Suddenly, there’s a still warm muzzle of a gun against your head. You don’t have to look up to know who it is.
The last words you hear are ‘I’m sorry’.
Then everything turns black.

[a modern day DW AU, with River being... oh well, you'll see.]
prologue (it goes click, click, boom, boom)

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kristi for going over it. No thanks to Eris who - in a way - started this whole thing. These two are to blame for this... thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If there are any perks of being homeless, it’s the fact that you are invisible. People don’t notice you – their stares slide off of you, they pretend not to notice you. You’re invisible, a part of this loud and boisterous city, you’re just another stop sign, just another lamp post – not worth paying any attention to. At first it hurt – being unseen, passed on the street without any acknowledgement of your existence. But once you get used to it, you start seeing that it’s not only a bad thing. It’s incredible how many things you can see and witness when you’re a part of the landscape. You’ve seen more personal dramas than you can count: arguments and spats between lovers, tears of joy and sadness, people facing with their fears and problems. Every day brings something new, a new scene to your collection.

Like today for example. You’ve been observing this guy for a few hours now. He’s been sitting in his dark alley since the early evening, patiently waiting for something to happen. Or for someone to appear. He’s someone who’s waiting for answers. You don’t really know why he’s sitting here of all the places: he doesn’t fit here. He’s dressed in a brown suit and a dark trench coat, thick-rimmed glasses are perched on his nose. But it’s not only the clothes that shout ‘I don’t belong here’. He looks like a decent guy, a person with morals. And morals are something this part of London certainly lacks. And the club the guy’s been observing... Well, it’s not like it’s a seedy place, quite the contrary: it’s posh and shiny, all steel and bright neon lights, expensive alcohols and patrons that spend more during one night than an average person earns during a month. No, the club itself isn’t a problem. The people who run and visit it are. Drug dealers, hookers, corrupted politicians, the mob. The police – unless you’re talking about a few policemen who like to snort coke with the gangsters – stay clear away from here. They know there’s nothing they can do about it: in this place law and justice are just another things you can buy.

But the guy here is most definitely not a corrupted politician nor the member of the mob. There’s only one thing he can be – a policeman on a quest for justice. He must know what happens here, and he wants to put a stop to it. Good luck to him. He’s not the first, not the last who thinks about putting an end to this dark stain on the city’s map. It didn’t work in the past, it won’t probably work this time, even though the determined set of the man’s shoulders suggests something else. Maybe he’ll succeed, maybe he’s the one who’ll wipe the dirt and grime from this part of the city.

Suddenly, in the darkness of the alley you notice a new figure slowly approaching the man. The man notices that person as well and even from his hiding behind bins, he can hear the exasperated sigh he lets out.

‘Song. Didn’t I tell you not to come here?’ the man says in a thick Scottish brogue. ‘Go home. I don’t need you here.’

‘And when was the last time I listened to you?’ you hear an amused female voice. ‘But you’re right about one thing: you most certainly don’t need me here. It’s me who needs to be here.’
‘What are you talking about?’ the man asks her. ‘Listen, I appreciate that you’re here. I do. But it’s my job. Someone from my department has been leaking information. And it’s my responsibility to find out who it is. Go home. Get some sleep. Otherwise you’ll be horrible tomorrow.’

‘You still don’t get it, do you?’ the woman quietly says. ‘I guess the fact that you haven’t figured it out is a compliment.’

‘What are you talking about?’ the man responds impatiently, his voice raised. ‘I don’t have time for one of your secrets and ‘guess what?’ games. So either say why you’re here or get out.’

‘Where’s the fun in that?’ she laughs. ‘Think. Use that enormous brain of yours. You’re so proud of it, show me what it’s worth.’

‘River,’ the man nearly growls, ‘right now you’re even more difficult and annoying than usual. And that’s some sort of an achievement. Remind me to reward you tomorrow. With a month worth of night shifts. Now, go home before I decide you could use some work going through the archives and sorting old paperwork.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ she stops his monologue and you can feel that something changed. Her tone is suddenly cold and bristle, it lacks the amusement that was there earlier. ‘You know, if you would just shut your mouth sometimes and looked, really looked at what is around you, we wouldn’t be here now. Still, I shouldn’t complain about it. You just make it easier.’

‘Make what easier?’ the man asks, confusion evident in his voice. ‘Listen, I don’t know what is wrong with you tonight, but let’s forget about it. Let’s just-’

She moves quickly and purposefully, one step forward, a hand dipping in a pocket of her coat – suddenly the man finds himself with a gun pointed at him. The expression on his face is one of shock and disbelief, mouth slightly agape, eyes flicking from the gun to the woman who holds it.

‘River,’ he whispers. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I think that is pretty obvious,’ she remarks. ‘As for the rest... Well, I kind of just gave you the biggest of spoilers, didn’t I?’

There’s a moment of stunned silence before the man speaks again.

‘No. It can’t... You had no opportunity,’ he says quietly. ‘You couldn’t have. You have no motive. You-‘ he stops. ‘Fuck.’

‘It suddenly makes sense, doesn’t it? The pieces match. And now you’re asking yourself why you didn’t see it all before.’

‘River,’ the man starts again. ‘It doesn’t have to be that way. I am sure that if you cooperate and work with us, it’ll all be fine,’ he takes a step closer to her but stops when her finger tightens on the trigger. ‘Just give me that gun and we’ll work it out.’

‘No,’ is her only answer and before he can take a step back or run, she pulls the trigger. The shot is surprisingly quiet – she must’ve put the silencer on – and the man falls lifelessly to the ground with a dull ‘thud’. She walks slowly to the body on the ground and simply stares at it for a few seconds. Then she turns around to leave.

You let out the breath you didn’t realise you’ve been holding this whole time. You were a witness of a murder, you must do something, call the police, tell them- Suddenly, there’s a still warm muzzle of a gun against your head. You don’t have to look up to know who it is.
The last words you hear are ‘*I'm sorry*’.

Then everything turns black.

Chapter End Notes

the fic's title comes from King Charles' 'Lady Percy' - a song that inspired this whole thing. the chapter's title comes from 'Pop Pop Bang' by Chantal Claret. both songs are great and you should give them a listen.
When his taxi stops at his apartment, his heart skips a bit. He pays the driver and gets out, his bag in hand. He looks around: the same sun shines and reflects on the buildings, the walls are painted with the same vulgar and ugly graffiti, the same men sit and glare at him. He even swears that the same papers and empty plastic cups litter the street. It’s been two years since he was here last and yet – nothing changed. But it’s not like he’s going to stay here long, he thinks while climbing the stairs to his apartment. In two days he has a flight to Brazil, so it gives him just enough time to settle a few matters, pack his bags and-

‘Hello, John.’

The greeting comes from a man who’s currently standing by the door to his apartment. He might’ve forgotten a few things during his absence, but one does not simply forget a nose like that.

‘Rory!’ he exclaims and envelopes the man in a one arm hug. ‘It’s great to see you here! How did you know I’m coming back tomorrow? Never mind that! What happened? Come on, tell me! We have-‘

‘Over two years to catch up, I know,’ Rory deadpans. ‘Two years with no contact from you.’

Oh. Right. There’s that.

‘I can explain,’ he starts. ‘I am sorry, I shouldn’t have left like that and I should have contacted you and Amy, but-‘

‘John,’ Rory interrupts him again. ‘You can explain it later. Now... Listen, I am here for a different reason.’

He looks at Rory and it’s then when he notices that he’s wearing his policeman uniform.

‘Oh,’ he says.

‘Yeah,’ Rory nods. ‘Come on. She’s waiting for you.’

‘No. I am done with this. You know that. She knows that.’

‘I know that. And she knows it as well. She respected your decision for over two years,’ Rory says slowly. ‘Do you really think she’d pull you back for something trivial? Just... Go and talk with her. It’s important. Trust me.’

He looks at Rory: his previous co-worker, his friend. One of the most honest man on Earth. There’s real concern in his eyes, but there’s also something else: a secret, something he doesn’t tell him.

‘Fine,’ he nods. ‘Lead the way, Mister Pond.’

‘It doesn’t work like that,’ Rory responds with a tired sigh, but there’s a hint of a smile on his lips.

‘It does.’

___
The ride to the police station is short and passes in comfortable silence. He knows that he will have to explain some things – quite a lot of them, actually – but for now it seems that Rory seems glad to see him.

‘Aren’t you angry?’ he asks him when they exist the car and head toward the heavy door leading to the station.

‘I am,’ Rory replies. ‘But then I remember that you still have to face Amy and I just feel sorry for you.’

He curses quietly under his breath and he can see Rory hiding a smirk.

‘So... How’s Amy these days?’ he asks.

‘Oh, you know. The usual. Loud. Scottish. Angry at you,’ Rory says as they walk down the corridor to his boss’ – ex boss’ – office. This place also hasn’t changed a bit: the walls are painted in the sickening grey colour, there are dead plants on the window stills, the same diplomas hang on the walls. Even the people are the same – at least some of them. They recognise him, smiling and waving to him, whispering to their partners as he passes them.

And here they are: the plain wooden door with a card saying ‘DSU Donna Noble’.

‘Good luck,’ Rory says, clapping him on the shoulder. ‘Try not to piss her off, okay?’

‘You’re not coming with me?’ he asks and if he sounds slightly panicked, no one can blame him. Donna is well... Donna. She has every person in the whole department by the balls – whether said person has balls or not. She’s fierce and loud, and the last time she saw him, she told him to get out of her sight before ‘she cuts his manhood off and feeds the pigeons with it.’

He has every right to be scared.

‘No,’ Rory shakes his head. ‘You’re on your own. Good luck, mate.’

And with this, he knocks on the door, opens it and pushes him inside the room.

He expects shouting. He expects snarky remarks or angry jabs. None of that comes. Instead he only hears quiet ‘sit down, Smith’ as Donna shows him a chair opposite hers. He sits and takes a look at her: her face is devoid of any emotions except for sadness and exhaustion. Whatever happened must have been big enough to make her reach for him and leave his mark on her.

Curioser and curioser.

‘I bet you’re wondering why you’re here,’ she starts, her voice calm. ‘Normally I wouldn’t get you out of your... retirement,’ she says that word with distaste, ‘but desperate times... You know.’

‘I do?’ he asks stupidly, but Donna ignores him.

‘It’s a murder case,’ she says. ‘We need your help with it.’

‘No,’ he says abruptly. ‘I am sorry, but no. I’d love to help, but you know that I am done with this job. Besides,’ he adds while standing up, ‘I am leaving in two days. You’ll have to find someone else.’

‘Ten’s dead,’ Donna says quietly. It’s just a whisper, but it’s enough to make him sit down. ‘They found him in an alleyway, in some nasty part of the city. Shot. Right between the eyes. There was
also another body of a homeless man. He must’ve been a witness.’

‘When?’

‘A month ago,’ she answers.

‘What?’ he nearly shouts. ‘You want to tell me you didn’t find the killer of a policeman? Does anyone even work here?’

‘Shut up,’ she hisses over clenched teeth. ‘You have no idea what we’ve been through. You have no-’ her voice breaks a little, but she takes a deep breath and continues. ‘There are no evidence. Nothing. The site was spotless and clean. Whoever did that was a professional. And...’

‘And what?’

‘There’s something else,’ she says and he swears that now she’s smiling a bit. The good old smug Donna smile. ‘There were two more killings of policemen. On in London, and one up north.’

He raises his eyebrow and shrugs a little.

‘And?’

‘And...’ now he can see a twinkle in her eyes and he knows that any second now she’ll drop a bomb on his lap. Three, two, one... ‘And the killer also left no traces. Nothing. Not even a shoe print. We believe that the same gun was used.’

‘So you have a nutter who travels around England and kills policemen,’ he says, feigning boredom. ‘Happens.’

‘Oh, it does happen,’ Donna nods. ‘But you know what is interesting about this whole thing, dumbo?’

His mouth twitch upon hearing her old nickname for him.

‘Do tell, detective Noble. What’s interesting here?’

‘They all attended the same school, although they didn’t study together. They didn’t know each other. They all worked on the same type of cases. But they all-’

‘Were a part of the Medusa project,’ he finishes for her. She looks surprised that he caught up so quickly and it makes him feel far more chuffed than he should feel.

‘So, Mister Smith,’ she drawls. ‘Will you take the case?’

He takes the case. Of course he does. And now he’s sitting in the old conference room where he spent so much of his time before he decided to quit. He made the right decision back then, he knows it. Still, he sometimes misses that: the smell of coffee in the air, dusty curtains in the windows, people slowly filling the room and taking places at the table. He knows some of them: Rory who’s sitting beside him or the dark haired man with a cheeky grin.

‘Jack Harkness!’ he says with a smile. ‘You’re still here? Now, that’s a surprise. I can’t believe Donna still puts up with you!’

‘Well, what can I say,’ the man winks. ‘I’m irresistible. And I’m on my best behaviour since I got my
last partner. I’d be a shame to leave someone like her.’

‘Oh? And who’s your new partner?’ he asks.

‘You’ll meet her any minute now,’ Jack smiles broadly. ‘I’m sure you’ll like each other.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ Rory mumbles next to him.

‘Even if it’s a disaster, it’ll be fun to watch,’ Jack laughs. ‘John, have you met our new girl yet? This little pixie here,’ he points at a girl who just entered the room. She’s small, tiny even and indeed, very pixie like.

‘Shut up, Jack,’ she says and smacks him on the shoulder. ‘I’m sorry about this idiot,’ she turns to him and extends her hand. ‘I’m Clara Oswin Oswald.’

‘Hello,’ he shakes her hands and cannot help but smile at her. ‘Nice to meet you. I’m John Smith.’

‘Yes, I know who you are,’ she says with a grin. ‘I’ve heard quite a lot about you. It’s good to finally see you.’

‘Yeah, it’d be even nicer if I hadn’t been brought here by force,’ he jokes.

‘Well, maybe it wouldn’t have happened if you answered your phone,’ someone behind him says. He turns around and sees a woman who just enter the room.

Correction: he thinks it was her hair who first entered the room. It must have been that way, because her hair is just enormous. It’s all curls: big curls, small curls, curly curls, all falling down on her shoulders. He’s never thought that someone can have this much hair. He studies her: a heart-shaped face, big green eyes, a wide nose with a small bump in the middle, full mouth stretched in a mocking smile.

Mocking? Mocking is not good. He needs to answer and be smart about it.

‘The cell service was of poor quality in the place I visited,’ he answers quickly and watches as she takes her seat next to Jack, who playfully tugs one of her blonde curls.

‘Right. Easter Island,’ she responds. ‘They must’ve worshipped you there. They even have your statues there, don’t they?’

‘Oi!’ he squeaks and he’s pretty sure that Rory is hiding a smile behind his hand. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am the woman who found you,’ the curly haired monster replies. ‘Now, you also had your satellite phone with you, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, but I had to use to for... other things,’ he says, but eyes her suspiciously. How does she even know these things? Did they follow him?

‘Of course. I forgot. You used it to build that thing... The dildo shaped one that you poked the rocks with,’ she says with a sugary-sweet smile on her face and this time no one in the room can pretend they’re not laughing. Jack has tears streaming down his face, Clara is giggling and Rory – et tu, Roranicus? – snorts and shakes his head.

‘Excuse me!’ he tries to shout over the noise in the room. ‘Excuse me! It’s not dildo shaped! That is one thing. Second thing: I wasn’t poking the rocks, I was trying to see if the radio waves affect the molecular structure of rocks and sand. That’s proper science!’
Everyone in the room stares at him with doubt and disbelief.

‘It is!’ he screeches and winces at the pitch of his own voice. ‘Trust me. I know all about science... And stuff,’ he finishes lamely.

‘Do you?’ the blonde asks. ‘And what are you? A doctor of physics?’

‘I could be if I’d finished the studies. They offered me a job at CERN,’ he smiles and straightens his back a bit, because she surely won’t beat that, will she?

‘Well, I dated a guy who worked at CERN, so I feel like I’m a bit more accomplished here,’ she says, rolling her eyes. ‘Anyway, you do realise that radio waves that you used and radioactivity – you know, one of the things CERN works on - are two completely different things?’

He realises that. He also realises that the room is full now – a few more people entered it in the meantime and everyone is now observing his banter with the annoying lady like it’s a tennis match. A tennis match that he’s rapidly losing.

‘Of course I know it!’ he exclaims and feels Rory’s hand tugging him down by the sleeve of his shirt. Apparently at some point of the discussion he stood up. Great. ‘Everyone knows it,’ he says while sitting. ‘I just meant that I am really good at science.’

‘If you say so,’ she says dismissively and he’s about respond and say that yes, indeed, he is sure, when Donna enters the room. All the murmurs and giggles die down in a second and even he knows better than start talking now.

‘Okay, I see we’re all here,’ Donna says with a smile. ‘It'll be a short briefing, because it’s Friday afternoon and you all want to go home. You all know why we’re here. We have 3 unsolved murders. Murders of policemen. They all happened in the last six months, two of them here in London and the third one in Yorkshire. They were all committed by the same person,’ Donna takes a breath, ‘who I hate to admit, is very good at his job. No traces left on any of the crime scenes. All of the victims worked on the same type of cases – murders, but there are no evidence that they were connected by any of them. You have to realise,’ she looks at everyone in the room, ‘that it’s not an easy job. If it was, we would have solved it by now. From now one, this case is our priority. Now. Detective John Smith – excuse me, a retired detective, a retired moronic detective if I’m to be honest – will help us with this case. We’re starting Monday morning. Any questions?’

‘Just one,’ he interrupts the silence that fell after Donna’s monologue. ‘How did you find me?’

‘Magic,’ Donna snaps at him. ‘We got a cauldron, a dead frog and three witches. How do you think, dumbo? Computers. That’s how we found you.’

‘No, but you couldn’t have,’ he shakes his head and his eyes dart to the blonde woman sitting next to Jack. ‘I did have my laptop with me, but I didn’t use internet. My cell wasn’t working. How did you find me?’ he directs the question at her.

‘Just like Donna said – magic and computers,’ she replies, a small smile in the corners of her mouth. ‘Now, if you excuse me, I am in a hurry,’ she looks up at Donna and when she nods her head, the blonde gets up and heads towards the door.

‘No,’ he stands up and blocks her way to the door. ‘How did you find me?’

She is quite tall, but not quite as tall as he is and she has to look up to meet his eyes. He likes that she doesn’t shy back from his gaze, that she holds her place. And she has quite nice eyes to look into.
Wait. Where did that come from?

‘You claim that there was no phone service,’ she starts. ‘That’s not exactly true. At one point, you did use your phone. What’s more, you used internet connection. To be precise, you posted a picture on your Instagram. A picture of your radio sex toy, some rocks and a virgin pina colada,’ she finishes and a few people giggle. He can feel a blush creeping up his face.

‘First: I already told you, it’s not a sex toy,’ he hisses. ‘And it doesn’t explain how you knew when I’ll be back.’

‘Oh please,’ she rolls her eyes. ‘We could establish where you are. And do you really think there are a lot of airports around the Easter Island? It was only a matter of observing when your name will pop up and checking the details of your flight. Now. Are we finished?’

The silence in the room is deafening and he’s sure that quite a few people there are holding their breath. He keeps his eyes on her and so does she, both of them barely blink. It’s like a battle of will: blink and you lose. *Blink and you’re dead.*

He’s the first one to break the staring contest.

‘Yes,’ he nods. ‘We’re done.’

He moves out of her way and hopes that he won’t have to work with her on this case. She’s stubborn, insufferable and he really cannot stand her. She passes him without a word and is about to exit the conference room – and hopefully his life.


He eyes Donna and comes closer to her and the woman behind him does the same. Donna is looking from one of them to another, with a gleeful spark in her eyes. He’s not an expert, but this cannot mean anything good.

‘John,’ Donna starts, her voice shaking with barely restrained giddiness and he already knows that the news will be bad, ‘let me introduce you to your new partner: detective inspector River Song.’

Chapter End Notes

*comments/thoughts - even if just 'omG DELETE IT!!!!1' would be super cool. but they're not necessary.*

*chapter title from 'another perfect catastrophe' by firewater.*
He must still be in a state of shock after Donna’s announcement, because he remembers that he let Rory drag him out of the conference room with a quick ‘see you all on Monday’ thrown over his shoulder and push him into his car. And now here he is: in the passenger seat, on his way to the Ponds’ place. Not that he’s thinking about where he’s going. He’s still too preoccupied with what happened back at the police station.

‘She cannot do that!’ he exclaims and mouths ‘sorry’ when Rory winces from the sudden noise. ‘She cannot just pair me up with a random woman, just because she thinks that she can handle me! It’s not how it works!’

‘To be honest, I am pretty sure this is how it works,’ Rory calmly replies while navigating his car through London’s streets. ‘Donna is your boss, so she is perfectly allowed to tell you who you’ll be working with. And it’s only this investigation. You’ll make it through. It’s not like you have to marry River.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t like to marry her either way,’ he mumbles. ‘She’s very annoying. And smug. Not to mention that she behaves like she’s the smartest person in the room and- What are you laughing about?’

‘Annoying. Smug. The smartest person in the room. Remind you of anyone?’ Rory says with a smile while he mumbles ‘very funny’ under his nose. ‘I admit – you got off on the wrong foot. But I am sure it will all turn out fine. You’ll be dragged into this case and-‘

‘This woman is not dragging me into anything, just so you know,’ he responds stubbornly.

‘I wasn’t talking about River,’ Rory says. ‘I mean in general. And when it comes to River – you should give her a chance. She’s been... She’s been a good friend to us in the last few years.’

‘When you weren’t here’ goes unsaid. He stiffens uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Maybe you should tell her that,’ he says defensively, feeling like a child scolded by his father. ‘She didn’t look happy with Donna’s news either.’

‘You have to understand that she was just as surprised with it as you were,’ Rory shrugs a little and stops the car at the driveway to a small house. ‘She’s been working with Jack for over two years now and they’ve been doing great job. In the moments when they weren’t busy flirting with each other and everyone else. Just... Give her time.’

‘Fine,’ he says just to end this discussion. He looks out of the car’s window and something is not right here. ‘Wait. It’s not your apartment.’

‘No,’ Rory answers, getting out of the car. ‘It is not our apartment. It’s our house.’

‘You got a house?!’ he exclaims, scrambling out of his seat. ‘When? And your previous apartment was lovely!’

‘It was, but it started being too small for us,’ Rory says with a smile. ‘You’ll see what I mean.’
He doesn’t have the time to ask for any explanation and how on earth can an apartment suddenly become too small, because the next thing he hears is the front door opening and words said in a thick, Scottish accent.

‘Look at you. You look even more ridiculous than before! At least you got rid of the bow tie. That’s a progress. Who knows, maybe you’ll learn to answer your phone next!’

‘Amy!’ he exclaims and turns on his heel so quickly that he nearly loses his balance. ‘You’re- huge.’

He hears Rory murmuring a soft ‘oh no’ behind him. And he knows he should have said that, that it was simply rude of him, but that’s the true. Amy is... Well. She’s what she’s always been: tall, ginger, with a bit of a moon-shaped head. But there’s something new about her: she’s definitely bigger than the last time he saw her. He slowly walks closer to her, never taking his eyes from her form.

‘I’m pregnant, you idiot,’ she says.

‘You swallowed a planet!’ he shouts and once again hears Rory nervously muttering something behind him. ‘How did that happen?’

‘Oh please. Don’t you know how it happens? Wait, you probably don’t. I bet you haven’t gotten some since you left,’ Amy purses her lips and he knows she wants to say ‘us, since you left us’, but her pride won’t let her, ‘your job, but really? You must know how the whole reproduction process works. You’re not that daft.’

‘I know how it works!’ he says flailing his arms a bit and feeling himself blush. ‘These are your private things! I am not asking for details, but you know, I wouldn’t mind knowing how long have you been hu- big- pregnant?’

‘Six months,’ Rory replies and Amy shoots him an angry look. ‘What? He wanted to know. Now. Can we please get in?’

He takes another step towards Amy, but she’s standing in the threshold, refusing to let them in.

‘I’m not hugging first,’ she says, crossing her arms and looking at him angrily. Normally, something like that would terrify him. An angry Amy Pond is something no one wants to meet. But with her arms crossed over her rounded stomach and her newly chubby cheeks – she looks a bit like an angry ginger hamster. Still mortally dangerous, but not that threatening.

‘I’m not hugging first either,’ he responds and turns his head left in order not to look at her. But he sneaks small glances in her direction and he can see that she’s doing the same: looking at him when she thinks he’s looking somewhere else.

‘Guys, can we just...,’ Rory sighs tiredly behind them. ‘It’s been a long day. Can we just go in and have dinner?’

He looks and Amy and catches her looking at him. They stare at each other for a few seconds before bursting into laughter. He takes the few last steps separating them and hugs her – carefully, trying not to crush her in his embrace. He can hear her voice in his ear – ‘it’s good to have you back, John’ – and her hair is tickling his cheek, but he doesn’t care, because for the first time in years he feels at home.

___

His weekend passes in a blur of getting back into his old life. He spends Friday afternoon and
evening with Amy and Rory, catching up and filling the gaps: he tells them the stories of his travels, the time he spent in the Amazon rainforest, the time he spent a few weeks in the Sahara, New Zealand, the Easter Island – he tells them about the things he saw in these places, the people he met, all the things he experienced. (They never approach the subject why he disappeared for over 2 years, why he decided to quit his job and throw his career out of the window. He’s grateful for that.) They tell him about their life during this time: much calmer, but not less eventful. Amy talks about her career as a crime reporter and all the ‘slimy bastards she managed to pin down’ – her words, not his. Rory watches her the whole time with a warm smile on his lips and when he manages to get a word in between her animated chatter, he talks about the work at the department, what changed and what stayed the same – he talks briefly about who left and who’s new and the cases they solved. When Rory tells Amy that River is his new partner, she nearly falls of the sofa while bouncing in excitement. She exclaims things like ‘that’s great!’ and ‘you’re going to get on so well!’ and ‘we’re going to have so much fun together’ and he doesn’t know if it’s sugar rush or her pregnancy hormones talking, but she looks so happy about it, neither he nor Rory tell her how badly his first encounter with River exactly went.

The rest of the weekend is spent on getting back to the normal life: he cleans his apartment from two years worth of dust. He washes his clothes and finds his favourite tweed jacket and his collection of bow ties. He brings his car back from a long-term parking lot: a vintage, dark blue Porsche Boxster that he bought after saving for over a year and winning a lottery. He takes her – it’s her and she is most definitely sexy – to a car wash and then takes a small round around London.

He goes shopping, he sorts through two years of post and catches up with the world’s most trivial news. He keeps himself busy, because he knows that otherwise he’ll start thinking whether or not he made the right decision to stay and take this case. But he promised and even though he doesn’t want to admit it – he’s intrigued.

Monday comes too quickly and he finds himself once again in the conference room, surrounded by a group of people he mostly doesn’t know. Donna quickly debriefs everyone and divides them into small groups, assigns a task to each of them and sends them away with a ‘and don’t you bloody disappoint me’ to work. He watches all the people scurrying off to work with a fond smile and he envies them a bit: he wishes he was more like them, younger and full of faith that the work he’s doing won’t go to waste. He’s still sitting in his seat, together with three more people: Rory, Jack and of course, River. She hasn’t made eye contact or even acknowledged his presence in the room since the moment she entered it. He doesn’t complain about it, instead he uses the time to study her. Or he tries to study her, because for the love of everything, he cannot read anything from her face or behaviour. She’s like a blank page, clear and unwritten on or written in a language he doesn’t understand. She sits through the whole briefing, face impassive but focused and attentive. The only time her cool facade broke was when Jack leaned in and whispered something into her ear. She rolled her eyes at him, but there was a small grin on her lips. And that’s it, that was the only time her face changed and he wonder if-

‘You’re probably wondering why I asked you to stay,’ Donna stops his train of thoughts. Oh right. The briefing is still on for them. ‘As some of you know,’ her eyes stop at River and Jack, ‘Ten suspected that someone in the department is leaking information. That’s why I choose you – people I know I can trust – to get this additional piece of information.’

‘And that would be?’ Jack asks, swaying a bit in his chair. ‘Let me guess: our murder is an alien. Or maybe we have a time machine that will take us back in time and we’ll see who killed all these coppers. Or maybe,’ he pauses a bit for effect, ‘you’ll tell us your secret for looking so glamorous on the Monday morning. Which one will it be?’

‘Harkness, it’s too early for that,’ Donna sighs. ‘It’s really too early. And sorry, but you missed. It’s
something different. I know I told you that the victims worked on the same type of cases, and that
there was nothing else that connected them. That’s not true. There’s something else.’

‘What?’ Rory speaks up. ‘Why didn’t you tell us earlier? Shouldn’t everyone know about it? If it’s a
part of the investigation, everyone should be informed.’

‘Maybe you’re right, but I don’t want to risk it. That’s why only you will know about it,’ Donna
responds. ‘It may be nothing. It may be something. It may be completely useless, but it also may help
us.’

She makes a brief pause and he looks around the room. Rory looks perplexed, Jack – interested and
River looks like she already knows what will be said next. Which is impossible, because no one
expect him and Donna knows what will be revealed.

‘There is something that connects all the victims,’ Donna continues. ‘They all were part of the
Medusa Project.’

‘The what?’ Rory and Jack ask at the same time.

‘The Medusa project,’ she repeats. ‘Just... John, please, tell them.’

He clears his throat a bit and waits until the attention is focused on him. Everyone is looking at him,
waiting for some kind of an explanation – everyone except for detective Song. Not that he wants her
to look at him, but she’s being unprofessional. That’s all.

‘The Medusa Project,’ he starts. ‘Actually it’s The Medusa Cascade Project. It started back in the
’60s. It was founded by the government and its aim was to create a half-policemen and half-spies. I
know how it sounds,’ he says at the snort of disbelief that comes from Jack. ‘Just let me finish.
They’d look recruits in the police academies throughout the country. They were looking for people
with certain psychological and physical abilities: IQ higher than average, ability to work under severe
stress, ability to solve problems quickly and effectively, whatever it takes, this sort of things. Once
they found someone who met these and other criteria, the training would start. They would send the
person to various police and army stations all over the world: FBI, various armies in Europe, The
Japan Self-Defense Forces and so on. The recruits would spend there some time – a week, two, a
month – depending how long they’d be allowed to stay and how they’d perform. There was also
diplomatic training involved. Language learning. Everything and anything that could be useful for
this kind of an... agent,’ he licks his lips. ‘The idea behind it was to create a policeman that in a time
of a crisis – or a difficult and complicated investigation – would have a chance to act and think like a
fully trained spy. You know, going undercover, thinking outside the box, things like that.’

‘Okay...,’ Rory says slowly. ‘As ridiculous as it sounds, let’s say we believe you. So I guess that Ten
was a part of it?’

‘They all were,’ Donna adds. ‘All the victims were a part of the project. Eight, Nine and Ten.’

‘What?’ Jack asks. ‘What is it? Some kind of a countdown?’

‘No. These are their uhm, nicknames,’ he adds quickly and he can feel their eyes on him. ‘The
numbers mean the order in which they were recruited.’

‘Fine, so we have a guy who goes around and kills people involved in the project,’ Jacks says.
‘Maybe it’s just some conspiracy nut? Ever thought about that? Maybe it has nothing to do with the
cases they worked on, maybe it’s just all connected to the project they were a part of.’

‘I doubt it,’ Donna cuts in. ‘The the project was kept under the wraps. It was stopped a few years
ago and it was only then when a few people not involved in it were informed about them, but it’s still quite a big secret. I didn’t know about it until a few days ago.’

‘And it’s not like the participants knew each other,’ he speaks again. ‘Sometimes there were years before they found someone who met all the standards. There were often decades between next participants. And there weren’t many of them.’

‘Yeah? And how do you know that?’ Jack asks in a taunting voice. ‘Found something on this subject during your trips? Maybe something was hidden on the Easter Island, eh?’ he laughs and gently elbows River, but she doesn’t react to Jack’s words. This time her attention is focused on him. He can feel her eyes boring into his skull: he feels like she can read him, see every single one of his thoughts and unravel all of his secrets. He hates to admit it, but it makes him uncomfortable and he shifts slightly in his chair so he doesn’t have to look in her direction.

‘So? How do you know all of that?’ Jack repeats, this time all serious. Rory is looking at him with a questioning expression on his face and Donna sneaks small glances into his direction.

‘I know this,’ he takes a deep breath, ‘because I was part of the project. I am the last one. I am number eleven.’

---

It takes him 30 more minutes to fully explain everything to his co-workers.

‘No, I didn’t know any of them, except for Ten. I’ve heard about Nine, but that’s about it.’

‘No, I cannot tell you if I was ever on the mission from the project.’

‘No Jack, we didn’t have matching uniforms, we weren’t Power Rangers.’

‘No Rory, I wasn’t like James Bond. I was much cooler.’

They seem to accept his revelations rather well, considering how surprised they were at first. Well, Rory and Jack were surprised: Donna knew about the whole thing from the beginning and River... It’s difficult to say what River thought. It’s difficult to see what she thinks. She leaves the room without any word and he has no choice but to go after her, because they are partners and they are supposed to work together. He follows her, nearly running after her along the corridor. He cannot help but feel a bit like a puppy running after its master. He also suspects he must look like that, because he can hear giggling from the people he passes. She disappears behind the door that leads to hers and Jack’s, his, her – their office. He quietly sneaks in behind her and softly closes the door.

The room is not big, but there’s enough space to squeeze in two desks, a big bookshelf and a mobile whiteboard that has currently pictures of all the victims pinned on it. One of the desks is cluttered with papers, open case files and empty cups – he guesses it must be River’s. The other one is empty, except for a single box standing on top of it: inside there are a few envelops and a stack of papers and on top of them is a mock nametag with ‘Captain Jack Harkness’ on it.

‘It’s your desk, Jack just didn’t have time to take the rest of his things,’ River’s voice surprises him and he drops the nametag back into the box. He tries to straighten himself and turns towards her and somehow – he’s not really sure how – in the process he knocks the box from the desk and sends its content flying all over the floor.

‘I am so sorry,’ he manages to stutter when he sees River’s widening eyes. ‘I didn’t mean, I just you know, I am a bit clumsy and I really didn’t mean to do it. I have no idea how that happened, it just–’

‘Fine, okay,’ River says with a sigh. ‘Just... Let’s just pick it up, okay?’
She quickly comes to the overturned box and starts collecting the papers. He kneels next to her and for a few seconds they collect the papers in silence.

‘Oh, look at you two, already getting cozy!’ he hears Jack’s cooing voice coming from the door. River quietly snorts beside him, but doesn’t stop sorting and picking up the files. ‘What was it? A ‘let’s get to know each other’ make out session on my desk that went rough?’

‘What? No!’ he exclaims and feels himself blush. ‘We were just- uhm...’

‘He just knocked down your box while he was flailing around,’ River says calmly without paying any attention to his flushed face. ‘Here. All sorted,’ she says while pushing the newly rearranged box into Jack’s direction. ‘Where will you be now?’

‘I have a nice desk next to Donna’s room,’ Jack responds with a boyish grin. ‘She really can’t get enough of me, can’t she?’

‘I think it’s more of her way to keep an eye on you,’ River chuckles and he cannot help but feel a bit uneasy. She seems to be getting fine with everyone except for him. Okay, so they had a bit of a messy start, but they’re supposed to work in a team, so they have to work it out. Quickly.

‘Isn’t it what I just said?’ Jack says winking. ‘And don’t be so cocky, Song. You’ll miss me. John, try to keep her from dying from longing for me,’ he laughs and River just rolls her eyes. ‘And you,’ he points her finger at her, ‘try not to eat him alive.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ River gets up and dusts off her jeans. ‘I’ll be delicate. Besides, he’s far too young.’

What is she talking about? Is she talking about what he thinks she’s talking about or is she talking about something else? And what does she mean when she says that he’s too young? He is not too young for anything, thank you very much.

‘Harkness! Where the hell are you?’ they’re all startled by a loud shriek coming from the corridor.

‘I think Donna is looking for you,’ he says to Jack whose smile gets a bit less wide. ‘If I were you, I’d go before she enters her banshee mode.’

‘Good idea. Madam, sir,’ Jack gives them a salute and disappears behind the door with the box in his arms. They can hear another ‘oh here you are’, a muffled sound of a smack and a brief ‘ouch’. Then there’s a bit quieter ‘and you will not move your ass until you give me something of substance’ and clicking of heels disappearing down the corridor. He looks up at River, but she’s already busy with looking through something at her desk. He slowly gets up wondering how should he start a conversation with her.

‘Hey, so I know our first meeting wasn’t the best one, but...’ – no, this one is too basic.

‘We are supposed to work together on this case and I think we should behave like professionals and put all the differences aside.’ Nope, too formal.

‘Wanna get crack-a-lacking at this case?’ He briefly wonders about this one, but thinks that River would most definitely dislike it. ‘So, maybe we’ll talk about this case over dinner and drinks?’ Wait. Where did that come from? He most definitely doesn’t think about her like that. At all.

‘Okay. Where do you want to start?’ River stops his train of thoughts and he’s never been more grateful for an interruption.
‘Excuse me?’ he squeaks out and River rolls her eyes at him with a slight huff.

‘I mean the case. Where do you want to start.’

‘Oh,’ he swallows and thinks for a few seconds. He needs to know everything in detail, he needs to be presented with all the reports from the crime scenes and morgues, he needs to see photos and lists of the cases the victims had been working on. He needs-

‘Okay, okay, I get it. I get it,’ River says and only then he realises he’s been thinking aloud. ‘That’s what I expected. I guess it’ll take us a whole day.’

He nods and runs fingers through his hair, feeling slightly excited? – no, it can’t be the case – of her use of the word ‘us’.

‘But first – let’s get some tea. We have a lot to talk about and I am not doing that without tea,’ River says and goes towards the door and he has no choice but follow her. Again.

‘Okay, tea it is,’ he nods even though she cannot see him. They walk along the corridor to the kitchen and he knows that it’s his chance to set things right. He only needs to find the right words and everything will be okay. How about ‘River, I am sure that we’ll work great together?’ Yes, it sounds fine. Professional and neutral, exactly what he needs and aims for. ‘River,’ he starts and he really wants to stick what he planned to say but it seems that his mouth has a life on its own. ‘I am really not too young, you know.’

Before he has a chance to panic and hit his head against the first hard surface, River turns around and looks at him with an amused, but for the first time friendly expression on her face.

‘Good to know that, honey,’ she says and her voice is warm. ‘Now, come on. The tea won’t make itself.’

And once again he walks behind her, but this time he doesn’t mind, because he know that somehow, miraculously he did find the right words.

And he knows that River and he will be alright.

Chapter End Notes

chapter's title from Queen's 'Killer queen'. any references/dialogue you may recognise is owned by BBC. I - sadly - own nothing.
I'll never get your bullet out of my head now

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s been only two days, but he already knows that River Song is the best partner he could’ve asked for while working on this investigation. She’s smart and quick-witted, she gets his ideas before he even fully formulates them and she doesn’t need him to explain his thought process. But more importantly – she doesn’t seem to be that impressed by him and has no problems with bringing him down when his ideas are too out there. She led him through the each case with ease and incredible attention to details that let him to imagine every crime scene as if he had been there himself. But even with her help, they didn’t manage to get anywhere: there’s still something missing. Well, there are many things missing. Evidence for example.

‘Okay, let’s go through all of this again,’ he says spinning in his chair while River groans from behind her desk. He cannot blame her – in the last 48 hours it’s been his most commonly used phrase.

‘Is there any point in it? We’ve been through this how many times? Seven? Eight?’

‘Come on, Song, humour me,’ he stops spinning and looks at her. ‘One last time, okay?’

‘I hate you,’ she mutters and before he can reply ‘no, you don’t’, she starts a monologue that by now he knows almost by heart.

‘Three victims. All of them white Caucasian male, their age raging between 45-50. Victim #1 – also known as Nine in the Medusa project, lived in Manchester, was murdered first. He was killed on the night from 22nd to 23rd November, found at the back of a pub in the late morning. The owner found him and called the police. He claimed that Nine wasn’t at the pub that night and people who were there confirmed that. He was shot in the head. The death was immediate, caused by a severe damage to the brain. Nothing was found on the crime scene – it’s been raining the whole night and if you combine it with the fact that the alley was full of piss and vomit to start with – there wasn’t anything of value there,’ she stops and takes a sip of water. ‘CCTV didn’t register anything – the murder was committed during the time when it wasn’t recording anything. Also there were no witnesses: everyone was getting drunk in the pub or sitting at home. Okay, victim #2: Eight from the Medusa Project. Quite a looker if you ask me,’ she looks appreciatively at the man’s picture hanging on the whiteboard. ‘Why all the good looking men are dead?’

‘River!’ he splutters. ‘That is really, really inappropriate.’

‘Oh, I am sorry if I hurt your feelings, sweetie,’ she says with a sweet smile and even though he knows she’s mocking him, he cannot stop his heart from swelling at the endearment. ‘You’re also very handsome. Although a bit baby faced. Now, can we go back or will you continue being outraged?’

She looks at him with a raised eyebrow and an amused grin. He knows that she’s doing it on purpose – trying to irk him and fluster him with her innuendos and inappropriate comments. It seems to be her favourite entertainment. And no matter how much he tries to match her, he never quite manages to. So this time he does what he usually does in these situations: he sighs and nods for her to continue.

‘Right. The handsome dead man. Killed on the 13th of March. Body was found on the Thames Boulevard by a group of teenagers who were going back from a party. Cause of death – the same as
with Nine: gun shot. Once again, the death was immediate. No witnesses, no CCTV in the area. The boulevard is a popular place, so there was more than enough evidence – just nothing that could be of any use to us. Now, Ten...’ her voice shakes a little at this. He wonders if it’s because she worked with Ten or maybe there’s something more to that. ‘Killed on April, 21st. His body was found in a back ally of a club called ‘Demons run’. It’s a well known club where the mob parties. He was there because he was sure someone from the department was leaking information to the mafia. They found him in the morning. Cause of death, like with the previous one: a single shot to the head. There was a witness, a homeless man, but he was also found dead. Other than the usual mess of an alley behind the pub, we didn’t find anything,’ she sighs. ‘That’s it. You heard it. Got any ideas?’

‘Let’s sum it up,’ he bounces from his chair, takes a marker from his desk and starts writing on the whiteboard. ‘Similar things about these murders?’

‘All the victims were policemen, who attended the same academy and were recruited to the Medusa Project,’ River starts. ‘They all worked on similar cases: first started with drug instigations, then moved onto murder cases,’ he dully notes everything River says. ‘Cause of deaths: in all cases it was a shot to the head.’

‘Bullet?’ he asks.

‘The standard 9 mm,’ she answers. ‘All the bullets were the same and came from the same manufacturer and that’s why we believe that the murders were committed with the same weapon, by the same person. Nothing was found on either of the crime scenes. They were all killed in semi-public places, which made finding any usable evidence almost impossible.’

‘Motive?’

‘Difficult to say,’ she shrugs. ‘Maybe they knew too much?’

‘Or maybe someone is trying to off the members of the Project,’ there it is. He said it. The thought has been in his head since his first meeting with Donna and he cannot get rid of it. It cannot be a coincidence that three of these who were part of the project are dead, can it? Never ignore a coincidence. Unless you're busy, in which case, always ignore a coincidence. That’s what they say at least.

‘I don’t think so,’ River says. ‘Just like Donna said: the project has been dead for a few years now. Not to mention that all of your personal information are still kept under tight wraps. There’s not even a line in your records that might suggest that you took part in something like that.’

‘You went through my records?’ he asks in a teasing tone. ‘What were you so curious about, detective Song?’

To her credit, she doesn’t even blush.

‘Of course I went through your records,’ she says. ‘I wanted to know whom I’ll be working with. Donna approved it.’

‘Hey, I have nothing against it,’ he says shrugging. ‘You just could have asked me, that’s all.’

She stares at him for a few seconds and he feels like a bug under a microscope. Not for the first time he feels like she knows him better than he knows her, that she holds something over him. She behaves like she already won a game of cards he has no idea they’ve been playing.

‘Yes, I could have,’ she nods. ‘But I was interested in the facts and truth, not in what you would tell
me. Now. Where were we?"

‘Before you doubted my sincerity, you were talking about how you don’t think it’s a job to off the
guys from the project. So it’s just a random hit and run in your opinion?’ he asks a bit brusquely.

‘I didn’t say that and you very well know it is not,’ she responds through clenched teeth. ‘All I said
was that I don’t think the murders are connected to the Medusa Project. That’s all. They must be
connected somehow, but that’s not it.’

‘Okay, okay,’ he raises his hands in a gesture of defeat. ‘What do you suggest then?’

‘I would say that they were at the wrong place, at the wrong time,’ River says slowly. ‘I would say
that if it wasn’t for-‘

‘How carefully the murders seem to be prepared and thought out,’ he finishes for her and is rewarded
with her staring at him with wide and surprised eyes. Hell yes, one for him.

‘Exactly,’ she recovers quickly. ‘It’s not a coincidence. There must be something connecting the
murders and the victims together, but I don’t think we should focus on the Project. We should look
for something else. Try another approach.’

He can’t ask her what else should they look for, because a quiet knock on the door interrupts them.
Whoever is on the other side of the door doesn’t wait for the invite, but walks into the room.

‘Good morning,’ Clara smiles brightly into his and River’s direction. ‘Found anything new?’

He shakes his head and she sends him a sympathetic look. He likes her: she’s smart, but doesn’t wear
it on her sleeve like River – or him. She’s more of a quiet thinker, she always thinking before acting
or speaking up – something he never manages to do. And she’s wickedly good with computers.
Only yesterday she managed to revive his old laptop with just a few flicks of her wrists and a few
mysterious commands written on the keyboard.

‘I have the personal records you asked me for,’ she says to River, handing her a stack of papers.
‘There’s also a report from Jack – I didn’t peak, I promise.’

‘Thank you, dear,’ River says warmly. ‘I hope it wasn’t a big pain in the ass to collect?’

‘No,’ Clara responds shaking her head once. ‘Thankfully all the stations have to be computerised
now and they have to keep their records in a digital and easily accessible form. So once I got the
names it was a piece of cake. I just don’t get why you need the names of these old guys, but hey, to
each his own.’

Wait. What personal records? What old guys?

‘You will find out in due time,’ River smiles at her. ‘Thanks again, I owe you one.’

‘You do, you do,’ Clara winks. ‘I’d love to chat some more, but Jack put caps from some gay porn
as a screensaver on Donna’s computer. And he put a password on it. I need to get rid of that before
she notices,’ and with that and a small salute she’s gone.

‘What was she talking about?’ he asks and comes closer to River who’s already looking through the
files in her arms. ‘What personal records?’

‘I asked her to do a background check on all the members of the Medusa Project,’ she answers
absent-mindedly.
'You what?' he shouts and she cringes at his sudden outburst. 'She wasn’t supposed to know about the project! No one was, except for us! River-

'Oh please. I didn’t tell her about the project,’ she says clearly annoyed. ‘I’m not an idiot. I gave her a list of names to check, that’s all. Now, can we-

‘But how did you know the names? I don’t know them and I was the part of the project!’

‘Spoilers!’ she looks at him with a teasing glint in her eyes. ‘Okay, so let’s go through these and-

‘River,’ he growls. ‘How did you get the names?’

‘I didn’t pluck this list from anyone’s dead hands if that’s what you’re worried about,’ she says looking him straight in the eye. ‘Donna pulled a few strings. Turns out she has a few friends in MI5. They were the ones who told her about the project in the first place and that all the victims were a part of it. That’s all.’

He nods.

‘Wait, but when did you do that?’ they barely left the office in the last two days, except for a few quick pops to the loo and to get another cup of coffee or tea from the kitchen.

‘Today morning,’ she says shortly, looking back at the files. ‘You were late, Donna was already in, we decided that we have to do something. Now. Can we do something with these?’

‘And Jack’s report?’ he asks and tries to ignore the burning of his cheeks. He’s supposed to be a pro here, come on!

‘I asked him to contact all the remaining members and asked them if they noticed anything weird around them recently. If there were threatened by someone. That sort of thing,’ River looks up from the files. ‘Just because I don’t believe that the murdered is after your little club, doesn’t mean we can overlook this possibility.’

She’s right – they simply cannot take this risk. They have a killer out there, a pretty good one and they cannot take any chances now.

‘Now, be a good boy and take these,’ she pushes a stack of papers into his hands. ‘Read through them and write down anything that catches your attention. I’ll take the rest and the files of the victims. You take Jack’s report.’

He’s not done nodding and agreeing to her plan and she’s already seated behind her desk, flipping through pages of the reports. He cannot help but be a bit in awe of how quickly and effortlessly she manages to come up with a new plan and a fresh approach to this situation. He sighs at the sight of the files in his hands. It’s going to be another long day at the office.

When he leaves for the day, he makes a quick detour to Donna’s office. He leaves it with River’s file tucked safely into his bag.

___

It takes them more nearly two days to go through all the documents Clara provided them with. As it turns out, their effort was fruitless – the files contained nothing that could help them with the investigation.

‘What do you mean, nothing?’ Donna’s high pitched voice drills a hole in his skull. It’s early Friday
afternoon and they – Donna, Jack, Rory and he – are in the conference room, going through everything they found out during this week. Which turns out to be nothing.

‘There was nothing in their files, that’s all,’ he scratches his cheek nervously. ‘The first seven participants of the project... They never worked together, they lived – and live – in different places in the country. Three of them are dead and causes of their deaths were natural. The rest is retired and they live happily, doing whatever retired people do. Feeding pigeons or whatnot,’ he looks around the room. ‘Where’s River?’

‘She had to check something,’ Donna says quickly. ‘How do we know they are not in danger?’

‘I contacted them all,’ Jack answers. ‘I asked if anything suspicious has happened around them recently, if they received any threats. Nothing like that happened.’

‘Bollocks,’ Donna mutters softly under her breath. ‘Rory? Please tell me you have something.’

‘Sorry, but no, boss,’ he shakes his head. ‘I went through all the reports and photos from the crimes scenes – we hadn’t missed anything the first time. The same with morgue reports. I asked Martha to go with me through them and we found nothing unusual. She confirmed only what she’d established when she’d done the post-mortems – death by a single bullet. In all three cases.’

‘Martha’s still working here? Blimey, that’s great! I’ve missed her!’ he grins excitedly. ‘But wait. You said three reports? But Nine was killed in Manchester. Martha couldn’t have done post-mortem on him.’

‘She didn’t,’ Rory nods. ‘Her colleague did it. Tom Milligan. He works at the Manchester’s city morgue and he’s been very helpful with the case. We have all the pictures and detailed reports from Nine’s examination. But it also showed nothing unusual. Or helpful.’

‘Jack, please tell me that we at least had some luck with the psychological portrait,’ Donna says helplessly.

‘I wish I could,’ Jack responds bitterly. ‘I asked Sarah Jane and a guy who worked on Nine’s case back in Manchester. They both came with the same things: our killer is prepared, can think on his feet, is good at his job, sure of himself but not full of himself... It’s all very vague. They both claimed they need something more to sink their teeth in.’

‘So we really have nothing,’ Donna sits heavily in her chair. ‘That’s rubbish. That’s utter and complete rubbish.’

They all nod their heads, but no one can suggested anything, because River enters the room. She mutters quick ‘sorry I’m late’ and crosses the room to sit on a chair next to Jack’s. She did ignore that there was an empty chair next to him. Not that he wanted her sit next to him, it’s just his empty chair was closer than Jack’s. That’s all.

‘And what sort of time do you call him?’ he asks her mockingly.

‘Oh, shut up,’ she rolls her eyes at him. ‘I know I am late, but I have good news. I might’ve found something.’

The second she says these words, temperature in the room raises by a few degrees, he’s sure of it. Jack quickly turns into her direction, looking like he’s ready to shake the information out of her, Rory looks up from the files he’s been staring at and he leans over the table so quickly that he hits his elbow on the edge of the table.
‘Shit,’ he hisses in pain. ‘Okay, Song – spill. You cannot just hide things like that. Where do you keep them? In your hair?’

‘I cannot keep them in my chin like some of us,’ she fires right back, but clears her throat and turns to Donna. ‘Look, it might be nothing, but—’

‘At this point I don’t care,’ Donna says quickly. ‘Just give us something, anything.’

‘Fine,’ River nods. ‘When I was going through the crime scene reports, something was bugging me. I couldn’t tell what, so I kind of neglected it. Only today I realised: they all have been killed in the proximity of clubs.’

‘So what?’ Jack says. ‘It could be a coincidence.’

‘It could,’ River nods. ‘Normally, I wouldn’t even look at it twice, but something made me look up the details of each club. They’re all these sort of... You know, they’re fancy clubs for very un-fancy patrons. These are the clubs for dirty customers. So then I—’

‘You checked the owners,’ he interrupts her, feeling excited. They are finally getting somewhere, he can feel it in his bones.

‘I did,’ he looks at him, slightly surprised. ‘How did you know?’

‘An educated guess. Go on.’

‘I checked the owners. In the last year, every of the three clubs we’re talking about – ‘Demons run’ where Ten was killed, ‘Apalapucia’ that is just 100 yards from Eight’s place of death and ‘Bad wolf’ – the one Nine was found – they all changed owners. Things like that happen, sure, but guess who owns ‘Demons run’ now?’ she makes a short pause for a better effect. ‘Dorium Maldovar.’

The name means absolutely nothing to him, but it must mean quite a lot to everyone else in the room, because they all look like they’ve been hit by a truck.

‘Nice one,’ Rory says quietly. ‘What about the rest?’

‘‘Apalapucia’ is run by Margaret Blaine and ‘Bad Wolf’ by a man known as Kazran Sardick. Anyway, that’s part one. Part two: I asked Clara to search through the cases the all worked on in the last year.’

‘We already did that,’ he quips in. ‘We didn’t find any similarities.’

‘We didn’t,’ River nods quickly. ‘But thanks to Clara we do now. She cross-referenced all their cases and the reports they wrote and she found what we’ve been missing. They all worked on cases that somehow included The Silence.’

Silence that falls in the room is brief and quickly interrupted by its occupants reactions to the news River just delivered. Jack is applauding here, Donna is already barking out what needs to be done. River adds her own ideas and Rory writes them all down – how he manages that he has no idea. Everyone is doing something – except for him. While he is happy that the investigation is finally going somewhere, he has no idea what any of this means.

‘Uhm, guys?’ he clears his throat, feeling like a complete idiot. ‘Sorry to interrupt, but what exactly is the Silence?’

He swears that the silence that fell in the room is so thick that he could cut through it with a knife. It’s
so thick that he can see waves created by Donna’s mouth falling open. It’s so thick—okay, enough of that. He doesn’t need to make himself feel worse than he already does. It’s the job of everyone else in this room. And it’s about to happen in three, two, o-

‘Are you kidding me?’ Donna asks in disbelief. ‘You don’t know who they are? Where the hell have you been?’

‘Not here,’ he answers drily. ‘Are you done with the mocking and can you tell me what we’re dealing with?’

‘We are not done with mocking, mate,’ Rory says. ‘I guess the fact that you were away explains a bit, but still. You just wait until I tell Amy about it.’

Great. The big ginge will now have yet another reason to torment him. This is exactly what he needs.

‘The Silence is the biggest and best organised crime organisation in the UK,’ River’s calm voice stops his self-pitying session. It startles him, because he expected her to be the next one to mock his lack of knowledge. He turns to look at her and listens carefully to every word she says. ‘They started out as a group of British immigrants in the USA, during the beginning of the prohibition period in the early ‘20s. They smuggled booze from Canada or made their own wine and vodka. They made money on it and they had no problems with using any means necessary to fight the police and their competition. And so they grew into power. A few years later, they were everywhere—in every state in America. Once the prohibition was repealed, some of them decided to come back here and see how the matters look back in the mother’s land,’ she takes a deep breath and continues. ‘The looming war didn’t exactly scare them—they made money on black market, selling and moving luxurious goods. They robbed smaller museums and private houses that whose owners left London. And as the police and government had more serious things to worry about at the time—they thrived and grew into power also over here. They’re still here and they’re even more powerful than they were back then. They have their hands in almost everything: alcohol, drugs, prostitution, moving stolen artefacts. You name it, they’re guilty of it. As far as we know, they don’t meddle with human trafficking. Yet,’ she sneers.

‘Why the name? Why the Silence? It’s a bit… stupid,’ he shrugs.

‘It’s not what they call themselves,’ Jacks answers. ‘It’s what they’d been called. They’re hard to catch and even when someone manages that, it’s usually a pawn that gets caught. The big fish stay hidden in the underground. They steer the machine with efficiency, but they do it quietly. No one ever wants to speak about them. Even if you get someone who could testify against them, their lips are sealed.’

‘In the ‘80s they were put aside and out of the loop a bit, by the new kids who came to the playground,’ Donna adds. ‘But they came back with full force about two years ago. Once The Master was out of the picture.’

He quickly lowers his head upon hearing The Master’s name. He can feels everyone’s eyes on him, daring him to speak up. He only swallows quickly.

‘They have connections with some of the dirty coppers as well,’ River says in the quietness of the room. He doesn’t know if she said it to stop everyone from staring at him or if she wants to tell him something else he needs to know, but he’s grateful for her interruption. ‘They can offer the policemen money the government can’t. Not to mention the supply of drugs and alcohol. And pretty girls. Or boys. In return, the coppers don’t notice anything suspicious going on in their part of the city. Because of that, it’s even harder to catch and track any members of the Silence.’
‘So basically, you want to tell me that we’re fighting a well-equipped and powerful mob that is almost impossible to catch?’ he looks at them and laughs loudly. ‘Oh, this is Christmas!’

‘Okay Santa Claus, don’t go fighting any Christmas trees yet,’ Donna rolls her eyes. ‘For now, you’re not going to do anything, except going through all the files we have on the Silence,’ she ignores his groan of protest and continues. ‘Every single one. You have this weekend to catch up. Figure out how they work and what makes them tick. Do your usual voodoo magic thing.’

‘It’s not voodoo, I’ve told you before,’ he mutters. ‘It’s-‘

‘Yeah, I don’t care what it is,’ Donna quips in. ‘I want to see it working since Monday. Now – the rest of you, you know what you have to do?’ when they nod in agreement, she smiles brightly. ‘Okay, so off you go. Tell the others what we established and set them to work. We’re starting to crack this thing on Monday.’

____

He spends the rest of his Friday on going through as many files on the Silence as he can. He asks for River’s opinion and help a few time – it turns out she worked on a few cases and knows people who work for the Silence and she’s also an apt and meticulous observer. But even her support doesn’t change the fact that by the day he’s tired, his eyes hurt, his back aches and he wants nothing more than leave the office and fall straight into his bed. He looks up from the pile of paperwork on his desk and stretches his back – the vertebrae makes snapping noises and he groans a little at the cramps in his neck.

River looks at him from whatever she’s been typing furiously at her computer.

‘Tired?’ she asks.

‘God, yes,’ he nods. ‘And bored. That’s the part of the job I didn’t miss.’

‘Let me guess, what you missed was the thrill of the chase? The puzzle? The excitement of putting all the pieces together?’ she says with a smirk.

‘Oh, but isn’t it the best part of this job?’ he smiles back. ‘And what do you like the most about it, detective Song?’

She opens her mouth and he hopes that maybe this time he’ll get some kind of an honest answer from her instead of one of her mysterious smiles, but they’re interrupted by a loud knock on the door and Rory’s head peeking in.

‘You’re still here, good,’ he says coming in. ‘Amy called and asked you both for dinner. Well, actually she asked River and she demanded I drag your ass there,’ Rory says looking in his direction.

‘Why does River have any say in it and I’m to be dragged to your house?’

‘Because Amy knows that no one would be able to drag River anywhere,’ Rory answers. ‘Whereas you…’

‘Oi!’ he whines. ‘That’s not polite. But okay, Mr. Pond. Just give me a second and you can drag me to the ginger planet swallower.’

‘She’s pregnant,’ Rory signs. ‘And you shouldn’t call her that. She even got you custard this time.’

‘And what about fish fingers?’ he asks quickly.
‘Yes, we have fish fingers as well.’

‘Fish fingers and custard?’ River repeats with disbelief. ‘It sounds positively disgusting.’

‘It’s the greatest dish in the universe!’ he exclaims. ‘You can try it, I’ll share with you.’

‘That’s very generous of you, sweetie,’ his heart skips a bit at the endearment, ‘but I already have plans for the evening. Send Amy my regards, okay?’ she turns to Rory.

He is not disappointed. Of course he isn’t.

‘Okay. She’ll be bumed though. You haven’t visited us for quite some time,’ Rory says and he puts the papers from his desk into a folder, to study them during the weekend. He gathers his jacket, bag and phone and tries his best to pretend he is not listening to their conversation. ‘Is it another hot date? Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. But Amy will want to know, so make sure you’ll call her.’

‘Will do. But I cannot promise I’ll call her tonight,’ River says with a teasing smirk on her lips. ‘Or in the morning.’

‘I really don’t want to know more,’ Rory raises his hands over his head and he’s suddenly incredibly grateful for his interruption, because he really doesn’t need to know and hear about River Song’s dates. And what happens after her dates. ‘Just remember: let him pay for the dinner and drinks. And if he doesn’t let you through the door first, he’s a loser.’

‘Yes, dad,’ River says with a fond roll of her eyes. ‘Off you go. Mommy Pond will be angry if you’re late. I have a few things to wrap up here.’

Rory tells him to meet him in the parking lot and goes to gather his things. River’s already focused on her work and he awkwardly steps from one foot to another, not sure what to say.

‘You’re still here?’ River’s voice startles him and he drops his bag.

‘So ready to get rid of me?’ he asks and kneels to collect his bag and most of its content from the floor.

‘And why would I want to get rid of a clumsy giraffe look alike, who looks like he’s twelve?’ River responds and he can hear the laughter in his voice, and for some reason his heart sinks a bit. He gets up and to his surprise he sees that the smile on her face is a fond one.

‘Yeah, why would you? I’m the only one in the world,’ he straightens lapels of his jacket.

‘And that’s a really good thing, sweetie,’ she laughs again. He likes the sound of her laughter, he decides. It’s light and carefree and it suits her. He’s so entranced by it that it takes him a few seconds to understand her last jab.

‘Oi, that was rude!’

‘Was it? I didn’t notice,’ she responds with an overly serious face. ‘Okay, off you go. Rory must be waiting for you. And you don’t want to be late for Amy’s dinner.’

‘Shit, you’re right,’ he says and nearly slips on the floor in his haste to get to the door. ‘Have a nice weekend!’

‘You too,’ she responds fondly. ‘See you on Monday.’

He walks to the parking lot with a big grin on his face and he feels like Monday can’t get here close
This week Amy doesn’t block the door to their house – instead they find her in kitchen, busy preparing the dinner. He cannot believe how much some things changed while he was gone – 2 years ago Amy wouldn’t even think about entering the kitchen, unless it was to get more wine or re-heat take-out. And look at her now: all grown up. In every meaning of this word. Rory comes closer to her and places a small kiss on her shoulder.

‘Hello, Mr. Pond,’ she turns around and kisses his cheek softly. ‘And hello to you, you giant pillock.’

Well, some things never change.

‘Hello, Amelia,’ he smiles at her. ‘You sure know how to make a guest feel welcome.’

‘Shut up and help me to set the table,’ she grumbles. ‘And you Rory – you can make tea. And I’ll sit down now.’

She walks past him and he cannot help but put an arm around her and press a kiss to her forehead. He can see her smile as she briefly hugs him and sits on a chair.

‘Wait,’ she says. ‘Where’s River?’

‘She already had plans for the evening,’ Rory responds. ‘You know, another one of her dates.’

Another one?

‘Really?’ Amy harrumphs from her seat. ‘I mean, it’s great that she dates, but I’d prefer if she didn’t pick up such losers. None of them even makes it to meeting us.’

‘She’s a big girl,’ he hears himself say. ‘I am sure she can take care of herself.’

‘Of course she can, but that’s not the point!’ Amy says loudly. ‘And it’s not like you’re a dating expert. Come on, when was the last time you were on a date?’

‘That is not important,’ he flusters as he puts plates and cutlery on the kitchen table. ‘And we were talking about River, not me.’

‘I am sure that River would be thrilled that we’re discussing her dating habits,’ Rory deadpans from behind him. ‘And no Amy, the fact that we’re her friends doesn’t allow us to meddle with it. Now, let’s stop this discussion here. Dinner is ready.’

‘Yes, the dinner I made. I think it allows me to pick up the topic of the conversation,’ Amy gets more comfortable in her chair while Rory puts pasta and grated cheese on the table. ‘So. Did you ask her about the guy?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Rory sighs. ‘And neither did John, so don’t try to grill him about it. But there’s something else you can ask him about.’

‘Oh, is there?’ Amy’s eyes dart to him even as she keeps on putting spaghetti and sauce on her plate. ‘Do tell, John. What did you do today?’

‘I have no idea what Rory is talking about,’ he answers slightly confused.
'He didn’t know what the Silence is,’ Rory says with his mouth full and it sounds more like ‘h’ bibfn’t knff wha’ d’ Sil’nz iiiif’, but Amy still understands him.

‘Excuse me, but have you been taking stupid lessons since the last time we saw you?’ she asks in disbelief. ‘I cannot believe, I just... Remind me, why did Donna ask you to come back? You seem quite incompetent to me.’

‘First off: thanks,’ he makes a face at her. ‘Second: she didn’t ask me, she nearly kidnapped me. Thanks to River, nonetheless. Third: it could happen to anyone.’

‘Yeah, anyone but a guy with an IQ of a genius, who claims to pay attention to everything,’ Amy says rolling her eyes at him. ‘I bet Donna is regretting her decision right now. Hell, both of them are probably cursing themselves now. Okay, after the dinner I’ll get you some of my articles about the Silence. We have to educate you. No need for you to embarrass yourself further.’

The rest of the evening passes in comfortable atmosphere of Amy and Rory gently teasing him about knowing more about some obscure tribes than current problems he has to deal with. He leaves around 10pm with a stack of printed articles written by Amy and her friends, but by the time he finally reaches his flat, he’s so worn out that he takes a shower and heads straight to his bed.

He spends most of his Saturday reading through the files that both the department and Amy provided him. He tries to stay focused even though the paperwork and just reading about the Silence bores him to no end. But there’s something that occupies his mind and distracts him from his work: River’s file that he asked Donna for a few days ago. It sits innocently on a shelf above his desk tempting him with the information it contains. He somehow stopped himself from checking her folder for a few days – he reasoned that it wouldn’t be fair to her, checking her qualifications now that he works with her. But then again – she had no problems with going through his file when she found out they’ll work together. He sneaks one more glance in the direction of her file – it lies there, in the cream manila envelope, looking perfectly innocent. He takes a sip of his alcohol free lager and looks down at the paper work he still has to go through. There’s still a huge pile in front of him and he knows that he should finish it before Monday. He slowly starts to understand how the Silence operates and he thinks that with a few more additional facts he could start predict their moves and figure out the possible involvement in the case, so he really needs to go over the remaining files and-

‘Screw it,’ he says to himself and takes River’s file in his hand. In his head he can see her face, smiling mockingly at him, saying ‘I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist for too long’.

He touches the envelope, running his finger over it. He still has time to change his mind. But then again, additional knowledge never killed anyone, did it? And the more you know... He opens the file. It’s not the one with personal information – Donna would never let these files out of her sight – this one describes River’s professional path. He starts reading and cannot help but whistle in awe. He expected her to be good and graduate the best schools, but she hasn’t excepted her to graduate from bloody FBI Academy in Quantico. And she graduated as on top her whole year. Of course she did. He has no idea how she managed that one – he assumed she lived in England her whole life. Don’t you have to be American to study there? And don’t you need to be a citizen of United Kingdom to work in the police force? He mentally puts this down on his ‘check-it-later’ lists. Shit. Shit. She worked at The National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. How does one go from FBI to a London police station?

He quickly flicks through the rest of her folder: opinions from her teachers, bosses and previous co-workers (all positive and full of praises and words like ‘extraordinary’, ‘professional’, ‘determined’ and ‘incredibly bright’), shooting tests results (all of them nailed) and list of cases she worked on.
There’s nothing there that could explain why she works here and he’s already thinking about possible explanations. Was she moved here? Was she sacked? Did she decide on her own that she wants to work in England? So many possibilities and he has no bloody clue which one is right.

He groans a little. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. This folder was supposed to provide him with some answers, instead it added even more questions to the mystery of River Song. Maybe he’ll ask her about it. He snorts. Yes, like that would work. She’d probably look at him with this unreadable expression on her face and smile her ‘I know more than you do’ smile and confuse him even more. No. It’s better to wait. Maybe the answers will come to him this time.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title from franz ferdinand's 'bullet' (do yourself a favour and download their new album, it's am-awesome-azing.
also, anything you recognise in this fic - it all belongs to BBC. everything belongs to BBC.
you sucked me in through the cinnamon stars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday morning is dull and grey, chilly and windy, but it doesn’t get him down. He contently hums on his way to work, manoeuvring his car through the morning traffic. He thinks he made some progress and found a new approach to their case and he cannot wait to share it with others. He parks his car in the underground parking lot and takes a look at his watch: it’s 9:06am and it it’s the earliest he’s ever been to work. He walks into the station, exchanging pleasant ‘good mornings’ and ‘how was your weekend?’ with a few people who are already there. He looks around, but he doesn’t spot River and he makes a small dance of joy. Finally, he managed to get to work before her. He decides to take a quick trip to the kitchen, to make himself a nice cup of tea – in his haste to get to work earlier, he didn’t have time for it at home.

The only person in the small kitchenette is Clara, who responds to his cheerful ‘good morning!’ with a quiet grunt of pain. She’s pale, her hair is a bit of a sticky mess and her clothes look rumpled.

‘How can you be so happy on a Monday morning?’ she asks him, opening a bottle of water and taking a long swing from it.

‘Maybe because I am not hungover?’ he says a bit louder than necessary. He cannot it, he likes teasing her.

‘I don’t have a hangover,’ she mumbles. ‘It’s my hangover that has a hangover. Can one die from it?’

‘I don’t think so,’ he says rummaging through the shelf to find his mug. ‘Want some tea?’

‘No thanks,’ she responds as he puts the kettle on. ‘I don’t think I could keep it in. Why did I agree to go out with Jack and his friends yesterday?’

‘Ouch,’ he cringes at this. ‘Why would you do that? Did you have a death wish?’

‘How was I supposed to know?’ she whines a bit and shuts her eyes in pain. ‘He told me it’d be only a few drinks.’

‘And you believed him?’ he snorts but remembers his own escapades with Jack and the Ponds. It was only ‘a few drinks’ but somehow, when Jack was involved, ‘a few drinks’ always translated to ‘the party will end a few days later in a really weird place’. One time, they ended up in Cardiff of all places. Cardiff.

‘Shut up, he sounded sincere,’ she groans when the kettle whistles. ‘Just make your tea and leave me here to die, please. And turn off the radio. The light makes enough noise on its own.’

He does as she says – turns off the radio, stopping the broadcaster going on about the fact that one of the oil tycoons was found dead in his castle in Saudi Arabia. He prepares his tea, trying to be as quiet as possible – he thinks Clara fell asleep on the kitchen table – and goes to his office. He expects to find it empty and on his way there he tries to come up with clever puns to annoy River with once she gets to work, but when he opens the door all his plans fly through the window. Because River is already sitting behind her desk, reading some papers placed in front of her.

Damn. This isn’t how he planned it. He walks slowly to his desk and places his mug there.
‘Good morning,’ he says and River looks up at him. ‘Blimey, you look like hell.’

‘Thank you, sweetie,’ she says rolling her eyes. But she does look tired and worn out – there are dark circles under her eyes and she looks like she didn’t get proper sleep lately.

‘Tiring weekend?’ he asks and immediately regrets his choice of words, because different images of how her weekend could be tiring spring to his mind. And he definitely doesn’t need these images there.

‘You could say that,’ she says but her tone lacks the usual energy. He takes one more look at her and takes his tea, placing it in front of her.

‘You look like you might need it. It’s clean, I only just made it,’ he says at her surprised expression.

‘That’s very nice of you,’ she responds and takes a sip. ‘Oh god, how much sugar did you put in there? A whole package? No wonder you’re so full of energy all the time. You’re on constant sugar high.’

‘Hey, if you don’t like my tea, you can always give it back,’ he pretends to be offended.

‘It’s my tea now,’ she winks at him and studies the mug for a few seconds. It has ‘Trust me, I’m a doctor’ printed on it. It’s his favourite mug and he takes it with him wherever he goes. ‘You are not a doctor though.’

‘No, I’m not,’ he chuckles. ‘Amy and Rory bought it for me when I got promoted to a detective. Unfortunately, the shop didn’t have trust me, I’m a copper mug, so they bought this one instead.’

‘I see,’ River smiles and takes another sip. ‘Okay, what do you have? Spill.’

‘What do you mean?’ he asks as he sits behind his desk.

‘It’s not even 9:30 and you’re already here,’ she says looking at him. ‘You must’ve found something during the weekend. Come on, tell me.’

‘Okay, I might have found something, but I’d prefer to say it to the whole gang,’ he replies, spinning a little in his chair. Honestly, how did she know that he discovered something? It must be some kind of witchcraft.

‘No chance for that. At least not today. Donna is at some meeting with a boss of her boss. Or someone like that. Rory called to say that Amy and he are going to their monthly check up and he’ll be here around noon, depending how long the visit will take,’ River says. ‘Jack... Well, I think he’s sleeping off his hangover. Or he’s sweating it out with someone he met during the weekend. I saw Clara somewhere, but she looks a bit worse to wear.’

‘Yeah, she partied with Jack yesterday,’ he sighs and River makes a small sympathetic noise.

‘It seems it’s just you and me then,’ River says. ‘What did your enormous brain come up with?’

‘I let you know that it’s not only my brain that is enormous,’ River looks at him with one eyebrow raised, but doesn’t take a hint. ‘Anyway. Relationships.’

‘Excuse me?’ River looks slightly baffled.

‘We have to talk about relationships.’

‘You certainly don’t beat around the bush,’ River seems amused. ‘We’ve known each other for
what? A week? And you’re already thinking about a relationship? What’s next? A marriage proposal?’

‘River! It’s not like that!’ he exclaims and flails a little, while River looks at him with a smirk on her face. ‘I meant the victims’ relationships.’

‘What a disappointment,’ River gasps mockingly. ‘Fine, what about them?’

‘I’ve been wondering... Because you see, I went through all the files during the weekend and some articles that Amy gave me. And there were a few cases when the Silence used someone close to their victim or close to competition to spy on them. Or they simply implanted someone in their victim’s life, got them closer, put them in a relationship. There weren’t many cases like that, only a few, but it’s worth checking.’

‘And you think that something like that had a place here?’ she asks a bit sceptically.

‘We could always check it,’ he shrugs. ‘Besides, Donna mentioned that Ten had been sure that someone is leaking information.’

‘Okay,’ River nods slowly. ‘I’ll get someone to contact Eight’s family. As for Nine, I have no idea if he had any family, I’ll check it in a second-‘

‘Wait, wait,’ he says. ‘You can do that in a minute. Let’s talk about Ten. Did he have anyone?’

‘You knew him better than I did,’ she points out. ‘I’ve known him only for two years. We worked on a few cases together.’

‘I know that he doesn’t have any family left,’ he adds. ‘As for dating – there was this one girl, but they broke up. Did he-?’

‘No, as far as I know he didn’t date after that,’ River responds quickly. ‘But you really should ask Donna about it. You know how close they were.’

‘How was she after... You know.’

‘She was... Crushed?’ River says quietly. ‘She tried to pretend she’s okay, but you could see that it’s very difficult for her. She’s been a bit better since you came back.’

He nods and swallows, his throat suddenly dry. He knows that Ten’s death had an impact on Donna – she’s less cheerful now, a bit more withdrawn and she wears this haunted expression most of the time. He should have been there for her, he thinks. He should have checked his phone more often and stopped running away from everything. ‘Right,’ he clears his throat. ‘I’ll try to contact people in Manchester, maybe they’ll be able to tell us something about Nine. will you take care of Eight?’

‘Sure,’ she says quickly. ‘I’ll go and ask Clara for help. Let’s hope she’s at least partially back in the world of the living.’

She leaves the room and for a few moments he stares into space. He missed so many things when he was gone and sometimes he wonders if he’ll ever be able to catch up with everything. But it’s too late for regret now, it won’t change nor change anything. He takes a deep breath and starts looking for a telephone number to Nine’s boss. Before he calls him, he notices that River left his mug on her desk. There’s a faint outline of her lipstick on its rim and he cannot explain why, but he really likes how it looks.
On Tuesday River manages to set a meeting with Eight’s wife. She takes Rory with her, claiming he’s good at talking with people, that they trust him. She also says that they’ll probably go to see Eight’s boss and see if he has anything to add and she tells him to make sure he gets everything there is about Nine’s private life. He scoffs a bit, because isn’t he supposed to be the boss here and order people around? But when he asks this, River just nods her head in what he feels is a patronising manner.

But he does what she asked him to do: he calls Nine’s boss and spends 10 minutes listening to the man chat about everything, but his dead policeman private life. Maybe because there’s nothing to talk about. It seems that Nine was a bit of a loner: he never really socialised with anyone at work, it didn’t look like he dated anyone and he never mentioned his family. It’s both good and bad news – at least they can safely assume that he wasn’t spied on, but they also have no one to ask about his cases or whatever he’s been chasing.

He sighs quietly and gets up. Donna is yet on another meeting today and he cannot talk with her about Ten like he planned to. He doesn’t want to go through the evidence and case’s files again, because on his own, he’s more than sure to come up with some ridiculous theories: he needs someone to bounce his ideas off. He hopes that River and Rory will come back soon – maybe they will bring something interesting back. He walks to the kitchenette, planning on making some tea. The only person there is Jack who’s busy pouring a generous amount of whiskey into his tea mug.

‘Do you think it’s professional?’ he asks him and Jack lets out a loud and startled yelp, but doesn’t spill the alcohol.

‘Don’t you ever do that again,’ he hisses. ‘And it’s not for my enjoyment. It’s a cure for my hangover.’

‘You still have a hangover? When did you stop partying?’

‘Yesterday, around 4pm,’ Jack grins. ‘I met a few interesting people and they showed me some really interesting.’

‘Okay, I don’t need to know more,’ he says quickly. ‘River and you are really a match made in heaven. Or hell.’

‘Wouldn’t you like to know that?’ Jack winks at him and takes a sip from his cup. ‘And where is River? Aren’t you usually inseparable?’

‘She’s with Rory, talking with one of the victim’s wife,’ he answers choosing to ignore Jack’s teasing. ‘Oh, since you’re here and you’re not doing anything important,’ Jack scoffs a bit, ‘feel like helping me out? I just need some more information about Ten.’

‘Sure, what do you want to know?’ Jack sits on one of the chairs.

‘Did he have anyone? Any friends outside the work? Girlfriends?’

‘You knew him as well as I did, if not better. He dedicated his entire life to this work, you know that. As for dating...’ Jack sighs. ‘You know how he was after Rose. He never got over her, not really. She came back here.’

‘What?’ he asks surprised. This is a piece of info no one shared with him before.

‘Yeah, a year after you were gone, I think?’ Jack nods. ‘She wanted to try again, she said she was ready to quit journalism for him, but you know Ten. He was too honourable to let her do this. He told her to pursue her career. He sent her away.’
There’s a moment of silence and he processes the new information and Jack takes another sip of whiskey.

“So, there wasn’t anyone else? Anyone close to him, who could shine some light on what he’s been working on?” he asks him again.

“I don’t know. But you should ask River about it,” Jack finishes his drink and takes out a pack of mints from his pocket. ‘Want one?’

He accepts the candy and puts it in his mouth.

‘Why should I ask River?’ he mumbles around the treat in his mouth.

‘She didn’t tell you?’ Jack asks in a confused tone. ‘Ten and she dated for a while.’

___

*Ten and River dated. Ten and River dated. Ten and River dated.*

This sentence keeps on repeating in his head. He’s spinning his is chair – tea forgotten the second Jack said these words.

Ten and River dated.

Why didn’t she tell him about it? He asked her about any relationships Ten had and she didn’t think it was worth mentioning that she dated him? He can’t really tell why he’s angry: is it because she lied to him or because he believed her? He’s supposed to pick up things like that, to read people. He was trained to do it.

He hears River’s and Rory’s voices coming closer and closer to his office. He and River will need to have a little chat.

‘Here you are, we couldn’t find you anywhere,’ River says entering the room. Rory follows her, sending him a smile. ‘Did you find anything?’

He shakes his head.

‘Okay, what is going on?’ she asks him, raising an eyebrow. ‘What happened when we were away?’

“You lied to me,” he says before he can stop himself. Rory and River exchange a confused look. ‘I know you did.’

‘Who wants coffee? Great, me too. Don’t bother yourself guys, I’ll get it,’ Rory says quickly and nearly runs from the room.

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ River says slowly, ‘but I am sure we can talk about it.’

‘No idea what I’m talking about?’ he raises his voice a bit and takes a few steps in her direction. ‘That’s just great. Really. You thought I wouldn’t find out?’

‘Find out about what?’ River asks. He takes another step towards her and now they’re nearly nose to nose.

‘You lied to me about Ten. I know you were dating,’ he says through gritted teeth. ‘I don’t know why you did it, but I want an explanation.’
‘That’s rich coming from you, John,’ River states in a quiet voice. ‘Maybe you want to talk about the things you didn’t say about the Medusa Project?’

He feels a flush of heat on his face and then panic floods him. How does she know about it? She isn’t supposed to know, no one is supposed to know about these things.

‘Now,’ she takes a deep breath and shoots a glance towards the door. He follows the line of her gaze and notices that there’s a group of people standing there, all of them gaping at their heated exchange. ‘Do you want to continue this discussion in private or in public?’

She stares him straight in the eyes and he understands her in a second. It’s a challenge, he knows it. If he chooses public, he’ll have to reveal all of his secrets and his prize will be dragging her relationship with Ten into the public eye. But if he chooses private – and she knows he will choose it – he get to keep his secrets and she’ll keep hers. Everything will remain between them.

He swallows heavily and nods his head. She turns around and closes the door to their office, sending the gathered crowd away with one angry glare. One the door is closed, she leans against it with a sigh.

‘Right. Where do you want to start?’

The thing is that he’s not sure anymore. He didn’t expect her to hit him back and to hit him with something so big. He has to play his cards right.

‘You lied to me,’ he starts again and stops her annoyed huff. ‘You and Ten dated.’

‘We didn’t,’ she says and moves from the door to the centre of the room.

‘I almost believe you here, but Jack told me something else,’ he sneers.

‘Oh, Jack,’ she rolls her eyes. ‘He’s the biggest gossip girl in here.’

‘Why would he lie about this?’

There’s a brief pause and River sighs.

‘He didn’t lie. But he also didn’t say the entire truth. We didn’t date,’ she hushes him gently, ‘we went on one date together. That’s all. One date.’

‘Why only one date?’ he asks even though it’s not something he needs to know.

‘Because we didn’t work that way. We figured we are better as friends and co-workers,’ she shrugs. ‘Plus, he was still not over his ex.’

‘Okay,’ he nods slowly. ‘But why didn’t tell me about it earlier?’

‘Because it’s none of your business and it has no meaning for the investigation. Trust me, this is not relevant to the investigation in the slightest.’

He doesn’t ponder on her stressing the fact that Ten and she dated – went on one date together, because next question slips from his mouth.

‘Anything else you want to tell me?’

‘Yes. He was a great kisser,’ River shoots him an amused look and he looks at her in disbelief. ‘What? You asked if there’s something more. Are we done?’
He nods slowly and tries to process everything he just heard.

‘Fine,’ River goes to her desk. ‘Rory and I talked with Eight’s wife. We didn’t get much, but-’

‘River,’ he starts, uncertain how to continue. ‘About earlier. You said, uhm, that you know about-’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says shortly. ‘We don’t have to talk about it.’

‘No. Tell me,’ he keeps his eyes on her. ‘What do you know about the Project?’

‘I know how the training looked,’ she says after a few seconds.

‘Yes, I told you all how it looked,’ he responds and feels a bit lighter. Maybe she doesn’t know anything after all?

‘No,’ she shakes her head and his stomach sinks. ‘I know how it looked.’

He runs fingers through his hair and cannot help but notice how much his hand is shaking. She is not supposed to know about it. He doesn’t want her to know about it. Scratch that: he doesn’t want anyone to know about it.

‘Tell me,’ he says throat suddenly dry.

‘Listen John, we don’t have to talk about it. I am sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned it,’ she looks at him with understanding.

‘No,’ he licks his lips. ‘Tell me.’

‘I- I know about the training. How it really looked, the second part of it. What you were subjected to. Sleep deprivation, mild starvation, waking you up in the middle of the night to investigate you, pumping you full of drugs, hypnosis...’ she quietly says. ‘I also know what you were forced to do. How they taught you to question prisoners. How you were the one questioned.’

He tries to breath, but it’s getting more and more difficult with every word that falls from her lips. He hasn’t thought about this part of his life in ages, he put in the furthest part of his mind, the one where he never goes to. And now she’s talking about it...

‘How do you know?’ he asks her hoarsely.

‘Not only Donna has friends in high places,’ she admits quietly.

‘How long have you known about it?’

‘I knew before you told us about the Project. I’m sorry, I tried to find out more about you, since you left so abruptly on that first day and I had no idea what I’d find.’

She knew about the project. She knew about it all along. No wonder she didn’t look surprised when he shared this story with everyone.

‘Did you tell anyone else?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ she shakes her head. ‘You should be the one to tell about this one.’

‘Thank you,’ he mutters and looks down. He feels relief rolling off him in palpable waves. He hears River whispering ‘don’t mention it’, before there’s a soft knock on their door.
‘Guys?’ Rory’s voice can be heard, uncertain and slightly panicked. ‘You didn’t kill each other, right? Are you okay?’

‘Are we okay, John?’ He looks up and sees that River is looking at him, her eyes soft and questioning.

He nods. They are okay. At least that’s what he hopes.

The rest of the week passes uneventfully: they find out some minor things, but they don’t add up to anything major and ground-breaking. He finally catches Donna and talks with her about Ten and his relationships. She says the same things as everyone else: he dated, occasionally, but nothing came out of it; he worked too hard to have any friends outside of this department.

Nothing happens on Wednesday, nothing happens on Thursday and by Friday he’s so tired of nothing happening that he naps on his desk and River has to throw pencils at his head to wake him up. (She doesn’t miss even once).

Now, River... They’ve been a bit cagey after their confrontation, talking to each other only when necessary. He kept on glancing at her whenever she was focused on job, trying to pick up any clue from her appearance. But there’s nothing that tells him anything about her: she’s like a blank page in a new notebook. He wants to trust her and he knows he has no reason not to do so. It’s just... There’s something about her that sets him right on edge and makes him feel a bit unsure of himself and everything he knows.

Nothing continues on happening until very late Saturday night. Or very early Sunday morning, depending how you look at it. But he has no time or energy to think about the night vs. day semantics. All he knows at this moment is the fact that his phone is annoyingly beeping on his bedside drawer and wakes him up from a rather pleasant dream.

‘ello?’ he answers and lights up a lamp. He looks at the clock – blimey, it’s nearly 1am. This better be good – better than his dream at least.

‘Get out of the bed, John,’ he hears Donna’s voice on the other side. ‘There’s been a murder.’

It sounds like a line from a very cheap and very American tv show, but the way Donna said it, wakes him up and reminds him that no, he’s not a ginger guy with fancy sunglasses hanging out around Miami.

‘What?’ Oh, he definitely is not this guy. He lacks cool one-liners.

‘Some guy got murdered. In a club two blocks away from our station,’ she says and he can hear her moving around and flipping through some papers. ‘I’m sending you and Rory there. I’ll send you the address in a second. Get dressed.’

She ends the call and for a few seconds he stares into the darkness of the room. His phone beeps again and his time it’s a text with the location of the club. Great. Where are his car keys? And most importantly – where are his pants?

It takes him a bit longer than necessary to get to the scene – he takes a wrong turn gets lost on his way, but it can happen to anyone. When he finally arrives, the place is already shining like a Christmas tree, lit by huge reflectors and lights from police cars. There’s a bunch of technicians walking around, securing the scene from the civilians who even at this hour stand there. He closes his car and flashes his badge to a newbie who’s guarding the scene and he’s let behind the ‘do not
cross’ tape. He nears the clubs’ entrance – guarded by a few policemen - and starts looking around for Rory.

‘You’re late,’ he hears behind his back, but the voice that says these words doesn’t belong to Rory.

‘Sorry honey, traffic was hell,’ he turns around to see no one else but River Song. Brilliant.

‘You got lost, didn’t you?’ She looks at him and there’s a smile in the corner of her mouth.

‘Yeah, well... Wait. What are you going here? It was supposed to be Rory. Not that I mind that it’s you, I don’t, but--’

‘Rory called and asked me if I can come in,’ she interrupts him with a sigh. ‘He didn’t want to leave Amy at this hour. He tried Jack before me, but he didn’t even pick up his phone.’

‘Fine. So it’s you and me, Song. Okay, let’s see what we’ve got- Why are you wearing this?’ he exclaims. They’re reached the brightly lit area near the club and only now he can fully see River and her, well, attire. She’s wearing a floor length black dress – or is it a gown? he’s not sure – with sleeves that are a bit see-through (he’ll have to ask Amy how the fabric is called). The dress – or gown, really is that important now? – is cut quite low and gives him - and everyone else - a rather good glimpse of River’s cleavage. Not that he’s looking there. He’s a detective. He notices things, that’s his job. And it’d be rather difficult not to notice something like-

He looks back up and notices River staring at him with an amused expression on her face.

‘You didn’t hear a word I said?’ she asks and laughs a bit at his confused face. ‘While you were busy staring at me, I was saying that I was on a date when Rory called. At the opera house, hence the dress. And you’re the fine one talking about clothes. Look at your shirt!’

He huffs a bit.

‘It’s a great shirt!’ he straightens the t-shirt he’s wearing. It’s an old one, but he loves it and cannot part with it: it has Gandalf holding a lightsaber on it. ‘It’s a space Gandalf! It’s cool!’

‘Yes, of course it is, sweetie,’ River nods her head in a patient way, something she seems to have developed around him.

‘Hey, you two!’ someone shouts behind them. ‘You plan on stop bickering anytime soon? The dead guy is waiting for you.’

They both turn around, wincing a bit and hurry to a young woman standing in the door of the club. He has no idea who she is, but River greets her like an old friend.

‘I’m sorry Sally, we had a bit of disagreement on clothes,’ she smiles. ‘This is DCI John Smith,’ she points at him, ‘and this is detective Sally Sparrow.’

‘Nice to meet you, John,’ he takes her extended hand. ‘I’ll be your guide on today’s tour,’ she adds with dry humour.

They follow her inside the club and listen to her summing of what is known so far.

‘The guy was found in the bathroom. And when I mean found... Well, you’ll see soon. He was shot around 00:15, we got here 15 minutes later. Managed to clear the whole place before anything got contaminated,’ she says and steps takes a turn into a smaller corridor of the club. ‘The bartenders and the owner are waiting for you in the main room. And here we are,’ she stops in front of the door with
‘men’ written on it.

‘I hope you didn’t eat anything for a few hours. And River? If I were you, I’d take these shoes off. And hold your dress up. Trust me,’ with that Sally opens the door. River shoots him a quick and questioning gaze, but he only shrugs. As if on cue they hear Sally’s voice again. ‘Guys, what are you doing there? Come on!’

With a sigh River steps out of her shoes and turns to one of the policeman guarding the site.

‘If something happens to these shoes,’ she says with a deadly serious expression on her face, ‘I will hold you personally responsible.’

The poor guy pales a bit and presents her with a vigorous salute, mumbling ‘yes, ma’am’ under his nose. He looks down to see why River is making such a fuss over a pair of shoes and almost immediately understands why: these shoes are the equivalent of his car. They’re deep red, shiny, ridiculously high and – even though he has never thought that he’ll think something like that about shoes – sexy. He looks around to make sure no one noticed that he’s spent the last few moments staring at heels and realises that River is no longer by his side – she’s already inside the bathroom and he has no choice but to follow her. What he sees inside the room stops his breath. Now he understands why Sally hoped they haven’t eaten in the last few hours.

Almost everything in the room is covered in blood - in some places you cannot even see the real colour of the tiles. He takes a calming breath and his gaze falls on the body laying on the floor. Well, he assumes it’s a body: for him it looks more like a bloody pulp someone just put there.

‘Shit,’ he mutters and Sally looks at him with understanding.

‘Yeah, that was our first reaction as well,’ she motions her head to the group of technicians working on preserving the evidence. ‘None of them ever saw anything like this.’

And whether he wants to admit it or not, it is nothing he has seen either. The body on the floor is in pieces: the head is blown off and there’s a hole in the back – a whole so big that he can see the floor tiles through it.

‘Bullets?’ he asks weakly.

‘They’re embedded in the wall,’ one of the technicians says. ‘We’ll try to retrieve them as soon as possible.’

‘What? Embedded in the wall? It’s impossible!’

‘Take a look,’ Sally motions him to come closer and gestures at one of walls. ‘There they are.’

There are two round holes in the wall and when he squints a bit, he can see the two bullets there. He swallows the bile rising up in his throat.

‘Okay,’ he croaks. ‘Where did the shots come from?’

‘Up there,’ River says behind his back. He twirls around and nearly trips over one of the technicians collecting skull fragments from the floor. He apologises profusely and looks at the spot River is pointing at. She’s standing by a shattered window, pointing her finger at a block of flats opposite of the club.

‘You’re joking, right?’ he look at her. ‘It’s impossible. To shoot from such a distance... The killer would have to be-’
‘A professional,’ she finishes for him. They exchange a look and he knows they’re both wondering the same thing: could this shooting be connected to Ten’s death?

‘Make sure you send someone there,’ River says to the group in the room. ‘Any ID on the victim?’

‘No, he had nothing on him,’ Sally answers. ‘But you should ask the owner and the bartenders. Maybe they knew him.’

‘When can we expect to get his ID?’ he asks, looking at the body on the floor. He notices the thick and expensive looking fabric of the man’s suit. He notices his polished leather shoes. He notices every detail of this broken body.

‘We don’t know,’ Sally stops his train of thoughts. ‘First, we have to pick all of this up,’ she gestures the whole room. ‘Only then it’ll go to the morgue. How long it’ll take there... I’d say Tuesday the earliest?’

‘Thanks for everything,’ River speaks up. ‘Just send us all the pictures and the reports as soon as possible, okay?’

They leave the room and while River picks up her shoes from the floor, he takes a first deep breath in the last few minutes. They start walking towards the main part of the club, where the owner and bartenders are waiting for them.

‘You think it’s the same person who killed Ten and the rest?’ he asks River quietly, mindful of all the policemen around them.

‘It’s difficult to say,’ she responds just as quietly. ‘We know only basics about this one, we don’t even know who the victim is... Too early to say.’

She’s right of course. They shouldn’t assume anything yet, not without any solid evidence. They enter the main area of the club and notice three men sitting behind a bar, accompanied by one policeman. The three of them look tired, scared and like they’re experiencing the worst night of their lives. He thinks it must be true in a way.

‘Hello,’ he starts. ‘I’m DCI John Smith and this is my partner, DCI River Song. Don’t worry, you’re not convicted of anything. Just tell us what happened here. Just tell us what you know.’

As it turns out, none of the men know anything. The owner wasn’t even here when it happened – he was at home, and the bartenders were too busy to notice anything until the chaos ensued.

*Did they know this man?* No.

*Could they describe him?* Not really, it was a busy night.

*Was he alone or with someone?* No idea.

*Did he looks like he was looking for someone?* Can’t tell if he was, the bar was too busy.

With every negative answer they hear, his enthusiasm and faith die a little bit more. Not that he expected them to give all the answers right there, but at least some of them would be nice. River seems to be as disappointed as he is, but she nods politely at everything the men say. She asks them for their numbers, so that they can be called at the station and properly questioned, but other than that, she tells them they’re free to go. It seems to give them wings, because they jump from their seats and rush to the exit before River can even finish her little speech.
‘Wait!’ he shouts behind them. ‘Do you have CCTV here?’

‘Yes, we do,’ the owner stops and walks back to them. ‘We have cameras placed in a few parts of the club: here, in the cloak room, by the toilets.’

‘We’ll need the tapes. From tonight, all of them,’ River butts in before he can speak. ‘We’ll send someone for them tomorrow, so please, have them prepared.’

The owner nods dutifully and scarpers back to the exit. He looks at his watch: it’s nearly 3am and he’s exhausted. He and River slowly make their way towards the exit, sending out some last requests and orders to the still present officers. They leave the building and the cold night air revives him a bit.

‘It’s not how I imagined to spend this night, but I guess it has to do. Actually, I think it was better than my date,’ River comments sourly.

‘The opera was that bad?’

‘No, the opera was great. The guy was a bore.’

His breath hitches a bit at this and he lets out a startled laugh. The adrenalin of the last few hours slowly leaves his body and he feels his body relax. His stomach grumbles loudly in the quiet of the street and suddenly he craves food.

‘I could murder a milkshake,’ he says. He walks a few more steps before he realises that River is not following him. She stands in a spot, looking at him questioningly. ‘What?’

‘We just watched people pick up a brain slushie from a toilet’s walls,’ she says slowly as if not sure if she heard him correctly, ‘and you want a milkshake?’

‘Uhm... Yes?’ his stomach grumbles again. ‘I wouldn’t mind one. Wanna join me?’

‘It’s 3am, John,’ she talks like she’s explaining a complicated matter to a child. ‘I really doubt there’s a milkshake joint opened somewhere.’

‘And that’s where you’re wrong, detective Song,’ he comes closer to her and cannot help himself – he bops her nose. The second he does that, he wants to slap himself – one simply doesn’t bop River Song’s nose! She’ll have him hang in any second now or in the very least she’ll break his hand. But nothing like that happens. She only stares at him as if she’s wondering if he’s crazy. ‘Come on, Song! Where’s your adventurous spirit?’

He expects her to refuse, to laugh at him, to throw him off with a snide remark or an innuendo.

‘Fine,’ she says instead. ‘Take me there.’

He stares at her and decides to ignore the double entendre. He leads her to his car – no, she doesn’t have hers here, she took a taxi from the opera – and she eyes his Porsche with amazement.

‘It’s yours?’ she asks a bit breathlessly. ‘It’s... beautiful.’

‘Thanks,’ he smiles and gets in the driver seat, River quickly slides next to him. ‘I saw her and fell in love. I felt like I have to buy her. It took me over a year of saving – and a lottery win – to finally get her. But now she’s all mine.’

‘Oh, it’s her?’ River says while he starts the engine. ‘So I guess it means that every day you’re inside a woman.’
‘River!’ he exclaims and pushes down the brake pedal instead of the accelerator and the car jerks a little. ‘You cannot say things like that! It’s, it’s- You can’t!’

‘And what are you going to do? Spank me?’ Even in the darkness of the night he can see her smug smile. He just hopes she can’t see the blush that is rapidly climbing from his neck to his cheeks. ‘Sweetie, are you sure you know how to drive a car? It doesn’t look like that to me.’

‘Oi! You just wait,’ he shoots her a look and restarts the car. ‘You just wait, River.’

They get to the milkshake joint much quicker than they normally would. So okay, he might’ve driven much faster than the speed limit allowed, but it’s 3am, the streets are empty and they are the police – no damage done. River gets out of the car before him and once he joins her, he sees her looking at the milkshake bar dubiously. He admits: it doesn’t look good from where their standing. The walls are dirty - as are the windows, the pavement is cracked and the neon sign above the door saw better days.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ he says quickly. ‘But it only just looks awful from the outside. Trust me.’

‘I don’t think it could look worse on the inside,’ River mumbles under her breath as they walk – River is still barefoot - towards the door. Her breath hitches when they enter and he can’t help but grin at this – it happens every time he brings someone here. Not that he brings people here all the time: so far only the Ponds and Donna visited this place with him. The bar is warm and cozy, with walls painted cream white and spacious booths to sit in.

‘I can’t believe my eyes!’ a man behind the counter bellows. ‘Is that really you, John?’

‘It is me, Wilfred,’ he replies with a smile. ‘I couldn’t stay away from this place.’

‘Yeah, took you only two years to come back,’ the man snorts. ‘Where have you been?’

‘It’s a story for another time,’ he says. ‘I have company now, so...’

Wilfred’s eyes fall on River and his face lightens up.

‘You came with a lady friend here!’ he giggles in delight. ‘Is that really you, John?’

‘She is not my-’ he stammers looking at River who looks both amused and a bit panicked. ‘She’s not my lady friend. We’re partners.’

‘Oh, if that’s what kids call it these days?’ Wilfred says teasingly. ‘Fine, you brought your partner here. So, what can I give you? Should I finally dig out the menu for love birds?’

He flails a little and tries to come up with a way to say Wilfred that River and he are not a couple.

‘We just work together,’ River says calmly by his side and Wilf’s enthusiasm dies in a second.

‘You’re sure?’ he asks disappointed and they both nod their heads. ‘Damn. And here I thought... You need to find yourself a nice girl, John. Not that you aren’t nice, dear,’ he shoots a wink at River. ‘You go and find yourselves some seats, I’ll whip something up for you.’

They seat in the nearest booth and he catches River looking around the place with interest.

‘Uhm, sorry about Wilfred,’ he starts, feeling a bit embarrassed. ‘He’s a bit... He says what he thinks.’
‘No problem,’ she shrugs. ‘How did you find this place?’

‘It was Donna who showed it to me,’ when River looks at him with confusion written on her face, he quickly explains. ‘Wilfred is her grandfather. He’s been running this place for years now. Best milkshake place in London. He has a gift for it, really. He can guess what a person likes, milkshake-wise, even if he sees them for the first time. And even if they themselves don’t know what they like.’

Speak of the devil – Wilfred appears in front of them, carrying a tray with two glasses filled with milkshakes. Wilf puts his favourite one in front of him (it’s custard flavoured, with double whipped cream, chocolate sprinkles and a maraschino cherry) and he puts another glass in front of River.

‘I hope you’ll like it, dear,’ he smiles warmly at her. ‘Well, you will like it. Enjoy. I’ll be in the backroom if you need anything.’

And just like that he disappears. River’s looking warily at the glass in front of her and slowly sniffs what’s inside of it. He takes a first sip of his drink – through a special kind of straw that Wilf buys and keeps just for him – and damn, it’s just as good as it was the last time he had it. He cannot help but let out an appreciative moan.

‘You’re really going to drink that?’ River asks him. ‘It’s a sugar bomb. You’ll start bouncing off the walls any second now.’

‘Nah,’ he mumbles around another mouthful of his drink. ‘I’m good. How’s yours? Why didn’t you try it yet? Come on, try it.’

‘I...’ River licks her lips a little. ‘I don’t know what’s in it.’

‘That’s part of the charm! Give it a try. A little milkshake never killed anyone.’

She glares at him a bit and sniffs her milkshake again. Then – finally – she slowly puts her mouth around the straw – hey, did Wilf give her his special straw as well? Traitor! – and takes a sip. He watches her face and when she swallows and smiles, he lets out a triumphant yelp.

‘Ha, you liked it! Okay, so what’s flavour is it?’ he asks curiously. What flavour does River Song like?

‘Uhm, it’s cinnamon,’ she takes another sip. ‘With a bit of ginger, I guess. ‘Now it’s my turn to ask a question: how come Donna brought you here?’

‘I didn’t know we’re taking turns asking questions,’ he smiles at her and gets more comfortable in his seat, while River just grins innocently. ‘It was actually after my first case.’

‘To celebrate the first victory?’

‘No,’ he laughs and scratches his cheek. ‘It was the other way around. It was a major fail, on everyone’s part. But the biggest on mine. Donna saw me moping and she took me here, to cheer me up. And it worked. Now, detective Song,’ he says and she rolls her eyes at this phrase, ‘what was your first case?’

She tells him and somehow they begin swapping stories of various cases and incidents they were a part over the years. He tells her how he met Amy – she was a criminal justice journalist reporting on a case he’s been working on. At first he found her a bit annoying and she found him a bit daft, but thanks to her tips they managed to catch the guy who’s been smuggling heroin to the country. And that was it – the first brick to their friendship was put on the ground. She introduced him to Rory – her ‘kind of a boyfriend’ back then – who just graduated his police academy. Soon Rory was
transferred to the department he was working it. They worked well together – the three of them, because Amy would often and help them with cases thanks to the tips from her sources.

He finds out that River’s first arrest was one of a man who committed public indecency in a public park. He was running around naked, spooking around pigeons, squirrels and old ladies. ‘Although,’ River adds at the end, ‘the old ladies seemed more entertained than scared.’ She briefly mentions her time in the USA, commenting on a few cases she worked on and her training at Quantico – which according to her was fun, but a killer.

It should feel weird – they barely know each other, it’s the middle of the night, he’s in a t-shirt and she’s wearing one of the finest gowns he’s ever seen. It should feel out of place, but it doesn’t. He feels good around her, he realises. He feels good around him and judging by River’s giggles – River Song giggles, ladies and gentlemen – she also feels good in his company. He doesn’t look at his watch until Wilf comes to their table and starts shooing them out.

‘It’s 5am,’ he mumbles. ‘The bar’s closed. Off you go.’

He wants to pay, but Wilf says this one is on him and smiles a bit. He looks through the window and the sky is slowly turning bright. Well, at least a brighter shade of gray. River elbows his side gently and exit the bar into the quiet of the morning.

They walk to his car, when River suddenly stops and raises her arm to hail a cab. It stops on the pavement and she moves to open its door.

‘What are you doing?’ he asks her, surprised. ‘I can take you home! Your home I mean, not mine. I mean, I could take you there. To your flat, I mean!’

‘It’s okay, sweetie,’ she laughs at him quietly and gets into the taxi. ‘It’s been a long night. We both should get some sleep.’

He nods. Of course she’s right – he’s tired, he can feel it now. He wants nothing more than get into his bed.

‘Go get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow,’ she adds as she closes the door. ‘And thank you. It was... really nice.’

And with that she’s gone. Her taxi quickly pulls away and joins the already forming traffic. For a few seconds he looks at the black dot, slowly disappearing from his eyes. He sighs and goes back to his car.

It isn’t until he parks in front of his building, when he realises that River’s heels are still laying in the front seat of his car.

Chapter End Notes

- chapter title from ‘just desserts’ by Marina & the Diamonds and Charlie XCX. which is a rad song.
- and sorry for the length of this chapter, 8k. oops.
I remember when your head caught flame, it kissed your scalp and caressed your brain

He sleeps through the rest of Sunday and manages not to think about the dead guy with two holes in his body until the Monday morning. He walks into the department’s building and he feels like he walked straight into a hive: the place is bursting with life and chatter, people are either typing something on their computers or talking with each other by their desks.

‘Here you are!’ He feels someone poking his arm and looks down to see Clara with a bossy look on her face. ‘We’ve been trying to call you for ages!’

‘Who’s we?’ He asks and sees a group of people going into a conference room.

‘Everyone,’ Clara says. ‘Where have you been? We’ve been working here on the new case since 8am. Donna called in a briefing, you’re here just in time. Here, take these,’ she shoves some papers in his arms, ‘and go to the conference room. Try not to get distracted on your way.’

‘You’re the boss,’ he salutes her mockingly and heads to the room. It’s almost full, only a few seats are free and he quickly leaves the papers next to Donna – who glares at him in a quite threatening manner – and sits next to Rory. He quickly scans the room ignoring Rory’s ‘oh, you finally got here’.

He quickly spots familiar curls: River is per usual sitting next to Jack and they’re lost in a conversation. She hasn’t noticed him yet and he wants to somehow catch her attention – in a suave way of course – but he doesn’t have time, because Donna clears her throat.

‘Everyone here?’ She asks and makes room for Clara who just sneaked into the room. ‘Okay. I am sorry that we have to start our week this way, but we have another case on our heads. As some of you might already know, we’ve been called to a murder on Saturday night. This is what two of our detectives encountered,’ pictures from a crime scene show on a big screen behind her. He looks around the room and sees shocked faces of his colleagues. Donna shows a few more pictures and continues. ‘I know, not pretty. Tell that to the guys who had to pick this guy up from the floor. And the walls. And from what I heard, there were also some parts of him on the ceiling,’ someone in the back of the room makes a disgusted noise. ‘Oi, quiet there. He was killed around 00:15am, in the club called ‘Midnight’. Our first team was there at 00:30. There was no talk about facial reconstruction as his head was blown clear off. No Jack, now it’s not the time for jokes about blowing. However, we ran his finger prints through our database and we have a match. Clara?’

‘The killed man was Father Octavian,’ the young woman stands up and starts talking and a headshot picture of the victim appears on the screen behind her. He has – had – closely cropped pale blonde hair, blue eyes and strong jaw. In the picture, his mouth is set in an unpleasant grin and you can feel the air of danger surrounding him. Suddenly it’s not difficult to imagine that there might be reasons for which he got two bullets.

‘Wait,’ Rory starts. ‘Father? As in a priest?’

‘No,’ Clara shakes her head. ‘As in that’s his name. He legally changed it 4 years ago. Now, his record is clean. However, before that he wasn’t this proper. His first name was Octavian Manson. He was the owner of ‘Byzantium Security’. Technically, he and his guys provided their service to clubs: they were bouncers and security guys. But that was only the cover-up. What really brought him money was the real thing he did: harassing and blackmailing, occasionally beating the shit out of
anyone he was ordered to. He was very professional and careful – he was caught about 3 years ago, only because one of his thugs left his brass knuckles on the scene of the beating. He got out after 5 months. He continued to run his business for some time. Then, about a year ago he completely disappeared from the radars. His business goes down, it just stops existing. Octavian pops up 6 months ago around Manchester,’ that catches attention of everyone in the room. ‘Yes, this goes exactly where you think it’s going. He met with one of our victims,’ a picture of Nine pops on the screen. It’s not stated what they talked about, but we know that Nine worked on a case related to the Silence. And funny enough, Octavian did a lot of work for them. He also did some work – security, we assume it was just security – for our friend, Dorium.’

‘So the guys starts leaking information,’ Jack starts, ‘and someone makes sure he himself starts leaking?’

‘It would seem so,’ Donna sighs. ‘I don’t know if it’s good that this case is connected to the previous one. Anything else, Clara?’

Clara shakes her head and Donna speaks again.

‘Was he alone at the club?’

‘I went through all the CCTV tapes from the club,’ next to him Rory speaks up. ‘He was alone. Just sitting in the corner of the club, sipping on his drink. He was there since about 11pm. He didn’t look like he was looking for anyone. Some girls approached him, but he refused them all. He camera in the corridor leading to the bathroom captured him at 00:10. That’s all.’

‘What about the owner and the bartenders?’ Donna asks, looking at him.

‘They said they didn’t know him,’ he shrugs. ‘He wasn’t a regular customer. They will come here for another questioning. Did we get anything else from post mortem?’

‘Except that the cause of death was a bullet blowing a giant hole in his head?’ Jack snorts and flips through a report in front of him. ‘Uhm, let me check. Traces of alcohol in his blood. No drugs and no history of drug use. He was healthy, all internal organs in good condition. Well, the parts of them that weren’t blown up.’

‘And do we have anything from the ballistics?’ Rory asks Donna.

‘Yes. Two bullets were retrieved from the scene. They were unusual, nothing they ever dealt before. 16 mm, both of them,’ the whole lets out a collective surprised sigh. ‘Yes, I know. And that’s all we have.’

‘What do you mean ‘all’? They didn’t identify the weapon?’ he asks.

‘No,’ she shakes her head. ‘They’re trying to do it right now, but so far no luck. We’re kind of stuck on this one.’

‘Tell them to check a märklin rifle,’ River’s voice rings loud and clear in the room. ‘That should be the one they’re looking for.’

‘How do you know that?’ Donna asks in the exact same time as Rory asks ‘What exactly is the märklin rifle?’

‘I encountered something similar during my stay at Quantico,’ River says. ‘Some weirdo was running around the forest, shooting rabbits with it. Which as you can imagine didn’t turn out well for him. Or for the rabbits.’
‘Okay, but what exactly is it?’ Rory repeats his question leaning slightly out of his seat.

‘It’s a hunting rifle. It was created in the very beginning of the ‘70s, but its production was banned in 1973 by the German government,’ River stars explaining. ‘See, normally it is used either as a trophy gun – one that old guys show off to their friends, or to hunt big animals. And when I say ‘big’, I mean elephant kind of big. No one with a bit of hunting knowledge won’t even try to shoot a deer with it, because all you’ll get is a huge hole with bits of a deer around it,’ she sighs. ‘The thing is, if you fiddle with the basic design and add things like for example a basic scope – it becomes a perfect gun for a killer. They made around 300 of märklins. Within a year, 1/3 of them was in hands of hired guns.’

‘Shit,’ Donna curses under her breath. ‘Do you think it’s possible to still get one of these?’

‘Well, it seems like someone did get their hands on it,’ River comments sourly. ‘If it really is a märklin, then it must have cost a lot. Both the rifle and the job.’

‘So we’re looking at a professional killer and a wealthy client. How big is the gun?’ he asks and River looks at him for the first time.

‘It weighs about 33 pounds, give or take.’

‘No way one could use it in a standing position,’ he scratches his cheek. ‘Did they figure out where the shoot came from?’

‘The rooftop of the block of flats opposite the club,’ Donna responds. ‘They didn’t find anything there, except for some white residue on the rooftop ledge. They’re trying to figure out what it is. No way of telling how long the killer stayed there. No CCTV around the building.’

‘Which side of the residue did they find the bullet cases?’ he asks and feels everyone’s heads turning in his direction.

‘What? How am I supposed to know that?’ Donna grumbles but flips through the notes and photos. ‘Right. They found it on the right side of the residue. Why do you need to know that?’

‘River,’ he turns in his chair to face her and observes how her hair bounce when she snaps her hair up. ‘Which side does the märklin throws the cases to?’

She looks a bit surprised by his question, but quickly responds.

‘Right. Wait… That means that the killer was right-handed.’

‘Yes,’ he nods his head and smiles at her. She doesn’t smile back.

‘Too quick, not following,’ Rory groans next to him. ‘How do you know that the killer is right-handed?’

‘If he was left-handed, the cases would be thrown in the middle, not that far to the right,’ River explains quickly and he nods his head again.

‘So we have a right-handed killer with an elephant rifle. That’s just great,’ Donna sneers and takes a deep breath. ‘Okay, I think it’s all we have now. I’ll call the technicians and ask them to check the märklin trope. Clara, once I am done and if River was right about the gun, you and Jack will find all the registered märklins in the UK and call its owners, and ask them where they were on Saturday. And if they use their enormous gun. And how they bought it. You need to find out everything,’ Jack groans at that. ‘Hush. Rory – you’ll keep in touch with morgue and the lab, in case they find out
something else. River, John – you will go and talk with our friend Dorium. But not today, do it tomorrow. Today focus on the motives that our killer could have. The rest of you,’ she looks quickly around the crowd gathered in the room, ‘will try to find everything on Octavian and his people. I want their names, addresses, their shoe sizes. Off you go, make me proud or I will fire you.’

He smirks a bit at this, because Donna would never fire anyone – she fights for every single person of staff like a lioness. But shaking her fist in anger seems to motivate people, so she keeps on doing that. People are already leaving the room, hurrying to their assignments and he exchanges quiet ‘hello’s’ and small smiles with them. He doesn’t head to his office yet – he’s waiting for River. It’s a gentleman-y thing to do, right?

River slowly approaches him with Jack who’s currently whispering something into her ear and grinning like a really satisfied cat. River’s rolling her eyes at him and shakes her head a bit. When they finally stand by his side the room is almost empty.

‘Ready?’ River says to him and motions her head towards their office. Sure, he’s ready. He’s always ready, now he’ll only say ‘hello’ to Jack and they can go and deal with whatever they’re supposed to deal. Just a quick ‘hello’ and maybe he’ll find out what they’ve been talking about.

‘I have your shoes,’ he blurts out instead. ‘Not with me though. They’re in my apartment. Just like you left them. I mean, you didn’t leave them in my flat, but I took them there, because-’

River quickly clamps her hand over his mouth and stops him from saying even more stupid things. He looks at Jack who’s nearly bouncing on his feet with excitement.

‘How come you have her shoes in your apartment?’ he asks shooting glances at River and him. ‘What were you doing together?’

River sighs and releases his mouth from under her hand.

‘Rory didn’t want to come to the scene and leave Amy alone, so-‘

‘So you came instead?’ Jack leers at them. ‘Did you come in his car or in his flat?’

‘Neither,’ she replies shortly and he blushes and flails his arms around, while Jack giggles at him. ‘I took over Rory, the scene was a mess so I left my heels in his car. That’s all.’

‘Are you sure? You two look a little guilty...’ Jack continues playfully.

‘Yes, yes, we’re sure!’ he finally gets his voice back. ‘Nothing inappropriate happened, right River? Now, come on, we have work to do,’ he takes her hand into his and stars dragging her towards their office. ‘It was nice to talk to you Jack! Pleasure!’

Jack’s laughter follows them until he closes the office’s door behind them. Once behind the door, they look at each other for a few moments. He’s not sure what he should say – should he apologise for Jack’s behaviour? Or for his own stupid mouth? Or maybe he should thank her for a lovely night – not like that! – and suggest they should do it again? So many possibilities, so many outcomes and he doesn’t know which one to choose. He swallows, still looking at River and he opens his mouth to finally say something, but River beats him to it. Per usual.

‘We should get to work,’ she says, breaking eye contact and heading to her desk. She’s right of course, but it’s not something he wanted to hear. Even though he doesn’t really know what he wanted to hear.

They go through Octavian’s files – at least the files that Clara managed to gather in such a short time.
Upbringing, education, relationships – nothing out of ordinary there. Octavian was a man who didn’t bring any attention to himself, at any point of his life. Even when he started his ‘security’ business, he managed to keep it low for a long time. Why did he decide to start leaking information? What made him do it? Neither he nor River seem to find the idea for this question. They’re not on top of their game today: something changed between them – he cannot put his finger on it, but something shifted and the air between them is suddenly thick and heavy with unsaid things. It makes him uncomfortable and slightly jumpy and more than slightly nervous. He’s drumming fingers against his desk and trying to catch one of the thoughts inside his head: it’s vague and fleeting and he knows it could provide them with answer to the case or at least push them in a new direction.

‘Okay, stop it,’ River’s voice stops his thoughts. ‘It’s driving me insane.’

‘What?’

‘The finger drumming. Twirling in your chair. Humming,’ she says through clenched teeth. ‘It’s like you have a terrible case of a cabin fever. Run around the building if you must! I don’t know, go and get a newspaper! Do something, just don’t act like an overactive puppy.’

Newspaper.

Newspaper. News...

‘That’s it!’ he yelps and jumps from his chair. ‘You are a genius, Song. Well, actually I am one, but you help to bring it in me,’ he smiles and bounces on his feet.

‘What are you talking about?’ River asks, clearly confused and looking worriedly at his antics.

‘Newspapers! That’s where we need to look for more into about Octavian!’

‘You don’t mean today’s papers, do you?’ She’s already catching up. She’s smart, she really is. ‘You mean the ones from what... Six months ago?’

‘Exactly. Six months or older,’ he’s already by the door, his jacket draped over his shoulder. ‘And we both know someone who might have some interesting articles on this subject. See? My genius is rubbing off on you!’

‘If I remember correctly, there wasn’t any rubbing involved,’ River smirks at him. ‘And buy some food. It’ll be easier to coax something out of her with food.’

‘Good point. Wish me luck,’ he throws over his shoulder while exiting the room. He makes a quick stop by Donna’s office, telling her where he’s going – it earns her approval, thank the gods, and he ignores Jack’s ‘trouble in paradise? The missus threw you out?’ quips. He’s a man on a mission.

He needs to get some good take-out Chinese.

___

Forty minutes later he’s knocking on the Ponds’ door. Or more like awkwardly scratching the door with his shoe, while trying to balance two big bags with take-away. He didn’t know what to buy: Chinese or Italian, so he bought both. He also bought some scones and cookies – who knows what may Amy want to devour? It’s better to be prepared.

There’s a loud and annoyed ‘I’m coming’ heard behind the door and the door open with flourish, revealing one angry Amy Pond. She takes a breath, ready to tell off anyone standing on her doorstep, but when she sees him, she lets it out.
‘I was about to take a nap,’ she sighs.

‘Hello to you too, Amelia,’ he rolls his eyes and squeezes past her inside the house. ‘I brought you lunch!’

They move to the kitchen – he nearly loses one of the bags somewhere in the living room, her stomping heavily after him. He puts the bags on the kitchen counter and starts setting the table – he even remembers about the napkins. Amy is sitting by the table, looking – no, glaring at him – with her arms crossed over her chest. He quickly looks away and sets all the dishes on the table: a small pizza, spaghetti, lasagne, spring and egg rolls, mandarin chicken – he might’ve overbought. When he’s putting the kettle on, Amy is still looking at him without even uttering a word. She breaks when he says ‘bone appétit’ with a huge smile on his face.

‘Okay, spill,’ she says eyeing all the food curiously. ‘What do you want?’

‘Can’t I just bring lunch to my favourite ginger person in the world?’ he says between taking bites from an egg roll. ‘You wound me, Amelia.’

‘Don’t call me Amelia,’ she grumbles and puts a slice of pizza on her plate. ‘I’ll tell Donna that I am your favourite ginger person in the world. We’ll see how she likes that. And unfortunately, you never do anything without a hidden motive and you never are nice to me unless you want something. So spill. What do you need?’

He swallows and wipes his fingers in the napkin by his plate. Better to get this over with, eh?

‘It’s nothing big, it’s only... I need you to do some research in your journalist-y things.’

‘Oh?’ Amy mumbles around mouthful of pizza. ‘And what is it that the police cannot check? Besides, I’m on a break if you haven’t noticed.’

‘I know, I know, but you still have friends and contacts, right? Maybe they have some info, something we don’t have. Some, uhm, inside source,’ he finishes lamely.

‘You’re joking right?’ Now she’s staring at him in disbelief. ‘You want me to rat out my sources? And convince my friends to the same? And discredit ourselves as journalists in the process?’

He winces at this. He knew it’d be a huge thing to ask for, but he wouldn’t ask her if it wasn’t vital.

‘I understand, but...’ he sighs. ‘Look, it’s important. And your job and reputation is important as well, I know,’ he hushes her gently, ‘but we have another dead guy who may be connected to Ten’s death – to this whole case. Official records say only this much and we know that the guy might’ve started leaking information and working with coppers a few months before his death. Maybe he talked to some of the journalists as well. That’s all.’

‘Fine,’ Amy says after a few seconds of silence. ‘But only this once. What’s his name?’

‘Yes, you are the best ginger person in the world!’ He does a small victory dance in his chair and Amy tries to hide a smile. ‘He’s called Father Octavian.’

‘As in a priest?’

‘No, as- That’s his name. He changed it a few years ago. His real name is Octavian Manson. We think he might’ve started talking and supplying information about six months ago. Ask your colleagues up north if he ever talked to them. Actually, ask all of your colleagues! Maybe he tried to sell his story to the press.’ He stands up. ‘Okay, my mission here is finished! Enjoy your lunch –
maybe don’t eat everything in one go, it cannot be healthy. Now, gotta go, the investigation is waiting!

‘Sit down,’ Amy’s voice stops him in the doorway. ‘We have lunch to finish. Besides, you didn’t think that I’m doing you a favour. Don’t you think I deserve something back?”

He slowly sits back on his chair and feels dread creeping up his spine. Of course. Amy Pond asking for something in return. It’s only natural. He was stupidly naive thinking he’d get away so easily. For a few minutes nothing happens: Amy is eating, switching between pizza and chicken and he starts to relax. Maybe she didn’t really mean it? Maybe she only joke and won’t have anything in return? Because knowing Amy – and he knows her quite well – if she asks for something, it’ll be something big. Or humiliating. Or both. At least Amy from two years back would do something like this. Who knows what this Amy will do. He puts one last slice of pizza on his plate.

‘So...,’ she starts. ‘What’s the deal with River’s shoes in your apartment?’

He nearly chokes on his food.

‘How do you know that?’ he manages to raps out between coughs.

‘Oh, you know,’ Amy says innocently, but looks at him from under her lashes with morbid curiosity. ‘Rory called to ask how I am and he mentioned that Jack told him that River had left her shoes in your apartment. After a night you spent together. So... What happened?’

‘Nothing happened!’ he exclaims and feels the heat on his cheeks. ‘We were on a crime scene – which by the way, your husband should have been on – and she came straight from a fancy date. She didn’t want to damage her shoes, so she took them off.’

Okay, so that is kind of the truth. Maybe Amy won’t notice.

‘Really?’ she looks at him with narrowed eyes. ‘You have your lying face on.’

‘I don’t have a lying face!’ Except he knows he does – he can feel it right now: it feels like he has a giant neon sign there, flashing ‘liar, liar’ in bright red.

‘You do. And right now, you have it on,’ Amy punctuates every word with a jab of her finger. ‘What exactly happened?’

‘Nothing happened!’ He whines and winces when he hits his hand on the edge of the table. ‘We just went to get milkshakes, that’s all!’

Oh-oh. He was not supposed to say this last part aloud.

‘Milkshakes? Wait, but it was middle of the night. Where would you get milkshakes at this- Oh my god,’ she nearly bounces off the chair in her excitement. ‘You took her to Wilf’s place, didn’t you?’

He nods his head, because now there’s not need to hide the truth anymore. Well, there never was any need to hide it, but for some reason he wanted it to be his secret. Which is silly, because it is not really a secret – he went to get milkshakes with his colleague, that’s all. But he wanted it to remain... private. And he thought that River wanted it as well.

‘-and you’ve known her for what – two weeks? And you already took her there! Unbelievable! It took you over a year to even mention this place to me and Rory!’ Amy releases a breath and he realises she must’ve been talking for some time now. ‘You have a crush on her!’
He’s glad he hasn’t been eating or drinking, because he’d choke.

‘What? Don’t be ridiculous!’ he says quickly. Maybe a little too quickly, because Amy eyes narrow once again. ‘I don’t have a crush on River Song. That’s stupid. And if that’s what you wanted to know in return for looking something up for me – well, you wasted this great opportunity on something perfectly trivial and not interesting,’ he flips his hair.

‘Oi! That is not over, just so you know,’ Amy punches him lightly on the arm. ‘And I didn’t waste anything. I obtained valuable info.’

Amy is smirking and it makes him feel more than a bit uneasy. Smirking Amy is never a good sign. He tries to steer the conversation in another direction – he asks her how she feels, how long it will take to get some information on Octavian and could she please inform him as soon as she gets anything? He thinks that he succeeds in diverting her attention from River and milkshakes – which is nothing she should pay any attention to, since it’s nothing important – but when River calls him and tells him to get back to the office, Amy giggles and makes a kissy face. And he understands that there is no way that Amy will drop the subject.

___

He arrives at the station and heads straight to the office he shares with River. He is slightly out of breath and runs fingers through his hair in feeble attempts to tame it. He might’ve run a few blocks to get here, because his car might’ve had a mind of her own and it might’ve stopped and refused to start again. He had to call car assistance and let them take her to a car mechanic, only to realise – when he wanted to catch a cab – that he left his wallet inside the car. Hence the running and general mess of his hair.

‘Okay, I’m here,’ he huffs once he’s inside the room. ‘What do we have?’

‘We have one of the thugs who worked for Octavian,’ River says, looking up from the computer screen. ‘What happened to your hair? Actually, I don’t want to know. Did you get anything from Amy?’

He nods and takes a sip from a bottle of water he left on his desk.

‘I did. She promised to look for something, ask around. She’ll contact me as soon as she finds anything. What about the guy we found?’

‘Yeah, Clara managed to locate him. His name is Adam Mitchell. 28 years old, he sales used cars now. And he is waiting for us in the interrogation room,’ River sighs. ‘Donna said we’re not getting out of here today unless we get a list of other guys who worked with Octavian.’

‘Anything else?’

‘The usual: attempted car theft, vandalism, indecent public behaviour,’ River gets up from her chair. ‘Come on, we can’t keep him waiting, can we?’

They walk to the interrogation room in silence. He’s trying to figure the guy out even before seeing him. If they get this one right, they may get the answer to some questions or at least they may get an idea how to get the answers. They walk inside and there he is: sitting behind a table, wearing dirty jeans, a faded brown hoodie and a nasty scowl, is their only link to Octavian.

‘Hello, Adam, I’m detective John Smith and this is my partner, detective Song,’ he introduces them as they sit on the opposite side of the table.
‘Finally, someone’s here,’ the man sneers. ‘So, why am I here?’

He glances at River and she hands him a file she brought with her. Inside it there’s a photo of Octavian, he shows it to Adam.

‘Do you know this man?’

‘I might,’ he shrugs. ‘And?’

‘You might have known him,’ he says. ‘He’s dead. He was killed a few days ago.’

‘Oh?’ Adam shrugs, but his eyes narrow and his mouth tighten.

‘Yes. Now, we know you worked for him,’ he continues and Adam’s head snaps up. ‘And we know what kind of business it was. We know the whole thing disappeared a few years ago. We know that Octavian disappeared from the radar.’

‘If you know it all, then why am I here?’ Adam asks harshly.

‘We don’t know who worked for him. You’re the only one we found. So we asked you here to help as a bit.’

‘No,’ Adam laughs. ‘I’m not gonna rat my friends out. It ain’t gonna happen, mate. Besides, I don’t remember anything. You can’t force me to remember.’

‘Think it through,’ he starts again while Adam gets up from his seat and looks at them with disgust. ‘It could be good for you. And please, sit down.’

‘Right,’ he sneers. ‘Good for you, more like. I’m not gonna do your job for you. I’m not a traitor. You can’t keep me here.’

‘You deal used cars now, right?’ River speaks for the first time, stopping Adam on his way to the door.

‘Yeah, I do,’ he responds turning towards them. ‘And?’

‘Please, come back here,’ River smiles. ‘Are they good cars?’

‘Oh baby, they are the best,’ he responds leering at her. ‘I could give you a ride.’

River is still smiling, but it is not a friendly smile anymore – and it never was a smile like that. He knows she has something up her sleeve.

‘And where do you get them?’ she asks.

‘Here and there,’ Adam responds with a slightly nervous shrug. ‘Why?’

‘Nothing, just asking. I bet they all have all the paperwork needed, right?’

‘Sure,’ Adam swallows and wipes his hands on his trousers.

‘And none of them could already have an owner, could they?’ River asks while flipping through a folder laying on her lap. ‘Because you see, we have this file about you and it mentions your attempts at car thievery in the past. But you grew out of it, didn’t you?’

He looks at Adam and oh boy, he will break any second now. He really expected him to be tougher
than that.

‘We could always check it, right River?’ He turns to her. ‘We could go and see his cars and compare them all with the stolen cars registry... It would take what... A day? Two?’

‘Something like that, depending on how much cars he has there,’ River nods. ‘And what we might find there.’

‘I...,’ Adam licks his lips. ‘Uhm...’

‘Yes,’ he asks, feigning disinterest. ‘You’re free to go.’

‘I could help you,’ he blurts out. ‘I can give you the names.’

‘You said you don’t remember them. And that you’re not interested in helping us,’ River says with a cold smile. ‘Changing your mind so soon?’

Adam nods so quickly that he’s fairly sure his neck is going to snap in a few seconds.

‘Okay,’ he nods and gets up from his chair, River following him.

‘No, where are you going?’ Adam asks in a panicked voice. ‘I said I’ll help you!’

‘Relax, mate,’ he snorts. ‘We’re going to get you a piece of paper. And a pencil. That’s all.’

They exit the room and he makes sure that the door is tightly closed behind them, before he lets out a little giggle.

‘Well, that was easy,’ he says while River tells one of the younger policeman to get Adam a piece of paper and let him out of the station once he writes down what he was supposed to write. River nods and when he playfully bumps her shoulder with his, she quietly hisses in pain.

‘I am so sorry!’ he exclaims while they enter their office. ‘What happened? Did I hurt you? I didn’t mean, I just-’

‘It’s okay, sweetie’, she says with a patient smile on her face. ‘It’s just... My shoulders are killing me today. That’s all,’ she starts packing her bag. ‘I think I’m going home now. It’s nearly five, we won’t get anything new at this hour.’

Oh, here goes his plan of going through the new evidence once again. Great.

‘But I thought-‘, great his mouth is once again independent. River turns around in the door and peeks at him curiously. ‘Never mind. You’re right. I’ll check some things and will also head home. Have a nice evening.’

‘Thanks, you too. Oh, and tomorrow morning, we’re going to see Dorium Maldovar. Don’t forget about it,’ she says and with that she disappears behind the door.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title from Lorde’s 'Buzzcut Season'. and oh, a märklin rifle is a thing that exists. google it if you're interested. it's huge.
He dreams about dancing. Or to be more precise: he dreams about watching someone dance. He doesn’t know who it is, it’s all a blur of colours: pale gold and red, and black, with flecks of white. The person – he assumes it’s a woman, but he is not sure – twirls around the room, getting closer and closer to him, and getting away every time he tries to capture her and see her face. But this time he will catch her, he’s sure: she twirls and twirls and twirls in some mad dance, his eyes follow her every movement and he starts feeling a bit dizzy, but she’s tantalizing close to him and he extends his hand and his fingers graze her arm: warm and soft, and he wants to tighten them around her hand and pull her closer to him-

_Thud, thud, thud._

_Thud, thud, thud._

What the hell? He slowly opens his eyes and glances at the clock on his nightstand. 6:26am.

_Thud, thud, thud._

It takes him a few seconds to realise that someone is knocking – no, banging – on his door. Who would come here on such an ungodly hour?

He gets out of his bed, nearly tripping on his duvet. Whoever is behind his door keeps on knocking and he’s pretty sure that all of his neighbours are already awake and ready to murder him.

‘What the he-,’ and the words stop in his throat, because it’s no one else but River standing on his doorstep. ‘Uhm. What are you doing here?’

‘I told you that we’re going to meet Dorium today,’ she passes him in the door and lets herself inside his flat. ‘We have ten minutes, get dressed. Right, I never thought I’d ever use this sentence.’

‘What?’ he mumbles sleepily. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Take a shower. Put some clothes on. Make your hair look presentable,’ she lists. ‘Quick!’

He is so confused that he does exactly what she tells him to. 8 minutes later, they’re walking down the stairs and he moans about the fact that he didn’t have time to eat breakfast.

‘I’ll buy you one once we’re done,’ River says with a roll of her eyes. ‘Hop in,’ she mentions a black Volkswagen standing on a parking lot and quickly unlocks it.

He slides into the passenger seat and he barely manages to close the door, when River starts the car.

‘You’re sitting on a file you were supposed to study,’ River sighs. ‘But looking at you, I doubt you’d get anything in there. Okay. So, what do you need to know?’

‘Why are we going there so early?’

‘Because the club Dorium currently runs – ‘Demons run’ – just closed for the night. Or the day, depending how you look at it,’ River patiently explains. ‘No clients, minimal guards, he’s there counting the money he made through the night. He won’t expect us now.’
'Okay, we catch him off guard,’ he says slowly. ‘He runs the club, fine. But from what I gathered, he is also involved with the mob? Why can’t we just arrest him?’

River takes a sharp turn that sends him into the door before explaining.

‘Because it’s not beneficial for us. And he’s not involved with the mob. Well, not only with them. He’s involved with everyone. Whatever happens in this city, sooner or later it will be connected to Dorium. He makes business with everyone. As long as he makes money and it isn’t too dangerous or too illegal – he’s game,’ the car speeds up and River manoeuvres with ease through the slowly building traffic. ‘He has information about everyone and everything. And he happily trades it.’

‘I see. So he’s kind of a information whore, isn’t he?’ he comments and River smirks at that. He has no idea how she can look so nice so early in the morning and how she can use her brain so effectively at such an ungodly hour. Maybe the secret is in the hair.

‘Anything else you want to know?’ she asks him.

‘Yeah... Do you really have to drive so fast? We’re far over the speed limit,’ he says a little nervously. River throws him a look that clearly says ‘are you kidding me?’

‘The quicker we get there, the sooner we leave and the faster you’ll get some breakfast,’ she points out and presses the accelerator a bit more. He’s sure she’s doing it on purpose, once again trying to unsettle him. He doesn’t react and hopes that if anything happens, the safety belts are working properly.

They stop a few minutes later and he gets out of the car to see a big building with a giant neon sign ‘Demons run’. It’s freshly painted and it’s made to look luxurious – and it does, but in this cheap way. But no matter how much paint and neons the owner will put on it, nothing will change how dirty and unpleasant the neighbourhood is. The streets are littered with trash: empty bottles and cans, broken glass and old paper. The air stinks of piss and something old and stale.

‘It’s awful, isn’t it?’ River says beside him. He can only nod.

‘This is where they found Ten?’ he manages to say.

‘Yes. In the alley behind the club,’ she clears her throat and points her head towards the club’s entrance. ‘You’re ready?’

He nods. It’s show time.

They quickly head towards the entrance that – just like River said – is bouncers free. They make their way to the bar – the air is still heavy with the dry scent smoke and perfumes. There’s a man sitting behind the bar, wearing a deep purple tunic with golden patterns sewed on it. He’s big, he’s fat, he’s bald, he’s... blue. It’s not a trick of light – the man sitting behind the bar, one he assumes to be Dorium Maldovar – is blue. Maybe he is just still very, very sleepy and sees things that are not true, but it couldn’t be that severe, right? He sneaks a glance at River who behaves like nothing is out of ordinary. There are two possible explanations: Dorium is not blue and he’s just seeing things or he is blue, but River is used to it. And none of these help him in the slightest.

‘Good morning, Dorium,’ River says in a pleasant voice. ‘Was the night good for the business?’

Dorium’s head snaps back.

‘Oh. Detective Song,’ Dorium slowly raises his head and looks at her. ‘I’d say it’s a pleasure to meet you, but we both know I’d be lying.’
‘Dorium, Dorium Dorium,’ River says while sitting opposite him. He quickly sits on the bat stool next to her. ‘You hurt me. Why so much aversion? ’

‘Should I list the reasons chronologically or alphabetically? On our first meeting you pretended to be a high class escort, dressed up as Cleopatra to arrest one of my patrons. Second meeting? When the bouncers refused to let your partner and you in, you knocked them down, you arrested one of my very important clients and your partner picked up my bartender. Do I need to go on?’ Dorium sighs and his eyes land on him. ‘Speaking about your partner, where is he?’

‘Jack got temporarily reassigned. This is my new partner, detective John Smith,’ she responds and his heart sinks a bit at the ‘temporarily’ part. But that’s it – they are partners for the time being. That’s all there is.

‘And here I thought you got yourself a puppy,’ Dorium smirks and raises a glass filled with brightly coloured drink to his mouth. ‘Did he even finish the academy?’

‘No, he’s still learning there,’ River speaks before he can cry out and tell Dorium how old he really is. ‘But he already managed to put The Master behind the bars.’

He can’t help but smile when Dorium chokes on his drink and turns his head towards him, eyes wide with surprise and awe. Not so full of yourself now, Mr. Blue Man?

‘I assume you’re not here to talk about detective Smith’s cases.’ Dorium recovers amazingly quickly, masking his embarrassment with an uneasy smile. ‘What do I owe the pleasure then?’

‘We’re here to talk about the murder of this man,’ he pulls out a photo of Octavian and slides it towards Dorium.

Dorium glances at the picture and probably pales slightly – it’s difficult to tell under all this blue.

‘Oh?’ He says after a while. ‘Sorry, but I don’t know this man. It’s a shame he was murdered, but I-’

‘Really, Dorium? We’re going to play this game?’ River rolls her eyes. ‘We know that you knew him. We know he worked for you. Don’t make it more difficult than it needs to be, okay?’

‘If you know that he worked for me, what else do you need?’ Dorium shrugs. ‘Yes, I knew him. Yes, he worked for me. But it was a long time ago. And the job he did for me was only security.’

‘Yes, we do know about it as well,’ he replies with a small smile. ‘Now, tell us something we don’t know about Octavian.’

‘He was smart. And ruthless. He knew exactly what the market needed and he provided it. He was caught only because one of the brainless idiots working for him lost something during... an operation he performed,’ Dorium smirks. ‘After this incident I stopped working with him, but he didn’t hold it against me. He knew I have a reputation to maintain.’

‘Your reputation, of course,’ River clears her throat. ‘When did you find out about his death? And who told you?’

‘I had no idea about-’ Maldovar starts, but River glares at him and he sighs in defeat. ‘I knew about it Sunday morning. Around 5am. A friend of mine called me. He knew I worked with Octavian.’

‘Did your friend mention that it was probably an execution?’ he asks Dorium.

‘An execution?’ Dorium cringes at this word. ‘You really use the most awful words, detective Smith.
He was killed, yes, but calling it an execution? That’s an exaggeration.’

‘He was killed with 2 bullets, 16mm each,’ River deadpans. ‘His head was blown clear off. So no, detective Smith does not exaggerate.’

This silences Dorium for a few moments.

‘I see,’ he finally says. ‘Am I to understand that it was a professional job?’

‘We believe so,’ River nods her head. ‘And you see, it’s funny, because we believe that a few months ago he got in touch with a policeman in Manchester. We assume he passed some information about The Silence to him. Because he worked for them, didn’t he?’

‘And what is even more interesting, Dorium,’ he says, leaning towards the other man, ‘is the fact that said policeman is dead. Along with two others. All of them worked on cases concerning the Silence.’

‘What do you expect me to do?’ Dorium says abruptly. ‘Solve the case for you? Nod at everything you say?’

‘No. We expect you to help us,’ River responds calmly. ‘Maybe you heard something – and you must have. It was an execution, Dorium. It must’ve been planned. And you like no one else know what is going on in this city.’

‘You really think that someone came to me and said ‘hey, we’re going to kill Octavian’?’’ Dorium looks at them in disbelief.

‘Nah, nothing like that happened,’ he says. ‘But someone must’ve said that he is becoming a problem. Someone must’ve noticed that their previous poster boy is leaking information about the worker. It must’ve made someone unhappy.’

‘I... Look, all I know is that yes, they did realise he’s leaking information. They have him a warning, but he ignored it,’ Dorium licks his lips and continues. ‘At first the case didn’t go that high and they dismissed it. But recently it got to the Monks.’

Oh. The Headless Monks. The group at the very top of the Silence hierarchy – called that because most of them remain illustrious and unknown. The mysterious monks.

‘The Monks?’ River repeats. ‘It means that Octavian must’ve had something serious on them. Some real evidence.’

‘I guess,’ Dorium shrugs. ‘I wouldn’t know. I only know what I’ve been told. And I’ve been told that Octavian made enough noise to alarm the Monks.’

‘What else have you been told?’ River asks, staring at him so intently that Dorium starts squirming in his seat a little.

‘No, nothing else, I swear, I-‘

‘It’s okay, we believe you. Right, John?’ River says and he quickly nods. ‘And we have a proposition for you.’

They have a proposition for him? Good to know.

‘We want you to ask about Octavian’s death. See if you can find out who did it,’ River continues and he stares at her. ‘We want you to find out whatever you can about the price that was paid for this
one, if anyone else could be on the list-‘

‘No,’ Maldovar interrupts her in a panicked voice. ‘This is not what I do.’

‘Dorium, I think I worded it wrong,’ River’s voice is suddenly cold. ‘It’s not a proposition. It’s a dictation of terms.’

‘River,’ he touches her arm gently and tries to pray her attention from Maldovar who looks like he’s about to pass out. ‘I don’t think it’s the best thing to do. We shouldn’t do it-‘

The look she sends him shuts him up in a second. He has never seen her looking more serious and more determined - her mouth is set in a tight line and she looks like she dares him to challenge her on this one. He knows she’d take it straight to Donna and there would be nothing that could save him from her wrath. He hates dragging civilians into cases, but it seems that here they have no other option. He nods his head with a sigh and River’s features relax a bit.

‘Right,’ she turns her attention back to Dorium who swallows audibly. ‘I’m sorry, I might’ve been a bit harsh. We won’t... We won’t force you to call everyone and get the information out of them. We do not want any harm to fall on you. But we expect you to help us on this one. Full cooperation, Maldovar. You hear anything – you call us. Is it understood?’

‘What if I don’t agree?’ Dorium replies sharply. ‘What then? Will you put me in a cell? You know my lawyers will get me out of there in a few hours.’

‘No, we won’t do anything like that,’ he quips in before River can speak up. And he hopes she will get this particular idea of his and go with it. ‘Instead we will just take you for a questioning. That’s all. But we’ll make sure that everyone will know where we’re taking you.’

‘We will ask you a few questions, that’s all, Dorium. A few innocent questions,’ River says and he’s never been so impressed with any of his work partners. Finally, someone who gets him and his way of thinking. ‘Or maybe we won’t even ask you anything. Maybe you’ll just spend a few hours at the station. I wonder, how your friends and clients would react to something like that? And would they believe you if you said that you didn’t say anything? That it was nothing, just a meaningless chit-chat?’

‘We could take you for questioning more than once, you know,’ he adds and Dorium’s head snaps in his direction. ‘But I am sure that everyone would believe you, right? They wouldn’t doubt your sincerity and loyalty, would they?’

Dorium licks his lips and quickly drinks the rest of his drink. River smiles and sends him a look that says ‘we have him now’. And they do – the next word Dorium says sounds like defeat.

‘Fine. I will... I will try to find out what I can,’ Maldovar says quietly. ‘But I need to know that you won’t just throw me to the wolves if anything goes wrong.’

‘We can’t promise you that,’ River says coldly getting up from her chair. ‘We are not your bodyguards. It’s a shame that Octavian is out of business, isn’t it?’

They leave the club, with Dorium cursing them on their way out. He should feel bad about it – they did put him in an uncomfortable situation – but at the moment, he’s mostly amused by the man’s choice of curses. River shoots him a few quizzical looks and it seems like she wants to tell him something, but decides against it. Normally he’d never even think that this is possible, but she looks a bit uncertain.

‘Listen,’ she finally starts while opening the car. The chilly morning wind tumbles her hair and she
tries to tame it with her fingers – without any success. Suddenly he wonders how would it feel to touch her hair, to feel its texture between his fingers and the thought startles him – he shouldn’t have thoughts like that. It’s unprofessional. He takes a step back and slides his hands into his jeans pockets, because this way they won’t find their way into River’s hair. At least that’s what he hopes.

‘... And you didn’t hear a word I just said, did you?’

He snaps back to reality – River is looking at him, her expression somewhere between annoyed and amused. He wonders if she knows what he’s been thinking – or more like trying not to think – about.

‘I... Yeah, sorry, I kind of zoned out,’ he says quickly and she shakes her head, once again sending her curls flying into every direction. He puts his hands even deeper into the pockets.

‘I was just saying – I know it wasn’t exactly... ethical or fair what we did there and I know that you might have problems with that. But we needed to do this, you understand it, right?’ She asks him, looking him straight in the eye. ‘I appreciate what you did there, it was a smart move to... threaten Dorium like that. Or convince him like that,’ her mouth twist in a grin.

‘I’m good at convincing people,’ he says with a wink and gets into his seat. River shoots him another amused look – will he ever be able to get any other reaction from her? - he wonders as he closes the car door behind him. River slides into her seat and starts the car.

‘So how did you like Dorium?’ She asks him while trying to join the morning traffic.

‘He’s a very... colourful person,’ he answers and River snorts at this. ‘Why is he blue? Seriously? It could be medical – but I doubt he suffers from cyanosis. Or is he one of these people who decided to improve his health with nano silver?’

‘None of these,’ River says. ‘It’s a full body tattoo. At least I assume it’s full body, never really checked. Nor I plan to do it.’

‘Wow... Full body? Must’ve taken a lot of time,’ River hums in agreement and nods her head and he looks at her curiously. ‘You know, I’ve been wondering...’

‘Huh? What about?’

‘Did you really dress up as Cleopatra to get in his club?’ He asks quickly, before he can stop himself. Because really, you can’t expect him not to ask this question! And he’s really glad he did ask it, because it seems that for the first time ever, River is lost for words. She opens her mouth a few times, but no response comes out and is it... ‘You’re blushing! You are blushing!’ he exclaims. ‘You so did dress up as Cleo!’

‘Fine! I did,’ she grumbles while parking in front of a small cafe. ‘Once. But it was for work. And I did arrest a head of a mob, so-‘

‘Are there any photos?’ He asks her, unbuckling his seatbelt and leaning into her side. ‘Come on, there must be pictures!’

‘Shut up,’ she mumbles and opens the door. ‘If you want to get breakfast, don’t even mention this again.’

‘Oh come on, I bet you looked great,’ he quickly opens the door and gets out. ‘The guy probably handcuffed himself.’

‘That’s it, you are paying for your own breakfast,’ she tries to appear cross with him, but there’s a smile lurking in the corner of her mouth.
'Sure thing, Song,' he puts an arm around her shoulders and tugs her toward him. ‘Promise that you’ll show me these pics and I’ll pay for yours as well.’

She elbows his side, trying to get away from him, but he only laughs louder and tugs her a bit closer. She stops squirming against him and just sighs in defeat and just like that, they walk to the cafe.

Chapter End Notes

yes, there's a disease called cyanosis. it happens when the tissues near skin have too little oxygen. and yes, if you overdo nano-silver, you may turn blue. or blue-grey, it depends. google for 'argyria' if you're interested.
chapter title from 'first time caller' by white lies.
They arrive at the station an hour later and the place is slowly filling with people and smell of coffee. It’s barely 8:30am and he cannot recall the last time he’s been at work so early. River has a rather good influence on him – not that it’s something he’d admit out loud, especially not to her. Donna is not in her office yet, but Rory is already sitting at his desk, waving at them the second he sees them.

‘I have something for you,’ he says when they approach him. ‘Well, Amy has something for you.’

‘Already?’ He asks in amazement. ‘Where it is?’

‘In your office,’ Rory looks up. ‘Amy wants to give it to you in person.’

‘Oh great! Let’s go, Song!’ He twirls around and nearly runs into River standing next to him. Things are moving forward: Amy is in his office with some new material they could work with and- Amy is in his office. ‘Wait. You let Amy into our office?’

‘Hey, she let herself in there,’ Rory shrugs and River snorts quietly. ‘I didn’t stand a chance.’

‘Thanks for nothing, Rory. I bet she’s having a field day there, going through all the reports and evidence.’

River and he run into their office – okay, he runs, River calmly walks and greets everyone on her way. He opens the door with what he hopes is a dramatic flair and not just a loud and anti-climatic thud. Just like he suspected – Amy is sitting at his desk, scrolling through something on his computer.

‘Aha!’ he shouts and strides in her direction. ‘Here you are! You know that this is my private computer that contains details about ongoing investigation?’

‘Yeah. And?’ Amy looks at him, completely uninterested in what he might have to say. Her expression changes to utter glee the second River enters the room. ‘River! Good morning! Come here. We haven’t seen each other in ages!’

River laughs brightly at this and comes closer to them. She helps Amy get up from his chair and hugs her. Amy seems to babble a thousand words per second: she’s telling River off for not visiting them more often, asking about her dates, complaining about being coped up at home, asking her how he’s doing – at which he makes a sound of protest, because really, he is right here! Amy only scoffs and sits on a chair next to his desk.

‘You should be nice to me,’ she glares at him. ‘I got you what you asked for. In less than a day.’

‘Yes, and you also went through the files on my computer,’ he snatches the usb drive she hands him. ‘Can you tell me why is it always my computer you choose to hack?’

‘Because I haven’t figured River’s password yet,’ Amy responds with a smile and River chuckles from behind her desk. ‘While yours is always the same: fezzes are cool without spaces.’

‘Amy!’ He exclaims embarrassed and looks at River who’s trying her best not to laugh out loud. ‘You cannot just tell everyone my password. And besides, fezzes are cool.’
‘Whatever,’ she shrugs her arms and waits for him to copy the content of her USB to his PC. Suddenly, she jerks in her chair and looks from him to River. ‘Wait. Did you come in together?’

Oh no.

‘Yeah,’ River says absent-mindedly, going through some reports on her desk. ‘We got breakfast, then came here.’

He can see the wheels in Amy’s head turning and twisting – and that is never a good sign.

‘Oh, you ate breakfast? Together?’ She pries in what she must think is an innocent manner.

‘Of course that we got it together,’ he responds quickly and pushes the memory drive in her hand. ‘Shouldn’t you go somewhere, Pond? Home for example?’

‘And why did you get breakfast together?’ She asks River, completely ignoring him. ‘Is it some special occasion or something?’

‘What?’ River looks up from whatever she’s been reading. ‘No. We met with Maldovar in the morning. We talked with him and well, presented him with an offer he couldn’t refuse. Then we went to eat something.’

He has never seen Amy Pond looking more disappointed and shocked. Her mouth is slightly open as if she’s trying to understand what she just heard. He smirks a bit at that. Take that, Pond, you nosy ginger.

‘Amy, is everything alright?’ River asks looking at her with concern.

‘Yeah, sure, everything is just splendid,’ Amy smiles and turns around to smack him on the arm. ‘You’re an idiot.’

‘Eh, what did I do?’ He asks and rubs the place she hit.

‘Nothing. You did nothing,’ Amy glares at him angrily. ‘I cannot believe that.’

‘Okay, I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ River speaks, looking a bit lost, ‘but Amy, you said you have something for us?’

‘I... Yes, I do,’ Amy shakes herself out of surprised state and motions to his computer. ‘What I managed to get you are various reports and articles, excerpts from books, interviews with guys who broke out from the mob. There’re about 20 articles, from the last year or so. I have no idea if any of them is about the guy you’ve been investigating, but I guess that’s your job to figure it out,’ she shrugs. ‘Of course, none of them is mentioned by their real name, but if someone sets off your alarms, you can always try and contact the author. But they may not agree to cooperate. Not everyone is as gracious and helpful as I am.’

‘I think you meant ‘not as nosy’,’ he mocks her and she gasps with outrage. ‘That being said: thanks for the effort. It was quick.’

‘It’s not like I have much to do anyway,’ Amy strokes her stomach gently. ‘It was nice, doing something. You’ll let me know if you find anything?’

‘I’m not sure we can do that, Amy,’ River says and smiles apologetically. ‘You know how it is. It’s confidential and you are not-‘
‘Yeah, yeah, I get it,’ Amy sighs and gets up from the chair. ‘I’ll just ask Rory about everything. Okay, off I go. Have fun kids!’

‘Do you need a ride back home?’ River asks quickly. ‘Just give me a minute, I’ll get my keys and we can go.’

‘Thanks, but Rory already promised to drive me back. He has to pick up something from the lab, he’ll leave me home on his way there. But if you want to do something for me, come for dinner on Friday. John will be there as well, won’t you, John?’ Amy glares at him with a smile that is slightly too cheerful. ‘I’ll cook something nice. Or we order something, because I cannot bother with cooking anymore, to be honest. So... See you two on Friday!’

She leaves the room, closing the door behind her and for the briefest of seconds, he fears for his future. Because Amy is clearly planning something – and this something clearly has everything to do with River. He sneaks a quick glance in her direction: she looks at the door behind which Amy just vanished and there’s a half-smile playing on her lips. Does she knows that Amy is planning? Okay, this is impossible, because he has no idea what Amy is planning – hell, Amy herself probably has no idea what she’s planning. If she’s planning anything, that is.

‘Alright,’ River clears her throat. ‘I have no idea what that was. Let’s just... You want me to help you with the articles?’

‘Sure, sure, that would be great,’ he nods. Anything to divert her attention from Amy and from her crazy plans and even crazier suggestions – that she blessedly did not voice here. ‘I’ll send you first ten on the list, okay?’

‘Fine. I’ll go and get some tea. You want one as well?’ She asks him, standing in the doorway.

‘Nah, I’m fine.’

He’s in the middle of his first article, when she comes back. She quietly sits in her chair and starts opening the files he sent her. For the few next hours they don’t speak much, except for the occasional ‘anything?’ and ‘no, nothing’. Screening the articles and deciding whether or not the author talks about Octavian is tiring and requires the utmost focus from both of them. He gets lost in the various crimes committed by the men from the articles, their cries for help, their epiphanies and coming back on the right side of the law. He reads a paragraph after a paragraph, an article after an article and hardly notices how the time flies. It’s only when he hears quiet knocking on the door, he lifts his head from the monitor.

‘Come in,’ River calls out, stretching on her chair.

‘Hi guys,’ Clara walks into the room. ‘I’m going to get some lunch, do you want something? You’ve been cooped in here for hours now, you must be hungry.’

‘What time is it?’ He asks and looks at the clock hanging on the wall. ‘Shit, it’s nearly 2pm. I haven’t realised.’

‘So, do you want something?’ Clara repeats looking at him and River.

‘No, but thank you, dear,’ River smiles at her. ‘I think I’ll grab something once I am done with these articles. I just want to get it over with.’

‘Hey, you offered to help me,’ he protests and River opens her mouth to respond, but Clara stops a discussion that would undoubtedly ensue.
‘Okay, okay, don’t bicker, better tell me if you found anything,’ Clara says, sitting on the edge of River’s desk.

‘Nothing,’ River says, shaking her head. ‘Except that life on the wrong side of the law is apparently a magnet for chicks. These guys scored one girl after another.’

‘Oh, maybe John should leave this job and become a criminal,’ Clara smirks and looks at him. ‘That way he’d get a girlfriend. Maybe that’s the only way?’ She and River start laughing and he feels warmth rising on his cheeks.

‘Oi!’ he tries to speak over their giggles, but that makes them laugh even harder. ‘I could get a girlfriend, thank you very much. I don’t need one at the moment.’

‘Yeah, chasing a crazy psycho killer is more than enough for you, isn’t it?’ Clara snorts and gets up. ‘No wonder you don’t have a girlfriend – no girl could compete with this, right? Or rather, no sane girl would stand it.’

‘Hey, Oswald,’ he says and throws a pencil in her direction, but misses. It lands in River’s cup, which earns him another glance from her and another fit of giggles from Clara. ‘Just so you know: I am a great catch. Tell her, River!’

‘He is a great catch, Clara,’ River turns towards the young woman. ‘Any woman would be lucky to have him,’ she continues and his heart swells at her words. He has never expected to hear such praises from River. What a pleasant surprise. ‘That is of course once he grows out of this baby face, ridiculous clothes and the need to either travel around the world or chase serial killers. What all of that happens, women will stand in a queue to have their chance with him,’ River finishes with a playful smirk on her lips.

‘Buuuuuuuuuuuurn!’ Clara shrieks and quickly leaves a room when he aims a handful of pencils at her. He sighs in defeat and looks accusingly at River.

‘That wasn’t very nice!’

‘I’m sorry, sweetie,’ she responds with a grin. ‘You’re just so easy to wind up and I just can’t stop myself. And on a day like today, I need some entertainment.’

‘And your choice of entertainment is to mock me?’ He glares at her in what he hopes is an angry way, but for some reasons it makes River laugh again.

‘I told you before – you’re too young to think about any other kind of entertainment, sweetie,’ River winks at him and he feels blush creeping us his neck again. ‘Now, don’t sulk, go back to work. If we don’t find anything here, we need to look somewhere else.’

He nods and clears his throat, all while trying very hard not to think about other forms of entertainment River might’ve been talking about. But the images just pop into his head, one after another and he’s wondering what if- No, no. Focus on the job. Back to reading the articles, right now. He turns his gaze back to the monitor – River’s deeply focused on her own monitor and whatever text is displayed there, not that he’s looking at her. Because he is looking at his own monitor and reading this fascinating article about a mobster who called himself The Fisher King and after 25 years of stealing money and beating up people, he decided to become a proper and honest citizen. Shame that he first had to spend 20 years in prison, but hey – it’s the thought that counts.

He opens another document and when he reads the first paragraph, he feels like he might’ve found something. He reads the article quickly – it’s relatively short, only 6 pages, but when he finishes it,
he’s sure – it’s about Octavian. They found him. He quickly reads the name of the journalist and it stirs something in his brain and- Oh.

Oh. Oh.

‘Something happened?’ River asks him with a frown on her face. ‘You’ve been repeating ‘oh’ for the last 30 seconds or so.’

‘Come here,’ he quickly says. ‘I think you should read something.’

She looks at him curiously and quickly walks over to his desk. He points at a few paragraphs and she leans over him to read them. With every word she scans, a frown on her face disappears. When she finishes, she looks at him with a smile.

‘You found him,’ she says. ‘That’s him, that must be him.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I think as well. But that’s not all,’ River raises her eyebrow questioningly and he speaks again. ‘Look at the name of the author.’

River leans again and quickly reads the part of the text he points at and her breath hitches.

‘Isn’t it-‘ she asks and he nods before she can finish the question.

‘It’s most definitely is,’ he replies with a short nod.

‘Oh,’ River looks at him with wide eyes. He cannot help himself and he bops her nose with his finger.

‘Oh indeed.’

‘Okay, let’s go over this once again,’ Donna says and starts rubbing her temples. ‘You want to tell me that the article about Octavian was written by Rose Tyler? The Rose Tyler? Ten’s ex?’

‘We believe so, yes,’ River nods her head and Donna swears under her breath. ‘We are still checking the facts, but we are pretty sure it’s her.’

‘It must be her,’ he quips in and leans towards Donna. ‘It is a common name, but she was a journalist, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Donna replies and sighs. ‘And she was writing about people like Octavian. That’s how she and Ten met. Then they broke up and she left London. Hell,’ she murmurs, ‘this case is getting more and more complicated. I don’t like it.’

‘Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out,’ River offers her a calming smile. ‘We just need more time.’

Someone knocks on the door and without even waiting for Donna’s call, they enter the room.

‘Harkness,’ Donna sighs at the sight of Jack. ‘I really don’t have time for any of your nonsense, so please, go away.’

‘No can do, boss,’ Jack says. ‘I actually have something for these two,’ he nods at River and him. ‘We got all the guys who worked for Octavian. Well, most of them anyway. We have their whereabouts. Some of you needs to figure out in which order we should bring them in.’
‘I’ll do it,’ River stands up. ‘I’ll take care of it and you discuss the article further.’

‘You’re sure?’ he asks her quickly and she nods her head, already on her way to the door. She starts discussing something with Jack and they quietly close the door behind them.

‘Okay, where were we?’ Donna speaks again and he turns his head in her direction. ‘Oh right. The bloody coincidence of Rose writing the article about a guy who worked for the Silence and was killed for possibly leaking information. What are the chances of that?’

‘One in a million,’ he responds with a smile and she rolls her eyes at him. ‘But one-in-a-million-chance usually happens nine out of ten times.’

They stay silent for a while, both lost in their own thoughts. It’s Donna who breaks the silence.

‘John,’ she starts hesitantly, ‘I know I don’t say it enough, but thank you for helping us with this one. It- it means a lot.’

‘No problem,’ he smiles. ‘I think I missed that. This whole madness.’

‘Good to know,’ she smiles back at him. ‘And I’m glad to hear that you had no problems with adjusting to your new partner.’

‘Well,’ he shrugs and flips his hair, ‘we had some problems in the beginning.’

‘You did, yeah,’ Donna says, but she looks at him with amusement in her eyes. And he already knows that this conversations is heading somewhere... bad. ‘But you got over it quickly, didn’t you? I heard you took her for a milkshake.’

He groans. Of course Wilf told Donna about it. He should have known.

‘It was just a-a,’ he stutters, ‘we just went there-‘

‘On a date?’ Donna grins and he shakes his head.

‘No, we went there as colleagues. After a case.’

‘Yeah, after visiting a crime scene with a victim splashed all over the walls. I saw the pictures,’ she points a finger at him. ‘You two must be a match made in heaven if you ended up drinking milkshakes after that. And talking for hours.’

‘Hey, that was a one-time thing and it was private and-,’ he doesn’t have a chance to finish his thoughts, because Donna interrupts him.

‘Look, I have nothing against it. It’s better if you date than try to kill each other – and let me just say that at first I was sure that the latter will happen. So it’s all good, John,’ she beams at him, but her face clouds after a few seconds. ‘As long as you don’t shag in my office.’

‘I-,’ he desperately tries to say that nothing like that will happen, that he and River are only partners and they have a chance of becoming friends – no shagging involved, but Donna interrupts him once again.

‘No, actually, don’t shag anywhere in the building, okay? We don’t have money to properly clean this place.’

He once again tries to say something, but this time he’s interrupted by Clara barging into the room.
'We got her,' she says quickly, sounding slightly out of breath. ‘We ran the check and it’s her. It’s Ten’s ex who wrote this article.’

Chapter End Notes

introduce more canon characters! because why the fuck not? the more, the merrier. that's what they say at least.

thank you for all the kudos and comments, they all really mean a lot. it's nice to know that you're enjoying this fic :3.

chapter title from 'she's thunderstorms' by Arctic Monkeys.
For the next few days River and he are busy with questioning all the men who used to work for Octavian. Every questioning is similar:

No, I don’t know this man.

I think you do know him.

I might’ve worked for him.

Why did he stop his business?

I don’t know.

After a while, he doesn’t recognise the faces anymore, they all just look the same: troubled youth turned troubled adult, dirty clothes and shifty eyes. They found nothing new, except for a vague information that Octavian had some family problems and that’s why he stopped. But they have nothing else, so when Friday afternoon comes, both River and he are exhausted and annoyed with lack of results. Once the last questioning ends, he feels like dancing – they might’ve not found anything substantial, but at least they don’t have to spend any more time asking questions to brainless thugs. As soon as the last of them leaves the interrogation room, River disappears somewhere – before he has a chance to ask if she wants to get some lunch. He’s not disappointed, he’d just prefer to eat in a nice company, rather than alone. He goes to a small bar near the station and eats a sandwich with fish fingers – a dish he suggested to the cook a few years ago. It’s been in the menu for all this time and even though they don’t serve it with custard – they are not that outrageous, they claim – it’s still tasty. He briefly wonders about his plans for weekend: a dinner with Ponds tonight, but nothing planned for Saturday and Sunday. He’ll make something up as he goes along, he decides, he’s great at that. He walks back into the station and looks around – people are slowly coming back from the lunch break, sitting behind their desks and counting minutes until they can leave work and start weekend. He starts walking towards his office, but Jack waves his hand at him, so he goes over to his desk.

‘I’ve been looking for you,’ Jack says quickly. ‘We have results from the lab. They identified the white residue that was found in the place from which the killer shot Octavian.’

‘Took them long enough,’ he snorts.

‘Yeah, but they had every right to take their time,’ Jack shrugs and gives him a piece of paper. ‘Look at this. I’d never even suspect something like that.’

He quickly scans the lab’s report.

‘What?’ He looks at Jack who just shrugs his shoulders. ‘Powder from bamboo stem? How did that even get there?’

‘Don’t ask me. The guys at the lab also have no idea, they are just over the moon that they managed to identify it. They’re going through their databases, but since it can be anything, it may take a while.’
‘At least we know what it is,’ he claps Jack on the shoulder. ‘Thanks, mate. Anything else?’

‘Yes,’ Jack wiggles his eyebrows and leans towards him. ‘There’s a hot blonde in your office, waiting for you.’

‘Oh, River’s already back? Maybe she’ll know what the bamboo thing is,’ he responds. ‘But you know, you shouldn’t talk about her like that. Not that she isn’t hot, but you know, she’s our co-worker and—’ Jack snorts and shakes his head at that. ‘What?’ he asks confused.

‘I was not talking about River,’ he says with a smirk playing in the corner of his mouth. ‘But good to know your first association was of her. I’m sure she’ll be happy to hear that.’

‘What? No, I don’t- I just was, you know, talking and it doesn’t—’ he tries to find some way out of this and he really needs to control his mouth a bit more. Because if River hears this one — and knowing Jack she most certainly will — he won’t hear the end of it. Which is just great, he really needs River to be more smug. Like she wasn’t full of herself enough! If someone in here needs an ego bust, it’s him: he feels a bit underappreciated and always in the shadow cast by River and her gigantic hair.

‘Okay, okay, don’t sweat, I won’t tell her anything,’ Jack looks at him with a mix of curiosity and amusement. ‘Anyway: Rose Tyler is in your office. She finally got time to come here, she’s been waiting for about 10 minutes.’

‘Rose is here? And you let her into my office?’ He sighs. ‘Why do you just let nosy journalists into my office? One day it’ll end in a disaster, I am telling you—’

‘Hey, hey! Rose is trustworthy,’ Jack cuts his monologue short. ‘I was on the phone with the lab, couldn’t take care of her. Now, instead of babbling, go to her. It’s rude to keep a lady waiting, don’t you know?’

‘Fine, I’m going,’ he twirls around and goes to his office.

‘You forgot the lab report!’ Jack shouts behind him, but he only waves his hand at him. It’s not important right now. What is vital at this moment, is the fact that someone who can give them some answers about Octavian and his involvement with the Silence is just a few feet away. He feels a bit nervous when he opens the door to his office. He knows Rose, of course, but all he really knows about her is that she’s Ten’s ex and a journalist. They’ve met once or twice, over two years ago, when she was still with Ten and that’s it. He’s not sure how he should handle it: should he introduce himself? Offer his condolences over Ten’s death?

She’s sitting in a chair next to his desk, her back turned to him, but when he walks into the room and the door creeks, she turns her head to him. She hasn’t changed much — at least from what he remembers: her hair dyed pale blonde and slightly past her shoulder, her eyes dark and gentle, and there’s still this air of youth and innocence around her.

‘Hello, I’m sorry you had to wait,’ he says walking through the room. ‘John Smith.’

‘I remember,’ she takes his outstretched hand and smiles. Her voice is warm and friendly and her hand fits nicely in his. ‘We’ve met before.’

‘Yeah, I know, I just wasn’t sure you’d remember,’ he smiles in return and sits behind his desk. ‘I’m so sorry that you have to come here on such short notice, but we found something and we just had to bring you in. Just remember – it’s not an investigation, we want to ask you a few questions about an article you wrote.’
Her face tenses a little.

‘I wrote quite a few articles,’ she responds slowly. ‘Which one do you mean?’

He wants to respond, but opening door stop him mid-sentence. River walks into the room, a cup of tea in one hand, in another a piece of paper. How she managed to open the door is beyond him – it’s probably one of these secrets and skills she hides in her hair.

‘You left the lab’s report at Jack’s desk,’ she says without raising her head from the paper in her head. ‘Did you see what they find? Bamboo powder with traces of-’ She looks up and notices Rose, sitting opposite him. Her eyes widen a bit in surprise, but she covers her initial shock with a smile. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know that you’re... You must be Rose Tyler,’ she says to the young woman who quickly nods.

‘Rose,’ he clears his throat, ‘this is detective River Song, my partner.’

Both women eye each other for a few seconds, but some kind of a truce and understanding must occur between them, because they smile at each other.

‘We are so grateful that you could make it so quickly,’ River starts, setting her mug on her desk. ‘It’s just a few questions but-‘

‘Yeah, I know, John already told me that,’ Rose nods into his direction..

‘Oh, that’s great,’ River grins and runs fingers through her hair. ‘Sorry, do you want something to drink? Tea? Coffee? And I’m afraid that’s all we can offer you.’

‘I-... Tea would be fine, thank you,’ Rose responds, slightly surprised. ‘Two sugars and milk if that’s not a problem.’

‘Not at all, it’ll take just a second,’ River smiles again and he feels a sense of uneasiness creeping up on him. Since when she’s so nice? Maybe she’s been kidnapped by aliens and that’s just her clone? There’s only one way to check it.

‘River, what about me? Will I also get tea?’ He asks her when she’s on her way to the door.

‘No,’ she throws shortly over her shoulder. Okay, she’s not an alien clone. This much, this good. He doesn’t start questioning Rose right away – he wants to wait for River, and besides, he wants Rose to relax and trust them. He starts some meaningless chat, he asks her about her work – general and safe questions she happily answers. He learns that she loves her job, even though it’s not exactly glamorous – instead of interviewing movie stars she talks with mobsters and criminals, but she doesn’t mind it one bit. She’s lovely, funny and easy to talk to, and for a moment he forgets why she’s here. It’s only when River re-enters the room with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand that he remembers that Rose is not a girl he met in a cafe, but someone who could help them in an investigation.

‘Here you go,’ River places the mug in front of Rose. ‘Hope it’s okay.’

‘Thank you,’ Rose beams up at her and takes a sip of her tea. ‘It’s perfect.’

‘And where’s mine?’ He whines while River drags her chair next to his. ‘That’s how you take care of your partner, Song?’

‘I told you I’m not going to make you tea,’ she shrugs, grabbing her mug from her desk and sitting
next to him. ‘If you want tea, get it yourself. Hey, what are you doing?’ She looks at him with surprise when he snatches her mug from her hands.

‘What, you told me to get my own tea. So that’s what I’m doing,’ he smirks at her and takes a sip. He immediately regrets his decision, because her tea is strong and bitter, leaving heavy aftertaste in his mouth. ‘Blimey,’ he says between coughs. ‘You could kill someone with this!’

‘That’s what you get for stealing someone’s tea,’ River glares at him, partly annoyed and partly amused by his disgusted face. She takes the mug back and lifts it to her lips with a challenging look in his direction.

‘Well, haven’t you heard about this thing called sugar? It could really improve your life, you know.’

River opens her mouth to reply, but a quiet cough interrupts her. They both jump a bit in their seats and redirect their gazes at Rose sitting opposite them.

‘Uhm, you wanted to ask me some questions?’ She asks them, looking entertained by their exchange.

‘Yes, sorry,’ he quickly says and clears his throat as River shifts in her chair. ‘A few months ago, you wrote an article about a man whom you called ‘The Priest’,’ Rose slowly nods at this. ‘You described him as ‘an ex-businessman who decided to quit his previous line of work’, right?’

‘Yeah, that’s right. But if you’re looking for him or you want to get information about what he’s done – sorry, I will not tell you that. I promised him my utmost discretion, you can’t expect me to-’

‘He’s dead,’ River cuts in, stopping Rose from giving a speech about ethics of journalism. ‘The Priest – or let’s just call him by his real name, okay? - Octavian is dead. He was killed on Saturday.’

‘Are you sure?’ Rose asks a little breathlessly.

‘Yes, we are sure,’ he nods. ‘Two bullets in him do suggest that he was killed.’

‘Also,’ River says in a quiet, but firm voice. ‘Everything we say here is off the record. Just so you know.’

Rose turns her head and answers her with a huff of exasperation. ‘I’m not stupid, you know,’ she barks out. ‘I figured this much.’

‘I was just making sure,’ River responds calmly, but her eyes narrow slightly. ‘You can’t write about it, at least not yet. The investigation is much bigger than you can imagine and any mention of it, any at all, could really do us more harm than good.’

‘Fine,’ Rose says. ‘Okay, it’s off the record. What do you want to know?’

‘Everything,’ he says with a smile. ‘Tell us everything you know.’

‘Uhm, well, I met him about 5 months ago,’ Rose starts hesitantly. ‘I’ve been living in a small city just outside Manchester and one day he just knocked on my door, telling he has a story. I wasn’t interested – I’ve been trying to write a book at the time, so I was busy with my own material, I didn’t need anything else on my plate. But then he dropped the name.’

‘The Silence,’ River cuts in and Rose nods.

‘Yes, that was it. I let him in and we had a pleasant chat – if pleasant can be said about him and his
activities. He told me he wants to start a new life and that he wants to bring some people down.’

‘Did he have the information to do so?’ He asks curiously.

‘I think he might have had,’ Rose shrugs a bit impatiently. ‘I planned more articles about him – in the first one, the one you found we focused more on his background and what he used to do. He was supposed to come to me later, with some more material and evidence, but it didn’t happen.’

‘Did he tell you why he wanted to bring his previous boss and workers down?’ River asks, placing her mug on his desk.

‘He mentioned something about revenge. He said that they were after him and that they started getting to his family. His niece, uhm, she died in a car crash. He was sure it wasn’t an accident, that it was arranged and he wanted to pay them back.’

River and he exchange a quick look – it’s something new, something they never heard before. This is good.

‘Okay,’ River takes a piece of paper from his desk and snatches a pen he’s been fiddling with from his hand. ‘Do you remember when this accident happened? And where?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Rose responds and frowns a bit. ‘I think it was 8 months ago? But I cannot give you a precise date, sorry. But I know it happened in Manchester, so that could help you.’

‘Manchester?’ River raises her head from the notes she’s been taking. ‘You don’t know which police station took this case?’

He glances at her quickly and she nods her head lightly. She’s been thinking the same thing he’s been thinking – that by some miracle, the case of Octavian’s niece’s death could have passed Nine. And they could have met.

‘No, no idea. He might've mentioned it, but it was some time ago, you know,’ Rose responds apologetically.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he gently pats her hand. ‘But could you just take a look at this photo for us?’

He takes out a picture of Nine from a folder laying on his desk and shows it to Rose.

‘Have you ever seen or heard about this man?’ he asks her and notices that her eyes widen a bit.

‘I did. I think that- No, I am sure that he’s the guy Octavian worked with,’ Rose says excitedly. ‘He told me that he knows this policeman who works on the Silence cases and would like nothing more than to bring them all down. From what I gathered, the copper was a bit bloodthirsty.’

‘Fine, but why would he agree to work with someone like Octavian?’ River voices the same question that has been on his mind all this time. ‘It doesn’t make sense. He had no proof that Octavian would deliver anything of substance. Why would he risk working with him?’

‘I don’t know,’ Rose lets out a breath. ‘Maybe he had something of value. I mean, he did mention that he has some kind of physical proof.’

‘And you never asked to see it?’ River asks her quickly. ‘Didn’t he offer to present it to you as well?’

‘I didn’t think it was necessary,’ the other woman responds, sounding slightly offended. ‘He talked about it, but I didn’t want to press him. He might’ve thought I don’t believe him and that wouldn’t be
good for the article and the professional relationship I had with him.’

‘Of course, of course, we don’t doubt that you made the right call,’ he quickly reassures her and he feels River’s heavy and questioning gaze on him. He chooses to ignore it and turns his full attention to Rose. ‘But did he ever mention what kind of an evidence it was? Documents? Some kind of reports? Did he have it with him? Maybe he put it somewhere for safe-keeping?’

‘He could have done it, I guess,’ Rose says impatiently. ‘Or he could give it to the policeman. You should ask him.’

‘Yeah, it’s not possible since he’s dead too,’ the words leave his mouth before he can stop them and Rose’s eyes flash with curiosity.

‘He’s dead? The policeman, I mean. Do you think these two cases are connected?’ She fires one question after another and he has no idea how to respond to any of them.

‘I think that’s all we need for now, thank you,’ River adds quickly with a forced smile. ‘Thank you so much for your time, you really helped us.’

‘Oh, sure, no problem,’ Rose stands up and looks at River a bit sourly. ‘Glad to be of help.’

‘Listen, we might need you again,’ he stands up abruptly, nearly knocking his chair down. ‘To ask about some, uhm, things?’

‘I’m staying in London for a few more days,’ Rose replies, tilting her head with a warm smile and accepting his outstretched hand. ‘Someone here must have my number, so feel free to call me if you need anything.’

He watches her walking away and decides that he’ll get her number from whoever has it. It’s for the investigation, right? She’s an important witness and they may need to contact her again and surely, it’ll be quicker if he contacts her, right? The sound of closing door stops his thoughts and he turns his attention back to River who’s looking at him with an unreadable expression on her face.

‘What?’ He asks, straightening his jacket. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘No, everything’s fine,’ she flashes him a smile and takes her chair back to her desk. ‘Okay, so what do you think?’

‘She’s really nice,’ he nods his head, but the look on River’s face tells him it’s not an answer she wanted. ‘Oh, you mean the other things. We got something new: both the accident and the evidence that Octavian had.’

‘The possible evidence,’ River sighs and sits behind her desk. ‘We don’t even know if it really exists.’

‘Let’s assume it does exists,’ he takes a seat as well. ‘Supposed there is something that Octavian meant to give – or gave Nine – what it could be? Documents he snagged from his bosses?’

‘Doubtful,’ River shakes her head. ‘They’re not stupid enough to have anything on paper. Plus, it’s 21st century.’

‘So we’re talking either an USB stick or some kind of external hard drive.’

‘Or an email. An archive of files. Encrypted messages,’ River lists one thing after another. ‘The possibilities are countless. And we don’t even know if this thing – whatever it might be – exists.’
‘So you think it’s impossible to find then?’ He looks at her.

‘Only a bit impossible,’ she replies with a smirk. ‘Okay, I am not saying it will work, but we could search all the deposit boxes in Manchester’s banks.’

‘Registered to both Octavian and Nine,’ he finishes for her and she quickly nods. ‘If we find something – that’s great, if we don’t – we’ll worry about it later. That’s sorted. What about the accident?’

‘We’ll have to check it out. The reports from Manchester police will have to do, I’m afraid. I doubt we’ll get any CCTV from back then and questioning the witnesses – if there are any – after such a time makes no sense. They won’t remember anything,’ River runs fingers through her hair.

‘Okay, so how do we split? You prefer to look for the secret evidence that may not exist or check out the accident? Or should we flip a coin?’ He asks.

‘No need for that. I’m taking the deposits. And don’t think you got a better deal,’ she warns him. ‘Remember that we already tried to do some business with these guys in the Manchester. It took us ages to get any substantial into out of them and we had to beg them for 3 days to have the files faxed to us,’ she raises her eyebrow and grins when his smile falters. ‘I’m going to Donna, to tell her what we found out. Good luck with your quest.’

He makes a face, but she only rolls her eyes at him and leaves the room. She must’ve joked about the difficulties they experienced with Manchester police, right? As it turns out – she didn’t joke. When she’s back in the room, with a piece of paper he assumes must be a list of all the banks in Manchester, he’s still trying to find someone – anyone – who could inform him about the accident. He keeps being redirected or put on hold and it’s slowly driving him insane. River just smirks at him – oh she knew how it’d look like and what kind of tortures he’d have to endure! – and starts her own search for information. Fortunately for her, the bank managers are much more cooperative than fellow policemen. Unfortunately, none of the banks she calls, stores deposits from either Octavian or Nine. With every phone call she loses some of her patience and engagement, but at least she actually talks with these people. He has to listen to 8bit version of some classical piece he can’t even recognise. But it seems that the fortune decides to finally smile at him: someone picks up and says something other than ‘no, sorry, I can’t help you, but let me direct you to my colleague’. He quickly briefs the Manchester officer in and surprisingly, he gets some results. The man on the other side of the line does remember the accident, he knows where the reports are stored and yes, no problem, he’ll fax them as soon as possible. He puts the receiver down with a sense of accomplishment and looks at River, who stares at him with an raised eyebrow.

‘You gave him a wrong fax number,’ she states flatly. ‘It’ll be sent to someone in the building, but most certainly not to you.’

‘Shit,’ he mutters and scrambles from his chair. ‘I have to get up and check who got it.’ But he doesn’t get a chance to leave the office, because Rory enters it, stack of papers in his hands.

‘Right, so my fax just started spewing these out,’ he waves the reports in the air, ‘and I thought that it’s bizarre, because I didn’t wait for anything. And then I thought ‘who from people working here could mess up their fax number?’ There was only one answer: you.’

River snorts behind her desk and Rory shoots her an amused look. These two seem to be communicating by looks and half words and he always feels that they treat him like a giant child.

‘Give it to me,’ he extends his hand and Rory pushes the papers towards him with a patient sigh. He sits on the edge of the desk and quickly scans through the reports from the accident. River quietly
comes over and reads it with him over his shoulder. It seems that the accident in which Octavian’s niece died was a standard one. Drunk teenagers going back from the party – the driver lost control over the vehicle and they crashed into a tree. Everyone died – 3 victims died from the impact, one of them died during a surgery. No other parties were involved and there were no witnesses.

‘Splendid,’ River groans next to him. ‘Nothing here. Not that I expected anything else, Octavian just came up with some conspiracy theory.’

He nods and puts the papers on his desk. This path is closed, now they need to focus on finding the evidence that Octavian claimed to have.

‘Guys, are you done here?’ Rory asks them. ‘It’s nearly 5pm. We could call it a day, huh? Amy could call for the take out and we could take it on our way, how does it sound?’

Both River and he nod mutely. There’s no point in staying any longer: they won’t squeeze anything else from the banks today as most of them work to 5pm. Besides, River and he did great job today: they really deserve some nice and tasty dinner.

‘Oh, and I hope you won’t mind…,’ Rory says while heading to the door. ‘I also invited Jack and Rose.’

At the mention of Rose’s name, his head snaps up with curiosity. He wants to tell that no, of course they won’t mind, but his body seems to have a mind of his own: instead of opening his mouth, his arms start flailing a bit and his right hand hits a mug Rose left on his desk. It falls down and the remains splash over the carpet – and River’s jeans. He stops breathing for a few seconds, because what should he do now? Apologise? Try to clean up the mess from the carpet? Try to somehow dry her jeans, now splattered with tea?

‘Oh. You’re certainly eager to see Rose again,’ River finally breaks the silence and her next words make the apology stuck in his throat. ‘And just so you know, sweetie, there are other ways to make a girl wet. You may need that knowledge in the future.’

‘River!’ He exclaims while Rory chuckles behind his back. He finds a pack of tissues in his desk and goes over to her.

‘It’s okay, just... Don’t touch anything, okay? And me in particular,’ River says with a sigh and a patient smile on her face, all while trying to soak up some moisture from her trousers. ‘Go without me. I need to get home and change.’

‘Just make sure to get to us, okay?’ Rory says and motions to him to get his things. ‘Amy will be furious if you bail out again. John? Parking lot, 5 minutes, try not to spill anything else,’ and with that, he leaves their office.

‘I’m so sorry, River,’ he starts again. ‘I really didn’t mean to do that, it just-‘

‘It’s okay, it’s not a big deal,’ she says with a wave of her hand. ‘Just pack your things and go, because Rose is waiting,’ she adds with a smirk.

‘River!’ He whines.

‘Oh, sorry, sweetie. I meant dinner,’ she winks while he packs his things and retrieves his jacket from his chair. ‘Dinner is waiting. Off you go, don’t keep her- it waiting!’

He wants to protest and tell her that she’s wrong and he absolutely doesn’t want to spend more time with Rose, but she just ushers him out of their room. Now he really has no choice, but go to Rory
and get into his car, right?

‘Okay, we can go now,’ he says when he finally finds Rory on a parking lot. ‘Wait, where are Jack and Rose?’

‘On the Titanic,’ Rory replies with a smug grin and gets into his car. He huffs and hops into the passenger seat.

‘A Titanic joke? Really? Are you still living in the ‘90s?’ He snorts and opens his mouth to mock Rory some more, but Rory gives him an amused look and pointedly raises his eyebrow.

‘I may be living in the 90s,’ Rory says, slowly starting the engine, ‘but at least I don’t spill coffee on my co-workers.’

‘Very funny,’ he replies grumpily. ‘First: it was tea. Second: it was an accident! It could’ve happened to anyone.’

‘Yeah, but it happened to you,’ Rory snorts and he prepared himself for another mocking remark, but it doesn’t come. ‘Now, back to your question,’ Rory says and take a sharp turn right, ‘Rose and Jack are already at our place. Amy ask them to come over and she told us to pick up the take-over she ordered.’

‘Didn’t she mind that you invited them along?’

‘Nah,’ Rory responds and shrugs. ‘She hasn’t seen Jack in some time and while she doesn’t know Rose – I think she only saw her once in passing – she’ll be glad to have some journalist buddy to talk to.’

‘She doesn’t know Rose?’ He asks curiously and Rory sends him one more of these amused and all knowing looks.

‘No,’ Rory explains and looks back at the road. ‘They never met, even though they write about similar things. Amy hasn’t even seen Rose when she was dating Ten, but then again we only saw her once or twice. But apparently Rose has heard about Amy and her involvement in the Master’s case.’

‘Well, who hasn’t heard about Amy then? Or who hasn’t heard her then?’ He laughs and Rory smirks at this. ‘I bet they could hear her shrieking in Ireland.’

‘Hey, that’s my wife you’re talking about,’ Rory says while stopping at a parking lot in front of a Chinese restaurant. ‘Okay, let’s go and get the food. The missus already sent me 3 texts, saying she’s hungry. And so are our guests.’

They arrive at Rory’s and Amy’s apartment 20 minutes later, with arms full of bags of deliciously smelling food. Amy greets them at the doorstep, but instead of opening her arms and hugging them or at least taking some of the bags, she looks over their shoulders and asks a bit confused: ‘Where’s River?’

‘There were some difficulties,’ Rory coughs and sends a look in his direction. Amy gapes at both of them before speaking again.

‘Oh, just don’t tell me she ditched us again! We haven’t seen her in ages and I had plans for today,’ she glances at him, but quickly looks back at Rory, ‘and let me just call her and tell her what I think about it-’
‘There’s no need for that,’ Rory says in a calming manner and gathers Amy into the house. ‘She’ll be here, just a bit later. Okay? Now, let’s get these into the kitchen and to our guests.’

He follows them into the kitchen and puts the bags on the counter, ready to unpack them and unload the food on the plates, but Amy smacks his hands.

‘Ouch! What was that for?’ He whines, but she doesn’t listen to him anymore, but pushes him out of the kitchen.

‘Go mingle with Jack and Rose,’ she says with one last forceful push. ‘Rory and I will take care of everything.’

As soon as the kitchen door close behind him, he hears their hushed voices, but he can’t make anything out, so he just shrugs and goes into the living room. Rose and Jack are sitting on the couch and giggling over something, margarita glasses in hands. They cheer a bit when he enters the room and make a place next to them for him. Turns out that they remembering some crazy incidents that happened to them in the past – and as it turns out, Donna took part in some of them. By the time Amy and Rory bring the dishes and set the table, he’s laughing together with Rose and Jack, making a mental note to remind Donna about this one time when she threw a bra at a barman in a pub. River arrives a few minutes later, wearing what she claims to be a new dress and telling him that he better not ruin this one. The dinner flies in a playful and cheerful atmosphere: Amy and Rose exchange stories about the articles they wrote and people they met, Jack digs out a few more stories embarrassing to the people they work with, Rory tells a few stories that should embarrass Jack, but don’t. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves and it’s only River that looks a bit on edge. She masks it well – she laughs at all the jokes, contributes in the stories, but there’s something off about her and he knows that he’s not the only one who noticed it. Amy keeps sneaking worried glances in her direction and when everyone’s finished eating, she asks River to help her clean up. They take the plates and what remained of food and venture into the kitchen.

It’s only when Jack proposes a pub outing when they notice that Amy and River have been gone for some time. He gets sent to kitchen to convince River to agree to go out with them, while Rory tries to tell Jack that the pubs aren’t the best place for a pregnant woman. He makes his way to the kitchen, trying to come up with a line that will convince River to go out with them- them, to go out with them and somehow he doubts that ‘oh come on, it’ll be cool’ will be enough. The door to kitchen is slightly open and he hears a snippet of conversation that makes him stop and- no, not eavesdrop. He’s just making sure that he’s not interrupting them in any important chit-chat, okay?

‘We’re worried, that’s all,’ he hears Amy’s quiet voice. ‘You haven’t visited us for a while- I know that you’ve been busy, I get it. We just missed you, that’s all.’

‘I know, I’m sorry, but you know how it’s been. Quite hectic,’ comes River’s quiet reply. He almost doesn’t recognise her voice: it’s soft and gentle and if he didn’t know River, he’d say she sounds insecure. ‘I’ll be better, I promise.’

‘Look, I don’t mean to be rude or nosy,’ he can’t help but snort quietly at this, because Amy is rude and nosy even when she doesn’t mean to, ‘but you don’t look good.’

‘Thanks,’ River replies snarkily. ‘That’s so nice of you.’

‘You know what I mean, River. Do you sleep well? Are-are the nightmares back?’

The nightmares?

‘I’m fine, I am, really,’ comes River’s harried response. ‘I haven’t been sleeping well, but it has
nothing to do with nightmares. I promise.’

He decides that he’s heard enough and gently knocks on the kitchen door, before walking in. Amy is sitting next to a dishwasher, putting the plates and cups that River’s handing her inside it. They both turn around in his direction and for a second he’s sure that they know he’s been fine, he’s been eavesdropping. But when Amy asks him what on earth he wants, he quickly speaks.

‘Jack wants to know if you’re going to a pub with us,’ he blurs out, looking at River.

‘Oh, you won’t even ask me?’ Amy gasps in mock anger. ‘You have a new friend now, don’t you?’

‘What? No! No! It’s just- I would love if you come with us as well, it’d be great, but Rory said that it’s probably not a good idea for you to go to a pub. Or you know for any other heavily pregnant woman to go to a pub. You know, alcohol, cigarettes – bad idea!’

Amy looks at him with a stern expression on her face before speaking again. ‘First of all: I am not heavily pregnant. Yet,’ her expression softens. ‘And second: Rory is right. I really don’t feel like going anywhere now. So River, it’s only you now.’

‘Yeah, come on River! It’ll be cool!’ Shit. He promised himself he won’t say that. And yet he did.

‘Cool?’ River smirks at him. ‘It already sounds like so much fun! But I think I’ll have to say no. Sorry.’

‘Oh come on!’ He asks her again and if his voice gets a little bit pleading no one comments on it. ‘It will be fun! I’ll even play darts with you and let you win.’

For some reasons unknown to him, Amy starts laughing uncontrollably in her chair and for a few seconds he’s afraid she’s going to fall from it.

‘You will let me win?’ River repeats slowly. ‘Oh my. How can I refuse such an offer? Count me in then.’

‘Yes! Good,’ he does a little victory dance. ‘You won’t regret it, Song. I’ll let the others know and we’ll be going in a few minutes, okay?’

He runs out of the kitchen and he doesn’t understand why he’s followed by the sound of Amy’s and River’s loud laughter.

Two hours later, when he’s standing in a giant queue to the bar in one of the most popular pubs in London, he understands why River and Amy found him so amusing. River absolutely slayed him in darts and she did it with a skill he can’t even dream to possess. And since they had a bet that the person who loses buys drinks for the entire group (that now also contains Clara and a few other people from the station), he’s now standing in a long line, waiting to spend his money and to hear more mocking comments from people who call themselves his friends and colleagues. He sees River making her way to him and he hopes it’s in order to help him with the order rather than add another bruise to his already battled ego. She’s almost by his side when someone – he focuses his glare – stops her by putting a hand on her shoulder.

The hand is large, tanned and definitely male and it’s connected to an arm – also male – that is connected to a man. A tall, dark and handsome man who is currently whispering something into River’s ear. He doesn’t like it – well, some man is abusing or nearly abusing his work colleague and wait, is River smiling and whispering something into the man’s ear? Wait. That is definitely not what he was expecting. And it’s not like he’s been expecting River’s outraged cry and him coming to her rescue – not at all. It’s just... But he has no time to dwell on that, because River is already by his side
and before he can stop himself, he asks.

‘What did he want?’ When she looks at him with a surprised expression, he rolls his eyes and motions his head somewhere behind them. ‘The guy who just talked to you.’

‘Oh. That one,’ River says with a breathless laugh. ‘Uhm, he just wanted to congratulate me on my game with you. That’s all. Look, it’s your turn.’

They order and make their way to their booth. Somehow he’s pushed and sits between Rose and Clara. River is sitting on the very edge, looking a bit distracted, but still taking a part in the conversation that goes on. Later that night he once again he spots her with this guy, chatting about something in the far corner of the pub. Not that he minds. Not at all.

He also doesn’t mind when he spots her with him the next morning, when he’s on his way to get his car from the mechanic’s. He sees River first – it’d be impossible not to spot her hair – sitting at an outdoor table in a small cafe. He waves at her, but she doesn’t notice him, staring through the window inside the cafe. He makes his way towards her – maybe they can get a coffee and scones? It’s be nice, right? – when Mr. Dark and Handsome from the previous night walks out of the cafe, two cups of coffee in his hands. He stops in his tracks and quickly turns around. Oh well. Things like that happen, right?

He doesn’t mind it one bit.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title from Foe’s ‘a handsome stranger called death’. woohoo, Rose entered the stage. what will happen, I wonder... also, I am not even sorry for the Titanic joke. had to be made.

thank you for all the comments and kudos. they're nice :3.
I can't stand this indecision, paired with a lack of vision

When the Monday morning comes, even though it greets him with unusually bright sky and sun streaming through the curtains, he wants nothing more than stay in bed and forget about the world around him. That or leave London behind and go somewhere – anywhere, as long as it’s far away from here. He realises it’s impossible – at least not yet, not when the investigation is still going on. He spends a few more moments in bed, listening to the gentle hustle of the slowly waking city. He finally gets out of his bed and goes through all the morning chores: shower, breakfast, cup of tea. He knows he’ll be late to work, but he can’t bring himself to care. He can’t pinpoint the cause of his foul mood, but he suspects that he’ll feel even worse by the end of the day.

He gets to work even later than he expected, but he can always blame it on the fact that traffic was terrible and he was stuck in it for over 30 minutes. And the fact that someone has already taken his place on the parking lot didn’t make him feel any better. Oh, he found another place without any difficulties, but that one place is his, okay? He feels... connected with it. With even worse mood he drags himself to the conference room, where everyone is already sitting in their chairs, quietly chatting about their weekend. He doesn’t join in, he only mumbles a few quiet ‘good mornings’ to these sitting closest to him. River is sitting by the laptop, busy with checking some information, but she lifts her head up when he enters and smiles at him. He doesn’t return her smile, just nods his head and sits in the first available chair. Donna enters not long after him – he’s so lucky he managed to get there before her – and the debriefing starts. She quickly sums up what they’ve discovered during the last week, but he knows all of this, so he doesn’t listen, staring at the wall opposite of him. It’s only when Donna clears her throat and takes a deep breath that he starts paying attention.

‘Okay, you may not realise that most of you don’t know all the details to the case,’ Donna starts slowly and his attention peaks. ‘But it got so complex that I feel you need to be informed about everything. There’s a connection between all the murdered policemen. We also believe that there’s a connection between their murders and the murder of Octavian,’ there’s a murmur of surprise going through the room. ‘Yes, I know, I should’ve told you earlier about it, but at that moment, I felt this information should be kept a secret. Now: all the victims worked on the same type of cases: cases involving the Silence. They also... They were trained in the same institution, but they did not know each other. It is believed that Octavian contacted with the victim from Manchester, a few months before his death. Now, River will introduce you to more details of Octavian’s case.’

Donna steps back and River takes her place. He turns in his chair a bit, making sure he faces her and hears everything she says.

‘A few months before his death, Octavian contacted not only one of our victims, but also a journalist, Rose Tyler,’ River says calmly. ‘She came here on Friday and we asked her a few questions. Turns out, Octavian wanted to start a new life, leaving the mob behind him and he thought he’d confess. And he did. Each of you will find copies of the article about him in your inboxes after this briefing. Now, she confirmed that Octavian did meet with our victim from Manchester. Apparently, he wanted to drag some of his friends down and since Nine was interested in hunting down the Silence, we can assume they started talking. What is more, we believe that he delivered some kind of documents to Nine – or at least tried to do it.’

‘Okay, it’s all fine, but why he suddenly decided to become a good citizen?’ Someone in the room asks.
‘His niece died in a car accident. He believed it was caused by the Silence, that it was their revenge on him,’ River replies. ‘We checked it – I’m sorry, detective Smith did, and it turns out that Octavian was wrong. It was an unfortunate event, that’s all. I managed to get some more info,’ he looks at her surprised, but she doesn’t pay him any attention. ‘I called their office again and by some miracle they still had the CCTV tape from the site of the accident. It confirms what detective Smith found out: it was an accident. And yes, you’ll find the clip in your inboxes as well.’

‘Right, so that’s covered,’ Clara speaks up. ‘What about the evidence Octavian gave to Nine?’

‘About that: we had no idea what it is,’ River runs fingers through her hair and turns to Clara. Wait, had? They still don’t know what it is, right? ‘We took a wild guess and started calling Manchester’s banks that allow their clients to leave deposits, hoping one of them may have a safe there. Turns out, we were right,’ she ends.

‘What?’ He squeaks in surprise before he can stop himself. ‘You didn’t find it out on Friday!’

‘I had more luck over the weekend,’ she says without looking at him and continues explaining to the whole room. ‘I managed to locate a deposit box registered to Octavian. It was in one of the Manchester banks, and it did contain a USB drive. They’ll send it over today, I hope we’ll get it by tomorrow. It’ll probably go straight to the lab – it’ll probably be heavily encrypted. No offense, Clara.’

‘None taken,’ Clara shakes her head with a smile. ‘So, what’s the plan now? If the files on the USB are encrypted, we might not find out what they contain that quickly. What should we do in the meantime?’

‘We’ll contact Octavian’s family – his sister lives in Manchester, maybe she’ll know something about his plans and motivation,’ Donna speaks again. ‘We’ll send someone there, I don’t want to bother their police with our investigation and it’s always better to get the news first hand.’

‘Also...’ River starts hesitantly, ‘I think that once we find out what is on Octavian’s USB, we might want to ask Rose a few more questions? Maybe she’ll recognise something from there.’

‘But do we really have to?’ He asks and sees the heads turning into his direction. ‘Do we have to do this?’

‘Do what exactly?’ River asks him with a questioning look in her eyes.

‘Involve more people. More civilians.’

‘Who did we involve so far?’ River asks and suddenly the room falls quiet, like there’s no one else here but them.

‘Maldovar. Rose. Now you want to drag Octavian’s family into it,’ he snorts and finally feels that his awful mood fully unleashes. ‘Did you forget that we’re playing with bloody dangerous mob here?’

‘First,’ River starts icily, ‘I am not dragging anyone into anything. What we do here is called ‘investigation’. Maybe you forgot this word during your break,’ he swears that he can hear someone – Jack? Clara? – snorting with amusement at River’s comment, but he doesn’t turn around, instead keeps his full attention on her. ‘It’s our job. And yes, shockingly, it involves questioning civilians. Surprising, I know.’

‘But we don’t have to do this!’ He exclaims and River rolls her eyes at him. ‘We could get these information in other ways. There’s no need to involve innocent people in this mess.’
‘Okay, okay, stop here, cowboy,’ River raises her hand. ‘I don’t know if you haven’t noticed, but Dorium is certainly not innocent. And as for Rose – miss Tyler,’ she corrects herself quickly, ‘I know she’s young and pretty and she looks innocent, but that shouldn’t be a factor in deciding whether or not she should be questioned.’

‘It’s not why I’m objecting,’ he says angrily. ‘And you very well know it. There are other reasons—’

‘Such as?’ River cuts in and he stares at her surprised. ‘What are these reasons? Do share them with us.’

‘We might be putting these people in danger,’ he says through clenched teeth, trying his best to remain calm. It’s a serious matter and he knows what he’s talking about. He hates getting civilians involved into cases, especially after what happened during the Master case. He promised himself then that he will never let a situation like that happen ever again. He promised and he’ll do anything he can to keep that promise. Even if it might the investigation more difficult.

‘Oh please,’ River says and he can hear barely restrained anger in her voice. ‘We are not forcing them to fight. We don’t put a gun in their hands and put them on the streets. We ask them questions, that’s all.’

‘But exactly this might be dangerous for them,’ he says through painfully clenched teeth. It infuriates him that River can’t see it what he sees – or that she simply refuses to see it. ‘It’s really simple. I can’t believe you don’t see it.’

‘And I can’t believe you’re behaving so irrationally. You need to stop being overemotional!’

‘I am not overemotional,’ he snarls, hitting his hand on the table. Everyone in the room jumps in their seats and Donna looks anxiously in his direction. ‘I just care about this people and I don’t know, maybe you don’t understand this concept. But you seem to get on with strangers, so I don’t really understand–’

‘Excuse me, what did you just say?’ River hisses and if a look could kill, he’s pretty sure he’d already be six feet under. He knows it’s a terrible idea, but that doesn’t stop him from opening his mouth again.

‘I said that you do seem to get pretty cosy with—’

‘Okay, that’s enough,’ Donna stops him mid-sentence, her tone sharp and cold. ‘Both of you. I can’t believe that you wasted our time with this ridiculous discussion. Not even a discussion, some mindless and idiotic babbling.’ River opens her mouth to say something – probably something to justify herself and put the blame on him – but Donna cuts her off with a loud ‘hush’. ‘I don’t care what the hell your problem is, but you have to get it sorted out. Sooner rather than later if you don’t want to spend the next week balls deep in paperwork.’

He opens his mouth to oppose, to tell them that he’s right, but he thinks better of it when he sees the stern expression on Donna’s face. He quickly nods his head and sneaks a glance in River’s direction – her face is emotionless and calm, like their argument didn’t happen. She isn’t looking at him, but focusing on a point somewhere above his head, seemingly oblivious to his stares. They will have to talk about it and apologise each other, and he can only hope that River forgives easily.

‘Right, now that the domestic is over,’ Donna starts, looking crossly at him and River, ‘we have to make some things clear. We will contact and question Octavian’s family. No discussion about it. As far as Rose is concerned – we will wait until we get the records from the flash drive and we will bring her back for further questioning only if it’s absolutely necessary. Is it okay with you?’ She
turns to him and he nods his head quickly. If that’s all he can get, he won’t complain and take it. ‘Good. Now, off you go. The briefing is over. Check your inboxes, you’ll find the files that River sent you and also a memo and update from me. Read it. If anything in the documents and materials will make you question what we found out and established so far – don’t hesitate to tell me or any other detective. We might’ve missed something and a fresh opinion is always welcome. Dismissed.’

Everyone leaves the room as quickly as possible, trying their hardest not to look at River and him. Maybe they’re expecting another disaster and argument to erupt all over again? He wants to apologise to River for his behaviour and less than polite comments, but she leaves the room before he has a chance to catch her attention. He slowly makes his way to their office, think about all the ways he could start the conversation and explain why he reacted that way. He wants her to understand that there are reasons why he doesn’t want to include civilians in the investigation, but he’s not sure if he’s ready to talk about it yet.

When he reaches the office, River is already sitting in her chair, sorting through the reports and various documents on her desk. She doesn’t look up or acknowledge his presence in any other way and he feels like he’s a 10 year old who got in trouble with his teacher. He swallows and clears his throat nervously.

‘Uhm, River?’ He stammers uncertainly and she finally looks at him. ‘Listen, about what happened. I am really sorry and-’

‘Oh, don’t worry about it,’ she interrupts him and looks back at the documents in her hand. ‘We both got carried away. Just forget about it.’

‘No, but I really want to apologise for what I said.’

‘John, it’s okay,’ River sighs tiredly. ‘I... It’s fine. We’re fine. Now excuse me, but I have to sort out all the paperwork I exchanged with the Manchester, okay?’

He mumbles quiet ‘okay’ and slides in his chair. He should be happy that River let this matter slide so easily, but the words they exchanged back in the conference room are still fresh in his memory. He can’t keep replaying their argument and remembering what they both said – and it doesn’t feel right. But maybe River really got over it so quickly? Who knows. He never was great with women and predicting their behaviour. Maybe they really are fine and it’s all already forgotten. He really hopes it’s the case, but when by the end of the day, River has barely spoken to him and left with a quick and harried ‘goodbye’, he knows they’re far away from fine.

On Tuesday morning he wakes up determined to make everything right between them. He needs to do it – they work together and it may affect their relationship. That’s one reason and while it’s important, he also wants to mend their... Friendship? Companionship? Whatever kind of a relationship they have. He hops out of his bed and forms a quick plan that simply has to work.

He arrives at work on time, balancing a plastic tray full of cups of coffee in one hand. Everyone move out from his path and – by some miracle - he manages to get to his office without spilling anything. While taking a shower he decided that it’d be a good idea to get River her morning coffee from this little cafe next to his apartment. Who wouldn’t like a nice cup of coffee in the morning? It certainly would meet with her enthusiasm and help get her in a good mood (he knows that River is really difficult to work with before she gets her morning dose of caffeine). And since he doesn’t really know how he likes her coffee, he bought a few different ones, hoping she’ll like at least one of them. He has latte with whole milk, with semi-skinned and skinned milk and with soy milk, there’s also mocca and americano, and chocolate caramel macchiato (with whipped cream and sprinkles). Okay, so the last one may be or him, never you mind. He sets the last paper cup on River’s desk when the door to their office open, but it’s not River who steps through it – it’s Jack.
'Oh, you have coffee? How fancy and nice of you,’ Jack says coming to the desk and grabbing one of the cups.

‘Oi! That is not for you. It’s for River!’ He exclaims, unsuccessfully trying to take the cup back from Jack’s hand.

‘Man, this coffee is good!’ Jack says, taking a sip. ‘And what do you mean for River? You want to keep this coffee here for a few days?’

‘Huh?’ He asks while trying to rearrange the cups on the desk. Jack snagged the one with whole milk – maybe he still has the time to go to the cafe near the office and get another one. It’ll be different than the others, but maybe River won’t mind. She should be here any minute now and-Wait. Wait. What did just Jack say? ‘What do you mean, wait a few days?’

‘Did you forget? She took a few days off,’ Jack says with a shrug. ‘Donna wasn’t too happy with that, but she let her go. That’s why River worked on Saturday on the whole Manchester thing. Didn’t she tell you?’

He shakes his head mutely, not sure what to say. ‘Yeah, my partner did not tell me that she’s taking a few days off in the middle of the investigation?’ That wouldn’t sound right.

‘So, did she say when she’ll be back?’ He finally speaks, trying to avoid Jack’s curious gaze.

‘Nah, she didn’t know how long it – whatever the it is – take. But she should be back by the end of this week or on Monday. Can you survive this long without her?’ Jack grins and he huffs in annoyance. Of course he can survive without River. He doesn’t need her at all. ‘Okay, leave the pouting for later. That’s not why I’m here.’

‘And why are you here, expect for stealing my coffee?’

‘Touché,’ Jack smirks. ‘It’s not your coffee. It’s coffee for River and since she’s not here, it’s nobody’s coffee. I gave it home in my body and a reason to exist. I gave it-‘

‘That’s enough,’ he sighs and stops Jack’s ridiculous monologue. ‘What do you have for me?’

‘Octavian’s flash drive arrived. Clara tried to crack it, but we don’t have software to encode it. So we’re sending it to the lab.’

‘Right, great. Any idea when we’ll get it back?’ He asks. ‘What does Clara think?’

‘She said that the encryption is not too complicated and it shouldn’t take them long to crack it. But it will all depend on how much work they have,’ Jack answers and slowly makes his way to the door. ‘A few days, I guess.’

He nods his head slowly. ‘Anything else?’

‘No, only that,’ Jack flashes him his trademark grin and disappears behind the door, but a few seconds later he reappears. ‘Actually – I’m going to lunch with Rose today. Fancy coming with us? You seem to getting on just fine, I am sure she won’t mind you joining us.’

‘Sure, I’d love to,’ he responds and smiles for the first time today. ‘Thanks, it’s... It’s really nice.’

‘Okay then, I’ll let you know when I’m leaving,’ Jack smiles back. ‘Oh and- since River’s not going to be here – can I take the coffees? I am sure someone out there will appreciate them.’
‘Yeah, just take them,’ he nods and watches him balancing all the remaining coffee cups in his hands. When Jack leaves without spilling anything – an ability that he himself hasn’t fully mastered yet and probably never will, all he do for a few seconds is staring at the empty desk opposite of his. Normally River would already be there, making a phone call or reading some reports, or shooting down one of his theories or teasing him- Enough. He doesn’t need River, he can work without her. Besides, he has something to wait for - the lunch with Rose and Jack. Everything’s going to be smashing.

And it is: he sorts and reads through all the reports River left for him (without any note, mind you. Rude!), he goes through the reports and the tape from Octavian’s niece accident in case they missed something (they didn’t) and during the lunch he has a wonderful time with Jack and Rose. He doesn’t think about River once.

Until the next day when he’s once again greeted by River’s empty desk. But there’s something else: he suddenly remembers why he never worked alone. He doesn’t like it – he’s used to talking to someone, to bouncing the ideas off another person, exchanging opinions and trusting other people to tell them when he goes a bit too far in his theories and assumptions. He hates to admit it, but River was perfect with all of these: she’s just as quick and smart as he is and sometimes she even managed to get things before him. It feels weird not having her there. He tries to make do of course – he puts a floor mop in her chair and pretends it’s her, but since the mop doesn’t roll its eyes at him and sighs when he tells something ridiculous, it gets put back into the closet. He tries to find a temporary living replacement for her – but everyone at the station is busy and frankly no one can keep up with him. At one point he even goes to Donna and tries to talk about the case with her, but she throws him out after 5 minutes, claiming she has paperwork to complete and she’s not in the mood for ‘outrageous theories that could never be even remotely true’. He tries to call Amy, but she either hangs up on him and dozes off while they’re on the phone. It seems that no one can help him in his current – and let’s hope brief – partner-less state.

But he doesn’t mope, nor brood, no matter what others say, laughing at him. He’s just bored, that’s all. And if in his state of mind-numbing boredom he calls Rose and goes for coffee – and lunch, and then for dinner on the next day – no one can blame him. (Actually, he kind of suspects that they’re all happy that he leaves the station for a few hours. At least that what he gathered when Rory and Jack nearly pushed him out of the door when he told them he has plans for lunch).

Plus, he really likes spending time with Rose. She’s lovely and bubbly, she laughs at his jokes – even the bad ones - and it’s just easy to talk with her. She doesn’t hide behind half smiles and short sentences that might or might not be lies. She’s open and carefree, but she’s also quite smart and just as passionate about her job as he’s passionate about his. And – he hates to admit it, but he knows it’s true – she’s not aware of his faults in the way his friends are. She has no idea that he is a man who one night packed a bag and left to another country, without informing his friends and letting them know what happened to him. She has no idea of the things he’s done, things he’s been through, what he’s capable of. With her he has a clean slate. And who knows – maybe he’ll get to fill it with only good memories.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title from 'everybody wants to rule the world' by Tears for Fears (originally). but Lorde's cover of this song is also A+++ (I dare to say it's kind of better).
a bit of a filler chapter, but soon things will start to happen. I promise.
On Friday he wakes up in a great mood. It’s Friday, the weekend is so close he can nearly taste it and he has a feeling that today everything is going to be great. Usually he doesn’t really like weekends – they’re boring and tedious, but he has plans for today and Saturday, so for the first time in a long time he actually looks forward to it. And it seems that the universe is also looking forward to the weekend, because this morning everything runs smoothly for him: his neighbour isn’t taking a bath at the same time he’s taking his shower; his toaster doesn’t burn his toasts and he adds the perfect amount of milk and sugar to his tea. His mood isn’t spoilt even when on his drive to the station his favourite song is interrupted by news about a murder of a young, but fairly influential German politician. Apparently the poor dead guy spent over a day in his hotel room, before anyone decided to check on him. That’s what you get for being in the opposition and that’s why I don’t get involved in politics, he muses and makes his way to his office. He’s whistling when he opens the door, but mid whistle stops when he sees that there are already two people sitting in his room.

‘River!’ He exclaims in surprise. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I work here, in case you’ve forgotten,’ she says with an amused smirk. ‘And I am so glad to know that you missed me, sweetie. You’re sweeping me off my feet here.’

‘No! No! I am glad you’re back!’ He quickly says, hoping that he doesn’t look as embarrassed as he feels. ‘It’s just – you know, I wasn’t expecting you back so soon?’

‘But she is back,’ Donna cuts in with an impressive roll of her eyes. ‘Sit down, we have to talk. Something came up.’

‘Okay, what is it?’ He asks curiously and sits in his chair.

‘I already told River since she was here on time,’ Donna glares at him and he has the decency to look down and pretend to feel sorry for being late once again. ‘We got the results from Octavian’s USB yesterday. They managed to crack it.’

‘Yesterday? Why didn’t you tell me it then?’

‘Because I couldn’t find you, since you’ve been frolicking gods only know where,’ Donna snorts. ‘But that it is not important. The content of said flash drive is. Turns out that Octavian had some valuable proof on it. They found a file with dates, names and places there. It looks like a list of potential drug exchanges.’

‘Uhm, sorry, but it doesn’t make much sense,’ River says calmly. ‘Octavian did get this info when – over six months ago? I doubt anyone plans drug drops so far ahead. It could have changed hundred times since then.’

‘It could,’ Donna nods, seemingly agreeing, but there’s a small smile in the corner of her mouth and he knows she has something else. ‘But it didn’t. There’s still a rather good chance that these days are still valid. Otherwise The Drug Squad wouldn’t bother with it, would they?’

‘Whoa,’ he says quietly looking at Donna who’s sitting with a smug expression on her face. ‘You
‘No, they were the ones who called me,’ she explains. ‘I would have called them, but they were quicker. They asked not to pursue this information, because it’s a part of an ongoing investigation. A big ongoing investigation.’

‘How big?’ River asks.

‘They think it might be their chance to catch Jim the Fish.’

The room falls silent for a second as he and River are trying to digest this news. Jim the Fish: one of the biggest drug dealers and smugglers in England. Impossible to catch, slimy and quick, hence his nickname. He perfected manoeuvring the drug market and in less than a year he became one of the most important dealers there. A few years ago he went completely underground – no one knew where he might be, a few policemen thought he was killed out of vengeance, body disposed of in some creative and disgusting way.

‘Jim the Fish? He’s still floating then?’ He jokes, but all he gets in return are unimpressed sighs from both River and Donna. ‘Fine, I am not making that joke again. Forget I made it.’

‘Yeah, we’ll try, but it may be difficult,’ Donna replies and he tries not to notice that River is hiding a grin behind her hand. Great. She’s been back for 10 minutes and he already made an idiot out of himself. It seems that he broke a new record. He can’t swallow in his misery, because Donna starts talking again. ‘Back on the track: they wanted to snag the whole case from us, at least all the information from Octavian’s USB and whatever the person they catch would say. I made them change their mind-’

‘You mean, you shouted at them over the phone, right?’ He quips in and River giggles next to him. Well, that’s worth even the death glare that Donna sends him.

‘No, I mean I persuaded them to change their minds,’ Donna repeats and looks at both of them. ‘Giggle all you want, but I got you spots on their team.’

‘What?’ River and he ask at the same time.

‘That,’ Donna snaps back. ‘You are both on the action. That’s the only way to get any further information from them. You’re going to the HQ once I am done with you.’

‘And what are we supposed to do there? We don’t have much experience when it comes to dealing with drug dealers,’ River says doubtingly and he nods along.

‘But John has experience with planning big actions and they said they need a fresh set of eyes to catch any last minute mistakes. And you’re the best shot I have here and have field experience. So you’re going, no discussion. Think about it that way: you get to help to catch a guy and he has some information from which our investigation can benefit. You help to catch him, but he doesn’t have any information? You get some new experience. It’s a win-win situation.’

‘Right...,’ he sighs. ‘And when exactly is the whole deal supposed to go down?’

‘Tonight, around midnight. So you better prepare for a tiring day and night,’ Donna replies standing up and straightening her clothes.

‘What? But I already have plans for tonight!’ He whines pitifully, but Donna gives him the look that makes him shut up in less than a second.
‘Cancel them. Besides, you have much better chances of getting laid if you help with this mission and make sure it ends successfully,’ she says with a smirk. ‘Your name may even be in the papers. Some girls like that.’

‘I- that... I wasn’t thinking about that!’ He splutters nervously, hitting his hand on the desk in his haste to explain. ‘I really didn’t mean that- I just, I am going out and I-‘

But Donna is already gone and River is looking at him with an amused expression on her face.

‘Okay, Don Juan, let’s get going,’ she finally says. ‘You’re not getting laid tonight, let’s hope you’ll survive it,’ she smiles at his outraged ‘River!’ ‘Come on, we don’t have much time to prepare for this mission.’

‘Oh, and I forgot,’ Donna re-appears in their office and he’s so surprised that he lets out a small yelp. ‘Oh hush you. There’s a car waiting for you outside, so you don’t have to take yours or take a cab. And what are you still doing here? Off you go, you have a drug dealer to catch!’

She disappears again – this time closing the door with a loud ‘bang’ and he looks at River who’s already packing her things.

‘Don’t you think she’s a bit too eager to get rid of us?’ He asks and gets up. ‘It’s a bit scary.’

‘Yeah,’ River makes a face and looks through the window. ‘Oh crap, the car really is here. Come on, let’s go down before Donna comes back and throws us through the window.’

___

This chair is really uncomfortable, he thinks for the nth time in the last hour. They really should invest in something better, especially since people spend hours in them. He sighs heavily and checks the time: 4:26am. Which means that River has been interrogated – no, questioned – for nearly two hours now.

What a fucking mess.

And to think that everything was going so smoothly.

Once they arrived to the Drug Squad HQ, they were greeted by one of the officers who planned the whole action. They were taken to the conference room, briefed in and introduced to all the measures that were taken to ensure the success of the mission. It took them months of planning and observing the drug market in London and they were sure that this time, it’ll be Jim the Fish who shows up at the scene. There was still a chance they it will be just a blind drop, but they hoped and believed it’ll be the man himself making the deal. But the mission seemed to be prepared perfectly: he only suggested a slight change in the placement of the teams on the ground and River gave her opinion on where the snipers should be. The suitable changes were made and they were given a few hours to go over the plan once again and meet the team. He was asked to be one of the people who would run the mission on the scene, River was supposed to be a part of one of the teams on the ground.

It was really going well.

The exchange was taking place in the sleazy part of the city, near a closed down factory and abandoned warehouses. By 11pm everything was settled and everyone was in place: he in a surveillance van, with monitors displaying every part of the scene. The mission was run by two operatives who’s been planning it for the last few months. They’ve been kind enough to let him stay and observe. Once all the teams take their positions, there was nothing left to do but wait. So they did wait: minutes were passing painfully slowly and he was nearly bouncing in his chair from
anticipation and excitement. It’s been too long since he’s been on a mission like this. Not many things can cause his heart to be this quick and make him feel so damn alive.

Thankfully, they didn’t have to wait too long. Just a few minutes after midnight, someone walked from between the warehouses. A man, well-built, dressed in dark clothes, but that’s all they could tell from the CCTV installed around the scene.

‘Is it the target?’ One on the men running the mission asked. ‘Anyone can get us a confirmation?’

‘I’m the closest to him,’ through the radio came a muffled voice, ‘but I can’t see shit. It’s too dark.’

‘It’s a fucking night, of course it’s dark,’ the other man spat out. ‘Fuck. What do we do? He’s getting closer to leaving the scene!’

‘Fuck that, let’s give them some light. We’re going to blind these in front of us, but fuck we don’t have any choice. Headlights on, now,’ the first man said quickly to the driver. ‘NOW!’

The headlights of the van they lit up almost the entire scene. The man they were observing suddenly stopped in the middle of his walk, nervously twirling around, trying to see what’s happening.

‘Is it him?’ Both of the men demanded harshly in the radio.

‘No. It’s not the target. I repeat: it’s not the target,’ came another muffled response.

‘Fuck.’

And in this very moment, everything went to hell. The first shot rang against the mask of their van – loud and bold, quickly followed by another, this time directed at the window.

‘Shit, he has a gun,’ one of the men muttered hunched over the control panel. ‘Fuck. We need to stop him before he escapes.’

‘He’s moving to the main road,’ a voice came through the radio. ‘He’s going to run.’

‘I can take him down,’ came another voice and this time he recognised the owner of it: River.

‘No way,’ one of the men barked out. ‘We need him alive. No shooting!’

Another loud bang was heard and a moan of pain was heard.

‘We have a man down,’ someone rasps through the radio. Another shot rang in the air and he saw on the monitor than the shooter – running towards the nearest street – dropped his gun and fell on the ground. The next second a few operatives are on him, cuffing him and dragging him to the ambulance that was waiting on the site. The door to the van opened and one of the operatives walked in, calming them and saying that the man is alive, only wounded.

‘The bullet merely grazed his shoulder,’ he said. ‘It was either the best shot in the history or the worst.’

‘Find me the person who shot. And take someone with you to go to hospital with the asshole we caught. And don’t take your eyes from him, report about his condition every 20 minutes. We’ll send someone to change you once we clean this whole thing up,’ one of the men says in a tired tone and the operative just nods and hurries away from the van. ‘Okay, all units, we are done here. See you all at the HQ, in the conference room.’

Once they came back to the headquarter the whole conference room was buzzing with the fresh and
juicy gossip: the woman from the murder investigation unit shot their target. Was it a good shot or did she just get lucky? Is she that good or stupid enough to just shoot and hope? Five minutes later everyone was dismissed home: everyone except River and him. He and two of the operatives who were running the mission, were taken to be questioned about every second of the mission. Was there an order to shoot the target? Was he a danger to any operative? Did the operative who shot the target acted on her own? Is she disobedient on daily basis? All these question were repeated over and over, until he was positively sick of them. Fortunately, they were released after 40 minutes, with a ‘you did good’ and information that the shot man’s condition is stable and his life is not in danger. He went out of the interrogation room and sat down on the bench on the corridor, waiting for River. She surely will be out soon, right?

He’s been waiting for over an hour now. Why is it taking so long? River did nothing wrong, in fact she saved the whole damn mission.

The door on his right finally opens and River walks out. Her whole body is tense and she’s still wearing her mission gear: heavy black trousers and jacket, combat shoes. She says quiet ‘goodnight’ to the people still in the room and closes the door behind them, but as soon as she does that, she sticks her middle finger in their direction and mutters ‘wankers’. He can’t help but snort quietly at this sign of rebelliousness. She starts walking away and he gets up to catch up with her, when the door open again and someone speaks up.

‘Miss Song?’ A male voice sounds in the quietness of the corridor. ‘Could you please come over tomorrow – uhm, today? Around 3pm if it’s not a problem for you.’

River turns on the spot and stares at the man who just spoke to her. ‘Again? Is there something else you need to know? You’ve been questioning me for almost 2 hours now.’

‘Please, just do come over,’ the man repeats and once again disappears behind closed door.

‘Tosser,’ River mutters tiredly and starts walking without even noticing him. He quickly strides towards her and gently lies a hand on her shoulder. She yelps and turns around, one of her hands raised in the air, ready to hit him.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she says surprised. ‘You scared me.’

‘You nearly knocked me out, I think we’re even,’ he smiles. ‘How did it go?’

River only shrugs and they start walking down the corridor. ‘I don’t know. After being ask the same set of questions for nearly two hours you kind of lose the ability to predict the result. I have no idea. Wait, I need to change,’ she stops him on the way to the exit. ‘I’m all itchy in these clothes.’ He follows her to the locker rooms and they nearly reach the door when she turns around and looks at him sharply. ‘Wait a second. What are you doing here?’

‘Oh. I was questioned as well,’ he mutters and scratches his cheek nervously. ‘So I figured that I’d wait for you.’

‘I hope you weren’t waiting too long?’ She asks a bit uncertainly. ‘John?’

‘What? No... Just a few minutes,’ he says quickly – he really has no idea why he’s lying, but it seems like the best thing to do at the moment. But River doesn’t seem convinced and she’s staring at him with a doubtful expression on her face. ‘Well, you know, I was out earlier, so I thought I’m going to wait for you, that’s all.’

‘That’s... Uhm, that’s very nice, thank you,’ she smiles softly. ‘Just give me a minute, I’ll just
She emerges a few minutes later, in her own clothes and a tired expression on her face.

‘Come on, let’s get us home,’ she says and he can only nod his head. It turns out that the car they came in here, is still waiting for them and they get in. He’s the first to be dropped off: he leaves closer to the HQ than River does. He’s exits the car, when a thought makes him quickly turn around.

‘Do you want me to come to the questioning tomorrow?’ He asks River. ‘I heard they want you tomorrow – well, today. I could go with you, you know, as a moral support.’

‘No, thank you, sweetie. I am a big girl, I can take care of myself,’ she smiles. ‘Thank you for the thought though. Goodnight.’

He nods and quietly closes the door behind him, observing the car until it disappears from his view.

___

On Saturday he sleeps in, finally getting out of bed around noon. He eats breakfast and cleans his apartment a bit – he even remembers to water the plants, or at least what is left of them. It takes him a few hours, but he’s finally done with everything and he’s starting to get bored. He still has time before his date with Rose – *is it a date?* He doesn’t really know. So okay, they are going to a nice restaurant together, but it doesn’t have to mean anything. They could hang out just as mates, right? But on the other hand...

Never mind that, the point is that he’s bored and he has to do something about it. Ha! He’s going to visit Ponds. Amy should provide some sort of entertainment, just as she always does. Less than 30 minutes later, he’s already at their door step, knocking loudly at their door. Rory opens the door and invites him inside. They walk to the living room where Amy’s sitting on the couch and next to her is...

‘River!’ He exclaims and everyone in the room flinches at the sudden noise. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘She visited us just like you did, you moron,’ Amy rolls her eyes, but beams happily at him. ‘Come here. All my favourite people in one place!’

He wiggles his body between Amy and River and puts his arms around both of them. They both take his arms from their shoulders with the same patient sigh. It’s a bit eerie if you ask him – them both having the same reaction as if they grew up together or were a family, but per usual – no one asks him.

‘So River,’ he turns to the woman on his left. ‘How was the questioning today? What did they want from you?’

‘They offered her a job!’ Amy states with a big smile on her face, looking like a proud mother. He looks at her, then looks back at River who just shrugs her shoulders.

‘They did what?’ He asks her quietly.

‘They invited me to come over to offer me a job,’ River says quickly. ‘They want me to move to their division.’

‘But you know nothing about drugs!’
‘That’s what I told them. But one of their officers is pregnant and while she wants to work some more, she obviously can’t go in the field. And well, they decided that on the mission I made the right call and they want me to join them. They say they need someone like me,’ she answers and catches him staring at her. ‘What?’

‘You’re going to refuse them, right?’ He says.

‘I don’t know. I’m considering it. I’ve been in this department for two years now. It’s nice, but change could be beneficial for me. I’d get new experience and new connections and-‘

‘But you can’t quit!’ He says hotly and feels everyone’s eyes on him. ‘I mean, with the investigation going on, Donna won’t let you. And you know.’

River opens her mouth to respond, but Rory quickly cuts it.

‘I think it’s River’s decision in the end. She’ll do whatever she thinks is right for her. Now: who wants cake?’

They spend a few next hours on banter and chatter: Amy mocks his clothes and he mocks hers, all while River and Rory exchange patient and tired looks. It feels strangely like a family he hasn’t had for a long time and he doesn’t feel like leaving when he sees it’s time to go and pick up Rose.

‘Oh look at you,’ Amy says a bit teary. ‘I feel like a mother, sending you out on your first date. Damn pregnancy, making me emotional.’

‘First, it’s not a date. Second, if you’re my mother, than Rory’s my dad,’ he says in an amused tone and tries to ignore Rory’s ‘I don’t want to have a son like you!’. ‘If you’re my parents, then who’s River?’

‘It’s simple,’ River responds with a grin. ‘I am your older, but incredibly awesome sister, who puts up with your shenanigans. Now, off you go, you’ll be late for your date!’

Wait, what?

The word ‘sister’ repeats itself in his head when he drives to Rose’s hotel. Really? That’s how River sees herself? As his sister? It’s nothing bad, it’s just... He would never call her that. He thought of her in terms of a colleague and a friend, but if she doesn’t feel that way... Or maybe she just joked?

He tries to stop thinking about it and just enjoy his time with Rose. Because he really likes spending time with her: she’s cute and funny, it’s easy to talk with her – and she obviously likes him. But a realisation comes over him: he feels about her like about a sister he’s never had. And when by the end of the night she asks if he wants to come over to her room for ‘one for the road’, he just shakes his head and kisses her forehead, going back to his apartment.

Alone.

Chapter End Notes

whoops, it's been a while since the last update.
but you know, everything has been the 50th anniversary and nothing hurt.

chapter title from 'I know the sum and substance of my evil' by I can make a mess like
nobody's business.
On Monday morning he finds himself in Donna’s office – once again. River is sitting on a chair next to him, looking way too good and too cheerful for such an early hour. Donna called them in as soon as they came in – well, as soon as he came in. Because he was a bit late. Again. Thankfully, she didn’t ask them about the mission and how it went – he’s not sure he would stomach talking about it one more time. Instead, she fills them in on the details about the man River shot.

‘His name is Ivan Nikolayevich. As you can gather from the name, he’s Russian. Which is where the problems starts,’ Donna sighs. ‘See, the Russian embassy doesn’t let anyone near him. He can’t be questioned without their permission and they won’t give it until they decide that he’s healthy and in a good condition. They don’t really care about him, they’re trying to save their asses, considering that they found nearly two pounds of coke on this guy.’

‘But what do the doctors say about his condition?’ He asks curiously.

‘He’s fine,’ Donna replies shortly. ‘The bullet only just grazed him, there’s no permanent muscle or nerve damage – he should be out in a week, if not sooner. But he won’t be, since the Russians want to be problematic. Without their permission to talk with this guy, we won’t have anything on Jim. And River – I know it’s not your fault.’

‘I know that,’ River responds with a shrug. ‘I knew where I was shooting him. I did what was necessary.’

‘The guys from the Drug Squad know it as well. And they even admitted that much to me over the phone,’ Donna’s mouth twists in a smile. ‘Good job, both of you. Now, to the bad news.’

‘There’s bad news?’ He pouts.

‘Unfortunately. We have to stop the murder case. At least for some time,’ she hushes their gasps of disbelief. ‘I know. That was my reaction as well. But someone up there thinks we’re not making enough progress on it and that we’re neglecting other cases. And they threatened to cut our funds if that doesn’t change.’

‘So what do we do now?’ River asks from her seat. ‘We drop it?’

‘No. You’ll still be working on it – just the two of you. You can ask someone to help you from time to time, but it’s just you from now on. At least until we get a new thread. Let’s hope that once Russians take their heads out of their asses and we get a chance to talk with the drug guy, we’ll get something new,’ Donna says. ‘Until then: you have to work on current cases. If you manage to work on the case simultaneously – that’s great.’

‘There’s really nothing you can do?’ He asks hopefully, but Donna only shakes her head. ‘But we’ve made progress!’

‘I know, but the idiots who give us money don’t realise it,’ Donna looks at him and River with sympathy. ‘I’m sorry, but that’s really nothing I can do now.’
It’s weird to work on normal cases again. Sure, they still work on finding the murderer of the policemen, but they have to do it after hours or squeeze it during the day. They’re stuck with the most mundane of cases: a homeless man found dead in the alley, a domestic that ended up with a wife killing her husband (even though she claimed that he ‘ran into her knife’). And if you combine it with the fact that suddenly they’re drowning in paper work – all the reports they neglected when they were focused on the previous case and the new reports, from their new cases – sometimes they barely have time to go and grab something to eat. But he finds that he doesn’t mind it: he and River make a good team, they tackle the cases one after another and for the first week they have no problems with filling the paperwork.

The problems with that start by week two and unfortunately for him, River doesn’t yield under his pleading gaze nor listens to his pleas. He almost always loses his battle against paperwork, no matter what tricks he tries to use. And oh boy, he does try.

___

‘Stop doing that.’

‘Stop what?’

‘Trying to build a tower from all your pens! Fill the reports!’

‘But River! It’s boring!’

‘It’s our job. We finish a case, we write a report. It’s simple.’

‘It’s boring!’

‘You get paid for that. So just do it.’

‘... River, I have an idea.’

‘No.’

‘But you don’t even know what I was going to propose!’

‘You wanted to say that how about I finish these reports on my own and you’ll take care of the next ones. And my answer is no.’

‘Come on, I’ll do anything you want!’

‘Anything?’

‘Yes! Anything. Just name it.’

‘I want you to finish your report!’

‘River!’

‘The sooner you finish it, the sooner you can go home and do whatever you want to do.’

‘Okay, fine.’

‘Good boy.’

‘... River?’
‘What?’

‘Let’s play!’

‘Just finish the bloody report, John.’

‘No, let’s play about who finishes the report!’

‘You really are a 5-year-old.’

‘No, but it’s a serious game! Can you listen to me for a second?’

‘I’m all chin, sweetie. Ears! I meant ears.’

‘Very funny, River. Now. Let’s play the trivia game.’

‘The trivia game?’

‘Yes. We exchange trivia and the first person to get baffled or shocked by another person’s trivia, loses. And finishes the reports.’

‘It’s childish. Go finish your report now.’

‘Oh, you’re afraid that you’re going to lose? Quite right so, I am great at this game.’

‘What are other rules?’

‘Excuse- Oh, you want to play? It’ll be so cool, you’ll see! The only rule is that you can’t make things up. If you run out of trivia, you lose. You get baffled – you lose. Want to start?’

‘Why not. Uhm... Koalas have fingerprints that are almost identical to human ones. It’s difficult to distinguish one from another even under the microscope.’

‘How very police-y of you. Uhm, let’s see... A horned toad can squirt blood from its eyes when it’s angry.’

‘Dolphins evolved from land animals that resembled wolves.’

‘I knew they’re smiley for a reason. Each cub in a litter can have a different father.’

‘Well, mommy bear sure knows how to party. Hm... Giraffes can lick inside their ears.’

‘Okay, I have a good one: when a goldfish is deprived of light, its skin will lose pigment and it’ll become white.’

‘The same thing happens to policeboys- policemen who spend too much time chasing criminals. Hush, it’s my turn... Female bedbugs don’t have any sexual openings. The male has to use its penises to drill a hole in a female’s body.’

‘River!’

‘Ha, you lost!’

‘No! What? No! That surely can’t be true! You’re lying!’

‘And you got baffled. Now, be a good boy and finish your report. And mine as well.’
‘No, that’s cheating!’

‘Google it if you don’t believe it. And don’t let it make you feel inadequate, sweetie. Some species have stronger sexual organs than others, that’s normal.’

‘River! That’s not- And my sexual organs are fine, thank you very much.’

‘Sexual organs? You have more than one? What’s next? You’re going to claim you have two hearts? Someone’s here is blowing their trumpet. And considering that you’re single...’

‘River! You can’t say things like that! And not that you need to know, but my... trumpet is fine.’

‘Okay. I won’t talk about your trumpet anymore. I promise. Now, since I won, I’m going to grab my bag and go home. Enjoy filling in the reports. See you tomorrow, sweetie!’

‘River! You can’t leave me like that! River! ... River?’

___

It’s Saturday in the middle of May, the sun is high in the sky and the air is warm, and he’s at the Ponds’ house, mingling with the guests. Well, he was doing that. A few moments ago. Right now he’s running away from the guests – from one guest in particular. It’s Amy’s baby shower and she invited all of her friends and family, which means that a huge part of this party is incredibly loud and Scottish. He’s been having fun: everyone was really nice, the food was great – Rory got a hang of barbequing and it turned out he has a knack for it and Amy loved the present he got her.

Correction: the present he and River got her. Once they’d been invited to the shower, they’d been talking about what to get Amy for this occasion – they both had wanted to buy something practical, but with a personal feel to it. They’d come up with the same idea: a hand decorated cot. They’d ordered a small wooden cot – River had said that she wouldn’t let him build it himself, because she’s pretty sure he would only harm himself – and then, on a Saturday afternoon, River had knocked on his door with a bag full of supplies. They’d spent the next few hours on painting the cot (deep blue) and sticking tiny sparkling stars on it. The cherry on top had been colourful glitter. Which in the end turned out not to be that great of an idea, because it’d resulted in a giant mess. And he might’ve been the one who had started it by throwing a bit of glitter into River’s hair. Just for fun! And River had seemed to take it as a joke as well: she had only rolled her eyes at him and continued placing silver stars on the cot. He’d not expected her to get back at him. But she had - with a power of a small army. River had just dumped the remaining glitter behind his shirt and over his head when he hadn’t been busy placing a finishing layer of lacquer on the cot. The worst part is that he had no glitter to throw back at her – everything had been behind his shirt and on his hair, and before he’d had a chance to catch River and make her pay for that, she’d been already closed in his bathroom, giggling madly and making him promise that ‘it’s a truce’. And he’d agreed, but once she’d come out of her safe spot, he’d dumped the remaining stars on her and then called the truce. His still apartment is still showing signs of that battle: there’s glitter on the floor no matter how many times he cleans it and his bed is sparkly as if a Disney princess slept in it. But in the end it had been worth: Amy spent a few minutes gushing over the cot and so did all of the guests. She also introduced him to all of his cousins and that’s when all the hell broke loose. Because Amy’s cousin – Harriet – grew incredibly... touchy when she drank her first glass of wine. Her hands started wandering and found their destination on his backside. First time he thought it was just a coincidence: she tripped and had to catch her balance. The second time he dismissed it well, but when she started following him wherever he went, he knew he had to flee. Which wasn’t very brave of him, but what else could he do?

He carefully moves through the corridor leading to the kitchen. Before he walks inside the room, he looks behind him: no sign of Harriet. Good. He quickly opens the door and slides inside the kitchen
with a quiet sigh of relief. Here he is: in his safe haven.

‘What are you doing here?’ A sudden question surprises him and his head whips to the person who asked it.

‘Oh, River. It’s only you,’ he breathes heavily. ‘I’m hiding.’

‘Only me? You do know how to flatter a girl,’ she snorts. ‘And why are you hiding, pray tell?’

‘I’m hiding from Amy’s cousin,’ he answers looking nervously at the door. ‘Oh, cupcakes!’ He smiles reaching for one of the treats on the kitchen table, but River smacks his hand. ‘Ouch! River!’

‘They’re for guests,’ she explains. ‘Besides, I have to ice them first. Amy asked me to do it, she said she has to keep her family in check, trying to stop them from killing each other. Anyway...,’ River starts decorating the cupcakes, ‘why are you running away from Amy’s cousin?’

‘She’s been fondling me,’ he says and props himself against the counter behind River’s back. Just when he says it, River’s hand slips and a portion of icing lands on the table.

‘She’s what?’ She turns around, looking at him with wide eyes.

‘She’s been fondling me,’ he sniffs, straightening his clothes when he sees disbelief written all over her face. ‘What? Is it that difficult to believe? I am very fondlable, River!’

‘Apparently,’ she smiles and turns around to the cupcakes. ‘So you’re planning on hiding here for the rest of the party?’

‘I don’t know,’ he confesses, because he has no idea what to do. He could try to ply Harriet with sweets and alcohol, hoping that she’ll fall into a sugar coma, but it doesn’t seem very gentlemany. ‘You could be my bodyguard.’

‘Me? Your bodyguard? But sweetie, how would I resist from fondling you?’ River replies in an amused tone and he feels a wave of heat flooding his cheeks. And he’s most definitely not thinking about River fondling him, he’s not! He opens his mouth to reply – with a brilliant come back, of course – but a dreaded voice is heard in the hallway.

‘John? John, where are you?’

‘It’s her!’ He hisses and grabs River’s arms. ‘It’s Harriet! She’s going to find me! River, do something?’

‘What am I supposed to do? It’s not like you can hide under the table.’

Harriet’s voice is getting closer and closer – any second now she’ll walk in here – what should he do... Wait, did River say ‘hide under the table’?

Brilliant.

He ducks under the table before River is able to say ‘what the hell are you doing?’ and for the first time, he thanks for Amy’s recent obsession with floor length tablecloths. This one is giving him a perfect hiding spot. He manages to get into a comfortable position, when the kitchen door bursts open and a loud ‘John?’ can be heard.

‘Oh sorry,’ Harriet says when she spots River. ‘Have you seen John?’

‘No. He’s not here as you can see,’ River answers brightly. ‘Just me and the cupcakes.’
‘Funny,’ Harriet makes a few steps inside the kitchen, her heels clicking on the polished floor. ‘I thought I saw him heading his way... You’re sure you haven’t seen him?’

‘Well...,’ River takes a moment to answer as if she’s wondering, ‘the last time I saw him, he was helping Rory with the barbeque. So maybe go check there?’

Barbeque is in the garden which is on the opposite side of the house. Oh, River is simply brilliant.

‘Thank you! I will see there! Thank you so much! Can’t wait to see him, he’s such a cutie!’ Harriet keeps on talking and he really hopes she’ll leave soon. The table stops being a comfy hiding place once you hit puberty and start growing. It’s not a good place to hide when you’re over 30 years old - he can already feel his muscles stiffening. Finally, with one more breezy ‘thank you’ to River, Harriet runs out and closes the door behind her. He waits a few seconds, before scrambling and sticking his head out from under the tablecloth.

‘Is it safe?’

‘Yes,’ River murmurs through gritted teeth. ‘And can you remind me once again, how old are you?’

‘It doesn’t matter!’ He says while scrambling from under the table. ‘It worked. You’re great, River. I owe you!’ He presses a smacking kiss to her cheek. ‘See? You are my bodyguard!’

‘Oh shut up,’ she says and there’s a smile hiding in a corner of her mouth. ‘Shut up and help me to ice the cupcakes.’

‘Whatever you want!’

‘And try not spill everything on the floor while we’re at it.’

‘Yes, ma’am!’

___

‘Stop fidgeting.’

‘But I am bored! We’ve been here for ages.’

‘Not ages, only 2 hours. And stop- Leave that seatbelt alone.’

‘It could have been ages. It’s so boring!’

‘It’s a stakeout.’

‘Stakeouts are rubbish.’

‘Are they? Oh, and who said yesterday ‘yes, it’s a great idea, River and I will do it!’ It was you, John. You can’t complain now.’

‘Well, I changed my mind! Only cows don’t change their minds. Not that there’s something wrong about cows. I like cows. They’re great. They give milk! And they’re quite tasty. Yeah... I am kind of hungry now. Maybe we could go and get something to eat?’

‘No.’

‘But-’
‘But no! We can’t leave the post for another few hours, you know that. Besides, you’re not eating in the car anymore. The last time you did, you spilled your milkshake all over the seat. And before that you dropped a kebab with fish fingers on the floor.’

‘It was because you started the car so abruptly!’

‘No, it was because you thought you saw a squirrel and started pointing at the pavement! You smeared the sauce all over the window and then dropped it on the floor.’

‘Fine. It might’ve been a bit my fault, but I really thought I saw a squirrel.’

‘Sweetie...’

‘And it was a great kebab.’

‘Can you just stop talking for a moment? Please, just keep quiet for five minutes.’

‘But-‘

‘Hush!’

‘...’

‘And stop fidgeting, please.’

‘...’

‘Or I am going to murder you.’

‘You wouldn’t do that. You like me too much.’

‘Do you really want to test this theory of yours?’

‘... Okay, okay. I’m not talking anymore.’

‘Thank you.’

‘... How much longer do we have to sit here though?’

‘Oh for fuck’s sake!’

___

‘It could be worse,’ he says as he slides into his car, looking at grumpy looking River. ‘Jack could be with us. Imagine his reaction to this particular crime scene. We wouldn’t get anything done.’

‘Just... Let’s go,’ River sighs. ‘I need to change. Your shirt is itchy. And ridiculously big. Good that I have some clothes at the station.’

His shirt. Yeah.

Things kind of happen and now River is wearing his shirt. Which for some reasons makes him feel ridiculously cheerful, maybe because in his shirt River looks a bit like a hobbit, curly hair and everything. But back to the point.

They were called on a crime scene the moment he set his foot in the station. A small house in suburbia London, dead: a white male, age 65. He was found by his neighbours who were concerned
that they haven’t seen him in a while. Turns out that he’s been lying in his bed for a few days. Which caused the mess with River’s shirt. Because as soon as one of the technicians went into the man’s bedroom, he came out running and stopped only to vomit all over River’s shirt. He wishes he had his phone ready at that very moment. He would capture the one-in-the-lifetime moment when River Song looked utterly shocked and baffled. She looked like a sheep that had a surprise of a lifetime. Not that he told her that – he’s a gentleman after all.

Instead, he simply walked her out of the house to his car - signalling to technicians that they’ll be right back – and handed her one of his shirt that he’s been keeping in his car for some time now, ever since he got them back from the cleaner's. River – still without any word – grabbed his shirt and headed back to the house to change. Two minutes later they were back in the dead man’s bedroom: this time without the puking technician and with River in his shirt, which turned out to be too big for her – a fact that she felt the need to repeat every other minute. But they finally managed to inspect the scene, which was a bit unusual. The bedroom and en suite bathroom were trashed. All the drawers were on the ground, it’s content thrown on the floor, various pills were in the sink and the mirror on the wall was smashed. It looked like a weird case of robbery-gone-wrong, but here’s the problem: from what the technicians have seen, nothing was stolen. The victim was found on his bed - with his trousers down, which was a source of unending amusement for the technicians – and there were no signs of struggle or fight. And no signs of possible cause of death; the man looked like he died in his sleep. Or at least while preparing to sleep – or do something else that some people do before sleep. The lab promised to send them the results of post mortem as soon as possible. Now he and River are on their way to the station, hoping that they’ll get something from the victim’s cell phone records. River is sitting quietly, with arms crossed over her chest and as soon as they stop on the underground parking lot, she jumps out of the car with a brief ‘thanks’ and heads to their office. He follows her and sees how almost everyone in her way look at her with surprised eyes and shift their gaze in his direction.

The whispers follow and soon the whole station is buzzing like a hive and everyone is repeating the same question: a question they ask him once River disappears inside their office: why is River in his shirt? He wishes they were brave enough to ask River about it. They’re probably afraid that she’d karate chop them to death if they did. He tries to explain, but for some reasons, no one believes that a technician vomited all over her and just by sheer luck he had his laundry in the car. Instead, they wiggle their eyebrows and pat his back and just wink when he’s trying to convince them that it really was just an unfortunate accident. When he finally makes it to the office, River is already dressed in her clothes and his shirt is on his desk, neatly folded. She sends him a smile and a brief ‘thanks for the shirt’ to which he nods and wonders whether or not he should tell her that a good part of the office thinks they got... busy and naughty and her shirt fell a victim to their activities. He decides not to do that: he isn’t sure that he would be able to tell any of it without dying from embarrassment and he really doesn’t want River to go and beat the stupid ideas out of their co-workers.

‘I’m looking over the victim’s phone records,’ River says. ‘I haven’t found anything interesting so far. There’s one blocked number and I’m trying to find out who it is.’

He nods and sits in his chair just to notice a pulsing icon on the desktop of his monitor: an email. He quickly opens it and to his surprise he sees a short email from Martha -a first brief summary of their victim’s post mortem. Martha Jones really is a star, he thinks, while he scans through the few pages describing their victim’s health (fairly good), health problems (heart failure), and the most important part: the cause of death – which turns out to be cardiac arrest. There’s also a brief note scribbled in a smaller font: traces of saliva and lipstick found on the victim’s sexual organs.

Cardiac arrest.

Heart failure.
‘River,’ he starts and River looks up, taking a sip of water from a bottle. ‘Do you think it’s possible to die from a blowjob?’

He expected River to roll her eyes at him and ask him what he means. He expected her to throw him off balance with an innuendo. What he didn’t expect is her choking on the water she hasn’t managed to swallow and trying to catch her breath. He’s by her side in seconds trying to decide whether he should perform Heimlich on her or just go with the 5 blows on her back, but she finally stops coughing and takes a deep and ragged breath.

‘You’re okay?’ He asks her, crouching by her chair. River nods and clears her throat.

‘Don’t you ever do that again,’ she finally says, her voice raspy and uneven. ‘I could have choked to death. Why would you even say something like that?’

‘I’m sorry, okay? The morgue’s report mentioned traces of lipstick and saliva on his sexual organs and I thought—’

‘That it would be a perfect idea to ask me if a blowjob can kill a man. Well, I guess that if it’s a really good one, then yeah, it can,’ she snorts, but this time there’s a small smile on her lips. She clears her throat again and turns attention to her computer, for which he’s thankful, because maybe she won’t notice that hearing the word ‘blowjob’ from her mouth made him feel slightly flustered. ‘But I think you might be right. His mind might’ve been blown along with other parts of him – sorry, I couldn’t stop myself,’ she winks and he can’t help but let out a slight giggle. ‘Before you nearly killed me with your sexually loaded question, I found out that one of the numbers is from an escort agency called ‘Funny Bunny’. We should check if he contacted them and asked for some company.’

He nods his head and gets to his feet, when Donna bursts through the door.

‘Good morning! I have something to tell you- Why are you both so flustered? Am I interrupting something?’

‘Nope,’ River clears her throat and looks at him mischievously. ‘He only asked me about blowjobs and I choked.’

Donna makes a disgusted noise and looks at him.

‘Didn’t I tell you to keep it out of work? We don’t have money to sanitise this place!’ She shakes her head and doesn’t let him explain what River had in mind. ‘Never mind. Just keep it in your pants. That’s not why I’m here.’

‘Then why are you here?’ He asks and scowls at River who’s giggling soundlessly next to him.

‘I’m here to tell you to pack your bags. You’re going to Vegas.’

___

It takes them a few moments to sit Donna down and get some sort of explanation from her. For a few minutes she just throws a million words per second and none of them make any sense to him or River. But when they finally manage to sit Donna in one of the chairs and calm her down, he finally asks the question he’s been meaning to ask for the past few minutes.

‘What do you mean, we’re going to Vegas?’
'I mean that you’re going to Vegas!’ Donna responds with a slight huff. ‘And it’s not us who’s going. It’s you, both of you. It’s not a difficult concept to get, really. You are supposed to be smart, both of you.’

‘And we are, but it is rather sudden news, Donna,’ River states calmly and sits on the edge of her desk. ‘Can you try to explain how did that happen?’

‘Well,’ Donna starts with a smug smile on her lips, ‘you’ll be surprised to hear that your friend started to talk.’

‘Which friend?’ He cuts in.

‘The friend whose arm River shot three weeks ago.’

‘I didn’t shoot his arm, I made sure to only graze the upper part of his trapezius muscle,’ River responds. ‘There’s a difference. But anyway: he started talking? Why now? And how did you find out about it?’

‘This is where it gets interesting. He started talking, because he got a new lawyer – not one from Russian embassy this time – and the lawyer, bless his soul, told our drug smuggler to start talking. He managed to cut him some deal – if he helps in the investigation, he’ll be able to stay in prison here, instead being transported back to his mother country,’ Donna explains. ‘And it seems that he doesn’t want to go back to Russia, because oh boy, he did speak. Not much of it you could use, but he did spill all the details of the drug deal he was the part of. It was supposed to be a blind drop that would be picked up by one of Jim’s thugs. Or maybe even by Jim the Fish himself, since these days he can’t really afford any beefcakes guarding him and running his errands.’

‘What?’ He asks and leans closer to Donna. ‘Are you saying that our dear Jim has problems?’

‘It’d seem so,’ Donna says cheerfully. ‘There seem to be some kind of nasty break-up between him and the Silence. And he woke up with his hand in his ass, so to speak.’

‘Okay, but did that guy say something else?’ River asks.

‘Yes. They found out that one of his most trusted partners at this moment is his girlfriend. They got her name and all they could find out about her. Currently she’s in Norway, but in a week, she’ll be on a plane to-‘

‘Vegas,’ he says excitedly.

‘Precisely,’ Donna nods and grins at him. ‘She booked two tickets. The second one is booked on one of Jim’s aliases.’

‘Everything is great, but why we are the ones going to Vegas? It’s not our case, not originally,’ River asks. ‘He was The Drug Squad’s witness on a case they’ve been working on forever. What changed?’

‘They pissed off someone upstairs,’ Donna states simply. ‘According to the people in power, they weren’t effective enough. Or maybe someone said a wrong thing to a wrong person? I don’t know. All I know is that the case got redirected to us.’

‘But why can’t the Norwegian police get him and his girlfriend?’

‘I don’t know,’ Donna shrugs. ‘They want to get him on American soil. They got in touch with DEA and these guys want Jim as well. They hope he’ll try to get in touch with some of his contacts
there and they want to catch him in the act. And you’re sent there to assist. And if the operation turns out to be a success, our government will have something to talk about for ages. It’s a win-win situation.’

‘If it succeeds,’ River comments sourly.

‘When do we leave?’ He asks excitedly. Finally, something is happening!

‘Jim and his girlfriend are leaving next Friday,’ Donna says. ‘The issue was discussed with the Norwegian government and it was made sure that they’ll be let out of the country. It’s the same with the Americans: they know that these two have to let in without any problems. As for you: you’ll be leaving early on Thursday, so you’ll have a chance to get over the jetlag - at least a bit,’ River snorts and shakes her head at that, ‘and get acquainted with the team and the plan. Your flight back is on Sunday.’

‘What if we don’t catch Jim until then?’ He asks and Donna only shrugs her shoulders.

‘You still come back. You’re given 3 days, that’s it. You get on the plane back on Sunday no matter what the results are.’

‘Great,’ River pinches her nose. ‘And where will we stay? Or are we supposed to work 24 hours, no sleep? It’s a bit late to book something now, especially in a place like Vegas.’

‘Don’t you worry about that, everything has been taken care of,’ Donna smiles at them. ‘The rooms are waiting for you. If you manage to catch that idiot quickly, you’ll have some free time to spend in a decent hotel. I heard it has a pool and a small casino.’

‘Just as about any hotel in there,’ River murmurs.

‘Hush you,’ Donna looks at her and stands up from her seat. ‘Now, check your inboxes, the guys from the Drug Squad should have sent you all in info they gathered. Study it, who knows what will come in handy. And pack your bags!’

‘Anything else we should do in the meantime?’ He asks her with a smile.

‘Try to solve that case from the morning,’ Donna replies. ‘If don’t get to do that, well, we’ll keep it waiting for you.’

‘Thanks Donna, we appreciate it,’ River replies with a sigh. ‘We’ll try our best not to leave you with the blowjob case.’

‘The blowjob case?’ He and Donna ask at the same time.

‘Well, he named it that way,’ River points in his direction. ‘Or very nearly so.’

‘I didn’t!’ He splutters and waves his hands in the air. ‘I only asked-‘

‘If a blowjob can kill someone! That is basically the same as giving a name to that case!’

‘No, it’s not the same! It’s completely different and-‘

‘Guys?’ Donna cuts in and both River and he look at her. ‘Dead guy? Possible murder? Try to save some respect, eh?’

River looks down, looking slightly sheepish and embarrassed. He also looks at his shoes, feeling like he has just been chastised by his school teacher. Really, what were they thinking, arguing over
something like that?

‘But River is right,’ Donna giggles and he looks up to see her by the door, laughing at both of them. ‘You did name the case. Which in turn makes you... The Blowjob Boy?’

And with that she leaves their office. He quickly looks at River, hoping she didn’t hear Donna’s comment, but when he sees her biting her lips in attempt not to laugh out loud, his shoulders sag in defeat.

‘You’re going to call me that now, aren’t you?’ He mumbles and River finally breaks into laughter.

‘Maybe,’ she says when she finally stops giggling. ‘But I think it suits you... John Smith, The Blowjob Boy. Yes, it has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?’ She smiles and walks over to him. ‘Oh, don’t frown, it doesn’t look good on you,’ she pinches his cheeks lightly and he swats at her hands. ‘Let’s but a smile back on that handsome face.’

He swats at her hands again and she moves away with a smile still on her face and he feels his own mouth stretching in a smile. Oh well, River is right: it’s not use in pouting over something like that and he definitely looks better with a smile on his handsome face.

Wait.

_Did River just-

‘Did you just call me handsome?’ He asks her and for a few glorious seconds is rewarded with speechless River Song. ‘You did call me that. You think I’m handsome,’ he sing-songs leaning closer to her.

‘For a twelve-year old, maybe,’ she finally responds and takes a step back from him. ‘Or for a giraffe. You’d make a dashing giraffe, sweetie.’

‘Say what you want, River,’ he straightens lapels of his jacket and confidently runs fingers through his hair, ‘but you noticed my manly charm.’

‘Sweetie,’ River says and straightens his bow tie, ‘up until now, I had no idea that you have any manly charms. Now, what did I say about the pouting? But since you mentioned your... manly charms, I have just the right use for them.’

‘Really? And what would that be?’ He swallows nervously as River slowly comes closer and puts her hands on the lapels of his jacket. He clears his throat and tries to focus on what he wants to say and not on the fact that River is slowly running her hands up and down his jacket. ‘What are your plans for me and my manly charms, detective Song?’

She looks up at him and smiles and he tries his best to suppress a shiver running down his spine. River raises on her toes and whispers into his ear – her voice low and soothing:

‘I’m taking you to the escort agency.’

Chapter End Notes

first of all: thanks for all the comments :3. they mean a lot. I'm just so glad you guys enjoy this story :3.
I hope you'll forgive me the excessive fluff and not really action-y action. yeah, another filler chapter, oops.

high five to everyone who finds 'Chicago' reference. a big virtual cookie and a cup of coffee to those of you who spot 'The Master and Margarita' reference. if you do spot it - yeah, I am not even subtle. I know.

chapter title comes from 'Amalfi' by Hooverphonic. which is an incredibly positive song and it'll make you feel warm and dance-y. and if you want to feel like it's summer, go and watch the video to it. it's lovely, especially if there's a snow blizzard outside.

last but not least: all the trivia about animals is true. the cockroach one too.
On next Thursday, at precisely 10am, River and he are on a plane that is taking off and about to take them to Las Vegas. The last few days passed on solving and putting the end to the Blow Job Case (yes, in the end it was given this name. The whole station seemed to love it. Thankfully, River and Donna didn’t told anyone about his new nickname – or what they claim is his new nickname). As it turned out, his first idea had been right: the victim had had some fun with a girl from the escort agency. He’d taken Viagra to be able to uhm, perform and in the end it’d turned out that his heart could take only this much. During the talk with the girl the victim had chosen, they found out that she didn’t mean to rob him: he collapsed and all she’d tried to find his medicine. When he passed out, she panicked and fled. All the evidence from the scene proved her words: nothing was taken from the house, all the money and valuables were untouched and the only things smashed were places where the medicines could have been. This part was easy. Informing the family of the victim how and why their beloved papa is no longer in the world of living – well, that was a completely different thing. How on earth River managed to talk with the family without laughing out loud is still beyond him.

But it’s not important anymore: right now they are on their way to Las Vegas to catch Jim the Fish and maybe, with his help get the case of the murdered policemen back on track. Unlike River, he’s kind of excited about this journey: he’s never been in Vegas before and he loves exploring new places.

‘River,’ he bounces slightly in his seat and waits until River looks up from the book she’s reading, ‘have you ever been in Vegas?’

‘Yes, once. Why are you asking?’

‘I thought that maybe – maybe you know some fun places? You know, nice places to see and visit,’ he explains. ‘We’ll be there for a few days, it’d be a shame not to see anything.’

‘Sweetie,’ River says with a patient sigh, ‘you do realise we’re going there to catch a drug dealer? I doubt we’ll have any time left to do anything else. Besides,’ she smirks and her eyes sparkle with amusement, ‘I thought you had more than enough fun recently.’

‘River!’ He whines quietly. ‘You promised that we won’t talk about it anymore! You promised! And it was all your fault to begin with,’ he points a finger at her.

‘How was it my fault, exactly?’ She bats her eyelashes, her face a picture of surprise and if he didn’t know her any better, he’d think she’s perfectly innocent.

‘You left me alone with a bunch of...’ he looks around them, but their fellow travellers seem focused on their own affairs, ‘with a bunch of call girls.’

‘They were really nice and polite girls!’ River protests and he knows she’s trying her best to remain serious, but her voice breaks into a quiet chuckle. ‘And you seemed to enjoy yourself around them. When I came back from questioning the owner and the girl, two of them were sitting on your lap.’

‘River!’ He hisses and once again looks around him. ‘I was not- They weren’t- It wasn’t like that and you know that! I was trying to question them!’
‘With their arses against your groin?’ River says and raises her eyebrow and while she tries to look stern, he knows that on the inside she’s laughing at him. ‘Is it some new method of investigation? Maybe you should teach me about it.’

‘River- That’s it. I am not talking to you anymore,’ he sits straight in his seat and crosses his arms against his chest. This woman! She’s awful!

‘Is it a promise, sweetie? Say it’s a promise. I really could use some rest from your chattering for some time.’

‘It’s a threat, River,’ he mumbles grumpily. ‘And you just wait, you just wait – you’ll miss me talking with you. You just wait. You’ll be begging me to-‘

‘Sweetie, you’re not supposed to talk to me, remember?’ She asks in a sing-song voice. ‘So hush now. Let me read my book in peace.’

To his credit, he does leave her alone for a few hours. He reads the book he took with him, but it only entertains him for so long: sooner rather than later he finishes it and once again he has nothing to do. He straightens his legs and shifts a bit in his seat and groans when he feels his neck cramp in protest. He looks at River who’s still engrossed in her book. No, he’ll not interrupt her. He looks away and tries to find something to do, something to occupy him for the next few hours. He tries making small planes from the paper napkins they were given with their meal, but fails and shreds the napkin into tiny pieces. He tries reading the travel guide that someone left in the luggage compartment, but it’s boring and terribly written.

It’s useless.

He’s bored.

Everyone on the plane seems to be sleeping – everyone except River. River, to whom he won’t talk. Even if it means he’s going to die of boredom.

He is not going to speak to River.

Nope.

‘River,’ he says approximately 30 seconds later, ‘I am bored.’

He hears River taking a deep breath and closing her book. ‘Oh?’ She finally says. ‘And what do I have to do with your state of boredom?’

‘I don’t know,’ he shrugs and turns to look at her. ‘We could talk. Or do something interesting.’

‘Sweetie,’ River says in an amused tone, ‘the only interesting thing that you can do on a plane is joining Mile High Club. But I think that the bathroom is occupied right now, so you’ll have to wait a bit longer,’ she eyes him up and down with a smirk and he feels warmth creeping up his neck and flooding his face.

‘River, you-you.. I-you can’t keep saying things like that!’ He sputters, his voice slightly higher than usual.

‘Or what? What are you going to do, handcuff me? Do you have your handcuffs with you, detective?’ River breathes next to his ear and he suddenly feels very hot and quite uncomfortable. His arms start moving on their own accord and he takes another look at River, who’s now quietly laughing at him. ‘You should’ve seen your face, sweetie! I have never seen you so terrified!’
‘Not funny, River,’ he huffs and shakes his head, trying to erase and block all the images that entered his mind when she started whispering all these things about handcuffs and Mile High Club into his ear. Because these thoughts are unprofessional and he shouldn’t be having them. He clears his throat. ‘You’re really not as funny as you think you are. And I am still bored.’

‘We can’t have that, can we?’ River takes her back and rummages in it for a few moments and then with a small ‘aha!’ takes out her phone. She taps the screen a few times and hands it to him. ‘Here you go.’

‘What is it?’ He asks and looks at the screen.

‘It’s a game. You have to kill pigs.’

‘River, I am an adult. I won’t play a game where I kill pigs. And I have to kill it with birds? It’s stupid!’

‘Just... Just play it.’

He groans and presses play just to humour her, but the games sucks him in. It’s only when River gently nudges him to put his seatbelts on, because they’re about to land. He looks at the phone for the last time – did he just played this game for nearly five hours? River takes her phone from him with a smile and he tries his best not to react to her comment about how some adults are just like children.

They land on time and take their luggage without any problems. There’s a man waiting for them in the exit hall. He’s wearing an expensive looking black suit and holding a card saying ‘Song & Smith’ in his hand. They approach him and his mouth twist in a small smile.

‘Detective Smith, Detective Song,’ he extends his hand. ‘I’m detective Canton, I’ll be your guide on this tour. Now, come on. We’re nearly late for a meeting.’

On their way to the car that is parked just outside the hall Canton asks them about their flight and provides some vague information about the hotel they’ll be staying at. By the time they’re inside the car, he already feel hot and slightly sweaty. Las Vegas is far hotter than he expected it to be: sun is high in the sky, the air is dry and everything seems to be nearly vibrating with heat. He has no idea how Canton manages to look so cool and sharp in his black suit.

‘So where are we going now?’ River asks when Canton starts the car.

‘We are going to a short debriefing. Sorry, I know you must be exhausted after the flight, but we want to meet the team and introduce you to the plan and your role in it,’ he says looking at them in the rear mirror. ‘We’ll try to make it as brief as possible, so you can have as much rest as you need.’

‘Okay. But tell us, why are you so interested in Jim? Why now?’ He asks and leans slightly in his seat.

‘You know that he had some falling out with his business buddies recently?’ Canton looks at them again and they both nod. ‘We believe that he’s desperate enough to smuggle and sell cocaine on his own. If he does that, we’ll be able to get his contacts and get rid of not only him, but them as well.’

The rest of the short drive is spent in silence. Canton parks their car in front of a tall building and they walk inside and he breathes a sigh of relief when he feels air conditioning working with full force. River and he are given badges with ‘visitor’ printed on them and together with Canton they go to a conference room at the end of a corridor. It’s full of people and noise, but everyone falls silent once they enter.
‘Everyone, this is detectives River Song and John Smith,’ Canton quickly introduces them to the gathered crowd. ‘They’ll be working with us on Jim’s case. Please, do make them feel welcome. And now, let’s try to brief them in as quickly as possible.’

As it turns out, Canton is nothing but trustworthy. The briefing goes fast, but all the information they get is precise and detailed: the main purpose of this action is to observe Jim and his girlfriend – without them noticing – and everyone they meet. They’ll be divided in small groups that will change throughout the day, so that Jim doesn’t get suspicious. Each group will be able to communicate with the other, so that Jim’s whereabouts will always be known. They are introduced to everyone in the room – he shakes so many hands that he lost count and forgets almost all the names – but after no longer than 30 minutes, he and River are back in the car and this time Canton is driving them to their hotel.

‘You have two rooms booked on your names,’ he says and parks in front of the hotel. ‘Your round starts tomorrow at 3pm. Someone will pick you up from the hotel and leave you at the observation point. And now,’ he says and smiles at them, ‘go and get some rest. You both look like shit.’

‘But it’s still early,’ he mumbles but yawns loudly. ‘Sorry. It’s... what, 4pm here?’

‘Yeah, but in your part of the world it’s probably around midnight,’ Canton chuckles and shake his head. ‘Now, really, go and get some sleep. We need you to be at your best tomorrow.’

They scramble out of the car, grab their luggage and make their way to the reception. Thankfully, it doesn’t take them long to get keys and register – he’s not sure he’d be able to stand there for much longer, all he wants to do is fall on a bed and sleep for ages – and just a few minutes later, he and River open their respective rooms. His room looks cozy and welcoming, but the only thing he can focus on is the bed: large, with fresh sheets and puffy pillows. He flings himself on the covers and breathes with relief. He starts drifting to sleep when someone knocks on his door. He groans and tries to will the knocking away – maybe if he doesn’t answer, the person at the door will go away? But whoever is knocking on his door doesn’t understand his subtle message and keeps on doing it. He stands up with another pained groan and walks to the door, opening it with – what he hopes is – an angry and discouraging expression on his face. Whoever stands on the other side of it, will be met with his anger and-

‘River?’ He says surprised. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I- Nothing. I just wanted to check something,’ she replies hesitatingly. She seems almost... nervous, as if in the space of the last five minutes something unnerved her to the core. ‘I’m sorry. It’s stupid. I’ll just-’

‘No, wait,’ he catches her wrist and gently tugs her inside his room. ‘What’s the matter? Is there a spider in your room? I can take it out of you want.’

‘A spider?’ River blinks in surprise. ‘Sweetie, I could take care of a spider on my own. No, it’s just- Do you have a bath or a shower?’

‘I- What?’ He stutters. ‘A bath or a-? I don’t know?’ He looks at her and then turns around and enters the bathroom. He turns on the lights and blinks at the sudden explosion of brightness. He looks around: everything is white and clean; there are white and fluffy towels laid out on the counter and in the corner there’s a huge shower. ‘Uhm, it’s a shower. Why?’

‘Would you mind-’ River starts when he comes back to the room, ‘would you mind changing the rooms? I mean, if you started unpacking, you don’t have to, but-’
‘Hey, hey, it’s okay,’ he stops her mid-sentence. ‘Sure, we can swap, no problem.’

Her face visibly relaxes and she gives him a small and faint smile – but he welcomes it after her previously panicked and scared expression.

‘Thanks,’ she says and reaches out to squeeze his shoulder. ‘That’s very nice of you.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ he smiles back and his stomach chooses this exact moment to rumble loudly. River snorts and shakes her head at him and he pokes her side. ‘Hey, don’t laugh at me. I’m hungry! We haven’t eaten anything in- In a long time.’

‘Come on then,’ River says and grabs his hand, ‘we can’t have you hungry.’

‘What- what are you doing?’ He says as she drags him on the corridor, barely giving him time to close the door behind him.

‘Taking you to the restaurant downstairs and buying us both dinner,’ she says and before he has a chance to protest and say that he can buy himself dinner, he’s not a child and he has money, she hushes him and shows him to follow her. ‘Hush you. I owe you one. Once in the lifetime occasion.’

Well, if she puts it that way... Who is he to refuse free dinner? Free dinner with River Song. It may be not what he expected to get in Las Vegas, but he’s certainly not going to complain about it.

___

Next day around 2pm, River and he are picked up by a guy from Canton’s office. After exchanging pleasantries and a few jokes about jetlag and weather, he quickly briefs them in on – as he calls it – The Jim Situation.

‘He and his girlfriend landed here just after 10am,’ he says while driving carefully through traffic. ‘They’ve been observed ever since then. So far they haven’t contacted anyone, but we’re still hoping they’ll make a move during this weekend.’

‘And where are you taking us now?’ He asks.

‘To your observation point,’ the man says. ‘Jim has a table reserved in a small restaurant in the city centre. We arranged things for you: you’ll be sat in a place from where you’ll be able to observe him, without being suspicious.’

‘What are we supposed to do if someone shows up to meet with Jim?’ River asks and leans slightly in her seat.

‘Tell us,’ the man behind the wheel replies. He hands him a small box. ‘These are earpieces for you. You have constant contact with us. You spot something – you tell us. Jim meets with someone in the restaurant – you tell us. You overhear something-‘

‘Okay, we get the point,’ River mumbles as she puts the piece in her ear and he does the same. ‘And am I to understand that we’re not to follow them if they decide to leave the place early?’

‘You understand right,’ the man nods and parks the car. ‘There’ll be a team waiting outside, they’ll take over your watch once Jim walks out. So don’t follow him. You’ll be our eyes and ears only in the restaurant. Now – there it is,’ he points to a place several feet away. ‘Just go in there and say you have reservation for Mr. and Mrs. Smith and they’ll know who you are. Jim’s already inside. Good luck.’
‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith? Honestly?’ River mumbles as they get out of the car. ‘Try to me a bit more imaginative next time.’

He can hear someone chuckling in his ear – and he supposes River can hear it in hers - and a voice replies: ‘We’ll try to do better next time. Also, welcome, glad to know that our communication is working. Remember, tell us anything and everything you see.’

‘Yes, we know,’ he answers as they near the restaurant. They approach maitre d’ and he says the magic words ‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith’. The man merely glances at them and nods, leading them to their table. They pass Jim and his girlfriend who seem to be lost in a conversation. They sit at a table a few feet away from Jim’s, in a corner of the restaurant. A waiter quickly comes and hands them menus and quietly walks away. As soon as he’s out of the hearing distance, River opens it to cover her face and quietly mumbles ‘We have a visual on Jim.’

‘Good,’ a voice in their earpieces responds. ‘He’s alone?’

‘He’s with his girlfriend,’ he says turning his face to River and pretending to be talking to her. ‘No one else so far.’

‘Okay. Observe them.’

For the next 20 minutes nothing happens – Jim and his girlfriend get served their lunch and he and River have to order something to stay inconspicuous. He’s about to start on his pasta, when River gently nudges him. There’s someone approaching Jim’s table: a man, tall, with dark hair. He catches a glimpse of his face and it stirs something in his memory. Where did he see him before?

‘Someone joined Jim,’ River reports, tilting her head and smiling at him. ‘He just entered the restaurant.’

‘Describe him,’ comes the voice from the earpiece.

‘White male. Tall, well-built, late thirties I’d say,’ River says quietly. ‘Dark hair. Dressed in a well-tailored black suit.’

‘He just sat at their table, they’re talking,’ he adds. ‘I think- I think I know him from somewhere.’

‘What?’ Both River and the person in his ear ask. ‘Where from?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says, looking at the man once again. ‘I am sure I saw him somewhere, but I don’t know where.’

‘That doesn’t help us in the slightest, sweetie,’ River says with a sigh. ‘Shit, he’s getting up. Do you have someone ready out there?’

‘Yes, we have someone already on it,’ the voice says. ‘Okay, he stepped out of the building, we have eyes on him. Good job. Now, stay put and keep on watching Jim.’

‘Will do,’ he replies and looks at River who looks into space with a slight frown on her face. ‘Something wrong?’ He asks her and she looks back at him and the worried expression disappears from her face.

‘No, I am fine,’ she smiles. ‘Now, let’s eat our food since the American government paid for it.’

‘Hey!’ Someone snorts into the earpiece and he can’t help but smirk at that and wink at River.
They eat their meals in silence, still observing Jim and his girlfriend. He’s on his dessert when Jim and his girl get up and go towards exit. He looks at River, but she just shakes her head and says ‘they’re leaving’ to her earpiece. They get another ‘stay in position, we have someone on it’, and a few minutes later they’re told they can leave. And so they leave (without paying, the maitre d’ just waving them away) and quickly go back to the car that is still parked across the street.

‘And?’ He asks once they get into their seats. ‘Do you have him?’

‘Slow down, cowboy,’ he agent behind the wheel smiles and starts the car. ‘We have people on both Jim and his mystery friend. We also got some decent pictures of that guy, we’ll be running it through the facial recognition soon.’

‘You didn’t arrest him?’ he asks again.

‘What for? He was only talking with Jim, nothing else,’ the agent shrugs. ‘You can’t just arrest people for going into a restaurant. It’s America.’

River and he exchange amused looks and she clears her throat and says: ‘Where are you taking us?’

‘Canton wanted to talk with you,’ comes a short reply. A few minutes later they arrive at the headquarter they visited yesterday. Canton is already waiting for them, greeting them quickly and briefs them in on the situation: another team is now tagging behind Jim and his girlfriend and while they’re not following the other guy anymore, they now know where he’s staying and can observe him from there. They also got his name from the hotel’s reception, but no results came up when they checked it – the guy registered with a fake ID.

‘And the facial recognition?’ River asks.

‘Nothing yet,’ Canton replies with a sigh. ‘We hope that if we broaden the search, we’ll get some results, because for now we have nothing on this guy.’

‘What’s the plan for tomorrow?’ He asks and looks at Canton who quickly nods his head in approval.

‘That’s actually why I wanted to see you,’ he says. ‘There’ll be a bit of a change. They’re splitting up tomorrow, so you also will have to split up. You,’ Canton points at him, ‘will go after Jim. He made an appointment in a posh tennis school. You’ll accompany him.’

‘But I can’t play tennis,’ he says.

‘Neither can he,’ Canton says with a small smile. ‘Look, you’ll just have to go out on the court and observe him. Maybe bounce the ball a few times. Can you do that?’

‘Without injuring himself? I doubt it,’ River quips in and he looks at her sharply.

‘I am perfectly capable of bouncing a ball without causing any damage to myself, thank you very much,’ he flips his head.

‘Sweetie, I know it. It’s a common knowledge you don’t have a girlfriend at the moment, so your... ball-bouncing abilities are at their best,’ River smirks at him and it takes him a second to understand what exactly she means.

Damn her.

‘River,’ he says in a hushed and slightly panicked tone, ‘you can’t say things like that. There are
people here!’ He flaps his hands around. He looks at Canton who – bless him – is pretending that he’s watching a piece of paper in his hand. ‘They may hear you!’

‘I didn’t hear anything,’ Canton replies, still focusing on the white sheet in his hand. ‘Nothing about balls and tennis, and bouncing. Besides, it’s none of my business. Now,’ he finally looks up and there’s a shadow of amusement in his eyes, ‘let’s go back to the subject of the tennis lesson. I promise, we won’t touch the subject of your balls, John,’ Canton adds quickly and he can hear River snorting at that.

Damn them both.

‘The staff of the school will be informed about your attendance, so they won’t bother you and if anything happens, they’ll help you with blending in,’ Canton continues. ‘Just pay attention to Jim – see if he’s meeting with anyone there. Maybe he will make leave some kind of a mark in the changing room. Or leave something inside his locker. Anything.’

‘Okay, fine,’ he sighs. This much he can do. Truth to be told, he’s quite terrible at tennis – he lacks hand to eye coordination and he can never hit the ball and send it where he wants it to go. At least he won’t have to play a match with anyone. ‘And what about River?’

‘Oh, she’s free tomorrow morning,’ Canton replies. ‘We already have an agent ready to follow Jim’s girlfriend in case she goes anywhere.’

‘What? That’s not fair!’

‘No one said it’s going to be fair, sweetie,’ River pats him on the shoulder. ‘You’ll do fine without me.’

‘Besides, in the evening you’ll be back together,’ Canton adds. ‘That’s if they decide to head somewhere in the evening.’

‘And what about the other guy? Will you keep an eye on him?’ River asks.

‘No, we can’t. We already have too many agents in the field, rotating all the time, making sure that Jim doesn’t suspect anything. We have his picture, facial recognition has to work for now.’

‘I am sure I saw him somewhere before,’ he mumbles and tries to remember the man’s appearance. Tall, dark hair, dark eyes, muscled and handsome. He’s so sure he saw him before – maybe once or more? But where? Oh, why won’t his brain cooperate?

‘We’ll let you know as soon as we find out more about him, maybe that will jog your memory,’ Canton says. ‘Right, that’s all. I won’t keep you here anymore. Go and try to see something. Just don’t get married,’ he laughs quietly.

‘Don’t worry, that’s not going to happen,’ River replies with a smile. ‘I’m not a wedding person.’

‘Me neither,’ he says quickly. ‘I’m rubbish at weddings. I’d be even worse at my own, I am sure of that.’

That’s true. He’s always been terrible at weddings. As a child, he went to a wedding of his parents’ friends. The bride loved daisies and the flowers were decorating almost every available surface in the church. The wedding hall was probably also covered in them. Not that he had a chance to see it – it turned out that he had a terrible allergy to daisies. Within the first 5 minutes of the ceremony he had a runny nose, red splotches all over his skin and 10 minutes later he started choking. So instead of eating a wedding cake, he and his parents spent the evening in hospital. Fun. Over a decade later, he
was Amy’s best man at her and Rory’s wedding and he nearly lost the wedding bands. Thankfully, Amy still has no idea about this little... misadventure of his, otherwise he wouldn’t be alive right now.

Besides, who says that everyone has to get married? It’s not for everyone.

It’s certainly not for him.

___

‘Hello?’

‘Hello, River!’

‘Oh, hello sweetie. How was the tennis lesson? Learned anything interesting?’

‘Not really. Except things that I already knew – I can’t hit the ball for the life of me.’

‘You can’t be good at everything, sweetie. But how was our friend doing?’

‘He was there for a lesson. Just a lesson.’

‘So you found nothing on him?’

‘No. He met with no one, I checked his backpack, but there was nothing- River, what is that noise?’

‘... Sorry, I tried to change while talking on the phone with you. You were saying?’

‘I said that I went through his backpack and- Wait, are you naked?’

‘No? Why are you asking that?’

‘You said you were changing clothes.’

‘Because I was. Now I am all properly dressed. Continue. So nothing in his backpack?’

‘Nothing. He also didn’t meet with- So you were naked?’

‘... Is it your poor attempt at phone sex, sweetie? Because let me tell you, it’s not how you do it.’

‘River! That’s not what I mean and you know it! I was just wondering-’

‘Oh, you were wondering if I’m naked?’

‘Yes- No! No! Not like that.’

‘Pray tell, how were you wondering if I’m naked?’

‘I wasn’t! Okay? I wasn’t wondering if you’re naked.’

‘Are you sure, sweetie?’

‘Stop it. I can hear you smirking over the phone.’

‘You know very well that you can’t hear a thing like that.’

‘I can!’
‘No, you can’t. Now, get off the phone and come back to the hotel. We’ll grab something to eat and maybe that way you won’t wonder about my state of undress.’

‘I hate you.’

‘No you don’t, sweetie. You don’t.’

___

He really hates this music. And from what he can see, River is not a fan of it either – she’s slumped in her chair with a displeased expression on her face. They’ve been here for a few hours now, observing Jim and his girlfriend getting progressively more and more smashed.

He’s also pretty sure that he’ll have a terrible headache tomorrow, the bass line already drilling a mile deep hole inside his brain. And really, who makes music like that? It’s repetitive and loud, and he doesn’t understand how anyone could enjoy it. But people around them seem like they’re enjoying it quite a lot – the floor is packed with sweaty bodies moving together with the rhythm, grinding against each other and gasping lyrics of the song between one move and another. He can’t even talk with River, hell, he can’t hear his own thoughts, let alone vocalise them and hear her response.

He spots Jim grabbing his girlfriend’s hand and leaning over to say something into her ear with an excited grin on his face. She quickly nods and wobbles a bit when she gets from the bar stool. Jim kisses her and then they start making their way through the crowd to the exit. He quickly looks at River and she nods her head to indicate that she also saw it. They stand up and head towards the exit, trying their best not to lose the sight of Jim. He clasps River’s hand in his so that they won’t get separated while navigating their way out of the club. They finally make step out of the club and see that Jim and his girlfriend already managed to get away a bit. They start walking fast to catch up with them and River uses this time and the relative silence around them to report back to Canton.

‘We got out of the club, we’re following them now,’ she says into her earpiece. ‘Yes. Okay... Right.’

‘What do they want?’ He asks slightly breathlessly, manoeuvring his way through the crowds on the street.

‘We have to tell them where these two are going, so someone can replace us,’ she replies and looks at the pair in front of them. ‘I hope they’re going to their hotel. They’re drunk out of their asses.’

‘But that means they’re not paying attention to anything,’ he says. ‘Okay, I think they stopped. Uhm... I think they’re going to a chapel.’

‘Fuck,’ River snorts. ‘Okay, we have to catch up with them and make sure it’s not just a way to dodge us.’

They quickly walk to the chapel, inside which Jim and his boo just disappeared. It’s one of many chapels on this street, but it certainly has the biggest neon sign on the roof. It flashes in bright yellow every few seconds and the letters form two words: The Pyramids. There are fake palm trees standing outside the door and for some reason, the entrance to the chapel is covered with sand and glitter.

‘Canton, they walked into a chapel. It’s called ‘The Pyramids’. Canton? Can you hear me? Fuck,’ River says angrily. ‘It seems we lost contact with the base. Fuck.’

He checks his earpiece, but it’s just as useless as River’s – he gets no response and the connection appears to be stone cold dead.

‘Okay, I’m going to call them now and ask for backup,’ River says and takes her phone out of her
purse. ‘You get us inside and try to see if Jim is still there.’

She walks out and starts talking on her phone before he has a chance to agree or propose a better plan. Okay fine, he wouldn’t come up with anything better. Well then. Time to get this show on the road.

Chapter End Notes

13th chapter on Friday the 13th. (hey, it's still Friday here!)
~spooky~
nah, actually it's just a coincidence

once again, thank you so so much for every comment and kudos :3. they mean a lot and it makes me really happy to know that you're enjoying this fic :3.

chapter title from Lana Del Rey's 'American'.


don’t let a kiss fool you, never marry for love

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

‘River, say something. Please.’

‘…’

‘River, I’m sorry, okay? I know it’s not what we wanted, but-’

‘Not what we wanted? Excuse me... What did I tell you when I went to call back-up? Please, remind me.’

‘Uhm, you told me to get us into the chapel so we can observe Jim.’

‘Right. Now, did I say anything – anything at all – about signing us up on a list to get married?’

‘No, but-’

‘Exactly. So why would you do that?’

‘That was the only way to get in that chapel.’

‘Couldn’t you just show them your badge?’

‘... I left it in the hotel room. Ouch! Why are you hitting me?’

‘Because you are an idiot.’

‘But I got us in!’

‘Yes, and instead of observing the suspect, we were married by a sweaty guy dressed up as Elvis. ... Don’t laugh, it’s not funny!’

‘It kind of is. Come on, don’t panic. We will get him. He won’t get out of the city, all the roads out are observed now. What?’

‘Even if we catch him, we will still be married. Forgot about that?’

‘Oh well... We’ll figure something out!’

‘Figure something out? I can’t believe that you’re so flippant about it.’

‘It will be fine, River. River? Where are you going? River-’

‘I am going to sleep this nightmare off. And try to figure something out. You call Canton and ask him to inform us about Jim’s every move.’

‘Hey, don’t order me around! Just because we’re married doesn’t mean- Ouch, why did you hit me again?’

___

It’s early Sunday morning and he’s sitting on the hotel’s terrace, eating his breakfast. It’s only 9am,
but the air is already hot and dry against his skin. He’s not used to this kind of weather: London
usually greets him with chill and gloom, the sun rarely peaks from behind the clouds. He’s not sure
he likes it: the sun blinding him all the time, the heat, the dry air sucking out all the moisture from his
body. He tries to come up with a device that would protect him from the sunbeams – other than a
baseball hat or sun umbrella.

Through his sunglasses he spots River entering the terrace and looking for him. At least that’s what
he hopes. She sees him and nodding her head once, starts walking in his direction. It’s only then
when he notices what she’s wearing: a short and flimsy dress – shorter and flimsier than anything
he’s ever seen her in – in a delicate flower pattern. It’s very unlike anything River usually wears, but
at the same time it suits her very much and he wishes she’d wear it every day. Suddenly glad for the
cover his sunglasses give him, he rakes his eyes over her body once more, before she sits by his
table. The hot weather isn’t that bad if you think about it.

‘Good morning,’ he says, his voice sounding a bit lower than he wanted it to. ‘Where were you last
night? I knocked on your door, but you didn’t answer.’

River shrugs slightly and signals the waiter, who nearly trips over his feet in haste to get to their
table. She orders only coffee, even though the waiter proposes her various meals from ‘their rich
breakfast menu’, all while sneaking glances down her cleavage. River thanks him with a polite but
curt smile and he scurries back to the kitchen.

‘We’re married for one day and you’re already not letting me in inside your bedroom?’ He tries to
joke, but the second he says these words, images appear in his head. Interesting and colourful
images. Of River’s bedroom. Or to be more precise: of her bed. Which are not thoughts he should be
having, especially not with River present. He gulps and watches her take a deep, calming breath –
and has he mentioned that this dress is really low cut? He gulps again.

‘I was at a bar, trying to drink away my sorrow of my loveless marriage,’ she responds, with a hint of
amusement in her voice.

‘You wound me, Song,’ he mockingly puts his hand over his heart, but something inside his chest
hurts at her words. Or maybe it’s just a minor heartburn? Either way, it’s better to ignore it. ‘Or
should I say, Smith?’

‘Very funny,’ she says, rolling her eyes and gracing the waiter, who just came back with her coffee
and a bright smile directed at her. She sends him away with a small wave of her hand and starts
speaking only when he walks away. ‘I looked into it. The whole marriage annulment thing,’ she
explains when he looks at her surprised. ‘It’s actually quite easy and quick. There’s this
organisation,’ she types something on her phone and hands him it. ‘They will do everything for us –
we just need to pay them and fill out a few applications. That’s all.’

He looks at the screen and sees a website of some organisation that claims 99.9% success rate. ‘1-3
days, 500$, Highest Success Rate In The State!’ the site shouts in bright red letters. He looks back at
River, who eyes him hesitantly, biting her lip.

‘Okay, what’s the catch?’ He asks her and she slowly exhales the breath she must’ve been holding.

‘You have to call Donna and ask her if we can stay a few more days,’ she says quickly.

He snorts in disbelief at her request. They have a flight booked for tonight and Donna did say these
few days is all they have. And now he’s supposed to call her and ask her for a few more days,
because they need to get a divorce?
‘You don’t have to say anything about the marriage and divorce,’ River says and he realises he’s been thinking out loud. ‘Just tell we found something new here and that we’d like to investigate.’

‘But why do we need to stay here for a few more days?’

‘Have you even read what I showed you?’ River sighs and starts explaining. ‘The annulment usually last one to three days. They cannot send us the papers today, because it’s Sunday and they don’t work. So they’ll send them tomorrow, we send them back along with the money and by Tuesday we’ll be divorced.’

‘But why can’t they send the paperwork to London?’ He asks her and she huffs impatiently.

‘It’ll take longer! And if there’s any inconsistency, they’ll have to re-send it and it’ll drag.’

‘And?’ He stretches in his chair and observes her through his glasses. ‘So it’ll take more time. Why do you care?’

‘Why don’t you?’ She asks him defensively. ‘It’s a problem. Don’t you see it?’

He cannot respond, because a shadow is cast over their table and they both look up: it’s Canton, dressed in a black suit, wearing a grim expression on his face.

‘Good morning,’ he nods and his lips quirk in a small grin, ‘and congratulation on your marriage.’

River groans and glares at him angrily, which makes Canton smile a bit wider.

‘As much as I’d love to tease you both about it some more,’ he says pulling a chair to their table and sitting on it, ‘I am afraid I have some bad news.’

‘What happened? Did Jim and his girlfriend managed to run away?’ River asks, leaning towards Canton.

‘In a way,’ he sighs and opens the envelope in his hand. ‘He’s dead.’

‘What?’ He shrieks, surprised. ‘How could he be dead? The orders – your orders - were to capture him, not kill him.’

‘I am aware of that, detective Smith,’ Canton replies sourly. ‘We didn’t do anything. It was his fault. Just like we suspected – he wanted to smuggle cocaine. The only difference is that he didn’t want to smuggle it inside the USA, but outside. We believe he wanted to fly to Mexico. He smuggled it in his stomach. He probably did that to make sure that if they get caught or controlled at any point, no one would be able to find it.’

‘Oh no, please don’t tell me that what I think happened, happened,’ River says in a panicked voice.

‘I am afraid it did happen,’ Canton responds showing them the pictures. ‘He swallowed the packages with cocaine, 25 of them. He either swallowed them too early or didn’t get rid of them quickly enough and some of them broke. He died from overdose.’

‘Fuck,’ he mumbles under his breath. ‘What now?’

‘Since he died here, smuggling drugs on the USA territory, we will investigate it here first,’ Canton slowly says. ‘Then we’ll work with the government in the your country. For you, the case is closed, at least for now.’

‘Is that all?’ River mumbles tiredly in Canton’s direction. ‘What about his girlfriend? And the guy we
saw them both with? He could’ve been the one who provided him with the drugs.’

‘We’re still searching for them, since they both seem to have disappeared. All the roads out of the city are closely monitored and if any of them tries to get out, we’ll know about it.’

‘His girlfriend wasn’t with him? No one saw her near the place where you found him?’ He asks, but Canton only shakes his head.

‘No. He was found alone in some alley. No signs of struggle or fight. We asked around, but no one paid any attention to him and to his companions.’

‘Fuck,’ River says. ‘And that’s it? We can’t even see the body?’

‘No, not now. They’re doing post mortem now. And even if they didn’t, I still wouldn’t be able to take you to the morgue. These are the orders from above. I’m sorry it’s like that, but I cannot do anything about it,’ Canton responds and gets up. ‘You’re leaving today, right? Try to get some sun. And try not to get married- Oh, I forgot. Too late for that!’

He leaves them, but the sound of his chuckling stays with them for a few more seconds. Okay. So things definitely did not go as planned.

‘Call Donna,’ River says once Canton is out of their sight. ‘We have to tell her about it.’

‘Why me?’ he whines, but pulls out his phone.

‘Because I don’t have her private number,’ River responds, while he’s searching for Donna’s number. ‘She won’t be at work today, you numpty.’

‘Oi, don’t call me that! Just because we’re married doesn’t mean that-’ River rolls her eyes at him and he doesn’t have the chance to respond, because Donna’s voice rings on the other side. ‘Hello, Miss Noble! How is your day?’

‘You don’t have to shout, John,’ Donna responds. ‘You better tell me how you’re doing. And how our little friend Jimmy is doing. Did you get him?’

‘Uhm, you could say that?’ he croaks and quickly briefs her in. For a few moments she doesn’t respond, he cannot even hear her breathing.

‘Bloody hell!’ She finally exclaims so loudly, that he has to put the phone away from his ear. ‘Couldn’t he overdose in here? It’s ridiculous!’

‘Yeah, I know,’ he tries to calm her down, before breaking down more bad news. ‘And they won’t let us take part in the investigation.’

The words leaving Donna’s mouth are so loud that he’s sure that the entire restaurant hears them. And since everything she’s saying is verging on vulgar, all the people occupying the terrace are starting to stare at them. He sends them all an apologetic smile, but River just turns around and glares at them in what must be an unfriendly and discouraging way, because they all quickly look back at their plates.

‘- and the cheek! The bloody cheek to think that they can just take the investigation from us!’ Donna continues shouting in his ear and she sounds so livid that he doesn’t even try to remind her that technically it’s not their investigation. ‘Bloody Americans. I wish I was there, I’d tell them what I think about it,’ he snorts quietly and makes a face, one that makes River grin. ‘Okay, we cannot do anything about it. Now, you have your plane booked for tonight, we’ll talk about it more once you’re
back here.’

‘Yeah, but about that,’ he says slowly and River urges him to continue. ‘Listen, is there any chance we can stay for a few more days? We’ll pay!’

‘No, no way,’ Donna responds firmly. ‘Just because you got married yesterday and want to catch a bit of your honeymoon in a place where there’s actual sunshine, doesn’t mean you can neglect work.’

‘What?’ He splutters into the phone and sees how River’s face slowly loses all colour. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Everyone knows that, you idiots,’ Donna’s laugh vibrates through his body. ‘Canton called me as soon as he found out. He says it’s one of the most hilarious things that ever happened to him.’

‘It didn’t happen to him,’ River mumbles next to him and he hushes her.

‘Anyway: I expect you to be in work on Tuesday,’ Donna says quickly. ‘Honeymoon or not – just be there.’

And with that, she ends the call. He’s too shocked to register it, sitting with his phone by his ear a bit longer.

‘We are so screwed,’ River says, perfectly voicing his thoughts. But he suspects they have different definitions of screwed: River is angry that people know that they are married, he’s angry – well, not angry, shocked – that someone else knows about it and he wasn’t the one to inform them. But then again, River is right – the whole station knowing about it may mean only one thing: trouble for them.

He puts the phone on the table and looks at River, who runs her fingers through her curls.

‘It’ll be fine,’ he tries to calm her. ‘We’ll get home and explain everything to them, and we’ll get the divorce and soon no one will ever remember about it.’

He himself doesn’t believe that, but he just want to console River now, because he’s never seen her so nervous and anxious.

‘Yeah, right,’ she sighs deeply, standing up from his chair. ‘Okay, let’s go back to our rooms and pack. I’ll send the application for the divorce papers. Maybe they’ll manage to send them tomorrow, and we’ll get them this week.’

They make their way through the lobby and ride the elevator to their floor. They’re nearing their rooms when his phone rings and one look at the display makes him cringe.

‘Oh no,’ he whispers. ‘No.’

‘What is it?’ River says and looks through his arm at his cell. ‘Oh. No. That is not good.’

‘I know!’ He exclaims, still looking at his ringing phone with ‘Amy Pond’ on the display. ‘What am I supposed to do?’

‘Just pick it up,’ River says swallowing visibly. ‘Maybe she doesn’t know.’

He shoots her a disbelieving look, but presses the green button on his phone. He doesn’t even get to put the phone to his ear, when a loud and Scottish voice booms through the speaker.

‘I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU GOT MARRIED AND DID NOT INVITE US!’ Amy screeches
into the silence of the corridor. ‘I JUST CANNOT BELIEVE IT!’

River shakes her head and quickly takes his key card from the back pocket of his trousers. He jumps a bit, but she shrugs and quickly opens the door and ushers him inside. And bless her for doing that, because Amy starts shouting again.

‘YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD US THAT YOU WANT TO MARRY! EVERYTHING WOULD BE BETTER THAN A VEGAS WEDDING!’ She takes a breath and he looks at River, silently asking her for help. She takes the phone from his hand and puts it on speaker, just in time to hear Amy again. ‘But then again, you two wouldn’t probably get the courage to do it! How much alcohol did you need to man up and ask her, you idiot?’

‘None at all,’ River responds with a sigh, before he opens his mouth. ‘Hello Amy!’

‘Oh, hello River!’ Amy’s voice brightens up. ‘Are you having a lie-in? It is kind of cute if you think about it. I am so happy that you got together! Just please tell me that you used protection when you shagged, because I am not ready to see John’s kids. I mean, can you imagine if a poor kid got his chin? What if it’s a girl? We’ll have to make you another party, once you get back. I’m thinking, next week? A small get together and-’

‘Amy, Amy, hold on,’ River says and miraculously, Amy stops talking. ‘It is not what you think. We didn’t get married. Okay, we did, but not because we wanted to. It was…’

‘A mission requirement,’ he finishes for her and she sends him a grateful smile.

‘What?’ Amy’s voice gets even higher and both River and he wince.

‘We’ll get it annulled as quickly as possible,’ River explains. ‘We had to do it to enter the chapel to catch the suspect. That’s all.’

There’s a long silence on the other side of the line - so long that they both start looking at each other anxiously.

‘Amy?’ He asks tentatively. ‘You’re alright?’

‘I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU!’ She’s back into her shouting mode. ‘I am so done with the two of you! When Donna called Rory I thought that you finally saw the light! But no! You are both a bloody disappointment! And don’t you think I am done with you. Just come back home!’

And these words and a few last huffs, she hangs up. For a few minutes they both stare at his phone and it’s River who breaks the silence.

‘You think she’ll be fine?’ She asks him.

‘Yeah, she’ll be great,’ he shrugs. ‘I’d be worried about us. She’s disappointed, angry and pregnant. It’s a deadly combination.’

River lets out a sound – something between a small sob and a giggle. She looks at him as if she wants to say something and he just realises how close to each other they’re sitting.

They’re sitting very close to each other.

On his bed.

And they are married.
At least in theory.

He shakes his head. Once again: it’s nor time nor place to have thoughts like that. He should get a grip.

‘Okay,’ River says, slowly getting up from the bed – his bed – and straightening his dress. ‘I’m going to pack now. We’ll get some dinner before the flight, okay?’

He nods quickly, not trusting his voice. River sends him one more smile, before quickly leaving and closing the door behind her. When he hears the lock click, he releases the breath he’s been holding.

Packing. Yes, he should do that as well. He lies on the bed instead and stares at the ceiling, making a quick pros and cons list of the last few hours. He already knows that the few next days are going to be... difficult, to say the least. With both Jim and their investigation dead (definitely going to the cons side of the list), they’ll have to try a new approach (cons once again). And the whole marriage thing... He can’t help but smirk to himself. Somehow, in the middle of his craziness, he got married to River Song.

And he’s not sure why, but without hesitation, he puts it on the pros side. Take that, life.

Chapter End Notes

oops?
oh come on, how could I resist a Vegas wedding that didn't really count, but kind of did? I couldn't. I stood no chance.
it's a good thing they have divorces, eh? :3

anyway and most importantly: thanks for all the kudos and comments. they make me happy on the inside :3. (not like that!)
have a nice weekend :3.

chapter title from 'dead and lovely' by Tom Waits
that's what you get for waking up in Vegas

Chapter Notes

there's a brief description of violence in this chapter, nothing too gore, but a warning just in case

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'I'm just so tired', he thinks as he puts his head on the steering wheel. Oh, what he would give for a few more hours of sleep. Which is not something he ever experienced: he’s never slept longer than a few hours at night – it has always been enough for him and besides: sleep is boring! Almost everything in the world is more exciting than sleeping, so why waste your time on that? But it seems that these days his body doesn’t agree with him – since the moment he and River landed back in London yesterday he’s been sleepy and tired, but when he tried to fall asleep later in the afternoon – he couldn’t. He kept tossing and turning in his bed for the next few hours. He managed to fall asleep three hours before his alarm clock started ringing, announcing loudly that it’s high time to get ready to work. And even when he slept, dreams were appearing in his mind: a man dressed in black, appearing and disappearing, talking with a masked person. In his dream he tried to get closer to them, see their faces or at least try to listen to their conversation, but every time he got closer, they disappeared and turned into smoke.

He groans and closes his eyes. Maybe if he went back home now and called in sick... Maybe no one would mind? They surely can work without him, right? It’s only one day. In a few seconds – okay, maybe in a minute – he’ll raise his head, start his car and go back to his apartment. Then he’ll call Donna and tell her that he’s unable to work today and they have to survive one day without him. He’ll do just that in a second, just let him keep his eyes closed for a bit.

Someone knocks on the window of his car and he’s so startled by the sudden noise – he was almost falling asleep, thank you very much – that he jumps in his seat and his head connects painfully with the back of the head rest. He yelps and starts massaging the sore spot on his head and looks to his right only to see River standing next to his car, looking at him with a slightly amused expression on her face. He rolls down the window and scowls at her.

‘What are you trying to do? Give me a heart attack?’ He asks her grumpily. ‘You know you won’t get much from murdering me. I don’t have that much money on my bank account.’

‘Actually, I was wondering why you’re sleeping in your car, sweetie,’ River replies. ‘And why you’re on time.’

‘Couldn’t sleep,’ he shrugs and slowly gets out of the car. His everything actually aches when he moves. ‘Jetlag is killing me. Do you think we get some kind of a refund for it?’

‘I doubt it,’ River smiles as they start walking towards the office. ‘And didn’t I tell you not to sleep on the plane?’

‘You did,’ he sighs. ‘And I didn’t listen to you. Your point?’

‘My point is that if you had listened to me, you’d not look like death right now. And soon you’ll drink a sea of coffee and you’ll be high on caffeine, and I’m the one who will have to deal with
hyper you. See? Had you listened to me, you’d have saved us both from misery.’

‘Oh shut up,’ he mumbles. ‘You’re behaving very wife-y right now. I’ve seen Amy doing this kind of thing, you know. We haven’t been married for a week yet and you already bossing me around.’

‘And what else am I supposed to do with you?’ River says as they walk into the station. ‘Speaking about marriage – I have all the divorce papers ready. You just need to fill your part, sign and we can send it. By the end of the week we should be free again.’

He nods his head looks around the main room at the station. There are only a few people sitting at their desks, sorting through mail and other paperwork. They don’t even look up and answer his and River’s greetings, only wave their hands in response.

‘It’s weird,’ he says when they’re nearing their office. ‘Where’s everyone?’

‘I have no idea,’ River responds and looks back at the few people at their desks. ‘Maybe there’s a briefing? Maybe Donna got some news from Canton?’

‘And they wouldn’t wait for us? We’re the ones who should be briefing everyone, not the other way around,’ he shakes his head and opens the door to their room. ‘Maybe they just–’

‘CONGRATULATIONS!’

The roar coming from their office is so loud that he’s pretty sure his hearing is momentarily impaired. Their office is full of people – he sees Rory and Jack, Clara standing next to them, Donna somewhere in the back, and the rest of their co-workers is also here. He has no idea how on earth they managed to fit into this room – the office he shares with River isn’t particularly large, it’s a bit bigger than a broom closet – but they did. And now they’re all clapping and cheering at him and River.

But that’s not everything. The room is decorated.

There are pink ribbons and balloons in the corners and on their desks, the floor is covered with sparkling confetti and pieces of colourful paper. He even spots a vase full of pink roses on River’s desk. And- Wait a minute. Do some of the balloons have ‘newlyweds’ written on them?

Oh shit.

They do.

He sneaks a glance at River, who’s staring at the hell in front of them with horror in her eyes. All their friends and co-workers are still cheering and shouting their congratulations at them and someone just threw a new portion of confetti at him and River. It can’t get any worse now, can it?

‘KISS!!’ Someone – he’s pretty sure it’s Jack – in the room shrieks and soon the entire room is repeating the word louder and louder. He will find the person who shouted it and he will- Actually, he’s not sure what he’ll do to that person. Probably nothing, considering that he’s pretty sure that he’s going to die from embarrassment any second now. The shouting intensifies with every second and he looks at River. She must stop this madness! Unfortunately, from what he sees, River’s face mirrors his own deer-in-the-headlight expression. Their friends – friends? Ha! – are still cheering and it doesn’t look like they will stop anytime soon. They surely don’t really expect them to kiss. That would be unprofessional. Very unprofessional if you think about it. Besides, kissing with all these people present? That would be just wrong. If he were to kiss River, he’d prefer it to happen in a more private place.
Not that he wants to kiss River. He doesn’t. Not one bit.

He notices that River is now standing closer to him, with her face turned in his direction. He looks at her questioningly, but she only shakes her head and he sees rather than hears her mumbling ‘I’m sorry.’ He wants to ask her what she’s sorry for, but she doesn’t give him a chance to even voice the question, because she grabs the collar of his shirt to yank him down.

And then she kisses him.

It’s a simple kiss, merely a press of her lips against his, but it makes heat shoot through his body.

(‘It was the shock and surprise,’ he will tell himself later that day. ‘That’s all.’)

He has no idea what to do with his hands and after a few moments of t-rexing them in the air, he gently settles them on River’s arms. He can’t hear anything that’s happening around them, all he can focus on is the warmth of River’s lips and the scent of her perfume. He takes a deeper breath and-

River pulls away.

‘Okay, the show has commenced,’ he hears Donna’s voice over the pounding of blood in his ears and excited whispers around them. ‘Off you go, all of you. Back to work. Or go to the kitchen and start eating the cake.’

‘Cake?’ River asks clearing her throat. She shoots him a quick glance, but just as quickly looks away and goes to her desk. ‘What cake? And whose idea was all of this?’

‘Everyone’s,’ Donna shrugs. ‘Now, I have news. And for god’s sake, John, can you please close the door? And your mouth while you’re at it?’

‘What?’ He snaps his head in her direction, but only a second later his gaze falls back onto River. He just can’t stop looking at her – he can’t turn away or look at anything or anyone else. His eyes seem to drift to her on their own and there’s nothing he can do about it. River on the other hand does everything not to look at him – she’s looking at Donna and doesn’t let her gaze move for even an inch.

‘The door. Close it,’ Donna repeats. ‘Really, did someone hit you on the head when you were over there?’

He closes the door and slowly makes his way to his desk. His legs feel a bit funny – actually he feels a bit funny. Maybe he’s coming down with something. Yes, it must be it.

‘Okay, so what do you have for us?’ River asks Donna as soon as he sits in his chair.

‘Quite a lot,’ Donna responds and smiles. ‘Canton called me yesterday. They have Jim’s girlfriend in custody.’

‘What?!’ He and River exclaim at the same time.

‘Quite a lot,’ Donna responds and smiles. ‘Canton called me yesterday. They have Jim’s girlfriend in custody.’

‘What?!’ He and River exclaim at the same time.

‘Why didn’t anyone tell us?’ He adds.

‘Because you were above the Atlantic when he called,’ Donna responds. ‘They caught her in the morgue – she came to confirm his death and get his things. She’s definitely not the sharpest crayon in the box, but no one’s complaining.’

‘Did they get anything out of her?’ River asks, but Donna shakes her head.
‘Unfortunately no. She’s silent. She spoke to no one – not even the lawyer she’s been given. She’s either in shock or she doesn’t want to cooperate. You’ll get to see her next questioning. We set up a video conference for today, at 6pm.’

‘That’s great,’ he says. ‘Do we have any more info on her?’

‘Clara is working on it,’ Donna nods. ‘But that’s not all. They found out who the mysterious guy who met with Jim is.’

There’s a loud clatter and sound of breaking glass and he looks up to see that the vase that stood on River’s desk is now on the floor, in tatters. The water is spreading, making a bigger and bigger stain on the carpet and the flowers are laying among the broken glass.

‘Shit, I’m so sorry,’ River gets up from her chair and kneels by the broken vase, carefully picking the pieces of it up. ‘I just had this terrible cramp – I’ll clean it up. You were saying?’

‘Don’t touch it with bare hands, you’ll get hurt,’ Donna says with a furrowed brow. ‘We’ll get someone to clean it up in a second. But yeah, they found the guy.’

‘How?’ He asks Donna, but he’s looking at River. She looks shaken and unsettled, even though she tries to hide it. She almost succeeds and to someone who didn’t know her, she’d look calm and collected. But by now he’s learned how to read her and now he can see that something is not right.

‘They ran the facial recognition on a wider range. First they tried only Nevada and nothing came up,’ Donna responds and he turns his attention to her, but he’s still aware of River’s every move. ‘Then they ran it through records from the entire States. Still nothing. And finally, someone with a brain suggested running it through our records. And just like that they had a match.’

‘So that guy is from here?’ He asks excitedly and Donna nods her head.

‘Yes. His name is Jonathan Bates.’

‘Bates?’ He repeats. ‘I think I heard it somewhere.’

‘You actually might have,’ Donna says. ‘He made his debut during the Master’s first trial. It was five years ago. He wasn’t his lawyer, but he helped to build the defence strategy. You could’ve stumbled upon his name when you were working on your case two years ago.’

‘Possible,’ he says. ‘But he didn’t work for the Master two years ago. I’d have remembered.’

‘He didn’t. It seems that he is quite smart, because he switched sides.’

‘He works for the Silence?’ He leans in his chair. ‘Why don’t we know about it? Why didn’t we question him? Why-‘

‘I told you that he’s smart,’ Donna interrupts him. ‘He... He doesn’t work for them, not exactly. He gives legal advice. Which is not forbidden. And if his clients happen to be mobsters, well...’

‘Don’t forget that the problem is that we can’t prove much to most members of the Silence,’ River adds and he looks at her, only to find her perfectly composed. ‘You know that the most important members stay underground and off the radar. Even if we suspect something, even if we know it was them who ordered this or that, we don’t have anything to prove it. So even if Bates works for them – it means nothing from the legal point of view.’

‘Exactly,’ Donna sighs. ‘That’s the problem. And I think that Bates might’ve turned into someone
more than just a legal advisor – he might be something of a spokesman now. That would explain his presence in Vegas.’

‘The question is: did he go there to patch things up or to get rid of Jim?’ He asks and River quickly responds.

‘I think it was to patch things up. He wouldn’t go there himself to off the guy. It wouldn’t make much sense.’

‘You’re probably right,’ he nods his head. ‘Okay, so what has been done so far? Did you go to his place?’

‘We did. Nothing. He hasn’t been there for over a week,’ Donna responds. ‘He probably found out about Jim and now he’s hiding somewhere. Or he’s still in America. We don’t know.’

‘Shit. Okay, do we have anything on him?’ River asks. ‘Did you manage to run any background check?’

‘Not yet,’ Donna shakes her head. ‘We found out about it yesterday. But we’re working on it. So far we know he doesn’t have any records.’

‘But what about his personal life? Any girlfriends? Boyfriends? Family?’ He asks, but Donna shakes her head again. ‘Fine. We can get on that.’

‘If it pleases you,’ Donna shrugs. ‘And you have nothing better to do during your honeymoon,’ she adds with a smirk.

‘Come on, you know it’s not like that,’ he says and can hear River groans from behind her desk. ‘It was... Well, it was our mistake. My mistake,’ he corrects himself quickly when River looks at him in a way that suggests that she’s a second away from throwing something in his direction. ‘And we had to do this to maintain our cover.’

‘And don’t worry, we’re getting divorce as soon as possible,’ River adds and Donna looks at them with a smirk on her face.

‘Whatever rocks your boat,’ she says and walks to the door. ‘Oh, just so you know, there’s a poll going on, how long you’ll be together. And another one, how long you two have been shagging.’

‘What?!’ He splutters and sees that Donna’s grin widens. ‘But we haven’t- We never- We don’t-‘

‘Sweetie, I think that’s enough,’ River says. ‘That’s quite enough. Any more good news, Donna?’

‘Nah, that’s all,’ Donna replies with a wink and opens the door. She’s nearly outside when she pops her head back in and says while giggling: ‘Except that basically every station in the city knows what happened in Vegas. And let me tell you – they find it quite amusing.’

And with that – and a loud laugh – she leaves their office.

‘Fuck,’ he hears River muttering under her breath. ‘Fuck. It’s a bloody nightmare.’

‘It could be worse,’ he tries his best to sound optimistic, but when River looks at him with a very not amused expression on her face, he gives up. ‘Okay, it couldn’t be worse. It’s quite awful actually-‘

‘You think?’ She snorts and shakes her head.

‘But people we’ll forget about it soon,’ he shrugs and smiles at her. ‘Except for Amy. And Donna.
And Jack. They’ll mock us until the end of time.’

‘You’re not helping, John,’ River hides her face in her hands. ‘Not helping at all.’

‘But you have to put up with me,’ he says with a smirk. ‘At least for now. I’m your husband!’

‘How do you even get married by accident?’ Amy asks again. ‘It doesn’t happen like that!’

‘Amy, we already told you,’ River patiently sighs and repeats it for what must be a tenth time this evening. If not eleventh. ‘We had to do this to maintain the cover, because Jim was still in the chapel.’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ Amy grumbles and tries to make herself more comfortable on the sofa. ‘The more you repeat it, the more it sounds like bullshit. And the more I think about it, the more I believe that you just got high on glitter and got hitched.’

‘High on glitter?’ He repeats confused and looks at River who seems to be just as lost. ‘Amy, why would we get high on glitter? How does one even do that?’

‘I don’t know! Maybe you just got drunk and woke up with wedding rings on your fingers!’ Amy shouts and crosses her arms. ‘How am I supposed to know? I just don’t but this whole “oh, it was for the mission” thing!’

‘I’m sorry, but that’s the truth,’ River says with a soft sigh. ‘That’s all that happened. Jim and his girlfriend went into the chapel, and John,’ he fixes her with a stern look, because he is not the only one who’s guilty of this mess, she was there too, ‘fine, we made the mistake of going to the main door, where the couples go, not the door for the public. And next time we knew, I was given a bouquet of roses and a sweaty guy dressed up as Elvis was giving us his blessing.’

‘Couldn’t you just stop it?’ Amy asks looking at them.

‘Pond, do keep up! I understand that your soon-to-be-out child is sucking all the energy out of you,’ Amy throws a pillow in his direction. ‘Ha, you missed! You’re giving your future kid a bad example! Anyway: no, we couldn’t stop it. Jim and his girlfriend – wife, were still there, looking at us. We couldn’t make them suspicious.’

‘To me it still sounds like a really terrible excuse,’ Amy grumbles and looks at them sharply. ‘You know the movies about aliens?’ She asks and he exchanges a questioning look with River. ‘You know, the ones where aliens capture a couple and force them to have sex? I think it was like that.’

There’s a moment of silence so heavy and dense that he’s sure that light would bend around it.

‘Aliens forcing people to have sex?’ River repeats slowly. ‘I- Amy, what kind of movies have you been watching recently?’

‘That’s not the point!’ Amy screeches and blushes. ‘Don’t you laugh at me,’ she points at him and he does his best to hide his smirk behind his hand. ‘That’s not the punch line of these movies.’

‘There’s a punch line? Oh great, I can’t wait to hear it. I bet that John can’t wait either, can you, sweetie?’ River smiles at him and raises her eyebrow.

‘Of course, dear,’ he replies and notices with a surprise how easily the endearment rolls off of his tongue. It’s the first time he called River that, but it feels right. It feels strangely fitting. He clears his
throat before speaking again. ‘Amy, do tell us, what’s the punch line?’

‘First of all: don’t think I can’t hear your sarcasm,’ Amy sniffs. ‘I hear it and I will remember it. And the punch line is: the aliens didn’t have to force them. They wanted to have sex, so they did.’

River looks at him with a confused expression on her face.

‘Do you know what she’s talking about?’ She asks him quietly, but when he shakes his head, she turns back to Amy. ‘Amy, could you- What are you even talking about? What does it even mean?’

‘It means that you are these people! You’re saying that the aliens forced you to shag, but the truth is that you wanted it!’

He can feel Amy’s angry glare piercing a hole in his head and he thinks that River must feel it too, because she’s squirming in her seat. Amy keeps staring at them, annoyance written all over her face. He’s not sure why she’s annoyed though: is she angry that they didn’t tell her about the marriage straight away? Is she angry about the aliens that forced some fictional characters to have sex? Not that aliens are real, mind you: but apparently in the ginger head of his favourite Pond, the aliens seem to be real. And threatening. And quite perverted from what he gathered.

‘Uhm, Amy?’ He starts slowly, looking at River who seems to be both amused and confused. ‘You know that aliens aren’t real? Sure, the Elvis guy looked a bit alieny – didn’t he, River? But I am pretty sure he was human. The aliens didn’t make us do anything.’

‘Exactly!’ Amy explains and throws her hands in the air. ‘That’s because the aliens don’t exist – it was all you!’

‘Oh no,’ Rory’s voice comes from the corridor and the next he appears in the room with a tray full of steaming cups of tea. ‘She’s been talking to you about the pervy aliens, hasn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ River and he reply in unison, which makes Amy groan in frustration.

‘I wasn’t talking about aliens, you moron!’ She sighs and accepts the cup of tea he offers her. ‘I was merely making a point about how-‘

‘Amy,’ River stops her mid-sentence. ‘You were talking about aliens.’

‘If I weren’t such a beached whale, I’d bite you all,’ Amy sneers and takes a sip of her tea. ‘You’re all morons.’

‘Let’s drop the subject of aliens, shall we? You better tell us how the video conference with Canton went,’ Rory says and sits next to Amy. ‘Anything new?’

‘Unfortunately not,’ River sighs and he shakes his head and tries to snag a biscuit from her plate. ‘Hey, leave that! Get your own cookie. Anyway, the girl claims she doesn’t know anything. Nothing about the drugs, nothing about Jim’s business. It’s all quite hopeless. The only plus is that this time she talked. During previous questionings she was silent.’

‘Maybe she really doesn’t know anything,’ he protests quietly and sees River rolling her eyes. ‘What? It is a possibility.’

‘Sweetie, we already talked about it. It’s highly improbably that she was unaware of everything!’

‘Ha! There you go. Improbable, not impossible!’
‘We’re not having this discussion here,’ River says through gritted teeth. ‘No, actually we’re not
having this discussion ever again.’

‘But River,’ he starts and turns towards her, trying to ignore her annoyed look, ‘we have to take
under consideration that she is innocent. She might be just a victim!’

‘Here we go again,’ River mutters and gives him a tired smile. ‘How many times do I have to tell
you that she bought the plane tickets and used his fake name for it? They were staying in the hotel
under yet another fake identity of theirs! How do you think she could be unaware of that?’

‘Okay, okay. But have you considered that he could’ve explained it to her somehow?’ He responds.
‘Maybe she isn’t innocent, but maybe she doesn’t know everything about Jim’s business. It is
possible. He could have kept it a secret! How often people find out something about their significant
other and it’s a complete surprise to them?’

‘Honey, it’s not a rom-com we’re talking about,’ River groans and runs a hand over her forehead.
‘We are talking about drug dealers who wanted to smuggle heroin to Mexico!’

‘You don’t know that!’ He exclaims and throws his hands in the air. ‘Maybe that’s not what
happened. Maybe she had no idea about it – she was just a bystander and-’

‘How can you deny the facts?’ River looks at him with her face flushed with anger. ‘The fact is that
Jim was found with 25 packets of heroin in his stomach. His girlfriend went to the morgue to collect
all the money he had on him. These are facts! You can’t simply disregard them and choose to look at
life with rose-tinted glasses!’

‘I am not disregarding anything, I am merely-,’ he hears a quiet snort coming from the other side of
the room and turns to see both Amy and Rory looking at them with grins on their faces. ‘What?’ He
asks them.

‘Nothing,’ Amy shakes their head. ‘Nothing at all. We’re just sitting here, admiring the wonderful
domestic you’re having.’

‘We are not having a domestic!’ He quickly shakes his head. ‘We’re just having a discussion about
our investigation.’

‘Sounded like a domestic to me,’ Rory snorts.

‘Well, clean your ears then, Roranicus,’ he replies and flips his head. ‘River, tell them!’

‘I am telling you that we were not having a domestic,’ River says in a bored tone. ‘I was just trying
to show this idiot that he’s wrong,’ she completely ignores his outraged gasp and continues, ‘but
unfortunately he still doesn’t see it.’

‘Oi! I am not an idiot!’ He squeaks and points a finger at River. ‘That’s first. Second: are you saying
that if I don’t agree with you, I’m wrong?’

‘Yes,’ River nods. ‘In this particular case, yes.’

‘Sounds a lot like marriage to me,’ Rory mutters under his breath and yelps when Amy smacks his
arm. ‘Not our marriage of course. Any other marriage, but not ours.’

Something in his chest tightens when he sees Rory pressing a kiss to Amy’s hair. He used to think
that there’s no place for a relationship in his life: the work has always been hectic and there was
always a subject of his past. Not many people would understand and accept the things he’s done. So
far he managed to push any ideas of a relationship out of his head: he was busy, he was away, he had an ongoing and complicated investigation on his plate, the girl was too soft and bright for him, he would only drag her down and taint her, make her miserable. And she’d leave him, sooner or later. He’s always thought he still has time to settle down and start a family, but right now he’s starting to think that his time may slowly be running out. There’s a lump in his throat and he turns his hand from the Ponds, who are now cuddling on the sofa. He turns to River and notices that she’s sitting motionlessly, staring at Amy and Rory with a strange and slightly pained expression on her face. She’s so still that for a second he thinks she stopped breathing. He’s never seen her so... personal, he thinks. She looks absolutely lost in the moment and whatever is happening in her mind. He feels the sudden need to comfort her and to ask her if she’s alright, but before he can do anything, her phone rings and she starts looking for it in her back. When she finally fishes it out from there, she glances on the display and her expression tightens – almost unnoticeably so, but he notices the sudden strain around her mouth and the way her brow furrows.

‘Sorry, I have to take it,’ she says with a tight-lipped smile and walks out of the room. He glances at Amy and Rory, but they only shrug at River’s departure as if it’s a normal occurrence. River comes back a few minutes later, when he and Rory are listening to Amy’s complaints about her unborn child and the damage it seems to do to her insides.

‘I am telling you, my liver is in pieces,’ she grumbles and puts her feet on Rory’s legs. ‘Not to mention my stomach! And kidneys. And some days, I am pretty sure that even my lungs are being kicked!’

‘Amy, you make it sound like you have an alien inside you,’ Rory says while messaging her feet. ‘Our baby is just enthusiastic.’

‘Enthusiastic, my ass,’ Amy groans. ‘How about I’ll be enthusiastic and try kicking you from the inside?’

‘Maybe he or she will be a football player,’ he says when Rory raises his hands in defeat. ‘I could teach them a few tricks.’

‘You can play football?’ River asks. ‘Without injuring yourself? Impossible!’

‘Oi! I’ll let you know that I am a brilliant at football,’ he flips his hair and turns to face her. ‘You constantly doubt in my abilities, River! That’s- Wait, are you going already?’

‘Yeah, I kind of- I have to go,’ she replies.

‘Well fine. Whatever. Feel free to leave your husband like that,’ he says to mask his disappointment. He really hoped they’ll spend this evening together with Ponds. He likes it when they’re all together. Somehow it feels... He feels like he has a family.

‘Was it a booty call?’ Amy asks sharply and all but glares at River.

‘Amy!’ River gasps in surprise. ‘I don’t think it’s any of your business.’

‘Of course it is,’ Amy responds. ‘I haven’t had a booty call in ages. I live through other people’s booty calls.’

‘Amy!’ This time it’s Rory’s time to gasp and blush. ‘It’s our private life and you’re-Don’t do that!’

‘Okay, I really don’t want to hear any more of it,’ River says and raises hands to her ears. ‘I already feel traumatised.’
‘It’s like hearing your parents talking about sex,’ he adds and makes a face at Amy and poor Rory, who at the moment resembles a very ripe tomato.

‘Right. I am going now. Thanks for the dinner. No need to see me off!’ River says and starts walking to the door. ‘Rory, John, see you tomorrow. Amy – take care.’

‘It was totally a booty call. Good for her,’ Amy says when the door behind River close. Something tightens in him upon hearing these words. Which is ridiculous, because he doesn’t care what River does in her spare time. He’s just... concerned for her.

And he really looked forward spending time with his friends.

His face must be telling a different story, because Amy looks at him with concern.

‘You’re alright there?’ She asks gently and he quickly nods and smiles.

‘Of course I’m okay. Why shouldn’t I be?’

Amy doesn’t respond, but she looks at him like she already knows the answer. He’s not sure he wants to hear it. At least not yet.

‘Alright then,’ Amy says with a bright smile. ‘We can have a movie night! Rory, do we still have some custard left?’

‘I’ll go and check,’ Rory quickly gets up and collects all the empty tea mugs. ‘And I’ll make more tea.’

‘See? And that’s why I love him,’ Amy beams and pats a place next to her. ‘Come on, sit with me.’

He happily complies and the next minute he’s sitting next to her and Amy gently lies her head on his shoulder, making herself comfortable. Amy Pond. He still remembers the first time he met her: young and passionate and absolutely unafraid of anyone and anything. But back then she was still a girl – a wonderful young girl, but a girl. And now she’s even a more wonderful woman – and his best friend. He presses a small kiss to her hair and she sighs slightly sleepily.

‘Amy,’ he asks and she looks up at him. ‘You’re not going to make me watch a movie about pervy aliens, are you?’

She snorts and smacks his arm.

‘I’m not, you big idiot. I’m not.’

‘What I don’t understand is why they keep questioning her when she clearly won’t tell anything. Maybe she just doesn’t know anything?’ He asks River while slurping on his milkshake. ‘They should let her go by now. They don’t have any concrete evidence against her.’

It’s 9pm on a Thursday evening and he and River are at Wilf’s milkshake place. They finished yet another – and quite useless - conference call with Canton around 7pm and decided to grab a dinner together. And then he managed to convince River to go for a milkshake with him. When Wilf saw them, he smiled the widest smile he’s ever seen and ushered them to a booth and appeared at their table 5 minutes later with milkshakes. And now here they are – drinking their milkshakes and discussing their case. Or maybe he’s trying to discuss it, River is merely rolling her eyes at everything he says.
'All I’m saying,’ he continues, mumbling slightly around his straw, ‘is that they should consider that she might be just an innocent in this whole scheme.’

‘We are not having this discussion again,’ River groans. ‘How many times do I have to tell you that? Jim’s girlfriend is not an innocent victim here!’

‘How do you know?’

‘How do I-,’ River looks at him like he got hit on his head with something hard and how he’s talking gibberish. Or maybe it’s the look that says that she wants to hit him on the head? He’s not sure. ‘Sweetie, they found traces of heroin in her luggage. They found a fake ID. They found two tickets to Mexico – isn’t it enough for you?’

He sighs and looks at River, who is staring at him with an impatient expression on her face. He knows she’s right: there’s no way that Jim’s girlfriend hasn’t been involved in his schemes. Even if they don’t have foolproof evidence, they know enough to keep her arrested until they get all the information they require. He understands that this is what they do, but... But.

There’s always that one thought in his head, one that hasn’t left him since over two years. Because what if she’s just a victim in it all? What if she’s an innocent? What if they’re pushing her in the hands of danger with their questions? He knows it’s a ridiculous idea, and yet – maybe it’s not that ridiculous. The last time... The last time it didn’t even cross his mind.

And now he lives with the consequences.

‘John, you’re a great policeman, you really are,’ River says and he looks in her eyes. ‘You manage to come up with the most ridiculous theories that in the end turn out to be true. But sometimes... Sometimes you believe in people a bit too much. Innocent until proved guilty – I understand it. But even know, when the evidence is screaming in your face, you’re still trying to protect this girl. It’s like we’re the ones who want to wrong her here.’

‘I know, I’m sorry. It’s just-’ he sighs and swallows thickly. Maybe it’s time to tell someone this story. Maybe he’ll feel better once he shares it with someone – whether that person understands or not. He takes a deep breath and asks: ‘Do you know that the Master had a wife?’

River blinks in surprise at the sudden change of subject.

‘Yes...’ she says slowly, carefully choosing her words. ‘Lucy. Lucy Saxon, right?’ He nods and grits her teeth. ‘But she committed suicide when the Master was arrested.’

‘She didn’t,’ he rubs hands over his face and the words start pouring out of his mouth, like they’ve been waiting for years for this opportunity. ‘She didn’t. She... She worked for us. For me. She worked for me.’

‘You turned her?’ River asks in an incredulous tone. ‘But that’s... No one ever said anything.’

‘No one knew. No one knows, except Donna and I. It was a very hush-hush operation. We never thought it’d work. It was a miracle, really. I took a chance with her. I walked up to her one day – she was sitting in a small cafe. She just looked so miserable and I thought that maybe I could help her. I told her who I am... She nearly walked out on me. But I convinced her to stay. I said...’ he stops for a moment and replies that moment in his head: Lucy with hope on her face, staring at him like he’s the only one who could help her. And he was cruel enough to promise her just that. ‘I told her we could protect her. From her husband, from everything he did. I said that if she helped us... I said she’d be free.’
‘What happened?’

‘Her husband- The Master found out,’ he says quietly. ‘He let us believe that he’s unaware. He knew all along. At least that’s what he told me when....’ he stops. Acid bile raises in his throat and he swallows around it. ‘I was the first to find them. He used her as a shield. When he saw me, he just laughed. He said that he knew. He said that Lucy was transparent and that- that he could smell her infatuation from a mile. He let her steal all the information we needed, he spied on her during all the meeting and phone calls,’ he shakes his head and looks through the window, without really seeing anything. ‘He had the upper hand all the time. And then... He slit her throat. I couldn’t-’

He grits his teeth. It’s been so long and yet he remembers everything: Lucy struggling to break free, the shiny blade pressed to her neck, the hot red of her blood splashed on the floor and walls. It doesn’t matter what he does, he just can’t forget it. He just puts it somewhere in his mind, behind a closed door and he tries not to open it and not to remember. But no matter how he tries, he can’t run away from it: he failed Lucy. He failed her and now she’s dead.

He’s startled by a warm hand covering his. He looks back at River. He nearly forgot she’s still here, sitting opposite of him, listening to his story. Her touch is strangely grounding and comforting; her warmth seeps through his skin and manages to calm him – at least a bit. But it’s always something.

‘It’s not your fault,’ she says, gently squeezing his hand.

‘I made her do it,’ he responds bitterly. ‘I made her-’

‘You didn’t make her do anything,’ River’s voice cuts through the space between them, sharp and loud. ‘She made her own choice. You gave her hope, that’s all.’

‘I promised her something I couldn’t really give her,’ he shakes his head. ‘She- she wanted to quit. A few times. She said that Saxon was suspicious. That he knew. But I didn’t listen to her. I convinced her to go back and play along, to pretend that nothing is going on. I used her. I wanted to finish this case. I wanted to win.’

‘And you did.’

‘Yes, but what was the price?’ He sneers angrily and sees River flinching. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that. I just- I’m sorry.’

‘You can’t blame yourself for the choices of other people,’ River says quietly. ‘Lucy made hers. So did the Master. You didn’t put the blade in his hand.’

‘I could have done it,’ he spits. ‘I should have listened to her.’

‘You should have,’ River nods and takes her hand from his. He suddenly feels heavier. Emptier. Cold. ‘But you didn’t. And yet, it doesn’t mean that you didn’t want to keep her safe. You did everything you could. It just wasn’t enough.’

‘It should have been.’

‘Yes, it should have been,’ River agrees. ‘It just doesn’t work like that in life. It’s not a fairy tale.’

‘Oh, you could have fooled me... Goldilocks,’ he reaches over the table to tug at a curl and smiles when it earns him a half smile from River.

‘Have you told anyone else?’ River asks once he settles back into his seat.
He shakes his head.

‘No. I couldn’t. Besides, as soon as the case was over, I just left. I had to be away from this,’ he makes a vague shape in the air with his hand. ‘I had to stay away.’

‘And now you’re back.’

‘And now I’m back,’ he nods and runs fingers through his hair. ‘Sorry, this evening really wasn’t supposed to become this. I just wanted you to know that I’m not doing these things... Out of spite. Or out of some wrongly placed naivety. I want to get this one right.’

‘You want to be forgiven,’ River states rather bluntly and he looks at her.

‘Don’t we all?’ He replies with a smile. ‘Look, I’m sorry. I never meant to dump this one you. I don’t know. I think I’m just tired. The investigation is not going anywhere, we’re out of clues and our prime suspect isn’t talking. It’s quite discouraging.’

‘I wouldn’t worry if I were you,’ River says with a small smirk and takes a sip of her milkshake. ‘Clues always sneak up on you when you least expect them.’

Very soon it turns out that River was right. A clue falls into his hands: or rather out of them on the very next day.

It’s a damp and grey Friday afternoon and he tries to survive the force of nature that is called A Grumpy River. For a few reasons, River is not a happy camper today. The reasons are as follows:

1) He discovered today that her hair doesn’t like rain and mist. He also discovered that River doesn’t like when someone brings up the subject of her hair looking like a giant ball of fizz and fluff during rainy days,

2) They got their divorce papers back today. At first it made River smile, until she opened the envelope and saw that their request was denied. It turned out that one of them had made a mistake in their birth date. Okay, it was him. He’d made that mistake. River just looked at him and threw the envelope at this head. He managed to duck and avoid being murdered by a piece of paper, but he can’t do nothing about the fact that River keeps on glaring at him with murderous intentions written all over her face. The fact that he apologises over and over anything, doesn’t change anything: River is sitting behind her desk with a grumpy expression on her face and refuses to talk to him unless it absolutely necessary.

He’s looking through the newest report Canton sent them when River’s phone starts ringing. She stops what she’s doing and starts looking for it in her bag, angrily mumbling when she can’t find it. She finally spills the content of her bag on the desk and finally spots her phone with a small yelp of victory. She glances at the display and her eyes slightly widen.

‘I’m going to take this one outside, okay?’ She says and he nods his head. She disappears behind the door and he glances at the mess on her desk. He can’t understand how she managed to keep all these things in her bag. There’s something there that catches his attention: a round black box that reflects the light from the window. He looks at the door – it’s still closed and well, it won’t hurt to look, will it? River surely won’t mind, he tells himself and he walks over to her desk, gently taking the small box in his hand. The top cover has ‘organic face powder’ written on it in golden letters. Under that, there’s another line. He leans closer to read it.

‘Bamboo face powder,’ he reads aloud. You can cosmetics from bamboo? No wonder that the
pandas are starving. He’s going to tell River just that, he thinks gleefully as he turns the box in his hands. She’s making the pandas starve with her powder! Not that it’s true – the pandas are more or less fine – but he really wants to check if he can rile her up some more. He looks at the ingredients written on the back of the package and studies them for a while. Powder from bamboo stem, gold...

Wait.

Wait a minute.

He’s sure, he’s so sure that he saw something like that before. These two things mixed together. He just needs to focus and remember- Of course.

He drops the box from his hand and gets back to his desk. It must be somewhere here, he things while tearing through the mountains of reports and paperwork stacked on his desk. He knows he didn’t throw it away and it is somewhere here and- There it is! He quickly scans the document he’s holding. He was right, he giddily thinks when he spots the right line. He was right! He needs to tell River. And Donna! But first River!

‘What on earth did you do?’ River’s voice comes from the doorstep and he looks up to see her standing there, with her hands on her hips and a cross expression on her face. ‘I left for 2 minutes and you managed to wreck havoc here.’

He looks around the room and oops – she’s right. The documents are all over his desk and the floor, his pens are somewhere between the pages scattered everywhere and-

‘What happened to my powder? Why is it all over the carpet?’ River asks and her voice reaches the pitch he’s ever heard in Amy’s voice before. This can’t be good.

‘I spilled it!’ He grins at her and waves the piece of paper in his hand. ‘But look!’

‘You spilled it? How- No, I don’t want to know that,’ River says through gritted teeth. ‘It was expensive, you know?’

‘I’ll buy you another one, don’t worry!’ He bounces on his feet. ‘River, your powder helped! It’s a clue!’

‘What are you even talking about, you delusional loon?’ River says and makes her way towards him. ‘Can you stop bouncing for a second and explain to me what is going on?’

‘Look here,’ he says pointing at the paragraph of the report. ‘Just read it and you’ll understand.’

River furrows her brow for a second, but then she takes a look at the paper he’s showing her. She reads for a few moments and then she look at him, a look of understanding on her face.

‘Oh. You think it’s the same thing?’ She asks him and he nods his head so eagerly that he’s pretty sure it’s going to fall off in a second, but he really doesn’t care.

‘I probably is! The white residue found at the building from which Octavian was shot is made from bamboo powder and traces of gold,’ he says. ‘Your powder is made from it. That residue may be coming from a similar product.’

‘Which could mean...,’ River starts and he finishes for her.

‘Which could mean that our killer is a woman.’
oops?
what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, unless it doesn't and everyone at your work knows what happened in Vegas.
anyway: I am still ridiculously happy that you somehow enjoy this story. wow. that's really cool.
it's 1:42am here, so forgive any typos that might've stayed in the text.

hope you had wonderful Christmas/holidays and well, happy 2014!
I saw your breath in the air and I could feel you everywhere

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘How on earth have you two only now come up with the idea that our killer could be a woman?’ Donna’s voice drills a hole in his head. It’s not a sound he ever wanted to hear at 8am on a Saturday morning. He looks at River, but she seems unbothered by the high pitch that their boss’ voice is reaching. Maybe it’s the hair, he muses. Maybe it protects her from dangerous sounds. ‘Aren’t you two supposed to be smart? What do I pay you for?’

‘Technically,’ he interrupts with a polite smile, ‘you’re not the one who pays us. It’s the government and-‘

‘Shut up,’ Donna turns and points a finger at him. ‘Just shut up. But really, could you explain how it happened? How could we miss something so big?’

‘We haven’t missed it, not per se,’ River starts softly. ‘We just never considered it.’

‘Which mean we missed it,’ Donna comments bitterly and sits in her chair. ‘Which in turn makes us idiots. Bloody giant idiots. We look like morons.’

‘There was no reason for us to think that it’s a woman,’ he explains patiently, but doesn’t need to see Donna’s tired look to know that there wasn’t also any reason not to think it’s a woman. ‘Okay, fine. We screwed up here. But we had no evidence that could suggest anything – let alone sex of our killer. Besides, have you seen the picture of the gun that was used to kill Octavian? It was enormous. We made a subconscious conclusion that our killer is a man. Who knows? Maybe it is a man?’

‘And the powder? How will you explain that?’

‘I don’t know,’ he shrugs. ‘But we’ll get there, right River?’

‘We sure will,’ River replies with a smile that looks a bit forced. ‘Shall we get on it?’

‘Yeah, you better,’ Donna sighs from behind her desk. ‘Oh, and River? I got a call from the Drug Squad. They want to snag you... Again.’

‘News travels fast here,’ River says, looking a bit amused. ‘And yes, it seems that they do want to snag me, as you put it.’

‘And when can I expect the answer from you?’ Donna asks nonchalantly, but he knows her well enough to know that she’s quite anxious. No wonder – River is one of the best detectives here and losing her would be unfortunate for the station.

‘I’ll let you know,’ River nods and leaves Donna’s office and he has nothing left to do but follow her.

‘So...,’ he starts as they walk down the corridor to their office, ‘the Drug Squad offered you job again?’

‘Yes,’ she answers shortly and enters their office.

‘When?’ He asks a bit petulantly. They’re partners! Someone offers her a job again and she doesn’t
Tell him? Come on.

‘Uhm, yesterday?’ River responds without looking at him, sorting through the mail on her desk. ‘Right, so what do you think we should do now?’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘What?’ She finally looks at him. ‘I didn’t tell you, because it’s none of your business? Besides, I got the call just before you’d made the discovery about the residue. So excuse me that I didn’t tell you about it straight away.’

‘Oh right. You don’t think it’s important? Telling your partner that you’re offered a new job? And when did you plan to tell me that?’ He leans against his desk. ‘You declined their first offer. Are you going to accept this one?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe. I have to think about it.’

Okay. He expected her to say that no, she’s going to decline and keep working here.

‘Right,’ he swallows. ‘Please tell me once you decide. I may have to look for a new partner.’

There’s a brief flash of pain on River’s face, but it disappears as soon as it appeared and he knows that his comment hurt her. They’re more than partners and he knows that. Except... Except he doesn’t really know what they are. Friends? Sure. Sometimes. Because there are times when he feels like he doesn’t know River at all, like she’s constantly hiding something – not only from him, but from everyone. So they are sometimes-friends and- And he has no idea what else. Oh, they’re married, but it’s more of a prank that life pulled on them. So not-really-married sometimes-friends who worked together. Which is similar to partners, which is really close to friends, but there’s always something more to them. He knows that and he thinks that River knows it as well – otherwise his careless comment wouldn’t have put that expression on her face. He opens his mouth to apologise, but River speaks first.

‘Don’t worry,’ she says, and looks at him with guarded and expressionless eyes, ‘I’ll let you know about my decision in due time. Now... Any ideas what we should do about the powder?’

‘I uhm, I-‘, he stutters a bit and clears his throat. River wants to head straight back to business? Well then, let’s do it. ‘I called the lab yesterday, but they’re swamped with other things for now. Besides, until we find out which face powder it is – or at least try to narrow it down to a few labels, they won’t be able to do anything.’

‘That is just splendid,’ River sighs. ‘Let’s just leave it for now. Maybe we should focus on the women around all the killed victims? Maybe we missed something the last time.’

‘Fine,’ he nods and tries not to see that River does almost everything in her power not to meet his eyes. ‘Uhm, and I think we should do something about Bates.’

‘Oh? What exactly?’

‘Do you think Dorium would know anything about him?’

‘I guess?’ River taps her fingers on the desk. ‘He could. I mean, Bates is kind of out of his circle of interests and clients, but we could try.’

‘Great!’ He leaps in his chair and claps his hands. ‘So, it’s my time to pick you up, right?’
‘What?’

‘You know, in the morning,’ he explains. ‘Before we go to Dorium. It’s no use in going now or later, so I thought we should go like we did the last time, you know, early in the morning. But last time we went with your car – and you ambushing me in my bed, okay almost in my bed, so I think I should return the favour. Not that I would like to ambush you in your bed,’ he corrects himself, ‘but you know, wake you up at an ungodly hour and make you work. Or you know, we could grab something to eat before visiting Dorium. Or after. Or we could-‘

‘Sweetie,’ River interrupts him with a small smile, one that he welcomes with relief, ’you’re babbling. And yes, fine. We can take your car this time. 7am?’

‘7am is fine,’ he says and gives his chair a small spin. ‘It’s a date. Well, not a date! Not a date-date, but it’s still a date. I think so? But not a real date. It’s more of a-‘

‘John?’ River says rolling her eyes. ‘Shut up.’

It seems that mornings are great moments to learn something new about River Song. On this fine, if slightly chilly Sunday morning, he learned that River is a terrible backseat driver. He has no idea if she does it to annoy him or if it’s just in her nature to comment while other people drive, but she doesn’t stop making remarks about his driving even for a second.

‘You should’ve turned left here, sweetie,’ she said. ‘Are you sure that you know how to drive her? And this is not a shortcut, trust me.’

These and many more words fell from her lips and every single one was delivered with an annoying and all-knowing smirk that he’s learned to associate with River. By the end of the drive, when they finally park in front of Dorium’s club, he’s pretty sure she’s been doing it on purpose: ruffling his feathers and seeing how he reacts. And he’s been patient, only responding to her teasing with ‘I know perfectly well how to drive my car and I don’t need your advice on this matter’. But when they got out of his car and started walking towards the club’s entrance, River just overstepped the line – and mind you, she’s been step dancing on it for some time now.

‘No, River!’ He exclaims and looks at her with shock and outrage. ‘No, you can’t drive my car on the way back. It's my car! Mine. You’re not driving it.’

‘I think I’d drive her better, that’s all,’ River replies with a small smirk. ‘We could put that to a test, what do you think?’

‘I think that no, no, we can’t – and we won’t put it to a test,’ he grumbles and opens the door to the club, letting River in. ‘End of subject.’

‘Are you sure?’ River asks again, this time clearly laughing at him and his angry face. ‘We could always try. Or make it a competition.’

‘Make what a competition?’ A voice speaks on their right and they both turn their heads to see Dorium Maldovar himself. ‘Detective Song, detective Smith. How much I haven’t missed you. Please, sit down,’ he motions two plush armchairs in front of him. ‘Should I congratulate you on your nuptials? Or isn’t there a need for such pleasantries between us?’

‘How- how do you know about that?’ He asks surprised, looking at Dorium’s self-satisfied smirk.

‘I know everything,’ Dorium replies.
'It’s wonderful that you know everything, Dorium,’ River says with a bitter smile on her face. ‘Because we have a question for you and we hope you could answer us.’

‘Do you know this man?’ He takes out a picture of Bates from the folder in his hand and shows it to Dorium.

‘I don’t know him,’ comes a short reply.

‘Oh, come on, Dorium,’ River says in a tired voice. ‘Do we really have to do it again? I thought we understood ourselves the last time.’

‘I’m telling the truth. I know who he is, I don’t know him,’ Dorium replies sourly. ‘There’s a difference.’

‘Well then. What do you know about him?’ He asks, making himself comfortable in the chair. ‘Don’t keep us waiting, we all have other things to do,’ he adds when Dorium lets out a pained sigh.

‘He’s a lawyer – or at least he used to me. Now he’s more of a... legal advisor. Smart enough to know where to change sides, not smart enough to know when to quit. He’s a bit of a message pigeon to the Silence now, running around, doing their errands, delivering their messages. Just delivering the messages, mind you. They’ll send him to talk with someone, not to beat them up. However, he often decides who’s going to get beaten.’

‘And do you happen to know where he is?’ River asks from her chair.

‘No. Nor I want to know where he is,’ Dorium shrugs. ‘I assume he’s not in London – otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Or maybe he is, but you just can’t find him. Either way – it’s not my problem.’

‘Are you sure you don’t know anything, Dorium?’ River asks.

‘Yes, I’m sure, detective Song. Or is it Smith, now?’ Dorium replies with a nasty grin.

‘Oh, and do you want to stay here and count the money you earned this night or do you want to go with us and spend the next few hours at the police station?’ River retorts with a smile just as ugly.

‘Right, I think that’s enough’ he interrupts River and Dorium. ‘Now that we all know where we stand: Dorium, can we count on your help? If Bates shows up in the city or people start talking about him, will you-‘

‘Let you know? Of course. Do I have any choice?’ Dorium says.

‘You do,’ River shrugs, standing up. ‘You just don’t want to make it.’

‘Can you blame me?’ Dorium whines, but River is already by the door. He smiles apologetically, pats Dorium on a shoulder and follows River’s path. He catches up with her outside the club.

‘You think he’s telling the truth?’ She asks him when he closes the heavy door behind him.

‘I think so, yes,’ he responds and goes to his car. ‘I mean, do you picture Bates as a patron here?’ He shrugs and points at the club as he opens the car’s door.

‘No. No, I don’t,’ River’s mouth twists in a grin as she gets inside.

‘So, breakfast?’ He asks starting the engine. ‘And you know, I’ve been thinking...’
‘That’s something new,’ River smirks, but he can’t reply, because the engine dies with a dissatisfied angry noise. ‘Hey. What happened? Old girl, talk to me.’

‘Old girl?’ River laughs. ‘No wonder that you can’t find a girlfriend if you call the most important woman in your life like that.’

‘Hush,’ he hisses and tries to start the engine again. It purrs back to life, but after moving a few feet, it dies again. ‘Don’t die on me again.’

‘You know that you have the hand break on?’ River states matter of fact. ‘How did you get your driving licence?’

‘With difficulties,’ he grumbles and releases the break, feeling himself blush under River’s amused gaze. ‘And I am a great driver, thank you very much,’ he says, joining slow traffic. ‘What was I saying?’

‘That you’ve been thinking.’

‘Oh right. Right. I’ve been thinking that maybe Ten was right.’

‘I... Don’t understand?’ River asks hesitatingly. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Maybe he was right when he talked about a leak at the station,’ he shrugs. ‘Or a leak in general. Don’t you think it’s a bit... weird that all these guys who were shot, were doing something to stop the Silence?’

‘How is that weird?’

‘Oh you know, they’re working at the cases and suddenly bam, all of them are dead.’

‘Not suddenly though,’ River says. ‘There were weeks – hell, months – before each killing. And as for the fact that they were working on these cases... Wouldn’t you like to shut someone up if they were trying to destroy your business? That’s not weird. Violent and criminal, but not weird or unreasonable.’

‘But how did the Silence know who was running these cases?’ He asks, glancing at River. ‘Someone must’ve give some kind of information about it.’

‘Or maybe they were all lunatics like Ten,’ River says. ‘Standing in the back alleys of the clubs, asking uncomfortable questions. Besides... You know how easy it’s to spot a copper. They can sniff us from a mile away.’

‘Maybe. But I feel there’s something else. Something- It’s staring in my face, but I can’t see it. Something big.’

‘Your chin, perhaps?’

‘Oi!’ He exclaims and looks at her with wounded expression. ‘And to think that I was about to buy you breakfast.’

‘You still can do it, no one’s stopping you, sweetie,’ River grins.

‘Your terrible and hurtful comments are stopping me,’ he huffs and parks the car in front of a small cafe. ‘And because of that, you’ll be paying for your own breakfast, miss.’

(She doesn’t.)
Of course he pays for her – their breakfast and coffee. Of course he does.)

The next week passed slowly and uneventfully – River and he went through every archive and digital piece of information on Jonathan Bates and came up with nothing. Oh, there’s one ticket for speeding, but besides that, there’s nothing of value. There’s nothing in newspapers either – he once again called Amy for help, but Bates’ records are clean. Almost too clean: there’s a word about his work on the Master’s case or him switching sides and giving legal advice to the mob. It looks like his records have been cleaned and polished - thoroughly. ‘Or maybe he really is just a good boy,’ he thinks bitterly one evening.

They also had no luck when it came to finding out something more about the killer of the policemen – the powder clue has been buried by the lab folks in the sea of other, more important cases and evidence. ‘It’ll take us another week or two,’ he heard when he called them. ‘I’m sorry, but there’s nothing we can do at the moment.’

He hoped that at least looking into the women surrounding all the victims won’t be a complete waste of time – but it is. They run background checks on basically every female that came in contact – however brief – with every victim in the last year. Nothing. Hell, they even monitor and check Ten’s barely-out-of-collage neighbour, but she turns out to be clean as a tear. They face a dead end wherever they turn and he’s getting more and more frustrated. The only upside of this week was the fact that Jim’s girlfriend – wife, uhm, widow – started talking and admitted that yes, Jim and she had been running away from the Silence and that Bates had tried to patch things up between them.

It didn’t change the fact that by late Thursday afternoon he was ready to smash something and this was exactly when River delivered her news. He was staring at the computer screen, mind blank and out of ideas, when she entered the room after having a talk with Donna. When he looked at her, he thought that she looked a bit... anxious. But it couldn’t be true: River is rarely nervous or anxious and she has never behaved that way around him. She crossed the room and sat behind her desk, sneaking brief glances at him all the time.

‘What?’ He finally asked when she opened and closed her mouth for unempth time. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ she replied too quickly. ‘I talked with Donna.’

‘I know,’ he nodded his head. ‘She got anything new?’

‘We didn’t talk about the case,’ River turned her gaze away from him. ‘We talked about something else.’

‘Sounds rather ominous,’ he said with a small smile, but the smile disappeared from his lips when he saw River frowning. ‘Okay, you’re scaring me Song. What is going on?’

‘Well,’ she started after a few moments of heavy silence, ‘it turns out that you’ll have to look for a new partner soon.’

‘What?’ He whispered shocked. He’s never expected her to-

‘I’m leaving. I accepted the job. The one that the Drug Squad offered me,’ River said and looks at him, smiling nervously.

‘You rejected their last offer,’ he licked his suddenly dry lips. ‘I thought- I didn’t expect you to accept this one.’
‘This one is a bit different,’ she responded and started explaining, but he couldn’t really bring himself to listen to her. He saw her lips moving, he heard her voice, but nothing that she said actually made any sense to him. All he understood was that she’s going to leave.

‘When?’ He interrupted her and marvelled how gruff his voice sounded. He cleared his throat before speaking again. ‘Uhm, when are you leaving? I want to know how much time do we have. To finish the investigation, I mean.’

‘Three months.’

He breathed out with relief. Three months is a long time. A lot can happen in three months. He could build a new model of car in three weeks. Okay, maybe not, but he could definitely design a new model of car in three months.

‘Good. We still have some time to tie up the investigation,’ he nodded.

‘And solve the whole marriage thing,’ River added with a thin smile. ‘We have to deal with that too. I think we should get the papers next week. Hopefully, this time you didn’t make a mistake in your own date of birth.’

‘Very funny, River,’ he rolled his eyes, but felt himself relaxing a bit. So okay, River is changing jobs. Not an ideal situation – he really likes working with her, and he just likes her, in general – but it’s not the end of the world either. ‘Anyone else knows about it?’

‘Not yet. So far, I only told Donna and you. But I guess I’ll have to tell everyone sooner rather than later – and Donna will be looking for my replacement, so the secret will be out either way.’

River’s replacement. What a silly idea, he thought. No one will replace River – she’s one of a kind.

‘It’s really sweet that you think that, John,’ River smirked at him and he realises he’d been speaking out loud. ‘Really sweet.’

‘I mean,’ he quickly babbled, trying to speak despite the growing feeling of embarrassment, ‘no one is so bloody annoying and stubborn like you are. And no one is going to have this much hair.’

‘Yes, I’ll miss you too, sweetie,’ River said, smiling softly and he felt sudden wetness in his eyes.

‘But you’ll visit, right? Come on, you’ll have to visit. We could always get a milkshake from time to time,’ he says lightly – or at least he hopes it sounds light. ‘And you know that Amy won’t let you off that easily. You’ll have to visit her every Sunday, like a good little girl.’

A shadow passed over River’s face and even before she opened her mouth he knew that whatever answer she was going to give him, he was not going to like it.

‘Actually,’ she started and his heart dropped at the sound of her voice, ‘I’m moving. The job they offered me is in Leeds.’

It’s a Friday evening and now he’s sitting in a small club, pretending to sip his wine (he doesn’t like it) and celebrating the fact that River is changing her job. Well, he’s not pretending to celebrate – he’s celebrating, along with a few people from the station: Jack (who’s currently dancing with three-no wait, four people he only just met), Clara (who’s talking with a lovely girl who’s an IT intern at the station), a few more people whose names he can’t recall and River – of course. River is making her way to the bar for a new round of drinks. He doesn’t really understand the need to celebrate the fact that one of his friends is going to move to another city soon. Oh, they’re going to keep in touch, nothing will change except for the fact that they’re not going to be working together. But other than
that, nothing is going to change. Or so everyone keeps on saying.

*Lies.*

Everything’s going to change. He knows what he’s talking about – he lost so many people, so many friends and colleagues over the years. People drift apart, it’s a natural thing – they change and move on, they find other people to spend their time with, they have other activities and promises of keeping in touch are only that: promises.

‘Why the grumpy face?’ He hears Clara’s voice and turns into her direction. Her face is slightly flushed – either from the heat of the club or the conversation she just finished, she’s sipping on her drink (something colourful and fruity) and she looks at him in a concerned and curious manner. ‘Shouldn’t you be happy for your partner? Celebrating her new job?’

‘I’m doing that,’ he says pointing at her with his wine glass.

‘Would being a bit more cheerful kill you? It’s like going drinking with Eeyore,’ Clara says. ‘Or are you sad that River is leaving without you?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ he huffs. ‘River can do whatever she likes.’

‘So you wouldn’t care if she was flirting with the bartender now?’ Clara asks blinking innocently. ‘Oh look, I think she’s giving him her number.’

He turns his head so quickly that his vision swims for a second. He finds River standing by the bar, patiently watching the bartender preparing the drinks. But she’s not talking with him and most certainly not flirting with him. Which for some reason, makes him breathe with relief. He glances at River for a few more moments, until he hears Clara snorting by his side.

‘You tricked me,’ he turns to her, poking her with his finger.

‘You fell for it,’ he responds and takes another sip of her drink. ‘And you should’ve seen your face.’

‘You should see yours,’ he mutters under his breath. ‘Your nose is all funny.’

‘Hey, I heard that,’ Clara says and pinches his side. ‘Maybe I have a funny nose, but at least I didn’t look like I want to kill that guy for standing next to your woman.’

‘I didn’t- I- She’s not my woman,’ he hisses, but Clara merely nods her head – mockingly, mind you. ‘But you want her to be.’

‘What? Don’t be ridiculous!’ He exclaims loud enough for a few people to turn their heads in their direction. ‘I don’t want River to be my anything,’ he adds.

‘Except your work partner, right?’ Clara asks and he slowly nods his head. ‘And your dinner and milkshake partner,’ he nods again, not really understanding where Clara is going. Of course he likes working with River, she’s brilliant at what she does - nearly as brilliant as he is, which doesn’t happen very often. ‘And now you’re moping that she’s leaving.’

‘I’m not moping,’ he takes another experimental sip of his wine, but spits it back into the glass. ‘That stuff is disgusting. Why do people drink it?’

‘You are moping,’ Clara starts and when he tries to deny it, she puts a finer to her mouth. ‘Hush. You’ve been sitting in his booth since we arrived, nursing this one drink. We’re in a club, you
know? You’re supposed to have fun, dance a little, meet someone new. Instead, you’re sitting here, looking like a puppy whose owner left it on the side of the road.’

‘I’m not a puppy.’

‘You look like one. But that’s not the point,’ Clara raises her eyebrows. ‘The point is that you should do something about it.’

‘About what?’ He looks at her confused, wondering how much she had to drink.

‘About the fact that you fancy River.’

‘What? Don’t be ridiculous,’ he scoffs. ‘I don’t fancy her.’

Because it’s true - he doesn’t fancy River, not one bit. He thinks she’s intelligent and smart, and funny – but only when she doesn’t make fun of him. And she’s the first person since all the people he met during his training in the Medusa program that actually can match his wits and follow his reasoning. It’s a relief to finally have someone like that.

Okay, fine. He does think she has nice hair – really nice hair, properly nice hair – but who doesn’t think that? He once saw a small girl walking to River on the street and asking if she can touch her hair (to which River agreed). Sure, he finds her attractive, but that’s because he has a pair of healthy eyes and 20/20 vision, and that’s all you need to see that River is... Beautiful. But the simple fact that he finds her attractive, doesn’t mean that he fancies her, right? He’s sure that many men find River just as attractive as he does, but that doesn’t automatically mean that all of them want to date her. Some of them do want to date her, for sure, but not all of them. That would be impossible. (Funny, the thought of someone else dating River makes his stomach drop. But he knows there’s an explanation to it: he simply cares about her and he doesn’t want to see her wasting her time on a wanker. That’s all there is to it, really.)

Besides, River is just a friend. A mate. Well, not in a way that Amy is a mate – he doesn’t think about them in the same way. God forbids, he shudders. If he ever thought about Amy in the way he sometimes thinks about River, he’s pretty sure his brain would turn into a pile of useless goo, all fried up and smelly. Which isn’t to say that he thinks about River in some... inappropriate way. He tries his best not to. But sometimes it’s really hard, errrm, difficult not to think about her that way. She’s pretty, smart and has a great sense of humour, she smells nice and she looked really wonderful in that black dress, and sometimes, when she stands near him, he feels... strange. But in a good way, in an oddly bubbly and happy sort of way. And he might’ve through about their brief (too brief) kiss a few times too many and he might’ve wondered how it’d feel to kiss River properly, without any witnesses, but-

Wait. Wait a minute. Let’s just rewind and-

And just like that all the puzzles fall in the right places and for the first time he can see the whole picture.

Oh no.

He fancies River.

‘And the penny drops,’ Clara says next to his ear and he looks at her with what must be fear, because she gently pats his shoulder. ‘There, there. It’ll be alright. You just need to grow a pair and ask her out.’

‘What?’ He squeaks and drowns the rest of his wine in one gulp. ‘No. No. That is not happening.’
'Why not?'

'Because we work together? And it’d be unprofessional? And Donna would have a fit? And-

'You’re scared that River would say ‘no’,' Clara cuts in mid-sentence and to his surprise, he finds himself nodding. ‘Okay, that’s a possibility. But it’s always a possibility when it comes to dating and asking someone out.’

'I know, but... It’d be different. It’d be...,' he stops trying to find the right word. It’d be a disaster, he thinks when he spots River’s head in the crowd by the bar. She must feel his gaze, because she turns around and smiles at him. She’s smiled at him before, but now it looks different to him. It’s brighter and more joyous and it’s send a surge of warmth through his body. He smiles back, feeling heat climbing up his neck and turns back to Clara. ‘It’d be... awkward.’

‘Only if you let it be awkward,’ Clara shrugs. ‘Sure, you both would feel stupid for a few days, but then you’d bounce back. Besides, she leaves in three months, right? You wouldn’t be stuck with her forever. And if you don’t ask her, you’ll forever wonder what her answer would be. I know you! You’ll dwell on it until the end of time. And oh,’ Clara adds with a sly expression on her face, ‘do you really think she won’t hook up with someone in Leeds? One day she may come to visit and it’ll be with a ring on her finger.’

An uneasy feeling churns in his stomach and most of the uneasiness comes from the fact that Clara may be right. River has always put herself on the market, so to speak: she’s been dating and meeting new people since the day he met her – and before that as well. It’s not going to change just because she moves to another city. If anything, he thinks bitterly, she’ll meet more people. Because she’ll be all alone in a brand new place and she’ll need a helping hand. And he will be here, miles away from River, without having any chance of being her... well, her helping hand (he stops this train of thoughts before his treacherous mind can show him every possible meaning of ‘helping hand’ that are out there).

Clara does know how to go straight for the jugular, he thinks as he rubs his face with his hands. With one small conversation she managed to wreak a havoc in his life and turn everything upside down. He’s never talking with her again.

‘What do I do?’ He asks her in a tone that sounds pitiful in his own ears.

‘Just ask her out and be done with it. Oh look, she’s coming back,’ Clara says quickly and his head shoots up, only to see River approaching their booth, drinks in her hands. ‘That’s your chance, lover boy.’

‘What? No, I can’t do it now!’ He hisses, but she just winks at him, that little witch.

‘Sorry it took me so long, but the bartender messed up the order two times. He’s new here and still learning,’ River says, putting the glasses on the table. ‘One strawberry margherita for you, Clara, one Screaming Orgasm for Jack,’ she says looking around, ‘but I think he took matters in his own hands and left with some people a while ago. Water for you,’ River continues handing him a glass. When her hand brushes his, he feels a sudden jolt of electricity running down his arms and his hand jerks, nearly spilling his water. ‘You’re alright?’ River asks and sits next to him. ‘You look... kind of jittery.’

‘Yeah, I am- I’m fine,’ he says without looking at her. And even though his head is lowered, he can see Clara’s smug grin. It basically radiates from her. Hell, he’s sure that if someone was on the moon right now, they’d be able to see Clara’s smirk. Damn her. He really, really hates her.
'I need to go to the loo,' Clara announces and before he can do anything, she gets out of the booth. 'It may take me some time, you know. I bet there’s a long line to wait in. I’m just saying.'

And with that, she disappears in the crowd. Oh, now he really dislikes her in this very moment.

'I have never seen anyone looking so excited about standing in a line to the loo,' River comments drily. 'What happened when I was at the bar?'

'Nothing!' He says quickly. 'Nothing at all. Everything was fine. We didn’t even talk about anything remotely interesting.'

River looks at him, slightly confused, but he ducks his head and stares at the table. He doesn’t understand why, but he suddenly feels nervous around River. She looks different now – or maybe it’s him who sees her different now. It’s ridiculous, he realises that, but the short conversation with Clara shifted his perspective on River. Suddenly, he sees her through the prism of feelings he has for ever – has had all along without realising it. His head is a mess and he really has no idea what to do. He keeps on replaying bits of his conversation with Clara in his head.

'you fancy River'

'hook up with someone in Leeds'

'with a ring on her finger'

'grow a pair and ask her out'

'Ugh, stop that!'

'Stop what? Sweetie, are you sure you’re okay?' River touches his arm and looks at him with concern. ‘You’re behaving a bit... weird. Well, weirder than usually.’

‘Uhm what? Did I- I did say that last thing out loud, didn’t I?’ He groans when River nods her head. ‘I’m going to kill Clara.’

‘What does Clara have to do with the fact that you’re behaving like a loon?’ River says with a small smile on her face. ‘It’s all your doing, not hers.’

No, he thinks. It’s all your doing. It’s your fault that I behave and feel like an idiot.

‘Clara has nothing to do with it. Okay, maybe a bit to do with it. But it’s mostly,’ he sighs and licks his lips. ‘Listen, can I ask you something?'

‘You just did,’ River says, still slightly amused and he knows that once he asks his question, the smile will probably disappear. ‘But go ahead.’

‘I’ve been thinking... Uhm, I’ve been wondering,’ he starts awkwardly, feeling like a teenager asking his crush on a date – which in a way is something that he’s about to do. ‘So, I’ve been wondering if you would like to-'

And in this very moment, right before he’s about to ask A Very Important Question, someone’s phone rings, stopping him mid-sentence. Fuck.

‘Sorry sweetie, just a moment,’ River says, going through her purse. Of course it’s her phone that’s ringing. She finally fishes it out of her bag and looks at the display. ‘Oh,’ she mutters looking at him. ‘Hello, Rory, what’s going on?’ She says when she picks up and despite himself, he shifts near her
to find out what’s going on. ‘Okay, calm down. We’ll be right there. As soon as we can. Yes, I have
him with me. Yes, don’t worry – just go back to her.’

‘What’s going on?’ He asks a little nervously and lets River drag him out of their booth. ‘What
happened?’

‘Amy went into labour,’ she replies shortly. ‘Everything’s fine, but Rory seems to be getting a bit
crazy, so I think we better get there as quickly as possible.’

‘Why didn’t he call me?’ He asks, clutching River’s hand as they make their way to the exit. ‘Not
that I mind, but why didn’t he call me?’

‘He did,’ River says over her shoulder. ‘You just didn’t pick up. You never do!’

It takes them a few minutes to hail a taxi and then about half an hour to get to the hospital. It’s far too
long and he feels restless – his legs are bouncing against his will and he checks his watch every
minute, trying to will time move faster. When they finally arrive at the hospital, he bolts from the taxi
after throwing some money at the poor driver (he really hopes it wasn’t a hundred pounds bill). They
find Rory at the maternity ward, pacing up and down the corridor.

‘Oh god, so good you’re here,’ he says nearly throwing himself at them.

‘How’s Amy doing?’ River asks when Rory finally releases them from his grip.

‘Fine, she’s fine. It took us some time to get here, because once her water broke, she refused to leave
house. She said that she’s going to explain to the baby that it should stay inside and there’s no point
in getting out,’ Rory sighs and he can’t help but grin. Amy Pond, Scottish no matter what. ‘But we
finally got here and I called you. Well, I called River, since you weren’t picking up your phone.’

‘I didn’t hear it. Besides, I was having a serious conversation,’ he mumbles quietly and both River
and Rory look at him questioningly. ‘Never mind that. Why aren’t you with Amy?’

‘She threw me out of the room,’ Rory says and sits on a plastic chair by the wall. ‘She says that once
she gives birth, she’s divorcing me and she won’t let any man to touch her ever again. She also said
she’s considering running away with the epidural woman.’

‘Don’t worry, she stops hating you in a few hours,’ River says sitting next to him. ‘So now we
wait?’

‘We wait,’ Rory sighs heavily, but just when the words leave his mouth, a nurse appears in front of
them.

‘Mister Williams? Your wife asks you to come in. She says – and I quote ‘that she forgives you and
that she needs someone to suffer with her’,” she says with a smile on her face.

‘Oh no,’ Rory groans, but quickly stands up. ‘Right. You don’t move from here. We’ll meet once it’s
over. Unless Amy murders me first,’ he says and obediently follows the nurse.

And so the wait begins.

At first it’s going fine, he and River swap embarrassing stories about Amy and Rory and try
pictureing them as parents. That takes about an hour. Then it gets harder. He starts getting restless
once again and once he runs out of leaflets to read, River pushes her phone in his hands and he
spends another hour playing Angry Birds. His on this third cup of tea from a vending machine and a
second package of Skittles (which he shares with River who – even though she denies it – eats all the
red and purple ones. And everyone knows that these are the best!), when he decides that he has had enough.

‘Is this how time normally passes? Really slowly?’ He groans once the batteries in River’s phone die.

‘I am afraid it is like that, sweetie. And you just sounded like you’re some kind of a time travelling mad man who can’t sit in one place for five minutes,’ River says shaking her head in exasperation. ‘Just sit still, please.’

‘It shouldn’t take so long,’ he says.

‘Oh, and your an expert on childbirth now?’ River rolls her eyes.

‘It didn’t take this long with me,’ he shrugs and catches her staring at him with confusion. ‘What? It didn’t!’

‘And you know that how? Please, don’t tell me that you remember it, this one I simply won’t believe.’

‘Don’t be daft, of course I don’t remember it,’ he huffs. ‘My parents told me. Quick birth, no fuss, a delightful child. What about you?’

‘I don’t know,’ River shrugs and stares at the wall.

‘What do you mean, you don’t know? Haven’t your parents told you about it?’ He asks, leaning slightly towards her.

‘They didn’t know how it happened,’ River says and just when he’s about to ask how is that possible, she turns to him and quickly explains. ‘Sorry, I forgot... I was adopted. My biological mother was a teenager girl. Left me at the hospital. I’ve been in the system for a few years, got adopted by a lovely couple when I was about 8. We moved to America some time after that,’ she says without really looking at him. ‘And that’s why I don’t know how long my birth took.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says quickly, feeling rather stupid. ‘I had no idea, I really didn’t know.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ River says dismissively. ‘It’s nothing.’

‘But I should-,’ he starts, but bites his tongue. He should know about it, he thinks. No – he wants to know about it, he realises. He wants to know more about River – everything that there is to her, her little quirks and big moments of her life. But every time he thinks he gets a bit closer to getting to know her, something like that happens – she just randomly says A Big Thing about herself and he realises how little he knows about her. It makes him feel stupid and a bit... disposable. Or maybe not disposable. Irrelevant seems like a better word. In moments like this he feels like there’s a tall impenetrable wall between him and River and no matter what he does, it stays in place, firm and thick, not letting him get any closer to her.

‘You should what?’ River asks, looking at him questioningly.

He wants to tell and explain everything to her. And maybe a maternity ward is not the best place for a confession like that, but he has to try, right? Just like Clara said, he has to grow a pair.

‘Excuse me,’ he hears before he can even open his mouth. ‘But Mr. and Mrs. Williams want you to meet someone.’

River quickly stands up with an excited glint in her eyes. He sighs and follows her and the nurse to
the room where Amy and Rory – and the new Pond – are resting. Another moment gone, another opportunity missed, he thinks bitterly and wonders if he ever gets a proper chance of talking with River and telling her how he feels, without people interrupting them and himself getting scared. But all the bitter thoughts escape his mind when he enters the room and sees Amy holding a small bundle in her arms. She looks incredibly exhausted and drained, but the expression on her face is one of pure happiness. Rory is wearing exactly the same expression: one of pure bliss and utter joy.

‘So it’s done?’ He says in the peaceful silence that enveloped the room. Both Amy and Rory look up at him, as if they were woken up from a dream and River snorts next to him.

‘Yes, sweetie, it’s done,’ she smirks. ‘Like a steak. From what I see this one is well done.’

‘Oi!’ He says when Amy quietly giggles and Rory rolls his eyes. ‘Don’t mock me. You’re giving The Puddle wrong example.’

‘The Puddle?’ Everyone in the room repeats.

‘Yeah, Puddle,’ he shrugs. ‘You are Ponds, so this little thing must be Puddle! It’s obvious!’

‘Forgive me, I let him drink three cups of coffee,’ River explains with a patient sigh. ‘And he might be slightly high on sugar. Don’t listen to him.’

‘Hey, you ate these Skittles as well-,’ he starts but Amy hushes him and gives them both a soft smile.

‘Are you going to keep bickering or are you going to come closer and see your nephew? Well, kind of a nephew?’

He and River exchange a small smile and walk over to the bed. The bundle in Amy’s arms turns to have a face: red and slightly wrinkled one, but it’s a start. Actually, that red and a bit angry looking face reminds him of Amy, but he knows better than to say that out loud.

‘I think he’s going to have Rory’s nose,’ River says squinting her eyes a bit.

‘Poor thing,’ he mutters under his breath. He clears his throat and looks from Amy to Rory. ‘I can’t believe you waited until the birth to let me know that it’s going to be a boy. Ha! Terrible friends, you are. So, how are you going to name him? Am I going to blush?’

‘We’re not going to name him ‘John’, you idiot,’ Amy raises her voice slightly and the Puddle stirs in her arms. ‘Hush, it’s okay. I only needed to tell your uncle that he’s being stupid.’

Uncle.

He likes how this word sounds.

‘How you’re going to name him then? And let me tell you, you’re letting go of a great name,’ he flips his hair and pretends to be offended, but Rory only sighs at his antics.

‘We’ve been thinking about Anthony,’ he says quietly and presses a kiss to Amy’s hair.

‘It’s a great name,’ River says, staring at the family on the bed. It’s a very quiet and peaceful moment, one that he never really experienced in his life before. He wishes he could stay in it forever. He wishes he could preserve it in his memory in detail and remember every little thing about it.

And it’s all interrupted by Amy yawning and sighing tiredly.

‘Alright, I think it’s our clue to leave,’ River tugs lightly on his shirt. ‘Come on, they’re all tired.
Amy needs to rest.’

‘But River, I only just became an uncle!’ He tries to complain, but she’s already exchanging quick goodbyes and shoving him out of the room. ‘You’re just jealous that I’m going to be the coolest uncle ever.’

‘Oh really?’ She says as they walk down the quiet hospital corridor. ‘And what are you going to show him? Your collection of bow ties?’

‘Excuse you, bow ties are cool,’ he nods his head. ‘Very cool. And he’s going to be a very stylish young man once he starts wearing them. Why are you laughing?’

‘Because I’m pretty sure that Amy is not going to let you even show him any bow ties,’ River says. ‘We have one bow tie wearing mad man and that’s quite enough.’

‘Well, there’s still a ton of things I can show him,’ he shrugs as they walk out of the hospital. He’s already making a list of all the things he’s going to show the Puddle – or fine, Anthony. He’ll be the most fantastic uncle ever. ‘And what are you going to teach him, River? The secret of hiding things in one’s hair?’

‘We’ll see, sweetie, we’ll see,’ she says and hails a taxi.

A bit later, when he falls asleep in his bed, he thinks that he rather likes being an uncle. He might not have much experience yet, but oh, time will remedy that.

Nothing can possibly go wrong now, can it?

Chapter End Notes

oh lords. first thing: I am sorry. for the long time since the last update, but mostly for how crappy this chapter is. I know it is terrible. I've been writing it for... nearly two weeks? and today I was one click away from deleting it, but then I realised that if I do it, I'll have to write this chapter once again, from the scratch. and that was met with my brain crying 'no please'. my brain, a bloody uncooperative organ that also kept on randomly reminding me that I have 2 other AUs started and maybe I should go and write them? no, brain. stop. so yeah. once again: a big sorry for this one. I'll try to do better next time. I promise.

second: thanks for all the comments and kudos. forever baffled by these. and I think I got a comment from a second (or maybe third?) person who said they read this fic in one go. holy shit guys, I'll never understand how on earth you managed to do that. and I'm forever impressed.

third: hope that 2014 is treating you well so far and that this state will continue.

fourth: chapter title from 'slow lights' by Sin Fang.
‘What about military snipers?’ He says walking into the office.

‘And good morning to you too, sweetie,’ River says from behind her desk and he can’t help but grin at her slightly frustrated expression. She hates when he comes into the office shouting out random things and he might’ve done it a few times just to annoy her. Not that he’s ever going to admit that – not to her anyway. ‘And while we’re past the unnecessary and pesky greetings, I am all for military snipers. Never could resist a man in a uniform.’

‘Very funny,’ he says, sitting behind his desk and trying to ignore the brief pang of jealousy. Because it’s ridiculous. ‘Now that we’re done discussing your taste in men, can we actually focus on something more important?’

‘I don’t know why you think my taste in men is not important, but please go on,’ River replies with an infuriating grin. ‘What about the military snipers?’

‘I’ve been thinking... What if the killer we’re looking for had professional training? I don’t mean in an assassin guild or anything like that, but in military?’

‘You’re thinking about army dropouts? Or those who finished their service but what? Feel angry? Betrayed? Disappointed?’

‘Something like that,’ he nods. ‘Or maybe they’re just bored and want to entertain themselves. See, this is why I like you, Song – you get me.’

‘I always knew you want me only for my brains,’ River jokes and he nearly bites his tongue to stop himself from saying that there are more reasons why he wants her. Thankfully – or maybe unfortunately – this time his mouth stays shut. ‘I think we could check it. I’ll get Clara on that, she should have access to that database. We’re looking for dropouts or for ones who finished the service?’

‘Both,’ he says. ‘All the snipers who finished their military service in the last 3 years. That should do it.’

‘What are we going to do once we have the list? Are we going to knock on their doors and ask them if they killed someone recently?’ River asks teasingly and he’s about to respond when the door to their office bursts open and Donna walks through it.

‘Get your things,’ she says. ‘You have a case.’

‘Actually, we’re working on something–’ he tries to finish, but Donna interrupts him harshly.

‘Not anymore. They found a body of a teenage girl. She was murdered and dumped in a park. You’re the only one I have on hand now, so you’re going.’

‘Shit,’ River mutters under her breath. ‘Okay, we’re going. Where is it? And have the technicians been called?’

‘Yes, they have, they’re already on the scene,’ Donna says and presses a piece of paper with address
scribbled on it into his hand. ‘Go.’

They arrive at the park after 10 minutes. It’s a small park and even from the parking lot they can see bright yellow tapes surrounding the crime scene. They walk over there quickly, without speaking and he’s already dreading what they’re going to see. There’s a young man standing by the line, ready to stop them, but when they show him their badges, he moves out of their way quickly and with a look of respect. They walk closer to the working team and he spots the body – it’s lying in the bushes, partially hidden from view by leaves and grass.

‘It’s a girl, late teens,’ says a young technician once she spots them crossing the yellow tape. ‘She was found by two runners about an hour ago,’ she points at two figures standing a few feet from the scene, huddled together and trying their best not to look at the body lying in the bushes. ‘Cause of death: trauma to the back of the head. She was hit a few times with something hard but thin. We haven’t found the weapon yet.’

‘Did she die here?’ River asks.

‘No,’ the technician shakes her head. ‘She must’ve been moved here after her death. Head injury like hers would bleed a lot and there’s almost no blood on the ground. There are splatters on the path, but that’s about it.’

‘Do you know when did she die?’ He asks and sneaks another look at the body.

‘We assume it was about 11pm last night, but we’ll be able to give you precise time only when we transport the body to the lab,’ she says.

‘Thank you,’ he says and she walks away to continue her work. He turns to River. ‘Are you going to talk to the people who found her? I’ll take a look at the body,’ she nods and quickly walks towards the couple that is still standing near the scene.

He walks slowly to the body, putting on a pair of gloves that another technician handed him. He hates this part: seeing victims for the first time. It’s not that he has a weak stomach, not at all. But he knows that just a few hours ago these people were alive. They were going somewhere, they had plans. They had someone who waited for them. And just like that, it’s all gone. He takes a deep breath and gently crouches near the body. It’s half hidden by the green leaves, but he can still make out the features of the victim. She’s wearing running clothes – plain back shorts, a grey tank top, now stained with blood and a dark hoodie. There are a few bruises on her legs, but none on her face. Her hair is matted by dried blood. He delicately moves her hair aside to look at the wounds there: a few thin cuts, some of them deep enough to see the skull.

‘What do you think?’ He turns around to see River walking towards him.

‘I think we need to find out who she is and inform her family,’ he sighs heavily and gets to his feet. ‘But before we do that, we need to find whoever takes care of this place.’

‘You mean a gardener?’ River asks and follows him, waving her hand at the technicians. ‘You think he will know anything?’

‘We’ll see. Maybe he noticed someone suspicious lurking around?’ He says as they walk to the small shed visible in the distance. ‘What about the witnesses?’

‘They’re not witnesses. They just found the body. They come here every morning to run and they stop at that point to stretch,’ River explains. ‘They seemed pretty freaked out. I told them to come tomorrow, so we can take their statements.’
They walk in silence to the gardener’s shed and he peaks through a small window at the back wall.

‘I don’t think there’s anyone inside,’ he says, cleaning a layer of dust from the glass. ‘I think we may need to call the park maintenance.’

‘John,’ River says slowly, ‘I think you should come here.’

She’s standing by the closed door to the shed and he quickly joins her. And as soon as he does, he knows why she called him: there are a few splatters of blood on the door and on the ground near the shed. They’re small and someone untrained wouldn’t notice them, but they are far from untrained.

‘We need to get the team here,’ he mutters and crouches. Someone tried to cover the evidence and wipe the blood away, but he or she missed a few spots. There’s an imprint of a shoe sole, only a half of it, but it’s large and deep which suggests that whoever was here – and probably murdered the girl – was tall and well-built.

‘Look at the door,’ River says and he obediently looks up.

‘Well then. Someone was planning on having fun here,’ he says through clenched teeth. The door is closed with a heavy and thick chain with just as heavy padlock dangling from it. Both of these things look brand new and barely used. ‘We need to get it open.’

‘I know. Move away, please,’ River says calmly.

‘Why?’

‘Because I asked you to,’ she answers with a smile so sweet that he instantly feels worried.

‘River, what are you planning to do?’ He asks, but takes a few steps back.

‘I’m going to open the door,’ she says with a wink and a second later, she takes out her gun from the holster hidden under her jacket and fires one shot into the padlock.

‘River!’ He exclaims as the door swings open. ‘You can’t do things like that!’

‘I just did, sweetie,’ she says with a grin. ‘The door is open and I believe that the technicians are on their way here. Two birds, one stone. Come on, let’s see what’s inside.’

With a sigh he walks after her inside the shed. They fumble for a bit, trying to find a light switch. He finally finds it and lights it with a victorious ‘ha!’ A small bulb dangling from the ceiling bathes inside of the shed in yellow and sickly glow. He looks around: there are gardening tools on the floor, a bag of something that looks and smells like fertilizer and—

‘Smells.

Smells are important.

‘It smells like bleach,’ he says after taking a deep breath.

‘You think someone suddenly decided to clean in here? Or maybe someone desperately tried to wash away all the evidence?’ River says, carefully inspecting everything inside.

‘Could be both. What is that? Candles?’ He says and sniffs a few tiny pieces of wax lying on a shelf. Whoever was cleaning here, missed a few spots. ‘Vanilla scented candles?’

‘A bit of romance never goes amiss,’ River tries to comment lightly, but when their eyes meet, he realises that she’s afraid that of the same thing as he is: that whoever did this, had a plan. A delusional and crazy plan, but still a plan. The girl wasn’t a random catch, no: she was chosen. ‘Look at this,’ River gently points to a big shovel lying under other tools. ‘There’s something smudged on
He nods, feeling slightly nauseous. Someone picked snagged that girl, put her in here to do what? Romance her? If yes, then something went seriously wrong.

‘What’s going on? We heard shots,’ a slightly breathless voice comes to his ear and he looks at the open door to see a woman from the technician team staring at them with a panicked expression. ‘Is everything alright?’

He nods, not trusting his voice.

‘I think we found the murder weapon,’ River says pointing at the shovel. ‘Try to see if you can find any prints on it. There might be blood on it, see if it catches the victim’s blood.’

‘And swoop the whole place,’ he adds. ‘Everything you can find. We tried not to touch anything.’

The woman nods and takes out her phone, calling the rest of the team. River and he quietly leave the shed, watching the technicians joining their colleague quickly.

‘What do we do now?’ River asks him while two technicians walk inside the shed and start collecting the evidence. ‘Waiting for the girl’s ID?’

‘No,’ he shakes his head. ‘We need to call the park maintenance. Find out all the people who work here and find out who was on rota yesterday. And then...’

‘And then?’

‘And then we’re going to pay them a visit.’

A few hours, countless phone calls and three conversations with suspects later, they find themselves at their last stop for the day.

‘Greg Allister, 37 years old, both parents dead,’ River reads from a report. They went back to the station to get some information on all the people who could’ve been at the park last night. They came up with four possible suspects: two gardeners and two park guards. One of the gardeners wasn’t on rota yesterday, same with one of the guards. The second guard admitted that yes, he was working since 9pm to 6am, but his booth is situated at the different side of the park. He didn’t hear nor see anything. None of the questioned men noticed anyone suspicious lurking around the park recently, nor they have paid any attention to the people who run there in the mornings and evenings. And now they’re left with one more possible suspect to question. He sighs and rubs hands over his face. Today has been exhausting and it seems that it might be far from over. He and River have a stack of reports to write and go through all the results that came from the lab.

‘What else do we have?’ He asks.

‘Uhm, not much. No tickets, no fees...,’ River says. ‘He’s been working at the park for nearly 3 years now. That’s all.’

‘Right then, let’s go,’ he says, but before they can get out of the car, his phone rings. ‘Okay, wait, I have to take this one, it’s from the station. Yes? Right. I see- Okay. Yes, we can go. Send me the address? Bye.’

‘What happened?’ River asks curiously and gets out of the car. ‘Where are we supposed to go?’
‘They identified the girl,’ he sighs and joins her. ‘Her parents filed missing person report. It hasn’t been 24 hours since she went missing, but since she’s- she was underage, they took it. We have to inform her parents.’

‘What was her name?’

‘Laura Cooper,’ he replies. ‘She went running in the evening, around 9pm. Her parents were out, came back around 1am and thought she’s already asleep. They realised she was not home today around noon.’

‘I can’t imagine what they must be going through,’ River shakes her head as they walk into the building where their last suspect lives. ‘Let’s talk with this guy and then we’ll go to Laura’s parents.’

He nods and knocks on the door to Allister’s apartment. Heavy steps are coming closer and closer to the door, but he’s too wrapped up in the victim’s story to pay attention to any of it.

(In the late hours of the night he will blame himself for it – for the lack of focus, for being too emotional and easily distracted. But not just now.

The regret and anger for his own sloppiness will come later.

Later.)

The door open with a creak and there’s a tall man standing in the doorway. His hair is dark and so are his eyes, but there’s nothing distinguishable about him. He has one of these faces that you forget once you turn your head away.

‘Greg Allister?’ River asks and the man nods his head. ‘Detective Song, detective Smith. We want to ask you a few questions, can we come in?’

‘Of course,’ Allister smiles and opens the door wider. ‘Please, do come in. Do you want something to drink?’

‘No, thanks,’ he replies as they walk inside the apartment. It’s a small flat, neat and tidy. It smells nice, he notices. It’s a familiar scent, but he can’t put his mind to where he smelled it last.

‘Let me just grab a glass of water for myself and you can ask me whatever you want,’ Allister says, waving his hand. ‘Make yourself comfortable in the meantime.’

They sit on a simple green couch and wait for Allister, who comes back a few moments later with a glass of water in his hand.

‘Sorry, but I just got back home a few minutes ago,’ he says and sits in an armchair a few feet away from them. ‘What do you want to ask me?’

‘Where were you last night?’ River says with a smile.

‘Uhm, at work?’ Allister scratches his head. ‘I finished at 9pm. I work at the park, uhm, at the-

‘We know where you work,’ he cuts in. ‘What did you do after you finished work?’

‘Came back here. Ate dinner. Watched some telly.’

‘Can anyone confirm that?’ River asks.

‘I don’t think so,’ Allister smiles apologetically. ‘Wait, I called my cousin? We talked for a bit. I
could give you his number. Did anything happen at the park?"

‘Have you noticed someone suspicious there recently?’ He asks without answering Allister’s question.

‘I... I don’t usually pay attention to people,’ Allister says. ‘I’m too busy working to pay attention to people, you know.’

‘Of course you are,’ River says seriously. ‘There’s one more thing... Could you tell us who installed the padlock on the door to the shed?’

‘What? A padlock?’ Allister nervously clears his throat. ‘I don’t... Oh right. Yes, I installed it about a month ago. You know, people are lurking there and you can’t trust them, right?’

‘You said you haven’t noticed anyone suspicious there,’ River says and Allister shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Uhm, well, I haven’t, but it’s better to be safe than sorry, right?’ Allister says and River opens her mouth to ask him something else, but he quickly cuts in.

‘I think that’s all we wanted to ask you,’ he says and Allister visibly relaxes. ‘We have to go to one more place today. Sorry for disturbing you. Could you come over to the station tomorrow?’ He says and take out a piece of paper on which he scribbles down the address. ‘We need to take your statement there.’

‘Sure thing,’ Allister nods and takes the card from his hands. His hands looks red and raw, as if he’d washed them in something caustic.

‘Thank you for your time,’ River thanks Allister with a smile and makes a move as if to follow him, but stops mid-step. He sees her staring at something in front of her. ‘Sorry, can I?’ She makes a move with her hand and take the object from the shelf it was standing on. ‘Oh, it smells lovely! It’s vanilla, isn’t it?’ His head snaps up only to see River staring at him meaningfully and holding a small candle in her hand.

The exact same type of candle they found in the shed.

*Oh fuck.*

Suddenly everything clicks in place with painful clarity.

The padlock was brand new and it couldn’t have been installed over a month ago. Lie.

The smell of bleach in the shed and Allister’s raw hands.

He’s tall and heavy enough to have left that imprint on the scene.

The candles.

The candles.

He’s so fucking blind sometimes.

‘Actually,’ he turns with a smile, trying his best to look casual, ‘could you come to the station with us now? I forgot that we have to go there, before we go to the next place, so we could take you with us.’
Allister looks at them for a few seconds and then nods.

‘Sure, no problem. Let me just grab my jacket, okay?’

During years of training, both in the police school and at the Medusa program, there was one thing that was repeated over and over again: be constantly vigilant. Keep your eyes open all the time. Blink and you’ll miss something. Blink and something happens. Blink and someone dies.

He blinks.

And when he opens his eyes, everything happens too quickly.

One: Allister makes a move as if to grab his jacket from the back of the door, but instead of taking the jacket, he grabs River by the back of her shirt and tugs her to him.

Two: his other hand moves behind his back and when he brings it back, he holds a pocket knife in it.

Three: he puts the blade against River’s throat.

This is one of these moments when he feels like his not living his life, like he’s only observing it: he feels like he’s watching a terribly cliché tv show. Because things like that can’t happen in real life and he can’t be looking at some madman holding a knife against his partner’s throat.

‘Well, I guess you changed your mind about going to the station with us then?’ He says licking his lips.

‘You can say that,’ Allister grins and presses the blade harder against River’s throat. He can see her taking a deep breath and tries to stop panic from flooding his brain. He has to stay focus and think. Think. ‘Now,’ Allister says taking a small step back and dragging River with him, ‘any of you has a gun?’

He shakes his head and sees River pressing her arm to her side, trying to conceal her gun and stop Allister from finding it.

‘Good,’ Allister nods his head. ‘Guns are dangerous, aren’t they? A lot could go wrong if they’re used irresponsibly. You know what? I like her,’ he says conversationally, his grip tightening around River. ‘She’s a brave one, isn’t she? Not like the other one. No, not another step,’ Allister sneers in his direction. ‘Or your partner may end up bleeding on my carpet. I am sure that neither of us would like that, right? Now, handcuffs. These you should have.’

He looks at River, who gives him a small nod. He digs into the pocket of his jacket and takes out a pair of handcuffs. It’s always been an unspoken rule between him and River: she’s the one with a gun and he’s the one with handcuffs. Not that it has any meaning now.

‘Wonderful. Wonderful. Now, put it around your right wrist,’ Allister commands. ‘Now.’

He swallows and closes one part around his wrist. He has no idea what happens now nor he has any idea how to stop this nightmare.

‘Let’s see,’ Allister says when he hears the lock closing with a quiet ping. ‘Oh, I know. You, kitchen,’ he motions with his head. ‘You go first and don’t try to pull any tricks.’

It’s funny, because even if he had any idea what to do, he wouldn’t do it, because he’s too scared that something could happen to River. He starts walking towards the kitchen, with River and Allister walking behind him. He can hear her hitched breathing, but other than that she remains calm.
‘What now?’ He asks as they enter the kitchen that smells of bleach. ‘Want me to make you a sandwich?’

‘Oh, you’re the funny one!’ Allister snorts. ‘He’s the funny one, isn’t he? Go over to the fridge and put the handcuffs’ chain through the handle. Quickly. Now,’ he says when the second end of the handcuffs is dangling from the handles, ‘let’s have your partner join you,’ he walks over to the fridge, still pushing River in front of him. ‘Take her hand and cuff her,’ River slowly gives him her left hand and he closes the cuff around her wrist with an apologetic smile.

‘I hope you’ll forgive me, I have to go now,’ Allister says mockingly and releases his hold on River. He takes a few steps back and walks over to the kitchen window. ‘No offence, but I hope we won’t see each other again.’

And with that he jumps out of the window. His feet his something solid and they hear his footsteps running down the stairs.

‘Fire escape,’ he mutters and looks at River, who’s delicately rubbing her neck. ‘Are you fine? Did he hurt you?’

‘I’m okay,’ she rasps and clears her throat. ‘I’m okay. Now, find the keys and let us out. We have to catch that bastard.’

‘Uhm,’ he stalls for time, because he’s pretty sure that River will be very displeased with what he’s about to say. ‘I don’t have the keys.’

‘What? How can you not have the keys?’ She asks and he just shrugs. ‘Right. Never mind. You call backup and I’ll try to get us out of it. Do it, now!’

He doesn’t even ask how she plans on getting them out of the handcuffs without the key. He quickly dials the station and asks for backup and for all the possible patrols to look for Allister. He ends the call and to his surprise he notices that he’s free. Well, at least his hand is no longer bound to River’s hand and he can move without dragging Allister’s fridge behind him.

‘How did you do it?’ He asks River incredulously, but she just rolls her eyes and tells him to move. When they get back to his car, the reports of spotting Allister are already coming in and they drive to the spot where a police patrol has seen him just a minute ago. It’s two blocks away – thankfully he didn’t manage to get too far. The street and pavements are packed with people and he can’t spot Allister anywhere.

‘There he is,’ River elbows him and points to the left. He spots Allister almost immediately: he’s on the opposite side of the street, trying to appear casual and blend into the crowd.

‘Okay, I see him,’ he nods. ‘And I think that there’s a patrol at the end of the street,’ he leans into the car and talks to them over the radio, confirming that they also see Allister.

‘That’s not good,’ River says worriedly and he looks up to see Allister nearing a group of kids standing in front of a pet store. He looks at them with interest, as if wondering and calculating his chances. ‘Do you think he knows we’re after him and that we have backup?’

‘I have no idea,’ he says as Allister moves closer to the kids. He can see an officer nearing him slowly, but the problem is that Allister spots him too. And for the second time today, he feels like everything is happening too quickly, because he blinks and Allister grabs one of the kids – a little girl - and presses the knife to her neck. The girl starts crying and trying to wiggle out of his grasp, the police officer stops dead in his track, unsure what to do. The crowd on the street notices what is
happening and starts panicking.

He can see that the officer is trying to talk to Allister and approach him, but it seems that Allister is not in the mood for negotiating. He starts walking backwards to a small alley between the shops and people part to let him pass.

‘Go there and try to distract him,’ River says. ‘Go.’

‘What are you planning to do?’ He asks and sees her taking out her gun. ‘Are you crazy? You can’t shoot him! He’s holding a child!’

‘Yes, he is,’ River hisses. ‘So stop talking and go there and leave the rest to me. Try to keep him from looking in my direction. Just... Trust me.’

He looks at her: she’s looking a bit pale and tired, but there’s a protective and determined glint in her eyes and he knows that she won’t any harm to fall upon the child. He nods and starts crossing the street, trying not to get hit by any of the passing cars.

‘Allister!’ He calls to catch his attention. ‘Come on now. It’s over.’

‘I wouldn’t say so,’ Allister snorts and grabs the girl tighter. ‘I have a perfect get-out-of-here card.’

‘You won’t get out of here,’ he says, trying to sound sure of himself. ‘This whole place is covered. No matter where you go, you’ll be met by my friends.’ Okay, so that’s a lie. He’s not sure that the patrols managed to cover the whole area. But Allister doesn’t know that and a little lie never killed anyone, right?

The kid starts crying.

‘Shut up,’ Allister says angrily, shaking the girl and he feels a wave of fury sweeping over him.

‘Hey, hey, it’s okay,’ he takes a small step forward and tries to smile at the girl. ‘It’s going to be alright, I promise. I’m John. What’s your name?’

‘Katie,’ the girl manages to whisper.

‘It’s a lovely name,’ he says, taking another step towards her and Allister.

‘Don’t talk to the kid,’ Allister growls. ‘And don’t take another step. Don’t you even dare.’

‘Why not?’ He asks and closer to the man in front of him. He can hear and ambulance and police sirens in the distance. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Oh, you don’t want to know the answer to that, boy,’ Allister sneers and steps back. ‘I am going to--’

The shot rings loudly in the air and Allister howls in pain. He releases Katie who runs into his arms. There’s blood on her shirt, but thankfully it’s not hers – it’s Allister’s. He’s laying on the ground, clutching his arm and howling in pain. Two officers run and restrain him, not caring about his injured arm. He’s hugging Katie and telling her that it’s alright, that it’s over and that she’s safe when he hears it: a high pitched sound of brakes pushed down too late, a dull sound of a car hitting someone and a sickening ‘thud’ of a body hitting the ground. The noise breaks out and he quickly turns around to see what exactly happened and who got hurt, but when he sees it, his heart stops for a second.

Because it’s River.
It takes a long time before he can get into his car and drive to the hospital where River was taken.

He questions Allister, who was taken to the station after having his arm bandaged and being given painkillers. And he plays nice with him, even though he wants nothing more than punch the guy. He takes his fingerprints and compares them to the ones found on the shovel and on the body. They’re perfect match. Usually, he’d try to talk with the guy, find out why he did that, but not today.

He writes down Allister’s statement.

He writes a report, trying to describe everything that happened from the moment River and he set foot on the crime scene to the moment she shot Allister.

He adds all the necessary reports from the lab.

He signs everything he needs to sign.

He answers every question that is asked, trying to calm everyone and tell them that River is going to be fine – even though he’s not sure about it himself.

When a few hours later he parks at the hospital’s parking lot, he’s exhausted. It’s barely 8pm, but he feels like it’s much, much later. He sighs and drags his hands over his face. He’s about to exit the car when his phone rings and he looks at the display, only to see Amy’s face there.

Oh crap. He absolutely forgot. River and he were supposed to go to the Ponds tonight, to celebrate the fact that the little Pond is two weeks old. Shit.

‘Hello,’ he says when he picks up. ‘What’s up?’

‘Where are you?’ Amy asks quietly. ‘You were supposed to be here over an hour ago.’

‘Listen,’ he starts. ‘I- Things got a bit complicated.’

‘The only complication I’ll accept is the one where you’re in bed together,’ Amy huffs into the phone. ‘Just please, if you are, don’t send me any pictures. I don’t want to be traumatised by your skinny ass.’

‘Uhm, that’s not it,’ he says and Amy must hear the seriousness in his voice, because she lets him talk and explain everything without interrupting him once.

‘Fuck,’ she whispers once he’s done. ‘Rory and I saw the report on the news, but we never thought... How is River?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ he says. ‘I couldn’t go to the hospital with her and when we tried calling from the station, the nurses said they’ll give information only to her family. Which is-’

‘Great,’ Amy finishes.

‘No, not really,’ he sighs. ‘I don’t know whom should I contact. She hasn’t really talked about her family and I don’t even know if they let me see her.’

‘You moron. You are her family!’

‘What? How?’
‘You’re her husband,’ Amy says a bit too gleefully. ‘Just tell them that and you’ll see her without any problems.’

‘Are you sure?’ He asks and gets out of the car and starts walking to the hospital’s entrance.

‘No, I’m not. But you can try, right? You have to try,’ Amy responds and he can hear a high pitched noise in the background. ‘Sorry, I have to go. Tony woke up. Just- Take care of her, okay? And as soon as you find anything out, call me. Or text me. Or Rory. Bye.’

He hides his phone and walks through the hospital door. He quickly finds the nurse station and asks about River.

‘And who are you to her?’ A small, but intimidating looking nurse asks.

‘I am her husband,’ he says quickly, hoping that the nurse won’t ask for any proof. Thankfully, she only looks at him for a few seconds and tells him to follow her. They stop in front of a small room and the nurse sticks her head inside, calling someone out. A tall man in a white coat emerges, looking equally annoyed and helpless.

‘Doctor, this man here is her husband,’ the nurse says and the man looks at him sharply.

‘Thank god,’ the man sighs in relief. ‘Sorry, I’m doctor Green. Mister Song, I presume?’

He can only nod his head mutely.

‘What’s wrong with my... my wife?’ He asks doctor Green and tries to peek inside the room.

‘Dislocated thumb. Sprained wrist. Badly bruised ribs. And a slight concussion,’ he doctor lists and he swallows nervously. None of that sounds good in his ears. ‘Don’t worry, none of that is too serious. She got really lucky in a way. The car that hit her was driving slowly and she managed to roll over the hood. We managed to bring down the swelling on her wrist and gave her something for the pain.’

‘Can I see her?’ He asks impatiently.

‘Yes, of course,’ doctor Green nods. ‘And please, try to convince her to stay here, at least for the night. She wants to go home, even though we explained the risk to her.’

‘Sure, I’ll talk to her,’ he smiles thinly and walks into the room.

‘John? What are you doing here?’ River says when she sees him. She’s sitting on a bed, wearing a hospital gown and looking quite beaten down. There’s a purple bruise on her cheek and another one on her wrist. He walks closer to her.

‘Shouldn’t you be lying down?’ He asks and she rolls her eyes.

‘No. Because I am getting out of here. And you didn’t answer my question.’

‘What do you think I’m doing here? I’m here to take care of you,’ he hisses. ‘And you’re not going anywhere.’

‘I am. And if you want to help me, get my things’ she replies stubbornly and hops from the bed. Almost instantly she sways and loses her balance, and he places his hands on her hips to steady her.

‘There, I got you,’ he says quietly. She groans in pain and puts her forehead against his shoulder. ‘Let’s get you back on the bed, okay?’
He helps her to hop back, but she still refuses to lie down.

‘I got dizzy, that’s all,’ she says. ‘I can go home, really.’

‘No, you can’t,’ he sighs. ‘Look, you’ve been nearly run over by a car. You had some psycho
pointing a knife at you. You should and you will stay here.’

‘No,’ she shakes her head stubbornly and her mouth twists with pain. ‘I don’t want to. I won’t have
to.’

‘River,’ he starts, but she shakes her head once again. ‘Oh, fine. How are you planning on going
home? Your bag is at the station.’ It’s a lie – he has it in his car, but he’s not going to admit that.
‘You’ll have to call a taxi, which may be difficult without your mobile. There’s payphone in the hall,
but you don’t have any money. But let’s assume that you somehow get into the taxi – you first have
to get to the office, get your bag and then go home. It’s going to take what... About an hour? Two
hours? Are you sure you can do that? You have a concussion. They’ve pumped you full of
painkillers and you can barely walk. No, really, feel free to walk out of it, I am sure it’ll amuse me.’

‘I hate you,’ River says after a moment. ‘I really hate you. Especially when you’re being reasonable.’

He snorts.

‘Does it mean you’re going to stay?’ He asks her and she nods weakly. ‘Great. Just let me inform the
doctor, he may cry from joy.’

Doctor Green almost does that, nearly hugging him and thanking him for his persuasion skills. He
also says to inform the nurses if River starts feeling dizzy, nauseous or loses consciousness and that
he’ll come and check up on her in the morning.

When he walks back into the room, River is nestled under the covers.

‘What are you doing? You should go home,’ she asks him when he sits on the chair next to her bed.

‘That would make me a crappy husband,’ he replies jokingly and stops her before she can say
anything else. ‘I’m staying, if only to stop you from escaping through the window.’

‘I don’t think I’d have the strength,’ River looks at him. ‘I feel like shit.’

‘Then why did you want to leave?’

‘Because I hate hospitals,’ she says quietly. ‘I feel trapped here.’

He wants to tell her that no one likes hospitals, but something in her tone stops him from that. It’s
something about her explanation or the way she said it... He just can’t put his finger on what exactly
it is.

‘You should sleep,’ he says instead, but River only huffs.

‘I can’t. My head hurts too much. And my ribs are killing me.’

‘Let me just call the nurse, she’ll give you something for the pain,’ he stands up, but she shakes his
head.

‘No, it’s okay. I’m already pretty much high and another dose won’t change anything,’ she sighs and
winces in pain. ‘I just have to soldier through it.’
‘Handy trick,’ he says after a few moments of comfortable silence. River looks at him with confusion written all over her face, so he points to her bandaged wrist. ‘Doing the thumb thing to get out us out of the handcuffs. Do they teach you that in Quantico?’

‘No, it’s just one of the things you pick up over the years,’ River says with a secretive smile. He wonders where she has been to to pick up something like that. Once again he’s hit by realisation how little he actually knows about her. But there’s a way to change it.

‘So... 20 questions time?’ He asks excitedly.

‘20 questions? Really?’ River says, turning her head to shoot him a disbelieving look. ‘Are you a teenage girl on a sleepover?’

‘Hey,’ he raises his hands in the air. ‘I’m only proposing a form of entertainment. And it seems like there’s nothing else we can do here, without you being all temporally disabled.’

‘I wonder what you’d propose if I wasn’t temporally disabled, as you put it,’ River smirks and he suddenly has a very vivid image of some entertaining activities he could propose if River wasn’t on bed rest. Did someone just turn the heating on? ‘And since it’s your idea, please, start.’

For a few minutes they ask and answer questions, the ones that one usually asks during this game. Favourite food? (River pretends to gag when he says ‘fish fingers and custard’). Least favourite author? (He nearly dies from laughter when River starts complaining about John Green and Paulo Coelho). Worst book you ever read? (He tells her about that time when he was at the airport, 30 minutes until the next flight and he ran out of things to read. He grabbed the first book at the airport bookstore, which turned out to be ’50 shades of Grey’. ‘I thought it’s about differences in viewing colours,’ he says while River is giggling into her pillow, ‘and let me tell you, it wasn’t about that.’)

‘It’s your turn now,’ River says once she calmed down after his ’50 shades...’ story. ‘But no matter what you ask me, I won’t be able to beat that story of yours.’

‘Okay, let me think,’ he’s silent for a few minutes. There are so many things he wants to ask her, but- And then a lost thought, a memory creeps into his head and lands on his tongue. ‘Why don’t you like tubs?’

‘What?’ River asks and her eyes flash with something he can’t name.

‘Uhm, in Vegas. You wanted to swap rooms, because there was a tub in yours.’

She’s silent for so long that he starts to think she must’ve fallen asleep or simply ignored his question.

‘I’m not afraid of tubs,’ she finally starts and he jumps in his chair. ‘I’m afraid of water. Standing water. Uhm, when I was small, I was staying at this orphanage... There was this pool in the backyard. Someone dared me to jump in and I did. I couldn’t swim,’ she says and bites her lip. ‘As you can imagine, I nearly drowned. They banned me from going out for some time after that. So yeah, not a big fan of pools of water,’ she shrugs.

‘Sorry, I had no idea,’ he says lamely, but she hushes him quickly.

‘You couldn’t have,’ she says and yawns. ‘Oh, I can feel the painkillers kicking in. I think I’ll be a terrible conversation partner in a second.’

‘It’s okay,’ he smiles and stands up. ‘Try to sleep and I’ll call Amy. She’ll kill me if I don’t.’

He quietly leaves the door and closes the door behind him. He dials Amy’s number and quickly
briefs her in on River’s condition. She breathes in relief when he tells her that it’s nothing too serious and that he convinced her to stay in hospital overnight. She ends the call with ‘give her our love’ and then, after a moment adds ‘take care of her’ in a slightly threatening voice. He promises to do just so and once Amy hangs up, he decides to give River a few more minutes of peace and goes to find a cafeteria. He orders a cup of coffee and he sips it slowly, trying to digest the story he just heard from River. It’s still strange to hear that she’s vulnerable or to find out that she hasn’t always been invincible. *We all have our weak spots*, he muses and finishes his coffee. When he walks back in River’s room, she’s soundly asleep, lying on her back avoiding the bruises on her sides. He dims the lights in the room and it’s only then that the x-ray viewer screen catches his attention. It’s on, shining brightly in the dark room. He walks closer to it, planning on turning it off, but the sight of the x-ray there stops him from doing it. These must be River’s x-rays, he realises, looking at the screen. He can see the slightly torn ligament near her wrist, the dislocated thumb and... He peers closer to the screen.

His teachers at the Medusa program lived by the rule that the participants have to have knowledge in every possible subject. So he had to learn some basics of nearly every discipline known to men: astronomy, physics, chemistry, diplomacy, medicine, joinery, archaeology, cinematography – you name it. He also was forced to take a course in forensic anthropology. His teachers claimed that one can find out a lot about one’s enemy just from their medical records or one x-ray. Sometimes, he was given random x-rays and had to tell who that person was and what they did for a living. Sometimes, he was given x-rays of a person who was waiting in another room and he had to figure out how and where to strike to win. And sometimes he was given x-rays to study the damage he’d done to someone’s body.

He shakes his head. He can’t think about it now. He has to focus. He looks at the x-rays in front of him once again. It’s been years since he last analysed something like that, but there are certain things you’ll always remember. The marks on radius and ulna are so characteristic and distinctive that he can’t be wrong about them. These are marks that one obtains by protecting one’s head against strong and repeated blows.

Marks like these suggest abuse.

Years of violence and abuse.

He looks at River, who’s sleeping peacefully. She told him that she was adopted by a lovely couple and he believed her. He had no reason not to. But now, looking between her and the x-rays, he starts to think that River must’ve lied to him about this one.

And a small part of his brain, that tiny little part that is not flooded with concern for River, wonders if there are any other things which she lied about.

___

River comes back to work on Tuesday, barely a week after the accident happened. He doesn’t like it and he tells her so, but she only gives him a glare that says ‘I don’t care’ and tells him that if she stays at home one more day, she’ll go insane. A part of him understands her, but another part can’t stop fussing about her and her general well-being. He’s pretty sure that he’s being inconspicuous in his care for her and he thinks he’s doing a pretty good job of taking care about her without it looking like he’s doing that, but when around noon River stops her work and looks at him putting a cup of tea on her desk, she speaks and shatters his illusions.

‘Sweetie,’ she says with a patient sigh. ‘I am fine. You don’t have to treat me like I’m terminally ill.’

‘You had an accident,’ he mutters and pushes the cup in her direction. ‘I made you tea.’
‘John, in the last 4 hours you’ve made enough tea for me to drown you in,’ she sighs. ‘I appreciate your help and concern, but I really am fine.’

‘Just a few days ago you had a sprained wrist, dislocated thumb, bruised ribs and a concussion,’ he lists impatiently. ‘And you’re already back to work!’

‘That’s because I am fine! And I told you, I’ve had worse and I’ve bounced right back,’ she says. Oh right. She’s had worse, he knows this much. He remembers the x-rays he saw and what he found out from them. And he’s not sure how he should approach River about it – if he even should approach her about it. Somehow he doubts that ‘hey River, I might’ve snooped in your medical records without your permission’ would meet with her approval. So he does what he thinks is best right now. Which is nothing. ‘Besides, all I’m doing is reading and correcting the reports and statements you wrote. It’s hardly exhausting. Unless you mean deciphering your handwriting.’

‘Oi!’ He says out of habit rather than real annoyance. ‘But you’ll tell me if you get tired, right? I could drive you back to your place or we could get dinner or lunch or-

‘Sweetie,’ River says slowly, in a tone of voice that he’s learned to interpret as ‘stop it or so help me’, ‘I can drive myself back home. And sure, we can grab something to eat if you’re hungry. Just let me get through this pile of reports first, okay?’

‘Fine,’ he nods his head. ‘Seeing that you’re being unreasonably stubborn, I have to run with it. You want me to help you?’

‘No, I am set,’ River murmurs and corrects something in the file she’s reading. ‘Honestly, you shouldn’t use exclamation points in your reports. No wonder Donna sent them back. If you want to be useful, tell be about Bates. Any news about him? Any progress on the case?’

‘Not really,’ he shakes his head and stretches in his chair. ‘I talked with Canton and he gave us the list of the places you can find Bates in – courtesy of Jim’s girlfriend. I ran it through Dorium and his friends confirmed, that yes, you can spot Bates there, but unfortunately we didn’t have much luck. He’s nowhere to be found. Maybe we should contact his previous employer?’

‘The lawyer that worked on the Master case? The first one, you mean?’ River looks from the reports. ‘What’s the point? It’s been years ago, I doubt they keep in touch.’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ he scratches his cheeks. ‘I have no idea what we could do. I tried to get to articles and journalists’ investigations about drug deals, but it’s difficult when you don’t have someone vouching for you. I don’t want to bother Amy now, she has her hands full with the tiny one.’

‘But she’s not the only journalist we know,’ River smiles slyly and for a few moments he looks at her in confusion. ‘I’m talking about Rose. Maybe she knows something. You could call her.’

‘I-I don’t think it’s a good idea,’ he stutters and River looks at him quizzically.

‘Why not? You seemed to be getting along just fine. Even better than fine if I’m to believe what Jack told me,’ River winks. ‘You should call her. Maybe she has some info we could use. And if not – you can always get a date out of it.’

He swallows and tries his best not to tell her that he doesn’t want to date Rose. Or anyone else for that matter. Unless that person is her, because he has no problems imagining himself dating her. Hell, he’d love to date her. Court her. Take her out – whatever the cool kids call it these days.

But she doesn’t want to date him.
So he doesn’t tell her any of that.

‘Wait, what is it?’ He looks up to see River opening a huge envelope that was hidden under the stack of papers. ‘It got here last... Thursday. Why didn’t you open it?’

‘Because it’s addressed to you?’ He scoffs. ‘I’m not nosy!’

‘It’s addressed to both of us, you moron,’ River sighs, looking at the papers that were inside the envelope. ‘Oh look! The divorce papers!’

‘Uhm. Wow. That’s good?’ He tries to sound cheerful, but he must be failing miserably, because River looks at him with amusement.

‘It’s okay to be happy about it, I won’t get offended,’ she says with a grin. He says nothing, because what he’s supposed to say? The he didn’t really mind being married to her? It wasn’t a nuisance for him, but apparently it was for River.

‘Anyway, this occasion calls for celebration,’ River says excitedly.

‘Celebration?’

‘Yes. We didn’t have a proper wedding party, so I think we deserve a divorce party.’

‘There isn’t such a thing,’ he says, but River just shrugs. ‘Right. Okay. Who are we inviting then?’

‘No one,’ River replies. ‘It’s our divorce. We’re the one who should celebrate it. Besides, I have plans for you,’ she smiles and it’s the kind of a smile that sends a wave of heat through his body.

‘Plans?’ He tries to sound nonchalant, but even in his ears it sounds more like a squeak. ‘What plans?’

‘I’m going to be your wingwoman.’

To his horror, River keeps her word. It’s 10pm, they’re at some club and he’s about to knock another shot of something that will surely melt his throat. But what the hell, he thinks as he looks at River’s grinning face, he just got divorced. Which is exactly the story that River is pitching to girls in the clubs – this one and a few others they’ve been in before. She walks over to a girl, tells her a story of her poor friend getting a divorce and asks her if she wants to have a celebratory drink with them. River – of course – omits the fact that she’s the one she got divorced from.

(When he asks her why she doesn’t say that, she only looks at him and says it’s not important. ‘Not important,’ he wants to snorts, but thinks better of it.

And per usual, he says nothing.)

River seems to be hell-bent on setting him up with someone before the night is over, because in every place they visit, she introduces him to at least one girl and as soon as he starts getting along with them, she quietly leaves his side. He supposes she thinks that he’s so caught up in every new girl that he doesn’t notice her departure, but he always does. But there’s nothing he can do to make her stay, so he lets her go and pretends to be interested in whatever the girl standing next to him has to say. And it’s not that they aren’t great, these girls. They are. They’re pretty, lovely and funny, they’re smart and adorable, but there’s always something missing. Like right now for example: he’s talking with his nice girl – Kelly, her name is Kelly. And she’s nice, she really is, with her warm brown eyes and blonde hair, and her gentle laugh. She laughs at his jokes, she loves the same writers
as he does and she has a PhD in astronomy. It’d seem that she’s quite perfect for him, and yet-

He looks around to see if River’s nearby, but he can’t spot her in the sea of bodies. He smiles and nods at whatever Kelly’s saying, but all he can think of is where River is. It’s not fair, but he can’t help it. He smiles at Kelly, tells her he needs to go to the loo and that he’ll be back in a second (liar) and then he dives into the crowd. He has no idea where he could find River, but he decides that he needs a breath of fresh air before he starts looking for her. He squeezes his way to the exit and takes a deep breath once he’s outside. Much better. The night is pleasantly quiet after the constant buzz of the club and the air is refreshingly cool on his skin. Now, if he could only-

‘John? What are you doing here?’ River’s voice rings to his left and he turns to see her sitting on the pavement, back against the wall.

‘I could ask you the same question,’ he smirks and walks over to her.

‘I got tired,’ she shrugs and doesn’t say anything else. He studies her for a few seconds, before sitting next to her.

‘Same here. And I was looking for you. Don’t you think it’s time to abandon this place?’

‘Why?’ She asks. ‘You want to go somewhere else? I thought you like that girl.’

‘Yeah, I like her. She’s... okay,’ he shrugs.

‘So why are you sitting here instead of dancing with her?’

‘I told you, I got tired. Needed fresh air. And I missed you,’ he pokes her side.

‘Oh please,’ she snorts.

‘What? You don’t believe me? You’re hurting my feelings, Song,’ he pretends to be offended and at this moment he’s really glad she’s not looking at him, because he’s sure that she’d be able to see that he really means it.

‘No, I don’t. Not a bit,’ she says and shivers. ‘Right, we better head inside. It’s getting chilly.’

‘Nah, let’s stay here a bit longer,’ he says and without hesitation puts his arm around her and tugs her to his side. ‘There. Better?’

‘A bit,’ she admits reluctantly, but he can feel her body relaxing against his. ‘You’re certainly very warm for someone this skinny.’

‘Is it a compliment? You’re really swooping me off my feet here.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ she mumbles and with a quiet sigh she rests her head against his shoulder.

He has no idea how long they sit like that – it might be minutes or an hour, but in this moment, he feels at peace. He’s never the one to sit still and contemplate things – he has to be in constant movement, running around and doing something, but this – sitting with River on a cold street – this he can do. He wants to stay here. With her.

Even though it’s not possible.

‘What are you thinking about?’ River asks and he looks at her surprised. ‘You’re sighing a lot. You must be thinking about something.’
‘I- You know, things,’ he clears his throat. ‘Just things.’

‘How very eloquent of you,’ River says and snuggles further into him. ‘No wonder you haven’t picked anyone up yet.’

‘Hey, that’s not nice!’ He squeaks and feels her laughing silently. ‘Maybe I haven’t, but neither have you.’

‘But I’m not looking,’ she says.

‘Neither am I.’

‘You should,’ River says quietly against his jacket. ‘You should find someone. Someone who will make you happy.’

‘River,’ his voice hitches and there must be something in the way he says his name, because she looks at him and the vulnerability in her eyes nearly takes his breath away. He’s never seen her like that – looking so soft and open. Her eyes are wide and dark green and he swears they’re sparkling like stars – and yes, he realises how cheesy it sounds. He feels like a writer of crappy romance novels for even thinking like that, but he can’t help himself.

‘River,’ he repeats quietly and her lips part slightly. There are words stuck in his throat, but he has no idea how to put them in the right order. He has no idea what would be the right thing to say. You would make me happy, he wants to say. And I could make you happy if you let me. But the words don’t come together, sitting heavily on his heart instead and he thinks that maybe it’s time for another form of communication. River keeps looking at him with this strange hopeful expression on her face and he starts leaning towards her, hoping that he’s not about to make a mistake and ruin their friendship. The second he feels her breath on his face, he decides that he doesn’t care if it ruins it. River licks her lips and her eyes flutter shut and he’s about to finally close the distance between their lips. They’re just a heartbeat apart and-

The door to the club burst open and a group of loud people emerges, laughing and screaming into the night. River jerks away from him and turns her face away, and when she looks at him again, the soft expression from her face is gone: it’s replaced by the usual cool and guarded look.

‘Right,’ she clears her throat and stands up, trying her best not to look at him. ‘Now we really need to head inside, don’t you think?’

He wants to say something, to stop her, to turn back time and return to the moment just a few seconds ago, but he knows it’s too late – that moment is gone. River’s already walking back to the club and he does the only thing he can do right now – he follows her.

By the end of the evening, he catches a glimpse of River leaving the club with some guy he hasn’t seen before.

___

He greets the next morning with a scowl and overwhelming desire to stay in bed. It’s not even a case of hangover – he could deal with that. He’d much rather deal with a pounding headache and feeling like he needs to drink an ocean to quench his thirst. He’d take all of that rather than this all consuming feeling of... rejection. It’s stupid to feel this way, he realises that, but there was a part of him that hoped – really hoped – that River returns his feelings.

Or could return his feelings, in the future.
Instead he read all the signals wrong and very nearly made an idiot out of himself. He rolls out of his bed with a groan and goes to the bathroom. He spends a few minutes just standing under the spray of warm water, trying to get the strength to put a brave face on and go to work. When he finishes his shower and puts on some clothes, eats breakfast and downs a cup of scalding hot tea; after spending over 30 minutes in traffic and finally parking at the station’s underground parking lot he thinks he’s fine and ready to face whatever this day is about to throw at him. He makes sure to greet everyone in the station with a bright and overly cheerful smile, stopping for a few quick chitchats, while all he wants is to sit behind his desk and don’t get up until the end of the day. He finally reaches the sanctuary of his office and opens the door, all while internally praying that River hasn’t come in yet. But per usual, luck isn’t on his side.

‘Oh, look what a cat dragged in,’ River says in a laughing voice. ‘Why the grumpy face?’

‘I’m not grumpy,’ he sighs and looks at her. She behaves normally, as if nothing happened and nothing changed.

_It’s because nothing happened, you idiot_, a voice inside his head says.

He’s not sure whether he’s relieved or saddened by the lack of awkwardness.

‘If you says so,’ River continues in the same amused tone. ‘Now, don’t sit. Donna wanted to see us. I was about to call you. I think she has something important for us.’

He mutely nods, drops his bag on his desk and follows River to Donna’s office. She’s talking on the phone when they walk in, but invites them inside with a wave of her hand.

‘Right, okay. Monday then,’ she says into the receiver. ‘Thanks. Yes, I’ll brief them in. Yeah, you too.’

‘What’s that about?’ He asks a bit harshly and plops on a chair in front of Donna’s desk. He swears he can feel River rolling her eyes at him while she sits next to him.

‘Why are you so grumpy?’ Donna raises an eyebrow. ‘What happened?’

‘I think that Uncle Hangover visited him,’ River says with a chuckle. ‘We might’ve had a bit too much to drink yesterday.’

‘I think it’s a miracle that someone sold him alcohol,’ Donna snorts. ‘He looks twelve!’

‘You do realise I am here, right?’ He says through gritted teeth. ‘And I’m not hungover. Now, why did you ask us here?’

‘Wow, someone’s really unpleasant today,’ Donna says. ‘Luckily for you, I have something to cheer you up.’

‘Oh yeah?’ He asks. He really doubts that there’s something that could cheer him up right now. Okay, he knows someone who could cheer him up, but unfortunately for him that person doesn’t feel like cheering him up.

‘Oh yeah,’ Donna repeats after him, smiling brightly at him and River. ‘Boys and girls, I have good news: we finally got Bates. And it gets better: you are going to interrogate him on Monday.’

Chapter End Notes
oops. uhm. well. this chapter was supposed to be up earlier. but I had a few personal and family issues recently and I didn't really have time to write. I don't know when the next chapter will be up (I kind of hope I'll manage to write it quicker than this one), but it's certainly going to be shorter and you won't have to soldier through another ass long chapter. (also, this fic is twice as long as my master thesis. how bloody sad is it?)

I am really happy that you didn't hate the previous chapter? I am equally happy and surprised, ngl. thank you, thank you, thank you for all the comments and kudos. it's still a bit ~wow~ that anyone actually reads and enjoys this fic.

one last thing: sorry for all the typos that might still be here, but it's nearly 2am here, my internet is shit and I'm just going to click 'post', without giving it one last read on the preview.
chapter title comes from 'someone must get hurt' by She wants revenge.

have a nice week everyone!
It’s early Saturday evening when he parks in front of Ponds’ house and grabs the cake sitting on the passenger seat, before getting out of his car. Before he can even raise his hand to knock on the door, it opens and Rory invites him in a hushed voice.

‘What’s going on?’ He asks and closes the door behind him. ‘Has Amy finally turned you into a butler?’

‘Very funny,’ Rory sighs heavily and leads him to the kitchen. ‘She’s upstairs with Tony and River. And she told me to open the door before you start banging on it like a mad man.’

‘Oi, I’d never do that!’ He squeaks offended. ‘Amy made that up. So... River’s here?’

‘Yeah, she is,’ Rory replies. ‘Hope you have nothing against it. Now, help me set the table. Maybe we’ll manage to eat dinner without any interruption from the little one. That would be nice.’

‘Why would I mind River being here?’ He says, trying to sound nonchalant and grabs plates standing on the counter.

‘You tell me,’ Rory says, stirring something in a pot. ‘You’ve been a bit weird around her lately.’

‘I haven’t,’ he mumbles and starts putting the plates on the table.

‘If you says so,’ he feels Rory’s gaze on him, but bless him, he doesn’t try to get some information out of him. Because there’s nothing he could tell Rory, not really. And he might’ve... tried to stay away from River recently. It was a conscious decision on his part – trying to put some distance between them in order to... Well, he’s not sure why he did that. He just needed some space to think and make sense of his feeling. Not that he succeeded in doing that.

‘So...,’ Rory starts again and a sudden feeling of dread washes over him. Rory isn’t going to have a talk about River with him, is he? Rory has always been kind of... protective about River and he’s not sure what he’s reaction would be if he found out about his feelings for her. ‘You’re finally going to question Bates on Monday?’

Oh right. Rory wants to talk about that. That’s definitely fine with him.

‘Yep. Finally is the key word here,’ he nods and starts putting cutlery on the table. ‘They got him on Heathrow. FBI notified The Drug Squad that Bates was going to be on a flight and they waited for him there. Sans flowers as I imagine.’

‘How did they manage to keep him for so long?’ Rory asks curiously. ‘They got him on Tuesday, right? And you’ll be questioning him almost a week later. He should be out already. It’s not like he can’t afford to bail himself out.’

‘True. But from what Donna gathered, he made a deal with them. He said he’ll tell them everything he knows in exchange for being taken into a witness protection program.’

‘Smart,’ Rory comments and he can only nod. ‘But do you think he’ll tell you anything? He has no obligation towards you.’
‘I don’t know,’ he scratches his cheek. ‘I guess we’ll have to wait and see. He might not even know anything relevant to our case.’

They work for a few moments in comfortable silence: Rory’s preparing a salad and he’s setting down the glasses and opening wine. He tries to help Rory with cooking, but Rory just shakes his head and says something about ‘no, the kitchen hasn’t been baby-proofed yet, wait until then’.

‘But if you want to be useful, go and fetch Amy and River,’ Rory says. ‘Just be quiet.’

He salutes and heads towards the stairs, quietly taking two at the time. He tiptoes to the little Puddle’s room and is about to open the door, when he hears Amy’s hushed voice. She’s saying something to River, her voice full of warmth and joy. He’s never heard her sounding like that, so he stops and listens – okay, eavesdrops – curiously.

‘You know, I thought that I’ll give birth, spend a month or two at home with him and then go back to work. I was going crazy from boredom during my pregnancy,’ Amy chuckles softly. ‘But now I want to stay with him. As long as possible. I don’t want to miss anything.’

‘Motherhood sure suits you,’ comes River’s reply.

‘And what about you?’ Amy asks and he can hear one of them shifting in their seats.

‘Oh, you know I’m not a type to settle down,’ River replies with a quiet laughter that sounds just a bit too cheerful.

‘I also remember that you’ve said that you’re not a wedding person and look at you now.’

‘Yes, look at me. We all know that an Vegas weeding during a mission absolutely counts as a marriage. An already annulled Vegas wedding, let me just add,’ River sighs. There’s a moment of silence before Amy speaks again and drops a bomb that makes him gasp.

‘I think you could’ve made it work if you’d tried.’

*Did she just?*

‘What?’ River asks, sounding as shocked as he’s feeling. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘You and John,’ Amy says slowly, as if she’s talking with someone mentally deficient. ‘I could see it happening.’

He expects River to laugh, to dismiss Amy and her ideas, to scoff in offense. He doesn’t expect her to remain silent.

‘Amy,’ she finally says and his breath catches in his throat, desperately wanting to know what she’s going to say, but also fearing it at the same time. ‘You have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘No, I think I am the only one who knows what I’m talking about and what’s going on,’ Amy whispers angrily. ‘And we’re going to talk about it.’

‘There’s nothing to talk about.’

‘Right. Right. So the whole behaving like an old married couple, nearly finishing each other sentences, all the dinners and lunches and the bloody milkshakes – that’s nothing?’

‘Amy, just drop it. Please,’ River says and something in her voice – or maybe her face? – silences Amy.
‘He’s a good guy, you know?’ Amy says again after a few moments, during which he tried to come up with a tactic to call them for dinner without betraying that he’s been listening to their conversation all along.

‘I know.’

‘He is,’ Amy repeats and takes a deep breath. ‘Look, don’t tell him I said that, but he’s a really decent bloke. You hear all that bullshit about nice guys, but he is nice. And good. And I’d like him to be happy. And I think that—’

‘He’ll find someone who’ll make him happy,’ River says sharply.

‘I kind of think that he already found that person,’ Amy comments under her breath. ‘She’s just too bloody stubborn to—’

‘Amy, I’m not going to talk about this anymore. Come on, I bet the dinner is ready.’

One of them stands up and he jumps away from the door thinking of a place to hide – or at least of a believable explanation why he’s standing here.

‘I just want you to be happy,’ Amy says, sounding almost pleadingly. ‘Both of you. You both have been through a lot. John doesn’t talk about it, neither do you. You both pretend you are fine all the time.’

‘I am fine,’ River says it at the same time he thinks it. ‘I am. And if John isn’t, I’m not the one who could make him better.’

_How can you be so sure_, he thinks bitterly.

‘Look, I know him. And I’ve never seen him the way he’s with you. No, listen to me,’ Amy hushes River gently, ‘I mean it. He’s always been a bit far away, always a step before everyone, always on top. No one could ever keep up with him. And he was always alone,’ Amy sighs and he can feel a sudden lump in his throat. ‘But you can keep up with him. He isn’t that alone with you. And I think that you’re not that alone with him.’

‘Maybe,’ River says after a few moments of heavy silence, ‘but that’s hardly ground for a relationship. It’d never work. Not with us.’

His heart drops at that. He still had some hope that maybe – just maybe – River could be interested in him. Just a tiny little bit. Even though she’s proved over and over again that she sees him only as a friend, he still thought...

‘Oh, so you thought about it!’ Amy exclaims. ‘You thought about getting involved with him!’

‘No, I didn’t,’ River blurts out quickly – maybe even a bit too quickly and he nearly flattens himself against the door to hear them better.

‘Did you make a list of pros and cons?’ Amy says in a slightly mocking voice. ‘Did you doodle hearts and sign your name as ‘Mrs. Smith’? Did you swoon about how dreamy he is?’

‘Amy!’ River says and he is delighted to hear that she sounds flustered and a bit... embarrassed. ‘Don’t be ridiculous!’

‘Oh, I am not ridiculous. Okay, saying he’s dreamy was quite ridiculous,’ he can hear the smirk in her voice. ‘But I am sure that I was spot on about the rest, wasn’t I?’
‘I’m not talking to you every again,’ River replies, sounding like a petulant child. ‘From now on I’ll talk only with Rory. He’s nicer.’

‘But you’ll talk with John too, won’t you?’ Amy asks, giggling quietly and he can’t help but grin at River’s exasperated huff. ‘Oh, you so will talk with him!’

‘That’s it, I’m going,’ River says and he can hear her footsteps nearing the door. Thankfully, he has just enough time to hide in the upstairs bathroom. He hears River and Amy passing the door behind which he’s hidden and he breathes in relief when they walk downstairs without noticing him. He follows them down a few minutes later, claiming loudly that he got stuck in the loo and that he didn’t want to call for help, because he didn’t want to wake up the little Pond. Surprisingly, everyone believes him: River just rolls her eyes at him, Amy calls him a moron and Rory moans that they have to childproof the upstairs loo.

The dinner passes in a carefree mood and even the tiniest member of the Pond family joins them. And for the first time since forever, he’s not bothered that River is keeping her distance.

He’ll give her all the time and space she wants.

___

Solving a case is like solving puzzle. In the beginning you get a bunch of elements that go together, but you have no idea in what order. You don’t even see all of the pieces at – some of them are turned over and hidden under others and you have to dig through piles and piles of pieces to find the one you want. And even when you get it – you still have to find a place to put it.

Since he agreed to take the case of the murdered policemen, he felt like he’s been given a bunch of puzzles that not only show a part of sky, but also don’t even fit together. There has always been something missing, something just out of reach – a piece that would allow him to move the investigation forward and solve it. It frustrated him to no end, but there was little he could do.

Little does he know that he’s about to be given a piece that will change everything. A piece that will help him to put all the other pieces in order.

And since there must be balance in the universe, once something is put in order, something else must fall apart.

___

On Monday morning he finds himself in the head quarter of the Drug Squad, in the very same room where a few months ago he was been preparing for a mission to catch Jim. River is sitting next to him, tentatively listening to what a guy standing in front of them – officer Hopkins - is saying.

‘Once his information proves to be true, Bates will be put in a witness protection program,’ the man says. ‘From what we managed to check, he is telling the truth.’

‘But don’t you think it’s... a bit suspicious that he decided to talk so quickly?’ He asks. ‘Maybe he’s setting you up.’

‘Believe me, we’ve been wondering the very same thing,’ Hopkins says. ‘But he’s been persuasive. And I don’t think he’s in a position to lie to us.’

‘I doubt that his bosses would look kindly upon his arrest,’ River says. ‘It probably wouldn’t matter if he cooperated or not – he’d become persona non grata either way.’
‘That’s what he told us,’ Hopkins nods. ‘He said that his arrest is his funeral and that he has no way to return there. It’d be a death sentence for him, so he decided to cooperate with us to get protection. He’s smart. He knows when to turn sides.’

‘That’s true but still... It’s harsh,’ he frowns. ‘The Silence must expect their people to get caught sometimes. All the drug dealers or thugs... Why would they get rid of everyone who got caught?’

‘You forget that Bates is not a random thug or a street seller,’ River says.

‘Exactly,’ Hopkins nods and continues. ‘It turns out he has vast knowledge of The Silence’s inner working. He revealed things about their drug dealing system we would never discover without him. And even if he’s lying about some of these things, other might turn out to be true and provide us with leverage.’

He nods. That explanation makes sense, but it also makes him shiver. Just how vicious and unforgiving The Silence must be that one of their top operatives chose to cooperate with the police instead of waiting to be bailed out?

‘Have you tested him with a polygraph?’ He asks and Hopkins nods quickly.

‘He passed it. With flying colours one might say. We made him do it twice, just to be sure. And in case you’re wondering – no, there’s not a chance that he managed to fool either us or the polygraph. Besides, it’s impossible.’

‘Not impossible. Only improbable,’ he says and smiles slightly. He knows that it is possible to fool and cheat during a polygraph test. It’s also possible to be trained to fool it. He knows it, because he went through such a training himself. ‘Right then. Can we talk with him now?’

‘Yes, he’s already waiting for you,’ Hopkins nods and they all stand up. They exit the conference room and go to the interrogation room. They enter the observation room that adjoins the interrogation room and for a few moments they observe Bates through one way-mirror. He’s sitting in a plastic chair, looking perfectly relaxed and at ease.

‘Where’s his lawyer?’ He asks and Hopkins snorts.

‘He’s his own lawyer. That’s what he told us.’

‘Let’s get it started then,’ he says and looks at River who doesn’t move from her place. ‘You coming?’

‘I think I’ll stay here for now. I’ll be in your ear,’ she says and points at two earpieces that are laying on a table beside the door. ‘I can come in later if it turns out you need a bad cop.’

‘A bad cop? Of course you’d choose this role,’ he smirks and picks one of the earpieces. ‘A bad girl for a bad cop. Perfect.’

‘You haven’t seen bad yet, sweetie,’ River says with an amused chuckle. ‘Now, off you go, Bates is waiting for you.’

He winks and quickly leaves the observation room. Before entering the room where Bates is sitting, he pauses for a second to place the earpiece in his ear and then he opens the door and confidently walks inside. Without saying a word he sits at the table in front of Bates and looks at him, taking his time to study him. Bates looks a bit paler than he did in Vegas. He looks scruffier – even though he’s sitting there in a pressed shirt and elegant trousers. And he definitely looks a lot less confident.
‘Good morning,’ he starts and Bates looks at him with an empty expression on his face. ‘I’m
detective John Smith. I work for-’

‘I already told you all I know,’ Bates barks. ‘Well, I told you all could. I’m not saying anything else
before having the deal signed.’

‘I’m detective John Smith,’ he repeats as if what Bates just said passed his ears. ‘And I work for the
department that deals with homicide and serious crime. We have a few questions for you.’

‘Yeah? And what if I don’t want to answer them?’ Bates asks, crossing his arms, but his eyes flash
with curiosity and brief recognition.

‘Why wouldn’t you want to answer them?’

‘What will I get from it?’ Bates asks, ignoring his earlier question.

‘Nothing,’ he says with a thin smile. ‘You’ll get nothing out of it. However, if you don’t help us, we
can always charge you with obstruction of an ongoing investigation. And see, something like that
could delay – who know, maybe even stop? – you from being accepted into the witness protection
program. And if I understand correctly, you don’t have any place to go, do you?’

‘Good one,’ he hears River’s voice in his ear and grins. Bates looks at him, both annoyed and scared
before spitting out an angry ‘fine’.

‘Wonderful. I’m glad we have an agreement,’ he smiles and pulls three pictures from a folder he’s
been keeping in his hand all the time – the pictures of the killed policemen. He puts them on the

table. ‘Now, please tell me: do you know who these men are?’

Bates takes a look at the photos in front of him and his face nearly splits in half with an ugly grin.

‘The club of dearly departed,’ he finally says. ‘Too young to die, too curious to live.’

‘So you do know these men?’ He says, trying to stay calm, but Bates’ cheerfulness over the pictures
is rubbing him the wrong way.

‘Know is a bit strong,’ Bates replies, looking smug. ‘I know that they’re dead. I watch the news,
mister Smith.’

‘It’s detective Smith for you,’ he says through gritted teeth. ‘And you have surprisingly good
memory. Not everyone would remember things like that. Do you remember all the news you watch?’

‘Only the one that catches my fancy,’ Bates says.

‘I wonder why these particular cases might’ve caught your fancy,’ he says quietly. ‘It’s funny, you
know – all these policemen worked on cases related to the Silence. Funny, isn’t it? They wanted to
bring your bosses down and here you are – knowing that they’re dead. It’s as if you knew about their
deaths all along. Maybe even before they were killed.’

‘I didn’t kill them if that’s what you’re implying.’

‘No, you didn’t,’ he says and he means it. Bates is not a person who could handle a job like that.
He’s not sly enough. He’s good for official jobs, jobs that don’t need him to get his hands dirty. ‘You
didn’t do it. You wouldn’t be able to pull it off. But you know who did it.’

‘What makes you say that?’ Bates replies slowly, but a corner of his mouth raises in a small smile.
'Come on, we both know what you used to do for The Silence. You were their face, weren’t you? The boy who talked to everyone. A bit like a pigeon carrying messages,’ he says flippantly. ‘Or more like a parrot, repeating everything that he taught.’

‘John,’ River’s voice comes through the earpiece. ‘Be careful.’ He knows he should trade carefully – antagonising Bates is the last thing they need – but he wants to see the bastard squirming. And he won’t lie: he enjoys how Bates grits his teeth in annoyance at his last words.

‘I was much more than that, let me tell you,’ Bates spits out.

‘Oh, I am sure. Would you like to tell me about it?’ He says tauntingly. ‘We could exchange secrets and talk about girls.’

‘It’s funny that you said girls. Really funny,’ Bates laughs and through his earpiece he can hear River’s breath hitching.

‘What do you mean?’ He asks, leaning slightly over the table. ‘Let me in on the joke.’

‘But if I told you the joke, you wouldn’t be laughing,’ Bates says, still sounding amused. ‘Besides, wouldn’t you like to figure this one on your own?’

‘Not really, no,’ he says lowly, clenching his hands into fists. ‘I think I’m getting slow in my age. I try to get all the help I can.’

‘I think you’d rather discover this one on your own. Because the answer could be... earth-shattering,’ Bates grins.

‘Now I’m definitely intrigued,’ he replies, trying his best not to show how annoyed he really is. ‘Care to share more? You said something about a girl.’

‘A girl? I’d hardly call her that. A woman is more fitting.’

He nearly groans at that. Bates is frustratingly uncooperative and the worst thing is that he knows something. He knows the killer – or at least something about her identity. Yes, her. Now he’s sure that the killer they’re looking for is a woman. Sure, Bates may be playing with him, steering him in a wrong direction, but there’s something in the way he talks and jokes about this subject... Something that makes him think that Bates is telling a piece of truth. The problem he’s facing is getting the whole truth out of him – without strangling him first.

‘Ask him about Octavian,’ River’s voice rings in his ear and he silently thanks her for the distraction.

‘If you don’t want to talk about girls, maybe you’ll prefer to talk about boys,’ he starts. ‘One boy in particular. What do you know about Father Octavian? Also known as Octavian Manson?’

‘I know that he’s also a member of the dearly departed club. I learned it from the news, of course,’ Bates says with the same annoying smirk. ‘Apparently he made quite a splash on all the walls.’

The next few minutes pass on a pointless conversation that explains nothing. He’s irritated and even though he tries to remain calm, he’s pretty sure that sooner rather than later he’s going to break.

‘John, come back here, something came up,’ River says and he sighs in relief. At this point he’d do anything to leave the interrogation room even for a second.

‘Excuse me for a moment,’ he says, standing up.
‘You’re leaving so quickly?’ Bates asks, faking sadness. ‘And here I thought we’re getting along just fine!’

He doesn’t give Bates a second glance and quickly walks out of the room. When he walks back into the observation room, River is waiting there for him, looking concerned.

‘What’s up?’ He asks. and she sighs.

‘We have to go. Donna called. There’s a dead person waiting for us.’

‘Can’t someone else go?’ He says, observing Bates through the one-way mirror. ‘We’re busy.’

‘No, no one else is available. Jack and Rory are also in the field, in the other part of the city. Andrew called in sick today,’ River explains. ‘It’s not like you have anything else to do here. He won’t talk.’

‘Maybe he won’t,’ he runs fingers through his hair. ‘Listen... Would you mind going alone?’

‘Why?’

‘I think I have an idea,’ he says. ‘I just want to try something. Please?’

River studies him for a second before nodding her head.

‘Fine. Let’s have it your way. You think he’ll talk?’

‘No. I don’t think he’ll talk,’ he shakes his head. ‘Not verbally at least.’

‘I wish I could ask you for an explanation, but I don’t have the time,’ River says extending her hand. When he looks at it cluelessly for a few moments, she sighs. ‘Keys. Give me the keys.’

‘What keys?’

‘Your car keys,’ River explains gently as if she’s dealing with someone who has problems with quick thinking.

‘What? No!’ He exclaims. There’s no way in hell he’s giving her the keys to his car.

‘Sweetie, we got here in your car. The crime scene is on the other side of the city. I am not taking a bus there. Or a taxi,’ River says, this time a bit less gently. ‘Now, keys.’

‘No,’ he says, pushing his keys deeper in the front pocket of his trousers.

‘Do you really think that putting your keys there will stop me from getting them?’ River says with a predatory grin and starts walking towards him and he tries really hard not to take a step back. ‘Give me the keys. Please.’

‘No,’ he repeats stubbornly. A part of his brain is still focused on the fact that River said she would put her hand inside his trousers to get the keys and if for a moment he thinks that letting her do that wouldn’t be such a bad thing – he can’t be blamed for that. But unfortunately (or maybe fortunately. He’s not sure how he’d react if River actually did that) River stops a few steps away from him.

‘Fine. Don’t give me your keys,’ she shrugs and for a moment he rejoices in the feeling of sweet victory. ‘It’s not like I need keys to start a car. I can always hotwire your baby, don’t you agree?’

‘You wouldn’t,’ he gasps in disbelief, but River only raises her eyebrow, as if to say ‘try me’. With a defeated sigh he digs the keys and tosses them to her. ‘That’s cheating and emotional manipulation.’
‘I know,’ River says in a sing-song voice. ‘I’ll call you and tell you how’s it going. I may even pick you up on my way to the station if you behave.’

He wants to tell her that it’s his car and that she’d better pick him up, because he has no money for a taxi or even a bus, but River is already out of the room. He sighs and stares at the door before remembering that he has a job to do. But first he needs to find Hopkins.

‘Right then,’ he says when he finally finds and barges into Hopkins’ office, ‘I need a laptop, a heart rate monitor, access to a few databases and a crayon.’

And to his surprise, they give him all of that. Except for a crayon, but you can’t always get what you want – and the truth is that he doesn’t really need it. Not this time anyway. Thirty minutes later everything is set and ready: Bates is hooked to a heart monitor that will screen his heart rate and pulse. There’s also a laptop in front of him, which will start displaying various pictures in a minute.

It’s a simple idea, a barbaric one if he’s to be honest. You hook someone to a heart monitor and observe changes in their heart rate when introduced to different stimuli. In this case, the stimuli are pictures. He saved a few dozens of various photos: either of people involved in the case, the policemen Bates came in contact with, photos of Jim and his girlfriend, random photos of people from stock websites and pictures of drug dealers and thugs who are known for they involvement with The Silence. He also included pictures of the military snipers he and River managed to track down. Any change in a heart rate and pulse upon seeing a person in a photo may indicate some kind of connection between that person and Bates, and in turn – a connection between that person and The Silence.

He crosses fingers for his plan to work and presses ‘play’, which start the presentation of pictures on the laptop in front of Bates. He’s sitting in the observation room, patiently watching Bates’ reaction to each picture. For a long time nothing happens. Sure, there are some spikes in Bates’ heart rate when a picture of Jim comes up. There are a few more spikes when the pictures of Octavian and the dead policemen. But that’s it.

That’s it, until the monitor he’s looking at quietly beeps, indicating that there’s a significant change in both heart rate and pulse. He looks at the screen in front of him to see whose picture is on display and his own heart starts beating quicker in his chest.

But it can’t be.

It simply can’t.

He runs the test once again.

And then once again. And then, just to be sure, once more.

Every single time, Bates’ pulse picks up at the same photo.

At River’s photo.

Chapter End Notes

oops?
I mean, it's not like you haven't seen something like that coming, right? things may get a
bit complicated from now on. oops?

and look, I actually managed to update quicker than the last time! and the chapter isn't long enough to bore you to tears and tire you out. yay.

thank you so much for the kudos and the comments. it means a lot to know that you're not utterly done and bored with this fic.

hope you'll have a nice week!

chapter title from Woodkid's 'ghost lights'.
I wouldn't do a thing like that, that's for sure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Couldn’t he pick a decent hotel for whatever he’s planned? I bet this whole place is infested with gods know what,’ River scowls and sits on a bed.

‘It’s not that bad,’ he says with a shrug and checks the volume on the laptop. ‘Okay, we’re all set. Now we only have to wait for him to make a move.’

‘Not that bad?’ River asks, sounding offended. ‘Sweetie, we are in a hotel room that is rented for hours rather than days. It smells of mold, there’s not air con, and we’ll spend here who knows how long. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t like to spend your evening somewhere else.’

‘Yeah, well,’ he sighs in defeat, ‘it’s not perfect, but I’ve been to worse places. And it’s not like we could spend the evening anywhere else. This is our case.’

‘If we’d left the station a few minutes earlier, we’d have been in a pub now and I’d be slaying you at darts,’ River remarks drily. ‘Why did he have to go to this motel when we were still on duty?’

The elusive ‘he’ is in the room next to theirs. Who is he? Dan Crane, a suspect in their new investigation – the very same case they were called to during Bates’ investigation. The victim was female, 34 years old, married, living in a small house in Eden Park. Cause of death: asphyxiation. There was hardly any evidence on the victim’s body – whoever killed her, cleaned the corpse afterwards. There were signs of sexual intercourse around the time the death occurred.

It was her husband who found her, coming from work for an early lunch and now it’s her husband who’s in the room adjoining theirs. Technically, he has an alibi: when his wife was killed, he was at work. But there was something off about his statement and alibi: everything seemed to rehearsed. During the questioning he sounded like he was reciting a poem during a school academy, rather than trying to help in finding the killer of his wife. There were no other suspects: no one entered or even neared the house since the moment he left it in the morning, his wife hasn’t contacted anyone, she also had no affairs - at least according to his husband and friends. Once they finished questioning Crane and his family, they were left with nothing. But since in cases like this one, it turns out that the spouse is guilty, they decided to keep an eye on Crane for a few days – and they got disappointed. The guy behaved normally, like any other man who just lost his wife – he took a break from work, he stayed at home, he started organising the funeral. But this evening, they got a tip that Crane is headed to a rather dingy motel at the opposite side of the town. He and River quickly followed him and thanks to the receptionist they managed to get Crane out of the room he’s been occupying and hid a few microphones in there. It’s not a masterpiece of surveillance – they placed the microphone hastily, but it has to make do for now. And now they’re sitting in the room next to his, listening to...

Nothing. Since Crane returned to his room, he’s said nothing, he’s made no phone call and the only sound that can be heard is his breathing.

‘It’s not like we wouldn’t be called back,’ he says and River sighs in defeat.

‘I know... I’m just tired, I guess.’

‘Well, you don’t look well,’ he says, glancing at her and taking in the paleness of her skin and dark circles under her eyes. She’s been looking weary and tired for the past few days, but he hasn’t said anything, only quietly observed her.
'You silver tongued devil, no wonder girls can’t resist you,’ River comments with a smirk, but her tone lacks the usual teasing and amusement.

‘No, that’s not what I mean! You look beautiful, I mean-,’ he stumbles over words, ‘I just noticed you look tired, that’s all.’

‘It’s okay,’ River waves her hand. ‘I’m just having trouble sleeping.’

‘You can take a nap now,’ he says and when River looks at him questioningly, he just shrugs. ‘It’s not like anything is happening. I can listen to him through the headphones. Anything comes up, I’ll wake you.’

‘Are you sure?’ River asks and the fact that she doesn’t even try to fight him on this one and convince him that he’s fussing over nothing is quite worrying. He nods his head and sees that she visibly relaxes. ‘I- uhm, thank you. Just wake me up if something happens.’

‘No problem,’ he smiles and watches her curling on the bed. For a few moments he focuses on her even breathing, before his thoughts start to wander to one single moment a few days ago.

Bates’ investigation. He hasn’t talked to River about it. He hasn’t talked to anyone about it. It’s stupid, he knows it, but he has no idea how to start this conversation. ‘Hey River, so you know, Bates pulse high rocketed when he saw your picture. Tell me dear, have you killed anyone recently?’

He shakes his head. The mere thought of River being the killer they’re looking is ridiculous and hilarious. She would never do something like that, he knows it. He knows her well enough to be sure of that. His brilliant plan clearly went wrong – maybe Bates found River attractive? That could be the case and it could explain the change in the heart rate. He knows that, he experiences it often enough around her.

But a small part of his brain, the part that is all reason and logic, keeps on nagging him with constant ‘what if?’

What if you’re wrong?

What if you missed something?

What if she’s not who she says she is?

He looks back at River, who’s sleeping on the bed a few feet from him. He can’t imagine she’d be able to do something like that. No, he doesn’t mean killing people – he thinks she’d be capable of that if the need arose, but he doesn’t think she’d be able to lie about it.

River stirs on the bed and a small groan escapes her lips. He glances at her, only to see that there’s a grimace on her face and her breathing comes in heavy pants. Her whole body is tense and she looks like she’s scared of whatever she’s dreaming about. She must be having a nightmare, he realises, taking off the earphones and walks over to the bed.

‘River,’ he says quietly, crouching by the bed. ‘River, wake up.’

He places hand on her shoulder and gently shakes her, trying to stir her awake without scaring her. The second his hand touches her shoulder, her eyes snap open and her hand grabs his wrist in a painfully grip and even through his shirt, he can feel how sweaty and clammy her palm is. Her eyes are wide and terrified, and he feels like he’s observing a wild animal – ready to strike back and attack at any second.
‘It’s okay, it’s okay, you’re safe,’ he says quietly and takes his hand off her shoulder. Her breathing
is still quick and shallow and she looks at him like she doesn’t know who he is. She blinks a few
times and a light of recognition lights in her eyes. She looks at his wrist, still tightly clasped in her
hand and she releases it quickly, as if burned.

‘I’m sorry,’ she clears her throat and sits on the bed. ‘I just- I’m sorry.’

‘Are you okay?’ He asks lamely and watches her run fingers through her curls.

‘Yeah,’ she says quietly. He can see that she’s trying to get herself under control again, put up all the
walls around her. He wishes she wouldn’t do that. He wishes she would let him in and let him help
her.

‘Hey,’ he says quietly. ‘It’s okay. You can talk about it if you want to.’

‘I don’t,’ River says sharply and looks up. Her eyes are already guarded and she seems to be
perfectly composed, except for her shaking hands. ‘I don’t want to talk about. There’s nothing to talk
about.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ she says, pursing her lips in a thin line. ‘Anything came up with Crane?’

‘No,’ he sighs, shaking his head. If she doesn’t want to talk about it, he won’t force her. ‘I guess I
can put him on speaker again?’

River nods and he walks over to the desk, pulling the earphones from the laptop. Almost
immediately Crane’s voice can be heard. He and River look at each other, listening to whatever
Crane’s saying.

‘Yes, a brunette will do,’ comes Crane’s voice, slightly muffled. ‘I don’t care about her age. Yes.
Paying by the hour, I know. How long will I have to wait? 30 minutes. Fine,’ he disconnects and
once again the whole room is bathed in silence.

‘Did he just order a hooker?’ River asks.

‘Uhm, maybe that’s not it?’ He says and scratches his cheek. ‘Maybe he ordered something else?’

‘Like what? Take-out?’ River snorts. ‘Well, in a way it will be take-out.’

‘River!’ He gasps and she just shrugs.

‘What? Come on, I really doubt he ordered a girl to discuss quantum physics with.’

‘Can you do that?’ He asks, slightly intrigued. ‘Order someone to discuss quantum mechanics with
them?’

‘Sweetie, I have no idea,’ River says and rolls her eyes. ‘Why would anyone want to do that?’

‘Because quantum physics is interesting!’ He exclaims and huffs when River raises her eyebrow.
‘What. It is!’

‘Sure thing, sweetie,’ she nods and her mouth twitches with amusement. ‘If that’s what rocks your
boat, who am I to argue?’

They spend the next few minutes arguing – discussing – whether or not that it’d be a good idea to
have a call centre to just order people for science discussions. Well, he’s the one saying that it’d be
the most brilliant thing in the universe. River just keeps looking at him and nodding her head. He can
see that she’s trying her best to make him forget that less than hour ago she was a mess, terrified and
stressed because of her nightmare. And he lets her do it, he plays along – he makes ridiculous
jokes and does everything he can to put her at ease.

A sound of knocking comes from the speakers of their laptop, followed by the sound of footsteps
and creak of opening door.

‘Mister Crane? I’m Jasmine,’ says a female voice with a thick Russian accent.

‘Jasmine,’ River snorts quietly. ‘Can’t agencies owners be a bit more creative with naming their
girls?’

He hushes her and turns up the volume. The woman must come inside Crane’s room, because their
voices come clear, without any interference from the outside.

‘You pay now. I’m staying for an hour. If you want me to stay longer, you pay for another hour,’ the
girl – Jasmine says. ‘No kissing on mouth. Oh, and I don’t swallow.’

‘And they say that the romance is dead,’ River rolls her eyes.

‘That’s very cynic of you,’ he says, trying to ignore the sounds of clothes hitting the ground that are
coming from the speakers. ‘Oh god, we are going to have to listen to it, aren’t we?’

‘Just put the volume on the minimum,’ River sighs. ‘Let’s ignore it and hope it won’t last too long.’

Unfortunately for them, the... activities in Crane’s room seem to have no end. And it makes him feel
uncomfortable, because listening to someone having sex – someone who’s unaware of it – makes
him skivvy and dirty. Listening to it with River in the same room – it makes him skivvy, dirty and
quite embarrassed. River, however, doesn’t seem to be affected by any of it – she’s staring into the
space, cool and aloof, as if she wasn’t hearing anything that’s going on in the room next to their. And
oh boy, things are definitely going on in that room, and if he’s to be honest, the moans and panting
heard through the speakers make him fell a bit... incompetent.

‘Okay, she must be faking it,’ he says after one particularly loud and high-pitched moan. His voice
sounds a bit gruff even in his own ears and he clears his throats. ‘She’s making it sound like he’s a
horse down there. Or has a zucchini for a penis.’

‘A zucchini?’ River stirs from her trance like state with a look of confusion on her face. ‘How is that
supposed to feel good? Sweetie, it’s been a while for you, hasn’t it?’

‘I- No!’ He shrieks and tries not to blush, but he can already feel the heat spreading all over his face.
‘Just listen to her!’

As if on cue, another loud moan pierces the air.

‘She’s certainly enthusiastic,’ River comments dryly. ‘But don’t feel threatened. She’s paid to do
that.’

‘I don’t feel threatened,’ he protests, but River just raises her eyebrow. ‘I don’t! I let you know that
I-’

Yet another moan interrupts him, but this time it sounds slightly muffled. He looks at River, who’s
staring quizzically at the wall separating them from Crane and his companion. The noise repeats once
again, even more breathless and choked, and he starts feeling slightly nervous. Crane’s wife was choked to death, during or right after a sexual intercourse. Now, this is happening: the woman next door is clearly being choked and from what they can hear, she’s being choked quite forcefully. He raises from his seat, ready to go and stop whatever is happening in the next room, but River stops him with a raised hand.

‘We have to do something,’ he hisses over the obscene moans coming from the speaker. ‘He’s going to kill her too!’

‘Just wait a few more seconds,’ River says, staring at the laptop.

‘What for?’ He asks impatiently, but the next moan that echoes through the room, answers his question. It’s still choked, but definitely expressing pleasure, not panic or pain. Loud ‘oh yes, right there, big boy’ follows and he sits back in his chair.

‘Uhm, I guess that explains it?’ He finally says and looks at River, whose face expression is something between amused and embarrassed. They listen to the rest of Crane’s tryst in uncomfortable silence and he thanks the power above when the girl doesn’t stay for another hour. They give Crane 5 minutes to get ready and then knock on his door, inviting him for a ride to the police station.

It takes them a few hours to question Crane - who finally admits that he killed his wife, but claimed that ‘it was an accident during the round of morning sex’. An accident or not, but it takes him and River quite a long time to fill all the paperwork and get Crane to jail. When he stumbles into his flat, it’s nearly 2am and he only takes off his shoes before collapsing onto his bed. River was right, he thinks sleepily. It’d be much better to go to a pub and play darts. And in this single moment, just before falling asleep, it hits him: darts. The sudden realisation grips him and makes him sit in his bed – that’s how he knows Bates. He’s been stumbling over this little thing for so long: he was sure he’s seen Bates before, but he couldn’t remember when and where. Now he remembers it clearly: it was during the evening when he went to a pub with his friends and River slain him at darts. He was at the bar, waiting to buy drinks and in the corner of his eye he saw Bates talking to-

River.

Bates was talking to River.

And on the next day he spotted them in a cafe together.

Fuck.

And just like that his whole life is turned on its head. The universe has been spun on its axis and the vertigo is making him dizzy. Everything seems to be its mirror reflection and he feels like he’s moved to some alternative universe – because it seems virtually impossible that something so ridiculous and improbably could’ve happened in his world. And yet.

A part of him simply doesn’t believe that River could be the killer they’re looking for. Hell, most of his brain refuses to believe that. But there’s another part of him, the one that has been trained to investigate and probe that quietly says that yes, it’s a possibility that River could be the one they’re looking for. Suddenly he sees all the tiny little things that he dismissed earlier: her mysterious phone calls, how often she’d disappear in the middle of the week, going gods know where. How she never misses when shooting.
He now remembers how her shoulders and back ached the day after Octavian was killed. He never really questioned the fact that she talked about the crime scenes and circumstances of each murder as if she had been there. Suddenly it’s like someone is casting light on all the small details and they’re connecting themselves in a plausible, but rather terrible image. And no matter how plausible everything starts to look, he still doesn’t want to believe that it’s true. But he also knows that he can’t leave it like that – he needs to know the answer and to find it, he needs to properly investigate this matter.

So he does just that – on his own. He knows that Donna would be furious if she found out that he’d stumbled upon a new clue and hadn’t told her about it. She would be even more furious if she found out that it’s River he’s going to be investigating. But right at this moment, he really can’t be bothered by Donna’s possible future outburst – he focuses on finding out everything about River. There’s also another reason why he wants to keep this investigation a secret. If River is who he thinks she might be, he needs to tread carefully. One wrong move could make River disappear or worse – it could earn him a bullet straight between the eyes.

He starts with her personal files. It’s not something he has access to, but he knows how to gain it: it takes an accidentally-on-purpose spilled drink, one that lands on Donna’s trousers. Donna always has a change of clothes in her office and with a sigh and a pointed look directed at him, she rises from her chair, takes her spare jeans and goes to the bathroom, leaving him all alone in her office. She is logged in on her computer, so it’s only a matter of seconds for him to find and save River’s files on his flash drive. When Donna comes back, dressed in a fresh and clean pair of trousers, he is sitting in his chair with an apologetic smile and innocence written all over his face. He spends that evening reading River’s files – the personal as well as the job related one (he made copies of it a long time ago, when he first read it).

Neither of the files tells him anything ground-breaking. Sure, he finds out a few new things (names of her adoptive parents, where she lived in before she moved back to England - Washington and New York; he also finds out that she first worked in police force, but was swept up by FBI because of her great results at the police academy). But there are two things that catch his attention: the fact that she seems to never work anywhere longer than 2 years and her psychological evaluation. Psychological evaluation is something every candidate for a policeman has to go through before they’re admitted to the academy. In River’s folder there were two reports from examinations: one from the academy and one from FBI. Both of the reports state the same things: highly intelligent (not that he expected something else), driven and motivated, emotionally stable (you’d be surprised how many potential candidates for future policemen are sent back home because they’re prone mental and/or emotional breakdowns), reliable, able to think on her feet, alert and able and come up with solutions in stressful situations. Some of these qualities fit the basic profile of the killer that they received some time ago. It’s not a proof itself, because he has some of the qualities from that profile, but once again it makes him wonder what else is there to River that he’s not privy to. In the FBI report he also finds a small annotation that River was suffering from night terrors, severe enough to suggest that she was suffering from PTSD, but further tests didn’t prove anything. He knows that River still struggles with the nightmares – he remembers Amy asking her about it and the memory of her having a nightmare in his presence is still fresh in his mind.

He has no idea what to make of it – the more he reads about her, the more mysterious she becomes. She’s like a paradox, a secret, wrapped in various layers of... deception? Lies? He’s not sure how to call it. The fact that he can’t just crack her open and see inside her, and understand her is slowly driving him mad. While there are evidences supporting the theory that River is the killer they’ve been looking for, too many things just don’t make sense. Why would she do it? The money is one of the
reasons, he assumes. But she could live on her killer salary, there wouldn’t be any need for her to work, especially in the police force. She’s been too helpful during the investigation to be a Silence’s mole at the station – if she was one, the investigation would be long in tatters.

He also goes through all the reports and diplomas that celebrate her shooting skills. ‘Celebrate’ is not a word he would ever use in this context, but it seems accurate in this case: every single document he reads, sings praises about River’s abilities in this field. She took to shooting like she was born with a gun with her hand – and that is an actual quote from the report from the police academy she attended. The files from Quantico are just as enthusiastic: she won three shooting competition and aced every single one of the tests. Hell, he saw himself how great of a shot she is. After seeing her in action, it’s not difficult to believe that she’s the one behind all the murders.

He studies River’s files all through the night and somehow, instead of answers, he ends up with one giant mess inside his head.

___

‘Yes, River Song. She used to work at your station,’ he says patiently into his phone. It’s 9am, he’s on his way to work – or it’s more like he’s stuck in traffic while on his way to work – and he’s on the phone with a chief of police station in Swansea, a place where River worked a few years ago. For the last few days, he’s been calling her previous places of employment, trying to find more about her and her behaviour at work. The answers always the same – a great detective, a great shot, it’s a shame she left, but what can you do? ‘Listen, it’s important. We’re considering her for a huge government job and we need to know opinions of her previous employers.’

Okay, he might’ve lied a bit, but he can’t just call people, tell them that their previous detective might be a professional trained assassin, guilty of murdering at least four people. He came up with a clever lie instead: a government program that wants to recruit River and so far, everyone bought it.

‘I don’t know if I can share these information with you,’ a deep and slightly bored voice rings in his ear and he mutters a curse under his breath. For some reason, this man is the most uncooperative person he’s had the misfortune to talk with. ‘Not through the phone anyway. Come to Swansea, we’ll let you have a look inside her files.’

‘I told you: right now I can’t go to Swansea and I am the person responsible for gathering information and opinions on the potential candidates. Look, if you don’t believe me, you can always call the Ministry of Defence and check my credentials. My reference number is 2395-321—‘

‘Okay, fine,’ the man on the other side sighs and he can hear his heavy footsteps through the receiver. He can’t help but silently thank the man for his laziness – he meant to give him the reference number from the Medusa Program. If the Swansea guy took time to actually check his credentials, he’ll unknowingly start a small alarm and complicate quite a few things. ‘I’ll check it for you. Anything else you want?’

‘Actually, yes,’ he says a bit nervously. This part is always the most surprising one and the other people reacted to it in different ways. ‘I need you to find and send me information on how often she was absent from work.’

‘What?’ The man grunts unpleasantly. ‘Are you mad?’

‘Sorry, that’s the requirement,’ another lie falls from his tongue. ‘We need to know how often out potential employees may be absent from work and on which days. Data like that allows us to plan the most efficient ways of planning and developing our-‘
‘Fine, I get it,’ the man snarls once again and he pretends that he can’t hear the mumbled ‘what a twat’. ‘How should I send it to you?’

He gives the guy his private email and gets off the phone with a relieved sigh. As difficult and tiring as this conversation was, he did manage to get what he needs: more information about River. He parks his car at his usual place on the parking lot and closes his eyes for a few seconds. In just a few moments he’ll have to go out and face River, work with her and pretend that everything is alright. It’s getting harder and harder to be around her, interact with her daily, knowing that she might be the person who killed so many people – the person who killed Ten. Acid bile raises in his throat and burns his mouth. He can’t imagine that she would be able to do something like that to Ten. They used to work together, they seemed to get on fairly well – bloody hell, they went on a date together. He can’t picture River waiting for Ten in a dark alley and shooting him right between the eyes, but there’s a part of his brain that constantly whispers ‘she might’ve done it’. Her shakes his head and gets out of his car. He’ll have his answer soon, he knows it. He only hopes it’ll be an answer he can live with.

He walks into the station, exchanges quick ‘hello’s’ with a few people and heads straight to his office. River is already sitting at her desk, filing some reports.

‘Oh, you’re here,’ she says, a bit surprised. ‘But it’s early? Too early for you anyway.’

‘Yeah, I thought I’ll come in earlier today,’ he smiles and shrugs. ‘Shouldn’t you be happy that I’m actually on time?’

‘You’re five minutes late, but it’s still progress,’ River says. ‘And since you’re here – help me with these reports. We still have to write one from that case a week ago-’

He groans and opens his mouth, trying to come up with something urgent and very important that he has to do to wiggle out from the paperwork, when his phone buzzes in his pocket. He fishes it out and looks at the small icon flashing on the screen – it’s an email. His heart starts pounding faster in his chest when he sees the title and files attached to the mail. He looks up and River and then back at his phone, and he’s pretty sure that the decision makes itself.

‘Forgive me, but I think that you’ll have to take care of the reports yourself,’ he throws over his shoulder, already on his way to the door. He now has the documents from all the places River used to work at - he has to go home and start analysing them now.

‘Where are you going?’ River shouts after him, but he just waves his hand as a goodbye.

He gets home in record time, bouncing impatiently in his seat. He all but runs to his flat and starts his computer to download the Swansea files. He notes down all the days when River was absent from work in all the places she used to work, and then he checks for murder cases all over the world. It’s a long shot, he knows that but something urges him to do that. He checks info on the internet as well as in various police databases. It’s dull and time-consuming, but after a few hours a picture slowly emerges. He stares at the notes and diagrams he jotted down while working and sighs. He’s about to check one more date, when someone knocks on his door. He groans in frustration and decides to ignore it, but the knocking doesn’t stop and is soon followed by his name being shouted by no one else but River herself.

‘John, you idiot, open the door,’ he can hear her clearly even through the heavy front door. ‘Or I will shoot it open.’

He grits his teeth and goes to the door, stretching his muscles on the way there. He takes a deep breath and pastes a smile on his face before opening the door.
'Oh, River, hi,' he says trying his best to be surprised. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Donna sent me to check on you?’ River says with an impatient huff, trying to get inside his apartment, but he blocks her way. Her files and other documents are spread all over his living room and the last thing he needs is her seeing all of that. ‘You left the station so suddenly, you’re not picking up your phone – what the hell happened?’

‘I’m sorry, I just-,’ he stutters, trying to come up with an excuse that sounds at least a bit plausible. ‘You know, I kind of, uhm, this kind of thing came up and-’

‘Are you having someone over?’ River asks curiously and tries to see past him into the living room. ‘Is that why you ran out of the station like your pants were on fire?’

‘What? I- Uhm,’ he says and then he says his chance. ‘Well, actually, I kind of do have someone over.’

‘Oh. Oh,’ River’s face falls for a second, but she quickly recovers and smiles at him, but he notices that the smile doesn’t reach her eyes. ‘I see. Okay, I’ll tell Donna that you’re not feeling well. Just- If you’re still busy tomorrow, call in sick. We won’t worry about you then.’

‘Will do,’ he nods his head and they stare at each other in silence for a few moments.

‘Right then. I better head back,’ River breaks the silence first and smiles uneasily at him. ‘Uhm... Have fun then.’

With that she leaves and he fights the urge to go after her and explain everything – and demand an explanation from her. But he forces himself to close the door and head back to his desk. He has one more thing to check, but he feels that he already knows what the result will be. Twenty minutes later his suspicions are confirmed and he tiredly rubs his face, feeling a bitter taste of defeat and failure in his mouth. How could he not notice it? Now that it’s all displayed in front of him it seems obvious.

In the last 7 years, every time River has taken a day off, someone in the world got murdered. People get killed every day, he knows that: they’re hit by cars, they’re beaten to death, they are in a wrong place at the wrong time. But the cases he’s been looking at are different - they’re all connected. Firstly, the victims are fairly influential or rich people: an oil tycoon from Saudi Arabia, an ambitious and young German politician (he remembers hearing about these two on the radio), a drug lord from Colombia, a banker from New York - and these are only a few examples. Secondly: all these cases are unsolved. There were never any traces left at the scene, no one noticed any strangers or anything suspicious happening around the victims before their deaths. There’s also third and probably most important fact: all the victims were killed by a single shot. Some of them were killed with a bullet from a shotgun, some were shot using a standard 9mm handgun, but in all cases it took only one shot. All these cases resemble the murders of the London policemen too much for it to be a coincidence – he realises it with painful clarity now.

For the last few days, he’s been filled with panic and fear.

What if he’s wrong?

What if River’s innocent and he’s invading her privacy?

What if she’s guilty?

But right now, the feeling of panic is replaced by hot anger. He can’t let his emotions get the better of him now, he realises and breathes slowly to calm his racing heart. He still has a few more things to do.
oops? [it seems that I always start notes with that. uhm, well then]

first: sorry for the late update, but I got terribly, dreadfully blocked when it came to writing it. it got intensified by the fact that I also got a bit lazy. not good, I know. so please, try to forgive me if you find the chapter rubbish. I tried, I promise:
He takes the next two day off work and buries himself even deeper in his research. He barely sleeps during this time, he eats only when he absolutely has to and he ignores all the phone calls. By the time he knocks on Donna’s door early on Friday morning, he’s exhausted, but he knows that it’s nearly over now. He shakes his head and tries not to think how many things will end once he crosses the threshold of Donna’s house. There’s no coming back now. For a few seconds he wants to turn around and run away, bury everything he’s discovered in the past days deep in his memory, but he knows he can’t do it. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he did that – but he’s not sure if he’ll be able to live with himself if he tells Donna what he discovered.

‘What are you doing here? At his hour?’ Donna’s surprised voice stops his train of thoughts. She’s wearing a fluffy pink robe and her hair is in artistic disarray. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be at your apartment, shagging that bird you never told us about?’

‘There’s no bird,’ he sighs. ‘We need to talk. Can I come in?’

‘You’re already here, it’s not like I can throw you out,’ Donna sighs and lets him in. ‘And you should tell River that there’s no bird. I think she’ll be glad.’

He swallows and follows Donna into the kitchen.

‘It’s River we have to talk about.’

‘I’m not giving you any love advice, at least not before I have coffee,’ Donna says with a smirk, but the expression on his face must alarm her, because she frowns and nods her head. ‘Fine. Just give me five minutes – I’ll wake up Lee and tell him to prepare breakfast for the kids. And I’ll make us some coffee. Go to my study – you remember where it is, right?’

He nods his head and leaves the kitchen, walks down the corridor and opens the door at the end of it. Almost nothing change, he notes when he enters Donna’s study. It’s still small and cluttered with papers and books and pictures drawn by her kids are stuck on the walls. He sits in one of the armchairs and for a few minutes enjoy the calmness of this room. He must doze off for a bit, because the sound of closing door makes him open his eyes and look around.

‘Right then, I gave my orders and made sure that no one will interrupt us,’ Donna says, handing him a cup of coffee. ‘Why are you here? Couldn’t it wait until we’re at the station?’

He shakes his head and hands her a manila envelope that he’s been holding the whole time. She takes it, looking slightly confused, but opens it and starts studying its content. Her brow furrows more with every page she reads, but she doesn’t ask him any question until she finishes it.

‘If you’re wrong, she could sue you for this,’ Donna finally says and looks at him.

‘If I’m wrong, I’ll give her the money to sue me,’ he replies.

‘You did it all behind my back.’

‘I had to,’ he shrugs. ‘But that’s not the point. The point is whether you believe me or not.’
'I don’t want to believe you,’ Donna says after a few moments of silence. ‘Are you sure? I mean, really sure. Maybe it’s all just one giant coincidence?’

‘You really think it could be a coincidence? Just- There’s something else,’ he takes out a few pages from his jacket’s pocket and gives them to Donna. ‘Look at that.’

‘Jesus fucking Christ,’ Donna whispers after a while. ‘How did you even get these?’

‘I pulled a few strings,’ he shrugs.

‘These’ are prints of River’s passports and IDs. Yes, passports and IDs, plural. He found two matching sets. Although he is not sure he can call them River’s, since two of them display different names. Even the pictures are different – River is still on them, but she made an effort to look different – she straightened her hair, her eye colour is said to be blue (set #1) and brown (set #2) rather than green. It was a miracle that he stumbled upon them: someone – probably River herself – erased them from general registry, so when he tried to find something through the face recognition registry, no results came up. But fortunately for him a friend of his used to meddle with hacking and various illegal online activities. It took a bag of greasy take-out, 2 bottles of beer and a bit of carefully worded persuasion to convince him to search the ID registry. After two three hours the first results came up – a trace of one of River’s fake passports that was used in New York. Another one was from Saudi Arabia. He also managed to find a grainy picture from the Saudi Arabian airport’s CCTV – it shows River with her head down, looking at the ground and walking somewhere. It’s blurry and poor quality, but it’s yet another proof that she was there.

‘Fuck,’ Donna mutters and folds the papers. ‘I don’t- What do we do now?’

‘You know what we have to do,’ he says tiredly. ‘We have to arrest and question her. Maybe it’s just a coincidence, maybe she has a good explanation, but-

‘You don’t think so,’ Donna finishes the sentence and runs fingers through her hair. ‘Shit. I haven’t expected something like that, I just... I think I may need a moment to grasp it.’

He nods his head because he understands – he went through it himself. A part of him still doesn’t want to believe it, even though he’s faced with hard evidence. He knows what Donna must be feeling right now: confusion, anger, betrayal. He’s been there himself and unfortunately, it doesn’t get any easier.

‘Do you think....’ Donna starts, her voice slightly uneven, ‘do you think that she also killed Ten?’

He swallows and looks up, only to see Donna staring at him with a pained expression on her face. He wishes he could lie to her, to assure her that no, it wasn’t River, it was someone else – but they both know that Donna already knows the truth.

‘Yeah,’ he finally whispers. ‘I think that she did it.’

Donna exhales sharply and for a second he thinks that she’s going to burst into tears, but she quickly collects herself.

‘Okay, we need to start doing something,’ she finally says through clenched teeth. ‘I will- I’ll call up an emergency meeting and brief everyone in. We will have to contact the NCA to take over River and the investigation.’

‘What? No, you can’t do that!’ He exclaims, shaking his head. ‘It’s our- We can’t give it away.’

‘John, you don’t realise what a mess it will be,’ Donna says. ‘Our department will be under
investigation. Every single case River worked on will be examined. We all will be questioned and prodded and it’ll be a miracle if everyone keeps their jobs. They won’t let us keep this case. Besides, we are in no position to question River. We’re too... involved.’

‘No. No, we can’t hand this case over,’ he pleads, even though he knows that Donna is right. In these circumstances no one will let them keep the case.

‘I’m sorry, John. It’s just how it is. I’ll try to call in a favour and maybe they’ll let us be a part of the investigation or at least be informed about everything, but other than that...’ Donna shrugs. ‘Our hands are tied.’

‘Shit,’ he mutters. ‘I thought... Well, never mind now. Right then. Off I go, I guess,’ he stands up.

‘Wait, where are you going?’ Donna asks.

‘Isn’t it kind of obvious? I am going to deal with River.’

‘No, you are not,’ Donna shakes her head. ‘At least not until I’ll get you some back-up. I’m not sending you there on your own.’

He wants to protest and say that he can deal with River on his own – that he needs to deal with her on his own, but Donna is already calling someone and asking for assistance. Less than 30 minutes later, two casually dressed but armed men knock on Donna’s door. Donna quickly brief them in on the situation and then they go outside, to wait for him in their car. For a few moments Donna and he just stare at each other without saying anything. They both realise that whatever happens next will change their lives significantly. It’s Donna who speaks first.

‘Good luck then,’ she says a bit shakily. ‘I- Good luck. We all we need it.’

‘Yeah,’ he nods. ‘You too. I’ll call you and tell you how it went.’

‘I called my colleague at the NCA. He’s taking with his bosses now and hopefully, he’ll take the case. He’ll try to let us in on the case, but he couldn’t promise anything just yet.’

He nods again and opens the door. He’s about to step outside, when Donna grabs his arm and forces him to face her.

‘Be careful,’ she says. ‘Just be careful. Because if anything happens to you, I’ll hold you personally responsible. Understood?’

‘Sure thing,’ he says with a smile. ‘I promise.’

Donna releases the grip on his jacket and with one last wink, he says a quick goodbye and walks out of her house. As soon as the door close behind him, his smile disappears. Right then, he thinks when he opens his car and gets inside. It’s play time.

It’s time to arrest River Song.

___

His shoes creak loudly while he’s walking down the corridor. He’s at the station, heading to the shooting range that’s situated on one of the lower floors. River wasn’t at home when he and the two NCA guys knocked on her door. Not that he expected her to be home – at least not in this apartment. After that, they headed straight to the station and this time he wasn’t disappointed - River’s car was at the usual spot. She wasn’t in their office, so he went straight to the place she would most definitely
be at – the station’s shooting range. He knew that River uses it regularly to practice, but he never understood why she bothered: she was more than brilliant at shooting and it seemed that it’d be impossible for her to improve. But now he understands why she keeps on coming in and practicing. It’s funny how all these little things keep falling into their respective places and forming a full picture.

It’s a shame that the picture that is appearing in front of his eyes is far from pretty.

He finally reaches the door leading to the range and takes a deep breath before opening it. Let’s get it started.

River is standing with her back turned to him, protective muffs on her ears and her whole attention dedicated to the target in front of her. He slowly walks closer, watching her firing one shot after another. It’s almost like she’s putting up a performance – her movements are graceful and poised and every fired shot reaches the centre of the target. She doesn’t miss, not even once. Once she’s out of the bullets, she must realise that someone’s behind her, because she turns around slowly – still holding a gun in her hand – and takes off the protective muffs.

‘John?’ She asks in surprise. ‘What are you doing here? Isn’t it a bit too early for you to be at work?’

‘I’m investigating,’ he replies.

‘Investigating?’ River looks at him with confusion in her eyes. ‘What?’


‘Right...,’ River drawls. ‘Who are you investigating then?’

‘You.’

‘Me?’ River takes a step back and he can’t help but notice how her fingers tighten on the gun. ‘I don’t understand.’


‘Have you finished a geography course recently?’ River asks and her voice is hollow and devoid of any emotions.

‘Where were you the night when Octavian was killed?’ He asks, taking a step in her direction.

‘I was with you, in case you forgot,’ River replies, eyes narrowed and trained at him.

‘Before that. Where were you?’

‘At the opera, I told you,’ River says through gritted teeth. ‘I was called in, because Rory couldn’t make it. You know it.’

‘No, you weren’t,’ he says and shakes his head. ‘You weren’t at the opera. You did buy two tickets, you even showed up at the opera that evening, but you left the building before the performance started. Then you started going into the direction of ‘Midnight’ – the very same club where Octavian was killed.’

‘Are you suggesting that I killed him? And the tickets and CCTV footage are your proof?’ River snorts and raises her eyebrows. ‘It’s not very convincing.’

‘But there’s more. Much more... Melody,’ he uses one of the names from her fakes IDs and for a
second rejoices in the fact that River’s eyes widen and fill with dread. ‘There are passports and fake IDs. There are proofs of your presence in all the places I mentioned, around the time when a high profile person was killed. And I am sure I’ll find a few more things. Won’t I?’

‘Well, well,’ she finally says, clearing her throat. For a brief second she looks defeated, but that impression is quickly replaced by the usual expressionless mask. ‘It seems that someone did their job. It took you some time, but you finally got it. I think that congratulations are in order. What now?’

‘You very well know what happens now,’ he says bitterly and takes another step in her direction. She doesn’t move away and her hand tightens further on the gun she’s been holding the whole time. She might’ve used every bullet in the magazine, but if there’s even one bullet left inside... River could shoot him and sneak out without anyone noticing. She would disappear somewhere in the city and they’d lose hours, if not days trying to find her. He knows all of that and yet he takes another step in her direction and extends his hand. ‘Your gun, please.’

River looks at his hand and smirks when she sees it shaking. Without taking her eyes off his, she slowly raises her hand and drops the gun onto his palm. The metal is hot and even though it’s just in his head, he feels like it’s going to brand him and leave a lasting mark on his skin. His fingers curl around the gun and he drops it on the table next to him. All the time River is looking at him with a blank and empty gaze, and he feels like she’s a complete stranger to him. In a way she is, he thinks and takes a deep breath.

‘River Song, I’m arresting you on suspicion of multiple murders. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defense, if you don’t mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you say may be given as evidence. Do you understand?’

___

The first interrogation is a spectacular failure. River just sits there, ignoring every single question directed at her and looking at the detective in front of her with an indifferent expression on her face. Donna and he are observing everything from the adjoining room, together with detective inspector Jeffrey Morgan, who took over River’s case.

‘It’s useless,’ Morgan sighs and he can’t help but agree. ‘She won’t talk. They’ve been there for what, an hour? And she hasn’t said a single word.’

‘Maybe if I went in-,’ he says, trying not to sound too eager. ‘Maybe I could convince her to talk.’

‘No way, you’re staying here,’ Morgan says sharply. He’s tall and well-built, but most importantly, there’s an air of authority about him. He oozes power and certain ruthlessness, and there’s no wonder why he’s the one in charge of the investigation. ‘You’re lucky enough to be here. Look, no disrespect – from the documents you provided, I can see that you did a great job. But she’s out of your hands now. I can’t let you in.’

‘Right, I get it,’ he nods and sighs in defeat.

‘Can you think of anything that could move this questioning along?’ Morgan asks. ‘Anything? The evidence and materials you provided us with are all good, but they won’t stick unless she confesses or someone recognises her.’

‘How about Bates?’ Donna asks after a few moments of silence. ‘He’s working with the police, I’m sure that he’ll help us.’

‘Bates!’ He exclaims and claps his hands. ‘Donna, you are a genius. Let’s get Bates here.’
‘Bates? As in Jonathan Bates?’ Morgan asks. ‘It’d be great if we could get him in here, but it’s impossible.’

‘Why?’ He and Donna ask at the same time.

‘He’s dead,’ Morgan says. ‘You probably didn’t have the chance to catch up on that yet. He was murdered tonight, around 2am. He was staying in a safe house, with a guard. They were both killed.’

‘Fuck,’ he mutters and looks at the River through the glass. ‘Do you think it was her?’

‘No, not this time,’ Morgan shakes his head. ‘Whoever did that, left a bloody mess. Both Bates and the policeman who was guarding him, had their throats slit. Reports from the morgue suggest that the killers was huge – much taller and heavier than she is.’

‘How is that even possible? Aren’t safe houses meant to be safe?’ Donna snarls. ‘Do they have any suspects?’

‘No idea. Apparently the scene was a fucking mess and finding any evidence there was nearly impossible,’ Morgan shrugs. ‘That’s all they’re saying. Nothing like that has ever happened before. You know as well as I do how closely kept secret the location of the safe houses are. And you know that they don’t send an amateur to guard a witness. It was a job done by a professional.’

‘Shit,’ he mumbles and his gaze wanders to River once again. ‘Do you think it'll happen to her?’

‘How am I supposed to know?’ Morgan sighs and rubs his forehead with his hand. ‘If she’s in this mess... Look, until we know for sure whether she did it or not, we can put some additional guards in front of her cell. If she’s innocent, nothing will happen, but if she’s guilty-’

‘What? What will you do then?’ He asks, probably a bit too aggressively, because Donna hushes him with stern ‘John’.

‘Then it’ll be out of my hands, you know it as well as I do,’ Morgan says. ‘All I can do is to protect her right now. But to do it, she has to help us as well and she’s not doing it now.’

They all look at River, who’s still sitting motionlessly behind the desk. Her hands are cuffed – he told the policemen guarding her to make sure that her cuffs are always tight – and she keeps them still in front of her. The officer questioning her repeats the same question over and over again, but no matter how much he tries, River remains silent.

‘Okay, there’s no point in that,’ Morgan says and picks up a small microphone that is laying on a small desk in front of him. ‘Dalley, let’s finish it for now,’ he says into the microphone. ‘Have a guard escort her to her cell.’

Dalley – the guy who’s questioning River - gets the message and quickly finishes the interrogation. River’s face is still impassive and devoid of any emotions. A guard comes inside the room to take her out and Dalley comes inside the room they’ve been observing the interrogation from.

‘Shit, she’s a tough one,’ Dalley says as he enters the room. ‘I have no idea how to get to her.’

‘We’ll leave it for now,’ Morgan responds. ‘We have a search warrant for her apartment. Go there, maybe you’ll find some clues there. Take a team with you.’

Dalley nods and quickly leaves the room and he turns to Morgan.

‘You won’t find anything there,’ he says. ‘In her apartment, I mean.’
‘How do you know that?’ Morgan asks in confusion and he can see that Donna is also looking at him in surprise. ‘We should be able to find something there. Her computer for example. Or another cell phone.’

‘But you won’t find anything,’ he sighs. ‘Just... It’s a hunch. I may be wrong, but I don’t think I am. Going to her apartment is a waste of time, but I guess you have to do it.’

‘No offense, but you’re making no sense,’ Morgan runs fingers through his hair. ‘Anyway, I’m sending a team to her apartment. We’ll inform you on the results of the search, but you can’t go.’

‘It’s okay,’ Donna says and he doesn’t have to look at her to know that what she really wants to say is ‘it’s not bloody okay’. But they both know their place at this very moment and they both know they’re not in a position to dictate terms. ‘I’m going to head back to the station now. John, come on.’

‘I think I’m going to stay here... If you don’t mind,’ he says and then looks at Morgan. ‘And if detective Morgan agrees that is.’

‘Sure, no problem,’ Morgan nods. ‘You could be useful. You know River the best. Still, we won’t let you question her.’

‘Right, stay then. I’ll call you if you’re needed at the station,’ Donna gathers her things and goes to the door. ‘Just don’t cause any trouble, we don’t need more of that now.’

He doesn’t want any more problems either and he would never look for them – it’s just that the problems find him. But he’s not going to tell Donna that, so he nods and says ‘see you’ with a smile. Once the door closes behind her, Morgan clears his throat.

‘Listen, I can’t keep you company. I have a meeting now and I can’t take you with me,’ he says a bit embarrassed. ‘We’ll wait for the second interrogation of your girl until Dalley comes back from her apartment. You can go and grab something to eat – we have a semi-decent canteen here. I’ll come and get you when we know something more or when it’s time for another questioning.’

He nods and lets Morgan lead him to the canteen. He has copies of River’s files with him, so he knows he won’t be bored while waiting, but there’s something bugging him, something that makes him jittery and restless. The uneasy feeling could be attributed to his tiredness and lack of sleep, but he knows it’s not the case. Nothing is going how he expected it to go, he thinks sitting at a table with a huge cup of coffee. River’s behaviour is completely irrational. He expected her to deny everything, call him an idiot, he expected – wanted – her to prove him that she’s innocent. He never thought she’d be sitting silently, ignoring all the questions directed at her, looking absolutely bored and unaffected. And the worst thing is that he has no idea how to get to her. Sure, it’s not his job anymore, but like Morgan said – he’s the one who knows her the best and who prepared and studied her case. He takes a sip of his coffee and opens River’s file, hoping that this time he’ll solve the puzzle lying within. He has no idea how much time has passed, but when Morgan comes to see him, his coffee is cold and undrinkable.

‘What time is it?’ He asks Morgan, who takes a seat next to him.

‘It’s nearly 3pm,’ Morgan replies. ‘We’re ready for another round of questioning. But first – tell me, how did you know that we won’t find anything in her apartment?’

‘So you didn’t find anything?’ He asks smirks. ‘Knew it.’

‘But how did you know it?’ Morgan repeats, looking at him through narrowed eyes. ‘The apartment was spotless. There was nothing there, but she couldn’t have known we’re coming. There were no
signs that she moved anything from there, it was just-'

‘Clean?’ He interrupts and Morgan nods his head. ‘Yeah, that’s what I thought too. I visited her a few times and that place has always looked too pristine for me. No personal things, no knick-knacks, no pictures of friends... Sure, she had everything there: cosmetics, food and so on, but all these things looked barely used.’

‘That’s exactly what Dalley said,’ Morgan says. ‘He says that they found her fingerprints and a few hair and the general signs that someone stayed at that place from time to time, but it felt more like a hotel room rather than a flat.’

‘We should have expected it,’ he replies. ‘She’s smart.’

‘So what do you think? She has another apartment somewhere else?’

‘That must be the explanation,’ he nods. ‘There must be another place, somewhere where she actually lives. We could start a search for it, put her picture on the news—‘

‘Can’t do, sorry,’ Morgan shakes his head. ‘This whole investigation is kept a secret. Unless we know more or unless she confesses – we say nothing to the press and tv. It’s a long shot, these fucking journalists will smell blood sooner or later, but we have to try and keep everything quiet for as long as we can.’

‘Dead end then?’ He asks and Morgan nods his head in defeat. ‘Right. Okay. Don’t we have an interrogation to go to?’

They get up and head to the interrogation room. Well, Morgan heads to the interrogation room and he goes to the observation room. He walks to the one way mirror and looks at River who’s already sitting at the table. She looks just as bored as she did before and he fears that this questioning will go just as terribly as the previous one.

‘Good afternoon, miss Song,’ Morgan says, sitting at the other side of the table. ‘I’m detective inspector Morgan.’

River looks at him, but her face betrays no emotions. Morgan clears his throat and speaks again.

‘I must say - you have a lovely apartment. I saw some pictures and you have a wonderful taste,’ Morgan says with a hint of smile in his voice. River’s head snaps up and for a few seconds she looks alarmed, but this impression vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

‘Glad you like it, detective,’ she replies. Her voice is slightly hoarse and she clears her throat. ‘I can give you the shops’ addresses.’

‘If it’s not a bother,’ Morgan replies. ‘And it’s good to finally hear your voice. You were painfully silent during your previous questioning.’

‘Maybe the questions were all wrong,’ she replies, raising her eyebrows challengingly.

‘Let’s hope I’ll be able to ask you better ones,’ Morgan says. ‘Okay Dalley, you can bring it in now.’

The door to the interrogation room opens and Dalley walks inside, dragging a polygraph behind him. It takes a few minutes to set everything up and during this time a young woman walks into the room he’s in and turns on the laptop that’s standing on a table.

‘Hi, I’m Jen,’ she mumbles quietly while typing furiously on the keyboard. ‘Detective Morgan
wanted you to observe the suspect’s reactions in real time, so here we go. You’ll be seeing what he’s seeing,” she says and turns the laptop towards him. The screen flashes for a few seconds but soon the image clears and he can see River’s pulse and heartbeat displayed on the screen in front of him. River’s pulse is surprisingly steady for someone who’s in custody and charged with multiple murders. It either means that she’s innocent or even better at hiding her emotions that he thought.

‘Right then, can we start?’ Morgan’s voice booms from the other room. ‘I am sure that you’re familiar with the procedure, miss Song, but please, remember: answer only ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Is that understood?’

River must nod her head, because Morgan starts the questioning. The first few questions are the usual and obvious ones, meant to see how the suspect reacts and what their responses are when they’re telling the truth.

‘Is your name River Song?’ ‘Yes.’ Truth.


‘Are we in Manchester right now?’ ‘No.’ Truth.

These meaningless questions seem to go on and on. He suspects that Morgan wants to lull River into a sense of security, but he’s pretty sure it’s not going to work. Her pulse is steady and it hasn’t changed since the start of the interrogation.

‘Are you married?’ ‘No.’ Truth.

‘Have you ever been married?’ ‘Yes.’ Truth.

He straightens slightly in his chair and winces at River’s tone – it’s slightly amused and careless, as if she’s telling someone about a stupid thing she’s done.

‘Do you know Jonathan Blake?’ Morgan asks another question and River’s answer comes almost immediately.

‘Yes.’ Truth.

‘Have you ever talked, worked or cooperated with him in any way?’ His eyes are glued to the screen, waiting for River’s response.

‘No.’

No change in her pulse or heartbeat. She’s telling the truth.

‘It’s impossible,’ he whispers to himself, but Morgan is already moving to another question.

‘Do you understand what you’re accused of?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Have you committed any of the crimes you’re accused of?’ ‘No.’

Once again, he’s nearly glued of the laptop’s screen, waiting for the slightest sign that River is lying, but nothing like that happens – her pulse is just as steady and calm as his. Morgan goes back to the mundane questions, stirring away from the topic of the murders and he welcomes the brief change and tries to rationalise what he just saw and heard.

Everything indicates that River is telling the truth. Every single sign suggests that she isn’t lying and that she’s innocent. But he knows she can’t be – he saw the evidence. Hell, he collected the damn
evidence himself. He couldn’t have been wrong about it, he knows it but he can feel cold fear creeping up his spine. What if he’s wrong? What if he made a mistake and dragged River into this mess even though she’s absolutely innocent? He stands up, suddenly too restless to sit and look at the screen. He walks over to the one way mirror and looks at the interrogation room. Morgan has his back turned to him, but he has a perfect view of River, who’s sitting in her chair with grace and composure. She seems to be perfectly in control of everything – as if she was the one running the investigation. He’s so focused on her that he barely registers the questions that Morgan asks her. The questions don’t matter anyway – every single one is met with a steady beating sound of the polygraph, meaning that River is telling the truth.

Fuck. What if he was wrong about this whole thing? What if-

No. It’s impossible. She can’t be innocent – or at least that’s what he needs to keep telling himself not to go mad. Because if by some miracle she is innocent... Then he fucked up big time. He disgraced himself as a detective, River will probably never speak to him again and-

‘Have you ever been to New York?’ Morgan’s voice cuts through his panicked thoughts and he refocuses on the investigation.

‘Yes,’ comes River’s reply and he doesn’t even need to glance at the monitor to know that she’s telling the truth.

‘Have you even been to Saudi Arabia?’ This question makes his pulse jump and he leans closer to the glass that separating him from detective Morgan and River.

‘No,’ River says.

‘No,’ he says to himself. ‘No, she’s lying. This can’t be-‘

If Morgan is just as surprised by River’s answer and the fact that it didn’t set off the polygraph, he doesn’t comment on it – he merely glances from the papers in front of him and asks another question.

‘Have you ever had and used bamboo face powder?’

For the first time since the investigation started, River stops looking at Morgan and her gaze wanders, until it meets the glass he’s hidden behind. He knows she can’t see him – the one side mirror prevents it – but he feels like she’s looking right at him. His hands are clenched into fists and he can barely hear her answer through blood pounding in his ears.

‘No.’

And in this one single seconds all his doubts fly out the window. He knows that River is lying. She knows she’s lying. And he knows that she knows that he’s here, listening to the interrogation. She must know he’d know if she lied. The polygraph turned out to be completely useless – River managed to fly right under the radar and beat it effortlessly. He needs to talk with her or question her – anything. None of the detectives working in the NCA will be able to get to her, he knows it. Sure, Morgan managed to get her to talk, but she still lied to his face without as much as a blink. River is on top of this whole investigation and it doesn’t look like anyone can push her from there. But maybe he has a chance. He knows her – at least better than all the detectives from the NCA and he may be the only one who has a chance to get to her and find out the truth.

He doesn’t pay attention to the rest of the interrogation – there’s no point in it, since he knows that River can bypass the polygraph. In a way, he can’t help but be impressed – not many people can do that. It took him a few months of training to learn how to do it. He wonders where River learned that
skill. Was it with in Quantico? He doubts it, but if you strike out that option, it probably means that she was trained by the Silence. This option is both thrilling and scary: thrilling, because if River decided to talk and cooperate, they’d get an inside look at how exactly the Silence prepares their employees. And it’s scary, because if they went to the length of teaching River how to evade the polygraph, what else have they taught her?

The door to the room opens and Morgan walks inside, interrupting his thoughts. He shakes his head a bit and looks to the interrogation room, but it’s already empty.

‘She lied,’ he says and hears Morgan’s heavy sigh behind his back.

‘I know,’ Morgan replies. ‘And yet she passed the polygraph. I’ve never seen anyone doing that. She’s much tougher than I thought.’

‘Listen,’ he starts and turns around to face Morgan. ‘I- Maybe I should talk to her.’

‘No way,’ Morgan says quickly. ‘I told you. You can observe, but not interfere. You’re not going into that room with her, not as long as I have something to say.’

‘But look – I know her better than you do. Maybe I could persuade her or reason with her. I could try to convince her to cooperate. Wouldn’t it be easier for everyone if she cooperated?’ He asks. ‘Think how much we could learn from her.’

‘Mate, no offense, but you’ve worked with her for a few months and she’s been fooling you the whole time,’ Morgan says sharply and he flinches at these words. ‘What makes you think that she’ll be honest with you now?’

He grits his teeth and looks down. Morgan is right – River would probably lie to him again. Still, he has to try.

‘Shit, I’m sorry,’ his head snaps up when he hears Morgan’s voice again. ‘That was- I shouldn’t have said it. I didn’t mean it,’ he sighs. ‘I’m sorry, I’m just tired. This whole thing was just pushed at us and we had to prepare to it in a crazily short time. And your girl is not cooperative,’ Morgan adds drily.

‘She’s not my girl,’ he says. ‘Please, just give me 10 minutes with her. That’s all.’

‘You know I can’t. You’re officially banned from the investigation and-‘

‘You see, officially is the key word here,’ he says and looks at Morgan. ‘Just let me go to her cell. For 10 minutes. Who knows, maybe I’ll get something out of her.’

Morgan doesn’t say anything for a few moments, just keeps looking at him with an unreadable expression on his face. His gaze doesn’t waver even for a second and he starts to feel a bit uncomfortable.

‘Fine,’ Morgan finally says. ‘I’ll see what I can do about it. But tomorrow. It’s too late for any of this today.’

‘Yes!’ He exclaims. ‘Thank you. You won’t regret it, I promise! I’ll do everything I can to help you.’

‘I’m sure of that,’ Morgan nods. ‘But now get lost. Go home. Get some rest. Come back tomorrow and we’ll talk then.’

‘Yes, sir,’ he says and salutes. ‘Are you sure there’s nothing else you need me for today?’
‘I am sure, Smith,’ Morgan sighs with a small smile. ‘Go and rest, you look like shit.’

He says his goodbyes and goes to his car. He sends Donna a quick text saying that he may be able to talk with River tomorrow and that he’ll call her with more info once he gets home. He sees that he has 26 missed and all of them are from one person – Amy. Shit. In the middle of this insanity, he completely forgot that Amy would find out about it sooner or later. He should call her. He has to call her. But what is he going to say? ‘Amy? Hello, our friend is a killer, probably a hired gun and today I arrested her for that. How was your day?’

He sighs and gets inside his car. He has no idea how to talk about it. To be quite honest, he has no idea what he thinks or feels about this whole thing – everything is happening too quickly and even though he had more time to adjust to this situation that the others, his thoughts are still a mess. He also knows that they have to talk about it – River was Amy’s and Rory’s friend and they deserve some explanation.

He calls Amy as soon as he enters his flat and she picks up after the first ring.

‘Hi,’ he starts tentatively. ‘Uhm, how are you?’

‘John,’ Amy says quietly, but in a tone that sends a shiver of fear through him. ‘What the fuck is going on? Rory just told me that River was arrested for the murders and that it’s all he knows. You can’t be serious about it. It’s a mistake, it must be.’

‘Amy,’ he tries to speak, but she cuts him off.

‘It’s a mistake or it’s another one of your crazy ideas. You made River into a bait, hoping that the real killer will reveal himself?’

‘Amy, calm down and let me speak, okay?’ He says and sits on his sofa. ‘It’s not a mistake. I think-I’m sure it’s true.’

The silence that falls on the other side is nearly deafening.

‘Amy? You still there?’

‘Yeah, I just....’ she finally speaks. ‘I- How can it be true?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says and closes his eyes. ‘It just is. I can’t really talk about it, but we have evidence. There are photos and-‘

‘I don’t care about that,’ Amy interrupts him and her voice sounds both pained and angry. ‘How could she do that? Why would she do that?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says and squeezes his eyes shut. ‘I have no idea.’

Amy is silent for a few moments and when she speaks again, he can hear tears in her voice.

‘How could we not notice? She was our- I thought she was our friend.’

Another question he doesn’t have an answer for. He’s been asking it himself for days now. How could he not have noticed all of that earlier? It seems so transparent now. But he was so caught up with the case and so... blinded by River’s deception, that he couldn’t really see what is going on in front of him.

‘Amy, it’s not our fault,’ he says quietly, even though he’s not really convinced of that. ‘It’s not.
We’re not responsible for the choices River made.’

‘Do you really believe that? You want to tell me that you really don’t feel guilty?’ Amy asks and not for the first time he thinks that sometimes she’s a bit too perceptive. ‘Yeah, I thought so,’ she says when he doesn’t respond. ‘Have you talked with her?’

‘No. I can only observe the questionings. I may be able to talk to her tomorrow,’ he says. ‘Though... She’s not very talkative.’

‘It seems so unreal,’ Amy whispers. ‘I can’t believe it. She was our friend.’

There’s nothing he can say to make her feel better and there’s nothing she can say that he hasn’t already thought of, so for a few minutes they just sit without speaking, with their phones pressed against to their ears. Finally, Amy breaks the silence and tells him to keep her and Rory updated. She seems calmer now or at least pretends for his sake. He knows that it’s far from over and that they’ll have to talk about it again – there’s a chance that they won’t talk about anything else for a long time. They hang up, but only after he promises to call regularly and keep Amy updated.

‘Get some rest,’ she says instead of goodbye and he mutters something that is supposed to sound like ‘yeah, sure’. But once he puts down his phone, he knows that he can’t rest, not just yet. He pulls out River’s files and spreads them on the table in front of him. It’s going to be a long night.

___

He’s walking down the corridor leading to River’s cell. He supposes he should be glad that Morgan let him talk with her in private, but he’s too exhausted to be feel anything, let alone happiness. He spent the whole evening and a good part of the night on studying River’s files, even though that he knows them by heart now. When he went to bed, he couldn’t fall asleep, reliving every single conversation he’s had with River and trying to find some clues there. When sleep finally claimed him, his dreams were full of River with a gun in her hand, shooting, shooting and running away. It’s only 10am, but he already feels ready to pass out on the nearest flat surface. He realises it’s probably incredibly stupid to talk with River when he’s not at his best, but a chance like that may not repeat and he has to take it now.

There’s a guard standing outside of River’s cell and he greets him with a nod. The man looks at him, nods his head and opens the door, letting him inside with a quiet ‘10 minutes’.

The room he walks in is small and brightly lit by one huge ceiling lamp. The walls are grey and slightly dirty and he feels like they’re closing in on him.

‘If you’re here for a conjugal visit, I’ll have to disappoint you,’ River’s voice comes from the corner of the room. ‘You’re a bit too late for that, we’re no longer married.’

He turns around to face her: she’s sitting on a small cot installed in the corner of the room. Funny, it’s been only a day since he spoke to her, but it feels longer. It feels like a lifetime has passed since then. But it also feels like nothing has changed – his heart still skips a beat at the sight of her and she still has that small smile in the corner of her mouth. And yet – everything is different.

‘It’s a good thing that it’s not why I’m here,’ he finally replies.

‘Oh? Why are you here then?’ River asks nonchalantly, but it takes him just one look to see that she’s affected by his words and his presence. During yesterday’s interrogations she put on a brave face and looked as if nothing affected her, but now he can see that it was all just a carefully maintained facade. Now when he’s in the same room with her, he can see that the events of the last
24 hours have taken their toll on her. There are dark rings under her eyes, she’s pale and looks like she hasn’t slept a wink at night. Her whole frame is taunt with tension and she looks ready to attack if the need arose.

“You know why I’m here,” he sighs and leans against the wall. “We need to talk.”

“Do we? About what exactly?” River asks, sitting straight on the bed.

“Stop that, River. Just stop,” he says angrily. “We’re way past playing games. It’s not funny anymore. Now... You lied yesterday. During the questioning.”

“I was right – you were listening! Lovely. And I’m sorry, but the polygraph didn’t agree with you,” River says with a small shrug. “It showed that I was telling the truth, didn’t it?”

“We both know that the polygraph can be fooled. Which is exactly what you did yesterday. I’m not interested in how you did it. Just... Stop doing that. Start cooperating.”

“And why should I do that?” River asks icily.

“To help yourself? To help us?” He says, running fingers through his hair. His patience is slowly crumbling and he can feel a small pang of anger in his chest. “You’re in a difficult situation, River.”

“Oh, and what happened to your noble ‘innocent until proven guilty’ stance?” River asks, gritting her teeth.

“I think I’ve proven that you’re far from innocent,” he barks out and takes a step in her direction. “I’ve spent hours over your files, fake IDs and passports, so excuse me if I don’t exactly believe that you’re not guilty.”

River doesn’t respond to that, just stares at a random spot on the wall behind him. He takes a deep breath and tries to calm himself.

“Why did you do that?” He finally asks. “Why would you do something like that?”

“You seem to know everything and have all the answers. Can’t you figure this one out as well?” River says and looks at him.

“Was it money? That’s why you did it?” He spits out and walks closer to her. “For money?”

Once again, River doesn’t respond, just keep looking at him with an unreadable expression no her face.

“God, River. Ten... He trusted you,” he says bitterly. “You worked with him, you spent your time with him... He was your friend.”

“He wasn’t my friend,” River says coldly and stands up. Now they’re facing each other, just a few inches between their bodies.

“No. Clearly, he wasn’t,” he sighs and tries to swallow through the lump in his throat. He can’t believe this is happening. He can’t believe that the person standing in front of him is River – his partner. A person he thought to be his friend. ‘I just... I won’t pretend that I understand you because I don’t. What you did is... That can’t be undone. But you can help us.’

‘Can I? How exactly?’ River asks in a flippant tone and he can feel his control slowly slipping.

‘By admitting that you’re guilty. By working with us. Sharing what you know about the Silence.’
‘Right... Let’s say I’ll cooperate,’ River says after awhile. ‘What will I get from it?’

‘I am sure that they could enrol you into a witness protection program,’ he says and feels relieved. Maybe she’ll work with them after all.

‘Oh? And will it work for me as well as it worked for Bates?’ River asks challengingly and he looks at her in surprise. ‘Don’t look so shocked. Your new friends talked to me today. They asked if I know who could be behind that slaughter. And that’s the exact word they used – *slaughter*. So, will I end up with my throat cut as well?’

He curses internally and feels a wave of anger directed at Morgan. He should’ve told him that they talked with River and told her about Bates. Offering her witness protection is pointless now – she knows that even the police can’t keep a person safe from the Silence.

‘I am sure that they’d do their best to keep you safe,’ he lies. ‘They’d make a deal that is most beneficial for both sides.’

‘Who are you kidding?’ River snorts. ‘You seem to forget that I know how these things work. No one would make a deal with a person who’s accused of what I’m accused of.’

Shit. He really did forget for a second that River is – was – a detective. And she’s right – The NCA wouldn’t let her walk away so easily.

‘Cooperation would certainly help you in court,’ he finally says.

‘Oh please. I’ll get 25 years instead of a lifetime?’ River sneers. ‘And how long do you think I’ll survive there?’

Confusion must be written all over his face, because she sighs, rolls her eyes and starts explaining.

‘I am a detective. Police force. And I’m accused of murdering other policemen. I’d have enemies in both inmates and guards.’

‘You’d make do,’ he mutters.

‘I would, sure. But how long? How much time would you give me? Half a year? Or maybe shorter? How long would it take for me to be too exhausted to defend myself?’

‘What’s your plan then?’ He says angrily. ‘There’s no way out this time.’

‘There’s always a way out,’ she shrugs. ‘The question is: why do you care? Why did you come here? To play a saviour again? Like you did with Lucy?’

His heart starts beating double speed when he hears Lucy’s name. He feels like River just slapped him.

‘Struck a nerve, did I?’ She continues with a cruel smile. ‘But maybe it means that you are guilty. Tell me: did you make a deal with her to help her or to become solve the case? To become the guy that brought down the Master? Which one was it?’

He grits his teeth and tries to breathe: deep, slow breaths to calm himself, but it doesn’t work: with every breath and every beat of his heart, he can feel fury rising inside him. How dare she. She has no right-

‘Because really, did you think that the Master wouldn’t find out about it? You corrupted his precious
wife. You took her away from him. And you thought that he’d let it go,’ River lets out a small laugh, but it’s nothing he’s ever heard before: it’s cold and laced with poison. ‘But you know, the worst thing is that you actually make the poor little thing to believe that she’s safe with you. That you’ll protect her. You manipulated her and used her.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ he says quietly, advancing toward River and making her take a few steps back. ‘Don’t you fucking dare to speak to me about her.’

‘Why? Because the truth hurts?’ River says. She has now her back against the wall, but she raises her chin and speaks again. ‘You knew what could happen and yet you told her she’d be safe. You put her right in the heart of danger. Did you even care what could happen to her or were you too busy dreaming about your new office and medals?’

Her words are partially drowned by the blood that thuds in his ears. All the memories come rushing back to him: Lucy’s scared face, her hope in him, her bravery and spirit. Her lifeless body and her blood on the floor.

‘And when she died, you escaped. Packed your bags and ran away, like a scared little boy,’ River’s voice cuts through his memories. ‘Was it guilt? Will it happen again? You solved another case, you’re a hero again. Time to put someone’s life in danger to achieve another of your goals now. What other lies will you tell me to convince me to cooperate with the NCA? That I’ll be pardoned?’ She smirks and leans closer. She’s so close that he feels rather than hears her next words. ‘Where will you run away when something happens to me because of you? Will you even care? And did you care about Lucy or was she just collateral damage?’

His heart is pounding in his chest and he feels like something is squeezing the air out of his lungs. His hands clench into fists so hard that his fingers start to ache and his eyes are seeing only one thing: River. He tries to say something – not even to explain, but just stop her from talking, but when he opens his mouth, no sound comes out. River sees that and speaks again.

‘You know what’s even more terrible? I think that you knew what would happen,’ she whispers, but it feels like she’s screaming right into his ear. ‘You knew what the stakes were and that the Master would find out about your plan. And yet you manipulated poor little Lucy. Because it had to be done. Because that what you’ve been taught – how to play and manipulate people,’ she says and every word feels like a nail piercing his skin. ‘Maybe that’s why you’re the one who caught me. Maybe we’re not that different after all.’

Later, he won’t be sure what made him snap. Was it that fact that he was so tired that he barely could stand straight? Were it River’s words? Or was it caused by the fact that deep down inside he felt that River was right?

All he knows at this very moment is that he’s incredibly angry. He’s furious at River for being who she is and for doing what she did. He’s furious at himself for not seeing through her sooner. He’s angry that he feels like her words are true and he hates that he feels like she’s reading his own thoughts – ones that he hid deep down inside his head. He feels lost and helpless, but these feelings are nothing compared to the overwhelming anger that’s consuming him. River’s looking at him with a smug expression on her face, as if she knows how she’s making him feel and he feels like he’s about to burst from fury any second now.

When he hits the wall with his fist, it feels like someone is forcing his hand to do it. The pain explodes in his palm and travels up his arm, but it doesn’t stop him from doing it again. This time his fist lands near River’s head and she gasps in shock. Her surprise lasts only a second, before she lifts her own hand to push him away. But he’s prepared – he grabs her wrist into his other hand and presses it on the other side of her head. She’s trapped between the wall and his body and for the
briefest second he enjoys the scared look in her eyes.

The door to the room burst open and a guard comes in running, shouting something he can decipher. The guard runs over to him and tries to pry him away from River, but he only tightens his grip on her wrist. She lets out a quiet yelp and tries to shake his hand off and with the help of the guard she finally succeeds. The guard starts dragging him out of the cell, swearing and cursing him loudly. Suddenly, the place is full of people – someone is walking into River’s cell, someone is trying to talk to him, but he pays no attention to any of this. He’s looking at River who’s standing in the middle of her cell and staring at him, and her eyes are filled with pain. He can’t stop looking at her and he tries to get back into her room, but the guard standing next to him pushes him against the wall. The impact knocks the air out of his lungs and when he manages to catch a breath, he looks up to see that the door to River’s cell is closed. And in that moment, the realisation of what exactly he just did, hits him like a bucket of ice cold water.

_Fucking shit._

___

He knows that Donna is furious with him, because she doesn’t talk with him. She hasn’t spoken or even glanced in his direction since she picked him up from Morgan’s office. She asked him to go and wait for her outside and while he did that, she stayed in the room and talked with Morgan. He could hear their hushed voices, but couldn’t distinguish the words. He felt sick and tired: exhausted both from lack of sleep and the pain throbbing in his hand. After a few minutes, Donna left Morgan’s office and without even a look in his direction started walking down the corridor. He had no choice but to follow her to her car, sit in the passenger seat and let her take him to hospital. They sat silently in the emergency room for what seemed to be hours before his turn came. It turned out that he has more luck than brains – he didn’t break any bones, just badly bruised his knuckles and sprained his wrist. He left the hospital with a prescription for painkillers and a light cast on his wrist. Donna was still sitting in the waiting room when he left the doctor’s office and without any word, she took him to a pharmacy and then to his apartment.

And how here they are: in front of his apartment, in Donna’s car, not saying a word.

‘I’m sorry,’ he finally says. ‘I don’t know what happened, I just-’

‘Don’t,’ Donna sighs tiredly. ‘Just don’t. What the fuck were you thinking?’

‘I thought that I’d be able to talk her into working with us,’ he says. His words come out slightly slurred and his tongue feels like it’s too big for his mouth. He tries to remember when was the last time he had something to drink or eat, but he can’t remember.

‘You obviously thought wrong,’ Donna barks out. ‘For fuck’s sake! There was a reason why you weren’t allowed inside the interrogation room. I still don’t understand why Morgan let you talk with her.’

‘She manipulated me,’ he says quietly a few seconds later.

‘She’s been manipulating all of us,’ Donna replies. ‘But today, you let her play you. John, I have no idea what she told you to get that reaction out of you – and frankly, I don’t want to know that. But the thing is that you let her words affect you, even though you knew what she’s capable of.’

He moves the fingers of his injured hand. It still hurts, but the pain anchors him in the reality. And as much as he hates to admit it Donna is right: he let River play him. He let her provoke him and she did it: she managed to wind him up like no one before. The only question is why? Why would she do
'I’m sorry,’ he repeats. ‘I won’t- I won’t do something like that again.’

‘No. You won’t,’ Donna says and looks at him. ‘You’re on medical leave, starting now.’

‘What? No. No! You can’t do it!’ He exclaims and turns in his seat to face her. ‘You can’t!’

‘I can and I’m doing this,’ Donna replies sharply. ‘For fuck’s sake, John. You nearly assaulted a suspect! Who knows what would happen if the guard hadn’t come rushing into the room.’

‘I would never hurt her,’ he says. ‘I would never-’

‘But you nearly did. You’re bloody lucky that she’s not suing you,’ Donna says and he notices how much she tries not to say River’s name. She’s acting like saying her name out loud may cause even more damage to their world. ‘Look, I’m sorry, but it has to be this way. You’re staying out of this whole thing from now on. I have no idea how long your leave is going to last. You’ll be paid in full though.’

‘No, Donna, please... Don’t do that. Please,’ he begs.

‘Too late. I made my decision. It’s for your own good, John,’ Donna says. ‘You got too close. To the whole case and to... her.’

‘And whose fault is it, I wonder?’ He snarls angrily. ‘You were the one who put us together!’

He regrets these words as soon as they leave his mouth, but unfortunately, he can’t take them back. Donna pales, but she raises her chin up and meets his gaze without flinching.

‘Don’t you think I know it?’ She says. ‘If I could turn back time... If I’d known who she is, I’d have never- None of that would be happening now. But I can’t change anything. Neither can you. We can only deal with the results of our actions and choices. And you’ll be staying away from both the case and the station, at least for some time. And don’t even bother getting the information out of anyone – everyone is under orders not to talk to you about the case. You can lie and say that this case hasn’t taken its toll on you, but we both know it’s not true. Take your time and use it to relax and rest,’ Donna runs fingers through her hair. ‘And if you want to resign... I won’t like it, but I won’t stop you.’

‘Is it everything?’ He asks. He desperately wants this conversation to be over. He wants to get out of this car and forget about everything that happened. He wants to run away from this whole thing.

*Run away.*

Isn’t it what River asked him about? Where will he run away now? Because that’s what he’s best at, right? Running away. Sometimes he feels like a mad man, far away from home, constantly running away from something. Or maybe it’s towards something? He honestly doesn’t know anymore.

‘John,’ Donna says when he’s about to open the door and step out on the pavement. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘For what?’ He asks without turning around.

‘For everything.’

He nods his head and finally steps out of her car. He doesn’t look back when she drives away, but heads straight to his flat. He fishes his keys out of his jacket’s pocket and opens the door. The
painkillers he was given at the hospital are finally kicking in and suddenly he feels sleepy and incredibly tired. He plops on his sofa and closes his eyes for a moment. His mind is buzzing and everything that happened today is playing out behind his eyelids. Every word that River said to him is replayed inside his head, like it’s stuck on repeat. He grits his teeth and tries not to think how close to the truth some of her words were.

‘It’s useless,’ he mutters and shakes his head. There’s no point in dwelling on it now. What’s done is done. He’s done, he thinks bitterly. He’s utterly and completely done. He lost and the case was taken away from him – this time for good. He won’t even be able to participate in it now. And since he’s on medical leave, he can’t even go back to work at the station. He has no idea what he’ll do in the few next days, he thinks sleepily through the haze of medicines and exhaustion. He’s never been good at sitting still and not working. Maybe they’ll realise that his presence is necessary for the investigation and they’ll call him back, he thinks and settles more comfortable on the sofa. Surely, they’ll call and he’ll be back in the interrogation room with River.

Except no one calls him. Not on the next day, when he wakes up in pain on his sofa. There’s also no call on the day after that, even though he spends his time staring at the phone as if he could will it to call. On the third day of his mandatory leave, he’s restless and slowly realising that no one will call him. Not today. Not tomorrow. On day four he calls the station, but just like Donna said – no one is willing to talk with him about the case or anything even remotely connected with work. Once he ends his short and quite pointless chat with Jack, he digs out his world atlas and starts planning his next journey. Where could he go this time? India? Already been there. Columbia? Better not. He needs a place where he can rest and forget that he’s a policeman. He needs a place where he’ll be able to disappear, even if only for a few weeks. By the evening, he knows where he’s going. All he needs now is to take off the cast from his wrist, get a plane ticket, but he can take care of that in the morning.

The next morning greets him with pouring rain and thunders in the distance. He hops under the shower and then leaves his apartment with a list of errands. Unfortunately, it seems that the world is against him today. He spends over 3 hours at the hospital, waiting to have his cast taken off. The dreadful weather has taken its toll on London – half of the city had the power turned off for a few hours, all the streets were paralysed and there were a few accidents in the morning. When he finally gets out of the hospital – his hand blissfully free of the cast – he knows he’s running late. He still has to buy a few things, call a few people, buy his ticket and pack. He gets back to his apartment to book his plane ticket and check if there’s anything else he needs to get from a shop.

‘Hello, detective Smith,’ detective Morgan greets him, standing next to his flat’s door. ‘I’m glad I managed to catch you.’

‘I’m on medical leave,’ he responds bitterly, trying to move past Morgan and open his door. ‘I think I am allowed to go where I want to. Now excuse me, I have things to do.’

‘You’re not interested why I’m here?’ Morgan asks, but doesn’t move from the place he occupies.

‘Not really,’ he lies, even though the curiosity is burning up his heart. ‘Besides, like I said – I’m on medical leave. Not to mention that you’re not allowed to share any details of the case with me. I don’t see why-’

‘She escaped,’ Morgan cuts him off.

‘What?’ He asks and turns to face the man standing next to him. Suddenly he feels like his heart is about to burst out from his chest. It’s impossible. He must’ve heard that wrong.

‘You heard everything correctly, detective Smith,’ Morgan says in a resigned tone and he realises
that he’s been thinking out loud. ‘River Song escaped and we need your help.’

Chapter End Notes

uhm, hi. sorry. anyone still reading this fic? it's been quite a long time, hasn't it?
I'm sorry. but two things happened: I couldn't bring myself to write and my life got busy
in the last 3 weeks. and while I don't have problems with writing anymore, my life will
continue to be busy. I'm on an internship and it's eating most of my time away, so I don't
really have time to write. which means that the updates may be coming slowly. or - in
the worst case - not coming at all. I'll do my best, because I really don't want to put this
fic on hiatus, but right now, I really can't tell you how it's going to be.

anyway: I hope you managed to enjoy this chapter. I realise it's bloody long, but I didn't
want to chop it into pieces. I probably crammed too many things into one chapter, but
oh well, I won't be changing it now.

the chapter's title comes from 'monster' by Mikky Ekko. hope you had a lovely weekend
and that Monday will treat you nicely.
The ride to the NCA’s headquarter passes in a blur. Morgan doesn’t want to say anything more about River’s escape and after having his questions ignored a few times, he stops asking. Rain is pounding relentlessly and he gets soaking wet in the short distance between the car and the entrance to the NCA’s building. Morgan takes him straight to his office and offers him a drink, but he shakes his head.

‘You didn’t drag me here, so we can chit-chat over tea,’ he says. ‘Let’s get it over with. How on earth did she manage to escape? Wasn’t she guarded all the time?’

Morgan sighs heavily and rubs his hand over his face.

‘She was. It’s just...’ Morgan sighs again and continues in defeated tone. ‘She refused to talk. She hasn’t spoken a word since the incident with you.’

He cringes at that. The incident. It sounds nearly as dreadful as it felt and looked.

‘But people don’t disappear by not talking,’ he shrugs.

‘No, they don’t. She was taken for a questioning today. Detective Anderson was conducting it. Have you heard about him?’

He grits his teeth at the sound of this name. Anderson is known to be effective, sure, but the methods he uses during the interrogations are nothing short of psychological abuse. Many suspects have complained about him, but nothing could be done – Anderson has friends in all the right places. The mere thought that he was in the same room with River makes his skin crawl with anger.

‘Yeah, I’ve heard about him,’ he finally says. ‘But what exactly happened?’

‘You need to watch this first,’ Morgan says and turns the screen of his laptop towards him. The screen displays a grainy image from the interrogation room and he can see River sitting in one of the chairs. Another chair is taken by a man – Anderson. He hits ‘play’ and the clip starts. It’s about 5 minutes long, without any sound but he can see Anderson asking questions and River ignoring every single one of them. With every unanswered question Anderson grows more and more annoyed and he can’t help but feel a brief pang of joy at his expense.

And then he notices it – Anderson is playing with something. He leans closer to the screen and sees that the object is Anderson’s hand is a key. Suddenly his stomach fills with dread. The image on the screen stops and abruptly fades to black.

‘What happened?’ He asks Morgan. ‘Why did the footage stop?’

‘We had a power outrage,’ Morgan sighs. Around 10am, this whole district lost power. We have emergency generators, but they didn’t kick in. The power came back but it took a few minutes.’

‘How long exactly?’

‘Three minutes,’ Morgan says. ‘She managed to escape during this time.’
‘How? She was cuffed!’ He exclaims. ‘There was a guard by the door!’

‘Anderson loosened her handcuffs,’ Morgan admits and he groans in annoyance. ‘He wanted her to warm up to him.’

‘For fuck’s sake...,’ he mutters. ‘Where is he now?’

‘He’s in the hospital,’ Morgan says with a small grin. ‘Your girl knocked him out and gave him a mild concussion.’

‘But how did she do that?’

‘When the power went out, it was chaos. We went down to check on the generator. She must have used that time to knock Anderson out and get out of the room.’

‘Wait, wait, wait,’ he stops Morgan. ‘I get that she got one hand free, took care of Anderson, grabbed the key to the handcuffs and opened the second lock. But how did she get out of the building?’

‘She jumped out of the window.’

‘You’re taking the piss now,’ he says after a few moments. The interrogation room is on the second floor. A jump from this height would surely knock River’s breath out and if she’d been unlucky, she could’ve ended with a broken leg. ‘It’s impossible. The window in the interrogation room is too small for that.’

‘She used one on the corridor,’ Morgan mumbles, looking slightly embarrassed. ‘She knocked the guard down, opened one of the windows and jumped.’

‘Wow,’ he breathes out. ‘That’s... amazing. I mean, it’s awful and you’re basically in a pile of shit, but she knows how to make an exit. You have to hand it to her.’

‘Thanks for bringing this to my attention, I haven’t noticed,’ Morgan comments sourly. ‘Anyway, she had about 40 seconds on us. But it was enough. By the time we got out of the building, she was gone. We tried looking for her, but it’s like she disappeared.’

‘And you need me here because?’ He asks and settles more comfortably in his chair.

‘We want your help in finding her,’ Morgan says simply.

‘I’m on medical leave,’ he responds but Morgan just rolls his eyes.

‘Please. Medical leave you were forced to take. We offer you a chance to get back to work.’

‘Why me?’

‘You said it yourself – you know her best. You build her case from scratch,’ Morgan shrugs. ‘You could be useful.’

‘I resigned from my job,’ he says. It’s the truth – he sent his resignation letter yesterday and Donna signed and sent it back to him a few hours later.

‘I know,’ Morgan nods. ‘We offer you work here. You’d be our consultant on this particular case.’

For a few moments he’s silent. He knows that he should say ‘no’. He should forget about this case, forget everything that has happened in the last few months and most importantly, he should forget
about River. But there’s a thin line between what he should do and what he wants to do. He wants to help Morgan and he wants to find River, but if he’s to be honest, what he really wants is to solve the mystery of her. His next words tumble out of his mouth before he has a chance to stop them.

‘When can I start?’

Morgan starts broadly as if he’s been expecting to get this answer from him.

‘You’re starting right now,’ he says and opens his mouth to add something else, but a tentative knock on his door stops him.

‘Come in,’ He says and the door open to reveal a young woman standing behind it.

‘Boss,’ she says, ‘I know you said not to disturb you but it’s important.’

‘What is it?’ Morgan asks sharply.

‘You told us to keep an eye on the suspect’s apartment,’ the woman says. Both Morgan and he turn their full attention to her now, because she must be talking about River.

‘Has she appeared there?’ Morgan asks, but he quickly shakes his head. River would never do something like that, it’d be far too reckless and thoughtless. Something else must’ve happened.

‘No, she wasn’t there,’ the woman replies. ‘The neighbours called the police, because someone trashed the whole place and tried to set it on fire.’

‘Shit,’ Morgan mumbles and grabs his jacket. ‘Thank you, keep me informed. We’re going there and we need to take some technicians with us as well. Get your ass up, Smith.’

A team of technicians joins them in front of River’s apartment. Morgan flashes his badge to a policeman guarding the scene and they’re let inside River’s flat.

‘Hey, what are you doing here?’ A stern looking woman asks, walking over to them. ‘It’s a crime scene. I don’t remember inviting you.’

‘DCI Jeffrey Morgan, NCA,’ Morgan shows his badge once again. ‘Sorry for not informing you earlier, but we only just found out about it.’

‘And what does the NCA may want to do with a case like that?’ The woman looks at them through narrowed eyes.

‘I am afraid I can’t tell you that, detective…’

‘Rayman,’ the woman sighs and extends her hand. ‘Helen Rayman.’

‘Can you tell us what exactly happened here?’ He asks her after introducing himself.

‘We got a call, about an hour ago,’ Rayman starts. ‘Two men were seen entering the apartment. A few neighbours complained about the noise they were making. They said it sounded like something was being smashed. As you can see, they were right,’ she sighs and motions her hand around.

The whole place is trashed. He saw River’s apartment before – well, she called it her apartment, he knows that she hasn’t actually lived there – and it was nothing but pristine clean. Right now it looks like a hurricane hit it and destroyed everything in its wake. All the shelves are open and their content is thrown all over the floor. The sofa and all the furniture are either shred to pieces or cut up.
'Someone has been looking for something,' he says and Morgan nods his head.

'The question is what for?' Morgan says. 'Were they looking for something or for someone?' He adds in a hushed tone.

Right. He hasn’t thought about it. The Silence may already know that River’s cover was blown and they might’ve tried to make sure that she remains silent or that nothing in her flat gives the police any hints.

‘There’s another question,’ he says and turns to Morgan. ‘Why did they come here? She did not live here, we know that. She would keep nothing of value here.’

‘Sure, we know that. But they might’ve no idea that it’s just a dummy apartment,’ Morgan replies.

The thought that River might’ve fooled not only them, but also The Silence is oddly exhilarating. Lying to him and everyone she’s worked with seems like a child’s play compared to lying to the most dangerous mobsters in England. But why would she do that? Why would she lie to The Silence about her address? She’s one of them, isn’t she? There’s no need for her to hide from them. Or there wasn’t, he thinks and once again glances at the destruction around him. River probably lost all her value and credibility the second she got caught, he realises and can’t help feeling a little guilty. It’s stupid, he knows it, but the thought that River could share Bates’ fate, makes him feel nauseous.

‘So what do you think they wanted to find here?’ He asks Morgan. ‘Find some information or find her?’

‘No idea,’ Morgan sighs. ‘Could be both. At least we know that The Silence is also after River. Which means that we really need to find her before them, because once they get to her, there won’t be nothing left.’

His stomach drops at this remark and at the same time he feels a wave of steel determination – he won’t let that happen. He’ll be the first to find River, even if it’s going to be the death of him.

___

‘Where do you think she’ll go now?’ Morgan asks when they’re in his car, on the way back to the NCA headquarter. ‘We put alerts on River’s name at every airport in the country. We just don’t know where she may go. Any ideas?’

‘She probably won’t leave the country. At least not now and not on a plane. She realises that we have her passports – both real and fakes ones, so unless she has more, she won’t leave England using them. She may stay hidden for a few days, wait it out and then go to France, Scotland or Wales. From there... She can go just anywhere,’ he shrugs.

‘Shit,’ Morgan breathes out. ‘I do hope you’re giving her too much credit. It’s enough that she made us look like idiots with the escape, we don’t need to look like even greater fools. She’d be a valuable source of information. We can’t lose her.’

‘Yeah,’ he mumbles, even though he knows that Morgan’s and his reasons for finding River are completely different.

‘What do you know about The Silence?’ Morgan asks unexpectedly.

‘I- uhm, you know, the general stuff? I studied some of their cases, but I wouldn’t call myself an expert.’
‘Right. Look, I just thought that you may want to go through our archive. It could help you to get some insight on how they work and maybe it could help you with predicting River’s next move.’

‘Sure, why not,’ he nods and stops himself from saying that he doubts that anyone could predicts River’s actions and intentions. They park outside the NCA’s headquarter and head inside. Morgan asks a few people if there’s any news on River, but all the responses are negative. With a sigh, Morgan leads him to his office.

‘Not gonna lie, I hoped that something will be known by now,’ Morgan mutters. ‘But it seems that you were right – she might be just a bit too good.’

He nods and Morgan shakes his head with a weary sigh.

‘Right then,’ he says. ‘Let me take you to your new office.’

‘My what?’ He stutters in shock, but follows Morgan all the same. ‘I have an office? Why would I have an office here? You had no idea whether or not I’d agree to work for you.’

‘Please. As if you could stay away from this case,’ Morgan smiles and opens the door to a small room and walks inside. ‘This is your new office. Make yourself comfortable. You have access to all of our databases and I already downloaded all the files regarding The Silence on your computer,’ Morgan says and grins. ‘Welcome abroad, detective Smith.’

With these words Morgan leaves him in the room that apparently is now his office. He has an office. Again. He slowly walks over to the desk and sits in the chair standing next to it.

‘Oh, it’s comfy. I have a comfy chair,’ he says bouncing lightly in his seat. ‘Could be worse. Let’s see what we have here,’ he says and turns on the computer. Just like Morgan said – there’s a folder full of reports from the cases regarding The Silence. There’s a few dozens of cases – ones he already knows from his previous investigation and more than a few unknown to him. He opens the first file and starts reading. The cases are mostly connected to money laundering, drug deals and murders caused by drug deals gone wrong.

Wait a second... There’s something here – he’s sure there’s something he’s missing. Something he’s been missing all this time. He looks around the room and notices River’s file laying on the desk in a manila envelope. Silently thanking Morgan for placing it here, he opens it and skips to the part where all the victims are listed. He checks the list and compares it with the one displayed on the screen of his computer. While the list of the crimes committed by the Silence is consistent – driven either by drug deals or money made during drug deals – River’s list is not. There are murders that scream ‘The Silence’ – the murder of Ten and other detectives, Octavian’s murder, killing of the young German politician that wanted to make the anti-drug law even more severe. But there are also cases that do not fit the profile. The banker in NYC, the oil tycoon from Saudi Arabia – these people had nothing to do with drugs. He knows that because he ran a small background check on them. These people wouldn’t interest The Silence in the slightest. He stares at the files in front of him for a few seconds and then smacks his head.

‘I am getting old,’ he mutters. ‘Old and slow.’

Of course. It seems to obvious now. River hasn’t worked only for The Silence. She has worked also for herself.

___

A few weeks passes.
They had no luck with finding River. The NCA even asked for Interpol’s help, but even they were clueless and helpless where and how to start looking for her. He doesn’t even know why, but he still works for The NCA. He might not be able to find River, but he can hunt down The Silence. Somehow, it became his new obsession – discovering and unravelling their plans before they have a chance to put them into motion. He seems to be able to tell where and when they’ll strike next – whether it’s a drug deal or a meeting of low rank operatives. Most of the arrested don’t talk – and if they do, they know next to nothing, but slowly they’re getting some information. It’s not much: dates of the next deal going down or a few names but it helps to put some cracks on The Silence’s armour. Personally, he can’t wait for the day when The Silence will fall.

That’s what occupies his working hours. During his personal time he meets with the Ponds and the gang from his previous station. Everyone’s lives seem to be getting back to normal and it looks like everyone is slowly getting over River’s betrayal. Everyone but him. While his professional interest shifted – he’s more focused on bringing down The Silence rather than finding her, River is still #1 on the list of his personal interests. His living room starts looking like he’s an obsessive creep stalking a girl and he thinks that he might just be that person. He put a large world map on one of his walls and marked all the places River had been, lived or committed a crime. Every single place is carefully described with a date, the place where the crime exactly happened and a short biography of the killed person.

He also put a bunch of post-its everywhere and every single one contains information about River. It’s either something from her files, pieces he deduced or something she told him herself. He’s not sure if he can trust either of these sources and that’s why on a sunny and warm morning he goes to the city’s library.

He’s been thinking about one thing in particular – the fact that River was adopted. The story checked out to be true – at least to an extent. There are papers claiming that, indeed, River was adopted at the age of 8. However, that’s it – no other documents exist. While he managed to find the names of her adoptive parents, he had no luck with finding them – it seems that they disappeared in thin air. Or maybe they never existed? He tried to pull some strings, but his source turned out to be just as helpless – all the paperwork regarding River’s adoption simply vanished. There were traces, of course – a line mentioned here, a single page of paper there – but nothing more. Something here doesn’t stick together and he’s determined to find out what. He knows it’s a long shot, but he has to try.

He starts with the newspapers from the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. Assuming River lied that her mother left her at the hospital, there’s a small possibility that she was orphaned in a way that left some imprint. Things like that happen all the time – car accidents where both parents die, a domestic ending violently or both parents dying early because of an illness. And since the public loves drama, stories like that find their way into newspapers.

At first, his search is unsuccessful. He goes through about a dozen of old newspapers and finds nothing. His eyes start to burn and he wants through sneeze because of the dust accumulated on the pages. With every turned page on which he finds nothing, he feels like his hypothesis has been terribly, terribly wrong.

Promising himself that it’s going to be the last newspaper he checks, he opens one from 22nd March 1977. Nothing catches his attention until he his page 6. There’s a column titled ‘A murder of a policeman and his wife’ and he starts reading it – more out of boredom than belief that he can find anything helpful there. However, by the time he gets to the end of the second paragraph, his heart is beating loudly in his chest. On March 21st, Charles W. and his wife were brutally murdered in their sleep. The killer broke into their house and killed them in their bed, leaving multiple wounds and mutilating their bodies. The murdered marriage had a daughter and she was the only person who
survived the attack. She was the one who ran to get the neighbours in the morning, after waking up and finding her parents dead. Her name was... Melody. At this point, he stops reading and takes in a deep breath. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. He never expected to find something like this. Sure, he doesn’t know if the little girl is River but something tells him that it’s her. His hands grip the newspaper tightly and he forces himself to keep reading the article.

‘While there’s no proof, it is believed that the crime was committed by a group that’s been trying to take over the drug market,’ he reads. ‘Detective Charles W. was known for his attempts to bring down the drug dealers and changing anti-drug laws. However, there are no witnesses who could testify and help the police in finding the killer. It’s also not known what will happen with the daughter of the murdered couple. Little Melody has no immediate family and for now is staying in the city’s orphanage.’

‘Fuck,’ he says quietly. In a strange and terrifying way everything in this article makes sense. The little girl who survived the attack was 8 years old, the same age River was when she was adopted. No immediate family would mean that she was in the system for gods know how long. As for the murder of her parents... If the story is true and her father fought the drug dealers, he might’ve stumbled upon The Silence in the early stages of their activity. It seems that nothing has changed since then – they still take out the people who endanger them and their business. He swallows through a lump in his throat and stares at a small and grainy photograph at the end of the article. It shows a little girl with wild and unruly curls. It must be a private picture, a photo someone took from the family album because the girl – Melody – is smiling broadly at whoever is taking the picture. It’s a picture from nearly 30 years ago but he knows the face in it. There’s no mistaking this hair or the strong nose, nor he’d ever mistake these eyes for someone else’s. After all, he’s spent the last few months studying this face almost religiously. He’s looking at the picture of young River, he’s sure of that. He carefully folds the newspaper and runs trembling fingers through his hair. When he started looking for some hidden truths, he hoped rather than really believed that he’d find something. And now when he found something – something big and game changing, he wishes he could erase it all from his mind. He might’ve just discovered the truth about River, but his discovery left him with a heavy heart and bitter taste in his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

so remember how last week I said that the updates might be a bit slower now? yeah, me too. now it looks like I've been lying. I was not. things happened (or rather they didn't happen) and I had a lot of free time at work this week, and I kind of just broke and went 'fuck this, I am writing an update'. so here it is. but i can't tell when the next one will be.

anyway: thank you for all the comments on the previous chapter! I was a bit overwhelmed with the positive response? thank you, it really means a lot. hope you'll like this chapter as well. I think that River may come back in the next one, but we'll see how that goes. hope you had a lovely weekend and that this week will be pleasant for you.

chapter title from 'tragedy bound' by the bravery.
It’s been two weeks but he’s still not been able to let go of the information he found in the library. He’s been trying to find something more – both about the man who was killed, presumably River’s father – and River’s adoption. And he hates to admit it but he hit dead ends in both of these cases. Cases this old aren’t digitalised and he doesn’t have clearance to open the case and investigate it. From what he managed to gather, the case remained unsolved – there were no witnesses or evidence. That fact itself makes him nearly certain it was done by The Silence but he has nothing else to prove it.

However, the thing that bothers him more is River’s adoption. Sure, he has the name of the orphanage she stayed in – officially stayed in, if you believe her story about being left at the hospital – but no one from the people who used to work there, remembers River. He found the adoption papers and once again tried to contact River’s adoptive parents but he couldn’t find them anywhere. It’s like they disappeared into thin air or haven’t even existed.

He came up with this idea – he knows it’s ridiculous and sounds like something from a crappy political fiction but the more he thinks about it, the more he thinks it must be true. What if River was adopted by someone from The Silence and trained to become who she is? It makes no real sense: a child is not a weapon but once she grows up...

What also bothers him is the fact that from all the possible professions, River chose to be a detective. She could’ve worked only for The Silence – she’d be their hired gun, no worries about taxes or problems with finding a job – and yet she decided to do something more. The fact that she was a bloody good detective doesn’t make his deductions any easier. She could’ve tanked every case she’s been part of but she didn’t. She solved every single case that was sent her way – even some cases regarding The Silence. It confuses the living daylights out of him and no matter how long he thinks about it, he still can’t find an explanation for her actions. The more he learns about River, the more mysterious she gets and as much as he loathes to admit it, it thrills him.

He should let it go, he knows this much. Nothing good can come out from him meddling in the affairs from the past. But... There’s always a ‘but’ poking on the inside if his skull. ‘But you have to check this! Oh sure, it could be tiring and boring but what if it’s important?’ And so he spends hours researching and checking various databases, always coming up with the same result: nothing. He slowly realises that with his limited access he can’t browse all the databases where some information is stored but he’s reluctant about sharing his idea with anyone else. He hasn’t mentioned his new discovery to Morgan – which is quite shitty of him if you think about it. Morgan is his boss and he’s currently taking a beating from his boss over the fact that River’s still out there and they haven’t even come close to capturing her. There were a few times when he was ready to go to Morgan’s office and share his news but there was always something stopping him. He feels weirdly protective of the information he gathered and he doesn’t want to share it with anyone, even though he knows that an outsider’s insight could be helpful.

(He tells himself that he’s protective of the information, not of River. The fact that information is about her - it means nothing. He just wants to protect the secrecy and integrity of his investigation, that’s all.)

He knows there’s one person who could help him with the search and keep the secrecy. And he knows that he should call her right now and offer her life-time supply of tea if she agrees to help him,
but he’s still hesitant. What he plans to do is potentially dangerous and while he doesn’t mind putting himself in risky situations, he doesn’t want to endanger anyone else. But then again... His hand digs in the pocket of his trousers and he pulls out his phone. He quickly searches for a familiar name in his contact list and is about to press ‘dial’, when the door to his office open and Morgan walks inside.

‘Something happened?’ He asks with a sigh and puts away his phone.

‘Yes,’ Morgan says and sits in a chair opposite of him. ‘You know Ivan Nikolayevich, don’t you?’

‘Yeah, I do,’ he replies. Nikolayevich was the guy he and River caught during their mission with The Drug Squad. Well, to be fair, River was the one who made it possible to catch him. She was the one in the field and he was the one in the van, but you know – it’s all semantics and not that important anymore. ‘What about him?’

‘You know he’s been doing his best to stay in the country?’ Morgan asks and he nods his head. ‘The guys from Drug Squad decided to cooperate with him. He proved to be quite a valuable asset, but he was a low rank operative, so sooner rather than later he stopped being useful. He fulfilled his part of the contract and now the Drug Squad fulfilled their part, which is shortening his prison sentence.’

‘And you’re telling me this because?’ He shrugs.

‘I’m telling you this because Nikolayevich is here and wants to work with us,’ Morgan says. ‘Hey, don’t look at me. That’s all I know. The Drug guys called me 30 minutes ago and brought him 15 minutes later. Apparently, Nikolayevich knows something that could be useful for us.’

‘But why now?’ He says, sitting straight in his chair. ‘He suddenly remembered that he has some information and that he could help us? It doesn’t make sense. He could be trying to drag us into something.’

‘Yeah, I thought the same thing. But from what I gathered, he’s scared that The Silence will get him once he’s left alone in prison. He’s a player and he knows how they play.’

He nods. Yes, this would make sense. The longer Nikolayevich stays out of prison, the more chances he has of surviving. If his bosses know he started spilling, he’s as good as dead. No wonder he clings to every chance of staying alive. In the end, this was what River did, wasn’t it? She escaped before The Silence could get her. He shakes his head and tries to will this thought away. It’s not the right time to think about River.

‘Right then, so what’s the plan? When can we talk with him?’ He asks.

‘The plan is that it’s not we but you, who’s going to talk with him. And you’re going to do this right now,’ Morgan responds.

They quickly make their way to the interrogation room. He’s been in this place a thousand times since River’s interrogation and yet, it’s the first and only image that comes to his mind every time he enters this room. For a minute or so, they’re just observing Nikolayevich from the adjoining room. He’s sitting at the table, dressed in a nice looking suit and there are no handcuffs around his wrists. He looks calm and collected, like a businessman before an important meeting. And in a way he is just this: someone trying to sell his information to a very important and influential buyer.

‘Okay, I’m going in,’ he finally says and tugs at his bow tie. ‘Wish me luck?’

‘You don’t need luck,’ Morgan says. ‘Just don’t try to be too smart. And wait, take this,’ he says and hands him a folder with some papers inside. ‘Go through these. These are files on this guy. And something else is there at the end. I think you should show it to him.’
He quickly skips to the last page of the folder and sees what Morgan was talking about. He stares at it for a few seconds and then nods his head.

‘Sure thing, boss,’ he says and walks out of the room. He quickly skims through the files in his hand before walking into the interrogation room. From what he sees, Nikolayevich seems like a simple and honest man. Sure, he dealt drugs – or was a person who was supposed to deliver a package to a place – but somehow it looks like he was there by chance, not because he wanted to be there. But he’s careful in his judgement – Nikolayevich may be just a very smart and talented player. Who knows, maybe he’s been pretending the whole time? He wouldn’t be the first.

He walks inside the interrogation room and quickly sits behind the table.

‘Good morning,’ he says and nods his head. ‘I’m detective John Smith. I’ll be conducting this questioning. Now, tell me... Why are you here?’

‘I have information,’ Nikolayevich says. His voice sounds slightly hoarse, as if he hasn’t used it in a while.

‘We know that. But what kind of information?’

‘About The Silence. I know things. I can tell you what I know,’ Nikolayevich says, wetting his lips with his tongue.

‘See, the thing is that we also know quite a lot about The Silence,’ he says with a shrug. ‘What makes you think that we’d be interested in what you have to say about them?’

‘But I helped! I helped the other guys, you ask them!’ Nikolayevich says heatedly. ‘I can help you as well!’

‘Anyone can say that, Ivan,’ he responds. ‘Can I call you that? Good. I want to believe you. And I think that we could work together really well, but it’s difficult to believe you just like that. Tell us what you know and we’ll see if it’s of any use to us. If it is – I am sure we’ll be able to make a deal.’

‘No, I am not telling you anything. No way. Not now,’ Nikolayevich shakes his head. ‘You’ll get what you need from me and then you’ll put be in prison.’

‘And why would we do that? If you are a valuable asset, why would you put you where we can’t protect you?’ He asks. ‘Listen, I know it’s not easy for you to trust us but if you want to get something from us, you have to give us something first. And if you don’t want to tell us everything you know, just tell us what kind of information you have. Just that.’

Nikolayevich is considering it for a few moments and then nods his head.

‘Fine,’ he says, his voice breaks slightly. ‘I know... I have some information about the Russian part of The Silence.’

‘So do we,’ he responds but his heart starts beating a bit faster.

‘But I know about their safe houses. Places where they produce drugs. Distribution canals,’ Nikolayevich says and for the first time since the conversation started, he sounds sure of himself. ‘And I know who from the government helps them.’

That catches him off guard. If Nikolayevich is saying the truth, what he knows is worth a lot. But something here is not right.
'How do you know it?' He asks, leaning over the table. ‘No offense, but you don’t seem like a brain of the operation.’

Ivan shrugs.

‘I wasn’t. I was more of an errand boy but you pick up a thing or two when you go all over the city to pass a message or deliver something. And the bosses talk. They think that people like me don’t understand. But we do.’

‘How do we know that the information you claim to have is still valid?’ He asks and Nikolayevich shrugs.

‘You don’t know that and neither do I. But are you going to take a risk of letting me go and losing everything I know?’

He’s right – they can't risk that. He nods his head.

‘Well then,’ he sighs. ‘It seems that you got yourself a deal. At least for now.’

For another hour he questions Nikolayevich. Not about the big stuff, not about the information he supposedly has, but about his role in The Silence’s structure. Just like he thought – Nikolayevich was more of a pawn and he was randomly chosen to deliver the drugs on the night he was caught. Every answer given by Nikolayevich sounds sincere but he knows they’ll have to check everything out, just to make sure that they’re not being made.

The questioning is nearly over and he makes a move to stand up when he remembers the files Morgan handed him earlier. He quickly opens the folder at the last page and his gaze falls on a picture of River. It’s a picture from her work file and she looks so refreshingly ordinary and normal there – like his friend and partner, not the killer she turned out to be – that he barely can stop himself from sighing with longing.

‘Do you recognise this woman?’ He asks after showing Nikolayevich the picture.

‘Of course I do,’ Ivan responds. ‘She’s the one who shot me, isn’t she?’

He looks up in surprise. He expected Nikolayevich to say that he knows River as The Silence’s sniper and not just a person who shot him.

‘Are you sure? You don’t recognise her from somewhere else?’

Nikolayevich stares at the picture for a few more seconds but in the end shakes his head. Morgan walks inside the room – he’s accompanied by a lawyer – and he uses this opportunity to leave and let someone else take over the interrogation.

He walks to his room not paying attention to anyone or anything on his way. The fact that Nikolayevich recognised River only as the person who had shot him, baffled him. Well, maybe not baffled, not exactly, but it certainly made him wonder.

Why doesn’t Nikolayevich know about River? He was a low rank errand boy but surely a person like River – The Silence’s private sniper who worked as a detective - would become a topic of conversations, right? Hell, he wouldn’t be surprised if she was some kind of urban legend in The Silence’s circles. And yet... There are a few explanations and first and the easiest one is: Nikolayevich lied. He quickly dismisses this one. Nikolayevich had no reason to lie about it – if he knew about River, he’d definitely share this piece of information. There’s another possibility, he thinks as he sits in his chair. It’s quite possible that River’s identity has been protected not only from
the people outside of The Silence, but also from its members. Maybe she was that important to them –
important enough to protect her from any harm or accidental exposure. There are probably a
dozen of other possibilities but he doesn’t want to think about them right now – there are more than enough
thoughts in his head as it is. Gods, everything is such a mess. He just wants to find some answers
about River – right now he’d take just anything, really – but all he gets is a question after a question.
Exactly the same thing happens with The Silence – every time he thinks he gets closer to finding
something out, the answer he gets covers only half of what he wants to know. He really hopes that
Nikolayevich’s help will change it.

It’s ridiculous that there was a time when he feared that Nikolayevich is a liar who just wants to use
them to get out of prison. The past few weeks proved how honest of a man he really is – or how
honest he decided to be after he’d gotten caught. He still can’t believe how much has happened in
the last month or so. With Nikolayevich’s help them managed not only to gather more info on The
Silence – some small, yet still important facts – but they also actually succeeded in stopping a few big
drug deals from happening. But that’s far from over – they started working with the Russians. Oh
yes. The fact that the Russian embassy and police force agreed to cooperate came as a surprise to
everyone but no one thought twice about accepting the offer. It was ‘one-in-a-million’ kind of deal
and no one wanted to waste it. Together they managed to dismantle a large, Russian-based web of
warehouses that produced drugs. With the information from the Russian government they took down
a club that was just a cover-up story of major money laundering and drug dealing. And since the club
was in London and was incredibly popular among teenagers, the press got a hold of the story and it
appeared in basically every newspaper in England. Suddenly, he was England’s new hero – yes, he
personally. Morgan made him the face of the operation and the whole attention was focused on him.
He had to sit through two incredibly long press conferences and answer questions not only about the
case but also ones of personal nature. Seriously, why would people care if he’s single? It’s his
business! He got invited to various talk-shows – a few offers he refused without even thinking about
them. Hell, he even got recognised on the street a few times, mostly by mothers who nearly
smothered him with their gratitude for saving their precious children from the claws of drug dealers.
His co-workers took to mocking him – in a friendly manner, but it even that got tiring in a while.

His efforts didn’t go unnoticed by his bosses either. He got a raise, got his back patted and his name
is now well-known by the people in power. In other words, he became the NCA’s poster boy. And
that’s probably why he’s now at a party celebrating the success of Russian-English cooperation.
Which normally would be perfectly nice but this particular party is hosted by Very Important People.
And it’s in British Embassy in Moscow. Yeah. He’s even wearing a tux, for god’s sake! That’s how
important and high-brow this party is. He’s here with vice-commissioner of British police force and
he’s the only person he knows. Sure, he finally met the detectives with whom he worked on the case
but he only talked with them during the dinner. Now all the guests – and there are about 100 of them
– are roaming freely in the ball room: chatting and drinking champagne that is carried around by
silent and efficient waiters.

He sighs and tries to deposit of his champagne flute in an inconspicuous manner. He’s never been
one to drink and tonight alcohol is the last thing he wants. It’s not that he doesn’t feel like celebrating
– he most definitely does. He and his colleagues – both from his department and Russia – did a great
job. The past few weeks have been tiring and crazy, and everyone involved in this case deserves a
break and a nice party. But for some reason, he feels all jittery and nervous. He feels like someone is
observing him but every time he looks around, he doesn’t see anyone. It’s probably all in his head.
He’s getting paranoid in his old age. Or maybe he just needs a breath of fresh air to calm his nerves.
He makes his way through the crowded room, heading to the balcony doors and taking a step
outside.
‘Already better,’ he mutters under his breath, walking a few more steps and leaning on the railing. It’s slightly chilly outside – it’s already September after all – but he welcomes it after the warm and stuffy air of the ballroom. He feels a bit ungrateful to leave a party like that but he really needed a break. It all got a bit... overwhelming. He’s in a foreign country, at a party honouring something he and his colleagues have achieved. He had some successful missions in the past but never something this big, not something that resonated so widely in the world. He made a difference and while it feels amazing, it also feels quite daunting. He achieved something so big but what comes next? Shouldn’t he try to top it and achieve something even bigger and greater? Is it even possible? He sure knows that he’d like to focus on now but-

His thoughts are interrupted by the strange feeling of being watched. It stopped for a while but he can feel it again: prickling at the back of his neck, sending shivers down his spine. He hears heels clicking on the tiles and the balcony doors creaking open. ‘There goes my hiding place,’ he thinks bitterly.

‘Hello, sweetie,’ a familiar voice cuts through him like scalpel.

What?

No. No. It’s impossible. No.

In the future, when he’ll think about this encounter, he’ll like to say that he turned away with poise and grace, wearing a face expression that said ‘I am mildly surprised but still in control’. He’ll want to say that his heart wasn’t beating wildly in his chest as if it was trying to break through his ribs and fall out. He’ll like to say that he didn’t feel sudden rush of heat running through his body and that he didn’t become more alert and super aware of every tiny thing around him. He will like to say all these things but he won’t be able to: he turns too quickly and slides on the slippery tiles and starts flailing his arms to regain his balance. He’s pretty sure that his face is the shade of a ripe tomato and if he looks as shocked as he feels, he must look like a very surprised tomato. When he finally manages to stand straight, he looks at the person standing in front of him, the one who caused him so much distress just a second ago – and a lot distress in general. And he’s staring at no one else but River Song.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ He squeaks out. Not his best opening line but it’ll have to make do.

‘No ‘I’m glad to see you?’ No ‘It’s been ages?’ No ‘You look great?’ Oh my, I must be losing my touch,’ River says and smirks.

She takes a few steps in his direction and he wills himself not to take a step back. He can’t believe it’s happening, it just can’t be true. Shit. Maybe he shouldn’t have had that sip of champagne earlier? But it seems that it’s not a drunken trick his mind decided to play on him – River is really standing in front of him. She’s wearing a green dress that shimmers slightly in the light from the ballroom. Her hair is pulled in some kind of updo and she looks nothing like a fugitive that the Interpol is looking for.

‘Right, where are my manners,’ he says through gritted teeth. ‘You look great and it’s been ages since you escaped from the arrest and gave a concussion to the detective who was interrogating you.’

River laughs quietly and his heart aches at the sound of it. God. Did he really miss the sound of her laughter so much? It's quite pathetic.

‘Not my fault that he made it so easy for me to escape,’ River shrugs lightly. ‘Besides, he is an asshole. You must know that.’
‘Sure, I know that,’ he replies, watching as she walks to the railing and leans over it. There’s about a feet of space between them now. ‘I also know that you are a wanted fugitive and that I have every right to arrest you right now and take you back to England.’

‘I see you got all strict. Not that I mind,’ River says playfully. ‘Besides, I’d really like to see you try to do it.’

‘And why is that?’ He asks, leaning towards her. He knows he should keep his distance and don’t get too close to her; she’s dangerous and gods only know what she could do to him. But it seems like his body has a mind of his own and it draws him to her as if she is a magnet and he is a piece of iron.

‘Tell me you’re joking,’ River rolls her eyes impatiently and it feels like nothing has changed, like they’re still partners and River is explaining him something obvious. ‘Look where we are. Look who is here. Do you really think I could get inside as a guest if I wasn’t here with someone important? If your answer is ‘yes’, then thank you for having so much faith in my abilities. But I’ll have to disappoint you: I did not get here on my own.’

Something clicks in his brain at her words. She’s right – this party if full of high-placed police officials and people from both British and Russian governments. The guests must’ve been thoroughly scanned and checked and no one in their right mind would have let River in. Someone must’ve invited her despite her reputation – or because of it. Arresting River would be like stirring storm into a cup full of shit. He’s pretty sure it’d cause an international scandal and that’s the last thing he wants to do right now. He needs to tread carefully.

‘Who are you with then?’ He asks and cringes at how angry this question sounds. Angry and jealous.

‘I am sure you’ll see it by the end of the party,’ River replies and turns to stare at the garden in front of them.

‘Why are you here?’ He keeps on asking, pretty sure he won’t get any answers – at least not any of value.

‘Spoilers,’ River replies with a hint of laughter in her voice. She turns her head to face him and speaks again. ‘But there’s no mystery in why you’re here. You made a lot of noise back home, didn’t you? Catching bad boys, closing clubs and warehouses. No wonder they wanted to show off their prized stallion here.’

‘Prized stallion? Don’t be ridiculous,’ he snorts. ‘I’m not a horse.’

‘Oh, what would you like me to call you then? Is ‘beloved pony’ more appropriate?’ River says and her mouth twitches in a smile. ‘See, there’s a joke about riding to be made. But since I know how you can blush, I’m not going to make it.’

‘River,’ he hisses out and once again he’s stunned by how easy and familiar it all seems. He’s standing here with her and it’s like nothing has changed: they’re bickering. River is making fun of him and he’s trying his best to keep up with her. It’s easy – way too easy to forget about reality and who they are. They’re not friends, not anymore. He shakes his head and clears his throat. ‘No, really why are you here? Are you planning on killing someone? It might be a bit difficult to do it with so many witnesses around.’

‘Maybe I’m not be here to kill someone. Maybe I’m just here to fuck someone,’ River asks sharply. ‘Ever thought about that?’
‘Changing professions?’ He says and feels heat on his face once again.

‘Maybe,’ River says with a shrug. ‘The second one doesn’t need so much effort. And please tell me, which one would you prefer me to do?’

He doesn’t respond to this, not really trusting his voice - instead he asks her another question.

‘Anyway, shouldn’t you be angry at me? I messed up with your bosses’ business.’

For a few moments River just stares at him and says nothing. When she finally speaks, her voice is devoid of any previous teasing and amusement.

‘Maybe I don’t mind it at all,’ she says and sounds a bit tired. ‘You just- Oh, never mind. Now excuse me, I have to go. It was nice catching up with you.’

Before he can react in any way, she’s already gone, lost among the crowd in the ballroom. He tries to look for her through the rest of the party, hoping to see who invited her. While earlier he was jittery, now he feels like he’s running on pure adrenaline. His mind is buzzing with questions. Why is River here? Who invited her and what for? Is she on a mission to kill someone, who will it be? And who hired her? He wonders all of that and his eyes keep on scanning the crowd all the time. He finally spots River at the very end of the party when some of the guests are gone: she’s talking with a young man, a new executive at The Federal Drug Control Service of the Russian Federation. What was his name... Boris? Yes, Boris. He appeared on the political and anti-drug stage less than a year ago but he made quite an impression right from the beginning. He started off as a minor employee of The Federal Drug Control Service but he climbed the ladder quickly and efficiently. He was the one who drew a new policy regarding drug dealing and production and it was one of the most severe laws in this part of the world. It was obvious that someone – namely The Silence – would take interest in him sooner or later and if they didn’t manage to buy or threaten him into submission, they’d try to take care of him a different way. And now River is talking with him – and the way they’re standing next to each other, their body language and hushed tone of their conversation clearly suggests that they know each other quite well, if not intimately. This thought makes his stomach turn but he does not really know why. Is it the thought of some poor guy falling for River’s trick so terrifying to him or is it the thought of River with another man that makes him want to retch? He’s not sure and he doesn’t want to dwell on that. For a moment he hopes to catch Boris alone and tell him who River is but he doesn’t have a chance – they quickly leave the party together and he can’t do anything to stop them. Technically, he could go after them – convince his driver to follow their limousine – but being arrested for stalking a high placed Russian official is not on the list of his priorities. He goes back to his hotel room, alone and unhappy and he barely sleeps during the night. His plane back to London leaves late in the evening, so he uses his free time to walk around Moscow. And even though he tries to watch the city and absorb its beauty, his mind constantly wanders to the encounter with River. He still doesn’t understand why she was there and why would someone fighting drug dealers invite her as his plus one – and then take her home. Presumably, of course. He checks the newspapers but there’s nothing about any murder – how disappointing, really. And by ‘disappointing’ he means ‘great’. It’s great that no one got murdered and especially that said no one is the guy from The Federal Drug Control Service. Good and long life to him. Cheers.

When a few hours later he’s leaving Moscow, he can’t help but wonder: will he meet River ever again? Right in the beginning, just after she escaped and he took over her case, he was sure that sooner or later he’ll meet her again. But time has passed and he hasn’t come closer to catching her, and his strong belief that one day they’ll meet again started wavering. Lately, he hasn’t thought about it at all: sure, he thought about ways of catching her but he never really thought he will ever see her again, not after all this time. Last night she just appeared in his life, sizzling and shining, full of secrets and he couldn’t stop himself from being drawn into it, into the mystery of her. And as much
as he pretends to hate it, deep down inside he knows that he doesn’t.

On the contrary: he loves it.

Chapter End Notes

yay, an update! or 'nay, an update’, since I am not sure how I feel about it, but here it is at last - it's been what, 2 weeks? or 3 weeks? since I last updated. but work has been a bit hectic and I didn't really have time to write.

thank you for all the comments under the last chapter! it's nice to know that you enjoyed it. and this is special message to two people who said that they read this story in one go: you are insane. in-fucking-sane. but I am not going to lie, it did make me happy to read that you got engaged enough to read it all in one go. still, I admire your dedication. (also, fun fact: this story has over 300 pages now. which is quite sad, because I think that I could have written the same story in much shorter way. oh well. but maybe I'll learn from this mistake and in the future I'll be able to stop my over-wordiness. let's hope so.)

well, I hope you'll enjoy this chapter. I'll try to update as soon as I can, which is... somewhen in the future. have a lovely week!

the title comes from Editors' 'Sugar'.
well it's a big big city and it's always the same

He really wishes he’d get paid every time someone wakes him up by pounding on his door. He’d be a millionaire by now. Okay, maybe not a millionaire but he’d be able to buy a new car. Not that he needs a new car. And okay, fine, he wouldn’t be able to buy a new car. Maybe a toy car. But the point still stands – people like to wake him up by knocking on his door in early hours of the morning. He got back from Moscow around 8pm, but it took him nearly two hours to get home from the airport and once he was home, he was too buzzed to go to sleep. River was still on his mind and he kept asking himself the same old questions. When he finally fell asleep, it was around 2am and now it’s... 7:03am. And someone is trying to knock his door down – at least this is how it sounds. He slowly gets out of his bed, yawning loudly and rubbing his eyes sleepily. What the hell? Can’t people sleep or at least let him sleep? He opens the door and peers outside, only to see Clara standing outside, impatiently bouncing from one foot to another.

‘Finally, you’re awake!’ She exclaims and barges into his flat. ‘You are going to buy me breakfast.’

‘I what?’ He asks slowly. What is she talking about and why is she so excited? Has he missed something?

‘You are buying me breakfast,’ Clara repeats, a wide grin on her face. ‘And you’ll do it with a smile because I have information that will interest you.’

That jolts him awake. A few weeks ago he finally asked Clara for help. He knew that she has access to databases he can’t check. He gave her some vague information about the case he was interested in – the murder of River’s parents – and asked her to be discreet. He hasn’t expected much – the case is old, unsolved and there’s probably no trace of it anywhere but as it turns out, Clara managed to dig something out.

‘Just give me 10 minutes!’ He exclaims. ‘No, wait. 5 minutes. Give me 5 minutes and don’t you dare to move!’

He gets ready in 6 minutes. Cold shower washes the remains of sleep from his body but it’s the excitement that truly wakes him up. There’s a good chance that in a few minutes he’s going to find out something more about River! It’s definitely worth getting out of the bed for. However, things do not go according to the plan. Well, not according to his plan because they go most definitely according to Clara’s plan. She takes him to a small cafe situated 5 minutes away from his apartment. Then she spends nearly 10 minutes on studying the menu and wondering what she should choose. When she finally orders, he starts wondering if he has enough money on him to pay for all of that. Apparently, Clara is one of these people who can eat cereal, a stack of pancakes, scrambled eggs, beans and some fresh fruit in one go. Their waitress puts a plate after plate on their small table and Clara starts eating. He can only stare at each dish disappearing in a matter of minutes and he keeps on wondering how someone so small can eat so much. During the whole breakfast – Clara’s breakfast, since he only ordered tea – Clara keeps on briefing him on everything that has happened at the station recently. And as much as he loves hearing about his previous workplace and co-workers, he’s dying to find out what exactly Clara found out about River. He taps his fingers on the table and nods politely at everything Clara says. He answers her questions and tells her about the trip to Moscow – and conveniently forgets to mention that he met River there.

About 30 minutes later, Clara finishes her fruits and looks at him with a smirk on her face.
'Look at you, being all patient,' she says. 'I can’t believe you lasted this long! And here you are,’ she says and takes out an envelope from her bag. It’s thin and he nearly tears it while opening but Clara gently stops him from reading the documents right then and there.

'You know, I was more than surprised when you asked me to find something about this case,’ she says. ‘It’s old and unsolved, and it’s out of your area of interest. But I thought ‘fair enough, maybe he’s bored.’ But you weren’t bored, were you?’ She asks and he looks down. ‘I can pretend all I want that I haven’t noticed the lovely analogy between the little girl’s name and... River’s last name,’ Clara says the last few words as if they’re a curse. In a way they are, he muses. ‘Not to mention that ‘Melody’ is a name she used on one of her fake passports. What the hell are you trying to do, John?’

‘Find out the truth?’ He says but even in his ears it sounds like a question. If he’s to be honest, he has no idea what he really wants to achieve with this little investigation. He wants to find out more about River. He wants to dissect her, put her under a microscope and understand every single thing about her. He needs to do it: something urges him to do it, no matter what the costs.

‘And will it change anything? You’ll find out that she had a troubled childhood and everything she did becomes irrelevant?’ Clara asks sharply.

‘No, it’s not like that,’ he shakes his head. Clara looks at him quizzically. For a few seconds he’s lost for words. He himself doesn’t exactly understand why he’s so hell bent on finding out the truth about that murder. No matter what he finds out, it won’t change what River did and who she is. And yet – something pushes him there, to discover and unravel the truth. He sighs before speaking again. ‘I just need to understand it. Or try to understand it at least. It won’t change anything but...’ he stops and shrugs. He can’t explain it but when he looks at Clara, he realises that he doesn’t have to explain anything. She wears that look on her face – one of sudden and complete understanding. She does that sometimes. She’ll look at you and you’ll feel like you don’t have to explain yourself because she already understands you. Sometimes he feels like she lived more than just once life, like she experienced more than she could have experienced.

‘Okay,’ she finally says. ‘Just whatever you do or find out... Don’t do anything stupid. It’s not like I can be everywhere to save your ass. And if Donna or anyone else finds out about it, I’m going to say you forced me to do it. Just so you know.’

He smiles and nods his head. They talk for a few more minutes, but Clara must sense how eager he is to read everything she found and she quickly bids her goodbyes and thanks him for her breakfast. He heads straight to his flat, clutching the files in his hand. All this thoughts are focused on the folder in his grasp – and then he sees a headline in a today’s newspaper.

'The miraculous rescue of a Russian politician!'  

Under it there’s a picture of no one else but the young man River accompanied to the party.  

‘Shit,’ he exclaims and that earns him a few unfriendly glares from the people passing him by. They also must be wondering why he’s staring at the headline in Daily Mail as if he was enchanted. He quickly shakes off initial shock and buys the newspaper. By the time he’s at his flat, the article is already read and the mess in his head grows bigger with every second.

**Bad news:** someone wanted to kill Boris what-his-face. **Good news:** they failed and he is alive. **Not sure if bad or good news:** the killer was stopped and killed by Boris’ bodyguard. When he read that paragraph, his heart was in his throat until it turned out that the killer wasn’t River. It was just some thug, unidentified and unknown to both Boris and the police. However, a comment made by Boris makes him wonder if River anything to do with the rescue. The assassin was killed with a single shot to his head – something he associates with River. Sure, anyone could shoot like that, but there’s
something in Boris comment – this pure awe of the skills of his bodyguard... If you add this to the fact that the incident happened around 3am last night and that Boris left the party with River – this means she could be there with him. But why would she protect him? Assuming that it was the Silence who was behind the attempt, River would be the one carrying it out, not stopping it. But it was Boris who invited her to the party. He knew who she is, she basically admitted this much. He must’ve realised he was in danger and asked her to protect him. And River agreed because... Exactly, why would she do it? Money? Could be. They froze her accounts, but it’s possible that she had others that they didn’t get. Still, new identity, fake IDs, moving from one place to another – all of this must cost money. But would money be enough to make her attend a party full of police officers and politicians? She had too much to lose. No, there must be something else. But what?

He sits on his sofa and rubs his face. This is exactly what he needed: more questions. Why can’t life hand him a set of answers just once? Then he remembers a folder that Clara gave him. He glares at it for a few seconds – if it only dares to give him more questions – and opens it. There are only a few pages, but it’s still something. And once he reads everything, he decides that he owes Clara another breakfast. And lunch. And dinner – actually, he owes her whatever her heart desires. Not only she managed to find a current address of a person who worked at the orphanage when River was staying the – supposedly staying in – but she also found something about the murdered man. Apparently, he was someone more than just a regular policeman. He was deeply invested in fighting the drug dealers and changing the way the police functioned. He was working on something called ‘The Mainframe’. There’s nothing else about it in the files that Clara gave him, but the name sounds familiar to him.

‘The Mainframe,’ he stands up and starts walking in his living room. ‘The Mainframe... The Mainframe...’

Then it hits him and the realisation nearly makes him sit down in shock. Of course he knows this name. The Mainframe was the first name of The Medusa Project.

Oh crap.

It looks that the man he believes to be River’s father, helped to start and develop the Medusa Project and then was murdered, probably because of his involvement in it. Shit. He’s not sure whether it’s good news or bad news, but one thing he knows for sure: things just got even more complicated.

___

And just like that, he finds himself in a middle of an elaborate game of cat and mouse with River: a game she’s probably not aware of. He knows he shouldn’t do that: it’s one thing to try and bring down The Silence when you have police force behind you, but it’s something completely different when you try to track a hired gun on your own. There’s still a formal investigation going on and the Interpol is still trying to find River, but it seems that even they are losing their interest and faith in finding her. He hasn’t informed anyone about the fact that he met River less than a week ago. He meant to do that, he did but something stopped him. Maybe he didn’t want to face the shame of seeing River and not capturing her. Maybe he just didn’t want to talk about her with anyone. He doesn’t want to think about his motivation.

He can’t help himself. He’s presented with a mystery wrapped in secrets and his fingers itch to uncover it. Of course he’ll do anything to find and catch River. Sometimes he spends evening after evening, watching news programs and translating articles from all over the world – all in hope of finding the oh so familiar face among the black letters. But except for finding out about various scandals and losing sleep, he doesn’t gain anything else. He promises himself that he’ll keep doing it only for a few more days – maybe something will come up? – and then he’ll leave it alone. Leave her alone.
And he almost does, but it’s River who destroys his plans. One evening when he comes back home, there’s a blue envelope on his doormat – its colour is nearly the same as the colour of his car. He carefully picks it up and examines it while opening his door. There’s only his address, printed, not hand-written and no address of the sender. Somehow even before he opens it, he knows it’s from River. Inside the envelope is just a piece of paper with an address on it – it’s printed in big and bold letters – and an annotation typed in a smaller font. It says ‘knock, knock’. Just as he reads it, someone knocks on his door and it startles him enough to make him jump. The knocking repeats and he slowly goes towards his door, silently wishing he had a gun with him. Not that he’d ever use it but at least he wouldn’t be defenceless. Whoever is on the opposite side of his door, knocks again. Right then. It’s either an overly polite killer or someone who doesn’t plan on murdering him. There’s just one way to find out.

He swallows and opens the door, only to find a guy from UPS there with a tired expression on his face. He’s holding another envelope in his hands – this one is bigger and plain white – and lets out a relieved sigh when he sees him.

‘John Smith?’ He asks quickly and pushes the envelope in his hands. ‘Please, sign here,’ he says on one breath and shoves a notepad with a pen under his nose.

‘But-but I didn’t order anything?’ He stutters and stares dumbly at the envelope.

‘But you’re John Smith, right? And it’s the address I was supposed to deliver it to, right?’ The courier asks and he can only nod. ‘So please, sign it. I don’t have the whole evening, you know.’

He reluctantly scribbles his name on the piece of paper and as soon as he’s done, the courier snags both the paper and the pen from his hands, shouting ‘thank you, have a good evening!’ while running down the stairs. He’s left with the white envelope in his hands. Once he closes the door, he studies it as carefully as he studied the first one. There’s nothing suspicious about it and yet he can’t bring himself to open it. ‘Oh sod it,’ he thinks after a while and tears it open. Inside he finds plane tickets to Rome (and back) and a confirmation of a reservation of a hotel room. Both things have his name on it, but he has never booked any of it. He checks the date on the tickets: they’re dated on two days from today, this Friday. He has flight back to London on Sunday. Both tickets are first class and from what he can assume about the name of the hotel and the thick paper the reservation details are printed on, it must be a 5 star one. There’s also another piece of paper in the envelope and he opens it hastily, nearly tearing it in half. This one is handwritten and he recognises River’s writing instantly. ‘See you there,’ it’s all it says.

Oh-kay.

River expects him to go to Rome and meet with her. She booked and paid for both the plane tickets and the hotel room. She gave him an address of what he assumes is a meeting point. She expects him to meet with her? Without any additional police force, without trying to capture her? She must be even more insane then he expected her to be. Sure, he did meet her and didn’t arrest her but it was different. Now he knows he’s going to meet her and he has every chance to go prepared to the meeting.

Wait. What? He’s behaving like he actually plans on going to this meeting.

Of course he’s not going to go there. Of course he isn’t.

Except... He’s curious now, even more than he was before. And he knows what they say – curiosity killed the cat and all that. But he isn’t a cat and nothing suggests that River wants to kill him. She sent him a ticket back to London! She wouldn’t waste her money like that if she planned on putting a bullet in his head, would she? That is at least what he hopes. Let’s sum it up: he has plane tickets to
and back from Rome, he has a reservation for a hotel room and a date – a meeting, he corrects himself quickly – with River Song. Maybe he’ll get a chance to capture her. If not – maybe he’ll get some clues about her whereabouts and what she’s planning to do next. He really has no choice, does he? He grins to himself as he sits on the couch, watching the plane tickets again. He is going to Rome.

On Friday he can barely sit still at work and focus on his assignments. Everyone asks him why he’s even more upbeat than usual, but he only shrugs and blames it on ‘weekend fever’. He leaves the work a bit earlier, promising Morgan to stay longer next week and then he makes a quick stop at his flat to grab his bag. He spends the entire flight shifting impatiently in his seat, wondering what exactly is waiting for him in Rome. He’s up from his seat as soon as the plane touches the ground, grabbing his carry-on and heading to the arrivals hall. He’s looking around, trying to spot whom exactly? Would River come to meet him here? He doubts it, but considering that she planned his trip herself, she probably thought about some kind of transport for him. And he’s not mistaken: there’s a man, dressed in a sharp suit, holding a card with his name on it. He slowly makes his way to him, trying to find a possible escape route in case it’s needed. He comes close to him and introduces himself. The man only nods his head and tells him to follow him. They walk outside and approach a black limousine parked just outside the door. He can’t help but whistle in admiration. Say what you want, but River doesn’t do anything half-way. He gets into the back seat, ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach and a quiet voice inside his head telling him that the car can blow up any second. Getting in a car provided by a wanted assassin? But there’s nothing he can do now – he’s in Rome, the car is already on its way to his hotel – all he can do is try to relax.

They stop at the hotel about 40 minutes later and when he leans in his seat to pay for the ride, the driver politely declines, saying that it’s already been taken care of. He shrugs and gets out, heading straight to the hotel’s lobby. Just like he thought – it’s a huge hotel, furnished with plush and expensive looking furniture, with staff wearing custom cut outfits and welcoming him with bright smiles. He quickly checks in and gets the card to his room, which is located on the last floor and has an amazing view of the city according to the person at the reception. When he reaches it and opens the door, he realises that they were absolutely right: the view from the window is truly breathtaking. The sun is slowly setting, bathing the city in orange and red lights. He can spot The Coliseum in the distance, its illumination lighting up the sky above it and basking the streets in neon lights. He checks the time – he has an hour to his meeting with River. Or maybe it’s a dinner with her, since the place she sent him the address to is a restaurant? He decides not to dwell on that and let things take their course. He takes a quick shower and changes his clothes and 15 minutes later his ready to go out. He decided to go to the meeting place on foot – it’s not that far away from where he’s staying at and he already mapped the route back at home. Besides – he’s in Rome, the evening is warm, why would he want to be stuck in a taxi? He leaves the hotel and starts his walk to the restaurant. It’s quite a walk but the weather is pleasant (seriously, how can it be so warm here in October? It’s magic!) and he likes Rome. He’s been here before, a few times and he enjoys the atmosphere of this city. He walks through the crowded city centre and stops at a small cafe to ask for directions. The owner points him in the general direction of the restaurant and with a nod of thanks he starts walking to where the guy pointed him, hoping that in the end he’ll end up in the restaurant.

The further he walks away from the city centre, the calmer the streets become. Sure, they’re still pretty noisy and bustling with life – it’s a Friday evening after all – but the crowd lessens with every step he takes. Finally, he reaches the restaurant where he’s supposed to meet River. Calling it a restaurant is being generous, he thinks, looking at the place in front of him. It’s tiny and it looks more like a hole in the wall than a restaurant but it’s not like he can do anything about it. He approaches it slowly, looking around and once again he tries to find a possible escape route. It’s better to be safe than sorry after all.

He holds his breath and walks inside the restaurant. It’s even smaller on the inside but the tables are
set in a way that allows the guests to have some privacy. The place is dark and lit only be candles standing on the tables. There are only a few guests inside and they’re either older men, drinking beer and staring at a football game that is playing on tv or couples who are too preoccupied with each other to pay attention to anyone else. No wonder River chose this place for a meeting. No one will notice them here. Speaking of River – his eyes rake over the table and he spots her. She’s sitting at a table in a corner, looking perfectly at ease but he can see that she’s aware of everything that’s happening around her. He runs fingers through his hair – his hands are shaking – and approaches her table.

‘Hello, sweetie,’ she says as he sits down. ‘Glad to see you here.’

‘You were worried I wouldn’t show up?’ He asks.

‘No, I was afraid you’d get lost,’ she replies with a smile.

For a moment neither of them speaks and he takes this time to study her. He can’t see much in the flickering candlelight but he can see that she looks tired. There are shadows under her eyes and she looks a bit weary, even though she tries her best to look like she’s at her best: she’s sitting straight, her make-up is perfectly applied and her hair is reflecting the light that shines on it. Her curls seem to be darker then usually and she’s wearing a grey, simple dress – something she would never wear before. It’s like she tries to become invisible and not draw any attention to herself. He opens his mouth to speak, but a waiter appears by their table and hands them menus. He wants to decline and say that he’s not hungry, but the man is already gone. Well then.

‘I’d suggest you order something,’ River says from behind her menu. ‘We’ll look less suspicious then.’

‘Less suspicious than a detective sitting at a table with a wanted killer, you mean?’ He snorts, but opens his menu.

‘You say the sweetest things,’ River sighs and goes back to her menu. A few moments later their waiter comes back and they place their orders. He orders the first dish from the menu, not really caring what it is, but River obviously put some consideration in her choice, because the waiter nods with a content smile when she speaks. Her Italian is really good, he notes with a surprise. He’s been learning it for a few years, but never felt confident while using it. River, however, doesn’t seem to have any problems or reservations about speaking it: she talks confidently and quickly and the words falling from her lips sound like music.

‘Right then,’ he says once the waiter is gone to fetch their orders. ‘Why am I here?’

‘I think it’s a question you should ask yourself, not me,’ River says and raises her eyebrow. ‘A mysterious summons and you just drop everything to go? How very careless of you.’

‘It wasn’t a mysterious who summoned. I knew it was you,’ he replies and stares at her. ‘Why did you do it? For all you know, I could come here with a bunch of policemen.’

‘But you didn’t, did you?’ River asks. ‘You were too curious to find out what I have to tell you to do something like that.’

He shrugs and says nothing. He really hates that she understands him well enough to know that. River looks at him and nothing in her expression betrays what her next move will be. He groans inwardly and drums fingers on the table. He’s not going to ask her what she has to tell him, he’s not going to ask her what she has to tell him, _he’s going to ask her what she has to tell him, he’s not._
‘Okay, why did you get me here? What could you possibly have for me?’ Shit. He did ask. River smiles, as if she knew about his struggle not to ask this question and their waiter chooses this very moment to come back with their food. He sets the plates and a bottle of wine on the table and disappears without a word. Right. Now they can talk. Because surely River is not going to eat anything right now. But it seems that River’s only ambition in life is to negate everything he says and thinks, because when he glances at her, she’s already eating her pasta.

‘Be a dear and pour me some wine,’ she says and looks at him with a raised eyebrow. ‘What?’

‘You’re going to eat now?’ He asks and his voice sounds overly squeaky even in his own ears. She can’t be serious.

‘Of course I’m going to eat it now,’ River shrugs. ‘When am I supposed to do it? When it gets cold?’

‘But- but...’ he stutters. ‘You were supposed to show me something!’

‘Eat your dinner like a good boy and then you may get your reward,’ River smirks and goes back to her meal. He gapes at her for a long moment, but it doesn’t look like she’s going to stop eating and give him what he wants. With a sigh he starts on his meal, but he observes River all the time. She tries to look perfectly at ease and relaxed, but he notices all the little tale signs: how she glances nervously over his shoulder to check if anyone walks inside the restaurant, how she slightly jumps at every unexpected sound. She’s nervous, he realises. Someone who doesn’t know her wouldn’t notice it, but he does know River – at least knows her enough to understand her reactions. The question is: what is she afraid of?

They finish their meals in silence: a small talk is not something either of them is good at and besides, what are they supposed to talk about? ‘Yes, the weather is lovely, and tell me, have you shot anyone recently?’

‘Well then,’ River says with a small sigh when the waiter takes their plates away. ‘Here’s your dessert,’ she says and hands him a white envelope. What is with people handling him envelopes these days? It’s 21st century for god’s sake. Can’t people invest into a flash drive? He takes the envelope from River and opens it. Inside, there’s a piece of paper and a few photographs. The light in the restaurant is bleak, but it’s just bright enough to see what’s on the pictures.

‘Fuck,’ he mumbles quietly and pushes the pictures back into the envelope. ‘Shit.’

He opens the piece of paper that was also inside. He quickly scans it and looks at River.

‘It’s- Is it what I think it is?’

‘Yes,’ she nods and her lips curl in a self-satisfied smile. ‘There’s more. Or there could be more if you’re interested.’

He looks back at the sheet of paper in his hand. It’s mostly empty: there are only 3 lines of text, but what text it is. He keeps staring at it, pretty sure it’ll disappear the second he takes his eyes off of it or blinks. It’s an address of a place just outside of London and from the look of it, it’s a warehouse. There’s also a date and an hour written under it, and you don’t have to be a genius to figure out the rest. River just have him the location of one of the Silence’s warehouses and a date when something will happen there.

‘This is amazing,’ he whispers in awe and looks at River. For a second he feels like in the old days, when she was still his partner and they worked together. But the reality quickly catches up with him and he remembers who is she. It feels like a bucket of cold water and he sobers instantly. ‘Why
would you give it to me?’

River’s face falls a bit at his sharp tone. She shrugs and looks away, somewhere over his shoulder.

‘Do you want it or not?’ She asks and her voice sounds impersonal and flat.

‘I do want it, but only if it’s legit. And if you tell me why you’re giving it to me,’ he crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. ‘Well? I’m listening.’

River regards him quietly and something akin to a smile ghosts over her lips.

‘Oh you know,’ she says lightly. ‘I stumbled upon this piece of information and figured you might be interested. That’s all.’

‘And you just stumbled over the pictures as well?’ He snorts and gestures towards the envelope that is laying on the table. There are 3 pictures, each of them black and white and grainy. They must’ve been made from quite a distance and are a bit blurry, but you can see what – or rather who – is in them.

‘You want to tell me that you just stumbled upon pictures of Robert Kovarian? Just like that?’ He asks and River smile grows wider.

Robert Kovarian – one of the people who are suspected of being the head of The Silence. Note the word: suspected. No one ever proved him anything. Sure, he’s been accused of things: drug dealing, money laundering and assaults. The usual mix. The only difference is that he has bloody good lawyers. He also has enough money to buy all the judges in the city, but he doesn’t even need to buy any of them since they’re all scared of him. To make things more complicated, he hasn’t been seen in the last two years or so: it’s like he’s disappeared. All of that makes it impossible to capture him. In other words: he’s slimy like a shit in mayonnaise and keeps slipping through the police’s fingers. And River just handed him pictures of him in the middle of something that looks like a major money and drugs exchange. He really doesn’t want to be impressed with her, but he is.

‘Okay, what do you want?’ He looks up from the photos in his hand. ‘You surely didn’t share it because you felt generous.’

‘You’re hurting me, John,’ River says mockingly and takes a sip of her wine. ‘But since you want to know... Build a case.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me,’ River says. ‘Build a case against Robert Kovarian.’

‘It’s difficult to build a case with a few photos and a piece of paper,’ he replies.

‘There’ll be more. Much more if you agree to do it,’ River says and looks at him. ‘The questions is: will you take the case, detective Smith?’

He doesn’t know what he expected when he got on the plane to Rome, but he certainly hasn’t been expecting River handing him a way to capture one of the most influential mobsters in England. It’s a chance he can’t afford to lose.

‘Sure, I’ll take it,’ he nods. ‘But tell me: if you’re going after the top, why not the very top? Don’t get me wrong, Rob is all good, but what about his mommy?’

River’s face tenses for a moment and he can see a flash of anger in her eyes, but a second later her
face is expressionless and calm. Interesting.

‘We’ll get to the mommy dear, I can assure you,’ she replies coldly. ‘Now, the rules.’

‘Oh, there are rules?’ He asks but leans towards River. ‘Do tell.’

‘Just don’t tell anyone your source,’ River replies and ignores his amused snort. ‘I mean it. Not your boss. Not your friends. Not - Just don’t tell anyone.’

‘And why would I do that? I doubt my boss would take kindly to me working with a wanted criminal.’

‘Oh, you have tons of weird ideas,’ River says. ‘Wanted to make sure this one isn’t on your list. Any more questions?’

Does he have questions? Sure. Lots of them. So many he has no idea which one to ask first.

‘Why do you want to help me with this?’ He asks. ‘It doesn’t make any sense.’

‘Does everything have to make sense?’ River says. ‘I chose you because I knew that you’re the only one mad enough to take this case. And I was right.’

‘And why did you get me here? It must’ve been expensive.’

‘Right, I should have knocked on the door of your office,’ River rolls her eyes. ‘I did what I had to do. Besides, I figured you could get away from London for a few days. And don’t worry, I didn’t invite you here to use you as a sex toy.’

‘What? I never - I didn’t -’, he stutters awkwardly and feels heat on his cheeks. Because he certainly didn’t consider this option or think about it. At all.

‘You’re still too easy wind up, sweetie,’ River says laughing quietly. ‘Don’t worry, I was only joking.’

‘It wasn’t a funny joke,’ he mutters and takes a sip of his wine. ‘This stuff is disgusting. How can you drink it?’

‘That also hasn’t changed, I see,’ River says with a fond look in her eyes. ‘Okay, I have to go. Now, one more piece of advice: be careful with the ambush,’ she says pointing at the piece of paper with the address. ‘Take a well-trained group, but don’t inform them where you’re going until the very last moment. And don’t examine the place before the mission. Satellite pictures will have to do. The Silence will be observing the warehouse and any sign of trouble will make them move to a different place.’

‘Why are you doing that? Who do you work for?’ He asks when she finishes talking. He just doesn’t understand that – her sudden change of heart. Why would she do that? For all he knows she could be playing him – again.

‘I work for myself,’ she says after a moment. ‘That’s all you need to know.’

‘That’s what you were doing in Moscow?’ He asks quickly, because River is already gathering her things. ‘Working? You were protecting Boris from The Silence, weren’t you?’

River freezes for a second, but recovers and stands up from her chair. She runs fingers through her hair and sighs softly.
‘I did what I had to do,’ she says quietly. ‘I did what no one else could do. I did what I was paid for.’

He nods at her explanation, surprised that she actually gave it to him. She starts moving towards the exit and he quickly catches her wrist. He can feel her tensing under his touch and trying to get her hand out of his grasp without making a scene. His fingers tighten around her wrist.

‘River,’ he says, ‘can I trust you?’

‘If you like. But where's the fun in that?’ She replies, trying to sound amused, but her words sound a bit breathless. ‘Now please, let me go.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’ He asks, letting go of her hand. ‘Here, I mean. I mean, it’s Rome and I have two more days here and-’

‘Oh, you are a lost case,’ River snorts. ‘What could you do in a city like that? I don’t know... Go sightseeing. Walk around the city. Go to a club. Pick up a girl and shag her senseless. Do whatever you like.’

‘Will you stay here?’ He asks and tries his best to ignore her last remark. ‘In Rome, I mean. Because-‘

River smiles at him sadly and shakes her head.

‘Goodbye, sweetie,’ she says and walks out of the restaurant. He wants to follow her, but he stands up too abruptly, sending his plate and glass on the floor. The noise of breaking glass bring the waiter to the table and suddenly everyone is looking at him. He decides to pay for the broken things and tries to pay for the dinner, but the waiter informs him that it’s already been taken care of. When he finally gets out of there, River is long gone and he has no idea where to look for her. Hell, she could be on her way to the airport right now. He mumbles a few curse words under his breath and starts walking back to his hotel. Once in his room, he looks over the materials River gave him. It’s not much, but she said there’ll be more. However, she never said how she’s going to contact him. Will she send the files by email? As a letter? Or will she meet with him again?

His heart starts beating a bit faster at that thought. Surely, there are materials she will have to show him in person. Information like that must be kept secret and you can’t trust the post or internet these days... He looks in the mirror and catches himself smiling. Oh no. Did he just smile at the thought of meeting a wanted assassin again? What is wrong with him? He groans in frustration and glances through the window in his room. The sun set about an hour ago, but he can still hear the city bustling with life. A walk is what he needs, he decides. It’ll help him to clear his head.

Less than 30 minutes later he finds himself in a bar. He doesn’t often frequent places like that – only when his friends drag him there – but tonight he doesn’t want to be alone. He wants to be surrounded by people. He doesn’t want to be left alone with his thoughts – at least not just yet. He realises he must look like a loser, sitting alone at the bar, but what can he do? He’s all alone here. He just observes people around him – laughing and enjoying themselves – and slowly drinks his beer. And then someone spills a drink on him.

He looks to his right and his gaze falls on an embarrassed young woman, who’s trying her best to wipe the liquid from the bar and his jacket.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she says and to his surprise, she sounds English. Very English. English enough to be from, well, England. ‘I wasn’t looking where I was putting my glass and damn, you probably don’t understand me.’
'I understand you perfectly well,' he responds and smiles. ‘And don’t worry about that. I spill things all over myself all the time, so it’s nothing new for me.’

She laughs at that – her laughs sounds relieved and friendly – and he takes a look at her. She’s slightly shorter than him, her hair is dark and straight, her eyes are warm shade of brown and they’re shining with warm amusement. In other words – she looks nothing like the woman that has been occupying his head for months. That’s good, isn’t it? He clears his throat and extends his hand towards her.

‘And since we already had a drink – in a way... My name’s John. What’s yours?’

Chapter End Notes

there we go: another chapter. funny thing, part of it was written a few months ago, part of it was written about a week ago and part of it was written just now. that probably explains the fucking mess it is. so yeah... sorry for that. also sorry for the long wait, but work doesn't leave me with much time or strength to write. I wish I could say that the next update will up be sooner, but it doesn't look like that. oops.

thank you all who commented on the last chapter. it's nice to know that you still read and enjoy this fic. really, really nice.

important thing: the phrase 'slick like a shit in mayonnaise' is borrowed from my favourite Polish author, Andrzej Sapkowski. I read it in his book at it amused me to tears and I just had to use it.

chapter's title comes from 'whistle for the choir' by the one and only The Fratellis.

have a good week, everyone!
with all that lies in front of us, the world looks so ridiculous to me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His boss nearly sweeps him off his feet and kisses him when he finds out that there’s a way to bust Robert Kovarian’s ass. He has never seen Morgan so happy and truth to be told, the permanent grin on his boss’ face is starting to creep him out. But no one can blame him: taking the young Kovarian off of the streets would be a huge achievement. Thankfully, Morgan wasn’t interested in how he gathered the information or who his source is: as long as the information keeps coming, he’s not going to ask questions. Which is great, because as understanding as Morgan can be, he probably wouldn’t accept the fact that the help comes from a wanted fugitive.

He still wonders how River will contact him with the next piece of information. It’s not something one can discuss over the phone and it’s not like River can come over to chat with him. He doesn’t have to wait long for the answer: less than a week after the meeting in Rome, another envelope arrives at his doorstep. This time it’s white and plain, but he impatiently tears it open. There’s a single piece of paper inside: a long line of numbers is typed at the top of it and under it, there’s a long block of text. He reads it quickly and whistles when he finishes. It seems that River just provided him with a number of young Kovarian’s account and a detailed instruction on how to monitor it – without Kovarian noticing it. Now they’ll be able to see who are his business partners and target them as well. It’s simply brilliant. But as ecstatic as he is over the fact that he has a new piece of puzzle in this case, he also feels a bit... disappointed that the envelope doesn’t contain anything else. He hoped for something a bit more personal. Which was just foolish, he realises now. River is not his friend and she won’t send him a postcard from wherever she is and keep him updated on her whereabouts.

He picks up the envelope laying on the floor next to the sofa and stares at it for a few seconds, and a small smile appears on his lips. River may not tell him where she is, but this little thing certainly will: the stamps show that the letter was sent from Budapest, 2 days ago. Which means... He jumps to his feet and walks over to the world map hanging on his wall. He’s been marking all the places of River’s appearances on it – recently he put pins over Moscow and Rome, together with the dates – and now he can add another pin: Budapest. He sticks a red pin next to the name of the city and scribbles a date from the envelope next to it. Moscow to Rome to Budapest... Quite a journey to make in less than two weeks. River is either overly cautious or in deep trouble.

He really hopes it’s the former.

——

Days pass quickly and turn into weeks, and these turn into months. The information from River keeps on coming: either in a form of a letter or heavily encrypted email or an address of a warehouse. The file on Robert Kovarian grows slowly but steadily: they now have pictures, a list of his clients and business partners – both previous and current; they know which places he used to visit and they have them under constant surveillance. With River’s help and information he slowly manages to deconstruct the protective web that Kovarian built around himself. His boss is over the moon the whole time: they’re getting closer and closer to capturing one of the most important mob leaders of this century. This realisation makes him happy as well, but the slow pace of this investigation makes him restless. He realises they have to go slowly: they can’t afford to alarm Kovarian in any way nor they can endanger themselves, but he wishes they could move things a bit quicker. That, however, depends on River. She keeps on sending him new bits and pieces, but they don’t come as quickly as he wishes them to. Sometimes, there are two letters in a week, but there are times when he has to
wait a month for another package. He hates the waiting, not only because it means that he can’t
connect more dots and push the case further, but he’s also worried about River. Yes, he realises how
utterly ridiculous it sounds, but he can’t help it: he worries when she stays silent for too long. He
doesn’t have any way of communicating with her: she’s the one initiating contact, so if something
happened to her, he wouldn’t even know about it. He hasn’t seen her since their meeting in Rome.
It’s probably better this way, both for him and her, but-

He sighs heavily and looks at the wall in his living room where the map is hanging. Over the last few
months, it has become full of colourful pins and post-its, marking every single place from which
River sent him a letter or a package. Call him obsessive. It’s all a part of an investigation, okay?

River still moves around the world, changing her location every few days. There are exceptions, of
course: Chicago for example. She stayed there for 2 months: December and January, then she moved
to Salt Lake City. Then it was Cairo, Kiev, Tokyo. Before Chicago she was in Florence and
Cologne, then it was Panama. He doesn’t even have to look at the map anymore, he knows this list
by heart. He can almost picture River in all of these places: standing next to Cologne’s cathedral,
walking down a busy Tokyo street, shivering from cold in Chicago. He realises that she probably
doesn’t devote nearly as much attention to him as he does to her, but he can’t help: it’s like she’s
constantly on his mind, whether he wants it or not. Which is definitely not good, because his mind
should be focused on another woman: his girlfriend. Yes, he has a girlfriend now. And the funny
thing is that if it hadn’t been for River, he probably wouldn’t have met Liz. She’s the girl from the
pub. Turned out she also alone: her friends stood her up and she went to Rome on her own. They
spent the evening talking and they agreed to meet the next day to walk around the city together. Just
before his flight back home, he gave her his number and a few days later she called him, telling that
she’s back in London and maybe he’d like to get some coffee?

They did get coffee that day. And the next day as well. Somehow, coffee turned into going to plays
together and that turned into dinners and bam: he was in a relationship. And it’s been pretty great so
far if he can say so. Liz is nice, lovely, and funny. She’s gentle and she’s not bothered by how
important his job is to him. It’s nice to have someone to cuddle with while watching telly or someone
with whom you can talk to about work and how your day was. It’s nice not to wake up in an empty
bed. It’s nice not to be alone. But there are times when he feels like there’s something missing,
something’s not quite right. Not with Liz, no. She’s fine, she’s more than fine: she’s quite perfect.
She’s exactly the kind of girl he needs. It’s him. He misses something, something he can’t name or
put his finger on. Sometimes he wishes that Liz wasn’t so polite all the time, he wishes that she was a
bit more adventurous. But that’s not who she is and he’s learned to accept it.

——

‘You know, I am still not sure I like her,’ Amy says and he groans.

‘We’ve been over this subject how many times?’ He asks with a sigh. ‘Just let it go, Amy.’

They’re in a park, sitting on a bench and enjoying first really spring-y day. It’s early April and it’s
still a bit chillyly, but the sun is shining and the sky is clear blue, so it’d be a crime to waste a day like
that by sitting inside. At least that’s what Amy said when she called him earlier today. She said that
they’re going on a first family spring walk and that he is invited.

‘You can take Liz with you if you like,’ she added after a moment with air of grace, like a queen
giving her blessing to a poor peasant. So here they are: enjoying the warm weather and watching Liz
playing with Tony on a playground that’s a few feet away. Rory went to grab some coffee for them
– he’s pretty sure that Amy planned it that way, because it means that she can grill him about Liz all
she wants now.
‘Yeah, we’ve been over it a thousand times, but it doesn’t mean that I know if I like her,’ Amy scoffs.

‘What’s there not to like?’ He shrugs. ‘She’s perfectly nice, has great sense of humour, she’s intelligent, great with kids...’

‘God knows she needs that being with you,’ Amy mutters. ‘Oi, don’t pinch me! I only told the truth. You’re like a big child, you know. So no wonder you appreciate her being great with toddlers.’

‘Very funny. It’s like you’re just coming up with ridiculous reasons not to like her.’

‘I’ve never said I don’t like her. I just said I’m not sure I like her,’ Amy replies in a matter-of-fact tone. He shakes his head. Something like that would make sense only in her head, surely. ‘Yes, she’s nice and funny, and good-looking. Emotionally stable. And you’ve been single for so long that I expected you to start courting a blow-up doll soon.’

‘Amy,’ he hisses and feels himself blush. ‘There are kids here.’

‘I bet none of them would blush like you just did,’ Amy says mockingly, but she quickly becomes serious. ‘I’m not denying that Liz is okay, but you must admit that she’s not your usual type.’

‘I don’t have a type!’ He laughs. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Right. You don’t have a type at all,’ Amy looks at him incredulously. ‘I can’t believe that you don’t see it. Look at your friends!’

‘My friends are normal,’ he says and furrows his eyebrows. ‘Except for you, of course. You’re crazy.’

‘And you’re an asshole. But fine, let me spell it out for you. Let’s take Donna for example: she became the head of your department in what? 3 years? Isn’t it a record? And she’s run it efficiently and flawlessly, even though the assholes above her were certain she was not going to last a month. Who’s next? Clara, why not. She’s basically a computer genius, she can dig any information you may need and I’m pretty sure her IQ is far above average. Not as high as yours, but still high. Martha: finished her medical school a year sooner than people normally do. Travelled the world, helping people in all these godforsaken places.’

‘I don’t see where you’re going with this,’ he says but Amy hushes him.

‘I am not done,’ she shakes her head. ‘I won’t even mention me and Rory, because it’s plainly obvious that we are fabulous. But let’s look at Rose, shall we? Little miss cute, that she is, but she also interviews bloody gangsters and writes about most vicious criminals. She’s also one of the best researches in our field.’

‘Your point is?’ He asks and waves his hand at Liz who just turned around and sent him a warm smile. Little Pond is in her arms and they’re both inspecting a huge tree – although Liz seems to be more interested in it than Tony.

‘My point is,’ Amy says sharply, ‘that you surround yourself with people who are driven and ambitious, not to mention danger loving. Liz – as fine as she is – is none of that. She’s not your type.’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ he shakes his head. ‘Nothing you said makes any sense.’

‘It doesn’t?’ Amy says, sounding both amused and annoyed. ‘Hm, let’s see... Who did I miss? Of
course! How could I forget about your crush extraordinaire: *River Song.*

He flinches when he hears River’s name. No one has said it around him for a long time and even though the name and its owner is on his mind all the time, it’s still unusual to hear it said out loud.

‘Amy,’ he starts, but it’s too late: Amy has already started one of her long and passionate rants and it seems like he has to sit through it.

‘After your first meeting with her, you were all ‘oh, she’s awful and terrible and I don’t like her’. A week later, you were following her like a puppy, hanging on her every word and ogling her on every step. You even got these cute anime eyes every time she did as much as talked to you. She seemed to get you and all your crazy ideas. You were like a match made in heaven! And then *bam* – she turned out to be a psycho killer. You had a hard-on for a paid killer. So I definitely think that Liz is a bit... out of your area of interest.’

‘I didn’t- I didn’t have a,’ he looks around and lowers his voice to a whisper, ‘a hard-on for River!’

‘Please,’ Amy rolls her eyes. ‘Just please. Don’t embarrass yourself. Whether you realised it or not, you had a crush on her. It was pretty damn obvious.’

‘I don’t think we should be talking about it here,’ he looks around nervously. Rory can come back any second and Liz is standing just a few feet away from them. None of them should hear this conversation. Especially not his girlfriend. They haven’t really talked about their previous relationships: Liz only mentioned some of her ex-boyfriends and labelled them as ‘losers’. She never really asked about his previous girlfriends and he never felt comfortable enough to discuss any aspect of his past with her. And he certainly didn’t feel comfortable discussing his... feelings for River. Yes, he can admit it: he fancied her. Who knows, Amy could be right: he might’ve had a crush on her. But it’s all in the past now. These feelings are long gone.

‘No, we are going to talk about it John,’ Amy says and something in her voice changes. She doesn’t sound angry anymore. Now she sounds sad and resigned. She looks at her and sees that she’s wearing a pained and troubled expression on her face. She sighs heavily before continuing. ‘We are going to talk about it. We haven’t talked about it for far too long.’

‘Amy...,’ he starts, but she shakes her head.

‘Don’t *Amy* me,’ she says. ‘Not this time. How can you just... Ignore it? We’ve been tiptoeing around this thing for months now and you just seem to... I don’t know, don’t care about what happened? At least not on a personal level. And I just don’t understand it, how can you not care, I don’t-‘

‘Amy,’ he says again and this time she stops and listens to him. ‘I- I care. Of course I care.’ An understatement of the century. He hardly thinks about anything else at all. ‘But... It’s not something one wants to talk about, you know?’

‘How can you not want to talk about it? How can you not want to talk about what she has done?’ Amy asks and her voice starts to shake. ‘She is- was our friend. And then it turned out that she was someone else entirely. It’s like having these two different memories in my head. It’s like I remember something that didn’t happen. How could she be our friend one moment and a killer the next minute?’

‘I think it’s something you should ask her,’ he says and Amy laughs bitterly.

‘Right. Silly me, sure I should do that! Do you have her number? Because somehow she forget to
give it to me when she escaped from the arrest.’

‘That’s not what I meant,’ he says and scratches his cheek.

‘I know,’ Amy says quietly. ‘I’m sorry, it’s just... It hasn’t been easy for me or for Rory. This whole situation, I mean.’

‘I realise that,’ he sighs. ‘But I don’t see how talking about it could help.’

‘No, you don’t understand that, John,’ Amy shakes her head. ‘Look, you’ve known her for a few months. We’ve known her for almost 3 years. She came here right after you decided to go gods know where. From day one, we just clicked together,’ Amy clears her throat and speaks again. ‘It was different in the beginning. She was different back then. She was still outgoing and well, River, but... She was very private. She didn’t share much then, you had to pry every little detail from her. But after a while she started opening up. And she became our friend, and soon she felt like a part of the family. Like a missing piece, you know? And now I don’t know if any of that was true.’

They’re both silent for a few minutes. He has no idea what he could say to comfort Amy: he doubts there are words for that.

‘Where do you think she is now? How is she doing?’ Amy finally breaks the silence. ‘Do you ever wonder? Because there are moments when I can’t think about anything else.’

‘I have no idea,’ he lies and he feels shame for doing that. He wishes he could tell Amy the truth or at least some part of it, but it’s impossible. Not only it could compromise the investigation, but it could also put both Amy and Rory in danger. And that’s something he’s not willing to risk.

‘But if you ever find out – something, anything... Will you tell me?’ Amy asks hopefully and he fakes a smile.

‘Of course, I will,’ he nods his head and turns his head away from Amy, not to see this big and thankful grin that appeared on her face.

‘What were you talking about? Liz asks, suddenly appearing by their side, with 3 cups of coffee in her hands. ‘You seemed pretty occupied, you haven’t even heard me approach.’

‘Oh, nothing important,’ Amy replies and smiles apologetically. ‘Hey, where’s Tony?’

‘Rory just came back and relieved me of my babysitting duties. He even gave me coffee, look,’ she passes the cups to him and Amy, and sits by his side. His puts his arm around her and pulls her closer, and Liz puts her head on his shoulder. Amy shifts uncomfortably and after a moment, she gets up from the bench.

‘Right, I am going to check on my boys,’ she waves her head in the direction of the playground, where Rory and Tony are swinging on a small swing. ‘And then we maybe we’ll get something to eat, how about that?’

Before either of them can answer, Amy walks away towards the playground. Soon, he can hear Tony’s delighted giggle and Rory’s laugh. Liz sighs softly by his side.

‘You know, sometimes I don’t think Amy likes me very much,’ she finally says. ‘She’s always very polite, but there are times when I feel like a third wheel.’

‘Nah, don’t be silly. Amy adores you!’ He says cheerfully, but deep inside he cringes and feels grateful that Amy can’t hear him right now. ‘She was just a bit overwhelmed now.’
‘After your conversation?’ Liz asks and he nods his head. ‘Well, what were you talking about then?’

‘Uhm, nothing that should concern you,’ he smiles thinly. ‘We were just talking about an old friend of ours.’

‘Oh, someone that you used to know?’ Liz asks and he nods his head again, not trusting his voice.

‘Yeah, something like that,’ he says after clearing this throat. ‘Someone that we used to know.’

When he gets from on Friday, there’s an envelope waiting for him in his mailbox. He tries to open it and the door at the same time and fails – his keys fall to the ground with loud clutter and instead of picking them up, he opens the letter. It’s from River – obviously – and it was sent 2 days ago from Austria. Making a mental note to add this location to the map, he takes out the contents of the envelope to study it. Two plane tickets: one to Berlin and another one back to London. There’s a four-hour long gap between the first plane’s arrival and the second’s departure, which leaves him with... roughly about two to three hours with River. There’s another slip of paper inside with ‘take your laptop’ scribbled in River’s strong and tidy handwriting. Interesting. Why would she need his laptop? Couldn’t River just once tell him what is going on?

He picks up his keys with a small sigh and finally opens the door. When he enters his flat and catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror, he notices he’s smiling. What? How? He has no reason to be smiling about! He tries to scowl, to wipe the stupid grin from his face, but it returns, no matter how much he repeats to himself that he really isn’t happy about another meeting with River. And then he remembers something that successfully wipes the smile from his face: tomorrow he has a date with Liz. He promised her that he’ll go and see the school play she directed and then he’s supposed to take her to dinner. Shit. He really doubts that saying ‘sorry babe, but I have to meet with a hired assassin’ is an excuse she’d accept. He groans and looks at the hour of his flight back to London. It’s supposed to land here on 7pm, which would give him an hour to get to Liz’s school. Nearly impossible, but doable. He traces his fingers on the edge of the tickets and this time, he doesn’t have to look in the mirror to know that he’s grinning.

He’s out of his seat as soon as the plane touches the ground. He’s been restless and jittery throughout the whole flight and now he’s pushing through the crowd, heading straight to the arrival’s hall. He has no idea if River is waiting for him there, but if it’s not her, someone else will surely be there to meet him.

He spots her as soon as the door to the arrival’s hall slide open: she’s standing with her back pressed to the opposite wall, trying her best to blend in and appear casual. He studies her as he approaches her: she looks healthy and well-rested, and there’s a certain air of calmness and ease around her. He feels kind of jealous that she is – or at least appears so calm. He feels oddly nervous and suddenly unsure of himself.

‘Uhm, hi,’ he stutters awkwardly when he nears her. His hands are clammy, so he wipes them on the rough fabric of his trousers. Why are his hands sweaty though? It isn’t that warm in here and besides- But River gives him no time to ponder over this phenomenon. She nods her head and says ‘come on’ before turning on her heel and heading towards the exit. Well. So much for a proper greeting. He follows her as they walk outside and head to a parking lot, where River quickly finds her car. He hops in the passenger seat, unsure what else to do or say. River doesn’t say anything either and seems to be completely focused on the road in front of them. He clings to the bag with his laptop and looks through the window, trying to see where they’re going. He’s not sure what to expect, but he
certainly wasn’t expecting River to stop in front of a small cafe and tell him to get out.

‘What? You’re taking me to a cafe? Why?’ He asks and stares at the place for a few seconds. It looks like a proper cafe: not a cafe that is a fight club or a super-secret meeting place for spies. Not going to lie, he is a bit disappointed.

‘They have free wifi and decent coffee,’ River says and heads to the cafe’s door. ‘I’m sorry if you expected dinner in a fancy restaurant. Maybe another time.’

‘I wasn’t expecting anything, I just-,’ but River is already a few feet ahead of him, walking into the cafe and he shakes his head and follows her. When he enters the cafe, he understands why River chose it for their meeting place: it’s small and sleepy, there’s only one waitress behind the bar and she looks tired and absolutely uninterested in everything except for her mobile. Bingo.

‘Okay, give me your laptop,’ River says as they sit at a small table that’s standing in a corner.

‘What? Just like that? No coffee? You said this place has good coffee,’ he says looking around the cafe. ‘I just landed here, give me a break.’

‘Yeah, and your flight was what? Two hours long?’ River scoffs, but she starts digging in her purse and after a while she takes out a wallet. ‘Fine. One coffee. That’s all.’

‘Do you think they’ll have apple pie here?’ He asks excitedly. ‘I could eat an apple pie right now.’

River rolls her eyes at him in annoyance, but he can see a small smile in a corner of her mouth. It makes him oddly happy, the knowledge that he can still make her smile. A minute later, River comes back to their table with a big slice of apple pie on a plate. He lets out a gleeful ‘ha!’ and extends his hands to take it, but River smacks them away with her free hand.

‘I’ll give you it once you give me your laptop,’ she says and with a sigh he passes his laptop in the direction of her chair.

‘You draw a hard bargain, Song,’ he says as she sets the plate in front of him.

‘You have no idea,’ she says with a smirk and she opens his laptop.

‘Oh, you’ll need a password,’ he says around a mouthful of pie. ‘Let me just-

‘No need, I already got it,’ River says with a small wave of her hand and then looks up from the screen. He must look pretty surprised, because she gives him a small shrug and says in a patient tone. ‘Come on, you have the same password to every account. It’s not quantum physics, you know.’

‘Still, you shouldn’t be doing things like that! It’s my computer!’ He says and points a finger in her direction. ‘It’s impolite and rude and and-

‘Eat your pie, sweetie,’ River says and returns her attention to the computer screen, typing something furiously on the keyboard.

‘What are you doing?’ He asks after a few minutes of silence. ‘And none of the enigmatic smiles and answers that don’t answer anything. It’s my laptop you’re messing with.’

‘Don’t worry, I am not going through your porn folder,’ River says and he’s really glad he isn’t not eating or drinking at this moment, because if he did, he’d be choking now.

‘I don’t have a porn folder,’ he hisses and looks around.
‘Says every guy ever,’ River replies. ‘No, but really, you actually don’t have a porn folder. I am impressed! Or worried, I can’t decide. Okay, okay, I am leaving your porn folder alone now. You were asking?’

‘I was asking what you’re doing with my laptop,’ he answers grumpily. ‘And a real answer now, please.’

‘I’m giving you access to the computer of one of the Silence’s lawyers-slash-bankers,’ River says without stopping the relentless typing. ‘Happy?’

‘That’s brilliant!’ He exclaims, but a second later the full weight of River’s statement hits him. ‘Wait. What did you just say?’

‘I said that I’m giving you access to the computer of one of the Silence’s lawyers. Problems with your hearing?’ River says and he can see the oh-so-familiar and yet so insufferable smirk that just oozes of pride. And damn, if she really has what she says she does, she has every right to be proud of herself.

‘But how did you get that?’ He asks and can’t stop the awe from his voice. ‘And what do you mean by access? What exactly: files? Bank accounts? Emails?’ He asks on one breath.

‘Breathe, sweetie,’ River says and smiles at him. ‘I’ll explain everything... Well, nearly everything.’

For the next few minutes he listens to River explaining the content of the files she’s uploading to his laptop and extent of access to James Preston’s laptop – that’s the name of the man who’s the Silence’s lawyer. Somehow (he has no idea how and River is not telling), River managed to copy a good chunk of Preston’s files regarding the Silence: the cases that found their way to the court and were turned down, the blackmail materials for the judges and policemen and more. He now has a limited access to one of Preston’s accounts: one that is closely tied and used to wash the money coming from the Silence.

‘Just remember to be careful. Try to log in and check Preston’s activity later at night. And don’t do it too often. Once he notices that someone’s broken in, that’s it, you’re out. I won’t be able to do anything.’

‘I know! I’m not a child,’ he huffs. ‘Besides, I am sure that our IT guys can take care of that.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ River says, turning her attention to the keyboard. ‘Oh, and make sure that you’re available in the near future. I may have something else soon and I would prefer not to send it by mail.’

‘You can’t just send me plane tickets and expect me to go wherever you tell me to, River,’ he crosses his arms. ‘I am not your taxi driver.’

‘And yet here you are,’ River replies. ‘Not to mention that I am more of the taxi driver than you are.’

‘Still, you can’t just expect me to just drop everything and run when you call,’ he says and leans back in his chair. ‘I have work. Friends. I have a girlfriend.’

He has no idea why he said that last thing out loud. It’s not like he’s thinking about Liz right now – to be honest, just a second ago she was the last thing on his mind. He doesn’t miss her, hell, he only just remembered that he’s supposed to meet her later today. And yet the stupid words slipped from his mouth unwanted and uninvited, and absolutely unnecessary. River’s fingers freeze briefly over the keyboard, but not even a second later, she resumes typing.
‘Congratulations are in order then,’ she says, without looking at him. ‘I hope you’re happy.’

‘I am. Liz’s great, she really is great and well, we are great and everything is uhmn, great,’ he finishes lamely and even in his ears it sounds like he’s trying to convince himself – which he doesn’t. Because everything between him and Liz is just splendid and... Great. Yes. River doesn’t comment on any of it – actually, she doesn’t say anything at all. For the rest of the meeting she only speaks to him about technical issues concerning securing the connection between Preston’s and his laptops and how to decode and use the information he may obtain. He tries to make jokes, to steer the conversation in a different topic, but it all falls on deaf ears: River doesn’t respond to any of it and after a while, he stops trying. It’s like a wall was created between them and no matter how much he tries, he can’t get through to her.

Later, when they’re back in River’s car, on their way to the airport – his plane is leaving in less than 2 hours – he decides that he needs to break the awkward silence that is hanging between them.

‘So, when will I see you again?’ He asks in a cheerful voice, hoping it doesn’t come off as needy or desperate.

River merely shrugs and parks her car in front of the terminal.

‘Okay, we’re here, off you go,’ she says without looking at him. ‘Come on, I don’t have a whole day. Get out.’

‘What? No. I still have time. I asked you a question,’ he asks and turns in his seat to face her. ‘The answer to it is important to me, I need to know how to plan my schedule. It’d be much easier if you just once told me when you plan on summoning me. I can’t just keep on taking a day off with no apparent reason. People may get suspicious and ask questions and that’s the last thing we need, isn’t it?’

‘It’s the last thing you need,’ River says and he looks at her quizzically. ‘That’s your problem, not mine. And there’s no us. Now, please, do get out. I have things to do.’

‘For fuck’s sake, I’m not asking you to tell me where do you live or how do you get all these information or where you’re going next,’ he exclaims angrily and yanks at his seatbelt. ‘I just want to know when I can expect another enigmatic letter with tickets gods know where, that’s all!’

‘Don’t worry, you won’t get another letter like that,’ River says and runs fingers through her hair. She’s looking at the terminal’s building in front of them – she’s looking anywhere, but at him.

‘What? What do you mean?’ He asks and stops struggling with his seatbelt. ‘I- You can’t just stop sending me information, not right now. Well, you can, but that would be the end of the case we- I started building and... You can’t do it!’

‘Oh, don’t fret, I am not going to do anything like that,’ River snorts. ‘I’ll keep sending you information, but I won’t force you to come to me to get it. I think it’ll work better that way.’

‘But why? This,’ he makes an awkward wave with his hand, pointing to him and River, ‘this is working pretty well if you ask me. There’s no need to change it.’

‘Yes, there is. This... arrangement,’ River says this word carefully, as if it’s not the exact word she wanted to use, ‘is clearly affecting you and your life. I should have realised that it could be difficult to you. Sorry about that. I won’t bother you anymore, don’t worry.’

‘No, no, you don’t bother me, I just... I didn’t mean it like that,’ he shakes his head. ‘I don’t mind meeting with you, it’s nice and-‘
‘I’ll send the next piece as soon as possible,’ River interrupted him as if she hasn’t heard a word he said. ‘It may take some time and you’ll have to spend more time on decoding it, but I am sure you’ll manage.’

‘You can’t do that. We work together and you just can’t do something like that!’

‘Oh, can’t I? Look at me, I just did it,’ River says sharply. ‘It’s done, deal with it. Shouldn’t you go now? You have a plane to catch.’

For a moment he sits silently, trying to understand what just happened. Everything has been going well – they were getting along and then out of nowhere, River just changed her mind and turned everything on its head. It makes him furious, not being in control of the situation and that every time he thinks he and River are on an even ground, something happens and she once again slips from his grasp and leaves him behind her.

‘Fine, do whatever you want,’ he spits angrily and finally undoes his seatbelt. ‘I don’t care. I thought we could work together and, I don’t know, do something good together. But it’s just like you to fuck everything up, isn’t it?’ He’s not sure what exactly he’s talking about: the fact that she just decided to cancel an important part of their partnership or the fact that for years she’d concealed her true identity. Maybe he’s so livid, because she’d hurt people he cares about. Maybe he’s so angry, because she’d hurt him. All he knows is that right now he’s shaking with rage and when he looks at River, he sees that their argument is affecting her as well: she’s gritting her teeth and her whole body is taunt with tension. She looks like she’s about to explode any second now, but that doesn’t stop him from saying the next thing that comes to his mind.

‘I talked with Amy about you recently,’ he says quietly, but his words are laced with venom. ‘She misses you, you know? She still thinks about you and how could you do all these things and she can’t just understand any of it. It’s been months and she still can’t deal with any of it. And you? Do you even care about any of it? About her and Rory? They were your friends! Do you ever wonder how much pain you caused them? Doesn’t it bother you?’

River slams the steering wheel with her hand and the unexpected and loud noise makes him jump in his seat. She is flushed with anger and her eyes flash dangerously when she turns towards him.

‘Don’t you ever speak to me like that,’ she says slowly, carefully, as if she’s desperately trying to remain calm. ‘You have no idea what I-,’ he listens, holding his breath, but River shakes her head and purses her lips. ‘Get out. Go away. Just go away, John.’

He wants to add something, to make her talk, to tell her all the things that are on his mind, but the expression on her face stops him. For a brief moment she looks utterly stricken and pained, and he feels like an absolute douchebag for bringing this expression to her face and causing her pain. Which is stupid, he knows that, but he can’t help the fact that he wants to comfort her and apologise for everything he just said.

‘River,’ he says and slowly raises his hand to lay it on her shoulder. ‘I- I shouldn’t have said that, I’m so-’

‘Don’t,’ she says coldly and shakes his hand from her arm. ‘Just don’t. Go now.’

He swallows through a lump in his throat and without another word, he gets out of the car. He takes a few steps towards the terminal’s, but something makes him turn around and look at River. Her car is still parked in the same spot and she’s sitting motionlessly inside, but even from where he’s standing, he can see that she’s crying. Once again, guilt nearly suffocates him and he has to fight with himself not to go back to the car and make everything better. If he could turn back time, he
would do it. But he can’t. He grits his teeth and starts walking towards the terminal. Nothing can be done now. River made her choice and she forced him to make his. Once again she proved that she doesn’t want nor need him.

When he looks around again, she is already gone.

---

‘Yes, I think I remember the case you’re talking about. But it was so long ago... Why would you ask about something like that after all this time? And do you want more tea, dear?’ Mrs. Summers asks and without waiting for his answer, re-fills his cup. He can’t look at tea anymore – in the hour he’s spend with Mrs. Summers, he drunk 3 cups. But she’s a lovely elderly lady and he really doesn’t want to be impolite, so he pretends to take another sip. Yes, Mrs. Summers is lovely and elderly, but what is more important, she may have information he’s interested in. She’s the person who worked at the orphanage that River stayed in. Clara found out her name and address for him a long time ago – right after he came back from Moscow – but he’s been stalling with using any of it. He kept telling himself that he just didn’t have time for any additional and private investigations: he started working on the young Kovarian case, he’s been spending time with the Ponds and then, well, Liz appeared and- But the truth us that he was scared to find out the truth. Maybe there wasn’t any mystery or tragedy in River’s childhood. Maybe she was just born this way or maybe the life of crime seduced her? Maybe she liked this life: constant thrill of the chase, adrenaline pumping through her bloodstream, the ever present danger of being discovered. Who knows.

After their meeting in Berlin – a fiasco of a meeting, really – he decided that he needs to find answers to at least some questions about River. And that’s why he’s in Mrs. Summers’ living room now, drinking his third cup of coffee and making a small talk about weather and cats.

‘You said you recall this case, right?’ He asks delicately, trying to steer the conversation onto the topic that actually interests him. ‘According to the documents, this child was placed in your orphanage. Look at this,’ he hands her a snippet from the newspaper – the one about the murder of River’s parents and a small picture of River- Melody, ‘maybe that will bring some memories.’

Mrs. Summers takes the papers from his hand and studies them silently for a while.

‘Yes, yes, I remember it now,’ she says and nods her head. ‘It was... A peculiar one, to say the least. And pretty heart-breaking.’

‘What do you mean?’ He asks and leans towards her. She puts the documents on the table and sighs.

‘It was always difficult when a child with a story like that was placed in our care,’ Mrs. Summers starts. ‘You could never predict how they’d react and behave. There weren’t many cases like this one, fortunately. But this girl... Melody... I think we all will remember her,’ she take a sip of her tea and continues. ‘She was... I have never seen anything like that. She wouldn’t talk to anyone. She would do everything she was told to, but I never heard her talk. We tried to give her all the help we could, but I don’t think we ever succeeded. Even our psychologist gave up after a few sessions. She couldn’t do anything if the girl didn’t talk. She was observed the whole time you know, and no one ever saw her cry. Poor thing.’

‘Could you tell me something more about the adoption?’ He asks, trying to focus on this aspect of the case and not on what little River must’ve been going through. But even though he tries to push it back, somewhere deep into his brain, he knows it’ll come back to haunt him sooner or later. ‘There are barely any documents left.’

‘Yes,’ Mrs. Summers nods. ‘Well, that’s what I meant by peculiar. A pair came to our orphanage
about a week after Melody had been admitted. I don’t remember their names... Oh, never mind. It was like they were looking for her in particular. And then, not even two weeks later, they adopted her. That was the last time I saw her.’

‘Two weeks? Isn’t it a bit... quick?’ He asks surprised. ‘I’ve always thought this process takes much longer.’

‘It does take longer. And it did take longer back then. But these people had wonderful references and besides, we thought that getting Melody a family was a priority. We hoped that she’d get back on her feet much quicker that way. But...,’ Mrs. Summers hesitates for a second. ‘This whole process was still incredibly quick, especially if you consider that they moved to America right away.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, they moved to America,’ Mrs. Summers shakes her head with the air of ‘Outrageous, I know! Why would anyone want to live there?’ about her. ‘There was another man with them. He helped to organise everything here, because Melody’s new parents had to go back to the States to prepare everything for her arrival.’

‘What man?’ He asks excitedly. ‘Do you remember his name? And do you know where did they take her?’

‘I’m sorry dear,’ Mrs. Summers shakes her head with a sad expression written all over her face, ‘I don’t remember any of it. It was so long ago... And we lost nearly all documents over the years. Unless...,’ she ponders something for a second. ‘Unless you want my old organisers. Maybe you’ll find somewhere useful in there.’

He has to stop himself from shouting ‘yes’ and sweeping Mrs. Summers from her chair. An hour and 2 pieces of cake later, he leaves Mrs. Summers’ flat with a bunch of old organisers in his arms. They all stink of mould, but he doesn’t care: they may contain some more information about River. He starts browsing through them once he gets back home. It seems that Mrs. Summers noted every single thing and meeting, however, she did it simultaneously in 4 organisers. Each of them contains only a small piece of everything that actually happened on each day and he has to read entries from each diary to make sure that he’s not missing anything. It’s tiring and terribly boring, but his effort pays off: after a few hours he stumbles on a name and an address and he lets out a loud yelp of joy.

Oh boy. Oh boy.

Now he only needs to get a plane ticket.

Chapter End Notes

/waves awkwardly

eh. maybe someone's still reading this fic. if not... hm, it'll be awkward. sorry for the super late update, but I was busy and tbqh, I didn't feel like writing. writer's block is a terrible thing. I can't promise anything, no idea when I'll be able to write and put up the next chapter. we'll see how it goes. I'll try to be quicker this time!

anyway, hope you managed to enjoy this chapter. have a nice Sunday and a pleasant week!
and one more thing: sorry for all the remaining typos, it's 2am here :\_\_\_\_.
does it trouble your mind the way you trouble mine?

Chapter Notes

this chapter deals briefly with a subject of child abuse, so skip it if you don't want to read about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are days when he feels like he’s living on planes and airports. Vegas, Moscow, Rome, Berlin – hours spent on the planes there and waiting on the airports – and all of that over the span of the few months. It’s not like he hasn’t travelled before – he has, quite a lot. He has always liked meeting new people and explore unknown places. He’s still excited about going somewhere new and he always enjoys walking along unknown streets and exploring new territories, but right now, no matter where he goes, his destination is River. And it’s not some kind of cliché – even though it sounds like one. It’s a fact. She called and he followed, no matter where she summoned him.

Even now, when she decided that she doesn’t require his presence anymore and deal with their arrangement by letters and heavily encrypted emails – he still goes to a place that is connected to her. At least he hopes it is.

New York, the city of million stories. Or so they say. They also say that some of these stories haven’t happened yet. Who knows, maybe he’ll be a part of one of these stories. For now, New York greets him with rain and cold wind, but he doesn’t care. He manages to catch a taxi – he nearly lands under its wheels in the process, but the point is that he has a taxi and right now it’s on the way to the hotel he’s booked. During the ride, he stares curiously through the windows: it’s barely 6am and the city is literally bursting with life. The pavements are overflowing with people rushing somewhere, the cars in front and behind him are honking loudly all the time and traffic is hell.

He sighs with relief once he closes the door of his hotel room. He barely got through the whole ordeal at the reception without falling asleep on the counter. He collapses onto the bed and groans. In a few hours he has to be in his top form – a lot depends on it, but he’s just so damn tired. His head is pounding and he feels like he could sleep for a day. Maybe flying on a red-eye flight wasn’t the best idea, but it’s not like he had a choice. He didn’t want to tell his boss anything, so he came to work yesterday, worked his ass off and then he went back to his flat, quickly packed a few things and headed straight to the airport. His flight left just after midnight and he got here just after 3am. So technically, he’s been awake for... Oh well, screw that. He’s been awake for far too long. He should take a shower and catch a few hours of sleep, but even though he’s beyond exhausted, his mind is still racing. There are two possibilities: he’ll either find out something big here or he’ll come back home with nothing – and both of these options are equally terrifying.

‘Is it worth it?’ He asks in the silence of the room. It’s not like he expected an answer, but a little pat on the shoulder and a word of reassurance would be really nice right now. It’s too late for regret, but he can’t keep these thoughts out of his head. Let’s see: he lied to his boss – the man who always has his back and trusts him, he’s pursuing a lead without any authorisation and he had a fight with his girlfriend.

Yeah.

Apparently even Liz – with her never ending patience and understanding – doesn’t take kindly to a
flippant ‘I am going to New York this weekend and no, I am not taking you with me’. He squeezes his eyes shut and tries not to think how loudly she slammed the door of his apartment when she left it the night before. It was their first real argument and he hasn’t contacted her since. But the worst thing is that he doesn’t even feel bad about it. Well, he doesn’t feel that bad about it. They had an argument, they shouted at each other – okay, Liz shouted at him – and she left. He understands that he behaved wrong and that he should’ve told her about his trip earlier or he should’ve explained why he has to go to New York. They are in a relationship and she has every right to know these things. He knows that he’s the one to blame and yet he doesn’t feel guilty about any of it. ‘I’ll make it up to her once I get back,’ he tells himself and closes his eyes, slowly drifting to sleep. ‘I’ll find out what I need to find out and everything will be back to normal.’

He really wants to believe that.

The Sandersons’ house is in the suburbs of the city. It looks exactly like he expected it to – tiny and well-kept, with a white-picket fence and a garden full of colourful flowers. He gets out of the taxi and starts walking towards the house. Running fingers through his hair, he repeats everything he knows about Michael Sanderson, which is not much. He’s the one who had given such wonderful opinions to the people who adopted River. Mrs. Summers had his phone number and address written in one of her notebooks. Only this, nothing else. She’d contacted him only once – a brief phone call, just before River’s adoption happened.

He did some research on his own. Turns out that Michael Sanderson existed and exists – he’s a real person, not another made-up persona. The old phone number was out of use, but he still lived under the same address that was listed in Mrs. Summers’ book. As of now, Michael Sanderson is the only link to River’s adoption. And he has no idea that someone is about to knock on his door and ask him about a thing from his past. Swallowing nervously, he takes a deep breath and knocks twice on the door.

‘Just a moment!’ A female voice replies from a distance. After half a minute or so, the door opens and a friendly looking woman peers at him from behind thick glasses.

‘Yes?’ She asks uncertainly when she sees him.

‘Hi. Hello. Good morning,’ he says and smiles. ‘Mrs. Sanderson?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is your husband home?’

‘He is, but I don’t understand...,’ she stops and looks at him once again. ‘Who are you?’

‘Sorry, John Smith,’ he says and extends his hand, but Mrs. Sanderson doesn’t take it. ‘I am a detective and I would like to ask your husband a few questions.’

Her hand tightens on the door and she takes a small step back inside the house.

‘I don’t know what you want to ask my husband,’ she says, ‘but he won’t answer any of your questions. Thank you, detective Smith. And goodbye.’

She makes a move to close the door, but he’s quicker and puts his foot between the door and the door frame.

‘Please, just listen to me,’ he says and pushes his foot further into the crack. ‘It’s nothing bad, I
promise, I just want a few answers-'

‘And I want you to go and stop pestering us! I’ll call the police if you don’t go!’ Mrs. Sanderson raises her voice.

‘I am the police,’ he tries to pacify her with a joke, but it’s not working – her face gets red and if it was possible, her eyes would shoot daggers in his direction.

‘Ellie, what’s happening? Why are you shouting?’ Another voice sounds in the hallway. A moment later, a man appears in the space next to his wife. ‘Oh. Good afternoon. And you are?’

‘John Smith,’ he replies, extending his hand again. ‘Mister Sanderson? Michael Sanderson?’

‘Yes,’ Sanderson nods his head. ‘And why do you ask?’

‘Michael, go inside. This man is leaving,’ Ellie says firmly. ‘Aren’t you, mister Smith?’

‘No, actually no. I am not leaving until I hear what I want to hear,’ he responds and turns to Michael Sanderson. ‘Please, I just want to talk with you. Ask a few questions. That’s all.’

‘Talk about what?’ Sanderson asks warily.

‘About this,’ he says and takes a piece of paper from his pocket. He hands it to Sanderson and observes him as the man studies it. Sanderson’s face pales slightly and he looks from the sheet of paper at him.

‘I see,’ he clears his throat. ‘I thought... Well, never mind now. Please, come in,’ Sanderson steps aside to let him inside. His wife lets out a huff of annoyance, but he turns to her with a sad smile. ‘Now, Ellie... I am sure that mister Smith just wants to talk for a while. That’s all. Don’t worry about me.’

‘Just wants to talk?’ His wife snarls. ‘Oh, I wonder what he wants to talk about! Huh? What do you want to talk about, detective Smith?’

Sink or swim.

‘I want to talk about The Graystark Hall Orphanage,’ he says and looks at the pair in front of him. Just like he thought – that name means something to them. Ellie pales and quickly grabs her husband’s hands and squeezes it hard. Sanderson tries to give her hand a reassuring squeeze back, but he fails: his hand hangs limply in his wife’s and his breathing hitches audibly. He half-expects them to throw him on the street, close the door, call the police, but nothing like that happens. Ellie nods her head and heads back inside the house and Sanderson stares at him for a few more seconds before letting him in.

They walk silently inside the house and Sanderson leads him to a small and cozy living room. Its wall are covered in pale yellow wallpaper and various plants are standing on window stills. There are also pictures, lots of them: of younger Michael and Ellie and someone else: two young children, smiling, standing next to each other, or being in the arms of their parents. These pictures look old, but he spots also a few new ones: in them, the children from photographs are now grown-up, with families of their own.

‘Please, sit,’ Sanderson points to an armchair standing next to a large window and without waiting for him sits in the armchair opposite of it. He sits in the armchair Sanderson pointed to and for a minute or so, neither of them says a word. It’s Sanderson who breaks the silence.
‘I’ve always known that one day someone will come,’ he starts. ‘To talk about it. About the orphanage. And here you are,’ he looks up and smiles sadly.

‘You worked there, right?’ He asks Sanderson and the older man nods.

‘Yes, you can say that. If you can work in a place that doesn’t exist.’

‘What?’ He asks and leans towards Sanderson. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘The Graystark Hall Orphanage never existed,’ Sanderson replies and sighs. ‘Okay. It existed. The building was there, all the documents were there. But it wasn’t an orphanage.’

‘What was it then?’ He asks a bit breathlessly. Shit. He hasn’t expected something like that when he first found Sanderson’s name and address in that old notebook.

‘I had to pick up the phone when it rang. Just that,’ Sanderson says as if he didn’t hear his last question. Maybe he didn’t. He looks like he’s lost in thoughts, lost in the past and memories that have been buried deep inside his head for years. ‘It was a difficult time, you know. I lost my previous job, couldn’t find another one... One child at home, second one on the way. I had to do something... And then I saw this ad in a newspaper ‘caretaker needed’. I called the number and they told me to come over,’ Sanderson stops for a moment and drums his fingers against his knee. ‘They told me that the job would be easy: I only had to pick up the phone and recite a prepared speech. That’s all. I would have my own office, work 8 hours a day from Mondays to Fridays, earn some decent money. That was it.’

‘And you agreed,’ he whispers and Sanderson nods.

‘I agreed. I didn’t have a choice. I had to take care of my family. And the job didn’t seem too difficult. Every day I went into the office, sat there for 8 hours. The phone called maybe 3 times during the 4 months I worked there.’

‘You were pretending to be a social worker and gave fake opinions on people who wanted to adopt a child. You sent fake documents. You pretended to be someone you wasn’t,’ he says flatly. The pieces slowly fall into their places, but the picture he sees is far from pretty.

‘Yes, I did,’ Sanderson says harshly. ‘I did it. I thought that would be all. They said it would be all.’

‘But it wasn’t.’

‘No. It wasn’t,’ Sanderson admits after a bit. ‘One day there was a woman waiting for me in my office. And she said that she had a proposition for me. She said I’d have to take care of a bunch of kids. It was a place just outside of the city. I’d be paid more, she said. I said I wasn’t really interested in changing my job at the moment. I said I’d happily stay here, answering the phones and sending the documents, but I wouldn’t be any good with kids. And then she said... She said that it’s not a matter of choice. She said I had to agree or she’d go to the police and tell them that I was pretending to be someone I’m not. She said I’d end up in prison. I had no choice.’

Sanderson sighs and hangs his head in shame.

‘I tried to stop it. To talk with them- to reason with this woman, but she wouldn’t listen. I had to do what she told me to.’

‘What happened then?’ He asks quietly.

‘Then I became a caretaker,’ Sanderson laughs bitterly. ‘There was a house. An old house. I spent a
week cleaning and organising it. Then, one day... They brought the kids.’

‘Kids?’

‘Yes,’ Sanderson nods. ‘Six of them. Maybe seven. They varied in age. I think they were mostly kids picked up from streets, but I never asked. I didn’t want to know.’

‘Who brought these kids?’ He asks and feels bile in his throat. If it’s going where he thinks it’s going... But he can’t stop now, not now. Not when he’s finally getting some answers.

‘Some men. I don’t know,’ Sanderson shrugs. ‘They wore suits. And they weren’t exactly nice looking. I tried not to talk to them unless I had to. Some of them started living at the house, to look after the kids at night, when I wasn’t there.’

‘What happened to the kids?’ He says and watches Sanderson’s face turn pale.

‘They...,’ Sanderson stops talking abruptly and stands up from his armchair. He starts walking from one side of the room to another: fast-paced long steps, just like he’s trying to get away from this room, from the questions and from uncomfortable memories. When he finally stops his restless pacing and leans against the wall, he looks resigned and tired. ‘You have to understand that the people I worked for... They weren’t pleasant. I never expected them to run perfectly legal business, but... What they were doing, wasn’t just illegal. It was inhuman. These kids – I think they picked them up from the streets. Or maybe adopted them, or pretended to adopt them. And then they were training them.’

‘To do what?’ He asks anxiously, although he suspects the answer to this question.

‘Steal. Sell drugs. If they had an older and bigger kids on their hands, they’d teach it to fight and then send it god knows where. Sometimes the kid would come back and sometimes...,’ Sanderson’s voice breaks. ‘I tried to stop it. I tried to quit or to inform someone, but they said- They said they’d hurt my family. And I couldn’t risk that. I just couldn’t.’

‘So you watched them turn the kids into thieves and monsters,’ he spits, not even trying to hide the disgust pouring from his voice. ‘What else did you do? Beat the kids up when they misbehaved?’

‘And what would you have done in my place?’ Sanderson asks and his voice is devoid of anger and any other emotion. ‘If someone threatened your family and friends and you knew you wouldn’t be able to protect them... What would you do?’

That stops him for a second. He never considered things from this perspective. He’s never been in a situation like that – never had to choose between protecting someone he loves and doing something he disagrees with. He knows he’d try to protect his friends no matter what, but there are some things one just shouldn’t do. Some things are just unforgivable.

‘I would try to do the right thing,’ he finally replies and looks at Sanderson who shakes his head.

‘If you say so,’ he sighs. ‘If I could turn back time, I would. I would and I would do things differently. But I can’t. I have to live with that. I can’t escape it.’

They stare at each other for a few seconds and neither of them speaks. He can see that Sanderson is still haunted by the events from his past. This conversation is his confession. It’s a shame there’s no one who can atone him for what he did.

‘Tell me,’ he says and his starts beating widely in his chest. ‘Was there... Any special kid in there? Someone who was treated differently, or behaved differently or was prepared to... different things?’
Surprise washes over Sanderson’s face.

‘How did you-?’ He frowns. ‘Yes, there was someone like that. But it was later. Much later.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘By the time his girl was brought, almost all the other kids were gone. Don’t ask me where, they just disappeared one night. One by one. And it was like they were forgotten and purged from everyone’s memory. No one ever talked about them, no one even breathed their name,’ Sanderson pauses for a second. ‘I remember them all, you know? Every face. Every name,’ he looks down. ‘I never forgot. I wish I could.’

‘The girl though. Who was she?’ He asks impatiently.

‘I don’t know,’ Sanderson shakes his head. ‘But she wasn’t American. She was brought to the orphanage maybe two years after the whole thing had started. There were maybe 4 kids there at that time. But they were gone quickly.’

‘And the girl stayed,’ he says and Sanderson nods.

‘She did. She stayed there on her own, in that big house. And the guards were observing her all the time, because she kept trying to escape. She almost made it once, but they managed to catch her. And what they did to her after that...’ Sanderson’s voice breaks. ‘After that she never tried to escape again.’

‘What did they do?’

‘You don’t want to know,’ Sanderson shakes his head. ‘Trust me, you really don’t.’

‘Tell me,’ he says forcefully, even though he’s scared of what he might hear. Sanderson shakes his head again, but then he shrugs, as if to say ‘fine, you asked for it’.

‘There was a pool in the garden,’ he starts. ‘It wasn’t big, but it was quite deep, especially for a kid. The woman - the one who forced me to work for her - she came over a day after the girl tried to escape. She went to her room and spent there an hour or so. Later they both came out of there. The guards took the girl downstairs, to the pool. The woman ordered them to bind her hands and feet. Then they,’ Sanderson swallows and grits his teeth, ‘then they threw her into the pool. And the woman said that if the girl liked to escape so much, she would have no problems with escaping that.’

They don’t speak for a while. He is simply too shocked to even utter a word – he never excepted to hear something like that. If it’s River that Sanderson is talking about... It must be her. He must be talking about her. And if what he’s telling is true... He closes his eyes for a second. He can’t imagine what terror River must’ve lived through.

‘She did get out, you know,’ Sanderson’s voice stops his musings. ‘To this day I don’t know how, but she managed to get out of her bounds and swim to the surface. But the worst thing is that the woman was happy. She actually smiled when she saw the girl getting out of the pool. Like it was some kind of a test.’

It probably was a test. The woman in charge – oh, he knows very well who she was – wanted to test Melody. She wanted to make sure that the girl would be fitting for her scheme. He breathes sharply through his nose and tries to clear his head from the suffocating anger. He can’t allow himself to lose focus, not now. He has to find out everything.

‘What else did they do to her?’ He asks and closes his eyes as Sanderson lists everything that was
done to River. Even if he had any doubts before if she’s the girl Sanderson is talking about, right now he has none. It all falls into a picture: every single things he hears fits with River’s behaviour. By the time Sanderson finishes his story, he feels sick to his stomach. Everything she’d been put through... No, he chides himself in his head. It still doesn’t justify things she has done.

It’s only when he opens his eyes, he notices that Sanderson stopped talking. The man is sitting in the armchair again, staring through the window, but not noticing anything. It must’ve been difficult for him: remember and admit all these things after years of keeping them hidden in the shadows of his memory. He wants to say something, to comfort him somehow, but has no idea how. Are there even words that could help Sanderson right now?

‘Are you two done?’ Come a voice from behind his back. He turns around to see Ellie, Sanderson’s wife, standing in the threshold and looking at him with a determined expression on her face.

‘Yes,’ he whispers.

‘Then I think you should go now,’ she says briskly and walks over to her husband, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s enough. I don’t need to see you off, do I?’

He stands up without a word. He starts walking towards the door, but stops when Ellie calls his name.

‘Mister Smith,’ she says and her voice is dark and hollow. ‘Don’t ever come back here.’

Chapter End Notes

oh, look. not dead.

if you're still reading this fic, then I'm sorry. for the delay in posting the next chapter, for how short and how ~off~ it is. sorry for everything. I can't promise that the next chapter will be up sooner - my muse is fickle and for various reasons I am thinking about either putting his work on hiatus or deleting. yeah.

anyway, I hope you're all well and that you manage to enjoy this chapter. have a good weekend!
With one final sigh and a few last taps of his fingers on his laptop’s keyboard, he finally finishes the report he’s been working on for the last few days. Well... Nights. He’s been working on it at nights. But that’s not important right now – it’s ready and he can finally print it. Once his printer is done with spewing numerous pieces of paper, he makes sure to thoroughly delete the original file from his computer. He has a copy of it on a flash drive – heavily encrypted, with a password put on it. The data contained in the file is not groundbreaking – it wouldn’t destroy anyone’s life; it’s not confidential, but he prefers to be safe than sorry. In this file, there’s everything he managed to find out about River. From her childhood and adoption, what she’s been through in the orphanage, through her education and work in the police force. He made extensive notes about her career, her arrest, escape and his later encounters with her. He carefully typed down every place she’d been in since her escape – every place he knows of, that is.

Call it his encyclopaedia of River Song. He knows too well how Amy would call it: *stalking bordering on unhealthy obsession and you really do have a crush on her, you idiot! Now, that is really creepy!*, but she doesn’t know about any of it. No one knows. And he wants to keep it that way. It’s something he can’t explain, but he doesn’t want anyone to know what he knows. Somehow, the information seems... private. For the reasons he can’t explain, he wants to protect River’s privacy from the others. He’s also pretty sure she’d be furious if she ever found out that he’s been digging in her past and that he’s found quite a few things.

Yes. He’s found out quite a lot.

He closes his eyes and tries to block the facts from entering his head, but no matter how much he tries, he can’t do that. Ever since he’s returned from New York, nearly two weeks ago, he’s been unable to just forget about everything he’s heard there. No, wrong. He doesn’t want to forget, he just wants not to think about for a while. But these thoughts won’t leave him – the more he wants them gone, the more they force their way into his brain. He can still hear Sanderson’s voice in his head: the voice of a man who’s been battling with these demons his entire life. His words still echo in his head, repeating the terrible stories over and over again.

‘If she was disobedient, they’d punish her. Lock her in her room without food or water. Sometimes they’d beat her up. They stopped it once she knew how to hit back. And trust me, she learned that quick enough.’

‘They pumped her full of drugs to see how she’d react...’

‘Trained her in hand-to-hand fighting...’

‘They taught her how to shoot-‘

‘Sometimes they’d wake her up in the middle of the night and they’d talk to her. They wouldn’t let her go back to sleep for hours. It’d repeat the next night. And then the next night.’

‘The girl... She wouldn’t be allowed to make friends with other kids. She attended school, but she wasn’t allowed to be friendly with anyone.’

‘Enough,’ he mutters and shakes his head. People say that knowledge is power, but sometimes what...
you don’t know, can’t hurt you. What he knows about River hurts him. He can’t even imagine what it must’ve been for her: living like that, being treated like an object, being isolated and surrounded by people who didn’t care about you. He recalls his childhood: the happy and carefree years, filled with love and joy. River has never experienced something like that, he realises with a pang of pain. No wonder she never wanted to talk about her past: so many skeletons hidden there, so many nightmares and dreadful memories. How could she cope with what had been done to her? Has she ever coped with it? Is it even possible to cope with something like that, get over it? He can’t understand how anyone could survive something like this. And yet, somehow River did survive it. He’d like to say that she walked out of it unscattered, but he knows she didn’t. The Silence made her into a killer and now there’s no way for her to turn back.

There are many things that bother him about this whole situation and he has twice as many questions as he has answers. However, there is one question that bugs him nearly constantly: why River? Why, from all the kids they could have picked, did they choose River? Why was she the one who was trained to become a killer? Why put so much effort and faith in one child? Why a child? They could have hired a hitman. That would seem like a smarter move: cheaper, less problematic, easier to execute and much quicker. And yet they chose the long way. They raised a kid to become an assassin. They modelled her exactly how they wanted and needed her to be. God. By the time she grew up, it must’ve been impossible for River to break free from her ‘arrangement’ with the Silence. It must’ve been impossible for her to change the way she thinks and behaves. She should be obedient to the very end – a perfect little soldier, happily executing every order spoken by her masters. And here’s where the problem begins: right now, River is working against the Silence. She’s helping him to bring them down. Sure, she’s doing it to help herself – she stopped being useful to her former bosses the second she got caught – but if she was that brainwashed, she would’ve tried to get back into their good graces. It doesn’t make any sense, it doesn’t add up, it just drives him insane. He can’t ask River for an answer or an explanation, because she hasn’t contacted him in weeks (not that he cares about it. He doesn’t.) And even if he asked her, he really doubts she’d answer his questions – and even if by some miracle she did, it’d be all lies.

There are many things about this whole situation that make him scared: the Silence’s mad plan of turning a little girl into a killer. The fact that they succeeded. The fact that there may be many other kids just like River – lost and used, being turned into machines and monsters. He’s furious that he didn’t see it earlier, he’s angry that he didn’t stop any of it, that he didn’t have a chance to save these kids and help them. He’s angry that he couldn’t have helped River. But what makes him most scared is that with every minute, he feels more sorry for her. He knows that she’d hate his pity, quite rightly so, but he can’t help himself. He also knows that feeling sorry for a person who killed others for money is just not right, and as a detective – and a decent human being – he should not feel this way and yet...

He wants to asks River questions. He wants to give her a chance to explain. He wants to give himself a chance to understand her and her motives, he needs to know her side of the story. He wants to help her, save her somehow: either from her past or from herself. In moments like that he wishes he could turn back time, undo things, unmake them, erase certain parts from history. But he doesn’t have this power. Things happened and they can’t be unmade. And they both have to live with the consequences.

___

He’s not a big believer in faith or destiny, however you want to call it. He prefers to think that things just happen, what the hell. Your life won’t change just because you turned left instead of right. The world just doesn’t work like that.

But there are days when he thinks that there must be something – some greater power – that makes
things happen. There’s someone up there who occasionally likes to help him. Some of his greatest achievements and successes were caused by a tiny little thing that fell into his hands. He managed to succeed in so many things just because he was in the right place at the right time, picked up a random newspaper or heard seemingly unimportant news. But what happened today, beats everything else on the head.


He still can’t believe it actually happened, even though he’s about to enter the interrogation room and try to get something out of the young Kovarian. His head is still spinning from this revelation and absurd of this situation. He can’t say he’s never imagined arresting Kovarian. He’s been building this case for quite some time and putting that asshole behind the bars would be immensely satisfying. In his head, he saw it happening during a raid on a drug warehouse or catching Kovarian and his business partners during some illegal operation. It always happened in the middle of the night, with a whole team of heavily armed policemen listening to his every word. There was always shooting, dramatic commands shouted over the noise of the fight. In his head it always looked like a scene from a really good action movie, but somehow it was even better.

None of his... fantasies took place in a middle of a pharmacy. In his dreams, he never was munching on a cherry lollipop. And in none of his fantasies, Robert Kovarian was buying strawberry-flavoured condoms. Yeah. Reality has no sense of dramatics, but it does have a great sense of absurd. Who would have thought that one of the most looked for gangsters will decide to take a stroll and walk right into the same pharmacy that he was in? What are the chances? Various detectives and policemen have been trying to find out where Kovarian lives. He’s been an enigma, a ghost – hidden somewhere in the city, safely tucked away, never leaving his safe haven. And today was the day when he decided to leave his hiding place and go to a bloody pharmacy of all the places. Why would one even need condoms in the middle of the day? Well, probably for the same activities you’d need them in the middle of the night, but couldn’t he have sent one of his minions to get them?

‘Okay, are you ready?’ The loud voice coming from behind him stirs from his rather bizarre thoughts. He turns around to see his boss beaming at him. He’s never seen Morgan this happy. For the last few hours – ever since he returned to the office with handcuffed Kovarian - the man has been floating in the air. And right now, he’s grinning like he’s a kid who was given the biggest and sweetest ice-cream in the world. ‘If you’re ready, then it’s time to get this party started. I managed to sort everything out – we have security around the room and I made sure that only people with clearance will be able to enter this part of the building. And now... Robert Kovarian is waiting for you. Let’s not keep him waiting.’

He nods his head and quickly walks out of his office, moving towards the interrogation room where Robert Kovarian is seated. Just before entering it, he stops just for a second and takes a deep breath. This is one of the most important investigations in his life. It just can’t go wrong. He won’t let it happen.

He enters the room confidently, with his head held high and no emotions showing on his face. Young Kovarian is sitting behind the table, handcuffs still tight on his wrist and an angry scowl on his face. He doesn’t look particularly happy about the situation he’s in, but then again, who would be?

‘Hello again,’ he says merrily and sits opposite Kovarian. ‘We’ve met before and since it was rather unplanned and hasty meeting, I figured we could spend some more time together and talk. You know, get to know each other. What do you think?’

Kovarian gives him one unpleasant look and glances away. He’s a strongly built man: tall and heavy,
but it seems that all the weight is in the muscles. His t-shirt is tight on his chest and arms, and he looks like a type of man that would pick a fight and beat up his opponent just for the fun of it. The line of his mouth is thin and cruel and he stares at everything with undisguised contempt. He’s not someone you want to meet in a dark alleyway. Nor someone you should arrest for that matter.

‘Not friends then,’ he sighs theatrically and opens the file laying on the table. He pretends to read it for a few seconds, before asking his next question. ‘How’s your mother doing?’

He must’ve struck a nerve, because Kovarian stirs in his chair and looks at him with a murderous expression on his face.

‘My mother will hear about it,’ he says through gritted teeth.

‘Whoa, calm down, Draco Malfoy,’ he snorts and looks at Kovarian, who’s looking pissed off and majorly unimpressed. ‘Not a Harry Potter fan then? It’s a shame. I am quite fond of it.’

‘Cut the crap,’ Kovarian spats. ‘You know I won’t stay here long. You have nothing on me. Nothing. And even if you do, my lawyer will get me out of his quicker than you can say bow ties are dumb.’

‘Bow ties are cool,’ he says, touching the one around his neck. ‘And I am sorry to disappoint you, but we do have something on you. More than just something. Your lawyer won’t get you out of this mess so quickly this time.’

‘No judge in this city will find me guilty,’ Kovarian says with pride in his voice. ‘You won’t find anyone like that.’

‘Are you sure about it? Really, really sure? Times are changing,’ he says and leans in his chair and observes Kovarian’s reaction to his words. He must sound incredibly sure of himself, because Kovarian falters for a moment and stares at him, as if he’s trying to figure out whether he’s telling the truth or lying through his teeth.

‘I want to talk to my lawyer,’ he finally says with a blank expression on his face.

‘Very well,’ he responds with a smile and nods his head. ‘We called him for you. It’s Mr. Headwright, isn’t it?’

Kovarian looks at him in surprise and gives a sharp nod.

‘Very well. He should be here in less than 20 minutes. And you see, the funny thing is...,’ he says and slowly gets up, stretching out the silence between his next sentence. ‘The funny thing is that we want to talk with him as well. Such a coincidence, don’t you think?’

And with these words he leaves Robert Kovarian – who’s rooted into his chair utterly shocked and pale as hell – alone in the interrogation room.

___

Had he known that arresting Robert Kovarian would have such an impact on his life, he would—Well, he’d have done it all over again. However, a memo saying that arresting a wanted mobster will leave you utterly exhausted, would’ve been nice. In the last 48 hours he had 6 hours of sleep in total. He simply didn’t have time for it in between interrogations, having his hand shaken by Very Important People, congratulations from his friends and co-workers, dealing with paperwork, making various phone calls, trying to find the right judge and prosecutor, making sure that the security around Kovarian is tight, choosing the most trusted people to discuss the results of the investigation
Okay. There are only 20 more stairs and the door that keep him from collapsing on his bed and
sleeping forever – or at least until tomorrow’s afternoon. His friends thought it’d be a smashing idea
to throw him a ‘congratulations on catching a bad guy!’ party on this very evening and while he
appreciates it, it’s not how he wanted to spend a Saturday’s night. But he stayed for a few hours,
laughed and joked with the guests, had a few drinks, all while fighting with the overwhelming
exhaustion. It was Amy who noticed it and called the party to an end – for which he’s extremely
grateful. He only dropped Liz off at her flat – she offered that he can stay over, but he shook his head
and kissed her goodbye. It’s not that he doesn’t like staying over at hers, he does. Her flat is small,
but comfortable, decorated in these woman-y things that he would never pick himself, but he actually
enjoys looking at them. Liz’s flat always smells nice – either of some perfume or food, but- It still
doesn’t feel like home. Maybe it will, in the future, but not yet.

With one final sigh, he fishes his keys from his pocket and opens his door. His apartment is dark and
silent and for a second he just stands motionlessly, enjoying the calmness of the night. He closes the
door behind him and starts to take off his shoes. He doesn’t even bother to turn on the lights – he can
navigate the route to his bed in the dark, thank you very much. He hops on his left leg, trying to undo
laces in his right shoe: they just don’t want to come undone no matter how hard he tugs at them.

‘You know, I’ve always thought you’re a bit daft, but I never thought you are this dumb.’

He nearly loses his balance and falls down. Someone’s in his apartment – someone broke into his
apartment and waited for him to come back home. Someone broke into his apartment, waited for him
to come back home and insulted him before even saying ‘hello’. And oh, he very well knows who
that person is. He’d recognise this voice anywhere, no matter how much time passed since he’s heard
it last. In the beginning his heart started beating fast from the surprise and fear, but right now, while
it’s still beating loudly, it’s caused by different emotions.

He knows the person hiding in the dark.

It’s-

Chapter End Notes

wow, an update for which you didn't have to wait a month! impossible.
but since things can't be that great, have a cliffhanger. I am actually sorry for this one,
but I had to do it this way. I wanted to write it all in one chapter, but it just didn't
happen. right now I don't have time to write it, and if I waited to write everything I
wanted to write, you'd get the update in a month or so. or never. that's always a
possibility.
I will try to update as soon as possible. I will have some free time this week, but I am
not sure I'll have time to write. once again: I'm sorry.

okay, hope you had a nice week, enjoyed your weekend and I hope that you'll have a
nice Monday!
He knows the person hiding in the dark.

It’s River Song.

A part of him wonders why he’s even surprised. Who else could be waiting for him in the cover of darkness like that? But there’s also another part of him and this part – slightly fuelled by the drinks he had tonight (okay, one drink) – is angry. Angry at what exactly he can’t tell, but who cares about the motives? It’s the result that matters. The result of River randomly appearing in his apartment is him being angry. Fine, there are other things he’s feeling at this very moment, but he feels it’d be better not to think about them and not to feel them. It’s... safer that way. He flicks the lights on and squints at the sudden brightness. Okay, not the best idea, but at least now he can see River. She’s sitting in one of his armchairs, looking as if she owns the place, no signs of discomfort or unease in her posture. She’s sitting there like a bloody queen on a throne and she has the guts to smirk at him.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ He asks angrily. It’s better to stick to anger in situations like that. Anger keeps you focused and sharp. But somehow the tone of his voice doesn’t seem to intimidate River: she shrugs her shoulders with a smile and points her finger at the wall to her left. The very same wall where he marks every single one of her appearances. Great. His only hope is that she hasn’t found the file he has on her.

‘I must admit: this is impressive,’ she says and takes a long look at the wall and the map hanging there. ‘Full of mistakes, but impressive nonetheless. Should I be flattered that you devote so much attention to me or should I get a restraining order?’

‘Very funny,’ he says. ‘Are you here to insult me? If yes, then I am pretty sure you filled your quota and you can leave now.’

‘Is this how you treat all your guests?’ River says and stretches in her armchair. ‘Rude. But then again, the fame might’ve changed you.’

Fame? What is she talking about? Then he spots the newspaper that are lying on the coffee table next to her armchair. He knows these newspapers – Amy has already mocked him with the articles printed there. Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, The Sun – the list goes on and on. Every single one of them printed some kind of article about him and Kovarian’s arrest. However, unlike proper newspapers, the tabloids did not focus on the fact that one of the most dangerous mobsters in the UK was caught. Instead, they focused on all the unimportant facts: what Kovarian was wearing during the arrest, what he was buying and unfortunately, they also focused their attention on the detective who caught him. That is: him. The journalists – if he can call them that – found out some bits and pieces of his biography, both professional and private. They even got his phone number and pestered him with phone calls, asking him all sorts of uncomfortable questions. Obviously, he answered none of them, but that didn’t stop the journalists from writing their articles, which are nothing more than stacks of lies. Normally, he would pay no attention to any of it, but he has Amy Pond in his life and Amy Pond doesn’t let things like that slide. She bought every single tabloid that printed an article about him, cut them all out and put them in a small booklet and now she uses said booklet to embarrass and torment him at every possible occasion. Tonight, she read excerpts from the articles at the party. Most people found them funny – especially after a few drinks. And when he thought that it can’t be any worse, he comes back home and finds River Song smirking at him over a pile of rubbish tabloids.
'I am not sure which title I like the most,' River says in a conversational tone. ‘The condom-fighter’ or ‘The cherry-flavoured justice’. They’re both pretty catchy, aren’t they?’

‘Ha, yes, they’re very catchy and you are incredibly hilarious,’ he says drily and walks into the room. ‘Anything else you have to say?’

‘Can I just repeat that you are an idiot?’ River says and suddenly all traces of amusement are gone from her voice. ‘A giant bloody idiot.’

‘You say the sweetest things,’ he forces a smile and plops on his couch with a heavy sigh. ‘What did I do to deserve this?’

‘I don’t know... Arresting young Kovarian? Does it ring a bell?’ River says and if he’s not mistaken, there’s a hint of anger in her voice.

‘Oh right. That. Arresting one of the most influential mobsters in the country. How dreadful of me,’ he laughs bitterly. ‘Why are you so offended by this? Was he your ex?’

‘What were you thinking?’ River asks, ignoring his remark. ‘Arresting Kovarian in a broad daylight? On your own?’

‘And what was I supposed to do, eh?’ He snorts. ‘Ask him to become a good citizen? It’s been a few years since anyone spotted him outside. I couldn’t miss something like that!’

‘But you could’ve tagged his car and see where he was going and find his safe-house. You could have called for back-up and capture him then! Anything would be better than arresting him like that.’

‘Yeah? And why is that so?’ He asks, leaning slightly into River’s direction. This is just rich: a criminal teaching him how to arrest other criminals. How and when has his life become this?

‘You do realise whom you’re dealing with, right?’ River asks after a few moments of heavy silence. ‘It’s not some teen gang, it’s not a drunkard making a scene in a restaurant – it’s one of the most dangerous mobsters in the country, if not in Europe.’

‘You would know that, wouldn’t you?’ He cuts in. River’s eyes flash with something – hurt? Annoyance? – and he feels a strange surge of joy when he sees it. He wants to get some reaction out of her – anything really, but... It kind of scares him how much he wants to hurt her. Not physically, as he despises violence, but he wants her to hurt inside. He wants her to hurt like he did after the truth about her was revealed, he wants her to hurt as much as her true nature and sudden disappearance hurt Amy and Rory. He can’t help it, but every time he looks at her, he can feel rage cursing slowly through his veins.

‘Yes, I would know that. As a matter of fact, I do,’ River responds flatly, but doesn’t say anything else. He’s a bit disappointed that he didn’t get more reaction from her, but he can always try later, can’t he? ‘You do realise there’s a price on your head now?’

‘What?’ He asks surprised. She can’t possibly mean what he thinks she means.

‘There’s a price on your head,’ River repeats slowly, staring him straight in the eye. ‘Mommy Kovarian wasn’t particularly happy that someone put her darling son behind the bars. She wants to take care of the person who did that and she’s already taken appropriate steps to do that.’

‘Oh? Is it why you are here?’ He says and gets up from the couch. He takes a few steps towards River and tries his best to look cool and aloof when saying the next sentence. ‘Are you going to put a bullet through my brain?’
'Don’t flatter yourself,’ River says in a bored tone of voice. ‘You are not worth my attention and my time - they won’t pay that much for your head. Not yet, anyway.’

‘But if they paid you enough, you’d do it, wouldn’t you?’ He asks with a sneer on his face. But even that doesn’t seem to anger River: she just keeps staring at him with a calm and unimpressed expression on his face. And that annoys him even further: he can feel anger slowly bubbling inside him, red and hot. He wonders what it’d take for River to lose her composure, to stop being so bloody calm and collected all the time.

‘Let’s hope you won’t have to find out,’ she replies, looking at him without as much as a blink. ‘And if you think that killing you is the worst they can do... Think about it again.’

‘What do you mean?’ He asks sharply, but she stands up, ignoring his question completely. It sends yet another wave of annoyance through his body. Through gritted teeth he repeats his question. ‘What do you mean? Explain.’

‘Look at you,’ River says and a sad smile curves her lips. ‘You think you know everything about them, don’t you? You think you have The Silence figured out and dissected and yet you have no idea how they work.’

‘Well, explain it to me, then,’ he says, taking another few steps towards her. They’re facing each other now and he’s so close to her that he can see the flecks of gold in her eyes. How long has it been since he was so close to her? He can’t remember, but gods, he wonders what would happen if he moved one more step in her direction.

‘I know you don’t care about your own safety, which is... Stupid, but it’s none of my business,’ River finally says, once again ignoring his question. She shakes her head and moves past him, heading towards the door. ‘But... There are other people you should think about.’

‘What do you mean?’ He says and feels like it’s the only thing he says in his conversation. He’s like a broken record, asking for an explanation over and over again. River stops on her way to the door and turns around to look at him.

‘I think that it’d be better if you sent Amy and Tony somewhere safe. Or at least give them some protection,’ River says slowly and almost hesitatingly. He frowns and walks towards her.

‘Are you threatening me? Are you threatening them?’ He says quietly. ‘Is it why you’re here? To throw some vague comments and frighten me? It’s not going to work.’

‘Just do it, John,’ River says and turns her back to him. ‘For everyone’s sake.’

She makes a move to open the door and step out of his apartment, but he’s by her side before she can touch the handle.

‘No, you are not going anywhere,’ he says, grabbing her wrist. ‘Not until you explain to me why you’re here. No more of this mysterious crap.’

She looks down at his hand clasped tightly around hers and stares back at him. Her eyes are cold and empty, and for a second he wonders: is it how she looked at all of her victims just before she killed them?

‘I think it’ll be better for both of us if you let me go right now, John,’ River says, but makes no move to release her wrist from his grip. His fingers tighten around it – he’s holding her so tightly now that he can feel her pulse against his palm. Thud-thud-thud-thud. Thud-thud-thud-thud.
‘And I think it’ll be better if you start talking, River,’ he draws our her name, tasting it on his tongue like it’s something bitter and poisonous. ‘Let’s make a deal: you talk and I’ll let you go.’

‘You really think that this,’ she moves her trapped hand a little, ‘will stop me from leaving? You’re really sweet. Sweet bordering on stupid. I’ve killed people. I escaped from the arrest. Don’t you remember that?’

Oh, he remembers. He remembers all of it and he knows what River is capable of. The reasonable part of his brain is telling him to back off and let her go, but like always, there’s another part of his brain, one that is telling him to push her even further and see how she reacts. What will she do if he corners her and leaves her no way to escape? What will happen then?

See, one of his problems is that he always underestimates his opponents. It’s been like that since he can remember: he talked back to teachers without thinking about the power they had over him; he scolded bullies and he expected them to listen to him and not smash his nose. He often talked down to criminals, sure of his power and intelligence, only to be left defeated or scrambling to get the upper hand again. And he always, always forgets that a cornered animal will strike back to free itself.

River does just that: she takes a small step back and then hits him with her free hand. She hits his sternum and she does it strongly enough to make him lose his breath for a second. He staggers a few steps back - trying to regain his balance, but doesn’t release her hand. He senses rather than sees River raising her hand again – this time it’s balled into a fist and aimed at his head – but this time he’s ready. By some miracle, he catches her fist before it has a chance to connect with his cheek, and holds it tightly inside his own. River lets out a surprised yelp and tries to free his hands, but without success – he holds them tightly and forces her to take a few steps back. Right now, she’s backed against the front door and has no way out. She’s struggling against his grip, trying to wriggle out, but he doesn’t lessen his grip on her wrists for a second. River leans against the door, looking angry and staring him straight in the eye with venom he never knew she’s capable of. She’s breathing harshly, her chest raising with every breath, her cheeks are flushed with annoyance and if look could kill, he’d be lying on the floor, cold and lifeless. At this very moment, River looks like Fury impersonated: dangerous and enrage, ready to strike again and fight him until her last breath.

There are many things he should do right now: call the police and take River for questioning. Or at least question her himself, here and now. Get all the information he needs from her and then let her go, telling her never to come back again. These things are the right things to do, they’re the things that are expected from him. Unfortunately, he does none of that. Instead, he closes the distance between him and River, and kisses her.

(Later, much later, he’ll blame it on many things: the drink he had a few hours before, the adrenaline pumping through his body at the moment, his inability to think clearly in River’s presence- The list will go on and on. The real reason why he did that, will lurk in the back of his mind, but he will dismiss it as far too ridiculous.)

River makes a soft noise of surprise and he expects her to turn her head away, push him away, fight him, but she kisses him back. It’s different from the awkward kiss they once shared – the fake ‘wedding’ kiss their co-workers forced them to have. That was a mere press of her lips against his and he was too shocked to react to it in any way. But this is- This kiss is everything he’s ever imagined and hoped a kiss with River would be. (Yes, he imagined it. Multiple times. Sue him.)

This kiss isn’t chaste in the slightest: it’s hot and slick, his tongue sliding across River’s lips, her teeth nipping none too gently on his lower lip. Their kiss is hungry and full of longing - it feels like they're trying to devour each other. It's like they've been craving for it to happen for a long time and now that it's happening, they can't stop or even slow down.
But just kissing River isn't enough, not anymore. He wants to touch her, run hands all over her body, discover her. He releases her hands and buries his own in her hair. It's soft and delicate, the curls fill his hands and slide through his fingers like they have life of their own. River puts her arms around his neck, bringing their bodies closer together and oh god. It sounds pathetic and like an utter cliché, but it feels like River was made for him. She fits perfectly in his arms – warm soft curves against his own lanky frame - and she feels almost too good. He places his hands on her hips, stroking her hipbones through the soft and flimsy fabric of her summer dress. It already feels pretty damn good and if the dress ever comes off...

River parts from him for a second and takes a deep, shaky breath. He looks at her and oh, he likes what he sees. Her lips are red and swollen from kisses - his kisses - her pupils are blown so much that her eyes are nearly black, her hair is in a disarray. She looks absolutely out of control and he doubts he looks any better. They probably should stop this madness and talk, or at least move to his bedroom, but he knows that if they stop now, none of it will ever happen again. He places one more kiss on her lips - last one for now - and moves to her neck. He places small, delicate kisses on her neck, breathing in her scent - her spicy and heady perfume, tiredness, smell of time wasted on planes - and wishing he could bottle it up and keep it forever. His hands move up, gently massaging her breasts through the layer of clothes. River lets out a tiny breathy sigh at this and arches into his touch, and he can't help but smile against her skin. This little sigh, this unconscious move in his direction - it feels like her surrender. And it's like River can read his mind and feel his smugness, because she starts grinding her hips against his, slowly rubbing the heat of her core against his erection.

'Fuck,' he mutters against her skin, feeling suddenly lightheaded. He feels like a teenager, horny and ready to come in his pants, before the girl of his dreams even takes off her dress.

'Yes, that's basically the idea,' River snarls next to his ear and slowly - too slowly - starts undoing the button and zipper of his trousers. Her hands are warm and confident, sliding into his pants and wrapping tightly around him. She pumps her hand up and down his cock, with just enough pressure and just the right speed to make him want to fall on his knees and beg for more. He bites skin on her neck and then soothes it with his tongue. River moans loudly - oh shit, what if his neighbours hear that? - and the movement of her hand stops for a second and it's long enough for him to regain the ability to think straight. Well, if River wants to play dirty, so will he. One of his hands finds its way under River's dress - her breath hitches - and he trails the edge of River's knickers with his fingers. Gentle, barely there touch, touching her, but not touching her where she wants him to.

'Is it what you came here for?' he asks her as he finally cups her through her underwear. He can feel her through the material - heat, wetness, the dark smell of desire - and can't help, but press his hand harder against her.

'Don't flatter yourself,' River says, but her reply is a bit breathless. 'I really doubt you're this - fuck - good.'

He kisses her again, licking inside of her mouth, reveling in the taste of her – so new and fresh to him. It may be the only time he has a chance to explore her and he should take his time, but River is already pushing his trousers and pants off his hips, scratching her nails against his stomach and making him hiss into her parted lips. After that, everything happens in a blur of kisses and caresses: him sucking at the swell of her breast just above the neckline of her dress, her biting viciously at his collarbone, him sliding off her knickers and lifting her up, her legs wrapped around his waist, his erection pressing into the wet heat of her, inch by torturous inch, until she enveloped him whole.

And suddenly, his head is blessedly empty. He doesn't think about anything, anything except for River. He can only hear her sighs and moans, the sound of their skin sliding together, ragged breathing that fills the space surrounding them. Right now, he can focus only on how she feels: her
nails pressing sharply into his shoulder blades, legs locked tightly against his hips, urging him to go faster and deeper; kisses pressed against his mouth and neck.

He thrusts his hips tirelessly, encouraged by River’s loud moans. He feels like his body is made of liquid fire: blazing hot and ready to ignite everything around him. Every noise River makes sends him closer and closer to the edge. He can feel his body tighten more and more with every second, but he’ll be damn if she doesn’t take River with him. He reaches between their sweat-slicked bodies to the place where they’re joined and finds River’s clit. He presses it hard – there’s no time for gentleness now – and pumps his hips faster. River cries out in pleasure and digs her nails deeper into his back. He does it again and again, until her voice become hoarse and her sex flutters madly around him. She comes with a shout that makes his ears ring. It takes a few more thrusts before he joins her, with her name whispered into her hair.

His knees give up under him almost immediately, and he slides to the ground, dragging River with him. They land in a graceless heap on the floor – River on top of him – trying to catch their breath. His heart is pounding so loudly, that he’s sure River must feel it against her skin. He looks at her, sprawled on his chest and looking absolutely exhausted. He makes a move to put his arm around her, pull her even closer to him – he can’t bear to be parted from her, not just yet – but she rolls over and moves away from him. Oh. Okay. This is not how he’s imagined it.

‘I’m sorry I did not meet your expectations, sweetie,’ he hears River’s voice and nearly jumps out of his skin.

‘Did I- Did I just say it aloud?’ He stutters, feeling utterly stupid. Really, can’t his mouth be shut just for a second? Just for a second. Why does he always have to embarrass himself in front of River?

‘I am afraid you did,’ River responds in an amused tone. ‘But don’t worry, I don’t think you’re a pervert or something. In a way, I guess I should be flattered.’

‘No! No, wait, let me explain, this is not what I meant! I mean,’ he sits up and runs fingers through his hair, ‘I did, but it’s not like that! I swear, okay?’

‘It’s fine. I know what you wanted to say,’ River says quietly and looks up at him. For a few seconds neither of them speaks. River’s gaze drops to his mouth and he starts leaning towards her, wanting nothing more than to kiss her again (and again, and again, only if she allows him to), but she sits up and starts straightening her clothes. He stands up and pulls his trousers up, observing River doing her best to get her hair under control. Any minute now she’s going to walk out of his flat and who knows if he’s ever going to see her again.

‘You don’t have to leave,’ he says hurriedly. River turns towards him, a surprised expression on her face. ‘I- Look, you can stay here as long as you like.’

‘I don’t want to stay here,’ she says sharply and takes a step towards his front door.

‘I won’t force you to,’ he says softly. ‘I just- If you don’t have a place to stay, you can stay here. You can leave whenever you want to. I won’t ever tell anyone that you were here, nor I will call anyone right now. You’re safe here.’

‘Why would you do that?’ River asks, turning around. He shrugs.

‘I don’t know,’ he says, feeling terribly awkward and out of place. It’s so bizarre – just several minutes ago they were so close and they understood each other without words, and now they can barely talk to each other. ‘The point is, you can stay here for the night. And for the day. And we-, uhm, we don’t have to do anything, I mean- We could talk?’ He finishes lamely, hoping that River
won’t laugh in his face, call him an idiot and leave him feeling like an idiot. He’s not sure he’d survive it.

‘Fine,’ she says and he stares at her, not sure if she’s joking or really agreeing. She’s looking at him with a tender expression on her face, one he has never seen before. ‘I will stay here for a few hours. However, I have two rules,’ she says and slowly approaches him. The warm expression from her face is replaced by a different one: there’s something wild and feral in River’s eyes right now. She looks like she’s about to eat him alive, devour him completely, until the last beat of his heart. It shouldn’t thrill him as much as it does.

‘What rules?’ He manages to squeak out as she places her hands on his shoulders.

‘They’re very simple, I am sure you’ll understand them without any difficulties. First: no talking,’ River looks at him and all he can do is nod his head. ‘Wonderful. Now, the second one...’ she stands on her tip toes and leans towards his ear. Her breath is hot against his neck and his hands move to her back on their own accord, pulling her closer to him. He can feel River’s smile against his skin as she whispers: ‘Take me to your bedroom.’

It’s still dark when he wakes up a few hours later. He lets out a content, sleepy sigh and slowly opens his eyes. The space next to him is empty. Of course it is.

River must have left when he was still asleep. Not that he expected anything else – he was sure she’s going to leave him sooner or later, but he didn’t except her to leave without a goodbye. And it’s not that he’s disappointed, he’s just- Wait, is it coffee that he smells?

He jumps out of his bed, runs fingers through his dishevelled hair and grabs a pair of boxers laying on the floor. He hops on one leg while trying to put them on and hurries to the kitchen. And there is River: casually sitting on a counter and sipping a cup of coffee. She’s wearing his shirt, her hair is even more messy than his, but somehow, in the yellow light cast by lamp in his kitchen, she looks the most beautiful he’s ever seen her.

Not that he’s going to ever tell her that.

‘I thought you left,’ he says and winces at how needy and moany it sounded. Act cool, he tells himself. Act cool. ‘I mean, you wanted to leave and I thought-‘

‘You know how to make a girl feel welcome, sweetie,’ River says with a raised eyebrow and he feels like a gigantic moron. ‘Hey, I’m only joking, don’t fret.’

He nods his head and his eyes fall on River’s legs that are rather nicely displayed in the shirt she’s wearing. His shirt. He tries to stop that ridiculous masculine pride from going to his head, because there’s something else he has to focus on. Something quite important...

‘Wait. You wanted to leave like that?’ He exclaims, gesturing widely and pointing at her state of relative undress. ‘That would be- You could be arrested for public indecency!’

‘Yes, because that’s the biggest of my crimes,’ River deadpans and he can’t stop himself from snorting in amusement. ‘Anyway, I had to borrow your shirt because my dress is a bit worse to wear. I’ll have to iron it before I leave.’

He nods his head and stares at the floor. He’s not quite sure how to act: suddenly, the whole
relationship he had with River has changed and shifted, turned itself on its head and then became something completely new: something much more complicated that it has been before. Not that it has ever been easy and simple, mind you. River has always made him a little bit unsure of himself and a tiny bit flummoxed, but right now he feels completely out of his depth. How is he supposed to act? What is he supposed to say? ‘Hey babe, I liked what we just did, fancy another go?’ Or maybe: ‘Hey, are you wearing any knickers underneath that shirt?’

He shakes his head. No, none of that will do. He should say something witty and smart and impress her and-

‘Wait. You’re drinking coffee,’ he says and quickly looks at River. ‘You’re drinking coffee. At...,’ he turns around to look at a watch hanging on the opposite wall, ‘3am. Why?’

‘Because I was thirsty?’ River says with an amused twinkle in her eyes.

‘You could’ve chosen water or milk. Or orange juice. No one drinks coffee at 3am just because they’re thirsty, too much fuss,’ he says and leans towards her slightly. ‘Unless your body is used to caffeine at this time or you need to compensate for a long journey, with changing time zones. Where did you come from?’

River doesn’t say anything, her lips merely twitch in a smile.

‘Oh, come on,’ he whines a bit pitifully, ‘give me something. It’s not that I can do anything about it, can I?’

‘Well, you can always put it on that wall of yours, sweetie. And I’m sure you will,’ River replies and he tries his best not to look like a schoolboy caught doing something wrong. She’s the one doing illegal things here! ‘Aren’t your friends concerned with your hobby?’

‘Don’t change the subject!’ He points a finger at her. ‘You’re the one who broke into my apartment, so don’t try to put the blame on me.’

‘I didn’t break in, not exactly,’ River says. ‘It’s not my fault you forgot to lock your bedroom window. You really should be more careful, you know. You never know who may be waiting in the dark next time.’

‘I wouldn’t mind if it was you again,’ he replies with a smile and leans against the fridge. ‘Stop distracting me and answer my question.’

‘Am I distracting you?’ River asks and leans towards him. The move causes her – his – shirt to open slightly and reveal a rather... interesting glimpse of her cleavage. No, no, no – he has to stay focused. Focus.

‘Stop that,’ he mumbles and looks away, trying to ignore River’s chuckle. ‘Fine, if you don’t want to tell me where you came from, tell me where you’re going,’ more silence and one more smile from River. ‘Come on, you can’t keep doing that! Sending me plane tickets and demanding my presence, then telling me that it’s all over, then showing up at my place and, and...’ he stumbles over his words a bit, ‘and now you won’t even tell me where you’re going next. That’s just not fair and I think I deserve at least this much and-’

‘San Francisco,’ River cuts in and stops his ramble. ‘I was in San Francisco before I came here.’

‘Right, okay,’ he says a bit surprised. ‘That’s... That’s a start. Where are you going now?’

‘Don’t you think you found out enough for now?’ River says and hops off the counter. ‘You can put
another spot on your map.’

‘What were you working on there?’ He asks, ignoring her comment.

‘Nothing,’ River answers quickly and shakes her head. ‘I wasn’t doing anything there.’

‘Bullshit,’ he snorts and takes a step towards her. ‘You see, I don’t believe you. Every single place you’ve been in,’ he waves at the map hanging behind his back, ‘every single one? You’ve uncovered something in every single one of these cities, whether it was something big or a tiny detail – you’ve always managed to find something out. It’s like you went to each of these places in sole purpose of discovering something. So don’t try to tell me that San Francisco was a stop for you to tan. Which by the way, you didn’t do. No bathing suit marks.’

‘Who said anything about a bathing suit? Maybe I decided not to wear one at all,’ River raises an eyebrow and he knows she’s trying to fluster him and steer the conversation in another direction, but he won’t let her do it this time.

‘Maybe. Or maybe you were too busy tracking someone down to bother with tanning,’ he replies and looks her straight in the eye. ‘Come on. Help me here.’

‘How am I supposed to do that?’ River crosses her arms and raises her chin a bit, meeting his gaze without hesitation.

‘Work with me,’ he blurts out without thinking.

‘I do that. I work with you, I help you,’ River says quietly.

‘No, you don’t,’ he says tiredly and rubs his face briefly. ‘I am not saying that you didn’t help me, because you did, tremendously. I wouldn’t be able to achieve what I have without the information you’ve been sending me. But... You just keep dropping all these things on me. One after another, no explanation, no background. Just facts that I have to connect.’

‘You’ve done it quite well so far,’ River shrugs and looks down.

‘I know, but if you decided to help me – really help me this time, I think we could achieve much more,’ he says and stares at her expectantly.

‘And why would I do that?’ River says defiantly and looks up. He quickly crosses the few feet of space between them and stands in front of her, with just a few inches away from her. He half expects her to take a step back, but she doesn’t budge – not even an inch.

‘Because for some reasons, you want to see The Silence go down as much as I do,’ he says and observes her reaction. Her face is carefully blank, but he knows that she’s listening to every word he’s saying right now. ‘You have your reasons for it, fine. But it seems we have the same result in mind. Why not work together to achieve it? What do you say... Partner?’

A small smile shows on River’s face, but it’s gone just as quickly as it appeared. She stares at him for a few seconds and nods her head.

‘I’ll think about it,’ she finally says. ‘I’m not saying I’ll agree to it, but I will take in under consideration. But I’ll do it later.’

‘Later? What are you going to do now?’ He asks and realises how close to each other they’re standing. One or both of them must’ve moved during their conversation and now River’s basically pressed into him. Or maybe he’s pressed into her? To be quite honest, suddenly he’s having
difficulties with focusing and deciding who the presser is. River smiles knowingly and he feels a wave of heat spreading through his body. There are vivid flashes of very recent memories displaying in his head right now and oh, what he wouldn’t do to re-live them.

‘You see, I just drunk a cup of very strong coffee,’ River says and her voice wraps around him like silk. Her hands sneak between their bodies and slowly – too slowly – she starts to unbutton her shirt. ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to fall asleep right now. I’m afraid I’ll have to stay up all night or at least a good part of it. Are you going to keep me company?’

This time it’s a loud clatter and a muffled ‘shit’ that jolts him awake. For a second he’s confused – he’s alone at his apartment, so where’s the noise coming from? But then he remembers: River. He opens his eyes and yawning, sits in his bed. The clock on his bedside drawer shows 6:42am, which means that he got about an hour and a half of sleep. No wonder he feels exhausted.

‘Sorry,’ River says quietly as she enters his room. ‘I didn’t mean to wake you up. I knocked down a stack of books in your bathroom. Do you really have to keep them there?’

‘They wouldn’t fit anywhere else,’ he replies and runs fingers through his hair. River is already wearing her dress and her hair looks slightly damn from a shower. She looks as worn out as he feels and he wonders if she got any sleep this night. But unlike him, she looks fully awake and ready to leave. ‘Wanted to leave without saying goodbye, eh? Use them and then toss them away, is that your motto, Song?’

‘But is it using if one begs for it?’ River says with a cheeky smile and he hopes that she can’t see how much he’s blushing. He remembers – very clearly - his desperate ‘please, please, please’ repeated just a few hours ago.

‘Shut up,’ he mutters, but River just laughs and slowly walks over to his bed. She stands there for a moment and then sits on the very edge, as if she’s suddenly shy or afraid to be near him. Her hand is lying on the cover and he reaches out to take it in his, but River quickly takes her hand away and runs it through her hair. His own hand is stopped in mid-motion and he feels like the embarrassment is going to eat him alive. What the hell was he thinking? River surely wants none of his attention. Does she?

‘And I wasn’t- I wasn’t going to leave without a goodbye,’ River says and stops him from mentally flinging himself into a ditch of depression and shame. He looks up at her and catches her staring at him with an oddly affectionate look on her face. The look disappears once she notices him staring at her and she quietly clears her throat. ‘Anyway... I’ve been thinking and- Okay.’

‘Okay what?’ He asks in confusion. River really shouldn’t be so cryptic so early in the morning. He barely had any sleep and he only just woke up! He can’t decipher her riddles in this state.

‘Okay, I will work with you,’ she says slowly and patiently, like he’s a small and not overly bright child. ‘I will help you with the Silence case.’

‘You will?’ He asks dumbly and feels his face stretching in a wide smile. ‘It’s brilliant! It’s amazing! And you are just- Beyond amazing.’

‘There will have to be some rules,’ River says seriously and the tone of her voice is enough to make him sober up.
‘What rules?’ He asks cautiously and sits up in his bed. River stares at him for a moment before speaking again.

‘I won’t always be able to tell you everything,’ she starts and raises her hand to hush him before he can even open his mouth. ‘No, listen to me. Telling you where I am or where I’m going next – it could endanger me and ruin my plans. I will try to keep you updated as much as I can, but it won’t always be possible.’

‘That’s fairly reasonable,’ he nods his head. ‘Anything else?’

‘No one can know about it,’ River says and ignores his snort of amusement. ‘I mean it. Not your boss, not Amy and Rory – no one. I know you’re not dumb enough to say it on purpose, but make sure that it doesn’t slip by accident.’

‘What do you mean by ‘not dumb enough’? I’m not dumb at all,’ he squeaks out, but River merely rolls her eyes at him.

‘We will have to establish forms of contact, obviously. I’ll try to come up with a new way of encrypting our emails, but we’ll have to find out some other channel of communication. Meetings would be preferable, but I know that you are not too comfortable with them, so—’

‘No, no, meetings are okay,’ he blurs out. ‘I mean, uhm, I am okay with meeting. With you, I mean, not just anyone. Meeting with you would be okay. More than okay even.’

‘Really?’ River asks surprised and he nods vigorously, hoping he doesn’t look too eager. ‘Okay then, I guess I’ll figure something out... We’ll see. Now, there’s one more thing.’

‘Only one more? How reckless of you,’ he smiles at her, but River doesn’t return him smile. She sits a little straighter and suddenly it seems like she’s miles away from him, not sitting just a few inches further on his bed, close enough to touch. He feels that he won’t like whatever River is about to say and the warm and bubbly feeling he had since he saw her this morning turns into cold and oily dread.

‘Obviously this can’t go on,’ River blurts out and once again runs fingers through her curls. He notices that her hands are shaking a little, but she quickly claps them together on her lap. She clears her throat quietly and stares at him expectantly, like she’s waiting for him to say something. He probably should say something, but what can a guy say in a situation like that? ‘What, am I not criminal enough for you?’. ‘Thanks for verbally castrating me.’ or ‘Like I’d want it to continue!’? The first one will make him sound like a jerk, the second one will make him look like a loser and the last one will ensure that River will leave his apartment thinking that he’s a first-rate asshole. Brilliant. He’s still has one more option left: an idiot.

‘This what?’ He asks naively. ‘What exactly do you mean?’

‘I mean... this,’ River says motioning awkwardly between herself and him. ‘This can’t happen again. Obviously,’ she clears her throat again. ‘What I’m trying to say is... Uhm, there can’t be any kind of intimate relationship between us.’

There it is. Served on a silver tray, dressed up in fancy words, left for him to digest.

‘Oh, okay, right. I thought it’s obvious,’ he tries to sound as casual as he can. ‘I mean, I never thought we would continue this and uhm... Yeah.’

‘Really? That’s... Great,’ River says and nods her head. He can only hope that she isn’t feeling half as embarrassed as he is, but the blush slowly covering her cheeks tells a different story. ‘That’s just great.’
'Yep, great,' he repeats automatically, wishing for the earth to open up and swallow him. For a minute or so, River and he sit in uncomfortable silence, staring at everything except one another. The ease and familiarity they shared last night is gone and he fears that it’s lost for good. He opens his mouth to say something, anything just to break the silence, but River beats him to it.

‘I have to go,’ she says and stands up, straightening her dress.

‘Already?’ The words fly out of his mouth and he sits up in his bed. ‘I, uhm, you can stay some more of you want to. We could eat breakfast or something like that.’

‘No,’ River responds curtly. ‘I have already stayed here too long. Plus, time is of value for me, so I’d better get going. No need to see me off,’ she moves towards the door, but stops just before leaving and turns out towards him. ‘I’ll see you again then.’

‘Can I trust you, River Song?’ He asks before he can stop himself. He’s not sure if he asked her that because he wants to know the answer or he doesn’t want them to part like that: in unfriendly silence, like complete strangers. It seems that his rather pointless question puts River at ease, because she turns towards him with a warm smile.

‘If you like. But where's the fun in that?’ She says and with one last grin (one that sends a wave of heat throughout his body and leaves him feeling quite... uncomfortable in certain parts) and a dull sound of closing door, she disappears from his life.

At least for now.

(The realisation what he did, hits him a few hours later. And oh gods.

Not only he cheated on his girlfriend – something he thought he’d never do; he who detested cheaters and could never imagine how and why would anyone do something like that – but he also cheated on his girlfriend – fuck - with a murderess - double fuck. But that’s just a top of the fucking iceberg. Then he decided to work with said murderess - triple fuck - and she agreed to that - quadruple fuck with a somersault at the end. He has no idea what will become of this, but one thing he knows for sure: he is so f*cked.)

Chapter End Notes

guess who's not dead? me.
guess who cares about that? oh right, no one.

uhm. so. there it is: an update. 5 months late, but you know, things happened. mostly work and the fact that I am tired 99% of time. so if there's anyone out there still reading this fic, I hope you'll enjoy it.
I am really sorry if this update is crap (which it probably is). it's been a long time and I wrote it in the span of 5 months - and some parts of it were written on buses. and I am double sorry for the... porn. first time writing it, so I am more that sure that it sucks. let's just forget about it and I promise I'll never do it again, okay? it's a deal.
it's unbeta'd, so all typos and mistakes are mine and mine alone.

anyway: hope you had a good Tuesday, have a great Wednesday and the rest of the
and I nearly forgot: chapter's title comes from 'little monster' by Royal Blood. It's a great song, a smashing band, so if you're looking for something to listen to, give them a chance.
if I'm guilty of anything

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few weeks pass by.

He buries himself in work. He meets with Liz and his friends. He acts like nothing happened. It’s easy during the day, when he’s busy and focused on other thing, but at night his mind wanderers. And it always wanders to the same moment – the night he spent with River. It’s like these few hours are permanently carved into his brain: no matter how much he tries to forget them, he just can’t. It maybe be due to the fact, he doesn’t really want to forget any of this – which is something he admitted to himself the first night after River’s departure. In this rare moment of honesty, he realised that there’s no way in hell he’d ever forget about what happened between them nor he’d ever want to forget it. But it was one moment of honesty. A fluke of his brain, let’s call it that. Right now he’d do anything to forget and just get over it. He’s angry that he still remembers every single kiss and caress, every word they exchanged – it all should be gone by now, right?

It isn’t.

His inability to forget (he refuses to call it reluctance) makes things complicated for him – especially his relationship with Liz. He hasn’t told her that he cheated on her. He has tried, numerous times, but he never could say it out loud. It’s not because he’s ashamed of it (which he is, obviously), but because he wants to keep a secret what happened between him and River. It’s the wrong reason and he fully realises that. And yet - he wants to keep it a secret not because he’s afraid what others will think of him once they find out (although he is a bit afraid). He just wants to keep it private, a thing between River and him. Or just a memory he keeps to himself, as River hasn’t contacted him since the morning she left his apartment. Not that he’s moping about it or waiting for her call. Nothing like that.

He’s never been so confused in his life. Every time he is with Liz: on a date, having a quiet evening at her place, talking and joking around, he can’t help but think about River. Somehow, being with Liz started feeling like cheating on River. Which is ridiculous – Liz is his girlfriend, not River. Hell, River would never be his girlfriend. It’d never happen and even if it did, it’d be- Great. Amazing. Incredible. Wait, what? No, no, no. It’d be a disaster. This is what he’s been trying to tell. River and him would be a disaster, even without her being a killer working for the Silence. And really, can his brain stop making everything about River? It is getting embarrassing.

‘Oi, have you heard anything I just told you?’ A loud voice interrupts his thoughts. He looks to his right to see Amy, who’s looking mildly annoyed. Well, more mildly annoyed than usually. ‘You invited me and Tony for a walk, but so far you haven’t uttered a single word except for ‘hello, big and little Pond’. What is going on?’

‘Nothing is going on!’ He exclaims, waving his arms in the air. ‘I have a lot on my mind, so I thought it’d be nice to just meet with you two and relax a bit. Take a stroll, chat, breath in fresh air...’

‘We’re in London, there’s no fresh air here,’ Amy says and points a finger at him. ‘You have your lying face on, mister. Don’t think I haven’t noticed it.’

‘I don’t have a lying face!’ He protests, but Amy shushes him with a glance. She sits on a park bench and he has no choice but to sit next to her. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. You are being ridiculous.’
‘Oh, am I?’ Amy crosses her arms and stares at him with a raised eyebrow. ‘Let’s see... You have a lot of work right now, don’t you?’ He nods reluctantly. ‘Your case against Kovarian is falling apart. Normally, you’d never leave the office before you completed everything and made sure that that asshole is behind bars for good. And yet, here you are, socialising!’ Amy exclaims in disbelief.

‘Hey, don’t be so loud, Tony is sleeping,’ he mumbles and points at the pram standing between them.

‘He’ll be fine. And don’t you try your little tricks, you won’t distract me this time,’ Amy says sharply. ‘I am not done with you. You leave work. You take me and Tony for a walk. That’s weird in itself. Not to mention that you’ve been lost in your own world for the past few weeks – and let’s make it clear, I am not talking about your usual absent-mindlessness. This I am used to. No, you are something else entirely now.’

‘What are you on about, Pond?’ he says nervously. Crap. It was not supposed to be like that. ‘You are making it all up in that little impossible head of yours.’

‘Am I? Really? So maybe you’ll explain your behaviour towards Liz?’ Amy asked in a deceivingly sweet voice. If he wasn’t already nervous, it’d be the moment to start sweating.

‘I behave perfectly normally!’ He says and hopes it sounded convincing. Amy’s gaze tells him that no, that did not sound convincing at all.

‘No, you don’t. You’re nice to her,’ Amy says with a sneer.

‘And since when that’s a bad thing?’ He shrugs. ‘Amy-‘

‘Since it’s you who’s being nice!’ Amy rolls her eyes. ‘You are never nice. Sure, you are, but not this nice.’

‘Okay, right now I am feeling offended. You’re hurting me with your harsh words!’ He says mockingly, but feels panic growing inside him. Everything in his head is telling him that Amy somehow knows. He is in so much trouble.

‘Remember that time when Rory got hurt during that arrest that was supposed to go smoothly, but didn’t?’ Amy asks suddenly. ‘You showed up on my doorstep, with a bag of my favourite cookies and tickets to a sold-out exhibition I’ve been dying to see. We had a great time and when you dropped me off, you casually mentioned ‘oh, and by the way, your fiancé is in hospital’. This is exactly what is happening with Liz. You’re buying her expensive jewellery. You’re taking her on romantic getaways and to fancy restaurants. You’re being all sweet and attentive. There are two options here,’ Amy says and fixes her glare on him. ‘First: you are head over heels in love with her and you’re thinking about proposing. It’s a possibility, but I really don’t believe it. Liz is nice, but she is not your type and she’ll never be,’ he opens his mouth to speak, but Amy shakes her head. ‘Option number two: you did something horrible and now you’re trying to make it up to her. Normally, when a guy is so bloody nice, it means that he cheated on his girlfriend. Now, you are not the type to do something like and even if you were to cheat on her, there’s only one woman you’d do it with and she’s not available right now, so...’ The fact that he knows whom she’s talking about is a dead giveaway. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, but thankfully Amy doesn’t notice that. She does, however, look at him and there must be something in his dumb big face that makes her gasp in disbelief. ‘Oh my god,’ she breathes out, ‘I can’t believe it- You did cheat on her, didn’t you?’

She smacks his arm before he can even open his mouth.

‘Ouch!’ He exclaims and rubs the spot she just hit. ‘What was that for?’
'You very well know what was that for,' Amy hisses out. 'It was for lying, for being a prat and-,’ she’s interrupted by a loud wailing noise coming from the pram, ‘and for waking up my child.’

'I am pretty sure it was you who woke him up,’ he says quietly, but mouths ‘sorry’ when Amy glares at him, hugging Tony to her. After a few minutes the boy calms down and he dares to speak again. ‘Look, Amy-’

'Don’t ‘look, Amy’ me,’ Amy sighs. ‘Just tell me that you didn’t cheated on your girlfriend. That’s all I’m asking. Look me in the eye and tell me that you didn’t do that. Please, John.’

He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. Amy shakes her head in defeat.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says lamely.

‘It’s not me you should be apologising to. And I’m not the one who has to forgive you,’ Amy whispers and presses a kiss to Tony’s forehead. ‘John. What the hell? You are not that kind of a guy. You don’t do things like that. What the hell happened?’

‘I don’t know. It was...,’ he wants to say that it was a mistake, a fluke, but he bring himself to say these words out loud. He’d never call it a mistake, he never could call it like that. ‘It just happened.’

‘Who was she?’ Amy asks sharply. ‘It wasn’t her, was it? Because it couldn’t have been her, right?’

*Her.* Amy is talking about River. For a second he wants to tell her everything: about his cooperation with River, how she keeps on helping him, what happened between them. Maybe it’d help him: to talk about it with someone, to confess and not be alone with his secret anymore. But he can’t say anything and he knows it. Not just because he promised River, but because it could destroy River’s plan and – what is worse – put them all in danger. He can’t risk that. So he looks at Amy - whose eyes are full of curiosity and hope – and he shakes his head.

‘No, it wasn’t her,’ he says, not trusting himself to say River’s name. ‘It was just some girl.’

‘Wow, a girl. And here I thought you finally succumbed to Jack’s charm,’ Amy says drily and he can’t help but chuckle at that. ‘John, you fucked up. You realise that, don’t you?’ Amy asks while rocking Tony in her arms. He nods his head. ‘I am disappointed with you, but it’s not about me. It’s about you and Liz. You have to make it right.’

‘I don’t know how,’ he says quietly.

‘Well, you’d better find a way, raggedy man,’ Amy says angrily. ‘And you’d better do it right this time, because if you don’t, so help me, I will find the biggest stick in this city and shove it up your-‘

‘Okay, okay, I get the idea,’ he sighs. They sit in silence for a few minutes. They’re both lost in their thoughts – he’s trying to come up with the idea what to do with Liz and how to apologise to her, and Amy... Oh, he can only guess that she’s busy trying to figure out if he lied or not. She’s trying her best to guess who the mysterious woman is – if there even is a mysterious woman. Maybe it’s someone she knows? He can see the wheels turning inside that ginger head of hers. He knows that she won’t let go of it – sooner or later she’ll pester him about it and try to get the answer out of him. It’s just a matter of time.

‘Amy?’ He says hesitantly and waits until she turns her head towards him. ‘Thank you. For talking some sense into me.’

‘Not a problem. It’s a difficult job, but someone has to do it,’ she responds and there’s a hint of smile in the corners of her mouth. The rest of their walk passes uneventfully – they don’t talk much and if
they do, they talk about weather and other unimportant things. It’s only when they’re in front of the Ponds’ house that Amy becomes looks at him with a serious expression on her face.

‘John...’ She starts and takes a deep breath. ‘Do you love her?’

He should ask her to be more precise. Who does she mean? Liz? The mysterious woman in his life? Someone else entirely? Asking any questions now would be stupid and could lead to a disaster. Amy knows him and whether he likes it or not, she’s pretty good at reading him. Any hesitation on his part could make her see right through him. And he knows that this question should be about Liz. She’s his girlfriend, she’s the one he should... be fond of.

But when he answers, Liz is not the person he’s thinking about.

‘I’m not sure, Amy,’ he says. ‘But I think I could.’

___

One day, when he was least expecting it, he found a letter in his mailbox. It was a new habit of his: checking his mailbox every morning and evening, right after he came back from work. Not that he was waiting for any form of contact from River, not at all- Okay. He was. And when it finally came, he felt a surge of joy blooming in his chest. He grabbed the letter – actually, it looked more like a piece of paper in a plain white envelope, but it was enough to make his heart race. He tore it open once he was behind closed door of his apartment. The envelope had no return address, only his (and it was printed, not hand-written) and inside there was a small piece of paper with an address printed on it. A quick google search told him it was an address of an internet cafe in the centre of London. There was something else written on that card – it looked like an address of a page or a server. He decided he’d figure it out once he gets there. And he did - turned out he was right: it was a page’s address. Sitting in a crowded internet cafe, downloading a file on his flash drive, trying not to get noticed or remembered (which was made easier by the fact that River had chosen the busiest and biggest internet cafe in London, bless her and her ridiculously brilliant mind) - it made him feel a bit like a badass spy. Hell, he even wiped the keyboard once he was done with downloading his file. That’s how good he is.

Decoding the file took him a few... Okay, several hours. River had improved the security of the files and the code she’d used this time was much more complex. But he finally succeeded and was rewarded with a short message with a set of coordinates and a post scriptum that said ‘ditch the bow tie’.

And here he is now, two days later (sans the bow tie, in his most boring and unremarkable clothes) on his way to Ribe. Or to be more precise: he’s driving through Ribe, looking for the address River sent him. He has never been to Denmark before and he never thought his first visit in this country would be a meet-up with a killer, but who is he to complain?

Ribe is an ordinary town, not too big nor too small. It’s a late afternoon, but not many people are walking around. Everything seems quiet and peaceful – a perfect place to hide in plain sight. Maybe that’s why River chose it.

He parks his rented car in a small parking lot in front of a motel. This is it. This is where he’s supposed to be. If he encoded the message right, that is. Which he might’ve fucked up, as the motel he’s looking at right now is kind of... Second-rate. Or third-rate. Okay, fourth-rate that hopes really hard to be third-rate when it grows up. He wrinkles his nose and goes to look for the room River’s supposed to be in: #11. Once he finds it, he takes a second to calm his racing heart (he has no idea
why it’s beating like it’s about to burst from his chest), run fingers through his hair and check his
breath. He nervously straightens his shirt for the n-th time and finally knocks on the door. For a few
seconds nothing happens and he fears that he really did mess up the whole search, but then a familiar
voice calls ‘come in!’.

‘Hi honey, I’m home,’ he says pushing the door open. The room he walks into seems to be empty
and he looks around, confused as to where River is.

‘And what sort of time do you call this?’ She speaks behind his back and he nearly jumps out of his
skin.

‘River!’ He exclaims turning around. ‘You startled me! You can’t- Why do you have a gun in your
hand?’

‘Don’t worry, I wasn’t planning to shoot you if that’s what you’re thinking,’ River says lightly,
putting her gun on a shelf by the door. ‘A girl can never be too careful, you know.’

‘Seriously? You have a gun!’ He says, flailing his arms in the air. Somehow, this is not how he
imagined their reunion.

‘And you are late,’ River says, moving deeper into the room. It’s a small place that had definitely
seen better days. The walls are covered with greasy and torn wallpaper, the carpet is grey and the
floor underneath it is even dirtier. It doesn’t look like a place anyone would like to stay in – it’s a
place where you stay when you have nowhere else to go.

‘How exactly am I late?’ He asks, trying to distract himself from his observations. ‘There wasn’t any
deadline. Or did I miss it?’

‘I expected you yesterday, so you are late,’ River says and sits on a chair. ‘What took you so long?’

‘Couldn’t take a day off,’ he replies and moves to sit in a chair opposite of hers. River pushes her
chair back, as if she’s trying to put as much distance between them as possible. He pretends he hasn’t
noticed it. He also tells himself that it doesn’t hurt him. ‘Okay. Here I am. Why?’

‘Your case against Kovarian is crumbling,’ River states. He gapes at her in surprise. ‘Please, don’t
look at me like that. It’s been obvious from the very beginning. You may have all the evidence you
need, you may have an uncorrupted judge and yet-‘

‘No one wants to convict him,’ he says flatly. ‘I’ve been trying, really, I’ve been talking to people,
but nothing works. Nothing! I’ve tried everything, you have to believe me-‘

‘John. I know,’ River says quietly. One of her hands reaches to touch his, but she quickly balls it into
a fist. ‘Look, I have something that can help you. Here,’ she says, reaching into her pocket and
handing him a flash drive.

‘What is it?’ He asks, eyeing the device in his palm.

‘Data from Kovarian’s computers. Some data from his various bank accounts, some emails, some
info from his mobile...,’ River says casually.

‘I- What?’ He splutters. ‘I- This is impossible. We confiscated his laptop, but there was nothing there.
The hard drive was clean! We couldn’t rescue any data from it. How did you get all of that?’

‘Spoilers,’ River says lightly, with a teasing smile on her face. ‘How I got it is not important. But it’s
important that you use it properly.’
‘Oh, I know how to use it properly, thank you very much,’ he says and catches sight of the amused expression on River’s face. ‘What are you laughing at?’

‘You know how to use it? Maybe you do, but shouting it out loud makes it look like you’re boasting and compensating, sweetie,’ River winks at him and it takes him a second too long to understand what she means.

‘Hey, I didn’t mean it like that!’ he exclaims and feels that his cheeks are burning. Damn her, embarrassing him once again. He should be immune to it by now. ‘You have a dirty mind, River Song.’

‘And you are too easy to wind up,’ she smiles at him and suddenly he feels that her smile made up for his embarrassment. ‘Now, do you want me to tell you how to use it?’

‘You could show me,’ he says before he can stop himself. His voice is a bit lower than he intended it to be and River’s smile falls from her face as she stares at him with intensity that he’s seen in her eyes only once – a few weeks ago in his bedroom. He wonders what would happen if he reached for her and pushed her against the wall – or better yet, let her push him against the wall and-

‘I don’t think it’d be a good idea,’ River says quietly, clearing her throat. She looks everywhere but at him and suddenly it feels like there’s an invisible wall between them. He swallows and takes a deep breath. He needs to forget about River and focus on what’s important: the flash drive containing data about Kovarian.

‘Okay, so... How am I supposed to use that flash drive?’ He asks to break the awkward silence between them. River looks up at him – a grateful look in her eyes – and starts explaining all the things he has to do (get an air-gapped computer, make sure it stays air-gapped, put a strong password on it, once he decodes the information on the flash drive, he’ll have to secure them again, show it only to the people he fully and completely trust, secure the data and the computer, make a copy, and if the need arises, destroy the flash drive). He focus on everything she says, asks for clarification when he needs it, but still, a part of his mind can’t stop thinking about the time when they didn’t need words to communicate.

‘I think that’s all,’ River says and stands up from her chair. ‘If you do everything I told you, you should be safe. And Kovarian should stay behind the bars, at least for now. I think the date I gave you is enough – a judge would have to be mad not to convict him.’

‘Thank you,’ he says sincerely. ‘You didn’t have to help me-‘

‘I did. I do,’ River says quickly. ‘We have a deal, remember?’

Yes, he remembers it all too well.

‘So what’s now? Want to grab something to eat?’ He asks, standing up and stretching. Damn, this chair is a torture device.

‘What?’ River asks and her eyes are wide with surprise.

‘I asked if you want to get something to eat,’ he repeats and shrugs. ‘I mean, it’s nearly 6pm, aren’t you hungry? I saw a nice place when I was driving here, traditional Danish cuisine. We could go there, try it out. I know nothing about Danish food to be honest, but it can’t be that bad, can it? I mean-‘

‘Sorry, I can’t,’ River interrupts him. She looks a bit unnerved by his proposition. ‘It’d be lov-, uhm, I really can’t.’
‘Oh, come on,’ he says and smiles at her, trying to put her at ease. ‘We’ll grab a quick meal, that’s all. I’m starving! You must be too. It’s not that far away, I promise,’ he says and cringes at how pleading his voice sounds.

‘I really can’t,’ River shakes her head. ‘I have to go. Now.’

‘Go where?’ He asks, raking a small step in her direction.

‘Away,’ she states and looks away. ‘I’ve already stayed here a day longer than I planned to. I had to rebook all my tickets, it’s a miracle that I had no problems with finding free ones for today.’

‘Where are you going now?’ He asks in defeat. How stupid of him, thinking he’ll get a chance to spend more time with her. What an idiot.

‘Can’t tell you,’ River gives him a thin smile. ‘Listen, we made a deal – I tell you what I can and when I can. I can’t tell you my destination – at least not yet.’

‘When will I see you again?’ The moment the question leaves his mouth, he wishes he could take it back.

‘I don’t know,’ River says and presses her lips together. For a moment neither of them speaks. ‘Look, I still have to pack and clean up, so I’d really appreciate it if you-

‘Yeah, okay, I’m going to leave now. I don’t want to be a bother,’ he starts walking towards the door, waiting for River to say that no, he’s not a bother, he never could be that, and yes, she’d love to go to dinner with him. But nothing like that happens. He reaches the door, pulls them open, mumbles a quiet ‘goodbye’ and when he hears no response from River, he leaves the room and closes the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

oh look. an update you didn't have to wait 5 months for. is it a Christmas miracle or? (it kind of is. I have a Christmas break from work, so I decided to write between cleaning and baking).

a bit of a filler chapter, so sorry if you came here looking for some action (and no, I did not mean it like that). I am also really sorry if this chapter is ridden with typos/mistakes, but I gave it just a quick read-through before posting it. I wouldn't have the time to do it tomorrow, nor for the next few days, so it was a bit of 'right, I am posting this today or sometime in 2015'. and here we are.

the chapter title comes from 'bad love' by white lies.

P.S. in the comments under the last chapter, some lovely soul mentioned that this fic is longer than the first 3 Harry Potter books. what can I say... uhm, JKR would do it better? sorry for wasting that much of your time?
P.P.S. people who leave me comments saying 'ha, I read it all in one go!' - you make me feel guilty and concerned for your well being. don't do that, that cannot be healthy for you!
P.P.P.S. last but not least: THANK YOU FOR ALL THE COMMENTS UNDER THE LAST CHAPTER. I was not expecting them. I just want you to know that I
appreciate every single one of them. thank you for taking your time to read and comment. it really means a lot.

hope you all had a lovely time during Christmas - or during the holidays if you don't celebrate Christmas. have a great NYE and let's hope that 2015 will be nice and gentle to all of us.
‘Broke up with her yet?’ Amy’s voice rings in his ear when he picks up his phone. It’s 9pm, he only just parked his car outside the apartment building and he’s now making his way to his flat. The last two weeks have been crazy – his boss and everyone on his team were nuts when he handed them the files on Kovarian. They finally had something substantial and real to properly nail the bastard down, so everyone has been working their asses off to make sure it happens. He’s been running on gallons of coffee and 3 hours of sleep every night – he doesn’t have the strength and patience required to deal with Amy. Not now anyway.

‘Amy,’ he starts warily and slowly climbs up the stairs. ‘Please, not tonight.’

‘That means you still haven’t broken up with her. Nor apologised, I suppose? Asked her for forgiveness and admitted to being an asshole?’ Amy continues in the motherly tone he’s learned to hate. How come she sounds so motherly and _adultly_ when she’s been a mother only for a few months? ‘John, what the hell are you waiting for? It’s been nearly a month since we talked about it.’

‘Three weeks,’ he murmurs. He really can’t have this conversation right now. All he wants is a warm bed and more than 5 hours of uninterrupted sleep. ‘Listen, I’ll come over tomorrow and we’ll talk, okay? Let’s not do it right now.’

‘I am not the one who has to do something,’ Amy sighs heavily. ‘You are the one who has to deal with this mess. The sooner you do it, the better.’

‘I know,’ he says and starts fishing for the keys in the pocket of his trousers. ‘You are right. 100% right. I’ll deal with it as soon as I can, but right now all I can think of is sleep.’

‘John...,’ Amy sighs and he can’t help, but feel ashamed at how disappointed with him she sounds. ‘Okay. Fine. You are an adult. It’s your shit to deal with. So deal with it. I am not going to interfere more.’

‘Thank you,’ he says as he tries to open his door. ‘I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? Give my love to Rory and the little one.’

‘I will,’ she replies and takes a breath. He knows what she’ll say next before the question leaves her mouth. ‘John, who was she?’

*Oh.* That again. Just as he guessed – Amy has been pestering him about the identity of the mysterious lady. So far, he managed to dodge all the questions, either saying he doesn’t remember or that she doesn’t know her, or that it’s not important. But Amy has been relentless and he knows that she’s no Else and won’t _let it go_ so easily.

‘Amy, I know you just expect to tire me out with your questions, but it’s not going to happen,’ he snaps and immediately regrets it. ‘Sorry, that was uncalled for. I am just really tired.’

‘And grumpy,’ Amy adds. ‘I just hope it wasn’t any of Liz’s friends. Please, tell me you didn’t shag her friend.’

‘I don’t even know any of her friends,’ he says leaning against his door. It’s true – he never met any of Liz’s friends. He heard stories about them, sure, but never interacted with any of them. He once
asked her to introduce him to the friends who stood her up in Rome. He joked he needs to thank them properly for giving him a chance to meet Liz. She smiled at this, but she kept on evading any other questions about her friends. So in the end he stopped asking.

‘You could’ve shagged her friend without knowing it’s her friend,’ Amy sighs dramatically. ‘Or it could’ve been her secret sister. Or her mother. Please don’t tell me you did her mother!’

‘What? Amy, are you okay? How did you even get the idea?’ He asks dumbfounded. ‘I think we should finish this conversation now and you should calm down. We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?’

‘Fine, fine,’ she replies. ‘But don’t think I’ll forget about it. If it comes to beating the answer out of you, so be it. I am crafty and I have Rory. And I am not afraid to use him!’

‘Goodnight, Amy,’ he says with a small smile and ends the call. He opens the door to his apartment and breathes with relief. Here he is, all alone, with nothing but his warm bed awaiting him.

‘Hello, dear! You’re finally home,’ Liz greets him as she comes out from the living room. ‘Poor you, you must be tired.’

‘What are you doing here?’ He asks a bit harshly and clears his throat. ‘I mean, did we have a date? Because if we did, I forgot about it and I’m sorry and-’

‘Don’t worry,’ Liz says and presses a kiss to his cheek. ‘We did not have a date. I just miss you. We haven’t seen each other in a while and I thought that I’ll make you a surprise. I made a good use of the set of keys you’ve given me. Look, I made dinner!’, She gestures towards his living room, where a table is set and candles are lit. Is it wrong that his first thought is ‘oh gosh, I am so glad I hid all my work’. He did. Some time ago, he hid everything connected to the Silence and to River. The map where he marked all of River’s locations was destroyed (but not before he transferred all the information to a digital form). All the files, blueprints, information – it’s all gathered safely in his room, in a small safe Liz – or anyone else – knows nothing about. Call him paranoid, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.

‘Thank you, that’s so sweet,’ he finally says and kisses her. Shit, he’s such a loser. He has a wonderful girlfriend and yet he cheated on her. And now he keeps lying to her, pretending everything is alright and he’s a doting boyfriend she deserves. There’s a special kind of hell for guys like him, he’s sure of that. ‘My, that smells fantastic. Let’s eat, I’m starving.’

Liz laughs and the sound hangs in the air: bright and loud. It’s so innocent and pure that just the melody of it makes him feel better. If only, he thinks. If only. If only he was a better man and if only he’d met Liz earlier, before- No, he won’t think about before now. Right now he’ll enjoy a nice meal with his girlfriend and they’ll have a wonderful time in each others’ company.

And they do. They talk about her work (he always dodges the subject of his), they discuss the possibility of going away for a weekend. They watch a dumb movie and exchange kisses during commercials. It’s nice. It’s normal. It’s exactly what he needs. It’s just a shame it’s not what he deserves.

Liz leaves his flat just before 11pm with a chaste kiss to his lips. He falls onto his bed right after, with one small persistent thought at the back of his brain. He feels like something is wrong, that something must be off – but he can’t put his finger on it. He tries to chase this thought, to catch it and understand it, but his eyelids get heavier and heavier, and all too soon he’s snoring loudly in the silence of his apartment.

Realisation hits him in the morning, when he’s brushing his teeth. It’s so big and so damn obvious
that he can’t believe he didn’t catch it right off the bat. Liz couldn’t have gotten in his apartment using the set of keys he’s given her some time ago. No one would be able to get into his apartment now. The reason is simple: last week he changed the locks and so far, he’s the only one who has the new set of keys.

*Well fuck.*

___

It is said that you know that an investigation is going well, if someone is trying to kill you. If that’s true, then your case is going splendid. He knows that he must’ve pissed off a bunch of people, but he never realised that he made them *that* angry.

‘Let’s go through that once again,’ his boss says and shoots him a worried look. ‘Start from the beginning.’

‘Morgan, listen, I don’t think there’s a need for that,’ he replies. ‘We’ve been over that a few times already, we won’t find out nothing new if I tell it one more time.’

‘You don’t know that,’ Morgan says harshly. ‘So, from the beginning. You went running, yes? Where?’

‘Walpole Park,’ he says in a resigned tone. ‘It was around 7am when I got there.’

‘Is it your usual place? Do you go there regularly?’

‘No,’ he shakes his head. ‘I get bored easily, so I change my running locations often.’

‘Anyone knew about it?’ Morgan asks.

‘Just my girlfriend,’ he swallows. ‘She wanted to join me this morning, but when she heard where I want to go, she declined.’

‘Any chance someone could’ve overheard you?’

‘No,’ he shakes his head. ‘We were in her apartment, she lives alone. No one called. It was just us,’ there’s a thought, a nasty ugly thought slowly growing in his head, but he refuses to listen to it. It can’t be true.

‘Okay. So you’re at the park. 7am. What happens next?’ Morgan takes a sip of his coffee. During their conversation, in the last 2 hours, the man has drank 3 cups of it. It’s a miracle he’s not walking on walls by now.

‘I started running,’ he says tiredly. ‘There’s a nice path there, by the ponds. Many trees and bushes, as you’d expect in a park.’

‘Ergo, a perfect hiding place for a sniper,’ Morgan finishes for him.

‘We don’t know if it was a sniper,’ he protests, but hushes when Morgan looks at him. ‘Okay. We assume it’s a sniper, but maybe it wasn’t the case.’

‘You think someone decided to just randomly shoot to people? Or maybe they weren’t shooting, but throwing small rocks at you? For fuck’s sake, John. Wake up,’ Morgan says angrily. ‘Someone tried to kill you. We both know whom that person worked for,’ they both are silent for a while, until
Morgan clears his throat. ‘Listen, John. I think it’s high time to give you some protection.’

‘What? No!’ He exclaims and stands from his chair. ‘That is impossible.’

‘Sit down and don’t be an idiot,’ Morgan says quietly. ‘Look, this... attack was bound to happen, sooner or later. You’re valuable to us and I can’t just let you be shot down like a duck. I’m not talking about anything big, just one guy making sure you’re fine and that no one is trying to get you.’

‘No,’ he shakes his head. ‘No way. I don’t need any help, I am fine on my own. If I get anyone covering my back, I’ll be always worried that something may happen to them.’

Not to mention that he won’t be able to meet with River whenever he pleases. Or whenever she pleases. That’s more accurate.

‘John...,’ Morgan sighs heavily, but he cuts in quickly.

‘But if you really want to put these guys of yours to work, send them to my friends,’ he leans towards Morgan. ‘Amy and Rory Williams. They’re my best mates and if anything happens to them... And I’m afraid that the Silence may go after them, sooner or later. But I want to be free, without anyone behind me.’

‘Okay. If you say so,’ Morgan says after a while. ‘I’ll send someone to your friends’ house tonight. Just make sure they know about it. The cooperation is much easier when both sides agree to it. Now, where were we? Oh right. You were running, by a pond. What was next?’

‘I was running and for a while nothing happened, but-,’ he hesitates. ‘I know it sounds stupid, but I knew something was off. I felt it.’

It’s true. He felt that something wasn’t right the second he started running. He was taught to pick up things like that, back in the old days. He felt like someone was watching him, tracking his every step. It felt like someone was just waiting to jump and attack him. It was a bizarre feeling – never before has he felt like a prey. He’s always been the one who attacked.

‘But you kept running,’ Morgan says slowly and he nods his head.

‘I did. I thought that the feeling would pass,’ he lies. He knew that something wasn’t right and that it wouldn’t change. He knew that he might be in danger, but he just couldn’t resist. Instead of getting out of there, he ran deeper and deeper into the park. ‘After a few minutes I stopped to stretch and then someone shot at me.’

‘The question is, how are you alive,’ Morgan peers at him. ‘There’s not a scratch at you.’

‘I ducked,’ he says quickly and hangs his head. ‘Look, whoever that was, they were hidden in the bushes. Put on some green-brown clothes, lay low, don’t move too much and it’s a perfect hiding place. But it was pretty windy. Windy and sunny. The wind moved the leaves, sun reflected in the lens and I saw the reflection. So I ducked,’ he says without looking at Morgan. Old habits die hard. He was trained to be bulletproof – to never let a bullet touch him. Turns out that it’s paying off now. ‘Two more shots came after the first one, but I rolled away. Other joggers were attracted by the noise, so our shooter had to flee. End of story.’

‘We tried to find the guy, but it seems that he disappeared,’ Morgan sighs. ‘And as you know, he left nothing behind on the scene.’

‘And we won’t find them,’ he shakes his head. ‘We should focus on something else, not trying to find the sniper. We’ll only waste time and money.’
‘If you say so,’ Morgan nods his head. ‘Listen... I need to ask this. Do you think- Is there any possibility that River was the shooter?’

‘No way,’ he replies. ‘It couldn’t have been her.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ Morgan asks curiously.

‘Because,’ he says and feels a small smile curving his lips, ‘if it had been her, I’d be dead.’

In the evening, he collapses on his sofa feeling absolutely exhausted. Today, he had to deal with:

1. someone trying to shoot him,
2. answering the same questions about the shooting over and over again,
3. Amy, who was not happy with the fact that some guy will be basically living on their lawn to make sure they don’t get hurt,
4. Amy (once again), who was not happy that he almost got shot,
5. Liz, who called him, asking hysterically if he’s alright, because she heard that there was a shooting at the park and she worried herself sick, and is he really okay?

Liz. She’s been on his mind almost all the time recently. Which should be a normal thing, since she’s his girlfriend and he’s supposed to be in love with her, but that’s not the case. His girlfriend has been on his mind, because he’s wondering whether or not she’s a Silence’s operative.

Yes, he knows how it sounds.

But just like it was with River, all the pieces fall into their places and things start to make sense – at least in his head. It may be just his paranoia talking, but-

She got into his apartment without the keys and lied about it. What if it wasn’t the first time?

She was the only one who knew where he was going to run today.

More than once he caught her trying to access his laptop. She might’ve just wanted to check her mail, but-

He doesn’t know much about her past or her friends. Hell, he hasn’t met any of her friends. She even appeared in his life out of nowhere. From time to time, she mentions her parents or some things from her childhood, but he has no way of checking if any of that is true. She could be making it all up and he’d have no idea.

Or she could be perfectly innocent and he might be accusing her of a serious crime.

There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?

He takes out his phone from his pocket and dials a number.

‘Clara?’ He says when the person on the other end picks up. ‘I need your help.’

another update? what the hell is happening? holiday break is happening. or it was happening as it's nearly over for me [halp, I don't want to go back to work].

but but but: clap your hands and say 'oh no' if you saw that coming. what can I say, I use the cheapest and most boring tricks. sorry. (although, in the beginning it wasn't supposed to be that way. Liz was supposed to be a normal and surprisingly emotionally stable girl with no criminal background. but then I thought 'what the hell, let's make it even more predictable!)

originally, this update was supposed to be a part of a longer chapter, but I thought 'hey, who doesn't love a cliffhanger?'. and here it is: an update and a cliffhanger. the second part of it is already written... in my head. oop.

I know I sound like a broken record, but thank you for all the comments and kudos. it still blows my mind that someone actually reads this fics and that you guys've stuck to it all this time. whoa. it's crazy. I can't wrap my head around it.

chapter's title comes from 'the killing moon' by echo & the bunnymen.
'River? Hi, how are you? Listen, I know you said this number is for emergencies only, but I think this is an emergency. Uhm, it might not be true, but I am pretty sure that Liz, my girlfriend, works for the Silence. I haven’t done anything about it yet and to be honest, I have no idea what to do. But I thought you might want to know that. Any pointers on what I should do would be appreciated. Uhm... I hope you’re okay. So... Bye.’

___

‘I can’t believe you did a background check on your girlfriend,’ Amy smacks his arm. ‘That is just low.’

‘Ouch!’ He whines and rubs the spot she just hit. ‘Don’t give me that. If I remember correctly, you asked me to run a similar check on Rory when you were dating!’

‘You what?’ Rory comes into the room carrying a tray with cakes and tea and puts it on the table. ‘I might’ve heard it wrong, but I think that John just said that you’d asked him to run a background check on me.’

‘It was a long time ago!’ Amy exclaims and looks at them with an expression that says ‘it was a perfectly reasonable request’. ‘I needed to know if you weren’t some kind of creep.’

‘Amy, you knew I was not a creep,’ Rory sighs and takes his cup of tea. ‘How long had we been dating when you asked John for that?’

‘Three years,’ he replies taking a sip of his tea.

‘Three years?’ Rory gasps at that and looks at Amy. ‘That was... I proposed to you after three years!’

‘And I could accept your proposal, because I knew you weren’t a psycho,’ Amy rolls her eyes and turns towards him. ‘And you weren’t supposed to ever say it! We had a deal!’

‘I forgot,’ he mumbles. ‘Listen, you had your reasons to see if Rory’s okay, I had mine to check if Liz is clean.’

‘And? What did you come up with?’ Amy asks and both her and Rory lean closer to him.

‘I am afraid... I am pretty certain that she works for the Silence.’

Both Ponds sit silently for a moment before Amy bursts into hysterical laughter.

‘Are you kidding me?’ She manages to say between giggles. ‘You must be joking now. I don’t believe that shit like that can happen to someone twice. First, you fancied a killer who worked for the Silence and now you’re dating a chick who is also their agent. It’s ridiculous!’

‘I know that, trust me,’ he sighs and runs fingers through his hair.

‘At least you’re not denying that you fancied River. Interesting,’ Amy smirks.
‘Amy, I don’t think this is what we should be focusing on right now,’ Rory says reasonably. ‘John, are you sure? It’s not an accusation you can just throw around without being absolutely sure.’

‘Believe me, I know,’ he replies and sits more comfortably in his armchair. It’s going to be a long conversation, he can feel it in his bones. ‘I checked it. I asked Clara for help.’

‘And what did you two come up with?’ Amy asks. She sobered up and now she’s staring at him with a serious look on her face.

‘It turns out that Liz has double identity. We run a facial recognition and came up with two results for the same person,’ he says.

‘But that doesn’t have to mean anything bad, right?’ Rory asks. ‘Maybe she had to change her name?’

‘She didn’t just change her name,’ he sighs. ‘She has two different identities. Two different names, addresses, passports. Her second identity – the one she’s using now – has been established about two years ago.’

‘That still doesn’t prove anything,’ Amy shrugs. ‘You need more.’

‘I have more. We tracked her bank accounts,’ he says and winces at the gasps his statement provokes. ‘What? I had to know!’

‘I know it’s a stupid question, but does Donna know about it?’ Rory asks and when he shakes his head, Rory just groans. ‘It’s not going to end well. She’s going to have a fit when she finds out.’

‘If she finds out,’ Amy says. ‘It’s not your problem, Stupid Face. Technically, we know nothing about it.’

‘But we do know something about it,’ Rory argues. ‘A rather large something.’

‘So now let John tell us even bigger something,’ Amy says with a smile. ‘Bank accounts. What about them?’

‘There are two. One to her official name, the one she’s been born with, and a second one – for this whole Liz identity. She receives her teacher’s pay to the second account, but we also noticed that she started getting some additional money there. Source unknown, but the pattern is similar to The Silence’s. First money transfer happened two days after she met me in Rome. From then on, every month she got some money. The day of the shooting, she got a double bid. A part of the money is run through a few wired accounts, and goes to her primary, legal account.’

Amy and Rory stare at him for a moment and neither of them speaks.

‘Okay, that looks bad,’ Rory is the first one to speak out. ‘Do you think she managed to snag some info from you?’

‘I don’t know. I hope not,’ he sighs. ‘I mean, if she had snagged something, some operations wouldn’t have succeeded. I hope she didn’t manage to find anything,’ they sit quietly for a while, until Amy pinches him. ‘Oi! What was that for?’

‘She was in our house!’ She says angrily. ‘We let her take care of Tony!’

‘And?’ He says. ‘How is that my fault?’
‘You’re the one who’s shagging her!’ Amy shrieks. ‘What is wrong with you? Are you attracted only to women who are on the wrong side of the law? Is it like a really shitty superpower?’

‘Amy, it’s not his fault,’ Rory says and puts his hands on his wife’s shoulders. ‘He didn’t ask for that to happen.’

‘I know,’ Amy murmurs and leans into Rory. He feels a sudden pang of jealousy: here they are, happily married, with a lovely child. No matter what happens to them, they have each other. He? He has no one. Oh, sure, he has his friends and he’s incredibly grateful for them, but sometimes, just sometimes he wishes he had what Amy and Rory share.

‘What are we going to do now?’ Rory suddenly asks.

‘We? We won’t do anything,’ he sighs. ‘But you are going to stay out of danger. That’s the last thing I’m going to say about it,’ he hushes the Ponds before either of them has even the chance to speak. ‘I want you to be safe. You have Tony to think about. So do it for me: keep him safe and stay out of trouble. That’s all I’m asking.’

‘And what about you?’ Amy asks and looks at him with concern.

What about him? He really has no idea. Should he confront Liz? Let it be? Report her to his boss? Fuck if he knows. River is no help either – he left her that message 3 days ago and she hasn’t replied nor contacted him since. And he really could use her help right now.

‘I don’t know, Amy,’ he finally replies. ‘I really don’t know.’

___

As it turns out, life has already made the decision for him. From the parking lot, he sees that all the lights in his apartment are turned on. Which is weird, because he clearly remembers turning them off before he went to Ponds. Heart beating loudly, he runs up and opens the door to his apartment with a loud ‘bang’. The person who’s currently snooping through the drawers of his desk jumps up and lets out a rather high-pitched shriek.

‘Oh my god, John! You scared the crap out of me!’ Liz says, pressing her hand to her chest.

‘What are you doing here?’ He says. To his surprise, he doesn’t feel anything. It’s almost like someone scooped all the emotions out of him and replace it with this icy calmness.

‘I was- uhm,’ Liz stutters awkwardly, but when she notices his glare, she shrugs and drops all the pretences. ‘You know, huh?’

‘I hoped I was wrong,’ he admits, closing the door behind him. He looks at the pile of documents laying by Liz’s feet. She must’ve gone through not only the drawers in his living room, but also through these in the bedroom. And it looks like she’s been trying to access his laptop. Wonderful.

‘What gave me away?’ Liz asks with a frown.

‘The keys,’ he says. ‘You couldn’t have used them to get into my flat last week. The locks have been changed. And then the pieces started making a rather unpleasant picture.’

‘They say that I have to be careful around you,’ she says. ‘That once you get the smallest hint, you’ll solve the whole thing.’
‘Good to know your bosses think so highly of me,’ he says mockingly. ‘I repeat my question: what are you doing here?’

‘I’m doing what I’ve been sent here for,’ she replies and takes a step back.

‘So I see,’ he smiles, but it must look more like a grimace. ‘And what did they promise you for that? New life? A place higher on the mob ladder?’

‘Now, don’t take it so personally,’ Liz shakes her head. ‘I really enjoyed out time together. And I never faked any orgasm.’

Oh, so he may be incompetent and blind to things happening around him, but at least he knows how to please a woman. Splendid.

‘This is it, Liz,’ he says and walks closer to her. ‘Give me everything back. Tell me what information you passed along to The Silence. We can work something out.’

‘Why would I want to work with you?’ Liz sneers. ‘They can give me much more.’


‘That’s the last thing I’ll ever have to do,’ Liz replies. ‘They promised. Now, let me go.’

‘No. You know I can’t do that,’ he says and blocks her way. He quickly looks at her: it doesn’t look like she’s armed. Her bag is too far away for her to pull any weapon out of it and even if she decided to throw something at him – a lamp or a book – he can always duck. He’ll be fine. Or so he thinks.

‘I also know that you’d never hit a woman,’ Liz smiles and before he can reply, she punches him. He’s surprised, but still manages to move and so her fist doesn’t hit him straight in the face, but it lands on his temple. The punch isn’t that strong nor well placed – it seems that Liz hasn’t been trained in that department, thank gods – but it’s enough to make slightly disoriented. Liz uses it to her advantage and quickly pulls something from the back of her trousers. When he notices what she’s holding in her hand, he takes a quick step back, but she’s quicker. She puts the device to his neck and presses the button. A second later, his knees hit the floor and he’s sure he’s going to suffocate: he can’t take a breath, his lungs feel like they’re about to burst, his heart beats erratically and he still feels electric current running through his body.

His sweet girlfriend – probably ex-girlfriend now? – just fucking tased him. A part of him thinks he should be grateful that she didn’t use a gun. He grabs onto a wall and tries to stand back, but Liz pushes him back on the floor.

‘Don’t make me use it again, John,’ she says, her voice trembles. ‘Please.’

She then grabs his laptop, a few of the files from the desk, her bag and she dashes towards the door. He catches her ankle when she runs past him, but she breaks free and she kicks his head with the other foot. That sends him flat on the floor and he thinks there’s no way he’ll get up. But he has to – Liz is already by the door, pressing the handle and-

‘Not another step,’ a voice sounds from the direction of his bedroom. A voice that sounds surprisingly like River’s voice, but it’s impossible, since she hasn’t even replied to his message.

Liz freezes in her place as someone emerges from his bedroom. He can’t see well – all he sees is a black spot with a splash of yellow on top of it.
‘Hands where I can see them,’ the person says to Liz and she raises her hands up. ‘Turn around. Slowly.’

His vision clears with every second and through tears in his eyes, he sees Liz turning on a spot and facing... River? How on earth did she get here?

‘Okay. Now, put everything you hold on the floor,’ River addresses Liz again and he notices that she’s holding her at gunpoint.

‘River?’ He croaks out and sits up. His vision swims again and he feels a bit dizzy for a second.

‘John,’ River nods her head without taking her eyes off of Liz. ‘You okay?’

‘Yeah, I think so,’ he nods and clears his throat. ‘Uhm, I’ll be fine.’

‘Wonderful,’ River says. ‘Now, be a darling and pick up everything your girlfriend dropped to the floor. And close the front door.’

He gets on his feet and walks – a bit unsteadily towards Liz, who’s now white as a sheet. He can see the fear in her eyes and it gives him the briefest pang of satisfaction. He quickly picks up all the things Liz dropped: her bag, the documents she snagged from him, his laptop, the bloody taser – and puts in on the couch in his living room.

‘And you – go and sit there. And please, don’t try anything dumb,’ River says Liz and points on of the armchairs with her gun. ‘Come on, we don’t have the whole night.’

Liz walks over to the armchair. Her whole body is stiff with terror and she looks like she’s about to cry or pass out. He, on the other hand feels like someone just kicked and tased him – oh wait, they did. This is not how today’s evening was supposed to go. He collapses on another armchair as River puts her gun in a holster that is placed around her hips.

‘Now that we are all here,’ River starts, leaning against his desk. ‘Tell me, did you give back everything you took from John?’

‘I- Yes,’ Liz says and nods. She sneaks a quick look in his direction, but she turns her head the second she meets his gaze.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ River says tiredly.

‘I’m not lying!’ Liz exclaims. ‘I am telling the true, I swear.’

‘You know, there are good liars and very good liars. Very good liars can not only make other people believe their stories, but they can also see when others lie to them,’ River says calmly. ‘I lie almost every second of my life. To me, you are as easy to read as a colouring book. So please, if you have anything else that belongs to John, put in on a table,’ when nothing happens, River shakes her head. ‘Don’t force me to do a strip search. In other circumstances I could make it pleasant, but today... You get my point?’

Liz hesitates for a second, but then she reaches into her pocket and puts 2 flash drives on the table.

‘Fuck,’ he mutters when he notices that one of them is the drive containing information on Kovarian. The other one contains pictures of cats he found on the internet. Hey, it’s not his fault. These cats are hilarious.

‘How long have you been working for the Silence?’ River asks in a tone that he instantly recognises
as her interrogation voice.

‘Uhmm, over two years,’ Liz says quietly, looking around the room like she’s trying a place to hide or escape. ‘They approached me when I was looking for a job, told me they can give me some money if I work for them.’

‘What were you doing for them?’ He asks and grits his teeth when a surge of pain hits him.

‘Nothing at first,’ Liz says. ‘For a long time I was just... I don’t know. They told me they’d contact me when they needed me. They gave me a new ID, told me to use it, but at first nothing happened.’

‘And when did they contact you?’ River asks.

‘October,’ Liz says. ‘One day a guy just came into my office at school and said they need my help. He said I’ll be paid.’

‘What was the objective?’ River asks and he can’t help but cringe at the question. He was someone’s objective. A project.

‘Uhmm, I had to meet John and uhmm,’ Liz stutters for a moment, ‘and-’

‘John, I think it’ll be better if you leave for now,’ River says in his direction.

‘No,’ he declines. ‘I want to hear all of it. You can say everything in my presence, I don’t care,’ he says to Liz and to his surprise, he discovers that he really doesn’t care. He doesn’t even feel betrayed by Liz. He feels nothing. He wonders if it’s because he’s so used to getting played or because he never really cared for her, not in that way at least.

‘I had to establish contact with John,’ Liz starts talking while River looks at him with concern. ‘Get close to him. Form a relationship if I can. Find out what he works on and bring back any information I can get from him.’

‘And what did you get?’ He asks her and she looks down with a guilty expression on her face.

‘Not much. Actually, nothing of value,’ Liz says and he can see that her employees haven’t been happy with her lack of progress. ‘You never talked much about work.’

‘Have you ever tried bugging his flat? Or gaining access to his laptop?’ River inquires.

‘Yes,’ Liz says quietly. ‘I couldn’t break the password on any of the laptops and I’ve never been left alone in here long enough to try any software I’ve given. As for bugging...’

‘None of it would work here,’ he says heavily. ‘I have installed a few devices that cause interference on all possible channels. All you’d get is white noise. Is it what happened?’

‘Yes,’ Liz says and looks at the floor. ‘That’s why I decided to come here today. To get something more.’

‘And what about the shooting?’ He asks and River looks at him in surprise. Oh. So she didn’t know about it. ‘Who was the shooter?’

‘I don’t know,’ Liz shakes her head. ‘I just had to tell them where you’ll be that day. That’s all. I have no idea who it was.’

‘What did they promise you in exchange for the information?’ River leans slightly in Liz’s direction, but shoots him a glance that tells ‘we are going to talk about the shooting, oh yes.’
‘Money,’ Liz shrugs. ‘Quite a lot of it.’

‘I see,’ River smiles sadly. ‘You think it’d be over? They’d never ask you for anything else ever again?’

‘They promised me,’ Liz says firmly.

‘You do realise they’re mobsters?’ He asks in exasperation. ‘Breaking promises comes naturally to them. Once they get your hands on you, they won’t let you go.’

‘They’ll ask for more and more from you, and when you can’t give them anything, they’ll dispose of you,’ River says. ‘How do you think they’ll react when you come back with your hands empty and tell them your cover is blown? They don’t forgive or forget easily.’

Liz looks from him to River and her eyes are wide from fright. He can see her mind working on its highest speed: what to do, how to get out of this mess, how to survive. He feels a sudden surge of sympathy for her. She doesn’t seem like a bad person – hell, he is sure that she’s a good person, certainly better than he is. It just looks like she got herself in a bad situation and believed people she shouldn’t have believed. And now she found herself in a nearly impossible position: caught by the police and having to face her bosses, telling that the mission she’s been assigned is blown to pieces. She probably had no idea what The Silence actually are and what they do.

‘We can figure something out,’ he says in a calming manner. ‘I’m sure that if you work with my department—’

‘Bullshit,’ River interrupts him sharply. ‘Look, you can sit here, listen to all the beautiful tales he’s going to tell you, but you have to know: they’re all lies.’

‘River! What the hell?’ He exclaims and stands up. ‘I am trying to help her. To help us, to get some information for the investigation!’

‘Yes, you are and you’re going to get her killed in the process,’ River hisses out. ‘I know you want to think that you can protect her, but the truth is you can’t. If The Silence decides to get her, they will, no matter how many wards you’ll put on her.’

The room is eerily quiet for a few moments. He sits down again, but doesn’t take his eyes off of River. She’s right, he knows that. The last thing Liz needs is cooperation with the police. They could try to keep her safe, but by the end of the day, she’d end up dead.

‘What do I do then?’ Liz breaks the silence with her question. ‘I can’t get back there.’

‘You can’t,’ River agrees. ‘And no offense, but you are too low on the ladder to be of any use to the police. You wouldn’t be a serious asset to the investigation. You’d be left on your own. And John, you know I’m telling the truth.’

He merely nods his head. He hasn’t thought about that: Liz probably doesn’t know enough to interest his boss, at least not to the point where she’d be given some kind of protection. She’d be left without any help. And very soon, she’d be very, very dead.

‘You have to disappear,’ River says. ‘Does anyone from The Silence knows what you were planning on doing tonight?’ Liz shakes her head. ‘Good. It’ll give you an advantage. Now. It’s not going to be easy, but if you listen to me, you have a chance of surviving.’

‘I can’t just disappear!’ Liz protests. ‘I have job and my parents and—’
'Do you want to live?' River asks sharply.

'What? I don’t—'

'It’s a simple question and the answer should be even easier. Do you want to live?’

'Yes,' Liz finally says.

'Then you’ll disappear. Today. No arguing.’

'But what about my parents?’ Liz asks in a teary voice. ‘I can’t just disappear like that without letting them know!’

'You can’t contact them either,’ River says harshly. ‘You got yourself in this situation, sorry. You have to pay the price.’

'Okay, okay, no need to be so... harsh,’ he says calmly. Liz looks at him with hope written all over her face, while River rolls her eyes. ‘We’ll figure something out. I’ll try to contact your parents and tell them what’s going on. Without any details of course.’

'Thank you,’ Liz says quietly. ‘I- I appreciate it.’

'Don’t thank him just yet. Anything can happen,’ River mutters. ‘As I said: I’ll help you, but first, you have to help us. Tell us everything you know.’

'How can I be sure that you won’t screw me over?’ Liz says to her. ‘He’s a detective, you are a crazy killer. Why should I trust you?’

‘And why should we trust you?’ He asks. ‘You’ve been pretending to be in love with me. You’ve been lying to me and everyone around you the entire time. You could be lying right now. We are giving you a chance.’

‘Trust me, _we_ don’t need you,’ River adds. ‘You’re the one who needs _us_.’

Liz seems to consider this for a few seconds and then she starts talking. Just like River suspected, she’s a low-level operative and she doesn’t know much. Still, she gives them a few names and a few locations he’ll be able to check out. That’s something.

'Fine,’ River finally says. ‘Now, listen to me carefully. You’ll go to King’s Cross station. There are lockers to leave your baggage. You’ll find shelf #111 and you’ll open it with this,’ River hands Liz a small silver key. ‘You’ll find a bag there. It’ll have clothes, some cosmetics and some money. Not much, but enough to last a month. Buy a ticket somewhere, possible as far away as you can get. Don’t use your credit card. Before you leave, change your clothes and leave everything in that locker. And when I say everything, I _mean_ everything: your old clothes, your bag, ID, your mobile,’ River says on one breath. ‘You’ll have to get a fake ID. Do you know how?’

‘I think I can manage that,’ Liz nods. She’s looking at River with fear and some kind of admiration.

‘Good. In two weeks, meet me in Dublin. The airport. I’ll tell you what to do next,’ River finishes. ‘That’s all. Go.’

Liz stares at River for a few seconds and starts gathering her things.

‘Thank you,’ she says. ‘You didn’t have to- Thank you.’

‘Don’t thank me yet,’ River says drily. ‘Thank me if you’re still alive in a few months. And Liz?
You know all the stories you heard about me?’ Liz looks at her in confusion. ‘You must’ve heard them. From the other operatives. Some were silly, some ridiculous and some simply improbable. You know what? They are all true. All of them. Even the one you’re thinking about right now. The one that no one ever wanted to say out loud. This one is real as well. So if you try to screw us over... Just know that I’ll be coming for you.’

Liz visibly pales, but nods and moves towards the door. She’s just about to leave when she turns towards him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I really didn’t want to hurt you. I wish- I wish it was different. And what I said earlier...’ she gives him a small smile. ‘It was all true.’

He has no time to react to that, because she leaves and closes the door behind her.

‘Well, you sure know how to pick them,’ River mutters.

‘Why did you let her go?’ He asks. It’s difficult for him to grasp: River hasn’t been overly keen on giving people second chances and he doubts that she suddenly changed her mind.

‘She deserved a choice,’ she simply says. There’s also a second part to her statement, a part that hangs between them: she deserved a choice I’ve been never given.

‘Thanks for coming,’ he says after a while. ‘I don’t know what I’d do without you. But it took you some time to get here.’

‘I was in Singapore when I got your message, River says angrily. ‘Their airlines were on strike for the entire week. Do you have any idea how bloody difficult it was to get a ticket on any place?’

‘I- Sorry, I had no idea,’ he says quietly and looks at River – properly looks at her – for the first time he saw her today. She looks tired and worn out – there are dark circles under her eyes and exhaustion nearly oozes from her. She’s wearing – his eyes move down and suddenly he’s incredibly glad that he hasn’t paid attention to her outfit earlier, because he would not be able to focus on anything else. She has on a black catsuit, so tight that it looks like it’s painted on her body. He tries not to stare, but it’s impossible – his eyes are glued to her body against his will.

‘John?’ River’s voice stirs him out of his mindless ogling, ‘have you heard anything I said?’

‘I, uhm, what?’ He stutters and looks up. ‘No sorry, I must’ve zoned out. Uhm, my head is killing me,’ he lies.

Well, it’s not a lie. Now that Liz is gone and all the adrenaline has stopped dulling out the pain, he feels like his head is about to explode.

‘Hey, let me have a look,’ River says softly and walks over to him. She gently tilts his head upwards and moves her fingers through his hair. ‘Okay, it doesn’t look like anything’s cracked, but I think you should go for a check-up. You might have a concussion.’

‘Nah, I’m okay,’ he shrugs. ‘I just need to get some painkillers and I’ll be as good as new.’

‘Okay, don’t move, I’ll get them,’ River says and before he can protest, she’s in his kitchen, going through his shelves. ‘There they are!’ Then she opens his freezer and looks for something in there. A minute later she’s back by his side, with a pill and a glass of water in one hand, and a bag of frozen peas in the other. ‘That’s for the pain and that’s,’ she says pressing the frozen bag to the side of his head, ‘for the beautiful bruise that’s starting to show.’
Neither of them speaks for a while, but it’s not uncomfortable. On the contrary: it feels... normal. It feels oddly domestic.

‘So... About the shooting,’ River starts. ‘What to tell me something?’

‘Not really?’ He shrugs and hisses in pain. ‘Shit. Uhm. Someone wanted to shoot me. But they didn’t succeed. I think we should be grateful for that.’

‘And let me guess: you didn’t catch the guy,’ River says and he nods. Her face darkens for a second and he can see that her fingers tighten on the bag she’s holding.

‘Hey, it’s not your job to find that person and go after them,’ he says. ‘Promise me you won’t do that.’

‘I won’t promise you anything,’ she says, but there’s a small grin on her lips. Once again, they fall silent.

‘Thank you,’ he finally says. ‘For being here. You didn’t have to come and yet-‘

‘I did have to come,’ River shakes her head. ‘We’re in this together, whether we like it or not. My safety was at stake as much as yours.’

‘Of course,’ he sighs. ‘Fuck, I am stupid. I should have seen this coming. It was so obvious now that I look at it: she appeared out of nowhere. Perfect timing, perfect place. How could I’ve been so blind?’

‘Don’t be so harsh on yourself,’ River says gently. ‘She was exactly who you needed and wanted. No wonder you didn’t suspect anything.’

‘But she’s not whom I want. She’s never been,’ he says without thinking and gently places his hand on River’s hip. He can feel the warmth of her skin through the thin layer of her clothes. ‘River, I-‘

‘I have to go,’ she says abruptly, taking a step back. His hand falls from her hip and he feels like a moron for even placing it there. When will he learn?

‘You can stay over,’ he says and tries not to sound too eager. ‘I mean, you’ve come a long way, you must be tired. I can take the couch, you can take my bed, get a proper rest and leave in the morning.’

‘I can’t,’ River shakes her head. ‘Being in London isn’t exactly safe for me. I really should go now.’

‘Of course, I didn’t think about that,’ he mumbles and takes the bag of now half-melted peas from her. River clears her throat and takes another step back. He has no idea how on earth they can be perfectly at ease with each other one moment and feel absolutely awkward the next. It feels like he always makes a wrong moves, something to make River run in the opposite direction. He’d just want to spend more time with her, is it so bad?

‘You should clean this mess,’ River says, trying her best to sound calm and collected. ‘And check if everything that should be here, really is here. And you probably should take a day off tomorrow. Unless you want to explain to your boss why you look like a wreck.’

‘Thank you, I’ll take that under consideration,’ he looks up and smiles at her. River smiles back, a warm and carefree smile that dies the next second.

‘I really have to go,’ she repeats dully. He’d like to think that she has to go, not wants to go. He hopes so.
'I know,' he says quietly and turns his head away.

He doesn’t watch her walking away and out of his apartment.

He even pretends that the sound of closing door doesn’t make him miserable.

Chapter End Notes

and there is it. sorry if it wasn't the smack down you expected. Liz's gone (or is she?), but I am sure some shit may still happen. shit does that.
I'm really not sure about this chapter. it looked kind of different (better) in my head, but when it came to writing... yeah. anyway, I hope you managed to enjoy it, at least a tiny bit.
per usual, thank you for all the comments & kudos. every single one means a lot to me.

one more thing: I have no idea when the next update will be. a large part of this one was written after NYE, when I had a few days off from work. right now, I don't have this comfort. so sorry in advance.

chapter's title from 'poor misguided fool' by starsailor.
New York greets him with grey sky and humid air. He’s deadly tired after his flight - 15 hours with 2 connecting flights and all because his department didn’t have the money for a direct flight – and he’s dreaming about a shower and a bed to fall onto. Technically, he should be preparing for the presentation he has in two days, but he’s far too beaten to even think about that. His presentation will have to wait. Besides, it’s not like he doesn’t know it by heart now, he thinks as he walks into his hotel room. Thankfully, his room is quite nice – probably only because he offered to cover half of its costs from his pocket.

He sighs. What he wouldn’t give to be at his own room now. But no: his boss decided that he needs to be the one to represent the department – and the United Kingdom – on the conference about ways of dealing with organised crime. He tried to persuade him that there are more qualified people to do it, but the man wasn’t taking ‘no’ for an answer. And here he is: jetlagged, exhausted and two days away from delivering a speech about his methods and ways of solving the problem of mobster. He’s not sure how he’s going to explain his rather extensive inside knowledge of the Silence. ‘Yeah, you know, I have a hired gun working with me. But don’t worry, she doesn’t kill people anymore! At least I hope so. And I might’ve had a one-night stand with her at one point. Right now she doesn’t contact me and it makes me feel a bit anxious.’

Yes. This is going to work just brilliantly.

He really can’t wait for this conference to be over.

___

14 hours later (12 hours of sleep and 2 hours of trying to convince himself that he’s well-rested and ready to face the day with a smile on his face) and with a travel mug filled with tea in his hand, he’s walking down a New York street and trying to find the place where the damn conference is held. He’s pretty sure he’s on the right track, but somehow the conference centre got misplaced. (No, he’s not lost. He doesn’t get lost. Ever.)

He’s looking for directions on his phone, trying to navigate the crowd – by some miracle he hasn’t bumped into anyone yet – and he’s pretty sure that if he zooms at the map on the screen, he’s going to find the centre in a tick-

In this very moment, seconds away from finding the damn conference centre, he runs into someone. His phone drops to the ground, as does his travel mug – spilling hot tea on the pavement, his shoes and on a pair of rather expensive-looking heels. A pair of heels that is attached to a pair of legs that are surely attached to a person. This is how usually it works in life. He swallows nervously and glances up, ready to face all the insults that await him-

‘River?’ He asks in shock as he stares at the very familiar face.

‘John?’ The shock on her face must mirror the surprise on his.

‘What are you doing here?’ They ask simultaneously. For a moment neither of them answers the question, still too shocked to process what is actually happening. But in his heart, another feeling
starts to bloom: happiness. He’s been thinking that he’s not going to see River for another few months and how here she is: standing right in front of him.

‘River!’ He exclaims again and pokes her arm. ‘Look at you!’

‘Yeah, look at me,’ River says and looks around. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Me? I’m here for a conference,’ he says distractedly and takes one of her curls between his fingers. ‘You dyed your hair!’ He pouts and twines the strand of hair on his finger. ‘You’re... almost ginger now. I am not sure I like it.’

River snorts at that.

‘You’re just jealous, because you are not ginger. And you’ll never be,’ she responds and shakes her head. Her hair shine in the morning sun: coppery red instead of pale gold that he got so used to. It suits her – not that he’s going to admit it out loud. ‘Anyway, what conference are you here for?’

‘International conference on dealing with organised crime,’ he replies, bouncing on his heels, but he stops as soon as he sees fear on River’s face. ‘Hey, what’s wrong?’

‘A conference on organised crime and you’re asking me what’s wrong?’ She hisses out. ‘Did you know I would be here? Have you told anyone else about me?’

‘What?’ He asks incredulously. ‘No. Why would you even think that? I would never... You are safe with me.’

River looks at him in silence, as if she’s assessing whether or not he’s telling the truth. Finally, she nods.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says quietly. ‘I just overreacted. I never expected to see you here.’

‘It’s okay,’ he says and places hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t flinch at his touch, just looks at him with an expression he can’t read. They’re standing in the middle of the morning crowd, focused on each other and not paying any attention to the people passing them by. Somehow, he feels like they’re the only people in this city.

‘I have to go,’ River says suddenly. ‘I’ll be late for work and you’ll be late for your conference. Uhm, glad to meet you.’

She tries to shrug off his hand from her shoulder, but he instinctively tightens his grip.

‘Hey, wait,’ he says, but River doesn’t pay any attention to him and starts walking. With his hand still on her arm, he has to either let her go or walk with her. He decides to trot along. ‘River, come on! We have to talk!’

‘I don’t have time now,’ she snaps at him. ‘Let me go.’

‘I am not saying that it has to be now,’ he says, dropping his hand from her shoulder but still walking alongside her. ‘But later today? In the evening? Uhm, dinner?’

That stops River dead in her tracks. She turns to face him and her eyes shine with surprise.

‘Dinner?’ She repeats after him. ‘You want to meet for dinner?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ he says and smiles. ‘I have to eat, you have to eat. We could eat together. And talk. I haven’t seen you in a while and, uhm, you know. It’d be nice to catch up.’
'Catch up,' she repeats again and stares at him. For a moment he’s afraid he just broke her. Is there a restart button or something like that? He waves his hand in front of her face, but she doesn’t even blink. *Shit.* He really must’ve broke her somehow. How was he supposed to know that the idea of dinner with him would cause such damage to her brain?

‘We don’t have to meet if you don’t want to,’ he says, trying not to sound too disappointed. ‘It’s fine, really.’

‘Ok,’ River says at the same time. ‘Dinner it is.’

‘Really?’ He says and smiles. The smile feels wide enough to split his face in half, but he doesn’t care. River just agreed to go out with him. In a way of course. It is a date, but it’s not a date-date. *But it could be,* a voice inside his head tells him. He hushes it down, not willing to dwell on it right here and now, with River standing just a few inches from him.

‘Yes, really,’ River says and gives him a smile that makes his head spin. It’s still spinning 5 minutes later, when River and he depart and go their separate ways. He still has no idea where the damn conference centre is, but it doesn’t matter anymore: at 8pm, he’ll meet with River for dinner.

Who knows, he muses as he once again checks directions on his phone, *maybe his time in New York won’t be that bad.*

___

It’s the sunlight that wakes him. He opens his eyes and blinks sleepily. Wait a moment. This is not his hotel room. He sits up in panic, suddenly very awake and alert. Where the hell is he? His eyes fall on the clothes strewn across the room and then on River sleeping next to him.

Okay. Right.

That happened.

Again. Thank gods it happened again, he thinks with a small smile. He takes a deep breath and settles back under the duvet. His head throbs slightly – both from all the wine and lack of sleep – but he thinks that a small nap should remedy that. Even in her sleep, River seems to agree with him, because she scoots closer to him and places her head on his shoulder. He turns towards her and grins. Quite a few things happened last night and somehow everything seems different now. Maybe easier? He’s not sure yet, but River and he are going to have breakfast together and talk and-

His eyes fall on the alarm clock standing on the bedside drawer. What? It’s already 7:30am?

‘Fuck,’ he curses softly and jumps out of the bed. He has his presentation at 9pm and he has to get ready, go back to his hotel to grab his notes, go to the bloody conference centre, go through his notes again... He makes a plan in his head as he’s trying to put on his trousers, hopping on one leg. He has no idea where his boxers are, but he has no time to look for them right now.

‘Normally, I’d ask you to stop making so much noise, but it’s just too entertaining,’ River’s voice sounds amused and husky from sleep. He yelps in surprise and nearly trips.

‘Don’t do that!’ He shouts, zipping his trousers. ‘Have you seen my bowtie?’

‘It was somewhere in the hallway last time I checked,’ River yawns. ‘What are you doing?’
‘Trying to get ready,’ he throws over his shoulder. He locates his shirt on the desk, with River’s bra laying on top of it. He blushes and wonders what he should do with it. Should he lie it on the desk? On the floor? Hand it back to River? Then he remembers he has no time to dwell on things like that and quickly snags his shirt from under it. ‘We overslept and I have a presentation in less than 90 minutes and I have to get back to my hotel and-,’ he struggles with his shirt. More than a few buttons are missing.

‘Right, calm down,’ River says and the covers rustle behind him. He turns around to see River stretching on her tip-toes. For a moment he forgets what he’s supposed to do and say. Just like him, River didn’t bother with putting any clothes before falling asleep, so right now she’s standing in front of him and she’s naked.

*Very naked.*

His fingers are itching to touch her, run his hands over her skin and he catches himself thinking that his presentation isn’t really *that* important. He could call in sick, right? And maybe River could nurse him back to health. So to speak.

‘Stop staring,’ River mumbles, finding her dress in the pile of clothes on the floor and putting it on. ‘Go take a shower instead.’

‘I don’t have time!’ He exclaims. Okay, so no nursing back to health. Fine.

‘Just go,’ River ushers him towards the bathroom. ‘I’ll call you a cab in the meantime. There’s a spare toothbrush in the drug cabinet.’

When he emerges from the bathroom 10 minutes later, he feels more awake and a bit calmer. He’s also smelling like River’s shower gel (coffee with milk) and shampoo (something fruity and sugary). His hair is a mess – he dried it with a towel, but he’ll deal with this in his hotel room.

River hands him a cup of tea the second he enters the kitchen.

‘Your taxi will be here in 5 minutes,’ she says and he nods in thanks, taking a sip of his tea. It’s perfect: strong and with as much sugar as would the cup would fit, with just a bit of milk.

‘Thank you,’ he says and takes another sip. He’s not sure what to say. Once again, he’s not sure where they’re standing and how to approach whatever River and he have. River does her best to appear calm and collected, but he can see that she’s just as anxious as he is. The barely noticeable frown on her face, the tension in her shoulders – he knows her well enough to recognise these signs.

‘You want something to eat?’ She asks with her back to him.

‘No, uhm, thanks. I’m good,’ he shakes his head and decides to finally take matters in his hands. ‘Listen... I think we should talk. Not now, obviously, but we should. Sooner or later. I think sooner would be better. Things uhm, happened and, uhm, you know,’ he finishes eloquently.

‘Okay,’ River turns to face him, but her expression doesn’t betray anything. ‘But as you said, not now. Your taxi will be here any second.’

As on signal, a loud sound of car horn pierces the air.

‘Shit,’ he mumbles, looking through the kitchen’s window. ‘I have to go.’

‘So go,’ River rushes him out of the kitchen and takes the mug out of his hand. ‘I’ll text you later.’
'Yes, that is a brilliant idea,' he beams at her and grabs his jacket from one of the armchairs. ‘Just don’t forget, okay? This is important.’

‘I won’t,’ River rolls her eyes at him, but there’s a hint of smile on her lips. ‘Now go. And good luck with your presentation.’

Good luck with the presentation. Easy for her to say.

On the way to his hotel and conference centre, River is the only thing on his mind. He can’t stop thinking about her and the scary thing is that it doesn’t bother him in the slightest.

Somehow, in his more than distracted state, he aces his presentation. He answers all the questions and engages everyone in the discussion. Piece of cake. He can only hope that his talk with River will go as smoothly.

They don’t talk. He’s not sure how that happened, but one minute he was knocking on River’s door (she told him to meet her at her place) and the next moment they were making out on her couch. He really meant to stop it at some point and make them talk – because gods, they really need to do that – but River did that very distracting thing with her tongue and all thoughts evaporated from his head. Then she did that very distracting thing with her hands... Actually, everything she did was distracting. And so instead of having a proper conversation, they ended up in bed.

‘This wasn’t supposed to end like this,’ he mumbles sleepily. Next to him, River snorts. She’s tangled in the sheets, looking perfectly content with how their talk turned out.

‘I know, we were supposed to eat first,’ she says and gets up from the bed. She puts on a thin bathrobe and runs fingers through her curls. ‘The food is probably cold by now. Let’s hope it’ll be edible once I re-heat it.’

Oh, right. Food. Before he arrived, River had ordered some take-out. It was delivered when they were making their way to River’s bedroom. At that time, neither of them was particularly interested in eating. All the boxes must still be lying by the door where he dropped them after paying the delivery boy. He only hopes that he didn’t give the guy a 100$ note. It was difficult to focus on anything when River’s hand was half-way down his pants.

He uses the time when River is busy in the kitchen to snoop around her bedroom. It’d be a crime not to, right? The room is quite small: only a bed, a small desk and a wardrobe fit in there. The walls are painted in a muddy shade of beige, there’s no carpet on the floor and paint on the ceiling is peeling in one corner. He can see a fire escape through the narrow window. The room is clean, but it’s obvious that it has seen better days. It also lacks any kind of personal touch – no pictures, no posters, no books anywhere. He bets River hasn’t changed anything since she moved in here.

‘What do you do?’ He asks once River gets back with their – now – hot food. He’s settled back under the duvet, doing his best to pretend he hasn’t poked everything around the room. River sighs and sits next to him, handing him a paper box with fried rice and a fork.

‘What do you mean?’ She asks innocently, chewing on her food.

‘In here. New York. Do you work or,’ he says and puts a forklift of rice in his mouth. ‘Shit, this is hot!’ He spits it back in the box.
‘And that’s incredibly attractive,’ River comments drily. ‘It’s not like I wanted to try it, sweetie.’

‘Hey, it is hot,’ he pouts and sees River shaking her head at him. ‘And don’t change the subject. I asked you a question and I fully expect an answer.’

‘You’ve gone all strict, not that I mind,’ River says with a small smirk and he tries not to get distracted by her voice and the lingering possibilities of just how strict he could be with her. No. He needs to focus.

‘I am still expecting an answer,’ hoping that he sounds firm and entirely focused on his question. River sighs in defeat.

‘I’ve been here – in New York – for about a month,’ she says and takes a bite of her food. ‘I needed a place to stay low for a while, after the whole business with your girlfriend.’

‘She’s not my girlfriend,’ he mumbles guiltily. Is it bad that he hasn’t really thought about Liz since she left his apartment on that fateful night? Probably. Okay, let’s be honest: he definitely doesn’t deserve ‘boyfriend of a year’ title.

‘Yeah, I guess she isn’t. Not anymore. Spying for one’s enemy must really take the romance out of equation,’ River says. ‘She’s fine, in case you’re wondering. At least she was fine when I left her.’

‘Good,’ he nods and feels like an utter twat for not even wanting to know more about Liz’s well-being. ‘So why New York?’

‘It’s a big city, easy to get lost in and stay unnoticed,’ River says quickly. Too quickly.

‘It would be easier to get lost somewhere in South America,’ he says lightly and observes River’s reaction. ‘New York is one of the most monitored cities in the world. Cameras at nearly every corner. I’d say it’s fairly difficult to remain unseen here.’

‘Maybe I’m just a big fan of ‘Sex & the city’,’ River says and raises her eyebrow in challenge.

‘I’m not sure about the city, but you’re certainly seems a fan of sex,’ he says and leans towards her. Her pupils are blown wide and her lips curl into a smile that makes his blood run hot.

‘If I recall correctly, you seem like a fan of that yourself,’ she finally responds, sounding a bit breathless. ‘And I must admit, I am fairly surprised you managed to say ‘sex’ without blushing.’

‘I can do many things without blushing,’ he responds cheekily and River breaks into delighted laughter. He grins at that. It’s been way too long since he heard that sound. He really wishes he could make her laugh as often as possible. ‘I am a grown-up man, you know.’

‘Oh, I am very glad of that,’ River says slowly and her voice is teasing and low. ‘Shagging a minor has never been on my bucket list.’

‘I guess I should be glad I’m not a minor then,’ he says and takes a deep breath when River moves a bit closer to him.

‘Well, I could show you exactly how glad you should be that you’re not a minor,’ River says and her voice sounds heavy with promises. ‘Do you want me to?’

A quick nod is the only thing he can manage.
On Thursday evening he shows up on River’s doorstep. Again. He hasn’t even thought that she may not want him there, he hasn’t really thought about anything at all, except for how much he wants to spend his evening with her. Which is ridiculous and weird and if he’s to be honest, it makes him slightly uncomfortable to feel so drawn to River, but there’s nothing he can do about it. And even if he could do something about it, he probably wouldn’t.

He knocks on River’s door and suddenly million of thoughts start running through his head. *What if she doesn’t want him here? What if she’s not at home? What if she’s with someone else? What if-*

But when River opens the door and sees him, her face lights up with joy, all his concerns and questions are forgotten.

A few hours later, when they’re in River’s bed, pleasantly tired and sleepy, he realises that he never heard an answer to the question he asked River yesterday.

‘Hey,’ he says quietly, gently running his fingers through River’s hair – something he never thought he’d be allowed to do, ‘you never told me what you’re doing here.’

‘Hm?’ River murmurs sleepily. ‘Right now, I’m doing you.’

‘Very funny,’ he snorts and pokes her side. ‘It’s not what I’m talking about and you know it.’

‘Do we really have to have this conversation now?’ River asks and scoots closer to him. ‘I’m tired.’

‘Yes, we do have to talk about this now,’ he insists and pokes her side once again. ‘Tomorrow I’ll forget or you’ll distract me or-’

‘I distract you? Good to know,’ River interrupts him and he can hear the smile in her voice. ‘Am I distracting you right now?’

‘River!’ He huffs and catches her hand before it starts travelling from his leg towards his... not leg. ‘I am serious. Can we talk? Please?’

‘Fine,’ River sighs and rolls onto her stomach. She looks at him, suddenly serious and just a little wary. ‘What do you want to know?’

‘The very same thing I wanted to know yesterday,’ he says. ‘Why here? Why New York? What do you do here? But I want to hear the truth this time.’

River is silent for a few seconds and he’s afraid that he broke one of their unspoken rules. He’s not sure which rule it’d be or if they even have any rules, but-

‘I work at a library,’ she finally says and he can’t help but laugh.

‘You?’ He says between giggles. ‘At a library? You’re joking.’

‘I’m not,’ River says with a small, self-satisfied smile. ‘And it’s not a library. It’s the library.’

That stops his laughter. He stares at her in disbelief.

‘Wait. Are you telling me that you’re working at The New York Public Library?’ He asks and it’s River’s time to laugh. ‘But you don’t have any experience! Or credentials!’

‘Sweetie,’ River looks at him like he just lost 100 IQ points, ‘it’s me you’re talking with. Faking credentials is even easier than faking an orgasm.’
‘Right,’ He clears his throat and decides not to dwell on the faking an orgasm part. He may find out things his male pride would not recover from. ‘But why a library?’

‘Because I like books,’ River says simply. ‘And I couldn’t be a nurse since my bedside manner leaves quite a lot to be desired.’

‘I don’t know,’ he shrugs, ‘I quite enjoy your bedside manner.’

‘Cheeky,’ River tries to hide a smile that his words caused. ‘Although I’d be disappointed if you didn’t enjoy it. But imagine me giving the same bedside manner in a cardiology department.’

‘That would definitely give them a hard time,’ he replies and waggles his eyebrows at her. ‘Oi! What was that for?’ He exclaims and rubs the spot on his arm where she just hit him.

‘That was for that terrible pun,’ River replies with a smirk. ‘Anyway, are you still interested in knowing why I’m here?’

For a second he wants to reply with ‘*is water wet*?’, but since River may see it as another bad pun – even one about her name – he just nods his head instead. He settles comfortably under the duvet and starts drawing patterns against River’s back.

‘Cedric Mancini. That’s why I’m here,’ River says.

‘I don’t understand,’ he replies in confusion.

‘He’s a senator for the state of New York,’ River adds lightly, as if that explains everything.

‘I still don’t understand,’ he says. ‘Are you planning on starting a career in politics?’

‘Never,’ River says and hums pleasantly as he delicately scratches his nails against her spine. ‘I knew this name wouldn’t mean anything to you. But what about the name Eric Van Statten?’

‘No,’ he says quietly and shakes his head. ‘You can’t mean...’

‘Oh, but I do,’ River smiles and nudges his hand that is now lying idly on her back. He shakes off his surprise and continues to stroke her back. ‘Any questions?’

‘Too many probably,’ he says. ‘How did you find him? How can you be sure it’s him?’

Eric Van Statten, Kovarian’s right hand right when the Silence began to rise into power. Just a handful of people knew who he was, even a smaller group knew how he looked like. He disappeared from the radar about 20 years ago and no one could find him ever since, even though there were signs of his activity in the whole of America.

‘I used to have access to some classified Silence files,’ River states simply. ‘Plus, I did a bit of digging on my own. It’s him, I’m sure.’

‘But is he still a part of The Silence?’ He asks.

‘Yes,’ River nods her head and he swears quietly. ‘I managed to get a hold of some of the emails he exchanged with no one else, but our lovely friend, Madame Kovarian.’

‘Shit,’ he mumbles and then looks at River. ‘Wait. When were you planning to tell me about it?’

River shifts uncomfortably for a moment.
‘I was going to tell you... Eventually,’ she says. ‘No, listen. I was going to tell you once I have something substantial.’

‘And? Do you have something substantial?’ He asks and River bites her lip. ‘River. We were supposed to be in this together. You can’t just shut me out.’

She’s silent for a few moments and he thinks that she must’ve fallen asleep or is simply ignoring him, when she finally speaks.

‘There was a rumour... Like an urban legend,’ she starts. ‘Van Statten has always been this mystery. People liked to talk about him, even if they’ve never even seen him. Apparently, he was supposed to be really paranoid and scared about his safety. He was to be always surrounded by guards, wear bulletproof vests under his clothes and so on. It was said that he also wrote everything down.’

‘What do you mean?’ He asks, slightly confused.

‘Every conversation he had, every email exchange, every money transfer – he was supposed to record everything. Record, then transcribe and then back it up,’ River explains patiently. ‘I’m not talking about his official life of course, I’m talking here about his Silence life. Imagine – years and years of various information, all transcribed and stored in one place.’

‘That sounds a bit ridiculous,’ he says. ‘No offense, but it does! Why would he do that?’

‘For protection,’ River says quickly. ‘If anything goes bad, he has something to give to the police. It’s a get out of jail free card.’

‘It still sounds like something straight out from a cheap crime show,’ he shrugs and River nods her head.

‘That’s exactly what I thought, until...,’ she stops and stares at him expectantly.

‘Until?’ He repeats. ‘Don’t tell the magical box really exists.’

‘It does,’ River says. ‘Okay, I don’t know if that’s it, but Van Statten carries something with him all the time. Some kind of device. Could be a power bank, could be something else. He records every single one of his conversations – whether it’s one on the phone or in person. Why would he do that if not to make a copy of this later?’

‘Maybe his memory is shitty,’ he sighs. ‘Right, let’s say he does that and he have this amazing back up with all the data on it. He probably carries it with him all the time. How would one get hold of it?’

‘There are many ways to get man out of his clothes,’ River says lightly and he feels a sudden surge of jealousy cursing through his body. It’s ridiculous and stupid, but he can’t help it. ‘Oh, don’t make that face. That wasn’t what I was talking about. Although, now that you mentioned it,’ River laughs and pinches his cheek. ‘You’re rather precious when you’re jealous.’

‘I am not jealous,’ he mutters and rubs his cheek. ‘Now, if you have a plan that doesn’t involve undressing Van Statten, I’m all ears. If not – I’m going to sleep.’

‘Spoilsport,’ River mutters quietly and flops on her back. ‘There’s going to be a party in a month.’

‘You want me to be your plus one?’ He asks excitedly.

‘No, you moron,’ River says with a roll of her eyes and a small smile. ‘The Library is organising a charity event. Gathering money to buy books and school supplies for children in underdeveloped
countries. Van Statten... Well, Mancini is supposed to appear and donate a large sum of money. He’s also supposed to attend the ball organised by The Library.’

‘And you know that because?’

‘Because I’m helping to organise it, sweetie,’ River turns to face him. ‘I’ll be present during the event as well, overseeing the whole thing. Anything could happen during a social gathering like this one. People may get drunk. People may lose their phones.’

‘There’s a lot of ‘may’ involved,’ he says lowly. ‘I don’t know. It all seems... So unlike you. Like you’re chasing after a ghost. You don’t even know if that thing really exists!’

‘And I’m never going to know if I don’t check it,’ River says sharply. ‘You’re right – it could all be a legend. I might be wrong. But what if I’m not? What if he has it? Imagine the information one could find there. His contacts, money transfers, all the connections with the mob and politicians... It could be a goldmine. Maybe not for you, because Van Statten is busy on this side of the pond, but it could be valuable for some people here.’

‘You’re thinking Canton?’ He asks interested. If River’s right and the magic device exists for real, Canton could make some use of it. Or he could hand it to the people who could use it.

‘Yeah, I’m thinking Canton,’ she nods. ‘You could send it to him as a gift. But well, no use talking about it now. We don’t even know if it exists.’

‘Do you need my help?’ He asks and feels a small pang of disappointment when River shakes her head.

‘I’m sorry, but no, sweetie,’ she says. ‘You’ve made quite a name for yourself and your fame has reached even New York,’ her voice rings with pride. ‘Van Statten surely knows about you. It’d be dangerous, for you and the mission.’

‘Doesn’t he know about you?’ He asks slowly and yawns. River yawns right after him and lies her head on his shoulder.

‘I’ve never met him,’ she says sleepily. ‘He might’ve heard about me, but I doubt he knows how I look like. And I don’t think that Kovarian told him that I’m not longer playing for the team.’

For a few moments neither of them says anything. River’s breathing is getting slower with every breath she takes and he feels his eyes closing. But there’s one more thing he needs to ask her.

‘River,’ he whispers, ‘are you awake?’

‘Mhhmmm,’ she mumbles into his skin. ‘What do you want?’

‘The conference... It’s ending tomorrow. I’m going back to London,’ he says and feels River tensing against him. He rubs her arms with his hand. ‘But I was thinking... Wondering really... Maybe I could stay here for the weekend. If you don’t have anything against it, that is.’

‘That could be nice,’ River says slowly – almost disinterestedly, but he feels the curve of her smile against his arm.

‘You think so?’ He replies and feels a big smile nearly splitting his face in two. ‘That’s... Really cool. I’ll try to book a room in a hotel for a few more days then.’

‘What for?’ River asks surprised. ‘You can stay here. It’s not like you’re in your hotel room right
now. And now that we have that settled... Can we please try and sleep? Some of us have work tomorrow, you know.’

And just like that, he stays in New York for the weekend.

With River.

In her apartment.

It should be a lot weirder than it is. He hasn’t lived with anyone in ages, so adjusting to River’s presence should be more difficult than it actually is. But nothing like that happens. When he comes to her apartment on Friday evening, River is waiting for him with dinner and wine. They watch some dumb action movie and he nearly falls asleep with his head on River’s lap.

It turns out that they both hate late-night infomercials, prefer to sleep with windows open and need to take a shower to feel alive in the morning. He doesn’t allow himself to think why he feels so good in River’s company: so calm and content, relaxed and happy. He just does and for the few precious days he allows himself to just live like that.

On Saturday, he wakes River at 8am, forces her into the shower, makes her a cup of coffee and when she drinks it, he drags her out of the apartment. He stayed in New York and he plans on using this time in the fullest. Their first stop is Bronx Zoo, where he tries to pet as many animals as he can. They grab a brunch in a small cafe a few blocks from the Zoo and then he proceeds to drag River from one city’s attraction to another. She rolls her eyes at him and complains about him being obnoxiously touristy, but she has a smile on her face the whole time. He doesn’t mind the crowd, crying babies and rude people – he enjoys the feel of River’s hand in his and the fact that they’re discovering New York together.

On Sunday, they get up later and decide to go to Central Park. They take a stroll there, buy a picnic basket and eat brunch in the shadow of a large tree. They stay there for a while – each of them reading a book and eventually falling asleep on the ground. He doesn’t dwell on how domestic this whole weekend feels, he doesn’t think that they’ve been behaving like a couple. He tries to ignore how heavy his heart feels when he packs later that evening and how miserable he is when he boards on the plane back to London. He tries not to think that suddenly ‘London’ doesn’t mean ‘home’ for him.

But most of all, he tries not to think how in love with River Song he is.

Chapter End Notes

... an update after 6 months. at this speed, the fic will be finished in 2-3 years. yay. what can I say. a huge part of this chapter had been written back in January, but then it all kind of went downhill. but today I kind of went 'fuck, let's finish this fucker'. and I did. so if the chapter doesn't make much sense, you know why. actually, this chapter is kind of really pointless, more of a filler chapter than anything else, but there's nothing I can do about it. oh well. I bet there's shitload of typos, but I just wanted to post it before going to bed. it's 1:32am now. I just want to apologise to those of you who read this fic and waited for an update. I'm
really sorry. I really didn't plan it that way.  
if anyone's still reading it - good gods, child, run and find a better fic with a regular update schedule! but if you choose to stay: thank you & I hope you'll enjoy it.

chapter title from 'slow life' by of monsters and men.
'stay as long as you want' - I haven't left your bed since

He misses River.

Terribly and pathetically. The worst thing is that there’s nothing he can do about that. He’s in London, River is in New York and he can’t contact her. He wishes he could call her every evening and just chat about some stupid and mundane things, but it’s impossible. He has her number, but it’s only for emergencies and he doubts River would think that him missing her is an emergency.

He doesn’t even know if River would want to chat with him. He knows how he feels about her – he’s rather irrevocably in love with her. If he were to be honest, he’d admit that he’s been feeling that way for some time now. It’s not something that just happened to him in New York. He knows that it’s not the sex that’s clouding his mind – he’s been enchanted by River long before they’d slept together for the first time.

He wishes it wasn’t the case. The feelings he has for River make a bloody mess of his life – and his mind. He absolutely doesn’t care who River is and what she’s done in the past. Or maybe he doesn’t allow himself to care about that? He no longer knows. All he knows is that he misses her and wants to be with her – whatever the costs. It scares him how much he wants and needs her - he’s never felt that way before and he has no idea how to deal with that. The fact that he has no idea how River feels about him doesn’t make anything easier. For all he knows, she could be playing him and using him for her advantage. She could be, but he doesn’t think she’s doing that. Logically, nothing points to that. Besides, it doesn’t feel like she’s playing him. When they’re together it feels... honest. It feels like they can be themselves, without any masks and games.

But it can be just his wishful thinking.

And that’s how his time without River passes: slowly, uneventfully and with him thinking about her nearly every second of his days. And nights too, but that’s a completely different issue.

However, thinking about River is not all he does. He also thinks about ways to defeat The Silence. With the young Kovarian getting closer and closer to spending the rest of his life behind the bars, with him and his department arresting more and more of The Silence’s minions he thinks it’s high time to go after the main player – Kovarian herself. For a few days he rakes his brain for a solution and then he finds it. Granted, it’s a bit risky and quite bonkers, but hey – ideas like that usually work. And so he types it all up and sends it to River via email. He takes his time and carefully encodes it, making sure that once the email’s sent, it won’t be traced back to him. It takes River 4 days to replay and he needs 13 hours to decode her answer.

Once he finally has her response on his screen, he doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. To his elaborate and frankly ingenious plan, River responded with just three short words: *dumbest shit ever.*

___

One Friday evening - about two months after his trip to New York - when he gets back home he notices that someone’s there. Nothing is disturbed or changed per se, but something is different - he can feel it in the air. Carefully, he walks inside and promises himself that if he survives this one, he’s
going to get himself a gun. Or a small knife. Or at least a bloody burglar alarm. Just let him live and he will take care of these things.

First, he checks the kitchen. He doesn’t know why kitchen is his first choice – he really doubts that his potential killer/robber decided to have a snack, but then again, you never know. His kitchen is exactly how he left it in the morning: a stack of unwashed dishes in the sink, bread crumbs on the counter, a cup with cold tea standing on the microwave. No killers hiding in his fridge. There are also no killers in his living room and bathroom. Which leaves only one more place where his potential killer may be hiding: his bedroom. He walks slowly towards it, trying to be as quiet as possible. A few more steps and he’ll open the door and who knows who’s hiding behind them? It could be a tall and well-built man with a gun, just waiting to pull the trigger. It could be someone with a knife, ready to slit his throat. It could be-

-River Song in his bed.

Wait.

What is River Song doing in his bed?

‘I’m trying to sleep,’ River says tiredly. ‘But it’s really difficult with you moving all over the flat like an elephant.’

‘What are you doing here?’ He asks in a hushed voice as River stretches under the duvet. ‘Not that I mind, but... What are you doing here?’

‘I’d be really surprised if you minded me in your bed,’ River smiles and cocoons herself in his blankets. ‘And it was yours or at one of your neighbours’ place. Unfortunately, none of them is a handsome young bloke, so I came here. Not that you’re a handsome young bloke,’ she adds after a second.

‘That is really rude, you know,’ he huffs, but can’t stop a smile from appearing on his face. ‘You could’ve told me you’re coming here. I’d clean a bit and maybe cook something.’

‘How very housewife of you,’ River sighs. ‘I haven’t told you anything, because it was safer this way.’

‘Where did you come from?’ He asks excitedly as he plops on the bed next to her. ‘New York? Or somewhere else?’

River opens her eyes and looks at him with amusement and a bit of annoyance.

‘John,’ she finally says. ‘I haven’t slept in 30 hours. I’m tired and my back is killing me. Other than that, I’m lying in your bed, completely naked and you want to talk?’

Well, if she puts it that way... But by the time he’s naked and ready to dive between the sheets, River is sleeping soundly, cuddling his pillow to her chest. He can’t help but smile softly at this sight and slides into bed. Who said you can’t take a nap at 6pm?, he thinks as he pulls River closer to him and drifts into a dreamless sleep.

When he wakes up, River is lying on her side and staring at him.

‘That’s kind of creepy,’ he mumbles and yawns. ‘The staring, I mean. How long have you been doing that?’

‘Ever since you fell asleep. Because that’s why I came here: to look at you sleeping,’ River says
sarcastically and rolls her eyes. ‘And when I do it, it’s creepy but if you were to do it, it’d be romantic?’

‘It’s not what I meant and you know it,’ he pokes her side. ‘And don’t get cheeky with me. You broke into my apartment and took hold of my bed. I could demand payment for that!’

‘And I know exactly how to pay you,’ River says and with a smile that could melt his bones she leans in and kisses him. It’s a slow kiss, full of longing and desire and it’d be just so easy to get lost in it, to get lost in the warmth and caresses, but there are some things he needs to know first. For a few more moments he lets himself enjoy the feel of River’s body on his: the smoothness of her skin, softness of her curves under his hands, the taste of her on his tongue.

‘Okay,’ he parts from River just when he’s about to forget about the world and let her do whatever she pleases with him, ‘I think you have some explaining to do.’

‘Spoilsport,’ she sighs and presses one more kiss to his lips. ‘What do you want to know then, boss?’

‘How did you come here?’ He asks and tries his best not to get distracted by the patterns River is tracing on his stomach.

‘By plane,’ River replies with a smirk and he huffs in annoyance. ‘Fine. I came here from New York. With a short break in Madrid. And another one in Lyon.’

‘You think we were followed?’ He asks in concern.

‘I don’t think so,’ she answers. ‘But you can never be too careful. Anyway, it’s not what you really what to know, is it?’

‘Fine,’ he admits after a while. ‘You have me here. Did you get it?’

‘You mean the mythical device that doesn’t exist? Is that what you’re talking about?’ River asks and raises her eyebrow. ‘Because if it is... I have it in my bag.’

‘What?’ He stutters. ‘You- In your bag? How?’

‘A lot can be done with the help of alcohol and a low cut dress,’ River says smugly. ‘Men get tipsy and they get sloppy. Someone else might use that. It’s a shame, isn’t it?’

‘What’s a shame?’

‘That men are so easy.’

‘Oi! I resent that!’ He protests. ‘I’m not easy!’

‘I beg to differ,’ River rolls her eyes. ‘Anyway, the point is that I managed to copy all the information from Van Statten’s hard drive. And yes, this thing exists. And it’s massive.’

‘You’re still talking about the hard drive, right?’ He asks and earns an amused chuckle from River. ‘Just making sure. So... Can I see it?’

‘I already put it on your laptop,’ River says and stretches. ‘But you know what they say about all work and no play?’

He jumps out of bed and gets his laptop, quickly logging in and checking the content River uploaded to it. She was right: it is massive. The amount of data astounds him: transcripts of conversations, profiles of politicians and criminals with whom Van Statten had business with, links to bank
accounts, lists of people who owe him favours and money. He hasn’t even managed to see one tenth of what River managed to bring here, but he already knows that it could be a severe blow to the American part of The Silence – if not wipe it out completely.

‘Shit,’ he mutters and runs fingers through his hair. ‘That’s good. That’s really, really good. And you are amazing, you know what?’

‘Oh, I know that,’ River says and he can feel her hands slowly massaging his shoulders. ‘Canton is going to be a happy man.’

‘Screw Canton, I am a happy man,’ he says and pulls River onto his lap, and she giggles in delight at that.

‘A happy man? You?’ She asks and leans in to kiss him. ‘Care to prove it?’ She asks when they part for breath.

Oh yes. He’s certainly up for this task.

Next morning around 11am, there's a knock on his door. He's in the kitchen, pouring coffee into two mugs and wondering whether he should make scrambled eggs or an omelette for breakfast, and the knock catches him completely by surprise.

Who could it possibly be? Never mind - no matter who it is, it's not good. River is in the shower, so he had a few minutes to get rid of his unwanted guest. The knocks are getting louder and louder and cold dread runs down his spine. What if someone knows that River is here? What if they're here to arrest her? Will he be able to protect her?

'John, open the damn door!' Amy's voice booms from the outside. 'I know you're there!'

'It's Amy, he thinks with relief as he opens the door. He can handle Amy. At least he really hopes so.

'Hello, Pond!' He says with a cheerful and fake smile on his lips. 'What are you doing here?'

'What am I doing here? Really?' Amy sighs and rolls her eyes. 'I can't believe you. You're the one who wanted to take a walk with us today. Tony and Rory are waiting downstairs and you're not even ready!'

Oh shit.

He absolutely forgot about this. He was supposed to meet The Ponds at the park about 30 minutes ago, but well, things happened.

‘Couldn’t you call?’ He asks and tries to block Amy’s view on the bathroom. Because if River emerges and Amy sees her... He doesn’t even want to think about that.

‘I’ve called you multiple times! You never picked up,’ Amy shakes her head. ‘We thought something happened to you so we’ve come to see if you’re fine.’

‘I am fine,’ he nods his head. ‘I’m more than fine, I’m splendid, wonderful even. Look at me, I’m great,’ he gently pushes Amy towards the door. ‘But I’m not fit for the walk, you see... I’m just a bit under the weather,’ he fakes a cough and opens the door. ‘I think it’ll be better if you go now. It’d be
terrible if you caught something and passed it on to Tony.’

‘Are you having someone over?’ Amy looks over his shoulder and peers into his apartment.

‘What? No! Don’t be ridiculous!’ He splutters and laughs nervously.

‘So you’re having someone over,’ Amy says with a curious expression on her face. ‘Who is she? I want to meet her!’

‘I- What? No! No way!’ He shakes his head and tries to stop Amy from going further into his apartment – without any luck. She’s already sitting on the couch in his living room. ‘You’re not meeting her- I mean, there’s no one here, so you can’t meet them!’

‘Sure, sure,’ Amy nods her head. ‘Now, tell me about her! Who is she? Where have you two met? Just please, tell me that she’s not some kind of a criminal. I’m not sure I can handle another one of your girlfriends being a member of the mob.’

Three things happen at the same time:

1. He’s trying to tell Amy that he only had one girlfriend who was a member of the mob,
2. Amy’s nodding her head with ‘yeah, sure’ expression on her face, all while pestering him about this ‘new bird of his’,
3. River exits the bathroom, wrapped in a fluffy cotton towel.

‘Is it coffee I’m smelling?’ River asks while trying to get her damp hair under control. ‘I really need some caffeine before we- Oh. Uhm. Hello, Amy.’

He closes his eyes in fear and wishes he could disappear. He can already imagine Amy’s shouts and accusations and- Nothing like that is happening. He slowly opens his eyes and looks at Amy. She’s sitting on his couch with her mouth open, staring at River like she just saw a ghost. River, on the other hand, is squirming under her gaze and trying her best to keep the towel wrapped around her body.

Amy is still silent. He’s never seen her like that. If this situation wasn’t as dramatic as it is, he’d take a picture of speechless Amy Pond for posterity.

Right. Okay. So things have gone terribly wrong: Amy has seen River and know she knows that he and River are, well, doing things together. But that’s not the end of the world. As mad as it sounds, one can negotiate with Amy and make her see the bigger picture. The worst thing has already happened. What else can happen now?

‘Honestly, Amy, what is taking you so long? Hauling his ass from the bed can’t be that difficult!’ Rory’s voice rings as he walks through the door with Anthony in his arms. ‘Did he crack his head open? Did you crack your head open? Should I call paramedics? Amy? What is wrong with you?’

‘Hello, Rory,’ River says in a tired voice and waves her hand when Rory whips his head in her direction. And just like Amy, his jaw goes slack and he’s staring at River with shock nearly radiating from his eyes. ‘John, is anyone else coming? Because if yes, I feel like I should get dressed.’

‘You should get dressed just because,’ he says and eyes her up and down. ‘You could catch a cold like that.’

‘It’s funny to hear that from someone who wouldn’t let me get dressed for the last few hours,’ River winks at him and he feels heat climbing up his face.
‘River!’ He exclaims. ‘Just... Hush!’

‘That’s also not what you said a few hours ago,’ River says teasingly and he opens his mouth to respond when Amy finally speaks up.

‘Can you two just shut up?’ She says angrily and looks at both of them with tears shining in her eyes. She takes a deep breath and points her finger at River. ‘You – go and get dressed. Now.’

Without a word, River turns on her heel and goes to his bedroom, closing the door behind her. He only hopes that she won’t escape through the bedroom’s window. But that’s the least of his worries right now.

‘You two are shagging,’ Amy says and he turns his head towards her. ‘You two are shagging. And acting like a couple. You two are shagging.’

‘Amy, I think we all got the point by now,’ Rory says slowly and sits on the chair in the hall. Tony is sleeping, blissfully unaware of the mess happening around him.

‘No, Rory. We did not- THEY ARE SHAGGING,’ Amy repeats, gesturing wildly with her hands. ‘SHAGGING. And he hasn’t told us!’

‘Amy, I... I wanted to, but I couldn’t,’ he stutters. ‘I- Listen, I-’

‘No,’ Amy shakes her head. ‘I asked you. Multiple times. I asked whether you knew something about her or- You said no. You lied to me. You... YOU’RE SHAGGING HER!’ Amy exclaims once again. Both he and Rory wince at the shrilling sound she emits. ‘How long has this been going on?’

‘Amy, this is not what you think-’

‘I don’t need you tell me what I think!’ Amy says angrily and he swears that her hair gets even redder. ‘Have you forgotten who she is and what she’s done?’

For a second there, he can’t find any words to speak. Because the truth is that yes, when he’s with River, he forgets who she is and what she has done. He shouldn’t do that. He shouldn’t work with her, he shouldn’t sleep with her and most importantly, he shouldn’t be in love with her. But it’s done, he cannot unmake it. Nor he wishes to.

‘I can explain,’ he says quietly, but Amy shakes her head.

‘I don’t want your explanation,’ she says as she stands up. ‘At least not right now. Don’t,’ she says when he tries to catch her hand and make her stay. ‘Just don’t, John.’

Amy leaves his apartment, taking Tony from Rory’s arms and quickly walking down the stairs. He’s left with Rory, who’s looking at him with an unreadable expression on his face.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says after a few moments of awkward silence, but Rory just shakes his head.

‘It’s not me you should be apologising to,’ he says quietly. ‘What you’ve done... What you both have done-,’ Rory points his hand in the general direction of his bedroom, where River is hiding. ‘You betrayed her. Amy trusts you with her life and maybe it doesn’t look like it, but you kind of are her hero,’ Rory says that last part slightly bitterly. ‘And now it turned out that you lied to her. She needs time to cool down.’

‘Do you think she’ll talk to me again?’ He asks and swallows over the lump in his throat. ‘I never
‘Of course you didn’t,’ Rory says with a tired sigh. ‘But with you these things just happen. As for Amy... Come over in the evening. I’ll try to talk with her.’

‘You’re taking this whole thing almost too well,’ he mumbles quietly as he shakes Rory’s hand. Rory shrugs.

‘Someone has to get us home in one piece,’ Rory says drily. ‘Besides, I used to work with you and I know what you’re capable of. And...’,’ he hesitates for a second before continuing, ‘as crazy as it sounds, I’m glad to see that River is fine.’

‘Yeah, I know!’ He says excitedly and in the same moment he feels like an utter moron. Amy and Rory both had cared about River – and from what Rory just said, they still do care about her. He’s had information about her and he never shared anything with them. ‘Listen, I’m sorry. I should’ve said something- I never thought-’

Rory just raises his hands in the air.

‘Don’t,’ he shakes his head. ‘It happened. I guess you had your reasons, but I’m not going to question you about them right now. I’m not going to inform the police about any of it, not just yet,’ Rory gives him a hard look. ‘But if you don’t give something substantial in a few hours, I won’t have a choice and I won’t hesitate.’

‘Aye, sir,’ he says weakly and gives Rory a small salute. He nearly collapses on the floor once he closes the door behind Rory.

Shit. That did not go as planned.

Actually, this wasn’t planned at all, so it probably went even worse. Creaking of his bedroom door and quiet footsteps stir him from his stupor.

‘You were supposed to get dressed,’ he says when he sees River next to him, still with a towel wrapped around her body.

‘Really? Is that what you’re going to focus on right now?’ She asks with a frown on her face. ‘That’s not the real problem, John.’

‘I know,’ he agrees. ‘Crap. I never expected it to happen.’

‘But it did,’ River says slowly. ‘What are we going to do now?’

His heart skips at the ‘we’ in her question. He also realises that she is here, with him – she hasn’t fled at the first sign of danger. He doesn’t know if it means anything, but he chooses to believe that it does mean something.

‘Now we wait,’ he says and squeezes River’s hand. ‘And then I’m going to talk with Amy and try to reason with her.’

When at 6pm he’s standing in front of the Ponds’ door, he feels like his stomach is filled with liquid lead and he nearly jumps out of his skin when Rory finally opens the door. He walks inside the house and heads to the living room, where Amy is already seated on the couch, looking at him with distrust on her face. As much as this looks pains him, he knows he deserves it. Rory comes in holding a tray with three cups of tea on it. He places it carefully on a small coffee table standing by the couch and takes a seat next to Amy. Their hands find each other and their fingers intertwine
instinctively.

‘Where’s Tony?’ He asks trying to dissolve the strained and painful silence between him and his friends. He’s not sure if they’ll want to be his friends after all of this, but he’s sure he’ll try to do anything he can to earn their forgiveness.

‘Upstairs, sleeping,’ Amy says quickly. ‘Don’t try to small talk us, it won’t work. You came here because you have something to tell us. So spill.’

He takes a deep breath, opens his mouth and then closes it. How the hell is he supposed to tell this story? How does one tell a story like that?

‘I don’t know where to start,’ he admits and feels Amy’s angry stare burning a hole through him.

‘Maybe start by telling us how you started fucking River,’ she spits out. ‘That sounds like a good start.’

‘Amy,’ Rory says gently and pulls her closer to him. ‘Just... Let him talk.’

‘Fine,’ Amy gives him another fiery stare. ‘Talk. But no bullshit this time.’

And he does talk. He tells them how River had protected a politician in Berlin, how she’d arranged to meet with him in Rome and offered her help. He tells her how she’d kept on sending him information about The Silence and how he’d travelled around the world to get information from her. He tells them how she’d saved him from Liz and how just yesterday, she handed him something that will help to dismantle American part of the Silence. Amy and Rory listen to him attentively: they don’t interrupt him and they don’t even drink their tea, that’s still sitting untouched on the coffee table. He finishes his story and looks at them, feeling as nervous as if he’s about to pass the most important exam in his life.

Amy and Rory sit silently for a few moments until Rory speaks up.

‘Right. That’s a lot to take in,’ he clears his throat. ‘I was not expecting that. Does anyone else know about that?’

He shakes his head and looks at Amy, who has her eyes trained at the carpet and refuses to look at him.

‘Amy?’ He asks gently and when she finally looks up at him, he sees tears shining in her eyes.

‘Why haven’t you told us?’ She says, but her tone is far from tearful. ‘Why haven’t you told us anything- Something? Don’t we deserve to know any of this?’

‘No, of course you do, I just, I-,’ he stutters. ‘I just thought... I wanted to protect you.’

‘We can protect ourselves,’ Amy says sharply and he nods his head.

‘I know you can. But it’s The Silence we’re talking about. I didn’t want to take any chances,’ he says slowly. ‘Besides... I needed to keep this whole thing a secret. For your safety, for my safety, for the plan not to fall apart-‘

‘To keep River safe,’ Rory cuts in and he nods his head.

‘Yes, that too. Can you blame me?’

‘Yes, I can,’ Amy says. ‘Have you forgotten who she is? I don’t know, maybe she has a magical
vagina and your mind is muddled with sex, but I can’t believe that you- What is wrong with you?’

‘Amy, I know it’s difficult to understand,’ he says calmly, because he knows that he has no right to be angry here. If anyone’s anger is justified right now, it’s Amy’s and Rory’s. ‘She helps me. Almost everything I’ve achieved in The Silence case is thanks to her. If she hadn’t shown up when Liz attacked, I’d probably be dead right now. And if I weren’t, all the information and the mission to bring down The Silence would’ve been compromised. I understand that you might hate me for not telling you all of that,’ he swallows at that because the thought of Amy and Rory hating him is a terrifying one, ‘but I can’t change it. I- I wouldn’t change anything about it. I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry that you haven’t told us or sorry that we found out?’ Amy says but her tone is gentler this time.

‘Both,’ he shrugs. ‘I’m sorry that you had to find out like that and I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you. I didn’t mean to cause you any harm.’

‘How do you know that she’s not playing you?’ Rory asks and he turns his attention to him.

‘I don’t,’ he answers truthfully. ‘But I doubt she does. She wouldn’t share this much with me if she was just playing me.’

Rory nods in acknowledgement and asks him a couple of technical questions: how do he and River communicate? How is the information sent? Does anyone else know about the deal he has with River? Aren’t people asking questions how he gets all the data?

He tells them as much as he can – some things he wants to keep secret, just to be safe. During this conversation, Amy cuts in and starts asking him questions. How is River? Is she fine? Has she been safe?

He answers this questions eagerly but with caution: Amy is a clever beast and one word too many could make her recreate River’s footsteps a bit too well.

Two hours later, when he stands up and gets ready to leave the Ponds’ house, he decides to give Amy and Rory one more thing.

‘Here,’ he says and hands Rory a flash drive he just fished out of his pocket. It’s a flash drive containing information about River: her parents, her childhood, how she got involved with The Silence – everything he managed to find out. For the first time ever, someone is going to read his encyclopaedia of River Song. ‘I- Just take a look at this. Read it either as a policeman or a journalist or like a human being. Just... Read it. Please. The decision you’ll make after that is yours. I’ll understand you, no matter what you choose. And once again, I’m sorry.’

He leaves their house with a slightly less heavy heart and hope blooming inside his soul. Maybe not everything is lost, he thinks. When he enters his flat, River is waiting for him by the door.

‘How did it go?’ She asks and for the first time, he notices how nervous she is and he realises how much she cares about Amy and Rory seeing her as something more than just a killer working for the mob.

‘I don’t know,’ he answers truthfully, hugging her. ‘I guess we have to wait and see.’

The knock booms at his door at 1am. Both he and River nearly jump out of the bed in surprise at that, but when they hear a hushed ‘John, open up,’ said in Amy’s voice, that’s when the real panic begins. He scrambles out of the bed, rushing to the door to open it and River follows him, putting on his shirt in a hurry. He opens the door to see slightly disheveled Amy Pond and sleepy Rory, standing behind her. Amy completely ignores him and goes straight towards River, who is standing
uncertainly in the door of his bedroom.

Amy stands in front of her for a few seconds and he swears that everyone in the room holds their breath. He’s not sure whether Amy is going to shout at River or strike her and he takes a step to help River if there’s a need for that.

But it turns out he won’t need to save River from the blows of an angry Scott, because Amy opens her arms and hugs River. For a second he sees that River stiffens in her arms, but then she melts into the embrace like she’s been waiting for it for a long time. Maybe she has, he realises with a pang of sadness. For a few moments no one says a word and it’s Amy who speaks first.

‘It doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven you,’ she says, still clinging to River and her voice is slightly muffled by River’s hair, ‘but I’m starting to. I understand so much more now... I’m sorry. And,’ her voice slightly breaks, ‘I’m really glad that you’re here.’

He can see that River’s eyes widen and that there are tears in her eyes, he can see how desperately she hugs Amy back and how she repeatedly whispers ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry’ into the younger woman’s ear. He hears a soft sigh behind him and turns only to see Rory moving from his place towards the two embracing women. He slowly puts his arms around both River and Amy and presses a kiss to River’s head. He stares at this picture for the longest time and he can’t stop a small smile appearing on his face.

He feels like it’s the most beautiful thing he’s seen in a long time.

___

It’s a Sunday morning and he’s trying to buy scones.

Well, he says it’s morning, but in fact it’s after 11am. After the events of last night and emotions after the Ponds’ surprise visit, he and River decided to sleep in. They got up around 10:30am, took a shower (yes, together in case you’re wondering) and now he’s on the quest to find something edible for their late breakfast. He buys milk, raspberry jam, a few freshly-looking scones and a couple of Sunday tabloids. Hey, who knows, maybe River can be persuaded to stay in bed and make fun of all the dumb articles? He’s certainly going to try to convince her.

His apartment is eerily quiet when he walks in, but he doesn’t think much of it. Maybe River decided to take a nap when he was gone. Last night must’ve been emotionally tasking for her, no wonder that she’s tired. He drops his shopping bag in the kitchen and heads towards his bedroom.

‘Oh, you’re not sleeping!’ He exclaims when he sees River sitting on his bed. ‘I bought milk and scones, and jam and-,’ his voice cracks when River finally looks up at him. Her gaze is blank and she looks at him like she’s never seen him before. For a second he’s puzzled and scared that something happened to her during the 20 minutes when he was out, but then his stare falls on the item River’s holding in her hands.

Oh fuck.

Ages seems to pass before River finally speaks up.

‘Care to explain what that is?’ She asks and the sound of her voice chills him to the bone.

Fuck.
oh, look an update! and you didn't have to wait 6 months for it. is it magic? maybe, who knows.
I'd say I'm sorry for the cliffhanger, but I'm not. at least not *that* sorry.

thanks to those of you who read the previous chapter. I was honestly surprised that someone is still reading this fic. mind: blown. I hope you weren't disappointed by this update!

chapter title from Father John Misty's 'Chateau Lobby #4 (In C For Two Virgins)'. 
somewhere on the outskirts of hope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Care to explain what that is?’ River asks and the sound of her voice chills him to the bone.

Fuck.

He’s so fucked.

What River is holding in her hand, is the printed version of his encyclopaedia of River Song. He’d printed it a long time ago, hid it under his bed and from time to time he re-read it. Usually, he did it in the long periods of not seeing River. He’s not sure why he kept on doing that – he knew all the information included there by heart. Maybe it was to remind and ensure himself that River wasn’t just a criminal, that there was more to her than that? Maybe it was a way to feel her presence even when she was far away from him? He doesn’t know nor he can’t explain it. All he knows is that River was not supposed to find it.

‘Cat got your tongue?’ River asks again and waves the pages she’s holding. ‘You seemed quite wordy in here.’

‘River, listen-,’ he starts carefully, unsure what to say and do. ‘It’s not-‘

‘I’m quite disappointed that you haven’t described how I am in bed,’ River says sharply. ‘Or maybe I’m so bad that it’s not worth mentioning?’

‘River, no, please,’ he shakes his head. ‘Just listen-‘

‘Not another step,’ she says coldly when he tries to get closer to her. ‘I do have a gun on me. I don’t think you want to see how quickly I can get it, do you?’

He stops and takes a breath, trying to calm down. He doesn’t believe that River would shoot him, but then again she looks like she just might do it.

‘Fine, not another step,’ he slowly nods. ‘Can I sit though? Here, on the floor,’ he points to the area by the bedroom door. River nods her head once and he gratefully slides to the floor, with his back pressed to the wall. River sits in the corner of the bed. She looks like she could strike him at any moment.

‘What were you planning to do with it?’ River asks in a cold voice. He looks at her in surprise. What is she talking about? ‘Oh, don’t play dumb. Why would you make something like that if you weren’t planning on using it in some way? What was the plan?’

‘I don’t understand what you’re talking about,’ he shakes his head. She can’t possibly think that he’d use it against her. River grits her teeth and he can see that’s she’s barely holding back the anger that must be boiling inside her. ‘I never planned to do anything with it. It was just- It’s just-‘

‘It’s what? A form of appreciation?’ River snorts. ‘My, my, maybe I really should get a restraining order.’
‘No, it’s not like that,’ he swallows and looks pleadingly at River. ‘Yes, I gather all the information. But I didn’t mean to use them against you in any way. You have to believe me.’

‘I don’t have to do anything,’ River spits out. ‘Besides, why would you collect all these things if not to use them one day?’

He doesn’t know what to say. How is he supposed to explain River that he needed to know more about her? That he wanted to figure her out, to see what motivated her? That he wanted to dissect her behaviour? He doubts she’d welcome this kind of explanation.

‘I just wanted to understand you better,’ he says softly. ‘That’s all.’

‘Understand me?’ River snorts. ‘And what? Did you understand me? Did you find another victim to save? Another lost soul to guide to the side of light?’

‘No, that’s not- You know it’s not true,’ he sighs. ‘I wanted to know what’s behind all of this. I wanted to know more about you, I wanted to-‘

‘Reassure yourself that I’m the bad guy and you’re the good one?’ River lets out a bitter laugh. ‘You wanted to know me? Couldn’t you just ask?’

‘Like you’d answer me! You’re drowning in lies – you’ve been drowning them your whole life! How can I believe anything you say?’ He lashes out and sees River recoiling under the weight of his words. She looks like he just hit her and in this moment, he feels like an utter asshole. The truth is that he believes River – what is more, he believes in her. He knows what she’s done and he’s not sure if he’d be able to forgive her for that. But then again – is he the one who should forgive her? No doubt there are other people who had been directly hurt by River’s actions and they’re the ones whose forgiveness could mean something to her.

‘Well then,’ River says slowly in the sudden silence that fell between them. She avoids looking at him and he swears he can hear her voice breaking. ‘I think that makes everything clear.’

‘River, I didn’t mean it,’ he says quickly, but she shakes her head and he stops mid-sentence.

‘You know... I trusted you,’ she says quietly and his heart shatters at the admission. ‘I never thought that you- That you’d... Never mind,’ she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. ‘Some things in there- I... Have anyone else read it?’

He nods his head, defeated.

‘Amy and Rory,’ he admits softly. ‘I’m sorry, I never meant-‘

River laughs softly, but he can hear her breath hitching.

‘And here I thought they really- But it was just pity,’ she says. She sits silently for a few moments and he doesn’t dare to speak. His heart jumps in his chest when River starts talking again. ‘Now, listen to me. I’m going to walk out of here and you’re not going to follow me. You won’t try to contact me, you won’t look for me. The arrangement we have is over.’

‘What?’ He jumps to his feet, forgetting about River’s warning about the gun. He feels like his whole universe is collapsing. ‘No, don’t do that. You can’t- We’ve achieved so much together, we’re so close... River, no. You don’t have to talk to me, you can pretend I don’t exist, but please, don’t leave me- Don’t leave this. You can’t-‘

‘Watch me,’ River says drily. She fishes her bag from under his bed and all but growls when he
takes a step in her direction. ‘I told you – not another step.’

‘River, please-‘ he begs, but she shakes her head and moves towards the window. She opens it while holding her gaze locked at him. Then, in one smooth motions, she jumps on to the fire escape. He takes a step back, ready to run to his door and chase down the stairs to catch up with her, but her voice stops him.

‘John, don’t,’ she says and the sadness in her voice renders him both speechless and motionless. ‘Too late. It’s done.’

She runs down the fire escape and disappears into the London streets.

He stands by the window for who knows how long.

It’s done, he repeats to himself as he stares through at the fire escape.

___

On Monday morning he’s barely coherent. He spent the rest of Sunday walking around London, hoping to find River somewhere. Idiotic idea, he knows that, but he couldn’t just sit at home and do nothing. The walls were closing in on him and driving him more and more insane with every passing second.

Of course, he didn’t find her. No surprise here: if there’s anyone who knows how to hide from him, it’s River.

Gods, he fucked up. Massively. He should’ve hidden it better, he shouldn’t have left River alone in his apartment, he should’ve-

He should’ve told her he has it. Pure and simple. She had the right to know that and read the file – after all, he’d pried into the deepest secrets of her life. He’d been curious about her, but he’d not been prepared for what he’d uncovered. It’s possible that River hadn’t come to terms with all of that herself and there he was, digging up all the dirt and showing it to other people. He really fucked it up. He meant no harm. If only River would listen to him and let him explain... But then again, if he was in her place, he would too react like that.

Now he doubts that River will ever speak to him again. It’s not a trivial thing that they had a small argument over. It’s something bigger than that. This time, it’s very personal and he doesn’t know if River has it in her to forgive him. Or just to understand him and his motivations. Without her, he’s not sure he can complete the mission of bringing down The Silence. He’s not sure he wants to do it without her. He’s not sure if he wants to do anything without her.

Someone knocks on the door to his office and he groans. He asked not to be interrupted him today, but apparently someone did not get the memo.

‘What?’ He asks tiredly and a timid voice comes through the door.

‘Sir? Can I come in?’

‘If you have to,’ he sighs tiredly and his oppressor walks in. ‘Andrea, I told you not to call me ‘sir’.

‘I know, sir. I’m sorry, sir,’ Andrea, a freshly hired intern nods her head. ‘You’re needed downstairs, sir.’
‘Tell everyone I’m busy,’ he sighs. What? He is busy! With self-hate and wishing things could be different. Andrea shakes her head and bites her lip. ‘No, really. I’m busy.’

‘It’s important, sir,’ Andrea says sounding both scared and eager to complete her mission. ‘It’s... Very important.’

‘What could possibly be so important?’ He rolls his eyes. ‘Can’t this department deal without me for one day? Is it too much to ask?’

‘Sir...,’ Andrea’s voice hitches. ‘It’s- Uhm, Kovarian is waiting for you downstairs.’

‘Kovarian? Don’t be ridiculous!’ He exclaims. ‘He’s in the arrest, awaiting his second trial. No one would let him out! If it’s a prank, I swear, I’m going-‘

‘No, sir,’ Andrea blurts out and shakes her head. ‘It’s not Robert Kovarian. It’s, uhm, it’s her. It’s Madame Kovarian who wants to talk with you.’

He stares at her for a few seconds before jumping from his chair and running through the door. He runs down the stairs, hoping he won’t trip and fall on his head. What the hell is happening? Why is Kovarian here? Does she have a death wish? Is it even her?

Just before entering the lobby, he stops and tries to get himself under control. He smooths his hair, calms his breathing and walks into the lobby in a confident swagger – or at least in what he hopes is a confident swagger. And just like Andrea said – Madame Kovarian is standing there, in the middle of the room. She’s surrounded by three bodyguards and by half of his department. No one in there speaks – he’s not sure if anyone even dares to breath. The mood is tense and it feels like it’d take one spark to set the whole place on fire. He swallows and walks further inside the room. He passes his boss, who looks like he’s about to pass out, and nears Madame Kovarian.

‘I believe you’re here to see me,’ he says calmly and watches her nod her head. ‘Please. The interrogation room has been waiting for you for quite some time.’

‘No,’ Kovarian shakes her head. ‘We’re going to talk in your office. Just the two of us,’ she adds in a commanding tone. He looks at his boss, who gives a sharp nod. Well then. He’s going to have a chat with the head of the mob in his office. Face to face. Wonderful. His heart is racing when he walks with Kovarian to the elevator. Thankfully, her bodyguards aren’t going with them – they were told to wait in the lobby. This much, this good.

His hands shake when he opens the door to his office and lets Kovarian walk through it.

‘I thought you’d be taller,’ she says as they both sit opposite each other.

‘Excuse me?’ He asks baffled.

‘I thought you’d be taller,’ she repeats and looks at him with amusement in her gaze. ‘You certainly looked taller on tv and in the newspapers.’

‘You know what they say: the media lies,’ he smiles tightly and takes a few moments to observe the woman sitting in front of him. From what he remembers from the bits of info they have on her, she’s slightly over 60. She looks calm and collected, dressed in an expensive-looking black suit, with her hair in a elegant up-do and perfectly applied make-up. There would be nothing extraordinary about her appearance if not for the eye patch covering her right eye.

‘Aren’t you going to offer me tea?’ She asks and smirks when he shakes his head. ‘Oh, the impolite youth. But fair enough, we’re here to talk, not to gossip over Earl Grey.’
‘So talk,’ he shrugs, trying to look at least half as in charge of the situation as she does. ‘You came to me. A daring act, I must say. You know that we could arrest you any second.’

‘Please,’ she snorts and her lips curl in a mocking smirk. ‘You know as well as I do that you can’t arrest me. You have no real evidence against me. No court would find me guilty.’

‘We arrested your son,’ he reminds her.

‘Robert is an idiot. It was a matter of time before someone caught him,’ she shrugs dismissively. ‘Didn’t shed a tear over him. That’s not why I’m here.’

‘Why are you here?’ He leans more comfortably in his chair. If she wants to play this game, well, he’s going to play along.

‘I want your protection,’ Kovarian says bluntly and he’s glad he is not drinking anything, because if he was, he’d surely choke.

‘Excuse me?’ He lets out a little laugh. ‘You want our protection? You came in here with three mountains of muscles. Aren’t they enough of protection for you?’

‘First: don’t insult my boys like that,’ she says icily and in that moment he understands how she’s managed to run The Silence over the years. She’s terrifying and you can clearly see the streak of cruelty that runs through her. He feels fear slowly climbing up his spine. ‘Secondly, no they are not able to protect me from whom I’m fearing.’

‘And who is that?’ He asks carefully.

‘River Song,’ Kovarian says while staring him straight in the eye. He’s glad that he’s too shocked to react in any way.

‘River Song?’ He repeats and feels like his mouth is full of sand. He licks his lips before continuing. ‘Isn’t she one of your employees?’

“She used to be,’ Kovarian shrugs. ‘She hasn’t been for quite some time now.’

‘Your minion quit working for you?’ He asks mockingly. ‘Oh, what a shame.’

‘It is, actually,’ Madame Kovarian responds seriously. ‘She was one of the best... If not the best. I trained her myself,’ she adds with a proud smile and he feels the anger slowly bubbling inside him. ‘She did that to me,’ she says and point at the eye patch. ‘She was 13 at the time. Got out of her room, past the guards and sneaked into my bedroom. She put the knife right into my eye. Then she tried to escape. She didn’t succeed, obviously,’ Kovarian says conversationally. ‘I appreciated the attempt though. But after this incident I made sure that she’d never again think about escaping.’

‘But it seems that she did escape you after all,’ he says viciously as he feels hatred flowing through his veins. ‘And it seems that she’s after you, isn’t she?’

He watches with satisfaction as Kovarian’s face contracts in fear. But the emotion is quickly gone and the woman directs her cold gaze at him. She seems to be studying him for a few moments and he forces himself to meet her stare.

‘Yes, now I understand,’ she says after a while and he raises his eyebrows in confusion. ‘See, you’re the only one she refused to kill. The first one. I gave her an order and she refused. For the first time. I couldn’t understand why, but now I do. Funny how these things work,’ he has no time to wrap his head around what he just heard, because Kovarian speaks again. ‘And yes, you are right: she is after
me. She ambushed me yesterday at night.’

‘What did she do? Did she threaten you physically? Verbally?’ He asks and leans towards Kovarian. ‘Did she inflict any harm on you?’

‘No,’ Kovarian shakes her head and he nearly laugh with relief. ‘She told me she’s going to destroy me.’

Silence.

‘So you came here thinking we’ll protect you?’ He finally asks and Kovarian nods her head.

‘Yes. I expect you to get me into the witness protection program,’ she says and that’s when all emotions inside him burst like a soap bubble. He laughs like he hasn’t laughed in ages.

‘Please, don’t tell me you’re serious,’ he says when he finally gets himself under control. ‘You want in on a witness protection program?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ he states. ‘There are people who need to be protected from you and your mob. We won’t keep safe someone like you. Besides,’ he adds, ‘you have nothing to give us.’

‘On the contrary, dear boy,’ Kovarian smiles and he feels like he’s staring at a shark that’s about to eat him alive. ‘I do have something that you may be very interested in.’

‘Oh? Pray tell?’ He says nonchalantly, even though he feels a sense of dread in the back of his mind. ‘What do you have to offer?’

‘River Song,’ says Kovarian. ‘I can give you River Song.’

*Oh fuck.*

___

‘Tell me again, what does she want,’ his boss asks him for the umpteenth time. They’re in his office and Morgan walks around it like he’s a caged animal. ‘I need to hear it again.’

‘Kovarian wants to be taken under the witness protection program,’ he says tiredly. He feels utterly exhausted, both physically and mentally. This whole day feels like a nightmare. ‘In exchange, she said she’ll give us information that will without a hint of doubt prove River Song’s guilt. She said she’ll give us everything.’

‘Jesus fucking Christ,’ Morgan says and rubs his face. ‘That’s- What the fuck are we supposed to do with it? It’s like someone shit on our desk and put glitter on it.’

‘We can’t accept the deal,’ he shakes his head. ‘We just can’t.’

‘I- I wouldn’t be so sure about this,’ Morgan says slowly. ‘Listen-‘

‘No, we can’t,’ he cuts in. ‘If we get Kovarian on the program, that’s it - she’s given a clean slate and all of her crimes are forgotten.’

‘But we wwould be able to control her,’ Morgan says with excitement in his voice. ‘We could make
sure she no longer does any harm.’

‘Are you sure we would be able to do that? Do you really think she has no back-up plan or that there isn’t someone who will continue her work?’ He asks. ‘Do you think she isn’t prepared for something like that?’

‘Isn’t it a risk we just have to take?’ Morgan says. ‘We can dictate the terms of the protection program. We can make sure that Kovarian stays where we tell her to stay. River Song is-‘

‘A small fish compared to her,’ he says angrily.

‘Is a killer,’ Morgan finishes and sends him a displeased glare. ‘She killed people for money. Yes, she acted on Kovarian’s orders. But we can get her and put her behind bars. And we can’t get Kovarian that way.’

‘I think it’s a mistake,’ he says silently, without looking at Morgan. ‘You want to go after the wrong person.’

Morgan doesn’t say anything for a few moments, just studies him quietly.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ he finally says. ‘I don’t know. I have to talk with the people who are above us. The choice will be theirs.’

He nods his head and leaves Morgan’s office. He walks to his room on autopilot, ignoring everyone who tries to stop and get some information from him. He closes himself in his office and for the first time since Andrea walked into his office, he lets his mask drop.

Holy fucking shit.

What the hell did River get herself into? Why now? What provoked her? There are also other thoughts swimming in his brain: River was ordered to kill him and she refused to do so. She chose not to kill him. She disobeyed a whole net of mobsters. He closes his eyes and tries not to cry.

River refused to kill him.

River refused to kill him.

River refused to kill him.

River refused to kill him.

River refused to kill him.

That’s the only thought left in his brain. He doesn’t allow himself to dwell on why she decided to rebel and disobey the order she was given, but-

A knock on his door stirs him from the daze. He quickly opens it.

Morgan walks into his office and without any preamble, he starts talking.

‘I talked with the big men. They said- They said we have to take Kovarian’s deal. That means, we’re taking River Song out. You’re going to be in charge of the operation.’
whoa, what is happening? two updates in the same week? what the hell? hope you'll enjoy it.

thank you for all the comments left under the previous chapter. I know I don't answer to all of your comments, but I appreciate every single one of them. trust me.

now, two more things that are kind of important:
1. maybe you've noticed, but this fic is slowly coming to an end. I'm thinking there'll be 3-5 more chapters? (with 3 being more probably than 5).
2. a more technical issue: my old laptop - the one I'm using right now - is slowly dying. hopefully, my new laptop will get to me soon, fully functioning and repaired (don't ask questions, I bought it a month ago, used for 2 days, nEVER MIND). I don't know how long it'll take to transfer all the files from my old laptop to the new one, and it may take me a while to install some kind word processor. so if the updates aren't coming, you know what to blame it on. but maybe it won't be that bad.

chapter title from Brandon Flowers' 'lonely town'.
When he finally gets home in the evening, he’s exhausted. He feels like he could sleep until the end of the next Ice Age – and even then, he’d first check if all the shit he got himself into is over before getting up. He opens the door with a sigh and freezes in the doorway.

‘River,’ he breathes out in relief. She’s sitting in the armchair, looking like she wants nothing more than just run away. But she’s here. Gods, she’s here. He’s never felt more relieved in his life. ‘I- Maybe I should give you the key. That way you wouldn’t have to break in every time you feel like visiting me.’

He means it as a joke, he really does, but once the words leave his mouth, he feels a small sting of pain. He can’t help but imagine a world where he does give River a key to his apartment. It’s a world where there’s no The Silence, where he and River are normal people – well, more normal than they’re now. It’s a world in which there’s not so much history between them and where they don’t lie to each other. It’s a world where there’s no mob and little kidnapped girls and where no one dies. It’s a world that exists only in his imagination.

‘I never meant to come back here,’ River says quietly. ‘But I figured...’

He walks towards her, ready to apologise and ask for her forgiveness, but her next words stop him dead in his tracks.

‘I never knew my parents,’ she says without looking at him. His head shoots up in shock, but she pays him no attention. She’s looking at one spot on the floor and seems entirely focused on what she’s saying. ‘I mean... I knew them, of course. At some point I must have... But I don’t remember them,’ she smiles sadly and her voice breaks a little. She clears her throat before repeating. ‘I don’t remember them.’

In this second the gears in his head fall into the right places. River found out about her parents after reading the information he’d gathered.

Oh no.

‘River,’ he whispers, but she shakes her head. He closes his eyes for a second and moves to sit on the couch. For the first time, River looks up at him and he can see the doubt and pain in her eyes. He longs to touch and comfort her, but it’s clear that she doesn’t want it now. So he lets her talk.

‘She told me-,’ River starts again and he knows that the person she’s talking about is Kovarian, ‘I was told that my parents didn’t care. That they thought they’ll be better off without me, that I wasn’t good enough for them. That maybe, if I learn and behave like she told me to... That maybe they’ll come back for me. But they never did,’ River gives a small, watery laugh and shakes her head. ‘I believed that. I really- I thought that’s the truth. I thought ‘why would anyone want me?’ I asked myself this question every day. The others... Other kids there remembered their parents. But they were glad not to be with them anymore. They were glad for some time, that is,’ River clears her throat. ‘I don’t know why I don’t remember. Maybe it’s because of what they’d done to me. I don’t remember any details, but I know- I remember enough to know that they’d messed with my head. With me. The second I’d arrived, they-’ she stops for a second. ‘She always said she is so proud of me. She... She said I’m going to go far and help her so much and- I guess I did.’
'No, River, it’s not like that,’ he cut in, but she shakes her head.

‘It is like that though,’ she softly protests. ‘I- I did what I was told. I- Never knew any better. I should have.’

‘How could you? You were only a child,’ he says quietly. River makes a sound of protest.

‘I grew older. I got smarter. I should’ve... Acted. Done something about it. But I never did.’

‘But you’ve helped me,’ he says. ‘Without you I would have nothing.’

He tries not to dwell on the true meaning behind his words.

‘Wasn’t it a bit too late?’ River says bitterly. ‘It’s done. Everyone I ever cared about- They hate me. And they’re right to do so. Even Amy and Rory-,’ she presses her lips together.

‘They don’t hate you,’ he shakes his head. ‘They really don’t.’

‘Right,’ River laughs at that. ‘They’ve completely forgiven me. Because how can’t one forgive a fuck-up like me? You have to pity it. Pity is not the same as forgiveness.’

‘It’s not just pity,’ he says and slowly walks towards her. She doesn’t shy away from him, so he sits on the floor next to the armchair she’s occupying. ‘Amy kept asking me about you. If I know something, if you contacted me, whether or not I know where you are... And Rory- He never asked, but I know he was concerned for you. I think- They felt betrayed. They couldn’t understand how you – their friend – could’ve done all these things.’

River’s mouth tighten and her hands ball into fists. He gently – taking care not to scare her – places his hands on top of hers. After a while, he feels that her hands soften and open underneath his.

‘They owned me,’ River says and he looks at her in surprise. ‘They- She said I owe her. That I’m hers, that she kept me alive for so long and that now I have to pay back. And so I did. I didn’t really- I thought it’d be just once. But after that, after the first-,’ she takes a breath, ‘they blackmailed me. Said they’ll tell the police and so on. I thought no one would listen to me.’

‘How old were you?’ He asks, hoping that his voice doesn’t break.

‘17,’ River says flatly.

Fuck.

River was 17 when she killed for the first time. At that age, he was making an idiot out of himself in high school and dreaming about constructing time machines.

‘And it kept happening,’ River continues. ‘I did everything they demanded of me. I just... After a while I didn’t care. I thought to myself ‘I don’t know these people, so that’s okay.’”

‘But Ten,’ he says before he can stop himself. ‘You knew him.’

River swallows and nods her head.

‘I did,’ she says quietly. ‘It wasn’t- I didn’t want to do that.’

‘So why did you?’ He asks and his grip on her hands tightens. ‘You could’ve told him, he would’ve helped you-‘
‘Maybe he would have,’ River admits. ‘But it wasn’t that simple. I didn’t want to risk-‘

‘Risk what?’

‘Amy and Rory,’ River whispers and looks at him. ‘They- She said she’d have them killed if I didn’t cooperate. She must’ve knew I lo- Care about them. I didn’t want to risk anything.’

Shit. He never thought that could be a reason why River agreed to kill Ten. But then it suddenly clicks in his head: she warned him about it. She told him to protect Amy and Rory, to make sure they’re safe. She knew what could happen.

‘River,’ he starts. ‘You should tell them that. They need to know-‘

‘It doesn’t matter,’ River says. ‘It really doesn’t.’

‘No, it does, it does matter,’ he says heatedly, but River merely shakes her head. For a moment they sit in silence. ‘River...’ he finally says, already fearing the answer. ‘I know... There were a few other people you killed. And these... murders, they weren’t on behalf of the Silence.’

River’s hands ball back into fists.

‘I- Yes,’ she says. ‘You’re right. I- Other people appreciated my skills too,’ she sneers. ‘But it was different. These cases... I was paid to kill these people. And they weren’t- They weren’t good people. They were abusers or frauds, or terrorists. The governments or families paid me to get rid of them. It’s not- The fact that these men were bad doesn’t make anything I did good or moral, I know, but-‘

‘Why did you do that then? For money?’ He asks and watches in terror as River nods her head.

‘Yes, for money,’ she says. ‘I thought- Remember that time when I got offered a job in Manchester?’ He furrows his eyebrows in confusion, but then nods his head. ‘It was just before- Before you caught me. I meant to move there. Work there for a month or two and then quit. I had enough money then to just disappear.’

‘You wanted to escape Kovarian,’ he says and River nods.

‘Yeah, I did. I just wanted to be free. To have a clean slate and to be my own. I didn’t want to belong to anyone anymore. I could’ve pulled that off. At least that’s what I thought,’ she shrugs. ‘But then you happened. Well, you happened earlier than that,’ she adds sadly and his heart shatters into thousand pieces.

‘River, I didn’t know,’ he breathes out. ‘I’m sorry, if I’d known-‘

‘But you did the right thing, John,’ she says tiredly. ‘You did what you were supposed to do. How could I blame you for that?’

‘You should,’ he shakes his head. ‘I- For the longest moment I wanted to believe that you’re a monster. I blamed you for everything. It took me some time to discover the truth.’

River doesn’t comment on that. She just sits in his armchair, clutching onto his hands and getting lost in her thoughts. He looks at her and for the first time he sees how brave she is. Oh, she’s broken, that’s for sure. Broken isn’t beautiful nor glamorous. It’s faulty. But it’s not fit him or anyone else to fix River and make her better. The most amazing thing is that she’s been trying to make herself better. She stood up to Kovarian and tried to break free. She protected people who mattered to her the most: the Ponds and him. She continuously put herself in danger to deliver him information about
The Silence. This one woman nearly toppled the whole mob to the ground. If that’s not brave, then he doesn’t know what is. Does that make up for all the things she’d done in the past? He doesn’t know.

‘You know what’s the worst thing?’ River says suddenly and stirs him from his thoughts. ‘For the longest time... I thought she cared about me. I believed her. I trusted her. For some time I even thought she loves me. And she- She never did.’

‘You stabbed her eye out when you were 15,’ he says quietly. ‘That’s why she’s wearing the eye patch.’

‘How do you know that?’ River asks sharply.

And so he tells her.

But this time, he tells her everything: how Kovarian came into the station today, how she demanded protection and how his good for nothing bosses decided that she’s the perfect material for witness protection program. He tells River that he’s supposed to catch and hand her in.

‘Well then,’ River finally speaks. ‘I guess you know what to do then.’

He thinks about her childhood, how scared she must’ve been the whole time.

He thinks about her life, how lonely and isolated she must’ve felt.

He thinks about all the lies she’s told.

He thinks about all the people who trusted her and were hurt because of it.

He thinks about all the people she killed.

He makes his choice.

___

It takes him a few days to think everything over. What he’s planning to do is not an easy task, but he knows he has to do it. His choice will have consequences, but he tries not to think about it at the moment. There will be time for regret, but he can’t allow himself the luxury just now.

On a Sunday morning, at 9am, he knocks on his boss’ door. He nervously steps from foot to foot until Morgan opens the door. For the first time he sees his boss out of the office and he nearly doesn’t recognise him. The permanent frown Morgan always has on his face is gone, replaced by a relaxed expression. He’s wearing a t-shirt and some sweatpants and both of these items are covered in flour.

‘Smith,’ Morgan says surprised. ‘What the hell?’

‘I wanted- I have something I need to tell you,’ he says.

‘This better be important,’ Morgan mumbles as he walks outside to stand on the porch. He closes the door behind him. ‘It’s Sunday, I’m preparing pancakes for my family, Sundays are no-work days for me. If you came here with some kind of nonsense-‘

‘No, sir, this is good,’ he swallows. ‘I- It’s worth your time.’
‘Is it?’ The other man raises his eyebrows. ‘Prove it.’

He takes a deep breath.

‘River Song,’ he manages to says through constricted throat. ‘I know where she is.’

Chapter End Notes

I just hope that this chapter doesn’t feel over the top/too melodramatic. if it does - I'm really sorry about that!

2 chapters left.

chapter title comes from Damien Rice's 'it takes a lot to know a man'.
For the next few days he’s busy. He barely leaves his desk and sometimes he doesn’t even bother getting home for the night. He eats whatever the inters bring him, drinks coffee from the office’s coffee machine and shaves in the badly lit bathroom. He’s tired, feels like utter shit, but in the end it’ll be worth it.

At least that’s what he keeps telling himself.

He doesn’t think about River, at least he tries his best not to. There’s no point in it now. What’s done is done. He can’t dwell on it right now. There’s still so much to do and time is running out.

Kovarian is already placed in a safe house. This thought leaves a bitter taste in his mouth every time he thinks about it. She’s sitting in a nice cottage somewhere in the country and is guarded by a dozen of highly qualified policemen. That’s not all: she’s also dictating the terms on which she’ll be included in the witness protection program. Her terms are ridiculous if he’s to be honest, but there’s nothing he can do about it. Kovarian agreed to spill some information on The Silence and he cross checks everything she says, but he knows - as well as she does - that what she shares is merely a drop in the ocean. He knows that there’s no point in telling that to the powers that be – they won’t even accept the thought that they may be making a mistake. But it’s not his business anymore.

All he has to focus on now is bringing River Song in.

___

It’s so damn cold. Why couldn’t they meet during the day? What’s wrong with sun and warmth? He gets it: night is dark and full of secrets, but they’re in London. Nights here are damp and chilly. If anyone asked him, he’d say that dampness takes the fun and secrets out of everything.

But no one asked him. No one ever asks him, he thinks as he drapes his coat tighter around him. He really doubts that the world would end if someone asked for his opinion – just once.

He knows he’s being overdramatic right now, but he really doesn’t do well in cold. Or even chill. He hopes that whoever asked to meet with him here – in the completely outskirts of London, with no living soul around – has something really important to tell him. And yes, he’s meeting someone who sent him an anonymous message via mail. The message had only location’s details and time, with very cryptic ‘information to die for’.

A mysterious summoned. How could he resist?

He huffs in the chillness of the evening. He’s giving his informer 5 more minutes. If they’re not here by then, he’s going home. He’s going to take a bath, drink some tea and then go to bed, like a proper crime-fighting detective.

Something shifts in the shadows around him and his heart freezes for a second. Finally, someone slowly emerges and starts walking towards him.

‘Hello, sweetie,’ a familiar voice says.
‘River?’ He whispers in disbelief. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘You tell me,’ comes her amused reply.

‘You sent me the message,’ he says slowly. ‘That’s... Well, I should have expected that.’

River laughs at that and he slightly relaxes at the sound. He’s glad that she’s here – it may very well be the last time they meet each other. If only he could see her... As if on request, two street lamps light up in the distance. They do nothing for the bone-aching chill, but at least he can see his surroundings.

‘So... What is the information you have for me?’ He asks and walks a bit closer to her.

‘The information is that your time is up,’ River says calmly.

‘My time? What are you talking about?’ He asks in confusion.

‘You know what I’m talking about. The Silence wanted your head. They’ve sent you plenty of warnings,’ River says. ‘And now their patience has run out.’

‘Oh? And what they’re going to do?’ He snickers. ‘Kill me? Everyone would know who is behind that.’

‘But think about the message it’d send,’ River says. ‘A policeman fighting against organised crime killed by the mob. The last one standing finally falls. The lonely god shot down by the heathens.’

‘That’s very poetic,’ he says sarcastically. ‘Shame we have their boss now. She agreed to cooperate, so I think the little killing deal is over.’

‘You think so? That’s sweet,’ River says mockingly. ‘You really thought she’d change? That she’d let her empire go to waste? That she’d forgive and forget? That she hasn’t chosen her prodigy? That she doesn’t plan an escape? She has her people in every police department in this country. Do you honestly think they won’t help her disappear in a month or so? By moving her to a different part of the world, you’re just helping her expand her business.’

‘What I believe and think is not important,’ he shrugs. ‘She agreed to certain terms, she’s obliged to fulfil them now.’

River lets out a brief laugh.

‘What exactly are you doing here?’ He huffs in annoyance. ‘No offence, I appreciate that you delivered the message, but do you have else to say? It’s quite cold here, you know. I’d really prefer to be at home now.’

‘I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can let you go home,’ River says.

‘And why is that?’ He sighs. ‘Please don’t tell me you have more boring news to share.’

‘No, sweetie. On the contrary,’ River replies and puts her hands inside her coat’s pockets. ‘I have a job to do. As I said – your time has run out. Just like with all the others before.’

‘What others?’ He asks nervously and starts looking around. The two street lights are flickering and giving just enough light so that he can see that there’s no one around. Amazing. Why does he always have to get himself in these shitty situations?

‘You know very well what others I’m talking about,’ River says sharply. ‘Your mates from the
Medusa Project. They too were too nosy. They knew too much. They also wouldn’t listen. And Kovarian gave one simple order: get rid of them. And now it’s time for you.’

Everything happens so fast: in one swift and graceful motion River pulls out her gun and trains it at him. He takes a step back and tries to say something, anything, just to divert her attention, but he knows that it’s all in vain. Her hand doesn’t shake and she doesn’t even blink when she pulls the trigger.

She aims her gun at his heart.

They say that your whole life flashes before your eyes when you’re dying.

It’s a lie.

Nothing like that happens.

Everything just goes black.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title from Melanie Martinez' 'milk and cookies'.
epilogue (every time I close my eyes I want to disappear with you)

Chapter Notes

on this very day two years ago, I posted the first chapter of this fic. a fic that transformed from an idea in my head to the giant, ass-long monster that you have in front of you. when I started writing it, I wanted only one thing: to finish it. and bam: it's done. here's the last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were no flowers at his funeral.

No one cried or gave an eulogy.

That’s probably because there was no funeral. Mostly because he didn’t die that night. Well, he was dead for a couple of hours, but then he came back to life. It was the easiest part of the whole night, to be honest.

The second his body hit the ground, two police cars appeared and arrested River. She didn’t even try to escape. An ambulance arrived, followed by a guy from a coroner’s office. They proclaimed his death, put his body in a black bag (with holes – a special, custom made edition), took pictures of the crime scene. Everything was performed with the utmost diligence and care, so if anyone observed the scene, they would have, without a doubt, believed that he was dead. And oh, they believed.

Not even two hours after his death, Kovarian tried to escape the safe house. Unfortunately for her, she ran straight into the waiting arms of his boss, who transported her to a cozy arrest where she was supposed to stay until the trail. She was off the witness protection program – that happens when the witness plots a death of one of the investigators. She denied everything, of course, but she wasn’t aware that at that very moment, River was confessing everything she knew about The Silence and Kovarian’s involvement in it. And as one can imagine, River knew a lot. She’d shared some of the information with him before, but in the past few days she managed to dig even more of little and big details about The Silence. Locations of their safe houses, names of people involved in the operations, name of some of the policemen who worked for Kovarian, access to their computers and bank accounts. The people questioning her barely managed to type everything down and he knew that the information that River provided would keep them busy for at least a few months.

While River was telling them everything she knows, a few groups of trusted and well-prepared men were storming The Silence’s quarters and houses, getting them out of their beds and arresting them. The same thing was happening in America – he and Canton made sure to strike The Silence at the same time, so that the members didn’t have time to communicate and warn each other. For an action that had been put together in just a few days, in the utmost secrecy and with just a handful of people involved, it worked pretty damn well – they managed to capture most of The Silence’s top operatives, confiscate their computers and freeze bank accounts. In just a few hours, The Silence was nearly dismantled. It wasn’t over – everyone knew that it may never be over, that they’d have to constantly make sure that no one would try to bring The Silence back to its previous glory, but at least they managed to dethrone one of the most dominant mobs that has ever been in power. And none of that would’ve happened without River.

On that Sunday morning when he’d gone to see Morgan, he’d told him everything. To say that his
boss had been unhappy that he’d kept in touch with a wanted fugitive would be a misunderstanding. Morgan had been furious with him but once he’d managed to control the urge to both kill and hire him, they’d discussed the whole situation and possible outcomes. He’d told Morgan that River was ready not only to spill all she knew about The Silence, but also try to infiltrate them and find out more. In return, she’d wanted only one thing: a clean slate. She’d demanded to be accepted as a witness on the witness protection program instead of Kovarian. At first, Morgan had declined. But then, after some persuasion, he’d agreed to go with the new plan. And so they’d set it into motion.

Through a well-placed burner phone, River had contacted Kovarian and told her that she’d come to her senses and asked if killing John Smith was still on the menu. Kovarian had replied with an eager ‘yes, yes’ and just like that, River had been welcomed back into The Silence’s good graces. And she’d used that time well: not only she’d managed to get many vital information, but she’d also made The Silence believe that she’d been back on their side. She’d shared some information about the police progress – unimportant and trivial details that had made it look like she’d really wanted to be accepted back.

The rest had been easy: they’d only needed to fake his death. Which hadn’t been necessary, but both River and he had agreed that if they were going to do it, they needed to do it with a bang (no pun intended). And what would’ve been a bigger bang than him dropping dead and River getting arrested? Not much. That had been exactly what The Silence had expected to happen and they’d been given that. They’d never suspected any tricks, they’d thought they’re mightier and smarter than everyone else – and that had been their downfall. A bulletproof vest, a small container with fake blood, one blank cartridge – that’s what helped to deliver the last blow and finally bring The Silence to its knees.

It’s been 8 months since his ‘death’ and he thinks they can say that The Silence is almost defeated. Sure, they still find and arrest some of the more and less important operatives, but the biggest fish are either already in jail or awaiting their trials. Knowing that he helped to put these people behind the bars and that the world is a bit safer thanks to that – it feels good. It feels like victory. When he looks in the mirror every morning, he doesn’t feel like lowering his gaze. He did some good job.

Unfortunately, everything comes with a price. When his former co-workers – Donna, Jack, Clara and the rest of the station – found out that he’d worked with and helped River… Let’s just say they weren’t happy with that. When he saw them last time, they weren’t in a forgiving mood and he fully understands that. He just hopes that one day they will find it in themselves to listen to him, but for now he lets them be.

As for other things – he got promoted. He now has a bigger office, a bigger pay and is responsible for international operations. He likes it – he travels a lot, meets new people and faces challenges every day. He makes sure that people stay safe and untouched by criminals. It’s good, it’s all splendid except-

He misses River.

He hasn’t seen her since that fateful night and he knows he’ll never see her again. After having shared all she’d known about The Silence, she was put onto the witness protection program. He wasn’t let on any details of that process – he was only told that River was safe and looked after. He knows she’s somewhere out there: alive and well, starting a brand new life in a brand new place. For the first time in her life she’s free. It should be enough for him – just knowing that she’s fine and that she’s been given a second chance she wanted so much. And most of the time it is enough. But sometimes, when he drinks his morning coffee or works on a particularly tough case, he wishes River could be there with him. Okay, it’s a lie: he wishes River could be with him all the time – when he wakes up and goes to sleep, when it’s raining and when he goes to Ponds’ Saturday’s
dinners. He wishes for sleepy mornings and long travels, for movies he could watch with her and thousands of conversations they could have. But he guesses it’s not how it works: you don’t get everything you want. Maybe he and River just weren’t meant to be. Maybe they were supposed to have just a few stolen moments. Maybe that was it. Maybe they didn’t deserve anything more.

He only wishes… He wishes he had a chance to tell her how he feels about her. He’s never been one to shout his feelings at the top of his lungs – he’d rather keep them hidden deep in his heart. He thinks – hopes - that River knew what he felt about her. She must have. When he thinks about it – about them – he thinks that she must’ve known that he loved her.

She just doesn’t know that he still does.

Day after day pass by: he wakes up, goes to work, gets back to bed. He eats and sleeps, visits Ponds, goes out with his co-workers. He’s quite content and there are days when he thinks that if that’s how the rest of his life is going to be like, he’ll be okay with that. There’s always this little thought hiding in his brain, telling him that it’s not enough and that it’ll never be enough, at least not until he’s with her – but he tries his best to ignore that thought.

One day, when he comes back from work, there’s an envelope tucked under his door.

It’s in a deep shade of blue.

With his heart beating wildly, he opens the envelope. Inside it, he finds a plane ticket and a card with more precise coordinates. He stares at it for a few seconds, not really believing it’s really in his hands. Then he lets out a loud laugh and runs into his bedroom. He throws a few essentials into a bag and calls for a taxi.

He has a plane to catch.

Easter Island is beautiful this time of the year.

Chapter End Notes

and now it's done for good. I can only hope that you weren't disappointed with the ending. from all the scenarios in my head, this one seemed to be most logical/probable one. I could've gone with more dramatic one, but I figured 'well, the fic already has plenty of drama, no need to add to it in the epilogue'.
if you don't like the ending - I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do about it right now.

and from this place, I also want to thank you all for reading this fic, leaving kudos and comments. every single one means a lot to me. I also hope that I've never made you feel pressured or obliged to comment. none of you ever owed me anything.
I can only hope that you were entertained while reading this fic and that you enjoyed it - at least a little bit. it's amazing that despite the irregular updates, long chapters and all of the fic's flaws, you kept on reading it. thank you once again. it was nice writing this fic.

chapter's title comes from Mikky Ekko's 'disappear'.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!