If there's something that Inspector McCartney hates... well, that's thieves. When he is assigned with the case of the year, Hermes' case, the melomaniac thief, Paul knows he'll do anything to catch him. But unexpected events are hidden where we at least can imagine. Even in the music shop in front of his home, run by a certain John Lennon...
The boy congratulated himself: he couldn’t choose a better night for his hit.

Seriously, what could he ask better than a pub full of drunk English fans? Fans pissed off because their team literally sucked, and therefore not very careful about their belongings, where "belongings" basically meant their wallets. Maybe he could get one full with lovely pounds.

Ok, but now his stomach was speaking. Because yes, he was starving and because the chips could be lovely, not the notes. Golden and crispy chips, which made his mouth water and continued to be served to the customers at the counter, where the TV with the bloody match was on air.

Enough! The boy decided to hurry up, otherwise he wouldn’t eat that night either. Only two days ago he was still at his last foster family’s house, in Liverpool, and now here he was, far from his hometown, running away after he got tired of everything and everyone, tired of being moved around from one house to another since he was five, like the simple baton of a relay, just because he was a little lively and untamable.

He was just a twelve years old tramp, on the run, penniless and with an empty stomach. He had decided to cope with that need, doing what he seemed to have developed a real talent for: stealing.

There was no other way to eat and to reach his destination faster: the great city of London.

At that moment his stomach reminded him of his annoying presence and the boy took courage.

He went further into the room full of the smell of deep fried food, beer and sweat, and he twisted his nose. Better not to be close to an English fan when his team was losing: it was a real torture not only for the hearing, but also and above all for the smell.

However, the kid had to stand and get closer to be able to nick what he needed.

So he took a deep breath and sneaked into the crowd in front of the counter. He was small and thin and slipped well among the crowded people, all intent on drinking and screaming at some player who wasn’t doing his duty.

Identifying the simplest targets wasn’t complicated. They were there, oblivious of a small thief who was about to pull off what caused the bulge in the back pocket of their pants.

His fingers were still small and tapering, no one would sense their light and fleeting touch.

He took off the first wallet, one with a blue pattern, from a boy who was screaming, "Fucking Andrew, move your ass!"

The second, black leather and all worn out, belonged to a man who could well be his father, and who was lazily watching the tv, absent-mindedly, as if he was in a world of his own where there
was only him and his half-empty pint of beer.

The third, an elegant and brand new shiny wallet, stuffed with money, came directly from the jacket of a distinguished gentleman, distinguished only in appearance because in fact he was already drunk in the middle of the match. Ok, England wasn’t playing well that night, but fuck, get a grip! It was still just a rugby match.

Just as the little boy checked that the stolen wallets were safe, France made another try and all the fans reacted loudly, red in their faces, cursing and raising their hands towards the TV, as if they could really get to the fucking players of their national team.

_Tossers_, the boy thought when he felt himself pushed to the ground, on the dirty and sticky floor.

Immediately he got up, wiping his trousers and his too-large jacket, which he had snatched before running away from Liverpool.

It belonged to that wanker who was so coward to beat his wife. He had tried to raise his hands on him too, when he realized it wasn’t so easy to tame him, and that the young boy had no intention of being even touched by his dirty hands. So he hit him once, twice, three times with that baseball bat they bought for him, to help him get rid of his rage. And he did it. Only he let off his rage on that fool's body. Then he ran away, without worrying about the conditions he left the man in.

In any case, he deserved it. _Bugger!_

Now the boy rushed out of the pub, nonchalantly, so as not to be noticed. With the same composure he went in, he crossed the threshold of the pub and finally, he was free. Safe, in the cool evening air.

He laughed amused, feeling the weight in his pockets, he hurried away until he found a narrow, dimly lit alley, where he could check the loot with tranquility.

He sat with his back against the cold wall, and began to take the first wallet, the elegant and polished one that turned out to be well supplied. There were at least a hundred and fifty quid, plus some small change. He had done well to eye up the distinguished gentleman in his sophisticated jacket and red cheeks for drinking. Well, with this wallet he was okay for a while. All that money meant food and some warmer clothes for the night and more food ...

The joy of having found such a treasure was so immense that it wasn’t affected by the disappointment of having found a miserable ten-dollar bill in the boy's wallet.

However, he did become disappointed in realizing that there was one of the stolen wallets missing. The realization left him really upset. What happened? He remembered they were three. He remembered taking the second and slipping it into his jacket pocket. He checked again, but nothing. It had disappeared. Where the hell was it? Did he lose it when he fell? Or maybe in the short journey from the pub door?

Where the fuck-?

"I suppose you're looking for this, aren’t you?"

That was the question that suddenly came to his ears.

With a snap the boy jumped up, looking at the man at the beginning of the alley. In the dim light of the lamp, he could see this tall, thin figure, and more importantly, he had a familiar-looking wallet in his hand. The young boy wide opened his eyes when he recognized the man he had taken the
He wanted to ask how he managed to get it back, but he found himself not only unable to speak, but above all not very eager to do so, simply because he didn’t trust anyone. In these cases it was better to never trust anyone.

For his part, the man looked at the tiny thief with a smile on his face: he could perfectly feel his fear, and even if he was good at hiding it, it was obvious that he was scared of him, thinking maybe he was a policeman.

And how to blame him, he was still a kid.

"I guess you're wondering how I managed to get it back." the man said, and the boy nodded imperceptibly, causing a little laugh, "Trade secrets, son."

The kid frowned, hesitant. Fucking trade secrets! What if that guy was a cop? What if he was just trying to approach him because he had seen him stealing and then arrested him? What if he found out where he was from and what he had done? This time they wouldn’t sent him to an orphanage, he would have been locked up in a fucking reformatory and he knew what those places were. They were known as custodial centers for young criminals, but actually, they ruined the boys, instead of correcting their bad behaviour.

"You did a nice job in the pub. I saw how you slipped the wallets, you know, I noticed you right away when you came in, even if you didn’t realize it." he said with a sort of admiration, "After all, I could read it in your face, what you were going to do. And if I can give you a little advice, you should be more careful about these things. They are very important for the success of the hit."

The boy said nothing, just kept looking at him, still tense and ready to run away at the first suspicious move of the man. He was smaller and faster, he would leave him behind in no time. A real child’s play.

"You're quiet, huh? What's your name?" the man asked him, as he walked towards the little boy.

The closer he came, the more he could see how young this boy was. Almost a child, like the ones he had been forced to leave back at his home. This kid couldn’t have been much older than his firstborn.

"Pete."

The look that the boy received was a very sympathetic one, almost... tender?

"If you tell me your real name, kid..." the man started, laughing, "We can share the contents of these two other wallets I stole, what do you think?"

‘Pete’ looked astonished as the man took out two more wallets from his jacket and showed them to him.

"Where do you-?" he began to ask, before thinking and being able to stop himself from starting to give confidence to this perfect stranger.

"Well, there was a little fight in the pub. A fucking Francophile’s fault! And damn it, those kind of brawls are a godsend for people like us."

"Poor people?"
"Thieves." he answered with a laugh.

'Pete' was slowly lowering his defenses and the man just wanted to tell him that he had no need to fear him, because he wouldn’t hurt him. From the first moment he saw him, he felt the despair in his eyes, the same need to run away to a better place and life. And he just wanted to help him, because that little boy reminded him too much of himself and his children, children who surely must now hate him.

"So..." the boy said, staring at him still uncertain, but not totally closed, "You aren’t a bobby, are you?"

"Have you ever seen a bobby stealing something?"

The little thief just shook his head, without looking away from the man.

"Then I'm not," commented the man, smiling fondly, "Now tell me, what’s your name?"

He looked at his hands uncertainly, he didn’t trust him completely, but the man's smile was so reassuring. It was as if he wanted to tell him that everything would be fine from now on.

As if he wanted to tell him to trust him because basically, they were in the same situation. So he nodded.

"My name is John, John Lennon."

"Well, John Lennon, are you from here?"

"From Liverpool."

The stranger seemed to be caught off guard and his smile wavered: "Liverpool?"

"Yes, why?"

"It seems we have not only one skill in common, but also the same origins. I'm from Liverpool too," the man answered, and his expression suddenly closed melancholically, "How did you end up here?"

"I ran away." John answered, sitting back on the ground.

"What are you running away from?"

John looked at the man as he sat next to him on the ground: "People who want to put me in a cage."

"In a cage? Who wants to put in a cage a little kid like you?" the man asked, incredulous.

"Those monsters who want to entrust me to a family, but I don’t need a family. I even beat the last wanker who was taking care of me."

"Beat?"

"Yes. He wanted to beat me and I defended myself beating him back."

The man nodded vaguely: "I see."
"And what are you doing here?"

"I'm running from the cage too."

"What have you done?" John asked him, now sincerely interested in this weird stranger who had approached him.

Perhaps, after all, he could trust him.

"I put my wife and my two sons at risk." he said with a deep sigh, "And I preferred to leave them, rather than see them suffering because of me."

"And now what will you do?"

"I'll go to London to have a new life."

"I want to go to London too." John said and finally smiled with a genuine smile.

The man turned to look at him, surprised, and laughed weakly: "Do you want to come with me?"

"Yes. You help me to get to London and I'll help you with some theft."

"Yeah, you know what…" the man thoughtfully said, "Together we could do it."

John nodded: "Of course we can do it, John Lennon always succeeds in everything."

"Well, it seems we have a deal, John."

"How about calling me Jim?"
When the man came out of the window, jumping on the ground with an agile leap, he took a deep breath in the evening air, cool but pleasant. Spring had finally come.

The alarm of Hard Rock Café had been ringing for more than five minutes and the police sirens had joined after a couple of minutes, when they realized that the thief succeeded in his intent and ran away.

Now he was running through Hyde Park, while police cars darted along the streets around one of London's most beautiful parks.

The thief laughed, continuing to run and tightening his grip on the bag. Another successful hit. He just had to get rid of those annoying bobbies. Not that it would be a particularly difficult deal, actually, he was kind of liking it.

It was almost amusing, how they were trying to keep up with him, so clumsy, pathetic because they hadn’t realized yet that Hermes was uncatchable.

For example, now the police would waste precious time opening the gates to get their cars in the park. The temptation to make fun of them was too much and Hermes decided to show off just a little, with a little movement in the shadows, so the stupid Inspector Stuart Sutcliffe would rush out, starting to run blindly behind his prey, without waiting for the cars to get in.

And indeed things went just as expected.

*Rash, Stu... too rash*, the thief thought.

Why shall anybody blame him after all? Stuart had known this was his last chance to catch the infamous Hermes. If he failed, probably the poor inspector would be moved somewhere else, perhaps in the countryside in a lost village with only a thousand souls, in which the most exciting
thing that could happen to a bobby was a flock of sheep blocking the road.

And the thief knew that this was the inevitable fate of his nemesis, because he really had no intention of being captured.

As the inspector entered his vision, the thief headed for the Serpentine (1), sure to leave him behind. After all, it was what the plan foresaw.

When he reached the artificial lake that separated Hyde Park from the Kensington Gardens, he immediately looked for what would make his chaser mislead. It was a boat house and among the small boats there was the one that had been placed there just for him.

He saw it right away because it was the only one who already had a "passenger".

The thief came up and eyed the remote control that was placed right next to the mannequin. The dummy had been dressed and tied to the boat’s wheel, so it stand straight and so he could look like the thief himself. A very impeccable job, and on the other hand he couldn’t expect less from that little, wonderful helper who managed all those wonderful tricks.

The man grabbed the remote control and ran to hide on a tree, waiting for the inspector to come. Stuart came with his clumsy run, panting heavily. Hermes chuckled softly and activated the device on the boat, which left immediately, startling the poor inspector.

"What the fuck?!" he cursed, and hurried to recover a boat to chase his prey.

The thief had to cover his mouth with one hand or his laugh would have betrayed him, while the man tried to start the small boat's engine.

"To all units." Stuart said, speaking in the transceiver, "The fugitive heads for the west bank of the Serpentine. Immediately surround and block every escape route."

The inspector managed to leave and the thief smiled satisfied. The plan was going just fine. Oh, how much he would want to see the faces of the bobbies when they would find out that the man on the boat was no more than a simple and inanimate dummy.

He stayed on the tree, while police cars flew in the park to try and stop Hermes once and for all.
As they went away toward the west bank and the Kensington Gardens, the young man decided to open his backpack to have a quick look at his stolen goods: inside, roughly fold, there was nothing less than the black and white striped dress that Freddie Mercury had worn in the Queen’s 1978 Jazz tour.

He touched it with one hand and felt a shiver down his body, the same that probably reverberated in the body of that legendary man, the same caused by his endless energy, the one that he showed in every concert, until the last days of his too short life.

And now that dress, that memento, like so many others, was finally in his hands.

"John?"

John kept admiring that wonder, he had long desired it, because of his boudless passion for music and in particular for the Queen and-

"John!" a voice continued to call him from his headset.

"Yeah, yeah, I’m listening, Georgie." he replied almost impatiently.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me Georgie?"

"Once again, my dear." John said and chuckled as he checked that no one was around.

"Shut up and move your fucking ass!" George replied, and John was almost sure he was offended.

The young, touchy, moody George Harrison. Ah! What a precious help he was for John. And how much he enjoyed making fun of hi...

"Coming, I’m coming, don’t worry, relax a bit, mate." John jumped to the ground and started to run opposite to the police, "Are you at Marble Arch?"
“Yes, did you lose them?”

"Tsk, George, don’t tell me you had doubts?” he asked, thinking that he had to considered himself a little offended now.

"Doubts about the notorious Hermes? Never ever." George commented with a little laugh, and then again, "So Sutcliffe is out of the game now?"

"Sutcliffe is out of the game. See what a fucking good news I’m telling you?"

"John, you know better than me that even if they send him away, they'll call someone else, maybe much smarter than poor Stu."

John finally found himself at the exit on Marble Arch and immediately identified George on John’s brand new motorbike, the latest model of Honda, sparkling in the evening lights.

"I know.” he said, coming closer and looking at him with a reassuring smile, "But you'll see that whoever will come, won’t last long.”

George handed him his helmet, while John lowered the hood of his sweatshirt, shaking his head to comb his auburn hair, "How can you be so sure?"

"Easy ." he said, climbing up the motorbike behind him and fastening his helmet, "John Lennon always succeeds in everything."

"Did you mean Hermes?" George asked, chuckling.

"John, Hermes, does it matter? They’re the same person."

And wrapping his arms around George’s waist, the two men darted together through the streets of London.

Police alarms were in the past now.
And Hermes got another hit.

****

"So, Inspector McCartney, welcome aboard." Richard Starkey stated, standing up.

"Thank you, sir, it’ll be a pleasure to work with you. I won’t let you down." Paul said.

He stood up and looked at his superior, the chief inspector of Chelsea police station, a small man with a remarkable nose and big blue eyes, and smiled at him confidently.

"I'm sure about it, in Liverpool they speak very well of you." Richard said, accompanying him to the door, "We leave the case in your hands."

"Don’t worry, his days are numbered."

"Tell me, have you already found an apartment?"

"Yes, sir, I found one in the neighborhood."

"I hope you like it."

"In fact, it's not bad." Paul replied, nodding enthusiastically, "It's a rather quiet area."

"Well, then today you can relax. Tomorrow morning you’ll take service and from there your hunting will begin." Richard said, shaking his hand.

Paul replied, "I assure you that we will catch him, sir."
The chief inspector smiled broadly at him, and after he took his leave, Paul McCartney left his office, showing off the most determined smile.

Richard Starkey, like Paul, had just been transferred to the Chelsea police station, and after relieving the former inspector Stuart Sutcliffe of his task after his disappointing failure, he assigned that job to the young and promising inspector McCartney.

He assigned him the mission of catching Hermes.

That penniless thief that infested London, the magical, charming London. Paul had always wanted to live in the Capital, and he would never have thought in all of his nearly twenty-five years that this wish could come true thanks to the category of criminals he hated the most: thieves.

He hated them because their crime is to take away something that belongs to you, something that you paid for, and maybe you even broke your neck to earn the money to buy it, or something that was given to you and then had an important value for you.

Paul devoted his entire career as a policeman to pursue those villains and recover the loots. He had committed himself body and soul in his work. Why? Well, when your father leaves your family after he starts stealing and getting into trouble, it's the least that can happen. And Paul hated his father as much as he hated thieves.

But now what mattered was his promotion and his new role. In Liverpool, Paul had managed to catch a gang of crooks who took advantage of naive old men and women to got into their homes and robbed them. Paul caught them cleverly and sent them straight to prison, returning most of the stolen goods to their owners.

And thanks to that, he had been promoted to inspector and was proposed to take up service in Chelsea, in the police station that was in charge of the Hermes case.

How to say no to such an offer?

Finally he could accept and leave Liverpool. His mother unfortunately died years ago from a bloody breast cancer that had taken her away from him too soon. And his younger brother Mike has been married for just a year. He married a good girl, with a baby on the way, and a job as a photographer. He no longer needed Paul's loving care.
Also in London Paul could spend much more time with his girlfriend Jane. Being an actress, Jane Asher spent much more time in London than in Liverpool. That way they would make their relationship easier.

Yes, Paul couldn’t wait to start a new adventure. It marked the beginning of the most exciting part of his career and the end, once and for all, of the infamous Hermes.

\(^{(1)}\)The Serpentine is the artificial lake that separates Hyde Park from the Kensington gardens.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Second chapter is here... yayyy! :D
Finally here we have John and Paul. How do they look like in these new roles?
Hope you like it.
As always thanks to Vale for her corrections and to all of you that have read!
See you next Saturday, I hope! Next chapter will be "A day in the life"... A very important day for this story.
Bye.
Chiara
A day in the life

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is un-betaed! :( 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chelsea’s area was really lovely.

Paul was so excited about working and living in the artists' area. Everything was amazing: the bright colours, the sounds, the smells... God, he already loved it.

It had been a good thing hanging around through the characteristic streets. He was coming back from the police station, when he started stopping here and there, admiring the lush green of the parks, the quiet Thames, the inhabitants’ chattering, the street artists, the small antique shops...

He also noticed some art galleries that he would like to visit. Surely to someone else he would appear as a tourist who set foot for the first time in London. Actually, he had been there many times, for work or holiday. But he never got to visit Chelsea. And now he would even live there.

He was so lucky, wasn’t he? He had an important career, a beautiful and famous girlfriend who adored him, a loving brother, a tiny and welcoming house...

Of course, he couldn’t imagine that the day he fully understood his fortune would be also the day when his whole life would change.

And it all began when he saw that shop.

In the end he decided to come home to arrange his stuff; he wasn’t in the same hurry as that morning, when he ran out to go to the police station, nor he was too busy carrying his stuff inside his home. So he was examining and admiring the small street of his apartment. It wasn’t very narrow, but the terraced houses that lined it made it look smaller than it really was. Each house had a different colour: soft colours, canary yellow, light blue, grey, highlighting the green of the plants that decorated the street all the way.
Paul's apartment was a very pale blue and he was about to return home when he realized that there was a shop right there in front of him.

A rather old-fashioned little music shop. The wooden sign reported the name, The Rock Temple.

Paul didn’t know why he felt attracted to that place. At the moment he thought it was the name’s fault. The temple reminded him of the Ancient Greece, as Greek was also the name of the man he was hunting for, Hermes, better known as the messenger of the gods; but Paul did his own research, when he was still in Liverpool, and he discovered that the Greek divinity was also considered the astute god, a night traveler, a musician and, more importantly, a thief.

The profile of that delinquent seemed to fully reflect his Greek and divine homonym. He was a thief, of course, he only acted at night, he thought he was smart enough to warn the police in advance of his hits and steal only memorabilia that had to do with great musical artists, especially rock stars.

Maybe for all those reasons Paul convinced himself to get closer the shop and then open the door and enter. He looked around: there were only two boys inside, looking for some CDs, and to his left, near a small cash register there was a young man about the same age, perhaps the owner: he had auburn hair, a little longer than Paul’s, and above all, messed up; there was a pair of round glasses on his aquiline nose, and his eyes were focused on the screen of a laptop.

The door bell made him arouse only a little from his torpor, just enough time to raise his eyes to the newcomer and greet him with a nod, "Morning."

"Good morning." Paul replied, before looking around.

The place was really tiny, and that’s why there wasn’t even the smallest centimeter free. In the central part there were counters with boxes full of old vinyl records, catalogued by genre. On the walls, instead, there were shelves with music CDs and books about the greatest rock stars, as well as different volumes of sheet music for guitar, bass and-

A suspicious movement caught Paul's attention as he carefully looked through the titles of the books. He saw it from the corner of his eye. The two boys on his left were giggling softly, while one of them was putting something under his jacket. Paul moved before he realized it. He approached and grabbed the wrist of the boy who was stealing a CD.

"Let it go now!" He ordered threateningly, while the boy loosened his grip on the CD and let Paul take it from his hands, in front of the frightened eyes of his friend.
"What’s the matter?” the owner asked, raising his head.

“These kids were trying to steal a CD.” Paul replied, dragging the little thief with him.

The man didn’t seem particularly upset when they were in front of the counter and Paul put the stolen goods in front of him; indeed he looked at them almost... amused?

"Hey, Danny, it's the second time I caught you nicking this month.” he scolded him, but the cheerful expression of his face completely cancelled his reproach.

In fact, the boy gave him a cheeky smile, "What can I say, John? I just don’t have the money for this. Besides today is my birthday."

"Really? Wasn’t it two months ago?"

"But this is the real one."

The man named John laughed, before taking the CD and giving it to the boy, "So keep it and happy birthday, but do not hang around here again until next year!"

The two boys took the CD and ran out of the shop, leaving Paul totally stunned by what had just happened.

"What the hell? Do you really let them go like this?” He asked without being able to hide his confusion.

"Sure, they're just two kids.” John replied, shrugging. "It's quite normal to do some mischief at their age."

Paul frowned, perplexed: a crime was always a crime.

"You think so? I don’t agree with you. I think that at any age, a wrong behaviour must be corrected."
"Yeah, but surely they won’t become criminals in the future just for this." John stated, amused, "Anyway, thank you for your help."

"You don’t have to thank me, it's my job." Paul said, showing his badge, "Inspector Paul McCartney, Chelsea district."

John raised an eyebrow, interested, before offering his hand, "John Lennon. So, you aren’t a local, are you? I don’t think I've ever seen you before."

"Yes, I was transferred to Chelsea from Liverpool."

"Wait, what? I'm from Liverpool too."

Paul looked surprised, “Really?”

“Yeah, I was born there, but after a few years my... my family moved to London. Is it good working in the Capital?"

"Actually I'm starting tomorrow, but I'm sure I'll be fine, they gave me a very important job." Paul replied, very proud.

"Do you mean Hermes’ case?"

Paul blinked in surprise, "How do you-"

John laughed, "Come on, it’s the case of the year, isn’t it? Everyone’s talking about it, the melomaniac thief who steals all the memorabilia of the most famous musical artists."

"It's not something to laugh at, he's a criminal." Paul said sternly.

He hated when people took the infractions of the law so lightly. It was as if they were laughing at
his job and then, at him, because Paul lived for his job. It was what made him feel alive and useful.

"Oh, come on, we're not talking about a killer. He never hurt a living soul." John commented.

"However he committed crimes and must be arrested."

"We agree about this." John finally stated, winking, "And so they got rid of who was hot on his heels, what was his name? Sur... Sus..."

"Sutcliffe. Inspector Sutcliffe. And I'd rather say he was relieved of his office." Paul said.

John folded his arms, thoughtfully, resting them on the counter, "Yeah, well, I guess the difference doesn't matter to the poor inspector."

"He should have made more efforts and this wouldn't have happened."

Paul snorted and almost regretted having dared to say so much with a stranger. It wasn’t fair nor professional, but basically it was what he thought. How could you let running away a thief who also warned you when and where he would act? Surely Stuart Sutcliffe hadn’t been trained as well as Paul.

"They say he's uncatchable."

"Oh, they say?" Paul replied, annoyed, "But I say, actually, I'll catch him and throw him in jail, where he will remain until he has served his sentence."

John smiled, admired, "You seem very confident. Don’t you think that too much self-confidence can be a problem?"

"I only trust what I can do, catching criminals."

And indeed, how couldn’t he be so sure of his abilities? From an early age he had shown that he was smart and worth something. He had to be good and special in his work to get to take on such
an important task, even if so young.

John looked at him for a moment, then sighed quietly, "Well, and I wish you all the luck of the world."

"Thank you."

"Tell me, were you looking for something special in my shop?" John asked, interested, changing the subject.

Paul bit his lip, caught off-guard, because in fact he didn’t even know why he entered the shop.

"Actually no."

"So you felt I was about to be robbed?" John asked, letting out a laugh.

"Er, no, I really don’t know why I got in here." Paul answered sincerely, "I was going back home and I saw the sign. I don’t know what I was thinking, I don’t even like music."

The fun from John's face suddenly disappeared, leaving an expression of utter confusion, "How can’t you like the music?"

"Actually, I can. I hate music."

John said nothing, he just stared at him as if Paul was an alien to him, with horns and green skin.

"Without music, life would be a mistake." John said and then went around the counter to reach Paul, "Do you know who said that?"

Paul shook his head, “Albus Dumbledore?”

"Nietzsche. And you know what, inspector? I think he was right. Try to imagine your life as a movie, one of those you watch at the cinema or on television. Do you think they would have the
same effect if you removed the soundtrack?"

“Well, I don’t-”

“Of course not, they would lose half of their beauty.” John explained, heartfelt.

"I don’t doubt it, and you will know better than me that music can arouse in us the most disparate emotions. The problem is that those emotions aren’t always pleasant."

And it was true, to anyone music could bring out the joy, love, happiness, but in the same way, it could make you revive the worst moments of your lives, bringing back sadness and tears. So why remember everything, if you could just turn off the stereo?

"It’s the beauty of listening to music. We need to show a lot of courage even in standing the unpleasant emotions or memories that it can bring us."

Paul shook his head with a sad smile on his lips, "So I’m not brave enough."

"I think you are, you’re a policeman after all." John replied, encouraging him, "Just look for it somewhere. And I know what can help you find your courage."

Paul sighed and cursed himself: when he entered the shop, he would never think of ending up in a disquisition on something as unbearable as music. The man didn’t want to understand that there was nothing to do: Paul hated music and not just some particular song, some artist or opera, he hated music in general and everything related to it.

But obviously his interlocutor was more stubborn than him, because he went to the same shelf where Paul had caught the two boys in the act, and returned with the same CD in his hands.

"Please, accept this gift." he then said, smiling and holding out the item.

"Why?" Paul asked, puzzled.
"To return the favor you gave me."

Paul waved his hands, in a clear sign of rejection, "There’s no need. I only did my-

"Your job, yeah, I get it. But I have to insist." John said, bringing the CD closer to the other man.

Paul looked at him reluctantly, but in the end, he convinced himself and took it in his hands: it was Exile on Main Street, by the Rolling Stones.

"Anyway, I don’t think I’ll listen to it." He stated with conviction.

"I believe you will, maybe in a few days, or in a few weeks, but yeah, you will." John said, confident, "Because after all, you’re a man of justice and you know you must give it a second chance, before proclaiming the final sentence."

Paul looked at him, sighing slightly. He thought he had never considered this point. He had a reason, a good reason to hate music, but it was also true that he had always been too angry to try to solve this particular situation. But now John Lennon was making him understand that his behaviour was wrong, while Paul was a righteous man. Mistakes weren’t expected from him.

"Why this?" He asked curiously.

John shrugged, "No particular reason. It's a new edition, the original is from 1972. Have you ever listened to it?"

"Not that I remember."

"You have to. Absolutely. Even those kids knew it was one of the best Stones’ albums. They were trying to steal it, it’s true, but at least they had good taste. And now you’re going to bring it with you and one day you’re going to listen to it, and then I’d like you to come and talk to me about it, to know what you think. Agree?"

Paul bit his lip, still hesitant, but finally nodded, "So thank you."
"Thanks to you."

Paul headed for the exit and John accompanied him.

"I hope to see you again soon, Inspector." He said, shaking his hand again.

"I think it’ll happen sooner than you imagine." Paul said, smiling, "Since I live right in front of your shop."

"Oh, really?" John asked, more than surprised, "I live here, next door. If you need anything, call me as well."

"Thanks." said Paul, "So, have a good day."

"You too."

Paul turned, before reaching the door of his house and disappearing behind it.

John, John Lennon, the man behind Hermes, followed him with a look and a big smile on his face until the last moment, remaining on the threshold of his shop.

Paul McCartney, the bobby on his heels was that kid so young, so full of himself and with his too big eyes? He almost laughed at the idea of how easy it would be getting rid of him.

Like stealing a lollipop from a child. If not even easier.

Oh yeah, Hermes’ path was all downhill.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo Paul also live across the street from John... :D
Maybe they can see each other veeeeeery often. Ah!
I'm really sorry for the un-beated chapter. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Next time it'll be betaed! :)
Hope you like it anyway! :o
For any question or comment or anything you want here's my tumblr.
See you next week with chap4, “In spite of all the danger”.
Bye bye
Chiara
"And what about the apartment?"

Paul smiled talking on the phone with Jane. He was using the earpiece while he was finishing arranging the last books in the library of his living room upstairs.

"Very nice." he replied, putting *The three musketeers* between *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *And then there were none*, "I've arranged all my stuff."

"Good boy." she said, giggling, "And the neighborhood?"

"Lovely. When you’ll come back to London, we’ll go around to have a look together." Paul promised, confidently.

Jane sounded enthusiastic, "Seems great."

"Are you done filming?"

"Yeah, but the director wants to fix the last scene." she replied, yawning bored, "So I think we’ll stay here some days longer."

"But then you'll come to London, right?" He asked, trying to hide his anxious wait.

"Sure. In a few weeks someone will turn twenty-five or am I wrong?"

Paul laughed, "No, actually I think you're right."

"We will definitely see each other for your birthday, love. Don’t worry."

"All right." he said, then lowered his gaze to the ground, unsure, "Jane, I lo-"

"I have to go now, Paul, I’m in a hurry." she stopped him abruptly, "The cast organized a party in the hotel this evening."

"Oh." he said, and this time he forced himself to hide his disappointment, "Yeah, sure. Have a good time, darling."

"Bye, Paul."

"I love you, Jane."

"Me too."

But the busy signal was already echoing in Paul's ear. Jane had hung up and Paul was alone again. The young man sighed, before throwing both earpiece and mobile phone on the couch.

He had to admit it. Living in London, where he didn’t know anyone, wasn’t as exciting as he expected at the beginning. Loneliness had knocked at Paul's house very soon. It was his cold and silent life companion.
In Liverpool when he’d leave home to go to work, he’d greet the neighbours who went out to get the newspaper or were hanging out their laundry. Then in the afternoon, he could visit his brother and in the evening he’d go out with some friends, Ivan or Pete, to have a drink in one of the pubs.

On the contrary in London he could only talk with his work colleagues. But otherwise he no longer opened his mouth, beyond a few phone calls to Jane or Mike.

Jane, his beautiful girl, was in New York filming a movie, an American comedy, from what Paul knew. She’d been pretty busy over the last few weeks, and the phone calls between her and Paul could be counted on one hand. The time zone certainly didn’t help: when Jane finished filming, around nine in the evening, it was two in the morning in London and Paul was still in the dreamland. He had always told her to call him, despite the time, but she didn’t want to wake him up.

He hadn’t seen her for months, he hadn’t kissed nor held her in his arms, breathing deeply the scent of her fiery red hair.

Sometimes he wondered if she felt the same way. Did Jane miss him just like Paul did?

An annoying little voice in his mind told him that no, she didn’t. Which led to a series of reflections that Paul probably wasn’t ready to face yet. One of them was that he couldn’t remember the last time she told him on her own initiative, "I love you."

Usually it was always him to tell her first, before saying goodbye, and she answered with a quick, "Me too."

However Paul tried to blow that thought away, he didn’t have to think about that, and above all he knew that in this case, only in this case, of course, he was wrong.

After all, there was only one thing he needed to deal with now. A tiny, bloody thief who seemed really evanescent.

It was almost two weeks now that he started work at the Chelsea police station. He read and reread and re-reread all the documents, articles, reports about every Hermes’ theft and still he couldn’t get how he managed to run away every time.

It seemed that the thief warned the police before every hit, and despite the police used the most sophisticated and extensive security measures, he always managed to get away with it. It was unknown how. It was just as if suddenly this man became immaterial, invisible, inaudible...

He simply disappeared, for some sort of weird spell. Like a wizard, like Harry Potter, with the Invisibility Cloak and the magic wand.

Yeah, of course, as if it was a real option, Paul laughed at how absurd his thought was.

In front of him there was a really difficult task. He knew at first that it wouldn’t be easy, and even now, after realizing the real difficulty of catching Hermes, he didn’t give up. He knew, he felt he had the skills to stop him.

He felt he was going to get him.

The thought made him sigh and then smile, as he decided to open the window to look at the warm light of the sunset that illuminated the street of his apartment. The coloured walls of the houses in front and next to his shone brightly with the soft slowly dying sunlight.
Paul leaned even more out of the window, his gaze fell on the door of the music shop that was opening and its owner... John? Yes, John was coming out to lock the door and lower the shutter.

Paul hadn’t listened to the CD John gave him yet, although he assured him he would try. And now that he thought about it, it wasn’t because he didn’t want to do it, but rather because he had been so busy with his work and his moving that he didn’t have time to do anything else. When tea time came, he didn’t even have the strength to cook.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn’t notice that John was staring at him, and when he caught his gaze, the other man waved him off and Paul smiled faintly, waving him back, before the man disappeared in his house.

Paul saw the lights turning on through the windows of the house opposite his, first downstairs, and then upstairs. He stared at them for a few minutes, imagining what that man's house must look like: definitely messy, dirty, clothes scattered everywhere, the dishes piled up in the sink, an entire room full of music and vinyl records, maybe even one dedicated to musical instruments. Probably that guy played the guitar, or drums or piano. Paul sighed, whatever instrument he played, the important thing was that John wouldn’t disturb him while he wanted to rest.

Thinking of rest, he couldn’t hold back a yawn. He was very tired. He would spend the evening lying on the couch, perhaps in front of the television, with the same reality shows, all equally boring and useless, then he would fall asleep and stay there all night, waking up the next morning with a terrible backache.

No, he didn’t like that plan, he thought as he closed the window. He looked at the sitting room he had just furnished upstairs. There was a large bookcase, with a small television set inside, in front of a sofa with soft pillows, and the CD that Mr. Lennon gave him was on a little cabinet with an antique lamp on it, taken from his mother's house.

Actually it was better to say that the CD was abandoned on the cabinet. Paul put it there before, because he didn’t know where else put it; he didn’t have a CD-holder nor a stereo to listen to it.

Even if he wanted to listen to it, how could he do that?

Maybe the DVD player would be useful as well.

Damn it, he didn’t even have the excuse of not having anything to listen to it.

So, in the end it was decided. He was almost certain that if he had met John in the next few days, the man would surely have asked him his opinion about the CD. So it was better to sort this mess out as soon as possible.

He put the CD in the player and then he turned it on, while he went to sit on the sofa.

How long since he hadn’t listened to some music properly? A whole life, actually. Since he left. It was that man who made Paul get into music at first, it was him who made him listen to the most famous albums, sharing with Paul his interests, and in the same way, it was him who had disappointed Paul, the reason why he didn’t listen to music anymore, so he had come to hate it.

So he avoided anything that had to do with music: each time it was as if that man appeared in front of his eyes. Paul hated him so much that he wanted to pounce on him, grab him by the shoulders and hit him, only to free himself of just a little bit of the suffer he had inflicted upon him with his leaving.

And he would keep hitting him like that, endlessly, until he was begging for Paul’s forgiveness.
Paul blinked, realizing that the CD had already begun and he didn’t even notice, too busy with those resentful thoughts towards someone who didn’t even deserve his forgiveness.

For a few moments he simply stopped to listen to it. The first songs alternated, without him being particularly upset. It was going everything smoothly. Or so it seemed.

A particular song struck him. It wasn’t bad. It had a nice rhythm, one of those that makes you keep time with any part of your body. And Paul almost did it, before realizing that he couldn’t afford it. It meant giving up too soon.

So he decided to lie down on the sofa, and just listen to the song. He didn’t get the words very well, it seemed like the singer sometimes would mumble instead of pronounce them properly. But from what Paul could understand, and he was neither an expert nor a critic, and he certainly didn’t want to be, it was just his style.

It suited well to songs with sadder atmospheres.

Paul had just thought this when a few minutes later, another song, the most melancholy song, the one he had only hypothesized, came.

And from the first notes, from the first words it tightened his heart. It threw him violently into a pub, one of those hidden in the dark alleys, dingy and smelly. Paul was there, in the middle of the pub, looking around. But he wasn’t lost, actually it was as if he knew who he was looking for. And in the end he saw him.

“And his coat is torn and frayed"

A middle-aged man, with his thin hair, with his heavy, dirty, torn coat... he looked so damn familiar.

“It’s seen much better days"

And as the coat, even that man had seen better days. He seemed to know it well, even if he was drunk: his flushed cheeks and his clouded eyes were the clear evidence that perhaps he drank too much beer.

“Just as long as the guitar plays"

So all he could do was to stay there, sitting alone at that table, probably thinking about his troubles while that song was being played to accompany his troubles.

“Let it steal your heart away"

Paul knew who he was, he knew what he had done, what he was thinking, why he was pining like that. If he were an ordinary man, Paul would approach him to keep him company, and drink a pint with him, as he asked, "What’s up, man?"

But no, that man with light blue eyes, so familiar, and that nose, the same as his own, deserved to be in that misery. Even if a part of Paul, a very small part of Paul, wanted to reach him desperately, hug him and ask him, "Why did you do it?", and then beg him not to leave him anymore, never again.

And so Paul felt this inner torment come to life, free itself from the cage in which he had locked it up years before, and climb along all his body, up to his eyes, which wetted and let out small tears on his flushed cheeks and Paul-
Paul jumped up, heading for the DVD player and with a sharp movement he switched it off. Silence and peace returned inside the room, but not into Paul.

He knew he should never have done this. He knew he wasn’t ready and he never would be. Why did he do it? For a stupid commitment he took with that stupid fanatic from the music shop?

Yeah, for that. But also because in the end, a part of him, the same part that still wanted to hug that man, hoped that he would have been able now, after so many years, to listen to the music again. After all, it wasn’t as if he had never listened to it, actually. Until his mother's death, music had always been present in his house, more to please her, of course. But it had been there. And this had to mean something.

He took the CD in his hand and placed it in the case. He tried and no, it didn’t go well, but he tried. And John told him that he should have gone over to talk about it later.

Well, Paul had every intention of doing so, especially to tell him that he knew it would end this way.

To tell him he was a hopeless case.

****

The next day, Paul came home from the umpteenth day of useless work, in which he found no valuable information about Hermes. Of course, the experience of the night before disturbed him, but he managed to keep his feelings under control, and blow them away from his place of work.

When he got there, the music shop was still open and Paul decided to drop by. He entered the shop, the bell rang, drawing the man's attention. The young inspector blinked in confusion when he realized he wasn’t the man named John. This guy was different. He was thin, his brown hair was long and framed a small face with pronounced cheekbones. He had earphones in his ears and when Paul came up, he took one away.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, er... My name is Paul McCartney, I was looking for Mr. Lennon."

The young man stared at him for a moment, squinting his eyelids.

"Mr. Lennon?" he repeated, amused, "I see, you must be the bobby."

"Inspector, please." he corrected him, not particularly appreciating the word.

"Whatever. John was waiting for you." the man answered, putting the earphone back in.

Paul raised an eyebrow, "Yes, but where-?"

He didn’t have time to finish the question, because the guy absentely pointed at the end of the counter. Paul didn’t notice last time, but there was a small curtain of the same color of the walls. He approached and moved the light fabric aside, while soft sounds reached his ears. Sounds he soon discovered to be made by John himself, sitting on a chair in the middle of a room as big as almost half the shop. He had a guitar in his arms and strummed it happily. The result wasn’t particularly pleasant. And it wasn’t certainly because of Paul and his adversity to anything that produced music. He could tell they weren’t the right chords.

John saw him and stopped, a smile appeared on his lips, "Hello there."
"Hello."

"I didn’t expect to see you so this soon, Inspector."

"To be honest, neither did I." Paul replied, giggling.

John mirrored him briefly, before inviting him to sit in front of him, "So, I assume you listened to the CD I gave you?"

"In fact, yes, I did."

"How did it go?" John asked, genuinely interested.

John wasn’t ready to see him that day. He was sure that Paul McCartney was going listen to that CD. After all, John had stung him in his pride as a policeman, but not so soon, and it surprised him pleasantly.

"Oh, not as you hoped, but as I expected."

John frowned, "Does it mean that you didn’t like it?"

"No, but this isn’t an easy thing to overcome." Paul explained, "I can’t get close again to something I’ve hated for half my life at any moment."

John nodded vaguely, "You are very enigmatic, have anyone ever told you that?"

Paul laughed, "You’re right, forgive me. What I wanted to say is that I was able to listen just to a few songs, not the whole album."

"But you did listen to some songs, right?" John asked, encouraging him.

"Yeah, sure."

"And what do you think about?"

"Well, they were... they were interesting. One, in particular, impressed me."

"Which one?"

"I didn’t know it, but I think it said: Baby, I can’t stay, you got to roll me, and call me the tumblin’ dice."

"Ah yeah, Tumbling dice, the one that goes like this." John said, before starting to sing and strum some chords on his guitar.

Paul looked at him carefully, lingering on his fingers and the way he played. As he imagined, John was wrong about the chords. His fingers were in weird positions, Paul knew it well because he...

He taught the chords to Paul when he was a child, and he taught them that way, like they were chords to be played on a banjo. But they weren’t suitable for a guitar. Paul discovered it some time later, thanks to the lessons that his mother made him attend.

His disappointment must have been obvious, because John stopped to look at him.

"What?"
"Where did you learn to play like that?"

"By myself, why?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just that you're playing the wrong chords." Paul said, trying not to show the Know-It-All that hid in him.

It seemed to be quite annoying and above all, misunderstood by the people he corrected.

"Excuse me?" John exclaimed, surprised and amused, "Don’t tell me you can play the guitar?"

"Actually, I can."

John chuckled, "I didn’t think a bobby could play the guitar, one like you, above all."

"And I say yes, I can, I took lessons when I was a kid." Paul replied, heartfelt.

John gave him a skeptical look, "And despite this, you do still hate music?"

"Yup."

John was lost in his thoughts for a moment. He knew that Paul was telling the truth, he knew that this inspector, the one on his heels, was sincere about that information. A shiver ran through him, while a thought crept into his mind, a foolish thought: it was very risky, but if he played his cards well, he could take advantage of this new acquaintance.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Could you teach me how to play the right chords?"

Paul blinked, totally upset by the request. An absurd, illogical, impossible request!

"What? There’s no-"

"Wait, before saying a final no." John interrupted him, raising a hand, "Try to think it could be useful to both of us."

"How?" Paul asked, the skepticism evident on his face.

"I learn the right chords, and you get closer to music again, one step at a time."

Paul frowned, perplexed: it was weird, but the perspective offered by John wasn’t so terrifying. There was something intriguing about the offer, about that man and about the way he was taking care of his little problem. Of course, John was doing it more for himself, to learn how to play the guitar properly, but Paul didn’t care, because, moreover, this deal would allow him to have someone to talk to outside the workplace. Perhaps they could also become friends, who knows.

Of course, it would be only about music, but Paul could stand it.

How did John say? One step at a time?

Yes, he could do it.

"I can pay you if-" John began to say, not getting any response from Paul, but he stopped him
immediately, raising a hand.

"There’s no need." He replied, "I accept only at one condition."

"Which one?"

"That you call me Paul." Paul said, holding out his hand.

John looked at it for a moment, before smiling and grabbing it.

"Well, Paul, how about calling me John?"

Chapter End Notes

Hello there. We're getting into the story. What about these future guitar lessons with Paul and John?
They'll be fun. :D
As I promised, this chapter is beat! So thank you very much to Vale for her corrections.
And also thank you to anyone who is following and reading the story.
Next chapter "What you're doing", next Saturday.
In the meantime I hope you liked this chapter.
Bye!!
Chiara
It was weird.

It was weird and exciting.

It was the most dangerous thing John had ever done and when he talked to George about it, he too called him mad, crazy, completely fucking nuts. But no one of his convincing attempts was able to make John change his mind, neither the "It's a fucking bobby", nor the "It's the fucking bobby on your heels", nor the "Just a false step and you're screwed."

It was just that John liked risking. Risk for him was like getting a little shock, it was like ketchup on chips, it made everything better.

And he also had to consider that this new "friendship" would be very useful to him. To learn how to play the guitar properly? Yes, of course, but not only. Because above all there was the possibility of getting some useful information on what the police would do.

So now he was with the above-mentioned bobby, no, wait… he had to start calling him with his name, Paul. They were in John's private room in the shop for their second lesson. He had a pair of acoustic guitars here, an electric one, a keyboard, an amplifier, then there were some shelves with music books. On the opposite wall from where John was playing, several pictures of him with George and his girlfriend Pattie. Above all of him and Julian, Julian playing in the park, Julian sleeping at home, Julian eating with the bib on... It was a way to have his son always with him, even in the morning, when the kid was at the kindergarten.

"Is he your son?" Paul asked suddenly.

He had already seen those photos during their first lesson, and he also recognized the bloke who had called him "bizzy" a few days earlier: his name was George and he used to help John in the shop. However, Paul had forgotten to ask about the child's photos. And now, as they tuned the guitars, Paul took the opportunity to know.

John smiled, with a sweet, happy, sincere smile, "Yes, his name is Julian."

"You can tell, he looks a lot like you."

"Really?"

"Sure, his eyes have the same shape of yours."

"Everyone says so." John commented, pleased, loosening the E string.

"How old is he?"

"Four. That’s why I still can cuddle him as much as I want." He said, before giggling softly.

Paul laughed, "Yeah, I guess. So you're married."
"No."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Mm... no."

Paul frowned, perplexed, "What about his mother?"

John sighed, he had to expect that question. However, he wasn’t ready to share so much with a complete stranger.

"Let's just say it's a very long story." John cut off.

"Oh, I see."

Paul bit his lip, thinking that maybe he had dared a little too much and that he wasn’t allowed to ask such private matters to a man he’d known for only two weeks. However, he hoped that John would understand that asking questions, being curious, was in Paul’s nature as a policeman. He wasn’t rude, his curiosity was simply stronger than anything else.

"Shall we go on?" John finally asked, smiling to show him that he wasn’t angry.

Actually, he was, but not with Paul.

He was angry because that story, Julian’s mother’s, still hurt after a long time and it wasn’t fair.

Paul nodded more relaxed, "So, did you study C major scale?"

"Of course, sir."

"Let’s see, then." Paul said, waving him to show him.

John only briefly looked at the strings on the guitar neck, to place his fingers in the right keys, and then began to play the chords of the C major scale.

It was much harder, compared to how he used to play. His first teacher, the one who introduced him into the world of music, had forgotten the small detail that the banjo had only five strings, while guitar had six. It was obvious that the way of playing was different.

Also, you shouldn’t always be playing with all the strings. Some chords involved only five or even four. This explained why when he played, some sounds weren’t very clear.

Paul had giggled when he saw him playing that way, before immediately correcting his technique.

So from that first lesson John practiced every day, while George replaced him in the shop, or at home, while Julian played with his LEGO.

John and Paul decided to meet twice a week. The lessons were pleasant, it was as if time passed quickly: John was enjoying the lesson, while Paul didn’t seem to be equally comfortable, both for the music issue and because he was still a bit embarrassed with John, considering the fact that they had known each other for a very short time. However John felt that over time Paul would loosen up. If there was one thing he was good at, it was make people liking him. When he made an effort, he was a master in such a skill.

And Paul, the Inspector McCartney, his nemesis, wouldn’t take long to loosen up, to trust him, to confide in him... After all, from what John understood, Paul didn’t know many people in London.
He must have felt quite lonely, eager to talk to someone sooner or later. When he had been ready, John would have been there, ready to gather his confidences. Above all he would have been there to try and understand his weaknesses and get any other information that could have been used for his thefts.

A quite cruel plan, but it didn’t matter. Not to John, at least. Life, people played tricks on him, let him down, abandoned him. So now why should he show respect or worry about people who weren’t the few who would never leave him? George, Julian, the man who saved him… they alone meant to John.

"Not bad, you learn fast, I see." Paul stated, at the end of the lesson.

John played the C major scale easily and then, together with Paul, he improved a couple of other chords scale.

"I don't learn fast." he said, shaking his head slightly, "It's just that I want to learn."

"Quite right. An important difference." Paul exclaimed, putting the guitar back in its case.

"What about you? You hate music, but you remember how to play."

Paul frowned slightly, "Yeah, well, I've been playing for a long time. These are things that can’t be forgotten. It's like riding a bike. You will know how to do it forever."

That said, he handed John the guitar. It was one of the guitars John had. Of course Paul left his at his mother's house, so John offered him one of those he kept in his small study.

"If you want, you can keep it." John told him.

"No, thanks." 

"Are you sure? I don’t mind, you know, I have a lot here."

Paul smiled, "I'm sure, don’t worry."

"As you wish." the other man sighed.

So John took the guitar from Paul's hands and placed it together with his.

"I have to go now." Paul said, "I still have to get some food and go to bed early. Tomorrow is going to be a very busy day of work."

John pricked up his ears, all his senses suddenly alert.

"Sure. How..." he said, turning slowly towards Paul, "How's work? Any interesting news?"

"Well, actually..." Paul began to say, but stopped just in time, "Maybe I shouldn’t talk about these things, you know, they're confidential."

"Oh yeah, right." John commented, biting his lip, "Sorry, I didn’t want to intrude."

Paul made a vague gesture of his hand, "No problem, thanks for your interest, though."

John nodded, smiling, and then they said goodbye, deciding to meet at the beginning of the following week for a new lesson.
When the inspector left, John cursed under his breath. He should never ask that question. It was too early, damn it, and it was obvious that Paul would have answered that way. Surely it wouldn’t be difficult getting rid of him, of this little bobby, but it was equally true that he wasn’t stupid. John could do it, he just had to play his cards well.

Now more than ever he had to resort to his intelligence.

Then Paul McCartney would be a simple memory.

****

The next day, while Paul was examining some files about Hermes, Chief Inspector Starkey told him that a rich manager would be in the city in a couple of weeks. He owned a famous collection of memorabilia from the most famous rock stars. He recently added a rather special one: it was a drawing from the mid-Sixties, which represented a character made up with some individual traits from the Rolling Stones; there were Mick’s hair, Brian’s face, Keith’s eyes, Charlie's nose, and Bill’s mouth. The portrait had been drawn by an English teenager who had managed to get it autographed by the band members themselves.

The man, now the owner of the portrait, got a message from Hermes, who warned him that he wanted to steal the portrait and was planning to do it next Sunday. For this reason he requested a police inspection and of course, their protection.

So that afternoon Paul and some agents went to the man's house. It was a large palace with three floors. Paul was fascinated, it looked like a castle, he had never seen such a big house. What were all those rooms for?

He laughed a bit for his thought, until a young woman with long blond hair, one of his agents, gave him a perplexed look, so he resumed a bit of attitude and professionalism. He gave a better look at the house and its surroundings. It was surrounded by greenery: on the sides there were trees with lush foliage and the garden was well looked after, surrounded by an elegant black-glazed gate, with golden and well-sharpened tips.

The owner of the building, John Lowe (1) welcomed them warmly and immediately brought him in a tour of the estate. Well, if Paul had been fascinated by the front, he was even more when he discovered that in the backyard there was a huge pool. However the most awesome thing was still that green garden, with hedges and marvelous trees.

For God’s sake, there was also a pond from which a small stream started, twisting and turning through the trees and flowing into a slightly larger lake.

The man informed Paul about all the cameras set at various points of the gate and the building, adding that they were all connected to the screening room that was in a wing of his large house. Paul decided to go immediately to study the room. It wasn’t bad, very technical, not even the police were so advanced from that point of view.

And there, in that room, Mr. Lowe informed Paul about his plan.

"The real portrait is in the basement?" The Inspector repeated, upset.

"Yes."

"Then we should have some agents there too."

"Of course not."
Paul blinked, perplexed, "Excuse me?"

"I think we shouldn’t, Inspector, it’s locked up in a burglar-proof safe." the man said proudly, "Besides, if the thief saw men in the basement, he would be suspicious. On the contrary, leaving it rather unattended, we will draw him to the hall where it’s exposed and you can get him."

"But it's too risky, sir, we're talking about an expert thief, not a common delinquent."

"And I tell you that the plan will work, don’t worry, Inspector McCartney. Hermes will end up in a cage, I promise."

So, in the end, Paul had no other choice but to submit to Mr. Lowe's suggestion.

It was totally crazy, Paul knew. But what could he do? Even Chief Inspector Starkey, when they returned from the inspection, advised him to follow the man's directions. They couldn’t do anything else, it was his decision after all.

However the anger in Paul kept boiling all day. Only when it was time to go home he began to feel better, to relax. After all, it wouldn’t be his fault if Hermes managed to steal that portrait.

Returning home, he felt the need to let off steam with someone, to talk about what happened, but with whom? No one was waiting for him at home and Jane was far away, probably busy filming her movie.

A sense of loneliness oppressed his heart as he came at the street of his apartment, and when he was in front of his door, his gaze fell on John's already closed shop.

Too bad, he could have talked to him. He felt the need to talk with someone who wasn’t a work colleague, just to pour out the absolute frustration of that day.

But then he remembered the last time they saw each other and bit his lip as he entered his house. Perhaps John wouldn’t have been so pleased to see him, after what happened.

Paul knew he had done the right thing, yet a small part of him was whispering that he didn’t answer his question because he didn’t trust him. Paul never trusted anyone and this led him to have few friends, indeed very few friends.

Jane told him that he was always too reserved and, when they were speaking on the phone, she encouraged him to try and find someone to socialize with and not let Paul feel too lonely, since her job would keep her away from London for many months during the year. If Paul thought it over, now he had only Jane and a couple of childhood friends in Liverpool.

Failing to trust people was a real problem. Paul knew it was due to being abandoned by that man in his childhood. It wasn’t something that he would solve at any moment. He pushed people away from his life, protecting himself from other pain. The only one who could get close to him was Jane. Paul would have been lost without her. Literally. Jane was the only certain thing in his life, the only thing worth risking.

However, it was also true that he couldn’t go on like this and he was only now understanding it, now that he had no one to confide in, not even his colleagues, since everyone was under his command and he couldn’t let them to see him uncertain, doubtful, angry.

Since he had started those lessons with John, Paul thought that perhaps there was no harm to open up with him. Just a little bit. After all, he was also facing his problem with music one step at a time. It had been difficult the first time he had the guitar in his hand. At first he was amazed that he
remembered all the chords perfectly and this perhaps helped him to carry on, hold the guitar again and play to show John the correct positions.

However, later, Paul realized that he had no reason to be so surprised, because it was simply natural. His first approach to music had been exciting, important, it marked him for life, just like what had followed did, what had led him to move away from music once and for all. But moving away didn’t mean forgetting it, because now it became a scar: it didn’t hurt anymore, but it was there and Paul knew it, he knew all about that scar, who caused it, why and how... A scar that was weak, it could reopen the wound and hurt again.

But not everyone in the world wanted to hurt him. Who was he, after all? Just a boy, one like many. Why would anyone, someone like John for example, want to hurt him? There was no reason. So why not try to trust him, just him for now? Little by little...

Facing this with conviction, Paul decided to show up at John's shop the next day. George was at the counter and when he saw Paul, he nodded to the small room behind the counter.

Muttering a quick "Thank you", Paul headed for the place, following the sound of some guitar chords.

John just didn’t expect to see Paul there. When he noticed the young man standing in front of him, he blinked in surprise.

"Paul?"

"Hi, John."

"What are you doing here?"

"I have to... er... I..." Paul began to stutter, uncertain, but then he remembered that his decision had been made and he was determined to go all the way, "John, I have to apologize."

The young man blinked, surprised, "What for?"

"Last time."

"Oh, last time." John repeated, remembering, "But, Paul, you don’t have to."

"No, it wasn’t fair." Paul retorted, "You are entrusting me, it means you have faith in me, and I’m grateful to you, you know, but I’m not doing the same with you."

"It’s not immediate, Paul, it takes time, you can’t become friends overnight." John said, laughing.

Paul shook his head, smiling to himself, "No, but the truth is that up to now, I’ve never wanted to find new friends. Actually, I never understood how important it could be, to have someone to talk about anything."

"And now you do?"

Paul nodded, feeling a slight shudder in his hands. Yes. Now he did. He knew he was taking another important step in his life, one he didn’t think he could do until a few weeks ago.

"What made you change your mind?" John asked, genuinely interested.

"Work stress." Paul answered with a laugh, "Is it enough for an answer?"
"'Course it is." John exclaimed as he stood up to grab a chair so Paul could sit in front of him, and then repeated the same question of a few days before, "So, Paul, how's work?"

Paul looked at John, who was patting his hand on the chair in front of him, inviting him to sit down; he bit his lip, while a stupid little voice inside him whispered to leave immediately. He was just hurting himself.

But Paul was changing. He had decided to change.

So, he silenced the little voice in his mind and sat down in front of John.

"A real disaster." Paul exasperated, "You have no idea of what I had to deal with today."

John smiled encouragingly.

"Tell me."

\(^{(1)} \text{ - John Lowe, one of the members of the Quarrymen.}\)

Chapter End Notes

Hellooo, here we are with chapter n°5. "Just" 25 other chapters left. Ahaha.
Anyway, they're switching from strangers to friends... :3
I promise, Julian will come in a couple of chapters. <3
Thank you to Vale for her corrections. Also, thanks to anyone who is reading.
Hope you like the new chapter. :D
See you next Saturday with chap6, "A hard day's night".
Bye for now.
Chiara
"Is everything ready, George?"

Without wanting it, the question came out of his mouth in a weird upset tone, which caused an equally weird look from George.

"Yup."

"What about the cameras? Have we got them all?" John continued, ignoring him and walking hastily in circles.

His friend sat at his spot, surrounded by several monitors and computers, and at John’s question, he sighed.

"Of course, John. I cracked them all and I’ll check them while you're on your job."

Each screen showed images from Mr. Lowe's estate. John and George had studied them thoroughly during the days before, to see if there could be a crack through which John could pass unnoticed; but every single inch of that building was filmed and on a tight leash by the police. So they decided to enter the operating system of the control room, and replace, at the right time, the real shootings with fake recordings filmed during the previous days.

"You’d better, you know?" John said, staring at him with a penetrating gaze and using an almost menacing tone that he rarely addressed to George.

But he didn’t get scared, on the contrary, he chuckled, "Hey, what's wrong with you today? Is it… perhaps, that you are scared?"

"Scared? Me?" John repeated, incredulous and upset, "You're joking, I hope."

"It seems so though. You keep walking around restlessly, back and forth, and smoking nervously. I recognize your nervous smoking all too well."

"My nervous what?" John began to repeat, but he had to stop to laugh and snort visibly, and a cloud of the abovementioned smoke came out of his lips, "And what should I be scared of, may I ask?"

"What about… the new inspector?"

John smiled, indignant, but above all amused, "What about the you must be completely out of your mind, mate?! So, should I be scared of that unwary little kid who slipped out all the most important things about tonight?"

"Yup."

George's precise and sure answer took him off guard, but John didn’t show it and continued, "Why?"

"Because in my opinion, he’s not as unwary as he seems and you shouldn’t underestimate him."
"I'm not underestimating him." John said quickly.

"It seems so to me. And remember that even Stuart at first underestimated you, and look what happened to him. Sent to some lost village in Scotland to look after sheep. But if they get you, mate, you won't end up in Scotland, you know that."

"I know." John retorted, his pride wounded.

He well remembered how Stuart had faced Hermes's threats too lightly, at least at the beginning, tagging him as a mere thief who had nothing better to do and wasn't even as smart as he thought he was. Now the same man ended as he deserved and John didn't want to make the same mistake. Too much self-confidence could be a weak point, not only for Inspector McCartney, but also for John himself.

"So, do not underestimate McCartney."

No, he wouldn't do it.

"Alright." John sighed, resignedly.

"And now just go. You don't want the bobbies to wait for you, do you?"

John laughed as he pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, "Of course not, we don't want to make them worry. Come on, let's synchronize the watches."

Both went on to check the time, and John headed for the door.

"Please, be careful." George told him, with an encouraging smile.

"Don't worry, Georgie, I'll be back before you can say, 'McCartney, you're screwed'."

****

Paul walked nervously in circles in the control room of Mr. Lowe's house.

It was now past eleven o'clock in the night and Hermes would arrive any moment.

"Calm down, Inspector. Everything will be fine."

Paul looked at Mr. Lowe, who sat in his comfortable chair, sipping quietly a glass of brandy, and snorted.

How could he stay calm when he was sure Hermes would immediately understand that something was wrong? There were too many policemen on the floor where the portrait was exposed, and not even one near the basement, if he didn't count the agents outside the front door. Who did Mr. Lowe think he was dealing with? It didn't take a genius to understand, even a child would have guessed. However, the rich manager hadn't wanted to listen to him, although Paul had tried to make him come back to his senses many times before that evening, without getting any results.

And then he threw in the towel. He was already nervous because that was his first chance to catch Hermes; he had no intention of letting the man's stubbornness get him irritate further.

"I'm dead calm." He lied shamelessly, trying to look confident at least in front of that man.

He really didn't want to appear so agitated in front of the same person who caused so much insecurity.
Mr. Lowe, however, burst out laughing, "Come on, we can see your nervousness from a mile away. Not to mention that you’re smoking cigarettes, one after another. This will get your mood worse, you know that, don’t you?"

Paul rolled his eyes, exhaling deeply the smoke trapped in his lungs. Then he looked at the cigarette and put it off in the ashtray next to the brandy bottle. He hated to admit it, but perhaps smoking a whole pack in little more than two hours didn’t help in making him feel better.

"Don’t worry, just think that soon you’ll get your hands on that third-rate thief." Mr. Lowe commented, gulping down another glass of liquor, "Besides, look at the screens, it’s all calm so far. If we’re lucky, we could also discourage him with these huge security measures."

Paul sighed, not very sure about what the man had just said. Hermes wasn’t really a thief who let himself be discouraged, actually. If he understood something from his researches, it was the exact opposite. If there was a challenge, even the impossible ones, he threw himself head long, totally careless, but confident of his skills and his cunning.

To try and distract himself at least a little, the young Inspector approached the room screens. It was a very technological and complicated monitor system: there was at least one screen for each camera on the property and three people checking everything. His attention was focused on the images of the cameras fixed on the garden and the whole perimeter delimited by the gate.

Everything was still as a millpond.

It seemed that Mr. Lowe was actually right.

It was all calm.

So far.

****

His heart was beating fast, now that John came at Mr. Lowe's estate, where his prey was hidden.

Damn it, George was right. John was nervous, yes, and he didn’t even know why. It wasn’t the first time he was stealing something. So, there could be only one answer to this absurd situation: John was scared of Paul.

Actually, not so much of the guy as the apparent ease of this hit. It had been really too easy to find out the most important information: the original portrait was hidden in the basement. Yet he had succeeded, with great luck, let's face it. However now, the hardest part came: stealing it.

So, paying attention to what George told him, John left the motorbike just out of reach of the cameras, well hidden by the trees with their lush foliage.

"When you're ready, John, I'm going with the first camera."

John looked closely at the gate, getting in position to be able to snap as soon as George gave him the green light, "I'm ready, George. Let's start the dancing."

"Well, then go ahead in 3... 2... 1... now!"

At the signal John reached the gate with a sudden movement and cleverly climbed and jumped over it. Landed inside the estate, he looked around carefully and saw the lights on the last floor of the building. They had to be all there: the fake portrait, the control room, the bobbies, the owner, and
of course, Paul.

"I'll neutralise another camera, so you can stick to the plan right away."

John snorted. The plan also included an idea proposed by George: they had to place a sort of bug in the control room. This way, once the police would find it, they would have thought that Hermes found out about the exchange of portraits, secretly listening to their conversations. Above all, they would have diverted their attention from the insignificant detail of the same inspector telling this important news to no less than Hermes himself.

Surely a useful trick, John didn’t doubt it, but it was an extra drag for him that night.

"Oh, do I have to?" he complained.

"Fuck, John, yes. How else will they be sure that Hermes knew about the exchange right here tonight?"

"Isn't it enough that I'm witty and brilliant?"

"Move your ass, Lennon." George told him off, and then he continued quietly, "You can go on now."

"Fuck, all right." John sighed, cautiously approaching the building, "Such a little pain in the ass."

"I hear you, you idiot."

John laughed to himself as he reached the side of the house the control room opened on. Luckily there were no policemen, at least on this side of the building, since he would have to enter right through the ground floor, whose lights were all off: that was the nearest entrance to the basement.

John and George had recovered the plan of the house from the London real estate registry with a little help from one of their friend who worked there, and they had studied it carefully. Then, through the somewhat generic information that Paul had unintentionally given John, they had discovered where this super-technological control room was, and consequently worked out their plan.

Right at the sides of the building there were trees with a huge trunk and solid branches. They were what John needed. Of course, even those trees were filmed by a camera installed nearby, and when George told him he blocked it, John climbed easily and as soon as he was at the right height, he stepped on one of the branches, being careful not to make too much noise. When he was close enough, he noticed that the control room had both a small balcony and a large window, which fortunately was half closed. He had to focus on this.

He quickly recovered from the sack on his shoulders a small sling: it was modern and incredibly precise, and a bug had already been placed on top of it. He leaned forward as far as he could from the branch, firmly fastening his legs. He had only one chance. If he had hit the glass with the bug, this tiny little bloody thing would have caused a slight tinkling, getting the attention of whoever was in the room, Paul above all.

Right now Paul was saying, "I’m dead calm.", with an uncertain tone that suggested the exact opposite. Maybe John wasn’t the only one who was nervous, which was pretty comforting.

Taking a deep breath, John stayed still, took the aim carefully and then... There! He did it. The bug travelled on its trajectory with a sharp and precise shot and ended up somewhere on the floor of the room.
Now, finally, the fun part of the plan was coming.

Stealing the portrait.

****

Paul began to torment his thumbnail. It was almost midnight and there was still no sign of Hermes's arrival or presence.

It didn’t help his nerves that Mr. Lowe kept telling him to calm down and that the thief probably would have changed his mind.

So, at a certain point he decided to go for a walk. First of all he went to the hall where the fake portrait was kept: the policemen were all at their spots, assigned by Paul. The young inspector wandered around the room with a nervous pace, finally approaching the portrait to stare at it. It really looked like the original, Paul managed to see the day before, when they checked the basement and the safe. But he still didn’t understand what was so interesting in a drawing a child probably would do much better.

He recognized some features of the portrayed characters, the Rolling Stones, right? They were the same band as the CD John had given him. Paul leafed through the booklet, looking at the photos of the musicians, recognizing those faces he often saw on the television.

Damn! He shouldn’t have opened that door. Thinking back to that CD reminded him of all the conflicting emotions he felt listening to the tracks: from the more serene ones, which he thought he could never feel again, to the more unpleasant ones, more heartbreaking, than reminded him of the dark moments of his life. He couldn’t afford to think of all that now, right now, when he was at work. He needed to be focused, in such a stressful situation: he felt powerless, because he didn’t know if and when his enemy would really come.

Paul sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair, and he decided he needed some fresh air. He left the room and quickly went downstairs to the ground floor, where he stopped only to check if the underground door was still closed; after having checked that it was all right, he went on and headed for the door. The other policemen were outside the door, to stop Hermes if he’d come.

It was a pity that he didn’t stop to have a look in other rooms on the ground floor, like, for example, the small sitting room overlooking the garden, because otherwise he would have found, hiding behind one of the heavy velvet curtains, his prey himself.

John held his breath as soon as he heard the steps approaching where he was. Once the bug was in place, John made the way backwards to penetrate the ground floor balcony. It was a child’s play to open such a trivial lock. Without making any noise he entered, closing the door behind him and hiding behind the curtain, to wait for the man to pass. John didn’t resist the temptation and leaned a little forward to see his neighbour in the hallway. In the darkness of the ground floor he couldn’t see much, but he noticed that his pace was nervous and agitated.

Poor little inspector. Did he really think it would be easy to catch Hermes?

However it was early to claim victory. After all, John still had to steal the portrait and sneak away as quickly as possible. Cautiously he came out of his hiding place, pricking up his ears. There seemed to be no noise in the background. Moving with a feline step, he crossed the room, taking care not to bump into the center table or the armchairs. When he reached the threshold of the door, he hid himself for a moment behind the wall. He peeked into the hallway to check that the hallway was clear. Then, finally, he saw the stairs that descended to the basement.
"Remember you'll find a door at the end of the stairs." George reminded him.

"Yes, I know, thank you." John murmured, before sneaking down the steps in total silence. "Why don’t you neutralize the underground cameras, please?"

"Already done." his friend answered and John mentally cursed.

Fuck George, who always had a comeback.

The door was easily opened and eventually, John found himself in the same room with the safe. Well, there was only one last barrier to separate it from the portrait.

He approached quickly to examine the safe: it was a wall safe, with a circular door on which there was a wheel, and a handle with three lower helves.

John smiled to himself and examined it carefully. Nothing so inviolable, but he should open it trying to deduce the combination. He put the fingers of his right hand on the wheel and his ear on the safe door. He began to turn the wheel, listening to the noises of the internal mechanisms. Not an easy job when your heart is throbbing in your ears.

*Get a grip, John,* he told himself, trying to ignore his crazy heartbeat.

He didn’t have to think that at any moment they could catch him in the act.

He didn’t have to think that at any moment he could be reached by Paul and arrested.

He didn’t have to think that all that would mean losing custody of Julian.

So why was he doing it? If stealing put at risk his son, the dearest person he had in the world, why did he keep doing it? He didn’t even need any more money.

Why was he doing it?

Because the truth was that it was the only thing he had decided in his life. The only one he could control. He had only this job, he was really good only at this job. Only this made him feel like he was actually worth something.

So he turned away all the distractions and concentrated on his work.

He moved the wheel until he could hear the craved click, a sign that the safe was now open. John took a step back and turned the large handle. The door opened and there it was, on the central shelf, the portrait he had been looking for a few years now. It was stored in a plastic case, well preserved and perfectly in order.

It was beautiful, really lovely and crazy and *fuck!* There were also the original autographs, a sign that that piece of paper had been handled by the Rolling Stones themselves.

Better not to think about it too much, otherwise he would faint there and right away.

"Georgie, we got the portrait." he informed him with a big smile on his lips.

"Great job as always, Johnny." George said, the voice that betrayed all his enthusiasm for the umpteenth successful plan, "Now get out of there."

"Just a moment, I have to leave a souvenir for Paul."
"What?"

"Come on, George, don’t make a fuss." John said, laughing, "Just restore the cameras."

"John, are you fucking crazy?"

"Come on, I want to have some fun!"

****

That night was beautiful. The sky was clear and starry. The spring breeze was fresh and awakened all the senses, driving away worries.

Paul looked at the guards outside the door, standing in their spots, and approached a couple of them.

"Everything ok?"

"Yes sir." a blond-haired woman answered.

She was the same girl who had looked at him curiously a few days before, when they had got in that estate for the first time.

Her name, as written on the tag on her chest, was Linda Eastman, a police officer who had moved to London directly from USA. Paul wondered why. What was or wasn’t there in the fabulous USA that convinced her to move?

He was about to ask her, when an alarmed voice came from his transceiver.

"Sir, the thief has entered the building."

Paul shuddered, as all the policemen around him did. He took the transceiver right away and answered. There were so many questions to ask, but fuck!, the most important was surely...

"Where is he now?" he asked, and somehow he already knew the answer.

"He's escaping from the basement."

In a moment, Paul took some policemen with him and rushed into the house. His agents went downstairs to the basement, but Paul noticed a strange current of air coming from the living room, where the balcony was wide open and the curtains swaying.

"This way!" he shouted, before throwing himself into the chase.

He began to run and dashed out into the open, seeing a hooded figure in front of him heading toward the gate.

"Stop!"

Paul kept running, pulling the sidearm out of his case. Not that he intended to shoot. He had never liked to shoot, but if it was necessary he would have to do it.

The man jumped on the gate easily and climbed over it, disappearing into the trees. Paul never stopped running, he had to get to the gate and when he did, he heard the noise and saw the lights of a motorbike being turned on. At that point he stopped, took aim with his gun, pointing a red rear light and as the bike left, he shot. The bullet hit the target, the light went out but the bike didn’t
stop. Paul watched it leave, sighing. The echo of the shot resounded in his ears crashing with the heartbeat in his eardrums. His breath was accelerated and Paul could feel every single adrenaline molecule having an effect on his body, upsetting it more than it was.

But despite all the effort, the result didn’t change: Hermes ran away after another theft.

Paul didn’t know how much time he had spent there, outdoors, looking at the point in which Hermes disappeared; he only knew that at a certain point, a voice came from the transceiver.

"Sir?"

With a lazy and defeated hand movement, the young inspector answered the call, "Yes?"

"The portrait was stolen."

Of course, what a surprise!

"Yes, thanks. I got that." He snapped annoyed, before starting to walk towards the building.

Fortunately, the policeman on the transceiver ignored his grumpy tone, "The safe was opened and the thief left a message for you inside, sir."

Paul blinked, perplexed.

"Read it!"

"Welcome to your worst nightmare, Inspector McCartney."

Chapter End Notes

Hey there, new chapter online. And yes, this is one of the chapters with action scenes in. I'm not very good at it, but I've tried.

I hope who's reading likes the story. I mean, I wrote it in 2014, basically I spent the whole year for it, what with all the researches, and when I couldn't write or I didn't like what I wrote. I'm very fond of this story, because it takes me a lot of effort. And I hope that some of that effort is coming out of the chapters.

Anyway, thank you to everyone that reads and thanks to Vale who corrects the chapters, even if it's a lot of work.

And speaking of this, if someone very good in English wanted to help me to correct the chapters, their help would be very precious for me. Let me know if you're interested.

For now, see you next saturday with chapt7, We can work it out!

Bye

Chiara
We can work it out

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is unbetaed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That house was too big for him. Or anyway too silent.

Yes, that was it, there was too much silence.

Once he liked silence very much: it was relaxing and tender and it always had the power to make him feel better.

However now it was... now it was deafening. Too much silence allowed his thoughts to resound in his head, bouncing from one wall to the other and coming back again to reverberate in his body.

Paul was lying on his bed since... he couldn’t remember how long, actually, but for a very long time, sure as hell. He’d constantly think over and over about what happened when fucking Hermes stole that stupid portrait!

Of course, as a consequence, Mr. Lowe became angry with him. Why? Because they found a fucking bug in the control room, by which Hermes had evidently known about the switch of portraits. The rich manager claimed they hadn’t thoroughly checked the place, but Paul answered confidently that there were no bugs during their inspection and consequently, it must have been put inside the room that evening, while Mr. Lowe was dwelling on how safe their security systems were.

That made the man even more angry, so much that he started to dump on Paul, but when Chief Inspector Starkey came up, he managed to calm him down and then told Paul to go back home. Luckily, he didn’t blame Paul.

Everyone knew it wasn’t his fault after all. Mr. Lowe's computer system had been easily cracked by some accomplice of Hermes and then...

Then that bloody basement! He, Paul, wanted to put policemen down there too, he wasn’t the one who categorically forbade it because he thought he was so cleverer than Hermes himself.

But now, whoever gave to the whole country a bad impression wasn’t Mr. Lowe. No, obviously not. Paul was the newbie who had let Hermes run away on his first task. All the newspapers were talking about it, and right now he could see in his mind Stuart Sutcliffe sneering at him from up there, in Scotland. Fair enough, thought Paul, since he had taken his role; maybe Stuart was thinking that Paul deserved it, because he faced everything with too much presumption and that, of course, is always a bad start.

He sighed heavily as he got out of bed. His head was bursting. The days following a robbery were always stressful, and now Paul felt like a wretch. He needed some kind of analgesic to ease the pain in his head, as if he wanted to squeeze the brain out of his body. God, what a fucking feeling!

Paul dragged himself downstairs towards the kitchen, and as he went down the stairs, he heard a
noise coming from the other side of the street: someone was lowering a gate. Even without looking out the window, he knew it was John's shop.

It had been more than a week since Paul showed up. From Hermes’ theft, actually.

As agreed with John, they should have had at least a couple of guitar lessons during the days before, but Paul didn’t want to and didn’t even tell his "student".

John, on his behalf, hadn’t looked for him. Paul had no idea why, but maybe John, having heard about his failure, decided to leave him alone. Or he didn’t really care much about his lessons. Or Paul was so disgusting as teacher that-

No, that wasn’t true. He didn’t have to complaining about himself. It was a rather childish behaviour, and now he was a grown up man. Not to mention the fact that self-pity was totally useless. It certainly wouldn’t solve his problems, it wouldn’t help Paul catching Hermes if he kept on thinking about how stupid he was, wondering what would have happened if he had stuck to his decisions. No, he wouldn’t catch him that way.

He had to react, he was strong, after all, he went through far worse things.

When he arrived in the kitchen, looking for something to eat before taking an analgesic, he didn’t think about the fact that far worse things weren’t so over his shoulders, indeed...

Instead he thought that he had nothing to eat in the kitchen, if he didn’t consider that yogurt now expired several weeks ago. It didn’t seem alluring, eating those little green living beings that had colonized the raspberries yogurt. A huge supply at the supermarket was urgently needed.

Five minutes later he was leaving his house, heading for the first supermarket he crossed on his path, which turned out to be a small shop belonging to the Tesco chain. Paul entered quickly and grabbed a basket, starting to wander through the corridors.

He put everything in his basket: fruit, vegetables, beer, of course, some meat, biscuits, then milk and-

"Hey, Paul."

Hearing his name, Paul shook his head: he realized that during the last moments, he had been still in front of the fridge, with his head turned to his left, right there where he had seen, with great surprise, the familiar figure of John. And when the man met his eyes, as he grabbed two chocolate puddings, he smiled and called him.

"Hi." Paul greeted him, looking cautiously at John, who was approaching him.

"How are you?"

"I… I’m ok, thank you." He hurried to reply with the first thing that came into his mind.

"I'm glad to hear that, you know, it's been a while since you showed up at the shop and I was wondering what happened to you." John said chuckling.

Paul jumped a little, more and more surprised, "Really?"

"Yeah, well... We skipped a couple of lessons, but I read about that thief on the newspaper and I thought maybe you didn’t want to show up for a while."
Hearing those words from John made Paul think seriously about the fact that he had actually avoided John on purpose. Not that he was aware of it, he didn’t want to avoid John. Yet somehow he, their music lessons, the shop where if they weren’t playing, there was always at least one record playing in the background... everything reminded him of that thief and consequently his failure. And it would be painful, too painful hanging around John’s shop.

The strange realization left him more upset than he already was.

"Yup." he answered, with utter sadness, "Yeah, I really think that was the reason."

"Mm." John murmured, almost not believing that his assumption was correct, "I'm sorry, but I don't think you have to worry too much, next time will be better."

"Next time?"

"Yeah, I can see that this is a serial thief, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, a serial thief, yes."

John smiled at him, sympathetic to see him totally uncomfortable with the subject, "Look, maybe you're dwelling over it too much, why don't you come back to the shop and get on with our lessons? Maybe some music could help you getting distracted."

"But music has also to do with... you-know-who." Paul protested weakly.

He didn’t want to think that part of himself was dying to go back and play with John, a small part that Paul didn’t think it could still be in him, that part that loved music as much as life.

John grinned amused, "I didn’t know music had something to do with Voldemort."

John's laughter made Paul suddenly woke up.

What was happening to him? He seemed to be with his head in the clouds and not there, at the supermarket, talking to John. He couldn’t allow Hermes, his job to interfere so forcefully into his life. It had to be left alone.

"You know what? You're right." Paul said, enthusiastic.

"Course I’m fucking right. So... does this mean you'll come back?" John asked and his concerned tone made Paul feel guilty for thinking he didn’t care about him.

"Well yes, why not? I was getting used to it."

"Perfect, you won’t regret it," he said, giving him a loud slap on the shoulder, "And maybe together we can get over your tiny problem with music and not let you think about that stupid thief, because you see, Paul, if you think about it, Hermes has nothing to do with music. He just deals with old junk, while we, we make real music, we create it, and this is worth more than all the crap he stole."

Paul nodded slowly, more to himself than to John, as if he wanted to convince himself that it was the best solution.

"You're right, John. When do we start again?" Paul asked, euphoric.

John laughed at noticing Paul's sudden change, "Whenever you want. You know where to find me."
"What about tomorrow afternoon?"

"Tomorrow be it."

Paul only looked at him for a moment, thinking that he was really doing the best thing for himself. He felt it like a good fire in his belly. It was that good premonition that preceded all the beautiful things in his life.

"Thank you so much, John."

"Thanks to you."

"See you tomorrow then." Paul greeted him.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

After a last smile, which John returned immediately, Paul turned and left, leaving John alone, at the counter of the fridge.

The man sighed. What-the-fuck-had-he-done?

Comforting Paul who was evidently downcast by his first failure with Hermes? Trying to cheer him up, talking even bad about himself?

How did this come into his mind? Wouldn’t it have been better, at this point, to just give him enough rope to hang himself with? This way his newly cheered up mood could also compromise Hermes's future plans.

No, no, it was right, John did well to behave like that. He did a good thing helping his enemy, because if he didn’t see Paul again, John could no longer have the informations he needed. And John needed them, he indeed needed them, he needed them all. Every little detail that Paul was willing to share with him, his interests, his private life, his problems with work...

John had to know him thoroughly so he could be sure to hit him.

Win over him.

Destroy him.

****

"Did he really leave you a note?"

Paul nodded, absently strumming the guitar in his arms. He had been in John's shop for a few minutes, and as they tuned the guitars, Paul felt the need to talk about what happened on the night of the theft. John was a great listener. He was attentive, interested and easily involved.

"Very arrogant of him." John commented.

"Indeed."

"And they even dared to blame you, don’t they?"

"Only the fucking owner of the portrait." Paul snapped, snorting, "Luckily, my boss didn’t make a fuss."
"Well, I hope that." John said, relieved, "After all, if that man has deliberately decided to underestimate Hermes, why should you get involved?"

"That's what I told myself. I'm not going to underestimate Hermes. I'll never do that."

It was a promise to Paul's ears, and a threat to John's. The latter bit his lip not out of fear, but rather out of a strange feeling of euphoria that he had to be careful to hide, at least in front of Paul.

"That's good, you know. I'm sure he too has no intention of underestimating you."

Paul looked up from his guitar to give him a grateful smile, before moving on to trying to play a song together: he chose *Knockin' on heaven's door* by Bob Dylan. It had been a difficult choice for him, it was one of his mother's favourite songs. He was almost afraid that playing that song could make him break down right there in front of John. However, Paul had been brave and decided to continue with his choice, also because it was simple enough to be the first song with which John could try the new chords. Besides, if he didn’t jump in it, he would never know whether his fears were true or not.

Luckily, things were going well. It was painful for Paul, of course: every chord, every word brought back in his mind the sincere smile of that woman, her sweet laugh, the warmth of her embrace, but it was in fact a soothed, dull pain, a superficial pain, something that he could bear and handle.

They were interrupted right in the middle of the execution. There was the sudden ringing of the shop door, followed by what sounded like a child's laughter. John immediately stopped playing, raising his head and setting his eyes on the curtain. As if he was waiting to see someone come in.

And indeed, a few moments later, someone came in, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that they rushed through the curtain.

"Hey, Jules!" John said with a big smile.

Immediately Paul turned back to see who caused that smiling and bright look on John's face: a child ran across his vision, ready to throw himself into the other man's arms.

"Daddy!"

"Luv."

Paul looked as John immediately put the guitar down on the ground, before picking up his son and holding him tightly. His heart tightened to that vision: he had never seen John smiling so much, that particular way that only a child could cause. Not that Paul had known him for long time, but it was really the first time that John's smile seemed genuine, without that smirk that was always on his face.

John withdrew only a little from the embrace to be able to rest his forehead on the child's little one and rub their noses.

"Dad, do you know that today the teacher gave me 'Excellent' for my drawing?"

"Excellent? Then you'll be our next Van Gogh." John said, smiling and hugging him again.

That way, John noticed that Paul was staring at the whole scene very interested.

"Oh, Julian, dad wants to introduce you to his new friend."
"Who?" The child asked as John put him down, turning him to Paul, who jumped just a little.

He found himself, suddenly, in front of that child with light coloured eyes, which he obviously took after his father, and thin hair of the same color of John’s. He had also those cute features that John didn’t really have, but on that angelic face they looked good.

"Julian, this is my friend Paul." John said, pointing to the man in front of both of them.

Hearing his name, Paul awoke from his thoughts and smiled at the child, who gave him a bit scared look.

"Nice to meet you, Julian." Paul said.

The child leaned back against his father, totally intimidated by Paul. So much that when Paul held out his hand, Julian turned, hiding in John's chest, who chuckled, stroking his soft hair.

"Come on, Jules, why are you so shy now?" John asked, trying to make him turn around again, but the child clung with incredible strength to him, "He doesn’t want to bite you, you know, Paul is a policeman, he has also a real badge, a gun and the siren in his car. Don’t you, Paul?"

Paul hurried to nod, "Of course, and if he wants, I can even show him the police car."

With those magical words, Julian loosened his grip on his father's shirt to turn around slowly and look at Paul with more interesting and less frightened eyes.

"Really?"

"If dad agrees, of course..." Paul immediately added.

"May I, daddy?" Julian asked impatiently.

This time it was John's turn to wince and almost shudder. Getting into a police car was a risk that he ran at every theft, but unless he confessed to be Hermes, there was no reason to get on that car to be locked in a prison. Plus Julian was waiting and was watching him with those very sweet eyes which John couldn’t resist to.

"Agree." he finally sighed.

"Then one day I'll show you." Paul stated, winking at him.

Julian's face lit up with a much more enthusiastic look now, almost forgetting that until a few minutes ago he was afraid of the stranger.

"Julian?" a female voice said coming from behind Paul's shoulders, "Did you say hello to daddy?"

Paul, curious, turned again to meet one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen. Long blond hair, tall, with light blue eyes, chubby cheeks and red, plump lips... A sort of goddess.

"Yes, thank you, Pattie." John said.

The girl named Pattie entered the room, approaching John and his son, "He also wanted to greet you before bringing Elvis to the vet, didn’t you, Julian?"

Julian nodded, still in his father's arms.

"Ah, Pattie, may I introduce you to Paul McCartney, the new neighbour and also my guitar
Teacher is a strong word." Paul replied, laughing as he stood up to shake Pattie's hand, "Nice to meet you."

"My pleasure." Pattie said with a smile, "It mustn’t be easy, having John as student..."

"Actually, he's a top student."

"Who? John?" Pattie asked, blinking and looking at the man who had now his chin on Julian's head, "You surprise me, hon."

"There’s no end for surprises, when it comes to me, my dear." John winked mischievously, and Pattie laughed amused.

Then, the girl checked her watch and looked again at the child, "Better go, now. Ok, Julian?"

The child nodded, while his father made him turn towards him, "Yes, go or you’ll be late. But first, little one, give me a big kiss."

"The biggest one?" Julian asked, wrapping his thin arms around John's neck.

"The biggest of the biggests!"

The kid laughed and then kissed him on the cheek, hugging him as much as possible. Paul watched the whole scene with a gentle warmth that seemed to make him feel better in an instant. He thought he had never seen a scene between a father and a son more beautiful than that, more beautiful than the one he had just touched with his own fingers, so delicately to be at the same time both spectator and actor.

Then Julian took Pattie's hand and left, while John told him they would see each other at home that night. When he looked back at Paul, he gave him a slight smile.

"Sorry for that." John told him, "But I asked Pattie to bring him here for a moment, before going to the vet, or I wouldn’t have seen him until tonight."

"No need to apologize, I understand perfectly and actually, I’m glad I met your son. He’s a lovely child." Paul said.

"Thank you."

"And Pattie would be the babysitter?"

John nodded as he picked up the guitar in his arms, "Sort of. She was Julian's teacher at the nursery up until a couple of years ago, and now she takes care of him after the kindergarten, until George and I close the shop. And before you ask it, yes, she’s already involved with someone."

Paul laughed, "I wasn’t going to ask."

"Oh really? As if I hadn’t noticed how you looked at her. But I have to warn you that she's married to George." John explained quickly.

Paul blinked more than surprised, "George is married?"

"Yeah, I know." John replied, chuckling, "He doesn’t look like a ‘marriage’ dude, but he is and I swear, I’ve never seen a happier couple. So, Paul, get her off your head."
"John, I’m telling you, I wasn’t really thinking of her that way, I’m happily engaged, you know?"

"What? I didn’t know, who would be the lucky one?"

"Her name is Jane Asher."

John’s eyes widened, incredibly surprised, "That Jane Asher?"

"Just her." Paul replied, unable to hide all his pride in having such a beautiful, famous, good girl, a very perfect girl.

"And how did you two get to meet?" He asked sincerely interested.

"Oh, you know, she came to shoot some scenes in Liverpool and I was just a simple agent at the time, I was part of the set security service. We started talking during the breaks from the shooting and one thing led to another, we finally went out together and we started dating seriously."

"So will you get married?"

Paul looked down, slightly uneasy about the subject, "I don’t know, she doesn’t want to talk about marriage by now. I don’t want to rush her, you know, but I don’t deny that I thought about it several times."

"If I can give you some advice, I think you’re right, but at the same time, you should still try to understand what her intentions are. You can never say how things can change in a single moment."

Paul looked back, surprised, noticing how his expression had suddenly become dark and gloomy: all the light brought by Julian was gone. And Paul was about to ask him what he meant, when John realized he had exposed himself more than he wanted.

"You should really introduce me to your girlfriend." he said then, smiling.

"Oh, sure, she’s coming to London next week. As well as my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Yes, they’re coming to see how I got settled. And guess what?" Paul said, euphoric, "I asked Mike to bring me my old music sheets, with all my notes from school."

"Great idea, I’m impressed, Inspector. Thank you."

Paul shook his head, "Don’t mention it."

"I really think so, these lessons are very useful, both for me and for Julian." He said giggling.

Paul frowned, "What do you mean?"

"Well, when I practice at home in the evening, Julian sits next to me and listens to me until he falls asleep." John explained, his expression serene and absorbed in one of his sweetest memories.

"You have a soporific effect then." Paul joked.

"’Course I have! That’s one of my magic powers!" John said, “But more than anything else, music helps him to calm down when he’s upset or crying, and I want to improve for him."

And why was Paul to be the one that didn’t want to help John? He wanted to help him so much, he
wanted to help him because John had a precious purpose and he wanted to contribute in any way he could.

“Don’t worry, John, you'll see we can work it out.”

Chapter End Notes

And finally... here we have Julian. He's my favourite Beatles' son soooo, I really wanted to put him in the story. And he will have a quite important role in the development of John and Paul' relationship.
I really hope you like the story. Let me know here or on tumblr. I'm still looking for a beta reader. If anyone would like to help me, I'll appreciate it very much. Thank you. :)
Bye bye and see you next week with the new chapter, "Birthday".
Chiara
Birthday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,

The answer is blowin' in the wind.”

He didn’t believe he had done it for real. It had been years since the last time Paul sang, but now he was there, in the small room in the back of John's shop, singing softly.

They were playing with the sheets Mike brought him from Liverpool. There were all the notes of his guitar teacher, as well as all the lyrics of the most beautiful songs in the history of music, songs that Paul liked very much, songs that even now, despite all his ups and downs, they managed to light in him a flame of passion.

That day they chose "Blowin' in the wind", a very simple song to play and sing at the same time.

It was John who asked him to sing it, but Paul at first had said no right away; playing was one thing and singing a completely different one, it needed much more from Paul, so much that he was still not sure he could handle. The last time he had sung was the day before his mother died. Knowing how much she loved to hear him play and sing, and seeing her so suffering in his agony, Paul tried to give her relief with his music. He tried to make her feel that he was still close to her, that he would always remain by her side, even if his music was sad and desperate like him, even though every chord was wet with his salty tears.

However, John wasn’t alone this time. He had a powerful ally in the tiny little figure of Julian. That afternoon he came from the nursery and had been taken to the shop by Pattie. John allowed him to stay during the lesson, only if he was a good boy and stayed in a corner drawing and playing in silence. Julian, enthusiastic, obeyed.

So when John began to pray Paul to sing for him, he also involved the child.

"Look, Paul." he said, "Julian wants you to sing, too, right, luv?"

The child turned to his father and looked at him while he winked at him. Then he smiled and looked at Paul.

"Yes, please, sing!"

And when Julian begged him, that was it for Paul, and finally he accepted.

Two against one wasn’t fair at all. Besides Julian could also count as three, with his being an adorable little chap, to be cuddled all day long. Paul had never really known how to behave with children, but only a few days with Julian, and he had already fallen in love with that child, feeling so incredibly comfortable with him. He was a smart kid, but also very sensitive.

"You're good at singing." John stated, at the end of the song.

Paul shook his head, making a vague gesture with his hand, "Oh no, I haven’t been singing for so long. I got some wrong notes, it must have been painful for your son."
"Don’t worry, Jules is used to hearing worse things, isn’t it, baby?"

Julian looked up from where he was on the ground, lying on his stomach in the midst of dozens of colored crayons, and nodded.

"Dad always sings."

Paul burst out laughing, under the gaze of a very hurt John. The innocence in Julian's voice and words was beautiful and funny at the same time.

"Julian!" he said, "I was talking about George."

"I like when uncle George sings." he absently said, looking at his drawing.

"What about daddy singing?" John asked, and Paul could see a sort of jealousy in his face.

Julian smiled at him, putting a finger in his mouth, "Also."

"Oh, that's better." John commented, heartened, ruffling his hair affectionately.

"So you're good at singing." Paul said, turning to John.

"Not like you."

"I don’t believe you, I want to hear something." John shook his head energetically, "No, please."

"Oh, come on, don’t make me pray, I've just sung for you." Paul pointed out.

"No way."

"It's not fair."

John crossed his arms over his chest, looking at him with a smile, a sign that he was letting himself be persuaded, "Next time I'll sing for you."

"Good." Paul said, and his face lit up with interest at the prospect, "I count on it."

John took Paul's sheet book and began to leaf through it distractedly, before looking at him and asking, "Do you have any special requests?"

"One of these will be ok. These are all songs I liked when I was a kid. I got to know them thanks to my mother, you know, I'm very fond of all, even if listening to them bring sad memories back to me: I used to sing when she was in therapy and she looked at me with her weak smile, but in spite of that, she kept smiling, until the very end."

"I see." John said, suddenly lowering his eyes, again on the sheets.

Everything in his voice and position was telling Paul a sort of unease and he blinked, noticing the sudden change of atmosphere. It had been his fault, damn, he had no intention of bringing sadness at that moment which had so far been so happy and carefree.

"Sorry, I didn’t want to embarrass you."

"No, don’t worry." John said hurriedly, smiling, "It's okay."
"Sometimes I don’t realize that what I say can make people uncomfortable."

"Paul." John began, leaning over to rest one hand on the other man's knee. "You don’t have to worry about that. When people talk about certain pains, people who haven’t felt the same things never know what to say. It’s nobody’s fault, even if perhaps, sometimes we would prefer someone to tell us clearly, ‘I can’t understand what you are feeling’, rather than making so many pompous and useless speeches that don’t mean anything at all. Because I know what it means to hear a song or see a particular place that reminds you of a person who left us."

"Who?" Paul asked, unable to hold back.

He had been fascinated by John’s words, because indeed, many times he had felt everything he described, but he had never talked to anyone about it. Neither with his friends, nor with Jane, no one had ever really understood how he felt, no one had ever guessed that Paul just wanted to scream sometimes, to let go of the pain that was too big to be kept inside.

Now John, John got that and when Paul asked, he turned and looked at Julian sadly.

"A person who is no longer with me now."

Paul blinked, confused, but hungry for answers: who wasn’t there anymore? And why did John answer by looking at Julian? Was it the mother of the child?

But before Paul could say anything, John awoke from his thoughts and looked back at him, trying to show a smile at least credible.

"Listen, what do you say if I’ll sing Blowin' in the wind too? So we’ll have two versions of the same song."

Paul sighed, and almost cursed himself for daring, once again, too much. Perhaps John wasn't ready yet to share something so private with him, and Paul didn’t understand why. Andhe thought he was the one too shut down. But slowly, he was beginning to realize that John also had a more complex personality than he wanted to show. It became apparent when Julian was there, along with him. Julian was able to bring out its softer side, as well as the shadows that were in John. And if the first one was shown more than willingly by John, about the second one, John was still particularly reluctant. Paul decided to respect his privacy and didn’t try to investigate further.

"I say, great idea!"

"But if you don’t like it then, do not complain."

"This won’t be the case, Julian likes how you sing and I trust his judgment." Paul exclaimed, looking at the child.

John looked at him, surprised when he felt himself shudder at the sweet look Paul gave his son. Julian was used to receiving these looks from anyone who met him, he was a cute sweet child.

However, Paul had something different. Paul had something that told him unequivocally that John could trust him. And something else in John was whispering to do it, trusting Paul, confiding in him. But John didn’t want to, he couldn’t. He wouldn’t make the same mistake as Paul: he was trusting John, giving him all his vulnerability. John, on the other hand, could never do it.

He swallowed that strange wish, hoping it would disappear forever from his body, and then put the guitar back in the case. The lesson was over and John and Julian had to go home and give a medicine to little Elvis, their cat that had just got a cold.
"A cat named Elvis?" Paul repeated, amused.

"A white cat named Elvis." John added.

"It's a good name."

"Didn't I tell you that my greatest love is Elvis?"

"Elvis?" Paul asked, surprised, "I liked him very much."

"Really?" John laughed, "You, the one who don't listen to music anymore?"

Paul frowned, "We're working on this, right? And anyway I told you that before..." he paused for a moment to order his suddenly messy thoughts, "Before I loved music a lot, otherwise I would never have started playing in the first place. And Elvis was one of the greatest artists in my house. After all, he still is the King."

"You're right. Then you'll understand that strange feeling that attacks me now and then, when I find myself wondering whether I was born in the right decade or not." John exclaimed, laughing to himself, as if he thought he was being ridiculous.

"Definitely in the wrong decade." Paul added and both couldn't help but laugh.

Then, while Paul tried to fix the guitar in the case, John asked if he could keep the sheets.

"Sure, Mike brought them from Liverpool."

"When did he come?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Does he stay at your house?"

"Yup." Paul answered, and his gaze toward John suddenly became intimidated, "Speaking of which, I wanted to ask you something."

He bit his lip and tortured his fingers when John urged him, "Tell me."

"So, you see, the day after tomorrow there will be a party at my house and I'd like you to come too. A lot."

John blinked, confused: wow, that was unexpected.

"Me?"

"Yes, there must be some friends at a party, there will be my brother, my girlfriend and then few colleagues from work, but no friends, and you are the closest thing to a friend here in London for me."

John's ears had risen and he had already convinced himself to go when he heard "colleagues from work". Not that he didn't hear all that followed, he had actually heard it very well; he also saw how Paul was blushing, as if he were making a huge effort to say those words, and John couldn't deny that he hadn't liked it; after all, he, too, had no other friends apart from George and Pattie. However the fact that he could be among other policemen had convinced him. It would be exciting, not to mention the news that he could hear about his alter ego, because even at a party, John could bet that those bobbies would talk about work.
"Thank you, Paul, it’ll be a pleasure."

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"You must have a screw loose!"

John laughed at George's joke and looked at himself in the mirror in his bedroom. He buttoned up his shirt, before trying to tie his tie. He was getting ready to go to Paul's party and had asked George and Pattie to take care of Julian while he was away. However, George didn’t seem particularly enthusiastic about his plans.

"Why?"

"Are you really going to a party full of fucking bobbies?"

"Seems so."

"Then you must really have something wrong, they're fucking bobbies, John. They're the ones chasing you."

"What do you think could happen, George? That they could suddenly read my mind?"

"No, but... they're always bobbies! And you're the number one wanted." George pointed out, gesticulating nervously, as he always did when he was uncomfortable, "It's crazy, it's like... as if a little lamb was going into a bunch of wolves... Have you ever seen it happen, John?"

John smiled amused as he fixed the tie knot, "No."

"Exactly, it's totally unnatural, John, not to mention dangerous."

"I repeat, my dear friend, I'm not wearing a t-shirt with 'I am Hermes' written on it. Unless I tell them, and believe me, I would never do that, I don’t think they will understand I am Hermes just by looking at me and talking with me."

George sighed resignedly, reluctantly helping John put on his jacket, "Do as you please, then."

"Thanks, everything will be fine, you'll see."

"Yeah, I know." he said, looking at him while a small smile was born on his lips, "I trust you."

"Good lad."

George nodded, giggling now that his anxiety was beginning to disappear, and he smoothed the sleeves of John's jacket.

"It would be fun though." John continued.

"What?"

"Go to the party and scream that I'm Hermes."

George looked at him for a moment totally apathetic. Then he turned to go to Pattie and Julian in the kitchen.

"Bye, John." he said hopefully.
A few minutes and a kiss from Julian later, John left his house and crossed the street between his and Paul's house. He took with him a bottle of some kind of Italian wine. He wasn't sure he had to bring anything, but presenting himself at a party with nothing made him uncomfortable. Besides, he wanted, or rather, had to impress Paul and his colleagues.

When John rang the doorbell, he hoped that some naive bobbies would let out some interesting news.

The door opened, letting a smiling Paul McCartney appear in his view. He wasn't as elegant as John. He only had a jacket and a shirt over a dark jeans. No tie.

"John, hi, welcome."

"Thank you." he answered, as Paul let him in and looked at him closely.

"So elegant!"

"Ah, well, I thought a party with who knows how many policemen and a famous actress required it."

Paul laughed, "Thank you, the policemen are in the living room and the famous actress will be late."

"Oh, that’s a pity."

"Don’t worry." he said, smiling sadly, his thoughts lost somewhere far, "She's just come back from the United States, she's very busy. I understand that."

John found himself unwilling insulting that girl. So many months separated and now that she had returned, how couldn’t she run to him? If it was true that she loved him, what was more important than Paul?

"She’ll come, I’m sure about that."

"Thank you." Paul sighed, nodding, not very convinced, and John noticing him, he thought it was time to change the subject.

"I brought you something." he said, holding out the emerald envelope with the bottle of wine.

Paul looked at him, surprised, but pleased, before taking the gift, "You didn’t have to."

"No way, it seemed just right."

"Oh, Italian wine." he said, as he pulled out the elongated bottle from the gift bag, "Wow, thank you so much, John."

"Never mind. I just hope you like it."

"Well, I love wine." Paul laughed, "Come on, let’s go, there's plenty to eat."

Paul grabbed him by the arm, leading him to the threshold of the living room, where there were at least twenty people. It was a rather spacious room, the carpet was light grey with the walls of a soft white cream. There was a dark sofa in front of a small, unlit fireplace: on one side there was a library full with books and, on the other, a television set between two wooden speakers. The room was well lit by a large sash window with a white wooden frame, which could also be seen from the street. It was a charming window with an attached seat, composed of a small sofa with two
cushions: you could just sit down and watch the street come to life beyond the glass, perhaps
drinking a cup of tea or reading a book.

Right next to the window there was a small table set that offered food and drink in large quantities.
John wasn’t surprised to see several people already buzzing around that table.

"They are all my work colleagues, while the man laughing at the moment is my boss."

"Oh." John exclaimed, following Paul's direction and noticing a tiny man with a big nose, a good-
natured face and blue eyes, "So that would be the new Chief Inspector of Chelsea."

"That’s him."

"He doesn’t look like an inspector."

"And I do?" Paul laughed.

"I haven’t said that." John raised his hands in surrender, "Anyway, I’m disappointed that there's no
background music."

Paul blushed slightly, "Er, no. I didn’t think about it."

“Maybe you didn’t want to think about it."

"Maybe." Paul said, doubtfully, "Do you think it would please the guests?"

"A party isn’t a party without friends, Paul, but neither without music." he replied, winking at him.

Paul smiled, nodding, "So, I'm going to get the CD you gave me. I've got it upstairs."

"Perfect."

"Meanwhile, please, get something to eat and drink." Paul said, heading up the stairs, "Make
yourself at home."

John watched him going upstairs, before entering even further into the living room. However,
instead of pointing at the food table, he headed for the bookcase, curious to know what kind of
books could read someone like Paul. Other guests looked at him quickly, but they didn’t speak to
him. Well, it was still early. After all, he had just arrived.

John looked through the titles of the books: there were detective stories, of course, he was an
Inspector after all, wasn’t he? But also thrillers and historical novels, and classics of English,
French and Italian literature. A wide variety of genres in his collection.

He didn’t think Paul could like, God, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

Just as he looked through the books on the shelves, John also saw a frame. Inside there was a photo
of two children with a woman, and all three were sitting on a lawn. Surely, John thought, it was
Paul's mother. She had the same delicate features that were still present on the young man's face.
The two children were held in her arms and smiled. They looked very much like each other, they
had the same cheeky expression. But something made the older of the two a little cleverer and John
decided that that child was Paul.

Just when he picked up the frame, he heard something interesting: in the small group of people
talking to Inspector Starkey, someone had mentioned Hermes.
John's heart winced.

"... he thinks it's something that could interest Hermes, actually, he's sure."

"What is it?"

"It seems to be one of Bob Dylan’s guitars dating back to 1965."

"A Fender Stratocaster." Someone pointed out and John felt his legs give way.

If it was what he thought, then he was about to become the happiest man in the world. He knew the story of that guitar and maybe that was what made it special. John knew that it had recently been found and had been auctioned, and the mysterious buyer spent the extraordinary sum of nearly a million dollars to win it.

Thus, he tried to be strong and continued to listen.

"The owner says it will arrive next week and he specifically requested our protection."

Great. John had a week to get organized and retrieve all the information he could. He absolutely had to warn George and then-

"You must be John."

The voice came from his right and John nearly jumped upset.

The man who had magically appeared at his side smiled at him, "Excuse me, did I scare you?"

"No, no, not at all." he lied, hurrying to reply, "I'm John, anyway."

He held out his hand, realizing that the man so similar to Paul could only be...

"Michael, nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine, you're Paul's brother, right?"

"I am, and don’t say that you can tell, because we don’t look like each other," he commented laughing.

"That's not true. You can definitely tell." John replied, "There's something in the eyes, you have the same eyes."

"My mum’s eyes, then." he commented, with a sweet smile that spread across his lips, "Are you having fun?"

"Oh well, I've just arrived, you know." he pointed out, thinking back to the young man's approach, "How did you know my name?"

"My brother recently talks about this elusive John Lennon who would have asked him about guitar lessons. He just talks about John and Hermes, actually, if we want to be precise, and since you don’t seem to be part of the group of work colleagues, I thought that you must be John Lennon."

"The elusive John Lennon, of course." John answered, trying to hide the effect that had on him hearing his name next to Hermes's in the same sentence.

"So, this is really true, does Paul give you guitar lessons?" he asked anxiously.
"Yup."

"Wow." Mike exclaimed, somewhat relieved and surprised, "It's so strange, I didn’t think one day Paul would have picked up a guitar to actually make music. He was good, you know?"

"He still is." John confirmed, "Otherwise I wouldn’t have asked."

"So, John, I thank you."

"What for?"

"Because you’re helping Paul with his problem, I was very sorry that he didn’t keep on with his great passion. It’s only thanks to you if he now wants to solve this problem."

John swallowed loudly. Something inside him purred, happy and warm and satisfied. However, along with this, there was also an unpleasant cold feeling that gripped his heart. Something that in other circumstances he would call sense of guilt. But John couldn’t feel guilty, especially against his enemy. No, he shouldn’t let himself be softened.

Yet the words that came out of his mouth were as honest as Mike's.

"Actually, he is the one who’s helping me, and thanks to him I’m learning to play decently."

"So you’re helping each other."

"That’s it."

Then Mike took the frame from his hands, looking at it softly, "When Paul told me he was starting again with the guitar, I didn’t believe it at first. He hasn’t been playing the guitar since our mum’s death. Although, if we want to be honest, if it wasn’t for her, Paul would stop playing when he left."

There he was.

"Who?" John asked.

He tried to look as if he didn’t know the answer to that question, but the truth was that John knew who that he was.

"Our father. He left us when Paul was ten."

Yes, John also knew that. How could he forget that evening of so many years ago, when his path crossed with the one of the man who would help him survive?

"Why? If I can ask, of course..."

"We don’t know exactly. I think he got into trouble, and rather than face his problems with his family, he preferred to run away with his tail between his legs. Paul and I, of course, have never forgiven him since then." Mike explained with a pained grimace on his face, pained and angry.

Of course they couldn’t forgive him, and John just wanted to tell him that they were both wrong not to want to forgive him. He, after all, had learned so much from that man. From Jim McCartney.

"I had no idea. I’m sorry." He whispered, looking profoundly sad.

John couldn’t be really sorry though: obviously, he thought that a child should never be abandoned
by one of the parents. However, without Jim he would have been lost, he would probably still be around stealing wallets from suburban pub clients, living the day. Perhaps without him, now he wouldn’t even have Julian.

"It's something that Paul prefers not to share, unless he's forced. I think he only told Jane."

And Julian was the only good thing in John’s life. For him he would do everything and thanks to his child, he could understand Jim’s choice.

"Don’t you think that maybe he, if it was true that he got into trouble, then run away just to protect you?"

He could understand it, even though he probably never would have done the same thing. If he got into trouble, he would try to solve his problems, always beside his son. He would never get away from Julian.

"It's still an act of cowardice, running away from problems. In this way, instead of solving them, he only caused others."

"And have you any idea where he is now?" John asked.

If they had suspicions about where Jim was, then he was in danger.

"No, not at all. Paul didn’t even try to find him. Basically we grew up without a father, and our mother took care of us. Why should we wish to see such a coward man?"

John bit his lip, watching as Mike's expression was hardening at every word. Though he understood his state of mind, he hated that expression on his face. He therefore decided to move on to another aspect of that subject.

"Why do you say that Paul's problem depends on this?"

"Because our father taught him how to play the guitar. Since he was five years old he began to teach him the basics of music and made him listen to all his vinyl records. Then when he left, Paul started to hate his guitar and his music, but our mother asked him to keep playing for her even if he was reluctant to do it."

"Why did he do it, if it wasn’t what he wanted?"

"Because he didn’t want to let her down. Our father had already done. So Mom signed him up for a music school, where Paul's style improved and every week he played something for her. Mum didn’t want Paul to throw a talent like his just because of our father's leave. It wasn’t right for him to pay for that choice this way. Besides, she liked to hear him play and sing. It was just for this that he went on. So when she died, Paul gave up music forever."

"Now I understand everything." John said, nodding slightly.

"I'm really happy that Paul isn’t alone here, you know. When he moved, I feared he would suffer loneliness, with Jane always on the road, and me and his friends in Liverpool, but he found you.” Mike explained, while John blushed involuntarily, "Paul isn’t a particularly sociable guy lately."

"Yeah, I noticed." John commented, smiling.

"He wasn’t like that before. Yet after dad’s leave, he didn’t trust anyone and still doesn’t. A lot of time has to pass before you get his confidence. He's so reserved he didn’t even want to tell anyone
that today is his birthday."

John opened his eyes, totally taken aback: "Birthday?"

"Yes. It’s basically for this reason that both Jane and I came to London, we took advantage of this to come and visit him. I could never have left him alone on this day."

"Hey!" Paul exclaimed, coming among them, "I see you have already met."

In his hands he had the CD John gave him when they met.

"Indeed, we have." Mike answered.

"You weren’t badmouthing about me, were you?"

"No, your brother was just telling me that today is your birthday, but it seems that none of the guests know it." John explained, giving him a look of blame.

Paul laughed amused, but under that gaze, he blushed dramatically, confirming all that Mike had said.

"Why didn’t you tell me?" John asked, annoyed, "I would have brought a more appropriate gift than a stupid bottle of wine."

"Precisely for this reason. I didn’t want you to stress about this uselessly."

"It’s a birthday party, Paul, it’s not ‘uselessly’." John answered warmly.

"Look, John, I really enjoyed your gift." Paul reassured him, putting a hand on his shoulder, "So don’t think about it anymore, okay?"

John curled his lips, not particularly convinced, but he finally sighed, "All right, can I at least wish you well?"

"Of course!" Paul said with a smile.

"Happy birthday then, mate."

"Thank you."

"Just don’t think about getting away with it so easily." John threatened, pointing a finger at him, "Now I’ll remember this date and next year I’m going to organize a hell of a party, with lots of music in the background."

"It looks terrible." Paul commented and then laughed.

Mike seemed to appreciate his joke, or maybe was he just appreciating the fact that Paul was laughing? He looked at him as if he saw him for the first time in many years. It made John wondering about how long Mike hadn’t seen his brother so carefree?

Even with all his professional and personal problems, Paul was able to laugh joyfully.

And who knows if partly it was thanks to John...
The next morning, Paul sighed as he woke and stretched out in his bed.

It seemed that the sun was out there and that it had risen for some time. It would be another lovely sunny day.

He moved a little in the bed, but realized that there was a soft mass of red hair spread on his shoulder, a warm face on his chest and a breath tickling his skin.

Jane.

Paul recalled the previous night, while his hand carelessly stroked the girl's back. Jane couldn’t come for his party. She arrived when all the guests had already left. Paul spent a beautiful evening on his birthday. His colleagues complimented him for the lovely apartment he had arranged; Chief Inspector Starkey didn’t spare him even on the first of his three days off, informing him of the possibility that Hermes would be alive soon; and then John, at the end of the Rolling Stones’ CD, had flown for a moment to his house to gather some CDs and together they listened to Elvis.

Paul thought it would be difficult: after all Elvis reminded him very much of his father, he was the idol of that coward. With Mike and John at his side, of course, and with the distraction of the party, it had been easier and why not? Funny. John told him about the tracks of that CD, about the characteristics of all those tracks, about everything that was hidden behind each lyrics and chord. For a moment Paul thought to be hearing his father, so huge was the passion behind those words. It was strange to think, but Paul would listen to him willingly for the whole evening.

Then the colleagues had begun to leave and last John, who assured him that he had enjoyed and remembered that sooner or later he would avenge for his omission.

Jane arrived shortly after, appearing at the door of his house with a sorry expression and a tired face from work and jet lag.

Paul couldn’t deny that he had been hurt, but at the same time he didn’t want to make it a tragedy. He wasn’t ten years old anymore and Jane had appeared deeply mortified by the delay, claiming that she had been held for a last minute interview. And why shouldn’t he believe her? She was his girlfriend, his sweet, adorable Jane, who loved him. Why would she have to make him suffer intentionally?

No, Jane could never do that.

Paul sighed heavily, turning to the bedside table. Next to the alarm clock, which showed that it was ten o'clock in the morning, there was the gift from Jane: a beautiful watch, with a black leather strap and a gold-framed quadrant. Definitely a very expensive gift and Paul had appreciated it, heck, it was a fucking good watch!

Yet, like the metal of which it was made, the thought of this gift transmitted only coldness. It wasn’t fair to complain about the gifts that were received, but you could understand a lot of a person from the gifts they were thinking of. And this watch only conveyed haste. As if Jane couldn’t spend more time on him, just money.

She was busy, he had to remind himself.

Yes, he sighed as the young girl stretched against him, she was just busy.

Jane rubbed her eyes and smiled, before looking up at Paul.

"Good morning."
Paul gave her a smile, "Good morning, did you sleep well?"

"Very well and you?"

"Alright, it’s good being in two in this bed."

"Oh yes?"

Paul nodded with a chuckle, wishing to push away his worries now and once and for all, "It's usually too big for me, it makes me feel lonely, you know?"

"Oh, poor little Paulie, but now I'm here to keep you company." she whispered with her bedroom eyes and kissed him once, "I'll take care of you."

"Would you?" he asked as she slid into his lap, straddling him and covering his face with butterfly kisses.

"Of course, I have to be forgiven, right?"

"Oh yes, you have." he managed to say before Jane took his face in her hands and kissed him passionately on the lips.

Paul immediately kissed her back, letting his hand wander in her hair and then farther down, on her back and beyond her buttocks, to go and caress her pale thighs that surrounded him.

When he boldly slipped his fingers under her nightgown, the cell phone on the night table rang.

"Oh fuck." he sighed frustrated.

"Forget it." Jane suggested, still holding him in her arms.

"But it could be the office..." Paul insisted and reluctantly pulled away from her inviting embrace.

Jane sighed defeated, falling back on the pillow, while Paul reached the phone.

"Hello?"

"Paul?"

"Inspector Starkey, what's going on?" Paul asked, sitting up straight.

"I'm sorry to bother you on your day off."

"No problem, sir. Please, tell me."

"Remember what we talked about last night?"

"Yes, sure. The man who requested our protection."

"Exact. As we expected, he received a note from Hermes."

Paul's heart winced, but after all, Inspector Starkey was right: they were waiting for him, just as Paul expected the words that followed.

"He's going to steal Bob Dylan's guitar."
Sorry for the delay. I'm really really sorry. I am so busy with work and the fact that I started the master degree. I have very few time to translate.
Anyway, here we are, and we found out several new things about Paul's past. We also met new characters, such as Mike and Jane. What do you think about?
Oh and the story about Bob Dylan's guitar is true! ;)
I really hope you like the story. :)
Thanks to my beta reader Vale, and thanks to all of you that are following the story. :D
Next chapter, "From me to you", will come next saturday. I promise, it will be on time. ;)
Bye bye!
Chiara
"Jules, are you ready?"

"Yes, daddy."

"Remember to bring Pepper with you."

When Julian ran to the kitchen, his footsteps echoed in the hallway, while John kept looking out the window in the living room. He had been staring at Paul's house at least since he had lunch, paying attention to the young inspector's movements: he had to check if he came out and especially when.

As long as Paul's car was in front of his house, John could be relaxed. He had seen him pass several times in front of the upstairs window and besides, he knew that he would soon leave the house. After all, it took him some time to get to Heathrow.

However, what really mattered to John was that Paul seemed agitated.

Well, he had every single right to be.

John was perhaps about to make his most difficult hit. The success of it depended on a simple, small gift that was now well hidden in his pocket, ready to be given to the unwary inspector.

"Daddy?"

Julian walked toward him with a beautiful box in his hand: it was red, square, with a golden ribbon to close it, but the most important detail of the package were all the little holes on the lid, created to let the air pass to his tiny guest.

"Do you think he will like it, even if it’s black?" John asked, crouching in front of him.

Julian nodded vigorously, "Yes. Everyone likes black cats because they’re magical."

"Magical?" John repeated, showing all his curiosity.

"Sure. They let you have everything you want." the boy explained, as if it was the most logical thing in the world, and in doing so, he managed to get a smile from John.

"Really? Then we should take one too."

"But we already have Elvis." Julian protested softly, "Then he becomes jealous."

"You're right, hon."
As he affectionately messed up his son's hair, John heard the distant sound of a door opening.

It was time to take action.

"Shall we go, Jules?"

The boy nodded and when his father held out his hand, he squeezed it tightly.

The two Lennons left the house and crossed the street to find themselves in front of a very busy Paul, who was opening the car door.

"Hello, Paul."

The man looked up, particularly surprised to see John and Julian approaching, and stopped what he was doing.

"Hey, hi, what are you guys doing here?"

"We have to give you something, don't we, Jules?"

Julian nodded and pressed against his father's leg, still a little scared of Paul.

"What?" Paul asked, interested.

"A birthday present." John answered, smiling and receiving a blaming look from Paul, "A week late."

"John! I told you there was no need to bother. You're embarrassing me."

Paul crouched down when little Julian, after a little push from his father, went towards him and handed him the trembling box in his hands.

"Well, and you embarrassed me at your birthday party; I'd say that we are even now."

Paul chuckled, "You were really upset about that, eh?"

"Of course, birthday is holy!" he proclaimed solemnly, making Paul laugh.

"Then thank you very much, to both of you."

"Open it, or Pepper is going to be sick." Julian hastened to say, worried.

Paul, rather puzzled by the child's words, looked at his present. From the small holes on the lid he could glimpse something black that stirred a little. The young inspector smiled even before lifting the lid, because he now understood that inside he would find...

"My goodness."

A black kitten.

The puppy suddenly stopped, curling up against a corner of the box and looking in the direction of Paul. It looked scared and Paul reached out an uncertain hand to stroke its head.

"Do you like it?" Julian asked, crouching too, in front of Paul.

"Yes, it's so beautiful."
And it was true, it had a ruffled fur and extraordinarily clear blue eyes. They resembled the lively ones of the child in front of him, who now stretched his little hand to caress the small ball of fur.

"Its name is Pepper." Julian said, smiling.

"Julian!" John called him softly, "That's the name you gave him, but now it's Paul's. He has to decide the name, hasn’t he?"

Julian looked at his father, showing a small pout and Paul, watching him, laughed.

"Pepper is a nice name though." Paul commented, bringing a smile back to Julian's face, "Can I call it so?"

"Yes."

Paul picked up the kitten, which stirred in his arms, but somehow Paul managed to hold it and then stood up.

"Do you like it, then?" John asked as Julian approached him again, searching for his strong hand.

"Yes, thank you, you didn’t have to, though. Really." Paul answered, taking another look at the kitten in his arms.

"I thought... in fact, we thought that since you live alone, you may like a little company, when you come home from work."

Paul's expression became radiant to that perspective, "You thought well."

"It already likes you." John commented, noticing how the kitten calmed down in the man's arms.

Paul followed his gaze and laughed, "It has very good tastes, then."

"Do you know that black cats are magical?" Julian said, getting a smile from Paul.

John laughed too and picked up the baby, who automatically wrapped his arms around his neck.

"'Course they are." Paul answered, approaching both, "Witches have black cats, otherwise they wouldn’t be able to make spells."

Julian laughed when Paul said that with a knowing wink, and hid his face in his father's neck.

"Speaking of witches, you'll need an amulet for tonight." John began, uncertain, "It's today, right?"

Paul's gaze suddenly became more serious, "Yes, I was just going to the airport right now."

"So..." John said, looking for something in his pocket with his free hand, "Take this little lucky charm with you."

Paul was more and more upset by those gifts; he watched John's hand, fisted, reach out towards him. The inspector hesitated for a moment, before reaching out his hand too, so that the other man could make fall what he held.

To his surprise, the lucky amulet turned out to be an electric blue key ring. Paul turned it over in his hand: it had the shape of a guitar, it also had all the details like the strings, the keys on the headstock and the name of John's shop was on the back.
"It's very nice of you, John, but all these things, I don't think I deserve them."

"Oh come on, Paul, just relax." John said, giving him a slight nudge on the side, "They're just silly things, nothing more, don't stress about it."

"Ok, then, thank you very much." Paul exclaimed, putting the key ring in his pocket, "Let's hope it'll bring me luck."

John looked and followed very closely Paul's hand slipping into his jacket pocket.

**He did it!**

"You're welcome." John said, smiling happily, "Now, what will you do with the kitten? Do you want me to keep it until tonight?"

"Oh, no, don't worry." Paul replied, approaching the front door and ringing the bell, "Jane's at home."

Now John would finally meet the famous Jane Asher. He was quite in a good mood to meet the girlfriend of the man that was chasing him. Julian also seemed to be interested and turned to the door of Paul's apartment.

A few seconds later, in fact, a beautiful girl, with a thick crown of long red hair, opened the front door.

"Paul! What happened- " she began to say, evidently surprised that Paul was still there, but her eyes were immediately attracted by the little creature in Paul’s arms, which seemed comfortable, "And where does that come from?"

"A last birthday present." Paul answered, chuckling and scratching the cat's head.

"From who?" Jane asked bewildered.

"My very kind neighbours." Paul answered, nodding his head to John and Julian.

"Hello." John greeted her.

"Oh, hello."

"Jane, let me introduce you to my friend John Lennon and his son, Julian. They live just in front of us, while this adorable girl..." he went on, looking at his girlfriend, "...is Jane Asher, my sweetheart."

"Nice to meet you." John said, with a nod.

Jane smiled faintly at him.

"They gave me this kitten to keep me company." Paul continued enthusiastically.

In response, Jane frowned, "A cat?"

"Exactly. Could you deal with it while I'm at work?"

"I've never had a cat, Paul, I don't know what to do." Jane protested, stepping back, while Paul was approaching to give her the cat.
"Oh, give it some milk, make sure it doesn’t mess the house and then I’ll take care of it." Paul explained shortly.

"Paul, have you thought about it?"

Paul blinked, disconcerted, "About what, honey?"

"Keeping it with you. How will you look after a small kitten if you're away from morning to evening? In a few days I have to leave. It would remain alone throughout the day."

Jane's question left him speechless and made his enthusiasm disappear in a moment. He didn’t think about this. Jane would leave in a couple of days and he would be left alone. How could he leave a kitten at home for many hours? He risked going back to his apartment and finding a mess every night.

Yet the idea that there was something living, someone ready to wait for him when he came back, was too good to be abandoned for silly reasons, as cleaning every night, books on the ground, the needs of the puppy left anywhere in the middle of the house...

When John spoke, Paul thought that maybe he had read his thought.

"Once it gets used to the house, you'll see that it's almost like not having it, it's totally independent."

"The problem will be getting it used to it." Jane replied, twisting her nose as she looked back at Paul's cat.

"It’ll happen sooner than you imagine." John reassured her, "We saw it with Elvis."

"Elvis?"

"It's our kitten." Julian explained.

"See, darling?" Paul said, smiling more confidently at the girl who still looked skeptical, "It’ll be fine, don’t worry. Sooner or later it’s going to get used to it."

However Jane didn’t seem to want to convince herself, "Knowing our luck, it’ll be later, rather than sooner."

"Knowing you, it’ll surely be later." John commented.

Jane and Paul quickly turned to John. Paul looked at him in shock and disbelief that he dared to say such a thing, while Jane looked angry and mortified, so much that without saying a word, she disappeared into the house.

"Thank you so much, John." Paul snapped, before following Jane.

John blinked, only realizing at that moment what had happened a few seconds before. He didn’t realize what he had said, his little remark to Jane. Yet it escaped from his mouth, without him being able to do anything to avoid it. It often happened to him, to make those slightly impertinent remarks, but it was stronger than him. He couldn’t help himself, if something bothered him, he had to say it openly, even if he could receive malicious looks and angry outbursts of people who didn’t understand anything about him.

And the same thing happened right now with Paul and Jane. The two seemed quite in tune, but
John couldn’t believe that the same Paul who had been put aside by his girlfriend on the evening of his birthday, now behaved with her as if nothing had happened. Maybe John shouldn’t have interfered, but fuck, if someone had done anything like that to him, well, they’d have to go through a lot before being forgiven.

"Why did they leave, daddy?" Julian asked, awakening him from his reflections.

"Oh, maybe they just had to talk a little bit about Pepper."

"Can I come and see it sometimes?" Julian continued, as John made his way to home.

"Well, we’ll have to ask Paul, okay?"

"All right."

Once back home, John let Julian go and play in his bedroom, and as he watched him climb the stairs, the phone in his pants pocket vibrated.

John took it and looked at it, immediately recognizing the number calling him.

"Hi, George."

"It was fucking rude what you said before."

John laughed slightly, "Does that mean everything works?"

"Everything works. You can get ready, Pattie is coming for Julian."

The everything concerned the insignificant key ring he had just given to Paul. Inside, he and George had put a tiny bug, so that they could hear what Paul and anyone close to him said from now on.

John knew that Bob Dylan's guitar would arrive to Heathrow and from there it would be transferred to an estate in the countryside in the north of London. Together with George, he decided to steal it along the way: it had always represented the most vulnerable stretch, despite the security measures that could be used.

Paul told him they were thinking of using three vans to confuse the thief, each with a different pathway, and that they would decide at the last moment which van would bring the precious guitar.

The plan caused distress to John and George. John never gave up, though, and he wouldn’t easily give up Bob Dylan's Fender Stratocaster for his collection.

So they came up with this plan and decided to spy on Paul.

It was the main reason behind all that act.

All to be able to give Paul the key ring with the bug, with the risk that he wouldn’t even bring it with him to work. Luckily so far everything was fine.

And the cat?

Well, that was his Trojan horse. He had to win Paul's full trust, before he could hit him from the inside. The cat was a cover to show him that it was good to trust him, John, a friend who was worried about Paul, who wanted him to be fine.
Sure.

Nothing could be further from reality.

"I'm ready."

****

The private jet landed perfectly in time and immediately settled in the hangar. Paul, along with Chief Inspector Starkey and their policemen, waited for the owner of the object Hermes was threatening to get off the plane.

He was nervous, like last time, if not even more. However, most of his nervousness this time didn’t depend on Hermes. There was John's unhappy joke about his girlfriend and besides, he had a fight with Jane.

The girl felt very offended by what John had told her, but she was angry with Paul because during all that conversation he had never tried to be on her side and what’s more, John's joke made her understand that Paul had told many things to the newly known man about their relationship, their ups and downs. Jane, feeling so exposed, was indignant.

What about Paul? He just didn’t know what to do or say. He tried somehow to explain that John was the only person who was the closest thing he had ever had to a friend in London, a person Paul was learning to trust, as all friends did, of course. Then he added that she should be happy that he found a friend. Wasn’t Jane herself to tell him to learn to open up with others?

Yet she had replied that this wasn’t what she meant. There were still limits. Besides, why did he have to talk to him about her?

When Paul had been on the verge of answering that it was logical for two men to even talk about such things, Jane sighed, exhausted from the fight, even though it lasted no more than five minutes. That sigh was always what made Paul yield. A very melodramatic sigh, very appropriate for such an actress, and this always forced Paul to apologize, even when he had no reason to apologize.

So things had calmed down. At least for now. Jane would look after the kitten until he was back home. The kitten given by John and Julian...

All the way to Heathrow, Paul thought of that big blue-eyed puppy which would wait for him at home from now on. As angry as he was with John, Paul had to admit that it had been a nice thought from the two Lennons. Weird, but John realized how much Paul felt alone in that house too big for him, and gave him a small roommate which could ward off a bit of loneliness when no one else could be there for Paul.

The man who appeared on the plane's ladder, descending to the ground, made him leave his thoughts.

He was a man in his fifties, tall, with a fit body, grey hair and a pair of glasses with a golden rim. His name was David Rogers and he was an EMI manager, as well as the man behind the mysterious buyer who had paid $ 965,000 to win Bob Dylan's guitar. This had been auctioned by the daughter of the pilot of the plane that in 1965 had brought the singer in concert. It was on that occasion that the pilot had come into possession of that guitar, forgotten by Dylan at the end of the tour. Now it belonged to the man who stood in front of them and was warmly welcomed by Richard Starkey.

"Mr. Rogers, welcome. I'm Chief Inspector Starkey." the man said, squeezing his hand.
"Hello, sir."

"Did you have a good flight?"

Mr. Rogers smiled, and his expression revealed the tiredness due to hours of travel, "Enough, thank you."

"Let me introduce you to Inspector McCartney." Richard said, pointing to Paul at his side.

"Nice to meet you, inspector."

"My pleasure, sir." Paul answered, shaking his hand.

"If you want to follow us, we’ll show you the armored cars that we’re going to use to transfer the guitar to your residence."

The three men reached the vans parked inside the hangar, while some policemen watched over the precious object, which was carefully removed from the plane.

Richard informed Mr. Rogers about the plan. Each van, guarded by two policemen on a squad car, would follow a different path: the first would go on the highway, the second would cross the city of London, and the third would travel in the countryside around the capital.

Together they decided that the guitar would follow the last path. It would be a less trafficked and easier to check route. However, Paul was still not satisfied with the plan. They also had to take into account that, for some strange reason, Hermes would be able to find out in which van the guitar would be, and in that case nothing would protect the precious instrument. Therefore...

"Inspector Starkey, Mr. Rogers." Paul called them, as the two men headed for the car that would take the rich manager to his residence.

"Yes, McCartney?"

"I wanted to ask permission to get on the van with the guitar."

Inspector Starkey blinked, slightly caught off guard, "We already have two security escorts."

"Actually, I’d prefer to stay together with the instrument, so if the thief were to arrive, I’ll still be there to protect it." Paul replied.

"It's dangerous, sir." Someone suddenly spoke behind him.

Paul turned and saw one of his agents, a heavyset lad named Mal Evans, take a step forward and watch him bewildered.

Right after him, agent Eastman also intervened, "Yes, sir, it could be risky, the thief could be armed."

"Thank you for your interest, but I won’t let him steal something again." Paul said, smiling slightly, "Besides, Hermes will also be a criminal, but he never really hurt anyone. He is only interested in stealing things."

"But sir-" Linda continued, but was soon interrupted by a raised hand of Paul and his confident smile.

"Enough now. I appreciate your concern, but if Inspector Starkey and Mr. Rogers agree, we will go
on with this plan."

Paul looked at Richard, who turned directly to the other man, "What do you think, sir?"

Mr. Rogers looked at Paul for a long time, before smiling.

"I think it's a great idea."

*****

"Paul, fuck, how stupid are you?"

John cursed, when George, through the headset, told him Inspector McCartney's idea.

"What are we going to do, John?"

The young man raised his eyes to the sky as he darted on his motorcycle, "What are we going to
do? We're going to stick to the plan!"

"If there's Paul together with the guitar, though, he can-"

"I don't give a fuck about that asshole." John cut short, "He's a crazy masochist and I'm not going
give up now because of him."

"So what do you have in mind? If he saw us..."

"He won't, there are some fantastic things called handkerchiefs, you know, George? We'll cover
our faces with those, like the good old bandits in the far west."

"Agree." George said, "John, the bug signal is approaching."

"Well, then let's get this done, I'll be with you in a minute."

The bug in Paul's key ring not only allowed him to hear everything the man and people around him
said; it was also a perfect position locator sending a signal to George's cell phone.

So once they knew the right pathway, George preceded him to the spot where they would attack
the van, to prepare a little staging, while John followed the van from the airport with his
motorcycle at a safe distance, in order not to make the police suspicious, but keep an eye on it in
case they changed their path at the last moment. In that case... Well, better not to think about it
now, huh?

As they had foreseen and learned, the van had an escort, a police car that smoothed the way just in
case, where, in fact, by just in case they referred to Hermes. For this reason, John and George had
to organize something to put the police car and the two policemen inside it out of play. They didn't
have to worry about the driver of the van, because in case of an assault he never had to get off his
spot. Too dangerous. Of course, as if John wanted to hurt someone physically. No, thank you, it
wasn't his style. Only an ordinary and brainless thief could have behaved like that, and he was far
from being ordinary and brainless.

When John saw the small village through which the van would pass appear after another bend, he
decided it was time to join George. He pulled away from the van's trail, turning into the first little
street on the right when he entered the village. He increased the speed of his motorcycle to try to
cross the country faster than the bobbies, and then dive again into the green countryside after the
brief break in houses and cement.
Finally he saw the place where they would make the theft. It was still deserted. George had diverted the opposite lane a few meters away with signs of work in progress. Then he thought of actually staging fake work in progress on the street that came from the village. He got everything necessary and now in the middle of the road there was a perfect roadwork that would certainly slow the police car and the van with its precious content.

"Good job!" John complimented him as he joined George into the thick trees that lined the road and hid their dark shapes as well as their bikes.

"Thank you."

"I mean it! Really, it's perfect."

"I know." George said pleased, "We just have to hope it works."

"It will work, I promise you, it always works." John grinned.

"I hope you're right, because they're coming."

"There's only one way to find out, my friend." he said, grabbing the handkerchief in his pocket and tying it to his face, "It's showtime."

The two men crouched behind a bush, waiting for the cars to pass. They began to slow down at the sight of the roadwork and then...

Then it was like seeing a slow-motion scene. The police car swerved and crashed into the guardrail as soon as the tires were pierced by caltrops, left by George on the road.

The van also suffered the attack of those small, but effective, sharp metal pieces. However, the driver, thanks to the considerable weight of the vehicle, managed to control it and stay on track, swerving just a little.

At that point George and John, with their faces well covered, jumped out of their hiding place. George had the task of taking care of the police car and making the two bobbies fall asleep by throwing a can of soporific gas into the cabin and then tying them, once they were harmless.

John would deal with the guitar and Paul, of course. He approached the van from behind. The driver had probably already raised the alarm, but he wouldn’t come out. He wasn’t the problem.

Cautiously, John reached the back doors of the van, the last obstacle to his goal.

Beyond those doors, there was Paul. And the guitar, of course, but also Paul.

Paul with a... gun? Would he shoot him right away, if John opened up the doors? After all he had the guts to do it, he was an inspector, and John had seen him with his own eyes. He and the bloody gun ruined the rear light of his motorcycle.

Yet… no, John knew, he felt that Paul wouldn’t shoot right away. He would first look into his eyes and tell him to stop. Yes, as if John could obey.

Finally, he decided. He was convinced that the doors were locked with another security system, but when John's hand moved to move the handle, the doors opened. Of course, after all, the extra security system was Paul.

"Be still, and hands up."
With a predictable and rather annoying heart thud, John stood completely still, facing Paul who was on one knee in the van compartment, next to the custody of the long-awaited guitar. Much more important, at least at the moment, was the gun well aimed at John, gripped firmly in Paul’s firm hand.

Paul stood up slowly, keeping the thief under his control. When he raised his hands in surrender, the inspector advanced, forcing Hermes to retreat.

Once they were both on the ground, Paul almost couldn’t believe he was right there, with his prey a few inches away. He just had to stretch out his hand and block him against the van. Then the handcuffs and finally the prison. He could already read the newspaper’ headlines of the next day, all ready to praise him, glorify him, Paul McCartney for capturing Hermes.

An involuntary smile was about to be born on his lips, but Paul managed to hold back and focused on the thief in front of him. He had never seen him so close. He was about as tall as he was and probably even of the same age. He couldn’t see much of him. His face was covered with a kind of bandana and the usual hood on his head, so he could only see his eyes. Two clear eyes, blue as ice, eyes that stared at him with a powerful look: they were very confident and not at all surprised, they didn’t promise anything good. As if Hermes knew what he was going to meet. As if he knew he would find Paul there...

As if…

But why?

For his part, John couldn’t deny being afraid. Fear was perhaps too important as a word, but in any case, finding himself face to face with his enemy made him feel uncomfortable. He knew that in a few minutes Paul could find out his identity as well as the fact that John had been a fake friend, to hit him from within and then make him feel betrayed.

A weird feeling tried to grab his heart lightly, what was it? Regret?

John Lennon, actually, Hermes couldn’t feel regret for Paul McCartney. Yet it really seemed to be that.

John also knew why. Reluctantly, he had to admit that he would miss the moments spent with him. It was mostly about guitar lessons, they mainly talked about music, but anyway, it was nice to talk to him. They were small moments of distraction that Paul offered him and that John welcomed gladly. Not to mention that John was learning a lot from him, and that Julian liked John's new way of playing.

The idea that everything could end, yes, made him feel a little sad.

For this reason the heart pounded furiously in his eardrums, preventing him from correctly hearing the sounds around him, like that slight sigh coming from the side of the road and the steps on the asphalt that hastened to reach them.

Then John understood.

When he saw a slight figure suddenly appear behind Paul, he understood.

When Paul fell to the ground, knocked out by a well-placed hit from behind, John understood.

George came and saved him.
"George!" John sighed, never so happy to see his friend.

"Everything ok?"

"Oh yes, I had everything under control."

"Yes, I noticed, but I thought about helping you anyway."

"Thanks, very kind of you."

"Let's get out of here, now, before more bobbies come."

John nodded, "Take the guitar, I'll replace the gift for Paul."

George hurried up into the van to retrieve the guitar case, while John bent over Paul and searched in his pocket, looking for his key ring. When he found it, he hid it in his pocket, and replaced it with a decidedly normal one. At least, if, very unlikely, he had suspicions about it, he wouldn’t find anything in that little piece of wood.

Then, satisfied and more than happy to get what he wanted so much, John turned away from the van and ran off with George with their motorcycles, darting through the English countryside.

*****

Try again, inspector.

Paul turned the note over in his hands.

You'll be more lucky.

Hermes definitely left it before he ran away with the guitar, of course.

You're an idiot, Paul, he thought.

Yes. He really was because the week before, the week of the theft, he had stupidly let the thief run away from his hands. He practically had him, he felt that shiver of fear and excitement because of the closeness that had made Hermes shudder too.

Fuck.

Now he was in his house, doing nothing in particular. The kitten given to him by John and Julian was happily nestled next to his thigh and purred blissfully. Paul looked at him and let out a smile, envying its serenity. There had been hard days, but Pepper was slowly getting used to him and the house. By now they were the only two tenants. Jane had left a couple of days after the robbery: she tried to comfort him as she could, but Paul was too full of shame that none of her words of comfort could calm him.

Right in that moment the bell rang, and Paul sloppily dragged himself towards the door.

There, in front of him, with his immense surprise, there was John. Two beers in his hand and a weak smile on his face.

Paul didn’t want to admit it, but he was terribly happy to see a friendly face, someone who had nothing to do with his job, someone who only cared about Paul, not Inspector McCartney.

"Do you have time for a stupid friend and for his excuses?"
Paul laughed, knowing that everything that John had said and had made him angry, vanished into thin air.

For this reason, he stepped aside, leaving room for John to enter.

"Come in."

Chapter End Notes

Here we go with chapter 9. So the story about the guitar is true, I've just made up the name of the owner.
I hope you like it.
I know, I'm not very good at writing action scenes, but I always try to do my best.
Next chapter, In my life, will come next week. We're going to see Paul and John's relationship growing.
Bye!
Chiara
In my life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Sweet child o’ mine_ by Guns ’N Roses echoed in the small room in the back of John's shop.

The month before, when Hermes stole the guitar, John said he wanted to learn how to play that particular song, begging Paul to do something about it, because...

"You're the teacher, Paul."

So the young inspector had to look for a way to simplify the complicated guitar riff as much as possible.

Apparently, John wasn’t the only one to have that desire: many others started discussions in forums on internet, and you could also find a couple of video tutorials on Youtube.

Paul chose one and first he learned to play the song; then he began to teach it to John too, and right in that moment the man was in front of him, all intent on playing and singing passionately and happily, while little Julian was sitting on Paul's legs. Until a few minutes before, the child had been on the floor colouring his drawings of rockets and astronauts in space. However, when his father started to sing, Julian stood up and approached them, and Paul, after watching him for a moment, put him on his own lap to make him comfortable, tightening his tiny waist with his arms. Julian seemed particularly absorbed by his father's music and soon, he relaxed enough to lean against Paul's chest.

John was good, _really_ good.

They had been studying the song for a couple of weeks by now and Paul was pleased that John was playing it very well, both as a technique and as singing. He was really smart and now that he was getting better every day, it was more and more evident. Paul was pleasantly surprised. With each improvement, John wanted to learn even more, and Paul, for his part, found himself wishing to continue those lessons to help him in his intent.

When John finished his performance, Julian clapped his hands in an enthusiastic applause, causing a smile on his father's face, so wide that it reached his ears.

"Did you like it, baby?"

"Very very much!" Julian answered and jumped off Paul's legs to hug John, "You're very good, daddy."

John’s eyes were sparkling with his son's affirmation and he bent over him to kiss his head, and then looked at Paul again.

"And what does the teacher think about it?"

"Well, Julian took the words out of my mouth, other than the _dad_ part, of course." Paul answered, with a laugh, "You were really fantastic, John, it wasn’t easy, but you played incredibly. I've never seen anyone improve as fast as you did."

John blushed, but tried to make this reaction less evident, placing the guitar on one side to pick up
his son.

"Don’t start to talk like that, otherwise I’ll get too excited."

"I'm serious, John." Paul replied, his heart on his sleeve, "You have a true talent, not just a
passion."

John bit his lip, remaining silent for a moment, feeling unsure under Paul's very determined gaze. Then he relaxed in a smile and thanked him.

"You should have started a career as a musician." the young inspector continued.

"Oh, no, I don’t think I could do that. I mean, all the hustle and bustle, the tours, and flying through the world from one part to another, without being able to stop for a while... No, thank you, I prefer being a dad at my home." John sighed, clasping his arms around Julian.

"Well..." Paul replied,shrugging, "This doesn’t mean you wouldn’t fit well in that kind of situation."

"Me too."

John, like Paul, immediately turned to the threshold, where George had magically appeared.

"George! Were you eavesdropping?" John asked, pretending to be offended.

His friend showed a sneer, "Excuse me? That’s a really bad word. I was just attending your performance without you three guys knowing it."

"That is a difference." John said, smiling.

"Seriously, Johnny, it was very interesting, I didn’t think you could really be that good."

John sighed, raising his eyes to the sky, "Thank you, George, you're always so kind."

"You're welcome." George replied, with a smile, "Anyway, I wanted to ask you if I could leave now to go to the fair with Pattie."

"Of course. I’ll close the shop, just go."

"And I wanted to know..." George continued, stepping forward, "If we could bring Julian with us too?"

"To the fair?" Julian immediately said, hearing his name, the shrill voice and eyes suddenly more lively than usual.

"Yes, would you like to come with us?" George asked, smiling at him.

"A lot." Julian answered and then turned to John, "May I, daddy?"

The man looked at the child for a moment, noticing without difficulty all the enthusiasm on his face, "Only if you promise to be a good boy and to do whatever George and Pattie will tell you."

"I promise." Julian said hurriedly.

"And if you give me a kiss first." John added and tickled his stomach.
Julian laughed and leaned towards John to place a big kiss on his cheek. Then John agreed to let him go with his friend. He got up to help Julian wear a jacket, because despite being in July, the air was chilly during London nights. He asked George not to let him eat only candies and other junk food, and Julian, after saying goodbye to John and Paul, took George's hand and walked away with him.

John followed them with his eyes from the small window of the room that faced the street, and when the two disappeared around the corner, he sighed, before turning quickly to the guitar to place it in the case.

Paul followed him carefully, studying every little gesture. He looked a bit agitated: his hands stumbled only a little while putting the guitar in the case, and his thin lips were contracted.

"What's wrong, John?" Paul finally asked, unable to hold back.

John jumped a little. Obviously he didn't expect Paul's question, or perhaps he was just too lost in his thoughts, "Wrong? Nothing, what should be wrong?"

"You sighed as if you didn't want to let him go with George."

"Oh, no, no. It's not like that, actually, I'm glad that George and Pattie take him to have fun every now and then." John assured him.

"So what's wrong?" Paul insisted, shocked, because John seemed sincere, "You can tell me, you know that, John?"

John stopped for a moment, as he slid the zipper of the case. His gaze followed the movement of his hand and seemed absent all the way; then he finally turned back to Paul. He was visibly worried about John and genuinely interested in whatever was tormenting him. It was nothing, really, and seeing that lad, who actually should have been his greatest enemy, worried about this with all the sincerity that he could show to John, gave him a weird feeling: John should have been indifferent, but the reality was that it pleased him, knowing that someone who wasn’t George or Pattie or Jim was interested in him.

One more friend.

"I know it's stupid, because I can't stay twenty-four hours a day with my son." he began, taking a deep breath, "But I miss him when he's not around. I’d always be with him to protect him, to prevent that something bad happens to him or even just to avoid that he leaves me."

Paul blinked, in total confusion, "How on earth could he ever leave you? He’s just a kid and he adores you."

"His mother did it." John replied.

He didn’t even notice he really said it. It was supposed to be just a thought, one of many about her, but apparently this time he had said it aloud.

"What?"

John stood still for a moment, quickly rewinding the scene in his mind to witness what had happened a moment earlier. And yes, he had just said so.

"Nothing, forget it." he snapped, moving away from Paul, toward the wall.
"John, no, please. From the first time we talked about her I’ve never dared ask you anything else."
he said and paused, before continuing more clearly, "But now I'd like to know about Julian's mother."

John put the guitar case against the wall, pausing only for a moment to look apathetically at it. He had heard Paul's request well and *fuck!*, if that wasn’t the most difficult part of his life to talk about.

Was he ready to share so much with Paul? After all the less Paul knew about him, the better.

He was ready, though, and the truth was that every time his eyes looked at Julian, he thought of that woman, blaming himself for what happened. Yet there was nobody there, ready to pick up his troubles and push them away with a gesture or a simple word. Of course, George and Pattie knew everything: George had been very close to him in time of need, and Pattie had always shown great interest and sympathy towards him, but it wasn’t right that after several years John continued to bother them with his problems, when they too had their fair share of troubles.

Now, however, Paul was there and wanted to know, because he had certainly guessed right away that there was something weird about the absence of that mother, and the fact that John hadn’t wanted to talk about her till now. It didn’t take long to figure out, but Paul had done it and was interested in him. So in the end, John made up his mind.

"I'll tell you only if you'll answer to one of my questions later."
"I'm listening."
"And I absolutely need to smoke." John said, hurrying to pick up a cigarette from the packet in his jacket.

His hands were shaking as they took a fag from the packet and put it to his mouth, after offering one to Paul, who refused. The really weird thing was that John was doing everything to try to hide his nervousness from Paul, but he knew that despite all the efforts, the body could act alone, showing the true feelings that tormented his soul.

"When I took over this shop, the house next door was owned by the Powell family." John began to explain, after lighting his cigarette, "There were three sons, the youngest was a girl named Cynthia."

"Cynthia?" Paul repeated, smiling, "Nice name."
John nodded vaguely, exhaling the smoke of the first hit. A cigarette always relaxed him, and at that particular moment it loosened the tension that had contracted his jaw a few minutes ago.

"The first time I saw her was when she came into my shop looking for a CD. Of course, I noticed this very pretty bird right away, I quickly got rid of my glasses and offered to help her. Once I found the CD, I offered to give it to her as long as she went on a date with me."

Paul just laughed, while John told him this with a melancholy smile on his lips.

"But she refused."

"What?"

"Yup. She came back the following week for another CD and the week after that... Each time my proposal was the same, but she always refused. Until inevitably, she gave in."

"You’re really stubborn, Mr. Lennon." Paul commented, winking.

John nodded, taking another hit from his cigarette, and elegantly crossed his legs, "She told me the same, you know, but from that moment we started dating. I was twenty-one when I met her, and no one before had made me feel so important or so in love. She was my first real love. She was beautiful, sweet and always incredibly in a good mood, at that time it was my exact opposite and I was terribly attracted to her. We’d see each other every day: she came to the shop and in the evening we went out together. Sometimes during lunch break, his parents invited me, they were always very kind to me. It was the best time of my life."

The young man paused as if this story was demanding more effort than John was expecting. However, Paul wanted to know and couldn’t help but encouraging him to continue.

"And then?"

"Then she got pregnant." John sighed, "The news shocked me completely. Until then I didn’t really think about becoming a father, but it was happening for real. She seemed to accept the situation better, she wasn’t as frightened as I was. Or at least she didn’t seem so. She was just happy to become a mother. Yet when I asked her to marry me, she refused, arguing that it wouldn’t be right, marrying me only for the baby. We’re no longer in the Sixties, John, she told me, and I respected her choice. So we decided to go and live together. Her parents retired at that time: they had been sparing some good money while they were working and at that moment they decided to use that money to move to the countryside, just outside London, leaving the house next to the shop to Cynthia and me."

"Very kind of them."

"Yes, in fact I’ll be always grateful to both of them. Despite this, Cynthia’s pregnancy wasn’t easy: she had risk of miscarriage, so she was forced to spend many months in bed. Until then she had been quite calm and relaxed with the prospect of becoming a mother, but at that time she began to get nervous."

Even John seemed more nervous about that. His forehead frowned slightly and his fingers tightened his cigarette more tightly, and Paul just kept looking at him, not finding anything to say, just waiting and listening.

"Many times I surprised her standing up, all intent on doing housework and when it happened, I scolded her, making her only more agitated. So, in the end her mother came to help us. She was with her while I was in the shop and made sure she didn’t make any physical effort. Then Julian
was born during a stormy night in early April. I was with her for all the labor, as scared as her: I saw her suffering and knowing that I couldn't do anything to help her was killing me, especially since we hadn't planned nor desired this pregnancy."

At that statement, Paul widened his eyes with utter confusion: he would never, ever have thought to hear those things from John's mouth, the same man who adored his son.

Once again, John seemed to read his mind, and he stood up to take an ashtray from a nearby shelf just to escape his surprised look.

"I know that a parent should never say or even think about certain things, but it's the truth: Julian wasn’t planned. I can’t deny this." John sighed, causing the now useless ash of the cigarette to fall back into the ashtray, before turning to Paul.

He leaned back against the wall, appreciating the distance he put between him and Paul. He couldn’t be so close to him both with his body and with his soul, because that was what was happening: he was literally opening his heart for him, to reveal the weight that he had been carrying for several years, and at that moment all that sudden and unexpected closeness was too difficult for John to deal with.

"However, when that night, I held him in my arms for the first time, and I saw his small bright eyes, I fell in love with him immediately. I had never seen anything more beautiful in my all life, and knowing that he was mine filled my heart with pure joy."

Paul relaxed in a smile, "I bet it did!"

"The happiness he brought in my life was so huge that it blinded me." John continued, leaning his head against the wall to look at the ceiling, "In those first months of his life nothing else mattered, only this little creature who needed me, who was incredibly in need of me. However, this way I didn’t notice the biggest problem: the more I was involved by our child, the more Cynthia was getting distracted and completely disinterested in him. In the early days, even if she was scared like me about this child so small, she tried, she worked hard, but the anxiety of not being able to do it was overwhelming. She didn’t know when to feed him, when to wake him up, she was afraid to drop him every time she picked him up and cried, became irritable, she didn’t sleep nor eat and I... I fucking didn’t notice anything."

"How is that possible?" Paul asked, although now John's situation was becoming clearer.

"I learned all these things only later." John answered, and took the last drag from his cigarette, "In those days I didn’t pay much attention to it or anyway I thought it was normal. I had heard of many women who faced a period of crisis immediately after giving birth, but they got to overcome it, it was just a matter of time for me. I didn’t understand that Cynthia's case was much more serious."

At that point, John allowed himself a little break to put out the cigarette in the ashtray with a somewhat restless gesture. Then he finally said it.

"Julian was a few months old when she left."

"She left?" Paul repeated, well aware that it was a stupid thing to say, but it was also the only one that his mind was able to elaborate.

John didn’t pay much attention to it. He made his hands intertwine and took a deep breath, closing his eyes, perhaps to reorder his memories and above all, his emotions. Incredible how they could always be so painful.
“Yes, one day I went home and found Julian alone, in his crib: he cried desperately, but there was not even the shadow of Cynthia. Only a few clothes disappeared from the closet, not even a note explaining where she was going or why. At that moment the only certain thing for me was that she had abandoned the two of us.”

And it was a certainty more than clear in his eyes. Only a fool wouldn’t noticed it.

"Then while I was trying to calm Julian, her father called me to warn me that Cynthia was at their place. I tried to get more information about why she had done it, if she wanted to come back, but Mr. Powell said nothing, just that she was well and safe, but she was upset and for the moment she had to rest. He hung up before I could protest and I was immediately overwhelmed by doubts. I didn’t know what to do: I wanted to run to her and try to figure out what was happening, but on the other hand I thought about my son and I knew I couldn’t leave him, not at that moment. So, days went by and very day I tried to call Cynthia's house, but no one answered. Of course!” John snapped, lowering his head.

Those emotions were as strong as they were four years ago. There were sorrow, loneliness, guilt, yes, of course, but also that ridiculous feeling of non-involvement, as if it wasn’t really happening to him. Those were things he had felt, but how could they involve him and especially Cynthia, the same girl who had bright eyes and a beautiful smile when she told him about their baby? And this, more than anything else, made him feel ashamed. So, he lowered his eyes, avoiding again Paul’s.

"Then finally, one day, her mother called me saying that Cynthia wanted to see me, but I shouldn’t have brought Julian. I laughed because none of this made sense, but in the end I decided to go. I had to. When I saw her, after several days, I noticed immediately that there was something wrong. She was thinner, and it seemed that all her happiness of being a mother was gone. She didn’t tell me that she was sorry to have left because she knew she had done the right thing to protect Julian from herself."

"What did she mean?"

John let out a chuckle, it was bitter and without any sign of real fun, but it was a laugh and Paul would never have expected it, not in that part of the story. Why did John laugh? What weird feeling was causing that weird reaction?

"What did she mean? Some fucking psychologist told her she was suffering from postpartum depression. That's what she meant." he muttered, no longer knowing, at that point, what emotion to show.

It wasn’t easy under Paul's urgent, inquisitive gaze, but he tried to keep him talking.

"Depression?"

"Yes. It seems..." John said, sighing, "It seems that it’s a very common pathology among the new mothers, and Cynthia reported all the symptoms, including the most serious: the total lack of interest in the child, but me…I couldn’t understand. How could it be this? How could she ignore the child? A mother would never do it, let alone my sweet Cynthia."

At that moment he really had a great desire to put his hands in his hair, but he managed to hold back. He didn’t want to be so vulnerable, so exposed to Paul. Paul didn’t seem so interested in judging him, though; instead he was trying to understand him so he could find words of comfort.

"Sometimes it can also affect the unexpected ones."
"I asked her if she wanted to go home, but she told me she had to stay there. There was a mental health clinic nearby and she wanted to be treated. I tried to insist, arguing that there was no better help than mine and Julian's, but she was afraid that if she came back, she would hurt Julian and this time for real. It was this perspective that convinced me definitively. If anything had happened to Julian, I would never have forgiven myself. So, we decided together that at least until she was ready, she would never see Julian again."

"So, she hasn’t been seeing him for four years, has she?" Paul asked interested.

"Oh, no, before Julian’s first birthday, she asked me to see him and I brought him to her. Her treatment was going on well and it was more than evident how much she was better. Still, she didn’t feel like coming home. We went on like this and the meetings became more frequent. Now I take him to her in the countryside at least once a month. The question is… I’m raising Julian, she has no intention of doing it. She’s afraid of falling into a depressive spiral again, which may be either less or more severe than before. I came to terms with it, for my son’s sake, even if it’s still a thought that saddens me. The thing that scares me most is that something may happen to him and God forbid, but if so, what will I do? I’m alone, who am I going to hold on to? If I lost Julian, I would be lost too. I think I could die. There would be nothing left for me."

Only then, with a real terror in his eyes, his broken voice, his trembling body, Paul really did understand John's behaviour during his story.

He really understood John.

John was much more complicated than he imagined. Behind that intriguing façade of charisma, love for his son and passion for music, there was actually an insecurity that clashed with everything else. Never ever would Paul have thought to find all that vulnerability, behind such an exuberant man.

Never, ever, he would expect to find in John the same fear of being alone that gripped Paul too, in the evening, when he tried to sleep, when he kept thinking that he was alone in that big city, when he wondered what his life would be like in one, five or ten years, if Jane would still have been by his side, if on the contrary she would have left him... All thoughts that clasped his heart, bringing him to insomnia and almost to tears.

Well, maybe no tears, after all he was a man, and men don’t cry for these things, do they? Yes, they do, because he had seen John holding back with a cigarette as an expedient and walking away from him, not to break down in front of Paul. Then, maybe there was nothing wrong if he cried too, whenever the desire to do it became more alive than ever.

So, he stood up and joined John, leaning his back against the wall, right next to him.

"You’re not alone, John, though." He said quietly and waited for the other man to turn to him before continuing with a smile, "You have George and Pattie and me too, now, if you let me. I’m fond of Julian, you just can’t remain indifferent to that child, and I’m sure that nothing bad will ever happen to him because you’re doing a great job, you provide him everything, you’re for him both a father and a mother, and when he will be a grown-up lad, he will become a good man and an equally loving father, if he wants to."

John couldn’t deny that he was particularly surprised, hearing those words coming from his inspector. If Paul had known the reality, maybe he wouldn’t have talked like that about John.

Did it matter now though? Paul’s words had the extraordinary power to calm the anguish that had accumulated in him throughout the story.
Why had this boy, known only for a few months, been able to achieve this result with such a little effort?

"Please don’t make me think of a grown-up Julian." John said, laughing, "I just want to enjoy his childhood by now."

"Oh, ok, enough talking about Julian like that." Paul agreed with a smile.

"Anyway..." John sighed, more relaxed, "Thank you."

"What for?"

"Because you’ve listened to me. I had never told this story like that to anyone." John admitted to Paul, but also a little to himself.

Paul smiled, accompanying him with a vague gesture of his hand, "Thank you for let me listen."

"This makes me remind of our deal." John said, winking at him, and Paul gasped slightly, caught off guard.

"Oh really?"

"Yes, it's up to me now." John announced, turning to his side to look better at Paul.

"So it seems." Paul answered and bit his lip, while his hands were torturing each other, while this time it was his eyes that escaped John’s inquiring ones.

John simply smiled, he didn’t even notice to do it and when he realized, it was too late. Paul was visibly uncomfortable and it was impossible not to smile softly to that vision.

"Your brother told me everything at your birthday party."

"All of what?" Paul asked.

The young inspector blinked in confusion, even though he knew what it was all about.

"About your father. The reason why you stopped playing and listening to music." John explained, using a careful tone, but he still managed to make Paul nervous.

"He... Did he do it?"

"Yup." John confirmed softly, "I wanted to know why you never looked for him? You're an inspector, you’d have all the means to find him."

John was genuinely curious about it. Of course, Jim knew who the new inspector was, and asked John to put an end to those thefts, but John refused. He couldn’t, damn it, he was now addicted to it. Not to mention that he was still waiting for the right opportunity to steal the last Elvis’ original LP that missed in his collection, that piece that would be the most important.

Luckily they didn’t have a fight, but a little discussion had taken place. Also because John was surprised that Jim didn’t feel ready to get more personal information about one of his sons. John was ready to ask Paul anything, but the man seemed adamant about it. The arrival of Paul had been a real surprise, dropping in on them, and Jim had been caught off guard. Especially since he was on the wrong side, once again.

However, John didn’t think the same way. He wanted to know, to know how Paul had lived
without that important figure and why he didn’t use his job to look for him.

"Isn’t his leaving a sufficient reason?" Paul asked, with total apathy, as if it weren’t an issue that concerned him.

Apparently, John wasn’t the only one to use that defense mechanism.

"Not at all."

"It is!" Paul protested, lifting his back from the wall, "He's gone, not giving a shit about his wife and his two children. Why should I care about finding him again, if he first showed no interest in us?"

"Maybe he's just afraid..." John tried to say, mindful of what he had seen in Jim every time the topic 'Paul' appeared.

"Afraid?" Paul repeated, letting out a sardonic laugh as if that was the most ridiculous excuse in the world, "Please, John, do you want to know what fear is? It’s seeing your brother cry while asking you why our father has gone, and not knowing what to answer without getting him confused because... how can a father abandon his so young children? The fear is knowing that your mother almost kills herself with work every single bloody day and night, to take care of you so she can provide you everything and seeing, day after day, how weak her body is, because she can go on by herself, but the price to pay is too high, that’s what fear is, John."

"Come on, Paul, try to put yourself in his shoes. A father would never leave his children and if he did, there must have been a reason-"

"Would you ever leave Julian?" Paul interrupted him and his question completely startled John.

The young man stared at him unsure, and let’s face it, impressed, before he could do anything but answer, "What?"

"You heard me!"

At that point, John felt forced to answer with all the sincerity that such a question required, "No, of course not."

"Well, you have your answer now." Paul sighed, as if the subject had finally been closed, and he went to the tent that separated the room where they were from the shop.

However, he hadn’t come to terms with the man he had called stubborn no more than ten minutes before.

"My case is different." John continued, oblivious to the fact that Paul was leaving, "Julian can only..."  

"Fuck you, John!" Paul snapped annoyed, stopping and turning with a sudden angry move able to flash John with his eyes, "What the fuck do you know about what I went through?"

Paul's reaction infinitely surprised John. He had never seen him behave that way. Paul was always calm and gentle. He confirmed his hypothesis that Paul also hid a darker side of himself. This didn’t scare him, though, on the contrary, it only gave him the strength to reply.

"My father abandoned us too."
John's words, with a low tone, sounded loud in the room and he could almost hear Paul pause, while John decided to share with him another sad act of that theatrical piece that was his life.

"My father left my mother even before I was born." John explained, and when he saw no sign of wanting to intervene on Paul's side, he went on lowering his head and losing his gaze on the floor carpet. "She went on as she could for some years until one day she was hit by a drunk policeman and died. I was only four years old, I don’t remember much of those days, only they gave me to CPS because we had no relatives, and they tried to contact my father. He didn’t want to have me in his life. It seemed I wasn’t his problem, so they sent me to an orphanage and from there I changed my family almost every year. I was a pretty lively kid, you know?" he exclaimed, adding a chuckle, "This way I have learned the hard way how certain fathers can make mistakes and how not everybody is meant to be a father. The last foster father I had tried to beat me and that was enough for me. I ran away forever from Liverpool to come here, to London."

John finished his story and finally lifted his gaze to meet Paul’s, who unwillingly blushed because of what he said before, but also because John seemed closer to him than anyone else. So many things in common.

"I-I'm sorry." Paul murmured and went back so he could be in front of John, "I had no idea, I thought that-"

"Don’t worry, it's not your fault." John cut short, adding a reassuring smile, "I told you that I moved here with my family, how could you imagine what the reality was?"

"Yes, but I'm sorry anyway."

"Thank you."

"And what happened when you came to in London?" Paul asked.

Now the curiosity was gripping him, but he felt freer to ask questions, to investigate, than at the beginning of this whole story.

"I..." John began, biting his lip.

Damn, the desire to let Paul know how much he could understand his feelings had been so strong, that he didn’t realize that the story could reserve potentially dangerous implications.

"Well, I came across a man who took care of me." he explained, carefully choosing the words, "He had some... problems with his family too. He used to live alone then and had mercy upon this poor, hungry, lost little boy. He had been very good with me. He made me study, he introduced me to music and taught me to play guitar..."

"So it was him who taught you those chords?"

"Yup."

"And did he raise you?"

John nodded, smiling at the memories of the kindness that the man showed for him, "He invested the money in my shop. He always believed in me and I will always be grateful to him."

"Is he like a father?" Paul asked, and the question made John think deeply.

Surely, he had been the closest thing to a father John had ever had, but he couldn’t really consider
him that way. It wasn’t right.

"No, he is already someone else’s father, I can’t consider him this way and steal this role from his real children." he said, hoping that Paul wouldn’t ask questions that went more specifically.

"So he's like a mentor?"

Fuck him and his curiosity as inspector.

"Let's say so." John answered, shrugging.

“What’s his name?”

That was a real good question and John had to be very quick to find a name other than Jim McCartney. Luckily, he knew perfectly which name to choose.

“He’s known as the Mick. I’ve always called him so.”

Paul seemed a bit upset and also outraged hearing that name.

“Oh yeah, I know it could be derogatory.” John added, “Also because you are actually a McCartney, but he's from Ireland and I’ve always found this name funny. After all these years, he grew fond of it now, you know.”

“ Weird. ”

“Yeah, but ask George and Pattie, if you want. They too know him as the Mick.”

Paul smiled, a bit amused, "And where is he now?"

"How many questions, Mr. Inspector." John answered, giggling and making Paul laugh, "I want my lawyer."

"Sorry, it's stronger than me."

"That’s alright. Don’t worry."

Actually, it wasn’t alright, first of all because it wasn’t a great idea to tell him where Jim's house was. Second, because in that same house, there were also...

Yet, why would this answer trigger Paul's connection between John and his father? There was no danger, John hadn’t said anything ambiguous and basically, how many situations of children abandoned by their fathers were there in England alone? Paul should have known better than John.

"He lives in the suburbs of London. At the beginning we were in a small apartment in the City, but when, thanks to the shop, we had some money available, we bought a house in a district of Greater London."

"Well, then you should just let me meet him sometimes." Paul commented, excited, and John forced himself to keep a cough.

"Yeah... I should."

Paul bent his head for a moment, thinking about his problem and looking at his hands, before raising one firmly and resting it on John's shoulder.
"I'm very sorry for what you've been through, John, but please understand me, I think now that you know better than anyone else why I have no intention of looking for my father."

Paul's words, along with his hand on his shoulder, seemed so convincing to John. Now that he thought about it, he too didn’t look for his father and he would never have done it.

"Besides..." Paul continued, "I know for sure that my father was a thief and that's why he got into trouble. It was his choice to steal and I hate thieves, especially since the consequences of his actions have been poured out on us. My mother has always defended him, you know, she always tried not to let us hate him, but to know that my father was one of them too was what made me decide to become a policeman and enroll me at the academy."

John nodded, before asking a question that was needed at this point, "Don’t you think one day you might regret it?"

"Sure." Paul admitted sincerely, "However I can’t really do that, John, not now at least."

"All right, Paul." John finally sighed, "I can’t make you change your mind, I understand that, but promise me you'll think about what I told you."

"Hey, I'm not Julian." Paul joked, giving him a light push with his own hand on his shoulder.

"Promise it anyway." John said.

He was serious, and his tone was also echoed by Paul, "I promise."

"Well."

Why was John doing it? Why was he trying to convince Paul to look for his father? After all if he really did it, it would be very risky for everyone, for Jim, for John, for Hermes.

So why did he insist?

"What exactly happened today?" Paul asked, awakening John from his reflections.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean all this talk heart to heart, as if we were real friends." Paul explained, suddenly cautious and yes, a little shy.

"Well, it means what it is, we are real friends." John answered, as if it were the most natural thing to say at that moment.

But was it really like that? They were real friends? Maybe that was true to Paul, indeed. It was indeed a true friendship on Paul’s side, yes, because the lad smiled without realizing it. It seemed really stronger than him.

What about John?

John had to think of this friendship as something useful for his second identity. He didn’t have to let the situation get out of his hands in any way.

Becoming a real friend with Paul was like going to an certain disaster.

"Oh, so since we are great friends, do you know what we should do?" Paul asked, enthusiastic.
"What?"

"I shouldn’t leave you alone tonight."

John laughed, "And what are you proposing?"

"How about a pint?"

"Ok, but the nearest pub is terrible." John hastened to reply, with a disgusted grimace on his face, "I know a better place, but first, help me close the shop."

Paul couldn’t stop smiling as he helped John in his task. He thought that for the first time since he was in London he was really happy. for the first time since he was in London, and the feeling was inebriating, one of those that you can’t help it without.

Of course, until then he had always considered John a friend, but after that day, after that intimate exchange of confidences, it was different. Now he knew, they both knew that they could always count on each other for every problem, that they could really talk about anything, that finally they were an important part of their life.

So, at this point, there was only one last thing to say.

"Welcome to my life, John."

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Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! I'm sorry I'm late. Life is too busy these weeks. ç.ç
Anyway, I finally finished translating the new chapter soooo, here we are. It's a bit long, I know, but there were many things to say at this moment of the story. So now you know John's past with Cynthia. ;)
Hope you like it, and please let me know if anything is wrong. :) Thanks to Vale who corrected the chapter and thanks to all of you that are reading. <3 Next chapter, Help. I hope it'll be ready next saturday! ç.ç
Bye for now.
"It’s not him."

"What?"

"It’s not Hermes." Paul explained with conviction to the audience, that was Chief Inspector Starkey and his agents.

They were in the nearby district of South Kensington, in the second branch of Christie’s, one of the most famous auction houses in the world. Right here there were any kind of memorabilia by Slash, Guns’n’Roses’ guitarist, who had decided to auction them and donate the proceeds to charity.

Right here it had been stolen a t-shirt which the musician used to wear in his concerts.

The problem was that the author wasn’t Hermes this time, at least, this was what Paul was convinced of.

"He warned us though, as usual, about where and when he would hit." agent Eastman pointed out.

"There is a fundamental difference from other times." Paul said, approaching the door that led to the corridor and sliding his gaze along its length.

"Which one?"

"The wounded guard." Richard replied.

Until then he had been following Paul's deductions in silence, thinking about what had just happened.

Paul turned to him to give him a look of deep approval, "Exactly. Of course, Hermes can be considered a villain, but he has never hurt anyone. Even when he stole Dylan's guitar, he made sure that the car would swing out after slowing it down. Now the situation is different."

It was different because the unfortunate agent had found himself right on the only way out that the thief could use. When he arrived, he took the gun and shot cold-blooded, without even aiming. The wounded agent, Mal Evans, had been very lucky, having been hit in the leg and had immediately collapsed to the ground, leaving the man free way.

Now Mal was in the nearest hospital, urgently transported by an ambulance, but fortunately he wasn’t in danger.

"So, we are dealing with a second Hermes." Linda said.

"It would be fairer to say this is a fake Hermes." Paul corrected, "He acts with the same style, or almost, hoping to make us believe that he and Hermes are the same person, but we have now found that it isn’t so."

"Maybe this thief and the real Hermes are in contact with each other." Richard added, rubbing his chin with two fingers, "After all we have seen that our man has an accomplice."
Paul sighed, shaking his head vigorously, "I think this is highly unlikely. Hermes’ accomplice would never act alone and above all this way. He would have no reason."

"Maybe to misdirect the investigation?" the Chief Inspector asked.

"No, sir, from what I have been able to see during these months, Hermes thinks only of his thefts: he plans them, complete them and then he immediately thinks about the next one. He would never plan something like that with someone who certainly has no qualms about using a gun." Paul explained, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well, McCartney, you seem very confident, so we all are in your hands." Richard commented, smiling encouragingly.

Paul gave him a gentle nod, "Thank you, sir. Now we should think of a way to catch both."

"I agree, and in the meantime, we'll move the exhibition to the King Street location." Richard added as they walked toward the exit of the building, "So we can carry on with the investigation, without Mr. Pinault (1) complaining about the terrible repercussions that this theft will have on his show."

"Anyway..." Agent Eastman began to say, once they reached the cars, "Don’t you think it’s weird that the real Hermes hasn’t showed himself to steal something from this show yet?"

"You’re right, Agent Eastman, it’s very weird. After all, it's been several days since the show is open to the public and the auction announcement was published earlier." Richard answered, opening the car door next to the driver, "What do you think, McCartney?"

Paul didn’t really know what to say, he had absolutely no idea why the real Hermes hadn’t announced a theft yet. In "normal" situations by now he would have already done something.

Perhaps he understood that something strange was happening. Or maybe...

Paul giggled, amused.

"Maybe he doesn’t like Guns’n'Roses."

"Fuck, how much I love Guns'n'Roses!"

Paul laughed when John exclaimed this. They were in the back of the shop, but this time they weren’t playing. John had surprised Paul and had convinced him to listen to a CD of the US group, *G N ’R Lies*, and when *Patience* started, John had shown his total love for it.

Paul was sitting in his usual position: he liked listening to that CD with John, but the best thing was to watch how that young man was absorbed in listening to the song, how he kept time with his head or foot, how he sometimes sang or whistled along with the singer. It was a fascinating show to look at, it almost felt like John was much more relaxed now, more comfortable with Paul. Not that before, before their chat, he wasn’t. It was just that now the difference was really palpable. Maybe it was John who smiled more often, or John easily goofing with Paul.

Did it matter, after all? There were so many little things that made the time spent with him so pleasant.

John, for his part, felt the same way too, so comfortable, as if he had known Paul for a lifetime and
not for a few months. Despite this, he was trying to keep himself in control. He had already made it clear with his conscience and above all, with his rascal heart, that he had to behave and not let himself go in that new, dangerous friendship. Just a little, yes, but not too much, that was sure!

He could succeed, now, reminding himself that he had a problem, a problem called "fake Hermes", or false, or impostor, or whatever the hell he was called.

Who the fuck was this new thief? And why was he exploiting his name in that ignoble way, preventing him from accomplishing that theft that John so longed for?

Damn, he had been so excited when he realized he had a chance to getsomething by Slash, so much that when Paul told him that they had received a note from Hermes, he had to draw on all his strength so as not to lose control and yell and curse because, fuck, it wasn’t him!

So along with George they decided to wait and see what would happen, and what happened was a tragedy: the name of Hermes covered in mud by an impostor who had even hurt an agent with a gunshot. John couldn’t bear it.

"It's a nice CD." Paul suddenly said.

John shook his head to awaken from his thoughts, "What do my ears hear? Mr. Paul I-Don’t-Listen-To-Music-Anymore McCartney is appreciating the CD that I chose?"

Paul laughed, hiding behind his hand, "Yes, but now do not cry victory."

"No, but from what you've told me, I've improved and you have as well." John said, approaching to sit in front of him and look him in the eyes, "Once, you would have been annoyed or you would have felt bad at the beginning of the CD. Now, look at you. You're so good with it!"

John pointed to him with a confident smile and Paul blushed slightly, while his heart winced at the realization that John had just showed him: he had never noticed before, but Paul wasn’t feeling bad now, indeed.

He had no palpitations of anguish, but they were joyful; the breath wasn’t ragged, but quiet. It was really all right.

"Yes, that's true." Paul said, nodding, "But it's thanks to you, you know, I could never have done it alone."

Then he smiled at John, who without thinking, reached out to place his hand over Paul's. His hands were so warm, so strong, and John felt them on his skin, before he could see them. And...

What the heck, what was his hand doing there?

As fast as he had reached them, John quickly turned his hand away from Paul's, getting up to go back to the stereo and turn it off.

"So how..." he began to say, clearing his suddenly dry voice, "How was work? I read that there was an unexpected twist."

"Oh yes, that’s true. I don’t think it’s our man though." Paul commented, leaning back in his chair.

"Who is it then?" John asked and turned to look at Paul with inquisitive eyes.

"I don’t know." he replied, shrugging, "But I know what he is not, and he isn’t Hermes."
"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm sure because now I understand Hermes, or at least his style. He would never shoot one of my agents."

John found himself smiling again. However, if once this smile would have been a challenge smile, because Paul would never have been able to fully understand Hermes, now it was a smile of gratitude, a satisfied smile, because Paul knew that he, or at least Hermes, wouldn’t act like that.

"It seems that you’re starting showing respect for that thief." John commented, keeping that smile on his lips.

Paul's eyes widened, surprised, indeed, deeply disturbed by John's words, "Respect? For a thief? I hope you're joking, John."

"I mean, respect for that part of his style, not his being a thief." John replied, "After all, he never hurt anyone."

Paul stared at him, frowning in perplexity, "He is a criminal anyway, I'll never respect him."

His promise sounded strangely melancholy for John: it was like a painful little squeeze to his heart, because he now knew that part of him wanted to be a real friend of Paul. Instead, those words showed such a clear and categorical refusal that John was silent for a moment, staring at Paul, trying to figure out what to do and say now, trying to keep calm those two sides of himself that for the first time came into conflict.

"Well, basically he’s just a thief, you don’t have to be friends with him." John joked with a nervous laugh.

"No, I don’t."

"Friendship is something else."

"Friendship is something else." Paul repeated, and he let out a smile, which had the extraordinary result of putting peace to John's inner conflict.

There was something so strong and at the same time tender in that young man. It was a dangerous mix, with immense power, and John was very surprised to fully understand what effect it had on him.

"Bloody hell!" Paul suddenly exclaimed, when his gaze fell on the clock, "It's very late."

"Late for what?" John asked, curious.

"I have to feed Pepper and call Jane before she leaves for Paris."

John blinked, surprised, "Paris?"

"Yes." Paul sighed, making his displeasure for this departure more than evident, "Now she's in Scotland to shoot something for the BBC, but they have to move to a set in France. It seems like it's an Anglo-French production."

"What a busy girl." John commented incredulously, "Good for her."

Paul smiled sadly to himself as he stood up, "I'm happy for her. Her career is great, she deserves it because she worked so hard to get to this point."
"How long have you not seen her?" John asked, not believing he really asked for it.

Was he really interested in that aspect of Paul's life? And above all, why did he care?

"Since my birthday."

Ah, that's why. How the hell could he stay so long away from her? And how didn't Jane think about going to see him more often? What kind of relationship was that?

"It's a long time." John pointed out.

Paul nodded, losing his gaze on the floor, "I know, but I understand it, and then if I had a normal job, I could take some days off to go and see her, but for now I can't leave London."

John nodded, biting his lip. Now, was that his fault? This very cold relationship between Paul and Jane?

"And when should she come back?"

"I think she has to stay there for at least a month."

"You never think she could..." John said and finished with a vague gesture with his hand, which Paul evidently didn't understand, because he gave him a look of pure perplexity.

"She could what?"

"Well..." John began to say, shrugging, "Far from you, she might know someone else."

"No." Paul protested heartily, "She would never do that, we're far away and we don't see each other often, it's true, but she will never betray me."

"Sorry, Paul." John said, raising his hands, "I didn't want to intrude, it's just that, even if she's so busy, if she really loves you, she would do anything to spend more time with you."

Paul winced slightly when he heard "if she really loved you," and tried not to show it, "Thank you for worrying about me, but trust me, John, she loves me."

"You know her better than me." John sighed, then giving him a reassuring smile, "So it must be so."

"Yes." Paul murmured, nodding more to himself than to John, "Yes, that's it, and now forgive me, but I really have to go."

"Sure, but... you're not angry, are you?" John hurried to ask him, jumping up.

Paul smiled at him, "Why should I be?"

"Well, because I've supposed certain things about you and Jane and now I understand that I didn't have any rights."

"Don't worry, John." Paul reassured him, "Just think about studying the song I gave you today, and I'll ask you next time."

Then he winked at him, before saying goodbye and disappearing behind the curtain. John stood in his spot, listening to Paul briefly saying bye to George and then leaving the shop. The next moment his friend and partner in crime joined him in the room.
"So... are we dealing with a fake Hermes?" George asked.

"George, you should do something for this your constant eavesdropping, you know?" John commented, laughing, "It starts to become inappropriate."

"Why?" George asked, frowning, "What secrets do the two of you exchange that I can’t hear?"

If John wasn’t so sure about the contrary, he could say that George had sounded a bit jealous.

"Nothing, but..." John began to reply, but then he realized that his was a very silly thing to say, and he sighed, "Oh, forget it and let’s think about the fake Hermes."

"What do we have to do?"

"I don’t know, for now we can only wait his next move." John commented bitterly, letting himself go on the chair.

"How do you know he will keep going on?"

John intertwined his hands on his lap, turning to the window on the street, "I know because he's not me."

From that window, he watched Paul enter his house and then close the door.

"I know because I'm the real Hermes."

*****

The Pinnacle, also known as Helter Skelter, was one of London's most famous skyscrapers. It had the characteristic shape of a spiral slide, and with its sixty-three floors it undoubtedly stood out in the London skyline.

The galleries and offices of Christie's auction house were on all the top ten floors of the skyscraper. They were literally one step away from the sky. And if anyone, someone like Hermes or his fake tried to enter to steal something from Slash's show, well, he'd fall into a trap. There were literally no escape routes. Unless one of them was able to fly.

Paul laughed to himself, what was he thinking of? Nobody could fly. No, this time neither Hermes nor the fake would steal anything. Actually, Paul knew he could get his hands on Hermes. Or at least on his fake version. A new message had arrived the week before, warning the police of another theft that would have struck that amazing exhibition. They didn’t know for sure whom it was coming from. Perhaps the real Hermes had finally decided to take action too and try to get a souvenir from the exhibition. Or maybe the note was from the fake Hermes and Paul was absolutely convinced of this idea. As shrewd and insolent, the real Hermes was also prudent and wouldn’t risk getting arrested for someone who had already been hit once.

Now Paul was on the penultimate floor of the skyscraper and he was looking out the window from the whole city of London under him, while the warm summer sun slowly disappeared on the horizon. It was a vision that gave shivers, and Paul thanked not to suffer from vertigo, otherwise working at 288 meters in height would have been a real challenge for him. For heaven’s sake!

There was also something that helped him to... keep his feet on the ground, in order to better cope with his work: it was the guitar-shaped keyring that he was turning around in his hands in that moment, the keyring given by John. He smiled at the memory of when John had been worried about his difficult distance relationship with Jane. It had been very kind of him; to worry was
something that made real friends and Paul couldn’t be happier about it. Knowing he had his help, his support to face his life in London, with all the problems involved, work issues or the distance from Jane, made everything more bearable and even easier.

"That's nice." a female voice said next to him.

Paul jumped slightly, to be surprised in his thoughts, and turned to see Linda's beautiful face staring at the object in his hands.

"Oh thanks."

"Is it a key ring?"

"Yes, a friend of mine gave it to me. Like good luck charm."Paul added, letting out a laugh as he remembered John's words.

"And does it work?"

"Not really right now, if I have to be honest." Paul replied with a resigned sigh, "But I’ve just got it, so let's give it time."

He finished winking and she giggled, putting a hand in front of her mouth.

"Well, in the meantime it made sure that our Mal survived the thief's aggression." she pointed out shortly thereafter.

"You're right, it really works then." he admitted, surprising that he didn’t consider that particular.

If Mal had died, it would have been a real tragedy, and besides, Paul knew that the fault would fall on him, because he was responsible for that case.

Linda smiled at him softly, turning better to him now, "I heard you went to see him in the hospital."

Paul nodded, lowering his head and looking back at the object in his hands, "Yes, the other day, with Inspector Starkey."

"It was very kind of you."

"It was just the right thing to do." Paul shrugged, "He was just doing his job when he tried to stop the thief, and we respect him and the effort he shows every day. Our visit simply wanted to prove this."

"Yes, well, but..." she began to say, approaching and placing a hand on his forearm, "Others wouldn’t have done it, so I just wanted to tell you that I respect you very much, sir."

"Thank you." Paul said, escaping her gentle touch to check the clock, "It will be better now to reach all our spots. It's almost X hour."

Linda sighed, before nodding, "Yes, sir."

Paul watched her leaving, thinking back to her words: did the lucky charm work?

Was it really giving him help?

Paul couldn’t yet affirm this with certainty, but he felt that somehow he would only discover it at the end of the evening, because he was now sure that he would get at least one of the two possible
The wind of that evening in early July was rather chilly.

Perhaps it was due to the fact that the sun had already set a couple of hours before.

Or perhaps, indeed, most likely it was due to those hundreds and hundreds of meters that separated John from the earth.

He was literally flying over London with a hang glider and, fuck! it was really very high up there. He had tried this experience on other occasions, but each time the thrill of seeing that city spread beneath his body perfectly aligned with the horizon made him shiver.

"John, think about it, please." George's voice suddenly said from the headset, "You're still in time to change your mind."

"I already thought well, thank you, George. And no, I don’t want to change my mind." John answered, smiling at his friend's question.

"But that warning..." George continued, "It could be a trap."

"A trap?"

"Yes, didn’t you think that maybe this could only be a police act to draw you into that fucking skyscraper and catch you?" George remarked, particularly heartfelt.

"Oh, my dear George, didn’t you hear Paul's words?" He sighed, shaking his head in resignation, even though George couldn’t see him, "Why should he tell me those things, if it was a trap?"

"It’s still dangerous." his friends snapped.

He seemed strangely nervous this time, but John had no intention of cancel the whole operation.

"We have to work it out, George. I can’t standsomewhere who acts unworthily using my name. It's a matter of principle."

Not to mention the fact that it was too late for an afterthought, since he had almost arrived at the Helter Skelter. He decided to come from above because surely nobody would have imagined that Hermes could come from the sky.

"Oh, John."

"Trust me, it’ll be all right." John assured him, "Am I or am I not the infamous Hermes?"

George sighed, "Yes."

"Well, then, relax now, my friend, we're about to go into action."

"Please, be careful."

"Don’t worry." John said very calmly, "Just think about being here at the right time."

"I'll be there."
John smiled to himself, and then finally prepared for landing. Bending slightly to one side, he made a fly-over to get an idea of how the roof was. For sure, it wasn’t a roof made for such a landing. Yet on the other hand, who could ever design an airstrip on one of London's most eccentric skyscrapers?

Finally he decided to settle down and as soon as he got close to the roof, he stretched his legs to slow down himself. Too bad that as soon as his feet touched the ground, he stumbled and fell to the ground. A loud crash told him he had just broken the right-hand side of the hang-glider.

"For fuck’s s-"

"Are you all right, John?" George asked.

"Yes, yes, all right. Just one... "John began, standing up and wiping his pants," A pebble that made me stumble."

"A pebble? How did a pebble turn up 300 meters above London?" George asked, laughing.

"I have no time for your existential questions, George." He pointed out, undoing the whole harness that bound him to the hang-glider.

"As you wish, but are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, George, I've never been better than this." John reassured him, "Now I'm looking for the opening of the ventilation duct and then we're inside."

"Please, wear the bandana, you never know what could happen."

"Yes, sir."

John, finally free of ropes and helmets and all the necessary equipment for the flight, stretched and then focused on the roof of the skyscraper. The base was rectangular and only one side, one of the shorter ones, was completely exposed to the air. From one of the two longest sides there was a concave window that surrounded the building and rose more and more towards the sky, until it ended on the parallel side in a sort of metal tip. Just on that side there was a small door which, with great joy, John discovered to be open. This led to a flight of stairs that most likely ran the building along its entire length. That would have been his escape, if things went wrong. Next to the flight of stairs, there was an elevator but it was out of the question to use it. Surely it would have been monitored with a camera and this time George had no control.

Then John saw it, the ventilation duct. He approached to examine it: it didn’t seem particularly tight. John could pass easily through it. Ok, he wasn’t very slim and a few pounds less would have been welcome, but he wasn’t that big either.

Waking up from those thoughts that were better suited to a gym rather than the place of a theft, John got ready to remove the grating that closed the ventilation duct and set it on the ground without making any noise. Then he set the small bag he carried on his shoulders, moving it over his chest and he climbed inside.

The space was definitely cramped and claustrophobic, but it was important that he would keep calm and that he breathed calmly so as not to panic. Even the famous Hermes could suffer from those problems and ruin everything. He could be shrewd and cheeky as he wanted, but he was still a human being with his weaknesses.

When he convinced himself that there was no reason why he should be disturbed (and he
succeeded in reminding himself of what a couple of floors would have been waiting for him), he began to move forward, trying to make as little noise as possible, creeping in swiftly and carefully not hitting the walls.

At the end of the tunnel, he stopped and sat down. The conduit continued vertically downward and you couldn’t see its end. John opened his bag and extracted a technological device that he had brought with him for this phase of the plan: it was a sort of coil that would help him to get into the duct. He put it tightly on the upper wall and then pulled the end with the carabiner to hook it to the waist belt. With a couple of violent tugging, he made sure that the coil device supported his weight and then, feeling a leap in his heart, let himself go into the void.

He cursed mentally as he turned away any fear about that precarious situation, trying not to think that if the device had collapsed, he would have been a dead man and Julian a fatherless orphan. So he leaned his back against a wall and pointed his feet firmly on the opposite side, before starting his slow and careful descent. He passed the tunnel that extended above the last floor of the skyscraper. It was already halfway and for now everything was going well. Great.

He went downward, his hands sweating profusely and his heart pounding in his chest, echoing in the narrow, silent conduit. That prick!, so it would let them be caught. Lucky that by now he arrived. He climbed into the second tunnel encountered in the journey and when he was safe, unhooked the carabiner from his belt, accompanying the gesture with a sigh of relief.

He crept again in silence, thinking that just below him there was the biggest display of memorabilia he had ever seen. On other occasions it would have been difficult to choose, but since it was Slash, John knew what to steal: one of his famous top hats that he wore over those black and indomitable curls.

There was only one problem.

Someone had arrived before him.

The grating on the side of the duct above which John was sliding had already been removed and leaned to the side.

And John knew it could only be that impostor.

He bit his lip thoughtfully. It was risky, since this fake Hermes could be aggressive towards him too, but John wouldn’t let his farce continue to throw mud over his name.

Taking his decision, he bent down and tried to take a look at what was happening inside the room. This was well lit and holy shit!, how many wonderful things were there: clothes, pendants, chains, guitars, dinosaur miniatures and... the top hats!

John also noticed a small secondary door on the opposite side of the main one and there, next to it, three guards tied up, gagged and sleeping in the corner. Probably his fake had made them out with some soporific gas.

Then John saw him. He was a tall, slender man, wearing a hooded sweatshirt, just like John, and had a bandana on his face. He was wandering between the top hats and had eyed up one that John hoped to find: a black top hat completely covered with studs.

When the man reached out to touch it, John didn’t hesitate. He raised his bandana on his face and dived into the room.
"Stay where you are."

The man stopped for a moment with his hand in the air, before smiling and turning to him.

"I was hoping you would come, my dear Hermes."

John blinked in confusion, while the man stared at him with an excited look and a satisfied smile that surely lay beyond the bandana. He seemed very young, perhaps John's own age, but there was no time to lose in these reflections. John had to know.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Brian Epstein." The man replied, "And I'm your admirer."

"An admirer?"

Brian nodded slowly, closing his eyes for a moment, "Yes, I follow you from your first thefts. You're an extraordinary creature, Hermes, your style drives me crazy: you're brilliant, smart and can get away with it, even though the police are always there waiting for you."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" John asked, almost laughing at the absurdity of his words.

How could any man feel admiration for a criminal like him?

John obviously knew he was great in what he did, but he never thought he'd have any admirers. One that also seemed very strange from what he could see.

"How could I joke now that I'm finally talking to you?! I'm so glad you noticed me, you can't imagine how much."

John opened his eyes. Brian's words made it clear that...

"Wait, are you telling me that you've organized all this just to lure me here and meet me?"

"Yes," Brian confirmed, giving him a look of pure ecstasy, "I knew that if I started copying your style, sooner or later you would intervene."

"But why?"

"Because you are my idol and I wanted to meet you and ask you to let me help you in your future projects." Brian explained, as if it were something so natural, that John would have to accept without thinking twice.

But John had other answers in mind.

"There's no fucking chance." he told him as he approached the hat he intended to take home.

Brian, totally taken aback, looked at him, widening his eyes, "What? Why? I learned your style, together we can do great things."

"You didn’t learn a single shit!" John snapped, without hiding all his irritation, "You sent a policeman to the hospital shooting him in the leg. I'm not like that. I don't risk the lives of other people. Just forget it."

"But I-"
"But nothing." John exclaimed, clutching his hat in his hands and looking at him with more interest than he was showing to the man behind him, "You're crazy, you're completely out of your mind, let me say it-"

A metallic noise, a noise like a pistol being loaded, made him jump suddenly. John, with his hat in his hand, turned around, finding himself with the weapon pointed at his face.

His heart lost a beat and the deafening silence of that moment made him believe he was already dead. But no, he was not dead and being able to hear Brian's sardonic laughter was a sufficient proof.

"Do you think you can refuse my proposal now, and then sneak out like that, as if nothing had happened?"

"Brian..."

"You can’t get away with it this time. You know, before I came here I thought, ‘He just has to accept my offer, otherwise I'll have to kill him.”

The look that Brian gave him was pure madness and John felt his face whiten, but still tried to stay calm and take time.

"You wouldn’t do it."

“You say? After all I've already shot a policeman and now you know my identity... If you do not work together with me, I'll have to pull the trigger, and then, at that point, I'll become the only true Hermes.”

Damn. Things got bad and John couldn’t even hope for George's help; his friend was most likely listening to the whole conversation, incredulous, feeling utterly powerless. What could he do now for John?

However, the help came from the person from whom John could expect everything except that.

The door of the hall swung open and three people broke in. One of them was...

Paul!

"Stop! Hands up!" the young inspector yelled, pointing a gun that was a thousand times safer for John.

Paul would never have shot at that height. He was sure of it. He wasn’t crazy like Brian.

However now John couldn’t get lost in such sentimentality, he had to think about how to escape and reach the roof. He remembered the secondary door he had seen across the room. It was a dangerous unknown escape, John didn’t know where it would lead him, but everything was better than the other exit.

So, faster than lightning, taking advantage of Brian's momentary distraction, John escaped, running breathlessly toward that door.

While he heard Brian swearing and Paul ordering his men to get the impostor, John noticed that the door had a panic-proof handle, and the bright green sign at the top indicated that it was an emergency exit.
Emergency, of course, that was indeed an emergency. And it meant freedom for John.

He pushed it open, tightly clutching the hat in his hand, and came up the flight of stairs he had seen when he arrived. It was his lucky day.

He rushed up the stairs, feeling hurried steps behind him.

"George, I really need your help now."

"I'm coming and anyway, I've already helped you."

"How?" John asked, his breath already ragged, "Because I didn’t notice it."

"I texted Paul from a private number, warning him that the two Hermes were in the exhibition hall."

"Ah, thank you, George, a great help, really." John commented, unable to hide his sarcasm.

"Well, you're still alive or am I wrong?!"

But before John could answer, there were two shots coming from where he was, and John jumped in fright.

Fuck!

He cursed very scared now; he didn’t know what had just happened, nor who had fired, but he only kept running over his fatigue and his heart, which was beating like a madman.

"Not for long, apparently." John informed George, still listening.

Finally he reached the top and hurried to go the roof. The hang-glider was out of order and there was not even the shadow of George.

"George, fuck, come on.” he snapped, feeling all the muscles of his body quiver with agitation.

"I'm here, I'm here."

Every second seemed like an hour for John. When someone came up behind him, John turned, feeling the adrenaline rush through his veins like a flooded river.

"Stop." Paul's voice said.

It was a determined and authoritative voice, but strangely it also had a sort of sweetness and this froze John in his place.

"Give up now, you're trapped."

John watched Paul pointing his gun at him. His hand was still, but he could see on all of Paul’s face that he had no intention of firing.

"I know it wasn’t you last time, you would never have shot one of my policemen, wouldn’t you?" He asked, approaching dangerously to John, "If you give up now, I will make sure this won’t be one of your indictments."

John wasn’t really able to move, Paul was getting closer and closer, still a few steps and he could find out that the man in front of him, Hermes, was just his friend John.
The only thing John could do was to hope for George's timely arrival. Or in another kind of help, like the arrival of Brian, who came up behind Paul, wrapped an arm around his neck and hit him in the head with the butt of the gun.

Paul's head fell forward like dead weight.

He had lost his senses.

*****

There was a sharp pain that kept sending annoying impulses to his nerves and there were also a buzzing in the distance and an unbearable whistle that resounded in his head.

Strange noises intertwined with a man's voice.

"Give me that hat and join me, it's your last chance."

"Or what?" a muffled voice said.

"Or I'll kill the inspector."

Paul would definitely have wanted to protest to that intention. He didn't have any wish of dying, but on the other hand he decided not to try to free himself, to avoid making the man nervous and make him lose his head. It was still a possibility.

"Why should you care?"

"Because as you said, it's not your style. You want to defeat him with your ability, not killing him, but if you don't accept my offer, I'll shoot him in the head and then I'll blame you."

Paul felt his heart increase his pace. No, he had to find a way to free himself and save himself. He had to find help, but who?

Where were his two agents who had stopped the impostor? They had let the man run away, then maybe something had happened to them? Maybe that fake Hermes had shot them too, and if it had been like that, were they okay now?

And how long did it take for the agents from the other floors to come to help him?

There was no one who could help him at that moment, apart...

Maybe there was someone: the real Hermes.

Paul opened his eyes and immediately met the clear ones of his prey. He stared at him intently and for a long time, trying to find in him a humanity that Paul was sure he had. He stared at him as if to ask him to return the confidence he had placed in the thief, when he immediately refused the hypothesis that he was the one who shot Mal Evans.

And the other man, his enemy, got it.

"All right, hold it." he said and threw Slash's hat at him.

This fell to their feet with a metallic noise due to the studs, and Paul heard the fake Hermes laugh a little, while the buzzing in his head became closer and closer. How strong did that villain hit him?

"Now just say we will work together and this bobby will be safe."
Paul watched the thief in front of him, biting his lip and bending his head.

Then that annoying buzz became really deafening, it sounded like a helix, or better, more precisely, a helicopter. A few seconds later, behind the real Hermes, two blinding lights appeared and dazzled Paul. He closed his eyes instinctively and perhaps even the impostor did the same, because Paul felt himself free finally and fell to the ground.

What happened next was something extremely excited. Hermes pounced on his fake version, landing and disarming him, throwing the gun as far away from the man as possible.

Paul, still on the ground, tried to regain some of the sight and managed to see Hermes as he hit the other man in the head, who lost his senses.

Then the original Hermes quickly retrieved Slash's hat and put it on. And when he started to leave, he turned to Paul and his eyes lit up, as if behind the bandana he was smiling, cheekily. His hand moved to the hat, lifting it a little as he gave him a deep bow. He stayed in that position for a few moments, as if he was waiting for something. Paul blinked in confusion, unable to move: something kept him from standing up and arresting the man whom he had been hunting for months, who was now there, ready for the handcuffs and for Paul. Yet, when the thief realized that Paul wasn’t going to do anything, he stood up and Paul finally watched him running away. The man climbed up a ladder that hung from the helicopter, and soon he disappeared, swallowed up by the darkness of the night.

Paul shook his head, recovering the use of his legs and vision, and stood up a little dazed. As he heard noises coming from the stairs, he moved to the fake Hermes and stopped him with handcuffs on his wrists. He had done it. He had arrested at least one of the two criminals he was chasing, the one that was undoubtedly the most dangerous.

Then, finally, he was joined by reinforcements.

"Are you okay, sir? What happened? Which one is this?"

They were all right questions at the time.

Yet at that moment, there was a more important question that Paul could only torment himself with.

This hadn’t been a theft like some of Hermes's.

This time it had been different.

Hermes did not escape.

Paul allowed him to escape.

And willing or not, it was an important difference.

\(^1\) - Mr François-Henri Pinault is the son of the French magnate, François Pinault, owner of the Christie's auction house.
Yeah, I didn't forget to update. It's just that it's a very busy period, what with work, university and so on.
Anyway, I did it at last. And this is the new chapter.
I thought about introducing Brian as the fake Hermes due to the fact he sort of had a crush on John.
Also, I know today is a sad anniversary for our lovely fandom and I wanted to translate something else concerning this day, but I didn't have time. ç_ç
Next chapter will be Good day sunshine. I've started translating it, but there are busy days ahead, also because next week I'm in London for Paul's concert. I'm so excited!!!!!!!!!! <3 It's the first concert of Paul I see. :3
So, hope I can post the new chapter after the concert. :D
Bye for now and let me know if you liked or not the chapter.
Chiara
"You have to be a good boy today, Julian, okay?"

"But I'm always good, dad."

John smiled as he fastened Julian's denim jacket, thinking that his son was really smart and that he was undoubtedly right: he was always a good little boy.

When the zipper was completely closed, John looked at him satisfied and amused. He was fine with the new clothes Cynthia had given him on her last visit at the end of June: he was wearing a nice pair of dark blue jeans and a sleeveless jacket, under which there was a white shirt with a nice print of an electric guitar and a comic with "My dad rocks" in it.

"You're right, love, but today even more, all right? No whims. If Paul says you can’t touch anything or it's time to go, we comply and leave, right?"

"Okay." Julian answered distractedly, since their white cat had just come along and had started rubbing against Julian's legs, getting his smiles.

John tilted his hair affectionately and then put on his jacket, checking that he had everything he needed in his pockets: handkerchiefs, wallet, cell phone... yes, there was everything. He also looked at the time: ten minutes to the date with Paul at the Chelsea police station. It was definitely time to go.

"Come on, Jules, say bye bye to Elvis."

"Bye-bye, Elvis!" The child repeated, crouching to give him one last caress on the little head, "Don't worry, we're coming back soon."

Then John took his hand and together they left the house.

It was a lovely afternoon of a beautiful Sunday in July, John's shop was closed and he was going with Julian to the place where Paul worked, because the inspector had promised that he would get the child in a police car. What better time than Sunday, when many agents were on duty in the streets and at the station there were only a sufficient number of policemen to guarantee any emergency?

When Paul proposed his plan a few days earlier, John initially refused. The idea of going of his own free will to a police station wasn’t all that appealing. Once he wouldn’t have given it much importance, but now, after what happened to the Helter Skelter, after being almost discovered by Paul, things had changed.

He wasn’t sure he could still stand the pressure of being surrounded by police officers, or the vision of Paul, his friend Paul, in the guise of that inspector who always appeared to try and catch
John’s alter ego.

Yet he had accepted to make Julian happy and because he was sure it would be him, as always, to give him a support, to make everything easier. He was his angel, after all.

So, when they arrived in front of the police station in Walton Street, John stopped for a moment and stared at the Victorian-style building. It was so impressive and austere, it only aroused fear with its rigorous facade.

"Have we arrived?" Julian asked, noting that his father wasn’t about to move.

John woke up, hearing his son's voice, and lowered his head to look at him, "Yes, we have. See how many police cars?"

He pointed to the cars that were parked right there in front of them and Julian smiled happily, when he saw them, one after the other, all sparkling, with their sirens on the top and the reflective stripes on their sides.

"Can we see them right away?"

"Oh no, let's see what Paul does, then he'll get you on one of these, okay?"

"Ok." Julian agreed quietly.

John gripped Julian's hand tightly and after crossing the street, the two finally found themselves at the entrance to the building. They quickly climbed the steps of the short staircase that led inside and then they were swallowed by the bustle of the police station: phones ringing constantly, agents hurrying from side to side, full of documents, and-

"Paul!"

The young inspector had just passed before their eyes. He seemed particularly busy, but John called him without even realizing it, as if it had been stronger than him. Paul turned, recognizing and immediately approaching the two Lennon.

"Hey, hello, you're here!" he said, smiling at John and then, bending down to ruffle Julian's hair.

"Did we choose a bad time?" John asked uncertainly.

"Oh no, no, well, more or less." Paul hurriedly explained, "I thought there wouldn’t be much to do, since it's Sunday, but of course it didn’t go as I hoped."

"What happened?"

"A head-on collision near the Chelsea Physic Garden, a couple of hours ago." Paul sighed, "Several vehicles were involved, so I had to send a couple of teams to help with the traffic, while the paramedics were helping the woundeds."

"How bad was it?" John asked interested.

"Not much, fortunately there were no victims. Now we are waiting for them to remove the damaged cars to clear the road."

John nodded, fully understanding the situation, "If you're busy, we can come back another day."

"No, my turn is finishing in a few minutes and then the boss arrives, so I'll be free." Paul said,
confidently, "Why don’t you wait for me in my office? I’ll be there in five minutes."

"Agree. Where- " John began to say, but Paul immediately stopped him.

He took a step toward him, pointing to the last door on the right at the end of the corridor that faced them. Then he told them to sit down as they waited for him, and disappeared behind a door in an office where the phone rang loudly.

John took a deep breath: that corridor was narrow, or perhaps it was the policemen who continued to pass in that stretch to make it narrow. A potentially claustrophobic situation.

He decided to cross that corridor only in one way: holding his son’s hand. He was his anchor, the stick to cling to when he had no energy, he was the shield that protected him from any bad things, he was strength, he was courage, he was love.

And with Julian near him, John walked into that corridor that seemed oh, so long, almost endless, but eventually they reached the end and when he saw the open door of Paul's office, he entered quickly and let himself go in a big sigh of relief.

Paul's office wasn’t very large. There was an L-shaped desk next to the wall on the shorter side, with a computer, a printer and a telephone on it. The other side of the room was entirely covered by bookcases, whose shelves had a lot of binders of all sizes, too full of documents.

John sat down opposite the desk, along with Julian.

"Well, then, Jules, now we must not touch anything, ok?" John warned him.

"Yes, dad."

John let go of the child who climbed up on the chair next to him. Then his gaze fell on Paul's desk: in addition to several folders containing work documents, there was a small plate right in front of him, in brass, which it had in darker letters, J.P. McCartney.

J was for James. Of course, Paul didn’t tell him he had the same name of his father. It shouldn’t be pleasing for him, but John already knew: Jim explained that naming the firstborn after the father was a very frequent habit in his family.

His gaze then fell on a frame that was in the corner of the desk. John was sure about whom he would find inside, but he still reached out to grab it. The photo portrayed an incredibly beautiful girl, with long red hair, in a slightly cheeky pose, hands on hips, upturned face and curled nose: Jane Asher, Paul's girlfriend.

Well, John had already seen her on other occasions, on television or in the newspapers exposed when he went to the newsstand.

She was definitely perfect for Paul, both young, both handsome... And yet something made him turn up his nose. He still didn’t understand how that relationship could go on. Obviously Paul was in love, but he risked being stuck in a relationship with a one-way love. Not that Jane didn’t love him, but-

“Dad, you said we must not touch anything!” Julian reproached him.

John winced and then, realizing that the child was right, put the frame in its place again, letting out a laugh.
He then concentrated on those folders right in front of Paul's chair. Among all the documents there was also a newspaper that stuck out under everything else. It seemed to be open on a page reporting an article about the arrest of the fake Hermes.

How many crap they had written in that article! John had read it, how couldn’t he? There were compliments to Paul and his team for arresting that impostor. As if John had nothing to do with that arrest. But then he had to recognize that Paul had been correct, because in one of his declarations he admitted that he had an important help from the real Hermes.

Perhaps, now, Paul hated him less.

But was it really that important, what Paul thought of his alter ego?

Yes, it was important, because Hermes was part of John now, so deeply rooted within himself, that perhaps he could no longer do anything without him. And yet, one day, who knows how far, it would happen. He couldn’t keep on stealing all his life.

So how long? Until Paul would have lost his job? Or before? But when?

"There you are, guys."

Paul's voice almost made him jump into the chair. John was so immersed in his countless, endless questions, that he hadn’t even noticed his approaching steps, but he was happy that his arrival had awoken him from those thoughts that led nowhere.

"Did I scare you, John?" Paul asked, amused.

"Oh, no." He lied, turning to Paul, and setting himself up, "No, I was just overthinking."

Paul laughed softly, before turning to Julian and offering him a hand, "So, little one, wanna go?"

"Yes!"

John watched the child jump to the ground enthusiastically and reach Paul, who took him by the hand and then turned to the other man, "Are you coming too, John?"

"Of course." he answered and hastened to join them.

Paul closed his office when they left, and led his two guests across the corridor. At that moment, even if John was surrounded by policemen again, he felt safe, and this time it wasn’t only thanks to Julian's presence.

It was also thanks to Paul.

Paul made him feel that way, as if nothing bad could happen to him, as if they were in that hall of the skyscraper and John still had a gun pointed at himself.

But no, he was wrong, he had to be wrong. It couldn’t be Paul, the same man who for a few months meant everything except safety. Of course, John was shocked by what happened with that crazy Brian Epstein. That must have caused all these turmoils, these reflections, these fucking questions!

Before reaching the door leading to the backyard, Paul stopped for a moment in a room. He entered taking Julian with himself and John looked inside, stretching his neck: there was a girl in uniform at the desk, she had long blond hair and a beautiful freckled face, and she was busy hand-filling a
series of documents. When she noticed Paul, she stood up, and Paul kindly told her to sit down.

Then he approached a wall where several sets of keys were hung on and he grabbed one. The girl looked at him perplexed, especially when Paul also took her hat resting on the desk and putting a finger on his lips as if to say 'Mum's the word', went out.

John followed him in a hurry and let out a great sigh of relief when they were finally outdoors, fresh air, without all those men and women wearing uniforms that just didn’t want to leave him alone.

"Wow!" Julian exclaimed and John didn’t take long to understand the reason for his wonder.

The back yard was full of police cars waiting to be used. Most of them were the classic cars that could easily be seen in the streets.

"Do you like it?" Paul asked as he led them to the nearest car.

"Very much."

Julian, as he always did when he was thrilled, began to run and Paul tried to keep up and contain, without success, his enthusiasm. When they got to the car, the boy left Paul’s hand and touched the bonnet, then looked for John.

"Look, Daddy, it's like the little car mum gave me."

John smiled at him and nodded. It was really very similar: an elegant white car with yellow and orange reflective stripes on the sides and blue sirens on the top.

"But you can’t get on that, right?" Paul asked, winking at him as he opened the driver's door.

Julian's eyes shone and he ran immediately to Paul, who had meanwhile sat down on the driver’s seat. John approached, leaning his back against the nearby car as he watched Paul taking Julian and placing him on his lap.

"Can we go around?" Julian asked anxiously.

"Unfortunately we can’t, but we can stay here for a while, like real policemen."

Julian looked at his father pouting, and John gave him an emblematic look, which reminded him of the warning he made before going out. No whims.

The child seemed to understand and Paul tried to cheer him up, "You know what a real policeman must have, Julian?"

"The gun?"

Paul blinked, totally taken aback, and looked at John, who was laughing at the smart answer of his son.

"Yes, indeed, but above all he must have a nice... hat!" Paul said and quickly set the hat he had stolen on Julian's head.

Julian's crystalline laughter filled the cabin as he tried to look up his hat. However this was too big for him and fell on his face. Paul, amused, adjusted it and looked at John.

"Now that you're a real policeman, let your dad have a look at you."
And while Paul made him turn to John, Julian put his hands on his hat: like any child, he had to touch to satisfy his curiosity.

"Dad, how am I?"

John bit his lip nervously. Seeing that particular hat on his son had a certain effect on him. On the one hand it was annoying him terribly: he looked like a tiny policeman, ready to hunt him down. However, on the other side, he couldn’t help but find him adorable. Julian was fine with everything, even with that bloody hat.

"You look so good, luv." he finally said.

Julian smiled pleased, before paying all his attention to Paul who began to explain to him all those buttons and control lights on the dashboard as well as the transceiver and the police radio. John noted with pleasure that the child was incredibly interested and listened in silence to the young inspector, who also seemed to be involved by that particular task.

Paul was happy. You could understand it by how he smiled, by his eyes shining with joy, by many small things in his body that transmitted so many positive feelings. John didn’t know the reason behind it, he had never seen him so enthusiastic about life. And that vision was so unique that John couldn’t hold back from taking his mobile and taking photos of those happy moments, between Paul and Julian, while they chatted and pretended to be chasing a thug, with Julian’s little hands on the steering wheel covered by Paul’s.

"And this..." Paul continued to say, bringing a hand upwards to indicate the ceiling light on the top, "It's the siren."

"That goes like -" Julian began to ask, then making the sound of the police siren.

"That's right." Paul said with a delighted laugh.

"Can I hear it?"

Paul frowned, unsure, "Well, theoretically we can’t."

"Just a bit, please."

"Julian, do not insist." John intervened with a decidedly authoritative tone.

The child bowed his head, assuming a low expression, while Paul looked at him hesitantly for a few moments before adding, "Perhaps we can only turn it on for a few seconds..."

Julian's expression changed drastically, but John hurried to protest, "Paul, there's no need, if you can’t, there’s no problem, really."

"Don’t worry, nothing will happen for a few moments, right, Julian?"

The child turned to him, nodding and looking at him anxiously, while Paul raised a hand toward the ceiling light.

"You’d better plug your ears if you want to save your eardrums." Paul warned, and once John and Julian followed his advice, he pressed the siren button.

The sound that followed was absolutely one of the most acute, penetrating and annoying that John had ever heard. So he pressed his hands more to his ears, making sure that Julian did the same
thing. The siren sounded in the courtyard for a few seconds, before Paul turned it off, but the silence didn’t last long.

"That was fantastic!" Julian shouted, enthusiastic.

"What do you have to say to Paul now that he has been so kind with you?" John asked softly.

"Thank you, Paul."

"You’re welcome, little one." Paul replied, stroking his hair.

Then, suddenly, a voice caught their attention, "Sir, are you all right?"

John looked at the door they had left a few minutes earlier: there was the girl they had seen before, staring worried at the three of them.

"Yes, Linda, all right." Paul answered and carefully got Julian out of the car.

He locked the car door, grabbed the hat from the child's head and hurried to reach the young woman. John held Julian close to him as he looked at Paul talking to the woman and giving her hat and keys back. Finally the young inspector greeted her with a big smile and came back to them.

"So, Julian, did you like our car?" Paul asked, crouching down to be at the same level as the child.

Julian smiled and nodded frantically, "Very much."

"When you grow up you'd be a perfect policeman, do you know that?"

John had a hard time holding himself from rolling his eyes, but somehow he succeeded. Julian as a policeman? No, he would never allow it, and not because the police were his enemies, but because John had seen and experienced on his own skin how dangerous it could be as a job. He really didn’t want his son to risk his life because of some crazy guy like it had happened to Paul with Brian.

"But I want to do Daddy's job." Julian said and John was so relieved, that he took the baby in his arms to hold him and kiss him on the cheek.

"Word up, Jules!"

"Well, then let’s hope he’ll be more intransigent if someone steals from his shop!" Paul commented, recalling what happened in the first meeting with John and winking in his direction.

"It will undoubtedly be so." the man replied, laughing after he had caught Paul's wink, "Anyway, Paul, thank you so much for this opportunity. Julian really appreciated it."

"Don’t mention it, it was my pleasure."

Paul smiled fondly and John only looked at him for a moment, before talking again and saying something that upset him, "Listen, if you have nothing to do, why don’t you come with us to get an ice cream?"

"Oh, yes, please." Julian said heartily.

Paul, surprised, looked at both of them before answering with a laugh.

"If you insist..."
The afternoon sun was warm, pleasant, sweet on the face.

John and Paul were sat on a bench in the shade of a large oak tree, while they both watched Julian climb up with other children on the playground. They had just finished eating their ice cream, although to be precise, John had to finish Julian’s. In fact when Julian noticed swings, slides and anything else in the park, he immediately lost all his interest in his ice cream and he ran to play.

Now John was carefully following all of Julian's movements, being sure that he wasn’t making false steps and then falling.

"You can’t take your eyes off him, can you?" Paul asked suddenly.

John turned for a moment to look at him, shaking his head, before returning to check Julian, "You know, I can’t let anything happen to him, just as I can’t let anything happen to me. We are only the two of us now, we have to take care of each other. I can’t leave my child like his mother did, and above all he can’t leave me. I wouldn’t bear it."

Paul moved to the bench, to turn better towards John.

"You'll see that nothing like that will ever happen, John, Julian is a good boy and you're a great father."

John snorted, as if he found Paul's last statement absolutely ridiculous.

"Yeah, as if…"

"I'm serious, John, I think there should be more fathers like you. Your life as a single parent isn’t easy, but you love him so much and you're doing everything for him. Your effort is so evident, you can clearly see it."

John felt himself blushing: he wasn’t used to receiving compliments, and receiving them from Paul on the most important aspect of his life was undoubtedly gratifying. So he turned back to him and smiled at him, this time stopping a little more to look into his eyes that transmitted so much courage and confidence.

"Hi, John." a voice said, interrupting that eye contact.

John turned immediately and Paul followed him. A little farther, near the slide on which Julian was playing, there was a woman holding a little girl by the hand: the woman was small, with long black hair, and the thing that struck Paul most was the oriental features of her face, features that could be glimpsed even on the child's face, most likely her daughter. The pose of the woman conveyed a lot of insecurity and shyness, and John greeted her warmly with his hand and above all with a big smile. She looked pleased with his answer and gave him a last nod, before leaving with the girl.

"Who is it?" Paul asked, genuinely interested.

"The mother of one of Julian’s friend from the kindergarten. Her name is Yoko, while the child who was with her is her daughter Kyoko."

"Yoko?" Paul repeated, "Is she Japanese?"

"Exactly." John replied, "She's been living here for a couple of years, I know she was in the United States before. She met her daughter's father, got married, but after the birth of Kyoko they split and
she moved here with the baby."

"I see." Paul said, nodding absently, "So she's a single parent, too."

John shrugged, "As far as I know, yes."

"And you’d like to..." Paul began leaving the sentence hanging in the air.

"I’d like to what?" John asked, frowning with obvious perplexity.

"Oh, come on, you got it." Paul cut short, feeling himself blush slightly.

He didn’t understand the reason of blushing, perhaps it was only because that was the first time that Paul talked with John about that aspect of his life, and John didn’t seem to want to make it easier.

"No, I don’t think so."

"Oh, come on." Paul sighed, resigned, "Would you like to ask her to go out with you?"

John blinked absolutely confused. He had never thought about this opportunity. Perhaps because he didn’t think he could find someone who could replace Cynthia for himself or for Julian. And anyway he didn’t think to find that person amongst other single parents. No, single parents meant other problems, problems that could be similar to his, or even more serious, but they were always problems and John didn’t really want to face others or even take charge of them. He already had too many on his own.

And thinking about it, he didn’t even have time for a possible relationship, what with the shop, the time spent with his son, the lessons with Paul and his second "job"... Well, it would have been fucking difficult to fit this other type of task.

"No."

"Why?"

"I just can’t."

"But there had been no one after Cynthia." Paul insisted, "You can’t go on being alone."

"One day, maybe, I’ll think about it." John replied, hoping to finish that conversation as soon as possible, "But now even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t have time."

Paul sighed, "There’s always time for these things, John."

John’s eyes widened, turning to Paul just in time to receive one of his most cheeky winks.

"Has anyone ever told you that you are a pain in the ass sometimes?" He asked, holding back a smile.

Paul laughed and nodded his head.

John didn’t know why at that moment, just at that moment he thought that what he was experiencing was really a lovely day.

"And you?" John asked.
"What?" Paul retorted, quickly becoming perplexed.

"How come you're so happy lately?"

Paul raised an eyebrow, very pleased, "You noticed, huh?"

"I would say it was impossible not to notice it. You ooze joy. In fact, you're all the opposite of when I met you." John commented.

"That's not true." Paul protested, pouting.

"Yes, it is." John replied, amused, "You were very serious and unfriendly, all reserved and closed to anything. And now look at you, you're so different."

"And is it good?"

"Sure, don't you think so?"

"Yes." Paul answered, nodding.

"So I wanted to know why you were so happy."

"Well, it's actually very simple." Paul answered, bowing his head and smiling because John had noticed his change, "A few days ago Jane told me that she will be in London in a couple of days. The film they shot in America is about to come out, so she is going to have interviews and other stuff like that and then there will be the premiere here. She'll be very busy, it's true, but at least she'll be with me."

John nodded, "I see. I'm really glad about it, Paul."

"Thank you." the young man said, "And then obviously the work has also influenced."

"How?" John asked, more interested, and Paul looked at him mischievously.

"I arrested the fake Hermes, right?"

John remained totally apathetic for a moment, surprised to have come so suddenly to a subject so dangerous for him to deal with Paul. Once he would have been bolder and happier to talk to the inspector about his work. But now that guilty feeling, because let's face it, it really was guilty, made this whole situation more complicated, and John began to think it was getting out of his hand.

"Oh yes, of course." he hurried to reply, "I read it in the newspaper! Congratulation! It was a great change."

"Thank you." Paul exclaimed, smiling happily at the compliment, "This isn't the real Hermes, you know, but I'm satisfied. It was much more dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"I think he has serious mental problems. And I have to admit that if the true Hermes hadn't intervened, I could have been killed by that impostor."

"Oh fuck." John commented, trying to look as surprised as he could, "So it's true that he saved your life?"

"Well..." Paul began to explain, biting his lip, "Yeah, kind of. He could not do that, but he did,
actually, I think he wanted to do it. And then I let him run away."

"Did you?"

Paul nodded thoughtfully, "I could have arrested him too that night. There was a moment when he was right there in front of me and maybe he was waiting for me to arrest him, but then I didn’t move, I just couldn’t. So, I stayed still and if he wanted to save me, well, I wanted to let him go."

"Well, this is weird. It's really weird of you." John noted impressed.

"I know, and I was also scolded by Inspector Starkey for this reason, but it was stronger than me. I couldn’t get him, not that night." Paul said, shaking his head helplessly.

Paul’s feeling of having to do with something he didn’t know well, something bigger than him, was what drove John to keep on with that conversation. It was dangerous, yes, but never so interesting.

"Why?"

"Because I was grateful to him." Paul answered, sincere.

"And so, now that he saved your life, do you hate him a little less?"

Paul bit his lip, before looking at John, "I don’t really know."

John became aware of his confusion and blamed himself for asking such a stupid question. Paul was so cheerful until a few minutes before that the last thing John wanted to do was ruin the mood that made him so incredibly... beautiful!

Not that John found him as handsome as Jane could have done, fucking hell! But it was the right word to use in that case. His laugh was beautiful, the way he joked with Julian was beautiful and just few minutes before with John, he was beautiful in every single expression.

That was it. On that beautiful sunny day, Paul for John was absolutely beautiful.

So John tried to save him once again, trying to push away this feeling of self-doubt that had arisen in Paul. Nothing had to ruin that day.

"Sorry, it's a stupid question." He hurried to say, "Don’t bother about it."

"But-"

"But nothing. Now you just have to think about getting him, right? And since you went so close, I think it won’t be long until you’ll succeed. Next time will be better."

Asshole!

That’s what John was.

He quietly called himself asshole and with a good reason. What the fuck was going on? Why did he say those things? Why did he keep encouraging Paul against his own good?

Why?

He had no reason. Paul was Hermes’ enemy and John had to think first of all about the good of his alter ego, not about Paul’s.
Yet there was an answer to that question, a very valid one.

The confident smile Paul gave him right away was exactly why John said all those things. It was worth it, oh yes.

John felt it with every fiber of his body, his heart jumped a little, he felt it was the right thing to do, just to see that beauty again in Paul.

"Thanks, John."

The realization upset him very much, indeed enough to make him feel totally embarrassed.

"You’re welcome." he mumbled annoyed, not against Paul, but against himself, "And never do it again."

"What?"

"Let me spoil a beautiful day like this."

Paul laughed and before John could blush under his gaze so full of gratitude, friendship, warmth, he returned to look at Julian.

"You know, I think we could make this nice day even better." Paul said, recovering all his enthusiasm.

"How?"

"Why don’t we rent a movie, get some junk food and go back to my place?" Paul suggested.

"To your house?" John asked uncertainly.

"Yes, so you’ll be able to check that Pepper is still alive."

John let out a laugh, "Actually, Julian was worried. We both were. And I miss some good junk food."

"So, are you in?"

The happiness, the beauty of Paul were so contagious that John had no choice.

"If you insist…"

*****

*Beyond the sea*'s melody echoed in the living room, while the ending credits for *Finding Nemo* were passing on the television.

They had chosen that movie because it was Julian's favourite, and John, smiling apologetically towards Paul, had pleased him, even if it seemed he knew all the lines in the movie. After that they had gone to McDonald's to buy cheeseburgers and lots of chips and finally they had come to Paul's house. Here Paul, helped by Julian, fed Pepper and while the child was playing with him, the two men set up their dinner in the living room, in front of the television.

They ate and then laughed and suffered along with the characters in the movie, and now that it was over, Paul sighed satisfied. He had never seen the movie before and had to admit he liked it. He almost understood why Julian liked him so much. After all, he was a bit like Nemo, who lived with
a loving, caring and yes, definitely anxious dad. Maybe John wasn’t exactly as Nemo's daddy, but Paul knew that John would do anything for Julian and that he was equally frightened that something could happen to the kid.

At that thought, Paul turned to his left and a smile was born spontaneously on his face: Julian slept huddled between him and John and even the latter seemed to be fast asleep, his head had fallen to the right and his hand was resting on the legs of the child.

Paul just moved to settle on his side and look better at both of them. It was useless to say that Julian looked like an angel while he slept. After all, he always did, what with his blonde hair and those sweet features. While John... John slept so peacefully that he really didn’t seem like he could sometimes be so witty and mocking when he was awake. Paul would have wanted John to be always so peaceful, as if he had no problems, no worries about the future or about what kind of father he was for Julian.

He wished John could spend forever some good days like the one they had just spent. He deserved it and Paul promised himself that he would try to contribute, within the limits of his possibilities.

Then sighing, Paul reached out and tried to gently shake John's shoulder, whispering his name.

In response, John closed his eyes even more, murmuring in protest to anyone trying to wake him up. But Paul laughed and insisted on his task, until John opened his clear eyes which immediately locked Paul's darker ones.

"Good morning."

John made a sleepy grimace and took off his glasses to rub his eyes.

"What time is it?" he asked, his voice drowsy.

"Almost half past ten."

John sighed and immediately couldn’t hold back a yawn, "Did I fall asleep?"

"I really think you did, but you're not the only one."

John looked at the child next to him, noticing that he was into dreamland. He smiled thinking that he should now take him home on his back.

"I'm sorry, we weren't much as a company."

Paul chuckled as he got up to get the DVD out of the reader.

"Don't worry." he reassured him, pressing the button to turn it off, "The movie has finished exactly in the same way as usual. Besides, today was such a busy day."

"Yup." John confirmed, before gently raising the child in his arms and making him rest his head on his shoulder, "It was also a beautiful day."

"We should do it more often." Paul proposed, returning to sit next to John.

He couldn’t stop himself from looking him in the eye, but thinking that maybe he was wrong to say something like that, because... Well, he really didn’t know why, there was this silly little voice inside his head that told him that the more he was with that man, the worst it was. But Paul had learned to ignore it, mainly because John had that magnetic look that made everything else seem
completely useless and because he always found ways to make him understand that this was right.

"We should." he said, as Julian moved just to hide his face in his father's neck.

Paul smiled and felt John's gaze on him, even as he looked for the remote control to turn down the volume of the TV that was now tuned in to the ITV1 channel. He certainly didn't want to wake Julian up. He looked so blissful and comfortable in John's arms, as if he were in the right place for him, as if-

"Hey, isn't that Jane?" John asked, all of a sudden, and adjusted his glasses on his nose.

Paul snapped his head up and saw the face of his girlfriend on the screen.

"What is she doing there?" his friend continued.

It was what Paul wanted to know. Of course it was normal to find someone talking about Jane from time to time, but the picture that had just appeared on the screen, made Paul think of something different.

The show's host was sitting on a crimson-colored sofa, and on the monitors behind him there was a picture of Jane, with big sunglasses and a white hat with a little flower on her long red hair. Paul knew that show: it was a late-night show that talked about celebrity gossip, and Paul had always thought that they would broadcast it at that time of the night to induce the viewers to sleep. But now the question was another: why were they talking about Jane?

"... it seems so, ladies and gentlemen, Jane Asher, the girl next door. She barely shows herself in public, but when she does, bloody hell, if she has style."

Paul still didn't understand what was happening. He only understood that among the audience's laughter and John who kept throwing strange looks in his direction, he was getting nervous.

"It seems that the beautiful actress was caught by paparazzi in Le Havre, France, while she was in good company."

Now, what exactly meant "good company"?

Paul didn't know, at least until the show's direction showed other photos about Jane walking hand in hand with a man who evidently wasn't Paul, because Paul had never been to Le Havre and certainly hadn't gone there with Jane or with anyone else. Yet there was a man with her, a man hugging her, a man all intent on kissing her.

But that man, logically, wasn't Paul.

"Paul, maybe it would be better if-" John began to say, but Paul didn't seem to listen.

At that moment he just had to know who was the man who wasn't Paul. And it seemed that the host read in his mind.

"The man with Asher is David Donovan, a famous Hollywood film producer, met in New York on the set of her latest film. Needless to say, the relationship started on that occasion."

But no, how could it be? While in New York, Jane called him and told him that she missed him. No, maybe the girl in the photo wasn't even Jane.

Yet in those photos it seemed just her. Paul remembered well when she bought that white hat with
the little flower on the side. He was there too.

"We know that Jane has been dating a police inspector for some time. We ask ourselves at this point how he reacted. We hope that our inspector won’t decide to arrest Donovan." The man joked, before giggling, causing the annoying laughter of the audience.

God, how much he hated those useless shows.

"Paul?" John tried to call him gently, with extreme caution.

But Paul didn’t answer. He knew what question would follow and he wouldn’t really know how to answer.

What can you say when all your certainties are shattered so suddenly, with the simple snap of a photo?

"Paul, how are you?"

How was he?

Well, wasn’t it obvious?

As if that was the worst day of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, there. Merry Christmas, even if it's late, and Happy new year. I'm really sorry about the delay. It was a very busy period. And Paul's concert was absolutely amazing, I mean, there was also Ringo. Too much joy for me. But I'll write a post on tumblr about the concert. :3 Anyway, here we have a new chapter. I hope you liked it. Paul and John's relationship is becoming closer and closer. Let me know what you think about. ;) New chapter, You're gonna lose that girl, is coming soon. I'll do my best. Bye for now. Chiara
The ringing phone echoed in the room, making Paul startle in his bed. He just grumbled annoyed and flipped on the other side.

_Ring as much as you want!,_ he thought closing his eyes. _Did he really care to answer now?_ 

The phone did nothing but ring in the last days, but he never picked it up. He knew who he would find on the other end of the line: Jane, the one Paul believed to be his girlfriend.

A thought that evidently no longer belonged to him alone, since the young and beautiful actress had been surprised with another man, a very different one from Paul: tall, blond, a head of hair in which Jane could dive her thin fingers, and then green eyes and a really fit body.

Basically, the exact opposite of Paul.

However, the really important thing was that Jane had cheated on him, and who knows how long this story was going on. Weirdly enough, it was something that Paul was interested in, more than the reason Jane had done it.

Perhaps Paul could have found out if he had answered one of Jane’s hundreds of phone calls. Yet Paul just didn’t want to answer; as soon as he recognized the number of her cell phone on the display, he refused the call: he wasn’t ready to put up with her _'let me explain, I'm sorry, forgive me...'_

They were useless words because obviously she couldn’t be sorry for something that had given her pleasure, and surely there was no explanation that could justify such behaviour. Also because from the pictures Paul had seen practically everywhere, it was clear that Jane was very different from when she was with him.

The day before Paul went out as usual to go to work, and passing the newsstand saw a series of tabloids that he usually ignored, but that day he was forced to stop and buy one. Jane's pictures and... what was his bloody name? Daniel? Darren?

David, of course, his name was _David_.

Well, the pictures of Jane and David were everywhere now, and Paul wanted to look at them well, in the safety of his home.

His workday was a torment, everyone asking him _'How are you? Do you need anything?’_ And he, even appreciating their interest and concern, replied that he absolutely didn’t need anything and was well. Of course, it was a fucking lie, but what else could he say? It wasn’t just as if he could show himself vulnerable and suffering in front of them. The workplace, especially that kind of work, needed him to be always ready, active, strong.
And now that his strength had collapsed, Paul had to wear that mask just so he could go on at least in his work. It was a heavy and annoying mask, but he couldn’t let that story ruin his life entirely. He knew he was still good at what he did. He hadn’t arrested Hermes yet, but he was sure he would. Of course, he had been scolded for practically letting him run away, and probably someone at the police station was beginning to doubt his skills, but Paul wouldn’t let himself be discouraged, not in this important part of his life. There were still those who believed in him: first of all himself and then some colleagues. And John too, of course. John had always had encouraging words for him, and Paul had to admit that he often clung to John’s trust in him, it was a good grip to grab in order to recover in moments of total despair.

Even now, now that he was lying in bed, without strength.

He couldn’t sleep that night, after reading the newspaper he had bought, but Paul still tried to sit up, leaning his back on the pillows. He grabbed the newspaper again, which he abandoned it by his side the night before, and leafed through it, returning to the main article.

The title was reported in very large characters, it said, 'Jane Asher, scenes from *La vie en rose*'. Below there was a sequence of photos that Paul already knew very well, but he seemed to find something different in Jane every time he looked at them: a new dimple on her cheek, the intertwined hands of the two lovers, her arms wrapped with passion around his neck...

That wasn’t Jane, or at least it wasn’t the girl he’d met, reserved, shy, sweet. This girl was now changed, grew up, she was a confident young woman, who knew she had a bright future ahead, and above all a girl who knew she no longer loved the man she had in London. Because, come on, it was obvious that Jane didn’t love him anymore. It was a thought that had often come into his head, but Paul always refused to consider it deeply, too attached to what they had been, too attached to the past. Now, as those photos showed, now Jane was letting go of the insecure girl she had been, she was letting go of her past, and who knows if Paul shouldn’t do the same.

Perhaps Paul was also ready to take that step. He didn’t know what the future would give him, but surely Jane wouldn’t be in it.

Was it painful? Yes, a lot.

Was it difficult? Yes, obviously.

But most of all it was *right*.

*****

Five, six, seven and... wow, how many were there?

A dozen of paparazzi just for Paul?

When John woke up that morning, he certainly didn’t expect to find his neighbour's house, a series of journalists and photographers ready to take Paul by surprise when he would leave the house.

He noticed them while he was preparing Julian for the summer nursery school, and even Pattie was particularly surprised when she arrived to pick up the baby.

"He's just like a princess locked up in a castle, prisoner of an evil dragon." the girl said, making Julian laugh.

Now John stared thoughtfully from his window, wondering if Paul, the princess, had already seen those photographers and especially if he was fine. The day before he glimpsed him as he left the
house, but he didn’t have time to talk to him. The problem was that he didn’t seem particularly upset, as John expected. Instead, it seemed to Paul that it was an ordinary day, not the one he had to face the betrayal of his girlfriend.

And maybe that was what worried John most, because yes, he was worried, he was very worried, so much, in fact, that he didn’t think much when he took the phone to call Paul.

The dial tone echoed in his ear for several moments and John waited patiently for Paul to answer, but the man seemed not to be willing to do it, or maybe he was just still sleeping.

John sighed and was about to end the call, when, finally, Paul answered.

"Hello?"

His voice was deep and tired, but it made John jump with joy.

"Do not leave the house!" John told him at once.

"What? John, what are you saying?" Paul asked, confused.

"Did you see the paparazzi outside your house?"

Paul hesitated a moment before replying, "Paparazzi?"

"Yes, they’re here ready to surprise you as soon as you step outside the house."

"Oh fuck, no." Paul swore, with total frustration, "I’m off today, I wanted to go out this morning."

Paul’s despair came to him, and even John could now see him as a princess imprisoned in the tallest tower of a castle. And everyone knows what a princess needs in these cases...

"Well, maybe I could help you." John asked hesitantly.

He felt very much like a prince that day. He certainly wasn’t charming nor he had the shining armor, nor a white horse, but he had the courage and the desire to save the princess in danger.

"How?" Paul asked, obviously not convinced that John could solve the situation.

However, John wasn’t discouraged and he let out a laugh, "I’m sure I’ll be able to come up with something."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don’t know, you said you’re off today?"

"Yeah, today I just wanted to leave the house to..." Paul explained, the tone of his voice suddenly became more sad and feeble, "You know, not to hear the phone."

"Sure." John answered, fully understanding the situation, "So you think that down there, at the police station, they’ll be very angry if I send them in that direction?"

There was silence for a moment at the other end of the line, and then John heard something that somehow calmed him and further encouraged him: Paul’s laughter.

"No, it’ll be fine."
"Perfect, then leave it to me and if you want..." he said, and this time, for some strange reason, it was he who lowered his voice, "Afterwards we could..."

"What?"

"Well, if you need someone to talk or just to take your mind off it..." John began to explain, trying to find the voice to speak, "I mean, I wanted to let you know that you can count on me."

Still silent, and John didn’t know how to interpret it, but something in him was hoping, and perhaps he was really convinced, that Paul was smiling, just a little, thanks to him.

"Thank you, John, but by now I just want to be alone." was Paul's reply, and John tried to hide his disappointment.

"Of course, yes, I understand, no problem. It was just to let you know." He hurried to add.

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Well, then I’ll go on a mission."

"Good luck, John."

"Have a nice day, Paul."

Then the busy signal told him that Paul had interrupted the call.

John looked at the phone for a moment, biting his lip. He really hoped that Paul wanted to see him, but clearly he didn’t need him as much as John needed to check by himself that he was fine. And the thought for some reason saddened him, as well as disturbed him. It wasn’t normal and not just because Paul was still his nemesis. There was some other reason John couldn’t quite identify: it was something that gripped his heart at the idea that Paul was suffering, the same thing that foolishly made him look up at Paul's window when John left his house. It was a totally useless and stupid gesture because John hoped to see him, only for a moment, but he knew it was impossible because now that he had been warned of the paparazzi, Paul would never, ever, risk being seen.

So why was he looking in vain for his face behind those white curtains?

Because John wanted Paul to see his performance as a professional liar, that's why. It had to be for that reason and after all, it was what best represented John: a liar who was building that new relationship only on lies, and he would never have thought that a lie could turn into something so fucking true. Yet it had happened and-

Enough now, John, how many bullshit!

John sighed and only then did he notice the slightly accelerated rhythm of his heart. Oh, he knew that he was inevitably entering into something bigger than him, that he couldn’t handle nor he knew what it was; yet it wasn’t really time to think about it. Right now it only mattered to save the captive princess in the castle.

So he approached the group of journalists and photographers and cleared his throat.

"If you're looking for Inspector McCartney, you certainly won’t find him at home."

The group of men and women immediately turned to him, someone even managed to take a photo of him, catching him by surprise with the flash. John closed his eyes, annoyed, raising a hand to
"Who are you?" a woman asked, who immediately grabbed a small recorder from her pocket and turned it towards him.

John looked at her with an annoyed grimace, "His neighbour."

"So you’re saying Mr. McCartney isn’t here right now?"

"Yeah, madame, I’m saying just that! I saw him going at work."

"Can you tell us where?" a man insisted.

"Sure." John said, smiling because they were really believing what he was saying, "At the police station in Walton Street."

"Thank you." someone said and immediately the whole group trotted towards the main road, disappearing around the corner.

"No, thanks to you." John murmured, giggling amused.

He had done it. Not that he didn’t think he could do it, but it had been easier than expected.

Satisfied, John turned around to go and open his shop, but stopped when he heard light taps at the window. He looked up and when he saw Paul's face behind a curtain, his heart made a little back flip.

_Foolish John!_

Paul waved at him, smiling and thanking him with a nod, and John greeted him back in exactly the same way.

When John opened his shop a few minutes later, he felt relieved and happy.

Saving a princess was a good way to start the day.

*****

The weather in those days was strangely benevolent. It gave beautiful days, with sun shining high in the clear sky, not even a cloud on the horizon and an ideal temperature for walking.

Paul, after being freed by John from his prison, had left his apartment and had taken the first train to the city center. He didn’t know exactly where he wanted to go, the only certain thing was that he wanted to get away as far as he could from Chelsea and those fucking paparazzi. So he went to Westminster, and when he came out of the tube, he found himself right under the imposing Big Ben.

It really had a great impact, seeing it from that position: it stood out majestically against the clear sky, and behind it, the House of Parliament stretched out.

How many times had Paul been there, but without really appreciating it? Last time he went with Jane, and they had a lot of fun, but still he had to satisfy her wishes. Now he could be a solitary tourist, choosing what to see, when to go, what to eat and everything that he had never been able to decide in his previous visits to London, because there were other people with him.

Like for example, the London Eye right opposite to the Big Ben. Here, Paul had never gone on it.
Jane didn’t want to because she’d suffer from vertigo. Yet for Paul it seemed so damn exciting, with its position so prominent on the river and that height... God, it was very high, but Paul wasn’t afraid. He was a policeman, after all. An inspector, thank you.

So he crossed the bridge over the Thames and reached the London Eye. He bought the ticket, and before getting into the cabins that, it seemed, were always moving, he put his sunglasses on his nose. He certainly didn’t want to be blinded by the sun shining hard that day.

The cabins were moving slowly, rising more and more and Paul remained close to the glass walls all the time, so as to be able to see the mainland beneath him moving away and becoming smaller. The people on the bridge looked so small, like so many little ants walking one behind the other. Paul chuckled and turned to the right. It was an unconscious gesture, he almost didn’t realize it, but he knew he was looking for someone next to him, to share his thoughts.

He was looking for Jane.

But Jane wasn’t there, Paul had lost her by now.

He sighed resignedly, thinking of the future that awaited him: it would always be like that, Paul couldn’t share anything with Jane anymore. He blushed both out of anger, and because a group of girls were looking in his direction and giggling foolishly, so he decided to go back to look out of the cabin.

Perhaps a romantic ferris wheel wasn’t exactly the best place to forget a love story that had come to an end.

Maybe he should have tried something else.

He decided to go to Piccadilly. It was a unique area full of life by day and especially at night, with all the theatres and entertainment venues. Of course, it was also full of tourists, real tourists, coming from distant countries to visit London city, and not from the near neighbourhood like Paul. However, there was an advantage: they instilled a lot of joy, made Paul feel less alone, at that moment and prevented him from thinking too much about his problems.

He had chosen the right place.

The young man looked at the shop windows, letting himself be cheered up by the tourists who crowded the shops to spend all their savings, and then the neon signs of the theatres, the posters of upcoming shows and... fuck!

No, it couldn’t be.

What was she doing there?

She, Jane Asher, always and only her.

Paul closed his eyes for a moment, trying to calm down, and then slowly opened them again. Fortunately, Jane wasn’t really there, in front of him, in the flesh. No, otherwise Paul would have gone mad.

Jane was in a movie poster.

Walking around, Paul didn’t realize he had reached the Odeon cinema, famous for hosting movie premieres, and even now it seemed that they had chosen that very cinema for the premiere of Jane’s new movie. It was covered with posters in which his gir-
No, where Jane was between her two male co-stars. She was dressed in black, her long red hair stood out making her so beautiful and her smile was sweet and cheeky. It was that smile that always made Paul Crazy. The girl in the poster, though, was acting, and this made Paul doubt even the smiles that she addressed to him. Had she ever been sincere with him, or had she also acted with Paul?

What was he thinking? It was unfair from him, a wrong thought due to his anger and loneliness.

Going out to be a tourist turned out to be a bad idea. It wasn’t fun, visit all those beautiful places, if he couldn’t share them with someone. So, reluctantly, he decided to go home. At least Pepper was there to keep him company. It was a nice distraction, that kitten. He was so lively and curious, but also lovely and warm. Life with it in that silent house was much more interesting.

Before coming back home, Paul stopped to buy some milk for Pepper. Thinking of it reminded him that the last pack had finished that morning; then finally he headed home. Luckily there were no paparazzi.

John's trick had worked, he thought smiling, as he entered the house. He went toward the kitchen, calling Pepper and-

"Hello, Paul."

Paul startled into the hallway and looked into the living room, noticing Jane, Jane Asher herself sitting on the couch.

He probably gave her a bewildered look that was saying, 'What the hell are you doing here?', because she smiled intimidated and raised her hand clutching a bunch of keys. Paul rolled his eyes, swearing to himself: he gave her the keys to his apartment when she came to see him. Of course!

"I'm sorry I came in like that." she said, standing up, "But I saw some paparazzi in the neighbourhood and it would have been risky waiting for you outside."

"Risky?" Paul snapped, laughing without any fun, "Now you’ve become very aware of the risk of being seen, haven’t you?"

Jane blushed dramatically and Paul cheered silently, maliciously. He had never felt like that, as if he wanted to tell her the worst things he could think of her, as if he wanted to make her suffer in the same way she was doing with him.

Paul knew why Jane was at home now: he had been fearing that moment since he had learned of her secret relationship with another man. He feared it because he knew what would happen, what she would say and how much greater and more unbearable could become his pain.

"Paul, please." Jane sighed, frustrated before she started explaining, "I'm here to discuss politely."

The sardonic smile on Paul's face disappeared in front of such absurd statements and he let himself go to the only thing he wanted to show her now: anger.

"Politely? Fuck you, Jane, there's absolutely nothing polite about this, you cheated on me, you fucking cheated on me. Remember me? I was supposed to be your boyfriend." Paul pointed out, perhaps because Jane hadn’t understood the gravity of her actions yet.

"I know, but-" she began to say, but Paul didn’t seem to have any intention of letting her talk.

"And the most absurd thing about this fucking story is that it became the headline of the worst
Paul yelled, raising his voice, showing all his resentment because the whole world now knew that he was the one betrayed by the beautiful Jane Asher, "Do you know that I found out by chance on television? Do you know what it's like? How helpless I was? As if I meant less than anyone else to you?"

"I'm sorry, I was going to tell you about it." she explained, trying to get closer to him.

She looked really sorry and sincere, but how could Paul believe all this when he had lost the trust he had placed in her when he realized he loved her?

"Were you? And precisely, you were planning on telling me when?"

Jane, caught off guard, looked down, "I... I don’t know, but I swear I decided to tell you.

"Well, I don’t need your useless decisions anymore." he snapped, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Stop doing that, Paul." Jane begged, imploring him with her eyes, "Can I at least explain you?"

"Is there really anything to explain? It seems to me it’s clear enough. Those photos said everything necessary."

"It's not true, there's a lot to explain. Please, Paul, sit down for a moment."

Paul, feeling his face burning and, above all, being sure he had no intention of knowing the details of that story, decided that it would be wise to do what Jane was asking. Perhaps for the last time.

So he sat down on the sofa and Jane sat next to him, turning completely to look at him; and as she carefully selected the right words to explain what had happened, Paul gave her an expression of expectation, with a raised eyebrow, as if to say, 'So what?'

"I met David on the set of the film, in New York." She began to explain with a deep sigh.

"Yes, I know that, I know all about him now." Paul cut off, "How long has it been going on?"

"A few months."

"A few months?" Paul repeated, surprised and bewildered, "Shit, Jane, but... Why?"

"Because I'm in love with him."

Important words, in love.

And normally Jane would have associated them with Paul’s name. But now... now Jane was there, in front of Paul, talking about her love for another man, while Paul’s heart seemed to have shrunk by three sizes and now it was a small, hard stone that could no longer beat and keep him alive.

Finally Paul's worst nightmare had come true, he had lost Jane because he hadn’t been able to keep her love. And repeating what she had just said wouldn’t solve anything, but Paul couldn’t do anything else.

"In... In love?"

"Very much. I... Paul, I'm sorry, but it was stronger than me." she confessed helplessly, continuing to look at him in the eyes, "We can’t choose who or when to fall in love, and that's exactly what happened. He was so funny and made me feel so good."
"And I didn’t?" He asked, deeply resented by Jane's last words.

"I didn’t say that." Jane said quickly, "But you were far away, we couldn’t see each other often. At the beginning I missed you desperately, but then I started getting used to it and even though I knew it was a bad sign, I went on like that, until he got interested in me."

"And you accepted his attentions." Paul finished, as it was taken for granted.

Jane sighed and nodded slowly, "Yes, and before I knew it, I was madly in love with him."

Paul closed his eyes for a moment, the room had begun to swirl and he couldn’t stand it, just as he couldn’t stand Jane's eyes, who steadily looked at him, firmly, a look that never wavered as she talked about her new feeling. Perhaps this was what, most of all, made Paul suffer. Jane was in love with someone else's and she was sure that was the best thing for her now. This only meant that there was no more hope for Paul.

His heart was tight in a painful grip, which had no intention of loosening its grip. It really hurt, so much that Paul, for the first time since his mother's death, felt a desire to cry.

"Paul, I'm so sorry, but I had to tell you the truth." Jane murmured, leaning towards him, trying to rest a hand on his shoulder, "It's not just a fling. It's a serious relationship, and I needed to let you know, before we br-"

Paul lifted a hand to silence her and move her arm away from himself, "Please go now."

"But, Paul-" she protested, trying once again to touch him.

"Shit, Jane." The man cut off, and pulled her aside as if he had just burned himself, "Go away."

Jane bit her lip, deeply contrite, then stood up, "I hope one day you’ll forgive me."

Paul didn’t bother to answer, he just couldn’t; he remained silent as he heard her leave the house and close the door behind her.

And only at that moment, the young man really felt the loneliness, which had returned forcefully to his home. It was always cold and too silent. It made the loss of Jane's love even more excruciating.

Paul couldn’t bear it. Not alone. He was on the edge of a ravine where he was sliding in slowly, and only that night he discovered that he had been in that situation for a long time.

He needed a hand to keep him safe.

He needed to be saved.

*****

John sighed, reading the newspaper he bought that morning.

Every day something happened, but in fact the real reason John bought it was because he hoped to find something interesting about Paul's girlfriend. Surely it would be easier to buy a tabloid, but he was too ashamed. Not that the newsagent could have cared much about what one of his clients read, but John didn’t want to take any chances. And then everyone knew that the English press, whatever it was, was thirsty for gossip.

In fact, on the show’s section there was a small paragraph with the picture of Jane and the handsome guy. There wasn’t much more written in the article than what John already knew, yet
something caught his attention.

"...In addition, Mr. Donovan will be in London next week for the inauguration of a movie museum near the National Gallery. The museum has been personally edited by the film producer and collects some of the relics from Hollywood history and not only. For more information check the website, etc..."

John frowned thoughtfully. A museum about cinema?

He didn’t have much to do with cinema, but he could always try to do some research. If he was lucky, he could find something interesting.

And then? Would he steal it?

Yes, sure.

But why? Why was he so worried about looking for something interesting to steal from that man?

Because stealing was his job. No?

Or maybe it had to do with the connection between Paul and that man?

No, no, absolutely not. It wasn’t like that at all. It wasn’t possible. It wasn’t-

The ring of the phone made him jump on the couch. And when he saw who was calling him, even his heart jumped.

Paul.

He thought he wouldn’t talk to him at least for that day, instead... Here he was! John was so curious about why he was calling him that he hurried to answer.

"Hello?"

A brief moment of silence that John interpreted as hesitation, and then finally Paul's voice, "Is your offer still valid?"

John didn’t realize it, but he was literally speechless.

"Sure."

"So, do you think we can meet tonight?"

"Yes." John replied, perhaps too quickly, "Let me arrange to entrust Julian to George and Pattie, and then we can go anywhere you want."

"Thanks, John." he said, his sweet and suffering tone.

“Don’t mention it. See you later."

"Yeah, see you later."

John ended the call and sighed. For heaven’s sake, he didn’t really hold his breath for the entire call, did he? Yet now he was breathing hard and his heart beating a little faster.

He absolutely had to calm down and think clearly about what had just happened: Paul called to ask
him out and his voice seemed so sad, that now John just wanted to be sure that he was fine. Something important must have happened, since that morning Paul talked to him very differently, he also laughed.

So it seemed that the princess needed his help again. And John, useless to deny it, was more than happy to give it to him.

He looked at Julian, who played quietly on the carpet with his toy cars and smiled, "Hey, baby, would you like George and Pattie to come tonight with you, while Dad goes out?"

"Where are you going?" The child asked absently, without taking his eyes off his games.

"I'm going out with Paul." he replied, getting up from the couch and going to sit next to his son, "You know, he's a bit sad these days."

At that point, Julian turned to him to ask him a curious look, "Why?"

"Because his girlfriend lied to him."

"And will you make him feel better?"

"I'll try." John replied, "So it's ok with you, if I'm not here tonight?"

"All right, but now you have to play with me." the child said, catching John by surprise and throwing himself into his arms.

John laughed a little and willingly submitted to his son's desire, playing with him. They made a race with toy cars and of course Julian's won, but John took revenge, taking him in his arms and tickling him, and Julian's bright laugh filled the room.

Then, as the child washed his hands for dinner, John called George to ask if he and Pattie could look after Julian that night, and if George could even investigate about the movie museum he had read in the paper. George accepted, although he was puzzled by John's last request, who reassured him that he would explain everything in due time.

When John and Julian had dinner quietly in the kitchen, the man began to feel strangely agitated. The reason must surely have something to do with Paul, but John didn't understand why. After all, it wasn't the first time he went out with Paul to have a drink, but this time was different.

It seemed so dangerously different.

*****

Paul looked fucking pale.

John noticed it only when he left his apartment. He had well-marked dark circles and a beard of at least two days, which created a special effect on his face: it seemed to be in contrast with those delicate features and his doe eyes, but also perfectly combined with the beauty of his face.

It was however useless to say that he wasn't spending a good moment. That joy that John had seen only on the Sunday before, had been turned off and now there were only shadows. John preferred not to say anything about it until Paul had done it himself.

So they walked to a pub not far from their homes, and sitting at a table, they started drinking beer and talking. Paul told him about the beautiful sightseeing that he had made that morning and John
listened interested, knowing well enough that it wasn’t the reason why Paul had expressed the desire to see him.

When the consumed beer began to increase, the situation changed and Paul decided to switch to a completely different kind of drink. Something stronger, a bit of whiskey, the powerful one, so much to make him forget his own name. John tried to stop him, but Paul had no intention of giving it up, not even when a strange reddish colour began to spread on his chubby cheeks and his eyes clouded.

As if that could be the solution to all his problems.

However John knew he couldn’t say such trivialities, it would only make the situation worse because when someone starts getting drunk, they becomes totally hostile towards anything. And when someone who tries to drown their sorrows in alcohol, gets drunk, well, then everything becomes unpredictable. So John waited and watched as even the whiskey glasses increased on the table and Paul began to talk nonsense.

"I knew it, you know?" Paul burst out at one point, and the giggling that followed was proof that he was totally drunk.

"What?" John asked softly.

"I knew that sooner or later it would come to an end, what else?"

John sighed, intertwining his hands on the table. Well, he knew that they would come to that subject, sooner or later, during the evening.

"Why?"

"We were like brothers by now, brothers who fucked." Paul said and burst out laughing with a sudden movement of his body that made a glass of whiskey spill on the table.

"Paul, fuck." John cursed, hurrying to search napkins to dry up the mess he'd made.

"What? It's true, you know? Although there was no longer the same passion and understanding as in the early days." he murmured, calming himself suddenly, and he crossed his arms on the table, "But knowing that she has fallen in love with someone else is too difficult to accept."

John blinked, looking at him now with obvious surprise, "In love?"

"Yes." Paul sighed and dropped his head on his arms, "She told me so."

"When?"

"Didn’t I tell you? No, of course not, how stupid I am." he cried, slapping his forehead before John could stop him, "I found her at home when I came back this afternoon."

"That was a surprise!" John commented, and Paul laughed weakly.

"You're damn right."

"So she explained everything?"

Paul nodded absently, while with one finger he was drawing invisible circles on the table, "The distance and our cooled relationship pushed her into the arms of another."
"I'm sorry, Paul." John told him, putting a hand on Paul's forearm.

"I thought it would last forever." And John didn’t know whether to attribute the sob that followed to the alcohol or to Paul’s suffering.

In any case, it was terribly disheartening, seeing him in that condition, knowing how happy he was until a few days ago. And like disheartening was the fact that John couldn’t try the right words to cheer him up, he was totally helpless in front of him, so he said the most ordinary thing that came to his mind.

"We can never know what kind of plan life has for us."

Paul sobbed and looked at his hand resting on his forearm: it seemed to instill in him a kind of sweetness that just wanted to cheer him up and see him feeling better.

However, it was too light of a sensation to soothe all the pain that was devouring him from within as if it were endless, as if Paul were to suffer forever, and there was no glimmer of salvation.

"Fuck, everything is falling apart. Everything!" He cried, hiding his face in his hands with a frustrated gesture.

"No, no, don’t say that, it's not true." John protested, but he wasn’t ready to suffer Paul’s reaction.

"What do you know?" The young man snapped, shaking off John's hand, "Jane was my real love. You know what it means, when you think it will last forever, and instead everything falls apart like a house of cards and you can’t do anything?"

John bit his lip nervously and looked down. How could he not know it? He knew it fucking well, he knew it as well as Paul did.

"Yes." he answered quietly.

Only at that moment, with his answer, with his calm that came to Paul, he understood that John knew better than anyone else what he was feeling. The only thing Paul could do in that very moment was feeling ashamed.

"I’m…sorry, John, I… I didn’t want to, I’m so sorry-"

"It doesn’t matter, you're drunk and your girlfriend cheated on you, I think you're justified.” John said, smiling and winking at him, “Only this time, you know."

Paul laughed, but the action made his head spin, "O-oh."

"What?" John asked, suddenly alarmed.

"I feel like throwing up."

"Oh no, fuck, not here."

As soon as John said this, he grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out. Paul followed him staggering dangerously, and when they were outside, John led him into the first alley he found on his way, just in time for Paul to throw up even his soul. Now, with all that poison, in the form of pain and alcohol, out of his body, Paul would feel much better.

John stood beside him the whole time, while the gagging shook his body violently, and when the worst had passed, Paul collapsed to the ground with his back against the wall. He left his head back
and closed his eyes.

"My head is spinning."

"I hope it is, what with you've just thrown up." John told him bitterly, noticing how pale he was now and the tears that had wet his cheeks, during the effort of a few moments before.

Paul murmured as he put a hand on his forehead, "I feel sick, John."

"You'll be better tomorrow. I promise you." John assured him, crouching in front of him.

"I would like it now."

And at that moment he seemed so innocent, his lips parted in an expression of utter despondency and his eyes shining with tears trapped in his long lashes, that John felt his heart tighten painfully.

It was a feeling too unusual for John, and it was confirmed when his hand reached out to wipe one of his chubby, wet cheeks.

"You can't now, Paul." John said, sighing sadly, "You just have to bear it."

"But it hurts."

"I know. It's necessary though."

"Why?" Paul asked frustrated, as John sat next to him.

"It's just that, you know, pain is necessary to heal."

Paul blinked, confused, and at the same time his body was shaken by a last sob, "What does it mean?"

"It means that... well, I can't explain it well, but I think it's like when you have a fever." John said, receiving a look of pure skepticism from Paul, "Fever makes you feel bad, it's true, but it allows your body to fight infection. It's the same thing in this case."

"And how do you know those things?" Paul asked, frowning.

"I have a four years old boy, remember?" John answered, giving him a slight nudge to his side, "I go to the pediatrician at least once a month."

Paul laughed lightly, "I see."

His laughter, however slight, was what showed John that Paul was a little better and that maybe it was time to go home, "Come on, let's go."

"Where?"

"What a question! At home, you daft." he replied, jumping up, "Can you get up by yourself?"

"No." Paul answered sincerely, looking sulky.

"Alright. Come on, I'll help you." John sighed and held out his hand.

Paul looked at it for a moment before grabbing it and being brought up by his friend.

"Here."
John held Paul's hand firmly in his, but when he saw that Paul staggered backward slightly, toward the wall, he snapped his other arm forward to support him from his side.

Paul laughed amused, "Oops, something is wrong."

"I would say so."

"I can't go home like this."

"We can't even stay here overnight, if that's the case." John pointed out, before slipping an arm around his waist and keeping him close to himself, "Come on, grab on to me and let's go."

Paul obeyed quietly and put an arm over his shoulders to support himself better. Then John began to take both at home, always making sure that Paul wouldn't stumble and eventually drop both to the ground.

The young inspector let John guide and support him, because at that moment Paul didn't need anything else. He had never felt so lost, so weak and apathetic. He knew what it was due to and if he wanted to, he could fight it, he had all the skills. Yet this time it was something stronger than him, a feeling of total loss, and Paul didn't want to fight it, he needed to let go of this emotion, because John was right, suffering now would allow him to get better later, maybe also the next day, if he was lucky.

When they arrived in their street, John instead of taking him to Paul's apartment, led him to his own house.

"John, I have to go over there." he said, trying to lead him to the other side, but John stopped him.

"I don't think so."

"But I-"

"Come on, I think it's better for you to stay to my place tonight, okay? We don't want anything to happen to you, alone at home, in this condition. Right?" John said, smiling fondly.

Paul protested, shaking his head, "No, no, no, I don't want to bother you."

However, the gesture worsened the situation and the dizziness increased just enough to make him hold on to John harder.

"You won't. Shut up, now, and come with me." John ordered amused.

Paul smiled, eyes clouded and slightly half-closed, and followed John when he opened the door with the key and dragged him into his doorway.

"Here we are." the man said, while Paul leaned a little further on him and murmured absently.

He was starting to feel heavy, and John had to put him on something soft before he fell asleep on him. He really didn't feel like lifting up that man of about six feet tall, did he?

So he headed for the living room where George jumped up from the couch, "John, what's up?"

"One too many." John commented, "Help me put him on the couch."

George obeyed and reached Paul on the opposite side, holding his arm around his waist. The two men dragged Paul to the couch, where they made him lie down and once comfortable, Paul
squinted, stretching his face with a grimace.

"Mm... John?"

"I'm here, Paul."

"My head aches." He shuddered, putting a hand on his forehead, "I can't stand it."

"I'll bring you an aspirin."

Then, while Paul mumbled something like a thank you, John grabbed George's arm and dragged him along, climbing up the stairs.

"Would you mind telling me what the fuck happened to him?" George snapped.

"Paul's girlfriend cheated on him and he got drunk, that's all." John quickly explained, "Julian?"

"Pattie is getting him to sleep."

"Good." John said, looking back over his shoulder, like an unconditional reflex of protection, "So, did you find out anything?"

George nodded, becoming suddenly more serious, "Yes, there is indeed something that can interest us."

"What?"

"It's an original mask from the movie The Wall." George answered as John slid into the bathroom to recover an aspirin.

"About Pink Floyd's album?" John asked, so enthusiast and surprised to close the medicine cabinet too quickly and make a very loud noise.

"Just that. But, John, there will be many policemen and security systems that are very difficult to crack. It's dangerous."

"I imagined it."

"Therefore, think carefully before deciding. Try talking to Jim too." George told him, lowering his voice.

"No, Jim doesn't want to be involved anymore since Paul... you know." John cut short, shrugging.

"I see, but-"

"And I respect his decision, ok?"

"All right, John." George sighed resignedly, "But try not to be reckless."

"I'll try, thanks for the information."

Then he put a finger to his lips to tell him to be quiet, before entering Julian's bedroom: the soft light of the bedside light dimly lit the room, while in the background there was a sweet lullaby that came from a carillon. Pattie was next to the child's bed, watching him sleep. Her gaze was sweet and melancholy, John noticed it immediately because it wasn't the first time that she had it for Julian.
When the girl turned to him, John smiled at her and she immediately smiled back, as the man approached the child to look at his calm expression, his eyes closed, his lips parted and his deep breath. He kissed his forehead softly, trying not to wake him up, and put the light blanket over him, wondering how Julian didn’t feel war by sleeping hugging that yellow submarine stuffed toy. It was a mystery. That stuffed toy was a sort of guardian angel and Julian couldn’t sleep without it now. The fact was they were in the middle of summer by now.

Then, as Pattie came out of the bedroom, John went to the closet, opened it and took out a blanket. He gently closed Julian's bedroom door behind him and turned to the two young guys in front of him.

"I don’t know how to thank you for tonight."

"Don’t mention it, you were busy getting the bobby drunk." George commented.

"That would be fun, but actually he did all by himself, I just listened to his complaints and took him home safe and sound." John said.

He didn’t know why he was trying to look annoyed, but someone didn’t believe his little act.

"You're getting fond of him, aren’t you?" Pattie suddenly asked.

"What?" John exclaimed, surprised and indignant, "You’re terribly off base, darling."

However Pattie didn’t really want to believe him and continued to look at him with a mischievous smile, "Am I? You’re basically doing things that only a friend would do."

"Is that so, John?" George asked, worried, and the look he gave him was one of the most eloquent, as if he wanted to say, 'Don't you dare!'

"No, no, it's not like that!" John protested, "We're just two acquaintances, two neighbours who sometimes hang out to play and have a chat, and he's having a bad time and I'm the only one of his acquaintances here, it's obvious that he comes to me."

"If you say so..." George commented, shrugging and going down the stairs.

Pattie followed him not before giving John another smile that seemed to know that John had lied, again, that seemed to have a deep knowledge of John's true feelings.

John, for his part, didn’t quite know what was happening to him. He had lied, yes, to George for more, his best mate. Why did he lie to him? Why couldn’t he just tell him that he was learning to consider Paul as a friend, in fact, that he now considered him more as a friend than as an enemy?

When he said goodbye and thanked George and Pattie for their help, John decided he didn’t want to know why. Not yet.

Yet the image that John saw a few minutes later, Paul snoozing on his couch, told him that he didn’t have to worry, that it was right that everything went like that. Sighing helplessly, John sat down on the table in front of the sofa and shook Paul lightly.

"Paul?"

The young inspector protested with an annoyed mutter, before rolling on the other side. John laughed, but he tried to wake him up again.
"Come on, Paul, wake up just for a moment."

Paul sighed and returned to look at John, his narrowed eyes just couldn’t open completely.

"Here! An aspirin and a little water, so you'll be as new tomorrow."

Paul looked at the glass John was giving him, and his friend's promise convinced him to lift himself a little to grab it: it was half-filled and in the water there were sparkling bubbles that indicated the presence of the dissolved drug. He drank it all in one sip, letting out a grimace for the bad taste.

John took the glass from his hands, before letting him lie down on the sofa and cover him with the light blanket. Even in this case Paul let him do it and when his head rested on the pillow, sleep threatened to overwhelm him again. Yet there was one more thing he had to ask John, because he, as a person now close to Paul, had to know the answer to that question.

"John?"

"Mm?"

"Why do people always betrayed me and leave?"

John startled at that question, and his heart made a little jump, "What?"

"Why do they do it?" Paul insisted, without agitation, only with all the calm that the short nappy had just infused him, "My father and now Jane, maybe I'm the one who got them away from me."

"No, Paul, it's not your fault, you never have to think of it." John said, shaking his head vigorously, "You... you’re a beautiful person, no one really wants to get away from you."

John's answer was once again ordinary, fucking ordinary, and Paul's next question was more than legitimate.

"So why did they do it?"

"I don’t know." John sighed defeated, "But I know for sure it's not your fault."

Paul closed his eyes, the expression was still painful, but more relaxed. As if he were now accepting that suffering.

"Thanks, John, I’m really lucky."

“What for?”

“For still being your friend.”

John looked at him, biting his lip and still feeling the guilt coming back from time to time, often, actually, to throb in him.

"Don’t mention it." he answered, his voice broken, overwhelmed by all the emotions of the day.

The sight of Paul completely lost and vulnerable, as he had never seen him before, had been too much for him. John didn’t think that Paul could really get himself in such a condition. Paul so calm, so smiling, Paul so special.

And in the same way, John didn’t think he could be so impressed. God, John knew he wanted to do
something, whatever, for that princess who kept getting into trouble, and he cursed himself because he couldn’t do much.

Or maybe...

Maybe there was something.

"Goodnight, John."

He could steal the mask.

"Goodnight, Paul."

*He could avenge Paul.*

**Chapter End Notes**

Hey, I've been good this week and succeeded in translating the new chapter in time. Woow!
Ok, that was a longer chapter, but there were many things to say at this point.
I really hope you like it.
Thanks to anyone who's reading and leaving a comment. I really appreciate it. <3
Next chapter, I’ve got a feeling, will be very, very important. ;)
Bye for now.
Chiara
I've got a feeling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A child's laughter was the cause of Paul's awakening the next morning. It was sweet, crystalline and distant. It echoed in his ears, but it was muffled, as if Paul had dived his head into a bubble and everything came to him lightly.

He didn’t know where that laugh came from, there were no children in his house, so... where exactly was he?

Unwillingly, he opened his eyes: it was the only way, basically, to find out where he was. He blinked a couple of times as he slowly focused on the surroundings and all his senses awoke with him.

He was lying on a soft couch, his head resting on a soft pillow, and a light blanket was placed above him so that he wouldn’t get cold during the night. In front of him there was a small table with a bowl containing coloured candies, and on the front wall there was a maple wood cabinet, with a television in the middle, a stereo next to it and on all the shelves there were books, DVDs, but above all CDs and vinyl records. Needless to say, this could only be John Lennon's home.

Paul got up with a painful grimace on his face. His head throbbed and hurt, while Paul tried to understand what happened the night before. And when he remembered everything from the discussion with Jane to the evening spent with John drinking beer and something much stronger, so much to get drunk, his head hurt even more and along with it, his heart showed his torment shrinking painfully. And yet the smell of that house, that sofa, that blanket, that smell seemed to make everything more bearable. It was Julian’s sweet smell when Paul played with him at the police station. It was also John’s strongest smell, when he grabbed him the night before to take him home and promised him that everything would be better the next day.

It had been so. The promise had been kept.

In fact, it was easier to get up and put his feet on the ground. His legs seemed ready and eager to carry him wherever he wanted to go.

Before that, though, his attention was captured by a movement, something that began to rub against his ankles. He looked down to see a cat. It didn’t seem to be much bigger and older than Pepper, but it was all white.

"Oh, hi, you must be Elvis," he greeted it, bending down to caress his little head and it immediately purred, arching its back, as if to say, 'Yes, that's me.'

Paul laughed and gave it his attention, until his stomach grumbled, sensing a delicious smell coming from the kitchen.

He stood up and moved toward the kitchen, hearing voices, obviously belonging to John and Julian.

"Hand me two more slices, Jules." John was saying, when Paul stopped in the doorway to watch the scene.

John was toasting the bread, which sizzled sweetly in a pan, while Julian sat on the shelf next to
the kitchen holding a packet of loaf bread in his lap.

From time to time John looked up at the child who smiled back.

It was almost a pity to have to interfere in that familiar picture, but the sight of three plates on the table containing a delicious breakfast encouraged Paul to speak.

"Good morning."

John turned immediately and smiled when he saw him standing.

"See, Julian? The princess have waken up."

Julian laughed as Paul frowned in perplexity, "Princess?"

"Long story, it doesn’t matter." John cut short, "So, you're just in time for our breakfast."

Paul still thought over the princess's story as John picked up Julian to put him to the ground.

"Julian, would you like to show our guest his place while Dad ends up toasting the bread?"

"Yes." the boy answered enthusiastically, and ran to grab Paul's hand, "Come here."

Paul let himself be led to the other end of the table and sat down, admiring the work done by John and Julian. There were three placemats with an orange and white checked pattern, and above each there was a plate with fried eggs, sausages and beans in tomato sauce. Julian sat next to him, just as John joined them by placing two slices of bread for each plate.

"Here we go." He sang softly, sitting at the table, "There's coffee and some fruit juice, if you want, Paul."

"Thanks, John, but you guys haven’t done all this for me, I hope..."

"Don’t worry. We have it almost every day, don’t we, luv?" John asked to Julian.

The child was all intent on eating his sausage already cut into small pieces, but he nodded to answer his father's question.

"See? So, Mr. Inspector, just eat."

Paul laughed and obeyed, starting to taste that generous breakfast, not only rich of calories, but also of peace and serenity.

"You're better today?" John asked carefully, looking furtively.

Paul nodded with conviction, "Yes. Thank you."

"I haven’t done anything." he hurried to specify.

"No, it's not true, you’ve done everything."

John looked at him for a long time, while Paul smiled at him softly, and at that moment the older man blushed slightly, but it was like he had two fires on his cheeks. Two real devastating fires.

For heaven’s sake, since when Paul had this effect on him?

"Well..." he began to say, babbling a little, "In that case, you’re welcome."
"I’d really like to find a way to return the favour." Paul said, very serious, while he poured some coffee.

Fucking hell, if he did need a coffee!

"There’s no need." John answered, surprised and making a vague gesture with his hand.

"Of course, there is! You can ask me anything."

"But Paul-"

"Come on, John." Paul interrupted him, with a little laugh, "There must be something you need."

"Yeah, but you don’t have to do it."

"Please, I really want to."

Paul practically begged him, and at that moment John realized the immense power that hid behind those too big and too sweet eyes. Difficult to say no in front of eyes like those.

He bit his thoughtful lip, "There would be something actually..."

"What is it about?" Paul asked, biting a slice of bread.

"Well, you see, I've been planning to repaint Julian's bedroom for a long time." John replied, "Maybe you could help me, so George can take care of the shop."

"Not maybe, I’ll definitely do that." Paul said, enthusiastic, "When are we going to start?"

"We still have to choose the colour, right, luv?" John asked, stroking Julian's hair affectionately.

The boy nodded, lowering his glass of orange juice and revealing his wet lips, "I want green."

"Green? It's a beautiful colour." Paul pointed out, "You’ve made a good choice."

Julian smirked, continuing to drink his juice.

"See, Johnny? No more problems, you just have to decide when to start and let me know."

John nodded, smiling to himself, "Thank you."

They went back to eat their own breakfast, with Paul wanting to know how many disasters he had made the night before in his drunken state and John trying to reassure him, assuring him that nothing so catastrophic had happened.

And it was right in the middle of the conversation that Paul's cell phone rang, making him jump visibly in the chair.

John looked at him intently as Paul took his phone from his trouser pocket and then saw the number on the screen. For a moment, John was sure, the young inspector thought it might be Jane, because a bit of fear obscured his face.

"It's from the office." Paul said, looking at John, "Do you mind if I go there to answer?"

"Don’t worry." John reassured him.

Paul thanked him, before coming back to the living room he had slept in, and answered his cell
"Hello?"

"McCartney, Inspector Starkey here."

"Good morning, Sir."

"Good morning. I hope your day off was useful."

"Thanks, yes, it was."

"I'm glad." the man replied, taking a moment to pause before continuing, "Look, I'm calling because we got a new message from Hermes."

"Oh, what does it say?"

"He'll be around next week at the inauguration of the cinema museum."

Paul blinked, as if he hadn’t understood. Indeed, as if he didn’t want to understand, because in fact he understood very well. How could he not understand the exact meaning of those words?

"The museum of cinema?" He repeated and his voice stammered stupidly.

"Yes, it was Mr. Donovan who warned us." Inspector Starkey explained, with extreme caution.

What was it?

A twist of fate?

Did Hermes have to choose to rob the man whom at that moment Paul hated the most?

"I see." Paul answered, with a small voice and he hated himself for this.

"I well understand it may be difficult for you, but Mr. Donovan will come to my office in the afternoon to discuss how we will act, and I need you to be here. After all, you are responsible for the task."

Paul gave a faint sigh. As they say, add insult to injury. It was exactly how Paul now felt.

"Yes, I'll be there, don’t worry, sir."

"Very well, then I'll be waiting for you in my office at two o'clock."

"Ok. See you later."

Paul ended the call and looked at the phone for a moment, before sitting down on the couch with his head in his hands.

He still didn’t believe what had happened, yet it was all damn true. He was about to meet the man who had stolen Jane from him and not for private matters, not for a payback.

It was Paul's work that was inevitably putting them in contact.

Fuck, it seemed impossible even to want to do it on purpose.

How should he behave? How should he look at him? What tone of voice should he use? Should he
ask him about Jane or not? It would have-

"Paul?" John called him, suddenly appearing out of nowhere, "All right?"

Paul winced and turned to him, pleased to see him because his arrival pushed away all those silly questions that had appeared immediately in his mind.

"Yup." Paul sighed, standing up and joining John, "Just a particular situation at work."

"What do you mean?"

Paul shrugged helplessly before coming closer to John, "Hermes had the brilliant idea of stealing something from Jane's new boyfriend’s museum."

"Fuck."

"Yeah... *fuck!*"

John giggled, amused, with a hand in front of his mouth, "Well, that’s a really strange twist of fate."

"Definitely." Paul agreed, rolling his eyes.

"You should root for him, huh?"

The young inspector blinked perplexed, "For whom?"

"For Hermes, no?"

"You're kidding, John, I could never do that. I'll do my best to protect anything he wants to steal. Even though I hate its owner, I'll try to be as professional as possible with him, as I've always done," he stated firmly.

John was taken aback. He had been so in tune with Paul, in those last minutes, that he expected a joke from him too. However Paul was always Paul, the most inflexible part of him was still present and ready to appear when speaking of topics very dear to Paul. And his professionalism was certainly the most important.

"Yes, right. Forgive me."

"Nope, in fact, I thank you again for what you did for me yesterday and this morning."

"You don’t have to thank me. It was a pleasure." John reassured him with a smile.

"But now I really have to go."

"Are you sure?" John asked worriedly, "You can stay as long as you want."

"Yeah, I have to get back on my feet properly. I don’t think it’s appropriate to introduce myself with dark circles under my eyes and these stinking of beer clothes." he pointed out, laughing and pointing to the clothes he was wearing and that were still from the night before.

"No, indeed." John agreed with a laugh, "That's not appropriate at all."

"See you later, if you want. We have to finish studying that song."
’’Course I want to.” John hurried back, ”I simply love Wish you were here.”

”I could have sworn.” Paul said, smiling, ”Have a nice day, John.”

”Good day to you, and good luck for today.”

”Ta’.”

That said, Paul said goodbye to Julian and went out of John’s house. He looked at him as he crossed the street and shut himself in his apartment.

Finally John sighed, closing the door.

There had been a moment before, when he had seen Paul with his hands in his hair, where John had felt a tightening grip in his heart. Not so much because he was sorry to see him in that state, now that was obvious. He accepted the fact that he found it difficult to see him suffer, even though it wasn’t yet clear why.

What mattered, though, was that John felt slightly worried. There was this weird feeling in him, bulky, growing every time he thought of Paul. He was afraid of how he would react when he found himself in front of the man; after the total collapse of the night before, who knows what Paul could have done to that man who in those days had even surpassed Hermes in the ranking of ”people to hate”.

Yet John was sure that Paul would do well. He didn’t even feel a little guilty for what he was doing, that was to put those two men in contact, because Paul would have to face him now, and he would have come out victorious.

At least for that aspect of the story.

It was obvious, as the reason reminded him, that the real winner would be Hermes.

It was also obvious, as his heart reminded him, that it was all wrong.

Damn fucking wrong.

*****

His eyes pierced him. Or at least that was what Paul was hoping for.

He wished that for once his gaze would have the real power to pierce that man from side to side, striking the heart of the man now sit in Inspector Starkey’s office, just like him and Jane had done with Paul himself.

The young inspector shook his head, pushing away those vindictive thoughts that weren’t very appropriate at the time, not even for an adult man, now grown up, like Paul was.

Here he was, David Donovan, sitting airily in his chair. He had his ankle resting on the other knee. He was wearing a dark blue suit, with elegant trousers and a matching jacket under which there was a white shirt unfastened in the first two buttons.

Occasionally, when he sensed Paul's penetrating gaze, he turned to him, only for a moment, clearly uncomfortable. Perhaps he just wanted to check that he wasn’t trying to stab him or otherwise attack his life, and this thought made Paul chuckle inside him.

"So, Mr. Donovan..." Inspector Starkey was saying, "The thief said he intends to steal a mask from
"your museum, right?"

"Yes, an original mask from the movie *The Wall*.

"Since you’re the owner of the museum, can you tell us how it can be of Hermes’ interest?" Paul asked, "As you know, Hermes only steals musical memorabilia."

"Of course, I think he's interested because the movie is about Pink Floyd. Who wouldn’t want to have something concerning Pink Floyd, huh?" He commented, ending with a faint laugh.

However neither Richard nor Paul found themselves sharing his amusement.

"McCartney, how do you want to organize the mission?" Richard asked, turning his gaze to the inspector next to him.

"We should do an inspection first." Paul answered, crossing his arms, "But anyway, I think we should try to have as many men as possible inside the museum, and of course we will arrange someone outside, at the exits, windows and so on. And I’d like also to search the guests."

Mr. Donovan stirred in his chair, deeply uneasy, "Is it really necessary? Many guests are my friends, it’s absolutely impossible that they can contribute in some way to the theft, or in any case represent any danger."

Paul snorted, looking up at the sky. He remembered his first case in London very much, when Mr. Lowe decided on his own not to put any policeman where the true portrait was hidden. Well, Paul wouldn’t repeat the same mistake.

"It's necessary." Paul finally said, frowning.

"But-"

"Look, Mr. Donovan, if you don’t let us do our job properly, then be sure we could never stop Hermes."

The man held Paul's icy gaze for a few moments, before accepting inevitably his condition, "Okay, let’s do that."

"Well, then I’ll go and ask Scotland Yard the permit about the search and the inspection." Richard said, standing up, "Will you continue here, McCartney, while I’m away?"

"Yes, sir."

"I’ll be right back, Mr. Donovan." the Chief Inspector said, moving towards the door.

"Please, take your time."

So, at last they finally remained alone, Paul and Jane's new boyfriend.

The man who had taken her away from him.

The man who had been responsible for his suffering.

It hadn’t been easy for Paul to prepare for this meeting. It took all his professionalism along with his good sense not to answer him badly, or worse, knock him down for an improvised boxing match.
It wasn’t easy to talk about work with him. Paul had this strange feeling, as if Mr. Donovan didn’t trust him. As if he thought that Paul, for their recent past, would do anything to create problems and maybe help Hermes in his business.

Damn bastard!

Who did he think Paul was?

Paul wasn’t like that. He would never avenge himself. Or at least he wouldn’t do it by putting his job at risk.

"Well, that’s a strange coincidence." Mr. Donovan began to say.

"What do you mean?"

The man smiled nervously, "Oh, come on, you got what I mean."

"Of course, but I don’t really understand what you’re supposing."

"Absolutely nothing, it was... it was just to say something."

"Well, if you have nothing more to say about the case, then I’ll leave you here waiting for Inspector Starkey. I have some commissions to do." Paul snapped, before starting to head the door.

"Wait a minute, Inspector." the man hurried to say, grabbing Paul’s arm and forcing him to stop, "I’m just worried. The museum is very dear to me, I’ve been working for some time on it and I’m fond of every single element of the exhibition. I really don’t want that because of my... private life, all my work can be compromised."

*There it was!* Just what Paul thought.

In other circumstances he would be angry, and very much. But now that he had met that man and had seen with his own eyes what he had expected from the moment he learned of that inevitable meeting, he found himself smiling.

"Mr. Donovan, if you think that I’ll let *my* private life interfere with my work, then, well, that would be the biggest mistake of all your life, because I assure you I’ll never let it happen."

"I’m sorry, I didn’t want to insinuate anything like that, it’s just that, you know, Paul... can I call you Paul?"

"No." Paul replied, snorting loudly, "You can go on calling me Inspector McCartney, Mr. Donovan, we don’t know each other and we’re certainly not friends."

"Okay then. As you like. It's just that seeing what happened with Ja... with Miss Asher, it seemed only logical that you could... I mean, you could."

"Put less effort?" Paul finished for him, almost amused by how much the other man was uncomfortable, "As I said, Mr. Donovan, you don’t know me, and I assure you that I will treat you with the same professionalism with which I would treat any other person who asks for my help, nothing less."

"I'm sorry to have doubted, but you see, it was stronger than me." David explained, trying to make up for his mistake.

"It doesn’t matter."
"And I'm sorry for what happened."

Paul rolled his eyes. Just like Jane, he couldn’t really be sorry for what they did together. It was just a way of being polite, but it hurt anyway.

"I don’t believe you nor Jane, but anyway, I hope you can be happy with Jane." Paul said, "And now if you’ll excuse me..."

"No problem."

"Inspector Starkey will let you know when the inspection will take place. In the meantime, have a good day." Paul told him, finally leaving the office.

"You too."

But Paul didn’t hear it, because he was already far away.

_Luckily, he was already far away._

****

He couldn’t believe he was there, right there, inside the museum.

Yet here he was, John, amongst all those elegantly dressed people, with such sophisticated looks, neat hair, gold watches and jewels... Basically, very different people from John.

But after all, did those rich snobs matter to him, when he was just steps from one of the objects he most desired? An original relic of Pink Floyd. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on it, he loved that one group.

He loved each song of each album, he loved _Money, Shine on you crazy diamond, Comfortably Numb_, he loved-

He loved _Wish you were here_ and he had loved it even more since Paul sang it with him a few days earlier.

John wasn’t sure why he asked Paul to sing it together. It was just that he liked it when they did, it seemed that it was so right, as if in another life they had done nothing but sing and play together and look at each other from time to time, while their lips formed the words of the song.

Paul had resisted initially, but John didn’t have to insist much this time. He had managed to convince him in a few moves, even without Julian’s help.

And so, he had joined him in the intimate performance of that song.

It had been simply unique, John had to admit that even the first time had been exciting, but now it was different. There was an emotion there, in that room, as they sang. It was the same one that had appeared slowly in John, and at that moment it came out of him, wrapping Paul with John too, as if it wanted to get them closer, while John couldn’t take his eyes off him, continuing to sing and play. Paul had sometimes locked eyes with him, and when he did, he smiled slightly, not only with his lips: he smiled with his eyes, with his curling nose, he smiled all over his face that lit up and then just blushed, just lightly, probably Paul didn’t even notice it, but John had managed to do it.

He fucking noticed it and _oh_, if it wasn’t the strangest and most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Perhaps because when he met Paul he would never have thought that he could find himself in that
situation, he would never have thought of being able to help Paul with his problem, and he would never have imagined that he could find out he wanted to see, to long for another smile from Paul. One more, just one, just for John. That day had been like that and luck had given him more than a smile from him.

That was why, when the song was over, John felt disoriented, finding himself under the amused look of Paul who laughed and then asked, "Too taken with the song, John?"

Yes, too taken with the song and with Paul himself, so much that John had to make an effort to come back to himself and succeeded when Paul invited him to the museum opening.

He told him that he could have a pass if he was interested, and John asked him why, while trying to ignore those two parts of himself that were having opposite reactions: the first cheered for the lucky strike, encouraging him to say yes so he could steal the mask of the movie more easily; the second whispered to him, treacherous, that he wouldn’t have to accept, he wouldn’t even have to steal that mask, because he was a traitor, nothing else, a real fucking traitor, who was playing with Paul’s trust like a toy, and that thought always sent cold, almost glacial, shivers enough to give him goosebumps.

Paul replied that being a very important inauguration and the owner of the museum was Mr. Donovan, he was afraid that Jane could be there.

Obviously Paul didn’t want her to come, especially because, even if Hermes' announcement hadn’t been made public, due to the importance of the evening and all its economic and social implications, it remained a risky evening, and Paul could never work properly if he had to worry about Jane.

So he asked for John's support.

And John accepted, not knowing well which of the two reasons that had pushed him to do it won, either to steal the mask or help Paul with his mere presence.

The important thing was that he was now inside, both as John and Hermes, and Paul had brought him.

The plan hadn’t been easy to program at all. It would require speed, agility, coordination, basically, all those things that John and George had always shown before, but on which John was beginning to feel insecure at the moment. It wasn’t a good sign. He no longer felt the enthusiasm as before. He was about to steal something just to avenge Paul. He would get him into trouble anyway, but the main reason was that John wanted to hit, in his own way, the man who helped destroy Paul.

The vision of Paul completely drunk and lost had hit him more than he could imagine. It came back to torment him from time to time, violently, making him only wanting to have the power to make him feel better with a snap of his fingers.

Like that moment.

Damn, he couldn’t get distracted. A moment of distraction would be fatal. He couldn’t take that risk. His mission had already enough complications, there was no need for John to waste time in his rather weird and disturbing thoughts.

You'll think about it later, John, he told himself, trying to get back to himself.

To help himself find his concentration again as he waited news from George, John decided to head for the table where elegant waiters served wine for the guests. He opted for a glass of white wine,
before admiring the items exhibited in different rooms of the museum. It wasn’t a very large museum, at least compared to the nearest National Gallery and Portrait Gallery. However it wasn’t bad, John had to admit it. There were original posters that probably dated back to before his grandparents were born, and then original costumes, props, and of course, the famous mask that John was about to steal.

It was resting on a simple pedestal, surrounded by red velvet cordons to prevent anyone, especially Hermes, from approaching. John would expect to find it inside a glass case, but luckily, nothing in that museum was protected that way. It would be enough to reach out and grab it, before running away breathlessly.

John examined it closely, sipping his white wine, with a slightly sweetish and crisp taste; then he went away quickly, so as not to arouse too many suspicions. The rooms were guarded by policemen in every corner. At the entrance they had even searched the guests. Of course, John had been informed by Paul beforehand, and he was prepared, but some ladies with their long, glittering clothes had been completely baffled by it. How could those bobbies think they hid some dangerous weapon in their little pursues or worse, in the neckline of their clothes? Good heavens, what an outrage!

John laughed seeing the ladies, decidedly bothered in their noble pride, while they were conducted in a private room for an equally private search with policewomen more worthy to handle such a situation.

Fortunately he didn’t have any problems. And how could he have? He wore just a pair of spectacles, with a thicker frame than usual, and in his jacket there were a wallet and a little box of mints, which always came in handy.

Oh and of course there was also a small, practically invisible headset to talk with...

"George?" he whispered imperceptibly, covering his mouth with the glass of wine.

"Yes. I'm almost done."

George was in an unspecified spot near the museum, hidden in a small van. He was trying to crack the security system of the museum, as well as the electrical system, in order to trigger a simple blackout that would allow John to act.

"I would like to get rid of this mess as quickly as possible." John murmured, pretending to cough immediately afterwards, "I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable."

"I remind you that it is your idea, John, so now shut up and do it."

What a friend, John thought, chuckling and approaching the posters hanging on the wall.

"Anyway, I've found out how to access the security system, but they have installed an extra power source that activates after a few minutes, so you'll have to be very fast."

John nodded, pretending to admire the items on display.

"I think I can get there in a minute. I'll be right under the window to the right of the room where you are, got it?"

"Yup."

"I'll handle the policemen on guard outside, but you'll have to do the rest."
Again John nodded, admiring a very rare 1931 *Dracula* poster, of which, according to the description, there were only three pieces in the world, and he was about to answer affirmatively, when someone came up behind him, without John could hear the slightest noise.

"Hello, John."

The man jumped visibly. Damn, since when had he become so easily sensitive?

Then he turned and when he recognized the man in front of him, he had his answer.

Since he had met Paul.

"Hello, Paul."

"So, you’ve come." he said, smiling incredulously.

"I said I’d be there and here I am." John answered, pointing to himself.

"Yes, you’re here."

He seemed genuinely surprised that John was there, and the fact that he was now biting his lip pushed away too easily John's thoughts from his conversation with George. It was taking them to a secret, hidden place where John could easily believe that his gesture with the lip only meant that Paul was very happy, so much so that he had to force himself not to let escape warmest words, compromising words, words that-

No, what was he thinking? John was totally off-road. John was Paul's friend. He was happy only for that reason.

So, seeing Paul still too busy with the realization, John decided to continue.

"So, great evening, huh?"

"If I didn’t have to work, it would be even more." Paul commented, snorting slightly.

"Quite right."

Besides, if Paul hadn’t been working, then that would have been a simple meeting between them. Only the two of them. Like a... *date?*

*Shit, John, what a fucking asshole you are!*

He was going crazy. That's all. There was no other reason.

"Jane didn’t come." Paul informed him, and John thanked him in his mind for the simple fact that he had spoken and offered an opportunity for conversation.

"Well, it was very reasonable of her." John commented.

"Yes. I think I couldn’t bear being in the same room with her and with... that thing!" he said, pointing to Mr. Donovan.

John let out a laugh before following him with his eyes, noting that the filmmaker was talking amicably to a man and a woman much older than him, as he walked away from that room to go into another.
"That thing? Come on, Paul, you can find something better for him." John pointed out, amused, pushing him lightly on his shoulder.

"Um... idiot?"

"Are you kidding? Come on, try more, mate." John urged him.

"Asshole."

"Now, we're getting somewhere." John said happily.

And his euphoria was also felt by Paul, who let himself get caught up in that little improvised game.

"Wanker." he said fervently.

"Perfect."

"Fucking bastard-"

"Sir?"

A female voice intruded into Paul's outburst, looking at him puzzled.

"Oh, Linda." Paul said, blushing at being surprised at such an improper behaviour, but nonetheless finding it even more amusing, "Tell me."

"I know that everything is okay, but I wondered if we should make another inspection in other rooms, to check that everything is alright." the woman proposed.

"Of course, you're right, I'm coming, thank you."

Paul watched her walk away, before turning to look back again at John and lingering over him for a time that seemed endless to both.

"Thank you, John, for coming, thank you so much."

"John, it's time."

But John didn’t hear George's words correctly, overwhelmed by the stronger, more interesting words Paul was saying. And his eyes, Paul's big eyes were back on him and this time they were looking at him with fun, happiness and something very warm, very sweet.

"We're going on stage in three..."

What was it? Affection?

It was about eyes that showed something that rarely John had felt and the feeling made his head spin.

"Two..."

His heart throbbed and John didn’t know why. Was it because of his imminent action, or was it because of Paul?

"One..."
He would like to answer that no, Paul couldn’t thank him, not that way, because John was complicating his life and Paul really had absolutely nothing to thank him for.

He wanted to tell him that the guilt was destroying him, but he couldn’t because George finally spoke.

"Now!"

And everything became dark.

*****

The first thing Paul heard was the dull thud of his heart, preparing for whatever was going to happen, like all the rest of his body.

He knew what was about to happen: Hermes.

Then there were the excited and frightened voices of the guests for suddenly remaining in the dark. So the young inspector decided to take charge of the situation, not before suggesting that John should follow his instructions.

"Keep calm, it's just a blackout. Follow my voice and gather around in this corner."

Paul could hardly see, despite a faint light coming through the windows. It was almost not even enough to distinguish the shapes.

"Agent Eastman, give the alarm to the outside team and look for Inspector Starkey, but be careful."

"Yes, sir."

Paul heard her walk away with a sure but careful step, while the remaining two officers in the room asked for instructions.

"Hold your positions, I’ll protect the mask." he said and tried to reach the pedestal with the object in question.

He was a step away from his destination when the sound of a breaking glass made him jump and immobilize, while there were other shouts from those present. However, Paul didn’t have time to turn around to look for the window that had been broken, since the minute after the hall was invaded by smoke bombs and everyone began to cough.

Damn.

Paul hurriedly covered his nose and mouth with a handkerchief, and although his eyes began to burn because of the smoke, the young inspector managed to reach the mask to prevent, as he could, its theft by Hermes.

He waited, trying to hone his hearing, the only one of his senses he could rely on in that situation. After all, with the darkness and the smoke it was as if he were blind. A great disadvantage for someone who had to protect an object of value and try to stop its predator. His heart throbbing in his ears didn’t help, mixing its beats to the violent coughing of anyone who had breathed that apparently suffocating smoke.

Then a slight stealthily noise alerted him, as well as a shadow that moved agile in front of him, right on the opposite side of the pedestal.
"You won't win, not this time. You're trapped." He tried to say, holding back the cough that wanted to take over.

He didn’t know exactly why he said it, maybe he just wanted Hermes to know his position in order to discourage him, but he knew it wouldn’t do any good.

So he risked everything. He could never protect the mask if it had been so exposed and decided to reach out to grab it, but at the same time he felt and physically sensed one of the supports of the protective cords that was pushed to the ground, producing a sharp and penetrating metallic noise.

Paul's hand hesitated, remaining mid-air, while he tried to understand if Hermes approached him; in that case he could decide to grab him rather than the mask and solve all his damn problems.

But that moment of hesitation was fatal to him, because another hand reached the mask and cleverly subtracted it, and then there were quick steps that moved away from the pedestal, but they remained in the hall anyway. Surely Hermes would escape from the same window he had entered before. Paul started to turn around and run after him, but the cords had fallen right next to him and made him stumble.

"Follow him." He ordered to the other two agents, while he stood up a little awkwardly.

It was terrible to have no idea of the surrounding space, neither distances, nor positions, nor anything else. Paul would never have wanted to find himself in such a situation again.

He began to run, trying to make his way through the hall in the smoke that just didn’t want to fade, but when he came under that forced way out, he saw a hooded figure disappearing beyond the window. Paul didn’t think twice. He climbed quickly and leaned out, noting that the agents who had to monitor that vulnerable breach had been put k.o.

He didn’t think long before throwing himself outside the building and running after Hermes.

He didn’t think at all.

*****

John sighed, abandoning himself to the wall.

He was sitting on the ground, in the same spot where he was when the light had gone out.

Right there, where Paul had left him.

He did it. Incredibly, he managed to steal the mask.

He inhaled deeply to recover as much air as possible, since he had inhaled himself a bit of that smoke, after leaving the mask to George. It must have seemed that he hadn’t moved from his position, it must have seemed that he was one of those present.

He closed his eyes, remembering those moments of anxiety and adrenaline to be a few steps away from his inspector.

When the darkness wrapped them, his glasses, a bit different from usual, allowed a clear vision, even if plunged into darkness. They were infrared glasses, disguised as common, banal eyeglasses. A very fine technology, definitely.

And then George from outside broke the window and opened it, while John grabbed his box of
mints, or perhaps it was better to say, presumed mints; he pressed the little button that seemed to open the box, and slipped it beside him, where it immediately caused that smoke that enveloped everyone present, including John himself.

However, as Paul seemed to have done, John covered his nose and mouth with a handkerchief and went into action. He approached the pedestal, knowing that Paul was right there, and saw when he tried, desperately, to grab the mask. So, to distract him, he decided to drop the supports of the velvety cords and then grabbed the mask from just under his beautiful nose.

Then he rushed to the window, from where George popped up to take the mask and disappear in the middle of the traffic in central London, while John returned to his spot to sit on the ground and recover the now finished smoke box, hiding it in his pocket, before the light came back.

The policemen in the room recovered quickly, looking for Inspector McCartney, but not finding him anywhere. Then, while they were helping the guests, Inspector Starkey and a quite angry Mr. Donovan came along, also looking for poor Paul.

When they saw that the mask was gone, well, that was when the film producer completely lost his temper. The Chief Inspector tried to make him calm, especially for the presence of his own guests, but he didn’t listen to him and began to shout that he had to expect it, that it was all McCartney's fault, because he was an incompetent and vindictive.

This until the man in question returned to the museum, visibly upset, breathless and sweaty. He was in a bad state.

And when he faced Mr. Donovan and had to explain to both of them that he had let Hermes escape because he had been swallowed up by the tourist crowd in Trafalgar Square, the man began to insult him, calling him a madman who had let his private life influence his work, and who had been hurt was David Donovan. When he dared to insinuate that he wouldn’t be surprised, if he found out that it was Paul himself who had organized the theft, then it was the inspector's turn to get angry, quite seriously, in a way that John had never seen. He told him that he had no right to get angry that way because Paul had done everything to catch Hermes and get his mask back, he had followed him in the crowd before he disappeared, swallowed up by the darkness of the night.

And before David could reply, Inspector Starkey sent him away from the hall, while the man screamed that he would be compensated for the immense loss he suffered from Paul.

When they were gone, Paul sighed. He was tired and just as tired John felt, not only to be a thief, something that now didn’t seem to excite him any more, but also to see, to notice Paul's tiredness. It was all John's fault, if Paul was now in that state, and John couldn’t accept it.

Even more difficult to bear was the way Paul turned and looked for him with his eyes, and then smiled at him, once he saw him on the ground, where he had left him.

He couldn’t continue like this. John could be both his strength and his weakness. It wasn’t fucking right.

"John, are you okay?" he asked when he approached.

"Yes, you?"

Paul nodded, sitting cross-legged opposite him.

"I'm sorry about what happened." John admitted, despite a shiver had just crossed it.
"Hypocrite, that was what he was, and a liar. A traitor even worse than Jane and Mr. Donovan."

"And I'm sorry for dragging you here." Paul replied, with a bitter smile.

John's hand moved automatically to Paul's, to reassure him, "Don't worry, we're all fine, that's what matters."

"Yup." he agreed and his smile became more sincere now.

"How..." John began to say, withdrawing his hand, "How did he get in?"

"He put the agents outside k.o, then he came in by firing a smoke bomb so that he could act more easily, and then he ran off."

"And the blackout?"

"I think it was his accomplice's work." Paul answered, crossing his hands and resting his elbows on his knees.

"Hermes has an accomplice?" John asked, trying to look as surprised as possible.

"Yes. We've known it for a while now, he's supposed to be some kind of computer hacker, he seems to be able to crack the control and security systems of the place where Hermes will act."

"Oh, well, too easy stealing that way." John exclaimed, shaking his head, "Arsène Lupin certainly didn't have an accomplice hacker. He did everything by himself."

Paul let out a laugh and it made John feel excited in a very familiar way, a way that John could hardly forget. It was the same feeling that John had felt when he first stole as Hermes.

Which made him think he was stealing another thing: Paul's confidence.

"Thank God you came tonight, John."

John shook his head slightly to clear away those thoughts that were both exciting and depressing, "Ah, and what happened to the 'I'm sorry for dragging you here'?"

"It was true, but I'm still happy you're here. It's all easier when you're present." Paul said and did it with a unique simplicity, an absolutely delicious naturalness.

The thud of John's heart was so strong that he was amazed that Paul couldn't hear it, but apparently it was just like that, and the young inspector still gave him that same smile that made his legs tremble. Obviously John couldn't be sure about it, he was sitting, after all. However, he was almost certain that if he stood up, his legs wouldn't support him, at least not if Paul kept smiling at him like that.

Damn Paul, bloody Paul. It was all his fault, he was playing with John's mind. And John... John hated him. God, if he did. And now he just had to get away as quickly as possible from that stupid museum.

"It was a pleasure, Paul, but now, if I have permission, I'd really like to go home." He said standing up.

"Sure, no problem."

"Don't be late, huh?" John advised, "You need to rest too."
"I'll try." Paul sighed, shrugging.

"And above all, don’t care about that wanker. He doesn’t know what he says."

"All right." Paul said, heartened, "Thanks again for everything, John."

"Thanks to you." he said, with a little smile, "So, see you soon."

"Yup. See you."

John nodded, looking at him for another moment. And then he forced himself to turn and walk away from that man who was now a danger not only to Hermes, but also to John. A danger that John could no longer live without.

"It wasn’t my fault." George said suddenly, reminding John that he forgot to remove the headset.

"What?" John snapped, coming out of the museum, head down and putting his hands in his pockets.

"That cold stab in the back you've felt before."

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on, when Paul said those things, didn’t you feel a little guilty? I would, if I were you."

"Oh, please, George, shut up."

"But I-"

With a nervous gesture, John took off his headset, hiding it in his pocket. Finally silence.

Not that it would be much useful.

After all, he no longer heard George nor Paul, but John was always present in him. And that John could become the most nagging, annoying pain in the neck when he made an effort.

Like now, now that he pointed out that it was true, it wasn’t George's fault, that cold stab in the back. And it wasn’t even Paul's fault, he wasn’t lying at all.

No.

It was only John's fault.

John, the stupid.

John, the traitor.

John, the thief.

*****

Paul couldn’t believe it.

He couldn’t believe that Jane had come to him, a couple of days after the robbery. It had been a real surprise to find her in front of the door once opened.

Yet it was really Jane, in the flesh.
She politely asked him if she could come in and Paul let her sit down. He didn’t understand why she was there, the only thing he was sure of was that suddenly being in the same room with her now was easier. All the anger he felt before for her had faded, along with his love. There was no doubt about this.

"I'm sorry for what happened." Jane began.

"What are you referring to?"

"Everything. Not just what I did to you, but also for the other night. I read the article in the newspaper. David shouldn’t have said those things in front of all those people."

"He shouldn’t." Paul repeated, fully agreeing, recalling the newspaper article that reported all the insults that David had addressed to him.

"I thought that not coming to the inauguration would make things easier, but I was wrong." Jane said, and her eyes became shinier, even though there was a sad smile on her face.

"That's not true, you were right. I think I couldn’t bear being in the same room with you two and in the meantime focus on my job."

"So finally, I did one good thing." she commented bitterly.

Paul shook his head and hurried back, "Jane, don’t say that."

"Why shouldn’t I?" Jane snapped, unable to hold back her tears, "I ruined everything we were building together."

"Hey, there are always two people in a relationship, and if that happened, then it's my fault too, I couldn’t keep your love."

"Oh Paul!" she let out before crying, shaking with violent sobs, "You shouldn’t say that, after what I did..."

"Well, I think if that happened, then it had to be inevitable, but now you have to be brave, Jane, and not cry." he told her, getting up to sit next to her.

He patted her shoulders lightly and handed her a handkerchief she accepted to wipe away the tears. The girl cried for a few minutes, while Paul tried to comfort her with sweet words.

When Jane finally calmed down, she apologized for the small collapse she had in front of him. Then she said she had to leave: she had a plane to France in the evening and was afraid of already being late.

Paul nodded and took her out of the house to the car.

"Then have a good journey." He told her.

"Thank you, Paul, for everything."

Jane smiled at him, her big blue eyes still shining, and Paul thought he couldn’t be angry with her. No more at least. Not now that it made no sense, because they were saying goodbye.

"You don’t have to thank me."

"I wanted to, just as I want to stay friends, if it's all right with you."
Paul bit his lip. He could never think of Jane as a friend. Even though he no longer loved her, it was still too early to consider her a friend. Yet he knew and Jane knew that once she left, probably they would never see each other again.

So what was the point in making her leave with a no?

"Of course, Jane, I’d be very pleased."

Jane smiled happily and Paul realized that she hadn’t smiled with him in a long time. Then she came over and hugged him tenderly, before saying goodbye once and for all and disappearing inside her car.

Paul watched her until the car disappeared around the corner. There was an emptiness in the heart now. But it wasn’t exactly unpleasant. It seemed almost good, like a good sign, as if something beautiful and incredible was going to happen to fill that void.

The thought was more positive and Paul found himself smiling, and he smiled even more when turning to go back into the house, caught the eye of John watching him from his shop.

He greeted him with his hand. A greeting and a smile, very automatic gestures now to be addressed to that man so particular and so important to him.

And John immediately greeted him back.

John who had just seen Paul with Jane with a painful grip on his heart. Not because he was jealous, after all he could see that it was a definitive goodbye between Paul and Jane.

The painful grip was for the simple fact of having locked eyes with Paul.

It was for all those emotions that Paul aroused in John.

For that feeling that stirred desperately and happy within him.

Yes, there was really a feeling in John for Paul.

No, it wasn’t friendship anymore.

Yes, it was something much sweeter.

No, it wasn’t a good thing.

Yes, it meant big trouble.

Because John, with that feeling, was fucked.

Because John, the thief, had lost his mind for Paul.

Paul, his inspector

Chapter End Notes

Hi hi hi! And as almost always, sorry for being late with the updates. I'm so tired with stupid work and stupid university. Why can't I write all day long? codigo
Anyway, important chapter this one, I've warned you! :D
Hope you like it. :3
Again thanks to anyone who is reading. And thanks to Ms_Berry, sunqueenofsaigon, someoneonica who left a comment in the last chapter. Your words made my day! *^^*
Next chapter will be "Here comes the sun" du ru ru ru. And I say it's all right! ;)
Bye then and have a good day.
Chiara
Damn.

Fuck.

What trouble did he get into?

John was running breathlessly in one of the narrow streets that skirted the luxurious Dorchester hotel, opposite Hyde Park.

He had just robbed Elton John himself. The famous and eccentric songwriter had a series of concerts at the Royal Albert Hall those days, and he stayed at the nearby Dorchester with his partner. The very special thing about that stay, which had even been reported on all English tabloids, was that Sir Elton had even booked a room just for his accessories, like shoes, jewelry and of course his glasses.

John had known for some time that, if he had the chance, he would steal one of Elton John glasses. They were so special, so unique, you needed to have guts to be able to perform in front of thousands of people with those odd accessories. However Sir Elton had shown repeatedly that he actually had guts, and it was one of the things that John appreciated about him, in addition to the great talent to write original and certainly effective songs.

The problem, though, was that John hadn’t been the same in those days. He read the article about the singer and didn’t have the slightest thought of stealing something.

He didn’t even want to do it. If it hadn’t been for George, in fact, John would never have decided to be Hermes again: George had insisted, saying it was an opportunity not to be missed and they absolutely had to steal something from the fabulous sir.

Reluctantly, John had accepted.

And now he was there, running in that little street, chased by Paul.

It hadn’t been particularly easy to do that theft, although a voice inside John kept repeating that, compared to others, this was easy-peasy.

John was the problem. By now he understood for a long time that he no longer had the enthusiasm, the inspiration, nor the right concentration.

Hermes's message had announced the theft without specifying his target. So, Paul put some policemen in the main chamber of the Sir, as well in other rooms, like the accessory one. John climbed from the outside to the fifth floor of the building. It was the only solution, since the interior of the hotel was full with policemen. Once he reached the balcony, he created a small breach in the glass, so that he could slide inside a device that would make the little group of policemen sleep with a powerful soporific gas.

In fact, the men fell to the ground, senseless, and John was able to act undisturbed. He entered and
was able to admire all those sparkling and eccentric glasses kept in the room. He wasn’t looking for one in particular, but then he saw the glasses with the shape of a grand piano, on whose lenses were the initials *E* on the right and *J* on the left, written with glitter. John knew right away they were the glasses that did the trick.

So he grabbed them quickly and rushed out to get back to the ground.

However, he hadn’t come to terms with Paul's overpowering hearing.

The young inspector heard the noise caused by the thief, he understood that something was wrong and ran into the room. John was halfway through when Paul from the balcony told him to stop, which John was far from doing.

So while Paul was back inside, obviously waiting for him on the ground, John hurried down. As soon as he was at a safe height, he let go and threw himself to the ground, starting to run in any direction, just as Paul and some officers left the hotel and started to chase him.

Now John was running and he was absolutely sure he was in the wrong direction. It wasn’t the street he had agreed with George. Which made everything more complicated because now John could no longer meet with George and leave Paul behind permanently.

"*John, where the fuck are you?*" George snapped annoyed from the headset.

"I took the wrong turn."

"*Fuck, John, what's wrong with you?*"

Well, that was a very fair question, to which it was equally difficult to find a sensible and acceptable answer.

"Let's think about this later. Now tell me what to do. Paul and his men are chasing me."

George sighed and John thought he also rolled his eyes.

"*Try to lose them and then I'll come and get you back.*"

"Agree."

As if it were easy.

Something was wrong that night and John was painfully aware of it: either Paul had gained more resistance in running, or it was John who was losing it.

The fact was that Paul was really very close and John was... Yes, he was tired of running. Tired of running away, he couldn’t deny it.

The only thing he wanted to do was stop and let himself be caught, even if Paul would find out his identity, even if Paul would hate him.

However he couldn’t, in any way he couldn’t be caught. He had to think about Julian. His child needed him, *only* him. And if John had been arrested, who would take care of Julian? He had no intention of letting his child deal with his own bad experiences. Yes, there was Cynthia, but what if she didn’t feel like taking care of Julian every day of her life?

There were also George and Pattie, but if they didn’t have the approval of the juvenile court?
No, there was only John for Julian.

Paul again told him to stop, bringing him back abruptly at that moment and John turned a moment to him.

He should never do it. The sense of guilt fiercely roared in him looking at Paul, his inspector, his friend, the man who had shattered John’s alleged normality, his daily life, his certainties...

The thud that interrupted those thoughts wasn’t certainly coming from his heart. No, the hard asphalt that suddenly hit his cheek and the palms of his hands, told him quite clearly that John had stumbled and crashed to the ground.

And Paul and his agents were approaching dangerously.

_Fucking hell_, John cursed to himself.

He got up immediately with an agile leap and started running again. He decided to get into the first street on the right and fortunately found himself in front of a building under renovation. The scaffolding was covered by a thick network that at that moment could save him as well as representing his trap. He decided to risk, trusting that the street was full of tourists. They had to be very close to Piccadilly circus, which meant that, _God_, he had really run a long way.

He found shelter in the scaffolding, and remained still, even holding his breath until Paul arrived.

His inspector, in obvious difficulty now, looked around for a few moments before diving into the crowd and John dropped to the ground with a great sigh.

He was safe. At the moment.

"George." he murmured breathlessly, "I lost the bobbies."

"Great, where are you?"

John tried to look at the street number and name, hidden by the scaffolding.

"3, Savile Row."

"Coming, don't move."

John nodded, even though George could never see it, and tried to relax.

Bloody hell, how stupid was he? He had taken the greatest risk of his entire career as a thief. His mind knew it well, it kept telling him he was safe, and his body was trembling uncontrollably.

John looked at his hands: they were injured, some blood appeared where the hard asphalt had rubbed the thin skin of his palm, and their trembling was evident, so John closed them in a fist to stop them.

He shouldn’t have done this theft, especially since the recent events had fucked John's mind.

There was the _Paul’s matter_, of course. How could it not affect him? It was enough to see how he had distracted John that evening.

Paul and John's new feelings for him. How could it happen? How did that relationship, which at least on John's side had started with the most hypocritical and unseemly intentions, become something so pure, so intense, so wonderfully devastating? How could John let it happen to him?
It had been stronger than him, it had been inevitable, as if it was dictated by destiny, the same that had led Paul into his shop at the beginning of this whole story.

Blessed and cursed day, that was.

Still, John couldn’t really feel sorry; despite everything, despite the terrible consequences that could follow his realization, John was happy, really happy with this feeling. He had never felt so euphoric, so attracted to someone. He was also scared, of course, but that amazing desire to be with Paul, to do nothing but listen to him while he was talking or singing, to look at him every minute he was with him, was too good to be denied, pushed away, or hidden.

John felt this way only another time.

With Cynthia. It was to fill the hole she left when she abandoned him and Julian, that John started to be Hermes.

And this brought his restless flow of thoughts to the other problem, which had arisen a couple of days before.

Cynthia called him, herself, in person. It wasn’t actually that to have worried him, but mostly her request.

How to define it? Well, the first word John thought was absurd.

"John, if you agree, I'd like to keep Julian for a weekend."

"I hope you're joking."

He practically shouted at her, without even realizing it, clutching the telephone with unbelievable strength. He would never have wanted to answer like that to her, in fact immediately afterwards he apologized. But it had been instinctive, stronger than him, because the fear of losing Julian took possession of him in a moment, with the same strength.

He never expected such a request, even though Cynthia had proven to be much better in the last few months. She reminded him of the girl he had fallen in love with, and this, as much as it could please him, also terrified him.

What if Cynthia asked, sooner or later, for Julian's custody? It was a real possibility now; although a mother might have problems, the courts always tried to encourage reunification between mother and child, even if she had abandoned her child, putting him in danger.

On the other hand, John didn’t want to deny his son the chance to see and be with his mother for more than just a day. So, reluctantly, he told Cynthia that he would seriously consider her proposal.

And now, now he just had to decide what to do. He was so incredibly torn that he saw only darkness in front of him, as if he was entering a stormy, dark cloud, a deep black, a cloud that promised nothing good, a cloud that would hide the sun forever from his life.

Julian had always been John's sun.

But there was a new sun in his life. Paul.

And both were inevitably moving away from him.

*****
George was cataloging some new arrivals at the shop when he saw the inspector stepping inside and heading for the counter where he was working.

"Hi, George." The man greeted him with a smile.

George winced. Was he really talking to him?

Well, of course, he said George!

The young man cursed himself because he began to feel his hands sweating. Actually, he cursed John, because he was responsible for the fact that the bobby now would go to their shop every single day.

Obviously meeting that man made their work much easier: John had been very clever, George had to admit it.

He, instead, was in trouble by now. John wasn’t there with him and wouldn’t show up in any way, so, how was George supposed to behave with Paul?

What expressions should he use? Could he smile? Or did he always have to remain sulky?

What was he supposed to do?

John's absence was heavy, as if it was a real presence there, with him and Paul. Shit, how could John be so calm when he was alone with Paul? What mysterious force helped him, gave him the strength to always be himself with his enemy?

George didn’t have any idea, but decided that simply staring at Paul with a face like a fish wasn’t the solution.

"Hello."

"I was looking for John." Paul said, his eyes wandering hopefully on the tent that separated the little shop from where he and John spent their time together.

"I'm sorry, but John isn’t here." he informed him with a sigh, putting the CDs in his hand on the counter.

However, George wasn’t really ready to see the sudden and deep disappointment that took over Paul's face, as if the sun had just disappeared from that beautiful summer day. The realization hit him like a powerful slap, leaving him stunned for a moment.

"Can I ask you why?" Paul asked, the face conveyed only a strange unpleasant feeling, "I haven’t heard from him for several days, he hasn’t even been answering the phone and I'm starting to worry."

"It's nothing serious, it's just that he’s not very good at the moment." George explained quietly, "But he'll recover soon, you'll see."

Paul opened his eyes, worried even more, even though George had tried to reassure him. A useless job, it seemed.

"What's wrong with him?"

Well, yes, that was a good question. The inspector of course was allowed to ask it, wasn’t he?
What was wrong with John?

Of course, nothing, but that stupid wound that he got in their last theft could have aroused suspicion in Paul; so, until it was healed, John would have to avoid the man.

However Paul was right to say that John seemed strange. Even George had noticed it and it didn’t have much to do with the small accident that evening. It was something that seemed to upset John infinitely, and George was getting stressed because he hadn’t talked to him and because he couldn’t understand him himself. Besides he was a bit jealous. John was spending much more time with Paul recently, which meant he spent less with George. Sometimes it was clear that John didn’t share everything about Paul’s stuff with George and he was starting to feel left out. The fact that even Paul was starting to notice something weird about John was the proof. George knew that John would confide in him if he wanted to, so why didn’t he?

"Just a little bit of cold."

"I see." Paul replied, "What a drag. Cold during summer."

The inspector couldn’t hide his obvious sigh of relief, and George found it almost amusing. It seemed that Paul’s affection for John was sincere.

"Yeah."

But then John? Did he feel something sincere for Paul too?

"And how can he take care of Julian if he's ill?" Paul asked again.

"We help him, in fact, Pattie helps him, I take care of the shop."

"You seem to be very close friends with John, don’t you?"

George smiled to himself, "Yes."

Paul bit his lip, thoughtfully, before continuing to ask George questions.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"How did you meet John?"

George blinked, perplexed: he didn’t expect such a question, and this only fed what he had thought a little earlier. Paul was a real friend for John, he was interested in him, his health, his family, his story, as any other friend would do. George would never want to be in John’s shoes, because the guilt must have been unbearable and infinitely lacerating.

But now Paul waited for his answer and George had every intention of giving it to him.

"Oh yes, that's a good story, it happened just before he met Cynthia. I was just eighteen and my friends challenged me to steal something from his shop."

Paul laughed slightly, "This shop is cursed."

George let out a laugh, surprising himself infinitely, "It's because of all these beautiful CDs."

"And did you do it?" Paul asked interested.
"No way." George snorted, still finding that memory of John funny, "John caught me almost immediately, he has a long sight, you know, I think he understood my intentions the moment I stepped into his shop."

"And what did he do?"

"Well, of course he told me, imitating some crazy old wise man: 'Son, you know you mustn’t steal, don’t you?"

"And you?"

"I couldn’t do anything but agree, before excusing myself." George replied, shrugging, "There was something in his face that gave me severity, but also a sort of serenity, as if what I did was yes, serious, but nothing so irreparable."

"Typical of John, huh?" Paul exclaimed, smiling sweetly, and leaned his arms crossed on George's counter.

George looked at him carefully and who knew John well knew that yes, it was typical of John.

So the boy nodded, no longer surprising about how much this speech was making him discover many little, interesting details of the relationship between John and Paul.

"Then he asked me why I was doing it, and he realized that I had to get bored a lot because of the stupid challenges of my friends, which is why he proposed me to work with him."

"Oh." Paul said, struck, "Very kind of him."

"Yes, of course I accepted immediately, I had no intention of enrolling in some stupid faculty, wasting time and asking for unnecessary money to my parents because of my total lack of desire to study, so I took the chance."

"Fair enough." Paul commented, "So, you’ve been friends since that day?"

"Yeah."

"And it was thanks to him that you met Pattie?" the inspector continued.

Bloody hell, his questions were endless, George thought, not so annoyed. On the contrary, he was almost enjoying it. Perhaps it was also his being a policeman who was pushing him to ask those questions, yet George was convinced that this had nothing to do with what was happening. No, Paul was just curious, with that innocent and childlike curiosity.

"Yes. Some years later. When Cynthia left, John had to register Julian for the day care, he was just a year old, and sometimes I would go and pick him up. Obviously after noticing how nice his teacher was, I would offer more often to go and get Julian, and John, who understood, willingly consented, but she was very reserved at the beginning and refused my invitations to go out."

Paul put an elbow on the counter to rest his chin on the palm of his hand, "Was she already engaged?"

"No, actually she was doing it for an important reason." George explained, and couldn’t help but become sad for a second.

"What was it?"
George looked at him, uncertain. He didn’t know if it was right in respect of his wife to talk about that matter, but Pattie was a smart woman and had repeatedly shown to be stronger than George over her problem. Which did nothing but increase the admiration and love that George felt for her.

He decided there was no obstacle to telling that story to Paul.

"She had health problems that made her sterile."

Paul jumped slightly, "I see."

"That’s why she turned away any man who showed interest in her." George explained as his hands tightened, remembering how sad Pattie had looked when she continued to refuse him, "But I told her I didn’t care, I only cared about her. That was how she finally gave in. And well, at the beginning of last year we got married."

He concluded with the brightest smile. It was the same as the day Pattie accepted his proposal, the same as the day of their marriage.

"It must be hard for her to work with children, knowing she can’t have one." Paul pointed out, with a slight frown.

"Yes, but I’m sure that’s also why she likes it." George replied, "Besides, there's always Julian, I don’t think Pattie can replace his mother, no one can, but at least she can take care of him like a child."

"And anyway there's always adoption. Have you ever thought about it?"

George nodded: it was their only solution, it was obvious that they had already thought about it.

"We are just starting to inform about it. We hope to be able to apply by the end of this year."

"It's definitely a great idea and I'm sure everything will be fine."

"Thanks, I'm sure, too. Pattie is the strongest person I've ever known and deserves nothing but the best." "Absolutely."

Paul smiled encouragingly, and George was fully aware now that he had just confided to Paul some of the most important moments in his private life. But the really weird thing was that everything seemed so natural, as if at that moment their opposing roles, of inspector and accomplice of a thief, had been cancelled and lost importance.

Was it Paul who caused all this?

"You know, George, I was thinking of something I'd like your opinion on." Paul asked him a moment later.

A mischievous and euphoric smile danced on his face, as if something beautiful was going to happen, but George didn’t know if it was anything good for him.

"Um... sure, tell me." he said in a slightly shaky voice.

"I'd like to organize something nice for John and Julian."

Well, George wasn’t expecting anything like that. Surely it was a day full of surprises, that one,
"Why?"

"Well, John helped me a lot when I was suffering for Jane and I’d like to thank him." Paul answered, looking down with a sweet smile on his lips.

"Did you already have something in mind?"

Paul bit his lip, and George noticed, finding it incredibly funny.

"Yes, but I need your help."

*****

Children shouting happily and splashes of water came from every corner.

Obviously, what else could John expect? It was still a pool.

The Tooting Bec Lido was one of the most important open pools in London. It was no surprise that on that August day it was so crowded with people of all ages, and he was there, with Julian, Paul, George, and Pattie.

It wasn’t really his idea. From what he understood, it had been Paul's idea, and George and Pattie had helped him by preparing baskets to have a nice picnic and stay there all day, and especially taking John and Julian to the mysterious place.

Paul had been found directly in the pool. Paul, the one who had come up with the whole day.

No one had ever organized a party for John, nobody. Only Paul, and it made him furious as well as cheer up. Perhaps cheer up was too restrictive. No, the surprise just swept him off his feet. When he understood everything, his legs trembled, risking to make him fall, even if John wanted them to resist, just for a moment, just to get closer to Paul, and hug him, and kiss him... but no! He couldn’t.

And it wasn’t even because he had certain feelings of affection for Paul, after all, man or woman, what did it matter? Paul was wonderful because he was Paul. End of the question. Everything else didn’t count.

He couldn’t because Paul would hate him. Paul could never reciprocate what John felt and even if he did, well, it would be a catastrophe, because surely John would make some mess and Paul would find out who was behind Hermes' mask and then he would hate him even more, even forever. He would wish he had never met John and this was more painful than just watching Paul, just being with him as a friend and nothing more, suffocating a feeling obviously too big and heavy for John.

So John would get mad. Whenever Paul did something nice for him, John fell into that swirl of sensations and desires together unpleasant and delicious. A vicious circle, that’s what it was, and it was dangerously playing with John's mind.

"John?"

Paul's voice aroused him from his thoughts, but he couldn’t make them go away from John forever. After all, they were about Paul. So the result was only that those same thoughts became more intense and his feelings warmer. Which wasn’t really a good thing, since the sun was shining with
determination that day.

John felt Paul's hand touch his shoulder, and fighting not to close his eyes and focus on those long fingers that, oh god, were touching him, turned to the inspector.

"Hello." he greeted him, trying to smile and was almost certain that the result had been rather disturbing.

Paul was so cute. Now John could see how much beauty adorned his body. Eyes that seemed too big at the first meeting, were now wonderful big doe eyes. Those features still so young, were even sweeter than any other face John could remember.

He was beautiful beyond words and now he was beside him, with his pale chest and long white legs on display, his hand still on John's shoulder and a smile on his face.

"Can I sit down?"

"'Course you can."

Paul sit next to John. Now they were both on the edge of the pool, legs swimming in fresh water, and Paul joined John to watch with interest George and Pattie playing in the water with Julian. The child floated thanks to his water wings and seemed to have a good time, while George pretended to attack him like a dangerous shark and Pattie saved him in her safe arms.

John was happy that his child was having fun.

"Nice day, huh?" Paul asked him, looking up at him.

"Wonderful." John commented, looking back, "Thanks to you."

Paul laughed, pleased, "It’s nothing."

"Why did you do all this?"

"I wanted to." Paul answered, shrugging.

"Come on, Paul." John insisted, "There must be a reason..."

"Couldn’t I just want to?"

"No! And if you don’t tell me, I won’t hesitate for a moment to throw you into the water." John exclaimed, stretching his hands towards his torso to push him.

However, Paul laughed, pulled back surrendering to his request, and the only dive that followed was John's heart’s when he couldn’t touch him. Damn it, he didn’t even know he wanted to touch Paul.

"Fuck, you really are so stubborn, John."

"I'm the champion of stubborns." John pointed out, trying to mask the disappointment.

And he succeeded, thinking that it was still a slight desire, something more like the simple curiosity of being in that new, exciting situation.

"It's just my way to say thank you." Paul explained, blushing slightly.
"What for?"

"You know, for what you did for me when Jane left me."

"You had already thanked me." John replied.

He really didn’t understand why Paul had done all this for him. Or maybe, he understood it, but it was hard to accept, especially because the memories of his hits as Hermes with no fucking regard for Paul were coming back to his mind, making everything just more confusing, more wrong, so damn unfair to Paul. It was something that was literally killing John, and he had no idea how long he would last.

"Yes, but this is better than just a word, right? We also have the opportunity to be together, we've never been anywhere with George and Pattie."

"Don’t tell me you've even become their friend." John said, forcing himself to laugh and pay attention to Paul's words, which in the end was what he wanted most in the world.

More than any rare and precious relic, John wanted just Paul.

"Well, I had to deal with them about the surprise, so I talked a little bit with them, especially with George."

"I hope he didn’t talk shit about me." John commented, grinning to himself.

"Actually, I tried to get some juicy things about you, but he didn’t let escape any."

"I’ll give him a pay rise then." John said, satisfied, while Paul gave him an amused look.

"He told me about Pattie and that they want to adopt a child." the inspector continued, in a more serious tone.

John seemed to regain some seriousness and nodded slowly, "They’ve already asked me if I could write a reference letter for them, you know, for all the times they looked after Julian."

"Will you do it?"

"Of course, if there's even one thing I can do to help them, then I'll do it. They always help me, I think it's fair to return the favor. Julian and I would be lost without them."

And that was an inviolable truth: for each aspect of his double life, George and Pattie had been fundamental to him and especially to Julian. Their presence made the lack of a mother less heavy.

"Nice of you." Paul commented, smiling.

"Thank you."

"Julian seems very attached to Pattie." Paul pointed out, while Julian was still in the girl's arms and he kept on giggling every time she blew raspberries on the neck.

"It's like that. She’s the only stable female figure in his life."

"Do you think he consider her as a mother?" Paul asked, very carefully.

"I don’t know, he knows very well that he has a mother, but sometimes I get the impression that his body conveys something else. It's as if his gestures clearly show that he thinks of Pattie as his
mother. It’s not fair, though, either for Julian, nor for Cynthia, nor for poor Pattie. " John finally sighed.

"Maybe you should talk to him."

"I tried, but he’s still too young."

"So what do you want to do?"

"I..." he began to say, but stopped biting his lip nervously.

John knew what he had to do, but he still didn’t tell anyone about Cynthia’s proposal. Maybe it was time to confide in someone and share that weight with Paul. After all, it was so easy to talk to him. If he talked to George or Jim, maybe they would protest initially and John didn’t want to hear protests.

He only wanted someone to listen to him, to give him an impartial advice, to simply be there to gather his confidence and treasure it, because his decision, even if shaky, had already been taken.

"Paul..." he said carefully, "Two days ago Cynthia called me."

"How come?" Paul asked softly.

"She had a request for me that concerned Julian."

"What is it?"

John looked away from Julian to rest his eyes on Paul: he felt he needed to look directly into his eyes to continue, there was a force lying there, and John desperately needed it.

"She wants me to leave Julian to her for a whole weekend."

Paul blinked, perplexed, "Well, that's a surprise."

"Yeah."

"What do you want to do?"

"I’d like to accept. After all, it’s okay that Julian is with his mother..." and without John noticing, the sentence ended with a sense of suspension.

"But?"

"But what?"

"I can see that there is a but, no?" Paul urged.

After a moment of surprise, John nodded, "I'm scared."

"Why?"

"I don’t really know that." John snapped, hating himself because his bloody fears were coming back to make their presence heavier in the least opportune moments.

They had never completely disappeared, even Paul understood by now, but John could no longer keep them at bay alone. He was no longer physically able.
"I never left Julian with Cynthia for more than a day." he sighed.

"Do you think she could hurt him because of her problem?"

"Oh no, absolutely not." John replied hurriedly, shaking his head, "She's been fine for a long time now and besides, her parents will be with her too. Julian is safe."

"So what are you afraid of?"

"What if in those days Julian liked being with his mother and decided to live with her?"

"Oh, John." Paul sighed, "It won’t happen, I'm sure."

"How can you be sure? After all, it is very likely, he sees his mother for a short time, they laugh and play, she doesn’t have to scold him when he makes a whims, she only gives him presents and cuddles him while I-"

"While you what?" Paul interrupted, almost altering himself for John's frustrated outburst, "Don’t you cuddle him, don’t you give him presents?"

"Yes, but, Paul, you're not there when I have to scold him." John replied, and bent his head, losing his gaze in the crystal clear water of the pool, "He looks at me in a way that... God, it seems almost that he hates me at that moment, and then I think that maybe I went too far and I was too severe and he didn’t deserve all this... "

"John, that's enough." Paul stopped him, grabbing him by the shoulders and forcing him to turn back to him, and then proceeding gently, "If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that this is exactly what loving a son means, if you don’t correct him when he's wrong, who will do it? Somebody really bad when he's older, and surely someone who doesn’t care about him, while you, you correct him for his own good. In the meantime, just do whatever you’ve been doing all this time with him."

Paul's words touched something deep inside him, and John felt on the verge of tears.

"But..."

"And don’t worry about him." Paul continued, caressing his shoulders distractedly, "Because Julian will never leave you. I know."

John nodded, aware that everything in Paul, from his sweet voice, to his caring caresses, to his kind words, helped make that decision more certain and less frightening.

"So, I just have to tell Cynthia." he finally sighed.

"Do you know what else I would do?" Paul asked, "I would also ask Julian."

"You say?"

"He’s old enough to understand the situation and you'll see his reaction right away."

John nodded. He had never even thought of asking Julian, but Paul was right, Julian had to be involved.

"Then would you like to help me?"

Paul blinked, totally caught off guard, "What?"
"Would you like to help me ask Julian?" John repeated gently.

"But it's too personal." Paul protested briskly, "I have nothing to do with it."

"You said once that everything was easier for you with me. Well." he started, holding off the fire that was trying to get hold of his cheeks,"It's the same for me."

Paul bit his lip, uncertain. Then, after that brief moment of hesitation, he smiled at him softly and John sent everything to hell and let his face turn bright red.

"If you put it that way, then ok."

****

A few minutes later it was John and Paul's turn to play with Julian, while George and Pattie were on the deck chairs to relax and sunbathe.

John made the child remove his water wings and now he was teaching Julian to move his legs and stay afloat, while supporting him with one hand on his stomach. Paul stood in front of him and held his hands, helping him to keep his arms stretched out in front of him.

Julian seemed to have a lot of fun swimming with his dad and he was doing great, when he suddenly made a wrong movement with his head which partly went under the water and he drank a little inadvertently.

John immediately pulled him out and the kid began to cough and cry together, holding desperately to his father.

"Oh come on, nothing happened, luv."

Julian didn’t seem to have the same opinion and cried as if he was going through hell. It was a show that tag Paul’s heart and he found himself smiling softly, because Julian had every reason in the world to cry like that. When Paul was a child, if some water came to his mouth or nose, he cried immediately, looking for his mother's attentions and cuddles, which never delayed coming and seemed to push away all his suffering by magic. When he was even younger, his father was ready to do the same, Paul couldn’t deny it, but that was before his father ruined everything.

Julian’s quieter sobs brought Paul back to reality and he noticed the funny faces John was putting now to make the child smile again, which promptly happened.

"Look, what good little chap you are, Julian. You stopped crying immediately." Paul said, approaching the two Lennons and tickling the child's side.

Julian, with eyes still flushed and his chest shaken with the last sobs, smiled shyly and had his head resting on his father's shoulder.

"Well, I promised him that if he stopped crying, I would give him good news." John explained, still cradling him gently.

"Oh yes, so you have to tell him now, right?"

Julian nodded and looked back at John, his big sweet eyes waiting for him. John turned to Paul for a moment, who smiled encouragingly and nodded, and took a deep breath.

"So, Julian, do you remember when Mum called?"
"Yes. She said she bought me a new toy car." the child answered between sobs.

"It's true, she told me also something else."

"What?" Julian asked, looking more interested now.

"She told me she wants to go on holiday with you for three days and would like to know what you think." John explained in the clearest and simplest way possible, and paying close attention to his son's reaction.

He didn’t seem very happy, but he didn’t protest either. It was as if he was still trying to figure out what was really going to happen and what that situation meant.

"Do I have to go with mum?"

"Yes." John nodded, stroking his forehead to pull the locks of wet hair aside, "Would you like to be with her and your grandparents?"

"At her house?"

"No, you’re going to a beautiful place, you know, there will be a swimming pool, and also horses and pigs-"

"And sheep too?" Julian asked, and his smile told John that he was beginning to get excited about it.

"I don’t know, but I think so."

"Ok, then." Julian said satisfied.

John nodded, a gesture that Paul interpreted as a way as any to accept his son's affirmative answer.

"When we get home, we’ll call mum, then, ok?"

"Ok, but are you coming too, dad?"

John shook his head, noticing the child's concern and hope in that question. After all, it was understandable, he had never been alone with Cynthia. And this, more than anything else, convinced him even more that it was the right choice.

"Oh no, honey, I'll take you to mum’s house and then you'll be alone with her and your grandparents."

"And what do you do?" he asked interested.

"I’ll be at home." John explained softly.

"Alone?"

"I'll keep him company." Paul intervened, taking John by surprise with his words.

The man blushed in a moment, while Paul winked at the child, who smiled faintly and tightened his arms around his father's neck.

"But if I don’t like it then, can I come back to you?"
"Of course, sweetie." John answered quickly, hugging him harder, "Just tell mum, so she’ll call me and I’ll run to you."

Julian nodded and cuddled back against John's shoulder.

"But you don’t have to worry about that." John reassured him, stroking the back of his head, "You and Mum will have a lot of fun, Mum is very nice, you know, and anyway, at the end of the three days she will take you back to me."

"All right." the child sighed.

"That’s my boy." John said, kissing his hair.

"And the goodnight kiss? Who will give it to me if you're not there?"

"Mum will kiss you."

"And you, who will give it to you?"

"Paul will." John answered, barely holding back an amused smile.

And this time it was Paul who blushed dramatically, taken aback, while a hot and cold shiver shook him for a long second.

What happened to him? Why did he blush?

John's was just a joke, as evidenced by the fact that he was trying not to laugh.

So what was that shiver?

*****

John closed the door behind him.

He sighed, letting his eyes close.

He had just brought Julian to Cynthia's house, and this explained the deafening silence that filled the house.

There were no laughter nor baby's crying.

Without him the house was empty, off, dark because it was Julian to make it alive and happy. He was as bright as the sun, as cheerful as the chirps of the birds, as vital as a beautiful summer day.

And even if the distance wouldn’t last long, it was hard for John to bear.

Not even Elvis, the cat, which approached him to welcome him back and purr around his ankles, managed to make him feel more warmth.

Not even Elvis, the real one, with his voice managed to fill the house with music and joy, later that evening.

Only the bell ring brought a faint ray of light, because Paul was at the door, with a bag full of beer bottles, chips and various junk food.

"Hello, John." he greeted him with a beaming smile.
And again the house was full of music.

"Did you come here for the goodnight kiss?" John asked him, letting him enter the house.

Warmth.

"Daft."

Sun.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, so new chapter. It's weird to post this summery chapter, while there's cold and snow and freeze all over. :D
Anyway, I really hope you'll like this little chapter.
Elton John's glasses are taken from this video. I just love them.
I want to thank Killer_Queen, Utaka14, Ms_Berry, heyheyhey, someonenica, clearskiies and also Tim, who left a comment to the last chapter.
Next one, Helter Skelter... little spoiler: remember that Paul has to help John in painting Julian's room? Well, it's definitely time to do that! ;) 
Ciao ciao!
Chiara
"McCartney?"

Paul lifted his head from his desk to notice Chief Inspector Starkey on doorstep and immediately jumped to his feet, "Sir?"

"Can I come in?"

"Of course."

The man entered Paul's office and sat down in front of his desk, while Paul also sat down. The young inspector clearly saw a deep frown on his forehead, and something told him it wasn’t anything good.

"Is there any problem, sir?" He asked, ignoring the slight anxiety that was beginning to tug his heart.

Richard stared at him for a few seconds, without answering his question, while his lips curled in a doubtful expression.

"It's nothing serious, really, McCartney." Richard assured him, "Anyway I should inform you."

"About what, sir?"

Richard tortured his hands, bowing his head to put the words in order, and then with a sigh returned to look at Paul, "Scotland Yard isn’t particularly enthusiastic about our work."

Inspector Starkey's words didn’t come unexpected, so Paul wasn’t surprised as well. Rumors had long reported that upstairs they weren’t satisfied with Paul's work about Hermes’ case. Who could blame them? Paul completely agreed. He had always tried to give the best of himself, to make every effort despite everything and everyone, yet every damn time Hermes seemed to know more and more than him, seemed to foresee his moves. How he could do that, Paul had no idea, but it was so, damn!, and Paul couldn’t do anything about it.

So it was obvious that his failures (because it really was failure), weren’t welcome. Who liked the failures? No-fucking-body.

They were trouble, serious trouble, especially for Paul.

He felt he had more than a sword hanging over his head, but if he stopped to think about it, he would do nothing.

"I see."

"I don’t want you to worry, because I think you are smart and because I think we have also been very unfortunate about the case, but I fear your days are numbered, if something else goes wrong."

Paul expected that too, it was logical. Yet his voice betrayed his state of mind so suddenly lost.

"Of course, I understand perfectly."
"Obviously, it's just my assumption as a result of what I've heard, and you don’t have to think about it too much." Richard tried to reassure him and Paul nodded.

"I'll try."

"Next time it'll be better, just don’t give up and be brave, we are all counting on you."

This was also true, and after all, on a couple of occasions Paul had been within an inch of capturing Hermes. Thanks to this Paul managed to cling to the inspector's words and make them his own.

"Yes sir, I promise you we won’t fail anymore, sir."

It was a promise, a risky promise, because Paul knew his enemy well, but he didn’t know what the future had in store for him.

Only one thing was certain: Paul McCartney would keep his promise.

"Hermes won’t steal anymore."

****

"Hermes won’t steal anymore."

"What?"

John's solemn declaration arrived that Friday afternoon, like a thunderbolt to George.

They had just opened the shop after lunch and George sensed something was wrong with the way John kept glancing at him fleetingly and uncertainly.

So, while George was arranging the new arrivals on the shelves, he thought what could upset his friend. Surely it wasn’t about Julian. John had accepted the fact that he was with his mother now, and George knew that the first day without Julian would be the hardest one. Less than forty-eight hours and John would have the baby wandering around the house again.

So if it wasn’t Julian, what was the problem?

George couldn’t really think what was going through John’s head, but that wasn’t certainly expected.

"You’ve got it."

"No, I don’t think so." George said heartily.

"Yes, you do."

"So, would you be so kind as to explain me at least why? The answer ‘it's illegal’ doesn’t count, I'll tell you right away."

John blushed at that question and bent his head; at that moment, George understood and widened his eyes.

"No." he exclaimed, shaking his head, "Tell me it's not for the bobby."

"What if it is?" John replied, frowning.
"What does it mean, John? You... You don’t want to steal anymore because of him?"

John felt it well, the accusation in his voice, the way he was trying to tell him how wrong his behaviour was.

"I can’t do it anymore, okay?" John snapped, impatient, "I can’t stand feeling guilty and this reflects on my skills. Did you see what happened last time?"

"Well, then you had to think about it before starting this masquerade."

"How could I know what would happen?"

"What happened, John?" George asked him rather directly.

John sighed and blushed. He was a disaster. What had he done? He had upset everyone’s life, his, George’s and especially Paul’s. George was right. Why hadn’t he thought about the consequences of his actions? He had been so blinded by that challenge, playing so dangerously with fire, that he didn’t notice that he had finally burned himself. In every possible way. He burned his thief skills and now he also learned to burn with that new feeling for Paul.

He had been reckless and his hypocritical intentions had finally turned against John himself, causing him more trouble than he already had.

And now George looked at him, waiting for an answer that wouldn’t make him angrier, an answer that wouldn’t make clear the big trouble John had gotten into.

"Paul is my friend, George, I can’t do this anymore." John explained with a little contrite voice.

"You said it wasn’t true." George protested, "I remember well what you’ve said, you know, but I had to imagine that you were lying, after all, you lied to Paul, why should I be spared?"

John sighed and approached George, "Please forgive me, I was so confused at that moment, I’ve never wanted to lie to you."

George looked at him skeptically as John stared at him sincerely sorry. His eyes confirmed that John was telling the truth, so George finally shrugged.

"It doesn’t matter. I knew it and I know you, okay? You were doing things you never would have done if he hadn’t been a friend, and the thing that puzzles me is that he also considers you the same way."

The fact that George also noticed it made John extremely happy. It meant it was a sincere affection, then, both on Paul and John’s sides. Perhaps the only honest thing about his life in the last few months. Although, as his heart reminded him, John felt something deeper and warmer for Paul, but it wasn’t necessary for George to know.

"Then you can understand why I made this decision, can’t you?" John continued, more relaxed.

"I’ll deal with it." George answered, nodding, "Did you tell Jim?"

"Yes. He agrees."

"Obviously." George sighed, raising his eyes to the sky, "Do you really think you won’t steal anymore? I mean, we have a good collection by now, and we’re still looking for the last two first edition of Elvis’ LPs."
John bit his lip. It was a good question and right now John couldn’t really tell if his decision was final or not.

"Elvis’ collection is entirely mine. I bought every single bit of it. There are other ways to get them."

“Yes, but-“

“I don’t know, George, okay?” he answered looking down, "Let's see what happens right now, then we'll think about it."

"So will you keep on hanging around with Paul?" George asked him, and at that question John made his eyes go back on his friend again.

"Yup." he hastened to reply, "I need him."

"Why?"

"Because he needs me too, he makes me feel... important." John answered, trying to ignore his heart that began to beat faster and warmer.

"And no one else does?" George replied, raising an eyebrow with total perplexity.

"I didn’t say that, but you and Pattie have each other, and if something happens, you can always count on each other. I'm alone, but Paul is completely giving himself to me." John explained.

Perhaps he seemed slightly passionate as he said those things to George, because his expression changed from mere perplexity to the most obvious bewilderment.

"John, are you sure you're not lying another kind of need on him?" he asked him clearly.

But John didn’t understand, or maybe he was just pretending not to understand, "What?"

"I don’t know how to explain it, but did you hear your words?" George asked him, "You talk about him like he’s more than a friend."

"It's not true." John protested.

"Yes, it is. And John, I understand that, you know, you've been alone for a long time. Maybe his attention made you think that this relationship could become something else, because it's normal that you need someone important to your side, but this someone can’t be Paul."

And John just wanted to ask him why, when everything in him was screaming that there was no more right person for John. Instead John only blushed violently and bowed his eyes.

"You're off track, George." John snapped.

"Then prove it."

"How?"

"Go out with someone."

"With whom?"

"I don’t know." George replied, shrugging, "Someone you know, how about Yoko? She also has a
daughter the same age as Julian. You guys could take them to the park."

John didn’t want to do any of that. Actually, he could wish to take Julian to the park with someone, but that someone must have been Paul. He remembered that Sunday spent with him and Julian. It had been a perfect day and it was Paul who made it that way.

Yet George didn’t understand, he didn’t even seem to want to understand and John had no intention of continuing to discuss about Paul with him. He didn’t want to talk about this anymore, he knew that continuing to talk about it would only ruin everything and John wouldn’t let anything ruin his feeling for Paul.

Nothing and nobody could.

The only solution, therefore, was to comply with George’s requests.

"Agree, then."

Or at least to pretend.

*****

Paul hadn’t slept at all.

Inspector Starkey’s words continued to haunt him all night. Result: he didn’t close his eyes and that morning he woke up looking awful.

It was easy for his boss to say, ‘Don’t give up’. He certainly wasn’t risking his job.

But Paul did think about it and it was impossible not to be discouraged about. Although he had been very sure to promise the Chief Inspector that he would prevent any other of Hermes’ hits, Paul would have been a fool not to admit that he was now on the verge of ending the same way as his predecessor, Inspector Stuart Sutcliffe.

Paul remembered exactly what happened to him, and he also remembered how presumptuous he himself was when he got that promotion. But now he was changing. He felt that he was very different from that Paul and this was obviously due to his work, which reshaped his ego, to Jane, who by making him suffer made him stronger, and also to John, who always encouraged him and showed him hope, trust and something that Paul still couldn’t understand. Something so confusing.

He blushed slightly when he realized that the more he tried to understand what it was, the more complicated it became. It was as if Paul had just stepped into a thundercloud looking for something important, but how could he find it if everything around him was dark and the flashes kept blinding him? Paul really wanted to find that something, but he also felt he wasn’t in a hurry: in fact it was all very quiet, it was strangely pleasant, because he was sure that sooner or later he would find it, he didn’t know how nor when, but it would be like that and Paul would be so happy then. As a typical case of serendipity. It didn’t make sense to rush to look for the object of his research, because sooner or later this would fall in his hands.

It made no sense, too, because that afternoon he had to help John repaint Julian’s bedroom and Paul couldn’t allow him to notice anything that troubled him, as surely John would end up doing if Paul wasn’t careful. It was one of John’s qualities that kept on surprising him, and if on one side it frightened him, because in front of him, in front of John’s eyes he felt totally exposed, naked, as if he were giving his heart and soul to John, for him to take care of, on the other side he was reassured, because Paul had never felt such an emotion with anyone else; he had always been too closed, too reserved, and now instead, he could finally let go, sharing all his problems with
someone, a man who understood him all the way.

So after lunch he got ready, wearing a pair of old trainers and an even older t-shirt, and although it was still too early, he headed for his friend's apartment. Maybe they could do something before or start working right away. What did it matter? After that night, Paul just needed to spend time with John, in any way, to turn off his mind from all that overthinking about his problems.

Hurriedly crossing the road, he noticed that John's shop door was open and laughs were coming from inside. One was John's, Paul recognized it immediately, because it was very familiar and very dear by now. But the other one was different, it didn’t even belong to George.

And at that realization, Paul accelerated his pace slightly and entered, immediately seeing John at the back of the shop, all intent on showing a vinyl record to a woman whom Paul recognized as the woman who timidly greeted John at the park.

His heart lost a beat, and Paul didn’t know why, whether it was because of the way John laughed or for her hand resting on his forearm casually.

Whatever the reason, Paul felt that way, and he might even think he was the prey of a sudden, useless jealous rage, but that would bring only more confusion in him. And Paul feared all this because he knew that sooner or later he would break down.

"Hello, Paul." George greeted him.

Paul startled and looked at his left to the boy at the counter: he hadn’t noticed that he was there, and how could he? He had been too busy with John laughing with... what was her name?

Was it really important after all? John had just noticed him and a sudden, beautiful smile lit up his face.

"Paul, you're already here." John said, leaving the vinyl in the woman's hands and stepping closer to Paul.

"Yes, I thought there would be no problems, but if you're busy, I can come back later." Paul explained, and he turned around, cursing himself for being childish and Paul hated all this, but he couldn't help himself.

He seemed to have interrupted something and even if he didn’t know what it was, well, he hated anything he interrupted. He was sure it wasn’t good. At least, not for Paul. But then why did it have to involve Paul? Just because it was about John? Yet, not everything that concerned John, concerned also Paul.

Right?

John's hand snapping to grab his arm and stop him from leaving was what told him that yes, this had to do with Paul. It had a lot to do with Paul.

"No, wait. I was just showing something to Yoko, don’t go. I'll be right with you." John reassured him with a smile.

Paul felt his heart do a little backflip, when John smiled at him and squeezed lightly his forearm, and from that moment he didn’t understand much of what was happening. He saw John go back to the woman and talk to her.

Yoko, yes, that was her name.
Maybe John said her goodbye because a few seconds later, she left, passing in front of Paul to get out of the shop.

Then his friend went to George and said something to him, before reaching Paul and grabbing him again by the arm.

And only then everything went back to the right place.

"Shall we go?"

Paul sighed when they finished the job.

He stretched his hands over his head, and moved to the center of the room. He looked at John who was still on the ladder to finish off the drawing he had painted on a wall in Julian's bedroom. He decided to surprise him: Julian knew that his father would repaint his room in green, but he didn’t know that he would find on the wall in front of his bed a beautiful yellow sun that peeked out in the upper corner, and soft and fluffy white clouds that offered themselves as a backdrop to a small flock of blackbirds.

It was beautiful and it was all John's work. Paul only learned that day that another of John's passions was art and drawing. As he told him, while drawing the shapes of the clouds, John loved drawing at least as much as playing the guitar. The new discovery made Paul happy, as he had just gotten another piece of that puzzle named John Lennon. However, it also discouraged him and the reason was stupid, it had to be stupid. How many things didn’t he know about John yet? How many things did Paul have to find out? And would he ever find them or would they remain a mystery? Paul didn’t want John to be a mystery. He was already so confused lately about him that he really needed to know him more thoroughly.

"What do you think?" John asked him, coming down the ladder.

"It's beautiful."

"Really? Isn't it a little...?"

"What?"

"I don’t know, I’m not really convinced." John said, resting his hands on his hips.

"Are you kidding? It's perfect, John." Paul exclaimed, putting a hand on his shoulder, "Julian will like it very much."

"I hope so." John sighed, "Hey, how about a beer to celebrate?"

"Agree." the young inspector answered, smiling enthusiastically.

"I'll be right back, then."

John left the bedroom, leaving Paul alone, who waited on the rags they used to cover the floor.

He relaxed, stretching his legs and backing away, pointing his hands behind him. Then he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, letting himself be carried away by the music. John claimed that working with music was more challenging and more enjoyable, and Paul didn’t take long to realize that he was right. Listening to that soundtrack was relaxing and allowed him to concentrate on his
task.

Since the painting took away all afternoon and the first moments of the evening, John opted for a hundred different songs as a soundtrack. He loaded them on his mp3 player and connected it to two small speakers so that the sound waves would be echoed in the room.

Now, there was a song by Stevie Wonder. His voice was unmistakable, but Paul didn’t know the title; he liked it very much, it was sweet and at the same time carefree, and it got a laugh from Paul because now he was no longer surprised to find himself appreciating the music that John offered him.

John improved his technique as much as Paul made great strides in trying to overcome his problem, what in a sense had started the relationship between John and himself, what had started everything.

Perhaps Paul’s problem wasn’t completely gone, but Paul felt how much the situation changed for him. Now he liked music too, he found himself whistling and humming when he was alone, at home, while cooking or getting ready to go to work. And it was all thanks to John.

John brought music into his life. To Paul, John himself was music.

He was a perfect melody that played just for him. That was the reason behind the jealous rage he had when he saw him with Yoko.

At that moment John entered the room with two bottles of beer in his hand. Paul followed him with his eyes as he sat cross-legged in front of him.

Why was Yoko there with him? If John told him he had no interest in her, why were they laughing like that? Together?

"Here's to you." John said, holding out a bottle that had already been opened.

"Ta."

"What were you thinking about?" the man asked interested.

Paul started. Damn.

"Me?"

"Who else?" John asked, laughing softly, "You had a thoughtful face."

"Oh, nothing special." Paul hurriedly said, with a vague gesture of his hand, "I was wondering what this song was called."

"You are the sunshine of my life."

"Sunshine?" Paul repeated, smiling, "Well, it seems perfect for your painting."

John nodded and followed him with his eyes when the young man turned to the sun on the opposite wall, without taking his eyes off his profile. There was something strange in his smile, it was so unnatural. Not that Paul didn’t think the things he said. It seemed more like he was hiding something more, another question maybe.

"Paul?"

And now John wanted to know what Paul’s real question was.
"Hm?"

"What were you really thinking about?"

Paul turned to him, looking at him more than surprised. He should have expected it, yet he couldn’t help but appear once again struck by John's ability to read inside him.

"Who tells you that I wasn’t really thinking about this?" he asked, trying to understand how John could have that ability.

"Meself."

"Why?"

"Because I know you." John answered, convinced, "So?"

Paul bit his lip nervously. He wasn’t sure whether telling John the truth was a good thing to do, or at least to say that truth. What if John misunderstood?

However, Paul was convinced that John deserved that sincerity, he understood that something was wrong with him and wouldn’t easily give up. So it wouldn’t make sense to lie to him and make up some other excuse.

And then... what was the harm in telling him his true feelings?

"I was just wondering why Yoko was there before, in your shop." he confessed with extreme caution.

"Oh."

John startled at Paul's question, his heart also lost a beat. He could expect everything from him, but never ever that question.

What an idiot, John!

Surely he was seeing too much in Paul's request, there was nothing strange in asking the reason for the presence of that woman. Yes, it was John's heart that travelled too much with imagination.

"We went out for lunch together." he answered.

"I thought you didn’t want to go out with anyone."

"I still don’t want to." he hastened to explain, "It’s just… I'm doing it to please George."

Paul frowned in perplexity. What did George have to do with it now?

"Why?"

"He..." John began, playing absently with the beer bottle, "He wants me to look for someone to… you know."

Well.

This changed everything. Almost. There was always the possibility that John could fall in love with that woman, by dint of frequenting her.
However, Paul didn’t really believe it, no, he was sure he was safe by now; John's answer made everything fit, even though the young man dared a little more, demanding further clarity.

"So you're not really going to be with her?"

"No, no, I just took her out for lunch, so George would stop bothering me."

"Thank God." Paul exclaimed and sighed relieved.

He just couldn’t help himself.

John laughed delightedly, but he blushed visibly at Paul's so sincere and relieved comment, "Why do you say that?"

And now it was Paul's turn to blush, less noticeably than John, but he noticed it and John noticed too and... God, if it wasn’t all that complicated!

"It's just that I don’t think she’s okay for you." Paul answered, trying to be honest.

"I remind you that you also suggested me to ask her out."

"Well, I’ve changed my mind." Paul shrugged, "I don’t think she's right for you, as you said, every single parent brings problems and you can’t take care of other people's problems."

"So, who's right for me?" John asked, curious.

Paul pushed away an absurd answer that was about to escape from his lips and that involved him too closely, and tried to find a more acceptable answer.

"You need someone who shares your passions, someone who is willing to share your problems and your life as well, someone who can take care of both you and Julian."

"It’ll be difficult to find them." John sighed, resigned.

"Never give up hope." Paul encouraged him, "Take me, for example. I thought I was a basket case, but you showed me I wasn’t."

John looked at him for a moment without saying a word, only smiling fondly, and then said, "Because I knew you weren’t."

"How?"

"I could see it from your eyes." John explained quietly, "They were begging me to help you. And I did."

"My eyes?"

"Sure, your eyes are so telling, you know?"

Paul had no intention of blushing even more, not at all. But good Lord!, if John was doing everything to bring him there, to that awesome and dangerous place where John could tell him anything and Paul would feel free to blush as he wanted, because John's words touched him so deeply and in the right places and... heck, how everything drove him crazy!

"And what do they tell you now?"
"Now?" John repeated, raising an eyebrow, before approaching to look better in his eyes, "Well, now they are saying you're worried about something."

"What for?"

John let out a laugh, "I don’t know, you have to tell me, I'm not a fortune teller, mate."

Paul nodded, smiling, before looking down at his hands.

"It’s about the job."

"What's up?" John asked, interested.

"Inspector Starkey made me realize that at Scotland Yard they’re not happy with my work with Hermes." Paul sighed.

John opened his eyes. It couldn’t be that way, it was too early.

"What does it mean?"

Or maybe it was just John's hope to tell him it was too early to treat Paul that way, the hope something unpleasant wouldn’t happen to him, like going away from London, where he could no longer see John every day.

"It means that if I don’t get him as soon as possible, they will make me end up like Sutcliffe."

Here.

"No, they can’t." John protested, shaking his head.

"Of course they can." Paul replied, sad about his situation, "I'm failing miserably. How many times did I let him run away? Five? In a few months I had him got away with it five times. It's not normal, John."

No it wasn’t. But it was about Paul and John didn’t want him to leave. His initial intent was just that and he was one step away from getting it, but now things had changed and no, Paul had no right to leave.

"And so, now what can you do?"

"I just have to arrest him. Next time he shows up, I'll catch him." Paul sighed.

Or they could just stay both in that deadlock: John wouldn’t wear Hermes’ clothes anymore and Paul wouldn’t lose his job. It was the only solution at the time and John had to admire himself for the timing of his decision.

"I'm sure you'll make it." he finally said, trying to encourage him.

"Thanks, John."

Paul tried to smile, but John could easily see behind that smile, Paul's true state of mind. He no longer believed in himself, in his abilities, it was evident and even normal, after all the times that John had managed to run away avoiding his own arrest. The problem was that John would never have made it, perhaps, if Paul hadn’t revealed his moves, if Paul hadn’t entered his life to upset it.

God, they upset each other's life.
Everything had changed for Paul too. John remembered his self-confidence the day he entered his shop for the first time, and now he seemed so lost, with little confidence in himself. And it was John who was responsible for that.

"I really think so, Paul, you're incredibly smart."

Paul nodded absently, bowing his head and John looked at him. His heart was beating fast, and he couldn’t take his eyes off Paul's beautiful face, which now showed one of the saddest expressions John had ever seen.

It was his fault if Paul was like that and John just wanted to do something to make up for it. On the one hand he knew he had to confess everything, his identity first and his feelings, but he couldn’t. He would lose him and he couldn’t give up on Paul.

He could give up on Hermes, yes, but never ever on Paul. He couldn’t have both, that was obvious, and that boy had slowly become more important than the other John.

At that realization, John smiled, took the brush still dirty with yellow paint and touch the tip of Paul’s nose. He, after a moment of hesitation in which he was probably wondering what the fuck John did, looked up and stared at him disconcerted only for a moment, before taking his brush, with white paint, and imitating his gesture on John.

John let out a laugh and touched Paul's chin with the brush. The young inspector let him do, giving him time to admire his work and be satisfied about it, then pounce on him and land him with one of his best moves, one of those he used to tackle the criminals and arrest them.

John didn’t really expect it, and he looked at him in surprise but amused, while Paul blocked him by straddling him and stopping John's hand, who lost his grip on the brush.

"Who's laughing now?" Paul asked defiantly.

"What are you going to do, Inspector? Arrest me?"

"No, I'll just take revenge." he commented maliciously.

His free hand took the brush with the green paint, left on the floor with rags and newspapers, and with it Paul painted the whole line of John's jaw. He had never noticed, but John had a beautiful jaw, it was neither too pronounced nor too delicate like Paul's. It was really perfect, so much so that Paul wanted to trace it with his own fingers, but he knew it was totally inappropriate. John would tell him to go to the hell and with good reason. Even Paul cursed himself, because... What a fucking desire was that?

Then John laughed and shook his head a little as the soft bristles were tickling the sensitive skin of his face.

"Maybe it's better to use something else." Paul said.

"Why? Haven’t you finished your masterpiece yet, Michelangelo?"

"'Course not, what a stupid question." he said, snorting.

Paul left the brush and decided to use two fingers. He took some yellow paint and leaned slightly over him, resting his fingers on his forehead. He drew a big sun in the middle of his smooth forehead, moving his fringe hair away with his clean fingers. He made sure it was a perfect sun, round and bright, like the one they had drawn on the wall of Julian's bedroom.
"What are you doing?"

"You’ll see it later, be quiet now."

"All right, boss."

Paul laughed and moved his fingers on one of his cheeks. He surrounded his eye, taking care not to get too close to the eyelid, admiring closely that colour so special in his eyes: the iris was light green, with amber specks that made his gaze so full of warmth.

A warmth that Paul found himself longing for.

Fuck!

He didn’t understand why and didn’t know how to feel that warm again and again. But he had a taste of it: John had been so kind to him, caring and always present when Paul needed him, that Paul now found himself relying on it and always wanting more.

So the hand moved to repeat the same action on the other cheek. He laughed slightly when his work was finished and John, interested, asked him if he had finally finished.

"Yes, I’d say yes." he answered satisfied.

"Oh, then you won’t mind if I do this."

"Wha-"

But Paul didn’t have time to ask for anything. He only realized that he had lowered his guard first, with his laugh, and loosened his grip on John’s hands. He understood it when, after a jerk of John’s hips, he found himself lying on the ground and the next moment John climbed on him, blocking Paul's arms and legs together.

"Hey, it's not fair." the inspector protested, laughing.

"What, darling, don’t you know that what goes around, comes around?"

"But-"

"Shhhhh, I have to focus and return the favour properly."

Paul tried to laugh but he found it very difficult. John studied his face with incredibly bright, almost burning attention. It was strange, but Paul had never been looked that way, and even more strange was the fact that Paul wanted that look on him forever. It made him feel important, special, loved.

Why had nobody ever looked at him that way?

Why was John the only one who did it?

The answers to those questions were too complicated and Paul didn’t really want to know them. Especially not now that John got his fingers dirty with white paint and was drawing a mustache on Paul's face, making beautiful curls on his round cheeks.

The contact between John's fingers and Paul's cheeks burned, however light, burned like the most devastating fire.

It was crazy, but Paul just wanted John to never stop touching him, to let John caress him, and
everything else didn’t matter. At least, not that day, when he realized he was losing the only two important things left to him: his job and John.

Right now he couldn’t do much about the job. He just had to wait for Hermes's next move, because there were very few clues about him. London was inhabited by millions of people and he was looking for only one.

As for John, Paul couldn’t allow him to go away from him. And when he saw him laughing with Yoko, Paul had been scared. Something was turned on, becoming more confused, more important. He had no idea what was happening to him, but Paul knew he wasn’t willing to share John with another person.

So George? Why didn’t he have this reaction with George?

George was John's friend, as well as Paul.

No, Paul knew that it wasn’t the same. It was different somehow.

All his thoughts, doubts, reflections burst like a soap bubble when John laughed softly at the work done.

Paul found himself smiling unconsciously. Perhaps he had been smiling for a few minutes, since John, euphoric, began to paint Paul's face. It was an incredible expression, almost hypnotic and above all beautiful on John's face.

Paul was amazed, fascinated... conquered.

"That's it, my revenge is satisfied."

John waited for Paul to say something, but the man just kept looking at him. John didn’t know why, and his heart was beating so fast he couldn’t understand anything else beyond that beautiful man who looked at him and smiled with a warmth that also came to John, and it seemed like his most rational self was melting.

Not knowing what else to add to try and get any answer from Paul, John said a simple and stupid, "Paul?!"

And finally he had his answer. Short and concise. Not very clear, and certainly so fucking surprising.

John had his answer when Paul lifted slightly with his torso.

When Paul kissed him.

It was so fast that John didn’t even realize it.

Paul, Paul McCartney, his inspector, his friend, his Paul kissed him. And god, if this wasn’t the most incredible thing John had ever tried.

Suddenly everything around him was brighter, as if that sun on the wall was real, and John felt so light: it seemed that with that kiss (it was a kiss, wasn’t it?) Paul made all his problems disappear, all those complicated doubts that confused John's mind.

Paul had kissed him. Oh yes, it was just like that. And John had seen him as he brought his full lips close and placed them on John's. He had never tasted softer and sweeter lips than Paul's. The acrid
smell of paint on their faces was still so intense and Paul's mouth tasted like beer, but there was a sweet taste like honey lying there, on those lips and John wanted to taste it again.

However, he didn’t have time to take his face in his hands to kiss him again, because Paul had already started talking.

"I... I should go, now."

John just wanted to tell him, 'no, don’t go, stay and kiss me again'. But he didn’t want to hurry things. That kiss opened a door that John desperately wanted to open and now that Paul had done in his place, now that door brought them to another dimension, one in which there was much to think about and maybe it would have been better that they had done it by themselves.

Surely this was what Paul was trying to tell him with his statement. Perhaps he didn’t know what to say or do because of his gesture, and therefore he resorted to that simple and obvious solution.

"Sure."

John let go of Paul and they both stood up, then headed towards the stairs.

"Thank you so much for... today." John told him, going down the steps.

"Don’t mention it." Paul answered, smiling nervously.

"If you didn’t help me, I'd still be half-done."

"That's what friends are for, isn’t it?"

"Yeah."

John nodded and Paul just kept looking at him, finding it incredibly difficult to leave, to take his eyes off John's face, which now looked so different.

However, he had to leave. Eventually Paul had broken down, just as he had foreseen, and in a way he didn’t expect.

"So, see you, John."

"Yes, bye, Paul."

Paul gave him a quick wave of his hand before turning and quickly leaving the house. The journey to his house was very short, but Paul could feel John's gaze on his back: it burned and made the return home endless.

Finally Paul reached his apartment and disappeared behind the door.

Now, only now he gave his body permission to assimilate and understand what he did. And what he did was the strangest thing, the most overwhelming thing, the worst thing he had ever done.

He kissed John.

A real kiss, and it was his initiative. He raised himself to get closer to John and touch his lips with his own.

John's lips, so fucking different from a girl’s and still so soft, so bloody perfect, made Paul want to kiss him again, but no, no, what was he thinking?
What the fuck is wrong with you, Paul? He asked himself in anguish.

He needed John, just this. At that moment, when he fully understood what that man had done for him, all that he represented and how wonderful he looked to his eyes, that kiss for Paul had been the right thing to do.

But it was wrong, too wrong, it was too messy, it was a tangled bundle of a thread that couldn’t be disentangled.

There was no solution.

And above all there was no solution now, with Paul's mind still clouded and his heart still so happy, so crazy.

He needed to sleep on it, and surely the next day everything would be clearer.

A night of rest, with the hope that this little boat which Paul was on, would come out of the storm.

A storm Paul loved and hated.

A storm named John.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand I did it! I thought I couldn't post today, because this week was Sanremo's week and with all the songs, I got distracted during the evenings. But luckily I did it! :D
Oh and I don't know if you guys were expecting a first kiss like that, but I hope you like it. :3
By the way, we're more than halfway of the story. :D I hope to translate faster after this exam session. So maybe I can also post the chapter more often.
In the meantime, I'd like to thank for all the love and interest you guys show for this story. <3
Also a big thank you to Ms_Berry, someonenica, Utaka14, sunqueenofsaigon, clearskies. Your comments make me so happy. :) Next chapter, You've got to hide your love away.
Ciao ciao. <3
Chiara
You’ve got to hide your love away

Chapter Notes

Sorry, it's unbetaed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning came softly, flooding Paul's bedroom with its golden rays.

And with it came that important realization that Paul had been waiting for since the night before.

No, he hadn’t dreamed.

Even though Paul slept peacefully, that memory wasn’t erased, because it wasn’t something that happened only in the dreamland.

It really happened.

It wasn’t ephemeral like a dream, it was concrete and Paul, that morning, remembered everything, up till the most insignificant detail: the smell of paint on their skin, the music in his hear, John’s warmth wrapping him as the softest blanket.

Everything was so alive in him that Paul knew it would be hard to forget.

But the question was: did he really want to forget?

He wasn’t so sure. There was a part of himself, the craziest one, shouting loudly that Paul shouldn’t forget something like that.

However, it was also true that this seemed the only possible solution.

No, the only acceptable solution.

Because in fact if Paul reflected well, there were two other choices, but both frightened him infinitely.

The first was to talk to John about what happened, what Paul did, and remembering that moment, remembering how himself took the initiative, the man blushed dramatically. God, he must have lost his mind to do such a thing. He couldn’t even blame on the alcohol. He had barely drunk half a bottle a few minutes before. Maybe he could blame on the room and that intense smell of paint. Maybe that was really what drove him crazy, some chemical substance in that greenish slop.

Because Paul had to be fucking crazy to kiss John. To want to kiss John.

And that was precisely the problem. What if Paul talked to John and found out that this was the right thing to do? Paul couldn’t believe it, but it was a real possibility. After all, John hadn’t rejected him and he wasn’t even as pissed as Paul could have easily imagined. He looked as surprised as Paul, but surely not angry.
And maybe... Maybe Paul was daring too much in his thoughts, but could he also say that John... appreciated?

Yeah. That was the crucial point. If he talked to John and together they had come to the conclusion that they could do that, that the idea of the two of them wasn’t so wrong-

Wait a minute, Paul, he told himself.

What was he thinking? Paul with another man? It wasn’t possible, it wasn’t likely, it wasn’t-

But John wasn’t another man. John was John and John was amazing, so wonderful to Paul, so... so...

No, for God’s sake, Paul, what the fuck is wrong with you?

Paul sat up, running his hand over his sweaty face, and breathed deeply and slowly. He hadn’t even noticed he was hyperventilating.

And while he started to breathe normally, his mind suggested the second solution, the one that his heart couldn’t even take into consideration.

Not see John anymore. Make him disappear forever from his life. No more having anything to do with him because he was fucking his psychophysical health. He was really a storm, the most devastating, and Paul, the madman, after having seen its effects, was still torn between running as far as possible from him and remaining at his mercy.

It would have been simpler, of course, but what was the price? One definitely too high to pay for Paul. He couldn’t allow it, not even this was acceptable. Running away, away from John, well, Paul would have been a coward.

So?

If he couldn’t get away from John nor think of him as more than a friend, what could he do?

What was he supposed to do?

*****

John sighed when Julian finally fell asleep.

The boy was back in the late afternoon and John had immediately noticed how happy he was. Seeing him so happy with his mother filled his heart with joy, but still he couldn’t help running towards him when he saw Cynthia's car parked in front of his apartment.

He had missed him so much that John just wanted to hug him and never let him go again. A desire obviously impossible to fulfil and certainly due to John’s immediate thoughts, but at that moment everything was granted, and John hugged him and then kissed him on the cheeks and forehead, while Julian laughed for the tickling.

Cynthia thanked him for the opportunity and promised Julian that they would see each other again soon. The evening was spent quietly with Julian telling John about his pony rides, and the times when he had fed the geese and then the dives with his mother in the pool. Yes, he enjoyed more than he could imagine. However, when later that evening Julian asked him to sleep in his bed, John was more than happy to please him. As if Julian too had missed his father and needed to feel him close to make sure he was back with him.
So here they were now, in John's big bed: Julian was snuggled in John's arms, his face hidden in his father's chest, and John hugging him gently.

He hummed a lullaby to make him fall asleep, and Julian, also because he was tired due to a busy weekend, collapsed in a few minutes.

John stayed awake, enjoying the powerful feeling of being back with his baby. He was warm in his arms, and his hair smelled of something good.

It was all he needed to calm his soul in torment for at least a day.

Since Paul had kissed him.

It was really hard to believe such a thing, but whenever John thought it was just a dream, then his heart beat like he was still there with Paul, and he could still feel the sweet taste of the younger man on his lips. All this to remind him that he hadn’t dreamed at all.

The problem was that Paul hadn’t contacted him yet. Perhaps he wanted to leave him by himself knowing Julian was coming back home. Or maybe, like John, he didn’t know how to behave. Should John be the one to call him? Or was it up to Paul?

And it all became even more complicated if John stopped to think about Paul's reaction. He, John, obviously didn’t have any problems. After all, was it or not what he was desperately waiting for? Fucking, if it was.

However, Paul had been impassive. He had kissed him, yes, but then? Then he behaved as if nothing had happened. And at that moment to John it seemed the best solution, but now he was beginning to change his mind. There wasn’t a single signal from Paul either in one direction or the other. Or maybe there was and John didn’t receive it?

Fucking hell, he would become crazy if he kept on spending his days and nights thinking about it without coming to any conclusion. He had to do something, he had to see Paul with his own eyes and only then would he understand what to do.

And since Paul didn’t seem to want to make the first move, John decided it was up to himself. He turned slightly, holding Julian close to him, and grabbed his cell from the nightstand. It was 10.45 pm. Paul had to be still awake. Or at least John hoped it.

He decided to write him a message. And wow, no message was ever more complicated to write. What was he supposed to say? How to start? Hello or was Good evening better? And then? How are you? Everything good?

Oh, he was an idiot. A fucking dumbass. Getting stupid problems for a stupid message like he was a fourteen years old teenager at his first crush.

Just write the first thing you think!, he told himself.

And so he did.

'Hi. I’d have a new song to study with you. Are you in?'

John sent the message, waited and meanwhile stroked Julian's hair, a gesture that had the power to calm him, and on that occasion it was absolutely essential to keep calm. If Paul didn’t answer immediately, John would go mad. Of course, it could be that the young inspector was already asleep. But in the same way, it could also be that Paul didn’t want to talk to him anymore, that he
wanted to erase him from his life, too regretted by what happened.

In that case, the worst catastrophes would happen in his mind, and John felt himself holding his breath just at the idea of never seeing Paul again.

Fortunately, however, the cell vibrated a few minutes later, and he immediately opened the message to read two simple words that made him at the same time incredibly happy and terribly anxious.

'I am.'

*****

Paul was ready.

As soon as he left his house, he took a deep breath and felt just like that. Ready.

Ready to see John again.

By now the decision had been made and Paul had accepted that this was really the only solution. That was why he accepted to meet John again for one of their lessons; and Paul knew for sure that John would behave exactly like him. The message he had sent was clear.

Paul crossed the street and came in front of John's shop.

His heart, stupid dude, was beating so fast: it was a bloody bastard, that's what it was. Paul made clear several times with himself, after many internal discussions, that he really couldn’t do anything else in that situation. But his little foolish heart never paid attention to him and it went on its own, going crazy just thinking he was going to see John again. God, the same John that Paul kissed.

Paul shook his head to push that image away again, and tried to ignore his heart at all costs as he crossed the threshold of the shop.

He looked around immediately and his reckless heart lost a beat, sinking into disappointment because there was not even the shadow of John. Was he were sick? He could have a relapse. It was a real possibility.

How stupid he was! Why did he keep worrying like that for John? He had to respect his decision. He had to-

"Hello, Paul."

A voice came to his ears, arousing him from his thoughts and allowing him to realize that there was only George.

"Hello." Paul greeted him, going towards him at the counter.

The boy was playing solitaire on the pc, while listening to some music with the earphones, "What brings you here?"

"John and I have to study a new song."

"I see."

"I can’t see him anywhere. He isn’t sick again, is he?" Paul asked, looking around and still not able
to see John.

"No, no." George answered quickly, with a vague gesture of his hand, "He brought Julian to the park with Yoko and her daughter."

Paul blinked, upset.

Yoko?

Again?

But John told him it was nothing serious, right? So Paul didn’t have to worry.

Of course he didn’t! Paul had no right to worry. That stupid jealousy that was once again gripping him was really incredibly stupid and useless.

He couldn’t be still jealous, and not because John told him there was nothing serious with Yoko. He couldn’t because things didn’t have to go that way between him and John. They were friends, just friends. That's all, and the sooner Paul understood it, the better. Not just for himself, but for John too.

"But he's coming back, he didn’t stand you up." George explained, "Otherwise he would have warned me."

"Oh yes, all right, thank you." Paul stammered, still a bit restless by the conflict between what his mind said and what his heart wanted.

"John has become very good, hasn’t he?"

Paul nodded, grateful that George offered him a topic of discussion to distract himself with, "Absolutely."

"I heard him the other day while practicing, I'm very impressed." George commented, enthusiastic.

"He really wanted to learn." Paul explained, "That's why he did it."

"Do you think you’ll go on for much longer?" George asked, interested, "After all he learned what he had to learn..."

Paul blinked and felt a thump in his chest, at the idea George was suggesting.

Perhaps because he knew George was right and that those stupid lessons were useless. At least, John had nothing left to learn about what Paul had to offer him. By now they were no longer lessons, they were only moments stolen from their lives to be together. Those were times which Paul clung to, only to have John all for himself.

As if he never had him on other occasions.

Yet that was how it began, and so it had to continue because Paul felt so good in those moments with John. There were only the two of them and the music. A perfect mix that Paul, by now, could no longer do without.

"Yes, I think work with John isn’t over yet."

"Why?"
Yeah, that was the most important question.

Why?

*****

John checked the time and almost cursed loudly: he was late for his appointment with Paul.

So he tried to hurry up. He had just left Julian at the park with Yoko. Actually he would have to take him home: he had no intention of leaving him with someone who probably wouldn’t look after him like John himself.

However, when he told Julian to go back home, he protested and Kyoko too. And at that point, Yoko offered to bring the kid home; so John gave up.

He wouldn’t do it once. He usually left Julian with George and Pattie because he trusted them, but never with others. Yet since he had left Julian with his mother for a few days, it was as if he had learned to loosen his grip on him. He understood this when he realized that since his birth he had never separated from Julian for more than one day, too busy with his responsibilities as a single father. But now it was different. He certainly didn’t want his son to grow up full of fear and anxieties, facing the world alone. Cynthia's proposal came at the right time, and it was also the best way for John to deal with and try to ease his parent's anxieties.

So John accepted and left Julian to Yoko, aware of the fact that the distraction that Paul was offering him was a considerable help to his situation.

In fact, when he turned into the way home and saw the door of the shop open, his heart began to beat faster and he smiled at anyone in particular. A very stupid thing to do, but holy shit! He was about to see Paul again. The same Paul who kissed him. He was allowed to behave like a fool, right?

He wondered if Paul had already arrived. Knowing him, maybe yes, he was already there waiting for him and... damn it! The thought made interminable that short stretch of road. As much as John could speed up his pace, the shop door always seemed far away.

And yet, he couldn’t quite find all this so stupid, in fact, it was almost funny, he thought, laughing to himself. He hadn’t felt so light and peaceful in centuries: it was incredible, it was crazy, and he just wanted this feeling to never disappear again.

When he finally approached the shop, he could hear George talking to someone.

"Do you think you'll go on for much longer? After all he learned what he had to learn..."

John suddenly stopped his pace, and with jump of his heart, he recognized the voice that answered him.

"Yes, I think work with John isn’t over yet."

Paul.

Paul had already arrived, just as planned by John, and he was talking to George.

"Why?"

Good heavens, he was just talking about him with George and at that realization, John felt himself
blushing for some strange reason.

"Er, we still have to refine some... yes, some things, you know, about the technique."

John blinked, noticing, not without some perplexity, that Paul's tone was almost... but it wasn’t possible, almost uncomfortable.

"It seems to me that it's fine now."

Stupid George, why did he have to insist?!

"Oh yes, but you see, he... he's helping me too... and I still need him."

John bit his lip, feeling even more red and warmer in the face, while his heart was beating euphorically in his chest, as if it was so happy that it no longer knew how to calm down. And heck, it had every reason in the world to be happy. Many times John found himself thinking about the same things as George, the fact that he no longer needed Paul's lessons, but many times he answered to himself just like Paul, with the same words, the same hesitation, the same shaky excuses.

Which could mean only one thing: that Paul, perhaps, had exactly the same feelings as John.

"But, Paul, I think you should-" George began to reply and at that point, John, frightened, decided to intervene and rush into the shop.

"Good morning!"

Both George and Paul winced when they noticed John.

"Oh, hi, John."

"Hi, Georgie." John said, smiling, before turning to Paul and soften his gaze as well as his tone, "Hello, Paul."

The man smiled him back weakly, "Hi, John."

"I'm glad you accept to help me with the new song."

"It's a pleasure, you know."

"Which song do you want to play, John?" George asked.

"Well, I thought of Songbird, by the Fleetwood Mac."

"Oh, it's very beautiful." George commented, impressed.

"It's very challenging, so the sooner we start, the better, isn’t it, Paul?" he asked, resting his hands on Paul's shoulders, and without even waiting for his answer, began to push him towards his room, "See you later, George."

John continued to push Paul, while George wished them both a good lesson.

When they finally reached their destination, John carefully closed the curtain behind him and turned to look carefully and with a sudden shyness Paul, who was looking for his guitar.

"So, what were you and George talking about exactly?" John asked, his voice sweet and attentive.
"Mm, nothing, he asked me if it wasn’t the case to end our meetings, since you've improved a lot." Paul answered, approaching the guitar case he used.

"And you answered no?"

"Sure." Paul answered, looking back at him, "In the end it’s not useful just for you, I'm taking advantage of it too."

"So it seems." He commented, taking one, two steps towards Paul.

The young man jumped visibly, but he still tried the words to reply, "It's the truth."

John nodded, smiling, "I know."

And John’s smile, sweet and mischievous, had a strange power over him: it froze him on his spot, making him unable to move a single muscle, while John was getting closer and closer.

Everything in Paul was screaming to run away, and everything in John asked him to stay there, just like that, still.

Only for a moment, waiting for John's move, now so clear, crystal clear: his mouth was looking for Paul’s.

But Paul reminded himself to be more than convinced of his decision and in a moment of clarity, before that last inch of distance was eliminated, he put his hands on John's chest and pushed him away from himself.

"What do you think you're doing?"

John blinked, totally caught off guard, "Huh?"

"I said, what the fuck do you think you're doing, John?" he repeated, the tone became slightly altered, in spite of himself.

"I... I just wanted to... kis-"

Paul laughed bitterly, preventing him from ending what he wanted to say, "You must be kidding."

"But Paul, I thought you wanted it too."

"You're so off road." Paul hurried to clear up.

"No, it’s not true." John protested, frowning and not liking this change of attitude in Paul, "You started this whole story."

Paul winced, failing to prevent himself from blushing, "That was a mistake."

"A mistake?" John repeated, widening his eyes.

Damn. It was just like Paul had thought. John... John had clearly welcomed Paul's kiss with pleasure.

It was a disaster. And it was all Paul's fault. He couldn’t blame John, because he was right: it was Paul who started everything.

"Yup." Paul sighed, trying to calm his voice, "We should both forget it and move on as if nothing
happened. We can do it, John."

The sweetest and most encouraging of Paul’s tone, the one that usually drove John crazy, was now... It was hateful, unbearable.

John looked at the man in utter confusion and shook his head, "No, Paul, we can’t."

"Why?" Paul protested heartily, "After all, it was just a mistake dictated by the moment."

"What do you mean?"

"I was..." he began to say, looking away and running a hand through his hair, "I was shocked about my job and I had just come out of an important relationship, ended up in a turbulent way. I didn’t really understand what I was doing."

"You're lying." John replied, pointing a finger at him, "You knew that."

"This doesn’t change the fact that it was a mistake." Paul snapped.

"Fuck, Paul, I don’t want to consider it a mistake, ok, I don’t want to pretend it never happened."

It was unnerving, it was a hopeless situation, John was trying to make Paul reason uselessly, because Paul... he didn’t seem to have any intention of moving from his position, John knew it.

The fear that Paul was trying to forget what happened had finally come true.

"Why?" Paul asked, impatient.

"Why?" John repeated, before approaching Paul again to grab him by the arms, "You too have felt what's going on between us."

"You're out of your mind, John." he commented, freeing himself from his grip.

John shook his head slowly, "No. You must have felt it, it's so powerful."

"What, John?"

John grabbed his hand, holding it gently, "This, Paul, this strange longing I have about you, I want to touch you and kiss you every time you smile at me, whenever-"

"Enough now." Paul told him, before moving away from him again, freeing his hand from John's grip, "Please, stop it."

"Paul?!"

"Fuck, John." The inspector said, careful not to raise his voice too much to prevent George, beyond the curtain, from hearing every single word of that crazy fight, "You're foolish. You can’t feel these things, not for me."

And although John was prepared for this reaction from Paul, it didn’t fail to hit him, like a dagger with a cold metallic blade that pierced his heart, and now John was bleeding and suffering, he fucking suffered.

"Why?" he continued in a whisper.

"Because I don’t want to."
John closed his eyes for a moment, looking for the courage and the strength to answer once again to Paul and his fucking stubbornness.

"It's my feelings, Paul." He murmured without any emotion, "You can’t stop me."

"So if this is the case, maybe we have nothing more to say to each other." the man said, before turning and heading for the exit.

But John, frightened, hurried to follow him and stop him with one hand on his arm, "Wait, Paul. What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving."

"No, please, Paul, I need you." John whispered softly, almost finding himself pleading with Paul.

"Then please, forget what happened." Paul sighed, asking him with his eyes to please him, because he also needed John, as much as John did, except that unlike him, Paul was too scared to admit how immense his need for John was.

"I can’t. If you hadn’t done it, I would. Sooner or later." John admitted, reaching out a trembling hand to Paul's face, but still not touching him, fearing his reaction, "And I’d keep on doing it, I swear."

"I'm sorry, John." Paul replied, sighing and stepping back toward the curtain, "I don’t need you that way."

John, at those words, felt himself sinking completely under the ground, as if a hole opened beneath him and it swallowed him mercilessly. And Paul... Paul was there to watch everything and not move a finger to help him.

Paul who went on, saying, "And if you can’t accept it, I must say goodbye."

"No, I... no, Paul, I can’t forget." John repeated, shaking his head, as if his was the most absurd request of all his life.

"Fine. Then goodbye, John."

That said, Paul turned away from the small room, leaving John in utter discomfort as he tried to understand what happened.

Not that there was much to understand and in fact it was all pretty clear. Paul was just hiding what he really felt. Or maybe John had only deluded himself that he felt just a bit of what was upsetting John’s soul.

Perhaps John had read too much about the things Paul did for him, what he was saying or how he behaved towards John. At the beginning John had seen all this with opportunistic eyes. Then slowly Paul's sincerity displaced him, making sure that he surrendered to such a strange friendship before and now to this feeling that it had grown to occupy every part of him.

And blinded by all this, John misunderstood, thinking that Paul could feel the same thing.

Maybe Paul was right. That kiss was just a mistake, an accident, that couldn’t go on, nor develop into something sweeter and more important.

However, John didn’t want to hide like Paul. He had already hidden an important part of himself,
he couldn’t be with him anymore and hide this feeling too. John would have gone crazy.

"What happened?" George suddenly asked, coming from the curtain.

John sighed, approaching the window to follow Paul going home with his hands tucked into his pockets and his head bowed.

"Only a bright quarrel."

Paul was right.

The only solution was not to see each other anymore. At least for a while, until John had passed this emotional and physical mess.

Then maybe they could have come back friends.

*Maybe.*

*****

Fucking John!

God, if he wasn’t a fucking little bastard, Paul thought, swearing to himself.

He was smoking nervously in the courtyard of the police station. It was his little break in the middle of the morning and he had thought about going to smoke a cigarette in the yard with all their cars.

However, he soon realized that he had chosen the wrong place, because there he could easily see again the scenes of a beautiful day of about a few weeks ago, when he brought John and Julian to see a real police car from close up.

A lovely day. It was sunny, and Paul had felt so happy to see the joy on Julian's pretty little face and John’s peacefulness. All this before his world was shattered just like his certainties.

Because now, right now all he could think of was John. He had done nothing else from their fight. To think of him and want to run after him to tell him that...

He wasn’t really sure what to say. He still thought about what he said to John, but now that they left each other so abruptly, he was having second thoughts.

And of course, the fact that John had fun returning to his mind every once in a while didn’t make his life easier. Actually it got worse and as a result Paul felt even more torn.

His world had been literally turned upside down since he had moved to London.

Never ever he would have thought of failing in his work, and yet here he was a step away from the abyss.

Never ever he would have thought about longing for another man, yet it was just like that. John entered his life putting everything in disorder, his life so perfect and Paul had been there to watch everything, helpless, without being able to prevent this from happening. Like a newly cleaned and tidy room, at the mercy of a too lively, too curious boy.

John was that kid and that room was Paul's life.
Paul hated the mess because it hid everything, the most important things were lost and he knew that despite his life was now messed up, the real himself was still there. He just had to find someone to help him in the search.

"Hello, sir."

A voice greeted him from behind and Paul turned to see Linda's smiling face.

"Oh Linda, hi." he said as she approached him.

"You too on a break?"

"Yup."

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"No, of course not."

The young woman nodded and took a packet of cigarettes from her pocket and pulled one out immediately, before Paul handed her the lighter.

"Thank you." she told him, smiling and looking fondly at him.

And for this reason, Paul blinked in perplexity.

Wait a minute...

Perhaps she could help him.

"I heard that Inspector Starkey gave you a little speech..." Linda started to say, exhaling a small puff of smoke.

"Oh that?!" Paul said, nodding, "Yes, actually it went like that."

Linda snorted loudly, "I think it's not fair, they shouldn't treat you this way."

"Thank you, but I think they're right." Paul said softly, "They called me for a reason, and yet I'm not doing my job."

"But it wasn't your fault." Linda protested, heartily, "We were just unlucky."

"Bad luck can affect once or twice, Linda, but there's something wrong." Paul sighed, resigned.

"Well, anyway, they can't kick you out like that, you're a smart man, sir, I really think so."

Paul looked at her carefully, and noticing the sincerity of her voice, as well as her sorry expression, he threw the cigarette on the ground, before shutting it off with his foot, and smiled at her.

"You're kind, thank you, but we can't do much for now, if not wait for Hermes's next move."

Even Linda smiled back, but she also did something else. She put her hand on his forearm, giving it a short and delicate caress.

"And I'm sure we'll get him next time, sir."

Paul felt himself blushing slightly, a small heat wave spreading over his cheeks. The reason was obviously that girl and the way she looked at him.
Obviously it wasn’t as if in the past he had never noticed the mischievous looks that other girls addressed to him. Heck, they were things that he recognized right away.

But this time it was different. Perhaps due to the fact that his bachelor status now allowed him to give in to that malice and maybe even take advantage of it. Or for some other reason that suggested that he was doing it only out of sheer spite, and certainly not towards Jane, who now no longer cared about him. There was another person's name in his head, but it was still scary. Paul didn’t have to think about it.

He never had to think about it again.

"Yes. Well said, we'll get him." he exclaimed, covering the young woman's hand with his own.

And doing so, he could easily see that Linda was blushed, but at the same time her face was also radiant with joy.

"Now... Sir, if you excuse me, I... I really have to go back to work." she said, a little unsure, her voice shaky as her legs stepped back.

Paul had to hold back a little laugh. He didn’t think he could still have this effect on a young lady; and it was precisely this reason to convince him to act.

"Ah, Linda?"

"Yes, sir?" she asked, stopping her backing away.

Paul came up slowly, and finally he took her hand, "I was wondering..."

"What?"

"I wondered if by chance you’d like to continue this talk."

Linda, her face now even more red, looked down to see her hand held by Paul’s, "Now?"

"No, I really thought maybe with a beer."

Linda let out a laugh, putting her other hand over her mouth, "Are you going to ask me out, sir?"

"Mm yes, something like that." Paul said, smiling and winking at her, "What do you think?"

Linda bit her lip thoughtfully, but it was a hesitation that Paul had easily recognized as flirtatious. Indeed...

"I'm in."

"Really?" Paul asked, blinking.

"On one condition."

"Which one?"

"May I call you Paul?"

*****

Crazy. He really succeeded.
He had a date with a girl.

Paul giggled nervously as he returned home by car.

After the story with Jane, he thought he had lost it trying to get a date with a girl, but apparently it wasn’t as he thought. Indeed, it had been easier than expected. They had yet to fix some details, but by now the most difficult part had been overcome, and the accomplice of this newfound facility had been Linda herself.

Paul hadn’t noticed before, for obvious reasons, but thinking back to the woman's attitude towards him, she wasn’t waiting for anything else.

He made a very good choice. Maybe Linda wasn’t as beautiful as Jane, but her freckled face with blue eyes and blonde hair, had a delicate beauty, those that enchanted sweetly, as memorable as the most overwhelming beauties.

It would be a perfect date, Paul was convinced.

Yet, when he parked in front of the house and got out of the car, he couldn’t help but think that a part of him would try to please this girl at all costs because she was his only salvation, the only grip on which Paul could leverage to get up from the situation in which he had fallen.

And he became painfully aware of it when he saw John across the street.

He had the little and sleepy Julian in his arms and was all intent on talking with Yoko, who carried her daughter in the same way. They must have had a pleasant afternoon together.

Paul tried to ignore the annoyed jolt of his heart, and too concerned with this inner duel, he didn’t notice that John turned to him.

The young inspector blushed violently, feeling John's eyes on him, but if until a few days ago the man would smile at him with a happy and radiant expression, he now simply ignored him. His face remained impassive and immediately returned to look at Yoko.

Paul's heart crashed to the ground and the noise it made was deafening, like a crystal vase that falls and shatters into millions of tiny splinters at the impact with the floor. Here, that same noise drowned out anything that surrounded the man and caught him off guard.

But why?

Wasn’t it what Paul wanted? John was hiding his feelings like Paul was doing, as Paul asked him.

But that... that was too much. John was even ignoring him and Paul couldn’t bear it, because this way his hands were tied, making it impossible for Paul to react.

If Paul had protested, he would have only contradicted what he had illustrated quite clearly in their last discussion. What impression would he give? That perhaps, perhaps he had regretted his request now?

No, however painful, that was the only solution. If both couldn’t meet as friends, hiding their tangled feelings, so intertwined with each other that they were able to get them closer, then ignore and hide each other, even hide their acquaintance, was really the only possible solution.

And with the hope that sooner or later Paul would pass this too, he ran inside the house to hide himself even from John's sight.
John who saw all of this out of the corner of his eye, absently listening to Yoko's words about how well she and her daughter had been together with them and that they should do it more often, maybe even just the two of them, John and Yoko, without their children.

John nodded at everything, vaguely. He was actually trying to find a reasonable answer to those questions that crowded in his mind the moment he ignored Paul.

*Did you really ignore Paul? We don’t ignore Paul, you idiot! Why the hell did you do it?*

Well, John didn’t know. Or perhaps he knew it, but Paul's reaction, the way he hurried to get into his house, burst out his convictions, brought them down one after another like dominoes. An inevitable fall.

Inevitable as the appearance of those questions about why John ignored it, when the truth was that Paul's simple vision for him, lately, had become so precious, so dear, an incredible source of joy.

Inevitable as well as his doubts, triggered by Paul's reaction. Why did he behave like that, if he had been the one to propose that solution?

It was Paul who wanted all of this and John recognized that he was right, so he was only now showing that he was behaving just like Paul asked for.

It didn’t make sense now, to feel sad about that behaviour. It made no sense like everything else in that relationship, it seemed.

And since they weren’t two computers, they didn’t have the reset button to erase everything and start all over again, so they couldn’t help but avoid each other.

Hiding, playing hide and seek knowing, however, that neither of them wanted to play.

That neither of them wanted to win.

*To find each other.*

Chapter End Notes

Again, sorry about this, but it was necessary. ç_ç
They're so stupid, aren't they? :( Anyway, don't worry, one of the characters told me he (or she) will try to fix the things up! :D
Meanwhile, I really want to thank Killer_Queen, Utaka14, someonencia, clearskiies, Eli for their comments, and also who is reading the story. <3
Next chapter, I want to hold your hand. I'll try to post it next Sunday, but this is the worst week ever, with my exam and a lot of work, and probably I'll have to study also in the evening. But I'll do my best to be on time! ;)
Bye bye!! :D
Chiara
John sighed.

Maybe it was the fourth or fifth time in a few minutes. Not that he cared, not at all. He didn’t even notice he was sighing.

But George did and found it particularly annoying, especially with that frequency. They had opened the shop for like an hour that morning, and yet John hadn’t moved a finger yet. He was sitting at the counter, playing on the pc without really paying attention, his face abandoned on his hand, and his eyes absent, certainly looking at another place.

It was a rather depressing show, at least for George, especially since it lasted for something like a couple of weeks, from the day John and Paul had that fight, to be precise. John didn’t want to tell him much about it and George didn’t insist initially, thinking it was more appropriate to leave him alone.

However now he was beginning to get nervous. He hadn’t seen John like that for a few years, since Cynthia left him.

Although, actually, it had been different in that case anyway. Back then John had a lot to think about, first of all Julian, who kept him busy and helped him to distract himself. But now? There wasn’t really much anyone could do. Apart from Paul, of course, and George would gladly talk to him, but not knowing what the real problem was, how could he say something kind about his best friend?

So he decided to talk to the other person involved, and bravely, he approached his friend, leaning in front of him the pile of CDs he was putting away.

"Johnny?"

The man jumped, abruptly brought back to reality by the sound of the CDs and George's voice.

"Johnny?" he repeated, perplexed.

"Yeah. It's your name, you know."

"My name is John and you call me Johnny only when you want to get something from me." John snorted.

George laughed slightly, "Oops, busted!"

"What do you want then?" his friend sighed, crossing his arms.

"I want to know what’s the matter with you, Johnny dear."

John frowned. Damn it, George was one who never gave up when he wanted to get something, and this had always been a noble virtue for John, but now that it involved John, he was starting to get nervous.
However, he tried to answer, "Nothing important."

"Nothing important, sure." George snapped, somewhat irritated, "That's why you're fucking sighing these days and you're distracted."

John blushed dramatically, "I'm not."

"Really? Go and tell David Bowie who found a CD by the Who in his section." George replied, clearly indignant, "In your opinion, who’s to blame?"

"When did that happen?" he asked supposingly.

But George replied promptly, "A couple of days ago."

"Ok, then." John sighed again, defeated, "What do you want to know?"

"What happened to you, why did you fight with Paul?" George asked, directly.

That was it. Just what John feared most. How could he explain to him the real reason for the discussion and the separation that followed?

"I already told you that it was a simple exchange of different opinions." he answered, trying to be vague once more.

"Sure, as if! So, that’s why you need to reduce yourself like this after a fight with him, isn’t it?"

John had a troubled expression when George pointed at him with a hand, in a totally disdainful way, "I'm not reducing myself in any way, George."

"Oh, come on, John, don’t tell me bullshit."

"Anyway, I can’t tell you."

"Why?"

Shit, George was really stressful. How could John run away from such a mess?

"It's about Paul, it's private." he explained, thinking that it wasn’t a complete lie.

After all, it was really about Paul.

"And since when do you respect his privacy?" George asked, skeptical, "Or have you forgotten how this whole story began?"

"I haven’t, and last time I checked, I decided to leave Hermes for him." John pointed out.

George sighed heavily, "So why can’t you tell me? Maybe talking to someone would be good for you, or if you want I can go and spend a few good words for you. Like, you know, "Whatever shit John has done or said, just don’t care. It’s his nature."

John laughed, moved at this point by George’s demonstration of affection.

"Why should it have been my fault?"

"I don’t know, my sixth sense." he answered, shrugging.

"Your sixth sense is wrong, you know, because this time he is to blame first."
"Oh." George said, totally caught off guard, "So how can I help you?"

"In no way, at least for now." John sighed sadly, looking down, "But thank you, George. Maybe I don’t tell you often, but I really appreciate what you do for me."

"It's just that I worry about you, I don’t want you to feel bad. We were fine until he arrived."

John chose not to reply, even if he wanted to.

Despite everything, John didn’t regret even for a moment having met Paul. He wasn’t sure he was so fine before he arrived. Perhaps he believed he had everything now, his son's love, the love of a few but good friends and of course a rather well-off economic situation. Paul, on the other hand, had disrupted everything. He made that lack evident in John. And no, it wasn’t about how to play the guitar properly.

It was an emptiness in his heart, one in which there should have been someone important, indispensable, someone to love and loved him back, someone who would always be beside him in joy as well in sorrow.

Paul had arrived in his life, without wanting to be in that place, yet now he was there and John was so happy about it.

After all, even if they didn’t talk now and were completely ignoring each other, John was still happy to feel such a feeling for Paul.

It was as if he knew he couldn’t feel it so intensely for someone else.

Maybe John had a wrong approach with him. Maybe instead of trying to kiss him that day, he should have first explained to him how he felt: taking him by the hand and telling him how important he had become for John, how much John dreamed of him during the night, how much he still wanted to be with him, to hold him, kiss him and-

"Thanks, George." John said, deciding to push away those thoughts potentially harmful to his mental health, "But don’t worry about me, I'll be fine."

If George believed his words, John couldn’t be sure.

At that moment all he could focus on was that annoying little voice that whispered to him that he could never do anything like that.

He could never talk to Paul about such crazy and passionate feelings.

His hand could never be intertwined with Paul's.

*****

Paul sighed.

Not really because he was bored. After all, Linda was a lovely girl.

They had gone out for a drink together that evening. Paul had spent at least two weeks to find the courage to make the proposal to go out come true. He knew that it wasn’t due to shyness, but to something else, something really hard to accept.

And now here he was, drinking a beer with that beautiful girl. He had to feel very lucky that she accepted. She was also very smart and funny, and at that precise moment she was telling him her
story, how she had fallen in love with one of her classmates, how he had got her pregnant and then he didn’t want to know anything about her or the little girl anymore; how her parents took care of them for the first years, until she decided to move to London, too tired of that city that reminded her how much she had been through and above all, now that the girl was grown up, she no longer wanted to be a burden to her parents; and London seemed like a good new beginning.

Paul listened to everything with great interest, asking questions to clarify some points. Yet he couldn’t help sighing. For what reason, Paul didn’t know it well. If it wasn’t a boring date, then what was it?

"I'm sorry about what happened." Paul said sincerely, "It mustn’t have been easy."

"No, but my daughter gave me the strength to face every new challenge." she replied, smiling lovingly at the thought of her daughter.

Paul blinked, bewildered for a moment. Linda's speech was familiar to him. She reminded him of someone, someone well known, but Paul couldn’t really think of him now.

"How old is she?" he asked, trying to distract himself.

"Five, her name is Heather and she’s the only good thing in my life."

"Oh, come on." Paul said, "Don’t say such a thing, you have a job you love and that you do very well."

Linda blushed slightly, before reaching out to rest her hand on Paul's arm, left casually on the table, "Thank you so much, Paul, you're a sweetheart, if I may."

Her thin fingers wrapped gently around his strong arm, and that touch burned like a devastating fire, but not for the reason that Paul could easily imagine: pleasure. It burnt because it was the memory of a similar gesture that burnt, the memory of that man who in a pub comforted him from his suffering, or at least he had tried.

But no, Paul couldn’t let himself going back to that evening. It was improper for many reasons: first of all thinking of another person on a date was very rude to Linda; besides, his thoughts were going against what he had decided, that is to say, to leave John alone.

Paul was convinced to close his mind to any memory of John knocking at the door of his heart, but apparently, he didn’t do a good job.

The evening, in fact, passed pleasantly: Paul managed to keep on talking to Linda in a rather quiet way, without any interference from a third inconvenient; and yet, when the two had to part later, when Linda greeted Paul with a kiss on the cheek, the girl also slipped her hand into the inspector’s, making their fingers intertwine.

And at that moment, Paul found himself thinking that Linda's hand didn’t fit into his own. It wasn’t compatible, it was so uncomfortable and Paul couldn’t stand it. As much as he wanted it, Linda wasn’t what Paul wanted. His hand knew better than he did, when it reminded him of John's grip that same night outside the pub.

A perfect hold.

Reluctantly, Paul had to admit it, as he returned home, as he opened the door of his apartment, and noticed the light on the first floor of John's house.
He missed John.
He missed him terribly.

****

That thought tormented him for the next two days and Paul was simply going crazy, especially since he couldn’t even see John. He didn’t care to talk to him, and even tried not to think about the fact that John would ignore him anyway.

Paul just wanted to see him, he wanted to meet his gaze just for a moment, so that he could understand exactly what he felt. Did he miss him only as a friend and partner of music lessons, or, as each fibre of his being suggested, was it something more?

The answer was in his heart, but he held on to this last possibility to realize that perhaps he had done everything wrong, that perhaps he had only misinterpreted his own feelings as well as John's.

He was thinking all of this as he walked quietly home, when his attention was caught by a movement in front of his apartment.

He easily recognized the gracile silhouette of George that was closing the shop's gate. Paul checked the time on his watch. It was just past four in the afternoon. A little early to close, wasn’t it?

Curious about what was happening on the other side of the road, he decided to reach the young man, and as he approached, he noticed that George's movements were slightly anxious.

"Hi, George."

George finally lowered the gate with his foot, and turned to Paul just enough to recognize him, before returning to his task.

"Oh, Paul, hi."
"You're closing earlier today..." Paul said, leaving the sentence hanging in the air.
"Yes, I have to rush to somewhere."
"But, isn't John in the shop?" He asked, trying to sound vaguely.

George sighed, after locking the gate, and turned completely to Paul, "John is at the hospital."

The revelation left Paul not only surprised, but also very concerned. John at the hospital? Why?
"What happened?" he hastened to ask, without bothering to show his true emotions that suddenly became so confused.

"Nothing serious." George reassured him, "But Pattie phoned me to tell me that Julian fell in kindergarten, and now they're all in the hospital."

"Oh, fuck, how is he?"
"I don’t know yet, I was just going there."
"Come on, I have the car right here, I'll take you there." Paul said, making a sign to follow him.
"Are you sure?" George asked, hesitant.
"Sure." Paul answered, grabbing him by the sleeve of his shirt, "Come on, let’s go."

The two rushed into Paul’s car and in an instant they left.

On the way, Paul tried to ask for more details, but George really didn’t know anything else, since Pattie had only told him a few things because of the agitation and the short time available to be on the phone.

So Paul decided not to insist and silently spent the rest of the way. But inside himself Paul was having a heated fight with himself. He was obviously worried about Julian, but so he was about John. He didn’t even dare to imagine how he was. He had to be so scared and Paul, at that thought, pressed even more on the accelerator, wishing only to be next to him as soon as possible.

He didn’t know what to say or what to do. He only hoped that the right words and gestures would be born in him the moment he met John’s gaze. Yet something was making him insecure and even more agitated.

If John didn’t want Paul to be there with him?

Paul didn’t even want to consider that hypothesis, partly because he was sure it was completely absurd.

Despite what had happened between him and John, in spite of everything, that was a moment when John didn’t want to feel alone. He needed his friends and he needed Paul. Somehow he was still important to John and Paul was sure of it.

Finally they arrived at their destination: at the hospital, George led him inside the building and they looked for the elevator to go up to the floor where the pediatric ward was located. Following the directions Pattie had given him, George headed for the corridor to the right and Paul followed him.

Then finally, they glimpsed John leaning his back against the wall of the corridor.

"John." George called him, going faster to reach him.

The man turned and so did the woman who stood beside him.

Yoko.

"George!" he said, before the lad hugged him, "Thank you for coming."

"Don’t mention it. I rushed as soon as I received Pattie's call." he explained, "So, how is he?"

John sighed and ran a hand over his face, and Paul didn’t fail to notice the slight tremor that ran through it.

"They gave him five stitches on his wound." he explained, his tiny voice barely audible, "And then they did a CT scan to exclude more severe head trauma. Now he’s asleep, but as soon as they get the results, they’ll let me take him home."

"But how did it happen?" George continued, "Pattie told me he fell."

"Yes. We... I was talking to Yoko while the kids were playing and Julian was climbing up on that stupid merry-go-round and then..." John babbled, and now, the same quiver that had crossed his hand, also struck his voice, "I don’t know, I think he put his foot badly and then he slipped... I... I
wasn’t looking and I heard him cry, but he was already on the ground, and I ran to him and—"

"Now calm down, come on." George interrupted, hugging him again to reassure him, "He'll soon be better. He's such a headstrong kid, you know."

John nodded as he let George calm him down with light pats on his back.

"John, if it's okay with you, I'll take Kyoko home now." Yoko intervened shyly, touching his arm with her small hand.

"Oh yes." John said, slipping out of George’s embrace, "Thank you very much for your support, Yoko."

"Don’t worry, I'll call you tomorrow." the woman informed him, hugging him briefly in her arms.

"Ok."

"Bye then."

The three men greeted her, and Paul looked at her as the woman went to the sleeping baby on the waiting-room seats and picked her up, then walked away.

Finally he looked back at John, and now that he had been reassured about the child's condition, Paul was able to see fully how devastated John was. Not only physically, his face pale, his eyes still frightened, and his shirt dirt with blood on his chest, but also inside him, he must have been destroyed. Paul knew it, he could well see it. So tired, terrified, so trembling in body and soul.

"Can see him?" George asked.

"Yes, go ahead, there's Pattie with him now." he informed him, pointing to the next door.

George followed the sign, and John saw him disappear behind the door before turning to Paul. At that moment the young inspector started visibly. Finally their eyes locked and fuck, the only thing that Paul could understand now, was the fact that he couldn’t understand anything anymore.

"Why are you here?"

Paul felt himself blushing slightly under the powerful gaze of the other man, but he ignored his distress and everything in him that was suggesting to lie, to tell him that he had come only to know about Julian's condition.

"To check if you were fine." he answered sincerely.

John frowned, perplexed, "I am, don’t you see?"

Paul sighed, expecting such an answer from John. So he reached out to grab his shirt over his chest.

"John, you have your son's blood on your shirt." he pointed out, hoping that John would understand what Paul really meant.

And as John's eyes grew larger, Paul knew he had hit the target.

John bent his head to see Paul's hand on his shirt and his expression suddenly became suffered. He moved hurriedly through the small waiting room, and Paul followed him just in time to see him burst into tears.
Many times Paul had seen John's vulnerability now, but never as that moment, the scene struck him so devastatingly: John leaned his back against the wall and let himself fall, putting his hands on his face to cover a frustrated cry, yes, but silent.

Paul bit his lip, torn about what to do. A part of him would simply want to stand beside him, giving him light pats on his shoulders.

However, the other knew that wasn’t enough for John at that moment. It wasn’t enough for John neither for Paul. He wanted to be with John, comfort and reassure him with every part of himself, and as long as that desire went against everything Paul had decided over the past few weeks, he also knew it was too strong to ignore or resist.

So he gave himself up to this need for both John and him, and in less than a second he was on his knees in front of him, between his legs, and his hand moved to gently caress his hair.

John recognized his gentle touch, but didn’t raise his head to meet his gaze, because it would have been too much for him to be seen in that state. Nobody could see him like that: so lost, so disoriented, like when you go to the supermarket with your parents when you are a little kid and suddenly you turn around and... puff! They disappear behind a few corridors and you don’t know where to look for them.

But he was grateful to Paul for that caress, so that without even realizing it, he found himself wrapping his arms around the other man's waist and moving him closer to himself, so that he could hide his face in his chest and keep on cry without being seen.

Paul felt his heart lose a beat, not understanding if it was because he had to push him away, or because it was so pleasant and gratifying the way John's hands clenched his shirt, clinging to him as if he were about to fall and Paul was his only handhold. As if Paul was indispensable for John.

God, had he ever been indispensable for someone? Yes, sure. His mother. But his mother was dead and so this made John the only person to feel such a thing for him.

And understanding this made Paul tremble because he needed John in the same way; John was just as indispensable to Paul, his presence was so sweet, so unique in Paul's life that all his abstruse concepts about love could just go to the hell.

What was love for Paul?

Until then it had been a young red-haired woman who made him crazy, so much to make him blind and make it impossible for him to realize that he wasn’t so important to this woman.

And now?

Now could it look like a man? A man who had accidentally come into his life and upset it?

He hadn’t looked for that feeling in John, he hadn’t wanted it, but it had happened and from day to day, Paul realized that slowly John had entered in him too, occupying all the space available in his heart.

John and his irresistible charm.

John and his sweetness.

John who made him crazy, yes, but at the same time he didn’t make him blind, leaving him still able to think clearly about this new feeling that was stronger than Paul.
And Paul didn’t want to fight it anymore. He had tried and hadn’t been able to destroy it, nor to push John away from his life.

So he wrapped his arms around John's neck, hugging him.

If John was upset by Paul's embrace, we couldn’t know. What really mattered was that he kept on crying, safe in that protective embrace.

It had been centuries from the last time he cried, but now it had been so easy to start because Paul had just as easily found the right words, the key that fit perfectly to open the doors of John's heart, to touch him so intimately and allow him to pour out and remove all those fears and anguishes that had accumulated over the years in his soul.

John cried and cried and cried, and Paul couldn’t help but continue to hug him, stroking his hair and whispering from time to time, "It's all right, John."

It seemed endless, but then George appeared in the room, and the lad looked a little surprised at the scene that presented itself in front of him. He said to himself that it was definitely not the time to think about this, because...

"John?"

At that call the man suddenly calmed down and looked up to meet George's.

"Julian woke up."

Still shaken by the last sobs, John stood up, wiping his eyes with his hands, and started to follow George. However Paul held him back before turning to George.

He held him by the hand, holding it gently between his fingers. John, surprised, looked down to see Paul's gesture with his own eyes. To understand if it was true.

And fuck, it was true!

"We'll be right there, George, thank you."

"Ok." He murmured doubtfully before going back to Julian’s room.

John said nothing, but just looked at Paul and asked him with his eyes why he had stopped him.

In response, Paul smiled at him and took a clean handkerchief from his pocket.

"We don’t want to show Julian that you cried, right?" he asked, carefully wiping away John's tears.

The other man shook his head slightly, while the sobs now became rarer and after a few minutes, Paul was satisfied with his work and left him free.

"Here, like new."

"Thank you." John told him, his eyes still a little shiny and his cheeks flushed.

Paul felt his heart tighten. John still seemed so lost and caused in him a desire to return to hug him, which by now was no longer strange to Paul.

"You're welcome." he answered with a faint voice and a smile, "Better going to Julian now, what do you think?"
"Yup." John murmured, and only then he let go of his hand.

John paused only another moment, watching Paul closely, as if wondering what was behind that change of attitude in Paul. However that wasn’t the time to think about it; now there was only Julian.

Julian that John had to take care of.

So he set off for his son's room, hearing Paul walk behind him.

When he finally reached his destination, he came in to see the child still lying in bed, with a bandage to protect the stitches just above the eyebrow.

Pattie stood next to him and smiled lovingly as she stroked his hair, and George was at the end of the bed.

John took a deep breath and entered, reaching Julian who was now rubbing his eyes with his hands, still sleepy.

"Hello, sweetheart." he greeted him, resting a hand on his legs.

The child turned and smiled faintly, before reaching his small arms towards him, "Daddy!"

John smiled in turn, bending down to be wrapped in his arms and kissing him gently on the cheek.

"How are you?" he asked, rubbing their noses together.

"I'm sleepy, Daddy." The kid answered, yawning, "When are we going home?"

"Soon, honey, first I have to talk to the doctor and then we can go home."

"Promise?"

"Promise!" John answered, smiling more trustingly, and stroking Julian's soft hair, "You've been a good kid today, you know, the doctor said he never saw a child so brave."

Julian laughed weakly, "Did you see that I never cried?"

"Yeah, you were very good, luv." John confirmed, remembering the moment when the doctor treated the child's wounds.

Julian didn't shed a single tear. He was suffering, of course, and his eyes were watery as the doctor applied the stitches, but he didn’t let even a tear slide down his chubby, flushed cheeks. The reason? Not even John knew this with certainty, especially since Julian showed he was stronger than his own father believed him to be. However, the man was almost sure, and proud of course that it was partly thanks to him. John had been beside him all the time, holding his hand and distracting him as the doctor advised him. He had told him a story, adding from time to time how good he was and that he was very close to the end of that little torture, and in doing so the child had no way to focus on the pain and the bad adventure of that afternoon.

John, however, until a few minutes ago didn’t really want to get what had happened, too busy to make sure that his son was fine.

Yet when Paul called him tenderly, reality hit him hard.

That afternoon he realized that not only his fears of losing Julian almost dangerously became true,
but he had shown himself more vulnerable than he already knew he was. Which made it even more
evident to his heart how important it was to him that Julian was well and was with him. Without
that child, he would have lost his mind.

He had been able to do what he did, take him to the hospital or stand by him during the treatment,
just to make him feel good. Otherwise he would have been at his wit’s end.

Then Paul arrived, and with a simple sentence he allowed John to realize the events of that day and
accept them.

He allowed that uncontrollable storm to calm down for a moment so that John could take a breath
and cry. Crying to push away those fears and that reality that were overwhelming him.

And he, Paul, hugged and comforted him, standing beside John in silence, listening only to his
sobs, warming his tired limbs, made cold by the sudden fright.

Simple but effective gestures.

They made John's heart ache, recalling everything that had happened in the previous days: the
things they said, the way they ignored each other, John who terribly missed him...

Yet now everything seemed to have vanished.

Now, as John cradled his baby, looking at Paul, who gave him a smile, it seemed that it was all...
All the same as before?

No, it wasn’t like before. John felt it: Paul's warm smile, his sweet eyes towards John, made
everything different.

However John didn’t want nor could think about this. His heart had already deluded him once and,
God, if John wouldn’t suffer again!

He had to be wrong, and all this was due only to what happened that afternoon.

Perhaps he had even dreamed.

Yes, it was just like that.

Still, there was something that kept telling him how badly he was wrong.

His hand.

The hand still full of Paul's warmth.

*****

Silence reigned supreme in the cockpit of Paul's car.

He was bringing John and Julian home. George instead went with Pattie.

Paul didn’t know what to say. He kept glancing at John sitting next to him. The man was holding
the baby back asleep in his arms, with no intention of wanting to loosen his grip or utter a word.

The doctor reported that the results of the exams didn’t show any problem, so they immediately
dismissed the child, to the great delight of the latter and his father.
That's why now they were on the way home, John with his fear, Paul with his newfound feelings.

He was happy and at the same time frightened by what he understood that afternoon. It didn't certainly arrive like a thunderbolt, but knowing he could feel something for John in return in some way, had in a certain sense sent him out of phase. It was usually so easy to talk to John and understand what he thought or felt. But now Paul had no idea what was going on in his head or what made his heart beat. Yes, he was certainly still frightened, but the doctor assured him that the baby would recover in a few days.

So what made his expression so apathetic and he so taciturn?

Paul had no idea, the only thing he was sure of was the strong desire to stand beside him and still hold his hand to show him that Paul was there for him, in every sense.

When they got home, Paul parked in front of the door of John's apartment.

"Wait, I'll help you." he told him, immediately getting out of the car and hurrying to go and open John's door.

Without John having time to protest, Paul took the child in his arms, trying to be gentle in his movements so as not to wake him up, and thus allowing John to be free to get off.

Then the man was about to take back Julian, but Paul told him to open the door, otherwise he would be rather uncomfortable with the baby in his arms.

John nodded, recognizing Paul's thinking as sensible, and opened the door. Only at that point Paul handed him Julian, who continued to sleep in the passage from Paul's caring arms to the loving ones of John.

"Thank you so much for everything you did today, Paul."

"Don't mention it, it was nothing." he answered with a smile, and his heart jumped pleasantly when Paul found the courage to go on, "If you want, I can keep you company and prepare something to eat. You haven't eaten anything."

"No, thanks."

"You sure? I can make, you know, a sandwich or some pasta, if you prefer."

"You're kind, Paul, but no, I just need to be alone with my son."

The disappointment suddenly took possession of Paul's face, but he didn't even realize it. He was too busy getting the fact that John didn’t want him that evening.

"Ok then."

"Bye, Paul." John murmured, before stepping back and closing the door in front of Paul.

The young man didn’t move. He couldn’t and didn’t want to. His hand, on the contrary, leaned on the wood of the door, perhaps to really realize, even with the body, that this was the reality, that John deliberately refused him that evening.

It hadn’t been as if he slipped out his hand from his grip. Instead, it was as if he told him a very clear ‘go away’, as if he used that same hand to place it on Paul's chest and push him as far as possible.
And this hurt, because Paul just wanted to be near him, while John rejected him.

How could he blame him, after all? It was more than normal.

Yet there was a part of him that had hoped, strongly.

The same one who knew that their hands would meet again and intertwine.

For one or a few moments, or maybe...

Who knows, maybe forever.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, we're here again, on time against all the odds! And yes, you're not dreaming, Paul saw the light!! :D

I really hope you like this chapter, it's a sort of cliché, I know. :( Anyway, thank you to all of you that left a comment to the last chapter. I'm so happy to read about your reactions. :3

Now I'll have more free time, so I can certainly translate faster.

Next chapter will be "A taste of honey".

Ciao ciao! ;)

Chiara
A taste of honey

Chapter Notes

Enjoy! ;P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Paul stepped into his house, he inhaled deeply the smell of that apartment.

At first it had been difficult for him to adapt to the change of his house, but now he could consider that as his real home and its scent was sweet as honey for Paul.

During the last days he also missed it.

He went back to Liverpool that week in early October, because his brother Mike had become father to a beautiful baby girl named Mary, after Paul's mother.

For this reason the young inspector, as soon as possible, ran to Liverpool to see his niece. He held her in his arms, so small and warm, her tiny little squashed face but looking very similar to his brother’s. It had been wonderful to hold a new Mary McCartney in his arms. But it wasn’t a surprise, because after all children can heal any suffering, like the painful loss of their mother.

So that was the most important event of his last week, and on Monday afternoon Paul finally came back home.

He did a good thing, getting away from London. And of course it was also good to get away from John.

After what happened to little Julian, Paul hadn’t heard any news from him again. He wanted to go to John or call him, but he was scared. He didn’t know how to behave. Should he take the first step, or should he wait for John?

His head throbbed and hurt when he started asking himself those questions. If he could, he would run to John right away. To do what, he wasn’t so sure, but he would do it.

However, whenever he was about to open the door to rush out, the image of John asking Paul to leave him alone hit him violently, like an unexpected slap. And at that point every Paul’s passionate desire vanished in an instant.

He could at least use the excuse to see how Julian was, but it wouldn’t be plausible, since Paul had finally seen with his own eyes that the child was recovering greatly. He saw him from the window of his living room, when Julian came back from kindergarten with John or Pattie. He was as lively as ever, which naturally pleased Paul.

A little less pleasant was when Paul became aware of Yoko's presence with the Lennon guys. Of course, there were always the children with them, but Paul couldn’t help blushing with jealousy at that scene. Why was she always with John? They couldn’t be together, right?
No, they couldn’t, Paul decided. Above all because John seemed to behave as usual with her.

How did Paul know those things about the Lennons, well, of course it was because it was enough for Paul to recognize the voice of Julian or John, and he immediately rushed to the window to see what was happening on the other side of the street.

It wasn’t surprising, then, if more than once John caught his gaze, realizing that his neighbour was spying on him.

Now, spying was too much of a big deal for Paul. After all, he was just checking that Julian was fine. Paul didn’t want to think that it wasn’t necessary to run every time at the window: by now he could tell that Julian was fine.

Yet he was stronger than him, and so he ran just to see John for a moment, even if, when he inevitably turned to him, Paul blushed and disappeared behind the curtain.

That's why he couldn’t go to John with the excuse of asking about Julian. By now John knew that Paul saw with his own eyes how good Julian was.

So now Paul was stuck in that harrowing limbo, where he could do nothing. His hands were locked, like one of those criminals he arrested. Paul didn’t know for sure, he had never felt the cold metal of the cuffs on his own skin. But he knew it must be roughly the same frustrating feeling of impotence.

All he could do was simply wait for something to change.

Someone claimed that “to look forward to pleasure is also a pleasure”.

Yet how could such a thought comfort Paul, if he didn’t even know what he was waiting for?

****

Paul was back.

John hadn’t been sure until that afternoon. He didn’t quite know where he had gone: he tried to think about it, and every hypothesis included Paul who was going away from London because of John and the way he rejected him on the night of Julian's accident. John felt guilty, later, about that episode. Paul had been so kind, but he should have known that John was infinitely upset that night and didn’t really understand what he was doing. So it was almost logical to think that maybe Paul had left to think or simply to no longer see John.

So it was easy for John to notice that for several days his house had always been in the dark and there had been no movement to indicate someone's presence.

Then that afternoon, when John came back with Julian, Yoko and her daughter, he glimpsed his silhouette behind the window upstairs. He was spying on them, again, and this thought amused John, who, however, hadn’t shown any emotion. He had simply looked at Paul for a millisecond, just enough to make him disappear behind the curtain.

It had happened often lately and John couldn’t help wondering why.

At first he thought that Paul was just checking that Julian had recovered; but after intercepting his eyes four, five, ten times, he realized that Julian was no longer dealing with Paul’s behaviour.

Paul had changed, John was sure.
From what John remembered about that terrible night when Julian went to the hospital, Paul had looked so different. He was kind, he was sweet... Fuck, he was so irresistible.

Thinking straight and without any worries about Julian's health, John could now recognize in him some delicate gestures and words, a concern, an interest that made his legs tremble and his hands sweat.

Yet, despite this, he still couldn’t allow his heart to delude himself. He remembered Paul’s precise words, his determined look when they had that fight.

Paul’s change that John had felt even with his own skin had to be due only to the critical situation of that particular evening. It was obvious that on certain occasions some more futile matters were put aside. That was what Paul had done.

And now they were both waiting for everything to come back as before.

Paul would soon come through this unusual need to look at John from the window, and John would more easily prevent himself from imagine impossible things.

He would come back to wait in vain for something he couldn’t get.

He would come back to wait for this feeling to disappear.

*****

Paul had to run to the supermarket as soon as he realized that there was really nothing edible in his fridge.

He needed to buy something, mainly because he had also picked up Pepper from Linda's apartment. It had been unfair of him to ask for this kind of help to the girl with whom he went out and whom he hadn’t even called back, but she was the only one who could help him with the cat. Obviously she had taken advantage of his return and asked him to go out again, explaining how good she had been with him that night, what a pleasant man Paul was, what a great listener and confidant he was...

However Paul didn’t want to go out with her, at least not anymore, and not yet ready to explain the real reason, he tried to claim that he was really busy and that for the moment he had no time for fun. She seemed to accept it, thankfully.

So Paul brought Pepper home and realized the urgent need to go shopping for both of them, but before he left, he waited for John to disappear from the street. The man had a perfect timing in deciding when to come back home with Julian, and Paul accidentally saw them from the window.

Thinking back to the moment when their eyes locked that afternoon, Paul blushed violently. He was making a fool of himself again and again and he hated it.

It was almost spontaneous for him to wonder what John thought of Paul, who kept on being caught while looking at him. Perhaps he believed he was crazy, which wasn’t very far from the truth. Or he understood the real reason for his behaviour, and the fact that he did nothing to approach Paul was even more agonizing.

It was a disaster. An intricate situation from which Paul no longer knew how to get out.

He sighed as he picked up a couple of cartons of milk for himself and Pepper, deciding that the supermarket wasn’t exactly the right place to try and sort out such private matters, since he was
surrounded by the creak of cart wheels, voices on the loudspeaker, parents who called their children who ran free in the corridors...

A sharp laugh, a child’s one, aroused him from his reflections, and immediately after something, or rather, someone crashed into his legs.

"Oh!"

Paul turned, curious, to notice that who had just crashed into him was...

"Julian?" he said, surprised, at the same moment when another voice called the child by his name.

And the next moment Paul thought he was sinking in the ground, because John had just turned the corner to get where he was.

"How many times do I have to tell you to look where you’re-"

His voice cracked when he recognized the man his son had crashed into, but Paul couldn’t tell whether it was something for John to be happy or disappointed.

"Paul." he said in a trembling voice.

"Hi, John."

"I... I'm sorry for Julian, I always tell him to look in front of him, but he doesn’t want to listen to me." John explained, immediately grabbing the child by his arms and putting him in the seat in the cart.

"Don’t worry." Paul reassured him, nodding with a smile, "On the contrary, I'm glad to see that he has recovered so quickly."

"Oh yes, there's no problem anymore. He’s fine now, isn’t it, Jules?"

Julian nodded, smiling, when his father ruffled his hair affectionately, and this way Paul could still notice a small band-aid where there were the stitches.

"It's a wonderful news."

John looked at his sincerely pleased smile for a moment, before stuttering an uncertain, "Thank you."

That said the silence fell between all three and Paul bit his lip. There were so many things he wanted to say: *I'm glad to see you, you have no idea how much I missed you, do you know I'm crazy for you?*

Yet it wasn’t exactly the right place for certain things, especially since John was so strange. Paul couldn’t understand the reason for his embarrassment: was it too much happiness or maybe didn’t he want to be there with Paul?

The young inspector called himself *idiot*, telling himself not to think about these things, and decided to concentrate on John's cart. There were many interesting things: Cokes, beer, chips of all kinds, pretzels, sandwiches ready to be stuffed with ham, and balloons, coloured plastic plates and cups.

Everything necessary for a party.
"Hey, is there any special occasion to celebrate?" he asked enthusiastically.

"Tomorrow is Daddy's birthday." Julian answered.

Paul blinked much more than surprised, almost stunned. John's birthday was the following day and he didn’t even know anything about it. The realization was really unpleasant, but he tried not to show it.

"Really?"

"Yeah." Julian nodded vigorously, "We have a party at home and Dad has even got my favourite chips."

"Which one?" Paul asked, interested.

"The round ones." Julian explained, pointing to a bag of chips.

"You know, Julian..." Paul began to say, reaching out to touch the tip of his nose, "They're also my favourites."

Julian laughed, "Then you must come too."

Paul blushed, not expecting such an answer from the child and not knowing what to say. Here, that was an unpleasant situation. If John didn’t invite him, he had to have his good reasons, and according to Paul, he had too many. And now, however, his son, without noticing it, had just embarrassed him.

"But this is Dad's party." Paul tried to make him notice softly.

Julian frowned, puzzled, and turned to his father, who winced, "Daddy, is it true that Paul can come too?"

John bit his lip, cursing to himself. Damn it, now Paul would think he hadn’t wanted to invite him before. Yet it wasn’t the truth. John would want him to come to the party, he would like it so fucking much. But who assured him that Paul would accept? That he wouldn’t answer him with another no?

"Of course." John hurried to reply, heartfelt, "If you like it, Paul, I'd be glad if you came too."

Paul just smiled. He wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about how he got that decidedly not spontaneous invitation, but now he couldn’t refuse. After all, John seemed sincere in his request. Maybe there was some other reason why he hadn’t asked him before.

"I’d be very pleased, John." it was his answer.

Julian cheered, while John also relaxed in a smile, a more radiant one; it brightened his face suddenly, lit it up with a sweet surprise and unexpected happiness.

And realizing the power of his answer, Paul's heart missed a beat, creating only for a second an extraordinary void in his chest, that same void that had long been ready to be filled.

"Well, then, come around seven o'clock, there won’t be many people, but they will be the most important ones for us."

"I’ll be there for sure," Paul reassured him.
"Now we have to go, you know, we have to buy the last things." John explained, vaguely pointing to the cart, but showing himself completely unable to look away from Paul now.

"Sure, see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow."

"Bye bye." Julian greeted him, while John started pushing the cart along the corridor.

Paul watched them walk away, waving goodbye to the boy until John turned back to him, keeping on walking. At that moment Paul's breath was taken away and he suddenly felt as light as a feather: he found himself smiling with a sweetness, a warmth he could feel on his own cheeks.

John smiled back, surprised, without realizing it, as if he didn't expect it.

He knew he shouldn't delude himself, yet there was too much in Paul that was making him losing his mind and rationality. His smiles, his looks for John, his accepting the invitation...

Was there really a little hope for John?

However, the combination of keeping to look and smile at Paul and keeping to push the cart was fatal: his cart crashed into that of an elderly couple, who didn't spare themselves to scold John immediately.

"Hey, lad, be careful, for heaven's sake."

John uttered a thousand apologies, while Paul laughed amused at the scene, but also because the sweetness that John reserved for him only had returned and had warmed his heart so cold for long time.

When finally the elderly couple went away, even Julian allowed himself to scold his father, "Daddy, you have to look where you go!"

"You're right, luv." John told him, before turning to Paul.

He was still there, all intent on looking at them and smiling. He seemed pleased to have just been the cause of John's little accident.

The reason was still unknown to John, but this didn't prevent him to face the rest of the day with a smile on his lips and a pleasant feeling of lightness in the heart.

*****

Next evening Paul got ready for the party, took the gift, and very on time, he showed up at the door of John's apartment.

He felt his own heartbeat rumble directly in his ears, and it beat with an absurd pace.

What a fool! Why should he be nervous? It was just a party, there would be other people besides him and John. Obviously, what party would it have been without other people? If it was just the two of them, it would be a date.

Paul had no reason to feel like that, he wouldn't be alone with John, he wouldn't have the chance to talk to him about certain things, nothing would happen.

Did it matter, though? Paul knew it, he knew that even if he had spent a single moment with John,
he would have melted into sappy smiles and intense looks, which would make his feelings too clear.

John would understand everything, because he always understood everything about Paul.

And at that point John would try to get closer to him, to resume that conversation that Paul had stupidly interrupted; then Paul would be *oh, so happy.*

Or maybe John would ignore him, he would pretend not to recognize Paul's feelings, really putting an end to whatever happened between them; then Paul would be *oh, so sad.*

The young man shook his head, or at least forced himself to do so to remove all those stupid thoughts and those useless doubts, and rang the doorbell.

But who came to open wasn’t exactly the birthday boy.

Instead, it was the name that in the last period was simply driving Paul crazy and no, not in a positive way.

*Yoko.*

"Hello." she said, "You must be the inspector."

The woman smiled faintly at him, and Paul found himself unable to reciprocate. It was John's house, yet she was the one to do the honours in his house? What the fuck did that mean?

"I don’t think they ever introduced us, I’m Paul McCartney." he held out his hand, trying to be very polite and not very upset.

"Yoko Ono." she replied, "Please, come in, you were the only one missing."

"Er... thank you."

Yoko led him to the living room, where there were already at least twenty people. Many small groups of conversation had formed, while in the background Elvis's warm voice kept them company with his songs.

Naturally, Elvis couldn’t miss.

"You can find here drinks and something to eat," the woman told him, pointing to a table where there were coloured bottles and sandwiches, pretzels and chips of all kinds.

Paul nodded, following Yoko at the table and looking for John in the room with his eyes. He saw George and Pattie on the couch, both busy in a conversation with another couple, whom Paul had never seen. Soon, the inspector realized that he really didn’t know anyone else present. He had no idea who they were, but if they were there, then they had to be John's friends.

"Would you like something to drink?" Yoko asked him, awakening him from his thoughts.

"Some orange juice, thank you."

Yoko hurried to get him a glass and Paul looked at her carefully. She seemed more and more important, in that party, as if she knew how to move, as if she knew thoroughly how everything necessary for the party was arranged.

"Did you help John with the preparations?"
"Yes." she replied, smiling and holding out the glass, "He asked me to help him, so I came in the afternoon and while the kids played with the balloons, we arranged everything."

"You did a great job." Paul commented, forcing him to smile at her, after admiring all that was offered on the food table and the festoons and balloons hanging around the room.

"Thank you."

Paul cursed himself when she smiled at him smugly because someone had finally figured out how important her role was at that party.

If he hadn’t been so dull, so stubborn to reject John, at that time he would have been in Yoko’s place. John would have called him, together they would have prepared the sandwiches and arrange everything.

Instead, Paul fucked everything and now... Now it was right that he was been eating by his silly jealousy. It was his most deserved punishment.

This didn’t prevent him from wanting to deepen his knowledge of the relationship between John and Yoko.

"John told me there would be few people, but it seems to me that he's already a good number of guests."

"Oh yes, they are mostly regular customers of his shop." she explained, pouring herself some Coke.

Paul blinked, surprised: he didn’t expect her to know that too.

"And..." he continued, clearing his throat, "And by chance, do you know if the Mick is present too?"

"You mean, the man who raised John?"

"Yeah!"

"No, he couldn’t come."

"Pity, I’d like to have met him." Paul murmured, taking a sip of the drink.

Christ, why did he take the orange juice? It was so damn bitter. It wasn’t healthy for him to drink bitter things, they only accentuated his already bitter feelings.

And John and Yoko being so intimate were for him as bitter as that orange juice.

"You and John seem very intimate." Paul finally said with caution and a slight sense of defeat.

"It’s just for kids." Yoko explained, bowing her head and turning her glass absently in her hand.

The woman's smile dimmed slightly, becoming almost melancholy.

"Just for the kids?" He repeated, perplexed.

"Yeah."

Yoko sighed bitterly and Paul noticed, of course he noticed. At first he was surprised, the
conversation until then had been a real suffering for him. But now, with that woman's sigh, everything changed.

"I... do I understand well you were hoping for something more?" He asked fearfully.

It was necessary to show prudence, at that point. A small spark of hope lit up again in Paul, but it had to be carefully protected.

"Exactly." Yoko replied, "But he made it clear to me that he wasn’t interested."

"Oh." was all Paul could say.

John wasn’t interested.

A few words that kept on echoing in Paul's mind, like a stuck record.

But it wasn’t enough.

"Did he explain why?" Paul continued.

"It seems there’s someone else on his mind." she replied, almost snorting in annoyance.

But despite her puffs, they had no power over the spark that the same woman had lit up again in Paul, in fact, they just went to feed it, to make it stronger.

"Who?" Paul asked, and the question came up without him even noticing.

Yoko raised an eyebrow with skepticism, "Does it matter?"

Of course, yes, what kind of stupid question was that? How could she think it didn’t?

*Perhaps because she has no idea that it can be you, you stupid fool,* Paul told himself.

"You’re right, forgive me." he said in a voice that was just trembling.

What a huge effort to try to control himself in front of her.

"Anyway, no, he didn’t tell me who it is."

Fuck!

But who else could it be if not Paul, right? Who else could win John over in such a short time? No, it wasn’t possible. It was definitely him. *It had to be Paul.*

"And when would it happen?"

"Yesterday afternoon. He also told me that he understood perfectly well if I decided not to help him anymore tonight, but I thought about doing it anyway. After all, my daughter is happy to play with Julian and I would like her to keep doing that, so she can have at least some friends."

"It was very kind of you to help him in spite of everything." Paul pointed out gently.

"Thanks." she told him, "Now if I may, I’ll go get more sandwiches."

"Yes, please, don’t worry."

Paul followed her with his eyes as she went to the kitchen. A part of him tried in every way to
maintain a certain behaviour, while the other only wanted to scream, shout to the world his happiness.

Good heavens, he felt so light, as if at any moment he could lift up in the air. Was it really possible? God, maybe yes, and Paul just had to find a handle before a gust of wind could take him away.

He found a good hold in John's eyes.

He was with two other men in the corner of the room. They were talking animatedly about something when John intercepted Paul's gaze.

The man smiled slightly, raising his hand to greet him and Paul felt himself blushing, waving him back, before returning to drink.

Did someone by chance put some honey in that orange juice? Because suddenly it had become incredibly sweet.

And so the coke that followed.

And the beer.

And…

*****

Finally Julian felt asleep.

He needed a fairy tale and two lullabies to make him sleep, but in the end John had succeeded.

Although Julian did nothing but run and play with Kyoko all evening, it seemed like Julian wasn’t sleepy. That child had a very high exhaustion threshold. Who did he look like? John seemed to be always tired.

Smiling to himself, John came back downstairs to find George and Pattie who were wearing their coats to go away.

"Did he fall asleep?" Pattie asked, interested.

"Yes." John sighed, "Finally, I’d say."

"He lived it up tonight." the girl commented, smiling.

"It wasn’t even his birthday." George replied, letting escape a little laugh, "Together with that little girl, he gave the best of himself."

John nodded, amused, "By the way, everyone is gone?"

George looked quickly at Pattie, before turning again to John.

"Actually, there’s a survivor." he said, waving to the living room.

John followed the sign and could see a mass of dark hair sticking out of the border of the couch. "Oh."
He swallowed loudly, recognizing his inspector still there, in his home.

What was he waiting for? And why?

Of course he was waiting for him, hadn’t John been the one to avoid him all evening?

He avoided him, yes, and he didn’t even know the reason for his actions. He barely greeted him, he glanced him sideways all night, looking away as soon as Paul's crossed his, and when by chance they ran into each other in the kitchen, and Paul offered his help, John dismissed him in a hurry, running away from the room with the first excuse that had passed through his head.

And now Paul was waiting for him, to do what, John didn’t know exactly, but he was more than sure that he noticed that John had avoided him and now he just wanted to clarify why.

John was trapped. A sweet, very sweet, excruciating trap.

Did he have the guts to deal with that?

Yes, he did, he had enough to talk to Paul.

"Do you want help?" George asked him.

John shook his head, smiling, "Don’t worry, I can do it."

"Okay, so we’re going." his friend said, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving him a loving pat.

"Sure. Thank you so much for tonight, guys."

"Thank you." Pattie told him, kissing him on the cheek, "And again, happy birthday."

John smiled and accompanied them to the door. As soon as they said goodbye, the man closed the door and sighed, before going to the living room.

He saw again that unforgettable head of ruffled black hair, and despite his doubts and fears, his heart was beating intensely at that vision, it made his chest tremble so sweetly; it was a wonderful feeling. It made him feel so alive.

Gathering a little of the courage that marked his thieving nights, he stepped into the hall and when he was standing by the couch, Paul looked at him.

"Hi."

"Hi." John said, sitting next to him and smiling embarrassed, "Nice party, huh?"

Paul smiled, in front of John's uncomfortable mood, "Yes, a lot."

"I thought you were gone."

The young man looked down, shaking his head, "I couldn’t leave yet."

"Why?" He asked, following Paul, who turned away from John to get something by his side.

"Well, first of all I haven’t given you my present yet." he replied and handed him what was evidently a gift bag.
"You didn’t have to bother."

"Someone once told me that the birthday is holy, so don’t worry, Mr. Lennon."

Paul handed him his present again and John laughed, recognizing his own words in the young inspector’s ones. He decided to accept the gift: it was thin, square in shape, covered with a silver coloured striped paper and a gift ribbon of a beautiful bright red.

"Come on, open it." Paul urged him.

John gave him a quick, amused look, before starting to unwrap the mysterious object. His hands were shaking, and perhaps Paul realized this, but at that point it was no longer important for John. Paul had seen him in worse conditions: crushed by the oppressive weight of fear, when Julian was at the hospital, and earlier, pleading in front of Paul who was pushing him away.

So really, it didn’t matter.

When the torn paper revealed the gift, John literally gasped.

It wasn’t possible.

His hands, trembling with love and surprise, were holding an Elvis LP. It was Blue Hawaii, one of his favourites, but it wasn’t just any record: it was in fact an original 1961 edition, one of the first published copies. The case was slightly damaged at the edges and yellowed. Poor Elvis didn’t look very good.

"Do you like it?" Paul asked, curious, since John didn’t seem to want to open his mouth.

"If I like it... I... This is... it's..."

His voice faltered in an uncontrollable way, either by surprise, by joy or by the immense feeling that Paul turned on in him.

"It’s one of the two original Elvis LPs you still miss." Paul finished in his place, "I know."

John looked at him, raising an eyebrow, "Did George tell you?"

Paul nodded, "I wanted to give you a special gift, but everything I could think of was trivial, so I asked him for help and he told me that there are two copies missing from your Elvis LP collection."

"Exactly, how did you find it?"

"Finding things and people is my job, right?" Paul exclaimed amused, winking at him, "I have my ways."

"But it must have cost you a fortune." John replied, surprised, stunned, and even more hooked by this young man because he couldn’t accept that Paul, the same Paul who was risking his job because of John, spent so much money for him.

"Well, I can’t express myself about this." the man commented, before shrugging, "You only need to know that I did it with pleasure."

John shook his head, "Anyway, I don’t deserve it."

Paul let out a laugh, abandoning himself to the back of the sofa, "I completely agree with you."
"Oh yeah?" John replied, blinking, caught off guard.

"Sure, and this brings us to another reason that made me stay tonight."

"Which one?"

"It was necessary, you know, you've been avoiding me since I arrived." Paul explained.

Surprisingly, John realized that Paul wasn’t angry as he pointed out that yes, he got that John avoided him. Instead, Paul was smiling, and he smiled so fondly that made his heart tighten.

"You're right." he murmured, turning slightly to the other man.

"Why did you do it, John?" the young inspector asked, looking down to find John's hand a inch away from his.

"I was afraid."

Paul nodded slowly and his expression clearly said he expected a similar answer, "Of what?"

"About the reason you came."

"I came because Julian cared about this and practically forced you to invite me." Paul answered, amused.

John laughed, imitating Paul and leaning on the sofa in the same way, "He didn’t force me, I did want to invite you too, but I didn’t know if you would accept."

"Of course I would, and Julian knew that, he's a smart kid, did I ever say that?" he exclaimed, turning to look at him sweetly and mischievously.

"Why did you come? Only for him?"

"For him and my favourite chips, of course." Paul commented, but before John could laugh at his joke, he reached out to stroke his arm, "And because you wanted it too."

John jumped visibly, realizing that his heart was more than mad: it no longer knew how to beat, it no longer knew which of the many wonderful emotions, aroused by Paul's words and gestures, to give way.

"Really?" He stammered, trying to keep his voice steady, but he failed miserably and failure wasn’t very important, "How can you be so... so sure?"

"Because..." Paul began to say, looking at his hand that slid up John's arm upward to the man's chin, "Once you said I must have felt this strange feeling between us, and I do now."

Lying in Paul's touch and inspiring deeply, John came closer to him, unable to hold back a smile, "Are you serious?"

"Never been so serious." Paul sighed, letting himself be infected by the same incredible mix of feelings as John.

"Because you know..." John said and couldn’t keep himself from approaching Paul again, "There's one thing I'd like to do right now, and you should know that too now."

Paul bit his lip, continuing to smile, "I do, I know it well."
John started a little, but left any hesitation in him because Paul waited only for his move, and he firmly reached out to rest his hand on Paul's warm cheek.

"But it's difficult."

"You're wrong, John, it's easy." he said, closing his eyes, as John's thumb began to stroke him, "It's the easiest thing in the world."

The next moment John thought that Paul was right.

It was easy to bend over him, almost naturally.

It was easy to touch Paul's lips with his, touch them once or twice.

He couldn't stop.

And the fact that Paul was neither stopping nor rejecting him, encouraged him only to never end his kiss. On the contrary, he wished and tried to deepen it, just a little, just to check that it was just as he remembered it.

Paul smiled when he opened his lips for John, allowing him to kiss him as he wished, and then let his hand intertwine with his thin auburn hair, while the other leaned on his chest, just above his heart, where Paul's kiss caused that crazy pace.

Crazy just like John felt. He took possession of Paul's mouth, recognizing the sweet taste of honey that had impressed him so much. The hand on Paul’s cheek continued to caress him, while the other slipped on Paul's side, squeezing and pulling him closer.

Finally, John pulled away from his mouth just enough to breathe again and sigh softly that name so dear to him.

"Paul."

Paul smiled as he rubbed his nose against John's cheek and stroked his chest.

"What, John?"

Unable to get away from him, John had his forehead against Paul's, delighted by his closeness, by his touch, by Paul himself.

"Tell the truth, you've stayed just for this tonight."

Paul burst out laughing, pressing himself against John, "No, but you got close to the right reason."

"Seriously?" John asked, looking at him, perplexed.

"Yes. Actually..." he began to say, pulling John to himself again, "I haven’t wished you happy birthday yet."

"Oh, damn it. It's true." John agreed, looking more confidently for Paul's sweet mouth.

Paul smiled again, before closing his eyes again and kissing John again.

"Happy birthday, John."

And then everything tasted like honey.
You're welcome! XD
No, no joke. It finally happened! Yatta! I don't know if it's as you were expecting it.
But in any case, I hope you like it! :D
Thanks to everyone who left a comment or just spend some time to read this story. <3
I really appreciate it.
Next chapter, I'm looking through you... :3
Ciao ciao <3
Chiara
It was raining the next day.

The sky was of a dreadfully dark grey: the rain had begun to pour very early and continued to fall in that gloomy afternoon, with so much thunder and lightning. It was a very unpleasant situation, which created many problems in the city.

There was probably only one person in London to whom that awful weather made no difference.

Inspector Paul McCartney, in fact, came back from work humming cheerfully under his umbrella. The rain was so heavy that his trousers, his sleeves and even his hair were soaked.

But it didn’t matter in what state he was, nor how much the clouds were threatening: that for him was the most beautiful day of the last months. He couldn't stop smiling. He had tried, but every attempt had turned out vain.

And the smile didn’t disappear even when coming home, Paul saw John's shop open and even better, caught sight of John himself from the window, all intent on playing his guitar.

Paul’s heart lost a beat, leaving him stunned, breathless only for a long, delightful second.

Paul knew it was its way to tell him to go on, enter the shop and... And then...

Then John!

Biting his lip to contain enthusiasm, Paul decided to do just what his heart was suggesting. His legs moved and led him with heartbreaking slowness towards the shop across the street. When Paul reached the door, he entered and was soon enveloped by a melody that gave him the sweetest welcome.

He knew that was John to play, he knew that right there, beyond that curtain, there was John, the same one that Paul had kissed the night before.

If he thought about it, and practically Paul had done nothing else from that moment, his legs were shaking uncontrollably and his breathing was caught in his throat. Yet, in spite of this, it was a feeling of the most pleasant and enchanting and--

"Hi, Paul."

Suddenly the dream in which Paul ran to John at that very moment, the dream fueled by John's sweet voice singing from his little room at the back of the shop, was interrupted because of George's voice, which brought him back abruptly to reality.
"Hello." Paul sighed, stepping closer the lad.

"How you doing?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, I really--"

Paul stopped since approaching George had allowed him to hear not only what John was playing, but also what he was singing.

“For you there'll be no more crying
For you the sun will be shining”

And continuing the conversation turned out suddenly to be the hardest of the tasks for Paul.

John's voice singing to himself was a reminder of the sweetest, to which it was terribly difficult to resist.

“And I feel that when I'm with you
It's alright, I know it's right”

However Paul had to get rid of George before.

"I wanted to say hello to John." He answered, daring a smile and receiving a cleverer one from George.

"You guys have made up, huh?"

Paul blushed violently, while in his head images of how he and John had made up appeared, images fueled by the always warm and velvety voice of man in the next room.

“To you, I'll give the world
To you, I'll never be cold”

"Yes." Paul answered, nodding.

George let himself go to an evident sigh of relief, "Thank goodness. John had become so bothering, always sighing inconsolably. Definitely annoying, you know.”

But if on the one hand thinking of John in that state made Paul's heart tighten with pain because he knew it was his fault, on the other it also made him feeling pleased, knowing that he, Paul himself, could have so much power over John's mood.

And wasn’t it the same for Paul? He too hadn’t been well in those days far from John, he was in a situation of constant discomfort, as if no one else in the world could make him feel good again.

“'Cause I feel that when I'm with you
It's alright, I know it's right”

Like no one else was right for him. That's right.

"I'm sorry, but the important thing is that we solved, isn’t it?" Paul asked.

George looked at him for a moment, his eyes just half-closed, almost wanting to read something
deeper into Paul. Something that was jealously guarded in his heart, and Paul swallowed, trying to close and protect even more his feeling for John, not yet sure he could share it with George.

“And the songbirds are singing
Like they know the score”

“Sure. Now everything will come back as before?”

Paul bit his lip: he didn't really think all could come back exactly as before, but he decided that for the moment it was what George could think of him and John.

So he nodded, smiling, "Everything as before."

"So, you know where to find our Johnny boy." George told him, pointing to the room from which the song came.

Paul started, before thanking George and approaching with delightful fear to his goal.

“And I love you, I love you, I love you
Like never before”

When Paul lightly moved the curtain, a thrill ran across his back, a warm shudder, as if the words sung by John were reverberated against Paul's body.

When he saw John, sitting and showing him his shoulders, his gaze on his guitar, it was as if Paul's heart had gone mad all of a sudden, beating violently against his chest, his throat, his ears...

“And I wish you all the love in the world
But most of all, I wish it from myself”

Who knows, maybe John heard the crazy beats of his heart, because suddenly he stopped and turned.

And only then Paul could free that smile which wanted to show itself in all its joy and brightness since he entered the shop.

The same smile that appeared on John's face.

"Paul?" he murmured slightly stunned at the sudden realization, "What a surprise."

Paul decided to finally enter the room, making sure to close the curtain very well behind him. John looked at him without being able to delete nor just lessen that smile that stretched his lips.

But how could he, and why above all? Paul was two steps away from him, with wet clothes and hair due to the incessant rain of that day and like that, he was so beautiful. As well as a real magic.

John was singing that song thinking about him, And magically Paul had appeared. It seemed almost as if he had heard John's thoughts and followed his call.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"You don’t." John reassured him, "How long have you been there?"
"For a while." Paul replied, vaguely, shrugging, "But a few minutes before I was there to talk to George and I could hear the song."

"That's what I wanted to play with you." John explained.

There was a new shyness that was guiding his gestures, his voice, but he didn’t care. That was fine.

"Ah well, then I am glad I didn’t have to play it." Paul said with a little laugh, which however left John perplexed, with his forehead wrinkled.

"Why?"

"Because sung and played by you it was… magic."

John laughed, relieved and pleased, before he began to put his guitar in his custody, since something more interesting was waiting for him, "You’re going too far."

"That's not true. I really like to hear you singing. Actually... I just love it." Paul confirmed, blushing mildly because now John was approaching him.

"Thank you." he murmured warmly.

Paul's eyes moved quickly from the guitar in the case, to John who was now a few steps away from him. He didn't know what he was most sorry about, whether for the abandoned guitar or for John still so damn far away.

He decided to maintain a minimum of decency, and the chosen was the guitar.

"Why did you put the guitar away now?" he asked, protesting briskly.

"Because you're here, what a question!" John explained, amused, and couldn’t help noticing the euphoria, caused by his response, which was now desperately trying to pull the corners of Paul's mouth.

Paul was obviously holding back, not yet sure how things should go on between them now.

However he had to consider himself a lucky boy, very lucky, because John had a certain idea and had every intention of putting it into practice.

"But I don't want you to stop playing." Paul protested again, "I didn't really want to disturb you, actually it will be better if I- Hey!"

His arm was grabbed and pulled by John, and the next moment Paul crashed into the other man's body.

"Paul, shut up, okay? You're absolutely the most beautiful reason to stop playing."

Paul couldn’t hold a little laugh, a decidedly more relaxed one now, and slipped his arms around John's waist, while he wrapped the neck of the young inspector.

"Well, then."

John closed his eyes for a moment, leaning on Paul's forehead, smiling because the man's breath tickled the skin of his face. It was extraordinarilly, and most importantly, again near him.

He had spent the whole night remembering what happened after his birthday party and every time
he closed his eyes, Paul kissed him again. Only that unlike that first, awkward kiss that Paul had given him in a moment of confusion, this time John was sure that it was wanted by both. It wasn’t enough for him to dream that Paul wanted him as much as John, now he could just open his eyes and Paul would still be there, ready to kiss him again. And John could hardly wait because he knew it would be still wonderful, if not more: it would be more passionate, more thought. Did it make sense? John wasn’t convinced, but there was only one way to find out.

So he opened his eyes, and when he saw Paul smiling at him tenderly, he trembled in his arms.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"You know, I really think a real magic has just happened." John told him, chuckling.

Paul let himself be infected by his joy (it was so easy by now) and laughed too, "What kind of magic?"

"Well, I've been thinking of you all night, and then all morning--""I wouldn’t say that!"

"... And all the afternoon." John went on, "And now here you are. If this is not a magic..."

"Oh, I see." Paul said, in bliss, "And is it a beautiful magic?"

"Of course it is. I’m so glad you're here." John said.

"And I am very glad to be here." Paul replied, when John's arms held him a little tighter, causing a small but lovely jump of his heart.

John answered murmuring softly, half-closing his eyes, "Mm, it looks perfect."

"It is, John." Paul agreed, "It really is."

John came back to look at him, moving his head away from the perfect young man trapped in his arms, and put a hand on his cheek which suddenly became of a faint red colour.

"Do you know what else would be perfect?"

John's question was asked with their eyes deeply immersed into each other, and Paul allowed a thrill to cross him from head to toe.

"What?" he asked breathlessly.

"A date."

"A what?"

"You've heard."

"A date?" Paul repeated, blinking perplexed, "A real date?"

"Yes, of course. A date! You know, you, me, a romantic place... What do you say?"

Paul blushed lightly. He didn’t expect of course to have a date with John when he entered the shop.
Not that he was sorry, clearly, it just sounded still strange for him, to live this situation with John.

Many times he went out with John, before everything turned into something deeper, but now it would be different: it would be just him, John and that new, crazy feeling that united them.

Paul was afraid, of what he didn’t know, but he would be with John, and that was all that mattered. Together they would make it. John seemed really sure and convinced that it would be all right, like the day he asked him to help him play the guitar, the day this whole thing started.

*One step at a time*, John told him.

Well, they would do one step at a time on this occasion too.

So Paul found himself smiling at John, smiling at him sincerely, fondly, gently.

"I say it would be great."

"*Great* is the word I was looking for." John commented, addressing him a cheeky wink.

"What for?"

"For a lot of things: our date, this moment, the kiss of last night..." John answered, and as he leaned in towards Paul again, his voice became ever lower, warmer, more vibrant, "Do you remember it, Paul?"

"Perhaps you mean the kisses." Paul corrected.

"Yeah, those. Weren’t they great?" John asked, letting his hand move now into Paul’s hair.

Paul curled his nose, deliberately thoughtfully, trying to remember accurately memories that were actually even more than alive in him.

"I don't know."

"You don’t, huh?" John said, as he knew very well what Paul was doing.

"I should make that experience again, you know, to be able to express myself objectively." Paul remarked to him, the most mischievous expression was dancing on his handsome face.

John felt all of a sudden charmed, caught by his gaze, totally at Paul’s mercy, just as under the effect of a spell.

And that spell just asked him to kiss Paul. *Now.*

"Come here, then, I'll refresh your memory." John murmured and made to draw him to himself.

But just when his lips were an inch from Paul’s, George called him loudly, making them jump.

“John! Move your ass, there’s a call for you."

*The magic is over*, he thought John snorting over George's decidedly unkind call.

Paul looked at him comprehensively, and let him walk away from him to look out of the curtain.

"Who is it, George?"

“Cynthia. She says she called you on the phone, but you didn't answer."
John sighed, lowering his head, defeated, "Tell her I'll call her in an instant."

George nodded, and soon after John came back to Paul and took his hands, holding them tenderly.

"Sorry for the interruption."

"Don't worry. I have to go home anyway and get these wet clothes off if I don't want to catch a cold." Paul explained, while all the warmth that John offered him minutes before was fading, recalling the more than evident wetness in his clothes.

John laughed, when Paul was covered with a thrill, and tried to rub his hands on his arms to warm him.

"I’ve heard tomorrow the weather will be good."

"Oh, and I bet you were thinking of tomorrow for our date."

"Sure, that's all right with you?"

Paul nodded, sighing a happy, "Yes."

"Let’s meet at three o’ clock."

"So soon?" Paul asked, mildly surprised, "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

"Sure, that's all right with you?"

"All right."

"Then, I'll see you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow, John." He confirmed it and then approached to give a little kiss on his cheek.

John's face was coloured by a very faint red, but Paul didn’t fail to notice it and before he went away and disappeared beyond the curtain, he gave him a smile that was yes, sweet, but also so fucking cheeky, a dangerous mix that shook John's legs.

And when Paul went away, John dropped back into the chair, smiling at no one in particular.

How long hadn't he felt this perfect and delightful feeling of impotence and invincibility together? Too much. But now there he was, he was again in a similar situation with Paul, Paul that made everything a hundred times more exciting because he was amazing and because...

Because he was still the man who was chasing him.

God, John was supposed to be the craziest of masochists. And if George knew the whole truth about the new nature of the relationship between John and Paul, he would say the same thing.

But George couldn’t know, not yet at least.

Now John just wanted to savor this feeling and wanted to do it with Paul, only with him, because everyone else would ruin what they both felt.

And this couldn’t happen, especially the day before their first date.
It had to be all right, it had to be perfect, a perfect day in a perfect place.

Someone might argue that perfection doesn't exist.

Well, maybe that someone didn't deal with John Lennon, with his projects, with his conviction, and especially with his heart.

****

The next afternoon the weather was really nice, as John predicted. The sky was clear, blue as it had never been for a long time. Or maybe it was just Paul who looked at everything with different eyes, eyes to which everything was beautiful, without any imperfection.

Paul let out a laugh while he was getting ready to go out. That day he felt strange, fought: on the one hand he was insanely excited about this date, but on the other hand was unnecessarily, stupidly terrified. The idea of spending the whole afternoon with John, knowing him better, being alone with him, turned on a mix of emotions in Paul, so different that they canceled each other to leave Paul in a pleasant and very light state of numbness.

He was a desperate case, that's what he was.

If he looked in the mirror, he would never see that upright, serious lad who came from Liverpool searching for an opportunity.

Instead he would see a man with his own eyes and his own lips, which, however, were also very different. There was a new reason for enthusiasm behind his endless smile, and a new reason of living that made his eyes sparkle.

He was different, he knew it, he was different deep inside. God, he even listened to some music willingly as he got ready. And it was all thanks to John.

When the time came, Paul wore his jacket, adjusted his hair in front of the mirror, went out and...

And gasped.

John was already there, right in front of the door of his house.

"I don't remember where we were supposed to meet." John smiled, sly, "So I thought to wait in front of your house."

Paul stepped closer, laughing amused, "Well, not that there were many options, since we live in front of each other, but no, we didn’t arrange any place, John."

"Well, then." John said, "Shall we go?"

"Where?"

"It's a surprise, you'll find out just by following me. Think you're brave enough?"

"I'm afraid I am."

John smiled and he made his way to Paul. He had some intention on where to take him, a place that the Paul he had known probably would have hated, but Paul was so different now and John felt quite confident of his choice.

There was quite another matter to worry about it. Hold his hand or not, that was the question. He
didn’t know if Paul would appreciate it, showing himself around hand in hand with him. Therefore he tried not to walk too close to him, so as not to touch him and give in to temptation. John was so bad at resisting temptation.

"Are we going there by walking?” Paul asked at some point.

"Oh no, no, we must take the tube."

"I see."

"Actually, two."

“Two? Where are you taking me, Mr. Lennon?” Paul asked, laughing.

"Wait and see. You’ll like it."

"I have no doubt."

Paul had absolutely no idea where John was taking him and for the time being, though Paul was rather anxious about the surprise, he decided to enjoy that walk. Also because he could admire the normal daily life of London with John.

What an incredible emotion, to be able to live all this together with him. Not that Paul had never visited London. But along with him, experiencing this for the first time with John, seeing the same things with the same insane feeling that warmed his chest, made everything perfect and so damn normal.

Normal like taking a damn tube.

There were a lot of people and Paul already foresaw that they would be packed in like sardines on the train. They barely managed to get on the first train, finding themselves pushed against the pole, but managed to settle down so that they could at least look at each other. There were many hands grabbing the pole and they both tried to understand where they could grab too.

Paul managed to find a small space to tuck his hand, and when John's fingers inadvertently brushed his, he involuntarily jumped. In front of his reaction, John withdrew his hand, grabbing to another side, and lowered his embarrassed gaze.

Paul bit his lip, thinking perhaps his reaction had been misinterpreted by John. He would never have wanted John to move his hand away, and yet he did, perhaps thinking that Paul had no intention of being seen hand in hand with him.

Before that day was over, Paul would show him how wrong he was.

“So, how many stops till we arrive, more or less?” Paul asked, after the train left.

It was just a pretext to make him look at himself again.

"About nine."

"Plenty."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I think we're strong enough to resist, don't you?”
Paul smiled at him encouragingly and John seemed to cheer up again.

"Absolutely!"

And he cheered up even more a few minutes later, when the train stopped abruptly and to prevent Paul falling backwards, John grabbed him by the side.

"Got you."

"Thanks! That was close."

"Lucky I was there for you, then."

"Lucky." Paul commented, smiling at him cheeky.

The cheekiness in his smile persuaded John to leave his hand right there on his side, to prevent Paul to fall again. Just for that, of course.

Paul didn't mind at all. So close to John he could feel the warmth of his arm and his heart beating fast. It was in unison with his own.

When they finally came to their destination, John dragged him off the train and Paul followed him. Once outside the tube station, Paul looked briefly around and smiled.

"Camden Town?"

"Yes."

"So the romantic place would be Camden Town?"

"Er… yes. Don't you like it?"

"I love it, I don’t come in here often. But let's say it's not exactly the first thing I think about when we talk about romantic places."

"And what did you expect then? A little ride on a boat in Hyde Park?"

"Sort of. But this is way better."

"Really? I wasn’t very sure at first, but-"

"Relax, Johnny boy, I really like it."

John sighed, relieved, "Well then."

"You're a man of many surprises."

"Oh, baby. You don't know how much." John said, "There are so many things you still have to find out about me."

"Can't wait." Paul answered, winking at him.

John gasped, but shook his head before he could basking in Paul's desire.

"And so what do you plan? A walk through the stalls?"

John curled his lips, "That would be nice."
"Maybe hand in hand?" he asked, whispering, touching his fingers.

John bent his head to look at his hand held by Paul, before returning to his eyes, "Why not?"

"Then it seems an unforgettable afternoon is waiting for us." Paul concluded, pleased.

"It will be, trust me." John said.

Then, feeling reassured by Paul's gestures, he slid an arm around his waist to draw him closer to himself and carrying his other hand on one of Paul’s locks of hair to fix it.

The inspector laughed softly and wrapped his arms around John's neck, "Here he is then, the romantic John."

"I told you so." John went on, leaning towards him, searching for a kiss, "You must still find out many things about me."

John's words were sighed on Paul's lips, and he visibly shivered, ready to let himself go on the other man's mouth.

But the mobile in John's pocket began to ring powerfully and his trill came as the most unexpected and unwanted of events.

John snorted resigned when he let Paul go to pick up his cell phone.

"I'm sorry." He hurried to apologize, without being able to hide his disappointment, "I keep it always on lately, you know, ever since Jules..."

John stopped, lowering his gaze, while the memory of that unpleasant day came back to being painfully alive in him.

"Don't worry, John." Paul reassured him, stroking his forearm, "It's more than understandable."

"Thank you."

John checked the new message and sighed.

"Any trouble?" Paul couldn't hold himself, not liking the dark shadow that covered John's face.

"It's Cynthia." John replied.

"Oh." Paul sighed, "It's all right?"

"Yeah, it's just that she wants me to leave Julian with her again." John replied, settling his jacket absently.

He needed something to distract himself with, while talking to Paul about that topic that had always been his weak point.

"And you? Don't you agree?" Paul asked, interested.

"Oh yes, of course. Is that... See, I was doing a good job with my fears as a parent. But then..."

"Then that accident canceled your work." Paul concluded for him.

John looked at him startled for an instant, before he nodded miserably and bowed his head.
"Oh, John." Paul sighed, approaching him and hugging him from behind, "I understand how insecure you are now, but it's normal. It's the natural consequence of a fright like the one you had when Julian fell. But you always, always have to remember that you are his father, and the love that you continue to show him isn't easily forgettable. Especially for a loving child like Julian."

John smiled to himself, when Paul ended his reassurance with a gentle grasp of his arms.

"Thank you, Paul." He murmured, covering the man's arms with his own.

"Better?" Paul asked worried.

"Yes, don’t worry." John replied, turning to him with a smile confirming the positive effect of his words, "But now we shouldn’t think of myself. Let's enjoy our date."

Paul smiled and nodded vigorously before he let go of John.

"So..." Paul began, holding out his hand towards him, "Shall we go?"

John glanced at his inviting hand for a moment, before smiling and grabbing it decisively, holding it as if not to make it slip away from his grip.

"Come on."

****

"Then that is why you went away last week?"

"That's right."

Paul nodded, smiling: he had just told John about the birth of his niece, while they were quietly sitting in a café.

They had spent all afternoon amongst the stalls of the vintage market of Camden Town, plunged into that stinging cold of an early autumn.

However Paul couldn’t really say to be cold: not after walking with John for most of the afternoon, nor having seen him hopping as happy as a child among the stalls of old vinyls.

As soon as they found the flea market, John had been frenetic to go and have a look. Of course, his intention was only that, but soon, in front of all those vinyls he wanted to buy something.

The problem was that he felt embarrassed, as it didn’t seem right to buy things on a first date. Paul, understanding all this, told him that there was absolutely no problem. The smile that John gave him was the thing that warmed Paul up immediately that afternoon.

So, really, how could he be cold, with John? With John in front of him, who looked at him now with eyes full of that warm feeling?

Simple, he couldn’t, indeed, he had to admit to be just fine at that moment.

"And how was it?" John went on.

Paul shook his head, reawaken himself from his thoughts, "What?"

"Hold your niece in your arms."
"Oh, that." Paul answered, making his gaze wander in his now empty cup of tea, "It was strange. I never held a baby in my arms. At first I was afraid to drop her, seemed infinitely small and fragile, but when I relaxed, I discovered that it’s the simplest thing in the world."

John nodded slowly, agreeing with him, before confessing to him what had occupied his thoughts in those days, "I thought you’d gone away because of me."

Paul turned his head towards him he and looked at him surprised, "Because of you?"

"Yeah, I told you to go away when you offered to be with me that evening." John explained, lowering his gaze upon his abandoned hand upon the table.

"Oh no, John, you didn't have to think such a thing." Paul replied.

However John protested, sincerely sorry, "But you were hurt, I got that."

"Yes, I was, but I also understand that you weren’t well that night, and maybe it was right for you to be alone with your son." Paul assured him, carrying a hand on John’s, patting it gently.

"So you're not angry?"

John's question was asked with fear and uncertainty, and Paul couldn’t hold a smile, "Never been angry."

"Ah God." John sighed finally, happy, "You don't know what a relief to hear you say it. I felt terribly guilty."

"Come on, John, don't think about it any more." Paul said, "Instead, just think of something nice."

“Like you?” John asked mischievous.

Paul giggled, amused, "I was thinking of all the vinyls you bought today. But yes, I'm indeed a good thought, too."

John smiled, "Hell yes."

Paul, fearing of blushing even more, decided to make an effort to keep the conversation about those bloody vinyls.

"I thought you'd emptied all the stalls."

"Well, more or less I did."

"We'll have to take a cab on the way home. You can't go on the tube with all these bags."

"I can’t?"

"Are you mad? They could be ruined. Or worse, someone could steal them. Thieves have been so good lately..."

John swallowed. In front of that truth, his second identity started to be frenetic again, threatening to creep into John's thoughts and he tried to reject it with all his strength.

Not now. No more.

"All right, Inspector. You’ve convinced me."
"So, come on, I want to walk a bit more before going home."

Having said that, Paul stood up and held out a hand. John smiled, before he grabbed it and went back to his level.

"Can I still hold your hand?"

"Why do you think I want to walk?!" Paul exclaimed, winking at him.

John found absolutely adorable the way Paul flirted with him: he was cheeky and sweet. A powerful mix, there was no doubt, it gave him a charisma that fascinated John every day more. And realizing this, John again tried the desire to kiss him, but reluctantly resisted: it wasn’t the perfect time to kiss Paul, not in front of everyone.

So John let himself be taken by the hand, they grabbed all the bags and went out again into the open air.

They left the lively centre of Camden Town, since Paul had decided to go in the nearby Primrose Hill, because "while we're here... I've never been there, John!"

And so John followed him. Not that there was anything awesome about it, but Paul wanted to see the London skyline.

The park was a mosaic of colors. They stepped into the avenues flanked by the trees, until they found the right corner from which they could enjoy the suggestive view.

The side of the hill that stretched below them was of a beautiful bright green and descended towards a blanket of groves with characteristic autumnal colors, behind which a typical view of London stood out.

The lights of the city were beginning to be bright in the sky, which instead turned to the darkness of the night, making everything simply breathtaking.

It was perfect, thought John.

That was the perfect time, with Paul's face lighting up by surprise in front of that view.

The young inspector left John's hand to approach a point from which he could see better what was offered to his fascinated eyes.

"Look, John."

Paul reached a lamppost, which was slowly lighting up, and turned to John, beckoning him to reach him.

Which was punctually made.

John could easily see that Paul was almost charmed by what he was seeing: the lights of London stretched below them, lights that were reflected and shone in Paul’s eyes, and it was right there that John could admire the same landscape.

Paul's eyes were like a real mirror, only that the frame of his face made it all a thousand times more enchanting.

John was just caught up.
Isn’t it beautiful?” Paul asked, smiling to himself.

“*He* is.”

Paul winced visibly to John's passionate sigh and turned, not quite ready to receive his gaze.

Never had he been looked at in that way, and *fuck*, if it wasn't the most wonderful thing that ever happened to him. He would like to be looked that way by John forever.

And by the time he realized that in fact John had always looked so fascinated, Paul could no longer hold himself and he stretched his hands to grab John's shirt collar and draw him to himself, before anything else could interrupt them again.

He kissed him with sweetness and passion, leaning with his back to the lamppost behind him, and tried to tell him with that gesture all the emotions that John turned on in him during that day.

John seemed to understand perfectly, while he pushed him more against the lamppost. He smiled in the kiss, thinking it was even better than he expected. It wasn’t only more passionate, it was above all more aware of what was happening, of how powerful the feeling that gave life to that gesture was. At the mercy of such an ardent thought, John couldn’t hold his hands anymore, which let go of the bags and moved eagerly, slipping on Paul’s chest until he wrapped his hips, trembling when Paul put his arms around his neck and let out a little sigh between his lips.

John’s heart jumped joyfully, though a few moments later, he pulled back from the man just enough to catch his breath.

"I was beginning to think I wouldn't be able to kiss you today.” John sighed, causing a little laugh by Paul.

"I think at some point, one of us would do it. In any way."

"I believe so too." John murmured, before he hid his face in the crook of Paul's neck, smelling of his aftershave and that day spent together.

The young man smiled when John stroked his skin with his own lips, and his gaze, his eyes closed with abandonment to thoroughly taste the incredible sensations coming from John, that delicate tingling, that pleasant fire caused by his caresses and kisses.

"Better go now.” Paul snorted reluctantly a few moments later.

"Really?"

"Really." Paul explained, trying to step back from John, "You have to bring these poor records safe. I saw how you threw them on the ground."

John laughed softly against him.

"Either that or the hell I could kiss you like that."

"Daft!"

****

"When can I see you again?"

Paul's question came at the end of the day, once he got home that night. As promised by Paul, they
had taken a cab so as not to travel uncomfortably on the tube. John's fingers were begging for pity. And although John did everything he could to pay for the cab, Paul didn’t accept excuses and it was up to him.

So now they were both near the door of John's apartment, and he had made a sign to the inspector to speak in a low voice so as not to attract George and Pattie’s attention, who were babysitting Julian.

"Whenever you like, Paul. As soon as possible, if I may add." John commented.

"Agree." Paul laughed, as John drew him to himself with a hand on his back and stole a last, quick, but throbbing kiss.

“It has been incredible today, John.” Paul said, sighing, "Thank you very much."

"Thanks to you."

"Had a lot of fun, you know."

"Yeah, me too, very much."

Paul hardly blushed, when John's arms held him a little more.

"But I could learn even new things about you."

John let out a laugh, while Paul stroked his arms still wrapped around his own waist, "Beautiful things I hope."

"Very." Paul whispered in his ear.

In doing so, John was crossed by a violent thrill that made every fibre of his being tingle, leaving him stunned for a moment. Then Paul leaned a hand on his cheek, caressing him briefly, looking at him lovingly.

"Then, see you soon, John."

"Yes, nighty night, Paul." John blurted, letting him go reluctantly.

"Good night." he replied, on his way home, stopping just another moment to look at him, so carefree, so incredibly happy.

John waited for Paul to go inside and sighed.

He felt just like Paul, as if they had just gone together on the rollercoaster, with peaks of euphoria that alternated with more delicate moments. A continual coming and going that was driving him mad, and they were only at the beginning.

In just one day, John had already opened with Paul, showing him that sweetest side of himself, the romantic one, as Paul called it.

Yet he didn't mind.

He didn't mind at all.

There was a problem, though.
That sense of guilt that until then John had managed to keep away, too caught up with wanting to get the happiness that Paul could offer him, was now returning to kick violently, reminding John of his presence.

Because John said something true to Paul: there were still many things that Paul had to find out about him.

There was above all a side of John whose Paul didn’t know its presence.

And it was a lie, a lie that would make him suffer desperately.

John was Hermes.

And for the first time in his life he wished he had never been.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, at the end I did it, 3 days late. I'm very sorry but last weekend was very busy and I didn't have time to finish the chapter.
Anyway, here we are with John and Paul on their first date.
I really want to thank Vale, my Italian betareader, because the original chapter was a bit different. It was too sloppy, too cheesy. Whenever I read it, I was like "omg I can't have written something like that". I mean, I love fluff, but that was too much even for me. So I changed some things, making them more normal and real, but basically the structure is the same.
I really hope this time the chapter is better.
And I have to thank all you guys that kept on reading and leaving comments. I'm so happy. <3
Next chapter is You can't do that.
Hopefully on Sunday, hopefully.
Ciao ciao.
Chiara
"John, stop it."

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You know."

Paul snorted, despite the fun tried to make him smile at all costs.

They had been in John's shop playing together for at least an hour, but they hadn't done much, since John kept looking at him and then kissing him and still looking at him, throwing both of them into a vicious circle that never ended.

Not that Paul was sorry, damn, John was impetuous in an absolutely adorable way, and Paul could do nothing but submit to his actions.

However those continuing distractions were affecting their work. They had finally decided that it was time to play an Elvis song together, and for the occasion Paul had seemed appropriate *The wonder of you*. The choice had been risky: it demanded a considerable load of courage from Paul to propose it to John, but that didn't spare him a cheeky look from the other man.

Paul didn't care though, because John was cute even when he was trying to show himself mischievous and brash. Like that moment, for example.

"No, no, please, Paul. I want to hear you say it." John exclaimed, finding it impossible to stop laughing.

John was sure that Paul didn’t really want to stop him; he knew instead that the guy still wanted that look on him.

"Oh damn it, John." Paul mumbled, pouting, "You're so stubborn sometimes."

"Come on, Paul." John said, standing up and approaching the man, "Tell me how and why should I stop looking at you."

Paul blushed lightly when John took his guitar from his hands and laid it gently on the floor.

"Because you distract me." He answered with a small jump of his heart.

John nodded, sympathetic, "And that's a problem, isn't it?"

"To tell the truth yes, if we want to learn how to play this song." Paul noticed with a laugh.

"You're right, baby." John agreed, bending down to caress his cheek, "But, you know, I can't hold..."
myself if you sing for me, 'And when you smile the world is brighter'."

Paul murmured softly, "John!"

"Or 'You touch my hand and I'm a king'." John went on, holding Paul's hand.

Paul lifted his head to rub his nose against John's, holding his breath, "And then?"

"And then, if you go on with, 'Your kiss to me is worth a fortune'." he sighed on his lips, "I just can't hold myself."

Paul felt himself caught up by his words, especially when John's hand shifted to his chin to lift it towards him.

"From doing what?"

However Paul's question had no answer. John just smiled at him, an inch away from his nose, and that was the last thing Paul saw, because the next moment he closed his eyes and after that there was only John.

John and his kiss.

Paul slid a hand over his chest, held his shirt in his fingers and drew him even more to himself, desiring only him at that very moment.

Incredible really how John could with a simple gesture push away all Paul’s thoughts, occupying every free space in his mind, in his heart. Sort of bossy, isn't it? But Paul always willingly submitted. It was the very first time he felt such a desire, a desire that became more ardent day by day.

Finally, reluctantly, John turned away, and passed his tongue over his lips to impress Paul's taste in his memory. Although it had been several weeks since they had both accepted each other's feelings, to John that was still something new. Paul, his kisses, his taste were still new for him. And all that was new intrigued him, because it made him want to explore endlessly Paul, his person, their relationship, to know every single bit.

"So..." John murmured, satisfied with the blissful expression on Paul's face, "Did I answer your questions?"

Paul murmured, absently, "Yes, but they don't justify the fact that we haven't been able to play the song well."

"No?"

"No, in fact, we should try again a few more times." Paul said, standing up and starting to put the guitar back in its case.

"Even if we run the risk of distracting ourselves again?"

Paul smiled to himself, before turning to look at him with a cheeky wink, "Especially for that."

John burst out laughing, "You're so greedy, Paul."

"Mm, yes..." he whispered, while John drew him to himself, "I become a little bit when there's something I really like."
"You should have told me before then, I would have prepared psychologically."

"Performance anxiety?"

“No fucking way."

Paul shrugged, "Because, you know, John, I also know how to content myself."

"You won’t have to." John answered, wounded in his pride, "I give the best when I’m under pressure."

Paul laughed softly, letting himself go to another little kiss in John's arms, but when his eyes fell on the clock on the wall and saw the time, he suddenly aroused himself, interrupting the idyllic moment with John.

"Oh, fuck, I'm late." he snapped, moving away quickly from him.

"What for?" John asked, totally baffled by what was happening, while Paul was beginning to grab his jacket.

"I have to meet... someone."

John frowned, puzzled, "Who?"

Paul wasn't convinced it was the right thing to tell John the truth. Actually, it was the right thing to do, Paul knew it well: it was essential for him to build a relationship on sincerity, especially with John.

However the idea of explain to John who was the woman he was about to see, didn’t attract him. That date had been a mistake. Of course, it made him realize how he was missing John, but it wasn’t a proper behaviour towards her. Which is why Paul arranged that meeting.

"Linda." He answered vaguely, putting the guitar in his custody.

"Again, who?"

"Linda." Paul sighed, finally deciding to turn around.

Better to face such a topic by looking into each other’s eyes.

"She’s one of my agents. You met her when you and Julian came to the police station that day, remember?"

“Yeah, but… why do you have to meet her?”

“Well, we went out on a date, you know, before the two of us-"

"Went out on a date?" John cut him, his eyes wide open.

Paul nodded, hesitating at the fact that John was repeating his words. Even his expression was far from quiet.

“Yes. It was when we were apart, but nothing happened.” He hurried to explain.

John looked at Paul in the eyes for a long time, finally deciding he was telling the truth. Yes, why would he lie? Paul had always been sincere to him, unlike John. Maybe he only lied when he told
him he didn't want anything deeper than a simple friendship.

So he nodded, but despite being convinced of his sincerity, the gesture appeared as uncertain. Maybe because of that feeling that tightened his heart with sorrow when he imagined Paul with that woman?

"By any chance, are you jealous, John?" Paul asked and his question matched perfectly with the one that echoed in his head.

"What?" John exclaimed, startled.

"I asked if you're jealous." He repeated, as he was making an effort not to laugh.

"Jealous?" John snapped, deeply indignant, "Me?"

"Oh yes, you." Paul said, smiling at last, amused, "You’re so fucking jealous."

"And you're off-road." John snorted, turning to grab his guitar.

However, soon after he heard Paul's warm chest leaning against his back, his arms wrapped around John’s waist and his nose touching his ear.

"You don’t have to be jealous, John." He assured him softly, "She’s just a friend to me."

John shuddered in his arms, his doubts now discovered easily by Paul.

"Are you sure?" he inquired, turning in his embrace, without disentangle it.

“Damn sure. I went out with her just out of spite." Paul explained, "I couldn't accept how important you had become to me."

"Now, could you?"

"Yes." he sighed, closing his eyes and smiling, "That’s why I want to talk to her and tell her the whole truth. I didn't behave with her."

John bit his lip for an instant, before he nodded, resigned, "I see."

"And you should tell George." Paul said, pointing his finger at his chest, where his own words created a sudden air void.

"What?"

"He's your best friend, John." The young man made him notice, "You should tell him about the two of us. I don't want to keep pretending in front of him and speak quietly here, in your room, not to let us be discovered."

"But-"

"No, John." Paul cut him, interrupting any protest from John, "I'm sure he'll understand because he's your friend."

John would want to argue that George would never understand, but this meant an explanation that Paul would never accept. George would scold him, and could even leave him forever. However Paul was right, John had to tell him, at all costs.
"I'll try." he sighed finally.

"Perfect." Paul exclaimed, enthusiastic before hugging him for a kiss, lingering on his lips as much as he wished, "Then I'll see you tonight."

"Yes, Julian will also be with us."

"What about the Halloween party at Yoko's house?"

"The little girl has a fever, so Yoko decided to cancel it."

"It seems fair." Paul agreed, putting both his hands on John's chest, becoming thoughtful for a moment, "Do you think we should tell him? To Julian?"

John looked at him for a moment, uncertain. It would have been an important step, as well as the most delicate of this story, but it was a step they had to do in one way or another.

"Well, sooner or later it'll be inevitable." John replied, "But for now I’d like to wait. Do you mind?"

Paul shook his head, "No, of course not. I agree."

"Thank you."

"Then you two guys choose a nice movie to watch together, ok? Possibly a good Halloween movie, so both of you don't fall asleep." He concluded, winking at him.

John chuckled, thinking back to when he and his son had fallen asleep at Paul's house, as they watched *Finding Nemo*.

"All right."

Then Paul picked up his jacket and John accompanied him to the exit of the shop, where the inspector also greeted George before leaving.

John sighed deeply, his gaze fixed on that door beyond which Paul had just vanished. And when he was aroused by his thoughts, he noticed George and his skeptical and inquiring gaze towards him.

"What’s the matter?" he asked slightly annoyed, not liking how his friend was looking at him.

George just shrugged, "Nothing."

John followed him with his eyes, while his friend was returning to his previous occupation.

He couldn’t tell George about Paul and him: George would never understand, George would protest, he would oppose, he would-

No.

He couldn't tell him.

But, one way or another, he had to do it.

****

"I'm sorry."
Linda smiled at him, leaning a hand over Paul's, on the table.

They had met in a small Café not very far from Paul's house, who delayed ten good minutes, since he wasted more time because of that idiot John, who sent him fools, adorable messages where he finally told him to let him know how the woman would react.

When he finally found himself with the woman, Paul gathered his courage, along with what he felt for John, and explained everything to her.

Linda seemed not to take it too badly.

"Don't worry, Paul." she kindly reassured him.

"But I practically lied to you." he protested.

"Oh, come on, I've had worse." the woman said, with a chuckle that couldn't hide a bitter bit, "I mean, you had the decency to be sincere. To the end."

"It was the least." Paul sighed.

Linda nodded, letting go of Paul's hand, "I confess that I didn’t see that coming."

"Me neither." Paul agreed, smiling to himself or perhaps to John's ever-constant thought.

"Does he love you?" she asked, interested.

Paul bit his lip: that was a really good question, but Paul didn't know how to answer.

"I don't know."

"And you? Do you love him?"

Again, a wonderful question, although Paul couldn’t yet answer with certainty.

"I don't know yet." Paul sighed, "But I know I want John in my life now."

"So you're happy?" Linda asked with a little smile.

Paul looked her in the eyes, feeling a jump of his heart that made him tremble, but at the same time it was infinitely pleasant. And the answer suggested by that same jump was very clear.

"Yes."

Linda smiled more sincerely now, "Then it's all right, isn't it?"

"Yes." Paul repeated, "It's all right."

The answer seemed to satisfy the woman, so the next moment she stood up.

"Since it's all settled now, I'd better go." she exclaimed, "Thank you for telling me, Paul."

"Thank you for understanding." he said, causing a sweet laugh from the young woman.

"You don’t have to understand love, Paul, you must only live it." Linda said, and she gave him a little pat on his cheek, "So don't worry about anything."

"I will."
"See you at work tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you." Paul greeted and watched her go away.

It had been easier than expected to talk to her and explain everything. Perhaps because Paul was only afraid she couldn’t understand him, that she could also judge him, but if he had to be sincere, he didn’t know that woman so well: she could have reacted either in a way or in the exact opposite, and by his fortune it had gone so, and he was also convinced now that he can count on her discretion at work.

Then, recalling John's recommendation, he hurried to grab his cell phone and began to write him a message.

‘Mission accomplished. Now it's your turn.’

When it arrived at his destination, John's phone rang and he read the text immediately.

Paul did it.

John smiled to himself. Obviously Paul had done it: he seemed very determined when he explained what he was going to do, and when Paul put something in his head, he hardly failed.

Now it's your turn, the message said.

John looked and looked at it, repeating it in his head several times, imagining the same message pronounced by Paul’s sweet voice.

Well, if Paul believed in him, then John could do it. So he left his guitar on the floor, got up from his chair and reached George in the shop.

The friend was all caught up in reading something on the computer, something interesting judging by his focused and enthusiastic expression. But John absolutely had to talk to him. So he advanced with a few uncertain steps and cleared his voice.

"George?"

The young man looked up from the screen and smiled, "Oh, John, you’re just in time. Look at this."

George waved him to get closer and John, sighing, obeyed. When he was next to him behind the counter, the boy pointed out what the screen showed. John half-closed his eyes and tried to read the article.

His heart made a little excited and frightened jump when he understood what it was.

"An Elvis exhibition?" he said, trying to disguise both emotions that had just lighted in him.

"Yes, in a month."

"Do you want to... Do you want to go and have a look at it?" John asked stupidly, knowing that George didn’t want to go and have a look at it.

Not only, at least.

"John, I don't want to go and have a look." He answered, shaking his head with a smile, "I want to go and get a lovely souvenir."
Well, just like John suspected.

"But George..." He tried to answer him.

George, however, interrupted him at once, raising a hand to silence him, "No, John, listen carefully now. There will be the last LP missing from our collection. It's a rare copy signed by Elvis himself. We must absolutely steal it."

John bit his lip, lowering his uncertain gaze, while George kept staring intently.

"Come on, John." He encouraged him.

"I can't." was his heartfelt reply.

George frowned, "Why?"

"Paul..." John sighed, "He will lose his job if... If I..."

"Fuck, John." George snapped, decidedly annoyed, "We have been waiting this day from the beginning of this Hermes story. We can't lose this occasion for Paul. Come on, he won't end up very differently as Sutcliffe. He will only be transferred somewhere in England."

"I can't allow it."

"Why?"

"I need him."

George rolled his eyes, almost frustrated in noticing how he couldn’t persuade his friend, "John, what the hell is wrong with you? I don't recognize you anymore."

John looked down, blushing mildly. He was prey to an internal storm that couldn’t allow him to find the words nor the lucidity necessary to deal with this subject. But he had to. For Paul and for himself as well.

"I'm seeing Paul."

"Yeah, I’ve got this." George sighed, resigned.

But his calmness made it clear to John that he didn’t fully understand the real meaning of his words.

"No, George, Paul and I are together." He repeated, pronouncing the words well and looking directly into his eyes with the hope that this time he would get it.

And George got it, or at least began to. He wide opened his eyes, remaining silent for a moment, perhaps to assimilate every single letter of those words, before deciding to speak.

"What does it mean that you are together?"

"It means what you think." John explained with a deep sigh.

The tone of George's voice didn’t seem to be any good.

"No." He began to say to him, shaking his head vigorously, "No, it's not possible, not with him."
"George..."

"How long has it been going on?" he asked sharply.

"A few weeks."

"And you tell me just now?" He went on with a deep rage that was darkening his expression, "Didn't you think it was something important to let me know?"

John gasped, noticing the evident annoyance on George's face. He didn't understand if he was more upset about the news or the fact that John hadn't told him before.

"I..." John began to explain, the voice trembled uncontrollably, "I was afraid you wouldn’t understand, that-"

"And you were right. You're crazy, John." George said, pointing his finger at his temple.

John frowned, not liking at this point the tone and words of his best friend.

"I'm not crazy." He rebatted, clenching his jaw, "We're fine together. I care about him as he cares about me."

"He what?"

"Stop it, George." John snapped, folding his arms.

"No, I don't. You're both crazy. But you even more and you also know why."

John looked at him. He wasn’t really angry with him. However he couldn’t prevent his face from blushing for annoyance. Or at least, that was what his mind wanted him to believe. His heart, the most sincere, was suggesting that he was angry because George was right, because it was an absurd situation, crazy and that certainly couldn’t end well.

George looked back at him, equally annoyed, but he subsided soon, when he noticed that there was something different in John. He was less closed in himself and tried in every way to overcome his fears and insecurities about himself and the people around him. And after learning the insane revelation about John and Paul, for George it wasn’t too strange to notice that John's change had begun at least from the moment Paul entered his life.

A good change.

"You..." George began to say soon after, "Do you love him?"

To that question John started and his heart with him, "I think so."

"I think so doesn't mean yes."

John sighed frustrated, in front of this wall that George seemed to want to put between them.

"I'm not sure, George, okay?" he snapped, "I only know that I need him now and I can't hurt him."

"You don’t have to hurt him." George rebatted, more quietly, "We just have to steal what we need."

However John didn’t agree and could never agree with George about this aspect of their lives. So he shook his head, more to convince that part of himself that just wanted to follow with enthusiasm George’s idea, that part named Hermes.
"I don’t care. It's as if I’m doing it anyway."

George became very concerned, noting that he was really unable to reason with John. It was like being in a dead end, and there was no way out.

Or maybe yes, even if it was risky.

"Well, then." George sighed, folding his arms across his chest, "If you don't, I'll take care of it."

John opened his eyes to that assertion, and his breath was cut down in his throat.

"What?"

"I've learned something in these months."

"You can't do it alone." John protested.

"Well, I suppose you'll have to help me." George exclaimed, "To prevent me from getting into some trouble."

John heard a thud in his chest. His heart was falling into a dark abyss and when it reached the end, it crashed on the ground, splitting himself into two perfect halves; and John knew that, at this point, he could only recover one.

"George, please." He murmured, with a tiny voice and begging tone, "Don't make me choose."

"I'm sorry, John." George said, grabbing his coat, "You’ve given me no other choice."

"But I..." He tried to answer, but found he had no strength to protest.

"If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Don't you imagine it? I’ve known for a long time that you felt something for him, but you lied to me when I gave you the opportunity to talk about it. You've lied to me many times since Paul came."

"I told you I was afraid." John said.

His voice was now more tired than ever, and an incredible urge to cry was trying in every way to win his reticence, but John couldn’t cry, not now in front of George.

"And I would have helped you. But it's late now, John. You’ve showed no faith in me."

John said nothing, he didn't know what to say, so he just looked at him while he was getting ready to leave. Then George approached the door, lingering a moment when he grabbed the handle.

"By the way, does Jim know? About you and Paul?"

John shook his head.

"As I suspected."

"I'll tell him as soon as possible."

"That's not the point, John." George said, "The point is that you ended up in a shitty situation,
mate. I warned you from the beginning, but you didn't listen to me. And now not only have you dragged us all with you, but none of us can help you. You’re completely alone.”

"I will overcome it." John pointed out, recovering that shred of conviction that was still in him, "As always."

George chose not to argue, perhaps because for the first time ever in his life he didn’t trust John. So he went without a word, leaving John just as he had told him.

Alone.

****

Julian's laughter filled the room.

He was always able to cheer John up. That and Paul's smile, so sweet every time it was for John. They had a very nice evening, eating the Halloween treats brought by Paul and watching *Monsters & co*.

"But it's not a scary movie." Paul protested, indignant when he had known the chosen film.

John answered that the two Lennon guys didn’t like scary movies and that was the best they could bear.

That Halloween’s night was spent with very much fun.

However John couldn’t help but keep thinking about what George had told him: the hit he had planned, the one they both have been waiting for always, and also the Jim’s question.

Paul's father had been glad that John suspended thefts due to his relationship with his son, but John didn’t think he would be equally happy if he came to know in which direction this friendship diverted.

Of course, he could accept it without any trouble. It was a small probability, but at least there was.

"Dad!" Julian called him, jumping on his legs suddenly.

"What, luv?"

"Can Paul tell me the goodnight tale tonight?" he asked with begging eyes, "Please."

"If he wants..." John said, looking up at Paul, who seemed to glow with joy at a similar request.

"Oh yes." Paul said, reaching the child and lifting him up with his arms, "I know just a perfect story."

"Do you?" John said, while Julian was starting to laugh.

"I do!" Paul replied, beginning to climb the stairs to the upper floor, "It’s about a yellow submarine-"

"Like my puppet!" the child exclaimed.

"That's right. And the captain is called Julian-"
“Like me!”

John chuckled, looking at them as they walked up the stairs and their voices faded.

Those two established a nice relationship: Paul knew how to deal with children, and Julian, for his part, seemed to be very fond of him. John thought maybe the baby was ready to know about him and Paul. He was convinced that his son would understand.

Because Julian was a good little boy, smart, clever, all the opposite of John, who hadn’t seen coming the big trouble in which he ended up.

And now that trouble became bigger, too big for John to handle, and it was also involving too many people. John had no idea how to fix things, especially after George's ultimatum.

He was trapped and he hated feeling like this: it made him impossible to breathe and therefore think properly. Yet... Maybe there was a solution.

Maybe if he became Hermes for the last time to prevent George from getting into trouble, he would have at least partly solved his problems.

Sure, Paul would have lost his job, but he could have found some other job, he could reinvent himself, change type of job. He could teach music as he had done with John, he would-

What the fuck was he thinking? Paul would never have been a music teacher. Paul would go wherever he would be transferred to. Music wasn't his life.

John had to choose. It was a sad reality as well as the only possible solution. And since the most serious problem was represented by George, the one who was testing John and his loyalty, John would choose his best friend.

So he hastened to pick up his mobile to write a simple message.

'I'm in.'

John looked at those two simple but decisive words, and taking a deep breath, sent them to George.

Then before he could regret what he had just done, he heard Paul's footsteps coming down the stairs and a minute later, two arms tenderly wrapped around his neck, while the sweetest lips and the gentlest breath brushed his ear.

His heart leaped with joy and sorrow.

"Did the story work?" he asked, trying to push away his gloomy thoughts.

"Of course." Paul replied, with his velvety voice, "Did you have any doubts?"

"Not a single one." John answered back and let out a laugh, which turned out to be very weak and unconvinced.

John knew, even before Paul spoke, that he noticed.

"Are you all right, John? You're so weird tonight." Paul murmured, worried, burying his nose in the other man’s thin hair, "Has anything happened with George?"

And John wanted to turn around and look him in the face to tell him it was going all wrong, and it would be worse because of him, just John's fault.
"No, don't worry, Paul."

However *like that*, with the possibility of not having to look into his doe eyes, John closed his own.

He abandoned himself in Paul's embrace.

He stroked his arms still gently wrapped around his neck.

And finally he sighed.

"It's all right."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry sorry sorry. Last weekend was really busy, my friend Vale came where I live and stayed for two days as a present for my bday and so I didn't have time to translate. But now, here we are with the new chapter. Oh and anyway, we have 9 chapters left until the end. :)
Hard times are coming for our cutie pies. ɕ_ɕ
Stay tuned. :D
Anyway, I want to thank all the lovely readers that follow the story and left a comment. You're my joy. :3
Next chapter, Hold me tight!
Ciao000
Chiara
That room hadn’t heard such sounds for several years.

It was something very light, almost fearful to show itself, but still vibrating in the air.

It was caresses of curious fingers on a soft shirt.

It was the rusting of legs eager to intertwine.

It was trembling sighs, hidden in the crook of a warm neck.

Paul smiled, his eyes closed when John's lips moved behind his ear. He had no idea how long it had been since those cuddles, more daring than usual, began. They just finished watching a movie, got the kid to sleep, and then...

A kiss, a caress, another kiss, until they got to that.

"You know, John..." Paul murmured, running a hand through John's hair.

"What?"

"I was thinking..."

"Mm, I like when you think." John said, stopping his attentions to Paul's inviting neck, only to steal a kiss from his lips.

Paul laughed softly, "Why?"

"Well, because..." John answered, pushing him backwards with one hand on his chest, to make him fall on the cushions of the couch, "...while you think, I can do this."

That said, he covered Paul’s body with his own, pointed his elbows on the sides of Paul's face and smiled at him, making their noses rub against each other, before kissing him. Paul automatically wrapped his arms around John's chest, arching only a little towards him, as a clear sign of appreciation.

"So?" John said, moving his mouth to the man's cheek.

"What?"

"What you were thinking..."

"Oh... Yes, I... " Paul sighed, bringing his head slightly backwards to offer more space to John, who went down again on his neck, "I thought we're lucky to live in this period."

"Why?"

"Well, do you remember when we said we should have been born in the Sixties?"
"Yes." was John's answer, muffled against Paul's skin.

"If it had been really so, it would have been more difficult, to live this kind of relationship."

John just lifted himself to look him in the eyes, puzzled, "Mm, no, I don't think so."

"Why? I mean, it was considered a crime."

"Why should I care?" John snapped, shrugging, "If it had always been about you, I would have done it anyway."

"Really?"

John nodded, giving him stroking his hair fondly, "Of course. If someone tried to stop me from being with you, I'd do anything to win them."

"John..."

"I'll always want you, Paul, whenever and wherever."

Paul blushed slightly, not for the embarrassment, but rather because his heart jumped joyfully into his chest, letting that feeling spread throughout the body.

So he went back kissing him, sliding a hand on his back, clutching his shirt between his fingers, while the other hand intertwined with his hair on John's nape, drawing him closer to deepen his passionate kiss.

John uttered a deep guttural sound, like Elvis' purr, which was sleeping in front of the chimney.

Soon John was the one to take over, kissing passionately the young man under him. He let his hands slip on Paul's hips, while their legs intertwined as if to never let go. It was very different from other times they had found themselves in that situation. At least, John felt different. Perhaps because he was discovering that it was the only way to silence the thousand voices in his head that protested and together encouraged him about what he decided to do with George.

Back into Hermes's shoes.

Cheat on Paul again.

John was seriously risking to go mad, but Paul, his passionate kisses, his warm hugs, managed to make him feel good for a single moment. A moment that John never wanted to end, a moment that John wanted to deepen.

He wanted more. Much more.

He wanted Paul.

He let out a groan to that thought and slid one hand further down to Paul's thigh, where his fingers caressed it before squeezing to lift it around his hips.

Paul gasped with pleasure, but also with surprise when they found themselves touching in that way. They were touching each other in every single point of their bodies.

Suddenly his mind was clouded with something that only suggested to let go and abandon himself in John's arms.
However it was a mere moment of enchanting madness, for he soon returned to think properly, especially when John's fingers walked the line of his belt to the buckle, with which they began to fiddle, making evident his intentions John.

Paul felt like choking in the violent realization that a part of him didn’t want to stop John, while the other was afraid to face something like that with him. Not that there was anything wrong. John was so fucking sensual, so much to make Paul go mad, and several times he found himself wanting him, wanting to try more with him.

But between wanting and actually letting go there was an abyss. Paul didn't believe he was ready yet. Or maybe he was, judging by how much his body was warming up under John's touch and arched towards him. It was just that he still had to accept it in his mind. He would do everything for John, he was sure, but his rational part, the important one, who had guided every action in his life, had to first assimilate this desire and accept it.

Then, he had to stop John now.

He put his hands on his chest and as the man eagerly explored a point behind Paul's ear, he gently pushed him backwards.

"I think..." Paul started to say, under John's baffled gaze, "... I think I'd better go now."

John, his flushed face, his clouded eyes, his ragged breath, took a few seconds to get the real message behind those words: Paul wanted to stop him.

He couldn't deny being disappointed, fuck, it was ages that he didn’t sleep with another person like that. At least with someone John really wanted and really care of. After Cynthia, he didn’t have much time for that and when he did, well, he would have a quickie with some anonymous girl he met at the pub.

However he should have seen it coming: neither of them had been with another man that way, and no matter how great the desire they felt for each other was. It was logical they wanted to take it easy. John, after all, was doing it for a sort of frustration, not to be alone and not have time to think. So he accepted Paul's decision and moved away from him, sitting properly on the couch.

"Yeah, you're right." He sighed.

"I have to get up early to go to work tomorrow." Paul began to explain, "It seems that Hermes showed up after all these months."

John suppressed a grimace of pain when his heart protested to Paul's words.

"I see."

"So I must be impeccable these days. I have to make a good impression with the boss." he said, winking at him.

John smiled, but the mortification in him was too much and to hide it, he had to hug Paul suddenly, only not to show him the expression of his face.

Paul laughed faintly, "Hey."

"Paul, you're amazing, you'll see, everything will be fine."

John held him strongly as if he wanted to grab on to him before he could escape from his arms. But
in the end, inevitably, he had to let him go and tried to recover a normal appearance.

"Thank you." Paul said, smiling with warmth.

John nodded, forcing himself to smile back, while everything in him was throwing outrageous epithets against himself: liar, opportunistic, traitor were only the kindest. They kept echoing in his head and it was a real torture for John. He couldn’t stop it, because he knew he deserved to suffer like that.

However he welcomed with relief the excuse of accompanying Paul to the door, partly because he had a little surprise for him.

"What is it?" Paul asked, when John made his announcement.

John just laughed, taking him by the hand and leading him in the doorway. Here he stopped at the little table above which there was the telephone and opened the drawer, taking immediately after an object from the inside.

When he handed it to Paul, he took it and blinked, perplexed.

"A CD?"

"It's not a normal CD." John explained to him, pointing to the cover.

Paul half-closed his eyes to look better at it: it was all colored with light green and in the middle there was a small little inscription, in white. So little was that Paul had to bring the CD to his eyes to understand what was written.

*From John to Paul.*

Paul burst out laughing, getting a perplexed look at John.

"What?"

"Nothing, it’s that there’s a very tiny writing." Paul commented, amused.

"Hey, I'm really not comfortable with these programs on the computer. It's George the expert." He pointed out.

“Got it. And what kind of CD is it?” Paul asked interested.

"It’s..." He began to explain, lowering his gaze uncomfortably, "It’s just some songs that I played and sang. You said you love to hear me sing."

Paul looked at him softly, blushing a little, "I do."

"So you like it?" John asked anxiously, "The surprise, I mean..."

"Oh, well." the other man said, wrinkling his nose and wrapping his arms around his waist, "First I have to check how it sounds. Then I'll let you know."

"Then hurry up, last time you took some bloody time with the Stones' CD."

"This time will be better, I promise, it’s one of my favourite singer." Paul said, "Meanwhile, thank you, Johnny."
Then he leaned in for a lazy kiss, while John held him just the same way. When Paul finally pulled away, he brought up their foreheads, looking into his eyes.

"You're not angry, are you?"

John blinked, baffled, "What for?"

"For what happened a few minutes before. I wouldn't want you to think that-"

"It's all right, Paul." He hurried to comfort him, "I understand you perfectly."

"Really?" Paul exclaimed, smiling almost incredulously, "Because you must know that I want it, I want you, but I don't think it's the right time."

John's heart jumped happy, realizing that Paul had blushed a little, as if the subject made him uncomfortable, but despite that, he still wanted to face the matter with John. It was a remarkable demonstration of strength on his part.

"Paul, don't worry." He murmured, caressing his cheek to reassure him, "It's normal to be scared. I am too."

"Seriously?" Paul asked, surprised.

"Of course." John said, nodding, "But if we're together, I'm sure we'll get through it."

Paul smiled, closing his eyes when John began to caress his back. His gestures, his words, his own voice were the most effective painkiller. Although Paul had a head full of thoughts, about work and realizing he wanted John so badly, at that time not one of his problems was prevailing the incredible and beneficial feelings that John was transmitting him.

So that night Paul went home, in peace with himself and with the world.

So he left John alone.

Alone and in a battle with himself.

****

The next day Paul went to work in a good mood.

He was happy, even though his job was at risk: it was something that didn’t matter much because, after all, if he was well, then he would inevitably do a good job. Also Paul had no doubt as to how it would end that story: he would get Hermes and this time for real. He wouldn't let him escape, no, sir. Not a fucking chance.

Throughout the day, he gathered information about the place where the Elvis exhibition would be held, analyzing the weaknesses of the building, the potential ways in and out. He also studied Hermes’ previous thefts to check where the police made a mistake. Chief Inspector Starkey seemed pleased with his enthusiasm and this made Paul even happier.

In the small pauses he gave himself during that busy day of work, Paul allowed himself to think of John.

His words reassured him: knowing that he was also frightened in the same way was just what Paul needed not to panic about that particular aspect of their relationship.
So powerful had been the effect that now Paul was just curious. Curious to know how it would be living such an experience with another man, with John.

His heart skipped a beat and he felt blushing, while a daring imagination soon took over him. He could well see himself and John in front of the chimney of his house, he could feel his hands slipping on John's shirt to unbutton it, feel John's ones on his hips, stroking him and holding him, he could even shudder imagining John's breath and lips hovering over his skin, he could-

"Paul?"

_Fuck._

Paul literally jumped into his chair as he noticed that Linda had just entered her office.

"Oops, I'm sorry I scared you." She said, smiling amused.

Paul immediately tried to put himself together, clearing his voice, "Oh no, you didn't. I was just-"

"Daydreaming?" Linda concluded for him.

Paul nodded, smiling, "Sort of."

"And was it a beautiful dream?" the young woman went on with interest.

"Yeah." he sighed, convinced, "I should say so."

"Then I'm sorry I interrupted it." Linda commented, laughing, "But I wanted to know if I could withdraw the paperwork you took this morning, since my turn is about to end."

"Of course." Paul gathered quickly the folders and he stood up to give them to the woman, "Here."

"Thanks. Were they useful?"

"Not particularly, but it was good anyway to have a look." Paul answered, running his hand in his hair and sighing.

The gesture was easily noticed by the woman, who frowned, worried, "Are you tired?"

"A bit." Paul snorted, "I should have gone home two hours ago, but I wanted first to examine all these paperwork."

"You should go home and get some rest, you know. If you're tired, it is useless to go forward, you wouldn't be of any help anyway." She suggested.

Paul looked at her, noticing an evident apprehension getting wide on her cute face. He didn't notice, but Linda had a point. If Paul got too tired, his work would be affected, and that was the last thing Paul wanted.

"You're right, you know?" he said with conviction, "I should go home."

"There, _bravo._" Linda commented, while he went back to his desk to get his wallet and mobile, "Go home, relax, eat something-

"Actually..." Paul began to say, stopping a moment and smiling to himself, "Tonight I should go to John's house."
"Romantic dinner?"

Linda's question left him speechless for a few moments. A romantic dinner with John was one of the many things they hadn’t tried together yet; but it would be very interesting. Paul could really consider it as a possible idea, he could cook: living alone, he learnt some good recipes.

However, he couldn’t really let himself go to such a tempting idea now, with Linda waiting anxiously for his answer.

"No, no, nothing of the sort." He said at last, "Just being at his house, you know, watching a movie, playing with his son and..."

"That lovely kid that came here during summer?" the woman asked.

"Yeah, a very lively four years old boy."

"Then, you will be very busy."

"Definetely." Paul agreed, with a chuckle.

But when his amusement decreased, Paul realized with ease that Linda's expression was decidedly changed, slipping into something more tense that made him particularly restless in an instant.

"Is there anything else, Linda?" he asked in a careful tone.

Linda bit her lip, hesitant, while her thin fingers held more the folders in her hand.

"Listen, Paul..." she began, the voice wavered hardly, but Paul worried anyway.

"Tell me."

"I... I know I shouldn't, but it wouldn't be fair to you."

Paul frowned, seriously worried now, "What’s the problem?"

"I printed an email today for Chief Inspector Starkey. I shouldn't have done it, but I read it." She explained with a deeply guilty expression.

"What was it about?" Paul asked.

He was holding his breath, he was painfully aware of that. And yet he didn’t know what Linda was talking about, but judging by the suffering expression of her face, Paul was convinced that it wasn’t good news. Not for him, at least.

"It was from the Commissioner." Linda replied, slowly trying to scan the words well, "It seems they have already chosen a possible substitute for you."

Paul opened his eyes wide, as he felt his heart falling and falling. It was endless. And the lack of an impact was more painful than the crash itself. Paul was sure.

"Impossible." he sighed breathlessly.

"I'm sorry, Paul."

"Who..." He began to say, but couldn’t finish.
"His name Is William Campbell. He's an Inspector from the Canterbury district. He solved many severe cases."

"But... No, it can't be. Inspector Starkey told me there was no need to worry."

"I think you should worry. A lot." Linda advised, "The mail was very clear. If we don’t catch Hermes, you will pay the consequences."

Paul tried to listen to those words very well, examine them carefully as if he wanted to find a last, unexpected handhold of hope.

But the truth was that there was no hope. No way. He was now condemned to a slow, full and agonizing sentence.

Paul was about to collapse. And there was nothing and no one who could help him. He could only count on his own strength. Even if, with this news burning in his body, it was difficult.

"Yes... Thank you, Linda." He told her quickly.

He needed to leave, someplace where he could turn off that painful and devastating fire.

"Are you all right?" she asked, anxious.

"I'm all right. Don't worry." He assured her, gently inviting her to go away, "Please, go home now."

"As you wish, Paul." She sighed, understanding the true mood of the man and deciding to leave him alone, "See you."

Paul didn’t answer. And how could he?

His mind was still too busy repeating Linda's words to try to find an escape from that catastrophic prospect that was in front of him.

But the message was very clear.

Paul would have lost his job, something he had got with difficulty.

What he had firmly held between his hands, was now slipping away.

And the solution was only one.

The solution was to get Hermes once and for all.

****

Where the hell was he?

John was beginning to get nervous. Only that morning Paul confirmed that he would come to his house, at about eight o'clock in the evening, but now it was already past eleven and he couldn't see not even the shadow of Paul. John tried everything: calling him on his cell phone, sending him messages, calling home, he even knocked on his door to check if everything was okay, but Paul wasn't there.

After nearly three hours of delay, John was worried to death. Something could have happened to him and he didn't know. God, he didn't even know where to start looking for him, and that was just driving him crazy.
It was a frustrating feeling of impotence.

It was a terrible anguish.

It was-

John jumped in the midst of his worried thoughts when he heard knocking at the door: Paul!

He rushed without even thinking and opened it.

With deep relief he noticed that in front of him there was Paul, leaning against the doorframe. However his gaze was absent, cloudy, tired, and the man lifted his red eyes to John.

"Paul?" John exclaimed, desiring to let him know how worried he was only by the tone of his voice, "Do you mind telling me where you've been the whole time?"

Paul chuckled and shrugged, "Oh, hanging around, you know, John, where else could I be?"

Only at that moment, thanks to an intense smell of alcohol that came from the man in front of him, John understood, not without a bit of fear.

"Are you drunk?" he asked.

"Nah, maybe… just a little." Paul snorted, and made to step forward, "May I come i-- ops!"

The young man, however, stumbled, feeling suddenly dizzy, and he would have collapsed to the ground if John hadn’t been ready to grab him with his arms.

Paul sneered, as he grabbed on to him, "Just in time, eh?"

"Come inside, you fool." John snapped, not sharing the same amusement as Paul.

He was actually busy wondering and looking for an answer to why Paul got drunk. It seemed that something important and also serious happened to make him putting himself into that pitiful state. Again.

Paul pouted, claiming he wasn’t foolish at all, while John was leading him to his living room. When he put him safely on the couch, he sat down beside him.

"May I know what happened? You fucking scared me, Paul."

Paul stared at him, while a foolish smile appeared on his lips, "Were you worried about me, Johnny?"

"Course I was. I didn't see you coming..." John replied, as if it were the most normal thing in the world, "I thought something had happened to you."

Paul approached him, with a sinuous movement, making their foreheads touching and putting a hand on his cheek.

"I’m sorry." he murmured, sweet, and then kissed him.

John let him do it for a few moments, before remembering that he was drunk and not at all in himself, so unaware of his every little action. He moved away, trying to call Paul, but he won the strength of his arms that blocked him, and came back on John. He held him against his body, drawing him closer, and brought his lips to his neck, leaving a triumphant smile when the other
man's skin was covered by slight shivers, but perfectly perceptible. Although John still tried to push him away, that encouraged Paul and he decided to let his hands act as well.

"Paul?" John said with more conviction, when he heard the young man's fingers start unbuttoning his shirt.

"Mm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Do you want me to draw it?" he asked, giggling in the hollow of his neck.

But John didn’t find it amusing at all, in fact he firmly grasped Paul's curious hands, moving them away from his body.

"Paul, no, stop."

"Why?" Paul asked, annoyed.

"Why?" John repeated, surprised, "You're so fucking drunk."

"But... I want you now." Paul went on, trying to get back on him, "I need it."

John shook his head, firmly, and tried to adopt a softer and reassuring tone of voice, given the unstable conditions of Paul.

"No, Paul, it wouldn't be fair. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Paul changed totally expression in an instant, and he became from begging and needy to irritated and closed.

"Fucking nothing." He snapped, standing on his feet, and made to go away.

John, however, followed him, grasping him by the arm to make him turn, "Wait a minute."

"No, fuck you, John." Paul burst out, freeing himself, "Leave me alone."

“Paul!"

John called him, trying to get him back, until, finally, Paul decided to stop and face him once and for all.

"Fuck, John." He sighed, his voice raspy and plainly exhausted, "I just wanted something tonight, but if you can't help me, then I'd better leave."

"No, don't go. Tell me what you wanted. Please." John asked, worried.

Paul looked at him, the expression still gloomy, but also wavering as he decided on what to do. It wasn't going just as he planned. While he drank and drank pints of beer, he had begun to feel so hot, so needy not to be alone, and John's thought had become constant and ardent in him. Thinking of him and wanting him. For this reason he decided to go to John, knowing that their desire, finally, could come true that evening.

"I just wanted you to hold me and help me not to think." He murmured, looking down.

"About what?" John asked, softly.
"About what?" Paul repeated, looking back at John with a sharp movement, "What about my life that just sucks?"

John frowned as soon as he did. He really wasn't understanding what was happening to Paul. Only the night before he was so happy, and now he seemed utterly destroyed, almost another person; that irrational side that had always been in him, was now coming out. And if so far it had been somehow controlled by Paul, accepting his feelings for John and letting himself go in many aspects of his life, now it seemed uncontrollable instead. It was utter madness, anarchy, and the whole thing was driven by a deep rage of which John didn’t know the origin.

"Paul, calm down now." John assured him, reaching out his hands to try to touch his arms, "Whatever happened, we can solve it together."

"No, we can't." Paul answered, frustrated, deciding to move backwards to the door, "You or anyone else can't do anything. I'm alone. Again, I'm so screwed, I'm-"

"Watch out!" John exclaimed, when Paul again lost his balance in the midst of his outburst.

But this time John wasn’t quick enough and Paul fell to the ground, with a thud against the floor.

"Ouch!" he complained soon afterwards, with a grimace.

John watched him, barely holding a smile because despite everything, despite his red and absent eyes, his lips cracked from cold, and his breath and his clothes soaked in alcohol, Paul still had that innocent expression that John found simply adorable.

So he kneed on the ground, stretching a hand towards his face.

"Paul, you're not alone. You will never be, never again, because, you know, I'm not going to leave you so soon. And whatever happened to you, it happens to me too now. I know for a fact that together we can overcome it. Trust me, Paul, please."

Paul, with his eyes shining for the upcoming tears, due to his anger, to the alcohol and also to John’s reassuring words, went closer to John and hid his face in his chest, holding tightly on to his shirt, as he began to cry. John sighed with relief, and hugged him into his arms, being able to do nothing but gently rock him and wait for the weeping to calm down.

He said nothing, while Paul was crying. He was just glad Paul finally trusted him. He waited, therefore, patiently for Paul's outburst to be completed, and when this happened, Paul sobbed strongly.

"John?" he whispered, and moved away from the man, showing his red swollen eyes and his moist cheeks.

John smiled comfortably, hoping that he would finally know what had happened.

"Yes, Paul?"

But the answer he got was quite different and decidedly less satisfactory.

"I'm going to throw up."

****

A few minutes and a few close encounters with the toilet after, Paul, all cleaned up, tired and
slightly more alert, found himself under the blankets of John's bed along with him.

John put a hand on his cheek to gently caress him, "So, can you please tell me what happened?"

Paul sobbing, snuggled up more under the blankets, and finally convinced himself to tell what happened that late afternoon. At the end of the story, John seemed angry and surprised, at least as much as Paul himself, which for him was already a sweet comfort. It was as if with that expression John made him realize that he wasn’t on the wrong side, actually, something wrong had been done to him.

"It was so fucking unfair, Paul." He snapped.

Paul nodded, sighing resigned, "I didn't think they'd already contacted someone else."

"They shouldn't have done it, indeed." John protested.

"Yeah..."

Paul turned around to lie down on his back and make his gaze wandering on the ceiling. John looked at him, feeling his heart kicking furious in his own chest. Furious about what was happening to Paul, but even more because of what John was going to do to Paul, John of whom Paul trusted, Paul who maybe loved him-

"Don't think about it now, Paul." John said, but it seemed directed more to himself than to the other man, "You must react."

"What can I do?" Paul inquired, and looked at John with his big doe eyes.

And John knew damn well what Paul was supposed to do.

"Get Hermes." He sighed, letting his fingers wander through Paul's dark hair, "Just this."

Paul shook his head, totally knocked down, "How? I haven't succeeded until now."

"Now it'll be different." John assured him, "You'll get him."

Paul seemed to notice that conviction and tried to make it his own, especially as it came from a person as important as John.

"Thank you." He said finally, with a little smile, letting John draw him to his chest, "And sorry about before."

"Don't think about it, babe." He said, with a sweet laugh, "Try to sleep now."

Paul nodded, before closing his eyes and looking for some refreshing sleep. John helped him, reassured him with caresses on his back and hair, until Paul fell asleep in his arms.

It could be a relaxing situation, lying there with Paul, warmed by his body, lulled by his deep breath.

Yet John's heart was in turmoil for a very different reason.

Now John knew what to do. What he had to do.

The sight of Paul in that state had been enlightening. John should do something to fix it. Something he had never thought of.
Sure, it would cost him an entire lifetime. He would lose Julian and his friends. He would lose Paul, too.

But he had to.

It was the only way to prevent Paul from losing his job and that John went crazy with feeling guilty.

Hermes had to get arrested.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, it's sunday and that means a new chapter.
I know, it's not perfect. Besides I tried and searched some infos about British police to make everything more realistic, but I understand it's impossible for this fanfic to be as realistic as I wish.
So, please, forgive about little weird impossible things that happened and will happened in the next (last) chapters.
Hope you like it anyway. John want to let himself arrested.
It was just a month from Christmas and London had been decorated with lights that coloured and made the streets of the city shine.

The Christmas lights were one of the few things that had always been able to cheer Paul up, making him enthusiastic about the upcoming festivities. They had this extraordinary power to make everything enchanting, almost magical; it wasn't just the shop windows and the streets. It was all the atmosphere that changed, people themselves perceived it and make it real, people who became better with each other.

Every year Paul was fascinated by that magic festivity. It was obviously his favourite period of the year, and despite he had some troubles with his job at that moment, it was with great joy that he gathered the first Christmas decorations for his home. He bought a beautiful Christmas wreath, then a small Christmas tree with lights, balls and ribbons.

That evening he decided to decorate the tree, listening to the CD that John gave him a few days before. He hadn't told him yet that he already listened to it not only one time, but several times. He liked it very much. There were all the songs they played together, and every time he listened to it, Paul seemed to relive all the moments they spent together, from that first, strange, diffident meeting to the last days, the warm looks at each other, the hugs, the kisses...

Paul smiled to himself as he thought that all this seemed almost like a movie. A movie he wished would never end.

Unlike John's CD. The track list ended with a song Paul knew, but he had never sung or played it with John. It was *Can't help falling in love* by Elvis. Paul, despite having had his problems with music, had always enjoyed that song. But now, now that John sang it on purpose for him... Well now he loved it.

And it was with a gentle jump of his heart that he understood.

Maybe John played that song for some reason. Maybe he wanted to tell him something particular, something he hadn't told him yet, and he couldn't tell him in person.

Maybe John loved him?

The question left him stunned all of a sudden, so that his hand let the bright red ball fall on the floor.

John loved him? Really?

What about Paul? Could he love another man?

Paul blushed, as he bent down to pick up what he made fall clumsily.

Yes, of course he could. He could and wanted to love John. He would have been a fool not to admit it. It wasn’t a relationship he had just for fun or to forget Jane.
It was important, it was the most extraordinary thing of all his life and for no reason in the world he would give up so easily on John.

The CD ended and Paul, still caught up by his thoughts, was preparing to put it in his case.

He needed to tell John. He had to do it because it was right that John knew. But how? How to find the right moment, the right atmosphere, the right words?

The young man murmured, thoughtfully, distractedly fiddling with the CD in his hands, as he went to sit on his couch. When his gaze fell on the cover, he saw once more that simple, small, very tiny inscription, From John, to Paul.

A laugh escaped him from the lips, while the perfect idea was born in his mind.

It was time to do something.

From Paul to John.

****

John put on his jacket and looked at his own reflection.

It wasn’t enough saying that he felt disgust over himself. In fact, it was more correct to say that he literally sucked.

The man who stared at him from the mirror was the most false person in the world. He was the personified meanness, he had covered himself with a shame that would accompany him for the rest of his life, something he would always regret, which would torment him until the end of his days.

What kind of a man could do something like that to someone he loved? What had been through his head when he started that whole thing?

Whatever it was, it was still wrong and now John deserved to suffer.

He suffered every time he was with Paul, to his every smile, to his every kiss. He suffered just to look at him. There was no way he could continue that story. At least, keeping on hiding the truth from him. A truth that for sure would lead to John losing Paul forever. But it was the right thing to do. He had to stand just for another day. A last day of suffering, of love, of Paul.

So now he was preparing to go to him. Paul invited him to dinner: he told John that he would cook. John chuckled a little, remembering how thrilled and enthusiastic the young man was when he showed the plan of the evening. At the beginning he was a little reluctant to accept, it was still the evening before Hermes’ last theft, the decisive one. But Paul insisted, begging him, telling him that he needed to be with John, only with him that night, not to think about the next day.

And so John gave in and accepted. On the other hand, trying to resist would have been complicated, not to say impossible. There was a light on Paul's face, it made his eyes sparkle more than usual and made his smile full of warmth. John feared he knew the reason behind it. There had to be something underneath, Paul had to have some idea for that evening.

And so John gave in and accepted. On the other hand, trying to resist would have been complicated, not to say impossible. There was a light on Paul's face, it made his eyes sparkle more than usual and made his smile full of warmth. John feared he knew the reason behind it. There had to be something underneath, Paul had to have some idea for that evening.

When John got it, he found himself very confused: if on the one hand the idea intrigued him, on the other it made him feel as if he wanted to reject that opportunity. But how could he say no? He was already about to break Paul’s heart, he owed him at least that one.

So he left Julian at George and Pattie's house, promising the child they would surely see each other
the next morning before he would go to the kindergarten. Then he came home to prepare himself, he gathered all his himself courage and went out.

He walked shaking towards Paul's house. His heart, like mad, was beating loudly in his chest and his fingers were trying to fight back their shivering to support the little gift he had bought for that evening. When he came in front of the door with a Christmas wreath on it, John fixed his shirt collar as a heat wave passed through his body.

He was excited and frightened, so torn between wanting to run away as far as possible and wanting to break into his house, take him in his arms and not leave him anymore. In both cases it would be too rash. He had to relax.

So, he took a deep breath and rang the bell.

A few moments later, with little graceful footsteps, Paul reached the door and opened it. And when John saw him, his heart tightened, telling him he had done the right thing.

"Hi, John, welcome." Paul greeted him, his face lightened up at the sight of John.

John smiled warmly, looking at him attentively. He wore a white shirt and dark grey trousers, but the elegant effect was softened by a dark green apron. Definitely very manly. Easily John noticed the puffs of what seemed to be flour, both on the apron and on his face.

Perhaps it wasn’t kind, but it was really impossible not to laugh in front of such a vision.

"What happened, Paul?" he asked with a little laugh, "Did you fight against the floury monster?"

"Sort of." Paul replied, smiling, "Come in."

John stepped inside the house, and immediately an inviting scent tickled his nostrils, teasing his appetite. Then, when Paul closed the door behind him, John handed him his present.

"Here, something for later."

"What is it?" Paul asked curiously, reaching out to take the present.

"A bottle of spumante."

"Oh, perfect." Paul said, "We'll open it with the dessert."

John blinked, impressed, "Did you make the dessert too?"

"Of course. A proper dinner." Paul explained, winking at him cheekily, "So, better go and check. It must be almost ready."

Then he made to pass by him, but John instinctively took the knot of his apron on Paul’s back.

"Hey." Paul said surprised, feeling himself pulling backwards.

"Wait a minute." John said and drew him to himself.

He didn't quite know why he was doing it, or maybe he did, but that didn't exclude the fact that there was something in Paul that night that was teasing another kind of appetite. So John took his face in his hands and kissed him, making Paul laugh faintly.

"Oh, hello, Johnny!" he sighed, pleased, on his lips.
John looked at him, stroking his cheeks to clean the puffs of flour, and went back to kissing him, but this time he couldn't resist and pushed him against the wall. And while Paul backed off, he left the bottle in his hand on the small piece of furniture at the entrance, right next to the phone, to allow his hands to hold on John's back.

John didn't seem able to stop and pinned him to the wall, deepening the kiss, leaving both out of breath. Paul sighed, wrapping his arms around his neck, and he arched his back, letting his chest touch the other man's. John slid his fingers swiftly down Paul's hips, grabbing him and pulling him closer.

That was the moment when John realized that no, it didn't have to go like this, but he found himself unable to stop, and if someone else hadn't done it for him, he would have probably gone ahead, allowing his ardent desire to lead his actions. Luckily though, a ring echoed through the house, making the two lovers jump.

It seemed so much the sound of a timer.

John pulled away slightly from Paul's face, trying to find along with him a more regular breath, but his gaze couldn't move from Paul in any way, from his eyes revealing his same desire, from his flushed cheeks, from his parted and damp lips, that just moved to say...

"Dinner's ready."

****

When Paul said he prepared a full dinner, it was the truth.

The menu was very inviting: the first course was spaghetti with clams and then seabass. John had been really impressed with everything Paul had prepared. He confessed that he found the recipes on internet, but also that he had some little accident in the kitchen: some fight with the seabass that just didn't want to be cleaned. And John sensed that the little accident wasn't so little when Paul categorically banned him from entering the kitchen. He must have messed up it, and John found everything irresistibly adorable.

The dinner, however, went on with no trouble. Paul had set the table in the living room, on a small table not very far from the chimney. The recipes he had chosen were very good and John had to admit that he cooked very well.

The young inspector, improvised chef for one evening, had been anxious all the time, anxious, to be precise, to know whether his work had been appreciated by John. So it was with great pleasure that in the end, after eating a delicious chocolate and raspberry cake, John complimented him, and Paul blushed lightly, thanking him with a big smile.

"Anyway there was no need to do all this for me. I mean it, Paul. You had something more important to think of."

"Oh, come on, it's no big deal." Paul said, standing up and starting to clear the table, "And then I told you I wanted to do it."

John imitated him to help him, "Yes, but all this work and then-"

Paul sighed, before turning to him to silence him with a quick kiss.

"Hush, now, I'll be happy just with a thank you." He murmured, curling his nose softly, "And your compliments, of course."
So John was forced to surrender, "All right, as you wish. But at least let me help you wash the dishes."

"Don't even talk about it."

"Look, I'm a champion in dishwashing, you know, I have a master degree in encrusted pots." He said very proud of himself.

Paul laughed, before taking the dishes from John's hands and adding them on the pile he had already collected, "I don't doubt it, but there's an incredible useful dishwasher there, in the kitchen, that is dying to wash all of them, you know?"

"Does it want any help?" he asked, while Paul disappeared in the kitchen, "Because I'd be glad to help it."

Paul didn't answer. John heard only some noises that indicated he was arranging the dishes in the dishwasher, and a few moments later, the young man returned to the living room, with two wine glasses in his hand and the John's bottle.

"You don't want to steal its job, do you, John?" Paul asked, placing everything on the table and preparing to uncork the bottle, "Now, let's have a toast."

John visibly gasped when the cork flew somewhere in the room, "To what?"

"What a question! To us." Paul replied, smiling and looking at him cheekily, before filling both glasses.

"Us?" John repeated, uncertain, when Paul handed him one of the two glasses.

"Yeah." Paul murmured with a little voice, letting his glass clinking with John's, "To us."

And after the toast, they both drank a sip of that sweet and sparkling wine, which gently inebriated all their senses. But this didn't prevent John from noticing that the song in the background had changed meanwhile. To his great pleasure, the soundtrack of that dinner had been the compilation that John prepared for Paul. And now the last track, his special surprise for Paul, was beginning. The song that John had put for a very specific reason, the song which just wanted to tell him that John was a fool, the most foolish of the fools, but despite this, he couldn't help but madly fall in love with Paul.

"So, you haven't told me if you like my CD."

"Course I like it. I've listened to it a lot of times since you gave it to me."

John almost choked, when he heard Paul's answer, "A lot of times? Really?"

Paul laughed amused by John's reaction, then took both glasses and put them on the table.

"You got it."

"Well, that's a change."

"Only thanks to you." Paul answered, his velvety voice, his eyes sweet and full of warmth.

It almost seemed like he was caressing him, an invisible caress that John could feel perfectly. A caress that at the same time frightened him, and when Paul started to approach him, John turned around and tried to reach the CD player to take the case with the tracklist.
"And do you like the songs I chose?"

Paul smiled to himself, noticing how much John tried to act casually, as if he didn’t know that Paul wanted only him that night.

"I do, very much." He replied, stepping closer, "Though we haven’t played them all together."

John laughed softly, and he shivered when Paul reached him and hugged him from behind.

"So, you did notice it, didn’t you?"

"Believe me, if we had sung *Can't help falling in love* together, I would have surely remembered it."

"Well..." John began, covering Paul’s hands with his own, "Consider it a bonus track. Kind of a final plot twist."

"I like plot twists." Paul murmured, against the skin of John's neck, who shuddered pleasantly, "Especially those about you."

When Paul stressed his comment with small kisses in the crook of his neck, John closed his eyes, remembering that Paul wouldn’t definitely like the next plot twist about himself. The thought was painful and John frowned in an attempt to push it away, while he tilted his head backwards towards Paul, trying to let himself go to him.

Without much surprise he noticed that Paul's hands had climbed up from his waist to his chest, starting to unbutton his shirt with heartbreaking slowness. John's heart missed a beat, and although his body reacted to Paul's touch by warming up at once, there was also something cold, damn heavy that kept him down on the ground.

"Paul..." He sighed, trying to stop the young man's hands.

"What?"

"Please, no."

Paul retreated, slightly frowned, while John turned to him.

"Why?"

"You don't really want it."

"I do."

"No, you're just worried about tomorrow." John pointed out, not convinced and Paul noticed it, immediately taking advantage of it.

"Then what? I told you immediately that I needed you tonight and you knew what kind of occasion this would be."

"But..."

"But what? You knew, John, you figured it out, and despite that, you came anyway, because you want it too. So why can't you let go to me?"

John bit his lip nervously, looking for a valid answer as he stared at Paul waiting for him: his eyes
were sincere and passionate, his parted lips only invited him, and the flickering light of the fireplace danced on his skin as candid as snow.

It was a mistake to look at him so carefully, because whatever reason John could find, it was blown away in an instant, leaving room for more questions.

What exactly was keeping him from appropriating such a wonder? Maybe because it was fucking wrong? That in addition to stealing his heart, now he would steal even the last thing that was left to Paul, his body? Because It was so, John would steal all of him.

*But it wasn’t stealing,* He protested within himself.

Yes, it was, because Paul didn't know the whole truth about John, and if he knew, to be touched by him would be his last wish.

Yet now Paul was offering himself to him with a tenderness that... *God,* John must have been a fool to reject him again.

It was wrong, it was so fucking wrong, but John was weak and weak people made easily mistakes. He couldn’t resist to Paul again, he couldn’t nor wanted to resist him, especially if he remembered to himself that Paul was totally lucid this time, that he was sincere in his words and gestures. And then maybe John could find a good thing in all that situation. For once he could show his sincerity to Paul, because what he felt for him, however painful, was also damn true.

So he grabbed Paul by his hips and drew him to himself, colliding right after with his sweet mouth.

Paul smiled satisfied in John's kiss and immediately brought his arms around his waist to prevent him to get away again. He wouldn’t allow it because, though he had seen John's reticence to let go, Paul knew that within himself, John wanted to be with him as much as Paul. John could also reject him in words, but his actions were clear, the way his hands held him, his mouth kissed him, his body was constantly looking for him. It was all so true that Paul was dying to feel more.

So he allowed his fingers to resume the activity that John interrupted just before, while the other man focused on his neck, pulling him closer with one hand on his nape and the other on his back.

When all of John's buttons were slipped out of their respective buttonholes, Paul grabbed the two flaps and opened them, showing John's chest, his warm skin that Paul allowed himself to feel with his fingers before and with his mouth after, making John arch against him and moan. John instinctively put his fingers in Paul's hair, keeping him close and let Paul do everything he wished for, as long as he wanted.

Then, inevitably, John realized that he wanted to touch Paul too. So he put his hands on his waist, where, helped by Paul himself, he tried to pull his shirt off his pants, and when he did, he began to unfasten it, faster than his partner did. Paul shuddered violently, letting out a little laugh, for the pleasant and tickling sensation that John's fingers were giving him, stroking his chest, his abdomen and then climbing up his back and holding him to himself. When John took possession of his mouth again, and made their chests meet, Paul grabbed the other man's shoulders, and sighed as he slid John’s shirt down his arms to let it fall on the floor.

John immediately returned the favor, before kneeling in front of him, brushing his lips against his abdomen. Paul let his head fall backward, smiling blissfully, as his fingers ran into John's auburn hair, holding them when the feelings John was giving him overwhelmed him.

John's hands went up, curious, along Paul's legs to stop on the belt. They hurried to unfasten it to
get rid of his trousers and underwear.

Paul held his breath when he felt himself completely naked in front of John; he had never felt so exposed and vulnerable not only with his body, but also with his soul. He had never shown himself to another person that way. With Jane it had always been different, he didn’t feel with her this total vulnerability that both frightened and charmed him. Perhaps because even with her somehow he had always been on the defensive. There was a part of him that always had to remain vigilant and attentive, despite whatever he was doing. But now John changed him and Paul for the first time felt he could show himself that way. For John and no one else.

When he looked down to notice John's hands caressing his legs, and his lips failing to pull away from his thighs, a thrill ran through him, leaving him stunned, burning with passion and before his legs could give in right away, Paul kneeled down to be on John’s same level. He wrapped his arms around John's neck, letting their foreheads touch, and closed his eyes, staying still for a few seconds, both to catch his breath and to savor that moment, trying to imprint it with indelible ink in his heart, like a deep scar not caused by pain.

When he reopened his eyes, he smiled at John. There were many things he would want to tell him, things he accepted and understood in the last days, but he knew he didn't need to talk. Because deep down he could see his own feelings all over John's face, in his eyes, in his smile; so, John could read all about what Paul was feeling just by looking at his face.

And when Paul thought he longed for a kiss right away and the next moment John caught his mouth softly, he realized he was right.

Paul happily submitted to his actions: he let John caress and touch him everywhere, he let John hold him so that their bodies could touch, he allowed himself to be laid down on the floor and then to be covered by John’s body, continuing to kiss and touch him tenderly.

Paul moaned for the pleasure that John was lighting in him, and although he began to be a little frightened, he reached out between their bodies to unfasten John's belt and then eliminate his last clothes. If someone, months ago, had told him that he would be able, with his hands and his body to turn on another man, and that even Paul could react to the same touch, well, maybe he would laugh before calling them crazy.

Yet now it was so, now he was there, lying in front of the fireplace of his house, totally naked, his legs welcomed John's body, his never satisfied hands ran on his skin, his eager mouth was always looking for John’s. This was his reality, his present, and no, he didn’t mind at all.

He didn't even want to stop there: he just wanted John, and he wanted John to have him, in a way no one else could.

Silently, he asked John’s body to join his, and John hesitated a moment, looking at him, his eyes half-closed for the pleasure. One last moment of fear that was quickly pushed away by Paul's sighs, by the way John made him moan, blush, warm, writhe under him.

Paul was setting aside, only for that evening, all his worries, and asked John to do the same; he was desperately asking him the same with every part of himself. And to please Paul was the only thing that really John cared about now.

So when Paul smiled at him softly, noticing his hesitation, John's heart missed a beat. He almost felt like dying. Die and be reborn the next moment, when they became one body, one soul, when John gently took him, making him his own.
Paul's beautiful face twitched in a grimace of pain, but in spite of this he wrapped his legs and arms around John, bringing him closer. Held so tenderly and knowing that Paul was suffering, John moved to caress his cheek, before kissing him wherever his lips could go.

When Paul's body relaxed in a palpable way, John started to love him.

It was so. At that moment, wrapped by Paul’s warmth, with his mouth whispering his name, with his hands grabbing and scratching his back, with his heart beating in unison with John’s, setting a pace to follow, John couldn’t feel anything but love.

The same love that turned on Paul's body. He followed John’s thrusts with enchanting perfection, while a devastating, but at the same time, so pleasant fire propagated everywhere within him.

Paul was fire, a fire burning for John, a fire that fell and fell to a place of promises of happiness and love, and Paul wanted to take John with him. So he moaned openly and grabbed with more strength at John's back, encouraging his thrusts. And when John held him closer, he burned with him, in a contact of passion, of love, of John and Paul.

They fell back on the floor then, Paul's arms had no intention of letting him go and John was grateful, loving the sensation of being wrapped by his body.

He lifted his head to look at him, as his breath calmed down slowly. His ragged breath joined Paul's, who smiled softly as his hand moved to pull aside the damp hair on John's forehead.

"John?"

His voice was slightly scratched, but still the sweetest for John.

"Yeah?"

"I have to tell you something."

With a painful jump of his heart, John stared at him, feeling his own breath be taken away. He knew what he was going to tell him and it scared him to death.

"I'm in l-"

So, as fast as lightning, John silenced him with a kiss. Oh, how much he would love to hear those words by Paul's mouth... But no, no, he couldn't let him.

"Shhh. Don't say it now."

"Why?" Paul asked, confused.

John moved to his side, to rest his face and hands on his chest.

"I just want to stay like this for now. Please."

Paul looked at him, still confused, but then he smiled, wrapping his arms around John, keeping him close, silently, as he asked him to.

It was obvious that John understood what he was going to tell him, even though Paul wasn’t quite sure about why he had stopped him. However he offered all himself to John that evening and thought that, perhaps, it wasn’t really necessary to specify even in words that he was in love with him.
Hopelessly in love with him.

Chapter End Notes

Hello. Here we are with another chapter. I'm so awkward in writing love scenes, so please, forgive me if the whole scene seemed... awkward. ^^'
I haven't very much to add. I mean, you all figured out that hard times are coming for our two lovebirds. So, brace yourself. ;)
Thanks to all of you, I really mean it. <3
Next chapter will be Run for your life. 6 chapters to go. Ahhh :D
Ciao!
Chiara
Run for your life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There's no need to specify what made John wake up the next morning. Simply because he had never fallen asleep during that night.

He just couldn’t.

Too many feelings were struggling within him, keeping him awake as a consequence.

For this reason he had spent all night holding Paul, watching him sleep, looking at how his dark hair fell on his own chest, making John shudder when his breath grew deeper and tickled his skin.

From time to time he allowed himself to caress his arm gently or touch his head with his lips, paying attention not to wake him up, even when the sun began to rise. After all, it would be a real shame to ruin his dreamy and happy expression.

No, John didn't want to disturb him at all.

He would cause him enough pain that night, there was no need to wake him up. Also because he wouldn’t be ready to face him, not when their first night together was also the last ever. What would he tell him? He couldn't find words that could express what he was feeling. Or maybe he could, but the problem was that there were too many things he wanted to tell him. How are you? I'm sorry. Forgive me. I love you.

John could never put that long list in order. Not to mention the fact that Paul, once he woke up, would like to start again the speech that John had interrupted abruptly the night before, and John didn’t change his mind about it.

Paul couldn't tell him such important things. Not in that situation. Perhaps there was no need for Paul to actually say it, yet it seemed something he really cared about. John noticed it not only when he had interrupted Paul by kissing him, but even a moment before, before they became one, Paul looked at him as if he was going to tell him, but then he didn’t, aware that at that time there was really no need.

However, that morning Paul wouldn’t give up and John wanted to prevent at all costs what the inspector had in mind. Thus, while enjoying the last moments of warmth next to Paul's body, John thought and the only solution to avoid a possible confrontation was to run away.

It wouldn't be fair, but Paul would understand, as always. John had also promised Julian that they would see each other before kindergarten and he always kept the word given to his son, even though it would be much more complicated from now on. Julian was the only thing powerful enough to make John change his mind. Still, he wanted to do the right thing even for him.

So, the only solution was to get away. His last escape from Paul.

He got out of the bed on which they lay down to sleep the night before, and quietly got dressed. Then, before leaving, he made sure that Paul was well covered and kissed him on his forehead.
Paul's expression was still happy and peaceful. John took it as a sign. Maybe he wouldn't be much upset about not finding John by his side that morning in particular.

Yet, did that really matter?

Was it really that important, knowing that Paul would soon have much more appropriate reasons to hate him?

Yes. Of course it mattered. By now John was doomed, this was sure as hell.

But as long as he could still be the cause of a single smile on Paul's part, well, then he would fight for that smile.

****

Paul stretched himself out slowly, winking his eyes as he came back to reality.

Coming back to reality was the sweetest thing that morning, because waking up implied that Paul's mind was brought back to the night before and flooded with images that made a smile appear on his lips.

But that was before opening his eyes and realizing that, although he had spent the night with John, although they had fallen asleep together in his bed, in each other’s arms, now Paul was alone.

Beside him, cold, silence, emptiness.

John had vanished for some reason, along with him all his clothes, and the blanket well arranged so that Paul wouldn’t get cold left no doubt that John had definitely gone.

The realization struck Paul strongly. He would have liked he could wake up beside him, be able to look at him with sleepy eyes and share with him a lazy kiss, before have breakfast together. It would have been the perfect beginning for a day that was very difficult for Paul.

Unfortunately it didn’t go like that, and the question kept tormenting Paul as he provided for everything he had imagined. He also checked if there were any messages on his cell phone, or if John left a note, but no. And the more Paul thought about it, the more he didn't understand why John went away.

Had anything happened?

Or maybe it had to do with Paul and what happened between them the night before?

Paul bit his lip when he came to that option. No, that couldn't be.

But it was also true that John had been very unsure at first, so maybe... did he have some regrets?

Why would he regret it? Paul just couldn’t, Paul would go back and did it all over again, Paul loved every single moment of that night with John, and the doubt that for him it couldn’t have been the same was driving him crazy.

He decided that he should clarify this situation with John before anything else that day.

For this reason, he left the house, bought some freshly baked muffins from the nearest bakery, and went to John's shop with his heart beating fast in his chest for the idea of talking to him, seeing him, touching him again.
When he entered, the bell rang, calling George's attention. Paul's heart calmed down for a moment, realizing that John wasn’t there. But it really lasted for a second, because not seeing him there made Paul worry.

God, was he really angry? But why? Nothing bad happened, so why did it seem like he was avoiding him?

A part of him tried to make him reason. *Just because you didn't find him in the shop doesn't mean he's avoiding you, silly boy.*

Paul agreed that he was right and said hello to George, who greeted him back.

"How do you do?" George asked.

"Good. I’ve brought some muffins for breakfast." Paul answered, smiling and handing the bag to the lad.

George seemed surprised and gladly accepted it, "Thank you very much, Paul. It’s very kind of you."

"My pleasure. Isn’t John here?" he asked, trying, and failing, to show nonchalance.

"Actually..." He began to say, looking unsure at the curtain at the end of the counter. Paul watched him puzzled, frowning, but before he could follow his gaze, he heard John's voice.

"I’m here."

When he finally appeared from the curtain, Paul let out a warm smile.

John felt the usual pain to the heart that caused him, as an answer, a very weak smile for Paul. He suspected that Paul would look for him and John thought he was prepared to meet him. Yet seeing him actually there shattered easily all his presumed being prepared.

"Hi, Paul."

"Hi, John."

John bit his lip, feeling the immense urge to have him in his arms, but in front of George it was difficult. So he nodded to Paul to tell him to follow him and Paul obeyed, going with John in his little hideout. The moment the curtain was closed was also the moment John turned to him and drew Paul to himself, before kissing him passionately.

Paul sighed surprised, but pleased, as he kissed him back and wrapped his arms around his neck, and when John pulled away just enough to let their foreheads touch, the young inspector laughed softly.

"What is it?" John asked, curious.

Paul shook his head, "Nothing. I was going to ask you if anything was wrong, since you left without waking me up this morning, but apparently there’s no need."

"It's just that I promised Julian I'd see him before he went to kindergarten." He answered, running a hand in Paul’s hair.

"You don’t have to explain yourself." Paul said, smiling before stealing another quick kiss, "I just
need to know you're not angry."

"Well, I'm not." John replied, caressing his cheek gently with the back of his fingers, "How are you? Are you okay?"

"'Course I am. Never been better."

John nodded slowly and smiled at him, pulling aside a rebellious lock of hair from the young man’s eyes.

He tried to enjoy those moments as long as he could, knowing for sure that it was the last time he could hold him. The last chance he had to touch him, to taste his lips, to smell his perfume...

The last chance, too, to be able to feel Paul doing the same things with him. The thought almost made him choke, but he couldn’t really let himself go right there in his arms. He didn't want to anticipate the moment he would lose him forever.

"Are you nervous for tonight?"

Paul's enthusiastic expression quickly changed into something more melancholy and he bit his lip, looking down.

"A little." he admitted.

"It’ll be all right, Paul."

Paul smiled softly, "And how do you know that?"

"It’s my sixth sense." John replied, shrugging.

"Then I'd better trust you and your sixth sense." he said cheeky, "It seems quite trustworthy."

"Oh, it certainly is."

"And what it suggests is tempting."

"Definetely."

"Then if it were to be right, and I caught Hermes, then we might go and visit this Elvis exhibit together, what do you say?"

John looked at him, while Paul looked at him with a smile full of wait, and the vision was so contrasting: Paul was sincere, while John was a liar. That had always been the problem with Paul. He had this incredible ability to show himself to John for how he really was, and remembering how he was reserved at first made it worse for John's state of mind because, as Paul always said, that change was due only thanks to John.

This allowed John to see himself as he really was: a petty man who didn’t deserve even a single bit of the happiness that young, beautiful lad could offer him.

It was just fair that John ended up like that. Now finally he would pay for his crimes, crimes he committed chasing a dream certainly passionate, but of course John didn’t choose the most legal way to do it. In fact, not only this way wasn’t legal, but it was about to make him lose that promise of happiness that the destiny, mocking and avenging, had sent him in the guise of his number one enemy.
But John couldn’t fight destiny because it was way stronger than him. So he could do nothing but wait for his condemnation in a heartbreaking wait.

"Well, it would be very nice."

"Good." He murmured, spreading his fingers at his heart’s height, "Just consider yourself booked for a date with me."

John tried to smile amused, and right in the middle of the smile Paul kissed him, holding him so tightly that John's heart jumped. Then when he pulled away, Paul rubbed his nose against John's.

"I must go now. I don't want to be late."

"Of course." John said, though his arms didn’t seem to have any intention of letting him go, so that Paul laughed faintly.

"John?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry."

"I'll call you as soon as possible."

John nodded. What could he tell him, what could be the perfect greeting, knowing what they were both going to?

Of course, nothing.

Everything would seem only a stupid joke.

But he couldn’t let him go like this, Paul expected one last encouragement. And eventually John decided.

"Good luck, Paul."

"Thank you, John."

Paul smiled at him one last time, before turning around and leaving. From his window John watched him run away.

He looked at Paul, who ran towards a new life, ran away from John's.

He ran to go away forever.

****

A little nervous.

He told John to be just a little nervous.

Bollocks!

The truth was that Paul was almost on the verge of a panic attack. At the end of that day his destiny would be fulfilled, and he would know how his career would end. A career he had built working hard, and that now a petty little thief was about to shatter so fucking easily, so much that it seemed like a fragile house of cards under the action of the weaker breeze.
How could this have happened?

Paul didn't really know how to explain it. After all, when he came to London, he was so different. Back then he would have faced everything with much more coldness and determination.

Instead now he felt only warmth, passion, desire to fully live the life he had been given, desires that occupied every part of his body, of his soul. They had always been present within him, but the past events had covered them with their icy mantle. Now someone had brought them back into the open air, letting their nature show itself completely.

John was the author of all this.

So yes, maybe going to London changed it, but Paul couldn’t even for a single moment regret that new adventure, because it had led him to John.

And that night he would fight for him too. Catching Hermes meant that he could continue to work in London and not be transferred to some remote place in the United Kingdom; and working in London meant being able to stay with John and see him every day, whenever Paul wanted.

Catching Hermes now was more important than ever.

“Paul?”

The inspector was brought back from his thoughts in turmoil and noticed Linda at his side.

"Yes, tell me, Linda."

"I just wanted to inform you that all the agents are at their positions."

"Thank you."

They were in a majestic mansion in South Kensington, owned by a rich manager, who made it available for the Elvis exhibit. In the early afternoon they had done another inspection to check that cameras and security systems were in place; then, when the evening began to wane softly, Paul ordered his officers to reach their respective positions.

And now they had just to wait for the arrival of his prey.

"We'll succeed this time." Linda said, encouraging, "We'll get him."

Paul merely smiled at her gratefully.

He wasn’t as confident as the girl, but surely he wouldn’t succeed with such an attitude. And Paul had already made clear to himself how important it was to reach his goal that evening.

Maybe there was a solution.

Just for one night he would have to go back and be the good old Paul. That Paul had many flaws, indeed, now he could well see them too. Yet he had also many qualities, those who had led him to be one of the youngest inspectors of the country. That was something.

"Yes, Linda." He said, feeling within himself a new strength, a new desire to win.

That change was necessary, fundamental.

*Just for one night*, he said, then he would return to what was now his normality: music, love...
John!

"We'll get him."

****

John was ready.

Perhaps it was more correct to say that he was almost ready. The almost made a big difference. It was something that he missed now, but which was very present in all his thefts as Hermes.

It was… wanting it.

He had no desire to get into action because he knew what he had to do, and what he had to do would make him lose a person who surprisingly had become one of the most important in his life.

However, the sense of guilt, the love for that man were so huge that alone were enough to compensate for the absence of will. They softly whispered to him that it was the right thing to do for Paul’s sake; so they would guide his legs.

John kept on playing with a little knife in his nervous fingers. He was right next to the house where the Elvis exhibit was. He waited for George to give him the go-ahead sign. He would distract the policemen, trying to get as many as possible outside, and knocked out the cameras. That last bit would be decidedly useless since John was going to get arrested; but no, this was something that George didn't have to know.

If he'd known, George would have stopped him, and John didn't want to be stopped. Now he was just like the little ball on the inclined plane: once he started, nothing could have stopped him because something much bigger than John, much stronger, attracted him inexorably towards his goal.

So when George told him that he was ready to enter the scene, John prepared to be back, only for one evening, the last one, as Hermes.

He didn't want to think about anything and anyone, especially his son. He had said Julian goodbye when he left him with Pattie. He hugged him and kissed him so much he didn't want to let him go. His little angel was the only thing strong enough to change his mind, but John wasn’t sure that he could continue to see him grow with regret over what he had done to Paul. It would have been much better if Julian had grown up knowing that his father had finally understood his mistakes and paid for everything. Perhaps he would hate him for not being around on his tenth birthday, at the beginning of high school, when he would have his first crush, but John would have finally been at peace with himself. He thought everyone would benefit from his decision.

That's why he had to do it, he thought pulling the hood of his sweatshirt over his head.

That's why he went towards his last mission, the one he'd never run away from.

The one without a getaway.

****

It took him a second to understand that it was finally happening.

As far as Paul could feel ready, well, it was still a surprise when the sharp sound of the alarm tore the silence that enveloped the great building.
However the young inspector was lucid and really ready quickly.

The alarm indicated that someone had penetrated into the surrounding area. The cameras filmed a not well-identified figure that had climbed over the gate, and Paul had been promptly warned.

Instinct told him not to let all his agents out of the house. So, he ordered only some of them to go and chase him out, while he and another team would stay inside.

When he stood watching his agents go out of the building, he was sure that was only an expedient to divert his attention. The man who left himself being filmed by the cameras had been way too reckless and Hermes had never behaved like that. The logical consequence was that Hermes wasn’t certainly the man who was now being chased by his agents. Hermes was much more likely still to arrive, so that man could only be his accomplice.

Perhaps that was reason that his hearing became suddenly much more perfect, allowing the sound of the alarm to become just a loud background noise and his intense heartbeat was the only thing to rumble in his ears.

He realized that the time had come even before he heard the sound of shattered glass from one of the interior halls.

He started to run towards the place, with adrenaline and throbbing anxiety that flowed into his veins. He felt it as a good fire in his belly: he would get Hermes. He was certain.

He stopped when he saw smoke escaping from the room from which the noise had come, and immediately after a figure with shaky gait appeared in his view. Paul grabbed his gun from the holster and was ready to point it at that figure, before realizing that it was Linda and that behind her there were other agents.

"Linda?"

"Paul... I'm sorry... " she tried to say between coughs, "He came in and... He used smoke bombs... You can't breathe."

Paul's heart jumped.

*Here we go.*

That was when he could and had to prove his worth.

That was Hermes' last moment of freedom.

"Go and call for backup, I'll take it."

"But it’s dangerous." Linda protested faintly.

"Don't worry." Paul encouraged her, "Go."

The young man left his team behind and went towards the room still immersed in that cloud.

Linda said it was dangerous. Actually, Paul knew that the thief, however criminal, had no intention of hurting anyone. If he was going to hurt him, he would have done it already. He had a lot of opportunities to do it. But Paul was still there.

Paul was *there*, just a step away from his goal. Only a blanket of smoke that was thinning was dividing him from Hermes.
He took a handkerchief to cover his nose and mouth and advanced into the room. The gun was firmly in his hand, hot and ready to shoot if Paul wanted to.

His heart was beating like a madman, preparing for that meeting that in one way or another would change his life.

His legs continued to walk him forward, his eyes recognized the silhouettes of the showcases with the memorabilia and then...

Then, here he was.

In front of him, standing still.

That silhouette, that Paul had seen many times from behind, now instead faced him.

Surely he noticed Paul stepping closer.

Then why wasn't he running away?

At that realization, Paul felt a sudden emptiness in his chest, as on the rollercoaster and after the slow ascent, when you least expected it... bum! Suddenly the descent.

That man, Hermes, wasn't waiting for him.

Right?

****

He had seen him stepping closer cautiously amid all that smoke.

That figure he had learnt to love now was there, at that moment, in their reckoning.

John was about to collapse under all the pressure of those mixed feelings that were fighting each other within him. But it was about to end. Another moment, only one and John would find peace again.

He used all that smoke just because he knew it would let everyone escape, except Paul, the only one who would throw himself into a cliff that night to get Hermes. If nothing else, he would be alone with him when he would break his heart.

Then he stopped, waiting for him, waiting for Paul. What he would do or say, he didn’t really know. He just hoped to find something to say or do at the time.

And so it was.

When Paul saw him, he stopped in front of him while the smoke was now disappearing. The gun was in his hand, but the man didn’t seem to want to point it at him.

Actually, he kept staring at him as if he was wondering what the fuck he had in mind. And John could do nothing but stand still, waiting for Paul to utter those fateful words.

"You..." began uncertain, "You’re under arrest in the name of Her Majesty, the Queen."

Paul couldn’t believe yet that he succeeded. Was he really arresting Hermes? The man who tormented his soul and put his career at risk?
It didn’t seem true, but the thief said neither did anything. He just looked at him with his head slightly lowered, his eyes under the hoodie's hood seemed so clear.

Still upset by what was happening, but above all by the ease with which he succeeded, Paul approached, and when he took those handcuffs on which from the beginning of this story was reported Hermes’ name, the thief lifted his arms, holding his wrists to the inspector.

With trembling hands, Paul was about to fasten the handcuffs, but stopped. There was something he had to do first.

See the face of the man he had been hunting for months.

His hand moved upwards until he reached the head of the man, where he grabbed the hood and pulled it forcefully backwards, finally discovering a face that for Paul was all too familiar.

John was almost able to hear the noise that Paul's heart made when it broke; it happened almost in unison with John's.

Two broken hearts and one responsible.

"John?"

Paul's voice came out weak, incredulous, in love, defeated. John's, instead, seemed to have vanished.

"It can't be."

Just one moment was enough to burn all the good things in Paul that day: the desire to do well, his self-confidence, his love.

Just one moment was enough to reduce him in a little heap of flesh and blood that couldn’t believe what was happening, no, seeing.

John, John Lennon, his John... He was Hermes? Had he always been Hermes? He had been Hermes the night when he stole things, as well as the day when he played guitar and was busy kissing Paul?

"I'm sorry."

Yes. It was him. That was his voice, sweet and intriguing, that had sung for Paul, those were his beautiful eyes that had looked at Paul, the lips that had kissed Paul, the arms that had held Paul, the hands that had touched Paul.

John was Hermes.

Paul's face suddenly became red and hot as fire. Just like the day before, Paul was fire, but this time it was the fire of rage, shame, despair.

Paul suddenly found himself weak and his greatest desire was to fall to the ground, as his body was begging him to do. But with that little dignity left to him, he decided to continue to face John, standing up, allowing himself only to let the handcuffs fall on the ground.

"You..." He started, knowing that everything he said, would be ridiculous, "You're... it has always been you?"

"Paul, I'm sorry, I don't wan-"
"Shut up." Paul snapped up a hand, realizing he didn't want to hear anything from the man he hated and loved together.

John bit his lip forcefully, seeing how wounded and shocked Paul was, and felt the metallic taste of blood on his tongue.

Well, what did he expect? Something different?

No, of course. But feeling with his heart, before seeing with his eyes, the actual grief caused to Paul was dreadful now.

"All this time... You were... God, I've been such a fool."

John would want to say something, but whatever he could say was pointless and would only upset Paul even more.

The young inspector, on the other hand, didn’t know what to do nor what to say.

How couldn’t he notice?

Was he really that naïve?

And then...

Did he have to arrest John?

Questions that were swept away easily when Paul heard the sound of hasty footsteps heading for that hall. He had to hurry, bend over, pick up the handcuffs and arrest John.

But John...

Paul knew that man, unlike all the other policemen. He knew too many things about him, things that made him take without hesitation the final decision.

"Go away."

John blinked, shocked. What did Paul say?

"What?"

"I said..." his voice was totally apathetic now, "Go."

"But... You're going to lose the job." John protested, looking for his eyes to figure out what the hell Paul was up to.

However Paul didn’t want to look at him, he just couldn’t, so he looked away from the other man, "Never mind."

John shook his head. No, he couldn't let him, it wasn't what he was prepared for, it wasn't what he was expecting from Paul, from Inspector Paul McCartney.

"No, I can't let you do that. You have to arrest me." He repeated, holding his wrists out.

"Please, John, go away before it's too late." Paul pleaded.

"Why?"
"Why?" Paul repeated, indignant, "John, there's a child at home waiting for his father. Julian is so sweet and sensitive, he doesn't deserve to pay for your faults. He's already suffered enough and I won't be the one to inflict other pains on him."

John stood speechless. Now he understood, he wasn’t talking to Inspector McCartney, he was talking to Paul, his neighbour, his friend, his fucking everything. He looked at him feeling his heart tighten itself, too full of love for Paul, for Julian, but also full of sorrow.

"You’ve been fucking reckless, John, and irresponsible." Paul resumed, "You don't deserve the love of your son. You were going to act just like my dad, when you promised yourself you'd always be with Julian. You're just a coward, but you're still his father. So now, get the fuck out of my sight."

Each of Paul’s words struck him in the chest, pierced him like the coldest blade. But Paul was right in everything he said. He had to go back to Julian and Paul was offering him that chance.

Even if it meant disappearing forever from Paul's life.

So he stepped closer to Paul, who continued to look at him with a dark shadow on his face, and John leaned lightly towards him, laying his lips on those of the young inspector, who didn’t move an inch and didn’t have the slightest reaction to John's gesture.

"Thank you, Paul." He sighed on his mouth.

That kiss was the only thing John stole that night.

Then he turned and without looking at Paul, he did as he was ordered.

He vanished from his sight.

And most likely even from his life.

Chapter End Notes

Please, don't be mad at me, please please.
Remember we have still 6 chapters ahead. ;)
So that was the moment in which Paul finally found out everything. I don't know if you've been expecting something like that, I just hope you like it. And if you don't, please, let me know. :) 
Thank you to all of you who support me with your lovely comments. <3
Next chapter will be Don't bother me. Hope to be able to post it on Easter. :D
Ciaoooo
Chiara
Another call from John.

Paul sighed, lying on the couch, while his cell phone rang and vibrated in his hands. When John's name appeared on the display, Paul had been watching it for a few moments before rejecting the call.

By now John would try to call him three, four times a day, and Paul would refuse the call right away.

Those had been and continued to be difficult days for Paul, and it all began of course when he had let Hermes run, or maybe he had to say John.

What the fuck? Did it matter? They were the same person, they had always been the same, John and Hermes.

All the time.

From the first moment he met John, he was that thief, he who had to be Paul’s prey, had become finally his predator. The exchange of roles ended with Paul summoned by Inspector Starkey.

It had only been a day since Paul's umpteenth failure, and when he found himself face to face with the Chief Inspector, he seemed decidedly sad as he told him that he would be transferred to Shrewsbury, a town near the border with Wales and especially near Liverpool. He would take service with the new year.

It just seemed like coming home. The idea was better than expected. At least he didn’t end up in a small provincial town like his predecessor, and this, according to Paul, was due to the fact that he had got, if anything, a miserable success when he arrested the fake Hermes.

But on the other hand, he let the thief run away twice after being one step away from getting him, Inspector Starkey told him, and so the transfer was mandatory.

Paul decided not to alert his brother so far, otherwise he would insist on knowing when he would settle down to Shrewsbury. By now it was enough for him to know that Paul had been relieved of his task. Paul needed some time to accept what happened.

If he still thought about it, he could go crazy. John had cheated him since the beginning of that story. Every moment he spent with John, every word he told him, every glance, every smile... All was fake. It had all happened for a second purpose, certainly not for love for Paul. John had always been interested In Inspector McCartney, not the man who hid behind that badge.

Maybe even Pepper, who was now lying asleep by the fireplace, had been a hype to deceive him. A devious way to get Paul's trust.
God, was there anything true in the man whom foolishly he thought he loved?

Paul would want to say no. *No, there wasn’t*. It was simple to say it with the rage he was feeling.

Yet he knew well within himself that it wasn’t so.

John's feelings for his son were real. No doubt about it. After all, it was the reason Paul decided to let him go.

That's all.

The rest no longer mattered. Any word or gesture of love that John had done for Paul, was no longer important.

And this was something that made him suffer endlessly and become angry. It made Paul want to scream and get rid of everything that John had given him, and then cry and despair.

But he couldn't.

Because it hurt too much.

Because John didn't deserve it.

****

When his call was refused, *again*, John left his cell phone on the couch and let himself fall on the fluffy pillows, making Julian look at him, while he was playing on the floor with Elvis.

There was nothing to do, Paul had no intention of talking to him. John tried everything: if he called him on his mobile, Paul saw the number and refused the call; If John phoned, instead, at home, as soon as Paul recognized his voice on the other end of the line, he would immediately hang up. Not to mention when John tried to approach him: the moment he would go out was also the moment Paul would disappear behind his door or in his car. He had become really good at avoiding him.

Of course, it hurt, and John understood that Paul had every reason to run as far as possible from him. But why, why didn't he give him a miserable, tiny chance to explain everything?

*Maybe because you don't have a decent explanation, you fucking bastard.*

Well, yes, it was obvious. John had no explanation about what he did to Paul, at least, not an acceptable one from someone with some common sense.

It was just that John wanted to talk to Paul. Not so much to explain himself, but rather to assure him that he soon began to feel remorse for what he was doing to Paul, until this had become unbearable, so as to make him understand nothing no more, so much to fuck his brain-

*No!*

No, no, no, that was an excuse, a nice and good excuse to justify his vile behaviour towards Paul.

No, there was no excuse, a responsible person wouldn’t have found excuses, they would only accept the consequences of their actions.

Yet the consequence of what John had done was too painful. He lost the most beautiful thing that had happened to him in the last few years, and there was no way to get it back. None of what John could have said or done, would convince Paul to come back to him, as before. There was no way
that John and Paul could be back just as John and Paul, without their double identity as a thief and an inspector, without what had happened between them could interfere.

No way.

Just saying that he was going crazy was limiting. He was in such a bad condition, he wasn't that bad since Cynthia left him with Julian. But this time there was nothing that belonged only to him and Paul that could save him.

If he could, he would give himself a slap, or even a fist, so as to transform a little of that suffering into physical pain. If nothing else, it would help him get better, more at peace with himself. Not that he would solve his problems of course, but he was sure it would be helpful, at least with the guilt.

"Dad?"

John woke up by his torments thanks to the sweet voice of his son who called him. Julian stood up and was now beside him, with small hands clasped round his arm. John found himself smiling.

Luckily he had Julian. He was his greatest distraction, he helped him without realizing it. He was amazing.

"What is it, luv?" John asked him, lifting him up and making him settle on his lap.

"Can we watch The Incredibles tonight?"

John frowned, puzzled, "But we saw it last week."

"Please!!" the child begged him, joining his hands and intertwining his fingers, "It's my favourite."

John laughed when Julian looked at him with his puppy eyes, and eventually found himself nodding, helpless.

"Alright."

The child rejoiced and leaned to wrap his arms around his neck before kissing him on the cheek. John let his son's love try at least to soothe his pain. In that case it couldn't be, unfortunately, a definitive cure, but it had a sort of palliative power. There was something in the love for a child that always gave the strength to go on, despite everything.

"Dad?"

"Tell me."

"Can we ask Paul to come and watch the movie, too?"

Paul.

John felt his heart break again, if possible, by hearing the name of the man he loved uttered by his child. His arms tightened around Julian as if to cling, before falling into a dark chasm of which John couldn't see the end.

It was strange, to hear it after all that happened. Strange because that name so simple and warm and sweet aroused in him the same feelings of the previous days and months. There was suffering, of course, and remorse, but above all there was love. A love so fucking huge that John still couldn't believe he was feeling it for a man, or even that it was so present and important within him. He
who barely trusted people, he who took very little love, and the first to show him had been Paul’s father. It was like a strange twist of fate, that so much love on John’s part was addressed to that man’s son, as if they were destined for each other.

But John ruined everything, as usual.

"No." He answered with a little voice, "We can’t, darling."

"Why?" Julian asked, slightly saddened by his father’s answer.

John bit his lip. It wasn’t certainly easy to explain something that aroused many discordant emotions to his son, the most important person to him.

"Well... You see, sweetie, Paul and I had a fight."

"Why?"

"You know, daddy told Paul a lie." he explained, almost feeling ashamed.

"Daddy!" Julian exclaimed surprised, "You always tell me that I mustn't tell lies."

"Indeed it is so." John said, blushing mildly to the right observation of his son, "But you see, luv, I did it not to make him suffer more."

"Why?"

"Because I love him."

"Like me?" he asked naively.

John sat up to look better at his kid; he looked at him for several minutes, caressing his hair and carefully choosing the words to say.

"Well, I love him very much, but in a different way from how I love you."

"And how?"

"How..."

How? Good question.

How could he explain what he was feeling for Paul to his son? It was certainly a new situation for John and he would have wanted so much Paul’s help. He was convinced that Paul would find the right words. But John was alone now, he should have gotten by alone.

"Well, I love him like I loved mom, when we were together." John carefully explained, "Do you understand what that means?"

Julian seemed thoughtful for a moment, but it really lasted the fraction of a second, because then he looked at John and said simply, "It means he comes to live with us."

John failed in holding back a smile while stroking the soft and plump cheek of the child. Perhaps he couldn’t expect more from him. He was still so young and the concept of love between two people was still too big for him, especially because he had never seen his father with another person, nor with his mother.
"Well, yes, something like that." he said softly, "Would you like it?"

"Can he play with me?"

"Of course."

"Then ok." Julian said, smiling.

"But I have to make Paul forgive me first."

"You must apologize. You have to say sorry when you say a lie, don't you, dad?"

John was mildly surprised by Julian’s question. Of course. The answer to his torments was so simple. How didn’t he think about it before?

"Yes, baby." John said, hugging him warmly, "It's true."

Julian was right, John had to apologize.

He had been so busy in finding excuses that could explain or justify what he did to Paul, that he didn’t understand that the first thing to do was to sincerely say sorry to Paul.

Even though he wouldn't accept it.

Even though it wouldn’t change anything.

John had to apologize.

****

Gathering all his belongings from his office, to leave it free to his successor, had been more difficult than expected.

It seemed there were many objects that belonged to him and that he carefully arranged when he had arrived.

At first they seemed to be few, really. Perhaps because he was excited about the new adventure and enthusiasm had driven him to work happily, regardless of the time he used to do anything.

But now the enthusiasm had vanished, as if it had been burnt by a very dangerous flame. So gathering his stuff and arranging them in a box was a long and not very interesting task.

He also took the name tag. He was kind of fond of it.

His agents had come into the office to say goodbye and show their displeasure. Paul was thankful to all. They had a good working team and leaving it now was heartbreaking. Despite all the problems, he liked to be there. His superiors didn’t behaved well, but his agents welcomed him warmly.

Now even this was over, he thought as he parked his car in front of his house.

No, not only that, he corrected himself, It's all over.

Even Linda went to say goodbye, hugged him and asked him what he would do now. Paul told her that he would have a short holiday, before taking service in Shrewsbury.
He sighed as he left the car and closed the door.

A kind of holiday, actually: he would stay in London anyway, trying to distract himself on his failure and everything that had happened with-

“John?”

Paul opened his eyes, when turning around he found John Lennon in person in front of his house. What the fuck was he doing there now?

"Hi, Paul."

John didn’t even try to smile, because Paul's gaze was clear: he wasn’t happy to see John.

Pity, because John on the contrary was mad for the happiness of being able at last to hunt Paul. He had waited patiently all day, and when his car had appeared in the street, John rushed out.

Paul was speechless. The surprise, the unpleasant surprise had come unexpectedly. Obviously he expected John to try and approach him some other times, but now he took him off guard.

Why?

How come didn't Paul notice? Perhaps he was too caught up in thoughts on his morning to notice John coming out from his house? Yes, it was very likely.

Once, ages before, Paul wouldn’t have lowered his guard so easily. And finding himself now before the man responsible for everything, from his failures to his change, was dreadful.

"Leave me alone." He said, trying to pass him by to reach his door.

However John was unwilling to obey and tried to gently stop him with a hand on his forearm, "No, please, give me only five minutes."

"No fucking way." he snapped.

But John wasn’t going to let him go, "Paul, wait."

"What? Maybe that you get my job back? Maybe you want to go and steal it to give it back to me? I don't think it’s possible, you know."

"Paul, I beg you, don't be like that." John begged, trying to stop him even with his other hand.

However Paul wasn’t going to be touched by him anymore, and he tried to free himself from his grip with a sudden movement that made the box of his belongings fall to the ground.

"Like what?" Paul asked, careless of what had just happened at his feet, "How am I supposed to behave with the man who ruined my life? They transferred me to another city because of you, you know? Next month I'll have to leave London, so you finally got what you wanted: get rid of the one who was supposed to chase you."

"Next... next month, but... " John mumbled, uncertain about what to say.

He had prepared some kind of speech, he hadn't gone there with the intention of improvising. But Paul wasn’t following the script written by John and now John couldn’t find words to say to the other man, especially after learning that in a few weeks he could no longer see Paul.
Of course, he should have imagined it.

"Paul, really I didn't want to, I-"

"Oh stop it, John. Don't be ridiculous." He said, surprised at how many words he could say to the man who ruined his life.

He thought he couldn’t say anything in his presence, nor he wanted to; in fact there were so many things to say that now Paul couldn’t stop. It was like a river in flood. He was breathing with difficult, but at the same moment his lungs were full of air, ready to go out.

"You knew exactly what you were doing." He went on, "You fucking used me and deceived me from the beginning. You were my friend just because it was convenient for you, while I thought you were sincerely interested in me, that I was-"

"I was, Paul." John interrupted him, "I am. I am that person. At first, you're right, I used you, but soon I started to feel remorse for what I was doing. And at that point, it was impossible to tell you the truth, I was afraid to lose you and I couldn’t allow it because I could no longer be without you, Paul. I liked the time I spent with you, and when I realized how important you had become for me, I stopped being Hermes."

Paul tried to ignore that part of himself that just wanted to bask in what the man was explaining, and decided to focus instead on a more than obvious contrast to John's words.

"Then why did you decide to come back?"

"I couldn’t go on with this stuff leaving you unaware and risking your job, the guilt was driving me crazy. So I decided to get arrested. I couldn’t go on, continuing to hold you and knowing what a great lie I was telling you."

"You wanted to get arrested to save my job?"

John nodded sadly, but continued to look him in the eyes, with a silent prayer in it.

"Paul, I love you, I'd do anything for you."

Paul said nothing. He just looked at him for a while, without showing any emotion from the eyes, nor from the lips, nothing at all, only the most total apathy. And John didn't really know how to interpret it.

"You know what, John?" he exclaimed after a few seconds, a sardonic sneer painted on his lips, "You’re really petty, I think you knew very well that I could never do that."

John blinked, upset about what he had just heard. No, not that.

"What? No, it's not true."

"Yes, it is, and if your alleged love for me had been true, you wouldn't have done this to me. I had a perfect life before I met you, and then you arrive and in an instant you screw up everything I've built."

John gasped, before his expression twisted by what Paul said.

"Now you're the one who's lying." John protested, pointing a finger at him, threatening, "You had no perfect life, you were locked up in this rigid mask with which you were pushing away anyone to
avoid suffering. You were a prisoner of a relationship that had stalled for a long time and you
fucking knew it well. So don't give all the blame to me now. It's you who allowed me to change
everything, it's you who allowed me to fall in love with you, it’s-"

But he couldn’t continue in any way, because suddenly Paul punched him right on the cheek, and
John found himself stepping back, while a throbbing pain spread across the right side of his face.

The scene had played too fast for Paul, and if it hadn’t been for the pain he felt now on his left
hand, he would probably have thought he had witnessed the scene from outside, as if he was
watching a movie. Actually, he was the one who hit John. The words he was saying were driving
him crazy: they were sadly true. At every word, Paul realized that John was right: Paul wasn’t
really happy with his life. The emotions, the new feelings John had aroused in him were the most
beautiful, warmest, most shocking thrill of his whole life.

Yet hearing it now, right now, from John's mouth, was... It was simply something that Paul
couldn’t accept. There was still too much shame in him, and this turned into rage as John spoke,
allowing him to understand that he had really given so much power to a petty and lying person like
the man who was in front of him.

John looked at him startled, as he held his cheek with one hand. It was obvious that he didn’t
expect it and the realization made Paul strangely satisfied.

"You had your five minutes." He snapped, now really breathlessly, picking up his stuff from the
ground, "Now don't bother me anymore."

John nodded, defeated. There was absolutely nothing he could do for Paul. A pain, this, which hurt
much more than the fist he had just received.

"As you wish, Paul. I just wanted to say that I'm really sorry for everything I've done, that's all. I
know it's not worth much now, but I wanted to apologize to you. Just that."

Paul chose not to argue. He couldn’t, in fact, he had no words to answer, neither in one sense nor
the other. He couldn't thank him because apologizing was useless, let's face it, since Paul couldn’t
really do much with his apologies. They wouldn't have persuaded him to forgive John, there was no
way he could forgive him.

And on the other hand, he didn't even have words to argue with his apologies, there was really
nothing else to say. It had to end like that, that story started somehow by accident and revealed at
the end so incredibly fatal.

However, when John finally left him alone, in front of his house, turning his back on him perhaps
for the last time, Paul could no longer ignore that part of himself, now reduced to a small shred of
his lacerated soul, who suffered to see John going away.

It wasn’t fair, nor acceptable, but there was and Paul couldn’t make it disappear in any way.

He didn’t want to make it disappear.

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"Ouch!"

"If you could be still for a moment, John, it wouldn't hurt that much."

John snorted at George's reproach.
He was sitting on the living room couch in his house, with his friend at his side taking care of his sore cheek with an ice bag.

The problem was that it hurt, very bad, and the pain increased if John remembered how he got it. He would never have thought that Paul could hit him like that, but that just confirms how foolish John was, how wrong he was in that story, from start to the end. Because it was so, he was sure, he really got to the end of whatever he shared with Paul.

This, along with physical pain, was what prevented him from standing still, while George took care of him.

"Our inspector does have a really nice hook." George commented, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

It was pretty heavy, and John's non-response only helped to make it worse. He looked away from George, trying to focus on some object of his living room.

George stared at him, worried. At the end of their last theft, when he had seen John coming back trembling, he asked him what happened, noticing above all the absence of the swag. John's story left him astounded and deeply angry at John because he had done everything without consulting him. But when he realised John’s shattered state, he abandoned all traces of rage and started feeling guilty.

"I'm sorry for what happened, it's my fault." He politely admitted to his friend.

"Don't say bullshit, George, you have nothing to be sorry for." John corrected, "You told me right away that things could have gone wrong, but I didn't want to listen to you."

"If you could go back, would you?"

"Listen to you?"

"Yes."

John made his eyes return to the lad, looking at him deeply, "And not have anything to do with Paul?"

George nodded.

"No, never." He answered, sure, shaking his head.

And while John was making a grimace of pain because of the intense movement of the head, George frowned, puzzled, dropping the ice bag and sat down to look better at his friend.

"Why?"

"For the same reason you don't regret having met your wife, every time you guys have a fight." John sighed.

"But this is not a simple fight, John." George remarked, attentively.

"I know, but the concept is the same. Although I ruined everything and Paul doesn’t want to forgive me, I can’t regret every moment I spent with him. He gave me so much in such a short time that I couldn't really help but fall in love with him, even though we were actually enemies."

The fall in love part startled George in an imperceptible manner. It had been ages since John admitted he was in love with someone. No, in fact, it had been ages since the last time he actually
felt in love.

"You... so, do you love him?"

John closed his eyes, thinking of the question, and the answer, which could only be one.

"With all my heart." He sighed, while a suffering expression appropriated his face.

George blinked a couple of times, realizing that what John was saying was true. Mind you, he knew for a long time that John felt something important for Paul, but seeing him finally admit his feelings even before him and noticing how much this fucking situation was making him suffer, was unbelievable. Like it was the first time George knew about those things.

"And what are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

"What does that mean now?" he asked disconcerted.

"It means nothing, George. I’ve already tried, but he has no intention of forgiving me, so I just have to give up." He explained, shrugging.

"Well, it seemed to me that Hermes didn’t give up in front of any challenge."

John shook his head, taking his hand on his head. It was literally bursting.

"I'm no longer Hermes."

"Hermes and John Lennon still are the same person." George pointed out with warmth, crossing his arms.

"Well, maybe I’ve changed thanks to Paul." He snapped, nervous.

He was shaking, and when he was agitated there would be always troubles for all. But George was so stubborn sometimes. Didn't he see that the topic was making him feel bad? Why wouldn't he leave him alone? Why did he insist on talking about it?

"Ask for help then."

"To whom?"

"To me." George answered, and soon afterwards, the perfect answer appeared in his mind, "Or to Jim."

John snorted, almost suppressing a malignant laugh.

"Yeah, of course, so I would erase even the smallest chance I have that Paul one day would wake up and out of the blue, change his mind and want me back. No, thank you."

"But he’s his father. You could help them reunite." He pointed out, hopeful.

Poor, little, naïve George. He had no idea what he was saying. There was no way Paul wanted to see Jim again, and Jim certainly didn't have the guts to do it.

"Paul wouldn't want anything to do with him, trust me, man."
"Do you know for sure?" George asked, frowning, "Because you know, John, I don't trust your judgment anymore. Maybe it's true that this story with Paul has changed you, but don't you think, then, that it may have changed him, too?"

John thought a moment, finding George's idea go smoothly. Paul himself had admitted several times to be changed. But anyway, John didn't see how Jim could help him.

No, there was no one who could help John. That was the sad reality, and the sooner John accepted it, the better it would be for everyone.

"Give it up, George. It won't work."

"But-"

"But nothing." John cut short, "Paul will be transferred at the beginning of the new year."

"And you want to let him go like that?"

"Yes."

George couldn't really believe what he was seeing with his eyes. John Lennon who gave up so easily. He had always known that John was actually very insecure, but seeing him now so dejected was strange. It was painfully strange.

"Don't you think it will be painful to keep watching him from your window without wanting to do anything to stop him, and wait for him to go away forever?"

"And that's why I'll go away for Christmas holidays."

"What?" he exclaimed, caught off guard.

"I'm going with Julian to Cynthia." John explained, sighing, "So they will pass the first Christmas together."

"You didn't tell me."

"She proposed that a few weeks ago. I waited to answer to understand what to do with Paul, but now it's the best solution. At least when I get back, he won't be here anymore."

"John…"

"George, it's all over." He snapped once and for all, before he got up and leave, "Forget it."

George shook his head.

Perhaps John had changed, and perhaps Paul had changed, but one thing was certain. George hadn’t changed.

Or at least, his stubbornness was always the same.

And when George put something in his head, he would hardly change his mind.

No one could tell him what to do.

No one could tell him to give up.
Chapter End Notes

Hard times are very hard. Ĝ_Ĝ
It's sad that this chapter is online on Easter day, but anyway, happy Easter, guys!!
Hope you ate a lot of chocolate. <3
I also hope you all like the new chapter.
I just wanted to clarify one thing. I didn't know and still don't know much about British police. I've tried to do some research but of course, some things are difficult to find. So I had to imagine some stuff as best as I can. Sorry if it's not good nor realistic. :(
Next chapter will be, Do you want to know a secret!
Ciao ciao
Chiara
George took a deep breath before ringing the bell.

God, was he really doing this?

He must have gone crazy, too, like John.

But fuck, he had to do it for John. Although his friend reassured him that George had nothing to do with the fight between John and Paul, George couldn't really help but feeling guilty.

He was the one who forced John go back as Hermes. John would never do that. It was also true that, considering his rash act of trying to get arrested by Paul, perhaps the pressure of hiding that secret eventually would have made him burst anyway. Therefore that fight was inevitable.

George, however, felt he wanted to do it.

He didn’t like Paul at first, and perhaps the reason was only for what John was up to; but later he realized that Paul had begun to become fond of John, to consider him a friend and then something more. So he couldn’t allow John to give up on him that way, knowing that his feelings were returned.

He had to make at least one attempt, and convince Paul that John had no intention of hurting him, no more.

So he lifted a finger and pressed the bell.

He just hoped Paul would let him talk.

The approach wasn’t, in fact, the most encouraging. When Paul opened the door a few seconds later, and recognized him, he sighed by raising his eyes to the sky.

"What do you want?"

Even the tone wasn’t certainly much willing.

"Talk to you."

"Well, that was obvious." He snapped, "But I must warn you. If you want to talk about someone we both know, I'm not in the mood."

"I don't want to talk about John."

After those words, Paul looked at him skeptical and George thought he had to specify better.

"At least, not directly."

Paul snorted, expecting something like that. What could George talk to him apart from John? They were never so close as friends.
"There's nothing you can say that can erase what happened."

"No, but..." George began, the voice wavered in spite of everything, "Paul, it wasn't his fault. I was the one who forced him to try and steal that record at the Elvis’ show."

"Oh, fuck. Fuck!" Paul cursed, hitting his forehead with one hand, "Of course, you! You’re his accomplice, how fucking naïve I’ve been."

How didn’t he think about it before? George was John's accomplice. Paul didn’t even ask himself when he had found out about John, because perhaps he was too much upset.

And that was something the real Paul wouldn’t have overlooked. John played and fucked his mind. Paul had just to get away from him as soon as possible and then he would regain control of himself and a normal life.

"Yeah. It's me. I gave him an ultimatum I knew he couldn’t refuse because otherwise I would get into trouble. John just wanted to save me."

"And why did you force him?"

"I was stupid, ok? And a little jealous, I admit that."

"Jealous?"

"Yes, I mean, you changed John. He was a lot more cynical at first, I think I’ve always known that he wasn't really happy. But this whole thing has softened him in some way. In a good way, of course, and I think it’s thanks to credit. I was jealous because I didn't know how to make him feel better while you did."

"I don't care." Paul said, crossing his arms, "He cheated me and I lost my job here, in London. What he did is unforgivable."

"I know." George agreed, "And I assure you he knows that too. He's so sorry for what he d... we did. We both are. But he was the first to realize how wrong it was."

"Nothing will change."

"Please, John isn’t a bad guy. ’Course, he isn’t either the best person in the world, but come on, we all have done something we're not proud of. Give him a second chance, Paul. Everyone deserves it. You know that."

Paul bit his lip, cursing himself. What a drag, having to deal with George!

Why was he doing this? Why was he showing himself so stubborn about John?

_He’s friends with John_, his little inner voice answered.

But how could he be friends with John? John, the same man who cheated Paul!

Paul closed his eyes for a moment, the suffering expression reflected very well the pain that his heart felt to every throb caused by John’s memory.

He knew why George cared so much about his friend. Paul had seen him with his own eyes, he had felt it on his own skin. For a long time he had undergone John’s charm as well, the same spell that clouded his mind and blinded his eyes.
Yet, to have George now there, facing him, so lucid, not blinded, but determined to put a good
word for John, suggested to him that perhaps John had shown something true to Paul as well.

And the doubt now soiled within him created a crack in that shield of glacial indifference and
flaming rage, through which memories and feelings passed, moments spent with the real John. The
same John, who more than once had conquered his trust, before his heart.

But Paul couldn’t let go, he couldn't forgive him. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't spend the day
without thinking about what John did to him. How could he be asked by John, George, his insane,
foolish heart, to forgive him?

No fucking way.

"George, go away, please." He murmured at last with a little voice, "I’ve been and still am going
through infernal days. I’m tired, you don't even imagine how much, and I just want to regain my
strength before I leave."

"But, Paul..." George tried to protest.

"Please." Paul stopped him with a raised hand, "Enough now."

That said, Paul shut the door in front of him, leaving the young man standing, astonished.

It hadn’t gone exactly as George hoped. Paul was stubborn, much more than John. George didn’t
believe it was possible someone more stubborn than his friend could exist.

Sighing, he decided to return to the shop.

What a disaster!

And now there was no way of getting out of it. At least, not with a happy ending. The "and they
lived happily ever after" seemed the most unattainable of utopias.

There were two broken hearts in the running and no one able to put the pieces back together.

Or maybe there was someone.

Someone who was upstream of this whole situation, someone who might have found the right
words for Paul and John.

George knew who he had to call.

He knew he had to ask Jim for help.

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“Yes. Sure. No, I understand perfectly. You're right. Yes, thank you. See you later."

George tortured his thumb nail while he stared at John talking on the phone. The phone call came
that morning. George knew who he would find on the other side of the line, so he let John answer.

When his friend began to understand what had happened, he looked at George threateningly and
continued to stare at him as he spoke with Jim and also at the end, when he hung up.

"What the hell have you done?" He asked, not angry, but in some way he was annoyed that George
had involved Jim in something hopeless.
"I only did what you didn’t dare to do." George answered, shrugging, "Telling Jim everything."

"And exactly what did you tell him?"

"What happened. But I thought you should be the one to inform him about the real relationship between you and Paul."

John sighed relieved. At least this had been left to his control.

Maybe this was exactly why he didn't want to ask Jim for help. Asking him for help meant admitting in front of him, once and for all, that he was in love with his son. And God only knew how Jim could react.

John was certain that he wouldn’t certainly want his head. But who knew, it was impossible that Jim was even happy. He was still a man of another generation.

However that was a problem he was supposed to face that night.

Now, as he came back to look at George, he remembered another important question.

"Why did you do it?"

George took a deep breath, before answering, "Because I went to talk to Paul yesterday-"

"You what?"

But George ignored him, continuing to talk, "...And I realized I had to deal with two stubborn lads. So since I can hardly manage one, I thought I'd ask for the help of someone who is very close to both."

"But George-"

"John." his friend interrupted him again, approaching him to grab his shoulders, "It's all my fault, what happened. I'm sorry and I want to make it up."

"George…"

“I want you to be happy, John, I've always wanted it and I'd do anything for this. And right now it's Paul who can make you happy.”

“Thank you but no." John replied, shaking his head vigorously, "It won't work. It will be useless."

"Look, I saw Paul yesterday, and he didn't seem to be good at all."

"What?" John asked, worried.

"Now, you might say he's suffering for what happened. But I like to believe he's suffering also because he misses you."

John closed his eyes, running his hands in his hair. No, it wasn't possible. Paul wasn’t suffering for that, he didn’t miss him, and John couldn’t caress such an option, because otherwise he would run to him instantly, even if Paul hadn’t asked him to.

But Paul is angry with you, his heart protested, Of course he would never tell you.

No, it couldn't be like that. John had no chance, it was foolish to delude himself that way. He
would only have suffered further, while John didn’t want to suffer anymore.

But now Jim was also involved and who knew how things would go. He could have improved his situation or made it worse, which was very likely.

He didn’t know what to expect from the immediate future. But whatever it was, John would have to accept it without at that point being able to do anything.

Once again his destiny was all in the hands of a McCartney.

Or more precisely, two McCartney’s.

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Paul visibly gasped when Pepper jumped into his lap.

The young man was seated in his armchair, trying to read the adventures of his luckiest colleague, Sherlock Holmes, when the cat suddenly jumped on him, searching his cuddles.

Paul smiled faintly. In the last days he had neglected him because, like other things in his house, Pepper also reminded him of John. And taking care of him was too painful.

But now the kitten, now grown up, was happy to rub against his hand, purring. Paul felt a little guilty about what he had done to him. After all, it wasn't his fault, and Paul was fond of him. He could never leave him now.

The other thing he had ignored was the music. It had been days since the last time he listened to a CD or anything. All the work done with John had gone to hell. Obviously.

It had been John, after all, to bring him back to that part of his life that he had given up on a man's fault. And right now Paul had been forced to give up music again, because of another man.

A man who wasn’t very different from the one who abandoned him when he was a child. They were both thieves and the thought almost made Paul laugh. It was a bloody twist of fate. His life marked and ruined by two thieves.

He was so caught up in his thoughts and dedicating all his attentions to Pepper, which he visibly jumped when he heard the bell ringing.

Good heavens, that damn doorbell had never been disturbed so much as in those days.

Giving a last caress to the cat's head, Paul stood up and left the book on the armchair. He decided that this time he would check the peephole.

The person who stood beyond the door was the same who in the last days blew up in Paul a thousand different emotions. How, how was it possible that Paul, in spite of all, was still happy and angry together to see John?

No one had ever had such an effect on him before, Paul didn’t feel so even when Jane cheated on him. It was as if he wanted to slap him again and immediately after pulling him into the most passionate embrace. By now, when Paul, with a resigned sigh, decided to open the door, the urge to slap him prevailed. But the opposite desire was still alive, it roared inside him, hot and suffering, it asked him only to forgive John, to take him back because he missed him so much, and all this frightened him endlessly.
"What do you want?" Paul asked, and clasped his grip on the door knob to avoid doing something very stupid, like grabbing John by the arm and pulling him closer, before he gently kissed that black bruise on his cheekbone, the same one caused by Paul.

John was delighted that Paul opened the door; He was sure that as soon as he had checked the peephole (because John was certain that Paul would do it, after being taken by surprise twice by John and by George), he would have just told him to leave, without even looking at his face.

Luckily, however, things had gone differently and now John could look at him better, unlike what he had done a few days earlier. On that occasion he had been too caught up in what he was going to say to Paul and from the news of his transfer in order to realize that yes, Paul wasn’t well, he was suffering, as much as he was and it was easy to notice for John, it almost seemed as he was looking at himself in the mirror. Of course, Paul had also a lot of anger and shame and betrayal outlining his features, but the pain, his missing John, the still-living love he felt for him were there, in his eyes, on his lips, all over his face.

"Paul, hi, I-"

"If it’s still for what has happened, John, save your breath, I have no intention of-"

"No." John interrupted him, "No, I wish you'd help me doing something."

Paul frowned. What kind of request was that? How was it possible to ask him for help as if nothing happened?

"Help you? Doing what exactly?" he asked disconcerted.

"If you come with me somewhere, I'll show you."

Yes, sure, Paul snorted to himself.

As if he could follow him like this.

"If you think I can come with you who knows where, you're fucking wrong."

John bit his lip, holding a grimace of disappointment and pain because Paul's answer was so clear. Paul didn't trust him anymore.

What a fool he had been. Yes, all right, he had seen all those emotions in Paul, but what did it matter if the most important was missing? Trust. Paul lost it, and now, now...

No, God, he couldn't be afraid that John would hurt him physically!

"Please, trust me." He pleaded.

"I can't."

"Just this time, then I swear I'll leave you alone, I will disappear forever from your life." John assured him, "But trust me, Paul, one last time. I could never hurt you."

"You've already done it."

Another stab in his back. But this time it was painful, much more than usual. Paul was too full of resentment, he would have twisted against John everything he said, and John still had a limit beyond which hurting himself in that way was unacceptable. Although Jim was willing to take that big step, Paul wasn’t quite as willing to make an effort to help him.
Suddenly John wished to cry, and instinctively turned away, giving his back to Paul, determined to go away and abandon forever even the weakest and shaky chance he had of being forgiven by Paul.

Paul, on the other hand, cursed himself. It wasn’t really he who spoke, those words escaped without him being able to hold them. They had been dictated by all that disordered mix of feelings, a potentially explosive mix. And having answered in that way to John had been an example of how dangerous Paul was, now, in that state of mind.

He didn’t want to answer that to John. He was still angry yes, no doubt about that, and John asked him for help, for what Paul didn’t know yet, but he had seemed so fragile, so frightened to face him and together so strong, that Paul felt his heart tighten to the vision.

"Wait." he hastened to say.

It was a very dangerous word to say; Paul didn't know what would happen next, and the unknown was still scary. But John no, John couldn’t scare him. John would never hurt him again. It was a difficult truth to accept, it was uncomfortable and extraordinary.

So when soon after, John turned to him, looking at him with incredulity and regained hope, Paul held his gaze, leaving the grip on the knob.

"Where are we going?"

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When Paul got off the car, he was very impressed with the building in front of him. It was a really lovely house, it wasn’t particularly big nor flashy. It had only two floors and the walls consisted of bricks of a beautiful bright red, the same that allowed the chimney to stand out on the dark brown roof.

A small staircase led to the entrance, leaving glimpses of some kind of basement at the bottom.

"What is this place?" Paul asked, looking at John at his side.

They spent the trip in total silence, which for both was quite embarrassing and especially heavy. Paul would have wanted to ask a lot of questions: Where we're going, what do you have to show me, and why?

While John would have liked to thank him for following him and once again reaffirming his passionate feelings for him, but he wasn’t sure that Paul would accept it very well. And anyway, John was sure that all the things that neither of them had the courage to say were present in the car, as if they were other passengers. That’s why the silence was the soundtrack to that trip.

"You now know my most important secret, Paul. But I want to be honest with you at this point, and reveal other things that I never showed you."

"And the help you were talking about?"

"Now I'll show you, come with me." John replied, nodded him to follow him.

Paul clenched his fingers in his fists. There was something that kept him still: the surprise of discovering that there were other things he didn’t know about John, and the fear that these secrets could hurt him once again. But Paul was dying of curiosity. It was now something that he had
accepted, that everything concerning that intriguing man was for him so fucking interesting.

So he decided to follow John, crossing the front garden first and then walking along the side of the house, to the back, where John led him down a staircase that descended towards the basement.

When John opened the locked door and Paul entered, he gasped. What he found in front of himself was at the same time his worst nightmare and the most longed-for dream.

Hermes' loot.

Special shelves and showcases exposed everything that John had stolen as Hermes. Paul easily recognized some objects. They were the ones John had stolen since Paul had been commissioned to get him: the Rolling Stones’ portrait, Bob Dylan's guitar, Elton John's glasses...

Paul had tried to defend them, but he had failed and now they were there, at his fingertips.

Speechless, he continued to look at the room with interest, noticing many other memorabilia which evidently John had stolen before of his arrival. He noticed a showcase dedicated only to original Jimi Hendrix or Jim Morrison’s manuscripts, then a Nirvana’s guitar, split in two parts, a pair of decidedly weird Kiss’ boots and a pair simple but characteristic Buddy Holly' glasses.

That basement contained so many different memorabilia and Paul didn't even want to think of the total value of such a treasure. Actually, the real question was another.

"What does all this mean?"

"You must help me to return these things to their owners." John answered, very calmly, but in some way his voice still wavered in front of Paul's penetrating gaze.

At first, the inspector thought he hadn’t heard well. John wanted to return what?

However his expression was very decisive; John wasn't saying crap, and Paul now knew when he was telling the truth.

Then, again, he remembered John's other lies which Paul had believed to like a fool, and decided that it was appropriate to check, to be sure.

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm serious. I don't want them anymore."

"But..." Paul began, blinking, perplexed, "I don't understand, why do you want to return them now?

"Because they made me lose you."

Without being able to prevent it in any way, Paul blushed lightly, and turned immediately towards one of the windows to hide it from John.

Damn!

How dared he still behave that way with him? How dare he remind him of all those little John things that made him fall in love?

Didn't he know it was painful?

"Yes, well, that won't change things." Paul pointed out, the voice slightly cracked, weak for the
memories aroused by John, "It won't allow you to have me back again."

John smiled to himself, resigned, "No, I know it well, I don't do it for that. But when I look at them now, they remind me how stupid and unfair I was with you. Besides, I was hoping they could help you with the job."

Paul didn’t quite know what to answer, he was definitely fighting about it. It was a vain thought, John’s; returning the loot didn’t mean that Paul would get his job back. But on the other hand, John was worrying about him, and even though Paul was still angry with him, he couldn't help but feel impressed by that concern. It was like a hand, delicate fingers constantly trying to get close to caress him, but Paul kept avoiding the touch: sometimes he was the one who wanted to avoid it, other times it was only his pride to push him away.

"There's no way to let me get my job again, John." He answered, looking at him again, "But we will return them because it’s the right thing to do."

"All right. Thank you, Paul."

Paul nodded, avoiding his gaze, "No problem."

John sighed. Well, one was done. Now the hard part came.

“Let's go upstairs, now, what do you say?” he asked, crossing the room, towards another door, behind which there was a short staircase leading to the ground floor.

Paul looked at him, intrigued, but his footsteps moved instinctively towards John, following him along the stairs.

"Why?"

"There is another thing I would like to show you." John explained, when they reached the entrance, coming out of the staircase, "Or rather, to return you."

Paul arched an eyebrow, while John drove him through the entrance until he had to stop in front of a door of fine mahogany wood, on which a brilliant brass knob was standing.

"What is it?" he asked, hesitating.

John leaned his hand on the knob and made it rotate to open the door.

"Something that's been stolen from you, but this time not because of me."

John's enigmatic answer had the effect of speeding up the beating of Paul's heart. He could hear it rumbling in his ears and had absolutely no idea why.

"What does that mean?"

"Go in and you'll find out." John suggested, with a smile, opening the door and inviting him to enter, but this time only Paul.

Paul looked at him for a moment, convincing himself to follow John's words faster than other times. So he went in, finding himself in an elegant living room, and gasped when the door behind him was closed.

"John?" he exclaimed, approaching the door.
Then a slight noise startled him, and a voice came to his ears.

"Hi, Paul."

The young inspector turned slowly, and when that man appeared from a corner of the room, as well as from Paul's past, a single word appeared in his mind.

*Impossible!*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Hey hey, Jim finally showed himself. It was about time, man! :D
Ok, what do you think will happen now? Did you like the chapter. I hope so. :D
Again, thank you for your lovely comments, they made me very happy. We're close to the end, now. Just few chapters left.
Next chapter will be I'll cry instead. :)
Thank you again and ciao!!
Chiara
Impossible!

Impossible was the right word.

Sure, he could have sworn, it would have been more understandable, but no, swearing was too trivial in that case.

Impossible instead was definitely more suitable.

Impossible for Paul to be in front of a man with such familiar features.

Impossible, too, that Paul seemed to look, as if he were in the mirror, a more aged version of himself, with the same nose and mouth, and wrinkles and white and thinned hair.

Impossible, finally, that John himself had led him to his father.

And it was this last thought that let him find the right words to say.

"It’s not possible." He murmured in a trembling voice, "You... It can't be you."

"It's me, sonny."

The man answered with a faint smile, and the combination of those words and that smile made Paul tremble violently. A shock that made him suddenly reawaken from that sort of numbness he felt since he saw the man.

"No." Paul protested, "Don't call me like that. Don't do that. You've lost any rights to call me that way."

Jim McCartney just winced, not expecting such an attitude from Paul, or at least, not so soon.

"You're right, forgive me."

"Forgive me?" Paul repeated, outraged and surprised, "Fifteen years with a single fucking news from you and all you can say is forgive me?"

"Paul, please. What else am I supposed to say?" Jim sighed, dejected, "Whatever I said, you'd turn it against me."

Paul let out a sardonic laugh, "Can you blame me?"

"No, but..."

"Then stop with these worthless lectures." He interrupted him, every trace of fake amusement vanished in an instant, "I grew up, and I no longer need you."

"Don't be like that, Paul, please."

"And how should I be? I'm in front of the man who abandoned my family."
"I was forced to." Jim snapped.

He was evidently in trouble, perhaps he had hoped that things might go at least a little better, but in spite of this, he forced himself to keep calm. Paul was the one being nervous enough for both of them.

"Because you were irresponsible and you got into trouble." He reprimanded him.

"I had no choice." Jim tried to explain, shaking his head.

"Yes, you had. You fucking had it." Paul protested, "And it was staying with us. We would have faced everything together."

"I couldn't allow it."

"Why? We would have helped you."

Paul seemed to let his dose of resentment decrease, years and years of resentment he had never been able to pour out.

However Jim kept shaking his head, "Paul, you don't understand."

"Then let me." Paul replied, almost instinctively.

Yes, Paul realized it was an instinctive and unexpected answer, because Jim stared at him surprised, _pleasantly_ surprised.

"You... Would you do that?"

And his trembling voice confirmed to Paul his fear. That answer came before he could reason with it and stop it. Actually though, now that he could think for a few seconds, he realized he didn't really want to stop it or retract it.

"I... yes, I think so."

"Really?" Jim asked, smiling with incredulous hope.

"Yes." Paul replied, nodding with more conviction, "At this point, I want to know."

Jim nodded slowly, "Why don't you sit down, then? Just for a few seconds."

Paul bit his lip, hesitating in front of that request.

Was he really going to let the man who ruined his life explain his actions?

Why? He had promised himself over and over again in his life that he never ever wanted to know anything from his father. He had promised himself that he wouldn't care for him anymore.

But the truth was that Paul was a different man now.

That part of himself that had always wished to hug his father, the same one who foolishly wanted to forgive John, was a small but important part of him; it was a part without which Paul couldn’t live. It was simply his heart.

And his heart could also be a foolish bastard, which made him long for things that went against the dictates of his reason, but Paul now knew how to listen to it. He knew he _wanted_ to listen to it like
he had never done before his arrival in London, before he met John, who had lighted up that desire in him.

Thus, letting the heart guide him as he did in the last months, he walked to the armchair in the middle of the living room and just sit on it.

Jim looked at him, surprised that Paul really wanted to know, but especially with love and pride: the love he couldn't show him in the last, long years spent away from his family, and the pride for the beautiful young man he had become. He knew that Paul would have had every reason in the world, if now he had risen and gone away, unwilling to listen to his words, he knew that he would also have been right not to forgive John; he also knew that being there now, waiting for him and having followed John, unaware of what was going to happen, had a great deal of effort on Paul’s part. Jim appreciated him and he loved him even more for that. He wanted to hug him, but he didn't believe it was something Paul would accept.

"So?" Paul asked, looking at him with expectation.

Jim let out a smile: his big eyes, the same ones he had inherited from his beautiful mother, were still the same as he remembered. They had the same sweet expectation and adorable innocence when Paul was waiting for his father to tell him the goodnight tale.

The fairy tale that he was about to tell, now, was quite different and the happy ending was by no means certain.

So Jim picked up all his courage and all his painful memories, and so, well vivid, and sat down in front of him, rubbing his hands on his trousers.

"The year before I left you, the company I worked for went bankrupt and was forced to close, dismissing many good workers. Some were lucky, they found immediately another job. But I, as well as my fellow ex-colleagues, weren’t as fortunate. For months we went ahead with the savings that your mother and I had put aside from our marriage. Your mother could find small jobs, doing housekeeping even in our friends’ houses. I didn’t agree, I didn’t want her to humiliate herself that way for people we attended, but she didn’t care. She only cared about being able to have something to feed her family, a family that I was no longer able to look after. This made me desperate enough to accept a job offer in Birkenhead that in the long run turned out to be a criminal conspiracy. I mean, I knew I was going to work for a conspiracy. But what was I supposed to do? I couldn't stand the failing to provide for my children. I've never been as strong as your mother. So they started ordering me to steal stuff to the bosses' enemies. I didn’t like that job: I always felt guilty, but I was good and I managed to get the trust of other colleagues. I tried not to think about how wrong it was, and this was possible because so huge was the joy I felt when I was able again to feed my children and my wife."

Paul seemed rather astounded. He had always known that his father had gotten into trouble, but he didn’t even believe in a mafia-style organization.

"What happened after that?" he asked interested.

"Well..." Jim went on, while his body was being crossed by a thrill, "It happened that at some point they gave me a very different task. I shouldn't have stolen something, this time I even had to kill a man."

"Kill?" Paul repeated, the voice died in his throat before the end.

"Yes, but I could never do it, not even for my children's sake. Taking a man's life was unacceptable
to me. So I said I would accept, but the night before the office, I went away. I decided it would be safer to leave by myself. Until I was with you, you all would have been in danger."

Paul shook his head. Now he could understand his father's actions, but there was still something not clear.

"We would have been anyway. They could find our house and hurt us."

"No, it would have been very difficult. I knew what I was going to be involved with, when I got that job. I was desperate, it's true, but not so unwarly. That's why I gave them a fake name. At least if something happened, they could never find you. So you'd be safe, even without me."

"But if you used a fake name, why couldn't you stay with us?" Paul asked, still perplexed, "We could all leave together."

"I was afraid they could somehow find us if you'd be with me and take revenge on you. I think you know very well what great power these organizations have."

In spite of himself, Paul found himself sighing. Yes, he did. It was a kind of crime he found even more disgusting than a simple thief.

"Then you won't find it hard to understand what I did. After all, you may not yet know what it means to have children, but you also have affections and I think you want them to be always well, or am I wrong?"

"No." Paul replied, with some kind of sense of defeat, "You're right."

"I didn't want to tell you this so you could pity me and have some hope of being forgiven, but now that we're here, together again, I had to tell you the truth."

Paul nodded absently, too caught up in all those sudden revelations and trying to assimilate them. It wasn't an easy task, because Paul had to deal with remorse and guilt, which were trying to overwhelm him. He had always hated his father for what he had done and now instead, he had to deal with his explanations, quite convincing explanations, dammit.

But he didn’t want nor could he bask in all this, he couldn't just let go and so easily forgive that man. If Jim had always been there, in London, if he knew John, then there was another reason Paul could hold on to resist.

"And John?" he asked, "How did you get to meet him?"

Jim didn’t seem troubled by the question, it was obvious that he was just waiting for it.

"When I ran away, I decided to go to London. It would have been harder to find me in this big city. So during a small stop in a pub in Warrington, this little boy came in: he seemed so smart and very easily he pulled out some wallets from the customers, including mine. I noticed what he was doing, so I followed him out of the pub and that was the moment this weird friendship began. He was so young, he could very well be my son and I realized immediately that he needed affection and protection. And since I couldn't take care of my boys, I decided to look after him. We went to London, where I could find a small apartment thanks to an old friend of mine. Living with John, I slowly discovered many little things about him: his father had abandoned his mother, she had died years before and he had been put in an orphanage. Soon after he began to change adoptive families, because none of them was able to give him what he needed: a bit of sincere love. Last time he was in custody of a couple, the guy beat his wife. When he tried to beat John too, he rebelled. He hit him forcefully before he ran away, and then, well, then he met me."
Paul gasped: he knew something of John's past, but that particular, a little John who defended himself so violently, had been omitted from him. And finding it out now, from his father's story, was unexpected and upsetting.

"And what about Hermes?" he asked immediately afterwards.

"Hermes..." Jim sighed, bending his head and blushing, perhaps out of shame, "In London at first we lived with little thefts, but then I found a proper job. I decided to put as much money aside for me and John. When after several years we found ourselves with a nice amount of money in our hands, we bought the music shop and we both started to work in. But after George started working with us, I thought I could withdraw and leave the work to the two boys. We had stopped with thefts and we were both fine. Then John met Cynthia and it happened what you already know. John, in the end, was completely destroyed. He didn't want to show it, but I knew he was. So when he thought of becoming Hermes, I didn’t stop him. For the first time after Cynthia, he was still enthusiastic about something. I knew that it gave him security and a sort of control that until then hadn’t had, especially with Cynthia, where things happened without he could do much for her."

"So, what you did when I arrived?" Paul urged him, shuddering with anxiety at what was the crux of the whole story.

"When you arrived and he told me that you two had met, I asked him to stop once and for all. But he wanted to continue in spite of everything. He's as stubborn as I am. But then, fortunately, he stopped, and I felt relieved. I didn't want you to lose your job because of him, or that he would end up in trouble for something that was slipping out of his hand."

"But then it happened." Paul pointed out, the mildly malignant tone, "I lost my job because of him."

"I know, and I'm sorry." Jim admitted, sincerely sorry, "I knew nothing, I wasn’t warned of their last theft and I'm very angry at John and George for what happened. However, when he confessed to me why he did it and above all, the feelings he felt for you, I decided to give him a hand to persuade you to forgive him."

Paul, unintentionally, found himself blushing at the very idea that John and his father had talked about... certain things.

"He... What did he tell to you?"

"That he was sorry and that he loved you and wanted to fix things."

Though his heart had a little gasp, Paul forced himself to snort, "And do you believe him?"

"Of course, I know him well." He answered, "I know when he's telling the truth."

"I don't think he chose the right person to ask for help." Paul pointed out.

His rational side was still too much powerful, he knew how to be incredibly sadistic when he wanted to. And Paul was able to see it easily from Jim's reaction: his face became very sad and his eyes turned shiny. As if he wanted to cry. But in spite of this, the man controlled himself and proceeded to face Paul bravely.

"Well, maybe I'm not the right person to convince you." Jim agreed, "But I'm sure I'm the only one who knows for sure that your mother would want you to forgive him. And forgive me, too."

Paul's eyes opened wide again with outrage, in front of the untouchable figure his father was
talking about.

"You don't know anything, you can't talk about her."

"You're so wrong, Paul, I know all about her."

"No, it's not true." Paul protested, rising to his feet, and this time he was the one who felt like crying for everything that had happened and was still happening, "You left her alone to raise two children without any explanations, so don't you dare insinuate what she would have wanted me to do."

"Paul, I know you're still mad at me, but you have to believe me." Jim said, looking down at him and convincing him to go back and sit down, "I remember all about your mother: she was the sweetest and kindest person in the world. And she was understanding; after all, she knew the trouble I'd gotten myself into and accepted my decision to go away."

If Paul hadn't felt his heart dash with a sudden thud, he would have thought it had stopped. He couldn't believe what his ears heard. Did his mother know?

"What?" he asked anyway, letting his confusion show itself.

"Yes." Jim replied, "You see, she helped me to arrange the escape. Of course at the beginning she tried to change my mind, arguing that they would never find us, even if I had given a fake name, but I knew it wasn't true. And she realized that I couldn't go on living with the fear that every day they could hurt you or her, in Liverpool together or anywhere else in the world. So she gave up and let me go. I was always trying to keep in touch with her: as soon as I could I sent her some money for you and Mike and she informed me of your progress in school and the-"

"But if she knew..." Paul interrupted, baffled by all the details that had been kept silent, "... Why didn't she ever tell us?"

"You're right. The fact is that at first, we thought we wouldn't tell you anything. You were too young and we feared you could let some information escape with someone. Indiscreet ears are everywhere, you know. Later, when you grew up, she would have wanted to explain the whole truth, but at that point you showed too much anger against me. She thought you could never believe her, or that you could hate her, too."

"Who tells me you're not making it up? She's dead, she can't confirm what you said."

Jim frowned. He was angry, yes, but mostly disappointed because Paul was proving himself the big stubborn John had described to him. Seeing him still full of doubts was painful. Of course, he didn't expect that Paul jumped for joy, but neither that he thought Jim could exploit his mother's death for their reconciliation.

"I would never lie about your mother, Paul." He said then, in a glacial tone, "She was my life."

To his words and his penetrating gaze, Paul felt shudder. Maybe he went too far this time. So he blushed and looked away, trying to think of other questions to clarify his doubts.

"Then why didn’t she tell us anything? If she had tried, maybe there would have been a chance."

"You said well, Paul, maybe. Maybe you would have understood, or maybe not, and so we would have just made the situation worse. We'll never know, Paul, we can't go back and change things. We can only accept what happened and move on."
Paul nodded slowly. Yes, his father was right: if he thought of himself as a boy, so full of rage for a father who had abandoned them, surely Paul wouldn’t understand his parents’ choice and the silence of his mother. Perhaps if his mother had spoken, she would have ruined her relationship with him.

"What did you do next, then?"

"I said to let it go and she just tried not to feed your anger towards me any further."

The young inspector bit his lip. The sacrifice of his father had been admirable, Paul had to acknowledge it to him. Though his father had been absent, if nothing else, Paul had had a loving and helpful mother. The memories she had left him were the sweetest.

"I... I had no idea you guys agreed."

"It wasn't an easy decision and it is for sure the wrong one, but this is to tell you that everyone can make mistakes. And when the people we love make mistakes, we suffer more, but this is also part of our lives. It's what allows us to grow. I was wrong to leave you that way, with hindsight I know that I could ask for help, the police maybe, so that we could continue to live together. Despite this, I tried to make up for my mistakes, dealing with a little boy who just like me was left alone. And now he's on the wrong side. But please, forgive him, Paul. John's a good guy. I know him very well."

The redness in Paul's cheeks became more intense hearing his father's prayer. Why did he care so much? Perhaps as much as his own forgiveness?

"And I should forgive you, too?" he asked him, crossing his arms on his chest.

"Well, it would be nice." Jim sighed, "I mean, that's the thing I care about most. Your forgiveness and Mike's."

"If you cared so much, why did you want to meet me only now?"

"I was afraid. But above all, I don’t think you were ready before now."

"How can you tell?" Paul asked, puzzled, "You don't know me."

To Paul's great surprise, Jim smiled with a bit of cunning. And this suddenly made him nervous.

"Oh, I know you well, instead." Jim answered, "And not just because I'm your father. When John would tell me stuff about you, I could see you clearly and recognize the child I had left to grow alone. Then, as John was beginning to become fond of you, his stories became so attentive and detailed that I felt like I was each time with you. As if we'd never been separated. John has always looked at you well, from the very first moment."

"Because he used me." Paul affirmed, with a puff.

And that was the first time Paul noticed that a bit of that anger, in fact, a lot of anger had waned, leaving place to a sort of bothersome annoyance.

"At first, of course, I don't doubt it." Jim agreed, "But then it was because he loved you."

Paul closed his eyes for an instant, feeling his heart shake in his chest. Good heavens, he couldn't give in now. What John had done to him was still terrible and he was angry and...
And Paul was tired of feeling that way, but he couldn’t resist the temptation to throw a last cutting remark at his father, one that also involved John.

"And you? You want me to believe that this is all right for you, this whole thing? Your son falls in love with the man who used him and broke his heart, and for you it's all normal?"

Jim startled a bit in his chair, not expecting such a blunt and intimate question. He thought about it for a few seconds, and then answered, trying to be as sincere as possible.

"Of course I never expected such a thing. When John confessed his feelings for you, I admit I was blown up for a moment. But it wasn’t so hard to notice his sincerity, and I realized how much he cared about you and how much he wanted to make you happy from now on. This reconciliation between the two of us is an example."

"Was it his idea?" Paul asked, blinking, perplexed.

"Technically it was George's." Jim answered, with a little laugh, "But John, who has been in more direct contact with you, understood that you had changed and that there was a slight chance that maybe you might like it."

Paul bit his lip, while Jim stared at him intensely, as if they were the two poles of a magnet, as if now that finally it was all cleared up, he could no longer look away from his child, his now-grown up child.

"Was he right, Paul?" Jim continued, fearful.

Paul clasped his fingers on his arms, while a single word occupied his mind.

A single word and one answer.

"Yes."

It had been hard to say, it had been hard to give in, but Jim's solar smile told him it was worth it.

"Well, I'm... I'm really happy, you have no idea how much-"

"But!" Paul interrupted, wishing to clarify some things, before his father made too many fancy flights, "This doesn’t mean that everything will come back as before or that I'll start calling you dad."

"No, I know it well." Jim said.

"It will take time, a long time, for this and to accept the fact that I want to forgive you." Paul specified, with conviction.

Jim nodded, smiling softly, as if now it was hard to stop smiling, "I'll be here waiting for you for as long as you want."

"All right." Paul sighed.

"And what about John?" Jim asked.

Yes, that was a good question.
The return trip was even quieter than the outward, if possible.

John had no idea what happened in the meeting between Paul and Jim. He had only caught a glimpse of Jim, who had smiled at him faintly. He didn’t know whether to take it as a positive sign, like a "It’ll be all right" sign, or as something negative, for example, "Mission failed".

He, John, didn't even have the guts to ask. Paul had a very focused look, as if he was intimating him not to dare even ask him a single question about what happened. And John, in spite of himself, had to obey, though curiosity was devouring him.

Then they took Hermes' loot and put it into the car.

And now there they were, all intent on unloading the heavy boxes and taking them to Paul's house.

When they finished, John put his hands on his waist, observing his loot. It was difficult, to let go of all those objects that he had got, actually, stolen, facing complicated missions, which were exciting, but also frightening. John reminded them one by one, with melancholy affection and remorse. However now he didn't need these things anymore. They no longer gave him any joy, nor the warmth or happiness that every human being seeks. He needed Paul, though, and returning the stolen stuff maybe wouldn't get his job back, but it could have hit him in the heart, just a little. John didn’t ask for much, a small breach in his heart was enough to bring out all the love that, he was sure, Paul still felt for him. And then who knows, maybe that love would convince him to stay.

The problem was that Paul wasn't showing any of that. He was like caught up in deep reflection as if he was on another world. John knew it was only because he had his father back. Paul must have been surprised, shocked. Oh, how much would he want only to hug him and reassure him, as he would have done before that disaster, tell him it would be all right from now on. But he couldn’t do it, he couldn’t hug him, because Paul would reject him, nor encourage him with those messages of hope, because John didn’t know what would happen in the future. Or maybe he knew, and that's why he couldn't tell him that it would be all right. It didn’t depend on him, he had done everything he could, now he was up to Paul.

"Then, how will you explain all this?" John asked, trying to distract himself.

Paul sighed, avoiding to look at him, "I don't know, I'll figure something out."

"You won't have any trouble, will you?"

"No, I don’t think so." the young man replied, shrugging.

"All right." John sighed, before biting his lip.

He didn't want that conversation to end, because it would only mean one thing: the final goodbye to Paul. And goodbye was such a bad word. It became unbearable when associated with Paul.

So John was forced from his heart to continue the conversation in any way.

"Everything all right with Jim?"

Paul bit his lip, "I'm not sure."
"Why?"

"He wants me to forgive him."

"And will you?" John asked, the attentive and sweetened tone, his gaze still on Paul.

"I believe so." Paul replied, "My mother would like me to forgive him."

"For what my opinion is worth, I think you should do it." John said, "You thought you lost a father and now you found him. In spite of all that he may have done, it is a fortune that it happens to a few people."

"It will be complicated, but I'll try."

"It's a very good decision."

Paul showed a faint, little smile that blew John's heart away.

He hoped that Paul would now say something about forgiving him too. Surely even Paul was thinking about it, he was in obvious duel with himself, but not a single word was spoken about it.

So John's little flight of hope went crashing down on the peaks of Paul's unshakeability. It was obvious. Paul would never forgive him. And the sooner John accepted it, the better it would be for everyone.

But above all, it would be easier saying goodbye to the young man who had twisted and improved his life.

"So..." John went on, "I think we just have to say goodbye."

Paul leaped lightly, before he finally brought his eyes upon him, "What?"

"Yes, goodbye, I am leaving tomorrow."

_goodbye_, a word which continued to rumbling in Paul's mind, shocking him a little, but leaving him lucid enough to ask, "Where are you going?"

"Julian and I are going to spend Christmas holidays at Cynthia's. When we get back, you've already gone."

“Oh.”

_oh_ was the right thing to say, since Paul didn’t quite know what to say nor do. He thought that he didn’t care anymore about John, that the fact of no longer seeing him would be only his wish that was fulfilled.

But now he found out that he didn't want any of this, in fact, the corners of his eyes pinching annoyingly, while a future that didn’t include John nor the little Julian flowed in his mind.

A future that was certainly painful.

"I wanted to..." John continued to say, smiling and just blushing, as he looked down, "I wanted to ask you to stay here, with me and Julian, because we will both miss you."

"Julian won't miss me, he's too little."
"No, it’s not true, he felt this kind of things." John answered, "And anyway, I realized I lost the right to ask you."

Paul opened his eyes, feeling his face flushed and no, not for pleasure. There was only so much anger now, anger along with something that Paul knew well. Both emotions made his heart beat stronger, as if this small, fundamental, foolish organ wanted to break free from the rib cage and take command of Paul's body.

And the young inspector, noticing that John had now given up fighting, decided to give it some of that command.

"You’re right, you know?" he said, pushing him out of his house, "You have no right to ask me."

John blinked, decidedly caught on the counterattack, "But... Paul, I-"

"So..." Paul went on, careless of what the other man was saying, "Goodbye, John."

And the next moment, Paul slammed the door in John's face, and then, regretful and frustrated by the gesture, sank to the ground and cried.

It was a silent cry that was worth a thousand words. The same Paul didn’t have the courage to accept, those which would forgive John, which would whisper to love him and then asked to kiss him.

Those words that would soothe his suffering, his and John's.

He hadn’t been able to say all these things to John, not yet, for before he should have said them to himself and above all, accept them.

And that was what he was doing.

Right now, in his loneliness, in his suffering, in his desperate crying.

Chapter End Notes

I did it!! Yatta! I mean, this morning I still had more than 10 pages to translate! Sigh. :( But here we are.
So, I know it's a long and not very exciting chapter, but at this point it was necessary telling Jim's story.
Hope you like it anyway! :D
We are very close to the end. But I have a surprise for you. :D Don't worry.
Next chapter will be, Till there was you.
Bye bye!!
Chiara
Goodbye.

Paul said *goodbye* to him.

He pushed him out of his house, said that unbearable word and then closed the door in front of his face.

John stayed for a few seconds to look at that stupid obstacle that divided him from the man he loved. He hoped Paul could change his mind and come back to him.

To tell him what, though?

Well, John couldn't really know. Paul could also not speak at all; he could just hug him, perhaps, or kiss him. *Oh*, that would be the best dream.

Yeah, how stupid had John been to think anything like that? It was only a dream. Such a scene could only happen in his dreams by now, because Paul no longer wanted to have anything to do with John. So now he had to be strong enough to accept it and stop fighting that useless battle. He felt almost like Don Quixote in his fights against the windmills.

And his love had become the most futile of those fights. Fighting for him now, with Paul who just wasn't going to forgive him, was too painful. John couldn’t continue to hurt himself, he wasn’t so insanely masochist.

He loved Paul, still, with all his heart, but if he continued to insist with him, if he kept banging his head against that unwavering wall, he would only hurt himself and this time very painfully. It was something he couldn’t afford.

He had to be well for his son, for that beautiful child who now slept serenely in his arms.

The man sighed, bending down to kiss his head gently.

The night before John did nothing but think about what had happened with Paul, and every moment relived in his mind caused him cold shivers and annoying grips to his heart. If he had continued that way, he wouldn’t have closed his eye all night, and since the next day they would leave, John had to be awake.

So, when Julian had fallen asleep, he took him gently in his arms and carried into his bed, snuggling against him and watching him sleep blissfully, before his sleep won him too.

Once again, the presence of the child beside him, the sweet sound of his slight breath, the quiet beating of his heart, the warmth of his small body, all those things helped him to be calm enough to sleep.

And now, as soon as he woke up after that refreshing sleep, John allowed himself to stay a little under the warm duvet, while he was trying to gently wake up the kid. Julian made a grimace when
he began to feel his father's fingers that tickled his cheek and neck. His eyelids squeezed and his lips were apart in a blissful expression, but he didn’t seem to want to wake up. So John approached him and began to kiss his forehead, cheeks, nose, and finally, Julian sighed and stretched, before rubbing his eyes with his hand.

"Good morning, love." John said.

Julian yawned, making his father smile, which lifted him up with his arms, rocking him a little.

"Come on, baby boy, wake up! Today we have to leave." He said, sweet-talking to wake him up definitively, "Are you happy to see your mom again?"

The child nodded and John chuckled softly, before lifting his torso and letting Julian sit on his legs.

"Then we must get up, wash and prepare our suitcases, right?"

"Yes." Julian replied, with his sleepy voice, "But I'm hungry."

"Then better go to the kitchen and prepare breakfast." John proposed, tickling his belly when it grumbled asking for food, "Will you help me?"

Julian smiled and nodded, so John told him to go immediately to wash his hands and the baby jumped out of bed, running straight into the bathroom.

Once he was alone, John sighed, sitting on the mattress.

In a few hours he would be left and then he would never see Paul again. The thought almost made him choke. He would have wanted to say *Fuck you* to his own dignity, run to Paul, and beg him to stay with him, because... How could he possibly think that John could go on living there without Paul in front of his house?

Without Paul in his life?

But then John put himself together, remembering that Paul had no more reason to stay in London. Maybe even Jim wasn't a good enough reason to stay. Jim wasn’t bound in London like John. He could go to Paul, go and see him whenever he wished.

John couldn’t, because Paul didn't want him in his life anymore.

So he had to care no more about Paul and leave.

The painful thought was interrupted abruptly when John's cell phone vibrated on the bedside table. His heart gasped and then it seemed to beat weakly, as if it wanted to allow the man's senses to become more refined.

And in fact John felt his throat get dry, his hands sweat, and his heartbeats echoing into his ears.

His trembling hand moved towards the bedside table, while a single question echoed in his mind.

*What if it was Paul?*

****

"McCartney, how is it possible?"
Paul sighed, shrugging. He was in the yard of the police station together with Inspector Starkey, Linda and some other agents to get the boxes with Hermes' stolen stuff from his car.

That morning Paul woke up early, thinking about what to make up as an excuse for his ex-boss. He had been thinking about it: it had to be something that couldn’t be investigated much, to prevent his colleagues from wanting to undertake more thorough research. Eventually he thought of an acceptable conclusion.

"Sir, I’ve told you." Paul said, "Last night I found this stuff left in front of my house."

"You had to call us at once." Richard scolded him, crossing his arms, "We could have begun to investigate."

"Pardon me, sir, but I highly doubt that you would have got some useful information. It’s a small street, not very busy."

Richard seemed to think deeply, rubbing his chin with two fingers, before looking back at Paul, "If I remember well, there was a shop in front of your house, right? We could ask the owner to find out if he noticed any strange movement."

The simple image suggested by Chief Inspector Starkey startled Paul imperceptibly. It would have been a real tragedy.

John... That man of course, stubborn as he was, foolish as he was, might as well have decided suddenly to confess everything directly to the Inspector Starkey, to be forgiven by Paul. And Paul was still convinced it wasn’t the right thing to do.

"I think it’s highly unlikely." He hurried to answer, calmly, "Since yesterday I was out with him. See, we're... We are very close friends."

Richard watched him with a raised eyebrow. It didn’t seem that he didn’t want to believe Paul, who struggled with all his strength not to blush; he seemed rather annoyed at what happened, as if he had just surprised a child to steal one single candy. Paul was sure he wouldn't get a real lecture. After all, he had already received his punishment.

"I don't understand, however, what would all this mean?" Richard sighed finally.

Paul shrugged, "I don't know, maybe Hermes got tired of stealing and collecting this kind of stuff and decided to give them back."

"Or maybe he got burned by his first failure and had an identity crisis." Linda added, "We may not even see him again."

"Maybe one of you is right." Richard said, before he came back to look at Paul with a very serious frown, "However, McCartney, you know that this won’t give you your job back, don’t you?"

"I know, sir." Paul replied, "I just thought I had to bring you the loot, so you could return all the items to their owners."

"Yes." Richard said, nodding, "You did well, thank you."

It was done, the Chief Inspector believed his words. Of course, Paul couldn't say it didn't put him at ease. He was still lying to his former boss, actually to the entire category of policemen, the same one he had been a part of for many years, the same which he had given all his efforts and all his strength for. Now, though, a more important value was driving his actions, and Paul could never
regret it. He was more than convinced of everything he was doing.

So he bit his lip and went back to look at his former agents, who ended up checking the loot to see if anything was missing.

"When are you leaving for Shrewsbury?" Richard asked.

"I... I don't know." Paul replied, uncertain, "I still have to arrange everything."

Actually he was no longer sure about what to do, and he hated himself for it, for he knew that was connected to the same person who had twisted his life. Since the last time he had seen him, Paul's desire to leave London and go away was like vanished into air. Instead there was a void, a void that asked to be filled, a lack that squeezed his heart in a way that hurt.

The problem was... Paul wanted to fill that void?

"You'll see that you’ll be fine." the Inspector said, awakening him from his thoughts.

"Yes." Paul replied, "Thank you."

"Now if you don't mind, I must go and report to Scotland Yard that we have found Hermes’ loot."

"Of course, sir."

"Good luck, McCartney." He told him, shaking his hand with a great smile on his lips, and Paul smiled back.

After all, despite what had happened, Paul couldn’t say that he hadn’t worked well with Inspector Starkey. The man had always been very correct towards him, helpful and kind, trying to make Paul's work easier, especially in the early days. And Paul really appreciated it.

"Thank you very much."

Then the Chief Cnspector greeted him, returning into the building, and Paul found himself with Linda, who gave him a little smile.

"So..." She started.

"So..."

"Are you really going to Shrewsbury?"

Again, that question...

And again Paul felt the same upset as a few moments before, the same emptiness that became so heavy and cumbersome and... Damn, he hated it!

"I don't know, actually." He answered to at least try to ignore that feeling.

"It's for John, isn't it?"

Paul slightly jumped: he hadn’t wanted to name that person since he made Paul realize that they would never see each other again. And now hearing it said from another person made him tremble violently. So much, in fact, that everything that was broken when Paul found out Hermes’ true identity, seemed to be fixed.
"I think... I think yes." He said breathlessly, marvelled at that realization which swept over him like a wave of the stormy sea.

“You think yes?”

No, it wasn’t just that he thought yes.

It was actually so.

Yes.

Paul didn't want to leave.

He didn't want to leave because of John.

He didn't want him to disappear from his life.

And now he knew that from the day before, the anger Paul still felt for him was due only to the fact that John could at least try to ask him to stay, but Paul understood why John had given up on it. After all John's reconciliation attempts and Paul's stubbornness, anyone would have given up. Frustrated and defeated, unwilling to suffer any further.

So now it was up to Paul to fix everything and relieve his and John's suffering. And he had to do it soon before John left, before he left London with the conviction that Paul wouldn’t want him in his life.

“Yes. I... ” He began to say and now he really couldn’t help but smiling, "Linda, sorry, but I must go away."

"Paul, what-"

But the woman didn’t have time to say anything, since Paul rushed straight to his car. He hurried to get in and darted out of the police station.

He didn't really know where John was going to leave from, and he certainly couldn't call him to ask. No, he had to face him and tell him what he had now understood and accepted.

In other words, that he was missing something from the moment the situation crashed. Not so much his job, because, after all, if he had left, he still would have had one.

But he would have missed something else.

A person who would wait for him at home, as John did.

A person who would smile when he saw him, like John did.

A person whose simple thought would make Paul smile.

Like John did.

Until John had been in his life, Paul felt complete.

And now with a little help from a friend he could fix everything.

With George's help, he would bring John into his life.
Once more.

****

Stupid.

Stupid, John.

Stupid stupid stupid John!

What was his fucking problem when he thought Paul could call him?

*You're just stupidly in love, you stupid John!*

Ah that! That was supposed to be the reason.

As a fool in fact, that morning he was quick to grab the phone from the bedside table to read the message.

And with a heavy thud of his heart, he had seen it was from George: he told him to be available, if he needed a ride to King's cross station.

So John sighed, letting his forehead fall against the palm of his hand.

No, he didn't need a ride.

He wanted to be alone in his last moments spent in the same city of Paul, the city that made them meet and then united them so madly.

It meant a last, silent farewell to Paul. He knew that thought would never come to its destination, but it was something he had to do for himself, more than for Paul. At least this way he would move on definitively and could go back to a life now decidedly normal. Without Hermes, without Paul.

Now he was just John, Julian's father. Everything else, the thief's clothes and those of Paul's lover, had vanished into thin air.

So he found himself that afternoon at King's Cross station. His right hand forcefully clutched Julian's to prevent him from getting lost, while with the other he carried the trolley with their clothes and other stuff to stay away from their home for at least three weeks.

With his blind sight, however, it was impossible for John to see the timetable. He decided to put on his glasses, and finally he read the platform from which their train would leave.

And *damn*, father and son were also late. The train would leave in exactly ten minutes and the station was so big and chaotic, full of people coming and going, not to mention the crazy fans who went to take a photo at the platform 9 ¾. What an obstacle when one was already late!

"Come on, Jules. Let's run a little, do you agree?"

"Yes, daddy."

John began to run, being careful not to lose Julian, and reached the platform area. He passed by all the platforms until he came to his destination. Like him, there were other passengers who were rushing to get on the train.

John looked for the right coach and once he found it, he first put the kid in it and then he got in too
with the trolley. When he found their seats near the window, he placed their luggage in the compartment above and finally sat with Julian. He didn’t have time to sigh for relief, that immediately Julian climbed on his lap to curl up against his chest, staring at the people still on the platform.

John wrapped his arms around his son, holding him close, and then imitated his gesture, looking out of the window.

There were many people waving at the passengers, saying *goodbye, have a safe journey*, or sending them imaginary kisses.

He smiled, while his imagination recreated a perfect scene from a sappy movie from the 60s, where Paul would run along the platform, looking for someone in particular through the windows. *Looking for John.*

His heart jumped with joy and sorrow, while Paul in his mind found him and declared his passionate love, a sign that he had forgiven him.

But no, it wasn't possible.

John closed his eyes, putting a hand on his head. Paul would never do that, he would never ever do that for someone like John.

Paul had given up on John and now John was giving up on him. He didn't even try to ask Paul to stay in London.

And while the ticket inspector had a final look on the platform to check for the last latecomers, John realized that trip would help make their separation easier.

"Look, Dad."

"What, luv?"

"There." the child replied, pointing the forefinger on the glass.

John leaned in to check better.

There was someone running along the platform.

And if John hadn’t been certain of the contrary, he could have told that it was Paul. He would recognize that lovely mass of dark hair everywhere.

But it couldn't be him, a part of himself pointed out.

Or maybe yes?

Was it *Paul*?

****

Paul parked in the first free spot he found. He wasn't sure it was possible to park there but well, what did it matter now? At most he would find a fine. He just needed five minutes to take something back.

In fact, he had to reclaim the most important thing in his life.
Actually, he thought as he entered the large building with the bricks of a bright red, he had to make sure it was in good hands.

When he entered the station, he soon found himself in one of the busiest environments that could exist in a metropolis like London. There were people going back and forth, with their heavy luggage ready for the holidays and bags full of Christmas gifts.

It was useless to look for John among all those people. According to the instructions George had given him a few minutes before, the train would leave in a few minutes. Paul had to find the right platform first.

So he turned his anxious gaze towards the timetable. He looked at it with attention, his heart was beating in his ears, making those annoying sounds of hurried steps, excited voices, announcements with the loudspeaker and screeching of tracks, even more deafening.

Then he finally found the information he was looking for and began to rush to his goal.

He still had a few minutes before the train left. If he was late, it would be terrible. He could never forgive himself for postponing trying to fix things with John to the last possible moment.

But it wasn’t appropriate to think too far ahead, after all...

After all, the train was still at its platform, and with it John himself.

He stopped only for a moment, trying to glimpse first of all the familiar figure of the man among those still on the platform. But none of them was John.

He must have been on the train.

So Paul, breathing deeply, started running, trying to look through the windows in the meantime, to find John on the other side of the glass.

If he didn't find him, he'd rather get on the train and fuck the ticket and his stupid car! It would be removed, but at least he would find John.

He would drag him back into his life.

He was about to arrive almost at the end of the train, as his desperate heart reminded him, when at last, with the emptiness in his belly that leaped suddenly, he saw him.

John was beyond the window: his gaze was surprised, utterly incredulous, but he forced himself to maintain some sort of control, perhaps not to appear too vulnerable in front of him.

Sooner or later, Paul would have to tell him that his vulnerable part was his favourite, because he was one of the few who had the honor to see and touch it.

But also because, at the same time, it brought out Paul's most fragile part.

As it happened right now.

Paul felt a thrill going through his body and weakening it, while John stood up and opened the window to make his head stick out.

"Paul?"

"Hi, John." He said in a trembling voice and with his suddenly dry mouth.
"Why... What are you doing here?"

Paul bit his lip, nervous. If he spoke now, he would no longer be able to go back anymore. It would have been so. He and John, together, for who knew how long. All his life perhaps, and the all his life was a very long time. Who knew what could happen. Sure, it was scary.

But the thought of that long future without John was even more scary. And that really convinced him to finally talk.

"There's one thing you stole and you didn't give it back to me." Paul said, his breath short for the running.

All John’s hopes that, since he had recognized Paul beyond the window, soared light into the air, into his soul, suddenly sank; they plunged, or better, were pushed down from the tallest skyscraper in London, and crashed with great clatter on the ground. Of course, how could John think Paul wanted to tell him anything else?

However, thinking about it well, John didn’t’ know what Paul was referring to. He had given everything back, he was certain.

"What?" he asked, the disappointment appropriated in a too obvious way of his face.

Only that it disappeared very soon.

It disappeared when Paul smiled, and this time his smile was one that John knew very well, it was the one that made his legs tremble.

It disappeared definitively, then, when Paul brought a hand on his chest.

Actually, on his heart.

"This." he answered without taking his eyes off John, looking at him now with no more fear, no indecision, no anger, nor any other of the horrible feelings that had tormented them both in the last days.

So free from his suffering, John felt he could burst out of happiness now. He also tried to close his eyes, as if to hold that amazing sensation within himself, but it was so powerful that it made him feel only dizzy and he was forced to look back at Paul, without any displeasure, of course, and grabbed at the window not to fall, now that his legs went weak in front of Paul.

"I'm sorry, Paul." He said with a little smile, "I can't give it back. It's the thing I've stolen I care the most."

"I know and I don't want you to." Paul assured him, "I want it to be yours. On one condition."

"Which one?" John asked, paying much attention, though Julian began to draw his pulling his trousers.

"You have to take care of it." Paul explained, trying to hold, and failing, a smile tinged with sweet malice, "Because I have to care the one I’ve stolen."

John chuckled, "Is this the first time you steal something?"

"Yes. And I don’t regret it at all."

"Me neither." John exclaimed, clutching his fingers on the window.
God, it was amazing to have Paul in front of him, with his short breath to have run after him, with that smile that just couldn't leave his face, with a sweet blush that coloured his cheeks and his nose and, heck, even his ears. It made John want to jump over that damn window that separated him from Paul, and then take him in his arms and hold him and kiss him and-

But the train conductor's whistle blew his fancy flight. For one frightening moment John thought he had been dreaming it all. But Paul was still there.

"Deal?" the man asked.

"Deal." John said, "But we're going to stipulate a sort of real deal to clear every single detail of this exchange. I'm a businessman, you know?"

"Don't worry about it." Paul assured him, "When you come back, we'll fix everything."

John blinked, surprised and delighted by what Paul's words really meant.

"Does that mean you're staying?" he asked, longing for a yes as an answer.

And the yes came.

"Yes." Paul replied, nodding, "I'll wait right here."

"I'm counting on it."

"Yes."

Then finally John turned his attentions to his son, who now more forcefully pulled the fabric of his trousers, and took him in his arms, allowing him to look out of the window.

The child smiled and greeted Paul with his hand, while he waved back and wished them a safe journey, promising to both of them that they would see each other again very soon.

The train took speed and John continued to look at Paul, as he became just a little spot on the horizon.

When he no longer saw him, John decided to come back and sit comfortably.

He smiled like a fool, or perhaps as a lover, while Paul's words, his warm voice, his big doe eyes, appropriated with adorable arrogance of his mind.

John couldn’t believe that it had really happened and it wasn’t another of his dreams. He was just a step away from giving himself a pinch to realize he was awake and conscious.

However he knew that he didn’t need to do so. The crazy beats of his heart were trying to make him understand all this.

No, he didn’t dream.

No, he would no longer think of Paul as someone he had lost, as a person who had belonged only to his past.

Now he could see him too in his future because all was well.

Because Paul, his Paul, would be there on his return.
There, waiting for him.

There, for John.

Chapter End Notes

Hiii. How are you? Everything good?
I hope yes, especially now that John and Paul are two adorable lovebirds again. <3
I know that scene in King's cross is a sort of cliché. But I really wanted to be so, because it was up to Paul doing something for John and Paul loves doing great drama scenes, because he indeed is a drama queen. <3
Anyway I repeat myself, but really thanks to anyone who is reading the fic and always leaves a comment.
Oh by the way, the quote about platform 9 and 3/4 is due to the fact that I am a Potterhead too. <3
Two chapters left by now, and the next one is All you need is love (love love love).
Ciao ciao! :D
Chiara
All you need is love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he was a little kid, Christmas holidays passed way too fast, and the school started again just as fast.

Paul hated how quickly time would run out. He liked not having to get up early in the morning to go to school, still enjoying the warmth of his bed, staying at home and looking outside the window while it was snowing... Uh, it seemed to be so cold.

Yes. When he was a kid, it really seemed like one day the holidays had started and the next one they were finished. Maybe because Paul was looking forward to the Christmas break from the start of school in September.

Now, however, it was different.

Now time passed slowly. *Too much* slowly.

And the reason was that Paul wasn't waiting for Christmas holidays.

He was waiting for something that would happen after Christmas, after New Year's Eve...

He was waiting for *John*.

He checked the time: exactly two days from John’s return. Paul would go to pick him up to the station, as promised.

Although... God, that day still seemed so far away. Was it possible that time was passing slower? No, right?

No, it was just a stupid feeling, a sensation due to silly guesses of his equally silly and in love heart.

Of course, being far away from John wasn’t helping to make him reason with lucidity, but by now he just had to cope only for another two days. What were two days compared to the three weeks that had already separated them?

Besides, he couldn’t say that he was getting totally bored. He had taken advantage of those days to try to reconnect the relationship with Jim. It wasn’t easy, there was a sort of embarrassment and shyness that drove their actions, but Paul was convinced of what he was doing. It was right towards a man who had been forced to make mistakes, though he knew he would make suffer his loved ones; it was right towards his mother, it was right towards himself and Mike. They shouldn't have kept feeling all that anger for their father. It would have been toxic and counterproductive, especially for Paul who had now decided to stay in London.

His father, after all, was an interesting person, he had always been. Paul remembered well when he began to teach him his musical culture: he took him by the hand in the living room and made him listen to one of his old vinyls. Just as clear were memories about the guitar lessons, when Jim taught him chords that later Paul discovered to be wrong for a guitar. They were, in fact, more
appropriate for a banjo. This explained why even John, when he met Paul, used that kind of chords to play guitar. At that time, though, for Paul was almost impossible to think of a connection between John and his father.

Paul remembered his early days in London. He was a completely different man then. Despite having many flaws, such as excessive security, a bit of arrogance and especially the lack of trust in other people, Paul had to admit he still liked that version of himself. After all, if he hadn’t been like that, how would his future have changed? Would he have dated John? Would he have been in love with him anyway?

He certainly would never know, but anyway he was happy with the way things went.

He sighed, as he was lying on the floor of his house, in front of the fireplace. He was listening to the CD that John had given him, trying to cool his heels by letting himself be taken and overwhelmed by John’s voice singing for him, and in the meantime he was reading a book, with Pepper crouched on his belly and Elvis beside him.

John had charged George with the task of looking for his cat, but Paul decided to do it personally, while the Lennons were away. He certainly had more free time for the little guy. Besides, he wasn’t sure if it would be a good idea, but he took it to his house: that way it could meet and play with Pepper. So it had been. At the beginning Pepper wasn’t very happy about the thing, but eventually it accepted the new cat. It was fun to watch them play together, chase each other on the floor and then get tangled up in front of the fireplace, biting each other’s ears and cuddling.

One white and one black, so much different they were, but they had bonded at once.

Somehow they reminded Paul of himself and John. Different, yes, and yet so compatible, perfect, as if they belonged to each other, as if they were two soulmates.

The thought made Paul smile among himself, while he stroked the little head of his cat, and the young man then wondered what would become of his life from now on.

Of his career, above all.

Going back being a policeman was unthinkable. It was a job he had loved. After all, it had been a dream that had come true. However, now, something had cracked. He was sure he wouldn’t have felt the same enthusiasm. Working in any London police station as an inspector wasn’t possible. Chief Inspector Starkey told him clearly when Paul went to resign.

Richard wasn’t very happy about his decision. He told him he could stay in London, but with a lower grade.

Paul couldn't accept it. After all, he had spent strength and energy to become an Inspector. He couldn't go back. So in the end, he preferred to resign with his true role rather than accepting that solution.

And it was very surprising that he received a job offer, a few days after speaking with Inspector Starkey.

Thanks to his father.

A couple of people among his friends and neighbours had been looking for a long time for someone willing to give guitar lessons to their children and Jim had proposed his name, aware of the good work Paul had done with John.
Paul at first was reluctant to accept, not so much for the kind of work, one that had to do with music, again; but rather for the prospects it offered. Yes, it was still a job, and he would be paid, but not so much to make a living. And by the way, how long did he have to give those lessons? Once the kids learned everything there was to learn, well, they wouldn't need Paul anymore. Then what would he do?

He would have so much wanted to talk to John, ask for his advice, but it was a subject they could face when he was back. So, for the time being, Paul decided to accept the offer.

He was spending his days without John going to visit George at the music shop, doing lessons in the early afternoon and having a tea at his father's house.

On festive days as Christmas and New Year, Paul had been invited to George's house and Pattie along with Jim.

His brother Mike preferred not to go to London with his wife and daughter, and Paul accepted his decision. He told his brother that he had found his father. He invented some kind of personal investigation that Paul did on his own to look for him. Mike hadn't seemed particularly enthusiastic, and although Paul explained Jim’s whole story, he needed time to accept the reality and maybe take the same decision as Paul. That's why Mike didn't spend those holidays with them. He was pretty upset.

For this reason Paul also decided not to tell him about John and the relationship between them.

One bombshell at a time, Paul, he thought.

But he was curious about how Mike would react. His sixth sense told him that everything would be okay. Mike had already liked John once, he would have liked him even more now that he had become the only person able to make Paul happy.

The young man smiled, turning on his side, with Pepper’s great disappointment: the cat woke up from his nap and reached Elvis on the floor.

He looked at the crackling chimney, realizing that there should be roughly the same temperature in his heart, thinking about the future that was waiting for him and John

Thinking of John.

He looked at the clock once more. Five minutes less than before. Well, it was still a good thing.

One day, twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes and then he could find everything he was waiting for.

Anything he needed.

John, love.

****

They were almost there.

After an hour's journey, the train arrived in London and finally began to slow down. John could see from the window the houses of the suburbs become slowly the buildings of central London.

And as the train slowed down, his heart accelerated the beats in his chest. It was beating quickly,
yes, but also with strength. Each beat shook his chest and made his skin tingle.

There was also a pleasant lightness that John felt in his belly and a slight tingling in his hands. All this for the person who was waiting for him on the platform, where they last saw each other.

All this for Paul.

God. Paul would be there for him.

John still couldn’t believe it. Three weeks apart seemed to have made Paul's run to the station only the most ephemeral of memories.

And yet John felt that it would be so. He would find Paul again and this time forever.

He was dying to see him, touch him, hear his voice...

It was strange to understand, because after all they had made up, but John and Paul never phoned each other during those days. John's last memories of Paul's voice were beautiful words of hope.

Then nothing. Not that they were no longer in contact, not at all. Messages, there were a lot. Only that neither of them had ever thought to phone. Actually John didn't think it was due to a lack of his or Paul's will. It was rather a sort of embarrassment that held him from phoning Paul at least once.

The simple message offered the protection of a screen. The phone call didn’t. John would have been exposed. If his voice had trembled, Paul would have heard it. If he hadn't known what to say, Paul would have heard it. If, even worse, he had said something inappropriate, Paul would have heard it.

And John didn't want to. He was afraid to ruin everything. That relationship with Paul was delicate, like the freshly-glued pieces of a vase. John felt he was still able to break that vase. Not that he wanted to hurt Paul on purpose, but John was such a mess. Even nothing would be enough to finally break up with Paul, and John was very good at finding that fucking nothing.

That's why he didn't call him, and he thought Paul feared the same thing, too. Maybe he knew how John was feeling, and he was just helping him not to cause trouble in their newfound relationship.

The thought alone caused John's heart to swell with love. With a little attention and with Paul's help, everything would be fine.

A slight movement called his attention, so John lowered his gaze towards Julian's head resting on his legs. The child slept deeply and John smiled at the sight while he stroked his angel hair.

The little boy had a great fun with his mother during the holidays, and John was happy that the relationship between Cynthia and their son was slowly rebuilding. She was much better now, more self-confident, so different from how he remembered her and this made him feel better too. After all, he had never wished for her to disappear from their lives and continue to suffer. It wasn’t fair, she was still Julian’s mother and an important person in John's life. He wanted her to be happy, that's all.

She also found a new partner, a doctor at the clinic where she was hospitalized. When he had been introduced to John, he had certainly had a good impression about him. He looked just perfect for Cynthia, unlike John.

However, it wasn’t something John had to struggle about, because he knew now to be perfect for another person.
The whistle of the train startled him just as his mind formed the name of that person.

Paul.

Paul who was there somewhere, waiting for him.

John tried to peek through the window looking for Paul on the platform, while the train stopped, but he didn't see him. There were a lot of people waiting for who had just arrived and it was also true that John was terribly anxious, and everyone knows that anxiety plays tricks. Yet he didn’t see him, and his heart, which was going crazy and desperate in his chest, was confirming it.

He didn't even see him a few minutes later, when John got off the train with Julian still a little sleepy, and made his way into the crowd that greeted the newcomers.

"Dad, I want to go home." Julian murmured, rubbing his eyes.

"I know, luv, but we have to wait for Paul. He's coming for us."

And while Julian was leaning against his leg, letting a little yawn escape, John took his cell phone and checked if he had told Paul the right time. Then, once he found that there were no mistakes on his part, he took Julian in his arms, making him rest his head on the shoulder.

In the meantime he took a look around to try and catch sight of a familiar head, trying to ignore the thousand questions that were buzzing bully in his mind.

What if Paul didn't come?

What if it was all a trick?

Or worse, what if he changed his mind?

However, John didn’t have time to despair over such horrific scenarios, because a few seconds later he heard two fingers on his back and a sweet voice brushing his ears.

"Hands up. You're under arrest in the name of Her Majesty, the Queen."

John smiled to himself, recognizing that voice that could belong to one man.

"On what charge, sir?"

"Being on the run."

"Oh, it looks dreadful."

"It is." Paul replied, while John finally decided to turn around, “Especially because I was waiting for you.”

When he finally found himself in front of Paul, his Paul, everything around him became blurred. The station, the trains, the locomotive whistles, the voices of the people... Everything seemed to disappear at the exact moment when he locked eyes with Paul, at the exact moment when John was complete again. And when one is complete, when he isn’t missing anything, what can he say?

He had no desires or special requests to express in words, because all he needed was in front of him.

Therefore, thinking that looking at Paul without a word would seem inappropriate, John decided to
slide his gaze on Paul's hand which was pretending to be a gun.

"A little harmless as a weapon."

Paul just shrugged, "I had to improvise. I was late. London is always so busy."

"The important thing is that you're here now." John said, amused.

"No." Paul said, lifting John's suitcase and bending down just a little towards him, "The important thing is that you're here."

And then he smiled. The same warm and sweet smile that John had been dreaming of since he had left.

The smile that just wanted to tell him...

"Welcome home, John."

****

Once they got home, Paul left them to settle down, as he went to buy something to eat for the three of them.

He was thankful that he had that little moment to catch his breath. He thought he couldn’t breathe since he saw Julian's sweet face in the station, in the arms of a man who was definitely supposed to be John.

So, that moment had been magic. Paul arrived at King's cross and his heart had gone crazy by the rush he made, since he was late, but when he saw John, everything became a hundred times more intense and upsetting, as if he could no longer breathe again normally.

It was only an impression, of course, but Paul felt it very well with his whole body and somehow managed to move forward, towards John, talk to him, look at him, touch him... and basically he did all those things he had only dreamed of during the weeks before. It was a delightful sensation, knowing that he could do now everything he wanted.

It just wasn't that easy though. It wasn't at all.

There was too much in Paul, too much agitation, too much love, he couldn’t do much in such conditions.

That's why he welcomed this moment of solitude with joy. He had been waiting so long for him to be face to face with John, and now that he was sure to find him at home, he could concentrate only on what to say or do.

So he bought some sandwiches, and soon after he took Elvis from his apartment. Then trying to be brave, he went back to the Lennons’ house.

Julian was so happy to see his cat again and immediately began playing with it, while John and Paul were preparing dinner.

From time to time, John would look at him sneaky, when they laid the table, or as they ate, or stared at him without even noticing to do so, while Paul explained what kind of job his father had found for him...

And Paul had to try not to laugh every time. Now he felt he was more self-confident, he had more
control of himself. However it seemed that John still didn't believe Paul was there with him. It was like he was dying from the desire to reach out a hand just to touch him and make sure he was true, that Paul was right there with him, that despite everything, after all they were still together.

In some very strange way.

Yet it was so, John noticed when for the umpteenth time Paul caught his gaze, causing him to blush consequently. He didn't understand why he was struggling to believe it. The crazy beats of his heart were more real than ever, and as always they were caused by Paul.

Maybe he was just a little scared. After waiting so long for that moment, now that it had finally come, John feared the face off that would follow for his damned insecurity, and not because it would be something that would ruin their relationship. Actually, they were supposed to sort out once and for all and start over.

It was supposed, too, that John had so many things to say to Paul that he didn’t know where to begin; but as long as Julian was with them, getting all Paul’s attention while John was clear the table, it was impossible to talk about it.

Therefore, it was with relief and a slight sense of fear that John understood when it was time to bring the child to bed. The little kid had begun to yawn soundly and rub his eyes, as he played with Paul, and John decided, finally, to take him to his bedroom. He took the child in his arms when Paul handed him carefully.

"I'll be right back." he told him.

Paul nodded, smiling, and almost wanted to tell him without a word that he would wait for him at any cost.

A few moments later John helped his son to wear his pajamas. Julian wasn’t very collaborative, his head practically dangled for sleep. John thought it wouldn't take a long time to put him to bed. In fact, as the child found himself under the blankets, John began to sing to him a lullaby, Julian fell asleep instantly.

But John was still frightened of being alone with Paul.

It was strange how a so craved desire could eventually be even so feared.

He spent a little time to finish the lullaby and caress Julian’s hair, hoping that his heart could calm down a little. John was almost convinced that Paul could hear them downstairs.

Then, when he thought he was ready to face Paul, John turn off the abat-jour and left the room.

When he turned around, he found Paul in front of him, leaning against the doorframe of John's room. And all his work of a few minutes before crashed.

"Did he fall asleep?" Paul asked, interested.

John nodded, his heart had gone crazy again. He felt his throat was dry; if he tried to speak, perhaps no sound would come out. But he had to try at any cost.

“Yes." He answered, approaching with uncertain step to the other man, "He was fast asleep even before the lullaby ended."

Paul laughed softly at the image created in his mind: John singing a lullaby to Julian.
"Can I peek next time?"

John wasn’t sure what now made him relax in an instant. Whether it had been Paul's laugh, or his very quiet attitude, or yet his sweet gaze that couldn’t get away from John. He thought it was the same feeling he had on his birthday evening. Even in that case Paul had waited for him, and even at that moment they had many things to talk about.

And now John knew the right words to tell him.

"I don't know."

Paul frowned, mildly surprised by John's answer, "Why?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"You have to accept my apologies for what I did." John said, causing a little smile on Paul's lips.

That was something Paul was waiting for.

"There's no need, John."

"Yeah, there is." John said, moving closer to the man, "You lost your job because of me."

"But I decided to stay here."

"Ok, but if I hadn’t done all this fucking mess, you wouldn’t have been forced to take that decision. You'd still have your job."

"And if you hadn't decided to become Hermes, I wouldn't have come here and maybe we would never have met, John." Paul pointed out, "So what do you think it’s worse?"

John sighed to the hypothesis suggested by Paul. A life without Paul was just what tormented him, when he had to decide whether to surrender to him or not. Of course, if he had to see it that way, then it was obvious what the answer was.

Paul seemed to read his mind because, without waiting for John to answer, he leaned towards him, causing him to tremble visibly, to squeeze his shirt between his fingers and draw him to himself.

"Paul..."

"I prefer you became Hermes, so I could meet you and finally, get you."

John laughed more relaxed, and felt brave enough to slide his still scared arms around Paul's waist.

"I thought it was me that got you." He said back, curling his lips.

"No, you're wrong. It was me." Paul insisted, shaking his head, before pointing a finger at his chest, "And now you have to promise me you won’t run away anymore."

"I don't want to run away anymore, not from you." John murmured, "But you must still accept my apologies."

"If it makes you feel better..." Paul sighed, letting his mouth rub against the other man's cheek, "Apology accepted."
John shuddered visibly, feeling after so long Paul's lips once more on his skin. He had missed all of him. From his doe eyes, to his warm hands, to his soft mouth, to his-

"And now I can finally tell you."

To his sweet voice that could always find the best words to drive John crazy.

"I love you, John."

John closed his eyes, clasping his hands on Paul’s sides when his faint whisper brushed his ear. His head suddenly whirled as if it were a merry-go-round that John fucking adored, but he couldn't stand on it. He needed to grab on to something so as not to lose the balance and collapse. Still he wished this carousel would never end up swirling because... Well, the reason was the simplest and most complicated thing in the world, it was the most ordinary, predictable thing, the most popular thing but also unique for each one on the Earth, the most important thing...

It was...

"I love you too, Paul."

John didn’t see him, because Paul was still facing one side of his face, but he was sure that he made him smile by the way he barely held his breath.

Encouraged, he decided to continue. He had much more to say.

"And you have no idea how happy I am that you're here with me."

"I think I can imagine it, you know, vaguely." Paul joked, laughing softly.

"But what are you going to do now that you don't have your job?" John asked, trying to look him in the eye.

It was, basically, a very serious subject to talk about, something that perhaps would torment John forever with remorse and guilt.

However, Paul's expression wasn’t serious as well. It was quite the contrary, actually.

"Do we have to talk about it now?" he asked, biting his lip.

"I thought you wanted to talk with me..."

"And I do." Paul answered, before resting the whole palm of his hand on John's warm chest, "But you know, I thought we would be doing something else right now..."

The sentence left open and Paul's strong hand on his heart, made John feel a chill together hot and cold.

"Like what?" he asked, the voice almost choked by a slight sensation in his belly.

Paul smiled mischievously, before drawing him to himself and then into John’s room, with his hand clasped on his shirt.

When John collided with his mouth, he understood what Paul's plan was for that night, and thinking that he didn't mind at all to submit himself to Paul's will, he shut the door of his room behind him, with a small kick.
And yet, as Paul held him and kissed him, and John led him to his bed, he understood that door had once and for all closed their troubled past out of their lives.

Because now it no longer mattered.

Because now only they were important for each other.

Because now, right now, there was only love.

Chapter End Notes

Second to last chapter, yay!
We're just one step to the end! Ahhh I'm really happy. Even if I received some critics about this fic, I'm really happy because when I started to translate this long fic, I couldn't see the end. I mean, 30 chapters to be translated from Italian to English. It seemed so long and hard. But I did it. And I also want to ask you if you're interested in a sequel. I'll get you was written in 2014 and a couple of years later I wrote a sequel, which is 15 chapters long. So, I was thinking to translate also that fic, which would be very different from this one, but you'll understand more after the last chapter. Just let me know if you're interested. :) By now I want to thank all of you that spent some precious time of your life reading these chapters and leaving a comment. Really really thank you. <3
Last chapter is a sort of epilogue, actually. We just have to know what will be Paul's future. I don't know when I'll be able to post it, because very busy days are on the horizon, what with the fact that I have to work this weekend as polling station supervisor for European election day in my town. ç_ç And next week I'll have my first days off of the years and I'll be in Verona with my sister and Vale for Elton John's concert. I'm so excited. <3 Anyway, hope you like this chapter, and I promise I'll do my best to post the last one on Tuesday maybe, or in the worst scenario on the 2nd of June. Ciao!!!
Chiara
Chelsea’s area was really lovely.

Paul was so excited about working and living in the artists' area. Everything was amazing: the bright colours, the sounds, the smells... God, he already loved it.

It had been a good thing hanging around through the characteristic streets. He was coming back from the police station, when he started stopping here and there, admiring the lush green of the parks, the quiet Thames, the inhabitants’ chattering, the street artists, the small antique shops...

He also noticed some art galleries that he would like to visit. Surely to someone else he would appear as a tourist who set foot for the first time in London. Actually, he had been there many times, for work or holiday. But he never got to visit Chelsea. And now he would even live there.

He was so lucky, wasn’t he? He had an important career, a beautiful and famous girlfriend who adored him, a loving brother, a tiny and welcoming house...

Of course, he couldn’t imagine that the day he fully understood his fortune would be also the day when his whole life would change.

And it all began when he saw that shop. Paul was coming back home, when he noticed that right there, in front of his apartment, there was a shop.

A rather old-fashioned little music shop. The wooden sign reported the name, *The Rock Temple.*
Paul didn’t know why he felt attracted to that place. There was something intriguing in the name as well as in its look. They both remembered something very old, something Paul was desperately looking for. But it wasn’t possible. He hated music!

So why did he feel attracted to that place as if they were the two poles of a magnet? He didn’t know, but he decided that the only way to find out was to step in and see with his own eyes what was so interesting.

He was about to cross the street when his cell phone rang in his pocket.

He stopped in front of his house and picked up the phone: Jane.

Gosh, it had been ages since she took the initiative to call him. Such a moment was too precious. Paul had to take advantage.

No.

He looked at the shop in front of his house. Perhaps, Paul thought as he saw two little boys coming out of the store chuckling with complicity, he could go there another day.

What are you doing, you idiot?

After all the shop wouldn’t have vanished overnight as well as its owner. Was he perhaps the man whom Paul could see through the window?

No, you stupid daft. You must step in now!

So Paul shrugged his shoulders and turned away to answer Jane and enter, meanwhile, into the house.

Only that instead of the delicate voice of the young woman, he heard a cry, something desperate, a scream so strong that he had to close his eyes.

He reopened them the next moment and the first thing he noticed was the accelerated beating of his heart and the sweat on his forehead. Surely they were both due to the nightmare he just had.

It was a nightmare, wasn't it?

It had to be a nightmare, because... Geez, because he didn't even know John in his nightmare. He had never entered his shop and as a result John had never entered his life.

Instead that was to be the reality: Paul lying in John's bed, in John's room, with John's arms around his waist, John's beautiful face a few inches from his and John's son asleep between him and his father.

He sighed after he breathed deeply. He hoped with all his heart that was the reality.

He had never had such a powerful and upsetting nightmare since things had settled between him
and John. He wondered why. Perhaps he had been so happy in the last months that his subconscious was worrying to give him some other thought.

*Thank you so much, stupid subconscious, right today by the way?*

A slight murmur told him that John was about to wake up and Paul decided to push away that terrible nightmare (because *it was* a nightmare) not to make him worry.

"Good morning." the man said, stretching lightly, being careful not to disturb the child's sleep.

This didn’t prevent him from just squeezing his arm around Paul’s waist.

"Good morning." Paul answered, laughing because John inadvertently tickled him.

"And happy birthday." John went on, leaning towards him to kiss his cheek.

"Oh." Paul said, moving a little on the pillow, "Thank you. But you're going to upset Julian."

John frowned, tilting his head with perplexity, "And why?"

"Well, he said he wanted to sleep here so he could be the first to tell me." He explained amused.

"He told me he wanted to sleep here because he was afraid of the storm."

Paul laughed softly, while his hand rested gently on the baby’s hair to caress him briefly. He slept quietly, with his head hidden in John's chest, his back turned to Paul and an abandoned arm on his father's waist.

"Oh, he's very clever."

"You can say it loud." John agreed, "He's my son after all."

"Yes." Paul replied, nodding without looking away from Julian.

They were true, surely it was so: John, his son, and Paul along with them. It had to be everything true, because the softness of Julian's hair under his fingers was concrete, and so was the warmth of John's hand on Paul’s side.

The nightmare that woke Paul had to be over. It couldn’t be anything but a stupid dream, something that had been produced by his equally stupid subconscious. He shouldn’t have to think about it anymore, he risked only to ruin his birthday, not to mention that he would have made John worry, and that was the last thing he wanted.

No, he shouldn't have thought about it. And fortunately, a help came right from the child between them, who began to wake up and coming back to reality, opening his big light blue eyes.

"Wake up, luv, it's already morning."

To those words, the child looked at his father smiling, with still sleepy eyes, but despite this, he still found something to say.

"Dad?"
"Yes, hon?"

"You didn’t say happy birthday to Paul first, did you?"

"Happy birthday?" John asked, pretending to be curious.

"Yes, today it’s Paul’s birthday."

"Oh, that’s true!" John exclaimed, hitting his forehead with his hand, "You’re definitely right. I have to fix it now. Happy birthday, Paul."

"Dad!"

Julian pouted, and his father’s joke made him immediately awake and more lively than ever. John laughed amused, while Paul shook his head.

"Don’t care about your father, Julian." Paul said, taking the child in his arms to comfort him, "If you hadn’t reminded him, maybe he wouldn’t even have told me anything."

And so saying he stuck his tongue out to John, who still seemed delighted by the joke he had just done to his son. Julian laughed, noticing Paul's gesture, and hastened to imitate him.

"Oh, and you know what?" Paul went on, "I think daddy deserves a good penalty, what do you say, luv?"

The child cheered up with joy, totally agree with Paul.

"And what kind of crime should I pay for?" John asked curiously.

"High treachery." Paul solemnly proclaimed.

"Oh dear Lord!" John cried indignant, "So, what is this punishment about?"

Paul thought of it a moment before he smiled, sign that he had just had an idea.

"You must cook breakfast for all of us and bring it to bed."

"Oh really?" John mumbled, folding his arms, "What if I had no intention of doing it?"

"Then, you will undergo a good tickling session, am I right, Julian?" Paul said, looking back at the child on his lap.

"Yes, you can’t even stand the tickling."

"Two versus one, huh?" John sighed, finally deciding to get out of bed, "It seems I just have to accept the punishment."

"Exact. And now, in the kitchen. Talk less and work more." Paul ordered, holding back a laugh and pointing to the bedroom door, "We both are hungry."

"And I bet you guys will wait for me here..."

"Of course, my dear."

John shook his head, before leaving the room, and Paul, smiling amused, held Julian who wrapped his arms around him, while they both crouched down more under the blankets, to joke and play
and wait together for a good breakfast in bed.

And suddenly Paul understood.

If that had been his reality, then it was all right, because he was fine.

But if that was just a dream, then he never wanted to wake up. He was convinced that whatever reality was waiting for him, once he opened his eyes, it would never be as beautiful as that dream, it would never make him just as happy.

So he held the child tight in his arms, feeling his warmth, the beating of his heart, and to prevent his body from waking up from that dream, he decided to grab on to him.

Grab on to Julian and John.

****

To Paul his birthday wasn’t much different from other days.

He had spent a pleasant morning with Julian at the park, while John was in the shop with George.

In the afternoon, however, he had several lectures with his pupils. They were now five kids who wanted to study how to play guitar. Paul had to admit that, despite his initial disappointment, he was pretty well now with it.

It wasn’t certainly easy teaching something to kids. Not everyone was really interested in learning how play the guitar. Perhaps some of them had only been forced by their parents. Others instead felt a sincere desire to play and improve their technique.

However with all of them Paul learned to be severe in the right way to be respected. Nowadays some kids were really unruly. They could pull out Paul’s worst side. Fortunately, he had learned to be patient over time, and that was thanks to John. Being with John and his son showed him how much patience could be in each of us. So he learned to look for his own, just like John did with Julian.

This was one of the reasons Paul was always physically and mentally exhausted in the evening. And on his birthday’s evening he was no less.

Right now he was going home, or maybe it was better to say that he was dragging himself home. He was tired yes, but he was also in a bad mood.

None of his family called him to tell him happy birthday. Neither Mike, nor his father. Obviously Paul was no longer eight years old, he shouldn't get angry if someone forgot to wish him a happy birthday. But Mike and Jim weren’t just someone, they represented what was left of his family.

What's more, the feeling of living only in a dream wasn’t helping him to feel better. Was it reality, or was it a damn dream? Paul no longer knew what he was living. He didn't want it to be a dream. He didn’t want to open his eyes, wake up and realize that John had never entered his life. Or even worse, that John was present in his life, but not in the way he was experimenting now.

How could he resist?

Paul sighed, forcing himself to push away once and for all that stupid thought.

Come on, Paul, a dream doesn’t last that long, he said.
Night didn’t last many hours and certainly not a whole day. Paul couldn’t have been dreaming for so long time. It was impossible!

What if that dream didn’t last for one night only? What if every time he fell asleep, Paul felt back into that dream in the exact moment where he interrupted it the previous night?

No, no, and fucking no. It was just ridiculous. It was the most absurd thing Paul could think of right now. He knew why he was feeling like this.

He was just afraid of being happy. To be really happy.

Happiness had always been an illusion for him, he didn’t really believe he was happy before this whole thing. He was perhaps satisfied, he had accepted all that life had given him, without ever risking to go and look for anything else. Yet with John he indeed risked, he had courage and suffered, but now, now he felt only happiness. Of course, he didn’t think that their lives would be without troubles from now on, but if they had been together, they could have overcome everything. He was sure.

*If only it were true...*

Oh fuck!

He had to get rid once and for all of that damn doubt that tormented him. He had already managed not to make John worry that morning; he wasn’t sure he could do it again, after a whole day of thoughts and questions and doubts.

So taking deep breaths, he tried to think only of beautiful things, like for example, his birthday. Surely John would prepare something special for him: a dinner only for three of them and then they would watch a movie, cuddled on the couch and they would feel asleep together this time...

Paul was smiling among himself for the lovely picture created in his mind, when he looked for the keys of John’s apartment in his pocket. He had given Paul spare keys some time before, since Paul had begun to sleep practically every night at his house.

The shop was closed, Paul noticed. It was pretty early to close the shop, and it made him worry a little, but if something serious happened, John would definitely call him on the phone.

So he relaxed and opened the door. The house was all dark. Maybe John was just out for a moment with Julian, maybe they went to get a present for Paul, because John had forgotten to look for something, or maybe they had gone to buy something to eat, or maybe-

"*Surprise!*"

Paul almost jumped, frightened when he lit the light in the hall.

There were colourful festoons and balloons and a large table with snacks and sandwiches of all kinds; but most of all, there were his loved ones, friends, George and Pattie, his family, Jim, Mike with his daughter and wife, and of course John and Julian who ran to him to hug him affectionately.

Everyone rushed to wish him a happy birthday, and this explained why no one had called him during the day. Obviously, they were waiting for the surprise party.

A surprise that, indeed, succeeded fully, and Paul thought he knew who was behind all that story.

He turned to John, who was a little behind the others, and looked at him affectionately, but also
like he wanted to reprimand him. John on his part just shrugged and smiled careless.

That smile, just that, made his heart jump softly.

Maybe, after all, he wasn't dreaming.

In a dream the heart wasn’t beating so hard. Or at least it wasn't beating so real, so much that Paul felt it even in his ears.

And since it was always John who caused that lovely feeling, he had to be real too.

*Right?*

****

The party was the most incredible that Paul had ever got.

The decorations were so cheerful, and the music in the background was definitely perfect, not to mention the gifts the guests gave him.

George and Pattie had even prepared a special cake for him, with cream, chocolate and strawberries, which had been put on the cake very skillfully by Julian.

Paul was very grateful to both of them. They were two smart guys and they deserved all the happiness of the world. A few months before they had been declared eligible candidates to adopt a child and Paul really hoped that soon a small creature would arrive in the Harrison family. They deserved it, after all. And George, at last, overcame that sort of jealousy he had felt at Paul’s arrival. He would have been John's best friend forever, something very close to a brother.

Speaking of siblings, Paul had been incredibly happy to have found Mike at the party, but especially that he had talked a lot with Jim. Only a few months before Paul told his brother that he had "found" their father. Mike's initial reaction had been understandable: he had no intention of knowing what happened to him, nor why Paul changed his mind when his whole life he had been saying he didn't want to forgive him. But in front of Paul's insistence, Mike gave in, listened to Jim's story and eventually, agreed to forgive him. It was followed by a first meeting, where Mike was as clumsy as Paul, but however they went through it, also because Jim's clear happiness had been able to involve his children as well. And when you are happy, it’s all easier, especially resume a relationship stopped too soon.

So now, it was an immense joy for Paul to see Mike and Jim talking, with the little Mary sleeping blissfully in her grandfather's arms.

There was no need to inform Mike about the true nature of the relationship between Paul and John. He understood it by himself, and the thing surprised Paul infinitely, when at some point in the evening, they found themselves talking, like they did before Paul went away from Liverpool, when they were young, and Mike told him clearly and seemed to have accepted it without problems.

But how did he figure it out? Paul obviously was sure that Mike wouldn’t make any disreputable scenes for their situation. However he would never have imagined that he would come to find out by himself. In the few times they had all gathered together, John and Paul had always tried to be discreet, at least until the rest of Paul's family had been aware of their relationship. Only that, it seemed, the only one able to be discreet had been John. Paul didn't exactly get the same results. On the contrary! There was too much in his face, in his special smile for John, in his looks full of a feeling way too familiar to Mike, in the voice that became sweet when he said his name... And it was all this that told Mike what Paul's real feelings were. He, on the other hand, knew him better
than anyone else.

But the surprise of this discovery didn’t last long and soon was replaced by happiness because now all the people who loved him knew and shared his joy, they didn’t judge him nor they pushed him away.

None of this.

It was all right now.

So at the end of the evening, the guests returned home; Paul thanked them one by one, before accompanying his brother to his house. They would stay there for a couple of days.

Then he went back to John's house and sighing, closed the door at the very moment when John was coming down from upstairs. He had just put an exhausted and asleep Julian in bed.

"So." John said, his back against the handrail.

"So."

"You liked the party?"

Paul laughed softly and nodded, "Yes, very much."

"The music too?"

"Especially that." He answered, with a cheeky wink.

"It's a CD I made just for the occasion, you know. Didn’t I promise you a party with a lot of music last year?"

"Oh, was it a promise? It seemed more of a threat." Paul joked, laughing a little, "But thank you, really, it was all perfect."

"Is the truth?" the other man asked, the glance had become serious all of a sudden.

Paul gasped and blinked, "Of course, why should I lie?"

"Why should you?" John stared at him intensely for a few seconds before stepping towards him, "Since this morning you seem strange. Did something happen?"

"No, John, nothing happened, don't worry. It must be that I’m tired." Paul answered, trying to laugh to reassure John first of all, but even himself.

Only that apparently he failed, and John noticed it right away.

"Bollocks." He snapped, now an inch away from Paul, "I shall also be daft, given the late hour, but I am always very careful when it comes to you."

"I know." Paul answered, looking at the floor.

"And I’m convinced that you are lying now, my love." John explained, worried, leaning a hand on his cheek, encouraging him to look him in the eye, "So, may I know what's going on?"

Paul sighed, finally raising his face towards John. He never wanted to make him worry like that: knowing him, John too had tormented himself throughout the day, having found out that something
was upsetting Paul, wondering what had happened, if it had been his fault, if it had been something said or done by John.

He didn't deserve to be kept in the dark, Paul convinced himself, since John had brought happiness into his life.

"Promise me you won't mock me."

"Why should I-"

"Promise me, John." Paul interrupted, putting a finger upon his lips.

"All right." John sighed, raising his eyes to the sky, "I promise."

"Well, then." Paul said, nodding absently after John made a cross on his heart.

Suddenly, under John’s affectionate and curious gaze, all those doubts that tormented Paul became so... ridiculous. Did he really think that what he had built with John, what they were living together was really just a fleeting illusion?

"Last night I had a nightmare." He murmured with a little voice, as if he had just become shy.

"What kind of nightmare?" John asked, interested.

"I had just moved to London for the new job, and I was about to step into your shop..."

"Déjà-vu."

Paul nodded sadly, "But in the dream I never came in and so I never met you."

John frowned, troubled, "And that was the nightmare?"

“Yes. When I woke up, I thought I was too happy to be able to live in reality. I thought this was a dream and that nightmare the real life."

Paul bit his lip, slightly anxious as he waited for John's reaction: an amused laugh, perhaps, or, in spite of the promise made, a nice teasing in Lennon style.

However, John didn’t do any of this, rather, he drew him to himself, wrapping his arms around his waist and gently smiling at him.

"But, Paul, you should know that well by now."

"What?"

"That we were destined to meet." John replied, laughing sweetly, "If you hadn't come in that day, you'd have done the next day. What does it matter? What matters is that I know for a fact that we would meet, in any way."

"Are you sure?" Paul asked, not yet fully convinced, "And if we had met in a different way and hadn’t become friends or-"

"Enough, now." John stopped him with a finger on his lips, "I told you. Anytime, anywhere, in whatever universe we found ourselves, I would choose you and you would take me with you, without any doubt."
Paul felt himself smiling in a more relaxed way, allowing himself to enjoy John’s warm touch, his sweet words, his tone that as the softest caress brushed his skin.

"All right, then. Let's forget this nightmare."

"That's a great idea." John murmured before bending over to kiss him softly.

And it was that loving gesture, along with what John had just told him, that finally convinced Paul that was reality. It wasn't a dream, it wasn't. Actually, it was a dream, yes, but a dream come true. And that was really all Paul could ask to life.

"I'm sorry I made you worry, John."

"Don't think about it."

"It's just that I'm so happy, with you and Julian, as happy as I've never been before; and the moment I realized it, I thought it was impossible for me to be granted this gift, that this huge happiness was true."

"It's true, Paul, because we're real."

Paul nodded, hiding his face in John's neck, letting him reassure him with caresses on his back and his lips touching his forehead. Unbelievable how with a few, simple, right words John could push away his fears. Of course they were real, John was real and warm in his arms, he smelled good, he smelled of a future with Paul.

"Is it better?" asked John then.

"Yes, thank you, John." Paul answered, giving him a kiss on his lips.

John smiled and fearlessly, slipped his hand into Paul's and let their fingers intertwine.

"Now, come with me, there's something that will make you forget this nasty nightmare once and for all."

"What is it?" Paul asked, curious, letting John lead him back into the living room.

John didn’t answer. He just approached the library and picked from the top shelf an object that then he handed to Paul. It was a square pack, slightly smaller than one of the many LP's John had, but definitely thicker, not to say heavy. It was wrapped in a shiny silvered paper over which a fine blue ribbon stood out.

"Is it a gift?" Paul asked.

"Gosh, what else could it be?" John replied, with a little laugh.

"Well..." Paul started to say, shrugging, "Actually, I thought the gift was the surprise party."

"The party was just a party, baby, but this is my birthday present for you. Or more precisely, a preview of the real gift."

Paul frowned perplexed, failing to understand what could hide behind John's words: he was usually good at knowing what he had in his mind, but it was also true that John knew how to be so damned mysterious sometimes. He made Paul want to be able to read in his mind. Yet like any other relationship, Paul also understood that leaving a bit of mystery was okay. It was what made the relationship more irresistible, exciting, unbelievable.
"It's no use trying." John said, waking him from his thoughts.

"Trying what?"

"Trying to read my mind, you idiot." John replied, giving him a slight pat on the shoulder, "Just open the gift."

Paul laughed and eventually decided to follow John's advice. He sat on the couch, impatient at this point to know what was hiding inside the gift, and began to remove the blue ribbon and then the paper.

In his hands he found what looked like an emerald-green velvet box.

"Open it." John encouraged him, crouching in front of him.

Paul obeyed. He snapped the opening and lifted the lid. He didn't really know what to expect, inside that box, but certainly not a shiny brass plaque.

"What does it mean?" he asked hesitating.

"Read it." John suggested to him with a nod.

Paul went back to look at the plaque and his heart made a small leap backwards.

There was a beautiful engraved pentagram: it was slightly wavy, with a G-clef at the beginning, but instead of the musical notes it was written...

"Lennon/McCartney Music school?"

"Yes, or maybe you prefer McCartney/Lennon?" John asked, biting his anxious lip, "But I think Lennon/McCartney sounds better and-"

"What... John, I don't understand..."

What does it mean?, he wanted to ask, but suddenly Paul found himself speechless.

No, he actually had the words, he had so many questions for John about what had been engraved on the plaque, that Paul didn't know where to start.

John sighed and stood up, only to go and sit next to Paul.

"You know, Paul..." He began to explain, leaning a hand on Paul's, "It's been a while since I started to think about it. You've done a great job with me and now, with all those kids. I think we should just open up a music school."

"A music school?"

John nodded, smiling, "At the beginning you could do the guitar lessons, and when we get a little bigger, we could hire teachers from other musical instruments."

Paul couldn’t believe that John was serious, but he knew that particular smile that was now on his face. It was what promised exciting adventures, as well as something that Paul would have loved very much.

"John, why are you doing all this?"
"Because I know how much you like working, but I understand that this situation is too unstable. I want to help you make it safer. Maybe a job that has to do with music won't be what you've always dreamed of, but it's still something."

"No, John, that's not the problem." Paul hurried to say, shaking his head to reassure him, "I mean, what are we going to do with the rest? What about your shop?"

"I'll leave it to George." John replied promptly, "He is going to need it."

"And what about the money for the school? Where will we take it?"

"We have some, don't worry." John assured him, "I've been saving money for centuries."

"I can't let you use it for me." Paul protested.

"Yes, you can. And I'm not using it for you anyway. Not just for you, at least. I'll use it for us. You'll be the teacher, and I'll take care of all the bureaucratic crap." John replied, trying to persuade him, "And then if I don't use it for the ones I care the most, who else should I use it for?"

John concluded with a sweet laugh and a slight blush on his cheeks, and Paul found himself imitated him. It seemed like John had thought of everything. He had the answer ready for Paul’s every question.

"John, you're so lovely, you know." Paul sighed, "And even this dream is lovely, but-

"Really?" John exclaimed, without caring much about the fact that Paul hadn't finished his sentence yet, "Does that mean you agree?"

"I'd love to, but we need a place for the school, right? We should look for a building and buy it and-

"I have it already."

John's answer, another rapid answer, made Paul blink, surprised.

"And what is it?"

John barely held a smile that had a hint of malice, and took Paul's hand hurriedly; he made him stand up and led him to the window facing the street.

"See? It's right there, in front of us." He explained, pointing to the apartment across the street.

Paul opened his eyes wide and turned to the other man, not knowing what to say. The only thing he knew for sure was that John's eyes shone like Paul hadn't seen for a while, and it was something that always managed to make him crazy.

"John, that is supposed to be my house."

John nodded and went back to look at him, allowing Paul to notice even more of that enthusiasm that was moving John's thoughts and actions.

"I know."

Paul had never seen John like that, as if he were a child with his new, incredible toy, and his mood, this anxious joy, managed to involve Paul too, especially since John's proposal also included a solution that lay now there, among them, as a silent presence between John and Paul.
"So..." Paul went on, smiling, "Do you want to evict me to do our music school?"

"Oh no." John replied, shaking his head, "or maybe yes, but I wanted to offer you a more tempting accommodation."

"What is it?" Paul asked, and the jump of his heart made him understand that somehow it already knew the answer.

Now it was right that Paul knew about it, too. So he waited, while John took the plaque from his hands and put it somewhere else, so they would be free to hold hands.

Then, at last, John spoke.

"Come live with me and Julian."

To those words, a thrill crossed Paul. It was born with love from John’s hands, so Paul thought that perhaps the same thrill crossed his partner. Which made him delightfully fascinated.

Paul could hardly say that he had never thought of it. It was obvious that solution had repeatedly crossed his mind in the last few weeks. It was just that Paul had never had the courage to talk about it with John; it was something that somehow frightened him, but Paul knew that basically it was a good fear, the kind of fear that came when a major change in his life happened, a certainly positive change.

"John, I-" he began to say in a trembling voice, but John that day had developed the amazing ability to always be able to interrupt him before he ended up talking.

"I know maybe it's a little rushed." John explained, his eyes had never stopped shining with enthusiasm and love, "But why postpone it again? You sleep here almost every night. And then I've already made another little plaque for our letterbox."

"Really?" Paul exclaimed, laughing, "And what's written on it?"

John put a hand in his trousers pocket to extract immediately after a small, shiny, rectangular brass plaque, on which there was engraved...

"Lennon/McCartney."

Paul smiled to himself, taking in his hands the new object. He felt that John's own warmth was now taking possession of his body, because John knew how to be impetuous in an absolutely adorable way. Everything in his hands would become the most special and exciting thing, like that tag, like their names next to each other and Paul just wanted them to be like this forever.

"Looks like a lovely prospect."

"It is." John agreed.

"Then if we already have the tag..." Paul continued, tenderly wrapping his arms around John's neck, "I think I really have to accept, don’t you think?"

"Yes, but only if you really want it." John said, holding him the same way.

"John, I love you." Paul sighed, happily, "How could I not really want it?"

"Well, I've messed up your life..." John said, spreading his fingers on Paul's back and pulling him closer, perhaps for a foolish and unconscious fear that he could lose him, again.
Paul knew that fear would be with John forever, and the worry he had caused in him that day was a proof. But John didn’t have to be afraid of losing him, of the future, nor of what happened in their past.

"You have messed up my life?"

Maybe they would deal every day of their lives with those worries, John with his fear of losing Paul, and Paul with the fear of not deserving that happiness.

"'Course I have. I am very grateful to you, Paul, because you have brought order in my life." John said, "But look what I did to yours. The complete opposite. I brought the mess. You were wealthy, you had a good job, a normal life and now-"

"Oh, John, stop it, please. You didn't bring the mess."

Paul smiled, letting himself be tightened by John's arms, so that their chests would touch, so that the heart of one beat in unison and next to each other, as they would do forever from now on.

"You've brought me a much more important thing."

"What?"

Because after all, only this counted.

How important were all the sufferings they had faced, those sorrows, those disappointments, the loneliness they had felt and now thrown behind them?

How important were all those things if now they had blown them away from each other’s life?

None of this mattered, if now for Paul there was nothing but John.

And his love.

And his joy.

And...

"John, you've brought me music."

The end

Chapter End Notes

Hello, sorry for being late. As I wrote on tumblr I went through busy days. And in some way also disappointing days, like the fact that Elton John cancelled the concert I was waiting from March 2018. But anyway, I finally did it and the last chapter of this au is ready.

I really hope you all enjoy the end. Let me know if you didn't like something. Did you imagine that could be the end of our lovely John and Paul? :D

Anyway, thank you very much to everyone who spent some time to read all the
That's great, really. <3
I think I'll translate the sequel which is called Baby it's you (sha la la la). Just give me some time to organize everything and also to write a oneshot I've been thinking of since last March. Lol. xD
So, again, as we say in Italy, grazie mille!! <3
Ciao!!
Chiara

End Notes

Hello!! I've come back! :3
So this is a new story, a Police! Au... I love AU's! <3
This is a sort of prologue, not a real chapter. But we have already seen John and Jim.
What do you think of this start? :D
Let me know here or on tumblr.
I want to thank Vale for her help with the correction of the chapters and whydontwedoitontheinternet for her support. <3
Next chapter, “It won’t be long”, next Saturday.
For now bye bye.
Chiara

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!