

Black Dog - Chapter 21

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The following morning Olivia woke before dawn, readying herself for another run, looking forward to it in spite of herself. By eight o'clock, though, she was beginning to wonder what had become of Grace. She had to give up the idea and get ready for work, and she was just grabbing her coat when she heard a knock at the back door.

"It's open, she called. "Did you oversleep? Grace?"

Grace, her head held low, was near unrecognisable without her usual neatly applied makeup, and with her hair pulled back into an untidy knot at the nape of her neck. She closed the door quietly behind her. Her eyes were swollen from crying and she still wore the tracks of tear-stains down her cheeks.

"Grace, what's the matter? What's happened?" Gently, Olivia guided her to the living room and sat her down on the sofa.

Grace sniffed. "Oh, Olivia, it was awful." She drew a deep, shuddering breath, snuffling into a soggy handkerchief. "Giles -"

Olivia's heart raced fearfully. "What's he done? Has he hurt you?"

"No! No, he would never hurt me. Not on purpose." Grace wiped her nose and stared fixedly ahead, unwilling or unable to meet Olivia's eyes. "He had some pills. I don't know where he got them from. He tried to kill himself. It, it didn't work, of course, and I think he'll be all right, but..."

A disconnected memory cut across Olivia's train of thought: Grace had said something before about their kind having supernaturally robust metabolisms. It sounded like Giles hadn't been in a fit state to take that into account. "But why would he do that?"

"I knew he was having a hard time," said Grace. She spoke more clearly, with the worst part out of the way. "Everything had changed for him and Lord knows that can be scary. I thought he knew I

wouldn't let him do anything more he'd regret, but now he's worse than ever and I don't know what to do!"

Words queued up in Olivia's mouth: useless, hollow words; things she thought maybe she ought to say. She held them back and folded Grace into a tight hug.

In the kitchen, the back door banged open again. "Hello!" Verity called. "It's only me."

Oh, no," Olivia whispered. "Come on, Grace: you don't want to see Verity right now, I'm sure." Quickly, quietly, she ushered Grace out through the French windows and into the garden. Verity would ask nosy, morbid questions, as if she didn't even remember that Giles was a real person.

"No, no, I don't think I can handle Verity right now." Grace was sniffing and shaking. Out in the garden, Olivia brushed crackling dead leaves off the bench and carefully sat her down again. "God, I should have got him to a safe place," said Grace. "I should have got him away from Eli as soon as I could." She blew her nose loudly into the clean handkerchief that Olivia offered. "I should have sent him off to London. Could have gone with him, even. No real reason for either of us to stay here . I should have told him about the others, let them help. I should have been more honest about me ! But he was taking it all so hard and I didn't want to scare him off. I'm so stupid," she berated herself, growling, "stupid, stupid, stupid ."

"Eli? What's Eli got to do with it?" Olivia could have kicked herself for allowing that to be her first response.

"He'd probably have been okay if Eli hadn't -" Grace stopped suddenly, and let out a long sigh. "No, that's not true. I knew Giles couldn't handle it, knew he's the sensitive type, and he's so sweet and kind that I just had to try . But I got here too late!"

Olivia didn't know what to say. For the first time, she stumblingly related the story that her dad had told her years ago: how Uncle George had died; how nobody knew quite what it was that had made him do it; how they'd been ashamed to tell Olivia even years later. It all came out in a messy, raw torrent, but Grace listened in silence, her dark and tear-glossy eyes fixed upon Olivia.

When it was over, Grace looked away and mumbled, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

Olivia regretted telling that story when Grace had come to her for comfort and reassurance. But the words were out and she felt empty and cleansed, as if thunderous winter rain had washed through her heart. "I just wanted you to know you aren't alone, and it's not your fault. It's nobody's fault."

Grace forced a smile, and just for a moment, Olivia thought she saw a strange look of pity behind the tears. "I can't help but feel responsible for him, though. Maybe, if I'd kept a closer eye on him, instead of trying to do everything all at once." Grace sighed again, heavy tears still rolling down her face. "When you're new to it, you need somebody to help you through - somebody who knows what it's like." She looked thoughtful. "And I know you've got people around, but they can't help you like I can. I know Imogen means well, but she's only recently died, and as for Verity... But you're strong, so much stronger than Giles." She paused, frowning, staring past Olivia into the distance. Olivia looked round to see if Verity had followed them out into the garden, but there was nobody there. What are you running from, Grace?

"He likes you, you know," said Grace at last, wiping her tears. "Thank you for taking the time to talk to him the other day at Imogen's tea party. If you could come and visit him some time, I think it might do him good?"

They'd hardly spoken at all, but Giles had seemed pleasant enough, and Olivia agreed.

"Oh, look at the time!" Grace exclaimed. "And you have work this morning, don't you? Sorry about our plans, but thank you so much for the talk." They hugged goodbye, and then Olivia had no choice but to race off on her bicycle, late for work.