A line in the sand

by marlowe78

Summary

Sometimes, making your own decisions leads to making really bad ones. So subsequently, if you're a bit afraid of making bad choices, it makes sense - for a while - to not make choices at all, right?

In the desert-city of Las Vegas, Steven Hyde draws a line in the sand, steps over it, and decides to do something about his future.
The sun was sweltering, casting shivering illusions over the paved parking-lot. From within the room though came a cool, air-conditioned breeze that hit him in the face. Maybe it was that shock of cold that woke him up, made him shake his head and take his surroundings in, or maybe the loud car-horn from behind, or maybe it was just coincidence. Fact was that Hyde frowned and read and even understood the sign over the door. 'Divine Chapel of the Desert', and underneath '24hrs wedding-chapel, for those who can't wait for Forever-After'.

What the hell?

Looking down, he understood he was wearing fancy pants and a jacket over a black t-shirt - much too well-dressed for the way he was feeling. There was a woman next to him, wearing a nice blouse and skirt, hair done in a fancy style and he had two rings clutched in his left hand and the heat was just as obnoxious as the electric recorded organ from within and he didn't know who that woman was! If you asked him, he’d have said he’d never seen her in his whole life.

He knew he was in Vegas, knew how he got there. Knew why he got there. A sharp pain sliced into his brain, digging into that spot behind his eyes and setting up camp. A headache of epic proportions was building, and he needed a fucking drink.

“Are you ready, honey?” the woman asked, and Hyde shuddered. He was about to marry a stranger, give a ring to someone he didn’t even know. He could still smell booze on his breath, could taste it between his teeth, and at a glance at the calendar, he understood that he had no fucking clue what he’d done the last five weeks. “Honey?” she asked him, looking concerned. Maybe she was a nice girl, and maybe she cared about him. But he was drunk, fucking drunk, still swaying – that wasn’t the heat, he knew that kind of sway – and she was about to marry a nineteen-year-old drunk who couldn’t have been sober for even a day during their acquaintance. So he didn’t hold much hope.

He took a step back.

“Mr Hyde and Ms Leonard?” a man from the chapel called. “The Hyde/Leonard-wedding?”

“That’s us, honey,” the woman – his fiancé? Oh god! – said, holding out her hand to him. Hyde took another step back. “What is wrong, Stevie?”

He felt like he was going to puke right here on the front-steps of this oh-so-romantic little chapel. “Uh.” His throat scratched like he’d gargled with acid, and the way he felt, it might not be so far from the truth. “Uh, sorry. Uh… um…” he wrecked his brain for her name, but it remained blank. “… darling”, he chose, lamely. “I… I’m really sorry, but this … I … Here.” He grabbed her hand and pressed the rings into her palm. “Find someone better, I can’t do this.” And with his world twisting and sending his brain in a hard spin, he turned around and left the chapel-grounds, happy that he found his Camino on the parking-lot and his keys in his pocket. He was sure he shouldn’t drive, but staying was not an option and leaving his car wasn’t one, either.

God, he needed a drink.

God, the last thing he needed was a drink.

Chapter End Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes
Hey there, hi there, ho there!
My first fanfic in this fandom - I'm so excited! I hope there's still someone out there reading it, but it more or less wrote itself, so. Had to post it.
Just in case you missed the tags - this will end up Hyde/Jackie, since duh! But it will take quite a while to arrive, so I hope you'll bear with me anyway. I did research and tried to find a timeline for when this is supposed to happen, but the show's all over the place with its time-accuracy, so I just dumped it all in 1979 and waved my hands. Anyway - on with the show.
Chapter 2

Oregon was rainy and cold. Not really surprising, but Hyde hadn’t thought it was possible for a place to be this rainy and cold. Since he’d arrived at Fort Porcupine three days before, he’d not seen even a hint of blue sky, not to mention a little bit of sunlight. It was gloomy, but it was weirdly appropriate.

Fort Porcupine was actually Fort Porculio, Oregon, a stone’s throw away from the Idaho border. Named after the great General Arthur A. Porculio, who’d rescued a kitten from a tree back in 1852 while slaughtering Indians in their beds. Or whatever, Hyde didn’t really care. He’d probably have to know that, come time, but right now he took the liberty of not giving a fuck. He was wet and miserable, and every muscle in his body ached in ways that seemed impossible. He’d never realized how many muscles there were in the human body. Should have asked Mrs Forman.

They had two hours off now. Rest and recover, but he felt an itch under his skin that was anything but restful. He’d probably be able to relax a little if he’d do a bit of circle-time, but that would not only lead to a swift kick in the ass but also completely contradict his reasons for being here.

And there wasn’t any pot on the base anyway.

So on top of his murderous muscles, he was also suffering from a bouncing leg. For some reason, he couldn’t stop thinking about the letter he’d written a few days after he’d found himself on the brink of marriage to a stranger. He’d been trying to dry himself out on a campground in Yosemite Park. It was remote and lonely and he’d hated every minute, but there hadn’t been any alcohol in the vicinity and it had been enough to pass the blood-tox-tests for his Basic Training Entry Exam, after which he’d been given a list of Training-Centres to choose from for ten weeks of learning how to yell Sir very loudly and do whatever some asshole in green told him to do.

He couldn’t quite believe it himself, but at the time, it had seemed like a really smart idea to join the US Army.

Red would be so proud.

Hyde chuckled dryly. Red would probably have a heart-attack, so he’d decided not to tell him. He’d decided not to tell anyone, mostly because he didn’t want anyone to know, but also because he couldn’t have any distractions around. He knew they couldn’t come visit, but he also didn’t want them to. Didn’t want anyone to be at the end-ceremony of this stupid endeavour, or realize he was so fucked up that not even the Army wanted him. And most of all he didn’t want a reminder of what he’d lost, probably due to his own stupidity and not so much because of what he’d originally thought.

Or maybe that was hope speaking. But right now, he didn’t deserve hope. He didn’t need hope, he needed some cojones to go through with this and everything that brought him back to Point Place, Wisconsin made his balls shrivel into soft little bags of misery and self-loathing.

Not literally, though, thank God.

The first thing he’d had to lose – after the alcohol in his blood – had been his hair. He still despised how he looked: just as moronic as every other guy here. No sideburns, no curls, just standard military nothing. It was cold, for fuck’s sake! He’d never realized how much his hair buffered him from a cold head, and he’d never thought a cold head was this uncomfortable. At least, other than Red
Forman’s, his hair would grow back in time.

Good thing he often wore a helmet these days.

Again, he chuckled – a little less dryly. Forman would make endless fun of him, just for the helmet. Hell, he’d make fun of himself if he could, but this was what he’d chosen and this was what he’d stick to. Being sore from running around and doing push-ups beat being sore from sitting on his ass and drinking his liver away. If he had to wear a helmet for that, he would fucking wear a fucking helmet.

The letter, on its way to Windhoek in Namibia, was not long. Half a page maybe. He hadn’t been sure to send it before actually arriving here – given his track-record, it was after all quite possible that he’d chicken out. But hearing that he wouldn’t be able to contact anyone for the ten weeks he was stuck in this mudpuddle had made the decision for him. He’d written it in his campground-detox-cabin, when his fingers had been so restless and his body had been shaking and aching all the time, but he hadn’t dared to proof-read it before putting it in the letterbox.

That explained why it was much sappier than it would have usually been. It made up for the very short letter to the Formans, which consisted of

Not dead, don’t worry, please. You can sell my stuff if you want to, though there isn’t really much value. I’ll come back and pick anything up that’s left once Form… he’d crossed that through Eric comes home. I’m sorry for worrying you, if I did. I promise I’m not being a dumbass right now. I’ll explain when I’m back. Bye.

He’d thought about writing more, about thanking them for being so generous towards him and giving him shelter and all the other stuff that had been floating in his brain at the time, but that would not help them stop worrying. In fact, it would probably make them worry even more, as it sounded like he would not be coming back at all.

But he would, of that he was certain. There wasn’t much certainty right now – never had been, really – but that one thing was a given for him. The Formans deserved to be thanked and appreciated in person.

But Eric Forman was the one far away from Point Place, and while he missed him like a limb, right now the distance made it possible for Hyde to tell him a bit more. About his reasons for diving off the face of the Earth for a while. About his doubts that those reasons where confounded and about this damn problem he had when it came to Jackie and Kelso. Forman would also understand why he needed to be far away from Point Place – more than anyone. Africa was pretty drastic, but the sentiment was still the same.

Something had to give.

He hadn’t written a letter to anyone else. Really, to whom? He didn’t think Fez would be interested much, apart from knowing he wasn’t dead and the idea of writing Kelso – even if he was one of his best friends – gave him hives. Donna… He would have loved to write a letter to Donna, but he didn’t know what to tell her. Of all of them, she got him the most. Of all of them, her letter would be the one that spilled everything, but her judgement would be the harshest. He couldn’t bear the thought of her reading everything and judging his reasons without him being there to give defence. He needed her to understand, and she wouldn’t be able to with just words. She needed to see him – and seeing her would break him into brittle little pieces and shatter all his resolve. He’d never quite stopped thinking about what could have been if she’d been open to his advances, back before it was clear that she would never want anyone as much as the scrawny neighbourhood-boy.

Maybe she’d have kicked him into shape, or maybe he’d have burned the spirit out of her. He would never know, and wouldn’t want to find out anymore. Donna was his friend, and she would forever
remain his friend – if he didn’t manage to fuck that one up one day – but she was also the first person he’d felt more for than friendly affection, and it had definitely not just been lust. He loved Jackie, there had never been doubt – inwardly – about that, and he’d never felt the urge to try once more for Donna. But. There would always be that little something more for her inside him, and he didn’t want to erase that.

He’d written her a Not dead card later, though. She deserved more, but that was all he’d been able to do then.

And Jackie? Well, for one he didn’t know her address. He knew she was in Chicago, had a little show in one of the local channels and looked more gorgeous than ever. But seeing her … it burned, like he was thrusting his hands into stinging nettles over and over. So he’d banned himself from that torture. He didn’t want her image to cause him pain, lest he end up like Pavlov’s mutt and start flinching whenever he saw her. He would see her, though. Someday, he’d grab his pride and drag it to her doorstep and they’d talk and he’d listen – fucking listen and if there was another man in her life by then… well. He’d hate it, and hate him, but he was kinda putting a lot of bets on this experience here to hope that he’d be able to let her go – with his own dignity and anyone’s face still intact.

But writing her? For mostly the same reasons that counted for Donna, he couldn’t do it. He’d spill everything into the letter or, to the other extreme, go into paragraph of paragraph of acid. He knew he was capable of that, since he’d started more than one letter in that cabin and most of them turned into accusations and angry vitriol. He knew he’d slice her heart out without ever wanting to, and she didn’t deserve that.

Even if she’d slept with Kelso that day, she didn’t deserve that. He knew that he could break her, and he didn’t want to have her broken. He was hoping that when he saw her again, she’d be strong enough to outwit her own insecurities and become the woman he had seen glimpses of every now and then. The one he’d always seen standing next to him whenever he’d allowed himself to think a bit of the future.

Too damn bad he’d been too chicken to tell her that before Chicago.

None of the letters gave a return address.

He hadn’t written a letter to WB. He didn’t think that was necessary, especially since he’d talked to him on the phone before he’d signed up. WB was the only one who knew where he was, had an actual address for him, and not just because he had to tell him that ‘Grooves’ would need a new manager for a while. Maybe his father had told Angie where he was, but he didn’t think so. Hyde didn’t really know why WB of all people, not Eric or Donna or one of the Forem—… ah, fuck, who was he kidding. He knew quite well. WB was a neutral party. He was far enough away to not be randomly pestered by his folks and friends, and he had a secretary who could pretend he wasn’t there if they did anyway.

If life had told him anything, it was that he needed an exit-strategy to feel safe. Not a strategy for life’s exit – that one was obvious. But one for leaving a sticky situation with as little damage as possible. Having someone know where he was seemed like a good idea.

He’d also somehow hoped WB would talk him out if it.

He hadn’t, just to make that clear.

He’d laughed about it and then told him he’d not even make it a week. Which – well. Not unreasonable. But there was no alternative Hyde could see. He had his reasons – it wasn’t like he just signed himself over to the Man, body and soul, on a whim – or drunk. He’d been at least a little
sober. He had his reasons, and one of them was that he knew himself too well.

Since there would be no contact with the real world outside the base anyway, Hyde figured it’d be smart to have someone know his whereabouts. In case he couldn’t keep his mouth shut and would be kicked out or killed himself doing something stupid.

A not unlikely scenario, though thankfully less likely than if it had been Forman here instead of him.

So anyway, here he was, now. Sitting outside the bathroom on the floor, wishing for a joint and thinking about Forman, of all things. He didn’t even have his shades here, and already he felt doubt creep up in his spine. These guys around him looked all alike, apart from the six black guys and the small Hispanic dude named Gutierrez and the wiry Italian San Marco. Most of the others looked like bleached white bread, and the few with tan faces looked especially moronic with their shiny-white heads where no sun had touched the skin before.

He at least was white all over.

Hyde felt himself smirk. Right.

“What are you doing, man?” One of them had snuck up on him. He thought his name might be Washington, but it could also have been Miller – he couldn’t quite tell, those two looked similar from the front. “We need to get up at five tomorrow, you should sleep.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Miller – that was him, he recognized the gap between the front-teeth – grinned. “Right. Still, better get some shut-eye; those sadists will be waking us earlier just to make our life miserable. I just know they do.”

“Yeah, thanks man.” Hyde scrambled up. Floor was cold anyway, and while the beds sucked, they were better than the floor. “You’re Miller, right?”

“Yo, all me.” He stalled. “What, no joke about not being able to tell us apart?”

“Why, that’s easy. Washington’s got that dent in his skull, probably where he got dropped as a baby.” Miller laughed and covered his mouth in an honest-to-God giggle. Damn, of course he’d managed to bond with the nerdy one from the beginning.

“I was talking more or less about all of us brothers, man. Usually, that’s the first we hear when there’s no hair or clothing to distinguish us from each other.” He sounded bitter and pretty smart. Hyde couldn’t place the accent, but he knew it wasn’t Wisconsin or Canadian. But the wording was upper middle-class, he’d bet, and the bitterness seemed to be more from general knowledge than personal experience.

“I wouldn’t say that, man. But most people only look at one thing anyway and base their assumptions on that. ‘s just the way society works.” He held out his hand. “Hyde.”

“Yeah, I know that. Brewer has yelled that a lot already. What did you do to piss him off so much? We’re not even here a week.”

Hyde had a pretty good idea why their Sergeant had picked on him as the scapegoat, but he wasn’t ready to tell that to just anyone. He’d done his research before signing up, and he knew what they were doing here. How they’d make perfect, little sockpuppets out of everyone. Even if he’d set himself up to the brainwashing on purpose and in full knowledge of the strategy, that didn’t mean he’d just blab to the first person who was talking friendly.
Even if this guy reminded him of Forman a little too much. If Forman were six foot five and black as the night.

“Right. Better get some shut-eye, now. And see if my pants are dry already. See ya, Miller.”

Most of the recruits were already asleep, two were talking to each other on adjoining beds, sharing pictures of family, or sweethearts. Maybe puppies, who knew. Three were playing cards, Go Fish of all things, and his cot looked so inviting that Hyde just climbed onto it, removed his boots and let the silent murmur of voices and the unpleasant smell of too many guys sweating in one room lull him into relaxation.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so as a forewarning: I’m not American, I have no real insight into the military structure – much less about the structure as it has been in the 70s/early 80s. I’m basing this here on some Wikipedia-articles and a lot of imagination. So for the record: I know the basics, and I don’t intend offense, and I hope I won’t make too many mistakes. This is not going to be a story about how much fun the Army could be if you were a little rebellious, like some movies suggest. I’m pretty sure those are bullshit, and it’s not my intention to make this one a joke or a parody. So please don’t expect or fear something like that from me. Oh, and I’m inventing the base because I can’t take a real one since they are all at the wrong places in the US. If it makes you feel better, just imagine Fort Porculio was torn down in the early 80s, it’s after all quite possible.

Also, as said before, this is a long story. If you don’t want to read a story without any other characters from the show but Hyde, just skip over to the second-to last chapter. I’d be sad, though, like Fez without candy.
Chapter 3

Hyde had thought he’d already been in as much pain as possible, but he’d been wrong. So, so wrong. After not enough sleep and disgusting food – still better than what Edna had fed him, but life with Kitty Forman had spoiled him rotten – the recruits had been sent out on a ‘little exercise’. Meaning: 15 miles of running through the wet, muddy terrain with backpacks filled with what felt like cement and boots that had not been broken in yet. He was one big lump of pain.

The only conciliation was that everyone in his group was the same. Carter – ‘no, no relation to the President’ – had fallen behind, and Master Sergeant Brewer was screaming at him every step he made. Hyde might have felt sympathy for Carter but he was too busy trying not to puke. Kelso had once said that running gave you a high, like weed, but so far it felt more like that one day when Hyde had tried acid. That trip had nearly skinned him alive and he wouldn’t touch it anymore with a ten-foot pole.

“You sissies, get your asses in gear or I’ll kick them until they’re blue! Blue-asses, all of you, lazy, fat, wobbly chicken, each and every one. Faster! Hyde, speed up or you’ll be overtaken by Carter and he might trample you in his wake, like that fat walrus he is!”

Hyde gave his legs a little more power and he picked up his pace – not in any way impressive, but he was just about done. Carter whimpered somewhere from behind, and while there were two more guys between them, Hyde would be picked out again today, he just knew.

Brewer hated his guts, or maybe that was an act that he’d perfected already. It was probably because he’d made some stupidly lame joke during the haircut, which led to Brewer asking his name and yelling at him and calling him a smart-mouth for half an hour, so he guessed that bit of idiocy had sealed his fate.

Hyde also wouldn’t go out of his way to impress that asshole, like most of the others seemed to try. Self-preservation-instincts were usually pretty high on him, but they came in quite messed-up ways. He tried to avoid work or punishment and pain but mostly through evasion, not obedience. He could have made his life less miserable if he’d just done what Edna and all those ‘uncles’ wanted from him, but that would have made him a freaking doormat. Or a punching-bag, or worse. So he’d just left whenever someone wanted something from him, or – if leaving was for one reason or another impossible – had distanced himself from everything so far that he was just as absent in mind as he wanted to be in body.

Through all this pain and misery now, he wondered if his coping-strategies would work here. Shoving pain away to get something done would work fine, but distancing to the point of not hearing everything was probably a sure-fire way to get his ass kicked.

“Halt!” Everyone stopped, trying to get breath back without making it obvious. As if Sergeant Brewer didn’t know they were all panting like pugs in the summer-heat. “Five minute stop, drink something and get your gear in order, and if by the time I blow the whistle even one of you slowpokes is still not standing and ready to continue, I will make this trip double and throw in some nice crunch-ups for good measure!”

Everyone dropped pretty much where they stood. Some of the guys were lucky enough to find a tree to lean against, but Hyde just slopped down into the mud. At this point, it didn’t matter if he got dirt on his back – everything was soaked and dirty anyway. “Man, I’ll be pruned up like a raisin when this is over,” he complained. The person closest to him – he didn’t even know who that was, not Miller, though – grunted back. Could have been affirmation or disagreement, didn’t make a difference. For a few precious moments, all he did was breathe. He remembered this trick from home.
whenever he got too upset to keep his breath even or tried to keep from bawling like a baby: deep in – hold it for a few seconds – deep out. It calmed him down and it didn’t take long to realize that cold was creeping up from the ground. Having his muscles cramp on top of being exhausted would be really bad, so reluctantly he groaned himself upright and unhooked his canteen. Long, slow draughts of water, wait until it settles, repeat. Man, if he’d known his childhood would give him the skills to withstand a long-distance-track in the Army, Hyde’d have been more grateful for the way he’d been raised.

Not really, no.

One of the guys from further back was already packing everything up, tightening the straps of his pack and re-lacing his shoes. Might be a good idea, except that the thought of even touching his feet right now would make Hyde break out in tears. As they were, they were tolerable. Change anything and they might be better – but if they got worse, it would be… well. Worse.

Still, he checked everything he had on him, trying to rile himself enough to get up. Mind over matter, young grasshopper, and with a sigh he wrapped his legs underneath him in the tailor-seat and pushed himself up from there. All around, the guys were rising as well. That guy right next to him – Wilson, how practical to have nametags what with everyone looking the freaking same – was still only half-done. Brewer was checking his watch, so Hyde tapped Wilson on his thigh with his toes. “Get up, man. We gotta get moving in seconds.”

“I can’t,” Wilson moaned “I think I’m dying.”

“No you’re not, idiot. Come on, we’ll only have to run more if you stay here. That includes you. So move your ass.” He held out his hand, and with a groan Wilson took it and let himself be pulled up.

“What have we got here, now!”

Of freaking course Brewer would look up just then.

“Is one of you chicken too weeny-tired to get up on his own, huh? What are you, girls? You chickenshit dumb boneheads, you’ll be a disgrace to the uniform and–” At this point, Hyde just stopped listening. Right at the end of the rant would come an order, he’d be back on air for that.

“Now get your asses in gear and move it! Tomorrow, 4:30, I want you on the grounds for some double-crunches together, seeing as you’re so close already!” He blew the whistle right in between their ears, and man, that really hurt.

The rest of the tour, Hyde tried to get the ringing to stop. Last time that’d happened was after a Black Sabbath concert, and it had taken three days to hear clearly. He was hoping that this time would be a bit quicker. Especially since he didn’t have half as much fun as at the concert.

Man, Ozzy really knew how to rock.

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Hyde was barely able to blink when, after what felt like days, a relieved groan went through the group. He looked up and there it was, the most beautiful thing in the world.

Fort Porcupine, in all its porky glory, just half a mile or so to go. He could totally do that.

Some hours – minutes? Weeks? – later, they all stumbled through the doors and if Hyde hadn’t known this would be a setup, he’d have broken down with the three guys from the front of the troop as well. But he knew it would be a setup, so he stayed on his feet, swaying. Wilson had stuck to him
after he’d pulled him up, and he wasn’t sure if he liked that. The guy’s face had a resemblance to Kelso that was really uncanny. Apart from the nose, which was less wide, Wilson could have been a twin.

“All right, you ninnies! Petersen, Washington, that Spaghetti-faced whatsisname – you’ll be glad to know that because of your inability to stay in line until I fucking give the fucking order to be at rest, all of you dimwitts will stand to attention for the next ten minutes. Packs down and at attention, do you hear me?!”

“Yes, sir,” the group mumbled, and of course that wasn’t good enough.

“What was that? I can’t hear you chicks! I want an answer, did you all hear me?”

“Sir, yes Sir!” Hyde didn’t even have the energy to mentally sneer at the sound of the numbed-down masses, degrading themselves to complete obedience. Mostly because right now, he was one of the masses.

“Now – A-tention!”

He blanked out again, concentrating on Zeppelin-lyrics instead. His knees were shaking and his legs were starting to wobble, but he’d be damned if he gave up and gave in. He could totally do this, he wouldn’t let the Man best him. Not here, not now.

All last night
Sat on the levee and moaned
All last night
Sat on the levee and moaned
Thinkin’ about my baby
And my happy home

Should have chosen a different song…

He knew for a fact it hadn’t been ten minutes when Brewer blew his whistle and commanded them to shower and get grub, then hit the sack. The song was just about seven minutes long, and he hadn’t gotten to the end yet. He might not understand what the hell a click was supposed to be, but he sure knew Zeppelin. He’d listened to them so much, he knew the length and pace of every single one of their songs, which was a handy method to keep time.

Brewer was taking it easy on them, then. Would you look at that.
Hyde knew that Basic Training consisted of finely-tuned torture to get the group to bond, shed individual thoughts and character, become one big, easy-to-control mass of good little tin-soldiers who would not even ask how high they should jump but just jump the highest they could. No questions, no doubts, no nothing. No names, no distinguishing features – apart from those that were attached – no past and no future. It was the way of the Military. No exaggeration – those were the facts, man. He’d done his research, after all, before signing up. The method was meant to kill the individual and form them anew, into something greater - they wished - and better. A pack – no, a fucking hive! – that would work as one great unit together, under the thumb of the Man on top. He despised the methods of breaking them all, but he couldn’t deny that it was working.

His friendly acquaintance with Wilson hadn’t formed further than what it had been after the two of them had to perform competing crunch-ups before sunrise. They were told to hold the shoulders up until Brewer gave the ‘Down’-command and whenever one of them started to sag – because that was a fucking given, neither of them was really that fit – the other had to hold it longer until the sagger had pulled himself up again.
In the beginning, Wilson had out-sagged Hyde quite a bit. Even if Hyde’s own muscles weren’t that amazing, the fact alone that he had thirty pounds less to hold up made a difference. Not that Wilson was fat. He was just heavy-set, and had probably done some weightlifting. Or worked on a farm, whatever. But after three or four times holding his own body up solely through the power of his abs for a goddamn long time, the difference had equalled itself out.

Hyde wasn’t sure who of them’d had to hold the longest but a few choice comments by the Sergeant had Wilson convinced that he’d been the one to suffer most. Hyde suspected they were pretty much equal because he was pretty sure by now that Brewer knew exactly what he was doing. Didn’t change a thing, though.

Wilson had stopped talking to him after that, and well – good to know early on before he invested any time in camaraderie. Sticking to himself wouldn’t work on the long run – that was the exact thing they were determined to snuff out in the Military – but working together wasn’t the same as actually liking each other. Hyde could work fine with anyone.

Right now, he was sitting in the classroom to learn about gun-safety. It was surprisingly smart that they wouldn’t be issued guns until they’d at least learned some basic rules about them, but everyone was giddy with anticipation.

After the three hours, they would get armed.

Hyde had mixed feelings for that. Yes, there were severe – really severe! – punishments in place if anyone neglected the safety protocols, but if someone did, the mistake could be fatal. He was already going through all his comrades in his mind, trying to find the ‘Kelso’ in between that he’d avoid at all costs. He still remembered the BB-gun-incident. Even though he’d not been injured beyond a pinch at his shoulder, he’d still been a bit terrified. Yes, he’d let Kelso off the hook – the guy was an idiot, not vengeful or malicious. But in the end, he’d handled a fucking loaded weapon in a closed room with as much clumsiness and idiocy as possible while at the same time being immensely angry at one of the people in that closed room.

That accident had been bound to happen, and Hyde was just glad that at the trip to Bob Pinciotti’s hunting-cabin, nobody had gotten killed by Kelso and his gun. At the least, Officer Kelso was in fact very careful with his weapons now. Forman had talked to him and made him realize that as a father, there would always be the possibility that his girl would find his gun.
New And Improved Kelso was close to paranoid with his police-weapon.

In the classroom, the Gun-and-Safety-Officer – O’Hare – came to an end. So far, there was nothing new or surprising, apart from the specifics of the guns they’d be holding in a few minutes. Their workings, their mechanism, safety on-off – that kind of thing. Hyde was bored but listened anyway. There would be near-certainly a quiz about it, and other than Maths or History in school, where he hadn’t really given much of a crap, this was important in a very immediate way.

“A-tention!”

Like the good little soldiers they were trying to be, the class stood as one, back straight – good Lord, his abs still burned! – legs straight, heels together, hands at the seam of the pants. Shoulders out, sight up front. The door at the back had opened, and Hyde was glad that he wasn’t for once in the back-rows and that there were guys between him and whoever had snuck up on them. He hated being snuck up on.

“At ease,” the person from behind said and they all went to the slightly easier, but laughably un-easy position they were being drilled into from six to seven every goddamn morning. “Sergeant O’Hare, are the recruits fit for the armoury?” It was Brewer; he would be taking them out to the range and deliver them to the next officer, one they hadn’t yet met. It was like freaking kindergarten here, an escort at every corner. Hyde wondered what they thought would happen if they were left alone. Probably drink, rock and roll, or something similarly depraving, while in reality 99% of his fellows would just drop where they stood and sleep for a fucking week.

“Yes, Sir. The recruits are updated on the protocols and functions of their weapons, Sir.”

“You made them aware of the fact that when it comes to safety, there will be consequences in a kind they haven’t yet seen?”

“Yes Sir. They are aware that they will get one warning for sloppy handling of their guns, and instant punishment should their behaviour endanger anything alive, be it a fellow human or a fly on the wall, Sir.”

“Good. Recruits!” Everyone stood at attention again. Damn, that mindscrew-crap was really working well. There wasn’t even any thought required, the body just reacted without the conscious part of the brain. “Follow me.”

”Sir, yes Sir!”

Silently, Hyde vowed to never call anyone ‘Sir’ ever again when he got out of here. That crap was toxic.

They marched in line – good God, he was marching! – to the armoury, where there was more talking about the rules, name-signing, explanation about the numbers they all needed to learn by heart so whenever someone handed them a weapon that wasn’t theirs, they would fucking know by looking at the number. Hyde hoped he got something easy, like 666, but of course he wasn’t that lucky.

At least so was nobody else, since the serial-numbers were several letters and numbers in a near-endless row. Great.

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They were partnered up, Hyde got San Marco as his partner. Miller got Wilson, who seemed to have some kind of problem with Miller’s skin-color, if Hyde wasn’t misinterpreting the avoidance Wilson
had going. Whatever – asshole would have to get up on his own from now on, or one of his whitebread-buddies from the corn-centre Wilson had started to hang out with would have to wake him on the next hike they’d be put through.

San Marco, while quiet, was a decent guy as far as Hyde could tell. They had spoken a few words here and there at the locker-room or at the cantina. So far, Hyde knew his name was George, his parents were from Lexington, Kentucky, and he’d never been to Italy in his whole life. Last person over there had been his great-great granddad. Even in WW2, San Marco’s male relatives had only been to France and Germany. Hyde knew that from listening in on conversations between San Marco and Willis in the evenings. The two had the bunk-beds right next to him and Washington. Because of his slighter build, Hyde had gotten the upper bed, from where he could hide a little from all the guys and all the gossip. Also, he could spy on people. Awesome.

In this exercise, one held the stop-watch while the other dismantled and assembled the gun and the time would be noted on a piece of paper. Then change the stopwatch to the other, rinse and repeat. Accompanied by the clicks and scratches of the metal, their lovely Sergeant screamed insults and abrasive comments to get them… well, Hyde didn’t know what he really wanted to accomplish. From experience with Edna and Red Forman, Hyde knew that yelling didn’t help anyone solve a task quicker.

He tuned it out as much as he could, but some of the poison dripped in. Especially whenever San Marco was the target, he couldn’t quite detach himself completely. That guy looked five minutes away from crying, and that would be a catastrophe.

George was a slender man, not unlike Forman but with less shoulders. He was twenty-three already and had always wanted to be a chopper-pilot. He’d probably do great, he had the will to do it, had fought his parents on going to the military instead of becoming something which earned a lot of money, and he felt so proud of goddamn America, it was nearly intolerable. Still – he seemed like a good guy, and Hyde didn’t want him to suffer what would undoubtedly happen if San Marco dropped even one tear. “Man, I can’t get this pin set right. How do you do it so quickly?” he whispered, and George swallowed his misery and gave Hyde a hint. It wasn’t necessary, the pin was one of the easiest things to assemble, but sue him; Hyde hadn’t been able to think of something else so quickly.

“No listen to that shit, man,” he whispered when Brewer was on the other side of the room, yelling at someone else. “He’s just trying to get a reaction, and the minute you show him one, he’ll burn you to the ground. Just… let that shit go one ear in, one ear out. Pretend it’s not you he’s yelling at, if that helps.”

San Marco shifted and took a look around, trying not to be too obvious about it. “Does that help you? He’s insulting your mother so hard, I can’t understand why you’re not up in arms with him.”

Hyde chuckled voicelessly. “First of, that would be all he wants – a reason. I won’t give him one. Second – whatever he’s saying about my Ma is pretty much accurate, so I really don’t care. He doesn’t know anything that would really hurt, man. And the same goes for you. He’s trying to goad you into showing your weakness, and the minute you do – bam, he’ll exploit it for the rest of your life.” At the puzzled stare, Hyde reviewed his words. “I mean your stay here. Of course.”

“What are you ninnies talking about, huh? Are you just blabbering and bragging like old lunch-ladies in the break room, or are you planning on becoming men here, you pussies?” Hyde might - might - have rolled his eyes a little, because come on, man – that was really pathetic. But he and San Marco did stand at attention quickly, blank stare on the face. Hyde knew San Marco had a much more difficult time with this blank-thingy they demanded at the Military; his parents were probably nice and kind and hadn’t taught him this trick already.
Forman would be crying by now.

“What are you smirking at, Hyde? Was there something funny I said?” Ah, crap. “I asked you a question, recruit! Answer me!”

“Sir, yes, Sir. No Sir, there was nothing funny, Sir.”

“So you’re grinning like an idiot just as it is, huh? Like you’re on dope? Are you a dopehead, Hyde?” If the situation weren’t so prickly, he’d totally grin right now because man, he so wanted to say ‘yes’. “You look like you’re doped up, you junkie. Are you on dope, Hyde?”

“No, Sir! Sir!” Dammit.

“Ohhh, so I’m a liar, now? Are you calling me a liar, Hyde?” Hyde tried to remember why he was here, because he wanted to snap back so badly. But it hadn’t even been even a week yet. “I will tell you what kind of liar I am, Hyde, I will tell you a big, fat lie now. Listen. Are you listening?”

“Sir, yes Sir!”

“Good. I will tell you that you are not to be expected after this exercise out in front of the barracks in t-shirt and underpants. I will tell you that I do not want you to be there with your rifle primed and ready in your hand, though of course I want you not to have it unloaded. Was that a good lie, Hyde?”

“Sir, yes Sir.”

“Good. Now, go get your Colt fixed the way it should be and let Spaghetti-Man here show you how it’s done properly. Now!”

Hyde felt like punching a wall, or better yet, kicking the Sergeant in the ‘nads. But that wouldn’t do. *Patience, young grasshopper. You have much to learn, still.*

San Marco showed him all the tricks and while doing so, mouthed a silent ‘thank you’. He hadn’t even done anything, and here that idiot was, thanking him for nothing.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Little warning added: the ‘n-’word is used in this chapter, but only once. I've also been made aware (thank you for that!) that in the Army or Military, there's absolutely no tolerance for racism and also that it's highly unlikely that little groups would form (which makes sense). So I'm really sorry, I took creative license here for my story and I'm once again reminding people that I don't want to offend and I hope you can just handwave it away for the sake of the plot. Sorry!

It was cold. Unbelievably, it was still raining cats and dogs. Oregon should be ten thousand miles beneath sea-level by now, the way the rain was falling here. That the jeeps that kept passing him by and honking obnoxiously at his misery were even still able to find traction on the roads was a miracle. They were either rivers over concrete or big, brown, long puddles of swampy mud.

That same mud that was cold and slimy and soaking through his socks.

Hyde had been standing at attention through Battle of Evermore, Whole lotta love and Going to California, which amounted to pretty much ten minutes. Now, though, he was just drifting in a haze, not sure how long ago the music in his head had stopped. He was so cold and wet, he could barely keep his teeth from chattering. For some reason he couldn’t quite grasp, though, it was important he stopped them. Don’t make a sound, don’t move played on a loop behind his eyes but he didn’t quite know the notes to that song.

Just… don’t move, stay quiet. If he didn’t move, she wouldn’t find him. No sound and they wouldn’t hear him. Be a tree, silent and watchful.

He didn’t know what he was watching for, though. Or at? Was he looking at something? Should he be looking at something? Was… was there somebody talking?

Hyde tried to catch one of those floating things behind his eyes, the purple one looked to be really nice. What were they? Warnings? Advice? More insults? Should he listen, or tune them out?

He didn’t know.

A shudder went through his body and he couldn’t stop it. His muscles wouldn’t obey him, they had started shaking and wouldn’t stop. His abdominal muscles hurt like someone had punched him – had someone punched him? Last time someone got his stomach had been at his house. One of his ‘uncles’ had kicked him for being too slow to leave the couch on which he’d fallen asleep because Edna and ‘uncle’ Punchy had occupied his room for a nookie.

How the hell had he been supposed to know Uncle Punchy wanted to watch TV after screwing Edna to sleep in Hyde’s bed?

He’d gotten a knee to the stomach and a nice kick for good measure when he was down. Took over a week to stop hurting. Who had kicked him? And why? Where was he, and why was he shaking?

Who was talking to him?
Why was he on the ground. Did someone pour water over him, was that why he was so wet? “Kelso?” he asked, because that was such a Kelso thing to do.

He got no answer, just an “Aw crap, now I have to haul your ass inside, you little dipshit.”

Red? The words sounded like Red’s, but the tone was wrong. It sounded like Red actually meant it. What had he done now? Would they kick him out of the basement? Would he have to leave home?

Crap. He didn’t know a damn thing anymore. He was probably high as a kite right now, that’s why nothing made sense. He’d sleep it off, then.

Except someone slapped him, and that was an instant wake-up call. With a gasp and a feeble punch towards who was slapping him in the face, Hyde jerked up – and fell back down with a groan.

Everything he thought until now was bullshit. He’d never hurt like this in his entire life. What the hell had happened?

“Recruit Hyde? Can you hear me?” The voice was new, kind. He liked the voice and reluctantly opened his eyes. Hadn’t even realized they were still closed.

“Huh?”

“Do you understand what I say?”

“Uh. Yuh.” He swallowed the water someone held against his lips. “Wait, what?” His voice was like Fez’s that time after he had smoked a fat, disgusting cigar, scraped raw from the inside. “What happened?”

“You are exhausted and hypothermic. We’ll be warming you up and you’ll stay the night at the infirmary, tomorrow we’ll see how you fare and if you can get back to your comrades, recruit. Don’t worry, this isn’t going to get on your records or make any difference in your training. It happens when recruits overtax themselves – not uncommon.”

Reality set back in then. Right. Army, rain, being stupid. Overtaxed… Because clearly, he’d been overtaxing himself here. Still, sleep and warmth sounded fine right now, and while he’d from now on till forever be the guy that fainted in his socks and underwear, he’d take every bit of comfort he got. Not long ago, Forman would have been the one to faint in his underwear and socks. Hyde wanted those times back with a passion.

“Can you stand, or should we get a stretcher?” the nice voice asked.

Hyde really wanted to stand on his own, because even if everyone from his troop was asleep – were they? What time was it? – word would get out and he’d rather have at least a little dignity.

But it was a ‘No’ on standing. Hell, it was a ‘No’ on sitting, even! “Sorry,” he murmured, “Can’t.”

“That’s ok, recruit. We’ll get the stretcher, that’s no problem.” Right. It would become one, though, he just knew. How could not being injured hurt so freaking much?

Did cheerleaders hurt like this after a brutal training? Had Kelso ever felt like someone had put him through a wringer during the police-training? If so, he’d never talked about it.

He lay there, not even feeling cold anymore. He knew he should be, because there was water falling on his face from the sky. Cold, wet water, man. Once, he’d gotten high on Mt Hump after that girl Whatshername had dumped him there. They’d had a quickie in her backseat but when he’d stepped
out to get rid of the condom and pee against a bush, she’d just bailed on him and driven away. At least she’d had the decency to throw out his jacket. And to think he’d had gone down on her, man. Life kicks you in the nuts the hardest right when you think things are going well.

So he’d taken a little time for a private circle and had gotten high underneath the milky half-moon. The starting rain had seemed beautiful and amazing on his face, like a caress of a mother that he sometimes imagined to remember. After all, his mother would have loved him sometime in the past, right?

Now as then, the world spun around him in circles. Not so pretty, but circling. And twisting. And he wasn’t cold, and he wouldn’t have to walk down Mt Hump and try to hitch a ride home because there would be a stretcher and a bed. Apart from not hurting so much, life couldn’t get much better.

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Twenty-six hours after dropping down in front of the barracks, Hyde went back to his bunk and his comrades. Most made snide remarks about him being a lightweight, but since most of it was done in jest, he took it in stride. Washington, his under-bunkmate, even slapped his shoulder and nodded at him. Hyde remembered that Washington’d had to stand to attention for twenty-five minutes a few days ago for flinching after being called a ‘no-good motherfucking loser of a nigger’.

Hyde had flinched, too, but lucky for him he’d not been spotted.

He nodded in recognition of pain shared, then swung himself up on his bed – with less pizzazz as before because his muscles still wouldn’t shut up but at least he wasn’t crying from using his abs anymore.

Painkillers were amazing things, man. Good stuff. He’d prefer pot, but still – great stuff.

From on top, he tried to get his bearings back. Strange how much it sucked being separated from the guys. Not so much the separation – he’d taken the time to get himself back into his head – but the coming-back. Things were different now, and he hadn’t watched it happen. Things – like friendships and alliances – moved quickly here, and getting the lay of the land had always suited Hyde well. Self-preservation, man. He needed to find his lot in between these people.

Washington had seemingly connected with Miller, Gutierrez and San Marco - strange group since up till now, the black men had kept pretty much to themselves. Not surprising. Wilson had been sucked into a group of whitebread dipshits at the other end of the colour-spectrum, and the five of them – Wilson, Lomark, Diedrichson, Kimberman and Warshowski – were starting to be open about their racism. Nice.

The rest of the recruits were pretty much one big group of ‘not important’. They might be good people – Hyde didn’t know them enough, yet – but they hadn’t left an impression. That might all change – there were still nine weeks to go.

Holy Fuck, it hadn’t even been a week!

“Well, Heidi. How much coddling are you gonna get from your little bout of lady’s legs?” The burly Kimberman laughed at his own lame joke, and hadn’t he been so loud Hyde would have ignored it completely. As it was, he grumbled a little.

“Wish I had one lady’s legs all right. Woulda not conked out with her stamina.” He was talking about Donna, though maybe Jackie would have been able to out-stand him as well. He’d seen her do poses that should have been impossible – for an impossible long time. But he wasn’t thinking about Jackie here, that wasn’t why he was here.
He’d have enough time for that crap back at home.

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For the next two days he was still separated from his group during the day. The docs at the infirmary had ordered some actual rest and light duty. Brewer could not have been happy, and Hyde’s fellows were probably not happy either that he got special treatment, but apparently it was bad performance to have the recruits fall down in exhaustion during the first three weeks. So Master Sergeant Brewer would have to just suck it. And the other guys as well. Hyde would dare them to not only do what everyone was doing on way too little sleep but also do crunches afterwards and stand for who-knows-how-long straight as a ruler in the rain, with no clothes on and no shoes. He had the right to conk out, man.

Wasn’t that he was doing nothing at his time alone, either. He’d been assigned to Corporal Abramovic, a much more relaxed guy with a slight eastern accent. Abramovic gave him tasks to fulfil and had him practice gun-assembly and – because he’d missed out on it the first time due to being in bed – shooting. On top of that, some sports but this new trainer wasn’t just less severe, he also explained things. For example, why doing crunches instead of sit-ups was just for show and punishment – well, Abramovic hadn’t said that last one out loud, but Hyde could read between the lines, man. Why use a ‘training’-tool that didn’t train, after all? So Hyde was doing push-ups and was shown stretching-exercises to loosen muscles and ligaments, ways to warm up and cool down. It wasn’t just much less painful, it was actually interesting. Huh. Who’da thought.

What had Hyde surprised the most, though, was shooting. He’d never shot a real gun before and had never wanted to. He’d never had the cutesy bonding-sessions men in Wisconsin had with their fathers – going out into the forest and killing animals. In a way, he was really glad about that. His home-life had been messed-up as it was without the added thrill of loaded firearms. The closest he’d come to gun-violence was when he’d been busted for Jackie’s sake, where the police-officer’d carried a weapon.

Learning about safety and precaution two days before had been fine, but holding the gun in his hands, heavy and deadly, put a tingle along his spine that Hyde really didn’t like much. He could turn around and shoot Abramovic, then go on a killing-spree where he could take down quite a few people before someone took him down permanently. The first time in his life, he held real power over people, over his fate. It was exhilarating.

It scared the crap out of him.

He nearly put the gun back down to leave, but Abramovic wasn’t just a good trainer when it came to physical exercises. He was also an observant sonofabitch.

“Scary?” Hyde numbly nodded. “Yeah. I get that. Family’s not much into guns and stuff, never held one before my BT, either. I never quite liked the idea of killing things, much less people, but I guess that’s the Army for you. We’re all about killing people if necessary. We just have to trust that when the time comes, when they order us, those orders are justified.” He slapped Hyde on the shoulder, and while that didn’t quite fit his own reasons for being scared of the gun, the fact that Abramovic had been scared at first, too, did make him feel better.

Huh. He might still be high on painkillers.

After a few exercises in holding the gun correctly, a lecture about the recoil and some more advise about safety, Hyde got to shoot his first bullet ever.

It went widely to the left, and Abramovic laughed. “Doesn’t matter, Hyde. Everyone misses the first
time. Now that you know what I mean when I tell you about recoil, you can compensate. Again.”

And again. And again.

He did get better. In fact, he got pretty good. After an hour of shooting, his arms felt as heavy as his legs had after his punishment, but he also felt relaxed and punch-drunk happy. Damn, shooting was a great way to relax. Better than dope, in some ways.

Again, that scared the crap out of him.

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That night in the barracks, with everyone whispering about their lives and the day they had, after the ribbing he got for being soft-touched for being a pussy, Hyde lay on his bed staring at the ceiling and thinking about the day at the range.

He wasn’t usually a guy to think about his reasons, about his mental state or anything remotely connected to his future. But being exhausted and alone, in the company of men he would have to learn to rely on, he couldn’t quite stop the thoughts from spinning. There wasn’t much else to do.

He surprised himself – again – when he realized that the fear he’d felt with the gun in his hand was about power. About holding life and death in his hands. Of – for the first time ever it seemed – being the one with power over his life. Interesting, how that hadn’t liberated him but instead chilled his insides.

All his life, others had wielded their might over him. Every step he’d taken, there’d been someone who could’ve yanked the ground out from under him. One hard step and the ice he was walking on would crack and drown him in the cold water.

First – and most important – had been Edna. For about sixteen years, she’d been the one to yank on his chains and stomp on everything he dared to do for himself, for a reason he’d never understood.

Bud leaving had pulled away the carpet, the last safety-net he’d had at the time since Bud, at least, had never been as mean as Edna. Maybe he’d actually cared for Hyde – he kinda thought he had.

Being left by him had shattered something in Hyde, and while now he could maybe understand that there wasn’t much fun in the life Bud’d had, with a nasty wife, a twitchy boy and way too much alcohol in his bloodstream, it didn’t change the fact. He didn’t really hate Bud for leaving that hellhole, but the damage to tiny-Hyde had still been done.

Lately, he’d thought that maybe Bud had realized that Hyde wasn’t his own blood, and that he’d left him with Edna because of that. He didn’t have any legal right to Hyde anyway, so taking him with him wouldn’t have worked. Then again – taking a nine-year old kid on a trip through the United Bars of America would’ve probably been stupid and might have messed Hyde up even more.

Who knew. He usually didn’t think that hard about it – it couldn’t be changed anyway.

After Bud, there hadn’t been stable ground at all, and the little thread of carpet-fibre Edna had still provided got ripped after she’d left him for good. Then he’d moved in with the Formans. And the carpet had started to re-knit a little. But while he loved them, they’d still held complete power over him. One misstep that Red found out about and bye-bye, carpet.

Then came Jackie. She’d yanked him in every direction, not just physically but his heart as well. He loved her, he knew that. But the more she tightened herself around him, the more he felt the urge to leave, to run. She already had a firm grasp on his carpet and her sharp heels were already dug into the cracks of the frozen lake. She could’ve torn him apart.
Huh. He’d felt powerless when he’d been with her. Tiny, fragile Jackie had had him under complete control and he bet she didn’t even know. Even when they’d broken up about the stupid ‘future-talk’, she’d held the power to make his heart beat faster, to have him break out in sweat and feel the urge to pound everyone into the dirt who looked at her strangely. He’d needed all his tricks to keep from being a violent, screaming piece of human emotion, to keep everything bottled up tight inside.

Good thing she didn’t know. He shuddered at the idea of what she’d have been able to do to him otherwise.
Still, understanding all that didn’t explain why he feared the idea of finally having control instead of relishing it.

With a grunt, Steven turned onto his stomach and closed his eyes. Soul-searching was exhausting. He’d come back to this sometime later, when he didn’t have to get up before dawn and breakfast to run around the compound.
Chapter 6

Apart from that little excitement, the rest of the week rolled along without incident. He won some more M&Ms, lost a few, won a lot more. He got even better with the guns and got a lot better in just reacting when someone yelled a command at him instead of thinking before doing them. It cut a lot of time and prevented a lot of insults, though of course not all.

He got really good at not reacting to anything Brewer or his compatriots threw at him. So did most of his fellow recruits, which didn’t seem to please Brewer all too much.

At the end of the week, the Sergeant grouped them into small units, each unit consisting of seven recruits. In a daily rotation-system, they would each take on different roles for the unit. Leader, communication, first aid/corpsman, explosions/destruction, backup/lookout and ‘normal’ soldiers. You know, the ones who gets shot in the back in real life. It was a smart thing to do, Hyde had to admit, even though he wasn’t overly happy with his designated unit. Carter, Washington and San Marco, he had no problem with. But added to the mix were Wilson and Warshowski, an unholy union like Give Back and Destroy, back in high-school. Only worse, as they were racism-spewing bags of shit. Oh, and one of them was a psycho. Oh, and to make it even more volatile, Goldberg had gotten the shit-luck to join them as well. The group now contained one racist dipshit and his tag-along, a black guy, an Italian who, unlike Donna, looked like one, a Jew, a surfer from San Francisco and well – him. So yay for Hyde, he was really looking forward to depending on this mix of chemicals for the rest of his time.

At least it would teach him about patience, he thought, while walking over to his group after they were oh-so-kindly asked to do so.

They drew straws about who would be the first leader of their group, then more straws until the schedule was fixed. Hyde didn’t mind at all that he’d be the second-to-last – he really wasn’t looking forward to leading anything, especially not a unit of would-be-soldiers into a make-believe battleground.

“Listen up, you sissies!” They stood at attention. By now, it was ingrained. Hyde wondered how long it would take to train himself out of standing straight the moment someone yelled at him once he got out of here. He might not have thought this through completely – there would be a lot of yelling once he got back to the Formans. “From now on, you form a unit, a band of brothers. You might not be happy with your brother all the time, they might piss you off or make you want to pummel the shit out of them. But you’ll be family, and you don’t get to choose family.” Ain’t that the truth, man. “You will eat together, work together, train together. You will share every praise and you will share every failure, and you will fail. A lot. You will sleep when your bothers sleep and shit when the others shit. You will look after your gear and the gear of your brothers. From now on, there will be no more individual punishment. If one of you fucks up, you all pay the price. Did I make myself clear? I can’t hear you!”

"Sir, yes Sir!" Because really… what else was there to say.

To start with, they were supposed to make it through an obstacle-course with running really fast, jump-running over those stupid wheel-things, crawling underneath barbed wire and climbing a big-ass wall with a moat and only a flimsy rope as help. Since they’d done most of the obstacles before, though individually, Hyde reckoned that would not be so much of a problem. It reminded him a bit of the backyards, illegal dumpsters and dirty alleys in his old neighbourhood. One of Edna’s special friends used to chase him through it more than once, and Hyde’d gotten pretty fast.
But behind the obstacles came the shooting-galley, where they had to take shots at cut-out targets in a certain amount of time, then work themselves through another course, then defuse a bomb – luckily, this one wouldn’t be equipped with working explosives – and make it backwards again. All of that in a set timeframe. If one of them got ‘injured’ – how, they would have to wait and see – the ‘medic’ of the group would have to take care of him. It was roleplay, more or less, but with real guns and lots of sweat and pain in their immediate future.

Their leader was to organize the unit into the designated roles; they would have to follow those roles for the day until changeover in leadership.

First off to lead his group was Carter. At least it was not Warshowski.

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Then again, maybe Warshowski wouldn’t actually be that bad. Carter, while a decent guy, stumbled through giving directions and delegating tasks like Forman did when Red turned his disapproving eye on him. After being yelled at by Brewer for being a pussy, Carter actually used orders instead of suggestions but he still didn’t like it and it was obvious that he had no confidence in his decisions. Under his direction, Hyde had been designated their ‘bomb-guy’ and Warshowski – of all people – as the medic. Wasn’t like those assignments wouldn’t have to come up at one time, after all, but right at the beginning it seemed pretty strange. Warshowski was clearly the best at wiring and de-fusing makebelieve bombs, and everything else would have been better-suited than medic. Giving the nutjob the one task he despised the most –Warshowski thought being a corpsman was demeaning and only fit for sissies – on the first day was either completely idiotic or a deliberate snide.

Hyde hoped it was just idiocy, or this unit would blow up even faster than he thought it would.

Either way, that was how it was going to be. No take-backs, no task-trading allowed. Leader decides, and they had to work with it.

The obstacle-course wasn’t really difficult for Hyde, he just imagined ‘uncle’ Bernie in one of his drug-addled moments and the drunken laughter of Edna, and he just flew over it without problems. But Washington never quite got low enough to avoid entanglement in the barbed wire, and Goldberg hung on the wall like a fish on the line until someone gave him a boost.

Their time was laughable, but at least the other units all had their own issues there, so everyone’s time was pretty laughable. The yelling had reached so-far unparalleled volume, and Hyde thought he’d actually heard Brewer’s voice give out at one time. Shooting-alley was alright, no serious problems there except for a few missed marks, but defusing the bomb turned Hyde yellow with the colour-powder that indicated he’d just blown himself up. And a few of his comrades along, if the sprays on their faces and bodies was an indication.

“Congratulations, Hyde – you just killed three of your men and permanently injured three. Your only luck is that you died as well, or you’d be living in hell right now! Now, down and give me a hundred, all of you, and after that you defuse that motherfucking bomb again! And if you fuck up again, you’ll give me hundred-and-fifty and then you defuse it again! Guess what will happen if you fuck that one up, too! And all you ninnies, while you’re doing those push-ups, you’ll thank your brother, Hyde, for killing you all! Down - thank you, Hyde - up! Hyde – keep count! “

At fifty, Hyde felt like he’d never wanted to be thanked for anything in his life ever again. Six pissed-off people yelling ‘Thank you, Hyde!’ fifty times – fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three … - was unsurprisingly not an ego-boost. And he was so looking forward to defusing that stupid bomb once more, with shaking fingers now.
In the end, he got it before blowing them up a second time. It was a close call, though, and on their way back one of the Corporals shot him in the back with a paint-gun. He died that day on the obstacle course, bled out in the dirt while Warshowski tried to find the right bandages and everyone else looked around like a bunch of scared chicken.

Good Lord, no wonder they needed such a big Army – they were cannon-fodder, man.

While running the extra laps along the track that night – dying, apparently, didn’t let you off from punishment – Hyde wondered if Brewer had set them up to fail, or if they’d just been unlucky. A few of the other units had done worse, to be fair, and tomorrow would be Goldberg’s day. He hoped he’d at least get passed over for the bomb-stuff.

At evening, right before bed-time, Dwayne Washington nudged his foot. “Better go take a shower, dude. You smell.”

Hyde sat up on his elbows, frowning. He knew for a fact that he didn’t smell – his hair was still wet from his shower not ten minutes ago. “What?”

“Yeah. ‘s real … smelly.” Dwayne shifted his eyes towards the door so Hyde took a wild guess, groaned and took himself over to the shower-barracks. In the rain. Because it rained. Again. Of freaking course.

The shower-room was empty, but he heard suspicious sounds from one of the supply-closets. And there he was, Carter, sitting next to a mop and trying furiously to stop crying. Jesus, what was it with all those people crying? He’d thought at least that crap would leave him alone in the military. For a second, Hyde just stared but Carter looked really pathetic. “What’s the matter, man?”

“Nothing.” Pretty unconvincing, with the sniff added and those red-rimmed eyes. “None of your business, Hyde. Fuck off.”

“You on drugs, man?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

“So you’re crying.”

“I… shut up.”

Hyde sighed. Why the hell did Dwayne think this was somehow his area of expertise? “Look, Carter. I don’t know what’s wrong, and I don’t really think I care all that much. But if you’re crying, you’re unhappy, and if you’re unhappy your mind isn’t on the tasks. And if your mind is not on the tasks, we’ll only get paint-covered more tomorrow. So – if talking to me won’t fix your shit, find something that will. I need to sleep, man!”

He thought that sounded reasonably friendly and like it was actually good advice. Hopefully, Carter would take the second suggestion because he hadn’t been kidding – he wanted to sleep.

“’s just.” Carter wiped his eyes. “Look, you’re real lucky.” At Hyde’s snort, Carter sat up straighter and nodded frantically. “No, I mean it. You’re really lucky, man. You don’t have this… these expectations on you. I don’t know why you’re here, but whatever it is, you don’t have a General and two Colonels in your family, standing over your shoulder and watching every fucking step you
make. All my life, my father was watching – and I bet you, he’s gonna ask about my performance here, and he will find out about this fuck-up today. I know he will – he always knows.” Carter sniffed again.

Hyde looked him over. Carter had this handsome, wholesome look on him. Blue eyes, good build, straight posture, nice tan – even now, in this freaking rainforest, he looked like straight out of a beach-wear magazine. All that was missing was the surfboard. “You’re right, my parents couldn’t care less about my performance here”, he finally said. “And I don’t envy you, man. But seriously, this was the first day of this unit-crap.” He stopped, checking if he slipped up with calling anything military ‘crap’, but it seemed okay. “You got the shit deal today – the first one to lead would have to be a freaking magician to get everything going smoothly. We barely know each other, some of us aren’t really in the habit of working with anyone, least of all a ‘brother’. And all of us are new to this kind of thing. Every unit had more or less the same problems. Well – they didn’t blow each other up, because they were lucky to not have me as the bomb-expert. But they were all shot, and they all had terrible timing on the course. We’re stumbling around because that’s what the bosses here want us to do. Learn by failing, man. At least we’re lucky that we get to fail without actually dying. I know this guy, he was in Korea and WW2, he was drafted at eighteen or seventeen, I don’t know, and sent off after only a few days. He had no clue at all, and they threw him into a freaking war. Bet they did the same to one of your Colonels, too. Now, I understand how that might have been necessary at the time, but right now, we can actually learn before it costs us our lives. Be grateful you get the opportunity to actually learn from your fuck-up. You’re gonna get another chance at this, man – we’ll be running these situations again and again, and you’ll have plenty opportunity to make different mistakes. Or none – who knows. At least now we know what not to do again, right?”

“Yeah.” Carter grew thoughtful. “Yeah. We also know you need to learn how to diffuse a damn bomb, man. So you’ll better start practicing, dude.” He grinned, and Hyde groaned.

“Yeah, ‘cause that’s a skill I’ll need in my life.” He swatted Carter’s head. “Now buckle up, soldier – I need some fucking sleep!”

“Hey, that’s no way to talk to your superior officer!” But Carter was grinning, shoving his shoulder so Hyde knew it was just joking. He left him to his shower and went back to the barracks, where Washington was already snoring loudly. Great – Hyde’d have to thank him tomorrow for designating him as the unit’s quack. What the hell, man?

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In hindsight, maybe Hyde would forever thank the stars that he’d be unit-leader as one of the last. Because failing? Really didn’t seem to be any fun.

After Carter, Goldberg and Washington also made fantastic errors of judgement, and they all got shot again. And had to run the tracks some more. Warshowski was so megalomaniac, Hyde felt the strong urge to shoot him himself. He might have, if they’d had paint-guns. With life ammunition, that seemed a tad drastic. Fun thing, though? Since Psycho had decided being the medic was demeaning, he put Hyde on that task when he got to be leader. First, Hyde’d balked, because attached to that decision came a lot of sneers and insulting remarks about how he looked like a girl anyway and would fit right into that nurse-uniform. Seriously, how? How did he look like a girl? He was as bald as anyone, and other than the ‘fro, what part of him was even remotely ‘girly’?

While crawling underneath that barbed wire, though, Hyde remembered that Mrs Forman was a nurse, and a damn good one at that. He’d heard Forman go on about how his ma had given lip to that arrogant doctor, how she’d handled nasty pus and horribly broken bones and how, after she’d had to wheel one of the patients she had liked really well to the morgue, she’d just belted music in the
Toyota and yelled the lyrics along so she could go home and be a good wife and mommy to her family without crying over poor Mr Henderson. And suddenly an image crept up on him, of Mrs Forman crawling underneath that wire, running over those stupid tyres and trying to climb the wall – in her hand her medical bag and on her head the nurse’s-hat.

He had to laugh out loud – thank god still under the wire, he’d have tripped if he’d been in the tyre-part already – and he got quite a few odd looks. But Kitty Forman could kick every one of these idiots’ asses if she wanted to. Maybe not physically, but she was tough as nails. She’d never bailed on anything, and she’d walk through Hell for her family. But not just that – she would walk through fire for other people in need, too, because that was just who she was. Even half broke, she’d convinced her husband to take a seventeen year old punk into her house, risking disappointment and theft or whatever people might imagine he’d been capable of at the time. He would have never done anything real bad to any of the Formans – well, maybe to Laurie, but probably not even that – but how had she known? People knew Edna, after all. It wasn’t such a far reach to assume such things from her son. But Mrs Forman hadn’t. She’d taken the risk, because she felt it was right – and every day since, Hyde was damn grateful that she existed. Even when she mothered him a bit more than he was comfortable with.

Anyway, either way. Nurses were pretty badass, and combat nurses would have to be the toughest people ever. They did the same things any other soldier did, but when someone would get hit, they’d be the ones crawling over and bandaging them up, all while being basically defenceless since you couldn’t shoot a gun while stopping someone’s guts from falling out.

There was nothing demeaning in that, and if being a freaking combat-nurse made him a girl – well, he was already half black. He could just as well be a girl, too.

He’d be a lesbian, though.

“He, get your lazy nurse-ass in gear! We can’t have you falling behind and rescue you!” Well, real soon that asshole Warshowski would be the one in need of rescuing, and Hyde would rescue the shit out of him.

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The next week, everyone’d had every ‘job’ in the unit and the circle would start anew. Hyde’s own moment of leadership-glory hadn’t been too bad, but him calling the shots wasn’t really that much fun. He’d had too many strings to hold together, order the right people at the right time to the right place, and he’d had to ignore Warshowski’s snides and snipps to Wilson because there wasn’t enough time to do something about it.

Why the hell Psycho had it out for him, Hyde couldn’t say. As far as he knew, he’d never said anything to him. He’d asked during poker, but Dwayne had just looked at him like he was crazy or just plain dumb and he’d not dared to ask again.

The night before Carter’s second time as boss, he’d asked Hyde to come with him and shown him a sheet of paper with names and a lot of arrows and notations. It looked like one of coach Morgan’s football-strategies, and Hyde had never been able to understand those. “What am I looking at?”

“This is us. Well… this is my idea of us. How we could be.”

Even with his head tilted, there was no clue Hyde could find. “Uh. Still don’t get it.”

“It’s my strategy, my ideal unit! I made notes every evening, because you’re right, we need to learn from the mistakes. But not just ours – everyone’s! I’m trying to find the ideal setup so we’ll complete
those tasks at the best we can, so we can beat all the other units, and this is my plan for now. See?"

With an explanation, some clarity came to the mess of scribble. “So, you have Goldberg as the medic for tomorrow? Why him?”

“Well.” Carter scratched his head. “I honestly don’t know where else to put him. He’s not such a good shot, and if I put him at the six, we’ll have to wait for him to come over the wall because he still can’t get it well enough. He’s… I’m sorry, but he’s just tiny! As a medic, at least we can keep him in the middle and in the game and help him over the obstacle, and Psycho and Wilson can’t trip him up. I don’t really want to deal with that situation again.”

Both of them winced, rubbing their thighs in memory. Day five, San Marco’s day, had given them a really long punishment-run through the hilly forest surrounding Fort Porcupine because apparently, letting one of the unit trip another one and then not taking action about it was worthy of a shouting that had until then not been heard.

“Yes, I get that. But… ah, ok, it’s your decision, man. It’ll be fine.”

“No, no. Please – tell me what you were thinking. I mean, I did ask you to look at this because I want your input, not just to show off or something.” Hyde raised his eyebrow. Why would anyone want his input in this?

“Man, I’ve got no idea about the military. You said so, no Colonel in my family. You’d be much better at this than me.”

“Maybe. But … well, all my father can do is give orders. He can’t discuss, doesn’t ever include me in any of his plans. I’m sure he’s got good skills there, but … I don’t ever get to see them. It’s apparently not my place.” The bitterness was not hidden, and Hyde was once more reminded of Red Forman and Eric. “So please – tell me what you were thinking?”

Hyde huffed. “Fine. Ok, see. Putting Goldberg as medic might give him security, but it’s not where he’s really good at. Strike Warshowski as the bomb-guy and put Goldberg instead. He’s really good with wires, I’ve seen him work in the practice-room. Last time on the course, he was just nervous, that cost him time, but he didn’t blow us up and didn’t make a mistake. I’d say rather a slow defusing than a fast trip to being dead.” He scratched his head. “Warshowski can be the backup, or plain soldier. But if he’s backup, he’ll have to shove Goldberg along, which might make Arty a bit quicker over the tyres, so we can gain more time for him to get over the wall.”

Carter was silent, scribbling on his paper. “OK, but who’ll be medic? I can’t put Psycho as the medic – he’ll just be an asshole the rest of the week to everyone because he thinks it’s an insult. Same goes for Wilson, even though he’s not as bad. But Psycho’ll just rile him up.”

While Hyde thought being scared of how your soldiers will react to an order wasn’t the best reason for making decisions, he also had no real desire to fix that bag of fleas now. “I don’t mind, I’ll be corpsman. Just keep me away from the bomb and we’re good to go.”

“Oh – well, awesome! Ok, then I got my setup. Thanks for the help, really appreciate it. I owe you one, man.” He winked, but also clapped him on the shoulder so Hyde was sure Carter was serious there.
Ok, a note of warning: there's gonna be open anti-Semite crap thrown out by one of the guys, which I feel really bad about but for the sake of the story, I'm sorry... it'll have to remain. So anyone who might be bothered by this - please skip one chapter.

It went well. Up until the evening, everything went perfectly.

But in the mess-hall, Psycho started on about how he’d been a much better bomb-expert, how Goldberg shouldn’t even touch the bombs because he was just waiting to bomb them all to hell, just they wait and see, and he just wouldn’t. Shut. Up.

Dwayne and Carter tried to get him to back off, Carter *ordered* him to shut up because until midnight, he was still in charge, but whenever Warshawski calmed down a little, Diedrichson would rile him up again. Goldberg finally had enough and grabbed his food tray, still only half-finished with the spaghetti. “I’m done, I need a smoke,” he growled and left and Hyde went with him because maybe if he pretended real hard, the cigarette would turn into a joint and he’d feel less like spiders crawling all over his skin. All the hostility in the air made him want to claw his skin off.

The two of them stood outside, smoking. Goldberg’s hands were shaking, and Hyde pretended not to see. He was *not* the unit’s shrink.

Finally, they started to calm down. A few guys from the other units were standing in a little group not far away, and Hyde recognized Miller and waved at his nod. He was about to head over there to talk some shit and see if they’d be open for a bit of poker when there was more yelling from just inside the door. “I don’t want to see your face in here anymore, Warshowski! Get your ass outside and start running! In ten minutes, I will be at the tracks, and you will be there running until you’re blue in the face, do I make myself clear, soldier?”

Apparently, Brewer’d had to step in, but before Arty or Hyde realized that this meant Psycho would come through the door any second, it had already happened. Red with rage, Warshowski slammed the door open, hitting Hyde in the shoulder. “Ow, man, watch out!” he yelled, and got a shove for good measure.

“Out of my way, you piece of trash!”

Hyde would’ve let it go – there was time to fight, and there was time to back off and he had learned early on which was which. But Arty Goldberg hadn’t, or maybe he’d just had enough. “What the hell is your problem, Warshowski? If you’re this volatile, you should not handle explosives. I can take that position anytime and I’m good at what I can do without blowing up whenever I get a hangnail!”, he threw at Psycho’s back.

“My problem? My problem? My problem is none of your business, you little fucker,” Warshowski yelled, turning around and walking backwards towards the tracks. “They should have just gassed you along with all your folk and family, kinda wish for that every day since coming here and smelling your disgusting Jewish cheese-smell!”
There was that one moment in time when everyone around was too astonished that someone had actually said that – not just thought, which was bad enough, but said out loud – before Goldberg roared and took off after Warshowski.

“Shit!” Hyde was off after them. Because this would get bloody. “Someone get Brewer, right he fuck now!” He could hear someone following, hoping it would not be Diedrichson or one of his cronies but he didn’t turn. His boots slipped in the mud as he ran across the lawn, trying to cut them off without even a clue what to do if he reached them.

Right in front of the track-course, Goldberg had tackled Warshowski and brought him down. He was not holding anything back – Hyde wouldn’t have in his situation, either – fists and knees and feet. The surprise must have been on his side, because Warshowski had several pounds of muscle on Arty and wouldn’t have fallen otherwise. Arty sat on his chest, and Hyde grabbed him around the middle to yank him away. “Stop, you idiot! He’ll get kicked out for the shit he said, don’t let him tear you down along, man!”

“I’ll kill him, I’ll kill him! You are dead, you fucking Nazi-psycho! Let me go, lemme the fuck go!”

“Yeah, Hyde, let him go – I’ll show him dead, the little kike will join his folks like he should have the first time!”

“Shut up! Shut your crap, this is-“ Hyde didn’t get to finish the sentence, as a knee got him in the groin so hard, words and thought failed to exist. While his vision whitened out, he saw Goldberg throwing himself towards Warshowski again, who took off, cackling like a loon. Distantly, Hyde thought he should follow them, but damn, his balls hurt so badly, he couldn’t even think of walking.

“Where are they?” someone yelled – Miller? Hyde didn’t know – and he pointed in the direction the two fighters had left. Jesus, he was sure his balls were smashed. Carefully – scared, but shhh, don’t tell anyone – he shoved his hand into his boxers and felt around for wetness or whatever else awful he would feel if his testicles had really been crushed. Nothing, and when he took his fingers back out, they were dry.

With a groan, he uncurled and turned onto his back. By now, all of the recruits had been in the mud so often that nobody really felt the smishy-smushy dirt anymore, or were worried about doing laundry. He waited a bit more for the pain to settle in a place where he could handle it, then groaned himself upright and to his knees. After a few deep breaths, he could stand again and limped towards where he’d last seen Goldberg and Warshowski. It was a bit scary that he didn’t hear anyone screaming – by now, someone should have either found them or the two were still going at it.

He found Brewer and Miller first. “Hyde!” Brewer yelled. “Where have they gone?”

“Uh. I thought they went this way – that’s the way I’ve seen them take off.” He scratched his head, then added “Sir.” But it seemed the Sergeant wasn’t even interested in proper protocol. Brewer cursed, then sent Miller off towards the barracks to get more help and flashlights.

“Hyde, you check the obstacle-course from the wires on, I’ll start from the other side. Dammit, I can’t believe this shit, this isn’t happening, this cannot be happening!” Brewer didn’t look like the man in charge right now. He looked scared and frazzled, and Hyde would’ve preferred the cranky Sergeant instead of the human one. After all, cranky Sergeants knew what they were doing.

“Yes, Sir,” he said anyway and limped off.

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He found them first, at the water-trench behind the climbing-wall. Initially, he didn’t understand what he was seeing but then he was off, crushed nuts forgotten, to take Warshowski down. Without pause and with all he had, Hyde kicked him in the face, then grabbed Goldberg’s hair to get his head out of the water, where Warshowski had been drowning him.

“Goldberg! Arty, come on, man, come on!” He slapped him lightly on the cheeks but there was no reaction – Goldberg was limp and quiet. He had a pulse, but he wasn’t breathing. “Shit!” All the first-aid lessons crashed into his brain at once, and Steven bent over, checked the airway, pressed Arty’s nose closed and breathed into his mouth. He felt his chest expand, waited – then did it again. Before he could do it a third time, Brewer arrived with two MPs. Steven didn’t hear what they said to him – if they even talked to him at all – but he noticed that they cuffed Warshowski. Right then, he felt Arty inhale on his own and was just in time to turn his head so he could spew out the water and puke sand and whatever else he had in his throat.

Panting, Steven kneeled next to Arty, keeping his hand on his back, absently stroking him and trying to stop the violent shudders that were coursing through Arty’s body. He didn’t quite seem to get what else was happening around him, didn’t really hear anything. He just sat on his knees and stared, wishing he were back home.

Goddammit, his balls hurt so badly.

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In the infirmary, they informed him that his testicles had not been permanently damaged. They were bruised quite a bit, but nothing ripped, squashed or broken. The doctor gave him some painkillers – great stuff! – and gave him a bed for the night. He’d be on light duty until he could walk again without pain, but Arty would have to stay for longer, wouldn’t be fine to continue with the other recruits. He would probably just signed up to the next class, or he’d leave the Army completely. Warshowski had broken two of Goldberg’s ribs, dislocated his shoulder and broken his ring-finger, and added to the general magnitude of bruises was, of course, the danger of pneumonia from his near-death in the water-trench.

Warshowski was in custody. Before he’d been overtaken, Goldberg had given him a broken rib as well and twisted his ankle into a torn ligament.

Oh, and Hyde’s kick had broken and dislocated his jaw and cost him three teeth.

Swimming in a wave of adrenaline and painkillers, Hyde wasn’t quite sure what that to do with that information. On one hand, he felt really sorry for Arty. Broken ribs were a bitch, he knew from experience. He’d never drowned – well, except in alcohol – so he didn’t know how that would feel. He guessed pretty awful. Realizing that this would be it, that your life was over, that the guy on your back wouldn’t back off, wouldn’t let you go. That you would die there, in a fucking puddle, killed by someone who was supposed to be your comrade, your brother… Well.

Then again, that was family for you.

But then there was the fact that Hyde had kicked someone’s teeth out, and not by accident. He’d learned that kick – they all had. He’d known what he was doing, even while not really knowing what was going to happen. He’d put all he had into the kick, and he’d broken bone and teeth with the power of the swing and the strength of his boot’s sole.

He didn’t feel sorry.

He also quite certainly didn’t feel good.
Yes, saving Arty felt kind of alright, and knowing Warshowski would not get into the military, would never be allowed to use explosives on other human beings was liberating. But overall, he just felt numb, and not in the fun kind, the pot kind of way.

He lay awake all night and went back to the barracks in the morning, still in a haze. Dwayne and Miller first tried to get some answers, but he was not quite sure what to say, so he didn’t. After a while, the two of them started deflecting anyone else who wanted to pester Hyde, for which he was really grateful.

Before breakfast, after the drills, the Sergeant called them all to attention and gave an abridged version of last night’s events, because “You’re all a bunch of rumour-mongering washerwomen, so it’s better to just know the truth before you make something up!”.

It was more or less the truth – Warhsowski had gone crazy, had insulted Goldberg, they had fought and then Warhowski had tried to kill Goldberg. Bit short, but the truth. Then, Brewer gave them a lecture about racism and that there would be no tolerance for any racist or anti-Semitie crap between the recruits or he’d all make sure they’d never get further than Corporal in their lives.

Forman would have pointed out that calling the recruits ‘nigger’ to get them to react fell into that exact category, but Forman wasn’t here and Hyde wasn’t so ballsy to say it out loud.

Over breakfast, looking at all the guys in olive who were talking about … well, basically anything, Steven realized that he didn’t want to stay here. Comradery was all great and all, and he liked Dwayne and San Marco and Arty and Miller. But liking them alone wouldn’t be enough. He didn’t want to end up in a life where the closest bonds he’d have would be to a bunch of dicks in green. He wanted the friends he chose, for himself, with no input from anyone and least of all from Uncle Sam. He didn’t want to carry a gun or blow something – someone – up, and he didn’t want to save someone’s life by kicking someone else’s face in.

He didn’t want to be a soldier.

Well, that wasn’t really surprising. He’d never wanted to be one. But he’d come here to learn to be one, to see if he would have the guts to be uncomfortable to the extreme, be out of his own safety-zone and somewhere he didn’t have anyone to rely on but himself and whoever life threw at him. He’d come to the Army not to make a man out of him but – “Hyde, you still in there, brother?”

“Huh?” He shook himself awake. Dwayne was staring at him, clearly concerned, and Steven grinned. Because he might not have chosen to get to know Dwayne Washington, but he was his friend now. He would stick to this, as planned. There was still five weeks to go, he’d already done half. He could make it to the end, and maybe then he’d know what he’d come here to find. “Yeah, I’m fine. Arty kicked me in the ‘nads, man. Good thing there are no chicks around, that’d be unpleasant.”

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With Warshowski out, the tension in the barracks fell to tolerable levels. Even though he was good at detecting tension and keeping as far away as possible, even Hyde hadn’t realized how much of it there had been among the guys. Now, he noticed how hard his shoulder-muscles had gotten and how much he’d been on guard the whole time, never quite relaxing, always watching, never falling asleep before the others.

Staying awake until everyone else was asleep had been a habit from home, and he’d thought he’d kicked it after moving in with the Formans. Apparently, it hadn’t died as he’d thought but he hadn’t even noticed that it was back. Until now, when the second evening in a row he fell asleep to the sounds of Carter’s laughter and Washington’s deep rumble.
With their unit down two men and Hyde still on light duty due to squashed balls, they were assigned to the kitchen for the day. It was Dwayne’s day to lead them, and he gave a good show of ‘leading’ them to the kitchen and assigning jobs. Bomb-expert was changed to garbage-disposal and medic got the knives for cutting vegetables. After that horror-show from two nights ago, no-one wasted the opportunity to have as much fun as possible without ruining the food or getting reprimanded for something. It was basically the first time Hyde felt relaxed and happy – just guys joking around and pranking each other, not unlike home.

Well, all of them except Wilson. Alone, without Warshowski, though, nobody let him ruin their day, and in the end he was left pretty much alone. A sucky feeling, Hyde knew, but Wilson had made his own bed and now he had to lie in it.

“Ok, I got one. ‘Gonna make you sweat, gonna make you groove’.”

“’Black Dog, Four minutes and fifty seconds. 1971, on ‘Led Zeppelin IV’. Fourth album, duh. Was also on the single’s B side of ‘Misty Mountain Hop’”

“Duuuuude! That’s incredible! Ok, ok – who’s got another one?”

Carter smirked. “Ok, Hyde, ten red M&Ms if you get this one right. ‘All the wrong I’ve done, I only wanted to have some fun’.”

“Duh. That’s from ‘In my time of dying’, 1975, on ‘Physical Graffiti’. It’s eleven minutes, ten seconds. And it’s actually ’All the wrong I’ve done, Oh you can deliver me, Lord – yeah, I only wanted to have some fun’” He grinned like the cat that ate the canary and held his hand out. “Pay up, sucker.”

Grumbling, Carter counted out the ten coloured peanuts while the others whistled and high-fived. “That’s incredible, man.” San Marco slapped Hyde on the back. “How do you do that?”

“I just like Zeppelin, dude. Also helps that I worked in a record store, but I actually own all the albums.”

“Whoa, you work in a record-store? That’s so cool! Where?”

“Small town between Madison and Milwaukee.”

San Marco stared at him. “Dude, you’re from Wisconsin? I always thought you’re from Cali or somethin’” Then he smirked. “Explains your dairy complexion, though.” Everyone laughed again, but Hyde wondered how it could be that he knew everyone’s home-state but no-one had known he was from Wisconsin. It wasn’t that he’d kept it a secret deliberately – why should he, it wasn’t a crime, or embarrassing. Lots of people lived in Wisconsin. It just hadn’t ever come up.

Still, he knew Dwayne was born in Boston, Goldberg was from New York, same as Warhsowski and that San Marco lived in Lexington, Kentucky. He even knew that Wilson was from a small town in North Carolina. How could nobody know he was from Wisconsin?

“Yeah, well. We do have a lot of cows, ‘s true.”

“Yeah? How ‘bout girls, man? You also have girls?”

“Nope. Just men and cows. We Wisconsins reproduce by mitosis.”
“By what now? You making up words here, Wisconsin?”

“No, idiot.” Carter slapped San Marco on the back of the head. “Mitosis. That’s when your cells divide themselves and create new cells. Didn’t you go to school?”

“Ow! That’s abuse! Sir, Mr Washington, Sir, my comrade abused me!”

“Recruit Carter, stop abusing the less intelligent in your unit.”

“Hey!”

Hyde carefully heaved himself on the kitchen’s steel-counter, watching the guys bitch-slapping and making fun of each other. It felt familiar, and it felt good. A little bit like home, back when everyone just hung out in the basement, before they’d turned into tail-chasing morons. Life had been simple then. Not always nice, and outside of the basement it hadn’t left any good memories for him, but it had been simple.

But this was, too. They were just having fun. Even though one of them had nearly killed another one of them two days ago, even though his privates still ached, even though he’d kicked someone’s face in, there was still fun to be had, still things that made him laugh. It wasn’t so different from Point Place, when he’d used every opportunity to entertain himself just so he could forget Edna and the ‘uncle’ of the week, or not think about what would happen once he got home. He’d consciously not thought about that, not thought about the evening and night he’d have to spend in his house, not thought about what he’d get to eat – if anything – or who would be there and how he would be treated. He’d enjoyed the time away from all that and just lived the moment, savoured what fun he could get.

Huh.

“Hey, Wisconsin. Come on, move your ass, we gotta clean up here before Brewer gets back from torturing the rest of us sorry bastards.” With an internal shake, Steven hopped off his seat and started to work. His testicles weren’t in agony anymore, just that persistent ache he already knew from when he’d gotten accidentally kneed by Forman. Poor guy had cried and apologized over and over afterwards, so much that Steven had felt worse for him than for himself.

Tomorrow, he’d be back on regular duty, and they’d probably make them all work up on what they’d missed. While this was fun, he was actually looking forward to shoot some more.
“-but if you have to shoot against the wind, you have to compensate for that as well.”

 Damn. Hyde had fully believed that he would never need maths in real life, and though working for WB in his office had shown him that there were some uses for adding and dividing, he’d never thought he’d have to apply freaking formulas to anything in his future. Now, he was sitting at a desk and tried to work out where he had to aim if the wind blew in his face or if it blew from the side.

 He didn’t want to be a soldier, so it wouldn’t matter on the long run if he failed this. But dammit, it was actually interesting. And shooting was fun – he wanted to be good at that.

 Apparently, you could only be good if you calculated equations. Fuck.

 At the end of the lesson, they went out towards the range. For once, it wasn’t raining, but the wind was steadily blowing from the east. They set up, Sergeant Weir explained some more about compensation and factoring the wind in, then they were ready to go.

 The first shot went wide, but Hyde’d figured it would. The next one was close, and the third was a bulls-eye. As was the next, and the next. He stopped counting shots after that and let himself drift into the moment where nothing bothered him and everything was crystal-clear.

 “Seize fire!” The shots stopped, and everyone sat up from their places in the sand. “Let’s see what we have here.”

 It was only very rare occasions that Hyde knew he’d done good at anything. Usually, praise crept up on him and he was surprised to hear a ‘well done’ from anyone, but this time he knew he’d been badass. Apart from the first two shots, he’d not missed the centre again. His grouping was fantastic, and he felt an unfamiliar prickle run up and down his spine. He didn’t quite know what it was. It felt like anticipation, but different because it felt good. Anticipation usually meant waiting for the other shoe to drop, but maybe that wasn’t all it was about.

 “Hyde!”

 “Yes, Sir!”

 “Are you a hunter?”

 “Uh. No, Sir?” Did the day with Forman and the guys in the woods count? He hadn’t shot anything.

 “Is that a question or an answer, recruit?”

 “An answer, Sir. I’m not a hunter.” Surely that day didn’t count.

 “So you’ve not shot at home before? With your daddy?”

 Well, duh. “No Sir, no shooting before coming here, Sir.”

 “Well, I’ll be damned. Good work, Recruit Hyde. I want you in my office at 1700 today. Don’t be late.”

 “No, Sir. I will be there. Sir.”

 Damn. This felt really, really good.
At five sharp, Hyde was in Sergeant Weir’s office. He was told to sit down, which he did without quite knowing how. In the end, he perched on the seat trying to keep himself from falling into the slouch he usually sat in when talking to authority.

“All right. Steven Hyde. Son of Edna Hyde and William Barnett. No military association in the family. You’re nineteen, if I read this correctly?”

“Yes, Sir.” Was that even a question? The guy had it black on white in front of him.

“Bit young, huh?”


“Don’t worry, soldier. I’m not the school-principal to slap you on the wrist for smoking in the toilets. I’m … more like a guidance-councillor today. Nineteen is pretty young, but you’re a man, right?” Apparently, Hyde had to answer this, so he fell back on the proved and proven ‘Yes, Sir’.

“Of course you are. Now, have you thought about where you’re going when Basic Training ends?”

“Not really, Sir.” Which was a bald-faced lie. Because he knew exactly where he’d go, once he was outta here. But the location probably wasn’t what Weir really wanted to know, and it was true that Hyde didn’t know what to do after this little trip.

“Well, I want you to think about becoming a sniper.”

Hyde felt his eyebrows rise, like his eyes wanted to pop out of his skull. Definitely not! “Uh… A sniper, Sir?”

“By what I can see on your shooting-record, you are a natural with the rifle, soldier. It would be a waste of talent to have you in the regular Army. Your aim is impeccable, and I’ll run you through a few more tests the next days to see if I’m correct, but I’m really confident that you could be a fantastic sniper. Will you at least do the tests and think about it? There are, after all, still over four weeks to go until you have to decide one way or the other, so I don’t need and don’t want an answer to that now. I know it’s a bit different, and maybe not what you want to do at all. I won’t hold it against you – it’s a lonely job with lots of boredom, but it pays really well and you would be a great asset to your country.”

“Uhm. Thank you, Sir?”

“Don’t thank me. Think about it.” Hyde nodded instead of verbalizing, mind spinning like a cassette-tape when the band ruptured. Apparently, right now that was allowed. “Dismissed.”

And Steven did think about it, all night until he fell asleep. A sniper. Someone in the bushes, shooting at unsuspecting people who for one reason or another were considered enemies. He could picture himself, lying on the ground in a twig-covered sleeping-bag, face painted dark green, looking through the sight, breathing in – breathing out. Pulling the trigger…

He could picture himself perfectly. Steven Hyde, US Army Sniper.

Yeah. Most definitely not.
Week six was ordinary. Lots of exercise, a little education – laughably little – and quite a lot more shooting for him. He had to come for the extra-practise in the evenings, when the others had time off, because the unit was supposed to stick together during the day. And with only five instead of seven, the training had surprisingly not lessened. Hyde didn’t mind staying overtime. He got to shoot at papers with a real sniper-rifle. It was just as much fun as he’d thought it would be, but it didn’t change his mind about the future. Because one day, those paper-targets would be people, and no matter how often they were told to ‘eliminate the target’ instead of ‘shoot that guy’ – he didn’t really want to kill anyone.

So, week six was a bit fun mixed up with bouts of physical exhaustion and the usual mind-fuckery.

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Week seven held a new surprise for them, and it started with a loud ‘Bang’ in the early hours before sunrise. Hyde was out of his bed in seconds, already scrambling for something to defend himself with. “What the fuck?” he yelled, but someone grabbed him and dragged a bag over his face. Whoever it was sat on him, and maybe, maybe Steven went a bit nuts then, blind and trapped and on his belly.

“Shit, someone grab his legs! Dammit, he kicks like a mule! Hold him still, for God’s sake!” Steven knew that voice, it sounded like Miller, but why would Miller do that to him? He hadn’t done anything! Someone – Miller? – grabbed his head and then there was a voice in his ear, whispering. “Hyde, cut it out. It’s us, man, you’ll be fine. I promise, calm down or you’ll hurt yourself.”

Steven stopped struggling, tried to pull himself together. His heart was beating like a jackhammer and the blood was boiling in his ears – he could vaguely hear that he wasn’t the only one confused and dazed by the sneak-attack, and that calmed him a bit further. He wasn’t alone. He wasn’t alone!

Someone tied his hands behind his back, then his legs together.

“Get ‘em up, recruits! On the trucks, hop to it!” Brewer. So this wasn’t gonna be a prank but some new kind of torture. Oh, sorry: training. Two people grabbed him and carried him out, where – surprise! – it was raining. He was put in the back of a truck, where another body was already squirming beside him.

“San Marco?” he whispered and got an ‘Uh-hu’ in response. “What’s going on?”

Before he could get an answer, he got a kick in the side. “Silence! I don’t want even one word from any of you pieces of shit!”

The engine rumbled to life, a deep bass that went all through his bones. For good measure, Hyde started the music in his head. ‘How many more times’ for starters. The hard drums were fitting.

****

More or less sixty-three minutes after the night-raid, the engine cut out and the loading-hatch was opened. The body next to him – Washington, from the feel of it – was pulled out. Hyde shivered. Dwayne’s body had been a welcome buffer against the cold. Poor guy must’ve been a popsicle by now, as the one closest to the elements. But he didn’t have time to dwell on it, only seconds later he was grabbed and carried a short walk to where he was placed onto surprisingly dry ground. At least this time, he was prepared for hands on his legs and body and held himself still.

Someone took the bag from his head and Hyde blinked into the grey, misty morning light. Looking around, he spotted all members of his unit looking as dazed and confused as he was. Brewer and two MPs stood in front of the little lean-to that gave the unit shelter from the rain. The Sergeant stood, as always, with his legs apart and his hand behind his back. His severe stare was a bit less intimidating...
than usual, with the water dripping off his hat and dirt-speckles up onto his groin.

“Ladies, you are in luck, here. This wasn’t a real raid, but if it were, you’d all be dead. How could you let your guard down, even for one second? That was easy picking, they had you at your dicks even before they got those bags over you and your hands tied. Pathetic!”

The angry – no, fucking pissed-off! – civilian in Hyde wanted to spring up and yell that first, Brewer had made sure they were wrecked the day before, too tired to even eat their food before falling into their cots. And second - he’d been the one to drill complete trust and loyalty towards their comrades into them. Where else should they have dropped their guards if not surrounded by their ‘brothers’?

Fucked up shit they pulled there. But he wasn’t a civilian now, so he shut his trap and glared at the ground.

“But what’s done is done. You got a chance now, girls. You get yourselves back to base from here, and we’ll be best friends again. And next time, it’ll be you who get to drag our fellows out of their beds and into the wild. Now. There-“ he pointed to a couple of backpacks “are your clothes, boots and water-supply for one day. Few MREs as well, since Uncle Sam doesn’t like it if his sissies starve during BT, or die from fucking mushroom-poisoning. You have three days to find your way back. There’re two flare-guns for calling for help. I think you can all imagine what will happen if you use them! But if you need us to come get you, you better do use them, you fucking morons! There’s a map, a compass and of course guns. There’s paint-ammo, because you will be ambushed once you get close to the base, and I don’t want you motherfuckers to shoot one of us accidentally. ’cause there’s no way you’ll do it on purpose, you losers. Now. Do not disappoint me unduly – I don’t want to come here looking for you.” With that, he turned on his heel and nearly slipped in the mud. Hyde couldn’t hold the giggle in, but Brewer hadn’t heard or chose to ignore it for the sake of dignity.

The MPs turned as well, climbed on the truck and within minutes, the five of them were alone.
Chapter 9

“All right. Let’s get out of these ties. Wilson, can you untie me from where you’re sitting?” Carter turned his back to Wilson’s, and Washington followed his example and twisted so he could tamper with Hyde’s bindings.

“Man, your hands are like slaps of meat from a freezer, Hyde. Did they cut off your circulation, or what? Oh – wait… I got it. Hold still.”

“Naw, just cold I guess.” They always got cold after too much adrenalin. At least they never lost feeling, he could still do everything with his fingers. They usually shook for a while afterwards, though, so he wasn’t looking forward to that. Then again, every single one of them had been completely unprepared – there was no way he was the only one with shock-symptoms here.

His hands fell apart and quickly, he untied his feet. The piece of rope was only loosely wrapped around them, and within seconds he untied Dwayne and left him to untangle San Marco while Hyde checked out their supplies.

The first-aid kit was fully stocked and heavy, but he still hoped they wouldn’t need it. There were only three rifles and two handguns, and it didn’t look like that was a mistake. Food was scarce as well – for the estimated three days, they had two MREs each. The canteens were full – he checked, it was indeed water – but it wouldn’t of course be enough, even without any heat. They had rain-gear, thank god, and there was a small cooker, fuel and five packs of waterproof matches. Five knives, yay, and the paint-ammo. On top of one of the packs was the map and underneath the compass.

“Put on some clothes, man. We won’t get home in time if we have to carry you because you’ve frozen off your toes, Hyde.” It seemed Carter had taken command, and Hyde didn’t mind. Carter was actually good at this, tactics, navigation and stuff. He was also trustworthy, had proven himself to be close to a friend. “San Marco, go check the map, see if we can find out where we are.”

Hyde dragged on his pants – dry, awesome – and then his socks and boots. Last came the t-shirt, button-up and jacket, but since there wouldn’t be clothes-checking like on base, he didn’t bother much with stuffing it in the correct way. Though it had started as an abduction and a moment of terror, this exercise tasted like freedom.

“Okay, I found Fort Porcup- uh Porculio. But there are so many hills and forests around here, I can’t say where we are.”

“We were in the truck for sixty-three minutes, give or take,” Hyde called over while tying the laces. “I’d say about hm… maybe thirty were on a road, then we were on gravel for a while –“ He tapped the rhythm out in his leg “- maybe ten minutes. The rest was just forest-ground, at least that’s what it felt like.”

Nobody questioned his time-estimation, and soon the five of them huddled around the map and tried to find the right road from Porcupine to wherever the hell they were now.

“We drove out the west-gate,” Wilson contributed. “The hinges squeak just like the barn-door at home, I heard it.”

“He’s right, they squeak. Wouldn’t know about a barn, but they sure squeak.” San Marco rubbed his nose and sniffed. “Ok, we went left at first, so this is the road they took us on. Ok, how long were we on it – ah, thirty minutes. Ok. Anyone know if we went on the gravel to the right or to the left?”

“All right, that’s something we can work on. Well. Except there are no gravel roads in the map, man. Only road put in are the ones close to Porcupine.”

“At least we know we’re somewhere to the east of the base. We won’t walk in the wrong direction. We need to find a vantage-point to see if we can find some landmarks here. Wilson,” Carter nodded at him “you and Hyde go in this direction and see if you spot a tree to climb, or a hill or something? We’ll check the other direction.”

“Sure. Come on, Hyde. Ever climbed a tree?”

“Nope. But I’m really good at climbing water-towers, man. Only time I fell off was because I was shoved.” Wilson laughed, and they took off uphill.

****

In books and comics, even in films, it’s easy finding a tall tree and climbing up it, looking from the top over the landscape and finding perfect points of reference so the lost traveller will find his or her way home.

In real life, trees got wet in the rain and their bark got slippery. They also rarely had perfectly placed branches so it would be like climbing a ladder right to the top. Hyde watched from below how Wilson got stuck halfway up, and he couldn’t do anything but yell at him where to place his feet next to get back down. Once on the ground, they decided to look for one more tree and then get back to the others. Maybe they’d had better luck, otherwise they would just start walking west and try to find something along the way.

There was a good-sized tree a few paces away and Hyde got the honour of climbing this time. It was a bit surprising how nimble he’d gotten and how easy it was to pull himself up with his arms and upper body. Cool.

“Can you see anything?”

“Actually, no. There’s rain, more rain, and trees. Just fucking trees, man, in every direction. Let’s go back, this isn’t Middle Earth, man, we probably need to use the compass.”

“Middle what? What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Uh, nothing! Middle of nowhere, that’s where we are. Hey, you think this branch will hold?” He knew he shouldn’t have read Forman’s stupid books. But from eight till fourteen or fifteen, Hyde had read pretty much anything he could get into his hands, be it shampoo-bottles, comics or nerdy fantasy-novels. Well, it hadn’t sucked, even though he’d preferred ‘Fahrenheit 451’. That had been messed-up shit.

“’kay. Let’s call this a bust and get back. If we’re still here when Brewer comes back, we can pretty much sign our death-certificate. And my parents’ll be so damn sorry.” Wilson led the way back and Hyde was happy to follow.

At the shelter, San Marco, Carter and Dwayne were already back, distributing the packs and laying out the guns and ammo. “I don’t understand why we don’t just follow the tracks the truck made. We’d find the road and be back just before dinner!”

“We were driving half an hour on a street at what, 50 mph? That makes a distance of about 25 miles.
Then we add the gravel-road, where we had a speed of – I don’t know, say 20 mph. Ten minutes at 20 makes give or take 4 more miles. Add the fucking trip through the rough and we have 34 miles if we follow the way we came here. But since we know we drove more or less in a circle, it would be much quicker to go through the woods and take the direct route. I don’t want to spend more time here than necessary.” Carter rolled up the sleeping-bags he’d found in the packs. There were only three, but that was better than just one, or none, Hyde thought. “Now, get your ass in gear, we gotta get moving. Staying here is not an option.”

Wilson scowled at Carter as he grabbed his pack and yanked it over his shoulders. “Who made you the boss anyway, Carter?”

“Nobody,” Carter answered. “You want the job?” When Wilson just sniffed but shook his head, he took a look around. “Anyone? I don’t mind.” Hyde actually believed him, but he sure as hell didn’t want to take him up on the offer. Leading was Carter’s shtick, not his. Never had been, never really would be. “Fine, so if there’s no complaint, that’s settled then. Let’s go. Wilson, you’re best with navigation, so you take the map. Hyde – take the kit, you’re our medic for now. Washington, on our six. Off we go.” He handed out the rifles, one to San Marco at the lead, one to Washington and one for himself. The others only got Colts, and Hyde stored his firmly at his hip. He still hated that thing, even without the ability to kill.

****

While it was wet and muddy, the trek through the forest proved to be less hazardous than Hyde had thought. After a few miles, they’d found a lake in a valley with the distinct shape of a duck. It had been easy to spot in the map, and with that reference they adjusted the course and estimated that they’d be at the base in maybe two-and-a-half days.

Sadly, they hadn’t calculated the weather in. It wasn’t just raining, which would have been uncomfortable enough on itself. No, the water also turned the soft forest-floor into slippery-slides, and more than once they had to drag each other up from a fall. Hyde’s hip ached from a drop on a stupid log when his boot had slipped on its wet surface, and Dwayne was favouring one leg after twisting his ankle. He’d gotten a bandage for it, but short on leaving him to get picked up by Brewer later, there wasn’t anything to do but continue.

Leaving one of them wouldn’t be an option anyway, they knew that much.

“So, Wisconsin. Any decisions about that sniper-stuff Weir is teaching you yet?” Dwayne and Hyde were walking side-by-side right now. There wasn’t anyone to order them in a certain line, and for once, they could talk and tattle as they pleased.

“Hm, nothing final yet.”

“So, you’re still considering the job?”

Steven swallowed at the question, choosing to concentrate on the terrain for a while before answering. “I really don’t think so, man. ‘s just… I don’t think that’d be my kinda thing, you know?”

Dwayne guffawed his loud laugh. “Hell yeah, I know. You’re not gonna stay in the Army, are ya?”

This was maybe hitting a bit close to home. “Why do you say that?”

“Because I know soldiers, man. My Pa was in the Army, two of my brothers are Marines, and my cousin’s Air Force.” He glanced over. “He’s the black sheep in the family, so don’t tell anyone.” Washington grinned. “But you? You’re not a soldier. Even when you’re snapping to attention, I can
see you’re trying not to yell back at the Sergeant. It’s not your thing, I get that. You’re more of a loner. Less of a wolf, more a… don’t know, a cat?”

Steven chuckled. “A cat? Well, I do like sun on my pelt, ‘s true. And catnip. Man, I’d kill for catnip right now…” Dwayne slapped him on the back and Steven nearly slipped again, only Washington’s reflexes held him up. “Thanks. But … you think I’m a loner?” He didn’t feel alone, never liked being alone at all.

Washington ran his hand over his head. Other than Steven, he’d gone back to the barber and shaved his hair again, leaving a short crew-cut which made him look older than the twenty-one he was. “Well, maybe not exactly. But you’re not really one of us, either, are ya?” Before Steven could protest, Dwayne held his hand up in apology. “That’s not what I mean. You’re … well, you’re just sitting there on your bed when everyone’s talking about home, or about where we wanna go. You’re there when there’s poker, and you’ve got our backs, I know. But man, we know nothing about you. I know about George’s whole damn family, even about Carter’s dog and his girl. Everyone knows I’m gonna marry Marisa the moment I get back outside and we all know Arty’s god-daughter is the most beautiful girl in New York. You? We know you’re from Wisconsin, and your name is ‘Hyde’.” He pointed to Steven’s name-tag. “Nobody even knows your first name, dude.”

Steven shivered when one of the trees suddenly dumped its whole supply on excess-water into his neck. He’d realized that he wasn’t the most forthcoming about his life but he hadn’t thought it was that bad! “It’s Steven. But I’ve always been just ‘Hyde’, man, so I never thought anything about it. What do you wanna know? ’s not that my life is that interesting.”

“Well, so ain’t mine, man. Don’t think anyone here is a secret superhero, so I guess there’s not many real interesting life-stories out there. And it’s not even that we think you’re holding back deliberately, man. I just realized that we know nothing about you – for all we know, you’re a Russian spy.”

Steven laughed out loud at that. “Nothing that cool. I just made a few stupid decisions and it ended me up here.”

“Oh, messed up some shit? Your family sent you here to get you straightened out?”

Hyde smiled. “Maybe a little bit. In way you could say that, but – “ A loud curse from around a bend interrupted their talk, and they picked up the pace to see Wilson slipping and sliding down a slope. “There’s a rock a few inches to your left, Wilson,” Hyde advised, but once Wilson’s boot had connected, the rock slipped from its perch and rolled down the hill. Following it with his eyes, Hyde spotted something else. “Shit, the map!”

Losing the compass wouldn’t be so bad. Wilson was really good at navigating and they’d be fine without it. But no map – that would be even beyond Wilson’s talents.

“I can’t let go here,” Carter panted. “George, get the rope, we need to get Wilson up. Leave the map, it won’t – fuck!” They all saw how a gust of wind flapped their precious map over, tumbling it even
further towards the river. Once in there, the current would drag it away like a leaf. For now, it was wedged against a small birch, still bendy but firm enough that it might hold a person, Hyde thought.

They really needed the map.

He took off his pack, seeing that the others didn’t need his help right now. Washington was heavy enough to keep Carter firm, and Carter’s grip on Wilson seemed to hold. George threw the rope, though how they’d fix it on Wilson was of yet anyone’s guess. He would probably have to let go of his root and just grab it, instead. The sling would help give him a grip.

Carefully, Hyde edged towards the edge, keeping his target – the birch – in his sight. He’d have to let himself slide down towards it and hope he didn’t get dragged off-course, or this whole endeavour would just get them all in even more trouble. His boots found a clump of grass that gave a bit of steadiness and with a deep inhale, Hyde stepped over the edge.

Right away, his heels slipped and he let himself fall on his ass. Instead of falling, it was a controlled slide down, boots first, and just before he reached the little tree, he dug his heels back into the wet earth and let momentum carry him up and over his balance-point so he fell forward, against the birch.

He’d done it!

Ignoring the calls of ‘Idiot’, ‘Moron’ and ‘Motherfucking stupid asshole’, Hyde took a few deep breaths and bent down at the knees, grasping the map firmly. “Got it,” he yelled, leaning his shoulder against his tree and folding the wet, muddy, but luckily waterproof paper into the inside-pocket of his Army-jacket. He had just closed the button over it and was turning to see how to get back up when the change in weight-distribution made one of his feet slip.

With a yell, he windmilled to get his balance back, but it didn’t help. He fell flat on his face, hit the tree with his wrist instead of getting a grip and then it was just one long-ass slide downward, face-first in the dirt. He tried to get traction again but it was never any good. His hands couldn’t find anything to hold on to, shirt, jacket and undershirt were dragged upwards and stones and sticks and clumps of loam and rock assembled in there, scratching his skin and being incredibly unpleasant.

Just when he thought he’d slide right into the water, he hit firm ground. Sadly, it came as such a surprise that instead of saving him, he tilted right over and Hyde fell backwards – just a short drop and a shockingly cold splat that took his breath away.

Immediately, the current clawed at him and dragged him out into the stream.

Shit. This could have turned out a little better.
Chapter 10

After the initial shock and a few angry bumps against the rocks littering the river, Hyde got a grip on one of the big granite blocks and climbed out of the freezing water. Shivering like mad, he tried to find his bearings. Where were the others? Which direction had he gone, had the river been flowing with them, or against their direction? How far from the shore was he?

His teeth were clacking against each other, and added to the sounds of the river, it made it hard to listen. But after a few minutes, he spotted movement on the left bank and recognized Carter. Great, that wasn’t so far away. He could totally get over to that side, and somehow, they’d get him up.

Right. Just pull yourself together and move your ass. The water wasn’t too deep, he could see the ground. Only around his rock was a gap with deeper water, he’d only have to get in and lean forward and he’d be able to grasp the next rock, and from there he could walk.

Easy.

Now, get to it.

Now, Hyde!

“Move it!” he tried to say but he couldn’t even understand himself. Goddammit, he was so fucking cold.

He might have drifted off a little afterwards, because the next thing he noticed was Dwayne, throwing rocks at him. “Huh?”

“Get your lazy ass off that rock, you moron. Come on, or I’ll leave you there and tell Brewer you wanted to nest and lay an egg, you asshole. Gimme your hand, dammit!”

Still with his chattering teeth, Hyde complied and let himself be dragged back into the water – so cold! – and over at the shallows, then towards the shore. The others had apparently made it down as well, all of them were dirty and muddy in various stages of pissed-off. But San Marco had built a pathetic little fire – how, everything was so wet? – and Carter was boiling water in the cooker and Wilson had cleaned up his dirty raincoat somewhat and was looking at his wet pants in disgust. If Hyde hadn’t been so damn cold, he’d have said something, like ‘thank you’, or ‘what took you so long?’.

“Get out of your clothes, you idiot. I can’t believe you’re this stupid, Hyde, I thought you were smart!”

“Ne-ne-ne- ne- no- not-t-t-t-t right n- n-ne-now,” Hyde stuttered, trying to open the zipper of his jacket. His fingers wouldn’t hold still, though, so Dwayne undid it for him. And since he was already on it, Dwayne also removed the jacket, shirt, undershirt and opened his pants. Hyde was vaguely aware of that, and vaguely not okay with the idea, but too out of it to do anything but stare. Dwayne sat him down on a rock and pulled a sleeping-bag around him, then untied the boots – cursing all the time – and finally dragged the pants off of Hyde.

“I guess we make camp here,” Carter sighed. “Would be no use trying to climb back up now, since Mr Stupid here wouldn’t make it anyway.”

Someone handed Hyde a cup of hot water with sugar, and he managed to get most of it inside his mouth. Being cold really sucked.
Slowly, life was seeping back into his bones. “Sorry,” he murmured after noticing the big, warm boulder behind him was in fact Dwayne, stripped down to shirt and pants and of course, boots. The both of them had the sleeping-bag over their shoulders, and someone had made a rudimentary roof with their rain-covers.

“Don’t mention it, dipshit. Gonna be ok on your own now?” Hyde nodded. His skin was still chilled and he’d have murdered for a hot shower, but bit by bit, awareness was creeping back in. “Why did you do such a stupid thing anyway?”

“Uh, I wanted to get the map, man. What else did you think I was doing?”

“How should I know, I had to stare at Carter’s ass the whole time, just heard you scream like a girl when you fell.”

“I didn’t scream like a girl!” He frogged him, like he would with Kelso. Except his fingers tingled and it felt really weird, so he supposed it wasn’t actually painful. “And yeah, I went after the map. Got it, too!”

Carter jumped over. “You got the map? I thought you idiot fell in the river for nothing. Where is it?”

Hyde had to think a bit. This felt a little like coming down from a circle, the thoughts still floating around in the air over his head. Hey, he might just freeze himself half to death instead of smoking pot. Would surely cost less. “Ah, inside-pocket of the jacket.”

Carter scrambled over and searched the jacket, producing the soaked, folded map like a first prize at a … whatever, something where you win prizes. “Guys, we’re back on the go. Let’s see how far we are off course and how fast we have to walk from now on. Wilson, come over here. You still got the compass?”

While the two were strategizing with George throwing in suggestions every now and then, Dwayne put his overshirt back on and brought Hyde another cup of water. “Shoulda brought tea, if there’s no coffee. But at least it’s warm and probably germ-free.”

“Thanks, man. Also thanks for pulling me off that rock.”

“As I said, don’t mention it.” He took a sip from his own cup, but soon his eyes were back on Hyde. “So, tell me about you. Got any brothers or sisters?”

Hyde grinned, then pulled the sleeping-bag closer over his shoulders. “I guess that depends.”

“Dude. Conversations aren’t just one-sentence exchanges. Go on, how does it ‘depend’ if you have siblings? I mean, I have four. Two brothers and two sisters, that’s not so hard to understand.”

“Well, I do have a sister. She’s in Milwaukee, last I knew.”

“You’re not close?”

This was growing into the kind of ‘talk’ Hyde really didn’t like very much. The personal one, the one where people wanted to know about feelings. He shrugged and wished desperately to have his glasses back. “Not really. We grew up apart, we don’t have the same mother.” Thank god for that. He wouldn’t wish Edna on anyone else, least of all Angie, who was pretty cool.

“Aaah, ok. Got it.” Hyde really doubted that but didn’t say anything. His home-life was pretty shitty,
but he knew for a fact that a lot of others had their own sob-stories and he’d never wanted to compete with anyone regarding childhood-trauma. It wasn’t a damn competition – in the end, everyone had to deal with their shit on their own.

With a shudder her tried to hide, he grabbed the pants someone – either Carter or San Marco, since they fit him more or less – had laid out for him and put them on. His boots were still wet, though they did smell like smoke from the fire now. Couldn’t be helped, they had to start walking. It was still daylight, only 1500, and there was time until sunset. They could make a few more miles today.

“C’mon, man. Let’s pack up. I’m defrosted now and really need to get my bones back into gear or I’ll start to rust.”

“Fine with me. Hey, Carter! You got a plan, or are we to just toddle along the river until we fall back in?”

****

Turns out Carter did have a plan, and apart from how it gave everyone wet pants and boots now from crossing the river at a shallow, it was fine. At least they all had cold feet, Hyde thought. Feeling sucky was a lot better if everyone around you felt the same.

Dwayne fell back into step with him. “So, what’s your sister doing in Milwaukee?”

“Really? Is this like a fetish with you? What’s wrong with your family, let’s talk about them for a while.”

Dwayne chuckled. “Fine, I don’t mind. My brothers Charlie and Ike are in the Marines, I told ya. Charlie’s training to be a pilot in Cherry Point and Ike, the lucky bastard, is in Hawaii. Dolores, she’s the youngest, is still in high-school. And Louise is going to be a teacher. She’s really smart, goes to Bridgewater, Biology and Chemistry.”

“That’s cool. My brother’s gonna be a teacher when he’s back, too. I don’t even know which subjects he’ll chose, to be honest.” Hyde scratched his head. Had they ever talked about that?

“You got a brother? Thought you said you had a sister?” There was a tone in Dwayne’s voice, a hint of mistrust and suspicion, but Hyde didn’t mind. His family-situation was a bit strange, after all.

“Yeah, well. That’s where my life gets maybe a bit interesting? Forman’s not my brother as my sister is my sister. We aren’t related, but for the past years, I’ve lived with his family and he’s my best friend, so … he is my brother.” He grinned, remembering his and Forman’s first meeting. “My skinny, twitchy, idiot of a little brother.” Forman was actually six months older, but nobody who knew them ever believed that.

“Wait, Wisconsin, your brother’s name is ‘Forman’?” George butted in. “Man, poor guy, and I thought my Ma’s totally screwed. Her name’s Rosatella!”

“No, you idiot. That’s his last name. He’s Eric, but… for some reason I can’t remember, we always called each other with our last name. Forman, Hyde, Kelso. Well, ok – there’s Donna. And later we kinda adopted Fez, but don’t ask me if that’s short for his first name or his last. He’s just Fez.”

“Ah, and Donna’s your sister?”

And… well, looking at his weird band of friends, that wasn’t actually a dumb question. Far from the truth – well, and a little bit on the money. “Uh, no. Donna is my friend and Forman’s girlfriend. We just hung out together since first grade.” He grinned. “Donna kicked Eric’s ass and I had to protect him from her. He paid me a quarter. We’ve been friends ever since.”
“And Eric is the guy who’s going to be a teacher?”

“Yupp, once he’s back from Windhoek, he’s going to college and if he doesn’t screw it up, in a few years they’re gonna set him loose on a bunch of innocent kids.” He smirked. “Poor guy. They’re gonna eat him alive.”

“Wait, I’m confused.” Wilson backed up to them, dodging a low-hanging branch. “What’s he doing in North Carolina?”

“He’s not in North Carolina, man? How’d you come up with that.”

“Windhoek, North Carolina. Or is there another Windhook?”

“Oh, yeah! Windhoek, Namibia. Which is in Africa, just in case you don’t get it.”

“Wait, I’m confused.” Wilson backed up to them, dodging a low-hanging branch. “What’s he doing in North Carolina?”

“He’s not in North Carolina, man? How’d you come up with that.”

“Windhoek, North Carolina. Or is there another Windhook?”

“Uh, yeah! Windhoek, Namibia. Which is in Africa, just in case you don’t get it.”

“Why didn’t you say that he’s in Africa in the first place?”

“Maybe because ‘Africa’ is a continent, not a place? It’d be like saying someone’s in North America even though you know damn well he’s in Phoenix,” Washington butted in. “Africa is even bigger than the States, it’s just more precise if you give an actual location.”

“Right.” Hyde nodded. “Now, did I satiate your curiosity? Can we move on now, or do you need to see my highschool-diploma and my dental-records as well?”

“Ooooh, someone is a bit touchyyyy,” San Marco sang, but before Hyde could frog him on the shoulder, George slipped and fell face-first into the moss. “Cazzo!”

Laughing, they helped him up and Carter decided to make a stop. It was getting dark and they’d made good progress, considering Hyde’s little dip and the subsequent drying-phase. They found a fairly dry spot beneath a copse of small spruces, strung up the rain-coats again as a cover and started to build camp. Despite the make-shift tarp, they couldn’t possibly stay dry at night, especially since they only had three sleeping-bags. His bath had earned Hyde the first watch, and San Marco was his lucky company.

The two of them sat at the edge of the cover and stared into the night, listening to the raindrops falling through the needles and branches and hitting the ground with quiet but audible thuds.

God, he hated rain.

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Day Two of their hike started with quite a surprise.

After crawling out from under the tarp and the spruces, actual sunlight hit their heads. It was still wet all around, but there seemed to be no clouds in the near future, since the sky over the trees was blue and clear.

Walking through a forest without getting wet like … wet things, whatever, was much more fun. Still not fun, but it beat doing the same in the rain. Hyde winced when at around 10:00, they reached a nice clearing that gave them a good view over the countryside and a new reference-point on the map. They were still on course and they’d be in time tomorrow. Hyde rubbed over one of the bruises from his tumble down the hill, or maybe from the stream. He didn’t know, he was black and blue in too many places to remember which came from which.

“At what point do we expect to be ambushed?” Dwayne seemed to be looking forward to this, his hands twitched towards his sidearm. “I mean, they can’t have set them up all over the place, there’s
Wilson put the map on a fallen tree and they assembled around it. With a pebble, Carter marked the base, as if they didn’t know where it was otherwise. “This is our starting-point, and this is where we are now.” He set two more pebbles. “Our route so far has taken us in this direction, so we’d be coming more or less towards the east entrance. Which is where they’ll set up their traps, maybe so far as to cover the south and north entrance as well. But I doubt they’ll cover the west. I thought about this, and … We’re not good enough to avoid being taken out by Brewer and his men. We have barely enough knowledge still to get from point A to B, there’s no way the five of us can outsmart the trap Brewer has set for us. We’re already fewer than the other units are to begin with, and he won’t make it easy.”

Hyde scratched his head. Dammit, he wanted his hair back! “I agree. The bastard’s gonna massacre us to make a point, but we already know the point here, right?” At the baffled look from George, Dwayne and Wilson, he clarified. “The point is: we’re dumbasses. We’ve been here seven weeks, all of us more or less without a clue about what we’re doing. There’s no way we can outsmart people who’ve been doing this shit for years already. That’s what he wants us to understand – or well, that’s what I’d want us to understand in his place. We’re rookies, man. Everyone’s better at this than us right now. By throwing us out there alone, he’s giving us confidence in our skills – and then he’ll destroy that confidence so completely that we’ll never dare to set foot out of line again, because we know nothing, and we’ll always have to rely on someone smarter if we want to survive.”

They stared at him as if he’d murdered a puppy in front of their eyes. “What? That’s basic psychology, man! It’s what they’ve been doing all along with us. Give a little, take a lot. Didn’t you notice that?”

Dwayne was shaking his head, but his smile was rueful. Wilson glared at Steven, apparently still with the puppy-killing here. San Marco frowned as if he was thinking about what he’d heard. Only Carter smiled. Not a happy smile, but it was clear he knew what Steven was talking about. Oh yeah, Carter knew this, all right. Maybe his father the Colonel had been teaching him this way all along, or maybe he was just a smart cookie. Either way, after a moment where nobody said anything, Dwayne slapped Steven on the back. There was quite some power behind it, but it was still a friendly slap, no damage intended. “You’re a paranoid bastard, Wisconsin. But you might have a point there.”

“He has.” Carter nodded towards the map. “Which is why we’re going to show Brewer that we know just fine what we can and what we can’t do. We’ll out-trick him.” He smirked evilly. “We’re going to go around, use the west-gate and avoid the traps. He’ll expect us not using the east-gate, but he won’t expect us taking the furthest. But to do that, we need to head north pretty soon, if not right now. If we make the circle big enough, we can outrun anyone set up between here,” he circled around the base “and here.” He drew another perimeter with the light pencil. “That’s the furthest out for the ambush to be, since I don’t think he’ll put his men out too far from base. So, we’ll take this route,” he drew a wide circular line from where they were now to the west gate “and walk right in, without dying.” Carter’s eyes were dancing – he was actually having fun with this.

Steven grinned along. He wanted to do this. Wanted to kick Brewer’s ass for being such a dick, for putting them down all the time they tried to grow a little, for yanking the carpet from underneath their feet every time they’d learned to stand up. Even if there was method behind the cruelty – no, especially because there was method behind this cruelty.

He never knew if Edna had a method; he supposed not, but he wouldn’t know. Putting someone down was the one trait about Red Forman he couldn’t really stand. He knew Red loved Eric – he’d seen it often enough when they’d been younger, and nowadays when Eric wasn’t looking. But the last year or so, he’d kicked Forman in the face whenever he tried to stand up for himself, set him up to fail or put him down in other ways. It sometimes seemed like he wanted to stamp on the goodness that was Eric and leave only bitterness behind. Maybe he was scared of Eric
being too soft, wanted to protect him. Or maybe it was because he didn’t even notice what he was doing, maybe his inner alpha-male couldn’t have another strong male in the family even though he kept saying that Eric needed to have more confidence. If there was one thing Steven knew, it was that confidence didn’t come from being kicked down repeatedly. Having a shell around your soul didn’t make you confident – it just prevented you from connecting to the rest of the world.

He didn’t think Red actually wanted to hold Eric down. As said before, he loved his son, and if Eric didn’t see that – well, Forman wasn’t always the sharpest observer. He sometimes needed verbal assurance, and Red was terrible with words. Maybe even more so than Steven himself. Getting out of Point Place – even if Namibia was quite far out – was the right step for Forman. It was pretty smart, actually. He’d have to be on his own, learn a skill he didn’t have yet, learn to rely on others that weren’t family, connect with people who might not even speak English. Whenever Steven had – secretly! – wished Forman would stay – and whenever he wished to have him to share a joint with now – he’d also wished he’d have the balls to go with him. Except that he never wanted to be a teacher, and he didn’t think Namibia was the place for him. At the time, there’d also still been Jackie, and he’d wanted to stick to her and to the comfort of Mrs Forman and his little store, where he’d felt safe. It had taken a lot more than a year of slumming to give him the kick in the ass needed to leave that safety-zone.

Then again, sitting in the dirt, eating disgusting processed food, drinking river-water – nearly drowning in river-water – and being yelled at and sent along gruelling exercise-courses might in a way be even further out than Namibia.

“We’d need to walk a lot faster, though,” Wilson interrupted Steven’s thoughts. “We’d be cutting it close to midnight tomorrow with our pace now, and we’ll need some time in reserve in case we have to rescue a drowned kitten again.” He smirked when Hyde slapped his head. “My calculations: we’ll have to keep walking until the sun actually sets and we can’t see anymore, be up even earlier than today and walk faster, talk less. It’s been fun so far, but we need to lose the fun and get with the action. So – I’d suggest we’ll hop to it, guys.”

****

Without complaint they’d all set a faster pace, skipped lunch-break for eating on the go. The hard cookies were terrible anyway, so it wasn’t actually worth stopping for. Their boots had dried a bit during the night, but they were still chafing. At around two, they made a short pause for everyone to apply blister-pads to their feet. There wasn’t one of them without, but when Hyde took off his socks, Carter grabbed his foot and yanked the pant-leg up. “Jesus, what happened to you leg, Hyde?”

Angrily, he pulled it back. “Nothing, man. Guess it’s from the river, or the hill. ‘s just bruised, I can walk just fine.” He hadn’t looked at himself after the tumble, but from the way his limbs and ribs kinda ached, he was probably black and blue all over. “Man, don’t you have bruises from all the bumping into the climbing-wall, or punching each other during hand-to-hand?”

“Sure we do, but that’s the great thing about being black, dude.” Dwayne grinned like a loon. “I don’t look like the victim of spousal abuse like you do, Wisconsin.”

“Hey, those bruises are hard-earned, man. Don’t mock my hard-earned marks of honour.”

Wilson snorted and held out his hand for a low-five. “True, man. But if the rest of you looks like your leg, you probably should hope they fade until they let us out of here. Someone might call the police or send you to one of those women-shelters. Cute as you are, no-one will even notice.”

“What the hell? I’m not cute, you dipstick!”

San Marco looked him over. “I honestly couldn’t tell. What with you being so delicate and all…” He
cackled, until Hyde sprang up and grabbed him to throw him over his shoulder or just into the dirt, whatever came first. Then, George was just squeaking like a guinea-pig.

Carter stepped in. “Stop it, guys. We need to move again. Hyde, put your boots back on and let San Marco up. Brewer might not like it if we come back one man short.” Reluctantly, Hyde backed away but held out his hand to pull George up. He wasn’t really angry, in fact he didn’t mind being mocked. It was his own fault for falling in the river.

Definitely not delicate, though. Idiots.
Chapter 11

“So, girls. What are y’all gonna do when we’re out here? I’m going to get wasted and find me a woman fer sure. I heard girls dig soldiers!”

Plummer, the tall, wide-shouldered Texan from one of the other units turned twenty-two today, and they had thrown together a few of their candy to give him at least something of a party. Hyde sat on his bunk-bed with his knees pulled up, observing. Since they’d come back from their ‘field-trip’, the five of them had become heroes for the rest of their year. They hadn’t actually kicked Brewer’s ass – the Sergeant had waited for them in his office and hadn’t even looked up when they’d presented themselves dirty but un-painted. Brewer had given them a ‘Fine, you came back. Are you expecting a medal here?’ but years of reading Red Forman had given Hyde the assurance that he’d been at least a little impressed.

Now, a bit more than one week to go still, everyone wanted to be on their good side so they’d tell them the secret to impressing Brewer. It wouldn’t work, though – once bitten, twice shy counted for dogs as well as Army Sergeants: Brewer’d included guarding every one of their gates for the other units. One of them was still out, expected back tomorrow.

Hyde had skipped out on the kidnapping-experience which the rest of his ‘brothers’ had so wanted to appreciate from the side of the kidnappers this time. But even though after their unit, every other unit knew that there would come a nightly abduction and were more prepared and probably wouldn’t freak out, he still didn’t feel the need to gamble on that. As he’d said – there were a lot of sob-stories out in the world, and the Army certainly attracted them like light did moths. So he’d sat that one out by giving himself some extra-lessons on the shooting range.

In the room, the would-be soldiers were singing a lewd version of a birthday-song and Hyde just wanted to be back home. These people were fine, he supposed, and the guys in his unit were probably his friends, especially Dwayne and probably Carter. But they were soldiers, that was getting clearer every minute they spent here, and at the same pace it was becoming clear that Hyde definitely wasn’t.

“What are you frowning at there, Wisconsin?” Dwayne stood by the bed, arms crossed on the mattress next to Hyde’s sock-clad feet, head resting on his forearms. “You look like you’re homesick, little fella.”

“Hm. I actually might be.”

“The Texan there remind you of your cows back home?”

Hyde’s mouth pulled into a loop-sided smirk. “Yeah, exactly. How come you know me so well?”

With a laugh, Washington slapped his leg. “You’re so easy to read. Must be your pale, milky complexion, man. No, but seriously – you ok there?”

Hyde sighed. “Yes, I’m fine. I just… You remember on our camping-trip, you said I wasn’t a soldier and that you could see that. I guess I’m starting to realize that. ‘s not like I really ever thought I would be very good at this, but- “he hesitated. Heart-to-hearts were usually to be avoided, but this was Dwayne Washington, a friend. And one he might not see again if he didn’t want to make an effort. So. Why not. “Funny thing, man. I always thought I would suck at this shit here, but I don’t. Not really. I didn’t come here like you, or Carter, with the clear goal of serving my country, laying my life out for it like you do. It’s not really who I am, you know? ‘s just not the way I am put together. But I thought ‘why not’ and signed up, so that’s more or less why I’m here.”
“So it’s not because your parents sent you here for teaching you a lesson before you inherit their dairy-empire?”

“Uh.” That one caught him cold. “What?”

“Well, that’s the word right now on your backstory. Since you never tell it anywhere, the guys thought they make up their own for you.” Dwayne winked. “The leading theory is that you’re a rich little boy back home who screwed the wrong daughter or wife and got sent to the Army to learn some respect before you can take your place as the rightful prince of the dairy empire of Wisconsin.”

There was a beat of silence between them. Hyde blinked. And blinked some more. Then he snorted, which became a chuckle and he couldn’t stop laughing after that. Like a maniac, he just couldn’t stop.

When he’d finally finished, diaphragm hurting in the best way, Hyde had to wipe the tears from his eyes. Dwayne was grinning, but mostly he looked fascinated. “I guess that’s not exactly close to the truth, huh?”

“Man, I wish. The closest I’ve ever come to a cow was when we were chasing them with fireworks back in school.” He could maybe give a bit more here. Wasn’t a secret after all. “My father owns a chain of record stores, so yeah, he’s got money. But I’m not gonna inherit anything, man. My sister’s the heir, and she’s way better for it anyway. She’s got ambition. Shit- to no taste in music, but great with numbers and sales.”

Angie would do great, Steven was sure. She was a shark when it came to business. As a math-major, she was bound to be a bit of a weirdo in the social department, but if she let him, he’d make sure the worst guy she’d date would be Kelso. At least Kelso was basically a friendly dork, dumb as a piece of bread but not malicious or deliberately mean. He wanted fun with beautiful women with no strings attached – though maybe Brooke and their kid would change that. But there were terrible guys out there, and Steven wouldn’t let them hurt his family. He hadn’t had it long enough yet to want to lose it again.

Of course he’d thought about WB giving him more parts of his imperium. He was good with music, after all, even though his favourite bands were slowly starting to get out of date. They’d forever be classics, but there were new bands, and some of them even had some great tunes in the books. But while he could get Grooves running without major difficulties thanks to the crash-course in accounting he’d taken, due to Jackie forcing him, he never wanted to do that for longer than necessary. His passion had never been numbers, and they’d never be. His passion also wasn’t money. He’d never had enough of it, but he’d gotten by. Sometimes barely, but mostly fine. And a few nimble fingers had usually helped when funds got too tight. So no, the Barnett-imperium didn’t hold his thoughts, no matter how often Jackie had tried to get him to think of all the amazing things they could do with those bucks behind their names.

Simple life, record-store-life, had never quite seemed enough for her. Sometimes, when he let himself, Steven wondered if he could have ever been enough for her. Maybe that’s why he would jump to assumptions when it came to Kelso and her, but then again … fucking Kelso, man? Kelso, who’s sole expectation was to get laid on a regular basis? Even Steven had more expectations to life than that.

Huh. He had expectations.

“So, kissing your ass won’t make me rich? Huh, guess I shoulda spent more time on butting up to Pole or Engeroll.”
“Yeah, sorry. But my sis is still single, so…” Hyde winked. “She’s also quite hot, you know?”

Dwayne pretended to think about it, but he got that soft, mushy smile on his face again that he always sported when he stroked the picture of his girl to sleep at night. Not that Hyde watched him or anything. Just observant. “Appreciate the offer, brother, but I’m marrying Marisa the first chance I get. She’s been my girl forever, won’t give her up for anything.”

Hyde looked over to the birthday-party, giving Dwayne privacy to get that lovey-dovey expression back under control. “Good for ya, man.”

“Yeah. She’s … she’s amazing. You’ll meet her at the ceremony, she promised to be there. You’ll like her, she’s got quite the spirit. She also likes white-boy music, so maybe you’ll have something to talk about.” He shoved Hyde’s shoulder. “So, what about your folks? Will I meet them at the parade?”

“God, no. I sure hope not, man.” He realized that he might have said too much there and backpedalled. “Uh, I mean… I kinda didn’t tell anyone I’m here, so if they come that means they found out, and that…, mean they got worried enough to look for me. So no, really hoping no-one will be there.”

“Really?” Dwayne’s eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. “You didn’t tell your family where you are? That’s … kinda messed up, don’t you think?”

“A bit, yeah. And it’s not true, come to think of it. I told my father.”

“Record-store man?”

“The one, yepp. He knows where I am, so if the rest of the family worries, he’ll know what to tell them. He’s cool like that, and he won’t come to that stupid parade either.”

“You really don’t care about the Army at all, do you?” There was sorrow in Washington’s face, and Hyde felt a bit bad for putting it there. He knew how much the military and its purpose and future meant to Dwayne, which was one reason he’d never talked about his own opinion. That, and the fact he’d wanted to clear his head enough of his preconceived ideas and at least give this a shot.

“Sorry. Not really.” Steven wished for his shades furiously, but the only thing close to that was wiping his hand over his face. “I mean, it’s not that I hate it! But all this… this parade and honour stuff, that’s just not how I’m wired. It’s fun with you guys, but I’ll never be like you, or Carter there.” He pointed across the room, where Carter, San Marco and even Wilson were roaring with laughter about something Miller had said. “He’s the kind of man who should be in the Army. I’m… I’m really not,” he laughed. “Really, really not.”

Dwayne slapped him on the knee. “I know, man. I’ll still miss you, wherever I’ll end up.”

“Well, if you’re ever near Wisconsin, come look me up.” He hadn’t wanted to say that, but now it was out he also wouldn’t have taken it back even if he could have. “Here.” He slid off his bunk and went to his lock-box to get a pen and paper. “That’s my number. Or well, it’s the number of the people I live with. At least I hope it will still be the number…” he hesitated, then wrote down another one. “This one’s for my father, so if the first one won’t work, call here. And if you ever come visit, bring your wife! I want to get to know why you get all teary whenever you look at her picture, man.”

“Thanks. I’ll make sure to drop bye when I’m in the area.”

Before this could get any sappier, the whistle called for light-out and the guys broke up the party, soldiers going towards their beds or to the latrines. Hyde climbed back onto his bed and crossed his
arms behind his head. Somehow, this felt like a last-day kinda day. There were still nine days left, but already everyone was as excited as the seniors had been the weeks before graduation.

Nine days left, and the rest of their lives would begin.

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The nine days packed a punch. There was even more and more tiresome training than before, the days were packed with learning and rehearsing all their ‘field-trips’ to the last second, play-by-play analysis of all their mistakes and successes. Since Hyde had been the only one to fall into the river, he apparently deserved a lot more ridicule from Brewer, and as if saying out loud that he’d never be a soldier had opened a gate inside his brain, he felt it more and more difficult to stand idle and let the insults wash over him. Hyde wanted to snap back so badly that, come evening, his jaws hurt from clenching his teeth so hard. But he could hold out for just a few more days. Just a few more days…

On the Thursday before their ‘graduation’, Sergeant Weir called him into his office. “Have you thought about that career-idea we talked about, Hyde?”

“Ah, yes, Sir. I thought about it. I just… Can I speak openly, Sir?”

“Of course, of course. Sit down.”

Hyde did, then took a few breaths to think about his words. “Sir, I really appreciate the offer. I’ve thought about it, even though my initial thought was ‘no’, because shooting is something I enjoy. That is, shooting a rifle at a paper-target is. The idea of shooting at people… I never really got the hang of that idea, Sir. Even with extensive thought, I cannot become a sniper, Sir.”

“So what are you saying there, Hyde? You do know that the Army isn’t a humanitarian organisation, and that one day, every soldier might be required to shoot at people.”

“Yes, Sir. I’m aware of that.” Hyde clenched his fingers hard so he wouldn’t twitch and fiddle. “Basically, I’m saying that I am not certain that the Army is the right place for me, Sir.”

Weir tapped his fingers on his desk, and his stare made Hyde want to twitch so badly, it was nearly painful to hold himself still. “I see. You might want to keep those thoughts quiet for a few days longer. Sergeant Brewer is not known to be very understanding of people who waste his time.” He stared even harder. “After all, we wouldn’t want him to think you’re deserting your country, are we?”

‘I can’t desert if I’m not in the military, idiot.’ “No, Sir.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

Well. That didn’t go so bad.

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Tired as all hell from the 0500-till-0200 day they’d had, the whole class of recruits put on their uniforms as crisp as possible, shined those boots and ironed the last edges of their shirts for the big parade. Brewer had outdone himself with their last training-day, and the only consolations they had was that the Sergeant had been awake just as long as them. Admittedly, it was a very small consolation.

“Hyde!” Ah, the sweet musical voice of their fabulous Master Sergeant, calling out his affections. Everyone in the room stood to attention, because by now that’s just what they did. Funny – Steven
remembered that he’d asked himself not so long ago how he’d ever get that conditioning out of his head, because standing straight had come to him like a reflex. Lately, though, he had the opposite problem and had to fight the urge to slouch or roll his eyes at every yell and curse and insult. Steven hadn’t noticed until that day in Weir’s office, but looking back it had to have been there earlier, or Washington wouldn’t have picked up on it.

“Sir!” He was still not out of here. And he did want to see it through, even though the idea of a parade was a bit laughable, if you asked him.

“Why haven’t you handed in your paperwork yet?”

Ah. Well. The paperwork…. The one that told Brewer and everyone where he wanted to go after Basic Training. The one that he had to get signed by the Sergeant to even have a shot at his chosen profession. The one that he had handed in – only it marked ‘discontinue the education’ instead of anything else.

The one he’d been hoping would just slip by, because well. Avoiding conflict was a proven method of survival. A lot of people survived a lot of shit by simply avoiding the shit.

Apparently, he wouldn’t be this lucky. Go figure.

“But I did, Sir.”

“You made a mistake there, recruit!” Brewer slapped the papers against Steven’s chest. “Because it says here that you’re not continuing in the Army, and that cannot be right, can it?”

Forget needles – you could have heard a feather fall to the ground, it was this quiet in the room. Impressive, how so many half-dressed men could hold their breath for so long.

“Answer me!”

“Sir, I find that the Army and me are better suited to be apart, Sir.”

“You ‘find’ that, do you? You mean you’re going to waste the time we put into your education by abandoning your country? We spent ten weeks getting you into shape, Hyde, and how do you thank us? By abandoning us! That is a disgrace - you are a disgrace! You are a … I can’t even find the words for how you disgust me! I want you out of this room, traitor! Grab your stuff – you don’t deserve a parade. *Move it!*”

Steven snapped to attention even more, despite his ligaments being already tight as steel-cables.

“Yes, Sir.”

"*NOW!*"

He spun on his heel and nearly fell over his bootlaces in his haste to get to his box. With everyone watching and Brewer glaring, Steven threw everything of his he could find into his duffle-bag. He looked up at Carter and Washington, both straight as rulers but with sympathy in their eyes. He couldn’t just leave like this, without a word. And since he was already being kicked out…

Standing up in front of them, he snapped one of the best salutes he’d ever managed. “Carter, Washington. Wilson. If I’d have ever felt the urge to go into a fight, it would have been an honour to stand at your side. Hope you’ll find whatever you’re looking for. Don’t die.”

Before Brewer exploded, he turned around and yanked the bag over his shoulder, then he was walked out of the barracks with the Sergeant at his back, still not done with the insults. But they didn’t bother him at all. Steven wasn’t pretending that this was all water flowing over him, like he’d done for most of his life. They actually didn’t bother him. Maybe Brewer and everyone else on this
base considered him a waste of space, useless, wasted effort, irresponsible, dumb, futureless, not worthy of time or even thought – among other things. That was quite possible.

But for maybe the first time in his life, Steven Hyde did not.
In the end, he’d stayed for the parade. Wearing his own clothes for the first time in nearly three months had felt amazing and liberating. Watching his comrades march in step, being cheered by family and friends had felt right, too. He hadn’t stayed out of loyalty to the flag or some such bullshit. But they were his friends, had become something close to brothers during the time together and this was important. Not to him – for them. Steven might not understand their devotion, but hell, he’d understood only half of what Forman devoted his time to, and yet he’d gone to so many stupid things with him. Most memorable? The Star Trek convention in Chicago.

And he’d gone on quite a few things Jackie wanted to go and mostly made an effort. Maybe he’d skipped a few more than he should have. Still, the point stood. For his friends, he could damn well do stupid things if it made them happy.

He’d also really wanted to meet Dwayne’s girl, who was indeed a knockout. There hadn’t been much time to really get to know her, since she’d mostly clung to Washington’s arm with a tight-knuckled grip, as if she’d been afraid he’d disappear.

Steven had skipped out on meeting Carter’s family, but he’d nodded at him from afar and mock-saluted. To his surprise, Carter had left his – uh, father? Uncle? – and jogged over to him and Dwayne. “Hyde! Nearly didn’t recognize you in civvies. Just wanted to wish you luck, my friend. I hope we’ll see each other again – it’s been fun. And also – thank you.” He’d looked so earnest, it had made Steven uncomfortable.

“Uh, sure.” He’d scratched his head – god, would those hairs fucking grow back soon? – and accepted the hard, deliberate handshake. “You’ll be fine, man.” And he would be, Steven was sure. He would be the kind of leader soldiers would willingly die for, which was scary and a little bit impressive. If there were only men like Carter in the military, Hyde would’ve been a lot less worried about the future.

Now, though, he was back on the roads towards Point Place. Things were starting to look really familiar; and they should be – he hadn’t been gone that long. Seventeen weeks – that wasn’t even half a year.

Felt like a lifetime.

He’d been to see WB first. Not because he was trying to avoid going home and answering uncomfortable questions as long as possible, but – ah, hell. Of course that was the reason. But who cares, it had only been two days at WB’s pretty, rich home, sleeping in a very comfortable bed and eating very good food. After all that time in a narrow bunk-bed – and the two nights he’d slept in crappy motels on his drive back – the queen-size mattress had felt like heaven. His father had laughed at his hair for a minute straight, then hugged him and told him he was very proud. Hyde kinda dug that squishy feeling it had created, but he wouldn’t tell anyone.

There was the sign for Point Place. He turned his Camino into the familiar road and felt a grin spread on his face as he saw the water-tower. Someone had re-painted the pot-leaf; it now looked more like the real thing. Hopefully, nobody had fallen down – there was a certain skill to it, and not everyone in this town was a Kelso. Even though Michael’s parents had tried really hard to take over the population. Steven wondered for a moment how his friend was doing in Chicago. If the police actually let him out into the wild with a gun, and how his god-daughter was doing. Once he’d spoken to Jackie, he’d check up on him, Hyde promised himself. Maybe he’d just call, that would work probably fine.
When he turned into the Forman’s street, though, his plans all tumbled over. He stopped the car at the curb, shutting off the engine but made no move to get out. Should he ring the front-door bell like a guest? Should he use the backdoor, like family? He didn’t doubt he was family – funny, how that one had settled into certainty without noticing – but they were probably still a bit upset about him just up and leaving without a word.

Mind made up, he stepped out and onto the front-porch. Ringing the bell it was.

Only, there seemed to be nobody at home. He rang again, then stepped off the porch to peer around the house to see if the cars were gone. Nope, the Toyota was in the driveway, so at least one of them should be home. Just then, the door opened.

“Sorry, sorry, I was in the bathroom. What can I do-“ Hyde had turned at her voice and there she was, tiny and squirrely with a purple towel on her head, fuzzy slippers on her feet, looking like the best thing he’d seen in a lifetime. “Oh my God!”

He smiled at her speechlessness. “Hey there, Mrs Forman.”

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“Oh my God, Steven!” She grabbed him around the waist and squeezed him like he’d always wanted his mother squeezing him. If there were a few tears in his eyes, that was certainly due to her squeezing so hard. Nothing else. She pushed herself away from him and slapped his chest. “Where the hell have you been! You can’t just do that, we were worried sick about you! When we got the letter, first I thought… I mean-“ she sniffed, dear hell, she was sniffling! “I mean, I knew you wouldn’t do anything stupid, but then again – maybe you would! And when Jackie came by and told us…” Kitty avoided his eyes and he felt like the biggest pile of shit in the world. He’d made her worry – he’d made her cry! “But you’re here! Oh, come in, come in. Don’t stand there, you must be cold, come in, I’ll make coffee – do you want coffee? I also might find a few cookies if I look real hard…” Babbling, she hurried into the kitchen and Steven followed along, dumping his bag on the way, next to the kitchen-door.

“I’m really sorry for worrying you, Mrs Forman.” There wasn’t much else he could say, after all. Every explanation wasn’t exactly one – he didn’t even remember anything from the moment he’d hit Vegas. “I just wasn’t really in a good place.”

“Oh, Steven, I can imagine.” She hugged him again. “But you are wrong, you were wrong! Jackie came by and she told us, and I believe her - Redbelieves her. There was nothing between her and Michael, I’m certain!”

“Yeah.” He ran his hand over his head. Better than eleven weeks ago, but still too short for his liking. At least he could feel a few curls coming in, he’d been a bit scared they’d grow back straight. “Yeah, I figured I’d overreacted slightly.”

“Slightly! Slightly is – oh, that is so much the wrong word. Do you know how long you’ve been gone? Do you, Steven Hyde?” She turned around and marched towards the wall, pointing at the calendar. It was one of those year-long things, and there were two different colours of markings. One, supposedly, was Forman - Eric - the other … well, apparently that was him. He felt about two inches small. “This long! Do you want me to count the days? This is nearly five months! Eric is gone, and then you leave like that, and… and…. And… and at least Eric writes us. And more than ‘I’m not dead.’ What kind of person only writes ‘Not dead’ in a letter!” She busied herself with the coffee-maker again, hands shaking so hard the powder kept spilling over the counter. Steven went over and took the spoon from her, then did what he’d very rarely done deliberately.

He hugged her.
“I’m really, really sorry Mrs Forman,” he whispered into the back of her head. “You deserve a lot better, but at the time, there really wasn’t much more I could say. Really not.” He kissed her on the towel. “That’s the sad truth.”

She turned, hand to her lips and looked at him with her big eyes. She took him in, from head to toe, then back to the head again. Ah yes, the hair… “Steven,” she whispered. “Steven, did you … did you join a cult?”

The laughter that bubbled up couldn’t be kept inside, and he just hoped she wouldn’t call the loony-bin for him. He still hugged her, so she wouldn’t be able to run to the phone, and after a while she apparently couldn’t help but giggle as well.

“No,” he said after he had himself under control, “though it’s not as far off as one would think. I had to get my shit together, figure some stuff out, though. And I really, really couldn’t write.”

Mrs Forman sighed, then wiped her coffee-covered hands in her dress. She wasn’t wearing an apron but that didn’t seem to bother her. “Well, wherever it was you’ve been, you look fine. Quite dashing even, if I may say so.” She cackled, then suddenly turned red as if she’d said something inappropriate. “So, Mister. Now you tell me where you’ve been all this time! I really hope for your sake that the story is a good one!”

After grabbing two mugs with coffee, she walked over to the table and patted the seat next to her. It felt comfortable to be back and Steven felt something settle in place that he hadn’t been aware of being out of whack. “Well, how do I start…”

Before he could, though, the back-door opened and Red walked in, evidently fresh from his muffler-shop. “Kitty, do we have more-“ Steven had jumped off his seat, like a little kid who had done something wrong and was waiting to be chided. Distantly, he cheered to himself that even Red Forman’s hard-ass military presence didn’t make him snap to attention. This was only shame, not obedience that had him want to scuff his feet and wring his hands.

“Look, who’s back, Red,” Kitty said, and she didn’t seem to know what to do, either.

“Well, would you look at that.” Red walked past them both and got himself a coffee. He seemed a little pissed off, but that could be wrong. Probably wasn’t, but it could be. With the counter between him and them, he made an effort to look Steven in the eyes. “And we didn’t even have to involve the FBI.” Oooh yes, he was pissed.

How do you apologize to Red Forman? Apart from the obvious, that was. “Yeah. Sorry ‘bout that, Red.”

“So, since you’re not dead, we can hand those boxes from the basement over – we were this close to selling them, but now you can take them off our hands and put them into your place.” Ah. Well. This wasn’t unreasonable, though of course Steven had been hoping he could move back in. But no, of course, this was not his home and after all, he was old enough to live on his own. He’d find something, and he’d…

“Oh Red!” Kitty slapped her husband’s arm. “He’s kidding, Steven! There are no boxes, everything is still where it was. We would never sell your possessions!”

“Ah Kitty, don’t lie to the boy. We tried,” he looked up but there was a smirk in the corner of his eyes. “But nobody wanted to pay for that crap.” And just like that, Steven knew he was back home for real.

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Sitting in the basement on the ratty couch felt strange. For now, he was completely alone, only the distant sounds from the vacuum-cleaner upstairs cutting through the silence. Steven stared at the blank TV without seeing anything and thought about his next steps. Jackie? Or Donna? Fez wasn’t a priority, he’d already decided, and while it would be a lot easier, it was also a lot less important. In the end, it was simply logistics that tipped the scale: Donna was at college in Madison but was on break and expected at home tonight – and Hyde didn’t have Jackie’s address.

For a while, he tried to strategize his explanations, order his words, tried to create a speech that would explain and apologize, but in the end, he should count it a success if he didn’t shut down completely after the first few words. So instead of thinking, he put on *A night at the Opera* because sometimes, you just had to have some Mercury to get by and started on sorting through his clothes and pile them into ‘urgent wash’ and ‘might wear when alone’. ‘Clean’ was a pitiful two Ts, one overshirt, some boxers and socks and one pair of jeans. He had travelled lightly when he went after Jackie, and the weeks in the Army had provided him with nice, olive clothes he’d given San Marco before leaving Oregon. Except for the underwear – he’d needed new ones anyway, and giving a guy your used boxers was a bit weird, even for him.

Stuck in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, he didn’t hear the Vista Cruiser rumble to the Pinciotti’s yard. If he’d heard, he probably wouldn’t have worried anyway. Dumbass that he was, he’d forgotten his really distinct car at the side of the road and that people driving by might recognize it and jump to – correct – conclusions.

So with Freddy crying for his Mama at top volume, the tall blond dervish managed to sneak up on him while he was putting his shirts into the washing machine.

“You stupid dillhole!” was the only warning he got before Donna was on him, first with a slap to the head, then a strong hug, then another slap, this time to his face. While he was still reeling, she grabbed him again and planted a kiss on his mouth. Holy shit, he was getting whiplash here! “‘Not dead’, was that supposed to make me feel better, you dumb piece of shit? I was worried sick about you, and all you can do is write a stupid card with two words on it? Were your arms broken, or why didn’t you use a phone, you prick?”

He managed to get a bit of distance from the fury. “Uh. Hey Donna.”

“Don’t you *Hey Donna* me! Is that all you have to say? I can’t believe it, I… how was I actually worried about you, you’re just a selfish sonofabitch, I should kick you in the nuts, I’m so angry at you right now.”

“Donna, are you crying?”

“No, I’m not!” She wiped the not-tears away angrily. “That would mean I care about you, and that would be stupid, right? Since it would obviously be one-sided.” She sniffed. Today was apparently the day Steven managed to bring every woman in his vicinity to tears.

“I’m sorry. Listen – I… I’m really sorry, Donna.”

“You should be! First Eric runs off and leaves me here, Jackie moves to Chicago and then you drop off the face of the earth like you never existed. Everyone runs away and I start feeling like I’ve got a nasty disease! I…” she stared at him, then lunged again but this time just for a hug. “I missed you, you idiot. I thought you were dead.”

Closing his eyes, Steven held onto her, trying to calm her shudders as she cried into his shirt. His nose was buried in her blond hair, where the red roots were showing and he kept pressing himself against her because Donna could give the best hugs in the world. Yes, even better than Mrs Forman,
or Jackie. Donna was tall, and she could squeeze really tight. He’d always loved her hugs. Maybe those hugs had even played a role in his ill-advised attempt to steal her heart, but it didn’t matter anymore. They were great for comfort, and he tried to give back as much as he took.

“I’m so, so sorry, Donna.”

“What happened?” she mumbled into his chest, and without looking at her, he found talking came easy.

“I needed to get my ass kicked.” He felt her frown. “I uh, I needed to not make any decisions for a while, because my decisions pretty much sucked. And … I was killing myself, Donna. One day at a time, step by step. Seeing Jackie in that motel and all – that was one big kick in my face and I didn’t really think. I just reacted, and it landed me in Vegas, and it nearly killed me.” She tensed, but he held her close so he could continue not looking at her. “I was on my way to doing something incredibly idiotic. My decisions are pretty much non-existent or moronic, so I went were decisions weren’t required.”

This time when she lightly pushed at him, he let her get out of the hug. She blinked – he’d never seen her this tearful, not even after her mother had gone to California without even thinking about taking her with her – and then, not unlike Mrs Forman, looked him over with a critical eye.

“Oh God, don’t tell me. Did you join a cult?”

He chuckled again. Even at the second time, the idea was too funny. “Not exactly.”

Her eyes went huge then. “No – no! The hair, the missing sideburns… all that muscle! You freak joined the Marines!”

Steven grimaced wryly. “Uh, Army, to be exact.”

She frogged him, painfully. “What the fuck, Hyde? Why would you do that? You hate the military, Jesus, you hate America! Why would you join the freaking Army?”

It was pretty much what Red had asked – though he’d been much more pissed that Hyde had left the troops, his thoughts running in similar circles as Brewer’s apparently. And that he’d chosen the Army, of all things. ’Those pansy-ass green-clad idiots wouldn’t even know how to build a raft out of a barn-door!’ Which might even be true – there hadn’t been any raft-building during his stay. “I don’t know, Donna. There I was, waking up from a weeks-long bender, and…” he tried to avert his eyes but she wouldn’t let him, holding onto his shoulders and fixing him in place. He closed them, instead. “I was scared shitless, man. I didn’t even know what I’ve been doing from the moment I arrived to the moment I woke up, and let me tell you, that was a pretty long time. And then there was the Army-office and … Well, it made sense at the time!”

He felt her chuckle and dared look again. She was laughing, and her furious face had softened. “That is such an idiotic thing to do. Nearly Kelso-level of idiotic.” She let go of his shoulders and slumped onto the couch, leaving Steven to continue his washing so he’d have a bit of distance. It was always easier if people didn’t get too close. “But on the other hand, maybe it wasn’t the worst decision.” She startled as the record came to an end, jumped up and shut the player off. “At least tell me you didn’t start on boozing again the minute you got out?”

Wincing, he nodded. He hadn’t exactly been hiding his drinking-habits, but since no-one had ever said anything, he’d kind of assumed nobody noticed. Or cared. “Yeah, I’m trying that whole sober-thing for a while now.” He turned, mocking himself to take the sting out – or maybe make it sting more, who knew. “It’s really interesting how many colours there are in the world!”
“Good. Great. You should. I – I don’t know if I should have said something before, you know? I wanted to, but…”

“Yeah. I don’t know if it would have done any good. I might have just yelled at ya, but I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t have changed a thing. I uh… I guess there’s a bit of a problem there.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Ya think?”
A few minutes later, she came over to him and silently handed him the detergent from the shelf. They didn’t talk, just worked side by side and it wasn’t even weird that she didn’t seem to care that she was sorting his worn clothes, including his underwear. “You look really weird like this. Not bad-weird. But… not Hyde, you know?” She nodded towards his head.

“It’s really cold. I want them back. I think that was the worst thing, getting that haircut. Pretty much everything else paled in comparison.” Not true. But he was already starting to forget the rest, so maybe it actually was true.

Donna chuckled again and swiped her hand over his stubbled head. “I can honestly say that I wouldn’t have had the guts to go through with this, in your place. I’m still talking about the haircut, by the way.” She bit her lips. “Did… did you find what you were looking for, at least?”

Steven sighed. “I don’t know. It was… Surprisingly, it didn’t suck too much. I always thought it would bug me, just jumping whenever someone said so, but …” he looked over, trying to judge her expression. “It was oddly relaxing, you know? I mean, I’ve never been that exhausted in my whole life, I kid you not. And man, the rain! It didn’t stop raining! I can’t even remember a day when there was no rain! Freakin’ Oregon, man. But most of the time, there was no time to thinking. Just doing. That’s surprisingly nice.”

“But you’re not… You won’t go back, will you?”

Horrified, he turned to her fully. “No! Jesus wept, no way. I’m out of there, that’s really not my shit. I’ve done my ten weeks of being a good little doggy, now I’ll go back being a grouchy,” he smirked. “and sell records. WB said the store’s mine, he just hired a temp-manager while I was gone.”

Donna was silent and sat back down on the couch. “You know,” she said when he sat next to her after starting the machine, “I went by the store to look for you. The manager – Dave, cool guy, you might wanna keep him – said he didn’t know where you were but said I should call WB. So… I called him. He said you’re fine, and you’ll be back. I might have yelled at him for being a prick, not telling us anything. He laughed at me, the asshole.”

“Really? He didn’t tell me that. Maybe he put you on hold, he does that sometimes.”

She smiled, but her heart wasn’t in it. “Yeah. Why… why didn’t you tell anyone else?” Why didn’t you tell me was what she was really asking. Donna always knew how to ask the right, the uncomfortable questions.

“Donna, man. I don’t know. Telling WB was the easiest, you know? He… well. He doesn’t really have a big say over me. He’s my father, but…. I didn’t even know him before a year ago. Also, I might have thought that you would talk me out of this.” Or, more truthfully, support the idea which would have made him balk and bail. That much, he knew about himself. “And maybe I really wanted to shoot something. Or punch someone. Seemed the best and safest way to do both.”

“Wow.” She looked him over again. “I can’t imagine you with a gun. Did you at least hit the target?”

Steven smirked. “Eh. I didn’t suck.”
The two of them stayed on that couch for a long time. Donna took a few minutes to tell Bob where she was while Steven went and begged for scrubs – namely two wonderful cheese-and-ham-sandwiches with fries and soda. He told her about Dwayne and Carter and George, even about Wilson. He kinda didn’t mention Goldberg – that conversation would have to wait some more. She told him about college, about her writing-class and that one professor she really liked, and how she planned to turn her studies into a journalism career. She was also thinking about going out with a guy from her English-class, since Eric had made the mistake of telling her he wouldn’t be opposed to going out with a girl from where he was working. Idiot. Then again, Donna shouldn’t stop her life just because her boyfriend wasn’t around, and if said boyfriend hinted at not being the boyfriend…. Well, at least it wasn’t Casey Kelso. For a few seconds, Hyde considered making a move but the two of them were much better off as friends. He still loved her – would always love her – but what he’d felt back when he’d been seventeen had mellowed down into pretty much the same feeling he had for Forman. Donna was a free spirit, ambitious to see the world and make a change. Steven… yeah, not so much. He knew what he wanted, at least for now, and that collided with Donna’s bright ideals too much. Holding her hostage in a small town in Wisconsin would dim her down and she didn’t deserve that. It could only ever be a fling, and … no, he wouldn’t do that. Flinging with pretty girls was fine for him, flinging with one of his best friends would be way too messy. Messier even than the whole Jackie-thing.

Speaking of which – the whole time she’d been talking, Donna hadn’t mentioned her at all. Which was fine – he wasn’t really looking forward to climb that mountain of explosives before he’d gotten his groove back. But he would have to, and he could at least test the waters now.

“So. Uh, do you by any chance have Jackie’s number?”

She sighed. “I do, yes. We talk on the phone sometimes – well, she talks, I pretend to listen. Mostly I put her on speaker and do laundry or write my essays. It’s like those whale-sound records, calms me down.” Donna laughed. “But yes, I have it. She might – and I’m using the word very understated – be a little miffed at you. At least she stopped crying about three weeks after you were gone. And the yelling and cursing your name, ancestors and offsprings has stopped… Huh, I don’t even know when that stopped. Maybe last month.” Donna slapped his thigh. “But I really don’t think you should call her and talk to her on the phone. That conversation needs to be face to face.”

That was what he’d wanted to, anyway. Well. Not wanted, really, he’d much rather not have any conversation at all and just get back to being good with Jackie. But then again, they hadn’t really been very good, had they? There was too much crap sitting between Jackie and him that needed to be addressed, and maybe they would be fine afterwards – or maybe not. For now, right this minute, without seeing Jackie in front of him – for now Steven was okay with her being not his.

But it would probably not stay that way. She had a way to get under his skin and make him stupid. He supposed that was probably love – after all, Forman had turned incredibly stupid once he’d fallen in love with Donna. But Steven didn’t know for sure – he didn’t know anything.

So no, for a little while, he’d let Jackie be in Chicago and find his footing again until he’d set himself up to get it yanked out once more. Man, he really had a masochistic streak.

“Hyde?”

“Yepp.”

“Do you still smoke pot?”
Hyde felt a smile creep up at the corners of his mouth, then turn his lips until it spread all up to his eyes. He hadn’t done it, not since that cabin in the National Park. But he’d wanted to, oh yes, had he wanted to. “I might still have some stash in my room. Why, Pinciotti? Are you being a bad girl here?”

“Oh, I’m such a bad girl. A really, really bad girl. Go, get! Slowpoke!”

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“Hyde?”

There it was, that feeling of sitting on a cloud, watching the world go by without a care. It was not exactly like shooting, but it gave the same peace. Being in the circle felt electrifying, sparks and ideas floating around. But getting down again, that’s where the magic had always been for him. Everything slowed down and nothing hurt and feelings came and went and didn’t bite him. It was a bit like cuddling after sex. “Yeah?”

“I thought you were dead.” Donna sat between his legs, back to his chest. They were on the couch, seeking contact but still strictly platonic. She frowned and took a bite from her cookie, absently wiping the crumbs onto the floor. “When I got that card, I thought it was a good-bye-note. I didn’t want to read it, you know? But then Mrs Forman came over and was just so happy that you’d written a letter – by the way, way to make them not worry, dillhole! – and then I got this shitty card and it only said ‘Not dead’. I wanted to murder you. And I kept hoping you’d come home so I could wring your neck, but you didn’t and I thought… what if you were dead? What if we wouldn’t even know? Would anyone even tell us? And now it turns out that you’re really fine, and all I want is to be mad at you for making me so scared, but I can’t because I’m just so, so glad that you’re not dead.” She leaned her head back and looked at him and he let her. Coming down had always made him mellow and he didn’t fight the thoughts in his head, the sorrow for making her worry so much, the apologies he wanted to say – everything he ever wanted to say. She could see them, and maybe she would understand. Donna was not Jackie – she didn’t need so many words to understand. Hyde and Donna… the two of them had always been able to not-talk with each other.

But maybe one thing had to be said. “You know what? I’m really, really glad about that, too.”

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A few days later, Steven was behind the counter of his store. His store! He had his records – Blondie was playing in the background, and it didn’t really suck – and his couch and Donna had just been by and promised not to tell Jackie that he was back, though she wouldn’t lie if Jackie outright asked about him. And he had met Dave and he really seemed like a nice guy and he was thinking of maybe giving him a shift here. Then again, it wasn’t that much work and right now, Steven didn’t have anything else to do anyway. He’d promised to call him and let Dave know, maybe they could work something out. But WB had said there’d be another store Dave could manage, so it wasn’t like Hyde was throwing him to the wolves.

A few customers had occupied his time and he’d sold a few records, and when he looked over this little hole-in-the-wall, it felt just as much like home as his basement. Maybe he was actually a Hobbit – he seemed to like dark, burrow-y places.

Next week, Jackie would be in town. Steven craved and dreaded the moment he’d see her again, wondering if she was fine, if she’d moved on, if her future would maybe still includ him, in some way. The talk they’d have to have was already giving him jitters, especially when there was nobody around to distract him. During the day, he had the store or hung out with Donna – making the most of the time before she’d have to go back to college. But the nights were harder, and sleep often
wouldn’t come. Once, he’d gone upstairs and cleaned the dishes and prepared a potato-casserole just to get his thoughts to stop whirling on what-ifs in endless circles. And yesterday, Red had found him in front of the living-room-TV, without sound because he hadn’t wanted to wake anybody. Red had taken him into the kitchen and started a game of scrabble with him, and they hadn’t talked anything beyond meaningless mocking over their scores. Hyde couldn’t remember who had won, but it had been a great way to spend the time between two and four in the morning. Just before he’d gone to bed, Red had looked at him and asked “Do you want me to hide the liquor and beer?!”, and Steven had felt that huge, enormous wall of feelings creep up, threatening to overwhelm him.

“No, man. Thanks for the offer, but that’s not what this is about. I just can’t stop my head from running; it’s driving me nuts.”

“Oh. Well. Do you want me to ask why your head is running so hard?”

“You can, but it’s not that big a deal. It’s… I mean… well, it’s … Jackie, you know?”

Red had rolled his eyes. “Of course it’s about Jackie, who else. I should have known. Now, listen. You might not believe it because you’re young and stupid, but you need sleep. Lack of sleep makes people stupid, and you don’t want to be even more stupid when you go down on your belly and crawl at her feet for having been such a dumbass five months ago. So Steven – get. Some. Sleep! If your day isn’t tiring you out enough, maybe go to the gym and hit a sandbag for a few rounds, but please… I’m not as springy anymore, and Kitty isn’t either. We need sleep, more than four hours. We get cranky otherwise.”

It had been a friendly reminder that the Formans still worried about him – and that they knew he wasn’t sleeping.

“Got it,” he’d said and Red had turned to go.

Just before the kitchen door had closed, he’d turned around once more. “Oh, and I wouldn’t be opposed to you making that casserole again one day. Maybe during the day, though, next time.”

Hyde tried the suggestion with the punching-bags, but it wasn’t the same. He’d even once gone a few rounds with one of the guys in the gym, but it didn’t give him the same high he’d gotten with Washington. So he didn’t think he’d do that again. Gym wasn’t really his style. He mostly just put on music and tried to bore himself to sleep with counting the spider-webs in the corner.

Some nights, he went to Leo and they smoked some weed and talked stupid shit and giggled a lot. Leo, in his glorious, non-judgmental way had just hugged him when he’d first seen Hyde back and then asked if he’d brought him a present. Then forgot that Steven had even been gone at all. Leo was uncomplicated like that. Be there – great. Be gone – also cool. Be back – great.

It seemed easy, but Hyde didn’t ever wish his brain to rot into that state of not-giving-a-fuck. Not anymore. Who knew if he would end up as happy and harmless as Leo, after all?

A young girl approached the counter, a bit hesitant. She seemed to be around sixteen, maybe a year more or less and Hyde smiled at the realization that he’d been that age not too long ago. She had cute eyes and a short, curly bob, and her jeans were torn in places that suggested more of a statement than poverty. “Uh, hi, can you help me, maybe?”

“Yes, what’re you looking for?”

“I.. I don’t know. See, I’m looking for a record for my boyfriend, but I don’t know what to get him. He already has pretty much everything of the Stones, and he likes Skynyrd but that’s not my thing.
So… I really don’t know, because I want to give him something I’d like too so we can listen to it together.”

Hyde looked her over once more, then turned his eyes up to think a bit. With a frown, he bit his lip and walked over to the ‘S’-Box. “What about Patti Smith?”

“What about Patti Smith?”

He raised his eyebrows in wonder. “Girl! I’m shocked!” He grabbed ‘Horses’ out of the crate and took it over to the player, put the needle to the track with the same name, then gave her the headphones. “Check it, and if you think your boyfriend won’t like it, dump him and find someone better.” He winked at her, because by now he knew that musical taste shouldn’t be the only thing that defined a relationship. He left her to it and when she started tapping her fingers on her leg, he smiled.

Maybe she wouldn’t buy it for her boy, but she might just take the record for herself.

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Donna came by on Friday. “Let’s take a break. Come on, I’m buying you lunch.” Well, why not. He could eat.

Hyde grabbed his jacket, the green, Army one he liked too much to have left it with one of his friends from Porcupine. It was sturdy, worn in and with the newly-sewn on Aerosmith-patch on the shoulder, it looked just cool. He slipped into the Vista Cruiser, smirking at the small changes Donna had made to stamp it her car instead of Forman’s.

He smiled at the newest addition – a picture of Cathrine Leroy, sitting in a shed with a grim-looking, stout soldier in the background. “You’re not planning in following in her footsteps, are you?”, Hyde asked, flipping at the photograph. “Because that would be really stupid, if you ask me.”

“No, of course not. You know I’d never do that.” She waited a beat. “I couldn’t take a sharp picture if my life depended on it. No, I just… I think… Ah, it’s stupid, I guess.”

But he thought he understood. “You want to leave a legacy, like her.” He saw Donna nod. “You should. You’re too awesome to stay here and raise babies. But,” he flicked at the picture again. “Leroy was twenty-one when she went off to be stupid, so at least wait until then, ok? Being nineteen and dumb is nice, too.” She waggled her head, but Hyde was pretty sure his message had been received. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“The Mall.”

“What? Why the Mall! We could’ve gotten a burger or something. You know I hate that place.”

“Yeah, I know. But I want to buy a new pair of jeans and we can eat something there – catch two flies with one stone.”

“Birds. You catch birds with stones.”

“Who the hell would throw stones at birds!”

They bickered the rest of the way, and even continued in the parking-lot and while walking through the doors into the temple of consumerism and decadence. It took him a while to realize she wasn’t going straight to the sub-pavilion as she’d promised, and also ignored all the stores that sold pants at too-high prices. In fact, she seemed to be scanning the crowds.
“Uh, Donna. Did you forget to tell me something? Are we waiting for someone here?”

“Ah.” She looked over but averted her eyes again. Busted. “Well, since you wouldn’t stop making me crazy with how you distinctly not talk about the tiny, brunette elephant in the room, I thought I’d make the decision for you.” She smirked and grabbed his head, turning it into the direction of the garish décor-store. “And there she is.”

There she was, indeed. Jackie.

How could he’ve ever believed he’d be alright with her not being his girl anymore? No matter how often he’d tell himself she’d be better off without him and he’d be fine without her, it didn’t change that Steven was lying to himself. The truth once more took his breath away and carried him to the moment he thought he’d left behind in Oregon.

Jackie, in that motel in Chicago, seconds before a half-naked Kelso appeared on the scene. Why the hell did he have that image stuck in his head? Why not something that wasn’t tainted with fear and shock and pain so bruising he should have looked like he’d done after falling in the river, or after Washington had beaten the crap out of him in the gym.

“Come on, Hyde. Talk to her.” Donna pushed at his shoulders but he didn’t budge. “Buckle up, soldier! You need to speak with her, and she needs to speak to you. I’m not saying this’ll be easy, but you can’t keep existing in this bubble, pretending you don’t mean anything to each other anymore. Because it’s not true.” She stepped into his line of sight and her face was earnest like it rarely was. “Hyde, no matter what she’ll tell you, don’t shut her out, okay? She still cares about you, and I know you care about her. Whatever happens, you can’t let this settle into indifference. Or worse. So, go on, talk to her. Be a man – make the first step.” She twitched a bit and a touch of shame coloured her cheeks. “Though of course that’s only because she doesn’t know you’re here. I might have not told her. So, here’s your chance to clear the air without her having a grand speech prepared. Seize it!”

Well. What else could he do.
Chapter 13

Up close, she was even more breath-taking than from the other side of the mall’s hallway. She was still gorgeous, but the doll-like appearance she’d sported for so long had mellowed out. In a lot of ways, that had happened even before Chicago, but now she seemed to look more like a young woman, not like a pretty little accessory. She was wearing a blue blouse with a pair of red bell-shaped jeans and she looked not so much pretty but beautiful.

Her hair was a tad shorter than he remembered but still shone soft, and he ached to run his fingers through it. Donna was right. Jackie would never mean nothing to him – he’d fallen for her so hard, he’d still not reached the bottom. It was exactly what Hyde’d feared, back when they’d gotten together and it had become clear that their summer-fling was turning into much more. But sometime along the road, he’d stopped caring about that and just gone with the flow, just let her sweep him away like a wave. He’d let her take him back and forth, not caring where it would take him. Out to sea to drown, or back on land to die in the sand.

That… might not have been ideal.

He was right next to her now, just a few feet between them. Enough distance to let her escape – or for him to run – but close enough they didn’t have to shout. She wasn’t aware of him yet, there were too many people in the mall to notice every single one, and she was also still scanning the crowds for Donna’s tall form. He took a breath but words wouldn’t come, and a few seconds long, Steven stood there like a fish. He cleared his throat. “Ahm. Hi, Jackie.”

Jackie turned but didn’t really take him in – or maybe she didn’t want to acknowledge him, the jury was still out. “Hi.” But it took only a second for her eyes to grow into saucers and she whipped back around, and then she was the one doing the fish-impression.

Oh God, she was so beautiful it hurt like a punch in the gut.

“Steven?” she whispered, her hand over her mouth. “How… Oh my God.” Then, louder, “Oh my God!”

What did you say now? How did one continue this kind of talk? Hyde didn’t have anything planned – all his plans had been dismissed due to being idiotic and sending the wrong message. Should he just say ‘Sorry’? Or what?

“Oh my God, you are here! What… why are you here? Wh… Donna! Oh my God, Donna, that bitch! She didn’t tell me – she set me up. Oh God.” She stood on her tiptoes to look over the crowd once more. Steven bit his lips, fiddling with the pocket-flaps of his jacket. Should he leave now? Defend Donna? What was the social expectation for such a situation? But before he’d reached a conclusion, Jackie was back on him. “What the hell have you done with your hair!”

“Oh. Cut it?” Great. Thumbs up for that brilliant piece of conversation, Hyde.

“That’s not a haircut, Steven. You look like a naked sheep!”

He knew a response to that. “And you look beautiful, Jackie.”

Apparently, he’d chosen wrong, since her hands flew to her mouth again and her eyes filled with tears.

“You… you…” she furiously wiped her eyes. “No, you don’t get to do that. You don’t get to make
me cry! Not here. Come, I’m going to yell at you somewhere private.” She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him along, and once more the tide was dragging him out into the blue, and once more he refused to swim against it.

Outside of the Mall, she steered them towards a little fleck of green to the left of the lot. She let go of his arm just as her feet touched the grass, and she whirled around, slamming her hands into his chest so hard he stumbled a few paces backwards. “How dare you! How dare you come here and make me cry! How dare you be here and – and – and just… make me feel all this again! I was finally getting to be alright, you have no right, no right to dig all the shit up again. My life was good, it was fine! I was fine – you don’t… you don’t have the right to make it miserable again!”

Getting stabbed would probably hurt less, Steven distantly thought. Numbness spread from where her words had hit, somewhere in the chest-area. All his skills in just standing by and taking shit weren’t enough to keep the sting out, to keep the pain at bay. The worst thing, though, was that his tongue got stuck in his mouth like a dead rat, furry and useless and disgusting. He made her miserable. He’d made her life miserable. Well, good to know, right? He should leave her, then, since he’d never wanted her to feel bad.

His legs wouldn’t work, though. All his limbs seemed to refuse to work. So he just stood there, wishing he’d never bothered waking up this morning, or – better yet – never bothered to come home.

But he recalled her words, her plea for him to tell her that there was a future for them. How could she say he’d made her miserable when she’d begged him to tell her they would remain together? Jackie wasn’t as stupid as to want to marry into misery, and she had wanted to marry him.

Then again, she’d also wanted to marry Kelso, so …

But no. No! They hadn’t always been miserable. There were great times, he remembered them. She on his lap, touching him all over. Her face in the morning when they woke up together, her eyes when she looked at him during sex. Her smile. No, that wasn’t the face of misery. He might not know very much about love, but what he remembered was definitely not just misery.

She was still talking, still pointing out how great her life was without him – but she hadn’t left. She hadn’t disappeared, she was still arguing! People didn’t argue when they didn’t care. So, he’d better get his own words in before she thought he didn’t care.

“Would you stop, please?”

Surprisingly, she did. “What?”

“Stop, Jackie. I get it. And I’m happy for you, okay? I’m happy your show is running well, and that Chicago is good for you. I don’t want to make you miserable, okay? Okay? If… if that’s what I’m doing here, then I’ll leave, all right? Just… just tell me and I’m gone. Won’t bother you again. But … I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry about jumping to conclusions back then, when I saw Kelso in your room. Okay? ’s all I wanted to tell you.” Big, bald-faced lie – he wanted to tell her so much more. But if this was really the end, that one was the most important part. It would also be the most important part if it wasn’t the end.

However this would turn out, he’d taken the wind out of her sails and she was visibly struggling to find words again. “I…” Her eyes turned liquid, glittering tears that she refused to let fall. “How … why did you think that? I’d just … literally moments before, I’d asked for a sign from you about our future, and then you assume I’d just jump into bed with the next best man I find? And Michael of all things! You… you know how I feel about him!”
“Do I?”

“What? How… I… I can’t believe you!” Her tears turned into anger, her whole face transformed into one of fury. “How can you even have a flicker of a doubt that I won’t ever get with stupid Michael ever again? How…” She shook her head. “I so want to kick you right now, but I’m not sure if that would be enough!”

Ah dammit, that hadn’t turned out right. Dammit. Hyde wanted to bury his hands into his hair but he couldn’t hold on to the strands just yet. “Jackie, wait, wait. Sorry, that’s… that’s not what I wanted to say. Please hold on, okay, let me try again?”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Go on, convince me here.”

How did he explain this… “It’s not… I’m sorry, this … Dammit! Okay, it’s like this. I trust you, or well, back then – but I might again… no, no, wait! No. I trust you, all right? I trust you not to go with just anyone. I never once doubted you, never even thought that you might possibly hop into bed with another man. Not a second while we were together, right?” Hyde sighed. Jesus, this was so fucking hard. “But when it comes to Kelso… It’s got nothing to do with you, not really. That’s … it’s got everything to do with me. I lose every brain-cell when it comes to the idea of Kelso and you. Every other guy, I’d never even raise a brow, even if he’d come in bare-ass naked. But Kelso?” He shrugged. “I just … my brain just short-circuited, man. I couldn’t stop it, and then it was like it had been switched off. Just poof” he gestured “off. Wish I could tell you anything better, but that’s… Yeah.”

Jackie stared at the ground and bit her lips. “But,” he voice was quiet and small, like she was trying to hide herself. “Why didn’t you come back and let me explain? Why didn’t you write me, or call me? Why… you didn’t call anyone!” She looked into his eyes then, and hers were, once more, full of tears, though they were angry as well. “How long did that short of yours go on for? I didn’t even get a chance to explain, you just ran away and stayed away! What was I supposed to do? I came back here, I waited for you! For two weeks I waited, then I just got so angry because obviously, there was no future for us. Or what else was I supposed to think? I couldn’t… I can’t keep my life on hold for the chance that you might - might want me. I can’t do that, Steven, I… and now? What do you expect from me here, huh? Should I fall into your arms and take you back because you say so? Because now that you’re back, everything I did for myself has to stop and I’ll be your good little wifey? For as long as it takes you to doubt me again? I won’t do that. I can’t-“

“Oh now, that’s just not fair!” Hyde exploded, clenching his fists just in case he wanted to hit anything. Not her – never her – but maybe that tree over there. Or the waste-bin. For now, though, shouting was fine. “I never wanted you to put your life on hold! I wasn’t the one with the crazy idea that love and marriage is the meaning of life! Those were your ideas, your illusions!”

At that, Jackie stepped up close and shoved him again. “Oh, yeah? Well, I know full well what you think of my dreams now, Steven!”

“No, you don’t! You don’t know anything, Jackie! You might think you know me, or what goes on inside my head, but you don’t. You never did, you just painted yourself the pretty little picture you wanted to see, just like you painted yourself the picture of Kelso as your future-husband, and just like you painted your parents in the perfect colours so the truth wouldn’t hurt you. But that’s just make-believe, Jackie. That’s what you want – not what’s truly there!”

“What else was I supposed to do, you wouldn’t talk to me! You never told me anything, you only hid yourself behind those stupid sunglasses and your stupid Zen and left me on the outside!”

“Oh, right, right. Because that’s what our relationship was all about – poor Jackie, all on the outside,
never included.” Steven huffed. “No, Jackie. Don’t put this all on me. Yes, I’m shit with words, but
did you ever bother to think what I might not say? You always wanted me to tell you that I love you,
and when I didn’t, you got insecure. I might not trust Kelso in your vicinity, but you never trusted me
with you! You wanted security, safety, and whatever I was able to give you was never enough. You
needed a ring, you demanded a ring, no matter if to me, that feels like a chain around my ankle.
Because Jackie – I’m nineteen! I’m fucking nineteen, I don’t want children now, and I don’t want to
marry anyone. I would have – I even bought a ring for you. But no, everything had to be in your
pace, and then you have the gall to ask me if you’re wasting your time in our relationship! If that’s
how you felt, that everything we did together was just a waste of time if it doesn’t end with a ring on
your finger – well. Then I’m sorry, but that won’t work at all.” He inhaled and backed off; he’d
crowded her in his anger and he needed to take a step back. He didn’t want to frighten her, he
needed her to understand. “I love you, Jackie. I would have followed you to Chicago if that’s what
you would have asked of me, I would have done pretty much anything. But I’m not like you, or like
Forman. I don’t have my life-plan mapped out in my head, with moments to tick off like a schedule.
Find a girl - check, marry girl - check, have kids, live happily ever-after – check, check, check. I’m
not wired that way.”

In front of him, Jackie was pale and quivering – he couldn’t quite tell if from anger or some other
emotion. It could even be fear, but she wasn’t running away and so he hoped it wasn’t that.

“Jackie. I never lied to you. Even when lying would have been easier, I didn’t.” Like when she’d
asked if he thought Pam was hot. She’d been hurt when he said ‘hell, yeah’, but if she hadn’t wanted
an honest answer, she shouldn’t have asked. “And when I tell you that I don’t know something, then
it’s not because I want to hurt you. I didn’t know if there was a future for us. I still don’t. Jackie.” He
made sure she looked at him, because this was important. “I pretty much don’t know anything. All
my life, I made a point of not thinking about tomorrow. I know you’re different.” He’d often sneered
at her plans and ideals, back before they became involved. When she was still with Kelso. But even
though her plans had changed so often, he’d secretly admired that she had them. At least she had
them, not like him, who’d drifted in a cloud of smoke, not quite convinced he’d ever have more than
jail or death to look forward to. “I know that, and I would never want to change that. Especially not
now, not when you have something you really love doing. Even though it’s not being a Dallas
Cowboy Cheerleader.” He winked and she smiled a little. “Look at me, Jackie.” She did so,
earnestly. God, he loved her, how had he ever doubted that he loved her? “See this ratty shirt?” he
pulled at the fabric. “And those jeans and those boots? This is me. That’s all I want to be. I want to
have a record-store and sell music, and I wanted to have you by my side, for as long as possible. If
that isn’t enough, if your plans for the future depend on having a man with ambition on your side,
then we really shouldn’t be any more than a short-term thing. And putting a ring on you despite
knowing our ideals and ideas clash so hard would be unfair to both of us.” He stopped speaking
then, out of breath. Steven felt like he’d just completed that obstacle-course in record-time, his lungs
were aching just like then, or as if he’d held his breath. He’d said his piece, now it was her turn
again.

Jackie sniffed, then searched her bag for a handkerchief. She took her time, visibly collecting herself
and when she was done with wiping her nose and carefully dapping her eyes, she looked at him
again. “See?” she asked quietly. “This would have been a very valuable thing to know. Why does it
take the world exploding for you to tell me this? Is it really that hard to talk to me? All I had was
guesswork. All I had to go on was what I saw, and what I saw was how you acted. Of course I saw
the way you looked at me. I know you felt affection for me. Maybe even love. You certainly looked
at me in a way Michael never really did, but… was that love? How could I know that? My parents
didn’t love each other, and yet they’d said ‘I love you’ all the time. Michael said he loved me, but
how could he, when he’d run after the first tail he spotted the moment I looked away? So you telling
me how you felt would have been very helpful. It might have prevented a few of these little…
Mishaps. Or disasters, whatever."

She might have a point. At least a little. “How would you have known that this time, it was different than with your parents, or with Kelso? If they said it and it didn’t mean anything – why would it suddenly be different if you heard them from me?”

“Because… because it would have! It would have… I’m sure it … I…”

“Jackie.”

“No! No, if you… If I… I might… I wouldn’t have gone to Chicago if you’d said it, or told me that you wanted to be with me. I wouldn’t have, I know that much.”

“Ah, but see… Would that have been better? Really? You staying here in Point Place, sitting next to me and doing … what? Paint nails? Cut hair? Seriously?” Carefully, he took her hand, just one, and just lightly so she could always pull it back. She didn’t. “You are on television, Jackie. You have an apartment and a room-mate,” Donna had told him. He hoped it wouldn’t get her in trouble with Jackie. “You have a career, Jackie. You have a future, and one you can have completely on your own. I will never be more than I’m now—” she yanked her hand back, only to grab his wrist.

“No, but Steven! You have so much more than that in you! I know you said I don’t know you, but I know you’re smart. Really smart – much smarter than Eric and maybe even smarter than Donna. And duh, way way smarter than Michael. You could be … I don’t know, but you could be so much more than this, and you could do so much more.”

It felt good, her saying this. It had always felt good to hear her say she saw something bigger in him. Too bad he’d never been able to see that for himself. But those ten weeks had taught him a little bit about himself that he’d never quite been able to believe, no matter who said so: He didn’t suck at everything. He wasn’t a complete screw-up. Apparently, Edna telling him over and over how much of a waste of air he was had done more to him than a few years with Kitty Forman could smooth out, no matter how much Mrs Forman tried to drown his doubts with cookies and unconditional love. But it had taken the fucking Army to show him that he could do things, that he didn’t poison the world around him with his touch. Even if those things were, up to now, shooting and running really fast and not-drowning in a river. And he’d managed to make friends, friends with people he’d have never met if not for the Army. People who considered him a friend in return. And they hadn’t known anything about him, had no past with him, nothing in common. No loyalties beyond those that formed in the ten weeks together. Friends who held no expectations to him except to do his best; nothing more – nothing less. He’d been able to stay sober and not even miss the daily intake of alcohol to get by – he’d gotten by just fine without it. And he continued to do so, and he’d fight every day to keep it that way. Hell, if fucking *Bud* managed to stay dry, Steven would be damned if he failed.

“I… it’s good to hear you say that. But here’s the thing, Jackie: I never quite believed you.” She dropped his arm and gasped, but he continued before her affection could turn back into anger. “I’m not saying that to be mean, you know? I just… I guess there’s maybe something wrong with me. Up till now, the best image of my future was reaching thirty without dying or being in prison. Or dying in prison. I’m not kidding here! I know you and Donna and Red and Mrs Forman and probably Forman as well all thought that I was joking, but…” he shrugged. “I wasn’t.”

She was silent, and her gaze crawled over his skin like spiderwebs, tingling and making him wish he could swipe them all away. Instead he scratched his neck with his now-free hand, longing for the millionths time he could play with his curls again. After a while, she swiped her mouth and turned around until she found a bench, nodding towards it in invitation. The two of them walked over and sat down, side by side, staring into the parking-lot.
“Okay. Okay, that’s… Okay.” She couldn’t seem to find words, and Steven was just too tired to help her. “I guess that’s… I think I can believe that. Now. I… I have to admit that I might not have believed if you’d told me before, but… Yes. Okay. I think I can, now.” She started swinging her legs – she was just so adorably tiny that when she sat back against the bench’s backrest, her feet didn’t touch the ground. “But you said that like it isn’t the case anymore?” They were still not looking at each other. “Is that right? Or am I reading things into this again that aren’t there?”

“I think not. No, I know I could probably do more, or at least different. I just don’t want to.” It had taken him a nightmare and ten weeks of deliberate deconstruction to understand what he wanted, at least for now. “Right now, all I want is my store and being… well. Me. It’s not much, but it’s what feels right, now.”

“Uh-hu. Ok. That’s… That’s not too bad. I mean, it’s better than being in prison, right?” She giggled. “And you’re right. We are pretty young. I thought - stupid, I know – that I was so perfect and ready for the world when I went to Chicago, you know?” Jackie looked at her hands, maybe searching for imperfection on the nail-polish. “But it turns out, I’m not. I know nothing, except that I’m pretty. And while that is great, it’s also not that much, right?” He felt her eyes on him but he wanted to let her talk, even though his hands ached to hold her close and hug her worries away. “Helena, my boss, she’s really great. She’s trying to teach me and I’ve learned so much already! But every now and then, I realize that she and Megan and Robert – they’ve done this for years already! I can’t possibly know more, and until I do, I’m depending on them to teach me more. If I mess it up, I lose that chance.” When Jackie touched his thigh, he couldn’t help but look. Her eyes were huge and it felt like she was trying to see right into him. “Is that what you felt? Like walking on a tightrope with no net underneath, and your feet the only thing keeping you in balance?”

“Hm, yeah, pretty close.” Except he’d always figured he was already hanging on to the rope with his fingernails.

She nodded. “Oh.” His hand was in hers now, and she stroked along his knuckles, small movements that made him feel… things. “Well, that really sucks.”

“Eh. It’s okay. It gets better with time, you know? I mean… look at you. Really, look at you, Jackie. You’re… you’re not a pretty little princess anymore.” He had to grin at her outraged look. “You’re… You’re gorgeous. And you’ll be successful, all by yourself. You’ll have a career, and if you marry someone, it won’t matter if he’s a dipshit. You could leave him any time, because you won’t be helpless and you won’t be alone. Isn’t that so much better than being a pink princess in a house full of dreams?”

“Oh, Steven.” Her hand flew to her mouth, then to her heart. But before she could fall back into her soft, hero-worshipping gaze, she visibly collected herself. “Thank you. I really … that really means a lot to me. I just wish – but no. No. I deserve my career. And you – well. If you want to be … whatever you wanna call that, record-seller or whatever, then you should do that. I never wanted to make you unhappy, believe me. Please, if you believe me anything, then believe me this. Oh, and of course that I didn’t sleep with Michael. That, too. I just thought you would be happier when you were more successful. I thought maybe, if you saw how great you could be, it would make you feel … well. Happy. I might have gone a little overboard there, though.”

Steven wrinkled his nose. “Little bit.” He held his thumb and index-finger about half an inch apart. “Tiny little bit.”

She giggled, and they relaxed against the bench. The weather was calm but cloudy and the parking-lot wasn’t really interesting. But Hyde didn’t want to go anywhere she wouldn’t be, and if they left here, the way this felt right now – he would have to.
Quite some time later, Jackie started to fidget. “So, what now?”

“I don’t know.” He hadn’t even finished that sentence before he knew that was the wrong thing to say. “I mean… I wish I knew? I… dammit.” Dammit. “I really just don’t know.”

But Jackie nodded, then bit her lip. “Yeah, me neither. I just know I don’t want to leave Chicago. And you just said that you want to be here, with your store. So… I guess that leaves us … as … friends?” Her eyes were hopeful and he could never deny her anything when she looked at him like that. Friends. It wasn’t what he wanted, it wasn’t what he wanted at all. But if that was what she was willing to give, then hell yeah, he’d take it. It was already ten times better than what he had now!

“Definitely friends.”

Her smile seemed a bit wobbly, but it was a smile. She patted his leg and rose, straightening her jacket over her blouse. “I guess I’ll see if I can find Donna and stop her from making terrible choices in clothes. I’ll see you around, Steven. I’m… I’m glad that you’re back.”

And she smiled again and stepped away, a tine wave with her fingers before she turned her back and started walking towards the mall.

No. Just. No. He couldn’t do that. He couldn’t let her walk away again, let her slip through his fingers. He wouldn’t.

“Hey, Jackie.” She stopped but didn’t turn. But she stopped. “Donna said the music-scene in Chicago’s pretty big, ’s she right about that?” He couldn’t hear her say anything, but he imagined there was a nod. “You’d think there would be opportunity to catch a show now and then, find new artists to support, right? For the store.” He smiled and stood up. “And, you know… Chicago’s not even three hours away, man.” She was still just standing there, no visible reaction. But still – not walking away. Slowly, Steven made his way towards her. “I mean, it’s a bit much for every day, I guess. But there’s always the weekends, right? I mean, Dave did really well with ‘Grooves’ while I was away – he might be interested in taking over for two days a week, or so.”

“What are you saying here?” Jackie still hadn’t turned around but by now, Steven had caught up and was just behind her, catching her scent. “Don’t…”

“I’m saying that I… I wasn’t really honest. I’m saying that I’m not okay with just being friends right now, Jackie. I… I don’t want to give this up without a fight – if there is still something to give up on, that is.”

He could hear her breath shudder but he didn’t touch her.

“Jackie. I … Is there still something here? Would it … do you think we could try this, for a while? See how it goes?” Be happy for a bit longer? “Jackie?”

“I wish I could say that, Steven. But… I don’t –“ she laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “I really don’t know. Isn’t that just wonderful? Now I don’t know.” She sniffed. Was she crying? “I guess it’s just fair. But I don’t like how this feels. I want my certainty back! I want… but I can’t. So … I don’t know. I’m sorry,” she gasped and she still wouldn’t look at him. “I’m so sorry, but no.” And she walked away. Didn’t turn, didn’t look back over her shoulder.

Oh. Well.

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Hyde was still on that bench when she came back. He didn’t know how long he’d been there, or
what he’d thought about. If anything at all. But he was still there, and she came back. At first, he thought he was imagining it, but nope, that was Jackie, marching towards him with purpose and her unique style that usually sent everyone out of her way. There was no-one in her path, though, so Steven could watch her the whole trip towards him. God, she was drop-dead-beautiful.

Before she’d quite reached him, she started to talk. “You know what? I was nearly at the food-court when I realized that this is all bullshit. When have I ever been satisfied with just one thing, huh? I’ve always wanted it all – why would I stop that now? Why should I choose between two things that I want.” She ended up right in front of him, and he looked up, only now realizing he’d been bent over and that his back really kinda hurt. He straightened. “You, or my career. Why can there only be one of them? Why should I have to choose?”

Steven shrugged. Hadn’t he been trying to tell her that? Maybe he should have used more words.

“I don’t want to choose! I want both! I want it all!!” Her mascara had run down her cheeks, she must have been crying sometime between leaving and coming back. “I want it all, Steven. I… I still don’t know, but screw that. I don’t give a shit anymore. Let’s try this – let’s go for it. Weekends. And whatever else we can get! As long as it works, and you can be damn sure that I’ll make it work!” All her steam seemed to have run out at that point, because uncertainty crawled over her face. Or maybe it was because he was still just sitting there, unable to move. Could be. He should rectify that.

Right now.

Get to it.

He blinked. Progress?

“Steven?”

Holy shit, what was wrong with him! He grabbed her hand because it was the closest he could get at without it getting really inappropriate. She seemed to startle and he softened the grip, intertwining his fingers with hers. “One day, you’ll get that ring I bought. Okay? Not now, not tomorrow. But one day. It’s yours, no conditions. Get me?”

Jackie nodded and freed her hand, just to put both of them on his shoulders. She pushed him against the bench and climbed onto his lap, knees on both sides of his thigs. Her mascara was running again, now, but there she was again, his bright, shining Jackie Burkhard. His arms folded around her, finding their natural place, and he tightened the hug so much he could feel her heartbeat against his chest. His breath shuddered as he buried his nose against her neck, kissing her underneath her ear like she loved. If he’d been anyone else – like, say, Forman – he’d be crying right now. As he was Steven Hyde, he just held her as close as possible without crawling into her body. He might have whispered her name – Jackie, Jackie, Jackie - over and over again, but he might not have. He didn’t know, and didn’t give a fuck.

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Later, after Jackie had given him a ride back to ‘Grooves’, he’d called Dave to ask if he’d be willing to come in and talk about a work-schedule. Luckily, that guy was happy with only working part-time and he’d agreed to be there on Monday. That gave Hyde Friday evening, half of Saturday and the whole Sunday free. He’d planned on going to Kenosha with Donna, but he was hoping she wouldn’t mind him skipping out. It was her own fault, anyway.

Shortly before closing, that same Donna came by. Sadly, she didn’t bring Jackie with her, and she had the gall to laugh when Steven stretched his neck out to see if Jackie wasn’t maybe hiding
outside, or whatever. “She’s with her Ma, you mushy little love-bird,” she mocked and fell onto the soft armchair. “I hope you’re not too mad that I set you up?” Donna smirked, knowing full well that he wasn’t mad. Still, he threw a paper-ball at her, because even though it worked out fine, she had set him up and that demanded revenge. “So, how are we set for tonight? And no – Jackie won’t be coming along. Remember? She has that dinner with her mother and that weird rich-people-club at the Vinyard. But I’ll make sure you’ll be home by midnight, cupcake – wouldn’t want her to come by an empty basement and get the wrong impression, would we?” She winked and he would have liked to hug her for being so awesome.

“Thank you, Fairy Godmother,” he said instead. “Should I wear my glass-boots then?”

“If you want to? I mean, apparently, I’m a lumberjack and you have even worse sense of style – that’s a quote, by the way – and if you like to walk on shards by the end of the evening, that’s fine by me. So, are we still on for Kenosha? I met Fez at the Piggly Wiggly, he’s coming with us, if that’s okay?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I just thought, since you hadn’t talked to him by now – which he’s seriously upset about, by the way – you might have a problem with him.” Absently, she’d started sorting through the records in the ‘Sale’-crate.

“Dammit,” Hyde muttered. He’d lost his place, now he’d have to re-start counting the money. “No, no problem with him. It’s got nothing to do with him or anything – just didn’t know what to talk about and he’s busy with his salon anyway. It’s gonna be fun to hang out again.” Hundred-and-fifty, two-hundred…

“Great! We’re gonna pick him up at six, dress sharp, Hyde! You’re gonna take me dancing tonight!”

He smiled. Dancing with Donna was fun, and taking Fez would make it even better since he could share the time on the floor with him. He liked dancing okay, but Donna on a good day was insatiable. On a bad day, she turned into a maniac. Hyde wasn’t yet sure what kind of day it would be.

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They had indeed managed to be back by midnight, and Steven had refused to rise to any of the Cinderella-remarks Donna and Fez had thrown out. He wasn’t sure if Fez really got what they were about – he hadn’t ever been all that sure what Fez got and what not – but the two of them had been on a roll. Once or twice, they’d made him laugh out loud.

The dancing had been fun, too. The club still didn’t play his kind of music, but at least there had been some Queen and The Who thrown in. His feet hurt but he was grinning. Not having Jackie with them had sucked at first, but he hadn’t had that much fun in months. And after an hour or so, her absence hadn’t bothered him as much.

Now, on the way down into the basement, Steven wondered how her little mother-daughter-thing had gone. Pam Burkhart was, for all intents and purposes, not fit to be a mother. Mr Burkhart had at least only been guilty of working too much and neglecting his daughter, whereas Pam had gone out of her way to make Jackie uncomfortable. Then again, Pam was about as smart as Kelso, so maybe she just didn’t know any better.

He didn’t even have time to take his boots off – his feet were killing him – before the basement-door slammed open and a dark-haired whirlwind clamped herself onto him. “Uff, Jackie!” He didn’t get in
any more, her mouth was on his in seconds and from then on, things got heated and a little hazy in his brain.

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“Why are you blue and purple all over?” Jackie whispered into his shoulder, after. “You look like someone beat you to hell and back. What happened to you?” She worried, he knew. He’d noticed her shocked gasp when they’d started taking clothes off, but it hadn’t been important at the time. She’d quickly forgotten about them anyway, and they didn’t bother him at all.

He kissed her neck. “Nothing, ’s all fine.”

“Nothing?” She looked up then raised herself, pointing to his thigh. “This is huge! You can’t say ‘nothing’ when there’s this huge, ugly bruise on your leg. Or that one–” she pressed on the one on his arm “that looks like someone grabbed you! Steven – were you mugged? Were you in hospital the whole time? Steven, you look like a car-crash- victim, for God’s sake!”

Hyde chuckled and gently pulled her back. He was mellow enough to not care about the questions and to not feel the need to hide himself from her. And really, there wasn’t anything he should hide, they were just bruises and they hadn’t been received in any shameful or especially concerning way. “No, beautiful, no mugging, no car-crash, no hospital. That one–” he moved his leg “was from a kick I didn’t dodge right, and the arm is from where someone grabbed me, but that was just because I was about to fall off the wall and he caught me. They’re all weeks old, anyway. Don’t hurt much if you don’t press on them too hard.” He mock-glared at her. “So don’t press on them too hard for another week or so.”

Apparently, his idea of alleviating her concern had misfired, because her eyes were huge. “A kick? Someone kicked you in the leg so hard? Steven – this isn’t just a bruise, this is… it’s huge! What were you doing, climbing walls and getting kicked? And don’t tell me that’s all there was, there’s still traces of bruises here–” she pressed – of course she would – on his collarbone “and here and here and here. And here. And don’t get me started on your back, Mister!”

“Ah. Well, it’s… we just had a little fight, Washington and me. He’s this guy I… this was going to end up a mess. Being mellow would only screw this up, he needed to get his thoughts straight. First step – sit up a bit. “Okay, Jackie – so I did something kinda really stupid, but it turned out to be the exactly right thing. Uhm.” He scratched his head. This was much harder than actually signing up, goddammit! “Uh. I kinda joined the Army for a while. That’s why the haircut. And the bruises.”

She blinked like a character from the Scooby-series. “Excuse me? You… you… this guy I…” this was going to end up a mess. Being mellow would only screw this up, he needed to get his thoughts straight. First step – sit up a bit. “Okay, Jackie – so I did something kinda really stupid, but it turned out to be the exactly right thing. Uhm.” He scratched his head. This was much harder than actually signing up, goddammit! “Uh. I kinda joined the Army for a while. That’s why the haircut. And the bruises.”

“Let me get this straight. After jumping to completely wrong conclusions about me and Michael, you didn’t go home and … I don’t know, talk to me like an adult, or even yell at me or punch Michael, but you went and signed up to the Army? Who the hell does that? Steven – that’s… that’s certifiably insane! And immature. Oh, so, so immature. Normal people might hide from their problems, but you – no, you need to go the extra-mile and sign over your whole life to the military! Steven – you despise the military!”

Oh, she was angry, all right. She would have been no matter where they were, but in bed, together, was probably he worst place to make her this angry. Hyde wasn’t at his best right now, he’d still been floating on happy and hadn’t been prepared, and her words hurt with the truth behind them. But there was more, she didn’t know everything, and he didn’t know if he was prepared for her to know exactly what had led up to the ten weeks in Oregon. He just had to hope that she’d understand once he told her, because otherwise… well. If she didn’t understand, he’d completely misjudged her and the two of them wouldn’t work at all. So better know it now than dragging this … this out even longer.
“Look. Okay, listen, all right? You said I should talk but you need to listen, Jackie, or this will not work.” He left the bed and put on his boxers, absently looking for his jeans. He didn’t find them but putting his shirt on let him feel a little more protected, as if a piece of cloth could actually stop anything she might do to him. Jackie was putting on her blouse as well, so maybe they both were similarly afraid.

“I’m listening,” she said, but the way she said, all prim and proper with her hands in her lap made him want to run away screaming. He didn’t want to be anyone’s focus, and the way she was staring at him was making him itchy in his skin.

“Yeah. Ok.” He stood, took two steps, then sat down in his chair again. “First of all – when it comes to you and Kelso, I’m stupid. I told you, didn’t I?” She nodded, and he bit his lip. “Right. So, seeing you with him – I ran. Don’t even know why, but I went all the way to Vegas. I think I just put the car in one direction and drove until the gas ran out, but … I can’t even say if that’s true.” Could just as well be that he’d never been to Las Vegas and had gotten the sudden urge. Who knew. “So. That’s the end of that story, because next thing I know, I’m in a chapel and I have two cheap rings in my hand, and there’s this girl,” Jackie gasped and he refused to look at her. This would hurt like hell, hearing the same thing from her, so he could give her privacy for her own pain. Just not an end, not yet. “And I’m about to marry her. I have no idea who she is and why I would marry her, still drunk as fuck, and I just … I basically threw the rings at her and ran like hell. Next thing, there’s this Army-recruiting-office and I thought… I thought that would be a good place to get my shit together without making even a bigger mess of things. So. I signed up.” Steven shrugged and finally took a peek at Jackie. She looked like a statue, frozen in shock and horror. “Jackie?”

“You… You were about to marry someone else?” Her voice rose beyond high-pitched, it was more like a scream. Of course, of freaking course she wouldn’t get what he’d been telling her, would get stuck on that part. The one part he’d considered the least important. But she wasn’t done. “You … you give me all that bullshit about maybe one day I’ll get that ring, and then you tell me you nearly married someone else - what, minutes? – after meeting her? What the … do you… is this a joke? Are you joking, because let me tell you, this isn’t funny at all! I’m so mad, I wish I could throttle you!”

“No, no! This … you… I’m not done here! You trample on my ideals of a future, you refuse to promise me anything remotely future-related, you freaking tell me that you don’t like thinking about the future, and you convince me, but now you tell me that this apparently isn’t true – it’s just something you refuse me! I… No. No. I’m not doing this.” Hectically, she started putting her clothes back on, tears on her face and absolute fury in every line of her body. “I’m done. We are done. Even Michael wasn’t as … as… as cruel as you.” Hyde tried to stop her, holding her arm but she yanked it out of his hand and pushed him with so much force that he had to move backwards, his feet stumbling over his shoes on the ground. He went down with a ‘thud’, his shoulder hitting the counter of the night-table and there was a crash when his lamp fell down. But he didn’t care, he needed her to stop. He needed her to understand, because she didn’t. Not at all.

“Jackie, stop!” he yelled after her, scrambling to his feet. Falling down and getting up quickly had been one of the things he’d learned very well in the Army, and he reached her before she could get the door to the basement open. Hyde threw it shut and held it closed, because he couldn’t let her leave. Even if he frightened her – he could see the fear in her eyes. Right now, this wasn’t about her. Or well – not solely about her. “Stop, and listen! You got the wrong thing stuck in your head there, that’s not what I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh? So you didn’t even want to tell me that the person I thought I loved – and who I thought loved me back – used the first chance he got to give what I most wanted to someone else? Doesn’t this
sound fucking familiar to you? And to think you got mad at Michael for hurting me – you’ve really outdone him by a mile”

“Shut up, Jackie! Shut the hell up!” She wasn’t listening, wasn’t even trying to listen. She had her head stuck and he needed her to hear or… or… he didn’t know, but he needed her to understand at least what was important here. “Shut up and listen, for once! I don’t care about this woman! She’s not important in this story-“ Again, she interrupted.

“Oh, as if that makes it any bet-“ With a yell, Steven slammed his fist against the door. Jackie shrieked and cowered down onto the ground, and in any other situation he’d feel like a piece of shit for scaring her so much. But he didn’t, just like he didn’t feel the pain from his knuckles. It was there, but not important, floating somewhere in the back of his brain.

“I don’t know who she is!” He took a deep breath, trying to get the abyss inside his mind to close back up. He hadn’t tried to confront this… this yet, not once during the last months, but he was doing it now, and it was about to consume him. “I don’t know her name, her age – nothing. I know she was blond and slender – that’s about all I remember. Jackie.” He tried to soften his voice but it was like cracked cement, brittle and sharp. “Jackie, when I was in that chapel, I’d been in Vegas for five weeks. I don’t remember a thing from those five weeks. Do you get that? Do you understand? It’s not that the woman isn’t important as in – not important in relation to you. She’s literally nothing to me, because I do. Not. Remember.” Hyde’d done it – he’d made her listen. She was still staring at him with those immense eyes, but she wasn’t cowering any more and she didn’t seem to be on the brink of running away. So he backed off and sat himself onto the couch, trying for … whatever, but only managing to curl up around something he desperately wanted to keep inside. But he wasn’t done talking yet. “I don’t remember a minute from those five weeks, and I tried, I’ve tried so hard.” Who was that girl? Why would he marry her? Where did he meet her, what was her name? And – even more important – what had he been doing all that time? He felt his neck tighten as his shoulders nearly reached his ears. “I didn’t have clothes with me, I didn’t have money. Where had I been living? How did I get money?” For all he knew, he could’ve robbed a bank. Or started hooking. There was just a big, blank space in his head, so either was possible. “Did she pay for me? Did she have money? What have I told her – what had she told me? And what the hell did I take to make me forget five weeks of my life, Jackie? What the hell have I been doing to myself?” He dared look at her, and she was still on the floor, knees tucked up under her chin. But she didn’t seem frightened of him anymore at all. It was rather like she was copying how he felt himself: like someone was digging into his stomach and trying to cut his insides out. “Jackie, it scared the shit out of me. It still scares the shit out of me to think about it.” Absently, he scratched his bare arms up and down and she noticed, followed the move with her eyes. Steven stopped himself, but with a grim smile, he acknowledged it. “Yeah. First thing I checked, all over. At least I didn’t get hooked on the needle, so… yay?” Jackie buried her face in her knees again, but she didn’t stop looking at him.

“Do you get it?” Hyde averted his eyes, staring onto the dirty floor. It needed a sweep. “I… I don’t remember anything, the only thing I can guess is that I spent five weeks drunk to all hell. Who the hell marries a completely drunk guy in a chapel in Vegas? And how the hell did I get booze? I’m not even legal to drink in Vegas!” But apparently legal to marry. America, man – screwed in so many ways. “Did she buy it?” Why should she? “Did she drug me?” Again – why? “How could I get back here after that? I can’t even explain to myself where I’d been – how should I’ve explained to the Formans?” Also, what kind of fucked-up would he have arrived in Point Place? He couldn’t have exposed someone as caring as Mrs Forman with his messed-up mind, and for all he respected the heck out of Red, his brand of ‘caring’ would have probably killed him. “How do you think I could have talked to you?”

Hyde hadn’t noticed that she’d risen, and so the dip of the cushions was a surprise. Without a word, Jackie wrapped her arms around him and pressed him against her. Her hand was up against his head,
running through the short strands and scratching his skin. She didn’t say anything, but he felt her shudder at every second breath. He leaned against her, not in the mood to fight her - or himself. He wanted to be cuddled, comforted, and he refused to feel shame about it. He was still scared shitless and he let her take some of that fear, even though as the man, it should be his place to comfort her. Then again, had this been Donna and not Jackie, he wouldn’t have a problem with that. So why not let Jackie be the one with the strength. He certainly didn’t have enough left to bend a straw.

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“Would you give me your hand, Steven?” Some time during the night, the two of them had changed from sitting next to each other on the smelly, ratty couch back to his bed. Steven was wrapped around Jackie like a giant octopus, holding her for comfort like he’d done to the stuffed dog as a kid. She was much better than Roomer, though, since she was alive, warm, and wouldn’t ‘get lost’ by Edna.

Jackie kept trying to get to his right hand and he didn’t quite understand why – just like he didn’t quite understand when they’d moved. “Come on, there’s blood on my blouse and I really need to see your fingers. Please?”

Carefully, Steven moved his hand from where he’d wrapped it into her armpit, surprised when it hurt quite a lot. “Ouch.”

“Well, duh. Hitting the door, did they teach that stuff in the Army? Because if they do, they should also teach you how to do it without breaking your bones, you idiot.” Her voice, though, was soft and careful, like she was talking to a frightened animal, or a small child. If he hadn’t been feeling this … this, his hackles would rise at her tone. “This really needs a doctor, Steven. I’m not… I don’t know about bones and stuff, but this looks … really disgusting.” Jackie swallowed and he could feel it, he was pressed so close.

“Tomorrow. I don’t wanna move.”

She huffed. “Okay, since it’s basically ‘tomorrow’ already, fine. But first light, I’ll drive you to the hospital myself.”

Jackie reached down and grabbed a piece of cloth – his shirt, it seemed – and wrapped his hand in it. “Just for protection, I don’t think this is even remotely sanitary. But now it’s all… eww, and I don’t want any more stuff getting in there.”

She settled back down and Hyde relaxed again. He was floating on air, not high, not coming down, not absent like when he’d been hypothermic. But it wasn’t bad. Felt kinda nice. ‘There is no pain, you are receding – a distant ship, smoke on the horizon… ’ Yes. Yes, that was the kind of feeling. Comfortably numb.

He closed his eyes and let the numbness spread a bit more. ‘You’re only coming through in waves. Your lips move, but I can’t hear what you say… ’ Maybe sleep would be good right now.

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Nothing was broken, luckily. They bandaged the hand and sewed some of the splits closed but the rest would have to heal by itself. Jackie had been right – it did look disgusting. Since hands didn’t have much meat on them, the bones and sinews were close to the surface. Breaking the skin over the knuckles gave you a nice view of the stuff that was underneath. Hyde now sported one of those braces and was already not looking forward to Mrs Forman’s care-attack he would receive when she noticed. And it was rather hard not to notice.
Jackie had been quiet the whole time, but she hadn’t left his side. Steven might have felt a little off-kilter still, but the shame he’d expected after telling someone of his personal nightmare hadn’t come up. He also didn’t feel free or liberated or whatever crap people might expect – he just felt a bit floaty, and that might very well come from the pain-pills for his hand. “Are we good?” he asked on the way back. He had to know that, for knowing how to continue from here.

On the driver’s seat, Jackie startled and quickly looked over, then back at the road. “Yes. I’m thinking, but I’m not mad. And we’re … Well. Good might be pushing it, but we are okay, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“That is what I was asking, yeah. Okay.”

“So,” apparently, her silent-thinking-phase was over now. “I’m going to deliver you to the Formans, and then I’m going to go to Donna because we have a spa-date she doesn’t know about yet. We will be talking, and we will be talking about you – just a heads-up – and after, I’ll come back and I expect you to be at home and not anywhere else. And we’ll… go from there. All right?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess.” Why not, didn’t sound like a bad plan. Except for one thing. “I have to be at ‘Grooves’ till twelve, though.” It was only eight-thirty, and the store opened in an hour.

“You can’t drive with your hand, Steven. I’ll drive by the store and you can put up a sign that you’re sick – which you are, so it’s not a lie. You can’t even see without blinking like and owl, Steven – no way can you sit in the store and sell anything. I’ll let Mrs Forman mollycoddle you to her heart’s desire.”

Hyde chuckled. ‘Mollycoddle’ – that was such a funny word, man.

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As expected, Mrs Forman went overboard with her caregiving. Not that Steven would complain – she made him waffles and cocoa and packed him on the couch in the living-room as if he were half-dead and not just slightly disadvantaged. But what was he to do – refuse all that? He basked in the luxury of having nothing to do and being waited on hand and foot, and enjoyed the babble when Mrs Forman brought over the laundry and started folding it in his company.

“I got another letter from Eric yesterday – he’s being more talkative now he’s on the other side of the world than he ever was before. Did you get a letter from him?”

“No, but that’s okay.” He started on folding some of the shirts but she slapped his hand away – carefully – and tutted at him. Like shirt-sorting would be dangerous. Sergeant Brewer would explode in a cloud of red dust if he saw him being such a ninny. The thought made Steven smirk and lean back against the couch. “We’re good.”

“Oh, I know you two are good. You are always so good for each other.” She got that love-struck, soft face again, as if someone had written her a song or something. He really didn’t get her most of the time, but damn, did he like her quirky personality. “From that moment in the bathroom, with the two of you covered in foam, I knew you two would be the best friends. And – I was right!” She giggled. “But anyway – he wrote the sweetest thing, you know? He said if you were here – oh, because when I’d written him last you hadn’t been back yet, so he doesn’t know you’re back home!”

Home. Such a strange thing, being at home here. But truthfully, it had always been home, even when nobody had acknowledged it. “So he said when you get back, we should take care of you! Like … oh, my boy is such a good boy!”

Her eyes were wet and she pretended to be very focused on the underpants she was sorting. Hyde
didn’t call her out, though. “Yeah, I guess he’s alright.”

“Oh, you stoic male-cavemen-types! You could at least acknowledge that you have feelings. ‘He’s all right’, that’s not a sentiment! That’s even worse than grunting at the TV!”

“Mrs Forman,” Hyde sat up to look her in the eyes, going for ‘very earnest’ here. “Your son is a very kind young man and a fine example of mankind. His praise can not be sung high enough, and soon the whole continent of Africa will know about his kindness and about the woman who made him so.” When she burst out laughing, he chuckled with her.

Only when she was on the way up the stairs, laundry done for the day, did he add – quietly – “He’s my brother, of course I know that.”

He wouldn’t say more about it, and living with Red Forman made certain she knew exactly what he meant.

When she came back down, she was in her work-clothes, already talking half-way down the steps about where there was food, and that he shouldn’t overdo himself, that resting his hand was important or there could be permanent damage – and some other stuff he didn’t really hear. Something about the pain-medication, but Hyde had heard about that from the hospital already. He certainly wouldn’t mix it with alcohol, and other than that, there wasn’t much danger. Except if you swallowed the whole bottle – which he also didn’t plan. His hand was just throbbing a little, no problem to handle. He switched the TV to some soap he didn’t think he’d seen before and before he knew it, his eyes closed and he felt his body sink into the cushions.

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Steven woke from Red Forman yelling in the kitchen. “Kitty, do you by any chance still have the stupid punch-bowl you apparently borrowed from Midge? She says you have it and wouldn’t shut up about it.” Red walked into the living room, and Hyde scrambled into sitting upright, blinking the sleep from his eyes. “Steven? What are you doing on my couch at such a fine day?” He took in his dishevelled appearance. “The loud-one end it between you for good?”

“Uh – yeah. Uh – no. No, we’re… fine, I guess. Just didn’t sleep last night.”

Red narrowed his eyes and looked him up more closely. “Yeah, that doesn’t look like a happy-kind of not sleeping. What happened?” Then he saw the hand. “You get your hand jammed into a door or something?”

“Or something. ‘s fine, but maybe the painkillers are making me a bit loopy. Sorry for sleeping on the couch.”

“Oh, don’t get all bashful – I know you too well. Get up and help me look for that stupid bowl, or I’ll never hear the end of it from Bob.”

He followed into the kitchen and started opening doors at random. “What am I looking for, anyway? How big is that bowl?”

“How should I know? Can’t even keep track of our own cutlery, how am I supposed to remember someone else’s glass-ware? Where’s Kitty, anyway?”

“Work. This it?” Steven pointed at a big bowl on the top-shelf of one of the boards.

“No, that’s a gift from Paula – I do remember that one, it has these godawful – oh, sorry, cute - little flowers at the bottom. Now – how did you hurt your hand?”
Damn him. Red was a sneaky sonofabitch if he wanted to be. “Hm, hit a door.” He turned to go to the dining-room, but Red was in his way and not moving. Hyde suppressed a shudder. He didn’t like being crowded in the first place, but this also felt like being on trial. Similar to his ill-advised, idealistic idea of going to jail for Jackie and being subsequently thrown out of the house.

He hadn’t put up a fight – it was, by what evidence there had been, a reasonable and deserved punishment. That it all fucked with his mind wasn’t Red’s fault. “Uh, Red?”

“Yeah… what door, and how, and why?” He grabbed Steven’s wrist. “You don’t get a brace for just hitting, for example, a swinging door. So spill – is there something I need to fix? Or … someone?”

“No! No, no – it really was a door. Uh, the one in the basement. It’s sturdy, nothing’s damaged.” Still glaring in suspicion, Red moved away, then followed to the dining-room in pretense of looking at his own set of cupboards.

“Uh-hu. So that thump last night that followed the yelling, which I heard when I went to get a midnight-snack, might that have been you and that door, then?”

Steven groaned. He’d fallen into the same kind of trap Forman usually landed in – assuming Red didn’t know everything, and trying to play it cool. At least he hadn’t completely fucked himself with some elaborate, too-complicated lie, like Eric. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“So, yelling at your girlfriend actually led to you two making up again? I don’t know if should be impressed or disappointed. Here I am, thinking my wife might actually be right about yelling not accomplishing anything much, and you prove her wrong.” The sarcasm was biting, and a thrill crawled over Steven’s skin.

Taking a deep breath, he closed the door he’d just opened – nothing in there but wine-glasses – and turned. He wanted to slouch but instead fell into something close to the parade-rest. It would serve his purpose better with this opponent. The air was thick, this wasn’t just a friendly talk. Red was concerned about him losing his temper, and subsequently about Jackie. While Hyde didn’t like being in this position – the point of suspicion – he had to respect where it was coming from.

“I lost my cool last night, Sir” – just because he understood Red didn’t mean he wasn’t angry. And calling him sir, like he’d call Brewer sir, would hopefully make that clear. He rarely called Red sir – and never ‘Sir’. “And I’m sorry about that. I yelled, I hit an unmovable object, we talked – in normal voices – and we went back to bed. I…” at the continued stoic stare, he faltered, feeling like he might burst into tears at any moment. His emotions where all out of whack, either from last night, the lack of sleep during the last week or maybe even from the stupid pain-pills, of which he hadn’t taken enough, as his hand was kindly informing him. He wanted to yell again but bit it back down. “…don’t… I wouldn’t. I’m… uh.” Shit. His hands were trembling and he clutched the wrist of his bad hand hard so it wouldn’t show.

But Red’s face grew concerned, so something might have slipped. “Oh, all right, all right. Calm down – Kitty’ll have my balls if you faint on me here. Sit, you’re as tense as a bow-string. Now,” he continued when Steven slumped into the chair, not able to hold any tension in his bones anymore. How the hell had he done that for ten weeks? “now, just tell me one thing. Do I need to be concerned about people’s safety around you? This has nothing to do with not trusting you, son. But right now, you have that look on you that I know from a few of my friends after the war. They were acting normal and suddenly, something went haywire and they exploded. Or froze – same thing.”

Hyde blinked. He didn’t have shell-shock, for Pete’s sake! Why would he? He hadn’t been in any kind of combat-situation at all, so where would that one come from? “No. No – at least I don’t think so.” He leaned on his elbows and bowed his head. “Or do I? How would I know that – but where
would that come from? I’ve been to fu – uh, freaking BT, not in combat or some such shit.”

“Well, how would I know? This is just what you reminded me of. I certainly wouldn’t wish that crap on you – or anyone. Got it? So how about this – you keep an eye on your moods and if there’s something you feel concerned about, tell me. I might know a few people who could help.”

Aaand there it was again, the urge to cry. “Thanks,” he managed, but the disgust on Red’s face made it clear he hadn’t been able to hide it well.

“Aw crap – you’re not gonna cry on me now, are you? Stuff it and keep it for Kitty – she’ll actually be thrilled if you do. Now come, we have to find that freaking stupid punch-bowl.”

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They didn’t find the bowl.

But Bob did, in his own kitchen-cupboard, where it belonged. Steven went back to his own bed after the subsequent yelling Bob received from Red and decided he was allowed to feel exhausted. He put on ‘Who’s next’ and waited for the repeating notes of ‘Baba O’Riley’ tootle him back to sleep.

The next time he woke, it was to the smell of oranges and cucumber. He smiled at the recognition of Jackie’s hair-scent, which was brushing his nose. Whatever would come from now on, he was determined to just enjoy everything good along the way. That included Jackie’s fresh spa-smell he’d always secretly been lusting for.

“Morning, sleepy-head. Were you a good boy?” she whispered close by.

“Hmmmm, yeah, but I have the urge to be really bad right now,” he grinned, and with his eyes still closed he grabbed her around her waist and rolled them so she ended up on top of him, shrieking in surprise. She was soon giggling though, and punching his chest playfully.

They wrestled and he let her win. It wasn’t about winning anyway, and when she was sitting on top of him, his hands ‘trapped’ over his head, with her looking down, cheeks flushed and her freshly-done hair a mess – when she didn’t seem to care at all how he made her look scruffy and sweaty… that was when he decided that he’d be fine with letting life sweep him away some more. This time, though, he knew he wasn’t debris. He had an anchor, more than one, and he wouldn’t let it all overwhelm him again, let it drown him.

He’d figure out how to find enough time for Jackie and ‘Grooves’, maybe visit Donna in Madison for a few days. Smoke a few circles with Leo – and anyone else interested. He might go by Kelso and Brooke, visit his goddaughter and spoil her rotten – probably take Fez, too, if he’d be up to it. Watch out for inexplicable mood-swings and spend some good time with Red and Mrs Forman. Maybe catch up with Dwayne, George and Sam Carter, if he ever found out where they ended up.

With a shock, Steven realized that he was making plans. His good hand skimmed over Jackie’s back, slipping under her shirt, sliding over her skin, just a little, which made her gasp and lose focus and her breathing deepen. He was making plans for more than just tomorrow, and it didn’t fill him with dread.

Maybe this was what he’d been looking for all the time, when he was too busy shoving any thoughts about the future far, far away. Maybe this was what Jackie had been running after, the contentment of not just this moment, but the idea of having more than this, and for a lot longer than ‘now’.

He’d try it, for a while. See where it got him. Right now, after all, he was warm and mellow and … happy.
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