybe later," Grace chuckled. "For now I just want to see your lovely rear end."

Billy turned and wiggled his bottom at her, grinning when she laughed delightedly.

"Marvellous! A truly glorious arse, pet, even if it is impertinent. And has anyone ever told you that you have wonderful shoulders?"

"Shoulders?" he asked, turning to face her again. He lost his train of thought, however, when he watched her eyes drop to his groin and stay there. As if her gaze were a physical touch, his penis bobbed eagerly, and Billy saw her hand tighten in the bedclothes, saw her swallow. After a
moment, he murmured, "A year isn't that long. It's like riding a bike, hen."

She looked up, startled, then smiled sheepishly. "I know. I do, really. It's just..." Even in the low light, it was plain she was blushing furiously. "I'd forgotten how...big they can look."

"I won't do a thing until you're ready," he promised, then climbed on the bed to sit astraddle her thighs.

"I know. I'm not afraid, I'm just..."

"Nervous?"

"Yeah."

"Would it help to know that I am, too?" he asked, and rested his hands on her sides just above her waistband.

"You are?" Grace was surprised.

"Aye, a little. I want this to be good for you. I want to pleasure you properly."

"Pleasure me?" she giggled. "I didn't know anyone ever actually said that."

"And why not? It's exactly what I want to do," he countered, sliding one hand up from her waist to her breast and cupping it gently. "I want to satisfy you, absolutely fill you with pleasure from top to toe." The simple touch to her breast seemed to ground her a little, and Billy was glad to see some of the tension leave her body. He slid his hand down over her flat stomach, over the waistband of her trousers, and on down until he came to rest between her thighs and began to stroke her with his thumb.

Her eyes fluttered closed. "Oh. That's a good start, then."

"Good," he smiled, and began rubbing her in light little circles. "Do you know, hen, there's something very important about you that I don't know, and I've been going mad with curiosity."

"Oh, really?" She shifted slightly against his hand and sighed. "What's that, then?"

"Whether or not you're a true redhead." He moved his hand up and pressed more firmly against where he knew her hair was.

Grace's lips curved up. "Well, I wouldn't want you to go mad..."

"Lift your hips, then," he requested with alacrity, carefully tugging her jeans off, then slipping her panties down her legs and over her feet before tossing them aside. He sat on her thighs and reached for the bedside lamp.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she squeaked. She tried to draw her legs up, but the weight of him held her where she was.

"Well, I can hardly see in the dark, now, can I?" He flipped the switch on the small lamp, flooding the bed with soft warm light, and looked down at Grace.

She lay with her eyes scrunched tight and her fists twisted in the bedding, her face flaming. "I'll get you for this, Boyd," she said between clenched teeth.

"Get me for what?" he protested, keeping his smile from his voice. "You gave me a pretty
thorough investigation. Tit for tat, wee girl."

"You're the one who's used to showing your scantily clad butt to the world. And I didn't stare at you in bright light, you beast!"

"You could've. And you'll get used to showing your scantily clad arse to me." Billy changed the subject and said, a hint of wonder in his voice, "You really are ginger, aren't you, hen? I've never been with a redhead before, I'd no idea..."

"Glad I could expand your horizons."

"Aye, me too," he chuckled. "I don't suppose you'll let me leave the light on, will ye?"

Her voice was unexpectedly soft. "Not this time, please."

"All right, luv," he said, his tone matching hers, and he reached across and turned out the light, plunging them into darkness. He could feel the tension leave her thighs, and he reached forward to rub his palms on her sides. "I don't know why you're so shy. You know I think you're beautiful."

"I guess I'm just not...used to being looked at," she admitted, and Billy could hear her rueful smile. "Well. We'll just have to work on that." He suddenly grinned. "After all, you've got a lovely muff, hen, it'd be a shame to keep it hidden all the time."

There was a second of silence before she suspiciously repeated, "A lovely muff? If I were Scottish, would I smack you for that?"

Billy laughed. "Possibly, but not very hard. It's a silly name, granted, but not really offensive." He slid his hands down her sides to her hips, and then brushed one hand over her crinkly hair. Two gentle fingertips began stroking her, exploring what made her sigh, what made her twitch away, what made her quietly moan. "Would you prefer honeypot?" he murmured.

A ghost of a laugh floated up to him. "Well, it's better than muff, anyway. Barely."

Without taking his fingers from his ministrations, Billy shifted to lie beside her, propped up on his elbow, and he nuzzled her face with his nose before kissing her. His tongue swept through her mouth, and only then did he ease one finger inside her. She made a low noise in her throat, so he released her mouth to ask, "Is that okay?"

"Mmm. Better than okay."

With his eyesight starting to adjust again to the dim light from the hall Billy saw her hand rise to his face, but before she could caress him he kissed her palm, then drew her forefinger into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it.

"Ohh," Grace breathed, and canted her hips a little, allowing Billy's finger to slide further into her. When he crooked it and began to stroke the wall of her vagina, she sighed, and when the heel of his palm pressed against her pubic bone and rubbed up and down as he slid his finger in and out, she moaned.

"I can feel you getting wetter," Billy whispered.

Grace reached up, and with a hand around the back of his neck, pulled his head down to hers and kissed him hungrily. Her other hand smoothed across his chest, her fingers playing with his nipples.
Billy shivered as a fingernail scraped lightly around his right nipple. He knew it wouldn't be long, he could feel that Grace was ready for him; he was just waiting for her to say so. When her hand traveled lower, and lower still, and then wrapped around his erection, he growled in the back of his throat and kissed her harder, his tongue plunging into her mouth as he slipped a second finger in beside the first.

Grace gasped, sucking the breath from him, and her back arched.

Obligingly Billy took his mouth from hers to cover one of her breasts, sucking hard and then pressing her nipple flat with his tongue, gratified by the way her fingers clutched his arm and she whimpered. Her hand tightened around his prick, and Billy couldn't help but rock into her grip a little. When she suddenly removed her hand he made a quiet noise against her breast, but when he realized she was feeling around for the box of condoms, he left her to it and simply continued his attentions, fingers still slipping in and out.

Grace groped around for the box, nearly succeeding in knocking it off the bed with her elbow before catching it at the last second. "Careful, you klutz," she scolded herself as she ripped open the end, pulled out a strip of condoms, and tore off one packet. She pulled the tube of lube free, then tossed aside the box.

Billy's lips released her breast and he eased his fingers out of her. "You want the lube?" he asked, a little surprised.

She still looked a bit nervous. "If you don't mind. We probably don't need it, but..."

He stretched up to place a soft kiss on her lips. "If you want it, use it. I don't mind in the least, hen. Are you ready?"

Her breath was uneven but her smile was wide as she said, "Hell, yes." She handed him the condom, then flipped open the cap of the lube and squeezed a large dollop onto her palm. "I'll warm it up for you, shall I?"

"You're not going anywhere, luv." He leaned over to plant a kiss on her lips, then returned to his task of rolling the condom down over his erection. "I'm pretty sure we'll be keeping each other warm enough in a minute."

"Oh--yeah. I suppose we will, won't we?" She huffed a little laugh. "I'm sorry, pet, I don't know why I'm so--"

Billy shushed her. "Relax, wee girl. Just have fun, yeah? You can do anything you want, whatever feels good. And you can tell me to do--or not do--anything you want, as well. Just remember to talk tae me."

"Talk. Right." She gestured at him with lube-covered hands. "Shall I?"

"I'd be gutted if ye didn't," he grinned. He shifted closer and picked up the tube she'd dropped by her hip, and his voice hitched as she curled slick hands around him. "I'll put--oh hell, that feels good, Grace--I'll put some on you, too. Just to be--mmm--sure."

"Yeah," she breathed, her eyes traveling up and down his body. "Do you know how sexy you are,
"Tell me," he suggested, his voice sounding a bit rough even to his own ears. He closed his hand almost compulsively over the lube he'd squeezed into his palm, trying to warm it up faster.

She stroked his prick, first with one slicked hand, then the other. "You're not huge," she began, then quickly added, "Your build, I mean," and she flushed when he laughed. "Dammit, I'm not good with words!"

Billy leaned over and kissed her, his mouth open and his tongue teasing, before pulling back to say, "Try again. Tell me, I won't laugh."

Grace huffed in frustration at her lack of eloquence. "You're not--well, you're not a hulking great brute, are you? You're...compact. Slender. But you have this sense of..." She paused, trying to think how to say it, and then gasped as Billy's fingers, slippery with the warmed lube, stroked her clit before sliding down.

"Go on," he murmured.

"You--you...ehm. Right. Where was I? I...I always have this feeling around you of...of strength that doesn't show. Like power and force held in check. As if you could break someone, just snap them in two with the greatest of ease, but you don't have to, so you keep it--under wraps. Like a coiled spring, or something. And all of that makes your gentleness, your tenderness, that much more...I don't know. Valuable? Whatever it is, put it all together, and it's sexy as hell, Billy."

He cocked his head. "So--what? You like a little hint of violence? I'm not sure I--"

"No!" She stopped him quickly. "God, no. Violence and sex don't go together for me. Nor do fear and sex."

"Good," Billy said, slightly relieved. "They don't for me, either."

"It's not a hint of violence I feel in you, Billy. It's just...simple strength. It's very appealing. Not to mention," she added, wanting to lighten the mood again, "That you have a fetching chest and hot arms and a gorgeous arse and I haven't seen too much of your legs yet but from what I have seen, you have very sexy thighs."

Billy slowly, carefully laid himself on top of her, his erection nestling between her thighs. "Don't forget my shoulders. You said ye liked my shoulders."

Grace craned her neck to kiss the nearest one. "I do. You have wonderful shoulders." She kissed it again, then fluttered her tongue against his skin.

"Mmm. So do you, ye know," he murmured, laving his tongue across her collarbone. "So delicate and pretty. How do ye want tae do this? Would ye be more comfortable sitting up, on my lap?"

"Maybe next time," she smiled, then licked her lips with a little residual nervousness. "This is good to start with. Do you want me to...?" She reached down.

"Aye, whenever you're ready." Billy propped himself up on one elbow to give her more room, feeling her thighs brush his hips as she raised her knees to place her feet flat on the mattress. "There's no rush, hen. Take your time."

"It's okay, I'm ready." She made sure she had a good grip on his slicked length. "Now kiss me, before I start concentrating too hard with my tongue between my teeth and looking more like I'm
writing a math test than making love with you."

Billy laughed delightedly. "That's a bloody adorable image. I'm hanging on tae that one."

She huffed a chuckle. "Don't bother. Are you going to kiss me, or what?" She gave his erection an extra squeeze as encouragement.

"I'm going tae snog ye senseless," he promised, his eyes gleaming in the dim light. He bent his head and, his lips hovering over hers, breathed, "I want ye so much, Grace." And then he kissed her.

She forgot for a moment what her hand was supposed to be doing, as Billy's teeth tugged at her lower lip and his tongue flicked teasingly against hers. One rock of his hips against hers, however, brought urgent recall, and she placed the head of his penis against herself and eased him inside.

Billy groaned into her mouth, buried one hand in her hair, and as slowly as he could pushed further into her. His balls ached with the effort of holding back, but even so she stiffened beneath him and her gasp sucked the air from his mouth. He stilled immediately and lifted his head to look down at her face. "Does that hurt?"

"A--a little."

"I'll pull out," he said, but before he could, she gripped his hips and held him where he was.

"Don't you fucking dare." She opened her eyes and looked up at him, and the trust in her eyes nearly undid him.

"Grace, love, we don't have to, not if it hurts--" he murmured, one hand brushing curls off her face.

"It's just been a while, that's all," she whispered. "Give me a minute to get used to it, okay?"

"Whatever you want. Just tell me what you want me to do."

"Don't move for a minute. I just need to...adjust." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. After a moment, Billy leaned his forehead on hers and let his own lashes drift shut. He synchronized his breathing with Grace's, willed himself to calm, and felt the tension slowly dissipate in the heat from their joined bodies. "That's it," he murmured. "Relax, love."

Slowly, tentatively, Grace canted her hips up a little.

"How's that?"

"Better," she whispered against his mouth. "Definitely better. Try again."

Billy simultaneously kissed her, cupped her breast with his free hand and massaged it, and gingerly eased himself further into her. He was about to release her lips to ask if it was all right when she moaned into his mouth and rose up against him, effectively pulling him even further into her. This time it was Billy who gasped, and he tore his mouth from hers. "Bloody hell, Grace--I don't know if I can hold still--"

"I don't want you to," she said breathlessly and to prove it rocked against him. "Move, Billy."

With a great shuddering breath Billy withdrew a few inches and pushed slowly back in. "Okay?"

"Yes."
"God, you're so tight," he growled against her neck. "Ye feel so good, love."

"So do you. I can't feel anything but you. I'd forgotten how good it feels to be so..." She tightened her muscles, making Billy bite his lip. "Are you all the way in?"

"Not quite. How good it feels tae be so...what?" Billy bent his head and kissed the side of her throat, rocking gently in and out.

"Go deeper," she breathed, her hands sliding around to his back, her fingernails lightly scraping down his spine.

He made a noise in the back of his throat. "Do that again." When she obliged, smoothing up and scraping down, he arched into it with a little groan, and slid almost all the way out of her. "How deep?"

"As deep as you can," she said, her voice beginning to betray her need. "To the fucking hilt, Billy. Please."

"Oh, Jesus," he growled, and slid his hand down her leg to hook under her knee and lift. As soon as he had a better angle with her knee clamped against his waist, he thrust into her, and his moan mingled with her whimper in the humid air between them.

"I'd forgotten," she panted, completing her earlier sentence, "How good it feels to be so--so filled. Can't feel anything but you inside me. I don't--don't know how to explain--"

"Ye don't have tae," Billy assured her, his breath hitching. "I know." He moved in and out of her several times, perspiration beginning to dampen his forehead. "Believe me, I know. You're so tight, Grace, sliding into ye, feeling ye surrounding me, feeling the heat of ye..."

"Yes. Just like that. Only, you know, opposite." She craned her neck up to kiss him properly, but Billy's breathless huffs of laughter made her fall back giggling. "What?" she gasped, grinning as she pressed her hips up against him. "It is just like that." "Only opposite," he chuckled, withdrawing slowly and then thrusting back in.

"Mmm. Well, I don't have the--ohh--the right bits for it to be exactly like that, do I?" Her fingers gripped his rear end.

"A fact for which I'm truly, immensely grateful," Billy averred. She laughed delightedly, if breathlessly, and he groaned.

"Oh, God--laughing during sex is--vastly underrated. Your muscles do the most--fantastic things, wee girl." He lurched to prop himself on one arm and reached down between their bodies, his thumb landing unerringly on her pubic bone and pressing against her.

Grace arched convulsively with a little whimper, and then laughed again.

"You're doin' that on purpose, aren't ye?" Billy managed, slowing down his next few thrusts to tease her.

"Yes. Nnh--faster, Billy..."

"Circles--circles is good," she panted, rocking against him, matching his rhythm. When his thumb began stroking her in firm, quick circles, her body rose up to meet him. "Oh, God, Billy--"

He bent his head and covered her mouth with his, plunging his tongue in to drink in the taste and heat of her. She thrust back at him with tongue and lips and hips, revealing a passion he'd suspected was there but hadn't been unleashed in their previously precious few intimate moments, and he felt his control fracturing. When her nails scraped his back from shoulders to arse, he wrenched his mouth from hers to gasp, "Fuck--I'm gonnae--Grace, I'm gonnae--"

"Come," she breathed, request and demand and permission and plea all at once, and with two erratic plunges of his hips Billy did, a low cry tearing from his throat as he pulsed within her. His fingers on her clit stuttered and stopped, all mental focus swept away by his orgasm.

Billy buried himself in her once more, the sensation of it dragging out his climax and setting him shuddering. "Oh God, Grace--" he panted in her ear. "Grace..."

"Don't stop now." Her voice was round and warm with a smile and with desire, and she clenched her muscles around his still-twitching penis.

"Oh, bloody hell!" he yelped, and his entire body spasmed in reflex. He vaguely remembered his fingers were supposed to be doing something, so he resumed rubbing her in small, tight circles.

Taken by surprise, Grace gasped and bucked against his hand.

"Ye must be close," Billy said hoarsely, still trying to catch his breath. "Ye feel incredible, sae hot an' swollen, sae good. Show me, Grace. I want tae see ye come, love." He abruptly changed the rhythm of his fingers and rocked his hips. His penis had softened, but the feel of him still inside her made her whimper.

"Billy--oh God, Billy, please--" She began to writhe under his touch, her hands clutching at him as she neared her orgasm.

He changed his rhythm again, speeding up, the circles becoming erratic as his wrist tired a little, but that only seemed to drive her closer to the edge.

"Oh God, Billy," she moaned, her head thrown back. "Oh fuck, oh fuck--Billy, please--fuck--fuck--Billy." Suddenly arching taut, Grace let out a high-pitched mewling sound, and began to tremble with an achingly strong climax.

"God, just look at ye," he growled in her ear. "Sae fucking gorgeous. I can feel ye come, all tight around my prick, and I want tae stay inside ye forever." When she began to shudder, he nudged her head to the side and kissed the nape of her neck, hoping to hear that sound again. He wasn't disappointed.

Grace mewled again, but this time it escalated into a cry at the combined sensations of Billy's lips on her neck, his soft penis still weighty inside her, and his fingers slowing on her swollen, sensitive clit. She wrapped her legs around his waist, whimpering softly as he slipped out of her, and pressed herself up against him while her mouth sought and covered his in a frantic kiss.

Unable to circle his thumb anymore, Billy turned his hand and clamped it tightly against her, feeling her thrrob against his palm in the aftermath of her orgasm, and he kissed her back, hard and wet and matching need for need. He felt Grace's body begin to relax, though, as the adrenaline of their lovemaking ebbed, and soon their kisses gentled, lengthened, turned languid and sweet. His fingers traced her jaw, her throat, her breasts; hers threaded through his hair and kneaded his
shoulders and mapped the muscles in his arms. Finally, with a last brush of his lips over hers, Billy lifted himself up, rolling to lay on his back beside her, sated. After a moment he sat up and checked the condom before glancing down at her. "All right, love?" he asked with a smile.

"Mm-hmm," she hummed, sounding utterly content. "You?"

"Very mm-hmm," he chuckled. "I'm going to go tidy up a bit. Ye want anything while I'm up?"

"No thanks. I'll meet you in the kitchen when you're done. I'm starving." She grinned up at him, and he laughed out loud.

"Worked up an appetite, did ye?"

"Apparently. Besides, I'll need sustenance if we're going to use up a few more of those condoms."

Billy waggled his eyebrows at her as he climbed off the bed. "Maybe I'll join ye for a wee snack myself, then. Wouldn't want to faint away at a crucial moment."

"No, we definitely wouldn't want that," she agreed solemnly, and then giggled. "Go on, then. And let's see a wiggle on your way out."

Billy left her on the bed, pausing in the doorway to wriggle his bare bottom at her. Her delighted laughter followed him down the hall.
Billy rolled over, sleepily patting his hand around in search of Grace. When he encountered only cool empty sheets, he groggily lifted his head to spot her silhouette in front of the window, a blanket draped around her otherwise bare shoulders. "Grace?" he croaked, propping himself on one elbow. "What are you doing?"

"Just looking at the moon," she whispered, not turning around. "Go back to sleep, hon."

"Come back to bed, before you freeze."

"I will."

When she didn't move for several minutes, Billy climbed out from under the covers, shivering as the chill air hit his skin. He padded over to the window, took the blanket from around her--shushing her when she protested--and tossed the blanket over his own shoulders. When he drew her back against his chest, she was enveloped in his arms and the thick, soft fabric. His thumbs stroked her bare skin as he held her. "What's going through that lovely head of yours?" he asked softly.

Grace leaned her head back against his shoulder, and her hair tickled his chest. "I'm a little--a little scared," she admitted.

"Of what?"

"That this is going to be hard. I already hate the thought of you leaving."

"Good." He turned his head and kissed her temple, then smiled against her skin. "If you were looking forward to being shot of me, we'd have a bit of a problem."

She snorted and pulled his arms more tightly around herself.

"I'm not pretending it's going to be easy, love," he murmured, "but we can do this. We'll take the steps to get your finances squared away, I'll come and see you every chance I get, and we can talk all the time."

"No, we can't," she said, adamant, and it surprised him a little. "Bloody hell, Billy, you're not made of money. Use the wits God gave you for a minute, please? It's one thing to switch a flight from New York to Toronto when you're already going through anyway, but you can't fly over just to visit all the time, and you can't rack up a fortune in phone bills. You may be well off, but you won't stay that way if you pull stunts like that, will you?"

"Grace--"

"I mean it, Billy! I don't want you to wind up--" She cut herself off abruptly, nearly biting her tongue.

"To wind up what?" he asked, and several possibilities ran through his head. After a moment he
"slowly said, "You don't want me to wind up regretting it."

"I don't. I don't want you to remember me as the one that sucked you dry."

"Depends on how you're doing the sucking," he grinned, then squeezed her extra tightly when she tried to elbow him.

"Billy--"

"Ah, hush, you know I can't resist winding you up. In all seriousness, love, there are no guarantees in life--you know that as well as I do. All we can do is try our best to be happy, and to make each other happy. But if you go into this assuming there will be an end to it, then you'll just be waiting for that to happen and you won't be trying your best. I deserve better than that, and so do you."

Grace was silent for a moment before finally--quietly--agreeing. "You're right. I'm sorry."

He kissed the top of her head in acknowledgement.

"But I still don't want--"

"Enough!" Billy exclaimed, chuckling. "Good God, wee girl, stop your worrying! Trust me, I have no desire to ever go back to being skint, all right?" He rocked her back and forth a bit. "I'm going to do the best I can for us, but I'm not going to risk losing what I've worked so hard for. Does that reassure you?"

"...Yeah."

"Good. Besides, I'm already trying to think of how to get work in Toronto," he said with a smile against her hair, then bent his head to kiss the side of her neck.

"Do you really think you could?" she asked in surprise, turning within his arms to look up at him.

The blanket covered half her face; Billy adjusted it around her shoulders. "I don't know. You have a lot of theatres and a pretty healthy film industry, but I don't suppose there's much call for a short-arsed Scot, really. Still, it can't hurt to look into it. I'll give Aude the heads-up when I get back."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed," she promised. "That would be so fantastic. In the meantime--"

Billy's eyes widened as she purposefully rocked forward against his half-hard penis.

"I think we have fifty or so condoms to get through, don't we?" she grinned up at him impishly, and then kissed his chest. "That is, unless you're too tired..."

"Why, you little minx," he breathed, then scooped her up blankets and all. "I'll show you 'too tired.'" He dumped her on the bed, her laughter pealing in the near darkness, and spreading the blanket back over the foot of the bed, he climbed in with her. "C'mere, you," he said, and pulled her flush against him.

Grace twined her legs with his and nuzzled his throat. "You're my boyfriend, you know," she said as her fingers skated across his ribs. "And you're very attractive." She licked and kissed his collarbones, then tongued the hollow between them. "I have an attractive boyfriend. A hot, sexy, handsome, gorgeous boyfriend."

It was all Billy could do not to moan at what her tongue was doing. His penis twitched against her. "And I have a--mmm--a hot, sexy, gorgeous, fucking lovely girlfriend."
"You bastard!" she said hotly. "I thought you said we were exclusive!" She sucked on his nipple, conveniently close by.

"Smartass," Billy chuckled, and lightly smacked her bottom before sliding his hand up and around to cup her breast. He stroked her nipple with his thumb.

"Billy?"

"Mmm?"

Grace kept her head down, her lips near his skin, and her hair pooled on his chest. "What turns you on?"

He reached down, put his hand behind her knee, and pulled her thigh up and over him. "You do."

"No, I mean it."

"So do I, wee girl."

She nipped at his belly. "Fine, then. What do you like?"

"I like touching you." He slid his hand up and down her thigh. "I like feeling your long hair sweep across my skin. I like feeling your hands on me."

"Where?"

"Anywhere." Sensing her protest, he quickly added, "But especially on my back...and my prick...and my hips."

Grace placed her hand on his bare hip, her thumb stroking into the hollow. "Here?"

"Mmm. Yeah."

She gripped his hip more firmly, but was startled into releasing him when a strange noise came from his throat; it had sounded like nothing so much as a whimper. "I'm--I'm sorry. Did that hurt?"

"No," Billy said with a shaky laugh. "I told you, it turns me on. It turns me on a lot, Grace."

"Ohh," she breathed, and put her hand back where it was, her fingers pressing hard against his skin.

"Bloody hell, love," Billy groaned, shifting against her touch.

Grace found herself wishing the moonlight were slanting across his face instead of the floor so she could see the arousal in his expression. She pulled her thigh from his grasp and wriggled a little further down.

"Where are ye going?" he protested, fingers brushing her arms in an attempt to hold her still. "Come back up here."

"In a minute," she said, and gently wrapped her hand around his erection. "Is that good?"

Billy rocked a little into her grip. "Oh, I suppose it's tolerable--" he began, but broke off with a gasp as he felt her mouth on the taut skin of his hip.

"And how's this?" she asked, lips skimming his skin as she spoke. She used her tongue to trace the crease of first his left hip, then his right.
He arched underneath her. "Oh, God," he growled, his hands clutching at the sheets to either side. "You're gonnae use tha' spot against me, aren't ye?"

Grace licked her lips and swallowed. "Like you use that spot on the nape of my neck against me? Hell, yes." She paused. "Billy?"

"Aye, love?"

"Should I--should I be concerned that your accent's thickening again?"

"Hmm? What?"

"Well--it happened the first time, too, but I didn't want to say anything. But now, I--well, I.... Oh, bugger," she said, and sat up leaving a good foot of space between them.

Billy propped himself up on his elbows. "What are ye on about, wee girl? My accent gets stronger when I'm truly passionate about anything, be it anger or sex. Ye knew that."

"I did not!" she said hotly. "As far as I'm aware, it only happens when you're holding yourself back, keeping yourself at a distance! Why is it happening now?"

"Keeping myself--oh, you mean with my fans. Oh, Grace, it's not the same thing at all," he said, his voice soft and slightly chiding. "Do ye really think I'd throw a wall like that up while we're in the middle of making love?"

"But--"

"I swear tae ye, it's different. With fans it's--I didn't even know I was doing it, it's like an imitation of myself I put on, I suppose. So I'm me with them, but not all of me, ye know? But this--" He lifted his hand, slid it under her hair to cup the back of her neck. "This is genuine. This is passion roughening up the polish I've been smoothing my accent with for the past fifteen years or so."

"Smoothing--" There was a frown in Grace's voice. "You haven't always-- Who the hell am I talking to, then?"

Billy huffed a frustrated little sigh. "Me. But sounding like I'm straight from the east end scheme I grew up in isn't any way tae get acting jobs. From the day I entered drama school I learned to tone it down so I'd be intelligible to the audience. It's second nature now, Grace, it's the way I talk now. Did I always have this exact accent? No. Is it a conscious choice, deliberate? No. Do you understand?" His thumb stroked the bare skin of her neck.

Grace was silent for a moment, then slowly said, "I understand that part. It makes sense you might have to modify your accent for work, and that you'd get used to it. But..."

"But?" Billy gently tugged her down until she was lying with her head on his chest. He pulled the blankets up over her bare shoulders and then slowly smoothed his fingers over her hair, spreading it out over his chest.

"But...it doesn't make sense to me that you'd use the same accent to create a distance between you and someone else as you do when you're passionate, even if it is unconscious. How can they be such--such different impulses, but still wind up sounding the same?"

"I don't know, dear heart," he said, his voice quiet. "But can ye trust me when I say they're not the same? Can ye believe me when I say I'll always be genuinely myself with ye?"
Grace turned her head just enough to press her lips to his skin. "Yes. Yes, Billy, I can."

His hand cupped the back of her head. "Thank you, love." After a long moment he spoke again, and he sounded determined. "I'll tell you what. I'm not particularly thrilled with the idea that I present such a façade to people; now that I'm aware of it, I want to stop it. Will you help me with that?"

"You don't have to--"

"Yes, I do."

"No, I mean--just because I--"

Billy laid two fingertips against her lips to hush her. "I know what you mean, and I'm not doing this because it made you a bit uncomfortable at first. I'm doing it because I know I can find a way to maintain a bit of distance between me and my fans without being..."

Grace wriggled up until her face was level with Billy's and she rested her palm against his cheek. "You weren't being fake."

He smiled crookedly, knowing she'd feel it under her hand. "Maybe. I don't know. What I do know," he said, deliberately thickening his accent until it was broad and round, "is tha' I want this tae be just between ye an' me."

"Oh, Billy," she murmured, caressing his cheekbone with her thumb. Then she laughed, low and rich. "Do you have any idea how incredibly sexy you sound when you talk like that?"

He startled her by flipping her onto her back, and his hands lightly pinned her wrists to the mattress. "Oh, aye?" he purred. "Do tell, wee girl."

Grace's giggle turned to a breathy sigh when Billy slid down to cover one of her nipples with his mouth. "Oohh. Go on--say 'economy box' for me, Mr. Boyd."

Grace woke slowly in the morning. Turning her head on the pillow she saw that Billy was still asleep, his gold-tipped lashes at rest on his cheeks. For several moments she simply watched him, listened to him breathe, revelled at being warm and snug and alone in bed with him. Soon, though, the urge--the need--to touch him grew irresistible. Inch by inch, practically holding her breath, she shifted closer and lowered one arm over him.

Billy sighed and tangled his limbs with hers, but remained asleep.

Lightly playing with his hair, Grace concentrated on the feeling of having him in her arms, his bare skin against hers from head to toe. Once he dropped her off at her apartment later that day she wouldn't see him again for likely two months or more, and she wanted to absorb as much of his presence as she possibly could. She still felt a bit bewildered by the day before--so many major changes to her life were going to take a bit of getting used to, and being separated from him wasn't going to make it any easier. But, she thought with a smile, inhaling the scent of his hair, he really was worth the effort. Gorgeous and funny and kind and sensible and sweet and passionate and talented and honest, and Grace couldn't think of any man she'd ever met who brought out the best in her so easily. Billy was right; there were no guarantees for them, but there was more than
enough between them to make trying worthwhile.

Grace tilted her chin down so she could see Billy's face. It was also still a wonder that so attractive a man as he would be interested in her. She knew she was pretty, but... She stopped herself there. There would always be someone more beautiful, especially in Billy's world of movies and theatre, but for whatever reason, Billy was drawn to her. She realized she'd better accept and grow comfortable with that, or it could rise up to bite her later. Besides, there were men who were technically more handsome than Billy--but he was the one she couldn't get out of her head. She studied his features, from the faint freckles high on his forehead, to the silver just highlighting his temples, to the curve and bend of his mouth. That bow shaped upper lip was much of the reason he could look so damned innocent, and it was the incongruity of it forming profanities that surprised so many people.

Billy stirred and his mouth twitched, almost as if it were curving under the weight of her gaze.

Grace lightly stroked her hand up and down his back. Either the gentle caress would lull him back to sleep or it would wake him further, and she was content with either result.

Wriggling closer, Billy nuzzled her collarbone. His voice rough with sleep, he mumbled, "How long've you been awake?"

"Not long," she whispered.

"Was I drooling?"

She chuckled. "No. Shh, go back to sleep, if you want."

"I might." He crooked one leg over hers, and his eyes stayed closed. "Get to wake up with you again."

"You could always just pretend. I hear you've done a bit of acting in your day. Word has it you're not half bad."

Billy nipped at her jaw. "Smartass. Sing for me."

"What?"

"Anything."

"Give me a word?"

"Mmm." He was silent for a moment, then his forehead wrinkled. "Don't know the word. But it's you and me, in bed like this."

Grace pressed a smile against his hair. "Okay...let me see..." After a moment, she began to sing, her voice low and soft.

*The dawn is breaking*
*A light shining through*
*You're barely waking*
*And I'm tangled up in you*

*I'm open, you're closed*
*Where I follow, you'll go*
*I worry I won't see your face*
Light up again

Even the best fall down sometimes
Even the wrong words seem to rhyme
Out of the doubt that fills my mind
I somehow find
You and I collide

I'm quiet you know
You make a first impression
I've found I'm scared to know I'm always on your mind

Even the best fall down sometimes
Even the stars refuse to shine
Out of the back you fall in time
I somehow find
You and I collide

The moment she finished the song, Billy surged up and covered her mouth in a swift kiss. "You are just...brilliant," he murmured in between kisses to her cheeks, her jaw. "Do you know that? Fucking brilliant."

"You're pretty nifty yourself," she smiled, and then squeaked when he rolled on top of her and his erection pressed into her hip.

"You're making me young and randy again," he said, then dropped his head to lick at the hollow of her throat.

"Yeah, because you're so positively ancient," she teased, tilting her head back to give him easier access.

"I may not be," he grinned against her shoulder, "But I would have thought three times within twelve hours was being overly optimistic."

Grace laughed and wriggled her hips. "To be honest, it's a bit questionable for me, too. But the fun is in the trying."

"You're damned right it is," Billy agreed fervently. He snaked a hand in between them, and swallowed Grace's gasp in a kiss.

Billy flopped on his back, chest heaving. "That's it," he panted, clumsily patting Grace's leg. "I'm officially all shagged out."

Her laugh was breathless as she agreed, "Me, too." She rolled over to press a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Thank you, love." His kiss bypassed her cheek to land on her lips. "Can you reach the tissues for me?"
Grace picked up the box off the night table and held it out for him. She watched as he took several, removed his condom and tidied himself, then wrapped it all up in one last tissue. He leaned over her and dropped the bundle in the waste basket beside the bed. Wrapping her arms around his middle, she pulled him down on top of her. "My turn."

Billy groaned, a twinkle in his eye. "Insatiable, aren't you? It's no use, love, I'll never get it up again. I'm not fifteen anymore, you know."

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm glad, because firstly, ew. Secondly, hello, illegal. Thirdly, EWW. No," she continued over Billy's chuckles. "It's my turn for a song. You and me, here, like this."

He stroked her cheek with one finger, thinking, before his smile slowly curved. "Got it. Need the guitar, though."

"Get your adorable self off me and I'll go get it," she offered. "I need to pee anyway."

"Should have thought of that before you pulled me down on to your bladder, then, hmm?" He rolled onto his back on the mattress.

"Yeah, I didn't think that one through very well, did I? Be right back."

Billy stretched, cat-like, then curled up on his side. By the time Grace returned, he was nearly in a sated doze.

"Oh my God, it is freezing out there," she informed him, shivering as she carefully leaned the guitar against the night stand and then leaped onto the bed, scrambling to get back under the covers.

Billy yelped as her cold feet found his, as her chilly thighs pressed against the backs of his, as her arms snaked around his waist and her cold fingers grazed his stomach. "Bloody hell, love, are you trying to give me a coronary? Get your wee icicle toes off me, you cruel woman!"

Grace obligingly pulled her feet away and simply snuggled the rest of herself closer.

Billy briefly pressed back against her breasts. "My," he snickered. "You are cold, aren't you?"

"I think I could cut glass with these," she muttered. "I turned the furnace on when I went past, and I'm not getting up until it's warmed up out there."

"You'll get no complaints from me about that." He rolled over within her grasp and gathered her close. "Better?"

"Mmm." She tucked her nose against his neck. "Much. I'm so very lucky to have a hot-blooded young Scot in my bed."

"Young? I knew there was a reason I liked you."

"Only one?"

"Bite your tongue."

"I've got better things to do with it than bite it, pet."

Billy laughed out loud. "And when I get home I want daily emails describing those 'things' in glorious, vivid detail."
Grace licked his throat. "There's one to be going on with. Now how about my song?"

"I was just waiting until you weren't quite so hypothermic. Pass me the guitar?"

When Billy had settled himself against the headboard, pillows behind his back and blankets pulled up as high as he could get them while still being able to play, he began to pick a complicated, melodic rhythm. "So," he said conversationally, "You wanted a song about you and me, in bed, like this. This is it. The song you sang, and this song--they are us." He began to sing, his voice soft and smooth.

After your orgasm the world is a different place  
The world is a different place  
After your orgasm--

"Billy!" Grace lightly kicked him under the covers. "I was being serious!"

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Cut it out, hen, and listen. I'm serious too, just give it a minute."

She made a face at him, but held her tongue.

After your orgasm the world is a different place  
The world is a different place  
After your orgasm when we slide out of bed  
We stay slippery, we stay slippery  
So the worries in our heads  
Slide away, slide away  

The world will change its angle so the furniture will slide  
Slowly to one side of the room  
For gravity is different now and everything must fall  
As we rise, surprising  

Oh we must slide into each other  
And let this air that knows us in  
It's harder to breathe out fast  
As we are filled  
And as the room turns, I will brace you  
As you bravely give your all  
To the moon-soaked wall and wind  

Billy's voice gentled, softened even more, and it was with a touch of surprise that Grace realized he was singing her a true--if unorthodox--love song.

The air inside this room has yours and mine  
It's been inside our breathing  
When you reached inside my ribcage and put both your hands around my spine  
You realigned my feelings  

Oh we must slide into each other  
And let this air that knows us in  
It's harder to breathe out fast  
As we are filled  
And as the room turns, I will brace you  
As you bravely give your all
To the moon-soaked wall and wind

After your orgasm, the world is a different place
The world is a different place

"Thank you," Grace whispered.

Billy pulled on his other glove and picked up the guitar case. "Is that everything, then? The blankets and pillows all stay here?"

Grace nodded. "Elijah and Dom's contribution for the use of the cottage. I'm taking all the sheets home to wash, though--my parents can bring them up next time they come." She mentally went through a checklist. "Furnace is turned down, fire is out, boathouse is locked, back door is locked, dishes are washed, trash is in the car to be dropped off at the dump. I guess that's it." She didn't move.

"Let's be on our merry way, then, shall we?" Billy said cheerfully. Grace was in no hurry, but he could hardly wait to get her back to her flat.

"Billy."

"Yes, hen?"

She turned her head, but had trouble meeting his eyes. "I--I wish--" She swallowed. "Thank you for coming. It's been...I mean, thank you."

He rubbed her shoulder through her coat. "I've not left yet, numptie," he said fondly. "Don’t end our time together before it's over."

"I know. It's just... It'll be a long time, you know? Lots of things could happen."

"You promised you'd come to Glasgow. Do you take that back?"

"No!"

"Well, then."

"Well, then," she agreed, if a bit weakly. "I guess I don't want to cling too tight."

"It will be hard, being apart," he nodded. "But stepping back now won't change that."

"It won't?"

"No. You'll just end up regretting the time you could have spent snogging me senseless."

She stared at him for a minute, then threw her arms around him and kissed him, hard.

Chapter End Notes
Lyrics from *Collide* by Howie Day and *After Your Orgasm* by David Wilcox.
"Can I ask you something?" Billy studied Grace's profile as they drove down the highway toward Toronto, leaving her cottage miles behind.

She glanced over. "Of course."

"If the world were a perfect place, and you had the opportunity and resources and abilities to do anything you wanted, what would you do?"

"Didn't we already have this conversation once?"

"Actually, no." He grinned. "This one has absolutely nothing to do with reality."

"Give me a 'for example', then."

He hummed, not taking his eyes from her as he thought. "For example...I'd be the world's most talented and famous actor/musician. But of course I'd still have my privacy. And I'd have a head for business and would open my own film studio, and Dom and Elijah would move to Glasgow to help me run it. It would be the best fucking studio in the world. And my band would be platinum-selling and sell out concerts all over the world whenever we felt like touring. And I'd be a wee bit taller."

Grace laughed. "I'd be taller, too."

Shaking his head, Billy said, "No. Not allowed. I want to tower over you, tuck you against me, pop you in my pocket. You have to stay my tiny wee girl."

"I'm not yours, remember?" she said lightly. "But I suppose I could stay a midget, if you want."

He let out a little huff, but said nothing except, "So what would you do?"

Grace glanced over at him again. "You're very sweet, you know."

"I know."

Returning her eyes to the road, she pondered his question. "Well, when I was younger I wanted to be a doctor and save people's lives."

"Really?" he said in surprise. "Why didn't you go to medical school, then?"

She grinned. "Because I failed chemistry and discovered I'm not very good with blood."

Billy laughed. "Aye, I suppose that would put a damper on it, wouldn't it?"

"For a while I was going to be a vet and own a horse farm. For six months or so I desperately wanted to be a museum curator."

"What happened to that plan?"

"Well, it's hard to want to be something when you're not entirely sure what it is they do. But it was the only job I could think of at the time, other than teaching, that involved history."
"So which one would you do?" he asked. "If the world were perfect and you had any qualities you wanted, which one would you choose?" He took his water bottle out of the console and took a sip.

"None of them." She smiled. "I would travel. I would travel and travel and travel, and when I got homesick, I would come home and lounge about my ridiculously large home that bore no resemblance to a shoebox whatsoever, and I would write critically-acclaimed and highly popular novels until it was time to travel again."

"Are you serious?" Billy shook his head. "You never cease to surprise me, wee girl. I thought for sure it would be something to do with music, and here you want to be a writer."

"No, I want to be a _traveller,_" she grinned. "With writing tendencies."

Instead of laughing as she expected him to, Billy studied her closely for a moment. "I don't think that's true," he said slowly. "I know you've a strong wanderlust, but... I don't think that's all there is to it."

"I just want to stay in fancy hotels with Jacuzzi tubs, that's all," she said, but there was a false note to it, even to her own ears.

"Do you write now?" he asked, eyes intently on her face.

"Billy--"

"Do you?"

Grace sighed. "Yes, I do, all right? But I'm awful at it, which is why this has nothing to do with reality. Remember?"

"How do you know you're awful at it?"

"Because I did not do well in my creative writing class in university, I nearly failed a paper in another English course, and because I dislike everything I've written since. Like I told Dom--"

"You told _Dom_ you want to be a writer?" Billy asked a bit sharply.

"No, I told him I scribble stupid stories down. Is that a problem?" Grace was starting to get a trifle annoyed.

"No, it's not a problem. Of course, it would be nice if you were as open with me as you seem to be with Dom."

"That is unfair, Billy," she said quietly, hurt.

He turned his head away from her to look out the window and muttered. "I know it is. I'm sorry, all right? I'm sorry. It's just that..."

"What?"

He let out an explosive sigh. "It's just that it seems to me like that's an important thing to know about you, and apparently I don't like it that you told Dom first."

Without taking her eyes from the road, Grace reached over and found his hand, twining her fingers with his. "I'm still not quite sure how, but he managed to talk his way into my shoebox on Thursday when we were getting things together for the party. I made the mistake of saying I go through a lot of pens and he asked why, and it all just sort of spiralled completely out of my
control."

Billy sighed again, then ruefully said, "Things have a habit of doing that around Dom." He squeezed her hand. "Grace, I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Billy." She glanced over at him. "You know I'd tell you anything, don't you?"

"At the very least, I know you wouldn't lie to me. And honestly, that's the one that matters." He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of it. "You're a woman of mystery, my intriguing little hen."

She chuckled. "If only I could write stories as mysterious as myself."

"Have you tried?"

"Yeah. It started off well enough, but somehow I managed to give my murderer the perfect alibi."

Billy laughed. "Maybe you just fingered the wrong bloke. Would you let me read it?"

She turned pink. "Trust me, you don't want to. It's awful."

"Ah, come on," he cajoled. "I'm hardly a critic, now, am I? Just for fun, love, what do you say?"

"Oh...oh, all right, I'll email it to you. But don't say I didn't warn you! And if you have any brilliant ideas on how to solve the stupid mystery, let me know."

"I will."

Grace cocked her head. "So, if you could do anything, be anything you could possibly dream of, you'd still be an actor? Not a famous soccer--I mean, footballer, or a racing driver, or a corporate demigod or anything?"

"No. I've dreamed about being an actor since I was wee, it's all I ever really wanted. Well," he grinned, "That and being a Jedi knight, but I don't think even our alternate reality will help with that one."

"So you're not really all that far off your ultimate dream, then."

He made a so-so gesture with his free hand. "I'll never be the world's best actor, and I'll never run a movie studio. But other than that, I've been very lucky."

"I don't know that luck has much to do with it. You've worked hard to get where you are."

"I have worked hard," he agreed. "But I have also had some very good luck, and I'm the first to admit that. Oh, you know what else I'd do?"

"What?"

"I'd use my most famous name to raise a fuckload of money for charity. I do some charity work now, but I'd do a lot more. In fact--" He suddenly laughed out loud. "I'd commission you to write a children's book. The Adventures of Annabelle and Heidi. And then we'd get someone brilliant to illustrate it, and we'd sell millions of copies and raise millions for charity."


Billy paused, looking at Grace for a moment. "What charity would you support?"
"Well, if it's a story about a frog and a dragonfly, it should be the SPCA, shouldn't it?"

"Perfect!" he crowed. "You do the SPCA, I'll do the children's charities, it's spot on! Grace. Why--"

"No, no, no," she shook her head. "Alternate reality, remember?"

"But--" He turned in his seat to face her.

"I don't know how to write a book!" she yelped. "I'm not actually a writer, you lunatic!"

"Piffle." He waved aside her objection. "You don't have to know how to write a book, you just have to write the stories down. Turning it into a book is what editors and publishers are for. Look, forget the rest of it for now. Will you write your story down for me? If you think of any more adventures to add, then write those down as well. If nothing else, I think Elijah would love it."

A reluctant smile curled the corners of her mouth. "He did seem to like Heidi and Annabelle, didn't he?"

"Aye, he did," Billy grinned. "Just don't let him talk you into reading it over the phone every night at bedtime. So you'll give it a go?"

"Well..."

"C'mon, wee girl," he urged. "It's just words on a piece of paper. If you truly hate it, no one need see it but you."

"You swear?"

"I swear. But if you don't truly hate it, will you let me read it?"

"Good grief," she grumbled. "I've known you a matter of months and you've got me writing stories and taking a loan and singing in public and letting you read the worst mystery the world has ever known. What sort of mythical, sorcerous creature are you, anyway?"

Billy leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm a Scottish pixie, remember? Besides, it's healthy to share things with your boyfriend, didn't you know?"

Grace reached over and gave his knee a lightning squeeze, then with mock annoyance began, "It's one thing to share, but another thing entirely for you to--"

"Wait just one sodding minute!" Billy exclaimed, staring at her. "What do you mean I've got you singing in public?"

Flushing hotly, she muttered, "Oh, fuck me."


"I'm not booked. I'm just...on a list. As maybe being interested."

"When is it? And where? And why the hell didn't you tell me, you sneaky wee thing?"

"I didn't tell you because I--I didn't want you to be disappointed in me if I chicken out," Grace admitted, even her ears turning red with embarrassment. "It's at a pub a couple blocks away, Thursday night, two and a half weeks from now. But I--the idea makes me nervous as hell, Billy."
"I know it does, hen. Which is why I wouldn't be the least bit disappointed in you if you backed out," he said earnestly. "I'd just encourage you to go home, practice for a while, and then try again. I know you can do it, love, but you have to know it, too."

"How do you know?"

"That bloody great C.N. Tower," he said.

Grace was lost for a moment before she remembered. "Because not doing it would piss me off."

"Exactly."

She smiled weakly. "Well, we'll see if my stubborn kicks in."

"It will," he said, sounding complacent. "What are you going to sing?"

"I don't know yet. Any suggestions?"

"Something you're comfortable with, something you've been playing long enough you don't even have to think about it anymore. Something you love. Peter Gabriel?"

"I suppose I could do Solsbury Hill."

"You said it's about taking a leap, didn't you? It'll be perfect," Billy said. "What else?"

"I only have to sing one."

"You may only sing one, but go in with at least three," he advised. "That way you've got another choice if someone does the same song you were going to. Odds are against it, but stranger things have been known to happen. It's good to have a choice of style or tempo, too--you can judge which your audience is most likely to respond to."

"My audience?" Grace said faintly. "Oh my God."

Billy chuckled. "Easy, wee girl. You'll do fine."

The closer they got to the city, the more nervous Billy became about Grace's reaction to her flat. He wondered if he should try and prepare her a bit. "How about we stop for a coffee before we get back to your place?"

"We can't, I'm afraid, we have to return the car. We could drop our stuff in my apartment and go get one, though."

"Ehm--sure, we could do that, too."

"Whatever you like," she cheerfully agreed. "What time's your flight?"

"There was a message in my voicemail. My seven o'clock flight's been bumped to eleven-fifteen."

"Aw, rats," she grinned, reaching over to give his hand a squeeze. "Well, I guess I can put up with
you for a couple more hours."

"I hope so," Billy said under his breath.

"Pardon? Sorry, I didn't hear you."

"Nothing. Listen, Grace--"

"Oh, shit!" she suddenly exclaimed.

"What?"

Grace lightly hit the steering wheel with the palm of her hand. "I forgot the rest of the beer up there. I hope you didn't want one tonight."

"No. No, that's fine."

"Well, on behalf of my cousins, who are going to drink it all," she chuckled, "I thank you."

"No problem. I didn't buy it, anyway."

"Oh, that's true, it was Dom and Elijah, wasn't it? How could I have forgotten the looks on their faces when they saw the selection wall? I'll have to email them."

"Yeah. Can I ask you a question?" Billy fiddled with the ring on his finger.

Grace glanced over at him. "Of course."

"If--if I wanted to surprise you, and I ended up going, well, maybe a wee bit over the top with it...you'd forgive me, right? If my heart was in the right place?"

"You mean there's more to this weekend's surprise?"

"Well--ehm--yeah."

"William Boyd, what have you done?" she demanded, but there was a softness in her face that gave Billy hope.

"What kind of surprise would it be if I told you? No, just--just promise me that you'll remember I had the best of intentions, because I'm dead fond of you. We just got a bit carried away, is all."

She pounced on Billy's slip-up. "We?"

"It was all my idea. But Elijah helped a lot. And Dom."

"I should've known," she groaned. "You've started a bordello in my apartment for a little extra income, haven't you? Don't think I haven't thought about it, but it's just not practical, with only the one bed."

Billy chuckled, his tension ebbing. "That's why we ripped out your kitchen. Voilà, room for another bed."

"Very ingenious. But where will I make your porridge when you come visit?"

"Bollocks. I knew there was a flaw in the plan."

"Just one?" she asked with a grin.
After returning the rental car, Grace and Billy took a taxi to her apartment. While Grace unloaded all of their bags onto the sidewalk, Billy paid the driver.

"I think we're going to have to make two trips," she said, considering their various belongings with her hands on her hips.

"Ah, we can do it," Billy encouraged, knowing full well she'd insist he remain with their things while she took the first load up. There was no way he was going to let her see her flat without him there to witness her reaction. "Here, you take this bag over your shoulder and these shopping bags in that hand, and your guitar in your other hand. Can you manage that all right?"

"Well, yeah, but--"

"Perfect! And I'll bring the rest of it."

She looked at him. "You do remember it's three flights of stairs, don't you?"

"A walk in the park," he declared, hefting the load he'd designated for himself. "I may not be huge, but I'm a wiry bugger."

"Well...all right, if you insist." She held open the door to the stairwell.

By the time he reached the third floor, Billy was breathing hard and his arms were aching, and with a grunt he dropped his burden outside Grace's door. "See?" he panted, leaning over with his hands on his thighs. "Piece of cake."

Setting her guitar down, Grace laughed, a bit breathless herself. "Sure. Shall I call an ambulance?"

"No, no, just hook me up to the oxygen, I'll be fine."

"Well, let's get inside, you can--" In the act of putting her key in the lock, Grace gave a piercing shriek as the door flew open to reveal Elijah and Dom, who both shouted "Surprise!" in her face.

Billy clutched at his chest. "Jesus Christ, why didn't you fuckwits tell me you were staying? Gave me a bloody heart attack!"

Elijah giggled, but Dom had the decency to look sheepish. "Sorry, Bill."

Grace leaned over to pick up her guitar again. "How the hell did you get in? What are you doing here, I thought you guys were flying out last--" She stopped abruptly as something over Elijah's shoulder caught her eye. "What the hell?"

Billy felt his stomach knot up again as Dom and Elijah drew back to let her in, and he followed her for his first look at what he'd wreaked upon her home.

His fears for Grace's reaction aside, Billy was pleased with how the flat had turned out. Just the sand-coloured carpet and deep blue curtains alone made an enormous difference, but with the fresh paint and all the other little touches added in, it was like a different apartment altogether.

Grace, her back to the three men, slowly set down her guitar case, then the other bags. "How did
you do this?” she asked, her voice far too calm.

With a glance at Dom, Billy said, "It's--it's a bit of a long story, dear heart. Why don't you take a look around first, and then we'll all have a cup of tea."

"That would be civilized, wouldn't it?"

Even Elijah was starting to look worried. "Grace? Don't you--"

Dom cut him off, taking a step forward. "Don't be angry, Penny darlin'. It's--"

Her voice was low, furious. "Get out. All of you, get out. Before I say something I'll regret."

Billy sighed, his head dropping for a moment. "You want a coffee, then?"

"Yes," she ground out.

He held the door open for Dom and Elijah, who silently filed out into the hall. Instead of following them, however, he whispered, "I saw a coffee shop to the right and up a few blocks. Give us half an hour, then come back. And for fuck's sake, don't forget to bring her a coffee." He closed the door, took a deep breath, and turned around. "Grace."

"I thought I told you to get out," she snapped. Her hands were balled into fists at her side.

"You did. But it's my fault you're angry. I tried to warn you."

She whirled to face him, her eyes sparking fire. "You call this going a little overboard? I thought you were having more flowers delivered, or something, not renovating my fucking apartment!"

"My heart was in the right place, remember?" he said quietly.

"Your heart may have been in the right place, but your wallet sure as hell wasn't!"

"I know, and I'm sorry for that. But don't forget this was all sorted before we talked about the money situation, hen. I would have stopped some of it, if I could have."

"But only some of it!"

"Yes," Billy said firmly, and crossed to stand in front of her. "But frankly, Grace, not that much. The cosmetic bits and bobs, yes. But fixing the heater? No. Putting in a bit of warm carpet? No. Fixing the window or putting up curtains so you could sleep? No. You know I care about you, hen, and I hated--hated--the thought of you waking up to such ugliness and misery every day. I hated the thought of you freezing your arse off in here. And I hated the thought of it wearing you down even further than it already has. So would I still have done something about those? Yes."

With almost every sentence he uttered, Grace had backed away from him until she was nearly in the corner of the room. "You hated it?" she shouted. "This isn't fucking about you, Billy!"

He followed her over, not wanting to seem aggressive, but not wanting to let her get away, either. "No, it isn't. It's about you, how much you deserve better than what you had--"

"And who the hell are you to decide what I deserve?" she seethed, her face flushing darker.

"Who better than someone that cares about you?" he demanded. "It should tell you something that all three of us very much wanted to do this, so stop being such a--"
"Don't you dare! Don't you fucking dare!" Tears suddenly started to her eyes, and she angrily dashed at them with her fingers. "You shouldn't have done this!"

Billy's voice rose in frustration. "You're not listening to me! Yes, I know I went a bit too far with it all, and I'm sorry for that, but this--" he waved his arms to encompass the entire flat, "--is good for you, Grace! Good for both of us! Don't try and tell me I shouldn't have, when I know damn well--"

"You don't know!" she yelled back, eyes and nose both running now. "You said Michael was controlling how I lived, how is this any fucking different?"

Billy stilled, his jaw clenching. Just then came a rapping noise from the floor beneath their feet, a warning from the store below to stop the racket. It startled them both, and Grace let out a sob and a hiccup. A long moment later, Billy quietly said, "If you don't know how this is different, then we have a problem."

"Of course I know it's different!" she wailed, but at a much quieter volume than previously. "I know that, but how am I supposed to live with this, Billy? How am I supposed to look at all these lovely changes every day and not feel guilty?"

"Guilty?" Billy growled. "You listen to me, Grace Cadence MacPherson, and you listen well. You have nothing to feel guilty about, do you understand me? For God's sake, this was my bloody idea, I wanted to do this. I'm pleased with how it turned out, I don't loathe the thought of you waking up here every day anymore. I want you to look at all these changes and think of me with one of those smiles of yours, I want you to enjoy being here now. I want you to be comfortable here when you're awake and when you're asleep and when you're stubborn and when you're loving and when you're soft and when you're so angry there's tears and snot all over your face." Grace started to raise her hand, but before she could wipe her face, Billy strode forward and yanked her into his arms, pressing her face into his shoulder. "I don't want you to feel guilty, to think I regret doing this. Because I don't. Not for one bloody second."

"Billy..."

He pulled back enough to catch her chin with one hand, raising her face to his and kissing her hard. He could feel the heat and wetness of her skin on his mouth, his chin, but kissed her anyway, fierce and thorough. When she tried to pull away, her cheeks heating even more in embarrassment, he slid his hand around to the back of her neck and with one soft thumb, stroked that spot on her neck. Grace whimpered in her throat.

After a moment, he lifted his lips from hers and kissed her warm forehead.

"Billy--"

"Shh, don't." He began to walk her across the room.

"But--"

"I said don't." With a smile, he passed her several tissues from the box on her coffee table. "I don't care that you're a bit snotty, love, I like kissing you no matter what. Go on, dry your eyes and blow your nose."

Grace did as he said, turning away and loudly blowing into the tissue. When she turned around again, the tissues clutched in her hand, Billy put a finger to her lips and then pulled her into a tight embrace.
"I mean it, Grace, I don't regret this for one second. So what's done is done, and I really want you to like it, and can we be done with this fight now? Please?" When she nodded into his shoulder, he put his lips beside her ear and whispered, "Besides, we can't change it now. It matches your soup bowls."

An involuntary laugh bubbled in Grace's throat. "It does not."

"It does too. Go get one and look." He let go of her, grinning when she glanced at him disbelievingly before crossing to the freshly painted kitchen cupboards and opening one.

"Oh my God. I can't believe you actually decorated my apartment to match my soup bowls!"

"That's not all. Remember what I called them when I saw them that first time?" Billy asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Umm..." She turned to look at him, her head cocked. "No, I don't think...oh, wait, the surfer-girl thing?"

"Aye. C'mere, hen." He beckoned her over, then led her to the large window opposite her bed. Pulling back one of the wide navy draperies to reveal a small, simple blue surfboard painted on the wall, he said, "I couldn't resist."

Grace finally laughed out loud. "I should have known. I'm surprised you didn't nail a real one to the wall."

"If you had more space, I probably would have."

Leaning over to inspect the painted board more closely, she said, "Wow, that looks great. Who--" She froze, then slowly straightened, a frown back on her face. "Billy. Who has been in my apartment?"

Puzzled, he said, "The designer and the workers, why?"

"Designer? Oh, for--" She turned away, angry once more, and scanned her apartment. "How many people?"

"They were necessary to get the work done, and they were all supervised--" he assured her.

"How many?" She began to pace.

With a sigh, Billy sat on the sofa and watched her circling the flat. "The designer, who is a friend of Elijah's mum, her name is Sunita. The carpet fitters. The glazier. The electrician. The painters. And possibly one or two labourers."

"Oh, is that all?" Grace snapped.

He kept his voice calm. "Sunita was here the entire time--"

"Dammit, Billy! My privacy is the only fucking thing I can count on here! And you go passing out my key to half the fucking city? Let a dozen people in here, looking through all my things? How could you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he said sharply, and rose to stand in front of her. "We trusted Sunita, and part of the deal was that she was the first to enter and the last to leave every day. No one was going through your belongings with her watching over them, all right? She's the only one that had a key."
Grace glared at him, her eyes still red from their previous argument. "You swear? This is my home, Billy. It's shitty, but it's the only thing I've fucking got."

Billy cupped her chin with one hand and met her eyes directly. "I swear, dear heart."

She held his gaze for a minute, then pulled away to resume pacing. "Fine. I just--I hate the thought of so many people in here. Seeing it. Seeing the way I..."

He waited, but when she didn't continue, he softly asked, "It's not so shitty now, is it?"

"Well of course not," she retorted. "But everyone saw it before, didn't they? Unless they were all working with their eyes closed."

"They don't know you, Grace. No one thinks less of you for living here, because they didn't know you to start with. And those of us who do know you, have a pretty damn good idea how much strength it's taking you to do this on your own. But it was just another job to them."

"I know that. I don't care if I'm being unreasonable," she said mulishly. "It's my home, and it's small enough without the shades of a dozen people crowding me."

"So stop picturing them being in here," he smiled. To his consternation, tears sprang to her eyes again at that.

"Oh, I'm glad you think this is so funny," she said, her voice tight, and she turned away, arms wrapped around herself.

"Grace--hey, come on, love." Billy immediately crossed the short distance between them and pulled her back against his chest, arms crossing over hers. "I don't think it's funny, dear heart. Now come on, what is this, hmm?" When she didn't answer, he prodded her gently. "Are you scared?"

"No, I'm not scared!"

"Worried, I meant. Because I'd never, ever risk your safety," he murmured in her ear. "One key, and Sunita had it the whole time. I promise you that."

"You already said so."

"Nothing wrong with saying it again. Now, I mean it--stop picturing people working in here, and just look at your flat. You haven't even seen the loo yet."

"You did the bathroom too? Billy!" she wailed.

"Oh, hush," he chuckled, giving her a squeeze. "A coat of paint and a shower curtain--it's nothing. Go on, see if you like it." He released her, and was gratified when she took his hand and towed him along.

Grace opened the bathroom door and gasped, and even Billy whistled between his teeth.

"Bloody hell," he said, awe in his voice. "I saw the drawings, but I had no idea it would look like this."

The ugly brown linoleum floor had been exchanged for a deep, rich blue, and the walls were a refreshing swirl of various shades of blue, aqua and white. The shower curtain echoed the sensation of being surrounded by water, but it was the ceiling that truly completed the illusion. It mimicked perfectly the distinctive effect of being underwater and looking up at a sunny blue sky.
"Holy fuck," Grace whispered, taking a step in. "Did somebody actually paint that?"

Shaking his head, Billy followed her into the small space, his eyes on the ceiling. "No. It's some sort of printed transparency. They sealed it so the moisture won't cause it to lift. That looks bloody brilliant."

"I suddenly want to start singing 'Under the Sea'," she said, a reluctant smile winning through.

He chuckled and rested his hands on her shoulders. "I doesn't make you feel seasick, then?"

"No, not at all. It's incredible. I guess you've unleashed my inner...fish?"

Billy laughed. "You're a naiad, remember? So am I forgiven, love?"

Before Grace could answer, there was a knock on the apartment door. She shouted, "Come in!"

The outside door opened and closed, and Dom cleared his throat.

"We're in the bathroom," she called. "Come here."

Elijah sounded hesitant. "Is there a lot of blood? 'Cause I'm not real good with blood."

"Oh, get your ass in here, Elijah Wood!" she demanded, even as Billy stifled a laugh against her shoulder.

They could hear Dom muttering as the two men approached the bathroom. "Not good with blood, my arse. You're the one who played with Astin's clot, for fuck's sake."

Grace made a face. "That's disgusting."

"That's Elijah," Billy agreed.

Dom peeked around the edge of the door, and a moment later Elijah's head ducked into view behind Dom.

Grace levelled a fierce stare at them both.

"Umm...hi, Pen," Dom said weakly.

"I suppose you two have seen this already?" she asked, her voice hard. Her little hand gesture encompassed the bathroom.

"Yeah. We--ehm..." Dom turned to look at Elijah for support. When Elijah nodded, Dom faced Grace again, missing Elijah's quick scuttle backwards. "We had to get your key back yesterday and--we stayed here last night. We were going to rent a hotel room, but we thought, well, after the great weekend we've just had, that you--you wouldn't mind if we crashed here instead." Dom faltered. "Were we wrong?"

"About that? No."

He looked a little relieved. "Good. I'm glad for that, then."

Elijah suddenly wailed, "If you're going to yell at us, would you just do it already? All this politeness is giving me an ulcer!"

Grace walked out of the bathroom, Dom and Elijah quickly backing away before her. She pointed
at them. "You two--sofa. Now. And you--" she pointed at Billy, who had trailed out after her. "Quit looming over me."

Billy grinned, raising his hands in mock-surrender, and then sprawled on her bed.

Dom sniggered. "Bill couldn't loom over a five year old."

As Billy raised two digits in Dom's direction, Grace glared at the two semi-recalcitrant men on her sofa. "You had no right to invade my privacy like that. None."

They looked sheepish, but before they could say anything, Grace continued.

"Elijah, I'd met you once. Spent a matter of hours with you. And Dom, I'd never even met you at all! And while I like to consider us friends, you had no right to waltz in here and turn my life upside down on the basis of such a new, fragile friendship. It was rude, it was promiscuous--" She stopped at the looks on their faces and sighed. "Oh, fuck me. I've got the wrong word, don't I?"

Billy heroically suppressed both laughter and mockery about the relative promiscuity of his mates. Instead, he merely murmured, "I think you mean presumptuous, love."

She turned pink. "Yeah. Presumptuous. That's the one. I've completely lost all dignity and authority now, I suppose?"

"Sort of, yeah," Dom agreed, giving her a kind smile. "But go on anyway, it'll make you feel better. And I admit maybe we deserve it."

"You do," she said firmly, trying to work back up to indignant at least. "And quit patronizing me while I'm trying to lecture you. It was rude, it was presumptuous of you, and I'm angry you let dozens of strangers into my home without my knowledge. I won't even get into how the cost of all this makes me extremely uncomfortable."

"You went into it with me," Billy objected. "Don't see why they should get out of it."

"Because it was your idea and I hold you primarily responsible," she retorted.

"Elijah bought that picture hanging on the wall," he protested, gesturing to a seascape photograph hanging above her sofa.

Grace looked at it, then dropped her gaze to skewer Elijah.

"Dom bought your new bedding," Elijah blurted. "And these pillows." He pulled one out from under his elbow and held it up, then slowly clutched it to his chest.

Dom threw his hands in the air in disgust. "And he sings like a bloody canary."

Grace suddenly looked tired. Sighing, she turned and crossed to the tiny kitchen and looked out the window. After a moment her hand rose and one finger traced where the crack had been in the old pane of glass. "I don't know how to make you guys understand."

Billy's voice held a smile. "We're having the same problem with you, you know."

"It's not--"

"Penny, love," Dom interrupted her. "Do you at least like it?"

"Of course I do, how could I not?" she exclaimed, frustrated. "Compared to what it was? This is
absolutely gorgeous! But Dom, I can't pay you back. I can't repay any of you in any way, shape, or form."

"We don't want you to pay us back, Grace," Billy said. "That's the entire point. It's a gift, you numptie."

Dom quickly added, "Do you expect Billy to repay you for the CD you made him?"

"Of course not, that was a birthday present. Besides, I didn't even--"

"Then so is this," Elijah chimed in determinedly. "When's her birthday, Billy?"

"May."

Dom and Elijah looked at each other and back at Grace, shouted, "Surprise!", and then began a very off-key chorus of 'Happy Birthday'. They even swayed back and forth as they sang.

Laughing a little despite herself, Grace raised her voice to say, "Oh, cut it out."

They ignored her, and finished the song.

"Problem solved," Elijah said happily.

Grace looked at him fondly. "Nice try, sweetie, but--"

"No buts," Dom said, then corrected himself. "Unless of course it's a really sexy butt, and then it's undoubtedly mine."

Billy rolled his eyes and climbed off the bed, coming to stand directly in front of her. He put his hands on her upper arms. "Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and happy birthday, all right?"


"And happy Bank Holiday Day," Dom grinned.

"And happy St. Andrew's Day, and Robbie Burns Day," Billy chuckled, looking down at Grace with such warmth in his eyes she was afraid she'd start crying yet again. "If you spread it out over seven holidays, it's a bit more reasonable, isn't it?"

After a moment, Grace finally gave in. "If any of you buy me a birthday present a few months from now, I'll kill you," she warned. "In the most painful way I can think of."

The men laughed, and Billy pulled her into a hug. "Those two promise," he said, and held on tight when she tried to pull away. "And I promise I will not go overboard, spend a lot, or be otherwise extravagant. All right?"

Grace hesitated, but then nodded against his chest.

"Thank you, love," Billy murmured, and gave her an extra squeeze.

She huffed a laugh. "I think that's a bit ass-backwards, don't you?" She lifted her face to meet his eyes, and held them for a moment before saying, "Thank you, Billy. This is--well, it's just not the same place, you know? I won't--it's--"

Billy smiled at her, amused.
"Shut up, you. What I'm trying to say is...it will be a pleasure to wake up here every morning."

He kissed her forehead. "That's all I need to hear."

Grace turned around, Billy's arms falling away as she did. "As for you two..." She squeezed between Dom and Elijah on the small sofa, putting an arm around each of them. "You are kind and generous, presumptuous and promiscuous and ill-advised. And thank you." She gave first Elijah, then Dom a kiss on the cheek. "I mean it, thank you."

Elijah laughed happily. "You're very welcome, dollface. Now, do you honestly like this picture?" He gestured above them to the framed print he'd been responsible for. "There were, like, six of them I liked, it was hell choosing which one. If you don't like it, we can easily get a different one."

"Don't even think about touching it," she declared, standing up again to take a closer look at the scene. It was an ocean view, looking out over sand and shingle to white-capped waves, a rocky promontory to one side, and tiny seabirds wheeling overhead. "I love it, I really do." She stepped up onto the sofa between the two men to take an even closer look, balancing herself with one hand on Dom's head. "I've never seen the ocean, but this is exactly how I like to think of it. Lake Ontario's so bloody calm most of the time."

"You've never seen the ocean?" Dom asked, surprised.

"Well, I am kind of in the middle of a continent, here," Grace smiled down at him. "I've only ever travelled in Canada, really, and there's around six thousand kilometres or so without a whole lot in the way of coastlines. The only other place I've been is the States, but nowhere near the coast there, either."

"I'll have to take you when I get you to Scotland, then," Billy smiled.

Grace hopped down from the sofa, beaming. "Really? Could we, I mean, without it being a pain in the ass? How far is it to the ocean?"

"Well, depending on where we go, I reckon we could probably get there in an hour, or so."

"Seriously?" She actually bounced on her toes. "That would be so fucking amazing...

For the next half an hour, the four of them sat around chatting. Elijah was finally able to claim full credit for his impressive job of juggling two complete surprises, and Dom helped him tell the entire tale from start to finish. Dom's eyes, however, kept flicking back and forth between Billy and Grace.

"Out with it, Monaghan," Billy finally growled. "Before you burst something."

"You two totally did, didn't you?" Dom said immediately.

Elijah's eyebrows went up in the centre as they always did when he was puzzled. "Huh?"

Billy turned a bit pink. "Dom, are you referring to what I think you're referring to?"

"You did!" Dom crowed, seeming delighted. "We leave you alone for one day, and you're shagging like bunnies! I knew it!"

"Shag--" Elijah choked, and then after a second his face split in a wide grin. "Awesome."

Grace dropped her head in her hands, her cheeks flaming. "Oh my God," she groaned, sounding
"I knew I should have made that bet with Viggo--" Dom began, only to hold up his hands placatingly at Billy's murderous glare. "Joking. Only joking."

"So does this mean you guys are together now?" Elijah asked hopefully. "'Cause that'd be fucking fantastic. I mean, it's okay if you're not, too, it's just--"

"Shut it, Elwood," Billy said, resigned. "I hope you two are planning on learning some tact and delicacy when you grow up. Yes, Grace and I are now together. No, we are not discussing our sex life with you. Any questions? No? Good." He spoke without a pause, giving them no chance to fit a word in. "Now, much as I love you both like the twin brothers I never had--"

Still smiling widely, Elijah held up one hand. "Enough said. We have a plane to catch anyway."

"No, we don't," Dom objected. "It's not for another--"

"You're absolutely right, Dominic," Elijah said loudly. "We'd better get going. We'd hate to get caught in security."

Dom looked defiant for a moment, but then gave in. "Oh, all right."

"Billy?" Grace said, her face still hidden in her hands.

"Aye?"

"Does this happen often?"

"What, these two wankers going on about things that are none of their business, being entirely inappropriate, and embarrassing the ever-loving fuck out of you?" He paused. "Afraid so, hen."

"Regularly," Elijah agreed.

"On a daily basis whenever possible," Dom added cheerfully. "Come on, then, Penny darlin', give us a hug."

Grace clutched her hair for a moment, but then rose and stepped into Dom's bear hug. "One of these days," she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder, "You're going to ask about something, Dom, and get too much information, even for you."

"If you say so, Pen," he said equably. "You take care of yourself, yeah? Stay warm and snug in here, and watch out for ABBA-toting drug dealers."

She pulled back a bit and reached up to place her palms against his cheeks. "I will, and thank you, Dom. I can't even begin to tell you how much I appreciate what you've done, all weekend, and what a difference it's made to me."

Dom said nothing, he simply gave her forehead a firm kiss, her nose a tweak, and then he let her go. He turned away to embrace Billy, and while the two men murmured to each other, Elijah wrapped Grace in a tight hug.

"Thank you, Elijah. You're sneaky as hell, you beast."

"It's a talent," he agreed, sounding pleased with the fact.

"You realize I'm never going to trust you ever again, don't you?"
"That's what everyone always says. And yet, they always do."

Grace said, "I think I should get you a t-shirt that says, 'Machiavelli has nothing on Elwood'."

Elijah laughed. "That'd be awesome, actually. Don't worry--I never plot against the same person twice in a row. You're safe for a while." He leaned back to look at her, his arms still comfortably around her waist. "Don't hold it against Billy, okay? He just wanted to brighten things up, give you a reason to smile every day. He likes you a lot, you know."

Grace's cheeks pinked. "I--Me, too."

"Good. I think you two are going to be just fine. Email me or call me any time you like, okay?" He gave her another quick hug and then released her, stepping back to give Billy one last slap on the back. "Later, Billy."

"Later, Elwood."

Dom and Elijah, with last farewells--and on Dom's part, blown kisses--exited the apartment and jogged noisily down the stairs.

Grace closed the door behind them and turned around to find Billy already sprawled on her bed, his head on a soft pillow, and a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Bloody airline," he muttered around a suspiciously wide yawn. "Now I have all this extra time to fill. Reckon I might as well take a nap. Wake me up when it's time to leave, yeah?"

Grace narrowed her eyes at him. "Of course," she said sweetly. "Would you like a blanket? I'd hate for you to catch a chill."

"Mm, that'd be lovely, ta." He closed his eyes, but couldn't quite suppress the smirk.

Grace turned the overhead light off, crossed to the window and drew the heavy navy draperies. With just the bedside lamp casting a warm glow, she stood a few feet from the bed and surveyed the man stretched out across it.

Billy waited a minute, then cracked one eye open. "Blanket, hen?" he reminded her.

With two running steps, Grace launched herself at the bed and landed spreadeagled on top of him. "Ooof!" Billy grunted, bouncing under her weight. "Bloody hell, woman, watch your knees!"

"I know perfectly well where my knees landed," she answered primly. "Don't be so melodramatic."

He opened his eyes to find her nose an inch from his own, and allowed his eyes to cross as he looked at her. "Melodramatic? I'm not the one leaping on top of people with no provocation whatsoever."

"You asked for a blanket, didn't you? And I am blanketing you, am I not?"

Billy swiftly rolled her over, his hands tangling in her hair, his hips pressing into hers. His lips ghosted barely over her cheek, her chin. "I suddenly find I don't really want a blanket after all," he said, his voice low and gravelly.

Grace tilted her head back, allowing him easier access to her throat. "I'm shocked. Now kiss me."
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Ripley’s Believe It Or Not

Hello, dear Billy. As remarkable and unusual and slightly difficult as it is for me to say, I find I rather miss your delightful voice.

If you have any spare time…

Thinking of you,
Grace

Just over two hours later, Grace’s phone rang, setting up a flutter under her ribs. “Hello?”

“Hey, wee girl. And why exactly is it so unusual and difficult to admit that you miss me? I am eminently missable, you know.” Billy’s accent in her ear was warm and welcome.

“Who said I missed you?” she replied, curling up in the corner of her sofa, hugging a pillow to her chest. “I said I missed your voice.”

“Oh, cold, MacPherson. Very cold.”

She chuckled. “On the contrary. For the first time since I moved to this shoebox, I am warm and cozy even though it’s well below zero outside. It’s remarkable the difference a working heater and a bit of carpeting and a solid window make.”

Billy sounded pleased. “Yeah? Where are you, on the sofa or your bed?”

“Why? Are you going to ask me what I’m wearing, next?” she teased.

“I wasn’t going to, but now I can’t think of anything else, thank you very much.” The grin in his voice brought an answering smile to her face.

“One word, Boyd--flannel.”

“You do realize that to a Scotsman, that’s sexy talk, don’t you?”

“What if I say wool, or--” She lowered her voice, getting as close to sultry as she could. “Tweed.”

“Oh, God,” Billy moaned, then ruined it by snickering. A moment later he asked, “How are you, love?”

“I miss you,” she admitted, her fingers plucking at the hem of her jumper.
“Ha! I knew it.”

“Yes, you’re very smart.”

“I am, you know.” His voice gentled. “I miss you too, wee girl. Was that really so difficult to tell me?”

“What? Oh, no--that wasn’t the difficult part. It was asking you to call me, instead of just waiting to hear from you. I mean, it’s not as if we go more than a few days without talking anyway. But you said you wanted me to ask.” Grace covered her eyes with her free hand. “And yes, I’m begging for a reassuring pat on the head right now.”

There were some indecipherable noises, and then the distinct sound of an ice cube clattering into a glass. “I’m glad you asked. I am both pleased and impressed.”

“Good. What are you doing?”

“Pouring myself a wee dram to sleep on. I was planning on ringing you tonight anyway, actually. For some strange reason, ever since I got home my bed has seemed disappointingly large and cold and empty.”

“Huh. What a coincidence, so has mine.” She sighed. “I can’t believe it’s only been a week.”

“I know. I’ve been keeping busy, but the time is still dragging,” he admitted. “What about you?”

“Have I been keeping busy? Oh, sure, it’s one excitement after another around here.” She realized she sounded waspish. “Sorry. I’ve been working. Been out to the laundromat to wash everything from last weekend. And I went out for groceries. That’s about it, really. You know, I’ve discovered one drawback to dating you, Mr. Boyd.”

“Just one?”

“So far.”

“What’s that, then?”

“I’ve been reminded just how hideously boring my life really is,” she said with a weak laugh.

“Dear heart--”

“No,” she interrupted him. “Don’t worry about it, Billy. I’m just feeling sorry for myself today. The party was so much fun, and I love your friends. I just have to get used to real life again, that’s all.”

“If it helps at all, I feel the same myself, a little,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I spent half the flight home daydreaming up a scheme that involved a commune for all of us to live on, so that every day would be like last weekend.” He huffed a laugh. “Then I decided that might be a bit much after a while, and that we should have three communes; one in Scotland, one in California, and one in Ontario. That way we can all rotate between them if we need a break from each other, or from the weather. As much as I enjoyed your snowy, wintry cottage, I don’t know that I’m cut out for months and months of it.”

Grace chuckled. “Oh, it’s amazing what you can get used to. But I must confess an escape in sunny California sounds pretty good right now. So what would we do for money? Send Orlando out once a month to make another blockbuster?”
“I like the way you think. I expect Viggo would raise herds of llamas or sheep or something, as well.”

“Goats,” she corrected him. “Then Dom can be an assistant goatherd.”

“I reckon Dom would rather be a spiderherd,” Billy laughed.

“No, no, no. No spiders allowed on the commune. Lizards, okay, but no spiders.”

“Ah, yes, I forgot you’re scared of spiders.”

“Not scared,” Grace objected. “It’s just...they scuttle! I hate things that scuttle, Billy, you can’t trust ‘em.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” A grin was plain in his voice. “All right, no spiders allowed within a mile of the commune. Dom will just have to stick to goats and geckos.”

“I’ll bring the maple syrup,” she offered.

“Excellent. And I, naturally, shall provide the scotch.”

“I should hope so.”

“You’ll need your passport,” Billy said. “Have you been in about that yet, love?”

Grace smiled. “I have, as a matter of fact. I had the photos taken on Thursday, and I went to the passport office today. Which was an exercise in misery, I might add. How is it possible in this day and age that there is only one fucking passport office in the city of Toronto? Do you know how many people were there?”

“Six? Bloody hell.”

“Yes, it was,” she complained. “This trip has a lot to live up to, you know.”

Billy chuckled. “Scotland and I shall do our best. How long until it arrives, do you know?”

“Supposedly I will have it in my hot little hands in about two weeks or so.”

“That quickly? Excellent. Then I shall go ahead and book you a flight,” he said cheerfully. “How does mid-April sound?”

“It sounds a long way away. But yes, that sounds good. Thank you, Billy,” she said, her voice soft.

“You’re not going to thank me every time we talk about it, are you? Because I will end up shouting at you.”

Grace huffed a laugh. “Duly noted. Perhaps not every time, then.”

“Wise decision. And to get practical matters out of the way quickly, I’ve already mailed you a cheque to cover the cost of the passport. I’ll know if you don’t cash it, MacPherson, so don’t even try it.”
“Autocratic today, aren’t you?” she said, albeit a little weakly.

“I prefer to think of it as benevolent tyranny. How long can I keep you?”

“What? Oh--in April, you mean. Um. Well, I was thinking nine days, if that’s not too long?”

“It’s not long enough,” he murmured. “Can’t you manage a few more days?”

Grace hesitated. “Well…”

Billy’s tone turned cajoling. “You’re flying all the way to Scotland, after all, you might as well make the long flight worth it, yeah?”

She sighed, melting. “I--I suppose. I guess I could manage twelve days, if I cover a few extras for other people between now and then.”

“Does that make things difficult for you?” he asked. “Covering, I mean?”

“Not when I have no social life,” she said lightly. “No, it really doesn’t, not when I can schedule my hours to suit me. Okay, twelve days it is. Just make sure that includes two weekends, okay? Other than that, I don’t care which days I fly in and out.”

The smile in Billy’s voice was plain, was like a caress. “Twelve days it is, then. I can’t wait to have you here, dear heart.”

“And I can’t wait to be there.” She tucked her feet up underneath herself on the sofa. “So what’s coming up in the schedule? Anything exciting?”

“You could say that.” He paused, and Grace could hear him swallow. “Awards season has officially begun, God help me, and the next month is crammed with opportunities to see and be seen. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to try your hand at some red carpets with me?”

“I’m sure,” she chuckled. “What’s first?”

“The Empire Awards in London tomorrow night.”

“And what are they for?”

“Empire is a film magazine, so the awards are for local and global film, but it’s the readers that vote for the winners. I hope it won’t be too terribly excruciating.”

“Is it for Lord of the Rings? Will any of the others be there?”

“As far as I know, it’s just myself, Andy, and Bernard.”

“Say hi to Andy for me,” she said. “And what’s up after the Empire Awards?”

Billy sighed. “Home for a week, interviews and morning chat shows, back to London for the BAFTAs, interviews, morning chat shows, radio programs, then to L.A. for the SAG awards, interviews, chat shows, premieres, dinners, and the Oscars.”

“Shit,” Grace said faintly. “You weren’t kidding about the month being crammed full, were you?”

“Sadly, no.”

“You’ll make it.”
Billy’s tone was wry. “I hope my sleep therapist is still on retainer. I have a feeling I’m going to need her.”

“She is indeed available. You might not be able to loan her out to your friends, though,” she teased.

“My friends can get their own damned therapists. She’s mine. And don’t say it.”

“Say what?” she asked, feigning innocence.

“You bloody well know what, MacPherson.”

Not wanting to argue, she gentled her voice. “Speaking of your sleep therapist, if you’re heading to London tomorrow, shouldn’t you get some sleep? If you want to get ready for bed, I’ll sing you a lullaby.”

“Would you? I’d love that.”

“Of course. Go do what you need, and I’ll get my guitar.” She set the phone down and retrieved her guitar from its case. Settling back down, she gave it a quick tuning, and then tucked the phone between her ear and her shoulder as she began picking out a melody.

“I’m back,” Billy said a few minutes later.

“You tucked up in bed?”

“Climbing in as we speak.”

“Good. Any requests?” she asked, playing a few random chords.

“A song you recently discovered, something you’re enjoying,” he suggested.

She huffed a laugh. “Are you sure? It’s a message from a cat to its human, who is depressed and wallowing in self-pity. At least, that’s what it is to me.”

“From a cat?” Billy repeated. “Who’s it by?”

“A band called The Weakerthans. It’s called ‘Plea From A Cat Named Virtute’.”

“Oh, this I have to hear. Hit me.”

“Okay. I’m putting the phone down, so shout if you can’t hear it.” Grace set the phone on the coffee table in front of her and began to play.

_Why don’t you ever want to play?_  
_I’m tired of this piece of string._  
_You sleep as much as I do now, and you don’t eat much of anything._

_I don’t know who you’re talking to_  
_I made a search through every room, but all I found was dust that moved in shadows of the afternoon._

_And listen, about those bitter songs you sing?_  
_They’re not helping anything._
They won't make you strong.

So, we should open up the house.
Invite the tabby two doors down.
You could ask your sister, if
she doesn't bring her Basset Hound.
Ask of things you shouldn't miss:
tape-hiss and the Modern Man,
The Cold War and Card Catalogues,
to come and join us if they can,

for girly drinks and parlor games.
We'll pass around the easy lie
of absolutely no regrets,
and later maybe you could try
to let your losses dangle off
the sharp edge of a century,
and talk about the weather, or
how the weather used to be.

And I'll cater
with all the birds that I can kill.
Let their tiny feathers fill
disappointment.

Lie down;
lick the sorrow from your skin.
Scratch the terror and begin
to believe you're strong.

All you ever want to do is drink and watch TV,
and frankly that thing doesn't really interest me.
I swear I'm going to bite you hard and taste your tinny blood
if you don't stop the self-defeating lies you've been repeating
since the day you brought me home.
I know you're strong.

She set the guitar aside and picked up the phone. “Odd, I know, but I like it,” she said.

“That’s brilliant,” Billy agreed, chuckling. “It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if that’s what cats really thought like.”

“Right? Sensible, but with a layer of complete self-absorption. Or something like that. Okay, my lovely, time for your lullaby. I hope you have fun at the Empire Awards tomorrow night. Let me know when you win?” She smiled.

“Thank you, wee girl,” he said with fondness. “Don’t know if we’ll win, but I’m sure I’ll enjoy it. Take care of yourself, and I’ll talk to you again in a few days, okay?”

“Sounds good. You take care too, and if you need anything, just call. I’ll be here. Now, are you all tucked in and comfy?”

“I am. Lights are off and my eyes are closed. Sing me to sleep, dear heart.”
Grace didn’t need the guitar. Cradling the phone in her lap so it wouldn’t be loud in his ear, she began to sing, slow and sweet.

*May your dreams bring you peace in the darkness*
*May you always rise over the rain*
*May the light from above always lead you to love*
*May you stay in the arms of the angels*

*May you always be brave in the shadows*
*Till the sun shines upon you again*
*Hear this prayer in my heart and we’ll ne’er be apart*
*May you stay in the arms of the angels*

*May you hear every song in the forest*
*And if ever you lose your own way*
*Hear my voice like a breeze whisper soft through the trees*
*May you stay in the arms of the angels*

*May you grow up to stand as a man, love*
*With the pride of your family and name*
*When you lay down your head or to rest in your bed*
*May you stay in the arms of the angels*

She held the phone to her ear again and whispered, “Goodnight, Billy.”

“Thank you, love,” he murmured. “Goodnight.”

Grace ended the call, picked up the guitar again, and began to play a quiet melody just for herself.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Plea From A Cat Named Virtute* by The Weakerthans, and *Lullaby For a Soldier (Arms of the Angels)* by Dillon O’Brian.
Tuesday, February 10
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: A topic I know you love.

Good morning, dear heart. I bet you thought I’d forgotten about that conversation we had at your cottage regarding your finances, didn’t you? Obviously I did not. It took me a little bit longer than I had thought it would, but the loan is finalised and we’re all set to make things a bit easier for you going forward. I just need you to send me your bank information, which I’m certain is going to earn me a glare to end all glares, but I’m afraid there’s just no way around it. So if you will please (I said please!) send me your

- Account holder name and full address
- Account number
- Branch number and full address
- Institution number
- Swift Code (international)
- Routing Number (international)

Yes, that’s a bad pasting job, sorry. If I try and fix it I’ll likely end up deleting something important, so I’m going to leave it as is. Although I’m fairly sure I know your name and address by now. You’ll have to call your bank to get the last two numbers, but other than that it’s all straightforward. Just email the information when you have it, and I will have the wire transfer sent post haste (although I think it takes a few days). I’m sending a bit extra just to cover any costs there might be at your end for it. If I’ve sent too much (more than what you need to pay off your loans, I mean), either bring it with you when you come, or use it to buy some Canadian music for me. Depending on how much extra there is, mind you. I bow to your judgement on that one. I’ve also attached a file with the name and contact information for the person I deal with at my bank, and a suggested payment schedule she set up for you, along with all the details on the loan itself. You can call or email her and adjust the schedule however works best for you. But I hope you can see from the numbers she’s put in that even though I’ve been a bit of a trial to you, the savings will be worth it. You’ll see, dear heart, probably sooner than you think. It won’t be long until you can afford that train to the beach whenever you want. And just so you know, when you come to Scotland, we’re going to the shore. Something tells me that no matter how fond you are of Lake Ontario, you’re going to love being by the sea.

That was long enough wasn’t it? Sorry about that. I’ll be honest, wee girl, I’m harbouring a secret dark fear that you’re going to refuse me this, even though I know you’ve already agreed to it. I reckon I’m rambling now just to put off the moment where I have to hit send. So I’ll stop dithering and just get on with it already.

Email me if you need to talk, or if you need anything at all, really. I’ll ring you.
Fond and fearful,
Billy

Tuesday, February 10
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: A topic I know you love.

I don’t know what I look like when I’m contrite, Billy, but imagine me making a contrite-ish (?) face right now. I know I’ve been a stiff-necked, obstinate pain in the arse over this whole money thing, and I’m sorry. I hope you have even an inkling of how much I appreciate you helping me. Yes, it’s hard for me to accept the help, but that doesn’t mean I’m not touched by your willingness to do it. Help, that is. Er. Yeah.

ANYWAY. I’ve attached all the info you needed on a separate document so you can just print it off and take it in to the bank with you, I thought that might be easiest.

And yes, I might have glared a bit. In fact, I might have paced around my shoebox glaring like a mad glaring thing, but not even a single itty bitty frown was pointed in your direction, dear Billy. They were all directed towards the thrice-poxed shithead who got me into this mess in the first place. I hope you feel better, knowing you are glare-free.

To quote someone smart that I know and kind of like, ‘I reckon I’m rambling now just to put off the moment where I have to hit send. So I’ll stop dithering and just get on with it already.’

Sheepishly,
Grace

P.S. I can’t wait to see the sea. No, scratch that. I can’t wait to see the sea with you.

Wednesday, February 11
To: Elwood
From: Grace
Subject: Shiny Happy People

Your earworm for the day. :D (Michael Stipe may hate the song, but I’m quite fond of it, really.) And why did I just drive that little spear of R.E.M. goodness into your brain? Because you, sweetie, are a shiny happy person, and I count myself beyond lucky to have met you. I was a little too overwhelmed when you were here to thank you properly for the (rather large, from what I hear) part you played in getting my apartment fixed up. Billy told me the designer was a friend of your mom’s, and that you arranged everything with her, working out the timing of everything to keep Billy’s surprise from him and mine from me. I wasn’t far off when I called you Machiavellian! But Elijah, I want to thank you again, from the bottom of my heart, for your kindness and generosity.
The shoebox is so much warmer now! That alone would make me your minion for life after this cold winter we’ve been having, but all the prettification on top of it...I have no words. All I can say is thank you, and if there is ever anything I can do for you, you just have to name it. Minion, remember?

Much love,
Dollface

Wednesday, February 11
To: lost_goat
From: Grace
Subject: Here Comes The Sun

Hello, darling Pellinore! I hope you’re having a lovely day, and that it’s warm and sunny where you are. Since I think you are in L.A., I’m guessing that’s a pretty safe bet. I am also warm and sunny, and you are (at least partly) directly responsible for that. I was too overwhelmed with everything when you were here to thank you properly for the part you played in fixing up my shoebox. You (unfortunately) saw it before the work was done, so I’m hoping you have some idea of the enormous change that was wrought, and what a difference it’s made to me. For one thing, it’s warm in here! I hadn’t realised how much the continuing cold was getting me down, until I didn’t have to be cold anymore. And the bathroom is so cheerful now! You and Elijah are spectacularly tricksy, and I owe you both more than I could ever possibly repay. I told Elijah I am now his minion for life, but I am afraid to say the same to you. I quake to think of the ridiculousness your minions get up to. I will, however, (in keeping with your kingly status), be your henchman for life, if you like.

Little darling
I feel that ice is slowly melting
Little darling
It seems like years since it's been clear

Here comes the sun
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's all right

Thank you for helping bring back the sun, Dom.

Respectfully yrs.,
Miss Penelope (Henchman)

Wednesday, February 11 (very late)
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: A topic I know you love.

Your wee sheepish face is adorable. Just so you know.

Thanks for the file, I’ll be off to the bank tomorrow. Please stand by.

I like being glare-free. It makes for a nice change. JUST KIDDING. :)

Bloody hell, but I’m worn out, wee girl. It was a long day of PR, and you know how that tires me out sometimes. So as much as I like you, too, and I’d love to send you a nice long epistle (how’s that for a good word?), I’m afraid it’s going to have to wait until tomorrow.

Sweet dreams, hen.

Billy

P.S. DAMMIT. I should have bought a cottage by the sea.

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Thursday, February 12
To: Grace
From: lost_goat
Subject: Re: Here Comes The Sun

You’re such a love, Penny darlin. And a henchman would be brilliant. But are you sure you don’t want to be my minion? I’d be ever so good as an overlord. Honest.

Don’t be daft, you don’t owe us anything. Pretty Pennies should never be cold. We just righted a terrible wrong, is all. I hope it’s less miserable, living and working in there now. I think Billy will worry about you a little less, anyway, and that’s something, yeah?

Did I tell you I’m off to Hawaii in May? Filming for Lost starts, although word has it the script is going through a complete re-write. Keep your fingers crossed this doesn’t get fucked up, will you? I really want it.

How’s your stash of marshmallow pies? Just say the word when you’ve run out, and I’ll send you more. So far customs isn’t banning them for being hazardous goods. So far.

Take care, Penny, and talk to you soon.

Fond regards,
Pellinore Rex

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Thursday, February 12
To: Billy
From: Grace  
Subject: Re: A topic I know you love.  

And this time it’s a topic which I know you love. And that topic is how very wonderful you are. (Don’t worry, thanks to my not being good with words, it’ll be a short conversation.) You are kind, attractive, thoughtful, delightful, likeable, charming, fetching, and ever so tempting. And there’s another word I want, but it disappeared off the tip of my tongue, dammit. Starts with a b. Or is it a g? I don’t know, but I’ll let you know if I find it again.

You may think this has come out of nowhere. Believe me, it hasn’t. You deserve every good word and more. In fact, if I thought you’d keep reading, I’d get out my thesaurus, but since I can already hear you telling me to stop it, I’ll be good. (Unless you were actually here, in which case I’d keep going. Because you have some lovely methods of shutting me up.)

You’re just too marvelous, too marvelous for words
Like ‘glorious’, ‘glamorous’ and that old standby ‘amorous’.
It’s all too wonderful, I’ll never find the words
That say enough, tell enough, I mean they just aren’t swell enough.

You’re much too much, and just too ‘very, very’
To ever be in Webster's Dictionary.
And so I’m borrowing a love song from the birds
To tell you that you're marvelous - too marvelous for words.

I feel much better knowing I’m not the only one who has trouble finding words sometimes. And now, before you insist again, I’m going to stop.

Someday I’ll be able to tell you these things in person without blushing like a...like a thing that blushes. A lot. Oh, shut up.

Georgia,  
Grace

Friday, February 13  
To: Grace  
From: Elwood  
Subject: Re: Shiny Happy People (Dance To The Music Remix)

I’m a sucker for a good remix. See if you can find it, I bet you’d like it!

You’re very welcome, dollface. It wasn’t easy to keep from letting something slip, but it was worth it just to get something over on Billy! It was a lot of fun. And thank you, again, for letting a load of weird actor types invade your cottage for the weekend. We all had a fantastic time.

And don’t worry, some day, in some way or another, I will need a favor, and I will call on my number one minion. :-)

Speaking of your cottage, remember when we were talking about bands we like? I thought of one I think you’d enjoy. Sons And Daughters, a really extraordinary band from Glasgow, they just put
out their first full-length LP. They’re kind of based in Americana and rootsy stuff, but they’re essentially rock and roll. They do these really amazing shared male and female lead vocals, and don’t sound like anything else out there, which is refreshing. If you have trouble finding their album, let me know and I’ll get hold of a copy for you.

I have to run, but it was good to hear from you. Be careful out there, it's Friday the 13th!
Later, dollface!
Lij

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Friday, February 13
To: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: I remembered the word!

Beguiling.

Smooches,
Grace

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Friday, February 13
To: Grace
From: Billy
Subject: Re: I remembered the word!

You forgot captivating, fascinating, and irresistible. Because I am, you know. Everyone says so.

Silly hen. Beguiling suits you much more than it does me. Me? I? No, that can’t be right. It suits you more than me. My beguiling little naiad who swears like a fucking sailor. I can see you right now, you know, sitting in that Toronto coffee shop across from me, your hair curly from the wind off the lake, your cheeks pink because you just called me a fairy, the look on your face as I wrote my name on your skin.

Christ, April is a long way away.

Missing you fiercely,
Billy

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To: Billy  
From: Grace  
Subject: Re: I remembered the word!  

Fucking hell, Billy, what are you trying to do to me?  
And I called you a pixie, dammit.  

Wishing,  
Grace  

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Friday, February 13  
To: Grace  
From: Billy  
Subject: Re: I remembered the word!  

I’m trying to make you miss me.  
Is it working?  

William  

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Friday, February 13  
To: Billy  
From: Grace  
Subject: Re: I remembered the word!  

You don’t need to try.  

Grace  

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Grace jumped when the phone at her elbow suddenly rang. Muting the tv, she picked it up.  
“Hello?”  

“So, you miss me then, do you?”  

She smiled. “You know I do, William.”  

“Ooh, I like it when you call me William.” The voice in her ear was warm, slightly rough.
"It doesn't make you think you're in trouble?"

"Not when you say it in that tone of voice." He chuckled. "How are you, dear heart?"

"I'm good. You'll never guess what I did last night." She curled up into the corner of her little sofa, getting comfortable.

"Ate a cheeseburger?" he asked.

"Er--no. Although that does sound good," she said thoughtfully.

"Learned to play the accordion?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, Billy."

She could hear the grin in his voice. "Shot a man in Reno just to watch him die?"

"No!"

"Good thing," he said. "Might have been a bit awkward otherwise. It appears you are correct, wee girl, I'll never guess what you did last night, so you'll have to tell me."

"You are nuts. Lucky for you, I happen to like nuts."

Billy's voice brightened. "I like nuts, too! I'm partial to a toasted macadamia nut, but cashews are my favourite. Although for sheer volume, nothing beats a Brazil nut--"

"Oh my god," she exclaimed, laughing, "Would you stop?"

"Stop? I'm crushed. And here I thought you found me amusing," he teased.

"Amusing and...and vexing."

"Marvellous word, vexing. So you find me vexatious, do you Grace?"

"Astoundingly." She decided to turn the tables on him. "Which is a shame, because you've completely distracted me from telling you about open mic night last night."

There was dead silence for a moment, then Billy swore. "Shit, bollocks, and arse! I completely forgot about it, wee girl, I'm sorry. You went, then? Did you play? How was it? Tell me all about it."

"No," she said airily. "I don't think I shall."

He groaned. "You're punishing me for being the world's worst boyfriend."

"What? No, I'm getting you back for being vexatious--which is a much better word than vexing, I might add. How could you possibly think you're the world's worst boyfriend?"

"I forgot about your open mic night! I know how big a deal it was to you, to even consider performing in public. I'm the one that talked you into doing it, and I intended to encourage you, but it completely slipped my mind." He sounded genuinely apologetic.

Grace was surprised. "Don't be ridiculous, Billy, we only talked about it the once, and you've been busy since then. I never expected you to remember when it was! You are most certainly not the world's worst boyfriend, you silly man."
"Be that as it may, please forgive me and tell me immediately how it went last night."

"It went reasonably well, actually." She smiled. "I nearly chickened out, but then I thought of you, and how I'd have to tell you I'd chickened out, and I made myself do it."

"Good for you, dear heart," he said, pleased. "I bloody well knew you could do it. I just wish I could've been there so you'd have had a friendly face."

"I wished you could have been, too," she admitted, running her thumbnail along the seam of her grey track pants. "I ended up taking Jamie with me for that, but I would much rather have been singing to you."

"Jamie, hmm?" Billy said. "And did it help having him there?"

"It did, actually. Like you said, a friendly face to look at. I just tried to ignore everyone else there, and if I did look up, I looked at him."

"Ah. Well, that's...grand."

Something in his voice made her pause. "You know he's my friend."

"I know. And I'm glad he was there for you."

"Are you?"

"Ehm--mostly?" he hedged.

"Billy," she said with a fond little smile. "Please tell me you're not jealous of Jamie."

"I certainly am not!" he denied. "I'm simply...oh, bollocks." He sighed deeply. "All right, I'm a little jealous. He spent Hogmanay in your bed, for god's sake, what do you expect?"

Grace wondered if perhaps she should feel a little less gratified about Billy being jealous. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because we weren't together and I didn't have any right to protest who you slept with," he grumbled.

"The operative word there being 'slept'," she pointed out. "There has never been, and never will be, anything between Jamie and I, you lovely idiot. He's like a younger brother to me."

"That doesn't mean he looks at you like a sister," Billy said darkly.

"Would it make you feel better to know that he's just started dating someone and he's totally besotted with her? I'll be lucky if he even remembers I'm alive over the next six months."

"What, so he'll just abandon you, even though he knows what you're going through?" he demanded. Grace sat up straighter even though he couldn't see her and, laughing, protested, "You can't have it both ways, Billy."

"I can so. I'm a very complex bloke."

"You certainly are," she said. "Trust me, hon, you have nothing to be jealous about. Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. But he'd bloody well better be good to you, or he'll have to answer to me," he
"I'll tell him that," she said wryly, but with a delicious warmth settling in her chest. "The next time I drag him to open mic night."

"Are you going to do it again, then?" he asked. "You enjoyed yourself?"

"I did," she admitted. "It was scary as hell, but it was also...I don't even know how to describe it. Nerve-wracking when I started, but by the time I finished, well, seeing all those strangers sitting there listening to me was a bit of a rush."

"The adrenalin of a live performance," he agreed, and she could hear the grin in his voice. "What did you end up playing?"

"Solsbury Hill. My hands were shaking so badly I fucked up the intro a bit, but I stubborned my way through, and the rest of it went okay."

"I'm so proud of you, wee girl," he said warmly. "Pure dead brilliant, you are."

Grace blushed, glad he wasn't there to see it. "Thank you, Billy. Thank you for challenging me to do it in the first place, too."

"You're very welcome, love. I reckon that means it's time for the next challenge, then, yeah?"

"What?" she exclaimed. "I'm still recovering from that one! What do you mean, 'the next challenge'?"

"Relax," he said, chuckling. "It's just emailing me your mystery novel, remember? I thought I'd print it out and take it with me whilst I'm travelling over the next month. It'll give me something to read during the flights."

"Oh. You're really going to make me send it to you, eh?"

"You said you would," he reminded her.

She sighed. "Fine. I'll email it to you tonight. I don't know if you should read it on a plane, though, you might disturb the other passengers when you're howling with laughter."

"I'll ignore that, silly wee girl. I'm off to London tomorrow, so I'll print it in the morning and take it with."

"Promise you'll be kind?" she asked, already half-regretting agreeing to send it to him.

"I shall be both kind and honest, and see if I can't figure out whodunit for you." The smile in his voice was plain.

"That would be much appreciated, I admit. I know you've probably told me already, but remind me what you're up to in London?"

"Tomorrow afternoon is a collection of interviews, and then there's a pre-BAFTA party tomorrow night, with the BAFTAS on Sunday."

"Good luck, hon. I'll keep my fingers crossed for you all day long."

"Are you home Sunday night?" Billy asked. "I'll ring you when I get back to the hotel and let you know how it went."
"Oh, you don't have to do that," she said, though she was touched by the offer. "That's sweet, but you'll have parties to attend, I'm sure, so it'll be late when you get back. You'll just want to head straight to bed."

"Who better to talk to than my sleep therapist, then?" he countered. "Will you be home?"

"Where else would I be?" she said lightly. "Of course I'll be here. I'll tell you what, let's compromise. If you get back to your hotel and you're wired, then call me and I'll talk you down. But if you're wiped out and just want to go to sleep, then you do that, and don't worry about calling, okay?"

"It's a deal, dear heart. And on that note," he sighed, "I should probably go. I haven't finished packing, I still have to ring Margaret yet tonight, and I've got an early start in the morning."

"Then why are you still wasting time talking to me?" she asked with a grin. "Go call your sister."

Billy huffed a laugh. "Yes, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am!"

"Yes, hen."

"Oh. Oh, I do love the way you sound when you call me that."

"What, hen?" he asked, surprised.

"Yeah. It's the way you say it, teasing and sweet at the same time."

"You do like the oddest things," he chuckled, then softly added, "I miss you, Grace."

"I miss you, too, Billy. Fly safe tomorrow, okay?"

"I will. You have a good weekend, and I'll talk to you soon. Bye."

"Bye."

Grace pressed the off button on her phone and set it aside. Tracing the blue stripe across the pillow next to her with her fingertip, she thought about Billy, and Jamie, and wondered if the two might ever become friends. After a moment she realised they might never even meet, let alone spend enough time together to form a friendship, which was a shame because she rather thought they'd get on quite well, given half a chance.

With a little sigh, she rose to fetch her laptop, and before she could either forget or talk herself out of it, she emailed her mystery story to Billy. She just hoped it wouldn't bore him--or amuse him--too much.

Grace worked both Saturday and Sunday, and by the time Sunday afternoon rolled around, she was in need of a bit of fresh air and exercise. It was cold but sunny out, so she bundled up, put her sunglasses on, and pulled her toque down over her ears before heading down the stairs and outside.

Heading purposefully down the sidewalk, she walked at a good clip for quite a while, thinking casually about Billy and the high profile events he was about to attend. Wondering if there would
be pictures of him online from the red carpet events, wondering if he was taking anyone with him. Surely he'd have mentioned it if he was, even if it was just his sister or a friend? She wondered what it felt like to be in the eye of the press, of the paparazzi, to have to smile and pose at events while flashes went off like fireworks, to never know for certain if your picture was being taken when you were out in public, even just doing the shopping or picking up the dry cleaning. It was harder on women, she supposed, who usually weren't made up and dressed up just to run errands, and then had to see photos of themselves splashed in the tabloids looking less than their absolute best. She wondered if, as Billy had said, there might be the odd camera trained her way when she visited him in Scotland, or if the paparazzi wouldn't care considering she was a complete unknown, girlfriend of a cast member of Lord of the Rings or not.

Eventually Grace turned and began making her way home. She took her time coming back, doing some window shopping, noticing with sadness that several more small stores in her neighbourhood had gone under, windows shuttered against the winter winds and the salt thrown up by traffic. She certainly couldn't afford to do much to support the local businesses, but knowing there was a toonie in her pocket, she stopped in at her favourite little Portuguese bakery where they offered day-old custard tarts and a coffee for $1.95. It had been a while since she'd indulged herself even in something so small, but she'd had a few dollars left from her grocery budget the week before after returning from the cottage with several days' worth of leftover food. She took her treats just down the block to a park, sat on one of the swings in the empty playground, set her coffee down on the ground, and happily munched on her custard tart.

She'd just finished the tart when out of the corner of her eye she saw someone come up from behind and occupy the swing next to her.

"Hello, Grace," a familiar voice said, "You're looking well."

Her head whirlled to look at the man casually sitting next to her, his feet on the ground and his gloved hands on the chains of the swings. "Michael," she whispered, her stomach doing a slow roll. "What--what the hell are you doing here?"

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Here Comes The Sun* by George Harrison and *Too Marvelous for Words* by Johnny Mercer and Richard Whiting.
“M-Michael,” Grace stammered, her stomach doing a slow roll. “What--what the hell are you doing here?”

“Now, now. Is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“Friend?” Her voice rose at the end of the word. “You bast--”

He interrupted her, taking a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket. “So tell me, Graceling, what’s new?”

“Don’t call me that,” she growled, feeling heat flare in her cheeks.

“I hear you’re seeing someone,” he continued, as if she hadn’t spoken. “Good for you. Quite frankly, I’m surprised at how long it took you to get back up on the horse, so to speak. Nevertheless--” He unfolded the paper and held it out, showing Grace two photos of her with Billy. “He looks like a nice enough guy. Does he make you happy?”

She looked at the creased sheet of paper and began to feel lightheaded. The first photo was taken in the lobby of the Royal York hotel, the morning of only the second day she’d ever known him. Billy had his arms looped around her and was smiling down at her. Only a moment later, Grace remembered, he’d bent his head and kissed her on the nose.

The second photo shook her. It was dark, and slightly blurry, but it was unmistakably her with Billy on the dance floor at the nightclub they’d gone to with Elijah and Andy. She and Billy were wrapped up in each other, and the attraction between them was obvious.

“Where did you get these?” she whispered. She reached out a shaking hand to touch the photos, then withdrew quickly as if she’d been burned.

“Paparazzi shots that didn’t sell. He may be a Hobbit, but no one knows who you are. Yet.”

Her gaze flew up to his, and her voice sharpened. “What do you mean, ‘yet’? What do you want, Michael?”

He smiled lazily. “Well, that depends on what you want, Graceling.” He carried on, forestalling her objection to his continued use of the pet name. “Do you want your boyfriend knowing your little secret? Knowing just how gullible you are? How you foolishly lost just about everything you own? Because that sort of indiscretion can follow a woman for a long time, you know.”

“You son of a bitch,” she said, low and trembling. “I didn’t lose anything. You took it. You took everything I had.”

He waved his hand as if it was irrelevant. “The point is, is that something you want your precious junior celebrity to know about?”

Grace glared at him, her hands in her lap tightening into fists. “He already does. He knows everything, as do my friends. So you can fuck right off.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “You surprise me, darling. I didn’t think you’d have the courage to
admit it and ask for help. You were always so fiercely independent. So proud.”

“And that’s what you counted on, wasn’t it?” she snapped. “That I wouldn’t be able to bring myself to tell anyone? Well, I did. I told him, and he doesn’t care.”

“Isn’t that sweet?” He cocked his head, his dark hair falling across his forehead. “I wonder if he’d care if, say, TMZ got hold of the story. They’re pretty good at ferreting out all kinds of hidden facts. They’d find out, for example, that your Billy Boyd’s last girlfriend went straight from his bed to that of some cable channel reality star in greedy, seedy L.A. They’d find out that two months later he’s dating some completely unknown Canadian woman. They’d find out that not only is she broke, but she’s up to her pretty tits in debt, and speculation as to her motives—and his naïve ability to be deluded—would run rampant through Hollywood. He’d be mocked incessantly, and become a laughingstock in Scotland. I wonder how much that would affect his ability to get an acting job then?” Michael mused, sharp eyes on Grace’s face.

Grace held onto the chains of the swing, feeling sick. “What do you want?” she asked, her voice hollow.

“Ten thousand. And if you don’t say a word to anyone, I’m fairly sure TMZ won’t discover a thing.”

“I don’t have that much! You took every cent I had, remember, you fucking—” She glanced around and lowered her voice. “I don’t have that much,” she repeated desperately.

“Oh, Grace; I always did have a soft spot for you. Fine, I’ll go easy on you. Five thousand.” Michael smiled, calm and collected. “I happen to know you’ve made some new friends lately. Friends with means. I’m quite sure they’d give you a small loan, should you ask.”

“I can’t—”

“What happened to that ridiculous little protective streak of yours? Does Billy and his career—not to mention his self-respect—not mean that much to you, then?”

Grace felt like she’d been punched in the gut, and she gripped the chains of the swing until her fingers ached. “I’ll—I’ll need some time—”

“Of course you will. Three days ought to be enough.” He rose to his feet. “I’ll be in touch, Graceling. Here—” he handed the printed photos to her. “You keep these, I have copies. See you soon.” He smiled at her, then left.

Grace barely remembered making her way home as frenzied thoughts whirled and darted in and out. She slowly climbed the three flights of stairs, her knees shaking by the time she reached her door and let herself in. She stood in the doorway for a moment, but a sudden fear struck her, and she slammed the door before quickly locking the handle, the deadbolt, and sliding the chain into place for good measure. Kicking off her boots and dropping her coat on the end of the bed, she curled up on the sofa.

She couldn’t do this again, she thought miserably, burying her face in a cushion. She couldn’t let Michael drag her back down, return her to that well of despair; she’d never be able to climb out again. But neither could she let Billy be hurt in any way, especially not on her account. Scared and lost and unable at that moment to see a way out, Grace wept.
Grace spent the evening alternating between disconsolate tears and red-hot rage. She paced around and around her tiny apartment, trying desperately to work out a plan. She came up with several ideas, but discarded each one for being either impractical or impossible. Finally, the adrenaline ebbed, her rage petered out, and she threw herself onto the sofa feeling discouraged almost beyond bearing.

She started violently when the phone rang. Her anxiety level going through the roof, she answered. "H-hello?"

"Good evening, wee girl," Billy said, sounding relaxed and happy. "Might I just say that I'm looking forward to the first time you come with me to one of these events? I confess to a purely selfish desire to have someone with me who knows even fewer people than I do. It will make me feel very suave and worldly, being able to introduce you to the four famous people I know."

Grace couldn't prevent the strangled noise that escaped her throat.

"Grace? Are you there? Have we got a bad connection?" he asked.

"Billy. I--I forgot you were going to call--"

"You forgot!" he teased. "That's put me in my place, now, hasn't it?"

She opened her mouth to say something, but found she was wholly unprepared to be talking to him after the day's distressing events.

When Billy spoke again, the smile was gone from his voice. "Grace? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she answered automatically, her mind racing.

"What is it? What's going on, dear heart?"

"Oh, don't do that," she said, her voice shaking. "Don't be all sweet and gentle. That's not fair."

"I can't help it," he tried teasing her, "I'm a very sensitive bloke. Now come on, tell me what's wrong."

"No! I mean, not yet. Not until I have--I need a plan. As soon as I figure out what to do--" Only half of her mind was on their conversation; the rest was consumed with trying to sort out what to do while still protecting Billy. His warm voice in her ear only intensified her desire to keep him from getting hurt, either personally or professionally.

"Grace," he said firmly, and there was no trace of amusement left, "talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

"Not yet."

"For god's sake, would you--"

"You're the one who started the not yets," she snapped, then lowered her volume. "Sorry, but you are. You can't use it only when it's convenient for you."

He let out a gust of breath. "I never used it when there was something very, very wrong, which
clearly there is. Tell me what's going on, please."

Her resolve wavered. "Look, I'll make you a deal. It's awfully late where you are, and I just--I can't get into it tonight. I need time to...to sort it out in my head. If you'll call me when you get home tomorrow, I'll tell you everything then."

"Grace--"

"Please, Billy," she said quietly. "Give me one night, and I'll tell you all of it tomorrow."

"You swear?" he growled.

"If you want me to, yes."

"Just tell me you're all right."

She sighed, rubbing her forehead with the heel of her hand. "I'm okay. I'll be all right. Just tell me one thing?"

"What's that, love?"

"Did you win tonight?"

Billy huffed, whether a laugh or in annoyance she couldn't quite tell. "Yes, we won. Not all of them, but we did."

"I knew you would. I want details later, okay? And I want to know who these four famous friends you're going to introduce me to are. And which awards you won. And I want to know--"

He cut her off, and this time it was definitely with a little laugh. "Miss I-Want-To-Know has returned, I see. Yes, you curiosity bug, I will tell you all about it in gory and glorious detail. Soon."

"Soon." She hesitated, wanting to get off the phone but feeling bad for ruining the end of what had obviously been an amazing night. "Are you going to be able to sleep, hon?"

"In a while, yes. It's going to take me a bit to convince myself not to fret about you," he said honestly.

"I'm sorry, Billy," she said, feeling wretched. "I'm really glad you called, but I wish you hadn't called, not tonight. You know?"

"I know. You will pick up your phone tomorrow, won't you?"

"Yes, I promise. I told you I wouldn't do that again, remember?" She sighed again. "What time are you expecting to get home?"

"Around seven. If all goes to plan, I'll ring you around eight, but it might be later."

"Okay. I'll be here. Goodnight, Billy--and I am glad you called."

"Goodnight, dear heart. Talk to you soon."

Grace hung up the phone, and promptly burst into tears.
By the following afternoon, Grace was frustrated and desperate. She still hadn't managed to formulate a plan to thwart Michael, and she knew the later it got, the closer the time came for Billy to call, and she wasn't at all sure what she wanted to say to him.

Lying in bed the night before, unable to sleep, she'd mustered up a little common sense and come to the realisation that no matter what Michael said, even if he went to the tabloid press and laid out the whole, messy story, Billy's career would hardly be ruined. As important as he was to her, she had to acknowledge that he wasn't exactly Brad Pitt, commanding millions of dollars for a single film, the paparazzi dogging his every step; and frankly, as much as Billy might protest the idea, as far as any press was concerned she really was a nobody and no one would care in the least whether she was in debt or not. Thank god banking information was private and they'd never find out about the loan he'd made for her.

Still, the less sensible side of her mind said, he could be horribly embarrassed by it all; the speculation and rumours could leave him looking foolish. She could take five thousand of the loan coming from Billy to pay Michael off, but what was to keep him from coming back in six months, or a year, and asking for more? Besides, she was fairly sure Billy wouldn't want her using the money intended to get her out of the hole, to dig it even deeper.

Grace's phone rang, and she groaned before answering it. The reprieve was over. "Hello?"

"Hey, wee girl."

"Hi, Billy." Instead of curling up in a ball on the sofa, she walked over to her bed and sat cross-legged in the centre of it, a pillow on her lap, girding herself for the unpleasant but necessary conversation she was about to have. "You had an easy trip home, I hope?"

"Aye, pretty smooth. My flight was delayed, but only by about fifteen minutes."

"That's not too bad, then." She fell silent, uncertain whether to just jump into it, or try and ease into it slowly, like walking into a cold lake inch by inch.

"Are you ready to talk to me, then, dear heart?" Billy asked.

"Yes, but you're not going to like it. Promise me you'll only shout a little bit?"

Billy heaved a sigh. "I promise. Now get on with it, Grace."

"Let me finish the whole story," she warned.

"Grace."

She closed her eyes and jumped in. "I saw..." She took a deep breath and tried again. "I went out for a walk yesterday, and I ran into someone while I was out. Or, rather, he found me. I don't know how."

"Who?" he asked, his voice starting to get a bit strained.

"It was Michael."

It took him a moment, but all Billy said was, "And?"

"And...he hasn’t fucking changed." She knew that sounded bitter, but she didn’t care; knew Billy
wouldn’t blame her.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes and no. I mean, yes, I’m all right, but things aren’t all right, not entirely." She gave a shaky laugh. "This is the part where you’re going to start shouting."

"Just tell me."

"Promise me you won’t interrupt?" she pleaded. "This is hard enough as it is."

"Get on with it, Grace," he said, sounding grim.

"He--he had pictures--"

"Pictures? Jesus--" Billy’s voice rose.

"I knew it, I knew you’d interrupt!"

"Bloody hell--" He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Sorry. But, please, Grace, you’re killing me, here."

"He had pictures of you and I, one from the lobby of your hotel where you’re hugging me, and one from the club when we were dancing. You know--together. And he threatened to tell you about how I lost all my money, about how I was broke and utterly gullible."

"You didn’t--you aren’t--"

She forgave him that interruption. "Those were his words, not mine," she assured him. "I said you already knew, that I’d told you myself and you didn’t care. Then he--" She stopped, and cleared her throat. "He, um, he said...he threatened to go to TMZ about Emily, and me, and that they’d dig until they found out what Emily did to you, and then how two months later you’re dating some Canadian nobody who’s not only broke, but in massive debt, and you’d become a laughingstock and no one in Hollywood or Scotland would ever respect you again and it would ruin your career. And that if I wanted to keep speculation and rumour from making you look like a fool, I should give him ten thousand dollars and he wouldn’t go to TMZ."

"Jesus Christ, Grace--" He sounded stunned.

"I told him that interruption. "Those were his words, not mine," she assured him. "I said you already knew, that I’d told you myself and you didn’t care. Then he--" She stopped, and cleared her throat. "He, um, he said...he threatened to go to TMZ about Emily, and me, and that they’d dig until they found out what Emily did to you, and then how two months later you’re dating some Canadian nobody who’s not only broke, but in massive debt, and you’d become a laughingstock and no one in Hollywood or Scotland would ever respect you again and it would ruin your career. And that if I wanted to keep speculation and rumour from making you look like a fool, I should give him ten thousand dollars and he wouldn’t go to TMZ."

"Jesus Christ, Grace--" He sounded stunned.

She forged on before she lost her nerve to tell him the rest. "I told him I didn’t have that kind of money, and he said he’d always had a soft spot for me and five thousand would do, and that he knew I’d made some rich friends lately, and that I could get the money from them. And I didn’t know what to do, Billy, I wasn’t about to ask you for the money, but neither was I going to let him publicly humiliate you and risk your career, and when you called last night I was so angry, and confused, and a bit scared, and--"

"Grace--"

“Let. Me. Finish,” she grated out, her throat beginning to burn. “I was a bit scared and I panicked, and I spent half the night trying to figure out how to fix this, because I am not going to let him fuck you over like he's fucked me over, and--"

“Grace--”

“I know, I know, maybe I should have told you all this last night, but he caught me off guard and it
just brought back all those feelings of being caught in a--a trap, and I didn’t want you caught in it as well. So I thought maybe there was a way to get out of the trap without you having to get near it--”

“Grace, shut the hell up!” Billy's voice was whipcrack sharp.

Startled, her breath tangled up in too many words, Grace shut up.

“You’re damned right right you should have told me last night,” he said. He wasn’t shouting, but it was a close-run thing. “You should have told me so that I could tell you fuck him. Fuck him and the horse he rode in on! Don’t ye dare give in to him, love! I’m not afraid of him or his fucking stupid threats, I don’t care who he tells about ye, because I am goddammed proud as hell tae call ye my girlfriend.”

Grace’s eyes stung with tears. “Billy,” she whispered.

“And I’ll tell ye another thing, people can speculate all they bloody well want, because I don’t give a tinker’s wee fuck for what they think, the only people whose respect I need are the people who know me, and the people who know me won’t believe a word of the shite that cunt tries tae spread. So don’t ye even think about giving in to his threats!”

She could hear that he was up and pacing. “Billy--”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her, and this time it was a shout. “Goddamned prick! Who th’ fuck does he think he is? One thing’s certain, he’s made a big fucking mistake this time. I’ll book a flight in the morning, and you’ll ring him and tell him tae meet ye, and then he and I will have a wee fuckin’ chat--”

“No,” Grace said sharply, dashing hot tears from her eyes, “you will not.”

“I’ll no’ let him--” he spat.

"I won't let you get involved in this, Billy! Michael was my mistake, he's my problem to deal with."

"I'm already involved! He's using me tae get ye, and he's got another fucking thing coming if he thinks I'll let him get away with that--"

"Stop, okay? Just stop!” It was her turn to shout. "I'm not going to leave you to pay for my stupidity, don't you get that?"

"What I don't get is why ye seem tae think you're on your own in this!” he demanded, sounding frustrated.

"Because--"

"No," he snapped, "Don't even think about answering that. I'm hanging up, Grace, and I'll ring ye back in an hour, when I'm not tempted tae put my fist through a wall."

Her stomach twisted sharply and her anger collapsed. "Fuck. Billy, please--"

"Don't be daft, love," he said shortly. "I'm not angry with you. I'm angry with the fucking cunt that's managed tae get us shouting at each other again. Goddamn bastard! I'll ring ye back, I promise." He hung up.

Grace set her phone aside and flopped onto her back, grateful he’d been clear who he was furious
with. She didn't blame Billy one bit for needing a bit of time to process everything, and to cool down. Hell, she'd done the exact same thing to him last night. She rolled over onto her stomach and buried her face in her pillows for a moment, until it grew difficult to breathe and she was forced to turn her head. "Fucckrmfucckshit," she whispered.

Three quarters of an hour later the phone rang and Grace, back on the sofa with a cup of tea, answered it on the second ring. "Billy, I know--"

"Slow down, there, Penny love," Dom's softly raspy, slightly nasal voice was warm in her ear.

"Dom?" she said blankly, startled.

"Don't tell me you're forgetting me already!" he teased. "You're breaking my heart."

"I just wasn't expecting to hear from you. How--how are you?"

"If I was any better, I couldn't stand myself. How are you doing?"

"Good--I'm, I'm good."

"Are you sure about that?" he asked.

It clicked into place, and Grace sighed. "You've been talking to Billy."

"As a matter of fact, I have. So why don't we go back a step; how are you doing, Penny darlin'?"

"If you were any better, I couldn't stand you," she said wryly.

Dom laughed. "You're not the first person to tell me that. But I'll assume the fact that you're taking the mickey means you're all right?"

"It's honestly not been my best weekend but yeah, I'm okay at the moment, surprisingly enough. Did Billy call you?"

"No, I called him to find out when he's flying in for next weekend, and half an hour later I finally managed to get a word in edgewise." The smile in his voice was unmistakable.

Grace was torn. On the one hand, she was glad Billy had a best friend he could talk to in times of stress. On the other hand, it was her private business they were discussing, even if Dom was already aware of most of it. "I see," she finally said, trying her hardest to sound neutral. "And what did he tell you?"

"A lot of swear words." Dom spoke carefully. "Are you upset that he talked to me? Have I bollocksed up again?"

She let out a loud, gusty sigh. "No. No, of course not. I just--I've spent so long keeping all this to myself, it apparently takes a bit to get out of the habit. He told you Michael showed up out of the blue yesterday?"

"He did, and he had many choice words to say about it, too," Dom said dryly. "He was right bent out of shape. That's why I'm ringing, actually, on his request. After shouting at me for half an hour, he wasn't any calmer, so he's gone out for a run to work some of it off. But he didn't want you
sitting there waiting for him to ring, so he asked me to give you a tinkle."

"A what? Wow, I really hope that's one of those words that's used differently here."

The grin returned to his voice. "Why, what's it mean to you?"

"A tinkle is generally used by little kids to mean a pee," she chuckled.

Dom laughed out loud. "I'll have to add that to my list, then."

"What, a list of words to use carefully outside the U.K.?"

"No, a list of words that mean pee. You'd be astonished how many there are," he said cheerfully.

Grace laughed again, and then sighed, and then felt tears prickle behind her eyes. When she spoke, though, she managed to keep her voice even. "Billy threatened to book a flight. I'm not going to let him get drawn into this, Dom. I can't. What if he winds up resenting me?"

"Don't be thick, Pen," he said fondly. "Billy resent you for anything that Michael did? Not possible. And besides, if he makes up his mind to get on a plane, there's nothing you can do to stop him. He's a grown boy, love."

"I know that. But I also know that your first priority, like mine, would be to protect Billy--so how do I do that?"

"Actually, my first priority would be to beat the fucking shite out of the goddamned asshole that's put the two of you in this situation in the first place," he said, and there was a note of something darker in his voice.

"You think I haven't fantasized about doing that myself?" she grumbled. "But thanks. I just--I don't know what the best thing to do is. I can't easily just pay him off, I don't have five thousand dollars. Hell, I don't even have five hundred."

"Grace," Dom said, his voice soft and serious, "if I actually thought it would work, I'd give you the five thousand myself this minute."

Her throat tightened. "Dom--"

"However," he went on, brisk now, "We both know it's not an option. If you pay him now, what's to keep him from coming back?"

"I know, but what else can I do?" she wailed. "I know it wouldn't be as bad as Michael made it sound, but I don't want to be an embarrassment to Billy. I can't let speculation and rumour make him look like a fool, I won't allow it."

"The two of you are something else, you know that?" he said, sounding fond and annoyed in equal measure. "You won't allow him to be embarrassed. He won't let Michael threaten you. You're both so determined to protect the other that you're missing the obvious, Pen."

"Which is?"

"That you can work as a team," he said gently. "If you two would ever just gang up, Michael wouldn't stand a fucking chance."

"Dom--" she choked out, and then had to fight back the tears swimming in her eyes. "Bloody hell."
"Aw, don't cry, Penny love. Just remember you're not alone this time, yeah? You've got Bill, and if the two of you need a backup squad, you just have to call, and me and 'Lijah will be there on the double."

"Stop saying shit like that," she wept.

He chuckled. "All right. But it's true, you know. In the meantime, when Bill calms down and rings you back, try working with each other for a change. And if he decides to get on a plane, remember it's his choice, not your fault."

"I'll try. My dear Pellinore, when did you get to be so wise?" She sniffled, wiping her eyes.

"Wise shmize. It's easier to see from the outside, that's all. One last thing, Pen--Billy was right when he said he's already involved. Michael brought him into this, and if anyone else has a right to answer to that, it's Bill."

Put that way, Grace realised he was right. "Yeah. Yeah, okay."

"Talk to Bill when he rings. I mean it, the two of you together can sort out anything."

"Thank you, Dom. And I mean that."

"You're welcome, darlin' Penny."

"Did you talk this much sense into Billy?" she asked with a little smile. "Or should I quote you directly?"

"Whoever thought I'd be the voice of reason in this relationship, eh?" he chuckled. "Nah, Bill would have come to it on his own, I just sped up the process a bit. You'll be fine now, right?"

"Yes, I will. And Dom, if you ever need a sounding board and Billy's not available, I'd be glad to try and be your voice of reason," she said shyly.

"Thanks, darlin'," he said, and he sounded pleased. "I just might take you up on that one day. Right, I'm off, then. Keep in touch and let me know what happens, yeah? And I was serious about the backup."

"I know you were. And yes, I'll email you as soon as...well, as something happens, whatever it may be."

"Good. Bye, Pen."

"Bye, Dom."

Grace hung up, putting the phone back on its cradle to charge for a while before Billy called.

An hour later she was trying hard to get a bit of work done while waiting to hear from Billy, when the phone rang again. Mindful of her mistaken assumption the last time, as she hit her time clock, she simply answered with, "Hi."

"Hallo, wee girl," Billy greeted her, sounding much more his usual self. "Sorry it's taken me so long to get back to you. Did Dom ring?"
"Yes, he did. He said you went out for a bit of a run?"

"Aye. I was a nasty combination of tired and angry, and I needed to work it off. And since I knew Dom had told you not to worry, when I got home I took a long hot bath."

"Oh, that's good," she said, smiling. "And do you feel better now?"

"Much," he admitted. "I'm sorry for shouting, love, and for buggering off on you."

"It's okay, Billy. Honestly. I mean, I was in the same boat last night, so I get it."

"I thought you would." A hint of a smile entered his voice. "Did Dom lecture you, too?"

She chuckled. "No, I didn't get lectured. But he did make a lot of sense."

"Aye. We keep working at cross-purposes, don't we, dear heart?"

"We do, even if our intentions are good." She rose and went over to her sofa, curling up in the corner and leaning her head back against the cushion. "What do you say, Billy? Shall we team up for a change?"

"I say it's about bloody time. No," he added as she made a noise of protest, "I wasn't having a go at you, love. Or, if I was, I was having a go at me, too. I just hate to see you hurting, and I want to do whatever I can to make that stop."

"I know," she said softly. "And I'd hate to see you get hurt, so I want to do whatever I can to prevent it."

He huffed a laugh. "We're a right pair, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are, and I'm so glad of it. So the question is, what am I--I mean, what are we going to do about Michael?"

"You'll let me help, then?"

"Yes." She twisted the corner of a pillow around her finger. "Billy, you were right when you said you're already involved. You have as much right to be angry as I do, and I'm so sorry you got pulled into this."

"It's not your fault," he pointed out. "It's that fucking prick's fault, and we'll deal with him together. Okay?"

"Okay. But I hope you have a plan in mind, because I've got nothing." She sighed, frustrated. "I mean, technically there are only two choices--pay, or don't pay. And it seems to me neither of them are particularly good options."

"Well, you're bloody well not giving him a penny," he said with asperity. "I meant it when I said I'm not afraid of his threats, Grace. He can't hurt me, he's just using that to try and scare you into paying. But neither are we just going to ignore him."

"Out with it, then, Boyd. You obviously have something in mind."

"First tell me what he said about paying him. I take it he gave you a bit of time to get the money together?"

She slid down on the sofa, stretching her legs out until her feet touched the opposite arm. "Three
"Perfect." He was silent for a moment, thinking, then decisively said, "Right. I'm supposed to be flying to L.A. on Friday for the SAG Awards this weekend. I'm going to change my flight and spend Wednesday and Thursday with you--that is, if you'll have me?"

After talking with Dom, Grace was prepared for the idea. "Of course I'll have you. If you don't mind sleeping in a shoebox."

"Really?" Billy said. "I expected an argument. Remind me to thank Dom later."

She huffed a laugh. "Shut up, you."

"Am I wrong?" he asked archly.

"No, of course you're not, and you know it. So you'll get here sometime on Wednesday, and leave Thursday?"

"No, I'll go Friday morning. One nice thing about doing it this way, it breaks up my flight nicely. Maybe the jet lag won't be as bad, yeah?" The smile in his voice was plain.

She chuckled. "Glad I could be of service as a layover--"

Billy snickered.

Grace felt her face heating even though he couldn't see her. "Oh, fuck me."

He gave a delighted laugh. "You're reading my mind."

She squinched her eyes shut tight. "I'm not going to say another word. Not one. More. Word."

"I've missed you, wee girl."

"Shut up."

"You're bright red now, aren't you?" he said, still grinning widely.

"As a freckled lobster, thank you very much."

"Poor girl. I'm so hard on you, aren't I?"

Grace made a choking noise, and after a few seconds Billy laughed loud and long.

"Get a grip on yourself, Boyd--" But that was too much for him, and just as he'd started to get himself under control, he was off again. "Billy!" she complained, but his laugh was infectious, and she couldn't prevent the grin on her face from showing in her voice. "Would you stop it, already? We're supposed to be having a serious discussion, here!"

"Ah, Grace, I've missed you," he gasped, still giggling.

"You said that already. Cut it out."

"Not a chance, love. Not a fucking chance." He caught his breath. "Bloody hell, woman, you'll be the death of me."

"You're the one reading something dirty into everything I say," she pointed out, amused.
"And you're every bit as bad. Or as good, depending on how you look at it." He paused, then warmly said, "I'll not thank Michael for one damn thing, but I admit to being glad as hell I don't have to wait until April to see you again."

"Me too, Billy." After a moment, she cleared her throat. "All right, why don't you tell me the rest of your plan, hmm? You arrive sometime on Wednesday, and then…"

"Well, we'll have to see what time my flight gets in. But either Wednesday or Thursday you'll arrange to meet the cunting bastard, and we'll both go and tell him precisely what he can do with his bloody blackmail attempt."

"That's it?" she asked in surprise. "Hell, Billy, if it's just a matter of saying 'fuck you' and letting him go ahead and do whatever he wants, I can handle that. You don't need to fly all the way here for the two minutes that would take."

"Yes, I do, and it's a bit more than that. I plan to threaten him a bit in return, and we'll see what he's made of." Billy's voice dropped and sharpened. "He'll not fuck with either of us again, not if I can help it."

Grace rolled onto her side and pulled her knees up to her chest. "Should I set this meeting up for a back alley where no one will hear him scream, or what?"

"I'd prefer somewhere private, but I don't think we'll need a back alley, hen."

"Dom said if we need a backup squad, we're to call and he and Elijah will come running."

"If it weren't so far, I'd take them up on it for the fun," he said. "But we don't need them, not when we're a team."

"We're the world's smallest gang," she said.

Billy chuckled. "Aye, we are that. Don't fret, wee girl."

"I could do it on my own," she said suddenly, wanting him to be clear on that.

"I know you could; you've proved that. But you don't have to."

"No. And I'm really, really glad. He ties me up in knots, Billy," she admitted.

"Hardly a surprise, not after what he did to you," he said softly. "But in a few days, you'll untie yourself. And I'll be there to help if you need it."

"Go book your flight. Right now."

"It's eleven p.m., love," he chuckled. "My travel agent's in bed. But I'll ring her first thing in the morning, and when it's all sorted I'll ring you with the details. And then I'll see you in two days."

"Do you still have your key?"

"I do."

"Two days," she said, her smile growing. "Guess I'd better stock up on porridge, eh?"

Tuesday
Is it a scheme? I'm not sure it's actually well-plotted enough to deserve the title, really.

Hello, Dom--and Billy, if you see this before I see you. As promised, Pellinore, I am letting you know what's in the works. Billy refused to be swayed (not that I tried very hard or at all), and is flying out here tomorrow. I was contacted again by the beslubbering maggot-faced bastard weasel, and Billy & I will be meeting him Wednesday evening. Not that he knows that yet, of course, he thinks it's just me. We appreciate (I appreciate) the offer of a backup band more than I can say, but I think we'll be okay. Billy's going to intimidate him, I'm going to shout and curse a lot, and then, um, well, that's as far as the scheme has got, really. I think Billy has something more in mind, but he won't confess to it. Friday morning he flies out at 10:45 a.m. and arrives at LAX at 1:10 p.m. on Air Canada flight AC791, and he says that's all the info you need. It seems to me there should be more, but Billy says no, and considering how much flying he's done in the past month alone, I guess I'll have to take his word for that one. He wants to know if you'll pick him up or if he should get a car service from the airport like everyone else. He says he doesn't mind either way, but that if you don't come get him, he'll hold your bottle of vampire tears hostage. And please don't explain, because I don't want to know.

Well, that's the grand plan so far. We've taken your advice and teamed up to form the tiniest gang in the world, and I think you should be our mascot. What do you say?

Yrs truly,
Ms. Penelope
(Gangster)

Tuesday
To: Grace
cc: Billy
From: lost_goat
Subject: Re: schedules & schemes

Hiya, Penny. Do me a favour? Tell Bill he's getting bloody feeble-minded in his old age. While normally I would delight in being at his beck and call, ferrying him around, cooking for him, cleaning up after him, etc, he's on his own this weekend. Elijah and I are in New Orleans for Mardi Gras (you're looking at the monarch for the Krewe of Orpheus, Pen, I hope you're suitably impressed--King Pellinore rides again). So Bill is just going to have to man up and take a car service from the airport like everyone else. I will stock up the refrigerator for him, though, because I know how helpless he is in American supermarkets. But if he touches my vampire tears, I'll switch his hair gel and his surfboard wax. And I'll use his razor to shave my pits.

Have you never flown anywhere before, Pen? Can I use you to help offset my carbon footprint? I've got a forest, but there are times when it's perhaps not quite enough. You would be of inconceivable assistance.

I just talked to Elijah, sorting out our travel plans for this weekend, and he says to tell you hi, and to
kick the beslubbering maggot-faced bastard (you remembered I liked beslubbering, didn't you? But you forgot sheep-biting) weasel right in the nuts. Really hard.

I'm not sure about the mascot thing, Penny. After all, I am King Pellinore, monarch to the Krewe of Orpheus! And, well, mascot to the world's smallest gang sounds a little demeaning, comparatively speaking. I'll think about it.

Sentiments & Salutations,
King Pellinore
Krewe of Orpheus Monarch

P.S. Did I mention that I'm monarch for the Krewe of Orpheus at Mardi Gras this weekend? Cause I am.

Tuesday
To: lost_goat
cc: Billy
From: Grace
Subject: Re: schedules & schemes

Dear Your Royal Highness, King Pellinore, Monarch to the Krewe of Orpheus,

Did you mention what you're doing this weekend? Because if you have, I've forgotten.

I just spoke with Billy for a few minutes, and he says he'll get a car from the airport, and for calling him feeble-minded and old, he's going to pee in your swimming pool. Maybe. You'll never know for sure. As for helpless, he says he's not so helpless that he can't call all your ex-girlfriends and warn them that you might possibly have the clap. And if you use his razor to shave your pits, he'll accidentally use your toothbrush to clean behind his bollocks. And that is the final time I ever act as intermediary between you two. Revolting, the pair of you.

As surprising as it may seem these days, I have actually never flown before. I've travelled in Canada a fair bit, but we always drove, and the two times I've been to the U.S., I took a bus and a train. So yes, if my ridiculous lack of global exploration helps you to offset your necessarily enormous carbon footprint, then by all means take advantage of me. Erm. You know what I mean. But what do you mean you have a forest? Like, in your backyard, or what?

I trust you will find this reply satisfactory, and remain yours faithfully,
Penny

Tuesday (late)
To: Grace
cc: Billy
From: lost_goat
Subject: Re: schedules & schemes

Wotcher, Penny. A last quick note tonight, since you and Billy will be far too busy to bother
My forest is in Bangalore, India, as a matter of fact. I connected with a company called CarbonNeutral and got in on planting a mango forest there. I only started with 40 trees, but aside from cleaning the air, the fruit provides income for the locals, and some of the income will be put back into more trees, so it will continue to grow. I haven't been back to Bangalore since they were planted, but I'd like to some day. And if I know I'm making extra flights (like to Ontario for a birthday party), then I do something locally. When I got home from your cottage, I bought offsets through an organization in Canada. It's not a perfect solution, but it definitely helps.

Tell Billy I'm taking my toothbrush with me, and that I warned all my exes long ago to block him. Oh, and I may or may not have added something to my pool. Something that might turn purple when exposed to piss. That might possibly stain skin.

With the highest esteem and consideration,
King Pellinore
Krewe of Orpheus (Monarch)
Chapter 44

Grace awoke with a deeply indrawn breath, and she stretched, her toes encountering icy cold sheets beyond the space she’d been curled up in. She stretched even harder, grunting as she did so, and then quickly turned on her side and drew her knees up to reclaim the warmth. She glanced at the clock, and even as she saw it was early yet, any thought of drifting back to sleep fled when she remembered it was the day Billy was to arrive from Glasgow.

Pulling the blankets up to her nose, she hugged her pillow to her chest and grinned into it, anticipation blooming in her chest. It was a new sensation, being able to feel unabashedly excited about seeing him again without the fears and reservations that had held her back before their time alone together at the cottage. As much as she was still uncertain exactly how their new relationship would work, she was ready and willing to give it--and Billy--everything she could. It had surprised her a little how much she'd missed him after their weekend together, considering he'd never had time to become a part of her day-to-day life, and the knowledge that she’d see him again in just seven hours sent a thrill through her.

Grace took a deep breath, threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. She turned the thermostat up, relishing the sound of the new baseboard heater clicking quietly to life, took a quick shower and then dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and a thick navy cardigan for warmth. After making coffee, she gave her apartment a quick cleaning. Normally tidy--it was so small that any clutter soon drove her crazy--a little dust had collected since its redecoration. Once the place was as spotless as she could manage, she had her breakfast and then slipped out to get some groceries. When she returned, she put the groceries away, made herself another coffee, and then settled down at her desk to try and get her day's work done before Billy showed up.

Grace finished her final article just before two, and finally allowed herself to look up the airport website, discovering that Billy’s flight had landed on time. She was just shutting down her computer when there was a light knock at the door. She rushed over, took a quick look through the peephole, and opened it. "Billy!"

His grin was quick and wide. "Hello, wee girl."

Grace threw herself into his arms, wrapping hers tight around his neck, laughing as he picked her up off the ground. "Hi, Billy."

"Hi yourself." He held her a moment longer, then set her down and took her face between his cold hands before kissing her, hard. He finally let her go, resting his hands on her shoulders and stroking her neck with one thumb as he looked at her. "God, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"It's only been three weeks," she said, completely helpless to stop her delighted smile.

"It feels like three months."

"It does." Not taking her eyes from his, she tilted her head to trap his hand between her shoulder and her cheek.

"Grace?" he murmured, brushing his other hand up the side of her neck, making her shiver.

"Yes?"

"Can I come in, love?"
Blushing, she closed her eyes and huffed a laugh, then stepped back, opening the door wide. "I suppose. Seeing as how you've come all this way to see me, and everything."

He grinned at her, then stooped to pick up his bags. "Very kind of you, I'm sure."

It was only then that Grace noticed how much luggage he seemed to have with him, and she plucked a garment bag off his arm as she held the door for him. "Good lord, aren't you only here for two days?"

"It's not the two days here, it's the three weeks in L.A." He slung his carry-on over his shoulder, picked up a guitar case, and pulled a large, wheeled suitcase through the doorway behind him.

Grace closed the door behind him, hanging the garment bag on a hook on the back of the door. "I thought they gave you clothes for these big awards shows?"

Billy put his bags down in a tidy pile near her desk, propping his guitar case in the corner, then shrugged off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. "I'll be getting a tuxedo for the Oscars, yeah, but I decided to wear my kilt for the SAG awards. It meant a bit extra to bring with me. And I'm booked on a few talk shows after the Oscars, not to mention all the events beforehand." He reached out to snag her hand and pull her towards him, wrapping his arms around her. "All these clothes, it's all very complicated, you know, wee girl."

"Is it, now?" She leaned into him, looped her arms around his shoulders, her hands coming to rest in the hood of his sweatshirt. "Poor Billy. Perhaps you should take some time off from wearing them, before you have to jump back into the well-attired fray."

He nodded his head slowly. "I do believe you might have hit upon a possible solution to my dilemma. What would I do without you?"

She made a sudden face. "Probably spend a lot less on flights, for one thing."

He leaned in to kiss the tip of her nose, then let go of her to head for the sofa. He dropped onto it with a sigh. "Any chance of a cuppa, hen? I'm parched."

"Of course." She went straight to the tiny kitchen and turned on the kettle.

"As a matter of fact," he said, stretching his arms behind his head, "My flights from Glasgow to Toronto, Toronto to L.A., and the car to get here, added up to a grand total of one thousand, two hundred quid less than the original flight did."

"Are you serious?" she asked, astonished, as she retrieved two mugs from the cupboard. "But that makes no sense whatsoever! And please tell me you're not talking about a seat in economy. I knew flying was expensive, but..."

"Business class. My travel agent thinks I'm mad, but I think my bank account is going to insist I stop in Toronto every time I have to go to L.A." He grinned.

She laughed. "Your bank account will insist, will it? And nothing else?"

"Nothing. Certainly not my hands. Or my mouth. Or my pants."

"Your pants! Oh, I see, so not only am I now a cheap stopover--" She threw a glare at him over her shoulder, daring him to bring up the word 'layover', "--but I'm just a convenient bit of hanky panky to fill the time on your way through, am I?" She poured the boiling water over the tea bags in the mugs, set the kettle down, and turned around to find Billy standing right behind her. She let out a
squeak of surprise.

"No, you're bloody well not," he growled, and threaded one hand into her hair to grip the back of her head before bringing his mouth down on hers in a swift demanding kiss.

Grace couldn't stop the whimper that formed in the back of her throat, nor prevent her arms from twining around his neck as he pushed her back up against the counter. Her mouth opened under his, and the wetslick heat of his tongue stroked against hers.

A few long, breathless minutes later, Billy shifted his attention to her throat, sucking and nibbling as she tilted her head to the side and softly gasped. "You're not," he murmured in her ear, his voice husky.

It took Grace a moment to remember what he'd even said before he kissed her. "I know." Her eyes drifted shut again.

"Do you?"

"Yes. I do."

"Good." Billy kissed his way around her throat until he could nuzzle under the hair at the back of her neck, seeking out his favourite spot as her head fell forward. When he found it, he pressed a hot damp kiss there, breathing in the sound of her moan. "Yes," he whispered huskily. "God, I've missed that sound."

Twenty minutes later they had recovered their composure and were curled up on the sofa with their tea.

"I don't particularly wish to break the mood," Billy said, leaning back into the corner of the sofa so that he was partially facing her. "But I reckon we'd better discuss cuntface. What time are we meeting him?"

Grace snorted. "Seven o'clock, in the park where he ambushed me the other day. It's not a back alley, but it will be dark, except for the lights along the walkway."

He reached over with one foot and used it to clumsily pat her own. "Good. You can be waiting for him in the light, and he won't even see me nearby if I keep to the shadows."

"Billy," she asked, uncertain for the first time, "What exactly do you intend to do?"

"Relax, love," he said, smiling, continuing to rub her foot with his. "I intend to beat him at his own game, that's all." He set his tea down on the coffee table and rose, going over to the carryon bag he'd set on top of his suitcase. He rummaged in it for a moment, then returned to sit beside her and held out a small digital recorder. "I did some research, Grace. I think he's made an epic fucking mistake, and we're going to try and catch him at it."

She took the recorder, turning it over in her hand, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"The first time, he didn't do anything illegal, yeah? You signed off on everything, and he just took what he was legally entitled to."
"Thanks for the reminder of my monumental stupidity," she muttered.

Billy made a 'tsk' sound. Taking first the recorder, then her tea from her hands, he set them on the coffee table and then wrapped his arms around her. Lying back, he carried her with him. "Stop it. You know I don't think that."

"You might not, but I do," she said, her words muffled in his soft hoody.

"You shouldn't. The point is, other than your tax return of which we've no proof, last time he did nothing illegal. This time, Grace, he did. He threatened you and asked for money in return for not carrying out those threats--and that, dear heart, is extortion."

She froze for a moment, and then cautiously raised her head to look at him. "Are you sure about that?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"No, I mean, are you really sure? Is that the law in Canada, or Scotland? Because I don't want to get my hopes up if--"

Holding her gaze directly, he said,"That's the Canadian law, love, I checked." He stroked his hand over her hair. "If we can record even some of his threats, we'll have evidence of extortion."

She laid her head back down on his chest, butterflies suddenly fluttering furiously inside her ribcage. "And then what?"

"You'll have a choice to make, which direction you want to take it. I reckon you've got three options."

"And they are?"

"One. You take the evidence to the police, and hopefully he's charged and the case goes to court."

Grace frowned. "And I'd have to testify, and everything would be made public anyway."

"Aye, likely."

"Well I don't like that option. Two?"

"Two, you show him the recorder and tell him if he either goes to the press or ever comes near you again, you'll go straight to the police with it." His hand smoothed down her hair and onto her back, rubbing lightly.

"That's the one, obviously. You think there's a third option?"

Billy was silent for a moment. "Yes," he finally said, as if debating with himself whether to speak. "You show him the recorder and tell him to give you back the money he took from you, or you'll go straight to the police with it."

"Give me back--" Her voice failed her. She extricated herself from his arms and sat up, still half on his lap, to look down at him. "Tell him to pay me back, or I'll go to the police. Isn't--isn't that--"

"Extortion, too?" He finished for her, and when she nodded, he sighed. He held out his hand, waited until she threaded her fingers with his. "I suspect that purely by the letter of the law, it might be. But morally? I don't think anyone would blame you, love. He tricked you out of everything you own, made the last year of your life hell, and then came back to try and do it again.
All you'd be doing is asking for your own money back, whilst trying to protect me. Ethically, I believe you'd be in the clear, but it's up to you. However you want to play it, Grace, I'll back you up."

She stared at him for several long minutes, her hand tightly gripping his, but eventually she had to move. Her nerves were getting keyed up, and her mind was racing, trying to sort out what she wanted to do, how Michael might react. She climbed to her feet and, wrapping her cardigan tightly around herself, began to pace, thinking furiously. A glance at Billy told her he was watching her, sympathy in his eyes, but he said nothing to try and influence her in any particular direction.

She almost couldn't bring herself to even think about the third option, not from any ethical dilemma, but because it was too tempting to think about getting her money back. After all, there was no guarantee that Michael wasn't just as broke as she was, if he was trying to blackmail her even knowing how little she had. Then again, she wouldn't put it past him to have pots of cash, and just want to twist her up in knots again. Judging from the way he'd toyed with her on Sunday, he got off on the power trip, on watching her squirm. He deserves it, she suddenly thought. He deserves everything he gets--

"You don't have to decide right now," Billy said gently, interrupting her thoughts. "You could wait and see how it plays out tonight."

"He wouldn't have the money on him," she said, and hearing how sharp her voice sounded, she stopped pacing for a moment and took a deep breath. She was in the kitchen, so she leaned against the counter and looked over at Billy. "He wouldn't have it on him, but it's not like we can trust him to come back with it."

Billy sat up, nodding. "No, we couldn't. We'd have to go with him to a bank. Is there one near the park?"

She thought for a moment. "Yes, there are two on the other side of the park, on opposite corners. One of them is an RBC, which is what he used to bank with, at least. Do you think he probably still does?"

"Likely, yes. All right, so from that aspect, it's possible."

She nodded once.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he gently urged, and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Talk it out."

She started pacing again, pausing to look unseeingly out the windows, to fiddle with the curtains, to straighten a dish towel hanging on the oven door. "He might not have any money. That could be why he's hitting me up now. Or he's doing it just for fun, which I wouldn't put past him. And he knows me, goddammit. He knows that if I'm willing to even entertain the thought of paying him off, that I'd want to keep it all quiet and would never go to court. I don't trust him, Billy. I don't trust him not to turn this to his advantage, somehow."

"That's why I'll be there, love," he said, sounding firm and steady, and when she looked over at him he was watching her intently. "I'll be there to back you up, and I won't let him twist you around with fast words or empty threats. Don't forget, we'll have the element of surprise; it's our turn to keep him off-balance. So don't worry about trying to figure out what he might do, or why, and just think about what you want to do."

"I want to at least try and get my money back," she said immediately. "I hate that he still controls
how I live. Even though this place isn't a shithole anymore--" She offered Billy a small smile, but quickly grew serious again. "--I'm only here because of him. I want my life back, I want choices back. I don't want him looming over us anymore."

"Come here?" he asked, holding out his hand. When she walked over to stand in front of him, he tugged her down to sit on his lap, wrapping his arms around her. He pressed a kiss to her temple. "Tell me to sod off if you like, Grace, but he doesn't have to loom over us, whether we get your money tonight or not. And I know it doesn't seem like it to you, not when you're down inside it all, but you've been making your choices, bloody good ones. You chose not to go bankrupt, you chose to sacrifice and live here to pay off the debts. You chose to fight. And no one, not even cuntface Michael, can take that away from you."

Grace's eyes filled with tears, and she swiped at them, annoyed. "Aw, fuck. I didn't want to do this."

Billy smiled even as he kissed her cheek. "I know."

"It's just that he does loom over me. No matter how hard I try to forget about it, to let it go, I'm constantly reminded in the back of my mind just by living here, what he did to me. It's so hard to let go of the anger when a part of me is angry every single day." She gulped a deep breath in an attempt to stop crying. "And in a bizarre, stupid way, it's actually a little worse now that you and I are...you know, good. Because now I'm happy, and then suddenly I'm angry because I'm stuck here, and then I'm grateful that you care about me, and then I miss you and I'm royally pissed off that there's nothing I can do about it because I'm fucking broke, and it's just this roller coaster of extremes and I feel like I'm losing my mind--" She broke off with a hiccup.

"Dear heart," Billy murmured, tightening his hold on her, stroking her hair. "You're not losing your mind. But you need to go easy on yourself, give yourself a break. Imagine if one of your friends went through everything you've been through in the past year." He shushed her with gentle fingertips on her lips when she tried to interrupt. "Think of all the enormous changes that have happened: Michael disappeared, stole all your money and more, and betrayed you. You had to sell most of what you owned, move into a flat you hated, your friends abandoned you, you met a ridiculous Scotsman who put you through the wringer, you learned about yet another debt, you met and hosted movie stars, you started a new relationship, and just when things were looking up a bit, Michael returned and is trying to extort even more money from you. Now, if all that happened to one of your friends, what would you tell her?" He rubbed her cheek with his nose and answered his own question. "You'd tell her she's fucking incredible, the way she's handled everything, and she should bloody well be kinder to herself, because she deserves it. You'd tell her she's been through hell, and she should accept any and every good thing the universe sees fit to bestow upon her, because it fucking owes her one. Wouldn't you?"

Grace tucked her face into the open neck of his hoody and, after a moment, nodded.

"Aye. And you're worth no less, Grace Cadence MacPherson," he said softly.

She began to cry in earnest at that, but the storm soon passed, and she raised her head again, wiping her face. She went to get up, but Billy held on to her.

"Don't go anywhere--" he began to protest.

"I want to show you something. Come with me." When he released her, she climbed to her feet and held out her hand, waiting until he rose and clasped it. She led him over to the window and wordlessly drew aside the navy curtain that hid the painted surfboard.
Billy crouched down, forearms on his knees, to take a closer look. The plain blue surfboard now had a white saltire on the nose, and on the tail were his initials, BB, intertwined with a vaguely Celtic design, all in white.

"I painted the Scottish flag with White-Out, and used a correction pen for the rest of it," she said, suddenly feeling silly. "I was lonely, and at loose ends, and I was thinking of you, and I just sat on the floor here one night and doodled--"

He surged upwards, swiftly gripped the back of her neck with his right hand, and pulled her in to kiss her hard.

She made a small noise of surprise as he kissed her, her hands caught between them against his chest. Her fingers curled into the thick cotton of his hoody.

"Bloody hell, Grace," he said roughly against her lips a moment later. "You have no idea what you've done, do you?"

"What--I--" she stammered, caught off-guard. "No?"

"You invited me in," he whispered, just before kissing her again, this time tender and warm. When her lips parted beneath his, he entered her mouth, tongue stroking hers, nibbling at her lower lip, groaning as she sucked on his. He slowly walked her backwards across the room, nuzzling her jaw, pressing kisses to the column of her throat, stripping off her cardigan as they went. Grace whimpered, her head tilting back, and when they reached the bed he bore her down onto it and covered her with his body. "God, I missed you," he growled.

"I missed you, too," she said, sliding her hands up under his hoody, under the hem of the t-shirt he wore beneath it, to lightly scratch a trail down his spine. She could feel the muscles in his back shift as he curved into her touch. "I'm so glad you're here, Billy."

He nuzzled her breast through the material of her t-shirt. "You brought home a few of those condoms, didn't you?"

She gave a breathy laugh. "Yes, I did."

"So I don't have to get up to fetch my bag, then?"

"No, you don't have to fetch your bag. Getting lazy, are you, Boyd?"

Billy pushed up her t-shirt to lick a stripe up her flat abdomen, revelling in the way she squirmed underneath him. "No. I just refuse to let go of your body for the next hour, at least."

"An hour, eh?" Her eyes fluttered closed as he undid the button on her jeans and dropped a light kiss on the portion of her belly thus revealed. "A bit optimistic, don't you think, considering it's been three weeks since we've seen each other?"

He grinned against her ribs. "I'm including a fifty-five minute nap in that."

She laughed out loud.

Billy breathed in sharply through his nose; the way her muscles contracted as she laughed had the unexpected effect of turning him on in a flash, knowing those same muscles would soon be clenching even tighter as she came. He rose to his knees and yanked his hoody and t-shirt off over his head, then pulled her upright to more gently divest her of her t-shirt as well. He drank in the sight of her breasts, creamy white against her navy lace bra, and dipped his head to mouth at her
nipple through the fabric.

Grace moaned, her arms rising to wrap around him, one hand in his hair, cradling his head to her. After a moment she pushed him away again, rolling him over to shove him down flat on the bed. She kneeled over him, sitting astride his hips, and looked down at him, her lips curving up. "I think I'd like to be in charge today, if it's all the same to you."

Billy made an involuntary noise, and his cock twitched against her arse.

She laughed, delighted. "I'll take that as agreement, then, shall I?"

"Ehm—if you like." He was trying for casual, but the tremor in his voice gave him away. He canted his hips up, pressing himself against her, lifting her slightly. The weight of her body on his was intoxicating, making his head swim. "Christ, yes."

Grace put her hands on his chest, palms covering his nipples, and leaned over to kiss his jaw, her light stubble rasping against her lips. "You'll do what I tell you?" she asked, low and sultry, her hair drifting across his shoulder.

His eyes slid shut, his head tilted back, and a sudden thought flickered through his mind. "Yes," he said, even as he wondered if her desire to be in charge was related to her fear that the evening ahead would be entirely out of her control. "Anything."

She huffed against his skin. "Aren't you supposed to say 'within reason'?"

"Intriguing. Are you planning on telling me to do something unreasonable, then?" He rested his hands on her bare lower back, his thumb tracing the trough of her spine. Her skin was smooth and soft and warm.

"You never know…" She nipped his earlobe, then soothed it with her tongue.

"Mmm. I rather think once you get going, I won't be capable of reason, so I'll leave it up to you."

"Brave man." Grace kissed the hollow at the base of his throat, and then sat up. She lifted her arms and crossed her wrists, resting them on the crown of her head, her face tilted down and away. "Undo me."

Billy drew in a deep breath. It was a conscious, shy pose, he knew, but he'd never seen her look so erotic. "I plan to, believe me," he said, voice deep and intent, his hands gripping her hips tightly.

She darted a glance at him as her cheeks pinked. "I meant my bra."

"I can do that, too." He reached up behind her, tracing the band around to the clasp, and deftly undid it. He ran his hands around her ribs, displacing the bra until it hung free in front, giving him tantalising glimpses of her bare breasts. When she lowered her arms, he slid the straps off and dropped it over the side of the bed. He wasn't sure if she wanted to instruct his every move, but he couldn't resist and palmed both her breasts, stroking them, lifting them slightly, thumbing the nipples until they hardened and pebbled.

Grace shivered and leaned into his touch, her hands drifting down to sweep from his shoulders up to his wrists and back again, ruffling the hair on his forearms, skating over his watch.

"Is that good?" he murmured.

"Yes." She leaned over further, shifting up slightly. "But your mouth would be even better."
With a groan of agreement, Billy stretched his neck up and guided her breast to his mouth, laving it with his tongue before drawing it into his mouth and sucking lightly. The softness, the weight of her on his tongue was exciting, and it made his prick stiffen even further.

Grace whimpered, a soft, breathy sound in her throat. She splayed her hands on the bed to either side of Billy's head to hold her weight and lowered herself enough that he could rest his head on the pillow. Her head hanging down a little, her hair pooled on the pillow just above him.

He suckled harder for a moment, and then switched his attentions to the opposite side, before letting his mouth slide off until just her nipple was between his lips, and he flicked it with his tongue.

She let out a faint gasp and rocked her hips, seeking friction but not finding it. "You have such a wicked little tongue, William," she said unevenly.

He felt his stomach swoop, and his fingers tightened on her sides as he sucked hard on her nipple before releasing it on a hot breath. "Oh, fuck, when ye say my name like that…"

Grace pushed herself up on her hands and tilted her hips back just enough that she was able to reach his lips, and she kissed him fiercely. As she swept her tongue through his mouth, she shifted her weight and moved one hand down to grope at his waistband, finding and undoing the button on his fly. The zip was easily undone, and she released his mouth with a soft moan. Shifting to sit to one side, her hands tugged at his jeans until he lifted his hips. She pulled his trousers and pants down in one swift move, removing his socks at the same time.

Billy kicked them off the end of the bed even as he reached for her to return the favour. "Want me to show you what else I can do with my tongue, love?" he teased, deft fingers at her waistband.

"That depends." She pulled off her own socks, then shoved the bedding down out of the way.

"On what?" He rolled her onto her back on the sheets and made quick work of removing her jeans and panties, tossing them aside. Once she was naked, he ran the palms of his hands down the outside of her bare hips. "Christ, you're beautiful."

"Oh fuck, who am I kidding," she said a bit breathlessly, pulling him down on top of her. "It doesn't depend on a damn thing. Yes, please."

Billy laughed against her collarbone, then shifted up enough to cover her mouth with his. He kissed her hungrily, tangling his tongue with hers, tasting the satin heat of her. As he stroked the inside of her mouth, she raised one knee, using it to push down on his arse, pulling him snug against her. He groaned into her mouth at the hard press of her pubic bone against his cock. Burying his face in the crook of her neck, he rocked against her.

"Aren't you supposed to be doing something with your tongue?" she asked, her voice gratifyingly unsteady.

"Tongue. Right," he said, and after one last roll of his hips began kissing his way down her body, reaching behind him to pull the sheet and blankets up to his shoulders, her waist. His stubble rasped across her stomach and she let out a squeak, squirming beneath him. Her thigh rubbed against his cock. He sucked in a sharp breath and thrust against her, the sensation almost overwhelming. "Jesus, Grace--"

"Tongue," she reminded him, her hands mapping his shoulders under the edge of the bedding. When he didn't move except to rock against her again, she pushed down on them. "I'm in charge,
remember? Now show me what that prudent little tongue of yours can do, right now."

Huffing a laugh against her sharp hipbone, he glanced up at her, pleased with the hitch in her breath that caused, before disappearing under the blanket as he wriggled further down. "Are you sure about prudent?" He settled in between her legs and nuzzled her neatly trimmed hair with his nose, his voice slightly muffled under the bedclothes. "I suspect you want prurient."

"Dammit," she groaned, twitching slightly in anticipation. "That'll teach me to try and use a good word when your mouth is--oh!" she cut off with a yelp as his tongue painted her with a broad stripe, bottom to top, ending with a little flutter against her clit. "Oh god. Yeah. Prurient."

Billy breathed in deeply of her scent. He'd delighted in the faint smell of her after they'd had sex at her cottage, but here in the warm humid air under the blankets it was intensified into a soft, sweet musk that made his cock throb against the mattress. His first taste of her had proved to be no less enticing. In the dim half-light he could just make out the shape of her, and he ran his narrow thumbs down the outside of her vulva, tracing her labia to end up at her perineum. He grinned as her thighs trembled and nearly squeezed in against his ears. He reached up to push the blankets back just enough to free his head, and she shivered slightly at the sudden rush of cool air against her. "Put your feet on my sides, love," he said, looking up at her from under his lashes as he swept his tongue up her again.

Grace, a pillow jammed under her head and her eyes now locked on his, let her knees fall to the sides under the blankets and placed her heels on his waist. She curled her toes, clutching at the top curve of his arse.

He squirmed, laughing. "No tickling, wee girl, or I might get too distracted. Which would be a shame, now, wouldn't it?" He laid his arms over her thighs, hooking his elbows down and sliding his hands under her firm bottom, lifting her up slightly and giving himself more room.

Her legs butterflied open, she felt the stretch in her hips as a warm pull and nothing more. "Yes," she said, breathing deeply. "Yes, that would definitely be a shame."

Billy drank in the sight of her laid out before him. "Thank god for Pilates, and for a bendy girlfriend," he said fervently, and bent his head to draw the tip of his tongue up, ending at her clit. "The mind boggles." She writhed underneath him as he drew his chin up her other thigh. "Oh, shit--I can't decide whether I want you to shave this instant, or never ever shave again."

He huffed a laugh against her skin, delighted with the reactions he was eliciting. "A beard would be a bit softer than stubble. Think you'd like me with a beard, wee girl?" He pressed an incongruently chaste kiss to her mound.

"I'd be willing to try it," she gasped. "If you insist. Are you going to do anything down there, Boyd,
"Patience, hen. My mouth has been kept busy answering you, since you insist on talking. Not that I'm against hearing you, mind," he added, kissing the soft, unprotected inside of her thigh. "But I was thinking more along the lines of a wee bit of steamy, 'Oh, Billy, oh god yes, please don't stop, Billy.'"

"Well, you might hear that, if you ever give me something to be steamy about. Get on with it, William."

With an entirely sensual smile up at her at the use of his full name, Billy bent his head to his task. He lapped and sucked and fluttered his tongue, starting slowly, gently, taking care not to use the tip of his tongue. He gradually sped up his attentions, and the response of her body was electric and uninhibited. When her legs began to tremble under his arms and soft gasps and moans began to form in her throat, he lifted his head to ask, "Do you want me to finish you like this, or do you want me?"

"You." She squirmed in his hands. "You, please."

"Pass me a condom?"

When he let go of her, she wriggled over a bit to reach her bedside table, scrabbled about in the drawer for a moment, and then tossed a foil packet down to him. She lay back and watched as he kneeled up to deftly roll it on, and she was gratified to see he was clearly every bit as turned on as she was. When he moved to crawl up over her, though, she pushed him back down. "Keep going for a minute."

He chuckled as he situated himself between her thighs again, happy to stay there as long as she wanted. "Whatever you say, love. You're in charge."

"I am, and I am quite enjoying your tongue. It's rather talent--oh!" She exhaled sharply as that tongue flittered against her clit and a quiver ran up and down her spine. "Oh, Billy, that's--"

He sucked her against his mouth and hummed, and the resulting mewling yelp she gave made him-impossible though he would have thought it--even harder. He groaned against her.

"Oh god, Billy--" she gasped, and suddenly her hands were on his head, pulling, reaching for his shoulders and tugging him up. "Minute's up. C'mere, c'mere--"

He scrambled eagerly up her body, aiming a swipe of his tongue at one nipple as he passed, before latching onto her neck to drop hot, open-mouthed kisses up the smooth column of her throat as his hips urged her legs to either side.

Grace wrapped one leg around him, buried one hand in his hair as the other clutched at his back, and she let out a low whine as his cock came to rest against her.

"Lube?" he growled against her throat, his hand unerringly finding and kneading her breast. "So gorgeous…"

"Don't need it." Her head pressing back into the pillow, she canted her hips up until she was rubbing herself against the hard length of his erection, slicking it up with her own wetness, and she moaned.

Billy's brain shorted out at the feel of her sliding against his cock, and it was a long moment before he realised he was breathlessly gabbling into her ear. "God, love, yes. Ye feel so fucking good, will
ye let me--oh god, please let me--"

"Yes," she whimpered, "Now, please Billy, c'mon--"

With a long, heartfelt groan, he shifted his hips, hitched her leg higher, and slowly eased his way inside her. Before he was fully seated, Grace was already rocking up into him. "Christ in a kilt, you're perfect, love, you're so fucking perfect," he rasped, then kissed her throat, hot and wet and messy, his kisses almost frantic as he forced his hips to remain still for her to adjust.

Grace had no intention of staying still, however; before Billy could shift his weight again she was gripping his ribs with her knees and pushing at him, forcing him to roll over onto his back, and somehow she managed to go with him until she sat on top of him, straddling him, his cock still inside her.

"Fucking hell, love--" he growled, hands on her waist holding her as he drove his hips up, drove his length deeper into her, the heat and tightness of her making him gasp. "You can be in charge anytime ye bloody well want tae."

She shifted a little, hands hovering in the air as if uncertain where to put them; as if now that she had him where she wanted him, she was at a loss what to do.

Billy hitched her forward a little and raised his knees, planting his feet flat on the bed. "Lean back if ye want, or use my hands." He rested his elbows on the mattress, his palms facing up towards her.

She did both, leaning back against his thighs and grasping his hands, threading her fingers through his. She kept her eyes on his as she slowly rose up on her knees a bit, and then just as slowly lowered herself back down. "Does that feel okay?" she asked.

He huffed a laugh, and his voice was uneven as he said, "A bit more than okay, wee girl. It feels fucking brilliant."

She grinned at him, her confidence returning, and tossed her long red hair back over her shoulder. Using his hands more for balance than anything else, she used her thigh muscles to lift and lower herself again, a little faster this time. "I may not have thought this one through," she said, her own voice unsteady as she continued to move on him.

"Why?"

"I still have to walk up and down three flights of stairs later."

He laughed again. "Shall I help you out, love?"

"How?"

"Lean forward, put a bit of your weight on my hands." Once she'd done so, he said, "Now, when ye go up, don't come down quite as far." He let her do it a few times, marking her rhythm, and then he began to meet her halfway. Now that his hips were freed of the full weight of her, he could rock them up more easily, and at his apex thrust himself fully into her. "Better?"

"Oh god, yeah," she breathed sharply, speeding up her tempo a little. "That's good." Her eyes fluttered closed.

Billy kept his eyes on her face. "You've no idea how incredible ye look right now, do ye?" he murmured.
Her rhythm faltered, and her head tilted down slightly.

"Your cheeks flushed, your hair tumbling over your shoulders and around your face, your mouth open just a little tae breathe deeper as ye ride me."

Her hips stuttered. "Oh god, Billy," she moaned, swaying forward a fraction.

"That's it, love, yeah." His voice grew rougher and he sped up their pace just a little. "Jesus, but you're gorgeous, Grace. I've never seen anything hotter than you, on top of me. I'm already close, and it's just from the idea that I'm going tae come inside ye, underneath ye, while you're riding my cock."

Grace leaned further forward and tilted her pelvis down, seeking pressure on her clit. "Are you always talky?" she asked breathlessly, "Or are you doing it for me?"

"Both. Oh god--" He rolled his hips in a little circle and gripped her fingers tighter when it made her whimper.

"Good. Keep it up," she panted. "Oh, fuck, Bill, your voice is so gorgeous. I can feel it like an itch in my spine."

He canted his hips in opposition to hers, felt her rub herself against him, and it sent a flash of heat zinging straight to his cock. "So ye don't--ye don't mind?" he said unsteadily. "I'm not distracting ye?"

She opened her eyes, raising her head just enough to train them on his mouth. "I love it. Don't ever stop. Your lovely, innocent-looking mouth, saying things like 'ride my cock'--" She moaned, and a shudder went through her.

While she still had her eyes locked on his mouth, Billy licked his lips, allowed his thickest accent free rein, and whispered, "Ye feel sae guid love, sae tight and hot roun' my cock. I wannae make love tae ye all afternoon and then fuck ye all night. I'm gonnae come in ye so hard--"

"Oh, fuck, Billy--" she gasped, and her eyes slid shut again as she ground down against him. "I'm so close, Bill, I'm so close oh god--"

Billy squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to hold on and let her come first. He could feel the sweat between their palms, her fingers hot in his, could feel sweat prickling on his neck and chest, and his toes curled into the bedding. "Come for me, Grace," he rasped, thrusting upwards, burying himself in her over and over as she rode him, her thighs shaking and her rhythm shattered.

With a sudden low cry Grace's back bowed up, her head nearly touching his chest, and she clutched his hands tighter as she began to come, driving herself down onto him, against him. "Billy, oh god oh god," she choked out, and as she clenched around him he was lost. His hips stuttered and jerked, and it only took two more plunges into her before he was arched up off the bed, blood roaring in his ears, the tendons of his neck straining as he came, hard.

"Oh Christ Grace, yes, yes, don't stop don't fucking stop," he groaned, head thrown back, every muscle in his body locked tight in agonizing pleasure, his cock pulsing inside her. He trembled and shook as sparks flashed behind his clenched eyelids and a long, low moan tore from his throat. It was only as the lengthy orgasm ebbed and he sank back down onto the bed that he became aware Grace was still trying to draw his satisfaction out. Her hands still propped on his, she hung between them limp and panting, her shoulder blades rising like delicate wings from her back as she rocked
against him.

"Shh," Billy soothed, nudging her forward and up enough with his thighs to allow his softening prick to slide free of her. Immediately he drew her down onto him and pushed at her knees to remind her to straighten them out.

Grace clumsily followed his urging and stretched out full-length on top of him with a soft whimper as he wrapped his arms around her.

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes, the only sounds in the apartment their slowly diminishing panting and the low hum of the refrigerator in the corner.

Eventually Billy tightened his hold on her and eased them onto their sides, rubbing one hand up and down the length of her back. "How are you doing, love?" he murmured, nuzzling his nose into her hair.


He smiled and kissed the top of her head. "The very same." He let her go and sat up, swinging his legs off the side of the bed. "I'd best go clean up. Don't go anywhere." Leaning over to drop a kiss on her bare shoulder, Billy rose and headed for the bathroom.

When he returned a few minutes later, after a detour to get his phone from his jacket, he found Grace curled up on her side with the blankets pulled up again and covering her to the tip of her nose. He climbed in and snuggled up behind her, warming himself against her, sliding his arms around her when she wriggled further back into his embrace. "Thank you, love," he whispered into her ear.

There was a smile in her voice as she replied, "You're welcome. Thank you."

"You're welcome. What surprised you?"

She huffed a laugh and hugged his arm against her chest, in between her breasts, the fingers of one hand curling over his. "Me."

Billy opened his hand to lace their fingers together, their thumbs resting against her breastbone. "Me too. But you were brilliant."

After a moment, sounding thoughtful, she added, "I don't think I'd want to do it like that every time, though."

"Did it hurt?" he asked, fairly sure it hadn't but needing to check.

"No. Not a bit."

He nodded, and his nose was tickled by her hair. "Not enough of your skin against mine."

She rolled in his arms and pressed herself against him, her arm over his waist and hugging him tightly. "Exactly. I'm so glad."

He stroked her hair, brushing it back from her temple. "It was...erotic, having you sitting on top of me, looking down at me. God, you were sexy as hell. But this--" He tightened his hold on her for a
moment, feeling her against him from breast to knee. "This feels so good."

"Yes," she breathed, and her hand slid down to cup his arse, tugging his hips against her. His soft penis gave a half-hearted little twitch, and she smiled against his pectoral. "It really does."

Billy leaned back a bit, looking down at her face, until she did the same and looked up at him. Two fingers lightly touching the underside of her chin, he kissed her, warm and open and slow. When she made a little noise, he slid his hand down her throat, then up the side to cup her jaw in his palm, his thumb stroking her cheekbone, his fingers cradling her neck. The kiss was languid, full of satiation and contentment and joy, and Billy found himself wishing they could stay like that for the rest of the day, possibly even for the entire next day as well.

Eventually, though, Grace ended the kiss, tucking her head under his chin. "Let's take a nap," she murmured, her fingertips stroking his pec, absent-mindedly playing with his chest hair. "I hardly slept a wink last night, and I don't remember the last time I felt so warm and cosy."

"And well-shagged," Billy added, his voice a warm quiet rumble of amusement.

She chuckled. "And well-shagged."

He rolled enough to reach his phone on the bedside table, and set an alarm. "An hour?"

"Perfect."

Putting it aside, he drew her against him again as he slid his thigh between hers. Snuggled up against him, Grace yawned. "What did you mean, 'I invited you in'?"

"Hmm?" Billy stroked her hair away from her face to stop it tickling his nose.

"When you saw the surfboard. You said I invited you in, but I did that the day after we met. You were the first person I ever invited in. What did you mean?"

He slowly rubbed his hand up and down her bare back as he thought about how to express it. "You invited me in when I wasn't here," he finally said. "You once said I confused you, that when I wasn't around you knew what you thought and felt, but as soon as I talked to you, you got all mixed up. That you painted me onto the surfboard, it...it meant you allowed me in when I wasn't here influencing you. And it meant you wanted to keep a piece of me with you."

She shook her head, her hair catching on his chest hair. "Not a piece of you. Never let anyone take pieces of you."

He remembered their conversation in her dingy flat that first time; it felt more like three years ago than three months. "If you give yourself away, what's left?"

"Yeah."

He was quiet for a long moment, thinking about that. "It's a piece of me I still have. We're sharing it."

Grace's shoulders shook in his embrace as she laughed. "That's starting to sound a bit disturbing."

He tickled her side, tightening his hold on her as she squirmed.

"Billy! Cut it out!" she gasped, giggling.
Wrapping an arm around her neck he hugged her head to him, mashing her face against his chest. "I'm being serious, Miss Smartass," he said with great dignity.

"Minny. Mebbe go."

He released her, huffing a laugh when she glared up at him, rubbing her nose. "You're the one who asked what I meant," he pointed out, smiling down at her. "I'm just trying to explain."

Grace wriggled up a bit until she could tuck her face into the crook of his neck. "I know. I think I get what you're saying. And yes, I wanted you here with me." She pressed a kiss to his throat. "I missed you."

He turned his head until his lips met her temple. "I'm glad. I missed you, too, dear heart."

"I'm glad."

Stroking each other with gentle fingertips, they were both quiet until first Billy, then Grace, fell asleep, entwined in each other's arms.
"Are you sure you'll be warm enough?" Grace asked, twisting her grey knitted hat in her hands. "Maybe you should put on another sweater--"

"I'll be fine, wee girl," Billy said patiently. Ever since they'd awoken from their nap, Grace had been getting progressively more twitchy, her nerves ramping up as the meeting with Michael approached. They were at the door, ready to go, but she kept finding reasons to delay their departure.

"Where did I put the bank account number?" She began to pat her pockets. It was a basic account she never used anymore, and it had no connection to her regular accounts. If by some chance they did convince Michael to transfer money into it, she fully intended to close it out once she'd put the money towards her loan.

"In your back pocket."

She checked, and sure enough, the slip of paper was there. "Maybe I should bring some extra batteries for the recorder, just in case," she said, and bit her lip.

"And what, swap them out in front of him?" Billy smiled and took her wrung-out hat from her fingers. He stretched it back into shape and put it on her head, tugging the knit brim down over her ears. Ducking in to give her a quick kiss, he said, "Let's go, love."

"But--"

He kissed her again. "Let's go, love."

"But what if--"

Another kiss, this time with a grin. "Let's go, love."

Grace rolled her eyes but was unable to prevent a smile, amused despite herself. "All right, all right, I get the point. Time to put on my big girl panties, is that what you're saying?"

Billy drew her into an embrace, their rustling winter coats making it awkward to get their arms properly about each other. "That's not quite what I'm saying, no," he said, kissing the tip of her nose. "I'm saying don't worry so much. Whatever happens, happens, but he's not going to hurt you again. I'll make sure of it."

"You will, will you?" She was touched and annoyed by that in equal measure, and couldn't quite decide which emotion to act upon.

He looked at her closely, and then chuckled, albeit with an air of exasperation. "Too overprotective for you, MacPherson? Look, as much as I'd like to shield you behind me while I pummel cuntface into a bloody pulp, you know full well I won't do that--because you don't need me to. You are perfectly capable of dealing with him, and that's exactly what you're about to do. I'm going with you as backup, as moral support, and as the other half of your gang. All right?"
Grace tightened her arms around him and buried her face in the scarf wrapped around his neck. She nodded.

Billy turned his head to press a kiss to her cheek. "Good. Now that that's settled, wee girl, shall we go? I don't know about you, but I'm beginning to roast inside all this warm winter clothing."

She took a deep breath in through her nose, and the scent of wool and Billy combined gave her a feeling of confidence that she had been sorely lacking. She let go of him, straightened up to her full five feet two inches, and nodded. "Let's go."

He opened the door, giving her a warm smile as she wrapped her determination around her like an overcoat and strode down the stairs.

"This is the park," she said, rubbing her nose with her mittened hand. They had paused at the corner for a last-minute conclave before taking their places. Despite her previous surge of confidence, she was feeling distinctly nervous.

"How far in were you last time?" Billy asked, checking his watch. "It's ten to seven."

"Not far. Just a little ways down the path there's a playground. I was on the swings."

He flashed her a grin. "Of course you were."

She gave him a little shove. "Shut up. I'm going back to the playground, but I'll stay on the path in the light. I don't know if he will tonight, but last time he came from that direction." She pointed down the road ahead of them, in the opposite direction from which they'd walked.

"All right. You'd best head in, then. And Grace?"

She looked up at him, and her breath hitched at the look in his eyes.

Billy took his glove off to cup her cold cheek in his warm hand. "I'll be close by the entire time."

She leaned into his touch. "Okay."

"Don't forget to turn the recorder on when you see him coming," he reminded her, and then with a last squeeze of her hand, he slipped into the shadows of the corner of the park.

Grace kept her eyes on Billy, but it wasn't long before his black coat, dark jeans, and black toque hid him from sight amongst the darkness of the spruce trees. She took in a deep, fortifying breath, let it out slowly, and then marched quickly down the path into the park. There was a lantern post near the swings, and she stood close to it to wait.

After five minutes that felt more like an hour, Grace was getting cold and impatient. She knew it was probably only just seven o'clock, and knowing Michael he'd be late just to toy with her some more, but the butterflies in her stomach had returned with a vengeance and she just wanted the whole thing to be over with. And if the wait was hard for her, how frustrating must it be for Billy? At least she could move around and stamp her feet, but Billy wanted to stay quiet and unnoticed. She was glad she didn't know exactly where he was; at least she wouldn't be able to give him away.

Several long minutes later, Grace finally heard footsteps crunching towards her over the crusted
snow. With her back still to the person approaching, she quickly stripped off her mitten, pulled the small recording device from her pocket and pressed record, then tucked it back in with the microphone at the top. She tugged her mitt back on as she turned to see Michael skirting the swings, walking towards her, coming to a stop a few feet away.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," he said, sounding amused. "Your little hobbit must be important to you, Graceling."

"You really need to stop calling me that, Mikey." She stood at her full height, already annoyed. Christ, she had to ignore his jabs, or she'd never get through this.

He laughed, unperturbed by her feeble attempt to get under his skin the way he got under hers. "But that's how I always think of you, darling. As my little Graceling."

"I am not yours," she bit out, clenching her fists inside her mitts. "Can we just get on with this?"

"In a rush, are we? Well, I suppose it is a bit chilly out here this evening. I'm getting tired of winter, to be honest," he said conversationally, as if there were nothing more important to discuss than the weather. "I'm heading to Barbados next week; you know, sand, sun and surf. Did you bring my money, Graceling?"

"Your--" She cut herself off before she could start shouting, and let out a short puff of breath. "I have it. What sort of assurance do I have if I give it to you?" Michael's sudden grin at that was sharp and feral, and Grace wondered how she could possibly have failed to see this side of him when they were together. She felt a hot flush of shame at the thought that he must have been laughing at her the entire time.

"None. But I can assure you that if you don't give it to me, I'll be calling TMZ tonight and telling them the whole sorry, humiliating tale. I thought you wanted to protect your little B-list celebrity boyfriend?"

She clenched her jaw tightly for a moment before grinding out, "I do."

"Then give me the five grand and I won't make that phone call."

"This has to be the last time," Grace said, letting all her anxiety and desperation show. "You took twenty-seven thousand dollars from me, you sonofabitch. I had to scrape, beg and borrow for this five grand, this has to be the last time. There's nothing left, do you understand? Even if you go to TMZ and tell them Billy's last girlfriend cheated on him and now he's dating me and I'm broke--"

"Not just broke, Graceling. Up to your pretty tits in debt, remember?" he said with a grin so smug she wanted to wipe it off his face with her fists.

"Even so," she choked out, barely able to force the words past the hot tangle of anger in her throat. "You've taken every cent I can lay my hands on, so there's no point in coming back. Have you got that? This is the last time, Michael Varas."

"No promises, darling," he said coolly. "But the payoff you've brought will go a long way toward keeping me quiet, and keeping your little hobbit friend’s reputation intact."

Grace couldn't take it anymore. "Stop calling him little!" she snapped. "He's a bigger man than you'll ever be." Unable to resist, she looked him up and down and scornfully added, "In more ways than one."

That got him. His eyes narrowed and he took a step towards her. "You always did have a bitchy
side, didn't you?"

Grace stood her ground, but before she could say a word she saw Michael freeze, his eyes locking on something over her shoulder, and then she felt a bracing hand on her back. "Think that's enough?" she asked, without taking her eyes from her ex.

"I'd say so," Billy said, and his voice was cold.

"Well, look who it is, the hobbit himself." Michael's eyes darted back and forth between them, and for the first time he lost a bit of his self-possession. "Is what enough?" he asked warily.

Grace removed her mitten and retrieved the recorder from her pocket, holding it up to show him. She hit the stop button and rewound it a bit before pressing play. Michael's voice demanding the payment was a bit muffled, but still perfectly intelligible.

"Fuck," he muttered, but then visibly gathered himself again. "So? It won't do you any good."

"What was the definition of extortion again, Billy?" she asked, safely pocketing the recorder.

"Demanding money in return for not carrying out a threat--including disclosing information to a third party."

Continuing to glare at Michael, she asked, "And what's the minimum sentence for extortion?"

The anger was still in Billy's voice, but now there was also satisfaction. "Five years for a first offence."

"Five years, Michael," she repeated, and she couldn't quite control the way her voice shook. "I have you on tape threatening to disclose information to a third party, and demanding five thousand dollars not to do it. You've gotten sloppy."

Michael licked his lips, and he glanced along the path.

Billy spoke immediately. "I may be shorter than you, ye piece of shite, but I reckon I'm a damn sight faster. Just give me an excuse."

Realising he was in a bind, Michael's face hardened, and he glowered at them both. "Fine. The deal's off."

"Too fucking right it is," Grace snapped. "But now there's a new deal. Give me back the money you stole from me, and we can all pretend none of this ever happened. That's the deal, so take it or leave it."

"And if I leave it?"

"Then this recording winds up with the police. I think you'll be too busy with them to have time to call TMZ."

Michael gave a sharp bark of a laugh, but there was little humour in it. "Well, well. The prim and precious Grace MacPherson fights extortion with blackmail. I didn't know you had it in you, darling."

She clenched her hands into fists to keep them from shaking. "I just want my money back, you utter shit," she said.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "And what assurance do I have?" he asked, mocking her.
"Unfortunately, you know me well enough to know I have no desire to go to court," she said, and tried to ignore the tightness that was building in her chest. "But believe me, I bloody well would if you forced me to. Give me back my money and you can walk away, and we'll never have to see each other again."

"It's a chance tae cut your losses and run," Billy added from behind her. "A court case would cost ye a hell of a lot more, and ye know it. Not tae mention those five years in prison."

Michael was silent for a moment, obviously weighing his options. With a disgusted sigh, he ran his gloved hand over his hair. "Fine. But I don't have twenty-seven thousand dollars."

"What a coincidence," Grace shot at him, feeling brittle. "Neither do I."

Billy's hand touched her back again, though she could barely feel it through her winter jacket and the sweater she wore beneath. "Here's what's going tae happen," Billy said, his voice hard. "We'll go tae the bank, and you'll transfer over everything ye do have. You'll smile, you'll say it's a loan repayment, and you'll give Grace her money." For the first time he stepped forward, slightly ahead of her. "And don't think ye can weasel your way out of this, ye fucking prick. I'm sorely tempted tae bash your arrogant face in, but for Grace's sake, I won't. Yet."

Grace was starting to feel ill. She'd heard Billy angry before, of course, but nothing remotely near this icy rage that he was obviously barely holding in check. She was briefly distracted by a trembling in her fingers and in her knees, but her gaze snapped back to Michael as he swore.

"Fucking cocksucker. Just try it," he blustered.

"Yeah?" Billy took a step towards him, but Michael hastily retreated at the same time as Grace reached out and grabbed at Billy's arm.

"No, Billy," she said, her voice sharp and high. "Don't. We--we have to go to the bank." She was disturbed by the fact that a part of her wanted to let him, wanted to watch him punch Michael until he begged Billy to stop, and she recoiled from her own thoughts.

Billy stared at the other man a moment longer, and then turned to grip her mittened hand. "Lead the way," he said, giving her hand a squeeze, and then releasing her. "We'll be following behind."

Grace took off down the path, glad to be in motion. She felt nauseated by her urge to see Billy strike her ex, and when she started to grow dizzy, she realised she was panting far harder than her pace dictated. She tried to focus, concentrating only on where she was going and on slowing down her rapid breathing.

By the time they entered the bank, Grace had herself under control. As she stuffed her mittens in her pockets she wondered if maybe she'd missed her calling as an actress, smiling at the teller as she handed over the slip of paper listing her account number. Michael was a bit terse, but did nothing untoward. He asked the teller to transfer twenty thousand dollars from his account to Grace's, mentioning it was a loan repayment, and signed the slip the teller placed in front of him. When she asked if he wanted a printout of the balance, Billy laughed.

"Holding out on us, Michael?" he asked, and if Grace hadn't known better, she'd have thought he was teasing one of his best mates. It gave her a chill.

Michael smiled thinly. "Have to keep a couple hundred for groceries, don't I?"

"Aye, I guess we can let you eat," Billy chuckled.
The teller smiled at them both, and processed the transaction. Giving both Michael and Grace a printed receipt, she wished them a good evening, and the three left, Billy close on Michael's heels.

Alongside the bank, away from any windows, Billy grabbed Michael's arm and swung him around. Grace sucked in a sharp breath, and the cold air burned in her lungs.

Michael jerked his arm out of Billy's grip. "Fuck off," he spat. "She's got her money."

Billy's voice was low and dangerous, and his eyes glittered in the light from the nearby parking lot. "If ye ever come near Grace again, or even try tae contact her, I will find ye, and I will rip your bollocks off and stuff them down your fuckin' throat. Are we clear?"

"Don't threaten me," Michael growled.

"Are. We. Clear," Billy repeated.

His lip curled. "Crystal," he bit out, and turned to walk away.

"Oh, one more thing, Varas," Billy said.

Michael turned back, muttering, "For fuck's sake, what?"

Billy lashed out and punched him hard in the face, shaking his hand out as Michael stumbled backward and fell against the wall, one hand to his nose. "That's for the 'pretty tits' comment, ye fuckin' bastart."

"Christ!" Michael yelped, blood seeping between his fingers. "You motherfucker, you broke my nose!"

Grace had had all she could take, and she snapped. "And I'll break the other one if you don't fuck off, you two-faced fucking liar! Go!"

Michael pushed himself to standing, muttering, "Cunting little bitch. I should--"

Billy started forward, but Grace was already swinging, and the palm of her hand connected with Michael's cheek with a loud crack. "Don't you dare," she ground out, shaking with a storm of emotion. "Get the hell out of here."

Giving the two of them one last glare, his nose dripping blood and his cheek turning red, Michael pivoted and walked away.

Billy and Grace both watched him hurry off down the street, and then Billy turned to put his arm around her. "Are you--"

She shook him off, still too angry and turbulent inside to tolerate being held, even in Billy's arms. "Don't." She felt sick and shuddery and she couldn't believe she'd just hit someone so hard.

"Grace?"

"Don't," she bit out. She grabbed his hand, and clenching it tightly, towed him along with her as she took off along the sidewalk at a fast clip.
Ten minutes and several blocks later, Billy had to speak up. "Grace, can we head back to the park?"

"What? Why?" She frowned.

"Because I know you need to move. But I'm bloody knackered, love, I need to sit down. It's one o'clock in the morning for me, and it's been a hell of a long day."

"Shit. I'm sorry, Billy," she said wretchedly. "We should go home--"

"No, you'll just end up climbing the walls." He gave her a small smile. "Let's go to the park and I'll sit on a bench like the old man I am, and you can work it off on your swings." He could see she was about to protest, so he added, "I'm too wound up to sleep, so we might just as well be in the park as your flat."

She hesitated a moment longer, and then nodded.

A few minutes later, they were back at the playground. Grace immediately sat on the end swing and began to pump her legs, swinging faster and higher each time. Billy looked for a bench, but there wasn't one nearby and he certainly wasn't going to let her out of his sight, so instead he took a seat on the swing next to her, content to just sway back and forth. He hooked his elbows around the chains and shoved his gloved hands in his pockets.

Billy watched her each time she swung out in front of him, and after another few minutes of silence, his disquiet grew. "Can you not talk to me, Grace?" he asked, pitching his voice loud enough to be heard over the squeak and rattle of the cold metal chains of her swing.

"Not yet." The answer whished past him as she flew by.

He frowned. "Soon, then. I'm concerned, love, and I don't know what you're thinking."

Her rhythm faltered slightly, but then she drove her feet forward again. "I'm trying not to, right now," she said, and her voice shook slightly. "But yes, soon. In a few minutes."

"Okay. Thank you." He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. The fury that had fuelled him while face to face with Michael--the cunting bastard--had faded, and he tried to set aside his unease at Grace's silence, as well. He wondered if she'd realised yet that her debt was now wiped out, that options closed to her just that morning were now wide open. He thought of how she could get a transit pass again and go to the beach every day if she wanted--although why anyone would in this weather was beyond him. In a few months she could afford to leave her shoebox for a better flat, or even buy a little car so that she could go up to her cottage whenever she felt like it. Billy wondered if she'd be more open to the idea of travelling to spend time with him, and immediately felt a bit ashamed of himself. She might not be in debt now, but she was certainly still poor, and it was selfish of him to hope she might want to spend some of her as-yet unearned money on visiting him. No, that was going to have to wait for quite some time yet. At least they still had her visit to Glasgow in April to look forward to.

There was a sudden jingle of metal chains followed by a crunching thump in the snow, and Billy opened his eyes to find Grace getting to her feet in front of him.

"I'm glad you didn't witness that leap," she said ruefully, brushing snow off her knees. "There's a reason my mom named me Grace, and it was so that I'd have some."

He chuckled and rose stiffly out of the swing. "All right, there, wee girl?" He held out one hand to her, and when she put her mittened hand on his, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly.
"Yeah," she said, her voice muffled in his coat. "Sort of. You?"

"Yeah. Sort of." He nudged her head up and dropped a little kiss on her lips, then pulled back upon feeling the chill to her skin. "Bloody hell, love, you're half-frozen! Let's get you back to your flat and warmed up."

She nodded, taking his hand again, and heading down the path at a good clip. "It's the swings. Too windy, apparently. I can't feel my nose."

"Did it help?" he asked.

"The swings?" She glanced up at him, and when he nodded, she returned her gaze to the sidewalk and shrugged. "A bit, I guess. I don't feel quite so much like I'm about to throw up, at least."

"Well, that's something, anyway." Billy gave her hand a squeeze, wishing he knew what was going on inside her head. He forced himself to be patient; they'd talk when they got back to her flat.

Billy pulled off his knit cap as Grace unlocked her door. Scrubbing a hand through his hair, he followed her inside, closing and locking it again behind them. After they'd shed their winter coats and boots, Grace turned the thermostat up and put the kettle on.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Yes, please." He stood and watched as she readied two mugs, put the milk and sugar on the counter next to them, and then pulled out a box of arrowroot biscuits. "Grace..."

"I'm afraid these are all I have right now. You had them sent to me when I was sick last month, but I've had them sealed up tight, so they haven't gone stale. Do you have them in Scotland?"

"Yes, we do."

"Oh, good." She gave him a weak smile. "You know, just in case I get a sudden craving for them when I come visit you."

"You'll be all set." Billy took a deep breath in through his nose. There was no point in pushing her; she was clearly still on edge and would just clam up on him. He walked over and brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheek, and feeling how cold her skin still was, he pulled her into another hug. "Maybe I should wrap you up in a blanket," he murmured, leaning the side of his head against hers.

"Maybe you should wrap me up in a blanket with you." Her voice was muffled against his jumper. He sighed. "I like the way you think."

"Just give me a few more minutes? Please?" she whispered. "I know you're about ready to kill me, but I just need a couple minutes."

Billy kissed her temple. "I'm not ready to kill you, numptie. I need to know what's going on in there, but a few more minutes won't hurt. I'm just glad you're letting me hug you now. I'll confess, dear heart, I don't like not being able to touch you when you're upset. But I do understand," he added, rocking her slightly.
"So you're not pissed with me?"

He leaned back to look her directly in the eye. "I'm not pissed with you, love. This is how you deal with things, and I can either like it or lump it. Since I like you, I'll simply be grateful that you keep me nearby until you're ready to let me in again."

Grace frowned. "Does it feel like I'm shutting you out?"

"A little bit. But not..." For a change, it was Billy left searching for the right words. "It's more like you pulling into yourself, and I can't reach you or read you when you withdraw inwards. But as long as I'm near you, as long as I can see you and keep watch over you, I can be patient if I must. Because when you say 'not yet', I know I can trust that." He bent his head and rested his forehead against hers.

She closed her eyes, pressed ever so slightly harder against his forehead, and unevenly said, "You can. And I'm sorry if it felt like I was deliberately keeping you out. I just--it was all rushing through my head, and I felt sick, and I thought maybe walking would help me get it in order, and maybe the swings would distract me enough that I wouldn't throw up, and then I just froze my face off."

He huffed a breath of a laugh against her lips. "Your forehead is warming up, at least."

"It was under my hat."

The kettle began to whistle, so Billy reluctantly let Grace go. He watched as she unplugged it, but her hand was shaking enough that he quickly reached over and poured the water himself. The last thing they needed tonight was her burning herself because she was distracted. He set the kettle down, leaned back against the counter, drew her forward to stand between his legs, and wrapped his arms around her again. "While that steeps," he said as she leaned her head on his shoulder, "I will tell you a very important secret--"

"A secret? About what?"

"About me."

"Oh, good. I like Billy secrets."

"I'm glad, wee girl. Now hold your wheesht."

She snorted a laugh into his jumper. "Sorry."

He nuzzled her hair with his cheek, then smoothed it down with his hand when red strands clung to his stubble. "The secret about me, dear heart, is that if I feel needed, if I feel necessary, I can put up with almost anything. That applies to many aspects of my life, but most definitely to my relationship with you. Tonight, even when you couldn't talk to me, you still made me feel necessary, and I thank you for that."

Grace looked up at him again with a tiny crease in her brow, searching his eyes. "I'm glad, because you truly were, Billy. You are. But how did I do that?"

"After Michael left but you weren't ready to be held yet, you could have taken off down the pavement," he explained, rubbing her back, "knowing I would follow. You could have grabbed my jacket sleeve and pulled me along behind you. Instead you grabbed my hand and held on ever so tight, and you didn't let go. It sounds like a little thing, I know, but that one little thing told me you needed me around, as much as I needed to be with you after everything that happened tonight."
Grace rose up on her toes to kiss him firmly on the mouth, and her cool fingers rested lightly on either side of his jaw. "I did need you. Your hand was the anchor that kept me from flying apart." Her brows wrinkled. "That doesn't even make sense, does it?"

"It does to me." He kissed her back.

"Why did you need me, though?" she asked. "You were amazing tonight."

Billy let go of her with a kiss on her forehead and turned to give both mugs of tea a stir before fishing out the teabags. "You were dead brilliant yourself, wee girl. You were strong and brave and you gave him hell. You were fierce." He pushed one mug over to her, along with the milk and sugar, before taking his own mug with him over to the sofa. "Sorry, but I need to sit down. You wore me out this afternoon." He winked at her.

"I wore you out?" she repeated, turning back to fix her tea. "Whatever. I was the one doing all the work, I don't know--" She suddenly stopped, and looked over at him, one eyebrow raised high. "Wow. That nearly worked, too."

He swallowed, fairly sure he'd just been rumbled. "What nearly worked?"

"That change of subject. It's the return of the master of deflection." She flipped the light over the stove off and carried her tea over to the sofa, where she set it on the coffee table to cool before sitting down.

"All right, point taken." Billy set his aside as well, and then gathered her into his arms with an appreciative noise. "That's much better." He tugged the blanket off the back of the sofa down over her, tucking it around her legs and making sure her feet were covered.

"Thank you, hon," she said with a little smile. "But I still want to know."

"Of course you do, Miss Curiosity Bug. Know what?" he asked, stalling for time.

"Know why you needed me. Spill it, Boyd."

Billy sighed and leaned his cheek on the top of her head. "We were supposed to be talking about you, remember?"

"Just get it over with, and then we can."

He huffed a laugh. "Fine. I needed you with me afterwards because...ah, fuck, wee girl. Because I couldn't see your face the entire time you were talking to Michael, but I could hear your voice, and I knew how immensely it was hurting you. And there was fuck-all I could do about it." He raised a hand to her hair and began to stroke it. "After we came out of the bank, after--well, after I hit him, I was afraid I'd gone too far. The look on your face...you looked ill, I thought you were going to faint. I desperately wanted to touch you, to reassure you, to make sure you were all right, but the last thing you needed right then was me. Or rather--" he quickly corrected himself before she could protest, "--that's what I feared until you grabbed my hand and held on tight. Then I knew you just needed to move. But I was worried, love, that you were so quiet."

"I'm sorry about the whole fucking thing, Billy," she said, sounding wretched. "I'm sorry I brought that thrice-damned sonofabitch prick into your life, and I'm sorry you had to hear any of that tonight."

"I'm not," he countered. "It may have been unpleasant, but I'm glad you didn't have to do it alone. I was glad to be here for you, Grace. Are you hearing me on that one?"
She nodded against his shoulder, and one arm crept up to twine around his neck. "I hear you. Thank you, Billy."

He twisted his head to press a kiss to her forehead, and then relaxed back again. "I was also angry as fuck, and I wanted to hold you because I was afraid I'd put my fist through something other than his hateful face," Billy said, choosing to be frank. "Luckily I started to worry about you and the anger died down."

"Aw, shit. I'm so sorry--" she said again, and this time she sounded near tears.

"Hey, that's enough of that, love. You have nothing to apologise for, so stop it." He rubbed her back through the blanket. "Everything was cuntface's fault, and he's the only one I was furious with."

"I know, but--"

"No," he interrupted her again. "There is no 'but' to it. Now, my darling wee girl, I told you why I needed you, so it's your turn. Tell me what was going through your lovely head tonight."

Grace snuggled closer, curling into a little ball at his side. "I didn't think I was going to get through it," she admitted. "He wound me up with practically the first words out of his pestilential mouth, and I knew I was in trouble."

"May I just say that I now fully understand your dislike of anyone calling you 'mine'?" Billy said, tightening his arms around her. "It will still probably drive me mad, because I know how I mean it, but I can see why you hate it so."

"Right? It turns out he's got an incredible gift for being an utter bastard, the way he pushes my buttons," she muttered. "Calling you 'my little hobbit', and me 'his little Graceling'. I hope I don't actually need to tell you that you will not ever call me that?"

"No, love, you don't." He kissed her temple. "You have my promise."

"Of course you're not--"

"And you!" She pulled away from Billy, sitting up and back on her hip as she smacked him in the arm.

"Ow! What did I do?" he asked, astonished, rubbing the spot where she'd hit him.

"You were icy, and furious, and you started towards him like you were going to tear him into little tiny pieces and you scared the hell out of me because I barely recognised you!"

"Grace, I wasn't--" But he stopped, concerned, when she suddenly pressed the back of her hand to
her mouth and her eyes filled with tears. He reached over and lightly grasped her arm. "What is it?"

"You were going to beat him bloody, and I wanted to watch you do it," she confessed in a whisper. "You didn't scare the hell out of me, I did."

"Oh, love--" Filled with a sad sympathy, Billy gently drew her close again, holding her with one hand on the back of her head. "Yes, I was tempted to give him a hiding, but two things stopped me. One of them was you, remember?"

"What was the other?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Me," he answered firmly. "Grace, it doesn't make you a violent person, or a terrible one. It means you were pushed to your limit, that's all. And yet you still stopped me."

"But you broke his nose."

Billy nodded. "I reached my limit, too, and I decided the satisfaction would outweigh the consequences. I honestly don't regret it--he had it coming." After a moment to let her think, he gently asked, "Do you regret slapping him?"

Grace hid her face against his shoulder. "I've never hit anyone that hard before."

"But do you regret it? Do you feel guilty?"

She was silent for so long he thought she wasn't going to answer, but finally she choked out, "No," and then began to cry.

He rocke her. He'd grown up witnessing--and being involved in--various levels of violence, both at school and on the housing estate, and he'd tested and determined his own limits years ago. It was clear that Grace hadn't had the same experience, though, and he remembered how shocking it felt to hit someone in fury for the first time. "It's all right, love," he murmured, leaning back into the corner of the sofa and taking her with him. He tucked the blanket around her again. "He bloody well deserved it, and you had every right. But it's over now, dear heart. Michael knows that you're too strong for him, and that neither one of us will be frightened into anything. He'll not be back, and that whole sad, sorry chapter is finally done."

Grace only sobbed harder.

"Shh, it's okay, dear heart." Billy continued to whisper endearments into her hair, his hands stroking and soothing. He wasn't surprised by the tears; for a year and a half now Grace had suffered hurt, anger and humiliation as a result of Michael Varas' greed and betrayal, and the bastard had put her through the wringer again that evening. It would take a while for the realisation to sink in that it truly was over.

"I'm sorry," she wept, trying to sit up, but Billy held her still.

"And where do you think you're going, dear heart?" he asked with a fond smile. "I won't melt."

"I'm going t-to get snot all ov-over you," she protested, hiccupping.

"And when have I ever shown the slightest concern over that?" He buried his fingers in her hair and hugged her even tighter, lowering his voice to murmur, "Let it out, love. This has been so hard on you, but you can let it go, now. It's over, and you're free and clear."

She sobbed so hard words were impossible, and she laid against him, shoulders heaving and hands
clutching his jumper as if she'd never let go.

"That's it," he said softly, cradling her tightly, "That's it, love, let it go. It's going to be all right now, darling wee girl. That fucking bastard will never hurt you again, you've no more debt, and it will all be better from here on out. Remember how you told me the water was up to your nose, that one more inch and you'd drown? The water is down to your gorgeous wee ankles now. You've more than proved yourself capable of handling anything that comes your way, Grace, and I want you to know I am so bloody proud of you."

"St-stop it," she cried, wrapping her arm around his waist. "You're just ma-making me c-cry more, dammit."

"Sorry," he chuckled, nuzzling the top of her head with his nose. "Just calling it like I see it, hen. You know what I think we should do tomorrow?"

Grace's breath hitched as she tried to get her tears under control. "I can g-guess."

Billy laughed. "And you likely wouldn't be far off. But actually, I was thinking we should go out and buy you your bus pass, or train pass, or whatever it is you need to get to the beach. Because you can afford to go again, you know."

She finally lifted her head to look up at him. Her eyes and nose were both red and swollen, and still streaming. Billy thought she'd never looked sweeter. "I can, c-can't I?"

"Yes," he said, smiling at her. "Although in this weather you'd risk losing valuable body parts to frostbite."

"I forgot you're de-delicate," she said with a tremulous smile, before dissolving into tears once more. "Oh, not again, dammit."

Billy kissed her forehead before pressing her head down onto his chest again. "It's all right, dear heart. It's going to take a wee while to sink in, to properly believe it's all over." He had a sudden idea. "Do you do internet banking?"

"Y-yes." She huddled against him, gulping deep breaths, trying to stop the tears.

He patted her hip. "Go and dry your face, love, and then bring your laptop over."

"Why?"

He kissed the top of her head and gave her behind a gentle slap. "Trust me. Go on with you."

Sniffling, Grace climbed off his lap and walked over to pluck two tissues out of the box on her nightstand, muttering, "Slap my ass, will you...?"

Billy grinned. "Anytime, hen."

She shot him a watery, rather weak little glare over her shoulder before turning her back on him and loudly blowing her nose.

He chuckled, and when she returned to the sofa with her computer, he pulled her down onto his lap, cradling her back against his shoulder so they could both see the laptop sitting on her knees. As the computer booted up, he wrapped his arms around her waist and said, "Go to the account the money was put into. You said that's an old one you don't use anymore, yeah?"
"Yeah." She rubbed her eye with her knuckles.

"Okay. Transfer the money from there into your regular account." He nuzzled her shoulder with his forehead, letting her know he wasn't looking at her account numbers or passwords as she entered them.

"You don't have to do that," she said. "I trust you, even with this."

"I know. And thank you, dear heart. Considering what you've gone through, that means a hell of a lot." He kissed the back of her neck, smiling as her fingers faltered on the keyboard, as she made a soft noise.

"Cut that out," she said, and her voice was uneven. "I can't concentrate when you do that, Mr. Boyd."

"Mr. Boyd, is it?" he murmured, and kissed her once more. "Transfer the money."

She lifted her head, which had begun to drift forward. "I will, if you'd quit distracting me." A few more keystrokes and she returned to her account page, then sat in silence just looking at it.

Billy hooked his chin over her shoulder, tightened his arms around her middle. "All right, love?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," she said, and her voice was as low as his. "I was comfortable before--before everything happened. But I've still never had this much money in the bank before. I feel like I'm looking at the wrong account, it must be someone else's."

"It's yours."

"No." She straightened up slightly, and sounding relieved, said, "No, it's yours. Can I just transfer it into your loan account, like I do with the payments?"

"You can," he said, wondering if he was about to make her furious again. "But you don't have to."

"Billy--" she said warningly.

"Let me finish. If you transfer it all now, you'll be back to being skint until you get a few paycheques in. Why don't you--"

"I'll have almost six hundred dollars left, and I get paid again before the rent is due. That's hardly skint."

"It is skint, Grace," he pointed out as gently as he could. "You just can't see it anymore because you've been living on pennies for too long. I would be much, much happier if you would transfer over fifteen thousand, and keep five, paying off that last five on whatever payment schedule you currently have set up." He hoped five thousand was a reasonable compromise on both their sides--much as he'd prefer she keep a lot more than that.

"But I don't need it, Billy," she protested again.

"I want you to be able to buy things you want," he explained, feeling oddly troubled about it, "and not just what you absolutely need. I want you to not be deprived anymore."

Grace set aside the laptop and turned so she could face him. She rested her hand on his chest just over his heart and met his eyes squarely. "Thank you, Billy. I mean that, I really do, because I think
that's the kindest thing anyone's ever wished for me. And I'm tempted, if only because it would make you happy. But..." She glanced down, and then up again, and despite the fact that her eyes were still red and her nose was still swollen, she looked more at peace than he'd ever seen her. "But I thought it would be years before I could be out of debt, and the fact that I can literally wipe out that loan tonight and wake up in the morning debt-free...knowing I could go out for breakfast and not feel guilty...knowing that no one, not the government, not the credit cards, not your bank, no one has a hold on me, I'm..." She searched for the right words. "You said I'm free and clear, but I'm not. Not yet." She smiled at saying that. "But that's what I truly want, Billy, to be completely free. Does that make sense?"

He nodded and brushed a fingertip along her jaw to her chin. "Yes. Yes, it does, dear heart. And seeing the look on your face right now...I'd give anything for that look to stay. So pick up your computer again, and transfer the full amount still owing on the loan. Be free."

Her eyes filled with tears again even as her smile widened, and she took his face between her hands to kiss him softly on the mouth. "You are the sweetest man I have ever known," she murmured, her eyes spilling over. "You'd better be careful, Billy Boyd, or I could really fall for you."

Billy felt his stomach flip, and as he thumbed away the tears on her cheeks, he gruffly said, "Transfer the money, Grace. And then I'm going to snog you senseless."

She laughed, sniffled, and then grabbed the laptop and completed the transaction. She looked at the resulting zero balance on Billy's loan account for a long moment before turning the computer around to show him, and her face was radiant.

He looked, and then he took the laptop from her hands to set it aside before cupping her face between his hands and kissing her, hard. When she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with enthusiasm, he scooped her up and carried her over to her bed, since they couldn't stretch out on her small sofa. He dropped her on top of the covers, but immediately laid down next to her, half on top of her, and covered her mouth with his.

Grace made a happy noise and twined her legs with his as she opened her mouth to him in celebration, all warm breath and slick tongue and soft lips as they made out like teenagers for a delightfully long time.

Eventually, though, lethargy began to steal through Billy's body, and he knew his long day was catching up with him. Before he could do something unforgivable like yawn in the middle of a kiss, he pulled back enough to bury his face into the space between her neck and her shoulder. His hand had wound up underneath her jumper, and he stroked the bare skin of her back as he said, "Your bed is dangerously comfortable, wee girl."

She buried her fingers in his short hair and scritched his scalp. He could hear the smile in her voice as she said, "It is, isn't it? Especially when you've been on the go for twenty hours or so, travelling halfway around the world to your girlfriend's rescue."

"Done much of that, have you?" he asked, and finally succumbed to a jaw-popping yawn.

"Flying to my girlfriend's rescue? Not so much, no. That was more of an educated guess."

"So I'm forgiven if I fall asleep in the next two minutes, then?"

She chuckled. "No, you are not. I'm not sleeping next to someone wearing jeans. Come on, get up and brush your teeth and get undressed properly, and I'll sing you to sleep."
Billy rolled onto his back with a groan. "Cruelty, thy name is MacPherson."

She poked him in the side. "Yes, offering to sing you a lullaby is abusive in the extreme. I ought to be shot for my despicableness. Despicability? Despicion? Desp--"

"All right, all right! I surrender." He rolled again until he could swing his legs over the edge of the bed and sit up, scrubbing his hand through his hair and blinking.

Grace sat up too, and one look at his face had her caressing his cheek with the backs of her fingers. "It just hit you like a freight train, didn't it?" she said softly.

"A bit, yeah. I'll just find my toothbrush..." But he sat there, unable to summon the energy to actually stand.

She smiled and rose to stand in front of him, holding out both her hands. When he took them, she pulled him to his feet and into a brief hug before letting him go again. "All right, go get your toothbrush, hon."

Billy shuffled over to his small suitcase, and opening it up, rummaged around. He finally located his toothbrush, and ten minutes later returned to the bed brushed, washed, undressed but for his pants, and more than ready for sleep. The sight of Grace sitting cross legged on the end of the bed, her guitar in hand, her red hair warm in the lamplight, filled him with a sense of rightness that was hard to ignore. He bent to give her one last lingering kiss before shedding his pants as well, climbing into her bed and pulling the covers up to his chin against the cool air.

"All settled, hon?"

"Yeah. 'M good," he mumbled, curling up on his side.

"Any requests?"

He smiled into his pillow. "Something quiet?"

"Well I wasn't about to start pounding out some AC/DC," she said with a snort. "Any slightly more specific requests?"

Billy thought for a moment, his eyes closed, and then said, "Yes. Something Canadian. Something traditional, that only you would ever sing to me."

She gripped his foot through the blankets for a moment, then let go. "I think I can do that. Imagine yourself...in a canoe, skimming along just above the water. You're up north, but there are no cottages there. Just you and the trees and the sky and the lake." She strummed one soft chord, and then picked a simple tune as she began to sing, her voice quiet and sweet.

Land of the silver birch
Home of the beaver
Where still the mighty moose
Wanders at will

Blue lake and rocky shore
I will return once more
Boom diddy-ah da, boom diddy-ah da, boom.

Billy felt the natural minor tune in his bones like quicksilver water gliding by, and he drifted. He was asleep before she'd finished the second verse.
High on a rocky ledge
I'll build my wigwam
Close to the water's edge
Silent and still

Blue lake and rocky shore
I will return once more
Boom diddy-ah da, boom diddy-ah da, boom.

My heart grows sick for thee
Here in the low lands
I will return to thee
Hills of the north

Blue lake and rocky shore
I will return once more
Boom diddy-ah da, boom diddy-ah da, boom.

After she finished singing the chorus for the final time, Grace continued to quietly play the song on her guitar, picking out the melody and embellishing it. She watched Billy the entire time, certain he'd been asleep since partway through the song, and she couldn't blame him. He'd been on the go ever since New Year's Eve, travelling and doing PR and awards shows, and now running to her rescue in his precious few days off before the insanity of the SAG awards and Oscars. It was a wonder he hadn't fallen asleep the moment they'd sat down on the sofa, really.

Grace thought back on their conversation, on Billy's desire that she be able to have whatever she wanted, and warmth bloomed anew in her chest at the sentiment that suggested. That warmth moved up to heat her cheeks as she remembered telling him she could really fall for him. It was entirely possible, she thought with a lopsided little smile, that she was more than a bit late telling him, that the falling had been accomplished some time ago.

Setting her guitar aside, she stretched out on her stomach beside Billy, careful not to disturb him, and propped herself up on one elbow, the better to see his tranquil, if tired, face. She recalled doing the same thing at her cottage almost a month ago, watching him sleep when she'd woken up before him one morning, and trying to determine just how she felt about him. And yes, perhaps she'd admitted to herself then that she was falling for him, had fallen for him. But it was a big step between that and telling him she'd fallen for him. And what did that mean, anyway? She liked him immensely, cared about him, was attracted to him. Did she love him?

Grace shied away from the idea, but then forced herself to look at it again, to consider it. Did she love him? Biting her lip, she decided no. No, she didn't love him, not yet anyway. If the entire catastrophe that was her relationship with Michael had taught her one thing, it was that infatuation wasn't love, and she'd better be damned sure not to rush into anything like she had with Michael. Billy was--well, he was someone truly special, there was no doubt about it. Not only did she trust him as a dear friend (unlike Michael before dating him), but she looked forward with eager anticipation to developing their relationship. The simple fact was, Billy made her happy, and she wanted to do the same for him.

Reaching over to lightly brush her hand over his hair, her eyes travelled over the dusting of freckles on his forehead, his eyelashes dark against his pale skin, the glint of red in the scruff on his jaw. Over the past several days she hadn't been able to look beyond the impending confrontation with Michael, but now that it was truly over, she realised she had a full day tomorrow--and another
night--with Billy all to herself. She smiled, and made him a silent and secret promise that she would find a way to thank him for helping and supporting her.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from *Land of the Silver Birch*, traditional Canadian folk song.
Billy woke slowly, and judging by the light coming in the kitchen window, it was early. He rolled onto his side, tucking his hand under his cheek, and watched Grace sleep. She too lay on her side, facing him, one hand curled under her chin, her eyelashes fluttering on her lightly freckled cheeks. Her mouth parted, her tongue peeked out to moisten her lips, and Billy stifled a groan as he felt himself begin to harden. There was something about watching a lover sleep in the mornings that had always turned him on, but with Grace it was even more arousing. She was soft and vulnerable, as most people were when they slept, but it also struck him that it was almost the only time she was ever truly at rest. He was surprised to realise that in that respect, she was much like Dom--always in motion, always fidgeting--although Dom's movement tended to feel jittery and restless. Grace's was calmer, and it just felt...alive. Even when they were cuddling quietly on the sofa, her hands were caressing him, or smoothing over his jumper, or stroking his fingers, or her feet were moving to a rhythm only she could hear. The few times they'd had sex she'd been active and energetic, her enthusiasm egging him on. On their sole day alone together at the cottage, Grace had woken before him, sung to him, been wide awake before they'd had sex. He wondered now what she would be like to make love to first thing, still warm and pliant with sleep, and the need to know grew to be too much to resist.

Billy climbed out of bed, hurrying over to the baseboard heater and turning up the thermostat, smiling as it ticked quietly into life. He carefully climbed back into the bed, thought for a moment, and then reached for the nightstand where she'd stashed the condoms. Taking one out, he quietly tore open the packet and tossed it aside, then after stroking himself to full erectness, rolled the condom on over his prick. There was no guarantee Grace would be interested in sex upon waking, but he wanted to be ready just in case.

Billy shifted closer to her, edging back the covers, delighted to find her breast exposed, her nipple tightening in the cool air as he watched. He covered her with his hand, feeling the nub against his palm, and smiled as she made a humming noise in her sleep. He rolled onto his stomach next to her, his prick heavy between his legs, and replaced his hand with his mouth, gently sweeping her breast with his tongue before taking as much of her into his mouth as he could and lightly sucking.

Grace shifted beneath him, her legs curling up, and he could see the moment she shivered into wakefulness. "Billy?"

He smoothed his hand over her abdomen before pulling the blankets back up over them, then swirled his tongue around her areola before releasing her breast. He murmured, "Good morning,
"Mmm." Her eyes closed again as she smiled, and her hand patted its way up until she buried her fingers in his hair. "Good morning indeed."

Taking that as permission to continue for the moment, Billy repeated his attentions to her breast, sucking a little harder this time, and ending with a tug on her nipple.

Grace hummed deep in her throat, and she tilted her body towards him, her knee rising and crossing over to rest on his bottom. She used it to urge him closer.

Billy had other ideas, however, and he laid her flat as he slid himself further down the bed, kissing and tasting and nuzzling her skin as he went, his hands running warm, smooth paths up her sides, over her breasts and collarbones, skating down her ribs to her trim stomach just as his mouth reached her inner thigh. By now he was completely under the covers, but he could still hear Grace's soft sigh as he kissed the warm, tender skin there, could feel her stretch beneath his touch.

"Billy," she said, but he hushed her.

"Shhh. Let me, love." He propped himself on one elbow, making a pocket of warm air under the blankets. He ran his other hand down the outside of her thigh, and as he began to stroke the pads of two fingers across the thin, sensitive skin behind her knee, he breathed hotly, high against the inside of her thigh.

"Oh," Grace said, a shiver running down her leg.

After several more breaths against her skin, Billy switched elbows and repeated the attentions to her other leg, the back of her knee feeling soft and delicate under his fingers as he once again exhaled against her inner thigh. By the time he finished, she was quivering beneath him, and he smiled. He moved to her side and urged, "Roll over, wee girl."

Grace rolled onto her side and reached for him.

"No, onto your front. That's it," he murmured, and lay on top of her but with his elbows on the bed, taking much of his weight.

Her head was turned to the side, her arms up underneath her pillow, and he could see the sleepy amusement on her face as she said, "Billy, are you wearing a condom?"

"Yes, I am. Just in case all goes well," he said with a grin, and then added, "Now relax and hold your wheesht, ye minx."

Her laugh was low and deep in her throat, but she remained silent, her eyes closed.

Billy swept her hair to the side, and after all their shifting around he took a moment to return to the unhurried, languid mood he'd encouraged before. He stroked her hair back off her face and neck several more times, drinking in the sight of her milky skin, the feel of her lissome body laid out underneath him. "Lovely," he breathed, and bent his head to drop soft, dry kisses across the nape of her neck. He reached that one spot that always elicited a gratifying reaction and sure enough, Grace let out a little moan. He drew his warm, slightly parted lips across it once, twice, and the third time he trailed his tongue across it as well. She moaned again, and curved beneath him, and Billy's cock twitched against her thigh.

Breathing deeply, purposely keeping things slow, he paid thorough attention to the nape of her neck before he moved down her body, caressing with his lips and hands, kneading with his thumbs.
She made a series of soft noises, and he did everything he could to continue to draw out those delicious little sounds. He kissed his way down her spine while his fingertips gently explored her ribs. When he finally reached her lower back, he nuzzled at the top of her sacrum, massaging her hips and bottom with his hands.

Grace whimpered, breathy and sweet. "Billy…"

With a smile, he buried his nose in the supple roundness of one cheek, opened his mouth, and gave her the lightest of nibbles.

She made a noise that was half-laugh, half-gasp, and her body coiled, though he couldn't tell if she was trying to move towards him or away.

Billy kissed the spot he'd just bitten, then shifted to her left, lying on his side further up the bed so that he could reach her neck with his mouth. She tried to turn her head on the pillow to face him, but he buried his fingers in her hair and held her where she was. When he felt her muscles loosen again, he let go, brushed the hair off her neck, and nuzzled her, breathing deeply as he did. Feeling her relax even further, he slowly swept his right hand down her back, across her buttocks, then gently cupped her between her legs. She mewled, and he groaned at the damp heat of her against his fingers, a raspy sound that made her thighs twitch.

He gripped her more firmly, and with his fingertips began scribing slow little circles over her clit as he continued to kiss the nape of her neck and her shoulders. The dual provocation soon had her pushing down into his hand, her fingers clutching at her pillow, tiny noises coming from her throat. Those sounds were so artless, so sensual that Billy was greatly tempted to mount her then and there. Instead he shifted his hand, and keeping his fingertips on her clit, he slid his thumb as deep inside her as he could reach, holding onto her as she canted her hips off the bed with a moan.

"Gorgeous," he purred.

"Billy…” she said, low and husky.

"I love your voice like this. Sleepy but turned on. It's exactly what I was hoping for." His breath on the back of her neck when he spoke raised the fine hairs there, and she shivered even as she rocked her hips into his hand.

"I've never been woken like this before," she admitted, and when Billy lifted his head, he could see her face had turned pink.

"I wouldn't have thought it was mine, either," she said unevenly. "I would have been wrong."

He smothered a smile in her hair. "I'm glad, dear heart. Because you are so bonny in the morning I cannæ help myself."

She breathed out a soft, "Oh--"

That sound sent a surge of heat directly to Billy's cock. He smoothly slid his thumb out of her and lifted her hip to roll her onto her left side, facing away from him, sliding his arm under her neck for support. He nudged her right leg up and forward until her bent knee met the mattress in front of her, spreading her backside towards him. "I want tae make love tae ye, Grace. I want tae pleasure ye slowly, gently. Will ye let me do that?"
"Yes," she whispered. "Please."

He took himself in hand and ran his fingers over the condom, checking all was as it should be. As he positioned himself at her entrance, he bent his head and began to kiss her neck and shoulder softly, delicately at first. He was desperately glad he'd had the forethought to don the condom before waking her, because pausing to fiddle with one now would have interrupted the flow of this moment for both of them. He eased his cock inside her, his kisses growing more fervent as the slick heat of her overcame him for a moment. When he was fully seated in her, he forced himself to hold still, to relax and regain his composure, even though the feel of her sheathing his cock was urging him to do anything but relax. He mouthed at the nape of her neck as he reached around with his free hand to cup her breast, holding the weight of it in his palm.

"When you say 'slowly' you really mean it..." Grace murmured, teasing.

He stifled a chuckle. "Wheesht, now," he said, but even as he did he began a gentle, unhurried rocking of his hips.

She made a soft noise of approval and stroked his arm under her neck, running her hand down to interlace their fingers together. Her other hand clutched at the edge of the mattress.

Feeling slightly overwhelmed, Billy lightly kneaded her breast, rubbing his thumb over her nipple, grounding himself in her quiet body. He rested his forehead against her shoulder and inhaled the warm, sweet scent of her skin; he began to withdraw his hips a bit further each time, pushing back in with nearly his full length. He kept every motion smooth and slow, and he revelled in the sensation of her silky heat around his cock. "Good?" It was barely audible, but Grace heard him.

"Mmm, very. You?"

"Very," he murmured in agreement. "You feel brilliant, ye bonny wee girl." He'd not intended to talk much, wanting to preserve the drowsy peace of the morning, but Billy found himself unable to stop the words once they started. He leaned his head against hers so his mouth was right behind her ear, and he talked as he moved within her, his voice low and rich. "You're so warm, love. Warm and soft, and the feel of your skin next tae mine is worth anything we went through tae get here, ye ken?" He released her breast and slid his hand down her stomach, rubbing soothingly when she shivered, to smooth over her hair before fingering her clit.

Grace made a gratifyingly throaty sound, and canted her hips so that on his next push he was buried deep inside her.

"Oh God, ye feel so good, love," he said, beginning to thrust faster, feeling a light sweat begin to prickle on the back of his neck. He circled his fingers on her clit, his touch light, his rhythm uneven. "My sleepy, sweary wee naiad."

"Billy--" she breathed, and tightened her grip on his left hand. She pressed her bottom back to meet him on every stroke, and he felt a tremor run through her.

"Christ, yes," he rasped, his hips bucking involuntarily. "Fuck--say my name. Say it the way ye do, the way I love it."

Her head tilted back on the pillow, and he latched onto her neck, kissing and licking. She gasped, and then murmured, "William," her voice soft and slow and unsteady.

"Oh--oh, Christ, love--" Heat blossomed in his stomach and travelled straight down to his cock, and his hips stuttered.
"William," she said again, and this time it was a plea. "Billy, please--"

"What?" he panted, trying desperately not to come already, like a teenager with no control. He didn't hold out much hope. "What do ye need? Tell me."

"More." Then, her hand on the edge of the mattress shifting for a better grip-- "Faster--yes--oh god--"

Billy dropped his forehead to her shoulder, biting his lip, and he sped up, plunging in and out of her and it felt so good, so good-- He belatedly realised she might have meant his hand, and he rubbed her clit faster, too, his fingers erratic on her swelling flesh. His pulse was pounding loud in his ears, he was gasping, and still her bell-clear moan went directly to his cock and he cried out as he thrust hard once, twice, the thin skin over his hipbones slapping against her arse, and he was-- "Gonna--gonna come, love--oh fuck --Grace--oh--oh--" White light blossomed behind clenched eyelids, sweat runneled along his spine, and electric sparks flashed from his pulsing cock to his fingers, to his toes, leaving them tingling as his orgasm peaked, then slowed, ebbed. A few last aftershocks made him jerk and shudder, and he buried his face in her long tangled hair, panting, every muscle trembling. His prick, already beginning to soften, slid free of her, and he automatically shifted his hips back to reach down and check that the condom was still in place.

The lack of him made her whimper, and she struggled to roll over underneath the weight of him on her back. "Where's your hand give me your hand fuck please--"

Despite the tremors in his arms, Billy hastily lifted himself up, and once Grace was on her back he scrambled down the bed, spreading her legs to lie between them. "I've got ye, love," he murmured, and painted a wide stripe up her wet cunt with his tongue. He dispensed with the teasing, and got straight to work sucking, licking, fluttering her clit until she began to quiver. When he thrust two slender fingers into her, as deeply as he could reach, the quivering turned to quaking, and she groaned, one hand going over her head to slap against the wall. Billy's prick gave a weak little twitch against that, and he moaned against her.

Even that slight vibration on her clit was enough to drive her over the edge, and she came hard, her hips bucking off the mattress, almost dislodging his head from between her thighs, but he managed to stay with her. He could feel her throbbing around his fingers, and when he swiftly rubbed them against her upper wall, she gave a wordless cry and twisted, pushing herself down onto his hand and his mouth, gasping. She writhed underneath him for long seconds before finally dropping back down onto the mattress with a moan, her chest heaving.

When he was certain she was finished, Billy carefully withdrew his fingers, gave her one last gentle lick with the flat of his tongue, and wriggled his way back up the bed. He paused for a moment to remove the condom, clean himself up with some tissues, and drop the bundle on the bedside table to dispose of later. Lying down again, he tugged her closer to lay her head on his shoulder and ran a soothing, settling hand up and down her bare back.

Grace whimpered, snuggled closer as she tangled her feet with his, and then sighed, sounding breathless and utterly contented.

Billy pressed a kiss to the top of her head and closed his eyes. "Think you could stand to be woken like that again sometime, wee girl?" he murmured. "I have to tell you, that was the best morning sex I've ever had, and I have a fondness for it. Thank you."

"Me too," she said, and the smile in her voice warmed him. "I think maybe I wouldn't complain. As long as it's not early early morning sex."
His chuckle was nearly silent. "Don't look at the clock, then."

She lifted her head, said, "Oh, fuck me," and buried her face in the crook of his neck.

Billy grinned. "Gladly, but you'll have to give me some time to recover. 'M not eighteen anymore, love."

"What on earth are you doing awake at this hour?" Her voice was muffled in the small space below his ear.

"What am I doing?" He rolled onto his side, the better to curl himself around her, to slide his thigh between hers and pull her flush against him. "I am thanking my lucky stars I took a walk on a beach a few months ago, mad as it seemed at the time. I am revelling in the feel of a dear, beautiful woman's body against mine. I am hoping she'll give me a kiss before we go back to sleep."

Grace lifted her head, a soft light in her eyes, but she put a hand up against his lips as he bent his head to kiss her. "I have two--" She cocked her head. "No, three things to tell you, and one question to ask, before I kiss you."

He rested his head on the pillow again, and reached up to stroke her hair back from her face. "What's the first thing you have to tell me?"

She smiled at him shyly, which he found utterly endearing, considering what they'd just been up to. "I am incredibly thankful you went for a walk on the beach a few months ago, mad as it seemed at the time."

He beamed down at her, caressing her cheek with the backs of his fingers, but all he said was, "What's the second thing?"

"I don't swallow."

Billy was surprised into a loud bark of laughter. "Duly noted, hen. And the third thing?"

"I--I've never kissed someone right after he's--you know--gone down on me," she said, a delicate pink tinge in her cheeks.

His voice soft again, he asked, "And what's your question?"

"What--" Her eyes dropped to his mouth. "It's not that I'm necessarily against the idea of the kissing. But what do I...taste like?"

Billy leaned forward to kiss her forehead, then laid his head on the pillow again. "Have you ever fingered yourself, love?" he asked, keeping his voice gentle. He didn't want her to think he was in any way judging her, no matter how she answered.

"Well, yes, of course I have."

He smiled. "A sight I'd love to see someday. Did you try smelling your fingers afterwards?"

Grace blushed, but at which part he wasn't sure. "Yes. It wasn't unpleasant, or anything. But..."

He nodded on the pillow. "Aye, I know, it's a bit of a strange thought. But you taste much like you smell, dear heart, and I'm not sure you'll believe me, but I quite like your taste."

"You do?" she asked, searching his eyes.
"Aye. To me, you taste like the sea," he murmured.

She squinched up her nose. "Fishy?"

Billy huffed a laugh. "You've never even smelled the sea, have you?"

"No."

"Well, thanks to the surfing, not only have I smelled the sea, but I've swallowed rather a lot of it over the years. And I can assure you, it doesn't taste fishy, and neither do you."

"So what does it taste like?"

He thought for a moment. "Clean, salt-tangy water, and windy clouds, and a hint of earthy green."

Her eyes fastened on his lips, she breathed, "Oh…"

"Shall I kiss you, dear heart?"

"I--yes." She closed her eyes and tilted her face towards his.

Billy set two fingers under her chin and leaned towards her, beginning with a gentle press of his lips. He then opened his mouth just a little, his tongue darting out to glide across her lips, encouraging her to do the same, to taste herself on his skin.

After a moment Grace followed suit, her lips parting, and she kissed him deeply, her tongue licking at his lips before entering his mouth, seeking out the flavours she would find there.

Billy hummed happily into her mouth and slid his hand around to stroke up and down the smooth bare skin of her back. They kissed for several long minutes, slow and sweet and deep, before Grace pulled back and tucked her face into the crook of his neck again. He shifted to a more comfortable position, cuddled her close, and closed his eyes with a smile. "Well?"

Her puff of a laugh was warm on his clavicle. "Well what?"

"Well, am I permitted to kiss you after going down on you, without having to go brush my teeth?"

She sighed. "I suppose it would be acceptable."

"Only acceptable?" he teased, resting his cheek on the top of her head.

"Agreeable?"

"Oh, surely you can do better than that."

She paused for a moment, then murmured, "Pleasurable."

"That's better. I'll take pleasurable quite happily," he chuckled. "I assume from the fact that you've gone rather limp, that going back to sleep would also be both agreeable and pleasurable?"

"Unless you're wide awake, in which case we can get up," she said, and yawned.

Billy immediately followed suit, unable to help it.

"Snooze it is, then," she mumbled, and within minutes her breathing had deepened and evened out, and Billy knew she was asleep.
With another yawn, he let himself sink further into the bed, and he followed Grace into slumber.

Grace woke slowly, and with a stretch. She was vaguely achey, and the thought of the activities that had led to feeling achey made her smile. Turning her head on the pillow, she started slightly to find Billy awake and watching her intently. "Oh. Good morning… What?"

"Were you dreaming?" he asked, shifting closer but not touching her. "You were, weren't you?"

"I--I don't remember. Why?"

"You were talking."

Grace noticed he hadn't smiled at her yet, and unease settled in her stomach. "Was I?"

"Yes," he said, and his eyes dropped to her mouth. "Well, mumbling, really."

"What did I say? Nothing incremental, I hope?" she said, trying to lighten his expression.

His gaze remained on her lips, his expression—or lack thereof—unchanged. "Incriminating?"

"What?"

"You said incremental, but I think you meant incriminating." He stretched the fingers of one hand just enough to stroke the ends of her hair where it lay on the pillow next to her head.


He glanced up then, a shade of surprise on his face. "Nothing's wrong. Why?"

"Because you're acting kind of...odd. And I'm not awake enough for this yet, so just tell me what the hell I said, would you?"

Billy put his arm over her and tugged her snugly against him, his body toasty and firm against hers. "Wheesht, wee girl, relax. I'm sorry I made you fret."

"I'm not fretting," she flared, trying to pull back, "and if you don't tell me in the next ten seconds what I--"

"You said my name," he murmured against her temple. "You said Billy."

"...That's all?" she asked blankly.

"Not quite, no. You said a few things I'm not sure I heard properly, you said my name several times, and you said--" His voice was warm. "You said 'catch me'. And then I think you might've smiled a wee bit, so I'm hoping that means I caught you."

"Catch me," she repeated slowly, the words tickling a hazy image forth in her mind. She closed her eyes in an attempt to recapture it, to decipher it, and after a moment she began to chuckle. "I was on a swing."

Billy laughed, low and quiet. "Of course you were; I should've known. Where were we?"

She opened her eyes again, still smiling. "A park in the town where I grew up, oddly enough. It was summer, I was on the swing and you were on the jungle gym, despite being a grown man."
Anyways, I knew if I jumped off, I'd hit the slide, so I said 'catch me'. And yes, you did, but we toppled over and landed in the tall grass. It was green and soft, though." She squinched her nose up. "And I think there was a giraffe."

"Had a lot of giraffes in your hometown, did you?" he teased.

"Dozens. I really do have the strangest dreams."

Rubbing his hand up and down her bare back, he said, "I don't know, I rather like that one."

She huffed a laugh. "So do I, actually." Then, recalling how the conversation had started, she smacked his bottom.

"Oi, what was that for?"

"For not even smiling at me, let alone giving me a cuddle when I woke up! You just stared at me and said I was talking in my sleep. I was afraid I'd said something awful, you jerk."

"Sorry," he chuckled, giving her a squeeze. "I'm sorry, love. I was doing some rather robust thinking, and I reckon I was a little distracted."

She tipped her head back to look at him. "That sounds a bit heavy for first thing. What were you thinking about?"

Billy froze. It was just for a moment, but it was enough for Grace to see a flash of consternation in his eyes. "Ehm," he said, and then rubbed his scruffy chin. "Not yet, dear heart. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," she replied, and it was, but she couldn't help but be avidly curious and just a little worried. "But just so you know, if it's bad, I'd prefer to hear it sooner rather than later."

He heaved a sigh and cuddled her closer, and when he spoke, it was in both amusement and annoyance. "Why do you assume it's bad?"

"I don't, I said if it's bad. But from the moment I woke up I haven't been able to read what's going on with you, and it's a little unnerving, considering we're in bed together," she admitted, tucking her face into the space between his shoulder and jaw.

"I'm sorry, love," he said again, cupping the back of her head with one hand. "I'm just a bit off balance, I think. So much going on the past few weeks, dealing with cuntface last night, not to mention a bit of jetlag--I reckon my brain's just not quite awake and back on track yet."

"Okay," she said, kissing his throat in relief. "I can certainly understand that." A moment later Billy's words registered, and a sudden thought struck her like an electric current, making the hair on her arms lift. "Oh my god."

"What?" Billy drew away to look at her, concerned at the tone of her voice. "Grace?"

"That wasn't part of my dream, was it?" She looked up Billy, her forehead furrowed. "I'm--I'm not broke anymore," she said, half in wonder and half in disbelief. Had it truly all been fixed so simply, so quickly?

His face had lightened with her first words, and now a pleased grin curved his mouth as he stroked her back. "No, wee girl, it wasn't part of your dream. You are no longer skint."

"I'm no longer skint," she repeated, testing the phrase out.
"And how does that feel, then?" he asked, and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"It feels...weird."

He chuckled. "I can imagine."

"No, I mean...no one who has all their money stolen like that ever gets it back. They just don't," she said with a slight frown, trying to explain the odd emotion floating under her ribs. It wasn't an entirely bad feeling, but it wasn't a comfortable one, either. "So why did I?"

"Why did you get your money back?"

"Well, yes, but I don't mean just the money. The whole thing was...resolved, done, just like that. Why?"

Billy stroked her hair until she laid her head on his shoulder again. "Because cuntface got greedy. Because you and I were a team. Because you're a good woman, Grace Cadence MacPherson, and the universe bloody well owed you one."

"Karma?" she asked, skeptical.

"Why not?" Billy countered. "It's as good an explanation as any, for something that's not entirely explicable. Why did everything align just as it did to allow the two of us together to confront him? I reckon it's because you deserved something to finally go your way."

"I'm no more deserving than some sweet little old lady who got conned out of her life savings," she protested.

"No more deserving, perhaps," he said gently, "but most certainly no less, dear heart. Call it karma, call it luck, call it a fluke if you like. The fact is, Michael did get greedy, after a few fits and starts you and I did start working together as a team, and you were fierce and strong and refused to let him push you around. Try not to get stuck on 'why', yeah? It just...is."

"You mean I was stubborn." Grace shivered against him, her shoulders curling inward. "Karma, huh? I'm not sure I like the idea of the universe paying that much attention to me," she said.

Billy chuckled. "That doesn't surprise me. You are..." He paused.

"Careful how you finish that sentence, mister," she said darkly, and tickled his side.

He squirmed away from her fingers, reducing the bedding to even worse disarray than it had been. "Sod off, ye minx," he said, laughing, twitching the blankets back up over their shoulders. "I'll finish it how I please, so keep your cruel fingers to themselves." He shifted his hold on her, trapping her arms at her sides. "You are fierce and strong, and yet you're content to be quiet, to fly under the radar. It's one of the things I like about you. And I've probably said this before, but being stubborn isn't always a bad thing, wee girl."

"Hmm. There are a few people in my life who would probably disagree with that," she said, and the wryness in her voice made Billy chuckle. "The fact that you don't is one of the things I like about you, since that's the only way you'll be able to put up with me long-term." She was afraid of how that sounded, and immediately tried to soften the implications, though a part of her knew he'd see right through her attempt. "Because, you know, a month more of my stubbornness might drive you to drink, or something."

"A month? You drove me to drink the day after I met you, if you'll recall," he teased, "and it did
my tongue no favours."

"I don't know, I was rather taken with your tongue," she said, and lifted her head to plant a firm kiss on his mouth. When she began to draw back, however, Billy's hand was on the nape of her neck, and he slowly brought her mouth back to his.

What had begun as a swift, firm kiss was translated into something soft, something sweet and unhurried, and when Grace hummed against his lips, he shifted until they both lay with their heads on the pillow, relaxed and trading warm, open-mouthed kisses for what felt to Grace like delightful hours. She slid her thigh between his and was rewarded with a soft, happy noise in the back of Billy's throat. Smiling against his mouth, she kissed him again, and again, revelling in the feel of his gentle fingertips on her throat, her breast, squeezing her hip and stroking her bottom, before sliding up her back to start the sensuous path all over again. She in turn let her fingers trail down his jawline, his neck, across his broad shoulders. She ran her palm over the rise of his pecs, ruffled his dark chest hair, set one fingertip over his nipple and pressed lightly. Billy huffed a laugh into her mouth, and she gladly took it in, absorbed it, reflected it back at him in her smile, in her touch.

Eventually a distinct rumbly noise began to emanate from the direction of Billy's stomach and, with a last tug on the cushion of his lower lip, Grace rolled onto her back with a stretch and a contented groan. "I think someone needs some food. What would you like for breakfast, pet?"

"Well--"

"Oooh, I know!" she interrupted him, her eyes brightening. She sat up, tucking her legs away from Billy's side, the blankets sliding off her back to leave her naked. His eyes dropped to her breasts, and she waited with a grin until he noticed her silence and his gaze returned to hers, an unapologetic leer on his face.

"Were you saying something, wee girl?"

"Yes, if you can manage to focus on something other than my tits for a minute," she said, poking him in the shoulder. "I was just about to tell you that I am going to take you out for breakfast--my treat," she added proudly.

He snaked one arm out and pulled her down onto his chest, giving her a fierce bear hug. "I think that's a brilliant plan. I would suggest one wee change, though, if you agree."

"What?"

Billy kissed the top of her head. "Buy me breakfast in Glasgow."

"Hmm," she said, and made herself more comfortable on top of him. "While I think that is also an excellent idea, I have to point out that breakfast time will be long over before we could get to Glasgow. And I don't have my passport yet."

Chuckling, he loosened his hold on her and stroked her hair, fanning it out across his chest, her coppery curls tumbling down his side. "Perhaps it does need a slight clarification, then. How about you treat me to breakfast when you come to visit me in Glasgow in April?"

"Why?" she asked, and pressed a kiss to his sternum.

"Well, two reasons, really."

"One?"
"One, I'd feel much better if you'd get your feet back under you a bit, before you go splashing out your hard earned money on me."

Grace kissed his chest again and, trying not to laugh, said, "It's breakfast, Billy, not a car."

"Aye, I know." He flicked her ear and fondly said, "Numptie."

She snickered, "And two?"

"Two, I am enjoying having your naked body all to myself, and I'd like to keep it that way for a little while longer. I'm going to make you breakfast in bed," he announced.

"You're going to make me breakfast in bed?" she asked, and lifted her head to rest her chin on his breastbone. "Won't that get a bit messy? Maybe you should just make it in the kitchen." She bit the inside of her lip, but couldn't help shaking with the silly laughter she barely managed to hold in.

Billy glared down past his nose at her. "Think you're funny, don't you? Miss Smartass."

She giggled, laid her cheek on his chest before her chin could dig in too much, and said, "Come on, that was a good one."

"That was a sad and terrible attempt at changing the subject," he said haughtily.

"I didn't change the subject! You said breakfast in bed, I was talking about breakfast in bed."

"No, you changed the subject. We were discussing breakfast in Glasgow." He suddenly tilted his head to the side. "Or your naked body. We could discuss that some more, I'd be fine with that."

She snorted good-naturedly. "I bet you would. Maybe we should talk about your naked body instead."

He flipped her onto her back, saying, "Go right ahead," and blew a long and loud raspberry on her stomach, his fingers simultaneously tickling her sides.

"Hey!" she squealed, thrashing beneath him, starting to giggle. "Fuck off, Billy! Stop it--stop--" She tried to grab his hands, but he somehow hunched his shoulders and blocked her access. "Come on, get off me, you great bully!" A feeling of fierce gladness surged through her, warming her from the inside out, and she began to laugh helplessly.

Billy lifted his head and stilled his fingers, though they still hovered too close for comfort. "You tickled me first. Say please," he demanded, a teasing warning in his voice.

"Why should I--no! No, no, stop it!" Shrieking with laughter, she wriggled and writhed beneath him as he resumed tickling her and began to slurp at her stomach. "Oh my god, you're--no, stop it!- -you're disgusting, Boyd!" Growing breathless, she slapped at his shoulders, "Get off me, you idiotic, beef-witted, bunch-backed toad!"

His sloppy smooching turned to a gurgle of a laugh against her tummy. "Oh, we're starting the good ones, are we? Go on, then, give me the best one you can think of, and I'll let you up." His fingertips tickled her ribs again, and he stuck the tip of his nose into her navel.

With another shriek, Grace bucked up against his hands on her sides and his face in her stomach, giggling, gasping, "Stop--I can't breathe!"

"One more of your best insults, and I'll let you up," he promised, and blew another little raspberry.
just below her belly button.

"Augh--okay, okay! Stop it, you--you roguish, ruttish--oh shit, Billy--" Her eyes watering, she squirmed underneath him as she desperately wracked her brain for the most creative ending she could think up whilst being cruelly tortured, "--beetle-witted, flap-mouthed, foot-licking, fustilarian hedge-pig!"

Billy let her go, laughing delightedly, rolling off to lay on his side next to her, his own chest rising and falling faster than normal. He went to rest his hand on her stomach, but she couldn't stop the galvanic flinch her reflexes gave and, still chuckling, he laid his hand on the bed between them instead. "Easy there, wee girl, you seem a bit jumpy."

"I wonder why," she panted, still giggling. Her face was hot, her ribs aching, and tears of laughter trickled down her temples. "I may be dying. You are a horrible man."

"On the plus side, your name-calling was impressive," he said, grinning. "Is fustilarian a real word? Or a Grace-word?"

"No, it's a real word," she protested a little breathlessly, diverted by the delicious things his accent did to it. She blinked, then admitted, "I had to look it up the first time I came across it. In Shakespeare."

"I wondered." He straightened the bedding, pulling the blankets back up over her before she could get chilled, and dipped his head to kiss her nose. He wiped the tears from her face. "Am I allowed to touch you yet?" he asked, his eyes crinkling.

"Only if you keep your fingers to yourself. It's going to take me an hour to recover from that." She rolled towards him as he shifted and opened his arms, and she let him draw her close. After a moment, wondering if her mind was playing tricks on her, she twisted her chin to look down. Sure enough, Billy held her with just his arms, but kept his hands bent back so his fingers were nowhere near her skin. She huffed a laugh. "All right, you can put your hands on me. Just don't wiggle your fingers around. I'll probably jump, and I can't guarantee where my knee will end up."

"Understood," he chuckled.

Grace tucked her head under his chin with a groan, still trying to catch her breath. "You know, if we'd been talking about anything other than breakfast in bed, I might think that was an attempt to distract me."

"But we were talking about breakfast in bed, so plainly it was not," he said, stroking a hand gently over her hair. "So suspicious."

"Do you blame me?" she said dryly.

"Not entirely. I admit it was a little unprovoked," he said, sounding entirely unrepentant. "What would you like for breakfast, hen?"

"Billy, you don't actually have to--"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," he warned her, giving her a squeeze at the same time. "I consider this a pleasure and a luxury. You can cater to my every whim and desire later."

"Okay," she said, and gave him a quick kiss on the jaw. Judging by his open mouth she had surprised him; she'd surprised herself, too, if she was honest.
“Okay,” he finally managed. “I must admit, I was expecting the wee red hen to get her feathers in a ruffle over that.”

“Well, the wee red hen says that ought to teach you not to presume your expectations are correct,” she said primly, and then snuggled closer.

Billy tightened his arms around her, and she could hear the smile in his voice as he said, "Fair point well made. And I do love surprises." He kissed the top of her head, and after a moment asked again, "What would you like for breakfast, dear heart?"

Stroking her palm down the centre of his chest, she said, "That depends. Can you cook, or should I request cereal?"

Even curled up as they were, he still managed to flick her nose. "I can cook, thank you very much."

"You have a thing about my nose, don't you? You're always kissing it, or flicking it, or poking it."

"It's the most adorable nose I've ever seen. Breakfast, wee girl? I'm about ready to eat your blankets." As if to prove him right, his stomach chose that moment to growl loudly, and Grace laughed.

"All right, all right. How about scrambled eggs and toast? That should be quick."

"You have eggs? That's perfect." He gave her one last firm hug, then climbed out of bed, tucking the blankets around her again before indulging in a good stretch, the muscles in his back bunching and then lengthening.

Smiling, she watched him, and impulsively said, "You're lovely."

Billy's face softened, and he leaned over to give her a light kiss as his fingers trailed down her cheek. "So are you," he murmured, then straightened up again. "You just relax and stay warm. Go back to sleep for a little while, if you like, I'll wake you when breakfast is ready." He disappeared into the bathroom.

"Don't shower yet," she called.

Billy stuck his head back through the door to raise an eyebrow at her. "I was going to wait until after breakfast. Why? Do you have some strange kink you haven't told me about yet?"

She grinned at him. "Yes, but this has nothing to do with that. I want to run a little experiment later."

His second eyebrow joined the first halfway up his forehead. "Oh really?"

"Yep. I want to know if two people will fit in my shower."

"I see." A slow smile lit his face. "Well, never let it be said that Billy Boyd stood in the way of experimentation." He winked at her just before closing the door to the bathroom.

Grace reached her arms over her head, her palms flat on the cool texture of the wall. She flexed her feet under the covers, then pointed her toes until she was stretched out taut and held it for three full, deep breaths, before relaxing with a contented sigh. She curled up on her side and hugged Billy's pillow to her chest, burying her giddy smile in its softness. Their morning so far had been unlike any other she'd ever shared with a lover, especially the soft, quiet, gentle sex he'd woken her with. That had been romantic, and sensual, and something she'd never forget. She didn't think Billy
had just been polite, either, in saying it was the best morning sex he'd ever had; he wasn't the type to say it if it wasn't true, and that knowledge sat warmly deep inside her chest.

The bathroom pipes emitted their usual shriek and rattle, and a moment later Billy appeared, shaking his head. "I should have had a plumber in, too," he muttered.

Grace snickered. "You forgot about the pipes, didn't you? Did they scare you again?"

"No, they did not scare me," he said, lifting his nose in the air. "My feet barely even left the ground." Rummaging through one of his bags, he pulled out pants, socks, trackies, and a t-shirt, and proceeded to quickly get dressed. "I had forgot it gets Baltic in there, though. How do you not wind up with pneumonia every time you shower?" He looked around the small apartment, spotted his hoodie, and pulled it on as well.

"Really hot water," she answered with a smile. "Don't worry, when we go to shower, I'll keep you warm."

Billy made a surprised, happy face, and then blew a kiss at her on his way to the refrigerator. "I reckon you will, at that. All right, wee girl, where will I find your fry pan?" Grace sat up and was about to get out of bed when he pointed at her, his arm extended straight out. "Stay."

"What am I, a dog?" she protested. "In the bottom cupboard to the right of the sink."

"Of course you're not a dog," he said as he retrieved the pan and set it on a front element on the small stove. "You're a wee red hen. I thought we'd covered that already."

She curled up on her side again. "Do hens sit and stay? Can you train them?"

He grinned over at her. "You're asking a city-born lad, love. But I imagine not particularly well, no. They're stubborn, independent wee beasties, aren't they?"

Grace buried her head under the covers so he wouldn't see her laugh, but above the blankets she flipped him off, and was rewarded with the sound of him chuckling. She tucked her arm back under and stayed where she was, the space dim and warm, not yet stifling. She heard him rummaging through a drawer. "What are you looking for?"

"A turner and a whisk. I think I see everything else I need."

"A turner?" she asked, for some reason thinking of an hourglass-style egg timer.

"You know. A flippy thingy. For turning over eggs."

"Oh, a spatula. Second drawer down. The whisk is in there, too."

"Isn't a spatula the rubber thing you use to clean out a bowl?" he asked.

"Yes. Might I remind you that you call dessert pudding and pudding pudding?"

"Point taken. You can call it whatever you like, love," he chuckled. "Is anything in the fridge off-limits?"

"No. But I thought you were making scrambled eggs?" She pressed her nose to his pillow and breathed deeply, wondering if it was too soon for it to smell like him. Apparently it was, and she sighed.

"I decided I wanted something a wee bit heartier. Do you want tea, or coffee?"
"Mmm. Coffee this morning, I think." She listened to the sounds coming from her tiny kitchen. The fridge opening and closing again. The cutting board being set down on the counter. A drawer opening and the soft rattle of cutlery. The tap running, and a moment later the sound of something being chopped on the cutting board. Grace felt warm and happy, and strangely moved by the domestic sounds of someone sharing her space for the first time in over a year. Her stubbornness and determination had got her through some dark and difficult months, but it had been terribly lonely at times. "Billy?"

"Aye?"

"I'm glad you're here." She could feel herself blushing a little, but was content that she'd said it.

There was a full five seconds of silence, and then Billy's voice came, warm and velvety. "I am too, dear heart."

She pushed the covers back from her face, and the air that rushed across her skin felt cold compared to the space beneath the blankets, warmed by her body and her breath. The chill reminded her of being on the swings the night before and she shivered, trying to turn her thoughts to something happier--or at least a topic further from the spectre of Michael. It was difficult, though, having just seen him the day before, so instead she forced herself to think of the assistance she'd had from her friends.

"Billy?"

"Aye?"

"You should call Dom later and let him know--well, what happened last night."

"Don't you want to tell him about it?" he asked, and a moment later she heard the coffeemaker begin to brew.

"Not really. I mean, not that I don't want him to know, just that I don't think I can go through it again. Parts of last night are a bit...well, fuzzy, to be honest."

"Distress can do that to you," he said.

Grace nibbled on the side of her thumb for a moment, wondering if it was distress, or unaccustomed rage, or perhaps a combination of both. Then, determined once again to turn her thoughts to something less unpleasant, she asked, "Do you know if Dom likes maple syrup?"

"He loves it," Billy confirmed. "Planning on sending him a bottle?"

She sighed. "I probably can't afford the shipping on a heavy bottle just yet. But there's a place in the St. Lawrence Market--remember where we had lunch on your sightseeing day?" At Billy's noise of agreement, she continued, "There's a place in there that sells maple syrup products, and I thought I could send him a few things. Maple sugar candy, some lollipops, that sort of thing."

"Dom does love a good lolly," he said, a grin in his voice. "Oral fixation, y'see."

Grace snickered. "Too much information, Boyd."

He laughed. "I'm sure he'd be delighted to receive any of it. It's a kind thought, dear heart."

She shrugged, even though she knew Billy wasn't looking at her. "He's been awfully nice to me, and remarkably helpful, considering how far away he lives. I just want him to know I appreciate
"Another thought struck her, and she smiled. "And maybe next month I'll poke around the used music stores and see if I can't find a couple of obscure and extremely local cds to send to Elijah. He wouldn't have an issue with used cds, would he?"

"He buys them himself all the time, when he can't find them new," Billy assured her.

"That's what I'll do then," she said, satisfied. Half-teasing, she added, "And then I'll have to think up something really, really good to send to you."

"No need," Billy said easily, accompanied by the sound of a cupboard door closing. "You've already taken care of mine."

"I have?"

"Aye. You're sending me you. Or had you forgotten you're coming to visit me soon? I certainly haven't." There was a definite grin in his voice.

"That doesn't count, that was already planned--and besides, it was your idea. No, I want to send you something different. I'll have to think about it."

"If you like," he said, and left it at that.

Grace thought for a moment or two of what she might send him, but when inspiration didn't immediately strike, she let her mind wander. April--and her anticipated visit to Glasgow--seemed a terribly long way away, but it really wasn't that far off, not in the grand scheme of things, she supposed. It was reassuring to note that Billy seemed to be looking forward to it just as much as, if not more than, she was. The thought made her smile. She curled up on her side, hugging the idea to herself just as she hugged Billy's pillow to her chest.

A few minutes later, Billy said, "Right, time to sit up, wee girl. Breakfast is ready."

After indulging in one more luxurious stretch, Grace sat up, keeping herself covered with the sheets. "Pass me my t-shirt, please?" she asked, pointing to where it was tidily folded on the end of the small bookcase beside the bed.

He walked over the few steps from the kitchen to the end of the bed, glanced down at her shirt, and instead pulled one from the top of his open bag and tossed it to her. "Long sleeves," he said with a smile. "It'll keep your arms warmer."

She shook it out and held it up, discovering the grey plaid shirt was indeed long-sleeved. Feeling her cheeks heat a bit, she pulled it on and fastened the buttons up the front. "Thank you. It's nice and soft." The sleeves were too long, so she rolled them up to just above her wrists.

"Don't get too comfortable in it," he said with a laugh. "I have to take it with me when I go."

"We'll see." She gave him her most innocent smile.

Billy raised an eyebrow. "I'm learning to be very wary of that look on your face."

"Guess I'll have to work on some different looks, then," she said, and stuffed her pillow behind her back before leaning against the wall. "I can't give away all my secrets already."

Returning with two plates in hand, Billy said, "Here you are. Mushroom, tomato, and cheese omelettes with toast."
"You got fancy." Grace inhaled deeply. "This smells delicious, Billy, thank you."

"You're very welcome." He sat cross-legged facing her, balancing his plate on one hand as he ate with the other, watching her with a little smile on his face while he chewed.

"What?" she asked, taking a bite. "Mmm, this is delicious."

"I'm glad you like it. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." She nibbled on a corner of her toast and waited expectantly.

Billy hesitated so long that she reached forward to give his knee a squeeze. "Out with it."

"Do you think...you'll move now?" he finally asked.

Grace knew that wasn't the question he'd originally had--the look on his face said that plain as day. She was also certain, though, that if she asked him about it, it would be another 'not yet'. She wondered what he was thinking about so much that he wasn't yet ready to share. "Not for a while, I suppose. A month ago I was desperate to get out of here, but…" She glanced around the tiny apartment with a smile. "It's not so bad now."

"Don't stay here any longer than you have to just because I fixed it up a bit," he protested.

"You fixed it up a lot," she corrected him. "But I won't, I promise. I'm just no longer desperate, so I can certainly stay here long enough to save up for a bit. I mean, I'd need more than first and last month's rent for another place anyway, and finding a decent apartment that's not ridiculously expensive will take time."

"So you're probably here for another few months at least, then?"

She nodded. "I expect so, yes."

"Good." He seemed to catch himself. "I mean, I'm glad you're okay with staying put for a bit."

Grace cocked her head and regarded him steadily. "Are you ever going to tell me what this--and this morning--has been about?"

He gave her a sheepish smile. "I will. Just…"

"I know." Grace smiled at him, and reached across once again to hold his hand. "Okay. Not yet."

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