Sweet to tongue and sound to eye

by Veto_power_over_clocks

Summary

It starts with dinner.

(Not true; it started the moment you became aware of each other's existence. You simply want to believe otherwise.)

Notes

I saw this movie a bit over two weeks ago with Sofia (who I blame for putting the "Fletcher and Ray are exes" thought in my mind), and at some point while watching the movie we concluded that Fletcher really wanted to be topped by Ray, who wanted to be topped by Mickey, who had definitely been pegged by Ros. That's 10% of why this fic exists. The other 90% is that near the end of the movie I said "If Coach and Ray survive, they should get together".

I spent three days throwing ideas back and forth with Sofia and saying I wouldn't write anything, and proceeded to give up on the fourth day when a scene pretty much pulled my hair and demanded to be written.

So! After ¿five? years of friendship, I'm finally gifting you a fic, Sofia. Congrats on getting me to write something that isn't alien robots that turn into cars.
Chapter 1

When you find out what the boys' plan to 'fix' your Mickey Pearson problem had been, you want to laugh, slightly hysterical and terrified, because they might have just painted a big target on themselves that no amount of favors will be able to erase. After you push down your first reaction and your strong desire to yell, you move on to practical things, like if they were seen, if anyone got away, and how they disposed of the weapons. When you conclude that all of you are thoroughly fucked, you give them the day off and tell them to stay in the gym, because you don't trust them not to go and try to find Pearson again to finish the job, or to try something even more stupid, like allying themselves with whoever it was that sent those men after Smith. You can only hope that saving Smith's life has won you enough goodwill to earn you a lifetime of service to the Pearsons instead of a trip to the morgue.

It's not a surprise when Raymond Smith shows up at the gym. It's not a surprise that your boys look ready to fight him. It's not a surprise that he comes with two thugs that probably wouldn't be able to take your lads in a fight, but who don't need to worry about that because they're carrying the sort of gun you haven't seen since you started over with your life.

"Can we speak in private?" Smith says, looking at the boys with amusement glinting in his eyes. To him, they must be nothing but a group of kids playing gangster, and you guess that makes you the troubled father that has to deal with the fire they accidentally started. "I promise that no one will get hurt," he adds when he notices you studying the thugs.

You believe him, because he hasn't given you any reason not to do so so far, so you take him to the office and tell your boys not to try anything, for the love of everything they hold dear.

Smith looks around the office with mild curiosity, turning his back on you because he knows you’re not an idiot, that you’re only alive because he wants it that way, that he could have killed you when you first met him and that he could kill you now with no problem or repercussions.

He inspects the pictures on the walls, the newspaper clippings and the trinkets on the shelf, and you wait by the door with your arms crossed in front of your chest, following him with your eyes. If he wants you to squirm, he’ll have to try harder.

Smith pushes back his coat and takes out his gun, setting it on the desk, and turns towards you.

You're not impressed by the 'gun on the table' move. A gun is just a paperweight until somebody actually uses it, and even then it all depends on how well it's used.

"I think you know why I'm here," he says, sitting on your desk.

"I'd prefer if you said it," you tell him, calm and disinterested. You're not prey until he decides that you are, and all he's done so far is display power. That doesn't impress you. It can't impress you; if it does, you lose.

He smiles slightly, clearly just as amused by you as he is by the boys, and says, "Your lads tried to kill my boss. Any idea why they decided to do that?"

You breathe in deeply and exhale heavily.

"They thought it was the only way to end my debt to him." Because you’re theirs as much as they’re yours, because they’re loyal and still believe that everything can be solved by making the right move, but they’ve yet to realize there are bigger things than them out there and for that
they’re so, so fucked.

"Luckily for them, he survived." That means they're not dead. Maybe they'll only kill you to set an example. "Even better for them, they ended up saving his life." He tilts his head back slightly, enough to look down at you. You stay as you are, arms crossed and expression blank. "Those two men they gunned down? They were friends with the Russians you killed at my place." You start to think that maybe, just maybe, all of you will survive the day.

“Sounds like your boss was very lucky as well,” you point out, just in case it hasn’t occurred to them.

“He was. He’s not happy about the attempted murder, but he’s happy about how things turned out.” Smith’s eyes are on yours, and you hold his gaze and wait to see what all the foreplay’s for. “And you saved my life. I’m happy about that too.”

You almost smile at the understatement, the corner of your mouth twitching, but whatever this is, you know you’re not free yet.

“Does your boss have a message for me or did he send you to do a recap of the events?” You don’t bother trying to sound nonchalant, but you remain calm. For some reason, they don’t want you dead yet.

“We would like it if your boys stayed out of our way from now on. They might not be so lucky the next time.” You can’t feel anything but resignation at the implied threat. If you mess with the wrong people, you have to accept the possible consequences.

“I’ll talk to them. I think they didn’t believe me when I told them we wouldn’t have to do you any more favors.”

Smith nods and stands up.

“As for you, my boss and his wife want you to join them for dinner tonight.” He picks up his gun and puts it back in its holster, finally looking away from you.

“Dinner,” you say flatly.

He looks at you with no more emotion than what someone would normally show while discussing the weather.

“Dinner,” he repeats simply. “They say they hope you like fish.”

“Is someone going to come here to kill my boys while I’m gone?” Or maybe the fish thing is a way to say they'll have you sleeping with the fishes soon. Do gangsters still say that? Did they ever really say it?

“Nobody’s going to hurt your lads, Coach,” he says, his voice curling around the word like a snake around a rabbit. He knows exactly how much you care about them and you would fight this man if that could give your boys a chance, but you know it’d be useless. He’s still displaying power, and you can’t let it get to you.

"What happens if I reject the invitation?"

"Nothing at all." Smith shrugs. "You miss on some good food."

He’s been honest so far. You don’t want to risk this being a lie.
You take a deep breath and uncross your arms.

"How long until dinner?" You might as well see what happens.

"Forty minutes." He walks towards you and looks you up and down. Something in the way he stops at your neck and hands makes you think there's something besides professional interest in his scrutiny. "They sent me to pick you up."

You look down at yourself. You'll be having dinner with Mickey Pearson and his wife in gym clothes.

"Lead the way, Mr. Smith," you say, gesturing at the door.

You find the boys caught in a staring contest with the thugs. They aren't happy to hear about your dinner plans.

"It'll be fine," you tell them, even though you're not sure, because even implying otherwise is bound to make them try to fix things in their own way.

"Come on, Coach, you can't go with them," Ernie says, and he and the others look pleading and worried.

You gesture for Smith to give you a few minutes and sum up the recent conversation you had with him for the boys, leaving out details like the gun and the implied threat in Smith's tone. Despite your careful editing, they don't look convinced.

"You're going to be alright as long as you don't insist on trying to fix a problem that doesn't exist anymore," you say, looking at them intently and hoping they believe it.

"But what about you, Coach?" Prime-Time says, shooting Smith an accusing look.

"You have my word that he'll return alive and unharmed," Smith says, looking at your boys in the eye one by one. "He'll have dinner and then he'll be back here."

"Four hours," Ernie says. "You have four hours to bring him back."

"Four hours," Smith agrees, as if that wasn't enough time to kill you and dispose of the body, as if there's anything your boys could do if Smith lied.

You get into the backseat with Smith and wave goodbye to your boys from the window, certain that, no matter how the evening goes, you're doomed.

The ride is silent, the thugs clearly more interested in the road than in making friends with you, and Smith is busy texting someone, but you appreciate it. You're not in the mood for small talk, especially considering the thugs periodically check on you through the rearview mirror.

You feel out of place when you reach Pearson's home. The place reeks of money and power, everything around you a reminder that these people hold your life in their hands, that any agreement you reach tonight will only stand as long as they feel like doing so. Your chances of a positive outcome rely entirely on how much Smith values his own word.

Of course, there's the chance Smith was being literal and that he plans to kill you on your doorstep.

The first surprise is how genuinely glad Pearson seems to be that you accepted the invitation. He shakes your hand, introduces himself (as if there was any possibility of you not knowing who he
is), introduces you to his wife (who is probably a force of nature, judging by the way she stands), and asks you how the drive was.

“There’s no time for small talk,” Smith says, standing a few steps beside you. “He has a curfew.”

“He has-” Pearson starts, disbelieving, then seems to remember you’re there and turns towards you. “You have a curfew?”

“My boys are worried about me being here alone,” you make a vague gesture, “so Mr. Smith has to bring me back in four hours.” You put your hands in your jacket’s pockets and ignore the quick look Pearson gives to Smith. “Lovely house, by the way.”

“That should be enough time for food and drinks,” Rosalind Pearson says, looking you up and down. Her gaze doesn’t linger on anything, not even on your running shoes. “Not enough for a good conversation.” She twists her mouth. “Do your boys have any plans in case you don’t return in time?”

You hear Smith breathe in deeply, but you keep your eyes on Rosalind Pearson. This is a test and she isn’t bothering trying to hide it. You’re certain that she could do it if she wanted to, and instead she has chosen to set her jaw and study you with hard eyes, letting you know that she’s measuring you, evaluating you, comparing you to others that have stood in front of her before. Her husband is smiling pleasantly at you, and it all feels like a good cop/bad cop routine, except everyone knows there never is a good cop, only a bastard that smiles and one that doesn’t.

It makes your skin crawl.

“They didn’t when I left them, but I don’t trust them to stay idle for four hours,” you say, and let them draw their own conclusions about how that might go and how aware you are of the potential disaster.

“I guess we must make sure you get home in time, then,” Pearson says, gesturing towards the dining room. “For what it’s worth, you’re not here alone. Ray’s your date for the night.”

Ray. Short for Raymond. That’s Smith’s first name. Mickey Pearson just joked about Raymond Smith being your date.

You turn your head enough to see Smith out of the corner of your eye and find him tensing up. In front of you, Rosalind Pearson finally smiles, private and pleased, because she’s in on the joke, whatever it was supposed to mean.

“We were hoping you would join us for dinner as well, Ray,” she says. “We haven’t met your friend before, and we thought him being alone here would leave him with the wrong idea.” From the corner of your eye, you see Smith turning his attention towards Pearson. “Now, if you please.” She leads the way towards the dining room, followed by her husband.

You turn to Smith fully and catch him watching Pearson’s back, a hint of hurt on his expression that disappears as soon as he notices you’re looking at him. It seems like you’re the only one that doesn’t get the joke. The word ‘friend’ stands out in your mind, and you file it away to ponder when you aren’t busy navigating a potentially deadly social situation.

The dining room is ready, places set at one end of a long table, Mickey Pearson and his wife sitting across from Smith and you, and one of the thugs brings over the food, completely ruining any pretense that this dinner is anything but a warning. Despite that, the Pearsons insist on light talk. You don’t last three minutes into a discussion on whether or not anybody cares about Madonna
nowadays.

“With all due respect,” you say before anyone can continue the conversation, “can you tell me why I’m here? I understand the role my boys had in the events of the last day, but Mr. Smith here has told me that they’re free to go as long as they don’t bother you, so I must assume you want something from me.” You need these people to stop playing pretend and tell you what the fuck it is.

Next to you, Smith tenses up again.

“I wanted to meet you,” Pearson says, reaching for his wine glass. He drinks slowly and doesn’t speak again until he’s set it down. “What your boys did was very, very stupid, and it could have gone very, very wrong for them. I understand they were trying to help you?” You nod. “I didn’t like what they tried to do, but I was willing to let it go because of the end result. Now…” He pauses, either to think or for dramatic effect. "I can respect their loyalty and good intentions. As Ray told you, if you ensure they never get in my way again, I won’t have any reason to touch any of you.” He gestures at Smith. “More important than that, however, is that you saved Ray’s life.” He grabs the knife and cuts a piece of fish on his plate. “I could use someone like you, but Ray tells me you’d rather stay away from my business. I can respect those wishes as well.” He brings the food to his mouth and starts chewing.

“We wanted to know to whom we owed Ray’s survival,” Rosalind Pearson says, finally smiling at you. It still sets off alarms in your brain, something about it reminding you of being sixteen years old and having dinner at some girl’s house, knowing that her parents were testing you. “And we wanted to thank you.”

You lower your head slightly as a show of respect and express your gratitude to them for sparing your boys.

Next to you, Smith remains tense and he stays like that even after you’ve concluded that the Pearsons really mean you no harm and finally start to relax. You don’t doubt that they’ll kill you if you give them a reason for it, and so the second surprise of the night is that by the time you move to the living room for a drink, you're almost enjoying yourself. You can't say the same for Smith, who you keep an eye on throughout the evening as you try to figure out what it is that these three know and you don't.

The third surprise of the night is when, instead of figuring out the joke, you put together what it means that you often catch Smith looking at Pearson, that he stands to refill drinks just when Pearson is about to finish his own, that he averts his eyes when Rosalind Pearson distractedly takes her husband's hand during the conversation and when Pearson brushes her hair out of her face later. The first two things you initially attributed to the sort of obsessive loyalty you've learned to expect from gangsters, but the last thing? You wonder if he's always so careless or if you're only noticing because you're paying attention to him. You wonder if his bosses know.

What you also notice is that Smith sticks to water after the main course and that he periodically checks his watch.

"I'm sorry to interrupt the conversation," he says, standing up right after you finish your third or fourth drink of the night, "but if we don't leave now we might end up having a situation."

You've kept track of time as well, and you're thankful to him for not having you ask to be taken home. If you leave now, you should arrive with ten minutes to spare, maybe more if traffic is good. You're thankful for that as well.
"Can you drive him home, Ray? I don't think you need Bunny and Dave for this," Pearson says, and Smith looks at him for two seconds with a slightly raised eyebrow before agreeing.

"Thank you for joining us. I hope we can see you again," Rosalind Pearson tells you, and if you didn't know better you'd think she means it.

"Thanks for the invitation," you say, and don't add how you really hope you never interact again. As you leave the room with Smith, you hear Pearson quietly say, "He could do worse."

His wife lets out a short sound of amusement and replies, "He's already done worse."

Smith shuts the door and leads you away. He's walking slightly faster than usual.

You're led to Smith's car and watch him as he starts it, lips pressed tightly and gaze lost, like he's thinking about something. Both of you are silent until you reach the street, when you say, "Just to be sure, you're not about to kill me, right?"

You watch his profile and catch the slight upwards curve of his mouth that announces that the answer you'll get is good for you.

"No, you're not getting killed by me or any member of my boss' business." He pauses and adds, "Nobody should kill you, as far as I know."

"Good. It was a nice dinner, it'd be a shame if you'd simply been preparing me for slaughter."

He actually smiles at that, but grows serious when he turns to give you a quick look.

"You understand that what was said today is true, don't you? If they fuck up again, you die."

Your good humor evaporates and you're once again very, very tired. You appreciate that he thinks you won't be the one to mess up.

You lean back in the seat and watch the road ahead.

"You mean I will get killed, or me and the boys?" Your voice betrays your exhaustion as well.

"Both end with you dead," he says, sounding slightly admonishing.

So your boys might make it. You can live with that. What you don't understand is why Smith can't as well.

"I didn't know you cared, Ray," you say, irony hiding your bemusement.

"You saved my life." He licks his lips and turns his head to look at you just long enough to say, "I don't want you to die."

You turn those words in your mind. Raymond Smith wants you to stay alive.

"Did you have anything to do with how things went?" you ask, because Rosalind Pearson had called Smith your friend and this looks like a good moment to think about that.

"I don't know," he shrugs. "When we were talking about everything that happened, I asked them to leave you and your boys alone. We were all alive and record shows we're better off not dealing with all of you for too long."
You snort. He's got a point.

"Do I owe you anything now?"

His mouth twists in distaste.

"You saved my life, remember? I think we're even." He gives you a quick look and adds, "You'll never have to see me again."

You turn your head to watch him. You study the angle of his nose, the curve of his ear and the line of his neck and you think that seeing him was never a problem, it was all the things that were associated with it.

Not seeing him again is alright with you, though. You don't want to owe him any more favors.

"I'm sorry about tonight," he says, breaking you out of your thoughts. "If I'd known what they were planning, I'd have put a stop to it."

Ah. It looks like he'll explain the joke to you.

"I still don't understand what all of that was about," you admit. "First you show up with some thugs, then the Pearsons treat me nicely."

"Sorry about the," his mouth twitches with contained laughter, "thugs. He made it sound like it wasn't going to be a friendly dinner, so we put together the unfriendly welcome committee."

"I'm feeling magnanimous. You're forgiven," you say, mock-solemn.

"That's so kind of you," Smith replies, laughter in his voice.

It might be the three or four drinks you had, or the relief that it's only Smith and you in the car, but you feel fine right now, and bold enough to insist, "What was all of that tonight?"

He eyes you questioningly.

"You really don't know?"

"I have no fucking idea what was going on. I only know your boss' wife must be one mean lady."

His face tells you that you are right in thinking that.

Slowly, throwing quick looks at you every few words, he says, "They seem to have mistaken my gratitude towards you for interest."

Huh.

"Huh." You narrow your eyes a bit and, to be sure, add, "When you say 'interest', you mean like…" You make a vague gesture. You consider a crude one, but it might not be the moment for it.

"Sexual, romantic, non-platonic, 'take you out for dinner and then go down on you' type of interest, yes."

So much for keeping it tasteful. You carefully refrain from picturing what he said; you can return to it later. Or in the morning. Or in the shower.

You're sure all your disbelief and confusion shows on your face. Everything makes an
uncomfortable amount of sense now.

"Let me see if I understand this." You point at Smith, who is doing his best to pay attention to you without ignoring the road. "Your bosses invited me for dinner to… give me their blessing?" Saying it out loud only makes it more absurd.

Smith makes a face.

"I think it was more about setting us up, but yes. That too."

There's so much you want to know now, and not enough time before you get home.

"Why do you need their blessing to date someone?"

He frowns and gives you a disbelieving look.

"That's what you're curious about?"

"What else should I be asking about?" Your face is still a picture of confusion.

He sets his jaw and you see his eyes move to give you a quick look before he says, "I was expecting you to ask about them setting me up with a man."

You raise your eyebrows. "Do you want me to say something about that?"

He doesn't reply, only tightens his grip on the steering wheel.

You turn to look ahead again.

"I've gone out with some girls," you say slowly. "I've gone out with some men." Smith's knuckles relax. "I don't have anything else to say."

He nods once.

"I…" He drums on the steering wheel. "You seem like a nice man, but I'm not interested in a relationship right now."

You can't help the snort that you let out. It's been a while since somebody called you 'nice'. Smith gives you an annoyed look.

"You don't need to be so careful, Ray." You smirk at his unimpressed face and think over what you're going to say next. How much should you reveal? How much would Smith be alright with you acknowledging? "I didn't know what was happening until now, and even if I had known…” You keep facing forward, doing your best to give him some privacy as you say, "I could tell who you're interested in."

Smith breathes in deeply. There's nothing to be said that won't make the situation more uncomfortable, so you stay silent.

"I'm working on it," he says after a minute.

"Does he know?" You still aren't looking at him.

He laughs. It's small and humorless; it makes you pity him.

"It's probably why he tried to set us up."
"Ah." That's downright cruel.

"I'm really sorry about all this." He looks at you to say, "Again, nothing against you. I'm simply... not the right person for a relationship right now." He turns towards the road again.

"Thank you for making that clear." Trying for humor, you add, "So you don't actually need their blessing to date someone?"

This time, his laughter is genuine.

"My last boyfriend was Fletcher, so I think they'd like to have a say on the next one."

Fletcher. What was he, a journalist? No, that was Pig Guy. Fletcher was the P.I. Seemed like a real cunt when you met him. You have to wonder if the reason he didn't seem to like you had anything to do with his 'ex-boyfriend' status.

"I can understand wanting Pearson, but Fletcher?" you say, judging. You're judging him. You need him to know that you're judging him.

"It wasn't serious." He says it just a tad too quickly for you to believe it.

"It doesn't sound like it was casual," you say lightly, hoping he understands you mean nothing by it.

"He was my boyfriend, no matter what a bad idea the relationship was." He winces. "Maybe I should have tried for something casual."

"I'm surprised, Mr. Smith," your tone making it clear that you're joking. "I didn't take you for the fuckbuddy type."

"You thought about that?" He smirks, pleased.

"A passing thought." You shrug, giving him a flirty smile. "You are very attractive." The beard could go, though.

"Thank you." He matches your expression. "You're not bad either."

The car turns down the corner of your street. You see a group of people in front of the gym that you know is the boys from the way they stand, and you pray they're simply waiting for you, not getting ready to raid Pearson's mansion or do something equally ill-advised.

Smith stops in front of the gym. Nobody seems to be holding any weapons.

You get out of the car and, impulsively, lean down before closing the door to say, "Goodbye, Ray."

"Goodbye." He's smiling at you, small and comfortable. "I won't see you around."

He seems to think that was funny. You raise an eyebrow and close the door.

You don't get to watch him drive away because your boys surround you immediately, asking what happened, if you're alright, if they tortured you or something equally heinous. They have so many questions that they don't let you speak, and you have to raise your voice to get them to stop fussing. Now that you know none of you is getting killed, you have many, many things to tell them about their idea of killing Mickey Pearson, so you get them inside the gym and, after letting them know that Smith kept his promise and you are physically and mentally unharmed, you let them know exactly what you think, loud and clear.
You want to believe they understood that they must stay away from drug lords.

“So, if Pearson wasn’t planning to torture you...” Ernie starts, two days after the dinner with Pearson, when he and the others have already gotten over their shame from everything that happened. He watches you cautiously, so you gesture for him to continue. “Why ask you to go to dinner?”

Around the gym, the boys keep to their routines, but you notice some of them moving more slowly, clearly trying to listen to your answer.

They outright stop moving when you say, “He wanted to set me up with his right-hand man.” You can’t blame them for that, it was surprising.

What’s also surprising is that, after they’ve all looked at each other, Benny asks, “When’s the date?”

You blink and stare.

“The what?” you ask flatly.

“When are you going out with him?” Benny says, moving his hands like that will help make the idea any less absurd.

“Why would I be going out with him?” You furrow your brow, narrow your eyes and keep staring.

“Why not?” Benny frowns.

“Remember how we talked about Mickey Pearson being bad news?” You look around at your boys, who simply look back at you. “That wasn’t a rhetorical question, I want to know if you remember.” After all of them have nodded, you continue. “Mickey Pearson is bad news. Raymond Smith is his right-hand man. That means he’s the same amount of bad news, except he can’t act unless his boss allows it.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem unless you break his heart, right?” Prime-Time says.

You close your eyes, press your lips tightly, and take a deep breath before looking at him.

“We didn’t just go through all this trouble to get out of the gangster business to walk right back into it,” you point out. Nobody seems convinced.

“You wouldn’t be in the business, just dating a gangster.” Prime-Time shrugs with one shoulder. “It sounds okay to me, Coach.”

The boys nod.

“We’d take care of it if he hurt you,” Ernie adds, which makes the boys nod more enthusiastically.

“That’s the exact sort of thing I don’t want you to ever do with whoever I end up dating,” you warn.

“But that’s kinda the thing, Coach,” Benny says, slow and tentative. “We’ve never seen you with anyone. And it’d be cool if you didn’t like that, but we know you do, and... why not?”

“What we wanna say, Coach, is that we think it’d be good if you had someone,” Ernie says, gesturing at the others. “We talk sometimes, and we want you to be happy.”
Part of you is touched. The rest of you is wondering what impression you give that they think you should go and date a gangster.

“I’m not going out with Mr. Right-Hand Man Of A Drug Lord,” you say, your voice final, and send everyone back to what they were doing.

“Think about it, Coach,” Benny says. “Why not?”

Because he’s bad news, and because he already wants someone else. Because you killed two men for him and you still don’t know why you did it.

You ignore the question, but you can’t ignore that Raymond Smith has been in your mind for the last two days, an annoying thought that likes to pop up at the most random times.

Except for when you think about him on purpose, when you get into the shower and return to the mental picture his words created and you touch yourself to the image of him on his knees, smiling at you, self-assured and eager, his hands on your thighs and his eyes on yours before putting his mouth on your cock.

It annoys you. You don’t like walking down the street and remembering his hands tightening around the steering wheel, you don’t like turning on the TV and remembering Pearson calling him your date, you don’t like looking at your boys and knowing that part of the reason they’re safe is that he asked for it, that you weren’t enough to protect them. You think about him checking you out and you won’t deny you looked at him too, and you return to the idea of burying a hand in his hair as he gets you off.

Or it could be the other way around.

You could hold him against you, whisper the filthiest promises into his ear as you wrap a hand around his cock and jerk him off, watch him as he loses his composure, have his hands tightening around your shoulders as you get him closer to the edge, have him moaning against your neck as he comes. You’ve seen him disgusted, you’ve seen him angry and you’ve seen him afraid, and now you want to know what it’s like to see him come undone. You want to leave him speechless.

Now that’s a nice thought. It might even be a realistic thought – he had looked at you. Sex doesn’t make a relationship and he mentioned the possibility of looking for something casual.

You start thinking about that instead.

On the list of the worst ideas that anyone has had in the last week, this one earns second place only because “fucking with Mickey Pearson” is still worse than “wanting to fuck with Mickey Pearson’s right-hand man”, but that still doesn’t make you feel any better. On the moral scale, your idea gets a worse rating, because at least your boys can say that their reasons had been somewhat altruistic, while your reasons are entirely selfish. It doesn’t stop you from driving all the way to Smith’s house and ringing the doorbell, telling yourself that maybe he won’t be home, which would be a sign that you need to go back home, take a cold shower, and never think about this again.

The door opens. That might be a sign that the universe hates you.

Smith doesn’t hide his surprise at seeing you. He blinks, narrows his eyes, looks behind you as he greets you and then asks, “No offense, but what are you doing here?”

You breathe in deeply and exhale through your teeth before saying, “I’m here to propose you something. Are you alone?”
His expression only becomes more puzzled, but he nods and lets you in, making you leave your shoes by the door.

“I was having dinner,” he explains as he guides you to the kitchen, where a plate of half-eaten lasagna waits on the counter next to a glass of wine. There isn’t a seat nearby. “Give me a moment to put this away and then we’ll talk.” He opens the microwave to put the plate inside, but he pauses halfway through the action to look at you and ask, “Have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

“Do you want some?” he says, already setting down his plate and going towards the oven. He takes out the lasagna casserole, and you have to admit that it looks good enough to make you hungry.

It’s only lasagna, not an expensive steak. You can accept it. Still, there’s a corner of your mind, the part of it that remembers the stories that thrilled you and scared you as a child, that brings up images of fae folk, and how you must never accept what they offer.

“Sure,” you say.

The man setting a portion of lasagna on a plate for you is very, very human; if anything tonight leads to disaster, it’ll be what you’re here for, not the act of accepting some homemade food. Besides, if you reject it you’ll have to get dinner for yourself and eat alone when you get home.

Smith sets the table at the dining room while your portion heats up, leaving you waiting in his kitchen to watch him come and go with cutlery, a glass for you and his own food.

He sets the places at opposite ends of the table and you waste no time digging into your plate, because it smells _good_ and you think the chances he’ll kick you out after he hears what you have to say are high, so you should eat as much as you can before that happens.

You know he’s watching you, probably trying to figure out what you’re doing there, but you pretend not to notice.

“I thought I’d never see you again. Did something happen?” he asks, his voice full of meaning, with a hint of dread.

You smile at him.

“My boys have been well behaved, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He almost relaxes.

“Then what is it?”

Your smile widens.

“I’ve been thinking about the conversation we had in the car the other day.” He presses his lips into a thin line. “How long ago did things with Fletcher end?”

He studies you before answering, slow and toneless, “Seven months.”

You nod.

“And you haven’t dated anyone since then.” He doesn’t say anything to that, only keeps his eyes on you and gives nothing away. You can’t blame him. “I’ve been thinking… Like I said, you’re
attractive. Like you said, I’m not bad myself. I’m definitely fine enough for you to have looked at me a couple times.” A flash of guilt crosses Smith’s face. “You said you don’t want a relationship and I respect that, but, well, can I be honest with you?”

You look at him and wait for his answer.

He looks mildly intrigued when he says, “Go ahead,” accompanying his words with a gesture towards you.

“I really think you could use a good fuck.” He raises his eyebrows and gives you a disbelieving look. “Tell me, Mr. Smith, when was the last time you had a companion that wasn’t your own hand?”

“Are you really asking me that?” There’s amusement in his eyes now. That’s better than the murderous intent you’d worried about.

“You don’t have to answer.” You take a drink of wine. “I’m here to offer an arrangement.” You put your hands on the table. “Neither of us is looking for a relationship and you could use a partner that doesn’t mind that you’re pining after someone else.”

He snorts and leans back in his chair to watch you.

“You came all the way here to tell me we should fuck each other?” He might sound disbelieving, but the way his eyes study you betrays his interest.

“Yes. Or you’ll fuck me, if that’s how you like it. I have no preference,” you say dismissively.

He stays silent, watching you, and you take the chance to eat some more.

“And you genuinely don’t mind that it’s someone else I want?”

It’s your turn to snort.

“First of all, don’t lie to me. You might not be interested in me in the same way you’re interested in your boss, but you’ve looked at me enough times that I know you don’t mind me.”

“That’s true,” he concedes, with a small inclination of his head that could generously be called a nod.

“Second of all, I’d mind if this was something with feelings involved, but it all boils down to you being hot and me seeing a chance for something mutually beneficial.” You drink some more. “You could even look at it as a way of not dying of sexual frustration while you’re emotionally unavailable. It can end the moment you feel ready to find an actual partner.” You down your glass and look him in the eye. “What do you think, Ray?”

You watch him as he closes his eyes, takes off his glasses and rubs his forehead with his fingers. You hold his gaze when he opens his eyes and looks at you - let him see that you’re serious, let him see that this is a real option he has, if he wants it. You get distracted when Smith licks his lips before speaking.

“It sounds like a damn good offer.” It comes out slightly resigned. You don’t like that.

“Feel free to think it over,” you say, pushing back your chair. Definitely a bad idea. You shouldn’t have come here. “There’s no hurry.”
“I’m sorry if that wasn’t clear.” He raises a hand to stop you from standing up. “What I mean is that I accept the offer.” That sounds better. His eyes are focused on you, his tone is almost playful, and the curve of his mouth is a promise.

You study him. He puts his glasses on again and returns to watching you, as if daring you to make the first move. You figure it’s only appropriate.

“Stay there, please,” you say, standing up and approaching him slowly and deliberately. This is his house and he’s the one that probably has a gun on him, but it’s not fear that makes you think you need to approach him carefully; it’s the fact that he’d sat as far away from you as possible, that he’d been eating in his kitchen while standing up, that he loves someone else.

You stand next to Smith and ask him if he can turn his chair towards you, and he looks mildly entertained as he humors you. He looks up at you and says, “Any further requests?” with a tone that tells you that you could ask for anything, but that whether or not you get it will be entirely up to him.

“Just one,” you say, leaning forward and maintaining eye contact as your hands come to rest on his knees. “Stop me if you don’t want this.”

He looks taken aback for a second, then his expression softens and he brings a hand up to almost touch your face.

“Aren’t you a gentleman, Coach?” he teases.

“You know I have an actual name, don’t you?” You slide your hands up his thighs.

“So do I, but you call me ‘Mr. Smith’,” His tone doesn’t change. His hand cups your jaw.

“I’ve called you ‘Ray’.” Your hands reach his hips.

“Only sometimes,” Smith’s voice becomes lower and his hand trails down your neck, “and only to mess with me in some way or another.” So he noticed. Not that you were very subtle.

“Very well, Ray.” Your tone doesn’t put any weight on his name, doesn’t attach any emotion to it, treats it like it’s just another word among the millions that exist. Your hands stay where they are. “I teach my boys to respect boundaries and ask for consent, and I try to do as I preach.” You rest a finger on the front of his trousers. “If you don’t want this, stop me.”

“Go ahead.” He drops his hand and watches as you loosen his belt, unbutton and unzip his trousers, and get out his cock. You watch him breathe in sharply when you curl your fingers around it, and you almost laugh when you realize that the last person that did this might have been Fletcher.

Fletcher, who sold him out. Fletcher, who not only got Smith almost killed, but Mickey Pearson as well.

You take off your glasses and leave them on the table, and you catch his surprised expression as you get down on your knees, but you can’t pay attention to his face when you’re busy putting your lips around his cock and trying to take him as deep as possible. That gets him to say your name, relief and desire intertwined with the word, a sound you’re eager to hear again.

You pull back and suck on the tip to get a chance to look up. Smith’s eyes are fixed on you, his lips are slightly parted, and you know he wants more from you and that he wants you as well when his hand goes to your face, touching it so lightly that you’d think he was touching something fragile.
You smile as best as you can, smug and inviting, and once again take him deep into your mouth, humming around him and enjoying the change in his breathing. It all travels straight down to your own dick, but you don’t want to miss a second of this, you want to know if he moaned more loudly when you sucked or when you licked, you want to know exactly when he started muttering words of encouragement, you want to remember what it was that you did that had him repeating your name urgently and telling you he was close, and so you ignore yourself to make Raymond Smith come undone, licking and sucking lightly until he’s leaning back in his chair, breathing heavily.

You stand up slowly, put on your glasses and take his napkin from the table to wipe your mouth. He’s looking at you appreciatively, but his gaze is still a bit unfocused.

“It looks like you needed that,” you say lightly.

“It was good,” he says breathily, closing his eyes and throwing his head back.

You have no idea what to do now. Or, well, you want to deal with how hard you are, but that's not something you can do in this moment.

“I should be going now,” you say, folding the napkin and putting it in your pocket, grateful that he must not have noticed your momentary hesitation. “Thanks for dinner, darling,” you add, and you like that that makes him laugh.

“See you soon,” he says, uprighting his head and looking at you.

Anybody who saw his face would be able to tell that he just came, and you’re so proud of yourself that you’re not really thinking when you lean down to kiss Ray’s forehead, keeping your lips against his skin as you say, “See you soon.”

Then you turn around and go home.

It’s only when you’re wanking to the memory that it truly dawns on you what you’ve just started.

Around noon, Smith texts you to ask you where you live and what time you get home, so it’s not a surprise to find his car parked outside of your building in the afternoon, and him leaning against the car’s door, smoking distractedly.

You start walking more slowly as soon as you see him, taking the chance to study his profile. The other night in his car you’d been riding high on the relief of survival and somewhat relaxed from the drinks you’d had at Pearson’s, and last night you were busier presenting your idea and looking for any signs that you should be getting out of his house. Before that, you only dealt with him in the context of the favors you owed because of your boys, and he was always fully present in the moment, worrying about Pearson and Fletcher and how to ensure things turned out well, and you were always more concerned with the matter at hand than with him. This is the first time you’ve seen Smith relaxed, and the first time you’ve been able to look at him without anything else demanding your attention.

He must notice you approaching out of the corner of his eye, because he turns his head to look at you with a small smile already in place. You like the way he looks at you, undemanding and knowing – this is a man that remembers last night just as well as you do, and who probably wouldn’t mind a repeat of the events.

You acknowledge him with a movement of your head and keep walking towards him at the same leisurely pace. He’s not going anywhere and you’re enjoying the view.
“You know those things are bad for you, right?” you tell him as you come to stand in front of him, your hands in your jacket’s pockets.

“Your boys raided a weed farm and you’re lecturing me for tobacco?” His smile widens slightly with his amusement.

“There’s no tar in weed, last I checked,” you say plainly. It’s just a fact; you’re not trying to prove anything and you’re not trying to win at anything.

“It still affects the lungs,” he shoots back, except his tone matches yours, so you can’t be sure if he’s really trying to undermine your point or simply stating a fact as well. He takes a drag of his cigarette and offers it to you. “Are you telling me you never smoked?”

You take the cigarette from him. “I didn’t even imply that.” You take a long drag and then toss it to the ground, putting it out with your shoe.

Smith watches you as you blow out the smoke, still leaning on his car and looking content. You move to stand next to him, leaning on his car as well, almost touching him. You look straight ahead.

"I didn't think I'd see you again so soon." That’s the truth. You'd expected him to wait a few days.

"I don't know if you remember, but last night you went down on me and left without giving me a chance to return the favor." He sounds reproaching. He sounds teasing. He sounds confused, you think.

"You said 'See you soon' when I told you I was leaving," you remind him.

"I wasn't thinking that coherently in that moment," he says after a pause, matter-of-factly with a tinge of satisfaction.

You turn to look at him and find he’s already watching you, both expectant and inviting.

"That good, huh?" If you sound smug, well, who can blame you?

“It had been a while.” You like the way his mouth curves, you like that he’s looking at you with open interest, you like that you can look at him in the same way and all it does is make him lean slightly towards you, just enough for his arm to touch yours. "But yes. You were that good."

“If you want, we can go in and I’ll do it again.” You gesture with your head towards your building. “It’s my place, so I won’t leave after you’ve come.”

“Maybe later.” He pushes himself away from the car and stands in front of you. “I’m here to take you out for dinner.”

His smirk tells you he knows exactly how bad that idea is, so you raise your eyebrows and ask him what he’s planning.

He hums in thought, even goes and puts on a pensive face while you give him a judging look you don’t really mean. You know what he wants and he knows you know, and you actually appreciate engaging in small talk before starting on each other.

“Our conversation last night reminded me that it’s been months since I last went somewhere with someone for reasons that weren’t business-related.” You push yourself away from the car as well and come to stand in his personal space, close enough that it can’t be ignored, but not so close that
“I was thinking that, well, since I already have to return last night’s favor and you have to have dinner anyway, there was no reason not to take you somewhere.”

“That sounds an awful lot like a date,” you tease.

“If you’re worried about romance, I can go down on you in the restaurant’s toilet.” Smith moves closer to you. He’s looking at your mouth, possibly remembering where you put it last night, and then he’s looking you in the eye and smiling, something in his face reminding you of him talking to Fletcher about predators and prey. It makes you want to take him to your flat and have him against the nearest surface.

Your own smile matches his. You’ve never been prey.

“Sounds scandalous, Ray. I’m all for it.” You move until your lips are close enough to his that you can almost feel them and, after a second during which you can see him debating whether or not to close the distance, you move back and sidestep him to go to your building. “I should get changed, then.”

You hear him exhale heavily and follow you.

Your flat is not nearly as impressive as his house, but Smith doesn’t let anything show on his face as you let him into it. Nothing shows on his face either when you reappear later freshly showered and dressed in the only suit you have, the one you keep for funerals and in case anybody ever decides to get married. It’s not a fancy suit, it’s a bunch of cloth that does the job of making you look presentable in situations where your own comfort isn’t a priority. You’ve never liked how it feels, stiff and a tad too big.

“Like what you see?” you ask Smith, and study his face for a reaction.

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here,” he says, walking towards you and gesturing towards your neck. “About that...”

“I’m not going to wear a tie,” you warn.

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” he says, the corner of his lip twitching with humor.

“What is it then?”

He slowly moves his hands towards the collar of your shirt.

"May I?"

Ah. You left the top two buttons undone. You nod when you realize he’s waiting for permission, and then Smith unbuttons the next one.

“I didn’t expect that,” you say, touching the button he just undid.

“That looks better,” he says, dropping his hands from your shirt.

“Any more fashion advice?” you ask lightly.

“A shirt with rolled up sleeves always works.” He takes a step back to look you over. “But I don’t think a restaurant is the best place for that look.”

“I’ll keep it in mind if I ever want to seduce you.”
“I’d like that,” he says, and it sounds like he means it. “Are you ready?”

“Lead the way,” you reply, gesturing towards the door.

You follow him to his car and spend the ride watching him, studying the way his hands rest on the steering wheel and imagining them on you instead, following the line of his neck while imagining kissing a path from his clavicle to the angle of his jaw, seeing the way he smiles when he realizes that you’re still looking at him and imagining what it’d be like to bite his lower lip.

When he’d mentioned dinner you’d feared he’d take you to the sort of place that makes people want to start setting things on fire, where you can’t look at the decor without getting charged the amount of money that’d pay the month’s bills, but the restaurant he takes you to, while definitely fancy, seems normal. Nobody seems to mind that your suit isn’t worth much, and when you check the menu you see that, sure, you’d never go there if it was your choice, but you could afford it if you wanted to impress a date or celebrate an anniversary.

“Satisfied?” Smith says as you lower the menu, his expression telling you he knows your interest in it had nothing to do with your appetite.

“Yes. I feel less like a whore now.”

Your tone and expression should have made it clear that it was a joke, but he frowns.

“Is that what you thought this was?” He leans away from you, his shoulders tense and jaw set.

“I’m joking, Ray,” you say, looking him in the eye seriously. “I know that…” You aren’t sure how to say it, so you simply voice it as it is in your mind, accompanying it with a vague gesture. “I know you’re being nice.”

He studies your face. You put your elbows on the table, which you know will probably make someone frown, interlace your fingers and return his gaze.

“Not many people call me nice,” he finally says.

“That’s because most people that deal with you do it because of business,” you say, matter-of-factly. It seems to be the right answer, because he relaxes.

“You know that I’m not trying to buy anything, right?”

You snort and shake your head.

“Ray, you could have shown up with a brand new car for me and I’d have known that anyway.”

Smith is still studying you, eyes slightly narrowed like he’s trying to find a hidden detail in a picture, his lips almost curved into a smile.

Whatever it is that he wanted to see, you think he found it, because he looks at the menu again, points a drink and one of the plates to you and whispers, “Please order that for me and meet me in the toilet.”

Then he pushes back his chair and walks away.

Huh. It looks like it’s really going to happen.

You order for both of you and leave your jacket on the chair’s back before going to find Smith. You are very, very grateful that the toilet is both clean and big enough that you won’t have to
worry about hitting anything. He locks the door and guides you towards a wall.

“To be clear,” he says as he gets on his knees and starts unbuttoning your trousers, “I usually take my time, but they’ll probably notice if both of us are gone for too long.”

“You can do that some other day,” you say, and then put a hand on your mouth when he takes hold of your cock and licks it from base to tip. He looks very, very smug when he lifts his eyes, and you like that, you like that he knows what he’s doing and how it affects you, and your only regret as he touches you and sucks on you is that you will never be able to properly focus on what he looks like as he makes you come.

*Mickey Pearson has no idea what he’s missing.*

You cling to that thought, to the knowledge that it’s you that gets to enjoy Ray’s lips and tongue, and hold onto it as he brings you over the edge.

You let your head drop back against the wall and stare ahead as Ray cleans his face and checks himself in the mirror.

“I’ll be at our table,” he says, heading for the door, and leaves you alone to recover and make yourself presentable. Mental recovery takes a while, because you keep thinking about what just happened, wondering how you got so lucky, and coming up with the many ways it all could go wrong, only to once again remember that Raymond Smith just went down on you.

By the time you return to the table, the drinks have been brought over and Smith is checking something on his phone. He smiles pleasantly at you when you sit down and puts his phone back in his jacket.

“That took you longer than I expected,” he says, the very picture of innocence.

“You were *that* good.” You grab your drink and sip on it.

“Thank you.” He holds his glass towards you, as if toasting. “Congratulations on that excellent idea you had about us.”

The food arrives and for a moment you’re distracted by it, but after a couple of bites you’re in the mood to talk again.

“After what just happened,” you start, and you don’t miss the way he smiles at that, “I must assume you’ve been before. There’s no other way you could have known that we wouldn’t get caught.”

“I’ve been here, but only for business.” He eats a bite of his food. “Michael sometimes brings people here.”

*Did you ever want to blow Mickey Pearson in the toilet?*

You carefully push aside that thought.

“Really? You never brought Fletcher?” You make sure to sound insinuating enough for him to raise an eyebrow.

“Very funny,” he says flatly.

“I only want to know if we just shared something special, darling,” you say, your voice sickeningly
Smith stares at you for a second and then breaks, covering his mouth to laugh, and now you can’t stay serious either and you laugh too.

“What the fuck was that?” Smith asks, gesturing at you and shaking his head, his laughter turned into a wide smile.

“I was being adorable, didn’t you notice?” You’re sure that your expression matches his.

“It was terrifying and I never want to hear that again.” He points an accusing finger at you. “It’s going to be in my nightmares.”

“I could only make your nightmares less scary and more interesting,” you say, even though you know there are nightmares you’ve had that nothing could make less terrifying, dreams of bad decisions and worse consequences that you like to tell yourself don’t bother you anymore. Smith must have his own bad dreams as well.

He doesn’t reply to that and instead says, “To answer your question, no. I never brought Fletcher here. I tried not to take him to any place that had something to do with my job.”

“That must have really limited your options,” you point out, and Smith’s face tells you that you were right.

The conversation moves on to more general topics. Both of you avoid mentioning Mickey Pearson and your boys, and you entertain yourselves commenting on the people around you and discussing whether or not you’d be able to take the thugs (“They’re Dave and Bunny”) in a fight. You talk while you eat and keep talking long after you’ve finished your food.

You don’t even bother looking at the check when it arrives and let Smith pay, and then he’s driving you home.

“You could come over on Friday night. If you get there early, we can have dinner.” He says it casually, like he doesn’t mean anything by it. Perhaps he doesn’t.

Then again, last night you found him eating dinner alone in his kitchen. Both of you could have dinner alone on Friday, or eat together instead before fucking.

“Sure. Text me the time.”

You once again don’t get to watch him drive away. He stays parked in front of your building until you go inside.

If you'd been asked about your expectations for what starting the arrangement with Raymond
Smith would be like, you'd have said you hoped the man would be good in bed and that he wouldn't secretly be a psychopath that would threaten you or your boys if he didn't like something. That was all you wanted and needed. You couldn't have imagined you'd end up at his place on a Friday afternoon helping him cook.

He texted you the time you should get to his house for dinner, and then he asked you how you felt about steak. It dawned on you that this man cooks and that if you got there at the appointed time you'd find the food waiting for you, and it seemed very rude to keep eating his food without helping, so you told him you'd be there early to help with dinner.

"You know I've been cooking for years, right?" he said when he took you to the kitchen.

"I didn't until just now. Still, it's my dinner too. What sort of example would I be giving if I let you do everything?" You rolled up your sleeves and washed your hands in the sink before he had a chance to ask, and he looked pleased when you turned towards him again.

"Something like a caveman," he said, handing you an apron and immediately starting to give you instructions.

It's easy work because he gives you the dull tasks, like peeling potatoes, and you pass the time talking about your week and plans for the weekend. Your boys have a match coming up. Smith wants to drive somewhere for the day. Your days passed as usual and you both seem to have arrived to the conclusion that the less you know about Smith's job, the better, so you mostly talk about how your boys are doing.

"Do they know you're here now?" Smith asks as he sets the table. Today, he sets the places on one end of it, one in front of the other.

"No, and I'm not telling them."

He nods. "Makes sense. After everything that happened, I don't think they'd be happy to know you're still talking to me."

You almost laugh at that.

"Talking? Is that what we're calling it?"

He returns to the kitchen and sets the food on the plates. You don't bother offering to help with this, only watch him as he works.

"No, it isn't." He looks up at you, eyes inviting. "But they don't need to know about everything else."

He hands you your plate and both of you head for the table and sit down.

"They might actually be happy if they found out what we've been doing," you say after your first bite. Damn, this man can cook. Mickey Pearson really doesn't know what he's missing out on.

Smith looks at you questioningly.

You eat another bite while you decide how to say this.

"They asked me what it was that Pearson wanted with me that night and I told them he was trying to set me up with you." Smith stares. "They really liked the idea."
"You told your boys that Michael Pearson was trying to set you up with me and they liked it," he says flatly.

"They want me to date." You shrug and eat some more.

"They really are your children, aren't they?" he says, his lips pressed tightly in an attempt not to smile.

"My lads. I told you when we met."

"I remember." Smith loses his battle and smiles at his food. "They also didn't comment on me liking men?"

"You really want someone to have an opinion on that, don't you?" You look at him curiously.

"There's always someone with an opinion." He says it far too detachedly for you to believe it.

"They're good lads. Impulsive and too creative for their own sake, but good." Lower, more serious, you add, "I don't tolerate bullshit in my gym."

Smith looks at you like he did at the restaurant, like he's studying a picture and trying to find what's hidden in it, and seems like he wants to say something, but in the end he only nods once and says, "In a way, Michael succeeded that night, didn't he?"

You hum in thought.

"I guess he did." You eat a bite to give yourself more time to think.

"He certainly put an idea in your head," Smith says, giving you a meaningful look.

"That was entirely your doing. You said he thought you wanted to take me out for dinner and go down on me and that was certainly an image." You laugh after realizing what you just said. "And you ended up doing it."

"Oh." He blinks. "I did, didn't I?"

You nod.

He sighs and grabs his glass.

"He doesn't have to know that." He sounds almost sad when he says it. He certainly sounds hurt.

"Why, you think he'll be jealous?"

"He won't be jealous." He drinks. "What he will be is smug, since now we're..." an amused smile dances on his lips for an instant, "talking."

"So we are calling it that," you say to lighten the mood, because Smith isn't looking at you and his expression is carefully neutral.

"Only sometimes." You look down at your plate to give him some privacy. "And we are talking right now."

"Are we? I thought this was foreplay."

"I can do better than this," he says. You glance at him and find he’s returned his attention to his
food.

Both of you drop the topic and enjoy the rest of your dinner. After that, you help him clean up, because you remember very clearly that that first night you didn’t even clear your side of the table. And after that he gives you a tour of the house, because both of you would rather wait a few minutes before starting on each other.

“I can’t help but feel like we’re not doing this casual thing in the right way,” Smith says as you leave the toilet, looking very entertained by whatever it was that he’d been thinking that led him to say that.

“As long as it works for us, I don’t see any problem with our way,” you say, drying your hands on your clothes and walking towards him. “So now... bedroom, or do you prefer something less personal?”

“I’m not fucking on the couch, if that’s what you’re asking,” he says, gesturing for you to follow him.

“Never?” It had looked like a very nice couch.

“Tonight, at least.” He opens the door to his room and lets you in. The first thing you see is that his bed is far too big for one person. “I like to be comfortable,” he says when he notices what you’re looking at.

“You could fit three people here, Ray.” You move towards the bed and sit on it. “Are you having secret orgies?”

“If I told you, they wouldn’t be secret anymore.” He comes to stand in front of you, and you tentatively put your hands on his hips.

“You could invite me for the next one.” Since he’s not moving away, you pull him closer.

“I’ll add you to the group chat.” He looks down at you with laughter in his eyes and reaches for your glasses. You let him remove them and set them on his nightstand.

“How do we do this?” you ask him as he sits down next to you.

“Do you have a preference?”

“No. You?”

“Me neither.”

“Coin toss?”

The coin toss says that you’ll top.

You lie back on his bed that probably has sheets with whatever many threads fancy sheets have and enjoy it while he goes to get what you’ll need.

“Already asleep?” he asks, nudging your knee with his own.

You raise yourself on your elbows to look at him, gesturing with your head to what he’s carrying.

“Did you already have everything or did you go shopping for me?”
“Yes,” he says, setting everything on his nightstand. You see lube, condoms, and gloves, and you’re not sure if it’s the fact that this man brought you gloves for when you lube him up or that he didn’t bother asking you to wear a condom and instead simply brought one, but now you’re feeling very proud of yourself for deciding to sleep with Raymond Smith.

You’re also feeling almost fond of him, so you stand up, put your hands on his hips and slowly move your face close to his, giving him plenty of time to push you away if this isn’t how he wants things to go.

He meets you halfway, his eyes closing right before his mouth touches yours. Ray’s lips are softer than you expected, and they part for you when you touch them with the tip of your tongue. His kiss, however, is determinate and hungry, and you can tell that he’ll do his best to wreck you when he gets the chance from how he bites your lower lip and the sound he makes when you let your hands move lower. He pulls down your jacket’s zipper and snakes his hands under the fabric to rest on your chest and back, and you wonder if he could have imagined this happening back when he’d looked at you with only a hint of interest in his eyes as you said goodbye forever.

He pushes back your jacket, letting it drop to the floor, and breaks the kiss to take off his own glasses, moving away from you to set them next to yours on his nightstand, both of them away from the edge and away from the bed, as safe as they can be. Your eyes go to his hands, follow the line of his arms up to his shoulders and neck and then finally to his face, and when your gaze meets his, Ray smirks and takes off his sweater.

You once again move into his space, guiding him until he’s sitting on the bed, and you smile when he starts tugging at your shirt. You lean down and put a hand on the side of his neck as you kiss him, your other hand resting on his thigh, but he’s more interested in undressing you, so you have to break the kiss so he can help you out of your shirt and you can help him out of his. After that, you see no reason not to take a second to look at all the newly exposed skin.

There’s a proud tilt to Ray’s head as he leans back on his elbows, watching you with the same amount of interest with which you’re watching him.

You lean forward to kiss him, and he puts an arm around your shoulders and pulls you with him as he lifts his legs to the bed and turns to lie back. You manage not to end up falling on him, and you press yourself against him to feel his skin against yours and let the contact set you on fire.

His hands map your back and you move to press open-mouthed kisses on his neck, careful not to leave any type of mark, your hand caressing every inch of skin it can reach. Ray puts a leg around your hips and pulls you close, raising his hips to grind against you, and you scratch the skin of his shoulder with your teeth and move against him, reckless and dirty, until he starts unbuttoning your trousers and you move away to help him finish undressing too.

You get a glove and the lube from the nightstand while he pulls back the covers, and you think about your earlier fantasies, of holding him against you while you make him lose his composure.

He watches you get things ready for him, still proud and confident, and imagining him moaning your name makes it difficult to focus on what you’re doing. You manage.

“Come here,” you say, reaching for him and pulling him to your lap.

There’s a small shift on his expression that makes you think he didn’t expect this.

“I didn’t get to see your face when I went down on you,” you explain as you circle him with a finger, studying him for any sign of discomfort, “and I won’t get to see it when you’re on your
hands and knees.” You start slowly pushing into him and smirk at his narrowed eyes.

“You’re a cunt,” he says, his hands settling on your shoulders. His fingers twitch as you start stretching him.

“There’s no need to be rude, Ray.”

He closes his eyes and breathes in deeply. You keep working on him.

“I’m the asshole you’re about to fuck, I can say whatever I want,” he says after a few seconds.

You snort and start with a second finger.

“Did you have to pause to think up that retort?”

Ray opens his eyes and only gives you a judging look.

“I’m a bit distracted right now,” he says through gritted teeth, closing his eyes again.

“I can see that.” Your tone is very, very smug and you don’t mind at all that he can hear it. Your voice is also rough around the edges, and you don’t mind if he notices that either.

You think about asking him if he picked the word ‘asshole’ from his boss or if he’s always used it, but then you see how his face has started to relax and decide against it. You don’t think bringing up his unrequited love would do much for the mood you’re trying to maintain. It might be the best for the both of you if you stay silent.

It’ll definitely be better for him if you can add a third finger, no matter how much it almost hurts to wait.

His eyes stay closed and you watch him relax and start to enjoy himself, and it’s almost enough to distract you from your hard-on. There’s a part of you that wonders if the reason Ray isn’t looking at you is that he’s trying to imagine that the man currently fingering him is Mickey Pearson, but then you figure that it doesn’t matter as long as he doesn’t end up calling you ‘Michael’. You want him to remember that it’s you with him right now.

“I think you’re ready,” you tell him when you feel your fingers easily slide into him.

“Finally,” he sighs, and it goes straight to your cock and to your head.

You hurry to remove the glove and put on the condom while Ray settles on the bed on his hands and knees. If you weren’t desperate, you’d give yourself a few seconds to enjoy the view; since you are, you go straight to asking him if he’s ready.

“You’d better do something soon if you don’t want him complaining later. You put a hand around his cock and jerk him off, enjoying how he tells you to keep going, how much
he likes what you're doing, and how eventually it's just your name that he says as he comes. After that, you're free to let go as well.

You pull out and lie down next to Ray, arms and legs spread out, and Ray simply flops down on his front and throws an arm over your chest in some odd claiming gesture that couldn't be called a hug by even the most generous person. His skin is warm against yours and when you close your eyes his contact is the only real thing in the universe, more certain than even your own heart, that's still beating fast and telling you that, yes, you did just have Mickey Pearson's right-hand man moaning your name. You're sure that he'll do his best to have you screaming his next time.

You smile at the idea and look at Ray, who's watching you through half-lidded eyes, expression pleased.

You throw the condom to the floor and turn to lie on your side, moving closer to Ray to bury a hand in his hair and kiss him, lazy and dirty, with him sucking on your lower lip and you sighing against his mouth, still thinking about how Mickey Pearson doesn't know what he's missing.

He breaks the kiss to grab the covers and pull them over both of you and rests his head on his crossed arms, his face turned towards you, eyes slightly narrowed like he's still trying to figure something out. You lie back again and let him watch you, content in the silence, which is only broken by the occasional car going down the road.

You don't know how much time has passed when he says, "I'm free tomorrow."

You'd tease him for his eagerness if you hadn't been mentally going through your schedule as well.

"There's that match I mentioned earlier," you say, shaking your head.

"Ah, right."

"Sunday, my place?" you suggest tentatively.

"Only if we meet up earlier. I have to work on Monday."

You won't ask him about that.

"That works for me." You sit up and stretch. "I have to be at the gym early on Monday."

Smith pushes himself up and you take the chance to appreciate his arms as he does so. He notices you staring and smiles at you, amused and promising.

"Come on, I'll explain the shower to you," he says, getting out of the bed and not even bothering to cover himself.

You pick up the trash from the floor and follow him to the bathroom, and once there you tell him to shower with you, half because he’s a nice thing to look at, half because it’s comfortable to have someone to wash your back and not needing to remember the exact way you have to turn the knob to get the water at the right temperature. You wonder if he thinks anything of the scars you have, the ones you can’t pretend are the product of something innocuous and innocent, if he’s looking at them and remembering that you killed two men in his garden with ease and no hesitation. You wonder what conclusions he’s drawing and how close they are to the truth.

He doesn’t ask, and so you don’t ask him either about the marks on his own skin, except for the one on the lower right of his abdomen.
“Appendix?” you ask him, brushing the scar with two fingers as you step out of the shower.

“When I was seventeen,” he confirms, grabbing towels from under the sink. “How do you know that?”

“You think you’re the first person with an appendectomy scar I’ve slept with?” You take the towel he hands you and start drying yourself.

“I could be.” He dries himself quickly; oddly disinterested compared to all the care he seems to put in everything else about himself. “They do the surgery differently now.” He hums in thought. "Did one of your exes make a point of telling you they didn't have an appendix? That's an odd thing to talk about."

"Don't judge my pillow talk, or I'll ask you about Fletcher," you say, mock-serious.

Smith grimaces.

"He talked a lot about himself, if you're wondering." He leaves the bathroom, taking the towel with him. “Any other questions about me?” he calls from his room.

You wrap the towel around your waist and go out in search of your clothes.

"None for now." You spot your underwear next to the bed.

Smith shows up in pyjama pants and carrying clean sheets.

"Help me with this," he says, and you find yourself in your underwear helping him change the sheets. It must be a pain to change them alone, what with how unnecessarily big the bed is.

Once done he takes a look out the window, then back at you and says, "You can stay if you don't want to drive in the dark."

You've started picking up your clothes again and take your time grabbing your jacket, using those seconds to try to figure out what he means with that. In the end, you simply frown and look at him.

"Stay?"

"It's a simple offer, don't try to find anything in it," he says dismissively, sitting down in the bed. "It's dark and some people don't like driving at night."

"Where would I sleep?"

That wasn't a very smart question. Thankfully, Smith's expression remains neutral.

"You can use the couch or sleep here." He shrugs. "It's a big bed."

You look at Smith's chest and arms, think of mapping them with your tongue, and shake your head.

"I don't have a toothbrush."

"I have spares."

"And I don't have clothes for tomorrow. I don't even have something to sleep in today."

He half smiles and tilts his head to look at you before saying, "You know you can say no, right? No need for excuses."
You know that. Saying 'no' has been an option since the day you helped him with Fletcher, it's simply that you keep deciding not to, and you still don't know why.

"I don't want to stay over, Ray." You start getting dressed.

Smith nods and stands up to get his pyjama top.

"For the record, if you ever want to stay, you can." He sounds like he means it.

Once again, you think of fairy tales, and how you must not fall asleep in the fae realm.

"I'll keep it in mind." You fully intend to never take him up on the offer. You've eaten his food and you've had sex with him, but you still know where the exit is.

He walks you to the door, looks you in the eye and says, "Text me when you get home;" then he's closing the door before you can point out that you're an adult, that he's only a guy you're sleeping with, and that his request shows he's awful at this 'casual' thing.

It leaves you with nothing to do but walk to your car without looking back.

You text him when you get home.

Ray texts you back to wish you a good night a minute later.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Hi! Welcome back to this fic!

First, a shout out to Sofia. It's been years since I last wrote a fic for a fandom she cared about, it's so nice to brainstorm with her again.

Second, super extra especial thanks to the people that commented on the first chapter. I absolutely loved writing those 14k words, so seeing that other people were enjoying them too made me feel very happy and eager to keep writing.

Third: you might have noticed that the chapter count went up. The fic outline hasn't changed, it's simply that I realized that if I put everything I had planned for this chapter here, it'd end up being about 20k words long, and that was a bit too much.

Fourth, and most important: I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Few things make it more obvious that fucking Raymond Smith is a bad idea than opening your door on Sunday and noticing how he clashes with the hallway. Your building is a monument to bad maintenance, with flickering lights and formerly-white paint in all the common areas, but the place is cheap, the plumbing has never betrayed anyone, and you don’t spend long enough in your flat to care about anything but how safe it is to fall asleep in it. Smith, meanwhile, stands in front of you wearing a black coat and shoes, grey trousers and sweater, and a white shirt with the top two buttons undone, tidy and almost elegant in the way he holds himself, two adjectives that nobody would associate with this building. You know there must be a gun hidden under that coat.

“Hello, Ray.” You smile at him and take a step to the side.

“Hi.” He raises a hand to show you a bag as he walks in. You carefully ignore how the movement lets you see the holster of his gun. “I brought my leftovers from yesterday.”

There are two locks and a chain on the door you opened to let this man into your flat. You don’t think about that either.

“Ray, at this point I have to ask you,” you say as you close the door, turning towards him. “Do you think I can’t cook?”

He gives you a puzzled look. “Why do you ask?”

You raise an eyebrow. “You brought your own food to my place.”

He looks at the bag and then back at you. Slowly, enough that you know he’s only doing it for effect, he smiles at you, small and lopsided with a hint of mischief, and says, “It’s for you. If you still feel like getting up to make dinner after I’m done with you, I’m ending our arrangement.”

You snort and shake your head, then take the bag off his hands as you say, “I’ll be the one ending this if it turns out you’re giving me false expectations.” You bring the bag to the kitchen to put the
food in the fridge. “Is this curry?” you ask, inspecting the container without opening it. He only brought one portion.

“Yes,” Smith calls from the living room. “You don’t like it?”

“I didn’t say that, Ray. I was only asking.”

You do a quick inventory of the fridge’s contents before closing it and joining Smith. He’s taken off his coat and left it folded on the couch. He also removed the holster, and you suspect you’d find the gun if you searched his coat.

Smith is looking out your window, his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the street.

“Anything interesting?” you ask him, standing next to him.

He shakes his head and turns towards you.

“Shall we?” he says, tilting his head towards the door that leads to your room.

He didn’t see your room the previous time. There wasn’t much to see in it then and there isn’t much to see in it now, just a bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe and some trinkets. Everything that’s worth anything to you is kept at the office or somewhere safe.

Smith looks at your bed and you nearly choke on air trying not to laugh at how carefully neutral his expression is.

“That’s what a normal-sized bed looks like, Ray,” you tease.

His lips part and he raises his eyes to give you an unimpressed look. It doesn’t affect you, you’re far too interested in moving into Smith’s space and bringing a hand to the collar of his shirt to toy with the top button.

“Is this for me?” you ask him, letting the back of your fingers touch his skin.

“Define ‘this’.” He puts his hands on your waist and smirks.

“I distinctly remember you keeping your shirt buttoned all the way up back when I brought you that journalist’s video.” You grin when he grimaces, and laugh when he drops his hands and takes a step away from you.

“Did you have to bring that up now?” He closes his eyes and rubs his forehead with his fingers.

“All I’m saying is that that day you showed me nothing, and that the other times we met you were wearing ties.” You go to get the lube, the condoms and the gloves. “But you weren’t wearing a tie on Friday, or today,” you say from the bathroom.

Smith is still looking mildly disgusted when you return, so you hand him the items to distract him. He inspects them and nods in approval before setting them on the nightstand, along with his glasses.

"We were talking about ties?" he says, sitting down on the bed.

"About how you're not wearing one," you say, standing in front of him.

"Oh, that." He puts his hands on your hips and pulls you towards him. “Considering what we're meeting for? It seemed like a waste of effort.”
“That’s practical,” you say, straddling him.

"I can wear a tie next time if you want." One of his hands sneaks under your shirt, laying flat on your back, keeping you steady. The other removes your glasses and leaves them next to his own.

"We still don't know if there'll be a next time, Ray," you say, mock-chastising. "You talked yourself up just a few minutes ago, remember?" Your hand settles on the back of his neck. The hand he has under your shirt starts drawing circles on your skin.

"There'll be a next time," he says, tone deceptively plain. "And a next one. And another one."

"I'd like that," you say, moving your face closer to his, and then Ray closes the distance and kisses you.

It's easy, after that. There's touching, and groping, and undressing. There's Ray kissing your neck and your fingers digging into his shoulders as he prepares you. There almost is some whining because of how long he spends on that.

"For fuck's sake, Ray, you're not that thick," you say as he pushes deep inside you with a finger, making you shudder with need.

"I'm being cautious, have some patience." You could swear he wants to laugh, but your brain is far too distracted by how Ray still hasn't fucked you for you to even try to judge him.

You think you could cry from relief when he finally does, and then maybe out of gratitude because he's clearly aiming towards meeting the expectations he created.

Mickey Pearson must really love his wife if he's willingly missing out on this.

Afterwards, as you lie on your front and Ray lies on his side next to you, you think you should invest in a bigger bed; one that won't have you feeling his breath against your shoulder as you enjoy the afterglow. You try to ignore it; try to remember that he’s lying close to you because you don’t have a bed meant for three people, that the limits between you are clear.

It's hard to do so when Ray presses his fingertips to the small of your back and quietly says, "You're tense."

"It's nothing," you mutter. You need him to stop touching you. You want to stay like this.

Ray hums, doubtful, and starts dragging his fingers upwards, drawing figures on your skin, and you tell yourself it's alright, that you can close your eyes and relax under his touch. You take deep breaths and entertain yourself trying to discover if there's any meaning behind his movements or if they're simply random lines, and after a while you forget what was so wrong about this.

"I think we're having a next time," Ray says softly, smug and content.

"Yeah, I don't want to get up and cook now," you mumble against the pillow.

You open an eye to look at Ray and find him looking pleased with himself. You close it again and let him enjoy the moment. He earned it.

Eventually, you have to get out of bed, because Smith has started growing uncomfortable with the sweat and the smell of sex, so you drag him to the shower with you and take another chance to study his skin as you wash his back.
There's something slightly off in Smith's appearance after he's done getting dressed, maybe how his hair hasn't been carefully combed back or maybe how relaxed he seems to be, but the ensemble doesn't work the same way as it did at the beginning. He still doesn't belong in your building, but at least he looks at ease as he follows you to the kitchen.

"Aren't you happy I brought those leftovers now?" he says, leaning against the doorframe as you take containers out of the fridge.

"I had my own leftovers, but I appreciate the gesture," you say, showing him said food as you speak. "Are you staying for dinner? With what you brought and what I already had, there's enough for the two of us."

He hesitates. You hope he decides to stay, there's no reason for both of you to eat alone.

"Do you have a table?" he finally says, stepping into the kitchen and starting to search for plates and cutlery.

You have a small, foldable one that he sets up in the living room while you reheat the food.

"Were you really planning on not eating here?" you ask him as you bring over the plates.

"What do you mean?" He sits down.

"You brought over only one portion." You sit down as well and look at him accusingly. "Were you going to leave me to eat alone?"

"We never discussed dinner in our plans for today." He shrugs. "I only wanted to make sure you ate well."

"You know you're bad at having something casual, don't you?" you ask him, slightly disbelieving.

"Luckily for us, you know that I don't mean anything with all of this."

"I can't imagine what you're like when you're emotionally available," you say, shaking your head, and you don't understand what it is about that that makes him give you an amused smile.

You proceed to talk about your boys' match, the place Smith drove to yesterday, and your plans for the week.

You agree to meet again on Friday at Smith's. You'll get there early to help him cook.

When he picks up his coat to leave, you remember that he brought a gun with him.

Sometimes you think you should worry more about how easily you let Smith into your life. You think about it when you see him leaving the room to answer a call or frowning at text messages. You think about it when you find a bruise while unbuttoning his shirt. You think about it when he carefully puts his folded coat on top of his gun to hide it from view.

You tell yourself it's all going to be alright when you're kissing him, when you have him moaning your name, when he throws an arm over you as you lie side by side. You tell yourself there’s no harm for you in this and allow yourself to create a routine with Smith in it: dinner and sex on Fridays, sex and dinner on Sundays.

The rest of your days go on as usual, and you let the days and the weeks pass, and one day you look at the date and realize it’s been two months since you showed up at Smith’s house with a bad
idea and questionable intentions.

“Two months already?” he says as he helps you cook. At some point you managed to talk him into letting you be in charge of dinner on alternating weeks, and you’re proud of yourself that he hasn’t complained even once about it.

“Two months already,” you confirm.

Two months of cooking, of giving him shit over Fletcher, of texting him when you get home after being with him.

You're still not staying over. You keep doing everything in your power to wreck him when you're together. You've never talked about Mickey Pearson, both of you changing the topic whenever he comes up in conversation.

You turn to ask him something irrelevant to keep the conversation going and find him watching you in that way you've grown used to, eyes slightly narrowed and lips parted, like he has an idea about you that he's trying to put into words.

You take a step towards him and give him a questioning look.

"Ray?"

He blinks once and looks at you apologetically.

"We have to talk," he says resignedly. That can't be good, but you can't imagine anything related to you that could make him sound like that.

"Let's talk, then," you say. You check the stove is turned off and that nothing is at any risk of falling and approach him again, leaning against the kitchen table. "What is it?" Curious, but not nervous. The biggest thing that could happen is that he got over Pearson and he's ending things with you.

It's funny, but you think you're going to miss him. You will definitely miss this kitchen.

He almost smiles at your tone.

"People usually react differently when they hear those words," he says.

"Because they are break-up words," you say, shrugging with one shoulder. "You and I aren't in a relationship. I guess you want to stop this?"

Smith presses his lips into a tight line.

“No, this is…” He removes his glasses, closes his eyes and rubs the bridge of his nose.

You tense up.

“Don’t tell me you want to start something serious,” you say coldly, almost unconsciously leaning away from Smith.

He lowers his hand and frowns at you.

“No, don’t worry," he says after a second, putting on his glasses again. "It's not that." He moves away from you and grabs some dirty items from the table, taking them to the sink. "Michael knows you and I have been…” he hesitates, "talking." He turns to look at you again, expression neutral.
"Did you tell him?" Hadn't he said he didn't want Pearson to know?

"He asked."

You try to imagine what reasons Pearson could have had for that. Jealousy? Has he finally decided to stop missing out on everything Smith has to offer?

No, it can't be that. Smith said that Pearson didn't care, and you're inclined to believe him.

"You'll have to be clearer than that, because that doesn't tell me anything," you finally say.

Smith exhales heavily.

"Remember when you dropped that pot the other day?" You nod. "I was on the phone with Michael in that moment. He later asked me who was with me."

You make a face.

"Couldn't you lie to him?"

Smith barely raises an eyebrow before saying, "I try not to lie to Michael."

"That sounds smart." You sigh. "What exactly did you tell him?"

"That it was you here that night," he says simply.

"Nothing else?" You don't believe this. There's something you're missing here.

Smith's lips once again press into a tight line, but this time the slight twitching of the corner of his mouth betrays that he's trying not to smile.

"He didn't ask why you were here and I wasn't going to give him unnecessary details."

It's you who ends up smiling, appreciative and amused. Smith deliberately keeping information from his boss was something unexpected. Then again, Smith doesn't look like someone who wants to go around discussing his sex life.

"Isn't that lying by omission?" you tease.

"I was completely honest," he says seriously, looking you in the eye like he's offended by you daring to imply he wasn't. After a second he relaxes slightly and adds, "Besides, I didn't think you'd appreciate being back on Michael's radar."

Ray kept information from Pearson out of respect for you.

"I'm assuming it didn't really work," you say, deciding not to think about that. "Or you wouldn't be bringing it up now."

Smith twists his mouth.

"He's hosting a dinner party next Saturday and told me to invite you." He licks his lips. "As my date."

You blink and stare. Smith holds your gaze and waits.

"He wants me at some elegant dinner?" you ask flatly.
“Yes.”

“As your date.” Your tone doesn’t change.

There’s nothing in his posture to tell you that he isn’t fine with the conversation. His shoulders are relaxed, his face betrays nothing. His reply comes half a second later than you expected.

“Yes.”

You remember that first dinner with him, when he’d sat at the other end of the table and you’d approached him slowly and carefully.

“Did Fletcher ever get invited to any of those things?” you ask instead of what you truly want to know.

The effect is immediate: Smith gives you an unimpressed look.

“Genuine question,” you hurry to say. “I’m trying to understand this.”

“Fletcher was never invited to anything,” Smith replies, not changing the way he’s looking at you.

“If he’s hosting a dinner, shouldn’t you be working that night?” you ask, frowning. “Making sure nobody tries anything suspicious?” Maybe threatening someone, dragging some poor bastard to a room and talking to him oh so pleasantly while a gun lies in plain sight on the desk.

“He said I’d earned a night off.” He makes a face and turns towards the sink again to start washing what he left in it.

You watch his back and think of Pearson inviting you to dinner two months ago, as Smith’s date. You think of Smith laughing sadly as he drove you back home. You think of Smith telling you Pearson would be smug if he knew what the two of you have been doing.

“Ray?” you ask tentatively as he fights a cutting board.

“Yes?” You decide to believe he sounds tense because he’s paying attention to what he’s doing, not because he’s worried about where the conversation’s going.

“I have a question. You don’t have to answer it.” You’d prefer that to him deciding to lie to you.

He finishes washing the cutting board and leaves it to dry. He dries his hands on the kitchen towel and turns to look at you again.


“Why is your boss inviting me to dinner?”

He makes a dismissive gesture with his hand.

“You don’t have to go. I told him you’d probably be busy.”

You watch him, waiting to see if he’s going to answer your question. He only looks back at you.

“Thank you,” you say when you conclude he’s not saying anything else. “I appreciate it.” You mean it, though. You hope he knows that.

He nods once and returns to what’s in the sink, so you go back to cooking. Between giving
instructions and making sure everything comes out right, you almost forget about Pearson’s invitation.

You certainly forget about it when you and Ray make your way to his room after dinner. You have better things to think about, so later it takes you by surprise when Ray says, “He said he's happy for me.”

His words are half muffled by the mattress and your skin, because he seems to think that the best way to cool down after sex is to become a starfish and throw an arm and leg over you, which always leaves you with his breath against your shoulder and feeling too hot to be comfortable.

“What are you talking about?” you ask, barely moving your head to catch a glimpse of his face.

“Earlier, you asked me why Michael invited you to dinner.” He sighs, and it’s so warm against your skin that it burns you. “He’s inviting you to dinner because he thinks it’s good that I have someone in my life to distract me.”

"Did he say it exactly like that?" you ask, sitting up.

Ray, bastard that he is, doesn't move from where he is and now his arm is thrown over your thighs and his breath is against your hip.

"I told him you might not be able to go to dinner and that we didn't have something serious, and he said that it didn't matter, that he was happy I was spending time with someone." He says it simply, like it's only a fact, something that happened, like what he feels for Pearson isn't something he's still working on. "He thinks that a distraction is good for me."

His eyes are closed and he looks tired. You don't think that's only because of what you recently did to him.

You lick your lips and say, "So this is another step in your boss' plans to help you get over him."

Ray snorts.

"Yes, that's what it is." He moves to lie on his side and look up at you. His arm remains on your thighs. "He seems to mean well."

Wasn't the road to Hell paved with good intentions?

"He needs to stop trying to help you," you say, tapping on his arm. "He's making you miserable."

He smirks and drums his fingers on your skin.

"I'm content with what his previous attempt led to." As if to ensure you know what he means, he slowly drags his hand down your thigh.

"That's only because you were lucky enough that he thought you were interested in me." You bury your hand in his hair and look seriously at him. "Do you want me to beat him up?"

He frowns and studies your face.

"Where did that come from?"

You shrug and lie down again so you can face him, forcing Ray to finally get his arm off you. Your hand slides to his shoulder.
"I appreciate what his meddling led to, but you don't want him having anything to do with your private life." You grin and lightly say, "I'm trying to defend your honor."

Ray sighs and gives you an amused look that borders on fond.

"You can't fight him. You'd force me to do something about it."

You remember the gun you keep pretending not to notice and let your hand drop to the bed.

"Don't I get some special treatment?"

The corner of his mouth rises in a private smile.

"You do, but I get more out of being on good terms with Michael than with you."

You raise an eyebrow.

"I had you screaming my name fifteen minutes ago," you point out. You like it when he says it, you like the way his voice curls around it, you like the difference between him using your name and calling you 'Coach', and you need to stop thinking about that, because Ray saying your name is one of your favorite things and it sends your mind straight to the gutter.

"He pays my salary. Sex with you is free."

"I give you food at least once a week," you say, mock-indignant, and your reward is how Ray tries not to laugh.

"My salary can buy food."

"You wound me, Ray."

"You'll live."

Unlike others. You think of Ray holding his gun, looking from the corpses on the ground and back to you, and wonder how things would have gone if you'd decided to leave.

"So," you say sharply, forcing yourself out of your thoughts. "Dinner next Saturday at Pearson's."

"A dinner party you don't have to attend, yes," Ray points out.

"Are those fun enough to go alone to?" you ask, disbelieving.

His silence tells you everything.

"I'm going with you," you say impulsively, already wondering if this dinner will affect next week’s Friday or Sunday plans.

"You don't have to," he insists.

You press your fingertips to his chest and look at him in the eye before saying, "If you don't want me there, you can say it, Ray. I won't get offended."

He shakes his head and raises himself on his elbows to look down at you. You move your hand to his arm and start distractedly caressing him, dragging the backs of your fingers up and down his skin.
“Sleeping together is one thing. Going to a dinner party with me?” He looks away from you for a moment. “You’ll be surrounded by all those people you didn’t want to deal with.”

“Are you worried about me, Ray?” you ask teasingly.

He doesn’t look amused.

Oh.

You school your expression and pull him towards you to kiss him, tugging at his lower lip with your teeth as you move away.

“Don’t worry,” you say as he puts a hand to your chest and pushes you until you’re lying on your back. He sits up and looks down at you as you add, “As long as nobody asks me for any favors, we’ll be fine.”

“You’re taking this better than I expected,” he says, his hand trailing up and down your chest.

“What were you expecting?”

"After the face you made when you thought I wanted us to have a proper relationship? I was sure this would have you running away as soon as I turned my back on you."

"First of all, you turning your back on me means I get to see your best side." He shakes his head in disbelief. "I wouldn't miss that by running away."

"It's nice to know you are so interested in me as a person." His attempt at deadpanning is ruined by the smile in his eyes.

"I like the way you talk too, don't worry," you say, your hand once again caressing his arm. "But, getting back on track? I'm not the running away type."

"Never?"

"You don't have to look so incredulous." Or sound so incredulous either.

"You did look like you were going to run away earlier," he points out.

"You took me by surprise," you say dismissively. "I was clear when we started that this wasn't a relationship."

"Your loss, really," he says, his hand settling on your hip. "I'm a catch."

You stare at him, trying to figure out where that came from, if he's serious or joking, if there's any sort of intention behind the comment.

"Ray, you work for a drug lord and you're emotionally unavailable," you finally say, and you only realize how tense you were when his smirk tells you that he hadn't meant anything with his words.

"I also cook and sometimes make you come without touching your cock." His thumb draws a circle on your thigh. “You’d really miss on that just to avoid a relationship?”

You raise an eyebrow and give him a curiously amused look.

“Why are we talking about this? Neither of us wants to date the other.”
“True, but I’m offended that you seem to think that dating me would be so bad.” He says it in such a way that you’d think he doesn’t care, but you haven’t spent two months paying attention to Ray for nothing.

You almost laugh when you realize what’s happening.

“Did I hurt your feelings? Is this about your ego?”

“All I’m saying is that I’m not the worst thing that could happen to you,” he says, still sounding like he doesn’t care.

“So it’s about your ego,” you say, still trying not to laugh.

“You’re the worst.” He removes his hand from your hip, but you catch it and pull him towards you, let him fall gracelessly on top of you and give you an unimpressed look.

He recovers quickly and puts his hands at either side of your head, moving to straddle you, caging you beneath him. For a moment, you think he wants to eat you up.

Instead, Ray cups your face with one hand and leans down to kiss you, his mouth hot against yours and somehow a better reminder of what the two of you do together than the fact that right now you're naked in his bed.

“Is that your attempt to convince me I should fall in love with you?” you say against his mouth, amused and teasing.

“That would be cruel. I’m still not relationship material,” Ray says, raising himself on his hands to watch your face. “And clearly, neither are you.” He narrows his eyes slightly. “Why are you so opposed to romance?”

You swallow, suddenly aware of the position you’re in.

“Is that relevant?” you ask disinterestedly. You’ve never been prey. This is just a power display. Smith won’t get to-

Ray sits up and moves to once again lie down on his front next to you, his head resting on his crossed arms.

“I’m curious.” He looks pensive for a second. “You wanted to sleep with me, but you didn’t do anything about it until you knew I wouldn’t be at risk of feeling something for you.”

“It wasn’t like that,” you say quickly. You don’t like how his words make you sound. Is this how Ray sees you? As cold and uncaring?

Ray hums, doubtful, and says, “Would you have suggested our arrangement if you’d thought there was a chance of me falling for you?”

You run his words through your mind. Ray has this habit of saying things in a way that forces you to read between the lines to find what's behind his words, and you need to make sure you get the important part of that question. He only looks at you as you think, and if he notices the moment you understand what he's truly asking, it doesn't show.

You have to sit up again. You need him to see you face as you say, “I’m not using you, Ray.”

He looks taken aback for a second.
“I didn’t say you were,” he says, lying on his side to look directly into your eyes more easily.

“You were thinking it.”

He swallows and keeps his eyes on you.

“No answer to that?” you ask when you realize he’s not going to speak, and try to tell yourself you didn’t sound hurt.

“I try not to lie to you either.” He sounds the same way you did. “You picked someone who you knew was in love with someone else and you’re adamant on how you don’t want a relationship. You can’t blame me for thinking it.”

He’s right and you hate it.

You close your eyes and exhale heavily.

“What I told you that night was true. I was attracted to you, I saw you were attracted to me too, and I thought we could have fun together. It wasn’t about you being in love with someone else, Ray.” You open your eyes because he’s touching your forehead. He’s studying you, brow slightly furrowed, lips pressed tightly. “And the reason I don’t want a relationship with you is that I’ve tried romance and it went wrong. It’s not you.” You smirk and add, “You really are a catch.”

His expression softens. His fingers trail down to your cheek.

“Are you telling me you’re afraid of falling in love?” His smile is sadly amused.

“I’m not afraid.” You are cautious. It’s different.

“I’m honest with you. I’d appreciate it if you extended the same courtesy to me.”

He can't imagine how much more honest you have been with him than with anybody else in years. You fired a gun again for him. You let him into your flat. You let him throw an arm over you after sex and burn you with his touch and breath. You're comfortable around him, even though you know you shouldn't lower your guard.

You close your eyes again and focus on Ray’s fingertips on your skin, moving from your cheek to your eye to your nose and from there to the other side of your face.

“Relationships are complicated and they always end messily,” you say quietly.

“They don’t always end,” he says just as quietly, matter-of-factly. He doesn’t stop mapping your face.

“Aren’t you a romantic?” you tease.

“Your frame of reference are some bad experiences and, what, the stories your boys tell you? They’re still young.”

You open your eyes to find Ray’s still studying you. You think he looks wistful.

“What are you thinking?” you ask him

“I’m in love with someone that will never be with me, and you’re so afraid of romance that the mere idea of it being a possibility makes you want to end one of the best things you’ve had in your life.” He smiles, almost sad, almost amused. “We are rather pathetic, aren’t we?”
“At least we’re confident.” You’re unable to keep yourself from smiling. “You think you’re one of the best things I’ve ever had?”

“We’ve already established that I’m a catch.”

You snort and he laughs. His fingertips are still caressing your face.

“We should work on not being pathetic,” you say, not really thinking about what you’re saying, because you’ve developed a bad habit of not filtering your words around Ray.

“That sounds good.” He cups your jaw. “I’ll get over Michael and you’ll find someone to date.”

You make a face. “I’m not a fan of the second part.”

“There’s no hurry. You can start after our arrangement ends.”

“That works for me.”

He traces your lips and you think about parting them and taking one of his fingers into your mouth, to carefully lick it and suck on it, holding his hand and pressing kisses to his knuckles and palm, scratching the base of his thumb with your teeth and leaving a hickey on the inside of his wrist.

Ray drops his hand before you can decide what to do about that mental image, and you know that’s for the best. You have to remember who he is and where you are right now. He’s not a random person, he’s Mickey Pearson’s right-hand man; if you don’t tread carefully you might never get to leave.

“That was odd for us, wasn’t it?” you say, looking at him uncomfortably.

“The emotional honesty?” He doesn’t seem affected. Either he trusts you or he doesn’t really care about you knowing what he feels.

You nod.

“Do you regret it?” he asks, sounding mildly curious.

“No.” Not yet, at least, even though you should.

And there it is, his way of looking at you: eyes slightly narrowed, lips parted. You remember the stories, how you shouldn’t let anybody know your true name, or you’d be theirs forever. Ray knows your name and has more clues about your past than anybody else you currently know, yet he doesn't seem willing to settle for that and studies you like he doesn't want to miss a single comma in the book of your life. You don't know if you should be flattered or afraid.

You do know it's time to go home.

Sunday happens as usual: sex, dinner, goodbye and no expectations of hearing from Smith until Thursday, which is the day he texts to let you know whether or not you'll be meeting the next evening and what time you should get to his place depending on what the two of you will be making (ravioli took forever, ceviche didn't, everything else falls in between), except for the time he also texted you on a Friday to say something had come up and he'd be unable to meet you that day (you didn't ask him what he had to do).

You don't know what to think when he texts you the next day, asking you if you're free in the afternoon.
You find him parked in front of your building again, leaning against his car, gaze lost. He’s wearing formal clothes today, grey trousers and a coat you remember from that night he told you the Pearsons wanted to have dinner with you (you know that there’s a gun hidden under that coat, that there might be a new bruise under his shirt, and that there are things you’re better off pretending not to be aware of), and when you get close to him you see a white shirt, a dark grey tie and a matching vest.

Smith smiles when he sees you, content and relaxed.

“No smoking today?” you say, looking at the ground to see if you find anything that proves otherwise.

“You complained last time and you’ll be complaining soon. I thought I could make things slightly easier for you by not smoking today.” The way he says it, clearly amused by whatever he’s about to do, makes you narrow your eyes and stand in front of him, scrutinizing.

“You were vague in your texts, so I assume this isn’t our usual sort of meeting,” you say slowly, guarded.

“It isn’t.” He says it almost enthusiastically, pushing himself away from the car, and you wonder what could possibly make this man so happy. “We’re going shopping.”

You stare.

“No.”

“You need a suit for Saturday.” You’re certain that the bastard would grin if he could.

“I’m not paying for a new suit I’ll only wear once.” He has a point, but you’re not giving up without a fight. You need a moment to make your peace with having to spend money on this.

“I know,” Smith says, and his expression becomes serious. “That’s why I’ll be buying it.”

You blink.

“I don’t need charity,” you say, tone full of contained anger.

Smith shakes his head, raises a hand in a placating gesture that has the opposite effect.

“That’s not what it is,” he says, looking you in the eye. “At this point, you must know that that’s not how I do things.”

You don’t. Not really. There’s what you want to believe about Ray based on how he treats you, and there’s what you suspect about Smith because of his job, and nothing gives you any certainties about how he handles anything outside of the parentheses created by your time together.

You breathe in deeply. You’re the one that said men must use their heads. Right now, your pride can take a step back and wait for clarification.

“What is it, then?” you say, not looking away from him.

Smith sounds almost solemn as he says, “You’re only going to need that suit because you’re going to that dinner as a favor to me. I feel it’s my responsibility to buy it for you.”

That doesn't make you feel any less pissed.
“I agreed to go to that dinner,” you remind him coldly. "I can buy my own suit.”

Smith sets his jaw and watches you, and the reluctance you read on that makes your anger subside enough for you to think again about what he said.

"That explanation was bullshit, wasn't it?" You smirk, accusing and confident. "You have another reason."

“I’ve already told you that I try not to lie to you," Smith says, still serious, except you think there's some of that earlier enthusiasm glinting in his eyes.

He didn't answer your question. He's good at using exact words and partial truths.

“You’re keeping something to yourself.”

He huffs, but his shoulders relax. The hint of enthusiasm is gone, replaced by relief.

“I want to do something nice for you,” he says simply. "I appreciate you going to that dinner with me, so buying the suit is the least I can do.”

It’s your turn to look at him with slightly narrowed eyes and try to figure him out. He could have argued with you a minute ago instead of only watching you expectantly. It’s like he wanted you to notice that he wasn’t being completely honest, that he was hoping you’d realize there were still some words under his tongue.

“Couldn’t you have said that outright?” you ask him, trying to understand.

He shrugs with one shoulder. “I didn’t know how you were going to take it.”

“You doing something nice for me?” you say flatly.

“Yes.” He licks his lips. “Niceness… hasn’t really been a feature of this arrangement.”

The only time you didn’t meet at your place or his, he went down on you in the toilet, and every single meeting has been almost a competition to see who can have the other moaning sooner.

He’s got a point.

“And what, you thought I’d panic?”

He raises an eyebrow and gives you a look that tells you that, yes, that’s exactly what he thought.

“Fair enough,” you say, with a slight tilt of your head. Without thinking, you reach for his tie’s knot and tap at it with a finger. “But we’ve already established that this isn’t a relationship and that it’ll end someday. I don’t have any reason to panic.”

Smith snorts.

“So what you’re saying is that you’d be running away if you had feelings for me?”

You make a face. “It sounded like that, didn’t it?”

He nods. He’s trying not to laugh and your fingers are still on his tie. You let them slide upwards to brush his neck and watch his Adam’s apple move as he swallows.

You bring back your hand to your jacket’s pocket.
“I’ve already told you that I’m not the running away type,” you say matter-of-factly.

Amused, Smith says, “I want you to know that I’m remembering that and I’ll bring it up when you inevitably run away from something.”

The joke is that you’ve already escaped from something, but you’re not letting him know that. Not that it matters, really; he might have done a full background check on you when you were running around doing errands for Pearson and now he’s simply playing along with the joke out of consideration for your privacy.

“You’ll die waiting,” you say. If anybody talked to you like that, you’d call them cocky. Since you’re the one doing it, you call yourself self-assured.

Smith hums, unconvincing, and then lightly asks, “Can I buy you a suit, then?”

It’s a good thing you aren’t touching him anymore, because his tone and the way he looks at you, like he knows he won the argument and is looking forward to what’s coming, make you want to pull him towards you and kiss the smugness out of his smile.

“Yes, Ray, you can buy me a suit,” you say, content in the knowledge that things are fine between the two of you. “Just don’t tell me what it costs.”

“I can do that.” He signals for you to get into the car and soon you’re on your way.

You turn in your seat to study him.

“You know, when you texted me earlier I thought you’d been kidnapped or something like that,” you admit, fully remembering the puzzlement at seeing his name on the screen.

Smith frowns slightly and briefly looks away from the road to let you see his bemusement, so you elaborate. “Because it’s Monday. I thought it was odd you were talking to me on a Monday.”

“Oh.” He nods in understanding. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t contact you if something happened to me.” The way he says it makes you turn towards the road again: like it’s a real possibility, like he’s thought about it, like he thinks you wouldn’t care if he was in danger. “You wouldn’t be able to do anything about it,” he adds, like an afterthought.

“Really? Considering I’m unrelated to your job, I think a kidnapper is more likely to let you contact me than Pearson if they wanted it to look like you’re fine,” you say lightly. You don’t like this conversation. You don’t like that it makes you feel the same way you felt when you saw those armed men at Ray’s two months ago: angry, anxious, and resigned.

He purses his lips. “I didn’t think of that. Would you be okay getting dragged into something like that sort?”

“Of course; it should earn me some more goodwill from your boss.” You aren’t sure whether or not you’re joking.

Smith presses his lips tightly, suppressing a smile. “You have so much goodwill from him that he invited you over for dinner, remember?”

You shake your head. “I was hoping for the sort of goodwill that lets me retire to some island in the Caribbean.”

“That sounds good.” His expression softens. “I’m sure you might get that if you tell him you’re
“I can do that.” You can also imagine it. “We’ll work on being less pathetic under the sun, while having drinks with little umbrellas in them.” It’s a very nice mental picture.

Smith’s expression slowly becomes tired. “If I ever get kidnapped…” he starts quietly, ruining the tenuous calm you’d finally achieved. “I think I’ll say something about getting dinner at McDonald’s, or coffee at Starbucks.”

Despite yourself, you laugh at the idea. It might simply be that your messy emotions are trying to find an outlet.

Ray smiles when you laugh and changes the subject, keeping the conversation away from anything serious during the rest of the drive.

You feel underdressed when you walk into the store, but it’s hard to think about that for more than an instant when Smith walks around like he owns the place and starts looking at different suits, all of them black and all of them identical to each other. You have no idea what he’s looking for.

“Stop making that face,” he reprimands you when he puts the fifth suit back in its place.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” you lie.

He gives you an unimpressed look.

“There are differences in materials, texture, cut…” He moves towards a different part of the store. “And price,” he finishes in a lower voice.

You smirk.

“What’s that about price I hear, Ray?” you say, unable to stop yourself from teasing him a bit.

“Not what you think,” he says distractedly, grabbing a new suit. “It has to be something nice that you also won’t hate me for getting for you.” He holds up the suit and alternates between looking at it and you. “It’s a gift, not misguided charity.”

“Is that why you’re not trying to have something tailor-made for me?” you say lightly.

“No, that’s because we don’t have enough time to get you a tailor-made suit,” he replies without missing a beat, sounding slightly regretful.

You narrow your eyes at him, unsure of how much of a joke that was. Instead of clarifying, he hands you the suit and guides you towards a changing room.

You take your time putting on the suit, careful with the material. The first thing you notice is that whatever it was that Smith meant when he talked about texture, he was right, because you like how the fabric feels against your skin as you pull up the trousers. The second thing you notice is that it’s comfortable, somehow, and that it fits you almost perfectly. You have to wonder how long Smith spent trying to figure out your measurements.

Smith didn’t hand you a shirt, so you wear the jacket over your t-shirt and the third thing you notice is how the garments clash. You smile at that and step out of the changing room to show Smith how the suit looks on you, certain that he won’t like the ensemble, but instead he looks you up and down critically, then certainly appreciative. You remember him seeing you in your cheap suit two months ago, how you’d thought in that moment that the fastest way to this man’s bed was probably
to dress up somewhat well.

“Like what you see?” you ask him, like you did back then, your smile an invitation.

“You need a proper shirt and shoes, but yes,” he says, walking towards you and rubbing one of the jacket’s lapels between thumb and forefinger, “I do.”

“I’m still not wearing a tie for this,” you warn him.

“What about a bow tie?” he asks distractedly, his focus apparently centered on studying you.

“A bow tie?”

He nods.

“I can wear a bow tie,” you say after considering it for a moment.

“I have one you can borrow.” His fingers trail from the jacket to your chest and up your neck to your chin. He narrows his eyes, licks his lips and tentatively asks, “What will happen if I kindly suggest you shave for Saturday?”

You raise an eyebrow. “Do you have something against my beard, Ray?”

He presses his lips tightly and gives you a meaningful look, bringing his hand back to his side.

“I’m not taking criticism on facial hair from you,” you say. “Your beard’s too long.”

“Fine. I’ll shave if you shave,” he says nonchalantly.

You blink and furrow your brow. “Just like that?” That was certainly unexpected.

Smith takes a step back from you and scratches the side of his face as he says, “I only started growing a beard because people thought I looked too young.” He drops his hand. “I’m not attached to it, and at this point I’m probably old enough to get along fine if I shave.”

You stare, trying to imagine him without the beard, and fail at it. You decide that’s something to think about later and return to the changing room to get back into your own clothes.

“This one, then?” you ask Smith as you return to his side.

“If you’re fine with it, yes. Unless you want to go around looking for something else.” You’re sure that he’d love to spend an afternoon seeing you try on different types of formal clothes, but you aren’t invested enough in this arrangement to willingly wear dress trousers for longer than strictly necessary.

“I’d hate that,” you say simply.

Smith nods. “I thought you would.”

You leave to wait for him by the car when he goes to pay. When he joins you, handing you the suit and a white shirt, you once again try to picture him without the beard and fail.

Another thought comes to your mind.

“How old are you?” you ask him as he starts the car.
Smith gives you a confused look. “You don’t know?”

"We never talked about it." You make a vague gesture. "You're old enough for your job; that makes you old enough for me to sleep with you without me feeling like a creep.”

He concedes with a small tilt of his head. “I’m thirty-nine. What about you?”

“Forty-three.”

He frowns and turns to look at you for as long as he can before he has to pay attention to what he's doing again. “Really?”

You raise an eyebrow. “Why do you sound surprised?”

Smith makes a face and says, “I thought you were fifty.”

“Fifty," you say flatly.

“Fifty," he repeats, not even trying to sound ashamed.

You stare.

“The beard doesn’t help you," he finally says.

"Unbelievable," you say, shaking your head. "Fifty."

"A very spry fifty year old," there's laughter in his voice, but it won't save him from your glare.

“Next time we’re alone, I’m making sure you know I’m not fifty," you mutter, leaning back in your seat.

“I’m looking forward to that.” The bastard smiles at that, open and relaxed, and it occurs to you that it's been a fairly common sight since the arrangement started. Back when you met, you didn't imagine that Ray could smile so much.

He drops you off at your place and waits until you've gone inside to drive away, taking the suit with him. He said you could change at his house on Saturday.

The Friday meeting is cancelled out of mutual accord, since you’ll be seeing each other the next day, and on Saturday morning you look at yourself in the mirror, curse, and proceed to shave.

You can’t remember the last time you saw your face like this. The man in the mirror looks less tired and definitely younger, like someone that hasn’t had any bones broken nor lessons about the world beaten into his head. The man in the mirror wouldn’t have propositioned Smith, and just for that you decide he’s more of a poor bastard than you.

Smith does a double take when he opens the door for you, and you wish you could take a picture of his face.

“Surprised?” you say, self-assured as you smile at him. “Don’t get used to it, I’m never doing it again.” You take off your shoes and head for Smith’s room to find your suit.

“I never thought you’d do it,” Smith says, sounding a bit choked.

“Two months and I can still surprise you, darling.” You laugh. “Excellent, that bodes well for us.”
You think Smith will tell you to forget the dinner and stay in when you get changed into the suit, the white shirt and black bow tie making it look the way it was meant to and leading to Smith biting his lower lip and breathing in deeply before telling you that you look good.

“You really like this, don’t you?” you ask him, flirty and inviting, moving towards him.

“I have clear tastes and you’re catering to me right now,” he says, his hands settling on your hips.

“I can tell.” You put your hands on his shoulders. “How old do I look now?”

He lets out a quick, surprised laugh. “You look your age.”

“I’ve been thinking…” You smirk. “Fletcher must be close to sixty, right? And you thought I looked fifty.” Ray’s eyes narrow slightly, like he can already tell where you’re going. “Does this mean you have a thing for older men? Is that why you agreed to my proposal?”

He gives you an unimpressed look and drops his hands. You bring one of yours to his face to cup his cheek and mock-earnestly say, “Are you going to end things between us now that you know I’m not even five years older than you?”

“You’re impossible,” he mutters, but doesn’t try to move away from you.

“It’s a valid question, Ray.” You pause to think for a moment. “How old is Pearson?”

He avoids your gaze as he quietly says, “Forty-nine.”

You do your best not to laugh at that. You don’t succeed.

“Wow, Ray. You do like them older.”

“Michael looks younger than you,” he points out, meeting your eyes so you can know how unamused he is.

“First, you’re biased. Second, that doesn’t matter because he is older anyway.” You move the hand you have on his shoulder to the back of his neck and lightly scratch his hair. “You’re not helping your case, Ray.”

“I’m sure you’ll use anything I say against me.”

“I will, yes.” You nod solemnly, slowly starting to smile smugly. “Don’t look at me like that, I didn’t even try to ask you if this was about daddy issues.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “In a way, you just did.”

“Not directly. That’s what matters.”

He raises an eyebrow and puts his hands on your hips again. His expression becomes serious and he says, “You know you didn’t have to shave, right? It was only a suggestion.”

“It wasn’t even that,” you say, moving away from him. “You hinted at the possibility of suggesting it.” He watches you cautiously. “So yes, Ray. I know I didn’t have to shave. I decided to do it, I did it, and I’m never doing it again unless I’m getting married.”

He relaxes at that. This is another thing you couldn’t have imagined when you met Ray, how easily he’d allow himself to relax around you, to banter and joke and generally exist around you without pressure. It’s like the moment he decided to sleep with you he also decided to lower any defenses
he could afford to be without.

The drive to Pearson’s is calm, you spend it complaining about everything that’s on the radio. Then you get to your destination and it’s like a switch was flipped, changing your companion for the man that brought you here a bit over two months: serious, observant, wary and, now that you’re aware of it, a bit sad.

What’s also the same as it was back then is how happy to see you Pearson seems to be. Now that you know what he’d wanted the first time, you realize that he probably had been genuinely glad to meet you and that his wife had definitely been evaluating you.

Pearson shakes your hand, welcomes you back to his house and thanks you for your presence. Then Rosalind Pearson is almost smiling at you as she greets you, a glint in her eye and something in her tone telling you she knows more than you’d like about what you and Smith have been up to. Smith watches the exchange in silence, eyes hard and shoulders tense, something like hurt slipping into his eyes when he sets them on Pearson.

The house is exactly as you remember it, except that now it’s full of people in fancy clothes that probably cost more than what you make in a month. Smith seems to know many of them, but he doesn’t look comfortable when they greet him, his smile stiff and his facial expressions reduced to raising an eyebrow and setting his jaw. Nobody seems to think that’s odd, and you have to remember that this is the Smith you met at the pub, this is the Smith people usually deal with, one that doesn’t laugh and who is only here because his boss requested it.

Speaking of Pearson, you’d like to fight him if you got the chance. First because you still think it was cruel of him to try to set up Smith with you, second because he doesn’t seem to understand what’s Smith’s relationship with you, and third because whenever Smith looks at him he grows more serious, more like the man that set a gun on your desk and less like the one that absentmindedly draws patterns on your skin in the afterglow, less like the one that thinks you don’t notice when he wipes his fingers on the sheets after removing the glove he used to prepare you, less like the one that laughs and teases you as the two of you cook.

“How long until dinner?” you ask him when you catch him following Pearson with his eyes for the third time.

“At least twenty minutes,” he says, distracted.

You step into his line of sight, startling him. “Let’s get some air,” you say, your tone making it clear you won’t take no for an answer.

Time for the scrutinizing look: parted lips, narrowed eyes. You hold his gaze and wait, let him find whatever he’s looking for in your face.

“Follow me,” he says, leading you outside.

It’s not a surprise to see that Pearson has a nice garden. If you were one for plants, you think you’d like to take a look around.

“Was it that bad?” Smith asks, sounding almost concerned and a bit more like the man you’re used to dealing with. “We can leave if you want.”

You make a dismissive gesture with a hand. “I’m perfectly fine, Ray. You, meanwhile?” You shake your head. “You keep looking at Pearson. If I was truly here as your date, I’d be offended.”

He makes a face.
“Am I that obvious?”

“No, I’m just paying attention to you.” You hesitate before adding, “You could have simply not told me about this invitation, or asked me not to come, but here I am. I have to assume you wanted me here for some reason, and I’m figuring out what it is.”

He looks away from you and resignedly says, “I needed a distraction.” He sighs. “Usually I’m working during these dinners. I have to be alert, make sure Michael and Rosalind are safe, keep an eye on everyone.” He looks back at you. “I’m good at my job. I don’t let my emotions get in the way.” He glances at the building. “I’m not working tonight and I don’t know what to do with myself.”

That makes sense. Out of respect, you won’t ask him if it’s the full truth.

“So you wanted me here to keep your mind off Pearson.” He nods. “I can do that.”

“I’m sorry for being such a lousy date.” You think he means it.

You stand in front of him and decide to gamble.

“I have an idea.” Slowly, you bring a hand to his face and touch his forehead with your fingertips. When he doesn’t move away, you brush his skin, trailing down to his cheek and settling there as you say, “We’re going to pretend this is really a date. You’re going to pay attention to me, we’ll get drinks and talk to people, and we’re going to make up stories about how we met that will have everyone laughing. Deal?” You bring your hand to your side again.

“Deal,” Ray says, his expression softer. The line of his shoulders isn’t tense anymore.

“Shall we return?” you ask, mock-solemn.

“We shall,” Ray says in a matching tone, resting a hand on the small of your back to guide you towards the house.

You think your idea was a success. Ray smiles and laughs, speaks of you warmly to everyone you meet, and his eyes return to you every time they start wandering in Pearson’s direction. You even have fun, despite how many of these people make you want to set things on fire.

Ray’s still smiling on the drive back to his house.

“You look content,” you tell him as you follow him to his room to get your clothes.

“I had fun,” he says simply, dropping his bow tie on the nightstand. “You’re a very good distraction.”

“You’re not the only one here that’s a catch, Ray,” you tease, but the effect is ruined when you yawn.

Smith looks at you somewhat anxiously and slowly says, “If you don’t want to drive in the dark…” He looks at the window and then back at you.

You look from him to his bed and think of how long it’ll take you to get home. You shouldn’t stay, you’ve always known it’s a bad idea. You have a clear list of reasons why you shouldn’t stay, why you shouldn’t let Smith occupy even a single additional minute of your life, why you’ll be lost the moment you spend the night.
You're tired and the bed is right there.

“Do you have anything I can borrow for bed?”

Smith looks relieved and goes to get you some pyjamas and a packaged toothbrush, and then the two of you are getting ready to sleep like it’s a perfectly normal situation for the two of you.

You don’t even hesitate to get into bed with him instead of asking him about a spare room or the couch.

“It feels odd to sleep with you in the literal sense,” you admit as he turns off the light. “Like we forgot a whole act in a play.”

He lets out a short sound of amusement.

“We can do something about that in the morning. I’m tired now.”

He shifts and soon he’s throwing his arm over you, because apparently he’s committed to his starfish performance.

“Yeah, me too,” you say into the pillow. Tired enough that you don’t even think of shaking off Ray’s arm, so you fall asleep with its weight on your back.

Waking up happens slowly, your awareness returning to you like you have all the time in the world to enjoy where you’re in, and you’re happy to let it be like that: Ray’s bed is soft and comfortable, the sun slips through the curtains and tells you the day has started, and Ray himself is warm next to you. There’s nothing else you need right now.

Ray’s lying on his side, facing you, his arm occupying the space between the two of you, his hair messy and no tension in the lines of his face, and you’re free to study the angle of his nose, the curve of his ear and the line of his neck, to smile to yourself because you’ve had plenty of chances to do so and you might yet get to have many more. You’d reach out to touch him if you didn’t think he might forget you slept there and try to fight you (it almost happened once, some weeks ago: he’d been dozing off and jumped when you’d tried to wake him up), and right now he needs the rest. Last night couldn’t have been easy for him.

You shift in the bed and look at the ceiling, enjoying the peace, your only awareness of the passing of time coming from the ticking of Ray’s wristwatch on his nightstand, its sound deafening in the morning’s silence.

“Good morning,” he mumbles after a while, barely comprehensible against his pillow. You turn your head to find he still has his eyes closed and that he’s doing a funny thing with his mouth, like he’s trying to remember how it’s supposed to work.

“Good morning, Ray,” you say quietly.

He blinks and buries his face in the pillow. “Give me a moment and we can make breakfast,” he says.

“Take your time. It’s a nice morning.” You look at the ceiling again and entertain yourself thinking about the upcoming week until Ray manages to drag himself out of bed. “Are you always this graceful when you get up?” you ask him as he puts on his glasses.

“Only when I don’t sleep enough,” he says matter-of-factly, already sounding like the Ray you’re
“Do you ever get to sleep enough?”

He sighs and doesn’t answer. That’s certainly concerning, but his sleeping habits are none of your business, so you push them out of your mind.

You sit up and put on your glasses, then get out of bed and wait for him to be done showering and dressing so you can do the same. You can’t help but laugh when you see that he even left you a package of new underwear in the bathroom. Of course Raymond Smith has spares of everything in case someone stays over. Maybe you should bring some of your clothes so he won’t have to suffer seeing you wearing the same ones from the previous day the next time you spend the night.

You make your way to the kitchen and find him boiling water and measuring ingredients for what you think are pancakes.

“I never took you for someone that would like a sweet breakfast,” you say, eyeing the sugar and flour.

“It’s Sunday,” he says, like that explains anything. Maybe it does, maybe the fact that the week is over and it’s a free day means he can do whatever he wants, forget about healthy eating and enjoy something sweet. He is, after all, wearing a polo shirt and casual trousers (you have to wonder if he owns some jeans).

“Do you put fruit on them?” you ask him, already looking for a knife for it.

He has strawberries and blueberries because he’s that sort of person, and you make yourself a cup of coffee and for him a cup of tea when the water boils.

He brings over the day’s newspaper and hands you part of it, and you eat breakfast in companionable silence, only breaking it to read headlines to each other that you think the other might want to get proper look at later. It’s easy, like talking to him over dinner or after sex.

You finish eating, clear up the table and put the kitchen in order as he washes the dishes. At some point he got himself some proper gloves for this.

“I’ve been wondering,” you ask him as you watch him, “why not use a dishwasher?”

“Can’t you guess?” he asks, turning to give you a small conspiratorial smile.

“You like to ensure they’re properly clean?” You could have sounded teasing, but you don’t see any point here. It’s just a detail about Ray and how he organizes his life.

“Got it in one,” he says, and keeps working.

“It’s not the full truth, is it?” you ask him after a minute, as he sets the plates to dry and starts on the cutlery, his expression oddly calm as he does so. He hums questioningly, so you explain, “It’s not just about cleanliness.” The conspiratorial smile returns. “You find it relaxing, don’t you?”

“It’s something that has to be done, and it’s easy and mechanical,” he says, his eyes on his task. “You only need to be careful enough not to cut yourself with a knife or let something slip from your hands.”

That’s a yes, then.
You nod in understanding and leave him to it, choosing to go to brush your teeth. He doesn’t need you hovering.

Ray meets you in his room later, and both of you look at the unmade bed and at each other questioningly.

“We said something last night about sex in the morning, didn’t we?” Ray asks, pulling back the sheets.

“You don’t have to sound so excited,” you deadpan. “I can simply go home, you know?”

“No, no, I want to. I have to change the sheets anyway,” he says, shaking his head. “You promised to make sure I remembered you’re not fifty, and I have been looking forward to that.” He looks you in the eye as he says that as if to dispel any doubts you might have. “I simply…” He makes a dismissive gesture towards the bed. “I don’t like to fuck in an unmade bed, but making it only to mess it up a few minutes later is a waste of effort.”

You hold back a smile at that because you aren’t sure he’ll know that you aren’t mocking him and reach for his wrist, pulling him towards you.

“If that’s what this is about, don’t worry,” you say in a low voice. His hands find your shoulders. “I don’t need the bed for that,” you whisper into his ear.

You move back enough to kiss him and let out a startled sound when his mouth finds yours first, then a pleased one when you realize he’s smiling. You reach towards the bed without looking and take hold of one of the sheets, unsuccessfully trying to pull it out of the bed without breaking the kiss.

“What are you doing?” Ray asks, bemused.

“I’m going to fuck you against that desk,” you say, tilting your head towards said piece of furniture. “And I’m trying to grab something to cover it with so you don’t have to clean it up later.”

He stares at you for one second before kissing you again, licking into your mouth and pressing himself against you, and you laugh in surprise at his enthusiasm, kissing him back just as passionately.

You have to disentangle yourselves to grab the sheet, which feels almost absurd in its practicality, and then you’re throwing it over the desk and kissing Ray again, pushing him against the desk.

“Fuck,” he mutters when you start unbuttoning his trousers.

“That’s the idea, yes,” you laugh against his neck, and it’s your turn to curse when he puts his hand over your crotch and slides it enough to make the friction drive you crazy. You wonder if he’d be such a tease with Pearson or if he’d go straight to business, and the old thought returns, that maybe he likes to imagine that the man that sleeps with him twice a week isn’t you.

Despite your attempts to distract yourself, you lose the rhythm of your movements, making Ray give you a curious look and call your name.

“What got into your head?” he asks, toying with the button of your trousers.

“Thoughts about what we’re doing,” you say, already pushing them away as you move to kiss Ray’s neck. “About how you’re free to imagine that I’m Pearson if that’s what you want to do.”
Ray stills against you and you freeze as well. His hands reach your shoulders and slowly push you away.

“Is that what you think I do?” he asks, his eyes fixed on yours and his voice cold.

You take a step back to let him get away from the desk, but he remains where he is, leaning against it. He holds onto the desk with both hands and waits for your answer.

There’s no getting out of this, the only solution was to never say anything at all, but you made the mistake of lowering your guard and once again being honest with Ray.

It’s not like this hasn’t been nagging at you from the start.

“You don’t?” you say seriously.

His hold on the desk tightens. “Who do you take me for?”

“Someone that’s in love with a man they can’t have.”

Ray’s eyes harden.

“A man that will never have me,” he grits out. “Do you know why that is?”

Because he seems to be straight. Because he’s in love with his wife. Because- No. He said that Pearson will never have him, not want him. They’re different things.

“No, Ray,” you say quietly. “I don’t.”

“Funny, you like to think you know so much about me.” He smiles, mocking and self-deprecating, and this time it’s your fault, not Pearson’s.

You ignore the jab and watch him, waiting for him to continue.

Ray scoffs and shakes his head, looking away from you for a second, before saying, “Michael is my boss.” The way he says Pearson’s name makes you feel sorry for Ray, his voice curling around the word like it’s embracing it, affection and care that he can never turn into actions finding a small outlet in the softness of his tone. “He knows how I feel about him. That’s not a suspicion, it’s a fact. He talked to me about it when he realized.” Ray’s shoulders drop and suddenly he looks exhausted.

So Mickey Pearson knows what he’s missing. For the first time, the fact that you get to have what he doesn’t makes you feel like you got kicked in the stomach.

“He told me that he respects me,” Ray continues, toneless and tired, “that he appreciates me, and that he thinks of me as a friend. That he would never do anything that jeopardized either our friendship or our working relationship.” He takes off his glasses and leaves them on the desk. “That even if he wasn’t a married man, he’d still be my boss, and being with me would be wrong. That he understood if I wanted to find a new job, and that he’d help me with it if I allowed it.”

There’s nothing you can say to that. There’s nothing you should say to that, but Ray makes you want to take risks and stupid chances, he makes your heart race with dread and excitement, and you don’t think straight around him, so you find yourself asking, “What did you tell him?”

He smiles ruefully. “That I liked my job and that what I felt or didn’t feel for him wouldn’t interfere with it.” He exhales heavily. “He’s been hoping I find a partner since then, and he was
ready to throw me at you when you appeared.” He laughs humorlessly and runs a hand through his hair, messing it up. He grabs his glasses and puts them on. “Did you truly believe I thought of him when we were together?”

It’s your turn to laugh without humor. “Are you really asking me that? How was I supposed to know that you didn’t?”

“By this point, you should have a clearer idea of what I’m like.” He’s watching you carefully. It’s not the curious look he usually has around you, it’s the cold one from that first meeting, when he was assessing whether you were a threat or an asset. Friend or foe.

You’re nothing good to him right now, but at least you can be honest, as damning as that will be.

“You’re someone who likes to speak in half truths or with exact words. You’re someone that can’t simply say things because you’re always worried about a betrayal or about the eventual consequences of your words.” You huff. “The only times you seem to say things plainly are when you’re threatening someone.” And even then it’s veiled threats, it’s simply that aggression doesn’t need translation.

“Ah.” He turns his head to the side and licks his lips, breathing in deeply. “You could have simply said that you don’t trust me.”

“Don’t twist my words. I’m sure by this point you know that I trust you.” Against your common sense and better judgment, you do. “I’m here, aren’t I? Nobody knows I’m here. I believed you when you said you try not to lie to me.” You’ve trusted him since the beginning. “The problem, Ray, is that I never know how much to read into what you say.” His actions, on the other hand, are always clear.

“Fine,” he grits out. “You want me to be clear? Then I’ll be clear.” He turns to look at you again. “I can’t imagine that you’re Michael because he told me that he would never touch me. I can’t imagine that you’re him because to do that I’d have to imagine that Michael didn’t keep his word, and that’s not the person I love. I can’t imagine that you’re him because you touch me, and he never will.”

You tell yourself that that doesn’t hurt. You’ve never been good at lying to yourself.

“I see,” you say, taking a step back. It’s probably better if you leave.

Ray shakes his head. “No, you don’t,” he accuses. “You can’t, because I’m not finished.” His hands hold onto the desk so tightly that his knuckles have gone white, and despite the situation you feel the urge to reach for his hands and make them loosen their grip, ensure they don’t hurt. “Didn’t it occur to you that when you showed up here with your proposal I didn’t have to accept it? You think I couldn’t have gone and found somebody else to fuck in all this time?” He lets go of the desk and takes half a step towards you. “The reason I don’t imagine you’re Michael is that I want you. You said it yourself, remember? I’d looked at you. I thought you were attractive, and I wanted to sleep with you. And then I got what I wanted. I wouldn’t have changed anything.” He takes a shaky breath and says, “Was that clear enough or is something up to interpretation?”

You look at the floor for an instant and then back at Ray. “It was perfectly clear.”

“Good.”

He looks away first and leans back against the desk again. The sheet has started to slip from it.

You can’t help but feel relief at finding out that he’d always been aware of you during your
encounters. You also can’t help but feel ashamed by that emotion, because you hurt Ray. You’re irrationally angry at him for never giving you any signs to dispel your worries, and then you’re angry at yourself for wanting them in the first place, when it was your idea to start this arrangement while fully knowing the risk associated to his feelings for Pearson. You don’t know what to say or do, but you know you should start with the basics.

“I’m sorry,” you say softly, looking at Ray. When he meets your eyes again, you repeat your words.

“What are you apologizing for?” he asks, his tone bordering on mocking. “Making me feel bad?”

“No. I’m sorry because you’re right. At this point I have an idea of what you’re like.” You swallow and try to put your thoughts in order. “I should have trusted the good things I know about you. I didn’t and I fucked up.”

“You did,” he says, looking away from you again.

The conversation is probably over.

“Do you want me to go?” you ask, just in case.

“Yes,” he says, toneless.

“Okay.” You check that all your belongings are in your pockets and head for the door. You turn to look at him for the last time and say, “Goodbye, Ray.”

He was already looking at you.

“Text me when you get home,” he says, and then he stands up and starts removing the sheets from the bed.

You know the way out.

You spend the drive home thinking about everything that happened, feeling angry at yourself and at him, relieved and ashamed, sorry for yourself and pitying Ray, and by the time you get to your flat all you want is a drink and maybe to hit something.

You text Ray as soon as you’ve locked the door and put the chain in place.

You only get a ‘Read’ notification.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: the last scene of the next chapter was one of the first ones I wrote and contains one of my favorite paragraphs.

I feel a bit bad that the chapter count went up because I'm unable to write short things, so I'm leaving you some stuff in case you want to try to get some hints of what's coming (no actual spoilers for the story, don't worry):

- My tag for the fic on Tumblr, where you can find vague posts in which I lose my mind over the story, or things that I associate with it
- **The Twitter thread** in which you can see my tragic descent into writing Hell as I got more and more ideas for this story (useful if you want an idea of how the writing's going)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!