

Carly Twehous

Author's Note—*The Tracks of Our Tears*

I'm doing something weird and writing the author's note first. Then maybe I can keep writing this story without thinking. I have to explain myself. And it'd probably be best if you'd read this first. Put my story into context.

I have this ailment when it comes to writing short stories and basically anything that's not poetry. (Actually, scratch that. I do it in poetry too.) I write for me. That might sound obvious and stupid but it's really the basis of my hesitance with this project. I write for the sake of myself, as if no one else will ever, *ever* read it. Therefore, there are things in my short story that only I am going to be able to understand and frankly I don't really care to share them with others. Sorry. Maybe if I were a better writer (or person), I'd let you in on the secret.

And it's not just that. The Doctor said, "Well, you'll remember me a little. *I'll be a story in your head.* But that's okay. We're all stories in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?" We're all stories in the end. Think about that. If, someday, I am reduced to nothing more than a few words on a page, my body rotted down to dust and my memory faded into oblivion, I want to at least write some of that story for myself. It's my secret to tell. *My story.* No one else has a right to write it. That's the thing. Short stories and novels, to an extent, are selfish. Sure, people will tell you that they're for the enjoyment of everyone, for the betterment and entertainment of all humanity, but that's not entirely true. The words on the page tell the story, but that's never the end of it. "Stories never end on the last page any more than they begin on the first." Because it's so much more than that. So much madder and so much *better.*

I said once that poetry is the heartbeat of humanity. If poetry's the heartbeat, then stories are the *soul.* The thing is, poetry is written and is part of the story. It can be written selfishly—for the sake of my insanity with only things that I can really understand—but poetry is, can, and will be interpreted in so many different ways. And it's beautiful because it becomes part of everyone's story. It can mean one thing to the author but hold even greater significance to the readers. And it becomes a story—of the author and whoever reads it. And the story is fluid and changing and ambiguous and *immortal.* It's human. With short stories, it's different. The written word is a powerful thing. And once it's there, it's written in stone, there to stay for all eternity without much room for various interpretation. It's there and it's fact. *A fixed point.*

But that hardly matters, really. Because stories don't end. By definition, they can't. They are the human soul. Stories *never* end on the last page. Someone else just picks up the pen and keeps writing. And makes the story part of them, part of their soul. And in that moment, both are *immortal.* But the thing is, you can't look back. Once the page is turned and the pen is passed on, you can't look back. The story moves forward and so must the author. Because both the author and the story share a secret of the past. They remember. It's not up to the reader to remember. It is for the reader to make the story their own, part of their soul, ready to pick up the pen when the last page is turned. Anyone who tells you differently is a liar. ("I always rip out the last page of a book. Then it doesn't have to end. I hate endings." Rule One: The Doctor lies.)

And this is what I did. It's not for the reader to remember what happened before or necessarily understand. The reader is only to listen to the story and respect its significance to me. No, I'm not telling you everything and no, I'm not going to. Let me be selfish this one time. Because I picked up the pen and started writing. And for these few pages, these words belong to me. They are *my* story. Not because I'm in it or it's a metaphor but because I'm the one who remembers it. I remember the last page.

*Hello, old friend. And here we are. You and me, on the last page. By the time you read these words—if by some miracle you read these words, I'll be gone and you'll be taking directions from an angel, searching for the last, impossible leaf of autumn. But promise me one last thing, before I too become a ghost. Promise me. **Fish fingers and custard**, one last time. I can't ask for immortality any more than I can ask for Silence. But promise me hope. Promise me the hope you once gave me and that your face will never fade from my memory. Give me that one last, mad, impossible hope. Because I am and always will be the hoper in far-flung hopes and the dreamer of improbable dreams. You taught me that. And you know what? You never let me down. So when I am nothing more than a ghost of a memory, like a forgotten book on a shelf, remember that. Run you clever boy and remember. Remember the tracks of my tears.*

The Tracks of Our Tears

by Carly Twehous

The old house gave her the creeps. But it was more than that, she decided. The ancient, crumbling, beautiful house looked as if it held a personal vendetta against the hands of time and the laws of the universe. It had the air of a *haunted* house. That maybe a proper ghost inhabited the shadows as an echo from another life.

As it turned out, though, it was less of a ghost and more of a man, but that conjecture is still a matter up for debate. He greeted her with a wide smile barely a second after she'd rapped the handle on the enormous wooden door. She was taken aback by his appearance. Not typical of a man behind the door of a presumably haunted house. No long, black cape or features devoid of any emotion, no wrinkling face or the poised arrogance of one accustomed to interactions with ghosts. Instead, he smiled. He smiled as if he hadn't a care in the world, though from the reflection in his eyes, she wouldn't doubt that he had seen his fair share of ghosts. He appeared to be in his thirties, but again, his eyes led her to believe otherwise. He wore a purple tweed jacket complete with tails and elbow patches that, in her opinion, should have remained in the store. Under the jacket, she could see the golden chain of a pocket watch hidden somewhere in the pocket of his vest. To her horror, he'd completed his aura of a disheveled professor with a bowtie, fastened securely around his neck.

He smiled proudly down at her, as if he'd been waiting specifically for her to make an appearance. "Sorry," she began, not sure why she was apologizing. It seemed the proper thing to do when a strange man opens the door to an almost-certainly haunted house. "It's just—"

"Hello," he said, pointedly interrupting her, his grin never leaving his face. She was struck by the prominence of his chin when he spoke. "I'm the Caretaker. Here to help."

"Right, I just—" she began again, pointing behind her for no particular reason she could identify. He nodded slightly, waiting for her to go on. "It's just—I have this note," she stuttered awkwardly. Quickly digging said note out of her pocket, she shoved it into his hand.

He took the scrap of blue paper and held it up to his face, studying it in great detail. "Ah, that's interesting," he said, as if it really were quite interesting. "Address, date, time." He glanced at his watch that was haphazardly strapped upside down on his left wrist. "Today's date and time, if I'm right. And I usually am."

The way he talked seemed oddly familiar to her, almost as a ghost from a long forgotten dream. He was not someone that most people would readily forget, but somehow, she could not place the memory with his face. *Add that to the list*, she thought sullenly. "Sorry, what?" she asked, shaking her head of her muddled thoughts. His smile fell, realizing she didn't hear him compliment himself. He held up the note. "Right," she said. "See, the thing is, that's my handwriting. But I don't remember writing it. And I don't know where I'd get the idea to come here, of all places."

"Ideas that think for themselves. Ha." His voice indicated that he was talking to himself, remembering something from the past as if it were real and present. Then, realizing she was still standing there, he cleared his throat and shook his head, glancing up at her. His eyes moved from hers to the note, staring at it suspiciously, completely disregarding his previous conjecture. "Well, it can't have written itself."

"My thoughts exactly," she replied, intrigued by his lapse from reality. He smirked at her, clearly proud of himself for coming back. "So I thought I might as well check it out."

"Quite right." He was still messing with the note. With a quick glance at her, he licked it and made a face. She raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. *What a peculiar thing to do*. Seeing her expression, he crumpled the note and threw it over his shoulder into the house. "So," he said, leaning against the door frame, attempting to emulate collectiveness. "Have you got a name? Well, I'm assuming you've got a name. Most people do. I don't. Well, not really. I'm between names at the moment. I—"

"Clara," she replied with a smirk, taking great pleasure in cutting him off.

He laughed slightly and looked down, as if he knew a secret that she didn't. "Clara," he said softly. He met her eyes and she was suddenly struck with the deep sadness blurred only by the ambiguous gray of his eyes. It was as if he really *did* know a secret and it was just too painful to speak aloud. He looked at her like he could see right into the depths of her soul, as if he knew everything there was to know about her, as if he could see right into the recesses of eternity. She thought at first that it should frighten her, but she was overwhelmed with the striking familiarity of such a gaze. "Clara," he said again, almost to himself. "Care to come inside?" He gestured behind him.

Clara nodded, though she was uncertain. Strange house, strange note, even stranger man. Anything could happen. Logic dictated that she turn around, walk away, and go back to the sanity of everyday life. *But where's the fun in that?*

With a smirk, she walked through the door which he politely held open for her. Her jaw dropped slightly as she beheld the sight before her. From the outside, the house appeared enormous. But the inside seemed to be pushing against the outer shell, dusty corridors and hallways and ornate staircases and ceilings stretching up and forever, as if it were—

"Bigger on the inside?" the Caretaker whispered, following her in. "Looks that way, doesn't it?"

She made an effort to close her mouth and nodded like it was the most ordinary thing that had happened to her in the past hour. Which, at that point, a house that was bigger on the inside probably was. Clara shook her head and cleared her throat, trying to think coherently. "Do you live here?" she asked.

"No," he said, walking over to a vase on a small table. He picked it up and examined it, as if he were seeing it for the first time. "I'm the Caretaker. I just work here."

"But do you have a name?" she asked, successfully switching the subject to something that was closer to sanity.

"I told you," he said patiently, "I'm between names at the moment."

“But what do I call you?” she persisted, still marveling at the interior of the house. *Definitely haunted*, she concluded. From where she stood, she could see down the main hallway, the walls scattered with pictures, reaching staircases that went up in every direction. Ornate wood carvings, mahogany tables, ancient vases, everything. *The memories this place must hold*. She turned back to the Caretaker. “You’ve got to have a name. I can’t just call you the Caretaker.”

“Why not?” he asked softly, approaching her with his hands behind his back, clearly delighted she’d taken interest in the house.

She glanced up at him. He towered nearly a foot over her head and looked at her, daring her to answer. “Because—well, it’s not a name.”

“Ha.” He spun in a circle, clapping his hands together once, his jacket tails flaring out behind him. “Care for the tour?”

“What?” she replied, taken aback by his sudden question.

“The tour,” he said, gesturing to the house, as if it were obvious.

She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “Why?” She kept her voice dubious, making it clear that she was intrigued, yet suspicious. This was not the type of situation she was used to. But, based on first impressions and a vague sense of familiarity, she had already begun to trust him.

“Does there have to be a reason?” he asked, clearly impatient.

She smirked. “Down, boy.”

He looked confused for a second before his face went red. “Shut up.”

Clara laughed slightly. “The tour, then?” she prompted, strolling towards the main hallway.

The Caretaker took a moment to recover before following her down the hall. They walked in silence, strolling side by side. The silence was peaceful, almost, as two old friends enjoying each other’s company. Clara glanced at him occasionally, trying to pinpoint the memory just out of her reach. Good memories she couldn’t remember, but also fear. She knew there was fear associated with his face. Fear and pain and regret. She could see that much in his eyes. As if he had his own ghosts.

They walked up the main staircase, shoulders brushing. At the top, a large painting hung on the wall. Clara walked up to it, reaching out to touch it, then pulling her hand back. It was different from the others downstairs. It had dimension and a sense of desperation to it. The painting was of a battle, the orange sky flaring in the background, the smoke rising from the ashes. She could almost sense the anguish that had went into this painting, as if just by the act of painting it, it resurrected ghosts of the long dead.

She glanced up at the Caretaker. His eyes were focused on the painting. There were tears there, she could see, but tears he'd already cried, long ago. As if the ghosts from the painting haunted him.

When he caught her staring, he turned back to her, his eyes and face resuming their normal look. "The painting has two names," he said, his voice soft, so as to not disturb the ghosts. "Some call it 'No More.'" His train of thought seemed to dissipate as he glanced back at the painting, the look of a man lost in time glossing over his face.

"And the other name?" she prompted gently, the look in his eyes weighing on her heart. *No man deserves that much pain.*

The Caretaker smiled again, a sad, ancient smile of a man much older than his physique suggested. He glanced at her slowly, his sad grey eyes tickling the recesses of her memory, the tears hidden behind the youthfulness of his face. "Funny thing, names," he said after a moment.

Clara blinked at him, not quite prepared for the shift in conversation. The Caretaker turned back to the painting, crossing his arms and rocking back on his heels, his expression indicating he was reliving a painful memory. "Names define us," he said, more to the painting than to her. "They make us who we are and decide who we will become." He glanced down at her. "The name you choose is a promise you make. And if—" He looked down and laughed scornfully to himself. "—when the promise is broken..."

"The name becomes a lie," she finished.

“Yes,” he whispered, his voice heavy. “And you become something else. One who regrets,” he continued, pausing slightly, “and one who tries every day to forget.”

She was almost completely certain he was talking about himself, his ghosts from his past. Part of her said she shouldn't push the matter, but another, mysteriously familiar part of her being demanded that she tell him what he needed to hear. “But you can't forget,” she replied, her voice changing tone. He glanced at her sharply. Not angrily, just confused. She drew a breath before continuing. “If you did something that horrible and broke that kind of a promise,” she said, nodding towards the painting, “you couldn't just forget. Where's the justice in that?”

The Caretaker opened and closed his mouth, clearly flustered that she'd actually said that aloud. In all honesty, she was shocked that she'd said it, especially considering how briefly she'd known him. He visibly huffed. “There's not a lot of justice left. Sometimes, in a single moment, there's only one choice. And that moment stands in judgement upon you.”

Clara couldn't reply. His eyes told her all she needed to know. Slowly, he shook his head, as if attempting to come back to the present and leave the ghosts behind. “Ah,” he said, turning away from the painting. “Don't listen to me. What do I know? I'm just a daft old man.” He looked at her, visibly trying to hold back tears. “Care for some tea?” he asked, his voice returning to normal.

She nodded, forcing a smile.

Clara followed him, unsure of what else she could do. Part of her knew she probably had good cause to be afraid of him. The logical part of her understood his vagueness concerning the painting and knew there was some unspeakable horror he was hiding. But all she could feel was pity and she couldn't explain it. The look in his eyes had torn her heart and she couldn't explain why she wasn't afraid of him despite the evidence against him. There was only pity and the elusive sense of familiarity that, she decided, might complete the puzzle of her fragmented memory.

There was a big difference between him and her, she realized as they continued through the halls in silence, the air of broken hearts between them. She wanted to remember and he tried every

moment to forget. They were two lost souls treading the borders of life and death, peace and sanity, ghosts and secrets, a burden weighing heavily on both of them. Maybe he understood that, she thought. Maybe that's why he looks at her the way he does, with eyes filled with sorrow and grief and pain, almost begging her to understand. Perhaps *he* understands and perhaps he doesn't want to. Because it hurts.

The Caretaker strolled ahead, breaking stride with her only to open the door and allow her to pass. He smiled slightly down at her as she walked by. But his face didn't smile. He had that look in his eyes. He was in pain and he was trying to hide it. Maybe it was the painting or maybe it was something more. It was the look of a man whose ghosts were dragging him to his grave.

Part of her wondered if she ever got that look. When she was grasping at the fragments of memory only to have them billow away as if they were made of nothing more than shadows and smoke. No, she concluded. There was a difference.

Coming back to the present, Clara looked around, hearing the Caretaker shut the door behind him. The kitchen was smaller than she expected, but homely. Not at all like she would have imagined it. The Caretaker walked straight over to the stove and put the kettle on. Clara sat down on a stool behind the counter, crossing her feet and placing her hands on her lap. She looked around the kitchen, the sight confusing her more than anything. The rest of the house was vast and complicated and ridiculous. But the kitchen seemed so *ordinary*.

"Who owns this place?" she asked on a whim.

"Dunno," he replied, his back to her as he messed with the stove.

"How can you not know?" she asked, quite baffled by his response. "Who pays you?"

The Caretaker glanced over his shoulder, a smirk on his face. "Who says I get paid?" Clara made a face, quite confused. The Caretaker spun on his heel to face her. He clapped his hands. "What if," he continued, his voice taking on a tone of mystery and wonder. "What if the house wasn't a house at all? What if, actually, the house was more of a big box?" He demonstrated the

notion with his hands. "A blue box, probably," he mumbled. "And what if it were so big and amazing and impossible that some daft old man stole it and ran away?" He paused with a grin on his face, a look of absolute wonder crossing his eyes. "Well, borrowed it," he resolved. "That's the story, anyways."

Clara was silent for a moment, just to be sure she followed that correctly. "So," she said slowly, testing the theory in her head. "You stole a house?"

He nodded then made a face. "No," he said, frowning at her, trying to display offense. Then he smirked. "No. I stole a box."

She looked at him critically, trying to solve the mystery that he presented. "Why do you keep saying that?" she asked, crossing her arms, daring him to answer as she successfully changed the subject to another conundrum. He seemed to have a great many of those. An impossible man. A mystery wrapped in an enigma held together by that ridiculous bow tie.

"Saying what?" he replied, feigning ignorance.

"Daft old man." She let the words roll slowly off her tongue, one by one, allowing the question hang in the air between them. "You can't be that old."

The Caretaker smiled softly, the far-away look returning for a fraction of a second. "Ha." He spun back to the stove, removing the tea kettle. "I'm older than I look."

"How old?" she shot back, her curiosity growing.

She heard him laugh slightly. "Bit personal," he said, glancing over his shoulder.

"How old?" Clara stood and walked over to him, leaning against the counter with her arms crossed, demanding that he answer her question.

He set the kettle down on a hot pad. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

He leaned closer to her and lowered his voice as if it were a great secret. "Eleven hundred and twenty-three," he whispered.

She blinked at him, waiting for him to laugh or smile or give an indication that he was kidding. But he held her gaze, his eyes almost begging her to believe him. And in that moment, she really could not tell if he was lying or telling the truth. Or maybe lying to her by telling the truth. At this point, that was a distinct possibility. "That's impossible," she informed him.

The Caretaker laughed and rubbed his hands together. "Things are only impossible until they're not."

"What?" she stuttered. "No, I mean—no one can be eleven hundred and twenty-three. No one lives that long. It's impossible."

"Aren't we all?" he whispered, his voice and expression almost pleading. She stared at him for a long moment, utterly taken aback. For that one moment, she was lost to the recesses and shadows of forgotten dreams and memories, unable to draw the line between reality and sanity, his words bringing back memories she wasn't sure belonged to her. "Tea?" he said, breaking her spell.

Clara looked down at his hands as he offered her a cup. She took it, managing to smile up at him, her hands trembling slightly. Avoiding his eyes, she walked back to the counter and sat at the stool, clasping the cup of tea as she raised it tentatively towards her lips, her gaze lost to eternity. "Have you—" she started, her voice cracking. "Have you ever felt like your life was an echo? That maybe—" she drew in a sharp breath "—maybe it belongs to someone else."

At her question, the Caretaker froze. He turned slowly to face her, gazing into her eyes. From that look, she could almost believe he was eleven hundred and twenty-three. She saw compassion in his eyes, boring into her soul. And hope. Behind the shadows of the oncoming storm, she saw a hope. Maybe it had been there before or maybe her question had brought it out, but it was definitely there. One last, mad, impossible hope.

The Caretaker walked over to her, sitting down next to her, faint smile dancing on his lips. "He felt that his whole life was some kind of dream and he sometimes wondered whose it was and whether they were enjoying it," he whispered, trying to meet her eyes.

“What?” she said, almost choking on her tea.

He smiled, glad to have her full attention. “Douglas Adams,” the Caretaker supplied. “Wrote an incredibly handy book, especially in my line of work.” Clara blinked at him as if he’d sprouted wings. Seeing her face, he leaned forward without hesitation and looked into her eyes, his voice lowering and switching tone. “If you are an echo, Clara,” he said, his voice catching on her name, “then you should have faded by now. If you’re a ghost, then why are you here?”

She didn’t know what he meant in the least. “Because this place is haunted,” she replied, seeing that as the only reasonable answer to his question. “And I had a note.”

The Caretaker looked down and smiled ironically almost as if he’d expected a different reply. As if he’d wanted a different reply. “Haunted?” he asked instead of dwelling on her lack of proper response. “This old place?”

Clara nodded. “I’d bet there’s more than a few ghosts in this place,” she said, only realizing the gravity of her words a second later. The Caretaker visibly cringed, not wanting to be reminded of such a fact. “Sorry—” she stuttered. “Have you got the time?” she asked in a desperate attempt to change the subject. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her tea cold and forgotten.

He nodded and tried to smile, but it was as if she’d driven a dagger through his heart. Clara grimaced, wanting to apologize again but unable to find the words. The Caretaker held his wrist out to her so she could read the time. She leaned forward, and upon seeing the time, she made a face. She slowly leaned back, sitting up straight again, eyeing the watch as if it was a mystery in and of itself.

The Caretaker saw her face and frowned, confused, and held his watch up to his face to see the mystery for himself. After deducing that his watch was functioning properly and there was nothing out of the ordinary, he looked back at Clara, even more confused. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Coming back to reality, Clara glanced up at him, surprised that he was still there. “Sorry,” she said, blinking a few times to clear her head. “It’s just—Have you ever looked at the time and seen

the exact same time every day, no matter where you're at or what you're doing?" He blinked at her, indicating that she should continue. "My mum had a theory," Clara went on, drawing a breath. "If you see the same time every day, then—then she believed it was the day you're going to die." The Caretaker leaned back and raised an eyebrow. "Every day," she said, trying not to look at him, "I look at the clock exactly at 5:02, no matter what. I always see that." He glanced at his watch again, confirming that it was indeed 5:02. "My mum would say that's the day I'll die. May the second." She paused and looked at him. "That ever happen to you? See the same time every day, I mean?"

The Caretaker held her gaze for a long moment, his eyes telling her that he wanted to give an answer. Instead, he leaned back and smiled. "What makes you think that you're an echo, Clara?" he said, his voice emphasizing her name, avoiding her question altogether.

"Well, I just—" she stammered, unprepared for his question. She shifted slightly in her seat, opening and closing her mouth, trying to form a response. Clearing her throat, she said, "Sometimes, it's just little things. Someone will say something and it'll feel like they just walked out of a dream or I'll suddenly open my eyes and I can't remember how I got from where I was to where I am. And then there's other times—like today—where everything is so impossible that I can't quite believe it and yet I'm standing here talking to you. Everything about this is—" she made a face, as if searching for a word—"familiar. And I can't explain it. That note, this house," she continued, taking a breath, "and you."

"Me?" the Caretaker asked, more intrigued than confused.

Clara nodded, not expanding any further on the matter. "Sometimes it just feels like my life belongs to, well, to someone else. Like it's not exactly mine and someone else made the choice for me to be here without my consent. Like fate or the universe or God or whatever the hell you believe in is laughing at me and living my life for me." She paused and looked at him. "Does that make any sense?"

He nodded slowly, a small, sad smile crossing his face. "Maybe," he said, drawing the word out, "maybe you just have to remember."

She scoffed. "Remembering implies that I know what it is that I've forgotten."

"Then maybe," he replied, his sad eyes meeting hers, "you are a ghost."

Clara stared at him, her breath catching, this time the dagger going through her heart. "Why would you say that?" she whispered, strange and unfamiliar tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

The Caretaker held her gaze, his eyes gentle and compassionate. "You remind me of someone," he said, his voice quiet. "Someone who died a long, long time ago. Or a long time *from* now, if you like."

"Who?" she demanded. The Caretaker looked down, a shadow crossing over his face, refusing to reply. "Is that it, then? Is that what I am? A ghost of someone you knew? Another bargain you've made with the universe?" Her voice rose with each accusation. "Is that all I am? A ghost? Just another book on the shelf? Is that why I came? Well, listen to me, I'm not—"

"Twelve twenty-five," he said, looking up sharply and cutting her off.

"What?"

"Twelve twenty-five," he repeated slowly, looking down and shaking his head slowly side to side. He glanced back up at her, his eyes pained and his voice thick. "That's my time," he whispered. "The time I see every day. My time. The day I'm going to die."

"But that's—" she started. "That's Christmas."

The Caretaker nodded slowly, the weight upon his heart evident from the look in his eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

Clara tried to smile and laughed slightly. "It's just a superstition," she said, trying to waive it off as such.

His expression didn't change. He looked at her with those sad, impossible eyes, pleading with her. "There is a time to live," he said, his voice thick with the burden the universe had allotted

him, "and a time to sleep. And this time, a promise that has to be kept." He paused and met her eyes. "Maybe that's why you're here. As a reminder of that promise." The Caretaker smiled softly, in an attempt to hold back tears. "I'm an old man, Clara. It's time to grow up."

"Grow up?" she asked, feeling a tear run down her cheek, not entirely sure of the origin.

"You mean die?"

"It's my time," the Caretaker replied slowly.

"And you're just going to accept it? Just like that?"

The Caretaker sighed. "I've seen a lot of this universe, Clara. I've seen the rise of empires and the fall of gods. And I have done things in the name of peace and sanity that I will regret for the rest of my life. I have known grief and pain and loneliness that never, ever goes away. And do you know what all of that boils down to?" he asked, tears in the corner of his eyes. Clara shook her head slightly, waiting for him to continue. Instead, he looked down. "The tracks of my tears," he said. "My journey through the universe. My story. And this is how it ends."

Clara blinked at him through her tears, unable to say a word. It was a grief that couldn't be spoken or ever completely understood. And that made it hurt all the more.

"Ah," he said, shaking his head slightly. "There's one thing first, before I go." The Caretaker stood and held out his hand. Clara hesitated for a second before taking it and he led her back through the house towards the main door. She hardly had time to look around; he walked at a fast pace, the shadow of a hopeful smile on his face.

They reached the entryway and he let go of her hand, walking over to a table, his back to her. After a moment, he turned back to face her, a large, red maple leaf in his hands. "This is yours," he said softly, a mysterious smile playing on his lips.

Clara blinked at him, confused. "How is it—"

He cut her off by placing the leaf in her hand. "Just this once," he whispered, smiling down at her. She looked at him and then down at the leaf, the fragments of memories coming into focus. "Just this once," he repeated. "Run, you clever girl, and remember me."

A tear rolled down her cheek. Without saying a word, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug. She felt his arms around her waist, shattered memories beginning to resurface. They stayed like that for a long time, the moments dragging on into eternity. After an infinitely miniscule amount of time, the Caretaker buried his face in her hair, holding her tighter, ensuring that she was so much more than a ghost. "Gotcha," he whispered into her hair.

He released her slowly, not really wanting the moment to pass. But they both knew it was time. The tracks of their tears lay behind them. It was time to move on. Without a word, the Caretaker opened the front door for Clara. She walked out, the leaf in her hand, glancing over her shoulder at him, one last time. He waved and smiled at her, before shutting the door.

Clara walked away from the house as snowflakes began to fall, the air brisk and cold. She glanced up at the sky, the leaf in her hand, and a memory flashed through her mind for the first time in a very long time. And she knew this time that it belonged to her. She remembered a snowman with a wicked smile, staring at her with its hard, stone eyes. And she remembered a smile from a stranger and a stairway to the clouds. And, as the first snowflake touched her lips, she remembered a kiss.