

## Chapter One

'I'm not in love with you,' says Clementine.

Arthur trembles. Cup, saucer and spoon vibrate. He winds his fingers together beneath the table. He wants to look at her. He tries to look at her. But the coolness in her eyes spins him into vertiginous fear, and he turns away.

Behind the serving counter there are large granite tiles beneath a blue painted wall. Jars of olives glow green and black, interwoven with shards of scarlet pimentos, glossy crescents of garlic.

On the wall there are black and white photographs.

The hands of a peasant woman cupping a heap of herbs.

The cropped profile of a woman with her head thrown back in laughter.

The joined hands of a man and woman resting on a table: a table identical to the one at which he and Clementine sit, a small, round tin table painted blue, and stencilled with marguerites.

'I am not in love with you' – as though the words need repetition, as though she wishes to construct a hall of mirrors with those words, so that whichever way he twists and turns, he is confronted again and again by her brutal integrity. Arthur sits lumpen, unable to speak, believing, the first time, that she does not love him.

'But I will live with you.'

Arthur's head jolts up, his heart roars, his hands bang against the underside of the table. He meets her eyes and the coolness remains but a softer light gives him courage.

'Why? Why will you live with me if you don't love me? What's the point?'

His voice is querulous, ungrateful. Why would he ask this question, if not to hurt himself and punish her? Arthur wishes he too could be cool, philosophical, detached: beyond reach of pain.

Clementine continues to look at him with that cool gaze, the colour of the sea nearing the horizon at first light. The blood in his ears pounds like the sound of the sea. Time stretches ahead like the wide wide sea, lulling an endless shore.

'Because I like you. Because I am tired of the city. Because you love me enough to give me time and space and shelter. Because relatedness matters more than passion.'

She stops speaking, and her mouth trembles, and she looks down, and her hands tighten their hold on each other. For her too time stretches ahead like the wide sea lulling an endless shore, and for her too this is an image both soothing and dreadful. Arthur smiles.

'So that's settled then,' he says.

Arthur knows about Clementine's life before she met him but he never speaks of it. His poet's mind imagines that he holds her stories in a box under his heart.

When Arthur met her, Clementine believed herself transparent, invisible, voiceless. She tried: often and often: to live properly, to live well: to work, earn money, have a social life. But old things catch up: who she used to be, what she did, who she knew. And again she would cower, staying small, staying quiet: staying, despite her desire to the contrary, *alive*.

The meeting of Arthur and Clementine was, depending upon your point of view, serendipity: or coincidence: or an act of meaningful synchronicity.

The details don't matter. What matters? That Arthur was drawn to Clementine by the heron-like grace of her tall thin body: by the unforgiving wit of her tongue: by the flailing energy of her neediness. At the time: he knew nothing of her past. It was weeks before, speaking of her with a friend, he suddenly realised: 'Oh, she is *that* Clementine.' The Clementine whose frustratingly brief career as a painter was sufficiently brilliant and strange to illuminate her for years after it ended.

Clementine was drawn to Arthur by his stillness: by the sinewy strength of his body, by the startling charm of his laugh and by his ignorance of her history. At the time, she knew nothing of his reputation as a poet. It was weeks before, drifting through a bookshop, she recognised his name on a slender-spined volume:

'Oh, Arthur *Transcombe*.'

For two years, Arthur steps lightly around Clementine, constructing from words and gestures and many acts of small kindness a world where she might feel safe: seen and yet hidden, loved without invasion. She does not make his task easy. She is ungracious, rude, distant. She demands and rejects, clamours and mocks. She does her very best to shatter the rugged clay of his perseverance.

And. But. She gives *enough*. Arthur lives within a small compass. Tiny degrees of joy elaborate for him a horizon of possibility. What does she give? Ah. Child-gifts. Things that, merely listed, would seem: sentimental, clichéd, naïve. Enough, that she gives enough.

They do not talk of painting, or writing. They do not talk of things beyond themselves. For two years Arthur delicately plunders what she will allow of her self. For two years Clementine, gauche, careless, learns what she wants of him.

And at the end of those two years, they meet in the café: Arthur sits like a frightened boy (although he is older, quite a lot older, than Clementine), and Clementine presides like an absolute monarch. And despite this unpromising tableau, the decision is made: that they will live together.

It is, of course, incumbent upon Arthur to find the house that they will live in.

Arthur sets out in drizzle and greyness, but as the track emerges at the top of the valley, the green of tree, grass, and hedgerow stand sharply delineated against a bruised indigo sky, as the sun flings down a lurid glare. Dazzled by the light and in love, at once, with the view, Arthur does not at first notice the building tucked into the extreme curve of the upper end of the valley.

It is little more than four walls and a roof. Valerian springs from the chimney's root. The windows are boarded up against the weather and birds. But he knows, even before he goes inside and discovers stone flagged floors, a crumbled staircase, damp and moss and mice droppings, that *this* is the right house. The beginnings of the home that he will make with Clementine.

Arthur draws upon all his resources: of money, creativity, time. He wants the house to be *ready-enough* for Clementine to join him, but not *finished*. It is essential, that she feels it is truly her home: a place where her own creativity is woven into the fabric.

Clementine feels passive, lethargic, in face of Arthur's enormous energy.

And, she feels excited and safe: for the first time in her life Clementine feels *necessary* to another person.

At last. Arthur leads Clementine into the house, the old, battered house, awoken from emptiness and drowsing to the stir and warmth of rich colours and soft light. Everything within has been chosen with passionate care.

And there is something unusual, something so splendid and special, that Clementine, enchanted, claps her hands and cries out.

Arthur has designed a spiral stair. The wooden treads rise from the square hallway weightless as moth wings, their inner edge lightly, lightly held by the central vertical timber: a mast, a magnificent mast that was Arthur's quest for many weeks.

Arthur says, as though reciting a poem, 'This mast holds secrets, it has known storm and doldrum, excitement and grief: it sighs as the wind sighs and creaks as the house creaks. It is sturdy, pliant, dependable. It has come here to rest, to live out its useful life in tranquillity.'

That first night in the house, Arthur presents Clementine with a book of his poems. Unimaginable, perhaps, but she has yet to see his work. She has not had emotional space or energy or time: more important that she learn to read Arthur, and accept being read by him, than to read his work.

She takes the book gravely in her hands. She steps towards him and her kiss is swift as bats passing by twilight. She turns away, and sits on the bottom step, and reads, at once.

And she discovers that Arthur's poetry is full of the sea. (Those who appreciate it sense the cool salt embrace, light but insistent, of the encompassing sea. Those who dislike it invariably feel unsettled, without quite knowing why: a primal fear of unpredictable water?).

Clementine reads and something tight and afraid within her yields and she turns to Arthur and says: inconsequentially: 'Yes.'

Arthur wishes she were answering his unspoken question, 'Might you paint again, here?'

But his courage fails. For now, this must be enough.

The first morning, Clementine wakes early. Arthur hears the secret murmur of her bed as she slips out, quietly quietly, intent on not waking him. He lies very still. His mind's eye sees her moving swift and soft along the corridor, down the spiral stair, and out through the narrow glass door from the sitting room into the garden.

He longs to jump out of bed, to run downstairs and follow her, but knows: that she needs this first hour alone, walking, finding for herself the rhythm of this new landscape. Testing body and mind against familiar light in a different orientation.

Clementine runs down the garden and through the gate into an open field, to the hill that rises and falls to the earth's deep breaths.

Sheep keep their distance and crows racket on, dash-dashing about the sky, heedless of her.

The air is soft and cool, but holds promise of late-spring warmth. With every step, light pulses higher and a little higher through vaporous clouds. Shadows: alter-ego of tree, hedge and creature, stretch slant.

Clementine walks nearly enough east, absorbing sun in face and hair. Her feet thump and pound. Hands swing free. Skirt loops and tangles around long-reaching strides.

And she thinks: '*Now* I can leave *all that* behind me, they cannot reach me, here.'

What does she mean?

She means: that you live and you paint and people like your work and you become a little bit famous. And then you love the wrong person and you behave a little badly and suddenly another 'self' bursts into being, product of the collective imagination. Things are said, words written, speculation transmuted into fact: and you become public property, an object of consumption and regurgitation: human cud from maw and belly of cannibals. Pah!

Clementine walks up towards the rim of the valley, crisp against lemony sky. The land shines with profligate glory, the universe scatters abundant free joy, and only Clementine to scuff it with her feet. She feels light and air and warmth drench her body, saturate her brimming, buzzing, prickling mind and heart. She thinks, 'I can let go. I am letting go. I *will not* be angry, all my life.'

She breathes in, slow and deep, and her pace shortens for the incline. Her lungs fill and fall to the rhythm of the ground beneath her feet. She reaches an immense oak, a tree that Arthur described to her: it is their horizon tree. Arthur said it has carved its heft into the skyline, sign and reassurance, for hundreds of years. Clementine leans in, forehead to bark.

Astonishing stuff, bark: it contains and protects and feeds. Every gnarl and crick both feast and shelter, depending on your place in the food chain. Clementine revisits cautiously the idea of herself

as cud, and is amused. She looks up at the perfect arc of the tree's embrace, and thinks of Arthur.

And then she turns, to look back up and across the valley to the house. Their house. Their *home*. It looks small, emphatic, shouldering aside trees and bushes and facing the sky with window-eyes wide and tranquil. It looks like a diminutive stone-shadow of the oak, reduced by angle and distance to the squatness of a troll. It looks... *wonderful*.

Clementine takes and releases a huge breath. She runs, bruising grass and scattering shadows. She scrambles up the rise to the gate, and pushes through, and up the garden where little, yet, is growing.

She slips through the narrow door into the sitting room, and stops. She listens.

And in the kitchen, a voice is murmuring. Soon she will become accustomed to this: that when alone, Arthur talks softly to himself. She will learn to love the lyric pitch of nothing-much said, to no-one but himself.

He turns as she enters, his face suffused with light, touched with apprehension. He says, 'Darling, do you think you can learn to love it here? Is it a happy walking place?'

And Clementine says, 'Yes. Yes. I will love it. It is a most happy, happy place to walk. I found the oak tree.'

And she beams, a child: as though she has done something very clever. Arthur beams too. He says, 'Good. Good! And now, coffee, I think?'

And the first ritual of their life is set: Clementine walking early alone, coming back to Arthur and coffee strong as love, thick as treacle.

And now:

Time passes.

The world turns.

Solstice, equinox, eclipse, come and go.

Life acts out its own elliptical purpose.

It will be a long while, perhaps twenty years, before we meet Arthur and Clementine again.