One Day Soon You Will Be Mine

by nadin

Summary

This is basically just a collection of drabbles based on tumblr prompts. Because I miss JW and Clawen!

Notes

So, I've never been good at prompts but I'm giving them a try! They're all one-shots and there'll be about 10 of them or so :}
It wasn’t that Owen Grady was pathologically late at all times. It was that he wasn’t a morning person when he didn’t have to be one. Certainly not on Sunday, whatever the circumstances.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Claire’s voice boomed from the bedroom door, and he didn’t have to open his eyes to know she was glaring daggers at him, hands on her hips.

Owen buried his face into the pillow and covered his head with another one. “Jus’ five more minutes,” he mumbled, savoring the sweet moments of self-induced darkness and contentment.

Sure, her family was visiting from Wisconsin, and yes, they were supposed to go to the aqua park or whatever. He just didn’t understand why it had to happen before noon. Didn’t they all need some rest?

“Five more minutes?” She echoes, incredulous. “We were supposed to leave 10 minutes ago.”

“It will still be there even if we leave in an hour,” he told her, finally prying first his right and then his left eye open, pleased to see her wearing white cutoffs and a broad brimmed hat. Casual Claire went all the way!

“That is not the point,” Claire huffed in frustration, throwing her hands in the air. “Get up and get dressed, Owen. Now. I mean it.”

Oh, he knew she did. But she was so adorable with her lips pursed into a stubborn line and eyes narrowed ever so slightly Owen simply couldn’t hold back the grin that tugged at the corners of his mouth until his face was nearly splitting in two.

“Then why don’t you come over here and make me?” He offered with a contemplative wiggle of his eyebrows.

Her scowl deepened, and even though she probably knew better than to take that bait, there wasn’t much that could stop her when they were running late – on the Claire Dearing scale of disaster, this one went right after a tornado, although definitely before a tsunami.

Claire crossed the room, marching up to him, and pulled at the blankets. “Why do you have to make it so difficult?” She demanded.

“I don’t have to.” Owen caught her wrist and yanked how down, rolling them over until she was sprawled beneath him, her hat handing on the floor. “But it’s so much more fun that way!” And before she could protest, his lips pressed to hers, swallowing what he could only assume would’ve been very unlady-like.

“Okay, I guess we have some time,” she admitted breathlessly when he pulled back a while later, arms locked around his neck.

“Well, well, Ms. Dearing,” he teased.

“I’ll just tell them it was your fault.”

“Works for me.”
“You did all of this for me?”

For the reasons yet unknown to Claire, Owen was not a fan of his birthday.

“It’s just a day,” he told her when she brought it up, and then changed the subject before she had a chance to dig any deeper.

It was not just a day, however, because if that day never happened, she would never have met him, and Claire was determined to let him know it.

Now, she might not have known why he was so dismissive of what she considered the best day of the year, but she did know that, even though it had been months since they returned from Isla Nublar, he still missed the island – not the life-and-death part of it, perhaps, but everything else about it for certain. And with his birthday coming up, she knew she had something to work with.

“Where are we going, exactly?” Owen asked when she picked him up from work a couple of weeks later and took a turn toward the seaside instead of their apartment.

“It’s a surprise,” Claire didn’t budge.

“The last time you said that, it didn’t end well.”

“Actually, the last time you said that, it didn’t end well.”

Owen let out a short laugh. “Touché.”

She parked her car near a recluse beach and turned off the engine. The sun went down in the time it took them to get here, but the breeze was warm and heavy with the smell of the ocean and palm oil filling the air.

Claire kicked off her shoes, the sand soft like velvet under her feet, the long skirt of her sundress brushing against her ankles.

“You coming?” She glanced at Owen over her shoulder.

But he was not looking at her. He was looking at the blanket sprawled on the beach not far from the water, the candles stuck into the sand around it, their glow a beacon for them to follow, and a picnic basket sitting on top on it. This far away from the city lights, the sky was pitch black and dotted with myriads of stars, bright and infinite. So many of them he couldn’t wrap his mind around it. Milky Way stretching right over their heads and the ocean, just as black, blending into it.

Standing there, Owen felt like he was floating in space.

“Owen?” Claire called him again.
“You did all of this for me?” He asked, regaining his ability to speak again at last.

“Well,” she cleared her throat, suddenly self-conscious, his awe-stricken voice making her skin tingle. “This,” she pointed up, “was already here, and I know you wanted to get away from the city noise, so—”

Owen crossed the distance between them in two quick strides, arm slipping around her waist, pulling her in until his lips found hers. “It’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

“Happy birthday, Mr. Grady,” she murmured against his kiss.

“Thank you for the best birthday I’ve ever had, Claire.”
“Wait a minute. Are you jealous?”

Chapter Summary

Claire is being adorable when she pretends she's not jealous. You know the drill!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Wait a minute. Are you jealous?”

Owen Grady was not a flirt.

For one thing, he regarded it as an unprofessional behavior - the one with dire consequences - seeing as how he spent most of his time at the park. And then there was his disastrous date with Claire Dearing a few months back that sort of proved him right.

He was not a flit, but, unlike certain people, he didn’t think that being friendly was a crime. He was also getting very good at avoiding said ‘certain people’ as best he could.

As long as it was an option, of course.

Granted, Claire seemed to be on board with the plan and he’d hardly had to see her for as long as she had Zara to come fetch his progress reports. Mature adults that they were, goddammit!

Which was exactly why he was the first to make a beeline for the door the moment the weekly staff meeting ended lest he and Claire make so much as an eye contact, only breathing a sigh of relief in the safety of the hallway.

Where he promptly ran into Marcia from accounting.

Owen liked her alright. Unlike corporate suits that paraded their expensive briefcases like it was a snob fashion show and spoke exclusively the language of income and profit, Marcia seemed… human. She had a son who was obsessed with dinosaurs and she’d brought him over a few times to ride a baby Triceratops at the petting zoo. She also was a regular at their weekend poker games and Owen knew for certain that Barry tended to watch her with soulful eyes when he thought no one was looking.

They exchanged a few pleasantries and were just about to dig into the Knicks game from last night when Marcia stood straight and pushed her glasses up her nose. “Ms. Dearing,” she said with a polite smile.

Owen turned to find Claire heading their way. She nodded dismissively at him and asked Marcia, “Would you mind sending me the revenue forecast tonight?” Then turned to Owen when the other woman was gone. “Don’t you have work to do, Mr. Grady?”

“Since when are we--” He started, but she simply brushed past him heading for her office before he could finish. He could have walked away. And he should have. Instead, he caught up with her in a couple of quick strides. “Actually, the feeding time is not for another two hours.”
Claire snorted. “Well, in that case, maybe you can file your paperwork on time for once.” And added, “Unless you are too busy flirting your way through the day.”

Owen stepped in front of her, stopping them both and causing her to all but bump into him. His eyes narrowed slightly as he watched her face for a heartbeat or two. “Wait a minute. Are you jealous?”

Claire’s moth fell open in genuine shock. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“You’re being absurd,” she huffed, all righteous indignation.

“That’s not an answer to my question,” he told her.

“That’s because your question makes no sense. Why on Earth would I…” She clamped her mouth shut, lips pursed into a thin line. “You know what? I have no time for this nonsense.”

Which was his cue.

Yet, he didn’t move. Hell, he hadn’t seen her this close since the night of their unfortunate get-together when she was glaring at him half the time, probably trying to incinerate him with the power of her mid or whatever. A strand of hair fell across her cheek, and Owen had to stuff his hands into the pockets of his pants to physically keep himself from reaching out to brush it away.

“We have an attraction, you and I. You know that, right?” He asked in a low voice, watching her eyes widen.

“We certainly do not, Mr. Grady,” Claire forced through her teeth, unable to hold back a traitorous color that rose in her cheeks. She stepped around him and stormed off on a parting, “And finish your paperwork!” without looking back.

Owen watched her go, his lips quirked into a smile, for once happy to have run into her.

Oh yes, they did.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, I hope you're enjoying this stuff :)


Chapter Summary

When the dust settled...

“You’re the only one I trust to do this.”

After the last ferry with the park guests was gone, after the anxious murmur of concerned voices died down and the sun began its descend toward the horizon, Owen found Claire sitting outside of the hangar on a bench someone must’ve dragged out of their make-shift waiting point, the blanket still wrapped around her shoulders, pale fingers clutching it tightly.

She turned to the sound of his footsteps, her expression changing from confused to relieved.

Without a word, he plopped down beside her and leaned against the warm concrete wall, tempted to close his eyes and fall asleep for a thousand years, the events of the past 24 hours finally catching up with him, making every muscle in his body ache, begging for a much-needed rest.

“You family…?” He began.

“Gone,” she responded quickly. “I don’t want them anywhere near this place. Not that InGen would’ve let them stay anyway.”

He nodded curtly, let out a long breath, “We’re next then.” And then reached out for Claire’s hand, interlacing their fingers.

She squeezed back, hard. He’d disappeared for a while, helping out with the evacuation, and by the time Karen and the boys got on the ferry, Claire was certain he’d left as well. And until this moment, she didn’t even realize how much she was hoping he hadn’t.

“It’s going to be okay.” Owen said, his thumb running soothingly over her knuckles.

At that, she let out a short, sharp laugh. “No, it’s not.” Her voice felt edgy and raw, and even though there was no immediate danger – as far as she was concerned – her whole body felt like it was about to break into a run, the line between physical and emotional threat blurring and fading away. “People might not be dying anymore, but it’s not over yet. Far from it.”

She felt him watch her for a moment or two.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” she turned to him, looking into his eyes for the first time since this conversation began. There was a smudge of dirt or grease on his forehead, his forearms were covered in scratches, and she wondered what she looked like in her torn clothes smeared with blood and… she didn’t want to think what else.

“Why me? You could’ve asked literally anyone else to help you find Zach and Gray. Why did you ask me?”
Claire swallowed, her mouth suddenly cottony and dry. Damn it, she did not expect *that*.

“You were the only one I trusted to do it,” she whispered at last, cringing inwardly at how personal it came out, and even more at how true it was.

His lips quirked into what was probably meant to be smile. It didn’t quite work, but she was willing to take it anyway. “Really? Even after…”

“The Margaritaville fiasco?” She offered helpfully and shook her head. “What can I say? I was desperate.”

He laughed. He actually laughed, and the sound of it uncoiled the tight knot in her stomach. Owen brought their hands up to his mouth and kissed the back of her hand, and she leaned into him, pressing her forehead into his shoulder, breathing in the scent of sweat and gasoline and the jungle, and finally – finally! - feeling safe and whole for the first time in a while. Years, maybe. Her eyes flattered closed, and she hoped they still had time to just be, like this, before all hell broke loose again.

“Are *we* going to be okay?” Owen asked after a few minutes, her breath tickling the crown of her head.

“Yes.” She said. “We are.”
I wish I could hate you.

Chapter Summary

...because if she hated him, it'd hurt less.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I wish I could hate you.”

She knew it would happen.

She just didn’t think it would happen this soon.

It had barely been a few weeks since the disaster in Jurassic World, but InGen was already gathering a new team to go back for the clean-up.

Claire knew it was more than just that though. They needed to try and salvage whatever data had been left there, assess the damage from the financial point of view, see which of the animals were still alive. An executive in her went through the mental list of what Masrani Global could do next with the island almost mechanically. She knew the figures, kept in mind the revenue and profit forecasts. For Claire Dearing, the Operations Manager of the park, it was almost a second nature.

She wasn’t surprised the new head of the company contacted her first – they needed someone to supervise whatever they were planning to do with what was left of the park. She refused without thinking twice, knowing that if they chose to fire her – well, so be it.

Owen, on the other hand, wasn’t as determined as she was.

Soon after his meeting with InGen, he found her in the maze of the Masrani Global headquarters trying to get a cup of a probably undrinkable coffee from the vending machine.

“You need to give a solid kick for it to work,” he suggested, approaching her.

“I’m not sure I can afford damaging more property here,” Claire responded. Then looked at him, really looked at him. “You’re going.”

“Claire…”

“No, it’s fine, really,” she said quickly, doing a poor job at masking her disappointment.

He hated the way she didn’t seem to be able to look him in the eye afterward, rambling about how she understood - and would this thing give her her money back at least? - choosing to stare at the vending machine menu instead.

“It’s just for a week,” he told her quietly, apologetically. “I swear. I need to make sure Blue’s okay. I have to.”

“I told you, it’s fine.” Claire repeated.
“Hey,” Owen stepped in front of her, invading her personal space until she had no choice but to meet his gaze. “If you want me to stay, I will.”

She hesitated, shook her head. “I just want all this to be over.”

“I know you hate me right now…” He grimaced a little.

“I wish I could hate you, it’d make everything so much easier,” she admitted.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Would it help if I wore board short until I have to leave? I mean I know they make you see red.”

“When are you going?”

“Wednesday.”

Claire closed her fist around the fabric of his shirt, twisting it in her fingers, her eyes mostly trained on his chin. “It would help if you could wear absolutely nothing until then.”

Owen laughed, then pecked her on the nose and threw his arm around her shoulder, steering her toward the elevators. “This can be arranged.” Once the doors dinged closed behind them, he drew her in for a proper kiss, murmuring against her lips, “I’m coming back because you and I are not done yet.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you’re enjoying this stuff, folks :)


Teach me how to play?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Teach me how to play?

One of the first real-life-no-kidding things Claire learned about Owen Grady was that he loooooooved video games. Her ongoing theory was that his Xbox moved into her apartment even before Owen did, or at least it felt that way more often than not. Her other ongoing theory was that if she was ever to kill him with her bare hands, it would be because of said Xbox.

“What?” Owen asked, his eyes still trained on the TV screen, fingers moving swiftly over the controller.

“I didn’t say anything,” Claire pointed out.

“I can hear you thinking,” he responded, knowing exactly what he’d see if he looked up – her standing in the living room doorway, hands on her hips, glaring daggers at him.

He grimaced and leaned to the side, pulling the controller up to his chest as if it could help his character stay undetected by his persistent pursuer.

“Oh, yeah? Can you hear yourself sleeping on the couch tonight?”

At that, Owen’s head perked up, mouth dropping open almost comically in confusion. He hit the pause on the controller, leaving a slack-jawed monster gape at them from the screen.

“What did I do?”

“So that got your attention, huh?” Claire huffed, and under the mask of frustration she looked hurt. “I barely saw you all week, and you spent 5 hours today…” She paused. “What was it that you were doing, exactly?”

“Saving the world,” he responded promptly and flashed a bright smile at her, wincing a little when her frown didn’t disappear. “Zach and Gray are coming over next week,” he explained, “and the last time they were here, they totally kicked my ass. There’s only so much a guy can take.”

Claire’s expression softened, her lips curving ever so slightly. “Okay, how about you teach me how to play and we’ll kick their butts together?”

His eyes arrowed skeptically for a moment. “Really?”

“Sure.”

Owen slid down onto the floor, his back leaning against the couch, and then caught Claire by the wrist and pulled her down until she was sitting between his knees, his arms wrapped around her, his fingers guiding hers on the controller as he explained the plot of Bioshock and what she was supposed to do.

It turned out Claire was a natural – not that he expected anything else from the woman who’d run across the jungle in high heels and shot a Dimorphodon off of him without thinking twice.

The problem was, however, that with Claire being engrossed in a single-player game, he found
himself… well, bored. Not to mention that Claire nestled against his chest was pretty damn distracting. Too distracting to follow the game he’d played already.

Owen let go of her hands and pushed her hair aside to press his lips to a sensitive stop behind her ear, leaving a trail of kisses down her neck.

“Owen?”

“You know,” he mumbled against her skin, “you’re right. It’s stupid to spend all day in front of the TV.”

“But I was just….” She started, but then dropped the controller to the carpet and turned around for a proper kiss, melting against him as his arms wrapped around her. “Oh, hell. You were saying?”

Chapter End Notes

I can so see something like this happen between them :))
“Do you…well…I mean…I could give you a massage?”

Owen Grady always thought that his was a perfect job. Everything about it was great. Everything except paperwork. Oh, he understood the importance of it just fine, but it didn’t make writing the reports and delivering them any more exciting. Especially after his disastrous date with Claire Dearing that basically left them both avoiding one another.

Mature and brave man that he was, Owen usually used Zara as a buffer, but as his luck would have it today, she was nowhere to be seen, and he really, really didn’t feel like having another trip to the management headquarters on the off-chance she’d be around later. The door to Claire’s office, however, was half-open and Owen could hear her fingers dancing on the keyboard like a rapid staccato.

He sighed, looked longingly over his shoulder to what he could only qualify as ‘freedom’, then rapped his knuckles on Claire’s door and peeked inside.

She snapped her head up and winced visibly. Owen pursed his lips tight for a moment, debating just turning around and leaving because come on, he didn’t have a kick out of having to interact with her either, but they could at least be civilized about it.

“Hey, I’m…” he started, cleared his throat, looked down at the folder in his hands, then up at Claire again. “Zara’s not here. Where do I leave this?”

“I’ll take it.” Claire swiveled in her chair and extended her arm for the papers.

And it was then that Owen noticed that her grimace was still in place, and that it looked like it was caused by some sort of a physical discomfort.

“Are you okay?” Owen asked, putting the documents on her desk and eyeing her curiously.

Claire bristled momentarily at that. “Of course of I am. Why on Earth would you–”

“Because you look like someone took you apart and forgot to put you back together properly,” he interjected with a scoff, kicking himself mentally for referring to the staff’s speculations about how she was actually a robot and praying she didn’t get it.

“I’m fine.” She regarded him sternly. “Would that be all, Mr. Grady?”

“Owen,” he corrected her automatically. Cleared his throat again. “It just… if you need any help…”

“I’m fine,” Claire repeated.

He raised his hands up. “Suit yourself.” And was about to leave when she spoke again:

“It’s my neck.” Her voice was barely a whisper, and when Owen turned to her again, she wasn’t trying to hide her pain anymore. “I must have strained it in my sleep.”

She averted her eyes for a moment as if trying to compose herself from revealing more from of him
than she normally would, allowing Owen to study her without having to pretend that he wasn’t.

Well, she looked like… Claire. And he had spent enough time trying not to see her as anything but his boss to start doing it again now. Not what he could help it. She looked good, and it made something inside of him ache.

“I’ve got some Panadol in my purse,” she continued, gesturing toward the couch where he clutch set on the cushions. “If you could… um, hand it to me, I’d really—”

“Or I could give you a massage.” The words were out of Owen’s mouth before he knew it, and he was honestly just as surprised by them as she was.

Claire’s jaw dropped, her eyes growing wide. “Excuse me?”

At that, Owen rolled his eyes and strolled over to her. “Just let me fix it, you’ll feel better.”

“What are you…” She began to protest when he rounded her desk and swiveled her chair until he was facing her back before she could so much as blink.

“Relax, Claire, I’m not going to bite.” He snorted.

“You know what—”

“Would you sit still for two minutes?” He demanded impatiently.

She was certainly not going to tolerate this kind of behavior… but then his hands began to work their magic, digging first gently and then more persistently into the sore muscles of her shoulders, his thumbs running through the tension knots in her neck, and God help her, she was a step away from starting to purr.

It was surprisingly – and unexpectedly – easy to relax under his touch, and now that he couldn’t see her face, she allowed her eyes to flutter closed, feeling the pain leave her body while a certain sense of comfort started pooling in.

Owen’s hands were warm, his movements sure, and why would he be working with the raptors when he had a real talent right here—

“Hey, Claire, Verizon moved your meeting to next week and…” Zara walked in and stopped in her tracks, nearly tripping on her own feet when her eyes fixed on the scene before her. She opened her mouth, closed it again, glanced around. “I’m sorry, the door was open, I didn’t think…”

Claire all but jumped into the air, and she would have had Owen’s hands not been holding her in place.

“It’s nothing like that,” she blurted out quickly.

“I’ll just come back later,” Zara said, not even bothering to hide her amusement which made Claire’s cheeks grow hot, before slipping out of the office.

“Oh, God,” Claire breathed out, then wiggled out of his touch. “This was exactly why—”

“Seriously?” Owen let go of her shoulders and shook his head. “She didn’t think it was anything like that, whatever that is.” He made a face and headed for the door. “And, for the record, normal people say thank you.”

Claire moved her head from side to side, then rubbed the back of her neck, willing the tingling left
by his fingers to go away, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

“Mr. Grady…” She called. “Owen.” That stopped him alright. She offered him a smile when he turned around, making him feel like he was looking directly at the sun. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't help it xD Embarrassed Claire is to much fun!
Okay, so this is pre-date, in terms of timeline. I’ve been thinking about why would Owen ever assume they had any attraction at all, seeing as how their date was a disaster, and this is what I came up with ;)
mouth shut before any of that slipped out. “You look like you’re about to bolt,” he said at last. “Everything okay?”

Claire looked around the room once again, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly, and when Owen followed her gaze, he saw Hoskins talking to what he guessed was one of the moneybags invited for a ride along.

“Peachy,” she responded under her breath and finished her drink in one gulp.

“Is he giving you any trouble?” Owen frowned, momentarily concerned.

“What?” Claire put her glass down.

“Hoskins. Is he bothering you?”

“No one is bothering me, Mr. Grady. Now if you’ll excuse me–”

“Claire.”

She sighed, gave him a somewhat dubious look, then shook her head. “He’s had a few drinks that convinced him that sleazy equals charming. I’d tell him off but I’m not sure a scene would be appreciated.”

Owen’s jaw clenched and he huffed through his nose, then turned to her. “How about that? I’ll stick around and tell him to go to hell if he tries anything.”

Claire frowned. “I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can, but what fun is that? Besides, I’ve been waiting to do this for too long to just walk away.” He also finished his champagne and added some wattage to his smile.

“You’ve been waiting to tell your supervisor to go to hell?”

“To hang out with you,” he corrected, and added, “And I don’t need to be drunk to be sleazy.”

“I can see that,” Claire sighed, trying to fight off a smile, and failing.

Just then, Hoskins popped up beside them like a Jack in the box.

Ignoring Owen, he grinned at her, not quite bothering to cover the fact that he was taking mainly to her breasts. “I believe we haven’t finished,” Hoskins drawled. Then glanced briefly at Owen as of only now noticing him, “If you don’t mind…”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Owen stepped closed to her, his arm slipped around Claire’s waist, hand resting on the small of her back. “Now, if you don’t mind.”

Skeptically, Hoskins glanced from him to Claire and back to Owen. “So, this is how it is, huh? You two are–”

“That’s exactly how it is,” Owen assured him smugly, and Claire was torn between an overwhelming sense of gratitude and a desire to elbow him in the ribs. She’d have been totally fine on her own, thank you very much, and the fact that this pissing match was even happening was setting her teeth on edge.

A smile fell from Hoskins’s face, replaced by a deep scowl. He walked off without another word.
“See? That was easy.” Owen’s hand dropped from her back. “You’re welcome.”

Claire regarded him sternly. “It’s almost you’re not rubbing it in my face, Mr. Grady.”

He faltered. “Owen. And… okay, that wasn’t cool.”

Her features softened. “Thank you.”

“Wanna dance?” He offered.

Claire’s eyes widened, jaw dropping for a moment when she found herself at a loss for words. “No, that’s not necessary. I wouldn’t want to keep you from–”

He took her hand and pulled her toward the center of the room where a few couples were already swaying to Eric Clapton’s *More Than Words*. “Aw, come on, we wouldn’t want to blow our cover.” Expertly, he span her around, pulling her toward him until his arm fit around her body once again. From this close, it was impossible not to breathe in the scent of her perfume, and it left his mind reeling. Or maybe it was the champagne, but he wouldn’t bet on it. “Might as well enjoy it before this place turned into a pumpkin at midnight.”

“Wrong story, Mr. Grady,” Claire mumbled into his shoulder, both surprisingly comfortable and acutely aware of the attention aimed at them.

“Nah, we just fought off the biggest rat, so…”

She chuckled at that, and finally allowed herself to give in to the slow sway of their bodies. “I didn’t know you could dance.”

“Well, there’s a lot–” He was interrupted by the loud cheers as the clock struck twelve, followed by the clinking of glasses.

Claire paused for a moment, then looked up at him. “Kiss me.”

“What?”

“For Christ’s sake, it was your idea.” She rolled her eyes. “And didn’t you just say–”

Before she could finish, Owen cupped her face in his palms and pressed his lips to his, feeling her stiffen for a second in surprise before her arms slipped around his waist, her lithe body melting against his and the sounds of the excited crowd faded around them. She tasted like champagne and something very Claire, and he thought his heart would leap out of his chest right there and then.

“You think we sold it?” Claire murmured, her face still not even an inch away from his.

“Dinner. Next Friday. You and me.” Owen offered in response, his fingers still playing absently with the strands of her hair. “We can discuss it then.”

Her lips quirked into a smile. “I could work with that.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it was kinda long. Hope it worked anyway!
If you die, I’m gonna kill you.

Chapter Notes

Let's face it, it's something Claire would totally say. Probably more than once :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If you die, I’m gonna kill you.
There were certain perks to dating the Jurassic World’s raptor trainer. Owen Grady was funny and charming; he had a heart of gold and a body of—

Claire Dearing cut herself off and glared at her boyfriend who was currently sitting on the paddock wall, trying to fix the lock that kept jamming for some reason. His theory was that it got rusty after the storm that hit the island a week ago. Claire’s was that he needed to cut the crap and let the technicians have a look at it.

Yeah, the downside of dating Owen was having to deal with the amount of stubbornness she had never encountered in her life. She appreciated the effort, of course, especially after the last time the gate wouldn’t close properly, nearly setting his precious raptors free, and thus endangering the lives of the personnel and the guests. But seeing him perched on the goddamn wall forty feet from the ground was making her heart do the flips in her chest, which did nothing to improve her mood.

“Get the hell down from there, Owen,” Claire demanded, hands on her hips, eyes squinting in the sunlight.

“Almost done,” Owen responded without looking at her.

He was humming, too, for heaven’s sake.

Claire rubbed her forehead and considered climbing up there herself, if only to get him to stop acting like a freaking Superman or whatever he thought he was. Except she was meeting with Simon Masrani in 30, which called for a proper attire, which included a skirt and black pumps.

Maybe if she threw a shoe at him….

Now that was a tempting idea.

“I mean I know you have a dying wish, your career choices considered, but this is getting ridiculous.” She said not without irritation. “We have a team of professional technicians who actually get paid to have things like this done.”

Owen glanced down at her, and even though the sun was right behind him, making it hard to read his face, she could have sworn he was smiling. Claire’s scowl deepened as she tried not to think of how one of his legs was swung over the wall, and who knew how high could the raptors jump. The thought made Claire queasy.

“Well, by the time they get here, someone might get hurt, so…” He tried to reason with her.

“Yeah, and that someone will probably be you.”
“Ouch! So much for your trust.” Owen shook his head with a chuckle.

“I’m serious, Owen. Where was this enthusiasm when I asked you to clear out the fridge?”

“In my defense, it didn’t sound nearly as exciting as this,” he pointed out, snapping the lid over the box with switches and wires back into place.

“There is a life form of sorts inhabiting the vegetable drawer. How’s that not exciting?” She huffed and folded her arms over her chest.

He let out a short laugh – and grabbed the edge of the wall after nearly topping down from it, the image knocking all air out of Claire’s lungs.

“If you die, I’m gonna kill you,” she promised darkly, and he honestly had no reason to think she was joking.

“I actually wouldn’t mind seeing–” he started.

“I’m out of here,” she interjected, turning on her heels and heading for her car, trying not to twist her ankles on the gravel.

In a quick, swift move, Owen slid down the iron pillars to the ground and caught up with her in two strides, snaking an arm around her waist and pulling her close for a long, searing kiss. It caught Claire off guard for mere second before she responded to it, disregarding the curious looks of the employees milling around the paddock, her hands reaching for her shoulders.

“See? Not a scratch.” Owen grinned, pulling back and resting his forehead against hers for a moment as the both tried to catch their breaths.

Which was a relief.

Until Claire looked down to find oil and rust hand prints on her beige blouse. “Owen Grady!”

He winced, eyeing her sheepishly. “Well, I think we could both use a quick shower.”

Chapter End Notes

So, whatcha thinking?
I almost lost you.

The nightmares started a week after Owen’s first tour to the Middle East.

He knew what they were and he knew they would be coming, but the blunt force and intensity they struck him with was disorienting nonetheless. And the most disturbing thing was knowing that they were created by own mind, trapping him inside the cage there was no escape from.

In the following years, Owen would often wake up in the middle of the night, his breath hitching in his throat, his heart racing, the images he could no longer grasp lurking in the periphery of his vision. It always felt like drowning, like being this close to the surface but never strong enough for the last kick to reach it.

Like a scar that would fade away with time but never quite disappear, Owen knew those visions were not likely to leave. His best bet was to learn to live with them.

And he almost did. Until Jurassic World and the Indominus Rex came along. Until there was blood on his hands, and the screams of the dying people in his head, and the fear, strong and paralyzing, that held him tight in its iron grip.

It was not dying that scared him, though. It was losing her.

Owen woke up with a start, eyes snapping open to find the shadow-striped ceiling above his head, his heartbeat frantic, his breathing ragged and short, a silent scream dying on his lips.

“Hey,” sleepily, Claire reached for him, palms on his cheeks, her voice soft and grounding. Even in the dark, her eyes were anchors, holding him in the moment before he slipped away to where he could not come back from. “It’s okay,” she murmured. “It was just a dream, Owen. It’s over.”

Palms smoothing his hair, pushing the sweat-soaked curls from his forehead, Claire scooted closer to him, and he wrapped his arms around her until she fit against his body like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, her soft breath falling on his collarbone, the scent of her calming the raging storms inside of him.

“It’s not,” Owen whispered, lips brushing to the top of her head, needed to feel her, to know she was safe. “Never will be.”

She shifted in his arms and looked up at him, taking in his features, the haunted panic pooling in his eyes. “Yes, it is,” Claire said quietly but firmly, and Owen’s heart splintered at the sound of determined resolution in her voice, at how much he wanted to believe her. She leaned forward, resting her forehead against his, her eyes fluttering shut. “It’s over, we’re safe, and I’m here.”

“I thought I lost you,” he said. “I almost lost you. The T-Rex… when you fell… I can’t lose you,
Claire. Can’t… I don’t know what I do if something—if you—” he swallowed. “If you were gone.”

Her lips curved into a small smile as she tried to ignore the pang in her chest, the mental image of what it would feel like to lose him.

“Crash and burn,” she suggested, earning a soft chuckle, relieved to notice that he was no longer shaking, his heartbeat no longer drumming against her chest as if it was trying to escape. “You can’t operate a coffee machine, for crying out loud. You’d never survive without me.”

“I do, too,” he protested, falling easily into a familiar game that required not talking about the things that scared them both out of their minds.

Laughter bubbling up in her chest, Claire tucked her face into the crook of his neck. “You nearly set the kitchen on fire.”

“That’s because it has more controls than a space ship,” Owen responded defensively.

“My point exactly.”

He stayed quiet for a little while, listening to the sounds of the night, soothed and sated by the warmth of her body, the weight of it against him, the contentment he didn’t even know he was capable of feeling. Wrapped in the darkness, holding Claire in his arms – it was everything. His stomach no longer coiling with fear, he allowed himself to relax, to let her form melt into him, soft and languid and so wonderful it hurt.

“I need you, Claire,” he murmured, kissing her temple, noticing her deepened, easy breathing.

She let out a long sigh, lips tugging up at the corners, not quite asleep yet, but not really awake, either. “I had a dream like this once,” she said softly, almost inaudibly. “About you. I’m glad it’s coming true.”

*Inspired by “Only You Can Save” Me by Darin

Chapter End Notes

I NEED SOMETHING LIKE THIS ^^ IN THE NEXT FILM! Ugh!
Looks like we’ll be trapped for a while… & Tell me a secret.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so “Looks like we’ll be trapped for a while…” was requested by a few people. Also, I decided to combine it with another prompt because, as I was going through the list, this fic practically wrote itself. Sorta. It’s post-date, pre-film, AU(-ish?). And since it’s 2 prompts rolled into one, it a bit long, so my apologies for that :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Looks like we’ll be trapped for a while… & Tell me a secret.

Frowning at the black cloud creeping in on the island from the east, Claire pushed the gas pedal into the floor and swerved into a sharp turn, her car jumping on the packed dirt road leading from the raptors’ paddock to Owen Grady’s… residence. She pursed her lips into a thin line, unsure if he was more annoyed at him for making her drive all the way across the island for the reports he should have turned in a week ago, or at herself for being annoyed, period.

So what if they went out once and he never called afterwards, choosing to act like it never happened whenever their paths crossed? Did she want him to call? Hell, no! Was her ego wounded, though? Maybe a little. Not that she would ever allow anyone like Owen Grady to get too deep under her skin.

Claire pinched the bridge of her nose, willing the headache to go away and wishing she had someone else to run this particular errand for her, but the time was nearing 8 in the evening and the conference call with the investor came out of nowhere, leaving her no choice but to take care of everything herself. And it was only when she started preparing her selling speech that she noticed that some numbers were missing.

Hence the trip to the paddock where she was told that Mr. Grady had already left for the day.

Claire gripped the steering wheel tight as her car finally jumped over the last pothole and rolled into the clearing by Owen’s bungalow. On another day, the structure would be bathing in fading sunlight, but with the heavy clouds hanging low over her head, it was almost dark by the time she got there, the light streaming through the windows of his home warm and inviting.

The sight of it set Claire’s teeth on edge.

She climbed out of her car and slammed the door shut a little harder than necessary.

This far from the resort and the hotels and the never-dying buzz of Main Street, it was so quiet she might have as well been on another planet.

With a sigh, she climbed the rickety porch steps and knocked on the door, praying this nonsense of a situation would be over soon.

Owen swung the door open on, “I hope you brought beer.” And then cut himself off momentarily, his mouth hanging open for just a moment longer. At the sight of Claire dressed in a black designer jumpsuit and strappy stilettos – God only knew how she was navigating her way around this place
in those things without breaking her ankles – he straightened his back almost on instinct and cleared his throat. “I thought it was Barry.”

“I figured,” Claire said flatly.

Owen leaned against her doorframe and gave her another once-over, his brow quirked up. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” He asked in a tone what implied that it was anything but.

She scowled at him. “Your reports.”

He frowned. “Come again?”

“Your reports, Mr. Grady. For October. The ones you conveniently overlooked to file.”

“I’m pretty sure I did.” He countered immediate. “Sent them to Hoskins… Let me think, 10 days ago.”

“Well, he doesn’t have them and I need them now,” Claire insisted.

“I’m sure he does and you know where he lives,” he shrugged.

Yes, she did and she could go there, technically. Except it would be another 20 minutes of her time, and then she would definitely be late.

“Can’t you just give me your copy?” She inquired as if it was something even he could have grasped if he tried harder. “Please.”

Shaking his head, Owen stepped back, leaving the door open, which, Claire guessed, meant that it was her call whether or not to come in.

After a moment of hesitation, she stepped inside.

She’d never been in his house before, and, all things considered, it was a surprising experience. It wasn’t messy, exactly. Not the way she’d imagine it if she’d bothered to think about it, but it felt lived-in. There were magazines and an empty cup on the coffee table, a few books left here and there, his rifle propped against the wall behind the door, and a quilt draped over the back of a couch. It was… cozy. Not the meticulous neatness of her own place, but that inviting atmosphere that tended to make people want to stick around.

She grimaced inwardly at the thought.

“And here I was hoping it was a social visit,” Owen said over his shoulder as he rifled through a stack of papers on the bookshelf.

“Why on earth would it…” Claire trailed off when the word ‘hoped’ registered in her mind. She folded her arms over her chest. “Does it look like a social visit?”

He glanced at her lingering by the door, looking about as out of place here as a penguin in Africa.

Owen chuckled under his breath at the mental image, finally pulling out the folder he was looking for.

“Indeed, it does not,” he drawled, but just as he was about to hand her the papers she came for, a rapid succession of lightning flashed outside, followed by a deafening clap of thunder that make the whole structure shudder, giving Claire a start. “Scared of a little storm?” Owen quipped.
“Don’t be absurd.” She took the folder from him, leafed through it quickly to make sure it was what she came for, relieved to see that it was. “Well, thank you, Mr. Grady…”

“Is this formality really necessary?” He asked, not without amusement.

“Have a nice evening,” Claire said, even though they both knew she didn’t really mean it.

“Oh, I will…” he started, and then the sky suddenly opened up as if someone overturned a bucket of water, dumping it all on the island at once, heavy and strong, beating mercilessly on the roof and the old, creaky boards of the porch.

Owen whistled quietly as they both watched the downpour through the door she never bothered to shut.

Claire’s fingers closed tightly around the papers. Just her luck, she thought grimly. It was not the end of the world. Her car was parked twenty feet from the bungalow and maybe, just maybe, her clothes wouldn’t shrink, but on top of everything else, it still felt like a punch in the gut.

“Well, looks like we’ll be trapped here for a while,” Owen breathed out after a moment or two.

She whirled around. “What are you talking about?”

“This road,” he waved vaguely in the general direction of the park, “gets flooded during the storms. You’re not going anywhere until it’s over.”

“This is ridiculous. It’s just a little rain!”

In a swift motion, Owen reached out and snatched the car keys from her hand.

“No, it’s not.”

“Hey!” She protested. “Give them back!”

With a smug smile, Owen stuffed them into the pocket of his jeans. “Take them.”

On that, he turned and headed for the kitchen.

“This is not funny!” Claire followed him, fuming. “Give me my car keys right now, Mr. Grady, I have an important…”

The lights flickered once, twice, then went out.

“You were saying?” Owen asked from the darkness, his silhouette nothing but a black spot against the window behind which the lightning kept flashing.

After about half a minute, a backup generator spluttered and coughed to life, starting to purr softly under the window, flooding the place with soft glow once again.

Claire took a deep breath lest she start screaming and then exhaled slowly. “I have an important call in… 20 minutes, damn it!” She rubbed her forehead. “I really need to go.”

He leaned against the cooking counter and shook his head. “It’s too dangerous, Claire.”

“Why do you even care?” She demanded icily.

“Because no one would pat me on the head if I allowed the Operations Manager of the park to
wrap her car around a tree or end up in a ditch,” he said, and added, “Make yourself at home. Want anything to drink?”

“I’m at work,” Claire pointed out.

“No for the next few hours you’re not.” Owen pulled the fridge door open and retrieved a bottle of while. He gave her a critical look, as if deciding something or the other. “You look like a Chardonnay kind of person.”

At that, her eyebrow crept up in surprise. “You keep Chardonnay in your refrigerator?”

“It was a gift.”

To that, she had no response.

Leaving him to his devices, Claire wandered back into the living room, finally thinking to check her phone and maybe salvage the situation by calling the investor before he decided that she ditched him. Her phone greeted her with a No Network Found message.

“Great, that’s just great,” she huffed, wondering what else was about to go wrong. A tornado maybe. No, a tsunami would be a wonderful end to her crappy day.

“What? Angry Birds are not cooperating?” Owen appeared behind her with a glass of wine that he handed to Claire and a tumbler of something that looked like scotch.


“Bullshit. There’s plenty of reception here, but in this weather? Yeah, it’s probably acting up.”

“Acting up,” she mimicked with a grimace, then gave the whole place another unimpressed look. “What do you even do here?”

Owen plopped onto the couch and propped his feet on a coffee table. “For starters, I’m usually not antagonized in my own house.” Head tilter slightly to his shoulder, he patted a seat next to him. “Your Highness?”

xxx

“You’re cheating!” Claire declared, all righteous indignation.

It had been 4 hours, and even though the rain eased up by now, it was far from being over.

At some point, Owen grilled a couple of burgers for them – she was so going to regret it, Claire thought, but she was hungry enough to let it pass – and refilled her glass a time or two. Not enough to get her drunk, but enough for her to relax and kick off her shoes, corporate image be damned.

They were sitting cross-legged in the middle of his living room now, playing Monopoly. And he was winning way too easily.

“How do you even cheat in Monopoly?” Owen inquired with a scoff.

“I don’t know, but you’re doing it.”

“Well, you would know,” he rolled his eyes, taking another sip of his… whatever.

Claire bristled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
He looked up, studied her for a moment or two. “It was a joke, Claire, not an attack.”

She let her shoulders slump a little, gaze wandering toward the heavy drops streaming down the living room window. God, she was tired.

“Okay, how about poker?” Owen suggested as a peace offering.

“Yeah, right,” she regarded him glumly.

“Go Fish?”

“What are you, twelve?”

“See? I don’t take everything you say as an insult.” He plopped back, stretching out on the carpet, and threw his arms behind his head.

“It wasn’t an insult, I was merely stating a fact.” She finished her wine and stretched her legs in front of her before they fell asleep.

“How about Truth or Dare?”

“Again – what are you, twelve?”

“Look, I know you probably busy yourself with reading *Economics Digest* or something equally boring before bed, but I don’t have anything of that kind here.” He stifled a yawn. “And I never would’ve pegged you for a chicken.”

Claire eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He watched her, daring her to disagree.

“Fine, whatever.” She checked her watch and sighed. For all she knew, this rain might have washed away the whole park, and she wouldn’t even know.

His eyes lit up. “Truth or dare, Miss Dearing?”

Claire hesitated, feeling like she was walking on a tightrope here, heading straight into the trap she couldn’t yet see. It wasn’t the stupid game that unnerved her so much as not knowing what he was going to ask of her. And what she would be willing to give.

“Truth,” she said at last, stretching out beside him, eyes locked on the ceiling.

“Tell me a secret,” Owen asked. “A real one, no cheating.”

“You would know,” she threw his own words at him, then let out a long breath, listening to the ticking of an old clock for a little while, trying to gather her scattered thoughts back together. “I really wanted you to ask me out,” she said at last, hr heart drumming so fast and loud she couldn’t hear the rain anymore. “And when you did, I wanted it to work.”

Owen stayed quiet for a full minute afterwards. “Your turn.”

“Truth or dare?” Claire said.

“Truth.”

“What do you think went wrong?”
This was probably the wine talking, she thought. She was tired and tipsy, and dam it, she wanted to know.

He considered the question. “When I saw you all dressed up that day and it finally hit me just how out of my league you were, I thought it would be easier to make you hate me than make you see it for yourself.” He smiled ruefully and ran a hand down his face. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Do you? I mean, do you hate me?”

Claire swallowed and rolled onto her side, tucking her arm under her head and pretending she couldn’t feel the scratchy polyester against her skin. “No. Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“What would you—”

He rolled over before she had a chance to finish that thought, his hand finding its way to her cheek, fingers threading through her hair, and his lips pressed to hers. He tasted like scotch and burger sauce and need, and it made Claire’s head spin. His arm slipped around her waist and her hand landed on his chest as she scooted closer to him, her eyes fluttering closed.

“Did that answer your… unasked question?” Owen asked a while later, breathless and giddy, and she laughed.

“Somewhat.”

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, running the back of his fingers down her cheek. “Hey, I think the rain stopped.”

Claire shook her head. “No, it didn’t.”

“I’m pretty sure it…”

She kissed him again on, “It did not.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew, this was long! Hope you liked it anyway :)


I’ve seen the way you look at me when you think I don’t notice

Chapter Notes

I was in a mood for some angst, so...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’ve seen the way you look at me when you think I don’t notice.

In hindsight, sticking together after the Jurassic World disaster didn’t seem like a bad idea.

It was good at first. And then it got bad. And then it got even worse.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, Claire moved to her parents’ house in Wisconsin that stood empty for the past few years, both saving Karen from having to check on it every week and also finding a perfect place to hide. The place was so deep in the middle of nowhere she doubted the press would come looking for her there.

Owen followed her without needing to be asked, and Claire didn’t find it in her to tell him he was making a mistake. Selfishly, she wanted him to follow her to the edge of the world.

It wasn’t until a couple of months later that the truth of what had happened, of what she allowed to happen at the park really hit her, the crashing wave of guilt sweeping her off her feet, leaving her breathless ad gasping for air. Owen wanted to help, wanted to be there for her, but she had spent so many years relying on no one but herself she didn’t know how to let him in.

She pulled away, grew distant, found herself unable to look him in the eye until it was too much for either of them to bear. Until they had nothing left to say to one another and the silence hanging between them turned heavy and suffocating.

He found a place a few blocks away from her house and moved out. She’d heard he got a job in the local YMCA, teaching a self-defence class to kids while she kept navigating her way through the pile of law suits, working long-distance – a courtesy of Masrani Global that wanted to keep her at any cost, more than willing to accommodate her needs even if it meant they only got to see her once a month when Claire flew to New York.

She’d still see Owen now and then – running in the park or standing in line in the local coffee shop. Sometimes, she’d wave and nod, but most of the time she’d slip away before he saw her, pretending she didn’t notice him, either.

Somehow, the pointed politeness of small talk was far more painful than his absence in her life that hurt so much she wanted to scream.

She dodged Karen’s questions, ignored curious looks of Zach and Gray, and put on one hell of a show to prove to them that she was doing just fine.

Until Gray’s end of the school year science fair rolled around when she found herself in a room full of parents and steaming volcanoes and the mechanisms she didn’t even hope to understand, desperately searching for her sister in the sea of unfamiliar faces, overwhelmed by the crowds and the noise.
“Oh, I’m sorry,” someone bumped into her, catching her elbow before Claire tumbled down in her wobbly high-heeled strappy shoes.

It wasn’t the voice that registered with her at first, but the scent of a familiar aftershave – the very one her whole house smelled of for weeks after Owen had left. She would still catch it on the linens now and then.

“Owen,” she breathed out, finally looking up, registering the surprise in his eyes that mirrored her own.

“Hey.”

He let go of her arm immediately and stepped back. She hadn’t seen him this close in at least three months now, and the longing she’d hoped she’d gotten over had hit her with the force of an oncoming train.

“I didn’t know you would…”

“Gray invited me.”

“Of course.” Claire cleared her throat, fighting the urge to bolt. “Have you seen…”

“Was just looking for them.”

“Right.” Well, the only thing they hadn’t discussed yet was the weather. “Well, I…” better go find the nearest exit.

It was then that something barreled into her with a loud yelp. “Aunt Claire! You came!”

“Ow!” She wrapped her arms around Gray – more to steady herself than for any other reason – but then recovered and bent down to kiss the top of his head. “Of course I did, honey. How could I not?”

“Owen,” Karen walked up to them. “It’s good to see the two of you–” Her eyes darted between Owen and her sister.

“Oh, we just ran into each other,” Claire explained quickly. “A minute ago.”

Without a word, Owen ruffle Gray’s sandy mop of hair, his lips curved into an affectionate smile Claire knew was reserved for her nephews.

“You wanna see my project?” Gray grabbed his hand and dragged him away.

“Not a word,” Claire warned Karen.

“Didn’t say anything,” her sister deadpanned.

xxx

Somehow, when the fair was over and Gray pulled Karen away to show her something, Claire found herself standing next to Owen in the parking lot while the other parents milled around them, en route to their respective vans. A high-level Executive that she was, she had no idea what she was supposed to do.

Squinting in the afternoon sun, Owen glanced around them, then asked, “Would you like to grab a cup of coffee or something?”
Claire gaped at him for a moment or two. “I actually… I have to be somewhere, so…”

He shrugged and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans, the three feet between them feeling like three miles. Or three thousand, for all she knew.

“Okay, sure.”

She bit her lip, torn, her fingers twisting the strap of her purse. “Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like… you know what I mean.”

Owen’s lips twitched into a weak, rueful smile, his head tilted slightly as he studied her. “Like I know that you’re blowing me off but it’s easier to go with it than force you to come up with more excuses? My bad.”

Claire exhaled, feeling deflated and weary. “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

By this time, the commotion around them had died down. Across the lot, the last family was climbing into a blue SUV.

“I miss you, Claire. And I’ve seen the way you look at me when you think I don’t notice.” He caught her gaze ad held it, his expression pained, pleading. “Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me I’m reading too much into it.”

They both knew he wasn’t. It was that a few months ago, she was better at thinking she could sell it.

“I was a mess.” She admitted with a sigh. “Still am. You deserve better than that.”

At that, Owen stepped closer to her, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. He lipped her face up and brushed his lips against hers, kissing her softly and sweetly, until something was breaking inside of her and her fingers were clutching handfuls of his shirt like she hadn’t just spent three months pretending she falling to pieces without him.

“You were my mess. Still are.” Owen said, wrapping his arm around her, pulling her close, until Claire could feel his heartbeat against her own chest. “But I can’t fight for you when you’re fighting against me.”

“I’m not good at this,” she whispered against his collarbone.

He pulled back just far enough to look at her, his palm resting on her cheek. “Good enough.”

“They’re reopening the park,” she blurted out.

His brows pulled together as he considered the news. He didn’t look surprised, but then again, neither was she when her supervisor called her a few days ago. “What are you gonna do?”

“Well, I told them to go…” Claire grimaced. “I quit.”

Owen leaned against the hood of his car, hands resting on her hips. “So, what now?”

“I have no idea,” she responded honestly.

“Sounds like a good plan, actually. Trust me, it’s not that scary.”
“Yeah, well…”

“I don’t wanna lose you, Claire,” he said after a moment, tugging her closer, his eyes searching her face. “I miss you. And I need you. And I don’t want to do any of this on my own.”

“The school runs?” She specified, her heart picking up pace and taking too much space in her chest, making it harder to breathe by the second.

“For one thing.” He chuckled. “How about this?” He suggested. “We’ll take it slow this time. We’ll go grab a coffee now, maybe lunch tomorrow. And by next weekend, I’ll move back in.”

She laughed, incredulous. “How’s that slow?”

“I’m not moving back in today, even though I have plenty of compelling arguments to support this idea.”

“I’m sure you do,” Claire shook her head, leaning into him until her lips pressed to his again. “Goddamn you, Grady.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, folks! Hope you're having fun :)
You fainted…straight into my arms. You know, if you wanted my attention you didn’t have to go to such extremes.

Chapter Notes

This idea was too much fun to play with, really :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You fainted…straight into my arms. You know, if you wanted my attention you didn’t have to go to such extremes.

Claire Dearing always prided herself on her ability to make smart decisions.

Unfortunately, overdressing on the hottest day of the year wasn’t one of them. In her defense, she wasn’t exactly planning on leaving her air-conditioned office today. Or driving the car with a broken AC.

(Damn it, Owen offered to fix it a couple of days ago, but she waved him off, saying she’d take care of it herself.)

Unfortunately, there were people from the Masrani headquarters who wanted to see him about his raptors program, and she needed to give him a heads-up seeing as how the last time she dumped unannounced visitors on him, it didn’t end well. Which, as a person, she understood him pretty damn fine, but from the stand point of a park’s executive, it was one hell of a headache to deal with.

Hence the trip to the paddock on this goddamn boiling afternoon.

She sighed and rolled the window all the way down, but the hot air whipping in her face was of no help.

When her car rounded the curve of the road and rolled to a stop in the shade of palm trees, Barry nudged Owen and jerked his chin at it, a grin starting to spread across his face.

“Looks like we got a visitor,” he all but drawled.

“Don’t we always?”

Barry chuckled as the two of them watched Claire climb out of the car and smooth her wind-tousled bob. “You still pining for her?”

“Shut up.” Owen grumbled half-heartedly, handing him the bucket to finish the feeding and headed toward the stairs, meeting Claire at the bottom. “Miss Dearing?” He smiled, hands planted on his hips to keep them from reaching for her in front of his personnel.

The secrecy wasn’t his idea. Hell, if it was up to him, he’d be parading their relationship in front of everyone, rubbing it in their faces. (“Very mature, Owen,” Claire snorted when he brought it up.) But there were rules, and even though he knew that, as a person in charge, she could probably bend some of them, he didn’t want to put her in a position of having to choose between ethical behaviour and, well, him.
“Mr. Grady,” she returned with a small smile that barely touched her lips but managed to light up her eyes nonetheless.

“What a pleasant surprise,” he noted as two handlers walked by them, nodding curtly their hellos. “What brings you to our neck of the woods?”

Claire’s smile dimmed. “I need to talk to you.”

xxx

“No,” he said firmly when she explained the issue to him.

“That’s not really up to you,” Claire sighed. “Or me, for that matter. The raptors belong to InGen, and if they decide to turn them into an attraction, there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Owen kept watching the girls dart in and out of the ferns in their cage, occasionally stopping to sniff the air and perk their heads to the sounds coming from the outside. He turned to Claire again, a stubborn line crossing his forehead.

“Are you seriously telling to start teaching them to jump through the fire hoops?”

She bit her lip, torn between supporting him and actually doing her job. “I’m asking you to not please yell at anyone when they stop by.”

He shook his head, disgusted. “This is not what this project was supposed to be about.”

“Look, I know you don’t like looking at them that way, but the raptors are the only animals at the park,” she paused when he vision began to swim, blinked to bring Owen back into focus. “The only animals at the park that make no profit.” She cleared her throat and rubbed her forehead, waiting for the sudden buzz in her ears to go away. “No one’s questioning your training techniques, but the numbers…”

“They’re not just numbers.” Owen frowned. “You say it like they’re a liability.”

Claire swallowed. “From the financial point of view, they are.”

Okay, this was not fun.

She reached for the cage bars to steady herself.

“Claire?” He stepped to her, still frowning but for an entirely different reason now. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I’m…”

“Claire, look at me.” His hand was on her cheek, his voice laced with panic. “Claire.”

“I’m fine,” she mumbled, belatedly realizing that the dots dancing before her eyes were not a good thing, and then the world around her went black.

xxx

She came to with a splitting headache hammering in her temples and a kink in her neck that might or might not have been causing said headache.

Slowly, she pried her eyes open, blinking, as she waited for her vision to adjust to the semi-
“Hey, look who’s back,” Owen soft voice enveloped her and his fingers curled around hers as his other hand pushed her hair out of her face.

“What happened?” She croaked, eyes darting over his shoulder, focusing on a messy shelf and a desk littered with folders.

“You tell me,” he smirked, although his concern was palpable. “You fainted… straight into my arms.” And added, “You know, if you wanted my attention you didn’t have to go to such extremes.”

It was then that she noticed that he must have taken off her jacket, and her pale lavender blouse was half-unbuttoned, revealing a white tank top underneath. Claire pressed her hand to her forehead and squeezed her eyes for a moment, pushing away the tension that pooled behind her eyelids.

“Where are we?” She asked, looking at him again and wondering why the hell were the walls swaying in this sickening way that kept making her stomach turn.

“Oh, this is where the magic happens,” Owen explained, glancing around. And by magic, she guessed, he meant the paperwork she usually had to claw out of his hands. He dropped the act then, regarding her with reproach. “What were you thinking, Claire?”

“What did I do?” Her eyes widened.

“You can’t be wearing layers when it’s over a hundred degrees outside,” he huffed, smoothing her hair again. “You’re dehydrated. And, Christ, when was the last time you ate?”

“In the morning,” she winced and tried to sit up.

“Easy,” he warned her when she clutched his hand as the room began to spin around her again.

She scowled at him. “I’m not one of your–”

“Animas,” Owen finished for her, rolling his eyes. “I know. They wouldn’t be stupid enough not to have a drink of water in hours and drive in a car as hot as an oven.” His features softened. He uncurled himself from his crouch and sat down beside her on the couch, drawing her toward him to brush his lips to the crown of her head, finally breathing out a sigh of relief. “You scared me, Claire. Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me?”

Claire leaned into him, burying her face into his chest, breathing in the scent of his aftershave and jungle and everything that was Owen. “Can’t promise anything. How else would I see all of your secret places where magic happens?”

“You just have to ask.” He chuckled, kissing her temple. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“I’m fine,” she protested.

“Like hell, you are! I’m not going to let you drive, so if you don’t want me to do it now, you’ll just have to wait until I’m done for the day.”

“And they say that chivalry is dead,” Claire muttered under her breath.

He found her jacket while she buttoned her blouse and put on her pumps, and then took her hand,
leading her out of the office. “Oh, and… I think this,” Owen pointed at the two of them, “is not much of a secret anymore.”

“What did you do?” She asked, horrified.

“Nothing, I swear,” he assured her. “But I might have called you ‘honey’ in front of a dozen people.” Claire’s mouth fell open. “Hey, you started it!” He added quickly, before she had a chance to throw an angry tirade in his face.

“Well, okay, I guess we can live with that,” she shook her head and he leaned down to peck her on the lips, grinning.

“This is the best damn thing I’ve heard in my life.”

Chapter End Notes

I mean, it totally could have been canon, right?
Don’t you ever do that again!

Chapter Summary

Basically, how some of the scenes would have played out if Claire and Owen had been dating all along. AU-ish

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Don’t you ever do that again!

“The “Indominus Rex”? Owen chuckled.

“We needed something scary and easy to pronounce.” Claire pointed out, leveling him with her glance. “You should hear a four-year-old try to say “Archaeornithomimus”.”

“You should hear you try to say it.” He snorted.

“Says a guy who named his raptor Blue,” she muttered under her breath as they stepped into the observation room...

The conversation kept running through Claire’s mind on an endless loop as she listened to the sickening crunchy sounds coming from the I-Rex’s paddock via the Control Room’s speaker system, a phone pressed to her ear to hard it hurt, her foot pushing the gas pedal into the floor.

Oh, God, no. Please, no. Not Owen, it’s can’t be...

She tried to swallow past the lump in her throat, tried to take a breath, but her lungs refused to cooperate and her heart hammered so fast in her chest she thought it would break her ribcage. Unable to breath, to think, to be...

He was dead. He was dead and it was her fault.

Claire wanted to turn the car around, go back, kill the stupid beast with her own bare hands because, God help her, it was so not worth it.

“Claire?” Lowery’s voice broke through the blood rush in her ears as the Control building sprung up from behind the trees, and she hit the brakes just in time to avoid jamming her car straight into the wall.

“Everyone remain calm,” she muttered as the whole room turned to her when the elevator doors slid open, not quite certain if she was talking to them or to herself.

Two dozen pairs of eyes watched her warily, waiting for her to step up and take control over this madness and fix it all. Like some goddamn superhero, she thought, while the only thing Claire wanted to do was to curl into a ball and cry until there were no tears left, and maybe then she would stop feeling like it was she who died in the teeth of a monster she helped create.

How could she do it? How was she supposed to save them all if she couldn’t even save herself?
Idiot! He was such an idiot! How could he do it—

The elevator dinged behind her back, and Claire whirled around, Owen’s name falling from her lips when he stepped into the Control Room, furious, shaken, with dirt on his clothes and smelling like he took a gasoline bath. But alive. So alive she wanted to weep.

“What the hell happened out there?!” He demanded angrily, his eyes darting between her and Simon Masrani, and there was only so much Claire could do not to throw herself at him.

“A technical malfunction?” She offered uncertainly, earning a You have got to be kidding me! look from him. She shook her head.

xxx

And if this was not enough to turn this day into the worst nightmare of her life, her nephews went missing as well.

“Claire.” His voice, steady and familiar, calling her across the crowded Innovation Center snapped the last string still holding her together.

“I need you,” she whispered the moment he was close enough, her breath hitching in her throat, hands gripping his, needing to feel him, to make sure she wasn’t imagining him.

“C’mere,” Owen pulled her toward the back of the room and into someone’s empty office, shutting the door behind them. Claire threw her arms around him as he wrapped his around her, holding her so tight she thought she would break in half, and it still wasn’t close enough.

“I thought you were dead,” she murmured into his skin, her face buried in his neck, his body warm and solid and buzzing with adrenaline against hers, the gasoline scent making her slightly dizzy. “I thought she… God, I heard her eat somebody, and I thought it was you.”

“Shh,” Owen kissed the top of her head, pressing his face into her hair. “I’m fine, everything is fine.”

“You scared me.” Claire’s fingers closed around his shirt as if she feared he would slip out of her grasp if she let go of it. “Don’t you ever do that again! I mean, how could you, Owen?” She demanded in a shaky voice. “How could you go in there?”

“She wasn’t supposed to be there, remember?” He pulled back just far enough to cup her face in his hands, smooth her hair. Her eyes were glistening with unshed tears, and the sight of it splintered his heart, his anger at this whole situation giving way to fear, to a realization of how close he came to never seeing her again.

Claire bit her lip. “She can control her thermal signature,” she admitted, and he cursed quietly.

“Okay,” he said after a moment of consideration. “Okay, we’ll fix it. I promise.”

“Owen…” she started, her voice suddenly high-pitched. “My nephews. They’re missing. And this thing is out there.”

He froze.

Of course, he knew about the nephews. The basics, at least. Like that they were coming to visit Claire because their parents needed a time-out to finalize their divorce. Merry fucking Christmas, everyone.
“How old?”

“Zach is…um, high-school age?” It came out as a question as if she expected him to know the answer. “And Gray is a few years–” She tried to show how tall he was as if it was of any help.

“You don’t know how old your nephews are?” Honestly, it would’ve been more amusing under less drastic circumstances.

“I…” She started and trailed off.

“We’ll find them,” Owen said, taking her hand and pulling the door open again, endlessly envious of a hundred oblivious people milling around the displays and holograms. What wouldn’t he give to not know what was out there? He squeezed Claire hand when she started to tremble as they waked toward the back exit where his car was parked, and then – screw the rules and her goddamn paranoia about relationships at work – threw his arm around her, brushing his lips to her temple. “It’s going to be fine.”

xxx

It wasn’t until everything was over, and Claire’s sister arrived to collect her shell-shocked kids, and the ferries started taking the guests back to the mainland – first the injured ones and then everyone else – and the sun began its slow descent, that he finally had her all to himself again.

Outside of the hangar, Owen tugged her toward him by the blanket wrapped around her shoulders until there was no air between them and his forehead was pressed into hers.

“You’re such a hypocrite, Claire,” he accused her in a soft voice, ignoring the personnel that kept giving them wide-eyed looks.

“When was I ever–”

“Playing fetch with the T-Rex? Seriously?” He shook his head, exhaling sharply. “When you fell, I thought she… I thought you… Jesus, Claire.”

His heart was racing under her palms, she felt the tangy scent of his skin, of blood and dirt and grime and sweat, and thought that she had never been more grateful for being alive.

“It turns out we trained her well,” she noted lightly, half-jokingly – because if she couldn’t laugh about it, she would start crying.

“I am so not letting you out of my sight ever again,” Owen muttered as he brushed his lips to hers.

At that, Claire looked up, studied his face for a moment or two.

“So, what do we do how?”

The corner of his mouth lifted, his eyes turning the color of the sea in the light of the late afternoon sun.

“Probably stick together.” He enveloped her in his arms, his chin resting on the top of her head. “For survival.”

Chapter End Notes
Okay, I know I said there'd be 10 chapter and this is the 14th one already, and there's more coming. Please bear with me :))
Don’t you dare throw that snowba-, goddammit!

Chapter Notes

I'm a sucker for angst, and I regret nothing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don’t you dare throw that snowba-, goddammit!

It wasn’t that Owen Grady never saw the snow. It was that, being born and raised in the South, he wasn’t as used to it as, say, someone who grew up in Midwest. The white blanket covering everything in sight and chilly wind biting at his cheeks were even more striking after the South American heat they’d escaped not 24 hours ago.

Claire turned the key and pushed the door open. It gave in with a creak and she stepped into the cold hallway that smelled mildly of dust and lemon wood polish.

For a moment, Owen lingered on the porch, scanning the quiet street lined with neat houses and old oaks and maples, a forgotten tire-swing, also barely visible under a pile of snow, tied to one of them. He squinted in the wind tearing at his hair and allowed himself to finally inhale deeply. Maybe it was because this place was so drastically different from Costa Rica that he could breathe again.

“I’ll turn on the heat and it’ll get warm in no time,” Claire said when he joined her in the hallway, taking in a narrow corridor leading to the kitchen, a living room on the right and a dining room with a massive oak table in the middle of it on the left. Carpeted staircase led to the second floor, and Owen wondered what he’d find there. “No one’s been staying here for a while,” she added even though he didn’t ask.

Her parents’ house, she told him on the plane. The one she and Karen had inherited after they died and neither one of them knew what to do with it, the idea of selling it never quite crossing their minds.

“Don’t worry about it,” he shook his head. The cold was the least of their problems now. Frankly, he couldn’t even feel it. Not really. Like his whole body was too numb with shock to respond to any sort of physical discomfort.

There still was a question of what he was doing here, but Owen didn’t know how to approach it just yet.

At some point between the InGen’s security invading Isla Nublar to help with the evacuation, the debriefings and a polite but very firm request not to leave the country – the US, that is – Owen found himself on the airplane, his hand closed around Claire’s and her family sitting across the aisle from them. She needed to escape. He had nowhere else to go. At the moment, it was that simple. And if anyone found it odd, they never said a word.

Karen offered them to stay with her and the boys, but Claire declined politely, although Owen wasn’t sure if it really was because the house would’ve been overcrowded with all of them crammed into it, or because she needed to not be smothered by her sister’s concern and the
questions they all knew were coming, desperate to process what had happened on the island on her own first. God knew, he could relate to that.

“So, here’s the kitchen,” Claire waved in the general direction of it, finishing the first floor tour. “And the bathroom is over there. There’s another one upstairs, with a bathtub and a shower.” She paused at the foot of the stairs, looked up at him. “The guest room is at the end of the hall.” Her gaze flicked upward. Owen quirked an eyebrow, the corners of his mouth tugging up. Claire bit her lip – a nervous gesture he wasn’t sure she was aware of. “Unless we want to skip that.”

He studied her. Wearing jeans and winter boots and Karen’s jacket, she looked nothing like the woman he got used to seeing across the endless expanse of a conference table, which made Owen wonder what exactly he looked like to her.

He sighed and stepped closer to her. “Nothing will happen that you don’t want to happen.”

Claire looked to the side, then met his gaze again. “I wouldn’t have invited you…” she trailed off. “My bedroom is the second door to the right.”

Owen threaded his fingers through her hair, lifting her face up to his, his lips brushing against hers, a feather-light touch that left Claire gripping his jacket and pulling him down for more.

“You doing okay?” He asked quietly, breathlessly.

She let out a shaky laugh. “Define okay.”

He smiled, then kissed her on the forehead. “We’ll be fine.”

Warm and soft in his arms, she was everything, and something inside of him broke, a surge of affection jolting through him with the force of a tidal wave, all but sweeping him off his feet. What a privilege it was, to not be alone right now.

“It’s going to snow again.” Claire said, shivering a little.

Curious, Owen glanced out the hallway window, at the blindingly-bright day and the sun shining down on the sparkling of snow. “Is it?”

“Don’t you feel it?” She wiggled her arms under his jacket, wrapped them around his waist, snagging the precious body heat.

“What are you, a snow whisperer?” Owen joked, half-skeptical, but mostly just amused. “Let’s go crank up that heat then.”

She turned out being right.

It started to snow again sometime at night, and the big, puffy flakes were still falling and twirling and dancing in the crisp air when Owen woke up just after dawn, the world outside the window hidden behind the white veil. Unlike the ever-alive jungle filled with a constant chatter of birds and animal cries, it was so quiet here he’d think he’d gone deaf had it not been for the soft rumble of the furnace.

He disentangled himself from Claire, careful not to wake her up, not when it took hours of tossing and turning beside him to finally fall asleep, and padded barefoot downstairs and into the back porch, ignoring the ice-cold boards beneath his feet and the wind nipping at his exposed arms.
Dressed in a tee and sweats that used to belong to Claire’s dad, for lack of other options, he stepped onto the snow-covered ground, turned his face up and closed his eyes.

Whatever reasons Claire had for coming here, he was staring to think it was a good idea. Maybe not forever, maybe not even for long, but for now – it certainly was. He pushed aside the pain of not knowing, the helpless fury that kept bubbling up and dying down inside of him and returning again when he least expected it, and tried to memorize the feel of his own heartbeat, the touch of the air that tasted like nothing he could recall, the soothing numbness settling over him. The one he needed so much to get through all this.

“Told you,” a voice behind him said.

Owen turned to find Claire watching him from the porch with the expression he couldn’t figure out. Amazement was the word that came to his mind, but surely it couldn’t be it.

She was wearing her old college sweatshirt, blue, with HAVARD printed on the back and a coat of arms over her heart, and plaid pajama bottoms. And so God help him, he would love to get used to the sight of that bedhead.

He cracked a smile at her. “Thought I’d check it out for myself.”

“And?”

He lifted his palms up to catch the snowflakes that melted instantly on his skin. “Real enough.”

“And how about this?”

Looking up, Owen saw her scoop a handful of snow from the porch railing, her eyes glinting with mischief – something so rare it made his heart ache. Until he realized what she was going to do.

Eyes widening, Owen stepped back involuntarily. “Don’t you dare throw that snowba–goddammit!”

At the sound of her laughter, he shook the snow out of his hair and charged after her, catching up with Claire before she could sneak into the house. Her back pressed against the cold wood, he gathered her in his arms and found her lips with his for a long and deep kiss that left them both panting.

“How did you even…”

“Softball team,” Claire explained helpfully, running her fingers through his snow-soaked hair. “That’s a nice look on you.”

“Thank you,” he breathed out against her mouth, his forehead pressed to hers. “For… all of this.” He swallowed, his stomach flopping up and down. “I don’t know how I would—how I would’ve dealt with… everything.”

She caught his gaze. “It’s just a break, Owen. You know that, right? We’ll have to go back, to clean up the mess we’ve created. I’ve created.”

“Not today.” He shook his head, then pulled her away from the door and opened it, the welcoming warmth of the house enveloping them momentarily. “Today I’m going to impress you with my pancake-making skills.”
I want Clawen and snow to happen sooooo bad! Agh!
Hey! I was gonna eat that!

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Hey! I was gonna eat that!

Claire Dearing was not used to living with people.

Sure, she dated occasionally, although not as much in the past few years. Not since the park’s popularity skyrocketed and her free time reduced to two hours a day. She usually used those for sleep. Not that it ever bothered her. When would she have time to be bothered by it? But dating someone was one thing. Going out and having occasional sleepovers were no big deal.

She was not used to living with someone.

Once the Jurassic World was no more, along with all of Owen’s earthly possessions, Claire found herself with a roommate-slash-boyfriend-slash-’what have I gotten myself into?’ that turned her entire life upside down. To say that it wasn’t easy was an understatement of the century. No, she liked having him around, she loved not being alone at night when the world would suddenly get too much and she would forget how to breathe.

But the coexistence required adjustment, and it was odd, to say the least, to have another person in her house. It was odd not to be in control of the remote or the thermostat, or her blanket, for that matter. (“Just wiggle closer, Claire!”) Shared showers were good. Looking for the hairbrush she usually kept in the bathroom and finding it in the living room – not so much. Not when she was running late. It was like a choreographed dance they needed to keep working on until they were good enough to stop bumping into each other at every turn.

He’d quit. Immediately. The moment they arrived back to the US, his resignation letter found its way to the InGen’s HR department before Claire could so much as blink.

“Good riddance,” he told her when she asked if he was okay.

Part of her wished it could be that easy for her, too, but she was a person of interest in the investigation, and with the death of Simon Masrani and Vic Hoskins, the company made it perfectly clear that they would have her back as long as she’d help them clean up this mess. The moment she walked away, she was on her own.

And so here they were, trying to fit into each other’s routine, mostly failing and occasionally succeeding, both too stubborn to give up.

In the morning, Owen would usually be back from his early run when she was about to leave for work. He’s stroll in, pulling out his earbuds, and steal whatever she had on her plate, normally a PB&J sandwich.

“Hey! I was gonna eat that!” Claire would protest.

“Aren’t you late?” Owen would smile cheekily, reaching for her unfinished cup of coffee.

“You’re a sheet stealer and a food stealer,” she would accuse him with a huff.

“And you love it,” he’d grin and kiss her. “Wanna join me in the shower?”
“Can’t,” she’d sigh, stealing another kiss. “Have to go.”

“Stay,” he would insist.

“I’ll make it up to you when I’m back,” she’d promise with that smile she knew would get them both through the day.

And he cooked.

God, the man knew his way around the kitchen. (“You can’t cook in military, you’re dead,” Owen told her once, although Claire suspected that what he meant was mostly indigestion.) She could pretty damn fine live off granola and OJ, but it was nice to have someone in her life who cared enough about her to make sure she had at least one proper meal a day. Two when he’d whisk her off for lunch. (“Three if you stop eating my breakfast,” she’d point out every time he’d bring it up.)

“I got a job,” Owen told her one evening about two months later while they were watching Shark Tank on mute, filling in the dialogue themselves based on the facial expressions of the actors just for the hell of it.

Her legs were resting in his lap and his fingers were digging into the soles of her feet, massaging away hours and hours of walking around in her beloved but occasionally agonizingly painful black pumps. Funny how in the two weeks she stayed off work, she got used to flats and tennis shoes.

She turned to him, her lip caught uncertainly between her teeth.

“At the animal shelter,” Owen offered when she didn’t say anything. “They needed a part-time animal behaviorist and, well, my reputation precedes me.” He looked at her expectantly.

“That’s… great,” Claire mustered at last.

“That’s… great,” Claire mustered at last.

“Then why does it sound like it’s anything but?” He inquired, his eyes narrowed.

She shook her head. “No, it is, really. You just… You don’t have to stay here. In this house. In California.” She glanced back at the TV to collect her thoughts. Up until now, she did her best not to think of where this was going, but job, even a part-time one, was serious. It made her realize that even though she was necessarily expecting him to leave any moment, she kind of accepted the idea that he would, eventually. Knowing that it wasn’t his plan was both elating and terrifying. “You don’t need to babysit me.”

At that, he cracked up. “Well, let’s be real, it’s you who’s usually babysitting me.”

“Because otherwise you’d play with a toaster in a bathtub,” she grumbled under her breath.

“Hey.” Owen leaned over and cupped her cheek with his palm, lifting her face up until she had no choice but to meet his gaze. “I’m where I want to be. Unless you want me to vacate the premises…”

“‘Vacate the premises’? Where’d you learn that?” She scoffed, unable to fight off the smile.

“Try living with you, Claire,” he rolled his eyes before kissing her slowly and deeply and had they not been sitting already, Claire thought, her knees would give in. “Do you want me to stay?” He mumbled breathlessly between the pecks.

“Yes,” she whispered, burying her fingers in his hair lest he pull away.
“Okay, so, next question. You wanna have dinner now, or should we celebrate me job first?”

She tugged at his shirt, pulling him closer and over her, his arms sliding impatiently around her, his hands suddenly everywhere at once. “Owen?”

“Mm?”

“Stop talking.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, it was good to have a break, but it’s really nice to be back :) A few more coming your way!
You heard me. Take. It. Off.

Chapter Notes

I'm having too much fun with this stuff ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You heard me. Take. It. Off.

Owen Grady was a generous man.

“Selfless and generous,” he would proudly point out to Claire.

“And modest,” she’d agree with a snort.

But, jokes aside, it was true. He was known for offering the shirt off his back to those in need or jumping under the oncoming train to save someone else’s life. Sometimes literally. Claire called it a hero complex. Owen called it being a decent human being. They both agreed it was a good trait to hold on to. As long as he didn’t try to kill himself, Claire would usually add.

There were certain perks to Owen’s personality – as far as their relationship went, he would do anything for her, short of getting the moon and the stars because, realistically speaking, it did seem like a bit of a hassle.

There was only one thing in Owen’s life he didn’t want to share with anyone, not even with Claire – his Lions jersey. The very one that she took special liking to. And a mature and grown-up man that he was, Owen Grady couldn’t watch her walk around the house in his one most favourite shirt in the world without pouting like a 5-year old who had to give his most prized toy to a sibling because his parents told him that sharing was caring.

And Owen cared! Owen cared a great deal about Claire, but he needed to win his shirt back.

“It’s not really your style,” he told her once, casually.

She quirked an eyebrow at him as she stood by the kitchen counter, wearing nothing but his jersey and sipping her morning coffee. The both knew he didn’t sell it because who was he kidding? With her legs that seemed to be a mile long when she was dressed like this and with his shirt hanging loosely on her delicate frame and falling down to her hips, it was, perhaps, the hottest he’d ever seen her. And suddenly Owen wanted to get her out of his precious piece of clothing, but for an entirely different reason. She didn’t mind.

The problem with trying to reclaim his property was that he couldn’t tell her why wanted this particular thing to rest safely on the shelf in the closet. Even in his mind, Because I like it the most sounded ridiculous at best, and downright stupid at worst. He’d never live it down.

Therefore, he had to be sneaky.

First, Owen tried hiding it, but, seeing as how the apartment was Claire’s for much, much longer than it was his, she seemed to have always been able to find it without even realizing what he was trying to do.
Then, he got her her own Lions jersey, but his strategic mistake was that owning something her own size didn’t have the thrill or wearing his stuff that was several sized too big and thus much more comfortable.

“It’s the suits,” Claire explained to him once. They were curled on the couch watching *Rear Window* or *The Shop Around The Corner* – something with James Stewart. Her back was resting against his chest, and his hand kept running lazily along her arm as he thought he could probably spend the rest of his life holding her like this. “Don’t get me wrong, I love my suits, but wearing them day in and day out… it just makes me want not to feel like I’m all straight lines and sharp angles every minute of my life.”

He could not, for the life of him, argue with that. So instead, Owen turned off the TV and showed her that, for all he knew, she was far from angles and lines.

Eventually, it led him to his next plan – to get her hooked on one of his other 30 shirts, the one that wasn’t his most favourite shirt in the world. But leaving them casually all over the house where Claire could find them had the exact opposite effect – she got frustrated with his messiness, which was not the case at all!

“Seriously, Owen, it’s one thing that your socks are somehow all over the bedroom floor, but using every chair in the house as a hanger?” She huffed, eyeing him with displeasure, hands planted on her hips. “Do we have to do this?”

And ultimately, out of options and quite desperate for a result, he came up with the most evil master plan of all.

“What is this?” Claire demanded when he came out for breakfast, wearing her favourite designer sweater – a pale lavender Max Mara piece, all cashmere and softness. The very one Owen spent 15 minutes pulling on because it was far too small for him.

“You like it?” He beamed at her, fully aware that this might be the last conversation they ever had. Right now, Claire looked downright murderous. She was so, so going to kill him. Or worse yet – dump him.

“Take it off!” She snapped, putting her coffee down.

“Hey, I thought we were doing the whole clothes swap thing,” Owen protested defensively, giving her a pointed once-over, his gaze sliding up and down his jersey.


“I will if you will,” he promised, taking a step back, a grin still in place.

“Jesus, Owen, you ruined it.”

“Okay, on the count of three then! Ready?”

She stopped in her tracks and shook her head. “You think I don’t know what you’re doing?” And then she pushed past him, pausing for a moment in the hallway to turn to him again, “You know why I like this shirt? Because it makes me feel like you’re always around even when you’re not.”

And then she disappeared in the bedroom, slamming the door hard enough to make the windows rattle in their frames.

Owen knocked carefully on it half an hour later and cracked it open slowly when she didn’t
respond, on the off-chance there’d be something flying at his head. He’d changed into his own tee, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t still mad.

She was sitting in the chair by the window with her knees pulled up to her chest, staring sightlessly at the palm tree swaying in the soft Californian breeze.

“Claire, I’m sorry,” he said softly. “Look, it was a stupid joke, and I was a moron.”

“Yes, you were,” she mumbled without looking at him.

With a sigh, he crouched down beside her, reaching for her hand, relieved that she didn’t try to pull away. “I’ll buy you a new sweater,” he promised, trying to catch her eyes.

“Not the point, Owen.”

He dropped his gaze, then squeezed her fingers just a little, and reached to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry,” he repeated when she finally looked at him, her expression almost unreadable, save for the disapproving crease between her eyebrows. “I didn’t mean to—I didn’t think it would… I didn’t think, period.”

Claire sighed and bit her lip. “If you liked your damned shirt so much, you could’ve just told me instead of ruining my things,” she accused.

He scratched the back of his head with a wince. “When did I ever take the easy way out?” His thumb ran over her cheekbone and a scatter of golden freckles. “Won’t happen again, I promise.” He swallowed. “I mean it. Please don’t be mad.”

“Well, I am mad,” she pointed out.

Owen ran his hand along her forearms. “Want me to take you shopping?” He suggested hopefully.

Claire considered his offer for a moment. “No, you’re a nightmare to shop with.”

“Okay, what can I do to make up for being a complete idiot?”

Her lips curved into a smile, her head tilted slightly to her shoulder. “Well, you can take this shirt off,” she pointed at the jersey she was still dressed in, “and show me just how sorry you are.”

Gleeful, he grinned. “Your wish is my command!”

Chapter End Notes

Admittedly, not the strongest one, but I hope it was still okay :)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Boo

The one thing that never ceased to amaze Claire about Jurassic World was that they didn’t have what she’d normally refer to as slow season.

Sure, the torrent of guests who chose to take a ferry to the park instead of staying at one of the hotels tended to turn into a trickle during the winter because of the foul weather. But those who decided to enjoy whatever the resort had to offer had a spa, an indoor aqua park, an aquarium and a whole range of bus tours at their disposal. At Christmas, New Year, Easter, and just about every other holiday in existence – the park was always packed.

Claire wondered occasionally what was it that made spending the holidays with the dinosaurs instead of their families so appealing to thousands of people, but it wasn’t like she hadn’t been doing the exact same thing for at least 7 years now. And who was she to complain about the growing revenue?

Therefore, it did not surprise her that the Masrani Global headquarters sent a whole delegation of potential investors to the island around Halloween. And if the men and women dressed in the most expensive suits imaginable wanted to go trick-or-treating – well, the park actually offered that, for the benefit of the youngest guests.

So she spent the entire morning parading 6 visitors around the facilities and the lab, explaining the work and the purpose of the Innovations Center, and then giving them a short tour to a couple of paddocks, before they all ended up in the main building again.

“Hold my calls, please,” Claire said to Zara, whose eyes grew wide when her boss strolled toward her office with her guests in tow.

“Claire, I think–” Zara began to protest, but before she could finish that thought, Claire already turned the knob and pushed the door open.

“Let me just–” she started, addressing the investors.

And then she yelped and leaped back, bumping into a couple of people when someone wearing a T-Rex mask – one of those the gift shops were stuffed with to the brim - jumped from behind the door with a, “Boo!”

Behind them all, Zara closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

The guests all stared at the dressed-up man while Claire proceeded to open and close her mouth, at a loss for words.

“’M forry,” a muffled voice said, and then the mask was gone, revealing Owen Grady. “I’m sorry,” he repeated as the colour rose up his cheeks. His hair was sticking out at odd angles and his gaze kept jumping from Claire to the visitors to Claire to Zara and back to Claire again. He cleared his throat. “I didn’t think…” he began, trailing off.

“I see that,” Claire sighed, her heart still hammering. She composed herself, straightening her back
and squaring her shoulders. “What can I help you with, Mr. Grady?”

Owen turned to the crowd behind her and waved a mask in the air, “Halloween, anyone?”

Their faces remained impassive and unimpressed.

“Mr. Grady?” Claire repeated somewhat impatiently.

He cleared his throat again. “The food budget.” He blurted out. “For the raptors. I thought we could… discuss it. Um, again?”

She let out a long breath, her mind racing as she tried to wiggle out of this situation with as much grace as possible. “You might have to wait,” she said at last, turning toward what she was starting to suspect was a waste of time after Owen’s stupid joke. “My apologies. Why don’t we take this to the conference room instead? It’s this way.”

And while they filed into what she hoped was an empty room, Claire slammed the door to her office, leaving Owen alone there and leaned over to Zara. “You knew about this?” She hissed.

“It was his idea,” Zara whispered urgently, pointing her finger at the closed door.

“Traitor!” Owen called back from behind it.

—

“What the hell was that?!?” Claire demanded half an hour later, entering her office once again.

Without a word, Owen kicked the door closed, and the next moment her back was pressed against it and his lips were on hers, desperate and needing, and whatever anger might have still been simmering inside of Claire dissipated without a trace as her arms wound around his neck, hands tugging at his hair. Damn it, having an illicit affair was hot.

“God, I missed you,” he said hoarsely against her mouth before kissing her again, slower, deeper, until holding onto his shoulders was the only thing that kept Claire standing upright. Well, the door also helped. Sort of.

“When did you come back?” She asked, trying to catch her breath.

“A few hours ago. Thought I’d come surprise you.” He grimaced a little at the memory of how badly it played out.

“Well, if we lost those people and their money, consider your food budget cut in half. Surprise!” Claire responded grimly.

“Sorry,” Owen mumbled once again, trailing his lips down her throat. And then added as an afterthought, “So far, it’s totally worth it, though.”

Claire pushed him back, palms pressed into his chest, and a slight frown back on her face, “You’re in so much trouble.”

He perked up at that. “Is that a promise?” And wiggled his eyebrows at her for good measure.

“Yes, and if I were you, I wouldn’t be so excited.”

He sighed and rested his forehead against hers. “I’m sorry. I had no idea you wouldn’t come back alone.” His fingers tangled in her hair, he brushed a kiss to her temple. “Want me to talk to them?”
Claire clutched a fistful of his shirt and shook her head. “No, I hope I fixed it, and Zara is sweet-talking them into trying the Cretaceous Cruise now. Maybe it would lift their spirits. I know I wouldn’t be bringing them to the raptor’s paddock, though.”

“Good,” he chuckled. “Because I might have an idea or two about how to fix that budget cut.”

“Don’t even joke about it,” she warned him.

“Let me make up to you for this, okay? Can I take you out tonight?”

Claire exhaled. “We’re not supposed to be seen together. Hell, we’re not supposed to be seeing each other.”

“Your assistant knows,” Owen reminded her.

“And whose fault is that?” She snorted.

“Yours,” he said quickly. “Because you didn’t lock the door. Anyone could walk in on us!”

“Because I’m not supposed to be locking myself up in my office.”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her again. Claire’s fingers curled around his wrists, and she wondered once again what had she gotten herself into. He was right, however. It was so worth it.

“How about a dinner at my place then?” He suggested as a compromise.

“That could be arranged,” she agreed with a smile.

“Great.” He pecked her on the lips one more time before pulling the door open. “I’ll see you later, Ms. Dearing.” And the added, loud enough for Zara to hear, “And wear that red thingy with lace that I like, will you?”

Zara’s eyebrows crept all the way up to her hairline while Claire just stared at his back as Owen sauntered lazily toward the elevators.

“I’m going to kill him,” she muttered under her breath.

Chapter End Notes

It was too much fun and I regret nothing xD You liked it, folks?
You lied to me

Chapter Notes

You lied to me

I usually try to keep my drabbles light and silly, but there’s only so much you can do with a prompt like this, so… Beware of some angst, folks!

You lied to me

Claire Dearing never believed in premonition. Or foreboding. Or any other 6ths sense crap.

If she did, she’d probably know that the day that started with spilling coffee on her favourite blouse and nearly spraining her ankle when the heel of her shoe got stuck in a crack in the pavement couldn’t possibly end with sunshine and rainbows. She’d see the storm brewing from miles away and brace herself for the impact.

As it was, however, she did not.

“You wouldn’t believe what a day I had,” she said to Owen, kicking her shoes off and wiggling her toes in relief. It was such an underrated pleasure to not have to wear heels in the house. “A full-blown tequila kind of day,” she added, expecting him to crack a joke about how tequila wasn’t her thing.

He did not.

“What is this, Claire?” He asked instead, throwing a stack of printouts onto the kitchen counter.

She froze in the doorway, her face falling minutely.

“Owen…”

“What is this?” He demanded in a low, measured voice that she knew meant a carefully held-back anger.

“The images from the park’s surveillance system,” she answered at last. Not that she had to – they both knew what the printouts were, but she guessed it was the date stamp that knitted his eyebrows together and threw the shadow over his face.

“You said the surveillance wasn’t working,” Owen reminded her icily. “You said it went out after all hell broke loose on the island. That the signal towers got damaged, or whatever bullshit it was.”

Claire’s shoulders sagged as each of his words landed on her like a blow. “Owen, listen–”

“You lied to me,” he interjected fiercely, and then pursed his lips tight and shook his head.

“I didn’t,” she said softly. “It wasn’t working at first.”

His laughter was short and humorless. “And then it was. And you just oh so conveniently forgot to mention it.”

Claire caught her lip between her teeth, then let out a long sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose,
wishing the headache away. “I was going to tell you.”

“Aw, really? When?”

“When we found something,” she admitted, trying to ignore how much his mocking voice hurt her.

His frown deepened. “Found what?”

“Blue,” she breathed out. “I asked Lowery to go through the footage and tell me if any of the working cameras caught her.”

“You should have told me that right away, Claire,” he accused. “It wasn’t your call to keep something like this a secret.”

At that, she snapped her head up and looked him square in the face. “Yes, it was. I didn’t want to keep your hopes up for nothing. Do you not remember what it was like at first? You hadn’t slept for a week, going obsessively through every news feed that had even a grain of footage from the park, searching for her even though it made no sense because the only footage the news channels had was from before and during the incident. Do you not remember that?”

“And so you decided to lie,” he sneered.

Claire swallowed. “I didn’t lie, I…”

“Chose not to share. How very convenient! Am I supposed to be okay with your hiding behind the semantics?”

“That is not fair,” she said.

“Life usually isn’t.” He glanced down at the images with disgust. “How long has this been going on?”

“Two weeks. I have Lowery send me a fresh batch every afternoon.”

“Two weeks,” he repeated in disbelief. “That’s just fucking splendid.”

After that, he brushed past her, all but sucking in his stomach so as not to touch her by accident and stormed out of the kitchen and out of the house, slamming the door on the way out, the sound of it making Claire flinch as the echo of the Bang! kept ringing in her ears.

On cottony legs, Claire walked over the counter and sank heavily into the chair, feeling world-weary and hollow and a thousand years old, her mind oddly numb and empty, as if the fight had drained the last remains of her resolve and composure, leaving nothing but an empty shell behind.

She propped her elbows on the counter, soothed by the cool touch of granite through the silk of her shirt, and dropped her forehead on the knot of her clasped hands, taking small, shallow breaths as if inhaling properly could make her whole being tear at the seams.

The return to the normal life after the incident was hard for both of them, and once off the island, ‘for survival’ turned into ‘for sanity’. She needed Owen to keep her in one piece whenever she felt like the world kept on collapsing around her, tearing her apart as well – collateral damage at its finest. He needed her—

Claire wondered if he’d ever needed her as much as she needed him.

Maybe it was stupid and selfish to keep her explorations from him – Blue was his raptor, after all,
and the loss of the live as Owen knew it hit him hard. But she didn’t want him to get even more hurt if it turned into a wild goose chase, she didn’t want to see him break apart again. Now, however, she wondered if her plan was worth losing him.

—

It was dark by the time the front door opened and closed softly, the lock clicking into place.

In the few hours that passed since their fight, Claire had changed out of her business suit and was currently staring at the goddamned pictures lying before her, a cup of camomile tea clasped in her hands, growing cold with every passing minute.

“Hey,” Owen cleared his throat, stopping in the doorway, his shoulder propped against the doorframe and his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans.

“Hey,” she looked up and studied his face, trying to read him, see if the storm had passed. “I didn’t think you’d be coming back. Tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Claire.” He grimaced a little. “I… I might have overreacted.”

“No,” she pushed the cup away from herself. “I should have… I just—“ She shook her head, palms pressed flat into the counter. “I shouldn’t have kept it from you. I just wanted to have something on my hands before I came to you.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to—” He cut himself off and ran his hand through his hair. “It took me a couple of hour to figure out I’d probably do the same thing if the situation was reversed.”

Claire lips quirked slightly. “You’d lie to me?”

He pushed away from the doorframe and walked over to her. “I’d do anything to keep you from getting hurt.”

She stood up. “They didn’t find anything yet, Owen. I’m sorry.”

“S’okay,” he murmured pulling her toward him until she was nestled against his body, his face tucked into the crook of his neck. “I’m sorry, Claire. It was uncalled for and I was a jerk, and… I’m sorry.”

She let out a long breath and wrapped her arms around him, her eyes fluttering closed as she allowed herself to melt against him, breathing in the scent of his skin and his aftershave and the humid californium air on his clothes. “I never lied to you and I never would.”

“I know.” Owen kissed the top of her head.

“But if… if they found her,” Claire started a while later. “Would you go back?”

He ran his hand up and down her back, looking at their reflection in the dark window. “No.”

She pulled back just far enough to look at his face. “You wouldn’t?”

His expression was conflicted, and for a moment, Claire thought he would change his answer, but in the end, he just shook his head. “I wouldn’t. Because you wouldn’t. And I’m done doing stupid things, like walking away from you.” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and dipped his head down to brush his lips against hers. “Together, for survival, right?”
The paint’s supposed to go where?

Chapter Notes

Okay, this one is super silly, but it was such a fun idea to work on, so… Beware of a twist!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The paint’s supposed to go where?

There was one thing Claire never expected to see in her life, and that was finding Owen sitting on the front porch with a brush and a can of paint, running smooth strokes over the small hallway table she found at a garage sale years ago to keep the keys and gloves and such. Right now, it rested on top of some spread newspapers, almost finished.

Oh, she knew that, being between the jobs, he was bored out of his mind, but normally it resulted in 10k runs and cooked dinners and, well, he mentioned getting a dog once or twice. She was on the fence about this one, but maybe it wasn’t the worst idea after all.

“What is this?” She asked, coming up the porch steps.

Admittedly, the table was old and could use a lick of paint. But it still didn’t answer all of the questions spinning in her head.

“Hey,” Owen smiled at her, shielding his eyes from the later afternoon sun. “Thought I’d freshen it up a little.” He craned his neck when she leaned down to kiss him on the lips. “How was your day?”

“It just got better,” Claire assured him. “And this,” she gave the table that was pale green now instead of dirty beige another look, “is a very good job, Mr. Grady. If I knew you were into arts and crafts, I would’ve asked you to repaint the whole porch a long time one.”

Owen got up to his feet, wiping his hands on the rag, and stole another kiss from her. “One of my many hidden talents,” he told her. “I found some paint and, well, my afternoon was free, so…”

“I’m not complaining.” She smiled brightly at him, and then his words finally kicked in. “Wait, you found the paint? In the house?”

“Yeah, in the closet. I needed fresh towels and…” He dropped the rag onto the chair he’d been sitting in while working and picked up a small, mostly empty can on green paint. “There were several of them.” He studied it for a moment, then shrugged. “Somewhat small to be useful, if you ask me, but it worked out fine.”

“Oh. Okay.”

The internal struggle was so clear on her face it was almost comical. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why are you saying it like this?”

Without looking at him, Claire pushed past him and into the house, “No reason.”
Owen followed her without a moment of hesitation, finally catching up with her in the living room where she wiggled out of her high-heeled strappy sandals and shrugged off her light jacket.

“Okay, what’s going on?” He asked slowly, watching her face turn scarlet red.


“Come on, you can’t just drop all that mystery on me and pretend that it’s nothing.”

“Or wine,” she added, ignoring his questions entirely. “Do we have wine?”

Owen put his hands on the doorframe blocking her way out. “Nah-ah! Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

She pursed her lips together, then exhaled through her nose, her color an even brighter pink now – if it was even possible.

“It wasn’t a paint paint,” Claire said at last, biting her lip. “It was a body paint.”

“A what?” He blinked, momentarily confused. “That paint’s supposed to go where?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s supposed to go on your body while we… you know…”

For a little while, his mouth just kept on opening and closing without any sound coming out. “But… there were no instructions,” he said rather dumbly.

She snorted. “I was supposed to be an instruction.”

Watching the realization dawn on him was the most hilarious thing, and she would’ve enjoyed it immensely under different circumstances - like if her face wasn’t burning, for instance. And when it finally clicked, Owen’s lips stretched into the widest smile imaginable.

He took in her expression, marveling at the slight discomfort, which was a rare and the most adorable thing. “Well, well, Ms. Dearing,” he drawled after a moment or two. “Who would’ve thought…”

“Oh, shut up.”

She finally managed to squeeze past him and into the hallway, but Owen caught her by the wrist, spinning her around, his other hand threading through her hair and cupping the back of her head until his lips captured hers, demanding and possessive, as he held her against his chest, the heat of his body seeping into her even through several layers of clothes between them.

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever heard,” he murmured, kissing her again, slower and deeper this time, until she thought her knees would buckle under the weight of her body that had suddenly gone liquid.

“You think you’re the only one with the hidden talents?” She responded breathily.

“I say we go check and see,” Owen grinned down at her as his hands slipped underneath her silk top and hers closed around the fistfuls of his shirt, his dilated pupils turning his eyes almost black. “There’s plenty of that stuff left where I found it.”
Later, Claire was stretched lazily between the tangled sheets, the warm air spilling through the open window pleasantly cool on her heated skid, while Owen, propped on his elbow beside her, traced lazy patterns on her back, dipping his fingers into the remaining paint and drawing swirls and lines, their breathing finally evening out, the world around them coming back into focus.

Well, the sheets were going straight into garbage, but for the first time in her entire life, she couldn’t care less.

“It tickles,” Claire giggled softly when his doodles reached her ribs.

He kissed her bare shoulder, the paint-free skin at the base of her neck, a spot between her shoulder blades.

“It was…” another kiss, “something else.” His hand trailed down her vertebrae, leaving a light blue line along it. “I will never question your talents again.”

“He leaned over to kiss her on the mouth, slowly and sweetly, and until her head was spinning. “Not in the past hour.” His hand pushed her hair out of her face and he beamed at her, revealing those dimples that kept sending her heart racing every. single. time. “It was like my birthday or something.”

Claire put her head back down on her folded arms. “It was meant to be for your birthday,” she pointed out. “If you didn’t go snooping around.”

“Aw. Have I ruined a surprise?” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“I might have a word or two for what just happened, and none of them are ‘ruined’.” Smiling, she rolled onto her back and pulled him over her. “I’ll just think of something else.”

Owen put the can he was holding away and wrapped his arms around her, finding her lips with his again. “I’m sure you will.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope it was fun! And please don’t judge me for knowing about that stuff ;)
I’m pregnant

Chapter Notes

Okay, I hope this one turned out okay. I don’t think I ever wrote anything about ‘big
news’ before, so please be kind *hides under the couch*

I’m pregnant

It started out innocently enough.

“What do you want for dinner? Chinese? Italian?” Owen asked her one Friday when he picked her up from work.

“How about Tacos?” Claire suggested.

He gaped at her, puzzled. “You hate Tacos.”

“I don’t hate them. I just don’t always enjoy them,” she corrected him.

“That’s your code for hating stuff,” he insisted, throwing his arm around her shoulders and steering her toward the parking lot.

“Don’t be absurd,” she protested.

He brushed a kiss to her forehead. “Nope, no fever. Weird.”

Claire smacked his lightly on the chest. “Smart ass.”

“I learn from the best!” He beamed down at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Whatever. You pick then.”

He opened the passenger door for her, stealing a quick kiss before she slid inside. “Tacos it is!”

And then it got worse.

“Since when do you like avocados?” Owen asked her when he caught her eating guacamole for breakfast. With a spoon. After the woman refused to eat in the restaurant that served anything with avocados for fear of getting even a grain of it in her own food.

“Since yesterday,” she shrugged, finishing the crate and all but swallowing the spoon itself for good measure. “It’s delicious.”

He stared at her for a moment or two, astonished. “Okay,” he said slowly, then cleared his throat. “Should I be worried?”

“Only if we run out of that stuff,” she waved an empty crate in his face.

“Now I’m scared.” Owen leaned on his elbow across the counter, studying her carefully. “Who are you?”
“You tell me.” Claire grinned at him, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and pulling him down for a kiss.

It was not, however, until she started falling asleep halfway through her day, zoning out during the meetings, and feeling more than a little nauseated by the smell of coffee – something she basically ran on – that she realized that something was wrong. Awfully, terribly, terrifyingly wrong.

One evening, Owen found her sitting on the couch in the living room, looking shell-shocked and seriously out of it. Worried, he walked up to her and crouched down before her, reaching for her hands.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” He asked, his eyes roaming around her face, taking in her downright horrified expression. “Claire, honey?”

She turned to him slowly, her lips trembling ever so slightly. It was only then that Owen noticed that all that time she was staring at an unopened pregnancy test on the coffee table before her, the enormity of what was going on sinking in slowly at first, and then landing on him like a sucker punch.

“I think I’m pregnant,” she mustered at last, her fingers flexing around his, although he wasn’t sure if she did it on purpose or if it was just a reflex.

“But you didn’t take the test,” he said carefully, his mind still trying to wrap around what quite possibly was the biggest news of his life.

“I know what the result is going to be,” she said in a small, miserable voice.

For a moment, Owen just looked at her, and then his face split into the giddiest smile. “That’s great!” he brought her hands up to his lips and kissed them. “That’s fantastic, baby!” And then his excitement dimmed. “It’s good, right?”

She sighed and looked down at the knot of their clasped hands. “I don’t know, Owen. I need to—I need to think about it.”

“Okay.” He hated the way she didn’t seem to be able to meet his eyes, the way his heart plummeted down into his stomach. “Like, you need 5 minutes to process it, or you’re actually not sure you want it?”

“I don’t know,” Claire repeated, biting her lower lip. Then shook her head. “It’s been what, 6 months now? It’s too soon. And I don’t even know how it happened.”

“Well,” he began, “let me explain. When a man and a woman like each other very much–”

She shot a stern look at him. “Not helpful.”

“You asked!”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, then ran her hand through her hair. “God, Owen, I don’t know. It’s… it’s scary,” she admitted.

He caught her hand again, and kiss her palm, finally managing to hold her gaze, mesmerized by how goddamn beautiful she was. Just like the first time he saw her all those yeas go. Magical.

“I’m here, okay?” He ran the back of his fingers down her cheek. “It might have as well been 6 years, or a lifetime. It doesn’t matter. I’m here, and it’s going to be fine.” He smiled again, watching the frown lines around her eyes smooth out. “If it is what you think it is, I’m happy. I
really am, Claire.”

“I know. I just…” she trailed off, not sure where she was going with this.

“Look, we’ll deal with it however you want,” he told her. “Take your time, okay? You don’t want to get married? That’s fine. We don’t have to.” The issue had already come up a time or two, and every time she outright refused to even discussed it. Her sister got the wrong end of the deal, and Claire chose to stick to No way in hell. Which was fine with Owen. For all he cared, it was a piece of paper that changed nothing. Certainly not the way he felt about her. “You want to raise him or her a rock star? … Okay, we might need to discuss that.”

At that, she smiled. “Setting the rules already, huh?”

“No sequins,” he stated firmly. “As long as there’re no sequins involved, I’m cool.”

Claire let out a short laugh. “Okay, we’ll talk about it.” She fell silent for a moment. “You sure you’re okay with that?”

“More than okay,” he promised. “I swear. It’ll be fun.”

“Everything needs to be fun with you,” she snorted.

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.” The he got up to his feet and offered his hand to her. “Wanna go find out for sure?”

—

“So?” Owen asked impatiently.

“Jesus! Do you have to stand there while I pee on that goddamn stick?” Claire all but growled from behind the bathroom door.

“Hey, I promised to be there for you,” he reminded her cheekily.

“That’s a bit too ‘there’. Can you please go away for, like, 3 minutes?”

He started to walk away, then then turned and pressed his palm to the door. “I love you, you know that, right?”

She stayed quiet for a few moments. “That’s the first time you ever said it. And you had to say it through the bathroom door.”

He chuckled. “Staying classy.”

In the time it took her to finish with the test, Owen turned on the kettle – for lack of better ideas – and proceeded to pace around the kitchen, his mind on fire. She was right, it was scary, and there were so many things that could go wrong, but at the same time, it was the best kind of scary, and he wanted it. Until today, he had no idea how much he wanted it, but the answer was – a lot.

And he was so crazy about her, so utterly and unbelievably and insanely in love with her he didn’t know how it hadn’t consumed him whole yet.

“Well, the good news is, this part wasn’t painful,” Claire said, appearing in the kitchen a few minutes later.

Owen whirled around to the sound of her voice. “And the bad?” He asked cautiously.
She sighed. “We might need to start looking for a bigger house.”

“Wait, we are pregnant, right?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “We are.”

He approached her in two swift strides and gathered hr in his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “We are,” he echoed. Then he pulled back and cupped her face in his hands, his mouth pressing to hers, feeling her smile with his lips. “Thank you.”

“Hey, half of the night feedings are on you,” she warned him, stretching on her tiptoes to kiss her again, her hands falling on his chest.

“Deal!” Owen agreed without hesitation. “Wanna celebrate?”

Her eyes grew wide with excitement. “How about some guac tacos?”
I swear that door attacked me

Chapter Summary

Owen being a total klutz when he sees Claire for the first time because she’s so gorgeous.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As far as perfect jobs went, training honest to god Velociraptors in the most talked-about park in the world was pretty much at the top of Owen’s list. Or, at least, he hoped it would work out that way, seeing as how the raptors hadn’t hatched yet, and his general idea of what exactly he’d signed up for was quite vague.

“Wow,” Barry whistled quietly under his breath when the two of them stepped into the administrative building of the park.

It was all chrome and glass and people in actual suits. Since his arrival at the park a week ago, the only person in a suit Owen saw was Simon Masrani, and the high concentration of those in one place was starting to give him a headache.

“Why are we here, again?” He asked Barry, eyeing their surroundings with a hint of suspicion.

Frankly, he’d much rather hang out at the paddock and watch the construction crew add final touches to it before it was good and ready for its future inhabitants. Or he could finally fix the solar panels at his bungalow – something he kept putting off for several days now. Seeing this nearly sterile place that he knew was full of legal talk and margins and profits made him want to stay as close to the nature as possible.

“HR,” Barry responded somewhat uncertainty. “I think they want us to sing those waivers about not suing their asses if we get eaten.”

Owen snorted. “This place is not that different from the military after all. Which way?”

They took the elevator to the third floor, ultimately ending up in a long corridor dotted with doors on both sides.

“Would it kill them to put up signs?” Owen grumbled at the sight of buzzing activity and the people who, unlike the two of them, seemed to have a sense of purpose to them. And the fact that dressed in t-shirts and cargo pants, they stuck out like sore thumbs, didn’t make it any better. Not that anyone seemed to care, though.

“Let’s just ask,” Barry mumbled.

“Yeah, let’s…”

Owen cut off when, through the glass wall of what looked like a conference room, he spotted Simon Masrani. It was not, however, the CEO of Masrani Global and the owner of InGen that rendered him speechless, but a tall redheaded woman in a white pencil skirt and a light blouse with
floral print he was talking to. She held a folder of some kind in one hand and kept casually tucking her hair behind her ear with another as she listened to her boss, nodding now and then.

Now, Owen Grady had seen beautiful women before, but there was something about this one….

Not just the way her clothes hugged her body, or the way her legs seemed to be a mile long in those white pumps he couldn’t possibly imagine anyone wearing outside of this building for the risk of breaking their legs. Or the delicately upturned slope of her nose and the slight tilt of her head. Well, that too, but not quite.

He had never been the one for poetic comparisons, but if had to name one thing that had an effect of a gravity pull on him, it would be an undeniable and, if he had to be completely honest with himself, downright intimidating air of confidence hanging around her. And if he put it in simpler terms – she was breathtaking, unbelievably hot.

Just then, the woman turned, their eyes meeting for a moment through the glass wall. Under any other circumstances, Owen would probably wonder what first impression he’d managed to make on her – slack-jawed and gaping. But all of a sudden, the tip of his boot came in contact with an uneven floor tile, tripping him and propelling him forward, his arms flailing wildly to maintain his balance, just as the door to the HR Department – hey, they found it! – opened right before him, hitting him in the face.

“Ow!” He gasped, reaching for his nose.

“Owen!” Barry yelped.

And then everything went black.

—

He came to slowly, following the throbbing pain pulsing in his head like a beacon. Even with his eyes closed, he could see black dots and white spots flashing before his eyelids. His face hurt and was also… cold?

Carefully, he opened his eyes, blinking in the sunlight that streamed through the floor-to-ceiling window behind him.

“Nice fall, sleeping beauty,” Barry chuckled somewhere on the left from him.

After a moment of panic over not being able to see anything properly, Owen finally realizing that he had an ice pack wrapped in a towel lying on the bridge of his nose.

Wincing, he removed it, his mind switching into an instant assess mode – his nose hurt like a bitch, but not enough to be broken, so that was good news. The back of his head was another story – he was starting to feel slightly nauseous and the ringing in his ears couldn’t be a good thing, all things considered.

“Are you okay?” Another voice asked, and when Owen finally managed to focus properly, he saw the redheaded woman hovering over him, her face stern, but not unkind. And her eyes… her eyes were the most captivating shade of green.

“Am I dead?” He asked weakly, kind of aware of his lips stretching in a ridiculously loopy smile, but unable to control it.

The woman turned to Barry. “How badly did he hit his head?”
Amused, Barry struggled to keep his face straight. “When he hit the door, or when he fell down to
the floor?”

Owen winced inwardly.

It was one thing to come across as a klutz, but whole triathlon – trip-hit-fall – was a disaster. The
office—he assumed it was her office, and he was currently sprawled on her couch—was freezing,
courtesy of the powerful AC units, but his cheeks began to burn nonetheless.

“I swear that door attacked me,” Owen said solemnly.

The woman sighed, then studied him for another moment, and turned to Barry again. “Someone
needs to have a look at him. Maybe someone from the First Aid Station downstairs.”

“Of course, Ms. Dearing,” Barry nodded eagerly, shooting You’re unbelievable, man look at
Owen.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Owen assured her quickly. He pulled himself up and grabbed the back of the
couch for support when the room began to swim around him.

“Claire, please,” she told Barry, ignoring Owen and his futile attempts to take an upright position
entirely. “It could be a concussion.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted, finally managing to sit and lean against the back of the couch.

The woman—Claire, was it?—huffed with exasperation. She sat down beside him and turned his
head toward her by the chin. God, she was so beautiful Owen had no idea how he was still
breathing. She skimmed her fingers over his nose, and had it not been for the cool touch of her skin
to his that made his whole body tingle, he’d probably howl with pain. But, as it was, he just stared
at her, noticing how her eyes were deep green around the iris and almost gray at the edge. She also
had golden specks of freckles on the bridge of her nose and her cheeks.

And maybe he did die after all. At least that way the bruise he knew was now spreading over half
of his face wouldn’t matter.

“Well, it’s not broken,” she said at last, her voice firm and certain.

“I know it’s not broken,” Owen responded, which came out a bit more defensively than he
intended.

“Can you walk?” Barry inquired.

“Of course, I can walk,” Owen muttered. “I hit my head, not broke my spine.”

Snorting, Barry offered him his hand and pulled him up, catching him by the elbow for a moment.

“I’m good,” Owen said when the floor stopped swaying beneath his feet.

Claire rose up to her feet again and smoothed out her skirt.

“Thanks, for everything,” Barry told her with a light smile.

“Yeah, and sorry for the show,” Owen added, touching his hand to the prominent bump on the
back of his head.

“Please be careful, Mr. Grady,” she said, not without a hint of amusement, and his face turned an
even brighter shade of pink. “I’m not sure if your corporate insurance covers severe head traumas.”

—

“That was epic, man!” Barry told him the moment the door to Claire’s office closed behind them, and slapped him on the back for good measure. “I hope someone caught it on camera.”

“I sure as hell hope no one did,” Owen breathed out, the purpose of their trip to the resort entirely forgotten.

“Where was your head?” His friend smirked, incredulous.

Sheepishly, Owen glanced over his shoulder at the office they’d just left.

It took Barry a moment to put two and two together, and then he burst out laughing. “No way, forget it!”

“Who is she?” Owen asked in an urgent whisper.

“Claire Dearing,” Barry explained. “Operations Manager of the park and Simon Masrani’s second in command.” He pressed the elevator button. “She runs this whole place and eats guys like you for breakfast.”

“I bet she’s a vegetarian,” Owen disagreed uncertainly.

“Not the point. You, my friend, have the same chance with her as I do with the Queen of England.”

“But isn’t the Queen of England out of your… age range?”

“Sure, because it’s the only thing standing between us.” Barry deadpanned. “Come on, Romeo, let’s get you some painkillers.

Owen stepped into the elevator after him and turned around just in time to see Claire walk out of her office, a phone pressed to her ear. On impulse, he waved at her, but the doors slid closed before he could see if she waved back.

Chapter End Notes

Let's face it, it could've totally happened ;)


I can’t believe you talked me into this.

Chapter Notes

Okay, this is basically me screaming about how much I miss snow. Please don’t hold it against me. And enjoy!

I can’t believe you talked me into this.

Little did everyone know, but for a person who had spent nearly a decade living on a tropical island, Claire Dearing really loved the snow. There was something mesmerizing about lying on her back and making snow angels and watching the flakes twirl and dance above her; about how it covered everything around her with the soft blanket, making the world look fresh and new and pure.

Well, at least when she was twelve.

Of course, it did not have quite the same effect after she had practically tumbled down the slope while trying and mostly failing to slow down her ungraceful descent, and now her ski poles were sticking from somewhere above her head and kind of ruining the view.

The good news was, she didn’t break her neck. Everything else, however…

“Well, that was…” Owen said, skidding to an abrupt halt beside her, his skis sending a spray of snow into the air. “Brutal,” he finished.

“I told you I’m not good at this,” Claire grumbled from her position on the ground.

“You had to keep your knees bent and your elbows at your ribs—”

“Yeah, because that’s what went wrong,” she retorted.

This whole thing was actually her idea. He’d grown up in the South, and even though he wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with the cold winters – thanks to his tours, mostly – she thought he’d appreciate a Snow Wonderland retreat, the true Midwesterner that she was.

And boy, was she right! Except Claire imagined them spending all of the time on the couch in front of the fireplace, while Owen decided it was all about conquering the slopes. And the most frustrating thing was that he was a natural. The man never touched the skis in his life and yet was zipping between the trees like a pro. She’d spent her entire childhood trying to muster the skill of not planting her face in the ground, and that was exactly what kept happening since. Go figure…

To her credit, she allowed him to run around wild and free for a couple of days, but today he woke up, firmly set on getting her outside. And look how it ended.

Owen unstrapped his own skis, and then knelt down beside her to help her remove hers.

“You okay?” He asked, tossing them aside and offering her his hand.

“Yeah,” Claire breathed out as he pulled her upright. “I can’t believe you talked me into this.”
“It’s a ski resort,” Owen pointed out.

“Where the skis need to be left alone in the storage where they belong,” she huffed. “Let them— ow!”

A white-hot jolt of pain shot from her ankle and through her leg, leaving Claire all but doubled over and gasping for air, and had it not been for his arm that reached around her instantly, she’d probably end up back in the snowbank she’d just climbed out of.

“Claire?” Owen asked, his eyebrows pulled together in concern. “What is it, honey?”

“I think I might have… my ankle,” she caught her lower lip between her teeth, gingerly balancing on her left foot, her hand clasped tightly around his for support.

Without another word, he scooped her effortlessly into his arms and headed for their cabin, which Claire managed to get almost all the way to. Thank god she didn’t slam right into it.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and he brushed his lips to her hair, his breathing not laboured in the slightest despite having to carry her while walking in ski boots. Claire pressed her forehead into his temple and let out a long breath. All things considered, this was nice.

Once in the cabin, Owen settled her on the couch in the living room and helped her take off her jacket, heavy boots and a ski suit. Carefully, he examined her right ankle, announcing she probably had a mild sprain, but nothing a few days of rest wouldn’t cure.

“How can you even tell?” She asked dubiously.

“Years and years of playing doctor are finally paying off,” Owen responded with a suggestive smile, earning a right whack on the arm. “How come you grew up here and still don’t know shit about all that stuff?”

“Not all of us are good at everything,” she snorted.

“Well, lucky for me, you’re good at so many other things.” Beaming, he leaned over to peck her on the lips, and before he had a chance to pull away, Claire grabbed his face, bringing their mouths together for a proper kiss.

He started a fire and made hot chocolate for both of them – with tiny marshmallows, as per Claire’s request – while she watched him move around the cabin from her spot on the couch with her foot propped on the cushion and a pack of frozen beans placed on the sore spot. And when the light started to fade and the soft, purple twilight settled in, he slid into a spot behind her, his arm curled around her waist and her back resting against his chest.

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“This okay?”

“Better than okay,” Claire assured him, relaxing into his body.

“Does it hurt?” He asked quietly against her hair as he kissed the top of her head.

She shook her head and placed her hand on top of his lying on her stomach. “You might have to carry me around for a while, though,” she said, tilting her head back to plant a kiss on his jaw, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

Owen dipped his head down to capture her lips with his. “My pleasure. Literally.” He kissed the top of her forehead next, his arms flexing around her to hold her closer as he breathed in the scent
of her skin, giddy and elated, marveling at how perfectly her body fit against his, at how abso-fucking-lutely wonderful it felt, all languid and soft, and his. He trialed his finger along her forearm. “I know this isn’t exactly what you had in mind.”

“Oh, it is,” Claire assured him, snuggling closer to him. “This is exactly what I had in mind, believe it or not. Sans the sprain, but still!”

“Oh yeah?” He arched his eyebrows while a lazy smile spread across his face, so broad Claire thought it would split his head in half.

“Uh-huh,” she nodded. “In fact…” She wiggled around until she was all but sprawled on top of him, her hands spayed over his chest, “I might need to catch you up on a couple of other ideas I had in mind.”

Owen’s hands locked on her lower back. His breath caught in his throat under the gaze of her green eyes, at the sight of a delicate bow of her lips. And, god, where did all the air go all of a sudden?

He raked his fingers through her hair, bringing her face closer and kissing her deeply, swallowing the soft sigh that escaped her chest with his mouth, feeling her body tremble slightly in anticipation.

“You sure about that?” He murmured softly as she started to press slow, hot kisses to his neck. “I mean, you just fell off the mountain.”

Grinning against his skin, Claire whispered. “Trust me, none of this requires walking around.”

Owen cupped her face in his palms, his thumbs running over her cheekbones, feeling like he was about a step away from losing his mind. “Yeah, okay, I could work with that.”

—

“You know, we should make it an annual thing,” he told her later when they were stretching between the tangled sheets and his hands was trailing slow patters in her back, raising goosebumps along her skin. “The whole mountain resort thing.”

Giggling, Claire kissed a spot right below his collarbone. “No skiing, and you got yourself a deal.”

“What skiing?” Laughing, he rolled them both over, pressing her down with the weight of his body, her hands caught into his and pinned above her head. “Now, where were we?”
Have I entered an alternate universe or did you really just crack a smile for me?

Chapter Notes

Sorry, it’s a bit long(-ish?) but the idea was fun to work with so… Enjoy! Post-date, pre-film AU :)

Have I entered an alternate universe or did you really just crack a smile for me?

Mondays were a crime against humanity, that much Owen Grady was certain of. If something was bound to go wrong, it would sure as hell happen on Monday – quite possibly because the big wigs of InGen tended to grow bored over the weekend and needed to come back to work with a bunch of fresh and bright ideas about how to screw everything up for everyone else.

Or at least so it felt more often than not.

And that why he found himself en route to the Hilton on that warm and sunny Monday afternoon – because he needed to talk to Claire Dearing and Her goddamn Royal Highness was not at the office.

He walked briskly past the people milling around in the lobby and took the elevator to the upper floor where the park’s executives resided when they were on the island, his mood growing darker and more foul with every second.

Unlike the majority of people he knew, Owen really and truly loved his job. What he couldn’t stand was the intricate games with InGen and dancing around their crap. And right now, not only was he missing out on the feeding – which was crucial in his training program for establishing the rapport with the animals – and the subsequent afternoon play session with his girls, but he was also wasting his precious time on trying to track down the one person on this whole island who hated his guts.

The feeling wasn’t quite mutual, he had to admit that, but who prints out an itinerary for a night out?!

He knocked impatiently on her door – banged on it, really - anxious and antsy and all but dancing on one spot as he waited. Her assistant told him she would be here, so what was taking so—

“You have got to get Hoskins off my back!” Owen all but barked the moment the door opened.

“Mr. Grady?” Whoever Claire expected to find on the other side, it certainly wasn’t him. “I don’t—”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” he interjected, fuming. And then he finally bothered to take a proper look at her. “What happened? You look awful.”

She didn’t, for a regular person. For Claire Dearing, Operations Manager of Jurassic World, however… Owen had never seen her dressed informally. Business meetings, company picnics, corporate holidays – hell, even at a Sunday market – she looked so pristine it seriously hurt his
brain. Not a crease on her immaculate clothes, not a hair out of place. It was like she’d stepped right off the page of some sort of a business magazine and forgot how to not be painfully perfect every minute of her life.

Right now, though, she was wearing… boy, were those sweatpants?! For a moment, Owen thought he was seeing things. Plain gray sweatpants and a tee with the dinosaur print – one of those he’d spotted in the gift shops and on about half of the guests. For once, her hair wasn’t flat-ironed straight and was falling around her face in soft waves instead. She looked… tired.

It caught him so off-guard that the anger that had been boiling inside of him for the past few hours dissipated without a trace.

“Gee, thanks,” Claire said flatly. “Thanks for coming all the way here to tell me that.”

“That’s not…” He started, then trailed off and shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“What can I help you with, Mr. Grady?”

“Frankly, you don’t look like you could help anyone with anything right now,” he blurted out.

“Suit yourself.”

She started to close the door, but he stepped forward quickly and pressed him palm into it.

“Seriously, Claire, what’s wrong?” It was the fact that she gave up this easily on their usual snarky banter that kind of freaked him out.

She studied him for a moment, then let out a long exasperated sigh. “A cold. Nothing deadly, nothing exciting. Would that be all?”

It was. It should have been.

And thinking about it now, Owen wondered why on earth would she open the door to anyone at all. Showing the vulnerable side of herself – even when the circumstances were entirely out of her control – was not exactly the most Claire Dering thing to happen.

Who was she expecting? he wondered.

He should have left right then and came back later. He should have called, he realized if a little belatedly. That would have been a very sane, a very logical thing to do.

Instead, he sidestepped her gently and invited himself in.

“What are you doing to get better?” He inquired, giving her a long contemplative once-over.

“Not having to listen to people tell me I look awful usually helps,” she promised, folding her arms over her chest.

“It’s not a fool-proof method,” he assured her.

“Mr. Grady…” she started with a warning.

“Owen,” he corrected her immediately. “We went out. You saw me drunk. I saw you angry and disappointed. We’re way past these formalities, don’t you think? In fact, all things considered, we’re basically married.”
“Over my dead body,” she mumbled darkly.

“Aren’t you a ball of sunshine?” Owen scoffed as he observed his surroundings.

He’d never been to her place before. That one time when they both nipped any chance of anything ever happening between them at the bud, they’d met up in the lobby.

It was nice, he had to admit that much. A fairly large one-bedroom suite featuring a living room that could fit his whole bungalow, and a balcony overlooking the park. Soft carpet, beige furniture, an entertainment system he’d kill for. Frankly, he wouldn’t give up on his little corner of the world, but he could see the appeal of this particular lifestyle.

There was a cup of half-finished tea on the coffee table and a box of some sort of cold medication. She was not joking.

Owen puckered his lips, considering his options. Jesus, this woman wold probably die before she’d ask for help. Feeling her heavy gaze on his back, he rounded the kitchen island that separated the cooking area from the living room and shamelessly poked his head into her fridge.

“What the hell are you doing?” Claire demanded, appalled.

“First, we’ll fix you up a little, and then we’ll talk about how you can get Hoskins to go fuck himself. Not literally, obviously, because that would be uncomfortable.” Owen slammed the fridge door closed and straightened up. “Do you ever eat anything?!"

She glared at him. “I don’t need to be fixed up, and I can’t help you with Hoskins. He’s InGen, I have no authority over them.”

“You’re resourceful,” he noted absently, his eyebrows pulled together in concentration. “I’m sure you can figure something out.” He turned to her, all the pieces of his plan finally clicking into place. “Stay here!”

“Thank god,” he heard her mutter under her breath the moment he was out of the door.

—

And then he was back. Half an hour later. With the groceries.

This time, he didn’t bother knocking. He just strolled right in and headed for the kitchen, making Claire nearly leap five feet into the air.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She snapped indignantly.

Halfway through unloading the stuff he found at the market that operated for the personnel of the park so that they wouldn’t have to make trips to the mainland every time they ran out of toothpaste or ketchup, Owen looked up at her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She snapped indignanty.

Halfway through unloading the stuff he found at the market that operated for the personnel of the park so that they wouldn’t have to make trips to the mainland every time they ran out of toothpaste or ketchup, Owen looked up at her.

“Would you please relax for ten minutes?” He asked with the polite smile that set her teeth on edge. “Maybe fifteen,” he added, and then after a short consideration, “Twenty, tops.” He should have probably checked if she even had any pots and pans and stuff. A person whose fridge contained nothing but 2 crates of yogurt and some water might very well have none of the cooking essentials. “How does one even get a cold on a tropical island?” He wondered aloud while rummaging through her cupboards.
Claire sank down onto the couch, choosing to try and incinerate him with the power of her mind or something form a safe distance. “I’m resourceful,” she threw his own words back at him.

It took 30 minutes, and she was starting to feel rather drowsy – probably the Tylenol kicking in, she thought – by the time he was actually finished with whatever he was doing in her kitchen. Jesus, how did this even happen? And who did he think he was to come here and… take care of her? Claire rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying oh so hard to ignore the fact that Owen goddamn Grady was doing something for her right now that no one else did in so long she couldn’t even remember the last time it happened.

Sure, Zara would have probably stopped by later. Maybe even Simon Masrani would have called to make sure she was getting better. But none of them would ever cook for her because she had no energy to do the grocery shopping herself.

And that… that was not something Claire was prepared to deal with.

“Scooch over,” Owen told her, appearing suddenly by her side with a steaming bowl of… something.

“What is this?” Claire regarded it with undisclosed mistrust, but did as he asked anyway, too out of it to put up a proper fight.

“A chicken soup,” he announced, setting it on the coffee table in front of her. “You’ll be good as new before you know it.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It smells awful.”

He rolled his eyes. “It smells fine. It’s your senses that are acting up.” He took a seat beside her. “Come on, eat it up. I’m not going anywhere until you finish it all, so you might as well get rolling.”

It sounded more like a threat than a joke to her ears. With a sigh, Claire reached out for the spoon. She was a grown-up and could eat a bowl of soup without throwing a tantrum, couldn’t she? Besides, the idea of actually getting him out of her house was so tempting she’d eat hot lava if she had to.

And then she turned to him, puzzled. “Why are you doing this?”

He studied her face for a few moments, noticing for the first time that with her guards down, she looked so much softer, so much more… more. And it made his heart clench – pretty much like that time when she’d told him at the end of their unfortunate date that ‘it was nice and let’s not do this ever again’.

He cleared his throat, only barely stopping himself from reaching out to brush her hair away from her face, if only to make sure it was as soft as it looked.

“Well, I don’t see anyone else doing it, so…” In an attempt to change the subject, he grabbed a remote from the coffee table and flicked the TV on. “Got anything good here?”

Claire picked up the bowl and leaned back, settling more comfortably in her seat. “Our ideas of good are most definitely very, very different, Mr. Grady.”

“Owen,” he reminded her automatically.
In the end, after a long and detailed examination of her film library, he picked *You’ve Got Mail*.

“Very funny,” Claire snorted around another mouthful of noodles. And damn it, the man could cook. Not that she’d ever admit it to him.

“What?” Owen asked with a frown.

“Did you choose it because Tom Hanks’s Joe Fox takes care of Meg Ryan’s Kathleen Kelly when she’s sick?”

The corner of his mouth quirked into a smirk. “No, that’s a lucky coincidence. I chose it because sounds so boring it’ll knock you right out. And you need that sleep.”

“I stopped having naps when I was four,” she protested.

“It’s not a nap when you need it to get better.” Owen pointed out, then checked the contents of the bowl she was nearly hugging to her chest and nodded with approval. “Good girl.”

Claire bristled at that. “I’m not one of your–”

“Animals,” he finished for her dismissively. “Thank god for that.”

As it turned out, Owen Grady had never seen *You’ve Got Mail* before, and if his soup – and later, the tea with honey he’d made for her – were meant to chase her virus away, it was watching him root for the happy ending that Claire found particularly therapeutic. Curled in her corner of the couch, she studied him as he followed the story, his expression changing from glee to triumph to disbelief. Repeat every fifteen minutes.

“Have I entered an alternate universe or did you really just crack a smile for me?” He asked, his eyes narrowed with suspicion, when he caught her looking at him.

Without a word, she shook her head.

At some point, he grabbed the blanket draped over the armrest and threw it over her, tucking her closer to him and forgetting to remove his arm from around her shoulders afterwards, seemingly unaware of what was doing. His body pressed against hers felt like a furnace, and after the soup and more meds, fighting off her sleepiness was futile.

She dozed off just as the friendship between Kathleen and Joe started to bloom.

——

The next time Claire woke up, the sun was up and she was in her bed. Still dressed in her sweats and a dino tee, she was sprawled on top of the comforter, covered with the same blanket Owen wrapped her into the previous evening.

And much to her delight, she no longer felt like she was dying.

However, it was not the light of the day that awoke her, but the gentle snoring somewhere in a very close proximity to her.

Confused, she rolled over to find none other than Owen Grady peacefully asleep on the other side of her bed, half-lying on his stomach, his arm tucked under his head. He stirred when the mattress shifted under the weight of her body and blinked his eyes open, his lips tugging up at the corners at the sight of her tousled hair and her somewhat glazed gaze.
“Morning, sunshine,” he croaked, stifling a yawn.

“What are you doing here?” She asked quietly.

“You asked me to stay.”

“No, I didn’t,” she protested, mirroring his pose and also placing her arm under her head.

“Hate to break it to you, but you did.”

“It must have been the fever,” she informed him.

He chuckled. “Doesn’t change the fact that I just spent the night with Claire Dearing.”

Her jaw dropped in shocked. “How dare you–”

“You’re adorable when you’re high on cold meds.” Owen rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

“Feeling better?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

This time, he didn’t hesitate to thread his fingers through her hair, pushing it back, his palm resting on her cheek. And when she didn’t pull away, she moved closer and brushed his lips to hers, first softly, and then deepening the kiss when Claire responded to it, her fingers closing around his wrist lest he draw back.

“I might still be sick, you know,” she murmured when he broke away, breathless.

“S’okay,” Owen replied in a whoosh of breath, capturing her lips with his again – greedy, now that it was happening. He’d wanted it to happen for longer than he could remember. “I think we got that routine figured out.”
Based on Tumblr prompt: “yes, i know this is your sweatshirt and that we broke up five months ago but it’s really comfy okay. i totally don’t wear it because like it still smells like you or is the only thing that even remotely feels like home since i moved out. pfft. absolutely not.”

Owen stared at the white door with three numbers nailed right below the peephole. Double-checked them with the address scribbled on the coffee shop napkin and stared at it some more.

He was a seasoned marine, fresh from the tour. He’d seen the things most of normal people didn’t even know how to have nightmare about. If he were completely honest with himself, he’d pretty much seen it all – whatever the hell that meant. All things considered, it shouldn’t be this hard for him to knock on his ex-girlfriend’s door.

And yet…

The last time he saw Claire, she made it perfectly clear she wanted him out of her life. He was quite certain he said something of a similar kind back – not because he meant it, but because it hurt so much to know he’d lost her and be unable to do anything about it.

No wonder his feet weighed a ton each and seemed to have started growing roots into the pavement.

He shook it off and crossed her neatly trimmed – and mostly dead at the time of the year – lawn, climbing the porch steps two at a time and pressing his fingers to the doorbell before he chickened out.

It was nice, he noted absently, taking in the porch swing and fresh paint on the windows. She’d moved here after everything went wrong between them, after he’d left. Five months ago, according to her sister. Owen wondered what else had changed. And then decided he didn’t want to know.

The door swung open, and for a moment, he was too lost in his thoughts to notice it, or get prepared for it, for that matter.

“Owen”, Claire breathed out, looking about as shocked as he felt.

“Hey,” he offered her a somewhat forced smile, struggling not to fidget, too restless and antsy.

Eight months. He hadn’t seen her in eight months, but it left like it had only been ten minutes.

“When did you come back?” She asked when the pause started to stretch between them.

He cleared his throat, darted an almost involuntary look at his truck parked in her driveway. “A few hours ago,” he responded. “Karen gave me the address,” he explained before she had a chance to ask. “I should’ve called, but…” He waved his dead phone at her, grimacing apologetically.
“It’s okay,” she assured him quickly.

“It’s a bad time?” Owen thought to ask, hoping he didn’t walk in on anything important. Like the new boyfriend cooking her a dinner with an intention of maybe dropping an engagement ring in her wine glass.

“No, not at all,” she shook her head, but made no effort to step outside. Or let him in. She just kept looking at him like he was a ghost. And in a way, he probably was.

“You look good,” he offered, filling the silence.

And she did. God, she looked so damn wonderful it physically hurt him not to reach for her, pull her close and never let go. Whoever said that the time healed everything was so full of crap, Owen thought. He was supposed to get over her - over them - by now, but standing before her made him miss her even more than when there were thousands of miles between them.

In the months they’d been apart, her hair had grown out and was now tied in a loose ponytail at the nape of her neck with a few escaped wisps framing her face. And just like back then, her ocean green eyes were making him feel like he was drowning.

“You, too,” Claire said, her lips curved ever so slightly into a small, fleeting smile.

The first lie. He knew he looked awful – exhausted and in a desperate need for a haircut. He cleared his throat – again, kicking himself mentally for acting like a deranged doofus. “I shouldn’t have dropped in you announced, but I was wondering if you… if you still have some of my stuff.” God, this was not helping. If you haven’t set it on fire, Owen wanted to add, but chose not to, on the off-chance that she did do just that.

She blinked, momentarily confused, and then nodded. “Yes, sure. It’s in the garage. Let me just…” She trailed off, turning around to get the keys from the table in the hallway.

And it was then that he finally noticed something.

“Is that my shirt?” Owen asked, his eyes narrowed in slight disbelief.

She paused and looked down at herself, as if only now noticing that she was, in fact, wearing one of his old sweatshirts, the color rising on her cheeks, sparkling her freckles alive.

“It shrunk in the drier, remember?” Claire shook her head as the memories flooded his mind, images from the time when nothing else mattered but the two of them, when he could hold her in his arms, and kiss her, and feel like he was soaring above the world. “You can still have it,” she offered.

“No, no, keep it,” he insisted. “It looked better on you. Always has.”

She was about to protest, but thought better of it. “Right, the garage…”

But before either one of them could so much as take step toward it, a ball of fur tumbled from the depths of the house, slamming into Owen’s legs and yipping with excitement. Puzzled, he looked down to find a Border Collie pup making circles around his feet, its tail wagging with furious happiness.

Her features softening, Claire bent down to pick it in her arms, earning a faceful of sloppy affection. She looked at Owen. “This is Molly,” she introduced the pup. “Molly, Owen.”
Chuckling, he reached to scratch the dog behind her ears. “How on earth did that happen?”

Claire rolled her eyes. “It was Gray’s idea. He and Zach picked her up. I didn’t have a say in this plan whatsoever.”

He studied her face, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “It’s good. Good for you, I mean. Everyone needs a friend.”

Her hand running along Molly’s back, she nodded. “Yes. They do.”

Owen followed her to the garage and held Molly while Claire opened the gate and rummaged through the stacks of stuff to find the boxes she’d packed his things into. There weren’t many of them – just some of his clothes, several books, some of his finishing gear – god, who knew? – and a bunch of knickknacks. Probably nothing he couldn’t survive without, but after Jurassic World claimed all of his possessions, leaving him with nothing but a shirt on his back, she couldn’t blame him to trying to hold on to whatever he considered to be his.

Once, she thought he’d be holding on to her, too. But apparently, she wasn’t his enough.

After he loaded the boxes into the bed of his truck, Owen turned to her again.

“Thanks,” he said. “For, um… keeping all this.”

“No problem,” she shrugged.

The low afternoon sun was tangled in her hair, making it glow like a halo around her head. He’d been shot a few months ago – because that’s what you get for shipping yourself off to the conflict zones without thinking twice – but it didn’t hurt nearly as much as standing two feet away from Claire Dearing and knowing they might have as well been a world apart.

“Hey, I was wondering…” He started, searching desperately for words that wouldn’t backfire one way or the other. “Is it okay if I buy you a cup of coffee some time?”

Head tilted to her shoulder, Claire hesitated, seemingly oblivious to the wiggling puppy in her arms. And then she nodded slowly, as if not certain. “Sure. Of course.”

Okay, go big or go home, Grady.

“How about now?”

“Now?” She glanced back at the house, then at Molly, then at Owen again. “If you don’t mind the company. I was going to take her out for a walk right before you came.”

—

Claire fetched the dog’s leash, and, leaving his truck in her driveway, they cut through the park toward the downtown area, talking about his tour, and her new job, and Karen’s boys, and all the small things that filled the space between them without suffocating them.

It was Claire’s idea to move back to Wisconsin for a while after the grand park fiasco. A change of scenery, she explained. Owen followed her without looking back. Back then, it didn’t matter to him if she wanted to live in Madison or on the moon. Granted, he didn’t stick around long enough to fully appreciate her home town, but sitting at the outdoor patio with her now, he was starting to see its appeal.
It wasn’t until their order arrived – vanilla latter for her and cappuccino for him – that he finally asked, “What happened to us, Claire? What went wrong?”

A wistful smile crossed her face as she stirred her drink while Molly continued to tangle her leash around the legs of Claire’s chair with enviable determination and precision.

“What didn’t?” She breathed out.

Thinking back to it now, Owen couldn’t even remember what the fight was about. He remembered the hurtful words, remembered throwing whatever was the closest to him into a duffel bag and slamming the door behind him. Remembered the heat of the desert and the longing in his chest that made him feel hollow. But not how it all began. Or whether or not it was preventable.

“It was too fast, too soon,” she continued, finally meeting his eyes. “We weren’t ready. And then you left.”

“You told me to.” He said quietly. “You never asked me to stay.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to,” she whispered and looked away, choosing to study a steady flow of the crowd across the street, the brightly lit shop windows and the life that seemed easy on the outside but could be broken and damaged if she were let in on its secrets.

Owen put his spoon down and folded his arms on the table. “I wanted to, Claire. I wanted to stay so bad.”

“You told me to.” He said quietly. “You never asked me to stay.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to,” she whispered and looked away, choosing to study a steady flow of the crowd across the street, the brightly lit shop windows and the life that seemed easy on the outside but could be broken and damaged if she were let in on its secrets.

Owen put his spoon down and folded his arms on the table. “I wanted to, Claire. I wanted to stay so bad.”

“Maybe it’s for the best,” she turned to him again. “Maybe it was not meant to be.”

He swallowed past the lump in his throat, wondering when did the one person that meant the whole world to him became a stranger; the words that used to come so easily now choking him.

“But if, hypothetically speaking, I were to ask you out,” Owen said before he’d had a chance to talk himself out of it. “To see if, hypothetically speaking, there is still something left that we could salvage. What would you say?”

She tucked the loose strands of hair behind her ears, took her time to blow on her drink and take a cautious sip, her eyes remaining locked with his the whole time. “Hypothetically speaking?” She repeated.

“No rushing into anything this time,” he nodded. And added in a whoosh of breath, “I miss you. I miss us. And… everything.”

Claire licked her lips, put her cup down. “Are you really staying?”

“If I have a good reason to.”

“Well, hypothetically speaking,” she offered him a small smile that exploded like fireworks in his chest, “I think I’d like that.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you like angst!
It’s not what it looks like…

Chapter Notes

...because I'm a sucker for secretly married Clawen...

It’s not what it looks like…

There was no smoke without fire. And in Claire’s experience, there were no corporate rules without precedents.

Masrani Global had a fairly strict policy regarding the personal relationships between the employees. They were no prohibited, per se, but they often resulted in the interdepartmental transfers to ensure professional objectivity and avoid the conflict of interest. Which was to say that they were meant to avoid the drama.

However, it was one thing to try and enforce this rule in the headquarters of the company located in the city, and something else entirely when it came to the island. It was not like the employees living permanently in the park had an extended dating pool to speak of.

The basic principles still applied – specifically regarding not dating one’s superiors or subordinates, but the executives of the park went out of their way to close their eyes to pretty much everything else.

Which basically meant that her affair with Owen Grady was going to backfire pretty badly when and if it became known to anyone. Well, not anyone anyone, perhaps. Zara knew about it – and Claire tried not to think of all the times her assistant stopped by her apartment for a signature or an approval of something or the other to find Owen in various states of, well, undressedness.

“You’re coming tonight, right?” She asked when Owen walked up to her while she was putting on the earrings in front of a vanity table and wrapped his arms around her from behind, his lips immediately latching onto her neck.

“Do I have to?” He asked against her skin, making her feel weak in the knees. It was usually at the moments like this that whatever reservations she might be having about their relationship flew right out the window.

“No,” she said, catching his eyes in the mirror. “But if you were there, it would make it much more tolerable for me.”

“Like an emotional support?” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

Like the air I need to breathe, she wanted to say, watching him watch her back, the warmth of his body against hers making her want to forget whatever reception she was expected to attend in less than an hour and just rip his clothes off.

“Something like that,” Claire mustered at last.

The corners of Owen’s mouth tugged up. He rested his chin on her shoulder. “Can I go as your ‘plus one’?”
“Unofficially,” she nodded.

“Claire…”

Biting her lip, she shook her head. “You know how it works. If Simon finds out, we’ll be in trouble.”

He started to pull away, unmasked frustration crossing his face, but she put her hands on his arms, and he stilled, remaining in place, even though his eyes were still hurt.

“Okay, so they’ll find out. I’ll get fired. What’s the big deal?”

“You won’t,” she reminded him. “As your superior who should’ve known better, I’ll be the one to be kicked out.”

“Then I’ll quit,” he shrugged, kissing a spot behind her ear again.

And god, did he even know what he was doing to her?

She scoffed. “Remember that weekend we went to San Jose? And how you were checking on your raptors every two hours?” He scowled back at her. “I don’t want to even begin to imagine what it would be like if you quit.”

He let out of a long exasperated sigh, burying his face in her hair. “Can I at least take you home afterwards?”

She smiled. “Depends. What do you have in mind?”

The sound of his soft laughter reverberated through her body. “So many things. But if I go into any details now, you will be a week late for your party.”

“A week, huh?” Claire turned in his arms, allowing her hands to lock behind his neck. “You seem to be awfully sure of yourself.”

Owen leaned down to brush his lips against hers, teasing her with a feather-light touch at first, before kissing her fully on her mouth, his arms closed around her in a dead grip. “How about a free trial?” He suggested in a hoarse voice, trialing slow kisses along her jaw.

“You have got to stop hanging out with the tech support,” she huffed. “Now, get out. I need to get dressed.”

—

About two or three times a year, the park would have an Open House day of sorts for the existing and potential investors of Jurassic World. Of course, they were more than welcome to stop by whenever they wished – usually, the amount of money they provided allowed them to all but own the park’s animals. But it was during the functions like this one that all the heads of the main departments were at their disposal, free to answer whatever questions and listen to whatever suggestions they might have.

To say that it was boring as hell would be a major understatement. But as Simon Masrani said to her once, it was a necessary evil.

And so Claire put on her best smile and tried not to groan too audibly every time someone made a sleazy comment aimed at her, or worse – tried to talk her into creating a hybrid of their personal
She was not there to judge. She was there to smile, nod, and then do her job however the hell she wanted when they were gone.

She grabbed a flute of champagne from the tray when one of the servers passed by her and headed for the make-shift bar where Zara was hanging out with a drink of her own.

“Is everyone here yet?” Claire asked.

“Another helicopter is coming in about ten minutes,” Zara reported. “And that’ll be it.”

Claire nodded. “Hey, have you seen…” She started, but Zara simply jerked her chin toward the opposite end of the room, and when Claire followed her gaze, she found Owen talking to one of the guests. He even put on a suit, which accentuated all the best parts of him quite nicely. Well, all of his parts were the best, she reminded herself, and immediately felt her cheeks heat up. She cleared her throat. “I was going to say Mr. Masrani.”

“I know,” Zara finished her drink and winked at Claire. “By he is not here, so why don’t you go say hello to your raptor guy?”

—

“Don’t you look nice,” Claire said, approaching Owen who artfully got rid of his company the moment he spotted her heading his way.

“Um, have you seen you?” He allowed his eyes to travel up and down her body, taking in her deep-blue cocktail dress.

She reached to adjust his tie – not that it needed to be adjusted, but she could hardly keep herself from touching him, and that was the only inconspicuous way to do it. “I should bring you along more often. Has anyone ever told you you look dashing when you’re not covered in twigs and dirt?”

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, did you say something? I was too busy thinking about getting you out of this dress.”

She stepped back, offering him that small smile that never failed to do all sorts of things to him. Goddammit!

“Right back at you, Mr. Grady.”

“Way to make a guy look objectified.” Owen took the glass she was holding and gulped down the remains of her champagne. His gaze skimmed around the room. “Are those things always this insufferable?”

“Welcome to the exciting world of the top management, baby,” she sighed.

Afterwards, it wasn’t until after Simon Masrani had arrived and she talked to every person attending whatever the hell this was, struggling to keep her face from splitting in half from all the smiling – seriously, it wasn’t natural! – that she finally managed to break through to Owen again.

Reading the distress on her face, he excused himself from the conversation he didn’t seem to have a problem maintaining. He caught Claire by the hand and steered her toward the door and into the hallway, his arms enveloping around her the moment they were out of everyone’s sight. She sighed with relief, with acceptance when his lips found hers, his hands pressed into her back.
“Thank you,” she murmured as her fingers fiddled with the lapels of his jacket. “For coming here, I mean. Just knowing I’m not alone is… everything, really.”

“You wanna get out of here?” He whispered, framing her face with his hands and kissing her again, deeper this time, until she started to feel like her bones began to melt.

“Soon,” she promised, with the smile. “God, those events are endless.”

“Even more so when you’re always all the way across the room.”

“Well, you know—”

A delicate cough made her jump away from Owen, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushes.

“Claire. Mr. Grady.” Simon Masrani was standing a few feet away from them, his curious gaze darting between the two of them.

“It’s not what it looks like!” Claire blurted out, trying to smooth down her hair and willing the floor to open underneath her feet and swallow her before she… died or something.

“Seriously? That’s the best you can come up with?” Owen snorted under his breath.

“Well, it looked like—” Simon started.

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” Owen assured him quickly, earning a horrified look from Claire.

Chuckling, Simon shook his head. “It’s all right, Claire. No drama, and I haven’t seen anything.” He looked around the hallway. “I was actually trying to get out of here,” he confessed quietly.

“In that case, we haven’t seen you either, sir,” Claire promised. She leaned into Owen once her boss was gone, her heart hammering like crazy. “This was…”

“Right.” He ran his fingers through her hair, kissing her temple. “You think he knows about us?” She smacked him lightly on the chest, making Owen laugh. “How much more time do you need?”

“Thirty minutes. And then I’m all yours.”

Smiling rather smugly, he said, “This is the best damn thing I heard all night.”
Prompt: “it’s my [insert family relation here]´s wedding and seeing all these happy couples is killing me and all i can think about is how this was almost us” AU (bonus: “i know that it’s two in the morning and i’m dressed really formally and a little (a lot) bit drunk but i couldn’t stop thinking about you after my grandma asked how you were doing also can i come in it’s freezing out here”)

Because I LOOOOOOOOVE angst!

It was a motion-sensitive light over her front porch that suddenly turned on at 2 in the morning that woke Claire up, its pale glow sneaking through the cracks between the drapes on her bedroom window.

Phone clasped in her hand, her thumb on the dial button to call 911 if needed, she crept into the hallway, hoping it was a raccoon and not a burglar. That happened before – the animals coming too close to the sensor, usually spooked by the light and long gone by the time she made it to the door.

However, this time, it was not the case. Instead, she found Owen slouched in one of the chairs, staring absently ahead of himself, and Claire’s heart made another leap in her chest, but for an entirely different reason.

He looked up when she pushed the door open and stepped outside, his eyes glazed.

“What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

“Owen?” Claire said, as if still not certain he was actually there. The porch floorboards felt freezing under her bare feet, and the chilly air nipping at her exposed arms was making the goosebumps rise along her skin. “What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

“Hey,” he breathed out.

“I thought you were…” She cleared her throat. “Shouldn’t you be at home? At your cousin’s wedding?”

“Hey,” he breathed out.

“I thought you were…” She cleared her throat. “Shouldn’t you be at home? At your cousin’s wedding?”

He knitted his brows together. “How did you know?”

Claire sighed and folded her arms over her chest with a slight exasperation, as well as in an attempt to keep herself warm. “Because you talk to my family more than I do. Apparently.”

He rubbed his eyes and let out a weary sigh. “I was. Just got back. Couldn’t stay there.”

That was when the sluggishness of his speech finally registered with her, and her frown deepened. “Are you drunk?”
This was new.

Even in the months right after their breakup, they somehow managed to avoid drunk texts and midnight phone calls. Claire got through it with the help of a carefully balanced dose of denial and crying herself to sleep. Whatever Owen’s crutch was, they succeeded to maintain forced politeness that relied heavily on avoiding one another as best they could.

“No,” he shook his head. “Not as much as I’d like to be.”

“Did you travel like this?” She inquired.

His mouth curved into a humorless smirk. “Nope. This is all courtesy of a 24/7 liquor store.”

She pursed her lips together, then exhaled slowly. “I’ll take you home.”

He rose to his feet, towering over her – all broad shoulders and lean muscles and the energy radiating off of him, and once again Claire wondered if she’d ever be able to stand this close to him, to look at him, and not feel this deep, consuming ache inside.

“Don’t bother, I’m fine,” Owen waved her offer off dismissively.

“You can’t live on my porch,” she reminded him, forcing herself not to take a step back to put more distance between them.

“It does feel a bit chilly,” he admitted in a whoosh of breath, then swallowed heavily as she watched his Adam’s apple bobble up and down. “Can I stay?”

Claire looked up, met his eyes, registered an emotional equivalent of a sucker punch that left her lungs empty. “No.”

“Why?”

She shook her head, reaching for the doorknob. “You know why, Owen. Give me a second.”

Inside, she put on a hoody and a jacket, found her tennis shoes and grabbed the car keys from the hook in the hallway.

*Because the last time I let you stay, you left anyway and took my heart with you,* she thought, feeling her throat close up again and taking small, shallow breaths in hope of getting through the next half hour, certain that anything more sophisticated than than would break her apart.

It was a short drive, and her body moved on autopilot – feet pushing the gas and brake pedals, hands turning the steering wheel whenever necessary. The muscle memory she was grateful for.

“They kept asking about you,” Owen said all of a sudden just when she started to think he had fallen asleep in the passenger seat.

“Who?” Claire echoed, caught off guard by his words.

“Everyone. Every goddamn person at the reception. Telling me what an idiot I was to let you slip through my fingers.” He rested his forehead against the window as they slipped in and out of pools of light cast by sparsely scattered street lamps. “As if I didn’t know that already.”

Her fingers flexed around the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. What could she say to that?
She parked in his spot, assuming he must have left his car at the airport, or the liquor store – depending on which idea dawned on him first. His spare key was where she remembered he used to keep it – tucked in a narrow space behind his mailbox. Owen probably had his set of keys on him, but his eyes kept zoning out, and she didn’t feel like doing a full body search.

His apartment looked the same way as it did the last time she saw it, save for a thin layer of dust on the furniture and the stale air that hung heavily around them. He must have been gone for a few days now. Not that it was any of her business.

“Come on,” she pulled his jacket off his shoulders, waited for him to kick his shoes off, and then steered him toward the bedroom without turning the lights on, muscle memory be damned.

She hadn’t been here in close to a year, and yet she somehow knew where to move to avoid running into a coffee table with her sheens, and which floorboard would have creaked if she stepped on it. Her gaze kept going involuntarily to the places where her stuff used to reside until she came over with a box and swept it all in without bothering to make sure it wouldn’t break, too eager to escape and not leave anything behind.

“There you go.” Claire muttered when Owen fell gracelessly onto the bed without pulling the comforter off, his eyes drifting shut almost instantly. He let out a long, slow breath.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She opened the windows to let some fresh air in, then poured a glass of water for him and found a bottle of aspirin in the medical cabinet in the bathroom.

“I’m going to leave this here, okay?” She said, placing the water and the pills on the bedside table.

He turned to the sound of her voice, his eyes fluttering open, and reached out to catch her hand, his thumb running over the pulse point on the inside of her wrist.

“Stay,” he croaked in a hoarse voice.

“Owen…”

“I’ll behave,” he promised.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“You really think I’d try anything?” He rubbed the corners of his eyes, and even though Claire assumed earlier that he was pretty wasted, his gaze was rather clear now.

“No, of course not.”

“Please, Claire.” Owen let go of her hand, but didn’t look away. “I just don’t want to be alone.”

She glanced over at the front door, considering her options. She didn’t have to do anything. She didn’t have to drive him here and right now, she could have easily walked out that door and never looked back. She could pretend the next time they ran into each other that it never happened. For all she knew, he wouldn’t remember half of it in the morning anyway.

But there was something about the way he was looking at her - this deep and profound desperation that resonated with everything she couldn’t shake off no matter how hard she struggled to - that the choice made itself without her even trying.
Reluctantly, she shrugged off her jacket and took off her shoes before curling on the other side of his bed, leaving a good two feet between them, and wondering if she’d topple over to the floor in the middle of the night. Arm tucked under her head, she watched him for a few moments, her gaze sliding over the familiar contour of his profile, the steady rising and falling of his chest as his breathing started to slow down, growing more relaxed.

As a simple physical act of being present in this room, her decision didn’t matter. She’d stay over with a friend who found themselves in a bad place without thinking twice. What terrified her, though, was how easily she’d fallen into a long-forgotten comfort of Owen’s presence, how all of sudden it didn’t matter they hadn’t been together in a long time, and the black void of misunderstanding that drove them apart in the first place started to shrink and disappear.

“It could’ve been us,” Owen said softly without opening his eyes.

“What?”

“While I was sitting there at the ceremony, listening to them saying their vows… It could’ve been us, you and me. It should’ve been us.”

Claire squeezed her eyes tight and buried her face in the pillow, breathing in his scent lingering on the pillowcase and willing herself not to tear apart at the seams. “No, it couldn’t,” she said quietly past the burning lump in her throat. “It couldn’t.”

When Owen woke up a few hours later, the sun was beaming right in his face and his head felt like someone climbed into it with a sledgehammer and decided to have a party. There was a lot of pain pooling behind his eyes and his ears didn’t like the sound of the dust particles hanging in the light.

That was not weird, though. That was something he saw coming from a mile away.

The odd thing was the scent of fresh coffee and the sound of something… sizzling?

He peeled his eyes open, blinking away the sleepiness, climbed from under the spare blanket someone – Claire? – threw over him while he slept, and followed the smells and sounds he was no longer accustomed to having in his house.

In the kitchen, the coffee machine was on, and Claire – still dressed in her PJs – was making pancakes.

She looked up when he shuffled in, wincing and scrunching his face.

“How are you feeling?” She asked.

“Dead,” Owen admitted, taking in the whole scene once again and wondering if he was still dreaming. Admittedly, it would’ve been more plausible if it wasn’t for the “What is this?”

“Your fridge is empty,” She explained. “The pancake mix was the only thing I could find. You have to eat something.”

“I’m good.” He shook his head, but she piled some pancakes onto the place and put it on the table, and he sat down dutifully, nauseated by the smell, but unable to deny her logic. “I’m sorry.” Owen said. “For the last night. For coming over. I shouldn’t have…” He trailed off.

“It’s okay.” Claire removed the last of the pancakes from the frying pan and turned off the stove.
“We all have our bad moments.”

“Well, I don’t remember you showing up drunk at my house in the middle of the night,” he grimaced.

“Maybe you weren’t at home,” she joked wistfully.

“For you, I’d be.” He ran his hands down his face, and when he looked up again, she was sitting across from him with a mug of coffee clasped between her palms, her eyes studying the texture of his oak table. “About what I said last night…”

She glanced up, looped her hair around her ears, pushing it out of her face. “Which part?”

He studied her face, trying to read how far would be too far. “I wanted it to be us. Always.”

She sighed and looked away, her lower lip caught between her teeth. “You were the one who pushed me away, Owen. You kept shutting me out every time I reached for you.” And the pain that flashed across her features felt like a stab in his gut. “I couldn’t keep fighting your demons for you. Not when you were siding with them.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “For everything, for… messing it up. For letting you go. For not knowing how to hold on.” His fingers curled into fists, and he forced himself to relax them slowly. “If I could… if there was a way to do it again, I’d do it differently.”

Claire turned to him once more. “That’s probably not a good idea.”


He knew she was, or at least had been. A few months back. Her family was tactful enough not to rub it in his face, but he’d caught some snippets of their veiled conversations. He never asked, though, because it was the kind of information he didn’t keep tabs on, fearing he’d go crazy if he knew too much. Fearing that at some point there would be no going back for the two of them, that they would be done for good.

“It’s not that,” Claire insisted. She took a cautious sip of her coffee to give herself a few moments to get her thoughts together, not really feeling the taste of the drink. She put the mug down. “When you left, it hurt so bad I didn’t think I’d ever get over it. I can’t go back to where we started knowing that this is how it could end again.”

He caught her gaze and held it, feeling the pull of her green eyes, the softness and the warmth of her, still remembering the taste of her lips, the feel of her body, his heart splintering at the sound of her laughter forever etched in his memory. “I’m sorry for not knowing how to let you in. I loved you.” His voice dropped. “I still do. I just wasn’t good at it.”

They stayed quiet for a while, the only sound breaking the silence was the ticking of the clock in the living room.

At last, she stood up. “I should probably go.”

He took her hand before she was out of his reach, lacing their fingers together. “Tell me you don’t miss this. Tell me you don’t miss us.”

“Owen…”

“Say it.”
Her shoulders sagged and she looked down at the floor, at her bare toes, then out the window – anywhere but at him. “Of course, I miss it. I miss you. But it doesn’t mean…."

“Yes, it does.” Owen was on his feet, standing right before her. He brought their clasped hands up to his mouth, kissing her knuckles. “I was a moron, and I hurt you, and there is no excuse for that. But I swear to God I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure it never happens again if you give me – us – another chance. Please, Claire.”

She ran her thumb over the back of his hand, her heart racing in her chest, making it hard to breathe, to think. The heat of is body this close to hers still rendering her speechless, frozen, her resolve dissipating once again. When she placed a hand on his chest, Owen thought she was going to push him away, but instead she bundled a handful of his shirt in her fingers, staring at his chin.

“On one condition,” Claire said after a few long moments, tugging him closer, pressing her forehead between his collarbones. His arms locked around her instantly, hands trialing down her back as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Don’t make me regret it.”
YOU DID WHAT?!

“YOU DID WHAT?!” Claire demanded, nearly choking on a sip of wine.

Owen winced when her voice broke through the otherwise quiet evening, nearly making the windows rattle in their frames, and smiled sheepishly at her.

“What’s the big deal?” He tried to reason with her.

She put her glass down and rubbed her forehead, then glared at him. “Let me recap – your friend asked you if you were bringing a ‘plus one’ to his wedding, and you went and told him it’d be me? Just like that? Without bothering to ask me first?”

“Well, when you put it that way….” Owen trailed off and offered her another apologetic smile. “I panicked,” he admitted. “Brian’s my best friend and I’ve got to be there, and you’re my friend, too.” A pause. “I didn’t think it would be a problem.”

She glared at him some more, her lips pursed together in a thin disapproving line, although she wasn’t quite sure what bothered her more right now – the fact that he didn’t consider her opinion and her plans, or his definition of their messed up relationship. Because if they were friends, she was the Queen of Middle Earth.

They’d been sharing an apartment for months now, and even though she did not expect to get at it straight away, after the hasty kiss and their decisions to maybe be there to support one another after the Jurassic World disaster, she thought there’d be a progression in their relationship. Owen, however, didn’t seem to be on quite the same page. They went out for dinners and movies, and occasionally talked all through the rough nights, usually sitting on the floor in the hallway, their backs pressed to the cool wall, but he seemed to be content sleeping in the guest bedroom, and if there was anything else to his intentions, she could not see it.

The problem was she didn’t know what they were either, and it only added to the frustration that had been building up inside of her since morning. This day was total crap, and no wonder it ended with this.

“That’s not the point, Owen.” She folded her arms over her chest. “Are you really asking me to go to Pasadena with you and lie to your friends?”

“No,” he added quickly. “I want you to go to Pasadena with me, wear a nice dress, have a good time and eat all the shrimp cocktails you want, and not say a damn thing to anyone and let them assume whatever the hell they want.”

“Because that’s healthy,” she scoffed.

“Did I mention the seafood?” He asked hopefully.

“Do I look like one of your animals who would jump on command for a snack?” Claire growled and threw her hands in the air.
He exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry, okay? I honestly didn’t mean… Look, forget it. I’ll talk to him, tell him you couldn’t make it and spend the night standing in the corner and drinking away everyone’s pity.”

Still more furious then not, she shook her head. **Goddamn you, Grady!** “Okay, fine. Whatever. I’ll do it.” She rolled her eyes at the sight of pure glee that lit up his whole face. “But you’ll owe me one.”

“I washed your car last week,” he reminded her.

“That is not the same thing,” Claire pointed out. “The dress is on you.”

“Sure, although I hope it’ll actually be on **you**.”

“And the shoes,” she added.

“Whatsoever you need.” He nodded eagerly.

“Now, what exactly does he think we are?” She inquired, dreading his answer.

He rubbed the back of his neck, and moved the knife stand out of her reach – just to be safe.

“That we’re a thing,” he admitted if a little unwillingly.

Claire eyes widened, her mouth dropping open. “Jesus Christ, Owen!”

—

“Are you sure you’re fine with this?” Owen asked again, desperately trying not to drop an armful of dresses Claire left him with.

“Lying to the people I’ve never met?” She asked from behind the changing room curtain separating them. “Sure. Piece of cake.”

“Would it make you feel better if you were lying to the people you knew?” He asked – mostly just to get a perspective.

She pulled the curtain open and stepped outside, wearing a strapless red dress that hugged her curves snuggly in all the right places, and observed herself critically in the mirror beside him.

“Don’t push it, Grady,” she warned him, not actually meaning it.

“It looks nice,” he assured her with a light cough and looked away.

It looked gorgeous – she looked gorgeous – and he was starting to have second thoughts about this idea. Claire Dearing looked so sexy in sweatpants and ratty t-shirts – because he was apparently friend-zoned enough for her to stop caring about what she wore on Sunday mornings – he could barely keep his hands to himself. Spending a few hours with Claire who looked like a superstar on a red carpet was one hell of a challenge to consider. The one he obviously didn’t think through properly.

“I look like a sausage,” Claire announced with a huff, and then dug out the next dress from his pile and disappeared behind the curtain again. It took Owen all of his willpower not to imagine what she looked like, peeling the tight fabric off her body. “Tell me what I need to know.”

“Um, Brian and I trained together. I’ve known him for close to a decade now.”
She flung the red dress over the railing that held the curtain, and Owen pointedly turned away, trying hard not to see her in his mind in nothing but her underwear barely two feet away from him.

“He’s been with Sarah for a few years now,” he continued quickly, eager to fill the silence with a mindless chatter. “He’s… nice. Kind of like the opposite of you.”

Claire stepped outside again, this time dressed in a deep-blue silk gown with an open back that fell down to her feet. “What’s that supposed to mean?” She asked with a frown.

Owen gave her a long considerate once-over – mostly because he was allowed to right now without it getting weird.

“It’d never cross her mind to bring an itinerary on a date.” He mused, noting that the open-back thing worked exceptionally well for her.

“Oh, would you please drop it already!”

“You nearly set my board shorts on fire when you found them in the hamper,” he reminded her.

“I was trying to do you a favour,” she met his eyes in the mirror.

“Really? Because to me it looked like you were trying to get me to walk around the house without pants.”

“You wish,” Claire snorted.

Owen dumped the dresses onto one of the chairs between the cubicles and came over to stand behind her, his palms on her shoulders, his gaze locking with hers. And maybe it was just him, but he could have sworn that her breath hitched. Then again, as far as Claire was concerned, there usually was a lot of wishful thinking involved on his part.

“You look… very nice,” he told her, hoping it came out as a compliment and not as Funny thing, though, do you mind if I help you take this dress off and then maybe we can forget that the clothes are a thing for a long, long while?

Claire studied her reflection critically. Nice. What was that supposed to mean? Little girls wearing tutus looked nice. Grandma’s homemade sweater was nice. Nice was a synonym of boring. And the older you got, the more pitiful it was beginning to sounds. Claire didn’t want to look nice. She wanted…

She didn’t know what she wanted. Frankly, she’d stopped trying to figure that out a long time ago.

“So, is this it?” Owen asked not without hope.

The gown didn’t look bad. It accentuated her height and highlighted the color of her eye. And yet…

“Maybe a couple more,” she decided at last, grabbing the next dress from the heap.

“And then we’re done?” Owen insisted.

“Then we’re going to find the shoes,” she called back.

“Oh god…” he groaned.
Claire poked her head from behind the curtain for a moment. “Hey, it was your idea!”

Owen pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled slowly. This was anything but. But he didn’t say anything.

In the end, she settled on a sleeveless shimmering gray dress that clung to her body and fanned out at her knees. Much to Owen’s relief, the shoes and a clutch were not hard to find afterwards. Although he only let out a sigh of relief once they moved to his favourite part of shopping – lunch.

—

On the night before the trip to Pasadena, Owen was parked on the couch in the living room, relentlessly killing zombies and the alien invaders from space, when Claire called him from the hallway.

“Owen? Could you come over for a moment?”

“Yeah, one sec.”

He paused the game, tossed the controller on the couch, took a swig of his beer and… tripped over his feet when he spotted her standing before the mirror wearing her wedding reception outfit. His gaze traveled slowly over her body, from the delicate curve of her neck, down her straight back, to her slim waist and her hips, and then to her long legs that looked downright endless in those new silver pumps.

“Thought I’d try it one more time,” Claire explained without looking at him when she caught the movement out of the corner of her eye. Her hands ran down her sides, smoothing the nonexistent creases. “To see if it’s okay.”

“It is,” Owen said in a low, hoarse voice, grateful that she was focused on her own reflection and not on how his jaw nearly hit the floor.

“Are you sure?” She bit her lower lip uncertainly, her brows pulled together.

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

There it was again, Claire thought. Fine. It was even worse than nice because it was so… dismissive. It was the word everyone went for when they didn’t know what else to say. She could be wearing a potato sack, and he’d probably say she looked fine. She wouldn’t mind looking fine if she made it through a car crash alive. But Claire didn’t need that. She wanted to look stunning. Breathtaking. Dashing.

“Um, there’s a…”

“What?” She glanced over at him.

“You’ve got a…” He cleared his throat. “There’s a tag.”

“Oh,” Claire craned her neck to see it. “Do you mind…?”

“Oh course.”

Quickly, he found the scissors and cut it off, his fingers grazing her skin.

And then…
He should have stepped away, but before Owen knew it, his hands were on her hips. He bent down, buried his face in her hair, breathing her in, and this time, her sharp inhale wasn’t a figment of his imagination.

A few moments later, he pulled back, horrified.

Slowly, Claire turned around, her eyes wide with surprise and a million questions he had no answer to, her lips slightly parted as though she didn’t know where to start, how to put her thoughts together. And that was something Owen could relate to, on so many levels.

“I’m sorry,” he stuttered, feverishly trying to come up with the escape strategy. Dying right this very moment didn’t seem like such a bad idea. There also was a chance he might have to move to another planet and learnt the art of growing crops in vacuum.

Owen took a step back, but as soon as he did it, Claire grabbed a handful of his shirt, pulling him to her again. And, so God help him, he could be slow around her sometimes, but he knew an invitation when he saw one.

Owen’s lips crashed against hers, hungry and demanding. They started kissing and didn’t stop. His hands ran through her hair, along her arms, down her back, sliding over the slick, soft material of her dress while she tugged impatiently at his shirt, her fingers finding their way underneath its hem, skimming over his chest.

“Claire…” He said in a low, raspy voice. A question. An invitation.

“Yes.” She kissed him again, harder. “Yes…”

—

Owen woke up the next day to the sun filtering through the light curtains and Claire brushing soft, feather-light kisses to his chest. For a moment, he wondered if he was still dreaming. If maybe he needed to pinch himself – except why would he do it? Why would he want to wake up from something like this?

Claire looked up when the pattern of his breathing changed.

“Hey,” she smiled.

“Hey, you,” Owen breathed out. “Slept well?”

She crinkled her nose in amusement. “When?”

Owen laughed, a vibration of a sound reverberating through Claire’s body. “Fair enough.”

She stretched over to kiss him lightly on the lips, and then buried her face in his chest. “Who knew?” She mumbled against his skin.

“What?”

“I never thought…” she snorted and shook her head, her face still hidden. “All this time, I was assuming you only stayed here for the food.”

Owen ruffled her hair. “For your burnt grilled cheese? Jeez, Dearing. That’s bold.”

He arms flexed around her when Claire started peppering her way up his chest and toward his neck with small kisses. “Why didn’t you say anything?”
“Thought you’d kick me out,” he admired, pressing his lips to the top of her head.

Claire looked up, and he captured her mouth with his again.

“We really need to get out of bed if we want to make it to that wedding,” she pointed out between the kisses.

“I got a better idea – how about I call Brian and tell him we’re sick? Both of us. And we need to stay in bed for… a long, long time.”

Claire laughed, the sound like sunshine, her smile so bright it almost hurt to look at her face. “Jeez, Grady. That’s bold.”

He threw his arm around his head and studied her coyly. “Come on, tell me this offer is not attractive.”

She folded her arms on his chest and rested her chin on her stacked hands. “You promised and we’re going.”

Owen poked her lightly in the ribs. “I thought you hated the idea.”

Claire’s gaze shifted to his lips, her heart thump-thump-thumping loudly in her chest. “I didn’t hate the idea. I didn’t want to lie, but now that it’s not a lie…” She let the end of the phrase hang between them, her eyes gleaming humorlessly, contemplatively.

He groaned, scrunching is face, but then lightened up after a moment. “Okay, I think I wouldn’t mind getting you out of that dress once again,” he told her with a cheeky wiggle of his eyebrows, and then caught her wrist and rolled them over, pinning her down with the weight of his body to the sound of her surprised and delighted laugh. “But we might be a bit tale.”

“I could live with that.” Claire raked her hands through his hand, bringing his face down for a long, searing kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Is it 2018 yet?
I'm having too much fun with this kind of stuff for my own good ;)

Wanna bet?

Chapter Notes

In Jurassic World, there were two very distinctive sounds – the cries and calls of the animas, and the sound of Owen Grady and Claire Dearing yelling at each other. Although the latter was mainly recognized only by the staff.

“It is irresponsible and unprofessional, Mr. Grady!” Claire snapped, her brows furrowed.

“Well, excuse me for having more important issues at hand than your margins,” Owen responded in the same manner, rolling his eyes.

“One of these days, they’re gonna kill each other.” Standing to the side with the paperwork regarding a new project for Claire to approve, Lowery shifted from foot to foot.

“Unless she jumps his bones first,” seemingly unfazed by the scene unfolding before them, Zara didn’t even look up from her phone.

“No way!” He shook his head with a smirk. “She hates his guts too much for it to happen.”

That caught Zara’s attention alright, and she turned to him.

“Wanna bet?”

Eyebrows arched, Lowery glanced at his boss and the raptor guy, and then turned to her again. “Fifty bucks she’ll bite his head off.”

“A hundred they’ll be sleeping together within 6 months,” she tipped her chin up.

“They’re not my margins,” Claire told Owen sternly. “They are what keeps this park afloat.”

“I was not hired to pore over the reports, Ms. Dearing,” he spat almost venomously, her name rolling of his tongue as if it was something he couldn’t bear to hold in his mouth.

Lowery’s lips stretched into a smug smile. “Make it four, and you got yourself a deal.”

Fuming, Owen pushed past him and Zara, stomping toward the elevators while Claire muttered something that sounded very much like an ‘obnoxious jerk’ to his back.

Arms folded over her chest, Zara pursed her lips for a moment, and then nodded. “Deal!”

The skies opened up all of sudden as if someone up there flipped the switch, dumping buckets of water onto the island and chasings the mud rivers and debris down the narrow, winding roads outside of the main tourist area of the park.
Determined, Claire turned the wipers up to maximum speed and pressed on the gas pedal, her hands clutching the steering wheel in the white-knuckled grip. This was not how she planned to spend her day – or any of them, for that matter – but trust Owen Grady to find a way to push all of her buttons at once.

She skidded to an abrupt halt near the raptors’ paddock, the tires sliding on the wet grass, and killed the engine, climbing out into fierce downpour. Her pale gray pumps sunk deeply into wet soil. Wonderful! Not only were her day and her outfit ruined, now that she was drenched to her bones, but now she would also have to throw away her shoes.

Standing under the make-shift cover near the harnesses, Barry caught her eye and jerked his chin toward the catwalk over the paddock, knowing that if Claire Dearing came all the way here in such a foul weather, it wasn’t a social visit. And there generally was only one person she came to see when she looked downright homicidal.

The other handlers chose to pretend they didn’t notice her arrival at all.

Claire climbed swiftly up the two flights of stairs.

Oblivious to the rain, Owen stood in the middle of the metal bridge, the water streaming down his face and his hair plastered to his scalp, barking short commands at the animals below who didn’t seem to mind the weather at all, save for the fact that they didn’t look particularly eager to do anything Owen requested of them either.

“What did you tell to the investors, Mr. Grady?” Claire demanded, striding toward him, her voice muffled by the heavy rain.

Owen turned and swore under his breath, the raptors loosing whatever interest they had in him immediately, their eyes focused instantly on her.

“What the hell are you doing here?” He asked her, irritated. “You can’t just barge in on our training like that! They’re not gonna listen to me now.”

“What did you say to the investors?” She repeated again almost with a growl.

He stuffed the clicker into the pocket of his vest and stared at her, his eyes narrowed slightly, both to keep the water out and also to give her an appraising look, both impressed and annoyed that she could look nearly regal even when she resembled a drowned cat.

“Which ones?”

“You know damn well which ones!” Claire retorted, stopping mere two feet away from him – in order to be heard, not because she wanted to. “A group from Japan that came by your petting zoo not an hour ago.”

Owen’s jaw clenched at her wording. “I told them that the raptors are not circus monkeys, and that the park already has plenty of those. That I can’t – and most importantly won’t teach them to balance a ball on their noses.”

Claire huffed. “Well, congratulations! We just lost five million dollars because you couldn’t just smile and nod. Are you happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” he assured her. “And also flattered that you would leave your precious throne to come scream at me when you probably have some statistics report waiting for you.”
She pursed her lips together in a thin line, glaring daggers at him and wishing she could set him on fire. “If we lose the funding, your program would be scraped first. You understand that, right? Your assets don’t contribute to the profit of the park, so the least you can do, Mr. Grady, is to not chase the sponsors away.”

He moved even closer to her, and even through the cool water hanging between them like a veil, she could feel the heat radiating off him. This close, he was even taller, and having to throw her head back to maintain eye contact frustrated Claire even more.

“There will never be shortage of people willing to pay for the dinosaurs, Claire,” he said at last, accentuating her name because he knew she never gave him permission to use it. “The raptors are not an attraction. They were never meant to be one. I swear to God I’ll never say a word to your investors if you stop sending them here.”

“That is not up to you,” she hissed through her teeth.

Owen tilted his head slightly to one shoulder, his lips curving into a mildly amused smirk. “Wanna bet?”

“Don’t push it, Mr. Grady.”

“Or what?”

Mouth pinched, Claire was about to turn around and march away, but then his hands were on her shoulders, his skin hot even through the sleeves of her blouse, and before she could so much as blink, his lips were pressed to hers, hard and demanding. He tasted like rain and forest, and for a moment, she froze, too surprised and too shocked to react, and then her lips parted against his, his tongue slipping into her mouth, and he tugged her closer until she was pressed against his chest, her fingers gripping the folds of his vest, the kiss getting slower and softer, until she was feeling weak in her knees. And if it wasn’t for the rain beating down on them, Claire thought she might spontaneously combust.

He pulled away, both of them panting and his fingers flexing on her shoulders with every breath.

“You kissed me,” Claire mouthed soundlessly, astounded.

“You kissed me back.”

—

Half an hour later, the rain finally stopped, and Owen climbed down the catwalk to find Claire’s car still parked to the side from the cleaning before the paddock. She was sitting behind the wheel.

He walked up to it and rapped his knuckles lightly on the window, startling her.

“You wanna keep making out or maybe pick up another fight?” He asked when she rolled it down. With a frown and without saying another word, Claire started to roll the window back up again, but the placed his hand on the glass, wincing inwardly at his crude joke. “Sorry. That was… off. What’s wrong?”

“It wouldn’t start,” she said, not looking at him and choosing to busy herself with going through the messages on her phone instead. In the time since they spoke, her hair began to dry up and was now framing her face in soft waves, making it almost impossible for Owen not to reach out and trail his fingers through it.
Instead, he cleared his throat and stepped back. “Pop up the hood,” he told her.

Claire’s head jerked up. “There’s not need… I already called the mechanic.”

Ignoring her protest, Owen walked over to the front of her Mercedes, their eyes meeting through the windshield. “He’s not here. And I am.”

With a sigh, she did as he asked, trying to think of anything but the heat creeping up her cheeks again, the memory of his mouth pressed to hers still so raw and fresh she could almost taste him. Her inner alarms were going off like crazy, and had it not been for a walk in the mud, she’d definitely try to get to the resort on foot if only to get as far away from him as possible, at least until her heart stopped doing flips and somersaults in her chest.

“Start it up,” Owen called from behind the lifted hood after a couple of minutes.

She did as he asked, turning the key in the ignition. The engine began to purr softly, and with triumphant smile, Owen dropped the hood down, wiping his hands on the rag.

“What was it?” Claire asked, all casual and business-like, as her car was the only thing that mattered.

“Some rust on the battery contacts,” he shrugged. “Nothing to worry about.”

She nodded, only daring to meet his eyes for brief periods of time. “Thank you, Mr. Grady.”

“Owen,” he corrected her. “Hey… um, mind giving me a ride?”

Her frown was back instantly, her gaze guarded. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because I just fixed your car,” Owen pointed out.

He thought she would refuse, the battle so visible on her face it was comical. But in the end, she bit her lip and gestured to him to get in.

The drive back to his bungalow was quick and silent. Claire eyes were glued to the road as she followed the less familiar route, taking careful turns and slowing down in all the right places. Owen’s were fixed on her, and he knew that she knew it, knew that it was making her nervous. A couple of times, he thought of initiating small talk, but the words seemed all wrong and his tongue was thick and awkward in his mouth all of a sudden.

She pulled up to his bungalow and put the car into park.

“Well, thanks.” Owen reached for the door handle, but then on impulse turned around, reaching for Claire over the compartment between the seats, his hand running through her hair, cupping the back of her head, as he brushed his lips of hers once again. Cautiously at first, waiting for her to push him away, and then deepening the kiss when she leaned into him with a small sigh of acceptable. “Wanna come in?” He asked in a low, throaty voice.

Her eyes, huge and such an incredible shade of green he couldn’t believe they were real, fixed on his.

And then she nodded.

“Mr. Grady hasn’t been around much lately,” Zara noted casually a few weeks later, placing a
stack of folders Claire asked her to retrieve on the desk.

“I believe he has four Velociraptors to babysit,” Claire responded without looking away from the email she was typing, her fingers hitting the keys rapidly. “That’s what he’s being paid for, right?”

Puzzled, Zara stared at her for a few long moments, and then backed out of Claire’s office missing the text message that Claire got only by a few seconds. *Are we still on for tonight?* Unable to hold back a small smile, Claire typed quickly, *Yes.*

“You know Jason, from HR?” Lowery asked her a few hours later when she stopped by the Control Room. “Tall? Dark hair? Expensive glasses?”

Scanning the monitors, Claire inquired, “Are you going somewhere with this?”

He coughed. “He likes the numbers, too. You guys would totally hit it off.”

Her gaze moved to him, leveling him and making him shift uncomfortably in his seat. “Would you mind not telling everyone that what we have here are not real dinosaurs?” She said in the voice that allowed no argument.

“Sure thing,” Lowery said quickly, turning bright red. “So, about Jason… I mean, never mind.”

Later that evening, Claire was sitting on the couch in Owen’s living room, her feet stretched out across his lap as he fiddled lazily with the Xbox controller, either killing something, or saving the world, while she had her nose buried in her phone.

“Lowery tried to set me up with someone today,” she said with a small smile a while later.

Owen whipped his head around, alarmed. “Who?”

“Jason. From HR.”

He paused the game and knitted his eyebrows together. “Isn’t he gay?”

Claire glanced up. “Is he? I have no idea.”

“So…. What did you say?”

She allowed her lips to stretch wider. “That I’d be delighted.”

“Oh, yeah?” Owen tossed the controller aside and then pulled her phone from her hands, moving in on her with a predatory smile, his eyes gleaming, making her whole body tingle in anticipation. “I bet I could change your mind.” He promised.

An eyebrow arched, Claire’s gaze shifted to his lips as she gripped his shoulders, pulling him over her, his hands sliding underneath her tank top, warm and rough against her skin, his mouth pressing to the pulse point on her neck. “Okay, let’s see what you’ve got.”

“How long are we gonna keep it a secret?” Owen mumbled, working his way up toward her lips.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, winding her arms around his neck. “For now, I want to keep you all to myself.”
It was easy to fall into a comfortable pattern.

In the following months, Claire continued to promptly ignore Zara’s questions and Lowery’s curious looks, waving them off dismissively. On most of the days, she would swing by her place after work and head over to Owen’s, or he would stay with her if she had to be up early the next morning. He stopped barging into her office every week, demanding something or the other, and she stopped pointing out his incompetence every time their paths crossed.

But if anyone noticed anything, they kept their mouths shut.

It was not, however, until Zara practically said goodbye to her hundred dollars three months later, kicking herself mentally for misreading all the signals she was certain were right there, that she had to drop by Claire’s apartment late in the evening, requiring her signature for a number of orders to be sent to their suppliers first thing in the morning, that cat was out of the bag.

Claire was on the phone in the bedroom, speaking French, if he was not mistaken, and Owen, sporting nothing but his boxers, headed for the door without thinking twice when someone knocked, figuring that at 9 in the evening it could be only a room service.

He was not the kind of person who got embarrassed easily, but under Zara’s blatant stare on the other side of the threshold, he felt his cheeks turn scarlet red.

“Mr. Grady.” She drawled after a moment or two, finally managing to pick up her slacked jaw, and then her face split into the widest and the most brilliant smile.

“What?” Owen asked carefully, confused, as he watched this transformation in slight panic.

“Nothing. Just wondering what I can do with a hundred dollars.” She thrust the papers she was holding at him. “Have Claire sign those for tomorrow, will you?”

And then she was gone before he could find a way to respond.

“Who was that?” Claire asked, stepping out of the bedroom.

Wearing nothing but his shirt, her hair tousled in that unmistakable, sexy way, she looked… she looked like everything he had ever dreamed of.

“We’re out,” Owen informed her, throwing his free arm around her and pulling her into him. “And apparently someone just won a hundred bucks.”
**Hands prompt 1**

Chapter Summary

Person A teaching Person B to make a fist, bonus: Person A caught Person B’s fist just before they land a hit

Chapter Notes

The other day I found these great Hands prompts, and based on the request I got - here's the first one :)

“What is this nonsense, Mr. Grady?” Claire inquired with a frown, her hands resting on her tights-clad hips.

Standing across from him in the boxing area of the personnel gym at the Hilton, the afternoon light streaming through the windows behind her back, she regarded him skeptically. Frankly, she could be doing any number of things right now, and being stuck in a closed space with Owen Grady was perhaps the worst one that happened to her all week – and she had to sit through some seriously mind-numbing conference calls, so that as saying something.

Sporting gray trainers and a white wife-beater that accentuated his sculpted muscles, Owen returned the displeased glare. “A self-defense class, Ms. Dearing. Requested personally by Mr. Masrani and obligatory for certain staff. As you’re well-aware of.”

Claire pinched her lips together, everything about her screaming *I can’t believe this is happening*. “Why am I the only person here?” She asked slowly after a few moments, as if he was a 5-year old.

“Because,” he started in the same patronizing voice, “you missed the official session on Wednesday. When everyone else was here.” And added, “Trust me, it’s not how I’d normally spend my Saturday either.”

“Well, that settles it then,” Claire nodded and folded her arms over her chest. “Mark my attendance, I’ll sign whatever you want, and we can be on our way.”

Owen scoffed, giving her a long, pointed once-over. “Oh, no. That’s not how it works. Besides, we wouldn’t want to put all this spandex to waste. When was the last time you wore trainers and not your ridiculous heels, anyway?”

“If this is going to be about my fashion choices…” She started, bristling momentarily.

“This is about me promising to take care of this,” he interjected, trying oh-so-hard not to notice how goddamn nice she looked in leggings and a tank top over a sports bra. It was like she was an actual real human being and not a half-robot everyone expected her to be. “When your boss’s boss asks you for a favour, you don’t screw up. You, of all people, should understand that.”
Claire hesitated, the emotional battle inside of her practically visible, and then she let out a resigned sigh. “Okay, let’s do it.” She stepped toward him, not quite sure what this whole thing was supposed to be about.

No, she got the concept alright, the importance of self-defense was not lost on her, and even though the resort had proven being a rather safe place in the past few years – as far as people were concerned, at least – it probably wasn’t the worst idea. Better safe than sorry, right? She simply wished it fit more nicely into her schedule, and that Owen Grady wasn’t involved.

“Ready?” He asked her. “Or do you need to have a look at your itinerary?”

She rolled her eyes. “Would you please drop this already?”

He grinned. “Just checkin’.”

He explained to her the necessary basics – all the stances, and where to aim to inflict the most painful injury, and how to wiggle out of a grip safely before the attacker gained full control. He was good, Claire had to give him that. Whatever their complicated relationship was, he certainly knew how to put the things she was not closely familiar with in a simple and comprehensible way. His voice was patient once they got over the fact that neither one of them wanted to be doing this and his skin warm on hers when he showed her where to keep her elbows and where she should aim her kicks.

It wasn’t enjoyable, per se. But Claire found herself oddly comfortable and not at all willing to apply her new knowledge on him, which was the kind of accomplishment she didn’t even hope for.

“Okay, now,” Owen stepped in front of her about an hour later. “Make a fist and hit my hand.”

He raised his hands to the level of his head, palms open for her to punch.

Claire straitened up. “I’m not going to hit you.”

He snorted. “Not for real. Just show me your hook.” She still didn’t seem convinced. “Look, it’s a part of the training, okay? Wouldn’t hurt you to know how to throw a punch, especially in a place like this. Come on.”

“Yes, because it a T-Rex escapes from her enclosure, punching will be the way to solve it,” she deadpanned.

“Just think of those times I mocked your shoes. Or your check lists. Or the way you–”

He didn’t get to finish because Claire, eyes narrowed and blazing with irritation, curled her fingers into a fist and hit him as hard she could in the palm – and Owen guessed it took all of her willpower not to aim for the face, if the burning glare she shot at him was any indication.

His hand closed around her fist for a moment, his eyes boring intensely into her face, and then he let go.

“Not bad. Now try to do it not just with your hand, but with your whole body. Aim from your shoulder. Got it?”

She nodded and did as he asked, but this time, Owen caught her wrist, and before she knew it, he flung her over his hip and onto the mat, landing on top of her and pinning her arms above her head, their faces not even an inch apart, both of them panting.
Claire swallowed. “Get off me.”

“I think we’re making progress.”

Owen offered her a lazy smile, his gaze lingering on her mouth for a moment longer than necessary, and she felt her cheeks grow hot. She chose to chalk it off to the heat of his body, and not the fact that she couldn’t stop staring at his slightly parted lips while his heart hammered against her rib-cage, feeling the whole length of his body with hers, all energy and rippling muscles.

Somehow, Claire managed to wiggle one of her arms free, and gaining a little momentum, she pushed him off, her hand gripping his forearm, and then she was straddling his midsection, holding her other arm under his chin as they both tried to catch their breaths. Despite their snarky comments earlier, Owen’s eyes were now gleaming with amusement and surprise.

Although the moment Claire allowed her lips to stretch into a triumphant smile, he basically yanked himself from underneath her in one fluid motion. She yelped in confusion, and the next moment he was on top of her again, his thighs bracketing her hips and his hands clasped around her arms just below the elbows, rendering her completely immobile.

“This is how our date should have ended,” he told her.

“Don’t you dare,” she warned him, her voice suddenly high-pitched and panicky – not because she actually thought he’d kiss her, but because she wanted him to, and the thought made her cheeks flush with color once again.

He watched her for a few long moments, contemplating the obvious, and then rolled off and leaped to his feet with an easy grace, offering his hand to her and pulling her upward as well.

Instantly, Claire balled her hand again and swung at him, thinking that he would easily deflect her attack. An element of surprise, if you please.

He did not.

Instead, her fist connected with his face, a sickening crunch exploding in the stuffy air of the gym, and then Owen staggered backwards with a surprised Ow!, his hands closing around his nose as he looked at her in disbelief.

Claire’s eyes widened in horror as the red droplets dotted the mat at his feet.

“Why’d you do that?” Owen muttered, his voice pained and muffled.

“I’m sorry!” She gasped. “I’m so sorry!”

“You bwoke my nove,” he accused her, grimacing.

“I didn’t think I would… I thought you’d…” She trailed off, prying one of his hands off his face and wincing at the sight of a purple bruise that started to spread over his nose.

Owen threw his head back in a mostly vain attempt to stop the bleeding, his whole head ringing.

“You know what would really help now? If you took off your shirt to sponge some of this stuff off.”
Half an hour later, Owen was sitting on the couch in Claire’s apartment – because her place was only an elevator ride away, and because he stubbornly refused to go to the first aid station, claiming he had survived worse than a nosebleed and it was downright embarrassing to run to a doctor with every scratch.

“You’re such a baby,” she told him with a huff, but didn’t protest, seeing as how the whole thing was her fault and she felt too guilty to push him into doing whatever he didn’t want to be doing.

She had already cleaned most of the mess off with a washcloth and declared that she was not strong enough to break anything.

Now, his head resting on the back of her couch, Owen watched her approach him with a bag of frozen beans wrapped in a towel. Claire sat down beside him, one leg tucked underneath her body, and placed the bundle on the bridge of his nose.

“This is going to look terrific for a while,” she observed, her tone sheepish.

“You did it on purpose,” Owen announced, trying to catch her eyes from under the frozen beans, his muscles finally relaxing now that the aching part of his face was finally growing numb.

Claire gaped at him for a moment, her mouth dropped open in shock. “You really think I’m that vengeful?”

“I didn’t,” he admitted, “but I do now. There were 20 people in that class on Wednesday, and no one ended up with so much as a bruise.”

“Oh, get over yourself.”

She started to get up, but he caught her arm, his thumb pressed to the inside of her wrist, not missing how noticeably her pulse accelerated under his touch.

“Maybe I deserved it,” he said softly.

Claire sank back into her seat. “I didn’t mean it,” she insisted, shaking her head.

“Maybe on subconscious level.” He run his thumb over her skin. “Jokes aside, you did great. I swear. I don’t think anyone would ever say a word to you now that I’ll spend the next couple of weeks being a living, breathing evidence of your wrath.”

She rested her elbow on the back of the couch, watching his profile for a few seconds, Owen’s eyes closed and his whole body relaxed and seemingly melting into the cushions.

“As if I don’t already have that kind of reputation,” she breathed out.

“Theyir loss,” he responded without turning to her, his voice quiet but earnest. “Although you should dress like this more often,” he commented with a quirk of his, earning a slap on the arm. “Yeah, right, kick me when I’m down.”

Claire chuckled, and he finally removed the beans from his face, looking at her with this wondrous expression she’d caught a time or two in the past, but never knew what it was about. The one that made her insides roll and coil, and the ground sway beneath her feet.

“You’re a force to be reckoned with, Claire,” he whispered, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down his throat.
“Yeah, your face is a clear proof of that right now,” she noted.

“Hey, you live and learn,” he let out a short laugh, and she leaned over and brushed her lips to his, surprising them both. She’d wanted to do that so bad for so long.

Owen stilled for a moment, his eyes flying wide open the moment she pulled back.

“Feeling better?” She whispered.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, pulling her close again. “Run that by me again?”
Just once

Chapter Notes

These two will be the end of me...

Just once.

Claire knew that that main reason Simon Masrani had hired her was not her Harvard diploma or her excellent references or her ability not to panic under pressure. No, the reason she got her job was because she outright told him that she could make anything happen. Back when the idea of the park was only starting to take shape, she promised him she'd make it everything he wanted it to be, and the in the years following this conversation, he never had a reason to doubt it.

The whirling wind raised up from the helicopter blades tore at her clothes and tugged at her hair as Claire climbed into the cabin, her small suitcase stuffed into a luggage compartment and a folder containing the main topics of discussion for the upcoming meeting perched precariously on her lap as she strapped herself into a seat. It was a relief to get off the island for the weekend, even if it was for business and not to spend three days in a spa.

Claire reached for the noise cancelling headphones, her papers sliding down to the floor, when the door leading to the landing platform opened again and another figure hurried toward them, waving at the pilot to hold on, half-bent to avoid decapitation, a duffel bag in their hand.

However, it wasn’t until the person was right by the door that Claire recognized Owen Grady, his hair tousled by the wind and a folded piece of paper gripped in his teeth. At the sight of her, he paused, his expression momentarily uncertain, but then he climbed into the chopper as well and signaled to the pilot to close the door and take off.

For a moment, Claire just gaped at him as he buckled his own seatbelt.

“What are you doing?” She demanded at last, gaining the ability to speak again.

“You tell me,” he mumbled, basically spitting the crumpled paper at her as the helicopter lifted from the ground, shuddering against the currents of air.

Gingerly, Claire unfolded it with her fingertips, her lips pursed together, realizing with a growing sense of dread that it was the same itinerary she had tucked into the side pocket of her folder. Her eyes scanned it once again, hoping there was some kind of mistake, but it certainly didn’t seem so.

“Wait,” she looked up at Owen, straining not to yell over the roar of the engine and the whoosh of spinning blades. “It says Hoskins here.” Her carefully manicured finger jabbed at the To: line.

Owen beamed at her, although his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “He’s sick. Food poisoning,” he explained eagerly. “We can still go back, if you insist,” he added, taking note of Claire’s surprise. “If you don’t mind holding his barf bucket and his hair for him.”

She wrinkled her nose and shoved his invitation back at him with a sinking feeling rolling in her stomach, and then turned away, choosing to busy herself with going through the paperwork instead, set on tuning his presence out. Of course, they needed an InGen representative. It felt, however,
like a twisted joke that it had to be Owen Grady.

“Come on,” his voice broke through to her, sounding particularly invasive in the headphones. “It’s gonna be fun.”

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“Please sign here and here,” the receptionist at the Marriott asked Claire with a professional ease, shooting quick looks at Owen who stood nearby with his elbow resting on the granite countertop. Claire did as she was asked, running her gaze briefly over the details on the pre-booking sheet, and then pushed it toward the woman. “And here’s your key.”

“Thank—Wait, a key? One?” She frowned. “This has to be a mistake. We need two rooms.”

The receptionist checked the reservation once again and shook her head. “Your reservation was only for one, Ms. Dearing.”

Okay, deep breathes.

“Well, can be book another one now, then?” She asked, hoping her voice remained steady and not a panicky as she was feeling.

“We’re all booked, I’m afraid.” The woman shook her head, her small smile turning apologetic. “Most of the hotels are sold out for the weekend. It’s the Music and Folk Festival.”

“Of course, it is,” Claire mumbled under her breath. “Are you sure there’s nothing else? Maybe something of a… smaller caliber? It doesn’t have to be an executive suite.”

Beside her, Owen snickered. “A storage room, maybe?” He asked the woman with a straight face that made Claire want to elbow him in the ribs. “A supply closet?”

The receptionist’s eyes darted between the two of them uncertainly. “I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine,” Claire said quickly, plastering her best smile on her face. It wasn’t the hotel’s fault, after all, and she was starting to feel bad for the personnel who quite possibly had to deal with a fair share of Owens on a daily basis. “We’ll be fine.”

She grabbed the key card from the counter and headed for the elevators, wheeling her suitcase behind and not bothering to check if Owen was following her.

“I think Hoskins has a condo in the city,” he told her, pressing the elevator button before Claire could reach for it, their hands brushing briefly. If he noticed that she jerked hers away, he didn’t show it. “He probably planned to stay there.”

“Naturally,” she breathed out and stepped into the elevator, catching his eyes briefly.

“For what it’s worth,” Owen continued, his voice no longer dripping with acidic humor, “this isn’t my idea of fun either. And I was told it’d be Simon Masrani and not you coming with me.”

“He couldn’t make it,” Claire stated the obvious. He shrugged dismissively in response. “Just once,” she sighed. “Just once I wanted something to go right.”

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The one thing she never noticed about the executive suites before was the space the bed seemed to occupy. Which was – a lot! Even if the room was big enough to fit half of her entire apartment in it,
the bed somehow ended up taking nearly all of it.

Or so it felt when Claire pushed the door open, and they piled inside, nearly tripping over each other.

The balcony faced the broad-walk running along the beach and a vast expanse of the shining water with Isla Nublar being nothing but a hazy shape on the horizon. Owen whistled under his breath, his eyes scanning the heavy furniture and light drapes on the floor-to-ceiling windows, and finally fixing on the bottle of champagne chilling in the bucket on the top of a mini-fridge.

“You know, I could get used to this,” he observed as he flopped down onto the bed and locked his hands behind his head, a long, relaxed sigh escaping his chest.

“Don’t,” Claire responded, pulling two suits out of her suitcase to hang them in the closet before they wrinkled beyond repair.

“Why? Because you think I’ll never be able to afford it?” He asked her with a dare in his voice, his eyebrows arched.

At that, Claire turned to him. “Because it looks fancier than it actually is,” she said flatly, and then pointed a finger to a loveseat by the balcony.

Owen glanced at it. “I can’t sleep on that thing,” he declared.

“Well, you’re certainly not sleeping on the bed,” she said.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

She tilted her head to her shoulder and placed her hands on her hips. “Do you want me to find a broom closet for you?”

It took her another fifteen minutes to unpack – the time that Owen spent poking around the room, checking the bathroom and rummaging around the contents of a mini-fridge, mostly out of curiosity. Surprisingly, it wasn’t that hard for her to pretend he wasn’t there and focus on what she’d be doing if she was alone, save for an occasional exchange of half-hearted witty quips. (“Did you have to bring half of you clothes for 3 days?” – “At least I won’t look like I just fell out of haystack.” – “Another message, and your phone will explode.” – “Would you like to maybe go play in the pool?”)

An hour later, just as the sun started to inch toward the horizon and Claire climbed into an oversized armchair to go through the agenda for tomorrow morning, Owen announced he was hungry, telling her they should go grab a bite.

“I’m good,” she said without tearing her gaze away from the papers.

“Everyone needs to eat,” he noted. “Unless your diet is based on starvation. In which case you need help.”

Claire glanced up, mildly irrate at this point, but this didn’t seem like a battle worth jumping into. If there was anything she’d learned about Owen, it was that with him, winning was about letting him think he got it his way. In the end, she agreed to go with him, mainly for the sake of getting it over with, and suggested they go to the hotel’s restaurant downstairs. He waved off her offer, insisting they find something in the city.

“Besides, the hotel food is a rip-off,” he added when she didn’t look convinced.
“The company is paying for our stay,” Claire pointed out, aware of how stupid it sounded the moment the words were out of her mouth.

“Not the case,” he scoffed, dragging her into the street and allowing the heavy, humid air thick with the scent of the ocean and the sounds of the music coming from the beach to wrap around them like a blanket.

She smoothed her hair down, running her fingers through his several times, but it was a lost cause – a few minutes later, that hour she spent in the morning straightening it felt like a massive waste of time, the soft waves falling on her cheeks now, softening her features, making the taste of breeze on her lounge sweeter somehow.

Owen watched her out of the corner of is eye as they walked down one of the narrow side streets, heading toward the sounds of the might market – her chin tipped up, her lips pursed together. He wondered if her hands itched to reach for her phone, seeing as how she barely put the damned thing down ever since they arrived here, but the cobblestone street did make it seem like a bad decision, and so she trained her eyes on the lights ahead of them, focusing on not twisting her ankles instead.

And then he wondered if she knew that her eyes were the color of the ocean, and that in the twilight dotted with lanterns and led lights hanging in the shop windows and from the roofs of the food and souvenir carts made her freckles spark alive.

“Oh, my god,” Claire mumbled a while later as she bit into one of the empanadas Owen bought for them from the street cart when they reached a small square packed with both tourists and locals, the rich, spicy taste exploding in her mouth.

“Told ya,” Owen grinned at her, popping a whole thing into his mouth and all but swallowing it without chewing. “That guy,” he pointed at the vendor as she reached for the next treat, “sells the best stuff.”

Claire snatched one of the napkins from him, careful not to drip anything on her top. She eyed him curiously. “How do you know this?”

“By not spending all of my time in the office,” he said, smiling, his eyes crinkling with amusement and satisfaction. When was the last time anyone surprised Claire Dearing with anything?

She shrugged, unfazed. “Someone has to.”

Afterwards, they made their way back to the hotel, taking another labyrinth of narrow streets filled with animated chatter and excited laughter, weaving their way through the crowds headed for the beach. A time or two, Owen’s hand landed on the small of her back as he steered her forward, making her breath catch in her throat and her fingers flex. And every time, it was gone after a moment or two, leaving her mildly disappointed.

Once in their suite, Owen called dibs on the shower, and Claire sank back into the armchair again, scrolling through her emails and sending quick responses whenever necessary, her mind strangely abuzz after their small outing and not at all willing to concentrate on what she didn’t have a problem with only a couple of hours ago.

He emerged from the shower ten minutes later, stepping into the room in nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. His hair was wet and falling on his forehead in lazy curls, the odd droplets of water clinging to the exposed skin of his chest, the tight muscles flexing with every small move he made.
“See anything you like?” Owen asked catching her widened eyes.

Slowly, Claire rose to her feet and walked over to him, stopping not even a foot away from him – so close she could catch the smell of his shampoo and what had to be purely Owen.

“Indeed I do,” she admitted, giving him a pointed once-over. “An empty bathroom.”

And then she grabbed her nightwear and a bag of toiletries, disappearing behind the door with a smirk as his face fell.

Claire stayed in the shower for the longest time, the hot water beating down on her skin and washing away the eight hours on tension, the comfortable warmth seeping into her body, making her muscles melt, the rivulets running down her back tickling her skin, leaving pleasantly burning trails.

She emerged from the shower cubicle in a cloud of flowery scented steam, wrapped herself in a towel and wiped the condensation off a mirror, catching absently the sounds of the TV working in the room – someone was shooting someone while yelling something in Spanish. Either Die, you son of a bitch, die! or Your grandma’s beef pockets suck – she wasn’t sure.

Claire pulled the medical cabinet open, hoping to find a hair drier, and knocked a glass sitting on the sink counter to the floor, the shatter startling her as she shards scattered all over the bathroom.

She cursed quietly, crouching down to pick up the biggest pieces, and the next moment the door swung open and Owen, sporting funny-looking boxers and a t-shirt with the Jurassic World logo on the chest, nearly fell in, making her yelp in surprise.

“What are you doing?” Claire gasped, her hand automatically reaching for the towel knot on her chest.

“I heard….” He looked down at the broken glass and cleared his throat. “I thought you hurt yourself,” he finished. “Which you did.”

“What?” She glanced down, noticing that she must have clenched her fist around a piece of glass and now the white floor towel was dotted with bright red droplets. “Oh.” She swallowed, slightly nauseated at the sight of blood. “I’m fine.”

“Of course, you are,” Owen muttered, stepping carefully toward her. He squatted down beside her and uncurled her fingers, carefully removing whatever shards could have ended up in the cut. “We better take care of this.”

“I can do it,” Claire insisted stubbornly, suddenly very aware of the warm skin of his palms cradling her hand and the fact that she was naked underneath the towel, praying he would write the color rising up her cheeks off to the hot shower.

Owen caught her eyes, holding her gaze and making it pretty damn impossible to look away. “But you don’t have to.”

Ignoring her protests, he cleaned the cut on her palm and bandaged it after finding everything he needed in the first aid kit, the touch of his hands soothing and his movements confident and efficient. Then, while she got dressed, he threw away the broken glass, making sure that nothing was left on the floor, and by the time he turned the bathroom light off and returned to the room, she had already climbed under the covers. Without a word, he flicked the overhead lights off.
“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Claire’s voice broke through the stillness of the night.

Owen fluffed his pillow again in a vain attempt to get comfortable, although the last couple of hours kind of proved that it was not going to happen, not when half of his body had to hang over the end of a loveseat.

“Ever tried sleeping on something twice shorter than you are?” He grumbled, and then let out a long exasperated sigh.

“As a matter of fact–”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve been through it all.” He made a face even though she clearly couldn't see it. “Maybe I should go sleep on the couch in the lobby.”

Claire bit her lip, her hands curing around the fistfuls of a sheet, torn between the idea of not sleeping because Owen would keep on tossing and turning for the rest of the night and the certainty that she wouldn’t catch a moment of shut eye because of his proximity. In the end, the overwhelming sense of guilt won.

“Fine, you can sleep here,” she hissed, hoping to sound outraged enough to cover the slight tremor in her voice. “But if you so much as…”

Owen was off the couch in a heartbeat. The mattress dipped under the weight of his body when he climbed under the light blanket, and she scooted further away to her own side, hoping she wouldn’t toppled down to the floor in the next few hours - God knew he’d laugh his head off if she did.

“No funny business,” he promised her. “I swear.”

Claire turned away from him, curling on the edge of the bed, her knees drawn up to her chest, way too attuned to the warmth of his body even from two feet away for her comfort. “I was going to say No snoring,” she whispered. “I don’t think anything else could be a problem.”

It took him a moment to wrap his mind around her words, and then he frowned, turning his head to look at the outline of her body in the dark. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She stayed quiet for a few seconds. “Thanks for… helping me. With the cut.”

“Anytime. But seriously, Claire, what the hell are you talking about?”

Claire felt her cheeks grow hot again. “Jokes aside, we both know you are not interested in ‘funny business’. I was never worried about that, is all.”

Unsure if he heard her right, Owen rolled over, propping himself up on his elbow, very much aware of a sharp intake of her breath, of how her back stiffened instantly.

“Come again?”

Annoyed at him for pushing on with this ridiculous conversation and at herself for giving in, she rolled onto her back, wishing she could see his face. And more importantly, wishing he could see her glare. No, scratch that – wishing there was another room and they were separated by a wall right now.

“You made it perfectly clear after our disaster of a date that it was a mistake. Which is fine. Just stop acting like I’m making it up.”
He stared at her, his mouth opening and closing as he struggled to find the words that wouldn’t come.

“Why on earth would you think that?” He asked quietly at last just as the silence hanging between them started to get unbearable.

Claire swallowed, not missing the slight break of his voice, the pure and unmistakable astonishment in his question. “Because you never… said anything.”

“Because I thought you despised me,” he whispered.

She didn’t see him move, but suddenly he was right next to her, his fingers trailing down her cheek, tucking her hair behind her ear, making her shiver all over, her breathing suddenly short and shallow, and somehow very insignificant. Owen leaned down, pausing an inch away from her face, uncertain if this was what she wanted, too. And then, Claire gripped his shirt, tugging him down, her hands burying in his hair, arms wrapping around his neck as their lips met in a slow, deep kiss. He laughed, the sound muffled and guttural, shooting sparks of pleasure through her as his palms slipped down her back and under the hem of her tank top to run over the plain of her stomach. He fell onto the pillows again, taking her with him until she was half-sprawled over his body, soft and languid, catching her every sigh with another kiss.

“You’re not saying all of this just because you don’t want to sleep on the couch, do you?” Claire asked breathily, while his mouth trailed down the length of her neck.

He chuckled against her skin. “I thought we agreed I wasn’t a total asshole.”

“Owen,” she pulled back for a moment, hovering over him.

His smile dropped as he searched her face, his hand drawing slow circles on her back. “I would never do anything to hurt you,” he said in a low, hoarse voice.

“Okay,” she pulled him toward her again.

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The next morning, Claire woke up to the sun streaming through the open balcony door. Owen was standing by the railing, his hands closed around it, and looking out at the ocean, the islands still hidden in the early morning mist.

She slipped from under the covers, pulled on his button-down shirt, and padded out into the fresh air laced with the tangy smell of fruit and tropical flowers. Arms snaking around his waist, she pressed a kiss to his shoulder blade, taking a mental note to ask him around the scars crossing his back later.

“Why are you up?” She murmured.

“Hey,” smiling, he turned around and wrapped his arm around her, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “A force of habit.”

Claire giggled and buried her face in his chest. “That’s a good habit.”

Owen dipped his head to kiss her. “Do we really have to leave the room today?” He asked suggestively with a contemplative wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Yes,” she told him with a small grimace. “But maybe I could cut the boring parts of the day short.
Why? What do you have in mind?"

He started walking backward into the room, pulling her with him, until his sheens hit the edge of the mattress and they both fell down, his arms locking around her tightly. “You.”
“Hold on!” Someone called out the moment Claire stepped into the elevator, and she obediently placed her hand on the door before they started sliding closed, her attention focused on the message she just received from Simon Masrani about the investors that wanted to meet and discuss their latest project – the Indominus Rex.

Claire winced inwardly every time the name of the new asset ran through her mind, somewhat embarrassed on behalf of the whole company. It sounded tacky and ridiculous, but since no one asked for her opinion on the matter, her job was to keep smiling and try to get enough money out of the interested parties to keep feeding that thing without having to throw the park’s animal handlers into her cage.

“It could be worse,” Simon told her once, laughing, when Claire mentioned this to him in passing. “Like people from the lab, you could be taking it seriously.”

“Thanks!” The person who asked her to hold the elevator finally caught up, their hand landing on top of hers on the door. “I really appreci—” Claire looked up from her phone to find Owen Grady standing before her. He cleared his throat and finished, “—ate it.”

She withdrew her hand quickly and moved aside to allow him to step inside after a short hesitation which didn’t go unnoticed by her. He punched the needed button and moved to stand by the back wall of the car as far away from her as possible in given circumstances.

“Mr. Grady,” Claire said flatly, not bothering with pleasantries.

“Claire,” he responded pointedly, knowing exactly how to get under her skin and set her teeth on edge, and the fact that he kept doing it was just as irritating as knowing that she was so easy to read.

“How are your assets doing?” She asked, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. Well, two could play that game.

His jaw clenched visibly and he huffed through his nose, making the corners of her mouth tug up ever so slightly. If she was easy to read, then so was he, and there was certain comfort in knowing that.
“Great,” Owen said with exaggerated cheerfulness. “What about your balance sheets?”

“Splendid,” she assured him with a smile. “Exciting as always.”

“Doubt that,” he mumbled, his eyes focusing on the digital screen above the door and the rapidly changing floor numbers. “ Haven’t seen you around much lately.”

“You’re welcome,” Claire responded breezily.

It was not the easiest task to tackle, but she managed to reduce their communication to a minimum before they ripped their throats out, especially after that one night when she stomped away from Margaritaville, fighting an urge to throttle him for his impossibly smug comments.

Owen chuckled, not at all taken aback by her words, although he had to admit that their occasional word sparring used to bring extra flavour to his life. Not that he could blame her for avoiding him ever since their disastrous date went down in flames – he’d probably avoid him as well, if he was Claire.

“Oh, don’t rob yourself of all the fun,” he told her. “Not on my account.”

“Don’t worry, I know where to find you if I change my mind.”

“Oh, I’m sure you…”

He was cut off by the sudden screech above their heads. The car shuddered and then stopped moving. The lights flickered once, twice, and then went out, plunging the small space into complete darkness for a few moments, and then the backup power kicked in, flooding them with pale bluish light.

“What was that?” Claire mouthed, her eyes darting around in alarm.

“Scared?” Owen quirked his eyebrow, his gaze darting down, and when she followed it, she found her hand gripping his arm just above his wrist.

Claire jerked it away as if the touch of his skin to hers burned her and pursed her lips together, feeling her cheeks grow hot, and if the lazy smile that spread over his face was any indication, he noticed it, too. “Don’t be absurd.” She scrolled her contact list quickly, grateful for the distraction, and pressed the dial button. “Lowery? What the hell is going on?”

The Control Room on the other end of the line seemed to be abuzz with activity. “You really need to be more specific, Claire,” Lowery responded, his voice muffled by a couple dozen of others in the background.

“The power?” She inquired.

“Oh, that. Yeah, we’re having a routine check. It shouldn’t affect anything. The backup generators are taking care of it, don’t worry.”

“Why aren’t the elevators working then?” She demanded, ignoring Owen’s inquisitive look.

“No, they are fine.” He assured her, his fingers running over the keyboard. “Oh, wait. There’s one in the Hilton that seems to be… Wait, where are you?”

“Take a guess,” she told him.

“Oh.” And after a short pause. “Oh…”
Okay, it’s fine. Everything is fine.

She took a deep breath. “Any chance of getting us out of here soon?”

“Us?” Lowery echoed.

“Never mind. When is it going to be fixed?”

“I’m gonna send a crew there right away, okay? Hang on.”

“Like we have a choice,” she mumbled, hanging up.

“Well, that’s fun,” Owen breathed out when she quickly recounted the conversation to him. “I’m going to miss…” he trailed off and shook his head.

“It’s okay,” Claire muttered under her breath, unable to tear her gaze away from the now black screen, the floor count no longer running.

What if the cables snapped, she thought. What if they were going to fall down? They had to have reached floor 7 by now. That would be a long fall. What if they ran out of the oxygen? The walls of the car started to close in on her, turning it into a box, and her breath hitched in her throat.

“Hey, you okay?” Owen asked, noticing that the color drained from her face.

“Yes.” She swallowed, hard, her fingers clutching her phone with enough force to leave dents on its plastic case.

“Claire?” He stepped in front of her. “What it is?”

Her gaze darted around with the growing panic as her ears started to ring. “I’m not…” She trailed off, her mouth suddenly dry. “I’m not good with… small spaces.”

His forehead creased with concern. “Are you claustrophobic?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Why was it so hard to breathe?

“Look at me.” Owen’s hands were on her cheeks, framing her face and lifting it up until his eyes were the only thing she could see in this eerie light. “Eyes on me, Claire. Keep breathing, okay? In and out. Come on.”

His touch was warmth and soothing, and something inside of her chest loosened a little, the cold hand twisting her insides finally letting go.

She took in a shuddering breath, her fingers curling around one of his wrists.

“Good girl,” he murmured. “In and out, Claire. We’re fine. We’re gonna be fine.”

She had never noticed that his eyes were this incredible shade of blue before. How did she never see that? His thumbs kept running over the cheekbones in slow, comfortable strokes, making the warmth pool deep in her stomach, and her fingers flexed around his wrist, gripping it harder.

“Tell me something,” Owen asked a little while later.

“What?” She blinked, confused.
“Anything to keep your mind off of this.” Gently, he looped a strand of her hair around her ear, threading his fingers through the soft locks. “What makes you happy? Spreadsheets? Budget meetings?”

Claire started at him for a moment. “That feeling when you step into the water and your feet sink into the sand, the way it gives way under the weight of your body,” she whispered before she knew that she was saying it out loud.

Owen’s lips curved into a wondrous smile. “Now we’re getting somewhere.” He nodded. “What else?”

“Tim Burton’s movies.” She searched his face for the signs of mockery, but found none. “Everyone thinks they’re dark, but I think they’re hilarious.”

“Good.” He moved closer, and Claire could all but feel the heat of his body now, her skin started to burn where it came in contact with his.

“Are we going to run out of air?” She asked quietly, her throat closing up again.

“What? No.” He shook his head. “This place,” Owen glanced around, “is not sealed, okay? There’s plenty of air, I promise.”

“I can’t,” she started and faltered, the black dots dancing before her eyes.

“Claire? Claire, we’re good.” He tilted her face up to his, and then his lips brushed gently against hers. “We’re good,” Owen repeated, pulling back to find her staring at him, her eyes wide.

“What did you do that for?” She whispered.

“To get you thinking about something else. Want me to stop?”

She shook her head vigorously, and then his mouth was pressed to hers again, tentatively at first, his tongue tracing the outline of her lips until she parted them for him, a low moan forming in the back of her throat. She felt him smile as she planted a kiss to the corner of his mouth before he took control again, urgent and needy, claiming everything she was willing to give. Claire’s hands fell on his chest, the rapid staccato of his heartbeat hammering under her palm, and his arms locked around her, pressing her closer, making the breathing impossible, but for an entirely different reason now.

The overhead lights turned on again, making them look up in surprise, and the elevator started moving again. It stopped at the next floor it reached, its doors slid open to reveal two men in the park’s maintenance uniforms, the words freezing on their lips at the sight of something they were obviously not meant to witness.

“It’s working again!” Owen announced, pulling Claire out. “To ya it was going to be okay.” He nodded to the men. “Thanks, guys, I think we’ll take the stairs from here.”

Her cheeks burning, she followed him without a word, her hand clutching his as if letting go meant she could float away.

They reached the end of the corridor, and Owen pushed the fire escape door open. Franky, she had never been happier to see the stairs more in her life. And the moment it closed behind them, he gathered her in his arms once more, kissing her again, but slower this time now that it had an entirely different purpose.
“You okay?” He asked her a while later, resting his forehead against hers.

“Yeah,” Claire breathed out. “Thanks for… Well, I mean, it worked.”

“So I see,” he brushed his lips to her temple.

“I hope the cameras were off,” she shook her head, bumping her nose against his with a smile.

Owen laughed. “I hope they were on.” He pulled back just far enough to have a roper look at her face. “So how about that second date?”

“I don’t know,” Claire gripped his shirt and pulled him down again. “I might need some more convincing.”
Take A Piece Of My My Heart And Make It Your Own

Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompt by @amelias-obsessions:
"And also - what is the ‘thing’ Zara was reminding Claire of when she was telling Zach and Gray what time she’d finish work? WE WILL NEVER KNOW.

But my Clawen heart is in overdrive regarding the secretly dating/married AU.. She had dinner with Owen planned, and she couldn’t cancel on him again after the last round of investors held her up. She’d introduce him to her nephews at some point. It wasn’t important, right?"

Chapter Notes

I’m such a sucker for secret relationships it’s not even funny...

Fluff alert!

It was not the sun filtering through the open window of the bungalow bedroom that awoke Claire but a persistent – although not at all unpleasant – smell of a freshly brewed coffee coming from somewhere in the house.

She rolled over onto her stomach and buried her face deeper into the pillow, desperately holding on to the precious moments of peace as she inhaled the warm scent of morning and Owen’s aftershave that seemed to have seeped into everything around. She reached blindly for her phone, groping around the nightstand until her fingers closed around it, and then pried first one eye and then the other open, cursing under her breath when she saw what time it was.

In the kitchen, Owen was standing by the cooking counter, tapping his fingers impatiently on the wooden countertop as he willed the coffee maker to hurry up, his hair sticking out in every direction. Claire paused in the doorway, the corners of her mouth lifting up at the sight of his bare back and the muscles rippling under his tan skin and his cargo pants hanging low on his hips, her mind flooded with the memories from the previous night. For as long as she could remember, she’d been known for her professional dedication and exceptional work ethics, but it was at the moments like this that Claire’s hands itched to turn off her phone, take a week off, and find better use to her time.

She walked over to him and wound her arms around his waist from behind, brushing a soft kiss to the base of his neck before resting her forehead between his shoulder-blades, inhaling the scent of his skin, momentarily lightheaded and dizzy.

“My alarm didn’t go off,” Claire murmured, feeling him shiver ever so slightly at the touch of her breath to his back.

Owen covered her hands with his, a rumble of laughter bubbling up in his chest and reverberating
through her entire body from the top of her head to the very tips of her toes.

“You needed it,” he assured her, chuckling. The coffee machine beeped, and Owen switched it off. He turned around, locking his arms around her and tipping her chin up to kiss her fully on the mouth. “I’d apologize for keeping you up late,” he added with a cheeky grin, “but I am so not sorry.”

“Figures,” she whispered into his collarbone and tucked her face into the crook of his neck, so giddy and elated she felt like she could take off and fly away.

“Wanna have some pancakes?” He offered, running his hand up and down her back and all but making her purr with pleasure. Dressed in one of his Navy shirts and still sleepy, she was everything.

“Can’t,” Claire shook her head. “I’m going to be late and I still need to–”

“Polish your shoes and straighten your hair,” Owen teased her. He allowed his fingers to trail through the soft waves framing her face. “I like it like this,” he told her.

“I know you do.” She leaned into his touch and kissed the palm of his hand, her eyes locked with his, wondering what she could forego in her daily routine to stay here for just a little while longer. “How about I take a day off next week and we’ll make something happen?”

Owen arched his eyebrows at her, eyeing her with contemplative glee. “Something good?”

“You bet, Mr. Grady,” she stretched up on her tiptoes to kiss him again, feeling her heart make a leap in her chest and start beating somewhere in her throat.

“We still on for tonight?” He asked her between the pecks.

Claire pulled back, disentangling herself from him, and flinched a little. She already had to cancel on him twice because either the investors or paperwork were holding her up. “My nephews come over today.”

“Right.” He nodded and leaned against the counter. “It’s okay, we can…”

“No, it’s fine,” she added quickly. “I’ll make it work. I promised you and I’ll be here, I swear. They’ll probably be too reoccupied with the dinosaurs to care about spending time with me.”

He snorted, amused. “You sound like a dream aunt.”

She ran her hand through her hair. “I don’t know what to do with them, Owen! I barely know them, and…” She trailed off and shook her head.

“Well, will I get to meet them?” He inquired.

“I don’t know,” she admitted with a sigh, catching her lower lip between her teeth. “You and I shouldn’t be seeing each other, let alone meeting each other’s families. There are rules–”

“But it’s much fun to break them,” he reminded her lightly, unsure if he was hurt by her refusal to acknowledge his existence to her nephews or not.

It was fun to keep their affair under wraps. It was hot even, what with all the thrill of secrecy, but this was different, and a part of him wished she was more willing to let him into her world than occasionally mentioning something about her family in passing and changing the subject if he
asked for details.

“Look, I understand that this is a big deal and all, but you’re not technically my boss…”

“I know, I know.” Claire rubbed her forehead. “Technically being the key word. I don’t want either one of us to get in trouble.” She paused, her voice almost pleading. “And I don’t want to lose you if technically turns out not being enough.”

He studied her face, the conflict on it so vivid his resolve deflated instantly. He took her hand and pulled her toward him again. “Tell you what – bring them over by the paddock tomorrow, let them meet the girls. Bet they’d be stoked to see the animals no guests have access to. How about that? I’ll be on my best behaviour,” he added when she still didn’t seem convinced.

Claire relaxed, the worry lines around her eyes smoothing out. “Yeah, well… when did that ever happen?”

He brushed a kiss to her temple. “So, dinner tonight, yeah?”

“Sure.” She nuzzled his cheek. “Wait, does it not count for anything that I came over last night?”

“Oh, it does. But did we get to the dinner part?”

“And whose fault was that?” She scoffed.

“Guilty,” Owen admitted although the look on his face suggested that he was feeling anything but. “And since you don’t have time for breakfast, how about a quick shower?”

And before she had a chance to respond, he started steering her back toward the bedroom, his smile growing more wicked and mischievous.

“When is anything ever quick with you?” Claire protested half-heartedly.

In one fluid motion, Owen swept her into his arms, and she squealed in surprise, arms wrapping around his neck on instinct. “But that’s your favourite part, right?”

She meant to meet them at the ferry terminal, she really did, but Simon Masrani called her when she was pulling away from Owen’s bungalow to head back to her apartment to change. He told her the investors would be coming by in the morning and she needed to take care of them, asking for a meeting with him afterwards. The I-Rex was scheduled to go public in just a few months and her mind was on fire.

Claire called Zara to make sure the boys had someone to take them to the hotel and explain everything to them, promising she’d meet them around lunchtime.

“Your thing for tonight is still on?” Zara asked casually, nothing about her voice betraying the amusement Claire knew her assistant had trouble hiding when it came to her and Owen, not since she walked in on them kissing in Claire’s office when he came over to drop off some papers.

“Yeah…” Claire confirmed distractedly, going through her mental to-do list for the day. “Yes, it is. Thank you, Zara. And call me if you need anything.”

This was a disaster, she thought. Her sister was going to kill her if she found out that Claire delegated handling Zach and Gray to someone else. But this was a problem for later, and now she
needed to hurry up. She was already running late—\textit{goddamn Owen Grady and his idea of \textbf{quick} showers!}—and just the thought of it was making her anxiety go through the roof.

Surprisingly, everything went well with the investors. She said all the right words, smiled at all the right moments, and generally sounded like the biggest hybrid ever created was everything they ever wanted, and more, hoping it worked well enough for all of them to stop worrying about how they were going to keep feeding that thing.

\textit{“Everything okay?”} Owen asked when he called her around the time she finally said goodbye to her visitors and was heading over to meet with her family.

“Yes,” she told him, unable to hold back a small smile as she pictured him standing on the catwalk over the paddock, away from the curious ears of the other handlers. “I can talk anyone into anything, you said so yourself.”

“No,” he laughed, and she could all but taste the sunshine in that sound. \textit{“I said you can talk \textbf{me} into doing anything, which is not the same thing, but it’s usually fun.”}

Claire bit her lip, feeling her cheeks grow hot, grateful the crowds buzzing around her couldn’t hear their conversation. She paused on the steps leading down toward the ground floor of the Innovation Center, spotting Zara and the two boys bursting in through the doors. “I gotta go, my nephews are here,” she told him quickly, her stomach starting to flutter slightly. Oddly enough, she wasn’t nearly as nervous about meeting the strangers a couple of hours ago.

\textit{“See ya later,”} Owen said, and added, \textit{“Miss you like crazy, Claire.”}

“Me, too.”

\begin{quote}
In retrospect, Claire should have probably guessed that the day that started with her sleeping through her alarm—never a good sign—couldn’t have possibly ended with her nephews parked on the couch in their room and her having a quiet dinner with Owen. But in her book, a ‘tough day’ usually meant the clash of scheduled meetings or other activities, or maybe a picky guest complaining about something. She certainly didn’t imagine a mass massacre or listening to a 30-foot tall creature eat someone who could very well be her boyfriend.

When Owen stepped into the Control Room 30 minutes later—30 minutes that she spent dialing his number over and over again only to hear his voicemail message—there was only so much she could do not to throw herself at him, so overcome with relief she thought her knees would buckled under the weight of her body.

And when he stomped out, angry at her for not listening to him, she followed him out, leaving the Control Room staff and Simon Masrani to think whatever the hell they wanted.

“Hey,” Owen started when the elevator doors closed behind them, cutting them from the rest of the world, his features softening somewhat at the sight of distress on her face, and Claire barrelled into him, needing to feel his body, big and solid and real, against hers as she trembled all over.

She knew he was still mad at her, at this whole situation, but he gathered her in his arms without hesitation, unable to hold her tight enough, his lips pressed to her hair, murmuring something she couldn’t hear through the rush of blood in her ears and the hammering of her heart, so rapid she felt dizzy. She inhaled the scent of his skin and sweat and the jungle clinging to his clothes, not quite ready to believe that this was actually happening.
“I thought you…. I thought she…” Claire mumbled into his shirt, and swallowed hard, not wanting to finish this sentence.

“Shhh,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head. “I’m fine. Everyone is fine.”

“What happened?” She finally pulled back just far enough to be able to look at him properly, registering small cuts on his face and a smudge of dirt on his forehead, feeling queasy all over again.

He caught her up on everything quickly, his face going more and more grim with every moment, his brows pulling closer together, as dread and fear settled deep in her stomach, her fingers flexing around the fabric of his shirt and the soft leather of his vest, not willing to let go.

“I’m heading to the lab now, okay?” He said as last, cupping her face in his palms, smoothing her hair.

Claire nodded numbly. “We need to find a way to fix it.”

“We will,” he promised and then brushed his lips to hers – a quick kiss that left her needing more; the only reassurance he could offer.

And then he was gone, and she was going back up to close the park and bring everyone back to the resort, knowing all along that this was only a beginning.

—

It was not until this nightmare of a day was over, and the guests were taken off to the mainland, not until Claire’s sister and brother-in-law arrived to collect their sons and InGen’s security assured them all at least a thousand times that the island was safe now, that the realization that they could have all died a few hours ago finally started to sink in.

In the hours they spent in the hangar waiting for the ferries, both boys managed to doze off for a little while, their face contorted restlessly even in their sleep. Claire, however, couldn’t even close her eyes, the idea of rest ludicrous and absurd. She was too wired up and too exhausted, still incapable of wrapping her mind around everything that happened, struggling fruitlessly to understand how could it all go so wrong so fast.

Sometime around dawn Owen disappeared to help with the evacuation, and when she wasn’t talking to the boys, promising them that their parents were coming, her gaze kept scanning the crowd, catching his familiar gait now and then, comforted in knowing that he was still there, still present.

Later, while the Mitchells busied themselves with making sure all of them were alive and accounted for, Claire slipped away from them, catching Owen eyes from across the hangar, and headed his way.

He hesitated for only a moment before his hands closed around the blanket wrapped around her shoulders and he tugged her to him, resting his forehead against hers for a moment. “You okay?” Claire nodded, and he slipped his arms around her as if his own sanity was also hanging by a thread. And maybe it was. He let out a long sigh to relief and mumbled, “Thank God,” under his breath.

“Owen….”

“I don’t care,” he told her. “I don’t care who sees us and when they think. I don’t care, Claire. For
all I know, we’re both unemployed as of five hours ago, and I am so happy that you’re alive.”

She snorted softly, practically feeling Karen’s curious gaze on the two of them. “So much for a quiet dinner, huh?”

He let out a short laugh, his arms flexing around her, holding her closer. “And there I was thinking of grilling some salmon for you.” He shook his head and rested his chin on the top of her head. “Guess I’ll have to take you out to a proper dinner instead.”

She inhaled sharply, allowing her eyes to flutter closed. Safe. Finally safe. “Just get me out of here. I think I’ve had enough of his island.”
Chapter Summary

Your OTP notice how different their hands are due to size/roughness

Chapter Notes

Because hands can be so sensual and stuff....

It was awfully ironic, and even Claire had to admit it, that even though she worked in Jurassic World and had to deal with actual, honest to god dinosaurs day in and day out, the most remarkable and extraordinary thing that happened to her had little to do with the park. Not directly, at least.

It all started out innocently enough. In fact, she couldn’t even pinpoint how it began, but one day Owen Grady was dropping off his late paperwork, all apologies and charming smiles, talking a mile per minute and giving her a migraine. And the next thing Claire knew, he was waiting for her outside out her office on Friday night, dressed – much to her surprise – in jeans and a tight tee. Arms folded across his chest, he was leaning against his bike, squinting in the later afternoon sun as he watched her approach.

“Mr. Grady,” Claire nodded, curious.

“Can I take you out?” He asked without dancing around it.

She hesitated, unsure if she was surprised by the offer or disappointed by the only answer she could give him, for the first time facing the disadvantages of her position at the park. They were not even working together, but as far the corporate hierarchy was concerned, she was his superior, and that changed everything.

“You know it’s not exactly allowed,” she responded.

“Oh, okay.” Owen shrugged, unfazed, as if expecting this outcome. “We can stay in. I could cook.” He tilted his head to his shoulder, watching her quizzically.

She looked away and past him, taking in the thinning crowds still hanging around Main Street, probably on their way to one of the cafes now that the attractions started closing down for the night, and turned back to him, her eyes narrowed slightly. “You can cook,” she repeated, her voice dripping with unmasked skepticism.

“I’m a man of many talents,” he assured her, his smile so bright it almost hurt to look directly at his face.

She laughed and shook her head. “And, by all means, don’t let your modesty hide them.”

“Come on, Claire—” God, she loved the sound of her name falling from his lips, “—what do you
have to lose?"

*My job,* she wanted to say. *My sanity,* a small voice in her head piped up. *My ability to think straight,* she had to admit.

There was something about him – the energy she seemed to be attuned to; the quiet confidence that drew her in despite the voice of reason loud and clear in her head; the affection with which he spoke about his animals that was making her wish to hear more even though she knew next to nothing about Velociraptors except that they were eating through half of the park’s budget – literally. Or maybe it was about the way he looked at her when he thought she didn’t notice.

“I won’t bite,” Owen promised, pushing himself up from his bike when he sensed her uncertainty. “Unless you ask for it,” he added suggestively.

Claire quirked an eyebrow at him. “Is this a dare?”

He handed her a spare helmet. “Why don’t you find out for yourself?”

—

If anyone told Claire a few months ago that she would be zipping through the park on Owen Grady’s bike, holding on to him for dear life, she would have laughed them in the face and called them crazy. And yet here she was, not only doing it, but also enjoying it more than she was willing to admit even to herself.

And could the man cook! This, of all things, came as a bit of a surprise to Claire, and a pleasant one at that. And so a dinner led to a picnic on the cliffs which, in its turn, led to Owen taking her to see the Mosasaurus show (“I can’t believe you never did it, jeez!”) until one evening several weeks later she hopped in her car and headed for the bungalow with no intention of coming back home for the night.

“This is like my birthday and Christmas and about 5 months of secret dreams coming true, all rolled up into one,” Owen told her later as they lay in his bed facing each other, not even a few inches apart, the sheets pooling around them, and their legs tangled together.

“Not so secret,” Claire assured him.

“Am I that transparent?” Owen leaned closer to brush a kiss to her lips, and then another one.

“Among other things,” she agreed. “And easily impressed, by the looks of it.”

“Not so easily,” he shook his head, smiling.

“We could get in trouble if anyone catches wind of this,” she told him, her face falling.

“Worth it.”

“It really doesn’t bother you?” Claire folded her arm and tucked it under her head, her eyes roaming around his features in the fading light of the humid evening, the sun outside the small bedroom window hanging low and bright orange, bathing the forest in golden hues.

“Do I look like it does?” Owen cocked an eyebrow, a wicked twinkle in his eyes.

Her lips stretched into a wider smile. “You look….”

“Handsome. Dashing.” He offered helpfully, making her laugh.
Claire ran her fingers through his hair slightly damp with sweat, pushing it back from his face, her lower lip caught between her teeth. “Like my birthday and Christmas, all rolled up into one,” she repeated his words.

Owen put his hand on hers cupping his cheek and kissed the inside of her wrist, his skin so much hotter than Claire’s to the touch it made her wonder if she actually had burn marks all over her body, and if she’d have more by the time she’d leave.

An animal let out an excited cry somewhere in the jungle outside the bungalow, and a gust of wind brought in fresh scent of the ocean laced with heavy fragrance of tropical flowers.

Owen pressed his palm against hers, noting how much bigger his hand was than hers, his skin several shades darker from the time spent in the sun, and much more rough and calloused compared to Claire’s soft and velvety.

“You’re so tiny,” he told her quietly, lacing their fingers together.

Claire giggled. “Say that to my sister. I’ve been taller than Karen since 8th grade. Or to my prom date,” she added, squeezing his hand back. “I don’t think he ever forgave me for wearing heels.”

“His loss,” he said, kissing her knuckles one after the other.

Owen pulled her closer then, repositioning them so that Claire’s back was resting against his chest, her body folded into his embrace. He brushed his lips to her bare shoulder, and then again, breathing in the intoxicating scent of her skin, so ridiculously happy he wasn’t sure how he could possibly contain it. And even less certain about how he could live outside of this moment.

“Where did this come from?” Claire picked up his hand, holding it in both of hers, her thumb running over a faint scar between his knuckles.

“Delta. When she was three months old.” Owen said. “When they were little, they used to follow me around like puppies. Before, you know, they realized that I could be their lunch.”

She laughed softly, picturing so clearly in her mind the four little raptors trialing behind him wherever he went, whining to be allowed to sleep in his bed, wagging their tails in anticipation of a treat, refusing to listen to his commands. She could hear Owen’s voice full of exasperated fondness, and it let something loose inside of her.

“And this one?” She turned his hand over and stroked a pale line on the fleshy part of his palm near the thumb.

“Campfire when I was 7,” he shared eagerly, soft laughter rumbling in his chest, a pleasant vibration. “Do not, in any circumstances, grab baking potatoes straight from the ambers.”

“I’ll remember that,” she promised, turning her head around to trail her lips along his jaw until Owen captured her mouth with his. She looked up at him. “Do you want me to go?”

He blinked, his forehead creasing in confusion. “Why would I want you to go?”

“Well, I don’t know what your policy is regarding the overnight stays.”

“I’ll make an exception for you, Ms. Dearing,” Owen promised, allowing his gaze to travel along her body in the way that clearly spoke of his intentions, making the color rise up her cheeks against her will.
“Special treatment, huh?” Claire scoffed with amusement that sent sparkles or pleasure along his skin, which made Owen wonder if he could cancel the rest of his week and convince her not to leave his bed for a while.

He met her eyes, his smile dropping. “Stay. I’ll drive you wherever you need if you have something planned in the morning. Just…. Don’t go.”

“Okay.” Claire wiggled around until she was facing him again, her arms snaking around his neck and pulling him over her again. “Now, about that special treatment…”

Chapter End Notes

I need this to happen in the next film!! Like, you have no idea how much I need it - along with their height difference moments. Ugh!
So, I found this waterfall…

Chapter Notes

I recently received a prompt about Owen giving Claire piggyback rides, and since it seemed to be working perfectly with one of the numbered prompts I had in my inbox - well, I HAD to combine them. Hope y'all are not sick of fluff yet!

So, I found this waterfall…

It wasn’t that Claire was averse to nature, per se. It was that her idea of nature was more about lying on the beach in the shade of palm trees, and less about traipsing around the hills surrounding the park while wearing five layers of sunscreen and being covered head to toe in mosquito repellent. Which wasn’t even working!

She swatted at the insects buzzing around her head and blew a strand of hair off her forehead with a huff.

“You know, when you said we should take a day off, this wasn’t how I imagined it, exactly,” she said to Owen’s back, not quite sure what irritated her more – the amount of wildlife eager to sink their teeth into her, or his cheerful demeanour when her own discomfort was driving her insane.

“Well, this is my only way to take you out,” Owen reminder her, glancing at Claire over his shoulder with a cheeky smile. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love the indoor times…”

She glowered at him. “If you’re trying to get back at me–” she started.

He paused and turned around, pushing his hair back from her face, seemingly not at all winded by the 2 miles they just hiked up a steep slope. “Don’t be ridiculous, Claire. If you don’t want to parade our relationship in front of everyone, that’s cool. I told you, it’s fine.”

Claire winced a little. “It’s not that and you know it.” She wiped beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “I don’t want either one of us to be the butt of every joke for… I don’t even know how long.” Her voice dropped, sounding almost pleading. “I’ve been there before and I… I don’t want it to happen, not with you.”

“Have you, really?” He quirked an eyebrow at her, amused.

“Not here,” she added. “But if this is such a big deal, fine – we can start… parading… everything. First thing tomorrow morning, I swear.”

Owen stepped closer to her, deflating minutely, his shoulders sagging slightly. Propping her chin on his knuckle, he lifted her face up until their eyes met. “I don’t care about that. I want you. That’s it, plain and simple.”

“Does it mean we can go back now?” She whined.

He dipped his head down to kiss her. “Nope. We’re almost there.”

On that, he turned around and started walking again.
“Where’s there, anyway?” Claire grumbled, trying to keep up.

“It’s a surprise.”

“If that surprise is a Jurassic-sized centipede or anything of that kind, I swear to god I’ll let it eat you.”

Obediently, she followed him for another half a mile, wondering who in their right mind would do something like this for fun – the way she knew some of the guests of the park did it in-between various shows. It was hot and humid, the air so thick she could practically touch it, and the narrow trail was nothing but packed dirt riddled with rocks she tripped over every other minute, expecting to plant her face in the ground most the time.

At last, Claire stopped again, bending at her waist and gripping her keens, trying to catch her breath. “You know what? Keep going. You can pick me up on the way… down. I’ll just…” She gulped more air. “I’ll just wait… here.”

Owen walked over to her, rolling his stiff shoulders. “Okay, let’s make it easier for both of us.” He shrugged off a small backpack with necessities he carried and repositioned it on his chest instead, and then he squatted down beside her. “Hop on.”

Claire stared at him like he was crazy.

“What are you doing?”

“I can carry you, come on.” He urged her.

“No, you can’t.” She shook her head. “I’m too heavy.”

At that, Owen laughed heartily, and her scowl deepened. “Wait, you are being serious?”

“I am not doing this,” she refused and folded her arms across her chest for good measure.

“You can do it, or we can spend the next two hours arguing about it, and then you’ll do it anyway,” he noted, and god, she hated it when he was so damn right.

Claire let out a frustrated sigh and grasped his shoulders on, “If you drop me, I’ll kill you,” before Owen hoisted her up on his back as if she weighed nothing at all and locked his hands under her thighs for support.

“You okay?” He asked a couple of minutes later.

“Feeling like I’m 5 again,” Claire mused with a fleeting smile, admitting to herself that it wasn’t half as bad as she feared.

“If you call me ‘daddy’, I will drop you, I swear,” Owen warned her.

“Not what I had in mind,” she nuzzled his cheek and dropped a small kiss on his temple. “Tell me about the surprise.”

“I don’t think you understand the meaning of a word ‘surprise’, Claire.”

“That’s because the last time you used it, there was a baby Dimorphodon living in your living room for a week.” She poked him in a shoulder with her finger.

“His mother refused to feed him!” Owen explained defensively. “Someone had to do it instead.”
“And that someone had to be you,” she scoffed.

“It could’ve been you,” he teased.

“Not a chance.” Claire gripped him tighter, feeling his muscles flex underneath his shirt, his breathing not even remotely laboured, and it was honestly infuriating. Except she loved feeling the warmth of his body against hers, and thinking straight – let alone being angry – was highly problematic in those circumstances. “The surprise is a stray dinosaur, isn’t it?” She sighed with a growing sense of dread.

“It’s a waterfall,” Owen said at last, shaking his head.

“A what?”

“A waterfall.” He glanced quickly at her. “Do you ever leave your office?”

“For important stuff, yes,” she said defensively, and he chuckled.

“We’re almost there.”

“You said that a gallon of blood I lost to—” she slapped herself on the neck, “—something ago. Why aren’t the repellents working?”

“Because you’re too sweet,” he assured her, and she rested her chin on his shoulder, lulled by the gentle rock of his gait, their breathing falling into an easy sync. His skin smelled of forest and aftershave and something that was purely Owen, and she felt an overwhelming urge to close her eyes and simply breathe him all in until he was a part of her, forever.

“I’m not hiding you, you know,” she whispered after a while.

“I know.”

“I don’t want things to get complicated,” she explained. “But in any case, between you and this whole island, I’d always choose you, and I need you know this, okay?”

Owen didn’t say anything for a few moments, and then he let out a low grunt, “You can’t say things like that when I can’t even kiss you!”

Claire giggled and pressed her lips to a spot behind his ear, ticking his neck with her breath. “Save it for later.”

Finally, the forest opened up before them and Owen stepped into a clearing in front of a waterfall where the river from the upper valley was dropping from about a hundred feet into a small lagoon surrounded by tall ferns and then spilling into a stream that snaked down the hill toward the resort.

He unclasped his hands and let Claire down as she gaped at the view before her, forgetting about being tired and not at all bothered by the soft breeze that kept throwing the curling wisps of hair that escaped her ponytail in her face. Her lips curved into a wondrous smile.

“Owen, this is beautiful.”

He dropped the backpack on the ground and stepped in front of her. “You’re beautiful.” Hands threading through her hair, he lifted her chin up and kissed her, feeling her smile against his mouth. “Wanna take a dip?”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t bring a swimsuit.”
In one fluid motion, Owen pulled his shirt off and tossed it to the ground before kissing her again, slower and deeper, his fingers artfully working on unbuttoning her shirt. “Even better,” he muttered.

“Owen….”

“We’re four miles away from the park. There’s no one here.” Warm breath and his lips on her neck. “Might as well use it to our advantage.”

Breathless, she brushed a kiss to his bare shoulder. “You’re such an awful influence, Owen Grady.”

“I know,” he chuckled, finally managing to free her from some items of her clothing. “Isn’t it fun?”

The water was cool against their heated bodies as they floated in the middle of the pool as the waterfall roared behind them, the mist from the impact hanging in the air and clinging to their skins. Claire had her arms wrapped around his neck while Owen kicked his legs slowly under the water to keep them afloat, his heart thumping sure and steady against her chest.

“This is the best use of a day off I could ever imagine,” he confessed between slow, sexy kisses.

“I’m surprised you’re not checking up on your raptors every five minutes,” she murmured.

“What raptors?”

“And I bet not telling me about the swimsuit was a strategic move,” she noted, pressed flush against his body, and feeling almost dizzy from his closeness.

“Maybe,” Owen admitted with a small laugh. “Look, I’m not asking you to do anything you’re not comfortable with, okay?” He tucked some loose strands of her hair behind her ear and then buried his face deep in her neck. “You don’t want anyone to know about us, it’s cool. This…” A soft chuckle reverberated through her body, making her shiver. “…works well. So damn well, Claire.”

“I know.” She pulled back to look at his face, at the smile wrinkles in the corner of his eyes, at the droplets of water clinging to his stubble, and wondering how could she hold all of this warmth and elation inside of her without exploding. “I just don’t want to lose you.”

He trailed his finger down her cheek. “You won’t. And you know how I know it?”

“How?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you, too.” Owen captured her mouth with his and took them both underwater.
Let Me In The Walls You’ve Built Around

Chapter Summary

A post-break-up AU: “well this is really awkward considering the last time we saw each other, i was screaming at you to never talk to me again, but like, my dog recognized you all the way across the park and literally dragged me over here because she misses you so hi”

Chapter Notes

Because I LOOOOOVE angst!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Claire turned up the collar of her jacket against the wind and burrowed her face deeper into it, kicking herself mentally for the tenth time in the past three minutes for forgetting to put on a scarf. The weather suddenly changed last night, the temperatures plummeting down, the air suddenly smelling of snow, which was odd for late October, even in Wisconsin.

She turned and stepped through the iron gate, intending to take a shortcut across the park. Even the sight of the glimmering lights in the coffee shop window twinkling on the other side of it made her feel better, and she hoped she had enough time not only to grab a to-go cup, but maybe linger inside for a few minutes as well until her fingers and toes started to thaw. She could practically taste her latte already, the smell of the freshly brewed Arabica ticking her senses.

Briefly, she glanced up at the grey clouds, hanging so low they were almost touching the tops of the trees and wondered if the snow was indeed going to fall later in the day. Not likely, she mused, but not impossible, either. Maybe she could stop by Karen’s after work, see how she and the boys were doing. The prospect of eventually heading back to her empty place when the weather was this awful and the memories too there all of a sudden didn’t look particularly appealing to her.

Claire was about to take another turn and maybe head across the barren rose garden to save another minute or two when the sound of happy yipping stopped her in her tracks. She turned around, more on instinct than anything else, and barely had time to brace herself before 35 pounds of pure excitement barreled into her.

“Sammy!” She exclaimed, crouching down in front of a black and white border collie who wagged his tail so fast it was nothing but a blur before Claire’s eyes, immediately receiving a faceful of sloppy love as the dog tried to reach whatever skin he could, his paws scraping the sleeves of her jacket. “What are you…” she started and cut off abruptly.

Her eyes shifted past Sammy as she followed the leash dragging behind him just in time to see Owen round a bend in the path in a light jog.

He skidded to an abrupt halt when he saw her, his breathing ragged and short from the chase, and the bulky black jacket making him look even bigger than usual. His hair was ruffled by the wind,
the mist hanging in the air clinging to his cheeks.

Of course, Claire thought with growing panic, realizing belatedly that she didn’t have an exit strategy. Of course, Owen would be here. Sammy was, after all, his dog. *Theirs*, she reminded herself and shook it off, refusing to think of him that way.

“Hey,” he breathed out, still in the process of trying to catch his breath.

“Hi,” she echoed, her fingers flexing around the dog’s fur, threading through it absently.

They had been together for a year and apart for twice as long, Sammy being the only thing still somewhat connecting them after all this time. She was the one who picked him up at the shelter because he was so excited to see them it seemed like his whole world would fall apart if they’d left without him. Owen got him after the breakup though. Claire insisted on it – he needed Sammy more, and she wasn’t sure she would be able to so much as look at him without breaking into tears every time.

She straightened up slowly, her hand still on the dog’s head, stroking it slowly, and took Owen in. He looked… like Owen, and her stomach made a small flip, twisting momentarily into a knot. His hair was longer than she remembered, but in a good way. She could so easily recall lying by his side and running her hand through it, over and over again. So easily it hurt.

“Sorry,” Owen said, picking up the leash, although making no attempt to pull Sammy away from Claire. “I didn’t expect him to… He must have seen you.”

“It’s okay,” she nodded and bent down to bury her face into Sammy’s neck briefly, nearly sending him into a cardiac arrest from all that happiness. “I don’t mind, it’s good to see him.”

“Haven’t seen you around much,” Owen noted casually, shifting from foot to foot, although was it from cold or from the discomfort of being around her, she couldn’t tell. Maybe both.

“Been busy,” Claire shrugged, choosing not to think of how she went out of her way to avoid every place where they could run into each other as if her life depended on it.

Not that he didn’t know it either. Not after that time a while back when she bumped into him in a grocery store and he saw an engagement ring on her hand. He didn’t ask a thing, only threw a box of mac and cheese into his basket and walked away. By the time Claire made it to check out, he was long gone.

“Well, we shouldn’t be… holding you back,” Owen cleared his throat and patted his thigh lightly – a cue for Sammy, which he followed obediently after licking Claire’s hand one last time.

She glanced at the stores lining the street ahead of them. “I was just going to get coffee.”

The corner of Owen’s mouth tugged up. A ghost of a smile that made her chest tighten. “Same, actually.”

“Do you mind?” Her glance flickered toward the leash in his hand and he passed it to her without another word, Sammy immediately beside himself with overwhelming glee.

They walked in silence for a couple of minutes, the only sound breaking it was the rustle of the dry leaves under their feet, their breathes puffing out in small clouds. Claire unclipped Sammy’s leash, picked up a stick from the ground, and threw it as far as she could across the empty soccer field. He took off after it at lightning speed.
“So, you’re back…” She started when the pause started to stretch between them.

“I’m back,” Owen echoed, kicking some leaves with his boot, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket.

He went back to the NAVY after their breakup. The money was good, and as someone who lost everything when the park collapsed, Owen wasn’t the one to dismiss it as unimportant. He did a couple of tours, mostly rescue missions, working as an assistant in the Paleontology Department at the local college in-between.

Claire knew all of this from her sister – the Mitchells took it upon themselves to take care of Sammy while he was gone, what with Gray being in love with the dog. Claire never admitted it out loud, but it stung that Owen never asked her to look after him, but she knew that had the situation been reversed, she probably wouldn’t have asked anything of him, either. It wasn’t like they parted amiably or anything. In fact, Claire remembered vividly telling him to go to hell, promising she would never say another word to him in her life.

This shouldn’t have come as a surprise, she had thought when the dust started to settle and the mere act of breathing stopped feeling like too much effort, but it still hurt. It hurt so bad Claire thought it would rip her apart. It hurt so bad Claire thought it would rip her apart. They were like water and oil; they fought a lot about the silliest things and then made up just as fast. She just never imagined there would come a day when she would tell him to leave her alone, and he would actually do it.

And then he did. It took her the longest time to learn to exist without him. And then it got better, somehow, the memories fading at the edges, no longer threatening to shatter her.

Funny how a person who used to be her whole world was now walking beside her, never quite looking directly at her, was now feeling like a complete stranger.

They reached the gate on the other side of the park and Owen whistled to call Sammy over so that Claire could strap a leash to his collar once again. It started to rain – a persistent drizzle that didn’t fall from the sky so much as floated around. Claire shivered. She handed the leash back to him, jerking her hand away the moment it brushed against his skin and hid her balled up fists in the pockets of her jacket, pointedly looking straight ahead. If Owen noticed anything, he didn’t acknowledge it.

Inside the coffee shop, the air was warm and thick with the scent of cinnamon and pastries, the line snaking along the food display and soft music playing in the background.

Owen shook his head, the way Sammy would have, to shake off the rain, and Claire’s lips curved into a small smile, forcing her to turn away and pretend she was interested in the assortment of cakes lest he notice it.

He paid for his coffee and then for hers as well, getting a pretzel for each of them.

“Thank you,” Claire said, clutching a cup in one hand and a small paper bad in the other.

Owen glanced at Sammy sitting outside the door under the umbrella the staff didn’t bother bringing in despite the fact that no one in their right mind would use the outdoor patio in this weather, and then looked at Claire again.

“Would you like to stay here for a bit?” He offered, which she knew was generous of him, considering that the last time they met, he found out she was getting married to another man. “You know, to get warm.”
She hesitated, torn between the crushing desire to sneak out of that door and start running until she put at least ten miles between them, and maybe then she would be able to start breathing properly again, her chest no longer so tight she suspected her lungs were collapsing, and the idea of maybe beginning to feel her fingers again.

In the end, Claire nodded and followed him to the table by the window, suddenly hungry and grateful for the warm pretzel, soothed by the familiar comfort of his presence. Some things never changed.

They stayed there for a while, talking about his job and hers, about Karen and the boys, and the people they both knew or used to know, slipping into old jokes now and then, and at some point it stopped feeling forced and like they were walking on eggshells around each other. Claire allowed herself to study him conspicuously when he wasn’t watching, taking note of deeper lines around his eyes and some weariness she had seen in him before but never got used to. He told her about the places he had been to, and she mentioned her recent promotion.

And then Owen finally noticed that her left hand clasped around the paper cup was ring-free. He trailed off, losing the train of his thought, and then looked up to meet her eyes.

Claire shifted uncomfortably in her seat and quickly put her right hand over the left one, the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth feeling like it was about to break her face in half.

“What happened?” He asked quietly, as if not able to help himself, and then cleared his throat and shook his head, looking away. “Sorry. None of my business.”

She swallowed, dropped her gaze down, and offered him a small shrug. “It didn’t work out.”

He nodded as if it explained everything, and change the subject, seemingly as relieved about not having to talk about it as Claire.

The truth was, it couldn’t have worked out. Rebounds tended to suck that way, or at least that was what Karen told her when Claire admitted seeing someone, and then showed her the ring a few months later. At the time, it didn’t feel like a big deal, but eventually it dawned on Claire that trying to fill an Owen Grady-shaped hole in her life with another person wasn’t going to do any good to either one of them. Even to this day, she couldn’t forgive herself for the sense of relief that washed over her when she returned the ring, muttering half-hearted apologies.

“Don’t be mad at me,” Owen started when she reached for her jacket half an hour later, about to say goodbye, “but…” He paused and licked his lips, and Claire froze, her heart pounding. “Would it have changed anything if I asked you first?”

It took her a moment to figure out what he was talking about, and when she did, it felt like a sucker punch that knocked all air out of her, the pain that over time reduced to a dull throb cutting through her with the long forgotten intensity.

Her lips quirked into a small wistful smile. “It was never about that. I didn’t want….” She glanced away, out the window and at the grey day that made her feel like the whole world turned black and write, drained of color. “I just didn’t want you to leave.”

“You told me to,” he wasn’t looking at her either.

“And you never came back.”

The rain outside grew stronger, blurring the lines and making the world look smudged and out of focus, and for a long moment, they simply watched it through the fogged up window, barely aware...
of the chatter around them and the random outbursts of laughter.

“I should go,” Claire said, standing up.

Owen rose to his feet as well, grabbed his own jacket, left some tips on the table.

He held the door open for her and then stepped out into the cold day, hunching his shoulders against the harsh wind. He untied Sammy who ignored him entirely, choosing to leap at Claire instead, and then turned to her.

“Thanks for…” He nodded to the coffee shop.

“It was good to see you,” she said softly.

Owen nodded again, feeling like one of those toys people put on the dashboard of their cars that bobbed their heads nonstop, starting to feel like a complete moron.

“Hey, um… I don’t want you to take it the wrong way,” he said, tugging at the leash until Sammy sat down by his side, “but I got a job offer, and I’m gonna stick around for a while. So if you’d like to grab a lunch sometime, or coffee, or if you wanna see Sammy…” They both stepped to the side when other people exited the café. “It would be nice,” he finished. “And Sammy would like it, too.”

Claire smiled, her head tilted slightly, as she looked up at him. From this close, he could smell the rain on his clothes and everything that used to make her head spin. It still did, she noted.

“I’d like that, I guess.”

——

It was easy to fall into a routine.

After three weeks, she somehow ended up babysitting the dog on the weekends, usually taking him for morning runs and a game of catch in the chilly weather. A few times, Owen took her out for lunch, their conversations growing more and more relaxed, focused primarily on the stories about their jobs or the films they managed to catch now and then. They went to Gray’s softball game together, cheering from the bleachers and blowing on their hands in unison to stay warm. Afterwards, Claire shrugged at Karen’s questions.

“We’re just friends.”

After the turmoil of their relationship that left Claire drained, their friendship felt oddly normal, comfortable even. Those were the perks of knowing someone inside and out. She trusted Owen to order something for her if she was running late, certain that she wouldn’t find any anchovies or olives in her lunch, and he knew she would not only listen but also offer valid advice if he needed to rant about his new job. Getting used to a civilian life wasn’t as simple as it seemed to him from the sidelines.

With her, though, it was better. Much like after the island, they needed someone to be there for them, and without the pressure of a relationship, this something, whatever it was, didn’t take much effort. They’d always been able to talk to each other, and it counted for something. Hell, it counted for everything.

“They’re going to poison each other,” Owen chuckled one Sunday afternoon when they were sitting on the couch in Claire’s apartment watching *Hell’s Kitchen.*
She stirred in her seat and then habitually sprawled her legs across his lap, grabbing a handful of popcorn from the bowl on a coffee table, her eyes never leaving the screen.

“If they poison Gordon Ramsey, it would be on purpose,” she mused.

He laughed, his hand landing on one of her ankles. “I’m surprised it hasn’t happened already.”

“You just wait,” she grumbled and muted the TV when the program went into a commercial break.

Owen ticked the sole of her foot, his lips curved into a coy smile, but when Claire turned to him, it slipped away, replaced by a thick lump that stuck somewhere in his throat.

“Do you remember what went wrong?” He asked her quietly, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“Between us?”

Claire stiffened. Until today, it was a territory they never stepped into. An unspoken agreement neither one of them wanted to break.

She hugged her shoulders, sinking deeper into the cushions. “You didn’t take out the garbage, and I DVR-ed something over something of yours,” she said.

He shook his head in bewilderment. “Total lack of mutual respect.”

She scoffed. “We were doomed.”

It was not, however, until the credits started to roll and Owen told her he should get going, calling out for Sammy who took to sleeping in the kitchen – probably because that was where the food was – that it finally hit Claire that she didn’t want him to leave. Not now, and possibly not ever again, the realization landing on her like a blow.

“You okay?” Owen asked in the hallway as he shrugged into his coat and fastened Sammy’s leash to his collar, eyeing Claire’s somewhat dumbfounded expression with curiosity.

“What?” She jerked her head up.

“Thinking of snapping that Ramsey guy’s neck?” He inquired, amused.

“No,” she said distractedly, a ghost of a smile flickering across her face, and to avoid Owen’s inquisitive look, she bent down to say goodbye to Sammy. “So, I’ll see you…”

“On Wednesday,” he said.

“Right.” She nodded, smiled again, hoping it didn’t come out as a grimace this time.

He didn’t say anything else.

—

After the park, it took Claire a long time to start sleeping at night without waking up screaming, the blood-stained dreams etched into her mind like scars she knew she would never be able to erase.

It got better, thought. It wasn’t easy, but it got better – and there was time when she didn’t even think it was possible. Eventually, Jurassic World became a memory she tried to convince herself never happened. Maybe if she repeated it enough times, Claire told herself, she’d actually believe it.
A few days after the *Hell’s Kitchen* Sunday, Claire woke up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat and with a scream frozen on her lips, her heart beating so fast she thought she was having a heart attack. It hadn’t happened in at least six months now, and she couldn’t remember what she was supposed to do, how to make it go away, how to tell the difference between what was real and what wasn’t, uncertain of where she was for a moment or two.

Almost on instinct, she grabbed her phone from the nightstand and dialed Owen.

He picked up after the third ring, his voice low and groggy. “*Claire*?” Her breath still caught in her throat, she swallowed, hard. “*Claire, you there*?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have…” Claire squeezed her eyes shut, thinking that maybe she should just hang up.

“What’s going on?” He sounded more awake now, and a great deal more alarmed. “*You okay*?”

“Nothing. I’m fine. I’m sorry. I had a… rough night.” For a moment, she didn’t even realize how late it was, an instinct to reach out for him as natural as breathing.

“Would you like me to come over?” He asked.

“No. No, it’s fine. I’m just…”

“I’ll be there in 20.”

And then he hung up before she could say another word, leaving her wondering what the hell just happened.

Seventeen minute later, her doorbell rang, and Owen was there in his pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt she used to wear when they lived together and the nights were cold. His hair was sticking out in every direction on one side and flattened by the pillow on the other. He smelled of soap and sleep, and when he reached for her, she fell into his embrace.

It had been almost two years, but now they seemed like two minutes. He felt the same, smelled the same, and a gaping wound that Claire believed had healed already opened inside of her again.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again. “I didn’t know I was calling you until I was and…”

Owen pulled back just far enough to cup her face in his palms, his eyes searching her face with the intensity that made her skin tingle, and the darkness lurking in her periphery vision, waiting to take over, disappeared.

He smoothed her hair down with his hands, his thumbs running over her cheekbones in slow strokes, and in that moment, it was so easy for Claire to *let go*.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said softly, a small smile spearing on his face. “I wasn’t really sleeping.”

“Liar,” she smiled back, a tentative curve of her lips, but she was grateful for it anyway.

He shrugged. “Besides, we’re friends, right?”

An eyebrow quirked up, he watched her for a moment or two as Claire’s heart sank all the way down to her stomach, making her queasy and nauseated. *Friends*. Was that what they were, now? Perhaps. After everything…

The struggle must have been visible on her face. Owen’s forehead creased, his smile dropping.
“It’ll get better, you know,” he said, misreading her reaction completely. “I mean, it hasn’t really been this long.”

Her laughter was short and harsh, and not at all humorous. She wanted to pull away from him – put a thousand miles between them, for that matter – and she wanted him to leave so that she could spend the next five years sobbing into her pillow.

The one thing she had always found impressive about Owen was his ability to read the room in two seconds flat, sensing the mood and reacting accordingly. The downside of this impressive skill was that when he missed the point, he missed it by a mile. Although for a brief second, she wondered if he knew exactly what this was all about but decided to take an easy way out all the same. Just because she didn’t seem to have moved on even after nearly getting married to another man didn’t necessarily mean he didn’t, either.

Claire had been the one to say that maybe it wasn’t working out between them, back then. She’d told him that maybe they both weren’t ready, that maybe they needed space – maybe she needed space. The garbage issue and the DVR were just excuses both of them chose to hold on to instead of actually trying to resolved whatever the hell they had cornered themselves into. The truth was, she had a bad week, and everything simply kept piling up. And the next thing she knew, he’d packed up and slammed the door on the way out.

Friends…

And now he apparently thought she was freaking out because of a bad dream and the dinosaurs that could have eaten her but didn’t. Jesus….

Claire untangled herself from him and took a step back, suddenly self-conscious about everything she wasn’t even supposed to freak out about after living with a man for a year. She looked past him, as if interested beyond measure in the vignette patterns on the wallpaper behind him.

“I’m sorry to have called you, Owen, but maybe you should go. I’m fine.”

He studied her for a few moments, his frown deepening with every passing second, the air between them getting so charged Claire thought the sparks would start flying any moment. And when that happened, someone would get burned.

“No,” he shook his head, and something inside of him snapped – something Claire had no name for, as if he could breathe easier again.

“What?” She turned to him.

Owen ran his hand through his hair. Shrugged. “We’ve done this before. And the truth is, Claire, I can survive without you pretty damn fine. I’ve learned to live without you and it’s been working.” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down in his throat. “But I don’t want to.”

“They asked me to come back,” she blurted out before he could say anything else.

“Who?”

“Masrani,” she winced.

“What did you say?” His voice was tentative, as if they were standing on a thin ice that could break under the weight of their bodies if they so much as blinked too hard.

It had been a while since either one of them had to deal with Masrani Global and InGen, not after
they both quit the moment the torrent of law suits against the company diminished to a trickle. They wanted her back, of course. Occasionally, they wanted him back, too, but the language Owen used to say no probably told them to stop trying. And now he was wondering if her nightmares returned because of that phone call, his hands curling up into fists he wanted to put through a wall, or better yet – through someone’s face.

“I told then that I’m getting attached to the cold Wisconsin winters,” she fumbled with the hem of her pajama top for lack of any other things to do. Looked away.

“Okay,” he nodded, as if it was everything he needed to know, and then he stepped toward her again and threw am arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer to him and a brushing a kiss to the top of her head. “Do you really want me to leave? Because if it’s some kind of defense mechanism speaking, I might have to kick its ass.”

Claire buried her face in his chest and shook her head.

—

It wasn’t easier the second time around. Harder even, Claire had to admit. Maybe because they both knew what the end result could be if they stomped through this mine field again instead of thinking five steps ahead. Owen never asked her about her failed engagement, and she never volunteered any information, both of them content in knowing that the past needed to stay in the past.

He had moved back in a month later, chuckling as he watched Claire clear the space for him in the closet and rearrange her drawers so that he could have a couple of his own, Sammy’s gaze darting between the two of them in disbelief.

Right there with you, buddy, Claire wanted to tell him, but simply shook her head with mock exasperation at the sight of Owen’s shit-eating grin.

We walked over to her, slipped his arm around her waist, planted a kiss on her neck. “Not leaving ever again,” he whispered against her skin. And she smiled that giddy smile she didn’t think she was capable of anymore. But hey, stranger things happened.

“Finally,” Karen grumbled when they meet for lunch the following weekend in a cozy café not far from the Mitchells’ house while the snowstorm grew stronger outside. “I thought you two would never stop this nonsense. It was starting to get ridiculous.”

“Like you knew it would ever end,” Claire snorted and took a sip of her coffee.

Karen’s lips stretched into a wide smile. “You look different,” she said.

Claire nodded, her own lips lifting up at the corners. She glanced out the window and breathed out, “Happy.”

Chapter End Notes

As per usual, I regret nothing.
I got you a present

“You have got to stop doing it, Owen,” Claire sighed with exasperation.

She grabbed his chin and tilted it this way and that to survey the damage, the frown between her brows deepening by the moment. The cut over his left eyebrow looked nasty, but it was *how* he got it that bothered her more.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” Owen said, wincing a little when she dabbed at it with a cotton ball soaked in antiseptic.

She shot him a glare. “You can’t go around punching the reporters as you please.”

“He shouldn’t have jumped out at you with all that crap,” he protested defensively, determined not to be swayed by her reasoning and common sense and all the other stuff that somehow kept her from throwing that hook first even though she totally should have gone for it. Come to think of it, Owen wouldn’t mind seeing it happen sometime. Hopefully, sometime soon.

Their dancing around each other and the whole post-park issue started getting seriously old three weeks after their return home. Five weeks in, and he was practically climbing the walls with not knowing what to do. As it turned out, kissing someone when he thought they were going to fucking die in the next ten minutes was a hell of a lot easier that doing it when he knew they would have to live with the consequences of his actions.

“And he wasn’t a reporter,” Owen added, eyeing her with a bit of trepidation – the way anyone should eye a woman yielding a bottle of chemicals - and trying hard not to think of every place he wanted to put his hands and his lips. Like, all of her, for instance. “He was a blogger, Claire, and he had no business calling you… that.”

He swallowed, hard, a looked away, choosing to focus on the window behind her shoulder lest he did something else stupid – frankly, the ideas just kept piling up lately.

“Yes, and now I will have to go and clean up that mess,” she snorted.

“Ow, easy!” He grimaced when she pressed too hard on the cut.

“Sorry,” Claire hummed although her expression suggested that she was anything but. “But this is what you get for acting rash and stupid.”

“The word you’re looking for *chivalrous,*” he snorted.

She locked her gaze with his, her eyes narrowed slightly and her lips pursed together. Form this close, Owen could smell her shampoo and that lotion she put on her skin every goddamn morning – obviously with the intention of driving him insane – that he got not only used but damn addicted to in the two weeks he’d spent sleeping on her couch.

He moved out when their undefined relationship got too painful to bear, claiming that the basement in Barry’s house would give them both more privacy and that her couch was doing something
seriously bad to his back – the most ridiculous thing that ever came out of his mouth, really. Claire never said a word, driving him and his sorry bag of possessions to Barry’s house, chatting animatedly about how she’d be happy to help him find a proper apartment if he was up for it, her voice never giving away a regret over his departure he was secretly – or maybe not so secretly – hoping for.

And it was all fun and games until they left yet another debriefing this afternoon and some jerk shoved his microphone in Claire’s face and asked her what it was like to have all that blood on her hands. Honestly, Owen wouldn’t have been able not to hit him if he wanted to. And God help him, he did.

“You need to find better ways to channel your aggression,” Claire pointed out, zipping her first aid bag shut and handing him a glass of bourbon, an eyebrow arched pointedly.

Owen took a sip of his drink, allowing it to burn its way down to his stomach and thinking of how he would like to channel his aggression, none of them even remotely possible, by the looks of it.

Claire took a swig on her wine, watching him over the rim of her glass, and he looked away when the moment started to stretch, kicking himself for being the biggest goddamn coward in the world. Maybe he should move to Mars and start harvesting the crops there or some other crap. Maybe that would help him get his mind off her.

He nodded obediently though, “That would be nice.” And then finished his drink in one gulp.

—

A nightly game of video races had quickly became somewhat of a tradition for him and Barry.

“What’s going on with the two of you, anyway?” Barry asked with undisclosed amusement while he and Owen swerved their respective cars on the wide-screen TV in his living room, darting occasional looks at a beige Band-Aid gracing Owen’s face.

“Hell if I know,” Owen muttered, only barely managing to keep his kart on the track.

It was one of those existential questions that didn’t seem to have any answers – what was the meaning of life? What house would you really be sorted into if Hogwarts existed? What the actual fuck was going on between him and Claire Dearing?

“Well, is she seeing someone?” Barry pressed on.

The question sent Owen’s kart flying over the fence and straight into a tree. It exploded epically, making him wish he was inside that thing.

“No that I’m aware of, no,” he shook his head and tossed the controller on the couch. Grabbed his beer that turned lukewarm and took a gulp, hoping it would stop the churning in his stomach.

It didn’t.

Maybe he was crazy. Maybe he should stop taking hits - literally - for the woman who might not even need it. Maybe he needed to back the hell off and let her date corporate bankers and such – it would, after all, explain why she seemed to have retreated into her shell the moment they stepped off the plane. He wrote it off to jetlag at first when he probably should have seen it for what it was – her letting him down gently instead of smacking him face first into Not interested.
“Just ask her,” Barry shrugged, reaching for his beer.

“Just climb Mount Everest,” Owen grimaced. “It’s *that* simple.”

“Or ask her out,” Barry pointed out. “What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

“Just one?” Owen rubbed his eyes and slumped back against the cushions. He could name Top Ten just off the top of his head, maybe more if he allowed himself to dwell on it. Which he didn’t want to go into, under no circumstances whatsoever.

Barry laughed. “Seriously, dude. You slept on her couch for two weeks. She wouldn’t offer it to just anyone. Didn’t offer it to me, or Lowery.”

“That’s ‘cause you guys weren’t actually homeless,” Owen scoffed.

“All the same. Ask her. Before someone else does.”

Owen finished his beer and didn’t respond. Well, maybe someone else should do just that. God knew he could outrun a freaky hybrid and teach a pack of raptors how to play catch, but with Claire, it felt better to play safe.

He’d die alone and have no one to blame for it but himself.

—

“Look, I know you’ve been kind of mad about that guy having to wear a black eye, but killing me and hiding my body is not the way to go,” Owen commented a few days later when Claire called him and told him she was coming over to pick him up because she wanted to ‘show him something’.

For a moment, his hopes flared up with a new and overwhelming intensity, but when her car pulled up to Barry’s house and she waved to him to get in, there was nothing about her suggesting anything was different. He slipped into the passenger seat obediently and she took off even before he finished buckling up.

“Oh, get over yourself,” Claire rolled her eyes.

He recognized the route – she was taking him to her place.

So maybe there was something to his hoping after all…. Owen shook his head, kicking himself mentally, and chose to stare out the window instead.

“Then what is it?” He asked.

“I have something for you.”

He glanced at her, an eyebrow quirked up. “Pray tell.”

“And ruin a surprise? Not a chance.”

“Now you scare me,” he muttered, unconvinced, making Claire laugh. “Come on, what is it?”

“I got you something,” she said breezily.

“Huh?”
“A present.” A small smile lifted up the corners of her mouth, and Owen wished he could see her face and now just her profile. Wished she would never stop looking at him, period.

He was about to voice something of that kind, the words that he had been swallowing for quite a while now rolling on his tongue, ready to slip out, but just then Claire turned toward her condo and parked in her usual spot.

The unusual thing about it was a shiny black Ducati parked in a spot next to hers.

“Ta-da!” Claire smiled triumphantly and turned off the engine.

Owen’s jaw dropped a little. “What is this?”

“What does it look like?” She snorted and pushed her door open.

He scrambled out after her, staring at the bike it was something extraterrestrial.

“Is this a joke?”

“No, Owen. Jokes are funny. Motorcycles are… anything but, if you ask me.”

She fumbled with her purse for a moment, and then threw him the keys, which he caught effortlessly, making her smile.

“You need a hobby,” she explained when he failed to say anything comprehensible. “You seemed to be good with this kind of… thing on the island, so…” She trailed off and shrugged as if it was something so simple a 5-year old could get it, and he should definitely catch up faster. “Wanna give it a spin?”

Owen walked over to the bike, studying it closely, carefully, seemingly in such an awe he couldn’t believe it was actually in front of his eyes, his lips curved in a disbelieving smile.

He turned to her after a minute or two. “I can’t, Claire…”

“Well, I can’t keep it either.” She placed her hands on her hips, her head tilted slightly. “Seriously, stop making a big deal out of it and just… I don’t know. Have fun or something. Stop punching people, maybe.”

His grin widened. “Okay, let’s do it!”

Claire’s eyes widened. “Oh, no. I’m good. Go ahead.”

Owen stepped closer to her, his eyes gleaming with dare. “Nah-ah. You and me, both.”

“Owen, come on…”

He was only a few inches away from her now, a sly smile stretching his lips. “You’re not scared, are you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she huffed. “I just… I…”

“You go, I go.” He shook his head. “Just… like… that.”

It was exhilarating, Claire had to admit that. The whipping of her hair, the roar of the wind, the
hungry and excited revving of the engine, the vibration of the bike beneath their bodies and the endless snake of empty highway ahead of them.

She clasped her arms around Owen, holding on tight, breathing in the scent of him, seeping in the warmth of his body, grateful for it in the cool evening breeze. Her heart pounded in her chest, her blood seemed to be running faster, and if this was what it always felt like, no wonder Owen was so crazy about his bike. This sensation of... flying, she thought, was to die for.

In the end, Owen slowed down and stopped at an empty parking lot near one of the viewpoints that the coastline was dotted with. He killed the engine and propped the bike on the kickstand before pulling off the helmet and shaking his head, which only made his hair more rumpled, and Claire had to suppress the urge to run her fingers through it, smooth it down. However, it was the look of barely contained glee on his face that made her feel like someone punched her in the stomach.

She pulled her own helmet off and ran her fingers through her hair a few times – futile, really. The breeze from the ocean kept throwing it in her face.

“You look like a kid on Christmas morning,” Claire observed, climbing rather awkwardly off the bike.

“Why did you do it, Claire?” He asked, studying her closely, and making her turn away and look at the water below instead, unable to meet his inquisitive gaze.

She squinted against the sun and the wind, shielded her face with her hand. “I thought it would make you happy,” she admitted, hoping he could hear her through the wind, and also praying he couldn’t.

“Oh, hell no!” She even stepped back for good measure.

It took him some convincing to make it happen, but in the end she gave in – mostly to get him to shut up, Owen suspected. He explained the basics to her – where to put her feet, what to turn and what to push to get the motorcycle going, how to keep her balance and use it to guide the bike. He slid into a seat behind her, his hands resting on hers on the handgrips.

“You really do have a death wish, Grady,” Claire muttered, eyeing the cliffs on the other side of the highway with growing dread. The one and only outcome of this foolish idea was, in her opinion, them both taking a dive into the ocean.

“I’m gonna be right here,” Owen assured her, his breath tickling her neck and her ear and making her shiver. “And I will never let anything happen to you.”

It was harder than Claire had imagined. The bike was heavy and uncooperative under them, too awkward and constantly tipping to one side or the other. How the hell did Owen make handling it look so graceful and effortless was beyond her.

To Owen’s credit, he was patient and thorough, catching the bike every time it threatened to fall down and crush them both, the warmth of his chest against Claire’s back eventually soothing her into relaxing and following her instincts instead of trying to simply get it over with. And when it finally moved in a straight line for a hundred yards, she let out a delighted whoop, making Owen laugh and snake his arm around her waist for a better grip.
“That was fun, you can admit it now,” he said an hour later when she told him she’d had enough, her biceps trembling with exertion.

Claire leaned against the bike, pushed her hair behind her ears and folded her arms over her chest, a small smile playing on her lips.

“It was not bad,” she didn’t argue. And then added, “I missed this… You know, hanging out.”

She wasn’t looking at him again, and for a long moment, Owen simply stared at her profile, outlined against the sunset, the wind persistently pushing sift wisps of her hair in her face, her shoulders relaxed.

“I thought you wanted me to leave,” he said quietly, recalling all those times when she mentioned how he needed to get on his feet again, tell Ingen to fuck off and get his life back. Had he been hearing her wrong this whole time?

“I thought you didn’t want to stay.” She turned to him, her gaze quizzical, uncertain, not quite sure why he was looking at her like he’d never seen her before. “What?” She asked when he didn’t say anything and the pause started to get weird.

“Oh, fuck…” Owen mumbled, and then he was right there before her in two quick strides, pulling her upright, one of his hands on her waist, the other one cupping the back of her head.

And before either one of them knew what was happening, he was kissing her again – hastily at first, his lips hard on hers, demanding and needy, like it was a matter of life and death, and maybe in some way it was. Claire arched her back against him, gripping his shirt, his shoulders, hands reaching up to lock around his neck, her lips parting against his, deepening and slowing down the kiss.

“That was…” Owen mumbled, pulling back for air.

“Let’s get away from here,” she whispered against his mouth.

The ride back to her place was the shortest and the longest in Owen’s life. He was speeding up shamelessly, although not as much as he would have without Claire sitting behind him, her arms around his waist.

Inside of Claire’s apartment, they started kissing again and weren’t able to stop, hands reaching for whatever piece of clothing they could pull off one another, bumbling with the clasps and buttons and everything in-between. Owen threaded his fingers through her hair, drinking her in, wanting all of this fast and yet holding himself back to make every moment last for eternity. Her hands slipped under the hem on his tee and she pushed it up until he finally allowed her to pull it over his head to toss it aside, her laughter sending his mind reeling. Her own blouse – missing some of the buttons – was already hanging loosely on her shoulders, and Owen pushed it down, his fingers trailing the length of her bra straps.

“Don’t…” She whispered when he finally figured out which direction the bedroom was and started steering them both toward it.

“Hm?” Owen pulled back from trialing slow, hot kisses down her neck, his eyes black and almost wild with need.

She looked up at him, swallowed hard, and shook her head. “Don’t stop.”
“Stay,” Claire murmured a long while later, curled into him, her hand drawing lazy patters on his chest. Pressed a kiss to his shoulder, and then to his collarbone.

He chuckled – the low sound reverberating through her body, and kissed the top of her head. “Why? What do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know,” a giggle bubbling up in her chest, Claire looked up at him, his face only barely visible in indigo twilight, save for a smile to broad it could split his face in two and so bright it was lighting up the room. “I might have an idea or two.”

“Jesus, Dearing…..” He caught her hand, kissed her fingers slowly, and then swiftly rolled them both over when Claire least expected it, pinning her hands to the mattress above her head and kissing her again like he’d never done it before.

A low moan rose in the back of Claire’s throat, her hands flexing against his and her impressive vocabulary pretty much reduced to please and more. He laughed against his mouth, and kissed her deeper. “I don’t think I’ll ever leave…”

Chapter End Notes

Let's face it, it's totally something Claire would do, so....
Why on earth would they schedule those ridiculous meetings this early in the morning, Owen had no idea. His raptors weren’t fans of any kind of human schedule to begin with, but every time he had to cut their feeding or the training session short because he had to be stuck in some room with thirty other people listening to someone or another drone on about some crap for what usually felt like forever, they tended to be extra pissy.

He was late.

Again.

Of course, he was late! He couldn’t just tell his animals to please not be little shits for once and let him have it his way when the clock was ticking and he was risking getting in trouble.

Owen slipped into a packed conference room and made it to an empty spot in the back, stepping gracelessly on several feet on his way there and only belatedly realizing that the only empty spot was right next to none other than Claire Dearing. Owen looked back, assessing his options and getting several displeased looks from the people who were apparently trying to actually hear what Simon Masrani was taking about from where he was standing at the head of a massive mahogany table.

Owen considered leaving altogether, but just then Claire turned to him, her eyes locking with his. She pressed her lips together, the slight frown she was already wearing deepened by the second. And it was suddenly a matter of not backing away for him.

He stepped toward her, noticing how she nearly sucked her breath in, stiffening, and tried to focus on why the hell he was dragged away from the paddock and his work.

“…better investment opportunities… advanced technologies that allow us… the legacy left behind…”

Simon Masrani went on with his usual pep talk. Owen like the guy. Liked him a lot actually. Compared to the majority of the corporate heads that looked at the dinosaurs and saw nothing but sacks of money, he seemed to appreciate them for what they were. But even Owen had to admit that Masrani’s vision of the park was a bit too idealistic for it not to backfire one day. You couldn’t leave a kid alone in a candy store and not expect drastic consequences.
“… and because we pride ourselves on our innovative thinking… always comes a day when we need… to accomplish the goals…”

Owen’s head started to swim.

He leaned over to Claire and touched her hand lightly. “What’s this about?” He whispered into her ear.

His touch startled her, making her jerk her hand away from him, her breath catching in her throat so audibly it was almost comical.

“If you made it here on time, Mr. Grady, you’d know,” she whispered back without looking at him.

Owen snickered – couldn’t helm himself, really.

“Oh, come on! You can’t possibly be this repulsed by me, Claire. You agreed to go out with me,” he snorted, lips curved into a cynical grimace of a smile.

She whipped her head around and glowered at him. “What does this have anything to do with–” she hissed.

A man standing in front of them turned around. “Do you mind…” he started. His gaze landed on Claire, his eyes widened. “Sorry, Ms. Dearing, I didn’t know….” He turned away again – so fast Owen suspected he could hurt his neck or something.

“For Christ’s sake, I asked a simple question!” He rolled his eyes. “Not asked you out.”

“And I gave you a simple answer,” Claire retorted.

“Are you always this impossible early in the morning?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He jaw dropped.

“Just happy that I dodged a bullet,” he mumbled.

More people turned around, not oblivious to their exchange of pleasantries now.

“You…” Claire started, her eyes narrowing.

But Owen just shook his head and started squeezing back toward the exit, deciding it wasn’t worth the trouble after all. He could catch up later. Talk to Barry or something. Anyone, just to get away from Claire Dearing, the irritation he couldn’t quite explain even to himself threatening to tear him apart from the inside.

Would it really kill her to not be so… so… what? He clenched his jaw, finally reaching the door. Ignored the grunts of the people clustered around it, all but feeling Claire’s glare on his back. Well, she might as well go and suck it, for all he cared. Surely the unmasked hurt that flickered in her gaze when he said he dodged the bullet wasn’t real… was it? How could it be?

Owen pursed his lips into a thin line, his eyebrows knitting together, uneasy guilt rolling in his stomach and making him feel even more antsy and on edge, even more eager to get away from here, from her.

His phone chimed with a text message. “You coming or what?” Barry.
Owen typed quickly, “On my way.” He looked back at the doors he just walked out of, and then turned around her walked off.

Owen had the most exciting job in the world, and he would honesty take no crap from anyone claiming otherwise. How many people got to train real, honest to God Velociraptors? Okay, scratch that. How many people got to see real, hones to God Velociraptors?

That being said, however, the evenings on the island – those that didn’t require his immediate presence at the paddock – could be kind of slow. Not for the tourists perhaps, or the personnel that didn’t mind mingling with the crowds on Main Street, but for everyone who didn’t particularly like the buzz and commotion of the resort, the only other choice was watching the tv. Which in Owen’s case wasn’t even an option, seeing as how his little corner of the world was too far away from the park to have proper cable.

Which was why an angry and demanding knock on the door sometime around 8 in the evening caught him completely off-guard. His wasn’t the place frequented by anyone, except maybe Barry for a lazy chat. But Barry wouldn’t knock. And he certainly wouldn’t try to knock his door down.

Owen swung it open, curious, only to find Claire standing on the other side, fuming and about to explode by the looks of it. She was wearing skinny jeans and a white top, which threw him off even more than her visit in and of itself. The only other time he saw her not dressed in one of her fancy suits was when she wore a nice blue cocktail dress to their one and only date. The one he sort of made her wear to Margaritaville, of all places.

The memory still left him with deep, hollow longing whenever it popped up in his mind.

“What is wrong with you, Mr. Grady?” Claire demanded meanwhile.

Owen propped his shoulder against the doorframe and put on a slow smile, allowing himself to give her a long once-over. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Claire?”

She pursed her lips together for a moment, glaring daggers at him, her arms folded over her chest. Behind her, Owen could see her silver car parked at the edge of the clearing near his property. Her normally straight hair started to curl in the South American humidity. And she was wearing flats. It was the first time Owen saw her in anything other than her impressive heels – how the woman survived a day in those things, let alone week after week after week was beyond him. He never really noticed how short she was, compared to him. If he were to wrap his arms around her, the top of her head would be resting just under his chin…

Owen shook this thought off.

“We may be having our issues,” she went on, oblivious to where his mind had wandered off, “but you don’t have to drag it into our professional relationship.”

His brow cocked up curiously. “Oh, you mean when you’re being condescending, I should just nod and keep quiet?”

Claire all but stepped back as if he’d slapped her. Her eyes narrowed. “This is not what I said. Just because I merely pointed out that you shouldn’t be late for the meetings you’re expected to attend–”

Owen’s smile slipped off, his gaze hardening. “What is this really about? The fact that I didn’t call after you made it clear you never wanted to see me again?”
She tipped her chin up. “You’re the one who keeps dragging our personal history into the mix, Mr. Grady. I never said a word about it.”

“Owen,” he almost growled, sick of this dancing around this bullshit. “And don’t tell me it’s not about what happened.”

She rolled her eyes, managing to look both breathtakingly gorgeous and somewhat menacing in the pale twilight. “Get over yourself. As if I’d say yes to a man who clearly didn’t give a damn the first time around.”

“Well, the last time you did it for both of us,” he snorted, infuriated and yet deeply ashamed, her accusation so spot-on it threw him off balance.

Claire gave him a measure look. “At least I put some effort, Mr. Grady. Because I wanted it to work.” She said quietly. “So trust me, I’m not the biggest fan of yours either, but if you could please stop assuming that everything I say or do is about you…”

Owen stepped over the threshold in a heartbeat, so swiftly Claire didn’t even notice he moved until he was right before her, their faces only a few inches apart, and she could see a whole spectrum of blue in his eyes, feel his breath on her face, smell the sun and the jungle on his skin. It was unnerving, exhilarating. Too much and not enough, and she wanted to turn around and start running. And she wanted to never leave.

“Did you really come all the way here to yell at me?” Owen asked quietly, somehow crowding her personal space, stealing away her ability to breathe properly.

“I don’t want anyone to think of me as unprofessional because of your comments, Mr. Grady,” she responded, and her voice almost didn’t tremble. Not enough for him to notice, or so she hoped.

“Owen,” he repeated pointedly.

And then his arm was around her and Claire was pressed flush against him, his lips on hers and his fingers trailing through her hair. She gasped, surprised, the beating of his heart against her chest so fast and loud it made her dizzy. And then she closed her eyes, her lips opening up to the kiss, his tongue slipping into her mouth in an instant as her fingers clutched a fistful of his cotton shirt. A low moan rose in the back of her throat, and Owen’s grip on her tightened momentarily, possessive, wanting.

“Why did you do it?” Claire breathed out, panting, when he pulled away for air.

“Because I wanted to do it since that damned date. Since before then.” He smoothed her hair down with the palm of his hand, cupping her cheek in it, lifting her chin up until she had no choice but to look him in the eye, her checks flushed and her lips parted slightly, and it was so hard for him to think straight, to exist without… without…

Claire swallowed, her gaze shifted from his eyes to his mouth.

“Want me to stop?” Owen asked in a low, raspy voice.

She shook her head and grabbed his shirt again, pulling herself up on her tiptoes, her fingers tangling in his hair, her mouth finding his again while Owen’s arms locked behind her back.

“Don’t go,” he murmured between the kisses.

“Won’t…”
The next morning, Claire woke up to his lips trailing slow, light kisses up her back. Smiling to herself, she stretched her pleasantly sore muscles, and rolled over. And Owen was right there, kissing her fully on the mouth, his bedhead so ridiculously adorable she couldn’t help but laugh when he nuzzled into her neck.

“This is how our date should have ended,” Owen whispered against her skin.

“I did want to take those board shorts of yours off,” she admitted, wrapping her arms around his neck. And then her eyes grew wide. “What time is it?”

He threw a quick look over his shoulder. “8.30.”

“Oh, God.” The color drained off her face. “Oh God. No, no. I have a… God, Owen, I have… something… scheduled for the morning.”

Quickly, she disentangled herself from him and leaned over the edge of the bed, fumbling with the pile of her clothes left on the floor, searching for her phone, her throat closing up with panic. Five missed calls from Zara.

“Shit…” she muttered.

“Hey, I’ll drive you, okay?” Owen caught her hand and pulled her toward him, not particularly liking the way she was reacting to something that clearly wasn’t a like or death kind of thing.

Claire swallowed, shook her head. “It’s fine. I’m fine.” She kissed him quickly before slipping out of bed. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

He cupped the back of her head with his hand and deepened the kiss, making her start to reconsider her priorities - against her better judgement. “You bet.”

It wasn’t that their new relationship was a big deal, or that it would have been a problem if they made it public, but Claire liked keeping it under wraps. She liked sneaking away to his bungalow on most evenings, or have Owen drive over to her place when she couldn’t leave for some reason or the other. He didn’t mind the secrecy – not that it was much a mystery, as far as she could tell. Zara noted that she was ‘glowing’ which made Claire wave it off dismissively, although not before a small smile crossed her face, and her assistant arched her eyebrows meaningfully, although she didn’t ask any other questions.

And Owen…

It was hard to imagine she had spent the last year without this, without him. Under a thick layer of smug and obnoxious, he was sweet and caring, and he made her stomach tight whenever she so much as thought about him, promptly pushing her job – which tended to be high on her list of accomplishments – so far into the background Claire couldn’t even see it sometimes.

“You never told me what that meeting was about, by the way,” he told her quietly a few weeks later as they stood in the back of the observation room at the raptors’ paddock while a group of potential investors watched Blue, Delta, Charlie and Echo play behind the reinforced glass.

Owen wasn’t a fan of showing his raptors to the ‘money bags’, the idea of them ever becoming one of the park’s attractions too uncomfortable for his liking. But having Claire visit him was a certain
advantage, and he wasn’t willing to forego it if he could help it.

His fingers brushed lightly against her hand when she didn’t say anything, too engrossed in watching the people watch the raptors, her lower lip caught between her teeth – he wanted to kiss her so bad in that moment it physically hurt.

“What?” She looked up, and then shook her head. “It was nothing. Nothing concerning you, at least. Simon… Mr. Masrani wants to make a new hybrid. To reinvigorate the public’s interest.”

He nodded curtly, uncertain of what to make of her words. But then Claire’s hand slipped into his, her fingers interlacing with his and derailing the train of his thought.

“It’s nothing,” she repeated and looked up at him, smiling like an honest to God sunshine. “We still on for tonight?”

Owen glanced briefly at the visitors to make sure they paid no mind to anything around them except the animals in front of them. He reached his hand to tuck her hair behind her ear and then leaned down to brush a kiss to her forehead. “You bet, Ms. Dearing.”
“Hey, have you seen the..? Oh.”

Chapter Notes

Kinda fluff alert?

“Hey, have you seen the..? Oh.”

“Hey, Claire….” Owen squinted, observing the pipe snapped in two and the water dripping from the ceiling onto the futon in Barry’s house he currently called home. “Remember that nice couch of yours?… I mean, of course you do, you see it every day.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, give me a call?”

Grimacing, Barry shook his head, although Owen couldn’t tell if it was his dumb message that made his friend all but facepalm, or the fact that as of now, they were both homeless. At least until the plumbing service came over and put an end to this inside pool. Frankly, Owen was just as torn.

“I thought she asked for some space,” Barry observed, picking up soaked cushions and dropping them onto a nearby chair.

Owen shrugged. “You’ve got your mom’s house, man. I’ve got a cardboard box if I don’t find a place to crash.” He ran his hand through his hair, already starting to regret that phone call and wishing he could erase the message before Claire got a chance to hear it. “She’s gonna say no anyway. I just… it was a knee-jerk reflex, okay?” He sighed and looked at Barry, his expression sheepish.

Truth be told, his situation was far less melodramatic than he was making it sound. Barry did offer him to come stay with his family if necessary, and it was only the fact that there’d be, like, 6 of them crammed in a 3-bedroom apartment that made him say no. He could call Lowery instead, or one of his NAVY pals currently stationed in San Diego, knowing that they would gladly offer their inflatable matresses or pull-out couches to him.

So why would—

His phone let out a series of chimes and Owen reached for it quickly.

“Hey,” he breathed out.

“What happened?” Claire asked. He could hear the traffic and the voices on her end of the line, figuring she had to be on her way to her car. An Ambulance passed by, swallowing whatever she said next, and Owen waited for a few moments for the blare of a siren to fade away.

“A flood,” he said simply and glanced down at his soaked shoes, trying hard not to think of the enormity of what had happened yet.

“I’ll pick you up in 15,” she said simply.

“No, I’m good—” Owen started, but by then she’d already hung up. He turned to Barry and stuffed his phone into the pocket of his pants. “Well, I’m no longer a hobo.”
Barry snickered. “As if you ever were.”

“You didn’t have to do it,” Owen tossed a duffel bag with his sorry possessions into the backseat of Claire’s car, choosing to come pick up his bike sitting in the back parking lot sometime later and climbed into the passenger seat of her silver Mercedes.

She slipped into the driver’s seat – after making sure that Barry was all set and didn’t need an extra floor space in her condo or at the very least a lift – and buckled up, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“It’s the least I could do for someone whose whole life is in a desperate need of a couple of cycles in a drier,” she said, starting the car.

Owen chuckled and shook his head. “Thanks, really.” He watched her pull into traffic, heading toward her apartment, the late afternoon sun tangling in her fiery curls – he couldn’t even begin to thank her for not straightening her hair obsessively anymore, even though the memory of trailing his fingers through it still hurt so much he had to consciously remind himself to breathe. “I mean it, Claire. You didn’t have to do it.”

“I know,” she glanced at him quickly, and something inside of Owen snapped. It had been a couple of weeks since he last saw her, but until this very moment he had no idea just how much he missed her. “So, what happened? Did you flood Barry’s place?”

“It was an old pipe,” he protested defensively.

“Just making sure my place is not in danger;” she snorted.

“You’re letting me stay over,” he told her as if it was news. “I can’t guarantee anything.”

She laughed.

And Owen thought he’d much rather be stabbed in the heart than sit next to her like this and not be able to touch her, kiss her, hold her.

*It’d be better that way*, Claire had told him several weeks ago. *For whom?* He wanted to ask. *Are you sure about that?*

He didn’t say any of that. Instead, he packed up and, well, did as she’d asked.

Even now, he was still waiting for the *better* part to kick in. It must have gotten lost in the mail or something, Owen decided in the end. Because if *better* was supposed to hurt like a bitch, he sure as hell didn’t want to imagine what would happen if she was wrong and this whole plan took a turn for the worse.

Although he had to admit that the truth was that he was fucking scared. Scared that she’d get to the *better* part first, and that it would be so good, she wouldn’t even look back again. She’d move forward and wave him a goodbye. Or stop picking up his calls, or the broken pieces of Owen Grady himself. That she’d toss him out like the Band-Aid that kept the post-incident Claire from ripping at the seams and forget he even existed, forget what it was like to kiss him, and tell him secrets in the dead of night when neither of them could sleep.

And the worst thing was that if all of that happened, he wouldn’t even have it in him to blame her for it. What if her *better* was to forget about the incident and everything related to it altogether?
And he was a big part of everything, Owen knew that much. A fucking huge part, at that. Was that what she was trying to do? Move on and pretend that nothing happened?

“Well,” Claire turned the key and pushed the front door open. She stepped into the hallway and cleared her throat. “You know where everything is.”

He nodded, offered her a lopsided grin. Dropped his bag on the floor and observed as much of her place as he could from his spot, and then followed her into a spacious kitchen. “Sure do.”

“And if you need anything…” she continued.

“I know,” Owen winced a little and quickly composed himself before she turned. “Look, I wouldn’t have…” She raised an eyebrow at him. “I didn’t mean to call you.”

“So you butt-dialed me when your house decided to channel Titanic?” She inquired, leaning forward across the counter, elbows propped on the cool countertop.

He rolled his eyes, “Not what I meant.” Met her gaze. “What I’m trying to say… When you asked me to get lost, well… I’m not trying to, you know, take any of that space that you need.”

“I never told you to get lost,” Claire pointed out. “I just needed… to think it all through, is all.”

“And kicking me out of your bed was the way to go.” An eyebrow arched, lips curved in amusement, he tilted his head to his shoulder as he waited for her response.

Claire sighed. “It wasn’t about that. I needed to know that what you and I had was real and not some kind of a post-traumatic crap. You’ve seen Speed.”

“It seemed real enough to me. And since when are you taking advice from chick flicks, anyway?”

Her jaw dropped in mock shock. Or maybe in a genuine one, he couldn’t really tell when it came to Keanu Reeves. “It’s not a chick flick, it’s a classic.”

“So is ER,” Owen told her.

“You need my couch or not?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She straightened up and pushed off the counter. “I’ll get some spare sheets for you.”

“Claire,” he called after her. She turned. “Thanks. Really. I know I can be a pain in the ass, but I really do appreciate… this. Regardless of… you know, everything else. It won’t be long, I swear.”

She nodded, her lower lip caught between her teeth, and gave him a long concerned look. “Take your time.” A pause. “Are you, you know, okay?”

He flashed a megawatt smile at her. “When wasn’t I?”

She actually had an answer or two to that, or a hundred, truth be told. But if Owen was good at anything – well, apart from her favourite anything – it was taking a conversation and derailing it so artfully she’d never figure out how they managed to end up flying off a cliff. She’d confront him about his issues, and they’d end up talking about Patrick Dempsey or some other nonsense.

What was this man’s deal with the medical dramas, anyway?
Claire was many things, but up until a few weeks ago, she didn’t think coward was one of them.

And yet here she was, so much in denial Freud would’ve been ecstatic to climb inside of her head had he still been alive and build a whole thesis out of her sorry existence.

The problem never was that she wasn’t sure about them. The problem was that she wanted them to work a bit too much for her liking. And so when InGen asked Owen to go back and he said yes for the sake of finding out what happened to Blue, she used it as an excuse to tell him that they (she) needed to take a break and sort out their (her) priorities before plunging into a relationship, and maybe later they (she) would be more sure about the whole thing.

Frankly, even now, it sounded so ridiculous Claire had no idea how Owen didn’t laugh in her face right there and then. She probably would have. Instead, he packed up and left, and all of sudden she was both relieved and disappointed for the reasons she couldn’t quite explain – it was her idea, after all.

The thing was he was right. And boy, did she hate it when he was right! She did have goddamn control issues, and relationships weren’t about control. They were about chaos and unpredictability and jumping off the cliffs. For a girl who brought a checklist on a first date, it wasn’t just outside of her comfort zone. It was as if comfort zone wasn’t even a thing and Claire had to walk on broken glass for the rest of eternity.

“You know, one day he’s going to wake up and realize that maybe this kind of stuff is not worth the trouble,” Karen had told her when Claire finally found it in her to talk to somebody about this mess and called her sister.

“Gee, thanks,” she sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. It wasn’t like she’d never thought of that herself!

Which ultimately brought her to their current situation and her being happy about the flood. Well, not the flood itself, obviously. She wasn’t that insane. But she was happy – she was fucking ecstatic – that he called her because Gog knew she was not likely to do it herself.

Although what she was supposed to do with it now, Claire had no idea.

There were certain perks to living with someone she knew inside and out. He knew not to leave dirty dishes lying around and she did her best not to hog the shower in the morning. (“It would be faster if we took it together,” he told her once, but his easy smile was teasing and not suggestive, and when he was gone, she found herself thinking that it wasn’t that bad of an idea.) And true to his word, Owen was rarely around. He’d usually leave before her and come back around 8 in the evening, having to stop by Barry’s place after work – they were repainting it after the water had been drained out.

Other than that, it was… it was easy. Comfortable. Goddamn frighteningly so. They settled into a familiar pattern of him going for a run early in the morning and her making sure she added an extra scoop of Arabica to the coffee machine, and one of them occasionally picking up takeout on their way back home, seeing as how their combined culinary skills left a lot to be desired. Owen was a pro of undercooking, and she could burn water. And she did once – when she forgot to add pasta to the boiling pot.

Claire plopped down on the couch one night, habitually reaching for the remote, but Owen snatched it with lightning speed, holding it away from her.
“Han-ah!” He shook his head. “No more Shark Tank.”

“Aw, come on!” She tried to take a hold of it, ending up all but sprawled all over him in her attempts to grab it, frustrated at first and then flustered when she found their faces not an inch away from one another. His gaze slipped down to her lips. With a scowl, she scooted back and picked up her carton of Chinese food. “Not Grey’s again. I mean it, Owen. If I see Dempsey’s stupid perfect face one more time, I swear I’m going to scream.”

His ears perked up at that. “In a good way?” He inquired. “Wait, you think he’s perfect?”

Claire rolled her eye and stuffed a spring roll in her mouth. “You know what I mean,” she mumbled around it.

They settled on marathoning the Die Hard movies instead.

“I don’t understand why you wouldn’t just quit,” Owen said half an hour later.

“You know why,” she sighed without looking away from the screen. They’d been through this a million times before. Once again, she wanted to remind him it wasn’t she who actually went back to the island. But she didn’t. Because he explicitly told InGen to go fuck themselves when he came back. And she didn’t.

“It wasn’t your fault, Claire,” Owen repeated the same lie she’d heard before. She wondered if she’d ever hear it enough times to believe it.

She dozed off hallway through a second film, her legs stretched across Owen’s lap. And for once, she dreamt of something other than blood and death.

—

“Hey, have you seen the..? Oh.” Claire walked into the living room on Saturday morning just as Owen pulled off his running shirt and stopped short, suddenly unsure of where to look and what to do. “Sorry,” she cleared her throat.

He straightened up in all of his shirtless glory, fine beads of sweat glistening on his forehead and chest, tight muscles rippling under his tanned skin.

“Relax, Claire. It’s nothing you haven’t seen before,” he smiled, and maybe it was her and a great deal of wishful thinking, but she had a feeling that if she’d crossed the ten feet between them now and threw her arms around his neck, he wouldn’t mind all that much.

“I was going to pick up some stuff at the supermarket,” she explained, choosing to ignore his comment. Because if she didn’t, she end up crying. Or worse – she’d jump him or something.

“I’ll be out of your hair in a few days,” Owen was speaking at the same time, both of them falling silent afterwards. “So, the groceries, huh?” He asked when she didn’t say anything else and the pause started to stretch. “We need to get something fire-resistant,” he joked.

Clare swallowed, hard. Willed her voice to sound even despite the fact that her stomach was all in knots. “Is the apartment ready?”

He swung his sweaty shirt over his shoulder and shrugged. “The paint’s gonna take a few more days to dry up and then… Well, then you’ll be able to walk around your condo in your underwear again.”
She smirked, “When did I ever–”

“It’s a rhetoric question, right?”

And those goddamn dimples made her feel lonely and hollow, the walls of her house closing in on her, terrified of being able to hear the sound of her own breathing in the empty rooms once he was gone. Except that one time on the day he moved in, Owen never brought up the subject of them again, and she couldn’t help feeling foolish now. Maybe there was something to Karen’s words. Maybe he’d grown tired of waiting. It wasn’t like she could blame him.

“Give me ten, and I’ll be good to go,” Owen said, oblivious to the fact that she was basically having some sort of existential crisis as he squeezed past her, heading for the bathroom to take a shower. “I think we’re running out of chocolate chip cookies.”

—

On the three-month anniversary of the tragedy – and a day before Owen planned to relocate to Barry’s once again, several local channels decided to run a segment on Jurassic World, finishing it with Masrani’s announcement about the reopening. Not now, maybe not even soon, but eventually – because they’d be bloody idiots not to do it, and Claire felt disgusted with herself for thinking that, for knowing it from the start perhaps, but not willing to admit it even to herself. And what else could they do? Scrap it and forget that Isla Nublar existed? Ignore this money-making machine? People would forget about the I-Rex massacre – she knew they would – and everything would repeat again.

In the evening, Owen came home to a dark condo, surprised to spot Claire’s car in the driveway but sign of her anywhere.

He found her five minutes later, sitting on the floor in her bedroom, in the narrow space between her bed and the window. A half empty bottle of tequila was perched precariously on the edge of bedside table beside her, her white pumps lying haphazardly on the floor, which was what freaked him out even more than tequila – because Claire hated tequila – seeing as how her shoes were her most prized possession. Her knees were drawn up to her chest and her arms were wrapped around her shoulders as she stared sightless ahead.

“Claire?” He crouched down beside her, alarmed. “Hey, what is it? What happened?” Gently, he pushed a strand of hair from her forehead, tucking it behind her ear, and it was the touch of his hand that made her turn to him, her eyes huge and a little too glazed over for his liking.

“I quit.” She muttered. “They told me they were reopening that place, and I couldn’t… I had to…” She trailed off and just stared up at him.

“Oh, fuck.” Owen plopped down beside her and pulled her closer, breathing in the scent of her hair and her floral perfume, and everything else that was just Claire, her whole body trembling slightly. She tucked her face into his neck, her fingers closed around the sleeves of his shirt. “Good for you,” he murmured into her hair, kissing the top of her head. “Good for you, Claire.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she whispered into his chest and took in a shuddering breath.

They sat like that for a while as he held her, his hand running up and down her arm, waiting for the tension to leave her body, for her to relax into him.

“So, what now?” Owen asked quietly at last.

She didn’t respond at once, her fingers flexing around a fistful of his shirt. “Now… now I… I don’t
He froze, uncertain that he’d heard her right. Pulled back to actually look at her – at as much of her as he could see in the light of a streetlamp filtering through the drapes. “Come again?”

“You heard me,” she said if a little defensively.

“Is this you talking or tequila?” Owen’s eyes narrowed skeptically.

“I didn’t drink it,” she shook her head. “The bottle was already opened. I took a swig and… it was disgusting.” Claire pulled back. “My point being, I don’t need space. I fucked up and I miss you, and I don’t want to wait till you don’t want me anymore. And I’m scared, Owen. I’m scared of this, and of what’s going to happen tomorrow, but I don’t want to lose you. I needed time… but I didn’t need it, I just needed to get my priorities straight. And I think I did.”

He broke into a smile – so goddamn bright she through she’d have to look away from him, from this overwhelming happiness that was radiating off him. And something inside of her broke and crumpled, setting her free, and before Claire knew what she was doing, she leaned over and was kissing him, feeling like her heart might burst in her chest. He palms found his stubbled cheeks and Owen’s hands were suddenly everywhere, in all the right places, making her wish for more. For everything.

She fumbled with his shirt, pulling it over his head while Owen worked on unbuttoning her blouse, his hands skimming over her skin, sending sparkles of pleasure through her body.

“What about not jumping into relationships based on traumatic experiences?” Owen asked, kissing his way down her neck.

“We’ll have to base it on something else then.”

—

When Claire woke up in the morning, the sun was up and she was alone.

She slipped from under the covers, pulled on Owen’s shirt that was draped over the back of the chair and padded into the hallway, heading for the living room where the bedding she’d given him several days ago was folded neatly and he was currently sorting through the contents of his duffel bag.

He looked up when he caught her stepping into the room out of the corner of his eye, smiling at her mussed hair and her futile attempts at stifling her yawns.

Claire folded her arms over her chest and leaned against the doorjamb. “I thought you weren’t moving,” she said carefully, trying to keep her voice neutral.

“Oh, I am.” Owen grinned. He dropped his bag on the couch and walked over to her. A palm of her face, he tipped her chin up and kissed her. “Down the hallway. If you have a drawer or two for me, that is.”

She craned her neck and brush her lips to his again. “We’ll figure something out.”

He studied her for a moment or two. “You sure about this?”

Claire bit her lip, shook her head. “No,” she admitted honestly. “But I know that I don’t not want it. And of all the things I don’t not want, this one is pretty much at the very top of the list.”
Owen laughed, the sound a vibration reverberating through her. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, drawing her into him and planted a kiss on her forehead. “Real world is a scary place, Ms. Dearing. You’re gonna love it.”

“I’m sure I will.” She snaked her arms around his waist and pressed her lips to the pulse point on his neck, smiling at the low growl that formed in the back of his throat. “And about that drawer… finding it might take a while. How about I reintroduce you to my bed first?”
Chapter Summary

Another one of the tumblr prompts for Hands:

"Person A cupping Person’s B face with their hands.
Bonus: Person B’s shaking hands reach up and covers Person A’s hands For clawen"

Plus a post break up AU:

“i found your box of letters underneath my bed last night and because i’m a nosy motherfucker i decided to read them and it turns out they were all addressed to me and the last one was dated the day you moved out and i’m not quite sure why i thought this would be a good idea but here i am, standing on your doorstep, wondering why the fuck we’re not together anymore”

Chapter Notes

I am honestly so in love with those!

Owen’s most vivid memory of the months he’d spent with Claire was the one of that night a while back when he was too wired up to fall asleep, too anxious for the reasons he couldn’t recall now. It happened not long after the park went down, when he would often find himself unable to catch a moment of shut eye, his brain crowded with the images he wanted to erase but didn’t know how.

Back then, Claire had another problem. Nightmares. Her mind would shut down alright, but then it would keep her trapped in the never-ending loop of thick, black memories that wrapped around her like a blanket, threatening to suffocate her.

However, on that particular night, her features were relaxed, her breathing deep and even, and Owen couldn’t stop looking at her, trying to memorize every small detail, every curve and every freckle. She was amazing, so beautiful. He couldn’t believe how peaceful she looked in her sleep, how much younger and more vulnerable than he was used to. He remembered thinking that in that moment, all he wanted to do was put his arms around her and hold her forever, shield her from the rest of the world, and never, ever let go.

They had spent plenty of nights together before then, and even more afterwards, but it was this one memory that etched into his mind, and if he could, he’d freeze that moment in time and relive it over and over and over again for the rest of his life.

Owen shook his head and looked around the room, wondering what he should pack next – his somewhat pitiful collections of books (it was hard to grow a proper one when he barely ever lived in one place long enough to memorize his own address) or the five cups and plates that didn’t come with the place when he moved in?
The movers would take care of the furniture, for the most part. All Owen had to do was put his sorry possessions in a few boxes and make sure they got shipped to the right place.

It was odd, he thought as he stood in the living-room doorway, to leave the one house that actually held some memories for him.

After the park, after that day, Claire was everywhere here, the sound of her voice filling the rooms, the scents of her perfume or bathroom products hanging in the air, her presence, even when she wasn’t around, so tangible it was surreal. He followed her to San Diego, no questions asked. It felt like the most logical, the most natural thing to do.

It was perfect

Until it wasn’t. Until one day it felt like they were two strangers living under the same roof, and Owen couldn’t remember for the life of him how it started, how it got to the point when Claire said that it wasn’t working, that it wasn’t good enough.

One day, she was there, the human sunshine, her smile lighting him up from the inside. And the next - her side of the bed was cold and empty. And Owen never learned to sleep without her. Even now, months later, he tended to stay perched precariously on his side of the bed, reaching for her in his sleep now and then, waking up when his hand grabbed nothing but the pillow that no longer smelled of her. She wanted more. She wanted something he couldn’t give her. He hated himself for it, and a part of him hated her, too.

And so he let her go.

His phone chirped and snatched his attention, drawing him back to reality.

“Hey, Lowery,” he said, picking up.

“Done packing, big guy?” Lowery asked with a habitual cheerfulness.

Owen winced. “Almost.”

“You still game for tonight?”

“Well, yeah. Seeing as how it’s my farewell party,” he chuckled.

“We never know with you.”

Owen stepped into the bedroom, his eyes landing on a pile of clothes he still needed to sort through and pack, see which ones he wanted to keep and which were going to Salvation Army or something. He somehow doubted he’d need thongs in Midwest.

“Yeah, I’m in.”

The move was scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, the plane ticket already burning a hole in his pocket. But he could still afford to get drunk with his Jurassic World buddies one last time, Owen decided, before the park became history. Or so he hoped. Maybe if he ran far enough away from all of this, his life would start making sense again.

He said goodbye to Lowery, promising him to meet him and a few of the other survivors – the word never sat quite well with Owen but the guys seemed to like it – later, and finally settled on going through his wardrobe first, choosing to leave the kitchen for later.
He was half an hour into his task when the nose of his boot kicked something sitting under the bed. Puzzled, Owen crouched down and pulled up a pattern comforter – the one Claire picked up when they moved into the house – to find a dust-covered tin box, shoved out of the way and seemingly long-forgotten.

He pulled it out and lifted the lid, his breath catching in his throat momentarily at the sight of small mementos filling it. Movie ticket stubs. Seashells and sand dollars they’d picked up during their walks on the beach. A handful of colorful sea glass he thought Claire had long tossed back into the water. A funny Get Well card he got for her when she was sick and miserable. Another card, the one he put in a bouquet of wild flowers he picked up at the farm market – the one that made her tear up a little.

Their whole relationship mapped out through a series of fleeting moments, things he’d never thought to remember. Things she’d treasured enough to save them.

Owen couldn’t believe she’d kept them all. Even a small bear he won for her in a Whac-A-Mole tent on Santa Monica Pier during that weekend when they decided to get away from everyone and everyone, on one of the rare moments when they actually bothered to get out of bed.

At the bottom of the box was a small leather-bound book. A day planner. He’d seen it before a time or two. Seen her making notes on the pages – appointments, job events, various to-do things.

He set the box aside and leafed through the day planner, catching things like Conf. call with M.P. and Call Karen and Dry-cleaning after 5pm marked in her neat handwriting, his stomach coiling at the sight of something he never thought he could possibly miss.

And then he saw them – random notes scattered here and there. Scribbles that had nothing to do with her routine. His name.

Owen’s throat closed up.

“…feeling alive… never thought I’d ever feel that way about anyone; never thought I was capable of feeling that way… the best thing that ever happened… somehow miss him even when he’s sitting right next to me… so silly… someone would feel this way about me… deserves better than…”

He snapped it closed and leaped up to his feet, his heart pounding.

The last entry – not even an entry, just a few sentences – was dated two days before she moved out, saying the things Claire never got to tell him, things that would’ve made all the difference.

—

The drive to her place was a fast one, and it still wasn’t fast enough. He broke just about every rule, only barely not tipping over at the turns and receiving angry honks that faded away before Owen could even register them. It felt like he was missing something, like being too late meant being too late, like there was a point of no return and once he reached it, there was no going back.

He hadn’t seen her in months, tried not to think of her for just as long if only not to fall apart when there was no one left to pull him back together. But now Claire was crowding his mind again, pushing everything else out of his head. Because he needed to know. He needed her to tell him….

After the break up, she moved into a smaller condo across the town. A two-bedroom place with new countertops and a neat backyard. He’d never actually been there, only knew the address because she left it to him to forward her mail. It looked cozy, very Claire. He wondered if she was happy here. Wondered if she was happy, period.
Owen flew up the small porch, his finger hovering over the doorbell button for a moment, waiting for his heartbeat to catch up. What if she wasn’t at home? What on earth was he thinking coming here like this? What if she wasn’t *alone*? He clutched the box he was holding in his hand so tight his fingers were about to leave dents on the lid.

He should just leave. Pretend nothing happened. Pretend—

The door opened.

“Owen?”

“Hey,” he breathed out.

She’d changed, and she hadn’t.

He gaped at her as if he was suddenly as surprised to see her as she was.

Her hair had grown out even more since they’d been together. She had it tied in a ponytail at the nape of her neck, with several loose strands framing her face, falling over her cheekbones in soft waves. Her eyes were exactly the way he remembered them – seawater and jade, their expression guarded. And there was only so much he could do not to put his arms around her. Just seeing her stand before him hurt like a sucker punch that knocked all air out of his body.

“I’m leaving,” he blurted out when the moment started to stretch and she shifted uncomfortably in her spot.

Which sounded odd and out of place even to his ears.

On impulse, Owen glanced past her and into the house, straining his ears to catch the sound of someone else being there with her, terrified of the idea. Relieved when he didn’t hear anything out of the ordinary.

“Oh,” was all Claire seemed to be able to say in response.

For a few long moments, they simply stood there, looking at one another.

And then he held up the box. “I found this.”

Her eyes widened momentarily, the color draining from her face. She swallowed, hard, as she stared at it.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Claire?”

She looked up again, and Owen could see the struggle between slamming the door in his face and standing her ground, so visible he wanted to laugh – a bitter, broken sound.

“Tell you what?” She asked quietly. “That I was a mess? That That you deserved better than that?”

At that, he did laugh. Loudly. Humorlessly. And she flinched.

“So you chose to tell me you didn’t love me?” He inquired, feeling angry and sad and lost and so desperate to turn back the time it made him want to scream.

She looked away, bit her lower lip.

“It was better that way, Owen.”
“Easier. The word you’re looking for is easier, Claire. Because it was so much easier to walk away than try to fix whatever you thought wasn’t working.”

She snapped her head up, and in the late afternoon sun, her hair flared up, her eyes gleaming. “You thought it was easy for me?”

“Well, you made it look so. Congrats.”

He shook his head, having to remind himself not to raise his voice. Not to punch a wall or something.

In two hours, he was supposed to say goodbye to the people who also made it through that nightmare of a day on the island alive. In about 16, he would load everything he wasn’t shipping off into a cab and head to the airport. He didn’t have time to go through his unresolved shit with Claire Dearing.

And yet…

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Claire wrapped her arms around her shoulders. “I got scared. And it was too much, and I…” she trailed off. “Why are you here, Owen?” Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper.

“Because I’m a moron, apparently.” His lips twitched into a rueful smirk. “Because I missed you. I missed you like crazy, and all this time I thought….” He pressed his lips together. “Because I thought there still was a chance—” Owen cut himself off, his gaze dropped down for a moment, then met Claire’s again.

A gust of wind made her shiver. Late January wasn’t particularly comfortable, even in California. Although it wasn’t just that. With Owen standing right before her, under his sad, disappointed scrutiny, she felt exposed and vulnerable. Like he was looking at her and seeing straight into her soul. Like there was nowhere to run, no place to hide. And god knew she’d been doing it for long enough to be too tired to keep trying. It wasn’t like she could run away from herself.

“I thought you said you were leaving,” she reminded him softly, a hand nervously looping loose strands of hair around her ear.

“I was.” He shifted from foot to foot. Then handed her the box. “I am.” Their eyes met for a long moment. “Just didn’t want all of this to be thrown into the trash.”

On that, he turned on his heel and started toward his car again, his heart heavy in his chest, aching with every beat. He made it halfway down her driveway, feeling Claire’s gaze on his back all the way. Then stopped and cursed quietly, his breath laboured as if he’d just run a marathon, chest heaving, lungs seemingly incapable of filling properly, making him feel dizzy.

Slowly, he turned around, half-expecting to see her still standing in the doorway, half-fearing to find her gone.

And then he crossed the distance between them in a few quick strides - before she had time to so much as blink, or take a breath. He wrapped his arm around her waist, his hand cupping the back of her head, his fingers tangled in her hair, and he captured her lips with hers, hard at first, his whole being nearly crumbling under the weight of missing and longing and wanting, his body still remembering hers as if only a few hours had passed, not several months.

Claire stiffened for a moment, surprised and caught off guard, and then she leaned into him as a soft sigh escaped her chest, her lips parting against his.
“I didn’t care you were a mess, Claire,” he whispered, cupping her face in his palms. “Because you were my mess. I wanted you. I still do.” He let out a short, shaky laugh. “Jesus…. I still do, Claire. Always will.” One of her hands was still clutching the box to her chest while the other rested against one of his. Her eyes fluttered closed. She turned her face, leaning into his touch, and brushed her lips against the inside of his wrist.

“Don’t go,” she murmured. “I missed you, too. And I’m sorry.” Claire looked up again, her lips trembling, her cheeks flushed. Owen ran his thumb over her cheekbone. “I’m so sorry for… for everything. Don’t go.”

The corner of his mouth tugged up. “Now?”

She shook her head. “Ever.”

—

In the morning, while Claire was still sleeping curled into a ball, her face pressed into his pillow – because was this woman good at stealing all of the space in bed! – Owen slipped from under the covers and padded into the kitchen, promptly ignoring a dozen of notifications on his phone.

He did remember to call Barry at some point last night, asking him to tell everyone that something came up and he wasn’t coming, but that was about it. The movers were still coming in a few hours, his taxi, the packed boxes - it was still somewhere in the periphery of his mind. But it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered.

There was a picture on the shelf that caught his attention – the one of him and Claire, the two of them beaming into a camera like there was no tomorrow, and whatever reservations he might have had were gone in that instant.

“You aren’t still leaving, are you?”

Owen turned around to find her standing in the doorway, wrapped in a sheet, a concerned crease between her brows.

“I thought you asked me not to,” he reminded her.

“It’s still your call.”

He walked over to her, brushed her hair from her forehead, smiling like a complete idiot just looking at her. Sleepy, with her hair tousled, she was everything.

“No fucking way, Ms. Dearing,” he chuckled, kissing her lightly. “Although there’s still one problem…”

Her eyebrow arched. “What problem?”

“As of five hours from now, I’m sort of homeless.”

Claire rose on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. The sheet covering her fell to their feet. “I’m sure we can figure something out.”
Prompt: "Can you do the classic Owen teaches Claire how to golf/baseball for a team building thing organized by masrani by standing behind her and wrapping his arms around her?"

Chapter Notes

The setting is a bit changed, but I hope that otherwise it's still working :)

The one thing Claire tended to be good at was seeing a bad decision from a mile away and steering clear of it.

And yet here she was, driving to Owen Grady’s middle-of-nowhere bungalow, the tires of her car sinking into the wet soil, soft and muddy after the rain. She gripped the steering wheel tighter and willed herself not to turn around. Surely she could deal with that man for 10 minutes without going for his jugular. Right?

“Well, well, well…” Owen drawled, swinging the door open, a lazy smile spreading over his face at the sight of Claire on his doorstep. He leaned against the doorframe and gave her a long once-over, taking in her jeans and plain flats – something Claire wouldn’t normally wear around other personnel, especially him.

“Mr. Grady,” she said with a plastic smile, her voice somewhat chilly at best, and bordering on hostile at worst despite her best efforts.

One of his eyebrows quirked up. “Are we back to formalities, Claire?” Owen asked, amused.

Claire gritted her teeth. “It’s not a formality when you’re being professional, Mr. Grady. Not that you’d—” She cut herself off.

He folded his arms over his chest, and gave her another contemplative look. “To what do I owe the pleasure? I mean, you wouldn’t come all the way here if it wasn’t a matter of life death, or something equally dramatic, right?”

She pursed her lips into a thin line and decided that it wasn’t worth it, after all. Nothing was worth it, really. If she’d learned anything during their disaster of a date – the one that she tried to erase from her memory as best she could – it was that he was smug and obnoxious, and whatever made her say yes when he asked her out could have easily been written off to a temporary insanity on Claire’s part. There was no other explanation, really.

And she tried real hard to pretend that this disappointment didn’t hurt.

“My apologies for bothering you, Mr. Grady,” Claire said through her teeth. She turned around and
headed back toward her car, feeling like a complete idiot, her cheeks burning.

"Wait!" Owen leaped off the porch and caught up with her in two strides. "Wait a sec." He stepped in front of her. "I’m sorry. That was… a dick move on my part. Really, tell me what is it."

Claire regarded him darkly. "Never mind." And tried to side-step him on her way to her car.

"Seriously, Claire. I’m sorry. You wouldn’t have come all the way just because." He put a hand on the door of her Mercedes before she could open it. "Unless…"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, get over yourself!" She huffed. "I need…needed your help."

Owen dropped his act, his brows knitting together. "Come again?"

"The corporate picnic, Mr. Grady." Claire sighed with undisclosed exasperation.

“What about it?"

She bit her lip and looked away, choosing to stare at the cluster of palm trees to the right from them, regretting just about every word that came out of her mouth in the last ten minutes.

“I wanted to ask you to show me how to play softball,” she said at last. “Last year, your team won, and you weren’t… too bad. So I was wondering if you could show me the basics.” She crossed her arms over her chest and looked Owen square in the face, chin tipped up. From this close, and without her usual elevated footwear, he looked surprisingly tall, and Claire had to fight back the urge to step away from him.

One corner of Owen’s mouth lifted. “So, you’ve been watching me.” A statement, not a question.

“Me, and a thousand other people,” she deadpanned without missing a beat.

His smile dimmed a bit. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder at his bungalow, growing darker in the fading light, considered his options, and then turned back to Claire who was glaring at him with unmasked impatience now, her green eyes all but shooting daggers at him – the only way she’d been looking at him ever since their itinerary-board shorts fallout. Like she couldn’t wait to rip his throat out. Except Claire Dearing was more classy than that, but it wasn’t exactly the point. The point was that even though he fucked up like a total moron, he still liked her. More than liked her. And the fact that she apparently hated his guts was driving Owen crazy.

“Okay,” he nodded at last. “Let’s do it. Wait here.”

“What, now?” Claire stared at his back as he started toward his house.

“You don’t look like you have any other plans for tonight,” Owen smirked without looking at her.

To that, she had nothing to say, and so she chose to wish she could set him on fire with the power of her mind.

Owen returned a few minutes later with a bat, glove, and several softballs. The game was an annual event meant for building trust and improving teamwork, and by now most of the employees had the basic equipment lying around. Frankly, Claire could have easily talked her way out of actually playing, but it was the fact that everyone expected her to wiggle out of something like this that made her more determined to at the very least not look her worst on the field.

It wasn’t like it was beneath her or anything!
Owen explained the rules to her, twice, and then made Claire repeat them to him to make sure she understood them.

“Okay, let’s see what you’ve got,” he said and handed her the bat. Then grabbed some balls and walked away, tossing them in the air with lazy ease that made her insanely envious.

Claire missed the first pitch. And the second. And the next five.

“You’re trying to do it with your hands,” he shook his head, his lips puckered together thoughtfully.

“What am I supposed to be doing it with?” Claire snorted as she straightened up and blew a strand of hair off her forehead. “My feet?”

“Not what I meant.” Owen approached her again and stepped behind her, his arms wrapped around her, hands resting on top of hers on the bat.

She stiffened, her breathe catching in her throat momentarily. Wrapped around her like this, his body felt hot and strong, tight muscles rippling under the tanned skin, his breath falling on the back of her neck made Claire shiver involuntarily, her heart beating faster all of a sudden. She inhaled shakily – the scents of the forest, and wet soil, and tropical flowers, and Owen, her head starting to swim. She knew he was telling her something, but it was damn hard to make out separate words through the blood rush in her ears.

“…whole body,” Claire heard at last, finally tuning back in. “Not just your wrists, Claire. Imagine that you and the bat are one. Swing with your whole body.” He voice was right in her ear, his breath warm on her skin, and she swallowed, wishing he would move away already. Wishing he wouldn’t do it, ever. How the hell did that happen? “Got it?”

She nodded numbly.

By then, it was too dark to see anything properly, and the next thing she knew, Owen stepped away and started picking up the balls strewn all around the cleaning in front of the bungalow. If he noticed anything he wasn’t supposed to notice, he showed no sign of it.

Claire lowered the bat and watched him in silence, torn between jumping into her car and driving off and, well, jumping him. The thought made her cheeks grow hot, making her exceptionally grateful for the cover of the nightfall.

“You did good,” Owen said when he noticed her just standing there quietly. He tossed the balls and the glove onto one of the lawn chairs by the fire pit and ran his hand through his hair, ruffling it. “If only we could have someone else pitch so that I could make sure your stance is right…”

Claire handed him the bat and stepped back, brushed her palms against her thighs. “There’re tennis ball machines at the courts.” She suggested.

—

She let out a delighted whoop when the bat met the softball with a dull thud, sending it all the way across the tennis court. Standing behind her, Owen laughed.

In the after hours, when most of the guests were enjoying their dinner or a selection of evening entertainment options, the tennis courts were empty and quiet, save for the soft rhythmic sound of the tennis machine spitting out the balls at the two of them.
“Not bad at all, Ms. Dearing,” Owen repeated, adjusting their position, his hands sliding down from hers to rest on the lower end of the bat instead, to give Claire a chance to feel her swings better.

She hit another ball, giddy with excitement, feeling her heart accelerate until it was drumming so fast Claire was sure it could leap out of her chest any moment. The warmth of Owen’s body all around her now felt soothing and reassuring. Only half an hour into their second practice, and she somehow didn’t want to murder him anymore. Instead, she wanted—

“You know, you actually have a chance of probably, maybe, not losing this time,” he observed, his tone teasing.

She elbowed him skillfully in the ribs. “Gee, thanks!”

“Not against my team, of course,” he added with a short laugh, earning a searing glare she gave him over her shoulder. “But maybe…”

“What if I am on your team?” Claire interjected, an eyebrow arched with a dare.

He faltered, watching her from only a few inches away. His gaze shifted from her deep green eyes to a scatter of freckles over her nose, and down to her bright red lips. She’d changed from the pumps she wore to the office to plain white tennis shoes when he picked her up an hour ago, and all Owen could think of right now was how neatly she fit in his arms, how very nice her body felt against hers, his breath short and ragged all of a sudden.

He swallowed and licked his lips, his hands flexing on the bat, fingers clutching it so tight now he could easily break it in two.

“Then we’d rule the world,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

The pattern of her breathing changed, her eyes roaming around his features for a few moments – a few moments Owen gave her to reconsider, step away, put an end to whatever was happening. And when she chose not to, he dipped his head and brushed his lips against hers, tentatively at first, and then more persistently, until Claire’s fingers let go of the bat and it fell to the ground and rolled away. His arms flexed around her body and she wiggled around until she was facing him, their lips never breaking apart. She clutched his shirt, pulling herself up on her tiptoes to press herself against his chest, wrap her arms around his neck, her fingers tangling in the curling hair near the nape of his neck.

Owen let out a low, guttural growl when she caught his lower lip between her teeth, making her smile, glowing warmth growing in her stomach, spreading all over her body. His arms locked around her, hands roaming all over her back, her shoulders, threading through her hair. Her lips parted, and his tongue slipped between them, deepening the kiss, making Claire weak in her knees.

“Well, I think we’re done for the day,” Owen whispered a long while later, breathless, pulling away just far enough to brush a kiss to her temple, her forehead.

Claire’s eyes fluttered closed as she gulped the air, one of her hands closed around a fistful of his shirt. She nodded and nuzzled his chin. “Yes, I think that would be… best.”

He kissed her again – cheek, corner of her mouth, lips. “Want to take it elsewhere?” Asked in a low murmur.

She nodded again.
In the morning, Claire woke up to a persistent buzz of her phone vibrating somewhere in the pocket of her pants lying in a heap on the floor of Owen’s bungalow. Cursing under her breath, she disentangled herself from him, pausing only to press her lips fleetingly to his forehead, smiling at how he instantly claimed the warm spot she’d just left behind, and slipped from under the covers. She pulled on his shirt and rummaged through the pile of clothes until her fingers closed around the hard plastic of her Nokia.

Since last night, she received several messages from Zara and a bunch of regular updates from Lowery and Vivian.

Claire wandered into the living room, scrolling through her inbox, marking the messages that required her attention and deleting those that didn’t really matter, her brows pulled together in concentration. She pushed her hair that started to curl in the South American humidity out of her face, looping it around her ears, distracted. The memories of the previous night were making her smile despite herself.

It was still early, a little before 7, and even though on any other day she would already be awake and getting ready for a busy day ahead, mentally scrolling through her agenda and to-do lists, right now she felt mellow and relaxed, her body practically boneless. Not exactly tired even after only a few hours of decent sleep, but more content than ever. No, scratch that. So ridiculously happy she felt like her heart could burst in her chest.

“I thought you disappeared on me.”

Owen walked up to her from behind and slipped his arm around her waist, his lips finding their way to her neck, his warm breath on her skin making Claire’s smile widen.

She turned around and leaned into him, burying her face in his chest and pressing a kiss just below his collarbone. “Why would I?” She murmured. “You kind of made it clear we weren’t done yet.”

“Hell, no.” Owen laughed quietly.

“Just didn’t want to wake you up.” Claire snaked her arms around him, breathing in the scent of his skin, feeling lightheaded. “Owen…”

“Hey.” He propped her chin up on his knuckle until she was looking at him. “This whole thing… I know it wasn’t planned. At least on my part.” He let the phrase hang between them until she was rolling her eyes and trying to bite down a smile. “So if you need to freak out, feel free to do it.” His hand smoothed down her hair, fingers trailing through her curls. “But it’s not going anywhere. I’m not going anywhere.”

She studied him for a few moments, relaxing against his touch, soothed by the quiet confidence in his eyes. “Okay.”

He kissed her lightly on the lips. “Okay.” He echoed. A pause. A small smile. “You have to go yet?”

Claire shook her head. “No.”

“Good.” He kissed her deeper, slower, and started walking them both backwards in the direction of his bedroom, Claire laughing every time they stepped on each other’s feet in the process, his grip on her the only thing keeping her from losing her balance. His shins hit the edge of his bed, and Owen fell backwards, pulling her down with him as she let out a surprised, delighted yelp.

“Because I still have some ideas…”
“Oh yeah?” She mumbled between the kisses. “Like what?”

He rolled them over, pinning her down to the sheets with the weight of his body. “Why don’t I show you instead?”
“Hey, I’m with you, okay? Always.”

They said that the sense of smell was the one most closely linked with memory. Not the sound. Not the visual representation. Or taste. Or touch. You could stand in front of someone, listen to them talk, and not remember them. And then you would breathe in the scent of their aftershave and the cigarette smoke stuck to their clothes, and know that this was the person you’d met at the party decades ago, their face nothing but a smudge in your memory, but their scent never quite erased from your mind.

Claire was no psychology expert, and, quite frankly, she never gave second thought to any of this, her mind perpetually busy with her schedule, the meetings, her life, only barely pausing to readjust-recharge-slow down.

But she would breathe in the tangy smell of wet soil after the rain, the orchids, the warm wood that baked all day in the sun until it was creaking with every gust of wind, and she would be right there with Owen, in his tiny bungalow, their bodies sprawled on tangled sheets on his bed, limbs intertwined together, their breathing synced.

She would catch a whiff of his soap and aftershave lingering on her own clothes, and feel his touch on her skin, his rough and calloused hands surprisingly gentle – like she was the most precious thing in existence, like he could crush her, break her if her wasn’t careful enough. She had never felt so… needed. So wanted by anyone ever before, and sometimes Claire would think she could, in fact, snap in two from the way he was looking at her, the way he was kissing her.

“It’s such a cliché,” Owen told her once, his hand tracing lazy circles on her arm as she lay curled against his side, “but I keep thinking that one day I’ll wake up, and all of this,” he brushed a kiss to her bare shoulder, “will be just a dream.”

“No, it can’t happen,” Claire protested, shaking her head.

“How do you know?” He laced their fingers together and brought their hands up to his mouth, kissing her knuckles one at a time.

“Because…” she wiggled around until she was facing him and wrapped her arms around his neck, her lips brushing lightly against his, “you can’t wake up from my dream.”

—

His place often smelled like motor oil and campfire smoke, and Claire’s whole body would start to tingle the moment she’d step out of her car, her hands itching to touch his skin, run her fingers through his hair, rub her cheek against his scratchy one.

At first, it was the thrill of secrecy that made her feel all warm and melty inside, her face growing hot at the mere memory of Owen’s soft laughter, the way he would sometimes brush his hand
against hers whenever they happened to be in the same room at the resort. Stolen kisses. Sneaky visits. Now, she didn’t care. Now, it was all about him being folded around her, big and heavy and real, his scent a mixture of forest and soap and sweat, just the way she loved it.

Claire rapped her knuckles on his door, and he swung it open not three seconds later, tugging her into his arms without hesitation.

“I was just going to go pick you up,” Owen murmured into her hair.

“Finished early,” she whispered, tucking her face into his neck, breathing him in, the whole day melting away, replaced in her mind by the pure euphoria of being with him, having his arms around her, his shirt soft and velvety against her cheek.

“Stay,” he asked, pulling her into the house and kicking the door closed behind them.

“Can’t.” Claire grabbed the fistfuls of his shirt and pulled herself up to kiss him properly, her awareness dimming. “My nephews are coming over tomorrow. Have to…” She trailed off with a gasp when his hands slid underneath her top, her eyes fluttering shut. “Owen…”

“Stay,” he insisted. “I’ll be on my best behaviour.”

She looked up at him, her lips curving into a coy smile. “Where’s fun in that?”

She should’ve known, Claire had thought at some point during that day, when her heart was racing fast and her blood pumping furiously, the heavy scent of the jungle filling her nose and making her feel dizzy and sick. She should have known that that past few months were too good to be true, that something bad was coming – the way it tended to when life was good and happy and right. She hated the smell of gasoline on Owen – a reminder that he nearly died – and the heavy, suffocating air, hanging like a cloud around them after the recent rain, so tangible she feared they’d have to cut their way through it with a knife.

The first time Karen asked her to have the boys over was about a year ago – Gray finished the term with excellent grades and was promised a reward for it. Claire couldn’t do it then. She didn’t remember now why – some project, perhaps. Her schedule was seldom not packed. Saying no for the second time didn’t feel right – she did feel bad and negligent, and guilty.

And look how it worked out…

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” Owen promised her quietly when they found Zach’s sweatshirt in the old park garage.

She was trembling, her mind numb by then with fear and panic and an overwhelming desire to crawl into the nearest hole and stay there until all of this was over. Except she couldn’t. And not just because she was responsible for this park, for this whole goddamn island, but because she needed to find her nephews, alive. The enormity of this situation, unfathomable, pressed down on her like a concrete block.

“Owen…” she whispered weakly, her throat dry.

He approached her, framed her face with his hands, his gaze steady and composed. She didn’t want to think what hers looked like to him, frantic and panicky. “It’ll be fine, I promise.”

No, it won’t, she waned to say. How could it be?
But she chose not to. Instead, she closed her eyes, soothed by his touch, her heartbeat evening out instantly. They both smelled of dinosaur shit and sweat and the jungle, but even underneath the layers of all this, she could still catch something warm and familiar and comforting, and just for a moment, everything felt better, easier. Everything felt possible.

“I can’t do it,” she breathed out, not sure what she was talking about – running through the forest chased by the prehistoric mutant, getting the panic in the park under control, or taking another breath and making it through the next few minutes.

Owen pressed his forehead to hers, their breaths mingling together, and she heard a soft whimper, belatedly realizing that it was hers.

“Hey, I’m with you, okay? Always.”

Her fingers curled around his wrists, and she nodded, uncertain what she was agreeing with.

Not that she had time to contemplate it as the next moment, the I-Rex roared so close Claire could feel the sound reverberating through her body, and Owen pulled her down and away from that place, her muscles burning, her feet bruised and blistered. And she had to bite down the tears and pray that she would get to see another day.

—

For a while, the incident at the park seemed like the worst thing that could have happened to them. During the first week at home, all Claire could think of was going back in time and never creating that damned thing, of making sure the day that changed so many people’s lives never happened. She was incapable of wrapping her mind around it, around Simon’s death and the destruction of the resort, the deaths and the letters of condolences the company expected her to write to the families of the bereaved.

Locked in her condo in San Diego, refusing to leave her house unless absolutely necessary, Claire kept replaying the events of that day over and over again in her head until she felt like she was about to scream.

“You didn’t make it happen, Claire. It wasn’t your fault.”

Owen plopped down onto the loveseat beside her and put his arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into his embrace, a habitual and easy move. These days, the warmth of his body was the only thing that kept her from losing her mind. She took to wearing his clothes in the house, finding comfort in having his scent wrapped around her like a blanket. In the world that collapsed around her in a matter of hours, this was what kept her grounded and in one piece.

“Then whose fault was it?” She murmured into his shirt. “It has to be someone’s fault.”

“Sometimes things just happen,” he kissed the top of her head. “Wrong place, wrong time. The whole shebang.”

“You can’t honestly believe that,” Claire looked up at him, taking note of the tired lines around his mouth, dark shadows under his eyes, her chest tightened at the realization of how much he was going through as well.

“I have to,” he offered her a small smile. “What else is there to believe in?”

Until this wasn’t enough. Until the worst thing stopped being one day and became all the days afterwards. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe Owen – she knew he meant what he said, but she found
it exceptionally hard to sink into the same way of thinking. They could have stopped it, could have so easily prevented it, but they were too greedy, too blind to see what was coming their way. And it was so hard, so damn impossible to live with it.

She told him she needed time, and he didn’t protest when she booked a flight to Madison. Not so much to see her sister, even though they were talking every day now, both of them scared of losing touch with each other again, but to have a break from all of this before she’d actually gone crazy. The company didn’t mind – they needed her more than Claire needed them, and she knew it.

“IT’s just for a week,” she said, shoving her clothes into a bag without even looking.

Owen walked up to her from behind and rested his hands on her shoulders, buried his face in her hair. “I miss you already,” he whispered, and Claire’s heart splintered at the sound of it.

A week turned into two, and then into a month, and then…

It took her two months to learn how to breathe again. To start sleeping with the lights off. To learn to shop without having a panic attack every time she needed to pick up groceries and the store had more than three people in it, her eyes automatically checking for emergency exits on the off-chance a T-Rex would wander in. To finally realize that the smell of gasoline didn’t mean death.

Until one day she no longer felt more broken than not. Until the world shifted back into place and started spinning in the right direction again.

“Hey,” Claire breathed out the moment he opened the door, her lips curved into a tentative smile.

“Claire,” he said, surprised, taking in her hair tied into a ponytail and her traveling bag slung over her shoulder. His hair had grown out a bit, she noticed. In a way that made her want to bury her fingers in it, thread them slowly through his soft curls.

They’d barely spoken ever since she left, and now Claire wondered if maybe she should have called first. If maybe they were not on the same page anymore. But she missed him. She missed him so much she came to his place straight from the airport, hoping for something she couldn’t put into words. And there was only so much she could do not to throw her arms around him the way she’d do without thinking twice only a few months ago.

He stepped out onto the porch just as she started looking for an escape route, her mind shifting into a panic mode.

“I didn’t know you were…” Owen started.

“I don’t need time,” she blurted out at the same time. “Or space. Or anything.” She allowed the bag to slide off her shoulder and land at her feet. “I just needed to find a way to forgive myself before…” She swallowed. “Before I could move on to… something else.”

He regarded her curiously, his head tilted ever so slightly to his shoulder. “Have you?”

“I don’t know,” Claire admitted in a whoosh of a breath. “But I missed you, and I’m sorry I didn’t pick up your calls. I just… I needed to do this myself, without you, but I don’t want to lose you, Owen.”

He broke into a smile, bright and broad, and moved toward her, reaching for her, palms resting on her cheeks. “I missed you, too,” he said, kissing her softly, and Claire slid her arms underneath his
unzipped sweatshirt to wrap them around his waist. The scent of him coated her immediately as she nuzzled his cheek and buried her face into his neck, seeping in the warmth of his body on this chilly morning, her hands gripping his shirt. “Stay,” he muttered quietly, making her heart sing.

“Just promise me one thing,” she asked.

“Anything.”

“Don’t let me go.” She glanced up at him. “Don’t let me go again.”
Chapter Summary

“Kissing the other person’s hands/fingers/palms”

Chapter Notes

“Kissing the other person’s hands/fingers/palms” from the Hands prompts. Seriously, I’m too in love with those prompts than I’m willing to admit.

What did it even matter?

Owen tossed his phone aside and took a swig of his beer, purposely staring at the wall in front of him. The beer had long gone lukewarm, sloshing uncomfortably in his stomach, and he wished he had something stronger. Like, pure alcohol. Or rat poison, for that matter. It would take a lot more than a bottle – or six – of beer to get the goddamn image of Claire Dearing all but hanging over another man out of his mind.

No, but did she have to post this stuff all over the social media?

And it wasn’t like he had any right to be mad. They had one lousy date – what kind of a control freak comes on a date with an itinerary?! – and exchanged a handful of insults afterwards. She could date whomever she wanted. She could post their pictures on goddamn Facebook all she pleased, and why would he even—

Owen put his beer down with a loud thud, spilling some of it on the coffee table and glared at his phone that blinked tauntingly at him, making him wish he’d smashed it against a wall instead. Not that it would change anything.

It was the fact that he had no fucking right to be mad at her that was driving him crazy more than anything else. She wasn’t even his ex, for crying out loud! And that Stevens guy? Seriously, why an accountant?! Then again, they probably had a lot to talk about. Like, profit margins and budget and financial forecasts. He probably never thought to take her to Margaritaville for dinner. In Owen’s mind, their dates were mind-numbingly boring. Of fucking course, she’d be into that kind of men!

It wasn’t like Owen wanted to go out with her on a second date.

He glared at his phone some more, and then turned away to stare at the switched off TV instead.

Except he did want to take her out again. But he didn’t know it until she started posting stupid Facebook pictures with some moron who spoke fluent Financial and was about as exciting as a teaspoon. She couldn’t possibly be into someone like this, could she?

He grabbed his phone, scrolled his contact list and dialed Claire’s number, his fingers moving on
autopilot, his mind too on fire with anger to register what he was doing.

The call went straight to voice mail. Figures! Owen snickered under his breath. When wasn’t she working? And why on earth would he think that anything good could ever come out of asking her out?

“…leave a message…”

“You and Stevens make a nice couple, Claire,” Owen spat acidly. “I bet you both enjoy long walks on the beach while talking about budget planning. Congratulations.”

And then he hit Send.

And then the reality of what he’d done hit him.

Message sending.

His eyes widened. “Shit!” Owen muttered under his breath. “Shit, shit…” He pressed Cancel. And then again. And five more times for good measure.

Error sending.

“Oh, thank god,” he breathed out.

He put the phone down and ran his hands down his face, his heart racing so fast he was feeling dizzy. This was close. Jesus, what was he thinking leaving her messages like this? Pathetic. Stupid. If she wasn’t already laughing at him, she certainly would if she got anything of that kind from him.

Owen leaned back against the couch pillows and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was probably time to call it a day. Especially considering he didn’t have anything other than beer for company.

He pushed himself up and headed for the bedroom.

On the coffee table, the screen of his phone lit up.

Message sent.

And then it went black again.

—

“You okay, man?” Barry asked Owen the following day as they watched the vets examine the raptors that growled unhappily in their harnesses. “You look like you’re about to bite someone’s head off.”

That guy from accounting, Owen thought darkly, his blood running hot at the very idea of Greg Stevens kissing Claire, more than kissing… He shook his head to get rid of the mental image before he got sick. Yeah, okay, maybe he should move the hell away from here before he actually saw something like this happen at one of the company functions or whatever. If he did, he sure would puked all over the place.

He cracked a humorless smile without turning to Barry. “Didn’t sleep well. Goddamn heat.”

Barry nodded and ran his hand over his shaven scalp, his eyes narrowed against the sun as he watched Echo try to snap at the vet checking her eyes. The guy seemed to be unfazed by it, though.
In this park, a row of teeth aimed at your hand was hardly something out of the ordinary.

“What are they doing here?”

Owen frowned and jerked his chin towards Hoskins talking to Simon Masrani and Claire in the shade of palm trees running around the perimeter of the clearing in front of the paddock, Claire’s car parked nearby. Masrani was nodding now and then to whatever Hoskins was saying while Claire dressed in a pale grey suit kept on tucking her hair behind her ears only to have the breeze throw it in her face seconds later, occasionally glancing at the cage.

Barry followed his gaze. “Status report?” He suggested uncertainly.

“Owen!” Hoskins called out across the clearing, making several heads turn curiously.

“Oh, hell no,” Owen muttered, choosing to pretend he didn’t hear anything, and started up the catwalk stairs, knowing they were not likely to follow him up there. There was no way Miss Perfect Shoes who could oh so easily break the heels of her pumps on the grated floor of the bridges running around and across the cage would even consider it.

Up on the catwalk, Owen whistled for Blue, who appeared from behind the trees, followed closely by Delta. He glanced quickly at Hoskins to make sure he had Masrani and Claire occupied with something else, and shook his head. He was so not up for dealing with her today, not after the embarrassing crap he had pulled off yesterday, his chest tightening at the thought of where she might have spent her night.

“Blue!” He called, deciding to focus on work instead, and added under his breath. “Come on, let’s make some progress today, girl.”

“You know, you couldn’t be more obvious even if you tried.”

Started, Owen whirled round to find Claire standing not ten feet away from him, arms folded across her chest, lips pursed together. He glanced down automatically to make sure she didn’t break her ankles climbing up the stairs, which was a tactical mistake because first, it totally looked like he was giving her a once-over, and second, he did give her a once-over, not exactly missing the fact that she looked immaculate and perfect and just as out of place here as an elephant on a skating rink.

“Can I help you, Ms. Dearing?” He asked with a deliberate snort.

“You heard Hoskins calling for you,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, well.” Owen clicked the clicker several times to get Blue’s attention back. Of course, they’d be more interested in Claire, he thought with irritation. Too used to the handlers, they regarded each new visitor like he or she were the most precious thing they’d ever seen. “I’ve got work to do, so if you don’t mind…” He trailed off and turned away from her, making it clear that the conversation was over.

“Mr. Masrani wants to know how is your program doing,” Claire said, ignoring his attitude entirely.

“I believe Hoskins knows everything there is to know.” Owen tossed the treats down to the raptors and they snatched them with frightening precision.

“Yes, but he is not training the raptors. You are. And your paper work is… sparse, to put it mildly.”
“Well, not everyone is living and breathing for paperwork,” he noted in a chilly voice. “Not that you, or your boyfriend, would understand.”

“Excuse me?” She frowned.

Owen turned to her again. “I’m kinda in the middle of something here, but I’ll make sure to send you everything soon. Would that be all?”

And without waiting for her answer, Owen walked away, leaving her to stand alone on the bridge, the raptors watching the two of them with their heads tilted to their shoulders.

—

The sky opened up suddenly two days later, finally giving them a much needed break from the heat and washing the afternoon work down the drain – quite literally so.

Stubbornly, Owen was determined to continue the training session, but the animals were distracted by the weather, ignoring his commands entirely, all of them equally frustrated for a number of different reasons. At last, he gave up, left the bucket with their food in the shed near the paddock and headed back home, soaked to his bones, his hair plastered to his head.

He was almost dry and halfway through reorganizing the junk drawer in the kitchen – because, god, was he bored! - when someone knocked angrily on the door.

“What is wrong with you?” Claire demanded the moment he opened it.

The rain was still pouring in full force, and she was drenched through from walking the twenty feet from her car to his bungalow, her hair curling from humidity and her clothes clinging to her skin. Not that she was aware of any of that, what with being too busy trying to incinerate him with her glare.

“You’ve got to be more specific than that,” Owen said, swiping her with his glance, annoyed at himself for noticing how nicely her wet clothes hugged her body in all the right places. And then he wondered how exactly she was planning to clean all that mud from her white shoes. “Because there’s today, and then there’s in general.”

“Cut the crap, Mr. Grady.” She snapped and reached for her phone, fumbling with it for a moment as it threatened to slip out of her hands.

And then Owen heard his own voice.

“…a nice couple…. budget planning...”

He froze, his heart leaping up in his chest and starting to beat somewhere in his throat.

“What the hell is this?” Claire demanded, shoving her phone in his face and playing the message again as if he didn’t know exactly what it was going to say. As if it could say something else the second time around. He somehow suspected she’d played it a dozen times already, hoping for this exact thing before coming here.

“You weren’t supposed to get it,” he said dumbly.

“Well, the next time try not sending it,” she suggested and pushed a wet strand of hair out of her eyes. “Why would you leave me this message?”
He shifted from foot to foot, and cleared his throat, fresh out of ideas by the moment. Considered inviting her in, if only because the roof over his porch was leaking, but figured she might take it as a mockery.

“I was drunk,” he said at last, desperately wishing he could wake up and realize that all of this was just a nightmare. Except she smelled of lilacs and vanilla and rain, which was a bit too specific for a dream.

“It’s an excuse, not an explanation.” She shook her head.

“Why don’t you make something up and I’ll just nod?” He suggested flatly.

She pressed her lips together. “I just want to hear the truth.”

“The truth, huh?” He snickered. “You want to hear how much it fucking hurt to see you draped all over some financial assistant? You want to hear how the one thing I wanted to do was punch him in his perfect face and then kiss you until you couldn’t think straight anymore? Until you’d forget about your itineraries and how much you hate tequila? I wanted to make you forget about the whole damn world!” Owen paused to take a breath, his voice dropping, while Claire stared at him, her green eyes wide, her expression unreadable. “But since I couldn’t do any of this, a lame voice mail was my next best choice.” They were standing so close now he could all but hear her heartbeat. “Is this what you wanted to hear? Happy now?”

“Immensely,” she said through her teeth, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly. “Coming from a man who couldn’t care less about our night out to dress properly, this speech was something else.”

“Says someone who had to bring a checklist on said date,” he retorted.

“At least I cared enough to actually want to make it work.”

“And I didn’t?” He rolled his eyes.

“You have no right to assume you have any say—”

“I’m not assuming anything, Claire.” Owen stepped back. “You’re free to do whatever the hell you want with your life and post sappy pictures on your Facebook or whatever.” He shook his head. “Best of luck with Stevens, hope you two will make each other happy.”

“Oh, we will!” She assured him, then turned on her heel and stomped away.

“And I hope you won’t bore each other to death,” he added to her back, his voice only barely carrying through the rustling of rain.

Claire stopped in the middle of his lawn and turned around. “I hope we will because then I won’t have to ever talk to you ever again, Mr. Grady!”

She climbed into the car, slammed the door and took off, spraying his picnic table with the mud flying from under the tires. Jaw set tight, Owen stormed into the bungalow and slammed the door, making his whole house shake, wishing it would collapse and bury him alive.

—

Fuming, Claire walked into her suite and tossed the keys on the table by the door. She headed to the bathroom to find a towel to dry her hair, considering her ‘dry clean only’ clothes were successfully ruined. And for what? And for whom?
She rubbed her forehead, her throat closing up, a burning lump stuck in it making it hard to breathe until her eyes were burning and she was biting her lower lip. She was not going to cry because of this impossible, insufferable, obnoxious….

Who did he think he was?

She glanced at her phone, her hands itching to delete the stupid message and forget any of that ever happened. God knew Owen Grady wouldn’t have a problem doing that.

In the end, she towed off her hair and went into the kitchen to turn on the coffee machine. The rain seemed to have picked up ever since she came home, and even though it was barely six in the evening, her whole apartment was dark and gloomy.

Claire adjusted the coffee machine settings and turned it on, her kitchen instantly filling with the warm, familiar scent.

And this was when the knock on the door came.

Startled, she snapped her hear up, her hand brushing against the metal kettle that was supposed to be filled with brewed coffee, and she yelped in pain, her heartbeat accelerating, her breathing suddenly short.

Another knock came, more persistent this time, and she turned off the coffee machine hurriedly and walked briskly toward the door, the beige carpet covering nearly the entire floor space of her suite soft underneath her bare feet.

“Owen,” she breathed out at the sight of him standing in the hallway.

The water was dripping from his clothes and hair, the droplets running down his face and arms. The anger that made her floor the accelerator pedal not half an hour ago so she could get as fast and as far away from him as possible was nowhere to be found. He looked… lost. Like he had no idea where he was and how he got here. Like nothing in the world was making any sense.

And that was something Claire could relate to.

“I meant it,” he said in a low, raspy voice. “Every word of it. It hurt like hell to see her with him. With anyone.” He paused and swallowed, hard, his eyes searching her face. “I know I fucked up. I know you’re better off with someone more like you. You and I… We don’t even speak the same language. But I don’t care. I want you to choose me. I want you to keep choosing me, no matter what.”

For a long moment, she just stood there, staring at him, feeling like her whole world had turned upside down as her stomach kept doing somersaults, making her feel like she was about to soar into the sky and fly away.

“Look, forget it, okay?” He said when a couple minutes passed and she didn’t say anything, his face panicky. “I was never here, and… Just don’t cry, Claire. I never meant to—” He faltered and trialed off.

“What?” Confused, she brushed her palm against her cheek, only now realizing that it was wet, and then finally noticed that she was gripping the door handle with her burned hand. “Oh… It’s not you, it’s…” She uncurled her fingers, revealing several red blisters.

Owen knitted his brows together. “Oh, shit. How did that happened?”
She threw a helpless look over her shoulder at the small kitchen tucked in the corner of her enormous living room. He followed her gaze and nodded, and then steered her back inside and closed the door behind them.

“You have a first aid kit or something?” He asked, running a hand through his hair to shake off some of the water.

“Bathroom,” she responded and pointed at the right door.

It took him less than a minute to find everything he needed.

“You should really be more careful with the hot stuff,” Owen said, rubbing a burn gel carefully into her palm, his touch careful and gentle, and Claire was trying oh so hard not to start crying again, but for an entirely different reason now.

“Greg and I…” she began when he reached for bandages. “We’re not together.”

That got Owen’s attention alright. He looked up at her, puzzled. “You aren’t?”

She shook her head. “It was a staff dinner. He asked me if I wanted to dance. Someone must have took a photo.”

“And you’re not dating?” He clarified – just to be sure, because it sounded a bit too good to be true, and quite frankly, this day had been every kind of crazy so far. He wouldn’t be surprised to find out he was hearing things or something.

“No.”

His eyes never leaving hers, Owen brought her hand up to his face and kissed her palm, noticing how her breath shortened, her fingers flexing a little. “Good for me, then,” he whispered. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” Claire whispered, and he kissed her hand again. “Not anymore.”

He finished bandaging her burns and then framed her head with his hands, bringing their faces closer, and brushed his lips against hers – lightly at first, giving her a chance to pull away, and then deepening the kiss when Claire clutched his shirt with her good hand and pulled him closer. She turned her face into his touch and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist, her eyes fluttering closed when he rested his forehead against hers.

“I want to choose you,” she murmured as he kissed her fully on the mouth again. “And I think we can start with getting you out of these wet clothes before you caught pneumonia.”

Owen trailed his fingers through her hair, chuckling against her cheek as his lips searched for more of her skin to press to. He wanted to breathe her in, seep her in – all of her, until he didn’t know where he ended and she began. “Hm, got any other good ideas?”

She looked up, smiling. “I don’t know, let’s find out.”

There were things that everyone knew about Claire Dearing – she operated on insane amount of caffeine; she managed to look composed and professional even in the most stressful situations; she hated the last-minute change of plans; and she considered Jurassic World her ‘baby’ even though it belonged to Masrani Global and wasn’t, technically, hers.
And then there was the things that Owen Grady had learned about her in the two weeks since they stopped… well, spending their nights, lunch hours and weekends alone.

She loved Peanut Butter Cap’n Crunch for breakfast. She was a pro at taking all of the space in bed. She would occasionally hold his hand in her sleep. To hell with her fancy suits – she looked drop-dead gorgeous dressed in nothing but his shirts that hung loosely on her slim frame. He loved her freckles more than anything in the world. Her smile could brighten up even the darkest of nights. And she was driving him mad in the best possible way.

“Are we gonna be in trouble for this?” Owen asked her, bringing her hand up to his mouth and kissing her fingers one after another. Outside the bungalow window, the sun was coming up and they should probably be heading to work, but neither seemed to be inclined to do that. Not yet.

She snuggled closer to the warmth of his body and brushed her lips to his shoulder before nuzzling his neck. “Maybe,” she admitted. “Does it matter?”

“No.” He propped her chin on his knuckle and looked her in the eyes. “I just love seeing you break the rules. Who knew?”

“You’re an awful influence,” Claire accused him, trying to bite down a smile.

“Well, guess what?” He kissed her once, and then one more time. “I learn from the best.”

She snorted and wrinkled her nose, and then grabbed his shoulders, pulling him over her. “Okay then, let’s see what else you’ve got.”
Hello, neighbor

Chapter Summary

"You’re so sweet and nice to everyone and I wanna be your friend but I’m basically a hermit."

Chapter Notes

I apologize for everything in advance (because AUs and I have a very complicated relationship)… This is a semi-AU, I guess. They’re still on the island, but Owen lives on the resort. Hope it still works :))

Of course, she noticed him. It was impossible not to. She’d have to be deaf and blind and delirious to miss the presence of Owen Grady on the island. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was witty and charming, and much to Claire’s annoyance – professional. It was like the man had no flaws, and for some reason it kept rubbing her the wrong way.

Well, there was a reason. Somehow, his charm never seemed to be aimed at her. In fact, Claire was fairly certain he tended to look straight through her. Which didn’t seem to sit well with her. For no apparent reason. It wasn’t like she needed Owen Grady’s stamp of approval or anything. She was excellent at her job, her prospects in the company were more than promising…

Was she really that boring a person?

Claire pushed her glasses up onto her forehead and rubbed the corners of her eyes. Owen Grady probably wasn’t working at 8 pm on a Friday night, she thought. Owen Grady probably wasn’t bringing work home. Period. Not that he could herd his raptors into his apartment, but she doubted she’d find him poring over anything other than TV digest at this time of the day.

She closed her laptop and pushed it away, and then looked at her stack of DVDs, wondering if it was a Tom Hanks or a Sandra Bullock kind of night. Well, the truth was she most definitely was boring. And most importantly, she was not a people person – not to the degree required for hanging out with her coworkers on the weekends.

Not to mention that she was never actually invited.

A peal of thunder rolled across the sky outside and echoed in the mountains, followed by a blinding flash of lightning, and the next moment the skies opened up, throwing gushes of rain on her windows.

The lights over her head blinked once, twice, and then went out.

Claire grabbed her phone immediately, pressing the speed dial.

“Lowery…”
“Working on it.” He said without waiting for her question. “Several back-up generators didn’t kick in.”

Her throat closed with panic. “The cages…”

“The paddocks are fine,” Lowery assured her quickly. This was their ultimate nightmare – some vicious storm damaging the power lines and setting the carnivores free. In the sudden silence that settled around her, no longer interrupted by the low hum of the fridge and air-conditioner, she could hear Lowery type something furiously on his end of the line. “The perimeter fences are all functioning properly, the locks are engaged. Bet the animals didn’t even notice anything.”

Claire nodded even though he couldn’t see her, flooded with relief.

And then another concern crept into her mind. “The guests–”

“All’s good,” Lowery promised. “We’ve already sent a crew to see what’s wrong. Most of the hotel wasn’t affected, just a few top floors and a garage, I think.” A pause. “No, a recreation center. Three generators didn’t engage for some reason, but it shouldn’t be too long.”

“Keep me posted,” she told him.

“Sure thing, boss.”

Afterwards, Claire called the customer service and made sure that someone explained the situation to the guests who were, like her, stuck in near complete darkness, and then she finally managed to take a proper breath and exhaled slowly, staring at the raging storm outside her window. It had been a while since she could hear herself think.

Truth be told, she was fresh out of options here. She could sit in the dark for God knew how long. Or she could find someone who might have a spare candle or a flashlight or something of that kind because she knew for a fact she had neither. Frankly, none of these ideas looked particularly appealing, but she still would rather do something than nothing at all.

Claire grabbed her phone and keys and ran mentally through the list of her neighbors, wondering whose door she should knock on. Normally, it would’ve been Mr. Masrani, but he wasn’t on the island at the moment. There was a Head of Financial Department living across the hall whom Claire spoke to exactly once, but it didn’t matter, did it? She just needed a candle…

Her knuckles rapped hastily on the heavy oak door before she had a chance to change her mind as she tried to remember the guy’s name. Was it Mitch? Or Matt?

The door swung open, and there was Owen Grady standing on the other side, looking just as surprised to see her on his doorstep as she was to find him in another person’s apartment.

For a long moment, they simply stared at each other, their faces occasionally illuminated by the flicker of lightning outside the hallway window.

Marcus. Right.

“Hey,” she was the first to find her voice. “Isn’t this Marcus Turner’s place?”

Owen’s eyebrow hiked all the way up to his hairline, and Claire felt her cheeks grow hot. For no reason whatsoever.

“Next door,” he responded, pointing to the right.
“Oh.” If the floor opened underneath her feet right now and swallow her, that would be really, really helpful, she decided.

“But he’s not around,” Owen continued. “Family emergency.”

“Oh,” Claire repeated and glanced briefly down the hall. “Well…” She cleared her throat and turned to the man standing before her once again. “I was going to ask him if had had a spare flashlight.” Their eyes met, and she even squared her shoulders for good measure, remembering that she was not in grade school, but was, in fact, running this whole place. “Do you maybe happen to have one, Mr. Grady?”

“Owen,” he said almost automatically, then opened his door wider. “Come on in, we’ll figure something out.”

She hesitated for a second, and then stepped inside. In near complete darkness, his place looked very much like hers, only smaller. And much neater, she had to admit. And then she remembered that much like almost everyone in InGen, Owen Grady came here from the military. The NAVY, if she was not mistaken. Well, it showed.

“Some weather, huh?” He asked from the shadows as he rummaged noisily through what Claire assumed was a kitchen drawer while she stood in the middle of his living room, feeling both curious and terribly out of place.

“I’m sorry about the blackout,” she said. “I’m sure they’ll fix the generators promptly.”

“Well, you didn’t break them, did you?” He appeared by her side with a flashlight in hand. Flicked it on and off a couple of times to make sure it was working, and then handed it to Claire.

“No,” she replied, caught off-guard by his question.

Owen beamed down at her, making her very aware of her house shorts and a plain tee she wouldn’t be caught dead wearing in public. “Then you have nothing to apologize for, Claire.”

They stood like this for a few moment, their hands on the flashlight, their pinkies touching, and then she pulled it out of his grasp.

“Thank you, Mr. Grady.” Voice calm and composed and even, and not at all as trembling as she feared it might be. Did she get points for that? She might have to process the fact that he did know her name after all some other time.

“Owen.”

“I should… probably go.” Claire resisted the urge to step back… No, scratch that – to freaking bolt out of his place and barricade in her suite until she could no longer feel the gaze of his deep blue eyes on her skin, so palpable it left her whole body tingling.

He nodded, and maybe she was reading too much into it, but she could bet he looked mildly disappointed. “Or you could stay.” He offered. “If you want to. Until the power is on.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose…” Claire swallowed, her throat suddenly dry and her heart racing a mile per second.

“It’s not imposing if it was my idea,” he pointed out. And smiled.

And why the hell not?
Claire loved her job. She loved the park and the resort and the never-ending buzz and excitement of the guests milling around at all times of the day. But she had to admit that her favourite part about her life on the island was everything the tourists knew nothing about. Hidden lagoons to swim in, trails cutting across the hills that weren’t marked on the public maps, a small village where most of the employees lives.

And the Sunday market.

She was standing in the condiments aisle in a small store that stocked the necessities for the staff, trying to decide on the finishing sauce for what she planned to cook for dinner, torn between something with garlic and something with parsley – both of them seemingly appropriate for what she had in mind.

“You should try this one,” Owen Grady appeared by her side like a genie out of the bottle, reaching over her head for something on the upper shelf and then handing her a small bottle of a red wine sauce. “It goes with everything.”

Claire turned around, trying to ignore that in the narrow aisle, they were nearly plastered against one another, unable to hold back a small smile. “Mr. Grady,” she said, an eyebrow arched.

“Owen,” he corrected her habitually with a chuckle. “You fell asleep on my couch. I believe we’re way past the formalities.”

She shook her head and busied herself with reading the label on the bottle he’d given her, amused but unwilling to let him see it. “With all kinds of meat, you mean.” She glanced up at him again. “I need something for fish.”

“Yes,” he deadpanned, and she snorted. “Hey, there’s a barbecue today. At Barry’s. You know Barry, right?” She nodded, figuring that she probably did know some Barry, and he went on. “You should come.”

“Yeah, no.” The idea of interacting with her colleagues outside of work was just as appealing to her as having a root canal done for fun. She had a neat stack of books and films prepared for when she was not doing either of those exciting things.

“Sorry, but I’ve got other plans,” she said - *Like a book and Netflix* - hoping she did sound regretful and not downright gleeful at the idea of not having to go anywhere, with anyone, tonight.

“It’s be fun,” he insisted with that boyish grin she grew to associate with him and no one else.

“Maybe some other time, *Mr. Grady.*”

“*Owen.*” He ruffled his hair with his hand and offered her one of his megawatt smiles that almost made Claire reconsider all of her life choices at once. “See you around, then.”

He picked up his own basket – that Claire noticed had a six-pack of beer and a packet of cheese,
and walked away, humming something under his breath. She watched him go, feeling her chest tighten with regret. Maybe she should have said yes, maybe she could…

She shook her head. Who was she kidding?

—

The knock on the door came when she was elbow deep in garden salad. Claire jerked her head up, puzzled. If there was one thing she could count on in her life, it was that no one in their right mind would come visit her on a Sunday night when they could be doing literally anything else.

She pulled the door open while trying to wipe the tomatoes off her hands with a dishtowel only to find Owen standing on the other side, a bag of groceries in his hand, a bottle of wine sticking out of it. White wine, she noted absently.

“Hey,” he cracked a smile at her, so bright Claire wished she’d had her sunglasses on.

She tilted her head to her shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

“Thought you might use some company,” he said and squeezed past her, inviting himself into her apartment that somehow shrunk in size by the moment.

“What happened to barbecue?” Claire inquired.

“There’ll be another one.” He placed the stuff he brought on the kitchen counter and grinned at her. “So, what are we cooking?”

—

If someone told Claire several months ago that she’d be having a secret affair with Owen Grady, she’d laugh them in the face and call them crazy. And yet here she was, unable to imagine her life without Owen in it.

“You know, it doesn’t have to be a secret,” he whispered against her skin, trialing his lips down her back, his arms wrapped around her waist form behind.

“I know,” Claire admitted with a small sigh and turned around to be able to kiss him properly, her fingers running through his hair. “But I want to keep you all to myself. At least for now.”

He pulled back and regarded her suspiciously. “If this the moment you tell me you’d tie me up and keep me in your basement if I say no? Not that I mind the tying up part.”

She giggled and pulled herself up on her tiptoes to press closer to his chest, whispering against his mouth, “You wish!”

He’d moved into a small bungalow in the middle of the island a few weeks later, claiming it was less loud and hectic than the resort. Claire didn’t mind, save for the fact that he was no longer within an arm’s reach anymore, but she did appreciate the remote location of his new home. Where she could, in fact, not share him with anyone in a three-mile radius.

“Seriously, why did you do it?” She pressed on one afternoon when they finally finished unpacking his stuff. “It’s not that I don’t like it,” she explained and looked around them at the small lagoon and cluster of trees running along its grassy bank. “It’s just so… not you, Owen.”

“Thought your antisocial tendencies would be more comfortable away from the crowds,” he teased
her and flopped down into a hammock hanging on the front porch.

Claire, currently wearing nothing but one of his NAVY T-shirts, put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “I’m not… antisocial.” She protested with a huff.

Owen caught one of her hands and tugged her toward him until she climbed into the hammock, curling into the curve of his body, and pressed an absent kiss to his bare shoulder.

He laughed softly. “Good one. When was the last time you even left the house for any reason other than going to work.” Claire’s face lit up. “Or to get the groceries,” he added quickly, and her smile dimmed.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she pointed out with a pout.

“Sure it doesn’t,” he shook his head and threaded his fingers through her wavy hair, bringing their face closer and kissing her slowly.

Claire’s lips tugged up at the corners, curving into a contemplative smile. “And here I was just wishing to be your friend.”

“Were you, now?” Owen’s brows knitted together in disbelief.

“Oh, come on.” She wiggled even closer to him, their legs tangled together, and giggled when he inhaled sharply as her fingers ran down the exposed skin of his chest. “Everyone wants to be your friend. You’re nice…” She kissed his cheek. “And funny…” Another kiss, to his jaw this time. “And kind.” Her lips brushed against his.

“And I also have many other useful skills,” he reminded her with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

“And your taste in clothes can totally be fixed,” she added. “I’m sure of that.”

Confused, Owen looked down. “What’s wrong with my board shorts?”

“I don’t like them.” She weaved her arms around his neck. “Take them off.”

“Yes, ma’am.”
Based on a bunch of numbered prompts, so... You know the drill!

"Are you drunk?"

The first thing Claire learned while living at Jurassic World was how to tune out the never-ending noise and commotion. There were certain perks to living right at the resort instead of the staff quarters, which, she knew, could offer just as appealing accommodation to someone of her position. But Claire appreciated being able to walk to her office, and having an eye at the park at all times was something that allowed her to sleep well at night. At least when the endless parties weren’t keeping her up, that is.

It was, however, fairly hard to sleep when there was a loud and persistent banging on her door.

Rubbing her eyes, Claire tossed her covers aside, ready and willing to tear whoever it was apart. The guests seldom mistook her room for someone else’s – her suite was located on the staff floor after all, and technically no one should be able to get there without the key card, but it wasn’t impossible, and the fact that Margaritaville was open all night wasn’t making it any easier.

She padded across the living room, wincing and hissing through her teeth when her shin met the coffee table, and then swung the door open, ready to rip a new one to whoever stood on the other side.

"Claire," Owen Grady drawled at the sight of her, beaming like it was his birthday and Christmas, all rolled up into one.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Claire demanded, dropping whatever manners she might have extended to the guests of the resort, her scowl deepening by the second.

Maybe she was having nightmare after all, she thought. There was no way in hell Mr. Board Short was standing on her doorstep at 3 in the morning. Well, standing was a big word. He desperately needed a wall to keep an upright position.

"Hey," Owen’s loopy smile stretched even wider. “I just wanted to say hi.”

"Are you drunk?" She furrowed her brows.

It was an unnecessary question though – he reeked of the entire menu of every bar on the island. And his gaze was so glazed over Claire wondered if he was even seeing her. Wondered how he managed to find his way to her apartment.

"Nope," he shook his head vigorously, which made him sway and grab onto the doorjamb for support. “I just had one drink.” He showed three fingers to her. “Because it’s my birthday.”

Okay, that explained it.

"Happy birthday," Claire echoed. “Are we done here?"
Owen didn’t seem to have heard her. “And I wanted to tell you that you’re a very beautiful woman, Claire.” He hiccupped. “Oops, sorry.” A giggle escaped his lips. “So yeah, you’re beautiful and… Um, where was I?”

She folded her arms over her chest. “On your way home. The elevators are over there.” She jerked her chin toward the hallways to the right from them.

He pulled his eyebrows together, confused. “No. Not that.” He studied her face for a long moment. “I was telling you that it’s my birthday and that I love you and that.….” He scratched his head. “There was something else, but I forgot what it was.”

For a few seconds, Claire just stared at him, her stomach in knots. Sure he was so wasted he could barely stand, but there was something in his eyes, the raw emotion that was making it hard to breath. Something that was making her want to slam the door in his face if only to put some barrier between the two of them while the other part of her wanted…

“You should go home, Mr. Grady,” Claire said coolly.

“Sure,” he agreed easily. “Just… one kiss, okay? For my birthday.”

And before she even knew what was happening, he leaned into her. Except he lost his balance, his lips grazing her cheek, until he practically collapsed on her, Claire’s knees nearly buckling under the almost 2 hundred pounds of pure muscles, her arms clasping instinctively around his waist. They both stumbled inside of her apartment, Owen somehow managing to stay on his feet, but only barely.

“Oh, that was un-thought through,” he mumbled, trying to straighten up, but with limited success.

Claire pursed her lips together, grimacing and still serving as his prop.

Never would she have assumed that she’d honestly prefer to have a visit from a random party-goer that somehow strayed away from his fellow drunks. Now this was something she could deal with. Owen Grady, on the other hand…

“This was very stupid,” she huffed, her mind feverishly trying to come up with what she should do next.

“You’re terrific,” Owen told her, his blue eyes searching her face.

“How much did you have, exactly?” She shook her head.

Frankly, her options were limited, so in the end Claire simply dumped him on the couch, quite certain that he started to snore even before his head hit the armrest. She could probably call the security or one of his friends from the paddock – which would require calling Zara first and that was something Claire didn’t want to do – but it was probably not worth the hassle. Instead, she found a comforter and threw it over him before retreating back to her bedroom, his words still ringing in her head.

She climbed under her blanket again, wide awake and too wired to sleep.

He was drunk. Very drunk. Who knew where he’d end up if he didn’t come here, and what he said… it didn’t mean anything. She was certain it was just the liquor talking. Gallons of it, by the looks of it.

He couldn’t have possibly meant it, could he?
She did fall asleep eventually, and when she woke up, the sun was up and her phone was about to explode with messages from Zara who was wondering why Claire didn’t show up for work.

Cursing under her breath, she tumbled out of her bed, trying to recall what she had on her agenda for today, her eyes sandy and her head heavy from lack of sleep after having maybe three hours of shuteye, at most.

In the living room, Owen was sitting on the couch, his face buried in his hands, when she zapped out of the bedroom and made a beeline for the kitchen, grateful beyond herself for her programmed coffee machine and the smell of the freshly brewed coffee hanging in the air.

“Morning, sleeping beauty,” she noted, glancing at him quickly. “Slept well?”

“I don’t remember,” Owen croaked, visibly so hungover she almost felt bad for him. If only he wasn’t sitting on her couch after causing her to sleep through her alarm. “What happened?”

“I was trying to ask you that, but I don’t think we got anywhere,” Claire hummed, filling two mugs with black liquid and adding cream to hers. “Here,” he handed the other one to Owen. “You okay to, I don’t know, stand? Not sure I could carry you.”

His lips quirked. “I think I’m good. Thanks.” He gulped his coffee, then squinted up at her. “I’m sorry. I… don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You weren’t, Mr. Grady,” Claire rolled her eyes. “Could you do me a favour, though? The next time, go somewhere else. Like, anywhere else, okay?”

Owen pushed himself up, towering over her now, and Claire had to resist the urge to step back, and it was only her stubborn determination to stand her ground that kept her where she was, her chin lifted to look him in the eyes. She couldn’t remember ever realizing how tall he was.

“Promise,” Owen said.

“Good,” she nodded, satisfied. “Now, we wouldn’t want anyone seeing you stumble around like this.” She gave him a pointed once-over, wringing her nose at the sight of his shirt and what she hoped were dirt stains on his cargo pants. “I’ll drive you home.”

“It’s okay,” Owen started to protest, but she leveled him with her gaze and simply headed for the door, trying not to think of how thrown her schedule was because of him.

“Claire,” he called just as she stepped into her beige pumps, and when she looked up, he was still standing where she’d left him half a minute ago. “About what I said…”

Her heartbeat accelerated by the second, her throat going dry. “What did you say?” She asked, hoping her voice was as even as she intended.

Owen looked down at his feet for a moment, and then at her again, his face bearing no trace of his smug trademark smirk. “I meant it, you know.” He approached her slowly until there was no air left between them, and she had no choice but to look him in the eyes. “The time was off. And the circumstances… well, I shouldn’t have barged in here like this.” He swallowed, hard. “But… would you like to maybe catch a dinner sometime next week?”

She considered his words, allowing the pause to hang between them for a long moment.

“Thursday,” Claire said at last, almost physically feeling his relief, the smile that broke on his face
brighter than the sun. “And I’m choosing the place,” she added quickly. “And…”

“No board shorts,” he promised her quickly. “I swear.”
'Can I open my eyes yet?'

Chapter Notes

Shameless fluff alert!

“Can I open my eyes yet?”

“Now you’re scaring me,” Owen said, only half joking.

Standing on the porch of an old house, he kept his eyes closed, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jacket and his cheeks flushed with cold as the chilly wind nipped at his skin. No, he knew Wisconsin would be nothing like Central America, but being unaccustomed to the cold climate, he certainly didn’t expect it to be this fucking freezing most of the time since they moved here.

And the craziest thing was that Claire, a person whose feet were permanently cold, startling him every time her toes brushed against his in bed, and who constantly had to wear a million layers to stay warm, was seemingly unfazed by it while he kept wondering how were people even surviving here.

Not that he ever questioned Claire’s request to relocate back to Midwest. If there was something Owen could understand, it was her desperate need for change – after the park, after everything she’d been living for for nearly a decade went down in flames. And for him, it didn’t make any difference. He wanted Claire, period. If she decided to move to the moon, he’s pack up his space suit in five minutes flat, no questions asked.

Although none of this explained so far why she picked him up from his job at the local animal shelter in the middle of the day and told him to keep his eyes shut while she drove them… where, exactly?

He could feel her there, standing before him, could smell the winter on her, and his hands itched to reach for her, pull her closer, bury his face in her hair.

“A small lady like me scaring a big marine like yourself?” Claire scoffed meanwhile, fumbling with the keys until she found the right one. “Coming from someone who trained Velociraptors for a living, it doesn’t sound very impressive.”

“At least I knew what to expect from them,” he countered eagerly.

She snorted. “Keep telling yourself that.” Which made him smile.

Owen heard the door open, the hinges creaking either form the cold, or from not being oiled for too long. Then Claire’s hand found his, their fingers interlacing, and she tugged him forward.

“Careful,” she warned him, and he instinctively stepped over the threshold without tripping over it.

The air got warmer instantly. It smelled of dust and furniture polish and wood, although Owen could tell straight away that wherever they were, no one had been living there for quite a while. Their footsteps echoed in the empty corners as his fingers squeezed hers.
“Is this where you’ll kill me and hide my body?” He inquired warily.

“Only if you keep asking stupid questions,” she promised solemnly.

“Can I open my eyes yet?”

“No.”

“Okay, what about now?” He pressed two seconds later.

“Soon,” she promised as they made their way deeper into the house.

“And now?” He was curious, he had to admit that much.

At last, she stopped, and so did he. “Okay, now’s good.” Claire said.

They were standing in the middle of an empty living room, a dusty hardwood floor beneath their feet and old wallpaper on the walls around them. High ceiling. A fireplace. Glass doors leading into a backyard currently covered with a thick layer of snow, the trees scattered over it, tall and old, were bare at this time of the year. But it as easy to imagine what they would look like in spring and summer.

“So?” Claire asked after he took his sweet time to study the room, taking in wood paneling on one of the walls and a chandelier above them that the previous owners left because it was too massive to remove and that she liked to no end.

At last, Owen turned to her, his eyes narrowed slightly. “What is this place?”

“Nothing yet,” she said, slipping her arm under his jacket to wrap it around his waist and looked around again, her lower lip caught between her teeth. “But it could be something.” She met Owen’s eyes again. “I grew up in the neighborhood. My parents’ house was only a few blocks away, and I saw the ‘For lease’ sign the other day.” She cleared her throat, suddenly self-conscious. “Thought it might be an upgrade from our one-bedroom.”

Owen grinned down at her, “It might be.”

“You like it?” Claire asked. “I know it’s old and it needs some work…”

He shifted to step in from of her, his hands framing her face. He studied her features for a few seconds, his thumb running over her cheekbone, drinking in the golden freckles over the bridge of her nose, her plum pink lips, the deep jade of her eyes. And then he leaned down to press his mouth to hers, unable to hold back his smile. Feelings hers with his kiss.

“It’s perfect.” He said quietly between the pecks.

“Look, if it’s too soon…” She began, but Owen put his index finger to her lips, and then kissed her again for good measure.

“We talked about it, honey, remember? Don’t overthink the good stuff.”

Claire smirked. “I thought you means eating whipped cream off my body.”

Owen grinned smugly. “Not exclusively.” He put his arm around her shoulders and gave the place another measured look. “It’s nice, Claire, I swear. And… Is the heating on?”

“Actually… Yes, that’s another thing I wanted…” She wiggled out of his embrace. “Wait here a
And before he could say a word, she was gone only to return half a minute later, carrying something in her arms. Something black. Something….

Owen’s eyes widened. “You got me a puppy?”

“Well…”, Claire blew a wisp of hair from her face with a huff, trying to hold on to the wiggling body of a tiny black lab as best she could while he tried to lick her chin. “Go big or go home, right?”

Owen scratched the pup’s head, earning a few high-pitched yips in response as the little fellow ditched Claire and climbed into his arms. “A house and a puppy. I swear you’re the best mom ever,” Owen said to her, and she rolled her eyes and smacked him light on the arm. “Does he have a name?”

“According to the paperwork, it’s Peanut,” she responded with a small frown. “Which makes no sense. I guess we can rename him.”

“No, Peanut is good,” Owen said before shifting the puppy in one arm and pulling Claire closer to him with the other. “So, we’re doing this, huh?”

She put her arms around his waist. “I’m in if you are.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “God, you’re wonderful.”
"Your smile is not as bright as it used to be"

Chapter Notes

"Your smile is not as bright as it used to be," and "we're designed to be disposable" ;))
BECAUSE I LOVE ANGST!

“Owen?”

He whirled around, feeling like something big and hot hit him in the solar plexus, his breath catching in his throat.

For a moment, he thought it must have been a figment of his imagination, his mind playing tricks on him. Surely, there were enough people to recognize him in this city and call out his name in the condiments aisle of the grocery store.

And yet…

There they were – the inquisitive green eyes, high cheekbones, a soft curve of pink lips. She was wearing her hair long now, braided, with a few wisps framing her face. His name on her lips echoed in every part of his body, making him feel like he’d spent an eternity underwater and was only now granted a gulp of air.

“Hey, Claire,” he heard himself say, his voice sounding like it was coming from miles away, his ears ringing.

It had been two years since the last time he saw her, but it might have been ten minutes. If he tried hard, he could oh so easily imagine stepping out for coffee or to get a newspaper or a carton of milk. Sometimes, it was easier to think of it that way than to remember how the things ended for the two of them.

“You’re back,” she said softly.

Owen glanced down at his basket filled with mac n cheese boxes, and instant noodles, and a six-pack of beer, wishing he’d grabbed a bag of lettuce or something, just so his choices wouldn’t look so pathetic. He had plenty of that going for him anyway.

“I guess I am,” he admitted as though it was news to him as well.

This was a loaded question he often didn’t think had an answer. If the last few years taught Owen anything, it was that he couldn’t really come back – from the island, to the way he was, to the way he wanted to be. He wondered sometimes if it was what drove them apart – if maybe Claire needed him whole, not just the scattered parts he didn’t know how to put together.

“Good,” she said, offering him a small smile – something that made his stomach turn and his start booming in his ears. “You look good.”

“You, too.”

He took her in properly. Good was a major understatement. In this slightly oversized sweater she’d
always loved, she looked gorgeous, radiant, so breathtakingly beautiful he couldn’t think straight. There was bullet scars on his skin, wounds running so deep they could never truly heal, but nothing he’d ever experienced, however painful, could compared to the agony of remembering exactly what she tasted like, what her body felt like pressed against his, how he felt both shattered and whole all at once when he was with her.

And worst of all was knowing that he could have it all, but never would.

Owen pushed his hair back and smiled at her, his face feeling like it was made of plastic, his lips refusing to cooperate. He needed to get out – to hell with food, he needed to start breathing again, and there was no way he could do it with Claire around. He needed to jump in his car and drive until he could no longer feel her with every cell of her body. Until his mind was free.

Instead, he asked, “Would you like to grab a lunch? Maybe catch up on… well, everything?”

She tilted her head to her shoulder, studying him for a few long moments, none of them paying any attention to the people squeezing past them in the narrow aisle.

“I can’t.” Claire shook her head at last, leaving him both relieved and so disappointed it was like the final nail in his coffin. “But coffee could work,” she added just as Owen was about to bolt for the exit to save himself from further humiliation.

—

There was a small coffee shop a block away they both used to frequent when they were still together, and he wondered if she still liked it or if it was a force of habit that got her to suggest going there now.

Over cups of cappuccinos, Owen told her about his job and Claire shared bits and pieces about her life as fifteen minutes turned into thirty and then into an hour, the crowd around them changing, people flowing in and out, the conversations carrying on.

“I guess the congratulations are in in order,” Owen said at last, his gaze darting pointedly at the engagement ring she never bothered to hide, her palms clasped around her second cup of coffee.

Unfazed, she glanced down at it and then met his eyes again. “That is not necessary, I assure you.”

He nodded. “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” she hesitated only for a heartbeat. “I am.”

Another nod. “When is the happy event?”

“Six weeks.”

He finished his coffee in one gulp, wishing it was bourbon. Or better yet – cyanide. “He’s a lucky man.”

She looked away then, staring out the window for a long moment, at the people hurrying alone the street, the cars honking, the dogs barking in the park across the road. Life never stopped for anyone, Claire thought. It kept its merry pace regardless of the moments when she thought it skidded to a standstill.

“We both are.”
“Your smile is not as bright as it used to be,” Owen breathed out.

Claire turned to him again. “Maybe so. But he is not making me cry.” He glanced down then, closed his eyes as her words cut into him, slicing right through him. “You left me, Owen. First for the island and your dinosaur. Then for the NAVY.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” he shook his head, his voice dropping and growing thick.

“There’s always a choice,” Claire countered. “We just don’t like the other options sometimes.” She traced her fingertips along the rim of her cup. “What was I supposed to do? Wait for you? What if you’d never come back?”

A corner of his mouth tugged up a little, his lips forming into a rueful smile. “I didn’t say you made a wrong choice.” The pause started to stretch between them, but when she opened her mouth, he said quickly, “It doesn’t change the fact that I loved you. I still do. Probably always will. And if you gave me a chance, I’d spend the rest of my life doing everything I can, and more, to make you happy.”

Her shoulder sagged, her expression growing pained. “Owen…”

“But it’s a lot to ask, I know. And…” He sucked in a sharp breath. “You deserve better than that. Better than me. You deserve so much better than what I have to offer.” He reached for her hand but then drew it back away. “I wish I didn’t know that.”

“I wish you’d come back sooner,” she whispered.

“I wish I never left.”

—

He wanted to pack up and leave. Get as far away from this town and from Claire Dearing as he possibly could. It was the right thing to do. A healthy thing. And all of his essence screamed for it, yearning to stop hurting.

Instead, Owen settled into a routine, busying his mind with everything that wasn’t her, which was almost as impossible as making the Earth spin backwards with the power of his will. He started to run. He dove deep into his job. He tried not to think of how much he wanted to die just thinking of Claire with another man.

He found a new grocery store.

And after a while, it started to seem like he could actually make it, the memories that came rushing back after that first encounter weeks ago finally dimming to a dull throb inside of him instead of the sharp jolts of pain that used to steal his breath away.

Until a loud knock on his door came five weeks later, snapping Owen out staring out the kitchen window as he waited for his coffee machine to work its magic.

“You had no right to do it,” Claire said the moment he swung it open, her hair tied into a sloppy ponytail and her eyes wild.

“Claire?”

“It took me months to get out of my bed, Owen,” she said with as much accusation as one’s voice could carry. “After you left, I had to learn how to be alive all over again.”
He stared at her standing on his doorstep, wrapped in a cardigan that did nothing to protect her from the chilly wind and looking in the early morning light like she was one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, fierce and furious, and for a moment, it felt so surreal he wasn’t sure it was actually happening.

Except she smelled of lilacs and vanilla and that floral detergent he couldn’t wash off his clothes for so long it drove him insane, and the strands of hair falling on her face were curling at the ends, making him want to reach out and brush them away. And there was no fucking way he’d make up the anger that was bubbling up inside of her, threatening to pour over the edge any moment.

“And then Dan came along. And he’s a good man. The right man.” She pursed her lips together.

“Like a bran muffin,” Owen offered, amused for the reasons he couldn’t quite place yet.

Claire gaped at him. “Excuse me?”


She huffed with frustration. “And then you show up, and…."

“And what?” Owen stepped out onto the porch until she had to throw her head back to be able to look at him. He expected her to move away, but she never did, her ocean green eyes blazing.

“And I don’t want to do the right thing anymore,” she finished quietly. “And I hate you so much for it.”

“Good,” he nodded, his smirk softening until he was looking down at her with the small smile. “I don’t want you to do the right thing, either.”

She swallowed, hard. “Did you mean what you said?”

“Every word.”

Claire stayed quiet for a while, just studying his face, taking in the lines around his eyes, his mouth, the tan skin of his face, the hair in a desperate need of a haircut, her throat closing up and staring to burn.

“When you left, you said that we’re designed to be disposable. You remember that?” Owen nodded. “Well, you were wrong. We are not. We’re designed to be happy.” She shook her head. “I called off the wedding.”

“You did?” Owen reached for her hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing her cool, reddened knuckles. The ring was not there anymore.

“One chance, Owen,” she whispered. “You have one chance, and if you so much as think—”

He cupped her cheek with his palm, tilting her face up until his lips were pressed to hers and a soft sigh escaped her chest. “Never,” he murmured, kissing her again. “I’m sorry. And I love you. And I’ll never leave you again.”
No one told Claire how hard it would be to juggle her work and her personal life when she first moved to Isla Nublar.

Then again, no one told her she would be having a secret affair with Owen Grady either, and this was definitely something that should have come with a warning. Not that it would have stopped her…

It all started with their disastrous date.

Owen was smug and obnoxious and criminally underdressed. He took her to the bar, of all places, and laughed openly when she pulled a folded itinerary from her purse. She wore her best cocktail dress and refused to so much as look at tequila. Although Claire had to admit to herself this wasn’t the worst date she’d ever been on, but it certainly was in her top five.

The logical course of action would have been to walk away and never look back, but five minutes turned into an hour, and then they suddenly found themselves in the parking lot, his lips pressed to hers, hard and warm and demanding. He tasted of lime and Margarita and a chocolate mouse, his hands bracketing her body while she stood with her back pressed to her car, her fingers tangled in his hair. And when he asked her if she wanted him to take her home, her answer was no. Her head was spinning and she had to hold on to him so that she wouldn’t collapse to the ground even though she didn’t take a single drink of alcohol that evening.

It must have been him then, Claire thought absently as his tongue slipped into her mouth and her knees nearly buckled under the weight of her body. It was Owen who was making her drunk.

Her place was closer, but his was more secluded, and the next thing she knew, her hands were dancing all over his chest and his back and just about every inch of his skin she could reach, their clothes strewn all over the bungalow’s floor from the living room to the bedroom.

Later, she would tell him that she simply wanted to get him out of those godawful board shorts that were an insult to the mankind, but they both knew that the truth ran much deeper than that. Owen’s occasional smugness didn’t stop him from being the kindest person she’d ever met, and his arrogance never prevented him from treating her like she was made of the finest porcelain that could break in his hands if he wasn’t gentle enough.

“Stay,” Owen murmured against her skin afterwards as she lay curled against him, his mouth pressing feather light kisses to her bare shoulder.

“Can’t,” Claire shook her head, turning to capture his lips with hers. “I have something first thing in the morning.” Another kiss, and she wiggled out of his grasp, wondering how she was going to find all of her stuff in the dark. “And if I stay, none of us will get any sleep.”
“Damn right,” he chuckled, then caught her wrist and pulled her toward again, his other hand smoothing down her tousled hair that started to curl in humidity. “I’ll see you later?”

She leaned over to touch her lips to his. “Damn right, Mr. Grady.”

So this was how she ended up spending just about every night at his place; how she found herself smiling in anticipation of seeing him; how Owen would seek any excuse to stop by her office whenever possible, his mouth pressed to hers the moment the door closed behind him, cutting them from the rest of the world.

Technically, it didn’t have to be a secret. He was employed with InGen and she worked for Masrani Global, and their only professional interaction was limited to Claire collecting his progress reports she had to include in the paperwork sent to the headquarters. But as a woman in the position of power, she was keenly aware of what it would look like to everyone else. Jurassic World was a small community, and being physically restricted by the territory of the island and its remote location, people longed for entertainment, always hungry for anything that was out of the ordinary. And the park’s Operations Manager spending a great deal of time in bed with the ‘raptor whisperer’ certainly fell under that category. She didn’t want people to talk.

If he was lucky, Owen would probably get points for scoring something that the ‘cold bitch from the management’ – Claire was not obtuse and certainly not deaf to what people were whispering behind her back. But God only knew what they’d start saying about her. Last time she checked, there was no right way for a woman to behave, whatever she was doing.

“I don’t care what they say, Claire,” Owen promised her when she shared her concerns with him, his head resting on her stomach and her fringes threading soothingly through his hair. He caught her hand, pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “You’re a badass.”

“That’s an unpopular opinion,” she pointed out, an eyebrow arched.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about that,” he shrugged and rolled over to kiss her properly on the mouth.

“Charming, Mr. Grady,” Claire murmured, smiling, as she pulled him over her like a blanket. “Now, where were we?”

She knew that Zara probably knew, or at the very least suspected something – it would be hard not to, assuming she’d seen more of Owen in the last few weeks than in the past two years, and Claire didn’t know how long the ‘he screwed something up again’ party line would hold. And the thought was filling her with exhilaration and fear – she higher she aimed, the harder would be the fall, and she knew they both were already falling.

“I missed you,” Owen whispered one afternoon, pressing her to the door with his body, his mouth trailing along her neck, making her heart beat faster, leaping in her throat.

Claire weaved her arms around his waist, nuzzled his cheek. “It’s been what, four hours?”

On the other side of the door, the potential investors were waiting for the tour around the park, and she shamelessly roped him into being their guide today - poor man didn’t even know what he was getting himself into as she worked that request into a very long and deep kiss a few days ago, his blood anywhere but in his brain at the moment. Which, Claire knew, was bound to backfire. Perhaps. Unless she wore that little black thing tonight that he liked seeing on her so much. Not that it ever stayed on her long.

“Never enough,” he breathed out, his voice hoarse, before his lips crashed against hers.
That she could definitely understand. She hated him for it, for his power over her. Claire knew he thought she was the one calling the shots, always having the upper hand in their relationship, and appeared to be fine with it, but the reality was that she was giving more to him than to anyone else ever before. Her time. Her body. Her goddamn soul, for that matter. And it terrified her more than that weird creature Simon Masrani was harvesting in the secret paddock 11, the one that gave her creeps.

The dinosaur Claire could deal with – after all, it was her job. With Owen, however, she felt herself stranded in the open sea, not knowing which way to go to find the solid ground again. She was breathing him in like he was her oxygen, her heart beating in sync with his. Never the sentimental type before, she was starting to understand what people meant when they were talking about finding their second half. No, she always viewed herself as a whole, but with him, she felt complete.

“Thank you,” she kissed him again. “You’re a lifesaver, I swear. I’m so swarmed and…”

“I know,” he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, allowing his knuckles to trail down her cheek, the corner of his mouth lifted into a half-smile. “The pleasure is all mine.”

She let out a short, breathy laugh. “We’ll see about that later.”

A promise, they both knew it. A dare.

At last, he pulled far enough away from her to allow Claire to straighten her clothes and smooth down her hair. She brushed her thumb to his cheek to rub away the bright stain from her lipstick, and he had to stuff his hands into the pockets of his pants to stop himself from reaching for her again, investors be damned.

Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing still short, and nothing looked better on her – he’d bet every last of his dimes on that.

Claire gave him a long once-over – not as Claire but as the Operations Manager of Jurassic World – to make sure he looked decent, nodded her approval, and pulled the door open.

“Oh, and, Claire?” Owen called quietly from behind her, pulling something out of his pocket and handing it to her, watching with unmasked amusement how her face grew hot by the second at the sight of her red bra in his hand. “I believe you dropped this. You know, in the morning.”

A shit-eating grin spread across his face, he squeezed past her into the waiting area, brushing his hand against hers in the process and sending bright sparkles along her skin. And as Claire stood here, her red bra clutched in her hand, practically hearing Zara’s mouth drop open, he sauntered over to the three guys in black Armani suits and herded them to the elevators, never once looking back.

She was so going to kill him.
If you want, we could go together?

Chapter Notes

Here we go! I hope I’m not the only one thinking that their friendship might be the most precious thing in the world :)

“If you want, we could go together?”

There were moments in Owen Grady’s life when his future seemed to be mapped out and stretching before him like a clear road without a single curve in sight. When his choices were making sense to him. When everything looked bright and crystal clear. When there was no question as to whether or not he should stay on the path he’d chosen.

Until it all went to hell and he had to escape, and the world stopped being black and white, and there was no right or wrong anymore, just the things that had to be done for him to keep on moving forward.

Owen had no idea what he was signing up for when he said yes to Simon Masrani’s offer. His idea of what he was supposed to be doing with the dinosaurs was vague, at best. But there was a moment nearly three years ago when he first arrived at the island that almost made him feel like he wasn’t falling into the abyss anymore. From the monorail car, he saw an Apatosaurus in the valley below, looking enormous and massive even from the distance. The real thing, Owen had thought back then. He had to admit to himself that until that very moment, he didn’t truly believe that the dinosaurs were real again.

That was the most incredible thing that happened to him on Isla Nublar.

The second most incredible thing was his surprising out-of-nowhere friendship with Claire goddam Dearing.

It started with a bunch of mutual insults aimed at everything they didn’t like about each other – from their clothes to their ability to meet the deadlines to control issues (Claire’s) to immaturity (Owen’s) - and gradually morphed into “Would you like to maybe grab a lunch/have a walk/catch a movie so that I could pine for you without having to be too subtle about it?”. At least on his part, Owen had to admit. He was fairly certain she was looking at him like he was a house plant or a lamp – something sort of necessary for comfort, but not vital enough to actually give it a second thought.

Not that it ever stopped him from fantasizing about all kinds of situations involving the two of them in different stages of nakedness, but since it turned out that her reputation of a cold-hearted bitch was massively exaggerated, he bit his tongue and chose to keep his mouth shut. The truth was, she was smart and intelligent and funny, and kinder than anyone on the island knew, and if he could have her only as a friend – well, he’d just have to suck it in and soldier on.

“This is getting ridiculous,” Claire shook her head, her lips pursed into a thin line as she stared thoughtfully at her cup of cappuccino as if it was holding all the answers she was looking for. “It shouldn’t be that big a trouble to find a birthday gift for my sister.”
A long sigh escaped her chest, making Owen all but choke on the pastry he was currently shoving into his mouth.

He swallowed and took a sip of his drink, feeling that his eyes were starting to water. It would be a rather poetic death, he decided. Suffocation at the sight of Claire Dearing breathing. If he could get any more pathetic than that, he couldn’t quite see how.

“I’m surprised you didn’t delegate that to your assistant,” Owen pointed out with a shrug. “Or order something on eBay.”

“Karen would know,” she regarded him with accusation as if it was his fault she couldn’t solve this very intricate problem, which made him smile inwardly. The woman had no idea how much that pout suited her.

“It’s not a rocket science, Claire,” he countered. “What does she like?”

“To patronize me,” she grumbled.

“I’m not sure they have it here,” Owen deadpanned. “Maybe in the village? You know, the place that isn’t stuffed with everything you personally ordered for the souvenir shops?”

Claire arched an eyebrow, watching him over the rim of her coffee cup, her lips curved into a small, amused smile. “Do you want to take me shopping, Mr. Grady?”

“Not particularly,” he snorted, but then cleared his throat and added, “But if you want, we could go together?”

The village was a cluster of buildings located in the middle of the island outside of the territory of the resort designed to house some of the employees and cater to their needs. Upon Simon Masrani’s insistence, it had a couple of local businesses that were the best place to find something interesting that wasn’t dinosaur-related and didn’t have a Jurassic World logo on it.

They took Owen’s bike, which required a great deal of persuasion on his part (“I am not getting on that thing, Owen!” – “We’ll never find a parking spot for your car there!”), and after a short ride through the humid greenery of the jungle, they were kicking dust on the narrow streets packed with the park employees enjoying their time off.

“This might actually work,” Claire muttered to no one in particular as they stepped into a dark, small store so stuffed with all kinds of junk it was hard to move around without bumping into or stepping onto something.

“You should get this,” Owen put a broad-brimmed hat on her head and beamed with appreciation, pulling it over her eyes. “Looks good on you.”

“Says the man who buys the same two pairs of pants every year,” she rolled her eyes, waving the hat in his face. “Online.”

“First, keeping tabs on me, huh?” He smirked. “And second, if they work, they work. Why make it any more complicated that that?”

“My point exactly.” She huffed, making her way through piles and mountains of stuff toward the glass displays with some sort of jewelry and decorative knick-knacks in the back of the store. “Thank you, grandma, I think I’ll pass.”
“Hey, you wanted an expert opinion,” he argued, following her.

“I wanted a ride,” Claire said breezily over her shoulder.

Owen chuckled under his breath, watching her trace her fingers along the scarves hanging on the rack and flipping through the hangers to have a better look at the designs on the white cotton shirts. The shop smelt of dust and talcum and dry lavender and potpourri, but it was the delicate scent of Claire – a mixture of her perfume and her sunscreen and something that was purely her – that was invading his senses, making it pretty damn hard to concentrate on anything else.

He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants and busied himself with staring at the wooden figurines lining up along one of the shelves. Oh, he knew very well where he wanted to put them instead – in her hair, on her face, all over her, for that matter. But seeing as how he was basically her girlfriend now, the only thing he could actually do was give her unsolicited advice about the things he knew nothing of and hope that they wouldn’t jump to painting each other’s toenails next.

In the end, Claire settled on a pendant and earrings, adding an intricately carved wooden box to put them in, and Owen found a colorful scarf that he wrapped around her neck and paid for it despite her protests, smiling at the elderly woman behind the counters who watched the two of them curiously.

“You didn’t have to do it,” Claire said as they headed for the door.

“I like the colors,” he tugged at one end of the scarf lightly. “They look good on you.”

She opened her mouth to object, but then just nodded with a fleeting smile, her hand pushing the door open. “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful,” he thought, but it hardly was the right thing to say, so instead he just stared at her, blurring out when the pause started to stretch between them, “Ice cream?”

—

The skies opened up all of a sudden above them when they were on their way back to where Owen parked his bike in the morning, pouring buckets of water on their heads and beating down the dust.

“Come on!” Owen grabbed her hand and they made a run for the cover, skipping over the puddles, the droplets of mud splattering their pants.

They squeezed themselves into a narrow alley between the houses that stood so close together their roofs were touching, protecting them from the vicious downpour. And Owen let out a short, delighted laughter at the sight of the wall of water hanging between them and the rest of the world.

“Guess we’ll have to wait it out,” he noted, pushing his wet hair back from his forehead, the rainwater streaming down his face, falling into the collar of his shirt.

“You think?” Claire cocked an eyebrow at him with a wry smile before turning her attention to the nature raging outside of their hiding spot.

Standing in the narrow space between brick walls, they were almost pressed against each other, and when Owen glanced down at last, he felt his grin slip off his face, his heartbeat picking up its pace.

She was still breathing hard from their sprint, her lips parted ever so slightly. Her light cotton shirt was clinging to her body and her hair, fuzzy from humidity, was framing her face with gentle
waves. She looked different, softer somehow, and so goddamn luminous it hurt. He could smell the rain on her, feel with warmth of her in the suddenly cool air.

“What?” Claire asked, her eyes narrowing slightly, when she finally noticed him watching her.

“Oh, fuck…” Owen muttered under his breath.

One hand on the small of her back, he cupped her head with the other, his fingers tangled in her fiery hair, as his lips pressed to hers, stealing her breath away. Claire was caught off guard momentarily, but before either of them knew it, she was pressing back against him, his shirt bunched in her hands as she pulled herself up on her tiptoes, eventually weaving her arms around his neck.

Until they were both breathless.

Until her head was spinning, and clinging to him was a matter of staying upright.

Until Owen started to feel like his heart was about burst in his chest.

“God,” he murmured, pressing his forehead to hers, her nose bumping against his. “Wanted to do it forever.”

“Why didn’t you?” She asked quietly, her fingers tracing the collar of his shirt.

“Didn’t think you were interested.”

At that, she chucked, her mouth pressing a kiss to his chin. “I was spending all of my free time with you, Owen. What else was I supposed to do? Rip off my clothes and throw myself at you?”

Laughter bubbling up in his chest, he lifted her face up until she had no other choice but to look him in the eyes. “That would’ve been nice.”

“I bet it would,” she shook her head, failing to fight back a smile.

He brushed her hair from her face, tucked it behind her ear, his fingertips trialing down her cheek. “My bad. I’ll make it up to you.”

Claire’s lips stretched into a contemplative smile as she grabbed his shirt and pulled his down to her again. “You better.”
Netflix and chill

Chapter Summary

"Why are you crying in the hallway?? Are you okay?? Let’s go to my place, I have ice cream and Netflix."

Chapter Notes

Because I have a soft spot for them being neighbors

When Owen was signing a contract with InGen, the bungalow was a deal breaker. He could’ve easily chosen an accommodation either at the Hilton with the executives, what with his being the head of the Velociraptor project and all, or in a small village where most of the other staff resided. But after the NAVY, the crowds were making him jittery and the occasional shouts that in reality were nothing but the people looking for their kids that ran off to see the next attraction kept setting off his inner alarms. Hence, the house in the middle of nowhere where he could pretend that it was just him and his raptors on the whole island. In retrospect, it probably wasn’t the healthiest approach, but at this point he honestly didn’t care.

So what if he didn’t have air-conditioning and the power was acting up every time the wind changed and there was always something that needed to be fixed? He could deal with that! For the most part, it felt like having an ongoing hobby.

Until one of the pipes burst – either from the heat, or from old age – and Owen faced the dilemma of having to choose being between bathing and doing his laundry and washing his dishes in the lagoon, and moving to the resort until he fixed it. Frankly, the lagoon didn’t seem like that bad an option, except it was hardly sanitary, and although he would get away with swimming there, there was no way in hell he would ever use that water to make coffee.

And this was how he ended up on the top floor of the Hilton where Simon Masrani insisted he stayed until the maintenance crew changed the entire plumbing system in the bungalow, dismissing Owen’s protests about how he was absolutely capable of doing it himself.

“Don’t worry about this, Mr. Grady,” he said with that easy smile of a man who was used to having everyone do what they were told. “Just enjoy your time at the resort.”

Owen swallowed his response and nodded, thinking that he was quite possibly the only person in this hemisphere turning down the luxury in favour of a nearly primitive existence. He even had a fire pit, for heaven’s sake! But it did seem easier to go with the flow instead of trying to swim against the current. Hell, everyone else would probably kill for this kind of upgrade. Even if it was a temporary one.

The elevator doors slid open before him on a Friday night and he stepped into the hallway, still
unaccustomed to the soft carpet under his feet and feeling pretty shitty about the dirt on his boots he didn’t manage to scrape off no matter how hard he tried. This was definitely another downside of a fancy living – he didn’t like being a fancy-living kind of person. In fact, he liked leaving his dirty boots on the porch without thinking about what they’d do to the floorboards.

Owen’s day had been long and exhausting; the girls kept acting up and driving him mad since morning, and the only thing he wanted to do at this point was to sit on the dock, had a bottle – or five – of beer and watch the fireflies circle over the murky lagoon water. Instead, he was bracing himself for another night of listening to someone else’s party going on in one of the bars until 3 in the morning.

“If it’s so bad, how come no one else is bothered by it?” Barry asked him a few days ago when Owen’s foul mood over having to stay at the Hilton started to show.

“That’s because they are everyone else,” Owen grumbled.

Well, at least he had beer in his fridge and maybe something—

He stopped in his tracks when he saw someone sitting on the floor a few doors down the hall, and it took him a moment or two to recognize a familiar red bob – Claire Dearing’s trademark hairdo. Her knees were pulled up to her chest and her arms were wrapped around them, and even though he couldn’t see her face that was tucked down, Owen was fairly certain that she was crying, if her slightly shaking shoulders were any indication.

He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot and then glanced up and down the corridor, uncertain of what unnerved him more – the fact that Claire was crying (because rumor had it she was not capable of expressing any sort of human feelings), or that she was crying in the fucking hotel hallway, of all places. He looked longingly at his door and the relative comfort of the evening waiting for him on the other side, and then sighed and headed in the opposite direction.

“Claire?” He crouched down beside her and reached for her shoulder.

She snapped her head up, startled, and he quickly pulled his hand away, struck by how bright her ocean green eyes looked and by raw emotion in them. Her breathing was shallow and rapid, the tears clinging to her eyelashes gleaming in the light of the lamps. He had never seen her like this, and now his heart was doing those weird leaps in his ribcage. Not because he supported the idea that she wasn’t even human - quite on contrary! - but because it was so out of character for the Claire he knew to fall apart like this, he lost his balance momentarily, his whole world as he knew it tilting and then shattering.

Claire swallowed a gasp of air and quickly brushed her palms to her cheeks, wiping away the tears. “I’m fine,” she assured him without hesitation, and Owen’s eyebrows arched in that Really? way, which made her frown. “Can I help you, Mr. Grady?”

At that, Owen let out a short laugh and shook his head. “Seriously? You’re the only bawling your eyes out and you think I need help?”

She pursed her lips into a tight line. “It’s a figure of speech—”

“I know that it is, Ms. Dearing,” he rolled his eyes, pointedly accentuating her name. “It’s not what I asked.”

“I’m fine,” she repeated stubbornly and smoothed down her hair with her hand.

Owen noticed that it started to curl at the ends, and he had to resist the urge to run his fingers
through it. “Okay,” he rose up to his feet. “But, you know, for someone who has a perfectly equipped apartment right here,” he jerked his chin toward her door, “you sure chose an interesting spot to have a meltdown.”

She stared at him, her mouth hanging open. “I don’t—I certainly do not… I have no idea what you’re talking about.” And then she let out a long, exasperated breath when he simply kept watching her with undisclosed amusement, and glared at him for good measure. “If I could get in, I wouldn’t be sitting here, now would I?”

Owen blinked. “Did you lock yourself out or something?”

Claire shrugged, which he took as a yes, and for a moment it looked like she was about to launch into a new wave of sobbing, but then she sucked in a shuddered breath and looked away, and it was his turn to frown now that her attention was focused elsewhere.

“Okay,” he said slowly. “So, why don’t you—”

“Because my phone is dead, Mr. Grady,” she interrupted him. “And no, the concierge downstairs doesn’t have a spare set of keys. And I just…” She trailed off. “Don’t let me get in your way of having a good evening.”

He snorted. Jesus, this woman was something else. Not only was she carrying herself like she was the Queen of England even though her eyes were puffy and she couldn’t stop sniffling, but she also somehow managed to make him feel like a jerk for offering his help with whatever crisis she’d found herself in.

“Look, you saw me drunk and I saw you pissed off. I think we can drop the formalities,” Owen suggested with a snicker, which only made her scowl deepen. “Also, would you like to come in?” He pointed at the door to his suite.

“I’m good, thank you.”

“You’re not going to actually live here, are you?” He regarded her with a mild panic.

If there was anything that could keep him up all night, it was certainly the thought of Claire sitting right outside his door. Not even the cheerful crowds managed to achieve that so far. Although it certainly wouldn’t be the first time that thinking of her would keep him wide awake, but he normally preferred another setting for this particular fantasy.

Meanwhile, Claire furrowed her brows, the struggle on her face so obvious it would have been funny had her attitude not been stabbing him like a knife every time she so much as looked his way. In the end, she let out a resigned sigh and finally uncurled herself from her little ball of misery to stand up on her slightly wobbly feet, courtesy of her black high-heeled pumps sinking into an inch-thick carpet.

“Actually, if I could use your phone…” She cleared her throat. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

Owen bit back the comment about how they went out once and she didn’t need to behave around him like they’d just met, but it seemed like the kind of thing that would work against him, so he just nodded and started toward his suite, fumbling for the keys in his pocket.

“I have ice-cream, too,” he said, glancing at her over his shoulder. “And, you know, Netflix and stuff.”

Claire raised an eyebrow at him as he pushed the door open and followed him inside. “I’m having a
bad day, Mr. Grady. I’m not 5.”

“So, you’re one of those people who think that fun has age limitations?” He hummed.

“Well, we both know you’re not one of them,” she noted.

Inside, he turned the lights on and tossed the keys onto the counter separating his living room from the small kitchen, wondering if his night was just successfully ruined or if it got a million times better than he expected – at this point, it was hard to tell.

“The landline’s over there,” he motioned toward the table by the couch. “Of you could use my cell.”

“Landline’s fine,” Claire assured him.

While she called whomever she needed to call and explained what had happened to her in a hushed voice, her back turned to him, Owen kicked off his boots, leaving them by the door. And after a brief mental debate about whether or not he needed a quick shower, he disappeared in the bedroom, trying oh so hard not to think about Claire in any way, which only made it so much more impossible to get her out of his head. He only hoped he wasn’t as transparent as he feared he was.

When Owen reappeared in the living room five minutes later, she was standing by the window, staring out at the Mosasaurus’ pool gleaming in the dark.

“Beer?” He asked, and added when she turned around and her gaze fixed on his damp hair and a towel hanging around his neck, “Thought I wouldn’t subject you to my ‘8 hours of working in the sun’ fumes.”

Her lips quirks, tugging at the corners, “I appreciate it, Mr. Grady.”

“Owen,” he started, and then shook his head with a chuckle when it dawned on him that she was joking.

He asked her about the beer again, expecting her to mention her diet and wondering if he would manage not to laugh this time – god knew, it was the last thing this woman needed. But instead she just nodded, and he popped a bottle of Corona open for her without another comment.

“Wanna tell me what happened?” He asked after a few gulps of his own drink.

She ran her fingertip over the mouth of the bottle sitting before her on the counter, “It’s a long story.”

“I’m free until Sunday,” Owen pointed out and leaned against the sink, watching her expectantly.

“You know those days when all kinds crap just keeps piling up? Well, it was that kind of day.” Claire shrugged and took a sip of beer. He didn’t say anything, allowing her to continue in her own pace. “First one of the handlers involved with Mr. Masrani’s new project nearly lost his arm, which will probably result in a lawsuit or, at the very least, an astronomical insurance payment. Naturally, several others expressed their concern regarding their safety.”

“New project?” Owen echoed, curious, but she just shook her head, which meant either I can’t talk about it, or I don’t want to.

“Then, in the afternoon, my sister called and said that she was getting a divorce, and maybe I could have her kids stay here for Christmas so that she could finalize it with her husband with a minimum
drama.” Claire tucked her hair behind her ear and looked away, choosing to stare at the shiny door of his fridge. “And when I came home, it turned out that after my alarm didn’t go off in the morning, I forgot to make sure that I actually grabbed my keys on the way out because I was already late.” Their eyes met again. “That’s about it, I guess.”

Owen nodded and finished his beer in one gulp. “And what’s the deal with the concierge not having a spare set of keys? Isn’t it, I don’t know, against the safety regulations or something?”

She made a face, her cheeks heating up in embarrassment. “They used to, but it’s not the first time it happened, and… Well, the keys that are currently locked inside of my apartment are a spare set.” And added when his eyes widened, “It’s okay. I called Zara and she’s going to send someone to deal with it. I just…” Her fingers were peeling off the sticker from the bottle now, her eyes fixed on the condensation coating its smooth sides. “I needed a moment. And that’s when you…” Claire cut herself off and looked up. “Thank you, really. I do appreciate it. A lot.”

Owen swallowed. Having her look at him like that – like she was actually seeing him and not staring right through him – was doing some really odd things to his body. Like, who knew that his heartrate could accelerate to a mile per second in just a blink of an eye?

He tossed his empty bottle into the trash and pulled a new one out of the fridge. “No problem,” he flashed a megawatt smile at her, wondering if she could also hear that blood rush in his ears. “What else are neighbors for?”

—

In the end, Owen gave her a whole tub of Ben & Jerry’s Cookie Dough ice-cream on, “You deserve it,” and they parked themselves on the couch, settling on Vertigo after a long debate about what to watch. He refused to even consider the romcoms and Claire said she was dealing with monsters every day and didn’t need Alien to entertain her.

She’d kicked off her heels and tucked her legs under her while Owen crossed his at the ankles and propped them on the coffee table as they watched James Stewart try to overcome his phobia for the sake of a greater good.

“Do you think he’d be less scared if he just did it all with his eyes closed?” Owen asked, reaching for her spoon, and Claire handed it to him absently as if his kitchen drawer wasn’t full of spoons and he couldn’t easily get one of his own.

“Then he would just fall of that ledge,” she pointed out.

“No, but I mean, would he be scared less if he didn’t see how high he was from the ground?” He insisted around a mouthful of ice-cream.

“I’m not sure it’s how it works.”

“We should watch Birds next,” he offered.

“No way. I won’t be able to set my foot in the aviary after Birds.” She reclaimed the spoon again and they just watched the film for a few minutes before as spoke again, “Can I ask you something?”

The corner of his mouth tugged up, twisting into a half-smile. “Yes, it is my natural color, and no, I’m not revealing my deep, dark secrets.”

Except instead of playing along, Claire stared at the half-empty ice-cream tub for a little, fiddling
with the spoon, and then turned to him. “Why board shorts?”

He turned to her, too. “Come again?”

She rolled her eyes. “Look, I know this place is hot as hell, but who wears board shorts to a date?”

Owen grimaced sheepishly and ruffled his hair. “You’re gonna laugh.”

“Probably,” she agreed. “But I want to know.”

He slumped against the couch cushions, his face scrunched in that I’d rather not expression. “My washing machine broke that day. Not only were all of my pants wet and soapy, they were also trapped inside of it because the lid wouldn’t open. I had to ask someone come take a look at it the next day.” A long, frustrated breath escaped his chest. “Those board shorts were my only alternative at the time. I thought you’d appreciate them more than my boxer briefs.”

She did laugh at that, and the crease between his brows deepened. “Come on, it is funny.”

“That’s because you didn’t have to go out on your dream date in basically your underwear,” he snorted which came both pouty and defensive, and then added, pointing to her face, “You’ve got something…”

Claire wiped at her cheek. “Better?”

“No,” he voice dropped and he leaned closer to her, his gaze shifting down to her lips. “Let me…” His palm cupped her cheek, and he kissed her on the corner of her mouth, not missing the fact that her breath shortened by the second. “Now I think I got it.”

She didn’t pull away like he expected. Instead, she asked, “Are you sure?”

Owen took the ice-cream tub from her hands and put it on the coffee table before siding his arm around her waist and pulling her closer. “Lemme check one more time,” he whispered, kissing her again.

Her lips obediently parted for him and his tongue slid into her mouth as she grabbed a handful of his shirt, tugging him toward her. He could taste cherries and vanilla on her lips and salt on her cheeks, and it was so much better than he’d ever imagined it could be it felt like he was dreaming again. Except her breath on his skin and her hair between his fingers felt real enough, and she smelled… God, she smelled so good.

“I’m sorry about your sister,” Owen murmured breathlessly when they pulled away for air, his mouth pressing soft kisses to her cheeks, her temples, her forehead.

“I’m sorry about your plumbing,” she responded, twisting his shirt with her fingers.

“Been keeping tabs on me, huh?” He teased her, looping her hair around her ear and trailing his knuckles down her cheek.

Claire scoffed. “Like I wouldn’t know where the maintenance crew is spending their time.”

“Uh-huh,” he nodded, unconvinced, finding her mouth with his again, kissing her slower and deeper and until he couldn’t remember who he was and where they were and how they ended up here.

She wasn’t entirely sure how it happened, exactly, but one moment they were both engrossed in
Hitchcock, and the next Owen was stretched on his back on the couch she was half-sprawled over him, their lips engaged in slow, sexy kisses, neither of them noticing when the credits started to roll. He felt warm and both solid and soft at the same time, and it was so nice to simply let go. He had one of his arms on the small of her back and the other entangled in her hair, and his skin felt so nice against hers, and she loved the smell of soap and the forest on him.

“Owen…”

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he whispered, running his thumb over her cheekbone.

“Get back to me on that when I don’t feel like I have a handful of sand rubbed into my eyes,” she joked with a tight smile, watching him uncertainly, suddenly very aware of how there was no air between them and she had no idea what she was thinking. Or he, for that matter.

His lips curved into a smile and he allowed his hand to push wisps of hair back from her forehead, his index finger then trailing along her cheek and down her neck. “Wanted to do this since the first time I saw you,” he said as his gaze roamed around her features, taking in a dusting of freckles over her nose and the specs of gold in her eyes. “I work with honest-to-god Velociraptors, Claire, but I have never been more scared in my life than when I saw you sitting there and crying today, and thought that someone hurt you. And then I thought that I could kill them for doing it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind for the future reference,” she promised. “And you know, if you’d just told me about your board shorts right away…”

Owen groaned and squeezed his eyes shut. “This is how our date could’ve ended,” he finished for her.

“Maybe,” she didn’t disagree.

He met her gaze again. “When’s your door getting fixed?”

“Sometime tonight.”

“Does it have to be tonight?”

Claire looked at him seriously for a few long moments, and the shook her head. “No.”

Owen woke up sprawled in the tanged sheets on his bed to the tickling sensation on his back. Sated and pleasantly spent, he stretched lazily and then attempted to brush off whatever—

“Don’t move,” Claire instructed him immediately.

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, Owen craned his neck to glance at her over his shoulder. “What are you doing?” He asked groggily, squinting at Claire who was propped on her elbow by his side, chewing on her lower lip in concentration as she traced something on his back with a… “Is that a Sharpie?”

The early morning sunlight was weaving through her hair, making it look like a halo, and when she looked up at him, he thought that he was about to go blind from how bright her smile was. The memories from last night came back with a rush, flooding his mind – about Claire making a quick phone call to Zara to tell her she was fine for the night while he traced slow kisses down her neck. Her hands tugging off his t-shirt, her lean fingers skimming down his chest, his shoulders, the way she bit his lip when his palms slipped underneath her blouse. And how she felt beneath him, her
pale skin luminous as as he kissed every inch of her body, his name on her lips…

“Hey there,” she leaned down to brush her lips to his, her wavy hair tickling his cheeks. “Did you know that if you connect your freckles like a dot-to-dot puzzle, they look like constellations?”

He cocked a curious eyebrow at her, “Is that your kink or something?”

She giggled. “You were asleep and I was bored. And so far, I found Cassiopeia, Pegasus, and Southern Cross.”

Owen took the Sharpie from her and put the cap back on before tossing it aside without looking and rolling onto his back with his arms locked around her. “Why didn’t you wake me up?” He asked, sliding his palms up her back. “We could be bored together.”

“You seemed so tired,” Claire bumped her nose against his with a soft laugh and then captured his lips with hers. “And the good news is…”

“Oh, there’s good news, huh?” He drawled.

“You might need some help washing that stuff of your back,” she murmured into his collarbone, kissing her way up his neck. “Sometime later, you know….”

“I really need to go,” she said for the fifteenth time in the past three minutes as he kissed her goodbye – again – while they stood by the door, her clothes nowhere near as immaculate as they usually were and her shoes clutched in her hand. Claire even reached for the doorknob to make her point, but the man was a master of distraction – hell, it took them an hour just to get to the shower and even more to get out of it. “They’ll be here any moment.”

They were supposed to be a locksmith or someone like that so that she could have her apartment back.

“I’ll see you later, right?” Owen murmured between the kisses as she pulled the door open.

“Hm,” she nodded. “You know…”

Someone cleared their throat behind her back, and Claire jerked away from him and turned around to find Zara and a guy with a tool box standing in the hallway. He didn’t look particular interested, but Zara’s eyes were wide and her eyebrows hiked up all the way to her hairline. Claire’s cheeks started to burn.

“Well, thank you for your help, Mr. Grady,” she said quickly after clearing her throat, barely glancing at Owen as she hurried over to her assistant while he snorted behind her, and even though she couldn’t see him, she could feel him roll his eyes.

Meanwhile, Zara nodded to the guy, and he started working his magic on Claire’s door. Her eyes lingered for a few moments on Owen until he disappeared in his suite, before she looked pointedly at her boss and said, “I need all the deets. ASAP.”
What if I never love again?

Chapter Notes

Okay, so someone asked me to write a song fic based on Adele's 'All I Ask', and since I LOOOOVE Adele, it was meant to happen!

If this is my last night with you,
Hold me like I’m more than just a friend.
Give me a memory I can use,
Take me by the hand while we do what lovers do…

The hotel room was small and dingy, only barely bigger than a broom closet, its only window overlooking a narrow street filled with the small shops and tattoo salons and laundromats and boarded up places that had long gone out of business. The hotel that housed no one but the local travelers was located so far away from the main tourist attractions of San Jose no one would recognize them here.

Claire’s skin itched under the layer of grime and sweat and blood. A few hours ago, when the ferry was taking them back to the mainland, away from the death and destruction, all she wanted was to try and scrub everything that happened in the past 24 hours from her body until it was raw, until the events of this godawful day were washed down the drain. But now she found herself unable to move, staring instead sightlessly at the people hurrying alone the paved street, chatting to one another in Spanish, children laughing somewhere, the sounds of the television sets and cheery music floating into the room.

How on earth Owen knew about this place she had no idea, but a part of her that was at least somewhat present in the here and now was grateful for it.

“Hey,” Owen walked up to her and touched her shoulder, giving Claire a start and nearly knock down a cheap vase filled with plastic flowers that was sitting on the table by the window. “You okay?”

Claire swallowed, hard, and stared back at him, taking in the cuts on his face and forearms, a bruise on his left cheekbone, dust and dirt in his hair, her heartbeat accelerating minutely. His voice was soft and muffled, and hard to focus on through the blood rush in her ears. He smelled of forest and gasoline and fear, and she wondered in the back of her mind if they’d need to burn down their clothes to get rid of this stench.

Yet, Claire nodded slowly, numbly. Mostly because it felt like the right thing to do. Was she okay? Probably. By many people’s standards, that is. She was alive, relatively uninjured, save for the blisters covering every inch of her feet and her ankles hurting from the sprint across the island. So what if she felt like she couldn’t breathe from panic, from thinking of everything they’d done and everything they hadn’t? She was okay because she had no goddamn choice.

He studied her face for a few moments, his brows knitted together in concern, although Claire couldn’t tell if this was because he saw the unmasked fear pooling in her eyes, or because she looked horrendous enough with half of the jungle tangled in her hair and smeared on the few items of clothing she was still wearing.
And then he nodded, too.

“Come on,” Owen said quietly and took her hand, tugging her toward the bathroom.

She followed him obediently and then watched him turn on the shower and get the towels from the shelf near the sink.

“Claire…” he started, turning to her again, and for a moment she thought he was going to leave her there alone to deal with the seemingly impossible task of getting into the bathtub by herself, and she shook her head vigorously, her fingers clutching his shirt, holding on tight. “Okay.”

He helped her peel off her torn clothes and then climb into the bathtub and under the blistering-hot spray of water before shedding his own dirty and ripped shirt and pants and stepping in there with her. She had her eyes closed, face turned up to the stream of water. Outside, the day was warm and humid, and now the water was hot enough to leave second-degree burns on her skin, but she couldn’t stop shivering.

The shower curtain rustled behind her back and she sensed more than heard him step into the bathtub behind her, his breath catching audibly in his throat when the hot sprays hit his skin. Claire started to turn, but he placed a hand on her shoulder. “Stand still,” his voice carried through to her, and she bit her lower lip and squeezed her eyes tight, the tears burning her cheeks. Every smallest cut, every scratch on her skin screamed in protest and she just… she wanted to allow her knees to buckle under the weight of her body so that she could curl into a ball of misery and maybe not feel like there was a gaping hole in her chest.

And then she felt Owen run a soaped washcloth down her back, along her arms, and her teeth dug deeper into her lip. She tasted blood in her mouth, only barely registering it, his gentle touch snapping something inside of her, something that was supposed to hold her together. She allowed him to wash her hair, his fingers massaging her scalp, threading through the tangled knots, pushing the pulsating headache away. He rinsed it thoroughly until the water running down her body was clear again, bearing no sign of dirt, and Claire finally turned around.

She trailed her fingers along the scratches on his face, muttering quiet apologies whenever he flinched under her touch, pushing his hair back from his forehead. There was a deep cut just below his hairline that made her frown, but it wasn’t bleeding, which Claire thought was a good sign.

He looked so infinitely tired and world-weary her heart skipped a beat or two as she ran the soft washcloth over his chest and shoulders, leaving lumps of foam on his skin. Her gaze lingered on the scars crossing his chest here and there, some looking old and faded, others fairly new, the questions she knew not to ask swarming in her head.

There was nothing sensual or intimate about this process, about getting rid of as much of that day as they could in given circumstances. Claire was either exhausted out of her mind or downright shocked by everything that had happened to care about the fact that she was standing naked before Owen Grady, and if his expression was any indication, he felt the exact same way. There was nothing but the need not to be alone right now.

And then something changed.

The shift was so subtle Claire almost missed it, but one moment the touch of his hands had nothing but practical use to it, and the next his gaze dropped down to her lips and he was suddenly so close she could practically hear his accelerated heartbeat, his eyes turning a few shades darker when they met hers again. And before she knew what was happening, his hand was cupping the back of her
head, his fingers tangled in her wet hair, his thumb resting on her cheek, and he was kissing her, deeply and desperately and like his entire existence depended on it.

She gripped his shoulders, her fingers digging into his slippery skin as she pulled herself up, or him down – not that it mattered. The tiled wall felt cool and soothing against Claire’s back when he lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his hips, and the contrast between it and Owen’s hot skin pressed to her chest left her wintering quietly against his mouth.

“Claire…”

She opened her eyes, breathing hard and wondering why the hell would he stop, and found him watching her with a question in her eyes, waiting for her permission to go any further. Which at the moment felt like a monumental waste of time, and she tugged him close with, “Yes. God, yes.” His mouth pressed to hers again, harsh and demanding and oh-God-we’re-actually-alive, one of his hands sliding around her back while the other slipped under her thigh, making her gasp and grip her harder, and Claire thought that if he stopped for one fucking moment again, she might as well die.

Neither of them noticed when the water started running cold.

—

“Someone needs to have a look at this. Maybe we should go to the hospital,” Claire suggested. She was sitting cross-legged behind him on the bed, wrapped in the hotel bathrobe that felt nice against her skin, her fingers running a cotton ball soaked with antiseptic from the first aid kit they’d retrieved from the front desk - that, honestly, was a joke, all things considered – over the cuts on his back left by the Pteranodons and Dimorphodons, and if Claire had to take a guess, a lawnmower.

“It’s okay,” Owen shook his head. Wearing nothing but the towel around his hips, he stiffened under her touch now and then, but otherwise he took her poor attempt at a medical care stoically.

“The hospitals are probably packed, anyway. With people who need real help.”

“Owen…” she started hesitantly, her hand pausing in mid stroke.

“I’m fine.” He glanced at her quickly over his shoulder, the tired lines around his eyes deeper than she liked. “It looks worse than it feels, I swear.”

She wondered if he knew how unconvincing he sounded, but chose not to press on. Chose to pretend she believed him because she would probably lose her mind if she let her mind wander off in that direction.

After being awake for nearly 30 hours, she thought she’d crash, all burned out, but the shower and everything that followed it left her oddly wired and antsy, although she couldn’t decide if she was this worn out, or if it was a side-effect of having sex with Owen goddamn Grady, which left her feeling more alive than ever before in her life. The events of those past 30 hours started spinning in her mind with a new and improved intensity, making her want to crawl out of her skin. And thus, a simple task of tending to his wounds – that looked beyond awful to her – was somewhat therapeutic. Or, at least, the second best therapeutic thing she could think of.

And selfishly, she was happy he didn’t want to go anywhere, wouldn’t leave her alone. God, what kind of a horrible person would think that?

“Why didn’t you leave with your sister?” He asked after a few long moments of silence.

She could have. Karen offered her to join them, even asked Claire to come stay with them.
“It didn’t feel right,” she said, focusing on his wounds again. “I don’t want to… drag them into all of this. They’d been through enough already, and there’s going to be an investigation…” She trailed off.

“They’re family,” Owen reminded her.

“They’re better off without me right now,” she shook her head.

“Well, maybe it’s not really your call,” he noted.

A car honked outside, startling Claire, badly, and she dropped the bottle on antiseptic – its cap screwed on tight, thankfully – to the floor where it rolled under a weathered armchair. She whipped her head around, her throat closing up by the second, panic rising inside of her, ringing in every cell of her body.

“Claire?” Owen’s voice reached her through the fog in her head, and she turned to him slowly, somewhat aware of gripping a bag of cotton balls so tightly her knuckles had gone white, her fingers tearing the thin plastic. She released it slowly, having to remind herself to breathe. In and out. Repeat. “It’s over,” he told her.

“No,” she whispered, “it’s not.”

His gaze was calm and steady, and the only thing that somehow made sense to her. And she leaned into his touch when his reached his hand to push her hair from her face, loop it around her ear, the warmth of his body and the scent of his skin that now had only the faintest trace of gasoline to it soothing and more comforting that she was willing to admit even to herself.

“C’mere,” Owen murmured.

He took the cotton balls from her and then he was kissing her again, softly and slowly, and when another car screeched to an abrupt stop on the street and a burst of laughter exploded shortly afterwards, she didn’t hear them. Instead, she allowed him to undo the bathrobe belt and slide his hands underneath it, his palms rough and calloused and surprisingly gentle and so much hotter than her own skin it made her shiver again. She tugged impatiently at his towel, feeling his smile with her lips as she moved back against the pillows and pulled him over her, taking him in, winding all of her around him, drowning in the sound of his voice whispering her name over and over again. Like a plea. Like a prayer.

Claire was the first one to wake up several hours later, feeling even more tired than before – something she didn’t think was possible. The room was dark and the cheap digital clock on the TV set read 4.24 am, blinking tauntingly at her from across the room. Her eyes were full of sand, her whole body hurt in the places she didn’t know could hurt, and before her eyes she could see the heart-rates of the ACU team flat-lining one after another, the sounds of the cars passing by outside reminding her of the roars of the animals on the island.

Owen was fast asleep, his arm draped over her waist, his face buried in her hair. He was hot like a human furnace, but even though the night was warm, Claire scooted back, deeper into his embrace, and he tightened his grip on her, even in his slumber unwilling to let go.

And that was it – this simple expression of affection – that undid her. The adrenaline had worn off, apparently, and whatever strength she’d had to make it through the I-Rex’s attack and everything that followed broke down. The tears came at last, and Claire buried her face in the pillow biting her
lip and trying not to make a sound, a burning lump lodged in her throat making it impossible to breathe.

Owen was more alert than she expected though, and he woke up a few minutes later to find her curled in on herself and trembling as waves of sobs washed through her one after another.

“Hey,” he kissed her temple. “Claire…”

And she rolled over and let him hold her lest she drown in her guilt and shock and panic and everything she knew she’d have to learn with for the rest of her life. His heartbeat was loud and steady in his chest, and she listened to him whisper something to her, the words not as important as the tone of his voice, his solid body all around her and his thumbs wiping away the salt from her face.

“I’m sorry,” she choked out, managing to take a breath somehow. “I didn’t mean… didn’t mean to… wake you.”

“Jesus,” Owen muttered, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t you dare, you hear me? Don’t you dare apologize for…” he rubbed his eyes and let out a long exhale. “For being you. For anything.”

Claire tucked her face into the crook of his neck, her breath short and ragged and like there wasn’t enough air in that room, her lungs feeling crumpled and small and…. And she just needed him to never let go of her, and tell her all that nonsense about how everything was going to be fine and she was safe and that he was not going anywhere, the fear of what was going to come next closing in on her with the speed of an oncoming train.

——

The last time Owen woke up gripped in a tight vice of an overwhelming sense of panic was… long enough ago for him to forget how consuming and paralyzing it could be, how his heart tended to want to beat its way out of his chest before whatever nightmare sent it into this frenzied dance had a chance to trap it for good.

The second thing he became acutely aware of was that he was alone in the bed.

He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, pushing away the sleepiness, and rolled over, half expecting to find the room empty.

Wrapped in her bathrobe from the day before, Claire was sitting curled in the armchair that she dragged over to the window and staring absently at something that from Owen’s spot on the bed looked like a piece of grey sky.

Her shoulders tensed when he stirred and tossed away the blankets, but she didn’t turn or say anything and simply continued to contemplate either the outside of their hotel, or the inside of her head. Either scenario seemed to be equally possible.

Owen climbed out of the bed, his muscles protesting against every move of his body, and dug a pair of sweat pants from the pile of clothes the hotel staff found for them in the Lost and Found. They were mismatched and the sizes were way off, but it still beat having to hang around wrapped in the towels until they acquired the stuff of their own. He walked over to the chair and brushed a kiss to her hair, and then promptly removed his hand from her shoulder when she stiffened noticeably, choosing to perch on the edge of the decorative table in front of her.

“Did you get some sleep?” Claire asked, her attention still focused on what he could now see was an assortment of laundry drying on the balcony across the street, or so he guessed.
“Yeah. You?”

She gave him a noncommittal shrug that could mean either yes, or *I spent the last five hours sitting as far away from you as this room would allow*, he couldn’t quite tell. Her phone was lying on the armrest of the chair, and he couldn’t even begin to imagine what she’d found on the news websites, her face was wearing this vaguely blank expression that started to stir some serious uneasiness in his stomach.

“I could’ve stopped it,” Claire said just as he was about to ask what the actual hell was going on, and Owen’s brows pulled closer together.

“No, you couldn’t,” he said, hating how she still wouldn’t look at him. As if she was unable to. “It would’ve happened regardless, unless you’d stopped them from making that thing in the first place. If not two days ago, then three months from now, or in six months, or in a year, but she was too smart, Claire. It would’ve ended up badly either way.”

He had no idea if this was the right thing to say – Was he supposed to agree with her? Did she expect him to tell her that everything was going to be okay? What was the protocol for situations like this? – but it was the truth, and he hoped that it was worth something.

“And I dragged you into this.”

“You didn’t,” Owen countered. “I didn’t have to help you. But I’m glad I did. God knows how it’d’ve all ended otherwise.”

“It shouldn’t have happened,” she said quietly after a few moments.

“Look, it’s all fine.” Owen tried the reassuring approach. “Everyone’s safe now—”

“No,” Claire exhaled shakily. “Us. Last night.” She pinched the bridge of her nose as it trying to rub the tiredness out of her eyes. “We shouldn’t have… It was adrenaline and shock and the craziness of this insane situation.”

“Maybe the first time,” he agreed, studying her face closely. “But not the next three.”

Slight color crept up her cheeks, and she finally turned to face him. “It doesn’t change anything.”

“Like hell it doesn’t.” Owen pushed away from the table and crouched down beside her so that their faces were on approximately the same level. He took her hand in his and laced his fingers together with hers, and then kissed her bruised and scratched knuckles, her hand flexing around his at the touch of his lips to her skin. She still looked like she was about to bolt, but her body seemed to relax a little. “Look, I’m not going to force you into anything you don’t want to be doing, okay? If you want me to walk out that door and never come back… I get it.” Owen ran his thumb over the back of her hand. “You can do it, Claire. You can go out there and kick everyone ass. We both know you can. But you don’t have to do it alone.”

“It’s going to be messy,” she whispered.

“Life usually is,” he offered her a small, wistful smile. “You want me to leave?”

She didn’t say anything, just tugged at his hand, and he squeezed with her into the chair until she was practically curled in his lap, his arms clasped around her.

“I’m bad at this,” she whispered, rubbing his nose against his cheek, her hand slipping around his neck.
“Post-disaster clean-ups?”

“No, that I think I can handle,” Claire admitted. “I mean, relationships, being with someone.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “No one is, Claire. It’s not like there’s a manual. But it’s worth a try.”

She allowed her lips to curve into a grin, glad he couldn’t see it. “No more board shorts, and you got yourself a deal.”

…it matters how this ends
Cause what if I never love again?
The first thing Claire gave up on upon her return from the island was sleep.

For one thing, she couldn’t even close her eyes without reliving every moment of that impossibly long day of either chasing the I-Rex, or running away from it, her heart pounding out of her chest and her lungs folding in on themselves. And on top of that, it started to feel like a monumental waste of time. Why would she sleep when she could agonize over the should-haves and what-ifs instead? They should have thought this project through better, they should have considered the consequences, they should have listened to Wu when he said that the genome wasn’t to be joked around with. They shouldn’t have let it get as far as it did, shouldn’t have played with the lives of the people who trusted them to keep them safe.

She should have known better.

“Claire?” Owen rolled onto his back and blinked sleepily. “Honey, what is it?” He sat up on the bed and swung his legs to the floor, his hand running through his hair. He rubbed the corners of his eyes waiting for them to adjust to the darkness, to see her standing by the window and peering out more clearly.

“It’s okay, go back to sleep,” she said quietly without looking at him. “I’ll be right over.”

He heaved a long sigh, his eyebrows creasing with concern. No, she wouldn’t. She hadn’t slept for more than an hour or two at a time ever since they returned back home, most of her nights spent staring out the window or pacing the living room – she thought he couldn’t hear. Hell, he could hear her think when she was like that, the wheels in her head not just turning but spinning at top speed. A night or two of that was to be expected, he had to admit that much. God knew he’d spent his fair share of sleepless nights after his tours, trying to piece his world back together. But it had been over a month now, and he was starting to get worried.

“Hey,” he caught her by the sleeve of his shirt, tugging her toward him until she was standing between his parted knees, her hands on his shoulders, staring vacantly somewhere past him. Grated, that painting on the wall across the room was a good one, but still. “Take to me,” he asked softly, searching her features, taking in the tired lines around her eyes, her sunken cheeks.

He turned his head and brushed a kiss to her hand, finally getting her to look down at him, her lower lip caught between her teeth. “Why are you here, Owen?”
“Here in your bedroom, or here on planet Earth in a more philosophical way?” He asked with a small smile. One of his eyebrows cocked up curiously in a mostly futile attempt to lighten up the mood.

Her fingers flexed on his skin. He heard her inhale sharply, and then then she shook her head. “I am, well, screwed – to put it mildly. You shouldn’t be… associating with me if you want what’s good for you.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her collarbone – the closest piece of bare skin he could reach from his sitting position. “Well, there’s your answer right there. I want what’s best for me, and that’s you. And you’re not screwed, Claire. They can’t pin anything on you.”

Her short laughter was harsh and humorless. She looked away. “They can’t because I was following the goddamn protocols to the word. But it doesn’t make me not guilty.”

He let out a long breath. “It wasn’t your fault,” Owen said firmly. “And I’m here because I don’t want to be anywhere else.” He waited for her to look at him again.

“For survival, huh?” She smiled ruefully.

“No.” He scooted over and pulled her down until she climbed back under the covers, tucked neatly against him, her small body all but folded into him. “You don’t need me to survive. And I guess I’d do just find on my own as well.” His lips pressed to the top of her head. “But I want you, all of you, screwed or not. Not just for survival. For everything.”

She pressed her forehead into his shoulder. “I don’t know what I going to do, Owen. With my life, with everything,” Claire whispered into his skin.

“We’ll deal with it, okay? You and me, together.” He trailed his fingers through her hair. “Sleep, Claire. You need to sleep.”

“I can’t,” she shook her head.

Owen shifted, adjusting his hold on her until they were both comfortable, the scent of her shampoo and her lotion and everything that was Claire filling his nostrils, making him feel at home. “Just don’t go anywhere then. Stay with me.” His hand started drawing slow, soothing circles on her back. “We could talk, share grilled cheese recipes. Would it make you feel better if I admit I cried when I saw Titanic for the first time?”

She glanced up, skeptical. “You did not.”

“You never know. These two… They only had each other. It was very sad.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

Owen tipped her chin up and kissed her, lightly at first and then deeper when she responded to the touch of his lips eagerly, her fingers running down his bare chest. She sighed and closed her eyes, resting her forehead against his cheek. “I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to walk away.”

“Good thing it’s the last thing on my mind.” He smiled, rubbing his nose against hers. “Want me to help you forget about everything for a while?”

“What about your beauty sleep?” She teased with a soft chuckle, Owen’s fingers already working on unbuttoning her shirt.
“I guess we can both agree I’ve had plenty of it already.”

“Classy,” Claire murmured, her worries already pushed back and out of her mind for the time being.

She wished there was some way of knowing when it was supposed to get better. Like a Five Stages of Grief, only in reverse, sort of. Something she could cross off her mental list on her way to not feeling like she was falling more and more apart with every passing day. Logically, she knew it had to get better at some point, but for now, it felt like sinking deeper and deeper into some sort of a black hole from which there was no escape. She was not a believer, but if she had to imagine what Hell must be like, being trapped inside her own mind and eaten slowly by the overwhelming sense of guilt until there was nothing left of her but a shell of a person she used to be would be her best guess.

The official investigation was a nightmare. Endless briefings and having to repeat the same things over and over again was about as much fun as gnawing on a concrete block. But at least those things had certain order and, if she were honest with herself, a certain degree of detachment on the part of the people involved. She was good at sticking to the facts and being logical and practical and composed under pressure. It was the press conferences the company mercilessly shoved her into that Claire couldn’t deal with, the questions the press kept throwing at her, the accusations she had no response to because yes, it was her fault. Maybe not 100%, but close. Yes, she probably could have prevented all of it if she bothered to actually stop and think.

So what if those weren’t even her decisions to make? There was no one left to be held accountable for the I-Rex massacre. She knew how it would play out from the start.

Two months later, Owen came home to find her car parked in the driveway and a dark condo. He followed the sound of the running water until he reached the master bathroom.

She was sitting in the shower, fully dressed, save for her shoes that lay forgotten on the tiled floor outside of the small cubicle, her sleeveless top and beige slacks plastered to her body. He had no idea how long she had been sitting there, but the water had gone cold so it was probably a while. Not that Claire seemed to notice it. She was staring vacantly ahead, her gaze a bit more glazed than he liked. Her arms were wrapped around her shoulders, but not to keep herself warm. His best bet was that she was trying to stop herself from falling to pieces.

“Claire,” he called softly, his heart splintering at the sight of her like this. He turned off the water and shrugged off his jacket before stepping into the shower and crouching next to her. “Claire, honey, look at me.” He brushed a strand of wet hair from her forehead, and she turned her face up, her lips trembling. His fingers lingered on her cheek as he forced his mouth to stretch into a semblance of a reassuring smile, failing miserably. “I’m here,” he added quietly and pulled her to him, both relieved and frightened by how tightly her arms wrapped around him, how much she was shaking.

Claire pressed her face into his chest, taking small, shallow breaths, her heart hammering against his chest. Her fingers clutched fistfuls of his shirt as if he could disappeared into thin air any moment, and she breathed in the scent of him, of everything that made sense to her while the world kept spinning backwards around her, threatening to crush her in the process.

Owen kissed her wet hair and she shivered, a tremor running through her entire body making him hold her closer, wishing there was something he could do to stop this never-ending nightmare. At least she stopped pushing him away. There was a week a little while back when it was her response
to everything, and he thought he’d rather go back to the island and let the T-Rex shred him to confetti than go through it again.

“I quit,” she murmured into his neck. “They asked me to go back, and I quit. Because I can’t…” She swallowed and shook her head, her voice dropping. “I can’t.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, for the first time in his life realizing what it was like to feel lighter with relief, noticing that Claire’s breathing started to even out and deepen. The physical contact was still the one thing that worked best for both of them, and often the only thing he needed in this world. He wasn’t surprised, not as much as he should have been after all the months of her trying to do the right thing and hitting a brick wall instead of telling Masrani Global to fuck off. Mostly, he just hoped that they could start putting all of this behind them. The park, the animals – he tried hard not to think of what happened to Blue and what was going to happened next to all of them – and the people thinking that this tragedy was one person’s doing.

After a few minutes, he pulled back and cupped her face in his hands, her green eyes huge and wet and red-rimmed, and he knew instantly that if he kissed her cheeks now, he’d taste salt on her skin.

“Good,” Owen whispered, running his thumbs over the dusting of freckles on her cheekbones. “You did good, Claire.”

She gripped the sleeves of his shirt. “You’re not mad?”

“God, no.” He pulled her up gently. “Let’s get you out of here, okay? You need to change into something dry.”

She nodded numbly, but stepped after him out of the shower. Owen scooped her easily in his arms and carried her back into the bedroom, her hands locked around his neck. There, he peeled off her wet clothes first and then towed her off before wrapping her into a soft bathrobe that all but swallowed her whole. And then he gathered her in his arms again, holding her as they sat at the head of the bed and he stroked her hair that started to wave from the water.

“Well, at least now we can think of what we’re going to do next.” Owen said after a while.

“Like what?” She murmured.

“Anything,” he told her. “Whatever we want.”

—

A trip to New York was his idea. A change of scenery.

He’d never been there, but Claire had and she seemed to be quite fond of it, so he decided – why the hell not? The last time Owen did anything remotely touristy, he was eight and his family took a trip to Idaho to visit his mother’s uncle. It was as exciting as it sounded.

“You’ve been all over the world,” Claire pointed out when he mentioned this fact to her.

“It’s not the same when you have to patrol the villages in the Middle East and hope you won’t get killed by a stray bullet,” he countered defensively. “It wasn’t exactly a party.”

And so it was settled.

The first night in New York, curled habitually into him, was the first time Claire didn’t wake up screaming in the middle of the night, her sleep deep and dreamless and restful. Owen, on the other
hand, stayed awake until way past midnight, his arm closed possessively around her, staring at the shadows moving across the ceiling and listening to the sounds of Big Apple coming through the half-open window.

This was no trip to Idaho, he decided. This was a whole new world.

It was refreshing, for once, to not think about the hordes of the reporters and phone calls and everything that was the island, and just be. Claire made a list – of course, she made a list! – of all tourist traps she wanted to hit. Statue of Liberty, Rockefeller Center, Empire State Building, Brooklyn Bridge Park – you name it. He followed her obediently drinking in her smile he hadn’t seen so bright since… well, ever. Listening to her voice, high-pitched with excitement. If she bought that hideous Statue of Liberty foam crown, he wouldn’t be surprised.

“What?” Claire asked while she walked along the bench in Central Park on their third day in New York, her hand gripping his for support, eyes cast down to keep her balance and only occasionally darting toward him. It didn’t escape her attention though that he was very un-Owen-like quiet for the past hour or so.

She jumped off the bench and then climbed on the next one, resuming her five-year-old girl’s fun.

“Nothing,” Owen shook his head with a short laughter, his eyes gleaming.

“Come on, tell me,” she insisted, her fingers flexing around his.

“Never seen you like this,” he admitted after a moment or two, watching her curiously.

“Imматure?” Claire snorted, reaching the end of another bench.

She was about to jump off, but Owen stepped in front of her, catching her in his arms instead, his face bearing that odd, wondrous expression – like he’d just realized something and had a problem wrapping his mind around it. Like he uncovered some secret. And her heart started beating faster.

Happy, he thought. Alive, he wanted to add but it sounded too cheesy even in his mind. So goddamn beautiful and blissful and free he thought his heart might just burst in his chest. Mine.

He tucked a strand of hair that the wind kept throwing across her cheek behind her ear, swallowing the words that threatened to slip out of his mouth, scared of saying them, and terrified of keeping them to himself.

They never spoke about it – mainly because Claire looked like she was on the verge of a full-blown freak-out whenever he thought of bringing it up, but it wasn’t like he didn’t get the survivor’s guilt. Except his, right now, was one of a different kind. The tragedy at Jurassic World gave him Claire, and it was selfish and awful and low to be happy about it, but he could help it. He wouldn’t want it to happen any other way, for as long as he got to be with her.

Owen kissed the tip of her nose, and then her lips. “How about we check that pretzel stand? I’m starving.”

Her features relaxed and she rose up on her tiptoes to kiss him properly, her tongues trailing along the outline of his lips until a low growl formed in the back of his throat, making her pull away with a giggle. She took his hand. “Lead the way.”

—

They were on the ferry heading to Staten Island a couple of days later and Claire watched the shore
grow closer, more pronounced. Owen was standing behind her, his hands gripping the railing on either side of her, his chin resting on her shoulder. The last time she was on a ferry, it was taking her away from Isla Nublar, and even now, it was hard to shake that memory off.

Claire shivered under the harsh gusts of wind.

“You think you’d want to live here?” Owen asked quietly.

She turned her head and nuzzled his cheek, his stubble scratchy against her soft skin. “On the ferry?”

“In this city,” he snorted.

“You want to move to New York?”

“Just tossing around the options,” he shrugged.

She stayed quiet for a while, watching the waves beneath them, listening to the people around them talk without actually catching separate words, registering only the buzz of their presence, and then said, “You don’t have to do it.”

“What?” He wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm.

“Stick around.” She felt him go still behind her. “I don’t want you to do anything just because of me, Owen. It won’t lead to anything good between us.”

“I’m not doing anything because of you,” he promised her, his breath soft and warm on her temple. “I’m doing it because of me. Because I want you. Because you’re the best damn thing that ever happened to me and I can’t lose you. It’s that simple.”

She covered his hands with hers, running her fingers absently along the length of his and around his knuckles, and leaned back into his embrace.

“And what if it’s not enough?”

He shrugged. “Then I’ll get myself a hobby that doesn’t involve…” he paused, “your nakedness.”

Claire laughed and turned her head up to brush a kiss to his jaw, catching his eyes crinkling with amusement. “That sounds challenging.”

He buried his face in her hair. “I’m in if you are.”
Claire overhears Owen talking to Barry about how he feels about Claire and she confronts him about it.

“Come on, man, you don’t have to cancel,” Barry insisted as he followed Owen along the catwalk above the raptors’ paddock and down the two flights of stairs that creaked and rattled under their feet.

“You know, if I wanted to be a third wheel, I’d find a more fun way to do it than tagging along with you on your date,” Owen snorted, an empty bucket in his hand occasionally bumping against the metal railing as he walked.

“We can make it a double date,” Barry offered.

“Sure,” Owen agreed. “You and Julia, and me and, let’s see, Echo. If I’m lucky, she’ll eat my face off before it got too awkward.”

Barry chuckled behind him as they stepped onto the ground and headed for the exit from the cage. The late afternoon sun was high up in the sky, bright and merciless, making it feel like it was trying to fry the island and everyone on it alive. Owen brushed the beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and fumbled with the buttons on the control panel to open the metal gate.

“Not what I meant.” Barry took the bucket from him and put it aside. “You could ask someone out. You know, a real person. Why don’t you ask Claire?”

Owen paused for a moment, hoping it looked to Barry like the buttons were stuck, and not like he was having an honest-to-god heart attack because it sure as hell felt like it. Although he chose to blame it on the heat.

“What Claire?” He asked flatly.

The door finally slid open.

“Claire Dearing. You know, from management?”

Owen stepped into the clearing in front of the paddock, and once Barry was out of the cage as well, he locked the gate again, squinting in the sunlight as it slid back into place with a loud clack.

“Why don’t I ask Claire Dearing out?” He repeated slowly as if this idea was wild enough for him to need a moment or two to let it sink in. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because I don’t hate myself,” he snickered. “Despite what my work hours might suggest.” He glanced over at Barry. “Because I don’t want to have my head bitten off? Or because I don’t want to be bored to death with the talk about the park’s statistics or something?”

They just rounded the corner of the cage, heading towards a low structure that served as the office-slash-storage-slash-break room to grab some water from the mini-fridge when Barry suddenly
stopped in his tracks, his face gaining this odd expression that was a combination of panic, horror, and a poor semblance of a forced smile.

Owen turned around and nearly walked into none other than Claire Dearing followed closely by Simon Masrani who regarded him with undisclosed curiosity while Claire, well, was apparently trying to incinerate him with her glare, her green eyes shooting daggers at him and her bright red lips pursed into a thin displeased line.

She took a pointed step back, wrinkling her nose at the sight of his clothes streaked with dirt and coated with dust. Owen winced inwardly. God only knew what he smelled like after working all day in the sun.

Barry was the first one to find his voice again. He cleared his throat. “Ms. Dearing. Mr. Masrani.” He offered his hand to Simon and the latter shook in firmly.

And then Owen did the same with hurried greetings, struggling to hold a polite smile on his face and knowing it probably looked more like a grimace.

“And Mr. Grady,” Claire nodded to him without a trace of menace in her voice and then shifted her attention back to Owen, her expression hardening instantly. “Mrs. Masrani was wondering if you could find five minutes in your undoubtedly busy schedule to catch him up on the progress of your project.”

And it almost didn’t sound like sarcasm. Owen wondered if Simon noticed, and if he did – what the hell did he make of it?

“Sure, of course.” He cleared his throat too, and jerked his head toward the other entrance to the cage – the one where the raptors were more likely to be hanging out in their free time. Plus, it looked a bit cleaner. “We can… ah, start there, if you don’t mind.”

Simon raised his hands up, “You’re the boss, Mr. Grady!”

Claire snorted quietly at that and then covered it with a cough and pretended to brush something nonexistent from her pale gray skirt, her hair falling over her face and shielding it for a moment, rendering it unreadable.

“Why don’t I find our latest progress reports for you?” Barry jumped in, steering Simon toward the admin building. “It’s not the same as watching them in action, but you could have….”

The sound of his voice faded as they started walking away.

“I’ll be right there,” Claire called after them, but Simon only waved his hand at her, already engrossed in whatever Barry was telling him.

“Claire…” Owen began, her name lodged like a thick lump in his throat.

She jerked her head up, her eyes blazing and her chin tipped high. “If I disgust you so much, why did you ask me out the first time around?” She demanded.

Barry glanced quickly at them, but neither of them noticed it.

“It’s not what I meant,” he said quietly. “It wasn’t what it sounded like.”

“Oh, really?” She tilted her head to her shoulder with a resentful snicker. “Because I think you made yourself perfectly clear.” She levelled him with a glare. “And talking about it with someone else?
“Owen,” he corrected her automatically, making Claire roll her eyes in that *Is this all you’ve heard?* way. “Look, I swear it wasn’t like that—”

“Let me save you some time here,” she interrupted him, her palm lifted up. “My answer would be a ‘Hell, no’ even if you did bother to call again. And please do me a favor – tell both sides of the story when you share the details about our unforgettable date with other people, would you?” With that, she turned on her heels and walked away on, “Please tell Mr. Masrani I’ll wait for him in my car. Not sure I can stomach even more of this… sun.”

Cursing under his breath and kicking himself for being such a moron, Owen watched her leave, her back straight and her hair whipping around in the wind coming from the ocean.

The truth was, everything he told Barry was a bull, and watching her watch him with disdain, knowing that he was filed as a ‘Major disappointment’ in her mental catalogue of Big Mistakes, was worse than if she’d hit him with a shovel in the face.

The truth was, she was smart and interesting and sophisticated, and so out of his league they might as well be living on different planets. And in retrospect, it was easier for him to make himself look like a jackass and get her to resent him from the start than gradually but inevitably watch her lose interest in him when she realized that all he could talk about was the NAVY or his raptors and that he hated wearing suits.

So here they were, Owen desperately want to kick himself in the nuts for letting someone like Claire Dearing slip right through his fingers – like he even had a chance with her, ha! – and Claire hating his guts. Although right now she was busy typing something on her phone, comfortable in her air-conditioned car, his very existence seemingly long-forgotten.

Owen shook his head and start toward the paddock again. It couldn’t have possibly ended any other way – now, or three weeks from now, or six months from now. One morning she would have woken up and realized that he was nothing like the men surrounding her, and then the outcome would be the same, but probably with more heartache.

So why bother at all?

—

“You asked her out?” Barry walked into Owen’s bungalow without knocking, the door hitting the wall with a deafening bang and making Owen wince a little. He was just uncapping the beer as he stood by the counter in the nook that served as his kitchen, spilling a few drops on the wooden countertop. “No, you went out with her?” Barry corrected himself, making it sound like Owen just told him that he was actually a lizard from outer space or something. Not that he told him anything at all. “With Claire Dearing? And you never said anything?”

Owen took a swig of his drink, marvelling in how the cold liquid bubbled down his throat and settled comfortably in his stomach.

“You heard?”

“Well, me and the rest of the park. What the hell, man?”

“There wasn’t much to say,” Owen noted dismissively.

Barry pulled another beer from the fridge, feeling quite a home. “What happened?”
“What do you think happened?”

“You said something dumb, she decided you were not worth the trouble,” Barry answered without a pause.

Owen rolled his eyes. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Was I wrong?” Eyebrows arched, Barry looked at him curiously.

“Only a little.” Owen let out a long breath and shook his head. He put his beer down, suddenly losing the taste for it and scrunched his face. “Why did you suggest I ask her out, anyway? I mean, of all people…”

Barry scoffed, eyeing him with utter disbelief. “Because of the way you look at her when you think no one’s watching.”

---

A few days later, Owen strode purposeful into her office without knocking, followed by flustered Zara who tried to all but jump on his back to stop him. Claire looked up from her laptop.

“What’s going–”

“Got a minute?” Owen asked.

“Claire, I’m sorry, he wouldn’t…” Zara began apologetically.

“We need to talk.”

“It’s okay,” Claire assured her assistant who hesitated for a moment, her eyes darting between the two of them, unsure if she should just leave them be or call the security, and then she chose to simply slip out and close the door.

“Mr. Grady–”

“I didn’t mean what I said, okay? Not a word. I don’t think you’re boring, Claire. I’m crazy about you.” He paused to take a quick breath. “And the only reason I didn’t call was because I knew you would tell me to go to hell, and would be absolutely right about it. I was an asshole…”

“Mr. Grady–”

“…and the reason I tried not to make a big deal out of that date was because I knew that even if I dressed up and took you to a nice place, it’d still take you ten minutes to figure out that we had nothing to talk about, unlike all those guys around here,” he gestured in the general direction of the door, “who know what profit margins are. But it was a big deal–”

“Owen.”

That shut him up.

Claire took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly before turning to the screen of her laptop once again. “I’m sorry, Mr. Daniels, we seem to be having a bit of an emergency. Would it be okay if I called you back?” Her tone was smooth and composed, and that alone made Owen’s cheek start to burn. Of course, he had to walk up on her having a conference call or something. The man’s response came as a series of unintelligible gurgles. “An asset is out of containment,” she added, her smile growing just a tad wider.
“An asset is out of containment?” Owen echoed when she closed her Mac shut.

“I would say a baboon is out of his cage, but he knows we don’t keep those here,” Claire shrugged. “What can I help you with, Mr. Grady?”

“Owen,” he cleared his throat and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants, noticing that her office was bigger than his entire house. And so spotless and organized it hurt his brain. It was cool, too, the AC unit humming softly under the ceiling, and Owen wished he could rewind the last three minutes of his life and not set his foot here. What was he thinking? “Can we talk?”

“We could, but I wouldn’t want to bore you to death,” Claire deadpanned. “Beside, I have a few heads to bite off. It’s not like they’ll do it themselves.”

“Claire, please.”

She sighed with slight exasperation, then pushed herself up from her leather chair and walked around her massive desk, leaning against it with her arms folded over her chest. Today she was wearing pale-green dress pants and white sleeveless blouse, her feet squeezed into black strappy stilettos, their heels so long and sharp she could probably pierce concrete while walking.

“All right, have your words,” she allowed graciously.

He ran his hand through his hair. “Okay, so… as I was saying–”

“Oh, I heard you just fine the first time,” Claire interjected.

“I want to apologize. For… that day, for saying those things.” Owen repeated. “I’m sorry.”

“That you said them or that I heard you?” She inquired.

“That I said this nonsense,” he huffed. “Were you even listening?”

Claire bit her lip and looked away. “Then why…”

“What was I supposed to say?” He threw his arms in the air, frustrated – at her for making him spell it out, and at himself for not knowing how to do it right. “That I fucked up my only chance with you because it was easier to end it right there and then before I got even more into you than I already was?”

His arms hell down to hang by his sides, and for a few very long moments, their breathing was the only sound interrupting the silence that settled around them. He watched her, trying to guess what she might be thinking, while Claire watched a vast expanse to the treetops outside of her window.

“Why ask me out at all, then?” She turned to him at last, her face more confused than condescending or angry, or other things he kind of thought she was.

“Because I really wanted to,” he let out in a whoosh of breath, his voice low and hoarse, and almost pained, and she stared at the laminated floor between them, at the swirls in the wood looping in on each other. “Look, forget it, okay?” Owen said when she didn’t respond for nearly a minute. “Forget I was even here. Except I’m still sorry. I never meant to–”

He cut himself off, letting the end of that sentence hang between them, and without looking at her again, walked out somehow holding back from slamming the door.

Claire wished he did.
He hadn’t seen her or heard from or of her for the next several days, choosing to throw himself into work instead. The raptors were getting pissy from the heat, acting up and pretending she wasn’t there even when Owen was dangling a bucket of treats over the paddock, growling and swatting at one another. And he was growing frustrated too, feeling like they hit a brick wall even though that probably wasn’t the case at all. It was hard not to feel like a failure when everything was falling apart.

“You still sulking?” Barry asked him on Friday when Owen decided to wrap it up for the day and headed for his bike.

The sun was hanging low over the horizon and the air was heavy and humid, but the breeze from the ocean still felt fresh, and this week was hellish enough for him to want to just sit on the dock near his bungalow with a bottle of beer and maybe not think for a while. Or maybe throw himself into the lake.

“You were wrong, you know,” Owen said without looking at him as he mounted his Triumph and pushed the kickstand up. “I’m not looking at… anyone like anything.”

Barry snorted. “Yes, you are.”

He was at home for about 5 minutes before the knock on the door, loud and demanding, spooked a flock of birds outside of his kitchen window.

“You can’t do that,” Claire said the moment he swung it open.

He gaped at her for a moment, feeling like they were already in the middle of conversation he had no idea they were even having. “Come again?”

“You can’t just walk into my office, say all those things, and then disappear,” she explained sternly.

Owen shrugged and propped his shoulder against the doorjamb. “You didn’t want to be talking about it, and we stopped talking about it.” He’d never seen her wear jeans and flats before – didn’t think she even owned any, and right now her Friday-night casual look was throwing him off balance even more than her presence at his house. “Want a beer?”

“Did you mean it?” Claire asked.

“About the beer? Sure, I have—“

Claire rolled her eyes, then grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled him down, her lips crashing on his, cutting him off in mid-sentence. If it caught him by surprise, Owen recovered fast, his hands lifting up to frame her face, bury in her soft hair that started to curl – also something he’d never seen before and now liked to no end. She tasted of strawberries and something that was just Claire, and Jesus Christ he was kissing Claire Dearing! All things considered, he was probably dead.

She was soft and warm and smelled of flowers and vanilla, and for a moment he thought his heart might just burst in his chest.

She bit his lower lip lightly, smiling against his mouth at his apparent surprise, his fingers gripping his shirt even tighter.

“Am I making myself clear now?” She whispered when they pulled away from one another,
“I don’t know,” Owen shook his head. He looped her hair around her ears, his lips stretched into a grin so wide he thought his head might crack open. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and he could swear she had never looked more beautiful. He dipped his head again. “Run that by me again?”

—

“Hey, you have to be anywhere soon?” Owen asked the next morning, poking his head into the bathroom.

Wearing one of his flannel button-ups with its sleeves rolled up to her elbows, Claire was staring at a very limited selection of hair- and skin-care products on the shelf over the sink, trying to come up with a way to make the best out of what she had at her disposal. Which wasn’t much.

“Mm?” She glanced up, smiling when he leaned down to kiss her. “Not really. What do you have in mind?”

“Wanna show you something,” he promised mysteriously, and added when she cocked her eyebrows, “Outside of the house.”

They took his bike and he drove them to the cliffs in the southern part of the island, so high one could see the coastline of the mainland on the horizon if the weather was clear.

Claire stopped not far from the edge, looking out at the endless sea – so bright blue it almost hurt her eyes. This wasn’t a tourist spot. She saw the cliffs from the territory of the resort or the ferry, but didn’t know there was a road leading up to their tops. The view, however, was mesmerizing.

It was windier here, too, and she gratefully sank into Owen’s embrace when he walked up to her and wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, shielding her from the stronger gusts.

“And for the record, I know what profit margins are,” he told her, resting his chin on the top of her head. “It just was the first thing that popped up in my head. This speech wasn’t exactly as polished as I wanted it to be.”

Claire laughed softly, running her hands along his forearms. Behind her, his body was all lean muscles folded comfortably around her, his heartbeat thudding steadily against her back. He always smelled of sunshine and forest, and she honestly had no idea what she was doing, but there was no way she was going to stop.

“And here I was worried we might run out of things to talk about,” she noted, making him chuckle.

“You want this, right?” Owen asked after a few minutes. “Us, I mean.”

She turned her head and looked up at him, her green eyes locking with his blue ones, a small smile blossoming on her lips. “I don’t know, Mr. Grady. Why don’t you run it by me again?”
”Comforting kisses pressed to tear-stained cheeks between whispered words of reassurance and concern” prompt

+ ‘Today was the first family gathering i’ve been to since we broke up and my little cousin that absolutely adored you asked where you were and i had to lock myself in the bathroom and sit in the tub for a half an hour and look through a folder on my phone of pictures i took of you to feel okay again” Post break-up AU prompt

Chapter Notes

It’s a bit long, but I hope it’s still okay :)

The last time Claire Dearing ended up sitting in the bathtub at a party was during her freshman year in college when a frat get-together turned out being so mind-numbingly stupid she was seriously considering drowning herself in the sink or something. But her friend refused to leave, and Claire ended up reading *Economics 101* until 3 in the morning, squeezed between the toilet and a towel rack.

And here she was again, fifteen years later, spending her first Thanksgiving with her family in years hiding in her sister’s bathroom, all because Gray wouldn’t stop asking her about Owen. Where he was? How was he doing? He should have come with her, and why didn’t he, Aunt Claire? There was something or another of the utmost importance he needed to show him, and maybe they should just call him?

Until Zach kicked him under the table, that is, and Claire excused herself hastily, all apologetic smiles and an inhuman effort she’d put into not actually screaming.

If this were how the rest of the evening was supposed to go, she’d rather skip the main course and even the dessert and move on to throwing herself into traffic.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and fished her phone out of the pocket of her jeans.

*You wouldn’t believe how huge this turkey is, she typed habitually. Bet it took Karen a week to cook it.*

Delete.

*And the cranberry sauce is awful. What’s the deal with it, anyway?*

Delete.

*They’ve been asking about you and I have no idea what to say.*
I miss you—

I don’t think I can handle a few more hours of this.

With a sigh, she opened the photo gallery instead and scrolled through the old pictures, trying not to think of how her chest tightened at the sight of their faces squeezed into the narrow frames, always smiling. Happy. The way he was looking at her – like she was his whole world.

To sum it up, this was how it was now – she had no idea where Owen was, or how he was doing, but she assumed he was fine. It was the whole point of them not being together anymore – so that they both could be fine on their own instead of miserable in each other’s company, right? He didn’t come because he would most likely rather subject himself to some form of extended torture than spend an hour in her company. And no, they shouldn’t be calling him because he was probably having the kind of Thanksgiving that wasn’t making him want to bang his head against the wall, and it would be bad manners to ruin it for him, all things considered.

Her finger hovered over the picture from about 6-7 months back when they went away for the weekend and stayed in a tiny bed and breakfast in Vermont. Owen was squinting in the late afternoon sun, his cheeks flushed in the chilly wind, his lips curved into a small smile she didn’t think he was aware of. He wasn’t looking at the camera, his gaze focused on something to the right from him. The day was crisp and the sky over their heads was clear and so wonderfully blue it hurt to look at it, the air smelling faintly of wet soil and smoke and spring that started taking over after the long winter. Claire could vividly remember thinking that she’d never loved him more than in that moment.

“Honey, you drowned in there?” Karen’s voice jerked her back to reality. “Everything okay?”

“Be there in a minute,” Claire called back, shutting the phone off and climbing out of the bathtub, her hands running automatically over her shirt and smoothing out the creases.

She paused briefly before the mirror, trying to recognize the woman looking back at her, and failing miserably. Her eyes were the same, her hair was falling down her shoulders in soft waves, looping around her jaw, the delicate bow of her lips curved ever so slightly. But the whole picture still wasn’t making any sense. Claire tried to remember when she stopped recognizing herself, when the inside stopped matching the outside, like she was perpetually stuck in looking for something inside of herself she wasn’t even sure existed.

The rest of the night passed relatively painlessly. Zach spent most of that time with his nose buried in his phone, alternating between texting and playing Angry Birds or something of that kind while Gray walked Claire through every step of building an airplane model. She didn’t understand half of it and forgot the rest before he even finished speaking, but it wasn’t the point. For once, everything felt so nice and normal she’d be happy to listen to his explanation of aerodynamics for five more hours if she had to.

“Don’t bother, I’ll just call the cab,” she said when Karen offered to drive her home.

“Don’t be absurd. It’ll only take 10 minutes,” Claire’s sister countered. “It’d take a cab five times longer just to get her, especially in this weather.”

It had started to rain a few hours ago – a persistent drizzle that was annoying more than anything
else, but Claire suspected it could easily turn into the first snow if the temperature dropped any lower.

In the end, saying yes seemed like the lesser of two evils, and both boys agreed immediately when Karen asked if they wanted to tag along, elbowing and pushing each other as they put on their shoes and coats.

It really was a short trip from the Mitchell residence to the small house Clair had been living in since she relocated to Madison in an attempt to put Jurassic World behind. And really, what could possibly be more different from the tropical island than Wisconsin? At first, she kept telling herself she was doing it for Karen’s sake so that her sister would stop imagining her dead in the ditch whenever Claire failed to pick up her call, but it turned out being nice to be home again. And apparently you could find decent therapists anywhere.

“Thanks,” Karen said, easily navigating the dark and mostly empty streets. “For coming over. I know we can be… a lot. But it was good to see you, Claire.”

“It was good,” Claire assured her, staring out the window shield at the bent and fractured light filtering through the raindrops while Zach and Gray talked in hushed voices in the backseat. None of them said a word about Owen again, and she wondered if Karen told them not to pry, seeing as how Claire’s best tactics included denial and an attempt to bolt.

“You should come over for Christmas,” Karen continued meanwhile. “I’ll make mom’s sweet potato pie.”

Claire snorted. “Like you could ever pull off–”

She was cut off by the blinding light that appeared out of nowhere from the left, flooding the car, and the boys’ loud, “Mom!” The deafening screech of tires on the wet road followed suit and then everything went black.

—

Claire was talking to the tired-looking on-call doctor in the waiting room while Zach and Gray sat slouched in the hard plastic chairs by the wall when the double doors swung open and Owen walked in, his eyes scanning the area assertively, the line of his shoulders relaxing at the sight of the boys. Then his eyes fixed on her, and it was like his very being there tuned out the presence of everyone else at the hospital. She certainly stopped hearing what the doctor was telling her, her heart pounding in her ears.

“Owen!” Gray leaped up from his seat and barreled into him without thinking twice, and it was the way Zach didn’t so much as glance at her that told Claire it was him who called Owen.

She had already contacted Scott, but he was spending the holidays with his family three states away, and even though he offered to catch the next flight back to Madison, she assured him there was no need for it. All things considered, she was fully capable of taking care of her nephews for a few days, despite their previous rather bumpy experience with that.

“Hey,” Owen breathed out, only half listening to Gray pouring about 5 months’ worth of news on him, his hand resting reassuringly on the boy’s shoulder.

“Hey,” Claire echoed, and then turned back to the doctor. “Thank you. For everything,” she said, hoping he didn’t ask her anything that required a more elaborate response.

He nodded quickly, and after promising to catch up with her shortly, disappeared in the ICU wing.
“What happened?” Owen asked her, his forehead creased with concern.

“Wait with Zach, honey, while I talk to Owen, okay?” She smiled weakly at Gray and ruffled his wild mop of hair. Reluctantly, he shuffled back to the chairs, throwing occasional curious looks at the two of them, and it suddenly hit Claire that this was the first time she saw Owen in months. She cleared her throat, willing herself to keep it cool. “You shouldn’t have come. Zach… he shouldn’t have called you.”

“What happened, Claire?” He repeated.

He looked… different. And not. The lines around his mouth seemed to be deeper, but then again, it could easily have something to do with the fact that it was 5 in the morning. His hair was longer than she remembered and he smelled of Owen and rain and home, and for a moment she honestly wished she was also unconscious in the Intensive Care with her sister. No, scratch that—instead of her sister.

“Our car got hit by a truck. The driver… he couldn’t stop on the wet road. The rain, you know, and…” She trailed off and ran her hand through her hair. “We’re fine, everything’s fine.”

“Karen…” Owen began.

“She will be okay,” Clare added quickly. “Her collarbone is broken and two of her ribs are cracked, but there’s no internal bleeding and no concussion.” She attempted to pull her lips into some semblance of a smile, but they refused to cooperate. “They will, of course, be keeping her here until she’s fully recovered, but there is no cause for alarm.”

Except Claire wanted to jump out of her skin at the memory of the moment when the two cars collided that kept replaying in her mind in slow motion, one agonizingly terrifying moment after another. Then again, it was probably nothing 2 hours of screaming into a pillow wouldn’t fix. It was a miracle she and the boys ended up slightly shaken and with a few scratches. The truck driver, on the other hand, was currently nursing a broken arm.

“And you?” Owen peered at her inquisitively, his eyes pausing for a moment on the two butterfly bandages covering a cut on her forehead where her head met the dashboard briefly, currently half-hidden behind a few strands of her hair. He almost reached out to brush it away, but Claire took a small step back, and his hand dropped down.

“I’m fine,” she repeated in that fake chipper voice that made her flinch inwardly. “And the boys, too. So… We’re good.”

For a moment, they just stood there, uncertain of what to do or where to look or what to say. In the end, Owen chose to stuff his hands into the pockets of his pants and have a better look around, learning just about everything there was to learn about the room round them in 2 seconds flat. Claire decided to pretend she didn’t notice Zach and Gray watch the two of them with growing interest. It wasn’t that their mother currently being hooked to an IV didn’t bother them, but right now, their aunt and her ex certainly seemed to be a far more interesting show.

“So, do you… um, need anything?” Owen asked when the pause started to stretch between them.

“No,” Claire assured him. “Thank you, but we’re good. I was just going to take them home. Karen will be asleep for a few more hours, and we won’t be able to see her until then…” She trailed off again and busied herself with checking her phone so that she didn’t have to look at him.

Owen nodded curtly. “Let me drive you, then.”
“It’s okay, I’ll just call…” She started to protest.

“Claire.” He shook his head with a small smile, their inside joke about how she could have a gunshot wound to her stomach and still keep insisting she was doing great instead of asking for help flashing through her mind, and her cheeks grew warm. “It’s no problem, really.”

She agreed. Mostly for the sake of not having to argue with him, her mind numb and sluggish after this already physically and emotionally exhausting night. Instead, she motioned to the boys to follow Owen, to which they obliged with surprising enthusiasm that made her frown.

Claire decided that Zach and Gray should stay with her instead of moving into Karen’s house for as long as she was at the hospital. For one thing, their schools appeared to be closer to her home, and then there was the matter of her own job.

“And also Aunt Claire has this awesome flat-screen TV,” Gray piped up when Claire explained to Owen why he should be taking them to her place instead of the Mitchells’.

“Yes, because it is an important decision-making factor,” she deadpanned from the front passenger seat.

Beside her, Owen chuckled without tearing his eyes off the road. And Claire had to look away to stop herself from smiling. Or crying, she couldn’t quite decide at the moment. Her head throbbed and her eyes felt like someone rubbed a handful of sand into them, making even something as simple as blinking painful. Honestly, the only thing she wanted to do was to fall asleep and wake up a year from now, which didn’t seem even remotely probable in given circumstances.

“Can you stay?” Gray asked the moment Owen pulled into Claire’s driveway and turned off the engine. “Can he, Aunt Claire? Just for a little while. Please?”

“Well, that’s up to Owen,” she said, offering Gray a small, forced smile and not looking at Owen at all. “It’s holidays, he probably has plans…”

“He doesn’t.” Owen responded, winking at the boy.

She should have just said no, Claire thought as they all piled out of his car and into a crisp, bright morning that bore no sign of the last night’s rain. She had enough on her plate to deal with without Owen Grady and his presence that seemed to be overwhelming all of a sudden. She liked structure and order, and he tended to bring nothing but chaos with him.

“Is that okay with you?” Owen asked quietly when Claire opened the door and the boys made a beeline for the living room and their beloved TV set. “That I stick around,” he added.

“It’s not really about me, is it?” She said, which wasn’t really an answer, but he decided to take it as a yes.

The rest of the day was a blur.

In the afternoon, they went to see Karen who was groggy from pain meds and emotional from everything else, and Claire had to repeat that they were fine at least a thousand times and then promise they’d be coming over every day before her sister finally stopped freaking out. Although Claire wished Karen didn’t spot Owen lingering in the hallway, her eyes nearly popping out of her head at the sight of him, but it was then that the nurse hustled them out, and she breathed out a sigh of relief.
Next, they had to stop by the Mitchells’ house to pick up everything Zach and Gray might need in the near future, which for some reason included their Xbox, but since it was three against one – because Owen decided he had a say in the matter – she simply allowed them to do whatever they wanted, figuring the fight was not worth it.

At some point, Scott called and talked to Gray while Zach pretended he couldn’t hear her call out his name. His relationship with his father was an odd one, as far as Claire was aware, so she let it slide. Let Karen deal with the family drama – her job was to make sure they had a roof over their heads while their mother was at the hospital. And that nothing ate them.

They played some video games, neither of the boys minding Owen mercilessly kicking their asses, and for once Claire was glad he kept their mind off what happened last night. The doctor told her to keep an eye on them, see if they started complaining about headaches or nausea, but both of them seemed to be perfectly fine, and she finally allowed herself to relax a little.

The day ended at 9 PM when Zach started nodding off and Gray outright passed out on the couch and Owen had to carry him into the spare bedroom. Zach followed them wordlessly and was asleep the moment his head touched the pillow.

After being awake for nearly 30 ours straight, Claire had a hard time remembering what happened next. She thought she thanked Owen. A part of her remembered locking the door behind him when he left. How exactly she ended up in her bed with a comforted pulled over her shoulders she couldn’t recall.

Which made waking up to the sound of pots and pans banging in the kitchen and the smell of something cooking odd, to say the least.

Yawning, with the blanket draped over her shoulders – and thanking all gods for the fact that it was Saturday – she dragged herself out of her room and into the kitchen where she found none other than Owen Grady work his magic near the stove as he hummed something under his breath - totally off-key, by the way - while Zach and Gray sat at the counter.

“What is this?” Claire asked rather dumbly, wondering if she was still asleep.

“Owen’s making pancakes!” Gray announced happily.

“Bacon pancakes,” Zach added with more enthusiasm than she remembered him expressing, ever.

“I can see that,” she said, trying to keep her voice level, her eyes fixing on two bags of groceries sitting on the table. It wasn’t even 8 in the morning yet, for Christ’s sake!

“You didn’t have any food in your fridge, Aunt Claire,” Gray announced. “Except this green avocado sauce and… um, soy milk?” And she winced inwardly, trying to recall the last time she bothered to buy something that wasn’t a take-away dinner.

“Who’d guess?” Owen muttered with a good-natured smile without looking at her, and she glared at him, wishing she could incinerate him on the spot or something, just for the hell of it. And then he put a plateful of steaming pancakes before the boys and silently handed Claire a cup of coffee. Two sugars. A splash of cream. Just the way she liked it.

“You don’t have to do it,” she told him quietly while piling the dirty dishes into a dishwasher a while later. “I can manage on my own.”

“I know you can,” he didn’t argue.
“Shouldn’t you be spending your weekend with your family? Or a girlfriend?”

“Is this your subtle way of asking if I’m seeing anyone?” He inquired with unmasked amusement.

“This is my subtle was of asking what are you still doing in my house,” Claire countered without missing a beat.

“I thought you said it wasn’t about you,” Owen responded with a slight rise of his eyebrows.

—

It took her two days to stop all but jumping out of her skin at the sound of Owen’s voice coming from the living room. And a few more to completely accept his presence as something natural. And the truth was, Claire did appreciate his involvement. She knew she was fully capable of keeping the boys alive and not sticking their fingers into the power sockets, but he was the one who was making them laugh, and that was something she couldn’t not be grateful for.

They settled into an easy pattern – she’d take Zach and Gray to school in the morning and he would pick them up afterwards so that they could go visit Karen without having to wait for Claire to get home from work. Her own visiting time was before dinner, and she normally kept it short, spending most of it dodging her sister’s questions about why her ex was doing all the heavy lifting.

“Because he volunteered,” she repeated one night with an irritated eye-roll for what felt like a millionth time.

“Well, he wouldn’t do it just because,” Karen, who was supposed to be released in about 2 weeks, depending on how fast her fracture and cracked bones would heal, noted reasonably.

“Maybe he needs a hobby,” Claire scoffed, and quickly changed the subject.

But the next thing she knew, Owen was staying overnight sleeping on the couch in her study ‘because it was easier that way’, and oddly enough, no one found it strange or out of place.

Claire tried not to think about it. Truth be told, she and Owen exchanged only a handful of words with one another, most of them being about picking up the food or choosing the movie and coordinating their schedules to make sure that all chess clubs and basketball practices and all sorts of extracurricular activities fit nicely into them, dancing around one another with the ease of two people who’d lived together long enough to know what buttons not to push.

“What?” Claire asked Gray when she caught him staring at her and Owen wide-eyed as they cooked the dinner one night, cutting and chopping and mixing and pouring without so much as bumping their elbows at the cooking counter. She moved slightly to the side when he reached for the chopping board, his hand grazing against hers.

“It’s just that you guys…” Gray started uncertainly.

“It looks like you’ve choreographed the whole thing,” Zach snorted, his eyes crinkling with amusement.

Claire took a swig of her wine, feeling Owens’ eyes on her and said, “Why don’t you guys help? This salad won’t make itself.”

—

The first time she had a bad night while Owen was there, she woke up chocking on her tears and
gasping for air. The dreams about the park started to fade away a long time ago, but it only meant that they were that much harder to deal with whenever they came back. She somehow knew not to freak out when they were a nightly occurrence, unlike the out-of-the-blue kind of situation that always left her scared and disoriented.

This time, she only barely made it to the bathroom before she threw up, her skin feeling hot and flushed and too tight on her bones, her head aching. It had been a while…

There was a light knock on her door and Owen’s muffled voice called, “Claire?”

“I’m fine,” she said, wiping at her cheeks, her heart hammering in her chest, still trying to cope with having to run away from yet another monster she couldn’t even see in the dark.

“It doesn’t sound like it,” he sighed. And then asked when she didn’t respond, “Can I come in?”

She swallowed, hard, and then reached over and unlocked the door while turning the faucet with another hand to rinse her mouth and splash some water on her face, the tears still burning her skin. She’d forgotten how awful this stuff felt. Forgot how it was Owen who used to make everything right again.

He hovered in the door for a moment, and then stepped toward her, pushing her hair out of her face, his thumb running over her cheekbones, and she had to resist the urge to close her eyes and lean into his touch the way she would back in the day.

“I get them, too,” he whispered. From this close, Claire could feel the heat of his body radiating off him in waves, and it made her feel dizzy. And safe.

“I’m okay,” she repeated almost soundlessly, grateful that they boys didn’t wake up.

He was wearing an old faded Batman t-shirt and funny-looking boxers with either boats or bananas on them, which was enough to almost make her smile. Instead, she looked up at him, feeling weak in the knees for the reasons that had nothing to do with still feeling slightly sick.

“It was my fault,” she murmured.

“No, it wasn’t,” he whispered, cupping her face in his hands. “It wasn’t, Claire.”

“Not the park,” she said. They’d been through this before – her consuming guilt that often left her breathless and paralyzed. “Karen. If she only allowed me to get the cab instead of taking me home, she wouldn’t be….”

“Shhh,” he moved closed, pressing his lips to her forehead, her tear-stained cheeks. “It wasn’t your fault. It just happened. And she is going to be fine.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling his mouth pepper her face with feather-light kisses in between whispered reassurances, catching her tears, his breath soft and warm on her skin, and when his lips brushed against hers, she turned her face up, pressing her mouth to his before he pulled away. If it caught Owen off-guard, he got over pretty quickly, his hands finally falling from her face and locking around her, his heartbeat a rapid staccato against Claire’s chest.

She didn’t remember exactly how they ended up back in her bedroom, her hands tugging at his shirt that now was an unwanted barrier between her and his skin, and the rest of him. She’d forgotten what it was like to feel so alive her blood was boiling in her veins.

“You sure about this?” Owen murmured, trialing his mouth along her neck, his hands slipping into
the waistband of her pajama pants.

“Stay,” she whispered, cupping his face in her hands, her breathing short and shallow. “Please don’t go.”

He pulled back just far enough to take off his shirt, dropping it on the floor, and then Claire lifted her arms to let him get rid of hers as well, her gaze never leaving his. She trailed her fingers down his chest, delighted by the sound of his sharp inhale, his eyes turning almost black with deep, primal need. He lost his boxers long before they reached her bed where he finally removed the remaining garments of her clothing, his lips only barely tearing away from whatever skin he could reach, his hands flying everywhere like he had at least ten of them, not two.

Owen kissed his way down her body, smiling at her gasp when he brushed a kiss against the inside of her thigh, Claire’s fingers curling around the fistfuls of sheets at her sides. And then he followed her lead when she drew his back up, her mouth claiming his again, greedy and demanding, and wrapped her legs around his hips, guiding him home…

“It was even better than I remembered,” Owen said later, kissing her bare shoulder, and then a sensitive spot behind her ear.

“It was,” she agreed easily. Turned her head and captured his lips, her whole body pleasantly relaxed, her muscles aching for all the right reasons. “What happened to us, Owen?”

“Well,” propped up on his elbow, he brushed a strand of hair damp with sweat away from her forehead, “you told me that we were incompatible. That it wasn’t going to work out. That we were a terrible mix and maybe we were better off on our own.”

Claire let out a long shuddering breath. “I said all that because I wanted you to disagree.”

Owen blinked, his face utterly confused even in near complete darkness wrapped around them. “How about the next time you give me some heads-up so that we wouldn’t have to go six months without doing this?” He planted another kiss on the tip of her nose while his hand slid around her waist in a very suggestive way. “Not sure I can last even an hour.”

“Is that so?” She inquired, her voice dropping as his mouth started doing some wonderful things again. “Let’s see what we can do about that….”

—

“Thought you bailed on me,” Owen said the next morning when he finally found her in the kitchen after having a few moments of panic upon waking up alone, his mind racing over everything that happened the previous night and trying to convince him it was just a dream.

Claire was standing by the window, sipping coffee from her favourite mug and staring out the window at what was promising to be a very grey day outside, her street lines with a neat row of bare trees and dark-brown lawns. Her hair was pulled into a sloppy ponytail at the base of her neck while several loose strands framed her face.

“I live here,” she reminded him.

“Never stopped you before,” he grimaced a little as he walked up to her, his arm slipping around her waist. He pecked her on the top of her head.

“Owen….,” She looked up, mostly at his chin.
“Oh, no.” His brows drew together immediately. “Don’t you dare. I know that face.”

Claire sighed and set her mug on the windowsill. “Look, last night—”

“Was something that should’ve happened. A long time ago. And now you’re freaking out again. Which is cool.” He rubbed his eyes and let out a long sigh. “But if you’re going to tell me now that it was a one-time thing, I swear to god I’ll bite your head off.”

The corners of her mouth tugged up slightly. “More like a four-time thing.”

He let out a short laugh and threw his arm around her neck, pulling her closer. “I’m glad you counted.” Her chin propped on his knuckle, Owen studied her face for a few moments, and then shook his head. “You know how I felt when Zach called me and told you got in a car accident? Before he explained that you weren’t injured… or worse? I thought my heart had stopped beating. Because if you were hurt, I’d probably die. So if you expect me to pretend that last night meant nothing… Well, tough shit. You might just have to deal with it.”

“I missed you,” she whispered, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

“Told you,” a voice behind them said, and they pulled away from each other to find Zach smirking at them from the doorway. He turned to Gray standing beside him. “You owe me ten bucks.”

“I can’t wait to tell mom,” Gray breathed out.

When Christmas rolled around, Karen’s left arm was still in a sling to keep her collarbone undisturbed, although no one was allowed to say anything about it or treat her any differently. Unless they wanted to hear everything she had to say about it, that is.

“So, you and Owen….” She started while Claire was finishing a potato salad as random outbursts of laughter exploded in the living room where Owen and the boys were doing something that apparently required a lot of laughing.

The timer on the oven went off, announcing that the roast beef was supposed to be done, too.

“Who knew, right?”

“Well, everyone.”

“It’s good,” Claire smiled without looking at her sister. “You know, the best kind of good.”

“You look… better.” Karen observed as she watched Claire pull out the pan with the steaming meat from the over and put it on the counter to cool off. “I should have ended up at the hospital sooner.”

Claire looked at her with reproach and pulled off the cooking mitts. “Don’t even joke about it.”

“So, everything’s good then?”

“Mom, Owen knows the coolest stuff!” Gray announced, zipping into the kitchen to grab a fresh roll from the breadbasket, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

“The dinner is in fifteen minutes,” Karen called after him when he ran off again, and looked meaningfully at Claire.
“You heard him,” Claire laughed as she crossed her arms over her chest. “Owen knows the coolest stuff.”

Karen poked her in the ribs with her good hand. “And that we will have to discuss in detail.”
Chapter Summary

Prompts:
“Does it ever stop hurting?” “No, you just make room for it.”
+
“I loved them more than anything in this world, and they’re dead because of me.”

The first time it happened a month after Owen’s return from his first tour.

He was sharing a tiny two-bedroom that barely fit the necessities with a guy from his platoon who got discharged at the same time, waiting for the new assignment. The place was so small he had no idea how they managed to squeeze a couch and a table into the living room, and no matter how much they cleaned and aired it, the whole place always smelled of mold.

Owen knew that after months in the desert, endless drills, and bullets whistling past him, settling into a civilian life even for a short period of time would be tough. He knew he would find the softness of the bed uncomfortable and the silence of the night so deafening it would hurt. But knowing was one thing. Having to go through it, however, was something entirely different.

After having seen the things no one should see in their lifetime, Owen found himself looking at the plain and trivial stuff surrounding him, and people focused on paying their bills and getting a promotion and not missing an episode of their favourite TV show, and it left him antsy and restless. Made him wonder what was the point of this all when someone else was dying for no reason other being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the blood was seeping into the sand. What was the point?

This was when the nightmares started, his mind helpfully reminding him of everything he was struggling to forget. No, the NAVY was his choice and he never once regretted making it, but it didn’t mean that coping with the consequences of doing what he thought was the right thing to do was easy.

The thing about nightmares was that Owen often didn’t even remember them upon waking up, but they inevitably sent his body into a fighting mode, and a month into his life in a crammed apartment the size of a shoebox, his roommate decided to wake him up because Owen was talking in his sleep. And before either one of them knew what was happening, Owen punched him, sending the guy flying out of the room and into the hallway before he leaped out of the bed and followed him, still half-asleep and certain he was being attacked, ready to beat the life out of his friend.

After that, Owen actually went to see a counsellor, realizing at last that it was not something he could deal with on his own, and eventually it worked. The memories faded like old photographs. The nightmares went away. He stopped waking up in cold sweat, clutching fistfuls of sheets in his hands and feeling like he was still half a world away, in a place where his life could end at any moment.

The therapist explained to him that it was his survival instinct taking over when his consciousness wasn’t there to make the right decision to protect him, and over time, Owen learned to live with it.
Until Jurassic World happened.

Until the nightmares came back.

Until he woke up one night hovering over Claire, his hand gripping her wrist so tight he could probably break it, and she was looking up at him at utter shock, her eyes wide and frightened.

She was scared. Of him.

The realization felt like a sucker punch to his stomach. “I’m sorry,” Owen let go of her and scooted away from her, breathing hard, his throat dry and raw. “God, Claire, I’m so sorry.”

She was still watching him warily, but after a moment or two, she pushed herself up into a sitting position, the confusion drained from her face and replaced with concern. “What happened?”

He scrubbed his hands down his face, then buried his fingers in his hair, pushing it back, his chest still tight and his heart hammering so fast he was starting to feel dizzy. He couldn’t even remember what it was that triggered this. Was it a bad dream? Was he talking in his sleep and Claire merely wanted to comfort him? Or did she just brush her hand against his by accident or tried to wiggle closer to him the way she tended to most of the nights, claiming she could sleep better when she could hear his heartbeat?

In the time they’d been together, he’d seen Claire Dearing frustrated, angry, affectionate, exhausted, confused, happy, amused, giddy. But he had not once seen her so scared she was paralyzed. Granted, it only lasted a second but… Did she think he was going to hit her? Would he if he didn’t wake up?

God, he wouldn’t. Of course, he wouldn’t.

But what if…

Owen dropped his hands down, his shoulders sagging. “It’s an… old thing,” he muttered in a low, hoarse voice, his tongue refusing to cooperate, the words getting stuck in his throat. “I must have—must have had a…” He shook his head. He had what, exactly? “Jesus, Claire. I didn’t mean to…”

“Hey,” her lips stretched into a soft, small smile as she reached for him. “It’s okay—”

“No, it’s not.” He pulled away from her and slipped out of bed, beads of sweat forming on his forehead, his shirt sticking to his back. What if he did hit her? “I just…”

“Owen.”

“I need a minute, okay?”

Without looking at her, he left the bedroom and headed for the kitchen to get a glass of water, his stomach twisted into a tight knot and his mind on fire.

In the past decade, he’d seen people die; he’d seen people being killed; he’d seen people being shot so many times they were more bullet holes than flesh and bones. And then, when he started to think that this part of his life was over, he saw someone being eaten—someone he knew; someone he’d been working and playing poker and having beer every Friday with. He saw a creature taller than the house he grew up in crunch someone’s bones with its teeth. And his world was teetering on a brink again.

He finished his water in a few gulps, not feeling better in the slightest and put the glass down on
the counter, staring out the window at the dark building across the street, only three of its windows lit up at 4 in the morning.

“Owen, come back to bed,” Claire called from behind him, and he snapped his head up, the sound of her voice making him feel like he was shattering to pieces. “Please.”

He turned around. “Claire…”

“I’m fine, everything is fine,” she promised him. “Let’s just go back to sleep, okay?”

He walked up to her on stiff legs. She didn’t step back or pull away – and it was only then that Owen realized he was expecting her to. Instead, she was watching him with a mixture of concern and puzzlement, which, in part, was even worse. His throat closed up, his hand hovered near her face for a moment or two before he lowered it without touching her.

“Go back, I’ll be there in a moment,” he said.

Claire opened her mouth to protest, but something about him stopped her, and she simply nodded and left without a word. And Owen continued to stand there on the cold kitchen floor until the sky started to turn grey and then purple and then pink, and the streetlamps switched off one after another.

—

“You can’t be serious,” Claire said as he was shoving handfuls of his shirts into a duffel bag sitting on the bed. Their bed, or so he grew to think of it in the past few months. She was watching him from the doorway, her shoulder propped against the doorframe and her arms folded over her chest. Owen had barely spoken to her since she found him making coffee a couple of hours ago. His mouth was set tight and the dark circles under his eyes made her frown. He had restless, jittery anxiousness to him, and when she asked him if he’d slept at all, even though she knew the answer to that question, he told her that maybe he needed to stay elsewhere for the time being.

“It’s just for a little while,” Owen said quietly, still not looking at her, focused on choosing between an extra pair of jeans and cargo pants.

“You make no sense,” she shook her head. “It was just a nightmare.”

“I could’ve hurt you.” He straightened up and turned around, his gaze shifted to the palm-shaped mark on her wrist – not quite a bruise, but the closest thing to it. “Really hurt you.” He could have snapped her neck in a heartbeat and broken her arm or–

“You could never do that,” Claire protested with so much conviction he almost believed her.

“You don’t know that,” he said. “Hell, even I don’t know that.” Owen rubbed the corners of his eyes and let out a weary sigh. “I punched another man once. And I put my fist through a wall on a different occasion. Through it, Claire.”

“Well, maybe that wall deserved it,” she pointed out, but her ghost of a smile didn’t hold when he simply looked away. “Look…”

At this point, he dropped the pretense of trying to pack – what the hell did he need, anyway? – and walked over to her, resting his hands on her hips and drawing her closer until there was no space left between them and her fingers were clutching his shirt as she stared straight ahead of her in the general direction of his chin.
“I’m messed up,” he said in a whoosh of breath. “And I need to deal with it before I hurt you or harm you in any way.”

Because if he did, Owen thought, he would never be able to live with himself. She was the best damn thing that ever happened to him, his honest-to-god sunshine, and he had no right to mess it up or make her regret getting together with him. But right now it seemed like she was better off without him, and the very idea was splintering his heart, the dull ache echoing in every part of his body.

“And the best way to do it is to break up with me?” She asked, twisting his shirt with her fingers and tugging him toward her.

“What? No, it’s not that… I’d never–” He let out a sharp exhale. “It’s only for a while, Claire. I promise.”

“It was nothing,” she said in a small, desperate voice.

“No, it wasn’t.” He pried her left hand off his tee and turned it over, his fingers closing around the red mark gently so as not to hurt her even more. He ran his thumb over the inside of her wrist and then leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead. “I’m sorry it’s so… fucked up.”

“Don’t go,” Claire looked up at him, her voice breaking, and she swallowed fast, her teeth digging into her lower lip. “Please, Owen. Stay.”

“I’m sorry,” Owen repeated, and then picked up his half-packed bag and brushed past her on his way out.

—

Owen hated the term PTSD.

Hated the way it sounded so generic. The stigma of it. The way it made people think he was out of control, unhinged. Maybe even dangerous. Like a time bomb that could go off at any moment. And more than anything, he hated the way it was making him feel – like he was trapped inside of his own mind, knowing that there was no escape. And how could he get away from himself, really?

The first time Owen was diagnosed with PTSD was after that infamous punching incident. And even though his buddy didn’t hold it against him, saying that there was no harm done, save for the purple bruise on his jaw, Owen got scared. It frightened him to know that he was capable of something so violent without even knowing he was doing it.

This time, it somehow felt a thousand times worse - either because he grew to believe he’d put the worst of it behind, or because the stakes were infinitely higher - but at least he knew what he was dealing with.

Owen made an appointment with a doctor who, after confirming his diagnosis, put him on mild anti-anxiety medication and also prescribed him sleeping pills that were also supposed to help him manage the stress levels.

In the few weeks following his relocation to a sparsely furnished studio, he started running as well, once again relying on the good old exercising routine that helped him keep his mind clear, primarily because it was damn hard to be stressed out and paranoid when his muscles were burning and his breathing was so labored he felt like he was going to suffocate half the time. He was running like there was another Indominus Rex chasing him, or like he was trying to run away from himself.
Barry would join him sometimes, but it was more about silent comradery and grabbing smoothies afterwards than anything else. If he was curious about what had happened to Owen, he never asked, their conversations mostly revolving around basketball and politics and the new bar that opened two blocks away and how Batman was basically Iron Man, just in a different universe – a crazy rich guy with daddy issues who was beating shit out of the bad guys because he thought that no one else could do it.

Owen didn’t like the idea of therapy, though. Not because he didn’t believe in it, but because having to relive those horrible hours on the island did not look particularly appealing to him, no matter the result.

And also because talking about Claire hurt like hell.

He missed her. He missed her so much that throwing himself into the teeth of a prehistoric monster didn’t sound all that bad by comparison. At night, he would hear some noise that was just the old house settling, and think that it was her in the kitchen. He would hear the pipes, and imagine her running a bath. He would wake up before dawn and habitually reach for her only to find the other half of the bed cold and empty and smelling of his Winter Fresh detergent instead of everything that was her.

She called him a few times, but after the first conversation he stopped picking up – it felt easier that way – and eventually she got the hint, although Owen wasn’t sure if she was giving him the time to become friends with his brain again, or if she’d given up on him.

Until she showed up at his place three weeks into his insanely uncomfortable but somewhat healing routine, glaring daggers at him from the moment Owen opened the door.

“Claire…?”

“You’re selfish. All this…” she gestured widely around his studio, “is selfish and stupid. And you have no right to make this decision for both of us,” she finished, basically choking on either her anger, or upcoming tears – he couldn’t quite tell.

She was like a hurricane that swept into his apartment, and Owen closed the door, thinking that he was about to be torn apart by the forces beyond his comprehension.

“It’s good to see you,” he said, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his pants so as not to reach for her. In the back of his mind, he wondered what she thought about the pile of laundry on the bed he was just about to fold and put away, or the empty cups on the coffee table, but Claire didn’t seem to notice any of that.

“This is ridiculous, Owen,” she said quietly.

He ran his hand through his hair, feeling the longing and frustration bubbling up inside of him, uncertain of which one was worse.

“I’m just trying to do the right thing,” he started.

“This is not the right thing,” she protested stubbornly, her lips quivering.

“Claire….” His voice dropped and was almost pleading now.

“I keep losing everyone I care about, and no matter what I do, I just can’t stop it.” She inhaled sharply and shook her head. “Seven years ago, I was going to go home for the holidays, for the first time since the reopening of the park. I asked Karen to come get me at the airport because I didn’t
want to bother with the rental car, but Gray got sick, and mom and dad decided to come pick me up instead. Except they never made it there. A construction truck barreled into their car at the intersection, only three blocks away from their house.” She paused, her hand fiddling with the necklace she was wearing, and then it fell down to hang by her side. Her was voice barely a whisper. “I loved them more than anything in this world, and they’re dead because of me.”

Owen swallowed, hard, watching a storm of emotions flash across her face, his heart thud-thud-thudding in his chest and his need to touch her was so overwhelming it physically pained him to not give in to it.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said at last.

“Yes, it was.” She pressed her hand to her mouth for a moment. “But I was too busy thinking about something that would eventually try to kill me to take a look around and notice what really mattered. And now I feel like I’m losing you, too. And I don’t think I can do it. Not after everything…” She trailed off.

“Hey.” Owen walked up to her and put his hands on her shoulders. “You’re not losing me, Claire. I swear, I’m still right here.”

She took a shuddered breath and met his eyes, her lips forming into a faint smile. “You look good.”

Owen let out a short laugh. “God, I missed you…”

“Come back,” she whispered. “It’s been… it’s been too long, and I hate sleeping without you, and I don’t even care if it’s a raging case of co-dependency or whatever all therapists in the world call it. I just need you, with me.”

She allowed her eyes to flutter closed when he pulled her toward him and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his lips to the top of her head. Face tucked into the crook of his neck, Claire breathed in the familiar scent of him as her hands locked behind his back and she let her body relax into him.

Owen ran his hand up and down her back, the aching need to feel her starting to give way to the desire to say yes to whatever she was asking for. Except he could still vividly remember the way she looked at him that night, and the way she flinched for a moment like she expected him to actually do something – even if Claire didn’t realize doing it – was cutting through him like a knife every time he so much as closed his eyes.

“You never told me about your parents,” Owen said softly.

No, he knew they were dead, but she never seemed to be keen on discussing it, and he never pushed, choosing to let her decide what he needed to know about her past.

Bathed in the fading afternoon light streaming through the wide window, his apartment was quiet, the silence interrupted only by the hum of the fridge in his nook of a kitchen. Claire smelled of oranges and coffee and vanilla and something familiar that echoed inside of him, making him tighten his grip on her in a desperate attempt to seep as much of her in as he possibly could.

“Not my favourite memory,” she admitted.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Owen repeated, although he suspected she’d had enough time to convince herself otherwise and his words were an empty sound.

She pulled back just far enough away to be able to look at him and wiped a tear form her cheek, her
lips trembling ever so slightly before they stretched into a smile. “You can sleep on the couch,” she offered as compromise, making him chuckle. “I don’t care. I mean, I do, but if that’s what it takes…”

Owen caught her hand and kissed her palm that tasted salty, his finger brushing her hair from her face. Honestly, he deserved a goddamn medal for making it without her for as long as he had. Before Claire, he didn’t even know that a person could feel like home.

“Look, it’s probably not the best—“

“It’s tough and messed up, I know,” she ran her fingers along his cheek. “But it’s how relationships work. And I’m not scared of you, and never was. I know it’s something you’ve been dealing with for a long time, Owen, but does it ever stop hurting? I mean, is it worth having to push people away?”

He watched her for a few long moments, knowing that she would be able to accept whatever answer he’d give her, even if it was a yes. And then he let out a long breath and shook his head. “No. I guess you just make room for it.”

She kissed him then, a feather-light touch to his lips, and then Owen’s hands were framing her face and pushing through her hair, and he was kissing her back like he’d never kissed her before. Like there were Pteranodons flying above them again and the death seemed imminent and their blood was pumping faster than ever.

“I had to do it,” Owen whispered against her mouth.

“I know,” she nuzzled into his cheek. “And now it’s time to go home.”
What Could Have Been

Chapter Notes

This story came from 'Owen and Claire booping each other's noses' prompt.

Okay, so…. First of all, there’ll be only one bopping. Sorry about that. Second, never underestimate my ability to turn anything into angst.

To answer the possible question - I have no idea why I wrote this. And as per usual, I regret nothing. Enjoy!

“So, this is it,” Owen breathed out.

“This is it,” Claire echoed, her voice about as shocked and dumbstruck as his.

For a few more moments, they both simply started at the positive pregnancy test sitting on the coffee table before them, listening to the old clock she’d picked up at the flea market years ago ticking on the wall – the sound oddly loud in near complete silence of the living room.

It was strange and unsettling that her whole world basically started spinning backwards, and yet nothing had changed. The walls didn’t collapse around her. A hurricane didn’t wipe her house off the face of the Earth. This was almost as hard to accept as the fact that she was carrying a tiny spark of life inside of her.

Maybe the problem was that the news didn’t come with the What Next? Manual, Claire thought absently. She and Owen had only been together for 8 months now. It was still so new and fresh and terrifying. And even though he made it perfectly clear it was exactly how he wanted it to be, that she was the person he wanted to be with, they never really talked about the future.

After the park, after everything, he just somehow ended up moving in with her, none of them seeing it happen any other way. And then the life started getting back to normal, the routine kicked in, and she thought they might have this conversation at some point – about who they were to each other and where this was going. But at the moment, it was right. It felt good. The rest didn’t matter.

Except right now, she felt like a tidal wave was pushing her onto the shore and then swooping her back in before she could find solid ground, and then spitting her out into the open again. Over and over. This was no What kind of cereal do you like for breakfast? kind of issue. This was huge. And it wasn’t that she didn’t want children. She just never really thought about it, not like this, choosing to nod and smile whenever someone would say that her time would come, seeing as a survival tactics rather than a subject she actually needed to discuss and consider.

Claire clasped her hands together and let out a shuddered breath.

“You okay?” Owen asked, reaching his hand to tuck her hair behind her ear, and Claire turned to him, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Was she?

“Yeah, it’s just,” she shook her head and rubbed her forehead, “you know, unexpected.”
He offered her a crooked smile, his hand now threading through her hair. “Tell me about it,” he admitted. “But it’s okay. It’s great. Really, Claire. It’s…” He took her hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing her knuckles. “Better than great.”

“Really?” She asked, only now realizing that she kind of expected there’d be an Owen-shaped hole in her door the moment she’d told him the news, and the fact that not only wasn’t he trying to run away, but was instead looking at her with this wondrous amazement had lodged a burning lump in her throat.

“Really,” Owen’s smile grew wide and bright, and soon he was beaming at her like honest to God human sunshine, and she wondered how long it would be before she burst out crying. Some of it must have shown on her face though, because the next moment he moved closer, pulling her toward him, until his forehead was pressed to hers and his palms were framing her face. “It’s the best, Claire. The very best.”

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Whatever Claire expected from being pregnant – if anything, frankly – it certainly wasn’t an overwhelming exhaustion. She had never felt this endlessly tired in her life, and it was frustrating, to put it mildly. She slept like a rock at night and kept nodding off in the afternoon, yawning her way through meetings and conference call, only half focused on what was going on. The morning sickness hadn’t started yet, although her doctor warned that it didn’t mean it wouldn’t, and so she decided to enjoy the easy part of this process for as long as it lasted.

“You feeling okay?” Owen asked her one night a few weeks later as he slipped under the covers and wrapped his arm around her waist, kissing her shoulder and then her temple, his hand landing on her stomach.

“Mm,” she hummed sleepily, and rolled over to scoot closer to him and into the warmth of his body, “weird.”

“What do you mean, weird?” He tensed. “Anything hurts?”

“No, no,” she said quickly. “It’s just…. It’s odd, you know. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around it.”

He booped her nose, smiling. “Good odd?”

“The best,” she murmured, her eyes fluttering shut again, soothed by his closeness and the steady beating of his heart against her cheek.

Owen was wonderful.

If she had any reservations about him, they disappeared in about two days. He was caring to the point of paranoia, making sure she ate properly and had enough rest and never had to pick up anything heavier than a mug of tea. Her handbag was permanently stuffed with granola bars on the off chance she’d get stranded in a place where food didn’t exist anymore, and he started talking to her stomach, referring to the life growing inside of her as Peanut since they wouldn’t know if it was a boy or a girl for a few more months.

Claire tried to draw a line somewhere – I’m not an invalid, for crying out loud, Owen! – but honesty, no one had ever doted on her like that, and she couldn’t bring herself to be irritated by his firm belief that she could fall apart from driving a car or taking a shower.

He was sweet. And so tender with her she wanted to cry. And so genuinely happy her concerns
started to fade away. Maybe this was not a bad thing, after all. Sure it was unplanned, and in hindsight, it was downright terrifying, but maybe it would work out.

—

The pain woke her up in the middle of the night a couple of weeks after their pillow talk, and at first, Claire thought it was something she ate, maybe a food poisoning. Taco night was her suggestion. It wasn’t a craving so much as a desire to change something, get out of the house and go out the way they used to not so long ago.

Maybe it wasn’t such a bright idea after all.

She slipped out of the bed and padded to the bathroom, nearly doubling over in pain when her feet stepped onto the smooth tiled floor, sharp tugging jolts shooting through her lower belly and into her back. And then another one. And another. It hurt so bad she had to pause in the doorway, gripping the door handle in her hand until her knuckles had gone white, her teeth digging into her lower lip to stop her from crying out. Her hand closed around her stomach, clutching a fistful of her pajama tank top.

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

Claire finally realized that it wasn’t indigestion when the pain grew hot, never really receding anymore, one spasm merging into another.

And this was when she saw the blood trickling down her thighs and dripping onto the white floor.

Her knees buckled when another pang twisted her insides, her hands knocking a bottle of shampoo sitting on the corner of the sink counter into the bathtub with a loud thud, her eyes filling with tears. She tried to take a proper breath, but her body felt like it had curled in on itself, her lungs small and crumpled and her throat closed up.

She could feel the blood now, hot and sticky on her skin, and her fingers closed around the floor towel as she whimpered quietly, willing it to go away, scared out of her mind.

“Claire?” Owen’s voice broke through to her between the flashes of white-hot pain, muffled by the door between them. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine—” She forced herself to say, gasping when another spasm left her nearly conscious.

“Open the door,” Owen told her. “Or I’ll knock it down.”

“I can’t…” Claire murmured, although she couldn’t tell if he heard her. Wasn’t even sure she said it out loud. It was hard to focus on something so trivial when the room was spinning around her and her whole body felt like it was on fire.

He broke the lock with a single precise kick, hesitating only for a heartbeat to assess the situation, and then he was kneeling next to her, his hands on her face, pushing her sweaty hair back from her forehead.

“Oh, Claire…” he whispered, cupping her cheek with his palm and kissing her forehead while she cried, not bothering to hold back the tears of pain and fear and loss and everything she couldn’t find the words for yet. “Honey…”

“It hurts,” she squeezed her eyes shut, her breathing short and laboured. “Why does it hurt so much?”
“Shhh.” Owen wrapped his arm around her, careful not to move her too much yet, allowing Claire to bury her face in his chest and hold on to his shirt while the sobs wracked her body. “It’s over,” he pressed his lips to the top of her head. “It’s all over now.”

The first thing Claire noticed upon waking up was that everything hurt. Not something in particular, but like someone put her through a food processor and then reassembled her in no particular order. Her head was full of fog, her limbs heavy as lead, and a dull throbbing pain was pulsating in her stomach.

She opened her eyes slowly, blinking a few times, letting them adjust. The whiteness of the walls and the fluorescent lights over her head was almost too much to bear, and she had to resist the urge to squint them shut again until it all went away. The air smelled faintly of disinfectant and antiseptic and, surprisingly, baby powder.

“Hey, there,” someone said quietly, and when Claire turned her head slightly, she found Owen sitting by her side, both of his hands clasped around one of hers. When he found her looking back at him, he brought them up to his mouth and kissed her fingers. “How you feeling?”

“What happened?” Claire croaked, her mouth dry. Her eyes fixed on the tube running from her arm up to the IV bag hanging on the metal stand by the bed.

And just like that, the memories came rushing back in. The pain so strong it felt like it was ripping her apart. Cool tiled floor under her palms. Owen wrapping her in a blanket and carrying her to his car, not wanting to wait for an ambulance. The way her tears burned her cheeks.

Claire’s fingers flexed around his. “The baby…” she started, knowing the answer. She’d known it since the moment she saw the blood, but until now, she didn’t want to accept it.

A flicker of pain contorted his face, pushing away the mask of forced cheerfulness, and he let out a long breath. “I’m sorry.”

Claire turned away from him, her hand going limp in his, and stared out the window at the impossibly blue sky, willing herself to wake up from this nightmare and knowing that it wasn’t going to happen.

She was discharged the next morning, although the paper work took longer to complete, and by the time Owen finally brought her back home, it was afternoon, the sun high and bright in the sky, flooding the kitchen and the living room with the soft light, and making Claire want to shut down the blinds and cut it off.

A part of her expected everything to be different – surely, something had to have changed after her whole world collapsed all over again – but the apartment looked exactly the same. For a moment, panic overwhelmed her, her gaze shifting to the bathroom door that stood slightly ajar, half-expecting to see rust-colored spots of dried blood on the floor. But it appeared to be scrubbed clean, complete with a scent of lemon cleaning spray. How that happened she had no idea – for all she knew, Owen never left her side for more than 5 minutes at a time for as long as she stayed at the hospital, promptly ignoring the requests of the staff to please leave after the visiting hours were over.

“You hungry?” Owen asked, walking up to her. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and
dropped a quick kiss on the top of her head. “Want some tea maybe? Or water?”

“No,” Claire shook her head. “I think I need to lie down.” What she needed was to rewind her life and stop it from shattering to pieces, but it wasn’t like something like that was on the menu.

“Okay.”

She looked up at him. “Would you stay with me?”

He brushed the hair from her face, his lips forming into a semblance of a small, relieved smile for the first time in two day. “Of course. Just let me lock the garage, and I’ll be right there.”

Tucked into his body, with Owen’s arm wrapped tightly around her, Claire fell asleep almost instantly. Owen, on the other hand, spent the next several hours staring at the ceiling, his other arm resting behind his head, listening to the sound of her steady, deep breath, his body still running on fear and adrenaline.

In his mind, he knew that it was over. That she was in no immediate danger anymore. That she was safe. But his heart kept tripping over itself every time the image of her in a pool of blood on the bathroom floor flashed before his eyes, feeling like a sucker punch that kept knocking all air out of his lungs. If he’d lost her, if something bad – something worse than losing their baby – happened to her, he wasn’t sure how he’d be able to live.

Owen kissed her hair and ran his hand up and down her back – something he used to do when she wasn’t able to fall asleep in the weeks after the park – and she stirred, draping her arm over his chest and letting out a long breath, too worn out to notice anything.

Karen called at some point, but since Claire’s phone was off, she dialed Owen’s number next. Claire never told her about the baby – I just want to keep it between you and me for a while, she explained. Just us – but there was no way around mentioning something like this to her sister. He talked to her briefly, explaining that everything was okay now and they were home, and Claire just needed to get some rest, promising to get her to call them when she woke up.

What frightened him the most was being out of his element – something that almost never happened. Helpless and useless, he had no idea what he could do to make her feel better, to fix it all so that her gaze stopped being so haunted. And a part of him hated himself for it, for feeling lost and stupid and out of place when she obviously needed more than that. Better than that.

Claire spent the next few days curled in the armchair in the living room with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and her knees drawn up to her chest, staring either out the window or just into space and giving Owen monosyllabic answers whenever he asked if she needed anything. Usually a no. No, she wasn’t hungry, or thirsty, or tired. No, the light was fine, and so was the room temperature. No, she didn’t want to sleep, or watch TV, or move to the couch. It unsettled him that she barely ever looked directly at him, her eyes either cast to the side or fixed on the spot over his shoulder.

He needed more than that, needed to know what she was thinking and how she was feeling, and then he kicked himself for being so selfish. It wasn’t about him, after all. Not even close.

At night, she would curl on her side of the bed, her back turned to him. And even though she hadn’t said anything to him once, he wasn’t oblivious to how she would stiffen if he so much as touched her or moved too close. And so he stopped trying to offer any physical comfort, a part of him wondering what it was what he did to make her push him away like this while the other feared that this was how it would be from now on. If she’d ever be able to look him in the eye instead of
sliding past him like a ghost, all but sucking in her stomach lest they so much as brush their hands against each other’s.

And then she threw herself into work, despite the fact that the company offered her an extended sick leave – *Take all the time you need, Claire. Honesty*. Owen wasn’t sure she even heard him when he said that maybe they were right. She certainly showed no indication of it. Long hours, late nights, tired lines around her eyes.

“You don’t have to do it, Claire,” he told her one night a couple of weeks later when she came home after nine, telling him she wasn’t hungry when he asked her if she had any dinner. If she had anything at all today.

“Yes, I do.” She tipped her chin up. “I do because I can’t be staying here, trapped in four walls. I can’t stay at home and think and think and think about what happened until I go crazy. I can’t have everyone ask me if I am okay and if everything is fine.” She paused to take a breath when she noticed that her words landed like a blow on him, making Owen flinch, everyone being him obviously. “I need to keep my mind off of it, okay?”

“Okay,” he nodded stiffly and looked away, allowing her to walk out of the kitchen and slam the bedroom door behind her, neither of them knowing what exactly just happened. It was quite possibly the longest conversation they had in weeks, but somehow Owen didn’t think it counted as progress.

That night, when she woke up, Owen’s side of the bed was cold and empty, and her chest tightened when she her hand brushed against his pillow. She slipped from under the covers and padded across the hall, finding him asleep on the couch in the living room, only barely fitting on it. His brows seemed to be pulled together in a frown even in his sleep, even though his breathing was deep and slow, dark circles under his eyes never fading away these days.

She stood there for a few long moments, feeling even more hollow than ever before, and then she draped a comforter she’d left earlier in the armchair over him, her hand lingering over his hair for a moment, before she drew it back without allowing her fingers to run through it and walked away.

—

“So, you’re sleeping on the couch now?” Claire asked the next morning, steering cream into her coffee, somehow managing to keep her voice almost casual despite the fact that it was nearly breaking, keeping her eyes on her drink and the swirls of white and black blending slowly together.

“I’m not sleeping on the couch,” Owen said without looking at her, focused on fixing his own cup – black, two sugars. “I fell asleep on the couch.” He rubbed his tired eyes, grimacing inwardly at how it came out, especially considering that they both knew it was a lie.

“Oh, okay,” she agreed – it wasn’t like there was anything else to say, anyway.

The toast popped out from the toaster, startling them both, neither of them particularly hungry.

“Jesus, Claire, I don’t know what you expect from me,” he said, putting his mug heavily on the counter and leaning against it with a sharp exhale. “Do you want me to move out?”

She snapped her head up at that, lowering her own coffee down – not so much because she didn’t want it anymore, although that was also the case, but because her hands started to tremble. This whole moment felt like a bad, twisted joke, and she wondered if she’d fallen into a black hole and ended up in another Universe or something, a place where nothing was making any sense.
whatsoever.

Surely it was a joke. He didn’t mean it. Couldn’t mean it. This was when he was supposed to laugh and tell her he was kidding.

“If that’s what you want,” Claire said after a few long moments when he didn’t – when she realized that he wouldn’t. And here she was thinking that her world couldn’t possibly spin even more off its axis by this point.

“Nothing about this situation is about what I want,” he breathed out, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down his throat.

“Why would I want that?” She asked quietly, studying his profile – sharp against the white wall, his jaw squared.

Owen’s lips curled into a rueful, humorless smile that looked painful more than anything else.

“You obviously can’t stand being around me,” he turned to her slowly, his gaze frightened and hurt and confused. “You can’t look at me, for Christ’s sake! And if that’s the case, I don’t want to force my company on you. I’d never…” He paused and swallowed. “The last thing I want is to make you unhappy, and if my presence is making you uncomfortable in any way, you should just say so. I’m a big boy, I can take it.”

“Owen…”

He ruffled his hair. “It’s been different, for you and me, but you’re not the only one who lost this baby, Claire. Yes, you were carrying him. Or her. But it doesn’t mean I cared any less. And if you blame me for what happened–”

“Why would I be blaming you?” She whispered.

He offered her a half shrug, and it finally hit Claire that he must have been sitting on this speech for quite a while now, turning and twisting it in his mind, replaying it over and over again – the same way she couldn’t stop thinking about that night and how scared she was, and how relieved she felt when he gathered her in his arms because she grew to believe that he could fix anything.

“Because you wouldn’t have ended up in this situation if it wasn’t for me,” he made face at how stupid it sounded outside of his head.

Claire started at him for the longest time, her lower lip caught between her teeth, her whole body deflated all of a sudden. “I thought you were blaming me,” she breathed out.

He blinked, confused. “Why would I ever…”

“Because I was supposed to keep it safe and make sure nothing happened to it.” She blinked rapidly when her eyes started to burn, her throat thick. Unlike Owen, she couldn’t think of this baby as anything but it, couldn’t call it anything else, because it hurt so much she thought she could scream. “It was my job to make sure that nothing like that happened. And maybe if I were more careful, or if I ate better, or if I slept more, or if…”

She trailed off and pressed her hand to her mouth, squeezing her eyes shut as the tears started to fall, leaving hot trails on her cheeks. She’d failed this baby, and Owen, and herself. After the hospital, when the reality finally started to sink in, she honestly didn’t think it could hurt any more than it already did, and yet here she was, wondering if this time she would tear at the seams.
“Jesus, Claire…” Owen stepped toward her, and this time and sank into his embrace, her shoulders shaking as she cried quietly, her fingers bunching his shirt, his tearstained face pressed into his chest, the smell and the warmth of him, so solid and familiar and safe, somehow making it worse, tearing down the walls she’d built. “It wasn’t your fault,” he murmured into her hair, tightening his grip around her when she didn’t push him away. “It was no one’s fault. Your heard the doctor. Sometimes it just happens.”

“He said we were incompatible,” she choked out, swallowed, sucked in a short breath. “How can I be incompatible with my baby?”

“It wasn’t you,” he whispered, stroking her back, her hair. “It wasn’t anyone fault, least of all yours.” Owen pulled away to look at her face, his hand smoothed down her hair, his thumb wiping away the tears from her cheek. “I wish I knew how to make it so that you wouldn’t have to go through any of this, Claire. But you didn’t do anything wrong, you hear me? You didn’t.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead when she didn’t protest and then pulled her closer again. And for a while they just stood there, with Owen’s arms wrapped around her and her face tucked into the crook of his neck, until her breathing slowed down and evened out, and her body stopped shaking.

It was the first time she cried, Owen noted. Not at the hospital, not after coming back home – he hadn’t seen her shed a single tear, thinking that it was shock of the situation that hadn’t fully registered with her yet. But now it was all out in the open, and he couldn’t even begin to imagine what it was like for her to carry this inside of her all those weeks. What it was like for her to be trapped in this small hell of her own. And his heart ached at the thought of never seeing it, never knowing how to help her, probably making it even worse.

“I wanted this baby,” she said softly at last, her breath hot on his skin. “I just didn’t know how much I wanted it until it was gone.”

He sighed. “I know, honey.”

“And when you asked me about moving out….” He fingers flexed on his shirt, tugging at it as if to reassure herself that he didn’t disappear into thin air. “I thought that maybe it was your way of saying that you’ve had enough of this, of me. That you wanted it to be over already.”

Owen let out a short laugh, a rumble deep in his chest that reverberating through her, and kissed her hair again. “I don’t even know if I should be relived or insulted by that.” He let out a long breath. “All I want is for you to be happy. But if I remind you too much of what happened… You need to tell me. I’d never choose not to be with you, Claire, but when you wouldn’t talk to me, or even look at me… I didn’t know what else to think.”

“Don’t go,” she muttered, her voice muffled, and snaked her arms around his waist. “I can’t lose you, too. I was scared and it hurt, and I thought you didn’t… couldn’t want me anymore.”

“For someone so smart, you’re sure full of ridiculous ideas sometimes,” he shook his head in disbelief.

“And I can’t not blame myself for it. Not yet.” Claire glanced up at him, her eyes puffy and uncertain.

“S’okay,” he allowed his fingers to trail down her cheek, thinking that his heart might burst just from looking at her. “We’ll work it out. I promise you.”

“And another thing…” she started.
“Mm?”

“I don’t want you to sleep on the couch again.”

He rested his cheek on the top of her head. “Deal.”

On the microwave, the clock changed to 9:00, the red dots blinking the seconds away. Claire was crying again, soundlessly, and Owen let her, knowing that there was nothing he could do but to hold her and hope that those tears would wash away her pain.
More Than Words

Chapter Summary

Prompt: “Okay so look, you see that jackass over there grinning at us? He thinks that I can’t get a dance with the most gorgeous girl in the room, and I was wondering if you’d help me prove him wrong? I mean, you’re very attractive and I’ve been mesmerized by you all night, so, what do ya say?”

Chapter Notes

Fluff alert!

It wasn’t that Claire didn’t like the Masrani Global’s functions and events. Most of the time, she didn’t mind them at all. It was that she didn’t want to be attending one right now. Her day was long and exhausting, and if she wasn’t mistaken, it had been lasting for about ten years already. On top of that, her schedule for tomorrow was packed as well, so all things considered, she would much rather be doing just about anything else rather than be here, surrounded by loud music and random outbursts of laughter.

But since she was the one to make this even happen, and since it was good for morale – as Simon would say – it was her duty to stick around long enough for the management to notice her presence before she’d have a chance to finally change into her favourite sweats and curl on her couch. After maybe setting her heels on fire.

Claire took a flute of champagne when a server slipped past her with a tray and then turned around as a shadow fell over her, a practiced smile in place, thinking it was one of her fellow-executives, boring as hell and impossible to get away from. The fun crowd didn’t seem all that eager to include her in their tight circle. And then her smile dropped when she saw it was just Owen Grady, probably on his way to the bar.

“Mr. Grady,” she nodded politely and wondered if he was onto something. If maybe she should head to the bar as well and get herself something stronger so that she could make it through the next couple of hours without going crazy.

“Claire,” he grinned with that boyish easiness that left her stomach in tight knots. “Nice party.”

“Nice suit,” she gave him a long once-over and took a sip of her champagne. She had no idea he owned one. Frankly, she had no idea he even knew what a suit was, what with their horrible disaster of a date which apparently didn’t warrant any kind of effort on his part.

“Nice…” He started, trying to think of a comeback as his gaze slid up and down her body, but then he just cleared his throat, and she smiled inwardly, awarding herself some points for choosing this dark grey dress with a halter collar and open back. “You. All of you.” And he added wattage to his smile for good measure.
“Smooth,” Claire snorted. “Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

“Actually,” Owen blocked her way when she tried to step around him. “Can I have word?”

She arched an eyebrow at him, uncertain if she was curious or irritated. It wasn’t like she was doing anything particularly interesting, but it didn’t necessarily mean she wanted to spend any more time with Owen Grady than absolutely necessary. Then again, he looked kind of fidgety, so maybe it would be entertaining.

“You can have a few,” she allowed graciously, still eyeing him with growing interest. He didn’t look uncomfortable exactly, but there still was some uneasiness about him she wasn’t used to, and it left her mildly intrigued. That, and the fact that he was trying hard not to let it show.

“I need a favour.”

“No,” she said simply and took another sip of her drink.

“You didn’t even hear what it was,” he protested.

“Okay,” Claire let out an exasperated sigh. “What is it, Mr. Grady?”

“Owen,” he corrected her automatically. “I just need–”

“No,” she said again as if it was all she needed to hear and attempted to walk away from him again. The problem was, there wasn’t anywhere to go. She could probably join one of a few groups her coworkers had broken into. Maybe the guys from Marketing. She knew some of their names, and it probably counted for something. Or maybe she could talk to Rick from HR who was currently standing alone in the corner. He was boring as hell and tended to speak in that monotonous voice Claire wanted to record and listen to on the nights when she couldn’t fall asleep, but it would still be a step up from—

“Okay, look at it as a business offer,” Owen interrupted the train of her thought, appearing before her again, his hand catching her elbow when she nearly tripped, startled.

She tilted her head to her shoulder. “What kind of business offer?”

He grimaced a little, and then dropped his voice, having to step closer to her so she could hear him over the music. “It’s Hoskins. He and a few guys bet I wouldn’t get a dance with the most beautiful woman in this room.”

It took Claire a moment or two to process his words, and then she laughed. And then she stopped when he didn’t join in, her smile slipping off. “Wait, are you serious?”

“Help me out?” He asked in that half-pleading, half-cajoling voice she was certain worked more times in the past than he could count. Not that it was something she wanted to contemplate.

“And you’re asking me because everyone else already told you to go to hell?” She clarified, her eyes narrowing skeptically. If this was some sort of a prank, she was personally going to feed him to something – God knew, her options were numerous and exciting.

Owen blinked, somewhat taken aback. “Well, no. You’re it."

“It,” Claire repeated. “I’m it.”

“One dance. One dance is all I’m asking for.”
Even though he was pointedly not looking anywhere but at her, Claire chanced a quick glance over his shoulder at a group of men hanging out not far from the exit. She knew they were the handlers – most of them from the raptors’ paddock, but she recognized a few others. Their eyes were locked on Owen’s back, and they all hastily looked away and started a loud conversation about nothing when her attention shifted to them.

“And did you try, I don’t know, growing up?” She asked with a smirk, meeting Owen’s eyes again.

“Come on, Claire, what do you have to lose?”

She turned on her heel and started toward the make-shift stage, wondering if there was anything she had to say to the hired DJ and then trying to come up with something. Maybe if she pretended being busy, Owen would go look for someone else to make fun of.

He did not just call her the most beautiful woman in the room, did he? The thought made her heart skip a beat.

“Dignity.” She said over her shoulder, easily maneuvering her way across the room. “Sanity. Five minutes of my life.” She didn’t look to see if he was following, somehow knowing that he would be. “Believe it or not, Mr. Grady, they are the things I actually value.”

As it turned out, he had no trouble keeping up with her. Except when Claire reached the DJ’s corner, she had nothing left to do but to stare at him for a few moments, and then face Owen once again.

“You’ve gotta have some sense of adventure in you,” he noted him a hum, his lips pursed together.

“Sure I do, but right now it’s getting drunk on tequila,” she responded, leveling him with her gaze. Then let out a long breath. “What’s in it for me?”

“Come again?”

“Well, if I’m helping you with anything, there’s got to be something in it for me.”

This caught Owen off-guard. “You’ll get to make out with me,” he offered.

She scoffed. “This is a definite no, then.”

“And you’ll have everyone talk about you,” he suggested next.

“Why on Earth would I want anyone to talk about me making out with some random guy?”

“Not some random guy,” he protested, trying to sound insulted. “Everyone here knows who I am.”

“Now you’re just making it worse,” she admitted, finishing her drink.

He exhaled loudly through his nose. “We’ll split the money. How does 50 bucks sound?”

“Like they’re not worth the trouble.”

“Okay, what do you want?”

Claire considered his words for a moment, kicking herself mentally for caving in. *Almost caving in.* She was certain she could just walk away and eventually he’d drop this nonsense. But really, it wasn’t like she had much to lose. This evening was about as entertaining as watching the paint dry.
“Just send you paperwork on time from now on,” she said wearily, like it was not worth fighting over after all.

He stared at her for a few long moments. “Really? You could have asked for almost anything, and you asked for that?”

“You know what, Mr. Grady? I think you can–”

“Oh, okay,” he interjected quickly, then took her empty glass and put it on one of the tables before drawing her closer to him and guiding them both toward the center of the room where a few couples were swaying to Eric Clapton’s More Than Words, his hand sliding easily around her.

“No funny business,” Claire added before resting one of her hands on his shoulder and allowing him to wrap his fingers around the other.

“Give me some credit,” he chuckled into her ear.

“I do, hence the warning,” she countered, somewhat unsettled by how comfortable his touch felt, how his body moved so easily with the flow of the music.

From this close, she could smell his aftershave and what probably was his cologne, and also the forest, and the sun on his skin. His heartbeat was sure and steady, his breath even, and if this whole thing had any effect on him, Claire couldn’t tell. And she prayed he didn’t notice how her own breath shortened, catching in her throat, and her body stiffened for a few long moments, until it was once again soothed by the warmth of his, and she rested her chin on his shoulder.

“Reports, and you still owe me those 50 dollars.”

“Done and done,” he assured her.

“If you step on my shoes, it’ll be way more than that,” she whispered.

“Is this what you’re thinking about now?” Owen asked quietly.

“What else am I supposed to be thinking about?”

His fingers flexed around hers, his thumb started running along the back of her hand, and she shivered slightly, and blamed fierce air-conditioning. His palms were rough and calloused against her soft skin, but so incredibly gentle, his touch feather-light and tender. Owen pulled his hand back slightly and then laced their fingers together, his other palm sliding up her back so that his fingertips could brush against her bare skin, and Claire swallowed hard.

“Well, personally I think of how this night looked like a pain in the ass only half an hour ago, and now I’m dancing with a beautiful woman.” She couldn’t see his face, but she could definitely hear his smile. “You smell nice. Like flowers and vanilla and something I can’t quite place.”

She inhaled sharply and then let it out slowly. “Patchouli.” And added, “And what did I say about–”

“Relax, Claire.” He shook his head, his hair tickling her cheek. “I just answered your question.”

Her fingers curled a little on his shoulder, siding down and around it. She allowed her eyes to flutter closed, thinking that she always loved Eric Clapton, even though he was a terrible choice for a corporate event.
“For the record,” she added softly, “I’m only doing this because I never liked Hoskins.”

“Of course,” Owen agreed easily, his breath grazing her skin as they continued to dance slowly, although she was fairly certain that they stopped moving forever ago.

“Owen?” She said.

“Owen? Not Mr. Grady? That’s a first.”

“I think the song is over,” Claire breathed out, not even bothering to mask her disappointment and blamed it entirely on the champagne that was starting to make her feel warm and fuzzy.

“There’s another one coming up,” he assured her just as Wonderful Tonight started to play, bringing their hands up to his mouth and kissing her fingers, and she pretended she didn’t notice because that way she wouldn’t have to do anything about it – like pull away and end this moment.

“Honestly, why the paperwork?” Owen asked her a little while later. “Out of everything else…”

“It felt safe,” she responded without really thinking.

“As opposed to what?” This time he actually stopped, and she lifted her head, suddenly finding herself literally nose to nose with him, their faces not even an inch apart. On her back, his hand felt warm and steady, and her throat went dry. “What did you really want, Claire?”

Her gaze dropped down and lingered on his lips for a few seconds before shifting back up to his eyes. The lights were somewhat dimmed, but she could still feel the intensity of his gaze that felt almost as palpable as his touch, making her want to start running and not stop until there were thousands of miles between them. Just in case.

“I think I need another drink,” she replied, which came out in a whoosh of breath. “And then I think I need to go home.”

She stepped back, and his arms dropped down. Around them, people kept dancing and talking and laughing, but to Claire the room felt empty.

“Claire…” he started, his face bearing no sign of his earlier teasing.

She gave him a weak smile. “It was nice doing business with you, Mr. Grady.” It almost sounded like a joke. Her voice almost didn’t quiver.

By the time Owen managed to make it through the crowd, she was gone.

—

The knock on the door came just as Claire managed to finally start drifting off to sleep, her mind too wired and awake. Like she had too much coffee, except she didn’t. And for a few moments, she thought that this sound was a part of the dream. Except the knocking didn’t stop.

“Owen?” She frowned, swinging the door open and finding him on the other side, his jacket unbuttoned and his tie loosened. His hair was slightly damp and smelling of rain, curling at the nape on his neck, and she thought absently that the weather forecast was right for once. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m not going to send you a single report until you tell me what it was that you wanted to ask in return,” he said in a low, hoarse voice, his eyes boring into hers like he was trying to see in them everything she didn’t know how to put into words. Frankly, he looked just as confused as she felt,
and it was both reassuring and unsettling.

Claire shifted form foot to foot, then licked her lips, her heart tripping over itself and then sprinting into a wild race. And maybe she did have a glass of champagne too many. And maybe she needed sleep. And maybe this was a dream…

She stepped toward him, grabbing him by his shirt and pulling herself up on her toes to brush her lips against his, the enormity of what she’d done landing on her like a punch the moment their mouths pressed to one another. But when she started to pull away, one of his arms snaked around her, holding her against his chest while his other hand cupped the back on her head, his fingers getting tangled in her hair. He tasted faintly of alcohol, although she knew he wasn’t even tipsy, and rain, and need, and something that made her weak in her knees.

“You’re a good dancer,” Claire murmured when Owen pulled back, panting, his lips seemingly unable to stop toughing lightly to her temple, her forehead, her cheeks.

“I like your jammies,” he returned the compliment, making her laugh breathily.

“I wanted to ask for a second date,” she looked up, her lips digging into her lower lips.

“Oh, come on! I wore a suit. We danced. We had sex.” He summed up the fun parts of the night. “Sounds like a date to me. And technically, it was a second and a third date.” His eyebrows wiggled at her.

She drew back and propped herself up on the elbow, trying to see as much of his face in the faint light. “Was it also a part of your bet? Is this what I am?”

“What?” He frowned, his forehead creasing. For a moment or two he wasn’t even sure he heard her right it sounded so absurd. “Jesus, Claire. Of course, not. C’mere,” he pulled her close again, wrapping his arm around her, and kissed her hair. “I would never… What kind of assholes have you dated before?”

She rubbed her nose against his collarbone. “The regular kind, I guess.”

He ran his index finger along her cheek, sliding it under her chin and turning her face up to his. His lips touched hers, kissing her slowly and deeply and until they were both breathless again, and she buried her face into his neck.

“You’re not a bet,” Owen repeated quietly. “You’re so much more.”

She sighed with mock pity. “You really aren’t as smooth as you think you are.”
“I’m good at many other things,” he promised her.

“Really?” Claire pressed a long, hot kiss to his neck, her mouth curving into a smile. “Snow me?”

When Owen pulled up to his bungalow the next morning, Barry was sitting on the porch steps, his elbows resting on his knees. His brows crawled all the way up his forehead when Owen climbed out of his car, his tie stuffed carelessly into the pocket of his jacket.

“What are you doing here?” Owen asked, squinting in the sun. “Something happened?”

“You didn’t come to work,” Barry snorted and gave him a pointed once-over, not hiding his amusement. “I thought you fell into a pool with the Mosasaurus.”

“Not even close.”

“So, we owe you a hundred then?” Barry drawled meaningfully.

“Keep it,” Owen shook his head, grinning. “I think I’ve got something much more important.”
Dancing In The Rain

Chapter Summary

A types of kisses prompt request by the lovely Millie: 'heated kisses with gasps in between, hands tugging at clothes and exploring skin, bodies pressed close, giving in.'

+ OTP prompt request by anon: Imagine your OTP walking home after going to dinner on a rainy night. Bonus: They don’t have an umbrella, so they’re foolishly running through the rain. Person A is grumpy about the weather at first, but Person B loves the rain and is giggling as they run through, and Person A eventually finds themselves smiling at Person B’s childish behavior. Bonus 2: One or both of them end up sick the next day, and they stay together cuddling in bed.

Chapter Notes

Again, fluff alert! Plus NSFW ;)

“I’m not saying they’re safe, Claire. I’m saying they’re not what people think they are,” Owen insisted. He paid their bill and then rose up to his feet and followed her toward the exit, his hand resting habitually on the small of her back. “Velociraptors are crazy smart, they learn very fast. And when they don’t follow my commands, it’s because they don’t want to – it’s called personality – not because they don’t understand what I’m asking of them.”

“So, what you’re saying is that they can make a good attraction?” Claire raised her eyebrows, glancing over her shoulder at him, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, her green eyes sparkling.

“I’m saying they were not meant to be an attraction, and I’d rather they stayed that way,” he countered, nodding a goodbye to the maître d’ who had seated them earlier, and making sure to drop his hand from Claire’s back lest the guy notice it.

(“Do you not want to be seen with me because I’m not cool enough?” He’d asked her a while back, kissing his way up her back, one vertebrae at a time, smiling whenever her breath would shorten under his touch.

“That, and your taste in music. I wouldn’t be caught dead with someone who is this much into country,” Claire murmured, a smile in her voice. She rolled onto her back and pulled him toward her until her was stretched alongside her and she could brush her lips to his shoulder, his collarbone, his chest, her mind foggy and her body mellow, pleasantly tired. “If anyone knew, they’d start talking.”

“Does it really matter?” He pushed her bangs away from her forehead, his fingertips running down her cheek.

“No, it doesn’t.” She shook her head and turned her face into his touch, pressing a kiss to the palm
of his hand. “I just don’t want it. Not for me, and certainly not for you.” Her hand trailed down his chest, eyes locked with his, silently willing him to understand. “I don’t want to be a free reality TV show for the whole park, Owen. I don’t want anyone to think that I roped you into all of this because I’m your supervisor, or that you get any special treatment.”

“But I do get special treatment,” his eyebrows wiggled suggestively at her, and she rolled her eyes, trying to fight off a smile. With limited success. “Okay,” he agreed easily, pecking her lightly on the mouth, and then deepening the kiss when she responded to it eagerly. “Whatever you want. I guess we’ll just have to keep all the cool stuff between us.”

Unfortunately, keeping the fact that they were a they under covers also meant that going out – as in, leaving the house – together proved being a bit of a challenge.

There were a few lovely places in the employees’ area of the island, tucked away from the prying eyes of the tourists that tended to bring hustle and noise with them wherever they went, but Claire insisted that showing up there together would be like shouting about their relationship from the rooftops. Which Owen didn’t mind doing, not even a little. But he didn’t protest when she offered to go to a Mexican place on Main Street instead. It was mostly frequented by the guests of the park, but even if someone working in Jurassic World spotted the two of them there, it wouldn’t be as big a deal as if they’d showed up in a bar Claire wouldn’t normally set her foot in.

“They need to be self-sufficient, Owen,” she continued in that smooth, breezy voice that implied she’d probably replayed this conversation in her mind a hundred times already, weighing all pros and cons. “The funding—”

“I know, I know.” He interlaced their fingers together when they were out of line of sight of the other staff and patrons of the restaurant and brought them up to his lips to kiss the back of her hand. “Why don’t you come over to the paddock this week? I’ll introduce you properly to the girls.”

Claire laughed as she pushed the door open and cool evening air rushed into the foyer. “And they’ll do their tricks for me?” She asked.

“Commands. They follow commands, they don’t do tricks,” Owen almost groaned with feigned exasperation. “It’s not a circus—”

He cut off when they stepped out and faced a wall of a heavy rain falling from the pitch-black sky while the faint peals of thunder echoed in the mountains – something they had missed entirely inside the restaurant, surrounded by music and chatter and the clinking of the silverware on plates.

“Where did that come from?” Claire wondered under her breath, extending her arm, palm facing up, to catch the raindrops.

Owen eyed his Triumph sitting by the sidewall under the cover of several heavy trees the branches of which formed a semblance of a canopy. “Well, that’s unfortunate.”

Claire stepped forward, her lips curved into a soft smile. “It’s just rain.”

“I’m not sure you understand how bikes work,” he hummed.

“I can’t believe you don’t like rain,” she teased him.

“Not exactly my point…” he sighed, his own mouth stretching into a smile when she turned her face up to the sky and closed her eyes, allowing the heavy drops to wash over her skin, sliding down her shoulders and arms, clinging to her eyelashes and tangling in her wavy hair.
She made a couple more steps and then turned around to look at him again, her knee-long satin skirt and light sleeveless blouse clinging to her skin, her face luminous. Main Street was mostly deserted at this late hour and in this weather, the shops long closed for the night, and only a handful of cafes were still illuminating the sidewalks with the light streaming through their windows. And standing in the middle of the empty road, in the pale light of streetlamps, Claire looked like she was floating in a cloud of sparkles, her skin glowing, her smile brighter than the sun.

“Come on, Mr. Grady, where’s your sense of adventure?” She cocked an eyebrow at him. A challenge. A dare.

“Warm and dry, watching *The Amazing Race*?” He suggested but followed her into the rain anyway, actually enjoying the temperature drop – a much needed relief from thick humidity that held them captive for a couple of weeks now.

In a matter of seconds, his hair was plastered to his scalp, his pants sticking to his thighs and the water dripping into the unbuttoned collar of his shirt. He let out a short whoop of delight, surprising them both, and shook his head like a dog, sending droplets of water flying everywhere - all to no avail. Claire kicked off her strappy sandals, picked them up and then, barefoot, threw her arms out and span in place, her head tilted back and her eyes wide open. From this angle, it didn’t feel like the rain was falling down on her. No, it felt like she was flying through the Universe at the speed of light, the stars flashing past her in a crazy kaleidoscope, yellow and green and purple, catching the grimmer of the neon signs and fairy lights stretched along the facades.

Feather-light and elated, she laughed, feeling something big and bright and warm blossoming in her chest, and for a moment it seemed like she could push away from the ground and soar into the sky.

Owen’s hand, warm against her cool clothes, slipped around her waist, and she stopped, allowing her arms to drop down, and then gathered some rainwater in her palm and squirmed it in his face when he leaned down to kiss her, giggling at his half-shocked, half-hurt expression.

“Oh, you’re so in for it,” Owen warmed her, and she easily slipped out of his grasp, walking backwards away from him, a mischievous smile never leaving her face, let lower lip caught between her teeth in that coy manner that made him want to start kissing her and never stop.

“In for what?” She inquired with a curious tilt of her head, and then easily stepped to the side when he made an attempt to charge at her, trying to take a grab of her, her feet splashing the puddle water around.

Except he was smarter than that, and faster, too, and the next thing she knew, one of Owen’s arms was wrapped tightly around her, pressing her flush against his chest. He ran his index finger up her bare arm, brushing away the raindrops, his eyes locked with hers, until his hand traveled all the way up to her face and cupped her cheek - his skin so hot against hers she wondered if his blood was made of liquid fire.

She drew one of her arms away, holding her shoes behind her back, and buried the fingers of her other hand into his wet hair, tugging his head down until his mouth was pressed to hers, hot and demanding. A low groan formed in the back of Owen’s throat, making her smile against his lips. He tasted of that one shot of tequila he allowed himself at dinner, thinking he might need to be alert enough to drive, and chocolate mousse they split for dessert, and rain, and her heart sprinted forward, thumping loudly against her ribcage, dimming her awareness.

Even though the hotel further down the road was lit up like a Christmas tree, and there were the sounds of muffled conversations and cheery music coming from one of the cafes, it felt like they were the only people in the whole world.
“You’re such a dork,” Owen chuckled softly, peppering her face with small, slow kisses, capturing the rainwater from her skin.

“You’re such a dork,” Owen chuckled softly, peppering her face with small, slow kisses, capturing the rainwater from her skin.

“You place or mine?” Claire whispered into his ear, nuzzling his stubbled cheek.

“You’s closer,” he told her.

“You’s more fun,” she countered.

“You sure you’re up to walking 2 miles in the mud?”

He started steering them toward the hotel where she was living in one of the executive suites at the top floor – a ginormous apartment that could house three of his bungalows. Something Claire never seemed to even really notice, based on how often she preferred to spend the night at his place. His arms locked firmly around her so she wouldn’t trip while walking backwards.

“I think I’m getting a hang of it,” she assured him, stretching up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“I’m not sure I can wait that long,” he said in a low, hoarse voice as they skidded to a halt under the next streetlamp and his eyes, dark and wanting, bore into hers.

Her fingers unclenching around the straps of her sandals and they fell to the pavement with the soft thud muted by the rusting of the rain, her arms winding around his neck. “Mine it is, then.”

By the time they made it to Claire’s place, the rain grew even stronger, turning into a vicious downpour. The wind picked up as well, throwing gashes of water against the windows, bending the trees almost in half and howling in the hills.

Inside, her apartment was dark, illuminated by nothing but rapid flashes of lightning flickering behind the floor-to-ceiling windows, but when she reached for the light switch, Owen caught her hand and drew her toward him instead.

“How about we get you out of these wet clothes, Ms. Dearing, before you ended up with pneumonia?” He suggested, his gaze locked with hers as he kissed her fingers one at a time.

She dropped her wet sandals on the floor by the door and allowed her eyes to roam around his face, half obscured by the shadows, until they shifted to his lips. “Hm,” she nodded slowly, “and I think we could both use a hot shower, too.”

He let go of her hand, choosing to busy his hands with unbuttoning her blouse instead while his lips found hers once again, his tongue slipping into her mouth while Claire tugged at his shirt, ripping half the buttons off, and they scattered all over the floor to the sound of her quiet laughter. She pushed his shirt down his shoulders, desperate to reach his skin, feel it under her palms, both of them equally frustrated when its rolled-up sleeves got stuck at his wrists, and then Owen straightened up for as long as it was needed to pull off his undershirt and toss it aside.

Claire started backing away from him slowly, trying to bite down her smile and working on the remaining buttons of her blouse until he caught up with her in two swift strides, pinning her to the living room wall, his mouth latching onto hers and stealing her breath away. His skin was so hot she thought the water dripping from her wet hair would sizzle on his arms. Thought she was going to evaporate altogether. He removed her blouse while she struggled impatiently with the buckle of his belt, gasping when his found the clasp of her bra and getting rid of it promptly, his hand
cupping her breast and making her forget how to think.

“You know, this is the best date we ever had,” Owen muttered breathlessly, wondering if she’d kill him if he simply tore her skirt off, and Claire let out a low, throaty laugh.

“And it’s not even over yet,” she murmured.

The small shower cubicle in her bathroom was full of steam, the hot stream of water beating down on their flushed bodies.

“Where’d you get that?” Claire asked quietly, kissing a long thin scar on his shoulder, her fingers roaming over his chest and the flat plane of his stomach, reading him like a map.

“Barbwire,” Owen breathed out, trying hard to stay focused and failing miserably, more than eager to allow her to explore as much of him as she wanted.

“And this?” Her mouth grazed against another scar on his chest – two pale parallel lines almost faded with time.

“Delta,” he snorted. “Not sure if she wanted to hug me or rip my heart out.”

Claire smiled, stretching up to brush her lips to his jaw. “And this one?” Her fingers skimmed lightly over a round one just below his right collarbone.

“Stray bullet.”

She paused and pulled back to look at him, her smile fading. And it struck Owen that in their occasional talks about their lives before the park, he never quite told her what the NAVY was really like.

“Owen…”

“Hey,” he framed her face with his hands, a corner of his mouth lifting, forming into a half-smile. “It was a small one.”

Her fingers curled around his wrists, the struggle crossing her face in waves as she tried to process and shelve this new information. To him, it all seemed like a joke now, something that happened so long ago it felt like another lifetime, but frankly, if she told him she’d once fallen into a bear den, he’d probably have a hard time brushing it off as well.

So he dipped his head and captured her lips with his before she spoke or asked any more questions, choosing to give her something else to think about.

Just like that, the switch flipped, the mood shifting from playful and comforting to needy, the earlier heat that subsided somewhat while they were focused on the actual shower stuff sparked alive with a new intensity, and Claire’s fingers dug deeper into his skin, her back arching so she could press closer to his chest, pulling him down toward her. Owen helped her here, sipping her hands under her thighs and hoisting her up instead until her back was pressed against the cool tiled wall and her long legs wrapped around his hips.

He swallowed her gasp with her mouth, stilling for a moment to marvel in the sensation of filling her, and then he trailed his mouth along her cheek and buried his face in her neck, his forehead pressed to her pulse point that hammered like a rapid staccato against his skin as they settled into a comfortable rhythm of feeling alive…
“You know, you were right,” she admitted to him later, when he carefully set her down again, thinking that the only reason she hadn’t collapsed to the floor was because she was literally trapped between the wall and Owen’s body, one of his arms hooked firmly around her waist. He kissed her again, slowly this time, smiling. “It is our best date.”

“This is the worst date ever,” Claire declared the next morning, staring at the small digital screen of her thermometer and wondering how it didn’t melt while sitting in her mouth.

“It was your fault, you know,” Owen noted from his spot on the couch, his eyes fever-bright and his cheeks flushed. “Whose idea was it to run around in the rain?”

She scowled at him, but said nothing seeing as how there nothing to say. She hated it when he was right and he seemed to be enjoying it way too much for her liking.

They both woke up with runny noses and scratchy throats, feeling like their bodies had been run over by a bus, and not in a fun way. She had to call Zara and tell her she’d be taking a day off, and Owen dialed Barry as soon as he located his phone in a pile of their clothes on the floor to explain roughly the same thing to him, saying he’d be checking in with him later to get an update on the training that Barry was supposed to take over for the day. And then he parked himself on the couch, only moving to make tea for himself and Claire or to grab a spare blanket from her closet.

“This is ridiculous,” she shook her head. “I don’t get sick, Owen.”

“Because you’re not human?” He inquired, tugging her closer to him and under the blanket until she settled against him, pushing her hair out of her face.

She let out a short huff. “Because I’ve got—”

“Stuff to do, I know.” He finished for her. “Come on, it’s not like you can will it away.” Arm wrapped around her, he rubbed her back and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Just… have a break.”

“So much for secrecy,” she muttered, thinking of how Zara would have to come over to get her to sign something or another, and by the end of the day everyone in a ten-mile radius would know that she was sleeping with Owen Grady. Not that she didn’t trust Zara to keep it to herself, but someone would find out, and… Well, it wasn’t like she was going to kick him out when he could barely walk in a straight line. Not that she wanted to, either.

Claire glanced up and then pressed the back of her fingers to his forehead. “Well, you’re officially a hot guy all over,” she observed.

He arched an eyebrow at her. “You think I’m hot?”

“You honestly needed me to say that out loud?” She snorted, and he tipped her chin up kiss her lightly. “What are doing?” She pulled back.

“Hoping your germs with kill mine,” he explained enthusiastically.

“Oh, well, in that case…” Smiling, she pecked him on the lips again, and then once more, before curling against him, her cheek resting on his shoulder.

Owen smoothed her hair, tucking a few loose strands behind her ear. Without her usual morning ritual to straighten it, it was falling down her cheeks in soft waves, and there was only so much he
could do to stop himself from carding his fingers through it over and over again.

“Hey, can I ask you something? You know Barry, right?” Claire hummed in agreement, and he went on, “He’s having a small get-together next week, for his birthday. And I know it’s against your rules and all that, but you would like to go with me?”

She rubbed her cheek against his soft sweatshirt and then tucked her face into his neck, her hand finding his under the blanket and squeezing his fingers. “I’d really like that.”
“How does one get stung by a bee on the back?” Owen asked, incredulous.

“How does one get stung by a bee on the back?” Owen asked, incredulous.

“First of all, it’s a shoulder blade,” Claire pointed out. “And second of all, I didn’t ask for it.”

Wrapped in a bath towel (because “I’m not getting naked, Owen! What if someone comes in?” — “If someone walks in and finds you in my house, they wouldn’t really care if you’re naked or not, trust me.”), she was sitting sideways on the couch with her back turned to him, her face contorted into a grimace of pain and her teeth digging into her lower lip until she couldn’t bear it.

“Well, first of all, that’s just semantics,” he countered. “And second of all, the jury’s still out on this one. For all I know, you pissed off that bee.”

She glared at him, or tried to through a wince, her fingers flexing around the fistfuls of her towel.

This day was total crap so far. Her morning alarm didn’t go off. When she finally scrambled out of bed, half an hour late for her morning meeting, she found her pre-programmed coffee machine not working, which was the ultimate sucker punch.

She didn’t have time to swing by Starbucks on her way to the office, but she did have time to twist her ankle when the heel of her shoe got caught in the crack in the sidewalk. The investors were irritated and uncompromising, asking her the questions she didn’t have answers to. But how do you know this attraction will succeed? Can you guarantee it’ll make profit in the first three months? What about six? Do you have a backup plan for if it doesn’t? Not answers they wanted, at least.

By four in the afternoon, Claire was ready to stick her head in a shredder.

But when she took her visitors on a tour around the paddocks open for public and then felt a sharp burning sensation in her back only to realize she must have not noticed a bee that somehow found its way in her car, it was the last straw.

She called Zara to have her finish the tour, and then drove to Owen’s knowing he would be at home — either done for the day, or on a break before the evening feeding.

And frankly, if someone did walk into the bungalow right now and saw her there, she would legitimately bite their head off. Which would actually work nicely with her plan to keep their relationship under wraps for the time being. The last thing she needed was the whole park buzzing
about them after she all but promised to feed Owen to the T-Rex a time or two.

“Are you allergic?” Owen asked her meanwhile.

“I don’t think so,” Claire shook her head, her eyes burning. She exhaled sharply, tasting blood in her mouth, and fixed her gaze on the *Casablanca* poster on the wall for distraction.

“Good.” He squeezed her shoulder lightly. “I need to get the stinger out, and you’ll be good as new, okay?”

“Okay,” she breathed out. “God, it hurts.”

“I know, baby.” He brushed a quick kiss to her hair, his breath ticking her neck. “Just a couple more minutes, and it’ll be better.”

His hands were warm and sure on her skin, and so very gentle, and Claire sucked in her breath and squeezed her eyes shut as he worked his magic, removing the stinger and rubbing a disinfected on the sore spot. His fingers danced lightly over her skin, moving swiftly and delicately, making her shiver.

Frankly, if anyone told her a while ago that this man would treat her like the most precious thing in existence, she’d laugh them in the face and call them a lunatic. And yet here she was, four months into whatever this was, feeling more wanted than she’d ever before. The world truly was full of wonders.

“I’m sorry to have… barged in here like this,” she muttered quietly.

He paused for a heartbeat, his own breath shortening, and even though Claire couldn’t see his face, she could oh so clearly imagine the slight crease between his eyebrows.

“I told you, you can just bring your stuff here and never leave, for all I care.” His voice was low, barely a whisper.

She swallowed uncomfortably. “It’s too fast.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first thirty times you said that,” he noted wistfully.

“Owen…”

“It’s cool. I told you it’s cool.” He assured her. “We’ll do it at your pace.” And then, “How’s it now?”

“Better,” she admitted, noting that the burning started to fade away. “It was a…. long day, and I needed…” He voice trailed off. Needed to see him, feel him, needed to know that the world hadn’t gone entirely mad. Although the very fact that she was running to Owen Grady for comfort was a clear sign of that, as far as she was concerned.

“S’okay.” He reached from behind to brush her hair from her cheek, tuck a few wisps behind her ear. “I know.” She glanced at him over her shoulder, her palms brushing the tears from her cheeks – honesty, the beers should be coming with a major pain warning - the corners of her lips lifting at the sight of his warm ocean-blue eyes. “I’m glad you came.”

His fingertips trailed up her bare back, making her take in a shuddered breath, his eyebrows lifting at the sound of it and his grin growing wider by the second. God, she hated it that he had this much power over her. And also loved it more than anything in the world.
Owen wiped away the tear lingering in the corner of her eye. “Stay here a sec.”

He pulled a pack of frozen beans from the freezer, trying not to think of how it got there, and most importantly when, and wrapped it in a towel. Then found a bottle of Tylenol from the cupboard over the sink and grabbed it as well, along with a glass of water. Claire swallowed two pills obediently upon his instruction, honestly willing to jump through fire hoops if it was necessary to make the pain go away. And then she stiffened when he pressed the bean bundle to her skin.

“It’s cold.”

“Kinda the point.” Owen placed his hand on her waist to keep her still. “It’ll reduce the swelling, make it hurt less, too.” And then, “I can’t stand seeing you cry,” he added in a thick voice.

“I’m fine,” Claire assured him. “Honestly.”

“Having a punctured lung hurt. But this?” He pressed a long kiss to the nape of her neck, then to her shoulder, his hand running up her arm. “This is unbearable.”

“Mm, that does make it much better actually,” Claire murmured with a small smile.

“Will you stay?” He asked against her skin.

“Can’t. I have a dinner with Mr. Masrani to discuss his latest project,” she admitted, her voice full of disappointment, which made him smirk.

“Come back afterwards?” He suggested.

“Maybe,” she agreed, finally starting to allow herself to relax, the pulsating pain in her left shoulder blade finally subsiding to a dull throb that wasn’t making her want to rip her skin off anymore. His hand dropped, and she turned around. “Could you drive me back to the park?”

He lifted her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips, making Claire wish she could call Simon and cancel whatever they had on the docket and spend the rest of the afternoon in his bed, getting creative in the fun way.

“Sure thing. You wanna get dressed or…?” Eyebrows raised in appreciation, Owen gave her a contemplative once-over. “I’ve got to admit, it’s a very nice look on you.”

She rolled her eyes and swatted him off, unable to fight off a smile. “Later,” she promised, stealing another quick kiss.

Owen grabbed her hand as they drove back to the park, his other one resting leisurely on the steering wheel. His thumb ran over the back of her hand, fingers toying with hers as he stared at the mud road, snaking through the forest.

“You okay?” He asked, weaving his fingers through hers.

“Yeah, I think that Tylenol has finally kicked in.”

“Look, Claire, jokes aside, I know I’m not exactly a catch with my 60 hours a week job and a house that doesn’t have air conditioning. And I just… I just don’t want you to feel pressured into–”

“Don’t,” she stopped him, squeezing his hand. “It’s not that. It’s… it’s new, and…” She sighed, her thumb stroking his knuckles. “I’ve never been good with that stuff. Relationships. I’m used to be in control, but it’s not what I want with you, and it’s… scary.” She admitted if a little unwillingly.
“Guess I need to keep my security blanket for a little while longer.”

Owen glanced at her quickly as they pulled into the staff parking lot. He found an empty spot and then turned off the engine before looking at Claire who was now staring straight ahead, chewing on her bottom lip.

“I only asked because half of your stuff is already living in my drawers,” he said lightly, bringing the knot of their hands up to his mouth and kissing the back of hers. “And you’re staying over most of the nights, too.”

She turned to him. “I know. And I need you to know it’s not about air-conditioning. If I needed that, I’d be seeing someone from Finance. Have you seen their apartments?”

“Nope. Have you?” He gave her a pointed look.

Claire leaned over to him and pressed her lips to his cheek. “Thank you. For everything,” she whispered. “Especially for your first aid skills.”

But when she started to pull away, Owen turned his head and captured her mouth with his, kissing her deeply until she could taste the sun, her fingers tangled in the hair on the back of his head. Until her heart was hammering away in her throat and the whole world seemed to come to a standstill around them.

“Take care,” he murmured when she pulled back. “Don’t let anything bite you. That’s my job.”

She trailed her fingers down his cheek. “Is that a promise, Mr. Grady?”

“You bet,” he chuckled and wiggled his eyebrows at her for goo measure.

“And, Owen?” She looked away for a moment, and then met his eyes again, her lips curved into a soft smile. “Not now doesn’t mean never.”
“Why does anyone have to be naked?”

Chapter Summary

Well, the title says it all, really xD

Chapter Notes

This is one of my fave fics i’ve ever written, even though it’s kinda short and lacks any plot. I seem to be on a roll with the secret relationship stuff lately, so bear with me please. Also, fair warning - it’s just mostly a lot of naked Owen because I’m quite fond of the idea of naked Owen. Totally not sorry!

“You’ll just have to stay. What’s the big deal?” Owen called back from the kitchen.

Sitting cross-legged on his bed with the sheet pulled up to her chest and her hair tousled in that suggestive way that put a smug smile on his face not so long ago, which made her cheeks grow hot, Claire glared in the general direction of the door.

“It’s not… a deal,” she huffed. “I just… I’ve got… things to do.”

“Well, I’m your things now,” he appeared in the doorway with a glass of water sporting nothing but a shit-eating grin, and she rolled her eyes despite the fact that it was a really good look on him; the one worthy of proper appreciation. “Seriously, you’re not going anywhere in this weather.” Owen jerked his chin toward the dark window behind which the storm was raging.

Howling wind was throwing angry rain at the windowpanes, making them rattle in the frames. She knew that the roads between the bungalow and the resort were nothing but rivers of mud now, and she was more likely to end up in the ditch than to make it back to the Hilton in one piece. If she’d even manage to make it to her car without drowning, that is. Not that she didn’t see it coming when she drove here, but she had her hopes.

“They can manage without you for a few hours,” Owen added, sensing her hesitation. He put the glass down on the dresser and leaned his shoulder against the door-frame, his arms folded over his broad chest. “And I can’t.”

They were smack in the middle of the rainy season. The park was half-empty – the animals didn’t seem to care one bit about the weather, but the tourists, as it turned out, preferred to spend their time elsewhere rather than traipsing around the sopping wet island on the off chance to maybe spot a dinosaur. She could probably take some time off and not show up for work for a week, and no one would even notice. Also, he was quite certain he could effectively keep her mind off the low figures on her profit sheets or whatever it was she was stressing about this time of the year. That was definitely something to look forward to.

“I know they can,” Claire attempted to glower at him, but only half-succeeded, a small smile betraying her best intentions. In the soft light of the reading lamp on the nightstand, he looked…
god, so good she had no words for it. She pushed her hair back from her face and tipped her chin up. “It’s not the point.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “You don’t actually think we’ll get bored here, do you? I mean, if we do, we could always play strip poker.” She wrinkled her nose at that. “Or strip chess,” he added, trying to class it up, and receiving a look in response. “Strip Monopoly?”

“Why does anyone have to be naked?”

Owen sauntered over to the bed and plopped down in front of her; propped himself up on the elbow and kissed her bare shoulder. “’Cause the last time I checked, it was the best part about, you know, everything,” he said in that low, husky voice that made her skin prickle with goosebumps, and not because of the drafts. “Tell me it’s not.”

Not really bothering to hold back her smile, Claire leaned over to brush her mouth against his. “My mom taught me not to lie,” she whispered, and then pulled away, her eyebrows knitted together. “Strip Monopoly? Seriously?”

“You can get creative with this one,” he assured her, and she snorted, her gaze almost involuntarily trailing over the whole length of his body.

Pleasantly sore and relaxed, his muscles gooey and his bones seemingly nonexistence, Owen stretched on his stomach and looked fondly at her with that mischievous glint in his eye which was both a promise and a dare. Or maybe a little bit of both. If it were up to him, he wouldn’t let her out of his bedroom for the next decade, finding new ways to get her to say his name in the ways that were making his blood pump faster.

She reached for his hand, lacing their fingers together, his skin so much darker than hers from spending most of his time outside. More rough and callused, too, and scarred in a few places. She’d never have imagined how gentle his touch could be, Claire thought as her thumb ran over his knuckles.

“You might have to remind me the rules. I’m a bit rusty. It’s been a while.”

Owen pushed himself up on his elbows, his grin widening by the second until he was beaming at her with the intensity of the sun. “I’m sure we’ll figure it out.” His voice dropped. “Really, Claire. Just… don’t go, okay?”

“I didn’t know we were at the sleepover stage yet.”

He scoffed. “A stage? Is it something from your mental checklist that you need to get to? Date 1 – bring an itinerary.” She tried to swat him off, but he ignored her promptly and went on. “Dates 3 through 145 – hot sex. Date 146 – sleepover.”

She wiggled out of his grasp and fell on her back, throwing her arms over her eyes. “Will you drop it already?”

“You threw away my board shorts,” he reminded her solemnly. “I’m still emotionally traumatized. And you want me to just forget about your itinerary?”

She peeked at him from under her forearms. “We haven’t been on 145 dates yet.”

“My bad,” he deadpanned. “I must’ve been courting the times we–”

“Oh, shut up.” Her cheeks burning, Claire tried to kick him in whatever she could reach, but her
foot got tangled in the sheets, making him laugh. He freed it though and kissed the inside of her ankle, his eyes locked on hers. “Did anyone ever tell you you’re awfully full of yourself, Mr. Grady?”

“Only you,” he tickled the sole of her foot and the pulled it away from him, unable to suppress a giggle. “Which shows how underappreciated I am.”

She let out a long breath, her smile slipping off. “You sure it’s okay? I mean…. God, Owen.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, then sat up again, her hair even more disheveled and her face scrunched with concern.

“You said that already,” he reminded her pointedly and reached out to smooth down her crazy red mane, tracing his index finger from her cheekbone down to her chin. “In a different context, but still.” She wasn’t buying it though, and he sighed. “Look, I’m not going to let you drive in the storm, regardless of your stages or whatnot. Even if I have to bodily restrain you from leaving.”

Her lips tugged up at the corners. “I’m sure you’d like that.”

“And I want you to stay,” he added quietly, the teasing gone from his eyes, replaced by the unmasked need, the very one that got her to drop her guards down a few months ago, ultimately leading them to this point in their… whatever the hell this was. The one thing that was making her feel like she was walking on clouds. What was she thinking? Granted, half of the time she wasn’t doing it at all. “I like the idea of having you here when I wake up.” He dropped another kiss on her shoulder, trailing his lips along it and up her neck as his breath tickled her skin. “Of making pancakes together. Do you like pancakes?”

“Hm,” she muttered noncommittally, kissing him fully on the mouth, her arms weaving around his neck and pulling him over her while his hands started to work on unwrapping her from the cocoon of sheets.

He pecked her on the nose, his muscles rippling under her fingertips while his palms skimmed along her ribs. “With whipped cream.”

Claire laughed, nuzzling his cheek. “I don’t trust you around whipped cream.”

Owen’s eyebrows climbed up to his hairline, and she carded her hands through his comically messy bedhead. “Why?” He inquired, genuinely curious.

“Because the last time whipped cream was involved, I was 2 hours late for work and had to wash it out of my hair later,” she reminded him.

He chuckled, a low rumble in his chest that reverberated through her body, making her heart beat faster. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

She pulled him to her again just as a flash of lightning flooded the room with shivery hues, followed by the peal of thunder than made the whole structure shake, filling her with sudden exhilaration. “I did not say that.”
Hey folks, I have a few prompts I never got to post here, so I'll try to get on with it :)

Owen’s father was a man of a few words. Growing up, Owen never ceased to be amazed by how much he could convey with a grunt, or a nod, or a frown. And to this day, he still didn’t know if his father valued the words so much he considered throwing them around for no reason sacrilegious, or if he truly had nothing to say.

All the more was he shocked when he joined the NAVY and discovered that the men talked. Actually talked. About women, and sports, and weather, and politics, and how sick they were of having the exact same stuff on the breakfast menu, they whined about the drills and the sergeants and commented shamelessly on the female personal at the boot camp. In fact, his mother’s chatty friends that often filled the house with noise and laughter had nothing on his platoon buddies who could chew on the same subject for hours on end.

Naturally, it was no surprise that his Jurassic World coworkers turned out being no better than that. Cooped up with one another on the island that wasn’t nearly big enough to stay interesting for long, they were hungry for gossip and conversations about everything that wasn’t dinosaur shit and menial labour.

“That Megan from the Petting Zoo’s got a nice rack,” Owen would often catch when heading someplace or the other during his day at the paddock.

“I hear Simon Masrani is bathing in champagne and sleeps on heaps of money,” a handler would scoff.

“Have you heard they hired a new chick for the evening Mosasaurus show?” Someone would ask, and get a burst of laughter in response.

“If the Cubs lose again, I’m out.”

“This heat is shit!”

“Wouldn’t hurt ‘em to make the female personnel uniforms skimpier.”

And so on, and so forth.

Owen would usually chuckle under his breath and continue with his business. He wondered sometimes if he was predestined to not be interested in this pointless pastime that everyone thrived on, or if it was a matter of habit. Back in the day, he could sometimes be working side by side with his father for hours and not exchange two words with him, neither of them ever questioning it, the concept of sharing opinions just for the hell of filling the silence alien to both them.

“You alright, man?” Barry would ask him absently now and then during their outings if Owen’s contribution to the conversation would come down to nodding and laughing at the other peoples jokes, or ordering a round of beer for everyone at the table.
“Never better,” he would raise his bottle and take a drink from it, more content about standing on the sidelines than running amidst the crowd.

Most of the time, he was amused.

Until he wasn’t.

“…like a fucking queen,” Owen heard Hoskins snort while he stood with a bunch of other men one afternoon.

The in-between time was slow sometimes. Between the feedings or training sessions or the visits from the resort. Owen would normally busy himself with cleaning or doing the paperwork while everyone else took one smoke break after another.

“Whatcha think, Owen?” Hoskins ask, noticing him.

“About that?” Owen squinted in the sun and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

“That Dearing bitch prancing around the park like she owns the place,” Hoskins sneered, and a couple of guys chuckled. “Bossing everyone left and right.”

Owen froze, the blood rushing to his head, hammering in his ears. He had never thought that being enraged enough to start seeing red was anything but a metaphor, and yet here he was, looking at the world colored in shades of crimson.

“I think you should mind your own business,” he said through his teeth, his fists balling of their own volition.

“Relax, buddy. She doesn’t need you to be her Prince Charming,” Hoskins laughed like it was the funniest joke in the world. “No one who’s ever got the job by spreading their legs does.”

“Dunno,” one of the handlers – Dan, was it? – noted as he puffed out a cloud of cigarette smoke. “That dude from Marketing, Greg or something, asked her out and she turned him down.”

“He’s from Finance,” another man added someone uncertainly. “But whatever.”

“So, she’s frigid, too,” Hoskins observed, enjoying himself.

“Owen, don’t,” Barry said quietly, moving to stand beside him.

Owen ignored him though, his gaze trained on the laughing faces. He narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw, willing himself to walk the hell away before it was too late.

Of fucking course Claire turned that guy down! She and Owen were… well, going out. Sort of. As long as going out meant actually staying indoors most of the time, not that either of them minded that particular technicality. He knew how she felt about this kind of talk behind her back. He knew how hurt she was by people assuming all kinds of shit about her while she was just trying to do her job – which she got by clawing her way up the corporate ladder at Masrani Global for the past decade. He fucking knew how upset she was about being judged for something that would’ve been praised in a man.

And none of the people who never even talked to her had any right to say any of that about her. People who had no idea how funny and smart and kind she was. People who didn’t know that she never said a single bad word about anyone. Not on a personal level at least.
“Well, she may be frigid,” Hoskins continued, “but she’s still one hot piece of cake. Which I wouldn’t mind sinking my teeth into.”

Another round of laughter followed.

“Don’t talk about her like that,” Owen said in a low, flat voice that was laced with rage so thick he could barely hold it back.

“Relax, Owen,” Hoskins waved him off dismissively, slapping him on the shoulder like it was no big deal. “I mean, who would mind doing that? Maybe she just needs someone to show her a really good—”

He didn’t get to finish his thought because the next moment Owen shrugged off Barry’s hand, and before any of them knew what was happening, Hoskins staggered backwards, a fountain of blood gushing out of his nose onto the packed dirt at his feet.

He yelped and doubled over in pain, his hands instinctively reaching for his face and his eyes started to water.

“I said, cut it out,” Owen repeated quietly, his chest heaving like he’d just ran a mile, his fists flexing.

And somehow, his vision cleared by the second.

“The fuck was that?” Hoskins forced through his teeth.

No one around them moved, uncertain of which side to take, or if there even were sides.

“I don’t know what your problem is, Hoskins,” Owen pointed a finger at him. “But if you ever speak of her in any way, I’ll break more than your nose.”

At that, Hoskins sneered, his face splattered with blood contorted into a grimace. “I see. You and her, huh? Well, you two…”

“I mean it. Shut the hell up.”

“Owen,” Barry said again just as the sound of approaching car cut through the still air of the hot afternoon, and they all turned to see Claire’s Mercedes appear from around the bend in the road and pull up in the shade of the trees.

The doors opened, and she and Simon Masrani climbed out, still in the middle of a conversation.

“Shit,” Hoskins muttered.

“I’ll take care of him,” Barry shook his head, darting a quick warning look at Owen, none of them bothering to check up on the rest of the crowd that started to disperse immediately. “Go talk to her before the word gets out.”

“Thanks,” Owen breathed out, finally noticing that his hand was throbbing, and yet unable not to feel relieved at the sight of Claire dressed in pale green blouse and pencil skirt heading his way, a small smile spreading across her face as the wind tossed around her hair, making it look like fiery halo.

—

“You want to tell me what happened?” Claire asked as her fingers gently dabbed his scabbed
knuckles with a cotton ball soaked in antiseptic while they sat in front of each other with her knees jammed between his.

The small office near the paddock used mostly for storing their snacks and unfinished paper work was dark and stuffy, the fan over their heads utterly useless for anything but chasing the dust around. But it was still nice to be there with her, even though she was frowning and scolding him like he was a five year old who stole cookies from the pantry.

“Not really,” Owen admitted, wincing a little at the burning sensation.

If he did, she’d probably rip Hoskins’s head off, and it wasn’t that Owen cared about his head, but she would be upset, too, and the last thing he wanted to do was give Hoskins the satisfaction of knocking the ground from under her feet. He didn’t want this whole fight to become public knowledge and turn into the news of the week. Didn’t want even more people talk about how Owen Grady punched Vic Hoskins for calling his girlfriend ‘a cold bitch’. And hey, did you know that he was sleeping with Claire Dearing all along? Maybe this is why his useless program gets funding even though it makes no profit? I bet she’s good in bed, the redheads are known to be fierce.

Owen glanced at her, at the soft bow of her lips and the stubborn set of her jaw, something big and warm blossoming in his chest, spreading all over his body.

God, he would kill anyone with his bare hands for hurting her. How could anyone look at her and not see all that light was beyond him. Were they blind?

“I might need more than that if he files a complaint,” Claire pointed out.

“He won’t.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “What makes you so sure?”

“Because then he’d have to tell what happened,” he scoffed.

Claire tossed the cotton ball into the trash and screw the cap back on the antiseptic bottle. And then she sighed, grabbing his hand with both of hers and eyeing him with reproach, her forehead creased with concern.

“Look…”

“It’s fine.” Owen promised quickly, tucking her hair behind her ear.

She brought his hand up and kissed his fingers, his bruised knuckles. “I just don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I’m not, I swear.” He smiled, searching her face and thinking how much he missed her even though it had only been six hours since the last time he saw her. “Hoskins was being a dick and he deserved it–”

“Owen…”

“But it won’t happen again.”

She still didn’t seem convinced, so he leaned forward and kissed her, bumping his nose against hers until he could feel her smile. She let go of his hand and he buried his fingers into her hair, suddenly very aware of their very uncomfortable position, and also knowing that if he dared to pull
her into his lap now, they wouldn’t get out of this room anytime soon. And they were both, technically, at work, her boss not even a hundred feet away on the other side of the door. Which was a bummer.

Claire brushed her palms up his thighs and clutched his shirt.

“I’ll see you tonight, right?” He murmured between the kisses.

“I don’t know, Mr. Grady. What do you have in mind?”

Owen tipped her chin up. “You. All of you.”

Her gaze shifted lazily to his lips. “Well, in that case…. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Deal.” He beamed. “Now, where were we…”

When Simon Masrani got his report and made a brief tour along the catwalks while the animals chased each other in the cage below, and Claire finally took him back to the resort, Barry caught up with Owen on the way back up to feed the raptors.

“Nice lipstick, man,” he noted without batting an eyelash.

Owen grinned and ran the back of his hand over his mouth. “Shut up.”
Chapter Summary

Clawen prompt where Owen and Claire are at Karen’s for Christmas and Claire is jetlagged from the flight to Madison that she falls asleep on Owen. Karen takes that moment to talk to Owen about Claire and he tells her how much he loves Claire and how’s he’s gonna propose soon. Plot twist- Claire is actually awake to hear all of that.

Chapter Notes

Ugh, I love me some sappy stuff!

I honestly hope I didn’t destroy this wonderful idea, although I think I tried. So… It’s all there, except the proposal part because it’s one of the things I don’t write, but I hope it’s still working. Also, Christmas is the best and it needs to happen more often.

“Didn’t know you were scared of flying,” Owen noted as their plane started a slow ascend, the landing stripe growing thinned with every passing moment, the hangars surrounding the airport starting to resemble those houses used for the Christmas displays every store had in their front windows at this time of the year.

Claire was sitting by the window, her gaze intense on the ground below, as she chewed nervously on her lower lip.

“I’m not,” she responded absently without looking at him, a concerned crease between her brows.

“You’re gonna leave dents in the armrest,” he noted, and she let go off it. “It’s just a weekend, Claire.”

“I know, I know.”

The ground was so far below them now it looked like a crazy chessboard with its uneven shapes of different colors, the fields and the roads making it look like a patched quilt.

“Is it me, then?” Owen inquired.

Claire finally turned to him, her lips curving into a small smile. “Believe it or not, but you’re going to be the most normal thing in this while situation.”

“Now, that’s a scary thought,” he scoffed.

She chewed on her lip some more, and then let out a long sigh. “It’s been a while since we had a family Christmas. About 8 years now. I mean, Thanksgiving through Easter used to be the busiest time at the park, I couldn’t take any time off, and…” She shrugged in that You know what I’m talking about way. “And you know how the last Christmas went.”
He took her hand and weaved his fingers through hers, feeling her relax momentarily. “It’s going to be fine. Realistically speaking, what’s the worst thing that can happen?”

“We might not want to see each other for 8 more years,” she responded seriously and he laughed, and then kissed the back of her hand just as the Fasten the seatbelts sign went out and the cabin crew started serving the refreshments.

‘Odd’ didn’t even begin to cover it, Claire had to admit this much. It would be her first family holiday without her parents, or Scott’s side of the family, for that matter. The first one since her new life began, too – she didn’t count the last Christmas because it was spent in a haze of questioning and interviews and trying to figure out if there even was a way out of the Jurassic World disaster, or if she was going to sink along with it.

She’d lie to herself if she didn’t admit that she was still ridden with guilt over nearly getting her nephews killed. Over not staying in touch and neglecting her family for the sake of the career that wasn’t worth a dime in the end. Over being selfish.

Guilty and scared.

Scared of losing Owen because what they were having was so big and wonderful it never seemed real, even less so now that she was actually thinking about it. Mainly because they never talked about it. It just happened, and both of them chose to just roll with it. Not that Claire minded that part, but her desire to put a label on their situation and stuff it into a mental box where it would be safe and comfortable to ponder was enormous.

How did all this come from a Christmas trip to Wisconsin she had no idea.

“Told you they’d be happier to see you than me,” she joked quietly a few hours later when Gray barreled into Owen with an excited yelp and sprang immediately into dumping all of the news of the past few months on him without even taking a breath.

And it hadn’t really been that long. Karen brought both boys to California in August before the end of their summer break, and all five of them went to Disneyland and Universal Studios – which was the only time the grown-ups were forgotten entirely because they couldn’t measure up to the awesomeness of the amusement parks.

“That’s ‘cause I had to peel him off you the last time,” Owen countered as Karen herded them all out. “Whoa!” He shivered when a gust of chilly wind hit him in the face.

“Welcome to winter, southern boy,” Claire smirked. “Did I not mention it’s the real deal here?”

“Oh, well,” he threw his arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m sure we’ll find a way to keep warm.”

The rest of the day was a blur.

It was nice, Claire thought as the familiar streets slid past her outside the fogged up window while the guys were laughing about something in the backseat. She tuned them out, feeling a long-forgotten pang in the pit of her stomach – the memories of something she couldn’t quite put her finger on. The past lurking around every corner, waiting for her to recognize it. It was nice, but she was glad it wasn’t her life anymore, although she also couldn’t blame Karen for choosing it for her family.
They unpacked quickly in the guest room and piled their presents under the tree so huge Claire assumed Karen had to teleport it into the house seeing as how no doors appeared to be big enough to carry it through. And then Karen ushered the guys into the backyard while she and Claire added the final touches to the Christmas meal.

“Thanks,” Karen said as they were finishing the dishes while the kitchen filled with the smell of an apple pie. “For making it here.”

“Of course,” Claire smiled. “I’m glad you called, you know.”

“It’s not the same, without mom and dad,” her sister added wistfully.

“As long as you don’t burn anything, mom would be happy - wherever she is,” Claire added, earning a slap with a kitchen towel on the arm.

“When was the last time you cooked something that wasn’t a microwavable dinner?”

“I… make coffee. And toast,” she retorted defensively, making Karen snort.

“This is nice.” They both looked out the window and at the blur of three parka-clad bodies running around. “Ever since Scott moved to New York, they’ve… well, I guess they need a father figure. Or a male figure, or whatever. It’s tough to be a good and a bad cop at once sometimes.” Karen’s lips curled into a grin. “Plus, it’s good that the adults outnumber kids. It’s been a while since that happened in that house.”

Claire looked outside again, spotting Owen who was now lying on his back in a snowdrift. “Yeah, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” She rolled her eyes pointedly, fighting but failing to bite back a smile at the sight of his face through the window glazed with frost, his laughter carried all the way to her by the wind.

After the dinner and the obligatory viewing of Christmas Story, Gray was sent off to bed, which he accepted with more enthusiasm than Claire would imagine in a 12-year old. Then again, he was too eager to open the presents in the morning to argue. Zach headed off soon afterwards, saying that It’s A Wonderful Life that Karen turned on next was boring. And Claire, tired from the sleepless night full of needless worries and jet-lagged on top of that, nodded off halfway through the movie, curled against Owen on the sofa.

“Claire…” Karen started, reached for her from the armchair.

“No, it’s okay,” Owen shook his head, and then picked her up effortlessly, smiling to himself when she muttered something unintelligible and tucked her face in the crook of his neck. “Guess it’s our cue.”

“Not a bad idea, actually,” Karen agreed, stifling a yawn.

She turned off the TV and then the lights, leaving only the Christmas tree on, and followed Owen into the hallway and up the stairs, heading to her own room.

“So, you and Claire, huh?” She asked.

“Guess so,” he responded.

“Is it serious?”

He hesitated for a moment. “It really is, actually.” They both paused in the upstairs hallway.
“Claire is the best thing that ever happened to me, and I’m crazy about her,” he added as Karen’s eyebrows arched. “I’d be a moron to ever let her slip through my fingers.”

“She’s been hurt before,” she added if a little hesitantly.

“I know. And I want to find those people and bury them alive, not add my name to that list,” he assured her earnestly. “Look, I know you don’t know me very well, but, as far as Claire is concerned, the only thing that I want is to spend the rest of my life making her happy.”

“You do know that if you ever make her cry, I’ll have to kill you, right?” Karen asked, only half joking.

Owen let out a short laugh. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good night, Mr. Grady.” She patted him on the shoulder and turned right as he went straight down the corridor.

In the guest bedroom, Owen lowered Claire on the bed and pulled a comforter over her, choosing not to wake her up to change, before turning off the light and slipping under it as well. As the mattress dipped under his weight, Claire rolled onto her other side and into him. She let out a long breath and relaxed into his body, and Owen wrapped an arm around her, his fingers threading slowly through her hair as the snow kept falling outside the window, making him feel like his whole day was magical.

“Best thing, huh?” Claire muttered without opening her eyes, startling him a little, a smile in her voice.

“You were supposed to be asleep,” Owen whispered as he continued to stroke her hair.

“You were supposed to tell me that before you said it to my sister,” she countered.

“It was a secret.” He pressed his lips to her forehead.

“What kind of secret?”

“A big one,” he chuckled.

“Smartass,” she poked him in the ribs, and then turned up her face and brushed her lips against his.

“Told ya it’d be a nice trip,” Owen brushed her hair from her face.

She swallowed as her eyes searched his face in near complete darkness. “Did you mean it?”

“No, I was spewing out the first words that came to my mind,” he hummed, and shook his head.

“Of course, I meant it. And since you haven’t kicked me to the curb yet, I must be doing something right.”

“A few things,” she agreed, resting her head on his shoulder again.

“Claire?” He called after a few moments.

“Mm?” She snuggled closer to him.

“I would never hurt you.” Owen breathed out.

“I know.”
“And not just because your sister is scary.”

She snorted. “I know.”

Finally, he allowed his eyes to drift shut. “You really are the best.”
Shut up, I’m a delight!

Chapter Notes

Just good old fluff!

Shut up, I’m a delight!

“It’s just a party, Claire,” Owen pointed out in that reasonable voice she hated so much, mainly because it didn’t suit him, and the reversal of their roles was always throwing her off-balance.

She was the logical and mature one, and he was the one with the collectible Pokémon cards, a person who played Mario Kart for hours on end and loved nothing more than to tinker with his bike. And every time he sounded rational, Claire couldn’t help but feel like she was Alice who fell into a rabbit hole and ended up in some alternate universe. And she didn’t like it.

“Besides, you don’t even like that stuff,” Owen added as her pout deepened. Curled in the armchair with her knees pulled up to her chest, she huffed at the absurdity of his words – mostly just for the sake of it, not because she honestly disagreed. “You don’t like people.”

“I like people!” She protested heatedly, and then, quieter, “Well, most people.”

He laughed. “You have a funny way of showing it.”

Claire crossed her arms over her chest. “Shut up, I’m a delight!”

Owen crouched down in front of her and reached for her hands, brushing light kisses to her fingers. “Yes, you are. But no one knows it.”

“Except you,” she sighed.

He grinned at her. “Except me.”

“But why are you invited and I’m not?” She dropped her head in her hands.

“Because no one knows that we’re together.” And there it was again, the goddamned logic. She scowled at him. “And because you don’t work with those people?” He suggested. “I mean, they don’t know you. The real you.” He tucked a few wisps of hair behind her ear.

Of course, they didn’t. Claire’s teeth dug into her bottom lip. It wasn’t like she could parade her relationship with Owen in front of everyone. Her job description clearly stated that the personal relationships with her subordinates were strongly discouraged, and even though Claire wasn’t sure how far the management would go if they found out about her and Owen, she wasn’t all too keen to test it.

She doubted they’d get fired – it wasn’t like the people with her experience and expertise were lining up to take over her position to run a park packed with dinosaurs, and the last time she checked, raptor behaviorist wasn’t on just about anyone’s resume. But she liked things the way they were. She liked having Owen all to herself. She liked knowing that when she walked into the Control Room after lunch, the new gossip on everyone’s tongues wasn’t about her. She liked
keeping her private life private. Although the word Owen preferred was paranoid.

“They hate me,” she breathed out.

“No one hates you, baby,” Owen leaned forward and pecked her on the lips, smiling when she smiled a little. “You wanna come with me? Like a plus one or something?”

She scolded him. “You know I can’t.”

“Okay,” he cleared his throat. “But… can I go?”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Far be it from me to stop you.”

“Is that a yes?”

“You can do whatever you want, Owen. You’re a grown man.” Yeah, right. The Pokémon cards. “Sort of.”

He studied her expression for a while and then sighed. “I wish you came with a manual.” And Claire smacked him lightly on the shoulder. “Scooch over,” Owen instructed, and, ignoring her protests, squeezed next to her into the armchair until Claire was basically in his lap, his arms locked around her, their faces on the same level. He smoothed down her hair and traced his fingertips along her cheek. “Work with me here, Claire, okay?”

She wrapped her arms around him, her fingers playing with the hair at the nape of his neck, and rubbed her nose against his. “It’s a birthday party. Of course, I don’t mind if you went, I’m not… god, I’m not… I’m not an asshole.”

Owen’s grin widened. The woman didn’t know how to curse, and whenever it actually happened – the Claire Dearing version of not being a polite private school girl that she was – it was adorable.

“Where’d you learn that?” He inquired.

“You’re an awful influence,” she admitted with mock resignation, and he kissed her properly, his tongue tracing along her lips before slipping into her mouth as his hand cupped the back of her head.

“You really are a delight, Ms. Dearing,” he said between the kisses. “Tell you what, I won’t stay long, and then we’ll have a private party afterwards – just you and me.”

“Keep talking,” she murmured.

“I actually have a better idea.”

The phone call came at 3 in the morning, brutally yanking Claire out of her blissful sleep. On instinct, she buried her face deeper into the pillow, thinking she was still dreaming, until eventually the high-pitched shrill became impossible to ignore.

“Owen?” She said groggily and rubbed her eyes. “Do you have any idea what time it is?” And then she jolted up, wide awake. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN STITCHES?!”

It took Claire ten minutes to drive from the bungalow to the resort and two more to find a parking spot near the first aid station, surprisingly alight and buzzing at this time of the night.
“Nice jammies, honey,” Owen said when she burst into the examination room.

He was sitting on one of the metal tables, sporting a black eye and a cut over his left eyebrow. An on-call medic was currently working on someone whose face she couldn’t see while Barry stood leaning against the windowsill, pressing a pack of ice to the back of his head. They all turned to her – the third man appearing to be Alec, Zara’s fiancé – and all of a sudden Claire became very much aware of the fact that she was dressed in pajama shorts and Owen’s t-shirt that shrunk during the wash enough to not hang on her like a dress, although its original ownership was quite obvious nonetheless. Add tennis shoes and a raging bedhead to that for good measure, and it was just enough for her to want to sink though the white tiled floor.

“What the hell happened?” Claire demanded, swiping the room with a quick glance until her eyes fixed on Owen again. She marched over to him, trying to ignore the curious looks of Barry and Alec, grateful that the medic returned to doing his job and wasn’t gawking at her anymore.

“Nothing,” Owen winced.

“You said stitches,” she hissed, throwing her arms in the air. “Jesus, Owen! Do you have any idea how you scared me? I thought you were stabbed or something… Were you?”

She gave him a long apprehensive look, wrinkling her nose a little. He reeked of beer, although she was fairly certain she had a large stain on the front of his shirt to blame for it, appearing mostly unharmed otherwise.

“No,” his eyes darted quickly toward Barry who was choking on laughter and trying to cover it with a coughing fit, with limited success. “Just a disagreement.”

“Meaning, you got in a bar fight,” she huffed, tilting his chin this way and that to survey the damage, her other hand resting on his chest.

And it was only now that Claire realized how badly she was shaking, her legs cottony and barely able to support her weight.

Owen’s hand landed on top of hers, soft and warm, his gaze holding her together somehow. “It was a very small fight. And we won.”

“I can see that,” Claire sighed, glancing quickly at the bump on the back of Barry’s head and Alec’s split lip. “You look awful,” she accused Owen, turning her hand and lacing her fingers through his.

“And you look pretty damn nice,” he responded promptly, kissing the back of her hand.

“Owen…” She started with mild panic in her wide eyes.

“I think they know,” he whispered.

“Oh, what the hell,” Claire muttered after a moment and threw her arms around his neck, pulling herself up on her tiptoes to press closer to his chest. “You scared me.”

“Shhh,” he brushed a kiss to her temple. “Let’s get out of here.”

She pulled back, allowed her fingers to skim over his face. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Never better,” he promised.
After Claire made sure that no one was seriously hurt or needed any help beyond the first aid station – in case they need to be sent to the mainland – and after Owen asked Barry if he needed a right and received a definite no, they finally found themselves in her car.

“What happened?” She asked as Owen slumped in the passenger seat and let out a long, weary sigh.

He offered her a small grimace of a smile. “Pool game gone wrong,” he admitted not without a hint of embarrassment in his voice.

“Figures…”

Through the windshield, they watched Zara rush toward the entrance on the first aid station, her face bearing the same half-fearful, half-outraged expression Claire walked in there with not so long ago.

“Claire…”

“I just–” She pushed her hair back from her face. “What were you thinking calling me like that and saying you needed stitches?!”

“Are you mad?”

“Of course, I’m mad. And I hate the smell of beer,” she rolled her eyes, even though she had to dig her teeth into her lower lip to stop it from trembling.

“No, are you mad that we’re not a secret anymore?”

He watched her face in the dark car illuminated only by the streetlights running around the plaza. Her shoulders sagged and she leaned back in her seat.

“No,” she shook her head after a short pause. “I’d very much prefer the whole park to not talk tomorrow about how I sleep in your clothes. Or about how I’m spending the nights at your place, for that matter. Or about… anything.” She took his hand, her thumb running over his knuckles. “But it’s okay. As long as you’re okay.”

Owen leaned over toward her and kissed her softly. “Let’s go home.”
Neighbor, neighbor...

Chapter Summary

OTP fic prompt: 'some asshole switched our flat numbers so your mail keeps getting delivered to me, sometimes i read it i’m so sorry you get very interesting mail'.

“You have got to stop stealing my mail,” Owen walked into Claire’s apartment without knocking to find her sitting at the kitchen table with her usual morning cup of coffee, flipping through a magazine.

*His* magazine.

She glanced up at him, an eyebrow arched. “It's not stealing if I found it in my hallway,” she told him, unfazed. “And what *is* that?” Her perfectly manicure finger pointed at a stack of envelopes in his hand.

“You bills, I assume,” he tossed the whole pile onto the counter and picked up a clean cup from the rack, filling it to the brim as she watched him with quiet amusement. “Unlike *some* people,” he made a dramatic pause, making Claire roll her eyes, “I don’t know for sure because I don’t go through *their* personal stuff.”

He plopped down across the table from her and pulled the plate with her half-finished sandwich closer.

It had happened several times this month already – someone kept switching the numbers on their doors, and she kept finding his stuff on her doormat instead of her catalogues. This was getting infuriating, really. Except it was the closest thing to a variety in her life right now, and Claire had no intention to pass it up.

“Not my fault your mail is actually interesting,” she protested defensively. “I mean… *National Geographic* I get. *Gun & Ammo*… I don’t, but it makes sense. But *Hauntings of America*?” She waved the printed edition featuring a poorly photoshopped nearly transparent shadow hovering over the lawn in front of an abandoned house before his face. “Seriously?”

Owen snatched it from her. “It’s educational,” he pointed out, chewing, all rightful indignation.

“In case the zombies attack?” She snorted.

“You don’t know they won’t!”

“Actually, it’s the one thing I do know,” she countered.

“You’d only know that for sure if you were one of them.” His eyes narrowed. “*Are* you?”

“Stop stealing my coffee and my food, and you’ll never have to find out.”

Claire plucked the remains of her sandwich from him and made a grab for his cup, but he saw it coming and shifted it into another hand. Her fingers closed around his instead, his eyes growing dark momentarily.
Of all the things Claire Dearing regretted in her life – and the list wasn’t a short one – cancelling
the lease on her apartment in downtown San Diego after her contract with Masrani got renewed for
8 more years a little while back definitely was somewhere in the Top 5. Right after never stopping
the creation of a homicidal hybrid, but definitely before every single thing she’d done on her prom
night.

In her defense, she honestly believed she was going to spend most of that time on the island, and
paying the rent for the place she maybe used for 2 weeks a year didn’t seem wise. She couldn’t
sublet it because it wasn’t hers to begin with, and she couldn’t actually live there because her
presence on the island was required at all times. Back then, she figured that if she were to relocate
back to the States, she’d have a decent notice period and would simply ask someone at the HQ to
find another condo for her.

It was not how it worked out after the I-Rex massacre on Isla Nublar though.

First of all, she was too busy fending off the attack of the press and the lawyers and the families of
the deceased to care. Apparently, once you allowed something big and scary actually eat people,
dodging the whys and the hows was bound to become your full time job. And then it turned out
that when a few thousand people suddenly come back to town at once, the real estate market
wasn’t able to accommodate them all.

In the end, she allowed Masrani Global to stick her and a bunch of other employees in the same
apartment complex co-owned by the company. Yes, she could definitely do better than that, and
she kept promising to herself to find something more high-end than a place terrorized by a 7-year
old, but for now, she was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth – for as long as the company
was paying for this place – and focus on something else.

Something like - what the actually hell was going on between her and Owen.

Not that there seemed to be an answer here.

“Nice try,” he cleared his throat when the moment started to stretch, and she let go off him quickly,
although without breaking the eye contact.

“And stop walking in here like you own the place,” she continued. “I gave you the key for
emergencies.”

How on earth she ended up being his next-door neighbour was beyond Claire, but if she were
completely honest with herself, it was nice. It was nice to have someone who knew exactly how
she felt living mere ten feet away. In the two months they’d been staying here, he taught her the
basic Morse code to talk through the wall between their bedrooms.

Except, that was it. From the moment their plane touched the ground, they went from Sticking
together to dancing around this whole issue and pretending that nothing happened on the island.

He punched someone who called her a cold-hearted bitch during a press conference, and she had to
bandage his fist afterwards. He listened to her testimony the night before the hearing, and he sat in
the gallery while she was reciting it again in front of the judge. He brought her a bottle of wine the
same evening but refused to share it, scurrying back to his place after half a glass. He once spent a
night on her couch when she was having a particularly bad time, but was gone before she even
woke up the next morning. He was walking into her place like it was his own and shamelessly
ravaging her pantry until Claire felt like she was living in a dorm again but other than that, he acted
like they were good friends and nothing more. He was smiling and supportive, and apparently very
much allergic to her proximity, seeing as how he kept going out of his way to keep at least a few
feet between them all times.

Owen Grady was the one person she trusted the most when she couldn’t trust anyone, the one person who could calm down the storms raging inside of her, the one person who made sense when nothing else did. And she had no idea what the hell he wanted. She was looking at him, and couldn’t read him, and it was driving her insane.

Almost as much as the notion that her was subscribed to *Hauntings of America*.

“"It was an emergency,” Owen continued meanwhile, taking big gulps from his cup, “I was fresh out of coffee.”

“What if I were indecent?”

He beamed at her, his smiled brighter than the sun, and about just as blinding. “That’s exactly what I hope for, every time.”

She leveled him with a glare, ignoring the fact that her heartbeat escalated by the second and the color rose up her cheeks.

“It must be that kid from down the hall.”

“Huh?”

“The person who’s switching up the numbers on our doors. Will you keep up please?”

“Can’t. You’re changing the subjects too fast. From the naked you to… what was it, again? Can we go back to that indecent part?”

“Grow up,” she scoffed.

“Mmmn, the mental images…”

She smacked him on the arm with a rolled up magazine, then got up, collected their cups and plates and carried them to the sink despite Owen’s protests about not being finished yet.

“How do you know it’s that kid?” He asked when she started the water.

“Deduction, Sherlock.” Claire rinsed the dishes, then dried her hands on the kitchen towel and tossed it at him. Silently, Owen caught it and wiped the stuff she just washed. “It’s either him, or the stoner from 7B, and he seems to have his hobbies sorted out.”

“But if you know it’s him…”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I ever saw him do it,” she puffed her cheeks out. “Right now I’m just happy you’re not into *Busty Ladies* or something else that would make my eyes bleed.”

Owen chuckled. “*Busty Ladies* are coming in next week.”

“You’re impossible.”

He scrunched his face. “Is that a step up or a step down from *unbearable*?”

“When did I say that?”

“Last week. Twice.”
She smirked. “Must’ve been thinking out loud.”

“Hey, you wanna…” He started, and she cocked an eyebrow at him. “The guys are going out for some drinks tonight. Lowery will be there, with that girl he’s seeing. And Barry. Some other people, too. If you wanna join…” He trailed off, and she just stared at him for a long moment.

This was almost hilarious, really. Of course, there’d be Barry, and Lowery, and 50 other people she didn’t really know. Strength in numbers was what Owen was calling it jokingly, or half-jokingly. Their support group for people who didn’t know what to make of their new lives. Which was great.

But it still made her feel stupid because she kept reading more into it than he’d obviously meant every time he’d ask her if she wanted to hang out, and then it inevitably made her feel guilty and ashamed for being annoyed with people who, unlike her, didn’t want to barricade themselves in their houses for the next decade.

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass,” she responded in that way that was supposed to sound condescending, like Me, in a bar? Don’t be absurd! and not hurt. She was being an idiot and it wasn’t his fault. “I think I’ll switch the numbers back and try to catch whoever is behind this evil scheme.”

“Sounds exciting. Need some company?” He leaned against the counter next to her.

“I thought you were going out.”

“No, I said the guys were going out and you were welcome to tag along,” he corrected her.

She crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head to the side. “I wouldn’t want you to miss all the fun on my account.”

Owen hummed, “You want my help or not?”

The corners of her mouth lifted. “I certainly do want to make sure I’ll never have to find Busty Ladies in my apartment, under any circumstances.”

He grinned.

—

“You know, for someone who’s supposed to be good at strategic thinking, you’re… not very good at it,” Claire observed that night while they were sitting on the floor in her hallway, backs pressed against the door and legs outstretched in front of them, their hips touching and their elbows brushing against each other now and then.

“I’m excellent,” Owen protested, sounding insulted to no end. In the dark – so that no one would see a strip of light under her door, he told her earlier – his face was illuminated only by the glow of the digital clock on her microwave perched on the counter above them, giving him an odd, ethereal look. “It’s gonna work.”

“And how, exactly?” She sighed.

“It always happens at night, right? Never during the day. So…” he glanced meaningfully at her, “we’ll have to sit here quietly and wait for him to show up.”

It was a bang up plan. As far as sitting in the dark went, they were doing great! In just about every other department, it felt like a monumental waste of time.
“Uh-huh, and how long you suggest we do it?”

“As long as it takes.” He replied with confidence. “Why? You have anything better to do?”

“Well, I’ve got to go to work on Monday…..” She started.

“You just want to suck the fun out of everything, don’t you?” He sighed dramatically, and Claire nudged him with her elbow. “Hey, at least we have this!” Owen shook a candy bag in front of her face.

“I don’t eat that stuff,” Claire pointed out scornfully, wrinkling her nose.

“That’s why it’s a trail mix,” he explained. “You can have all the boring stuff, and I’ll get the goodies.”

He scooped a handful of Smarties and Skittles into his mouth and started chewing with gusto.

“Charming,” Claire commented dryly.

They’d been sitting here for nearly an hour now, and she was starting to see the flaws in his oh so brilliant plan. For one thing, she had no idea the suspect was going to show up tonight. She was starting to get sleepy in the dark. And, quite frankly, she could think of about 20 other things she could be doing instead of sitting on the floor in the hallway, bothered by the proximity of Owen Grady who somehow managed to not treat her like she had a plague for once. The very same Owen who seemed to be enjoying himself more than anyone else would in this situation.

“What’s the deal with Hauntings Of America?” Claire asked after a little while when the sound of her own thoughts got too loud.

“Huh?” He looked up from his candy and blinked, confused.

“Last time it happened, with the mail, I found, like, the whole collection of… what was it, Shrek comic books?”

He gaped at her, horrified and insulted. “Green Lantern, Claire! It was Green Lantern, a classic ruined by the adaptations. I had to preserve it in its purest form – you know, paper copies.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” she pointed out.

He shrugged and offered her that crooked smile that always gave him a mischievous, boyish look. “I’ve always wanted to be a Ghostbuster. Haven’t you?”

“Not to the point of chasing the ‘real’,” she accentuated real with air quotes, “ghosts.”

“Geez, what were you into as a kid? Accounting for pre-schoolers?”

“Shut up,” she grumbled. “For your information…”

“What?” He prompted when she fell silent.

Claire let out a long breath. “I don’t get you, Owen. You’ve been to war, yet you’re like a 5-year old on a sugar rush most of the time. You train dinosaurs and collect comic books, but you’re incapable of not burning a toast.” She paused. “And you’re sitting on the floor in my apartment on a Saturday night even though–”

“Even though what?”
“Why are you here?”

“It’s fun,” he said simply, at eyebrow arched, daring her to object, but Claire just shook her head and let out a short laugh. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t think you ever wanted to get me.”

And there they were again, to the flirting-slash-bickering that tended to make her feel like she’d run head first into a brick wall.

“I didn’t think it through, obviously.”

She reached into his snack bag, their fingers brushing, and in the dark, it was so easy to imagine that she heard his sharp inhale that made her heart beat faster. From this close, she could feel the heat of his body, smell the aftershave on his skin, and had it been just little bit brighter, there’d be that dimple on his cheek that kept making her want to feel it with her fingertips, smooth it out.

“Didn’t think it through? That doesn’t sound like you. You always think 10 steps ahead,” he said quietly, watching her with that curious expression Claire never managed to figure out, a mixture of wonder and bewilderment, like she was the most interesting thing in existence. Like he wanted to uncover each and every one of her secrets.

“There’s always a first time for everything,” she deadpanned, having to bite her bottom lip to hold back a smile. “Oh, I think it’s the last one.”

She held up a green M&M.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Owen protested and tried to snatch it form her, by Claire leaned away from him and then tossed it in her mouth.

“Mmm, you were right, these are good,” she informed him around a mouthful of chocolate.

And then suddenly his palm was on her cheek and his lips were pressed to hers, sort and warm, his fingers braiding through her hair. She was caught off guard momentarily before leaning into him, her lips parting against his, tasting him – chocolate and need. Or maybe it was her. Or both of them. She couldn’t tell anymore. His tongue darted past her lips, and Claire gripped the hair at the base of his neck, a low moan forming in her throat. He smiled against her mouth, making her heart flutter like crazy in her chest.

“Holy shit,” Owen muttered, pulling away for a breath. Still smiling, he rubbed his nose against Claire’s.

“That was…” she licked her lips.

“That was my candy,” he said.

Claire looked up, trying to catch his gaze. “You kissed me.”

“Well, you kissed me back.”

“Why would you do that?”

“You had my candy,” he repeated. Her eye grew wide, and he added quickly, his fingers tracing along her cheek, “And because I wanted to do it since the day I met you. Wanted to do it every single minute of my life since the time we first kissed, on that day.”

She swallowed, hard. In the dark, his eyes seemed to be gleaming like embers, and it wasn’t easy to
hold his gaze, and pretty damn impossible to look away. “Why didn’t you do it?”

“I don’t know,” he dropped his hand from her face and ran his fingers through his hair, making it stick out at odd angles. “I wanted to give you time, I guess. Didn’t want to push it. Didn’t…” he kissed her again, sweetly and slowly, his hand tangling in her hair again, “think you wanted me to.”

“Jesus, Owen,” she sighed with exasperation. “I didn’t think you were interested. You… never made a move.”

“Not interested?” He echoed, incredulous. “And the fact that I was spending every waking moment with you never clued you in?”

She snorted, smiling when he pressed his forehead to hers. “I thought you were here for the food.”

“Again – rice crackers are not food. And who’s saying ‘make a move’, anyway? I thought they only use it on TV or in, like, second grade.”

Claire found his hand, her fingers playing with his, tracing them absently with her fingertips as their lips engaged in another tender kiss, her whole body feeling warm all over, her skin prickling whenever he touched it.

“I think there’s someone,” she murmured softly, “at the door.”

“They’ll have to come back. We’re busy.”

——

The next two weeks progressed like nothing had changed.

She went to work; he went to work - or whatever passed for his work now that the whole program was scrapped – not that it was something that bothered Owen. Past the fact that he had no idea what was going on with Blue - because even though some of the cameras were still operational on the island, he didn’t have the clearance to view the footage and probably, maybe see her – and he couldn’t care less about what they were going to do next. She never pressed because he didn’t seem too eager to discuss it.

It took her two weeks to figure out that Owen maybe slept at his place once in all that time, her cupboard was now stuffed with Chips Ahoy!, and she found his jeans in her laundry hamper a few days ago. And oddly enough, it didn’t freak her out.

“I just don’t get it,” she said to him for the tenth time. Sitting on the couch in her living room with her legs stretched over his lap, she was leafing through a comic book – something she only planned to do to get him off her back, but now it was starting to suck her in, and her mind was reeling. “Why would anyone want to be called Green Lantern? What kind of superhero wants to be called a lantern?”

“You’re missing the point,” he groaned and closed his eyes in that See what I’m dealing with?! way that made her smile.

“I’m trying to find it, actually,” she countered and pulled one of her feet from his grip to poke him in a thigh with her toe. “When I hear Green Lantern, I don’t picture a guy. I picture a lamppost hopping around.”

A wounded look on his face was so comical she couldn’t help but laugh.
“You’re not even trying,” he complained.

“I like it,” she assured him, putting the new issue of whatever on the coffee table and folding her arms over her chest. “It’s no Jane Austen, but it’ll do.”

He scrunched his nose like she’d just proposed to set his prized collection on fire. “You’re no fun.”

At that, her lips curved. “That’s not what you said…” She began, and he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and plopped down alongside her, wrapping his arm around her waist just in time to stop her from toppling to the floor, his lips latching onto hers.

“Un-huh, I remember what I said,” he muttered, shifting them until Claire was half-sprawled over him and her hands slipped underneath his shirt.

A new batch of comic books arrived at her address the other day, although this time it wasn’t a mistake. And when she not so subtly asked if he was moving in, Owen just shrugged and said it was her call. She didn’t respond, just told him later that day that the socks strewn all over the house were a deal breaker, and that he could take the middle drawer if he wanted. That seemed to have settled it.

“When were you going to tell me?” Owen asked a few kisses later.

“Tell you what?” She frowned down at him.

“That you quit.”

“I didn’t. Not really.” She chewed on her lip for a few moments. “I mean, it won’t be effective until after the investigation is over. And it might take a while….” She shrugged.

“So, what’d you think you gonna do?” He inquired, running his hand along the stripe of exposed skin between the waistband of her jeans and the hem of her shirt.

“Well,” Claire smiled against his lips, “I’m going to kiss you again and we’ll see where we can take it. Then we’re going to eat PB&J sandwiches for dinner because I’m too lazy to go anywhere, and you’ll tell me more about Iron Man or whatever else that makes your life complete.”

“That doesn’t sound like a solid life plan,” he pointed out.

No, it was not. For someone with serious control issues, it was like being thrown into the ocean without a goddamn life-saver, and she had to admit that it was beyond terrifying. But she was also tired of planning ahead and aiming for having her whole life mapped out. If that were the case, she wouldn’t be here now, on a Saturday afternoon with Owen Grady stealing her every breath away. And that certainly was worth not trying to fit her life into a box and stick a label on it.

“I’ll think of it when I get there,” she shook her head as he brushed her bangs away from her forehead, tucking her hair behind her ear. “But for now, it’s enough.”
A knock on the door gave Claire a start and her heart lodged itself in her throat, making it hard to breathe. She checked the cheap digital clock on the nightstand across the room and frowned. It read 2.36 am, green digits bright in the dim light of a reading lamp.

She uncurled herself from a stiff armchair, ignoring the protest of her muscles and her blistered feet and walked slowly to the door, the carpet rough against the tender skin of her soles.

After the ferry took them back to Costa Rica, Masrani Global shoved all of the employees into a small hotel on the outskirts of town, the kind that smelled vaguely of mold and not so vaguely of fry oil and fish. Her room was barely the size of a birdcage overlooking a narrow alley. She could probably step out the window and right into the apartment across the street without much effort. Hardly a place for tourists.

After she checked in earlier in the afternoon, she scrubbed the grime and sweat and blood and about a thousand more layers of jungle off her skin in the tiny shower, standing under the blistering water until her skin was red and raw, her sunburns screaming in agony. And then she fell asleep for a few restless hours despite the heat and the music playing somewhere outside only to wake up around midnight, gasping for air, her body rigid, awash with panic.

And just like that, sleep didn’t seem like an option anymore.

It was dark but still hot, even though she couldn’t stop shivering, her shoulders and face burning. There was no lotion in the bathroom, nothing but a bar of soap and now empty bottles of shampoo and body wash. She thought of going downstairs to maybe get something from the front desk, but the idea of leaving the seemingly safe confines of her room filled her with terror.

There was nothing on the TV – this place didn’t have cable, and she was too tired to focus on understanding the programs in Spanish. She let it run on mute anyway, if only for the sake of feeling less alone.

And then, the door.

She pulled it open slowly, careful with the burns on her palm from the flare, half certain she’d dozed off and dreamed it up.

Owen was standing on the other side. Also freshly showered and with his hair sticking in every direction. He was wearing grey sweats and a t-shirt that she suspected came from the same Lost & Found bin as her shorts and tank top, courtesy of the hotel.

Claire’s stomach clenched in the unfamiliar way she couldn’t quite make sense of.

She hadn’t seen him since they got their keys downstairs hours ago, didn’t even know what room he was in, and in the time between then and now, she was too busy trying to hold it together to wonder if he was even still around, or if he took off as soon as he could. God knew nothing
would’ve surprised her.

“Hey,” she said quietly.

“Hey,” he echoed, peering into her room over her shoulder. “I, um….” He ran a hand down his face, then through his hair, desperately searching for words. “Just wanted to see how you were doing.” His voice was low and thick, and Claire detected the notes of the same panic that was coursing through her in it. “Saw the light under your door…” He trailed off.

She stepped back, pulling the door open wider, and she walked in, barefoot.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she mumbled, turning to him.

He sighed. “Yeah.” Which didn’t say much.

Owen made his way to the window and peeked outside. “You’d think they’d find a presidential suite for someone of your caliber,” he noted with a faint hint of amusement that didn’t linger.

Self-conscious all of a sudden, Claire tucked her unruly hair behind her ear. “Everything else must be packed,” she said softly and dropped her gaze to stare at the vignette pattern on the rug at her feet, her fingers clenching and unclenching slowly. Frankly, even this room seemed like too luxurious after everything she’d done – everything she’d allowed to happen – on the island.

“Claire?”

When she looked up, he was standing so close she could feel the heat radiating off of his body with her skin, her spine prickling with goosebumps. She swallowed, her throat dry. From this close and without her ever-present heels, Owen looked taller than she remembered, towering like a safe, solid mountain over her. A surge of relief washed over her, a sliver of comfort settling somewhere deep in her bones, making her slightly less unhinged and unfocused by the second.

“I’m fine,” she said, struggling not to step back away from him.

His eyebrow arched. “Are you?”

“I will be,” Claire assured him, which, she knew, sounded far less convincing than she wanted it to.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, for lack of better options. And Owen lowered himself down next to her, staring absently at the old movie on a grainy screen. She could smell body wash on him, his hair was curling slightly in humid air, and she had to clasp her hands together to keep herself from running her fingers through his, smoothing it down.

“What are we, Claire?” He asked in a whoosh of breath. “‘Cause okay doesn’t seem to be it.”

She glanced at him even though he was still staring straight ahead, and it struck her how vulnerable he looked, how lost and confused, and almost unfamiliar. So much not like the man in charge.

“We are…” She faltered. “We’re trying.”

He turned to her then, and she could all but feel him struggle to grasp what she was saying, to make sense of the words that carried little weight after what had happened. And then he nodded, slowly, as though he was only now seeing her properly for the first time, his eyes tired, mirroring her own weariness.

“You should get some rest,” Owen said after a lost pause.
Her lips twitched into a humorless smirk and she shook her head, dropping her gaze down. “I can’t even close my eyes.”

He brushed her hair away from her cheek, and she felt her skin burn where he touched it, her pulse tripping over itself. “Want me to stay with you?”

No, she thought. “Yes.”

She slipped under a thin sheet first, curling into a small ball, exhausted to her bones. Owen turned off the light and opened the curtains to allow some fresh air in, however heavy and stifling it was, and then he slid under the covers behind her, wrapping his arm around her waist and tugging her toward him. A moment of hesitation, and Claire sunk back against him, his breath grazing her skin and his heartbeat reverberating through her, a humming lullaby that calmed her mind and soothed the rough edges of the day.

And before she knew it, the sleep claimed her, deep and black and dreamless. She was finally safe.
Shattered Jar

Chapter Summary

Owen tried to find Claire's emotional side.

Chapter Notes

Prompt: "You found me crying on the kitchen floor in the middle of the night surrounded by a shattered jelly jar".

“I am not emotionally unavailable, Owen!” Claire snapped for the umpteenth time, getting her teeth together.

“You never cry at the end of Titanic,” he pointed an accusatory finger at her. “Who doesn’t cry at the end of Titanic?”

She rolled her eyes. “The movie starts with an old lady who says ‘It’s been 84 years’. It’s quite clear her boyfriend doesn’t make it. I have 2 hours to get used to the idea.”

He stared at her in utter shock for a long moment, spluttering and at a loss for words. “These two only had each other, Claire. And that piece of wood.”

“I believe it was the door,” she noted.

“Not the point. They could have easily fit on it, both of them, and spent the next 84 years together.”

“It wasn’t that they couldn’t fit on it.” Claire folded her arms over her chest, giving him a measured look. “It was that the rules of physics kept flipping it over whenever they tried.”

He glared at her, hating to admit that she was right.

It was an old argument of theirs – his getting emotional over fictional stories and her ability to cold-heartedly dissect them into parts and components, looking straight through the aspects that were making his heart clench. Someone died after catching a stray bullet? Well, maybe he shouldn’t have gotten in its way. Someone’s true love drowned before they got to save them? Well, they probably shouldn’t have jumped into the water if they couldn’t swim, should they?

Oh, Owen was very much aware she was the most sensitive person he’d ever met and had the gentlest soul in the world, and all of this was nothing but a silly banter – one of a million they engaged in on a daily basis without even realizing they were doing it. He simply couldn’t understand how she could watch someone die tragically and ask him if he wanted more pop-corn. Who did that?!

“I bet you didn’t cry when Bambi’s mom died either.” He said, having nothing else to add to the augment.
Claire threw her arms into the air. “Christ, Owen, I was 5 when I first saw that movie. I might not have completely understood the concept of death back then.” She lifted her chin triumphantly. “And most importantly, all of this is made up. I get emotional about real things.”

“You get angry,” he countered.

“When you leave your socks all over the house, yes.” She shrugged. “Who wouldn’t? Besides, you’re crying enough for us both.”

Owen dropped his face into his hands. “What is wrong with you?” He asked dramatically.

Claire pursed her lips together into a thin stubborn line and picked up her coffee cup. “I’m sorry for not wasting my feelings on something that’s not even real.”

He squinted at her. “Are you a robot?”

“You wish,” she snorted.

—

“Okay, this will make you bawl your eyes out,” Owen said the following Friday, popping *Marley and Me* disk into a DVD player, certain that he’d finally found something that would shift something inside her.

Claire plopped down onto the couch and pulled her knees to her chest, tucking her hair behind her ears. She picked up the DVD jacket, skimming the back of it as she read the synopsis, her lips puckered skeptically.

“You know, your desire to make me cry is starting to make me anxious,” she noted.

“It’s not about that,” Owen rolled his eyes and sat next to her, slipping her arm around Claire’s waist and pulling her into him. He brushed a kiss to her forehead, his hand running up and down her arm. “It’s just a movie.”

Fifteen minutes into the film, Claire grabbed a pillow and shoved it under her head before resting it in Owen’s lap, her eyes glued to the screen and a young Labrador retriever wreaking havoc on the poor couple and their home. “I’m starting to see it.”

“What?” He asked, running his fingers through her hair, enjoy its soft silkiness against his skin. “Nothing’s happening.”

“The dog is destroying their house. If I came home and found my couch shredded into spaghetti, I would’ve cried.”

“Do you even have a soul?” He inquired, chuckling.

“If I bothers you so much—” she started, all righteous indignation.

“It doesn’t,” Owen promised her, leaning down to drop a kiss into her hair. “You have a lot of other good qualities, Ms. Dearing. And skills. Let’s not forget your skills.”

Claire poked him in a thigh with her finger, but she was smiling, so Owen dropped it.

She didn’t shed a single tear.

However, that night, Owen woke up to the sound of muffled sobs coming from somewhere in the
house. At first, he thought he was dreaming, or maybe it was just the wind, but when he rolled over, reaching habitually for Claire to tuck her closer to him, seeking comfort in the warmth of her body pressed against his, her side of the bed was empty.

“Claire?”

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he tossed away the covers and climbed out of the bed, padding out of the bedroom and down the stairs, following the sound that seemingly pulled him out of his slumber in the first place, unsettled and anxious.

The light was on in the kitchen, and when he stepped inside, he found Claire sitting on the floor in his shirt she always wore to bed, surrounded by shattered glass and what he assumed was splatters of strawberry jam, her face hidden in the palms of her hands and her shoulders shaking slightly.

“Claire, baby, what happened?” Careful to avoid the glass, Owen walked over to her and crouched down beside her, pushing her hair out of her face, his eyes darting around in search of blood, relieved to spot none. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” The word came out as a shuddered sob, and he pulled her closer until her face was pressed into his chest, her tears soaking his shirt, and her arms wrapped around his torso.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” he cooed soothingly, kissing the top of Claire’s head and running his hand up and down her back, rocking her like a child until her breathing evened out and her body was no longer trembling, melted into his. “What is it? What happened?”

“I just wanted to get a glass of water,” she told him, her voice muffled and her breath hot on his neck. “And then the jar… I don’t know why it was on the counter and I just… How could they have let Marley die?”

It took him a moment or two to figure out what she was talking about, and then his lips curved and his body relaxed at last. He chuckled, pressing another kiss to her hair. “Is this what all this is about?”

“Why are you laughing?” Claire tried to pull away, sniffling, but Owen held her close, his cheek resting on her head.

“I’m not… it’s not… You just scared me, and it was all about a movie.” He sighed. “Come on, let’s go back to bed.”

He helped her up to her feet and stole a quick kiss on her mouth before he steered her toward the stairs, climbing into bed after her and telling her they’d clean up in the morning, it wouldn’t go anywhere until then. Half of his body wrapped around hers, Owen buried his face in her hair and let out a content breath.

“I’m not emotionally unavailable,” Claire whispered, clasp her hand around his wrist.

“I know, honey,” he promised her, his eyes drifting closed again.

“It just got me thinking…” She murmured.

“What?”

“The movie.” She stayed quiet for a long moment, and then she said, “There’s a chance I might be pregnant.”
“How long is 5 minutes?” Claire asked absently, pacing back and forth in front of the bedroom window, her eyes darting toward the bathroom door every few moments.

“How about 300 seconds?” Owen suggested from where he was sitting on the edge of their bed, his eyes following her frantic movements.

After she told him about her suspicions, they stayed up most of the night, taking, his fingers running absently through her soft hair. She wasn’t sure, Claire said. But something was off, and it was a bigger something than anything ever before. For one thing, she was late, but it didn’t necessarily mean anything — it happened now and then, given the stressful nature of her life. It wasn’t only that, though. It wasn’t even her sudden craving of pickles that she’d never been a big fan of. Getting emotional over a movie certainly fell into the ‘unusual’ category, too, to say the least.

They were careful most of the time, but given the stage and the duration of their relationship, they weren’t meticulous about it, so her theory wasn’t impossible. Far from it.

Claire couldn’t quite explain it to him, but she knew her body, she knew how it was supposed to behave, and it wasn’t responding in the ways she expected it to. There was not much else to it, so while she was still asleep this morning, Owen slipped out of the bed and drove to the pharmacy a few blocks away to buy a pregnancy test. His body buzzed with jittery nervousness, his hands practically shaking on the steering wheel, and he was grateful the streets were mostly empty at this early hour.

And now it was Claire who was practically bouncing off the walls as they waited for the results, counting the seconds in their heads.

He tried to figure out how he felt about either outcome, but they both seemed equally terrifying at the moment. A no would be disappointing, but also a relief — it wasn’t something they were planning for, and the last time he brought up the idea of marriage, Claire was rather adamant about not going through with it. Watching her sister’s steady and solid relationship crumble before her eyes got her thinking, and Owen never pressed. It didn’t really matter to him. A piece of paper was a piece of paper, and nothing else.

Then again, if it was a yes… How could he not be exhilarated by the idea? How could he not want it? Claire was his home. Not a place with four walls and a roof over his head, but a splatter of freckles and leaf-green eyes that took his breath away every time. He’d walk to the edge of the world for her, jump over the moon if needed be. A baby, his baby… It was almost too good to be true.

“It’s not going to work faster even if you wear a hole in the carpet,” Owen tried to joke, but she was wringing her lean fingers, her forehead creased with concern, and his words fell flat. He doubted
she even heard him, which got him wondering about what *she* was thinking. “Claire?”

She stopped abruptly and turned to him, paler than usual. Checked her watch. Two more minutes.

He wished he could climb into her head and see what was bothering her, what outcome she was hoping for or fearing the most. Either way, they were together in this, but he still felt like knowing where she was standing on the idea of a child would calm down his own inner turmoil. Scared. She was scared alright, but he couldn’t tell if it was a good or a bad kind of scared, and in this situation, the difference was crucial.

“I think it’s time,” he said at last.

She turned to the bathroom door. “I can’t…” The words fell from her lips, so soft he almost didn’t catch them.

“You want me to…?” Owen began to stand up, but she shook her head.

“No.” Swallowed. “I’ll get it.”

When she returned to the bedroom half a minute later, her face was shocked and more than a little panicked, her lips quivering slightly, and he couldn’t tell at once if it was because she was trying to hold back a smile or because she was going to cry. Or both. Wouldn’t be surprised if it was both.

She nodded, slowly, and he finally let out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding, his own mouth stretching into a grin.

“Yes?” Owen asked nonetheless.

Claire nodded again. “Yes.”

“Really?” His face lit up, his heart thumping so fast it was practically bursting out of Owen’s chest.

He caught her hand and drew her toward him until she was standing between his parted knees with that utterly disbelieving expression on her face. Owen’s gaze darted from her eyes to her belly for a few moments as if looking for further confirmation.

“Really,” Claire echoed. “I’m going to schedule a doctor’s appointment because those things can give you a false-positive, but…” she paused, finally focusing on him. “Owen, you don’t have an x-ray vision, you can’t see anything through my skin.”

He tugged her closer and pressed a kiss to her shirt-clad belly, a loopy smile on his face. “You’re not kidding.”

She laughed softly, her fingers carding through his hair, the tension that was holding her chest in a tight grip finally beginning to dissipate as something warm began to blossom inside her, spreading over every cell of her body.

Her knees were still weak from when she saw that blue plus on a plastic stick a couple of minutes ago, her heartbeat a wild flutter in her chest, and the future, so sure and simple and predictable not so long ago was now—She didn’t know what it was. Different, for sure, and there was an anxious flurry in her belly, and she wasn’t sure she was even capable of thinking at the moment, period.

“Afraid not,” Claire breathed out.

Hand of her hips, Owen stood up. He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, thinking that his
face might split in half from smiling, unable to look away from her. “So, now what?” He asked.

“Now….” Claire faltered. “We might need to paint the guest room yellow, I think? Or something else.”

He laughed – a bright, uncontrollable sound that vibrated all the way through Claire. His hands were in her hair, framing her face, his lips brushing feather-light kisses to her forehead, her temple, trailing along her cheek until they reached her mouth.

“God, I love you,” Owen murmured, pressing a long kiss to her lips, smiling because Claire was smiling, too, her fingers bunched around fistfuls of his shirt.

She drew back after a moment, an eyebrow arched inquisitively.

“What?” He asked. “Did I not mention that before?” He lifted her chin, his eyes crinkling with joy and amusement as he watched her, taking in the scatter of freckles and the captivating deep-green on her eyes, the delicate bow of her lips. In the early morning light, she looked radiant, her cheeks flushed pink, and so damn beautiful it hurt. “Must’ve slipped my mind.”

—

It was a yes.

Claire knew it, and Owen hoped for it, but it was Claire’s doctor who actually confirmed it two days later. Roughly 5 weeks in, he told Claire, giving her an approximate due date and a list of appointments she needed to schedule in the coming months, going through the basics and encouraging her to ask any questions she might have.

Outside of his office, her hand pressed to her mouth so she wouldn’t scream, she allowed Owen to pull her into him, his arms wrapped tightly around her. Yes. She wasn’t sure, not even after the test, not even after knowing for a while that something was off. Owen was the first one to fully embrace it, though. And he was so happy she could feel the tears starting to burn her eyes.

“You okay?” Owen asked when he heard her sniffle, pulling back to have a look at her – a very, very confused Claire.

She nodded, unable not to smile before burying her face in his shoulder again. “Yes.”

“Thank god,” he murmured, kissing her hair, her head cupped in his palm. “It’s gonna be great, Claire. I swear.”

“I love you, too,” she breathed out into his shirt with a shaky laugh.

By week three, however, Claire almost started to regret she had told him anything at all. Surely she could hide this for seven more months and blame the changes in her physique on donuts, right? Before Claire knew it, Owen had the whole schedule made for when she was supposed to eat, sleep, and most importantly – not work. He’d dote on her like she was made of the finest china, delicate and breakable, making sure she didn’t have to lift anything heavier than a pen. It bordered on honest to god smothering, except it was impossible to be mad at him when he was looking at her like she was the finest thing in creation.

Besides, she was so tired all the time, she usually didn’t have it in her to fight Owen’s enthusiasm. He was talking to the baby, too. Even before Claire started doing it, he’d flop down on the couch and rest his head on her lap – because it was the closest he could get to her belly, Owen would tell
“She doesn’t know that ‘countershading’ means,” Claire told him once, more amused than anything else, her fingers running through his hair. “Because I don’t.”

“She?” Owen looked up at her.

She offered him a small shrug. “I can’t call it an it, it’s weird,” Claire explained, half embarrassed by the sentiment. Owen curled his hand around hers and kissed her fingers, holding her gaze.

“No, I get it,” he said. “Do you want her to be a she?”

“I don’t know.” Claire wrinkled her nose. “It doesn’t matter, really. As long as she, or he, is healthy, and all the fingers and toes are in place, and…”

Owen sat up and turned around, leaning in to kiss her – first a playful peck, and then a proper kiss that left them both breathless. He ran his fingertips along her jaw, feeling her smile more than seeing it. She was radiant these days in ways Owen couldn’t explain, still anxious more often than not, but also so unmistakably happy it was almost palpable.

It wasn’t all a smooth sailing, of course. She was cranky and moody at times, or inexplicably weepy and emotional for no apparent reason. She either slept for 12 hours straight, or was too abuzz with energy to stay up all night, but those were minor moments compared to how affectionate she’d become, far more so than before, seeking comfort in him when finding it inside herself was impossible. He loved it, Owen had to admit that. Loved being needed in a way he never knew was possible before, loved having her curled into him, the wheels in her head he could often practically hear starting to spin slower, her heartbeat steadier. He loved every moment of this more than he could ever imagine he would.

“He or she can be whatever they want,” he promised Claire. Then checked his watch. “Snack time, Ms. Dearing.”

“I’m not just my baby bump, you know?” Claire grumbled one day when Owen came back home and said hi to her stomach before he said hi to her, half joking and half jealous of the attention that the tiny person who wasn’t even born yet was getting from him without even trying.

Owen pecked her on the lips before pulling her closer for a better kind of hello, smiling despite himself when their mouths met in a slow, deliberate kiss. She still hadn’t changed out of her office clothes, and he didn’t know whether or not he should mention how utterly lovely her pantsuits went with her slightly rounded belly. Couldn’t decided what he loved more – this, or her wearing his shirts and jerseys because they were supposedly more comfortable and less of a hassle than the maternity stuff.

“Okay, how about this – we leave this one,” he poked her lightly in her side, “with a baby sitter, and have a night out. Just you and me, the grown-up stuff and all. No baby talk. What’d you say?”

Claire wrapped his arms around his waist, nuzzling into his neck, breathing in his scent, the headache that kept sneaking in on her all day starting to dissipate. “Mmm, sounds good, Mr. Grady. Very good.”

The first time the baby kicked, Claire was four and a half months in, mere days before they were scheduled for an ultrasound to find out if it was a boy or a girl. And of course, it had to be in the middle of the night.
“Owen?” She called him, barely breathing, as the small body moved inside her.

“Mm?” He stirred sleepily beside her, and then his eyes snapped open, alert and wary. “Are you okay? Did anything happen?”

“No,” Claire smiled, a surge of affection toward him zinging through her. In all these weeks and months following the discovery of her situation, he hadn’t been anything but wonderful, and she could hardly believe it was even real. “Give me your hand,” she urged him before the baby stopped moving.

Owen stilled when a foot or a hand bumped against his palm in the dark. Claire heard his sharp inhale, and then he pretty much stopped breathing altogether. “Is this…” He mouthed without a sound.

She nodded, smiling from ear to ear. The baby settled by then. They waited for a few more minutes but it must have fallen asleep, either because it simply needed to find a better position, or because the warmth of Owen’s touch soothed her. Reluctantly, he removed his hand and kissed Claire on her belly before resting his head on the pillow again, their faces almost touching.

“Did it hurt?” He asked quietly.

Claire shook her head. “No. It might later, I think. But not yet. It’s like…” She paused, searching for words. “I can’t describe it.”

He nodded, kissing her on the tip of her nose. Then draped his arm over her, a half protective and half possessive gesture, prompting Claire to snuggle closer into him, and let out a long breath. She could barely see him, his face unreadable, but there was a smile on his lips, even when his eyes fluttered closed.

“You’re magical, Claire,” he murmured, almost dozing off, curled like a shell around her – around both of them - his palm finding its way to her stomach again, a light touch so as not to disturb her or the baby.

“Why?” She sank deepened into his embrace, also drowsy. Safe.

“You’re growing a whole new life inside you. If this isn’t magic, I don’t know what is.”

It was a girl, the doctor told them a few days later, the peanut not a peanut anymore, but a tiny human, with little arms and legs, shifting and moving on the screen, her heartbeat steady and strong. Claire squeezed Owen’s hand as she watched the blurry gray image on the monitor, and he leaned down to kiss her on the top of her head.

“I told you,” he said quietly. “Magic.”
Trick-o-Treat!

Chapter Summary

Prompt: "I’m Trick-or-Treating with my kid and you answered the door and oh- fuck me you’re seriously the hottest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on."

Chapter Notes

I tweaked it a bit, but it’s pretty much what the prompt is about, so.... :))

How long did it take to die from hypothermia, Claire wondered grimly as she trailed behind her 9-year old nephew, Gray, down a suburban street dotted with decorated houses, each scarier than the one before. Giant spiders perched on the roofs, miles and miles of fake spider web wrapping the porch pillars, ghouls and witches sitting in the lawn chairs or guarding the doors, their toothless smiles disturbingly creepy. If the whole neighbourhood wasn’t bursting with groups of kids in bright costumes, Claire would probably reconsider leaving the house altogether.

She shivered in her jacket and stuffed her hands deeper into the pockets, trying to ignore the wind. With her luck, it was going to start raining any moment now. Coming back home on this weekend of all weekends had been a nightmare in every possible sense so far.

Yet, with her mother’s birthday being this close to this godawful holiday, she hardly had a choice. And yes, she could think of about a hundred things she could be doing right now, like reading, or having a root canal, or sticking her head in the oven – anything would be a better alternative to trick-or-treating, but they had a deal – she and her sister, Karen. Claire would take Gray to gather the candy from the neighbours, and Karen would make a cake for the birthday brunch/dinner/whatever, and after Zach, Gray’s 14-year old brother who wouldn’t be caught dead hanging out with his geeky sibling, took off with his own friends, she wasn’t left with many options.

Although after 2 hours in the freezing October evening, she was staring to think if maybe it wasn’t her best decision. Maybe she could bake something without setting the house on fire. Maybe she could even—

“Come on, Aunt Claire, let’s do this one!” Gray grabbed her by the hand and dragged her down yet another cobbled pathway, past a very impressive fake cemetery and toward the porch sporting no less than ten thousand carved pumpkins, or so it seemed.

God, let this be the last one, she pleaded in her mind, allowing the boy to steer her up the porch steps, barely feeling her toes. There was nothing that Claire despised more than being the ‘Are we there yet?’ kind of person, and yet, each house they stopped by made her wonder just that, there being the end of this pointless tradition. There was enough candy in Gray’s house to send any dentist into a cardiac arrest, for heaven’s sake! Why would he even need more?

However, she climbed the steps obediently, promising to herself that she would never, ever, ever…
Gray was already pounding on the door, seeing as how the doorbell was hidden behind yet another freaky decoration, nearly bouncing with excitement, his Grim Reaper costume flapping in the wind, loose sleeves making her think of the giant bird’s wings.

The door swung open without a warning, giving Claire a start, and a tall man filled the doorway almost completely, blocking whatever light was spilling from the hallway.

“Trick or—” he started automatically, then paused, his face changing with recognition. “Oh, hey, Gray!”

“Owen!” The boy shrieked, his features lighting up like someone flipped a switch. He peered into the house past the man for a second. “Didn’t know you lived here.”

“I don’t,” the guy – Owen? – responded, also glancing inside, toward the sounds of the TV or the radio, and the whiff of an apple pie drifting from the kitchen.

And Claire’s breath was all but knocked out of her body when his face came into a better view.

High forehead, long straight nose, five o’clock shadow running down his cheeks, and lips that she was certain were curled into a mischievous smirk more often than not. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to his elbows, the seams at the shoulders nearly bursting from bulging muscles rolling underneath. The way he was standing there, so at ease and almost lazy, told her that he was very well aware of his size and strength, and very comfortable with both. Blue jeans loose on his narrow hips just added to the overall image of a man who knew what he wanted and wasn’t shy to take it without asking.

All in all, he meant trouble.

“But I’m on a candy duty today,” Owen finished, flashing a grin at her nephew that made Claire weak in her knees. “What’d it be?” He reached for the bowl sitting on the table in the hallway. “Knock yourself out!” Gray dug happily into the chocolaty treasure trove. “You live around?”

“Two blocks down,” Gray responded eagerly.

And that was when Owen’s gaze finally traveled past the boy and settled on Claire, and she was suddenly very much aware of her non-festive look, which was meant to make her stand out less, and that was making her rethink all her life choices right now. So what if her clothes quite possibly cost more than this guy’s car? He was not likely to know the difference between Prada and a Prada knock-off. What he was seeing was bland and bleak and probably very boring, and for some reason, Claire couldn’t recall anything she’d every regretted more on her life.

In semi-darkness, it was hard to make out the colour of his eyes, but the way they swept up and down her left her more that a little breathless.

“New sitter?” He asked Gray meanwhile, his voice dropping to that conspiratorial whisper that was intentionally loud enough for Claire to catch it, his eyes squinted slightly.

The boy glanced at her and shook his head. “Nope, that’s my Aunt Claire. She’s visiting.”

Owen’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “Really?” And Claire felt the colour spread over her cheeks. God, she was pathetic. But seriously, how was this man’s voice such a perfect combination of cocky and husky, oozing with poorly masked sass? It was like warm honey, dripping from a honey comb, reminding her of long summer days and the smell of wildflowers. And the worst thing was that she knew he wasn’t even trying, and yet in under three minutes, he got so deep under her skin, she might need a surgery to get him out.
“Claire.” She took a step forward and offered him her hand – because that was the social protocol, and because she wanted to know if his skin was as soft and warm as it looked in the pale light of the porch lamp.

“I gathered that,” he smirked, making her turn scarlet red. He shook her hand though, firmly, and yes, his palm was warm and maybe a little calloused. “Owen.”

“I gathered that,” she shot back, hoping she’d managed to regain her composure enough not to turn into a puddle of goo at his feet. Then again, it would be very in style with the other decorations, so maybe—“You guys know each other?” She asked, clearing her throat and finally remembering how to talk.

Owen ruffled Gray’s hair with easy familiarity. “I’m a coach at a local YMCA.”

“Zach’s coach,” Gray piped up, which was entirely unnecessary – Claire doubted he knew how sports worked. There was just no way he was on a team. Any team.

“Right…” she echoed, feeling like she was 15 again and a football captain at her school told her she smelled nice, or something of that kind. She didn’t remember his exact words now, but she had no problem recalling the rubbery feeling in her knees – like they were going to buckle under the weight of her body any moment.

On the bright side, she was not cold anymore. In fact, her face was burning so much she wondered if she was actually glowing. Damn it! She added wattage to her smile just in case.

“So, have you guys seen anything scary tonight?” Owen asked, leaning causally against the doorframe, arms folded over his broad chest, and seriously, why wasn’t he required to wear something shapes and unflattering in public? This was just cruel.

“Mrs. Simmons, from that old house on the corner,” Gray made a face.

Owen cocked his head curiously. “Was she dressed as a witch or something?” He asked, genuinely curious.

“No, she was her regular self,” Gray muttered with a sigh. “And she gave me raisins.”

At that, Owen laughed heartily before reaching inside the house again and then dropping a couple more mini candy bars into Gray’s pumpkin-shaped bucket. “To balance it out,” he explained with a chuckle. “No one should ever get raisins for Halloween.” And with that, his gaze flickered toward Claire like it was some kind of an inside joke between them.

And okay, maybe Halloween wasn’t entirely ridiculous after all.

Still, she straightened up and tucked her hair behind her ear, placing her hand on Gray’s shoulder. “We should go, honey. You mom will be worried.” No, she wouldn’t but it sounded better than ‘We should be going before I spontaneously combust’.

The boy nodded and waved his goodbye at Owen.

They were walking down the porch steps when he called out, “Gray!” The boy stopped and Claire paused in her tracks, both of them turning around. “Come here for a sec.”

“Can you hold this?” Gray shoved his bucket at Claire and scrambled back while she studied the emptying streets and an assortment of glowing Jack-o-Lanterns here and there, wondering how many of them would be replaced with Christmas lights first thing tomorrow morning and trying oh
so hard to ignore the hottest man she’d ever seen standing mere twenty feet away from her. Jesus Christ, how were those shoulders even real?!

“What was that about?” She asked casually when Gray joined her again and they set off toward the next cluster of houses.

He offered her a cheeky smile. “He asked me for your phone number.”

Claire jaw dropped. She expected him to say something like “Tell your brother the practice is cancelled” or “Nice costume”, but that?

She coughed, struggling to keep a straight face. “And what did you say?”

“That you’re staying with us and he knows the number,” the boy’s eyes were glinting with outright amusement now. He took his candy bucket from her and handed Claire a piece of folded notepad paper. “And he told me to give you this.”

Claire looked over her shoulder at Owen’s house, but he’d gone inside already. Yet he heart fluttered in her rib-cage nonetheless, lodging itself somewhere in her throat. She opened the note that read ‘Owen Grady’, followed by a series of digits, and her lips curved into a contemplative smile.

She hadn’t said a word about the uselessness of Halloween for the rest of the night.
**You Broke My Nose!**

Chapter Summary

Prompt: "I was tricked into a haunted house by my horrible friends and when you jumped out to scare me I punched you in the face."

Chapter Notes

Halloween, part 2 xD

If there was anything Masrani Global knew how to do, it was organizing the corporate events. That was to say that Claire knew to make them happen, and how to make them memorable. From birthdays and anniversaries to New Year’s Eves and Christmas parties, she was an unceasing fountain of ideas. And on top of that, she had catering and decoration team on speed dial. Anything was possible and the sky was limit.

However, little known fact was that she absolutely hated attending any of these functions.

Be it a fundraiser or a party, she found them all equally intolerable – same people mulling over the same gossip, and as a person in charge, she rarely had the liberty to just enjoy herself. If she were honest with herself, half the time she simply wanted to get hammered to make whatever gathering she was at more bearable.

And then there was Halloween, which Claire didn’t get at all. They were on the island full of dinosaurs, for heaven’s sake! Was it not entertaining enough? And yet, every year the decorations would go up, plastic skeletons would find their spots along the footpaths and bowls of candy would be placed near the entrance to each of the attractions. They’d turn one of the pavilions into a Haunted House and she’d have to find volunteers to dress up and jump at the guests from the dark corners. It seemed like the joys of her life never ended.

“Come on, Claire, you have to come!” Zara followed her out of the office, trailing behind Claire toward the elevators.

“No way,” Claire pressed the button to go down, tapping her foot impatiently, eager to get out of this mess for once. Taking care of the preparations was tedious enough. She was not going to take part in the actual celebration. And what were they celebrating, anyway? “You’re all set. Go, have fun.”

“What if something goes wrong?” Zara demanded.

“You have my phone number.”

“And what if–”

“You have my phone number,” Claire cut her off.
The doors slid open before them, and she could already taste the wine she was going to pour for herself in about 10 minutes. God, it sounded too good to be true.

“You know what? I’m not taking no for an answer.” Zara stepped into the elevator after Claire and looped her arm through Claire’s. “You’re coming. You need to have fun!”

“I am having fun,” Claire protested. “Look, I really—”

“Reading Financial Digest every night before bed is not fun, Claire,” Zara countered.

“I’m not dressed up.”

“Don’t worry about that, you can be…”

A raging bitch everyone thinks I am? Claire wondered darkly.

“You’ll be fine,” Zara, who was wearing obscenely revealing Sexy Cop costume, assured her in the end, flashing a quick smile at her boss. The resistance seemed futile.

In the lobby, she steered Claire toward the bathrooms where she told her to take off her jacket. Then she covered Claire’s face with a layer of foundation so pale Claire’s skin started to look practically translucent. Then Zara drew dark circles under her eyes and smeared something that was meant to look like blood first on her cheeks and then on her pale blouse before Claire could so much as open her mouth to protest. There wasn’t much that could be done to her skirt, but some more blood streaks on her legs and—

“Voila!” Zara nodded with satisfaction. “A little bit last minute, but you make a damn nice zombie bride, Claire.”

Terrific, Claire thought faintly just as they fell into the warm night. I sure feel like one. Main Street was packed with crowds, and they were swallowed instantly by the buzz of voices and outbursts of laughter and screams that under normal circumstances would’ve been alarming. Claire chose to tune them out lest she lose her mind.

A Haunted House – the very essence and the sole point of this whole night – appeared at the end of the street when they rounded the Innovation Center, towering before them in all its macabre glory. A supply warehouse emptied for his occasion, it was decorated with numerous glowing Jack-o-Lanterns, endless blankets of spider-web, blood smears drawn on the walls and a whole lot of other things that Claire couldn’t quite remember and certainly couldn’t make out in the dark.

She stopped short when it became clear that it was their ultimate destination. “Oh no, I don’t think so.” She knew it was fake and all, but it was still creepy and unsettling, and frankly, this whole thing was for the kids, right? They didn’t need to go in there and ruin—

“Oh yeah!” Grinning wickedly, Zara grabbed her hand and steered toward the entrance painted as an open mouth – tongue, fangs and all. They found a few of Zara’s friends lingering outside, their postures vaguely familiar, but their features hidden under layers of elaborate makeup and plastic masks, so Claire simply nodded her hellos as she followed them, stifling a resigned sigh and waiting for her chance to escape.

Inside, their footsteps echoed under the high ceiling; the glowing lamps provided just enough light not to trip or run into anything, but otherwise it was more cobwebs, weird creaking sounds coming from the speakers overhead and pale skeletons hanging from the walls. Claire knew it was meant to be something like a maze – several rooms connected to one another with a handful of volunteers sitting around, impersonating corpses in different stages of decomposition or something of that
She walked through the parlor and stepped into what looked like a dining room. More cobwebs, a bowl of ‘eyeballs’ on the table and a creepy laughter coming from behind the old standing clock by the wall. The lights flickered, someone shrieked and then laughed, and then everyone was laughing and trying to scare each other.

And then someone’s hand closer around Claire’s elbow, tugging at it lightly.

On instinct, she whirled around, finding herself face to face – or more like face to chest – with someone very tall, their features hidden in the shadows. Claire’s breath caught in her throat. She knew it was just a game, her mind very well aware of planning it not two weeks ago, but before she knew it was even happening, she drew her arm back, curled her fingers into a tight fist and thrust it forward just like her self-defense instructor taught her. Silently and with precision.

There was a crunching sound before everything fell silent around them, and then the person standing before her let go of her arm and clasped their hands around their face.

“Ow!” Their voice came out as a muffle wail. “You broke my nose!”

Breathing hard, her heard hammering, Claire gaped at the guy for a moment or two, and then snapped, “You broke my wrist!”

—

Well, nothing was broken, that was a good thing. The bad news was that upon Claire’s insistence, the medical staff was wandering around and keeping an eye on the possible emergencies.

As her luck would have it, she clocked none other than Owen Grady in the face, so that was just a cherry on top of her already less than spectacular night.

“It’s not broke,” she repeated once again as she marched into the infirmary, Owen dressed as a vampire or something like that trailing behind her, his head tipped back to stop the blood from dripping on his already ruined costume. Her hand was throbbing, too, but she could move her fingers without sufficient difficulty, so it was likely just a bruise as well.

In the bright glare of the infirmary, he gave her a long appraising look, eyebrows cocking curiously.

“What’re you supposed to be?” He asked while Claire rummaged through the drawers and cupboards, cursing herself for not having at least someone around here to take care of him. Well, what was he thinking grabbing her like that? He was lucky she aimed for the face and not for… more delicate parts.

“Don’t make me finish what I started,” she glowered at him over her shoulder, then pointed at one of the chairs. “Sit…. Please.”

He smirked, but obeyed, and she hauled a handful of bottles and packets to the nearby table – cotton balls, a pack of ice, antiseptic and whatnot.

Even with him sitting and her standing, they were roughly the same height – a discovery that left her a tad lightheaded. And she knew for a fact that the bruise Owen was currently sporting probably hurt more than she could imagine. Yet, his ever present half smile was in place, and his blue eyes were twinkling with amusement as he studied her.
“No, seriously, what are you?” He pressed. “Your real self?”

Claire grabbed his chin and turned his face this way and that, surveying the damage. Nothing serious (she knew it wasn’t broken!), but he’d probably look like a raccoon for a while, what with the bruise likely to spread into his cheeks. God, her aim was good.

Not that she was particularly proud of it right now.

“I can’t tell the real blood from the fake one,” she muttered with exasperation as she started cleaning his face with the sanitary hand wipes, her fingers trembling slightly, her body still abuzz from a sudden adrenaline rush.

“The real one is gushing from my nose,” Owen offered helpfully.

“Nothing is gushing from your nose, Mr. Grady,” she informed him sternly.

“Owen,” he huffed. “Is this the payback for board shorts?”

Claire scoffed. “If I wanted to punch you for your board shorts, trust me, I wouldn’t wait six months to do it.”

The goddamned date, she cringed inwardly. Did he have to bring it up every single time while she was doing such a good job at pretending it never happened?

And were his eyes always this incredible shade of blue? They reminded her of the ocean in the Arctic, deep and stormy, and more dangerous than anyone could imagine.

Was she staring? Claire felt her cheeks grow hot, grateful for once for a solid inch of foundation, covering the traitorous colour. Well, he was staring back, so there was that, but somehow it wasn’t making anything any better because while she struggled to keep her breathing under control, Owen Grady was looking straight into her very soul.

Claire cleared her throat. “What were you even doing there?” She tossed the used wipes into the trash, tipped his head back and affixed a pack of ice on the bridge of his nose to reduce the swelling. “You were not supposed to be on that team.”

“A last minute adjustment,” Owen muttered, wincing a little. “A guy who was meant to come got a food poisoning, or something. I don’t know.” His gaze darted toward her. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Claire snorted. “I should’ve hit you harder.”

She shook her head and stepped back, but Owen’s arm suddenly snaked around her waist, and she was suddenly standing between his parted knees pressed to his chest, and the ice pack was on the table beside them, and he was kissing her like his very life depended on it. She was caught off guard momentarily, but then her arms slipped around his neck, and she allowed her lips to part, and whether the guttural noise in the back of his throat meant pleasure or pain, Owen made on attempt to stop. Instead, his grip tightened, hands roaming around her back, and he was smiling against her mouth, and Claire nipped at his bottom lip, feeling electrified all over.

“What was that?” She asked breathlessly, pulling back for oxygen a while later.

“Well, you know how they say that kissing is supposed to heal,” he murmured, still not letting go of her.
“I am not kissing your bloodied nose,” she giggled, surprised by her own boldness, the fact that she just made out with Owen Grady, and the realization that she was planning to do it some more. Probably. Whether it was this surreal night, the freaky Haunted House, or the fact that despite his many, many flaws, she had never been entirely opposed to kissing him, she didn’t know, and right now, it didn’t matter.

“My mouth is close enough,” he chuckled before raising her scabbed knuckles to his lips and brushing a gentle kiss to her skin, his eyes never leaving hers. “See? Doesn’t it feel better?”

“I don’t know.” Claire’s gaze dropped to his mouth while her heart plummeted into her stomach, fluttering wildly. She swallowed, moving her face closer to his. “We might have to try it again. You know, just to make sure.”

Owen smile grew brighter than the sun, so blinding Claire had no other choice but to shut her eyes when he drew her in again. “Yes, ma’am.”
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Prompts: "We're at this Halloween party and this guy tried to drug your drink and I should probably tell you you’re also really cute"
+
"Hey that’s my candy!” “If you want it back come and take it.” While it’s in their mouth
+
“You convinced me to sneak out on Halloween to a haunted place and I’m about to shit my pants why did you think this was a good idea??”

Chapter Notes

Okay, i’m going to cram them all into one piece because it’s basically Christmas already, and because I probably won’t have much time to write in the next few weeks. This is a college AU and it’s so bad it’s scary. Not even Halloween scary, just ‘OMG WTH is this?’ scary. Sorry about that! ☠ Proceed with caution ☠

The worst thing about being stood up was, perhaps, being stood up on a blind date. The one thing worse than that? Being stood up on a blind date you didn’t want to come to in the first place.

Tired and groggy from studying all night and quite possibly failing his Biology test this morning, Owen scanned the crowd crammed into one of the frat houses that was converted into a party central for Halloween, searching for a Sexy Doctor or a Slutty Cop named Sherrie who he was supposed to meet almost an hour ago. Well, her or his friend, Barry, whose dumb idea it was to set him up with her.

“Come to the party,” Owen muttered under his breath, mimicking Barry’s voice with a grimace. “It’ll be fun. Fun, my ass.”

Well, on the bright side he wasn’t dressed like a giant hotdog, which Owen considered a small mercy. In fact, he shamelessly chose to forego the costume altogether, Halloween be damned. If he was going to be kicked out of college in near future, he might as well enjoy his time here not being the 10th Hulk in the room, or whatever the hell was trendy this year.

The music was loud, and the lights were dimmed, reduced mostly to the plastic Jack-o-Lanterns placed here and there to allow enough illumination to move around, but keep the atmosphere pseudo-spooky nonetheless. A flock of Playboy bunnies giggled their way past Owen on their way to the kitchen as he started to squeeze his way across the room toward the makeshift bar set up in the corner, deciding to at the very least grab a drink before he headed back to his dorm room. He did, after all, drag his sorry ass all the way here. Would be a real shame to waste all this time for nothing.
He wiggled between a group of drunk dancers, finally breaking away from the stifling mass of bodies that packed every crevice and nook of the front of the house. A guy that looked vaguely familiar to him – from the soccer team, maybe? – was bartending, which basically consisted of bobbing his head to whatever was spilling out of loudspeakers, which he probably thought looked cool. It didn’t.

Across from him, a girl dressed in plain blue jeans and a plaid shirt tied at her waist was either enjoying or ignoring the company of a… oh, here he was again, the hotdog dude. Probably one of the sorority bros, Owen figured – no one else in their right mind would assume they could pull off something as ridiculous, Halloween or not. The girl’s bright red hair was pulled into a ponytail and a cowgirl hat was sitting on the counter in front of her, next to a half empty glass of her drink of choice.

From this close, he could practically feel the taste of cold beer, pouring down his throat and washing his stress away, his fingers itching to close around a bottle of Corona or Bud.

Owen was still ten feet away from the bar, his progress slowed down by a hammered Dracula who stopped him to tell him off for not being ‘in style’ when he saw the girl turn toward the bartender, leaning closer to him to hear whatever he was saying over the music. The moment her attention shifted, The Hotdog reached for her drink, his eyes trained on the redhead, but before he was even halfway there, she grabbed the glass and took a sip from it. The Hotdog dropped his hand and grinned at her when she looked at him again.

The fucking frat parties!

Owen frowned, speeding up, his hackles standing on ends. Was this idiot really trying to drug her in plain sight? His hands curled into fists, barely controlled anger bubbling up in his chest, channeled into an overwhelming desire to send this douche flying head first through the French patio doors. Yet, when he finally reached the bar counter, The Hotdog peeled away from it with a lazy wave and disappeared in the crowd that moved like a sea before Owen’s eyes, making him slightly dizzy.

He gestured for a bottle of beer and leaned closer to the girl who was now nursing the rest of her drink with her back turned on the festivities taking place around her.

“I don’t want to alarm you or anything, but that walking Bratwurst just tried to spike your drink,” he said quietly, his fingers tapping impatiently on the counter, eyes still darting toward the people milling around in hopes of maybe spotting the guy again.

The girl whipped her head around, staring at him with wide eyes, and holy crap, was she pretty! Thin bangs hanging over her forehead and green eyes peering at Owen from under dark eyelashes. Pale and serious, she studied him like it was his fault that some jerk would try to take advantage of her not three minutes ago.

“What did you say?” She regarded him warily, her eyebrows pulled together.

Owen grabbed his beer from the bartender’s hand. “Watch your drink.”

Behind them, the room exploded with peals of laughter and applause – someone set up a keg in the middle of the dance floor, taking the party to a whole new level.

“Why would you even…” The girl started, grimacing in disgust, and added when she caught Owen looking at her curiously, “Not my scene. A friend asked me to come along, for moral support and maybe a ride, but she’s been hooking with one of the Supermen for the past hour.”
He nodded and took a swig of his beer. “You don’t happen to be Sherrie, do you?” He asked even though she obviously wasn’t. Sherrie was supposed to be a perky blonde, according to Barry, not a brooding redhead.

She shook her head and offered him her hand. “Claire.”

“Owen.” He clasped her lean, cool fingers.

She gave him a pointed once-over, one eyebrow arched in that elegant way that went straight to his head, making him wish he’d made an effort to maybe at least comb his hair or check if his shirt was clean. “What are you supposed to be?” She asked.

Owen’s lips twitched. “Myself five years from now, broke and unemployed,” he deadpanned.

Claire smiled, her whole face lighting up like someone suddenly turned on the sun. “Good one. I should’ve thought of it.” She winced. “Sorry, I think I bombed an exam this morning, and all of this,” she gestured around with a wide swipe of her hand, “is only making it worse.”

Owen nodded, propping his elbow on the bar. “Biology, with Fischer?” He asked sympathetically, trying to remember if she was in his class, or any of his classes, for that matter, but all he could think of was photosynthesis and evolution, and probably, maybe writing the wrong answers in the test sheet.

“Macroeconomics, with Addams.”

Okay, she was a Business Major then, he figured, or something of that kind.

“Welcome to the club anyway,” he breathed out.

“Well, here’s to a fabulous career in Subway,” Claire announced, raising her glass.

“And unhappy customers,” Owen clinked the neck of his bottle to it.

She down her drink in one gulp and turned to watch the Keg Adventures Of A Dozen Sorority Dudes who were now taking turns at trying to empty it, her expression a mixture of boredom and disdain, and Owen took his sweet time to study her in the flickering lights, taking note of the delicate curve of her lips and slightly upturned nose, not missing the dimples that popped up on her cheeks whenever she’d smile. From this close, he could smell something delicate and floral on her, like jasmine, perhaps, wondering if the wisps of hair that curled at her neck felt as soft to the touch as they looked.

He cleared his throat. “Hey, you wanna see something scary?”

Claire looked up, as if surprised to find him still standing there, her gaze hardening by the second. “You know, this is the seventh time I heard this line in the past hour,” she snorted. “Ninth since I walked through that door.” Her chin jerked toward the hallway. “Not exactly original.”

“What?” Owen blinked. Then his eyes widened. “No! I didn’t mean it like…” Thank god, it was too dark for her to see how red his face had turned in under two seconds. “There’s a supposedly haunted house two blocks from here…” he trailed off.

She tilted her head to the side, curious. “The Lancaster Mansion?”

He nodded. “Unless you want to wait for everyone to start throwing up.”
Claire’s eyes darted toward the ongoing keg fun, then to Owen, the debate comically obvious on her face, and he all but held his breath, watching her try to decide whether he was worth the shot, or if she should simply call it a night and forget this party ever happened, and he was praying to whatever was out there for her not to choose the latter.

“Isn’t it a private property?” She asked after a few moments, her eyes narrowed.

“Only if you don’t know a secret way in,” he flashed a wicked grin at her.

—

The Lancaster Mansion wasn’t really a mansion, per se. It was actually a Victorian house built in the 1850’s that belonged to a wealthy trader and his family and that stood empty for about 30 years now after housing a school, a bed-n-breakfast, and a Historical Society after the Lancasters either died, or relocated elsewhere and that was known for a heap of legends surrounding it. Granted, most of them came from its shabby and neglected appearance rather than from facts and evidence, but what did it matter, really?

Owen checked the street for any signs of the campus security patrolling the ground before sliding through the half-open gate, dry leaves crunching under his feet, Claire following him close behind, shivering slightly in the chilly October night. The front yard was bathed in the light of the streetlamps, but when they rounded the building, the darkness around them thickened, not dispersed even by the pale half-moon hanging in the sky.

Owen reached for her hand. “Careful. There used to be a cobbled path running across the garden. Some stones are still hiding in the grass.”

She clutched his fingers, warm even in the cold night, and wondered once again what the hell was she doing here. Coming to the party was a bad idea. Sneaking away with a complete stranger? Well, that was a whole different level of stupid. Except she couldn’t help but feel intrigued, and the fact that he was tall and seriously attractive didn’t help the matters. The slight curve of his lips when he talked, the way he managed to look her in the eyes instead of staring at her boobs, and, well, offering her a much better alternative to getting drunk sealed the deal.

Was she actually crazy?

He paused by the back door, and that was when she found out that a ‘secret way in’ consisted of jiggling the doorknob at a certain angle until the latch slipped out of its socket.

“Smooth,” Claire whispered, watching him pull the door open.


She scoffed and stepped inside, reaching for her phone to use it as a flashlight.

“Watch your step,” Owen warned her. “There’s a lot of junk of the floor, and some floorboards might be, well… rotten, to put it mildly.”

Inside, the house smelled like dust and stale air. There were pieces of furniture sitting around, mostly broken by the homeless or the local teenagers who regularly snuck in on a dare, believing that the old John Lancaster was still living here, wandering the halls of his house. The wallpaper had long peeled off the walls and was hanging down in ripped stripes. Half of the bannister running along the staircase that led to the second flood had been broken, its pieces scattered around the floor covered with at least two inches of dust and dirt, and Claire didn’t want to know what else.
“How’s that for a party?” Owen let out a soft laugh behind her, the light of his own phone dancing around the walls and bouncing off the debris at their feet.

She paused when something scuttled along the floor right in front of her, making them both pause and exchange glance in the eerie bluish light of their screensavers. “Owen…”

“It’s probably just rants,” he suggested uncertainly.

“You do know there’s a ghost here, right?” Claire asked in a whisper, unable to get herself to speak up even if no one else was around.

“Sure,” he snorted, pausing next to her at the bay window.

“No, I’m serious. Some guy broke in here a couple of years ago. Thirty minutes later, he burst into the campus police office, claiming that a white orb chased him down the street all the way there.” She glanced up, trying to see his face. “You can look it up, it’s all over the Internet.”

“Oh, I will,” Owen promised her. “He was probably stoned out of his mind when it happened, too.”

Claire opened her mouth to argue when the sound of footsteps coming from the kitchen broke the eerie silence settled around them, making them both freeze. She reached for his hand again, gripping it tight, feeling her fingers tremble ever so slightly.

“Hello?” A voice called out from the dark.

“John Lancaster?” Claire whispered, her heart beating so fast she thought she’d pass out.


He pulled her into the next room, which happened to be a study and pressed her to a wall, his hand on her mouth and his body shielding her from the view. A finger at his lips, signaling at her to keep quiet, he peered around the corner to see a middle-aged man in a security uniform swipe the living room with the glare of his flashlight.

“Come on,” Owen mouthed, tugging her after him and toward the hallway window, which wasn’t nailed shut.

“Hey!” The guy had obviously heard them and was trying to catch up, tripping over the broken chairs and scattered bricks that used to be a fireplace.

Holding her cowgirl hat with her hand lest it fall off, Claire followed him, nearly falling on the uneven surface, her heart fluttering in her throat. Owen pushed the window up and the cold air rushed in, making the hairs on her arms stand on end. He jumped out first and then held up his arms to catch her when she took a three foot drop, all wind knocked out of her when his arms locked around her for a brief moment, his face suddenly right in front of hers and his breath warm on her face.

“Let’s go.” He set her down, apparently familiar enough with the properly layout to know where they were, and steered her along the wall, both of them bent down to avoid being spotted through the windows, and around the corner until they were in the front yard again and running toward the street.

“Well, that was….,” Claire slowed down half a block later to catch her breath, giddy laughter bursting out of her chest.
“Fun?” Owen glanced past her, but whoever was with them in the house either lost them, or chose not to bother with the chase.

“Spooky,” she admitted with a giggle, finally straightening up.

“Yeah, well….” He ruffled his hair, grinning. “Gotta keep it interesting.”

He walked her home afterwards, passing along the houses wrapped in the fake spider web and adorned with carved pumpkins of every size and caliber as they shared random details about one another, their hands brushing occasionally until Owen finally summoned enough courage to slip his fingers through Claire’s, not missing a slight blush that rose up her cheeks.

“You don’t really think there’s ghost living that house, do you?” He asked when they reached her dorm building, pausing under the porchlight.

She plucked a candy from his hand – the last one of the handful he shamelessly stole from a bowl left for trick-o-treaters, claiming that he was saving someone from a cavity or two and popped it into her mouth. “I guess we’ll never know!”

“Hey, that was my—“ Owen began, mock appalled, which only made her wicked smile grow wider.

Leaving the rest of that phrase to hang between them, he stepped toward Claire. His palm on her cheek, he tipped her face up and pressed his lips to hers, tasting the chocolate and everything that was her, her lips soft and warm, and everything that he wanted them to be. Caught momentarily off guard, she allowed her lisp to part against his, deepening the kiss as Owen’s arms snaked around her, holding her to his chest. Neither of them noticed when Claire’s hat slipped off her head and landed at their feet.
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

A prompt submitted by averageclawenfangirl about Claire tending to Owen's cuts inflicted by Blue :)

Chapter Notes

I totally butchered the original idea because it's what I do, but I love this type of plots so...

What kind of a man shows up to a date in board shorts?! Claire fumed.

Her hands gripped the steering wheel tighter as she turned left at the fork in the road, heading toward Owen Grady’s bungalow in the fading light that flickered through a canopy of foliage over her head, the peaceful evening only amplifying her frustration by standing in stark contrast against her inner turmoil.

She knew Owen was bad news, knew it from the moment he sauntered over to her with a smug smirk of a man who was used to getting what he wanted without even having to ask, and offered to treat her to a night out, undoubtedly expecting her to go into a cardiac arrest from happiness.

Claire didn’t, but the idea intrigued her. He was tall and unmistakably attractive, a man who knew how to present himself in the best light even when he smelled of the dinosaur cage and his boots were caked with mud. She knew she could be forceful and intimidating, and that, as a rule, people looked at her with a great degree of trepidation, especially in the park. Meeting someone who seemingly didn’t give a damn about her status on the island was refreshing, to put it mildly. It did not surprise her, though, that it came back later to bite her in the ass.

She took a sharp turn, uncertain of who she was angrier at – herself for thinking that he was actually different for her regular corporate type, or Owen for proving her wrong. And screw board shorts – who takes a date to a tequila bar that serves nothing but nachos and, well, tequila?! She’d spent two hours fixing her hair and trying to find just the right outfit, hoping that, for once, going out with someone who didn’t live in Armani suits would be fun, all to spend the night watching a guy who didn’t even bother to dress up for the occasion do one shot after another.

This was a new low, she decided in the end. The kind of date she would compare all of her dates to from now on to determine the viability of the potential relationship. Was it Owen-Grady bad, or just bad? Or halfway to Owen-Grady, but not quite? And yes, she might have been a little prim, and she might have had a checklist printed out, just in case. Because she didn’t know what to expect and wanted to have options, not because she was going to shove it down his throat! He certainly didn’t have to make her feel like a freak because of it.

Eyebrows pulled together and lips pursed into a thin line, Claire slowed down when the silver camper parked next to his bungalow popped out from behind the trees, fighting the urge to turn
around and head home and never talk to this man ever again. Unfortunately, the reputation of a heartless bitch she had around here wasn’t quite as accurate as everyone thought, much to Claire’s dismay.

After their unfortunate date, she gave Owen a ride (even though she was more than tempted to leave him stranded in the staff village, half drunk), and this morning, she found his dog tags under the passenger floor mat when she dropped her phone charger to the floor and leaned down to get it, noticing them glint in the morning sunlight. Frankly, she couldn’t remember him wearing them, but the goddamned bar was dark, and they must’ve been hidden under his shirt, and yes, she did consider throwing them into the Mosasaurus’s pool, to make a point, if for no other reason.

Yet, despite what everyone else was thinking about her, Claire considered herself at least a semi-decent person, and a semi-decent person would return lost property to its rightful owner, even if said owner was an asshole. Hence her drive to the paddock after work. As her luck would have it, however, Owen had already left by the time she made it there, forcing Claire to take another detour and stop by his shack, which did nothing to improve her mood.

She wondered absently if he realized his dog tags were missing, or if he’d made a connection, or if he’d even remembered they went out. Now that was a good question!

Leaving the car behind the bungalow, she crossed the lawn, the heels of her shoes digging into the soft soil, and climbed the porch steps. This far from the park and the ever-persistent scents of food floating out of the restaurant windows, the air here smelled strongly of the jungle and the lagoon, and she couldn’t help but inhale deeply, surprised by how industrialized the resort could feel at times, despite being isolated and with only a restricted number of vehicles permitted on its grounds.

Owen’s dog tags clutched in her fist, she rapped knuckled on the door, and then knocked louder when no one responded.

“Come on in,” came from the inside after a moment or two.

Still, she hesitated, uncertain of what the protocol was. Obviously, the ‘stop by any time’ courtesy did not extend to her, and maybe he was expecting someone else. What if she was interrupting something… Claire knocked again, choosing to play it safe, and on the off-chance if he was too lazy to lift his ass off the couch – well, it’d serve him right.

“It’s open!” Owen hollered louder, and this time she decided that she had more important things to do than deal with the manners.

Another moment of a brief mental debate, and she turned the knob and pulled the door open, stepping into the hallway-slash-living-room-slash-kitchen. And when her eyes adjusted enough to the dimness, she spotted Owen dressed in stained jeans and a sleeveless undershirt rummaging through the cupboards over the kitchen sink across the room from her and muttering quiet curses under his breath.

“Mr. Grady,” she started.

He glanced at her over his shoulder, a flicker of surprised in his eyes quickly replaced by his trademark grin. “Claire. You don’t need to be so formal.”

She ignored his comment, hoping she managed to keep her face straight. “Do you have a moment?”

“Not really, actually.” He went back to his task at hand.
“It won’t take long,” she pressed, hesitant to move further in. He offered no invitation, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to receive one. It wasn’t a social visit after all.

Owen abandoned the upper shelves and dove into the drawers near his small two-cooker gas stove. “Yeah, well… I’m a little busy right now.”

Claire scoffed, glaring at the back of his head. “Doing what?”

“Trying not to bleed to death.” With that, Owen finally turned to her, revealing a bloodied towel that used to be white, she assumed, wrapped around his right forearm, looking like something from a horror movie, and it took her a moment to realize that the heavy smell hanging around them was the smell of blood.

Her mouth went dry and her eyes widened. “Oh, my god… What happened?”

He shrugged casually, finally finding what he was searching for, which turned out being a small army-style first aid bag. “Blue.”

“What?” She asked dumbly.

“Not what. Who. One of the raptors. Now, if you’ll excuse me….” He set the bag on the table tucked between the living room and the kitchen area and went to snatch some fresh towels.

Claire gaped at him, dumbfounded. “You need to go to the infirmary!”

He snickered. “No, I don’t. It’s barely a scratch. But I do need to bandage it properly.”

She frowned. “But you just said–”

“Was being melodramatic.” Owen gave her a curious once-over. “Anything I can do for you?”

She regarded him skeptically, probably expecting him to drop dead any second, he figured. And then she lifted her hand and opened her fist, and he saw his dog tags hanging from a silver chain hooked over Claire’s index finger. “I found these in my car,” she said. “You must’ve dropped them when….”

“Oh.” He blinked, honestly not expecting this, his forehead creasing momentarily. “I thought I left them on the sink.” His eyes darted almost involuntarily toward his bathroom. “Thanks. If you could put ‘em over there,” he jerked his chin toward the counter.

Claire did, still eyeing him dubiously. The thing was, she knew he was not a complete moron, despite the evidence to the contrary. To her knowledge, the man obviously could tell a fatal wound from something that could be disregarded altogether. He did, after all, survive real, honest-to-god war. And yet… this looked like a lot of blood, to her knowledge, and she didn’t trust his hero complex to make the right decision in a situation that wasn’t a life-and-death kind, per se.

“Do you… do you need any help?” She asked on impulse, surprising them both.

“With what?” Owen dropped his towels on the table before glancing at her again. “This? Nah, I’m good…”

Claire rolled her eyes and stepped toward him. “Oh, for heaven’s sake.” She snatched the first aid bag from him. “Sit. I’ll probably get sued if you die on my watch.”

Owen opened his mouth to protest, but then reconsidered and plopped down obediently into a
chair, resting his injured arm on the table and eyeing her not without caution. “That’s touching,” he hummed.

Meanwhile, Claire dragged another chair closer to him and sat down gingerly. She unwrapped his make-shirt bandage, which was basically the cleanest towel he could find in the back office at the paddock after Blue tried to give him a hug. It didn’t escape his attention that she turned a couple of shades paler at the sight of three slash marks left by the raptor’s razor-sharp claws, but to her credit, she didn’t so much as flinch as she inspected them carefully.

“Well, the good news is you don’t need any stitches,” Claire announced at last.

“Shame,” he offered her a cheeky smile. “I was going for just that.”

Frankly, it was Owen’s fault. The main downside of seeing the raptors being born was that he tended to overestimate their loyalty and underestimate their instincts. It was a miracle he was still alive, to be honest, what with throwing his caution out the window half the time as far as they were concerned.

He watched Claire dig through his skimpy medical supplies and pull out a bottle of antiseptic and a healing balm. She found a washcloth and fresh bandages, too, and then finally pulled his arm closer to her and started cleaning the wounds. He hissed thorough his teeth at the first contact of antiseptic with his skin, the burning sensation nearly making him leap into the air.

“Sorry,” she muttered, sounding like she was anything but.

Oddly enough, her cool fingers felt soothing and the fact that he could watch her without having to be sneaky about it worked as a fine distraction. Her eyebrows were knitted together in concentration and her bottom lip was caught between her teeth in that way that made him want to kiss her even more. And whether it was the light, or the sight of blood Claire Dearing obviously wasn’t overly accustomed to that threw her off, but it made her freckles stand out against her pale skin, and for a minute, Owen busied himself with counting them, a sprinkling of sunshine across her nose.

Regardless, her movements were steady and sure, and maybe she didn’t like being in this position, and her expression said as much, but she obviously knew what she was doing.

“Where’d you learn that?” He asked after a while, choosing to break the silence that started to feel too heavy.

“Hm?” Claire glanced up, as if only now remembering she was working on a real person and not a disembodied limb. “Learn what?”

“I don’t know, first aid.”

“Why wouldn’t I know how to clean a wound, Mr. Grady?” She asked indignantly.

“Well, the jury’s still out on that,” Claire deadpanned.

Because he did. He really and truly did ruin it. Not with his hideous attire or the nightmarish choice
of the venue, and not even with his rather crass jokes that did make him seem like a jerk, despite what he was saying. No, he ruined it when she drove him home and he kissed her. Just like that. She stopped the car, expecting him to get out, and he leaned over the console between the seats, and before Claire knew what was happening, his hand was cupping her cheek and his lips were pressed to hers.

He tasted of tequila and want, and her head started to swim. And the worst part was that she kissed him back. Because she wanted to, ever since he asked her out and smiled that crooked smile at her. She wanted to kiss him all the way through the worst date in her goddamn life, and by kissing her, he took away Claire’s one and only chance to write off the past 3 hours of her life like they never happened. And that she hated them both for.

“I really did think it was a casual thing,” Owen mumbled, earning a glare in response, although she made no further comment. “I didn’t meant to… I never meant to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Claire huffed, trying to blow a strand of hair that kept falling on her cheek, her hands busy and her heart racing because it was getting more and more impossible to ignore Owen’s gaze that felt almost as palpable as a touch, and how did his whole bungalow get so small all of sudden? Did it shrink when she wasn’t looking?

She felt his fingertips on her skin, brushing her hair back and tucking it behind her ear, and while it did seem like he was simply trying to help, her breath caught in her throat nonetheless and Claire had to make an effort not to lift her gaze because she was suddenly very much aware of the fact that her face was burning.

“Thanks,” she murmured, reaching for the bandages at last, her fingers trembling ever so slightly. Two minutes, and she’d be out of here, Claire told herself. “I still think you need to have it properly checked,” she added with pointed exasperation. “It can get infected.”

“I’ll take that risk,” Owen replied, his voice dropping, and when Claire secured the wraps and zipped his first aid kit shut and finally turned to him, his face was suddenly inches away from hers, his eyes roaming around her features until they fixed on her lips, and there was just enough pause to allow her to pull away – he was giving her a chance to do that. “I… don’t even know how to thank you,” he breathed out almost soundlessly when she didn’t.

“You’ll probably figure something out,” Claire responded in kind.

And then his good hand was in her hair and his mouth captured hers, and he was kissing her like the future of the whole Universe depended on it. Her fingers closed around fistfuls of his shirt like she feared her might disappear, and she was right back in her car a week ago, lightheaded and dizzy and feeling like she was floating. Her lips parted against his, and god, the man was infuriating, but he sure as hell knew how to kiss.

“Well, I should probably…” Claire muttered breathlessly as she pulled away from Owen. “Go. I should go.”

“Don’t.” He rested his hand on the back of her neck, playing absently with her hair, and drew her in again, pressing his forehead to hers. “You just basically saved my life, probably,” he whispered, watching her smile widen. “The least I can do is take you out on a second date, see how it might go.”

“What makes you think it’s a good idea?” She smirked nonetheless, feeling her heart flutter somewhere in her stomach.
“Yeah, well, there’s only one way to find out.”
It was the late morning sun coupled with the sound of commotion coming from somewhere in the kitchen that awoke Claire on the Christmas morning. Hushed voices, but voices nonetheless, and she was not used to it. Certainty not when the only person who was normally making the racket in the house was currently curled around her, snoring peacefully into her hair.

She groaned inwardly and pressed her face into the pillow, exhausted from staying up way past midnight and desperate to snag a few more moments of sleep before the new day sucked them back into the whirlpool of the holiday chaos. But Owen, sensing that she was awake, was already stirring, too, his arm flexing around her, drawing her closer into his chest, his heart beating fast and steady against her back, reverberating through her entire body.

“Morning,” he mumbled, his soft breath tickling her neck.

“Morning,” Claire muttered, her lips stretching into a small, content smile.

“Merry Christmas,” Owen pressed a tender kiss to her shoulder, his hand skimming lazily over her stomach.

“Merry Christmas,” she echoed, rolling over to meet his sleepy gaze.

His mouth was curled into a lazy grin she’d seen on so many other mornings just like this one, his hair sticking out at odd angles – her favourite kind of bedhead. Like always, the image made her chest tighten as something warm started to blossom in her belly – the feeling Claire hadn’t quite gotten used to yet, even after all those months.

A year.

In about a week, it would be a whole year of small moments and big revelations, of laughter and fear, and working hard, and early mornings, and surprise dates, and whispered confessions, of fights and forgiveness, and slow kisses, and feeling the ground shift beneath their feet.

It was incredible how fast these months flew by, and even more incredible that Claire still felt like she was walking on clouds. She was not surprised so much as amazed by how seamlessly every thread of their lives had woven together until she had no idea where she ended and he began.

“You’re such an ass!” Gray yelled somewhere in the depths of the house, disregarding the fact that someone was still supposed to be sleeping. At least in theory.

“Language!” Karen barked before Zach – Claire seriously doubted that the younger Mitchel brother would call his mother an ass, which left them with only one other possible candidate for the unfavourable title – could respond.

The clatter of the pots and pans followed, and Claire sighed and pressed her forehead into Owen’s chest, knowing full well that the morning bliss was over, even though she had a better idea for the
next half hour or so. “We have to get up,” she murmured, brushing her lips to his skin.

“I’m sure they’ll manage,” Owen breathed out, his hands creeping down her back and under the hem of her tank top.

“They’ll destroy the house,” she hummed.

“Two teenagers and a grown-up will not destroy the house,” he protested, pressing his mouth to her neck, and it was so damn tempting to ignore what sounded like a civil war happening downstairs. “Whose idea was it to invite them over, again?”

“Yours, actually,” Claire laughed, pushing away from him while she still had at least some self-control and earning a displeased pout in response.

Well, it was a more or less mutual decision, if she were honest with herself.

After the incident, many promises were tossed around, and Claire was rather proud of herself for managing to keep at least some of them. Like not falling off the face of the Earth, as far as her family was concerned, and even though she and Owen chose to stay in San Diego, she called Karen at least twice a week and Skyped or Facetimed with her nephews as much as she could, or as much as they needed to.

It was funny, really, that they seldom had anything to talk about – Zach and Gray weren’t particularly clued in on her new job, and Claire’s memories of the intricacies of the middle and high school were smudged at best. Yet, she recognized their need for someone who really understood what it was like to go through something monumentally traumatic and have to learn to live with it however they could, and that was what brought them together, essentially.

And seeing as how their last Christmas was an honest-to-god nightmare, it was somehow decided that inviting them over for the holidays was a good idea. They could take the boys to Disneyland and the beach, and Karen could escape the cold of the Midwest that always seemed to last a year or two instead of a few months.

Claire wanted to do it right this time around. It was all she wanted.

The Mitchell clan had arrived three days ago, and even though Claire made sure to get the presents beforehand, they went to buy the Christmas tree together, the five of them bickering the rest of the afternoon as they tried to decorate it. And despite the chaos her house had never known before, it was the most fun Claire had in so long she couldn’t even remember the last time it happened. She loved the smile on Gray’s face, the easy chatter Karen was showering her with, the way Zach was trying so hard to pretend he wasn’t enjoying himself, and how Owen was looking at her when he thought she wasn’t paying attention.

They cooked the dinner, which left the kitchen looking like a tornado swept over it, and watched A Christmas Story because it was most mundane and the most Christmassy thing in the world. And not once did anyone mention the island so far, which felt good. A whole new level of normal.

And now it was apparently the time to open the presents.

“Rain check,” Claire murmured, stealing another quick kiss and slipping out of Owen’s grasp before she changed her mind – and god, she was this close.

Grumbling, Owen climbed out of the bed as well, yawning for all he was worth and stretching with gusto until his arms locked around Claire again. “Promise?”

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“Promise,” she murmured against his cheek.

They were planning to go to the beach today, maybe stop for lunch at one of the numerous cafes dotting the promenade that ran along the strip of sand framing the water before actually hitting the parks tomorrow to avoid the Christmas Day crowds. So far, she was content to spend the rest of her life doing just that.

Downstairs, the whole pack was busy at work trying to make breakfast. Both Zach and Gray still in their pajamas and Karen dressed in something casual and sensible… wait, was that Claire’s shirt? As it turned out, the fight broke out over the old-as-time ‘pancakes vs French Toast’ argument, which Karen nipped at the bud by making both, although not before some strong words were tossed around.

Karen waved her hello with a spatula. “Pancakes or French toast?”

“Pancakes,” Claire responded.
Owen grinned. “Both.”

And afterwards, all five of them found themselves in the living room, searching for the boxes with their names on them and feeling like they were kids again, what with the Christmas lights flickering above them and the scent of pine hanging in the air, wrapped around them like a cloud of memories from a long time ago.

There were books and an iPad for Gray and a stack of video games for Zach, a jewelry set for Karen and an ‘ugly’ sweater for Owen, which Claire bought just so she could see his face when he opened the box. It was worth it! She suspected he got her the Reindeer slippers for the exact same reason, though. Well, that and the bracelet she mentioned quite casually a while ago and didn’t think of since, which all but lodged a hot lump in her throat.

Claire herself was rather proud of finding a handmade scarf for her sister that she was certain Karen would appreciate, and the FitBit was something she knew Owen was thinking of buying anyway, so it made a nice addition to the pile as well. Small souvenirs here and there, and in a roughly half hour, they were nearly buried under a mound of wrapping paper and colourful ribbons, laughing in the way she never knew would be possible again.

“Got get dressed,” Karen told the boys after they cleaned up the space around the Christmas tree, and all three of them retreated to their respective corners, hauling off their presents, eager to get ready to get out of the house.

“Come on, I have something for you,” Claire whispered to Owen, tugging him toward their room.

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Really? Do tell!”

“Not that,” she rolled her eyes, unable to bite back a small smile. “Be ready in 10!” She called out down the hallway before pulling him inside and closing the door behind them.

“That’s optimistic,” Owen chuckled, looping his arm around her waist.

“Nice try,” she hummed, slipping away from him and crossing the room to dig out another wrapped box from the drawer of her nightstand.

He blinked, confused for a moment. “A pen?” He tried to guess, based on the shape of it. “A watch!”
“Just open it,” Claire handed the box to him and stepped back, biting her lip.

He did, ripping off the wrapping paper unceremoniously and lifting the lid. And then his eyes grew wide when he took in a white plastic stick with two blue stripes in a small window. Claire watched his expression change from confused to, as the realization settled, mildly shocked.

Owen looked up at her slowly, dumbfounded and speechless. “Are you…” He started, and she nodded. “Really?” Another nod, and his face broke into the biggest, brightest smile Claire had ever seen. She pressed a finger to his lips to keep him quiet. “Oh, baby.” He set the box down on the dresser and stepped toward her, his hands in her hair, framing her face, pulling her toward him. “It’s not a joke, is it?” His eyes narrowed, fastening on hers.

Claire shook her head, smiling softly. Her hands curled around his wrists as he continued to watch her like she was the biggest wonder and the most puzzling mystery in the world. “But how… When did you… How long have you known?” Owen’s thumb ran over her cheekbone.

“A few days,” she admitted. “I wanted to tell you sooner, but…” Her smile turned coy. “I wanted to make it special.”

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her, trapping her hands between their bodies, Claire’s face tucked into the crock of his neck. Seven weeks and counting. She also had the first ultrasound to show him later, a healthy critter that was hard to catch because he (or she?) kept wiggling around.

“It is… God, I don’t know what to say.”

Claire’s eyebrows knitted together, her heart skipping a beat. “Is it… okay?”

In the excitement of the past few days, she didn’t have time to contemplate the repercussions of this particular development. Their relationship progressed as if independently of them altogether—she couldn’t even remember how exactly they decided to move in together, but one day she was fending off the press that seemed to be quite fond of ambushing her at every opportunity, and the next thing she knew Owen was trying to fit his shirts into her closet and his protein bars were taking up half of her kitchen. It felt like a hurricane that swept them off their feet and left them hanging a hundred feet above the ground. Whether or not he wanted to be with her was never the question, it was the extent to which he wanted to be with her that Claire wasn’t fully aware of for it had never occurred to her to bring it up. It never felt like something that needed to be discussed.

But a whole new human being growing inside her was something else entirely, and she had to—

Owen ran his hand up and down her back. “It’s not okay, it’s… what better than okay?”

She nuzzled into his neck, finally managing to free her hands and lock them on the small of his back. “Okay is good.”

“A baby…” He dropped a kiss into her hair.

This called for a talk, at the very least, and as much as Owen appreciated the gesture, her timing was so off because there were people—

“Aunt Claire, we’re ready!” Gray yelled from the hallway, and Claire tightened her grip on Owen.

“We gotta go.”

“Be out in a minute!” Owen shouted back, then pulled back and cupped her face in his palms.
“Proper celebration later?”

“Sure.” Claire pulled up on her tiptoes and brushed her lips to his. “Merry Christmas, Owen.”
Well, Christmas is already here in my neck of the woods - so Merry Christmas if you’re celebrating! Hope you’re having a wonderful time with your loved ones and a good weekend regardless!

The working title for this one was ‘Christmas XXX’, which is all it really is, with some fluff and snow woven in. I regret nothing.

It wasn’t that Claire didn’t like the holidays, but somewhere along the way she got fundamentally disillusioned about them. No, there were Christmas nights in her life filled with twinkling lights that felt like magic, piles of presents, and cookies and milk left for Santa under the tree. But between her parents who started to skip the most exciting night of the year, choosing to work instead and leave her and Karen in the care of a babysitter, and then essentially growing up, it was bound to happen.

And then Jurassic World came along, with Christmas being the busiest time of the year when the park was booked to a full capacity. Claire couldn’t take the time off for fear of jeopardizing her career, and thus she ended up having a glass of wine in her tree-less suite on Christmas Eve for seven years straight, usually while going through one report or another. She certainly did not resent the festivities, moderately enjoying the bright decorations adorning the streets of the resort, but she also couldn’t say she cared about this time of the year in any particular way.

Naturally, the fact that the Indominus Rex incident happened around Christmas time didn’t bode well for any fond memories, either. If anything, she couldn’t help but cringe at the mere thought of it. Even now, a year later, it snuck up on her now and then, making her feel like she was still on the island, still running. She wondered if she would ever stop.

Claire looked out the window, feeling her lips curve into a small smile. It was snowing, again. These days, it always seemed like it was snowing, and she didn’t even realize how much she’d missed it.

Being back in Madison, she felt like her life had made a full circle, bringing her back to where she’d started. Somehow between the court hearings regarding the incident and trying to figure out what she wanted to do next, she ended up here – partly because she felt bad about inadvertently putting Zach and Gray through honest-to-god hell and was now desperately trying to make up for it as best she could; and partly because the striking contrast between the chilly Wisconsin and a tropical island was making her feel at peace with herself.

Her phone chimed, and she grabbed it from the couch, her smile growing wider by the second. “Hey,” she breathed out as her heart made that small leap that tended to leave her a little out of balance. Every. Single. Time.

“Hey, baby,” Owen’s voice sounded as if it was coming from across the globe, muffled and distant, but so familiar and dear it almost hurt.

After failing to quit InGen due to his contractual obligations with the NAVY, he had no other
choice but to stay behind for a while until he was transferred to the Midwest. And before Claire even knew it was happening, he was within her arm’s reach again, and once the realization had finally dawned on her, she didn’t have it in her to tell him not to do it, not to change his plans and turn his life upside down for her. She wanted him there, and she’d denied herself the things she wanted for so long she could barely stand the idea of losing someone who was now her whole world. The way their relationship unfolded, it felt almost effortless at times – never easy, but always simple.

Once his transfer was settled, he decided to forgo the active duty, choosing to teach the new cadets in the Recruit School instead – probably because every time he brought it up, Claire would turn ashen, the idea of him running among the bullets whistling past his head making her sick and more than a little nauseated. They were toying with the possibility of him walking away, but he needed a job, and finding one after the incident turned out being much harder than either of them anticipated – people were curious about him, about what had really happened on the island. No one even read his resume, he got calls based solely on his reputation and his 15 minutes of fame, and it was driving him nuts.

It sounded like a good plan at the time, still did actually, except his new base was in Illinois, and he was flying back and forth every few weeks to see her. It wasn’t forever, Owen promised her. Just for a bit, until he figured out what to do next while also making some money. She didn’t protest, reveling in the magic of having him with her when he was around, falling harder and deeper and stronger than she could ever imagine. She missed him like crazy, but it made their time together all the more wonderful. Like fireworks that ignited her blood, making it run like molten gold in her veins.

“Where are you?” She asked. “You sound like you’re calling from a bunker.”

He wasn’t meant to come back until the next weekend, which meant she was going to spend Charismas alone. Well, not alone – she was spending it with her sister, but it was not the same, and she couldn’t help but feel that her ache for his presence would make her implode.

“Yes, almost.” He laughed, and the image of his easy smile flashed in her mind. “Hey, I know I promised we could talk now, but would it be okay if I called you back in 15? Something came up…”

“Sure, of course.”

It was their thing – come rain or shine, hell or high water, they talked every day, finding the way around each other’s schedules. Mostly about nothing. The weather, their jobs, the films they saw or the books they read, their conversations laced with unspoken longing. It was never enough, and Claire was always left wishing for more, but the sound of his voice smoothed out her sharp edges and calmed the storms inside her, and sometimes it was all she needed.

She put down the book she was trying to read – with little success, and padded into the kitchen to turn on the kettle, pausing briefly by the window. She’d always loved watching the snow fall, ever since she was little. Loved the way it made the world look like the white blanket made it seem completely reborn. A fresh canvas, unmarked and pristine. Like anything was possible. She didn’t enjoy the cold, never had, being constantly chilly even on the warmest of days, but in her time on the island she missed the real winter with its delicate lace of frost on the windows and the smell of hot chocolate.

In a way, it was a relief to come back to it, to the comfort of something familiar that ran deeper than simply recognizing the streets she’d known her entire life. For all she knew, she loved the snow for as long as her soul existed.
A knock on the door came just as she reached for the kettle, making her frown momentarily. She wasn’t expecting anyone, although Karen didn’t need an invitation, and neither did the boys who didn’t have a problem dropping by announced now and then. In the worst-case scenario, it was a very unfortunate solicitor stuck in the snowstorm.

It was neither of them.

“Hi,” Owen grinned at her, his hair dusted with snowflakes from the quick walk from the cab that was peeling off the curb right now to the door.

“Owen….” Claire muttered, disbelieving, her heart fluttering in her throat.

She squealed then and pressed her hand to her mouth for a second before throwing herself at him, arms wrapped around his neck so tight she thought she would throttle them both in the process. His traveling bag hit the porch floor with a dull thud, and the next moment, his arms locked around her in a death grip. He smelled of snow and his aftershave and everything she grew to associate with him, and she inhaled deeply, unable to stop smiling, feeling like her face was about crack open.

“Missed you,” Owen murmured into her hair, finally kicking his bag into the hallway and pulling Claire inside before she froze to death in her thin sweater that was not meant for the outside wear when it was so cold.

He slammed the door closed behind them and Claire pulled back just far enough away to take in his face, her gaze skimming over the smiley lines in her corners of his eyes, his hair that was curling over his forehead because of the moisture clinging to it, the curve of his lips, not quite certain yet that she was actually seeing him.

“What are you doing here?” She asked, tracing her fingers along his jaw, his stubble prickling her fingertips.

Owen leaned into her touch without breaking the eye contact to kiss the palm of her hand.

“Couldn’t leave you alone on Christmas, could I?” He whispered.

Her chest tightened. “And when you called--”

“From the cab,” he confessed. “Surprise.”

Claire let out a shaky, excited laugh, and pulled up on her tiptoes to nuzzle into her cheek, melting into him, her fingers clutching at his overcoat that felt rough and cold to the touch, smelling faintly of the gasoline fumes of the car. The four weeks that she hadn’t seen him felt like forever now, and all she could do was try and seep in as much of him as she could before he was gone again so she could bottle up the memory and hold on to it later.

“What are you tired? Hungry?” She asked quietly.

“No. Yes.”

“Let me make something for you,” she offered. “There’s lasagna--”

“No, for this.” A hand on her cheek, he tilted her head up and captured her lips with his, urgent and desperate, his need shooting through Claire like a jolt of electric current that left her weak in the knees.

Her phone chirped in the kitchen, giving them both a start, and then proceeded to ring persistently.
“Take it,” Owen breathed out between the kisses.

“No.”

“Take it, Claire, it’ll only stress you out more if you don’t.” He pulled back and pecked her quickly on the tip of her nose.

“It’ll only be a second,” she promised peeling away from him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright.

Owen finally shrugged out of his jacket and kicked off his boots caked with the packed snow that was starting to melt, leaving slushy puddles on the floor, and followed Claire into the kitchen, rubbing his cold hands together.

“Hey, Karen!” He caught her say. “No, just at home… Well, actually--”

He slid over to where she was standing near the counter and wrapped his arms around her, “Don’t tell her anything.” His hoarse whisper sent a shiver down her body, effectively cutting Claire off.

“Oh, no, nothing. I was just…..” Her voice trailed off and her breath hitched when Owen pressed a kiss to her neck, feeling the flutter of her pulse with his lips while his hands slipped under the hem of her sweater and started to roam over her belly, her skin so smooth he felt like he could break it with his touch. “I was…” She allowed her eyes to drop shut when Owen’s fingers travelled along the waistband of her pants, not really hearing her sister over the blood rush in her ears. “I’ll call you later.”

Claire hung up without waiting for Karen’s response and turned around in the circle of Owen’s arms. “Great. Now she probably thinks I’m cheating on you,” she giggled, tracing her mouth along his jaw while her fingers carded through his hair.

“I don’t mind,” Owen chuckled gruffly.

“Really?” She drew back, one eyebrow arched quizzically.

He rolled his eyes. “That she thinks that. So long as you’re not cheating on me with me.”

“That’s not how--” she started, but he silenced her with another hard kiss, his hands siding up her body, skimming over the lines of her muscles, his palms still cold and calloused to her skin.

Claire arched her back, a low moan rising in her throat when he pushed her against the counter, trapping her between the cool granite and the heat radiating off of him and setting her blood on fire. She raised her arms, allowing him to pull her sweater off and toss it unceremoniously aside before he cupped her breast with hand and the back of her head with another, kissing her with an almost frightening desperation, his tongue darting past her teeth an into her mouth. Her belly warm with anticipation, she slid her fingers into the collar of his shirt and around his neck, gripping the hair on the back of his head, needing the proximity, lost in the familiar taste of him.

There was a hurried, dire need in every kiss, every touch, the clash of their lips and tongues and teeth against each other. Claire pushed his hooded shirt down his shoulders and tugged at his tee, almost ripping it off of him, skimming her fingers over his chest, palms splayed on his ribs, fingers digging into his flesh. He growled against her mouth when she scraped her nails down his sides, his muscle rippling under her touch as if she was shocking his at every point of contact.

Claire gasped when he pulled her slacks down and hoisted her onto the counted in one fluid motion, his eyes black with wanting, his gaze electrifying. She grabbed him by the belt loop of his
jeans, pulling him closer while his finger ran along the waistband of her panties, slipping in just far in to make her yearn for more and raising goosebumps all over her body.

“Owen…” her mouth dropped slightly open when he pushed a strap of her bra down her shoulder, his lips latching onto her neck while his hands worked on pushing his jeans down his hips and stepping out of them.

One whole month too long, he thought, burying his fingers in her hair and kissing her again, drinking her, drowning in the taste that haunted his dreams since the day they bid their goodbyes at the airport weeks ago. Smiling against his mouth, Claire teased her hand down his sternum, stroking him through the fabric of his boxes before nudging them down his hips to have Owen shove them away with a primal grunt of barely contained desire. He lifted her, helping her wriggle out of her panties, and then thrust into her with a needy growl before they even hit the floor.

Claire stilled around him, panting, her chest heaving and her nails digging into his shoulders, leaving pale-pink half-moon marks all over him.

“Want you so bad,” Owen mouthed soundlessly, marveling in the feeling of having her walls clenched around him, the anticipation of pleasure driving him mad.

The counter was high enough, but only barely so, leaving Claire perched on the very edge of it with her legs wrapped around his hips and his hand on the small of her back, keeping her safe in this precarious positon. Her huffed his want, snapping his hips up, testing their limitations, swallowed whole by the blackness of her widened pupils, the heat zinging from his core through his every nerve. Owen was used to tamping his instincts with her, holding back like she could break in his arms, but the weeks of missing her and needing her left him on the verge of losing his mind.

Claire nodded almost imperceptibly, and he threw himself into her, into the chaos of sensations, teetering on a brink of the void. She was moaning softly into his ear with each exhale, clutching and tugging and squeezing at him with every thrust, and he was falling, too fast and too soon, spiraling into her, gripping desperately onto her arms-waist-thighs, sleek with sweat.

“I’m sorry,” Owen murmured into her neck, breathless, Claire’s hands running over his shoulder, her body still singing to him. “Sorry.” He kissed his way up and along her jaw, cupping her face in his hands, their breaths ragged from the effort and mingled together.

“It’s okay,” she murmured, smoothing down his hair, brushing her palms over his cheeks, her knees still locked around his ribs.

“No, it’s not.”

Owen kissed her slowly and deeply before abandoning her lips to trail his mouth down the pale column of her neck as his shaking fingers finally managed to undo the clasp on her bra to drop it down to the counter. His mouth closed around her nipple while his hand cupped around her other breast, his thumb running over its hardened peak, his skin pricking with the sound of her sharp inhale.

Hands sliding over her sides and around her hips, he lifted her off the counted and carried her to the bedroom, spreading her on the mattress, feeling the heat inside him rise again as his mouth started its quest down her body. His tongue traced the curves of navel as his fingers moved toward her center, Claire’s hips rising to him in a silent invitation, her hands gripping fistsfuls of sheets, struggling to keep on breathing.

“Damn it, Grady,” she muttered, gasping when his mouth reached its final destination.
Owen chuckled and drew her knees wider apart, rubbing his bearded cheek on the inside of her thigh and coaxing a loud whimper out of her, teasing and tasting and caressing, hands firm on her thighs, holding her in place. She grasped his hair with a moan, ready for him, nails scraping over his scalp, the whole universe shifting around them. It never felt odd with Owen, never felt like asking for too much. He was giving willingly. With him, everything felt right.

She didn’t last long, shattering under his touch and the artful movement of his tongue between her legs, her body quaking with spurts pure pleasure while he kissed his way back up her body, nuzzling into her soft belly with a quiet snort, finally collapsing next to her, spent in the best way.

“Now it’s okay,” Owen whispered, kissing her breasts again, one and then another, before resting his head on her sternum, Claire’s rapid heartbeat pounding like a drum through him.

She let out a small, unsteady laugh, running her fingers slowly through his hair damp with sweat, pushing it back from his forehead. “We’ll have to bleach the kitchen,” she murmured thoughtfully, and he laughed, too, wrapping his arm possessively around her hips.

“Oh well, spring clean, winter clean…”

“Why didn’t you call?” Claire asked after a little while when her breathing evened out.

“Wanted it to be a surprise,” Owen rubbed his cheek against her ribs, making her giggle.

“Well, it worked,” she assured him, playing lazily with his curls, sated and drowsy. “And what’s with the secrecy? Why couldn’t I tell Karen you were back?”

He started tracing slow patterns on her hip with his hand, sending small shocks right through her, not oblivious to her subtle response. “Wanted to have you all to myself for a while,” he confessed.

“I thought you liked my family.”

Owen propped himself up on the elbow to look her properly in the face, taking in the reddened cheeks and the ocean-green on her eyes, the gentle bow of her red lips, struck by her beauty that started to consume him years ago and never stopped since, feeling utterly dumbfounded by how it was even possible that she was his.

“I love your family,” he promised her, then reached out to brush a strand of hair from her face. “But I’m not due to be back for a few more days, and we… it’s been so long since it was just the two of us, and I missed you so bad, Claire.”

His voice dropped as he watched her features soften and melt into something that resonated deep inside him, tugging at his very heart and snapping the strings that were holding it in place until it started to feel like it could flutter right out of his chest.

“And what did you have in mind?” She asked, one eyebrow arched.

His smile stretched wider and he allowed his gaze to travel up and down her body in a very suggestive way before their eyes met again, the echo of his desire reflecting in her own gaze. He scooted closed to her, a hand on her cheek and an arm looped around her waist as he rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him. “Oh, I think we’ll figure it out.”

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The late afternoon darkness had settled around them, crowding the corners, when Claire finally disentangled herself from Owen who’d dozed off earlier, exhausted from his trip. She paused
beside him for a moment, reaching almost involuntarily to touch his hair, to feel its softness between her fingers. Her lips tugged upwards when he stirred without waking up, burying his face deeper into the pillow, her pillow, struck momentarily by how much younger he looked in his sleep, almost boyish in the indigo twilight that coloured everything around them in greys and blues, her chest tight with missing him even when he was right here beside her.

She brushed a quick kiss to his forehead and then slipped from under the covers. Wrapped in one of Owen’s shirts, breathing his scent lingering on the fabric, she headed into the kitchen. The discarded garments of their clothing were strewn all over the floor, and she picked them up absently before diving into one of the cupboards, looking for something to eat, her stomach growling.

Grocery shopping wasn’t her forte, and without Owen around, she tended to forget about it altogether. There was, however, a box of Pop Tarts sitting on the upper shelve—

“Where’d you go?”

She turned to the sound of Owen’s voice to see him saunter into the kitchen wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants that hung low on his hips, yawning for all his was worth as he moved and scrubbing his hand down her face.

“I got hungry,” Claire smiled when he wrapped his arm around her and dropped a kiss into her hair.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” He murmured against her temple.

“Because then we wouldn’t get here anytime soon,” she pointed out, feeling his chest rumble with laughter.

“Probably,” Owen didn’t argue, running his palm along the small of her back. “Hey, where’s the tree by the way?”

“Huh?” Claire finally wrestled a package of Pop Tarts open and offered him one before biting into her own, only now remembering that they skipped lunch.

“The tree.” His gaze darted toward the living room across the hall. “There’s no tree.”

“Oh.” She chewed and swallowed. “Well, you weren’t supposed to come home until after Christmas and I was planning to spend it at Karen’s, so a tree for just me seemed excessive.”

Owen gaped at her, opening and closing his mouth comically. “That’s blasphemy,” he gasped in the end, making her giggle. “We’re getting one tomorrow.”

“It’s probably a few weeks too late for that.”

“C’mon,” he leaned against the sink and drew her toward him. “This whole state couldn’t possibly run out of Christmas trees even if it tried.”

“Even if it tried?” She echoed, skeptical.

Owen pecked her quickly on the lips. “Mm, gotta love the taste of cherry on you.”

The did clean the kitchen, and then Claire offered to order something to eat, maybe Chinese or a pizza, but Owen made them grilled cheese sandwiches instead, and they ate them squeezed into one armchair in the living room while The Santa Clause was playing on the TV and the snow continued to fall. She fell asleep with her legs stretched over his lap to the sound of the wind.
howling outside, lulled by the warmth of Owen’s body and the steady rise and fall of his chest against hers.

When the credits started to roll, he turned off the TV and picked her up to carry her to bed, turning the lights off along the way. Her eyes fluttered open when he lowered her down, blinking sleepily until his face came into full focus.

“Are you really here?” She asked quietly.

The corner of his mouth cured up into a small smile. He touched his had to her hair, traced his fingertips along her cheekbone, “I think so.”

Claire pulled him down and over her, her gaze darting between his eyes and the mischievous curve of his lips. “Prove it.”

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Claire turned out to be right, more or less. Most of the farms in the area had long been closed, having sold their supply of Christmas trees a couple of weeks ago.

Not that Owen would ever allow something quite as trivial as that to stop him. It was Wisconsin, for crying out loud! And they were going home with a tree even if he had to chop one himself! (Claire reminded him that it was illegal to reign in his enthusiasm.)

She didn’t really care, and she told him as much. It was not about the tree, and now that he was home, she honestly couldn’t care less about the technicalities of this holiday, but he was adamant, and persistent, and stubborn like only Owen Grady could be, and in the end, she decided not to swim against the current but follow it instead.

The clouds were low and heavy, the day grey, but snow had stopped sometime at night, and as they drove down the road, winding between the trees nearly buried in snowdrifts, she watched the occasional stray snowflakes float in the air, pushed around by the wind.

From the driver’s seat, Owen reached for her hand and squeezed it, a pleasant warmth spreading all over her body at his touch. They had a lazy morning, lounging in bed way past the time Claire would normally get up, even on the weekends. But when she woke up to Owen pressing small kisses to her bare shoulder, slowly working his way toward her neck and that spot behind her ear that always made her melt, and there was no way they were skipping that.

With a suddenness that left her dizzy, like reaching the top of the loop on a rollercoaster and then plunging down at the speed of light, Owen was there, taking up her every thought, all the smallest spaces of her life, and she wouldn’t have it any other way. Not for anything in the world. If he wanted to hunt down a Christmas tree – who cared?

Well, except it was starting to feel like a waste of time.

As if sensing what she was thinking, Owen promised, “Just one more place, and we’re heading to Walmart to buy a plastic one, okay?”

“Watch the road,” she told him, trying to swallow a smile.

It wasn’t just one – it was ever just one anything with him – but they got lucky at the second stop they made. A small place tucked off the main roads that Owen stumbled upon only because he got lost, despite his heated reassurances that he would never…
The farm wasn’t overly crowded, filled mostly with the other last-minute customers, roaming among the trees peppered with snow. The air smelled strongly of pine tar and complementary hot chocolate that was left on the picnic table in the gazebo, mixed with the scent of gingersnap cookies and chimney smoke. Like holiday, Karen would say.

“Told you,” Owen singsongs triumphantly, pulling Claire toward him by the thick scarf hanging around her neck and kissing her nose, flushed red in the cold. There were snowflakes on her eyelashes, melting from the heat of her body and glinting like diamond droplets, and he could swear she’d never looked more breathtaking to him.

“What?” Claire asked, watching him.

“Nothing.” He tucked a strand of her hair that the wind kept blowing in her face behind her ear, his fingertips lingering on her cheek. “It’s good to be home.”

It wasn’t until they picked their tree, treated themselves to hot chocolate and cookies and drove back to Madison that Owen dropped the bomb, tough.

Dressed in leggings and his sweatshirt, Claire was rummaging through a box of ornaments in the living room, looking for her favourite ones while Owen poked and prodded at the logs in the fireplace, trying to get the fire started, his face scrunched in concentration, and Claire’s fingers itched to smooth the crease between his eyebrows. The house wasn’t cold, but it was old and drafty, and there was something about the crackling of the wood on winter nights that begged for the comfort of fire.

The snow started again soon after they came back home and Owen wrestled the almost 6-foot tall tree into the living room, leaving a trail of pine needles in his wake and making the whole house smell like a wintry forest.

“Hey, do you know if there’s another box of ornaments?” Claire asked, looping her hair around her ears, her eyebrows knitted together. Considering the fact that she’d had the holiday stuff shoved into the farthest corner of the closet in her apartment in San Diego for almost a decade, it was a miracle she still had it, but not being able to locate something or another was still frustrating. “I can’t find the tinsel.” She glanced up when he didn’t respond. “Owen?”

“Huh?” He looked up, distracted.

“Is everything okay?”

He shifted the logs with the fire poker, sending a flurry of sparkles into the air before plopping down onto the floor. He rested his arms on his bent knees and ran a weary hand down his face and through his hair.

“I’m not going back,” he said after a moment or two. “I quit.”

Claire dropped the green globe decorated with gold back into the box and frowned, uncertain she’d heard him right. “You quit?” She echoed. “Why? And…. Were you going to mention it?”

Owen winced a little, looking sheepish by the second. “Of course, I was. It’s just… There were more important things to attend to.” He offered her a contemplative grin and reached his hand out, and she finally abandoned her attempts at decorating and took it, allowing him to pull her into his lap. “I’m sorry, I should’ve… I wanted to tell you sooner.” Owen’s hands locked behind her back, warm even though the layers of fabric.

“What happened?”
“Nothing. Nothing at all.” He shrugged and glanced quickly at the fire before meeting her eyes again; the flames reflected in her gaze, making it look like Claire herself was made of flame, confined in a human form. “I asked them for a transfer, closer to here,” he explained, running slow circles with his thumbs on her back. “There were no positions available. So I quit.” Owen let out a long exhale, bringing back everything he had mulled over before making the final decision.

Her hands slipped around his neck, playing absently with the hair on the back of his head. “I thought you liked it.”

“I did,” Owen admitted. “But I didn’t get off that godforsaken island so I could only see you every other month.” He twisted a lock of her hair around his fingers, enthralled by how alive and alight it seemed in his hand. “I missed you. And I want to… I want to have this,” he swept the room with his gaze, “every day. I want to be with you, period.”

He tugged her closer and rubbed his nose against her jaw, breathing everything that was Claire.

“I don’t want you doing it for me,” she whispered.

“I’m doing it for me,” Owen responded simply. “I mean, what’s the point? It’s just a job, I’ll find a new one. Anything. I don’t even care.”

If there was one thing that the island taught him, it was that everything could change in a heartbeat, their lives could turn upside down in a split second, changing every aspect of their being forever. He had almost lost her once already, and the memory still haunted him like it only happened yesterday. And if he couldn’t be with her, if he couldn’t come back to her every day or wake up not to her every morning, then what was he even doing?

Claire leaned into him, her breath on his temple. He didn’t hear so much as feel her heartbeat, the warmth and the sweet weight of her in his arms.

“Aren’t you worried you’ll get sick of seeing too much of me?” She asked quietly, a small smile tugging at her lips and shooting straight for his heart.

Owen’s hands slid up her thighs and behind her back, creeping under her sweatshirt. He pressed a kiss to her temple when her breath hitched, and then pulled her shirt off over her head, grinning at her for all he was worth. “There’s only one way to find out.”

…pale and smooth, Claire’s skin glowed in the firelight as she moved above him, her hair falling over her shoulders in heavy waves and her eyes dropping shut with every rock of her hips. Sprawled on the pile of their clothes beneath her, with his fingers digging into her thighs, Owen could barely tear his gaze away from her – so blissful and happy and so damn beautiful.

As her breathing grew ragged and erratic, he sat them up, cupping his hand behind Claire head and clashing his mouth to hers, swallowing her moan of surrender and release, muting her outcry of pure bliss. His hand found the small of her back to continue their movements while he trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down her neck until his lips closed around her breast, and she was shuddering in his arms, coming fully undone.

His hand tangled in her hair, he continued his quest, pumping his hips while she was riding out her orgasm until he, too, was groaning into her ear. Suddenly too weak to keep the upright position, he collapsed back, taking Claire with him, her face buried in his neck, pressing her lips to his throat, his collarbone while the world exploded around them.

“God, that was…” She started breathlessly.
Owen chuckled, tightening his grip on her, their skin sticky with sweat and the musk of sex wrapped around them like a blanket. “Yeah,” he agreed.

“You’re not leaving,” Claire repeated, as if still amazed by the news.

“Never.” A pause. “Wait a sec,” with a quick kiss to the crown of her head, Owen wiggled away from her to reach for his pants and dig out something from the pocket. When his palm opened, Claire saw his dog-tags, a silver chain pooling around the plates. He let them fall from his grasp, hanging between them for a few moment, and then put the chain over her head, pulling her hair from under it until the dog-tags nestled neatly in the crevice between her breasts, cool against her heated skin. “All yours now.”

Claire traced the length of the chain, feeling the engravings on the plates with her fingertips before her gaze fastened on Owen’s again.

“Mine.”

---

Zach and Gray were the first to burst into the house in a flurry of loud voices and scarves and hats, talking over each other like there ten of them, not two.

“What’s with the change of plans?” Karen huffed, following them inside with a dish wrapped in tinfoil in her hands.

“You didn’t have to bring anything,” Claire told her.

“Well, the dinner was supposed to be at my house and I cooked it--”

“Owen!” Someone shrieked in the depths of the house, probably Gray, but could be Zach, or both of them, and Karen’s eyebrows climbed all the way up to her hairline as she pulled off her coat.

“When did that happen?” She followed Claire into the kitchen to put her potato pie into the oven to keep it warm.

“A couple of days ago,” Claire admitted, not even bothering to hide her smile. “It was meant to be a surprise.”

In the living room, Owen was tackled down to the floor, laughing while the Christmas tree – properly decorated and adorned with twinkling lights – gleamed in the corner, a pile of presents nearly as high as the tree itself surrounding it like a wall.

Claire folded her arms over her chest, leaning against the doorframe and regarding the whole scene with a great deal of fondness.

“What do you think is going on here?” Karen asked, pausing next to her, trying oh so hard not to grin.

“Not sure, but it sure looks like fun.”

“Claire…”

She raised her hand. “I know, I know. I should’ve told you.”

“No, what I wanted to say was that you look happy.”
Claire looked at the man sitting on the floor, with the two boys in front of him, hanging hungrily on every word he was saying. She thought of what it was like to wake up next to him for the past few days, remembering the way he looked at her in the lazy moments between sleep and wakefulness, the way the sound of his voice was washing over her, making her feel whole.

Claire Dearing wasn’t the one to believe in the concept of blessings, but she wasn’t stupid not to see one when it was staring her straight in the face.

Chapter Summary

Claire gets something for Owen as his Secret Santa and it makes him realize that he's really not over her.

Chapter Notes

This is the last one, I think, and now I’m going to leave you alone for a while now and hopefully I’ll see y’all in 2017.

2 years ago

Claire dearly loved Simon Masrani.

She loved and deeply respected him as her boss and an exceptional human with the values that many could only dream of. There was something about his openness to the world and its endless possibilities that filled her sometimes with the fierce protectiveness, making her want to run faster and push harder, all so she could never see a flicker of disappointment cross his face. If there was anyone, she thought, who deserved to have their dreams come true, it was him.

And if she were completely honest with herself, she envied him just a little, too. Envied the fact that somehow he managed to grow old without growing up, holding on to everything that made the world interesting instead of tedious.

This was why she singlehandedly launched the Aqua Park in Jurassic World – because apparently showing the real dinosaurs to the world wasn’t enough and he wanted the resort to be more. And this was why she kept nodding and taking notes when he was talking about the Indominus Rex even though the mere idea of creating something from scratch seemed ludicrous to her. They had more than enough genetic material to squeeze several million years of evolution into this place. What would they need a hybrid for?

The investors were going crazy, though, and Simon was happy, and as his friend and his second-in-command, Claire couldn’t help feeling more than a little thrilled herself. Just a tiny bit.

Yet, there were times when she downright wanted to throttle his enthusiasm. Like when he suggested an Easter egg hunt for Easter last year. In a dinosaur park. Where they couldn’t exactly let people wander around as they pleased, and Claire knew that they would. (And they did, which was a nightmare.) Or when he wanted to have a Masquerade Ball for Halloween, ‘No costume – no entry’, and she had to somehow not only make it happen, but also find the time to hunt down a decent outfit for herself, deeming the sweatpants and a ratty tank top, which she’d wear if she didn’t have to attend that event not particularly appropriate.

And now it was his Secret Santa idea, which she honestly didn’t have any time or energy for, what with their business partners breathing down her neck about the revenue, the heat that threatened to
kill everything and everyone on the island, and the fact that they were so overbooked for the holidays the hotel was about to burst. Besides, everyone knew that there was no secret about the Secret Santa nonsense – people would talk, and then they would swap with one another for the names they were hoping to get. Just like elementary school all over again, except with the fake smiles because everything was about good manners now.

She certainly didn’t have it in her to actually search for a present for someone she probably never even spoke to, and with her luck, she’d get stuck with that Junior Accountant hired a week before, the one who was scared to so much as look at her. Or someone who not so discretely called her Iron Bitch. Couldn’t they just dish out an extra bonus and be done with it? No, Claire appreciated Simon’s efforts and the fact that he treated his employees like his family, but god, was it exhausting sometimes.

And now she was late for the very meeting where they all were supposed to write their names on pieces of paper, toss them into a bowl, and keep their fingers crossed for drawing someone they at the very least knew, all because the heel of her Jimmy Choos snapped right off when she was hurrying down the metal stairs at the I-Rex’s paddock this morning. They were still building the cage for the animal that Henry Wu promised would be taller than the T-Rex and about twice as scary. It was too early to think about that, not when it had only hatched last week and resembled a grey lizard right now. The incident with her shoes was devastating, however. Claire had just bought them. Not to mention the sprained ankle – because her internal pain over losing a pair of expensive footwear was simply not enough.

When she burst into the conference room at last, after having to swing by her office to change into Steve Maddens that she kept in the coat closet (and that didn’t go with the suit she was wearing), there was only a handful of folded pieces of paper left at the very bottom of the glass bowl, and all eyes were on her.

Claire muttered her excuses, and then, praying she’d end up with Zara or maybe Vivian, she reached in.

Owen Grady.

Her breath caught in her throat and tumbled out of her chest almost with a sob that she managed to hold back before anyone else heard it.

As if this day needed to get any worse.

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“Why are we doing this, again?” Owen asked on the night of the staff Christmas party, tugging impatiently at the knot of his tie and wishing he was sitting on the dock by his bungalow with a bottle of beer. It probably was humid as hell near the lagoon, but he would still very much prefer the company of mosquitoes to the shiny sea of low-cut dresses and expensive suits, surrounding him now. Somehow, this place with its top-notch cooling system felt more stifling than his house that never knew the existence of air-conditioning.

“Free food?” Barry suggested uncertainly, looking almost as out of place here as Owen felt, his eyes darting around with a mixture of curiosity and panic.

They shouldn’t even be here, Owen thought. This was a Masrani reception, but in his charming manner, Hoskins wiggled his way into being invited as well, so naturally, they rest of them ended up paying for it.
The food was probably good, that much Owen knew for certain. The very look of it screamed ‘chic’ and ‘exquisite’, and the abundance of alcohol certainly made the difference, but only barely so. This was not his scene, and the suit he’d only worn two or three times in his life felt like a straight jacket, stiffening his moves and making him feel trapped.

“Fair enough,” Owen muttered, grabbing a glass of something that had to be booze from the tray when a server passed by them and downed half of it in a simple gulp, wincing involuntarily when the drink burned its way down his throat and settled comfortably in his stomach.

His gaze skimmed over the crowd, taking in the gleaming jewelry that resembled the Christmas decorations hanging around a tad too much for it not to be ironic. He didn’t know these people, never met most of them, and much to his annoyance, they didn’t look like they wanted to make a run for the elevator the moment they had a chance. In fact, the majority of them seemed to be in their element, and Owen wondered if a little absentmindedly how they would feel if the situation was reversed and someone threw them into a paddock to deal with the animals they were trying to sell but probably never saw up-close. Somehow, knowing that he’d have an upper hand then made him feel better.

In the corner, a ten-foot tall tree looked like it had robbed a Cartier store, sparkling in the light of crystal chandeliers, the pale led-lights twinkling among the ornaments and between rows and layers of tinsel. A mound of presents was piled on the table sitting next to it, labeled with the names of the recipients to be distributed when the official part of the evening was over – meaning, after Simon gave his congratulatory speech and everyone was free to get drunk out of their minds.

Somewhere out there was a box or a parcel with his name on it, Owen mused, and maybe he was just a little bit curious about that.

Barry followed his gaze, taking a sip of his own drink and eyeing the crab cakes on the self-serve table with interest. “Who did you get?” He asked, raising his voice a little to be heard over the music.

“Huh?” Owen reached for the darned necktie again, stopping himself the last moment. Were those things designed to be this uncomfortable?

“For the Secret Santa thing,” Barry explained. “Who did you get?”

“That Lowery guy, from the Control room,” Owen replied, cringing inwardly at the memory of trying to come up with the present for someone he didn’t really know. He settled on a pair of high-tech headphone, good for the gamers the clerk told him. Lowery seemed like the type. “You know him?”

“The one that comes with a bag of sarcasm?”

“That’s him alright.” He chuckled. “You?”

“Zara Young. The new girl.” Barry answered. “Claire Dearing’s Assistant, I think.”

“Yeah,” Owen cleared his throat and finished his drink before the sound of the familiar name twisted his insides into a knot tight enough to leave him paralyzed for hours. He knew that from experience, the one he didn’t want to repeat.

He took another cursory glance around.

And speak of the devil.
Dressed in a blue halter dress that shimmied down to her ankles and with her hair pulled up into a shell-shaped twist, Claire was talking to the guy from the PR, if Owen was not mistaken, a flute of champagne in her hand and an easy smile on her face. She turned away when someone called her name, giving him a proper view of her exposed back and the wisps of hair curling at the nape of her neck, too short to be tucked into her ‘do.

His fingers curled into a fist, itching to touch them, trace the whole length of her spine with his fingertips, one vertebra after another.

Owen scowled at himself.

This woman was a menace, and if there was one thing he didn’t want to deal with tonight, it was her. Not when he was forced to squeeze into a suit and smile for hours on end instead of being left the hell alone. No, he and Claire Dearing were toxic to one another, and being in the same room with each other couldn’t possibly end without a mass catastrophe and some serious collateral damage.

He’d spent the 3 months that passed since their disaster of a date doing his best to stay out of her way for fear of having the world implode if they so much as said two words to one another, which wasn’t entirely impossible. She seemed to have that effect on the universe. Due to the emergency at the paddock, he had to cut the meeting regarding the festivities short, leaving before she arrived, and a part of him hoped she wouldn’t show up at all.

Fat chance!

“I need another drink,” Owen muttered, squeezing past Barry and allowing the crowd to swallow him, moving away from Claire Dearing as fast and as far as he possibly could.

And after a while it almost started to seem like he managed to dodge that bullet. Another glass of scotch later, the world had lost its sharp edges, and he even started to enjoy the evening, allowing himself to breathe out a sigh of relief. The music was fine, the food was good, and if he tried hard enough, he could almost pretend he wasn’t feeling her presence in the room.

At least until the time came to open the presents – the offer that was met with so much cheering Owen’s eardrums nearly burst.

Eventually, a rectangle-shaped package found its way into his hands. Carefully, he peeled off the wrapping paper that most definitely cost more than everything he ever owned, and underneath it, he found a book, his mouth curling up at the corner at the sight of it.

_Dinosaurs For Dummies_.

He snorted under his breath, ignoring the excited commotion of a couple hundred of grown-ups digging into their presents around him, their voices muffled by the sound of the tearing paper and the plastic packaging being ripped off. Well, at least his Secret Santa had a sense of humour.

Owen picked up the card that was attached to the present, not hoping for much. They were not supposed to sign them anyway. Yet, his smile slipped instantly and his heart clenched in his chest when his gaze ran over his own name.

He knew that handwriting.

He saw the exact same curve of w’s and e’s on a piece of paper Claire pulled out of her purse on their night out when they ran out of things to talk about. She’d printed out her itinerary and then added notes in the margins like she was studying for a test.
Truth be told, he’d probably recognize her penmanship in his sleep.

His throat dry, he scanned the crowd again, this time deliberately looking for the familiar face, his feet carrying him to her on the will of their own.

“Dinosaurs For Dummies? Clever.” He waved the book in front of Claire’s face when he finally managed to find her.

He thought his directness would catch her off-guard, but give it to Claire Dearing to never be surprised by anything. She merely arched her elegant eyebrows, barely holding back her amusement.

“I thought it was appropriate,” she shrugged. In her hands, Owen spotted a—sweater? God, who was crazy enough to give someone a sweater as a present when their skin was melting off after 3 minutes in the sun?

He shuffled his feet, acutely aware of the fact that the whole roomful of people fell back and it was just the two of them and the smell of pine and oranges hanging between them, mixed with the scent of her floral perfume.

“Is this your subtle way of telling me that I’m an idiot?” Owen asked, feeling brave, thanks to the alcohol circulating in his system and the intoxicating hope for the impossible.

Claire’s lips curved into a soft smile, the sharp glare he’d expected to receive nowhere to be found. She took in his suit and his obvious discomfort, and he made a conscious effort not to stare at her, his gaze having a real trouble staying on her eyes, slipping down to her lips painting bright red instead. And god, he wanted to kiss them so bad. Wanted to make her forget about that goddamn night and his crude jokes, erase their stupid date from their minds altogether and start anew.

She took a sip of her champagne, watching him over the rim of the glass. “Why don’t you figure this out for yourself… Mr. Grady?”

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Present day

If Owen had to define hell on Earth, he’d probably describe it as doing holiday shopping in New York a week before Christmas. The streets were packed with angry and cold people who either forgot to buy their presents earlier, or got slammed with the last-minute change of plans that left them cranky and unhappy. Bulky coats and heavy boots, crowds so thick it was hardly ever an option to choose where you were going, swallowed by the sea of shapeless forms whose mob mentality forced them to fight for every toaster and a pair of gloves till their last breath.

It was madness.

Aside from that, though, the Big Apple was magical.

The trip was Claire’s idea, a stop on their way to see her family in Wisconsin. She insisted they needed to see the biggest Christmas tree in the world, and everyone knew that no tree was as magnificent as the one they put in front of the Rockefeller Center, adorned with at least a ton of ornaments and wrapped in several miles of fairy lights. Standing before it last night, his arms wrapped around Claire to keep her warm, Owen felt like he was five again. Like everything was possible and the world was endless in its wondrous beauty.

Somewhere along the way, he forgot how to enjoy the small things and learning to do it again was
not an easy process. But he was trying. They both were. And every smile on Claire’s face, and the sound of her laughter was worth it, a thousand times over.

Except they didn’t bring the presents for her nephews with them, which was a huge tactical mistake. Hence being stuck in a mall now, instead of… well, making out on the top of the Empire State Building, like Owen was planning to.

He slipped his hand into Claire’s and weaved his fingers through hers, squeezing them. She turned to him, smiled, and his heart leaped all the way up into stratosphere.

“Almost done,” Claire promised him in a whisper, stretching up to brush a quick kiss to Owen’s cheek.

They were already loaded with enough bags and boxes and packets to put Santa Claus himself to shame, but there never seemed to be enough, and just as he would start to think they got it all, she’d remember something else, and on and on it went.

“Take your time,” Owen said, brushing a quick kiss to her temple. “Where to next?”

The bookstore was the last place on Claire’s list, and compared to the department stores, it was relatively empty, too, with only a handful of customers wandering among the shelves and book stacks – the kind of people who didn’t want to be murdered in a fight over a cheap TV set.

Immediately, Claire made a beeline for the teen fiction section. No dinosaurs – he was pretty certain Karen repeated that at least a hundred times. The Mitchell house was officially a dinosaur-free zone, both Zach and Gray permanently forbidden to so much as mention them – not that they wanted to. She told them not to bring anything, period, but they all knew Claire would ignore that request. But at least she knew not to buy anything prehistoric.

Owen paused in the non-fiction aisle when his gaze snatched a familiar cover.

*Dinosaurs For Dummies.*

The exact same one as the copy that he had no other choice but to leave on the island when they were evacuated, alongside with everything else he owned in this world. He’d almost forgotten about it. It was a funny book, though – he did make an effort to flip through it after that party, smirking under his breath at the ‘kindergarten’ level of information provided in it. Yet, at the time he couldn’t help feeling thrilled to hold something that Claire picked specifically for him, and he had no doubt that she did. This was the kind of present that had Claire Dearing written all over it.

Well, this was when his hopes for getting over her went down the drain.

“Were you looking for something?” Claire asked him when they met at the checkout register 15 minutes later, a stack of young adult novels balancing precariously in her hands.

“No,” he cleared his throat. “Just browsing.”

He reached for his wallet, trying not to think of the book he’d already paid for, neatly tucked away in one of the other bags where she wouldn’t see it straight away.

They returned to their hotel room afterwards – to leave the purchases and catch a breath after the mayhem of the holiday shopping, Owen’s ears ringing with the silence of their suite after several hours of chatter and commotion everywhere around him. For a moment, it was like he could actually breathe again. Hell, he cold finally hear himself think.
He found the book in their bags while Claire was on the phone, and then slid up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist, pushing her hair away and pressing a kiss to her neck.

“I have something for you,” he murmured, smiling at the sound of her subtle gasp.

“I thought we were going to eat first,” Claire noted without making an attempt to pull away, but sinking into him instead.

“Not that, but I like the way you think.” Owen laughed, then plopped down onto the couch and pulled her with him until she was sitting in his lap, her hands linked behind his neck. “Look. Remember that?” He chuckled under his breath.

Claire’s eyes widened when she saw the book he was holding. She took it from him, her fingers skimming over the cover. “Oh, god… where did you—I can’t believe you never called me.”

Owen’s jaw dropped and he blinked at her, confused and uncertain that he’d heard her right. “Say what, again?”

She sighed and shook her head, looking at him with exasperated patience. “I was offering you a truce, Owen. Our date was mess, but with that book… I thought you’d get it and call me again.”

He coughed. “I thought you were trying to tell me I was a moron.”


His expression grew pained. “Honey, you should’ve been more direct. Especially if you knew that I was slow.”

“How much more direct could I possibly be? Should I have thrown myself at you?”

“That would’ve worked, yeah.”

“You’re impossible.” Claire began to pull away from him, but Owen held her firmly right where she was, his hands moving soothingly over her waist.

“And yet, you ended up stuck with me anyway.”

She pushed his hair back from his forehead, and Owen leaned in and kissed the inside of her wrist, his eyes growing darker by the second, the playfulness shifting to love, and nothing was funny anymore.

“You know what?” She muttered, cupping his face with her hands. “I’m not really that hungry.”
Prompt: we’re stuck on the top of a Ferris Wheel together and i only got on next to you because i really didn’t want to wait for the next go-around ??

It was a mistake.

They shouldn’t have come here.

Claire knew it the moment they left the quiet comfort of a side street and stepped onto the promenade that ran along the bay, pulled instantly into a crowd so thick and loud it looked like the 4th of July parade, not New Year’s Eve.

She swallowed uneasily, her eyes darting around in alarm. Too many colours, too many voices blending into a cacophony that her mind refused to process. Her fingers curled into tight fists until Claire could feel her nails dig into the soft flesh of her palms, and it was the only thing that stopped her from turning around and bolting where they came from so she could catch her breath and put an end to the sensory assault that felt so overwhelming she wanted to curl in on herself and disappear.

Even now, a year after the incident on Isla Nublar, she was not doing well with large congregations of people, her body going into a full combat mode and her senses growing so sharp it almost hurt. Too much of everything all at once, and she couldn’t help but look for a safe exit. Supermarkets were bad enough – she would start with a cursory check and move through the aisles in a strategical order, aware of how insane it was, but unable to control it. This? This was a nightmare. Last week, she’d spent an hour in the parking lot outside Whole Foods when someone’s car backfired and her body forgot how to breathe. What was she going to do if someone set off a firecracker here? Stop, drop and roll?

“Aunt Claire, look! There!” Gray was tugging at her hand, pulling her out of her personal hell that her brain had turned into after the island, his voice breaking the ice that rendered her paralyzed for a few moments.

Claire followed his gaze, finally noticing what caught his attention.

One of the hotels was doing a full-blown New Year’s Eve fair or something of that sort, complete with the champagne fountain and an honest-to-god Ferris Wheel and a few other rides. Even from their spot a good three hundred feet away from it, she could hear the music and smell cotton candy, her stomach churning uncomfortably. Yet, she followed the boy obediently, knowing that any resistance was futile.

Of course, they would want to come watch the fireworks. She should have known that from the start.

“You okay?” Karen asked quietly, making Claire wonder just how shaken she looked, thrown smack into the middle of her worst nightmare.

She nodded automatically, offered her sister a crooked smile and didn’t say a word for fear of
starting to scream. Had it been Claire’s choice, she’d be saying goodbye to this year curled up on her couch with a glass of wine, trying to block out the explosions in the sky outside her window. But when Karen invited herself and the boys over to California for the holidays, this plan went out the window. She had enough sense to at least try to pretend it was for their sake and not because Claire went off the grid again, and she was getting worried.

Naturally, keeping the kids locked up in the house for nearly two weeks was not an option. They did the parks, and the beach, and the malls, and so much more, until Claire learned not to see the unasked questions in her sister’s eyes like they were not there at all. They kept doing that dance when they both pretended that everything was fine and peachy, and frankly, Claire didn’t want to have it any other way. She had nothing to tell them, nothing that would make them feel better, at least. She was coping as best she could, end of story. Yes, her life was a mess, but she had a job, and as far as social norms were concerned, she was doing great. Everything else… well, she hoped it would get better eventually. One day, she might wake up and feel whole again.

Zach and Gray were trudging ahead of them, easily maneuvering their way through a mass of people, leaving her and Karen behind.

“Wait for us at the gate!” Karen called after them, her voice muffled by a few thousand others around them. Still, Zach gave her a wave of acknowledgement, and she breathed a sigh of relief, both she and Claire slowing down. Claire bit her lip and tucked her hands into the pockets of her light jacket, expecting yet another Maybe you should see someone speech. As in, therapy. As if, You’re a lost cause. Instead, her sister asked, “Is it always this warm in December?”

Claire blinked, surprised by the question.

It wasn’t warm, not by Californian standards, and the breeze coming from the ocean made her shiver. But, of course, compared to Wisconsin, it probably felt like tropical climate to them. Hell, the boys didn’t even need jackets, both of them perfectly comfortable in their hoodies. It had been so long since she had to deal with the real winter, Claire almost forgot what it was like.

“Normally, yes,” she responded, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

She really did appreciate having Karen around, even just for a while; having the voices of Zach and Gray fill the rooms and bounce off the walls and make her house feel alive. They’d grown so much in the months since she last saw them, Zach towering over her and Karen, and Gray almost as tall as them as well. She just wished they’d stop tiptoeing around her like she was going to break and fall apart if they so much as sneezed. At times, it felt like she had to tote not only her own issues around, but the weight of their worries as well, and that was the one thing she didn’t think she was strong enough for, all the stiches keeping her together barely holding on.

Closer to the main source of entertainment, the sidewalks were even more packed, the voices louder, the laughter more excited. Claire’s senses tunneled as she tried to push the word ‘danger’ out of her mind.

The boys were waiting for them near the gate, as instructed. And with them was—

Claire’s heart stopped.

The last time she saw Owen Grady was eight months ago and the things between them ended—well, they ended. And on a rather ugly note, too.

After the incident, they stayed together for a while, holding on to one another to save whatever shreds of sanity they had left. The investigation and the trial were brutal, the press was going after
them like a pack of rabid dogs, and in the midst of it all were tears and sleepless nights, the
nightmares that threatened to suck them into the void and never let them go, and the need not to be
alone. Sometimes, she couldn’t help but feel like the aftermath of the tragedy ripped her into pieces
so small she would never be able to put them back together, and even if she did, they would never
fit right.

And when it got better, when the fog started to lift and the hellhounds backed off, looking for a
new victim to sink their bloodied teeth into, Claire did what she knew how to do best. She put her
armour back on and pushed him away, scared of getting too attached and not trusting herself to be
objective as far as Owen Grady was concerned. And after a while, Owen got tired of banging on
that door and trying to break through to her. He called her selfish, she called him heartless; he told
her she couldn’t run away from herself, she told him to get out.

He did.

He stayed with InGen for a while, and even went back to the island for the post-incident clean-up
to make sure his raptor was safe; returned briefly to the NAVY afterwards, then quit and came
back to California because his lease still wasn’t over.

Claire knew all this from the snippets of information her nephews shared in passing. She was never
brave enough to ask anything directly. Not that she had any right to, either. She’d spent the first
couple of months after their breakup feeling catatonic and listening to the small voice in her head telling
her that she knew he was going to leave anyway, unable to shut it down. Your fault, your fault,
your fault… And then she started over.

All things considered, she did not expect to see him tonight.

“Owen!” Karen’s fake-cheerful voice broke through the haze in her head, uncharacteristically loud
and startling, and then the rest of the world burst right back in as well. The music, the laughter, the
revving of an engine somewhere in the alley, muffled announcements in the speakerphones hanging
from the trees.

For a moment there, a black hole inside Claire that he’d left behind opened up again, and she was
scared it would turn her inside out, leaving her unable to claw her way out of it again.

“What a… nice surprise!” Karen added when no one else said anything for a few seconds, and the
desire to fill the pause grew unbearable.

“Yeah, well….” He ran his hand over his hair, glanced at the boys beaming next to him, cleared
his throat, then offered Karen a small smile that looked somewhat tight at the edges. “This is
where the fun is.” His gaze shifted. “Claire.”

The sound of her name coming from his mouth knocked her world right off its axis.

“What can we go in now?” Gray cut in, bouncing on the balls of his feet with anticipation.

Karen’s eyes darted toward Claire, and she nodded, and the next thing they knew, Zach and Gray
dragged Owen away until the three of them disappeared from the view.

Claire sucked in a sharp breath when her lungs started to burn, her ears still ringing with the sound
of his voice and her skin prickling like she was shocked by an exposed wire. In her chest, her heart
continued to fold in on itself, and she wondered how long it would take for it to disappear
altogether.

“Claire?”
She turned slowly to find an ocean of worry in her sister’s eyes, its waves raging and trying to drag Claire all the way down to the bottom.

“A little heads-up would’ve been nice,” she muttered in a strained voice.

“I didn’t know, I swear,” Karen said quickly, fiddling nervously with her necklace. “I would never… Look, I don’t know what happened between you—”

“Nothing happened,” Claire cut her off.

“—but it was probably Gray who invited him to come along.”

“I didn’t know they were still in touch.”

Karen shrugged, relaxing a bit now that it started to look like the storm had passed and her sister was not going to turn into a puddle of goo. “He told them they could call anytime if they needed anything.” A pause. “It’s not like I can do much about it.”

“You’re their mother,” Claire breathed out not without accusation.

“It’s not what I meant.” She sighed. “He’s helping them.”

“That’s what the therapy is for.” It was a mean and petty thing to say, and the words left a foul aftertaste in her mouth, but Claire was so damn tired of being a collateral damage in someone else’s lives.

They started slowly toward the rides and a row of booths lining the sidewalk. “The therapy wasn’t working. I can drag them into the room, but I can’t make them talk. And they actually talk to Owen. Zach’s grades improved, Gray started to sleep better. You know how bad it was in the beginning.”

She did. The nightmares, the memories fueled by the reports on the news showing the footage none of them had seen before – it took a toll on her as well. What it did to two traumatized kids, she couldn’t even begin to imagine, and what kind of a monster she was not to want what was best for them?

Claire pursed her lips together, trying to stay focused on not losing it.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She asked after a few minutes, her eyes snatching Owen’s tall frame from the crowd. He was paying for three packets of cotton candy and funny New Year’s glasses, Gray smiling from ear to ear and Zach smirking at whatever Owen was saying, both of them enthralled by the prospect of having him there.

He didn’t change much, she noted absently. Lost some weight maybe, but bulked up a bit in the shoulders. His hair needed a cut, curling at the ends near his neck, and a five o’clock scruff was spilling down his cheeks – she still remember the feel of it against her palms, and some other parts of her body, both scratchy and soft at once. The memory made her cheeks grow hot, but Claire hoped she could chalk it off to the wind if needed be.

She used to hope he’d come back. And then she used to hope she’d run into him somewhere on the street. And then the night would come, tearing down the veil of pretenses, and she would wish she’d never met him at all.

“Because it has nothing to do with you, Claire. If he wasn’t here tonight – and again, I didn’t know he would be – what difference would it make?”
All the difference in the world, Claire thought. Because despite their breakup and the words they tossed at one another, all the hurtful feelings that were left piled up between them, he still cared. And that was something she didn’t know how to live with.

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The evening stretched before them, the lights getting brighter, the laughter louder, the people around them turning into smudges of every colour in existence. Claire’s senses sharpened, as they tended to do in the dark, and she couldn’t help but look over her shoulder now and then, half-expecting to see a set of teeth aiming for her.

“You don’t have to do it,” Karen told Owen the next time the merry trio reappeared before them, loaded with hot dogs and fries, referring to the fact that he was basically babysitting her offspring.

“I know, but we’re having fun,” Owen promised her, ruffling Gray’s hair and pointedly pretending that Claire wasn’t even there while she also tried to ignore him, scared of what she’d see in his eyes if she looked too closely. Maybe the same fear and longing and confusion that seemed to be fueling her own existence.

She was getting good at that, at recognizing the equally damaged. Except her own broken pieces she could handle. Owen’s? She wasn’t so sure.

How they ended up in line for the Ferris Wheel, she had no idea. One moment they were seemingly just standing around, and Gray was slurping his coke, and Zach was doing that thing when he would casually push his hair back from his forehead if a cute girl was around, while Karen was trying to fill in the pauses before all five of them were crushed by the space between the words that loomed around them, and then suddenly there was a break in the crowd and a bored-looking ride attendant was ushering them in twos toward the slowly moving Ferris Wheel, nearly as tall as those that they had at Disneyland.

Zach pushed past his brother and sprinted ahead, and after a short hesitation, Gray yipped and followed him, his sandy hair tousled by the breeze.

Claire tried to step aside, but the crowd carried her forward, a sea of people propelling her straight ahead, and then she was sitting on a hard plastic bench a row behind her nephews, making big eyes at Karen who managed to safely stay on the other side of the fence.

“Oh no, I’m sitting this one out,” Karen called out, raising her hands and shaking her head.

“Sir?” The ride attendant turned to Owen, disinterested but determined to follow the safety protocol. “In or out.”

“Owen, come on!” Gray called and both boys waved at him to hurry up.

Claire thought he would bolt. If she were him, she’d probably make a beeline for the bay and leap into the water. There was a flicker of panic on his face, or maybe Claire simply wanted to see it, and the Ferris Wheel was moving ever so slowly, lifting the weight off her chest with every second – soon, it would be too late for him to join in and he would have to wait for the next round.

She let out a breath of relief--

And then the bench beneath her shuddered when Owen plopped down next to her, his closeness effectively knocking all wind out of her body, and it was too late. The safety bar snapped shut, trapping them in this place, in the moment.
She was going to kill Karen for allowing this to happen.

The crowd below them started to grow smaller with every passing moment, and the wind, unobstructed by the structures and people began to get stronger, tasting of salt and ferociously throwing Claire’s hair in her eyes. She shivered and sank deeper into the bench, taking note of the muffled sound of the music she could hardly hear anymore. For a moment, the distance between her and the rest of the world felt almost liberating, and the darkens felt safe for once. And if she tried hard enough, she could almost imagine that she couldn’t feel the warmth of Owen’s body next to her, couldn’t smell his aftershave – the very same scent that stayed on her pillowcases for months after he had left, couldn’t see him glance at her out of the corner of his eye at the exact same moments she happened to glance at him.

They stayed silent, and she chose to focus on her nephews in the seat in from on them – their heads turning left and right, fingers pointing at something or another in the distance. From this far up, they could see the whole city gleaming and flickering below them like a sea of fairy light. Their presence felt comforting, their excitement reassuring, and she had to admit that the view was damn nice from up here. It had been a while since she felt that the world was lying at her feet.

And then the Ferris Wheel creaked and stopped moving with an abrupt jerk. Someone gasped, someone else yelped, a child started to cry.

“Aunt Claire?” Gray was looking over his shoulder at her, his eyes wide with panic.


“It’s alright,” she said quickly and looked down at the control booth where the ride attendant was glancing up now and then while saying something into his headpiece, his face puckered with confusion. “Everything is fine. It’s just a minor glitch, we’ll be moving again soon.”

“It’s okay, guys. Stay put,” Owen added, and she scowled inwardly at how much calmer and not as pathetically fake he sounded. Almost relaxed.

He was good like that. Very good, in fact. He managed to chase the demons haunting her dreams away with a soothing touch of his hands and a whisper that would cloud her mind and keep it hidden from the monsters. Claire hadn’t slept for a month after their breakup, torn apart by the hell that her mind had turned into.

No wonder it worked this time, too. Both boys turned away and slunk in their seat, their sneaker-clad feet dangling almost lazily as they continued to talk quietly.

“Relax, Claire. I’m not here to invade your personal space,” Owen scoffed when she shifted, moving an inch or two further away from him. “They asked me to come, is all.”

“I didn’t say you were,” she retorted icily, her hopes for not having to exchange another word with him getting washed down the drain.

He offered her a grimace of a cynical smile. “It’s what you’re thinking. Always have been.”

Claire turned away and stared at the vast black canvas of the ocean below them. “How would you know? You left.”

“Because you told me to.”

“You needed an excuse, I gave you one. I don’t see what you’re complaining about now.”
“I didn’t need an excuse for anything,” he muttered, shaking his head and looking straight ahead. “I loved you and you told me to get lost. You chose to lock yourself in a glass coffin and watch the life go by. How’s it working out for you, by the way?”

She inhaled sharply, feeling his words land on her like blows, leaving her heart bruised and bleeding.

“You have no right to judge my life, Owen!”

He snapped his head around, his gaze hard and unapologetic, and Claire was grateful for the darkness, for the dim lights that saved her from the worst of it. “What you have is not a life! It’s hiding behind those castle walls that you’ve built because you’re scared of feeling anything.”

“This is not the right time,” she said stiffly.

“It’s never the right time. It’s never the right place, either. It’s never the right anything, Claire. Never was and never will be because you can’t compartmentalize people and relationships. You can’t put labels on them and shove them into perfectly shaped boxes and store them away. Life is messy, and sometimes things happen. You deal with them and move on. You don’t bury yourself in your house because you’re too scared of being alive. That’s what only cowards do.”

He might have as well slapped her.

“You want to talk about being a coward?” She hissed. “Fine! How about your obsession with the goddamn island? If I never was able to move on, then neither were you.”

Owen’s jaw clenched. “That’s not the same thing. I have not pushed everyone who cared about me away just because dealing with them was inconvenient.”

Her hand clutched the metal bar in front of her so tight her knuckles turned white. “I did no such thing. You walked away because you wanted to. Don’t you dare put it on me.”

“I walked away because I couldn’t fight your battles for you. You didn’t want me there. You wanted to be right in your assumption that everyone leaves. Happy now?”

“You’re no better than me, and you know it.”

“At least I’m trying.”

Her eyes narrowed and she snickered. “Is that what you’re doing? Is that why you’re still here and not across the world somewhere, saving another dinosaur?”

“I am still here because I only ever felt sane when I was with you.”

And there it was, the last nail in her coffin.

Claire’s blood rushed out of her head and into her fingertips, making them tingle like someone suddenly punctured them with a million tiny needles, her skin hot and her breath nowhere to be found.

He was not wrong, not at all. If saving her from the madness of the world was what Owen did best, then running away from actually living her life was Claire’s forte. She shut herself off on the island for as long as she could, and when that stopping being an option, she chose to pretend that she didn’t need anyone. Because she was Claire Dearing. Because she didn’t know how to need people.
Needing people was messy. Needing people was terrifying. Needing people was throwing herself into the abyss and trusting them to catch her. No safety nets, no \textit{control}, just the magic of free falling.

“Claire?” Owen’s voice broke through to her across the fog.

She blinked.

His face was right in front of hers, his hands on her cheeks, and his eyes so pained his gaze was slicing into her like a knife. How long had she been out? Not long. They were still stuck on the top of the Ferris Wheel, with the world hovering far below. His expression softened when she managed to focus on him and take in a shaky breath.

“Good girl,” he murmured. “Breathe, okay?”

“I missed you,” she mouthed soundlessly when his thumb ran over her cheek because there was nothing else left to say.

Owen’s relieved smile slipped and floated away, and his fingers twitched slightly on her face. She counted to three in her mind. Then to five. Then to ten.

Her gaze dropped to his mouth.

The clock struck midnight.

His lips crashed against hers as the sky around them exploded.

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The pounding on the door awoke Owen at 5 in the morning. Loud and demanding, it snatched him out of his restless slumber that kept him teetering on the verge between sleep and wakefulness and dragged him into the hall where he expected to see the world ending, no less.

He checked the time and grimaced, ran his hand through his hair while stifling a yawn and finally pulled the door open.

“You can’t do that, Owen.” The words tumbled out of Claire’s mouth and scattered around his hallway, resonating against the walls and every fiber of his body. “You can’t tell me that you loved me and then walk away like nothing happened.”

It took them 15 minutes to fix whenever was wrong with the Ferris Wheel and get everyone back down. The fireworks were still lighting up the sky in red and green and blue and every colour in-between when the boys and then Claire and Owen finally stepped on the solid ground again. And before Claire knew it, he was mumbling some lame excuses and making a hasty escape, her lips still burning and her mind reeling, crowded with the question she didn’t know how to ask.

And she \textit{needed} to know.

Hence coaxing Owen’s address out of Gray and driving here at the crack of dawn because if she didn’t, she would go crazy, her body humming with enough adrenaline to send her all the way to the moon.

“Love,” he corrected her.

She blinked. “What?”
“Present tense. Still do.” For a long moment, they simply looked at one another. “What do you want, Claire?”

“I don’t know how to do it,” she whispered, her voice cracking and breaking.

“Do what?”

“Not be afraid.”

She looked small and lost and fragile, and a jolt of protectiveness flared up inside Owen, all the way from the heart to the tips of his toes. He swallowed, his head spinning.

“Claire…”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? That you loved me?”

He shuffled from foot to foot and shrugged sheepishly, very aware of his old shirt and stretched sweatpants, and the bedhead that didn’t go well with this moment. “I thought you knew.”

She let out a shaky laugh. “You’re the one who can read minds, not me.” Owen moved aside and opened the door wider to allow her to step in. “I’m not good at this, Owen. At everything you want me to be.” Her gaze skittered around the semi-dark apartment, and for a moment, he thought she was going to sprint away.

“I don’t want you to be anything.” He closed the door, an odd kind of calmness settling over him. “I want you to be you, and I want you to know that it’s enough.”

Claire tilted her head to her shoulder, studying him closely. “What if it doesn’t work again?”

“Then we’ll keep trying until it does,” he said simply.

She crossed the distance between them and pressed her mouth to his, her palm on his jaw. He could still smell the ocean on her skin, her clothes, her hair. They stumbled into the hallway, tripping over the shoes strewn over the floor and nearly falling. Owen steadied them with one hand on the small of her back and another one on the wall as Claire clutched his shirt, bunching it in her fingers.

“Sorry,” Owen muttered against her lips, kicking his boots out of the way.

“Don’t stop,” she murmured between the kisses. “Please don’t stop…”

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“So, are you going to tell me what happened last night?” Karen asked, wrapping her jacket tighter around her body to shield it from the wind coming from the surf, her eyes narrowed slightly against the sun and the wisps of hair that escaped her ponytail fluttering against her cheeks.

“No,” Claire smiled without looking at her sister.

This had been going on for hours now, ever since she showed up at home at 11 in the morning just as her family was finishing their breakfast and started artfully dodging their questions and avoiding the looks they were giving her and the hushed whispers behind her back. The smile gave her away, Claire figured that much. They didn’t need to know the rest. Not yet.

Their eyes grew even wider, crowded with a myriad of questions, when Owen showed up at her place an hour later to take them all to the beach, beaming so bright it almost hurt to look directly at
him.

“Is that a hickey?” Karen asked, making sure her sons were out of the earshot, an eyebrow arched curiously as she eyed a mark on Owen’s neck.

He grinned and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans, looking at Claire like she was the center of his entire universe.

And now he was flying kites with the boys on the empty stretch of sand, their shouts swallowed by the thunderous crashing of the waves against the beach and hungry cries of seagulls circling over the water. The wind was tugging at the ropes, trying to snatch them out of their hands, their unzipped hoodies flapping around like wings, and their faces scrunched with a happy concentration.

“That’s just mean,” Karen sighed, shaking her head. “He’s good for you,” she added after a few moments when Claire didn’t respond.

“He is,” Claire agreed softly, and then turned to her sister. “I have a feeling it will be a good year. For all of us.”
He didn’t know who she was.

Of course, he didn’t know who she was. If he did, Owen would never have the guts to actually ask her out. He’d heard the name Claire Dearing long before he saw the face to associate with it, and she had quite a reputation in the park. As far as he was aware, she was practically a local Dementor of sorts, swooping in unannounced and sucking out the souls of the innocent. A nightmare in the human form, or so the rumor had it.

In all fairness, it would never even cross his mind to connect this kind of image with the woman he spotted at the resort when he drove over there from the paddock to sign some leftover HR paperwork before his job with the raptors truly started. Red hair, curious green eyes, and a delicate curve of brightly painted lips – the hot afternoon breeze was throwing her hair in her face as she stood outside the main administrative building, talking to one of the handlers. Owen grew to know how to spot those – tanned skin and khaki pants, usually, and an instinct to look over their shoulder now and then even when there were no animals around. The latter Owen couldn’t blame them for.

The woman, however, looked nothing like someone who would wreak havoc and leave panic and fear in its wake. She ws stunning.

Thinking about that day, he wondered sometimes if their lives would turn out differently if someone gave him a heads up and maybe singled her out in the sea of faces. Alas, he was a ‘fresh meat’ and nobody cared.

Right now, Claire was sitting at the dining table in his bungalow, typing away at light speed on her laptop, trying to finish a report or an email or something just as ridiculously boring, and it was driving him insane. But at least she was a pleasure to look at.

Dressed in nothing but his shirt, so big if looked like a mini-dress on her, with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows and thin-rimmed glasses perches on the bridge of her nose, she was chewing on her lip in concentration, and there was only so much he could do to stay in his spot on the couch and let her work. This was the rule. She didn’t mind spending the night so long as he wasn’t getting in the way when she had issues to take care of, and what kind of a moron would he be to object?

Her hair was still mussed from when he showed her just how he missed her since he last saw her this morning an hour ago, and Owen was very much aware of the goofy smile plastered on his face, following the movement of her hand as she tucked the strands, curling in the humidity of his house behind her ear every now and then, her foot tapping absently on the floor whenever she paused to re-read a finished paragraph.

If anyone told him six months ago that they’d end up here, like this, he wouldn’t believe them, and then he’d probably spend every night praying that they were right. Their first date was a mess, but the kiss at the end of it that stretched out until the early hours of the morning proved that they had something to work with, and man, was he glad about taking that shot!
“Come on, Claire, it won’t be that long,” he prodded again.

There was fair of forts happening on the mainland next week, and after being stuck on the island for nearly 8 months now, Owen was starting to lose his mind. He wasn’t bored, per se, the job keeping him busy enough to make the days fly by in a blur, but he desperately craved the change of scenery. Besides, Claire insisted they keep their relationship under wraps in the park, hating the idea of the gossip mill churning them into a pulp, but if they managed to get away for the weekend, it wouldn’t be an issue. For the reasons he was still trying to get in terms with, Owen desperately wanted to have some normalcy with her – not just sex, although it was so good he wondered how he even made it through 35 years and 3 months of his life without it, but the simple stuff, like holding hands, damn it!

“I told you, my calendar is full,” she sighed.

He paused the video game he was trying – and failing – to occupy himself with while she was busy. “Well, that’s an easy fix. Just take a day out of it.” She gave him a look over the rims over her glasses, struggling not to smile. “What? Do I need to start telling chemistry jokes to get a reaction from you?” He added solemnly.

“What are you, 12?” She shook her head, tuning back to the screen, but her lips were quivering, the smile ready to blossom and turn him into a pile of ashes with its brightness.

“Just saying,” he shrugged, unpausing the game again, although he’d lost track of what he was doing or what it was about at all. “We could try that seafood diet you keep talking about. Like, you see the food, and you eat it.”

Claire exhaled with exasperation. “Another pun, and you’re sleeping on the couch tonight,” she threatened mildly.

“This is my house,” he pointed out defensively.

“Would you like to move the party to my place?” She enquired, an eyebrow arched.

Owen regarded her grimly. “Your phone’s ringing nonstop when we’re there.”

“Lucky for you, it doesn’t work here,” Claire rolled her eyes. “There’s no reception in this part of the island.” She snorted for good measure as if it was his personal fault, and he offered her a cheeky grin in response, showing that he did consider himself quite lucky in this regard, indeed.

“Only on the roof,” Owen added, and she finally closed the laptop and pushed it away, an exasperated groan bubbling up in her chest. She pushed her hand through her air, and glared at him in a silent reminder that he was walking on a very thin ice here.

As a woman in a position of power who didn’t like to share it, Claire was rather fond of making him aware of the fact that this relationship was happening on her terms, and for the first month he almost believed her, except the goddamn reputation that everyone was pushing on her had nothing to do with the person she really was, and maybe she wasn’t willing to relinquish the control easily, but he was getting good at coaxing it out of her, one kiss at a time.

Owen tossed the controller on the coffee table and uncurled from the couch, padding across the living room-slash-kitchen until he was standing behind her chair, hands gripping its back. Claire looked up as he leaned down to plant a kiss in her hair, and his lips ended up on her forehead instead. Owen’s lips curled slightly. He loved the way she smelled – of vanilla, his laundry detergent, and sex, mixed with the scent of the jungle that effectively permeated into their skin
form hanging around them like a cloud 24/7.

“Two days,” he whispered, catching her eyes and holding her gaze.

Claire turned around and allowed him to pull her up to her feet. He took off her gasses carefully and put them on the top of her laptop before threading his fingers through her hair, her face lifted up to his and his gaze roaming around her features, taking in the details – the curve of her eyebrows, the slight worry crease on her forehead, the goddamn freckles. God, she was so beautiful.

“I’ll think about it,” Claire said at last, knowing that it was a losing battle, and his grin widened by the moment, beaming with the intensity of the sun down on her.

“Okay,” Owen agreed, almost managing not to sound too smug about it, then leaned in to peck her on the tip of her nose, his voice dropping and his eyes getting darker, “Let’s back to bed.”
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

Based off a tumblr prompt "stOP LEAVING STICKY NOTES EVERYWHERE"

Chapter Notes

Because the silly ones are the most fun to write :))

Everyone had ‘a thing’ - that one trait that defined their personality or their position in certain circumstances. Some could cook without learning how to, some could drink anyone under the table without even getting tipsy, others managed to be the heart of every company for no particular reason. Unsurprisingly, those were the qualities that were high regarded on Isla Nublar.

Claire Dearing’s thing was that in her nearly 7 years on the island, she only had one sick day – two years ago, a heat stroke made the world around her spin in that funny way that required bedrest. The one she didn’t manage to power through with the help of baby Tylenol like she did with just about everything else in the book.

Until four days ago.

Claire’s eyebrows knitted together in displeasure as she stared at the beige wall of her apartment, frustrated over feeling so damn helpless.

And knowing that she had Owen Grady to thank for it was a cherry on top of her already crappy mood. Well, and herself of course – for that monumental lapse in judgment when she went against sound reason and said yes to his offer to take her out for dinner. Little did she know that said dinner would consist of nachos in a tequila bar in the staff village and that they would get soaked in the rain on the way back because Owen chose not to bother with the car, probably knowing that he was going to get drunk.

She almost broke one of her heels on the poorly-paved path, for heaven’s sake! Although knowing that she even bothered to dress up nicely for this joke of a date was humiliating in and of itself.

When Claire showed up at the office the next day, pissed off, sleepy, and with the sore throat, Zara took one look at her and scheduled an appointment to finally have her tonsils removed, ignoring Claire’s protests completely. In all fairness, it wasn’t the first time something as mundane as the weather had left her in this kind of situation, and not even the second, and deep down Claire knew that Zara was right, even though she hated the idea of someone making decisions for her. Any decisions, period. She wanted to object, of course, except her urgent hissing went unheard.

Zara took her to the hospital in San Jose for a rather uncomplicated procedure and then picked her up several hours later before safely depositing Claire in her apartment with enough ice-cream in the freezer to feed a small army and a pile of painkillers. As far as Claire was aware, she was facing roughly two weeks of being stuck at home, and the thought was downright dreadful.
Doing nothing felt awful, which left her antsy and restless, pacing around her one-bedroom suite and willing the time to speed up. There was a reason she hated taking time off, after all. She tried watching TV, but it got old faster than she thought it would. She could still email and keep her fingers on the pulse of the park’s life through her assistant, but not being directly involved with anything was frustrating, and if she had to eat another spoonful of ice-cream, she’d probably get sick. Four days in, and she was practically climbing the walls, feeling trapped and bored.

Frankly, if Claire knew beforehand that the daytime TV sucked this much, she’d never let Zara have it her way. Sore throat or not, she doubted her sanity would survive another episode of *Jersey Shore* or something else equally ‘intellectual’. Reading required too much concentration, and in the end, she was spending most of her time going through her email and staring at her phone.

A knock on the door came just as Claire was contemplating the idea of having a crack at the biannual report that wasn’t due for the next two months but that she could get out of her way and then fill in the missing data when the figures came in. It wouldn’t be entertaining, but it could help her kill a few hours.

Still, she checked the time, curious. The only person who visited her was Zara who brought medication and food, but she usually stopped by during her lunch break, not in the evening.

Unless something happened, something that required Claire’s immediate response.

Her stomach clenched uncomfortably as she reached for the doorknob, a million worst-case scenarios crowding her head – from flood and fire to a complete financial bankruptcy that left 2000 people unemployed in a span of 5 minutes—

“Good, you’re here,” Owen said the second he saw her.

His cargo pants had grass stains on them and his left forearm was scratched like he tumbled through rose bushes while on the run from something deadly, and if Claire had to take a wild guess, based on the smell of hay and that unmistakable tangy scent of nature, he came here right from the paddock. What for, though, she couldn’t even begin to guess.

Her hand still on the doorknob, Claire arched her eyebrow, still needing more than *Good, you’re here*. She tipped her chin for good measure and added some annoyance to her glare to focus on something other than the fact that he was currently seeing her in a ratty tank top and the sweatpants that were at least a decade old, but too comfy to get rid of them. A flicker of panic that jolted through her indicating that she actually cared threw her off balance, and her frown deepened momentarily.

They stared at each other for a few moments.

“Can I come in?” Owen asked at last when the pause started to get ridiculous.

She tried to slam the door in his face.

However, he wedges his way into her apartment before she could do it and whistled quietly under his breath, taking in the furnishings that probably cost more than everything he had ever owned.

“Wow.” His gaze skimmed over the beige couch and armchairs, pausing briefly on the entertainment system, and then taking in the view of the park outside the glass door, leading to a patio. “You actually *live* here?” He asked, turning to Claire, his hands resting on his hips.

She pursed her lips into the thin line and crossed her arms over her chest, half happy that the silent treatment could probably, maybe get him out of here fast, half regretful she couldn’t tell him to get
the hell out.

Talking hurt. She knew it would, but didn’t expect it to hurt this much, and Owen Grady was not
the kind of person who was worth the effort, or the discomfort that came with opening her mouth.
The doctor who walked her through the process before the procedure at the hospital explained that
it could last for up to a week before she was comfortable speaking again.

If Owen came to continue their mild argument in the parking lot, during which Claire explicitly
express her desire to never see him again and Owen confirmed it being quite mutual, he was in for
a nice surprise.

“You can’t cut the budget for the raptors’ project in half, Claire,” Owen blurted out, surprising her,
a concerned line wedged between his eyebrows. “I know you didn’t personally do it, but this stuff
goes through you. You said so yourself at—” He cut off and cleared his throat. Yeah, that sounded
like one of the things they might have covered during their very unfortunate night out. She didn’t
remember because she tried not to. “You can’t do that,” he finished. “We’re already barley
scrapping by. Do you have any idea how much they eat?”

Claire’s frown deepened as she tried to understand what he was talking about, her irritation
growing with every passing moment. The budget was approved in the headquarters, and each entity
– the park and InGen – sent their documentation individually, even though they shared the
accounting department here on the island, more for convenience than anything else. Regardless,
she had no clue about the issue, and if Owen Grady had a problem, he needed to take it elsewhere.

Her eyes darted toward the door, and frankly, as far as hints went, this one was pretty damn clear.

He didn’t move.

She tried to remember what her hair looked like and whether or not she even brushed it today,
resisting the urge to ran her hand through it, maybe smooth it down.

“Of course, you don’t.” Owen rubbed his eyes and let out a long, weary breath. “Look, if you’re
trying to get back at me for the other night – fine, but don’t take it out on my animals, they did
nothing to you.”

Claire’s eyes popped out in disbelief, and for a moment is accusation was ludicrous she wanted to
laugh, except the unfairness of it stung more than she thought it could. She huffed through her
nose, glaring daggers at him across the room and hoping she would knock him out with the power
of her mind or something else of that kind.

“I know you don’t see them for the living things that they are,” Owen continued, the words falling
out of his mouth harsh and laced with bitter disappointment. “But they didn’t ask to be made either,
and….” He trailed off, and then regarded her almost with accusation. “It wasn’t just my fault, you
know? The whole date thing – it was on both of us!”

This time, Claire’s jaw nearly hit the floor. It wasn’t?! He acted like a complete jerk…. Well, most
of the time. Except his table manners were fine, as far as bars were concerned. He took care of the
bill and walked her to her car (in the goddamn rain, and Claire had to drive him home because he
was half-drunk, so it probably only half counted). He did make an effort when their conversation
stalled—

Then again, she knew wasn’t have any more fun than she did, and he made fun of her itinerary
when the only thing she was trying to do was have a backup plan. It wasn’t like she was forcing
him to stick to it, for Christ’s sake!
“That’s right!” Owen went on, watching her appalled expression go from confused to shocked to infuriated. And then his own frustration turned into alarm. “Are you really not going to say anything?”

Claire rolled her eyes and marched angrily toward the counter that separated her living room from the tiny kitchen and grabbed a pad of Post-It notes and a pen. ‘TONSILS’ she wrote on one, exclamation mark, underlined twice. Tore it off, walked over to Owen and stuck it to his chest with a pat.

He tore it off, his eyes running over the angry letters several times before he looked up at her, frowning skeptically. “Really?”

Claire threw her hands up in exasperation and grabbed the sticky notes again. ‘BUDGET = MR. MASRANI’. She handed it to him, shaking her head in a universally recognized ‘I can’t believe I have to deal with this’.

Owen disregarded it entirely, seemingly only now really *seeing* her. His gaze traveled up and down her body, taking in everything from the hair she didn’t bother straightening out because there was no point to the pink nail polish on her toes.

“So, you can’t talk? At all?”

Claire puckered her lips, her gaze boring into his. And somehow the state of her hair and the fact that she was practically in her PJs in front of him became slightly less relevant.

When did he get so tall?

“Shit,” Owen cursed quietly. “I… didn’t know. when your secretary said you had a day off, I thought—Does it hurt?”

There was something akin compassion in his voice now that made Claire’s annoyance with this whole situation deflate a little. She rolled her shoulders in a half-shrug and looked away, very much aware all of sudden of their proximity to one another and yet unwilling to step back so as not to show her discomfort for fear of having Owen notice the way her skin was prickling in his presence. It was like he was radiating some sort of charge that made the fine hairs on her arms stand on end.

“Shit,” he repeated with an inward wince, then looked around her living room before darting out of the door on, “Don’t go anywhere.”

Claire almost forgot about him until he burst into her apartment an hour later, showered and wearing stainless jeans and a dark blue t-shirt, a paper bag cradled to his chest. She managed to start on her report by then, mostly out of sheer boredom, his appearance scaring the hell out of her as she jumped in her seat, her glasses slipping down to the tip of her nose.

“Okay, so here’re popsicles,” Owen said, ignoring her confusion altogether and began to unload the bag into her fridge, glancing at her over his shoulder now and then as she pushed up from her desk and crossed the room. ‘Grape ones. Because they taste the best. And jelly. You like cherry? And some soup, but you gotta let it cool down a little.”

Claire reached for the sticky notes again. Jesus, it was getting annoying.

‘WHY?’

‘’Cause it’ll hurt more if you eat it while it’s hot,” he said with careful patience.
She clenched her teeth and let out a huff through her nose. ‘WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?’

He grimaced and ran his hand through his hair, a mental debate so visible on his face she could all but read him like a book. It was almost hilarious, except she still felt like she was trapped in Twilight Zone of sorts because none of this was making any sense.

“Okay, here’s the deal,” he said after a few long moments. “And thank god you have to listen without interrupting for once.” This earned him a dirty look. “I’m sorry about the date. I didn’t mean to mess it up.” A pause. “Shit, Claire, I didn’t expect you to say yes when I asked you out in the first place, and you did, and I panicked.” He sucked in a sharp breath. “Have you seen you? How can someone not be crazy about you?” He scowled at her defiantly, as if daring her to protest. “There, I said it. And okay, the goddamn shorts were one step too far, but come on, it had to be at least a hundred degrees then. I didn’t know you’d show up, looking like we were going to a reception at the White House or something. Which was a great look, by the way, but it’s not the point.”

How he ended up standing right in front of her, Claire had no idea, but suddenly she needed to actually crane her neck to maintain the eye contact. He smelled of a pine-scented body wash and jungle and sunshine, and she swallowed hard, her eyes nearly starting to water with the stinging feeling in her throat. Yet, she didn’t look away.

“I didn’t mean to come across as an ass,” Owen breathed out, watching her closely. “How on earth did we end up here?” he muttered, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, his fingertips lingering on her cheek for a second. “I should probably—“ He glanced at the door. “Get well, okay?”

She grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him down before he had a chance to step away from her, stretching up on her tiptoes to press her mouth to Owen’s in a hot kiss that tasted of strawberry ice-cream and cough drops. He was caught off guard momentarily, but recovered quickly by locking his arms around Claire while his lips moved against hers, his hands threading through her hair and running over her back and her shoulders.

“D’you want me to leave?” He murmured breathlessly between the pecks.

“No,” Claire whispered almost soundlessly and shook her head vigorously, weaving her arms around his neck.

“Shhh,” he put a finger to her mouth, and then kissed her again.

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“Ha! Finally something you’re not god at!” Owen pumped his fist in the air, grinning victoriously.

A few days later, on his day off, they were sitting crossed-legged on his couch, playing Scrabble, and he was beating her ass mercilessly from the start. Somehow, in a span of 48 hours it occurred to Claire that being on a sick leave didn’t necessarily tie her to her own place, and while Owen’s bungalow lacked what she normally considered comfortable necessities, his company compensated for their absence a million times over. Plus, she got to wear his clothes whenever she wanted, which was a sweet deal. Like the flannel shirt and his boxers she was sporting right now.

The biggest trick was to get Zara off her back without the whole park finding out about the sudden progression in their relationship. Although Claire suspected that the ‘I don’t need anything, email me if something comes up’ text made her assistant sigh with relief.
Still, she uncurled one leg from under her body and nudged him in a thigh, miraculously managing not to turn the Scrabble board over (despite kind of wanting to).

“Hey, fair’s fair!” Owen protested, clasping his hand around her ankle and holding it in place, his thumb running over her inner ankle bone. “Luckily for me, you’re good at many other things.” He flashed a cheeky grin at her, and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively for good measure.

‘SHUT UP’ Claire wrote on a Post-It note and stuck it to his forehead.

“You gotta stop leaving sticky notes everywhere, babe,” he snorted.

Claire smirked and leaned forward, her hand curling around his neck to pull him closer and capture his mouth with his, smiling because he was smiling, too.

“Yeah, okay, you win,” Owen mumbled, tugging her into his lap.
Claire wondered sometimes if she’d still go through with it if she knew what she was signing up for exactly when she started a relationship with Owen Grady. She, a woman who had her entire life planned for a decade ahead, each of her steps carefully calculated and everything about her routine compartmentalized and labeled for convenience, broke every rule in her book for a man that she wasn’t even sure was good for her in the long run.

The only problem here was that she loved it. She loved flying under the radar and sneaking to his bungalow after work, loved watching his eyes turn dark with desire every time he saw her, loved waking up next to him when she could allow herself the luxury of staying over. Every moment they spent together felt like there were fireworks exploding around them, the whole world going down in flames, and a practical and logical Claire Dearing was falling hard and fast, and enjoying every moment of it.

For once, she was doing something she wanted more than anything else in the world, even if it meant keeping their relationship under wraps for as long as they could.

There was a certain degree of thrill to it that made her fingertips tingle and her heart beat faster in anticipation. It made her miss him more – something Claire didn’t expect to happen for she normally knew better than to get attached to someone she had no business getting attached to.

She didn’t care. The feeling of her blood flowing in her veins and her heart beating out of her chest was additive enough to make her yearn for more, make her hungry for all of him and not just the stolen moment and quick kisses.

The grey walls of the raptors’ paddock appeared from behind the lush greenery of the jungle and Claire finally turned off the narrowed road and pulled her car to a stop at the edge of the clearing before the low structures surrounding the cage that housed the offices and storage facilities. The afternoon sun was hanging high up in the sky, beating mercilessly down on the word, and she wondered once again how these people managed to survive spending of a bulk of their time outside day after day, assaulted ruthlessy by the elements.

She picked up a folder from the passenger seat, relieved to have an actual reason to come over here for once – the headquarters sent InGen’s paperwork to her office by mistake, and before Zara could so much as open her mouth, Claire volunteered to deliver it to its proper recipients under the
pretense of needed to stretch her legs. She also chose to ignore the way her assistant’s jaw that dropped when those words came out of Claire’s mouth.

The gravel crunched beneath the soles of her Louboutines as she made her way toward the staircase leading to the catwalk above the cage, hoping to find Owen there—

“Well, well, to what do we owe the pleasure?” Vic Hoskins peeled off a group of people talking in the shade of palm trees and sauntered over to Claire, giving her a speculative one-over, his eyebrows arched.

She clenched her teeth and forced herself to smile. “Mr. Hoskins.” If she could knee him in the junk for being so unbearably sleazy right here and now, she would do so without thinking twice.

“Well, technically, she could give the damned papers to him. He was, after all, in charge of this whole project here on the island, even though she knew full well that without Owen it would sink faster than a rock thrown in the water. The man knew how to talk the talk but not walk the walk, and she spent many a night listening to Owen vent about Hoskins’s blatant incompetence as far as the animals were concerned. Which rose the level of her own irritation, and his staring at her boobs wasn’t helping the matters.

“Not really,” she responded evenly, holding his gaze, her glare so apparent it was a miracle Hoskins didn’t evaporate right before her eyes – something she thought she wouldn’t particularly mind, in all honesty. Her eyes darted around for a moment, landing on Barry who was heading toward the cage with a bucket of something that she hoped wasn’t raw meat (yeah, fat chance). “Excuse me.”

She knew Hoskins was probably checking out her ass as she walked away from him, but decided that he wasn’t worth the trouble for the time being.

“Probably in the office,” Barry told her, jerking his chin toward one of the smaller buildings when Claire asked him about ‘Mr. Grady’, eyeing her speculatively for a moment and making her cheeks grow hot by the second – she probably couldn’t be any more obvious even if she tried.

‘The office’ was a small room with a couple of desks squeezed closely together, a file cabinet and a mini fridge by the window and a couch, taking up the rest of the space. The blinds were half-closed, giving a small, stuffy space an eerie look, and a fan mounted on the wall did nothing but chase the hot air around without offering any kind of relief.

Claire closed the door behind her, blinking for a few seconds as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness that felt even more disorienting after the blinding brightness of sun outside, and for a moment, it looked to her like Barry was wrong – the place appeared to be empty. It wasn’t until a full minute later that she finally spotted him – stretched out on the couch, his feet hanging over the armrest because the thing obviously wasn’t meant for anyone over 6 foot tall, Owen was snoring peacefully, the faint sounds filling the space around him.

Rolling her eyes inwardly, Claire shook her head and put the papers down on the cluttered desk closest to the door before crossing the room. She lowered down on the edge of the couch next to him, nudging Owen a little. He shifted obediently without waking up, making her smile, the corners of her mouth tugging upwards on the will of her own.

His face was streaked with the shadows, his arms folded over his chest like he’d fallen asleep in the middle of having a serious conversation, and even in the dim light, barely getting in through the
cracks between the blinds, she could see her eyes move under the eyelids – he was dreaming.

Claire reached out to run her hand through his hair, pushing it back from his forehead, marveling in the softness of it, the stubbornness of the curls that refused to be tamed, insisting on sticking out at odd angles instead. She trailed her fingertips down his stubbled cheek and along the line of his jaw, taking note of the faint lines near the corners of his mouth and tired circles under his eyes. It was so easy to forget sometimes how vulnerable he could seem now and then despite his size and endless jokes spilling out of him at any given moment. Almost on instinct, she ran her thumb over the crease between his eyebrows, smoothing it out, so overcome with tenderness it all but took her breath away.

And this was when Owen woke up.

He blinked sleepily, confused and disoriented for a few moments, until his gaze focused on her, and Claire could swear he thought he was still dreaming.

“Hey,” his voice was low and groggy, soft like velvet. He stifled a yawn and ran his hand over his face, rubbing his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Watching you hard at work, apparently,” Claire joked, unable to hold back a smirk.

“Sorry,” Owen breathed out. “Delta wasn’t feeling well, had to stay here last night.”

“So I noticed,” she hummed, placing her hand on his and lacing their fingers together.

“Shit,” he winched. “Did you come over?”

“I did,” she nodded. “Wanted it to be a surprise. And I stayed over, too, hoping you’d show up. Your fridge is empty, by the way. How do you even survive?” She regarded him with reproach, and earned a cheeky smile in response. “Also, that red and green flannel shirt that you like is now mine.”

Owen brought their entwined hands to his mouth ad brushed his lips to Claire’s knuckles, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Deal. So long as you wear nothing but it.”

“This could be arranged.” She offered him a coy grin and leaned down to kiss him, giving in easily when he cupped the back of her head with the palm of his hand, deepening the kiss until they were both breathless and panting.

“I could get used to it,” Owen murmured when she pulled just far enough away to catch a breath, their noses still touching.

“To me in nothing but your clothes?” Claire laughed quietly, breathing the smell of his skin, her throat closed up momentarily with so much longing she wanted to simply sink into him and never let go. So much for a casual relationship.

“To seeing you every time I wake up,” he chuckled, running his thumb over her cheekbone, looping her hair around her ear, the sound of his voice washing over her like a tidal wave of pure sunshine.

“I’ll see you later then, Mr. Grady.” With a quick peck on his mouth, she pushed away from him and stood up, smoothing out the wrinkles on her pants.

“You betcha,” Owen called after her, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively when Claire paused briefly by the door to give him a parting look.
“Nice lipstick, man,” Barry told him when Owen finally bothered to drag himself out of the drowsy comfort of the office, yawning for all he was worth and not at all inclined to deal with the moody raptors for the rest of the afternoon.

He ran the back of his hand over his lips and muttered good-naturedly, “Shut up.”
“Owen?” Claire called quietly, rubbing her eyes and waiting for them to adjust to the darkness of her bedroom.

She stifled a yawn, feeling the tightness in her chest ease, her heartbeat that spiked momentarily settle again to a steady hum when she spotted him standing by the large window overlooking the park, his form black against the indigo sky outside and the faint light of the streetlamps below, barely reaching her top-floor suite.

Claire kicked away the covers and reached for Owen’s shirt draped over the foot of the bed, pulling it on, wrapped instantly in the softness of the fabric and the comfort of his scent, and shivering slightly in the cool air spilling out of the vents above her head. He was still as a statue, his gaze glued to the glimmering lights below. She padded across the room, the carpet soft beneath her feet, fiddling clumsily with the buttons, but not making it past just three. Even the rolled up sleeves were nearly reaching her wrists, and—gosh, she could probably spend the rest of her life wearing his clothes and nothing else. Just like that.

“Hey.” Her arms slipped around his waist and she nestled her forehead in the hollow between his shoulder blades, marveling in the warmth of his skin against hers. She pressed a kiss to his skin when his hands clasped around her wrists, a low sound of acknowledgement rumbling in his chest. “What are you doing?”

“I… um, got up to get some water,” Owen responded softly, the sound rising from deep inside him, reverberating through his body and into hers.

He ran his thumbs over her wrists, his gaze gliding slowly over the pale stripes of footpaths below, snaking between the paddocks and across the parks, circling around the blue jewel of the Mosasaurus pool that gleamed brightly with the underwater lights to the left from them, the form of the prehistoric beast invisible from this far away. It was nearing 4 in the morning, and the streets were empty, the bars closed for the night and the island asleep. Somewhere in the distance, an animal let out a cry, and moments later, another one responded with a long call.

Somewhere in the distance, something took off from a tree and soared into the sky, a black dot that disappeared in the blackness before Claire could guess what it was. A hawk, perhaps.

Her arms flexed around him and she let out a long breath, already feeling her eyes start to droop.
sleepily again. This was still new, still the kind of uncharted territory that made her think carefully of every step she took, the fear of waking up and not finding Owen there with her still very real despite being utterly irrational. Her lips curved slightly – if she were honest with herself, she had a much harder time getting rid of Owen than getting him to stay, knowing for a fact that if they didn’t have their respective jobs, they would probably never leave his, or her, bedroom for months. And the realization left her with the glowing warmth in the pit of her stomach.

“I just never saw it like this,” Owen added after a few moments, making her realize if a little belatedly that they were mostly spending their nights at his place, away from the prying eyes of the employees of the park. This was probably only the second time he’d been to her suite. “It’s…”

“Breathtaking,” she finished for him when he stalled, and Owen nodded faintly.

She stepped around him, ducking under his arm and allowing him to tuck her into his side. He ran his hand up and down her spine, a soothing gesture of reassurance, a promise of his presence, of the kind of comfort only he could give her. He brushed a kiss to the crown of her hear, enveloping Claire’s whole body with his.

“Thank you,” Owen murmured into her hair.

“For the park?” She asked, resting her cheek on his shoulder, feeling his heart thump steadily against her chest, making it hard to tell it apart from her own heartbeat.

He chuckled, his fingers anchored on the small of her back. “For giving me a second chance,” he whispered. “I don’t believe I ever thanked you properly for not telling me to go to hell.”

Claire snorted softly, kissing his collarbone. “I believe you have, that time when a can of whipped cream and soft fudge were involved.” She giggled.

His laughter boomed across the room. “That was a practical demonstration.”

“You groveled. How could I say no?”

It was tempting though, Claire could admit that much. For about 10 seconds, she did want to give herself the satisfaction of making him feel like shit – kind of how he made her feel during their first date. Except when he showed up at her office on a Friday night several months ago, there was something in his eyes, the kind of deep longing that took her breath away, rendering her paralyzed for a long moment. The one that spoke louder than his apology ever could. The one that made him look exposed, and as open as he could be, and she knew that he knew it, too, and that he was willingly allowing her to see that side of him if that was the price he had to pay for having Claire give them another chance.

“I did not,” Owen protested.

“Please! You all but dropped on your knees.” She skimmed her fingers over his bare back, smiling at the sound of his sharp inhale.

“I would have,” he admitted after a pause, his voice laced with sly smugness. “Probably. But you gave in so easily.”

“I wanted to spare you the humiliation,” she snorted, all righteous indignation.

Owen drew back just far enough away to cup her face in the palms of his hands. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.” His gaze roamed over her features, his lips curved ever so slightly. “This. Us.” He smiled. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be.”
Claire’s hands curled around his wrists and she nodded, trying not to imagine what her life would be like without their spontaneous dates, and Owen’s bike revving beneath them when he showed her the parts of the island she’d never seen before, and the bitter coffee and crammed shower in his bungalow, their clothes strewn all over the floor, the sound of is voice saying her name. There was an instant familiarity to everything about them, their lives clicking together easily, falling into easy patterns.

She stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed him.

“C’mon,” Owen tugged her away from the window and toward the bed. “Let’s get some sleep, and maybe in the morning I’ll show you again just how grateful I am.”

She climbed into bed next to him and settled into the comfort of his body. “Promises, promises.”
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompt: It’s bloody Valentine’s Day and there is a discount in the cafe for a couple and I don’t have enough money and oh hey you are single too so let’s pretend we are a couple and get this fucking discount I am bloody starving

Chapter Notes

Most of the stuff I shared recently was from a while back, so this is the first piece I wrote this year and I hope it’s okay. Enjoy!

There was nothing more pathetic than getting dumped on Valentine’s Day, and if there was, Claire couldn’t quite think of what it might possibly be. Not on the spot. Sure, getting kicked to the curb a day after prom when she was 17 wasn’t any more fun, but at least the guy she was going out with back then had enough sense to wait until the morning and not ruin the night for her.

Not that Ethan From Marketing – somehow, it was always Ethan From Marketing and never just Ethan even in her head, which probably should’ve been a red flag that she blissfully chose to ignore – actually dumped her. This was supposed to be their second date, which hardly counted as a relationship. However, the worst part was that once she got through about 50 layers of pity, doubt, and self-loathing after he sheepishly suggested that it probably wasn’t going to work out and then scrambled away, leaving her alone to process his words, Claire realized that she was more relieved and maybe a little inconvenienced than upset about this particular turn of events. As great she looked in these three-inch heels and the skirt that hugged her body nicely in all the right places, they had nothing on her ratty sweatpants and a glass of Merlot she could be enjoying on her couch right now. And that, she decided, was more than just a red flag – it was a fucking red banner the size of Texas.

She took a sip of her Daiquiri – because to hell with the diet, she deserved a treat – and put the glass back on the coaster, her reflection in a perfectly polished countertop pensive and a little detached.

Still, did he have to do it on Valentine’s Day?! Couldn’t he have done it yesterday, or tomorrow? Not that she cared about this nonsense of a holiday designed to make the ‘unattached’ people feel like crap, but there probably was some kind of etiquette. There had to be.

She took a subtle look around, noticing pink heart-shaped decorations, hanging everywhere and the quiet music that was meant to set a romantic mood for the rest of the clientele, sitting in twos at the tables and tried to ignore the fact that she was the only person nursing a drink alone at the bar. Thank God she had enough sense to take this joke of a date to the mainland where the employees of the park couldn’t—

“Well, well, as I live and breathe!”
Startled, Claire snapped her head up, recognizing the lazy drawl instantly, but refusing to believe that she could get this royally screwed twice in one night. Please, dear God, no! Not today!

No luck.

One eyebrow arched, his mouth curved into a smug, lopsided grin, and the top buttons of his dark blue shirt undone, revealing just enough skin to make every waitress notice him instantly, Owen Grady was making his way toward her, unmistakable even in the dim light of the candles sitting on every table that provided just enough illumination for the patrons not to trip over one another.

Her stomach clenched – mostly with humiliation of being discovered by the one person she positively didn’t want to deal with, but also because of the whole ‘why does this man look like a Greek god carved out of a piece of granite, all perfect angles and right lines?’ thing that kept setting Claire’s teeth on edge ever since their date went straight to hell several months ago, but her mind apparently didn’t get the memo.

She glared at him and turned away. Brought the glass up to her lips again, barely resisting the urge to finish her drink in one gulp and ask for more. Always a light-weight drinker, she was already starting to feel a pleasant hum in her head and the warmth spreading over her body, and for once, it didn’t seem like a bad idea to revel in the sensation, let it go.

“Go away,” she said flatly when Owen approached her, not seeing him as much as noticing his presence next to her, the warmth of his body and the smell of his aftershave that wrapped around her like a cloud, happy that she avoided falling off the damned barstool, which would definitely be a cherry on top of her already crappy evening.

Owen ignored her comment. He leaned against the counter and gave her a pointed once-over, taking in her low-cut top and a teardrop pendant nestled in her cleavage, and not at all subtle about it.

She resisted the urge to throw the rest of her drink in his face. Somehow, Claire found the idea of him being here alone highly implausible, which made her feel like an even bigger loser. Not that it was a competition, but with him, it always felt that way.

“Why don’t you go back to your company… that probably gets paid by an hour?” She suggested snidely.

“Go away,” he snorted. “You think I need to pay anyone to spend the time with me?”

“It’s hard to imagine anyone doing it for free,” she deadpanned, turning to him.

“You did,” he piped up.

“And I’ll never get those two hours of my life back,” Claire retorted without missing a beat.

Owen hummed. Touché.

He raised his hands. “How about a truce? For one night.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed suspiciously and she regarded him skeptically, as if trying to see behind the ever-present cheerful veneer, all easy smiles and complete lack of subtlety. And yet, despite all that, the man was impossible to read. Without even trying, he somehow managed to never take off the mask Claire knew wasn’t the real him, if only because of those flashes behind his eyes that gave away something she couldn’t quite put her finger on. A vulnerability of sorts that drew her to him in the first place. The very one that slipped in every time he talked about work, or when he
didn’t know she was looking at him.

Of course, he then went and ruined everything, but that was another story.

Meanwhile, oblivious to her thoughts, Owen jerked his chin toward the poster behind his back that advertised two pieces of cake for the price of one, a couple’s discount and all that, a cheesy lure that apparently managed to fill most of the place tonight.

She frowned. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not really.” He pulled his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans and made a show out of going through its contents. “I’m hungry and low on cash.” Shrugged and peered at her expectantly. “What’d you say?”

Claire reached for her clutch purse, resting on the counter next to her glass. “I’d say I’m out of here.” She slid off her barstool and dropped a few banknotes on the polished surface.

Owen smirked. Shook his head. She wondered how he managed to look so in his element in any situation – practically one of the animals in the paddock, a heart of every company outside of work, not even remotely as pathetic as she thought she was in this place full of happy couples, enjoying each other’s company.

“Relax, Claire,” his voice was like honey, barely audible and yet impossible not to hear even over the music. “It’s just a cake. I’m not asking you to marry me.”

She pursed her lips together into a thin line, torn between storming out and giving him the satisfaction of knowing that he managed to make her uncomfortable and get under her skin again, and staying here and, well, actually feeling uncomfortable and maybe more than a little irritated. Mostly at herself.

“Very well.” She gave him a measured look, similar to the one that he graced her with earlier, and allowed her lips to curve into smile that didn’t touch her eyes. “Bring on the cake.”

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“Oh, god,” Claire moaned quietly when the first bite landed on her tongue, and even closed her eyes, savoring the sweetness.

A triple chocolate goodness adorned with chocolate-dipped strawberries and served with vanilla ice-cream. It tasted so good she thought she might die. Or maybe she already did and this was heaven. The only problem with that theory was the presence on Owen Grady not two feet away from her. Unless she went to hell instead and he was her punishment. Which would actually explain a lot. This whole night, for instance.

“Should I leave you two alone?” Owen asked around a mouthful of his own treat from across the table where they relocated from the bar.

“Shut up,” she mumbled mildly.

When was the last time she had a cheat day? Right, 275 days ago, but who was counting? She could probably marry this goddamn cake right now and have her own happily ever after. Jesus, no wonder all those people sitting around them looked so blissful – they were so high of sugar they probably didn’t even know where they were or what was going on. She knew she was close to feeling that way, although that could also be because of that third Daiquiri she ordered when Owen asked for a double scotch.
Wonderful. She was getting drunk with Owen Grady. On Valentine’s Day. Okay, maybe not drunk, but it was still a whole new low for her regardless. Thankfully, the cake was making up for it.

“What?” Claire demanded a little more tersely than she intended when she caught Owen watching her, his fork frozen halfway to his mouth, which was downright insane for a man who’d never let anything get between him and the food for as long as she knew him.

“Nothing,” he shook his head, amused. “You were smiling.”

“I was not,” she protested.

“You were, too,” he singsonged, chewing with gusto, and waggled his eyebrows at her. Claire did not dignify that with an answer. “So, who was it?” Owen asked.

“Who was what?”

“Who stood you up?”

“Who was it?”

Her mouth dropped. “What makes you think I was stood up?”

He gave her a *Really? Are we doing this?* look. “Come on, Claire, even someone like you wouldn’t be drinking alone on Valentine’s Day at a hotel bar a ferry ride away from a handful of better bars for no reason.”

She spluttered for a moment, her hackles standing on end at the implication. “Excuse me? Someone like me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

He scooped the ice-cream onto his fork, mixing it with a piece of cake and took his sweet time to savour it, her eyes never leaving hers. “I’m talking about the whole ‘I don’t need no people in my life’ crap you’re so into.”

“Says the man who lacks basic manners,” she rolled her eyes.

“At least I’m not in denial about it,” Owen beamed at her.

She regarded him darkly. “I think the real question is – what are you doing here, Mr. Grady?”

He pointed down at his plate. The at the poster. Then reminded her, “*Owen.*”

“Not that,” she scoffed and gestured vaguely around the bar. “*Here.*”

“Oh, there’s a party,” he waved dismissively toward the back patio. “It got boring.” A shrug. “Seriously, come on, who was it? Eric from Business Strategies or Darren from Accounting? No, wait! Alex from Wu’s team. Gotta be him. Am I right?”

Claire plucked a plump strawberry off the top of her dessert and took a bite, not oblivious to how he nearly choked at the sight of it, feeling significantly better about herself by the second. “Why would you think it’s either of them?”

Owen swallowed hard and tore his eyes away from her lips, as red as the strawberry, and took a sip of his drink, more to have something to focus on that wasn’t her mouth than anything else. “They’re obnoxious assholes,” he explained. “Thought they might be your type.”

“You’d know,” she hummed. “I went out with you, after all.”

His eyebrow quirked curiously. “I thought you were pretending it never happened or something.
Blocking the whole thing out, maybe.”

“I am.” She confirmed. “You do make a nice cautionary tale, though. To remind me not to make the same mistake twice.”

And there it was again – a flicker of something in his gaze. Not quite hurt, she decided, caught off-guard and overcome with guilt all of a sudden. Of regret, perhaps. Alas, it was gone before she was even sure she saw anything at all.

Owen let out a short laugh. “Glad to be of service. And for what it’s worth, he’s a moron.”

“No one stood me up. Do we have to talk about it?”

“Okay, no one stood you up. Then where--” He cut off, his smile slipping. “He didn’t…”

“You know what?” Claire pushed her half-finished cake away and stood up, the legs of her chair scraping on the floor and making a few heads turn their way. “This was fun, but I have to….” She trailed off and cleared her throat, refusing to look at him because there was only so much humiliation she could handle in a span of a few hours. Her throat tightened, a hot lump lodged in it making her eyes sting. Trading mocking comments was one thing – like playing ping-pong, back and forth, back and forth, to make sure they still got it. Dealing with his pity, on the other hand, was not something she could bear.

“Shit,” she heard Owen curse behind her back as she made a beeline for the foyer, past the hotel patrons and the personnel, past the bellboys and the sounds of music and laughter, drifting in from the pool, and toward the doors leading outside. Shouldn’t have had that third drink, she was thinking now, her head light and weightless, like it was going to detach itself from her neck and float into the night sky. “Claire, wait!”

He was right behind her, but the sound of his voice only propelled Claire forward, her heels clucking on the cobbled street, echoing in the night, carrying her toward the dock. If she was lucky, she wasn’t late for the last ferry to the island yet because there was no way in hell she was staying here. She’d swim, if she had to.

“Just… wait a sec.” Owen trudged up to her, easily matching her pace stride for stride. “Look, you’re upset--”

“No shit, Sherlock,” she muttered under her breath, and winced, never a fan of harsh language. Gripped her purse tight and took an unsteady breath, reminding herself to ignore him. Ignore the whole world, for that matter. She would wake up tomorrow, and everything would shift back into place, and she would forget this night ever happened. Owen Grady and his jokes… “Leave me alone, Owen. Go back to—whatever it was you were doing there.” Tired, she was pointedly keeping her eyes starlight ahead – mostly to avoid tripping on the uneven sidewalk and spraining her ankles, but also because the idea of seeing what she kept glimpsing on his face was almost painful for the reasons she couldn’t quite place.

He didn’t. Instead, hands tucked in the pockets of his pants, he followed her silently as if it was the plan all along, steering Claire into one of the side alleys that did, in fact, was a shortcut that saved them at least 10 minutes, and boarded the half-empty ferry with her.

The buzz in Claire’s head intensified, and she climbed onto the top deck, holding tight onto the railing as she walked lest she fall into the black water, churning below. The wind was chilly up there, tugging at her hair and whipping it in her face, her skin prickling with goosebumps. She inhaled deeply, breathing in the rich scent of jungle and the ocean, allowing it to envelop it like a
blanket, very much aware of Owen’s presence and half-tempted to remind him he didn’t have to escort her home, but not having it in her to bother.

“I’m sorry,” he broke the silence after a while. Leaning against the railing next to her, he was watching the lights of the park grow closer and brighter, his voice muffled by the wind. “It was none of my business and I… um, I ruined your night, and…”

“Yeah, because it was going so great before you showed up,” Claire murmured, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Ethan. It was Ethan.”

Owen’s ears perked up and he turned to her, studying the outline of her profile, pale against the blackness of the sky that was pouring into the sea until he couldn’t tell where one ended and another began.

“A dude from Marketing? That Ethan?” He asked and cleared his throat. “Well, I hate to rain on anyone’s parade, but it’s probably for the best. Doubt his wife would’ve approved of you.” Claire whipped her head around, and he added quickly, “It’s not about you, I swear. It’s just the marriage thing.”

“Oh, my god,” she groaned and dropped her face into her hands, squeezing her eyes shut. “What is wrong with me? Why am I such an asshole-magnet?”

“I’ll try not to take it personally,” he noted. His hands handed on her shoulders and he turned her to him, pulled her hands down and framed her face with his fingers until she was looking at him, her breathing shallow and warm on his skin. “You’re not an asshole-magnet, Claire.” He ran his thumb over her cheekbone. “You’re smart, and funny, and brilliant, and this particular asshole is very sorry he screwed it up.” Her eyes were huge and bottomless, and the corner of his mouth curled up as he stepped closer to her until there was no air left between them. “And just so you know – everyone from Marketing are jerks.”

Claire bunched a handful of his shirt in her fingers and pulled him down to her, her mouth crashing against his.

They started kissing and didn’t stop, hungry lips and wandering hands and an undercurrent of burning desire right beneath the surface. Claire’s tongue slipped into his mouth and a low groan formed in the back of his throat, his palm hiking up her skirt, inching toward her hip, rough and calloused against her silky skin. She tasted of chocolate and warmth and Claire, her hands running through his hair, gripping it tight in her fists, and it was almost too much. She nipped at his bottom lip, pressing herself closer to him, warm and real, and so much more than he ever imagined she’d be.

“Take me home with you,” Claire whispered when they found themselves on the solid ground again, no longer swaying with the ferry, although neither remembered how it happened, how the dock emptied and there was no but them in the dim light of a lone streetlamp, surrounded by the whisper of the waves.

“You’re drunk,” Owen told her, making no attempt to step back, though, his hands flexing ever so slightly on her sides, each movement matching his ragged breathing.

“But not that drunk,” she promised, pulling up to kiss him again.

Claire woke up to the bright sun beaming in her face, which was wrong on so, so many levels,
only because her bedroom was west-facing, and a loud pounding on the door somewhere close to her. She groaned and buried her face deeper into the pillow, squeezing her eyes shut, and it was only then that it finally occurred to her that the pounding was not coming from the outside but was rather a raging headache, booming inside her skull.

Grimacing, she reached for her face and rubbed the corners of her eyes, very aware all of a sudden of several things – this was not her bed. Aside from the window magically moving itself to the wall where it didn’t belong, she could attest to not owning a Winter Fresh fabric softener that the pillowcases smelled of. In addition to aforementioned headache, she could also feel a wire from her bra digging rather uncomfortably in her skin, which meant that somewhere along the way she broke her rule about not sleeping in her underwear. And if that wasn’t confusing enough, she could hear someone humming an off-key tune somewhere… wherever she was.

Claire opened her eyes, squinting in the glare, streaming through the thin lace curtains and looked around, taking note of a large wardrobe in the corner and a dresser opposite the bed, a few books stacked on the top of it. The door to the right from her was half-open and she could see a two-seater couch and a coffee table, a patch rug on the floor and a pair of boots. Her own clothes from the previous night were folded and sitting on the chair next to the bed and—

Her eyes flew open and she tossed aside and blanket, momentarily horrified, and then immensely relieved to find out that she was wearing an oversized shirt on top of her underwear, a faded logo on which depicted some music band she couldn’t quite make out from this angle.

And then it finally clicked – her disastrous date with Ethan from Marketing, three glasses of Daiquiri on a practically empty stomach, Owen Grady.

Owen Grady.

Shit!

Claire scrambled out of the bed and peeked out of the room, her nose twitching at the smell of coffee wafting in from the kitchen and her stomach clenching uncomfortably. For a moment, she wasn’t sure if she was going to get sick, or if maybe her head would explode first because her skull was suddenly too small for her brain that apparently was trying to get out.

The polished hardwood floor was warm under the bare soles of her feet when she finally mustered the courage to step into the living room and take a cursory look around what turned out being Owen’s small bungalow that, much to Claire’s surprise, was cleaner and much more in order than she would have expected. Under other circumstances, she would most likely take her time to appreciate it properly. Right now, however, she desperately needed to fill in the black gaps in her memory that bothered her to such a degree she was almost hyperventilating.

Dressed in loose sweatpants and a grey sleeveless shirt, Owen was rummaging through one of the cupboards in his tiny kitchen. He turned around and stopped humming the moment he noticed her out of the corner of his eye, and offered Claire a smile so bright it made the sun seem like a 20W lightbulb by comparison.

“Morning, sunshine!”

Claire winced, her headache pulsing behind her eyes. There was a reason she didn’t drink much, doing so out of self-pity was proving to be more and more stupid with every passing moment. “What happened?” She asked, swallowing, her mouth dry and her tongue seemingly made out of sandpaper.
Owen’s eyebrows arched expressively, “Before or after I rocked your world?”

Her eyes widened, the floor swaying beneath her feet. And for a moment, Claire wished she would drop dead, or better yet – wake up yesterday and not end up in this moment to begin with. “Did we…” She started in a weak, horrified voice.

He studied her for a moment, then chuckled and shook his head. Filled a mug with coffee from the machine on the counter and took a generous sip, watching her over the rim, his eyes inquisitive and impossibly blue. “Relax. You threw up and passed out. I slept on the couch.”

“Oh, god.” She collapsed into one of the mismatched chairs at the table and buried her head in her hands. Somehow, this seemed even worse. Granted, if they actually slept together, she’d prefer to have some recollection of it, but throwing up in front of him was perhaps more humiliating. Infinitely more! She felt her cheeks grow hot, the traitorous colour rising up her face – her personal little curse. Damn it!

“S’okay.” Owen set her own mug in from of her, her stomach still folding in on itself. “This should help.” She glanced up at him, grateful, and he reached out on impulse to loop a strand of hair around her ear, his fingertips lingering on her cheek for a few seconds. “Want some Tylenol?”

Claire shook her head, caught off guard by the gentle gesture that felt oddly familiar and more comforting than she was willing to admit. “So, you didn’t--”

“Take advantage of a woman who had no idea what was happening?” He scoffed. “Give me some credit, Claire. Besides, when it happens, I’ll prefer you to remember it.” When, not if. A promise, not another quip. And her skin flushed again, but for an entirely different reason.

She clasped her hands around her mug and took a cautious sip, allowing it to burn her tongue and wondering if it was going to stay down. So far, so good. She glanced down at what she figured was his shirt then. “And… um, this?”

Owen plopped down into the chair opposite from her, grinning. “Oh, you did the undressing.”

“Great,” she muttered, wishing she could drown in her coffee. Staring at the scarred surface of his table, she could feel his gaze on her, warm and palpable, and her heart was a nervous flurry in her chest, beating against her ribcage. “You know, I think I could actually use that Tylenol,” Claire said after a few minutes of silence interrupted only by the ticking of the clock on the way.

“Sure.” He pushed his chair back and stood up. “Ah, and if you want to take a shower or something before I drive you back, go for it.”

Claire met his eyes; tried to keep her face neutral, hoping he wouldn’t notice her trembling fingers. “There’s no need for that. I mean, you don’t have to. I could…”

“Walk two miles?” Owen finished for her.

They both glanced at her three-inch heels sitting on the floor near the coffee table.

She sighed.

---

“I am not getting on that thing!” Claire announced, regarding Owen’s bike skeptically, her hands on her hips and her lips pursed stubbornly together. Slightly wobbly on the lawn in front of his bungalow, she tipped her chin up for good measure, well aware of how ludicrous she was looking,
still dressed in her last night’s clothes and knowing that this man was holding her hair not 8 hours ago when she was paying dearly for her poor decisions.

“Didn’t bother you last night,” Owen noted, amused, glancing at her over his shoulder.

“Please don’t tell me--” she started.

“And you liked it, too, baby,” he added with a cheeky smile.

Claire pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a slow breath, torn between suppressing her exasperation and hiding a smile that kept slipping, betraying the fact that last night, despite of how it ended, wasn’t the worst Valentine’s Day of her life.

Owen sighed and leaned against his bike, pulling her toward him – uncertain at first and then more sure when she didn’t resist - until she was standing between his parted legs, their eyes on the same level. One hand on Claire’s waist, he smoothed down her hair curling in the tropical humidity with his fingers, threading them through the soft locks, his eyes fastened on hers. She still looked sleepy and maybe a little panicky, and he resisted the urge to run his thumb over the sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks, mesmerized by the softness of what he used to think of as sharp edges.

“I’m sorry your date didn’t work out last night.”

“I’m not,” she said, allowing her lips to lift up at the corners, still processing the fact that somehow in a span of one night, and seemingly without her say in it, they went from frenemies to something that was making her weak in the knees, her head swimming. “I mean, it seems to have worked out just fine, all things considered.”

“Do you remember anything at all?” He asked softly.

Claire’s hands landed on his chest. He’d changed into a navy-blue t-shirt that stretched nicely over his broad chest, his skin warm through the fabric. She bit her bottom lip, studying him, taking her time to notice golden specs in his blue eyes, faint smiley lines in the corners of his eyes, her hands itching to touch his face, run his fingertips over the stubble on his cheeks.

Her gaze dropped down to his mouth.

“Yes,” she whispered, watching his lips curve into a broader grin, barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes, but leaned into him nonetheless because what she did, in fact, could recollect was pretty damn nice on every possible level.

“Thank god,” Owen breathed out, tilting her face up to capture her mouth with his. “So I was thinking,” he muttered between the kisses when Claire’s arms slid around his neck, her fingers gripping his hair on the back of his head, “maybe I could pick you up later and we’d make some new memories.”

She rested her forehead against his, her hand running over the collar of his shirt. “It’s Sunday,” Claire said after a brief pause. “I don’t have to leave yet.”
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompts:
Claire and Owen kissed and Owen asks her to be in a relationship with him but Claire says it's "against the workplace rules" despite the fact that she wants to SO he continues to try and convince her to be with him.

+  
“Look I’m gonna ask you a question, and you have to promise you won’t lie to me. Did it mean anything to you?”
“Please don’t-”
“Did it mean anything?”
“…yes.”

“I can’t believe you don’t like *Die Hard!*” Owen gaped at her like she’d just admitted to national treason.

He hopped off the couch, collecting their empty Bud bottles from the coffee table, and Claire uncurled from her spot and followed him to his nook of a kitchen.

“I never said I didn’t like it,” she protested. “I just don’t think it’s a Christmas movie.”

Owen huffed and dove into a fridge. “Of course, it is. The story is set on Christmas. Ergo, it’s a Christmas movie.”

She snorted and leaned against the counter, watching him pull out a handful of sandwich ingredients. He cocked an eyebrow at her in a silent question, but Claire only wrinkled her nose and shook her head, well familiar and not impressed with his culinary talents. Unlike him, Claire actually cared about her cholesterol levels and wasn’t planning to die from a heart attack at the ripe age of 32.

“By that logic, *Gremlins* is also a Christmas movie, but would you honestly call it a feel-good holiday film?” She scoffed.

“Oh, baby, you and I have a very different idea of what’s supposed to feel good,” he grinned at her and waggled his eyebrows suggestively for good measure, making her roll her eyes but not really mean it.

Quite frankly, she still had no idea how exactly they ended up where they were right now – it seemed like one moment they were annoyed by one another to no end, irked by just about everything that the other was, and then suddenly Owen was fixing her car when it was misbehaving and emptying her fridge with a frightening regularity, and she was listening to his rants about Hoskins being an asshole and spending more time at his bungalow than in her own suite, far less concerned about the lack of air-conditioning than she ever thought she could be.

Their friendship was an odd friendship, to put it mildly. At first sight, it seemed like they had little to nothing in common, and had anyone told Claire that she would be craving to spend every free moment of
her life with the man who tamed raptors for a living, she’d probably laugh them in the face.

Owen surprised her, though. They did have the same outlook on quite a few things, from politics to environment to music, shockingly. Granted, Owen’s idea of having fun differed drastically from hers, but in the grand scheme of things, it was none of her concern, and if he wanted to spend his Friday nights in a bar in the staff village while she sipped expensive wine and flipped through a book that she started a year ago but didn’t have time to finish – so be it. She liked him in a way she never expected she would – beneath the mask of an obnoxious jerk that Owen never shied away from demonstrating rather freely, he was smart and funny, and Claire felt more than a little ashamed of initially judging him based on solely the first impression that wasn’t all the favourable.

She loved it that he kept her on her toes and never tried too hard to impress her, which was impressive in an of itself. And the most important thing was that he treated her like his equal, despite her status on the island – something that she found surprisingly refreshing after dealing with the people who literally scattered away from her in trepidation. With him, she felt human rather than a robot that half of the employees of the park took her for. He could listen, too. And give good advice, for that matter. True, he might not have been deeply familiar with the technicalities of her job or the inner workings of the park – and, boy, did he have issues with exploiting the dinosaurs for commercial gain! – but he managed to help her look at certain issues from a different angle that helped Claire more times than she was willing to admit.

Spending the time with Owen – be it watching him reorganize his work bench outside or marathoning something ridiculous on Netflix – was perhaps the closest she’d felt to being her real self in quite a while, which was both exhilarating and somewhat disconcerting in its unfamiliarity. She wondered sometimes if he knew how much it meant to her, their relationship that started out of nowhere and turned her whole world upside down, but this was a dangerous territory Claire didn’t want to venture into. Didn’t want to think about it, either.

“Charming,” she scoffed, eyeing his sandwich that did actually look better than she anticipated. Granted, anything would look mouthwatering if you stuffed roughly $50 worth of cheese and ham between two pieces of bread, and she was quite hungry…

Claire snatched it from the plate and took a generous bite while Owen was putting the bags and packages away. Tipped her chin up when he turned, daring him to say a word, but he only smirked and cut the whole thing in half without a comment. God, she was picking up his habits. Soon, she would be sitting on a dock with a fishing rod for fun and chug can after can of lukewarm beer. He already got her to drink scotch after a particularly stressful day.

“Well, that’s what you come here for.” Owen leaned against the counter next to her. “Charm and class.” He toasted her with his half of their snack.

“To charm and class,” Claire agreed, touching her half to his and biting into it again, nearly moaning with pleasure as a kaleidoscope for flavours exploded on her tongue. So much different from her low-fat-no-carb life.

She could feel his warmth close to her, suddenly very aware of his proximity, their elbows almost touching, and smell cedar and eucalyptus on his skin, the scent of his shoulder gel mixed with soil and something that was just Owen, something that made her want to press her face into his neck and breathe him in until she was drunk and dizzy. The thought caught her momentarily off guard. He was not her type, and as far as she was aware, Owen saw her as nothing but a sparring buddy for their verbal duels, which she was fine with, at least most of the time.

She shifted ever so slightly, moving half an inch away from him, and then half an inch more, trying to make it look like she was merely adjusting her posture and not trying to put as much
distance between them as possible, all because the fine hairs on her arms were standing on end like
he was electrifying.

“Wanna tell me what’s up?” Owen asked a minute later, giving her a start, and for a moment,
Claire wondered if he had read her mind.

She cleared her throat. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “You only nitpick on the movies when you’re bothered by something.”

He shoved a chunk of sandwich into his mouth, watching her as he chewed, and Claire’s first
instinct was to object because who the hell did he think he was to assume that he knew her better
than she knew herself?! The problem was that he was right, and since there was nothing Claire
could take her frustration out on, Bruce Willis had to become a designated collateral damage.

“It’s nothing,” she grimaced. “Mr. Masrani wants to launch a new project.”

“And the problem is?”

The problem was that even though all dinosaurs at the park were, technically, hybrids, Dr. Wu still
did his best to recreate them as close to the original species as he could. Sure, they had no choice
but to add the missing genome, but these pieces of DNA were usually taken from the similar
species, or the direct descendants of the extinct animals. God only knew how much they lucked out
with the Mosasaurus and an abundance of amphibians they could use.

Claire didn’t know all the details – in part because she wasn’t a biologist, and in part because her
job was to memorize a different kind of data, and there was only so much she could jam into her
memory before her brain would go into an overload mode. Still, it seemed pretty safe. But now that
the sales were going down, Simon wanted to create a new animal. He wanted to mix and match the
genome of several species and come up with something brand new, something that was meant to
blow away the minds of the audience that no longer found the regular dinosaurs entertaining.

From the business standpoint, she could see where he was coming from, and if they were breeding
pandas, she’d be all for it. However, the way he presented it to her – more deadly, more terrifying
– didn’t sit right with Claire, making her chest constrict uncomfortably. She’d seen the raptors up
close when she’d swung by the paddock before, their eyes focused on her making her skin crawl.
She’d stood on the other side of the glass from the T-Rex, not even twenty feet away from it while
it watched her back, and she’d seen her death in the animal’s eyes. What could be more deadly
than that? There was a reason they kept the number of the carnivores to a minimum – just enough
to make the place attractive to the thrill-seekers, choosing to focus on the timid herbivores who,
while still dangerous due to their size, weren’t looking at the guests of the park as a meal.

“I don’t think he understands the potential consequences of his idea,” Claire responded
diplomatically, careful not to spill too much since the project was supposed to stay secret at least
until Wu made progress with the actual cloning. Not that letting Owen in on the whole idea
would’ve much difference, Claire mused.

“Just tell’im what they are and let’im think he figured it out by himself,” he offered.

“So this is how it works with you, huh?” She hummed, unimpressed.

“We’re not that complicated,” he let out a short laugh. “Wait, you have something…”

He reached over and brushed his thumb to the corner of her mouth, wiping something off, and
Claire’s pulse tripped over itself, his impossibly blue eyes boring into hers and rendering her numb.
He swallowed audibly, his easy smile slipping. Claire expected him to drop his hand, pulled back, but his fingers lingered on her cheek, making her skin burn and her heart leap up into her throat. His gaze dropped to her lips. A part of her was still waiting for him to laugh it off, tell her he was messing with her (because she’d long lost the count of his ridiculous innuendos that he kept bringing up just for the sake of ruffling her feathers) when Owen suddenly leaned in, tilting her face up, and pressed his mouth to hers.

His lips were soft and warm, and he tasted of the salad dressing and beer, and before Claire knew it, she was stretching up against him, pressing closer to his chest, her hands gripping his shirt, his shoulders, carding through his hair. She heard a quiet grunt of appreciation, realizing if a little belatedly that it came from her when Owen’s hands slid around her and up her back, tangling in her hair, and all she could think was – finally.

The relief and excitement were short-lived though, and when the reality of what was happening dawned on her, it felt like an ice-cold shower that made Claire jolt away from him, both of them panting, their cheeks flushed and hair mussed, and her palms itching to smooth down his curls.

“We can’t,” she muttered and pressed a hand to her lips that felt tender and almost bruised.

“Mixed signals here, Claire,” Owen breathed out, standing a good five feet away from her, unmoving. Like he was scared of spooking her, and not without reason, perhaps. She wasn’t sure. His house suddenly felt the size of a matchbox, and she could barely breathe.

“There’re rules,” she stuttered, the words sounding ridiculous even to her own ears.

Owen blinked in confusion and ran his hand through his hair, making it stick out in every direction even more. “And?”

“And… What do you mean – and?” Oh god…

“Screw the rules,” he blurted out, watching her pace between the table and the sink. “Who cares? What are they gonna do? Send us to the principle?”

The blood rush in her ears was making it hard to think. “How about fire us?”

He laughed – a humourless sharp bark of a sound that sliced through her like a knife. “Are you serious now? No one’s ever gonna fire you. There’s no one in the world who’s qualified to run this place.”

She paused, her hands on her hips and the frustration inside her rising with an alarming speed, although at what or who exactly, Claire couldn’t quite tell because he was right, just like he was right in probably knowing full well that there was no one else to run the raptors’ program, either. Which still didn’t mean they were invincible.

“You know it’s not the issue,” she retorted. Rubbed her forehead, conflicted. The air around them felt charged, making her skin tingle. “Relationships between employees are not encouraged in general, but relationships between executives and subordinates are strictly against the policy, and technically—”

“Technically, you’re not my supervisor, Claire,” he interjected. “Technically, we don’t even work in the same company.” His voice grew edgy and bitter. “So what you’re saying is that I’m not good enough for you.”

“You don’t have to twist my words!” She snapped.
He sneered. “I’m not, I’m just putting them in simple terms.”

Claire folded her arms over her chest and scowled at him. “Why do you even care? Five minutes ago you weren’t even interested!”

He gaped at her. “You picked up this place from the ground and turned it into a multi-million dollar machine, and yet half the time you can’t see what’s right in front of you.”

Her jaw dropped. “What’s the supposed to mean?”

“I think you know.”

“I think I should go.”

“Surprised you’re still here,” he huffed.

She brushed past him and slammed the door on the way out, making the windows of the bungalow rattle, feeling a smug satisfaction from knowing that he probably flinched.

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He didn’t mean it like that, and the fact that Claire stormed out clearly insulted left a nasty aftertaste in Owen’s mouth. He felt like a jerk, and yet her words felt like a slap in the face, making his cheeks burn with fury.

This was bullshit, and the both knew, but if she needed an excuse to run away, well she was very welcome to stick to a fucking rule no one in a hundred mile radius was adhering to. They were bending the nature and playing God, but heaven forbid if they got involved with one another. Blasphemy!

“No workplace relationships, my ass,” he muttered, waiting for the coffee machine in the cramped container that served as the InGen office – which was a joke, really, because they barely managed to squeeze a desk, a couch and a file cabinet inside, with just enough space left for one person to get to the fridge tucked in the corner – to go off.

It had been a few days and the frustration that he half-heartedly expected to simmer down only grew stronger, almost going through the roof every time he’d habitually reach for his phone. Like some lovesick teenager, for crying out loud! She didn’t call, and why the hell would she? Not that he expected her to, and yet, the black screen was a reminder of their ugly fight, making him want to chuck his phone against the wall and be done with it. At least then he’d stop waiting, or worse yet – thinking about calling her.

Although Owen had to admit that the worst thing was not knowing who exactly he was mad at – Claire with her desperate need to follow every stupid regulation to the letter even when they made no sense whatsoever, or himself for probably, maybe blowing the whole thing out of proportion for no reason. Except there was a reason, of course. He’d been crazy about her for as long as he knew her. From the first day they met, the first time they spoke, his palms sweaty and his heart beating out of his chest before she so much as opened her mouth to say hello as she brushed past him on her way… well, wherever she was headed while he stood there and watched her go, her hips swaying gently with every step and her phone glued to her ear.

Like a moron, he was thinking now, glaring at the coffee maker.

He’d never had any illusions about them, and if friendship was all she as willing to offer, he was happy to take it and be grateful for it. The truth was, he was scared of pushing her away if he made
a move. The truth was, he was missing her so badly now it was ripping him apart because she was all he had – well, the raptors, too, but they proved being a lousy company for beer nights and even lousier listeners, disappearing into the bushes the moment they knew there’d be no treats from him, their interests lying elsewhere.

The air around him was stuffy and stale, clouds of dust dancing in the sunlight that streamed through the blinds. The place smelled of mold and paper and burned coffee and the dirt brought in on the soles of their boots. There were dirty coffee mugs sitting on the fridge, but thank god, everyone knew not to leave any food scraps behind. Still, it looked rather dreary, which reflected Owen’s mood all too well.

His fingers tapping absently on the wall, he peeked outside into the humid, muggy day that was hanging over the paddock like a thick blanket, making everyone think that they were swimming through the air rather than walking. The raptors were grumpy and uncooperative, too hot and too lazy to work, which certainly was of little help with his own attitude toward the day and his life in general. They still needed to go through another training session today, or at least grad their asses through it, for Owen had no hope for any progress.

The door to the office opened abruptly behind him, letting in what passed for the fresh air here and giving him a start. He turned around, expecting to see Barry or one of the other handlers looking for a snack. Instead, his eyes met Claire’s, his stormy gaze fastening on her jade-green one.

She stopped mid-stroll, caught off-guard, and for a moment her carefully composed mask slipped, revealing a sliver of hope mixed with panic until an expression of utmost annoyance took over. Her hand on the doorknob and her lips pursed into a thin line, she regarded him darkly, and Owen’s eyebrows knitted together in response, the coffee forgotten instantly and his stomach in knots.

“I’m looking for Hoskins,” Claire said in lieu of a greeting, glancing around the small space as if waiting for Vic to climb from under the table or out of the fridge.

The coffee maker finally beeped and switched off.

“He’s not here,” Owen said as if she hadn’t already figured that out for herself and turned away from her with a pointed dismissal.

“Well, could you tell him--” Claire started and trailed off, and for a moment, Owen thought that she chose not to bother and simply left mid-sentence, his back so stiff that his hands were shaking.

“So, is this how it’s going to be between us?” She asked suddenly, her voice different - small and uncertain.

Owen put down the mug, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to swallow anything anyway and looked at her again. Shook his head and focused his gaze on the nail sticking out of the wall to the left from her. They used to have a map of the island hanging there, but at some point, it disappeared, replaced by the digital copies. He wondered absently just how much of his own life was gone without him noticing.

“What do you want me to say, Claire?”

His eyes locked with hers, taken by surprise by how lost she looked in that moment. Even in her crisp Armani suit, not a hair out of place – picture perfect in each and every sense. If only people knew how to look deeper and see beneath the veneer of pretense and games, the image she was so desperate to hold that she was willing to sacrifice anything to keep it in place.

Her shoulders shagged under his scrutiny and her hand fell down to her side, her form deflating
Owen still remembered the first time she showed up at his place with a bottle of wine and a hell of a day under her belt, needing to unwind in a company of a real person. He burst out laughing because until that very moment he didn’t know Claire Dearing even owned jeans and tennis shoes – a look he was digging way more than pencil skits and heels, for whatever reason. She almost left then, glaring daggers at him, and if looks could kill, he could probably drop dead in an instant. She was like a tiny ball of righteous indignation and eyerolls, barely reaching his chin – something that struck Owen like a sucker punch.

He had never seen Claire so out of her usual element before, and the level of trust that it required all but swept him off his feet.

Standing before him right now, she looked about just as small and a thousand times more vulnerable, and he knew in that moment that if he chose to strike hard and fast, she’d keel before him, stripped off the armour and defenseless.

“You know that it’s not about you, right?”

He grimaced and shook his head, disgusted. “Gimme a break.” His jaw tightened, his gaze uncompromising. "If you’re going to recycle the *it’s not you, it’s me* bullshit, just… leave. I’ll tell Hoskins you stopped by.”

He stepped toward her with the intension to leave before being in close proximity to Claire Dearing squeezed all life out of him, his lungs seemingly refusing to function properly when he could smell the delicate scent of her presume that wrapped around him like a cloud, clinging to his skin and clothes. Lately, he was starting to believe that it was going to linger on him till his dying day, and the idea was downright torturous.

Claire didn’t budge even when he was practically pressed to her, as if daring him to physically move her out of his way. From this close, he could see every golden spec in her eyes, every goddamn freckle that was haunting his dreams at night, smell the sunshine on her skin, and his fingers curled into his palms, arching to reach for her. If there was a way to get her taste of his memory, Owen had no idea what it was, hating himself for it while a part of him wanted to never forget it. Not even for a moment.

“It’s not about the goddamned policies, Claire,” he murmured, his voice tight and hoarse. “I’d never force you into anything you don’t want. But it’s not the case now, is it?”

She swallowed, and he could swear he felt her resolve crumble. “What makes you think I want this?”

His mouth curled into a humourless smirk. “Because I was there. You kissed me back, remember?”

Her eyes hardened. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Owen’s eyebrow quirked, his blood so hot in his veins he feared it would burn right out of him. Behind Claire, the paddock was buzzing with the afternoon activity, a truck came in with the food supplies, a couple of handlers were smoking in the shadow of the palms trees, desperate to get out of the sun.

It was loud, the sound of the voices mixing with the crash of the waves against the rocks several hundred feet below them, but the blood rush in his ears tuned the familiar commotion out, and the warmth of her body squeezed into pants that probably cost more than everything he’d ever owned.
was suddenly too much. He knew that if they continued to stand there – or worse yet, parted their ways – he would implode and cease to exist.

One hand on the small of her back and another on her jaw, lifting her face up, Owen dipped his head and pressed his mouth to hers, kissing her hungrily, a low groan rumbling in the back of his throat, a curse and a warning. He pulled her into the office and kicked the door closed, wrapped momentarily in everything that was her. Pressed her to the door that creaked on impact, but it only made her push closer against him, her hands flying over his shoulders, gripping the hair on the back of his head, sliding under the collar of his shirt.

Owen gripped her tight, tugging at whatever he could reach, intoxicated by the eagerness of Claire’s response. Her lips parted for him and his tongue darted into her mouth, which earned him a sound of approval from her that reverberated into his body, setting him on fire from the inside.

He tore away from her, panting, kissing her face, his hands tugging and squeezing while Claire lips were dancing over his cheeks, his neck, pressing hot kisses to whatever skin she could reach, leaving red stains from her lipstick all over him, their breaths mingled together, chests heaving and knees wobbly. He pushed her back, pausing only briefly to catch her gaze, her eyes dark with wanting and her bright red lips parted. Claire nodded faintly, as if uncertain if he needed a further invitation, and he fitted her mouth to hers for a desperate, sloppy kiss. He trailed his mouth down her neck before dropping down on his knees. Nuzzled into her stomach while his hands worked on unbuttoning her pants.

“Owen…” She started, half surprised and half-begging.

He yanked them down to her knees in one fluid motion, revealing lace underwear beneath. Pushed her legs further apart.

“Trust me,” he puffed against her skin, kissing her belly, her thighs, along the hem of her panties before slipping down, too, finally gaining the full access to what he was after.

His breath on her skin so close to her core made her shiver and she bit hard into her lip to stop herself from crying out, her back pushed into rough metal door. It had been a while since anyone was willing do please her that way, let alone by choice, and she could feel the heavy tug of anticipation in her lower belly just from thinking about it, about Owen touching he there. Her hands dug into his shoulders, fingers pulling at his hair, her breath coming out is short, laboured rasps. His stubble felt raw on her soft skin, sending zaps of fire through her whole body and making her feel raw all over.

He was anything but not thorough, exploring and caressing, ripping a loud moan out of her when his mouth finally reached its destination, slow flicks of his tongue pushing her closer to the edge, his hands on her thighs and her butt holding her firmly in place. Not that she wanted to move. Not enough, Claire thought while his tongue did something incredible. She had never felt less in control, and happy about it. Not enough, and then suddenly too much, and the world exploded around her, carrying her off into a bright oblivion, her nails scraping over the fabric of his shirt, thinking that she was going to collapse.

“More,” she whimpered when he was suddenly gone, demanding rather than pleading, scared that it was over.

But instead Owen helped her step out of her pants, her heels miraculously still on her feet. His hands slid under her thighs, her body still sharking in aftershocks that were washing over her in waves, and lifted her easily, stumbling back until they both plopped down on a dusty couch, Claire knees on either side of his lap. She framed his face with her hands, breathless, and kissed him deep,
tasting herself on his lips, her fingers trembling. Arched her back to press into him, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt, needing to feel his skin.

Owen grunted when she pushed it open, her palms skimming over his chest, thumbs running over his nipples and her mouth curled into a coy grin, eyes glinting. He wanted her to badly it hurt, driving him crazy. His hands blushed along her thighs, siding up to cup her butt, and she responded by rocking against him, very well aware of who was in control now, drunk on power.

He pressed his face into her neck while Claire tugged at his belt, her fingers clumsy on the button and the zipper.

“Jesus,” he mouthed almost soundlessly, squeezing her thighs when her hand slid inside, swift fingers stroking and teasing him over the thin fabric of his boxers, and there was only so much a man could handle.

He pushed his pants and boxers down just far enough for her lift and then take him in, deep on a single thrust, her gasp morphing into a moan. She was still tender, still throbbing from the release a few minutes ago, but Owen didn’t have it in him to give her time to catch up. He was already moving inside her, pumping his hips against hers. Hot and tight, she was pulsing all around him, lips and hands and breath on his skin, the scents of sweat and musk and jungle mixed together. So beautiful in the afternoon sunlight, catching the coppery fire of her hair that was framing his face in soft curls. He wanted to take it slower, to be gentler, but she’d already been taken care of, and he needed more.

Her eyes kept fluttering closed with every push, her pleasure mounting until it was washing over her and into him, her walls clenched so tight around Owen, he thought they could never be able to pull apart again – he idea more than a little appealing, seeing as how this didn’t last nearly as long as he wanted it to, both of them too worked up to really savour one another.

He grunted, cursing under his breath, his whole body quaking, ripped apart and pulled together again. His fingers flexed on her sides as he pulled her down to his chest, smoothing her hair with his hand. He brushed a kiss to her temple, breathing her in, sated at last. Limp and heavy in his arms, she shifted with Owen still inside her; let out a slow breath and rested her forehead to his, her blouse half unbuttoned and a cream bra peeking from beneath it. Unable to resist it, Owen reached inside it and traced its strap with his fingers, thinking of how the next time there would be no clothes so he could taste all of her, every inch of her skin. Take hours, days even, however long it took for them to forget everything else.

And then suddenly, as if reading his mind, she was pulling back and scrambling to her feet, frantically buttoning up her blouse and picking up her discarded garments from the floor.

“Claire?”

“I have to go,” she muttered. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

Owen all but leaped up from the couch, pulling up his pants, disbelieving, his blood hammering so fast in his temples it was making him dizzy. The sudden change from a complete bliss to whatever was happening right now left his mind reeling. It was like he reached the top of a roller-coaster and plummeted down before he had a chance to so much as take a breath or grab a hold of something so as not to fall out, clearly soaring right into the void right now.

“What the hell are you talking about?” He asked as she pulled on her pants and ran her fingers through her hair, trying to make it look more like her usual do and less like a fizzy mess that it was (even though Owen liked it so much better this way, tempted to touch his fingers to the soft curls
framing her high cheekbones) before starting to button up her blouse with weak fingers.

Claire snapped her head up, meeting his eyes at last – for the first time since something got up her ass about the development in their… situation.

“Come on, where do you think this could possibly go?” She hissed, finally managing to make herself look more presentable than she was a few minutes ago.

“To a more comfortable location the next time, I hope,” Owen scoffed, tucking his shirt into his pants, his skin still prickling with her touch, demanding more. He glowered at her as he pulled his vest on, worn leather hugging his shoulders.

“I’m serious, Owen.” She grabbed her phone from the desk and stomped toward the door.

“I would have never pegged you for such a coward,” he threw after her.

She stopped in her tracks and whirled around, her face hard. “How does not following my every whim mean being a coward?” She retorted.

“A whim? Is this what it was?”

“What else?” She yanked the door open, blinking for a moment in the sunlight, so much brighter after the comfortable semi-darkness of the office.

He followed her without missing a beat, not caring for one second about the curious glances drawn to their confrontation. “Tell me you didn’t want it,” Owen demanded, unfazed, his voice carrying over the clearing. “Tell me that what just happened didn’t matter.”

“You only want what you can’t get, Owen.” She

“It didn’t feel like I couldn’t get you fifteen minutes ago.”

She slid into her car without another word and drove off, the tired screeching and a cloud of dust hanging around him. By the time it settled, the taillights of her Mercedes disappeared around the bend in the road.

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The problem wasn’t that Claire thought that Owen didn’t want her – god knew, this was not an issue at all, and if she were completely honest with herself, she would also admit that she didn’t give much of a damn about any rules and restriction either. The problem was that she had never felt so out of control. He wasn’t bending to her will the way many other men did. Not that she wanted him to, but if something went wrong, if their relationship didn’t work out, there would be nowhere to go, no place to run. And quite frankly, she had little reason to believe that they could make it work.

Who was she kidding? They were a disaster waiting to happen.

Which didn’t mean she didn’t miss him, in every possible way, the bruises and marks he left on her skin making her yearn for more. He was right, though. She was scared…

The phone call came in the early afternoon while Claire was poring over the presentation, feeling like she was losing her mind, the lines blurring before her eyes from hours and hours of staring at the screen of her laptop, the figures and numbers no longer making any sense.
She pinched the bridge of her nose as she reached blindly for her phone, expecting to hear Simon Masrani on the other end, with questions or instructions.

But it wasn’t him.

There was an incident in the raptors’ paddock, and the protocol was to notify her immediately. Claire didn’t hear much after the caller said raptors’ paddock, gripping her desk so tight her knuckles turned while, the room swaying around her.

*Owen.*

By the time she got to the infirmary, he was already discharged, his injuries too minor and his determination to get out too strong. She tried his phone, but he wasn’t picking up, and by the time Claire made it to his bungalow, she was frantic and terrified, imagining him bleeding out somewhere in the forest, all because of his rock solid head and the stubbornness of a bull.

He was not at home either, and after trying his phone one more time and learning that his voicemail inbox was full, she collapsed onto the porch steps, certain that if she tried to drive now, she’d wrap her car around some tree in two seconds flat, what with her hands shaking and her knees weak with worry. Besides, she had no idea where to look for him, no idea where he could have possibly be.

His car pulled up to the bungalow half an hour later, right when she was about to call for a search party, and she stood abruptly as he climbed out, his left arm nestled close to his chest with a sling.

“Claire.”

He paused, startled when his gaze locked with hers, a battle of emotions so evident on his face she could clearly read everything from hurt to panic to confusion, all rolled into one. His shirt was stained with what looked like blood, his hair disheveled and his eyes haggard. She had never been happier to see him.

He was still standing by the car when she crossed the distance between them in two steps and threw her arms around him, trusting him to catch her before they both tumbled to the ground.

“Ow,” he stiffened on impact.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, shifting to make sure she wasn’t hurting him.

“S’okay,” Owen muttered when she started to pull away. His good arm wrapped around her and he kissed her hair. “I’m okay.”

“What happened?” She drew back just far enough away to look into is face, trailing her fingertips down his cheek as if uncertain that he was even real.

Owen’s lips curved. “Delta decided to give me a hug. No biggie. It’s just a scratch.” His smiled slipped. “What are you doing here?”

Claire’s lips pursed into a flat line. “Really?” She huffed. “What do you think I’m doing here?”

Her arms dropped from his shoulder and she took a step back.

Owen cleared his throat, eyeing her contemplatively. “I just… after you’ve left the other day…” He shrugged. “The message seemed loud and clear.”

“You’re such an idiot, you know?” She rolled her eyes, happy to be annoyed rather than terrified.
out of her mind that he went and did something dumb because his reckless nature couldn’t resist it and it turned out being the last straw.

“Do tell,” he smirked, leaning against the hood of his car, and it only then occurred to Claire that he probably shouldn’t be driving.

She scowled at him, considering telling him off, but then just sighed and shook her head instead, crossed her arms over her chest and looked away, studying a cluster of trees near the edge of the clearing in front of the bungalow.

“I had a fight with Karen last night,” she said after a while, aware of Owen looking at her, but finding it easier to speak without the eye contact. “Nothing interesting, just our old stuff.” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “And when I hung up, I realized that I was dialing your number without thinking, without even knowing that I was doing it. Not because I needed to rant or anything, but because…” She sucked in a shuddered breath, finally meeting his eyes. “Because you’re the most sane thing in my life right now. And I know it’s all messed up, but miss you. And when they called me today and I thought--” She cut off and rolled her shoulders, her unspoken words hanging between them.

Owen studied her for a long moment. Nodded as if he was having a conversation with himself in his head.

“I need you to tell me the truth, Claire. What happened between us… Did it mean anything to you?”

“Please don’t-”

“Did it mean anything?” Ye pressed.

“…yes. Of course, it did.”

He nodded again; studied his mud-covered boots for a while. Then peeled off the car and stepped toward her until they were barely in inch apart. Didn’t make an effort to touch her though, which was a monumental achievement on his part, simply watching her.

“So, what now?” He asked.

“Now… We can give this a try—Give us a try. See how long we can keep from going for each other’s throats.” A shaky laugh bubbled in her chest, the sound that made his heart sing. “I’m in if you are.”

“And… the rules?” He teased, an eyebrow quirked.

“Screw the rules,” she repeated his own words back to him. Then licked her lips nervously. “It’s not the rules that are a problem.” Her finger was now absently tracing a button of his shirt as she share in the general direction of his chin. “I just… I don’t want to lose you, and if this goes down-”

He tapped her on the chin until she was looking him in the eyes. “We’ll just have to make sure that it doesn’t happen. Okay?” His smile widened before he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I deal with moody and grumpy raptors day in and day out. I think I can handle a bossy Asset Manager.”

“And here I was thinking about staying over. In case you needed help,” she grumbled.

Owen threw his arm around her shoulder and steered her toward the bungalow. “Bet I can convince
you to stick around.”

She craned her neck to brush a kiss to his jaw. “I wouldn’t be so sure, but let’s see what you’ve got.”
Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompt: "Imagine person B is insanely ticklish and when person A goes to exploit this weakness, B accidentally punches them in the face when trying to fight A off."

Owen Grady was a man of many talents. The Navy taught him a lot, and the life – even more. He could hunt like he was born with a rifle in his hands, grill a mean steak, look dashing without even trying, and kiss her until she was weak in her knees, which Claire considered the most valued of his skills.

Well, the second most valued, if she were completely honest with herself. The first one she discovered on the night of their first date when they stumbled into his bungalow, tugging at each other’s clothes like their lives depended on it, and Claire hadn’t left until the next morning, unstable on her feet, her body aching in all the right places. The man clearly knew what he’d been doing the night before. And maybe they annoyed the living hell out of one another more often than not, and maybe he didn’t appreciate her control issues while Claire found most of his habits distasteful, but, boy, was it easy to ignore all of that when his hands were on her body.

Claire’s eyes skittered over his living room, taking in the fishing gear on the walls, the books organized in alphabetical order on the shelves, his boots caked with mud sitting by the door. Even though she’d spent many a night here, she hadn’t paid much attention to the interior design of his place before, which was a shame, really. The one thing that she certainly didn’t anticipate when she jumped into their messy affair was to find out that he was a neat freak, his bungalow that she expected to be messy and chaotic was about as organized as she imagined his Navy housing used to be. Everything had its place, the floors were clean and the kitchen sink empty, no moldy dishes piling up in it. Even his bathroom… well, his bathroom was putting hers to shame. Frankly, she had never been more wrong about someone based on a first impression.

She traced her fingers over the framed photo of Owen with a few other men from his platoon, all of them in the Navy uniform, tall and broad-shouldered, resembling a solid wall, the sky above them and the water behind them so strikingly blue it hurt to look at it. Her lips formed into a small smile on the will of their own. It must have been at least 5 years since the photo had been taken, his grin radiant and cheery, making her heart squeeze in her chest.

The early morning sun was peeking through the crack between the curtains, bathing the living room in the honey-gold glow. Claire pushed her mussed hair out of her face, breathing in the unmistakable scent that all wooden structures seemed to bear. The polished floor was warm beneath her feet when she padded back to the bedroom where Owen was still fast asleep, sprawled diagonally across the bed, tangled in the sheets and snoring softly into her pillow, taking full advantage of a Saturday morning to catch up on what they barely had time for the previous night.

Her lips lifted at the corners at the memory, her eyes scratchy and her body pleasantly sore. Claire had to admit that she did, in fact, had certain reservations about their relationship. Or used to have, at least, but there wasn’t a moment when she regretted it, the pieces of their lives falling so perfectly and seamlessly together she couldn’t help but admire the picture that they made.
She lowered down onto the edge of the bed, allowing herself to study him uninterrupted (and without an array of ‘Like what you see?’ jokes that would rain on her whenever he’d catch her looking at him), her gaze skimming over the taut lines of his broad shoulders, the fine muscles of his back that moved with his inhales and exhales, streaked with scratch marks left by her nails – her personal branding, and down toward the narrow waist that ended with the finest ass she’d ever seen. The one that never failed to make her want to sink her teeth in it – which she did on more than one occasion. Her response to the bruises on her inner thighs from his hands and lips that never seemed to fade.

Claire looped her hair around her ears and leaned down to press a kiss to his shoulder, trailing her mouth slowly toward the nape of his neck, one hot kiss after another, tasting his skin, breathing him in. Whatever this was – whatever they were – Claire couldn’t get enough of it, of them, of this. She’d never known anyone like him, anyone so willing to give without asking for much in return. On the surface, it might have seemed that their fight for dominance was imminent and unavoidable, a battle that would leave nothing but victims in its wake. However in reality, he was more willing to relinquish his position, let her call the shots, if she so pleased, somehow maintaining his status quo nonetheless while also allowing her to maintain hers.

It was weird still, thrilling in its newness, requiring the kind of trust Claire didn’t know she was capable of giving, and more often than not, her first instinct was to retreat, or worse yet – to attack and reclaim her position. He never fought her, letting her find her footing. It was a slow process, she was a work in progress, but so was he, and there were certain things that were worth the effort, a thousand times over.

Her hand moved lightly over her skin, tracing the contours of his muscles, memorizing his body with her fingertips, searing the texture of his skin into her mind. He grumbled something in his sleep, a low, guttural sound deep in his throat, and rolled onto his back, lying before her in all his naked glory, a sheet draped artfully over half of his hip. Claire chuckled under her breath, amused by his bedhead and more than a little pleased by the instinctual reaction of his body to her touch.

She scooted closer to him, her face hovering an inch from Owen’s, taking in his ridiculously long eyelashes – and how unfair was it that guys always got the best deal on eyelashes when they were almost completely rudimentary to them?! – and the tan lines on his face, the perpetual crease between his eyebrows from squinting in the sun day in and day out that never went away anymore, a bow of his slightly parted lips, and the shadow of his scruff, spilling down from his cheeks and onto his neck, scratchy to the touch. Her whole body was covered with pink marks left by it.

“Mmm,” Owen’s eyes fluttered open slowly, as if sensing her proximity. He blinked, his gaze unfocused.

“Hi,” Claire breathed out, pressing her mouth to his collarbone and moving toward his throat with slow and deliberate precision, planting one open-mouthed kiss to his skin after another, not oblivious to how his breathing shortened momentarily, his heartbeat sprinting into a race.

She’d long lost count of the number of times when she’d woken up with his hands and mouth doing something wonderful to her body, his fingers dancing over all the right places, knowing exactly where to press and where to stroke to make Claire’s blood run hot. She imaged he wouldn’t mind if she returned the favour.

Owen inhaled sharply when she teased a path down his sternum with her fingers – he might not have been fully awake yet, but a few parts of him definitely were, and knowing that she had that effect on him, so much power over him, was intoxicating.

She loved the warmth of his skin, the leathery feel of it, the heat radiating off of his body in waves
like he was a human furnace even on the hottest of days. Loved the smell of it – the cedar from his body wash and forest and something distinctive that was purely Owen, the combination that often left her hyperventilation and yearning for more. It was ridiculous how she could catch his scent even when she couldn’t see him, picking up on his presence in the roomful of people, her skin tingling in response whenever he was within half a mile from her.

She had never given this much control over her to anyone ever before, let alone willingly.

Owen swallowed, his breath hitching briefly when she threw her leg over his hip, straddling his waist, her palms splayed on his chest, green eyes glinting with amusement and contemplation, her lips curved into a coy smile. He smirked and gave her a suggestive once-over, taking in her tousled hair, the sunlight tangled in her mane, drinking her up. He loved the pristine version of her, suits and heels, not a hair out of place. But it was this Claire, the one that smelled of sex and looked like she could eat him alive that was driving him wild.

Claire leaned down, her hands propped on either side of his head, and traced her nose down his cheek, her lips formed into a soft half-smile, feeling his wanting in her core. If anything, Owen certainly taught her to appreciate the weekends and lazy days off, spent half- or completely naked, fleeting touches and hungry mouths, soft laughs and never-ending exhilaration. Her lips trailed along his jaw and fitted to his; his hands bunching fistfuls of his shirt draped over her body, pulling her closer. However, when he tried to deepen the kiss, Claire drew back, hovering over him, close, but out of reach.

“That’s how we gonna do it, huh?” He smirked.

Without another word, Claire moved back, rising just far enough to take him in, deep on a single slide. Owen’s eyes went black and he snapped his hips snapped up, filling her completely. Her mouth dropped open with a surprised moan, fingers scraping over his chest, his palms on her thighs making her skin burn. She was certain she’d find blisters everywhere he touched her later on.

He sat up, the suddenness of a new angle making them both gasp. One hand on the small of her back and the other one tangled in her hair, Owen captured her mouth with his, swallowing her whimper, devouring her, Claire’s body pulsing around him, hips pushing against his, savouring the moment.

“You’re overdressed,” Owen muttered, his fingers fumbling with the two buttons that were keeping his shirt in place, needing to touch her, see her, feel her whole.

He pushed it down Claire’s arms, his teeth scraping down her throat and along her shoulder until his mouth closed around the rosy peak of her breast, cajoling a sigh off appreciation from her as his tongue ran around her nipple while his thumb played with the other one – gently strokes that were making her shiver. She arched her back against him, throwing her head back to give his a better access to her, and he smiled mid-kiss, leaving faint bite marks all over whatever skin he could reach, loving the sweet, warm weight of her pressed into his body, soft around the edges in the morning light. Radiant and so damn beautiful he couldn’t believe she was really there. Couldn’t believe his damn luck, for that matter.

Hands full of fistfuls of his hair, Claire nudged their hips into a rock, demanding rather than asking, her pleasure mounting. Eager to oblige, Owen fell back, taking her with him, and rolled them over, pinning her to the sheets, her yelp of surprise morphing into a laugh. His mouth crashed against her, silencing her, their fingers laced together above Claire’s, delicious friction that left them both balancing on the edge. She let out a low, breathy whimper when he buried himself deeper inside her and her long legs wrapped around him, reeling him closer still, the hot, throbbing sensation turning his whole body into a bundle of raw nerves, their bodies smearing into one another.
Owen found the rhythm and set on a more deliberate quest, sliding in and out of her, Claire’s hips rising and falling to meet him rock for rock. His lips were dancing all over her face, light sloppy kisses dropped on her cheeks, her forehead, her eyelids while his hands groped for her skin, grabbing the headboard for support. Deeper, faster… She clenched around him, crying out, nearly undoing him in that instant, her fingers digging into his shoulders, and then he was falling after her, spiraling into pure, sparkling bliss.

The world still spinning wildly, Owen pressed his forehead to her temple. Grunted, the words incomprehensible. Meant to thank her, but it required the energy he didn’t have. Claire laughed and kissed his shoulder, his body damp and wonderfully heavy – the only thing that mattered. He stirred, his muscles still spasming as surges of lazy aftershocks rolled slowly over his body, his hands clutching fistfuls of sheets.

He actually had to make a conscious effort to unclench his fingers, reaching for Claire instead. He touched his hand to her hair, his eyes heavy-lidded and his breathing still nowhere to be found. Made a faint sound of appreciation in the back of his throat that came out as soft groan against her skin, making her squirm away with a giggle.

“Tickles,” she breathed out, kissing his neck, but when he tried to move, she tightened her grip on him, holding him close. “Don’t.”

“You’ll suffocate,” Owen chuckled, nuzzling into her hair.

“Mm, not the worst way to go,” Claire purred into his ear, earning a short laugh in response, her mind clouded with enough endorphins to make her feel like she was floating through space and time as her hands played with the hair near the nape of his neck, carding slowly without soft curls, elated and giddy.

Still, Owen’s flopped on his side with her still wound tightly around him, her head resting on his bicep and their lips meeting in tender, slow kisses.

“Now that’s… wat I call… a good… morning,” Owen murmured, punctuating the words with the pecks on her mouth.

“You and I have that in common, Mr. Grady.” She wiggled her leg from beneath him, pressing closer to his chest, her other one draped over his hip, their sweat-slick bodies sticking to each other. Her hand dropped from his face and skittered along his side, making Owen tense. And her eyebrow cocked in surprise. “Wouldn’t have pegged you for the ticklish one.”

He brushed her bangs back from her forehead, studying the golden specs in her eyes. “We all have our weaknesses.”

Claire smirked. “I thought I was yours.”

Owen’s fingers traced the line of her cheekbone, slipping under her chin to lift her face up. “You’re definitely in the top 5.”

“Is that so?”

Catching him by surprise, she pushed him onto his back and straddled him again, holding him down, smiling wickedly, her hair veiling her face. Their chests were still heaving, small tremors still running over their bodies. One corner of Owen’s mouth curled into a cocky grin.

“Wanna play it rough, huh?”
“Top 5?” She echoed, incredulous and more than a little insulted. “Top 5?”

And then she suddenly let go of his forearms, her fingers flying all over his chest, skimming over whatever parts of him she could reach. Owen let out a shriek of confusion followed by bellows of laughter as he tried to catch her hands, wiggling beneath her. Claire, however, had a much better leverage. Lean and swift, and impossible to get a hold of, she had a definite advantage over him, the peals of her triumphant laughter ricocheting against the walls.

Until his hand shot forward to grab her wrist just as Claire leaned in for a kiss. Too fast, too unexpected… The heel of his palm connected with her skin with a sickening crunching sound, and then she let out a pained howl and jerked away from him, scarlet droplets of blood splattering the grey sheets.

“Claire?” It took him a moment to realize that something was wrong.

“Oh, my god,” she mumbled, scooting away to the edge of the bed, her voice muffled by the hand she was holding over her face, her eyes filling with involuntary tears. “You broke my nose.”

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He didn’t, but even half an hour later, Owen was still feeling sick to his stomach from the idea of hurting her, however unintentional it was, his hands shaking with a jolt of adrenaline that was coursing through his system.

Wrapped once again in his shirt, Claire was sitting in a chair in the living room with her head tipped back and a pack of frozen peas resting on the bridge of her swollen nose and studying the beams and pillars that held the roof of the bungalow in place. The sharp pain that scared the living hell out of her not so long ago had dulled down to unpleasant throbbing that made the process of breathing not quite as comfortable as she preferred.

“Baby, I’m so sorry,” Owen crouched down beside her and kissed her shoulder. He had probably apologized at least a thousand times, seemingly far more freaked out than Claire, albeit slightly less inconvenienced. Holding her face between his palms, he kissed away the unbidden tears, murmuring soft apologies until the words started to blend together. He tucked her hair around her ear, his eyebrows knitted together. “Does it hurt?”

Claire shot him a quick sideway look. “What’s your best guess?”

“Claire, I swear to god—”

“I know, I know,” she breathed out, ashamed of her snappy voice. It was no one’s fault, after all. She was an idiot and Owen was merely trying to shield himself form something that was causing him discomfort. And now, they were both paying for it. So stupid. “It’s not that, it’s…”

“Let me see.” Owen easily swung her chair around, its legs scraping against the hardwood floor, and plopped down on the couch in front of her. Pulled Claire’s hand away from her face, her fingers cold and her nails turning blue from holding the frozen peas – he knew he was going to hear more about the fact that he even had frozen peas in the freezer later, what with his diet consisting primarily of crackers and beer when she wasn’t around. He grimaced a little and she frowned. “This is going to bruise.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” she sighed. Rubbed her forehead and let out a frustrated huff. “I have a meeting with the President of Trade Associations first thing in the morning, and what am I going to do? Show up looking like a raccoon who was hit by a train?”
“You know, if a raccoon was hit by a train—” He cut off when she gave him another look. “Or, you could just tell the truth.”

She touched her nose cautiously, wincing. “That my boyfriend punched me in the face?”

*That it was an accident,* Owen wanted to say, but instead he just stared at her like she’d just grown a second head.

“What?” She asked when he didn’t say anything, her heart leaping into her throat. “It was a joke, I’m not going to actually say that.”

Owen ran his hand over his hair and cleared his throat. “It’s the first time you called me your boyfriend.”

Claire blinked. “No, it’s not,” she protested automatically. “And even if it is… is that a problem?”

“No! God, no,” he replied quickly. “It’s just…. You’ve always wanted it to be a casual thing.” The words tumbled awkward out of his mouth, a topic they rarely addressed. The one that was filling the space between them half the time, squeezing the air out of their lungs.

She did.

Until she didn’t.

Until her spare toothbrush found a permanent home in his bathroom and there were her clothes in his hamper, and staying over became more of a thing than sneaking out in the middle of the night – all the things Claire didn’t expect to happen were staring her right in the face. She had no idea just when exactly did they settle into a semblance of a routine – even though the word *routine* could hardly be applied to them – but there was nothing that felt more normal anymore, her days filled with business meetings and her nights with Owen. She certainly didn’t mind that balance.

She looked past him and out the window where the sunlight was bouncing off the bright green foliage, making the whole world look like it was glowing, a thick lump rolling in her throat because she was scared. Hell, she was downright *terrified,* and having Owen sit there in front of her in his grey sweatpants, waiting for her response, was making it pretty damn hard to think straight.

“Hey, c’mere.” Sensing her hesitation, he reached for her hand and pull her up to her feet and into his lap, the peas left behind on the chair. His fingers ran over the bridge of her nose gently, the spot tender to the touch, before tangling in Claire’s hair and turning her face to him so she had no other choice but to look at him, the words rolling on his tongue but having a very hard time coming out of her mouth. “I’ve always wanted more. You know that, right?”

She nodded slowly, her gaze locked with his. “I don’t know *what* I want,” she admitted after a short pause. “But I think I want more, too.” Which was perhaps the most honest thing she’d ever said to anyone she’d been in a relationship with, which left her stomach in knots.

“I would never hurt you, Claire.” His voice was soft, the words so earnest they felt like a sucker-punch, knocking all wind out of her.

Her mouth quirked, her lips quivering. “Forgive me for not believing *that.*”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again, kissing her temple. “How ‘bout you skip that meeting tomorrow?”

“Can’t.” Claire’s hand curled around the back of his neck. “We need that contract. Without it, we
might have to consider including the guests of the island in the meal plan for the animals.” God, she loved smelling herself on him, loved not knowing where she ended and he began, his warmth like a cocoon around her. “And that is frowned upon.”

He laughed, a vibration that shot all the way from the top of her head and into her toes. “Okay then.” Owen’s hands was rubbing slow circles into her sides. “Then how ‘bout you stay here today and make sure this hurts less?” His voice dropped to a husk that ran over her skin like electric charge as he trailed her finger down her nose, barely touching her and yet leaving a burning trail.

“I don’t think that what you have in mind can actually help with that,” she pointed out, not disagreeing but challenging him to try harder.

He cupped her cheek with his palm, kissed her lightly, and then again - deeper. “No harm in trying.”
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompt: Owen walking into Claire asleep at her desk after she didn't come home from the office when she was meant to.

Chapter Notes

This is ridiculously short, but I adore their bittersweet moments, so....

He knew she was a workaholic before he knew anything else about her. Before he even knew her name. In all honesty, it was impossible to look at Claire Dearing and assume that she was anything but, all straight lines and sharp angles, her very essence screaming of precision and determination. There was a joke on the island that she was hopelessly and irrevocably married to her job, and one look at her was enough to know that it wasn’t that far from the truth. She truly was a force to be reckoned with. And Owen knew full well that after quitting Masrani Global, she was going to throw herself into whatever project came next because it was what Claire knew how to do best.

He just didn’t expect it to be that bad. Endless hours in the office, their moments together scant and few and far between, often when they were too tired to appreciate them. He got it, in a way, could see her need to fill the hole what opened up in her life so suddenly Claire didn’t know how to find her footing again. She needed time. They both did. He missed her though, missed her in a way their morning coffee and occasional texts didn’t make up for.

The elevator doors slid open before him without a sound, and Owen stepped into the 6th floor corridor, dimmed lights making it look almost eerie and the steady thud of his footsteps bouncing around and ricocheting against the walls. Claire’s office was the last one on the right, and the only one with a strip of light under the door. She was working late, and it wasn’t the first time it happened. Frankly, he’d be far more surprised if she did make it home for dinner at least once a week. But Claire always found time to shoot him a quick message and she never ignored his calls before, and after leaving several voicemails on her phone, reminding her that it was supposed to be a date night and it was only half as fun if she weren’t there, he drove over to her office to make sure she was okay.

He rapped his knuckles on the door, careful not to startle her or interrupt a phone conference - both of which he was guilty of - and poked his head inside, expecting to find her buried in papers or glued to her laptop, working on the presentation she’d been talking about all week. Instead, her head was resting on her planner, the light of the reading lamp on her desk tangled in her hair, making it look like it was glowing, a highlight marker clutched in her fingers. He paused in the doorway, and his heart clenched with fierce tenderness he couldn’t even begin to put into words, unable to move or think for a long moment, utterly transfixed.

The building was quiet, the silence around them interrupted only the by the hum of the cooling system pushing the air thought the vents and the unobtrusive buzz of the office equipment.
And then he closed the door behind him and crossed the room before crouching beside Claire’s desk. This morning, she left the house with her hair smoothed to perfection and falling down her shoulders, not a strand out of place. Right now, it was twisted into a bun and secured with a pencil, of all things, on the back of her head, unruly wisps framing her high cheekbones. The glasses that she wasn’t fond of and that she only wore when she didn’t have a choice slid to the tip of her nose, and her eyelashes fluttered faintly. She was dreaming.

A smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, Owen pulled her glasses off and set them on a stack of papers on her desk. “Claire?” He looped a wisp of hair around her ear, his fingertips trailing down her cheek. “Claire, honey…”

She stirred and blinked, her gaze unfocused for a moment or two. Raised her head and groaned when her neck protested the movement after being craned uncomfortably for probably quite some time. Rubbed the corners of her eyes, and then finally saw him. “Hey,” she whispered, her voice low and groggy, making him think of Sunday mornings and the smell of pancake syrup filling every corner of their apartment. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you know they only hold a table reservation for three hours?” Owen asked, trying to bite back his smile.

Her eyes widened as the realization kicked in, her jaw dropping comically and the colour rising up her cheeks. “Oh, Owen….I’m sorry.”

“S’okay. C’mere.” He pulled her into his arms and she fell willingly into his embrace, a cheek pressed to his shoulder, all sweet weight and warmth against his body, the scent of lilacs and vanilla tickling his nostrils. He gathered her closer, breathing her in, the full extent of his worry finally catching up with him. “You didn’t pick up the phone.”

“Forgot to charge it,” she murmured into his shirt. “This presentation… I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

He chuckled and kissed her hair, “I sure hope so. Come on, let’s go home now.”
Time Of Our Lives

Chapter Summary

Tumblr prompt: "Who goes on a multitude of dates, none of them successful, who tries to be sincerely disappointed for them but can’t stand the thought that they might not be together forever. ( “not that we are together in that way but you know”)"?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His name was Steve and when he leaned in to kiss Claire good night after walking her to her car, she pretended to misread his gesture and offered him her cheek instead. Admittedly, she wasn’t that good an actress. A flicker of recognition flashed across his face when their eyes met again, and she knew he wouldn’t be asking her out again, which left her relieved and somewhat guilty at the same time. This was supposed to be a date after all. This was a date. She was supposed to want to kiss the man who was nothing but nice and charming, or at least tried to be nice and charming, and she did appreciate the effort.

Yet, it felt more like taking a test, and after 2 hours of conversation about their jobs and the movies they saw and the books they liked, she couldn’t name one thing about him, and she also couldn’t wait to leave, the weight lifting off her shoulders at the sight of her car parked across the street from the restaurant.

What the hell was wrong with her?

Claire waved her goodbye and slipped into the driver’s seat, habitually reaching into her purse to pull out her phone, the buzzing she’d heard just as the server asked whether or not they wanted a dessert – no, thank you – had been making her palms itch for the past twenty minutes.

There was a missed phone call from Owen, followed by two texts – one asking whether she wanted Chinese or sushi for dinner, and the other one (that came when she didn’t respond) saying that he forgot about her date and that he was picking up Thai food from a small place two blocks away from her apartment that she’d never noticed in all the years she’d lived in the area and that Owen found within a week of moving in. He was good like that, more observant to his surroundings than Claire would ever be. She could find an error in a financial statement at first glance and whip up a presentation out of nothing, and then she’d just as easily get lost in a three-block neighborhood.

She wondered sometimes if this was the problem. If this was why she hadn’t noticed the real him for so long. Like maybe he wasn’t in her face enough.

Until he was.

Until the incident happened, and suddenly Owen Grady was everywhere in her life, following her to the press conferences and court hearings even though he didn’t have to, talking her through the worst of it, his words not as important as the soothing tone of his voice that wrapped around Claire like a blanket, keeping her safe, being the wall she could lean on. Until he became the only person who made her feel sane when the rest of the world was downright deranged.
However, when Owen said that they should stick together, she didn’t exactly envision the two of them becoming nothing but roomies, didn’t think he would claim her guest bedroom – the one that she’d offered to him when he has nowhere else to go – as his own and spend endless hours on her couch in the company of beer and *Halo*. For a while, Claire’s heart kept dropping down into her stomach whenever he stepped into the room, expecting him to… well, do something, give her a sign. Anything, really. He kissed her after all – Claire was there, she didn’t make it up. And she remembered the moment all too well, her lips burning for days afterward.

Except it didn’t seem to have meant anything whatsoever. Not to him, at least. Truth be told, she didn’t exactly expect him to pounce on her the moment they were alone, but the days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months, and she might have as well been another piece of furniture in her practically and tastefully furnished apartment. Owen cooked her dinners and picked up her mail. He held her hand when she cried and saw her first thing in the morning, bedhead and all, handing her a cup of coffee without Claire having to say anything because apparently her habits were easy to pick up on. Come to think of it, maybe he’d seen too much, she mused. Maybe he didn’t want to know what her pre-coffee self was like before they even had a second date. Speak of shooting the mystery in the head.

It was a mess, but it was the kind of mess Claire hoped they would manage to figure out somehow eventually. God knew she wanted it to happen, preferably before they turned into her grandparents and brought weekly Bingo game into the picture. She thought they had a chance.

Until Dan from Marketing and PR asked her out a couple of months ago.

That night over dinner, she mentioned it to Owen with pointed casualty, hoping for… well, something. *Anything*. A part of her hoped that maybe the possibility of her becoming unavailable would push him into action or something. Instead, he told her to go for it, live a little – Owen’s words, not hers. And just to spite him, she said yes to Dan, uncertain of whether she’d even liked the guy or not, but since the one she was actually into was far more interested in lounging in her living room and talking about the culinary skills of the *Iron Chef* contestants, it didn’t seem like that big of a sacrifice at the time.

Until Dan turned out being about as exciting as a piece of stale bread, and Claire nearly fell asleep, listening to him talk about long-term investments and importance of the real estate market for the economy, or something of that nature. Suddenly, discussing the merits of different knives became more appealing. She’d honestly wished she’d spent the night with a bowl of ice-cream, debating the pros and cons of cilantro with Owen. It wasn’t that thought that scared her, though, but the realization that it was probably a matter of time before he started dating someone as well. Unless he already was and he simply forgot to mention it to her. Not that Claire had the guts to ask….

To say that it was messed up was an understatement of the century.

And then Mitch came along, a Commercial Loan Manager who owned a car that cost twice more than all of Claire’s possessions combined. Well-read and witty, he was a step up from Dan in the right direction. They went out twice. He took her to the restaurant that normal people needed to book eight months in advance but that he could walk into on a whim and there would always be a table for him, the staff beaming so bright at the sight of him Claire feared the rest of the patrons would go blind.

He was her type. Hell, he was a *definition* of her type, and a few years ago, she’d be thrilled to spend time in his company. So what if their dinners were interrupted by the phone calls he had to take? She got it. She got the importance of the things that couldn’t be put off for later. It had never
been an issue before. But it made her think of how Owen wouldn’t even check his texts when they were eating cheap takeout out of paper boxes, and she longed for it. She wanted undivided attention, and not just anyone’s, too.

Mitch faded away, swallowed by his job, and Claire was more than a little tempted to give up on the whole ‘living a little’ idea. The only problem here was that she knew that the only way to get over Owen would be to focus on someone else.

Sadly, Steve definitely wasn’t it.

The ‘it’ was probably finishing a second helping of fried rice or green chicken curry right now while Meredith Grey did something unfathomably stupid on TV. Again. What was it with Owen and Grey’s Anatomy?

He poked his head out of the living room where the residents and interns were calling code something-or-other, a takeout box and chopsticks in his hands.

“That bad, huh?” He asked around a mouthful of… something.

Claire quirked an eyebrow, her fingers expertly undoing the straps of her high-heeled shoes “What makes you think it was bad?” She inquired, uncertain if she was insulted by the assumption or not. He wasn’t wrong, after all.

He left the food behind and stepped into the hallway, his arms folded over his chest and his hair tousled from his post-work run and curling at the ends after the shower. She could smell her body wash on him even from fifteen feet away, her chest nearly caving in from longing.

Owen gave her a pointed once over, then checked his phone. “For one thing, it’s not even 9,” he noted. “And I know the look.”

Which could’ve easily been a very bold statement coming from someone else, perhaps, but of course, he knew the look. He’d seen it first-hand. Claire scowled at him without a comment.

“C’mon, let’s fix it.” He peeled of the doorjamb and, hands on her shoulders, steered her toward the couch the coffee table in front of which was full of leftover takeout boxes. Her lips curled involuntarily at the sight of an ass-shaped mark on one of the cushions.

Truly a view she missed in a fancy restaurant, Claire thought without a hint of irony as she plopped down and reached for his half-finished dinner.

“Beer?” Owen asked, offering her a bottle, but she shook her head, her eyes already glued to the screen. He slumped down next to her and reached into her carton with his fork with the comfort and familiarity she no longer found odd, all things considered. “Come on, gimme the deets.”

“Read my face,” Claire retorted half-heartedly, mad at herself more than him for keeping her goddamned hopes up even after all this time. One of these days, she was going to show up at home after work and find a sock on the door, a universal sign for Do not disturb. It was like living with a ticking bomb in her house, the one that was emptying the pantry like a vacuum cleaner and forgetting to unload the dishwasher.

“For what it’s worth – I’m sorry,” he said, not a trace of sarcasm in his voice. He was watching her, Claire could feel it, even though her own eyes were still on the screen, feeling like she was 13 again, but in a very pathetic way.

“No, you’re not,” she said with a huff.
“Maybe a little,” he admitted with a smirk. “Although, let’s face it, we both know what the problem is.”

She turned at him, surprised to find him closer than she expected, his face barely an inch away from hers, making it pretty damn hard to resist the urge to push his hair back from his forehead, see if it was as soft as it looked. Claire narrowed her eyes skeptically as she tried to ignore her pulse that escalated by the second, her heart pounding so hard and so fast in her chest it was making her dizzy. “Do tell.”

“These guys… They’re vanilla ice-cream,” Owen announced with confidence, digging through the carton of food she was still holding but had long forgotten about.

She blinked. “Is that supposed to make any sense?”

“No, I mean it,” he added quickly, shoving a forkful of chicken curry into his mouth and finally looking up. “There’s nothing wrong with vanilla ice-cream. Everyone likes it. It’s a good, solid choice. But no one ever picks it when there’s Rocky Road or Cookie Dough or whatever else on the menu, you know?” He rolled his shoulders in a half shrug.

“Is that so?” She hummed, struggling to keep a straight face. “And where does that deep wisdom come from?”

“Oprah,” he replied proudly. “Screw those guys, Claire. You gotta find your Rocky Road.” He nudged her shoulder with his and then pulled her feet into his lap and leaned back, his fingers digging expertly into her soles, massaging the tension away. “Or Cherry Garcia.”

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled,” she promised, shaking her head.

“Either way,” he flashed a megawatt smile at her, cheeky as hell, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “You keep coming home to me.”

She stared at him, the words running on an endless loop in her mind as she took them apart and put them back together, the letters and syllables thrown into a mix, somehow still falling into the same pattern each time she rearranged them. And it was so easy to see more into his comment than he’d probably meant, her fingers flexing involuntarily and her gaze dropping down to his mouth curled crookedly while the ambulance sirens wailed on Channel 10.

“Hey, there’s a new guy in my office. You’d totally hit it off. I could introduce you…” Owen said all of sudden and trailed off. He cleared his throat, his unfinished question falling between them like a wall and making her sick to her stomach.

“You know what? I think I need to recover from tonight’s date first.” Claire pulled her feet off of his lap and stood up, the spell broken and the cocoon of intimacy around them torn to shreds.

She stepped over a stack of magazines that he pushed to the floor to make room for his dinner and trying to pretend that two minutes of foot massage were worth the subsequent disappointment.

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Fuck.

Owen flopped down onto his bed – well, technically Claire’s guest bed, which was a double fuck, really – and ran a hand over his face. His chest constricted with a shuddered sigh, his gaze fixed unseeingly on the ceiling.
Did he just honestly offer to fix Claire up with someone?

On a scale of one to dumb, he was officially unapologetically stupid.

Behind the wall in their shared bathroom, he could hear the water running, Claire drawing herself a bath, probably with one of those Lush bath bombs that would make her and the rest of the house smell like an exotic resort, or a bubble gum factory. Or a freaking bakery – cinnamon and vanilla. Like he didn’t already want to eat her alive, his boner being a perfect example of the cause-and-effect charts she loved to use in her business presentations. Once she kicked him out – which he was starting to suspect was going to happen sooner rather than later - he’d have to buy everything Lush ever made, quite possibly incapable of jerking off to anything else.

How exactly they ended up being the kind of friends who braided each other’s hair and painted each other’s nails was beyond him. Basically, they were a stone’s throw away from having pillow fights in their underwear – not that Owen would ever say no to that – and there was no coming back from that. In all fairness, it wasn’t like he thought they’d get at it the moment the hotel door closed behind them on Costa Rica, and the first few weeks were so intense it hardly was the right time to bring up the ‘I kissed you and maybe we should take it to a new level’ issue. But between that and the fact that Claire was now dating, apparently, it was starting to seem like he’d missed his window entirely, and the idea was filling him with dread.

And what was he supposed to say when she mentioned that what’s-his-name ask her out? If anything, it only proved that she was ready and willing to move on… not from him, obviously, because they were never a thing to begin with, but from everything else – the incident, the investigation, the chaos their lives had turned into.

Owen was more than a little surprised that the banker didn’t stick around – from what he’d heard from Claire, they were a match made in heaven, or however the phrase went, but it was still only a matter of time, he figured, before she got sick of his company and politely asked him to vacate the premises. They both knew that after a few months, he was quite able to afford his own place, and Claire didn’t seem like the type who needed a roommate. Admittedly, it wasn’t just that at first - the incident brought them together like no relationship could. There was the kind of understanding between them that he had trouble putting into words. And truth be told, Owen was scared of being alone, locked in four walls one on one with his demons, knowing that Claire feared it, too.

“Just ask her out, man,” Barry told him on more than one occasion. They took to running together now and then, and normally it was a silent occasion interrupted only by the heavy pounding of their sneakers against the pavement, but Owen’s doom and gloom was starting to weigh down both of them at this point.

“Just ask…” Owen echoed, his breathing coming out in labored puffs and his calves burning. “S’like saying if you want to fly to the moon, just fly.”

Barry slowed down and then stopped, bended at the waist, his hands gripping his knees. “What’s the worst thing that can happen?” He inquired.

Owen squinted in the sunlight, his chest heaving, the air that smelled strongly of the ocean and magnolias clinging to his skin. Hands on his hips, he grimaced a little, the pleasant post-run buzz settling inside him. Scoffed, when he caught Barry watching him quizzically because apparently the question wasn’t rhetorical.

“Where do I even start?” He muttered, which wasn’t entirely a joke.

He had never wanted anyone more than he wanted Claire, and several months of shameless
fantasizing about her did little to help tame his urges. But the most important thing was that she was his friend, the one he never expected to find in none other than Claire Dearing, of all people. If he did something stupid and Claire didn’t reciprocate his feelings, he would lose not only the idea of her, however impossible, but also the person he could talk to, the one that listened to him and seemingly cared. In the best case scenario, they would end up with a perpetual wall of awkwardness between them. Their conversations would go strained and their eye contact fleeting. With Owen’s luck, he’d have to move to another planet and learn to grow crops because anything else would be too unbearable.

So yeah, the stakes were kinda high, and as much as he appreciated Barry’s wisdom, Owen figured he might need a slightly more solid plan than Why don’t you just.

Which was problematic to come up with when he could oh so clearly picture her in the goddamned bathtub only a wall away from him, and all he could think of was kissing every inch of her body and every freckle and those plump red lips that he was more than certain would feel pretty damn good everywhere on his skin.

No wonder even Lowery, a guy whose love life was desperately sad, was making fun of him.

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“You’re coming to Gray’s graduation, right?” Karen inquired, which sounded more like a statement than a question. “Claire?”

Her phone squeezed between her ear and her shoulder, Claire bit her lip, trying to stay focused on her sister and the balance sheet spread before her on the desk at the same time, her eyes scanning the narrow lines filled with figures. Choosing impeccable timing was certainly one of Karen’s undeniable talents.

“I’m here,” Claire muttered, rubbing her forehead. “Yes, of course. I told you I was.”

The one good thing that came from the goddamned incident was, perhaps, patching up her relationship with her family that had been steadily falling apart for years. She had to admit that there was nothing quite like a near-death experience to prompt some actual bonding, and much to her own surprised, she actually missed Zach and Gray more than she expected, or was willing to admit, especially to Karen who had been on her case about being more involved with the boys for as long as they lived. Trying not to dwell on all the missed birthdays, holidays, and milestones, Claire was quite looking forward to her visit to Madison in several weeks, her feet itching to walk the familiar streets, among other things.

Not that it was making Karen’s untimely phone call was any less inconvenient.

“And your… boyfriend?” Karen pressed.

Claire sighed and leaned back in her chair, choosing to give up on the report for the time being. “He is not my boyfriend,” she repeated for what felt like a millionth time, pointed patience in her voice because she knew Karen couldn’t stand it – probably about as much as Claire hated this whole conversation.

“I’m sorry. The man you’re living with,” Karen snorted. “Gray talked my ear off about him, and considering your situation--”

“There is no situation, Karen. Actually, we’re seeing other people,” she added, which was vague enough to mean just about anything while not being a compete lie.
"People? As in – plural? Both of you?" Claire didn’t dignify that with an answer, and her sister went on. "Anyway, he is more than welcome to join you." A pause. "They both seem to think very highly of Owen, and… well, it’s up to him of course. And you. I mean… I don’t even know if he can take the time off."

"I’ll ask," Claire promised before Karen’s rambling got out of hand.

In the past few months, the incident became sort of a taboo topic that neither she, nor Karen brought up, and either by an unspoken agreement, or by their mother’s instruction, the boys never mentioned it to her either, their Skype calls usually revolving around their daily lives. She knew Karen got rid of Gray’s dinosaur collection, and neither of them would probably go anywhere near Costa Rica for the rest of their lives, but if that was what healing was, Claire was willing to take it.

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Contrary to popular opinion, Owen wasn’t an impulsive person. His whole life was a series of carefully calculated decisions and thought-through steps, the consequences of the possible mistakes always on the periphery of his attention. Sure, he had his fair share of bad decisions, the nights he regretted, and roughly a hundred tequila shots that he probably could’ve live without. No to mention a tattoo that Owen had to turn into a Navy one because getting into a truth or dare game with a bunch of drunk buddies was hardly ever a good idea. However, his choice to join the Navy and then accept the offer from Simon Masrani was not made lightly.

Therefore, buying a motorcycle with his first post-incident check was not exactly something he did on a whim. In retrospect, he could have and should have done something useful with that money. Something like getting his own apartment, for instance, and if he was thinking with his head at least on some occasions, he’d do just that. However, when he cautiously mentioned moving out to Claire, she scanned his list of selected Craigslist ads, her face pinched like he’d handed her a dead rat, crossing one after another while she explained to him how exactly the people who posted them were going to kill him, and ‘have you never done this before?’

For a moment, it almost seemed like she actually wanted him to stay, although Owen refused to actually think of it. But his search for an apartment had been stalling since. And even Claire didn’t seem particularly surprised when he rolled into the driveway on a slightly used but still impressive-looking Triumph he’d found on the used-cars lot, clearly overlooked. He didn’t technically need it, but sharing Claire’s was growing more and more inconvenient for both of them, and a bike seemed like a perfect solution at the time.

She merely raised her eyebrows when he finally came to a stop and propped his newly acquired beast on a kickstand, his hands shaking slightly from tension, unaccustomed to the feel of power beneath him again. It wasn’t exactly like riding a bicycle, but his body knew all the moves, curving at the right angles as he swerved at the curves of the road. There were things he didn’t miss about the island – stifling heat and humidity that felt smothering and thick, mosquitoes and the shower that kept braking on the days ending with a ‘y’, but this was something he used to enjoy quite a bit, the accelerated heartbeat and the speed that felt like flying.

On that first day, Owen pulled off his helmet, grinning at Claire who was watching him from the porch, her arms folded over her chest. He patted the passenger seat behind him, to which Claire informed him that she didn’t have a death wish, thank you very much, although her lips were curved into a smile that suggested that she didn’t mean it, her face soft in a way that made his heart leap up into his throat – a hot lump that made it hard to breathe. There was some colour in her cheeks, the wind tugging at her hair gently, and he thought he was losing his mind. She’d been referring it his bike as his hobby ever since, noting that everyone needed one and thank god his
was mildly suicidal but not overly so.

Owen turned onto their street, slowing down at the curve, the roar of the engine still ringing in his ears.

There was someone on the porch when the condo came into his view, two shadows in the pale light of the porch lamp over the door, and Owen’s stomach twisted uncomfortably. Claire had a date by the looks of it, and this time the guy made it all the way to the door. He felt sick at the idea of her thinking that he wasn’t at home and maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to invite the guy in – not that Owen expected his presence to stop her from doing it, and they could always go to the man’s place anyway – but it still was akin a punch in the gut, and by the time he rolled up the narrow driveway and stopped in front of the garage door, he was practically hyperventilating.

Maybe he should have turned around and headed wherever, Owen was thinking, except if he did that right now, it would be too obvious and deliberate, and he didn’t want to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing his tantrum. Not that Claire would see it that way, he figured, considering how she didn’t really care. Maybe he could do that, after all. Pretend he’d forgotten something at work. Pretend… he was getting frustratingly good at it lately, and it was starting to grate on his own nerves more than he was willing to admit. At this point, he could probably wish her all the best with the straight face, without batting an eyelash, and it made him disgusted with himself to the point of feeling nauseated.

Owen pulled off the helmet, sliding as gracelessly off the bike as he could, given that his whole body was shaking with too much adrenaline coursing through his system.

Claire was still wearing her office clothes, as was her date, both of them looking like they’d just tumbled out of a corporate meeting, except it was nearing 11 PM and the personal space didn’t seem to be much of a thing, from where he was standing. Claire was clutching her purse and a folder with some papers in her hand, her back turned to Owen, and the man was leaning if a little too comfortably into her, his tie loosened a little, his voice louder than Owen liked. Not that it was any of his business. Frankly, the only thing he really cared about right now was that there was no back door in her condo through which he could sneak in unnoticed rather than having to walk past them.

Claire turned to the sound of his footsteps, a flicker of something that looked very much like relief flashing across her features for a second, making him pause briefly in his tracks.

And this was when Owen noticed that something was off. The guy she was with was clearly drunk, and not just tipsy, but shit-faced hammered, and his swaying was not flirty. He simply couldn’t stand still without the gravity pulling him down. From this close, he could see the difference in Claire’s body language as well – tense and wary, her smile bit too tight around the edges.

“Owen.”

Claire Dearing knew how to deal with men – be they drunk, overly opinionated, or just assholes in general. She knew how to say no and get them to understand that she meant it, and she knew how to make her position perfectly clear. She was perfectly capable of getting them to back off and thinking that it was their idea in the first place, and she wasn’t above using physical force to ensure her safety. That being said, it didn’t make certain situations any less uncomfortable and more than a little uneasy. Especially when they were taking place on her porch after what felt like a waste of 2 hours of her life she could’ve spent not hating her choices.

Frankly, she had never been happier to hear the familiar road of Owen’s bike coming from around the corner, a stiff line of her shoulders going slack by the second. She knew it was a bad idea to say
yes to Nathan – not because she saw his ordering one cocktail after another coming, because she
certainly did not, but because she didn’t care about him in any way that mattered. He seemed nice
enough and they worked in the same field, which made it quite impossible to lapse into extended
periods of awkward silence. However, she did it out of habit, said yes because it was easy to do so,
and it was unfair to both of them, considering that Claire regretted it not a second later, knowing
for a fact that it would not be happening again. In fact, in the few hours that passed between their
conversation and the actual dinner, she was tempted on more than one occasion to call him and use
whatever excuse she could come up with to cancel.

She didn’t.

And now she was having to deal with the fact that not only he insisted on walking her home
because she’d left her car parked near the office and he had at least some sense left in him to know
he shouldn’t be driving, but with the idiotic idea he came up along the way.

She hoped her adventures would be over for the night after Nathan dropped her off, but he was
dead set on walking her to the door, leaving Claire with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.
And then he got it in his head that he wanted to come on for ‘coffee and chat’, and nothing that
Claire had said in the past fifteen minutes convinced him to leave. She wasn’t worried he’d do
anything – after all, the man downed enough scotch to knock out a bull – but it was dark and he
was a fairly large person, and she could easily kneel him in the area that was meant to be treated
nicely, but she didn’t particularly want to go there, or make a scene, or call the police, for that
matter.

All things considered, she didn’t need Owen’s help, like she never needed anyone to save her ever
in her life, but he was here, and her heart grew five tons lighter from the familiar warmth of his
body that appeared right behind her and the scent of his aftershave that permeated her very skin,
the one thing she associated with safety for what felt like forever.

“Hey,” Owen echoed flatly, his eyes sliding up and down Claire’s company.

She cleared her throat. “Nathan, this is Owen Grady. Owen – Nathan Gibbons.”

Nathan offered Owen a sloppy salute. “Sorry, man, we’re kinda in the middle of something here.”

“I don’t think so,” Owen responded mildly tucking his hands into the pockets of his jeans.
Standing beside Claire, he seemed like a solid wall, and just as unmovable.

“It’s okay,” Claire assured him, feeling slightly less wobbly in her stomach.

Nathan’s gaze darted between the two of them, his eyes narrowed. “Wait, him?” He jabbed his
finger at Owen’s chest. “Is this why you wouldn’t put out?”

Owen’s hand darted forward at lightning speed, closing around Nathan’s finger and bending it
backward until the other man yelped in surprise and pain, struggling to pull away from him.

“I suggest you choose your words very carefully, man,” Owen said in a low, dangerous voice.

“Owen, don’t.”

The sound of her voice drowned in the swoosh of the first punch.

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“Was that really necessary?”
Owen snorted as she pressed a pack of ice wrapped in a towel to his bruised knuckles.

She still didn’t quite understand how exactly the fight broke out, and more importantly – how Nathan managed to even swing his fists, let alone to cause any damage when he could barely keep the upright position. She blamed equilibrium, and a great deal of luck, for the matter. Thank god, it was over before one of the neighbors called the police and Nathan stumbled unsteadily into the night, making Claire wonder if a little absentmindedly if their business interactions in the future would be as uncomfortable as she suspected they would be.

She didn’t have a chance to catch a glimpse of Nathan’s face, but Owen ended up with scabbed knuckles, a split eyebrow and an impressive bruise on the cheekbone that would stick around for a while, she assumed.

“Apologies for ruining your date night,” Owen deadpanned. “Would you like me to go catch up with him and apologize?”

“It’s not what I meant,” she countered with an exasperate sigh that only made his scowl deepen, although it remained a mystery as to why.

“Would you like to run after him?” He offered in a voice that suggested that he half-expected her to take off.

She swallowed down a smile and shook her head. “Thank you,” added softly. “This needs to be cleaned.”

Her gaze on the cut over his eyebrow, Claire reached for his chin to tilt his head to the side to have a better look, maybe figure out if he needed stitches, but Owen leaned away from her touch.

“It’s fine. Just a scratch.”

He pushed past her, stepping toward the fridge. Dove inside for a moment before straightening up again, a bottle of beer in his hand. In a tight shirt that was stretching over his chest, his face battered and his hair tousled and sticking out at odd angles, he looked like he just fell out of a bar fight. Which wasn’t that far from the truth, and which, under different circumstances, she would gladly comment on. However, it seemed an unnecessary joke when he was looking at her like the events of the night were purely her fault. Like he could barely stand being in the same room as her.

Claire dropped her hand. “You can’t possibly be this repulsed by me.”

Owen froze with the bottle halfway to his lips, his eyes popped out in shock. “Come again?”

“Forget it,” she muttered, turning on her heel to leave.

“No, wait a sec…”

Owen Grady was many things, but slow wasn’t one of them. Unless ignoring her not so subtle hints counted – in which case he was the dearest and blindest man alive with the reflexes of a snail. Still, he crossed the distance between them in two quick strides and blocked the doorway as effectively as a wall would, forcing her to stop, his brows knitted together in confusion.

“What the hell was that?”

“Nothing.” She raised her chin, willing her voice to remain steady. “I didn’t say anything.”
Except she did, and his frown deepened. “You can’t seriously think that.”

Claire threw her hands in the air, the frustration she’d been stewing in for the past several months finally boiling over the edge. “What was I supposed to think, Owen? I didn’t quite imagine…”

“What?”

She bit her lip, feeling the heat rise up her cheeks. “When you said we should stick together, I didn’t exactly think you meant it in the watching-Netflix-on-the-couch kind of way!”

He regarded her grimly. “Is that why you started dating?”

“You seemed to be fine with it,” Claire reminded him, her voice dripping with accusation.

“I didn’t know you needed my permission,” he retorted, and winced when it came out sharper than he intended.

“I didn’t need your permission. I needed to know what you cared, which obviously was a criminal lapse of judgement on my part.”

For a long moment, they simply glared at one another, chests heaving like after a sprint and lips pursed into thin lines. The air between them felt charged, their gazes fastened on one another’s – jade-green and deep blue, Owen’s face contorted with more hurt than she’d anticipated, shimmering underneath the layer of fatigue that was radiating off of him, almost palpable to the touch.

She could feel it now, the seismic shift between them. Could feel it under her skin like jolts of electric current shooting through body, and the change she’d been craving all those months was staring right in her face, terrifying in its immensity, making Claire wish she could step away from him, or better yet – disappear, put as much distance between them, chagrined under his stare.

“Fuck,” Owen cursed under his breath, his expression closed-off and unreadable.

She thought he’d storm out – god knew she would if he wasn’t blocking the door.

Instead, he yanked her toward him, one hand on the small of her back and the other tangled in her hair as his mouth crashed against hers, hard and demanding and unapologetic, claiming rather than asking. Caught momentarily off guard, Claire gasped against his lips, surprised by the suddenness and the sheer force driving him and reverberating into her with every beat of his heart.

Her hesitation only lasted a moment, mixed with panic that he might change his mind, and then she was kissing him back like they were still on the island and the chaos raged around them. Gripping the hair on the back of his head, she pressed closer to him, deepening the kiss and ripping a guttural groan from him that made her feel like her body was on fire. Owen’s tongue pushed past her teeth, his fingers bunching her skirt on her ass, his desperate needy wanting ricocheting right through her with sweet, burning ache. He smelled of his aftershave and leather and sweat, and the memory was so vivid she could almost hear the screeches of Pteranodons all around them, muffled by the loud hammering of the blood in her ears.

She had never wanted anyone so much in her life.

“Still think I don’t care?” Owen chuffed against her mouth between sloppy, breathless kisses.

Oh, he did. Claire could feel it hard and clear – pun intended – pressing against her hip.
“Shut up,” she mouthed soundlessly as her fingers closed around a fistful of his shirt and she pulled him down to her again.

They stumbled out into the hallway, bumping into the decoration table, nearly knocking it down to the floor, and then into the bedroom – whose she had no idea and didn’t care one way or the other – Owen’s hands sliding over her body like he had at least six of them all of sudden, tending to whatever parts of her he could reach, none of it ever enough. She tripped over a cord on the floor and he caught her before she lost her balance, holding her close to him.

“Claire…”

“Don’t stop,” she whispered, her fingers tugging at his shirt, pulling it from under the belt of his jeans, hands slipping under the hem to find his skin.

She scraped her nails down his chest, and he growled and pressed a slow, hot kiss to her neck, Claire’s eyes fluttering shut, her breath nowhere to be found. Owen chuckled as he tossed his shirt aside and started to work on the buttons of her blouse with one hand while the other hiked her skirt all the way up to her waist, his fingers tracing the along the waistband of her panties, inching closer to where she wanted to feel him the most. She whimpered, the sound turning into a shuddered sob when his fingers brushed to the sensitive spot.

More.

“Let me,” she murmured and pulled her half-buttoned blouse over her head.

“Handy.”

In near complete darkness, dispersed by the faint light coming from the hallway, his eyes looked black and bottomless, his ragged breath on her skin making her shake all over. He raised his hand, traced the strap of her white lace bra, his fingers slipping inside as his other palm cupped her face, and he was kissing her again, with deliberate precision this time, artfully removing the remaining pieces of her clothing as he did so, allowing the gravity to take them. Her bra hit the floor and Owen’s thumb ran over her nipple, earning a tug on his bottom lip in response while Claire’s unsteady fingers tried to undo his belt with little to no success.

She couldn’t remember the last time someone consumed her mind so completely, the primal need to feel him until he was all there was in the world zinging through her with sparkling, sharp clarity. Giving in to her desires was not something Claire was overly familiar with, the territory she found herself in terrifying with the enormity of possibilities, but when Owen pushed her skirt down her thighs and it pooled at her feet in a puddle of silk, his hands sliding up and down her back, probably leaving blisters in their wake, she knew it didn’t matter, her mental itinerary shredded into confetti.

He followed her to the bed, pressing her into the sheets, his hands and lips trailing over her smooth skin, ready to drown in her. His gaze skimmed lazily over her body, pale in the dark and more perfect than his wildest dreams, the ones that left him incapable of looking her in the eye the morning after for fear of letting her in on something that felt like a secret. Owen fitted his mouth to hers, his face caught between Claire’s hands, tasting her smile, his fingers digging into her flesh, marveling in the silky feel of her body, wrapped in the scent of vanilla and something that was purely her.

His hand slipped behind her back, all but yanking her lace panties off in one swift motion, before tucking her neatly beneath him, their lips meeting in hungry, hot kisses, one sound of pleasure morphing into another. Her teeth closed around his earlobe as his fingers skittered over her belly,
her hips rising to meet him in a silent invitation – she knew what she needed and wasn’t shy to demand it, and for once, Owen was more than willing to oblige. His palm slid along her side and under her thigh, lifting her knee. Claire’s gasp of surprise at the suddenness of him filling her completely turned into a whimper of acceptance, a sound low in her throat that jolted from the top his head to his very toes.

Owen caught her wrist, pressed it into the mattress above her head; kissed her again, the slick wetness of her nearly undoing him in the best way. His hips snapped forward, the instinctive need to curb his urges, make the moment last dimming instantly, pushed back by the raw need he’d been keeping at bay for far too long. His vision tunneled, zeroed in on her and thank god, and finally, her legs wound tightly around him reeling him closer.

The squeeze, the rhythm, her breathing coming out in soft moans, her usually impressive vocabulary now reduced to yes and more, the sound of her voice vanishing in the sheer joy of gliding in and out of her, teetering on the periphery of his attention. His breathing grew ragged, his quickening thrusts almost frantic. And then she was shuddering all around him, a delicious clench, grasping and groping, her outcry breaking through his blurred awareness and throwing him over the edge in the explosion of pure delight.

The world shifted into place slowly, taking shape around them, its edges sharpening and then dissolving, and coming into focus again.

A slow, lazy laughter bubbled up in his chest as Owen kissed her temple, her cheek, his fingers laced through hers flexing to make sure she was real. Claire purred, nuzzled into his stubbled jaw before he collapsed on the sheets beside her, completely spent in the most incredible way.

“Oh, god,” she breathed out, rolling onto her stomach with a giggle, waiting for her heartbeat to find itself.

Owen threw his arm over his eyes, his chest rising and falling rhythmically, and suddenly she wished she could see more than a mere outline of him, her skin still tingling with the memory of his touch, every inch of her body already missing the contact.

“I can’t believe it,” he groaned with a short, incredulous laugh.

“Which part?” She asked, mellow and limp for all the right reasons, the thoughts having serious trouble forming in her mind.

“We could’ve been doing this for months,” he responded, sounding comically miserable, making Claire’s smile stretch out wider. “Years even.”

She snorted. “Months – maybe. Years?”

Owen turned his head to look at her, his features nothing but a dark smudge, but she knew he was grinning for all he was worth, could feel it wash over her in tidal waves.

He rolled onto his side. Propped up on his elbow, dipping his head to press a kiss to her bare shoulder, then the base of her neck before finding her lips again, kissing her slowly and sweetly and like they had all the time in the world, which they probably did, and the thought filled him with such consuming elation it almost hurt.

He brushed her hair that smelled of strawberries and lemons back from her forehead, twisting a strand between his fingers. “I have never not wanted you, Claire,” he murmured between the pecks.

“You have a funny way of showing it,” she grumbled.
Owen wiggled closer to her and gathered her in his arms until she was half-sprawled over him, their legs tangled together and their sweat-slick bodies glued to one another, and pulled the covers over them when she shivered. He didn’t seem to be able to stop touching her, tracing the lines of her body and drain lazy circles on her back, cocooned into the scent and the delicious weight of her. God, she felt so good, so right, so damn amazing - all of her curved into every curve of him.

“Should I have punched someone for you sooner?” He inquired.

“You shouldn’t have done it, period.”

“Next time I’ll hold your purse and you’ll do the swingin’,” he suggested.

She scoffed and rubbed her nose into his chest, pressed a kiss to a spot below his collarbone. “How was I supposed to know?”

“Know what?”

“I didn’t think you were interested,” she explained.

“By what logic wasn’t I interested, Claire? Why’d you think I haven’t moved out?” Mock-insulted sounded good on him, Claire decided.

“The ocean view?” She suggested. “Free parking?”

He snorted like she couldn’t have been more ridiculous even if she tried. “Please! You asked me to move my bike so many times it would’ve been less of a hustle to build my own garage.”

“What was I supposed to do? Get naked and throw myself at you?” She demanded with a scoff.

“Worked tonight,” he noted, and she smacked him on the shoulder with the back of her hand.

“You didn’t make a move.”

Owen let out a long sigh, his fingers threading lazily through her mussed hair, the amount of affection making her heart squeeze. “I thought you’d kick me out if I did. Thought I was your charity case or something, I don’t know.” He poked the sole of her foot with his toe.

She pressed her face into the curve between his neck and his shoulder. “You’re such an idiot.”

“It seems to be a popular opinion,” he admitted. “So… now what? Are you still going to keep seeing those morons?”

Claire chose to ignore the second question, caught all of sudden in the what now part, seeing as how even her wildest fantasies never went past sleeping with him – which was so much better than she ever imagined that she had no word for it. Afterwards, she assumed, they would probably ignore it happened and move on with their lives. Which, as it turned out, was not the case at all.

“We can start with moving you here to my room.”

“Technically, this my room.”

She raised her head, finally noticing the chest of drawers that was sitting in the ‘wrong’ corner, and Owen’s gym bag left on the chair, and it was only now that she noticed that the bedding smelled of his cologne, too. “Technically, it used to be my office, and I want it back.”

He laughed and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. “Well, that can be arranged.”
“So, you are bringing a ‘plus one’?” Karen pressed, and for a moment Claire wasn’t sure whether to be amused or offended by her undisclosed surprise. Especially considering the fact that Karen was the one who kept calling Owen her boyfriend from the day she met him.

“Stop calling him that,” Claire huffed as she flipped through the hangers, looking for something to match the dark blue shoes she loved but almost never wore.

“Okay, then... what should I call him?”

And that was a very good question indeed, the one that Claire was still struggling with to a certain degree, torn between the need to label and compartmentalize the progression of their relationship and the tentative idea of actually letting it unfold at its own pace.

Owen moved into her bedroom almost two weeks ago, his clothes now crowding her closet and drawers and his books piled on the second bedside table that used to mostly collect dust. And one day last week, he’d actually turned what used to be his bedroom back into a study while Claire was at work — a gesture that left her with glowing contentment pooling in the pit of her stomach.

At times, it felt like nothing had changed, their routines seemingly the same as they were before, and yet her mind was still reeling from the clash of newness and familiarity, the seamless way their lives clicked together like it was meant to be this way from the start, and she knew that if she brought it up with Owen, he’d have a word or two to say about how their date should have ended differently almost two years ago.

Claire bit into her lip, trying to tune out his off-tune humming in the shower and focus on the conversation with Karen and maybe getting dressed for work before she was late.

“A work in progress,” she said with a small smile.

“You sound... good,” Karen noted.

Claire caught her reflection in the vanity mirror — in a tank top and pink panties, her cheeks flushed and her hair framing her face in soft waves she no longer bothered to straighten, not with the same religious devotion she was so into for as long as she remembered, at least. Frankly, she’d never been happier. So much so that the woman looking back at her almost looked like a stranger, but the one she couldn’t wait to know better.

“It feels good,” she admitted.

The door behind her opened, and Owen emerged from a cloud of pine-scented steam, his wet hair slicked back from his forehead and a towel wrapped loosely around his hips, making her heartbeat trip over itself. An eyebrow quirked, a cut above it reduced to a pale scar that Claire knew would fade before he even noticed, he offered her a lopsided grin, his eyes glinting with amusement, and she knew instantly that her not particularly subtle once-over didn’t go unnoticed.

“Really good,” she added, hanging up without saying goodbye.

Two minutes later, she forgot what she wasn’t supposed to be late for.

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Chapter End Notes
Feedback is much appreciated :))
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

Tumblr request: what does claire think of owen down there ;)

Chapter Notes

Lotsa adult stuff ahead, I guess?

The water was lukewarm at best and the pressure was a joke, but if this was all Claire had to scrub the grime and sweat and blood off her body, she would take it, and she would take it gladly. Somewhere between boarding the ferry, getting off it in San Jose, and finding a tiny closet of a room in an overcrowded city filled with traumatized survivors of the massacre at the park, she realized that if she didn’t get every bit of this island off of her, she would have to peel her skin off.

The rustling of the shower curtain gave her a start, and she turned around abruptly, nearly slipping on the wet surface to see Owen step into the tub next to her, a moment of panic replaced by overwhelming relief, her senses still on edge, and having him here curbed her paranoia over having a T-Rex ram into their hotel despite the distance and the water separating them. It should have been awkward, and she imagined that sharing a shower with a man she never slept with and wasn’t technically dating probably would be under different circumstances, and maybe it was shock, or adrenaline, or plain exhaustion but Claire found herself not caring one bit about being naked around him. Apparently her self-consciousness died on that island as well.

“Let me,” he said, taking the washcloth from her, his voice low and hoarse, the sound of it feeling like a touch of velvet to her skin.

She nodded without a comment.

There was nothing sensual or sexual about him emptying bottle after bottle of liquid soap on the washcloth and scrubbing the dirt off her skin, somehow knowing which spots hurt the most and which he could apply some pressure on, his touch surprisingly gentle to her sunburns and bruises.

And while he was at it, she allowed herself to study him properly. He was a massive man in every sense of that word, his muscles rippling and bulging under his tanned skin, streaked with new cuts and old scars. From this close, with barely half a foot of space between them, he looked like he was taking up every inch of this whole room, and Claire wondered absently how he even squeezed through the door, which was ridiculous, really, but her thoughts were fragmented and hard to hold on to, and Owen Grady was one hell of a sight to marvel at.

Her gaze skimmed over his shoulders and down his defined pecs, along the ‘landing stripe’ of hair running from his sternum and toward a patch of curls at his crotch, taking in every line and every mark and every goddamned detail a dying light of the day streaming through the narrow window.
over the sink allowed her to see. And then further down because she couldn’t resist the curiosity. Claire swallowed if a little nervously, although not in the very least ashamed of staring, and looked up to find him looking back at her, his hand frozen on her clavicle.

They had a bumpy start and not a particularly smooth ride, but the attraction simmering just beneath the surface was undeniable, threatening to send the sparks flying any moment. She’d always felt drawn to him and truth be told, she’d lie to herself if she didn’t admit that she wondered on more than one occasion about what it could be like to be with him, feel his hands on her body and everything else in their respective place. But that was then, but the time for wondering was over now - she wanted to know.

His eyes went dark, which wasn’t lost on Claire. Her hand on the back on Owen’s neck, she pulled him down and pressed her mouth to his while her hand skittered down his chest, feeling his muscles twitch. His surprise only lasted a moment, and then he dropped the washcloth to the floor and his hand slid around her side as a low growl formed somewhere in his chest, reverberating through her like an invitation Claire only half-needed. He pressed her against the cool tiled wall, and the contrast between it and the heat of his body made her shiver, her teeth nipping at his bottom lip in encouragement. His palms slid up he arms and down her chest, fingers brushing to her nipples, teasing and caressing until she was arching her back into him.

And oh god, what was she doing? She knew she was most likely going to regret this in a not so distant future, and the voice in the back of her head kept screaming at her to stop. But then Owen’s hands grabbed her waist and he hoisted her up like she weighed nothing at all, her long legs wrapped around his hips, all without breaking the kiss that she knew would leave her lips bruised. One hand hooked under her thigh for support, he allowed the other one to cup over her breast, and she wished they were in a better position to use hands and mouths more freely, her fingers digging in his shoulders, trusting him not to drop her because how awfully ironic would it be to get away from a prehistoric monster only to end up in the ER after a shower sex incident?

She brushed against him in a desperate need to feel wanted, and perfectly present, and so much more alive than ever before, and he groaned, already hard and ready, his teeth scraping along her jaw and down her throat, his chest heaving against hers. And it was so not enough.

“Claire…” he muttered – a final warning, she presumed.

“It’s okay,” she breathed out, grabbing a fistful of his hair and finding her mouth with hers again, gasping mid-kiss when he shifted their position and pushed into her, all the way on a single thrust. “Oh god…” She dug her nails into his back, feeling him fill her completely, tight and hot, and a like a part of her own body. She’d never been with someone of Owen’s, well, caliber before, and the sensation was nearly enough to send her over the edge just like that.

His body tensed, misreading her reaction, his ragged breath falling on her shoulder in short, heavy pants and his calloused fingers flexing under her thigh, brushing against her center as if filling her to the brim was not enough.

“Keep going,” she stuttered, clenching her legs tighter around him, her lower belly hot and tight with anticipation and primal need for more.

He obliged willingly, his hips snapping up and hitting the G-spot she didn’t even know she had. Claire whimpered, grabbing for him, his skin slick under her palms, waves of pleasure washing over her as he kept pulling back and slamming forward, his hips crashing into hers with deliberate precision.

Owen abandoned her mouth to trail a line of sloppy kisses toward one of her breasts, his hand
groping for the wall for support as she swiveled her hips against his, meeting him with the same erratic desperation that was radiating off of him. He pressed his face into her neck, grunting with each trust, his rhythm escalating fast, the collision of their bodies frantic and needy and like they were running out of time, the warm glow of pleasure pooling at her core.

And then her abdomen started to spasm, her walls clenching around him in the most wonderful way. She bit his shoulder, trying to stifle the moan that morphed into a muffled cry of release while he continued to go, pumping his hip upward and deeper into her until he, too, was groaning, his body trembling against Claire’s, neither of them noticing that the water turned cold.

At last, Owen’s hand slipped from under her thigh and up to her waist, lowering her back to the bottom of the tub, and Claire was instantly reminded of the blisters she’d blissfully forgotten about for a quarter of an hour.

“You okay?” He asked, stroking her wet hair, the words tripping over themselves as he struggled to find his breath again, still crowding her against the wall.

“I’m good,” Claire muttered and pressed her face into his chest, inhaling the scent of his skin that still bore a faint trace of gasoline and wet soil “I’m…” alive. The word lodged itself in her throat, choking her, and she swallowed convulsively, her fingers pressing into his slippery skin like he could also get washed down the drain if she didn’t hold on tight.

Stress and shock and fear and fatigue aside, she couldn’t not appreciate how good he felt, exactly the right fit, her mind mellow and her body still riding off the aftershocks of the best orgasm she had in years, if not her entire life. Claire brushed a kiss to her collarbone, then to the pulse point in the crook of his neck before finally letting him pull away and grab a towel to dry them both off.

It later became a running joke between them, his ability to satisfy her in every way she could ever imagine, the first few months of their relationship spent nearly exclusively in bed, trying to make up for all the time they’d lost since their unfortunate date that both wished ended up differently. No one Claire had ever been with before felt quite as good, just the right fit, she’d decided. And she made sure to make him very well aware of that.
First Kiss

Chapter Summary

Tumblr ask: If the incident never happened, when would Claire and Owen’s first kiss have been?

Chapter Notes

Because I’m a sucker for those things!

Claire blew a strand of hair from her forehead with a frustrated huff and let out a long breath, glaring daggers at the flat tire of her car that looked impeccably pristine not a few hours ago, but was now splattered with mud up to the very roof.

There were many things she liked about Simon Masrani’s vision and his take on the park, his undying respect for John Hammond and his desire to pay tribute to the old man’s ideas. He was adamant to make an attempt at preserving the place as best they could and minimize the damage to a very delicate ecosystem that they were trying so hard to integrate into the modern world. Hence his determination to keep very few cars on the island and reduce paved roads to a minimum.

Normally, Claire really and truly appreciate it, but right now she had a few choice words to say about that particular fixation of his. Not to Simon’s face, of course, but it was sort of therapeutic to at the very least let them run through her head. Whatever rock slashed her tire could go burn in hell, for all she cared, ecosystem be damned.

The late afternoon sun was burning right through the lush foliage over her head as the hot breeze that smelled of the ocean and wet soil tickled her skin. Outside of the air-conditioned comfort of her car or the administrative offices, she could feel beads of sweat form between her shoulder blades and slide down her spine, a camisole she wore underneath her thin pale-blue blouse clinging to her skin, making her untick it every couple of minutes because she couldn’t stand the sensation.

Now, Claire Dearing was many things and she was capable of a lot, but even she couldn’t change a tire with her bare hands. She tried. Ironically, her phone was dead, rendering her completely cut off from all the help she could possibly get. The one thing she relied on the most for the majority of the time had failed her.

Claire looked up and down the empty road, trying to figure out what to do next. This wasn’t a popular route. It was mainly used for deliveries, and for her, taking it was the best shortcut from the Indominus Rex’s paddock to the Control Room – a decision she was regretting more and more with each passing moment. There was a good chance that no one would pass by for a day or two. She could walk, of course, and if worse came to worse, she’d just that. The Control Room was only a couple of miles away, and it wasn’t that big a deal, per se. After all, she knew this island like the back of her hand, and the idea was comforting.

Hands on her hips, Claire glanced down at her grey suede shoes that cost roughly half of her
paycheck sinking into a giant puddle of mud that the road had turned into after the last night’s rain and sighed. As if this day needed to get any worse! Simon kept pushing her with the I-Rex project, calling her every day to inquire about the progress and to remind her that the time was money, which was stressful enough as it was, but today one of the investors called to apologize for having to step back because of the unexpected financial issues. As a human, she could understand, but as a business woman who was expected to deliver whatever, whenever she was faced with yet another delay that she would have to explain to the Board. Come to think of it, having a flat tire on a day when nothing went right wasn’t that bad a thing. For all she knew, she could have been mauled by something big enough not to need to even spit out her bones.

The thought made Claire look around uneasily. She was suddenly very aware of the life surrounding her – the rusting of the wind in the trees, the chirping of the birds, and the distant cries of the animals coming from the valley that echoed in the hills, suddenly reminded of all the times when the invisible fences were down, the fine hairs on the back of her neck standing on ends in alarm. Granted, all of the carnivore species were safely kept behind the cement walls, but the startled or angry herbivores were no less dangerous, their size alone posing a serious threat to anyone unfortunate enough to end up in their way.

A walkie-talkie, she thought absently. All handlers used them instead of cell phones. She would get herself a walkie-talkie the first chance she got.

It was a rumble of an engine thundering over the trees that started her, spooking a flock of birds and snapping her awareness back to ‘here and now’, and a momentary panic was quickly replaced with overwhelming relief. She didn’t have to walk anywhere, after all. If whoever was coming her way – one of the handlers, she guess, or the maintenance worker – couldn’t help her with the tire, surely they wouldn’t mind giving her a ride.

And then her lips pursed into a thin, irritated line when a black motorcycle rounded a bend in the road and skidded to an abrupt halt when it nearly swerved into her Mercedes, a spray of mud that flew from under the front wheel accompanied by a string of muttered curses.

Owen Grady. In the flesh.

Claire folded her arms over her chest as she watched him shake off his surprise and assess the situation, finally noticing not only her car that she managed to roll to the curb but her as well, his glance skimming over her in a quick once-over than made Claire’s frown deepen. Here’s to thinking that her day couldn’t get any worse…

“Mr. Grady,” she said flatly, half-hoping he would start the engine again and be on his merry way. She’d rather walk all the way to the resort. All four miles.

His lips quirked sardonically, the smile not reaching his eyes. “When did we go back to Mr. Grady?” He asked.

Claire gave him a measured look, willing him to leave. Today, he certainly was the last person on the island she wanted to deal with, the sparring match that their conversations normally turned into not nearly as appealing as it usually was.

“Between your fourth and seventh shot of tequila,” she reminded him coolly, her mind flashing back to the disaster that was their date and just about every life choice she’d ever made that led to that night that Claire reconsidered while they tried to find their way around one another and getting more and more lost with every step.

Meanwhile, Owen propped his bike on the kickstand and slipped off of it, all casual easiness and
lithe grace. He was coming from the paddock, she figured, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to his elbows and his hair disheveled, a streak of dirt on his chin. And even like this, Owen Grady looked like he owned the world. She thought of what she must be looking like, sweaty and annoyed, and about as outside of her element as she could be, and her cheeks grew hot with embarrassment and frustration over the fact that she had no business caring for what Owen Grady thought of her, and yet she did anyway.

“Lemme have a look,” he said, stepping toward her, and the nonchalance with which he walked across muddy puddles like they weren’t even there made her grimace.

Claire blocked his way as if trying to shield the car with her body. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Owen smirked, a glint of amusement sparkling in his eyes. “‘Course you are.” He sidestepped her easily and crouched down in front of the flat tire. “You have a spare?”

“In the trunk,” she responded stiffly after a moment of hesitation, contemplating the idea of simply ignoring him, but it seemed childish and ridiculous, and the sooner it was all over, the sooner she could put this whole day behind her. If she was lucky, there was a glass of wine and a pair of old sweatpants waiting for her at home.

“Tools?”

Claire shook her head, waiting for another quip, but Owen simply nodded and walked over to his bike, digging a small box out of the back compartment and rummaging in it for a few moments, his brows furrowed and the clanking of metal on metal accompanying his search for the right wrench, or whatever it was that he needed.

She popped the trunk open without another word and he dove inside, pushing aside a box with flyers and brochures that she meant to drop off at the front desk of the hotel before pulling a spare tire and the jack to lift the car from the back. Claire moved out of the way as he brushed past her, his hair catching the sunlight and glowing golden at the ends. She swallowed and looked away before he saw her staring and chose to blame this temporary insanity on the heat.

“You okay?” Owen asked, glancing up at her as his hands worked on the bolts.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She arched an eyebrow.

He shrugged, focusing once again on the task at hand. “Coulda have lost control of the car and hit something.”

“Oh.” She cleared her throat and smoothed down her hair that started to curl in the thick humidly that was wrapped around them – a nervous gesture that made her notice a slight tremor in her fingers. “I’m fine.”

He nodded again and pulled a rag form the back pocket of his jeans, wiping the dirt off his hands. The whole process took maybe five minutes, at most.

“All done,” he announced, tossing the wrenches back into the box. The rag followed suit before Owen snapped the box shut and stood up, towering over Claire who didn’t think to move out of his way and doing so now would seem like his proximity bothered her. Which it did, but he didn’t need to know about it.

She glanced down at the fixed tire, then up at him again, resisting the urge to reach her head over and run it through the ruffled curls over his forehead, see for herself if they were as soft as they looked.
“Thank you…Mr. Grady.”

“Owen,” he pressed, one side of his mouth curled up into a half-smirk. “You know, it’s okay to ask for help sometimes. Nothing’s wrong with it.”

“I was planning to.” Claire’s gaze darted toward her phone clutched in her hand. “Dead battery.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

His eyes were twinkling with humour, and the comebacks that were normally rolling on Claire’s tongue in abundance were suddenly nowhere to be found. Form this close, Owen Grady was impossibly tall, making her need to throw her head back to keep the eye contact – something that gave Claire at least a semblance of control, however elusive it was. He knew he was making her uncomfortable, but far be it from her to give him the satisfaction of actually seeing it.

“I’m sure it wasn’t…Mr. Grady.”

And there it was again, a spark that flared up inside him, flashing across his face. The loss of carefully maintained balance that threw him off, if only for a splinter of a moment. A familiar dance she was certain he enjoyed as much as she did.

“Hey, you have a…” He trailed off, his fingers threading through Claire’s hair and pulling a dry leaf from between the fiery strands. Held it before her eyes for a second before letting it float down on the ground. “You good here? I could give you a ride.”

Claire felt her lips curve into a faint smile. “That would negate the point of fixing my car though, wouldn’t it?” Her eyes darted toward his bike and she offered him a pointed grimace that looked like he’d offered her to hold a dead rat. “Besides…” I wouldn’t be caught dead on that thing, she wanted to add.

The words froze on her tongue when Owen’s hand curled around her cheek and he dipped his head to press his mouth to hers, catching her off-guard and effectively cutting her off, the words disintegrating in her head. She should have stepped away, Claire thought. Like ten minutes ago. Should’ve pretended she was simply camping on the side of the road and send him away before he even got off that bike of his. She didn’t need Owen Grady to help her. She didn’t need anyone to save her.

Claire’s eyes dropped shut, a moment of surprise replaced by the fast hammering of blood in her temples and a rush of heat that broke across her skin. His lips were soft and warm, moving over her mouth slowly like he was trying to memorize its taste and texture, almost teasing her but not quite. She could smell the forest and man and motor oil on him mixed with the faint scent of the animals that permeated the clothes of everyone who was working with the dinosaurs. Not unpleasant, but peculiar, like old leather and tangy musk, and it was filling her nostrils and making her head spin.

His hand slipped down from her cheek and curled over the back of Claire’s neck as her lips parted against his, a low guttural growl forming in the back of his throat when she allowed her tongue to run over his bottom lip, her hand gripping a fistful of his leather vest, soft from age and wear.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of a little speed, Claire,” he murmured, drawing back for a breath, her bright red lipstick smeared over his mouth, which should have looked ridiculous but which only made her want to kiss him again.

“I’m not,” she agreed. “But I don’t have a death wish, either.” And in that moment, Claire was fairly certain that they were no longer talking about his motorcycle.
And he sure as hell knew it, too.

Still, he stepped back and grinned at her. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” she called after him as he strolled back toward his bike and stored the tool box away before throwing his leg over the seat in that easy was that told her he’d done it a thousand times before, a movement as natural as breathing.

She’d lie to herself if she didn’t admit that she wanted to do it, feel the wind in her hair and have the world blur in the periphery of her vision. Just like she wanted to kiss him since the day she met him. Although he definitely didn’t need to know about either of those things.

“Well,” Owen pushed the kickstand up, allowing the weight of the bike to shift beneath him, flexing his hands on the handlebars to hold it in place. “On the off-chance you will, I hear that new restaurant you guys just opened is decent enough. Wanna check it out this Friday?” A pause. “We can go through all items on your list this time.”

Claire’s heart slammed into her esophagus, making it damn hard to breath by the second. “Have I not seen all of your board shorts yet?” She asked, struggling to keep her voice steady despite the wild flutter of heart in her chest.

Owen chuckled, holding her gaze for a long moment. “Not by a long shot.”
“It wouldn’t kill you have some fun, you know?” Zara noted with a sigh, picking up the papers from Claire’s desk that she’d left earlier for her boss to sign.

“Yes, I know, I know,” Claire smiled apologetically. “But… I have… you know how busy my schedule is.”

“Yes,” Zara paused, one hand on the door handle. “And I can make it all go away.”

“That’s not how it works,” Claire protested even though yes, she was, perhaps, the only person who could make it all go away.

“Well, promise me to at least think about it.”

Claire nodded obediently, “I promise.”

Once the door behind Zara closed, she puffed her cheeks out and slumped against the back of her chair, expensive leather cool through her silk blouse.

She felt like an ass trying to find a way around going to her assistant’s birthday, but truth be told, it wasn’t about her packed day planner so much as about the fact that it was a party, not a reception, or a soiree, or even a dinner. Claire knew for a fact that it would be full of people whose positions and salaries she knew by heart but whose personalities were no more familiar to her than those of complete strangers. And worst of all, she knew for a fact that the feeling would be mutual – she would be viewed as one of the park’s attractions at best.

Still, there was no way around it, and Claire knew it the moment Zara dropped the invitation on her. She couldn’t say no.

Claire rubbed her eyes, exhausted. She would stop by, she decided, drop off her present, make sure Zara saw her there, and be on her merry way to… yet another pathetically lonely Saturday night. Just her and a glass of chardonnay and maybe a Tom Hanks movie. All things considered, Claire Dearing was acing her life. Next, she might as well adopt a cat or two. Or five, just to be sure. Or a dinosaur, for that matter.

—

A small bar on the outskirts of the park, in the area commonly referred to as a ‘staff village’, was brightly lit with fairy lights and packed like a can of sardines when Claire arrived there. Apparently, the notion of being fashionably late did not apply to the places… well, like this one, she assumed.

It wasn’t even really a bar – more a roof attached to several poles, with a bar counter in one corner, a few tables in between, and loudspeakers hanging from the ceiling. The night was hot and humid, people spilling from under the tin roof and onto the beach, laughing. Even in her most casual outfit, Claire felt criminally overdressed, her plain Prada sandals standing out among cheap flip-flops. Board shorts, she sighed internally. Board shorts everywhere, faded Hawaiian shirts, and wifebeaters, flimsy tank tops and denim cutoffs. In her slacks and cream-lace top, she looked like she was attending a gala.

She huffed and stepped inside – as much as there was an inside, scanning the crowd looking for
Zara. Someone pressed a beer bottle into her hand, but by the time her eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness and she was about to protest, it was hard to tell who gave to her. All around her, people were talking and laughing, no one seemed to be paying attention to her whatsoever. She assumed that having a drink in her hand was more of a mandatory thing than a choice, and clasped the bottle tighter, almost grateful for its coolness against her skin.

“Claire!” The sound of her name made her snap her head up, and she finally spotted Zara waving at her from across the bar. “You’ve made it!” In a floating pale sundress and with her cheeks flushed from the heat and probably a cocktail or two, she looked younger, reckless somehow. Her arms wrapped around Claire in a brief, tight hug.

“Happy birthday,” Claire smiled, pulling back, relieved to find a familiar face in this sea of strangers.

A small box found its way into Zara’s hands and her face lit up. “You didn’t have to…”

Claire pushed her hair back, struggling to keep a nervous smile in place. “It’s no trouble. I… um, hope you’re having a good time?”

It didn’t mean to be a question, but she sort of wanted to know – was this really meant to be fun?

The heat and the scent of suntans and coconut oil and fruity perfume was making her dizzy, the flickering lights giving the place and the crowd a surreal look.

“Yeah,” Zara nodded. “Can I open it later? I don’t want to…” She jerked her chin toward a small table near the bar with a pile of neatly wrapped boxes sitting on top of it. “I don’t want to lose anything.”

“Sure, of course,” Claire nodded if a little distractedly. It didn’t matter, really. She got her a pair of earrings matching one of Zara’s necklaces, hoping it wasn’t a miss.

“Great! Do you need a–” Zara noticed beer in Claire’s hand. “I see you’re all set.” And Claire nodded again, adding some wattage to her smile. “There’re cocktails too, and–”

She got distracted by the arrival of someone else, and the whole scenario repeated – a hug, a few thanks, a gift in exchange for pleasantries. Claire stepped back to make room for more people, moving out of the way of feet and elbows and red solo cups before their contents ended up on her clothes.

It wasn’t that bad, she had to admit. The music was cheery, if a little repetitive in that way that would make you forget it was even there. She didn’t mind watching the people she barely ever saw in non-professional environment before navigate their way around. It made them more real, she decided in the end. Made them 3-dimensional. Yes, there wasn’t a single person in a three-mile radius who would voluntarily talk to her, but she didn’t need that. She could get a martini (probably), stay here for another hour, and then forget—

Someone bumped into her, nearly knocking her down.

“Whoa!” A firm grip around her waist kept her from tumbling down. “Careful there.”

And when she looked up, she found none other than Owen Grady with his arm wrapped around her and her face practically pressed into his chest. Dressed in faded jeans and a blue t-shirt, he blended right in, she thought without much pleasure. At the sight of her, his eyebrows shot up, nearly disappearing in his hairline. Well, the surprise was mutual.
Claire scowled at him and stepped back. From this close and without the additional benefit of her heels, he was towering over her, six feet of lean, lazy grace, the corner of his mouth curled into a half-grin, blue eyes studying her with mild amusement. She could feel the heat radiating off his body and smell the forest and salt from the surf on him like he’d just climbed out of the water.

“Do you mind?” She asked when he didn’t move, blocking her way.

“What’s a nice girl like you doing—”

“If you finish that sentence, Mr. Grady, I swear to God…”

“Owen.” He took a swig of beer from his bottle, never breaking the eyes contact, and Claire’s frown deepened, his cockiness rubbing her the wrong way. “What’s with the formalities, Claire?”

The way he said her name – drawled it, really – made her skin tingle. She pursed her lips into a thin displeased line. One mistake of a date gave him no right to be so frivolous and familiar with her, and just because the place was packed, he didn’t have to stand practically on her toes, either.

“Why don’t you go…”

She wasn’t sure if she was going to wish him a nice evening or suggest he go straight to hell when a girl in short denim cut-offs appeared by his side. It was by her short dark hair that Claire recognized a clerk from the souvenir store. “Owen!” She looped her arm through his. “Are you coming?” And then she saw Claire, her eyes growing wide. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She made no attempt to let go of him, though.

“It’s okay,” Claire flashed a cheery smile at her. “Mr. Grady was just leaving.”

“In a sec,” Owen told to the girl without so much as a glance.

Madeline? Melanie? Claire couldn’t recall. After a brief hesitation, she stepped back though, eyeing the two of them with unmasked puzzlement. And then she disappeared in the crowd without another word. Claire sighed subtly, feeling with her very skin the wheel of gossip start churning. Granted, she had an excuse to be here – heaven help her if she’d come here by choice! – but it was a small consolation.

Meredith! Of course!

Claire stepped around Owen with a half-hearted, “Excuse me,” and turned to the bartender. “Martini, dry,” she asked. “Please.”

A grim-looking man on the other side of the counter nodded curtly and she allowed her gaze to travel over the rows of bottles on the shelf behind him, some of them clearly sitting there for decoration. Pink and yellow and green – they glinted in the blinking light of fairy-lights, reminding her of fireflies she and her sister used to capture in the park in the summer, putting them in mason jars only to release them on the way home.

The memory made the corners of her mouth lift.

“You’re like a whole different person now.”

Owen’s words gave her a start and Claire whipped her head around to find him still standing beside her, leaning on the polished counter as her peered at her.

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be?” She asked in an almost bored voice. “It’s rude to make
“your date wait.” With that, she smirked. “Then again, when did that ever stop you? I would know, after all.”

“She’s not my–” Owen started and cut off. “I’ve never made you wait,” he said, his voice so low Claire wasn’t sure if he actually said anything, what with the music blaring.

She hummed. “Maybe for a good time.”

“Ouch.” He actually laughed, not at all insulted. “You gonna finish that?”

“Be my guest.”

She pushed her untouched beer to him along the counter just as the barman sat her martini in front of her.

“Cheers, Ms. Dearing.” Owen touched his – her – beer to Claire’s glass, and by the time she thanked the barman and turned around, he was gone.

The music got louder, the voices more excited. In the next hour, Claire caught sight of Zara a time or two and got a hug from Barry who, she was certain, needed to lay off booze and go get some fresh air instead. He was tipsy enough to make her suspect he wouldn’t remember any of this tomorrow, but she still found this kind of affection unexpectedly heartwarming. He made her promise him that she would come here again and she easily agreed, knowing he wouldn’t really care if she actually did.

She talked to a couple more people, mostly those who had little to no idea who she was – a pointless chit-chat about the heat and stale nachos this place was offering and the best burger joint on the island. Her side of the conversation was mostly monosyllabic and consisted of nodding her head a lot, but she didn’t mind. all things considered, this felt like a frat party of sorts, and maybe it wasn’t the worst kind of experience.

The breeze coming from the ocean felt surprisingly nice on her face when she finally stepped outside, the sand soft beneath thin soles of her shoes.

“Claire!” Zara materialized beside her, breathless and bright-eyed. “C’mere!”

“I was actually–” Claire started, looking longingly toward her car parked somewhere on the road, “—leaving,” she finished just as they stepped around a cluster of bushes and found themselves in front of a small bonfire and half a dozen people sitting around it, talking over each other.

Zara plopped down onto one of the logs, pulling Claire down to sit beside her. “I really have to–” Claire began again in a loud whisper.

“Truth or dare!” Someone exclaimed all of a sudden, and the offer instantly drowned in the cheers of approval mixed with loud clapping.

Hell, no! Claire thought and started to rise, ready to bolt, whatever the cost, and feeling not nearly drunk enough to even consider the horrendous repercussions of this plan.

“I dare you to play,” a familiar voice said lazily right beside her.

Of course, he was there, she realized with dismay. The ever-present Owen I’m-so-cool-they-have-my-picture-in-the-dictionary-near-the-definition-of-cool Grady. Even after the scant light of the bar, the beach seemed darker still, the faces hidden in the shadows. Even with the fire – Jesus Christ, it was already hot! Whose brilliant ideas was it to start a fire?! – the most she could see for
a solid minute was the people’s knees. And now she felt trapped.

Silence fell around them, and in that moment, Claire could feel the eyes of everyone on them, watching them. Waiting.

She lowered down slowly, promising herself to kill him sometime in the near future. Maybe drown him – the ocean was right there. Maybe not with the witnesses, though, Claire decided grimly. Instead, she reached for his beer and pointedly gulped down half of it before returning it to him to the sound of a loud, excited whistling.

In the end, it turned out not being such a bad thing.

Claire leaned a few embarrassing college stories she kind of hoped she would never find out about the people she was working with, somewhat grateful for the darkness and the light buzz in her head. There was a chance she wouldn’t remember half of them by morning.

A guy from the Control Room had to pour half a bottle of beer on his head – it would’ve been a full bottle if there was one. And a girl from the petting zoo had to do cartwheels, which she couldn’t, so she ended up being thrown into the surf.

There was an attempted – and failed – breakdance on the sand, a clothes swap between Barry and a receptionist from the hotel, which left everyone in stitches when he put on her crop top.

All things considered, it felt weirdly normal to just… be, without either of them looking at her like she was some kind of different species.

When it was Owen’s turn to ask the question for the second time, he turned to her, eyeing her contemplatively for a moment or two, and Claire’s heart did a somersault in her chest, fluttering against her ribcage.

“Truth or dare?” He asked in a low, husky voice, his mouth curved ever so slightly.

“Dare,” she said, surprised by her own boldness.

His eyebrow cocked in surprise.

“Kiss me.”

And just like that, everyone was staring at them again, the silence of the night interrupted only by the gentle lapping of the waves against the sand.

Claire scoffed, not at all surprised and if a little put off by his boldness, tempted to laugh in his face. And then she reconsidered. It was just a game, and at least she’d get to keep her clothes on. For a moment, she thought of stomping off, but really, she had already admitted to an awkward thing or two and maybe that last round of beer was not the best idea, but what bad could happen from kissing someone? In the back of her mind, she was certain the whole point of this challenge was Owen trying to push as many of her buttons as he could, maybe get her to storm off.

And that thought alone got Claire to lean forward and press her mouth to his for a quick kiss.

However, when she started to pull away, Owen’s palm cupped over her cheek, and Claire’s lips parted, his tongue darting between her teeth. He tasted of beer and summer and something vaguely familiar in a way that felt more like a déjà vu than a memory. It caught her by surprise, her head spinning and heat pooling in her stomach.
His fingers pushed into her hair, and… Jesus, the man could kidd. Two could play that game, she decided, and bit his bottom lip lightly, pulling at it. A low, guttural groan formed in the back of Owen’s throat, and she hoped as hell no one else heard it.

They pulled away from one another to a peal of laughter and a loud wooohooo! Owen’s eyes, when they locked with hers, were glazed over and dark with wanting that made her breath hitch in her throat, his chest heaving.

“Truth or dare, Mr. Grady?” Claire smirked, her eyes narrowed.

Owen finished his drink in one gulp. “Truth.”

“Why did you ask me out?”

“To find out what this,” his gaze darted down to her lips, “felt like.”

He might have as well dumped a bucket of ice-cold water on her.

Just a joke. She was just a joke to him.

Jaw set tautly, Claire leaped up to her feet, ignoring the loud protests of the rest of Zara’s party and headed for her car, fumbling for her keys only to realize that she was hardly in any condition to drive for at least eight more hours. Great. Fucking great!

“Claire!”

She didn’t turn.

“Claire, wait!”

“You’re such an ass!” She whirled around nearly causing Owen to bump into her and jabbed a finger at him. “And just for a moment there I almost thought—” She cut off and growled to herself, annoyed with herself for getting caught in the moment, for allowing herself to have fun. “Go back,” she snapped at him, wishing the sand wasn’t making walking so damn complicated.

“Look, let me expla—”

“Save it,” Claire shook the sand out of her sandals when she reached the paved pathway. God, she was so stupid. Pathetic…

“It wasn’t like that. I mean—it came out the wrong way.”

She turned around abruptly. “What do you want me to say, Owen? Congratulations! You got what you wanted, and all it took was a martini and a few beers. You can cross that off your bucket list, or, I don’t know, your Great List of Achievements.”

He stared at her for a long moment, uncertain of what was more sobering – her implications or the fact that she’d just used his first name for maybe the second time ever. “You can’t drive like this.”

“Wasn’t going it,” she snorted. “I just need to get my purse.” The hotel was only a couple of miles away. She could walk and pick up her car in the morning.

“Look, I’m sorry. It was a shitty to way to say it like… I asked you out because I wanted to know you.” She stared at him. He opened his mouth, closed it again, completely at a loss for words.

Then shook his head. “Let me take you home.”
“You’re drunk,” Claire muttered even though for only a fraction of a moment, it didn’t seem like a bad idea.

“I’m not, actually. I had a couple of beers. They’d long worn off.”

She scowled at him, weighing her options. It beat having to walk in the middle of the night – the park was generally a safe place, but she couldn’t disregard the fact that it was still full of wild animals that were prone to testing the barriers whenever they could, and that thought alone gave Claire chills.

And still…

“I think I’ll be fine,” she huffed.

The bar was still open, its lights glinting behind the trees. The crowd had long thinned but she could still hear the hum of conversations, the music playing, muffled by the sound of the ocean.

“For heaven’s sake! Pretend I’m someone else if it bothers you this much.”

Claire’s frown deepened. She was tired and cranky and more than a little tipsy, and she wasn’t sure what annoyed her more – the fact that Owen Grady wouldn’t leave her the hell alone, that she didn’t really want him to, or that the ‘pretending’ part didn’t occur to her first. How on earth did they end up here?

“Fine,” she said through her teeth. “Where’s your car?”

“Well, it’s not really, strictly speaking–” He rubbed his neck, and pointed at his bike parked at the curb.

Claire’s eyes widened. “Oh, no. Hell, no! You’re kidding me, right?”

Owen sighed. “Just give me your keys.”

This was not how she thought this night would end, but the next thing Claire knew, she was doing as he’d asked, and he was opening the passenger door for her, and when she turned to thank him – an automatic response that had nothing to do with the fact that she felt very little gratitude at the moment, he was suddenly right there, his chin at her eye level. It was too dark to see anything, his face in the shadows, entirely unreadable. And then his fingers were in her hair, framing her face, and his mouth was moving against hers in that urgent, hungry way that made Claire weak in her knees.

She gripped his shirt, pulling herself up and closer to him, her arms weaving around his neck, hands carding through his hair. His palms slid down her back, splayed on her ribs, slipping under her top. Claire gasped, her guard crumbling.

“Okay, just… um, how drunk are you?” Owen murmured, kissing his way down her neck, catching her earlobe between his teeth. She moaned softly, finding it near impossible to stay focused, or keep her eyes open, or function, period.

Claire swallowed, hard, and pulled back just far enough away to catch her breath. “I’m not… not enough not to know what’s going on,” she whispered, tracing her fingers along the collar of his shirt, over the back of his neck.

He pecked her on the lips one more time, and she could feel the curve of his smile that echoed with a flurry in her chest. “So, I guess, the next question is – your place or mine?”
Claire woke up to a pounding headache and the sound of a blender turned on in the kitchen. She squeezed her eyes tight and buried her face in the pillow, willing her mind to shut off for just a little while longer. The sun outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of her suite was bright and merciless, and apparently on a mission to burn right through her eyelids.

The first thing that dawned on her was that it was late, later than she’d normally stay in bed even on the weekend. The second was that this was her bed – her soft linen, her pillow – and she found that realization comforting. And finally – the blender?

In the kitchen, Owen was rummaging through her fridge, humming something under his breath. He straightened up when she stepped out of the bedroom, furiously rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. The fact that he was only wearing his funny-looking boxers with the ‘claw rip’ print across his butt made her smile and her cheeks grow warm by the second. He broke into a wide grin at the sight of her bedhead and a ratty shirt Claire normally slept in and that was the only thing she was bothered to pull on half a minute ago.

“Look who’s still alive,” Owen commented brightly and she regarded him with mock displeasure.

“I’m not–”

His palm on her cheek and his mouth pressed to hers cut her off, making her lose the train of her thought. “Here, drink this.” He thrust a glass of something that looked more like swamp water mixed with clay into her hand. “It’ll fix you right up.”

“I’m fine,” she protested, but took a cautious sip nonetheless, grimacing at the taste and smell of it. “I don’t usually drink—Do I want to know what’s in this?” He shook his head. “Thought so.” Another sip settled in her stomach. “Look, last night–”

“Was great.” Owen leaned against one of the tall bar stools near the counter and pulled her toward him, his arms locked behind her back and their eyes on the same level. He was looking at her with the wondrous expression of someone who’d found his dream present under the Christmas tree, and it nearly made her heart burst. “Our best date so far.”

Claire’s jaw dropped. “This was not a date!”

He shrugged, not at all perplexed. “Sure it was. We have a few drinks, had some fun, you kissed me, we had sex. Sounds like a date to me.”

His eyebrows wiggled suggestively, and Claire smacked him lightly on the shoulder, all righteous indignation, but when she tried to pull away, he dropped the act. His face became serious and he traced his fingers along her cheek, pushing her hair back and lifting her chin until she was looking at him. His thumb run along her lower lip, and Claire forgot how to breathe.

“You’re impossible, you know that?” She asked wearily, struggling to bite back a smile that kept tugging at her lips.

“Uh-huh,” Owen nodded eagerly. “Wanna make a day of it?”
No Strings Attached

Chapter Notes

Okay, the last one!

This is an oldie, based off a tumblr prompt that I can no longer find because I wrote this little piece 2 years ago and have long lost a lot of prompts :P Something about lipstick stains. Hope you'll still enjoy it though!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No strings attached.

That was how Claire had put it.

Naturally, Owen didn’t object. And who would? When their disastrous first date had turned into a hot night in the back of her car, he had known there was no coming back from that. Her lips were bright red, looking like rich wine and tasting as such. And maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea, in retrospect. And maybe they had been just a little bit drunk – enough to overlook the stupidity of their actions. And maybe one of them should have stopped and suggested to talk it all through, but the moment Owen’s lips had crashed against hers while his hand slipped underneath her dress, hiking it up her thigh, he’d known it wouldn’t be him.

This one time was enough to get him hooked and completely addicted to her – her slender form and her pale skin that felt like silk beneath his calloused fingers, smooth and soft, and utterly intoxicating. He couldn’t get enough of her voice, of the taste of her lips, her jade-green eyes glinting in the dim light of his reading lamp. He loved that she knew what she wanted and never shied away from claiming it, confidently and unapologetically, like a hurricane that would leave you ripped apart and grateful you were still breathing.

No strings attached.

He could work with that.

Always at his place, never hers. Claire loved the remote and secluded location of the bungalow, hidden away from the prying eyes of the park employees always hungry for gossip. As a woman in a position of power, she was keenly aware of her reputation, the need to never come across as too affectionate or reveal a weakness always the deciding factor in her life. If that meant spending the time at Owen’s tiny house that had no air-conditioning and where the plumbing and cell phone signal depended heavily on luck, magic, and weather – well, so be it.

“Are you ashamed to be seen with me?” Owen asked he only half-jokingly one day, combing his hand through her hair as she was trying to catch her breath, sprawled over his chest, her hair curling in the humidity of his bedroom bathed in the light of the fading sun.

“Only on the days that end with a ‘y’,” Claire told him with a snort, sitting up, hands flat on his chest. Owen could count the number of times she had expressed any sort of uncertainty or hesitation, but the way she was looking at him in that moment caught him off guard. Something akin vulnerability lurking behind her eyes. She sighed. “Look, I can’t have anyone drag my name
across every lunch break conversation.”

She was biting her lip, too, and Owen hated to admit that the ‘no strings’ part didn’t sting even a little bit, but the lip biting thing was seriously getting to him. And the next he knew, he was pulling her down again, his hands flying all over her body.

In the few weeks that they had been together, he had learned every curve and dip and crevice, knowing exactly what he could do to make her forget the world. He had kissed every inch of her skin, mapped every line of her body, marvelling at the work of art that was Claire Dearing, mesmerized and captivated by the scent of her skin, the way she could make the whole universe fall apart around him. It was not without a certain degree of fascination that he was watching her barriers collapse as well, revealing the sides of her that Owen suspected only a few people were familiar with.

He cherished it – probably more than she knew, or would believe if he’d told her – treading around carefully so as not to scare her off. The sex was great, way beyond great, exceeding even his wildest expectations, and god knew, he’d had plenty of those. From the moment he had first laid her eyes on her in the Masrani headquarters on the island till the day he’d finally lost himself in the sweet oblivion of her embrace, his time had been equally divided between his busy schedule and the stubborn raptors in his charge and imaging Claire in various stages of nakedness.

But it wasn’t the physical closeness that intrigued him the most. There was something about peeling her layers off, one after another, slowly getting to the person she really was that Owen treasured the most. A glimpse here, an accidental revelation there – languid softness hidden under the metal armour.

Trust.

Owen knew it all came down to this – she trusted him with her body, her quaking form wrapped tightly around him, infinite legs, nimble fingers, crimson red lips that left stains on his sheets and his body he wanted to wear like a badge of honour. This was her trust wrapped in a shiny paper and gifted to him. Her mind, however, was another thing entirely, and he was intrigued, eager to find a way to her core through pleasure and bliss.

He trusted her, too. Enough to let her lead the way, which went against his nature for as long as he’d known himself. Enough to let her be in charge when there was no other way for this to work. He craved her like she was his air, wondering just how big a deal it really was for her to surrender when she would choose to do so in the rare moments of allowing him to satisfy his needs however he deemed desirable.

“You can stay, you know?” he offered her one night, kissing his way up her spine, slowly, one vertebra after another, dizzy from the vanilla scent of her skin, drunk on endorphins.

“I can’t, actually.” Claire all but purred when he traced her shoulder blade with his tongue, kissing her bare shoulder, each freckle he could spot in the purple light of the dusk. “Unless you have one of these multipurpose phones I need for the conference call in the morning.”

Owen chuckled, burying his face in her hair, intent on inhaling her whole. “If I knew it would be a deal breaker, I would get one,” he muttered into her neck, and she squirmed, giggling. The fact that she was ticklish was, perhaps, Owen’s favourite discovery about her. Well, maybe after that thing she could do with her tongue… His hand slipped around her waist and down her belly, not oblivious to her gasp—

Claire caught his wrist and he groaned in disappointment.
“As tempting as this offer is,” she said, rolling over to face him, unable to hold back a sly grin at the sight of his pouty expression, “I really do have to go.”

“Any chance I could convince you to change your mind?” Owen muttered, kissing her once, and then one more time, deeper, his tongue running along her bottom lip, teasing her.

“No,” Claire murmured breathlessly, pulling away.

She managed to disentangle herself from his grip and the sheets and began to pick up the discarded garments of her clothing from the floor, impatiently pushing her hair from her face. From the bed, Owen watched her pull on her panties and a black lacy bra, followed by strict pencil skirt and satin blouse.

Propped on one elbow, he allowed his gaze to skim over her, not without a smug, possessive satisfaction. This was quite possibly his favourite sight of Claire. Not the half-naked part, although it did make for a nice view, but the flushed cheeks and wild hair thing, and her clothes that didn’t sit quite as straight as they were meant to – either because they weren’t freshly ironed at this point, or because the process of undressing her earlier had taken the edge off her deliberately intimidating image. He loved seeing her sharp edges smoothed out, her expression soft, almost dreamy – at least when she didn’t think he was watching.

“Tomorrow then,” he offered as she was putting on her shoes, sitting on the edge of the bed. “It’s Friday. Surely you don’t have anything planned for Saturday morning.”

“Owen,” she started with reproach.

“I just want you, for once, to not run away the moment you get what you came here for, is all. Way to make a guy feel objectified.” She didn’t smile, and he huffed in frustration and met her gaze with a firm look of his own. “I’m asking you to have pancakes for breakfast with me, Claire, not marry me.”

Which was the wrong thing to say, and he knew it the moment the words came out of his mouth.

Glaring at him, Claire stood up. “Not the point,” she said sternly. “This wasn’t supposed to be like… like…”

“Like what?” He cocked his head, daring her to continue.

“Like…” She bit her lip and turned away from him, busying herself with looking for her phone.

“A relationship?” he offered.

Claire snapped her head up. “This isn’t a relationship. I thought we agreed on that.”

“Okay then,” he didn’t object. “What is it, then?”

She lifted her chin. “A business arrangement.”

He laughed at that – couldn’t help it, really. “A secret business arrangement,” he reminded her. “According to which you would allow me to eat hot fudge off you but won’t share a meal with me.”

Hands on her hips, she levelled him with a searing glare. “What do you want me to do, Owen? Shout from the rooftops about rolling in the sheets with you?”
His ears perked up at that. “If I say yes, can we do it?”

Claire groaned and stormed out of the bedroom, and he scrambled out of the bed, tripping over his feet in his haste. He caught up with her in the living room just as she was grabbing her purse from the couch and reaching for the door and placed his hand on top of hers before she was gone.

“What are you afraid of, Claire?” he asked, watching her closely.

Claire’s fingers flexed on her purse. “I’m not afraid of anything, Mr. Grady.”

“And we’re back to Mr. Grady,” Owen muttered and rubbed his eyes.

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “If this is not working out for you, you don’t have to make a scene. You could have just told me.”

With that, she pulled the door open and was starting her car before Owen thought of how to respond. From the porch of his bungalow, holding a sheet around his waist, he watched her speed off, mud spraying from under the wheels of her Mercedes. He cursed under his breath and exhaled loudly, his body still buzzing with the remnants of the aftermath of his time with Claire, and he knew from experience that his sheets were going to smell of her for days even if he washed them twice. Not to mention his own skin, his clothes…

This was going to be interesting.

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“You okay, man?” Barry slapped Owen on the back with so much enthusiasm it nearly propelled Owen forward a few steps.

A bucket of raw meat in hand, Owen grunted something incomprehensible in response. He was tired and cranky, and that gallon of coffee he had drunk today wasn’t doing shit to fix anything. It had been three days since Claire had stormed out of his house, and she wouldn’t answer his calls or return her texts since, and it was driving him crazy more than he wanted to admit. And the worst part was that he didn’t even know what annoyed him more – Claire’s shutting him off so easily, or the fact that it bothered him so much.

It was supposed to be about casual sex, and for a few months it worked out just fine for both of them. So what the hell did it even matter if she had decided to ditch him for someone less problematic? It wasn’t like he wanted anything more than that, right?

And yet, his mood was foul, and the raptors, sensing the shit storm happening in Owen’s head, responded with acting up and ignoring his commands, inevitably leaving him even more exasperated. They would snap at one another and promptly forget everything they’d learned, squabbling with each other over everything. It was like a whole new level of hell that Owen didn’t know how to break out of. Like a lovesick teenager, he would constantly check his phone for messages/signal/battery life, fighting the urge to fling it against the nearest wall.

This was not who he was, and who that woman thought she was—

“Nice lipstick, man,” Barry chuckled, pointing at Owen’s shirt, and sure enough, there it was – a bright red stain on the collar.

Owen glowered back at him, not knowing what to say, his comebacks suddenly nowhere to be found. This shirt was supposed to be in the hamper, but he must have grabbed it by accident, and now he wanted nothing more than to claw his way out of it.
Well, maybe not nothing.

“Shut up,” he uttered at last, and Barry burst out laughing.

“Come on, man, who was it? That nice piece from the petting zoo?”

“No one,” Owen shook his head, and the sound of it felt hollow and lonely somehow. No one. That was what they really were, weren’t they? “Can you finish this?” He handed the bucket to Barry and reached for the rag to wipe his hands clean, ignoring a rain of questions that poured down on him. “I need to do something.”

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“Everything okay?” Zara asked when Claire signed the third order form in the wrong place.

Claire nodded curtly, keeping her eyes on the papers. She frowned, struggling to focus on the purchase requests Zara had brought over. “Of course.” She cleared her throat. “Did they change those?”

“No that I’m aware of.” Zara shrugged.

Claire shook her head. “I’m just tired.”

Tired was a major understatement. Someone could have put her in a food processor and given it a couple of spins, and she still probably wouldn’t have felt this edgy and drained all at once. Claire Dearing was not used to overthinking things… No, she was. It was all she was used to, but not as far as a relationship with a man was concerned. Any man. Ever.

And yet here he was, Owen Grady, crowding her thoughts. The very same Owen Grady who had somehow managed to get right under her skin and ruin everything – their perfect agreement, the best kind of anti-stress therapy she could think of and an illusion of being totally in control of the situation, which was all Claire needed from her life at this point. The problem was that leaving him behind was easy. Now, getting him out of her goddamn mind was another thing entirely. She might need to use pliers, she decided. And a lobotomy.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Claire felt scared.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea!” Zara dropper her voice conspiratorially. “Alec knows this guy… You’d totally like him.”

Claire blinked at her. “Are you trying to set me up with someone?” she asked rather dumbly.

Alec was Zara’s fiancé. He also worked as one of the handlers involved mostly with the Triceratops herd. And, as far as Claire was concerned, he couldn’t possibly know anyone she could be even remotely interested in, let alone anyone she’d go out with.

Zara shrugged. “Yeah, his friend, Mark, just started here. In marketing and PR.” She paused and gave Claire a meaningful smile. “He actually asked about you.”

Okay, this wasn’t so bad, Claire thought. Marketing was the kind of place that was stuffed with the people in expensive suits that were selling themselves as well as the park. They had their own clique, loud and chatty, kind of always sticking together at corporate events and never giving her any trouble so far. She didn’t love them, but she didn’t dislike them either.

Except she still didn’t need her assistant to fix her up with a date, thank you very much.
“I’m good,” Claire said politely. “But I appreciate the concern.”

Zara raised her hands in surrender. “Just keep it in mind.” She collected the forms from Claire’s desk. “Oh, and there’s Owen Grady who wants to talk to you?” It came out as a question rather than a statement. “From this raptors project?”

Claire’s eyes widened. “He’s here? HERE here?”

“Right on the other side of the door.” Zara regarded her curiously. “Should I let him in?”

Claire cleared her throat, her hand raising involuntarily to smooth down her hair. She dropped it down hastily because what did it matter what she looked like? For all Zara knew, she had never even met Owen Grady before, not outside a social function or two organized by the company that he bothered to attend.

“Sure,” she nodded, hoping her voice sounded as detached and professional as she wanted it to. “I guess I have a few minutes… Oh and, move my 12 o’clock to 3 in the afternoon, please? I’m meeting Mr. Masrani for lunch and it might take a while.”

“She left.”

There was no reason to be nervous, Claire told herself as she stood up and walked around her desk. Whatever it was that he needed… Well, he surely wouldn’t want to talk about anything personal with her assistant and half a dozen other people present in the nearby offices, would he? Zara poked her head out and nodded at someone, supposedly Owen. And the next moment, he was stepping into Claire’s office and shutting the door behind him, and her heart did that flip thing Claire always considered trouble.

She scowled at him, trying to look past everything… personal.

“Hey,” he said evenly.

“What can I help you with, Mr. Grady?” Claire inquired.

Owen scoffed, and she could feel him swallow a few words he was probably eager to throw at her. “You forgot this,” he said instead and handed her the charger she normally kept in her car and that had apparently made its way into his house without her noticing. “Thought you might have a heart attack or something if you ended up without your phone for more than two minutes.”

“I have a spare one,” she told him, but took the charger from him anyway, careful not to touch him accidentally.

It didn’t go past him. “So this is how it is now, huh?” Owen asked softly, watching her with weary wistfulness. “You’re just going to act like nothing happened?”

Claire bit her lip and dropped her gaze. Arms crossed over her chest, she stared at her shoes, then at his, caked with mud and grass.

It was the weirdest feeling, knowing that when Zara mentioned his name, she was… god, what was it? Relieved? Hopeful? Happy that he went past leaving voicemails? Yes, she had no idea what to say to him, but she also didn’t quite expect it to be about something she forgot at his house. Thank god it wasn’t a pair of her underwear, she thought. And yet it was like now that she was out of the picture, Owen couldn’t wait to get rid of every trace of her – a clean slate and all that.

She did not expect it to get to her this much.
“We had a deal,” Claire said at last, meeting his gaze. “You stopped being okay with the conditions of that deal, which is fine. So, naturally, it’s off the table now.” She lifted her chin. “In fact, I have a date.”

Owen’s eyes narrowed. “Are you, now?”

She nodded. “With Mark. From PR, I think.”

“You think,” he echoed and shook his head, suddenly looking very out of place in her pristine and polished office. “I’m taking it, we’re seeing other people, then?”

“Well, we’re not seeing each other, so…” She trailed off, refusing to break the eye contact. And then her eyebrows arched. “Is that my lipstick on your shirt?”

Owen smirked, his eyes growing cold by the second. “Yeah, but unless you’ll start walking around with your mouth attached to my neck, no one will know.” He looked around, then gave Claire a long once-over, and turned on his heel, reaching for the door. “Good luck with that date.”

“Good luck with--” she started but the door slammed behind him before she knew how she was going to finish that sentence.

---

A date.

With Mark.

“From PR, my ass,” Owen muttered angrily, pulling the fridge door open and grabbing a bottle of beer.

How on earth did he go through the rest of the day without punching someone in the face he had no idea. One thing he was certain of – he had never been this happy to get his work over with so he could get the fucking hell away from everyone. Even the raptors. The latter was particularly surprising – in the past, Owen could always count on his girls to never irritate him on a personal level. Sure, they’d had their moments of stubborn disobedience, but he had never felt frustrated enough to want to yell at them.

Of course, it wasn’t them he wanted to yell at. It was Mark. From PR. And his manners and perfect teeth or whatever. Granted, Owen had never met the guy, but he’d have to have perfect teeth for that sort of job, and maybe an Armani suit – Claire had standards, after all. All things considered, she wouldn’t go out with just anyone.

Hence his annoyance with everyone and everything at the paddock.

Until he got home and the walls of his bungalow started to close in on him, making him feel like he was suffocating.

That was just so fucking perfect… Owen let out a long sigh and then inhaled deeply, pushing mental images of Claire in another man’s arms out of his mind, but the more he tried, the more persistent they got, until he could barely think straight.

Maybe he could just go there and… be a pathetic not-even-ex boyfriend.

Right, that would fix everything straight away.
He flopped onto the couch and took a swig of his beer that settled heavily in his stomach, wishing he had something stronger, but also not having it in him to drive anywhere. He grabbed the remote and flipped on the TV, not sure what he was looking for but needing some sort of distraction before he actually exploded.

At around 9, the heat finally got to him, and after suffering through *Sharknado* and 2 episodes of *That 70’s Show*, Owen grabbed another beer and headed out onto the porch. Mosquitoes were hardly better than being cooped up in his bungalow, but there was the evening breeze coming from the sea half a mile away and being eaten alive felt like a small price to pay for a gulp of fresh air. He was halfway through the bottle when he heard the sound of an engine, and then a car pulled off the road and stopped by his picnic table.

There were only two people on the island who could come to his place at this time of day without notice, and one of them had a date tonight. The other one was Claire who, ironically, was also supposed to be out. With Mark. From PR, maybe. But sure enough, there she was, stepping out of her clean, shiny car, dressed up for the occasion Owen wasn’t invited to.

She crossed the lawn and climbed up the porch steps, taking a seat next to him on the top one, all without a single word. In her floating skirt and halter-top and what looked like diamond earrings, she looked so out of place here the Owen wanted to pinch himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

“Weren’t you supposed to be eating foie gras or something?” he asked when a couple of minutes had passed and Claire didn’t say anything.


He turned to her then, his eyebrows pulled together. In the dim light of the porch lamp, she was impossible to read, save for the nervous energy radiating off of her that he could feel with his skin. It made him nervous too because he’d never seen Claire be anything but composed, and it was disconcerting on more levels than he could comprehend.

“What happened?” Owen demanded. “If he so much as touched you--”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” she assured him quickly and offered him a small smile that morphed into a halfhearted grimace. “I do appreciate the sentiment though.”

He took a swig of beer, but it tasted off, what with his stomach churning. “So…”

“So, I was at the restaurant with this nice guy who has two degrees, one of them from Oxford. And it was good. He was smart and funny, and…”

“If you came here to have girl talk, Claire--”

“No, it’s not that.” She clasped her hands around her knees. “It’s that I was having a… well, not a bad time with someone I could have easily had a nothing kind of relationship with if I wanted to, and it suddenly dawned on me that I didn’t want it. That it wasn’t fair. That he deserved someone who cared about his stories and his jokes.” She paused and let out a long breath. “And that I deserve it, too.”

“Okay,” Owen said slowly, not quite allowing himself to believe that she was saying what he thought she was saying just yet.

“And I told him I had to get home.” She looked at Owen again, her expression almost comically confused. “Which I was going to do. Instead, I somehow found myself driving here. On the off-
chance that you still wanted me."

Owen gaped at her for a long moment, finding it very hard to process the fact that Claire Dearing had never exposed so much of herself to him, had never let him in like that, and for a long moment, he didn’t trust himself to speak for fear of saying something that could ruin this.

And then his hand slipped around her neck, cupping the back of her head, his fingers tangled in her hair, and he was kissing her like he was a dying man in the desert and she was a gulp of water.

“Is that a yes?” she asked against his lips when Owen pulled just far enough away to catch a breath.

“I don’t know. What was the question, again?”

“Do you still want me?” she murmured.

His thumb ran along her bottom lip, slowly. “I have never not wanted you, Claire,” he rasped, his voice hoarse and low. “I just need to know… If it wasn’t for that lame-ass date, would you be here now?”

“It wasn’t lame-ass,” Claire said quietly. “And that was the problem.” In the near complete darkness, her eyes were wide and shiny, the scent of her almost intoxicating. She swallowed, hard, as her fingers traced the collar of his shirt before bunching it in her fist. “It was fine. But it wasn’t you sitting across from me, and…” She looked away. “Maybe not now, but I’d be here tomorrow.” Her hand tugged at his shirt a little as if to make sure he was still there.

She smiled when he lifted her chin. “I wish you were here yesterday.” His mouth latched on hers again, firm and demanding, and god, he didn’t want to ever stop kissing her, Owen thought, gathering her in his arms.

They stumbled into the bungalow, a collision of mouths and limbs, clumsy in their hasty attempts to shed the clothes that felt like the worst kind of barrier at the moment. She was laughing, teetering in her designer shoes, and Owen was laughing too, elated and giddy, and so ridiculously ecstatic he thought he might float away.

It wasn’t until Claire collapsed on his chest, panting and limp, a long while later that he allowed himself to believe he wasn’t dreaming, although based on his heart rate, he could be going into a cardiac arrest.

But still…

“I missed you,” Owen murmured, kissing her on the forehead.

“I still don’t know what is it that you want from me, and if I can give it to you,” Claire said after a long moment, her fingers absently tracing slow circles near his collarbone, her breathing slow and even now, and her voice uncertain again. He could almost feel her desire to bolt. Old habits and all that. She didn’t. “But maybe we could try. It probably wouldn’t kill me to leave a spare toothbrush here.”

Owen chuckled, flexing his arms around her, seeping in her wonderful weight, the smell of her perfume and her skin and sex, all mixed up into a fatal combination. His threaded his fingers slowly through her hair, trying to memorize her features from this particular angle, a pleasant, warm ache spreading all over him. Until now, he had no idea he could miss someone this much.

“It sure wouldn’t,” Owen agreed.
“I’m not good at this,” she admitted softly, nuzzling his neck.

He laughed. “Oh, yes. You are. Very much so.”

“Not this,” she scoffed and pulled up to look at him properly, her arms propped on the pillow on each side of Owen’s head. “The… relationship stuff.”

He sighed, his thumbs running soothing patterns on the small of her back. Hovering over him, with her hair falling on her face in thick waves and her eyes shining, she looked so fucking beautiful it hurt. “You seem like a fast learner to me.”

Claire considered him skeptically. “If you’re going to hog the bathroom--”

“I’m not going to hog the bathroom,” He promised. “Scout’s honour. Anything else?”

“I can’t sustain on beer and ramen noodles.”

“Check and check.”

Her features softened. “Well, I think I can work with everything else,” she concluded.

“Good.” Owen flipped them over, pressing her into the sheets, his lips claiming Claire’s to capture her surprised laugh as his hand slipped down her body. “Let’s make sure one more time we’re actually a good fit…”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was one hell of a trip down the memory lane. Thanks for checking this story out, guys!

And how that you are finished and probably want more fic to read, please go ahead and enjoy The Missing Years by akajb and EliseCollier! You will love it :D

Also feedback is always much appreciated :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!