



LAURA S. FOX

**THE
LOVELY
EYE**

The Lovely Eye

by

Laura S. Fox

*To Dave,
Thank you for helping me bring Otis to life,
Along with his journey and his love,
Laura S. Fox*

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M/M Romance

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of violence, as well as other themes that can make readers uncomfortable. It also contains on-page sexual acts between men and it is not intended for minors. All characters in the book are over the age of eighteen.

Chapter One – The Ugly Duckling

One of the stories he'd enjoyed the most as a kid – and grandma always obliged him by reading it to him on the days when he felt sick and missed school – was that of the ugly duckling turning into a beautiful swan. The ardent question on his mind had always been if such things happened in real life. Could an ugly duckling turn into a beautiful swan? Grandma never really answered that question. She just caressed his hair and kissed his forehead, to check if his fever had finally gone down, her kind smile never leaving her face.

Well, as an adult, he knew the answer to that one. Things rarely changed, and, if they did, they took a significant amount of work. Otis stared into the mirror and painstakingly arranged the long bangs of his hair so they fell over his left eye, to obscure the fact that it was smaller than the right one. Plastic surgery could do a lot of things today, wondrous things, but fixing that kind of defect wasn't on the list, or at least his research had led nowhere on that particular topic. Not that he had the money necessary for such complex procedures anyway, but it felt good to dream that fixing his face was a possibility.

He sighed as he finally managed to make his straight hair settle into some kind of draping over his smaller eye. The color of his hair didn't help the overall effect of his face on people, either. It always looked like a hair-dyeing appointment at the salon was long overdue. Otis had never set foot in one of those, but that didn't make it less worrisome that the roots of his mane always remained dark, while the rest of it was an unnatural – that was what people called it – dirty ash blond. After reading dozens of magazines abounding in beauty advice, he had ended up more dumbfounded than before. Maybe all that advice didn't apply to men.

And his strange light blue irises were surrounded by such dark limbal rings that whenever he stared too long at someone – or just looked at them with no particular interest – people just averted their eyes as if he intended to curse them or something. That staring habit of his had gotten him into plenty of trouble in school, and teachers had warned him that people would start calling him weird if he didn't cut it out. Apparently, he didn't need to blink as much as normal people. He tried to remember that himself and blink intentionally, as often as possible.

He shrugged and pulled his shoulders back, but good posture didn't fix the fact that he had almost no meat on his bones. Any clothes he wore ended up looking like they were hanging on a hanger. People complained about body fat percentage and whatnot, but was there such a thing as a meat percentage? He would have to look that up online, but later. Now, he needed to bring out the last of his grandma's things from the old place that had been in storage since forever.



The delivery man was already waiting outside and gave him a short, annoyed look while mumbling something under his breath. He handed Otis the tablet to sign for receiving the items,

threw another look around, this time a disgusted one, and got back into his vehicle, leaving him on the sidewalk with a white credenza, a large mirror, and a handbag full of personal items. Otis considered his predicament for a little bit, but then, as always, came up with a solution. He wrapped the rope he had come equipped with through the spaces in the ornate frame of the mirror, the one his grandma had loved so much, and created a harness. Stepping into it carefully, he finally hiked the mirror up on his back, and then grabbed the handbag. That left him with only one hand for the credenza. He could just drag it along. As long as he got everything into the elevator, he would be fine.

Getting back into the building seemed like a real adventure, though. On more than one occasion, he feared that he might turn the beautiful mirror into many useless pieces, and while breaking pots and plates was a sign of good luck in some cultures, it appeared that breaking a mirror was in the exactly opposite category for most people.

He noticed that there was someone already waiting in front of the elevator. A man, at least six foot three tall, and his body obviously possessing an optimal meat percentage. And the meat was well shaped and, as far as one could tell from a distance, covered with tattoos. On both arms. He wore a tight white t-shirt and regular cut jeans that hung on his hips just right. Otis looked at him from behind and then noticed the earbuds. The man was probably listening to music or podcasts. He was probably bettering himself right now by listening to self-improvement advice. His hair was cut short and close to the head, and Otis admired the shape of the back of his head, too. He shivered just imagining how it would feel to move his hand over that short dark hair. Would it be like petting a shorthair cat?

The elevator arrived at the ground floor and the doors opened. The man stepped inside, absorbed in his self-improvement book, and turned, allowing Otis an unimpeded view of his front, too. The tight white t-shirt stretched over a chiseled chest – words like chiseled made Otis’s tongue feel funny, slightly ticklish – and his abdomen looked flat, not skinny. What was that expression? Washboard abs? Otis didn’t like it much. He didn’t see himself rubbing soapy laundry over that man’s abdomen. Or anyone else’s, for that matter.

The man’s was frowning in thought, but he had a very admirable face. His jawline was square, as it should be, and he had a straight nose and thick, dark eyebrows. Everything on that face was intense, strong, remarkable.

Otis continued to watch as the man reached for the control panel without looking at what he was doing. That had to be a very interesting podcast or book. Just as the doors began to close, the man looked up and saw Otis standing there. His brows unfurrowed into an expression of surprise, and now they were visible his eyes were revealed to be almost as dark as the hair on his head. He quickly shot one arm forward and stopped the doors from closing. Then, he touched one of his earbuds. “Hello there. Are you coming?” he asked in a deep rough voice.

That was another thing Otis found ticklish – voices like that. They were mesmerizing voices, indeed.

The man waved his free hand. “Hello?” he called out loudly.

Otis shook his head. The man was talking to him, obviously. “Yes, thank you,” he shouted back, just as loudly.

One of the dark thick eyebrows quirked in question. “Just moving in?”

Otis began his march while dragging the credenza after him, as the man half-stepped outside to hold the door and make room for him to get inside. “No. I just had some beautiful things I needed to bring in.”

“Let me help you,” the stranger offered, and when he moved, Otis caught a glimpse of his neck.

He touched his self-consciously. In that respect, he was something of a crane, and a crane was a far shot from a beautiful swan, while this man... well, this man had the strong neck of a beautiful mammal, like a horse or something similar.

The man quickly moved the credenza inside first and took the handbag from Otis, placing it on top. He then stopped and threw Otis an odd look. It had to be because of the mirror and the way it hung on his back, but, at this point, he couldn't help it. He slipped inside, brushing unwittingly against the stranger. Now that he was in, it appeared that there wasn't any room left, but the stranger didn't seem to care and pushed Otis gently but firmly against the credenza until the doors closed behind him.

“What floor?”

Grandma always said that being polite opened doors, so Otis decided to show that he knew how to do that. “I'm imposing,” he said. “Please, let's go to your floor first.”

It was difficult to carry on a conversation like that because he was staring directly at the man's throat. To look him in the eye wasn't exactly an option because he would have to tip his head back a lot.

“No,” the stranger said shortly. “Your floor?”

“Fifth,” Otis said, deciding not to insist since every moment spent like this, cramped and inadvertently touching each other, was a moment that was not good for his overall state of mind.

“What a coincidence. That's also my floor. Also, you'll need help getting that out.”

What a nice young man, his grandma would say. “Thank you. You are a nice young man,” he said.

Hot air blew over the crown of his head, disturbing the bangs covering his smaller eye. The man had sighed, and it was not clear what he could mean by that. Was he annoyed by having to go up to his floor, cramped like that? Otis looked down by reflex.

“And what are you? Eighty?” the man asked in his gruff pleasant voice.

“I am twenty-two,” Otis replied.

“Then, you’re the young man here,” the man commented. “We’re here.”

The elevator doors opened. Otis allowed the stranger to handle his belongings while he held the doors open.

“What’s the number of your apartment?” the stranger asked.

Otis felt himself stiffen. Grandma was also adamant about not giving out personal information to strangers, mainly because there were so many scammers in this world. However, she also said that there were also plenty of nice people, and this tattooed man seemed to belong to the latter group. “508,” he said, as soon as his deliberations regarding the stranger’s intentions were over.

Without being asked, the man took it upon himself to take the credenza in his arms and carry it to Otis’s door. He placed it down carefully and then gestured for the mirror, too. “Should I take that from you?”

“No, it’s okay,” Otis said. “You’ve done enough already for a stranger, which I am to you.” He couldn’t quite get over the fact that he had annoyed the other somehow, the way he had made him sigh while they were riding the elevator. That meant he couldn’t expect any more favors or else he’d be in trouble soon. People always got annoyed when asked for too much, and Otis had to be especially careful about such things.

The man surprised him by offering his hand. “Then how about we stop being strangers? I’m Hudson. And I just moved into 505 two days ago.”

“Hudson, like the river,” Otis said. He realized a little too late that Hudson was still holding out his hand and shook it awkwardly. He began with a limp hand and was very much aware of how damp it was, too, and then he remembered that people appreciated a firm handshake. Therefore, he squeezed his neighbor’s hand tightly.

Hudson laughed. “Ouch. Now that’s a strong grip. Do you have a name?”

“Otis. Like the elevator.” Hudson hadn’t given him his last name, so he wouldn’t either. Imitating others in social situations was a good strategy to make sure that he didn’t do something that wasn’t sanctioned by the general population.

“Okay, Otis, have a nice day.” Hudson gave him another smile, the kind that made a dimple appear in his right cheek and made Otis stare a lot more than necessary, just because it was asymmetric, and there was no dimple in the left cheek too.

He took out his key quickly, feeling a bit hot and needing to get inside, away from those dark and, at least as they seemed to him, inquisitive eyes.



Hudson took another look at the young man fiddling with his keys and fumbling his way inside the apartment, and shook his head for a moment. He wasn't here to fraternize with the neighbors, but he couldn't act like he didn't want to know anyone there, or at least that was the justification he was giving himself. That was one odd-looking kid. Not in a bad or repulsive way but, quite the contrary, in a way that made you look a second time even if you met him out in the street by accident. Was he a model? Yeah, right. That rundown building was a nest to people of all kinds, but runway models didn't fit the bill.

Maybe no one had scouted him yet, but it should happen any day now, Hudson mused as he let himself inside his apartment for now. Otis was skinny enough to be a model, but that wasn't the striking thing about him. No, the most striking thing about him was the color of his eyes... of the eye, because Otis wore his hair over half his face, and that was all that Hudson had managed to see. That eye reminded him of Zeus, his Siberian Husky, who had to be relocated for the duration of his undercover mission since keeping him here, in this dingy apartment, wasn't an option.

The boy's eye was the same shade of blue, and the black ring around it contributed to its striking quality. He wasn't a boy, Hudson reminded himself. Otis had been quite adamant about telling him his age. Also, he had the manners of an old person, another odd thing about him. It was a wonder he hadn't smashed that mirror on his way into the building, and Hudson had kept an eye on it the whole time.

He shrugged. He wasn't here to get an eyeful of the would-be model living a few doors away from him. Or play the Good Samaritan, although, it appeared that he couldn't exactly help it when there was someone genuinely in need of assistance.

His phone beeped. He picked it up right away while taking off his earbuds. “Yeah?” he asked roughly.

“This is the last time I'm calling you until you're finished,” his captain, who was also a close friend, began. “Is there anything else you need before getting started?”

“How's Zeus doing?” His captain had taken Zeus in, without one moment of hesitation.

“The girls love him. He loves them back. I’m afraid you won’t have a dog anymore if you take too long with this mission.”

“Thanks for the motivation, captain,” Hudson said with half a smile. “Why did I agree to do this again?”

“I’d say it’s because you need the paycheck, but that’s not everything. You’re the only guy in the entire department with the stomach for it, West.”

Hudson snorted. “What you’re really saying is that I’m the only guy in your department who won’t have trouble staring at naked men all day long.”

“That, too,” the captain admitted. “So, any prospects so far? You know what we’re looking for. Foreign, not too many friends, no actual job history, no means to call for help. These are their targets, and we need to identify leads, too.”

For some unfathomable reason, Hudson’s mind drifted to the odd-looking young man in 508. He seemed lonely, too. Again, he shook away the recent memory that kept coming back to him. It wasn’t like him to dwell on things that weren’t important to the task at hand. He was a master of focus.

Apparently, not so much when a striking blue eye was staring at him like its owner was trying to find a way inside his soul.

“Have a heart, captain. I’m just setting up shop. I did place the ads. Anyone who needs to turn a quick buck is going to come knocking on my door.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you to it. Get to the bottom of this, and I think there might be a promotion in store for you.”

“Don’t tell me you plan to retire,” Hudson joked. “I don’t want your chair. It already sags and has at least a few screws loose.”

“Yeah, yeah, call me old and fat one more time.” The captain laughed. After a moment, his voice turned serious again. “Don’t let it get to you, okay? Don’t make it personal.”

“Hey, you said I was the only guy in your department with the stomach for this. Have a little faith.”

“I also know there’s a heart in there,” the captain continued, his voice turning kind. “That’s why I need to remind you that some things might be out of your control.”

“A few, maybe,” Hudson said. “But most of them can and will be in my control. I’ll be fighting tooth and nail for it.”

“I don’t doubt it. Good luck hunting,” the captain wished him before cutting off the convo.

Hudson took the phone apart with calm hands. From now on, he'd use a different phone and completely assume his new identity, that of a shady photographer looking for young men willing to pose in racy getups for a market with particular tastes. Ever since they had learned about the seemingly new human trafficking ring operating in the area, and a few bodies had turned up, the captain and a handful of detectives had been hard at work to find a way to infiltrate it and catch the bastards who had such a lack of empathy for human life that they used young people for the sick entertainment of others, just for the sake of money.

He brushed one hand over his eyes. The captain was right when he asked him not to make it personal. Just seeing what had been done to those young men, how much they had endured before their lives were cut short, had filled him with the sort of cold rage that never died out completely. The captain had also been right to choose him for the job, because now he was like a bloodhound with the promise of prey etched in his brain. He wouldn't stop until he took down that ring of human traffickers and put the ones responsible behind bars for good.

He sat on the couch with his laptop on his knees. For the sake of seeming to be the real thing, he had set up a site, and it looked like he had a few messages already. That meant he was starting.



Otis followed the words on the screen with his finger. "Date more than one person at a time," he murmured and frowned in thought. He had trouble getting one date, and the first rule was that he needed to date more than one man? He'd installed all the dating apps, but after that, he had started removing one after another, as some pictures he had seen there were too intimidating to even look at them for a second time.

He continued his research while lying on his belly on the bed. The credenza had taken up some valuable space, but it was one of the few things he still had from his grandma, which meant that sacrificing a bit of space wasn't an impossible feat. "Be authentic," he continued to read. Now that was another difficult thing to do. Being authentic, in his case, made people nervous. Sometimes, it made them laugh, but it wasn't the nice kind of laugh, and Otis could tell they were laughing at him, not with him. His intelligence was at least average, and he knew how to recognize the signs.

He turned his phone with its face down and then closed his eyes, his head resting on his right arm. "Grandma, I do want someone to love, but it's hard," he said out loud, as he'd started to do since he had been left all alone in the world. "Dating is difficult in the twenty-first century. First, a machine has to find a match for you. I did swipe right, but I believe that I've ended up talking with all the bots on each app. Bots are like fake people," he explained, since his grandma had a hard time keeping up with technology.

Today, he didn't have a lot of things to report to her. After all, not much had happened... but that wasn't true. He turned on his back and linked his hands over his belly. "I brought home your credenza. It looks really nice in the corner. It lights up the room." There was no point in telling her that there was barely any space left for him to move around in because of it. The mirror was in the hallway, causing its own kind of trouble. But it had been her who had taught him that white lies were good at times, and he was just telling one of those now.

"Ah, and there was a very nice young man in the elevator who helped me," he said, excited to tell her about Hudson. Suddenly, his dejected mood improved. "He did not appear to enjoy being called a young man, although he didn't seem older than thirty to me. His name is Hudson, and he lives in 505, just a few doors away from me." He hesitated, but in this case, not saying anything meant that he would be lying about something important. "He has tattoos on both arms. They're really impressive. And he has what you would call a brusque manner at times. However, he helped me by carrying the credenza to my door. Also, his smile is beautiful, and he has a dimple on his right cheek... it's not symmetric at all, but it didn't look strange or anything." His grandma would scold him if he admitted how obsessed he was with symmetry in the human face, so he stopped there.

"I still have trouble getting a date. Besides talking to those fake people online, it seems that when I talk to others they also think that I'm a fake person, and then they want my phone number, and I don't want to give that to someone who assumes that I'm not real." He sighed at the end of his tirade. "I need someone to teach me how to date. I'm not capable of figuring it out myself, even with the information readily available on the Internet. It just doesn't work."

With that thought, he drifted off to sleep. He'd see about the mirror later. Now, he had several hours left until his shift started, and being well-rested was important for a good and healthy life, just as his grandma had taught him.

His sleep soon turned into a world of dreams, and Otis saw himself moving down a winding slope, only to realize that it was a green serpent that reminded him of the tattoos he'd seen on his neighbor's forearm. What a silly dream, he told himself as he was dreaming, but silly dreams could also be funny, so he didn't mind them at all.



He was busy wiping glasses and putting them back in their places, so he missed someone calling for him. Usually, when he was working, he was as good as invisible, and being that was a good thing. There was no one to make uncomfortable with his stares and strange appearance.

His manager, a man in his forties, with a big belly, eventually had to pat him on the shoulder to get his attention.

“Yes, Mr. Smith,” he said dutifully. “How may I be of service?”

He hoped Mr. Smith didn't plan on firing him, because he needed each of the three part-time jobs he was keeping to pay the rent and for all of life's necessities. His grandma had taught him how to be content with little, but sometimes, it was hard, especially when he saw something he liked, such as tiny glass figurines.

“What would you say,” Mr. Smith said slowly, as he usually did when talking to Otis, “if we send you out on the floor to wait on tables, too?”

Otis took his time to reply. That was the equivalent of a promotion, but did Mr. Smith understand that, maybe it wasn't a good idea to put him out in front of clients? “I am happy where I am, Mr. Smith,” he said.

His manager sighed and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Jerry pulled a no-show on us tonight. Missy will show you what to do, and she'll be close all the time.”

“Do you want me to start right now? For how long? Jerry will be back.”

“Or not,” Mr. Smith said with a shrug. “Look, Otis, you are very polite and you do each task well. I'm sure you will do fine. Missy is going to show you the ropes.” He turned to leave but then looked at Otis again. “Just push that hair out of your eyes. It will strain your sight if you're not careful.”

Otis didn't say a word and touched his hair protectively. Mr. Smith's demands were, sometimes, difficult. With reluctance, he brushed his hair back over his head. He would try not to stare at the customers too much so that they wouldn't be put off by his asymmetric eyes. And, hopefully, he wouldn't end up making a mess out of their orders.



“You know, you are a lot more helpful than that asshole Jerry,” Missy, his colleague, said as they began wiping down the tables. “And, I have no idea if you swing that way, but the man at table three, you know, the one in the expensive suit, asked about you.”

Otis didn't remember any man. He had kept his eyes averted at all times, intent on not staring and making customers uncomfortable. Mr. Smith ran a respectable restaurant, and Otis was happy to work there, because it paid the most of his three part-time jobs. However, as respectable as the restaurant was, it wasn't the kind to warrant the presence of someone in an expensive suit. “What did he ask?”

“If you've worked here long, if you're looking for something else, things like that. He might want to hire you.”

“Hire me as what?” Otis asked, puzzled. What could men in expensive suits want with him? He only knew how to clean and perform menial tasks.

Missy looked at him and burst into laughter. She pinched Otis’s cheek. “Arm candy, what else? Don’t worry, I told him we’re not that kind of place.”

Arm candy was an odd term that described beautiful people who accompanied others who liked having such attractive individuals by their side for the sake of beautiful photos. So, Missy was joking. Also, she had said a truth; the restaurant didn’t sell or rent arm candies.

“You are right,” he told the woman politely. It wasn’t nice of her to tease him, but she always seemed nice, and had a good hearty laugh, so Otis wouldn’t hold a thing like that against her.

“I’m telling you, he didn’t seem pleased,” Missy continued while energetically wiping down one table. “And he left a measly tip if you can believe it. Cheapskate. Otis, I’m telling you. Stay away from assholes like that. They parade their clothes and car and bling just to get your attention, and then they ask you to go Dutch if you say that you aren’t going to go down on them on the first date.”

Missy had a considerable list of disastrous dates under her belt, so Otis knew that he couldn’t go to her for advice. If anything, she appeared to struggle just as much as he did. However, she was considerably advanced in her efforts to try to get a date, since she didn’t talk to bots on the Internet like him.

“What does an ideal date look like to you?” he asked, partially out of politeness and partially out of curiosity.

Missy laughed. She did that a lot. She sounded like a very happy person. Also, the huge red mane on her head made her stand out. Otis would be terrified to stand out so much. It didn’t appear to bother her, however. “I suppose it would be one at the end of which the guy doesn’t expect a blow job as payment for a tepid beer and a couple of burritos.”

Otis felt his face getting hot. He knew the term blow job, as well. It meant oral sex, and it was the kind of thing that made him uncomfortable in a way that caused a terrible shame to creep in. He had watched some videos. They had been enough to convince him that it was a very pleasurable activity. However, it also seemed to be something undesirable. Missy, for instance, didn’t want to do it, and, from what she was saying, offering a blow job would make her seem cheap, something she wasn’t. Otis wanted to tell her that people didn’t come with price tags, but he had learned to keep his mouth shut more often than not. Like his stares, whatever came out of it also made people laugh at him, or, at least, uncomfortable.

“What about you?” Missy suddenly asked, turning her attention to him.

He grabbed his hair and pulled it over his eye. Since Mr. Smith had gone home already, there was no need for him to protect his eyesight by exposing his asymmetric eyes to the world.

His silence didn't seem to please his coworker. Missy came near and, much to his dismay, brushed away his hair, sweeping it back. "Any girlfriend? Boyfriend?" she asked with a large smile.

"No boyfriend," he said quickly. "A girlfriend wouldn't suit me."

"Go figure. That guy's gaydar worked just fine. Too bad he was a cheap bastard," Missy commented. "Why no boyfriend?"

"I am actively looking." That was more of a grey lie. He was trying to be active in looking. So far, it hadn't worked.

"I see. What are you using? Grindr?" Otis shook his head. He must have looked horrified enough because Missy laughed. "Yeah, you don't look like the type. For a while, I thought you might be some religious nut, a cute one, but still. Your clothes are so prim and proper. However, it looks like they're not enough to keep the interested at bay." She winked at him, although Otis didn't know what she meant by that.

"I end up talking to fake people," Otis blurted out. He had meant to say 'bots', but that had been the first thing that had come to his mind.

"You're telling me?" Missy said with a snort. "The world is full of them."

So, he wasn't the only one who had that problem. That was a relief. "Do you happen to know anyone who offers dating advice?" he asked.

"I don't trust those bozos with their podcasts and whatnot," Missy said and tsiked in disapproval. "The best way to get good advice is from someone real, someone you know, someone you can talk to, face to face. My girlfriends are also in the same boat as me, though. And my mom used to date in completely different times, so she's no use. My big sis is pregnant with her third. That's from her fourth beau, though. As you can see, dating experts are in short supply in my world."

Missy was right, once more. He needed to find someone with experience in the real world of dating, not read articles on the Internet. His mind took him to his new neighbor. Did he swing that way, as Missy put it? If he did, he looked like someone who'd have no trouble getting a date, Otis thought.

He continued wiping the table in front of him. It was worth keeping an eye on his neighbor. Just to see if he swung that way, at least.

Chapter Two – Research Is the Mother of Learning

That was the fifth in two days, Otis dutifully wrote in his notepad. Of course, there could be more since he wasn't there all the time to spy on his neighbor. Also, standing in the hallway and always pretending to be busy with inspecting the light fixtures for signs that they needed changing – although that wasn't something that fell within his responsibilities – was highly impractical. There was, as well, the matter of doing all this research on the downlow so that Hudson didn't start to suspect that he was the main subject in the scientific endeavor Otis was conducting at the moment. It was only a vague idea, but he believed that his new neighbor might not take being spied on lightly.

One thing Otis had noticed was the reasonable level of attractiveness in the young men frequenting Hudson's apartment. They seem to do fairly well in the muscle department and they wore tight clothes. Some had jewelry, such as ear studs, and some had tattoos. He was completely thorough in his evaluations and he wrote down all the aspects he considered important.

For instance, the average session for each date Hudson organized in his apartment was between half an hour and an hour. Briefly, Otis had thought that his neighbor might be running some sort of tattoo business in there, but that idea was quickly discarded. Peeking around the corner when the door to 505 opened to let the newcomer out, he had observed a certain degree of intimacy between Hudson and those young men. Supposedly, tattoo artists didn't send their customers on their way with pats on the butt. Even if Otis knew close to nothing about the habits of such people, he thought it sound to conclude that those young men were Hudson's dates.

Did Hudson have a Grindr account? The mere idea made it tempting to re-install the app and hunt for those sleeve tattoos; even if people there didn't always show their faces, opting for other body parts, Otis was confident he'd be able to identify his very handsome neighbor. However, that app wasn't for the faint of heart, which he was, and wading through a sea of naked bodies with all kinds of tags attached seemed like a perilous journey.

He pulled at the collar of his dress shirt. He was thinking of seeing his neighbor naked. It was, he convinced himself, nothing but an exercise in futility. That would never happen. He was basically the opposite of those attractive young men going in and out of Hudson's apartment.

Lost in thought as he was, he missed the door opening to 505. He pulled himself back around the corner, but it felt like one moment too late.



Hudson waited for a full minute for Otis to emerge from behind the corner. Didn't he realize that his shadow was giving him away? He had seen his neighbor from 508 sneaking around, armed

with a notepad, and scurrying away the moment Hudson opened his door. That was odd; if Otis hadn't been so strange in his mannerisms, Hudson would've suspected that his movements were being followed, which wasn't a good thing, given the nature of his operation. Could it be only some strange curiosity? Or was it something else? His gut instinct lay dormant when it came to the attractive youth living a few doors away, but he couldn't discard the signs. Otis, as in Otis like the elevator, was – not so low-key – stalking him. Hudson was curious about what that notepad contained.

It wasn't like him to postpone making things clear. "You can come out," he said loudly. Since Otis didn't appear to understand that he was the one Hudson was talking to, he continued. "Come on. I can see your shoes."

Finally, Otis peeked from around the corner. "You cannot. The angle is not right. And I'm standing far back."

Hudson crossed his arms and gave the pretty fool a hard stare. "How about you pay me a neighborly visit right now?" He pushed the door to his apartment wide open.

"Right now?" Otis asked, seemingly oblivious that he had just been caught in the act. "I have work in an hour."

"I'll be mindful of that," Hudson assured him. "Come on."

Otis didn't appear in the least disturbed by having had his cover blown and walked toward Hudson, the notepad under his arm. Then, he made a small stiff bow before walking into the apartment.

Was that too much trust? The young men who had crossed his threshold over the last few days knew what they were getting into. Hudson felt an unpleasant knot tying itself up in his gut at how obviously Otis walked in. If he were a bad man, he'd be pleased with having such easy prey walk right into his trap. He shook his head. Going through the case file day and night had clearly made his mind work in nasty ways. What they said was true, investigators had to be able to put themselves in the perpetrator's shoes to understand what motivated them, what made them act against other human beings. Whether or not that was healthy was a matter still up for debate.

He invited Otis into the small living room that served as his studio. There was a sofa, a camera set on a tripod, and other paraphernalia needed for his current line of business, lined up against the wall to the left and scattered on a table. Otis stopped for a moment, appeared to throw a quick look at the offending objects and then sat awkwardly on the sofa, only to get up a moment later, as if something had burned the seat of his pants.

"What?" Hudson asked gruffly. "I use a blanket when someone's over."

Otis blinked a few times and their eyes met. No, not their eyes. While Hudson used both of his to look at his visitor, Otis had his left eye covered, as seemed to be his habit. “There isn’t a blanket now,” he pointed out.

Hudson moved slowly and rested one hand on the camera. He swung his hips for a moment, while gauging the other’s reactions. Otis appeared to follow his every move with curiosity... no, it was more than that. The only exposed eye showed hints of awe and fascination. It felt a tad strange to be looked at like that. As the type of man used to getting plenty of appreciative looks from members of both sexes, Hudson felt a bit thrown by that particular interest shining in Otis’s startlingly beautiful eye. “Are you here for the same thing as the others?” he asked.

Otis looked at the camera, appeared to hesitate, and then shook his head. Hudson shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Why did he feel disappointed at that? Did he really expect his very prim and proper neighbor to walk in here and take off his clothes? That was crazy. “Why are you here?”

“You invited me for a neighborly visit,” Otis replied promptly.

“Right,” Hudson said dryly. This kid was too smart for his own good, it seemed. “Let me rephrase that.” As he said the words, he walked over to his visitor, grabbed the notepad out of his hand and pushed him back to sit on the sofa. “It’s clean, by the way. Why are you watching me?”

He moved back to a safe distance – safe for whom? – and began leafing through the scribbled pages. They were filled with timestamps and details about the guys who had visited him over the last few days. They weren’t all there, but the precision with each of the visits had been jotted down was impressive. “Do you have a thing for tattoos?” He looked at Otis, who sat there, hands on his knees, his back straight, as if he were just about to be questioned by a teacher.

“I do not,” Otis informed him.

“Who sent you?” Hudson asked and frowned in thought as his eyes glided over the next entries in Otis’s strange stake-out book. “This visitor must have put something in his pants,” he read out loud, “because they bulged quite uncomfortably in front. He looked as if he had stuffed a raccoon in there. Do they bring raccoons on dates now?”

That must have been the guy who had come with his own chastity device in place. Now that had been an interesting photoshoot. No raccoon, unfortunately, Hudson thought and looked at Otis pointedly. “Has the raccoon got your tongue?” he asked, barely keeping in a smile.

“No,” Otis replied and pursed his lips. Then, he inhaled deeply. He looked as if he was building up courage for whatever was next. “I want to ask you if you could help me and, if it wouldn’t be that much of a bother, provide me with some dating advice.”

“Dating what?” Hudson had considered that many different things, some of them undefined, could come out of Otis’s pretty mouth, but not that.

“Advice,” Otis shot the word out as if it was a toad he had almost swallowed by accident.

“And what makes you think you’re going to get that here?” Hudson asked, now partially relieved that his cute neighbor was simply odd, and not someone sent to watch his every move. However, he didn’t need that sort of complication, so he began to rip the pages from Otis’s notebook and then tear them into pieces.

“That’s not very nice. It doesn’t belong to you,” Otis scolded him.

“Maybe. But the things you wrote in here don’t belong to you, either.”

Otis appeared to ponder. Then, after some deliberation, he said, “That is true. I apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable by spying on you.”

“So, you agree that you’ve been spying on me,” Hudson said.

“Yes. But it was for research. And research is the mother of learning. I need to learn.”

“What, exactly? My work schedule?”

Otis turned his head to look around, but only briefly. “What kind of work do you do, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I do mind. It’s nothing kids like you should know about,” Hudson said. The little neighborly visit was over, and he could safely send Otis back to his apartment.

“I am not a kid,” Otis said, carefully enunciating every word. “I am twenty-two years old.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that. Come on, let me see you out.” Hudson gestured for Otis to get up.

Otis did, but not without reluctance. “What about the advice?”

“Look somewhere else, kid.”

Before Otis had a chance to protest again at being called that, Hudson took him by the arm, not too firmly, as his cute neighbor seemed like the kind to get startled easily. They were almost at the door when an energetic knock came.

Hudson pushed Otis back a little and looked through the peephole. He wasn’t expecting anyone at that particular hour, and the guy standing at his door didn’t appear a good fit for the job, either. Without looking behind him, he stretched out a hand. “You, back in there,” he advised and opened the door.

The new visitor was somewhere north of forty, with thinning black hair, brushed back. His face was bony, and his eyes were cold. He wore a long coat, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Yeah?” Hudson asked.

“Mr. Vegas,” the man said, without actually asking, “it looks like you’re running a business. Do you mind if I come in?”

Hudson barely had time to step aside. He looked down the hallway briefly. The presence of the two goons by the elevator didn’t surprise him. Then, he turned, and froze when he saw the dangerous newcomer facing Otis, who was staring back, with all that candor that seemed to be him.

Quickly, Hudson moved between them. He pushed Otis into the small kitchenette that was, thankfully, separated by a door. “Darling, how about you go make me a sandwich?” he drawled. Then, as he turned toward his new visitor, he continued, “How can I help you, Mr.--”

“Watkins,” the man replied. “Who was that? One of your... models?”

“No,” Hudson replied, feeling his hackles rising. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Too bad. He’s got a good face.”

“He’s not made for business,” Hudson said quickly. “Now, what can I help you with, Mr. Watkins?” He made no move to invite the other to sit. Part of his cover was being an insolent prick, as well as being a guy who seemed to lack basic awareness of what kind of dangerous situation he was getting himself into.

“Yes, you’re right,” the man said. “You can help me. Greatly.” He produced a business card from an inside chest pocket with a gloved hand. “I presume boys with the ambition of becoming part of the entertainment industry often come knocking on your door. I’ve seen some of your body of work on that website of yours. I’d say you have a good eye. How about you send such boys to me? I have even more venues to offer. And I bet they can use the money.”

“I see. Any particular type of young man you’re looking for?” Hudson didn’t like the way Watkins’s eyes moved to the door of the kitchenette. “He’s not for sale,” he said pointedly.

Watkins looked at him with a sly smile. “Everything is, usually. For the right price. But I’m not here to step on your turf, Mr. Vegas. Do you understand?”

Oh, he understood all right. That was a warning. “Yes, of course. You still haven’t answered my question. What’s your pleasure? Blonds, redheads?”

“Desperate,” Watkins said from the tip of his lips.

“I see,” Hudson said slowly. Could it be that he was lucky enough to have one of the men running the human trafficking ring knocking on his door so soon? His eyes moved toward the narrow door leading to the kitchenette. Not so lucky, though. The timing was horrible.



Otis felt rightfully annoyed, he believed. What was with that sudden demand for a sandwich? He wasn't there to make sandwiches, and he wasn't a darling to Hudson, either. He meditated briefly. Maybe his neighbor was demanding some sort of payment for dating advice. That had to be it. Then, making a sandwich wasn't that big a deal. The darling matter, however, was not that clear.

He slowly inspected the small space, until his eyes fell on the small refrigerator in the corner. He opened it and stared inside. A lot of beer. Pursing his lips, Otis took one bottle out and looked at the label. With a shrug, he placed it on the counter and proceeded to continue his investigations. He had been caught in the act so easily. Never before had he felt so inadequate. That wasn't true. He almost always felt inadequate in his interactions with other human beings.

He missed his grandma so much. She understood him. And now, under such duress, she'd know what to do. Otis identified a small egg, forlorn in a case for a dozen, and picked it up. He then placed it carefully next to the beer bottle. He had to look inside the cupboards, too, and after much searching he came up with one slice of bread, which he sniffed for any signs that it had gone bad. With great pains, he found some bacon behind the beer bottles.

It looked like there was barely anything else. Disconcerted, he took another long look at his meager findings. Hudson had a very unhealthy lifestyle, but it wasn't Otis's responsibility to correct that. However, he had been asked to perform a task, and maybe it would be considered payment for at least one piece of advice on dating rules.

He opened the microwave on the counter, glad to have found at least one appliance in that poorly appointed kitchen. It wasn't very different than his, but he had a breakfast maker machine that could toast the bread, fry the egg, melt the cheese, and then serve everything in a round shape Otis liked a lot. Hudson didn't look like he had anything like that in there.

He put the bacon on a plate and then broke the egg, separating it from the shell with extreme care. He punctured the yolk a couple of times with the tip of a knife he had found in one of the drawers. Then, he placed everything inside the microwave, and stared intently. His grandma had taught him a lot of tricks, how long to let the microwave do its job and all that. Pleased with the result, he assembled everything on the slice of bread. It wasn't much of a sandwich, but that wasn't his fault. Next time, he'd recommend that Hudson let him go to his place and bring back some food, or even use his breakfast maker to prepare some proper sandwiches.

After a short moment of deliberation, he opened the beer bottle. Hudson hadn't mentioned it, but maybe he liked a drink with his sandwich. Just as he was admiring his handiwork, thinking that he hadn't done a half-bad job, the door opened, and Hudson walked in with a displeased look on his face.

There was so little space in that room, that they were now standing close, so close that Otis had to tip his head back. Since he didn't have enough room to move, he made an awkward gesture toward the sandwich on the counter.

"What is that?" Hudson asked. He seemed in a bad mood. Otis knew a few things about bad moods. Some people would say he knew a lot, not just a few.

However, now it was important to insist if he wanted to learn at least some introductory details about dating. "It's the sandwich you asked for. You know, you could ask more nicely when you want people to do things for you. And your refrigerator doesn't have food. I mean, this is all I could find. And beer."

Hudson groaned and ran one hand over his face. "Jesus, kid. Did I get myself a wife or something? This visit's over. Beat it."

Otis was nonplussed for a moment. Was the sandwich he made that bad? Hudson hadn't even tasted it. "No, it's not," he said stubbornly. "You must say thank you." That was what his grandma had taught him a long time ago. When someone did something for you, you thanked them, even if you weren't necessarily happy with it.

Hudson seemed about to relent for a moment, but then he quickly grabbed Otis by the scruff of his neck and proceeded to escort him out of the room. All his efforts from the past few days were going down the drain before his very eyes. Otis dug his heels in once they reached the hallway. "I'm not leaving before you give me some dating advice."

"Right." Hudson finally let go of him. "Here it is. Consider it a freebie. Don't knock on the wrong door."

Otis dutifully took out his phone. His notebook was back there, and he didn't dare go get it.

"Are you kidding me? You're writing it down?"

"So that I don't forget," he explained. "And I'm still waiting for that thank you."

"Fuck me," Hudson groaned. "All right, have it your way. Thank you for the sandwich. We cool now?"

"No," Otis said stubbornly. "I can tell you don't really mean it."

Hudson grabbed him by the back of his neck again and turned him toward the door. “Don’t let that door hit you in the ass, ‘kay?”

“That’s not very nice,” Otis insisted.

“Don’t press your luck,” Hudson growled, but he wasn’t scary or anything. “Goodbye, kid. Stop spying on me.”

Otis stared at the closed door that had just been slammed in his face for a bit. That hadn’t gone too well, but things weren’t that terrible either. Somehow, he felt that he could press his luck with his neighbor. Grandma wouldn’t agree, most probably. She’d frown at Otis’s insistence, which was a sign of bad upbringing, but he felt courageous today.

Don’t knock on the wrong door.

Yes, it was a good piece of advice. Otis believed that it was Hudson’s way of saying that he shouldn’t go for men that weren’t right for him, seeing how he hadn’t actually knocked on any door, let alone the one to his neighbor’s apartment. He didn’t plan to opt for men who weren’t right for him. Even better, that little piece of advice from Hudson also helped remove a heavy rock from his chest. Now, he had the confirmation that Grindr wasn’t the right app for him.



Hudson entered the kitchenette in a state of annoyance mixed with alarm. He had been unreasonably hard on the kid, but it was for his own good. Watkins, if that was the man’s real name, had instantly took to Otis, smelling blood in the water like the fucking shark he was. Even without having a nosy neighbor getting up to no good, the present situation was bound to become dangerous sooner rather than later. Hopefully, Watkins got the message that the pretty airhead he had happened to meet there was off-limits. And, although that was where Hudson nurtured many fewer hopes, Otis also understood that it wasn’t a good idea to stick his nose into other people’s business.

Absentmindedly, he took the sandwich from the table and began eating. The yolk dripped over his fingers. “Fuck,” he groaned, and then realization hit him. It was a damn good sandwich. He only needed to be careful not to get yolk all over himself.

So, Otis from 508, Otis like the elevator, Otis who was – only heaven knew why – in terrible need of dating advice, that Otis also knew how to make a sandwich. Hudson shrugged. The chances were Watkins wouldn’t come sniffing around too often. A man who needed two goons to guard his ass didn’t prefer visiting dingy apartments all the time. That was a man who wasn’t exactly at the top of the food chain, but obviously had ambition. This little meeting had been a means to impress Hudson – Mr. Vegas, as his undercover nickname indicated – by catching him

with his pants down, so to speak. It looked like Watkins appreciated a business partner that would cause no trouble.

However, trouble was exactly what he had in mind to cause certain people. The game was afoot. There was just a little pinprick that made him itchy, and it had a name. Hudson shrugged again. He was reading too much into everything. However, he'd keep an eye on his nosy neighbor, one of the reasons being that he wanted very much to see that other eye.



Confusion was natural, Otis thought as he joined Missy at waiting tables on the floor, promoted as he seemed to be to that role since Jerry had chosen to be a no-show for good. Mr. Smith had promised him a raise, too, and that was a good reason to be happy and dedicate himself to waiting the tables. He enjoyed doing his job competently, but it was getting difficult with him thinking of his handsome neighbor all the time. There was also the matter of that ugly man who visited Hudson that day. Otis scolded himself; it wasn't nice to call other people ugly. It was only how the man had looked at him, with the sort of curiosity one would have toward an animal, that had made Otis think of him as repulsive.

Missy woke him from his conflicting musings by nudging his elbow. "That man is here again," she whispered.

"What man?" Otis asked. Did she mean the ugly man visiting Hudson that time? But, how could she—He was being silly again. She meant someone completely different.

Missy moved even closer. She was so short that even with someone like him, she had to push herself up on her toes to reach his ear. "Don't look. It's the guy in that well-cut suit at table three. It looks like he likes that table. And you."

Otis tried to look in the direction indicated, but Missy hissed at him again. "Don't look."

"How can I look at him without looking?"

Missy pushed a menu into his hands. "He just asked for you. I would've flipped him off, but our dear boss doesn't exactly take well to what he calls my antics. Now, go. Whatever he offers, say 'no'."

"He'll ask for food. I can't tell him 'no'," Otis replied, feeling more confused than before.

Missy rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean."

No, he didn't. But, armed with the menu, he walked toward table three with what he hoped was a deferential smile, and not the kind that freaked people out.



The customer at table three was alone. He wore, indeed, what looked like a well-cut suit, as Missy had put it, in the sense that it draped well on his body. Unlike Otis, he had a reasonable meat percentage to show off, and the suit jacket stretched across his shoulders as it should. He had dark hair that looked greasy in the restaurant light; he probably used some hair product, Otis decided. It was too shiny to be just dirty. Especially, since the rest of the man appeared to be clean.

“Good evening, sir,” he said quietly.

The man, who had been absorbed in something on his phone, raised his eyes and smiled when he saw him. He looked younger than Otis had thought while eyeing him from afar. He moved his arms in wide gestures, as he put his phone down and then accepted the menu from Otis’s hands.

“Hi there, pretty eyes.” He began leafing through the menu with one hand while he touched his tie pin with the other. It was silver and drew attention to itself by being in contrast with the black tie. Everything the man wore was black, including his dress shirt. Except for that pin.

After what felt like no longer than a minute, the customer handed Otis back the menu and ordered with something akin to affectation. Otis knew that word because it could be mistaken with affection. The affectation in this case came with ordering the most expensive things on the menu, not that they had a lot of those. “I will have to ask the cook,” he said. “It might take a bit.”

“That’s all right,” the man said joyously. He had a boyish face when he smiled. Although the well-cut suit suited him well, when he smiled like that, he looked like a boy stealing his older brother’s clothes so that he could pretend to be someone else. “I can wait if you keep me company.”

“I can’t,” Otis said curtly. “I have other customers.”

According to Missy, this young man wanted him as his arm candy. That could mean exactly that, or it could mean that the customer in front of him was interested in getting a date. Since it appeared that he wasn’t right for Otis, being so young and wearing his older brother’s clothes, the best course of action was to follow the advice offered by Hudson.

“What other customers?”

It was a slow night, and there were only a couple of other tables occupied. Missy was on the job. Therefore, his lie, as white as he intended it to be, didn’t hold water. The correct thing to do was to let him down gently, either he was interested in some strange sort of arm candy, or a date.

“I will be right back,” he said, nodding shortly.

“Don’t take long,” the customer called out after him.

The cook, after mumbling something about wannabes and crooks, most of which Otis didn’t understand, agreed to prepare the meal the young man wanted. Without any reason to linger in the kitchen, Otis returned to table three.

The smile from before grew wider on the young man’s face. “I’m Jackie,” he said, but without offering his hand like Hudson had. “And you are,” he pretended to squint while reading Otis’s tag, “Otis. It’s a pretty name.”

“Thank you. Yours is pretty, as well,” Otis replied dutifully.

“Come on. Sit down,” Jackie offered.

“I can’t. It’s against the rules,” Otis said and stiffened.

Jackie grinned, rubbed his chin in thought, and then stared at him. His green eyes were like those of a kid, too, round and pretty. They widened and moved, and they were very expressive. And his eyelashes were very curly, Otis noticed. Was that how Hudson saw him that caused him to call him a kid?

“I have a feeling that you don’t like me too much, Otis.”

“That is not true. I like all our customers the same.”

Jackie laughed, and he didn’t seem like he was laughing at Otis, as people usually did. “Ah, straight through the heart, huh?”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Otis replied, and he was being very sincere. What was happening to him while looking at this young man who seemed interested in him was very strange. A few days before, he would have felt happy about it. There was finally someone interested in him. Could it be that he was starting to become arrogant because he was waiting tables now and was no longer comfortably hiding in the back?

Or was it something else entirely?

“What I mean,” Jackie said and leaned back, hands behind his head, “is that, for some reason, my usual charm doesn’t seem to be working on you.”

Otis let his eyes linger over the taut body underneath the well-cut suit. It had to be a wonderful body, judging by what he could see of it. However, he needed to make it blatantly clear, because leading people on was not right. “I’m sorry. It is not your fault. You’re too young for me.”

Jackie gave him a startled look. “For real? If I wasn’t sure they don’t hire underage people in this place, I’d say you were like sixteen or so.”

“I am twenty-two,” Otis replied, slightly aggravated now. He didn’t look that young. He was sure of it.

“And I am twenty-six,” Jackie said, sounding and looking quite exasperated. “Who are you calling young?”

They must have started talking too heatedly, because Missy appeared by their side. “Otis, you may go. I know you wanted to leave early. I’ll take over. Good evening, sir,” she said in a sugary tone, addressing Jackie. “So happy to see you here again.”

Otis didn’t wait to listen to any more. He gave a formal farewell and disappeared. He must have looked that young to Hudson, too. No wonder the man called him a kid. And that wasn’t good.

Chapter Three – Serious Business

The merchandising opportunity had fallen through. Not that it had been that much of an opportunity, Otis thought as he began calculating his ins and outs, seeing how the people who were supposed to give him work rarely called him. One of them had commented on his looking like he couldn't lift a box if his life depended on it, and that had hurt because it wasn't true. Maybe he wasn't fit for heavy lifting, but surely he could lift a box. Or even two.

That left him with his part-time job at the restaurant and the dog-walking business. Otis liked the sound of that. Dog-walking business. It meant that it was justifiable to take it seriously, and Otis found himself a lot more at ease in the company of Fidos and Buddies than in that of humans. He was so lucky that Mr. Smith had promoted him to waiting tables. It was enough to make ends meet already, and Missy had also assured him that he'd start raking in more than decent tips. So far, he had gotten a few, but he had only been in his new position for a few days. It felt rather good, and he silently thanked his grandma for teaching him good manners. So far, from what he could gather, he had gotten the biggest tips from his elderly customers. Just like his grandma, they appreciated a young man who knew how to behave without being rowdy or obnoxious like so many youths today (as grandma used to say), and that Otis could understand.

Well, it wasn't only the elderly part of their customer base leaving him tips. There was also Jackie. The boyish customer in the well-cut suit appeared relentless in his pursuit of arm candy, although it left Otis feeling rather odd. Maybe Jackie was the kind who liked unusual things and unusual people. Definitely, since he was frequenting a restaurant that appeared to cater more to people of a certain age, that was a bit odd about him. That evening, when he and Otis had talked for the first time, Jackie had left Missy a generous tip, but only after having her promise that she would share it with Otis. And then, the following day, he had appeared again and, while Missy refused to send Otis over to take his order, he hadn't gotten mad and had just looked at him from afar. The glances Jackie threw his way, while indulging in his expensive food, made Otis go through the stages of an unknown illness. At times, he felt hot all over and, at others, he sensed a cold gripping him as he started to sweat.

Jackie left good tips, according to Missy. In Mr. Smith's book, he was a good customer. Missy had started to mellow toward him, as well. She had laughed at something he said at least once, and Otis had noticed that it was her pleasant, good-natured one, not a fake one. That meant that she was beginning to like Jackie, at least a little.

In the meantime, Otis had struggled to keep clear of his handsome neighbor. After all, the last conversation they had, things hadn't gone down too well. Otis had managed to snatch one piece of advice from Hudson, but it now looked like an appetizing morsel that left him wanting more. One way or another, he had to find a way to apologize properly for spying on his neighbor – it had to be the spying that had made things sour so fast – and then make a new attempt at

obtaining new advice from someone as accomplished in the dating sphere as Hudson appeared to be.

Only those young men didn't appear to be there to date Otis's neighbor. Hudson had mentioned his work... but he hadn't cared to disclose what that was all about. There had been a camera, and some objects hanging on a wall... Otis closed his eyes and tapped the pen against his lips as he struggled to remember. He recalled something that looked like a leash, and another object that appeared to be a muzzle meant for dogs. And the camera, of course. However, none of those frequenting Hudson's apartment appeared to be pet owners. That left Otis more puzzled than ever. There had to be something else. Without a moment's hesitation, he began searching for other uses of muzzles and leashes on the Internet. And it only took him a few quite interesting answers from the bots roaming the vast virtual world to make him close the browser and turn his phone with its face down.

Was Hudson into that sort of thing? Otis shuddered as his mind wandered. Just imagining himself wearing a leash and coming to rest his chin on Hudson's knee, his tongue lolling out, waiting for a treat, made his entire body tremble in the most impossible ways. He lay on his back, and placed both hands on his belly, waiting for the trembling to fade. Before, he had thought that his neighbor was out of his league, looks-wise and everything, but now, he had confirmation that was true. He would never be able to assume the kind of alternative lifestyle the Internet had just explained to him, where leashes and muzzles were not used on pets.

It would be better if he didn't think about his neighbor so much. Otis decided that he would do everything tonight not to think of Hudson at all. His brain needed a breather, obviously, because all night he dreamed about tattooed arms closing around him and impossible heat scorching his skin.



“How did you get those?” Hudson questioned as he took the young man's hands in his and turned them slowly. The chafing was bad. There were scars and scabs there, which meant that whoever had done that to him hadn't cared about letting him heal. Or was it a sign that his latest model preferred to torture himself?

“You know,” the reply came. “The usual way.” He drawled the words while wedging his knee between Hudson's legs and looking up.

“Oh, yeah? And what's that?” Hudson continued while taking in the marks on the thin wrists and making mental notes about the human being in front of him.

He was nineteen, he called himself Jasper – which Hudson suspected to be a fake name – and he looked like someone whose innocence had been robbed from him some time ago. His washed out

looks – blond hair, pale skin, eyes of such a light blue they looked watery – didn't make him stand out as far as appearance went, but the languid way he carried himself sent the right message. He was available and willing.

“Can I blow you?” Jasper, most probably fake Jasper, whispered and freed his hands to palm Hudson's crotch.

“No need for that,” Hudson said, moving away. He should ask his captain for a serious bonus after this; he hadn't had a proper erection in days. The pictures from the case file were haunting his dreams. And he had thought himself tough, capable of stomaching most anything. This time, it looked like there was a piece of him waiting to be snatched by the darkness of that world.

“I won't ask for extra,” Jasper whined. “You're paying well.”

Hudson ignored him and took his seat on a chair behind the camera. “It might come as a surprise to you,” he said, crossing one leg over the other at the ankle, “but I don't fuck my models.”

“Are you sure you're in the right business, man?” Jasper asked, trying to hide how hurt he was that his overture had met such a blunt refusal. “I mean, all the guys into this stuff,” he gestured vaguely at the walls, “fuck. Don't tell me you don't have a working wiener or something weird like that.”

Wiener. That was the type of thing a kid would say. Hudson consistently asked his models for their IDs, but he had seen so many fake ones so far that it had turned mostly meaningless. In the case of the age-ambiguous fellow in front of him, he had every reason to believe that he was dealing with a runaway. The accusation, however, stung more than it should. Hudson had no issues with his equipment, ever. Now, it looked like he was going through some old-age crisis, and he was several good decades too early for that.

“I happen to have all I need at home.” As he said the words, the flash of a singular blue eye, its iris rimmed with black, crossed his mind.

“Oh, really? What is he like?” Jasper asked and crossed his arms.

“What other kind of work do you do?” Hudson asked abruptly. Just thinking of Otis in front of this messed-up youth made him feel dirty. And why was he thinking of his neighbor as if he was the imaginary boyfriend? He needed to get out more, probably, he thought with grim humor.

“I can do everything,” Jasper bragged, opening his arms wide. “I hustled on the way here, you know.”

“Anything since you got here?” Hudson asked. “Has anyone approached you with some proper offer?”

Jasper took his interest as something else. He offered a toothy smile that must have looked cute in his mind. It only made Hudson pity the young man more. “You know you can have me all for yourself, daddy.”

Hudson could only do this much not to roll his eyes. He had just turned thirty. But probably, for young men like the one he was looking at now, he looked old enough to be called that. Would he look the same to Otis? Would he think the same type of stupid shit? No, Otis, despite his oddities, appeared to have an unusual kind of intelligence.

And he was doing it again, letting his mind wander to his strange, beautiful neighbor while he had a job to do, and one that required all his attention and everything he had, his soul included. “You’re into daddies?” he asked, forcing himself to smile. “What kind?”

Jasper seemed to understand that Hudson’s interest was only professional, so he straightened his back. “The kind that pays, you know?”

“I see. And have you found some lucrative business so far?”

Jasper narrowed his eyes. “You think I’m lame. You think I can’t find men to pay for my ass and mouth. That’s why you’re asking.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m asking,” Hudson said in a level tone, forcing his smile into a smirk.

Jasper huffed in annoyance. “I’ll have you know that I’m already working.”

“Oh, yeah, where?”

There was only a short moment of hesitation, and Hudson grinned more, showing his teeth. Jasper relented. “The Bouncing Bunny. I suppose a family man like you doesn’t go there. But it’s got class,” he argued, as if he was being contradicted in some way. “And customers pay big bucks to have us boys all to themselves.”

All right. That was one trashy venue to look into then. He wasn’t crazy to send anyone to Watkins, not unless he found someone he hoped would infiltrate that organization successfully and that he could control from afar. And, while Jasper fit the bill, with his lost innocence and wan smile, and the desperation shining in his eyes, he wouldn’t send him to the chopping block, either.

However, Watkins was bound for a little visit. Hudson was curious about what was on offer. “The Bouncing Bunny, huh? I might try it out,” he said.

That appeared to confuse Jasper. “But I’m right here. You don’t think that there are prettier boys than me there, do you?”

“And if I do? You said the place’s got class,” Hudson mirrored his words from earlier. He was cruel on purpose.

Blotches of red appeared on the pale skin. “You’re an asshole. I’m not going to do anything for you.” He got up and grabbed his jacket.

All for the better. Hudson didn’t care too much about his current fake job. He had selected several sets of pics so far to update the site and make it look like an alive and well-to-do place, but he didn’t want to have possibly underage strays undressing for him and his camera. That also meant that The Bouncing Bunny was going to get a new prospecting customer and soon. If all the boys there looked as young as Jasper, he had a little tip to offer to the right department. However, he needed to see if The Bouncing Bunny was part of the human trafficking ring or not.



It hadn’t worked at all, Otis thought grimly as he walked back home. The restaurant wasn’t very far from his apartment building, and he liked the exercise, regardless of the weather. He had tried to think less of Hudson, but quite the opposite had happened. It hadn’t helped that Jackie hadn’t been there tonight, as usual, to serve as a distraction. It baffled Otis to the extreme that so much of his mental space was inhabited by his neighbor. Maybe it was all because he had unfinished business with the man. In life, one needed to have guts; he had read that exact thing somewhere, but he didn’t recall where. And this type of situation required guts.

He would knock on his neighbor’s door tonight. He would apologize again for the spying, and then he would offer payment for the dating advice he needed. Was Hudson expensive? As someone who had just come into a little bit of money, Otis thought it right to provide himself with a little extravagance. Of course, there was the matter of not exactly knowing his neighbor’s rates when it came to that kind of thing, but maybe they could work something out, like business partners. Yeah, that sounded about right.

And, before he lost all his courage, he decided to do it right now. As grandma used to say, no moment like the present, and there was also that nice quote she used about the present being a gift. That was a gift Otis was planning on putting to good use tonight.

He decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator, and by the time he reached the landing on the fifth floor, he was already breathless. However, the restless energy that had propelled him into action was now a bit subdued, so that he could control his thought-mouth coordination when talking to Hudson.

He paced the landing a few times, determined to get his breathing under control before doing what he was there for. Once he decided he no longer sounded like he had run a marathon, he stepped in front of 505 and knocked. There was a chance that Hudson wasn’t home, and that

would be a tad disappointing, especially since he worried that his newfound courage might deprecate before he got the chance to try again.

He was still lost in thought when the door opened in front of him. Hudson was there, right in front of him, and the way he looked rendered Otis speechless. He wasn't wearing a shirt and that left his chest bare. The beautifully shaped pectorals made Otis's mouth go dry and, to escape them, he moved his eyes lower, over the well-defined abdomen, only to have them come to rest on two symmetrical tattoos engraved over the external oblique muscles. They represented some sort of gun, the barrels pointing at the V the lower abs were making at a slanted angle. Otis felt a new kind of terror flaring inside his mind. He couldn't tear his eyes away. They were glued there, while his mind was supplementing the details that were still hidden to the naked eye by low-cut blue jeans, hanging over sexy hips.

"You have more tattoos," he whispered.

Hudson sighed, like it pained him even to talk to Otis. "Are you here for an inventory of my tattoos? And my eyes are up here."

Otis finally managed to unglue his eyes from the sight of those gun tattoos and looked Hudson in the face. "Do you need an inventory of your tattoos? I wouldn't mind."

Hudson laughed and crossed his arms, leaning against the door jamb. "Why are you here, Otis?"

"Right." Otis reached into his pocket and took out the tip money he had collected over the last few days. "As you can see, I have come into a little bit of money. Now, I can pay."

Hudson blinked once and then frowned, although the corners of his lips curled upward, a clear sign that he couldn't be mad. "For what?"

"Dating advice."



Hudson had been killing time before the opening of The Bouncing Bunny, and the last thing he'd been expecting was to see his nosy neighbor at his door. And now, Otis was there, handing him a few neatly folded bills with both hands and leaning forward, like a Japanese businessman offering his card. This wasn't a good time. In one hour, he'd be out the door, heading over to a shady venue that probably exploited youths who didn't have anywhere to go or were unable to fend for themselves, young men who sold their bodies like they were nothing. And now, he had this young man standing there, so unlike all the men that had visited his apartment over the last few days.

It wasn't a good idea to have Otis over. No, not a good idea at all. However, some of the weariness that had been growing in him since he had taken over the case seemed to lift the moment his eyes met that singular amazing blue eye. Without thinking twice, he moved out of the door and gestured for Otis to follow. "Come on in, then."

Otis moved past him and Hudson closed the door behind them, not before looking – force of habit – up and down the corridor for any sign of suspicious strangers.

"So, what do you want to know?" he asked.

Otis sat gingerly on the sofa, but only after Hudson insisted. "About dating. I can pay." He was still holding out the neatly folded bills.

"Put that back in your pocket. I'm not charging for this. But, first of all, let me get this clear. What makes you think I could give you dating advice?"

"You date a lot," Otis pointed out, as if it were some obvious fact that Hudson wasn't aware of.

He actually dated very little. Ever since making detective, he hadn't paid much attention to dating anyone. Hooking up, yeah, he did that, but getting involved with someone? That hadn't been in the cards for a long time.

"What exactly makes you think that?" Hudson was standing, but at a fair distance, so as not to startle the strange, beautiful creature sitting on his sofa. However, it appeared that even so his mere presence was tangling up Otis's speech. The words coming out of the pretty mouth that made him think that a term like Cupid's bow was aptly applied were a stuttered mess.

It didn't take a genius to realize that Otis was ogling him. He was trying not to, but the way he bit his bottom lip, turning his eyes away only to move them back was so endearing that Hudson felt something akin to a wave of pleasant sensations moving through his chest.

"You are comfortable with other men," Otis finally explained.

"And you're not?" Hudson asked and moved closer, drawn to the pretty man in front of him.

Otis shook his head slowly, while his only visible eye remained glued to Hudson.

Hudson smiled and put one hand on Otis's head, running his fingers through the silky hair, marveling at the strange contrast between the dark roots and the rest of it. Otis stared at him, his lips parted, moist and inviting. What would it take to have him? Hudson wondered. What would it take to scare him off, as he should?

The fascinating blue eye blinked slowly, so slowly that it seemed unnatural. Hudson felt enthralled beyond reasonable thought. He tipped Otis's chin, caressing it and then leaned over. He closed his eyes as he brushed his lips against the soft mouth waiting for him. There was no

resistance, just a sort of startled passivity. Hudson waited against himself to be pushed away, but, when nothing happened, he moved his tongue to taste the pretty lips properly. A small soft moan escaped Otis's mouth, and Hudson took it as an invitation. He cupped the blond head with one hand to help himself into that maddening kiss.

Otis tasted amazing. Hudson wanted more—

He almost stumbled and fell on his ass when he was pushed away. Otis rushed out of the room and then the front door opened and slammed shut, while hurried steps faded away.

He looked around, a bit startled and confused. What on earth was he doing, flirting with his neighbor? Then, he winced as he felt the not-so-familiar-lately straining in his pants. He grabbed his crotch and groaned. "Are you fucking kidding me?" he asked, his words bouncing back to him in the empty apartment.

For days, he had looked at attractive men in all kinds of sexy outfits and getups, or wearing nothing at all, and his dick had remained as limp as if it served no particular purpose but hanging around like an old wino at a seedy bar. And now? It was up and about only from a mostly innocent kiss.

Hudson increased the grip on his erection until the itch went away. He had work to do; getting hard over his pretty neighbor was not part of it.



Otis clenched his hand into a fist over his chest. His heart was hammering. He was sweating so much that his shirt clung to his back, and his cheeks were burning in shame. What had just happened? Why? His brain struggled within the confines of his skull, searching for a way out. Was that what a real kiss felt like? And people weren't instantly dying or combusting from them? How was it possible?

Without actually doing any thinking, he began undressing, decided that he needed a cold shower. His entire body was burning. He stepped under the spray and gasped when he felt the water on his skin. The shock alone helped him focus a little. He put both hands on the wall and stayed there.

Hudson, his neighbor – what was his last name? – had just kissed him. Otis touched his lips briefly. There was nothing left there, but Otis couldn't shake off the overwhelming sensations washing over him, not entirely. He let his forehead rest on the cool tile wall and took deep breaths.

His very handsome, very sexy neighbor, had kissed him. Did he kiss all the men coming into his apartment? What kind of work did he do, again? Otis squeezed his eyes shut, but it wasn't

helping. His imagination worked in unbecoming ways. Otis pressed between his legs; his neighbor made him have sex thoughts, strange thoughts that involved him spread naked on the man's sofa, wearing nothing except for maybe one of those leashes on the wall. Hudson would bring a hand to caress his back slowly until he reached lower.

That was just as far as he could go. Otis was only dimly aware of his breathing growing ragged, harsher, as the tension in his body gave in. The cold water carried everything away, even the signs of that shameful release. He shuddered, his eyes still close. Hudson should never know that he had been thinking of him like that. It was wrong; Otis knew it, and yet, he couldn't bring himself to feel bad about it. His body trembled for a while, first from the slowly fading eddies of pleasure, and then from how cold he felt.

He turned off the water and walked back into the room, using a towel to dry his hair and rub it against his skin. He needed to be careful about not catching cold, especially now that he had just gotten a promotion at work.

That had been a kiss, he thought, as he lay on the bed, his arms spread out to his sides, his eyes on the ceiling. "Grandma, someone kissed me today," he whispered, as his cheeks began to burn. Of course, he wouldn't tell her about what that kiss did to him, but he could tell her something else. "It was like nothing I've ever felt in my life. It was amazing."



Finding The Bouncing Bunny hadn't been an easy feat. The place wasn't listed anywhere, Internet research hadn't produced much, and if those weren't signs that something was very wrong about the place, Hudson didn't know what else it could be. However, his street smarts didn't let him down. He knew how he looked, with his tattoos and rough appearance. He had led a different kind of life before becoming a detective, running wild, doing whatever he believed would make him feel free until, quite soon, he had come to the realization that so-called freedom was overrated.

Asking here and there as he walked through rundown neighborhoods finally brought him to the front of what looked like a door leading into a cave. It was quite apropos; shady dealings weren't meant for sunlight. He entered without being challenged by anyone, but once he was inside a heavyset man on the north side of two hundred and fifty pounds put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, pal."

Hudson took in the long stage that was probably meant for some type of striptease entertainment. There was no one dancing in skimpy clothes on the elevated dais at the moment. There were very few clients, too, and they were all nursing drinks.

He waited for a moment to reply to the brute palming his shoulder just enough to prove that he was someone people didn't usually mess with. "Hi," he said and turned his head to face the man. "I've heard good things about this place," he added. "Although it looks kind of empty."

"You here for boys?" the brute asked.

Straight to the point. Hudson nodded.

"They don't happen until later. Go to the bar. Drink."

What a pleasant welcome, Hudson thought dryly and obeyed. This kind of place was probably concealing its usual source of income by providing outrageously expensive drinks to the patrons. He took a place at one of the tables around the stage and waited as his eyes began scanning his surroundings.



A couple of hours later, and what would count as an enormous expense as far as drinks went – Hudson had chosen the path of moderation while trying not to come across as frugal – the show started rolling in front of his eyes. The boys, because they could hardly be called men, presented themselves with languid moves that appeared to whet the appetite of those watching at a snail's pace. Hudson pondered. He had gotten into the place without any problem. That meant that the owners who ran the club weren't worried about the police. It also meant that, most probably, they had some solid fake ID business helping them, to prove that their employees were of legal age. That was one theory. Hudson was all the more intrigued.

"Hey, family man," someone called for him. Jasper stretched on his belly and came level with Hudson's eyes. "I thought you were too good for the likes of me."

Hudson smiled and waved a bill in front of the young man, watching how his eyes followed it avidly. "I thought I'd try it out. Say, what's the usual MO around here? Who do I ask for a special lap dance or something?"

Jasper pouted but grabbed the bill from Hudson's hand, putting it carefully into his skimpy underwear. "You could have had me for free. Don't tell me you want to pay now."

"Maybe I'm here for the atmosphere," Hudson joked. "How about you and a friend? How does that sound?"

Jasper turned his head, and it took Hudson only a moment to realize that he was searching for someone with his eyes. "I'll go ask and arrange something," he said, all business-like. And then, as if he had just remembered that he was supposed to be in this for pleasure, too, he offered

Hudson the same toothy grin as before. Just like then, it was lackluster, and only a sign that something important had been lost some time ago.

The brute from before came to escort him down a long hallway, his attitude somewhat deferential now that Hudson was a paying customer. “Do you like ’em young?” he joked and neighed like a horse.

“The younger, the better,” Hudson said with a shrug.

“We got all kinds here,” the brute said and opened the door to a red room, in which a round bed was placed in the middle with a couple of chairs around it. Despite the shocking crimson color, upon a closer inspection, the appointments appeared cheap as if they had been shopped for at a discount store for used things.

Hudson made a show of trying the bed springs and nodded as if he was satisfied with it. He had his back to the brute and wasn’t in the least surprised when the man grabbed his arms and began searching his pockets. “Hey, man, what the hell?” he protested for show.

“A photographer? Like for newspapers and shit?” the brute asked.

“No. I’m an artist,” Hudson said with self-importance. “Erotic photography.”

“Is anyone paying for it?”

“Yes.”

“So, you here to take photos of them boys?”

“Yes. I will pay.”

“You be damn sure you pay,” the brute said and pushed him away. Then, he pushed the stolen card into Hudson’s chest. “But no funny business. No newspapers and shit. We don’t need that kind around.”

“I’m not a reporter.” He was someone much worse than that for the kind of business they ran at The Bouncing Bunny. But he wasn’t keen on volunteering that information.

The brute seemed convinced. “Well, enjoy yourself, photographer. No funny business,” he repeated and wagged his finger at Hudson.

Hudson put his hands up and offered a grin full of teeth. “No funny business,” he promised.

Chapter Four – The Kind of Neighbors that Kiss

Hudson stepped into the elevator and pressed his forefingers against his temples, forcing a groan out of himself as he leaned against the wall. Two days after having paid that visit to The Bouncing Bunny, and he still felt the grime of that place on his skin. He had taken photos of the two young men while giving them free reign to pet each other – nothing too raunchy, he had ordered, some people liked using their imagination – and he had focused the phone camera on their faces, trying to catch them at good angles so that he could search for them in the missing persons database he accessed using his usual credentials. It was a tedious task that had kept him awake more than it should have, but he couldn't stop himself from doing it. The captain kept telling him he couldn't save everyone. That still left room for saving some, right?

“Hold the door, please,” someone called out and Hudson immediately held up his arm to do as asked.

He was rather surprised to see his neighbor, his cute neighbor who had run out of his apartment after being kissed as if his house had been on fire, rushing into such close quarters with him, looking a little flushed and breathless.

“How're you doing?” he asked with a polite smile, meant for neighbors he didn't know anything about. Except that he knew a couple of things about this one, didn't he? He stole a glance at Otis. He was biting his bottom lip and looking ahead. Was the young man trying to ignore him? That would do both of them a world of good.

“I'm fine, thank you for your kind question,” Otis replied in his usual, over the top formal fashion. “And how are you?”

“I've been better. Thank you for your kind question,” Hudson mimicked.

The elevator seemed to move at a snail's pace. There was an awkward silence between them until the car stopped. Hudson made a move to get to the door, and Otis hurried toward it at the same time, which made them clash and look at each other, equally startled.

There were things you could change in the world, right? Philosophers and the like said so; they said it was healthy. Hudson made the decision in the blink of an eye. “Are you still looking for dating advice?” he asked.

“Yes, always,” Otis replied and blushed. He bit his bottom lip again and looked away.

“How about now?” Hudson offered. For some reason, the youth in front of him didn't think himself dating material and that was a mistake. Also, since he appeared to be so gullible despite his strange mannerisms, he could also fall victim to bad people. Hudson was already preparing a mental lecture. Damn, maybe he was getting old. Older than his years, obviously.



That had been an unexpected encounter. Otis had played various scenarios in his mind regarding the best way to act when seeing Hudson again. Apparently, his imagination had a way of running away with him, because, invariably, he visualized himself getting pressed against a wall, a sofa, a bed, or even the floor, by his neighbor's hard body and made to yield to another kiss. He had to stop imagining ever seeing Hudson again altogether just to stop the boiling in his blood. Well, maybe it didn't boil, because that would cause his death, but there was a definite rise in temperature he experienced if he did as little as think of those tattoos pointing at a certain part of his neighbor's anatomy.

His grandma used to say that fate had its ways to work itself out. Even the direst circumstances shouldn't make you lose hope. That was a beautiful thought; Otis had always thought so.

Right now, fate was offering him a chance. Hudson was offering more dating advice, so he had to take it because a 'no' at the wrong time might close that door for him forever.

"Yes," he replied energetically to his neighbor's question. "I would love to."

"Then, please, be my guest for the next ten minutes or so," Hudson said.

"Ten minutes? That sounds like a very short time for proper advice," Otis commented.

"You're in the habit of cutting these little sessions of ours quite short," Hudson said as they walked side by side down the hallway. He added a smile to that, and Otis made the mistake of looking at him. That dimple was there. It drew his eyes and he wanted to look at it from up close, maybe even touch it. "Is there something on my face?"

Otis shook his head. "You have a dimple. It's funny. It makes me want to poke you."

Hudson laughed and opened the door to his apartment. "Come on. I'll answer your questions and give you some thoughts of my own. But no poking, please."

"Of course not. I don't act on my impulses," Otis replied with emphasis. "I'm a thinking person."

"Until you're not." The last words were said so quietly that he almost missed them.

However, it seemed dishonest to pretend. "I heard that," he said.

"Damn, you're a smartass," Hudson commented and chuckled.

Even the way he chuckled made him sound like a man, Otis mused. Yes, everything about Hudson was manly, from the short stubble on his face to the way he moved with so much

confidence in his muscles, joints and bones. There was so much to learn from him. Otis felt truly excited about it.

Hudson invited him to sit on the same sofa, and Otis decided to project the right image this time around. He took his seat with determination and then looked up at his host expectantly. "I'm ready," he said, after a few unnerving moments during which Hudson just stood there, a couple of feet away, staring at him. There was also the matter of all those leashes and muzzles on the wall, and Otis had to use all his power not to let his eyes stray there. The need to ask questions would surely come next. Something told him that they weren't far enough into dating advice to bring those up.

"Let's start with something simple," Hudson began. Otis nodded eagerly. "Have you ever kissed someone?"

"Yes," Otis lied. He wasn't thinking at the moment, as much as he thought himself to be a thinking person. He couldn't help staring at Hudson, and that made his throat go dry. The way his neighbor crossed his arms, exposing his sleeve tattoos, was enough for him to turn hot and cold from one moment to the next. How was it possible to feel like that in Hudson's presence? Did Hudson realize what he was doing to people, only by walking in the world, with that purposeful stride, with those strong arms, with that confident look in his eyes?

"Let me make a few things clear. We're not talking here about the way you kiss your mom good night," Hudson said.

Otis felt his chest turning inward. His mom had never liked good night kisses. He couldn't remember one occasion she had let him kiss her.

Hudson took his silence for something else. "Look, Otis, it seems to me that you don't kiss much. And, if you want to date, kissing sort of comes with the territory."

He clasped his hands tightly and held them pressed against his knees. "I do kiss. Boys. Men." His face was getting hotter and hotter by the minute.

Finally, he dared to look up. Hudson was staring at him with a stricken expression on his face. "Wow. Does my breath stink or something, then?"

Otis knew his face had to be beet-red by now; most probably, the whites of his eyes were making an ugly contrast against all that red. Hudson was obviously referencing their kiss. He looked down, feeling chastised. "No, it doesn't. You... taste good." He took one deep inhalation at the end of that, his chest tight and uncomfortable.

"Okay," Hudson said gently. "Then, what happened? Did you forget and leave your oven on?"

"I don't have an oven."

“Then what are you eating? Never mind. One look at you is enough to answer my question.”

“I have a breakfast maker,” Otis whispered, his voice already squealy and unnatural.

“Why are we talking about kitchen appliances?”

“You brought it up,” Otis felt it necessary to point out.

Hudson, to his surprise, sighed deeply. “Why do you need dating advice, Otis?”

“Because,” he began, feeling that he was finally stepping onto firm ground, “I am very bad at it.”

“I don’t see why. You’re well-behaved, neat, beautiful.”

The last word hit him right in the chest. He raised his eyes. “Beautiful?” he whispered.

You’re ugly. You’re so ugly. How do you expect anyone to tolerate you around them?

The words, hissed at him so many times paired with alcohol-infused breath, made him turn his face away until his chin was grabbed hard and he was forced to look into those eyes filled with hate for him for reasons he had never understood.

“Yes, beautiful,” Hudson repeated the word, without realizing what such a simple thing could do to him. “So, it appears to me that the only obstacles in your way are of your own making. Let’s talk a little, and let me explain to you some things about men, and how to choose the right kind from the many douchebags who’ll surely want to bang you.”

Otis was breathless. He looked at Hudson for any signs that it was all just a mean joke to him. Maybe his neighbor considered him pitiful, unable to date at his age of twenty-two and all. But all he saw on that ragged face was honesty, or so he thought.



Hudson had no idea what to make of his cute neighbor’s reaction to being called just what he was. The slightly parted lips were maddening if he only looked at them. They reminded him of the kiss they had shared not too long ago. *You... taste good.* Such a simple admission from a beautiful young man who was staring at him as if he had just seen something astonishing, never having been seen before.

He had no intention of being a flirt. In retrospect, the kiss had been a mistake, but he wouldn’t say it out loud. Otis was likely to misunderstand, as it seemed to be his usual reaction to almost everything. He was fragile, Hudson realized. He needed to be treated gently and with care. Was there such a person as a good man for Otis out there? The young man deserved him if he existed.

To gather his thoughts and explain to Otis how to search for such a man and not waste his time and effort on douchebags, he let his eyes travel to the wall of BDSM paraphernalia. Was he really the guy to give proper advice? Otis didn't know his true purpose here, but a wall full of whips, paddles, leashes and whatnot didn't serve well to recommend him.

He sensed Otis getting up from his seat and walking toward him. He turned his head just a moment too late. The next, Otis was all over him, wrapping his arms clumsily around his shoulders and going for a kiss. The surprise was so great, and Otis so enthusiastic in his attack that Hudson lost his balance and, together with his neighbor, he ended up slipping out of the chair and right onto the floor.

Otis appeared little fazed by their fall and continued to search Hudson's mouth with his tongue. Their lips met without much trouble, and the eagerness that exuded from the other's entire being knocked him off his feet. Which was very apropos, seeing how they were already sprawled on the floor.

All thoughts about mistakes and doing the right thing flew out the window that very moment. Otis's mouth was so hot on his, and even if it appeared that its owner had close to no clue in regards to what he was doing, it felt better than anything else he had experienced in his life so far. That was quite high praise for the pretty klutz in his arms. At some point, without even realizing it, he had also wrapped his arms around the other and was now holding him close.

As the guy in charge, as he should have been, he had to guide them both along that treacherous path. So, he snuck one hand up to bury into the lush hair at the back of Otis's head, to steady him in his attack and retreat flailing stratagem. He imposed the rhythm by taking the other's plump lips between his and then coaxing them into opening so that he could sneak his tongue inside and begin to taste Otis properly.

His cute neighbor had one sweet mouth on him. He was also emitting the cutest moans Hudson had ever heard in his life. The men he had hooked up with were usually experienced, business-like, just like him. It wasn't like him even to approach someone like Otis. Not that he didn't like this kind of buttoned-up, tidied-up, endearing young men. Quite the contrary. But he was firm in his beliefs that he wasn't the right type for them, and that it was obvious from the get-go that there was no point in trying.

It looked like such beliefs no longer held their usual place at the moment, because he was enjoying kissing Otis a lot. Even more, he was being kissed back, a slippery tongue, as sweet as honey, moving in and out of his mouth, in simulation of something else. He could tell that his cock very much agreed with that provocation, and he used one arm to press Otis against him hard, to make him understand exactly what his erratic attacks were doing to him.

He moved his other hand from the back of Otis's head to his ear, slowly massaging its edge between his thumb and forefinger, then stroking it slowly against the temple next to the never

seen eye. His fingers met a raised ridge of flesh and, just as he was trying to figure out what it was, Otis stopped abruptly and pulled himself away from the touch.

Hudson had to admit that he couldn't really remember the last time a kiss had left him as breathless as he was now. Otis touched his temple, self-consciously.

"How did you get that?" Hudson asked, not one to beat around the bush.

"It doesn't matter," Otis replied and pulled his bangs down to cover the area properly.

Not a lie, not *it's an old scar*, not something along the lines of *you wouldn't believe the kind of crazy things I used to do as a kid*. What wasn't being said hung heavily between them. Hudson caressed Otis's face. "Is your shyness curable, after all?" he asked playfully, not wanting to press something that shouldn't concern him. After all, they were nothing but neighbors. The kind of neighbors that kissed each other breathless.



Otis couldn't believe a lot of things. It was as if, ever since that morning, he had turned into someone else, brave enough to lunge at his handsome neighbor and start kissing him. Another astonishing thing had been that he hadn't been pushed away, but instead, kissed back. Of course, there was the matter of the Wound, with a capital W, something that people usually didn't comment on, but Hudson had, nonetheless. Missy at work hadn't said a word about it, nor had his manager, but maybe they just didn't care. The customers hadn't been put off by the sight of it, since Mr. Smith had him keep both his eyes bare, and that had been a relief, too. About Jackie, Otis wasn't so sure. While talking to him, Otis had tried to face him by offering only his good side, so maybe the reason why Jackie still seemed so keen on turning him into arm candy was that he hadn't noticed.

"My shyness is the problem," he said energetically, as he finally remembered that he still had a tongue, as much as he had been keen on lending it to Hudson indefinitely for the last several minutes. Was that how long the kiss had lasted? It had felt short and long at the same time. And, lo and behold, he hadn't combusted from it. Go figure; he just needed some proper exposure, after all.

Hudson smiled at him and caressed his face slowly. "Well, it looks like something good did come out of this little session of ours. You kissed me."

Otis munched on his bottom lip nervously. "Yes," he squeaked. Why was he back to feeling awkward, after having kissed Hudson? That had been insanely brave, now that he looked back. But it had turned out well, because Hudson hadn't appeared to mind it at all. On the contrary, there had been signs of a certain type of desire being awakened in the other.

And now that he thought about the hardness poking him in the crotch, the one behind the fly of Hudson's jeans, he was starting to feel breathless again.

"So, do you believe me now?" Hudson asked, unexpectedly.

"About what?" Otis shot back, while trying to adjust his position without drawing too much attention to himself.

"That you're beautiful. I wouldn't kiss just anyone," Hudson said, and he had that playful smile on, the one that showed his dimple the most.

"I kissed you," Otis pointed out.

"Ah, you're such a stickler for details. How about we return to a vertical position?" Hudson proposed.

"Certainly," Otis said right away. He tried to push himself up, but Hudson caught him again and kissed him tenderly on the lips without sneaking in his tongue this time around.

It was only after that Hudson allowed him to get to his feet. Otis offered his hand and Hudson took it. Once they were both up, Otis couldn't help but notice the difference in height between them once again. This time, however, he did tip his head back to look at his neighbor. "Can you teach me?" he said in a heartbeat, before he lost all courage.

"Teach you about dating?" Hudson asked and brought one hand up to push Otis's hair behind his ear, the one opposite to the side with the Wound.

"Yes."

"Okay."

"How much do you charge?" Otis asked dutifully.

Hudson's dark eyes bore into his. It was easy to get dizzy just by looking. "Are we still on about that? For you, it's free."

"So, it isn't free for the other men," Otis concluded out loud.

"What men? Ah, you mean, my usual visitors," Hudson said and laughed for no apparent reason. "You are nothing like them."

Otis finally got the guts to look at the wall with leashes. "Do they like to pretend to be dogs?"

"Dogs?" Hudson seemed a bit surprised by the question. "Yes, some of them."

"Can I do that?"

“No.” The answer had been a bit too forceful, and it took Otis by surprise. Could it be that it was actually Hudson who...? No, that couldn't be right. He seemed more like a dog owner to him. “Here is what I suggest, Otis. If you're in a hurry to date, just don't. Not until I teach you everything you need to know to land the right boyfriend.”

That seemed reasonable. Otis had thought himself in a bit of a hurry, being twenty-two and all, but now he had a teacher, so he could postpone it a bit. “I would very much like that,” he said directly. “And I'm no longer in a hurry, now that I have found you.”

“Good.” Hudson patted him on the head and then kissed him on the forehead. “Then, off you go now. Whenever you feel in the need for advice, knock on my door.”

Otis was in a daze as he was guided toward that same door. Only after he reached his apartment did he realize that it would've been easier to ask Hudson for his phone number and establish their business meetings by that method of communication.



Hudson drew one long breath after Otis's footsteps in the hallway faded for good. What exactly was he doing? In all honesty, he had no idea how to teach Otis how to find the perfect man. He didn't know how to find one for himself, so what good was he as a teacher? And the whole thing was completely nuts if he only took a damn moment to think about it.

Of course, there was always a way to rationalize his actions. He wanted to keep his neighbor safe. One way to do it was to keep him from dating the wrong men. Otis seemed the obedient type, so it hadn't been difficult to fool him.

Hudson ran one hand over his face and groaned loudly. With all of the times in his life when he had been available to pursue someone he really liked, why was it happening now? He liked his cute neighbor, maybe a bit too much. His clumsy kisses were the best and made him feel alive like no one and nothing else had.

Yeah, Otis must have felt his erection. He hadn't seemed put off by it. That meant that he was a red-blooded man and one with no hang-ups after all, and that was good news. For a while, Hudson had feared that Otis might have been the victim of some sort of sexual abuse or at least harassment in his past, but his desire had been real and natural, with nothing of the feverish need or its opposite, the revulsion that stemmed from the mere possibility of the act. Those were the two sides of the same coin he had noticed in people who had gone through such horrible events in their lives.

For now, things on that front would remain as they were. While he went about his investigation, he could keep his pretty neighbor from falling into the arms of the wrong man. In the meantime,

Hudson would find a way to lecture him properly on the kind of man he was supposed to search for.

Damn, what a mess. He shook his head in mirth. Yet, somehow, it looked like the sort of mess that could keep him sane for a while. There was still good in the world, right? And good people.



Otis could hardly believe his luck. He felt so excited and in need of sharing with someone the news that he had kissed a man and gotten kissed back. All along with the promise of learning how to date properly. What else could he hope for? He had felt too shy to give grandma all the details during his daily recounting of events when he was talking to her, because there were too many things that made him blush in there.

However, there was someone who might want to hear about his foray into the world of proper dating advice, and that was his colleague, Missy. They were on break now, Missy vaping with a frown on her face from a small pink device and blowing scented mist into the air.

“Take my advice, Otis,” she said while shaking her tower of hair, “never smoke. I got into this,” she pointed at the thing in her hand, “and now I’m addicted to one more thing. Plus, I feel that I look like a douchebag, either way.”

“You don’t look like a douchebag,” Otis said promptly, and he really meant it.

Missy looked at him for a moment and laughed. “You’re such a good kid. Mr. Smith said we shouldn’t comment on it, but, between friends, how did you get that scar?” She pointed at her own temple, but Otis knew what she meant.

He just shook his head, the familiar buzzing in his ears growing louder. “It was a long time ago.”

“So sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” she said sympathetically and patted his arm. “Consider I haven’t asked.”

That was a difficult thing to do, seeing how he knew she had, but there was nothing to be done to take it back. So, as his grandma used to say, he needed to let it slide because it was good to have Missy as a friend. She had just said that. She had said the words ‘between friends’.

He smiled.

“Anything good happen to you lately?” Missy asked. “You look pretty happy.”

“Oh, yes, and I wanted to tell a friend,” Otis declared.

Missy stared at him for a moment, smiling with her eyes. “Come on, tell me,” she said. “Or I’m not a friend?”

“You are,” Otis said hurriedly, deciding not to insult his coworker who was now his friend. “Well,” he began, realizing that he was finding it difficult to get the words out. “I kissed a man. A man kissed me.” The phrases shot out of him like a gun popping bullets.

“Wow,” Missy said and grinned. “Was it good?”

“I almost combusted because of it,” Otis admitted. “Is it always this good?”

Missy looked at him nonplussed for a moment. “Wait. Are you trying to tell me you didn’t kiss anyone until this guy?”

He couldn’t confess such a thing to Hudson, who was so experienced, but he could say it to Missy. “Not much. Not exactly. I mean, not at all.”

“Wow. So, gay guys can be blind, too.” Missy shook her head. “Okay, okay, just tell me about this guy. Is he hot?”

Otis revisited the image of Hudson he now carried with him in his head all the time. “He is this tall,” he explained by putting one hand up, “and he has many visible muscles, because his t-shirts tend to be tight. He has a great neck and a lot of tattoos.”

“Tattoos? Wow, did you get yourself a bad boy, Otis?” Missy nudged him playfully in the ribs. “Where did you find him?”

“In the elevator,” Otis supplied right away.

Missy laughed. “Naughty. Did he jump your bones, or was it the other way around?”

There was no point in dwelling on that first kiss. Otis had run away from it, and that was embarrassing to admit. “It was reciprocal, but I went first,” he explained.

“Get out of here,” Missy exclaimed and smacked him on the chest with the back of her hand. “No way!”

Otis straightened himself up. “I understand that it sounds incredible.”

“It sure does! I mean, you’re such a goody two shoes all the time. I suppose you’re actually a tiger, not a kitten.” Missy meowed like a cat and made her hand mimic a paw with claws, slashing through the air with her cherry red fingernails.

It was pretty funny, so he laughed. “Maybe I am.”

“Tell me more about those tattoos,” Missy said and looked at him with droopy eyes.

Otis began explaining. "He has these, up to here," he pointed up to his elbow, "and then, he has these guns, here," he added and angled both palms to make Missy understand.

His colleague's eyes grew wide. "Double, no, triple wow, Otis. So you've seen him naked?"

"Just without a t-shirt," Otis said dutifully.

"Good for you, anyway." Missy nodded energetically. "However, my sweet boy, since I can tell you don't have much experience as far as bad boys are concerned, let me give you some advice."

It was so wonderful. Now Missy was giving him advice, too, although she was a girl and had a bad dating history. However, as grandma used to say, bad stuff could also teach you something.

Missy continued, oblivious to whatever was going on in his head. "These guys are really sexy, and I'm going to be the first to admit it. But trust me, most of them are frogs and remain frogs. Kiss them all you want, they won't turn into princes."

Otis nodded dutifully. He had no idea what Missy meant by that, except that he could tell that Hudson had nothing of a frog about him.

"Now," Missy said, "this guy, if he's like many I've met in my life, he's going to want to get freaky with you. When that happens, make sure to be firm about protected sex. Nothing without the rubber, my friend. Are you with me?"

"Condoms, of course," Otis replied. "Sex must always be safe."

Missy sighed. "Yeah, too bad there are no condoms for your heart. Anyway, moving on. I'm not only talking about sex that involves, you know, penetration." She looked around and her voice dropped to a whisper. Even though Missy was famous for her big mouth, she didn't want to be heard talking about this. Maybe it was a big secret. "Now, listen to me. The guy says anything about you going down on him, refuse politely. Even better, point down at your best friend and say 'dinner is served, sir'. If he says no, throw him back into the pond. Get it?"

Hmm, so he needed to start calling Hudson 'sir'. Since he was his teacher and older, it was only polite. Good thing he had Missy to remind him of things like that.

"I'm talking about blow jobs, Otis," Missy said slowly, emphasizing every word.

"Yes, yes," he replied hurriedly.

"Good, I'm relieved that you understand. I don't always know with you so, sorry about being blunt, but I had to make sure. Don't suck his dick. That will give him too much power over you. Also, sucking on a condom is not that much fun, no matter what they say." She looked toward the door as someone opened it. "Yeah, yeah, we're coming," she shouted.

"Thank you for all the advice, Missy," Otis said politely.

She patted him on the shoulder and put her vaping device back in her pocket. “No problem. You deserve plenty of good in your life.”

Chapter Five – Twilight

In all honesty, Hudson had been expecting that call. He picked up, pretending that he didn't know who was calling, although he had saved that number in his phone the moment he had received the card from those gloved hands.

“Mr. Vegas,” Watkins called from the other end. Not a question, not a greeting.

“Yes, this is he. Who's calling?” Hudson asked.

“I paid a visit to you the other day. You were unhappy with my appraising your merchandise.”

Hudson moved his phone from one ear to the other, to gain time – and pretend that he still couldn't place the man calling. So, the asshole hadn't forgotten about seeing Otis at his place. “Merchandise?” he asked. “Oh, Mr. Watkins. I apologize. I should have saved your number. Business has been crazy lately.”

“I can tell,” Watkins said dryly. “Your website is booming with newcomers. And yet, you've sent not one our way.”

Our way. Of course. Just as he had thought, Watkins was an underling, one with some leeway, without a doubt, but still a subordinate. “What can I tell you? It seems like only college kids with a sense of adventure drop by. They're not exactly your type, if I recall correctly.”

“But you did have a few of those,” Watkins said airily. “A young man. Jasper, I think his name is.”

Hudson frowned. He hadn't published the photos he had taken of Jasper and his other friend at The Bouncing Bunny. What was Watkins playing at? And had Jasper already found his way into that cold man's clutches? Hmm, his moves at that seedy club must have been watched and reported.

“He's not particularly attractive,” Hudson argued, without asking how Watkins knew about the boy. He had to pretend to be pretty stupid, too, or at least too full of himself to take a moment to think things through. “I thought your standards would be higher.”

“Oh, he'll do,” Watkins said airily. “For what we have in mind for him.”

“And what might that be?” Hudson asked, pretending that he wasn't really interested and was just asking out of politeness.

“How about you pay a visit to our select club?” Watkins proposed.

Something was fishy. Watkins either suspected him or wanted something else from him. It didn't matter. He intended very strongly to pay a visit to that select club, whatever hellhole it would be.

“I’m busy... and it looks like our businesses don’t really align,” he said, the opposite of what Watkins was expecting from a babbling fool like him.

“Oh, but I do think they could align very well,” Watkins insisted. Hudson could easily imagine the cruel smile at the other end of the conversation. “If you saw what kind of entertainment we offer, you’d definitely be more able to select the proper candidates for us. Consider it a business proposal, one in the making, Mr. Vegas.”

“Of course. If you put it like that, I feel very much obliged.”

“You know,” Watkins said after a short, measured silence, “you intrigue me, Mr. Vegas. At first glance, I’d say you’re from the rougher part of town. Any town. But upon closer inspection, you strike me as someone with an education.”

Of course. A shmuck. Someone who put on a few tattoos and tried to make it big in the porn industry, while having not a clue about the real players. Hudson very much liked to believe that his assumed persona had already fooled a shark like Watkins. However, he wasn’t willing to walk blindly into this. Or to trust Watkins in everything he said, for that matter.

“I went to college. However, accounting felt too boring for me. Plus, I have the inclination to make bigger bucks than I would just working my ass off nine to five every day,” he offered the explanation Watkins was looking for.

That appeared to satisfy the man on the other end. “That’s refreshing, Mr. Vegas. It’s not often that we meet your kind in this line of business. I look forward to getting to know you better.”

Hudson was counting on that ‘we’. If there was someone above Watkins who wanted to know him, he was ready for it. “Same here, Mr. Watkins. Send me the details, and I’ll pay you a visit at the soonest.”

“How about tonight?”

Things were moving. Hopefully, not fast enough that he didn’t get to get Jasper out of some terrible situation. However, he doubted Watkins was willing to show him their most dangerous type of entertainment from the get-go, provided that his business was part of the human trafficking ring. He was, after all, someone to be known and weighed for the moment.



Hudson had called him beautiful. Otis still turned that simple word over and over in his mind, while going about his cleaning duties. The shift would soon change, and he would be on the floor, waiting on customers, but, for now, for the extra cash Mr. Smith was giving him, he did

some other chores. All in all, life felt pretty good. So, when his shift truly started, he brushed the hair out of his smaller eye without being reminded by the manager or Missy.

He saw Jackie at his usual place and walked toward his table with confidence. He had let Missy know that he didn't want to hide from such a loyal customer anymore and promised that he would always split the tips he got from the young man with her. Missy had patted his cheek in a motherly gesture and told him that, as far as that table was concerned, the tips would be all his, since it was because of him that the guy was dining there so often.

Jackie's face lit up as he walked over with the menu in his hands.

"Good evening, sir," Otis said pleasantly. "We are happy to see you again."

Jackie grinned and batted his long, curly eyelashes. "For real? And don't call me 'sir'. Weren't you saying I was too young for you?"

"I apologize for that. I shouldn't have insulted you."

Jackie waved. "Water under the bridge. Hey, what would you say about a little bit of dancing?"

"Dancing? Here?" Otis looked around. The restaurant owner took great pride in offering a pleasant quiet atmosphere, a reason for which the establishment catered mostly to seniors, and all that, without putting obscene prices on the menu.

"No, not here obviously," Jackie said and laughed. "Although, I wouldn't mind waltzing you all over the place."

Otis was impressed. He offered the menu he was still holding. "Do you know how to do that? Waltz?"

Jackie laughed again. He seemed like a very happy fellow. "I like it more when hip action is involved."

"So you prefer Latin American dances?" Otis asked, more and more intrigued by Jackie's abilities.

"You bet. But I don't mean just that. So, what do you say? Once you finish your shift, of course. I'm taking you out to the Twinlight. Do you know it?"

"No, I cannot say that I know of such a place."

"I work for the big boss there," Jackie said while nodding, although Otis hadn't asked anything else. "So, getting in is no problem at all." He flattened the air with one palm to make a point.

A night of fun and dances? Otis had never had such a thing before, but it sounded exciting, and he had always wanted to try it, at least once. However, was what Jackie proposing an invitation to a date?

He sighed. "I cannot go on dates."

"Hey, who said anything about a date? It's just friends having fun," Jackie said.

Oh, so it wasn't a date. Otis felt relieved. "If it's about fun between friends, can Missy come, too?"

Jackie seemed to ponder for a bit, his eyes blinking a few times. "Yeah, sure, why not? Although, you know, it's that kind of place. She might get hit on by some sisters."

Otis puzzled over what Jackie was saying. Why would Missy be courted by some nuns? And then, slowly, he remembered some of the things he had read on the internet. "I will ask her if she'd be bothered by that. But first, please let me know what you would like tonight."

Jackie offered him another big smile and began ordering.



Hudson took in the big sign over the large doors. It all looked so legit, right? He had seen enough in his life to know that it wasn't enough to prove Watkins and his business as being clean as a mountain spring. The young people waiting in line were dressed in hip clothes and the sounds of laughter and carefree banter filled the evening air. Definitely, this crowd didn't appear to be the kind to attend extreme porn shows. He moved along the red rope until reaching one of the bouncers keeping the crowd at bay at the entrance. "Vegas, for Mr. Watkins," he said.

It looked like the bouncer didn't need to check his name on a list and let him in right away. There was no servility in how he did that, which meant that Watkins hadn't advertised him as some big shot visiting. If anything, the bouncer appeared to scan him head to toe as if he wanted to make sure he'd be able to identify Hudson in a lineup. Okay, that was fair. To these people, shady or not, he was an unknown quantity at the moment. That meant that the moment for weighing and measuring was upon him.

The somewhat gaudy neon lights from outside didn't do justice to the interior. The inside lights, switching gently between sexy crimson and aquamarine blue, enveloped everything in a soft blanket. There was a dance floor in the middle, redolent of late seventies discos, surrounded by tables and what looked like plush sofas. As expected, a pair of stairs, opposite facing, led to a higher floor where more tables and sofas could be seen at a glance. That was where the big guys usually sat, from what Hudson knew of night clubs.

The few patrons already inside were migrating between tables and the dance floor, and that provided no justice for the people waiting outside. But it was, again, something natural for that kind of place. Until a certain hour, when the real fun began, people had to be made to wait so that they didn't notice the expensive price tag on the drinks or the simple fact that they could dance with their friends anywhere else.

He noticed Watkins at one of the tables on the upper floor right away. The man was dressed in a dark suit and had one arm resting on the frosted glass bannister that separated the table area from the open space below. Hudson would bet that the man was waiting for him, hence his very insistent invitation from earlier.

He hopped the stairs two by two, and winced at the top, as if he had strained himself too much. Watkins turned and took him in with a thin smile on his face. "Mr. Vegas. You found your way."

"Your club is one of the hippest at the moment. It wasn't hard," Hudson offered. "I'm eager to see what kind of entertainment is available. However, I must say that I'm a bit surprised. I was expecting young men in leather, ready to ignite the senses."

Watkins laughed, but the amusement didn't reach his cold eyes. The soft lights of the club, along with the music thumping through the walls, like the beating of a heart, appeared to not touch the man. In that environment, he seemed alien to his surroundings, a preamble to a horror movie, a foreshadowing of dark things to come.

"We offer special entertainment to special guests." Watkins didn't invite him to sit. Instead, he gestured at him to follow as he got up from his seat.

Hudson threw another cursory look around and walked behind his host. As he suspected. The soft-lit nightclub for the hip generation served as nothing but a front for something a lot less legit. At least, the signs pointed in that direction so far.

Soon, they were walking down a corridor painted in red appointed with a long plush carpet in the same color. The music from the club was slowly fading; even the air appeared to change, a bit cooler. Hudson shrugged his shoulders for a moment.

"You might be willing to change your mind about your little protégé," Watkins commented.

"What protégé?" Hudson asked, feeling a cold snake coiling in his gut. He absurdly thought of Otis and his beautiful eye. "You mean, Jasper?"

"Yes. The boy is quite a natural," Watkins said. "And he's the main dish tonight. Ah, one more thing." He turned just as they were about to enter a door with a keypad to the right. "You won't mind a little frisking before entering, right?"

"No, of course not," Hudson replied. He looked away as Watkins punched in a code. He had other means to get through that lock if need be.

A bouncer stepped outside on cue and patted him down without a word. Hudson held his arms up, allowing the man to feel his body for any concealed weapons. When the bouncer inspected his left calf, he held in a breath although he knew the very thin blade he had wrapped around it was impossible to detect unless someone intended to undress him completely, and not even then quickly enough.

The man gave him a short nod and turned toward Watkins to do the same. Then, he stepped away and put his hand on the door knob. As soon as the door opened in front of him, a different kind of music hit Hudson's eardrums, a mix of punk rock with modern elements, sounds made by a machine, not an instrument. The interior design of the room also appeared industrial in inspiration from which it must have been taken. The scene in the middle had metallic structures in the corner, seemingly much needed for sustaining the ceiling from which different devices hung.

They weren't in use at the moment. Jasper, who Hudson immediately recognized by his pale skin since his face was turned away from the door, was wearing nothing but a black harness, and a buff man in his late twenties was holding him by it while thrusting into him with what seemed like erotic abandonment.

"Real sex," he commented, while Watkins guided him toward one of the tables.

Hudson had to blink to adjust his eyes to the darkness engulfing the entire space around the scene. In contrast, the place where Jasper and his partner were putting on their performance was so harshly lit that it made it all look like a strange hospital room mixed with the elements of a BDSM dungeon by a weird interior decorator.

As he looked around, he could tell there were other customers already at their tables, protected by the darkness. He couldn't stare openly, because Watkins was surely watching his every move and would quickly assume the worst of him. He pretended to focus on the sex scene in front of him, leaning forward and pursing his lips, as if he were a professional plumber examining the work of an amateur. "I had no idea he would be up to something like this," he said.

"He told us about you. The man without a cock," Watkins said, without commenting on his remark at all.

Hudson turned his head toward his host abruptly, mimicking surprise. "That's not very nice of him." He couldn't see Watkins' face, but he didn't need to while his other senses were on high alert.

Watkins laughed. "Don't worry. I never trust the word of a whore. Especially when it's not what I'm looking for when I'm interested in a man." He paused for effect. "What I'm interested is whether or not he has a good pair on him. So, my question for you this evening, Mr. Vegas, would be this: do you have big balls?"

“Don’t tell me you want me to show them to you,” Hudson replied. “I only undress others for a living, not myself.”

“Don’t take it so literally, Mr. Vegas. For now, let’s enjoy the show. We’ll talk about things later.”

Hudson leaned back into his seat, pretending he was satisfied with that enigmatic reply. The buff young man pulled back, apparently finished with Jasper. Cheers and whistles erupted from the audience. All in good fun, it seemed. Hudson frowned as he watched Jasper, who seemed to be breathing hard after his earlier exertions. His skin was covered by a sheen of perspiration, and even his hair was wet. What he noticed as he moved his eyes downward made Hudson frown even more. “No condoms in the house?” he asked directly after a short, thought-out, grunt of disbelief.

“We test our models regularly,” Watkins offered affably. “Now watch, Mr. Vegas, how real money is made.”

A muscular man dressed in nothing but a skimpy jock strap jumped into the scene and grabbed a mike hanging from the ceiling. He played at the impersonation of a commentator at a sporting event as he brought the mike close to his lips. “A round of applause for our young novice, gentlemen,” he called out. “Now, who wants to see him get fucked by an even bigger cock? Place your bets, gents, place your bets.”

Hudson set his jaw hard but angled his head toward his host. “That’s quite an interesting concept. How far does it go?”

He didn’t need to see Watkins’s face in the dark. He could bet the scumbag was grinning. “As far as our dear customers still have money in their pockets. We don’t do credit cards.”

No wonder there. Was Watkins showing him something illicit? He had either done a background check on Hudson and bought into the fake persona, or he intended to intimidate him or worse by the end of the performance.

He could wait. Not an easy thing to do while watching Jasper getting straddled by another muscular man and hear him gasp and moan, not entirely sure that it was pleasure he was seeing and hearing. In the meantime, his brain was working in overdrive as he took in everything there was to glean from his surroundings.



“Wow, this place is it,” Missy commented as she took in the interior of the club, shaking her big mane of red to and fro. “But you know, Jackie, I hate you. You should have let us go home and change before coming here. I’m in my street clothes, you know?”

Jackie laughed as he took both Missy and Otis by the shoulders. “Otis told me you’re not into carpet munching. And the guys here won’t have eyes for you. So why does it matter what you’re wearing? By the way, girl, you’re fine as frog’s hair.”

“Eww, shut up,” Missy protested. “Is that how you gay dudes compliment a woman?”

“Frogs don’t have hair,” Otis contributed to the conversation in his own way.

“Hey, that’s an expression I learned from my mum,” Jackie protested. “And it is a compliment, so you two stop splitting hairs.”

“A frog’s hairs?” Otis inquired politely, although he knew for a fact that frogs really didn’t have any hair whatsoever.

Jackie squeezed his shoulder. “You’re so funny, Otis, I swear. I’ve never met anyone like you. Now, you two go up to the bar, while I’m doing the rounds for a moment. Oh, and tell the man it’s all on my tab. Go crazy.”

Otis followed Missy dutifully to the bar that looked so pretty with all those beautiful bottles lining the wall behind a tall man mixing a drink in a tall glass that he felt rightfully intimidated. The barman was impressive, not only in height, but in how muscular his upper body was. He had a green Mohawk and studs in both ears. All in all, he looked like someone from a movie set.

Otis watched Missy as she hiked herself up on a chair and did the same. When Missy placed her hands on the bar, crossing them slightly, he mimicked the move to the letter.

“Twins?” the barman asked as he finally turned his eyes on them. He appeared to stare at Otis more.

He was in a new place, so he had covered his eye so that no one felt offended by it. Not everyone was like Hudson, who thought he was beautiful regardless of his asymmetric eyes, or Mr. Smith, who cared about him not losing his eyesight.

Missy scoffed. “Thanks for the thought, but unfortunately, I didn’t share a womb with this gorgeous boy right here.” For reasons Otis couldn’t figure out, she nudged him in the ribs. Ah, she probably was making him pay attention to the proper etiquette.

Since the barman hadn’t talked to him directly, he opted for the tried and tested. “Good evening, sir. May we have a glass?”

The barman smirked and put down the drink he had been mixing. It appeared that it was early and not many customers were crowding the bar at the moment. “Hi, gorgeous boy,” he drawled while placing his elbows on the bar and leaning forward. From up close, Otis noticed that he was wearing contacts, a mesmerizing type that reflected the lights of the club in kaleidoscopic patterns. “Call me Utah. Not ‘sir’.”

“Utah, like the state? Is that where you’re from?” Otis asked, surprised by such an unusual name.

“No. It’s just what I was born again as,” Utah said and winked at him. “Your glass, gorgeous, what should it contain?”

It was normal for someone in the customer service business to talk like that to their patrons. It was conducive to good tips, Missy had assured him, so Otis made a point to notice when the regulars at their restaurant were wearing new clothes or had their hair done, especially the ladies.

Utah’s question, however, left him a bit dumbfounded. He turned toward Missy, needing help. “What should we have?”

“I don’t know about you,” Missy said and slammed her small hand on the bar, “but I’m in the mood for a dirty Manhattan. Oh, and put it on Jackie’s tab. We’re with him,” she added and grinned at the bartender.

Utah rolled his eyes. “That guy, I swear.” He shook his head. “And you, sweetheart?” he asked, turning toward Otis. “What would you like?” Then, in a low whisper. “The sky’s the limit. Order the most expensive stuff. I love watching Jackie sweat.”

Otis had absolutely no clue why Jackie would sweat over his choice of beverage, but he felt it would be impolite to ask for something expensive only because there was someone else paying. He communicated his point of view right away. “What is the least expensive?”

Utah made an incredulous face. “That would be water. It’s free.”

Otis nodded enthusiastically. “Then I will have a glass of water.”

Utah stared at him in disbelief. Then, he turned his head toward Missy. “Is he for real or just pulling my leg?”

“He’s the real deal,” Missy confirmed. “Salt of the earth, our boy. He wouldn’t take a dime he didn’t earn.”

“Wow,” Utah said and looked at Otis again. “And people say miracles don’t happen anymore. What’s your name, sugar?”

“Otis.”

“Cool beans. You know what, Otis? I’ll bring you a Cosmo. And it’s on me, not Jackie.”

“But--” Otis started to argue, but Utah wagged a finger at him in warning.

It looked like he couldn’t say ‘no’ to that. He very rarely drank alcohol. It was only one drink, though. He wouldn’t get drunk or anything.



“I believe you’ve seen enough of the show to understand what kind of entertainment we’re selling here,” Watkins offered in a confident voice and touched Hudson’s forearm. “Now, I will refer you to one of our employees so that he can show you what kind of work we have in mind for you.”

Hudson didn’t like being placed in the care of a subordinate, but, at the same time, that was an opportunity. If he happened upon a blabbermouth, it was all for the better, unless, of course, Watkins had in mind that taciturn bouncer who had frisked him earlier.

They were back in the corridor now, although Hudson had a hard time stomaching the fact that he was leaving Jasper there, paying a lot more for what he was earning than he should. Only for the time being, he promised himself. He needed to keep close to the place now more than ever, while still keeping an ear to the ground, in case he was on the wrong track. There were many things to tackle, but he had always been good at keeping a cool head while multitasking.



They were now in an anteroom that held a secretarial desk, a vertical file cabinet with two drawers, and huge potted plants in the corners. Watkins walked over to the cabinet and pulled out something. He threw the folder on the desk and reached for a pen inside his suit. “Before we proceed any farther, Mr. Vegas, I need you to sign an NDA.”

“Sure,” Hudson said with a shrug.

“Sign it with your real name,” Watkins reminded him. “As fortuitous as Vegas sounds as a name in this business, I don’t assume that’s what it says on your driver’s license.”

“You’re right, and of course, I’ll use my real name.” John Adam was about to sign an NDA with the devil, or at least one of his acolytes. Just a normal day at the office. His fake ID was ironclad.

“And now,” Watkins said as he put his pen back and closed the folder after Hudson signed on the dotted line, “let me introduce you to your role in our lucrative business. You’ll be our photographer, since we need to promote our business, as they say, in a more artistic fashion. These are the times we live in,” he added with a shrug.

No one had asked him if he wanted said role, and Watkins had behaved as if it were a done deal. He didn’t mind; the idea was for him to turn into a dutiful minion so that he could ascend through the ranks. It was also easier to be in touch with gossip on dark matters if he was closer to that world, in case Watkins was just a shady live porn peddler and not much else. Somehow, he

doubted it. Fresh businesses usually looked forward to expand, and that meant hiring every piece of shit willing to get their hands dirty.

As if on cue, as soon as Watkins finished talking there was a loud knock on the same door through which they had walked just earlier. “Come in,” Watkins called out.

Hudson turned to see a young man in his twenties, wearing a black suit and a knowing smirk on his face. He was attractive in a boyish way, and maybe his thug career, which appeared to be in store for him, was only in its freshest years.

“Did you want me, boss?” the youngster asked while eyeing Hudson shamelessly.

Hudson had seen that look plenty of times. So, Watkins hired guys with the same inclinations as the clientele. Was that good for business? That was one point to ponder over.

“Jackie, this is Mr. Vegas,” Watkins said shortly. “He’s here to take pictures of our highest sellers. You’ll take him to the red room.”

Jackie seemed really interested in the new Mr. Vegas’s addition to the family. He took Hudson’s hand, although he hadn’t offered it, and shook it vigorously. “We have the best models here, Mr. Vegas,” he said. “Come on, I’ll show you everything.”

Hudson shrugged and followed.

“We’ll discuss your remuneration after we see the first sets of pictures,” Watkins told him on his way out.

“No problem,” Hudson said airily and followed Jackie into the hallway.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Jackie talked quickly and gesticulated. “The pay here is absolutely awesome.” He kissed his fingers with a loud smack. “And, you know, the boys are also top notch. I’ve had a few of them, and damn, they’re worth every penny they earn here, if you know what I mean.”

Obviously, Jackie thought he was made of the same stuff as the rest, and it didn’t matter to him that Hudson wasn’t replying to his chatter with the same enthusiasm. “Are there many boys here?” he asked.

“Around twenty, give or take. But they come and go, you know?” Jackie offered.

“Really? Where do they go?”

Jackie shrugged. “As they say in other businesses of this kind, they graduate.”

Gut instinct. They didn’t call it that for nothing, because Hudson felt the snake in his abdomen coiling tighter. “What does that mean?”

“You know. They take a bunch of money and go and spend it on vacations and shit. It’s not like they can work here forever.”

They liked them young... was that what Jackie was trying to tell him? Hudson painted his face with a leering smile and leaned toward his companion. “Do you mean, they’re, you know, young?”

Jackie stared at him, and Hudson wondered if he hadn’t overstepped and taken the young man for a fool too quickly. “Eighteen is the gold standard now,” he explained. “Hey, you don’t have to worry, man. What we do here, it’s all above board. I know, because I did that kind of work for a while. Then, they promoted me,” he said with pride and straightened his back.

“Do you mean, that kind of work?” Hudson gestured vaguely.

“Yeah, I stripped, I sucked, I fucked,” Jackie continued to brag. “But I was already twenty-four when I got here. Not young and pretty enough, not big enough to be one of the bulls. Don’t feel bad for me, man. I get to fuck the most gorgeous guys in the house. Now, let’s put you to work, ‘cause the boys are waiting for you.” Hudson nodded as Jackie held a door open for him. “You don’t mind if I leave you to your thing, right?” he added. “I’ll come back in half an hour.”

“No, not at all.” That was actually for the better, Hudson thought before stepping inside.

Chapter Six – A List of Things You’re Not Allowed

The drink was odd but pleasant, and Otis had to do his damndest not to gulp it down. It wasn’t nice to gulp down your drink or gobble down your food, his grandma had taught him, and now, he was in the company of interesting people, who knew a thing or two about how to drink alcohol the polite way. After moistening his lips in the pink drink for a moment and then licking them slowly, as he noticed Missy doing, he needed to find the best words to thank Utah for the treat.

“I am very much grateful,” he said after he took another small sip from his glass. Something of how that cocktail was made caused him to giggle, and somehow, he believed that wouldn’t be too nice.

“Do you come from one of those communities?” Utah asked him, leaning over the bar again, and looking him in the eye. “Where they churn butter all day and read the Bible?”

“I thought so, too, at first,” Missy intervened. “But no, he’s just one very polite guy,” she explained.

“My grandmother raised me like this,” Otis added, not willing to hide a thing from the people who wanted to get to know him better. “She taught me everything.”

“Did she teach you how to dress, as well?” Utah asked with a smirk. “That explains a thing or two.”

Missy scoffed. “Hey, man, don’t be an ass. Otis is pretty sensitive about his looks.”

He didn’t feel insulted. “Yes, she taught me how to dress. She always said that a man should present himself as someone responsible, on whom people can count. And that his clothes must reflect that.”

“Actually,” Utah said, getting closer and resting his chin on one palm, “I like you like this a lot. I could use a responsible man, on whom I can count.” For some reason, he mimicked his words with a large smile, as if they were a cause for amusement.

There was so much for him to learn, Otis decided, and this outing in the real world was proving to be a bit scary, but also exciting and filled with opportunities. Also, he was abiding by Hudson’s advice not to date until he knew everything there was to know about finding a proper boyfriend.

Utah startled him by gently touching his cheek, his long fingers smooth and pleasant against his skin, just like the drink he was having. He didn’t pull away, however, and stared with renewed curiosity at the bartender. “Damn, you’re really pretty,” Utah said slowly. “Do you have a phone number?”

“Yes, I do,” Otis replied firmly. Everyone had a phone these days and a phone number to come with it. That was a strange question.

“Utah!” someone called from his right, causing the bartender to straighten up and his smile to fade.

That same someone slammed one hand on the bar in front of Otis, startling him further. He looked up and found himself face to face with a young man with spiky pink hair and an eyebrow piercing. His eyes were heavily lined with black, as were his lips. “Who’s this weirdo?” he asked, pushing himself into Otis’s face, making him lean back, which was hard on that kind of stool.

“Babe, quit it,” Utah said and pulled the strange young man away. He didn’t have all that upper body strength for nothing because it seemed easy for him to drag the newcomer halfway across the bar between them and then kiss him hard on the lips.

Otis felt funny looking at them, so he moved his eyes away. Missy leaned toward him. “Uh, I think our Utah here’s a bit of a player. Watch out for his kind, Otis. It looks like he has a boyfriend.”

Of course. That explained the kiss. They were boyfriends and boyfriends kissed, although he and Hudson kissed, too, and they weren’t that. However, it was perfectly explainable in their case, too, since Hudson was teaching him about dating men. Between seeing two men kissing each other so freely and remembering about his neighbor’s firm lips on his, he was starting to feel a bit funny. It was a pleasant sensation in the pit of his stomach, but also a bit too ticklish. He didn’t know if he’d start laughing or get really queasy.

Utah finally let go of his boyfriend, and the heavily made-up face turned toward him once more. “Beat it, fugly,” he said from the tip of his lips.

Otis recoiled at the word. He didn’t know many things, but he knew when he was called that, regardless of the variations of it. Heat rose to his cheeks and his right hand began trembling. He needed to get away from there. At that very moment, just as he was about to bolt, Missy reached for him and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. “Hey, who are you calling that, drama queen?” she yelled at the bartender’s boyfriend. Then, she turned toward him. “He’s obviously jelly as fuck.”

“Am not,” the guy replied, putting his hands on his hips. “This little hussy’s obviously a homewrecker.”

That wasn’t fair. He had never wrecked anything... except a few cups and plates when he was still struggling with coordination issues. He put his hands between his knees and hunched his shoulders. He couldn’t run while Missy was still holding him like that. There was warmth coming from her and it took the edge off what he was feeling inside.

The bartender laughed. "Don't mind Danny, Otis. He is jelly."

He didn't dare to look up, but maybe he needed to, because everyone else fell silent, and they were probably expecting him to talk. "It is fine," he said slowly, not knowing if it were the right thing to say under the circumstances.

"Of course, I'm jealous," Danny said with a huff, crossing his arms over his chest. "You're the one flirting with every new cute face in the house."

"That's because you just assumed we were in an open relationship without asking first," Utah said. Otis looked at him only to notice the playful smirk on his lips. How could he be so laidback given all the drama unfolding? "Payback's a bitch, darling."

Danny huffed and turned his back to Utah. He did look over his shoulder, though. "I changed my mind."

The bartender seemed unimpressed with that statement. However, his smirk turned into an affectionate smile as he grabbed Danny by the shoulder and squeezed. "What's your poison tonight?"

Otis was curious about the way that strange relationship was unfolding in front of his eyes, but he didn't have time to hear Danny's answer because someone embraced him from behind, hiking him up in his seat and out of Missy's hold. He was about to put up a fight when Jackie said into his ear, "How about a little dance, Otis?"

He disentangled himself from the stool with some difficulty while Jackie helped him to his feet. His hand was grabbed quickly and Jackie began pulling him toward the dance floor. "You, straight girl," he yelled, "come on! Let's get wild!"

Missy downed her drink in one go and followed, with a huge grin on her face. Otis suspected that she loved dancing very much.

"Has Utah treated you right?" Jackie yelled at him, although the music wasn't that loud. Maybe Jackie just liked being loud.

"He gave me a pretty drink," Otis replied dutifully. The music had changed to a rhythmic beat, and now the dance floor was no longer bare.

Jackie pushed him so that they could face each other and began moving to the beat of the music with a coordination Otis observed with growing envy. He was a good dancer, indeed. And he seemed like a fun person, because he smiled and talked a lot. By his side, Missy was doing her own kind of dance, and she seemed to be a pretty good dancer, too. Jackie turned toward her and they both began performing a strange duet, jerking their bodies left and right, always with one shoulder forward as their dance partner moved the opposite back.

They were having fun, and Otis felt the room tilting for a moment, just a smidge. He was also warm all over, and his heart was starting to beat in synch with the music.



Hudson would have liked to question Jackie for a bit, but it looked like the loyal servant was anything but that. He said that he'd been twenty-four when doing the kind of work Jasper was doing, which meant that he was over twenty-five now, at least. However, he looked younger than that, and Hudson had his doubts that Jackie was telling the truth about everything. Still, he seemed to be a bit of an airhead and someone who bragged a great deal, so maybe he had a few truths about the place he could reveal, whether he wanted to or not.

It worked for him to be left alone with the 'models', whatever that work entailed. The room he found himself in was decorated in red, just like the hallway, and there was a small raised dais in the middle of it, appointed with a stripping pole.

The curtains behind the dais shifted for a moment, and then he heard some muffled voices emerging from there. "Hey," he called out loud, "anybody home?"

The curtains parted and a young man stepped onto the dais. He was completely naked, but that wasn't the part that made Hudson raise an eyebrow in question. There were red welts on his abdomen, crisscrossing it, and they looked pretty fresh.

"You the photographer?" he asked, one hand on his hip. He had a dark cruel smile on his face that made a terrible contrast with what seemed to be his young age.

"What's your name?" Hudson asked while taking in the slender body, the short blond hair and the blue eyes that were trying to pin him down with a cold stare.

A roll of the eyes, and then the cruel smirk was back. "Call me Angel."

Hudson shrugged and took out his phone. It would have to do for lack of better equipment. Watkins had left instructions for him to send the pics over once he was done.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Angel scolded him. "Aren't you supposed to be artistic and shit?" He marched back behind the curtains and came out with a box, which he dropped in front of Hudson. "For the record, I'm really flexible, so get to work already."

The contents of the box shouldn't have surprised him. He picked up a long rope and stared for a moment at the young man, who might have looked like an angel some time ago but now appeared to be more of the fallen kind. It appeared that his choice was appreciated, and a slender arm pointed at the ceiling. A system of pulleys hung there and Hudson wondered if he were supposed to provide some particular skills in getting the rope around it. Angel snorted, too astute

for his own good, and knelt on the floor, where he fiddled with something on the side of the dais. The system began descending, and Hudson wasted no more time. To show that he knew how to be in charge, he pushed Angel on his back and then turned him. He had readied himself for something like this, so his moves were precise as he pushed and pulled the rope around the slender members until the attractive body was stretched in impossible angles. “Too tight?” he asked in a voice rough enough to let the other know that he really didn’t care, or worse, that he’d be pleased to hear the confirmation only to deny any demand for mercy.

Angel was the wrong name for the young man. Hudson didn’t wither under the disdainful glance his charge threw over one shoulder. “This isn’t my first rodeo, outlander,” he said with the same sardonic smirk from before.

“Outlander? Really? You should get more creative with your insults.” Hudson linked the ends of the rope to the pulley and let his hands wander over the entire setup, Angel included, to check for any safety hazards.

“It’s what you are,” the young man said and blinked lazily. “And didn’t I tell you? I’m an angel.”

Hudson pushed the button himself and watched as Angel was being hiked up into the air. Then, he reached for his phone. “Say cheese,” he said as he raised his arm.

Even the way he laughed made Angel sound like a cynical bastard. “Screw you. I’d rather play dead.”

Hudson felt the now familiar snake coiling tightly in his gut. And Angel made faces at him from above, sticking his tongue out and letting it loll to the side, while his eyes rolled in his head. Then, he suddenly flashed a knowing look at him. “Fuck me, you should see your face.”

Hudson frowned. “Good thing you’re pretty. ‘Cause you have one shitty personality, man.”

“Thank you,” came the bright reply.

“Now, show me you’re here to actually sell something, not goof around.” His pointed jibe reached its mark, because Angel’s face suddenly turned serious. “I thought so. Now let me do my job.”



Someone bumped into him from behind, and Otis turned to see a man in his thirties flashing a smile at him. “New here?” he yelled over the noise.

Otis didn’t have the time to reply because Jackie slung one arm over his shoulder and pulled him back. “Hey, this guy,” he said pointing at him but talking to the stranger, “doesn’t go on dates.”

The stranger seemed undaunted. He leaned forward to touch Otis, but Jackie was quick to pull him back even more. “Who says anything about dating?”

“Take a hint, man. If he’s going to hook up with someone tonight, that lucky asshole’s gonna be me.”

“Possessive much?” the stranger said with a smirk, but it didn’t look like he wanted to continue the conversation.

Otis stared after him for a bit and then turned toward Jackie, who was looking at him from up close. “I don’t hook up,” he said primly.

Jackie grinned, making his face look even more like a boy’s. “I thought so. That means I still have a chance, right?”

Otis didn’t know what to say. Jackie was nice, but to hook up with him... meant doing that kind of thing, and he was pretty sure that Hudson wouldn’t approve and just shake his head at him, disappointed.

“I need to check on something for a bit,” Jackie said and patted his shoulders. “I’ll take you and Missy back to the bar so that Utah can keep his eyes on you.”

“Do we need someone to do that?” Otis inquired politely. The club was packed by now, and Utah seemed to be over his head by what he could tell even from a distance.

“Someone might want to steal you,” Jackie said promptly. “And you’re here with me. I can’t allow that.”

Otis laughed. He wasn’t an object to be stolen. “People get kidnapped, not stolen,” he explained, when he realized that Jackie didn’t get what the source of his amusement was.

“Ah,” Jackie said and his eyes grew big. “You like to tell things how they are, don’t you, Otis? Damn, just another thing to like about you. Anyway, let’s get you back to the bar. I promise I’ll be quick.”



Hudson pointed at the welts on Angel’s abdomen. Their little session was over, and it appeared that it was just one model for him to take pictures of, for the time being. That was his ticket in, or not. Sink or swim. “How did those get there?”

Angel touched his skin slowly, caressing each red line and looking down. “I like it rough. Don’t tell me that comes as some big surprise to you?”

“Is that why you’re here? To get your rocks off?” Hudson asked and used his phone to send Watkins the pics. Soon, he’d know if he just got himself hired into this shady place.

“Among other things.” Angel rolled on his back on the dais and rubbed his arms to get the blood flowing again. “The pay’s good, too.”

“And? What’s next?”

“What do you mean?”

“After you graduate,” Hudson said.

“Graduate? Ah, you’ve been talking to that twit Jackie. He doesn’t know shit about what’s going on here.” Angel put on an expression of superiority, and Hudson felt tempted to learn more.

“I don’t know. He seemed to know what he was talking about,” he said with a shrug.

Angel rolled to one side again and stared at him. It was strange not to even think that there was a naked attractive body so close to him. He didn’t think of the young man that way, and wasn’t that wrong of him? At what point had he stopped thinking of them as real people, and started seeing them as nothing but pawns on a chess board?

Or maybe there was something else. A part of him felt repulsed by what these young men were doing with their bodies. It wasn’t the fact that they were selling themselves, or that some of them truly were into hardcore sexual practices. It was something fetid in the air, something he was probably only imagining, but his gut told him was there. If this lead proved not to be the one for the human trafficking ring, he’d be surprised. In his career so far, he didn’t recall ever being surprised more than once or twice.

The door opened brusquely and Jackie made his entrance, his gait cocksure and his playful smirk directed at Angel. “Hey, babe,” he drawled. “How’s it hanging?” And then, to him. “Mr. Vegas, do you still need time with our top earner?”

Angel ignored him and pushed himself up, only to disappear behind the curtain without a word.

Jackie seemed completely unbothered about having been flipped like that. “These celebrities, right?” he said and shrugged. “I think he’s still pissed I haven’t taken him out to that new French restaurant, what’s it called?” He snapped his fingers and looked at Hudson for help.

“I’m done here,” Hudson said shortly.

“Okay, okay, then I’ll escort you out. And I hope Mr. Watkins will hire you. It’s always nice to have new faces around.”

“Is that right?” Hudson asked with a crooked smile.

Jackie seemed completely oblivious to his lack of enthusiasm. “Yeah, I mean, it’s exciting to see how business is done and all that. I want to put some money aside and start a thing of my own. Maybe not like that,” he pointed vaguely at the system of pulleys from which the rope still hung. “I’d do some really crazy vanilla shit. I mean, like with a bit of spice, a bit of romance,” he said, moving his hips as if he was dancing. “I’m telling you, in a couple of years, all this extreme stuff is going to be totally boring. And then, what will people want?” He opened his arms wide. “They’ll want the vanilla stuff. ‘Cause that’s how the wheel turns.”

Hudson just nodded. He doubted Jackie was looking for business advice, seeing how he appeared to have everything figured out as far as his future endeavors would look.

Jackie was about to add something, when his phone pinged. He looked at it with a serious expression on his face and then offered Hudson a strained smile. “Hey, man, I’m just going to take you out to the club in front, and then I gotta dash. Some late night errand. What can you do, right?”

“No problem, man. I can find my way. You can go.”

Jackie rubbed his neck for a moment. “I’ll still take you out front. House rules.”

That was understandable. No matter how much of an airhead Jackie appeared to be, a few rules had been drilled into him. So, exploring the dark side of Twilight wouldn’t happen tonight. For now, Hudson believed he had some leads.



He moved through the throng of people, wondering again how they could be so oblivious to what kind of entertainment was offered in the back. But that only went to prove how tight the plan of those behind it was; they put on a hip front that seemed to be all above board, as Jackie would say, while they did their shady stuff behind that facade.

Since he was there, he could still do some reconnoitering to figure out the people that acted as liaisons between the front and the back. And the best person to ask was, of course, the man tending the bar.

Hudson offered pleasant smiles as he rubbed unwittingly against body after body and felt a few hands wandering across his back and ass. He could tell at least one guy must have slipped a note into one of his back pockets, most probably containing a phone number. If this were a regular night out, he’d be having a lot of fun within less than an hour.

He was working. And no one was doing it for him anyway. They seemed to him a blur of faces, which he examined in search of clues to help him. He didn’t categorize them as attractive, or as

blonds or brunets, or tall or short, and so on. Their smiles glided over him, without leaving one trace behind.

He pushed himself toward the bar and suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. He recognized that hair, that prim scrubbed shirt, and that rigid posture, even though he hadn't had the time to examine their owner at as much length as he would have wanted. Hudson felt his teeth grinding. What the hell was he doing here, out of all the places in the world?

He forgot all about questioning the bartender or striking up a friendship with him for the sake of information. His priorities were suffering an incredible metamorphosis as he put one heavy hand on Otis's shoulder.

"I can't date, I can't hook up," Otis announced as he turned in his seat.

"Good to hear," Hudson said abruptly and grabbed his arm. "Let's go."

"Hudson? What are you doing here?" Otis asked, obviously surprised to see him.

"That should be my line. Come on, move your sexy butt."

Otis followed him without comment. Hudson wrapped his hand around the slender fingers, holding them tightly. The only thing on his mind was how to extract Otis from that place, and fast.

"Wait. I should tell my friends that I'm leaving," Otis said suddenly, when they were almost at the front door.

"Tell them later," Hudson ordered, and it looked like Otis knew how to read the room, after all.



Otis blinked as the fresh night air hit him in the face. How auspicious to meet Hudson there, at the club. He had been thinking about him, and what he would think of Otis's outing. After all, one goal of their sessions on dating rules and whatnot was to cure him of shyness. He was very happy that Hudson was there and he could ask him directly what he thought. And that meant that he had to communicate that right away.

"I am very glad to see you, sir," he said, as he recalled that he needed to be polite toward his teacher.

"Are you an actor?" Hudson asked as he opened the door to a sleek black car and held it for him to get in.

“No, I wait on customers at tables. And dogs.” Otis giggled. “I mean, I’m not waiting on dogs, although it would be so funny to have a tiny restaurant for dogs, where they sit at tables, with napkins around their necks and all.”

Hudson seemed unimpressed with his little joke. That was something else for him to work on. He wasn’t funny, and people liked funny people. He waited patiently for his neighbor to get behind the wheel. The ticklish sensation in his stomach caused by all the evening’s excitement turned into a sinking one as Hudson put the engine into gear too fast.

“Wait, the safety belt,” he said and Hudson brought the car to a halt.

Otis held in a breath as Hudson hovered and secured the seatbelt across his torso, and then proceeded to do the same for himself. “Safety first. That is very important.”

Hudson huffed. “Ain’t that right? Now, speak. What were you doing there tonight?”

“I went out with friends to waltz. Wait, that isn’t right.” Otis felt the heady sensations caused by the alcohol from the two cocktails he had had on Utah’s tab, as the man had insisted, coming back to him since inside the car was not as cold as outside. “We went out to dance.”

“And what friends are these?” Hudson questioned him.

“Missy, from work, the one with the big red hair. And a new friend. Jackie,” Otis replied dutifully.

Hudson stopped the car at a red light so abruptly Otis leaned forward.

“You don’t appear to be a very good driver,” Otis felt the need to point out. “Wait,” he said, realizing with growing terror what was going on. “You were at the bar too! You were drinking! We’re drinking and driving!” He needed to get out. That was how people ended up in bad accidents. He also needed to convince Hudson to abandon the car that very moment.

Hudson caught his hand just as he was about to go for the keys. “What do you think you’re doing? I’m not drunk.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Otis insisted. “Even a drop of alcohol can affect your ability to react under dire circumstances.”

Someone was honking at them from behind.

“I didn’t drink a drop,” Hudson assured him. “But you did. We need to have a serious conversation, young man.”

Oh, no. That was the kind of thing his grandma used to say when he did something bad, and there was a lesson to be learned. It could be painful, in his experience, as he felt ashamed to disappoint his grandma. And now, by drinking, he seemed to have disappointed Hudson, too.

He leaned back into his seat, his hands in his lap, waiting to be lectured. Grandma was always kind, even when teaching him about things he didn't know, but what if Hudson started yelling at him? What was he going to do then? He could only hope that he had the willpower to get through it all.

To his surprise, Hudson didn't continue up the street in front of them and just pulled the car into a small parking lot, away from the main road.

One good way to prevent feeling too badly about what would follow was to admit his mistakes first. The lecture would still hurt him, for sure, but it was for his own good. Grandma was always so sad that he thought every lesson to be painful, but it wasn't that, and he couldn't explain it well. That had to be from before he had been with his grandma, and those were some dark times, as she had used to call them. A bad habit. His inability to deal with almost anything he didn't know already.

"I drank two cocktails, and it was wrong," he said quickly. "I'm sorry." Hudson sighed and turned toward him. Otis didn't dare look up, still busy watching his hands. "I should have known I'm not allowed to do that." What he said made no sense, and his grandma had tried in vain to make him understand that, but it was the only thing he knew that would make the accusations that followed less hurtful. Not that grandma had ever accused him of anything.

"I suppose I should put together a list of all the things you're not allowed," Hudson said.

Otis looked up. A list would make things so simple. He wouldn't have to worry about breaking any rule if he knew them all.

Hudson was smiling. Then, he frowned slightly. "What does this Jackie look like?"

Otis explained, relieved that he was being given an easy way out, after all. But the frown on Hudson's face was only growing deeper, making his handsome face look scary. He made himself little in his seat.

"Hey, what's with you?" Hudson asked.

"Tell me what I did wrong," Otis mumbled.

Hudson let out another sigh, but then, he was suddenly close and caressing his face. "I'm not scolding you, Otis. But you better stay away from Jackie and that place, okay?"

Otis nodded. Was that all? Jackie was sort of wild, talking about hooking up and all sorts of things, and probably Hudson, who was so well versed in the ways of the world, knew that.

"You're not going to ask me 'why'," Hudson said matter-of-factly.

"No. You know better," Otis said, convinced that had to be the truth.

Hudson leaned his head back and seemed lost in thought for a moment. “This thing you do,” he said quietly, “the way you put yourself in my hands like this.”

“Yes?” Otis barely managed, his throat dry. He could see himself in Hudson’s hands, allowing him to do everything he wanted.

“Don’t do it with anyone else. Do you understand? It’s very important.”

“Yes, I do. You only.” Hudson seemed a lot easier to please than his mom had used to be.

“Okay. Now, come here. I didn’t mean to scare you with my bad driving.”

Otis had to unlock the seatbelt, move and put his head on Hudson’s shoulder. He was soon wrapped in a warm embrace and he could tell Hudson was kissing the crown of his head.

“But I’m still putting that list together. You’re not off the hook.”

“I won’t drink again,” Otis promised hurriedly.

Hudson laughed. “Maybe you can. As long as I’m watching over you.”

“Do you think I could be one of those people who get very violent when drinking?”

“That’s not my worry.”

“You... worry? About me?”

“Yes. I thought that would be obvious.” Another small kiss on the head followed. “I just think you would be easy to take advantage of when you’re drinking.”

“How does that work? Who would take advantage and how?”

“Bad people, and as for how...” Hudson fell quiet for a moment. “You really don’t see how beautiful you are, do you?”

That word again, making him warm and fuzzy all over. Otis put one arm around Hudson, enjoying how solid his strong body felt. That moment, just as he wanted to kiss his handsome neighbor again, his phone went off.

Hudson took it from him. “It’s your friend from work. Is it all right if I send a text saying you got a tummy ache?”

Otis just nodded and took the phone back. And then, he forgot about everything else as Hudson kissed him.

Chapter Seven – What Boyfriends Do

Big fat raindrops began pelting the windows while Hudson kissed him slowly. The only two things he was aware of at the moment were the increasingly rapid noises made by the rain against the car roof and the way Hudson moved his tongue inside his mouth so unhurriedly as if they had a whole life in front of them to do only that.

That was a lesson his teacher wanted him to learn, without a doubt. Clumsily at first, Otis began to mimic the way Hudson kissed him, going left when he went right, and then the opposite. It made for a peculiar dance of tongues, and one that melded with the beating of his heart and the thumping in his ears, some of which he could only blame on the two Cosmos he had had at Twilight only earlier.

So this was how people kissed and he had to pay attention. After all, his teacher had been quite clear that not shying away from kissing was essential for him to start dating. But it was difficult to focus on one move or the other as overwhelming sensations threatened to take him over. Hudson made things all the more tortuous as he pinched his chin just a smidge, making him open his mouth wider.

Then, it suddenly stopped. Otis met the dark gaze unflinchingly. The fact that he didn't blink as often as other humans helped under the circumstances because he didn't want to miss one beat, one clue that would make him understand what was truly going on.

“How is it?” Rough voice, gentle tone. Because the man holding him so close was a mix of contrary impressions, impressions he could elicit in those around him.

“The kiss?” Otis asked slowly. His lips were tingling. He felt a terrible need for more of it. Could kissing become so addictive to some that you wouldn't be able to live without it anymore? That was a worrying thought.

“You're frowning. Don't tell me I'm a bad kisser. I might not survive the disappointment.”

“Are you addicted to kissing?” Otis inquired, incrementally worrying that as outlandish as that idea was, it had to have an ounce of truth in it.

“You could turn me into an addict,” Hudson replied and smiled.

Relief flooded through Otis's system. His neighbor liked to joke a lot, it seemed, when he wasn't all a frown and giving orders and expecting them to be followed to the letter.

“Well? Are you going to tell me or are you going to keep me on my toes?” Hudson insisted.

“About the kissing?” Otis watched closely until the nod of confirmation followed. “I do not have a lot of basis for comparison. Based on what I know so far, you are an excellent kisser.”

“Thank you. That wasn’t so hard, right?”

Otis shifted in his place. There was something hard, but he couldn’t bring it up. It would either make him sound like someone who couldn’t keep it in his pants – he had heard that expression enough times to understand what it meant – or as if he was asking for something. Seeing how Hudson asked for nothing in return for these lessons, that would be very rude of him. He opted for a little white lie. “No, not at all. It was very easy. I could follow the steps because you did it slowly.”

Hudson had returned fully to his seat, and Otis could take in his manly profile. There was still a smile there. Maybe, after all, he was at least a little bit funny.

“So, it was a lesson?” Hudson asked and looked at him. He reached for the keys, but Otis put one hand on his.

“It’s raining quite hard.” Out the window, the lights of passing vehicles left luminous trails that faded rapidly into the night. “It’s not safe to drive in such weather conditions.”

“Especially since I’m such a bad driver,” Hudson added and leaned slightly toward him.

He had managed to insult his neighbor. Grandma would shake her head and purse her lips; she had never scolded him but those were pointers that she believed that he could do better than that.

“I am terribly sorry about that,” Otis said. “I’m not good with speeding vehicles.”

Hudson wrapped one arm around his shoulder and squeezed. “You’re so well-behaved, Otis, that I wonder if you’re real. To prevent any questions on your part, that’s why I’m touching you right now, to make sure.”

That made sense. And Otis very much enjoyed Hudson’s touch, his large hand so reassuring even through the fabric of the shirt. For a moment, he wondered how it would feel against his naked skin and shuddered. Was it because of the alcohol that he was experiencing such heightened sensations at the mere thought of something like that?

“I have nothing against spending more time like this while we’re waiting for the rain to let up.”

Talking about the weather was always a safe option for striking up a conversation with a stranger. While his neighbor was no longer exactly a stranger, it couldn’t be said that they had known each other since forever, either.

“Summer rains can be unpredictable,” he offered politely.

“I believe there’s something else that can be called that. Or rather, someone.” Hudson looked pointedly at him.

Otis straightened up in his seat. A different type of lesson was about to be delivered, without a doubt. Hudson had said that he wasn't scolding him, and he was counting on that to be the truth. Nonetheless, the part of him that just couldn't let go of waiting for the other shoe to drop – another expression he had noted down for further understanding – demanded to be listened to.

“I thought you were shy, and then I find you in that place. Imagine my surprise,” Hudson continued and rubbed Otis's shoulder to convince him that it wasn't really a lecture he was getting right now.

“I intended to work on my shyness,” Otis explained. “Going out to a club where young people entertain themselves by drinking and dancing sounded like a way to do that. At the time. I now know that I'm not allowed to go to such places,” he added right away, to prove his determination to follow Hudson's advice to the letter.

“Because...” Hudson said slowly. He was smiling again.

“Because I'm not ready to date or hook up,” Otis uttered the first thing that came to his mind.

Hudson said nothing for two beats. “That's a good answer, Otis. I'll take it.”

He was serious. No matter how weak the dome lights inside the car were, Otis believed that he could read that handsome face well.



Interfering in this young man's life in such an intrusive manner was in no shape or form in his job description, and yet, here he was, trying to protect Otis from the likes of Jackie and the people at that club without coming across as an arrogant impossible prick. The most astonishing thing about the situation was the way Otis actually helped him reach that goal without any moaning and groaning, which he had expected from the get-go.

No, Otis placed his faith in him for reasons Hudson couldn't well fathom, and that kind of trust was beyond endearing. It was dangerous if misplaced, and therefore, Hudson very much intended to make Otis understand that he was safe with him. A short look at his pretty neighbor convinced him of another hard truth: danger played on both teams. Never before had anyone placed himself like that in his hands. It felt empowering and more than that.

It felt... exhilarating, a sensation he had seldom experienced in his life. He could easily relate it to what he had felt when having sex for the first time. It was also new, something that settled into his very bones, just as easily as the sight of that gorgeous mysterious blue eye had been etched into his memory forever now.

That was dangerous, too. He had no time for exploring what having such a strange beautiful being in his arms meant. Talking about bad timing. He shook his head as he pondered over it for a moment, and then realized that getting lost in his own head with Otis by his side wasn't truly an option. A part of him, a deep part of him, wanted to assure Otis that he wasn't being neglected and never would be.

"So, have you learned anything of value from your little outing?" he asked. Talking about things other than kissing that beautiful mouth until he could no longer breathe was the safest choice.

"I saw two boyfriends kissing," Otis replied dutifully. "It was quite odd."

"What was?" Hudson was intrigued. "That they were kissing in public?"

"No. One was the bartender. He gave me two drinks for free. The other was a young man named Danny. He caused some drama and called me--"

"What did he call you?"

"It doesn't matter. He thought his boyfriend was flirting with me and got mad. It was all a misunderstanding, after all. It appears that Utah--"

"Who's Utah?" Damn, the investigator in him never slept, it seemed.

"That's the bartender's name. But I don't think that's his real name. Because it would be quite unusual to be called that. Although it's a very interesting name. You won't forget it after leaving the bar."

"Otis is also an interesting name," Hudson said with a small smile, only to see again that expression of innocent surprise on his cute neighbor's face.

"Thank you," came the dutiful reply.

"Go on," Hudson encouraged him. It didn't hurt to learn a thing or two about the bartender. Was he in on the scheme involving the business they were keeping in the back? Or was he just someone playing his part as an employee of the legitimate business?

"Utah accused Danny, that's the boyfriend, of believing that they were in an open relationship, although they weren't. What kind of a relationship is an open one?"

"That's when the two people involved decide to see other people on the side."

"See them for what?"

"Usually, for sexual satisfaction."

Otis pursed his lips and seemed to consider. “Utah said he didn’t know. He seemed both upset with Danny but also happy to see him. Why?”

“It must be because he likes the guy and is willing to forgive whatever happened before,” Hudson offered his two cents. “Most relationships between people are not this complicated, Otis.”

“Ours is very simple. Very straightforward,” Otis said, seemingly convinced of the validity of his statement.

“Is that so? What kind of relationship do we have?” Hudson asked.

“You’re my teacher, and I’m your student.”

“Hmm, it sounds like the premise for an illicit relationship,” Hudson said and smiled. Otis was so endearingly cute that he felt the need to play with him like a cat with a toy mouse.

“How so?”

Hudson slid one arm behind the back of Otis’s seat and inched closer. His neighbor had such a soft, beautiful mouth. Just looking at it for a moment made his tongue feel like sandpaper. He wanted more of those lips, that pink tongue in his mouth, everything. The rational part of him told him to pull back, look forward, turn the key in the ignition and take Otis home. No, not his home. Damn, who was he kidding? He felt attracted to this young man like he couldn’t remember ever feeling attracted to anyone. And it wasn’t only sexual, an area where he performed well. No, this time around, he was on shaky ground. It didn’t scare him; on the contrary, it was challenging him, making him want more.

“Because of this,” he eventually replied to Otis’s question and angled his head for another kiss.

Otis pushed his head forward, while the rest of his body still remained stiff. But his mouth was hot and sweet, with a hint of alcohol, and Hudson found himself wanting more. He snuck one hand upward to caress Otis’s cheek and then caught his chin to deepen the kiss.

“See?” he asked in a heated voice he barely recognized as his own. “Student and teacher. Kissing. It should be forbidden.”

“But it’s part of the curriculum,” Otis said and gazed at him so candidly that Hudson had to look away or else something inside him would snap like a twig.

“Is that why you let me kiss you? Because of the curriculum?” Why did he sound like a scumbag right now? What did he have to prove?

“No. It’s,” Otis licked his lips and his eyes went to one side, “because I also find you very attractive.”

Hudson felt a jolt of pride and satisfaction. “Oh, yeah?” he said and grinned, mostly to himself.

“Yes, you have a muscular shape and a very good meat percentage by what I can see of your body.”

Hudson began laughing. It was good to laugh because it took away from the tension rising in his body; it wasn't the bad kind of tension, but he truly needed to get a grip. “Okay. What else?” he challenged Otis to come up with more compliments about his physical appearance.

“You also have tattoos.” Otis pulled at his sleeves and he appeared to shiver for a moment. Hudson could swear his cute passenger was experiencing some pleasant sensations of his own. “They're... what do people say? Sexy. They're very sexy.” At this point, he sounded like he was choking on his own breath.

It wouldn't be merciful to continue. Otis was attracted to him, and that was the only thing that mattered.

“What other things do boyfriends do?” Otis asked, changing the topic.

Well, he was the young man's teacher, right? He could give some advice. “A lot of things. Together. Such as going on dates, sharing meals, and so on. And no, open relationships are far from being the norm.” Wow, his knowledge about what boyfriends did together was abysmal. Not from a theoretic point of view, but a practical one. Otis had a bad, bad teacher. He didn't have to know that just yet.

Otis seemed pleased enough with the answers he was getting so far. Then, once more, he changed tack. “What do you have against Jackie?”

He had a feeling that saying something such as *that man might be part of a human trafficking ring and I'm investigating just that* wouldn't be wise. So, he opted for something else. “He's a rat.”

“A rat?” Otis seemed abnormally astounded by that characterization of the person in question. “He seems to me more like a tomcat. And he knows how to dance.”

“You don't say,” Hudson said dryly.

“If Jackie is a rat, what animal are you?”

Good. They were doing some childish quiz. “I have no idea. I haven't thought about it.”

“I think you'd be a huge dog,” Otis supplied the answer for him. “No. Maybe a wolf. No, that's not good, either. I think you'd be a wolf master,” he concluded.

Hudson closed his eyes for a moment. Outside, the rain still raged on. He could play with Otis for a bit longer. “A wolf master?”

“Or just a dog trainer,” Otis supplied and giggled. It had to be because of the alcohol still in his system.

“What about you? Are you a kitten, maybe?” Hudson played along. And then, he leaned toward Otis again, eager to smell his scent and feel his body heat. “Or a puppy?”

The mysterious unique eye set on him. “If I’m a puppy, will you put a leash on me?”

Okay. That was enough playing for now. Hudson straightened up and tried hard to ignore the tightness in his pants. This kind of conversation with his innocent, yet very daring, neighbor was very dangerous. As cool as he had been over the last few weeks, all business and no play, being close to this beautiful being was enough, and he was turning into a playful dog. Yes, that comparison was right; he was a complete dog, and a horny one, there was not that much blood left in his brain to keep it functioning since it was busy going somewhere else.

Damn, the image of Otis wearing nothing but a thin leather collar was going to haunt him for many nights. “I think I can drive us both home now,” he said and put his hands on the wheel.



His eyes kept closing. He didn’t realize that he was resting his face against the window inside Hudson’s car until he was shaken gently to wake up. “I’m not sleeping,” he said right away.

His denial was met by a low chuckle. Was that how sexy people laughed? He needed to work on that, too.

“Not yet. But you will be soon. In your bed,” Hudson said, as if he needed to use that much redundant information.

“Yes, in my bed,” he repeated in a perfunctory manner.

The rain had turned into a soft drizzle, so he shuddered after he got out of the car. Hudson threw an arm around him and pushed him gently toward the apartment building. “Sorry, I don’t have an umbrella.”

“Summer rains are unpredictable,” Otis murmured and then realized that he had repeated what he had said earlier, like a parrot. Maybe his animal alter-ego was some creature between a crane and a parakeet. That would explain certain things.

“Come on, puppy, before we get wet,” Hudson urged him on and breathed warmly over the crown of his head.

As they stepped into the elevator, it felt as if meeting his new neighbor had happened long before and not only a few days ago. That was an odd feeling, certainly not unpleasant, but unexpected

nonetheless. He sensed his lips quirking into a smile, as his body still felt partially boneless because of the last traces of alcohol in his system, without a doubt.

“Something funny?” Hudson leaned into him, crowding his space.

According to books on human behavior which he sometimes read to get more in touch with humans in general and understand them better, that kind of move could easily be interpreted as intimidation and a sort of territorial display. The elevator space definitely didn’t qualify in any way, shape or form as Hudson’s territory, and Otis didn’t feel intimidated, either. So, it had to be something else.

“I was thinking that it feels as if I’ve known you since forever,” Otis replied honestly. “Isn’t that strange?”

Hudson caressed his cheek briefly. “You know what?” he whispered. “I don’t think it’s strange at all.”

The elevator stopped at their floor that moment, interrupting their conversation. Hudson stepped out and held the door for Otis, who followed with a polite nod and murmured thanks. His grandma would have liked Hudson a lot, despite his scary tattoos and overall rough demeanor. It had to be one of those cases when the old adage of not judging a book by its cover held more truth than usual. However, Otis had to say that he liked the cover just as much and breathed in Hudson’s scent while moving past him.

A low chuckle coming from the other made him giggle again. The way Hudson did that was tickling him on the inside. He’d have to learn that trade. It was impossible for men not to fall at Hudson’s feet if they only heard that sound. Wasn’t it nice to be that attractive? Still, Otis had high hopes of his education. Some skills could be learned, right? Especially from an excellent teacher like his dangerous-looking neighbor.

Hudson escorted him to his door, pressing a hand against the small of his back, a simple gesture that felt so comforting. They stopped in front of it, and Otis began rummaging through his brain for the right words to say as goodbye until their next encounter.

Once more, Hudson showed who was the more experienced in dealing with humans in general, and such situations in particular. He moved closer, tipped Otis’s chin up gently, and kissed him featherlike. “Good night, Otis. Don’t let the bed bugs bite your lovely ass.”

Wow. He had no words. If he told someone – a potential date – the same words, would that date swoon the way he felt like swooning at that moment? Hudson’s touch lingered as the man moved away, still looking back at him over his shoulder a couple of times before he reached his door.

“Good night,” he said loudly and waved, realizing that he hadn’t said one word back, which was a very impolite thing to do.

Hudson smiled at him and winked before stepping inside his apartment. Otis waited until the door to 505 closed and then hurried into his place. He had a lovely ass, according to Hudson! He hadn't thought of that part of his anatomy in such terms, but if a man like that praised his behind, it had to be at least a little true.

Otis pressed his back against the closed door and allowed the rush of pleasure to course through him. Ah, now he remembered. He stared into the large mirror he had left there, just leaning against the wall and said, "Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

He giggled as he noticed how flushed his face looked. Of course, he should have asked something like that, but, in the heat of the moment – and heat was a very good word to describe the situation because he felt hot all over now – his memories of such phrases must have gotten all jumbled.

He had to buy coffee and figure out a way to make it with his meager means for preparing anything in his apartment. Or he could make it at work and then store it in a thermos and bring it home. He would make a fresh cup every day and take it home until Hudson said 'yes' to that question.

Or he gathered enough courage to ask it.



Hudson had to shake his head several times to get away from the avalanche of pleasant sensations that had taken both his body and mind by storm ever since he had put his hands on his beautiful neighbor tonight. What was he truly doing, getting Otis all mixed up with his investigation?

But that wasn't what was truly happening, was it? That damn Jackie had to try his luck by trying to lure Otis of all people to that den of iniquity, and left him with no choice. Yeah, he snorted at himself, rationalize more. If he were completely honest – an ability that he appeared to be incapable of lately – he could protect Otis without kissing him and telling him how beautiful he was.

Easier said than done, right? Hudson felt hard-pressed to explain the situation to himself. If Otis weren't so endearing, so innocent, and so willing to fall into his arms, things would be completely different. But beggars can't be choosers. Another rationalization. Great. If that made him a beggar, he was one lucky mofo, because it definitely felt like someone had just dropped a million-dollar check into his lap.

He pressed his forehead against the door and groaned. He needed to get his head screwed on right and fast. There was an investigation that wanted him, no, needed him to be on top of his

game, and it had to be now that the most beautiful person in the world had chosen to step into his life.

He walked into the room and took in the BDSM paraphernalia on the wall, waiting for the dark images from the case file to flood him and erase every trace of the overwhelming pleasure he had felt while kissing Otis only earlier. The whips, the paddles, the muzzles and the leashes seemed nothing but inert objects that tonight failed to elicit anything of the kind in him. Actually, it was the opposite when he happened to look at a thin strip of leather, which he touched gently. How would Otis look if he were to play the puppy-in-training part?

He shook his head. He was getting ahead of himself. He would try his damndest not to picture his pretty neighbor in such a getup. Because that was an off-limits fantasy. Yes, definitely.



“How’s your stomach?” Missy asked him as soon as she saw him at work the next day.

“My stomach is fine,” Otis replied, wondering why his friend was asking him about that in particular.

“Maybe those drinks didn’t agree with it,” Missy said and leaned into him. “Me, I got a little smashed. Jackie had to carry me home.”

Jackie, according to Hudson, was a rat. Not a cute mouse like a cartoon character, but like a pest. Otis didn’t know how to tell Missy that. Rats could be dangerous; they could bite and, depending on the century, give you the bubonic plague. Sure thing, Jackie wouldn’t bite Missy, because that would be a ludicrous scene.

“You know, that boy is smitten with you,” Missy continued. “He kept on blabbing how disappointed he was about not seeing you before you left. And he wasn’t the only one. Hey, you know Utah said that you disappeared with a tall tattooed stranger? I thought he was just pulling Jackie’s leg to see him squirm, but now that I think about it... did you hook up last night, Otis?” she asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

“No,” Otis said and felt a bit disappointed over it. He would have hooked up if Hudson had offered. What was he thinking now? He shook his head in horror. That kind of behavior made him into a... He didn’t know the right word for it. Maybe he could ask Missy, but that didn’t feel like the right thing to do, either.

“What about the tattooed stranger? Was Utah talking out of his ass?” Missy nudged him playfully.

Otis snickered. No one could talk out of their asses, but it was a funny thing to imagine. “That was my neighbor.”

Missy stopped for a moment and her mouth formed a perfect O. “Your neighbor? Do you mean, THE neighbor?”

Otis could stop her and explain that Hudson was one neighbor of many, but she seemed too excited to listen to such explanations. “Yes, the one with the tattoos. Who I kissed,” he added. “In the past. Last night, he kissed me.”

Missy began fanning herself rapidly with her hands. “Wow, wow, wow, Otis, slow down, this train’s moving too fast.” What train? “I mean, anyone would look at you and sees this prim and proper dude who you’d take home to momma, and you’re actually a total vixen.”

He would prefer to be a puppy and get properly trained by Hudson with the help of a leash. And maybe... squeaky toys? Or treats? He shook his head again, afraid that Missy might read such thoughts on his face.

“And? After he kissed you, what happened?” Missy asked, apparently unaware of whatever was going on through his head.

“He escorted me to my door, although that’s not very far from his door, and said ‘good night’. After he kissed me one more time, very briefly. Also, he mentioned bed bugs, although I should have told him I don’t have those. My apartment is clean, and I do the laundry every week.”

Missy shrieked so loudly that he cringed. “He took you to the door and kissed you goodnight? O. M. G., Otis, how did you find this guy? He’s a total gentleman. How could he let a little scrumptious thing like you get away without a scratch?” Were there people who scratched others for fun? Otis felt his head swimming with new information, as his co-worker continued her tirade. “Don’t tell me. Is he straight? Or bi, at least? Because if he is, and you don’t introduce me to him, I will hate you forever.”

Otis had no intention to bring Missy’s wrath upon his head, and he also needed to be honest. “I don’t think he is interested in women. Even his work is about having men over all the time.”

That seemed to confuse Missy even more. “What is he doing with them? Oh, don’t tell me. I hope he’s not a manwhore. You know, one for cash.”

“What do you mean by that?” Otis asked, now interested in tapping into the well of knowledge that Missy seemed to be.

“You know. A guy who sleeps with people and gets money for it. Gay for pay, my sweet innocent friend,” she added and laughed.

“Oh, no. He pays people. Not to sleep with them, but to take pictures. He has a couch for it, too. And many interesting things on the wall.” Otis was, indeed, very much interested in those things on the wall. Not only the leashes, now that he thought about it.

“Wow, a real casting couch?” Missy asked, adding even more information to the things he needed to understand. “Did he ask you to pose for him?”

“No. I don’t believe that I’m in the same league,” he used the phrase clumsily hoping that it was correct, “with the men who visit him. They are all attractive. And they tend to have a good meat percentage.”

“Meat percentage,” Missy said slowly as her eyes fogged up. “Ah, you mean, muscles?” She caught her left bicep with her right hand to make a point.

“Yes. Some have big muscles. Others, not so much, but they’re still handsome,” Otis explained.

“Your neighbor is a very interesting fellow. And it looks like he’s big into courting you,” Missy said and flashed a huge smile at him. She gave him two thumbs up.

The door opened and Mr. Smith was there, glaring at them. “What are you two doing, chatting like two mindless birds? Get to work.”

“Right away,” Missy said brightly.

Ever since he had started waiting on tables, Mr. Smith had changed the way he treated him. He was no longer made of glass, and the manager treated him just like he treated Missy. Otis was glad about it. That kind of thing made him feel normal, like he was as much a human being as any other.

Was Hudson really courting him? No, what was he thinking? Missy didn’t have all the facts. She didn’t know that Hudson was actually his teacher of dating rules.

Chapter Eight – Trust

There was a phone call for him. Of course, there was. Hudson let it ring a few times before answering. “Mr. Watkins,” he said brightly, “I wasn’t expecting a call so soon.” That was the exact opposite of what he had been thinking, seeing how a certain state of impatience had begun to take its toll on him. As an investigator, he knew very well that things took time and that waiting was par for the course, and yet, over the last couple of days, he had experienced a restlessness, the kind of thing that rarely happened to him.

It had to do with avoiding Otis, maybe. The young man followed very strict routines, so staying clear of his path had been easy. That didn’t mean that Hudson had thought about him any less often.

He needed his head in the game. Maybe all this avoidance wasn’t the right strategy to follow. And now, he needed his wits about him more than ever.

Watkins’s harsh voice came through with crisp clarity. “You did fine work, Mr. Vegas. We’d like to hire you. How about you drop by? Later tonight? At eleven?”

One stroke away from midnight. Hudson felt his mood lifting; finally, there was something for him to do other than search the police database to match Jasper’s and Angel’s faces with missing people. How some individuals could appear as if they had no roots whatsoever, just floating in the wind. Maybe they thought it liberating, not dangerous, as Hudson saw it. He, more than others, knew the importance of roots.

“I’ll be there. Should I bring my camera?”

“Of course. The tools of the trade make the man,” Watkins commented.

Cruelty flowed out of every word that man spoke. Hudson liked to believe that he didn’t allow his personal dislike to get in the way of judging a person or a situation fairly, but there was something about Watkins that made his lizard brain flare up as if faced with an imminent threat.



This time around, the bouncer at the main entrance gestured for him to go through the back, which could only mean that he had been upgraded in his standing with the boss. All in all, it appeared that he was on a good path to getting the job. He didn’t expect Watkins to put him right in the middle of it all, but he was willing to work his way up, rung after rung. Or was it more like descending into darkness?

The thought occurred to him as his guide for the night – not Jackie this time, but a sullen fellow with a shiny shaved head and a suit that should have been made to order to present itself well on that gorilla body – took him to what appeared to be the basement.

Behind the last door, no dungeon-like setting welcomed him, as he half-expected. The large room looked like a small cozy club, complete with a bar, plush sofas and a small dais, meant, without a doubt, for the performers.

“Mr. Vegas.” Watkins walked toward him, seemingly emerging from a dark corner as if he had just materialized into being. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss this opportunity for the world,” Hudson said as he put on his most plastic smile and shook the man’s bony hand vigorously. “What did you think of the pictures?”

“I’m very pleased. You do have the eye, Mr. Vegas.” Watkins patted his cheek right under his left eye and smiled, the same cold sneer that never reached further than his lips.

“Great. Does this mean that I can get to work?” Hudson rubbed his hands and looked around.

“Eager. I like it.” Watkins snapped his fingers and the gorilla character rushed forward, waiting for an order. “Bring the boys.”

The shaved head nodded shortly and disappeared behind the raised dais.

“I hope you don’t mind a little bit of, let’s say, directing on my part,” Watkins said.

Hudson didn’t have the time to reply as the gorilla pushed Jasper and Angel forward, throwing them down on the floor. Angel grinned and stuck out his tongue, seemingly used to rough treatment, but Jasper had a wild look on his face. Hudson quirked an eyebrow and gave Watkins a questioning look, while his pulse quickened.

This time around, they hadn’t searched him, and he had counted on that. And even if they did, they wouldn’t necessarily think that he would make an appearance there with a concealed weapon.

“Let’s see you at work, Mr. Vegas.”

Hudson turned and opened the camera case. He only had to sneak one hand under the front layer and reach for his gun if needed.



For two evenings in a row, Jackie hadn’t come to the restaurant to dine as was his habit, which made Otis believe that maybe he had seen the last of him when they’d hung out at Twinlight that

fateful night. He liked to think of it all in terms such as ‘a fateful night’, although it had still been evening at the time and not full night yet, and ‘fateful’ was a bit of a suspicious word since it implied the role of unseen forces in people’s lives. Grandma had told him so many times that he was in control of his own fate and that he should not let anyone tell him otherwise. Such speeches that she had used to give him were empowering; that was also something she had told him on many occasions.

In the meantime, Otis hadn’t seen Hudson, either, not even by accident, and that made him feel a bit unsettled. He got anxious for no reason, and on one occasion, he had dropped a plate. Things couldn’t go on like this. At this rate, he might end up breaking something. All he had to do was take a deep breath and knock on his neighbor’s door. Good things always came to people who dare.

“Someone wants to see you,” Missy chanted in his direction and smiled while peeking around the corner.

Was Hudson there? But no, he caught himself in time, Hudson didn’t know where he worked.

“Who?” he asked and grabbed the menu to present it to the customer. It was almost closing time.

“It’s Jackie, and he totally looks like a kicked puppy. Don’t fall for his act, though,” Missy warned, wagging a finger. “I have a feeling that boy is a total player.”

Jackie wasn’t a puppy. He was a tomcat, although Hudson thought he was a rat. Otis hurried out with the menu in his hands.

As he expected, Jackie was at his usual table. His face lit up when he saw Otis and stood from his seat like gentlemen did in front of a lady. “Otis, how you’ve been, man? Damn, you disappeared on me that night.”

“I didn’t disappear,” Otis argued. “First of all, good evening.”

“Right, right, you’re a stickler for good manners. Good evening,” Jackie replied with a big smile. “You know, Utah almost got me, telling me that you left with some dude with big guns.”

Big guns. How could Utah know about those tattoos? As far as he remembered, Hudson had a t-shirt on, so it was impossible to see them. Otis felt a short stab of jealousy as his mind conjured up images of the bartender tracing his long fingers over Hudson’s gun tattoos. He shook his head. What an irrational thought. There had to be another explanation.

“I had a stomachache,” he said and blushed as he was not particularly good at lying. But that had been what Hudson had used that night as an excuse for him, so he needed to stick to it or, otherwise, he’d make his neighbor sound like a liar.

“Anyway,” Jackie said and stretched his arms out in front of him, “my boss has been riding my ass for the last couple of days. He wanted me to move so much cargo. I think he’s going to open a new place, and, who knows? He might put me in charge of it.” He grinned and wiggled his eyebrows.

Otis didn’t exactly know what Jackie meant by that kind of facial gymnastics. “That sounds like a good thing,” he offered politely.

“Anyway, I’m starving. And I have the evening free of any chores, so how about we hang out later? Just you and me,” Jackie said and took his seat.

Otis handed him the menu. Hudson had warned him about Jackie, and he knew what he was doing. That meant that he had to reject the offer but do so in a way that didn’t hurt the other’s feelings. “I apologize but I cannot honor your request.”

Jackie’s face fell. “Why not? It looks to me like I’m your last client.”

“It’s because of my lessons.”

“Lessons? At this hour? What kind of lessons?”

That was a secret Otis wanted to keep to himself. “They’re online. But I need to be at the computer the same hour every day.” It looked like he was getting the hang of this lying thing. Still, he needed to be careful; one bad habit could drag along another and another until he would become a bad person.

“Okay,” Jackie murmured, and he looked unconvinced, because, most probably, Otis wasn’t that good at lying and it showed. “And I so wanted to spend my night off with you.” He winked at him and grinned again.

According to Missy, Jackie was interested in him. That made Otis feel guilty, which meant that it would be a good idea to let him down gently but firmly. “For the moment, I cannot engage in any hooking up activities,” he explained. “I’m not ready.”

At first, Jackie gave him a surprised look, his round boyish eyes looking large and pretty as he did so. Then, he laughed wholeheartedly. “Who says you’re not ready?” He leaned forward and smiled.

“Hud—I mean, I’m simply not ready and I know it.”

“Then how about becoming friends?” Jackie offered. “And if we go from that to the other that,” he added with a small shrug, “no one’s gonna judge, right?”

No, he couldn’t even be friends with Jackie as long as Hudson believed he was a rat. But how had Hudson reached that conclusion? Did he know Jackie? Otis couldn’t believe that he hadn’t

thought of asking that. Could it be that Hudson only knew people like Jackie? That wasn't fair, though. Otis liked to believe that Jackie wasn't a bad person, even though he talked so easily about hooking up. Maybe he and Hudson needed to meet and get to know each other.

"We could be friends," he eventually said. He couldn't imagine one reason, even a fake one, for which someone would be able to say 'no' to friendship.

"Okay, that sounds good." Jackie smacked his palms together to show his satisfaction. "Now, please, feed me before I waste away."

"What would you like tonight?"

"The usual. You know, between you and me," Jackie said and leaned over the table to look at Otis from below, "I wouldn't normally be caught dead eating in a place like this, but the food here is to die for. Just like the staff."

Otis blushed and clasped the menu tightly, pressing it against his chest. Jackie really had a way with words. He was also pretty, and Otis wanted to pet his greasy head. Or maybe just his forehead.

Jackie continued to babble on. "I mean, I make enough to go to all the fancy places in this city. But nothing compares to the food you guys make here."

"I don't make it. The cook--"

"I know. You're good people here, Otis," Jackie said.

It was a real compliment. A very touching one. Otis smiled and made a little bow. "I'll come back with your order at the soonest."

They were good people here, he thought. Mr. Smith, who was a bit stern when they were wasting time and lingering too long on breaks, was a kind man. And Missy was a friend, and the cook and the other servers were all a good fit for the place. Grandma would have liked to have a meal now and then here. Although her cooking was unrivaled.

He brushed a small tear away as he went back to the kitchen.



Hudson was surely at home, probably still working with those young men visiting, but Otis felt like he couldn't wait any longer. He had repeated the words he intended to use as an introduction over and over, hoping that Hudson hadn't already forgotten that he had a pupil. With so many attractive men stopping by his couch, the chances were pretty high for him to fail to remember their little agreement.

Otis wiped his hands against his pants as he felt they were clammy and unpleasant. So far, he had behaved properly in front of his neighbor, but today, most probably due to his high anxiety, he believed that he needed to make a good impression without coming across as too demanding and pushy. How many times hadn't his mom pushed him away when he was trying to get her attention? He needed to remember that other people had lives. On the other hand, grandma kept on telling him that it was all right to ask for things as long as he was polite and understanding of other people's limitations and needs. No matter how many times she had told him that the same didn't apply to her and that he could wake her in the middle of the night if he needed something, he hadn't managed to change that habit.

He had spied enough by listening from behind his door to know that Hudson had to be alone, unless he was grossly miscalculating. As his grandma would say, the only way to find out was to knock. He knocked two times, short and hard, and then one more time. If Hudson didn't come to the door in about half a minute, that could only mean that he was busy and didn't want to be disturbed. Otis looked at his phone, counting the seconds.

"Thirty," he said under his breath and quickly turned on his heel, relieved for the moment.

The door to 505 opened when he was half-way to his apartment. "Otis," Hudson called from behind him. "Did you knock?"

"I did," he said brightly. "But if you're busy--"

"I'm not. Come on in."

His relief had been short-lived, after all. He dragged his feet until he realized that maybe that looked weird and tried to remember what he wanted to ask before chickening out.

Hudson waited patiently for him and closed the door once he was inside. "I believe you know the way," he joked.

Otis knew, of course. He sat on the couch without being invited and then remembered that it was impolite to do so without hearing from the host that it was all right to take a seat. Hudson smiled warmly at him and squeezed his shoulder as he sat by his side, unlike before.

Nighttime dream memories flooded Otis as he looked Hudson in the eye. He was so attractive from up close, with his square manly jaw and short stubble, firm lips and kind eyes. Otis wanted to touch him so much he ached somewhere inside, but he knew that he needed to ask for permission first.

"Well?" Hudson asked, his smile broadening. He was turned toward Otis, one leg folded under the other, and he was resting his head against his palm, while his elbow was propped on the back of the couch. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," Otis said softly.

Hudson continued to stare at him, and he continued to smile as if everything was normal. Only it wasn't, because Otis knew that he needed to start talking already before things became very awkward.

"I wanted," he started and swallowed a lump in his throat, "to ask you about..." He racked his brain for what he wanted to ask and couldn't remember.



It was all for the better that his cute neighbor had decided to pay him a visit. This way, the decision was out of his hands and, while he hated to consider himself a coward, when it came to the wonderful young man now sitting on his couch, lost in thought, he found himself more helpless than in life-or-death situations he had encountered before.

"Did you forget?" he asked softly and reached for Otis's cheek to caress it. "It's all right. I'm sure it will come back to you."

"I didn't forget," Otis argued. And then, brightly, "It's about the list!"

"The list?" Hudson wasn't so good at processing thoughts while he was getting lost in admiring this strange beautiful boy next door.

"The list you told me about," Otis continued, now in better spirits. "The list of things I'm not allowed."

After his working gig at the club the other night, seeing Otis, with his innocent manners and calm serene eye looking at him in wonder, was just what he needed to make him forget. A stiff drink hadn't done it for him. Maybe he needed to treat his malaise with something else.

So, he said the first inane thing that came to his mind. "The first on the list is that you're not allowed to talk anymore."

Otis didn't protest in the least when Hudson covered his mouth with his and began kissing him slowly. There was so much life in that kiss, real life, not the kind lived in the shadows. Watkins had pushed him as if they were both trapped in a game of chicken, and he had resisted the temptation to call for time-out, only so he could prove himself.

That mission had been accomplished. At the end, Jasper had been in tears, while Angel had just waited for his master to praise him, the same cruel, knowing smile on his face, without throwing one shred of mercy at his partner. It had taken Hudson all his training to resist the temptation to throttle Watkins on the spot. It was for a good cause, he had repeated to himself. He needed to dig deeper into the darkness until he uncovered everything.

And now, the darkness that had clung to him like a cape made of spider's web was receding as he kissed Otis over and over. It took him a few long moments to realize that Otis, despite kissing back with his mouth, was sitting rigidly, his fists pushed against his knees.

He pulled back reluctantly and placed one hand over Otis's fists. "Since I believe you're here for your lessons," he said softly, "here is another for you. When someone kisses you or touches you or does anything that makes you uncomfortable, you must say 'no'. Loud and clear."

"I don't want to say 'no'," Otis replied and looked him in the eyes.

Hudson rubbed his palm gently over Otis's closed fists. "It looks to me like you're not crazy about this. Care to share?"

Only then did Otis appear to understand what he meant. He blushed profusely and shook his head. "It's not discomfort." He almost choked as he tried to get the words out. "I mean, I suppose it is in a way, but not like that." A short silence followed. "It's because... I'm afraid," his voice faded to a whisper, "that you might... not like it if I acted... how I feel."

Hudson let out a relieved sigh. "I trust you," he said and closed his hand tightly over Otis's fists. "So, do your worst. I promise I won't stop you unless it really hurts."

Otis's beautiful eye grew wide. "Then, I can do anything?"

"Anything. As long as you don't hurt yourself, either," Hudson added, although, just as he said the words, that there was never a guarantee that feelings wouldn't get hurt.



Otis felt dizzy with elation at Hudson's words. Kissing didn't hurt at all. In fact, it was amazing. But now, energized as he was by that simple promise made by his teacher, he wanted more. He was even greedy, he realized, but it didn't matter. He stood up and walked over to the wall covered in those unusual implements. He didn't dare look at Hudson, afraid that the man might change his mind about giving him carte blanche.

Slowly, he let his fingers hover, not really touching anything. He licked his lips nervously as he stopped to look at what seemed to be a heavy wooden paddle. What was that used for? He had so many questions! But he needed to focus. What he really wanted was a bit further to the right. Closing his eyes for a moment, he braced himself for the decision. Such had been his dreams over the last few nights, wide-eyed dreams while he had laid in bed, unable to sleep. He grabbed the chosen item from the wall and pressed it against his chest.

Well aware of the heat in his cheeks, he turned toward Hudson. "I want you to put this on me."

For a moment, he thought that he might have gone too far. Hudson was looking at him, his face unreadable. But then, he got up from the couch and walked over to him, moving slowly and gracefully, his dark eyes never leaving his. A warm rough hand wrapped around his clenched fist and removed the item with infinite patience. "I think this is a bit too much for the first time and it doesn't fit you."

"But--" Otis argued, desperate that the opportunity was slipping through his fingers.

"Wait," Hudson advised and crouched to look for something in a metal box placed at the foot of the wall, right under all of those implements. He put the heavy studded collar back on the wall and turned toward Otis. He was holding another collar that looked like a simple leather band and not much else.

Only when Hudson moved his hands did Otis realize how pretty the collar was. It was held together by a thick metal buckle shaped like a heart. He didn't move, didn't even dare to breathe as Hudson put the collar around his neck, his fingers working efficiently and touching his heated skin only now and then.

He could feel the small heart pressing slightly against his neck, but only enough to let him know it was there without being uncomfortable. Hudson's hands on his shoulders were the same, not too heavy, not too light. "How does it feel?"

He didn't need any help to express that. "Safe," he replied and touched the metal heart.

"Is it too tight?" Hudson continued.

Otis shook his head energetically. "No, it's perfect. And it's a very pretty collar."

"It's actually called a choker," Hudson explained.

"It doesn't choke me," Otis pointed out.

A shadow moved over Hudson's handsome features for a moment. "And it's not supposed to. It's yours if you want it."

"Can I keep it? Really?"

"Yes."

"Can I wear it all the time?" Otis didn't recall ever receiving such a pretty gift. And sexy. Yes, it was sexy, because it made him feel sexy.

"Don't you think people at work might wonder about it?" Hudson teased him.

"I'll wear a higher collar. Like this," Otis explained. "Thank you. How can I repay you for such a wonderful gift?"

Hudson's eyes darkened, but not like before, with something alien and strange, but also with something else that made Otis feel heat returning to his cheeks and the need to squirm.



How could someone so innocent push all the right buttons? Hudson felt desire flooding back into his system after it had been chased away by the recent events so harshly that he would have thought it impossible to feel it again until weeks later. It wasn't the spike of want he usually experienced either, not an itch he needed to scratch, not a base sensation either.

"Repay me?" he asked slowly. "You don't have to do that."

"I insist," Otis said, looking determined to obtain what he was there for.

Hudson truly wanted to know more about that, and not only. He wanted to know this beautiful young man as much as a human being was able to know another. "If you insist," he said. "Okay, but only if you promise me, really promise me, that you will stop if you feel that I'm going too far."

With any other man waking such sensations in him, he would have been naked and halfway through the act by now. Only this wasn't the usual sensation, was it?

"Please, tell me," Otis said eagerly.

Hudson took one step back and then another. "I'd like to see you wearing nothing else but that choker."

Otis looked at him in unhidden shock. "Do you want me to pose for you?"

Why not? He'd keep that particular set of pictures for himself, without a doubt. "Yes."

"But I'm not handsome like the others," Otis argued.

"Sorry for breaking it to you, but you're wrong. Actually, you're right," Hudson decided to tease the pretty man in front of him a little, "you're much more handsome, nothing like them."

Otis began to snicker, aware of the joke. "You'll be disappointed," he warned.

"Let me be the judge of that."

"Will you tell me if I look weird naked?"

"Cross my heart."



Hudson wanted to see him naked. He was so unprepared for it, mentally at least, because he did have clean socks on and underwear and everything else. But this was a chance for his teacher to evaluate what kind of chances Otis might have in the real world of dating, seeing how gay guys seemed all to be interested in meat percentage and things like that. Maybe Hudson had some advice for him to get more of that, too.

He touched his choker and smiled. If he was brave enough to wear something like that, he could undress, as well. Maybe he'd keep his eyes closed and that would save him some embarrassment. "Please, promise not to laugh," he pleaded as he reached for the cuff buttons of his shirt.

Hudson didn't look to be at all in the mood to laugh. His dark eyes were burning, or so Otis felt under his gaze.

"Should I go sit on the couch?" he asked.

Hudson stepped out of the way and then took his seat on the chair across. He began fiddling with the camera installed on the tripod and then looked at him again. "Continue."

Was it his hearing going bad, or had Hudson's voice sounded huskier than usual? Otis removed his shirt completely and placed it carefully on the arm of the couch to his right. "Should I do the undershirt next or remove my pants?" he asked.

"Take it all off," came the crisp reply.

Otis nodded, happy with being given such a clear order. He hoped he was efficient enough as he removed his underwear and folded it to put it with the rest. For a moment, he stopped and covered his front. It was enough to look at Hudson, how he sat there, one leg crossed over the other at the ankle, his tight t-shirt stretched over his chest, and Otis could feel his temperature rising without having a fever. "How," he began and swallowed thickly, "do you want me?"

"That's a dangerous question, Otis," Hudson growled and stared at him intently. "Please lie on the couch, on your belly. Yes, like that. Turn your head and look at me over your shoulder."

To look at Hudson now meant looking at the camera, and that felt a bit odd. "Are you cold? You seem a bit stiff."

"I've never posed before," Otis explained.

"I understand. Forget about looking at me or the camera. Close your eyes if you want. And think about how having that choker around your neck makes you feel."

That was a lot easier. Otis tipped his head back a little and touched his choker. If he kept his eyes closed, he could still imagine Hudson's fingers brushing against his skin while putting it on him.

"Yes, like that, baby," Hudson encouraged him. "Lift your butt a little higher."

Otis felt as if he had gotten drunk again, although he had had nothing but water all day long. He pushed his ass up, as Hudson asked him to, feeling a new type of heat pooling in his groin.

Hudson moved away from his tripod and came closer. Otis tipped his head back as far as he could to see him hovering above, the camera in his hand.

"Now, slowly, get up on all fours," Hudson advised and caressed his spine from between his shoulder blades down to the small of his back, right above his ass.

Otis shuddered, but obeyed. His breath hitched as Hudson reached between his legs but only so that he could push them apart slightly. The back of Hudson's hand brushed against his most intimate parts and the heat inside him soared.

"Now turn, baby," Hudson encouraged him.

"I can't," Otis whispered.

"Why?"

"Because... I..." he choked and didn't say it.

Hudson took it upon himself to help him turn on his back. And then, he took his hands when he tried to cover his shameful parts and pushed them up, above his head. "Don't worry about a thing, beautiful," he whispered. "You look amazing. Every inch of you."

Otis dared to open his eyes. The hair had fallen away from his forehead, so he was giving Hudson the unimpeded sight of his weird, smaller eye, too, now.

That didn't appear to shock Hudson in any way. "Hold your arms above your head like this and look up." He released Otis's hands to handle the camera. "Damn, Otis, you should see yourself." Before he could argue, Hudson added, "You're the most beautiful man I've ever met in my life."

That was enough for him. He bit on his bottom lip and let out a small sound. The next moment, hot lips were all over his again.

Chapter Nine – Into the Light of Another

The camera had long been forgotten, as Hudson pressed his lips firmly against the soft ones opening for him like a delicate flower. How could some people walk through the world without any of its darkness marring the most beautiful part of them? Yes, he wasn't mincing words; he meant every one of them as he praised Otis, and it wasn't only his physical appearance that made him so. Otis's beauty shone from the inside and it spilled out of him through his mysterious eye, through the way his mouth opened to talk so innocently about things both big and small, without ever making a difference between them and treating all of them with the same deference as if the whole world mattered.

In the Twilight basement, his skin had turned so cold, crawling with apprehension, and now he felt warm as he touched the supple body moving ever so gently under his fingertips. This new experience reminded him of a song talking about how cracks were only there to let the light in, only that Otis, the whole of him, was the perfect opposite, and it was the light radiating from him, as kind as his soul was, and warming those living outside in the gray dull world.

A soft cute moan from the other pulled him out of his musings, and the reality of their hard bodies meeting rippled like an earthquake aftershock through him. He brought one hand to caress Otis's face, the curve of his neck over the heart buckle of the choker, the expanse of a collarbone until he wrapped it around a smooth shoulder. Hudson felt as if he wanted to fill his hands with the lovely being shuddering slightly under him for as long as time allowed him.

Such luxuries were meant for further examination at another time. Without needing a map and a compass, he knew very well what Otis needed, despite his innocence. "Is this all right?" he asked in a ragged voice, as he traced an invisible line from Otis's solar plexus down to his bellybutton and then lower. Even that part of him was as cute as the rest. Hudson felt a deep need to tease Otis until he heard him cry out, incapable of letting his pleasure soar higher.

"Everything is all right when I'm with you," Otis breathed out and watched him with both eyes, unlike before.

Hudson caught himself in time. He wanted to touch that raised skin, that scar, and ask Otis about it and learn everything about whoever had hurt him so that he could chase them to the end of the world and hurt them back. The only thing keeping him from doing so was that he didn't want to risk Otis shutting him out because he wanted too much too soon.

Hudson dared to venture further. Now, he was cupping the smooth ball sac in his right hand, rolling the testes inside slowly. He needed to proceed with caution. Everything about Otis screamed that he was an innocent in every aspect. Therefore, no matter how willing his gorgeous neighbor was, it was in his hands to respect that lack of knowledge and handle it with care.

"What about here?" Hudson asked and pressed his thumb on the engorged head of Otis's cock.

It was, indeed, such a cute thing, not too long, but not too short, either, a bit on the thick side, which was surprising for someone of Otis's slender frame. In Hudson's eyes it was simply perfect and, given free rein, he wanted to gorge himself on it, swallow it to the hilt and lick it at length. However, he needed to ask, and in terms that would leave no room for misunderstanding.

"You..." Otis whispered, lost for words as he seemed.

"You will have to do better than that. I need to hear you," Hudson said gently. "Can you put it into words? Can you ask me?"

"I..." Otis began again. His hands were running freely through Hudson's short hair, tentative at first, but progressively bolder. "I want you to--" He swallowed and couldn't continue.

"Allow me to help you. I will tell you what I want, and then you'll either agree or not. Is that okay?" Otis nodded eagerly. "I want to put my mouth on your cock," Hudson said firmly. The look of perfect astonishment that met his eyes convinced him – as if there was any need – that Otis mustn't have done such a thing with anyone else until now. No one could be that good an actor and pretend to be innocent in this day and age. "Have you ever done this with anyone? Has anyone sucked you off?"

"No," Otis whispered.

"Would you like me to?"

"I would love it." The affirmative was finally spoken in a firmer voice.

So Hudson let his wishes come true as he locked eyes with Otis and took him in his mouth.



Were they skipping steps by going directly to that? Otis didn't think so, because everything felt too right to be wrong. Hudson was, without a doubt, most generous to offer something of the kind. When he had seen videos of men doing that sort of thing, Otis had found himself prey to so much desire that he had never lasted longer than a couple of minutes. According to plenty of articles he had read online, men in general considered that lack of stamina to be shameful and, under any other circumstances, Otis would have said 'no' to Hudson's offer. However, since he was learning and Hudson was his teacher, there was no shame in being what the Internet called 'a fast shooter'.

But what if Hudson minded such a thing? What if he couldn't conduct his lesson properly because Otis was too fast? He needed to ask. "I might," he said with difficulty while the contact of firm lips with that part of him made his back arch off the sofa, "be too fast."

Merciful in his own right, Hudson removed his mouth for a moment. “It doesn’t matter. I will enjoy it either way.”

“All right, all right then,” Otis repeated for the sake of giving himself courage. “Please proceed with, um --”

“With blowing you?” Hudson’s dark eyes flashed at him.

Otis felt his cheeks turning crimson. Then, he steeled himself. Wasn’t he the one who said that he needed to get rid of his shyness and become bolder in his interactions with men? Hudson was a man, and not only. He was his teacher and someone who would accept his missteps on the matter. “Yes, please,” he confirmed, but his voice was shaky and nothing like the bold person he hoped to become.

“Say it,” Hudson encouraged him. “Say it with your own words, but say it as dirty as you can.”

Dirty was another word for sexy, as Otis had dutifully had written down in his secret notebook. Now, that was quite the tall order and he had no idea if he could pull it off. Nonetheless, he was there to learn, which meant that he could at least try. “I want you to--” he started bravely and then stopped abruptly. “May I start again?”

Hudson stuck out his tongue and licked the head of Otis’s member slowly. Otis trembled as new sensations swam through him like electric eels. “You may start as many times as you want. But don’t mind my getting to work in the meantime. Something tells me that you only need the proper stimulation to get your dirty-talking juices flowing.”

Oh, there would be juices, and they would be flowing, Otis thought, as his eyes remained glued to the impossible scene in front of him. Hudson had to be a master of all things sexual, and that had been the same line of thinking he had had from the very start of getting to know his neighbor. His masculine jawline, his firm lips, the way his thick eyebrows furrowed as he was... getting to work, as he had mentioned – that was a lot more than Otis had ever envisioned while picturing himself on the receiving end of this type of sexual act.

“I can feel your tongue,” he whispered. “It’s so good.” He trembled from head to toes, although Hudson was teasing and playing only with that part of him. “You are... sucking me...”

He shuddered as he felt the wave of pleasure growing inside him, as he had seen at the beach, a long time ago, on the only trip there he had ever been to, that rise of the water, so inevitable, so smooth, before the crest broke to fall and accelerate toward the shore.

There was no crest breaking to speak of. Otis gasped as Hudson caught his cock by its base, making a vise-like grip with his fingers. The wave remained up there, cutting his breathing for a moment.

“What are you doing?” he asked and blinked. His skin was burning, his eyes were getting moist, and he had never felt such great pleasure in his life.

“I’m helping you feel this for a little while longer,” Hudson explained.

Otis nodded. “You are such a great teacher. I’m happy I found you.” He wanted to sound as polite as possible, but his words came out chopped off and ungraceful, since he couldn’t control the sensations wreaking havoc inside him.

“Let’s try something else.” Hudson wrapped his tongue slowly around the head, his eyes half-closing. He was teasing the skin right underneath, making the shudders inside Otis grow in intensity so much that they felt like small earthquakes.

“What...” Otis began and blinked away a few tears of extreme pleasure. “What does it taste like?”

“Like the most delicious thing I’ve ever had,” Hudson told him and released the tight ring at the base of Otis’s cock for a moment while engulfing him whole in his mouth.

That was high praise and it had to be a bit of a white lie, the kind that was allowed from time to time. Otis could only assume that Hudson had tasted many delicious things in his life, and probably ‘that’ wasn’t exactly the most delicious of them all. Or, maybe, if he thought about it... but he couldn’t because that very moment, Hudson squeezed him between his lips and pulled up only to descend fast.

All of his cock was in the other’s mouth, and it felt like nothing else ever. Otis couldn’t describe it; it was pleasure to the hottest degree, and he had to tell it like it was. “Hudson,” he moaned, “it is... as if... you’re taking it all... out of me...”

The last words ended up as a long keening sound while Otis couldn’t hold back. His toes curled against the sofa, and Hudson just held him down and sucked it all out of him, determined as he seemed not to miss one drop.

Otis closed his eyes as he experienced the best falling of his life. It was a wonder he wasn’t going through the sofa, his body regaining slowly the same consistence and weight he knew. For moments there, he had felt as if he no longer had a material body and was only made out of sensations and nothing else.

He threw one arm over his eyes. Was there anything he could say to let Hudson know just how much that meant to him? How grateful he was? His mind was a field of molasses and made no sense. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. And some of it, he did, as he let a sob escape his lips, followed by a low giggle.

“Hey,” Hudson called for him gently. “Are you okay?”

Otis thought for a moment what he could say or do, but then he just acted on impulse. He straightened up enough so that he could throw his arms around Hudson and hold on to him. “Thank you,” he said with profuse honesty, “thank you, thank you!”

Hudson hugged him back. “You’re more than welcome, beautiful.”

Otis felt his chest expanding and warmth spreading throughout his entire body. He enjoyed how Hudson didn’t let go of him and continued to hold him, both gently and firmly, as seemed to be his manner in dealing with all things.



How different Otis was from any lover he had ever held in his arms before. Hudson was dumbfounded how no one had snatched this lovely young man and made him his, but he was more the grateful for it. It offered him a chance like no other to have him all to himself, no matter how short that time may be. As long as this investigation went, he promised himself. He had to protect Otis, he said to himself. That was all, he lied – a little – to himself.

Otis’s clear eyes were amazingly beautiful as they bore into his, as they needed to break their embrace. “May I taste yours now?”

That was a question Hudson hadn’t expected, when he should have. Otis was a generous being, in all possible ways. However, he wouldn’t take advantage, not right now. “Maybe later,” he chose to say, no matter how much his flesh throbbed at the promise of having those beautiful lips wrapped around his cock, teasing him with their clumsy yet endearing innocence in such dealings. “But you will have to promise me that, in the meantime, you won’t rush into doing this kind of thing with the first man that crosses your path.”

Otis snickered. “The first man that crosses my path each morning is Mr. Jericho, the mailman. I don’t think he would like me to offer such a thing.”

Hudson traced the shape of Otis’s nose playfully. “Don’t be such a smartass. You know what I mean.”

Otis nodded eagerly. “I won’t taste... another man’s cock,” he eventually said and blushed, “before yours. And until you finish teaching me. But you will... you will put it in my mouth, right?”

He was whispering now, and Hudson had to lean forward to catch it all. He didn’t mind since it allowed him to be as close as he could be to that lovely human being and the warmth of his body. It was easy to lean forward and catch the pretty lips in another kiss.

“Is there nothing I can do for you in turn?” Otis asked anxiously once Hudson gave him back the ability to breathe.

“Maybe there are a few things,” Hudson said as he decided that Otis might very well like the thing that would follow. “How about making that inventory? Of my tattoos? You seem like a very thorough fellow to me.”

Otis’s eyes lit up. “Do I get to see you naked? Completely naked?”

“You must check every inch of my skin, you know?” Hudson joked. “And, who knows? I might have tattoos in places I don’t remember.”

Otis blinked while the wheels of his mind kept turning. “Is that possible? Doesn’t it hurt to have a tattoo done?”

Hudson shrugged. “You just go ahead and satisfy your curiosity. Deal?”

Otis nodded with irresistible eagerness. There was a short time for regrets once hurried hands began to finger the hem of his t-shirt, but it was very short. What followed would be in equal parts satisfying and tough to bear teasing.



What an incredible chance Hudson was giving him! Otis helped Hudson out of his tight t-shirt first and licked his lips at the sight of that hairy chest. His eyes moved from one perky nipple to the other and then back again.

“Take a picture, it will last longer,” Hudson joked.

“May I?” Otis inquired politely.

“Not now. Get to that inventory already.”

Right. Hudson was offering him so many tasty bits to choose from, and he was like a kid in a candy shop. He truly needed to focus and start with the first thing offered. After a short moment of deliberation with himself, he reached for the belt buckle on Hudson’s jeans. What would his neighbor’s cock look like? It had to be darker, right? What about his behind? Otis had shamelessly ogled Hudson’s ass a few times, and in those tight jeans, that part of the man’s anatomy appeared to be rock hard.

Secretly, Otis decided that he would push things as far as Hudson was all right with, since there was so much for him to learn about the male body in general. Only that it wasn’t quite so, and he had to admit to himself, just as secretly, that it was Hudson’s body he wished to learn down to each pinky and no one else’s.

Maybe it was because it would be the first body he was allowed to explore to such length. He would think of it later, once alone. He shook his head. Once alone, he would most probably relive what Hudson had done to him over and over again, until exhaustion.

“Come on,” Hudson encouraged him since he had frozen with his hands on the buckle. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of snakes. This one’s not poisonous, I assure you.”

Otis remained disconcerted briefly, and then he understood that Hudson was using a euphemism for his sexual organ. Now, he was all the more curious. Was it as long as a snake? And what kind of snake?

Full of curiosity and emboldened by Hudson’s willingness to allow him to explore his body to his heart’s content, he proceeded at helping the other out of his jeans and underwear, too. That was when his jaw dropped so fast and hard that he had to grab it with one hand and put it back. “What’s this?” he asked in unhidden fascination as he pushed against the metal bead coming out of the little hole and having a matching bead right underneath. “You have a piercing!” he exclaimed and began playing with it. It moved easily, but it looked like Hudson wasn’t that comfortable with his manipulation of the metal half-ring, so he stopped.

“That’s Prince Albert for you,” Hudson explained and let out a short breath.

“Oh, he’s royalty? How should I address him?” Otis lay on his belly so that his head was level with Hudson’s crotch. That way, he could stare openly at that thing, which looked like nothing else he had seen in his life.

He looked up as Hudson touched his head. He needed to angle his neck so that he could meet Hudson’s eyes, as his cock was in the way. And what an incredible thing that was! Not only because of the piercing, but because of how veiny and hard it presented itself. Darker, yes, it was darker than the rest of Hudson’s body, and it was complete with a nice pair of hairy balls that made Otis want to weigh them in his hand and marvel at their heaviness.

“That’s the name of the piercing,” Hudson said and smiled. “But if you want to address my cock as Your Majesty, I’m not against it.”

He was laughing. Of course, he was laughing because it was a joke. Otis guffawed, too, and then, before Hudson could say a thing, he pressed the large cock against his cheek. “Your Majesty, you’re so big and strong,” he said, and he wasn’t lying.

Hudson ruffled his hair. “Didn’t you have a job to do? Or now that you’ve seen my piercing, you’re no longer interested in my tattoos?”

“I am very much interested in everything,” Otis said promptly.

How at ease he felt being naked in another man’s presence! That could only mean that he was making tremendous progress. Reluctantly, he gave up on staring at Hudson’s amazing cock from

up close and placed himself on his knees. Carefully, he took Hudson's right hand and began examining the tattoo that appeared to go as high as where the shoulder met the torso. No wonder he had dreamed of riding down a serpent after seeing his new neighbor for the first time; that right arm was covered in green scales and winding paths that circled their way around in an upward spiral. When his eyes fell on the highest point of the shoulder, he came face to face with a pair of burning eyes, and only then did he identify the presence of an animal head. "It's a dragon," he exclaimed and traced the inky design with his fingers. "How wonderful." Now, all the more curious about the other arm, he hurried to examine it before Hudson got bored with him. "And here?" he asked, as he traced the ink lines carefully, barely touching the skin. "Why black roses?"

Hudson offered him a somewhat forced smile. "Something about beauty in darkness, I thought at the time. For a cool kid like you, I bet that sounds pretty mid, right?"

Otis knew for a fact that Hudson was simply pulling his leg. "I am not a kid, I am twenty--"

"--two, I know. Frankly, I thought you'd protest at being called cool." Hudson flashed another dazzling smile at him.

"I wouldn't. Cool is a good thing to be when you're young. Not very much so when you grow older, because you might come across as immature."

Hudson looked at him with questioning eyes. Otis blushed and draped one arm over himself. He was naked and had taken too many liberties. And now he was blabbing about all the useless things he knew and no one cared about. Before he had the guts to come up with an excuse so that he could leave the apartment, Hudson took his hand – the other one – and placed it on one of the tattooed guns. Otis looked up for confirmation and noticed right away the burning eyes.

"Weren't you curious about these before?"

"Yes. They are very--" Otis swallowed and decided to muster all his courage. He placed both his hands on the inked guns – a pair of shotguns, he believed – and moved them slowly downward. They were sexy. That was the word he was searching for. Now he remembered. But he didn't have time to say it, because Hudson talked again.

"But these were the easy ones. I have one more."

"Oh, I want to see it," Otis said right away. "What sort is it?"

Hudson's smile was enigmatic. "I will let you discover it on your own."

Hmm, that sounded a bit disconcerting. Otis looked the chiseled body in front of him carefully, although it did nothing for his nerves to do so. Yes, he had been right from the very start about that meat percentage Hudson had. His body was sculptured, like a work of art. It was hard, but

warm to the touch, unlike stone. And Otis loved the hair. He brushed his hands over Hudson's chest and snickered. That felt very good.

"Aren't you forgetting your mission?" Hudson asked in a teasing voice.

Usually, someone taking that tone with him would make him wary. People certainly loved having a laugh. It was when they were having it at his expense that things got complicated. But Hudson wasn't mean, and he could tell. A mean person wouldn't let him have his go at all that exploration, with so much patience and understanding.

"What mission?" he asked, still mesmerized by the movement of those beautiful muscles underneath the skin.

"Finding my secret tattoo. I'm going to make it worth your while," Hudson promised.

"How so?" Otis asked, his ears perked up to attention, like a dog's.

"Let's say that I'll give you a prize."

"We're just going to say, or will you give me a prize if I find your other tattoo?" Otis asked, eager to have everything straight.

"There's no cutting corners and beating around the bush with you, is there?" Hudson grinned and flicked his nose playfully. "I will definitely give you a prize as a reward if you can find it."

Otis touched it and stared back. "What is the prize?"

"A secret until you meet your goal. What do you say?"

"Like a mystery box. That is so cool," Otis said, a bit awkward for saying stuff like that, because 'cool' wasn't a word usually in his vocabulary.

"Now, let's make it time-sensitive. I'll give you five minutes--"

"Starting when?" Otis pushed himself back on his heels and began scanning Hudson's body with keen eyes.

"Don't steal the start," Hudson chided him. "Starting now."



Otis took him by surprise when he pushed him, so he laughed while his naughty neighbor rolled him on one side, his eager hands all over. He obviously meant to handle and fondle him at the same time, because Hudson could feel Otis's fingers roaming across his skin. He wanted that

experiment of theirs to last for a bit longer, but that wouldn't happen with such a determined little hunting doggy as Otis was.

Hudson allowed him to manipulate him so that he was now on his belly, which had to give Otis the unhindered view of his 'secret' tattoo.

"That is so pretty!" Otis exclaimed and pushed his finger into Hudson's right butt cheek. "It's a butterfly, right?"

"As you see me lying right under you in the buff," Hudson confirmed. "So, what do you think?"

"It's very different from your others," Otis commented. "It is so pretty and colorful. The others are sort of dangerous--"

"What do you mean, sort of?" Hudson asked, pretending to be scandalized by such an understatement.

"They are dangerous-looking," Otis hurried to say. "But this isn't."

"Are you sure?" Hudson teased him. "What if it's a poisonous butterfly?"

"It's not," Otis said with incredible confidence. "I know all the poisonous types of butterflies, and this isn't one of them."

If he hadn't known Otis already and his fairly odd habits, he would have thought that the guy was pulling his leg. "I had no idea there were butterflies like that. You sure?"

"Yes," Otis said promptly. "Some you can use to poison darts and arrows. You know, for hunting."

"Okay, Mr. Grylls, remind me not to get on your bad side."

"I'm not Mr. Grylls, I'm Mr. Bendecker," Otis insisted.

Hudson decided that he was already having too much fun to insist on details. "Oh, and you want me to address you formally now, Mr. Bendecker?"

"No. I don't think that would be a very good idea since we have already seen each other naked."

"Ah, so that's one of the criteria for getting chummy with you. I see," Hudson teased his cute neighbor again.

Otis pressed his finger into the middle of the butterfly. "How did this get here?"

"What? You don't like it?" That would be a bit of a bummer since Hudson hoped he would impress Otis in all possible ways. Why that was so important, he couldn't very well say, except that it would give him a very pleasant feeling.

“I do. But it’s so different from the rest.”

“Fair’s fair. I made a bet and lost.” Hudson smiled at the memory. Not everything was bad all the time, was it? That had been a lesson for him to learn, and for others to teach him.

Otis surprised him by bending over and kissing the butterfly. His lips felt so good against his skin, but Hudson pushed the feeling away. “Hey, that’s ticklish.” He had to be careful around this pretty man. It was too easy to get lost in his strange blue eyes; they had the power of hypnosis, even though their owner didn’t know it. And what he did with those soft lips could drive a grown man crazy, too.

He turned and pulled Otis over his body to kiss him and regain control. Otis seemed to allow it patiently, kissing back, but also being the one to break it. “What is my prize?”

Eager, always so eager. He was definitely tempting Hudson beyond what he could possibly deal with. “I’ll do you a favor, but I’m letting you choose.”

“Choose?” Otis echoed slowly. “Do I have to say it off the top of my head?”

“Yes. So what would you like? For me to blow you?” Hudson whispered in Otis’s ear, enjoying the small shiver in the supple body he was holding, “or maybe taste you in another way?”

To his surprise, Otis pushed him away and then straddled his body. He looked quite determined, holding him prisoner between his thighs like that. The hair had fallen over the one eye Otis preferred hidden, but he was all the more alluring like that. “I want to play with this,” he said and grabbed Hudson’s cock with both hands.

He grunted as that simple thing did nothing for the horniness he had experienced since he had invited this pretty guy into his apartment. “The favor was supposed to be me doing things to you. For you.”

“I want this,” Otis replied and pursed his lips, seemingly displeased with being contradicted on the matter.

Hudson put his hands on Otis’s wrists only to hold them not remove them from his body. “Do you want to give me a hand, then?” he asked, suddenly aware of the raspy tone of his voice.

Otis nodded and smiled. “Can I? I might not be good, but--”

Hudson decided that it was about time to give his neighbor his vote of confidence, so he grabbed him by the back of his neck and pulled him close so that they could openly stare at each other. “You can do no wrong, Otis.”

The temptation was too strong, after all, so he indulged in kissing Otis again, while slender fingers began moving up and down, tentatively at first, and then faster, as their kiss grew hotter.

He couldn't tell how he came so fast, but it happened, and he swallowed Otis's surprised, yet pleased, gasps with his mouth long after.

Chapter Ten – Until You Become Nothing but A Dot

He liked the smell of sex, but not as much as the man lying in his arms, completely abandoned and gone to the world. Hudson brushed his hand through the silky strands of Otis's hair over and over, hating the moment when he would have to wake up his precious charge and send him back to his place with a pat on his delicious rump. He would have to do it anyway. How often had he thought with his dick in his life? Not that many times. But now was one of them, and, if he indulged in this kind of satisfaction too much, there was a high chance he'd get burned.

And not only him. He had a responsibility, whether he liked it or not, toward his nosy neighbor. No, it wasn't a matter of like and dislike, because he liked it too much already. Hence the problem. He patted Otis on the shoulder, lightly at first, and then more firmly. Otis grumbled in his sleep, so unlike his usually over-the-top polite self that it made him laugh. The shaking of his body finally convinced the sleeping beauty to wake up.

Otis blinked and stared at him. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Yes." Hudson traced the lean curve of Otis's back, still unwilling to let the beautiful man in his arms get up and leave. Again and again, so unlike him. No matter how attractive the guy he slept with was, he didn't care about waffles in the morning and satiated kisses. Once the deed was done, they both hit the road.

"Did I snore?"

Hudson laughed. "Maybe a little." Otis touched his nose in surprise. He was way too easy, so Hudson laughed more. "Not really. You are a very polite guest, even when you sleep."

"Thank you. That's a relief."

"Why so?" Even making casual conversation of the strangest kind filled the space of the dingy apartment to such a degree that Hudson didn't want to allow his guest to take his leave.

"According to certain commercials, your spouse might file for divorce if you don't solve your snoring problem."

It was so like Otis to pay attention to commercials and take them at face value. So he decided to offer a reply that would be in line with the same reasoning. "Even if you snored, we wouldn't be in any danger. In order to get a divorce, we'd have to be married first." Otis's candid stare was just too much. Hudson pinched his smooth cheek and kissed his nose. "I'm afraid I need to take you back to yours. I assume you need your beauty sleep just as much as I do."

"No amount of sleep will help," Otis delivered in a convinced tone.

"Help what?" Hudson asked.

Otis didn't reply, but the way he pulled his bangs over his left eye left no room for guessing. That wouldn't do. They weren't strangers anymore, were they? He raised his hand and brushed the blond bangs out of the way. "You're beautiful as you are, Otis."

Otis looked to the side. How could a grown man like him still feel embarrassed when given compliments? Well-deserved compliments, on top of it all. "Don't ask me," he murmured.

"I won't," Hudson promised. Was it a burn scar? It pulled at the skin around it and the raised aspect, as well as the coloration, reminded him of what he had seen before in some victims from a case a long time ago. What could have caused it? Otis had no other similar scars on the rest of his body, which made the detective in him imagine horrendous scenarios. That scar could very well be the result of a deliberate wound cause by a hot object held against the skin.

A wedge was splitting the comfortable space they had been sharing up until now, and Hudson regretted it, although he knew that it was for the best. "Come on," he said, "let's get you dressed and back to your place."

Otis didn't protest. He kept his eyes down as he carefully put each article of clothing back on he had removed only earlier with so much shy enthusiasm. Hudson batted his hands away and buttoned him up. When he reached the last, he caressed the heart-shaped buckle.

"Do you want it back?" Otis asked.

"No. Why would I?"

"Because I'm not completely honest with you. I can't--"

"It's all right," Hudson interrupted him. If they got into any competition who was the less honest between them, Otis would lose by a landslide. "And this," he said, caressing the leather strap and only slightly touching the skin above it, "looks way too nice on you to take it back."

"Thank you," Otis said primly. He put his hands by his side, fists closed.

Hudson recognized the signs. So, he took the clenched hands into his and watched as the expression on Otis's face changed as he kissed one and then the other. "I'll take you to your apartment."

"I live only a few doors away," Otis protested, too meekly to mean it.

Hudson knew what was happening with him, too. He was a dog sniffing a scent. He wanted to know more about Otis. He could lie to himself that it was for the sake of his investigation, to get to know his neighbor intimately enough to uncover his secrets, such as what could have caused that scar he tried so hard to hide. What importance could that have for his detective work? None whatsoever, but it didn't stop him from taking Otis's hand in reassurance. "Just let me get some pants on."



Hudson wanted to know about the scar. Of course, anyone who got close, mostly by accident, was dying to know how he got it. 'Dying to know' was a very strange expression; nobody really died while trying to gain knowledge of various things, unless it was to identify what mushrooms were poisonous and which weren't by means of ingesting them or something similar.

He wanted to be alone and touch the old scar again. He hated it but knew that he wouldn't ever get rid of it. Lies, he could tell plenty to himself. But it wasn't fair to get rid of it, even if he had the money to do so, even if he revolted against it and what it stood for.

Hudson was so nice and neighborly, to want to take him back to his apartment, to ensure that he got there safely, the way people did when they cared. He wanted so much to experience that feeling more, to revel in it, to bottle it up if he could and keep it for later. The pressure of the heart-shaped buckle against his throat reminded him of the beautiful gift Hudson had given him tonight.

This was safer than he had felt ever since grandma had passed away. She had been so kind to him, contradicting him even though he knew he was to blame, only because of the goodness of her heart. But she must have been lying, or otherwise, why couldn't he be convinced of the truth of her words? She was lying because she loved him and she didn't want to see him sad all the time. So many days, in the beginning, dragging him out of his room so that they could eat together and listen to the radio and even dance when a waltz came on.

He shook his head. The more he thought of her, the sadder he became tonight. He remained turned away while Hudson put on a pair of jeans and one of his skin-tight t-shirts. He welcomed the warm hand on his shoulder. Maybe one day, he'd find the courage to tell his new friend everything and leave it up to him to judge and decide whether Otis was still someone he wanted to be friends with.

That begged the question. "Are we going to be friends?"

Hudson laughed softly. "I like to think that we are there already. What remains is to become even better friends. What do you think?"

Otis nodded eagerly. "Yes, I would very much like that."



Friendship wasn't exactly what he had in mind when looking at those plump inviting lips and that hypnotic eye. Yet, it had to do. He was getting too close, as things stood.

Otis opened the door to his apartment and then half-turned toward him. "Can you still drink coffee at this hour?"

"I'd better not. Wait, are you asking me to pay you a little visit?"

"Yes," Otis confirmed. "I don't have coffee anyway. I will bring some from work."

"Just for me?" Hudson asked.

"Yes."

He wasn't surprised anymore. So no, no one was allowed to snatch this precious boy from his grasp, for as long as he could help it.

As soon as he was inside, he noticed the large mirror leaning against the wall. Otis avoided it with seemingly practiced ease and then stopped. "I'm sorry about the mess. I guess it needs to be put on the wall, but I don't know how to do it."

"I'll help you," Hudson promised.

He followed Otis into his small bedroom. It was sparsely appointed, and only the good taste in pastel colors for the few furnishings in it saved it. There was barely any room to maneuver, and the credenza he had brought in that day only caused the space to shrink even more. It wasn't his place to comment on Otis's choices for interior decoration, although he doubted that was what motivated his neighbor to make such choices. What had he said that day? That he needed to bring in some beautiful things?

The next thing he noticed was the array of various glass figurines that took up a thin shelf. He carefully picked one up and looked at it; it was a tiny mouse staring up with begging eyes, a small piece of cheese between its front paws. To observe all those details, he needed to bring it close to his eyes, that incredibly small the glass figurine was.

"That cost a real fortune," Otis said with pride in his voice.

"Oh. I should put it back then," Hudson replied. He had no idea how much a thing like that could cost, but he didn't want to break Otis's heart by breaking it by accident.

"It's all right. I can tell you are very careful with other people's things." Otis came close to him and began pointing at the other miniscule figurines. "That pig, I got three months ago. It was a good week at work and I had plenty saved from before. And that crocodile was a real steal. I bought it at a 21% discount."

"They are so small," Hudson expressed his astonishment. "You know," he joked, "for someone into the heavy stuff like you, I was expecting something else from your bedroom."

Otis put the tiny mouse back as it were and stared at him in surprise. “What do you mean? What heavy stuff?” Hudson pointed at his neck suggestively. Otis touched his choker. “Is this heavy stuff? You didn’t let me have the studded one.”

“You’re not a vicious dog to train you with that kind of thing,” Hudson replied, playing into dangerous territory as if nothing else mattered.

“Hmm,” Otis grunted and pursed his lips. “Is it bad to be easy to train?”

They weren’t supposed to be having this conversation. They were just coming from the hottest sex Hudson had had in weeks, no matter how tame it must have seemed compared to his usual man on man action. He turned the conversation toward safer topics. “Why do you like these things so much?” No one had a collection of animal figurines smaller than a human fingernail without having a real appreciation for that sort of craftsmanship.

Otis leaned over to observe his treasures up close. “Don’t you think it would be nice? To be so small that you could move through the world without getting noticed? And then, when someone wanted to look at you, really look at you, they’d notice all the little details about you? I have a magnifying glass if you want to look at them some more,” he added while straightening his back.

“Another time. I hope you’ll invite me over more often now that we’re not strangers anymore.” Hudson smiled to reassure his eccentric neighbor of his best intentions.

“Without a doubt.”

For a few moments, they stared at each other, saying nothing. Hudson caressed Otis’s cheek slowly. “How small do you wish you could be?” Otis stared back, unblinking. That was another unnerving thing about him, but Hudson was getting used to it. “As small as that mouse? Don’t tell me you’d wish you were invisible.”

Otis shook his head slowly. “No. But small enough to forget.”

That must have been a slip of the tongue because as soon as the words left his mouth, he pursed his lips and looked away. Hudson pulled him into a hug and a kiss. “Good night, Otis. See you around.”



Otis lay in bed, staring at the ceiling for a long time after Hudson was gone. No one had come into this room before. It wasn’t the right place for having someone over. There was no space to sit, except on the bed. And if they sat on the bed, together, that meant—

He touched the heart-shaped buckle again. He loved it. Grandma had always made such a big fuss of his birthday. She’d loved going all out, cake and decorations, and, of course, the gifts.

One thing he hadn't said to Hudson earlier was that the oldest piece in his collection, the blue seahorse, had been a present from her. She had told him at the time that seahorses were symbols of good luck, and he had believed her. That had been the last of his birthdays they had spent together. Afterward, she had fallen ill, too ill to bake him cakes and buy him beautiful glass figurines.

Hudson said they were friends now. He believed it desperately; not just trying to believe it. Grandma had used to say that, too; that you needed to believe in things, such as seahorses that meant good luck. That must have been why he had met Hudson. Yes, sometimes, it was enough to believe.



He was a man with a job now. Watkins had established a routine for him, and he was in charge of populating the business' website with artistic pictures of the models, in all sorts of racy getups and postures. That was the easy part. As long as he had to deal with people like Angel, who seemed to know exactly what they were getting themselves into, he could guard his emotions well.

That wasn't the case at the moment. He hadn't seen Jasper since he had left him in tears that night. He had tried to ignore the plea in the watery eyes, steeled himself against it because he couldn't blow his cover just because the boy ended up getting used more than he thought he deserved.

He adjusted the focus on his camera, while Jasper lay on the red sofa in front of him. The crimson velvet made his pale skin appear vulnerable. The shadows of veins underneath the skin caused him to look like a statue slowly being brought to life. His eyes were red, the lids inflamed, and the marks around his neck from when Angel had choked him while holding one knee pressed hard against his crotch were still visible.

"Are you all right?" Hudson asked, pretending that he still needed to fiddle with the camera.

Jasper closed his eyes and then turned his head toward the door, his eyes wide. Like a startled animal, Hudson thought. "Yes," he replied in a meek voice and faked a smile.

"Do they hurt?" Hudson asked, pointing at the marks around his neck.

Jasper touched them gingerly and winced as he pressed one with the tip of his forefinger. "No."

Another lie. And his eyes kept darting toward the door, as if he was expecting someone to burst through at any moment and hurt him. With steady moves, Hudson walked over and opened the door. He stepped outside and looked to both left and right. There was no one there. It didn't

mean that invisible eyes weren't watching them. He expected it. Jasper, in his ignorance, must have had no idea of where to look.

He returned and closed the door. He leaned over Jasper, crowding him under the pretense that he was explaining to him how to pose. When he was close enough, he whispered in his ear. "After our little session here, meet me at the café around the corner."

"Okay," came the barely audible, scared whisper. Once Hudson was back in his place, behind the camera, his tone turned forced and playful. "Want a piece of all this?"

Hudson grinned for show. "I'd rather not. We both have a job to do."



He checked his phone for the time. If Jasper didn't appear in the next half an hour, he would have to believe that the young man hadn't understood the real message hidden behind their small secretive exchange in the red room. For now, patience was required.

He had chosen a table as far from the windows as possible. Getting chummy with boys he intended to wrangle out of the hands of those suspicious individuals wasn't something he wanted to be known for. One thing that helped was how crowded the place was at that hour. And he had kept his jacket on to hide his tattoos. The personnel seemed too busy taking orders from delivery people and day workers to pay attention to him, but he liked to play it safe.

To his right, an elderly couple was sharing a small cake with a candle impaled in it. They seemed lost in their own world, talking in soft voices and laughing from time to time. What did young people say today? Relationship goals? Hudson shook his head. The other table close to him was filled with a group of hip youngsters that didn't appear to be employed. That explained why they could afford to waste time like this. Still, even that rowdy bunch got up and left after a while.

Hudson was about to call it a bust when Jasper rushed in and searched for him with the jerky motions of a chased rabbit. He got up from his seat and waved at him until the boy noticed him. Jasper drew his head into his shoulders and hurried toward him without looking directly at his table. He was stealing nervous glances left and right and, when he sat at Hudson's table, it was easy to see that he was trembling.

Hudson didn't have to push Jasper into confessing what was going on.

"Man, you gotta help me," Jasper whispered, his eyes pleading, his entire body hunched forward.

"What with?" he asked. If this was some sort of trap, he needed to take his time to read the troubled youngster in front of him.

Jasper blinked a few times, eyes darting to the side, out the large windows, over the elderly couple still indulging in their anniversary cake and quiet conversation. When he turned his head toward Hudson, his eyelashes were wet. “Those people are crazy,” he whispered.

“How so?” Hudson asked in the same icy tone.

Jasper threw him an incredulous look. He pulled back a little. “Did you want me here so you could screw me?” he asked.

There was real hurt in those eyes. And desperation. And terror. Hudson didn’t need any other confirmation. If he was reading this one wrong, Jasper deserved an Oscar and needed to ditch his porn career for Hollywood. “No. I wanted you here to hear why you’re so scared.”

Jasper hesitated. Now he was the one suspecting Hudson. “You’re not with them, are you?” He leaned over the table again. “You don’t seem to be... I mean, they just hired you, right?”

Hudson gestured for Jasper to come near. He pushed a strand of hair behind his ear. “Sit by my side so we can talk.”

The boy obeyed without making a fuss about it. His shoulders were still hunched, and he moved like a scared, beaten dog. He slid into the seat next to Hudson, pressing against him. He looked down and began talking rapidly. “I thought they just liked to play rough, you know? I mean, you’ve seen Angel. He’s a demented fuck. He almost killed me that time. I swear to God, if he’d done it, they wouldn’t have cared.”

“Slow down, Jasper. Tell me what you’ve heard.”

“How do you know I’ve heard something?”

The hesitation and lack of trust were natural. However, now that he had the confirmation that something was happening at Twilight, Hudson didn’t want to dally. “Call it intuition. Come on, man, you look like you’re about to jump out of your skin. Tell me everything. I will help you.”

“Do you promise? Can you?” Jasper asked in a pleading voice.

“Yes and yes. Now spill it. The faster we move, the better. But first, tell me everything you know.”

Jasper linked his hands and pressed them with his knees. “I heard them talking. About fresh meat. They were talking about me. They said I wasn’t pretty enough to keep.”

A pregnant silence followed. “And they didn’t mean they were going to fire you,” Hudson said calmly.

Jasper shivered by his side, so Hudson draped an arm around him. For anyone who looked, they were the picture of any couple sharing a latte in a café. He pushed his cup toward the boy. “What were they talking about?” he asked calmly.

“I don’t know exactly, but they were talking like... I don’t know. Like they wanted to put on a show with me. At a new place.”

Hudson’s ears perked up. “What place?”

“Till The Sweet End,” Jasper replied. “So they called it. And they laughed.”

“Slow down,” Hudson advised him again. “Who were they? Watkins and who else?”

Jasper bit on his bottom lip and winced. “I was behind the curtain and was supposed to have gone on a break. So I didn’t see them. There were at least two other guys. One sounded like he was the real boss. He had a strange voice.”

“Strange how?” Every little detail mattered.

“He sounded like a robot,” Jasper replied. “I’ve never heard anyone talk like that before. I thought, at first, that Watkins was playing with some machinery or something. But their conversation... that didn’t sound like something a robot would talk about.”

Hudson had his theories about the robot-like voice, but he wasn’t about to offer Jasper a crash course on them. They had no time for that. “Okay, continue. You say there was someone else there, besides Watkins and this boss of his.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t talk very much. They both treated him like he was their servant. It could have been one of the bouncers, but I didn’t have the guts to look.”

“Tell me more about their conversation. Till The Sweet End, you said?”

“Yes. They said they could use me as the debut piece. They talked about... making it last. Making me last.” Jasper’s voice turned so quiet that Hudson had to hold him really close to hear him. “They used words like finished, done for, like that. And then, the bouncer guy asked if... when he would have to get rid of the body.”

Hudson schooled his face into a neutral expression and looked ahead, taking in the daily noise of human existence, so oblivious to the darkness lurking in the shadows. “What did they say next?” he asked.

“Didn’t you hear me, man?” Jasper asked anxiously. “They made it sound as if I was the body.”

“The bouncer mentioned the body,” Hudson reminded him.

“Does it matter?” Jasper’s voice came out as a frightened squeal.

“Yes. Everything matters.” It mattered because otherwise, cases got dismissed, and murderers walked free.

“The one with the robot voice told him off. He said something about him being distasteful or something like that. But he did talk about a body!”

“When is this debut supposed to take place?” Hudson asked.

“Are you nuts? I need to fucking disappear!”

“I will make it happen,” Hudson said calmly. “But I need all the details you can give me. And if you want to disappear so much, how come you haven’t tried to run?”

“You think I haven’t tried?” Jasper swayed between desperate and angry. “But they put that guy Jackie on my case. He sticks to me like glue.”

Hudson worked his jaw. Jasper wasn’t playing him, but he wasn’t that bright either. “Where is he now?”

“I told him I was going to get a coffee and promised him one, too.”

“Was Jackie with the boss and Watkins that time when you overheard that conversation?”

“I don’t think so. That guy can’t keep quiet for a minute.”

Hudson stood from his seat and took Jasper by the arm. “We need to leave now.”

“Oh, fuck,” Jasper whispered. “Oh, no.”

Hudson looked ahead, knowing already what to expect. Jackie was pushing through the waves of people, his eyes already on them.

He threw one arm over Jasper’s shoulders and smiled. “Let me do the talking. Everything I say, your only job is to agree with me. And do it without looking like you’re about to get lynched.”

“Easy for you to say, man. Fuck, I’m done for.”

“No, you’re not.” Jackie was barely a few feet away and grinning at them.

“My man, Vegas,” Jackie said and offered his hand. “So nice to see you. How’s work?” He winked and then turned his head to look at Jasper.

Hudson took the offered hand and shook it hard enough to make Jackie focus on him. “Good enough.”

“Awesome for me, too. I’m in charge of watching Jasper, you know?” Jackie let go of Hudson’s hand. “Make sure he doesn’t want for anything.”

“That so?” Hudson asked. “He just told me you sent him on a little errand.”

Jackie rubbed the back of his head and smiled sheepishly. “He offered. Hey, man, what’s with you?” he asked, his attention trained on Jasper now. “Have you been crying or something?”

“It’s his mother. He just got the news. Terminally ill.”

“Yeah,” Jasper whispered softly and looked down. “She’s got it bad.”

Jackie’s face metamorphosed into what looked like genuine concern. “Ah, man, I’m so sorry to hear that. Fuck, is there anything I can do? Just name it.”

“Jasper needs to go be with her,” Hudson continued. “And he needs to go now.”

“Sure, sure,” Jackie said but he didn’t sound convinced. “I should call the boss and tell him--”

Hudson grabbed his arm. “You can tell him later. Now, we’re going to take Jasper to the bus station and send him home.”

“Okay, okay, sure, but just let me grab my bitter fix. Two minutes. I know these guys,” Jackie promised and hurried toward the counter.

Hudson began talking quickly while slipping Jasper one of his cards and all the cash he had on him. “We go to the bus station, and you buy two tickets, in different directions. We’ll load you into one of them, and then, I’ll grab Jackie. You get down and climb on the other. Call me as soon as you can so that I can ensure your safety.”

“They might find out. They might squeeze the truth out of you,” Jasper whispered.

“So don’t let me know that second destination. I’ll find a way to keep Jackie in the dark while you buy the tickets. This way, they won’t be able to squeeze anything out of me.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Hudson remained silent for a moment. “It’s my job,” he said curtly and smiled as Jackie returned with a sealed cup in his hand.



“Poor guy,” Jackie said and shook his head as they left the bus station.

Under the pretext that they both needed to be back to work ASAP, Hudson had dragged Jackie away just as Jasper boarded the first bus.

“You know, my momma passed away a couple of years ago, too,” Jackie continued blabbering.

Hudson was all eyes and ears but pretended to be preoccupied by other stuff. “Yeah, that’s tough.”

“Man, you’re all ice,” Jackie complained. “I mean, you’ve never lost someone like that, huh? That must be it. I barely kept from crying in front of Jasper right now.” He looked out the car window and sniffled. “But you, you’re the big man, right?”

“What can you do?” Hudson said with a shrug.

“How the fuck am I going to break the news to the big boss?” Jackie continued his lamentation after a couple of minutes of silence.

“About what?”

“About Jasper taking off like that. He told me that Jasper would be our first hot number for the new club.”

“What new club?” Hudson asked, acting as if he was hearing about it for the first time.

“He hasn’t told you? Damn, big man, you’re not one of the guys yet. That means you should work harder. Anyway, I’ll tell you because I like you.”

“Lucky me,” Hudson said and offered Jackie a grin when the guy turned to stare at him. “Come on, shoot, what new club?”

“It’s still in the works, but it’s going to be huge,” Jackie bragged. “Jasper needed some serious training before the big opening, and I guess the boss needs to find a replacement now.”

Details, details, details. He needed more of them, but he couldn’t act too eager. “Too bad his momma got ill.”

“Yeah. Anyway, it’s a couple of months until then. They’ll find someone else, I bet,” Jackie said.

“And what’s the name of the club?” Hudson asked as if he was just making conversation.

“Right, I didn’t tell you. Till The Sweet End. Pretty neat, huh?”

Indeed. Hudson looked away so that Jackie didn’t see his nostrils flaring. Fresh scent. And he was on the hunt.

Chapter Eleven – Blind Spot

Hudson could say that he had expected this to happen, as he entered Watkins's office and was asked to close the door after him. Jackie was there already, with the look of a kicked dog on his face, and stole a glance at him, one filled with pleas of being let off the hook as the master looked elsewhere for another victim. Unlike him, Hudson held his back straight and nodded at Watkins, who sat behind his desk, his fingers steepled in front of him, while his cold eyes inspected his guests with a sort of cruelty that left little room to guess why they had been summoned there.

"What's going on?" he asked directly after the formal greetings.

Watkins stared at him for a couple more moments. "Jackie here is telling me an interesting story. One in which you helped my debut number for a new club I've been working on for months now run away."

"You're talking about Jasper." Hudson frowned a smidge, as if he couldn't for the world imagine what Watkins was upset about. "He had a family emergency."

"So I heard," Watkins replied. He leaned back in his chair and inspected Hudson with his empty eyes, without showing any sign that he believed what he had heard about Jasper's family emergency.

It didn't matter. The boss in charge of those shady clubs had no proof, although Hudson could have done without drawing the scumbag's attention to himself in that manner. Given the circumstances, he had made his choice and had no regrets. As long as it meant that Jasper was safe, he'd see about the rest with the usual caution he used in his dealings as an undercover detective.

He waited. Jackie was sitting, his eyes on the floor, although he kept his legs spread, his hands linked over his chest, elbows firmly pressed against the arms of the chair, trying to assume a posture that told the world that he was on top of things. Watkins hadn't invited him to sit, so he remained standing, displaying only faint signs of irritation. At the same time, he was very interested in what Watkins would say next.

"I am quite disappointed in both of you. I would have liked to help poor Jasper in these trying times myself."

No shit. Hudson schooled his features into an expression of pleased surprise at Watkins's magnanimity. "I thought we shouldn't bother you with something so trivial. You are, after all, a very busy man, and Jasper is just one of the many models under your wing." He upped the ante and offered a crooked smile. "Consider it a professional flaw, boss, but I didn't think his leaving would matter. He's not that much of a looker if you ask me."

“I’m not asking you, Mr. Vegas,” Watkins said and frowned. Something was bothering the fucker, and his brain was surely turning Hudson’s words on all sides while he took his time to reply. “In the future, I would appreciate if you tell me you’re planning to make my next star disappear.”

“Disappear?” Hudson quirked an eyebrow, feigning surprise once more. “He’d just gone home. I’m sure he’ll be back for the big opening you have in mind if the timeline aligns.”

“Well,” Watkins said and grimaced in a weird way that combined pain with annoyance, as well as sort of a perverse pleasure, “I’d say that he disappeared, seeing how he’s gone completely incommunicado. He’s not answering his phone, and the device seems to be out of service, even.” He turned his chair around and took in the view from his window. It wasn’t much, since it looked out onto a back alley, and across from it, onlookers could see a redbrick building and a fire escape zigzagging its façade. “It looks to me like the boy made fools out of both of you, and now I have to deal with the consequences.”

“He was really crying, boss,” Jackie said in a pleading voice. “His momma--”

“Quiet,” Watkins ordered without turning his chair.

Hudson preferred it when he could examine his opponent’s face at length while having a conversation, but this new boss of his wasn’t some schmuck from the street. He wasn’t some rat; no, he was a different creature altogether, and Hudson couldn’t help a prickling apprehension running like an electric eel down his spine.

Jackie looked down again, even more sullen than before. He definitely felt bad about getting chastised like this in front of the newcomer. There was no more glance of hope toward Hudson, either. The chances were that Jackie was already blaming him for this falling from his master’s good graces. That was something Hudson could deal with. But later. Now, his entire attention was on Watkins and what his next course of action for him – and probably, Jackie – would be.

“You will both have to do some bottom work for a while,” Watkins decided.

Hudson frowned, this time, for himself. Bottom work could mean anything. Could it be that he was being sent into the thick of things so fast? No, that couldn’t be possible. Watkins wasn’t insane to let a stranger like him see the true face of his business unless he was suspecting him and laying a careful trap. Of what Watkins could be suspecting him was uncertain, but the Jasper episode had definitely earned him no points.

“But, boss--” Jackie whined.

“Do you like your job, Jackie?” Watkins addressed the young man, turning his chair suddenly.

Jackie made himself little. The dynamic between the two had certain undercurrents. Hudson stashed that information away for further perusal. On the surface, Jackie looked like not the

brightest tool in the shed, but looks could be deceiving, as he well knew from experience. And Watkins called him by his first name, like everyone else. Hudson couldn't help noticing a certain degree of intimacy between the two.

"Yeah, boss, I like it a lot," Jackie said defensively.

"Then, starting tonight, you'll play bodyguards at Twilight. Play is a manner of speaking. You'll break up fights, you'll see about throwing out drunkards, and so on. And I don't want to hear a peep from you, Jackie. Mr. Vegas, do you have anything to add?"

"No, boss." Hudson shrugged as if he didn't mind the demotion and was taking everything in stride. "We'll know better next time."

"Of course, you will." The derision was out there, in the open. Watkins didn't give a rat's ass about either of them, apparently. Hudson had to play the fool and just take it like it was, his being bundled with Jackie like two schmucks. "Dismissed."



Hudson waited until they were outside for Jackie to speak, steeling himself for the reproach that would soon follow. As little as he thought of Jackie's intelligence, it wasn't like him to underestimate people. In the web of deceit and shadows Twilight and its owners existed in, Jackie had more information than he did. Keeping on the good side of the guy would be nice.

However, that wasn't what happened as soon as they were well out of earshot.

"Man," Jackie began complaining, "the boss really ripped me a new one about Jasper. I tell you, you were lucky." He patted Hudson on the shoulder in a friendly gesture. "He didn't yell at you like he yelled at me."

"I didn't think he is the kind to yell at anyone."

"He yells at me for sure," Jackie replied and then let out a sigh so deep that it seemed to have emerged from the depths of his soul.

Again, the detective in him found that odd enough to require further examination. "Why is that?" Hudson asked, but as if he did it out of politeness and nothing else.

Jackie shrugged. "He cares or something."

Nothing came after that simple admission. There was definitely something there. "Since you're the veteran here," he said as means to tickle Jackie's vanity, "what's this bottom work all about?"

“Exactly what the boss said,” Jackie replied promptly and puffed out his chest. “We’ll have to keep our eyes on the customers and frisk anyone who’s out of line.”

“Frisk? Really?”

“Hey, a lot of good looking dudes come to the club each night. We might get lucky.” Jackie wiggled his eyebrows with a playful look in his green eyes.

“I thought you preferred models,” Hudson reminded him.

“Yeah, but, you know, those guys are fussy. And, anyway, I’m just playing. I have my eyes on a real prize.” Jackie nodded and smiled, while his eyes became unfocused. “I mean, I’m not some nice guy to bring home to momma, but for this dude, I’d go the whole nine yards.” He gestured widely to emphasize his words.

“What dude is that? Better than your models?” Hudson teased and offered Jackie a lopsided grin.

Jackie sighed again and gave Hudson a look full of suffering. “He’s definitely better. He’s like, I don’t know, man, chef’s kiss. He dresses like a nice boy, he behaves like a nice boy, he always talks so politely. Did I mention? He’s frigging beautiful, but you know, not like the usual, but like... I don’t know, a bit odd, but in a good way?”

Hudson felt his face freezing in that forced friendly grin. “What way is that?”

Jackie shrugged. “Don’t ask me for words. You know, like he’s high class. These dudes who take their clothes off at Twilight, they’re basically like porn actors. But this guy is like a model for some fashion brand. I mean, he’s thin just like supermodels, and he’s... strange, I think, especially with that eye--”

“Eye? Just one?” Gradually, Hudson sank his fingernails into his right palm to stop himself from grabbing Jackie by the throat.

“Yeah. He wears his hair like this, over one eye,” Jackie explained. “But it gives him a mysterious air, you know? Ah, man, I’m totally in love.”

“Does this odd-looking guy have a name?” Hudson carefully chose the last nail to hammer into Jackie’s coffin.

“Even his name is weird. I mean, who the hell calls their kid Otis nowadays?” Jackie laughed and then his eyes fell on Hudson, suddenly filling with concern. “Hey, man, are you all right?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” He was well aware his voice carried with it a tension that hadn’t been there before.

“You’re a bit pale. Is it something you ate?”

Hudson unclenched his fist, and with it, the frozen expression on his face. “I doubt it. Maybe I was nervous the boss was going to yell at me, too,” he offered a joke as explanation.

“It could also be crappy food,” Jackie continued. “I should take you to the restaurant where Otis works. They have really good food. Good Bits, they’re called. Really delish, I’m telling you.”

The asshole even knew where Otis worked. He was going there to eat, often most probably, and laying his traps to catch the beautiful young man. Hudson fought himself for another moment in an effort to regain his nonchalance. That was one more reason to keep his eyes on Jackie.

Hudson had no use for fate and looking for meaning in the coincidences in his life. But the way his lovely neighbor kept popping up everywhere he looked, especially where his investigation of the human trafficking ring was concerned, made him almost believe there was such thing as destiny.



He touched his collar, overly conscious of the choker underneath that he’d had gone through great trouble to hide from view. Nonetheless, he liked its presence there, reminding him of all those moments he had spent with Hudson a few nights ago. It was enough to recall the touch of those calloused fingertips, moving ever so slowly across his skin, and he would shiver, caught in a web of pleasant sensations, strong as a safety net.

“Otis!”

He jumped at the sound of his name and turned toward Missy with a guilty expression on his face. “Yes?”

“Sorry, did I startle you?” Missy touched his elbow lightly. “I’ve been calling you for like two minutes.”

And he had been daydreaming, a very interesting activity but which was the opposite of what he was required to do while awake, which was to pay attention to his surroundings all the time. “I apologize,” he said primly. “It won’t happen again.”

“Come on, man, stop acting so serious,” Missy said and patted him on the arm. “I wanted to tell you something.” She leaned forward, and her voice dropped to a whisper. After looking around as if she were expecting someone to jump them from behind the swinging doors to the kitchen, she began. “Mr. Smith is going to hand out some bonuses this week. And I’ve heard someone’s name being mentioned.” Her smile broadened.

“Whose name?” Otis asked. He would congratulate that member of the personnel once the bonuses were handed out by the manager.

Missy stared at him for a few moments, and then burst into laughter. “You’re such a straight shooter, Otis, I love you. There’s not one drop of ill will in you, is there?”

Those were nice words that warmed his soul. People believed nice things of him, like Missy and Hudson, and even Jackie, despite his greasy hair.

“It is you,” Missy added and hugged him. “He’s going to give you the biggest bonus this month because you’ve worked hard, and customers are in love with you.”

He didn’t know what to say, his heart felt so overwhelmed all of a sudden. He had been worrying constantly about bills and whatnot lately, and there had been no additions made to the glass figurine collection on his shelf, because he didn’t know if he could afford both a new piece and food at the same time. Things had been looking up since Mr. Smith had promoted him to waiting on tables, and even more. He was so happy he couldn’t put it into words.

“You deserve it, and I don’t want to hear a word from you,” Missy said and her red mane jiggled on her head, making him smile. “The question is... how are we going to celebrate? Another night out?”

“I can’t go to clubs because I’m at risk of hooking up,” Otis explained warily. He couldn’t openly tell Missy about his arrangement with Hudson, who was giving him dating advice.

“Oh, such dreadful risks.” Missy laughed. “You’re a relationship type of guy, I bet. But we could have some fun without hooking up. Actually, it takes a lot of the pressure off I usually feel when I go to such places. It’s like everyone expects you to hook up when all you want is to have some fun.”

Otis thought back over what Hudson said about Jackie. However, Missy was right. They could have fun without hooking up, or feeling pressured into it. Maybe they could try some other venue for fun? He didn’t know what could be more entertaining for Missy than going to a club and dancing there with frantic moves. The best course of action, as grandma had always said, was to ask the questions you wanted answers for.

“Besides drinking and dancing, what could we do for fun? What do you like?”

Missy adopted a thinking pose, crossing her arms and rubbing her chin in thought. “Hmm, you know what, Otis? You’re right. We should try other things. Do you have something you’ve always wanted to do?”

Otis pondered for a moment. There were so many things he wanted to try, actually. “Maybe wall climbing?” he said hesitantly.

Missy looked at him strangely. “I thought you wouldn’t want to try any activity that involved sweating ever. I don’t even think you sweat.” To make a point, she leaned forward and sniffed him. “Yeah, you always smell great.”

Overly conscious of the choker he was wearing, Otis took a step back, taking Missy by surprise.

“You don’t like people getting close, right?” Missy asked.

“It’s not that,” Otis protested.

“It’s fine, really. I’m too touchy-feely,” she added, but Otis could say that she was no longer her usually happy self.

“It’s not that,” Otis repeated, not knowing how to repair the situation. He was bad at making friends as he was, and keeping the few he had was essential.

Missy put her hands up. “You’re way too nice, Otis. It’s all right, and I shouldn’t have pushed myself on you like this.”

He was losing her. Yes, that was going on, and he had no idea how to stop it. So, he did the only thing that crossed his mind to prevent a disaster ending in a broken friendship. “I have this,” he said and opened the first two buttons of his shirt.

Missy blinked and her eyes grew wide. “That’s so pretty, Otis. I mean, it’s a bit, how should I say, eccentric to wear that kind of thing at work but, boy, it looks great on you.”

“It does?” That made him so happy. Careful that no one else saw it, he buttoned himself up. “My neighbor gave it to me.”

Missy grinned wildly and put a hand on her hip. “For real? You two are at that stage where he’s collaring you? Man, you’re a firecracker.” She made a move to slap his arm but thought better of it at the last moment.

That was the thing that needed repairing. Otis took Missy’s arm and slapped his arm with her hand, making her laugh again. “There. I’m fine with you touching me,” he said with satisfaction.

“Well, that’s a relief, because I want to pinch these cheeks.” Missy did what she said and caught his skin between her fingers, pulling slightly. “Here I thought that you were a shy dude, who can barely find the guts to install a dating app on his phone, and you’re playing the hard way with your sexy neighbor.”

Playing wasn’t the right word, but Otis didn’t wish to contradict her. He wanted to keep his lessons with Hudson a secret from the world. A secret felt good to have; like his glass figurines, it belonged only to him, and that mattered the most. Why, he didn’t care to explore at the moment.

“So, when are we going wall-climbing?” Missy asked.

“We are?”

“Why not? I want to try new things, too, but most of the time I get too lazy or I talk myself out of them. As you can imagine, I end up doing the same old things and complaining that nothing changes.”

“Do you have to do new things so that you can change?” Otis asked, interested in what Missy thought about that. His grandma had always insisted that he should try new things, things that young people did, but he’d felt ill-equipped to deal with such challenges. Now, he regretted not having had more guts to try them. Nonetheless, he was still young, at twenty-two, and there was enough time to do all the things that caught his interest, now that he was bound to receive a little fortune.

“Definitely,” Missy confirmed. “How about we go next weekend?”

“After we get the bonus.”

“Yeah. It’s a deal, partner.”

He shook Missy’s hand formally and didn’t protest in the slightest when she pulled him into a hug. Maybe she thought she was too touchy-feely, but he didn’t think that was a problem between them. He preferred her that way.



Hudson was busy going over and over the details of the meeting with Watkins, and the man’s attitude toward Jackie. Without a doubt, the young fellow was not the norm for Twilight bouncers, since he didn’t have the brawn, nor their sullen attitude. However, that wasn’t his role in the organization, right? He had just been demoted to it, and with great suffering on his part, as Jackie had insisted on reminding him repeatedly after they had left the big boss’s office.

Every investigation tended to be a puzzle. There were events and people, connected or not, which he needed to examine and establish how, why, or if they were related. His small apartment wasn’t suitable for a crime board, but he had it all in his head and even took pride in keeping track of many various elements of an ongoing investigation like no one else could. His captain was crazy about him for it, or so his colleagues liked to gossip. Being the teacher’s pet had never been among his life goals, but now that he was, he believed he had earned that place, fair and square.

Jackie didn’t fit the picture somehow, and it unnerved him that he didn’t see how he did fit. Watkins preferred his employees to be quiet, efficient, and nondescript as far as their physical aspects went – beyond the muscles required for the job – that regular people would have a tough time picking them out of a lineup.

And then, there was Jackie, loud, obnoxious, boastful, not so bright, and yet he had his place under Watkins's skin. That was a matter worth investigating. Could it be that they were related? What had Jackie said? That Watkins cared or something? Hudson zeroed in on that information.

Could it be that Jackie was Watkins's blind spot? The man had left Jasper, the unfortunate boy, in Jackie's care, and the braggart had lost the centerpiece for Watkins's gruesome business venture's debut without asking too many questions. Hudson had been satisfied with Jackie's lack of brains over it, but there was more to it and he needed to investigate.

Also, save for some yelling and a demotion that would probably not last too long, Jackie hadn't suffered any other consequences for letting Jasper 'run away'. But if Jackie was, indeed, Watkins's blind spot, how had that come to be?

Someone was knocking energetically on his door. Hudson was working less on taking pictures for his website, now that he was gainfully employed, but some guys still dropped by from time to time. Even so, he moved toward the door carefully and looked through the peephole. A smile quirked his lips when he saw Otis on the other side. He appeared to have his arms full and shifted a box from one arm to the other to knock again.

Hudson opened the door before his cute neighbor could do that.

"Hello," Otis said politely. "I am here to bring you a gift."

Hudson took the box from his neighbor's hands and stared at the picture and label on the side. "A crockpot?"

"Yes. I got two at a discount," Otis announced proudly. "A really good discount," he added and leaned forward while raising his eyebrow in an all-knowing expression like an old lady at the market striking the biggest bargain of her life to date.

"That's nice of you. But why?" Hudson asked.

Otis's pretty face lit up. "I got a bonus at work. It's confidential and I can't say anything about it, although Missy knows exactly how much I got, and I know how much she got, but we're not supposed to make other people feel bad that they didn't get as much."

Hudson fought hard not to laugh at Otis's considerate logic and stepped aside. "Come in. Also, what I meant to say, is why give me a gift? And why a crockpot, of all things?"

Otis seemed on top of his game today. He appeared quite bold as he took the box from Hudson's hands and walked into the small kitchen. "It is perfect for the little space you have. And for mine, although I had to find new places for other things to accommodate it. You can make all kinds of food with it." He took it upon himself to install the crockpot neatly on the counter. Then, he turned toward Hudson, his face all a smile. "Now you can eat a lot of healthy foods, like fork-tender roasts and butternut squash soup. It is an excellent addition to any kitchen--"

“Okay, okay,” Hudson stopped him before Otis ended up reciting all the marketing materials he must have studied at length – given his propensity for being as exact and thorough as someone a lot older than his twenty-two years of age. “Thank you for your thoughtful gift. The thing is, I don’t have a lot of time to cook.”

That seemed to deflate Otis considerably. “You don’t like it. You hate it.”

Hudson felt like the biggest asshole in the universe. “No, no. Come on, don’t say that. It’s just that it was your hard-earned money you spent on this. Why would you spend it on me?”

Otis worried his bottom lip before giving the answer. “Because you help me. And for free, on top of everything else.”

“And nothing in the world is really free?” Hudson asked while walking closer to his guest. He wanted to comfort Otis, and that need was strong in him.

“I don’t mean it like that. I just wanted to do something nice for you, but it looks like I was off the mark, and I apologize. Maybe I should have gotten you that moon lamp.”

Hudson laughed softly. “You know what? A crockpot was just the thing I needed without knowing I needed it. Just don’t scold me when you come around and you find it unused.”

“Can I cook for you?” Otis asked bluntly. “Sorry. May I cook for you?”

It was so easy to fall for this great guy. Damn the freaking timing. Destiny, fate, whatever that was called in his case, had the funniest sense of humor. Indulging in this pretty man, with all his quirkiness and good heart, should have been on top of a list of forbidden things for him. And yet, he found himself opening his mouth and saying the most incredible words in his personal history. “I’d love it if you cooked for me.”

Otis was so happy, his only visible eye shining and his entire face an expression of pure joy that Hudson wanted to get his camera quickly and immortalize that moment forever.

“These things come with recipes, and they all sound so good,” Otis continued to blabber away. “I will cut all the ingredients at my place, and then I can come with them and put them in your crockpot.”

“Hmm, wouldn’t it be easier if you just brought me the final result?”

Otis’s brows furrowed in thought. “But then I made a mistake by getting two crockpots. But if I only got one, then I wouldn’t have gotten the discount--”

Hudson stopped another convoluted budgeting tirade by taking Otis in his arms and kissing his furrowed brow. “I’m not hungry right now, so you can sleep on it.”

“Good. I will do that,” Otis promised, his earlier determination appearing to melt slowly.

Hudson brushed away the bangs obscuring the hidden eye and kissed the other brow, too. Otis squirmed a little and then looked up at him, his lips parted, his eyes even shinier. Suddenly, he blurted out, “I wore the choker you gave me at work.”

“You did?” Hudson licked his lips. Otis smelled so nice, he felt his throat going dry just from standing so close to him. He wanted to devour this beautiful young man, crockpots and recipes be damned. And how nice was that? A stranger buying him a gift because he was that nice a person.

Such behavior needed some proper rewarding. Hudson took Otis by the hand and pulled him toward the main room. “How about showing me?”



So, maybe he had been off the mark with the crockpot, and Hudson, who was a very busy man, couldn't be bothered to cut vegetables and turn them into edible things, but in the end, it seemed that everything was working out. Otis was happy for it and tried to avoid reading too much into the way Hudson pulled him along toward the sofa he now knew so well.

He found himself feeling incredibly shy at his earlier admission of having worn the choker to work. Was that too bold of him? But he had promised Hudson he'd do that, so there was no reason for him to worry about having gone too far.

Hudson sat across from him and left him alone on the sofa. His shyness returned, and he looked around, his eyes drawn again to the paraphernalia on the wall. The sight of a new leash made him do a double take. That hadn't been there; he was sure of it. He always tried not to forget things.

“Well,” Hudson's voice was deep and rough, “are you going to show me or not?”

Otis touched the first button, a slight tremor in his fingers. He had been so audacious showing it to Missy, so why did he feel like this now? He hardly had any explanation for it. But Hudson was there. He was his teacher. Maybe he'd know. “I don't think I can,” he whispered.

Hudson misunderstood and came closer. He began unbuttoning Otis's shirt slowly. Their eyes met as the rough yet gentle hands continued their descent, one button after the other. “You really did wear your choker.”

“I did.”

“How did it feel?”

“Nice. A little naughty,” Otis confessed in a low whisper.

“Naughty and nice. How come you're all that?” Hudson asked.

They were so close, they could smell each other. And Hudson had such a manly, dizzying smell about him, and not because of the personal grooming products he probably used. No, there was something unique about his smell, and Otis was sure he would be able to identify it from a thousand or more. “I don’t know,” he replied in all honesty.

“I think I do.”

“Can you tell me?” Otis closed his eyes as Hudson’s lips brushed lightly over his.

“It’s simply how you are. Still waters.”

“Run deep,” Otis completed the old adage. “Is that new leash for me?” *Please, say yes.*

“You know the rules, Otis. Say that you want it, and it’s yours.”

Could it be that easy? “Yes, I want it. Please, give it to me.”

Chapter Twelve – Restraint

Hudson watched as Otis unhooked the leash from the wall with delicate moves. Heaven help him, he wished he'd never be forced to let his beautiful neighbor out of his sight for long, and that was a new feeling for him. He'd known he liked men ever since his teenage years and had his fair share of notches on his belt, so how come everything about this new guy felt so different? Life's ambitions must have gotten in the way of a genuine relationship more often than not, so why wasn't that working now? To a certain degree, it felt like a joke, one at his expense, orchestrated by invisible forces. It was a frightening realization, too; someone in his position, as an investigator working undercover, as a man who didn't do relationships – such a cliché, and yet, still true, right? – would ask Otis to leave so that things could return to his control and stay that way.

He did nothing of the kind. In fact, despite his better judgement, he did the opposite. Even putting that leash up on display among the other paraphernalia had been a calculated move on his part – if he could even call it that – a move in the game of seduction they played.

Was it only him or could it be that Otis was also playing? His pretty neighbor was a guy incapable of guile and deceit. For Otis, it was the real deal, and, no matter how much he wished he could tell himself otherwise, Hudson knew that it was the same for him. There was more than base desire between them, not that there was anything wrong with feeling the need for another person's touch or enjoying sex.

Otis returned with the leash in his hand, his eyes shining with excitement. His rosy lips parted slightly, and he bit on the bottom one from time to time, leaving it glistening in the wake of his shy gesture. Hudson swallowed thickly. There was only one thing left to do, right? To reach out and grab that illusory figment of fate, presented to him in such a pretty package.

“What do we do now?” Otis asked in a strained whisper, still holding the leash in his hand, but this time at an awkward angle, as if he didn't know how he was supposed to act.

It was true. He was that innocent, and Hudson felt a thrumming in his blood, a flurry of beautiful sensations playing across his skin, raising goosebumps everywhere. “Give it to me.”

With the same deference that appeared to have been ingrained in him from an early age, Otis placed the leather strap on his open palm and then waited, his hands behind his back, his whole body tense in anticipation.

That made two of them. Hudson cleared his throat. Men loved it when he was dominant in bed, when he took them in hand, so to speak, and yet, that pure look of abandonment in the lovely blue eye staring at him from one side made him feel more empowered than ever. It was so overpowering it made him feel dizzy. What kind of explanation did scientists have for something

like this? Would they say it was all just fluids and hormones and body chemistry? It couldn't be; Hudson liked to think that there was more to human beings, to what they shared, than that.

If he needed any other proof that he was losing his head a bit over this sweet man standing before him, that was it. "Take off your clothes," he ordered while swinging the leash in his hand slowly.

Otis nodded and quickly began. His fingers were unsure and, more than once, he struggled with a button of his dress shirt, but Hudson didn't offer to help this time around. He was the one overwhelmed now, just sitting there and eyeing each inch of milky skin revealed to him. He felt the new promise of endless, mind-blowing satisfaction take over at knowing he could touch everything, feel everything, if he only decided to move.

Only the rustling of clothes disturbed the silence between them. Hudson resisted the need to fidget, to adjust himself. For Otis, he had to show that he knew what he was doing.

"I'm ready." Otis was completely naked and held his hands in front of himself, one wrapped around the other's wrist, covering his nether parts.

"Show me," Hudson ordered softly. "Your cock."

That elicited a small gasp from Otis, but he obeyed. Hudson focused all his attention on the bare skin presented to him, a smile finding its way to the corners of his lips as he observed the endearingly fast reaction. "Good," he said. "Now kneel."

Otis scrambled to his knees and looked down. He was red in the face, his cheeks as delicious as apples, and Hudson couldn't help anticipating how scrumptious they would be if he pretended to take a bite.

He patted his knee. "Come closer and put your head here."

A more eager puppy had never been seen. Otis reached him and pushed his head against Hudson's knee, his lips drawing apart to let small huffs of pleasure escape. He reached for the choker and found a place where he could push the carabiner clasp through. "Is it too cold?" he asked as he sensed the shiver go through the prone body at his feet.

"No."

"All right. Now, move back a bit. Keep kneeling."

He was holding the end of the leash, and now it was acting as a link between them. Otis was sitting back on his heels and placed his hands on his knees, his eyes, unblinking, set on Hudson. That game could be unnerving for both of them. "Very good," Hudson praised him again. "Tell me how you feel." When had he ever needed to make sure that his partner was enjoying it? The usual soft grunts and moans of pleasure were a dead giveaway, and most men he had been with

were quite vocal. However, Otis was different, and he appeared to need gentle coaxing to say what he truly felt.

“Safe,” Otis replied, without one hint of hesitation.

That was the same thing he had said about the choker. Otis was a young man with a deeply ingrained need for safety, and Hudson was more than happy to provide it. “What would you like to happen next?”

Otis blushed more and looked away, worrying his bottom lip, as he usually did when thinking. “I want you to ask me to do things,” he whispered and set his eyes on the floor in front of him.

“Are you giving me free rein?” Hudson asked.

“Yes.”

“But you will stop me if you don’t like it.” Since there was no answer forthcoming, he insisted. “I need to know that you will do that, Otis.”

“Yes. I will tell you... I will stop you... But... I like everything you tell me to do.”

Hudson had to shift his position a smidge. Sweet surrender, was that what better poets than him called it? “Come here,” he said again.

Otis looked happy to obey. When he was only an inch away from Hudson’s knees, he stopped and waited. All he was missing was a lolling tongue. Hudson caressed his hair, pushing it back and drew an invisible line over the forehead, nose and lips. He cupped Otis’s jawline and used his thumb to caress the soft lips slowly. They parted of their own accord and soon a keen tongue wrapped around his digit, triggering a hundred new sensations in his body. “Suck,” he ordered in a gruff voice. He stopped himself in time. It wouldn’t do to scare his precious charge by being too eager himself.

Otis set to work enthusiastically. He caught Hudson’s thumb between his lips and began sucking with gusto. It should have been the sort of foreplay partners enjoyed in order to postpone the inevitable. Yet, he believed it was the sort of torture meant to make a man mad with lust. He didn’t know if he desired Otis to move on to something else or just let himself remain a prisoner to those magnetic blue eyes, both of them staring at him while their owner provided the arousing image of his mouth engaged in the sucking motion that gave Hudson a very good idea of how it would feel to have it done to another part of his anatomy.

Speaking of the devil, that part felt neglected and pulsed in his jeans. “I thought I should teach you restraint,” he said in a rough whisper. What an incredible notion that seemed now. “That was what the leash was for.”

Otis stopped sucking and stared at him without letting his prize out of his mouth. It was difficult to gauge what he was thinking when he did that thing involving not blinking at all. Hudson removed his thumb and used it to caress Otis's lips again. "I can be good," Otis said, dropping his eyelids and licking Hudson's hand slowly. "Just tell me what to do."



He didn't know what Hudson wanted. His sexy neighbor was a man seasoned in the ways of physical love, as people described it in old romance novels, while he, Otis, was completely unknowledgeable. It was a bit frustrating the way his experienced tutor was teaching today's lesson. Too little guidance, he wanted to complain, too much freedom, and he didn't know what to do with that, either.

And then, there was also the way he felt down there, the stiffness of his cock making him burn with embarrassment. If Hudson thought anything of his red face, he chose not to comment on it, and that was his saving grace. Sucking on the man's thumb had felt good and rewarding, but now, he was eager for more. Could it be that he was too greedy? And what did restraint mean, anyway?

Nonetheless, he needed to show that he was willing to learn. Therefore, he pressed his burning cheek against Hudson's hand. "Teach me restraint if that is what I must know."

Dating had to be quite a complex relationship between people, and it was confusing, too. But he had a great master, and he was putting his all into it.

"I'm afraid that ship has sailed," Hudson replied, but the tone of his voice suggested nothing remotely similar to regret. Not the way he had heard people use the word 'afraid', either. His neighbor made for a good study regarding the complexities of human beings, too. He should have been so happy... yet, the overwhelming sensation he was experiencing was one of imperious need.

He also felt helpless in the face of the disappointment he sensed coming. If the lesson for the day was ruined, what did it mean? That he had to put his clothes back on and leave? The throbbing between his legs was real, so he wrapped his arms around Hudson's calf, pressing himself against him.

The way Hudson caressed his head felt good. The rough feel of the jeans against his cheek was the same. But what could he do, as badly equipped as he was, to put all that he was experiencing into words? There was so much for him to learn, and so little time. Would he ever catch up?

Hudson interrupted his train of thought. "What are we going to do, Otis?" He let out a sigh, too, but he didn't seem regretful this time around, either. "I want to do unspeakable things to you."

Unspeakable. So Hudson wasn't skilled at putting everything he felt into words, either. That was a comforting thought. He mimicked his teacher, for lack of any brighter idea. "I want that, too."

Hudson's chuckle made him shiver for a moment. "You want me to do unspeakable things to you?"

That wasn't exactly what he had meant, but he knew the proper answer to that one. "Yes."

"You're killing me here. Well, if that is so, then."

Otis watched as Hudson used only one hand, unwilling as he appeared to be to let go of his head and caressing him, to open the fly of his jeans. Prince Albert sprang from underneath like a jack in a box. Now that was a sight that had overtaken all his dreams of late, some even of the type to have left him wide-eyed. Hudson's cock had every right to be called a prince because it was majestic and handsome, like a fairytale prince, if there were a fairytale in which princes were men's penises.

"Bring your face closer, Otis," Hudson said gently. "Don't you want to see it better?"

He nodded happily and moved so fast that his cheek ended up plastered against the length of Hudson's cock, now freed from the confines of the man's jeans completely. His teacher laughed and steadied him. "Now, all I want is to look at your beautiful face like this."

Otis stared in fascination while Hudson began moving one hand up and down the erect cock. There was moisture gathering inside the little slit, and the metal bead made it look so yummy that his mouth went dry at the sight. Without being told, he moved closer and stuck out his tongue.

"What are you doing?" Hudson asked, but he sounded amused. Otis remained like that, tongue out and looking up. "You have no idea, do you?"

Otis didn't protest in the slightest when Hudson took him by the back of the head and gave him his reward. The feeling of that engorged head on his tongue was like nothing he had ever experienced in his life to date. The pressure from Hudson's hand propelled him forward and, so fast that he had barely had time to realize what was going on, half of that amazing cock was in his mouth, and he could feel the metal beads with his palate and tongue both. It made him feel as if he was playing with the most exciting lollipop. He began exploring eagerly, using his tongue plenty.

"Damn, Otis," Hudson whispered. "That's some real tongue action."

Was that bad? It didn't seem bad. However, without letting go of the prize in his mouth, Otis looked up for confirmation. Hudson ran one hand over his eyes. "Go ahead and use me if you must."

Must was the right word, because it was stronger than need. Otis lapped at the piercing from all sides, playing with it and enjoying the taste on his tongue. He wanted so much of it, but it looked like his mouth was too small. He had seen some adult videos, and those people appeared to encounter no such issues. What was he to do? What if his mouth was wrong? And it was a shame that he couldn't even focus on the technical limitations of his own anatomy because having his mouth, all of it, as little help as that was, all over Hudson's cock, sent ripples of pleasure through his entire body.

"You're doing good, Otis," Hudson praised him. "Now, I need you to move back a bit and close your eyes."

He obeyed without protest, eager to learn more about that sort of pleasure. He opened his mouth wider, without being told, and stuck out his tongue.

"Damn," he heard Hudson say, and then, something warm and liquid hit his eyelids and cheeks, some of it landing on his tongue.

It was a bit salty and strange but he swallowed eagerly, opening his mouth for more.

Hudson guessed what he wanted right away. "Do you want more? I believe you squeezed it all out of me, but here."

Otis felt the still hard cock rubbing against his tongue, and he chased more of that strange liquid around the head. He knew what it was, of course, he wasn't that unknowledgeable. However, he had never tasted it, and now that he knew what it was like, indeed, he wanted more. So he licked it all from Hudson's cock until the man pushed his head away playfully and laughed. "It's too sensitive now, Otis."

"Sorry," he said and tried to open his eyes, but his eyelids were heavy with semen, too. What a waste, he thought, but kept it to himself. Maybe that was the lesson, that he couldn't have the whole of it, when it happened. He would have to ask, but later. The throbbing between his legs had only gotten worse, despite how satisfied he felt from tasting Hudson's semen.

Hudson used a tissue to wipe his eyes and cheeks, and then gave him a short peck on the lips. "Your first time eating cum?"

That was such a naughty way of putting it, but Otis liked it. He nodded and looked up. "It was very good, thank you."

Hudson laughed and caressed his cheeks. "You're thanking me for the meal?"

"It was hardly that. Too little," Otis explained.

The dark eyes opened wide in obvious amusement. "Aren't you a cheeky bastard now, judging me for my lousy load?"

“I am not judging you!” Otis protested. Had he overstepped? Dating rules were hard.

Hudson kissed him again and surprised him by having him stand. And, just like that, without any warning, there was a hot mouth over his throbbing erection, all of it, much to his chagrin and envy. Not that those feelings lasted long. For balance, Otis had his hands wrapped around Hudson’s head, while the hotness and wetness overwhelmed him. He could tell that everything was there, everything that he needed and wanted to feel.

And there was something else, too. Hudson was pushing his right hand between his legs, from behind, and his thumb was now pressed against Otis’s hole. That was so embarrassing! Had to be, at least... but again, he couldn’t think, because it felt good, too, although it didn’t go in. Nonetheless, the tension steadily applied made him want to buck back his hips and spread himself somehow, as needy as he was of that new sensation.

Not that much was required for him to reach the finish line of their lesson. To feel pleasure was easy, he thought as his entire body gave in; to give pleasure was a bit more complicated, but he had a good teacher, so he was sure he’d learn everything he needed.



Restraint, my ass, Hudson thought as he pulled Otis into his arms and made them both sit on the sofa. That had been the complete opposite of it. Not only had he allowed himself to give Otis a sexy facial, but he had even initiated the exploration of the young man’s definitely virgin backdoor. The simple realization of that fact was enough to trigger in him all sorts of new ideas, such as feeling entitled to Otis’s virginity, and the need to push away any other man who dared to come close to his prize.

When had been the last time he had felt so possessive? He was mostly a surly man, he didn’t like people to get up in his business, and he kept a lot to himself. But none of these character traits justified the stinginess he felt regarding having to share Otis with other men in the present and future, both. It was silly to think that he was falling for his cute neighbor. There had to be an explanation for it, such as that the young man was like a ray of light in the world of darkness he had chosen to delve into of his own accord, and that his innocence balanced all the bad, helping him feel normal for a change. That sexual desire flared between them, that was good and natural, and it reminded Hudson of the good that was in the world, for which he had vowed to fight for as long as he breathed.

It was a good rationalization, of course it was. Usually, he was good at it, his brain capable of analyzing clues, putting them together, and finding a solution. His was the brain of an investigator, and yet his abilities as a detective were falling short on this particular occasion. They didn’t explain why he felt so attracted to Otis, and especially so possessive.

“How do you feel?” he asked, looking down at the blond head resting on his chest. It seemed so natural to hold that naked body in his arms. Otis, as shy as he seemed, appeared to be quite comfortable with him, even without his clothes on.

“Amazing,” came the honest reply. Then, a lot less boldly, “Are you going to teach me about the butt thing also?”

The butt thing. Otis was too cute for his own good. “Do you mean, anal sex?”

“Anal is a word that has more than one sense,” Otis recited. “Such as when you say that someone is anal, you mean that he is persnickety, and not that he is an ass.”

Hudson couldn’t help the bubbling laughter in his chest. “Persnickety? And, I don’t know, but a guy you can call that just might be a bit of an ass.”

Otis thought it over for a while. “That is confusing,” he declared.

“Not really. And I believe you’re the first person I’ve heard in my life to use the word persnickety so casually.”

“Is it not done?” Otis inquired politely. “Not a common word?”

“I guess you can say that. You’re obviously more knowledgeable of less used words than the people I know.”

Otis sighed. “Every day, I am learning,” he confessed. “But it’s hard to know from the dictionary which ones are the common ones, and which are not. Grandma always told me to focus on the common ones.”

Hudson grunted in confirmation. That niggling sensation at the back of his mind, that instinct that made him a good detective, told him that a simple aspect like that, Otis learning words from the dictionary, was important. “So, you just decided to be anal about it,” he offered as a joke.

Otis looked up to him with the most candid eyes a guy his age was allowed to have. “Are you calling me an ass?”

Hudson laughed. “Just persnickety. Why are you learning words from the dictionary? Are there spelling bees for adults I don’t know about?”

“There are no spelling bees for adults,” Otis corrected him. “If you’re fifteen years old, you’re out.” He appeared very sure of that, so he must have done his research thoroughly.

It still didn’t shed any light as to why he had to learn words from the dictionary; maybe it was nothing but a hobby, and he was trying to read too much into it. A short jolt of realization followed. He wanted to learn about Otis, not only the sexual things, but also the things that made him tick. So far, Hudson knew that his neighbor was very polite, had a strange practical manner

regarding various things and seemed a sucker for discounts where kitchen appliances were concerned. “So, why are you learning? What’s your motivation?” he asked.

Otis remained silent for a bit, and Hudson couldn’t help thinking that he had struck a nerve, and not entirely by accident. Leaving his detective inquisitiveness and intuition at the door didn’t work with him. “I know very little,” Otis explained. “That’s why.”

“Were you a slow learner in school? Don’t tell me you were a bad boy, skipping classes,” Hudson teased him.

“No,” Otis replied and looked at him with a little scowl that only made him cuter. “School is very important. I was just late to start.”

That was a piece of important information. Maybe pressing him for more wasn’t a good idea; Otis wasn’t a perp he needed to force into confessing.

Otis saved him from his conundrum by continuing. “When grandma took me in, people my age had already been in school for many years.” His voice grew somber, and Hudson half-regretted insisting on the topic. “So I had to learn from scratch. Everything. And it’s a lot. Some things I just cannot understand easily.”

“Maybe because some of them can be insanely boring,” Hudson came to the rescue.

Otis pushed himself up so that he could look into Hudson’s eyes. “I thought only I found them so!”

“No, definitely not,” Hudson assured him. “And I was a bad student when I was in school. I only wanted to learn the things I liked. That didn’t sit so well with all my teachers, as you can easily imagine.”

Otis seemed so happy at that confession that Hudson had to smile, too. “That’s a relief,” he said and pressed his hands on his chest.

It wasn’t that wise because it drew Hudson’s attention to those rosy nipples. Suddenly, he had an appetite that demanded him to taste those perky nubs of flesh. He hiked Otis higher and sucked on his chest, making him gasp and giggle. “What?” he drawled and then kissed the other.

“I’m a bit ticklish.”

“I can’t help myself since you’re so tasty everywhere.”

“Really? But you really taste good.”

He had to go and say the darndest things. Hudson had a vague idea that he needed to stop, and as he forced his head to clear itself, he made the decision he hadn’t cared to contemplate for the

entire evening. “Let’s get you back into your clothes and you back to your place. What do you say?”

“Of course,” Otis said politely. “I have overstayed my welcome.”

“Trust me, kid, you’ve overstayed nothing. But I believe that we both need our sleep, and if I keep you here, I don’t think either of us is going to get any.”

“This sofa is really small,” Otis said and pursed his lips. “Not ideal for a sleepover.”

He could say that again. Hudson gave him a long kiss without making it too sexual and got themselves up to their feet. He didn’t have sleep to worry about, but his shift at Twinlight. The reality of his work invaded his brain. This had been a good break to enjoy. But, like all good things, it needed to end, no matter how much he wished things were otherwise.



Again, he was alone in his bed. It wasn’t very narrow, he mused, as he stretched out his arms. Surely, more comfortable than Hudson’s sofa. The only thing he needed to figure out was how to get his neighbor in bed with him. The thought made him giggle. It had to be a little naughty since no one thought of that expression except for expressing an intention to have sex, one activity he had indulged in quite a lot lately, under Hudson’s guidance.

He had had oral sex. Otis touched his lips gingerly. Had it been enjoyable? For him, definitely, but he lacked experience, so Hudson maybe didn’t think he was that good. It only led to one logical conclusion. He really needed more practice.

Did Hudson ever sleep well on that sofa? It was long enough to accommodate the man’s height, but it wasn’t a bed. He needed to create a list of differences between a sofa and a bed so that he could convince his neighbor to share a bed... his bed.

He sighed in contentment and closed his eyes. That list could wait. What couldn’t wait were the tiny thoughts trying to send him cowering into a corner ever since he had said too much. He didn’t know what about his past would make Hudson think he was strange, so the safest rule should have been to keep his mouth shut altogether. But, as he had lain there in those strong tattooed arms, he had given up on that old guard and said too much, for sure.

With those regrets came memories, and they were far from pleasant. The speech therapist had been so kind to him, helping him articulate each word correctly. Stunted development? That had been what they called it. How could he have learned how to speak properly when the smallest whisper of his voice was enough to trigger his mom’s rage? He had learned to be quiet. Quiet and observant, carefully listening through the cracks between the baseboards to the other room. There were no books, either, and no TV. His mom yelled at him and slammed the door shut,

leaving him in darkness until the next day. She didn't like talking, either, her eager hands just reaching for the bottle.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to push those sad thoughts away. His grandma had read so many books to him until he had learned to read them himself. So much to learn, and he was eager to do so, too, but there was a limit to what he could assimilate every single day. By the time he could go to school, he was the strange one, still.

He had felt sick on many days of school. That wasn't always because he had a fever, and many times he faked the illness, but it was only because it made him sick to his stomach to think of going to a place with so many unknown faces. There were just too many things there to be aware of, and even not blinking didn't help. How could he be expected to keep his eyes on everyone, when there were so many of them?

Not all of the teachers understood that he was special. His grandma always said that he wasn't strange, just different from others. But it wasn't right to put him into a school for people with special needs, because his intellect was ready for the challenge, or so the different therapists they had seen together said.

No point in thinking of those days. He was a grownup now. He waited on tables and customers, and he took lessons in dating from a very handsome man. He was even making friends, like Missy and Jackie, and grandma would be so proud of him.

So, why did the taste of ashes still linger in his mouth as he tried to fall asleep? In his dreams, he never reached the house in time. It was always too late.

Chapter Thirteen – The Straight and Narrow

So far, things had worked out just as Jackie had described them to him. Maybe there wasn't as much frisking involved as his unwitting partner in Jasper's escape had liked, but Hudson could do very well without it. The memory of his earlier pursuits involving Otis still lingered, and despite freshening up for his job, he could swear the sweet taste of his neighbor was still there on his tongue.

"This is so boring," Jackie said, working a kink in his neck and rolling his eyes. "Seriously, I thought being a bouncer was a lot more than this. Now, I'm starting to suspect the boss of trying to get us to quit only because of all this boredom." To give more weight to his words, Jackie looked around at the well-behaved patrons who were busy dancing and drinking without causing any problems that would warrant that much-desired bit of frisking.

"Would you quit because of something like this?" Hudson asked, while he scanned the place with different eyes than Jackie. At least the security personnel knew very well what took place inside that half of the club hidden from plain view. As always, he was fishing for clues. He couldn't and wouldn't exclude anyone.

"Are you kidding me? No way," Jackie said. "Now, my man Vegas, you might look at me and think that I'm this slick city boy, who's got it all figured out." Hudson was quite certain he didn't see Jackie like that but nodded in agreement only to hear what the guy had to say. "But when I came here, I was nothing but a country bumpkin, I'm telling ya."

Seeing how Jackie was waiting for a reaction, Hudson rose to his expectations. "You don't say. I'd never have suspected it."

Jackie smiled, pleased with that answer. "Yeah, like I said. I had nothing but the shirt on my back and a bag full of dreams, as they say. Well, not exactly nothing. My momma gave me this number to call, right before she passed." A short silence followed. That bit about Jackie's history had to be true. As impressionable as the young man seemed to be, there was real emotion there whenever he mentioned his mother. "So, I called this number, and that was the boss. At first, he showed no sign that he knew who my momma was, but I insisted, you know. I was like a dog with a bone, 'cause I was down to my last dime and didn't want to start washing dishes or doing some schmuck job."

"How did you convince him to hire you?" Hudson asked. "Did he recall your mom's name, after all?"

"Yeah, after a while. Maybe he was just testing me? I don't know. Probably he gets calls like that every day, and he didn't want to be taken for a dope."

“What was your mom to him?” Hudson asked, pretending to make conversation for conversation’s sake and nothing else, while he continued to watch the room for signs of any wrongdoers.

“Momma didn’t say, and he didn’t either,” Jackie replied. “But I bet that they knew each other well enough for him to pick me up from the street like that and give me a roof over my head.”

“You mentioned that you worked the stage, too.” Hudson didn’t want to believe that Watkins would put his own kid – if that was the relationship he had with Jackie – up to that kind of work, but he had seen too many monsters in his life to be too surprised by anything.

“It was for a short while. I liked it, but then, you know, those boys got to serve the more generous patrons, and that was something the boss didn’t think I was up for.”

“Why not? I’d say you’re pretty enough,” Hudson said and offered Jackie a crooked smile. Yeah, the little asshole wasn’t bad to look at. Hopefully, Otis didn’t think the same. Damn, he really needed to get his head screwed on right or he risked losing it. Thinking of his cute neighbor out of the blue led him down a dangerous path.

“Not ‘boy pretty’ enough, though,” Jackie explained. “I mean, I have these guns.” He flexed his biceps although he had his usual suit on. “Men who pay don’t like guys like me. They want the weaker type, you know, all innocent and stuff. Like my Otis.”

Hudson turned his head away from Jackie so fast that he heard the bones crack.

“What? Some drunk scumbag causing trouble?” Jackie asked and moved closer to stare in the same direction.

“Nah, I just thought I saw some guy I know,” Hudson offered as an explanation and moved a smidge away as a measure to control himself.

Jackie snickered. “A guy like you, I bet you’ve seen plenty of action. Be on the lookout for jealous exes, right?” He elbowed Hudson in a friendly gesture. The poor schmuck had no idea how close he was to getting a fat lip.

“So, you weren’t fit for playing the innocent boy for the big buyers?” Hudson chose to steer the conversation back to what he considered safe ground.

“Yeah. Although I liked the attention, to give it to you straight. I mean, I even had a regular. The guy was a bit of a weirdo, but he paid.” Jackie rubbed his fingers together in a suggestive manner.

“And why did the boss give up on this lucrative relationship that you had with the guy? I suppose he gets the lion’s share of what you boys make.”

Jackie seemed pensive for a bit. Hudson briefly examined the frown etched between those dark eyebrows. “Yeah, he does. That was why he surprised me a little when he pulled me off of doing that kind of work. I was good at it. Anyway, as I said, that guy was sort of giving me the creeps sometimes. Better off, I guess.”

Hudson felt his nostrils flaring. “Why was he giving you the creeps?”

“Are you asking me to dig around for some old history now, man?” Jackie complained.

“You brought it up,” Hudson pointed out.

“Right.” Jackie seemed to consider for a moment. “You know, the boss told me to keep my mouth shut about it, but what the hell? – it’s been a while, and that guy didn’t come back after I wasn’t on the shelf anymore. But, between you and me, Vegas,” he added and leaned closer, “the boss can’t know I told you anything.”

“My lips are sealed. And it’s like we’re only doing this to kill time, right?”

Jackie’s laugh was a bit forced. “Yeah, kill time. So, this guy,” he began, a bit more lively, “he was a super freak. He would put me into this cold bath, in a tub filled with ice, until my lips turned blue. I was supposed to keep my mouth shut and close my eyes and just lie there until he said so. And then, he got me out – he was really strong, you know? – and carried me to the bed. And I was supposed to be completely limp, and then he began fucking me. It hurt, too, ‘cause he used nothing, the fucking asshole.” The more Jackie remembered about that john, the more he seemed to see his past as a sex worker in less rosy colors. His lips had set in a grim line, and his eyes were blank. Hudson was all ears now. “So, one day, when the boss asked me how it was going, I spilled the beans. The guy, the john, I mean, he paid me extra not to say anything, but I felt like I had to.”

“What happened next?”

Jackie shrugged. “The boss seemed annoyed. He told me that could get me sick in the lungs or something. And two days later, he moved me to other stuff. And he said, I kid you not, he said ‘from now on, you’ll walk the straight and narrow, Jackie, you hear me?’ Like hell, man. Straight and narrow. Yeah, I ain’t lying.”

Straight and narrow. What a strange choice of words indeed. Hudson’s eyes followed a couple of security guys disappearing through the door leading to the secret part of Twinlight. “Some hot shindig tonight?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Jackie asked. “It’s like a really slow night.”

“I’m talking about people going in and out all the time.” Hudson pointed at the door through which the two guards had just disappeared.

“Ah, that, you mean.” Jackie pursed his lips. “Frankly, the boss told me nothing. He’s really mad at me. Damn, I mean, I think the boss is a great man, taking in a stray like me and all, but, sometimes...”

Hudson waited for whatever Jackie wanted to add to that and only then realized that his partner was focused on something happening at the front door.

“Shit.”

Hudson frowned. It took him a moment to understand what Jackie meant by that expletive.

Twinlight was getting raided by law enforcement, and the timing was truly peculiar.

He grabbed Jackie by the shoulder and steered him toward the door to the secret area of the club. If there was anything that the police would find suspicious, it would be there, and tonight, Hudson found himself on the wrong side of the law. In body only, of course, but his mission wasn’t common knowledge; getting entangled in a police raid at this moment seemed not that great an idea.

Also, if his instincts weren’t failing him, this was a good way to prove himself. Ignoring the police asking everyone to be calm as the music stopped, he made himself scarce through the door, dragging Jackie along.

“Do you know how to get out of here in under two minutes?” he asked Jackie.

“Yeah,” the other replied. “The fuck is going on? The boss keeps the pigs fed, as far as I know.”

Hudson set his jaw hard at the insult, but now wasn’t the time for delicate sensibilities.

“How many of your top winning models are around?”

“Angel is. And a couple more. Nothing that special about tonight, I guess.”

Go figure. “We need to grab the boys and get out. Let the others fend for themselves. I bet the boss won’t like it if any of his pretty models end up spending the night in the slammer. Are you with me?”

“Yeah,” Jackie said quickly.

“Tell me the way to the back. I’ll pull the car up to the door.”

He was short, his orders efficient. There was no time for explanations and the like, and it seemed like Jackie, although not the brightest tool in the shed, could follow clear and precise commands when needed.



It took them a little over two minutes to be inside the car. Angel climbed in by Hudson's side without giving him a look. The only sign that the youth was troubled by the police raid was how he began tapping his fingers on his right thigh as he looked out the window. Jackie was in the back with the other two guys, and Hudson only examined them briefly in the rearview mirror. They were, more or less, versions of Jasper and Angel combined. It was as if he had just saved one so that two could appear in his place. The captain's words rang true in his ears.

You can't save everyone, West.

He flexed his hands on the wheel. That was the last thing he needed to hear or know. "All set? Let's hit the road."

"Yeah, boss, let's go," Jackie confirmed and slammed his hand on the back of Hudson's seat.

Another look in the mirror let him know that the guy was nervous. So, the chances were he hadn't been let in on the scheme if that was what that raid was. What could have been on Watkins's mind? Jackie had been clear that the big boss was careful to line some pockets on the force, so that raid was either known to him or he was getting a warning on a late payment.

Somehow, the latter didn't seem right. Watkins wouldn't jeopardize his business like that. He appeared to be a cold, calculating man who left not one detail to chance.

That only left one option to consider. There had been an order for the raid, but for what purpose? Hudson had a hunch that he would learn about it soon enough.



Jackie had given him pointers along the way to a place where they could leave the boys to get their beauty sleep. All of them, Angel included, had been silent as Hudson had put the pedal to the metal, the lights of the city rushing past. The light traffic had been a blessing; he had been checking the mirror for signs of police cars chasing them until they were close to their destination.

For a while, Jackie had tried to ease the silence by making jokes, only to leave them to die on their own feet. The night was strange, and Hudson's instincts were on high alert.

Angel got out of the car first and rushed into the house – a nice three-bedroom with a manicured lawn located in an affluent neighborhood just outside the bustling city – followed closely by the other two. They disappeared behind the door, and Hudson watched as not one light was turned

on to give away that there was someone inside. He couldn't help thinking that he was being watched back. That Angel was ticking him off the wrong way.

"Do you think they'll be fine here, on their own?" he eventually asked Jackie. "You can get in front now."

Jackie obeyed without one comment. All night so far he had been on his best behavior. Hudson almost wanted to commend him for it. He wouldn't do that; Jackie seemed to have the hots for Otis, and that made them rivals.

The hell was he thinking now? Jackie was instrumental to the case, the way he saw it. And he needed to stop at that. Any personal feelings had no business getting in the way.

Jackie plopped himself in the dead man's seat and groaned. "Man, what a fucking night. What do you think we should do now?"

"Now," Hudson said calmly while kicking the engine into gear, "you're going to call the boss and tell him about the raid."

"Yeah. And tell him how we got Angel and the others to safety. I reckon that'll earn us some points, right?"

Hudson couldn't agree more. Although, it made him wonder how his quick thinking would be seen by the big kahuna. Would it open room for more suspicions? He was on probation, because of the Jasper thing, and any more attention drawn to him could leave him with little wiggle room, something he wasn't looking forward to.

"You care about what the boss thinks of you, right, Jackie?" he asked as he turned the car around a corner to get them back to the city.

"Of course, I do. Seriously, if he weren't so cold like he is with everyone, I'd say he's like a father to me."

Hudson searched his brain and could see no physical similarities between Jackie and Watkins. For that cold lizard to have fathered the guy sitting next to him, it would have taken a miracle of no DNA getting transferred from parent to the child. Still, he couldn't rule out that possibility completely.

"So, use tonight to get back into his good graces," Hudson suggested.

"Like how? We barely escaped. And it was all thanks to you," Jackie said.

"Well, turn it to your advantage. Tell him how quick you were to act. And how you took the guys to safety."

“But it was you—ah, I see what you did there,” Jackie said and grinned. “Ah, man, don’t feel guilty for me. I was onboard with getting Jasper to that bus like instantly. You didn’t drag me into it or anything.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been with the boss far longer than me. I don’t want him to think that I have too much initiative,” Hudson explained.

“It was very good initiative, though,” Jackie praised him. “All right, we’ll do it as you say. But, you know, he might not think me capable of thinking on my feet like that.”

“How so? It seems to me like he’s counting on you.”

Jackie pursed his lips and looked out the window. “For the small stuff, yeah.”

“Jasper wasn’t small stuff,” Hudson reminded him.

“I blew that one, though. Anyway, the boss thinks I’m pretty stupid. He must be keeping me around just because he has that duty to my momma, although she’s been dead for some time now.”

“Hey, why are you beating yourself up all of a sudden? Cheer up. You did well tonight.”

The last thing he had expected was to have Jackie turn toward him with stars in his eyes. “For real, Vegas? You mean it, man?”

“Yeah. Hey, don’t tell me that demotion to being a bouncer at the club really got to you.”

“A little,” Jackie admitted. “You know what, man? You’re really cool. I mean, here I am, telling you all these embarrassing things about me, and you don’t bat an eye. Anyone else working for the boss would either laugh at me or, you know, look down on me.”

Jackie looked like someone who could use a friend. But he was barking up the wrong tree. Hudson had no room in his life – especially under the circumstances – for a friendship.

He didn’t have room for playing with his neighbor, either, but there he was, anyway. However, Jackie was a different matter. For all he knew, all this kicked puppy act could be just that, an act, and the guy could be up to his eyeballs in the nefarious business his boss was running.

More than ever, he needed to keep his eyes wide open.



Hudson pretended to have all his attention trained on the road while Jackie made the call.

“Yeah, boss,” Jackie confirmed a few more times. “Yeah, they’re okay now. Nothing happened. I mean, I don’t know what went down at the club, and frankly, I don’t think my man Hudson and I should go back there just now. The pigs might still be there. No, we don’t have anything to hide, but those assholes, they might want to haul our asses off just to have a laugh. Yeah, thanks, boss.”

“So, how did it go?” Hudson asked once Jackie finished his conversation.

“He didn’t say it, but he’s pretty damn happy that we took the boys to safety.”

“Was he worried? You said everything is above board, right? And it’s not like any of them look underage to me.”

“They’re not,” Jackie confirmed. “The boss keeps saying the boys, but it’s Angel he must have been worried about.”

Hudson had a hard time picturing Watkins truly worried about anyone. He seemed like the kind of man who’d believe everyone to be expendable. Nonetheless, the big boss’s preference for the attractive asshole who played the top dog among the models at Twinlight was worth noting.

“Does he want to see us?”

Jackie nodded. “Yeah. I think he’ll take us off the bottom job. We proved ourselves tonight. Give me five, Vegas. Come on, don’t leave a man hanging.”

Hudson grinned at his partner and high-fived him. “You really know how to get under the boss’s skin, don’t you?”

Jackie puffed out his chest. “Yeah. There’s no one like me when it comes to that. I bet it’s because of that he wasn’t harder on us for losing Jasper. But how could I stop the guy from leaving, with his momma and all?”

“Yeah, you’re a good egg, Jackie,” Hudson praised him. Maybe compared to the clique Watkins was running at Twinlight. Still, as much as he wanted to keep Jackie in his sights as one of the baddies, the more time he spent with the guy, the more his gut instinct was telling him something different.

He usually went with his gut, but not when it involved the positive. So, Jackie was still in the doghouse, figuratively speaking, until he had solid proof that there was nothing that warranted keeping the young man there.

And now, he was very curious about what Watkins wanted to talk to them about. It could be what Jackie was saying, that the boss only wanted to reinstate them after proving themselves during the police raid, but Hudson didn’t think so.

Tonight felt pretty much like a test. The test in question must have been for him, and that left Hudson feeling a bit odd. That funny feeling in the pit of his stomach was usually related to bad stuff, so not something to ignore. Was Watkins getting suspicious of him? His background check must have been clean as a whistle, but what if being too clean caused problems on that front?

He had just the right idea how to endear the man to a more criminal version of himself. After all, showing himself as a flawed man with his fair share of skeletons would make him more of a candidate for Watkins's inner circle than any other thing he could do at the moment.



Without letting Jackie see his surprise when he got the directions to Watkins's personal address, Hudson considered this new piece of information. He couldn't allow himself any feeling of victory, as this was only the beginning. Soon, he would be able to step into the big boss's inner sanctum, and that showed trust. And trust, in such circles, was hard-earned, which meant that he had serious reservations about what Watkins really thought about him and his involvement in the night's events.

The place was a modern mansion, perched on the top of a hill, as if to show the mere mortals that no one could afford living higher in the area. It was an impersonal monster of concrete and steel, with floor to ceiling windows that created the illusion of an all-seeing eye glaring down at them as they climbed the hill.

The lights were on downstairs, which meant that they were expected. Jackie gushed enthusiastically about the place, although Hudson couldn't see the guy getting too cozy in a cold-looking home like this. Home wasn't even a good word for it, something confirmed to him as soon as they walked in.

Watkins was sitting on a creamy white sofa made of good quality leather, balancing a tumbler of scotch on his knee. He gestured for them to come in and sit in the armchairs matching the sofa, to his left and right. Hudson didn't miss how the big boss was splitting them apart. Inviting them to sit could be, of course, seen as a sign of good will, but his high alert didn't ease at all.

"I heard you got a bit of action tonight." Watkins stared at him. "Jackie, fix Mr. Vegas a drink, and grab one for yourself."

Jackie jumped to his feet and sauntered to the bar, a spring in his step. That was a guy who knew his way around the place.

"I'm sorry, boss, but I have to refuse you. I'm driving."

Watkins smiled, his eyes as cold as always. "I didn't peg you as a stickler for following the rules."

“I just don’t need to get in any trouble with our boys in blue,” Hudson said and waved vaguely. He made a point of shifting nervously in his place, sure that Watkins would pick up on it.

“And why is that? Besides the obvious, of course.”

Jackie came back with the drinks, and Hudson accepted his but let it rest on the arm of his chair without touching it. “Well, let’s say that I wasn’t that much of a choir boy in my younger years.”

“Really?” Watkins quirked an eyebrow. “Nothing showed up on your record. I hope you don’t mind that we ran a background check on you.”

Hudson made a short hand gesture to assure his current boss that he didn’t mind it at all. “I was lucky nothing showed up on my record,” he said. “But I was very close, and let’s just say that it took a really kind-hearted man to overlook what could have brought me some serious jail time. Serious for someone as young as me at the time. However, the same guy let me know that if I ever stepped wrong, that it would come back to bite me in the ass. I haven’t tested it to see if that’s true so far. And, to be honest, I’m not keen on doing so, either.”

Watkins laughed, to show his understanding. “What was it? Weed?”

“That was the least of it.” Hudson held his chin high, hoping his peacock impersonation was enough to fool the criminal he was sitting across from. “I dealt a little of everything. I wasn’t the kind of guy to put all my eggs in one basket, if you catch my drift.”

“I see. That’s good to know.” Watkins didn’t question him further. Hudson was pretty sure he could see the man’s brain gears turning if he looked close enough. The big boss was already strategizing on how to find ways to turn his newest employee into blackmail material. That always worked wonders for loyalty in the underworld. Wash my back, and I’ll wash yours.

“We didn’t have time to think, boss. We just took off, I mean, after we grabbed the boys,” Jackie explained.

“You two did well,” Watkins commended them. “And I suppose that warrants a bit of gratitude. Starting tomorrow, back to where you were. Good enough?”

“Thank you, boss,” Jackie chirped away happily. “You have no idea how grateful we are. I mean, it’s not like we don’t want to work, no matter what kind of job you give us, but--”

Watkins interrupted his underling’s speech with a short wave of the hand. “I wasn’t planning on keeping the two of you at that kind of job forever. I was only a little upset with you for letting Jasper go like that, without letting me give him some money for the road.”

“Ah, damn,” Jackie moaned. “It didn’t even cross my mind.”

“What about you, Mr. Vegas?” Watkins asked. “Did it cross yours?”

“I gave him some cash for the bus ticket,” Hudson replied smoothly. “I would have given him more but, like Jackie, it didn’t really cross my mind.”

Watkins appeared satisfied with that explanation and got to his feet, a sign that their little meeting was over. Hudson was certain now. It had been a test, indeed, and while he liked to think that he had passed it with flying colors, it was never a good idea to let his guard down until he was definitely sure that he was off the hook.

He had just given Watkins a little bit of rope, and there was no doubt in his mind that, soon enough, he’d feel the pull of his master’s hand. It didn’t trouble him in the least. Watkins was no spring chicken and seemed seasoned in all manner of criminal activity. Still, Hudson had no intention to play fast and loose, not now when he was so close to getting a pass to the underworld over which this strange cold man reigned supreme.



Otis had many questions, and the thing with having many questions was that you needed to figure out a way to ask them in the right order. He rubbed the glass and stared at it in the light. Things in the physical world were so straightforward. A glass was either clean, dirty, or a little smudged. Sure enough, there were various stages of uncleanliness, but you knew what was what, as far as a glass was concerned.

“That’s clean enough,” Missy assured him as she stacked the clean plates and turned to watch him. “Something on your mind, Otis?”

“How do you ask someone to sleep with you?”

Missy wiggled her eyebrows and grinned. “Are you going to ask your sexy neighbor to do the horizontal cha-cha with you?”

“Dancing while lying down is hardly practical.” Otis frowned and munched on his lower lip. “I don’t think it would work. Also, that is not what I have in mind.”

Missy laughed. “Okay, let’s ditch all the talking about dancing so I can be honest with you. Do you want to get your neighbor in your bed?”

Otis’s face lit up. That was exactly what he wanted, and Missy understood. “Yes. You see, he only has a sofa, and there is hardly any room on it for him, and he is tall, so it is quite a large sofa. But my bed,” he began gesticulating, “is this wide, so I think that two people could lie in it without getting into each other’s hair too much. Which is only an expression, because getting in someone’s hair means being really close and annoying.”

Missy examined him and then clapped her hands. “Well, that’s easy, Otis. You first send him a message that says ‘Wanna stop by?’ and then, when he’s knocking, you open the door and lean against it, wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy shorts – I bet you look great in that kind of thing – and you look at him suggestively.”

“Suggestively? What should I suggest?” Otis didn’t want to point out that opening the door in his underwear seemed impractical as it was pretty cold outside, even in the hallways of his building, for that to be a good idea.

“Exactly what I’m going to tell you.” Missy flicked her red mane to and fro. “You will say this – ‘there’s an empty spot in my bed with your name on it’.”

Otis pulled out his phone. “I have to note down all of this, or else I won’t remember it.”

“You do that, sweetheart,” Missy said and smiled at him. Then, she pinched his cheek. “Just one look at you is enough to know.”

“Know what?” Otis asked.

“That your neighbor is going to say ‘yes’.”

What was the question, though? Otis hesitated and it cost him. Someone called for Missy, and she placed a quick peck on his cheek before scurrying away. Still, this plan was better than nothing.

He’d put it into practice tonight.

Chapter Fourteen – Gentle Darkness

Hudson woke up with a start and groaned as he worked a kink in his neck. Otis was not far off the mark in telling him that his sofa was very impractical, as far as sleeping was concerned. It wasn't like him to check out like that, but he had been bone-tired after the night with the police raid at Twilight and, without realizing it, he had slept well into the afternoon.

Watkins, in his amazing generosity, had recommended the day off for both him and Jackie, and that meant he could take the time to rest. At least some good had come out of his undercover work so far; he had sent Jasper away, so one person had been saved. Better than no one, but still so many more to go.

Hudson traipsed to the kitchen, rolling one shoulder and craning his neck left and right. He should have thought of getting a place with better furnishings for his mission. But if he had done that, he would have never met Otis; bad sofa and all, it had been the best choice he had made in a long time.

He couldn't keep in a grin at the sight of the small slow cooker sitting on the counter. As he fixed his coffee, his mind went back to all the times he'd had a man in his life for more than just a few weeks. Was he the one who'd made all those relationships fail? He liked to believe that he could be considerate enough. Hmm, maybe he was fooling himself into thinking too nice things about his own personality. His work had come first so many times. No, not so many times, but always. No one wanted to stay in the life of someone who had other priorities, one hundred percent of the time. Funny how, while growing up, he wouldn't have pegged himself as a candidate for becoming a workaholic. Seeing your best friend die could change a man's goals, it seemed.

He hadn't thought of Pete in a long time. Pete had been the closest he'd had to a family, one he cared about at least. They hadn't been lovers. There had been moments, sure, but maybe that was just his overactive imagination driven by a teenager's raging hormones and nothing else. A hand lent here and there, but every time, a thing between bros and no more than that. Hudson smiled and shook his head. Pete had been one hell of a guy, larger than life, ideas running through his hot head at a million miles per second, not all of them good, obviously. He had never cared about anyone else in his life more, although he wouldn't fall down memory lane to feel sorry for himself. One thing was certain: he hadn't been in love with Pete, although he had loved him more than all the people he'd ever known.

And after he'd died, his choice had been made. Hudson left his cup on the counter and took another look at his new slow cooker. He had become a detective because he needed to do everything in his power and beyond to save as many people as he could. No matter what the captain said.

He patted the kitchen appliance on its lid on his way out as if it were a person. The bitter fix he'd just ingested would kick in soon. And he had some research to run on Angel. With Jasper and the other guys, he had had no luck so far, but he never gave up. Like a dog with a bone, as the captain often said about him. He actually liked that comparison, because not giving up was part of who he was.



Tonight had to be perfect if he wanted to convince Hudson to sleep over. Otis pondered for a moment and then opened the windows again. Grandma always said that it was vital to let the sun and air in or otherwise any house would get sick. He liked the way she treated inanimate objects as if they had souls. That was why he loved his glass miniature collection. She had started him on it, but he had quickly become fond of them. They could be his; they didn't bother anyone, with them being so tiny and all.

One of the hardest things for him to do had been to take things into his possession after having nothing for so long. Grandma wasn't rich, but she always found ways to give him little gifts, and not only on his birthday. A few times, he had caught her wiping away tears from her eyes, but she always said that it was nothing, and he didn't make her cry.

She had been so good to him, and after he'd had so much bad in his life, he hadn't known at first what to do with all that kindness. After the fire, he had been in a strange state for several weeks, one with a medical name that sounded very close to the name of a place. Catatonia. Grandma had explained it to him, years later, what it all meant. He himself had encountered great difficulty in telling the doctors what was wrong with him, but the general consensus had been that he had experienced an overwhelming fear, one that had paralyzed him for all those weeks on end.

Could someone be afraid of being afraid? It was the reason why grandma always took care to explain everything to him in minute detail, asking him questions along the way so that she could be sure he understood. For a good portion of his life, he had worried about falling into the same state again, out of the blue. That was it; he only worried – he couldn't be afraid because he didn't recall his thoughts or feelings from being like that. If he thought about it enough, he thought it resembled a long sleep without dreams.

He observed the room with a critical eye. The sheets were freshly laundered, all the surfaces wiped clean of any traces of dust, and not one thing appeared to be out of place. That left him with only one thing left to check. Taking a deep breath, he opened the small bag and extracted the shorts he had just bought for the occasion. Missy had been so sure that he would look good in such things, and when he had searched the store for the kind of underwear he never bought for himself, just seeing these had convinced him that he had to have them.

Now, doubt was creeping in. What if he looked silly? He undressed and put the black shorts on, taking his time to tie the strings on the sides. Was he supposed to make little bows or just let them dangle downward like that? Bows it had to be; they were prettier.

No matter how embarrassing, he had to take a look or else he might end up not wearing them at all, and then the shorts would be nothing but money wasted. Otis knew very well that he wasn't rich enough to spend money on underwear he'd never put on. That was the ultimate argument, and he proceeded toward the hallway, where the large mirror was still in the same place. Hudson had said something about helping him out with it. Between showing him his new shorts and inviting him to sleep over in a bed that was better than that cramped sofa, maybe he'd find the time to remind his neighbor, as politely as possible, about his promise.

He looked and blushed at how he looked. The word sexy hadn't been put there on the package for nothing. The shorts did make him feel that, and it was a strange feeling. Although he was the one looking at his own reflection in the mirror, he felt as if someone else was looking at him. He brushed one hand across his chest and over his belly, stopping right above where the shorts started. It was odd and different, but he didn't dislike it. That was the first step when trying something new. Even if it was a little scary, just pushing through could work wonders sometimes.

He would have to ask Hudson for his honest opinion on these shorts. That was another thing he had learned – that, when in doubt, asking for what other people thought was the correct way to learn the truth.



It had been a long day and a fruitless one on top of everything. Hudson groaned and pushed his hands against his eyes, rubbing them for a good half minute. A detective's job could be such a downer at times; there were times when, no matter how much work you put into it, the answers remained out of reach.

He'd had no luck finding Angel's real identity. A better way was to snoop around at the club and find out the guy's personal details, the ones he must have provided when he'd been hired at Twilight. The chances were high, seeing the shady kind of business Watkins ran there, that Angel had an identity as carefully fabricated as Hudson's.

Or maybe he was reading too much into things and Angel was, like many other pretty boys his age, in this business to turn a quick buck based on his looks alone. He looked old enough not to be underage, but there was something so unpleasant about him, as if what lurked under the surface matched in intensity his outward beauty but was skewed in another direction.

Could it be that he just disliked the guy profoundly? That was always a possibility, and Hudson forced his mind into taking a long view. What he knew of Angel so far was that he didn't mind playing into the sick games his masters ordered, and that he liked making bad jokes.

Bad dark jokes.

Hudson shook his head. Whatever was going through Angel's mind, he wouldn't figure it out by sitting on his ass and going through the records he had access to. As always, the best detective work was done out in the field. He'd have to get chummy with the guy, and see where that would take him.

It was getting late and he needed to grab a bite. Could he ask his pretty neighbor over to cook him a homemade dinner? As thorough as Otis was, he would probably scold him for not saying anything sooner. After all, that was a slow cooker, and that meant it couldn't make food fast.

Hudson chuckled and shook his head. It was so easy being around Otis and getting into his shoes. His mind was simple, but that didn't make him stupid. He was odd, but endearing. And, above all, he was cute and eager, and just thinking about that was enough for Hudson to feel his jeans getting a bit too tight. Well, he could use a distraction. All he had to do was see if his pretty neighbor wanted to go out and have a bite.

That reminded him. Otis worked at a restaurant. And Jackie was going there to pester the guy with his lecherous intentions. Hudson grimaced at that; his thoughts and plans regarding his cute neighbor weren't pure either. The chances were, at that hour, Otis had already had dinner and wasn't interested in going out. As much as he wanted to, Hudson decided against visiting the restaurant where his neighbor worked. It was chilling enough that Jackie knew Otis; any more colliding of those two worlds and he'd start to think he needed to whisk Otis away from all the danger.

An incoming message interrupted his train of thought.

"Wanna stop by?" he read slowly. It was from Otis, which made him smile, but the tone of the message, while comprised of nothing but three words, didn't sound like his quirky neighbor at all. He was politeness incarnate, and Hudson could bet that he wouldn't usually be caught dead using such informal manners.

That made him slightly wary and, after another second, increasingly wary. He thought for a moment and, without a trace of hesitation, he opened his camera case.



He had been right. It was cold in the hallway, and Otis trembled not as much because of the feel of the cool air on his bare skin, but because he was worried that some other neighbor might

wander by and see him standing there, wearing the impossibly small piece of fabric that barely covered his nether parts. Hudson hadn't replied yet, but he was too impatient to wait inside.

So, he was standing in front of his own door, wearing sexy skimpy shorts, a guarantee – according to Missy – for ensuring that Hudson would want to spend the night in his bed.

The door on 505 opened abruptly, and Hudson stepped out. He did it so quickly that Otis started and then remained glued in place, unable to move. There was something in the way Hudson moved, a tension that made him seem odd. As if it were a tsunami coming, and they had to run, no time for questions.

“Otis, what in the world are you wearing?”

He took a step back. That was bad. Everything he could read on Hudson's face was surprise mixed with something he couldn't define, but it wasn't good either. And the idiom ‘what in the world’, as he had learned from the dictionary, was often used to express disgust.

It took only a moment for his stomach to get the message that he'd made a horrible choice by wearing those ugly shorts. They weren't ugly, but he was. He rushed into his apartment, away from the shame, but when he tried to close the door, he couldn't. Hudson was strong enough to push him back and soon, they were both inside.

What he had wanted, but now didn't want anymore.

Hudson hugged him briefly and then pushed him away, as he began to inspect the place. “Did you send that message just earlier?”

“Yes,” Otis squealed. His voice was no longer working properly. “That was me.” He had no idea what to do with his hands, and Hudson was blocking his way so he couldn't grab some clothes to put on, either. The hallway was so small that he couldn't avert his eyes from his own reflection in the mirror. How could he even think that he looked desirable? The only way he looked was ludicrous, bizarre, even disgusting. He wished he didn't know so many words.

Hudson sighed and ran a hand over his face as soon as his inspection was over. He looked sideways at Otis and grinned. “Did I scare you?”

That development was unfamiliar to him. What had just happened? Hudson no longer seemed surprised or disgusted. He was even smiling, and he had one of those beautiful smiles that Otis wanted to see every day only so that he could get into a good mood.

The only thing he could do was shake his head and look down.

“And what's with the sexy getup? Are you trying to seduce me or something?”

Otis raised his eyes. That was stupefying. Dumbfounding. It was even blowing his mind. How could Hudson go from looking surprised in a bad way to being surprised in a good way? Otis hadn't changed himself. He was still wearing those stupid shorts. He should have taken Missy with him and chosen something sensible.

His silence made Hudson move toward him, and soon he was engulfed in those strong tattooed arms and made to feel safe again. Gradually, he relaxed into the embrace and let his hands move down Hudson's back, until they reached something hard and cold sticking out of the other's jeans.

Otis jumped one step back. "What's that?" he asked. "Behind your back?" He gesticulated wildly with one arm.

Hudson frowned and reached behind him. Otis was even more startled when he saw what it was.

"This is my gun," Hudson said and held it at a neutral angle.

"Guns are dangerous." Otis eyed the heavy object with growing discomfort, dark and scary just by being there.

"Of course they are. That's why only qualified people should use them."

Otis pondered over his next question. Hudson didn't strike him as dangerous, but he wasn't knowledgeable enough about the world to know for sure. "Are you qualified?"

Hudson nodded but offered no other information. So, people who took photographs of men in muzzles and leashes needed guns? Grandma would have a few things to say about the state the world was in today.

His eyes followed Hudson as he put the gun into the back of his jeans. "I got the text from you. It didn't sound like you. So I got a little... confused."

The confession dumbfounded Otis even more. "Can you get confused?" Hudson didn't look at all like someone who would get confused.

"Once in a while. Sorry about scaring you, too. I'll go back to my place."

"Wait." Otis didn't want this opportunity to slip through his fingers. He worried about the gun, but he trusted Hudson. "I asked you here because I want you to sleep with me."

Hudson turned on his heel so fast that he almost lost his balance. Otis steadied him by grabbing his arm with both hands.

"I see. That's why you were in the hallway buck-naked."

“I’m not buck-naked,” Otis protested. “I bought these today, because they were important for the plan to work.”

“And what plan is that?”

“To get you in my bed.”

Hudson doubled over, and Otis worried for a minute until he understood that his neighbor was just laughing. That wasn’t at all the effect he had been aiming for.

“Come here,” Hudson said and kissed his forehead. Then, he rubbed Otis’s head with his fist, messing up his hair. “Does that plan still stand?”

“Yes,” Otis replied, although he still felt rattled over how his efforts in seduction – apparently, that was his play here – had gone. He was obviously very bad at it.

“Then let me just go to my place and put the gun away. I don’t want you to worry about its being here, at your place.”

“Don’t go. As long as you’re qualified to use it, I don’t mind it.”

“Are you sure? I live two steps away from you.”

“The distance between my door and yours is longer than two steps. Unless they are giant steps. Don’t leave.” He was saying the same thing over and over, but he still felt too shaken about it all to let Hudson out of his sight. What if he changed his mind and didn’t return? Then Otis would have wasted good money on a pair of useless underwear.



Maybe being in detective mode all the time wasn’t healthy. That was his major flaw and probably why few people truly understood him. What he needed to do right now was put Otis at ease after scaring him earlier by going through his apartment for signs of intruders. In hindsight, it would have been ridiculous for anyone wanting to hurt him or his neighbor to send Otis out in a pair of sexy shorts as the welcoming committee.

He was lucky Otis’s mind worked in different ways than other people’s because there were no follow-up questions about the gun. Hudson was happy to take that as it was.

Otis acted primly as he invited him to sit on the bed. That made for a funny contrast with the way he was dressed, or better said, undressed. Hudson lay on his back and put his hands behind his head; only then did he realize that the gun was poking him in the back. He straightened up and searched around for a place to put it. If Otis hadn’t been so adamant about not letting him leave, he would have put it out of sight already.

“Here.” Otis hurried to his side and opened the nightstand by the bed.

Hudson placed it inside, noticing the notebooks stacked neatly on top of each other. His gun looked incongruous next to them. That made sense. A man like him and someone like Otis shouldn’t be so close. He dealt with dangerous people, had a dangerous job, and carried a dangerous thing like a gun. While his prim and proper neighbor was someone who would be much better off in the company of a guy with a safe job and safe hobbies.

Otis sat gingerly on the bed by his side and looked at him. “How do you find it?”

“What?” Hudson asked. “It’s definitely something.” He let his eyes wander down Otis’s slender body. His skin was so beautiful, he felt a small pain inside his chest just looking at him. So different from the world Hudson lived in. As for the skimpy underwear he was wearing, Hudson felt a twitch in his fingers to reach out for that little bow and pull at it to make the damn thing come undone.

“I know, right?” Otis said enthusiastically and bounced up and down on the bed. “I told you it was better than your sofa. Perfect for a sleepover.”

Hudson blinked once, frowned for a bit, and then laughed. “You want me here so that I can sleep in your bed?”

“Yes,” Otis replied, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to present yourself in sexy shorts and tell a guy that you wanted him in your bed.

That sort of innocence deserved all the protection in the world. Hudson moved closer until he reached Otis and caressed his bare shoulder slowly. “You are so good, Otis.”

That declaration earned him a sideways glance that conveyed little besides confusion. “Good how?”

“Like this,” Hudson said and tipped his chin gently so that they could angle their heads for a kiss.

A small sigh came with the parting of soft lips, and it sent a breeze through him that raised goose bumps in its wake. When was the last time he’d felt like this for a man? Maybe it had happened in the beginning, when all sex was new, and every experience was a first.

He brought Otis closer until he had him between his legs. His hands traveled down the smooth back resting above the underwear. “You are so beautiful,” he said and kissed him harder.

Otis was inviting him to take over, to become someone better. Was this the right thing to choose? Maybe not now, but in the long run Hudson knew in his gut, the same one that never lied, that it would be good for him, it would be so good that even his priorities might change.

Through slow coaxing, he had him on his back, legs spread, and Hudson liked how well he fit between those slender limbs. He caressed the smooth skin everywhere, deepening each kiss and drinking from it like his entire life hinged on it. His right hand cupped a knee and then traveled down the well-defined calf. Even his ankles were so delicate, yet strong; no wonder the first thing Hudson had thought of Otis was that his neighbor was a runway model in hiding. Everything about him was proportioned just right, on the light side, but beautiful in a diaphanous way that inspired the onlooker, making him feel things he'd never felt before.

And all that beauty lay in his hands, at his mercy, showing no desire to push him away. Hudson stopped a slow growl growing in his chest right in time. He was being offered ownership, he had known it since Otis had demanded, in that innocent way of his, to be collared. And he was more than willing to take it. No, that wasn't even half-right. An imperious feeling pushed him to accept it.

He let his hands roam over the beautiful body under him, over the chest and nipples, the lean abdomen muscles rising and falling with each deep breath. But, before he ended up doing something that might scare Otis off or create room for too much misunderstanding between them, he needed to ask.

"Why did you put these on?" he asked and fingered the little bow of string that had enticed him just earlier.

"To make sure you'd want to sleep in my bed," Otis replied. His breathing hitched a little, and his chest continued to rise and fall, while his pretty lips remained parted and alluring.

"So, let me understand this," Hudson said and propped himself on one elbow, still keeping a possessive leg over Otis, but keeping just enough distance so that he could endure this self-inflicted torture. "You're really worried that I'm sleeping on that sofa."

Otis nodded eagerly. In his earlier ministrations, Hudson had pushed his hair away from his hidden eye, so now he could admire the young man in all his beauty. "You could really hurt your spine if you sleep badly."

That was the kind of answer he'd come to expect from his eccentric neighbor. Hudson sighed and pressed his forehead against Otis's for a moment. "All right. Then I suppose I should grant your wish of helping me. I will sleep here tonight."

Otis's face lit up. "I've never had a sleepover," he confessed, "but others made a big deal out of it. So I've always wanted to know what it would be like."

Another bit of the foggy past revealed to him. Hudson willed his investigative mind to take a break. Needling Otis for answers about everything that had happened in his prior life shouldn't be high on his list. It was there, because he couldn't help it, and he wanted to learn about this pretty man's life, but it couldn't be now.

First things first, he needed to put even more distance between them – only a few inches more – so that he could clear his head. “I came in a rush,” he said. “I actually wanted to take you out for a bite.”

Otis made a very disappointed face. “All right.”

Hudson grinned. “Well, you can always make me a sandwich.” That reminded him of the day when Otis had stared at him so sternly and made him feel like a bit of a douchebag. “I promise that, this time, my gratitude will be genuine and heartfelt.”



This was pretty exciting, Otis thought as he rushed to the small kitchenette and fired up his sandwich maker. It pleased him so much to do things for Hudson, and the only downside was that it was starting to feel a little breezy wearing nothing but those skimpy shorts. However, Hudson had been quite adamant about not letting him put anything else on and even smiled in a way that made Otis’s insides do somersaults. That wasn’t really possible, and he was quite certain that all his organs were in their proper places, but the expression was funny and he could imagine little people doing all sorts of gymnastics inside his stomach and entertaining themselves while at it. He preferred that to thinking that he had butterflies in his stomach; he wasn’t terribly fond of that expression. It made him believe that those butterflies were caged in there, and that was bad.

His hands trembled as a memory came uninvited. Alone, in the dark, the door locked. Shouting for help, shouting for anyone, had never worked. The more he dared to do that, the more time he’d be left there, alone in the dark.

It had taken him many years to stop sleeping with the lights on every night. It wasn’t good if you didn’t get proper rest, and if you didn’t spend enough time with your eyes closed and sleeping without any source of light present. Humans were like animals and had their circadian rhythms. They needed the dark to sleep, and blue light in particular could interrupt the production of melatonin, making people sleep badly. As he thought about that, the trembling in his hands abated.

He picked up the plate with the sandwiches on it to take to Hudson. It was a bit ridiculous to serve a customer while being dressed like this, and also amusing. His body was shaking with laughter when he handed his guest the plate along with a paper napkin.

“What’s so funny?” Hudson took a bite out of his sandwich and eyed him with a glint in his eyes.

“This,” Otis said and pointed at himself. “If I were to start serving customers while dressed like this, everybody would laugh. It would be really amusing.”

“Hmm, your customers’ reaction might be different than you think.”

Otis pondered for a bit. “Yes, you’re right. They might get mad and think that the restaurant management lacked decency.”

Hudson shook his head and smiled. “This particular customer doesn’t think either.”

“What does he think?” Otis asked, willing to take part in this game of talking about one of them in the third person.

“He thinks he’s a damn lucky guy,” Hudson replied and took another bite.

Otis felt his skin getting hot again, like earlier, when Hudson had kissed him and run his hands all over him. “Okay,” he whispered, “okay.”



They were lying on the bed, their hands so close he only had to lift his pinky and he would touch Hudson. “I should turn off the light,” he said and moved to do that.

Soon, they were engulfed in darkness. Otis knew he wasn’t afraid. There was someone in the same room, breathing and warm. And then, he felt a pull at the string keeping his shorts together on the side facing Hudson. “What?” he stammered, not even knowing what he wanted to ask.

“Tell me you want to go to sleep right now, and I’ll let you be, Otis. I will stop.”

No. “No, don’t stop.” He took a deep breath as he felt Hudson’s calloused fingers pushing down the fabric and inching slowly along his hip.

This darkness was different. It was deep and silent, so silent that he could hear his own breath and Hudson’s, but it was gentle, too.

Chapter Fifteen – All the Signs

It was so light, that touch, barely a skimming of fingers over his heated skin. Otis wished he had all the words in the dictionary to express what he was feeling, but, at the same time he had a hunch that it wouldn't be possible, not even with all of the knowledge from all of the books he could ever get. This was real life, and his grandma had so often insisted that he should learn by experience and by experience alone.

And real life was beautiful now, so exciting and making his skin prickle in the most pleasant way possible, as Hudson's hand moved slowly, as if they were both caught in a trance from which they didn't want to wake up.

"Don't hold your breath," Hudson whispered, and his low, husky voice filled the room.

Otis exhaled. He hadn't realized that was what he had been doing for the last minute or so, and the intake of air he took was sweet and brought with it relief.

"Now, I'm going to do things to you, beautiful, and know, all the time, that you can tell me to stop."

Otis nodded and then remembered that Hudson couldn't see him in the dark. "Yes, please, do so."

The chuckle that followed tickled him, or was it just the way Hudson blew hot air over the side of his face? He couldn't tell for sure. A rough hand cupped his cheek, his sexy underwear abandoned for a moment. Otis opened his mouth before being told to. At this point, he was knowledgeable enough to realize when he was about to be kissed.

A lot of things were happening all at once. Hudson caressed the inside of his mouth with his tongue, making him feel hotness spread from there through his entire body. Then, his underwear got pushed away, and there were fingers caressing his cock, maddeningly slow. According to all the information he had read so far, men could easily make fools of themselves by reaching their sexual release too fast, and that meant that he needed to resist that sensual assault. He clenched his fists by his sides and curled his toes in an effort to prevent such a shameful episode from happening to him.

Hudson wasn't making his job any easier. While he was gentle in his prodding and probing, it appeared that his fingers were bent on making Otis come undone. They snuck slowly past his balls and lower, insisting until Otis understood that he would have to spread his legs to allow them to do what they wanted.

He squirmed and gasped into the kiss as the fingers pushed against his asshole. This was the butt stuff! Or something very close to it, and Otis felt his cheeks burning as he understood what was going to happen. Although his tolerance to watching adult-oriented videos was very low, he had

a good idea of what followed. Just to make sure, he pushed Hudson slightly away, although he didn't want to interrupt their kiss. "Are you going to finger me?" he asked, unsure of whether it was done to ask such things beforehand.

Hudson laughed and rubbed his nose against his. "You need a bit of easing into things. Or do you have a different opinion?"

With a courage he didn't recall possessing, Otis let his right hand wander over Hudson's body until he reached the bulge hiding beneath his jeans. He cupped it and fondled it. "Will you put this in me?"

"Ah, damn, you're tempting me so much," Hudson growled. "I'm the good guy here. I really am. Just don't make it so hard for me, Otis."

"I think it's already hard," Otis said as his fingers squeezed the stiffness between them with every intention of feeling it grow even stiffer.

"Okay. We'll fool around, but I'm not going to put it in just yet," Hudson warned him. "Things like this, with guys like you, they take time."

Guys like him. Inexperienced. Awkward in bed. Who knew what else his neighbor thought of him. "Why?"

"Because it hurts at first. And I'll be damned if I'm the guy who's going to hurt you, beautiful."

Otis wanted to laugh, more like squeal in pleasure, because Hudson called him that. And he seemed to be doing it off the cuff, like he didn't even have to think to establish whether the person he was talking to was, indeed, beautiful, or he just wanted to make the other believe that. It was a sign of honesty, and Otis took it and put it into a little mental drawer to examine later.

"You're silent. If you are reconsidering what we're about to do right now, just say it."

"No, I was just... thinking. I do that all of the time."

"Yes, I recall very well how you told me you are a thinking person. What were you thinking about?"

Maybe he was about to ruin it by saying things that were too true. "No one has ever called me beautiful the way you do. It's like... you really mean it."

"Ah, damn. It means that I'm not doing it enough or the right way."

There seemed to be real regret in Hudson's voice, so Otis hurried to reply, "That's not true. You're doing it very well."

“Nah, it looks like I have to do a better job.” Hudson leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Beautiful.” He moved his lips and placed them on Otis’s ear next. “Beautiful.” The side of his neck followed. “Beautiful.”

“Stop,” Otis begged. His skin was all goose bumps. He was trembling and his heart was so full that he didn’t know what to do about it.

“Okay,” Hudson breathed out the word against his skin. “You’re lucky I promised I would stop the moment you said it.”

“Or else?” He was brave tonight, so brave that he couldn’t even recognize himself in that sort of behavior.

“Or else I’d say it to you until tomorrow. I’d only stop so that I could catch some sleep.”

Otis laughed and caught Hudson’s face between his palms. “You’re weird,” he said and tipped his head back, prey to new fits of giggles.

“Oh, really? As if I’m the guy roaming the hallways at night, shaking my bare ass, and tempting men to take me.”

That was a jab at him, and Otis felt proud for understanding it for what it was. If Hudson allowed it, he would use him to understand all that he needed to learn about human interaction, all that he didn’t know and was desperate to discover. “I barely took a few steps out of my apartment. My ass wasn’t bare. And I wasn’t tempting men.”

“Okay, not men, but me. Fair enough? Don’t tell me you had absolutely no idea what seeing you like this would do to me.”

“I didn’t. It was a test. And, at first, I thought I failed it.”

“You didn’t fail a thing. Will you let me play with your lovely ass?”

Otis took one deep breath. Talking for a bit had made the sensations he had been experiencing earlier a bit more manageable, and he had Hudson to thank for it. “Thank you. And yes.”

“Always so polite,” Hudson said and moved his lips slowly along Otis’s jawline. “Then how about I teach you a new trick?”

“Yes, please, teach me.”

“On all fours, butt to me. And I’m going to turn on the light if you don’t mind.”

He minded a little. Being naked with Hudson like that felt a bit better in the dark, something he hadn’t expected. But, because Hudson was his teacher, and he needed to show his willingness to learn, he would obey every word. He reached for the bedside light, but Hudson stopped him.

“A beautiful man like you really needs to be admired in all his glory.”

Otis buried his face in the pillow. He had been naked with Hudson before, so why did he feel so embarrassed now? He closed his eyes tightly and waited. Now that he had someone to be in charge, someone with a lot more experience than him under his belt, it was all right for him to let go for the moment and just let things happen to him.

And, indeed, they were happening. Hudson pushed his underwear down and moved his fingers slowly, along the space between Otis’s buttocks. “Should I take the shorts off?” he asked, and his voice quivered in synch with the rest of him.

“No, I like you like this.”

That was a relief. That meant that those shorts still had their usefulness. Hudson picked up one of the laces and brushed it along Otis’s butt crack. “You know, I think you’d look amazing in a G-string.”

Otis snickered. “G-strings are for girls.”

“Nah, they’re not. Just imagine it.” Hudson explained as his hands continued their work. “First of all, this little pink hole of yours would be barely concealed, which would make it even more enticing. Then, there would be just a small patch of fabric covering your balls and cock.” To put more emphasis on his words, Hudson teased the skin lower in passing. Otis felt a new surge of pleasure.

“Would you like me to get a G-string? But you must wait, because I don’t have the budget for another piece of expensive underwear this month.”

“I’ll buy it for you.”

Was that even right? Hudson not only offered him all the knowledge he needed for no charge, but he also offered to buy him things.

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” he said, aware that he was supposed to act according to his upbringing so that other people didn’t think he was an uncivilized person.

“Oh, trust me, you couldn’t even if you tried.”

Then, Hudson did something incredible. Otis was forced to forget about his embarrassment so that he could look over his shoulder. Hudson’s face was buried between his buttocks, and was that... his tongue? Otis closed his legs and tried to get away, but Hudson grabbed him so hard by his hips that he couldn’t run. However, he did manage to turn to his side, and studied his neighbor, his very sexy and knowledgeable neighbor, for signs that this was some sort of a joke.

“What were you doing?” he asked.

Hudson grinned and then rubbed the back of his head while wincing. “I was trying to eat your ass, but I might have been going a bit too fast. I should’ve known it would shock you.”

“It did,” Otis confirmed. “Why would you want to eat my ass?”

“It’s a figure of speech. I just wanted to lick it, since it was in my face and it looked so good.”

Otis worried his bottom lip. “Is it a sexual practice?”

“Do you really not watch porn at all? In this day and age?” Hudson asked.

“A little. I can’t get very far. It’s too intense,” he confessed.

“So, you’ve never heard of rimming?”

He had encountered the word but hadn’t dwelt on it. “A little. I thought it was advanced stuff.”

“Ah, so it looks like I skipped a few lessons, then. Was it unpleasant?”

Otis shook his head. No, far from it. “It was too pleasant.”

“Okay. I promise to take it slow.”

“Okay.”

He put himself back on all fours without protest. If Hudson believed he was ready for advanced stuff, that was praise from his teacher. For good measure, he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes again.



As far as Otis was concerned, everything was new. Hudson cursed himself for being so impatient, but a deep need had grown inside him lately, a need to offer this beautiful young man in front of him all the pleasure known to humankind. There was a sense of urgency in how he did it – and the reason he thought himself to blame – so it should have been no surprise that Otis had been taken aback by his actions.

The world wouldn’t end tomorrow. He could – and would – take his time. However, since Otis had given him permission, he could return to the task at hand. The smooth buttocks fit in his hands perfectly and parted to give him easy access. He licked tentatively, determined to stop himself before he surrendered to the hunger the scrumptious piece of tail in front of him roused in his gut.

Cute moans assured him that he was on the right track. Otis was no longer the shy guy once the boundaries of his reserve broke. “This is... too good, Hudson,” he whispered.

“If it’s that good, why don’t you help me out a little?”

“How? What can I do?”

“Just grab your butt cheeks and pull them apart. That way, I can do other things, as well.”

Otis obeyed right away. Hudson took advantage of the opportunity to rub the full ball sac with one hand while using the other to milk Otis’s cute cock. It was so nice the way every bit of this beautiful young man fit in his hands.

To give him even more pleasure, Hudson moved his tongue along the taint and then filled his mouth with Otis’s balls. The sounds he was hearing went up an entire octave. That only served to fuel Hudson’s desire to please him beyond words or human experience. To have something like that for the first time, that thought alone made him lose himself a little. He wasn’t even thinking about himself anymore as he pulled Otis’s cock to get his mouth on it.

“I can’t,” Otis chanted, his voice breaking, “I can’t, Hudson, no more!”

It was just what he wanted to hear. He slowed down a little and, just then, a hand grabbed him by his short hair and pushed him down, back to his work. He grinned before engulfing Otis’s amazing cock completely and pressing his lips down hard until he felt the other’s release gushing in.

He drank from Otis’s body, drank without even thinking twice, and used his lips to tease and pleasure, until the tremors in that slender body died down. With a smile on his face, he witnessed the way Otis dropped onto the bed, face first, groaning and smacking his fists against the pillow. Was that frustration? But Hudson felt the taste of Otis’s cum on his tongue, so that couldn’t be it.

Otis turned and his eyes were wet. “I came too fast, didn’t I?”

Hudson couldn’t help laughing. “Is that what’s worrying you? It doesn’t matter. I love making you come undone.”

“But... I’m a mess.” Otis turned and looked at his body.

He was sweaty, a bit disheveled, but otherwise fine. Damn fine. Hudson grinned and drew a long line down Otis’s chest to his belly. He put the finger in his mouth. “That could be solved, you know. I have half a mind to lick you all over.”

“No,” Otis protested and covered his face. “I might... combust.”

Hudson grabbed the slender hands in his and kissed their knuckles gently. “Come on, a realist like you should know such a thing isn’t possible. People can’t combust.”

It looked like Otis was looking for an answer, his overly analytic mind could live with. “That’s true,” he finally admitted. “But I do feel very hot.” He touched his chest and belly as if to check.

“That’s because you are hot. You’re hot stuff, Otis,” Hudson declared, trying his best not to burst into laughter.

Otis looked around, ran his fingers through his hair, but when he tried to drape it again over his scarred eye, Hudson stopped. “Not while you’re with me, understand?”

A small expression of stubbornness settled on the beautiful face, but eventually it ended in a nod. Hudson brushed the silky hair back over Otis’s head. The hypnotic blue eyes rested on his face, without blinking. “Now what can I do for you?”

Always the polite one, the person meant to serve. “Well, since popping your cherry tonight is out of the question--”

“Why?”

Did Otis act shy only when it was convenient? Hudson sucked in a breath. “Let’s say I’m not ready.”

“Why?”

Hudson groaned and grabbed Otis by the cheeks, pulling them hard. “I’ve told you already. I don’t want to be the guy to hurt you.”

One blink. At least he got that. “For the butt stuff, do I need one of those things? You know, to stuff inside? I can’t wear it to work, though.”

“Are you kidding me? You’ve never watched a porn video long enough to know what rimming is, but you know what a butt plug is?”

“Yes,” Otis replied as if that was the most natural thing in the world. His learning was very selective, it seemed.

However, Hudson didn’t mind teaching him everything if need be. But, as a good teacher, he needed to prepare all those lessons in advance, or else he risked both himself and his student failing. In a million years, he didn’t want to be the reason that happened.

“No, I don’t want you to wear such a thing, let alone at work. But let’s say that you need some proper opening up before we move on to things that are bigger.”

“Your cock is very big,” Otis agreed and nodded in appreciation. “I don’t know for sure, but I think my asshole needs to be larger for it. Thank you for taking all of this into consideration, Hudson.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome,” Hudson said and bit his lower lip to stifle his laughter. “So, you’re set on this? You want me to be the guy to top you?”

To his surprise, Otis giggled. “You know, when you say it like that, it sounds as if I’m a dish, and you’re the topping.”

“You’re as tasty as that, but not that funny.” Hudson pulled playfully at a few strands of sweaty hair. “When I mean top, I mean,” he lowered his head so that he could whisper in the ear of that naughty hot thing, “me inside you. Do you understand?”

“I,” Otis choked on his own words, “I do.”

“Good. So, how about you be a good boy now and let us both go to sleep?”

“But I felt it, yours is hard, too. Can I at least take it in my mouth?”

Hudson groaned again. Otis could be exasperating when he put his mind to it, but in a very good way. He did it so that nothing could be held against him. For that reason, Hudson wanted very much to make him happy and satisfied. But how could he explain that he felt satiated, hard cock and all notwithstanding, just by giving another pleasure? He hadn’t been a selfish lover in his life so far, but not a strict giver, either. With this beautiful guy around, his priorities were starting to change. Wasn’t that something?

Otis appeared to take his silence as an answer of sorts, because his feverish hands were now on Hudson’s belt and making headway in pulling his cock out. “You know, publications of all sorts say that it is not healthy for males to get aroused and not have sex. It’s called epididymal hypertension.”

“What?” Otis never ceased to amaze him with his extensive knowledge of obscure facts such as this, along with a complete lack of awareness in common situations. “Is it deadly?”

Otis shook his head. “No, just uncomfortable. Its symptoms are pain and aching in the testicles.”

“Oh, gawd, you’re talking about blue balls,” Hudson said and laughed. “Okay, since you care so much for my wellbeing, let’s get this show on the road. Do you want to suck me off?”

Otis nodded energetically, his pretty face all a smile.

Hudson decided that it was just the right time for a smidge of teasing. He stopped the blond head before it dove into his crotch. “Really? Do you want to suck my cock? Put this pretty mouth on it?”

Otis looked at him, confused. “Yes. Is there some misunderstanding?”

Hudson grinned. “This is dirty talking, Otis. It makes things livelier in the bedroom. And by that, I mean arousing. So, I want to hear you do it.”

Otis squirmed. “But I don’t know how to do it.”

“It’s easy. I’ll help you. Here.” He took his cock in his hand and then pushed Otis gently toward it. “Grab it.” His pupil obeyed right away. “Now play with it. Rub it over your face, lick it. Then close your eyes and say whatever comes to mind about what you’re doing.”

“Okay,” Otis agreed.

Hudson lay on his back, hands behind his head. He was damn lucky to have this pretty guy all over him, eager and ready. Throughout his life, he had experienced sex as something pleasant, a means to an end. In other words, he liked to fuck and get his dick sucked just as much as the next guy, no more, no less. But Otis’s innocence was starting to cultivate something new inside him, a need for something else that was torturing and delicious at the same time.

“It tastes so good,” Otis began in an unsure voice.

“All right, go on,” Hudson encouraged him. “You’re doing great.”

Otis offered him a grateful look and then returned to his task, this time with more determination. By instinct alone, it appeared that he knew exactly what to do to milk Hudson’s cock for all the precum available. He did it with a purpose, too, as he began to lap at it. “It feels so good to suck your cock,” he whispered. “I want to eat it all, like you wanted to eat my ass earlier.”

He didn’t ever realize the low growl in his chest was his at first. “I changed my mind,” Hudson whispered back. All that licking, along with the earlier teasing, was starting to get to him. “Drop the dirty talk, get to it.”

Otis looked up with his pretty innocent eyes. “Should I start sucking your cock?”

“Yes, and stop teasing me with that naughty tongue. Come on, gobble, gobble.”

That seemed to help Otis make up his mind. And, as it seemed to be with everything in his life, he set to it with enthusiasm and a conviction to do it right. Hudson had to groan in pure ecstasy as that pretty hot mouth was all over him. Sure, he was still clumsy, and he didn’t have the deepthroating abilities of a few of the men Hudson had been with in his life, but he didn’t need to be skillful. On the contrary, what made it all better was his endearing quality of being a novice at sex.

And he knew how to take guidance with so much single-mindedness that Hudson couldn’t help but feel taken with it all. With Otis, as a whole. Right now, like the determined little thing that he was, he went at it and devoured the cock in his hand like it was the only thing he wanted to do forever.

Abandonment wasn’t, in his case, the name of the game. The men he had been with knew how to give and take and never let it go to their heads. In other words, he had never had a lover falling for him, and that could be mostly because he steered clear of the type to do that. He was good at it, it seemed. No breakup he ever went through had ever been on the dramatic side. Most of the

time, he and his partner both knew when it was time to say their goodbyes with a friendly handshake and hit the road.

The strangest thing of all he was experiencing while Otis was giving him so much pleasure could only be how he didn't see the same happening between him and the beautiful man with his head buried in his lap. No, these moments of his life were different. Hudson ran his hand through the blond hair, squeezing from time to time only to be rewarded by a soft moan that sent eddies of vibration through his cock.

It usually took a more experienced cocksucking technique for him to get off, but for the sake of the efforts Otis made, he focused and helped with a hand where the generous mouth couldn't reach. From time to time, the beautiful hypnotic eyes flashed up at him, in search of approval, so he gave it, as firmly and loudly as he could manage, given the circumstances.

“Yes, beautiful, lick the head now, but close your eyes, it might get messy.”

That was an understatement on his part. When he blew, ropes of white flew over Otis's head, landing on the sheets behind him, and painted the pretty face, the closed eyes, the open mouth and extended tongue. Hudson couldn't help himself; even as his high died down, he pushed more of his cum into Otis's mouth, rewarded by the greedy tongue lapping at everything he had to give.

“It looks to me like you're a natural. You're really taking to it.”

“I like it,” Otis declared. Then, as before, he hesitated. “Is it not okay to like it so much?”

Hudson laughed. “It is. But only when you're with me. Because I'm your safe choice.”

What the hell was he babbling about now? Sure, he meant it as an allusion to the fact that his tests were up to date, and that his partners never had to worry about being in any danger as far as that part of the deal was concerned. The way he had just said it made it sound like something else.

Otis nodded thoughtfully. “I see. I am very grateful that you're here with me, and that you are my teacher.”

Hudson cursed inwardly. He moved closer and caressed Otis's face, still stained with cum. “I have a little confession to make.” He waited for the approving nod that came right away. “What we're doing right now is beyond the call of duty. I mean, a teacher's duty as far as teaching dating rules is concerned.”

Otis angled his head. “Are we more than teacher and student then?”

“We definitely are.”

“Good. But you can still teach me, right?”

“Everything you want to know. Aren’t you going to ask me what we are?”

“I was. What are we?”

Hudson caressed the blond hair, busily making it behave as it had started to stick up in all directions. “I think we’re temporary boyfriends.” He held his breath. That was one way to keep Otis away from all other temptations.

“Temporary employment is followed by permanent employment if the employee is deemed indispensable,” Otis brought his own logic to the conversation. “Do you think I could ever become indispensable to you?”

Hudson pondered over his answer. It would cost his heart and soul to say a resounding ‘yes’, and it was what he felt. “We’ll see. We should first get to know each other better, see if we click beyond this.” Oh, he was pretty sure they would. Otis would be the light to his darkness, but it would be so selfish of him to ask for something like that. It wasn’t fair and, although at the end of it all he’d leave, taking with him enough regrets to last him a lifetime, he needed to get his head screwed on right and make the right decision.

“Yes, of course,” Otis agreed. “According to all the signs so far, I’d say that a permanent position is in the cards.”

“Well, Mr. Manager, thank you,” Hudson said and laughed. This obliviousness would help Otis get over it. He was, after all, such a practical young man, not the kind to let himself get ensnared in the mire of emotional dilemmas.

And Hudson was counting on it. “And now,” he added, “I believe it’s time for us to sleep. What do you say?”

“Yes,” Otis said with determination and then, a bit clumsily, but lacking nothing in resolve, he hurried to kiss Hudson on the lips.

How on earth would he ever be able to say goodbye to such a man?



Otis was in the small kitchen, preparing breakfast for both of them, and Hudson needed to return to the real world after the blissful night just passed. The kinks in his neck and shoulders were gone, and he felt more rested than he had in a long time. He opened the small nightstand to get his gun. While eyeing the neatly stacked notebooks, his gaze fell lower. Right under the stack was something that didn’t align with the straight edges of the notebooks, and it took Hudson only a second to figure out that it had to be a clipping from a newspaper.

The investigator in him gave him a nudge and, after stilling for a moment to hear Otis still working in the kitchen, he lifted the stack of notebooks and removed the yellowed piece of paper.

Fire destroys small property and kills one

Three firemen battled the blaze until dawn to put out the fire that engulfed a small property inhabited by one Olivia Bendecker and her son. The location, far out in the fields outside of Berckly, made it difficult for the units to reach the conflagration in time.

As the embers of the fire died down, the only thing left for the responders to retrieve from the burned-out house were the remains of an adult victim. Luck had it that Olivia Bendecker's son, 10-year-old Otis, was not at home that night...

Hudson's ear caught the noise of the kitchen faucet turning off just in time. Quickly, he put the newspaper clipping back and closed the drawer. His chest ached as he turned to face a smiling Otis, his hands filled with a plate on which three nice-looking sandwiches lay.

"I'm sorry this is all I have. If you sleep here more often, I will use the slow cooker to cook other things."

"That's all right, Otis," Hudson said and wrapped one arm gently around his beautiful host, "that's more than all right."

Chapter Sixteen – Gone to Ground

The pleasantness from the night before lingered in his bones, at odds with the findings revealed by the newspaper clipping Hudson had found inside the nightstand. The scar by Otis's left eye must have been caused by burning, but according to that old piece of news, he hadn't been at home when the house in which he lived with his mom burned down. That was quite puzzling, and Hudson couldn't make sense of it. An injury like that couldn't have come from being caught in a fire, because he had seen enough of his beautiful neighbor naked to know that, save for that scar, his skin was absolutely flawless.

Otis had asked him not to ask about the scar, and he had kept his part of the bargain. But that had been the agreement only because there had been a distance between them. Now, as temporary boyfriends – Hudson felt the need to laugh at his own lack of creativity – they might be required to offer more intimate confessions to seal the deal. The honesty, however, would have to work one way only. He couldn't tell Otis what he was there for. It was bad enough that he couldn't stop getting involved with the lovely young man, despite all the rules he should obey. The part of him that liked to dabble in rationalization continued its efforts to convince him that the current arrangement was the best course of action. Otis, in his innocence, accepted the idea of being temporary boyfriends, which should be enough to keep him away from the darkest of temptations.

There were so many pieces of the puzzle that he had to discover and assemble. He couldn't keep Jackie away from Otis, not as much as he wanted to, because he couldn't raise any suspicions. But he could tell his neighbor that they were boyfriends of sorts and, therefore, Otis would know better than to get entangled with that odd fellow.

Hudson stopped in front of his door. Jackie was odd, wasn't he? One hundred percent blend of stupidity and bravado, and yet he didn't seem to share the evil ways of his master. He shook his head. What he needed to do was to use Jackie as he saw fit, without a moment of hesitation. There was so much at stake.

The door handle felt cold in his hand, dragging him back to reality. He pushed the door open and stepped inside. His nostrils flared, while his gut instinct kicked in. The small rug in the hallway had a corner turned. Maybe he wasn't some housekeeping star, but something told him that he hadn't done that.

Slowly, he reached for his gun and moved toward the main room. Chances were that whoever might have been there was already gone, but Hudson wasn't in the business of taking risks.

Everything else seemed in place. The BDSM paraphernalia on the wall appeared to be untouched. The blanket thrown over the sofa was in the same state as he remembered, while his camera case lay on the chair by the tripod, as he had left it last night when he had grabbed his gun, alarmed by Otis's message.

He frowned as he inspected the case. He might have been in a hurry when he was reaching for his gun, but he had secured the fake bottom back in place by force of habit before storming out.

The fake bottom was in place, as expected, and yet Hudson felt his hackles rising. It had been put back too neatly, not like his hurried actions would have left it. It was aligned too perfectly. He ground his teeth hard. Someone had been inside his apartment and rummaged through his belongings. That someone knew about the existence of the fake bottom in his camera case now.

Calmly, Hudson walked over to the wall and grabbed a few things at random. Then, he stashed them in the hidden compartment and slammed the camera case shut. He would have to figure out another way to sneak his gun in from now on. The good news was that they hadn't found it. Otis's innocent actions had saved him a world of trouble, if not more most probably. Had the intruders been expecting to find him at home? The thought was chilling to the bone.

Whatever was happening, someone was either onto him or trying to get there. Hudson weighed the piece in his hand while thinking hard.



Temporary boyfriends. Now that was a new notion, and Otis simply loved to examine it from all sides. He was so glad that Hudson had made things so clear; maybe it was all part of teaching him about dating rules, and what better option to do so than by trying to have a real relationship?

He sighed dreamily and put back the clean glasses, one by one, with infinite care. It was a great thing to be capable of handling things with care. For a while, back then, he had lacked proper coordination. That good doctor had mentioned something about his not having had the opportunity to exercise all his muscles well. Physical therapy had been involved, but his grandma had told him later that he had grown into his own body properly. Sure, she'd had no idea that Otis believed himself to be too skinny for men to like him, but again, those weren't the kind of things to share with someone so much older. It was a matter of respect, he believed. Also, his grandma hadn't liked to hear him obsessing over his physical aspect. She was such a kind and gentle old lady, but any mention of that made her frown and purse her lips. *Beauty is not important, Otis. Real beauty is here.* And when she said that, she pressed her tiny bony hand into his chest hard, as if she wanted to make sure he wouldn't forget.

He had tried to remember. But the reactions of those around him, like he was some sort of nasty animal, made him believe more and more that those words from a long time ago had to be true. He must have been so ugly that they couldn't keep from reacting to him with unhidden disgust.

His grandma had tried to assure him that it wasn't so. *This world here, it's so small, Otis,* she said, cupping her hands to make him understand. *It's because of the smallness of their hearts that they treat you like that.*

He was far away from that small world. He was in a big city now, and here, it looked like people thought differently. People like Missy and Jackie and Utah the bartender and, most of all, Hudson.

Again, his chest rose and fell with a satisfied sigh.

“How’s it hanging, partner?” Missy slapped him on the back, and this time, he wasn’t taken by surprise because, in the meantime, he had learned that people did that when they were friends. However, he couldn’t see himself slapping Missy back like that. Somehow, he felt that it wasn’t done.

“I,” he began slowly, “have a temporary boyfriend.” There, it was out in the open.

“Temporary?” Missy wiggled her eyebrows and then nudged him playfully in the ribs. “Don’t tell me it’s your sexy neighbor. The one with the guns?”

Hudson had a gun, but that wasn’t what Missy was talking about, and he knew that now. “How did you know it was him?” he expressed his disbelief.

“Come on, he put a leash on you and you get all dreamy out of the blue. Plus, you kissed him. And wasn’t it because of him that you wanted advice on how to get someone to sleep with you? Clearly, the poor guy didn’t stand a chance.”

“A chance for what?” he inquired politely.

“To resist you, obviously.” Missy pinched his cheek lightly. “You’re a darling, Otis, get it? This guy is totally lucky to have you. But make sure you put that good ol’ ball and chain round his leg so that he doesn’t escape you.”

“How do I do that?” So far, Missy’s advice hadn’t been too bad, and it had even spurred him on to be braver. Therefore, if she had anything else to add, he was all ears.

“I doubt it’s going to be difficult for you. I mean, look at you. You’re awfully pretty. And you have a heart as big as a planet. If he hasn’t fallen for you yet, get ready for it. These bad boys fall the hardest.”

“Really?” The thought made Otis so happy. “But he insisted that this is only temporary.”

“Ha!” Missy exclaimed. “That’s just his way of fooling himself into believing that he has a chance of getting out of it. Just out of curiosity, what did you tell him?”

“I told him that, when employment is involved, a temporary position transitions to a permanent one if the employee is deemed indispensable.”

Missy laughed and slapped his arm with her towel. “Now that’s a great argument, Otis! Yeah, make him feel like he’s the one on trial.”

“But I want to become indispensable to him,” Otis further explained. “How do I do that?”

Missy pressed her index finger against her lips and appeared to be lost in thought for a bit. “You know what, Otis? I think the best advice I can give you is to be yourself. If this guy doesn’t see you for the precious little thing that you are, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

“But what if being myself is too little?” A small thread of anxiety was starting to creep in.

“It can’t be. And you know why?” Missy reached for the glass in his hand and held it against the ceiling light. “Because of this. Because you always strive to do and be the best you can.”

Otis examined the glass for any smudges or other signs of uncleanness. But it was all clear, nothing to mar its translucent beauty.



“So, what’s on the agenda, boss?” Hudson said, molding his face into a cryptic smile as he sat his camera case on the chair as he remained standing. He didn’t miss the way Watkins’s eyes moved to it for a brief moment and then slid back to him.

“Vegas, I’d say you’ve proved yourself to us,” Watkins replied with a thin smile. “You’re moving up the ladder.” He swiveled his chair and looked at the redbrick building behind him. “There’s a new club we’re working on, and it’s meant for a more selective clientele.”

“Okay. What’s going to be my job?”

“First of all,” Watkins said without tearing his eyes away from the dull sight, “I want you to put together a new website for us. But I have to warn you from the get-go. This isn’t going to be one of those things where everything is bare and out in the open. We’re going to sell a fantasy. Are you with me so far?”

“Sure. What’s the fantasy?”

Watkins finally turned to face him. “The new club’s name is going to be Till The Sweet End.” He let the words sink in, and Hudson could easily tell that not one muscle was moving in his face. “That is the fantasy world we’re building.”

“I’m afraid that you’ll need to be a little clearer, boss. I have no idea what you mean.”

Watkins’s creepy smile sent cold shivers down his spine, so Hudson just shifted in his place and crossed his arms, legs parted, to show that he meant business even if he had no idea what business that could be. “It’s going to feature simulations for patrons with refined, sophisticated tastes. The models will be, let’s say, rougher than usual with each other.”

“As long as no one’s getting truly hurt,” Hudson said with a shrug.

Watkins’s smile changed like a chameleon’s skin, from creepy to self-assured. “Of course.”

“Just asking, boss, what will these patrons be looking for at this new club?”

The question seemed to please Watkins. Everything this new employee of his did appeared to be aimed at that. It was a play Hudson was most comfortable with. The prey was face to face with its predator, but Watkins didn’t realize how misguided he was in thinking he knew who was who in this game they were playing.

“A way to witness the obliteration of youth and beauty.”

Hudson scratched his head and gave Watkins a confused look. “Are they going to beat the crap out of each other? Knock out a tooth or two?”

Watkins leaned back in his chair. “No, no, nothing as vulgar as that. Delight is born from postponing things, from making them last. You will see.”

“So, it’s all a make-believe. Like on a movie set,” Hudson insisted.

“Of course,” Watkins said and opened his arms wide. “Wait, did you think we would really hurt our boys for the sake of money?”

Hudson shrugged. “Some pornography can be extreme. And people enjoy it. I just want to know what I’m getting myself into.” And don’t appear too eager to enter that world and raise suspicions. Also, this creepy boss of his had to know that he had seen the red welts on Angel’s abdomen that first time when he’d been on trial for securing a position within the evil company the man seemed to be running.

“A cautious man.” Watkins wagged his finger at him. “I like that about you, Vegas. It still baffles me that that boy Jasper fooled you into believing that sob story of his, but let’s let bygones be bygones.”

Hudson could have very well done without that reminder. “It couldn’t have been just a sob story, boss, with all due respect.”

Watkins opened his palms and quirked his eyebrows. “I know for a fact that Jasper’s dear mother is alive and well. She definitely isn’t suffering from any terminal illness.”

Hudson had the wits to act surprised. “For real? Why would he lie about something like that?” His mind was already racing but he forced it to cool down so that he could learn all the facts.

Watkins shrugged. “Who am I to know what is happening in these pretty empty heads? I don’t know about you, Vegas, but Jasper didn’t exactly strike me as the brightest tool in the shed. So, whether we like it or not, he tried to pull one over on us.”

“It looks like he succeeded,” Hudson said, frowning to show how upset he was.

“Not really. We’re going to bring him back.”

Fuck. First of all, unlike him, Watkins knew Jasper’s real identity, his home address, and who knew how many other details. “Why bother?” he asked. “Boys like him are everywhere, and I bet they’re dying to take his place. You wanted him for this new club, right?”

“Oh, it’s not a matter of not having enough models lined up to be part of our new entertainment. But, you see, Vegas,” Watkins said and leaned forward, “one thing I dislike to the extreme, call it my pet peeve if you will, is to put my faith in people and get crossed in return. Now that’s something I can’t condone, no matter what.”

“If what you say about Jasper is true, then that means that he doesn’t want to be here or work for you. You don’t want to drag him back here against his will, right?”

“Oh, no.” Watkins changed his position again and put his hands up. “We hope to convince him, that’s all. Also, we paid him a hefty advance for work he didn’t do. Let’s say that he’s under a contractual obligation and he needs to either cough up the money – which I bet he spent already – or keep his part of the deal.”

Jasper hadn’t had a dime on him when he ran away at Hudson’s advice. This was all bullshit, and it made him mad. The hardest part was to keep himself in check, but luckily he had plenty of training. “Then is he going to be part of the new club’s line-up, after all?”

“Yes. No doubt about it.”

Fuck. Three times fuck. Watkins wouldn’t act so sure if he weren’t convinced that his men would bring back the stray.

Just one more problem to deal with. When things were going just peachy.

“What do you want me to do for now?” he asked, like the good employee he was.

“Jackie is going to take you to the site of the new club. Only a few rooms are ready, but they’re a great background for you to start taking pictures of the models.”

Hudson nodded. Closer and closer to the snake’s nest. “Who’s going to be there?”

“A couple of new faces, a couple of old ones,” Watkins replied.

“Angel?” Hudson asked. He couldn’t get it out of his head how strangely Angel had behaved the night of the police raid at Twinlight.

“No, not him. Apparently that boy likes getting on my nerves lately.”

“How so? Where is he?”

Watkins shrugged like he had no idea. “He’s gone to ground.”

For a moment, Hudson felt his blood curdling and slowing to a stop. “What do you mean?”

“He’s in hiding,” Watkins explained. “That’s his way of sticking his tongue out at me. It’s so trying to search for him and bring him back. My patience is wearing thin, no matter how much of a soft spot I have for his pretty face.”

“Is he your lover, boss?” Hudson said with a stupid smile he hoped was convincing enough.

A scoff followed. “The little whore may have excellent skills, but I don’t lay a finger on the merchandise, Vegas. It’s bad for business. No, you see, these boys are often lost, and that means that they will stick to anything and anyone as long as they’re given the slightest bit of attention. Such misguided affection doesn’t interest me. In other words, I’m no one’s daddy, and I don’t intend to become one, either.”

“That sounds about right,” Hudson agreed. “You’re running a business.”

“Exactly.” Watkins pointed a finger at him again as if he were happy that they were seeing eye to eye. “Jackie’s already waiting for you outside.”

So, the meeting was over, and he had new things to worry about, such as Jasper’s return and Angel’s disappearance. And all of that on top of someone breaking into his apartment to check out the hidden compartment in his camera case.



Jackie was, indeed, outside, leaning against the hood of Hudson’s car like it belonged to him. This was no time for useless irritation. Hudson shook the offered hand briefly and made a sign for Jackie to get in the car as he moved around it to climb behind the wheel.

“Man, you can’t believe how many things have happened,” Jackie began while fastening the seatbelt.

“The boss told me a few things. It looks like Angel has been a no-show lately, huh?” As little as Jackie might know, it was still better than nothing.

“He does that. You know, I think that guy acts like such a diva.” Jackie rolled his eyes. “Seriously, he has one rotten personality. I mean, I know he’s pretty as hell, but come on, he shouldn’t expect to have the whole world at his feet, right? Let’s be real, no one’s that irreplaceable.”

“Do you think the boss wants to replace him?” Hudson continued his light interrogation while he pulled the car out of the parking lot.

“Nah. But I think he’s just about had enough of him. But I guess this kind of thing comes with the territory.” Jackie nodded as if he were a sage unveiling the secrets of the universe. “When you know you’re that pretty, you get up to all kinds of mischief. Do you know what the key is?”

“What?” Hudson asked, very much in need of enlightenment from the youngest wise man to ever walk the earth.

“Not to know.” Jackie became increasingly excited. “I mean, look at my Otis. He really doesn’t know he’s that pretty. That’s why he doesn’t act all high and mighty.”

Hudson worked his jaw and gripped the wheel. “Where is this club? Or do you want us to run in circles until we stumbled upon it by accident?”

“Wow, someone’s in a mood. Did the boss tell you anything to make you like this?”

“He told me Jasper lied to us,” Hudson said snappily.

“Yeah, that. You know, I was both bummed out and happy about it all at the same time.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Jackie continued in the same oblivious manner, “on the one hand, yeah, he took us for a ride, but on the other, his momma’s fine.”

Hudson shook his head. Sometimes, Jackie pointed out the obvious based on the very little he knew. “The boss says that he’s going to bring Jasper back. Do you know anything about that?”

“Yeah, he does that sometimes. Not that he ever put me in charge of things like that. He has those gorillas.” There was envy in Jackie’s voice, but Hudson could also hear relief. If that were true, it could mean that he could cultivate an ally of sorts in the doofus riding shotgun with him. Using all the precautions possible, of course.

“And are the guys, you know, willing to come back?”

“The boss offers them very attractive deals,” Jackie said with confidence. “And he’s not exactly the man to say ‘no’ to.”

“Why is that?”

Jackie threw him a look of disbelief. Even out of the corner of one eye, Hudson could read his reaction. “Have you met the boss, man? All he has to do is to give you that stare, like he’s your dad and about to get the belt, and you’ll piss your pants. Only you can’t see it, right?” Jackie punched him in the shoulder. “You’re one big scary man, aren’t you?”

Hudson returned the grin. “What? You’re not?”

Jackie’s face lit up. He was so gullible, and Hudson took it at face value because he needed this unwitting ally to show him more than a glimpse into the evil business Watkins and whoever was above him were running.

“I’m still wet behind the ears, between you and me,” Jackie replied. “But you know what my advantage is compared to you?”

“Let’s hear it.”

“You’re into this for the artsy part of it,” Jackie explained with self-assurance. “And you look like a guy who’s got it all figured out. But that’s not me.” He shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Nah, I’m lean and hungry, and I want a big chunk of all this for myself.”

“Did the boss promise you something?”

“I need to prove myself to him. And I told you, I’m putting money aside for my own thing. Also, the boss sees me as an asset or he wouldn’t make me part of the new club thing.”

“Do you happen to know how many clubs are out there? And is our boss, you know, the big kahuna?”

Jackie sucked on his teeth. “He is the big guy in charge. As for the clubs, there were a couple before Twinlight, but I don’t know much about them. For whatever reason, they didn’t generate the proper return on investment. So, to minimize the losses, the boss sold everything and built Twinlight from the ground up. That was the winning ticket, and that’s why the business is growing. This new club is going to be so lit.”

“Yeah, the boss told me a few things. I’m supposed to create the website for it.”

“Really? That’s cool, man. What did I tell you? You’re the artsy guy. Access to the club is going to be by invite-only,” Jackie continued. “Uber select, top of the crop, all that jazz.”

“There’s going to be some pretty extreme stuff from what I’ve heard from the boss,” Hudson said casually.

Jackie shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s going to be like in the movies. I mean, it’s not like all that blood and gore is real, although I was squeamish as a kid. I’ve never gone to horror movies and the like. Used to be the joke of the neighborhood.”

“You can’t be squeamish still,” Hudson said.

“Nope, I’m still squeamish as hell. Still, it’s nothing real, and,” Jackie leaned closer, making their shoulders touch, “the people that get off on this kind of thing, no matter how staged, they’re pretty fucked up, right?”

“Not my place to judge others,” Hudson said.

“Yeah, mine neither,” Jackie hurried to confirm and pulled away. “The boss thinks like a businessman, catering to the market, all that. I still stand by my vanilla stuff. It’s just like the movie industry. People might like their horror shows, but there’s always going to be room for romance, right? That’s my play, and I’m sticking to it.”

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?”

They had been driving through an old industrial part of the city, and the buildings had significantly decreased in glamor to leave room for a different sort of architecture.

“Yeah. I know that this isn’t the kind of area you’d expect for our new club,” Jackie said, puffing out his chest, “but the fact that it’s out of the way makes it more exciting, right? The people who’re going to pay big bucks don’t expect your regular posh club downtown. They want a... what’s the word? A gritty experience. The boss said so.”

“I see.” The gun strapped to his ankle didn’t make him feel any safer. The boots he wore had been, in the end, his choice for concealing his weapon. Hopefully, no one intended to frisk him. And, if they did find it, he’d just play it off as being in need of a piece just like the next guy. A schmuck with a gun, thinking himself smart. That would be his ruse. So far, Watkins had appeared to be swallowing the bullshit he’d been serving him. Only, maybe not so much; otherwise why had he sent someone to check out his apartment, and particularly, his camera case? The man was a creep but, as many who worked in the shadows, being suspicious especially of new people, came with the territory.

They stopped in front of one of the structures. It looked like an old factory and, before they could get inside the interior yard, they needed to open a door through a wire fence.

Jackie gestured around. “This thing’s going to go. They’re going to put a serious gate here, and a booth with someone to keep an eye on everyone coming and going. There will be cameras everywhere.”

Hudson took a look around. A loading dock that must have seen better days was located to his left, and it was covered by plenty of dust and grime to let him know that the work of turning the place into a bustling entertainment venue couldn’t have been started too long ago. Watkins had mentioned that a few rooms were ready, and now he was curious to see what he could mean by that.

He followed Jackie as they walked toward the large concrete building in the back, eyeing the abandoned storage areas to his right in the process. A few rickety crates piled on top of each other, along with small mountains of long pipes, were the only reminder of what must have been a booming business decades ago. They offered a few hiding places if he considered it. Knowing your environment, especially when on enemy territory, was paramount for survival. Discreetly,

Hudson took out his phone and snapped a few quick pictures while Jackie walked in front, oblivious of his actions.

A heavy metal door slid open with some difficulty as Jackie pushed it. Soon, they were inside a large open space. It was almost empty and, when he looked up, Hudson noticed the exposed pipes and ductwork crisscrossing the high ceiling. Huge skylights let in the natural light of day, but that didn't make the place seem any less desolate.

"I know that it doesn't seem like much now, but the boss is going to contract a couple of serious construction companies to deal with the place," Jackie explained. "He says that he'll keep some of the things, you know, to create the right atmosphere. Like heavy chains and such."

Hudson nodded. "Has the boss already installed some security cameras?" he asked casually.

"Not that I know of," Jackie replied.

"He told me that we're going to meet a few of the models here, to start working on the pictures for the new website." Hudson stole a glance behind him. "Our car looks like it's the only one here."

Jackie waved while guiding him down a large passageway. "There's a back entrance. And anyway, the guys chauffeuring our divas around won't come back until we're done. So, you know," he said as he turned around and gave Hudson a pimp's wink, "if we want to fool around with our pretty boys, maybe we can."

"I'll pass," Hudson said dryly. "And didn't you say you were in love or something?"

Jackie pressed both hands on his chest and sighed. "Yeah, totally, but that's going to take time. I mean, I have to be patient to land a guy like Otis. And I can't be patient if I got itches down my britches, if you catch my drift." He winked again. "Now, what's holding you back? Don't tell me you have a wife and 2.3 kids at home."

"No, but I have a boyfriend." Technically, not a lie.

Jackie wiggled his eyebrows. "For real? A guy like you, with an eye for cuties, must have a real beauty at home. When do I get to meet this guy?"

Preferably never again.

"We'll see," Hudson said with a saccharine smile.

"I can barely wait, you know? Maybe we could even go on a double date!" Jackie snapped his fingers. "I'll come with Otis, and you can come with—what's your guy called?"

"Let's get to work before it gets dark," Hudson said, sidestepping the question.

“Right, right.” Jackie sauntered ahead and opened another door. “Hi guys,” he said cheerfully to some people Hudson couldn’t see yet.

Six pairs of eyes fixed on him as soon as he walked in. This area was smaller and had been repurposed to some degree. There were the heavy chains Jackie had mentioned, a large metal container in a corner, and what looked like a huge blast furnace. It disappeared into the high ceiling, probably ending in one of the tall chimneys Hudson had noticed before stepping into the building.

Watkins had told the truth. Hudson recognized three of the young men from *Twinlight*. The other three were new. They were all naked and appeared awkward in the strange environment.

It looked like he had to get to work and earn his honest bread while saving as many lives as possible in the process. No, not ‘as many’, but all.

Chapter Seventeen – Blurred Lines

Grime and sweat. Under other circumstances, Hudson would've understood the appeal. As one of the young models wrapped his arms around a large rusty vertical pipe and looked at him, only his eyes visible over his shoulder, the rest of his face concealed, Hudson adjusted the lens on his camera, focusing on the erotic aspect of the display. The young man's penis was hidden from view, so that the enticing curve of his behind along with the keen look in his eyes were the focus of the picture. Those were all his artistic inputs, and so far, they had been acceptable to Watkins who, no matter what Jackie believed, wasn't the big boss. The evil mastermind behind it all was the mysterious man with a metallic voice that Jasper had overheard that time. According to his research, Hudson thought the man must have undergone a total laryngectomy surgical intervention and now talked only by means of an electrolarynx. The only good thing he could surmise was that he would be able to identify the man easily if they ever met.

And he hoped that they would meet only so that he could put him behind bars forever. That is unless he felt too tempted to wrap his hands around the man's throat and make sure he'd never talk or breathe again. Such dark thoughts veiled his mind as he continued to snap picture after picture.

“What are you doing?” One of the models had crawled on his hands and knees so that his head was now disappearing into the mouth of the large hearth at the base of the blast furnace.

The guy pulled his head out and stared at him. “The boss said that we need to show some initiative. That you're way too vanilla for the hardcore stuff.”

Hudson balanced the camera in his hand. “You don't say,” he said dryly. “And what's that supposed to mean? Do you think you're sexy if only your butt is sticking out of there?”

The young man glared at him, annoyed at being called out for his lack of imagination. “The boss said that he'd like to see some headless shots.”

Hudson turned on his heel and put his camera back in his case. “I think we're done here,” he said snappily.

That seemed to send the would-be model into a different state than earlier. “Come on, man,” he whined, “I didn't mean anything by it. It's just that he said everything I just told you, and I'm on trial, so I don't know if I'll make it to the final selection and stuff.”

For his sake, it would be good if he didn't make it to the final selection. However, Hudson couldn't risk another Jasper incident, not right now. The chances were that Watkins's long arm would be able to reach these boys no matter how far they ran. The only way to ensure all these guys' safety was by cutting that long arm off, figuratively speaking.

“Looking to stand out?” he asked the young man.

The other nodded eagerly.

“You and him,” he said and pointed to another guy. “Sixty-nine. Now.”

If Watkins wanted headless shots, he needed to be a man – an evil one – about it and tell it to his face.



Jackie was picking something from under his fingernails and seemed engrossed in this grooming activity. He raised his eyes and stared at Hudson. “Did you say something, man?”

“We’re done here. Ready to roll?”

“Yeah.” Jackie looked at the group of young men, who were now engaged in various stages of different sex acts.

Apparently, Hudson thought with wry humor, he did have something of a pornographic artist in him. By stimulating the models at hand to ensure that the pictures he took were as erotic as possible, it appeared that he had managed to stimulate other bits of them in the process, too. He could bet an arm and a leg that Watkins wouldn’t be too pleased with his shots, but the asshole needed to show his hand even if it meant that he’d have to guide Hudson through it like he had only half a brain.

“Damn, I think I need to get out of here before I do something I regret,” Jackie said and grabbed his crotch with a hiss.

“If you want to get freaky, you can stay,” Hudson suggested.

“Nah, I mean, I thought about it, and no way.”

The change in attitude surprised Hudson. “Why?”

Jackie winced. “Look at you, man. You have a boyfriend. I bet it’s not because you like to fool around. And I need to be a guy with standards now. For Otis.”

“What about those itches in your britches?” Hudson reminded him.

Jackie sighed. “I guess I can settle for my own hand for a while. I bet that guy’s a blast in bed. The quiet ones always are. But they’re so hard to catch. So, let’s roll.” He made quick work of calling the guys in charge of chauffeuring the models around.

Hudson touched the bottom of his case, pretending that a few of the things he had stashed in there haphazardly didn’t fit properly, but Jackie didn’t throw one strange look in his direction, his eyes gliding over his moves without registering anything.

Watkins had sent his gorillas to do his dirty work. Jackie couldn't have been on the team to search his apartment the night before. That was good to know. However, the way Jackie continued to yap his mouth about Otis was getting on his nerves, and he needed to control himself for the sake of the investigation. One way or another, there was a high probability that Jackie would find out about him and Otis, and managing the shitshow that would surely go down as soon as that happened was not something he looked forward to.

"Is this Otis of yours single?" he asked as they made their way back to the car, leaving the others behind.

"Yeah, he's single. What kind of question is that?" Jackie bristled as if he had just been poked with a sharp instrument.

"A guy as awesome as he is," Hudson continued, "there's no way others haven't seen him, too."

"I saw him first," Jackie said, petulant like a child.

"Just saying, man. I mean, prepare for disappointment, and it won't hurt that much."

Jackie stared at him over the roof of the car just before climbing inside. "You know what, Vegas? You can really be an asshole when you want to be. No, Otis is single. I asked him out. He keeps saying he can't date 'cause he has like online classes or some stuff like that and he's busy in the evenings."

"Maybe he can't date because he has a guy he's seeing," Hudson said with a thin smile. Why was he enjoying seeing Jackie squirm so much? It wasn't like him to be a sadist. That part about getting a hold of himself was turning truer and truer. He'd have to start on it and preferably, as soon as possible.

"He's not seeing anyone," Jackie mumbled morosely and got into the car, making sure to slam the door on his side loud enough to make a point.



"Do you think I could make this using a crockpot?" Otis asked, pointing at an item on their menu. Since their manager allowed them to have some of the food made in the kitchen, he knew that dish to be very good. Sure, he could take some of it home and serve it to his neighbor, but he had made a promise to cook, and that he had to do.

Missy shrugged. "I have no idea. Do you have a crockpot?"

"Yes, a small one. It's energy efficient and came with non-stick coating," he explained.

“I’ve heard that you can make basically everything in one of those. Ask the cook for some tips, and there you go.” Missy smiled broadly and nudged Otis in the ribs playfully. “Don’t tell me you want to put some meat on those bones for the sake of your temporary boyfriend.”

A remark like that would have hurt him in the past because it reminded him that he was skinny and therefore, not very appealing for men who wanted to have sex with him. If they wanted that in the first place. However, he had two reasons why his thoughts didn’t immediately take him there. One, Missy was his friend, and she would never hurt him, not on purpose at least, and two, Hudson already wanted to have sex with him and didn’t appear bothered by his skinny self at all.

“No, that is not my purpose. But I promised my boyfriend,” he said and giggled, because it sounded so funny to say words like that, “that I would cook for him.”

“Wow, you’re looking to get married,” Missy teased him, and her eyes laughed along with her mouth. “And you’re coming to me for advice when it’s clear as day that you don’t need no help.”

That made him very happy. It meant that he was on the right path to make Hudson see that he was indispensable. The temporary position would soon turn into a permanent one, no question about it. Well, he did have questions, but that was how that expression went, and he liked it.



“Jackie’s here. Do you want to take his order?” Missy asked. “Be careful when you tell him you got yourself a boyfriend.”

“Careful in what way?” Otis asked, filled with curiosity. He was always as careful as he could possibly be, especially around other people.

“You’re going to break his heart,” Missy explained and caressed his cheek briefly.

“I don’t want to do that,” Otis replied. The idea of breaking plates horrified him enough; breaking people’s hearts would be too much for him to bear.

“You know, at first, I thought he only wanted to get into your pants,” Missy said with a pensive look on her face. “I mean, he’s a bit of a city slicker, with that attitude, flaunting his money and everything. But no one is this persistent when he’s told ‘no’ over and over again. He really likes you.”

Otis felt his chest squeezing in on itself briefly. How was he supposed to get through such a thing? Never before had he thought about needing to learn how to... what? Reject someone? The concept was completely alien to him. He had only thought of learning about how to handle rejection from various self-help books that hadn’t proven very helpful in the end. Could he recommend one of those to Jackie, seeing that he was bound to make a mistake when handling

this situation, based on his lack of knowledge? But those weren't very good recommendations, now that he thought about it properly.

"Hey, where did you go?" Missy asked, staring at him and looking a bit concerned.

"Do you think that recommending a good self-help book to Jackie on how to handle rejection would help?"

Missy laughed and shook her head. "Let's not go that far. I don't think he's going to need therapy over such a thing. And I bet that it wouldn't be the first time in his life he has gotten told that. Still, since I've seen that he isn't such a bad guy, let's figure out a way to get him to understand that you still like him, only not as boyfriend material. What do you say?"

He wasn't very sure he did like Jackie. He didn't dislike him, and in terms of like, he could only think of Hudson as a man he liked very much. He liked Missy as a friend, but Jackie had put it out there that he had an interest in him, and now that he thought about it, that thing had acted as an obstacle in the way of their becoming friends.

"I think I know, Missy. I will tell him that I would like him as a friend."

"That's always a good idea, but you know that, when people say things like 'let's stay friends', they usually don't mean it."

"That's a dishonest thing to say then. But it wouldn't be in my case. I will tell him the truth."

"Oh, you really mean it," Missy said. "It shouldn't be that big of a surprise with you. You are honest to a fault. Then, that is what you should tell him. The truth. And if he doesn't like it, that's too bad, but that's life." She shrugged, although she still seemed to be a bit concerned.

Otis felt compelled to ask. "Do you pity Jackie? Because I have to tell him about my boyfriend?"

"A little, maybe. But it's so easy for him, with those big eyes that look at you like a kicked puppy. And I bet that act has worked for him countless times. He's going to try it with you." Missy wagged a finger at him, to get his attention. She already grasped the situation fully. "There is one thing you should leave out, however."

"What is that?"

"Don't tell him that your neighbor is your temporary boyfriend."

"But I don't intend to lie to him."

Missy waved impatiently. "Just leave the word 'temporary' out. It's only going to make him think that he still has a chance with you, and that would be cruel on your part. Also, with your techniques, that sexy bad boy will be yours forever."

Forever. What a nice thought. Otis smiled as his chest expanded again to its normal size.

“Now go and get the menu to him. I’ve noticed that he eats everything. Not a fussy boy, and also, he really does come here for the food.”

Otis nodded and took the menu Missy offered to him. What a strange and upsetting feeling, to be the person to refuse someone else. Life was, indeed, full of surprises, and not all of them were pleasant. But that was how life was, his grandma had used to say. Not all bad, not all good. But you could choose which moments mattered the most.



As soon as he saw him, Jackie’s face lit up with a big smile. “Hey, Otis,” he said and winked at him. “You sure took your sweet time. I thought you were going to leave me here to starve.”

“I am terribly sorry. I was talking to Missy,” Otis said cautiously.

“It’s all right,” Jackie said and opened his arms wide while leaning back into his chair. “It’s all forgiven, as long as you give me some sugar.”

“What kind of dessert would you like tonight?” Otis asked dutifully.

“You.” Jackie wiggled his eyebrows and grinned. Sure enough, he was an attractive young man, but Otis didn’t see himself as being anything more to him more than a friend. And that he truly wanted. How many times hadn’t grandma told him to go out and make some friends? But he had been so busy taking care of her during her last years, and also there were no people where they lived that wanted to be friends with him.

“Let’s be friends,” he blurted out.

Jackie gave him a disoriented look. “But we are already friends, Otis.”

“We are?” When had that happened? How did people become friends, to begin with? With Missy, he had been surer when she had made it clear to him, but now, with Jackie, he felt as if the lines were blurred. That was another expression he was intrigued by; it served to show that a situation was confusing or not very well established. While he preferred it when things were one way or another, sometimes lines were, indeed, blurred. And that included the invisible lines people traced between them.

“Yeah, totally,” Jackie replied, obviously unaware of the mental analysis he was trying to run while having this conversation at the same time.

“Then that is great,” he said.

Jackie leaned over the table, pushing aside the empty bread plate in front of him. He stared at Otis from below, and he did look like a puppy. The thought immediately took him to the muzzles and leashes hanging on Hudson's wall. It also made him blush.

"You're getting red in the face," Jackie pointed out and grinned. "That means that you know what follows. Ah, damn, I have such a good feeling about this."

"Nothing follows," Otis replied, confused by Jackie's words. "What should follow?"

Jackie bit his bottom lip and closed his eyes lazily. "Now follows the moment when I ask you, as officially as possible, that we add a little something to that friend thing."

"What?" Otis asked, eager to learn more about human interactions and their many mysteries.

"The word boy," Jackie said. "Ah damn, that sounded lame, right? Let's be more than friends, Otis. Let's be boyfriends."

He should have seen that coming, Missy would surely say. Everything she had told him was true. Jackie was interested in him that way, and it was more than just sexual interest. Now, he understood why Missy told him that letting Jackie down would hurt the young man. Because, if he thought about it, if Hudson decided that they shouldn't be boyfriends anymore, he would hurt just as much, if not more. Definitely more.

Therefore, it was with a heavy heart that he eventually said, "I can't. I'm very sorry, Jackie, but I can't."

"What?" Jackie drawled the word, his smile never showing any signs of fading. "Why? Don't tell me it's because of those evening classes."

Otis knew exactly what Jackie was talking about. His lie about having to study online when he actually meant the dating advice he had hoped to get from Hudson. But, in a way, it wouldn't be that much of a lie to admit that it was so.

He looked briefly in Missy's direction. She was serving a nearby table, and the look she gave him assured him that he needed to be brave and rip the band-aid, like grandma always said. "I have a boyfriend," he said in a heartbeat.

"No, you don't," Jackie said with a snort. "Don't tell me Missy put it into your head that you should stay away from me because I'm some bad boy."

According to Missy, Hudson looked more like a bad boy than Jackie. He wore tight t-shirts that showed off his muscles and jeans, and he had gun tattoos and even that cute thing on his... Otis had to stop himself from making a mental inventory of all the body art inked into Hudson's skin. They were made of the same sweet stuff as pleasant dreams, and now he was at work and not

supposed to daydream about tracing his fingers over those painted guns pointing at his neighbor's, no, boyfriend's intimate parts.

"You're not a bad boy," he said with conviction.

"Don't tell me that's why you keep saying no. Ah, you're such a firecracker underneath that starched shirt, aren't you?" Jackie continued to smile, still oblivious to the fact that Otis was speaking the truth.

"I do have a boyfriend," Otis insisted. "His name is Hudson, and he has many tattoos."

He must have said the last few words louder than his normal voice, because a few patrons turned their heads to look at them. That wouldn't do. This was a place where people came to eat and enjoy a pleasant calm atmosphere along with their food.

"He is my neighbor," he explained in a lower voice. "I cannot be your boyfriend, too."

Jackie appeared to finally understand that Otis was telling him the truth. "I'll be damned. Hudson, huh?"

"Like the river," Otis pointed out. "Just as mine is like the elevator."

Jackie was working his jaw and he really did look upset. Missy had been right, of course, and now Otis had an unwanted place in the first row of seats for witnessing Jackie's hurt at his words. And he still didn't know what to do to make it better.

"Ah, well," Jackie said with a snort. "I guess I let you slip through my fingers. My bad."

"What can I bring you? Have you made up your mind?"

Jackie shook his head. "I guess I'm just not hungry anymore. See you around, Otis."

He stood up so abruptly that Otis had to sidestep quickly to get out of the way. And this was how they lost a patron, one who came there often and ordered the most expensive things on the menu. Their manager would be upset if he knew that Otis had caused that to happen. But it was more than that. Again, Otis felt that he came up short when dealing with other people was involved.

Was he ever going to learn how to be normal like everyone else?



Changing the locks had been at the top of the list of priorities once he got home, but that was barely a guarantee that would be the only time his space was invaded by Watkins's men. He didn't see the asshole himself getting down and dirty like that, but his gorillas weren't any better.

No, definitely not a guarantee, but recent events were surely a reminder that this case was dangerous.

The soft knock on the door pulled him out of his dark musings. At least his laptop seemed to have resisted any attack. Not that they could find anything. Hudson followed a very strict protocol with regard to wiping his browsing history and not only that. Except for people on the force, and even among them only a few knew how to access the kind of information he was searching for with that seemingly ordinary device.

With a last look around the room, he walked toward the door. A look through the peephole assured him that there was nothing for him to worry about. Quite the opposite. In front of his door patiently stood the only reason why the fucked up situation he was in right now was bearable.

“Hey, cutie,” he said as soon as he opened the door, “what’s up?”

He leaned against the door, not wanting Otis to step inside a place where people with bad intentions had been less than twenty-four hours ago.

“Hi Hudson. I know a new recipe for stew, and I will use the slow cooker tomorrow to make it. Do you think you would like to eat stew tomorrow? It’s a vegetable stew, but it is very good. The cook at the restaurant where I work swears by it.”

Otis’s speech indicated that the young man was his usual self, but his eyes told a different story. He looked down, not that a thing like that made him look any less pretty.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” he asked gently. “Rough day?” He raised one hand and caressed Otis’s cheek, lingering along the jawline and touching his lips briefly with his thumb.

“I had to let someone down,” Otis explained.

“It happens,” Hudson said. “We can’t please everyone all the time.”

Otis pursed his lips for a moment, but he didn’t volunteer more information on the matter. “Can I come in?”

“How about we go to your place? It’s a lot more comfortable. Just let me grab my laptop.”

“Don’t forget your gun,” Otis said dutifully. “It’s best to keep it close to you, because you’re the one qualified to use it.”

He wouldn’t part with his gun in his sleep, given recent events. But, of course, in Otis’s bed, he could relax for a bit and put his gun away, too. However, as always, Otis’s logic made him smile.

“Can you also bring,” Otis whispered and leaned forward, “one of those things?”

Hudson grinned. “Do you want me to put you on a leash?”

Otis blushed but nodded eagerly, without looking at him.

“Of course. Just give me a moment.”

In less than two minutes, he was out of the place that now gave him the creeps. He wrapped one arm around Otis’s shoulders as they walked down the corridor together.

“Hudson, what do you think of blurred lines?”

The innocent eyes were full of questions, and Hudson felt that the question was a lot more pointed than Otis had intended to make it.

“I’d say,” he replied, “that you can’t really make a living as a human being without having to deal with them from time to time. What do you think?” Otis’s way of thinking, of seeing the world, was a breath of sweet air for him. It reminded him that there were still many good people left in the world.

“I think that it takes courage to cross them,” Otis replied. “Just because things are not one way or another doesn’t make them all good or all bad.”

“That’s deep, my friend,” Hudson teased him and kissed him on the temple, as they waited for Otis to open his door.

“Am I only your friend?” The unconcealed blue eye stared at him, looking so startled that Hudson couldn’t help thinking that he must have said something wrong.

“No, not only, and you know it. But the fact that you’re my boyfriend now doesn’t preclude the fact that you’re also my friend.”

A friend who probably saved his skin just the other night, just by being himself, innocent and untainted by the outside world.



There had to be so many things that boyfriends did together, but he wasn’t very knowledgeable of many. The internet was not particularly helpful when it came to explaining what two people who didn’t know each other that well did to fill up all the moments spent together. He didn’t have enough money to invite Hudson to travel together, and although he had told Missy that he wanted to try wall-climbing, he had let that idea die on the vine.

Also, they were limited by the fact that they only had this small apartment at their disposal, and their time together was very short. He had to work, and so did Hudson; Otis couldn’t understand

how people had enough time on their hands to go on vacations and whatnot, only to get to know each other better.

But, according to other sources readily available online, they could spend some quality time together as boyfriends even if they didn't go out. If going out included only things like going to noisy places like clubs, Otis couldn't see how people could learn a lot of things about each other. At most, they could learn how to match their dance moves, and that didn't seem particularly important to building a relationship.

Why was he getting himself so worked up over such things? After all, he had Hudson here, and he was an expert. Otis wondered briefly if it were a good idea to ask him what to do about Jackie, but then he remembered that Hudson didn't like Jackie, although he didn't know why.

But if Hudson knew Jackie, why didn't Jackie know Hudson?

"A penny for your thoughts," Hudson said and pushed his hair away from his hidden eye, as he usually did when they were alone. "Did you change your mind about the leash? I'm good either way, just so you know. Between the two of us, you're the kinky one, in case you were wondering."

That was funny. Otis snickered, because that implied that he was a lot more experienced than Hudson, and that was ridiculous. Some of the heaviness on his chest, experienced ever since Jackie had left the restaurant tonight, his shoulders hunched, hands in his pockets, dragging his feet, lifted.

"It's good to see you smile. You should do it all of the time."

"I smile when I wait tables at the restaurant, but I don't think that I can do it all of the time," he argued.

"Smile when you're with me. That should cover it." Hudson leaned toward him and Otis understood right away.

That was one thing boyfriends could do when alone with each other. They could kiss a lot, and he didn't dislike the idea at all. He angled his head and met Hudson halfway. Soon, a hand was in his hair, and an arm was around his waist. They were in the hallway, so Otis managed to sneak a peek at the way they looked.

They looked good, like in the movies. Hudson was such a handsome man, he could play in blockbusters and even romantic dramas. But that would mean sharing him with everyone who would look at those motion pictures, because, without a doubt, a lot of women and men as well would dream of being trapped by those strong tattooed arms and kissed like that.

Possessiveness was not like him. Asking for permission was like him. And yet, at this very moment, he decided that he would do things differently. So, he chose to forgo asking for any

kind of permission and opted for being possessive of his boyfriend for a change. He wrapped his arms tightly around Hudson and pulled him toward the bed.

There, a lot of things could happen, things that made two boyfriends very happy. They weren't talking, that was true, but they could do that in the morning, over breakfast, or later, when he would ask Hudson to taste his stew.

Suddenly, he no longer felt so unsure. Even if he didn't know a lot about what boyfriends did together, he would learn. And because he had Hudson by his side to guide him every step of the way, he would be just fine.

Those were beautiful thoughts for the future. Otis didn't use to have many of them, and that realization made them all the more precious.

That was the last thing he allowed his brain to dwell on. Hudson was doing wonderful things to his mouth, using his tongue a lot, and he needed to start paying attention. After all, one of his goals was to be so good a student that, maybe, one day, he would be able to surpass his teacher.

And that, again, was another beautiful thought to have tonight.

Chapter Eighteen – No Regrets

A small gasp falling from Otis's lips made reality fade even farther away. Life could be so simple if he only let it happen, like right now. The tension keeping him so strung day after day slowly unfurled and drifted away as he let his hands roam all over his lover's curved back until they reach their intended destination.

Otis gasped louder and, this time, pushed him slightly away. Both his eyes, pretty and startled, set on him. "Is this the night when you..." He swallowed and then averted his gaze.

Hudson chuckled. "Ask me anything, Otis. The answer will be 'yes'. Unless, of course," he teased gently, "you want me to go back to my place and sleep on that horrible sofa only to get up tomorrow with pain in my neck."

"No, absolutely not," came the honest reply. "Then I want you... I want you..."

"Yes," Hudson encouraged him and smiled. He brushed Otis's hair out of his eyes completely and kissed the now exposed forehead. "Here's another quick lesson for you, since I know you're such an avid learner. You can be as bold and naughty as you like. So, go ahead, sweetie, say it the way you want to say it."

"Can you put it... in?" Otis's voice dropped to a whisper now.

It only made him want to tease his beautiful neighbor some more. "In... where?"

"In my butt," Otis said in the same low whisper and then giggled.

"I don't see why not," Hudson said, more brusquely than intended. His cock twitched painfully at the offer. Men like Jackie were waiting on the sidelines. Why let his precious Otis wait for him to make the right move – because it had to be right, his entire body was urging him to believe it – and maybe leave him ripe for others to have him?

Even if he ever came to regret this, it felt too right to be wrong. Hudson pushed Otis onto the bed and climbed on top of him. "Do you know what you're asking for? Is this something you need crossed off some list?"

He moved his crotch against Otis, happy to find that the gorgeous man underneath him was suffering the same affliction as he was.

"I do have a list," Otis admitted and made himself sound so guilty that Hudson couldn't help himself.

He captured the soft lips between his and dove into the kiss, slowly, without any predictions or planned strategies in mind. Nothing would stand in the way of crossing everything off Otis's list; he was there for that and more.

“You don’t mind?” Otis asked as soon as Hudson allowed him to breathe. “That I have a list?”

“If it were anyone else but you, I’d be a little annoyed. But it’s you, Otis,” Hudson said and caressed his hair, “and don’t mind my words right now, but I wouldn’t let anyone else have you, not if it cost me everything.”

Otis nodded slowly and blinked. There was a high chance that he didn’t quite understand what Hudson was going on about, but it didn’t matter. Who knew where life would take them in the future? It was something he preferred not to think about right now, no, not now when he wanted Otis so much and it felt as if there was nothing else in the world worth wanting.

“Then have me,” Otis offered himself with the same candor that made him who he was.

Hudson moved only so that he could undress himself, aware of the awe in the pretty blue eyes fixed on him, without blinking. Maybe it would be unnerving for some people, but not him. No, without one shadow of a doubt, he wanted to have those eyes staring at him like that forever.



Who was he to deserve a man like this? A creeping little thought, thin as a spider’s web, began wrapping itself, cutting like a razor’s edge, around his mind. Hudson was the kind of man anyone would want, unless they had very peculiar tastes, such as not liking muscles, or perfect proportions, or manly body hair, or...

His thoughts were brought to a halt by Hudson climbing on the bed again to kiss him. Otis loved those kisses. They were beyond pleasant; they sent tiny eddies of warmth across his body down to the tips of his fingers and even his toes. But more than anything, Otis sensed something akin to an unknown feeling growing inside him while Hudson kissed him so completely. He no longer belonged to himself. Give and take were perfect words for such a surrender, because he knew that he could never be the same once he gave himself to his boyfriend right now.

“We should get you undressed, too. What do you say?” Hudson asked and teased his lips again, only biting them gently.

“I should, of course,” Otis replied right away.

His hands were uncoordinated and his moves clumsy as he removed his shirt and undershirt. Hudson helped him with the rest, and soon he was naked. Although he had been like this before in his neighbor’s company, now he felt even more naked than he had been before. How could it be possible, to feel yourself more than something you already were?

His hands moved to cover his front, but Hudson chuckled and pushed them away.

“It’s all right to be nervous.”

That was good to know. It meant he wasn't strange or abnormal. All these new things, would they help him become who he wished to be? He hoped so, and the part that made him feel all warm inside about it all was that he knew he had someone to rely on, someone who liked him, despite all his weirdness.

Hudson made him part his legs and brought his head down. Otis let out small puffs of breath as he felt the warm mouth he knew now descend over his cock and engulf it fully. He was only slightly aware, as if he was a faraway witness to it all while still being inside his body, of the short cries of pleasure he let out while his cock was squeezed and wrapped in that perfect heat.

"Would it be bad if I came?" he asked through his strangled moans.

"Come, baby," Hudson cooed and returned to devouring his cock in the same manner that was destined to blow his mind.

That was all he needed, and his entire body shook with the intensity of his release. He knew Hudson was drinking him, that part of him, and the thought made him so happy he couldn't express it. The best part was that he didn't have to express it at all, save through moans, shouts, and groans that all melted into the same expression of gratitude.

He gasped in surprise as Hudson turned him and placed him on all fours. A look over his shoulder assured him that something equally amazing was bound to happen and soon. His entire skin caught fire as he saw Hudson opening his mouth and letting the semen on his tongue pour down.

His crack was slowly getting wet, as Hudson moved his tongue along it, while his eyelids drooped like a lazy cat's. Otis wanted to tell him that he was embarrassed, that he couldn't take it, but it wasn't what he wanted to say and, for a change, he said nothing and waited for good things to happen to him.

Something inside him throbbed with new want as Hudson proceeded to lick his buttohole at leisure, shooting a glance at him from time to time.

"Now, this is something that needs proper consideration," Hudson explained as he pushed himself up to his feet. "We will take it slowly."

Otis put one hand back and felt his opening. It was quivering with desire, just like the rest of him. "You're talking about having it lubed, right? I bought something online," he admitted as his cheeks caught fire again.

"You did? You're a man with a plan, baby, I have to give it to you."

Hudson laughed and moved, making his amazing erection bob up and down as he did so. He followed the instructions and retrieved the needed lube and condoms from the indicated drawer.

“Wow, you even bought different sizes.”

“I had no idea what sort of size would be the proper one,” Otis explained. “You look like XXL,” he said, his eyes unable to move away from Hudson’s impressive cock and the glistening piercing for more than a few seconds at a time. “Those are also larger in girth not only in length,” he explained, eager to point his boyfriend in the right direction so that they could get back to the job at hand.

“These are the brand I use, and I did have one on me,” Hudson said. “But this is really helpful, Otis, because I don’t think I’m going to limit myself to just one time with you tonight.”

Could they do it more than once? Otis felt his heart fluttering in his chest. His stomach was also doing some things he couldn’t quite describe.

“Then could you please hurry? What if tonight is not enough?” he voiced out loud some thoughts that crossed his mind.

Hudson laughed, throwing his head back, his hands full with the things they needed to make that particular thing happen. His throat captured Otis’s imagination the most. He liked it. He could see himself licking that Adam’s apple and smelling Hudson’s natural body scent.

He must have let out a short strange sound, because those dark eyes that unnerved and pleased him at the same time set on him.

“I should get to work, then. Since you’re such a busy man and probably worrying about being in shape to go to work tomorrow.”

That wasn’t what he had meant, but he didn’t have it in him to explain it all to Hudson in minute detail, because rough yet gentle fingers were at his backside and now they were slowly getting in. Otis had read serious literature on the subject; if asked, he knew how to explain what was going on, but his mind was empty now. There was nothing in his brain except for that sensation of increasing pleasure. The aforementioned literature, he remembered vaguely, explained a lot of things about avoiding pain, and it looked like Hudson must have read it, too, because all he did caused pleasure and nothing else.

“How do you feel?”

“Good.” Otis grabbed a pillow and hugged it tightly. He felt a sudden need to wiggle his butt only so that he could show his gratitude and most of all, his satisfaction at how things were progressing. Just like a doggy. The thought made him snicker.

“What? Am I tickling you?” Hudson drawled. “I’m glad that you’re entertained, but I feel the need to tell you that being so close to your delectable naked ass is making my dick and balls hurt.”

“Oh, no,” Otis expressed his concern right away. “What can we do for them to stop the hurting?”

“You could start by telling me what made you giggle like a naughty boy.”

Honesty was the only way forward, and Otis had read enough to know that it was absolutely necessary for a relationship to function as it should. So, he readily confessed, “I wanted to wiggle my butt and I thought of how I would look with a tail. A doggy’s tail.”

Hudson surprised him by slapping his ass playfully. “Do you want a tail? I’ll get you one. But you will have to wiggle this sexy butt of yours for me properly once I do that.”

“You make me feel so good. I will gladly wiggle my tail for you,” Otis promised.

Hudson took a deep breath. “Promise me you’ll only be this forward with me. Only me, Otis.”

Of course. These were intimate matters. “I promise,” he said from the bottom of his heart. He didn’t have to lie about such things. With Hudson here, he could be just as he wanted to be. The only thing he didn’t understand was why things were taking so long. “Does it always last as long as this?” he asked, curious about all of the intricacies of giving his body away to another man.

“You’re a virgin,” Hudson explained while he put in another finger.

Otis could feel the stretch now. It was still pleasant, but there was some discomfort. Bits and pieces of his self-education came back to him and he willed himself to relax. After all, Hudson was a man who needed XXL condoms, and that meant that his butt had to adjust itself to that sort of girth. According to the same literature, when done correctly, it would give a lot of pleasure to those involved, and that included the penetrated person.

He would be penetrated. By Hudson’s fantastic cock. Such thoughts were so naughty and made him shiver. The stretch of his ass didn’t matter as much as long as he focused on the important parts. What would his boyfriend think of him once they got there? What could he do to make it better? At this point, he just lay there, butt up, while Hudson did everything?

If he were good enough, would he become a permanent boyfriend to this handsome man? Sex was essential for a healthy relationship. Good sex. But what if he weren’t good enough at sex?

“Does it hurt? I can tell you’re tense,” Hudson interrupted his train of thought.

Otis breathed out. “Will you still like me if I suck at sex?” That was how people put it so that they didn’t sound pretentious, and that was exactly what he wanted, too.

“It’s impossible to suck at sex,” Hudson said, and he sounded like he knew what he was saying.

“Do you mean, in general, or just me? But you can’t know,” Otis argued.

He yelped when Hudson slapped his ass again. It was still playful, but it felt like a warning, too.

“Let me be the judge of that. Stop thinking about crazy things, and maybe I’ll have a chance to put it in tonight,” Hudson said and sounded amused by it all.

Since he was a man who had been in such situations before, it was only normal for him to take things lightly. Still, he felt like pouting a little.

“Have you done this with many men?”

“We’re burning through this relationship a bit too fast, sweetie. Don’t get jealous now. Just relax. That is, in case you still want it. I can always stop. Just remember that.”

“No, please, don’t stop,” Otis begged. He closed his eyes and relaxed as Hudson continued to move his fingers inside him, slowly making him open up.

Tonight was all that counted. He could make his brain shut up for a while so that he could behave as he should. And they didn’t matter anyway, all the men Hudson must have done this with before. Tonight, he was his, and that was the only important thing.

“I’m going to start fucking you now, Otis,” Hudson said and moved behind him. “It will feel much bigger than it is at first. Talk to me all the time. Don’t bother being polite. I want you to feel amazing.”

“Okay,” Otis said and took a deep breath.

It did feel big. His first impulse was to pull away, but Hudson held him by the hips and steadied him. If he ran, he would make a bad impression. That was the rational part of him. The rest made him push back a little to meet the considerable girth stretching his apparently tiny asshole.

“You are so beautiful,” Hudson said softly. He caressed Otis’s back with one hand, still holding him with the other. “Believe me when I tell you that it takes everything I have not to push my cock to the hilt inside you. I want to fuck you so damn much.”

That was dirty talking, right? But Otis could tell it was also honest, and it mattered. To be wanted so much. It felt good. He didn’t have any other words to express it, and the few he had seemed unable to cover the way he experienced it all inside.

“Please, fuck me then,” he said in a low murmur.

“Don’t tempt me so much,” Hudson growled, but it sounded as if he wanted to do just that.

He could do that. He could provoke Hudson, this experienced older man, into wanting him, and a sense of elation grew inside him as he realized that.

“I want... your cock... deep inside me,” he whispered.

“Oh, damn, baby,” Hudson scolded him but did so with obvious affection. “Don’t hate me for this.”

The sudden move made him cry out in surprise. And it did hurt a little and Hudson stopped right away. “How can I do this?” he complained. “I want to relax but--”

“Hush, hush, take it easy. Your body is capable of adjusting,” Hudson slowly encouraged him. “I won’t move for a bit. You will see that you are getting used to the sensation. Now talk to me. What do you feel?”

“Like I’m so full,” Otis explained. “I’m full of you,” he said with wonder in his voice. “Yours is really big, Hudson.”

“I’m afraid so,” Hudson replied.

“Don’t apologize. Everyone wants a big cock.”

“Otis, stop making me laugh. You’re going to make me lose my erection. How is it now? Can I move a bit?”

It took courage to do such things, and Otis was aware of that. He encouraged his lover to continue both through words and by reaching back and grabbing Hudson’s hip. Even if the sensation was still a source of discomfort, it was a lot less so, and he could deal with it. At the same time, the stretch was giving way to other things. A couple of times, he could tell that the way Hudson did it made him feel something extremely pleasurable, and he used his voice, as advised, to let the other know.

“I think there was something there,” he said, his breath hitching. “You... hit me just right.”

“Oh, I’ll hit it more than just right,” Hudson promised.

It happened again. Otis wanted to shout to express his joy at it. There was nothing wrong with his butt and he could feel all the things he wanted and needed to feel while in a man’s arms. Hudson seemed to know what he was thinking because he helped him to an upright position. Then, he caressed his face, turned his head and kissed him, while Otis curved his lower body to meet each movement.

“How is it now, baby? How is your first time getting dicked?” Hudson murmured hotly in his ear.

The sensations were overwhelming, rushing over him in waves. He moved his head as Hudson guided it, just as he did his hips. Another move, another thrust, and the pleasure he experienced was so much, too much, that he had to cry out.

“Do you want me to go slower?” Hudson asked.

They were both sweating, and Otis loved the smell. Hudson sounded a lot less like his usual self, but in such an amazing way. He sounded... like he couldn't control himself, and it made Otis feel so proud that he was the one who was able to make a man with so much experience under his belt – what a fitting expression – to lose his head over him.

“Is it me?” he asked for confirmation. His ass was so stretched and full now, but he didn't feel like he was the only one giving something or surrendering. No, he had Hudson where he wanted him to be, and the fact that such a desirable man was there, with him, doing these things with him was all that mattered.

“It's you,” Hudson confirmed without asking for any other explanation. “I don't want anyone else.”

The answer was deeper than the question, but Otis couldn't keep track of its ramifications because the intensity of the sensations coursing through him kept soaring. And Hudson's right hand dropped from his chest where until now it had played with his nipples to his hard cock. He couldn't recall a thing as he went higher and higher, only to drop from those impossible heights down the slope of absolute delight.

He had done it, he thought, as overwhelming joy drowned him. He had lost his virginity to an amazing man, and crossing things off lists notwithstanding, there was nothing more for him to wish for.

Hudson pushed him down and began slamming into him. His ass, another fantastic aspect of the whole thing in itself, could take it.

“Sorry for using you like this, beautiful, but at this point, I might just go crazy if I stopped,” Hudson said through loud moans and groans.

“Use me, please,” Otis begged him and cupped his own manhood, elated to feel it so wet and satisfied.

“That is all I can stand,” Hudson said and pushed inside him hard and stayed there while Otis could tell, from the sensations inside his ass that something else was happening, something new was happening to him.

He had made it happen, he had made Hudson, who knew so much about dating and sex, come undone.



No regrets. As the ebb and flow of sexual release was fading away and he lay there on his bed, Otis's bed, with the beautiful young man catching his own breath beside him, he had expected

them to come circling him like dogs sniffing easy prey. Nothing like that was happening. Things demanded by impulse were usually a hard sell with his conscience. And yet, it looked like he experienced nothing like that.

Could it be that he was lying to himself? That he had just offered Otis his first experience of the kind with a man who knew how to appreciate him for his beauty and kind heart? That would have been a convenient lie if it hadn't been for that thing he had let slip out of himself, those words that meant more than he had ever said to any other man he had gone to bed with in his life.

I don't want anyone else. It was the closest to a profession he had ever allowed his lips to make. At least, he hadn't finished the sentence and scared Otis away. *Ever.* One word amiss but it could change what was going on between them for all the future that waited for them.

Otis was the one who rolled over and faced him. "What is the expected duration between doing this two times?"

Hudson laughed and pulled him close. "Don't tell me your ass is eager for another pounding. I'm afraid I got a bit carried away."

"I feel very satisfied," Otis assured him. "But I must care about your satisfaction, as well."

"Quid pro quo. That's how things are with you, right?"

"Something for something. That's the translation. But I think this is more than just something."

"How so?" Hudson had never met anyone like Otis before. It always made his mind flare with possibilities whenever they had even the most mundane conversation.

"How many times do we have to do it so that I'm no longer temporary?" Otis whispered the question right into his ear.

Was this a possibility? A real possibility? That he would solve the case and then grab Otis and whisk him away from this place. Take him home, have him meet Zeus. His dog would love Otis, without a doubt. And while he was away all day, pulling all-nighters to solve one case or another, they would keep each other company and Otis would forget about hating him for being at home so little.

Was that the kind of life to offer to someone as amazing as Otis? His heart hurt, but it wouldn't be right. Otis didn't even know what he actually did for a living. It felt dishonest, but his work came first. Besides everything else, it would be terribly unfair to get the beautiful young man by his side entangled in the dark world he lived in.

The dream was nice, though.

“I am also learning how to cook,” Otis continued, taking his silence as something else. “I can even bring you your slippers if that is what you want. Is your language of love acts of service or some other thing?”

“What?” Hudson asked. Otis was a permanent surprise, but this thing about bringing slippers and whatnot sounded pretty wild.

“I read a book, about the languages of love,” Otis explained. “I’d like to know yours.”

“I haven’t really given it any thought,” Hudson replied. “You know, you keep pestering me that I should give you advice, but it looks to me like you’re better read than I am.”

The compliment – which was also a fact – appeared to please Otis.

“I’m trying to read at least one book a month,” he said.

“Very commendable of you. Now,” Hudson said and turned to face his pretty host, “what was your initial question?”

“Oh, yes. How many times do we have to--”

There was no need for so much talk. Hudson moved fast and shut Otis up by kissing him. However, knowing who he was dealing with, he needed to behave properly.

“I’d say that one time was enough.”

Otis’s eyes grew wide. “Really? But that’s not possible! And you haven’t tried my stew! I haven’t even cooked it yet!”

“I will try it, don’t sweat it.” Hudson laughed with all his heart. “But I want you to know. You’re enough for me.”

He pushed away any thoughts causing him to doubt if he was enough for Otis. What a selfish thing for him to do, but he couldn’t help himself. One day, he would be honest, entirely honest with him, and then let him make his choice. Until then, he was a civilian who didn’t have to know that he was an undercover cop. Putting it like that didn’t help a smidge.

The captain would have his head if he knew that he was busy getting romantically involved with a beautiful young man while working on a case. But the captain had no idea how much he yearned for feeling the sort of happiness he only seemed to find by getting entangled with this quixotic neighbor of his, who had entered his life not by barging in but by knocking politely and asking to be let in.

“So,” Otis asked, and he sounded so sly yet unaware of it as he did so, “am I your permanent boyfriend now?”

“Yes,” Hudson said and laughed. “You are.”

“That is such great news! I will work hard!”

He would work hard. That was something he was good at, and Hudson was crazy about him for it.

“Then how about you put another condom on me and work hard on my cock?” he joked.

“Right away!” Otis jumped up from the bed ignoring, without a doubt, how delicious he looked completely naked and moving about.

His moves were clumsy but determined as he tried to get the condom on Hudson’s half-erect cock.

“You will have to make it a bit harder first,” Hudson said and caressed his head. “Do you know how to do that?”

Otis gave him a sideways look but then his face lit up. “Yes. I learned it from you.”

Hudson didn’t have a chance to ask what that was, because Otis already had his cock in his mouth. And damn, if he didn’t look like he belonged there, between his legs, getting that pretty mouth of his busy with giving pleasure.

“Are you enjoying this?” Hudson asked.

Otis’s eyelids fluttered in response. He didn’t let go of the cock growing hard in his mouth but set to work with even more conviction. Hudson could swear that he needed to look away if he didn’t want to end up blowing all over that pretty face, but it wasn’t like he had a choice.

Where experience failed him, Otis had the enthusiasm to make up for it. He was using his tongue, too, as much as he could, and he licked Hudson’s cock from all sides, insistent around the piercing, which seemed to fascinate him. Suddenly, he stopped.

“I didn’t feel it a lot when you put it in my butt. Was it because of the condom? But it’s advertised that they will let you feel everything.”

“Then maybe you’ll feel it once I put it inside you raw.”

“Raw? Right. Bareback. Is that correct?”

“Yes. Your theory is in order. But before you get it into your head that we should try it right now, we won’t.”

“Why not?”

He knew he had to reply with the right answer. It wasn't a matter of health issues, without a doubt. Before Otis had entered his life, he had gone through quite a dry patch, and his last bill of health had reported he was perfect on all accounts. He wouldn't have let Otis drink his cum otherwise.

So what was holding him back? This relationship was evolving without him at the helm, it seemed.

"It's a big step," he said.

"Of course," Otis hurried to agree. "We will have to go to the doctor's office and listen to him or her asking us questions about our sex life. We will have to answer truthfully and then have our blood analyzed."

"Yeah. And who wants to do that?" Hudson grabbed at the offered reason to postpone what had to be inevitable with such a hottie in his bed.

Only that he was the one in the hottie's bed and, apparently, he wasn't calling the shots anymore. The little devil snickered.

"Are you afraid of needles, Hudson?"

"Oh, fuck off," Hudson said with a laugh. "Are you going to suck my cock or not?"

"Wait. I only need to make it harder to put on the condom. Then, I'm going to climb on top, right? Or is that too fast for a beginner like me?"

"You look to me like you're the fastest learner in the West," Hudson joked.

Otis nodded and smiled. And then, like it wasn't a thing he had just learned, he pushed half of Hudson's cock in his mouth in one go.

Chapter Nineteen – Breaking Point

Hudson placed his hands under his head, trying hard to school his face to not betray the sensation of absolute delight he was experiencing at the sight of his clumsy, yet delicious, boyfriend riding him. His cock didn't care so much for that type of honesty. It was twitching and enjoying the perfect squeeze delivered by Otis's ass, so tight and able to take it at the same time.

"You might have some regrets in the morning," he teased his partner.

Otis gave him a surprised look. "Why?"

Hudson grinned. "Ah, I see. Let me spell it for you, beautiful. Your amazing ass will feel this workout. You might have trouble sitting." A part of him felt elated at the thought. Otis was so level-headed all the time, taking things as they came. Whenever he was surprised by something, he looked so adorable. And Hudson would so love to watch his lovely lover's eyes growing wide in surprise when he tried to plop down on a chair.

Otis, no wonder there, stopped and nodded in understanding. "That happens when you are a novice like me. It cannot be helped."

"Well, we could stop and do it again in a few days." His cock remained trapped in the exquisite heat of Otis's ass, completely oblivious to the type of torture Hudson was preparing for him with those words.

"No," came the firm refusal. "What should I do now? Is this enough? I don't know for sure."

Hudson moved to capture Otis with one arm around his shoulders. His hand found purchase in the strands of ash-blond hair, and he used his strength to make his lover yield. He got busy kissing him while he held him by one hip. It was enough for him to control the situation, as he pushed upward while dragging Otis over his body, to drape himself with the lovely young man.

Yes, he could fuck Otis like that, and it was maddening because his range of motion was limited. Still, Otis understood enough to meet him half-way, and that caused them to fall into a rhythm that was simply perfect.

"But you are still doing all the work," Otis complained when Hudson allowed him a mouthful of air.

"I can't help but take you over and over," Hudson admitted. "I'm afraid I won't let you be in charge too often in the beginning. Damn, I want to ravish you to the point that no one else would matter."

"No one else matters anyway," Otis said promptly and caught Hudson by the shoulders to support himself. His head lolled to one side and his eyelids fluttered.

It was quite obvious what was going on. Hudson didn't need it spelled out for him. His experience in dealing with men and sensual matters helped him a great deal in the process. Now Otis was receiving the fruits of all that experience. A fleeting thought made him wonder if Otis would ever be jealous if he knew of all the previous conquests under his belt. He hoped he would if only for the sake of seeing those pretty lips pout and those eyes throw daggers at him.

He wanted Otis in every possible way. He wanted Otis to look at him while feeling anxious, ready to yield, annoyed, and yes, jealous. All those faces belonged to him and him alone. That was his privilege and he wasn't prepared to surrender his lover to the world once all was said and done.

There was no notion left in his mind of what that meant. Thoughts swirled around in his brain, but only on the surface. Everything he felt was overwhelmed, taken over completely by the notion that he had Otis in his arms. He was fucking him, yes, but it wasn't ol' plain fucking. Hudson had had enough of that in his life to realize the difference. With both wonder and elation, he discovered that being so intimate with Otis led to just one end result. They were making love. He'd love to hear the analytical, practical mind of his lover dissecting the notion. Without a doubt, he'd come up with something surprising, something other people would never think of.

Otis let out small huffs of breath, as he appeared to be fighting a losing battle in Hudson's arms.

"How does it feel?" Hudson asked, his question as urgent as the need of his body to meet Otis's slender frame with each thrust.

"It feels so good," Otis whispered. "Is it always so good?"

"With the right person, always," Hudson replied.

"Is it as good for you?"

"A lot more. I have no words. Otis, you're amazing," he continued his hurried, whispered answers to the passion Otis was doling out to him.

"Hudson, I think something is happening," Otis confessed, his breath shallow and delivered in short gasps matching the rhythm of slapping flesh on flesh.

He only had a dim awareness of how fast they were going. Hudson only knew that it was good, that he needed it, and that there was nothing in the world to prevent him not only from wanting it but from getting it, too.

Otis squeezed him in his arms so hard Hudson could swear there was no escape left for him. The slender limbs were more powerful than they looked at first glance, the sort of power belonging to them that had to be recognized and acknowledged.

He wrapped one arm around Otis and held him close as he felt his lover riding the pleasure he felt. This was lovemaking. Not one ounce of doubt remained in his mind. This was the point of no return, and there was nothing left beyond it. Other than happiness. Yes, he felt that, and there was no denying the feeling whatsoever. How simple and wonderful.

His growls matched Otis's pretty moans. As he came, he regretted telling Otis that they should wait indefinitely for starting to do it raw. He wished, at that very moment, that he could come inside the perfect body he was holding. It would make him feel so complete, perfect in ways that he didn't believe possible.

That was a thought for another time. Greedy as he was, he had to settle for their coming together in that manner. How many couples could take pride in a thing like that? And it was basically still the first time he was doing this with his lovely lover.

"I made a mess," Otis whispered once he was by his side. He rubbed his fingers into the cum drops trapped in the hair on Hudson's belly. "Do you mind it very much?"

"Not at all. It's the right kind of mess. You marked me, beautiful."

"I did?"

"Don't act so surprised. You're so damn sexy. And without a condom, I will make an even bigger mess when I come inside you."

"Really?" Otis sounded more and more excited. "And if you come more than one time, I will be pretty messy, right?"

"Damn it, beautiful, stop teasing a man like that." Hudson threw one arm over his eyes to show his helplessness. "I just came, and now you're talking about taking load after load from me. And you were saying that you were no good at dirty talking."

"Then it appears that I'm better at it than I thought," Otis concluded with unhidden glee.

"As I said, you're one fast learner. Don't ever let anything get in the way of your learning. You're doing wonderful things with everything you learn."

"I know that some people might believe it to be a cliché, but that is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me," Otis said with pride.

"I plan on saying it more often. That and other things."

Otis sighed in contentment. Hudson shared the feeling. How could he not? It all had happened so naturally between them there was no need for any feelings of inadequacy. There was none from him and, as it seemed, none from Otis, either.



Taking a shower together felt so intimate. The place was so cramped, they couldn't help making a mess. One particular thing that made it seem impossible to act properly, or at least as what Otis knew of taking efficient showers, was the way Hudson didn't seem able to let go of his mouth. All of the time, he wanted to kiss him, and Otis felt like kissing back. Only the fact that he knew they both had to work the next day stopped him from doing other irresponsible things.

Save for one. He dropped to his knees, his fascination still centered on that sexy piercing. He teased it with his mouth and then swallowed half of Hudson's cock.

"Can you please use my mouth?" he asked politely. He knew that there was nothing polite in how he imposed himself on Hudson, who had to be tired by now, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted to learn more about how it felt when Hudson came while he was teasing around the piercing. His curiosity simply had no bounds.

"Stop tempting me, you imp."

He was learning many things. For instance, right now, Hudson didn't mean it. He wanted what Otis offered him, and it became more apparent as the rough hands moved to cup his head and he found himself being made to swallow a bit more of the length of the cock in front of his eyes.

His surprise must have been felt by Hudson, who immediately withdrew. Otis didn't want that to happen, so he grabbed Hudson by his buttocks to gain leverage allowing him to push him into his mouth.

"Fuck, sexy," Hudson whispered. "Do you even have any idea what you're doing to me?"

Not precisely, but his mouth was too busy to ask for additional details. He focused on the feel of having his mouth full. It was a different sensation than having his backside full of Hudson's cock, but it caused the same sort of pleasure. There were differences, of course. For instance, right now, he found pleasure in giving pleasure. It was the mindboggling kind, too, because he discovered that he wanted nothing but to push further, to see how much he could take and what he could do.

He moved his head back until only the tip of Hudson's cock was on his lips. With increased appetite, he twirled his tongue around the piercing, listening closely to all the sounds his boyfriend was making. That was what he was doing right now. He was giving his boyfriend a blowjob. A frisson of pleasure coursed through him, although it was warm in the bathroom and the cramped shower. That sounded so good and dirty. He wanted to learn more dirty words, and he wanted to do what all those words meant to Hudson. Such things boyfriends did to each other. His lessons were bearing fruit.

He placed his hands in his lap, determined to have his way. While using only his mouth, Hudson was holding his head and moving his hips. Otis could tell he was drooling as the cock moving in and out of his mouth was slick with his saliva. That was also dirty and good. It didn't matter if things got messy because they were in the shower anyway.

"You're driving me crazy," Hudson whispered. "You have such a sexy mouth, baby. Fuck, I'm going to come in your mouth. Do you want it? Do you want my cum on your tongue? Down your throat?"

Oh, yes, he did. He wanted it so much. But he couldn't talk and truly hoped that this was one of those occasions that proved that actions spoke louder than words. He used his lips and tongue to show Hudson how desperately he desired to be used that way. As he opened his eyes, he noticed the look in Hudson's dark ones. There was no need for any other explanation, as little versed as he was in the way such things worked. That naked look of desire spoke for itself. Otis closed his eyes and went as deep as he could. Hudson cradled the back of his head and then made him stop.

There was no other thing for him to do but to wait patiently as Hudson began shooting in his mouth. Such a strange thing to have become so familiar with sexual things in such a short time. But they felt right. He didn't have to question himself about doing them the right way or not. He just knew that it was good for Hudson and him.

The sensation of having his tongue coated with his boyfriend's cum was getting the better of him. No, the best. Such expressions were sometimes fuzzy, they needed to be used and transformed for each situation.

"Good job," Hudson said and smiled at him while caressing his head.

Otis grinned from below. "Only good?" It was essential for him to grade his performance so that he could improve it.

Hudson leaned down and kissed his forehead. "No, awesome... blowjob, Otis."

He moved to meet the kiss that waited for him. Hudson seemed more than pleased to explore his mouth and taste himself from his tongue. That was also dirty and good. How many wonderful things he was learning.

"Keep going like that, and you'll become an expert at giving head," Hudson praised him with a pleasant smile on his face.

"I certainly hope so. May I apply myself to using you?"

Hudson burst into laughter. He grabbed his ball sac and squeezed it. "For as long as my balls are capable of making jizz, I'm yours."

That was a more than satisfactory answer. Otis felt proud and accepted Hudson's help getting to his feet.

"You know," he confessed, "I've always thought that I would experience a great deal of trouble with talking dirty, but you make me understand that it comes naturally."

"Okay. But don't use it with other guys." Hudson put a hand on his ass and squeezed hard.

"What other guys? These are conversations to be held between people who are intimate," Otis explained the lesson he had just learned. His boyfriend was obviously testing him to see if he got the notions right.

"You're danger dressed up as mind-blowing pleasure, baby. Don't ask what I mean. Just think of how all of me belongs to you now. My cock and balls included, of course." A short laugh followed. "Let's sleep before I discover that I can do it for a fourth time tonight."

"Is that a big challenge?" Otis questioned. "It must be," he gave himself the answer. "Producing semen takes effort."

"Please don't launch in some in-depth explanation of that," Hudson begged.

Otis turned to see the big smile on his boyfriend's face. "I won't. But it is all very interesting."

"I don't have one doubt. But you wrecked me tonight, baby. Let's rest."

Rest meant sleeping together. Otis sighed in contentment.



As he adjusted the lenses on his camera, Hudson couldn't help but notice the way Jackie kept very close to him like a dog in search of a master.

"What's up?" he asked as he continued to work.

Watkins hadn't sent them back to the location of the new club, and they were doing their job at Twilight for the moment. He, at least, was doing that. Jackie was only busy getting into his hair, making Hudson wonder just how much close supervision Watkins believed he needed.

"I took the freaking plunge," Jackie said in a morose voice.

"Hmm," Hudson offered no more than a noncommittal grunt.

Jackie appeared incapable of taking a hint. He leaned over and whispered as if he were sharing the biggest secret in the universe, "I told him how I felt. Only to find out that he has a freaking boyfriend."

That warranted stopping what he was doing.

“Take five,” he said to the models lounging in sexy positions on the small dais. “Now you have my full attention,” he added as he turned to face Jackie.

Damn, he looked like a kicked puppy all right. Hudson had a feeling that he knew what was coming. He couldn’t stop it and it was also his doing that the young man in front of him looked like that. Therefore, a bit of responsibility taking was in order.

“I went and told Otis how I felt. It took courage. I mean, look at me,” Jackie said and gestured wildly. Hudson didn’t understand what exactly he was supposed to see. “I’m good as long as I behave like a player. But asking someone out? That was new to me, in the sense that I was serious about it. And he turned me down.”

Hudson nodded. He felt the need to fiddle with his camera only so that he didn’t have to stare at Jackie. All feelings of annoyance he’d had for the guy had faded. Maybe it was the surety he had of having Otis as his. So he patted Jackie on the shoulder and gave him a compassionate smile.

“Better to know, right? At least you know where you stand.”

Jackie pouted. “I would have been better off. You and your freaking advice, Vegas. You got this into my head, and now I’m heartbroken.”

“I assume full responsibility. The drinks are on me. Let’s hang out tonight.”

“Really? You’d do that?” Jackie’s face lit up. “And you won’t get bored hearing me talk all evening about him? How pretty he is? And how he broke my heart?”

“He was honest with you. That’s a big thing.”

“Yeah,” Jackie said and nodded. “Honesty. Big thing, indeed.”

Hudson felt just a pang of discomfort at the way Jackie said it. There was nothing wrong with it; his reaction upon hearing it was more likely to be the cause of that. He observed Jackie from the corner of one eye.

“What?”

The confused look told him everything he needed to know. Jackie was aware of very little happening around him. A strange line of business to be in and be such an airhead. Hudson couldn’t stop thinking of what strange connection had to exist between this young man and Watkins. There was a story there, more than what Jackie let on, not because of his unwillingness to share, but because of his lack of knowledge on the matter.

He grinned at his imposed partner and punched his shoulder.

“You’re a handsome mofo. You’re going to be all right.”

“If you say so,” Jackie said, puffing out his cheeks and looking like a chipmunk in the process.

“Say, what does the man tell you about the preparations for opening the new club? Any news?”

“You know as much as I do. You know, he got pretty pissed about that Angel thing. His disappearing like that on him. But the good news is that Jasper’s coming back. Man, I’m so going to give that guy an earful.”

Hudson turned and pretended he needed to put his camera away or wipe its lenses or some other thing to hide his face from Jackie. He had to start being more careful. The case he was working on was dangerous and there was no room for rookie mistakes. Or any mistakes, for that matter. Between getting cozy with Otis and seeing Jackie more and more as a not-so-guilty party in whatever was going on, he felt as if he was starting to slip.

“When is he going to be here?” His tone was a neutral as possible.

“You know, Vegas, I wish I could be as chill as you, you know? I mean, Jasper tricked you first and foremost. And you don’t seem mad at him at all. Teach me your secrets.”

“I’m not mad at him. He must have had his reasons,” Hudson said. Then, schooling his face in an expression meant to allay any more suspicions, he looked at Jackie. “Okay, maybe I’m a little mad at him, but I can’t stay mad at people as a rule. I guess everything’s on track now. Jasper’s going to be here for the grand opening, after all.”

“Yeah, although the boss is now so set on Angel, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“How so? Does he know where our top earner is?”

Jackie shook his head, but there was something in his eyes telling Hudson he wasn’t quite sure. He wished he could prod him more, but the boys came back, ready to pose. There was time, he liked to think, as he grabbed his camera again. And being close friends with Jackie seemed like a good strategy for getting info on things Watkins didn’t care much to make him privy to.

Before getting to work, he checked on Jackie one last time. There was something eating the young man. Was it only Otis’s rejection? In a simpler world, maybe. But Hudson wasn’t the kind to work with maybes.



Getting close to Otis’s workplace had been a no-no so far, and Hudson intended to keep things that way. However, when a disappointed Otis received the news over the phone that his permanent boyfriend of just one day would be late, Hudson had made another concession to

himself. Therefore, he was now waiting for him at what he believed to be a safe enough distance from the restaurant where Otis was tending tables. Since he didn't intend to add more lies to the ones he already told his boyfriend, he didn't offer an explanation of his choice, but Otis had appeared perfectly happy with the arrangement.

Which was that he would walk him home and only after that go about his evening, which included meeting Jackie and not much else. Hudson couldn't quite recall a moment in his life when he had been so keen on finishing work so that he could return home. Bone-tired, yeah, he had been that, but this had nothing to do with the natural need to rest. It had everything to do, however, with a pair of amazing blue eyes that were bound to get him into trouble one of these days. The trouble he had in mind was of the sweetest variety.

Otis waved happily from a distance and hurried toward him. Hudson opened his arms and hugged him, as if this were a thing they had been doing for many months or even years now.

"How was work?"

"It was fantastic," Otis said with a large grin. "I don't know why, but I couldn't stop smiling, and people noticed and I got so many tips you wouldn't believe it."

"Really?" Hudson drawled, ready to tease his pretty boyfriend. "You have no idea why you couldn't stop smiling?"

"Yes, it's like I'm so happy I'm ready to burst out of my skin, although if I did that, it wouldn't be too nice a picture, actually at all, because it would be like something from a horror movie--"

Hudson moved closer and, after a quick look around, pinched Otis's behind through his dress pants. Only for a fraction of a second, but it was enough to earn him an outraged gasp from the cute young man walking by his side.

"Hudson, we're in public," he whispered. "What if someone sees us?"

"Oh, are you ashamed of me?"

Evening had set over the city, and the street lamps cast their light over Otis's hair, making it look a particular shade of silver and gold.

"No, I'm not!" the protest came promptly. "But things like that... I mean, not that I don't like it... actually, if I think about it--"

"If you need to think, I'm doing something wrong," Hudson continued his teasing.

"No, that's not true," Otis continued his defense. "But I've never had a boyfriend before, and... is this what boyfriends do? Pinch each other's butts in public?"

“No, not usually. Not in polite company. But tell me, Otis,” Hudson said gently as he stopped and turned the other to face him, “do you see anyone else around?”

The passersby were few and far between at that hour in that part of the city. The more glamorous venues claimed more than their fair share of party-goers, hip young people with corporate jobs going out for drinks, even couples looking for the right place to spend a romantic evening.

Nothing was more romantic than this, Hudson decided as he pulled Otis close. “I’m of a mind to do something even more scandalous. With your permission, of course.”

“It’s not butt-pinching, right?” Otis pulled slightly away but only so that they could look at each other.

“No, it’s this.” Hudson hugged him and placed a soft, almost chaste, kiss on the soft lips waiting for him, slightly parted and signaling nothing else but the sweetest desire.

Otis smiled and pushed his hair away from his usually concealed eye in what seemed an unconscious gesture. Hudson looked at him for a moment, caught between hard to describe and conflicting feelings. When he noticed the slight frown transforming the cute face in front of his eyes, he hurried to remedy the situation. He brushed his lips over the old scar.

“You’re always beautiful to me.”

Otis giggled, and it was a tender sound, so in tune with the evening falling around them like a cozy blanket. A soft wind had been blowing for a few days now, a sign of the fall that was to come, but there were still pleasant days ahead before chillier weather would become the usual.

Hudson took Otis’s hand in his and offered him a smile. “Let’s see you home.”

“I’m so curious,” Otis said. “I put the slow cooker in charge of the stew. But if it doesn’t end up right, will you be all right with something else? Like sandwiches?”

“You know what? I’ll call you and if the slow cooker failed you in your attempts to seduce me with food, I will grab something on my way back. What do you say?”

“It sounds wonderful.” Otis stopped for a moment in the middle of the street, making him stop as well. “Is this normal? To feel so happy?”

“That’s what all people wish it would be,” Hudson assured him. And then, he added for the both of them, “We’re the lucky ones.”

“I like that. The lucky ones,” Otis repeated after him and grabbed his hand so that they could continue to walk together.



When he arrived at the bar where he had agreed to meet Jackie five minutes early, he was surprised to see his work partner already there at a table, a few empty bottles in front of him.

“Have you started without me?” he asked, eyeing the table before taking a seat across from Jackie.

What he received in return wasn't a reply but a pointed look. A frown crumpled the usually smooth forehead, making Hudson think of something incongruous like as a cartoon character aging overnight.

“What's the matter?” he asked.

“Why the fuck are you called Hudson?”

The noises around them grew dim, as old instincts kicked in.

Jackie rambled on, unaware of the change happening before his eyes. “I got it that you used Vegas as your moniker as an artist or whatever the fuck you pretend to be, but you're supposed to be fucking John Adam, right? Are you lying to Otis? About your real name?”

The slip-up. And it had happened at the beginning, when he had given his neighbor his real name, going against undercover basics 101 like a newbie.

Hudson watched Jackie. This was bad. He could lie and wiggle his way out of it, but there was no way Jackie would keep this to himself. It wasn't a small detail, it was the kind of thing that could get him in a very dangerous situation.

Despite the alcohol-induced drawl, Jackie's next words sounded clear enough to confirm his worst fears.

“You know, I wondered why the hell Jasper confided in you. He saw you as the outsider, but he probably knew, right? That you'd help him run away. Are you like a cop or something?”

Hudson took a snapshot of the place while Jackie's words still lingered. And then, he moved, lunging quickly across the table, grabbing Jackie by the front of his shirt with one hand, while holding the other under the table.

“Listen here, I can blow your kneecap off if you do as little as squeal. Now, we're going to get up slowly and you'll turn, and we'll walk out of here through the back.”

He hoped Jackie was drunk enough or stupid enough not to see through his bluff. Their eyes engaged in a battle of wills for a moment, and then, the green eyes grew wide in understanding.

A nod followed, and Hudson loosened his hold, not completely, but enough to allow Jackie some freedom of movement.

On their way out, Hudson offered a couple of patrons reassuring strained smiles, gesturing with his chin at Jackie who was having trouble holding himself upright. To anyone looking, he was taking a drunken friend out for a walk and a bit of fresh air.

“Vegas,” Jackie breathed out, “what the fuck, man?”

“Shut up and do exactly as I say.”

Time for him to go off-script. Damn, he had been stupid. Otis had disarmed him with just one look, and he had forgotten his mission. If that wasn't a sign from the universe that he had fucked up, he had no idea what was.

He forced Jackie to walk to where he had parked the car and pushed the guy inside. “Don't fucking move or I'll blow your brains out. Am I clear?” he said in a menacing growl.

“With what gun?” Jackie challenged him, finally getting hold of himself.

The bluff had only held this far. Hudson looked around and then punched Jackie short, in the face, making his head snap back. Mission accomplished. Now on to the next step.

He smacked his hand on the hood of the car. “Fuck!”

And then, he climbed into the driver's seat. There was no time to waste. With one hand on the wheel, he searched Jackie's jacket for the guy's phone. If anyone else knew, that was one way to find out.

Chapter Twenty – Like Snuffed Out Candles

No sign of Jackie's blabbing to others about double identities and whatnot, at least not on the guy's phone. Hudson worked quickly, one hand on the wheel, the other on the extra burner he had with him in case of an emergency. As soon as the gruff voice at the other end answered, he didn't waste a moment.

"I'll need Room B," he spat.

"How soon?"

"I'll be there in fifteen."

"Okay."

"The captain shouldn't--"

"Yeah, I know. I wasn't a moron, last time I checked."

Hudson held the curses climbing up his throat in check. Gavin was an asshole, but he was right. Also, he was a dependable asshole for all the times they needed to circumvent the usual procedures to get things done.

Gavin didn't even offer him the courtesy of a perfunctory 'bye'. Knowing the gruff officer, he was already on the job, doing what was needed. Hudson wasn't particularly fond of going off-script, but if there was one guy who could help him save the case – no, not the case, just his undercover op – Gavin Stetson would be that guy.

Jackie groaned, drawing his attention. Well, there was no way of telling how long he'd be out of it, and Hudson hadn't meant to hurt him too much. The way he saw it, the youngster was his lifeline, and, even if Jackie didn't know it, that went the other way, too.

He stopped the car behind the station, using the back entrance to get inside. Carefully, he extracted Jackie from his seat and dragged him along as Gavin opened the door for him. Room B was the closest for the kind of thing he had in mind, and also out of the way enough not to draw too much attention from other people working at that hour.

"Damn it, West," Gavin said and moved the toothpick he liked so much to chew on from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Can you at least bring them in while still conscious?"

Hudson threw his unconventional friend and colleague a look that conveyed most of what he was thinking. Gavin looked fairly unimpressed. He helped Hudson move Jackie quickly, and soon they had the guy inside the interrogation room, his wrists secured to the table with handcuffs. Gavin took it upon himself to pat Jackie's cheek and shake him until the other came to.

“What the hell?” Jackie murmured and, as he tried to straighten himself up, realized he was restrained. He did what anyone under the same circumstances would, he struggled to get free, his eyes bulging out of their sockets, his mouth open wide while his brain forgot how to curse.

“Looks like we’ve got a lively one,” Gavin said cheerfully. And then, turning toward Hudson, “What did this one do?”

Hudson set his jaw hard. No point in admitting his mistake; Gavin would never let him forget it. “I need to show Jackie here a few pictures.”

Gavin stood and crossed his arms. “So?”

Hudson gave his friend a good hard stare. Gavin took the hint and moved away, shrugging. He waited until his friend was out of the room to give Jackie his undivided attention again. His eyes fell on his unexpected hostage’s hands, the way they still squirmed although there was no possible way for him to get out of there.

“If this is your idea of fun, Vegas, I don’t like it,” Jackie said morosely. He shook his head, trying to clear it of booze and misunderstandings.

Hudson didn’t have time for that. He slapped the table with both palms, right in front of his prisoner, startling him. “Look here, asshole,” he said in a low menacing growl, “who did you talk to about me?”

“What the fuck do you mean? No one,” Jackie said defensively. “I saw you leaving with Otis, kissing him in the street. And I thought you were my friend. Where the fuck are we? Are people into this kind of thing now? Interrogation rooms? I don’t like what you did with the place.”

Jackie sounded fearful, but there was clearly a part of him, sly and ready to help him wiggle his way out of it. Hudson had no intention of letting him escape. “I’m not playing.”

“What? What do you mean? Shit, is this real?” Jackie made another attempt to free himself, while his nostrils flared. The alcohol haze was lifting and fear was taking over. “Then, I need my fucking phone call! And a lawyer!” His voice rose, while his eyes darted around, looking for something to hang his hope on.

Gavin walked in, with a folder in his hands. He took turns staring at Hudson and Jackie but held his tongue for once. He put the folder down on the table and stepped back.

“Why are there two of you here? Are you going to play good cop, bad cop with me now? I’m not telling you nothing.”

“We haven’t asked you anything yet,” Gavin said, the irony in his voice evident.

Hudson opened the folder and looked inside. He took one picture and placed it in front of Jackie.

“Do you know this guy?”

Jackie set his jaw hard, and Hudson expected resistance. But the green eyes full of fear moved to the table and took a look at the displayed picture. Jackie looked up and then down again. “Yeah, I know this guy. We call him Bang-Bang.”

“Okay.” He looked over his shoulder at Gavin, who quirked an eyebrow and offered him nothing more. “Why Bang-Bang?”

Jackie raised his shoulders and let them fall. “Because he likes getting gangbanged.”

“One of the models, then?” Hudson continued.

“Yeah,” Jackie replied as if his interrogator was hard in the head and couldn’t see the obvious.

“Is he still with your club then?” Hudson asked, slowly showing his teeth.

Jackie threw him an unpleasant look in return. “No, and you probably know that. Since you’re obviously a cop.”

“He doesn’t miss much this one, does he?” Gavin said with a snort.

“Neither of you is the good cop, right?” Jackie shot in a quarrelsome manner just to show that he wasn’t as scared as he looked. He wasn’t good at it.

“Tell me,” Hudson continued patiently, “where is Bang-Bang now?”

“How should I know? He graduated, took his money and dashed. Doesn’t even bother to call, the scumbag,” Jackie commented.

Hudson searched the young face for any signs of lying. But all that met his eyes suggested that his mark was scared and wanted to get out of there. He chose another photo from the folder, careful not to bring out too much at the start.

“What about this one?”

Jackie leaned over the table. “That’s Stud,” he said. “Come on, Vegas,” he tried to play it cool, “all these guys are legal. Don’t tell me you think they’re underage or something.” Clearly, he was searching for a reason why Hudson was keeping him there, asking him about these guys. “Like Stud here. He has a dick as thick as a baby’s arm.”

Hudson closed his eyes for a moment as he focused his mind on not dwelling on how Stud looked in the other pictures stashed inside the folder in his hand.

“Don’t tell me, he graduated, too,” he said through his teeth.

Jackie, seemingly more and more in control of his own emotions, shrugged. “Yeah, this is a business where new faces are in high demand. But you wouldn’t know that, since you’re a cop,” he spat again, narrowing his eyes.

“Damn, you broke the kid’s heart,” Gavin commented.

That was his colleague’s due. He got to watch and be a part of it. And run his damn mouth all he wanted. Hudson ignored him and picked another photo from the several inside.

“Do you know him, too?”

Jackie didn’t make a fuss and looked at the face in the picture for a bit longer than at the others. They were all ID-like photos, magnified for the sake of creating a profile for all the victims identified so far.

“The hair’s wrong,” Jackie said quietly, “but I always thought that kind of platinum-blond could only come from a bottle. But I can bet my ass this one’s Sweetheart.” He looked at the picture, his eyebrows furrowed.

Hudson hovered closely. “What about him? What happened to him?”

“Graduated,” Jackie replied, but this time, there was a flair of stubbornness in the way he said it.

“What was your relationship with him?”

Jackie shook his head and tried to touch one of his ears, only the handcuffs preventing him from doing so. He was searching for a lie, and Hudson had just gotten the tell.

“No relationship,” Jackie said promptly.

“Really? You keep telling me how much you score with the models,” Hudson taunted him, hoping for more.

“So? It’s all wham, bam, thank you ma’am,” Jackie replied, increasingly irritated. “What’s to say about all that?”

“Have you heard from any of them since their graduation?” Hudson asked.

“No. But it’s their fucking business. The boss gave them good money, and now, they’re all too good for the rest of us,” Jackie expressed his frustration. “If they did something shady, that’s not the boss’s fault, Vegas.”

“Vegas,” Gavin echoed and snorted.

“Yeah, like that’s not even your real name,” Jackie continued, all riled up. “Fucking cop.”

Hudson opened the folder again, debating on how to proceed. He knew how, of course he knew, but that didn't mean that it would give him any pleasure. Quite the opposite.

"Give me the key," he told Gavin without looking at him.

He used it to free Jackie's hands, watching his temporary hostage rub his wrists.

"What the hell, man?" Jackie murmured. "All this to ask me about some dudes from a lifetime ago? By the way, you know I'm going to tell the boss everything. Man, he's not going to like it."

He made a move to get up, interpreting this small mercy as being let go. But Hudson had something different in mind. He began to take picture after picture out of the folder and throw them on the table.

"They graduated? That's what you're saying?"

Jackie was still holding one wrist with the other hand. He stopped and looked at the pictures, bending over as if he couldn't understand what he was seeing.

"What the hell, man, are these... shopped or something? The fuck you're making me look at this shit? It's like--" He stopped abruptly and looked closer at one.

Hudson didn't move a muscle. He just watched, waiting. Jackie touched the bottom edge of one picture with his fingers and a tremor began shaking his whole hand.

"These are fake," he said, but it was clear that his confidence was crumbling.

Hudson knew, without looking, which of those horrible pictures had held Jackie's interest. He reached into the folder and selected another. He placed it next to the other at which Jackie was looking. "In case you were wondering where the rest of him is," he said quietly.

Jackie moved violently away, his face pale, sweat gluing his hair to his forehead.

"Sink, over there," Gavin said sternly. "Fucking operation shock and awe," he commented as Jackie threw himself at the sink and began retching.

Hudson moved to his side and held his forehead. Jackie's skin was dead cold, and his entire body was shaking. Then, he said something he never said lightly. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Aww," Gavin the asshole intervened, "are you two going to get a room already?"

"We just did, so leave us the room, please," Hudson shot at his colleague. "Also, how about you make yourself useful and print out those forms?"

"Okay, boss," Gavin said mockingly but walked out nonetheless.

Jackie was barely keeping himself upright, so Hudson took it upon himself to steady him.

“Is it true?” Jackie asked in a raspy breath. “Is he... dead? All of them, dead?”

Hudson filled a cup with water from the sink and handed it to Jackie. “Rinse,” he said.

Under the circumstances, orders like that were the easiest to follow. Jackie obeyed like a young child. And then, he filled the cup again himself and drank, the sound of his gulping the only thing breaking the silence of the bleak interrogation room.



The stew wasn't half-bad, Otis decided, although he would have preferred to call it half-good instead. But how good was half-good? By the rules of mathematics, somewhere in the middle, and he liked to think that his stew was better than that. The correct way to describe it, he thought, after some deliberation, was above decent.

Would Hudson be all right with above decent stew? The deplorable state of the small refrigerator his neighbor had in his apartment should be enough of an argument that his tastes wouldn't be particularly refined. However, Otis didn't want to jump to conclusions and then see Hudson unhappy with his stew.

With measured moves, he picked up each piece of cutlery there was and examined it with a critical eye. Now that he had a boyfriend, and not just a temporary one, he definitely needed to invest in some proper spoons and forks.

He looked out the window. It was getting late, and Hudson had said that he would be home in time for dinner. Otis consulted the clock on his phone dutifully. His boyfriend must have gotten caught up in something. According to the internet, phoning to check on your partner too often, too soon, too annoyingly, was a sign of clinginess and frowned upon by boyfriends all over the world.

That meant that he would just have to wait. In the meantime, he had to busy himself with something, so he returned to his phone. Having a boyfriend came with a wide range of responsibilities, one of them being getting to know the other's hobbies. How difficult was it to learn how to fire a gun?



Hudson gathered up all the pictures from the table and stashed them back in their folder. Their job was done. More difficulties would follow, but he believed himself to be a good enough judge of character. The captain would never approve of this kind of unconventional approach, but he did close an eye or two when needed, for the sake of results. Nonetheless, Hudson preferred that

the man who trusted him so much didn't learn about his going off-script in this particular case. Gavin was trustworthy.

And that left him with just one wild card to handle. He didn't say a word as Jackie moved back to the table and sat on the chair of his own accord. Leaning over and covering his eyes, the young man was rocking his body to comfort himself, as little as that was possible.

"Who did this?" he asked in a raspy voice. "I hope you guys are chasing the fucker who did this. That you caught him already."

"We haven't yet," Hudson said. "And it's not a single person doing this."

Jackie looked up. There were lines etched into his face that hadn't been there before. "What do you mean? Isn't some sicko, some serial killer or something, doing this?" His eyes trailed to the folder in Hudson's hand and then moved away. His face was turning green again.

"No, it's worse than that."

"What could be worse than that?" Jackie whispered and huddled in on himself. A pained moan escaped his throat, and he rested his forehead against the cold table.

Hudson got up and locked the door. Gavin would get the message and wait until the door got unlocked again.

"How long have you known Watkins, Jackie?"

"The boss? I told you. Since I came into the city. You don't think... the boss has nothing to do with this," Jackie said with conviction.

Hudson didn't offer a reply, knowing very well that his silence was as good as an answer.

"No, you really can't believe that," Jackie continued his protests. "What? Do you have like a beef with him or something?"

"When the same MO is noticed in a string of homicides," Hudson recited, "the first thing on the order of business is to identify similarities between the victims."

Jackie watched him with the eyes of a wounded animal. "They all worked for the boss. That's your similarity?" he spat. "It could be just any lunatic."

Hudson sighed and ran one hand over his face. This job was ninety-nine percent suffering; the rest, if you got lucky, was the satisfaction of putting bad people behind bars. But the rest was dealing with the scumbags of the earth, and the hate, the pain, and the misery they brought on others.

"How do you explain that their disappearance are linked to what you call their graduation?"

Jackie's eyes grew wide. "You don't think I had anything to do with this?!" His body began shaking again, his eyes wandering frantically over his surroundings. "Not him, why did it have to be him?" he mumbled and hid his face.

"What was he to you, Jackie?" Hudson asked, as gently as he could.

A shake of the head was the immediate reply. Negation rising from hurt so extensively that it couldn't be processed.

"Did you sleep with him?" Hudson continued.

"It was more than that," Jackie lashed out and then, with a pained groan, he grabbed tufts of his hair and pulled, twisting furiously.

"Then you should help me bring down the ones who did this to him," Hudson said. "They didn't graduate. You can't continue to tell the same lie to yourself. And your boss, Watkins, I bet he knows very well. He knows what happened to them. Even more, he's the reason why this happened to them." The gentleness had gradually faded from his voice, making room for harshness, and he smacked his hand on the closed folder to get the other's attention.

"But the boss--" Jackie said and swallowed thickly, "no, it's not... it can't be. But even I was there, and then, the boss didn't let me work with that guy, and yeah, I mean, there were some others who asked for weird stuff, too--"

He was babbling, and there were many things Hudson wanted to extract from that mind, but not as addled by grief as it was now.

"How well do you know Watkins, Jackie?" he insisted again.

Jackie stopped rocking his body. His eyes kept darting to one side, but then they returned to the folder under Hudson's hand. "There must have been others, like those weirdos," he whispered.

"Like the one who liked you cold, right?"

Jackie nodded.

"And how did they meet these boys? Who introduced these so-called clients to Elliot, Fergie, and Henry?" He used the victims' real names, aware of their impact. They were walking a thin line here. And he couldn't hold Jackie forever. Continuing his undercover op depended on how things stood once they were ready to call this meeting over.

Jackie pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes shut, but there were tears running down his cheeks now, and he couldn't hold them back. "Henry," he said, "that's Sweetheart. He was always so nice. Damn, he was so nice to everyone. Never hurt a fly in his life, that one, I'm sure. Why, why would they do that to him?"

Hudson leaned over the table. “These are people who cannot be called human beings. Help me catch them, Jackie.”

“Like how? I mean, what the hell do I even know? If I’d continued to work for clients, they would’ve gotten me, too. I would’ve been in one of those pictures now.” Jackie started heaving.

Hudson caught his shoulder and squeezed hard to pull him back from the dark place threatening to engulf him. “But you are here,” he said firmly. “And because you’re here, you can make a difference. You can help me get them, put them behind bars--”

“Like hell, I want to kill them!” Jackie reacted, pushing his arm away. “I’m going to get a fucking gun, and I’m going to blow his head off! Not Henry,” he began weeping again, “why Henry?”

“Watkins is not alone in this,” Hudson said.

Jackie raised his eyes to stare at him and wiped them with the back of his hand. “If you know so much, how come they’re still free? They shouldn’t be fucking breathing!”

“You’re right, Jackie. But we need evidence. And we need to know who else is in on it. Do you know of anyone with a metallic voice? Someone who talks like he has a robot stuck in his throat?”

Jackie shook his head. “No, I have no clue about anyone like that. Is that the scumbag who killed my Henry?”

Hudson didn’t want to talk more about what he knew without having Jackie’s signature on the right papers.

“I want your help. And I know you want to help me. So how about we strike a deal, you and me?”

“How? I’ll do it,” Jackie said, closing his fists.

Hudson walked over to the door and unlocked it. Gavin walked in ten seconds later, with the print-out in his hands.

Jackie stared at them for a while, still twisting tufts of his hair from time to time. “I’m becoming a snitch?” he asked bitterly.

Hudson exchanged a glance with Gavin. It was all down to what Jackie was going to say next.

“Can I get a pen?” Jackie asked, stretching out one hand.



Waiting was difficult, and one of the most difficult things when you had a boyfriend who was late for dinner, Otis decided. He looked at his phone and pondered over whether certain circumstances were considered appropriate for placing a call to inquire about how long he would have to wait until Hudson got home.

What if he forgot? Otis felt the familiar squeeze in his chest, as the memories threatened to overtake him. His mom had used to forget about him for long hours every day. She was too busy drinking herself into a stupor, grandma had said. Otis had learned the meaning of that expression later, when he started to learn how to talk properly. Stupor was a good word to describe what happened to her during those times. While growing up, Otis had learned ways to unlock the door to the room where she pushed him to be left alone so that, yes, she could drink herself into a stupor.

A paper clip had become his closest friend. For hours, he scraped the insides of the lock with the deformed little thing, listening carefully to every sound. It had taken him many months to figure it out, but in the end, he had become an expert. By instinct, he hadn't told his grandma that he knew how to pick a lock. It sounded like something only scoundrels would know, and he didn't want his grandma to think that about him.

With the faithful paper clip hidden in his pocket, he quietly walked around the house. His mom, luckily for him, was a noisy sleeper and if she woke up, she usually knocked over various things in her path, a chair, a cup from the counter, to alert him that she was no longer deep in her slumber. As soon as he heard her, he rushed back to the room and closed the door. He counted on her not realizing that the door was unlocked, due to her state of confusion caused by the alcohol.

And then, the confusing part would begin. She would drop to her knees and hug him.

I'm a good mom, right, Otis?

He'd never known what to say back. She was simply mom, not good, not bad.

Dwelling on the past was good in small amounts, as grandma said. Otis shook his head and turned his attention to his phone. If there had been a reason for his delay, Hudson would have called. Maybe he couldn't call. Maybe he was caught up in something... but what? A late night photoshoot with sexy men?

Otis surprised himself with the way he pursed his lips until they hurt. Was what he felt right now... jealousy? But taking pictures of handsome men wearing nothing but collars and other things was Hudson's job. Otis would be a very unpleasant boyfriend if he got jealous over his partner's occupation.

Still, the images that came to his mind did nothing for his nerves. He got up from the bed and walked to the door. Maybe Hudson was right at the door, and he was working himself into a jealous fit over nothing.

There was no one at the door, nor walking down the hallway. Disappointed, Otis closed the door and returned to the bedroom. Then, he asked the internet how long he was supposed to wait until calling a tardy boyfriend.



Hudson checked his phone and frowned. Damn. Things had gone out of his mind completely. And he couldn't take that call in front of Jackie and Gavin, for a number of reasons. How crazy had he been to get involved with his cute neighbor while undercover? Crazy didn't cover it. And now he was faced with an incredible dilemma. Anyone would tell him to back away and do everything necessary to get Otis out of his life and himself removed from the other's life.

But was that really an option? Jackie knew Otis. No, even more, Jackie knew that he was the boyfriend Otis had talked about. There was no coming back from that. To protect him, he couldn't just call it quits and hope for the best. This whole undercover op was a mess by any standard. The problem was, as always, the human element.

He needed to send a quick text.

"Hey, playing Pokémon can wait," Gavin warned him.

Displeased and unable to hide it, Hudson put the phone away. Otis would chew him out for sure, but this was one of those situations that made it impossible to act the boyfriend part. The life of a cop. He was wrong to involve Otis in it, and now as it had been for some time, it looked like it was too late.

He followed Gavin and Jackie, whom they were both flanking, down to the other room to finalize all the details. Jackie was walking with his shoulders hunched, like a man heading to his execution. Maybe only now it was starting to dawn on him the kind of dangerous situation he was getting himself into, by turning into a snitch for the police. Watkins must have protected his protégé for reasons only he knew until now, but Hudson doubted that this kind of betrayal – if discovered – would be brushed over. Yeah, after all, Jackie was right to walk like that, as if he was climbing onto the gallows.

Tonight, after all the ups and downs he had suffered, he had gotten himself an informant. He was yet to find out if he still had a boyfriend after missing dinner and being an asshole by not even calling. Worse even, he had just let the other's phone calls go unanswered. Would Otis understand?



Hudson wasn't picking up. What did that mean? Otis plopped down on the bed and puffed out his cheeks. Usually, he was too busy getting into evening learning of various words and other things, but that held no appeal right now. And learning about guns had proven quite boring.

How little he knew about relationships. Did everyone go through these strange sensations? He didn't even know if he had reason to worry. What if Hudson had gotten hit by a car? Then, Otis would have to search for him at all the hospitals in the city, like he had seen in movies. But the city was quite large, and there were several prominent hospitals, as well as numerous clinics.

No, he wasn't supposed to think about bad things. The nice lady who had helped him with speech therapy so patiently had guided him away from dark thoughts.

Life is not all about pain and suffering, Otis...

Even as he had listened to her soothing words, he still felt the taste of ashes in the back of his throat.

But what was the alternative? Otis considered. A problem needed to be looked at from all angles. The first thought that had crossed his mind was that Hudson was surrounded by sexy models and enjoying their attention. In some movies, the jilted wife often discovered that her husband of twelve years or more was having an affair with his secretary.

But Hudson didn't have a secretary, which was a good thing. Also, suspecting his boyfriend of cheating was a nasty thing to think.

There could be a large number of other reasons why Hudson was so late. Three hours late. The stew was cold. Otis needed to go to sleep, because even one night of bad sleep could wreak havoc on one's health. Still, as he changed into his night clothes and lay in bed, he doubted that sleep would come quickly tonight.

He turned on one side and focused on the lessons he had learned a long time ago from the therapist and his grandma. One had to think happy thoughts to push away the darkness. Beautiful thoughts were like an incantation that could dispel curses, which were the bad thoughts.

His mind continued to churn. Hudson was at the supermarket, debating what kind of milk to buy. They didn't have his favorite brand, and it was so late that the personnel had left and locked him in. Otis found himself laughing at the ludicrous scenario playing in his head.

He couldn't stop worrying, it seemed. He turned on his back and put his hands behind his head. If happy thoughts were important to chase away stupidity, maybe he would just think... He munched on his lower lip. He knew. He'd think of all the nice things Hudson had told him lately.

His phone buzzed, making him jump to pick it up.

I hope you're already sleeping, but anyway, good night, Otis. Feel free to strangle me tomorrow. I bet that stew was a blast.

Chapter Twenty-One – A Beautiful Accident

He was taking chances, Gavin had warned him. Hudson looked at the back of Jackie's head. Silence had settled between them after having the young man sign the papers that made him into an informant for law enforcement and, for a while, it was all right to let things take their natural course, whatever that would be. In the light of what had transpired in the interrogation room earlier that evening, Jackie needed – and was granted – time to adjust.

Yes, he was taking chances, but he trusted Jackie even more after discovering that one of the murdered models had been the guy's lover. Hudson hated the part of himself that was all right with showing someone the earthly remains of one who had shared his bed and most probably more than that. It was one of those necessary evils, or so his reasoning went. His thoughts wandered to Otis, uninvited. His mind had a way of conjuring up the worst-case scenario. It was par for the course, as far as his detective work went, but in this case, it hurt. How would Otis react to being called to identify a body, one that used to belong to someone close?

Hudson squeezed the wheel and sighed. Otis's old scar was presently on his mind, as well. The beautiful young man, as innocent as he was in his dealings with men and sex, had plenty of bad history he wished to forget. Otherwise, he wouldn't ask so pointedly not to be questioned about it. Yet, Hudson wished he could learn everything, even about the bad in his boyfriend's life.

He liked to think of himself as someone with the right motivations. In this case, saving his undercover op had come with certain advantages. He could continue to be part of Otis's life. If anyone knew, Gavin, the captain, they would tell him what he was doing was wrong. And he knew it. But, at the same time, the die had been cast. Now, he needed to remain close to Otis so that he could protect him. Cold sweat lingered at the small of his back, a reminder of the evening's unfurling of events. Jackie's decision to become a snitch for the police might have saved more than Hudson's undercover op tonight. That disgusting waste of space called Watkins had seen Otis once. Who was to say that he wouldn't come sniffing around?

“What about Otis?” Jackie asked morosely as if Hudson's thoughts of his neighbor-slash-boyfriend had just triggered that question. “Is he a cop, too? Are you a couple of cops on the job?”

“No, Otis is not a cop.” There was no need to beat around the bush. Jackie knew they were together.

“Then what is he?” Jackie asked, some of the rancor from before still tainting his voice with belligerence.

“He is...” Hudson took his time to come up with the proper response. “He's a beautiful accident, that's what he is.”

Jackie turned to stare at him in disbelief. “The fuck you mean?”

Hudson shrugged. “We just happened, he and I.”

“My dumb luck then, I guess,” Jackie mumbled. “I see one guy who’s as pretty as…” he didn’t continue and let the words – and a beloved name – die on his lips. “I don’t fall for just anyone, so you know.”

“I know,” Hudson said grimly. “If it’s any help, I take no pleasure in this.”

“You stole the guy from me,” Jackie argued. “And you lied. You heard me talking, Otis this, Otis that. You couldn’t have thought there’s a weird name coincidence. Not many people named Otis around.”

It was a matter up for debate, but the last thing Hudson wanted was to get into a long discussion about being right or wrong. “I told Otis to stay clear of you. The moment he mentioned your name.”

“Did he tell you about me? What did he say?”

Hudson threw Jackie a curt look. “You have no chance with him. Beat it, man.”

“Yeah, okay, fine,” Jackie replied and crossed his arms. “So, does he know?”

There was no need to ask what. “No, and you won’t tell him, either.”

“Because you’ll punch me in the face again? Okay, stop giving me the stink eye. I get it. Fuck, to think that you’ve worked with me for weeks, and I had no idea.”

“Do you think you can do this, Jackie?” Hudson asked abruptly. “Keep a straight face when Watkins is around? Help me catch those bastards?”

“For Sweetheart, I’m going to do it,” Jackie promised. “How do you do it, though? I mean, Otis must think you’re some shady photographer. Doesn’t that bother him? He’s such a goody-two-shoes.”

Hudson felt a smile twisting his lips for a moment. The night had worn him out almost completely. Just thinking of Otis’s sneaky stalking at the start of their getting to know each other was bound to make him feel lighter, though. “He’s very direct. If he had been bothered, he would have told me.”

“A beautiful accident,” Jackie said the words slowly, quoting Hudson. “You mean, you’re not supposed to hook up while on the job, right?”

“It’s not hooking up. Otis is my boyfriend,” Hudson said. How strange to hear those words coming from his lips. A good reason for a laugh or two, at least as far as his present acquaintances were concerned.

“Damn. I really have no chance left,” Jackie said in self-deprecation and shook his head. “So, how are we going to do this? What’s my job?”

“Your job is to keep your eyes peeled and your ears perked up like a hound. Watkins trusts you, so he might slip up in front of you.”

“Obviously, he doesn’t trust me enough, or I would have known about--” Jackie let out a small choking sound and looked out the car window again.

“That’s a good sign,” Hudson offered to comfort him. “He doesn’t believe you’re made out of the same evil material as he and his boss are. But that doesn’t mean that he will be as careful around you as he is around me.”

“He used to be on the fence about you. He told me that. He said something like not knowing exactly what’s wrong with you, but that he feels there’s something.”

“Used to. Now, he has better feelings for me, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. There was that thing with the police raid at Twilight.”

“And then, he sent his goons to go through my stuff,” Hudson added.

Jackie gave him a surprised look. “What do you mean? What did they find?”

“Nothing. That must have strengthened my position with the company, or whatever the organization Watkins is running can be called.”

“He did seem rather impressed in a positive way with you. He said that he doesn’t like all these hipsters who think they can break into the porn industry, but you’re the real deal. If only he knew,” Jackie concluded with a snort. And then, after he noticed the way Hudson stared at him, “Not that I’ll say anything. My lips are sealed. Now, I don’t know one thing about this bigger boss you’re talking about. How come you know?”

There was no need to put Jasper in the crossfire. Hudson was a miser when it came to sharing the information he knew. And it was better if Jackie simply treated Jasper as usual without suspecting anything. There was trust, and there was trust. It was bad enough that Jasper might be pressured by Watkins into confessing how Hudson had helped him. That is if the boy was so incredibly unlucky that Watkins’s goons found him and brought him back for the big debut of the new club.

“I came across a piece of interesting conversation,” he said vaguely. “There was talk about how to proceed about the bodies.”

Jackie shivered at the sound of that. His attractive face scrunched up, and there were new lines where there had been none before. “They still do this thing, don’t they? Are there other...

victims,” he asked while sucking in a shaky breath, “I mean, besides the guys you told me about?”

“Not that we know of. But think about what the new club is called. Something must have happened that drove them under cover for a while, but it looks like they’re getting back to it, and with a bang.”

“Till The Sweet End,” Jackie recalled and he frowned. “I had no idea people so fucked up existed... why the hell are they doing this?”

If only there was a simple answer to such a question. “The same reason why horrible people throughout history have tortured, maimed and killed others.”

“Some sort of sick pleasure? Is that it? But those guys... they were--” Jackie stopped to consider his words as his gaze floated ahead, deep into the darkness stretching before the car, beyond the streaks of light making the road visible. “They were so full of life,” he said quietly.

“When Watkins came around to hire me, he told me that he’s searching for desperate guys looking to turn a quick buck. Were they desperate?”

Jackie knew very well who Hudson was talking about. “Yeah, I guess. Mostly, runaways. Guys coming from bad places. Not Stud, though. No, he was into it for the kink. But he didn’t want people to know what he was doing for fun. He had some bigshot job in the daytime.”

“Yes. He wasn’t quite like the rest. We had a hard time finding someone to identify him for us, though.”

“Yeah, ‘cause he had no close family, that’s why,” Jackie said. “Not so many friends, either. He had moved to the city not so long ago.”

“Watkins sure knows how to pick them.” Hudson was aware of the grim line his lips had set in, but the bitterness in his mouth didn’t go away.

“Yes. He likes them beautiful. Like Angel.”

Like Otis, Hudson thought but didn’t say his name out loud. “Tell me about Angel.”

“He’s a bit like Stud, I mean being in it because he likes what he’s doing,” Jackie explained, oblivious to Hudson’s dark thoughts.

“But he ran away. He must have learned something about your boss’s business.”

Jackie made a disgusted face. “I don’t know how I’ll manage to keep looking him in the eye and consider him the good man I thought he was.”

“You have to play your part,” Hudson reminded him.

“Yeah.”

“About Angel. Tell me everything. Even a minor detail could help. If we find him before Watkins, we can get him on our side and bury those assholes.”

“Well, it’s not like I know a lot. Let me see. First of all, he’s like a major weirdo. I mean, whenever he did some of the extreme stuff, he was really egging the guys on to do him harder.”

Hudson didn’t need any extra incentive to remember how Angel had abused Jasper on stage during the demonstration Watkins had insisted he watch. Cruelty seemed to run deep in the guy’s bones, and it went both ways.

“Go on,” he encouraged Jackie. “Remember. Every detail counts.”

“Okay.” Jackie seemed to focus. “Yeah, he was into strangling a lot. Vegas, man, what if--” he started and then began again. “What if he graduated like the rest? What if they strangled him until he died?”

“I don’t think that’s the case with Angel. Watkins is still looking for him, isn’t he? That means that he’s in hiding. Also, it might mean that the powers that be want him because he might be dangerous to their operation. Otherwise, why would getting him back matter so much?”

“Yeah, that sounds legit,” Jackie agreed. “Maybe they threatened to keep him in that room.” That simple phrase was followed by a snort.

“What room?”

Jackie blinked and stared at him as if he couldn’t understand the question. “Ah, there was this thing I heard Angel say one time when he was in the boss’s office. It sounded like a joke, one that they shared. Sorry, I meant it only the way he said it. It can’t mean anything.”

“Or it might mean a lot. Out with it.”

Jackie pressed his fingers against his temples. “So, there was this one time when Angel was meeting with the boss, and I was around. And Angel kept making a fuss about wanting more money. The boss was getting a little pissed at him, but Angel is so damn wicked. He said something like ‘You’re not going to put me in that room, are you? Just because you don’t want to pay me more’. And he was laughing. And then, the boss said ‘Maybe we should put you in that room for a while, to teach you some manners’. Or something like that, I don’t recall their words exactly.”

“Any details about what they meant by ‘that room’?”

Jackie shook his head. “Not really. But then, Angel began whistling a song, and the boss laughed like it was such a good joke. I didn’t get it, so I asked them why they were laughing. And the boss said something like ‘Angel here wants to see his old man and his farm’. I still don’t get it.”

Hudson pondered for a bit. “Is Angel from the country?”

Another shrug. “He could be, for all I know. He used to say that he only got born yesterday and only to be a star. What do you reckon, Vegas? Do you think he went back home?”

“Anything is possible. However, from what you’re telling me, Watkins might know very well where Angel’s old man and his farm are. It doesn’t sound like such a great idea to me for him to hide there. And Watkins would have brought him back already if that had been the case.”

“Yeah. Sorry I’m not more help.”

“Is Angel involved with anyone?”

“Do you mean, like a boyfriend? No. He doesn’t even have friends. Because he’s a major prick,” Jackie explained. “And he’s so shifty. You can never really tell what he’s thinking.”

“He seemed troubled. That night, by the raid. Do you recall?”

“I wasn’t paying that much attention to him. But now that you mention it...” Jackie took a few moments. “Yeah, he wasn’t so full of himself anymore. I thought he got a bit rattled because of the cops ruining a night of making money for him. But that night was nothing special. Angel doesn’t even work most nights. He’s the boss’s special pet.”

“They must have had a falling out. Clearly, Watkins is none too pleased with Angel’s disappearing act. Although he made it sound like it’s not the first time his favorite model has pulled a prank like this on him.”

“It’s all shady as fuck,” Jackie concluded for both of them.

Yes, it was. And hopefully, Jackie would be able to keep his wits about himself while they were working together. As much as it was an asshole thing to think, the fact that one of the victims had been Jackie’s boyfriend or someone close to him at least helped the case.

Only that Hudson no longer knew how much the case counted when people were involved in such a manner. Of course, it counted, he corrected himself right away. Because it was the only way to make those assholes behind the murders pay.



Otis knew that it was, probably, a desperate move to stalk Hudson's coming back home instead of going to sleep, but after having received that message he had forgotten all about the importance of eight hours of sleep per night. Well, not entirely, only that he believed in exceptions to the rules. Tonight was one of them, and he would make use of it, too. The first on the order of things was to clear the air about any temptation to strangle his boyfriend. No violence was on his mind of any kind, and it appeared an essential aspect to talk about before Hudson got any strange ideas about their future interactions.

Curiosity, he had to admit, was nagging at him. What could have happened to detain Hudson so late into the night? A session with sexy models who couldn't be roused from their sleep before the fall of darkness? That was sort of poetic if he thought about it. Vampires and other denizens of the night made for excellent love interests in the romance genre, according to an article he had read online not so long ago. Was it possible that Hudson was attracted to that type? Creatures that enjoyed the darkest hour? Otis made a mental note to ask.

And it seemed like he wouldn't have to wait any longer, as the elevator door opened and Hudson walked out into the hallway. Otis had no idea why he was acting surprised when their eyes met. Hudson was the only one entitled to be feeling that particular emotion.

However, he changed his mind when Hudson, instead of greeting him and asking him what in the heavens he was doing out of his apartment at that hour, began looking about him, as if he were expecting Otis to be holding something hidden behind his back.

"Um," he started, a bit confused and lacking any strategy in regard to how their late-night conversation was supposed to go. "What are you looking for?"

Hudson offered him an apologetic smile. "Any sort of kitchen implement that could easily be turned into a weapon."

"What sort of kitchen implement would that be?" Otis asked, considering the question odd, but not in the least intending to act rudely by ignoring it when there were other, more ardent questions on the tip of his tongue.

"Anything you could use to bust my ass for missing our stew date."

"Was it a date? And why would I--" Otis turned serious. "I wouldn't use violence over a missed date. Which was dinner, not a date."

Hudson moved closer, invading his space and making him take a step back. "What would cause you to use violence?"

Another strange question. Otis pondered over it for a moment, and then he remembered the first reason why he had stayed awake, waiting for Hudson to arrive. "I do not use or condone

violence,” he said slowly. All the time, he kept his eyes on his boyfriend, ready to gauge any sign of misunderstanding.

“So, I’m off the hook then,” Hudson said and brushed his hand through Otis’s hair, leaving a tingling trail in the wake of his caress.

“You never were on the hook,” Otis decided to clarify. “How intrusive would you find questions about the reasons behind your coming late?”

Hudson laughed softly and began pushing him slowly toward his apartment. “Can I still sleep at your place tonight?”

“The stew is cold. It can be consumed either hot, warm, or cold, but it’s not as palatable. Our chef says so.”

“Let’s say that, while far be it from me to disrespect your talents as a cook, stew is not exactly the most important thing on my mind right now.”

“What is?” Otis inquired.

They were now inside, and Hudson closed the door behind them without tearing his eyes away from him.

“This,” Hudson declared with a deep sigh, one that sounded like weariness and a touch of regret. The action that followed contradicted that analysis, Otis believed, as he felt the now-familiar lips caressing his.

He angled his head, a little cautious and overly conscious of the mechanics of kissing, which only lately had been revealed to him. But that train of thought, the one he always kept on using like a personal version of Ariadne’s thread, failed in front of that sensual attack. He would call it an attack because his defenses fell without resisting as soon as the deft tongue moved past his lips, triggering a series of pleasant yet delicate sensations all over his skin.

His body followed suit, moving as if it didn’t need a brain and neural circuits to tell it what to do. He was pressing against Hudson as if he wanted to connect and touch every patch of available portion of himself, and his own tongue did a riposte, something that immediately triggered a short sound like laughter in his boyfriend.

“You’re a tiger, aren’t you?” Hudson cooed while moving his hands across Otis’s back. “I should be careful since you obviously don’t mind pouncing on me like this.”

It was unclear, this bit about pouncing and other actions that would be performed by the aforementioned feline, but Otis enjoyed the comparison. Tigers were beautiful, graceful... deadly? The sudden realization made him pull away a bit so that he could take a good look at Hudson’s face. Understanding the signs presented by how a person’s face moved and reacted

helped a great deal. Not seeing a lot of people for most of his childhood hadn't helped with this part of his development. The only cues he'd taken had been from his mom, and she hadn't been a reliable subject for learning about how to be human.

"Did you want to ask me something?" Hudson asked, looking puzzled and rightfully so.

Otis shook his head, and along with that came the memories that had kept him company lately when he least expected them to come. "Just this. Am I deadly?"

"Hmm," Hudson purred. "Is this because I called you tiger?"

"Yes." How wonderful it was that Hudson had understood that. Not many people would. Otis had learned over the years that it was essential to be apologetic and explain himself as much as needed.

"No, I don't think you're deadly at all. I won't call you that if you don't like it. Especially since you're more like a puppy yearning for his leash."

Otis snickered. "Oh that. That I like very much. And puppies aren't deadly."

"No, I don't believe they are," Hudson agreed. "But I still believe that you wanted to ask me something."

"Yes, definitely. And I already asked you--"

"Ask away."

Otis had expected some sort of irritation and evasion. Boyfriends, as a general rule, appeared to not enjoy being questioned endlessly about where they had been and the like. Such things made the other person seem controlling. It wasn't desirable to be that way.

"Do you like vampires?" he asked what he believed to be the least aggressive question on his list.

"No, not particularly. I've barely heard of Dracula."

"I see," Otis commented and nodded. "What about other creatures of the night?"

"Like werewolves?"

Otis hadn't really thought of them. "I mean, like people who like to be awake at night."

Hudson laughed and ruffled his hair for a moment. "Do you want to ask me why I was late tonight?"

"Yes," Otis admitted.

"If I told you it was because of work, would that be enough for you?"

“Yes.”

Hudson smiled again and kissed him on the forehead. “I don’t deserve you, Otis,” he whispered against his skin, so breathily that the tingling was back.

“You don’t have a secretary, so there’s nothing for me to worry about. Why are you saying this?”

“Because of the kind of things you just said earlier. About vampires, and werewolves, and secretaries. If I make you mine, will you forgive me? Just take a moment to think. Don’t say ‘yes’ right off the bat.”

It didn’t matter if he took a moment, or ten, or none at all. “Yes,” he answered with the same determination as before. “Did I say it too fast?”

“No, not at all,” Hudson replied and pulled him close again.

To say that the stew was promptly forgotten would be an understatement. Otis was already too busy melting in Hudson’s arms.



He took his time getting Otis out of his clothes. Despite the late hour and the grueling way he’d spent the evening, all traces of tiredness were gone from his bones. He moved only slightly away to pull the t-shirt over his head and then decided it was a good moment to apologize.

“I should take a shower first.”

“Don’t,” Otis said, grabbing his wrist, his grip surprisingly strong for someone who looked as if he was eating only when he didn’t forget food was actually a requirement for survival. “It’s late and you can take a shower after anyway.”

“After, huh?” Hudson nuzzled Otis’s cheek, enjoying how it felt to have his short stubble brush against the other’s flawless skin. His kisses made the plump lips redder, and the touch of skin on skin left redness in its wake. Those were his marks on his boyfriend. He loved making them. It was his prerogative, without a doubt. “And what do you mean by that?”

“You don’t know?”

This was Otis, so the question was genuine, not coquettish teasing.

“Come here.” He wrapped his arms around the slight body that trembled so prettily at the lightest of his touches. It had to do with how he was naked already, while Hudson still had his jeans on. “Let’s do something,” he proposed and helped Otis straddle him. While he continued to kiss him

and tease him gently, Hudson moved his hands to cup the bare buttocks and spread them. Otis rewarded him by keening softly, and that was his cue.

It was so amazing and yet so natural to come home to a willing partner. The way Otis leaned into him filled him with tenderness. For only a moment, because the next, his beautiful and gentle boyfriend had brought one hand back, grabbing his manhood through his jeans.

“You want it?” he whispered, wanting to hear Otis say it.

“Your cock? Yes, I do.”

“Get it ready to enter you and then use me as you see fit.”

Otis nodded eagerly and moved so that he could take care of business. Hudson remained sitting on the edge of the bed, his heart filled with the same excitement as he'd felt during the first times having sex in his life. The focused look on the pretty face brought a smile to his lips, and some of his tension lifted. His shoulders were lighter. He could sit straighter. And when Otis straddled him again and their bodies began becoming one, Hudson realized that he was allowed these precious moments, and he could put everything else aside and just feel happy for a while.

It hurt, too, but in a pleasant, unbearable way. The source of the sensation came from somewhere in his solar plexus and it spread through the rest of him, warm and unstoppable. Otis's face twisted for a moment into a small grimace, but even that looked cute, because it was him doing it.

“When will I be able to feel you completely?”

The question took him by surprise. He moved his lips across Otis's neck, pressing down from time to time, only so that he could feel the other's shivering reverberating through him. “What do you mean?”

“Raw,” Otis whispered.

Hudson smiled. “We'll have to work on that, right? Soon?”

“Soon sounds vague.”

“And you're a man of hard facts, aren't you?”

“I try to be.”

And didn't he love him for it? Hudson knew conversation had no place anymore between them, as Otis's scorching hot body engulfed him. His lovely neighbor was a fast learner, indeed. He was observant and focused, something that must have earned him the startled attention of people he had met along his path, but Hudson liked that about him.

Determined to do a good job, Otis was moving his hips slowly, then faster, with the same expression of keen concentration on his face.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” he felt the need to ask. His cock twitched as it was squeezed, tortured with delight, and brought closer and closer to the final act.

“It is,” Otis sucked in a breath, “awfully pleasant.”

“Awfully?”

“It’s almost too much.”

A bit of reason was needed maybe. But who cared about such things when he could simply turn the tables and take Otis from behind while staring at the arched back, the plump yet small buttocks and become trapped in the hypnotic rhythm of his cock moving in and out of that amazing body.

Otis threw a look at him over his shoulder, his lips wet and parted, his eyelids dropped, eyelashes fluttering. Hudson reached for him to cup his jaw and turn him more so that he could steal a kiss. Their mixed moans filled the room.

At the startled reaction when he reached between his lover’s legs, he had to offer an explanation. “You first.”

Otis nodded and let him, although his right hand remained wrapped around Hudson’s wrist, moving to the same up and down pace. It didn’t take his lover much to reach his peak, and Hudson smiled as he sensed his fingers getting wet with Otis’s cum.

“You taste so good, baby,” he whispered into the damp hair, making another soft, strangled moan rise from those cherry lips.

He kept Otis close as he increased his hammering. Such a light body, but still so strong. Hudson was not afraid he might break it by squeezing too tightly, moving too forcefully. The slap of flesh on flesh only heightened his desire. His right. His desire. His payment for the rest of his life.

Even as his cock began softening inside the other’s body, he didn’t move. He just wanted to continue to stay like this for as long as he could afford to.

“This definitely beats a stew date.”

The straightforward remark pulled him back to reality. He laughed and pushed Otis away playfully. His lover snickered and turned, offering him the delicious sight of his sweaty face, gleaming eyes, and lips quirked in a gorgeous smile.

“Let’s say you could be the lousiest cook in the universe, and it wouldn’t matter.”

Otis appeared to take offense at that by the way he pouted. “I’ll have you know that my cooking so far proves to be above average.”

Another tidbit. “Good to know. You’re working on becoming marriage material, then?” Hudson joked.

“Marriage?” Otis’s hair had fallen over the scarred eye again, so there was just one hypnotic blue orb fixed on him. “Yes, definitely.”

Chapter Twenty-Two – Too Far Away From Home

His life was split in two, Hudson mused as he stepped into the new club, if the former industrial building could truly be called that. Unlike the first time when he had visited the place with Jackie, some new furniture had been brought in, mainly long sofas and tables, which meant that the only comforts were reserved for those who would walk in there as clients. Otherwise, the grim look of the place had been kept and, for a second time, Hudson let his eyes wander to the thick steel beams crisscrossing the high ceiling. A cathedral of sorts, his mind whispered, one meant for worshipping the devil, not a god.

That morning, he had left Otis sleeping, a sheet pulled over him, one arm bent under his head, his face smooth and relaxed, a small smile quirking his lips as if under the influence of a good dream. For a moment, he had felt tempted to wake his boyfriend up to kiss him and hold him, just to postpone what he needed to do, step into this other world that should never taint the one he had recently come to know.

Jackie whistled, mimicking the sounds an owl at night would make to get his attention. This time, they hadn't driven here together, so Hudson didn't know if he would see the young man at the location of the new club.

There were dark shadows under his eyes, and he looked older. Wiser, hopefully, as well. Hudson nodded at him. "What's with the signal?" he asked.

Jackie shrugged. "Aren't we supposed to have a code or something?"

Apparently, they were all alone in that large enclosure, surrounded by nothing but furniture in disarray. However, Hudson knew that he needed to educate Jackie and fast.

"No, what we are supposed to do is to behave like always," he said curtly as he examined his camera and began taking out the accessories he assumed he would need to use for whatever Watkins had in mind.

Jackie was about to say something else when the door behind them opened and someone walked in. Hudson took in the stranger with curious eyes. He was a man in his fifties, with a few strands of hair brushed over his shiny scalp in a pathetic attempt to cover for what must have been lost a while ago. He wore a long coat with its collar raised, although the weather didn't warrant such warm clothes despite the days growing shorter, so his body was obscured from view. His height was a bit over six feet and he appeared to be large in the shoulders. His mouth was thick, but not sensual, reminding Hudson of a fish living at the muddy bottoms of lakes. His nose was misshapen, caved in, like the result of a blunt trauma. But his eyes were what made the whole visage come off as something from a horror movie. There were no eyelashes and no eyebrows to speak of. And the eyes themselves were covered by a film that made them look watery and alien.

A face meant for nightmares. Hudson must have been staring, because the stranger eyed him, too, without saying a thing.

“Um, sir, excuse me, can I help you with something?” Jackie hurried to intervene. “I think you must have gotten the wrong address. This here’s a private business.”

What followed made Hudson’s hair stand on end.

Because the stranger spoke in a metallic voice that left no guesswork as to who the newcomer was. “Watkins’s boy, are you?”

Jackie’s reaction was visceral. He took a step back and gawked at the man, then, as he must have remembered the bit from his conversation with Hudson at the precinct, he closed his fists and took a combat stance. “And who the fuck are you?”

Hudson jumped in and pulled Jackie back, gripping his arm hard enough to make him understand. Under his fingers, the young man’s bicep was rigid.

“Are you friends with our boss? We were waiting for him, actually,” he offered with a perfunctory smile, blinking for good measure as if to show his confusion. “He told us he’d be here by six.”

“Mr. Vegas,” the man’s voice whirred mechanically, “is it?”

“Yes. It looks like you know who we are.” Hudson let go of Jackie, pushing him back an inch, and stretched his hand out. “Who do we have the pleasure of meeting?”

The man laughed, as much as it could be called a laugh, but didn’t shake Hudson’s hand. He was holding both in the pockets of his dark coat. “You two make quite the couple. And Watkins warned me that his boy is not the sharpest tool in the shed. As for you, Mr. Vegas, he told me you are an interesting fellow. A true artist.”

Hudson pulled back his hand, without displaying any sign of irritation. His face was an open book and he continued the conversation as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Thank you. But your praise feels unwarranted given that you haven’t seen anything of my body of work.”

“Excellent choice of words, Mr. Vegas,” the stranger said with delight. “But that is where you’re wrong. I’ve seen some of it. And I must say I’m impressed.” He leaned back, his eyelids dropping. That way, he reminded Hudson of a reptile in the mood to strike. “You have an eye for genuine beauty.”

“I understand then that the boss showed you some of the pictures I took of the models. Could you tell me which of them captured your attention?”

“The subject is as important as the man behind the camera,” the man continued.

By Hudson’s side, Jackie was showing signs of restlessness.

“Forgive Jackie’s manners,” Hudson said quickly. “He is very protective of the boss’s business. He’s very loyal.”

That seemed to please the strange man. He turned his eyes to Jackie. “What Watkins failed to tell me was what a handsome young man he’s been keeping around. Without putting him up to the work he’s meant for.”

Completely explainable, the expression on Jackie’s face was one of horror and disgust. However, Hudson couldn’t allow his ally to compromise the whole thing by leaping to strangle the man who had to be the key to the operation. Not until they had all the facts and they would put all those involved behind bars forever.

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” Jackie asked.

The stranger laughed. “I will ask Watkins to put you on display. A little birdie told me you used to do the kind of work I’m talking about. So don’t act so high and mighty, little whore.”

Hudson grabbed Jackie before something irreversible happened.

“You fucking asshole!” Jackie grunted, fighting against Hudson’s hold.

“Hey, hey,” Hudson shouted and pulled him toward the door. “You need to calm the fuck down. Take five and clear your head.” And, as he pushed Jackie out, he whispered in his ear, “I got this.”

As soon as he closed the door with Jackie on its other side, he returned to their visitor. “I believe he doesn’t like to be reminded about the way he used to earn his keep around here,” he said with a sad smile.

“Do you have a lot of pity for former whores, then, Mr. Vegas?”

He shrugged. “I believe people are entitled to their choices. And to change their mind, as well.”

“A true liberal,” the stranger said from the tip of his revolting lips. From up close, they had a sickly bluish color. Whatever accident had messed the guy up, it must have been horrendous. “How is it that you show proper deference while little Jackie behaves like a riled up dog?”

“I must have a bit more life experience. Since you’re here, and you know the boss, the only explanation is that you have a direct interest in the business Mr. Watkins runs here. So, you must be a VIP. An investor, perhaps?”

Once more, the man seemed pleased with the suggestion. “You’re not far off, actually.” He removed one of his hands from his pocket and Hudson noticed that it was covered by a black leather glove. He rubbed his chin for a moment and then put his hand back in his pocket. In the sweet fall weather, the stranger should be boiling in his own sweat, all dressed up like that. “I am the man with the money. All the money.”

“I see. Well, then, do you want me to show you around? And is the boss going to be here soon?”

“He will. I will let him know that I want to see Jackie without his clothes, up on the stage. Properly used.”

“With all due respect, sir, wouldn’t it be easier to enjoy the models who don’t mind doing this, to begin with?”

“That mutt needs to learn some respect. I want to see him in tears. Only for a bit. He’s too old already.”

Hudson didn’t comment on that. There was hardly anything he could add. The situation was getting hairy and fast. Jackie wouldn’t take lightly to being treated like that, especially since the man with the metallic voice had to be the one Jasper had overheard that one time.

“I should call the boss and see what’s keeping him. I assume you are more interested in talking to him than making conversation with me. I don’t know a lot about the business side of things.”

“Oh, he’s late only because he has something to take care of. Someone, actually.”

Hudson showed his surprise at that. “Who? Has Angel come back? Sorry, you might not know who Angel is.”

“I know everything,” the man said mysteriously. “No, not Angel. That boy is still on the loose. Too bad. I was looking forward to seeing him perform again. Stunning, isn’t he? And so very creative as to how to use his body.”

Could that mean that Watkins had gotten hold of Jasper, then? Between Jackie foaming at the mouth behind the door right now, and a scared Jasper that might spill the beans about Hudson’s role in his escape, the noose was getting tighter by the moment. However, he had the evil mind behind the whole thing right in front of him at last.

“I wanted to get on Jackie’s nerves a little because he seems so skittish, so forgive my earlier manners,” the man said and outstretched his hand suddenly. “Keres. Gideon Keres.”

Hudson hurried to shake the man’s hand, without neglecting to show his gratitude for being considered worthy of making the big kahuna’s acquaintance. “So glad to meet you, Mr. Keres.”

“Charmed, Mr. Vegas. May I ask you a question?” Keres was still holding his hand. “Why doesn’t my electro-larynx bother you? I could tell poor little Jackie was scared out of his wits.”

“I am not the kind to pass judgement. Or embarrass others by noticing their... peculiarities.”

Keres laughed. “A true liberal, indeed. You didn’t even use the word handicap. Are you curious about how I got in such a sorry state?”

“Only if it’s something you’re willing to share, sir,” Hudson said solemnly.

“It was quite the thing,” Keres said right away, as if he took delight in picking at his own scabs and wounds. “I was still a young man, finding my way in the world. I pissed off the wrong people. They tortured me for hours. They left me for dead, but surprise-surprise, evil seed that I was, I refused to die.”

Hudson had the presence of mind to look shocked. “That is horrible. And commendable of you to have fought through and survived such a thing.”

“Yes. They paid for it later. And unlike the way they proceeded with me, I made sure they stayed dead at the end of it all.” Keres grinned and showed rows of fake teeth. “Have I managed to shock you yet, Mr. Vegas?”

“I believe so,” Hudson said, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Come on, I’m just pulling your leg,” Keres said. “It was an accident in childhood. I invented this story I just told you to make other kids think I was cool and not a freak. It’s refreshing to see people’s horrified surprise and then relief once I tell them the story isn’t true.”

“I have to say that you really got me there,” Hudson agreed. “And yes, I am relieved to learn that it wasn’t something as traumatizing as people truly trying to hurt you.”

“It was traumatizing nonetheless,” Keres said. “Ah, I see that we have company.”

The door opened at that very moment, and Hudson took in Jasper being pushed forward by Watkins. Jackie followed behind.



“What do you think is the most efficient way to learn something?” Otis questioned Missy while they were on break.

“You study all the time. What do you want to learn this time?” Missy asked.

“I want to know about guns. How to fire one, more precisely.”

That made Missy stop arranging her big red mane with her fingers. “Guns? What’s gotten into you? You’re the last person on earth I’d peg for a gun nut.”

Otis snickered. “Gun nut. Guns don’t make nuts.”

Missy laughed. “If they did, they’d be something else. What I mean is I don’t think you’d be the kind of guy into guns. Why the interest?”

Hudson’s gun came to mind. Last night, his boyfriend had done the same thing he had before, putting the gun into the nightstand before going to sleep. Its simple presence intrigued Otis. He didn’t want to bother Hudson with useless questions, and now he realized that he was reluctant to disclose to Missy that the man he was sharing a bed with – his bed – had such a thing in his possession.

“It looks like a skill that might be useful to learn,” he told a white lie. As long as he avoided the truth, he would be fine. “And I don’t want a gun. I just want to know how to use one.”

“Well, if you’re so curious, and since we didn’t go wall climbing, how about we hit the shooting range?”

“A shooting range? I thought you’d tell me where to find useful information about them on the Internet,” Otis said.

“Well, you asked me how to learn something, and my answer to you is by doing. That’s how you learn things the best way.”

It made total sense. After all, even if he had shown interest in learning about dating and sex from Hudson in the beginning, it had been by doing that he truly discovered how glorious that felt. Missy was right.

“Also,” his colleague continued, “I wouldn’t mind coming with you at all.”

“Do you want to learn how to shoot, too?”

“No need for that. I know how to fire a gun because my dad taught me. Yeah, don’t look at me like that. I used to be the fastest shot in our town.”

“Wow,” Otis expressed his amazement. “That is quite incredible.” He stared at Missy’s carefully arranged tall hairstyle. He couldn’t quite picture her firing a gun. “But don’t I need to be certified to handle such a thing?”

“Do you mean, a license? No, they have people there who can train you how to shoot. And you pay a fee, go in, and shoot. That’s pretty much it.”

“You make it sound not very exciting.”

“Definitely not as exciting as wall climbing. But you might like it. My dad used to say that it’s the kind of thing that works for individuals with a steady hand and a firm mind.”

“What did he mean by that? A steady hand, I think I understand that. But what about a firm mind?”

“I think he meant to say that once you set your mind to use a gun, you should show no hesitation when you pull the trigger. Well, he was a cop,” she said and sighed. “I do miss my old man.”

Otis examined his friend carefully. Missy did look sad, so he decided to ask. “Is he no longer among the living?”

Missy snorted. “He’s not dead. Just retired. And moved across the country, where it’s warmer and better for his old bones. Let’s shoot some guns, Otis, once we’re done here. However, since I know you’re the kind to budget everything down to the last penny, I should warn you that the fee for non-members is not exactly cheap. How badly do you want to do this?”

“Badly,” Otis decided. Hudson was certified to use his gun. That meant that he knew how to shoot it. Wouldn’t it be a surprise to let him know that he wasn’t unknowledgeable about guns, either?



Something was wrong with Jasper, Hudson thought, as he took in the young man and his pale complexion. He moved languidly like he was swimming not walking.

“I see that you brought him back,” he told Watkins, who was holding his prey by one arm.

“Yes, and it wasn’t easy. But now, he’s going to make some good money for us. Aren’t you, baby?” Watkins cooed in Jasper’s ear, making Hudson’s stomach turn.

Jasper nodded, and his eyes wandered over the rest of the people present, as if he couldn’t recognize anyone.

“You remember Vegas, right?” Watkins said cheerfully.

Jasper blinked a couple of times. “Yes,” he eventually said, but his voice was meek, coming from far away.

They must have drugged him, Hudson decided. Damn, things were moving fast. At least, some of that was working to his advantage, because it was unlikely that Jasper could talk much or that anyone would take his words seriously.

“What a pretty boy,” Keres commented and moved to touch Jasper’s face.

The guy flinched and his eyes fixed on the man touching him. However, whatever startled him was soon gone. He presently leaned into the gloved hand.

“Yes,” Keres said. The cadence of his metallic voice made him sound void of any emotion. It was likely that he had none to begin with. Hudson was inclined to believe that the first story about how Keres had come to get his physical problems was the actual truth.

“We need some great pictures of our debutant here,” Watkins said. “Do you think you can work with him like this, Vegas? We found him in a hellhole, drugged out of his mind, keeping company with bums and other rejects.”

“Shouldn’t we give him some time to come to his senses?” Hudson suggested.

Watkins shrugged. “We’ve lost a lot of precious time because of his antics. We need to get right to work, and I like him pliant like this, anyway. He’ll sleep it off later. Now, there has to be something more consistent to show our first guests as a preview.”

“Watkins,” Keres said and grabbed his associate’s shoulder.

Hudson could swear he saw Watkins flinching at the touch much as Jasper had done earlier. What kind of relationship existed between the two? His senses were all on high alert.

“Yes?” Watkins asked, still as a rock.

“Your boy here, Jackie. I want him for the preview, too.”

“Why? Jackie’s too old,” Watkins replied, on the defensive.

“I like his face.”

“You can kiss my ass, I’m not doing shit,” Jackie spat.

“Jackie,” Watkins said sternly. “As you wish, sir. Vegas, take the boys. They both have to look as if they are sleeping.”

Hudson caught hold of Jackie before he could make a run for it. He could very well understand what was going through the guy’s head, but now wasn’t the time for them to lose their wits.

“Come on, guys, you won’t have to do a thing, I promise,” he said cheerfully.

Only a stern look from him made Jackie eventually obey.

“What’s wrong with you?” Watkins hissed at him. “Weren’t you bugging me just the other day that you still wanted to make money with your ass? Now’s your chance.”

Hudson laughed, to cover whatever Jackie was about to say next. “It must be stage fright. I’m on it. You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

“Go to the room at the end of the hall. It’s more suitable for this kind of thing. Put the boys in various positions, find their best angles, and all that. Do your thing,” Watkins barked at him, most probably to cover up his lack of authority in front of the guy with the money. “You don’t want me to teach you how to do your job, right, Vegas?”

“No, sir,” Hudson replied.



“Are you kidding me? Are you freaking kidding me?” Missy bounced up and down, seemingly excited out of her wits.

Otis felt his face warm as he removed the headphones and the shooting target traveled to them from the other end. He looked at the small holes left by the bullets he had shot out of a gun. He had only used a pistol so far because the other weapons available seemed too daunting to him. The trainer had explained to him about the correct posture, how to hold his arms, and how to aim. He had listened to everything carefully and had proceeded exactly as told.

And Missy was impressed.

“Man, your accuracy is out of this world,” she said.

Even the trainer came closer to stare at his results. “Young man, I believe you’re a natural. Do you want to try something bigger?”

Missy began encouraging him. “Yes. Let’s see what you can do with a rifle next. And I thought I was a good shot,” she complained. “No, don’t look at me like that,” she warned him, pointing a finger at his chest. “You’re just that good a learner, I guess.”

He had always tried to be. And it appeared that all his dedication was finally paying off. Those hours of trying to get his mind to work hadn’t been in vain. Boy, Hudson would be so surprised when Otis sneakily invited him to a shooting range so that he could show off his skills. Although, that would have to happen at a later date since the fee was, indeed, as Missy had warned him, not quite budget-friendly, at least not for him.

He watched the trainer as the man explained how to use the rifle. All of this was pretty exciting. Maybe wall climbing was still better, but for what it was worth, he was enjoying it.



“The fuck do you think it’s wrong with him?” Jackie mumbled as he pulled at Jasper’s arm.

“Hush,” Hudson warned as he leaned over. “This place could be bugged, for all we know. Just let me take charge, and you won’t get hurt. Jasper, either.” He pretended that he needed to adjust the boys’ position so that he could shoot those words to his informant as quickly as he could. All the time, he made sure to keep his head down and at an angle that would be hard to catch on camera, in the off chance that any of the scumbags in charge of this shady operation could read his words off his lips.

Jackie was sweating profusely, and his hands trembled as he tried to get himself out of his clothes.

“You’ll be fine,” Hudson whispered quickly.

His words would be put to the test, without a doubt. But if there had been evidence about the wrongdoings of these assholes, they would have been in jail by now. That was his mission, why he was there: to find the evidence needed. At least, he could say that things were looking up for his undercover op. He had gotten to know Gideon Keres, if that was his real name. Tonight, he’d have to run some serious searches not only on the name, but on any information that could reveal more about the character. That hadn’t been any accident causing the guy to look so messed up. What kind of gangs or organizations had relied on torture decades ago? That was the timeline Hudson was setting for his further investigation of Keres. No wound on that hideous face was fresh. And despite being unable to tell Keres’s actual age, a young man he wasn’t.

“Hey, man,” Jackie made an attempt to get Jasper to look at him. “Vegas, quit staring at my naked ass.”

Hudson shook his head. “Unfortunately for me, I don’t have a choice. Now, lie by Jasper’s side. Ass up, yes. And close your eyes. Damn, you sure look better with your mouth shut, too.” He made light jokes, as if he were performing for strangers’ eyes, as he couldn’t tell whether there were eyes on him or not.

Jasper, however, didn’t seem capable of taking even as simple an order as that. His eyes wandered and his head lolled from one side to the other, as if his neck couldn’t hold the weight of it. Hudson moved closer and cradled the young man’s head in his palm. “It’s okay,” he told him. Whatever they must have given the guy, it was pretty strong stuff. Still, it didn’t knock him off his feet. It only kept him in a state of not being entirely conscious. Pliant. Had that been the word Watkins had used?

“Close your eyes, Jasper,” he said, kneeling on the bed the two guys were stretched out on, the camera in his hand ready to snap some pictures for the reptiloids running this show for freaks who took pleasure in others’ pain and suffering.

Jasper only stared at him, his chest rising and falling. Jackie stirred. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Hudson shook his head. “I have no idea. We don’t have all day though. So we have to make him close his eyes.” He hesitated for a moment. Deep darkness pulled at him, but with the same mental acuity that had helped him make the right decision in the blink of an eye, he opted for going with it just as his insides clenched deep in his gut. “Run your hand over his eyes,” he told Jackie and raised his camera.

“Like this?” Jackie asked, luckily oblivious to the significance of the gesture.

“Yes,” Hudson said and began snapping pictures, while Jackie’s fingers brushed over Jasper’s bluish eyelids making them descend over the unsettling eyes.

That should earn him a few points with the powers that be, he thought and set his jaw hard. On the worst days, he believed he’d quit his job. Getting so close to the evil that lay in people made him feel dirty, tainted by it. But then came a good day, like a sliver of hope. A day when a bad guy ended up where he belonged, and there was that bittersweet realization that, although the individual in question had hurt people, he wouldn’t hurt other innocents anymore. The world needed someone to stave off that darkness. And if that was him, so be it.



Otis smiled as he opened the door wide. “You’re late, but you’re here,” he said without reproach. Having a boyfriend came with some waiting on his part, but he didn’t mind it. Even that was new and exciting. He had something great to look forward to every evening now. The moment when Hudson would arrive, cross his threshold and come spend a few of his waking hours with him. In time, they would get to know each other, become so intimate that they wouldn’t know where one of them was ending and the other starting. Although not a poet by nature, Otis liked jotting down beautiful quotes like this, and now he remembered it.

“I only dropped by to tell you that I can’t sleep at your place tonight.”

“Oh.” Otis felt his face falling. That expression was quite literal when it happened to you. The muscles holding the cheeks suffered from the sudden pull of gravity, and there was weight to it, too.

“I have a lot of work to do, and that means that I’ll have to burn the midnight oil,” Hudson continued with a strained smile.

“You can work here,” Otis said, opening his door just a bit wider so that his boyfriend would understand his invitation.

“I’d rather not bother you. I won’t be any fun, and I’ll be up late. But tomorrow night, I’ll be here,” Hudson promised. He took one step forward and leaned in to kiss Otis’s cheek. “Also,

with you around, I think I'm going to feel too tempted to drop what I have to get done and jump your bones."

That was a reasonable explanation. His face lifted to its rightful place again. Hudson was complimenting him. He was telling him he was sexy and desirable. And Otis knew that he was one other thing. He was well aware of how important Hudson's work was to him.

"I understand," he said courteously. "Please see to your obligations. I can wait until tomorrow."

"Thank you," Hudson said with a relieved sigh. He moved his head and brushed his lips over the corner of Otis's mouth. It was an innocent kiss, but it felt so good. "See you tomorrow, then?"

"Yes. I will be here."

Hudson moved away and when he was about to walk into his apartment, Otis remembered what he had wanted to ask, mostly as a way to see how his boyfriend would feel about his suggestion. "Hudson, would you like to go out, not now, but some other time? Do something exciting?"

"Sure. Do you have something particular in mind?"

Otis licked his lips. "A shooting range."

Even from that distance, he could tell that Hudson's face had furrowed into a deep frown. "Why? You told me guns were dangerous. No, not a shooting range," he said brusquely. "But I'll think of something you will like."

Otis nodded. That had been a bad idea, it seemed. Hudson probably thought that he believed guns to be toys. And they weren't. He shouldn't have been so flippant about it.



Hudson closed the door and rubbed his forehead, surprised by the deep line etched between his eyebrows. He needed to keep Otis away from that world, his world. Why would he want to fire a gun? Obviously, only because he had seen his boyfriend carrying one.

He couldn't explain it, but he didn't like the idea of Otis with a gun in his hand. He was not that type of person. And the type of person he was, Hudson wanted to protect with all his being.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Boiling Frog

The screen burned his eyes. Hudson passed one hand over them and stifled a yawn. Sleep could wait; when there were such bad people at work, he couldn't succumb to the temptation of lying down on his cramped sofa for a nap. The chances were he wouldn't wake up until morning, and he hoped to get at least some information on what cave Gideon Keres had crawled out of.

As expected, searching for the name only led to very few results, and the people who happened to share the man's name – if that was his real name – had nothing in common with him, at least at first glance. Hudson's belief was that everyone had to come from somewhere, and sure as hell, the evil mind behind the murders that had tortured his sleep lately couldn't have materialized out of thin air.

He gave up on his searches related only to the name in favor of poring over a long list of horrible crimes from decades ago. Good thing that he could access the police database like this. Back in the day, other detectives didn't enjoy the same luxuries offered by technology as he had access to now. At first, he searched through crimes that had happened in the area that could have led to Keres's horrible disfigurement, but he realized that he needed to expand it beyond the local list of terrible events.

At one point, he believed he had found a thread. The presentation of the facts was as chilling as heart wrenching. A boy of twelve had been extracted from the ruins of an old building, and the doctors had thought he wouldn't survive. Miraculously, he had come back to life, and the police had noted that some of his extensive injuries couldn't have come from the building collapsing on top of him. There were suspicions of foul play, but the investigation that followed led to nothing conclusive. Hudson leafed through all the information available, but there was no mention of the victim having been interviewed in regard to his accident. No mentions of legal guardians being interviewed were there, either. The logical conclusion was that the victim was in no condition to be questioned, and no parents or other adults responsible for the boy's care had come out of the woodwork. The victim remained nameless and was integrated into the system, given a name eventually. Hudson needed to find out more, although there was one element that didn't fit and discouraged him in pursuing this line of investigation. The horrible accident had taken place only ten years prior, and Gideon Keres was definitely older than twenty-two.

That concluded his first foray into the search on the man controlling Twinlight and Till The Sweet End. He hadn't expected to have any conclusive results from the start, but the taste of disappointment was still bitter. Of course, a man like Gideon Keres wouldn't have an Instagram or a Facebook account, but no mention of such an affluent investor in the local press was a bad sign.

Keres knew how to conceal himself, in plain sight even. Hudson suspected that the man's operations – financial and otherwise – were carefully covered so that no suspicions would arise. However, contacting Gavin and having the guy use his contacts to discover if some unusual

investors had appeared lately on the government's radar was on his to do list. It was a long shot since financing a club most probably didn't count as that important a sum of cash to draw the attention of the highest powers investigating fraud and whatnot. Still, the money had to come from somewhere, and Hudson was very much interested in its provenance.

Bone-tired and disheartened by his lack of results, he collapsed on the sofa. Otis had truly noticed all the problems with it; it wasn't long enough so Hudson's legs went over and there was no healthy way for him to hold his head while sleeping. Probably, in the beginning, he had thought of bringing over a proper bed, but those thoughts had gone out the window the moment he had started working on the case. Once he got into that state, it was difficult for him to get back to what people considered normal, a normal that included things like the importance of getting proper sleep.

He checked the watch on his phone. Too bad he couldn't go knocking on Otis's door and slip into bed with him. That would have made everything better, Hudson thought, as exhaustion overtook him and he fell into a deep slumber.

When he woke in the morning, his head was pounding and it took him a good minute to realize that someone was knocking on the door. He groaned and managed to get to two feet and walk over. Halfway, he shifted to moving stealthily, as he always needed to check who was on the other side before answering.

He let out a breath of relief when he saw Otis waiting patiently in front of the door, unlike other times when he'd been quick to rush back to his apartment, afraid of disturbing his neighbor. Part of Hudson's tiredness, still not mended by his fitful sleep from the night before, disappeared at the sight of that pretty face. He quickly opened the door, anxious to see his boyfriend and forget, for a moment, about the actual reason he was there, forced to sleep badly and dream of putting bad guys away.

"Hi Otis," he said with a smile. "What's that?"

Otis lifted the casserole he was holding. "I made you some breakfast. Mini sandwiches. I thought you might want some."

"Definitely. Come on in. Do you have some time, or do you need to run to work?"

"No, not for some time. Are you sure I am not imposing?"

Hudson laughed and shook his head. "No. You are so polite. I'll leave you alone for a few minutes while I take a shower. You're not going to get bored, right?"

"I can examine those things on the wall some more."

"That works for me." Hudson took Otis's elbow gently and pulled him inside. "You're a godsend, you know? I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

“That is a strange expression,” Otis said. “I don’t think horse meat could be very good, but I’ve never had any, so maybe I’m wrong. Also, I would feel badly about eating a horse.”

“I suppose other people might not feel that bad, hence the saying. Don’t worry. I will always eat what you make, and I know that there won’t ever be horse on the menu.”



Otis watched Hudson disappear into the bathroom and began looking around. While his neighbor and boyfriend wasn’t particularly messy, the way the room looked suggested that Hudson had had a bad night. So, instead of examining the objects hanging on the wall, since he knew them all by now, he proceeded to open the window and tidy up the room. There were very few objects lying around, and Otis liked to believe that he had identified their correct places.

He stopped when he noticed the laptop. That had to be part of Hudson’s equipment for work. Otis had heard about photo processing and he believed now that people in magazines were never as good looking as they appeared to be since there were so many tools professionals could use to make them look like they didn’t have dark circles under their eyes, too much girth around the waist, or many other imperfections. Too bad there weren’t tools for erasing such things in real life with the same ease.

Although, lately, and only because of Hudson, he hadn’t worried as much about his scar. He touched it slowly, somewhat surprised to find it there still. With his boyfriend’s admiration, Otis would have expected it to have magically disappeared, but things never worked that way. Was his scar as bad as before now that he didn’t care about it the same?

That was a good question. Otis wondered if he could use Hudson’s laptop to learn new words from the Internet, but then he recalled his grandma always telling him about respecting other people’s property. That had been another thing he hadn’t had one idea about, although he wasn’t the kind to steal. He just liked beautiful things and wanted to touch them. The other kids in school, when he started going, looked so frightened when he attempted to do that.

Hudson’s laptop remained untouched. Otis sat on the sofa to wait for his boyfriend to finish his shower. He did so just in time, as the bathroom door opened.

“Did I leave the room like this?”

Otis straightened up. Maybe that was overstepping, too. “I know all the things on your wall now. I thought I would tidy up since you are so busy with your work. But I can put them all back the way they were.”

“No,” Hudson said. “Thank you for doing that for me. And it’s true. I had a long night, and I’m not the kind to bother that much with housekeeping. Can I have some of your delicious mini sandwiches?”

“Of course.” Otis removed the lid and handed Hudson a napkin. “They are all yours.”

“Damn, you should think about taking some courses to become a cook,” Hudson suggested as he sank his teeth into the second sandwich. “I’m sure you would do well in that line of business. Maybe even at the restaurant where you’re waiting tables at the moment. I bet they don’t know the potential you have.”

“You believe so? You do not just say these things because I’m your boyfriend and you must compliment me?”

“Cross my heart,” Hudson promised. “Although I must compliment you all of the time, too. You deserve it.”

Otis felt his cheeks warming up. Hudson had that effect on him. “Thank you,” he said primly. To hide his embarrassment, he looked around the room, in the end his eyes came to rest on the laptop on the small table. “Did it take all night to transform pictures?”

“Transform?”

“Like using special brushes to make people look twenty years younger.”

“Ah, I see. Something like that. It is hard work.”

“Can you show me?”

Hudson stared at him, looking surprised, and then shook his head. “I’m dealing with naked men every day. I don’t want to make you jealous.”

“I am not jealous.” Otis stopped himself in time. He wasn’t supposed to needle and pry. “I understand that your work is important. I will not bother you with such questions again.”

Hudson walked over to him and brushed his hair out of his eyes. “Hey, let’s not get this serious. And you’re the most beautiful guy I’ve ever met, anyway. Can I get a kiss?”

Otis nodded. He couldn’t help thinking that Hudson wanted to avoid talking about his work, which could mean that he probably didn’t enjoy it that much. At the same time, he was in no position to insist on learning more about it. After all, he had refused, when asked, to talk about his scar and how he had gotten it.



It felt disingenuous to refuse Otis point-blank like that, but Hudson didn't want his boyfriend anywhere near the things he was working on. Not that he didn't feel guilty about it. Even as Otis angled his head to accept his kiss and was an eager participant, Hudson could tell the other was disappointed at being refused like that. It looked like, lately, he was saying 'no' to Otis more often than not.

Maybe once this ordeal was over, he thought, he would tell Otis everything. Hell, if he wanted their relationship to continue – and he definitely wanted that – there was no way he could keep the fact that he was an undercover cop under wraps. All right, so his beautiful guy would eventually learn the whole truth, but it could wait. Hudson had more pressing matters to attend to.

Nonetheless, since he felt the need to atone, he caressed Otis's cheek gently and said, "I'll sleep at your place tonight. How would you like that?"

"I would like it very much," Otis declared with enthusiasm. "You don't have to work as hard tonight?"

"I will work on finishing everything before coming home. Wise people say that it's not good to bring your work home with you, to your family."

Otis looked like he was about to ask another question, but, in the end, he only smiled. "But you work at home, too." He gestured around, to make a point.

Hudson laughed and kissed Otis on the forehead and the nose. "I'm afraid you're too smart for my own good."

"Should I be less smart?" Otis asked, visibly puzzled over such a thing.

"No. Stay the way you are. You don't have to change a thing, unless you want to."

That appeared to please his pretty neighbor and lover. "That sounds very good. And I believe you shouldn't change, either. Just know that I am not jealous that you work with so many sexy naked men. It is your job."

There was nothing else he could say to that, save for leaning over for another sweet kiss. His decision was made that very moment. Once the case was solved, he would tell Otis the whole truth and put himself at his mercy.



"How are things?" he asked with a self-imposed relaxed smile as he approached Jackie.

His reluctant partner was standing in front of Twilight, chewing his nails and wearing a tired, haunted look on his young face. Gideon Keres had made a couple more jokes about the guy the day before, but in the end, he had told him that he was off the hook because he was way too old and also not that attractive once his clothes came off.

“I asked them to let me take care of Jasper. Vegas, man, I’m afraid they keep him on drugs all the freaking time.”

“What did they say? Are they letting you? That would be a good idea.”

“Yeah. It looks like Jasper is used to me. He needs to sleep a lot, and he mumbles in his sleep. He’s upstairs,” he said and pointed at the building where the club was located over his shoulder. “I only left him for a moment when I saw you coming.”

“So, there are actual bedrooms on the upper floor?” Hudson asked, eyeing the face of the building.

“If you can call them that,” Jackie said with a snort. “You’re going to catch these bastards, right?”

“I’m on it. It’s good that we know who’s running the business now. We’re getting closer. However, I will have to ask you to keep yourself together. What I need is solid proof, not just hunches. To nail bastards like them, serious work has to be done. What did Watkins tell you yesterday? I noticed that he stopped to talk to you before leaving.”

Jackie shrugged and his eyes relaxed for a moment, losing some of their haunted quality. “I suppose it was his way of telling me that he was sorry or something. Not in those words, but I think that was his intention. Good thing I’m too old, right?”

“Any word on Angel?”

“Not that I heard of, but the boss wants to see you in his office and since I’m here to deliver that message, I got a chance to see you. I’m sort of scared shitless, man.”

Hudson put a firm hand on Jackie’s shoulder. “I get you, don’t think I don’t. But you’re safe. Don’t do anything rash or stupid. It’s all I’m asking.”

“Easy for you to say. So, once you have that solid proof or whatever, are there going to be special forces all over the place? Breaking down doors, things like that?”

“We are being watched,” Hudson told a little lie. He needed Jackie to feel safe so that he didn’t endanger the operation by letting fear get the best of him.

Jackie let out a sigh of relief. “Great, man. That’s really good to know. Now go see the boss. It looks like he’s counting more on you than me these days.”

Hudson just nodded and patted Jackie on the back as he hurried into the club. He wondered what Watkins wanted to talk to him about.



Watkins had his back turned, along with his chair, when Hudson walked in. He seemed to have his eyes fixed on the red brick building in the back and didn't face his guest even after the door closed.

"Are you up for a special job?" he asked curtly.

"Sure. Tell me about it."

To his surprise, Watkins threw a set of keys at him over his shoulder without turning. "Go out through the back and into this building across the way. I will watch you climb the fire escape ladder. At the third floor, third door on the right. Go inside. The glass wall is a one way mirror. You know what I'm talking about. Like in--"

"Movies?"

"Interrogation rooms, I wanted to say."

"Okay," Hudson said, completely unperturbed on the surface.

"He cannot see or hear you," Watkins continued. "But there are means to rouse him. On your right, you will notice several levers. Use the second to send a soda can his way. He might be thirsty by now."

"Boss," Hudson began, "with all due respect, what's going on?"

Watkins finally turned in his seat and gave him a vague look of recognition. Unlike his usual behavior, he seemed lost in thought. "Just a bit of punishment for Angel, that's all. When he's angry, he's at his best. Don't worry, he'll get out of there eventually, and it's not his first time. Take pictures, Vegas, as I told you."

"Okay," Hudson said slowly. "What's the angle?"

"Trapped," Watkins said and the ghost of a smile passed over his face. "Tell me if you can do it. You must know by now that we're not your ordinary entertainment suppliers. The boys don't mind being pushed around a little bit. Like yesterday, with Jasper. As you can see, I've succeeded in bringing everyone back into the fold."

"It appears so, yes," Hudson said, acting his best to continue to seem surprised and puzzled.

Watkins stared at him with open hostility. “Are you having second thoughts? Is the pay not good enough?”

Hudson reacted as if roused from his sleep by an urgent order. “I’m on it, sir. You can count on me.” He pointed at Watkins with the keys in his hand and hiked the camera bag up onto his shoulder. In a moment, he was out of the room. Like a good lap dog who knew better than to bite the hand feeding him.



The whole world seemed better since he had a boyfriend. Otis couldn’t very well explain the sensation, but it was growing day after day. While yesterday had had its reasons to make him feel a little down as Hudson had needed to focus on his work, today was a different matter altogether. There was lightness in his bones, making him float around, from table to table, serving the usual patrons with a big smile on his face. Some of his good mood seemed able to be passed to others, who turned to him with their faces lit up by a happiness that didn’t belong to them. It was like a fire that could keep others warm, Otis thought, as he felt prey to poetry.

He was halfway through his current orders when he almost crashed into Missy, who was coming from the opposite direction. “Aren’t you happy?” His colleague smiled openly and her big hairdo wiggled as she sidestepped as if in a dance movement.

“I sure am,” Otis admitted.

For unknown reasons, his eyes flicked to the big windows, at the world outside. The evening was setting in, and the weather was growing colder with each passing day. There was nothing out there to tinge his joyful feelings, but Otis still shivered slightly.

“Damn,” Missy said, “is there something wrong with our AC? I suddenly felt a chill.”

That had to be it. “Did you feel it, too?”

Missy rubbed her forearms vigorously. “A bit like that saying. You know, that someone’s walking over your grave?”

“What a strange saying,” Otis remarked. But one that described that sudden jolt he had just experienced earlier down to a tee. He would search for its exact meaning at home.

His grandma had told him on more than one occasion that he didn’t have to let himself fall prey to a state of melancholy only because the past had ugliness in it. Only this kind of situation that Otis couldn’t describe very well wasn’t the past. It was actually... nothing if he thought about it a little more. And that meant he had no reason to let it shadow his happiness. With that thought in mind, he continued his floating routine around the tables.



He fought the temptation to look toward the Twilight building as he walked up the fire escape at a steady pace. That room, as Jackie had recalled it, must have been Angel's fate, after all. But why? If only he could communicate with the guy, but that seemed unlikely. Hudson was beyond certain that his moves would be observed by a concealed eye all the time. The noose was only getting tighter, with Angel's life on the line now, too.

What if there was something else afoot? The investigator in him needed to base all conclusions, even transitory ones, on a thorough examination of the facts from all angles. For all he knew, Angel could be in on it. He could put on a show for Hudson, at Watkins's orders; after all, he had proven during their first encounter that he could be one hell of an actor. Also, Hudson didn't feel that the theory there had been a falling out between Watkins and Angel could stand on two legs.

His gut instinct didn't pull him in either direction. It was sitting this one out, which meant that Hudson had to rely strictly on what his intellect was telling him about it all.

Once inside the building, he stopped on the landing for only a moment so that he could throw a furtive look back to locate the window to Watkins's office, through which the scumbag was often staring at this other building. How many young men had he kept in here? Hudson wondered. These old buildings housed renters from all walks of life, and it didn't strike him as particularly out of the ordinary that a man like Watkins chose it for his nefarious plans. What did surprise him, however, was the nerve of the guy to be so bold as to have it so close to his so-called legitimate business.

He entered the place using one of the two keys in the set. What was the second for? Staring at the grated metal door that separated more than half of the apartment from the rest, he knew that he had his answer. A short hall followed and then he was in front of the one-way mirror.

The mirror being, obviously, on the other side so that Angel could watch himself go through all his stages of grief. He didn't hear Hudson at all, that much was clear, because he was lying on one side, curled on the floor, his back to the wall separating him from whoever was watching him. Hudson prepared his camera, acting as he might very well be expected to act, given the abnormal nature of his task. He looked around, shrugged his shoulders and lifted the camera to take a few shots of the naked man on the other side.

He stopped and pretended that he was checking the photos he had taken so far, as his eyes darted sideways to the levers. There were three of them, and he only knew what one did. What were the other two for?

Throughout his career as a detective, he had seen a lot of bad things and met plenty of questionable characters. But this case was taking him over in ways that made his skin crawl. His only saving grace was having Otis at home to stave off the darkness.

He shook his head. He didn't want to think of his innocent, beautiful boyfriend while he was in a place like this. The separating wall must have been erected some time ago, as his eyes searched for signs of an earlier construction project, finishing touches that might point out at a worker having done it recently. That could only mean that this wasn't the first time Watkins had kept someone there. The conversation he'd had with Jackie on the topic had told him as much.

That also meant that the unusual project must have been handled by someone – a company, or at least a group of people – and Hudson's bet was on the same name or names now handling the refurbishing at Till The Sweet End. That was one trail he could follow.

His gut roiled as he reached for the second lever, knowing in advance or at least guessing what display of human misery he would soon witness. The room where Angel was kept was well soundproofed, because he only saw the soda can rolling on the floor. However, the captive could hear it very well because he jerked from his slumber and crawled across the floor on his hands and knees to grab it.

Hudson lifted his camera again, capturing Angel's slow motion. His hair was matted and there was something about him that told Hudson that Angel must not have washed for days. That meant that Watkins had kept this a secret for some time.

At first, the young man opened the can and gulped greedily from it. But he must have been only halfway through when his head turned slowly toward the one way mirror wall. His face changed, metamorphosing under Hudson's eyes. His usually shrewd smile was now twisted, and Hudson flinched when Angel threw the can at the glass, leaving a smear across it as the bubbles from the fizzy drink faded into oblivion.

Then, the guy walked over to the wall and stared into it. Hudson knew it wasn't him Angel was looking at, because he was off to the left. However, it was evident to the person on the other side that desperation was slowly creeping in the captive's harmonious facial features.

And then, he raised his fists and began thumping the wall. At first, with pursed lips and determined eyes, metamorphosing gradually into an expression of wild pain.

And Hudson began snapping pictures again, steeling himself against the display in front of him. He needed to focus on how his conversation with Watkins would go; he needed to weigh Angel's chances of surviving this ordeal. Taking into account what he knew so far, he had no reason to believe that Watkins intended to starve Angel to death, but he better have his burner at the ready to have the good guys storm the place.

The main reason he was evaluating all the facts was that he was after bigger fish than Watkins now. Based on the way Angel was being treated, there could be enough to bury the guy, but his boss, Gideon Keres, would wiggle his way out of it like the snake he was. That was the chance he didn't want to take.

He waited until Angel's energy left him. His silent cries of anger and despair had been caught on camera and were now ready for delivery. Hudson believed that his job was done once Angel realized that his efforts were in vain and withdrew sullenly into a corner. He probably believed he was alone again.

So far, Watkins had been introducing him slowly to his house of horrors, Hudson realized. He was the boiling frog in the man's eyes – or had it been Keres's idea? – someone to be tested, step by step, until he became one of them. It was what he had been after from the get-go, but Hudson had trouble pushing down the bile rising up in his throat.

He put his camera back into its bag and hurried out, throwing one last look at Angel who had fallen to one side now and was looking at nothing. His wide unblinking eyes made Hudson shiver. Since some reaction was expected from him, at least for now, he didn't have to act unmoved by all of it.



Watkins was waiting for him with a huge smile on his face. Hudson didn't have to look twice at that cold unpleasant face to know that he had passed the test.

“That is absolutely marvelous, Vegas,” Watkins said as he looked through the pictures taken of the captive across the street. “You really know your stuff, but that's not all.” The man pointed a finger at him. “You earned my respect. And my trust. Most people would have run out of that building like they were on fire and made fools out of themselves by going to the police.”

Hudson stared at his employer, his eyebrows raised. “What do you mean, sir?”

Watkins offered him another sly grin that could give anyone at the receiving end the willies. “What did you think of Angel's situation?”

“He doesn't look like he's in his best shape. He really pissed you off, didn't he?”

Watkins took Hudson's shoulder. It took him all the effort he could muster not to shake the touch away. “He did, and that's why he agreed to play his role in this little ruse.”

“Ruse?”

“Yes, of course.” Watkins pulled out his phone. As soon as the other person answered, he held it so that Hudson could see who was taking the video call.

Angel's face appeared on the screen, grinning ear to ear.

"Say cheese, Angel," Watkins said in a cheerful tone.

"Vegas, you should see your face," Angel called from the other end.

Hudson grinned, too, and shook his head. "You had me there, the two of you."

Mission accomplished. Watkins believed him to be a total schmuck.

Chapter Twenty-Four – How to Educate Your Dom

The elevator was out of order, so he took the stairs, climbing them two at a time. The exercise did him good, the ache in his muscles once he reached his floor a good indication that there was a lot he needed to work out of his system. After seeing Angel on the screen of Watkins's phone, his mind had become a nest of snakes. What was Angel's role in all of this? As he had suspected – one of the versions of truth he had examined on his way to 'that room' – Angel appeared to be in cahoots with Watkins.

Those young men, the victims, had been prey for these predators. Some people were in charge, like Watkins and Keres, but someone had to be the hand that killed. Was that Angel's role in the organization? Hudson remembered quite clearly what great delight lit Angel's flawless face while roughing up Jasper on stage during the show Hudson had been asked to immortalize in pictures, the first test of his gullibility in a string of many.

Throughout his career, he had met many people who fell into the trap of believing that a beautiful face couldn't hide darkness behind it, while only average or ugly looking people could be, in their book, committing crimes. It was a common human fallacy; it had an explanation. And if anyone looked at someone like Keres, his face so akin to a character from a horror movie, they would immediately believe him to be as bad as they come. They wouldn't think the same thing about Angel for a moment. His physical beauty made the perfect cover-up.

Hudson preferred to keep his options open. Angel could or couldn't be the one in charge of the actual killing. One thing was certain, and it had been quite clear from the first moment he had laid his eyes on Angel. There was no way the guy was innocent, no way that he didn't know, at least partially, that his boss's dealings involved things that were beyond the sort of stuff BDSM clubs were usually known for.

But then, that night with the police raid, Angel had looked freaked out by something. Hudson wished he knew what that was; the guy had just proven his abilities as an actor, putting on a show for Hudson. He had looked every bit like a trapped animal, behaved like someone being kept inside a creepy room against his will, and yet—

Hudson rested his feet against a chair and tipped his head back, searching the ceiling for answers. Angel's performance in that room had been just that, a performance. He had acted as expected, from lying unmoving on the floor to the dramatic way he had thrown the half-drunk can of soda at the mirror wall.

And all the time he had had a phone with him. For the next part, Hudson closed his eyes. He'd been told, on more than one occasion, that he had an excellent memory, pretty much like a camera; he could remember details like no one could from those snapshots of flashbacks, things that had helped him a lot in his work as a detective.

Where had Angel kept the phone? At first glance, the room had appeared to be exceptionally bare, nothing on the floor, nothing on the walls. That wasn't entirely true. The wall opposite the mirror had a window, as Watkins couldn't wall that in or else the people in charge of the building maintenance would have taken notice. The window had been covered with heavy burlap curtains, but the sill...

Yes, now Hudson could see it. He reached for his camera to see if his memory served him well, as usual. He flicked through the pictures taken earlier in the afternoon and zoomed in. There it was, a thin flicker of silver, the phone case. Next thing, he focused on Angel's expressions. It was in the eyes, of course. There was no fear in them, no matter how twisted his mouth was in a snarl. His eyes were relaxed and now that Hudson saw it, he couldn't un-see it.

Angel was an element that fit in place. Whatever the thing that had spooked him during the night of the raid, it could have no connection whatsoever to the things happening on the dark side of Twilight. The young man was a complicated fellow, after all.

The knock on the door took him by surprise. He smiled as he realized who it might be. Even the way he knocked was polite. This time, Hudson had no reason to tiptoe to the door and examine the person on the other side, as usual. He did it, nonetheless, part force of habit, part the anticipation of seeing Otis standing there, his face serene and void of any malice.



Hudson could very well be late from work, although that was a stretch since he didn't seem to keep regular hours like other people did. Otis had opted against sending a message or calling on the phone as he didn't want to meet with refusal again. He had read that people often had a harder time refusing something when face to face with the person asking them something than over the phone. In hindsight, he was surprised that door-to-door marketing wasn't still as big a thing as it had been in the past. Marketers preferred calling nowadays, even sending emails which were so easy to discard.

He must have been still wondering about the mysterious evolution of marketing when Hudson opened the door because the hint of laughter in his boyfriend's voice let him know he looked sort of weird.

“Where do you plan on taking me? To try some exotic food out? The kind with insects in it?”

Otis opened his mouth to deny any such thing and then remembered his decision to be as truthful as he could be with the man sharing his bed. “I was wondering why people who sell things now prefer emails and phone calls to door-to-door marketing.”

“I see,” Hudson said as if he really did understand where Otis was coming from with saying things like that. “I promised to take you out, so I suppose that is why you are here.”

“No,” Otis replied truthfully. “I am here because I do not intend to make the same mistake as other marketers today. I am here in person to invite you over. And you must sleep with me.”

Hudson leaned against the door jamb and gave him a long look. Otis felt his skin prickling and his ears getting hot.

“Not like that,” he protested. “I mean it as real sleep.”

“If you really mean it like that, you disappoint me,” Hudson said as he walked back into his apartment. He left the door wide open but didn’t invite Otis in, leaving him to crane his neck to watch him. “Come on, let’s go to your place,” Hudson added as he came back.

Otis nodded shortly and walked in front so that he could open the door. Would Hudson believe that he was addicted to sex? Addiction was a stranger to him, in the sense that he didn’t drink or smoke. He liked to buy his figurines and have a good night sleep, but that was the extent of things he believed he couldn’t very well live without.

Sex with Hudson, however, was stronger stuff than his liking of tiny figurines and need for eight hours of sleep each night. As he thought about it, he felt his skin only growing hotter. It wasn’t a thing he could hide, and Hudson was walking right behind him, which only meant that he was a first-hand witness to all of his embarrassment.

All those things went out of his mind the moment they were inside, because Hudson grabbed him and kissed him hard on the lips.

“I hope this is the main reason why you want me here, or otherwise I fear that I’m losing my appeal.”

It was a joke. Hudson was good at joking, and Otis made a mental note to ask him later how it came so easily to him to say amusing things. Again, his thoughts were cut short as Hudson cupped one hand around his head and kissed his lips. Their tongues moved together, and it was a good exercise to forget about everything else. Maybe that was the reason why sex could be addictive. It took over your mind, and you became unaware of anything else.

Because it was with Hudson, Otis wasn’t scared. His boyfriend made him sit on the bed and then climbed on it, holding him between his strong thighs. When he looked up, their eyes met. Hudson’s dark eyes burned, making his skin burn even hotter.

Wild wasn’t a word to describe him. He had never been like that, but there was a part of him that ached to be free. Otis put his impatient hands on Hudson’s chest and grabbed at the fabric of his t-shirt, feeling the hard chest underneath. He pushed them up in an effort to get his man out of the thing as quickly as possible.

“Ouch, I think you pulled some hair out there,” Hudson said.

“I’m sorry,” Otis murmured, although he was far from being any sort of sorry. He only continued to pull at Hudson’s t-shirt until he gained access to bare skin.

Hudson took it upon himself to pull his t-shirt over his head and render himself naked from the waist up. Otis put his hands on the handsome chest again and pulled at the coarse hair with intention this time.

“You cheeky--” Hudson sucked in a breath as Otis went for his prize, a pert nipple that grew harder in his mouth.

Otis didn’t protest in the slightest at being subjected to the same treatment. His shirt was pulled out of his pants and Hudson worked his hands up underneath it until he reached Otis’s chest. They played with each other’s nipples, as little thrills thrummed through both of them. Their bodies vibrated in synch. This had to be the sort of thing that meant they were compatible.

“I want to taste you, baby,” Hudson said pleadingly.

With reluctance, Otis let go of the nipple in his mouth and fell onto his back. Hudson was an expert at taking him out of his clothes, but he worked with naked men all day long, so he had to be.

The question left his mouth before he had a chance to stop it. “Have you done this with your models?”

“Are you jealous?” Hudson asked and grinned as he unbuckled his belt.

Otis’s eyes remained fixed on his boyfriend’s moves. He was fascinated by everything Hudson did.

“Are you asking me if I taste them the way I taste you?” Hudson pulled at the belt slowly, freeing it from the loops of his jeans.

“In the past,” Otis whispered. “That is what I asked.”

Hudson held the belt in one hand and moved it slowly over Otis’s chest. “Admit that you are jealous, even if just a smidge.”

“But that is not done. Jealousy is petty, not pretty.”

“Says who?” Hudson challenged him while moving the belt lower, letting it graze over Otis’s now hard manhood and letting it drop even lower. He caressed the insides of Otis’s thighs with it and then slapped one of them.

The slap didn't hurt; it was too soft for that, but it was sudden enough to make Otis jerk his body upright.

"What did you do that for?" he asked.

"You are very curious about the things on my wall. Do you want me to show you more?"

Otis only nodded, too taken with how Hudson moved the belt around, smacking it against his skin ever so lightly, to utter another word.

"You will have to tell me a word. A safe word."

Otis looked up. "What for?"

"So that I know if I'm going too far or too fast. Right now, I want to caress your lovely ass with this belt until you admit to being jealous."

"Is this like a game?" he asked, cocking his head to one side to give Hudson a good look.

"Yes, but it is a game between people who love and trust each other."

Love. Otis blinked one time. In movies and whatnot, the story ended with 'I love you'. But he didn't want his story to end there, so he took that word, said so seriously by his boyfriend, and held it carefully as you would a small scared chick.

"I trust you," he said.

Hudson smiled and ruffled his hair with his free hand. "And for this to work, I must know that I can trust you. Safe word, my beautiful prince."

Otis looked around, his eyes falling on his collection. "Seahorse," he said without thinking twice.

"All right. Turn."

He did so without thinking twice and continued to remain silent as Hudson placed him on all fours and made him part his legs a little. In passing, he received a caress on his ball sac, but it was short-lived. His cock was hard now and Otis knew he desired to have sex with his boyfriend, but he had agreed to the game, and now he was curious about what would happen next.

Hudson rested his belt briefly on one of Otis's exposed buttocks and then gave it a sharp smack. As before, Otis jerked for a moment, surprised by the act. It should have been something to abhor, being hit, but he experienced nothing of the sort. Instead, he felt anticipation. He bit his bottom lip and hiked his butt back.

"What a lovely show," Hudson purred. "Do you really believe I would have eyes for another man when it is you I have in my bed? Presenting so beautifully like this?"

Another smack followed, prompting Otis to gasp in disbelief. Tingling happened in his lower belly, a different kind of want. He wanted more of that, and he wanted it harder. But if he spoke the truth, if he admitted he was jealous, what would happen then?

The game would be over, and he didn't want anything like that to happen. Not before he was beyond reason crazy with wanting for Hudson. So he said nothing.

"I see. You are quite the stubborn fellow," Hudson said, and he appeared to feel as delighted at the prospect of plying his belt some more as Otis was.

A series of smacks followed, no stronger than the previous one had been. Otis felt frustrated. He wanted more of it.

"Harder," he found himself saying.

"What?"

"Harder," he said through his teeth. "All you are doing is caress me with your belt."

Hudson made a further point by moving his belt around each buttock without doing anything else. "So, let me understand this. You prefer to be hit harder rather than admit your jealousy?"

Otis felt a little mean streak growing inside him. It scared him in its urgency and suddenness. "I feel nothing," he said. "You don't hit hard enough."

The following smack landing on his backside was stronger. At the point of contact with the skin, Otis felt a sting. So liberating, he thought, although he could feel it, and it was starting to feel uncomfortable.

"Still disappointing," he said slowly, as he remembered Hudson's earlier use of the word.

Hudson seemed to hesitate. Otis didn't look over his shoulder, although he wanted to. The following smack echoed in his small room, and he gasped. It hurt. But, at the same time, it felt good. It was punishment, and it wasn't. It was safe.

"More," he demanded, bracing himself for the next smack.

It didn't follow.

"I can't, Otis," Hudson said and sucked in a breath. "It's going to leave marks."

Otis felt tears pricking his eyes. "It doesn't matter."

"You can't mean it. It must hurt."

"It does, but it feels good," Otis said stubbornly. "Use something else, something that won't leave marks. Go back to your room and bring something."

“This wasn’t supposed to go like this. You look like the squeamish type.”

Otis ground his teeth. He’d heard enough.



Hudson was taken aback by Otis turning brusquely. His beautiful boyfriend had a new fire in his eyes.

“This is not fair. You started it.”

In all honesty, he had expected to tease Otis a few times with the belt, never hitting him more than a couple of times. His boyfriend was the truthful type, and he had expected to find Otis admitting to his petty not pretty jealousy right away.

Instead, he had watched the flawless skin turn red under his ministrations, and it had taken him a moment or two to realize that he was going too far. And that Otis showed no intention of stopping him, but instead seemed bent on egging him on.

Otis grabbed his wrist hard. “You must finish it or I won’t forget it.”

“Wow, that sounds like a threat.”

“And you like it,” Otis added, seemingly deaf to his words.

The way his boyfriend grabbed him by the front of his jeans spoke volumes. Hudson had to admit that seeing Otis, prim and proper Otis, surrender to him like that, with no questions asked, enthralled him.

“All right,” he said in a whisper. “But I’m going to use my hand only. And I’ll use the safe word once I think it’s enough.”

“Not fair,” Otis warned him with the same resolute look in his eyes.

Hudson raised one hand and caressed Otis’s scar. “Not everything in life is fair.”

To that, Otis replied by looking guilty. Hudson had a feeling there was some misunderstanding going on, but he wouldn’t let his boyfriend withdraw from it. So, he threw the belt away and climbed on the bed, pulling Otis over his lap.

“No, not like this. I want you to watch me so that you know,” Otis said and moved so that he could straddle Hudson. “Here. Smack me hard.” He took Hudson’s hand and moved it over his ass.

Their eyes locked, and Hudson obeyed the order. Otis's eyes grew wide, his eyelids fluttered, but then an expression of complete bliss flooded his face. Hudson watched the transformation happening under his very eyes, mesmerized by it. The sound of his hand slapping Otis's ass became a faraway noise as he put his all into it. And with each of the blows, Otis gasped and closed his eyes, and then he smiled, each time a bigger smile than the one before, until it seemed as if his entire face was nothing but a huge blissful expression of joy.

"Otis," he warned, as his groin ached.

Otis caressed his head and looked him in the eyes. "Would you like to fuck me now?"

Such dirty words coming from such a pure mouth. They weren't dirty anymore. Hudson growled low in his chest. "Have some mercy. Say the word, Otis."

Otis's grin turned sly. He leaned over to brush his lips over Hudson's mouth. "Seahorse."



He was on his back, with Hudson between his legs. His backside flared from time to time, as his now sensitive skin brushed against the crumpled sheets. The piercing rubbed against the tender spot inside his ass, and it was a maddening sensation. He wrapped his arms tightly around Hudson.

"I am jealous, I am so jealous," he chanted as his boyfriend fucked him hard. "I'm jealous of everyone who's ever been with you like this."

"You needed a red ass to admit it," Hudson breathed into his ear. "Damn, Otis, you feel so good."

"I can feel your piercing, it's so good," Otis said, grabbing the sheets with one hand. "Tomorrow, let's go tomorrow."

"What? What do you mean?" Hudson asked in a ragged whisper.

"To the place that allows us... no condoms..."

"Fuck, baby," Hudson growled into his ear and bit on the lobe, hard enough to hurt.

Otis liked it. He liked that kind of hurt, too. "Yes," he whispered, no longer caring whether it was the proper thing to talk like that. "I want you all inside me. To come inside me. Please, you are so good to me."

"Oh, fuck, you really know how to make a man crazy. Say it, Otis, say you want my cum inside you. I want to hear you say it."

So he said it, over and over, while Hudson thrust into him in short strokes, making Otis feel like the end was nearer with each of them. When they stopped, it only happened because they were at the peak.

“I’m afraid I love you, Otis,” Hudson said suddenly, while locking eyes with him.

Otis felt raw happiness splitting his chest wide open. “Don’t be afraid.”

Hudson clamped his mouth hard over his, making him forget that the correct thing to say back was ‘I love you’. But their story wasn’t over, he believed, and their bodies shook together until it made everything else that was real disappear.



Hudson held Otis in his arms, caressing his ass slowly and enjoying every moment the slender body in his arms trembled gently in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Yes, he could call it that. He hadn’t expected to say those words, but they had just flown out of him, and he had no intention of taking them back. He felt empty and free, all in the best of ways.

“You know, that was pretty crazy, in anyone’s book, I’d say.”

“Because of the spanking?” Otis asked, his voice drowsy.

“Yes. I mean, it’s not like it’s the first time--”

“Hush, I don’t want to hear about your other men,” Otis ordered, this time sounding livelier.

Oh, but he was his little tiger. He was too innocent to realize how he sounded, and that made it absolutely perfect. “All right. I won’t speak about others anymore. Not only in your presence. Anywhere else.”

“That sounds extreme.”

“And you’re surely the guy to talk about extremes. You crazy little beautiful thing,” Hudson scolded his lover, “what was that all about?”

“You mean, why did I want to be punished? It’s... I needed it. I need it.”

“Why would you need such a thing? I bet you’ve never hurt a fly in your life.”

“That is true. But I did hurt someone else.”

That sounded like a confession. Hudson held his breath, waiting for more to follow, but none did. “You’ll tell me everything about it one day, won’t you?”

“I will,” came the promise.

They both had things they kept hidden. He wasn't one to talk, given what he was keeping from his boyfriend, someone he claimed he loved. He pulled Otis closer into his arms and kissed his head. Every bit was true; especially about being afraid. A curtain of red descended over his eyes as a transient thought crossed his mind – if anyone, ever, dared to hurt his Otis, he would kill that person.

Otis's soft groan let him know he was holding the other too tightly now. He released him and then let out one deep breath. “Now, tell me, my sweet boyfriend, where did you learn to order a dom around like that?”

“A dom? Like in a dom-sub relationship? I did read about such things,” Otis admitted.

“I'm sure,” Hudson purred. “And I bet you took an intensive course on how to educate your dom.”

Otis looked like there was not one ounce of sleepiness left in him. He moved closer and stared at Hudson greedily. “Are there courses like that? Are they expensive?”

Hudson laughed out loud. “Only you would think of budgeting something like that with the intention of driving your boyfriend crazy about you. Don't worry about stuff like that. You're obviously a natural.”

“Hmm, just like--” Otis stopped abruptly.

“Like?” Hudson asked, curious about the sudden stop.

Otis shook his head and rolled away from him. “Like my cooking,” he said brightly, but it was obvious he was lying.

It couldn't be anything bad, Hudson thought. Otis was honest, and if he was keeping anything to himself, it had to be for reasons that were as innocent as they could be.

Of course, there was the story behind the scar, and that was something Hudson really wanted to learn about, not out of curiosity, but out of a need to remove all reasons for hurt from his beautiful boyfriend's life.



They lay on the bed, facing each other. Otis watched Hudson curiously as his man traced each of his facial features with his fingers. He seemed to take great pleasure in doing that, as if he was painting him.

“Have you always wanted to be a photographer?”

“No, not always, but I’ve been told I have an eye for beauty.” Hudson didn’t stop.

Otis liked the way those rough fingers moved across his face. “You have many men like that posing for you.”

“I promised not to talk of other men. How about being a good sport and avoiding the topic, too?” Hudson suggested.

“Of course,” Otis hurried to agree. His courage from earlier was mostly gone. His ass was throbbing, too. He shifted a bit and pursed his lips.

“And now, you’re starting to feel it, right?” Hudson said with a sly smile. “Do you have anything for the pain in here?”

“Only some aspirin. I don’t budget for things that are not a regular need.”

“As I imagined. Although I still suspect you of buying the most expensive course on the market to learn how to train your dom.”

“I have done no such thing,” Otis said. He regretted not having thought of doing such a thing, but he had no idea that there were courses like that. “And I don’t believe I will ask you to spank me again soon.”

“I’m just teasing you. I’ll run to my place and come back with something a bit stronger than your aspirin. I want you to be able to sleep.”

Otis nodded and watched Hudson getting dressed so that he could walk out of the apartment. He waited for a moment and then, driven by curiosity, he reached for Hudson’s gun, stashed, as usual inside the drawer.

Now he knew a lot more about guns. He knew how to remove the safety and then pull the trigger. He raised one hand and pointed it toward the door, trying to recall the lessons from the shooting range. He almost dropped it when Hudson appeared in the door frame.

“Otis!” Hudson shouted at him and then grabbed the weapon from his hand. “Don’t ever do that.”

“I--” he started but quickly realized how it must have looked. “I’m sorry. I was just curious. The safety was on. But it’s not safe practice to point a gun around like that,” he babbled.

“Hey,” Hudson said gently as he still held the gun in one hand, “it’s okay. Do you want me to explain to you why it’s dangerous? And you will have to promise that you will never touch my gun again. Ever. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes, I understand.”

Hudson sighed and patted the place by his side. Otis moved there eagerly and watched as his boyfriend explained things he already knew.

“Now, listen to me closely. It is very important that you don’t play with such things. It’s why I’m keeping it close to me all of the time. But if that’s a problem, I’d rather sleep at my place. When I go, my gun goes.”

Otis nodded, feeling rightfully chastised. “Please, don’t leave. I promise I will never touch your gun again.”

Hudson pursed his lips and gave him a short sad look. “I’m sorry I bring such a dangerous thing here. I should--”

“Don’t go,” Otis pleaded and grabbed his arm. “It was stupid of me. Tell me what I have to do to keep you here, and I will do it.”

“Your word is enough,” Hudson said.

Even if he said so, it felt as if a wedge had been driven between them. Otis hated it, he hated that he had become so curious about guns. Not only he would never touch Hudson’s gun, but he would never touch a gun again ever in his life.

He was surprised by Hudson pulling him close. His body was so warm against his. “Take the pill I brought you. Your ass will hurt a lot less. I need to remind myself that you can really surprise me sometimes.”

“I will let you know about my intentions in advance from now on. This way, you won’t be surprised anymore.”

“Hey, don’t make it sound like a bad thing. And in due time, we’ll get to know each other well. Until then, surprise me all you want. For instance, you can surprise me with breakfast in bed.”

That sounded like a good idea. The wedge wasn’t there anymore. Hudson reassured him with a few kisses planted all over his face.

“There, that’s your punishment if you prefer to call it that. Make me breakfast, and we’re even.”

“I will make you breakfast every day.”

“Let’s not turn me into the perfect feckless husband,” Hudson joked. “I will make breakfast, too, at least from time to time.”

“But you seem bad at it. You have other skills.”

“Hmm,” Hudson purred in his ear, “you surely make me feel like I know next to nothing. Tonight, you taught me how to dominate you, and I had a fairly good opinion of myself in that sort of role.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Not about that. It was an incredible experience, and I won’t forget it soon. Now, let’s get to bed as it’s getting late, and I believe we’ve had our fair share of excitement for a single evening.”

“I agree. Are there any specific dishes you prefer for breakfast, lunch and dinner?”

“None whatsoever. I promise I will eat anything you give me. You’re the best cook in my world.”

Otis snickered. “Then your world must be very small.”

“It doesn’t matter how big or small it is, as long as you’re in it.”

Chapter Twenty-Five – A Game of Fate

Hudson woke up with a start. A strange dream had disturbed his sleep through what felt like the entire night. It involved Otis wielding a gun and laughing a harsh unpleasant laugh, and every time Hudson had tried to take the weapon away from him his beautiful face had turned into the nightmarish visage of Gideon Keres. Other faces had come and gone, belonging to Jackie, Jasper, Angel, and the victims the police had on file. In his dream, Hudson had walked down a gallery of such faces, a gallery of death – he had thought at the time – although many of them hanging there were still alive.

Still? He straightened up until he was in a sitting position and ran his hands over his face. A grey morning was sneaking into bed with them and the promise of a new day filled him with apprehension. He reached for Otis, who was deeply asleep. Not a morning person, his beautiful boyfriend. That was enough to bring a smile to his face, the remnants of his bad dreams already shrinking and fading to the shape of a soon to be forgotten memory.

He pushed himself out of bed and traipsed toward the bathroom. What nonsense. He wasn't the kind to believe in dreams. They only went to show the tremendous amount of stress he had been under lately. He would catch those bastards soon. Watkins and Keres obviously wanted a debut with a bang for Till The Sweet End, and they had no idea there was an intruder in their midst.

Not one, but two. Hudson trusted Jackie to be on his side until the end. After that, he would have to take care of the guy, one way or another. He couldn't just abandon him to his own devices. Funny how paternal he felt toward the young thug. But, in his book, Jackie was someone who could use some saving, and saving was Hudson's job.

He went through the motions, brushing his teeth, taking a shower, washing away the misery of last night's dreams. Otis's bathroom was small and filled with steam quickly, giving him the illusion of being wrapped in a fuzzy blanket that would protect him against the world outside, no matter what.

Safe. Safety. Otis's favorite words were getting under his skin, it seemed. Well, he needed to get out of there and face the music, as always.

A pleasant smell wafted to his nostrils as soon as he stepped out of the bathroom. By the looks of things, Otis was busy making toast, faithful to his promise to bring Hudson his breakfast in bed.

"Sorry about the smell," Otis called out from his small kitchen. "This place is so small that I can't help it."

"Don't worry," Hudson shouted back as he put on his jeans and t-shirt. He checked his gun, too; it looked like Otis hadn't let himself fall prey to curiosity again, because the thing looked like it hadn't been moved from where he'd left it.

He needed to trust Otis, but the unsettling sensation he had experienced last night upon seeing his gun in the slender white hand came back. He pushed it down. To have a boyfriend, one to whom he had just confessed his love, meant to have faith, too.

A smile curled his lips as he remembered Pete saying that to him over and over.

Have a little faith, man, just a little faith.

There had never been a bigger optimist than his best friend. That hadn't helped him in the end, but whenever Hudson recalled the good times he had spent with Pete, he wished silently for a heaven to exist somewhere. Another world, deserving of so much love for life as Pete had used to have.

In the memory of his best friend, he could have faith. He let out a deep sigh and stowed the gun in the special holster attached to his calf. Draping the jeans over his boot to conceal the thing, Hudson took one last critical look. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to use it, but its presence was reassuring.

Otis came back with a plate filled with toast. "Are you leaving already?"

"No, not yet. But somehow, prancing around naked and eating your toast sounded a bit too decadent for me," Hudson said.

"You should bring a few things over. Like casual clothes you can wear indoors. Do you have any?"

Hudson laughed. "I'm not that helpless. My wardrobe is fine."

"I could buy some things for you," Otis said while his pretty face scrunched up in thought. "But I need to know your sizes."

Hudson took the plate from Otis's hand and placed it on the nightstand. "Are you sure you can budget for things like that? I'm a big guy. And I have expensive taste."

Otis gave him a long once-over. "Expensive? It doesn't look like it. And yes, I can budget."

Hudson hugged Otis, pressing the willowy body against his own, enjoying his warmth. "You really want to make yourself indispensable, don't you? I've heard that's how the road to perdition starts."

"I don't think I understand," Otis's muffled words emerged from below.

"I'm just teasing you. I'll bring some more clothes later tonight. Is that all right?"

"Yes, certainly. I will make room for them in the closet. Hudson, can I ask you something?"

“Go ahead. You made me toast, so you’re entitled to ask as many questions as you want.”

“I’ve read a little and…” The hesitation stretched for a few moments. “I believe I would like to be owned. By you.” The last words were a dropped whisper, barely audible.

“Owned? That choker isn’t enough? A leash?”

“I don’t think so,” Otis continued in the same quiet murmur. “Not anymore.”

“Damn, you want to make it official,” Hudson said in a teasing voice. “I’ll think of something. Until then, I want you to know that you’re mine and I won’t let you go. How does that sound as a promise?”

“It sounds great,” Otis agreed hurriedly. “I like your hands, here,” he said and took Hudson’s arms to move them until they were resting on his shoulders.

Hudson couldn’t say that he was in the least surprised to feel Otis pressing his fingers around his svelte throat. From there, he got the gist. He held his hands wrapped around Otis’s neck, pressing only gently at the base in front with his thumbs.

“I gotta say, my beautiful prince,” he chuckled, “you are a lot kinkier than I thought.”

“I don’t understand a lot of things, but I understand this,” Otis continued in the same soft voice. “I understand why people want it because I want it, too. And I’m so lucky to have found you, because I know it cannot be just anyone.”

“Your words are music to my ears, do you know that?” Hudson said tenderly and moved his mouth slowly over Otis’s plump lips, coaxing a sweet kiss out of him. “I’m lucky, as well.”

“Do you believe in fate?” Otis murmured against his lips.

Fate. Hudson couldn’t say he was the superstitious type.

“I mean,” Otis added, “it must have been fate that caused you to move into this building, and I moved into this building, and we crossed paths like this. Take away any one small decision that has led us here, and we might not have happened. And that would have been very sad, although we would never have known it.”

“I have no idea. I’m not into fortunetelling and the like. People make their own luck, I guess. And fate.”

“That makes sense,” Otis agreed. “I moved here because it was cheap and I could afford it. There wasn’t that much of a choice. Did you have to choose between this place and another?”

“No,” Hudson said. “It seemed like the perfect option for what I had in mind.”

It did. Not the perfect option for finding a boyfriend and falling in love with him, but his choice had been logical if that was what Otis wanted to find out with all these questions.



Since Hudson seemed keen on not believing in fate, Otis decided against asking him about sensations of foreboding and whatnot. It bothered him that he was still thinking of the unpleasant feeling he had experienced the other day when he and Missy had both noticed that distressing draft. His skin crawled just thinking about it.

There was no such thing as fate, and Hudson was right. He didn't even know why he was getting so obsessed with it. Maybe because he was happy and he didn't want anything to come between him and his happiness. It was an unreasonable worry about things that could happen. He shook them away.

The most important aspect right now was that he was slowly getting Hudson to move in with him. He was being a tad sneaky about it, but he had been busy reading all sorts of blogs with relationship advice and a bit of sneakiness could take one a long way. As long as there was no resistance on the other's part, it meant that they both wanted the same thing.

Still, moving too fast could scare the potential partner off, and Otis couldn't have that. Now that he had that out of the way, he could focus on more practical aspects such as freeing enough space in his closet for Hudson's things.

He must have been lost in thought for a while because Hudson pulled him back from his musings.

“A lot on your mind?”

“Yes, according to reliable research, humans have around 60,000 thoughts every day. That sounds like a lot, and although I haven't counted them--”

“What are you thinking of right now?”

There were many things, and that research must have been right on point. Otis remembered that there was something he had been meaning to ask Hudson.

“The pictures of me you took that time,” he began, feeling courageous, “are you going to correct them? With your special brushes?”

“I don't see one reason why I'd do that.”

“But they can't be perfect. I'm not perfect,” Otis argued.

Hudson chuckled and pressed his lips against Otis's forehead. "That's where you're wrong. In my eyes, you're perfect."

"And is that good enough for you?"

"Only you would ask such a question. Otis, you really have no idea," Hudson continued and sighed but not like someone in pain or exasperated. It was difficult for Otis to put his finger on exactly the significance of that sigh, but it was surely positive. "There is only one possible answer. Yes. You're good enough, perfect as you are."

Later, after Hudson was gone, Otis realized something amazing. His small apartment seemed like a palace. It was no longer small. It was even beyond adequate. There was so much room for him and everything that made his heart feel as if it was full to the brim.



Their meeting place was, once again, at the location of the new club, and Hudson noticed the changes once he walked inside. Before entering, he would have sworn that the industrial building lay in the same state of disarray as it had previously, but that impression faded as soon as he took in the modifications made to the large, cathedral-like, room.

The furniture was in place, the tables and chairs included. A stage had been built in the front and several St. Andrew's crosses made the background for it. The other paraphernalia in place made anyone looking believe that it was just a regular club catering to people with a developed taste for pain as part of their sexual congress.

It was nothing like that here, Hudson thought. The difference lay in the trust and the ability not to betray that trust that practitioners of that particular kink were known for. Trust wasn't an ingredient in the layout offered by the – soon to be opened, most probably – club that went by that ominous moniker.

He waited for a while, observing his surroundings, taking note of every nook and cranny. Jackie hurried over to him after sneaking through a side door. He had to have another talk with the guy about stopping that. They couldn't act like they were conspiring all the time. For all they knew, there were cameras hidden in the heavy folds of the crimson curtains covering the back of the stage, peeking at them from underneath the tables arranged in two semicircles to allow a narrow path between them, or observing them like cold strange eyes from the beams crisscrossing the ceiling. That part had been left as it had been. Part of the charm, perhaps.

"Something is so off," Jackie hissed at him as soon as he was within earshot.

"What do you mean?" Hudson took his camera and began snapping pictures of the place.

“They’re in a hurry or something. I mean, I have an idea why, but I don’t know for sure. Man, I just don’t know.” Jackie shuddered and his lips twisted into a grimace.

“Out with it,” Hudson advised shortly while he schooled his face into a bored expression and snapped picture after picture, like the professional he was supposed to be.

“Jasper... he’s in a bad way, man,” Jackie said and sighed noisily. “He doesn’t eat, and he’s sleeping way too much. I think they must have done something wrong, drugged him too much.”

“We’ll have to get him out of here then.”

“Yeah, I agree with that. Only we might not have time.”

As soon as Jackie said those words, the doors behind them opened, letting in Watkins and Keres.

“Well, Vegas,” Keres said shrewdly, “what do you think of the place?”

“It looks good,” Hudson replied. “It looks like it’s almost ready to open its doors to patrons.”

“And it is,” Keres confirmed. “Watkins here keeps telling me that we should wait, but I don’t see why. We already have all the seats reserved for the premiere.”

“Are there any holdups?” Hudson asked. He noticed how Jackie moved to stand behind him, at a fair distance from Watkins and Keres, but he couldn’t advise the young man against it.

“Watkins believes that something is missing to make it perfect.”

Hudson set his eyes on Keres, his nightmarish face lit by a sinister sort of glee. Whatever was happening behind those usually expressionless eyes, it couldn’t be good.

“Because something is missing,” Watkins insisted. “We have Angel, and we have Jasper. But we need three acts for opening night.” The manager in charge pointed at the three saltires on the stage.

“It will all work out,” Keres said in his bizarre metallic voice. “We will soon have our third star with us.”

Another potential victim. So, Angel was to go on the stage. Did he know? Was he aware of what that show was, ultimately, about? Hudson looked at the stage again, trying hard to rein in the unsettling feeling nestling in the pit of his stomach. Or was Angel to be spared?

And who was the third, unknown, person to be made to climb on the stage and join the line-up? Three young bodies, full of life, lined up for those eager patrons to see, to watch, while they writhed and squirmed for the same people’s delight.

“You know there’s always Jackie here,” Keres added and laughed, if what came out of him could be call a laugh.

“No, Jackie’s too old,” Watkins said through his teeth, although it looked like it pained him greatly to disagree with his boss like that.

“No fucking way. I’m not getting up there,” Jackie said aggressively.

“Relax. I have someone else in mind. Someone beautiful,” Keres replied. “Only the best for our soon to be loyal customers.”

Hudson made a mental note. The room housed ten tables, each with four places. Sold out, wasn’t that what they were saying? That meant a good honest amount of work for the force, once they descended upon this place. Today, he’d call the captain. This was one time when he would no longer rely on Gavin alone and their friendship.

“Is there going to be a rehearsal?” he asked. “I could take pictures and upload them for your future customers to see. When is the premiere?”

“The day after tomorrow. Vegas, you’re booked from now until then, so make sure to phone home and tell them they’re not going to see you for the next 72 hours or so.” Keres’s eyes were keen on him.

“Our star photographer here only has one toy,” Watkins added. “And I doubt that toy is going to have a say against his spending time at work.”

Why were they talking as if they knew shit about the nature of the relationship between him and Otis? Hudson couldn’t shake off the unpleasantness he experienced just thinking about those two and his boyfriend in the same setting.

“I’m a free man,” he said with a fake smile. “And the boss here is wrong. I have many toys. They keep knocking on my door.”

Keres acted surprised as he turned toward Watkins. “Didn’t you say you saw an incredibly beautiful boy at Vegas’s place? What was that all about?”

Hudson kept his jaw in check but it wasn’t easy. He couldn’t protest too much as he could risk giving his interest in Otis away, and he didn’t want these two horrible individuals to have even the slightest idea about the true nature of his relationship with his neighbor.

Watkins waved. “Vegas is a fly guy, so it doesn’t surprise me that he’s already forgotten about that scrumptious little thing I met at his place when I first visited him.”

That didn't settle the nest of snakes in his stomach. As soon as he had the chance, he'd call Gavin, have a detail guarding Otis from afar. If anyone could make such a thing happen on the down-low, it was that guy. And he was going to make that chance appear right now.

"I need the little boys' room for a moment," he said.

"Yeah, yeah," Watkins waved at him like it was stupid even to say such a thing. "We'll be here to finalize the details. You and Jackie have a ton of work, so don't you forget about it."

He sauntered off, his mind already working in overdrive. Had he been too lax about the whole thing? Had he missed details that he should have seen? First things first. Call Gavin.



"What do you need?" Gavin asked him directly without any preamble.

"A security detail. Supervision. 24/7."

"And it isn't even Christmas yet," Gavin said dryly. "Who should I shadow?"

"I didn't say it has to be you," Hudson said quickly.

"I wouldn't let anyone else have the honor of telling you."

"Telling me what?"

"That you fucked up. You did, right?"

"Let's leave this conversation for another time." Hudson fired the details at Gavin in a hushed voice.

Next, the captain would be put in the loop. This op was getting close to its end, and Hudson was sure as hell he wasn't going to let anything go wrong. He would be ready, and the backup team would be ready, too.



Otis picked up each figurine and wiped it lovingly. They needed a bit of dusting because lately he had been too busy with Hudson to pay proper attention to his cleaning chores. A situation like that needed to be remedied fast before things began piling up, like grandma had told him so many times. She would be so proud of him right now. Settling into the life of an adult, getting a boyfriend, trying out so many new and different dishes. It was what she wanted for him: a normal, happy life.

He felt normal and happy. He had more than he had ever imagined he would have by this age. His development had been slow and achieved with great pain. For once, he felt as if he was getting his big break. From here on out, things would be simpler and easier.

He turned his head suddenly. Was that the front door? Could it be Hudson? But he always knocked, not try the lock directly, as that was what he was hearing.

Yes, someone was trying the lock, and Otis stopped, dead in his tracks. Two words came to his mind. Home invasion. And it was silly to think of something like that because he had nothing worth stealing. Yet, whoever was there, right behind the door, wasn't knocking and waiting politely for the person inside to come to the door. With one steady hand, Otis pulled out his phone. He had read enough on the topic to know what to do.

The door opened abruptly, admitting a dark shape that moved toward him so quickly he only saw a blur. Otis grunted as he felt the sting in his neck. The phone dropped from his hand just as an impatient voice at the other end uttered the expected words.

“911, what's your emergency?”

Otis felt strange. How come he couldn't talk? In his fall, his arm caught the shelf of figurines, and he only managed to turn his head before he saw them dropping like a multi-colored rain, accompanying him on his way to the floor.

The last thing he heard was the sound of glass crunching under something heavy. And the last thing he saw was a black boot right next to his face.



His head was pounding and he couldn't open his eyes. Not at first, at least, but he made an effort. From across the room, his own reflection met him.

Where was he? Otis felt his neck first, his fingers scraping over a small sting, no bigger than the mark left by a mosquito. He checked his face, his head, and then his body. He appeared to be in one piece, and that was the thing to check first in case you could still move and you had just been in an accident.

Only there had been no accident. Otis looked around. He was inside a bare room with a mirror wall. He moved closer toward it and stared at himself. Indeed, there seemed to be nothing broken. Was he dreaming? That was always a possibility. But dreams happened fast, while seeming to last a long time.

He struggled to remember everything as it had happened. Researchers believed that the more people were asked about a certain incident, the more likely it was possible for investigators to hear different versions of the string of events. Otis believed in accuracy of detail above all else.

The floor creaked under his feet and then he noticed that his footwear had gone astray. The strange attacker must have wanted his shoes. Otis stored the detail away and continued his slow evaluation of the situation.

There was no door, no obvious sign of one. The mirror wall had to be the key to getting outside then. Without hesitation, but with slow moves, he moved closer and began exploring the smooth surface with his fingers. The mirror was cool under his fingertips.

He tipped his head back and followed the edge of the wall where it met the ceiling. It wasn't obvious, but there was a small space between them. If he could get that high and tried to pry it open, maybe he had a chance.

He looked around again. Heavy curtains covered what could very well be a window. Otis gave up on inspecting the mirror wall and focused his attention on his new finding. He grabbed the curtains and shook them, but they were heavy and solidly secured by their fittings. Still, he could push them up so that he could look outside.

It was a window, but it wasn't made of glass. Otis felt the surface again; it had to be durable plexiglass and that wouldn't break, not easily as far as he knew. But it allowed him to see beyond it, so he looked.

Directly across from where he was there was a one-story building. Something about it struck Otis as familiar, but he couldn't say what. No, it wasn't the building, but more like its surroundings. A conviction that he was still in the same city began growing inside him.

Could he pound on the glass and get someone's attention? He could try, but there was no one outside as far as his eyes could see. Also, he needed to consider saving his strength since there was no way of telling how long he would have to wait for the person behind all this to open the door and let him out.

How could he categorize what was happening? Had he been kidnapped? But he had no family, no money. Someone must have mistaken him for someone else. There was nothing to gain from his kidnapping. As soon as the kidnapper showed their face, just a manner of speaking since they would surely be masked, Otis would calmly explain that he was poor and all alone in the world.

Not so alone, he remembered, but shook his head, thoughts like bees trying to get inside his mind. Hudson was almost as poor as he was since he had to rent a place in the same building. Otis didn't want to think of Hudson. This situation was something bad, and Hudson was all the good in his life right now.

A wave of weakness made his knees buckle under him. The therapist had warned him about such episodes. They were part of a distant life, but he couldn't keep them at bay, not now.

Her feet making noise, making the floorboards heave with each of her steps. A hand grabbing his arm so tightly it brought tears to his eyes. And then, the taunt, "Are you going to cry now? Crying makes you ugly, did you know that?" The harsh laugh. "You're ugly anyway. It doesn't matter." Then, the abrupt warning. "Don't you dare cry. It pisses me off."

Otis took one deep breath. Mindfulness. You're in the present now. Those things are in the past. You are safe...?

He wasn't safe. He blinked away the tears. He was in danger, one that was waiting to disclose a name for itself. His heart was beating faster. He was trapped. His eyes searched frantically for a way out, a way that wasn't there.

And then, the slow admission of the facts. This had happened to him before. Otis crouched and rested his back against the wall. Yes, he had been here before, not here, in this strange room with a mirror as big as a wall, but trapped and left alone until he'd go mad with fear.

Fear never helped. It never went away, but it didn't help. Other things helped. Such as a bent paper clip that could open a locked door. What did he have on himself to help him? That was what he needed to focus on, not fear, not those scary memories. His fingers began moving as his mind started to work. A shirt had buttons, a pair of pants had a zipper. A belt had a buckle.

There was little he could do with such flimsy weapons by his side, yet so much. He turned around, looking again. His eyes became blurry as his fingers got busy. He must have tempted fate. He hadn't atoned for the bad in his life yet; someone up there was keeping the tally, and he must have come up short. That was why this was happening to him.

No, he would not let fear get the better of him. He had promised his grandma, and he had promised the nice lady that had helped him throughout those years. Even if he was trapped in this scary empty room.

And he needed to think, think about a way out. There had to be one. He only had to find it.



A strange sound woke him up. To conserve his strength, he had decided that it was for the better to sleep like soldiers who took advantage of every minute they got right in the middle of wars. But he hadn't slept, not really, fear deep inside his gut always awake, keeping guard for him.

It took him a few moments to understand what that sound had been. He picked up the soda can and stared at it. It appeared to be as mundane an item as he had expected. But he wouldn't drink

it. There was a possibility that there was something bad in it, injected in there without any visible signs left to be discovered by anyone searching. He put it back and stepped away from it, although his throat was parched. How long had he been in there? He didn't have his phone, and people no longer wore wristwatches unless they were very rich.

How useless that information was now. If he had been smart, he would be wearing a watch now, and he would have known how long he had been there.

Another sound and he turned to see someone walking in from behind the mirror wall. As he had suspected, that was the door, too. At least, a part of it.

He examined the person walking up to him without blinking. He, because he appeared to be a man, wore some sort of mask. Otis hid his surprise when he realized, from up close, that it was no mask. The man's face looked as if it were all a scar.

"You didn't have your drink."

His voice was strange, too, but Otis kept silent. Could it be that this person was some sort of automaton? Such an amazing feat would have been all over the media. But he didn't appear to be human, either.

Too bad it wasn't a dream.

The man raised one gloved hand and pushed his hair out of his eye. Otis didn't blink.

"How lovely," the robot-like voice said. "Such a beautiful scar. You're not scared of me, are you?"

Otis didn't blink. He kept staring.

"We're alike, you and I," the stranger whispered, moving his face close. "What a wonderful surprise. Keep looking at me, beautiful, behold me in your gaze, and I shall keep you."

Otis didn't blink. He wouldn't miss a moment, a detail of what was going on.



Hudson winced as his phone kept buzzing in his pocket. It was his burner. Was Otis safe? Why was Gavin calling him? And could it really not wait?

The buzzing stopped, and he surreptitiously grabbed the thing. Since Watkins and Keres weren't there, he could afford a small indiscretion.

Bad news, partner.

Chapter Twenty-Six – One Step Behind

Fear turned his stomach into a block of ice, while the blood halted in its course through his veins. Hudson looked around, his head swimming in darkness, his eyes unable to see a thing.

“Hey man,” someone called him, right by his side, and it took him moments to understand that Jackie was trying to get his attention. “The fuck you look so spooked?”

Hudson shook his head as if he were trying to get rid of some water that had gotten into his ears. It served to clear his mind a little. “I need to leave you here, in charge, for a bit.”

“What?” Jackie blinked and licked his lips like someone that hadn’t had a drop of water in a long time. “Where are you going? Fuck this shit, don’t leave me alone, Vegas. These fuckers, they could put me up there.” His usually playful eyes were shiny with unshed tears now.

He needed to be the strong one here. He needed to give Jackie all the reassurance the young man had to have from him, and he needed to rush to Otis’s help. Gavin’s laconic message had been enough. He couldn’t sit idly by and pretend everything was fine.

Jackie continued to stare at him as Hudson grabbed him by the shoulders and squeezed. “I’ll be right back.”

“You’re not bailing on me, are you?”

“I know you’re scared,” Hudson said, moving closer and staring into Jackie’s eyes, hoping to lend the other some of the strength he no longer felt. “But there are police everywhere around this place. The whole thing is under close surveillance. Nothing will happen to you.”

“But I want you here. You can protect us. Shit, I don’t even have a gun. Do you have one to spare?”

“I’m not giving you a gun, Jackie,” Hudson said sternly. Then he patted the guy’s cheek. “Listen to me. You’re strong. You can do this. And I thought you were a man capable of holding his own. Was I wrong?”

The jab at Jackie’s ego worked. A nod followed, even if it lacked much in the way of self-assurance. “No. I can do this shit. But these assholes, these fuckers,” Jackie said through his teeth, “they’re all going to pay. Tell me they’re not going to get out of here, walk free, after what they’ve done.”

“You have my word. Hold the fort, partner,” Hudson said and squeezed Jackie’s shoulder one last time.

He called the captain on his way out. “It’s on.”

The captain didn't have to know everything, just the details pertaining to the case. And now, he was running to the car, getting inside, one hand still on the phone, calling Gavin.



“You know you're not supposed to be here. I'm not supposed to let you in here.”

“Shut up,” Hudson grunted as he took in the scene from the door hanging open.

“And how am I going to tell the captain this is related? Most of all, are you sure this is related?”

“Gavin, you're a major pain in the ass, did you know that?”

“So I've been told. Don't touch anything. And you can't go inside.”

“I know. I've been to school.”

“Sometimes I doubt it. Now, spill.”

Hudson turned toward Gavin and endured the judgmental look from his friend. “The guy's my boyfriend.”

“Fuck me sideways. And why exactly was he kidnapped? That's the most logical assumption 'cause there's no body and--”

Hudson put one hand up. “He's not dead. Listen now, because I need to get back. There's this room where these fuckers hold people.” He got Gavin up to speed on the redbrick building and the significance of the room that served to hold people hostage, making sure that his colleague understood everything he needed to.

Gavin nodded as he typed quickly on his phone. “I heard through the grapevine you've already told the captain to gather the troops. This isn't something you told him about, right?”

Hudson set his jaw hard. “You don't have to rub it in, asshole. Tell me if you'd rather be doing something else.”

“West, I'm an asshole, but I'm a loyal asshole. Trust me on this. We'll get your boyfriend back. And when all's done, I'm going to laugh at you, but not before your guy is safe. Clear enough for you?”

Hudson nodded. “I have to get back now. Keep me posted.”



Otis didn't say a thing as a black hood was pulled over his head.

"I apologize terribly for this," the man with the metallic voice said, "but I can't risk you getting away from me. We will be great friends."

"Friends do not kidnap each other," Otis opened his mouth. Now that the ability to see had been taken away from him, he couldn't count on studying his surroundings for clues. There was always a chance that the whole thing was a terrible mistake, but even if things stood as they were, he had become – as the TV shows he had watched taught him – an inconvenient witness.

"I don't disagree." The stranger wrapped one hand around his. It was covered by a leather glove, Otis could tell. "Well, that only means that we're just on our way to becoming the best of friends."

"What is your name?"

"What a wonderful creature you are," the man commented. "We're going on a little drive and I will tell you what you need to know about me."

Otis kept silent from that moment on. His hands were tied in front and his bare feet sensed cold hallway floors and then what had to be the pavement outside that building. He was made to climb into a car. Making a run for it under the circumstances wouldn't end up well for him. That was something he knew and knew well, also from the movies he had watched. People who ran were shot in the back; usually they were side characters, and side characters didn't have to be spared.

In this story, he didn't know what sort of character he was. But he felt, in the chill running down his spine, that he had to be the kind that wasn't going to be spared.

He heard the car engine purring to life. It had to be a good quality vehicle by the smell of the upholstery and the smoothness of its movement.

The driver took his hand again. "My beautiful boy." Dry lips touched the back of Otis's hand as it was lifted into the air. "My name is Gideon Keres. And you are?"

"You kidnapped me. You must know who I am."

This was a chance to see if he had been kidnapped by accident. Gideon Keres must have wanted someone else.

"So clever. You are a wonder, do you realize?"

"No."

"And modest, too. All right, Otis Bendecker, consider me enthralled with you. And your beauty."

It wasn't an accident. His heart began beating faster. Otis fought his hardest not to let his kidnapper know he was afraid by controlling his breathing through the exercises he had learned from his therapist.

"You have no reason to be afraid of me."

What a ridiculous thing to say. Otis had heard all of it before.

"Why are you sitting there? Sit here, close to mommy. What? You are afraid? Because I shook you a little earlier?"

It had never been a little. She had never been directly violent, never slapped him or kicked him, save for that last time. But it had always hurt just the same. And the fear had always been the same.

"You are very silent. I know you aren't stupid. So, talk."

"I have no money. There is no one to pay any ransom money," Otis said, articulating every word with difficulty. The memories had come unbound now, and he couldn't stop them. They could send him on a downward spiral and he didn't know if he could stop it.

"I wouldn't trade you for all the money in the world," the metallic voice continued. It was hard to believe the words were pouring out of a human being and not a robot created to talk. "You are beautiful."

"I am scarred." Otis swallowed thickly. His thirst was accentuated the more he talked.

Gideon Keres let out a sound like a sinister laugh. "I am a whole scar. And that makes you so imperfectly perfect. I had no idea. I thought you were just the kind of beauty I'd take great pleasure in destroying."

It wasn't fair. Fate wasn't fair, Otis thought as he inhaled and exhaled slowly. He hadn't been kidnapped for ransom money, but for something else. The only way to find out what his kidnapper meant by it was to ask.

"Why did you kidnap me?"

"Because I need a friend. You took a good look at me. Do you believe I have many friends? Or none at all?"

"I don't know. I don't know you." Breathing through the dense fabric of the hood made everything more difficult, talking included.

"You will be my friend, Otis. My special friend. You are already special because you have that lovely scar, but I will slowly transform you into my better half. Have you read *Frankenstein*?"

“Frankenstein is the doctor’s name, not the monster’s, like many people believe by mistake,” Otis recited what he remembered from his reading. “But I haven’t read the book.”

Another mechanical laugh followed. “I will read it to you. You appear the kind to have a deep appreciation of unusual beautiful things. Unlike Frankenstein’s monster, I will ask no doctor to create a mate for me. I will do it myself. It’s only just for me to find love just like anyone else. Don’t you think?”

“What do you mean?” Otis asked, ignoring the direct question. He had no answer for it.

“I will turn your flawless skin into a scar. I will take away your sight to give you mine, your hearing so that you can only hear me, and at the end of it all, you will be perfect. My perfect mate.”

Perfect was a word full of hate in how it sounded coming out of Gideon Keres. Otis didn’t want to become the man’s perfect mate.

He couldn’t escape. Not now. Even if he managed to open the door on his side, jumping out of a moving vehicle would most likely lead to serious injuries and even death. And the driver would only have to stop the car and collect him from where he had jumped only to drag him away just as was happening right now.

Another option to check off his list. But he could wait.

The house was silent, so silent, and his working on the lock was deafening in that silence. He feared she was somewhere inside, waiting to jump at him and hunt him down, dragging him back into the punishment room, but the bottles – he had inspected them the day before – were all empty, so she had to be out on her errand to bring home more of the same.

He needed to be patient. If it didn’t work on the first try, he would try a second time, and a third time, and a fourth time. He would be free if only he could be patient enough.



“Where have you been?” Watkins barked at him the moment he got back. “We have to ensure everything’s perfect for the opening, and you’re running around, getting your dick wet.”

Jackie gestured from behind Watkins, pointing at the camera Hudson was holding.

“I needed to bring in more gear from a friend,” he said in a pacifying tone. Right now, he wanted to wrap his hands around Watkins’s throat and strangle the fucker until he died. “You sort of took me by surprise with your announcement.”

“All right, all right,” Watkins waved impatiently. “Jackie, take Vegas to shoot some pics of Jasper.”

“But he’s like almost not moving at all,” Jackie protested. “I don’t think he’s going to open his eyes even.”

“That’s all for the better for what we have in mind,” Watkins spat at his underling. “Go. I have a thousand things to do.”

“Where is the big boss?” Hudson asked casually.

Watkins gave him a hard stare. “Do you want to keep tabs on the man who signs your paycheck? Artist or not, Vegas, you think yourself more important than you are. Do as you’re told. And don’t bother me again until you’re finished.”

Jackie grabbed Hudson by the elbow and dragged him along. “Come on, man, let’s do our job.”

They were walking down the hall when Jackie hissed at him, “Man, not gonna lie, you look kind of wild. The fuck’s going on? And you keep telling me not to blow it.”

Hudson couldn’t share that part with Jackie. The guy would freak out, for sure. “Just stress,” he said shortly.

“Well, de-stress yourself, ‘cause I think shit’s about to get real.”

He needed his head on his shoulders. For Otis, and not only for him. Jasper, Jackie, and who knew? Maybe even Angel. He stopped for a moment, dead in his tracks. As much as a part of him worried about Otis still being alive – irrational, demanding, crazy mad – he now knew beyond the shadow of a doubt who the third cross on the big stage was for.

His phone buzzed. The burner again. The noose was getting tighter, and he was playing fast and loose. But the ability to have options had flown out the window and there was no turning back now.

He checked the phone quickly. There was a picture from Gavin. The caption read.

We’re still one step behind. But your guy is smart.

Hudson zoomed in to understand what he was looking at. A blank wall on which something was scribbled in faint letters.

I was here

Otis Bendecker

September 29 2023

time unknown not morning



The air changed. He was taken out of the car and brought inside another building, Otis realized as he steeled himself and honed all his senses to catch as much as he could of his surroundings and what was going on. His bare feet felt gravel and dust before entering. This place was not inside the city, or at least not in an area with pavement. It could be a house out in the fields, like his mother's had been but somehow he didn't believe that. There was a faint smell of rust in his nostrils. Houses, even unkempt houses, didn't smell like that. He couldn't place the source of that scent, either.

The hood was removed from his head and he blinked to adjust his vision to the bright light.

"What a surprise," someone commented.

It took him a few more seconds to identify the source of the new voice. Otis searched the other person's face. He knew that man. He had seen him before. In Hudson's apartment.

He didn't say anything and turned his head, looking around. It looked like a boiler room, with equipment lying around, uncared for. That was why it smelled like it did.

"He's a weird one," the man said again.

"He's lovely," Gideon Keres said.

"Of course. Very pretty."

"Watkins, you have zero eye for true beauty. You don't realize what you're seeing although it's right in front of your eyes."

Keres moved closer to Otis and brushed his hair away from his scar. Then he began to finger it with his gloved hand. "Just imagine the possibilities."

Watkins looked at Otis, meeting his gaze only for a moment. He looked as cold and dead inside as Otis remembered from that first time.

"He's going on stage with the other two. Yes, I'd say he'll do just fine. Maybe we should even start with him."

"No. He is my triumph." Keres seemed so taken with his scar, pressing around it and feeling it like he couldn't stop doing that. Otis was fighting himself not to flinch away from that disturbing touch. "He's my end goal."

“I appreciate everything you’re doing for the business, boss,” Watkins said and his grin turned sardonic and ugly, as Otis calmly inspected him. “But most of the time, I have no idea what you’re going on about. So, is he going to go last? After Jasper and Angel?”

Jasper. Angel. Otis tucked the names away. He might need them later.

“No. He is going to be the centerpiece for a long time. I will transform him slowly, with my own hand. And I will keep him alive until he’s perfect for me.”

Watkins sighed. “And will the others think that’s what they deserve for their money? They want proper bloodshed, not art.”

“I believe they are all coming here because they trust my vision,” Keres replied. His breath was foul on Otis’s face. “And don’t call it bloodshed, it’s in bad taste.”

“Is it just me or is the weirdo acting like he’s not scared shitless? What did you give him?”

Otis stared as Keres moved brusquely and smacked Watkins across the face so fast that the man staggered and choked, as if he had just been forced to eat his words.

“As I said,” Keres continued and turned his attention back to Otis. “You’re nothing but a grunt, Watkins. And don’t worry, they’ll pay to see me create my masterpiece. As for your question, my beloved here is not frightened because he understands. Because he’s the soulmate I have been searching for my entire life without even realizing it. But now I know.” He caressed Otis’s cheek and turned his face slowly. “I know that I’m in love.”

Watkins squealed from his place. “In love? For real? You don’t have a dick, how are even supposed to fuck him?”

Otis expected Keres to launch into another vicious attack like earlier, but his thick strange lips stretched into a smile. “You are a vulgar animal, with no taste for what is truly beautiful in life. My body has none of your earthly needs. I do not need to copulate with my beloved to assure him of my undying thirst for him.”

“Undying?” Watkins squealed again. To Otis, he sounded like someone scared, so his words were strange, seemingly pushing him in the direction of getting hit again. “Are you going to keep him forever?”

“Of course. Once I finish turning him into the perfect object of my desire, I will embalm him and keep him inside my house. My very own Taj Mahal, but I will live in it, along with my beloved. Immortalized forever. Together.”

“You’re one sick man,” Watkins spat with disgust.

“Watch it, lap dog,” Keres said without turning. “I’m barely tolerating your sight as it is. Your bravado, this very moment, whom does it serve? My beloved doesn’t care about you. He only has eyes for me. And you know my opinion of you. Get out.”

Otis heard Watkins walking out of the room. He continued to keep his eyes on Keres, without blinking.

“Don’t mind these mere mortals. They don’t understand a thing, the worms,” Keres said as he continued to touch Otis’s face. “But you do understand me. Look at you. You aren’t even trembling. Because you know that I’m not threatening you. I love you. So how could I hurt you?”

“I would never do a thing to him.”

His mother’s voice, tearful and pleading.

“This house is a complete mess, Olivia. Is this where you’re raising your son? And where is he? I haven’t seen him in three years.”

His grandma’s voice. Tired, yet firm. Otis remembered her vaguely. He was watching from behind the corner.

And later, more reproaches. “The boy barely speaks! Will you let him come with me? I will take him off your hands if he’s too much work for you.”

“He’s my son!”

The sound of broken plates.

“You forced me to give up on you, but you’re not going to force me to give up on him, too.” His grandma again, as firm as ever. “I will take him from you, whether you like it or not.”

“No!” His mother screeched, like a wounded animal. “You can’t take him away! He’s all I have! I love him!”

There were different types of love, Otis had learned. And one of them was sick and dark and unyielding, and the nice lady at the clinic had told him that wasn’t love, but for so long, that was the only kind he had felt.

He looked into Keres’s immobile, scary eyes. “You can’t hurt me,” he said, calm and ready. A mantra he had learned a lifetime ago so that he could start anew.

“As I thought,” Keres said with what had to count as delight if the slight inflections of his metallic voice could be interpreted one way or another. “My true peer. My true love.”



Hudson felt Jasper's neck. He was still alive, but it was unsettling that they were going so far with drugging the young man. There was life left in him, but he needed help.

"Who's in charge of giving him the drugs?" he asked in a quiet voice as he arranged Jasper in various ways, pursing his lips in frustration – for anyone watching – and worry – for himself – when the youngster's limbs refused to stay in place.

"That's Angel," Jackie said and stole nervous glances around.

"He's going on the stage, too. Does he know it?" Hudson asked.

"Do you think he'd miss his chance to become a star?" Jackie said with a snort. Then, he blanched. "Don't tell me... that is what they're going to do? On the first night? To Angel, too?"

"I can't tell everything they're thinking. Angel might be spared, but I'm not counting on it. Do you see him around? Is he here now?"

"He must be. He's supposed to be here to administer another dose to Jasper. He laughs and tells me they're vitamins. How stupid does he think I am?"

"Let him believe whatever he wants. We don't need him to get the jitters and ruin the perfect setup," Hudson said through his teeth.

"But they might want to... you know, him too," Jackie said, his eyes darting sideways, increasingly disturbed.

"We won't let it happen," Hudson assured him.

The door opened, making them turn. Angel walked in, his gait cocksure as usual, his face lit up by an arrogant smile. "I'm here to give the young man his medicine," he said as he searched his little purse.

He brought out a kit complete with a syringe and grabbed Jasper's limp arm. Hudson seized Angel by the wrist that very moment.

"I believe he's had enough," he said in an icy tone.

Angel narrowed his eyes. "That's not for you to say, brawn for brains. I have direct orders from the boss. Jasper needs proper care."

"And I say that I can easily break your arm and let the boss know that I thought you'd look much more enthralling with a cast," Hudson said calmly.

“Hmm.” Angel tried to yank his wrist free but to no avail. His eyes set on Hudson, searching his face. “You’re not the boss.”

“Press your luck, then. This club is known for loving pain and it’s not even open yet,” Hudson said evenly, keeping eye contact with Angel. “I don’t mind applying some so that you catch my drift.”

“Fine,” Angel said with an exasperated sigh. “But it’s on you. I’m going to tell the boss you didn’t let me do my job.”

“Really? Is he going to like it when he hears that you’re so easy to intimidate?”

Angel frowned as he seemed to ponder over the pros and cons of his next strategy. “Ugh, you’re such a bully, Vegas. I suppose the kiddo is primed and ready anyway.”

Hudson released Angel’s arm. He watched as the syringe was put back into its kit, and then everything went into the purse. Angel adjusted the strap over his shoulder while pressing his lips together in an unhappy smile. “Well, I suppose you owe me one.”

“I beg to differ.”

Angel stared at him as if he was trying to save some face by intimidating Hudson back. “You know, you’re a bit too much of a goody-two-shoes for this line of business. And I don’t care how awesome the pictures you take are, ‘cause it’s not like we’re running an Instagram-like nest of bitches here.”

“I don’t think you can really appreciate my work,” Hudson said, doing his best take on a venomous snake. “You’re clearly not a city boy. So, country mouse, how about you walk and let the real artists do their jobs?”

Angel’s eyes grew wide and then thinned again. “You didn’t.”

Hudson shrugged. “I guess I did.”

Angel smirked. “You just made yourself an enemy, Vegas, and I’m warning you. I take no prisoners.”

“Look at me, quaking in my shoes,” Hudson added fuel to the fire. This type of banter – or serious talk, in Angel’s case – was bound to make him look ‘normal’ to the cameras trained on them, in case they were there.

Angel turned on his heel with a huff. “See you later, boys. I need something sweet to wash away the bad taste you two leave in my mouth.”

“I wouldn’t let you close to my dick if you paid me,” Jackie said under his breath.

Angel threw him a withering stare. “Ah, I see. So you and Vegas are sucking each other’s dicks. No wonder there. You’re both ugly as hell.”

Hudson gave Jackie a short smile once Angel was out of earshot. That was good. They needed to play their roles until the very end.



“And who do we have here?”

Another voice, one Otis didn’t recognize. He was now in a different room, one with a bed and red curtains. It would have looked comfortable if not for the aggressive tones of red that reigned supreme everywhere he looked. Keres had taken him there and told him to rest. He didn’t plan on doing that. He had too much work to do.

He looked at the intruder, a young man with symmetrical, pleasant features. His mouth was twisted in a snarl, and that made him ugly. He moved around with grace, swinging his arms, as if he were on a stage. His eyes were set on Otis, inspecting him as if he were a specimen that provoked disgust.

Otis draped his hair carefully over his left eye. It was, without a doubt, because of it that the newcomer looked so stricken at his sight.

“I didn’t get a good look at you,” the stranger continued, switching from talking to an invisible someone in the room to talking to Otis. “I was too busy getting you out and into the loving arms of your future master.”

Otis felt his hackles rising. This young man, he must have been the one to sting him in the neck with that thing.

“You stepped on my seahorse,” he said sternly.

“Oh, you don’t say,” the young man cooed as if he were talking to a baby. “I stepped on your plushie?”

“It was a glass figurine,” Otis explained, as a muscle began ticking in his cheek.

The young man shrugged and pushed Otis’s hair away. Everyone seemed to like doing that to him lately.

“Psh, you’re so damaged. I don’t get the big attraction. And you’re so damn skinny.”

Otis pulled away from the touch as a hand reached for his chest.

“Shy, aren’t we?” the stranger cooed again. “Well, that can be fixed. Hi, I’m Angel.” He held out one hand.

Otis watched him with suspicion. Why was everyone here behaving so unlike most people? Angel – what a strange name – was treating him as if they were about to become friends. Otis didn’t see how that could happen, given the fact that Angel had been the one to pick the lock on his door, sting him in the neck, destroy his collection, and kidnap him.

“You broke it,” he accused again.

“Can we get over it already?” Angel gesticulated wildly. “We’re going to be colleagues, you know? Well, maybe not for long since you look like a disposable little thing, but still. What is so special about a glass figurine? Don’t tell me it was a collectible and it was worth thousands of dollars.”

“It was a gift, but it retails for \$18.99 and you can’t find it at a discount,” Otis continued, feeling his anger soaring at how reckless some people could be regarding other people’s precious belongings.

“\$18.99,” Angel said slowly as if he couldn’t understand what the numbers meant. “Well, I’ll get you one. Will that make me your friend? Come on, let’s shake hands.”

Otis batted Angel’s hand away. “No, we can’t be friends. I am not friends with careless people.”



“We searched the club, after we got an anonymous tip on drugs being traded on the premises at that exact time,” Gavin informed him. “No dice.”

“Then he must be here,” Hudson said shortly. He was outside, hiding behind an abandoned rack of pipes that hadn’t yet been removed from the premises.

Gavin tsked. “That means we have to wait. We can’t storm the place until they have everyone there. We need those fuckers who pay for disgusting stuff like this. We can’t let them get away. Not a single one of them.”

Hudson pressed the phone against his temple. Gavin was right, of course. They couldn’t jeopardize the whole operation when they were so close. And they had reason to believe that Otis’s life wasn’t in immediate danger.

“If he’s here, I’m going to find him.”

“Be careful, man,” Gavin advised before cutting the connection.

Hudson took in the industrial building looming before him. Was it just wishful thinking on his part? Otis could be in many other places. Who knew what they wanted to do with him? Could it be that they had found out about him and now held the young man prisoner to ferret him out?

Doubt was not his speed. The worried boyfriend needed to take a step back and let the detective do his work. And the detective was going to turn the place upside down if needed to find the better half of his soul.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – The Promise He Made

They wouldn't hurt him, not until it was for their own benefit, Hudson kept telling himself as he hurried back into the building. Just as he entered, he came close to crashing into Watkins, who seemed keen on getting out at the exact same moment.

"Vegas," the man barked at him, "whenever I look for you, you're never here. Get to work already."

"What do you need me to do?" Hudson asked, wondering at how calm the words sounded coming out of his mouth, given the circumstances.

"We have an entire group of wannabes. They're for the website mainly, but they will also open for the main act for the premiere. You need to make an album that we can present to our guests the moment they step through the door. A souvenir, you may well call it." As he explained Hudson's job, the man seemed to calm down some, but there was a certain nervousness in his movements that couldn't be easily overlooked.

"Everything fine, boss?" Hudson asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Watkins asked, irritated. "Well, if you want to know so much, the police got Twinlight turned inside out on a fool's errand, or so it seems. And let me tell you, that wasn't on my 'to do' list. Someone will have to answer for this crap."

"I'm sure it's nothing," Hudson said. "That place is as clean as a whistle."

Watkins gave him a long suspicious look. "As opposed to this one?"

Hudson put his hands up. "I didn't mean it like that, boss. Who knows? Maybe it was just a rival, trying to get a rise out of you."

"Yeah, maybe. Too bad I'm too busy to look into that shit. And those souvenirs? You're still in charge, right? Come on, get to it already."

Hudson nodded like an eager to please employee and walked in the opposite direction from Watkins. Gavin was the kind of guy who was always careful to conceal any traces of his activity, and Hudson was counting on him, but with the big operation underway, there were multiple pairs of ears and eyes getting involved. Watkins was buried up to his nose in the opening of the new club, so maybe he wouldn't have time to look into why Twinlight got the earlier visit from the police.

Hudson didn't work with maybes and false hopes. He needed to find Otis, and his conviction that his beautiful boyfriend was somewhere in the building was growing stronger by the minute.



“So, you think yourself smart, don’t you?” Angel hissed while bending at the waist and getting into his field of view.

Otis moved further away from this young man who kept trying to get into his personal space, without having any consideration for what counted as boundaries. He had worked so hard to understand them, and it had always seemed like he was the only one around coming up short where the myriad rules for social interaction were concerned. And yet, this other person seemed to trample everything in his path. From kidnapping him to behaving like this.

The whole situation would have been a lot better if only he had a pair of socks. Without understanding why, the sight of his own bare feet made him feel vulnerable. With not one kind face in sight, he couldn’t afford to feel that way. The power, the strength had to come from within. He clasped his hands together and pressed them between his knees while bending over, forcing himself to become as small as possible.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Angel asked. “Ah, you’re one of those guys. Hard in the head. I don’t get why he wanted you here.”

“Who is he?” Otis asked. Under such dire circumstances, the more he knew, the better his chances were of finding a way out.

“The big boss. He brought you here, so he must think there’s something to be done with someone like you. Probably as an opening act? I somehow doubt it. You’re as stale as day-old bread. Your clothes are so lame. Whatever. You will be naked, anyway.”

“The scarred man,” Otis said slowly.

Angel smacked him over the head with his small purse. It didn’t hurt, but it made him feel humiliated, as if he was an animal that had to be mistreated to behave. At his startled reaction, Angel began laughing. How could such a beautiful person appear so ugly? Otis watched the way the corners of the other’s mouth curled up, making his face appear similar to that of a nightmarish clown. His eyes gleamed with darkness and they seemed to give away nothing. It was a bad look, Otis just knew it.

“You’re so stupid,” Angel added. “Don’t you dare talk like that in front of the big boss. He might eat you for breakfast instead of making you part of the opening. Eh, I guess you’re not going to be around here for long.”

“No. The scarred man,” Otis said stubbornly, “told me that he loved me and that he would take me home with him.”

At that, Angel gave him a long look while his eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Now, you’re just making stuff up. There’s no way a nobody like you--”

The door opened, admitting the man called Watkins. Otis stared at him, unblinking.

“This guy is a complete nut case,” Angel accused, while pointing a finger at him. “He keeps making stuff up about the boss. Can’t we just get rid of him? Send him away with a boot in his ass?”

“Stop getting on my nerves,” Watkins said shortly. Although the man with his cold eyes had seemed to Otis to be completely in control, when he interacted with other people he appeared to be a person experiencing a lot of stress. There was a small twitch at the corner of one of his eyes, and his hands trembled from time to time.

“What do you want me to do with him?” Angel asked.

“As long as the boss wants him alert and awake, nothing. Before he goes on stage, make sure to give him the same medicine as you’ve given Jasper until now.”

“You know, I tried to keep the guy under treatment, but that gorilla of yours stopped me.”

“Who was in Jasper’s room?” Watkins asked abruptly. “You know you have to keep an eye on things.”

Angel rolled his eyes. Otis watched the interaction taking place before him with the utmost care. These people were holding him, and at least one other person called Jasper, hostage. He didn’t know what to think about the term ‘medicine’ as it came out of Angel’s mouth, but he had to believe that it was something terrible. Maybe it was a way to get rid of him, anyway, but in the way a lethal injection would send someone away, out of this life completely.

He had considered death, even his own, before. The people at the hospital that had treated his burn had said between themselves that he’d been lucky not to be at home when the fire that had killed his mother started. He didn’t know why they called it luck. It had happened only because his mother had made sure he would run away. And then, she had been unlucky enough to die in the fire. Unlucky sounded like a rude word under the circumstances. Otis had looked up the word ‘tragedy’ in the dictionary long afterwards, but not even that explanation had put a stop to his questions about the whys and the what-ifs.

Angel continued talking, swinging his hands in a strange fashion as if he needed to make sure the polish on his just done nails dried. Otis hadn’t noticed any polish on Angel’s nails.

“I’m talking about Vegas. He is so concerned I’m giving Jasper too much of his vitamins. What a douche. I bet he wants to score with that guy. Really, you should warn him about touching the merchandise, okay?”

“Hmm, so Vegas was worried about Jasper? How quaint,” Watkins commented.

Vegas was a place, not a person. But maybe it was someone who took his name after a place, like Utah, the bartender at Twinlight. His visit to that club seemed to have happened a lifetime ago. And in that other lifetime, Hudson had taken him from there and kissed him.

Some memories hurt, but not all of them hurt the same way. What would Hudson think when he didn't find him home tonight? Maybe he'd think that Otis went away on a trip without telling him anything.

“And even Jackie sided with him,” Angel continued his rant.

Jackie. That was a name Otis knew. But it could all be just a big coincidence.

“If Jackie did,” Watkins replied, “it means that you really went overboard with Jasper's medicine.”

Angel pursed his lips and then clucked his tongue. “No, I didn't. They are a pair of assholes, that's all. And you know what? I don't think we need to hide behind words while in front of this guy.” He pointed at Otis. “He's so stupid that he doesn't understand why he's here. What's he going to be? Some extra?”

“He's going to be part of the main act.”

“What?” Angel raised his voice. “No freaking way. Wait, I mean... he's going to... you know?” He pointed with his head in Otis's direction again.

“No. The boss has big plans for him.”

“Okay,” Angel said slowly. “What kind of plans?”

“That's none of your business,” Watkins said and looked at Angel, his eyes narrowing in what Otis could only interpret as displeasure. “Now, before the show, make sure that he gets the treatment, too. Just like Jasper. Although it's not going to be his only appearance, we don't want to scare him more than necessary. He needs to last. Do you understand?”

“Whatever. I'm only an employee, always at your service. So, who's going to be the third? One of the newcomers? No one's pretty enough, in my opinion, but I guess they'll do for one big act, am I right?” He began laughing.

Even the way Angel laughed made Otis feel his skin crawl with unpleasant apprehension.

“Oh, we got our line-up ready,” Watkins said.

Angel was looking somewhere else, so he wasn't aware of how Watkins was looking at him. Otis observed everything, trying to interpret all the cues, as his therapist had taught him. Right now, a

part of him wanted to warn Angel about something. Watkins was looking at the young man as if he had bad intentions regarding him. Otis couldn't tell what those intentions were, but there was something akin to hatred in Watkins's dark stare. No one looked at someone else that way without being the villain in a movie and watching their next victim.

But maybe, the people he was observing, his eyes dry and itchy from not blinking for too long, were both villains. And the victims were people like Jasper and him.

Who was that Jackie they were talking about? It was a silly thing to hope that it was the same Jackie he knew. From the short conversation between Watkins and Angel, Otis got the feeling that Jackie and that Vegas person were trying to be good people. Of course, he didn't know them and assuming such things about individuals that were complete strangers to him was not the correct way of thinking.



“Have you solved whatever stuff you needed to solve?” Jackie asked him, talking in a low voice. “Because you keep looking at the door as if you’re expecting some ghost to walk through.”

Hudson pursed his lips. He was snappy, ordering the boys around to take pictures of them, and from time to time, went to the laptop provided by Watkins so that he could upload them to the site on the go. There was a lot of work to do and not enough time. It hadn't been bullshit, about his not being able to go back home until the big opening.

“It's all under control,” he murmured at Jackie.

“Hey, man, don't keep me in the dark,” Jackie said. “I can help you. Just give me more to do than telling me to keep my eyes peeled and my ears open. I'm so tense you could cut me and blood wouldn't come out.”

“You're doing just fine. Now entertain our entertainers for a bit. I need to make a round and see if everything's in place.”

Jackie threw him a suspicious look but didn't add anything. Hudson nodded to him briefly and then went out the door.

There couldn't be a lot of places where they could hold Otis. If he was there. No, he pushed the doubt away from his mind, he had to be there. Why Watkins had chosen to do something as bold as that, to kidnap Otis, who was Hudson's neighbor, was beyond him. There was no time to dig for whys, but he could search the place.

He walked down the long corridor. There were several doors on each side, most of them converted from what must have been the offices on-site when the industrial building was still in

use. They were holding Jasper in one of them, so it was only natural for him to think that Otis would get the same treatment.

The thought sent a chill down his spine. Carefully, he tried one door and looked inside quickly. It was empty and appeared to be a sort of a storage room for now. He still had five more to try. No, four, if he counted out Jasper's room. Should he count it out? What if they put Otis in there, too? That should be his next target, but he doubted the door was unlocked. If there was something inside – or better said, someone – they considered valuable enough, they wouldn't leave it open for anyone to walk in. That was another good pointer. He would have to consider it a sign and identify the locked rooms to inspect them later, at night. Since the big boss expected it of him, he would have to spend the night there and continue to work on the last details. That worked just fine, because that would leave him enough leeway to search the place.

But first, he needed to identify the locked rooms, to reduce his searching area. He was about to try a second door, when a door opened at the end of the hall, and Watkins and Angel walked out, arguing about something. Hudson retraced his steps, moving as quietly as possible. However, he wasn't fast enough, and Watkins noticed him.

"Vegas," he called out to him, "how is the album coming along?"

"It's coming," he replied.

Watkins and Angel reached him, and the older man grabbed Hudson's arm, forcing him to walk back down the hall with him. It was as if the guy was trying his damndest to get him away from there. That only served to send his entire alarm system flaring.

"Are there other models besides the guys I have with me?" he asked.

"No," Watkins said brusquely.

Had it been just his imagination or had Angel just opened his mouth to say something?

"What about our star here?" Hudson asked, wanting to hear the young man speak and see what he had to say.

"Don't be stupid, Vegas. I'm the guy who works from the sidelines this time around."

"The sidelines?" Hudson stole a glance at Watkins. "But I thought--"

"Angel is right," Watkins cut his words short.

So, Angel had no idea he was going on stage. Hudson didn't like it, but maybe that was a sign that the first show of the new club wouldn't go to the worst of extremes from the get-go. Still, he expected the show to be a whole lot different from any other clubs that functioned in the world of

law-abiding citizens. That wasn't even the right way to put it. This club was an abomination, with no ties whatsoever to humanity, not even that of the lowest kind.

"He's our little busy bee," Watkins added and caressed Angel's cheek, making the young man lean into his touch like a spoiled pet.

His eyes looked dead as he stared at Angel, and Hudson noticed. He recalled the night of the raid again; who or what had spooked Angel that one time? He shook his head. If Angel was going to be among the sacrificial lambs, he would get saved along with everyone else. Until then, he had to keep his mouth shut, although he wanted nothing more than to push Watkins out of his way and run to the door he and Angel had just walked through.

No rash actions or decisions. He had noticed the gorillas hired by Watkins around the place. Some of them were obviously packing heat, as he had observed before. The whole point was to get everyone out of there alive. His plan was to release Otis before everybody else. There was no way to tell how hairy the situation would get once opening night rolled around and the police flooded the place to put behind bars a lot of people to whom such a thing would easily be called mercy by anyone with a beating heart.

He had to bide his time and ignore the pang in his chest and the pounding blood in his ears. There was no room for error.

"That's too bad," he said. "Angel would look great on our website. The pics I took of him at the beginning of my working with you got the most likes."

"Yes, yes, you're an artist, and so is Angel," Watkins said and pushed them both to walk in front of him. "But we need to focus on the task at hand."

"Vegas, why are you sucking up to me? By the way, I've already told our boss here about how you didn't let me give Jasper his vitamins." Angel's pout wouldn't fool anyone.

Hudson tensed, but only for a moment. "Any more of your tender loving care and we might not have anyone to go on stage on opening night. Really, I could barely get anything out of him. And he needs some proper food, not your vitamins."

"I trust your judgement, Vegas, in this case," Watkins said. "Angel tends to go overboard sometimes. And we don't want a corpse on stage, just someone pliable enough to play with."

Hudson felt a muscle twitching in his jaw but forced a smile anyway. "I thought so, too. But he will get some proper food once this is over, right?"

"Of course," Watkins said in a voice filled with fake concern. "He was just a bit too stubborn when we got him back, but he's lucky that our usual audience is in love with the unresponsive type. Also, for your peace of mind, Vegas, since you seem to care so much about these boys, a doctor saw him just yesterday. He's as healthy as a horse, and after his performance, once we

show him what a big success he was, he is definitely going to reconsider his position with our company.”

“I’m sure of it,” Hudson replied. “I should get back to work, then.”

“Go,” Watkins said. “And you, Angel, make sure to take a cold bath. It looks to me like you’re starting to sag in places.”

“What? Where?” Angel asked in a scandalized tone.

Watkins’s laugh was ugly and unsettling. “Here and there. You can’t stay young and beautiful forever, can you?”

“I sure can,” Angel replied aggressively. “Just you wait and see.”

“I don’t think I have the patience. But as long as you want it strongly enough,” Watkins said, without finishing his sentence.

Hudson hurried toward the room where the boys were waiting for him. Angel didn’t know. He had no idea that he would be part of the opening act. Watkins had something against him, but what? So far, Angel had seemed to do his boss’s bidding... except that he had been trying to hide for a while, or at least that had been what Watkins had wanted him to believe.

They were all twisted and psychopathic. Hudson included Angel in that category, as well, and his money was on Angel knowing what was truly going on. Still, he must have fallen out of favor, and he was now in line for paying the price. But for what? Disobedience? Betrayal?

All in good time. Hudson moved his feet as if they were made of lead. He couldn’t hurry. This time, he would do it right. Not like when he had promised Pete to always have his back only to fail him so miserably later. This time, his promise to Otis, and all the other young men who didn’t know what dangers and darkness lurked under the façade of the new club, would be kept.



“We’ll have to sleep in here,” Jackie announced when he finally wrapped up the final adjustments to the album he had been working on for hours and shut down the laptop.

“It looks sort of cramped.”

The other guys were there and some had gone to sleep, huddled together on the big bed.

“These are for us,” Jackie told him. He pointed at two sleeping bags that were already arranged on the floor.

As he had worked, his mind in two places at the same time, Jackie had come and gone several times, bringing food for the guys along with other refreshments.

He was about to ask Jackie more about the particulars of the arrangements when he thought he heard something. A soft click. A frown etched its way between his eyebrows, bringing a new headache with it as he walked over to the door and pressed down the handle.

“What the hell?” he murmured under his breath.

Jackie was by his side in an instant. It looked like the young man was trying to remain glued to him at all times, or at least in his very close proximity. It was like having a rescue dog brought from the shelter. Hudson wasn't against it because he could only suspect what sort of dark thoughts were going through the young man's head, given their circumstances.

“It's locked,” he explained after trying the door one more time.

“What?” Jackie sounded as alarmed as Hudson felt. “Come on, it got stuck or something?”

“Wait,” Hudson said. “Maybe it's because they don't want any of these young people roaming the place at night.”

“You think?” Jackie asked, his voice ripe with irony. “The fuckers locked us in here, and that's weird as fuck.”

Hudson heard his phone ping and went back to the desk on which the laptop lay to grab it. He showed the message to Jackie.

See you all in the morning. Sorry for the inconvenience, but there is too much equipment to worry about with so many people around. Consider it a way to avoid theft. And wanderings off. We have a show to run.

“These guys aren't real,” Jackie whispered. “We should break the fucking door down.”

Hudson was about to tell him to keep it quiet so they didn't alert the others about the strangeness of the situation, when Jackie reached inside his jacket for his own phone.

“Just great,” he said with a grimace. “The boss just sent me a similar message. Apparently, tomorrow they'll get more security and the place will be better guarded. Like, what the hell do they want more security for? They got like a dozen bouncers here already. I think there are as many of them as there are models.” He pointed at the guys sleeping soundly on the bed.

Hudson didn't like it, either. More security meant more trouble for the final operation. He would have to let his people know as soon as he got a handle on everything that was going on. That had to wait until tomorrow.

“Then, I guess we’ll have to sleep like this,” he concluded and knelt by the side of one of the sleeping bags.

“This is utter crap if you’re asking me,” Jackie mumbled angrily. “They better open this door in the morning or I’m going to break it down and then ask for their shitty explanations.”

They turned off the light and then lay on the floor.

“Hey, Vegas,” Jackie called to him in the darkness.

“Yeah.”

“When you’re around, I’m not that afraid.”

“Good to know.”

“Okay. But you don’t think I’m lame because of it, right?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay, good talk.”

“Sleep, Jackie. We’re going to need all our strength.”

They would, without a doubt. Hudson wondered if he’d be able to do as he’d ordered Jackie, and his thoughts went to Otis. Where was he? Was he really in that room that he didn’t get to inspect, after all? What was he thinking? Was he afraid? He was different from most people, but getting kidnapped must have shaken him to the core. And Hudson wanted to be close to him and soothe all his fears before they engulfed them in their ugly embrace.



He had carefully inspected the lock on the door for what must have been hours. Since he lacked his usual tools, his efforts so far had been in vain. Still, that didn’t mean that he wouldn’t continue to try. Only that he needed to stop for a while and rest. Since that visit from hours ago, no one had come to see him again. He felt the pangs of hunger, and he could tell that the effects of dehydration added to the mind fogginess he was experiencing at the moment. Was he meant for the slow death of starvation? He should have drank that soda, but no, Otis shook his head, feeling resolute in his decision. If it had been poisoned, he wouldn’t be alive right now.

The scarred man spoke many words, and they seemed to indicate that Otis would remain alive for a while, but one thing he had learned about the outside world was that, too often, people said one thing and meant another. Unlike him. And that made him stand apart from the rest and make him feel like he didn’t belong among them.

He flexed his fingers to get rid of the numbness. The lock wouldn't give in so easily, and Otis didn't have the right tools with him. He could always improvise and innovate, but he had searched the room for anything that could remotely be used as a lockpick, and he appeared to be out of luck.

No, he shook his head again, he wouldn't think in such self-deafeating terms. Only that he needed to rest for a bit and steer his thoughts away from food and water. He rested with his back against the door. In movies, victims shouted and banged against the door, demanding to be let out, but that was a counterintuitive thing to do. If the bad people had average intellectual capabilities, they wouldn't keep their victims in a place someone could hear them, someone who could let them out. Also, they wouldn't release their prisoners just because they shouted at the top of their lungs for them to do so.

He needed to conserve his energy, especially since he had had nothing to drink or eat for what seemed to be at least an entire day from dawn till dusk. He couldn't be entirely sure without a watch, but it felt like it was night.

He had checked the room. There were no windows. There had been at some point in the past, and Otis could tell they had been walled up, the marks of where the paint had gone over the hard to miss ridges still obvious to a careful eye.

At one point, if the thirst and hunger got too bad, he might have to yell, anyway. Not in the hope that he would be miraculously released, but to ask for at least a drop of water. More than a drop, actually. He was so thirsty now, his tongue felt like a block of sandpaper in his mouth.

His head snapped in the direction of a sound. Someone was turning the knob. He quickly got to his feet and stepped away from the door. His eyes remained unblinking, set on the slowly turning knob.

The movement stopped. Whoever was there probably meant to scare him. Or give him false hopes. He felt a need so strong to start shouting, but he held back. And then, another sound, like the scraping of a tool against metal.

Someone was trying to get inside, and they didn't have a key. Otis made a move toward the door, but then stopped. The person on the other side was working in complete silence except for that soft scraping. That meant they didn't want to draw attention, and they were there to get him out.

Otis felt a whimper climbing up his throat. He wouldn't jeopardize the rescue mission, if that was what this was. However, he moved close to the door to listen to the sounds of his impending release. Could he signal the person on the other side that he was there?

He knew what to do. He tapped softly against the door. The scraping stopped, so he continued his tapping to the rhythm he had learned from a short video on Morse code. Maybe the other person knew it, too.

The scraping resumed and then stopped, seemingly abruptly. Otis wanted to tap his S.O.S. again but hesitated. If his would-be rescuer had stopped, there could be many reasons for it. He listened carefully, his neck craned until it hurt, but nothing followed.

He counted. One minute passed. Two minutes passed. He was sweating while he waited, and that wasn't good since he was already so dehydrated.

At the four-minute mark, the door opened, and he jumped to his feet, ready to meet his rescuer.

“Happy to see me?”

Otis took in Gideon Keres with wide eyes. What had happened? Without a doubt, the rescuer had been forced to interrupt his operation.

“I'm thirsty,” Otis said mechanically.

“Angel didn't bring you food and drink?”

“No, no one has been here for hours,” he lied.



Hudson wanted to slam his fists against the wall in frustration. He had been so close. And his conviction that Otis was there only grew. Who else would be smart enough to send him a message?

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Rescue Me

Keres had taken it upon himself to feed him and give him water, and Otis had obeyed without protest, even if the water from the plastic bottle in the man's hand had shaken enough to make most of it spill over his chin and down his shirt. He didn't like it when things got messy, but his need to straighten up his clothes and change into something else had to be reined in. There was no change of clothes available for him. He wasn't at home, but in the hands of a dangerous person, who could change his tune at any moment.

"Let's get you cleaned up," Keres ordered after brushing his gloved hand over Otis's mouth a few more times to remove some wayward crumbs.

Otis had only nibbled at the food, his stomach too tight to accept anything beyond a few bites. He knew that trying to force too much into his belly would only lead to stomachaches and he intended to avoid anything that could make him less fit for the self-saving operation he was trying to concoct in his weary mind.

He accepted the offered hand and walked behind Keres like a child.

"Can I have a pair of socks?" he asked meekly, not as much because he wanted to assure his captor that he had no intention of getting away, but because he still felt faint from the lack of nourishment and water endured over what felt like more than twelve hours. Maybe sixteen. More even. Having no sense of day and night added to his confusion even more.

Keres looked at him and then down at his bare feet. Otis curled his toes into the carpet as if making such a futile effort was enough to protect the patch of skin visible from any bad intentions.

"You have lovely feet," Keres said. "I will kiss them for hours. Before I break each and every one of your little toes." Everything that came out of the metallic throat sounded even, without any inflection, but Otis already knew his captor better than that. Keres looked forward to doing all those horrible things to him. He was excited at the prospect, while Otis felt a cold chill running down his spine. He had to have faith. He hadn't despaired before, and he wouldn't start now.

There was no offer of socks, and Otis didn't insist. They walked out of the room and down the corridor until they reached what had to be a bathroom. The small room was cramped and had only an open shower.

Keres helped him out of his clothes, and Otis had to fight the need to limit how much the gloved hands touched his bare skin. When otherwise violent people chose kindness, it was better to sit still and do nothing in an effort to avoid their wrath. He stood under the warm spray, accepting the way he was being stared at. At least, Keres didn't seem keen on getting wet, and that worked to his advantage. Otis could truly use a break from feeling his skin crawl with apprehension. He

hadn't quite gotten that expression when he had learned it for the first time, but it made sense now. The sensation he was experiencing was like that of a thousand creepy crawlers moving all over his skin.

"Such a lovely human being you are," Keres commented as Otis washed himself thoroughly. "You were made for me to love you."

When hateful people used words like 'love', it didn't mean anything. They had to be pitied. They had no ability to feel love, whether it was directed at them, or if they imagined they cared for someone else. That thing about pity, Otis didn't understand it. He felt no pity now.



Hudson listened as the door opened but made no move to show that he was awake. It was better to pretend as much as possible with this bunch.

"Rise and shine, future stars," Watkins announced in a cheery voice that grated on Hudson's nerves.

The guys began waking up slowly, and Hudson made a show of stretching and yawning, although he hadn't been able to sleep for more than a half hour at a time. His fractured sleep had everything to do with his worries about Otis and what these people might do to him.

"You," Watkins said, pointing at him, "the boss wants to see you."

Hudson worked a kink in his neck and grimaced. "Can I freshen up first?"

"No need for that. Move."

He followed without saying a word. He didn't like it when something happened that he couldn't make sense of. Watkins was right behind him, pushing him in the direction he wanted him to go. Jackie tried to tag along, but Watkins stopped him and sent him back to his chores, barking orders.

Keres was inside one room that must have been reserved to act as sort of a temporary office, and Hudson took his time looking it over, while the big boss appeared engaged in a long phone conversation.

"Yes, I know it is a bit of an inconvenience, but something came up."

Hudson was all ears, even if his eyes were busy looking bored while taking in his surroundings. Keres finally finished his conversation and then placed his gloved hands on the large desk, linking them tightly.

“You wanted to see me, boss?” Hudson asked, standing with his feet apart and his arms crossed to show that he wasn’t the kind to be easily intimidated.

“Yeah,” Keres said and added nothing for a while.

“Well?” Hudson asked as the silence stretched. Watkins wasn’t saying a word, either. Hudson threw him a short look and got nothing in return.

Keres moved slowly, putting a hand in his pocket and then removing something from it. When he placed the thing on desk, Hudson felt his gut twisting. Nonetheless, he lifted his gaze to give Keres a confused look.

“Should we call the only number stored in the phone’s memory?” Keres asked.

How had that gotten there? Hudson’s mind raced with various possibilities. He hadn’t dropped it, not in a million years. Had someone stolen it from him? But who? Jackie? No, that couldn’t be, right? Angel, then? He looked like the kind of guy who wouldn’t mind searching other people’s pockets, and when he had been in Jasper’s room, he had taken off his jacket for a bit.

It didn’t matter. It could be an exact copy of the kind of burner he used, but he didn’t see Keres as the type of guy to bluff.

He shrugged. “Why are you asking me?” He looked again at Watkins; his eyebrows raised in lack of comprehension. “What’s going on?”

“Let’s see,” Keres said and initiated the call without removing his eyes from Hudson.

The call connected on the second ring. But only silence followed. Gavin wasn’t born yesterday. For long seconds, nothing happened. And then, a click. The call ended.

“So strange,” Keres commented. “But silence is also an answer, isn’t that how the saying goes?”

Hudson shrugged again. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, really? Isn’t this yours?” Keres pushed the phone toward him, but Hudson made no move to pick it up.

“No. Mine is this one,” Hudson said and pulled the other phone out of his jeans, making sure to keep the same look of surprise on his face all the time.

Keres made a gesture for him to hand it over, and Hudson walked to the desk and placed it there.

“You took some very interesting pictures,” Keres commented. “But they’re not on your phone, I bet. Not on your camera, either. Not anymore. And yet, somehow I got my hands on them. You’ve been keeping things from us, Vegas. Or should I call you John Adam? That is the name you used to sign with us.”

“We’re in the entertainment business. I bet Angel’s real name isn’t Angel, either,” Hudson said with a shrug. “What pictures are you talking about?”

Keres gave him a long look. “Not the easy to forget kind. I must say, I was impressed from the start. I’m a pretentious man. Very few things appeal to my tastes. But I saw an angel, a real angel, and my heart skipped a beat, as they say in cheap romance novels nowadays.”

Hudson kept his eyes looking straight at Keres, as every muscle in his body tensed. He couldn’t show it. He knew what pictures that vicious dog was talking about, of course. The pictures he should have never taken. Regret was a bitter dish.

“Well, Mr. Adam,” Keres said, “I’m happy I got the chance to see them.” He leaned back into the chair and stared at Hudson, long and hard. “Not happy that you kept them for yourself, but since you’re in my employ, they’re not really yours, are they?”

“I’m not sure I’m following, and I still don’t know what pictures you’re talking about. Before Mr. Watkins here came to offer me a job, I was in contact with dozens of models. I have no idea who caught your eye.”

When Keres tried to smile, his face was straight out of a nightmare in the minutest detail. “I doubt it. I think you know who I’m talking about. Your boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” His throat was so tight he had to struggle to keep his voice sounding normal. “I don’t do boyfriends.”

Keres reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, the one next to the heart. For a moment, Hudson had a vision of pulling the beating organ out of the asshole’s chest and feeding it to him so that he could poison himself with his own darkness.

Keres pushed the printed photo toward Hudson. “I’m talking about him.”

He didn’t have to look to know, but he did look anyway. Otis’s half-closed eye was staring at him. At the time the photo was taken, the eye had appeared full of wonder, but now Hudson could only read reproach in it. *You didn’t keep your promise.*

“That is my neighbor,” he said and frowned slightly. “What’s he got with do with your business here, boss?”

“What a question. Don’t you have eyes, Mr. Adam?” Keres was using his fake name as a means to get him riled up. Were they still trying to figure out who he was, were they still in the dark? Hudson wasn’t so easy to read, or so he hoped. “He’s perfect for our opening act.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s not into this kind of thing,” Hudson continued the game. Was Keres the cat, playing with the mouse before striking the deadly blow? His burner was on Keres’s desk, out in the open, but his gun was still strapped to his ankle and he could feel it, its reassuring heaviness.

“He can’t not be,” Keres said. “But you’re right. That’s why he’s a keeper. No, please, allow me to correct that. I will be his keeper.”

“He is quite the prude,” Hudson argued. “You won’t be able to convince him.”

“Prude, you say?” Keres leaned over the desk to stare at the photo. “He doesn’t strike me as that at all. But of course, his beauty is pure, and justice has to be observed and credit given where due. As for his possible rejection of my offer, you don’t have to worry, Mr. Adam. He’s already convinced.”

“Is he going to be here for the opening?” Hudson asked, his fingers fighting the need to reach for the photo and snatch it from underneath those predatory eyes.

“He is here already. A perfect beauty,” Keres commented. “There will never be another one like him. He will become mine truly. Ah, and we thought you should know. The premiere is tonight.”

“Tonight? But I haven’t even sent out--”

Keres waved impatiently. “You were never in charge of the real thing, Vegas.” He was Vegas again. What did it mean? “The premiere is tonight, and I will start my work on my beauty. Dismissed.”

Hudson’s mind was reeling. He made a move to take his phone, the regular one, but Keres stopped him. “There’s also a new rule. No phones until after the premiere. Security issues.”

“Okay.” Hudson moved his hand away. “Just asking. Is this rule only for me?”

“No. No one is allowed to use a phone until further notice. Wasn’t I clear the first time? Dismissed.”

Hudson turned on his heel. Why were they doing this? Was his cover blown or not? He couldn’t call Gavin or the captain to let them know what was going on. Whoever had gotten into his phone had to do a pretty good job at hacking. Gavin’s number had been the last he had called. It had never been listed to be called at a simple touch of the screen.

The game of cat and mouse was on. Hudson had no hope that he wouldn’t be followed and every move he made watched and every word he said listened to. Once he was out of the room, he allowed himself one breath. Just one. The countdown had started, and he needed to find a way to let his people know of the change of plans and to find Otis before it was too late.



“What’s happening?” Jackie greeted him the moment he was back. “They took our phones and it’s going down today?”

It seemed that everyone had been informed while the big boss grilled him. Hudson nodded with a grim look on his face. His freedom of movement was limited, but maybe now was the time to take Jackie up on his earlier promises.

“Can you get into a room? If I told you which one?”

“Just because I’m a thug, you expect me to know how to pick a lock?”

“Can you?”

“Yeah,” Jackie said, his lips pursed. “What the heck is happening? I’m not doing shit until you rope me in.”

“I’ll have to make myself scarce. My cover’s as good as blown, although they don’t have all the facts,” Hudson shot the words out like rapid fire. “And they have Otis.”

“What the fuck?” Jackie hissed at him. “How is that even possible? Are you going to leave me here? And what do you mean, your cover is blown? How come you’re walking still? And Otis?” Questions were tumbling out of the young man’s mouth, questions with no easy answers.

“They might have nothing against executing a bit of a manhunt on the premises,” Hudson said. “And I’m going to give them one, but first, you need to get Otis out. No one’s going to look at you. At least at the moment. I need you to be quick.”

Jackie’s eyes were darting to and fro. “Man, this shit is—okay, I’ll do it. Which is the room? And what am I supposed to do with him?”

“Tell him I’m watching over him, over all of you. But I can’t be close, not right now. That’s what they expect of me. But you’re a whole different story.”

“I don’t know about that, but heck, it’s high time for me to be a hero, right?” Jackie’s eyes shone in the artificial light hanging above their heads. There were no windows in most of the rooms.

“Don’t do that. Just be careful. Extra careful. And don’t look back once you get out of here. I’ll take care of the rest, I promise. You take Otis and run. That’s all you have to do.”

“Okay, okay,” Jackie mumbled as if he were trying to convince himself that he could do it. “You take care, too, Vegas. Okay?”

Hudson only nodded shortly. He knew in his bones that he’d been given a short reprieve the same way hunters let their prey entertain the thought of getting away only to release the hounds later.



Otis shivered as he lay on the mattress wearing nothing. Keres had left him without his clothes and there was no blanket in the room so he was trying to preserve body heat by curling into himself. At first, he didn't hear the door, so someone's voice calling at him in a whisper took him by surprise.

"Jackie," he muttered when he saw who it was. "What are you doing here?"

"Babe, there's no time for twenty questions. Come with me. Vegas told me to grab you and run."

Otis scrambled to his feet and hurried to take Jackie's hand. It could all be a ruse, and some unspeakable horrors waited for him behind that door, but staying cooped up in that room while being so cold and confused could make him go mad.

"Who's Vegas?"

"I think his real name is Hudson. Come on, babe, it's your neighbor. And your boyfriend," Jackie added. "Let's go."

"I'm naked," Otis pointed out.

"That's crappy, and we have no time."

Jackie took off his jacket and put it around his shoulders and then pulled him along. They were out in the hallway, and Otis felt his teeth starting to chatter as his bare feet touched the cold floor. It didn't matter. He was out of that room, and while he couldn't see the way out, as confused as he felt, here, in the hallway, he felt freer than inside.

He hurried to keep up with Jackie, even if he had cramps in his calves preventing him from walking at full speed. Jackie was fast and held his hand. Both of them had clammy hands, Otis realized. But what was he saying about Hudson? Why would he be here? Why was he called Vegas?

Jackie was right, of course. This was no time for questions. He didn't even dare to look behind them for fear the scarred man would appear out of thin air and chase them down.

The light outside was so bright, it took him by surprise. He blinked a few times and walked close to Jackie.

"Come on, come on, where the hell is that car?" Jackie mumbled under his breath.

They went around a corner and Jackie stopped abruptly.

"Fuck."

Otis didn't condone cursing, but this was the sort of situation where it was warranted.

“The place is swarming with them,” Jackie said under his breath. “We need to find another way to get away.”

They turned and walked straight into the man named Watkins. Otis felt his gut sinking at the sight of the cruel eyes set on him.

“What do you think you’re doing, Jackie?” Watkins hissed. He grabbed Jackie by the arm and shook him.

“What the heck is my boyfriend doing here, boss?” Jackie retorted and shook the man off.

Otis observed the scene, pulling the jacket tighter around himself. Could he make a run for it while Jackie distracted Watkins? But they were in the middle of nowhere--

He froze as someone pushed him from behind. There was a thing, cold and hard, jabbing him in the ribs.

“Jackie, you need to shut the fuck up,” Watkins said. His voice was low and menacing.

Otis couldn’t understand a thing. The man behind him, someone dressed in black with a mask on his face, was holding him now.

“What the fuck is going on?” Jackie asked through his teeth. “Is that a gun? Hey, man, not cool. Stop threatening my guy like that.”

So, Jackie knew Watkins, but he didn’t know these were the bad guys? Otis wanted to grab his head and scream in fear and confusion. He took a deep breath. He wouldn’t lose his mind.

“This is more than you can handle, boy,” Watkins warned Jackie. “And since when do you have a boyfriend? Never mind. He belongs to the boss. Now, shut the fuck up and follow my lead. The boss can’t know about you taking his precious angel out for a walk.”

Jackie had a wild look on his face. His hair was glued to his forehead, and he appeared to be just as confused as Otis. Even more. And more scared, as well.

“You understand, good. Now, we need to make sure no one talks.”

Otis didn’t understand what was happening. He only saw Watkins pulling something from his pocket so fast it happened in the blink of an eye, and then a whistle-like sound flicked through the air. The man in black holding him fell off his feet, as if he were a puppet on strings, and someone had just cut those.

“What the--” Jackie choked on his own words. “You killed him!”

That was obvious but had to be said at the same time, Otis realized. No matter how many times Jackie would repeat the same thing, it wouldn't make it sound any more real. Otis stared at the crumpled shape on the ground and began shaking.

"Grab him," Watkins told Jackie and gestured with his long barreled weapon.

It had to be a silencer, Otis thought dimly, all his thoughts a tight coil of more and more confusion.

"Don't make me tell you twice."

"How are you going to explain this?" Jackie pointed at the dead person, his arm shaking violently.

"I won't have to. There will be enough bodies to get rid of by the end of tonight. No one will notice this one is missing."

Otis felt his throat constricting. Oh, no, it was coming, and he couldn't stop it. Numbness stretched from his feet now glued to the ground up and up, along his spine--

"What's wrong with him?" That was Jackie's voice.

He could hear everything just fine. He just couldn't move or react in any way. And his scared mind could bang against the confines of his skull to no avail. He should have stopped it, but he hadn't been able to.



He noticed a barrier made of black cars preventing anyone from going into or out of the premises. In all truth, he hadn't expected to be allowed to walk out of there, no questions asked. Or no shots fired. The security detail was a lot more extensive than he had expected. Those were people with shotguns and rifles, so out of the ordinary for a bunch of bouncers hired to keep an eye on clubgoers, even if it was that kind of club.

Good thing he had mapped out the place before, although his gun seemed no match for a dozen or so people armed to the teeth. Hudson pressed his back against a stack of old pipes, considering his options. Was there a way to sneak out? By now, Jackie should have gotten out of there with Otis, although something in his gut was telling him that might not be the case.

If they were guarding the back the same way they were keeping watch on the front, it wasn't going to be child's play to waltz out of there, especially with a rescued hostage in tow. Hudson counted on Jackie being resourceful, but now, he had his doubts. He hadn't expected the people with shotguns and rifles.

He looked out from behind his hiding place. The barrier split to admit another string of black cars. Hudson observed as passengers emerged from those vehicles, the armed men treating them with the sort of courtesy that could only mean one thing.

Those had to be the guests. They all wore masks, even as they emerged from their cars. There were both men and women, and they appeared dressed for a special occasion such as the premiere of a movie. Some walked in pairs, some alone, but they were all accompanied by one or two people with guns.

Why were they there so early in the day? It wasn't even noon. Hudson took a moment to think. His theory about the manhunt appeared sounder and sounder by the moment. He took in the tall wall on his side. He could attempt to climb it, but it would make him a clear target, and he couldn't risk it.

Unless they were too busy with the guests. He moved closer and then he noticed the metal coils and barbed wire mounted on top. Those hadn't been there before. Hudson crouched and searched the ground for a pebble big enough to work. He aimed at an angle that wouldn't reveal his position and threw the small stone with as much precision as he could. The wires flared at the impact, and there were a few shouts of surprise from the arriving crowd.

Hudson wasn't surprised to hear the couple of shots that followed. They confirmed his suspicions.

He would be hunted. What they probably didn't realize was that he didn't plan on letting them catch him.



The world continued to happen, to move outside of him. Otis knew his head lolled to one side, but he couldn't straighten it up even if he wanted to. It was as scary as ever. It was also his way of protecting himself.

"Oh, great, you broke him," Angel said from his left. "Although I guess he was broken anyway. That's just swell. One's a vegetable, and one's a nutso that doesn't move or blink. I hope the third number is better than these two."

"How the fuck are you not freaked out by this shit?" That was Jackie, somewhere to his right, his voice strangled by fear.

Angel laughed, the sound ugly and harsh. "I suppose your uncle thought you needed protecting from this stuff. He even planned on sending you home before tonight."

“The boss just freaking killed someone,” Jackie muttered under his breath. “Right in front of me. Bam. Just like that. And stop calling him my uncle, I don’t whore myself out to him like you.”

“Oh, baby, so you don’t know?” Angel laughed again. “There’s just one reason the boss keeps you around, although you’re dumber than a rock. You shouldn’t even be here, but the big boss wants your ass for some reason.” He tsked as if he couldn’t believe Jackie was so silly not to understand the situation.

Otis registered the details, the tone of voice each of them used.

“Angel, we need to get the fuck out of here. This shit is weird as fuck. Why are so many people with guns all over the place? Let’s take Otis and Jasper and make a run for it.”

“Don’t be stupid. And you and me, we’re fine. No one’s going to hurt us. These two, however, they’ll make an awesome opening.”

“The hell you talking about?”

“You really don’t know, do you? Damn, you make me want to pat you on your empty head in pity.”

“What am I supposed to know? Have you noticed that they locked us in here? We’re not safe, Angel. This place is fucked up. And--why the hell are you laughing? You wrong in the head or something?”

“I don’t understand how you’ve managed to stay so blind to everything all this time. Let me spell it out for you, Jackie. This place is a different type of wonderland than what you know. Hell, it’s different from everything you’ve ever seen in your life.”

“Stop taunting me and talk,” Jackie said.

“Well, where should I even start? You see, I’m on the inside and always have been. It’s true that I thought in the beginning that you wouldn’t last long until the boss told me you’re kin.”

“That’s bullshit. He would’ve told me if he were my uncle. Why hide it?”

“Aww, boo-boo, are you going to cry? Because he doesn’t need a soft underbelly, you dummy. And seeing how you’re not the sharpest tool in the shed, he decided not to tell you so that you wouldn’t yap your mouth all over the place like an idiot. Frankly, I believe you grew on him in time. At first, he told me you wouldn’t be sticking around too long.”

“You’re full of shit. Stop talking,” Jackie whispered.

Otis could tell there was real pain in Jackie’s voice. He would have offered a kind word, but he couldn’t move, let alone talk. He was inside that safe cocoon that wouldn’t let anything happen to him.

“Oh, but now you’ve got me going,” Angel taunted. “The boss must have had some revelation that he doesn’t want to die in a home for old people and somehow imagines you’re going to be the guy that will drive him to the doctor and change his diapers when he’s too old to do all that for himself. I have my doubts about that, but what do I know? I have no family left.”

“For real? I thought you still had your old man.” Jackie spoke quickly as if he wanted to escape from there by talking.

“He wanted me to stay at home and straighten my ways. I don’t think I meant to hurt him that badly, but heck, he started it. And it looked so much like an accident that I didn’t want to spoil it for everyone else who got so excited over his little freakish mishap. Falling from his tractor right into his own bush hog like that, tsk, tsk.”

“Now you’re talking out of your ass,” Jackie said, growing more and more agitated judging by the way his voice sounded.

“Maybe, who knows? But let me tell you this, Jackie. This guy here won’t survive the night. They’re going to take him apart, little by little, enjoying every second of it.”

“Stop talking, that’s not true,” Jackie moaned as if in pain.

“I’ve seen it before, my little silly boy. But you were blind to it all. Like when you were trailing after that guy all your waking hours... What did they call him? Sweetheart?”

“Don’t you dare,” Jackie growled like a wounded animal.

Angel laughed. “You were so heartbroken after, thinking that he left without even giving you his number. Damn, you were so cute and dumb. So many times I wanted to tell you--”

“Tell me what?” Jackie’s voice was low and deadly now.

“That it was my greatest pleasure to look him in the eye as he kicked the bucket. Yeah, I did it, Jackie. It’s because of me your precious Sweetheart doesn’t call.”

A shout and the sounds of a struggle followed. It all happened outside his field of view. He couldn’t turn his head, couldn’t cry, couldn’t help.

Otis felt a small tremor growing in his right hand, his fingers tapping, spelling out the letters one by one in a language he believed no one else knew. It didn’t matter; no one was coming.

But hope died last, always. So his hand jerked to the rhythm of its own accord.

Rescue me. Rescue me. Rescue me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Cutting It Close

The building rose before his eyes like a fortress. In daylight, it should have displayed none of the ominous signs of its true purpose, but the men in dark clothes roaming the perimeter lent it that exact quality, the rays of the still bright sun bouncing off their shiny weapons, blinding him now and then for a moment.

He needed to think this through. There was no room for failure, no room for a misstep of any kind. Otis was there, trapped inside that machinery made of evil and concrete. That was what he felt, deep inside his gut. Sure, there was always the chance that Jackie had succeeded in getting both himself and Otis to safety, a glimmer of hope and also a door wide open for Hudson to search for a way out, not a way in.

The duty he had sworn to his career prompted him to save his skin and let his colleagues know about the change of plans. They had to trap all of these scumbags, all these sorry excuses for human beings, and then lock them up forever. If they escaped punishment this time, who knew how much hurt and suffering they would continue to spread in the world? And it had to happen at just the right time and in just the right way, or they would just get away, based on technicalities and who knew what else.

He could tell himself there was no way out. That the walls were too high, the electric fence that had been added to the layout an insurmountable obstacle, and all the entry and exit points too well-guarded. And maybe all that was even true.

But he had to check first to make sure that Otis was no longer there. He'd only leave if he knew that. Do his best to leave, anyway. He doubted it would be some walk in the park to escape the premises, seeing what sort of security detail was now in place.

That meant that he needed to do the opposite of what these people expected him to do. He kept both hands on his gun after he checked it to see that it hadn't been fiddled with somehow, without his knowledge. The loss of the burner phone still stung. Whether Angel – it must have been him – was an expert in pickpocketing, or he had been insufficiently concerned and aware of his surroundings for a moment more than he should have been.

The front was no dice. He needed to find a way through the back. If he moved behind the abandoned pipes and crates with enough care, he'd be able to sneak along the side wall and then end up behind the building. He had seen enough of it to know where the best entry point was for him to do his duty to Otis.

If it hadn't been for him, Otis would be free now. The thought kept pestering him like a vicious fly, bent on infecting him with doubt. He pushed it away. The time for him to do something about it was now.

He looked from behind the stack of pipes at the men ensuring the security of the place. They appeared unconcerned for the most part, as if guarding a place where they slaughtered innocents was business as usual. How much of what was going on inside that building did they know about? Another detail that had no importance. If any of those assholes pointed his gun at him, Hudson knew he wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger first. His years with the force had ensured he didn't lack the skill or determination when it came down to either him or the perp.

He sauntered to the wall the moment he spotted an opportunity. So far, so good. He slunk along, the sound of his steps on the gravel path too loud in his ears. Once he reached the corner, he listened for a moment before taking a look.

Someone was coming, his steps heavy and confident. Someone patrolling, perhaps. Hudson waited, all the sinews, bones and muscles in his body at the ready. The steps were getting closer.

He acted before even spotting the man. He hit him in the face with the butt of his gun, so hard that bones were crushed on impact. He grabbed and silenced the man with his hand before he could yell and alert the others. But this guy was no ordinary grunt, it seemed, because despite the blood pouring from his nose and the pain that had to come with it, he pushed back and reached for his gun.

Hudson elbowed him hard in the chin and the guy fell on his back. There was no way of telling if anyone else was patrolling the usually deserted back, so Hudson pulled the man by the feet and then rolled him close to the outside fence where the overgrown plants and bushes no one had cut in ages made an adequate cover for now.

He didn't intend to kill anyone if he could help it, although the chances of that were slim. This guy might be in luck, since he was unconscious. Hudson made quick work of removing the guy's belt and tied his hands and feet behind his back in a way that would make it hard for him to free himself. There was one other aspect he needed to take care of; he searched the guy's pockets and stuffed his mouth with a handkerchief, using the straps from the small backpack he was carrying to secure that in place, too.

He grabbed the guy's rifle and hiked it over his shoulder. With so many potential enemies roaming the place, every bullet counted. He pushed the two magazines he found in the guy's pockets inside his jeans for quick access.

Just when he was about to leave, he noticed something odd. There was something else in the overgrown grass. Hudson looked around for a moment, keeping a close watch on his surroundings, and then walked over to where he had noticed the hidden object.

It was a black combat boot. And it was attached to a foot. Hudson pushed the tall bush in his path away and then saw the owner of the boot. A guy in black, similar in clothing and built to the one

he had just neutralized lay there, on his belly. Hudson knelt by his side and checked his pulse. This one was dead. What the hell did that mean?

He had no time for questions without answers. Could it be that man was not supposed to be there? Hudson turned him over, expecting with dread to catch a glimpse of a familiar face – someone from the police op team getting ideas in his head? But no, he didn't know him, and he didn't look like law enforcement, either.

There was still the mystery of his death. If he had to take a guess, Hudson was thinking the guy must have been shot. He checked the body and found another magazine for the same type of rifle he had grabbed. That went into his stash, as well.

He was about to get out of the hiding place when he heard voices. Quickly, he dropped back down to the ground, crouching, hoping that the brush was high and thick enough to conceal him. He gripped the rifle tightly. If there was going to be a shootout, at least he needed to be fast, accurate and deadly.

There were two of them, also dressed in black and armed with shotguns. Hudson observed them as they walked past, talking to each other, something about a match coming up the next Sunday. Such a normal thing to talk about given the circumstances. After they disappeared from view, Hudson still waited to see if they came back, and only when they didn't, he got out.

Time was of the essence. If Otis was still inside, Hudson would raise hell to get him out.



Time moved like molasses when this happened. Otis was vaguely aware that someone – Jackie, most likely – had placed him with his back resting against a wall, and he was on a soft surface, a bed perhaps. The earlier fight had ended with Angel leaving, the door slamming hard behind him, and Jackie crying and whispering things to himself to soothe his broken heart.

Otis couldn't even blink, or he wasn't aware of doing so anymore. He wished he could offer Jackie a hand, although he knew there were no words to soothe a pain like what poured out of the young man's mouth. The person named Sweetheart, he must have been someone very dear to him. And Angel had admitted to having had something to do with that person's death. Maybe he was just mean, maybe he had said those things only to hurt Jackie. There were people like that, who enjoyed seeing others suffer, for all the good that did. There was no good to be had from other people's suffering, and still, some caused it nonetheless.

“Oh, fuck, Otis, what the hell am I going to tell Vegas?” Jackie pleaded, still sniffing from time to time. “There's no way I'm letting those fuckers hurt you, do you hear me? You probably

don't, and it's scary to see you like this, but I made a promise. I'm going out for a moment. I need to check the place and see if there's a way out."

Otis wanted to cry and shout and tell Jackie not to leave him, but he was lost to the world and had no means of protecting himself or even begging for others' protection.



He was inside now. There was no way he was fooling himself; from this moment onward, he was trapped and surrounded. Gavin would tell him he was a big freaking idiot; the captain would use nicer terms, but the gist would be the same. He was nuts to attempt this when he had already delegated Otis's rescue to Jackie. When it came to his boyfriend, apparently, he couldn't let go so easily.

The long hallway opened in front of him. Quiet. Everyone must be in the main room or close to it, rehearsing their roles. Did they have the slightest idea what they were rehearsing for? Hudson doubted it. No one in their right mind would still be there willingly if that were the case. Jasper had learned of their evil plans, and look where that had gotten him. He was as good as a vegetable, and a – still – living reminder for Hudson that maybe he wasn't as good at his job as he thought himself to be.

Chase away your doubts. They're no use. Hudson walked swiftly, his hand on the rifle, ready to eliminate anyone that was an immediate threat or run back the same way he had come in if that was a choice.

A door opened behind him and he ducked into one of the adjoining rooms that, thankfully, was open. He closed it slowly, praying that the hinges didn't need oiling, and kept it slightly ajar so that he could steal a glance outside.

More men in black uniforms. Where the hell had they gotten all these guys? They weren't particularly bright. Hudson had taken one down, and there was also the matter of the dead one.

He waited until the sound of their footsteps died away and opened the door with infinite care. First, he'd check all the rooms where they usually kept the models and then head over to the main one. With a bit of luck, Otis would no longer be there. And being on the inside wasn't such a bad idea. Since there was no way for him to know if the cavalry would arrive in time, it was up to him to stop the massacre that was scheduled for that evening.

Another door opened and Hudson drew back. He did have time, however, to see Jackie walking toward the place where he was hiding. His heart sank; if Jackie was still there, that meant that Otis was, too.

At least, he had an answer.

Jackie moved past his door rapidly. He went for the door in the back by the sound of his steps. Could it be he was still trying to get out? Hudson waited and listened.

“What do we have here?” someone sneered.

“Fuck off, dude,” Jackie replied. “Get your hands off me!”

There were sounds of a struggle, so Hudson opened the door wider. He looked out, making sure to keep himself as concealed as possible. Two of the security men were holding Jackie and feeling him up.

“He must be one of the guys who’re going to show it all on stage tonight.”

“Yeah, inside and out,” the other commented and laughed. Then, he made a disgusting gesture as if he had just had his belly cut and was trying to hold in his intestines.

Hudson set his jaw hard. So they knew.

“Who says we can’t have a bit of fun with this one?” the first man said and grabbed Jackie by the back of his neck. “Do you know how to blow a dude, sweetheart?”

Jackie let out such an anguished cry that Hudson felt his hair stand on end. He saw everything happening as if in slow motion, Jackie lunging at the guy to strangle him, the other lifting his weapon.

He was so quick he had no idea he’d moved until the two bodies hit the ground, a fraction of a second separating them. Jackie remained standing between them, choking and trembling like a leaf.

“Jackie,” Hudson called out in a whisper as he ran toward him, “it’s okay.”

Jackie turned to face him, still shaking. “Vegas,” he mumbled. “For fuck’s sake.” Tears were pouring freely down his cheeks. “I couldn’t. They fucking caught us. And Watkins killed one.”

One mystery solved. Hudson grabbed Jackie and hugged him briefly. “Where’s Otis? How is he?”

“He’s not moving, man.” Jackie started crying harder.

Hudson felt his heart stop. “What do you mean? Is he dead?”

“No, but it’s like he’s frozen. He’s in that room, but not easy to move.”

That didn’t matter. He’d hike him up on his shoulder and run with him. No, that would be stupid with so many armed men around. He needed to fucking think.

By his side, Jackie babbled on. “And Angel... he killed Sweetheart, Vegas.”

Hudson looked around. He wasn't surprised by that revelation. "We need to hide these bodies. Quick."

"Didn't you hear me, man?" Jackie continued his plea.

Hudson grabbed his arm. "I hear you, loud and clear. They're going to get what's coming to them. But now, help me hide these assholes."

Jackie obeyed. "When are your guys coming?"

Who the hell knew?

"They don't know it's going down tonight."

"Fuck this shit," Jackie barely whispered. "What are we going to do?"

"First, hide these bodies," Hudson repeated the same words.

He opted for the room where he had just been. Jackie grabbed one guy by the legs and Hudson lifted one up, so they finished fairly quickly. And just in time. Because that place seemed to be frequented by those assholes more than he hoped for.

He didn't close the door, just like before. Good call not grabbing Otis because with him in his arms, they'd end up being easy targets. Acting in such a short time, they hadn't been able to wipe away the traces of their actions. There was fresh blood in the hallway, and if those guys missed it, they had to be blind.

"Jackie," Hudson said in a low whisper, "do you know how to use a gun?"

He wouldn't normally part with his service weapon, but Jackie needed something smaller than a rifle. The poor guy was still trembling from head to toe.

"Yeah," Jackie replied.

"Take it," Hudson said and handed him his gun. "Now, don't hesitate."

They barely had time to get behind the door, as the two from the hallway blasted in. Hudson saw both guys falling at the same time, which meant Jackie had just come through.

"Good," he said. "But I guess all this shooting is starting to draw attention. Hide that gun, keep it on you, and go watch over Otis."

"Can't I stay with you? Kill all these fuckers?"

"I need you to take care of him," Hudson said, grabbing Jackie by the shoulders. "Now, go back to that room and pretend everything is normal. When they come running, you say you heard shooting and chose to stay inside. And keep that gun out of sight."

“Like a coward,” Jackie murmured.

“Hey, they’re not going to pay if we’re dead,” Hudson said.

Jackie nodded. “Okay. And thanks, Vegas. For earlier.”

“Don’t mention it.”



Jackie was back, Otis could tell. He felt his hand touching him briefly.

“Vegas is here,” Jackie said quickly. “He’s going to take those bastards down. He gave me his gun.”

Otis saw the thing pushed before his eyes. He recognized it. It was Hudson’s gun. He tried to be happy but he couldn’t shake it off. That strange paralysis with a weird name.

Jackie straightened up quickly and moved away from him. Someone else was coming in.

Watkins. Otis now recognized him, even by his smell, something that reminded him of unwashed clothes. As they said in movies and books, he stank of fear, and why would he feel fear since he was one of the bad guys?

“Jackie, did you see anything? Who’s shooting?”

“How the hell should I know? I heard the shots, I hid in here and prayed that whoever’s outside didn’t come for me, too.” Jackie’s voice was quivering.

“Stop looking so fucking spooked,” Watkins barked at him. “If this works, we’re rich and won’t have to work ever again.”

“Is it true?” Jackie asked, his voice deep and hurt now. “What Angel keeps saying? That you’re my uncle?”

“What? What did that idiot tell you?” Watkins sounded guilty now. “Don’t be stupid. Can’t you see we’re nothing alike?”

“Yeah, I can tell. Is that what your business is all about? Getting guys, what, murdered on stage?”

Otis couldn’t turn his head to witness what was going on with his own eyes so he had to depend on what he was hearing alone. Watkins must have grabbed Jackie hard.

“Don’t you dare shoot your mouth off at me, punk. It’s because of me you haven’t ended up like the others yet. And the big boss likes you a bit too much, you know?”

“I ain’t scared of him. Or you.” Jackie’s bravado was threadbare, but perhaps he needed it to survive this nightmare. Otis found no fault in his behavior.

“Oh, you’re not? Maybe I should drag your sorry ass to Keres and tell him he’s free to have a go at you. What do you say?”

“I call bullshit,” Jackie said back. “You ain’t gonna let him do nothing to me. ‘Cause you’re my freaking uncle and that explains everything.”

“Keep your shit together. That’s all you have to do. And keep your eyes on this broken doll. We can’t afford to lose him. If he disappears somehow, I won’t deny Keres having you on that stage instead. What do you say? Play this as I tell you.”

“Okay,” Jackie said in a low menacing voice. “I just want to know one thing. How did it happen with Sweetheart? Who got him?”

“Why do you want to know something like that?”

“Was it Angel?”

“He told you that?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“And you? Where were you? Watching?”

“Yes. Not like I had a choice. Unlike these freaks, I don’t get off on it. Don’t play the high and mighty with me, Jackie.”

“I won’t.”

Watkins walked out of the door. “Good. I see that we understand each other.”

Jackie continued talking, even with the door closed between him and his uncle. “You can be sure that I’m going to come down to your level and kill your sorry ass. For Sweetheart.”

Revenge wasn’t good for the soul. But Otis doubted the heavens themselves would deny Jackie that bitter solace.



Hudson closed his eyes for a moment. He couldn't stay in that room long, not with red marks on the floor pointing at him there; a neon sign flashing above his head would make for a less visible sign. By now, they had to know there was an enemy on the loose, and that wouldn't make things easy at all. Taking those guys out one by one was one thing, but dealing with a whole army rushing at him was completely different.

He checked the rifle and fed it a new magazine. Better be prepared to take down more than one scumbag or two. And now, he needed to move on. He checked the hallway for signs of life and hurried toward the exit. His plan was to see where the forces gathered up front had gone, and if their numbers had dwindled after the whole ruckus inside.

He was in the brush, catching his breath for a moment, when the speakers began wheezing to life. It was easy to recognize Keres's robotic voice.

"Dear ladies and gents, it appears that we will get to enjoy a bit of pre-show entertainment. It wasn't in the initial plan, and I'm telling it to you now so that the frisson of novelty can provide you with the much-needed pleasure of a manhunt. Yes, here, on our premises, we have a beast looking for a way out. Our men have been instructed to catch him alive, but since he's quite the wild animal, all bets are off. And speaking of bets, you can place yours. Let's say... how long do you believe it will take our men to bring him down or to us for later amusement? I should add, the beast on the loose is not to be underestimated. He is, after all, trained."

The speakers died down, and Hudson cursed under his breath. He had expected as much. That also bought him time, and not only him. By now, knowing that Hudson's cover had to be as good as gone, he'd be on his way to organize a different type of intervention. But all that was in doubt in terms of time and strength of operation since their initial goal was different.

Hudson knew the captain would want to save his ass. But, in the meantime, he didn't plan on letting anyone down. He'd do his job, and he'd save his own ass.

He moved slowly, making sure not to make a lot of noise and still remain hidden in the tall wild bushes. Still, he'd check on the front, as planned. Then, his better chances still lay inside, where it was more difficult for his would-be killers to come at him in large numbers from all sides.

As he had expected. They hadn't given up on guarding the main entrance, and there were still six men there. Without knowing their precise number, Hudson could easily assume that the most of them were now inside, looking for him.

He raised his rifle, taking aim. It was high time to even the odds a bit.

The first man fell, executing a clumsy pirouette, and the second had no better chance. Hudson crouched low as random bullets flew over his head. Two more down, an unknown quantity left. Those marksmanship classes he had taken at the captain's suggestion were really paying off now.

The wall above his head was chipped to the rhythm of the shots fired at him. They would come closer to check after a while, and, in the meantime, more guys would pour out of the building, excited by the thrill of the chase.

How many would he have to kill before those security guys figured out they were fodder for the man who had hired them? Would they turn against the hand that fed them?

Unknown quantity, he told himself. The more he dropped, the better.



“What are you doing here? I don’t want to see your fucking face,” Jackie yelled at someone coming into the room.

“So what? I need to inject this guy with the medicine for tonight. This shit takes time to work.”

Angel. Another name that made his skin crawl now that he knew more about the young man in question.

“You don’t fucking touch him or I kill you,” Jackie said.

“Fuck off already. I lied, okay? About Sweetheart. I had no idea you were so into him. And I had nothing to do with it. I learned about it later. Come on, you know we can be friends, you and me.”

Otis doubted it. Angel sounded honest, but then, only earlier, Watkins had told Jackie that what Angel had confessed the first time was true. Jackie wouldn’t be so easy to fool, even though he had puppy eyes that Otis remembered clearly. Even though he seemed to be what people called too gullible for his own good.

“I’m going to be your friend when hell freezes over. Leave him alone,” Jackie said in a tense voice.

“Come on, Jackie, you don’t want the poor guy to feel it while he gets cut up and dismembered and who knows what else.”

“Do you hear yourself? How can you even talk like that?”

“I care about my skin, okay? You know, when I found out we’re going to have another show of this type, I wanted to bail. Seriously. It took your uncle a whole lotta of convincing to make me come back.”

“I don’t believe a word that comes out of your mouth.”

“Well, believe what you want. Now, let me do my job. Hey, cut that out. Okay, fine. He’s a goner, anyway. And if he wakes up screaming, it’s on you. Also, since I hate his fucking guts, it’s all for the better. I hope he wakes up screaming.”

Angel protested some more while Jackie must have been kicking him out the door. Otis tuned out the sounds. Wake up screaming. He had learned to deal with his nightmares, taught himself to look them in the face and struggle to find the tiniest scraps of courage that existed somewhere, inside him.



What were the guys who were supposed to be part of the show thinking of that announcement and all the shooting taking place? Hudson wondered briefly as the hallway behind him was now littered with bodies. He winced at the burn in his shoulder and ignored his own limping. It wasn’t like he expected to get out of this unscathed. Superficial wounds still hurt like a bitch.

His goal was to reach Keres. If he found the guy, all bets were off. That sorry excuse for a human being would have to call off his hounds, and then, they might start negotiating. Although Hudson knew those fuckers had one chip to trade that was nonnegotiable in his eyes.

Otis. Who had turned into a statue, according to Jackie, under the weight of the shock of his kidnapping and everything else that followed. Maybe that was mercy; maybe it was for the better that he could no longer see and hear the horrible things happening around him.

He hadn’t forgiven himself for Pete, either. He doubted he’d forgive himself for Otis.

His first bet was on the room to which he had been summoned that very morning, a time that already seemed so far away. He doubted that he would still find Keres there, but he had to check each of those rooms, anyway.

He started when the chair moved and turned, revealing the man in charge. Hudson pointed the gun at him.

“Please come in and close the door after you,” Keres said with a smile that made his lips stretch like a pair of rubber bands.

Hudson closed the door with his foot without looking behind him. He’d be trapped in here but better not to have some asshole shooting him from behind. He made sure to move away from the door, so that he wouldn’t get killed through it by his enemies filling the door with lead. All this time, Keres watched his every move, that unsettling smile never leaving his face.

“Call them off,” Hudson said. “Free all the boys, everyone that’s not your goon or ally. And I’ll let you live.”

“Hmm, it feels like we have quite the standoff,” Keres commented and pressed his gloved hands together, steepling them in front of him on the desk. “I could have everyone eliminated, everyone you care about, at least, and shooting me wouldn’t bring them back.”

“Are you going to make that call with me here? I dare you,” Hudson said.

Keres laughed. It didn’t sound like human laughter at all. “No, it pleases me to have to deal with someone as gifted as you. Under other circumstances, I’d even offer you a place in my organization.”

“No, thank you. Employment in your organization doesn’t last very long, from what I’ve seen so far.”

“Well said.” Keres wagged a finger at him, looking horribly pleased. “You are a very interesting person, Mr. West.”

“So you know,” Hudson said in a deadpan voice.

“It wasn’t easy information to obtain.”

“Who told you?”

Keres’s disgusting grin was the answer.

“Do I even know the guy?”

“Too small fry for you to know. And a big operation like that,” Keres tsked all-knowingly, “is bound to have some loose ends.”

Hudson still kept his weapon trained on the guy, weighing his options. “So you know what’s going down? And the show is still on?”

“Why would I cancel it? Yes, I suppose that the good guys in blue will appear at some point. But that will only make it more interesting. Let’s say that in my life I’ve learned the thrill of cutting it close. Would you like to hear my story, Mr. West? My real life story? We have time, and you’re still trying to decide whether killing me would lead to the demise of that beautiful thing or not. Aren’t you?”

“Mindreading is hardly your strongest suit,” Hudson replied coldly.

He would buy some time. The demented fucker in front of him was cunning, but the clock wasn’t working to his advantage.

Chapter Thirty – The Lovely Eye

Keres sat half-turned from him as if looking out the window could help him recollect those memories of a different time. Hudson looked the same way briefly. The sun was going down; soon, it would be evening. What was taking them so long?

“I’ve always believed myself to be a redoubtable opponent, regardless of the conflict I was engaged in,” Keres began. “My accident that I told you about didn’t happen like that. I crossed the people I was working for at the time. They decided to teach me a lesson, torture me until I cracked. They were bad people, you might say, but I was worse. I’ve always been the worst,” he went on with delight. “Too bad, there was a good soul among them. See, I was not yet twenty when that happened. He thought that saving me would be a good thing. For his soul or something of the kind. He dropped me off at a hospital. Other good souls took care of me there.”

“I searched your accident online and couldn’t find anything,” Hudson said.

“I’m afraid it happened well before the Internet was a thing. Older archives should have it all on paper. In case you’re wondering, yes, it was about forty years ago, and I’m far from being a young man. Back to my story now. Don’t think you’re buying time for yourself. I’m the one who does that.”

Hudson shrugged, his ears perked up for any noises in the hallway. As long as Keres was here with him, he couldn’t give orders for the innocent people on the premises to be killed. His statement about buying time, however, was unsettling.

“Once I was back on my feet, I went after my enemies. But the first person I killed was the man who saved me.”

“Why?”

“Excellent question, Mr. West. Because kindness is a close sibling to stupidity and that’s something I can’t tolerate. He should have finished the job. If he had, a lot of other people would have stayed alive. Do you disagree?”

“Go on.”

“Holding on to your principles. Of course. It’s this sort of inflexibility that draws trouble. I set the hospital where I was treated for my wounds on fire. I couldn’t kill everyone, although the death toll was impressive. Should they have known who I was, what I was, do you think they would have chosen to smother me in my sleep? Cut off my air supply? What’s the limit of kindness, Mr. West?”

“I would have killed you,” Hudson replied calmly.

A short bark of laughter followed, mechanical and otherworldly in the worst kind of way. “You’re a man to my liking, as I thought.”

“Have you done this often? How many people have you killed for your sick entertainment?”

“Now you’re skipping steps. And I thought you liked the idea of keeping me here, hostage to your will, until your guys arrived. You see, there was another – quite important if I may say – drawback to my accident. I was left without my sexual organs. Let’s say that the suckers who tortured me found it funny to leave me without the possibility of procreation.” Keres put one hand up. “Please, don’t pity me.”

“I have no intention of doing that.”

“Very good. I hate pity. Such a muddy, disgusting sentiment. Not a lot to be gotten out of it. Being left without the ability to satisfy myself in the base manner humans and animals share, I had the unique opportunity to refine my pleasures. And I discovered them, little by little. It started off with the thrill of killing, of course. But that had been a pleasure of mine even before my so-called accident. The downside was that it lasted a very short time. Torture was the next logical step. But even that grew stale after a while. And soon enough, I realized what was missing.” Keres stopped for a moment as if he was goading Hudson into asking him for details. “I wanted to share my pleasure, the exquisite sophisticated pleasure of watching a man drained of his life at my hands. I love the Internet. So many dark corners, where you can find people like me.”

“Did you start a Facebook group?” Hudson asked.

“Such a plebeian sense of humor. No, of course not. But I found my people, so the idea of having some organized places where I could put on display the beautiful exhibits I intended to destroy became very appealing. Imagine, Mr. West,” Keres said and swiveled his chair to face Hudson, “how it would feel to walk into – let’s say – the Louvre, and start destroying those precious artworks. Slash the Mona Lisa, cut the canvas right through with no one to stop you. Smash the Venus de Milo into pieces. You know, she’s so beautiful already, without her arms. Why not make her perfect? Have you noticed how many artworks celebrate death?” Keres’s face seemed animated by dark glee as the sun was setting down behind him. With no lights whatsoever in the room, even the mundane furniture ended up draped in new shadows, lending the atmosphere an eerie, disquieting quality. “Beauty is unnatural. It fades, never lasts. Why not destroy it at its peak? Young people, in particular, appeal to me. Why let them become wrinkled and gray? Why let them suffer?”

Hudson shifted his weight from one foot to another. By now, he should have seen some action.

“Enough talk,” he said abruptly. “It looks to me like no one’s coming to save you. Or wonder what’s keeping you. That means that it’s over, Keres.”

“Now it is quite rude, interrupting me like this. But I suppose I don’t mind it that much. You’ll give me so much pleasure later.”

Hudson frowned as he felt the prick in his neck. He brought a hand up and touched the area, surprised with some latency of feeling the needle embedded already in his skin and deeper.

“What--” he mumbled, as his body became heavy and the room tilted.

He was still conscious as Keres walked over to him.

“I could take you down at any moment. Now you will serve my pleasure.”



He gasped as he realized he couldn’t breathe through his nose, but even that didn’t help. The water entered every way it could find, making him sputter and heave.

“Finally, awake,” someone commented.

Hudson grunted as the punch to the stomach took him unaware. He bent over and lost some bile; he hadn’t eaten for the last twenty-four hours or so.

“Not such a fucking big man now, eh?” the same man asked and hit him again.

“Don’t break anything. The boss wouldn’t like it.”

“That doesn’t mean that I can’t hit him where it’s not so visible, right?”

Hudson curled on the floor to protect his head. That was the one thing he couldn’t afford to lose. The asshole hitting him chose to kick him in one of his shins instead. The pain was searing, overwhelming. He had the feeling that he was already battered and bruised; had they kicked him at leisure while he’d been unconscious?

Keres must have used an automated trigger to take him down like that. A detail that he must have overlooked when walking into the room. But he’d had eyes only for Keres, and no one else had been there. It wasn’t an excuse, just a fact.

“This fucker killed like twenty of us,” one complained. “What can’t we just gut him like a fish? And then, we’ll tell the big boss that he tried to run.”

“No, we can’t do that,” the first one spoke again. “Be happy with beating the crap out of him. If you don’t deliver him still breathing, there’s going to be hell to pay. These assholes here dabble in torture if you didn’t get it. I don’t intend to become a replacement for this fucker.”

Hudson grunted but didn't give the scumbag the pleasure of hearing him scream. The mind had to remain in one piece. And hold on to the hope that the good guys in blue were on their way.



“Tie him up.” A short barked order from Watkins.

Jackie had his lips pursed when he appeared in Otis's field of view. “Don't worry,” he whispered as he fastened one of Otis's wrist to a solid surface. “I'm sure those guys are coming.”

Otis couldn't close his eyes. He felt so tired. Jackie's hands were gentle on his skin, and he could tell that the ropes were barely restraining him.

“Hurry up already,” the same Watkins ordered. “And don't worry. Your boyfriend is bound to survive the show. Keres wants him.”

“What the fuck does he want him for?”

“That's no business of yours. Come on, as I told you. Do as I say, and we're going to leave this place rich.”

“If we get to leave at all,” Jackie commented under his breath. “I'm staying here. I want to keep watch on Otis and Jasper.”

“You don't have to do that. The way they look to me, they're not going anywhere. Fine, suit yourself. But I have things to do. The guests are getting restless. Ah, by the way, your good friend Vegas, he's a fucking cop.”

“What?” Jackie asked, his surprise sounding convincing in Otis's ears. “No way he is.”

“Yeah, and he's now getting the royal treatment from our guys. He's going to pay for the shit he pulled on me. He's getting on the stage too. How does that saying go? Death by a thousand cuts? That's one thing I want to watch. To watch that pig bleed out.”

Fear coiled like a snake inside his gut, although he couldn't tell if he could still feel it or it was nothing but a ghost of the real feeling. Hudson was in danger. And yet, he still couldn't move or do anything to save himself. To save... Hudson.

“Why are his eyes still open? Didn't Angel give him that shit?”

“He did,” Jackie replied. “I guess he can't close them.”

“This won't do.” Otis felt the rough hands grabbing his chin, forcing his mouth open, and then something at the back of his throat.

“What the fuck? Are you trying to make him choke?”

“It’s not as good, but it will have to do,” Watkins commented. He patted Otis’s cheek. “Good boy. He swallowed it.”

Now his tiredness was slowly turning into something else. The world around him was an array of muted colors and sounds, moving further and further away.



The scent of ash tickled his nostrils, and his eyes snapped open. Dim, flickering candlelight cast eerie shadows on the rough walls, while the air was thick with a metallic tang. He couldn’t tell what it was, that sickening smell. A muffled scream reached his ears, while otherwise the room appeared to be sunk in an oppressive silence.

He couldn’t get away. Something was burning. Could anyone else feel it?

She was sitting at the table, one arm slung over one corner.

The silence wasn’t perfect, no, far from it. A constant drip broke it in places, edging in on his consciousness like a memory that served better being buried and forgotten.

Drip, drip, drip. Or was it just an echo?

He walked closer, although he should have known better than to bother her after draining her bottles. Drip, drip, drip. One bottle lay on its side, and the liquid poured from it, directly onto the kitchen tile floor. Drip, drip, drip.

“Mom?”

There was no reply from her, so he walked closer. And closer. Drip, drip, drip. Her arm stole all his attention. There was something wrong with it. He touched her fingers, so cold and scary. She jolted in her sleep, so he stepped back.

Only then he saw it. The second dripping noise, where it came from. He looked at his own hand. So red. And that metallic tang he couldn’t escape.

“What are you doing here?” A hiss, aimed at him. “Go to your room.”

“Mom,” he called out, not knowing how to say that he was scared.

She pushed herself up from the table and grabbed him. She hadn’t ever been fast, and other times, he would have escaped, running to his room and hiding, hoping that she’d forget until the next day.

“You go, run from here,” she ordered him while digging into his arm with her cold fingers.

“No,” he cried. “Mom.”

Her laughter only scared him more. And then, her voice, tiny and unlike before. “You better run, Otis. Leave mommy alone.”

“No,” he insisted.

“Go! How stupid are you? Ugly and stupid.”

Otis gasped as he took in the scene before his eyes. Was he dreaming? Was he still remembering that night when he had lost everything he thought he had?

People were gathered there, sitting at tables. Their whole undivided attention seemed to be trained on him. No, not only on him. He was on some sort of stage, and he couldn't move. But he could use his eyes and watch those who watched him back.

Their faces were partially obscured by masks, and the long shadows from the candles cloaked them in darkness. Otis took them in, as much as he could distinguish from that distance. The masks left dark eyeless holes right in their centers, and their expressions varied from leering grins to grotesque red pouts, the unmoving faces of dead clowns.

Someone in a long dark hooded robe moved into his line of sight, obscuring the frightening audience momentarily. Otis turned his head and saw someone to his right. A young man, bound to a strange cross, tied to it with ropes going around his wrists and ankles. He then turned to his right. Another young man... he thought he knew him.

His head was dropped low, to his chest. His chest heaved. He was making those sounds. Otis moved his eyes over his figure and gasped again when he saw it. Drip, drip, drip. Right from his mouth. And then, another thing.

A long red gash across his abdomen. Otis could feel the metallic tang in the back of his throat now. The hooded figure moved close to the young man and pushed something that looked like a pair of long metallic tongs, the kind used in the kitchen, into his abdomen. No, something looking as horrible as that had to have been made for other reasons.

The gurgling wail that rose from the bound figure made Otis's hair stand on end. A part of him was reacting to the physical pain that was being doubled by the overwhelming fear taking root in the young man's mind.

The dripping sound faded away, as if it were already only a memory. But it was now replaced by something else. Ra-tat-ta-ta. A cadence, like a song made out of a single note. Ra-tat-ta-ta, for a second time.

The audience began to murmur among themselves.

“A bit of an inconvenience, but we’re taking care of it as we speak,” someone said.

A metallic voice he knew. Was this the perfect nightmare? Or was reality twisting around itself to make him go mad? Ra-tat-ta-ta, again and again.

“Please, continue to enjoy the show,” the man named Keres said. “As promised, we’re bringing in an addition. The beast on which you bet so generously today. I hated to disappoint my audience, but I am the only one responsible for cutting his performance short today. The final death toll was high. All the more pleasure to have him destroyed slowly in front of you.”

Otis watched everything as if he were underwater. It had to be a nightmare, nothing real. Even bloodied and bruised, he would recognize him. Two men pushed Hudson down and he fell on his palms, while the audience gasped as if they couldn’t believe what they were seeing.

“Of course, he’ll have to wait a little since right now we’re taking care of our first darling.” Keres moved past Hudson and close to the young man being tortured. “Have you seen such a beauty often in your life, ladies and gentlemen? And yet, his physical appearance, no matter how pleasing, has no merit. What has merit is his, let’s call it, rotten personality.”

Only muffled groans of pain came from the victim now.

“A traitor,” Keres said and smiled.

Otis was looking at him. Keres looked back, their eyes clashing. Otis held that gaze, while he moved his wrist slowly. The ties weren’t tight at all.

“The punishment for traitors must always be the same. A good ol’ fashioned execution. What? What are you saying?”

Keres leaned over, pretending to listen to what his victim was trying to get out of himself. But he wasn’t listening, because he kept on looking at Otis, his filmy eyes unmoved and cold.

A sudden gasp from the victim made Otis flinch. Keres laughed and brought up a gloved hand, red with blood.

“What is pain? Pain is nothing. Death, however, is everything,” Keres said and walked over to Otis. He caressed his face, making the smell grow unbearable. “As you can see, my esteemed guests, I have brought forward, for your sake, my own beloved. He’s special. I know, everyone must think the same when they’re in love, but in this case, I’m telling the whole truth. Look at him, unafraid, staring back at me with his lovely eye.” Keres carefully draped the hair over his scarred eye and sidestepped as if he were dancing, to allow the audience to have a good look at Otis.

“Leave him alone,” came a growl from the floor. “You bastard!”

Hudson grunted as one of the men who had brought him in kicked him with his foot.

“Let our presentation truly begin,” Keres declaimed, raising both arms in the air.

Otis didn't blink. One of those horrible men took out a knife and stabbed Hudson in the shoulder.

“You don't want to leave? I'll make you leave.” That bad smell she smelled of when she emptied all the bottles. The pain in his arm where her fingers sank into his flesh.

She dragged him through the house. The smell of ashes, of smoke, grew stronger. He tried to get away, but he couldn't shake her off.

She made him watch. The long metal bar growing white-hot on the stove. He trembled and cried out.

“You will leave, Otis,” she said, so softly he could barely hear her. “Mommy doesn't want you here anymore.”

He didn't know that was his voice, so ragged, so like an animal's. But it had to be, as he was blinded, and pain crushed his skull, and she let him go. He stumbled over chairs, bumping into the corners of furniture. Out, out, he needed to get out.

The air outside, finally, so clear, so good. But the pain! So hot, and his skin, as he touched it, melted like butter, soft and foreign under his fingers.

He looked back. She appeared so lonely, in the frame of the door. And the whole house was so bright now, yellow and warm like it was during the holidays. She yelled something at him, but he couldn't hear her anymore. He broke into a run, stumbling at times, landing on his knees and palms, but getting up, relentlessly, far, as far as he could, the smell of ashes haunting him already.

“Now how did you do that?” Keres scolded him as if he were a kid.

One of his hands was free. He didn't remember freeing it himself. He stared at his own wrist, so pliant in Keres's gloved hand that left smudges of red on his skin.

“No,” he said and flexed his hand into a fist, preventing Keres from tying it back up.

Keres tsked. “And I just praised you. Ah, I believe I know what this is. You want me to punish you. You're eager for it. But, my love, this isn't punishment. I would never punish you. I only have affection for your lovely self in my heart.”

Otis struggled some more but Keres's was stronger than he was.

“Let him be,” Hudson growled while crawling on the floor toward them, jerking upward as his tormentor sank his blade into his hand, pinning him down for a moment.

Ra-tat-ta-ta, closer now.

Otis only watched. Hudson pulled out the knife that had been left stuck into his hand and used it to slash his attacker’s chest in one swift move.

“What is this?” Keres asked in an annoyed voice. “Okay, feel free to shoot this damned cop.”

“Otis, close your eyes,” Hudson shouted at him, but he wouldn’t listen to his boyfriend. Not this time.

The other man, who wasn’t writhing on the floor like his partner, aimed his gun at Hudson, whose arm moved in an incredible wish to be faster than a bullet.

“I don’t fucking think so,” someone spoke from behind, and the man trying to shoot Hudson fell backward, dropping his gun. He cried like a baby, clapping one hand to his opposite shoulder.

Otis knew that voice, too.

“The cavalry is really here,” Jackie yelled from the top of his lungs. “Get the fuck out while you still can!”

The audience ignored Keres’s calls for calm. Candles fell to the ground as the men and women in masks rushed toward the exit behind them. Hudson was by his side, helping him out of his ties, kissing him shortly. “You go with Jackie now, Otis,” he said quickly.

“No,” Otis whispered, an echo of the same word from a long time ago.

“Yes, I need you safe. Jackie, come on. Get Jasper and Otis out of here now, before this whole thing comes crashing down.”

Otis was only dimly aware of being pulled away. Jackie was struggling with another young man, who seemed unresponsive. He hurried to help while they hurried down a long corridor.



“Damn it, Angel,” Hudson murmured as he struggled to get the guy out of his bonds.

That wound didn’t look good at all, and he had to work fast. Angel stared at him, his eyes shiny, his mouth so red with blood. What the hell had they done to him?

When Angel tried to open his mouth to speak, he understood. Those bastards had cut out his tongue.

All around them, there were cries of fear and anguish, but Hudson didn't care to stop. Angel couldn't talk, but he'd be able to write down everything that he knew. As long as Hudson managed to get him to help him in time.

He could hear his guys overcoming the resistance outside. It had to be nothing short of a war zone. But Otis had to be safe now, along with Jasper and Jackie. That mattered more than anything. Now he could see about doing his job, securing a witness.

He heard the door slamming and turned to see Keres, who calmly took a long metal bar and pushed it through the large handles, securing the door from the inside. Then he turned and started strolling toward him, hands in his pockets, as if he were taking a pleasure walk.

"It's over, Keres," he said. "What's happening outside now, you can't stop it."

"No, and I have no intention to, anyway. I'm not in the business of false hopes, Mr. West. Although I applaud your persistence. And yes, I know there's another way out and that you're thinking you could still get to it."

Hudson turned, his whole body tensing. He put himself between Keres and Angel.

"You're here because of your duty. Correct?"

Hudson nodded shortly while keeping his arms loose. He was bone-tired, but adrenaline had kicked in again, whatever reserves his body still had. If Keres made the mistake of coming close enough, he'd fuck him up.

"Even now, you're hoping to get this dying man out of here. Step out of the way, Mr. West."

"No."

He moved out of the way a second too late. The metal probes from the taser struck him, making his muscles spasm out of control. Down to the last nerve, his body screamed in protest. A searing pain, sharp and unrelenting, carved its way from the point of contact, sending waves of agony through all his limbs. In a moment, he couldn't move at all.

He could only watch as Keres took another gun out of his opposite pocket, seemingly bored and calm, and shot Angel in the head, cutting off the young man's muffled cries.

Keres walked over to him and prodded him with his boot. "You see, Mr. West, what sets me apart from most people is that I'm not afraid of dying. Death has been my friend for a long time now. She's a faithful mistress, I must add. And you, the rest of you, are all afraid of her, as if it's such a big deal to die. Here's a little secret. Dying is a soothing experience, but not like doctors and priests and whatnot tell you."



They walked and walked down the long corridor, the smell of ashes growing stronger. The walls were smeared with blood, and the sound of weapons being fired continued. The young man called Jasper was heavy, but Jackie fought to take most of the burden.

“Hudson,” Otis managed to mumble and stopped.

Jackie stopped as well and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. The hand in which he still held Hudson’s gun. “Otis, my man, Vegas told me to take care of you. Let’s go.”

“And who...” Otis struggled to speak. “Who’s taking care of him?”

“Come on, he’s a big bad cop,” Jackie said. “He needs no taking care of.”

Otis pulled one fist tight. “I am going back for him,” he said and began walking back the way they had come.

Jackie grunted and tried to rest Jasper against the wall. “Vegas is going to have my head if I lose you.”

Otis turned to face him. “He will understand.”

“Ah, damn it, you two are in love and all that.” Jackie shook his head. “But I can’t let you, not like this.”

Otis walked over to take the gun from Jackie as it was being held out in his direction, its butt to him. “Thank you, Jackie,” he said. “For everything.”

The floor was cold under his feet, the gun moist from Jackie’s sweat in his hand. But more than everything, he smelled the stench of ashes deep inside his mind.



“Are you going to give me another speech?” After the initial shock, he was getting some of his lost control back. “Why the hell did you kill Angel?”

“Watkins told me he tried to rat us out to the police. Staged a raid at one point, thought he could get away with it. A small town boy.” Keres tsked. “Thinking he could play the big boys’ game. Don’t tell me you’re going to cry for him? You know, he was a part of it all. He just got a little bored, wanted out, and thought treason was the way. Too bad for him. This isn’t the kind of game you get out of. It’s for life. Well, now his is over.”

“What do you want? They’ll come crashing through those doors any time now. And you’ll die.” Breathing alone was pain.

“I am well aware of all that. Don’t insult my intelligence, Mr. West. But I love cutting it close, didn’t I mention that before? And you’ll die first anyway. The only question, which will remain unanswered for you, is whether you will die alone or if you’ll have me as company on the way to the great beyond.”

Hudson could barely move his head. Dammit, he needed full control of his already battered body if he wanted to have a chance at taking down this fucking asshole. Hopefully, Keres was still into long speeches.

He watched as Keres turned his head, his gun still trained on him.

“What are you doing here?”

Someone was coming. Someone was there. An operative? But Keres seemed too relaxed for that. Dammit, if he could only move his head.

“Now, now, what do you intend to do with that? Ah, you came back to me, didn’t you?”

Hudson forced himself to roll onto one side. He watched in horror as Otis walked toward them, his flawless naked body marred by smudges of blood here and there. He was holding a gun. Hudson’s gun.

“Come into my loving arms, my love,” Keres chanted. “You belong to me.”

Otis didn’t stop. Hudson didn’t even dare breathe. Keres could shoot at any point, and it didn’t matter the order he chose to execute them in like he’d done with Angel.

Otis stopped only a few feet away.

“Why do you keep that pointed at me?” Keres asked. “You’re not going to shoot me.” There was a touch of incredulity in his voice.

Hudson heard the click, calm and steady.

Keres went on. “You’ll hesitate like all good people do when faced with the opportunity of taking a human life. And I really don’t want to hurt you like this. Forgive me for--”

The bang from the gun sucked the air out of the room and out of his lungs. It was as if his field of vision suddenly tilted until he realized that he was staring at Keres’s body, dropped to the floor, one knee bent as if the guy was lounging, enjoying a rest.

Otis appeared in his field of view. “Hudson,” he whispered and touched his face gingerly.

“Give me the gun, Otis,” he whispered back. “Put it in my right hand. Yes, like that. And now, lay down on your belly, hands behind the back of your head. They’ll be coming in strong. Do you understand?”

Otis nodded. “Yes, Hudson,” he replied in that manner of his that couldn’t be shaken if the world was coming down around them.

It was over. And the last thing he saw before his eyelids dropped was the amazing sight of that lovely eye, the same that must have looked down the barrel of the gun while shooting Keres.

Chapter Thirty-One – My Guardian Angel

His eyelids seemed to have turned into heavy weights and he was incapable of opening his eyes. A constant beep had entered his dreams, and it punctuated the passing of each moment with unnerving precision. Hudson struggled and finally managed to open one of his eyes. As he brought a hand up that was being held back by something long and wiry, he realized that the eye remaining closed was actually bandaged. Funny thing, he didn't recall how that had come to be, although those goons had had no problem with hitting him while he was down.

He turned his head slowly, taking in the white walls and all the equipment surrounding him, as his brain began moving at a snail's pace to catch up with his most recent memories. Ah, damn, it hurt to breathe too deeply, but he could breathe, which was a great thing in itself.

His one good eye finally landed on the only person present in the room. Hudson tried to speak, but his throat was parched, and what came out resembled a growl more than anything.

The sleeping man slouched in a chair by his bedside finally stirred.

"Hey, asshole," Hudson uttered in a gravelly whisper, "rise and shine."

Gavin started, probably because he had finally realized that the patient was awake. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times. Then his tired face lit up, making him appear younger by at least five years. "Looks who's finally awake. How are you feeling, partner?"

"Great, given the circs," Hudson whispered. "My throat is damned parched. How about you fetch me a beer?"

"Yeah, right," Gavin said with a snort and pushed himself off the chair, wincing at the audible creak in his bones. "Only water for you, I'm afraid. Doctor's orders."

Hudson groaned as Gavin adjusted his bed so that he could lift his head enough to accept the plastic cup brought to his lips. His longtime friend even used a tissue to wipe his mouth.

"Looking to secure a permanent position around here? Tired of being a cop?"

Gavin laughed. "Shut up, West. But thank you. I'm glad you find my bedside manner good enough. Although I bet it's not my ugly mug you wanted to see the first time you opened your eyes."

Hudson threw a look toward the door. "Is he here? Or was he taken in for questioning?"

"We've already done that. And yes, he's here. There are just some details I need to work out with you before I leave you two lovebirds to it."

"Shoot. But first, did you catch that guy Watkins?"

“Yeah, we got him,” Gavin confirmed. “He walked right into our hands, and it happened before we rained fire and brimstone on that bunch of lowlives. Gotta tell you, man, he started chirping like a magpie. Hoping to secure a deal for his sorry ass and whatnot.”

“Don’t you dare let him walk,” Hudson forced himself to speak.

Gavin offered more water, and he gulped it down. “He tried painting himself like some sort of victim, but you know that shit doesn’t fly with us when such high profile cases are involved. There’s more info to squeeze out of him.”

“All the names, other similar operations, all that, right?” Hudson let his head drop back on the pillow and closed his eye for a moment. “He must want some sweet deal in return.”

“He might not have as much to offer as he thinks he does. Your informant and that boy Jasper offered us enough to nail the bastard, too. When it’s personal stuff like that, well, you know how it is.”

“Personal?” Hudson asked.

“Looks like Watkins is your boy’s uncle.”

“What? Otis’s uncle?”

“No.” Gavin laughed and shook his head. “Jackie’s.”

“No way. They don’t look like each other at all.”

“It happens. Thing is Jackie really has a bone to pick with the guy. Because of that guy he liked, from the old cases. Sweetheart.”

“You seem to know everything.”

“Not everything.” Gavin rubbed his forehead and then threw Hudson a puzzled look. “Your shoulder is shot, man. You’ll need a long vacation. It’ll come with a nice paycheck, don’t worry.”

“So? I guess I earned it,” Hudson replied.

Gavin gave him another long look. “But that’s your right shoulder. Can’t very well use your shooting hand with it in such bad shape.”

“And?” Hudson kept a neutral face, as much as that mattered, seeing how patched up he was.

Gavin pulled his chair in closer and leaned over. “Kind of hard to be the same cool hand with it like that. And yet, damn, bull’s eye. I’m talking about that Keres guy.”

“What can I tell you, man? He got right in my face. It was impossible to miss.”

“You didn’t think of just hurting him so that we could interrogate him later?”

“My life was on the line. And yes, my shoulder was in a bad way. I thought it better not to take any chances.”

“Convenient. Still, man, bull’s eye.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

Gavin nodded and pulled away, resting against the back of his chair. “Good. ‘Cause there’s a lot of paperwork to fill out, and I don’t want you coming up later with all that ‘it’s not how it actually happened’.”

“No worries from me. Are you in charge of all that pesky paperwork?”

Gavin grinned. “You know how much I love doing that. I wouldn’t let anyone else near it. And it was a damn good thing that those assholes turned on each other.”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t hmm me,” Gavin said and chuckled. “The captain is sure to commend you for taking care of the department’s budget. You barely shot like three bullets or so.”

“I like to think they were shot when it mattered.”

“And shot who mattered,” Gavin added with a sly smirk. He got up and patted Hudson on the knee. “Get well, partner. I’m sending your boy in next.”

“Jackie?”

“Gotcha. No. Mr. Otis Bendecker. This is how he introduced himself, and yes, with Mr. in front. He gave us an exact account of the events he witnessed and offered not to leave town for the foreseeable future.”

“Sounds like my guy.” Too bad it hurt so much to smile. “And? What do you think?”

“He’d be good for you. That is if he still wants to keep you after seeing your mug wrecked like this.”

“He will. He’s not the superficial kind.”

Gavin gave him a thumbs up and then yawned loudly. “Good that you’re awake. I can finally go home and change.”

“How long was I out?”

“Long enough. Next time, you’ll be the desk guy, and I’ll be the operative. See how you like that.”

“I’d like myself some desk time.”

“No, you wouldn’t. See you later, partner. And make sure you let the captain know how much restraint it took for you to save so many bullets during such a big op.”

“Will do,” Hudson confirmed and lifted his arm to shoo Gavin away. “Come on, go home already.”

Gavin shook his head in mirth and left the room but not before he saluted with two fingers tapping an imaginary hat, his gesture completely un-ironic.



To his relief, Otis looked as serene as always, and he didn’t appear to have been harmed during that showdown between the police and Watkins’s hired goons. His clothes were perfect, scrubbed and without a wrinkle, and his hair was brushed over half his face like usual. Hudson felt a pleasant tingling sensation when Otis hurried to the bed and took his hand gingerly between his smooth cool ones.

“You are well,” he said and smiled.

“Yes, I am. Thanks to you.”

Otis stole a nervous look around and leaned over so that they could speak in complete privacy. “I lied to the police,” he whispered. “Because that is what I understood that I had to do from the little information you offered.”

“Good boy,” Hudson praised him. “I knew you were smart.”

Otis sighed. “You shouldn’t praise me for doing bad things. I am at risk of it becoming a habit.”

“I think it takes more than that, but don’t worry, I won’t ask it again.”

Otis looked around and saw the chair in which Gavin had slumped until only earlier. He sat down primly and put his hands on his knees. There was something rigid in the way he assumed that position as if he were a pupil in school and was waiting to be reprimanded by the teacher.

“You are a cop,” he said after some hesitation.

“Yes.”

“And you’ve been working undercover.”

“Yes.”

“Throughout our relationship.”

“Yes.” He had been wrong before; Otis was putting him through the wringer, not expecting to be the one put on the stand. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want to put you at risk. Although it looks like I did that anyway. Do you think you could forgive me? Not right now, but later?”

“How much later?” Otis trained his beautiful eye on him.

“It depends on how long it takes you to forgive me.”

“But I’m not mad at you. Not upset either.”

“Oh, you’re not? That’s a huge relief. I was looking forward to doing some begging and groveling.”

Otis shook his head. “No need for that. But given my position, I have to ask. Was being boyfriends part of your undercover operation? Please be honest with me, Mr. West.”

Ah, damn, it was so unfair he couldn’t laugh. Still, the sounds he made were unmistakable for anything else.

“What is amusing?” Otis asked politely.

“Otis,” Hudson said with a sigh that helped some with the pain, “you are too good for me.”

“I see. I read about such things. Because our relationship was fake, now we have to break up.”

“What? No!” Hudson tried to roll to one side to reach Otis, but he couldn’t do much. “Forgive me, I’m a complete idiot. There was no plan for me to get a boyfriend. Actually, I went against all the unwritten rules of undercover ops by falling for you. I have no regrets, though. Even if the captain will eventually bite my head off when he learns about the details of this whole deal--”

“He won’t,” Otis interrupted him. “Mr. Stetson appears keen on standing up for you. And I believe he doesn’t mind,” he added while leaning forward, “doing some lying himself. That is what I understood.”

“Take my hand, Otis,” Hudson requested.

He liked to see his dark callous hand being cupped so gently by white flawless hands, beautiful as the wings of a dove.

“You know,” he said in a low voice, “you have the sort of strength that scares me, Otis.”

“Why?” came the natural question.

“Because I’ve never seen it before. Because I have never dared to imagine that it could even exist.”

“I don’t believe I understand.”

“I know. You’re above this dark wretched world in so many ways, that’s why. But you came down to its level. For me.”

“I had to. There was no one there to protect you.”

Hudson laughed. “Then there’s just one explanation for it. You must be my guardian angel.”

To his surprise, Otis snickered like a schoolkid. “The doctors and nurses here must be giving you some very strong medication, Mr. West.”

“Come on, Otis, I’m in love with you. And stop it with this Mr. West thing. Call me Hudson like always. And what do you mean by that? That I’m too high to think straight?”

Otis broke into full-blown laughter now. “You can’t think straight. Because you’re gay.”

Hudson rolled his eye. The only one he could roll. “Mr. Bendecker, did you just make a joke?”

“Yes,” Otis replied with delight, “I believe I did. It was just so funny to call me your guardian angel. Angels aren’t scarred like me.”

“Mine is,” Hudson shot back. “And he’s perfect. One of a kind.” Even though it hurt, he lifted his arm enough to brush the hair away from Otis’s face so that he could see both his eyes.

“Okay,” Otis said and blushed. “Okay.”

“I’m happy to hear you agree. Although,” Hudson smiled slyly, deciding to tease his beautiful boyfriend a bit, “I must say that you took your time to shoot that asshole down.”

“I had to get close enough to make sure I didn’t miss,” Otis replied, his face all seriousness.

Hudson had to drop his arm. “I was just teasing you. By the way, Otis, you’re an amazing shot.”

“I know.”

“What? Full of yourself much?”

“It is the truth.”

“Yeah, yeah it is. Now, I’m afraid you will have to do all the work because I need you to kiss me just to make sure that my strong medication isn’t the only reason why I’m going to have such nice dreams.”



According to Mr. Stetson, Hudson would need a long time to get his body working the way it used to, and that meant that he needed a lot of care. Otis wondered how his small apartment could accommodate the equipment required to help his boyfriend with the physical therapy he would need. Hudson's apartment wasn't any better, and as he thought that he realized that his boyfriend had to have another home somewhere.

He thought of all that while brushing his lips against Hudson's dry ones.

"What? So little? Don't you think I deserve more after everything I've been through?"

Otis had so many things he needed to put in order, but Hudson's request was valid. So, he put more into getting his mouth all over his boyfriend's so that they could kiss properly. When he was done this time, they both looked a little flushed.

"Thank you, Otis," Hudson said, his throaty voice low and tickling Otis's ear in an unforeseen manner. "I think that will give me the proper incentive to get better as fast as possible so that I can get back home to you."

"Where is your home?" Otis asked.

"That's true, you've never seen it. There are so many things for us to learn about each other, isn't there?"

Otis confirmed with a nod. He hesitated for a moment and then blurted out. "I kept things from you too. Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, my beautiful. I've been a stranger to you. I plan to correct that. And when I'm out of the hospital, I want you to come live with me. That is if it's something you also want. I'm not imposing, but I do plan on begging you to do it."

"Is your home big enough for the necessary equipment?"

"What equipment?"

"You will need physical therapy."

"Ah, I see. Yes, there's enough space."

Otis worried his bottom lip while pondering on what other questions to ask. "What about your kitchen? Is there room for more than just a little fridge with two beers?"

Hudson sighed. “I guess that’s something you won’t allow me to forget soon. It has everything it needs, my kitchen. It does lack love and someone to use the appliances, though. I’m not that much of a cook.”

Otis nodded in acquiescence. “Will I be able to reach work in less than two hours?”

“Hmm, I think so.”

“What public transportation is available?”

“That is a bit of a problem, because it’s in the suburbs,” Hudson explained. “You’ll need a driver’s license. And a car.”

“That will take some time,” Otis said as he considered the issue. “How long will you wait for me to come live with you?”

“We’ll figure it all out, don’t you worry. Also, I must tell you from the get-go. I have a dog.”

Otis felt his eyes growing wide. “A dog? A real dog?”

“Yep, not a fake one. Don’t worry; he’s friendly. I’m sure he’ll take to you like there’s no tomorrow.”

“A dog,” Otis whispered with delight. “I did some dog walking in my time, you know? I mean... ah, I think that business fell through since I haven’t returned the clients’ calls--”

“I’m sure they’ll understand. Only that, you see, Otis, Zeus is the jealous type. He might not like you walking other dogs.”

“I understand,” Otis said while nodding. “How much will the rent be? I need to budget correctly so that everyone is happy. Since I have to give up on the dog walking business and find something else.”

Hudson tried to laugh again and winced. Maybe he wasn’t on that strong medication after all, Otis thought. “The place is mine. You don’t have to pay any rent.”

“But there must be a mortgage,” Otis insisted.

“And I can afford it. My boyfriend will not have to pay a dime.”

“But I can’t be a freeloader!”

“I’m sure you’ll find ways to avoid that. Ah, it’s just too bad that I’m hurting so much. I would hug you and kiss you once every minute but I can’t.”

“Should I call a nurse?” Otis offered. His boyfriend’s wellbeing was the first item on the list. There were no other priorities for now.

“No. They’ll want to put me to sleep, and I just want you here with me for a little longer. Is that all right with you?”

“Yes,” Otis confirmed. “Hudson, you say that we are strangers. But I don’t want us to be. Can I tell you about my scar? But if you think this is not the time--”

“Don’t worry. Please, tell me everything you want me to know.”

He opened his mouth a few times, not knowing how and where to start. “She was... not okay,” he began. “But she was my mother.”

“Was she the one who hurt you?”

“Yes, but... I think that, in her own way, she did it because she... didn’t want me to suffer at her hands anymore. She didn’t want to hurt me ever again. Do you know there are people who can’t love properly?”

“I believe so, yes.” Hudson didn’t press and allowed him to continue with all the breaks he needed to take.

“According to my grandma, she used to be a beauty. There were many men courting her, and that went to her head. That’s what grandma used to say. She even said that maybe if my mom hadn’t been so beautiful, she would have had less trouble coming her way. But she fell for the wrong man while very young. That must have been my father. She ran away from home to be with him, although she didn’t know much about life or how to make a family. I couldn’t question grandma about it, because it always made her cry. But she insisted on telling me, so I listened to everything she could tell me.

“For many years, grandma didn’t even know where she was, although she looked for her everywhere. Only when I was five or so, my mother called to ask her for money. I think that was when I saw grandma for the first time. She smelled nice and she was so good to me. She spent a few days with us, not that I remember it all that well. Save for the stories. Grandma knew how to read bedtime stories. She and mom got into a big fight, and it was because grandma offered to take both of us home with her and take care of us. But my mom didn’t want to go. She insisted that she must wait for her husband. My father. That he wouldn’t know where she had gone if he didn’t find her there. That he would get mad.

“Back then, there was still enough food. My mother had a job, at a local grocery store. The house was still clean. That’s what grandma told me. And since mom sent her out the door, she left. She was shocked to discover how we lived years after. My mom called her regularly, telling her not to worry, promising her we’d visit, she and I, but never following through. And all that time, she turned sadder and sadder and brought home more bottles than food. She sold things from the house. I have only a vague memory of having a TV. She didn’t like me to talk, kept me home from school, and barely noticed me around the house.”

Hudson let out a sigh. “Don’t mind me saying this, Otis, but your mom sounds like a piece of work.”

Otis shrugged. “I don’t mind. She must have been as you say, and I wish I had one happy memory of her because I don’t. I believe she chose the darkness inside her, as grandma used to say. She didn’t like to turn on the lights in the evening, said her head hurt. And she got mad every now and then. The moment she heard me talking or being around, she locked me up in my room. In the dark.”

“Ah, damn it, Otis,” Hudson whispered. “I had no idea things were that bad for you.”

“The nice lady at the therapy office told me that not everyone might be comfortable with hearing my story. That I should only talk about these things with people I trusted, kind people. She told me I would know the kind from the bad, because I have the soul for it. I didn’t know what she meant by that. But if you need me to stop, I will.”

“Go on, tell me everything. I want to know everything.”

“The days were long and hard,” Otis said. “I had nothing to do all day, without school, without television, or toys or other things children have. I didn’t know that, but I heard grandma talking about it. But that wasn’t why it was so hard. I always found ways to not be bored. Like picking the lock on my room so that I could get out. The hard part was that she would catch me. Very often at first, and she got so mad.”

“Did she hit you?”

Otis shook his head. “No. She just said mean things and never let me talk. I didn’t understand much. I just feared her. So I became better at staying out of her way. At being silent and listening for any sign of her still being up and about. Still, I had to brave her anger when I needed to find something to eat.”

“I hate your mom,” Hudson said under his breath.

“I don’t,” Otis replied. “I don’t understand why, but I don’t. The night she gave me this,” he added and pointed at his scar, “it was the one kind thing she did for me. In her own way. Because she had cut her wrists and set the house on fire, but did this to chase me away so that I didn’t die along with her.”

“I read the newspaper clipping,” Hudson said. “I shouldn’t have, but I--”

“That’s good, actually. You know what happened, and I don’t have to go into all of the details. She burned in that house. They said that even if they had arrived earlier, they wouldn’t have been able to put the fire out. I ran away that night and when I came back... I couldn’t save her.” He bent at the waist and traced the shape of his scar. “I wished I could have, but I was too scared. Too scared that I was suddenly all alone, and... that froze me.”

“Like what happened to you during your kidnapping?” Hudson asked.

Otis nodded. “It is a coping mechanism, some doctors think. That’s what they told me. Grandma had come to see us not too long before. She scolded mom hard that time. She noticed I wasn’t talking. And that the house was dirty. And that there were so many bottles everywhere, some empty, some half-full still. She wanted to get help so that she could take me away from my mom. And that... grandma blamed herself, she told me. That her threats that time must have triggered mom’s desire to kill herself. And she also blamed herself for believing everything was fine when it wasn’t. She wished she had come for me earlier.”

Poignant silence followed. It was hard but also good to talk about this thing, like when you press on a sore spot but the pain feels good.

“But I don’t think so. I think my grandma wanted the right thing for me. And for my mother. And she wanted to save me. Which she did. She was so kind to me, all the years that she had left. For some time, I didn’t speak at all and remained frozen like that. But she didn’t care that it took time and money and other things to take care of me. I learned to talk, and I went to school, although it was hard to be the worst student in the class. She was sick and frail herself, but she still used all her waking hours to teach me how to... get all those years back. She wasn’t rich. Actually, I believe that she was poor. But her house was clean, and there were no bottles. And there was always food, even if it was nothing fancy. Most of all, she loved me. She loved me the normal way, talking to me, and making me feel that I truly mattered to her. Teaching me everything she could. New words, good manners, how to cook an egg.”

For a moment there, he had to stop as the memories of his grandmother came flooding back. He blinked one time to get rid of the moisture in his eyes. “To her last day, she cared. Too bad my seahorse is gone now. That was my favorite gift from her.”

“Your seahorse?” Hudson asked in a hoarse voice.

“The glass figurine. Angel crushed it when he kidnapped me.”

“He was the one who did that?” Hudson asked in disbelief.

“Yes. He told me. Like he told Jackie that he enjoyed taking the life of a young man called Sweetheart. I believe Jackie was in love with him. With that Sweetheart person.”

There was something that sounded like sniffing coming from Hudson.

Otis leaned closer. “Did I make you sad with what I’ve told you about me?”

Hudson moved his head away. “No, baby. But you can be sure as hell that I’m going to buy you all the seahorses in the world.”

“Seahorses should be free to swim in their coral reefs and among the mangrove roots,” he said, not quite understanding why Hudson was saying that.

“Okay, you’re right,” came another whisper.

“Did you know that they sometimes swim up estuaries because they can deal with different types of water salinity?”

“I do, now. Thank you for telling me. What about glass figurines? Can I get you those?”

“Yes,” Otis agreed. “But make sure that you budget for them properly. Always buy at a discount. They can be pretty expensive.”

“Of course. I appreciate your sensible advice. Now come here and hug me. Don’t let me go until I say so. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I enjoy doing what you say. You’re like grandma. You care about me.”



He recalled the last time he had cried as a grownup man, and it had been after Pete’s funeral. Not when he’d seen him dropping dead, not when holding him until the ambulance had come, not even as they lowered the closed casket into the ground. After, and for selfish reasons. Because he had never felt so alone ever before.

That had been pain, and Otis’s confession had caused pain too, but it was different. Because now he wasn’t alone. And the solid warmth of his boyfriend’s body in his arms assured him that he wouldn’t know that feeling of deep loneliness ever again.

“Can I keep you forever?” he asked into Otis’s hair, still smelling of what had to be shampoo bought at a discount. It was the best smell ever known to humankind.

“Yes.”

No hesitation there, but Otis Bendecker was surely not the kind of man to hesitate when it mattered. People who met him without getting to know him must think he was a shy young man whose sometimes awkward manners made them feel out of place, or in worse cases, superior. But they didn’t know the truth, not by far.

“I want to thank you, Hudson,” Otis said without letting go.

“Are you sure? I was supposed to protect you, but it was the other way around, after all.”

“I got to the end of it. Because of you.”

“The end of what?”

“I had this dream coming to me almost every night. About going back to save my mom. Always getting there too late. Just in time to watch the house burn and smell the ash in the air. The nice lady at the therapy office told me I needed to make peace with it.”

“Did she tell you to let go? That you couldn’t do anything to save her?”

“No, because it was all in my imagination now. She told me that I was brave and strong and that I could save whoever I wanted to save because it was my dream.”

“You came for me because of that?”

“Not only, but that was an important part of it too. That is why I knew I had to go all the way, to reach the end of the dream. When I knelt by your side and saw you truly alive, I knew I had won. It was a powerful feeling.”

“I’m glad to have been at least of some use.”

“You were. You saved all of those people. Mr. Stetson says you might get a special commendation for your bravery. For being a hero.”

“Not as much as you.”

“Don’t say that. I know you’re a hero. Because I’ve always imagined that I would fall in love with one.”

“Wow, is that a confession I’m hearing?”

“Yes. Was it too awkward? I can say ‘I love you’ instead.”

“I believe it was enough for me as it is.” Hudson brushed Otis’s ear with his lips. “But I wouldn’t mind hearing those words from you, over and over again.”

Chapter Thirty-Two – Have You Ever Been in Love Before?

Otis observed the large clock on the wall for the umpteenth time. While he had agreed to go live with Hudson starting the day of his boyfriend's release from the hospital, he still needed to go to work every day and sleep in the same small apartment he had been renting. Hudson had protested, insisting that Otis should take over his household even if he wasn't there yet, but nothing had moved him from his decision.

Even bad things could have good consequences, his grandma had used to say. There were lessons to learn and aspects that could change a person's life for the better. And, in this case, Otis had decided that he wouldn't be afraid to return to the place where Angel had kidnapped him. His thoughts traveled back to those days, as it happened often. His whole attention had been trained on Keres and the gun he was holding, and later, on Hudson. But as the police took him and Hudson away, he had noticed Angel hanging on his restraints, crucified on that cross, his head limp, the blood that had poured from his wounds congealed and frightening in color. He was dead already, Otis had learned later. Jackie had been revenged, after all, but that was no victory. It had been Keres who killed him. Such disregard for human life, it had to be the deepest sort of darkness. But Otis wasn't afraid of looking it in the face, as he had learned. It made him stronger.

Which was why he wasn't afraid to continue to sleep at his place, as usual. However, things were about to change, and he could barely keep in his excitement. Today, he would be with Hudson and they would go home together.

Home. It was a word that carried a lot of significance for him. He had had a home where he lived with his mother. It was dirty and often smelled. And then, he had lived with his grandma, and that was a different home. Very small, but tidy and well lit all the time. He didn't know if he could call the place he rented a home, but it had been so. Hudson had made love to him there, so that counted.

Hudson promised him, over and over, that his home belonged to Otis too, but he was having a hard time picturing it. Even when his boyfriend had offered to show him pictures, Otis had stubbornly refused to look at them, because he wanted to see that place with his own two eyes for the first time, not as what the lens of a camera had captured. There was always something amiss from pictures, he believed.

"You could ask the boss to let you leave early," Missy said from behind, pulling him out of his reverie.

"No. I don't want other people to carry my load. If I wanted that, I should have asked for a free day in advance."

“I swear, you should be employee of the month every month, Otis.” Missy nudged him in the ribs and grinned. “Are you trying to make the rest of us look bad or something?”

“I wouldn’t,” he protested, somewhat startled by his coworker’s comment.

Missy laughed and patted him on the back. “Just kidding. You’ve been a big help around here. If there’s one soul here complaining, I’m going to lecture them until they quit. Ah, Otis, I will surely miss you.”

“Why? I will go live with my boyfriend, but I will still work here.”

Missy rubbed her forehead and gave him another pleasant smile. “Otis, you’re too smart to be working a part-time job at a restaurant. Not that anything’s wrong with that, but I think you should take advantage of the fact that your boyfriend can pay all the bills to do something with yourself.”

“I don’t understand,” he said politely. “Hudson will not pay all the bills. I can’t be a freeloader. And I’m not smart. I only started to learn how to read properly after the age of twelve.”

Missy came closer and whispered in his ear. “You didn’t hear it from me, but it looks like Jackie has learned a thing or two from that cop gang that you’re not aware of.”

Otis had promised Hudson that he wouldn’t run his mouth about the big case his boyfriend had busted wide open, but it looked like Jackie hadn’t kept his promise in the off-chance that he had made one too. While Missy didn’t know all the gory details, the papers had been wild with the high-profile case, and since his coworker had a quick mind, she had put plenty of two and two together. Also, Hudson had agreed that Otis wouldn’t lie to his friends – only Missy, since he didn’t have that many friends – about his boyfriend being a cop.

Jackie had another job now, and strangely enough seeing his past career choices, it was related to law enforcement. Otis hadn’t quite understood what Jackie was doing, but he had heard Mr. Stetson say that if Hudson had done it, he didn’t see why Jackie wouldn’t be able to pull it off. Apparently, he was receiving on-the-job training, and he liked it.

And now, he was learning from Missy that Jackie, Mr. Stetson, and Hudson – they had to be the cop gang she was talking about – were talking about him when he wasn’t present.

“I see that you’re too polite to ask me what they say about your future, so I’m going to tell you,” Missy continued, as he didn’t say a word. “Your boyfriend’s partner likes you for a job on the force, but Jackie said that it looked like Hudson wasn’t very happy with that prospect. Still, Jackie told me that Hudson said something like ‘whatever he wants to do, he’ll do, and I’m not going to stand in his way and I’ll support him in every decision he makes.’ You really scored yourself an awesome guy, Otis.”

“But I don’t know what I want. This is very new,” Otis said. “What else did you learn from Jackie?”

“Your guy is bent on letting you choose, so, according to Jackie, he told his partner that you are way too smart to end up doing the dirty work they do. And he said that he’d very much love to see you in school, studying something you really like.”

“School,” Otis said nonplussed. “But I finished school.”

Missy smiled. “High school. What about college?”

“College,” Otis repeated, feeling like a parakeet, incapable of saying anything else but what he heard from others, Missy, in this case.

“Yes. I see you’re speechless, so I’m going to do some more talking in your stead. Don’t let this opportunity pass you by. You do have the brains for it, and now you have a boyfriend who wants to put you through school.”

“But how am I going to pay him back for his generosity?”

At this, Missy laughed. “Well, I can’t tell you that, although I bet your man’s head is full of ideas.”

“Of course, I should think of such things, too. First of all, I will do all the cooking and the cleaning. And I will play with his dog and take care of him and all that.”

“See? I knew you had a big brain. You’ll figure it all out,” Missy said and pinched his cheek. “Now, don’t you start thinking that you hate leaving this place behind because we’ll be here.”

College. New knowledge. Something he had always appreciated, ever since his grandma had read him his first bedtime story. Those were things to think about, indeed. But, first, he needed to finish his shift, and then head over to the hospital to accompany Hudson to his place.



Hudson could tell Otis was excited, although he was fighting against the feeling, probably because he suffered from a bad case of excessive politeness. Gavin was driving and had let them be together in the backseat, so Hudson could take in his boyfriend’s beautiful face, barely keeping in a smile here and there, while Otis fidgeted in his place and craned his neck to look at the landscape running past them as if he didn’t want to miss a single detail. With a mind as analytical as his, that was no surprise.

“The captain is waiting for us at the house, as he promised to bring Zeus himself,” he said and took Otis’s hand in his.

“Your captain? What if he’s going to have questions for me?”

“He won’t. He read Gavin’s paperwork. I bet he fell asleep halfway.”

“Hey,” Gavin protested from behind the wheel, “I’ll have you know my prose is beautiful, although a bit heavy on the technical side. Don’t worry, Otis. The captain is going to love you, just like the rest of us.”

“Hey, dude, you’re talking about my boyfriend,” Hudson warned his partner.

“Well, you sure got yourself one hell of a boyfriend. Competition is to be expected.”

Hudson observed from the corner of one eye how red Otis was getting. “I don’t care about competition,” he said. “Because Otis chose me, and he doesn’t change his mind.”

Gavin laughed. “I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you. Now, kids, road trip is over. Give Zeus a belly rub from me, ‘cause I have other stuff to do and I can’t dally with your lot around here.”

The car stopped in the driveway, and Otis hurried to get out first so that he could hold the door for him. Hudson appreciated the care, but he wasn’t used to getting the royal treatment all the time like this.

“Thank you very much for the ride, Mr. Stetson,” Otis told Gavin. “Your kindness and assistance are much appreciated.”

“Just call me Gavin already. I’m not that old. As for the ride, no sweat, Otis. We all owe you too much to mention a little thing like this,” Gavin said, almost just as courteous. “See ya. Make sure Hudson eats his veggies. And don’t let him strain that shoulder. Doctor’s orders.”

“I will take care of him, taking all the doctor’s orders into account,” Otis promised solemnly.

Hudson hooked one arm over Otis’s shoulders, as his boyfriend hurried to support him. “You know,” he whispered into a few rebellious strands of blond hair, unsettled by the wind, “I can actually walk by myself, but this feels good. I’m not too heavy, right?”

“No, not at all,” Otis assured him.

The door opened and Zeus came running through it, letting out barks of excitement. Hudson barely had time to get ready before his dog smacked into him, too happy to care that his owner was actually still hurt.

Hudson crouched and began rubbing Zeus’s neck and back vigorously. “Whatcha doing, partner? Missed me?”

Zeus gave him a short dab with his tongue on the nose, so fast that Hudson didn't manage to dodge in time. He laughed and tried to keep his happy dog away to no avail since Zeus was bent on showing his love and just how much he had missed him.

"Zeus, I want you to meet someone," Hudson said while struggling to keep that thirsty tongue away from his face. "Otis, a little help here. He's already washed my face twice."

It looked like little was needed in terms of introduction because after giving Otis's his paw like a good boy, Zeus went to enthusiastically licking Otis's face too. They were definitely going to get along great, Hudson concluded as he got up.

"Come on, guys, the captain needs us to tell him he's free to go to see about his chores," Hudson said, as he gave the man standing in the doorway a brief nod.

The captain smirked, which wasn't usually a good sign. "So this is the famous Otis Bendecker."

"Nice to meet you, sir," Otis said while extending his hand and holding Zeus by his side, somewhat in check since the dog was still too happy and energetic to keep himself still.

"Take care of our guy here, Otis," the captain said with warmth while shaking the offered hand. "I've heard from other team members that you're already good at it."

If the captain wanted to make Otis give himself away with that remark – although there was no ill intention behind it – he'd have to reconsider his tactics. Otis's poker face was absolutely flawless.



The house was so big, Otis felt his neck hurting from too much turning it to take in everything. And Zeus was fantastic. He was the most beautiful dog Otis had ever seen in his life, and he was incredibly friendly. Since Hudson had told him that his Zeus was a Siberian Husky, Otis had made it his homework to learn as much as possible about the breed and any special needs such a dog might have. He hadn't expected Zeus to take to him so quickly, although his breed was known for being an easygoing bunch compared to other dogs.

"I'm glad you didn't take the bait when the captain tried his hand at causing you lose your composure," Hudson said as he gave Otis a glass of water, since Zeus was sitting in his lap as if he were still a puppy, making it impossible for him to move.

"I made a promise to you not to give myself away. It's not very difficult to avoid any situations or reactions that might put that in jeopardy," Otis replied.

"For you, it's not, because you're that good."

“At lying?”

“At keeping promises,” Hudson said with a fond smile. “Zeus, stop monopolizing our guest.”

The dog barked at Hudson, not aggressively, but to make a point that he didn’t intend to let go of Otis.

“Come on, dude,” Hudson scolded him, “he’s my boyfriend.”

That appeared to have no effect whatsoever on Zeus, who only made himself more comfortable, even if only his belly rested against Otis’s lap.

“Well, if you’re that keen on being present when we display our affection, so be it,” Hudson said with a shrug and wrapped one hand around the back of Otis’s head to pull him in for a kiss.

Zeus rested his head on his front paws and ignored his master completely. Otis felt the heat from Hudson’s kiss spreading through his neck and down inside his chest. If they continued like this, he would be burning from head to toes pretty soon.

“Hudson, your shoulder,” he moaned softly.

“It’s not that bad,” his boyfriend replied. “I finally have you here with me, and save for a few kisses now and then, it’s been a pretty dry time for me. I didn’t even jerk off. They monitored my vitals way too closely to risk it.”

Otis understood. “I didn’t masturbate either.”

“But why? You could do it, anytime you wanted. No well-intended nurse breathing down your neck.”

“Because it wouldn’t have been fair to you.”

“I see. Let’s leave Zeus to enjoy the backyard by having it all to himself, while we take care of ending our abstinence stint. What do you say?”

“Would Zeus be okay with being left alone after not seeing you for so long?” Otis asked the most natural question in the world, but Hudson was already on his feet and Zeus followed him wagging his tail happily.

He waited patiently while Hudson disappeared with Zeus through a door that had to lead to the backyard he was yet to see. In the meantime, he took his time observing his surroundings. Hudson’s house was really beautiful and airy, with large windows and light color tones that made anyone feel welcome. At least, that was how Otis felt. He had expected to be more nervous, feel more like an intruder being here, but none of that happened. If anything, he felt the opposite of that. He felt at home.

The sofa was so plush and welcoming. Otis felt like lying down while grabbing one of those big decorative pillows and squeezing it in his arms while he dreamed of a beautiful life. Was this truly happening to him? It was incredible, but he was right there, so there was no mistake.

He was happy. And in love. He lay down on one side and admired the large living room with its high tech entertainment center and beautiful art pieces on the walls, nothing expensive, he could tell, just images of the sea and autumn leaves and a little house on a prairie. They were so pretty. Otis could imagine himself having the most beautiful dreams if he happened to fall asleep on that sofa.

He closed his eyes, and his entire body relaxed. Happiness was real. He was touching it.



“Hey, beautiful,” Hudson said gently and very close.

“What? Did I fall asleep?” Otis shook his head to shake off the feeling of disorientation still wrapping him like a blanket.

“You must be tired.” Hudson kissed his cheek. “How about I show you the bedroom? So that you can have a nicer rest there than here, on the sofa. Also, I hope that you enjoy sleeping naked. I need something to get me going after not seeing you for so long.”

“I visited you at the hospital every day,” Otis pointed out.

Hudson’s eyes shadowed momentarily with something that made Otis feel his skin turn all tingly for no apparent reason. “You know what I mean. Come on. I’d carry you, but--”

“You mustn’t strain your shoulder,” Otis said hurriedly and took Hudson’s offered hand.

He followed his boyfriend up the stairs and then inside a bedroom that looked cozier than the living room downstairs, but just as beautiful in its design and color palette. As he stood there, taking in the room, Hudson came from behind and placed his hands on his shoulders.

“How do you like it?”

“I like it very much,” Otis said honestly.

“I like you being here very much too,” Hudson whispered in his ear. “Would it be too much if I asked you to let me make love to you?”

“No, but your shoulder--”

“Ah, damn, I think I’m going to go nuts because of too much pressure in my balls. Now, let me kiss you before you explain to me what a serious condition blue balls are.”

Hudson made good on his promise and kissed him deeply. Otis melted into the kiss, turning enough to make both of them enjoy it.

“I can do it,” he whispered against Hudson’s lips.

“What?”

“You just lie on your back, and I will climb on top of you,” Otis explained. “Only,” he said while biting his bottom lip, “would it be okay to do it without a condom?”

“I believe you’ve waited for this moment long enough. You deserve it,” Hudson said with a chuckle. “Should I let you do all the work, though? That hardly seems fair.”

“We must make sure that you don’t strain yourself. I am in charge of your recovery, and I can’t allow anything to happen to you.”

“It’s good to know that I’m in such good hands.” Hudson took off his t-shirt, with some difficulty that showed that his shoulder was still not in its best condition.

Otis hurried to help him out of the rest of his clothes. He took his time because he didn’t want to move too fast and end up out of breath. It was enough that he was seeing Hudson naked for the first time in a very long time. He brushed his cheek against Hudson’s semi-erection and heard a grunt from his lover.

“Is this really okay?”

“If you leave me high and dry while looking at me like that from down there, I’m afraid you’ll have to deal with a really pissed off boyfriend during the days to come.” Hudson pushed his hair away from his eyes and leaned over a smidge so that they could stare at each other properly. “You are very beautiful and I want you very much. I’m in your care, so please do your job.”

Otis nodded. He understood all that. And Hudson’s promise, that they would do it raw, had been enough to light a myriad of small fires under his skin. He took Hudson’s hand and helped him to the bed, where his lover stretched, showing off his muscular body.

He didn’t take his eyes away as he undressed as well. By now, Hudson’s cock was at full mast, and Otis couldn’t tear his eyes away from that gorgeous sight. The thought that he would have Hudson, all of him, inside, without anything between them, no barrier, made his fingers clumsy, and undressing himself seemed to take forever.

But he succeeded at last. He was naked and feeling a tad more vulnerable than when he had been hiding behind his clothes, but there was a new confidence he had cultivated lately that pushed him forward. He climbed on the bed, his eyes never leaving Hudson, and he was quick to straddle his boyfriend and make their sexes touch. It was such a pleasant, titillating sensation.

Otis thought of how much he wished to take Hudson in his mouth and taste him. Not only his manhood, but everywhere, every inch of his skin.

“Kiss me, beautiful,” Hudson whispered, and Otis leaned forward and their lips fused.

He could tell that Hudson was helping a great deal, because he felt something wet at his behind as fingers slowly scissored the tight entrance. Being patient at this stage seemed so cruel. Otis fidgeted and tried to get Hudson to hurry up, but there was no way that was happening. Hudson kept his mouth busy while his fingers worked efficiently, although at what seemed like a snail’s pace. Otis huffed and moaned while Hudson explored his mouth with his tongue. He pushed his ass back while his boyfriend continued to finger him.

“More, please, put it in,” he begged.

“You will have to do it,” Hudson teased him. “And make sure to let me see it. How you get my cock inside you.”

No need for further encouragement. Otis took Hudson’s cock in one hand while he stood for a moment and then crouched slowly. Something inside him lit up as the tip of Hudson’s cock now touched his ass. It was like a promise of the pleasure soon to come. Otis took one deep breath and pushed himself down with care.

“Oh, baby,” Hudson moaned. “You feel so good. I might blow too soon.”

“Not before I’m all in. I don’t want to miss a drop,” Otis warned him.

“Damn, you say the naughtiest things. And with such a straight face. Oh, yes, like that. I feel you so well.”

It wasn’t easy, not after so much time passing without doing it, Otis thought. “Would one of those things called butt plugs help if you’re ever away from home long?”

“Do you want to play with your ass while I’m out on business?” Hudson challenged him with a chuckle. “That’s not fair. I’d like to see it.”

“I’m only talking about keeping my ass in shape. In shape for you to put your cock inside it.”

Hudson grunted as if in despair and grabbed him hard by the back of his neck. “You will so make me blow too soon.”

Otis didn’t want that, although he felt himself being stretched to the limit, as far as his desire went. Even if it was uncomfortable, he managed to push himself down until he sat on top of Hudson’s crotch and could tell that his boyfriend’s entire length was now lodged inside him, touching his most sensitive point.

“Now, since you’re so keen on doing all the work,” Hudson whispered, “go ahead and show me what you’ve got.”

That was an unclear demand, but Otis knew what he wanted. He felt a little selfish for using Hudson like that, but he couldn’t help it. He pressed his palms against Hudson’s hairy chest for leverage and began moving his hips. “Please, do not move your hands,” he said.

Hudson put them both behind his head. “As long as you’re moving like this, I have no problem with following orders.”

Otis nodded. He had to focus, but it wasn’t as hard as he thought. His body followed a certain pattern which it seemed to know well, or maybe it was just the imperative of pleasure telling him how to move and what to do. And throughout it all, he had Hudson’s face in front of his eyes, and by the way pleasure played on that handsome face still carrying the marks of a few scars, he knew that he was doing a good job.

For that reason, he got bolder. He began moving his hips amply, and moaned softly as Hudson’s cock hit him by natural effect in the right spot, over and over.

“I don’t think--” he whispered and soon lost all coherence.

His body knew when to release its pent-up desire too. He watched helplessly as his ejaculation came out so strongly that it hit Hudson in the face. At first, there was surprise in the dark eyes, and then more than that. Otis found it impossible to protest as Hudson grabbed him and pressed him down against his chest while he moved wildly underneath.

Otis felt that his backside was on fire as Hudson pushed inside him relentlessly. After his release, he felt raw but good too, and Hudson didn’t take long. His pleasure, now dwelling in his mind as well as body, soared as he felt Hudson releasing all his desire inside him. That was what he wanted, and now he felt fulfilled.

Hudson covered his face in kisses.

“You strained your shoulder,” Otis whispered.

“Not true,” Hudson protested and continued to kiss him.



Later, in the night, both of them underneath the same blanket, Hudson felt the need to talk.

“I can’t believe you’re here with me. It feels like a dream.”

Otis moved on his side and came closer. Hudson could sense him breathing and it was such a reassuring feeling.

“Have you ever been in love before, Hudson?”

“Before you?”

“Yes. It’s all very new to me. I’m afraid I might burst from feeling so happy,” Otis confessed.

“I did love, but I wasn’t in love,” Hudson confessed as well. “There was this friend of mine. I felt for him deeply.”

“What happened? Did he move away?”

“No.” He didn’t want to ruin the moment, Otis sleeping under his roof for the first time, but he wanted to be perfectly honest. “He died.”

“Did he love you back?”

“In his own way. Like a brother. I don’t think that I wanted more either. But we did everything together.” Hudson moved closer to face Otis in the dark. “I used to run wild. That was what we did. Pete and I. But we played too fast, too loose, and he died.”

“And you?”

“I turned my life around. I became a cop. To make the world better, even without Pete around.”

“How did you love him?”

“Not like I love you, for sure. I thought I wanted him, but in hindsight, it was more the idea of having someone special. I didn’t know what that was until I met you.”

“You’re not lying.”

“Of course I’m not.”

More silence followed. Hudson waited patiently.

“I’m glad. Not that your friend died. But because you love me the way you do.”

“You’re truly special, Otis. I want to make you very happy. All my life.”

“You’ve already done that.” Otis cuddled against his chest and pressed his head against it. “I will be happy forever, here with you.”

“Then the next step is to--”

“Get married.”

“How did you know what I was going to say?” Hudson asked, startled by his lover’s astuteness.

“Because I want to be the one to ask you first. Will you marry me, Hudson West?”

“You can be damn well sure I will, Otis Bendecker.” Hudson kissed the smooth forehead and then lower. “I need you in my life like I’ve never needed anything else.”

“That is good to know. Because I love you so much I know I can never be alone again.”

Hudson smiled, even though Otis couldn’t see him in the dark. That was all he needed to know, really. Everything else would come naturally, and they would tell each other everything.

Epilog

“So, that means that we’re going to be missing you for a bit, Mr. Bendecker?” Mrs. Wellis held her daughter close, while Miranda peeked from behind her at him. She grinned and hid her face in her mother’s skirt when Otis looked down and made a funny face.

“A substitute teacher will be taking over, but it will not be for long.”

“I heard that you’re getting married. That means that you’ll be on your honeymoon.”

“Yes, but it’s going to be very short. I do not wish to be away from my work for more than a week.”

“I bet that’s because these little imps don’t want to see you gone.”

“When you’re so young, even a week seems like an incredibly long time,” Otis explained.

“Indeed. It’s hard for us grownups to put ourselves in their shoes. Have we forgotten our childhoods without realizing it?” Mrs. Wellis pondered out loud.

Otis didn’t know how to reply. Working as a kindergarten teacher for children with special needs fit him like a glove, as Hudson told him often. He did understand the struggle of making sense of the world around them that all these kids were going through. He had been there, and he had missed his own childhood for the most part. Therefore, all the things he was teaching the little ones applied to him just as well. He was learning with them, and he was more like a child himself, one of them, and not so much a teacher.

But, of course, he kept those thoughts to himself. After going through many years of education to qualify for this position, the grownups, as Mrs. Wellis put it, should believe him to be the most prepared for his job. Otis believed a lot more in learning on the job than learning in university, and for him, the kids taught him more than all the books and courses, although those helped him a lot too.

Miranda put one hand up and Otis pressed only the tips of his fingers against her tiny ones. That was the special code they had established to say farewell, and it had been quite the task to make her to open up to even that much touch. In Otis’s book, that was a victory like no other.

These kids would be fine for a week, he tried to convince himself as he waved Mrs. Wellis goodbye. Hudson would be here shortly to take him home. Tomorrow was the big day, and after that, an entire week to themselves. Even though he didn’t want to part with the children, he had to admit that he could be a little selfish at times, such as wishing for more time with Hudson.

Hudson, who would soon be his husband. Although they had lived together for the last eight years, that was still a new concept, and wrapping his head around it wasn’t the easiest thing to do. Even the frequent assurances from Hudson that nothing was really going to change between

them didn't convince him. Not that he hadn't grown a bit more used to change and new challenges, but he wanted to make it all feel special, and he had no idea how. The Internet hadn't been particularly helpful in that regard; all the advice about what promises to make, and what sort of gifts to choose hadn't seemed on point.

The deadline was tomorrow. And he was like a kid without his homework finished. The playful honk announcing to him that his husband-to-be was already here stopped his musings. Somehow, this wasn't the kind of thing to ask Hudson, since Otis was supposed to be the bringer of a pleasant surprise to mark the start of their life together. As husband and husband.



Even without asking, Hudson knew that there was something on his lovely boyfriend's mind. With the wedding approaching, his mood had transformed into a quiet shape, and although he had tried to poke him playfully, Otis had continued to keep silent. If they hadn't spent the last eight years loving each other madly, he would have started feeling a bit unsure of his beautiful partner's feelings.

That wasn't it, but something was taking up real estate in Otis's thoughts, something he didn't want to disclose. Hudson had learned a lot about how to behave in his relationship with Otis since the young man had been through a lot, and pressing him wouldn't work. When he had once confessed about such things to Gavin, his best friend had solemnly advised him not to treat his partner like some perp.

Therefore, he was, this time, at a loss. Otis's wide smile when he hurried to the car put any worries he might have had at ease. That was how people in love smiled, as he had learned over the years. Despite his previous vast experience with men, once he had gotten together with Otis, he had not felt the need for anyone else ever again. But was it the same for his boyfriend? People changed, right?

As Otis hopped in and kissed him effusively on the lips, his worries melted away. Even if his boyfriend had been a virgin when they had met, that didn't mean that he wanted to explore new horizons after eight years of living together.

Hudson had wanted the wedding to happen faster, but Otis had been adamant about having a proper job before saying their vows. As he had been the one to insist on the option of pursuing an education for Otis, he couldn't take it back.

So, he had been patient.

"How was today? Did they cry a little when they heard you won't be here for an entire week?"

Otis sighed. “Just Nico and Tate. But they only sniffled quietly. You know they are not very open in expressing their emotions.”

“You’re doing a great job,” Hudson praised his lover. “Even so, I think they’ll miss you.”

“Yes. I received a few small paintings from them telling me as much.”

“How ready are you for tomorrow?” Hudson asked, hoping that his cheerful tone wouldn’t put Otis off too much.

Even so, his question caused a little tension to square Otis’s shoulders.

“Ah, damn it, I know it’s not the best time,” Hudson began, “but do you still want to get married?”

Otis gave him a startled look. “To you?”

“Hopefully, not to some other guy,” Hudson joked.

Otis relaxed. “Yes,” he said with a lovely smile, “I very much want it. You. Want you.”

“Good, ‘cause I was getting a bit nervous there for a minute. Would it be too much if I asked you what’s on your mind? Is it work-related?”

“No. I will figure it out,” Otis assured him. “It is something I have to do on my own.”

“Okay, I trust you. But if you need my help, don’t forget that I’m right here.”

As expected, there was nothing more he was able to squeeze out of Otis, and insisting would get him nowhere. Hudson kept in a sigh and stared at the road ahead. He might have joked about it and everything, but if Otis had decided not to get married, he would have been pretty bummed out. A mild way of saying devastated.

Yes, eight years later, and he was still that crazy in love. He hadn’t confessed that part to Gavin, because the guy would tease him until the end of the world. For now, it looked like Otis was keeping him on tenterhooks, although he wasn’t the kind to tease.



Well, the big moment was here. Otis wrung his hands for another minute. Hudson was aware of his nerves and had held him and kissed him through the night, but they hadn’t done anything so that they would be well rested during the ceremony. He was anything but. Soon, he would have to recite his vows, and his list was all jumbled. He would probably stutter. Worse, he might end up not realizing what the letters in front of his eyes meant, even though the piece of paper was secure in his pocket.

“Ready?” he heard the cue for him, and he started as if he had just been told that his execution hour had been pre-poned.

All the happy faces smiling at him made him feel a little better. And Hudson was there, so handsome in his wedding attire, a new suit that fit him like it had been made for him, which it had been, not some off-the-rack thing.

The minister’s kind voice enveloped him like in a warm blanket, and he was well aware of Hudson’s hands holding his. His vows were also beautiful, all the words arranged one after the other, flowing like a river.

And then, the dreaded moment. Silence. Everyone was waiting for him to speak his vows too. The words were stuck on that paper in his pocket. Otis took it out and stared at it.

“Baby,” he heard Hudson’s voice traveling to him like from a distant land. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he replied. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he stuttered. He looked at the paper again.

“Leave that. Just look at me,” Hudson told him tenderly.

And he did look. He met Hudson’s eyes, and his worries began to fade.

“I am no good with words,” he said.

“That’s fine,” Hudson replied and laughed softly. “The only thing I care about right now is whether I’m allowed to kiss the groom or not.”

It felt as if it was just the two of them alone, encased in a warm cocoon. “Are we at that part yet? It all happened so very fast. I was supposed to say something. My vows.”

“I’ll take the way you’re looking at me right now instead of any words.”

“How do I look at you?”

“Like there’s no one else but us in the entire world.”

Otis felt his face stretching into a smile. His fingertips tingled. It was all right. His senses were coming back to him. He snickered and looked at the paper in his hand. “There’s a lot on here. So I’ll make a quick selection.”

The people present began laughing too.

“I really don’t mind if you keep it short,” Hudson said with a happy grin.

“Okay, then,” he said and took a deep breath. “This line I like. I hope your life with me is going to be as sweet as our wedding cake.”

“Sounds good, go on,” Hudson encouraged him.

“Ah, and here is a little joke. It’s about fries. I promise to share mine, but you will have to do the same, because fries always taste better from someone else’s plate.”

Hudson laughed, as did everyone else. Even the minister seemed to be in an agreement about the fries.

“And,” he added and stopped for a moment. Was this a good thing to say on such a happy occasion? As many times as he’d tried to work around it, he had ended up in the same spot with it. “And my hand will always be steady, and my aim true,” he said quietly.

The next thing he knew, he was in Hudson’s arms, while the minister protested jokingly that he wasn’t finished.

“Do you really mean it?” Hudson asked.

“Yes, of course. I would never lie to you,” Otis replied.

“Since our sweethearts here are in such a hurry to embark on their honeymoon, here it is,” the minister said. “I now pronounce you husband and husband.”

Otis didn’t quite wait for the minister to finish. He was all over Hudson, kissing him. His vows hadn’t been that far off the mark, after all.



“And this one, what’s in it?” Otis examined the arrangement in the pretty glass with keen eyes.

“Only good things, I’m sure,” Hudson said lazily. After two days and nights spent having sex, sleeping, and eating, without letting Otis out of his sight for more than a handful of minutes at a time, just lounging around, indulging in sweet cocktails, was just right.

It appeared that, after all that, Otis had only been nervous about his vows. That had been a huge relief.

“When we get back, what is going to change?” he heard the direct question.

Hudson opened one eye to look at his pretty husband. “What do you mean? Not much, I guess.”

“But we’re married now,” Otis insisted. “We should try new things. We should do married people stuff.”

“Like what? Please don’t say we should become swingers!”

“What are swingers?”

“Never mind that. Ignore me,” Hudson said quickly. He rolled over on his side so that he could look properly at Otis and his beautiful eyes. He no longer kept the one with the scar hidden from the world. “What do you think we should do?”

“Buy new furniture?” Otis asked, seemingly unsure of his own question.

“Do we need to? Hmm, maybe something to complement your grandma’s credenza... That could be a thing. But furniture is a boring topic. Say something else.”

Otis hesitated, licked his lips, and, in the end, remained quiet.

Hudson couldn’t let that continue. “Married people also think about children,” he said. He was shooting in the dark but had to get it all out in the open with his husband.

Otis stared at him in shock. “Children?” Then, on an excited note, “Children! How come I haven’t thought of that?”

“What? Did I really get it?” Hudson felt excited too. Not even the three cocktails he had just had could keep him down. He rolled over and captured Otis under him. “Do you want us to have children?”

Otis nodded enthusiastically. “That will make marriage make sense!”

“What? And it didn’t make sense otherwise?”

Otis pursed his lips and then made a guilty face. “I’ve been worried about how things would change now that we’re married. I wanted to know in advance.”

“Well, for the most part, we just have to wait and see what happens. Ah, my husband, always the worrier.” Hudson nuzzled Otis’s cheek and chuckled. “Well, now that I understand the source of your concerns... we’re going to do all sorts of things. We’ll travel the world, we’ll learn how to bake cakes, we’ll jump off mountains--”

“I’m not sure about the last one. But I do want children,” Otis said quickly. “With you.”

“Good. That’s a great answer,” Hudson praised him. “Still, you didn’t let me finish. We should also finally teach you how to drive--”

Zeus jumped on them with a happy bark, his fur soaked with sand and water.

“Hey, man, not cool,” Hudson protested.

Otis abandoned him in favor of spoiling the dog. “Thank you for saving me, Zeus,” he whispered into the wet fur, although Hudson could hear him loud and clear.

“Don’t think that you’ve escaped for a minute. You’re not getting off the hook that easily,” Hudson warned him.

Otis rewarded him with eyes full of love. “I don’t plan to. But we can postpone it for a bit, can’t we?”

Hudson knew he was a complete pushover when it came to his husband and his quirks. Apparently, Otis enjoyed watching the world from the passenger seat when traveling by car way too much to think that he could focus on driving as one was supposed to. But maybe he would change his mind about that.

After all, they had all the time in the world to wait and see what happened.

THE END